

Embers of the Fire

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Embers of the Fire

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

The aging starship Gibraltar is brought out of mothballs to assist in Federation humanitarian relief operations within Cardassian territory in the immediate aftermath of the Dominion War. The crew quickly discovers not everyone shares the Federation's vision for Cardassia's future.

Chapter 1

Point Station Epsilon - Sector 21504 - Allied Occupied Cardassian Territory

Point-Station Epsilon was an insignificant speck against the majestic backdrop of the violet-hued McAllister C-5 Nebula. It was an unlikely structure for this locale, a region of space that had been firmly in the possession of the Dominion and their Cardassian allies just nine weeks earlier.

In stark contrast to the great majority of Starfleet's thoroughly planned, exactly constructed space installations, Epsilon was a small, hastily assembled conglomeration of prefabricated components and salvaged equipment. Derisively referred to as a 'cookie-cutter outpost' by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, the facility was underpowered, understaffed and inadequately defended. The official nomenclature was, 'Minimally operational.'

The station was the physical embodiment of Starfleet's presence in occupied Cardassian territory. Thoroughly half-assed, all good intentions aside. Epsilon and four other sister-stations of equally questionable pedigree had been established by Starfleet Command to help officiate over the Federation's hard-won spoils of war.

In the wake of the chaotic conclusion of the Dominion War, much of the Cardassian Union's infrastructure had collapsed. Seething over the last-minute betrayal by their reluctant Cardassian allies, the Dominion's fearsome Jem'Hadar soldiers had exacted a terrible toll on the worlds of the union prior to retreating from the Alpha Quadrant. Orbital bombardment had been a favorite amongst the Vorta administrators, second only to the application of exotic bio-toxins and radiation poisoning. Those considered 'fortunate' among the Cardassian victims of these assaults had died quickly. They were unmercifully few in number.

The Cardassian core worlds and outlying colonies where survivors still clung to life amidst the rubble of their once great civilization were in desperate need of assistance. Despite the fact that many Federation member worlds had also suffered catastrophic damage during the war; the Federation Council had decided that some effort at aid, however token, must be rendered.

The United Federation of Planets and their Klingon allies had agreed to co-administrate fully three quarters of the territory formerly occupied by Cardassia. The remaining territory had fallen under the control of the Romulan Star Empire, the third party in the victorious Triumvirate Alliance of the Alpha-Quadrant.

True to form, the Romulans had once again suspended diplomatic ties with the other great powers, focusing their energies on pacifying their new holdings and solidifying their grip on these systems.

And so, Epsilon and her sisters had been built. Strategically located throughout Federation-administrated space, these stations served as the backbone of the Starfleet and civilian relief task forces that now labored to perform triage on a planetary scale.

The indigo-tinged tendrils of the McAllister Nebula were playing hell with the attention of newly minted Captain Donald Sandhurst. With some effort, the middle-aged man pulled his eyes away from the spectacular panorama on display through the viewport of his cramped guest cabin aboard Epsilon station. Despite the Spartan nature of the small quarters, his rank had merited single-occupancy accommodations, a luxury aboard so overcrowded an outpost. His only complaint about the view was its intoxicating ability to divert his focus.

Sandhurst stifled a yawn and forced his attention back to the computer terminal atop his otherwise empty desk. Behind him, resting atop his bed was a cylindrical carry-all case containing a few holograms of friends and family, and an assortment of trinkets and memorabilia collected during his twenty-two years of Starfleet service. The diminutive closet contained a half-dozen outfits of seldom worn civilian clothes that had been long neglected during the recent conflict. These were the sum total of Sandhurst's worldly belongings. Two years of warfare had instilled in him the necessity of packing lightly and the importance of valuing people over possessions. It hadn't always been that way. There had been a time not so long ago when Donald's reputation as a pack-rat had bordered on the legendary.

He was of average height, and as more than one medical officer had helpfully noted, he was carrying a minimum of twenty-five unneeded pounds. The extra weight had settled on his once rail thin midsection, but Sandhurst liked to think that he carried it better than he might otherwise, due to the broadness of his shoulders. His hazel eyes looked out from under neatly trimmed black hair. During the last year, a hint of gray had begun to appear at his temples, his body's concession to the stresses of war coupled with the inexorable march of time.

Sandhurst tapped at the computer terminal and scrolled through a seemingly endless catalog of Starfleet service records. He had been studying these files for more than six hours, trying to familiarize himself with the officers and enlisted personnel who would soon be assigned to his command. *My crew*, he thought with trepidation.

The idea still seemed alien to him. In the middle of the night he would awake with a start from a dead sleep, his mind fixated on the incredible responsibility that he had assumed. The fourth pip on his collar, affixed less than a week ago, weighed heavily on him. *Over a hundred people who will live or die based on my decisions and judgment.* Unable to focus any further on the terminal's scrolling text, his weary mind reflected back on the unlikely path that had led him to this place.

Two years earlier Sandhurst had been the chief engineer on the starship *Venture*. He was acknowledged as one of the finest engineers in the Fleet, and he found his work both challenging and fulfilling. As he had earned his command school qualifications, Sandhurst had been content to oversee the occasional late-watch bridge duty, but had no interest in pursuing the command track.

Then the Dominion War had swept over the Alpha Quadrant like a savage tide. Lieutenant Commander Sandhurst found himself thrust into the

position of first officer, after the ship's exec was killed by Cardassians while leading an away mission.

Sandhurst hadn't wanted the job, but had assumed the post out of a sense of duty. He had been as surprised as anyone to discover that he had an affinity for command. The same skills that had made him an effective and popular department head also served him well as XO. His had been the soft touch, the counterpoint to Captain Ebnal's taciturn command style.

The joy he felt at the war's ending was matched by the comforting knowledge that he could now return to his trade. After all, the fleet would have to be rebuilt, and engineers of his caliber were in short supply. It was, however, not to be. As the war had dragged on and casualties mounted, the available pool of command qualified officers had dwindled. Post-war Starfleet was spread thin, and had been given an impossibly long list of critical tasks to accomplish.

Sandhurst had been hesitant the day Rear Admiral Covey had approached him. Covey had been his captain earlier in his career, and her encouragement and advice had led him to take up the challenge of becoming a department chief. This time she had come offering him a captaincy.

His reluctance had been short-lived. She knew the right words to say, the correct strings to pull. Duty... honor... service. Fifteen minutes after their conversation ended, he had been promoted. Two hours after that, Sandhurst was on his way to Epsilon station by way of warp courier.

His combadge chirped, heralding an incoming message. "*Ops to Captain Sandhurst.*"

He tapped the pin reflexively, jolted from his reminiscence. "Sandhurst. Go ahead."

"*Captain, Gibraltar is on approach. ETA is thirty-seven minutes, sir.*"

Sandhurst pursed his lips, "Acknowledged." He stood, stretched, then took a moment to straighten his uniform. Just enough time to pack up his belongings and grab a quick bite at the station's replimat. Then it would be time to meet the crew.

His crew.

USS *Sojourner* - Crolsa System - Allied Occupied Cardassian Territory - In orbit of planet Lakesh

USS *Sojourner* had been in orbit of Lakesh for less than a week. A dedicated science vessel, the *Nova*-class starship had been designed for long-term scientific surveys. Aside from making a detailed analysis of the widespread environmental damage suffered by the planet and its populace, *Sojourner* was woefully ill-suited to the emergency aid assignment to which it had been tasked. With a crew of forty-two, the ship had neither the personnel nor replicator capacity necessary to make any significant contribution to ongoing relief mission on the surface.

Commander Taun'Ma had tired of looking at the battered greenish-brown sphere on the main viewer. The planet's atmosphere was occluded by dark gray cloud formations, lit from within by flashes of lightening. These were the result of the firestorms that were consuming the vast forested areas on the larger of two southern continents. Science officer Rainert had determined that the Breen, apparently lacking the Jem'Hadar taste for creative mayhem, had simply bombarded the surface of Lakesh with conventional weapons.

The effort had been adequate. Conservative estimates were that seventy-two percent of the population had been killed immediately, some two and a half million souls.

Those hundreds of thousands that remained were increasingly desperate for basic necessities such as clean water, food, and shelter. As the weeks since the disaster turned into months, the survivors' patience with the inadequate aid effort had deteriorated, and violent confrontations between locals and relief workers were on the rise.

Now, nearly half of Taun'Ma's crew were planet-side, assisting with a water purification project in what remained of an urbanized area on the northern peninsula. She worried about their safety, and cursed her inability to provide more than a handful of security personnel for their defense. As tenuous as the Starfleet position was on Lakesh, it was widely acknowledged that it would get worse.

Villalobos, the Operations officer, called over his shoulder, "Shuttle *Aberly* on approach, Captain."

The Saurian nodded in response, her reptilian eyelids blinking laterally in quick succession. "Acknowledged, Albert. Initiate standard landing protocols."

The exchange was routine, and if truth be told, unnecessary. This was the twenty-first shuttle sortie of the day. Nonetheless, she wanted to keep her people sharp. This was no cushy berth on a survey ship. As some of her human crew insisted on saying, *Sojourner* was in 'hostile country.' She understood the gist of expression, and marveled once again at the humans' ability to romanticize the persistent danger they faced.

The senior chief at the Tactical station intoned, "Security scan complete, no anomalies. *Aberly* is cleared to land, sir."

The *Aberly* vectored for final approach to the ship's aft shuttle bay. The shuttle had just dropped off a supply of replacement components for the overworked industrial replicators being used by relief parties on the surface. By order of the chief medical officer, the shuttle was returning with two seriously ill Cardassian civilians in need of immediate medical care aboard *Sojourner*.

As she rolled ninety degrees to align with the parting shuttle bay doors, the *Aberly* suddenly accelerated and veered hard to port. The shuttle crashed directly into the ship's port warp nacelle. The resulting impact and explosion sheared away the forward third of the nacelle and exposed the warp field coils which began venting super-heated drive plasma into space.

On the bridge, the crew felt the jolt of collision, followed by the near instantaneous blare of alarm klaxons as the ship yawed wildly to

starboard. At Helm, Lieutenant S'Von called out over the clamor of alert sirens and startled crew, the Vulcan's voice supernaturally calm as he announced, "We have lost attitude control. Attempting to recover."

Taun'Ma engaged the safety restraints on her command chair, "Report!"

From behind her, the duty engineer shouted from his station, "Showing critical failure in the port nacelle's structural integrity!"

The scene on the main viewer had become a crazed mélange of spinning planet and swirling stars. As damage readouts flashed across his console, the engineer assessed their plight, "We're venting drive plasma! Inertial dampeners at one-hundred seventeen percent of rated output _"

The commander cut him off, "Quench block plasma to that nacelle; route emergency power to thrusters and inertial dampeners."

The engineer grimaced as he was slammed against his console, his affirmative response lost in the din of wailing alarms. As main engineering scrambled to transfer all available power to the designated systems, the duty engineer attempted an emergency cut-off of the plasma flow from the reactor core to the nacelle. It became apparent that the control valves in the nacelle itself had been critically damaged or destroyed. "Captain, I can't stem the flow at the nacelle, we're going to have to shut down the reactor."

The Saurian replied immediately, "Initiate emergency core shutdown." She glanced at the Tactical officer, "Send out a distress call, let the *Phoenix* know we're in trouble."

As *Sojourner's* crew struggled to regain control of their stricken ship, three small meteorites on seemingly random trajectories around Lakesh changed course. As they moved out of their slowly decaying orbits, they accelerated towards the starship.

Each of the ersatz meteorites was less than three meters in diameter and was equipped with a subspace jamming emitter. Utilizing these, the gravitic mines had gone undetected during the orbiting starships' routine sensor sweeps. Now, each of them increased the power to their jammers, in hope of scrambling any attempts at getting an accurate sensor scan or targeting lock during their final approach to their objective. Within each, an anti-matter charge armed. Optical sensors identified predetermined target points on *Sojourner* and the three mines spiraled toward impact.

Almost unnoticed in the confusion on the bridge, a proximity alarm warbled at the science station. Ensign Rainert struggled to read the display as the ship's constant bucking jostled him in his seat, "Captain, I'm reading three unidentified transients inbound!"

Taun'Ma swiveled in her chair to face him. "Identify."

Rainert checked his readings. "I can't, sir. I'm getting interference, but I can distinguish three separate sources, and they're closing." He blinked, "Impact in... six seconds."

Suddenly, Taun'Ma realized with a cold certainty that she and her crew were not victims of an accident, but the targets of a deliberate attack. She had just started a non-recoverable shutdown of the matter/anti-matter reactor, and knew full well that it would take ten seconds or more to re-route emergency power from the thrusters and inertial dampers to the shield grid. Not enough time, she thought desperately.

It was too late, but she gave the order anyway. "Shields!" Taun'Ma then toggled the intraship, "All hands, brace for impact!"

The first of the mines detonated ten meters from the underside of the secondary hull. Structural integrity was instantly breached, and main engineering was opened to space. Those few crew who survived the initial explosion in the engine room died seconds later as they were blown into the airless void.

The second mine exploded only meters away from the top of the saucer section, obliterating the main bridge and causing multiple hull ruptures along the ship's dorsal axis. Commander Taun'Ma and the others on the bridge were dead before they had fully registered the initial blast.

The last of the three mines finished the job started by the *Aberly*, detonating just aft of the ship, shredding the nacelles, punching through the retracting shuttle bay doors, and killing every living thing in the rear half of the secondary hull. Crippled and without power, *Sojourner* drifted helplessly in a cloud of her own debris as she tumbled end over end in a slow death roll.

The starship *Phoenix* arrived just moments later. Her scans revealed only eight life signs left aboard the smaller ship. *Sojourner* was tractored in tow, and rescue and emergency engineering parties were sent aboard to attempt to stabilize her remaining systems. As her attackers had intended, *Sojourner* hadn't been destroyed, only badly maimed. The care of her surviving crew and the salvage of the vessel itself would be a further burden on the already over-extended Starfleet presence in orbit.

Chapter 2

The *Constitution*-class starship *Gibraltar* had begun her career some ninety years earlier as the USS *Hood*, a contemporary of James Kirk's *Enterprise-A*. Constructed from the keel up as an upgraded variant of the venerable *Constitution* series ships, she served with distinction for three decades before being decommissioned. Her name and its accumulated prestige were stripped from her and bequeathed to a newer class of vessel, and she was exiled to the Dalashni V Long-term Storage Anchorage.

Encased in a protective sheath of durapolymers, she was set adrift and quietly forgotten. Twenty-five years later, in the aftermath of the Tomed Incident, she was towed out of the bone yards and hastily refit to serve as a hospital ship. Rechristened *Gibraltar*, she was assigned to humanitarian relief missions along the Romulan Neutral Zone. Fourteen months later, having once again fulfilled her duty, she was returned to the Dalashni system to resume her hibernation.

At the outset of official hostilities with the Dominion, the Federation Starfleet was already desperate for ships. Two Borg incursions in the last decade, coupled with the brief yet punishing war with the Klingon Empire had sapped Starfleet's material strength. Classified estimates early in the Dominion conflict gauged that at the current rate of attrition, Starfleet would lose approximately forty-four percent of its operational starships in the next eighteen months. Facing those projected losses, Starfleet Command ordered the vessels mothballed at Dalashni and other such facilities to be refit and reactivated, *Gibraltar* among them.

Thus, the grand old girl had been given a new lease on life. An intensive eight-month refurbishment at Starbase 234 succeeded in replacing or upgrading *Gibraltar*'s primary systems, though her refit was finally completed three weeks after the end of hostilities. She was faster and better defended in her new 24th century incarnation, but *Gibraltar* was still no match for more modern ships of the line. She and her resurrected brethren were intended to fill support roles, such as routine patrol, diplomatic missions, and escort duty. In this way, they were to have freed up more battle-worthy vessels for combat duty on the front lines.

Epsilon's transporter room was a converted office module, one not terribly well suited to the extensive modifications necessary to accommodate the transporter dais and its ancillary systems. Like Sandhurst's guest cabin, it was cramped, and like his cabin, it afforded a fantastic vista through its view ports. It wasn't the McAllister Nebula which transfixed the young ensign at the window, however, but the presence of the starship *Gibraltar*, holding position less than a thousand meters away.

The ensign whistled softly to himself and remarked, "That is something you don't see every day."

The quiet swish of the doors marking Sandhurst's arrival was masked by a series of computer tones from the transporter chief's console. The chief, clearly amused at the young man's demeanor, asked, "What's that, Ensign?"

"A museum piece, Chief. There hasn't been a *Constitution*-class ship in service for a half century." He shook his head in disbelief. "We're going to pacify the Cardies in *that* thing?"

The transporter chief looked towards Sandhurst and gave the captain a devious smile as she blatantly provoked the younger man, "Oh? Is that what you're out here to do then, Ensign?"

Still mesmerized by the graceful yet all-too-vulnerable lines of the starship, the ensign nodded distractedly. "Absolutely, Chief. Those people need to be put in their place. We've fought two major wars with them in the last thirty years, and heaven knows how many border skirmishes. We'd be fools to leave them in a position to stab us in the back again."

As the chief looked at him expectantly, Sandhurst paused before announcing his presence. The captain found himself hard pressed to disagree with the young man. The treachery of the Cardassian government, and that of Gul Dukat in particular, had cost the Federation dearly. Regardless, such thoughts were not worthy of a Starfleet officer, and Sandhurst knew that he could not let such ideas foment among his crew if their upcoming mission was to have any chance of success.

"We're here to help the Cardassian people, Ensign, not to subjugate them."

Ensign Brett Lightner laughed coolly. "Yeah, let's hope they're capable of discerning the difference." The sandy haired youth glanced over his shoulder, but his smirk evaporated as he realized the source of the rebuke. He stiffened, pivoted neatly on one heel and came to rigid attention.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't realize..."

Sandhurst cut him off and waved a hand dismissively, "It's okay, Mister... Lightner, isn't it?" The captain continued in response to the ensign's nod. "I can't tell you how to feel about the Cardassians. God knows there are enough of us with sufficient reason to hate them. Nonetheless, we're here to help them recover as best we're able. If we leave them to suffer or try to rub their noses in this defeat, there *will* be another war with them. Count on it."

Lightner nodded curtly. "Yes, sir."

Sandhurst turned to the transporter chief. "All set, Chief?"

"Aye, Captain. *Gibraltar* is standing by."

Sandhurst stepped up onto the dais. "Shall we, Ensign?"

Lightner followed, his face still flushed with embarrassment. Sandhurst glanced out the view port at his new command and quietly savored the sight for the briefest of moments before he uttered, "Energize."

The two officers vanished in a cascading field of bluish energy.

Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos came to attention as his commanding officer materialized on the pad. The El-Aurian security chief had joined the *Gibraltar* at Deep Space Nine, the last stopover before Point-Station Epsilon, and was just settling in himself. His last posting had been to Starfleet's elite and covert Special Missions Teams and he had spent the majority of the war 'sneaking about and blowing things up,' as he liked to describe it. Lar'ragos was enjoying his transition back to shipboard duty and had been looking forward to his impending reunion with Donald Sandhurst, a former academy classmate.

The faintest hint of a smile tugged at the captain's lips as his eyes settled on Lar'ragos, "Permission to come aboard?"

Lar'ragos' smile, in contrast, was ebullient, "Granted, sir. Welcome aboard, Captain." He stepped forward, hand extended, as Sandhurst moved off the pad.

Sandhurst clasped the proffered hand, pumping it vigorously. "Good to see you, Pava. It's been too long." He turned and inclined his head towards the still blushing junior officer who'd arrived with him. "Lieutenant Lar'ragos, this is Ensign Brett Lightner. He'll be driving the ship."

Lar'ragos nodded to Lightner as the ensign stepped down from the dais. "A pleasure, Ensign." Lar'ragos appeared to take measure of the younger man and his smile faded slightly. "First tour, Mister Lightner?"

The newly minted officer had regained some of his composure and replied, "Aye, sir." His eyes quickly swept the unusually configured compartment and finally settled on the transporter operator's console. The control panel was sequestered behind a transparent aluminum partition, a throwback to the days when transporter systems produced mildly hazardous levels of theta radiation. To Lightner, it symbolized everything that was wrong with this assignment. The ensign's focus drifted back to Lar'ragos, and he directed a smile at the lieutenant that didn't seem to reach his eyes. It was a dead giveaway to someone from a race of listeners. "I'm excited to be here, sir. I've heard a lot about this ship."

The captain directed a curious look at Lar'ragos. "Not that I'm not delighted to see you, but I was expecting Commander Ramirez."

At this, Lar'ragos' smile vanished completely. "She was unavoidably detained, sir." The nuances of Lar'ragos' words were sufficiently subtle that only Sandhurst, with his years of experience with the El-Aurian was able to read into the statement that the ship's executive officer had been anything but.

Sandhurst nodded; his expression carefully neutral. "I see." The captain turned back towards Lightner. "Ensign, would you be so kind as to confirm that arrangements have been made to beam our personal effects over from Epsilon?"

"Aye, sir." Lightner looked relieved to have something to do and the ensign moved towards the transporter control cubicle where he began speaking quietly with the chief manning the console.

Sandhurst and Lar'ragos moved out into the corridor. The captain glanced over his shoulder as the doors hissed closed behind them to confirm that the two were alone. "I take it she's angry?"

Lar'ragos chuckled. "I see your gift for understatement remains intact, sir." He gestured to their right, "The turbolift is this way." As he fell into step beside the captain, Lar'ragos offered, "She's been the epitome of professionalism, at least since I've been aboard. She's furious, but thankfully she's keeping it to herself."

Sandhurst sighed. In many ways his introduction to the ship's first officer, Lieutenant Commander Liana Ramirez, was going to be the biggest obstacle of the day. "I guess that's to be expected. I'd hoped she might take this better, but I can't say I'm surprised." He scratched absently behind one ear as Lar'ragos led them into a turbolift alcove and pressed the call button.

The narrow corridors here were paneled with burnished gray plating, and carpeted in a bland copper hue that did little to lessen the severity of the decor. Sandhurst reminded himself that this ship was designed decades before Starfleet had adopted policies mandating generous personal space allowances in all common areas, passageways included.

The turbolift arrived, and they stepped aboard. Lar'ragos deferred the choice of destination to his captain. Sandhurst looked pensive for a moment, before trying to submerge his unease beneath a calm, studied command persona. Lar'ragos wondered whether Sandhurst's apprehension would be as apparent to the average human crew member as it was to him.

"Bridge." Sandhurst resisted the urge to slouch casually against the wall, despite his fatigue, and stifled a yawn as the turbolift began its ascent. "Your impressions of the crew?"

Lar'ragos shrugged with his hands, which were clasped in front of him. "About what you'd expect. Aside from a gaggle of newly commissioned ensigns, we've become the dumping ground for some of the Fleet's problem children. We've also got more than our share of activated reservists and career dead-enders just waiting for Starfleet to rescind the stop-loss orders." The deceptively youthful looking El-Aurian shook his head slightly. "I'm more worried about our green junior officers. Most of them are products of the academy's accelerated war-time curricula. Many have only three years of academy training, some even less."

Due to the appalling personnel losses suffered during the war, Starfleet Command had been forced to call up the service's reserve units for the first time in more than a century. In addition, Command had elected to reactivate the commissions of tens of thousands of retired veterans. People who hadn't worn a Starfleet uniform in decades found themselves involuntarily returned to service. Active-duty personnel who had been on the cusp of retirement just prior to the war were barred from departure or resignation by a Federation Council mandated stop-loss order that had yet to be repealed.

Sandhurst mock winced. “That good, eh?”

Lar’ragos attempted an apologetic smile. “Don’t get me wrong, sir. I don’t mean to paint the entire crew with the same brush. There are some standouts, mostly among the senior staff and higher NCO ranks.”

The El-Aurian glanced at the turbolift’s control panel as the car shifted from vertical to horizontal travel briefly, then resumed its climb. “The rest of them will do their duty. Most just feel they’ve done their part and are ready to go home.” For career officers like themselves in an organization that prided itself on being a meritocracy of the willing, the idea of serving with discontented or unmotivated people was almost unthinkable.

A subdued chime announced their arrival on Deck 1. Sandhurst straightened and gave an unconscious tug at his uniform top before the doors slid open to reveal *Gibraltar’s* command center. The captain had to admit to being a bit surprised. He had almost expected the parting doors to open onto an unmodified 23rd century starship bridge, with subdued lighting and pre-LCARS control consoles studded with buttons and switches. This bridge, however, was every bit as modern as he could have hoped.

Laid out in the more traditional circular pattern that was seen with less frequency in more recent Starfleet designs, the main bridge was detailed in soft whites and muted grays. Amber highlights in the carpet matched the hue of doors and hatches. The color scheme gave the impression of a larger compartment than was actually present. The lower well area of the bridge housed a single semi-circular console bank which supported multiple workstations, broken only by two sets of stairs forward to the upper ring. The Operations and Helm posts were side-by-side in a single console bank facing forward towards the main view screen. Flanking them on either side of the pit were stations for the Executive Officer and a mission specialist, respectively.

Ringling the upper level of the bridge were the Engineering, Science, and Security/Tactical stations, as well as two auxiliary consoles which could be configured for a variety of functions. At the aft-most section of the bridge was a small, recessed entrance to the captain’s ready room, next to a large master situation monitor which displayed a cutaway silhouette of *Gibraltar* and her major systems. A small stand-alone Tactical console stood immediately behind the captain’s chair, which was currently occupied by a petite, raven-haired, olive-skinned human woman who seemed engrossed in the contents of the data padd she held in her hand.

As Sandhurst stepped from the turbolift with Lar’ragos in tow, Lt. Commander Liana Ramirez glanced up from her padd. She stood from the command chair in a smooth, deliberate motion as she announced, “Captain on the bridge!”

Standing just a fraction over five feet, Ramirez was not the most imposing specimen of humanity ever to don a Starfleet uniform. However, despite her diminutive size, she projected an aura of confident authority that left little doubt that she was not one to be trifled with.

In response to the executive officer’s announcement, all activity on the bridge ceased simultaneously as crew members turned to get their first look at their new commanding officer. Sandhurst responded with a slight smile, designed to convey an easy self-assurance that he most certainly did not feel. “As you were.” He turned to Ramirez, who remained standing as ramrod straight as a cadet on review, her eyes locked on some indeterminate point on the far bulkhead. Sandhurst sighed inwardly, *So this is how it’s going to be, then.*

“Computer, log the following exchange as an official transfer.”

The computer accepted the command with a three-tone chime, and Sandhurst continued. “By order of Starfleet, I hereby assume command of this vessel.”

Ramirez responded formally, “As of this time, seventeen-thirty-seven hours, I stand relieved. Computer, transfer priority-one command authorization codes to Captain Donald Sandhurst, authorization Ramirez tango-sierra-charlie one-oh-six-four.” The computer verbally acknowledged the transfer of command authority, and Ramirez stepped aside as she swept her arm dramatically over the captain’s chair like a game-show host presenting a contestant with a prize. “She’s all yours, sir.”

Sandhurst nodded approvingly but made no move towards the center seat. “Commander, please join me in the ready room.” He looked to Lar’ragos and intoned, “Lieutenant, you have the conn.” Sandhurst moved to the small hatch leading to his new office and triggered the door to slide open. He stepped back and motioned for Ramirez to enter, and then followed her inside.

The compartment that now served as ready room was, on the old *Hood*, an airlock situated behind the bridge. Though small, it easily accommodated a medium-sized work desk opposed by two sitting chairs, a couch, and a replicator station recessed into one wall. Where the airlock hatch had once stood was a circular transparent aluminum view port, just behind the desk.

He strode into the room behind Ramirez and walked past her, then turned around and leaned against the front of the desk, arms folded across his chest. Before she could speak, he launched a preemptive, “Permission to speak candidly granted, Commander.”

Caught momentarily off guard, Ramirez blinked, and took a moment to consider her next statement. Finally, she asked, “Respectfully, Captain, what am I doing here?”

Sandhurst frowned, “I’m going to need you to be a bit more vague.”

Ramirez ran one hand through her hair in a gesture of exasperation. “I’ve put in my Fleet time, sir. Fourteen months as exec on the *Tempest*, a wartime posting. I worked damned hard for Captain Berkhalter’s recommendation, and my assignment as Admiral Covey’s adjutant was going to be my ticket to a first line ship, maybe even my own command!”

Sandhurst contemplated taking a conciliatory tack with her, but only for an instant. Perhaps it was the lack of sleep affecting his judgment, but he’d been primed for a confrontation with his new XO since he stepped aboard. *Best to have it out here and now*, he decided, *to clear the air.*

“I’m terribly sorry if your being posted here has inconvenienced you, Commander, but I requested your transfer because I *need* you here. You’ve spent a good portion of your career assigned to ships along the Cardassian border, serving under CO’s like Jellico and T’Surn.” He paused but refused to look away from Ramirez’s piercing gaze. “You’ve faced the Cardassians on the battlefield as well as over the

negotiating table. You understand them in ways that I don't, and to be perfectly blunt, I desperately need that insight."

Ramirez broke eye contact first and looked away angrily as she bit back a reply that she was sure would constitute insubordination.

Sandhurst felt himself building momentum and continued, "You know perfectly well what we're up against here. Starfleet's attempting to render aid on a multi-planetary scale despite inadequate resources and too few people to do the job. We're going to meet with resistance, if not outright hostility. I want to have someone by my side who understands their culture, their mindset, how they're likely to react in a given situation."

Still refusing to back down, Ramirez seethed, "Don't think I'm unaware that you and Admiral Covey have a history together. I object to being traded between the two of you like a commodity. My career isn't someone's marker."

Sandhurst smiled humorlessly. "If this post doesn't jibe with your career plan, that's too bad. I require you to do your duty, Commander. You can either be an asset to this crew, or a hindrance. I'd much prefer to have your cooperation. Either way, you're staying until our mission is accomplished."

He walked around the desk and took a seat. "Following the successful completion of this assignment, I might be willing to entertain the option of returning you to Admiral Covey's staff, based on my assessment of your performance as XO on this ship."

Ramirez seemed to deflate somewhat at this potential olive branch. She looked at least partially mollified as she inquired, "Will that be all, sir?"

Sandhurst activated his desktop computer terminal and deliberately turned his attention to the screen. "Oversee our immediate departure as soon as all remaining crew and supplies are aboard. Inform the senior staff we'll be having a mission briefing at oh-seven-hundred hours tomorrow. You are dismissed."

"Aye, sir." Ramirez spun smartly on one heel and marched out.

As he called up the ship's personnel roster, Sandhurst picked up where he had left off aboard Epsilon station. To no one in particular he remarked, "Yeah... that could have gone better."

Chapter 3

After the choking dust-filled air of Lakesh, the recycled atmosphere of the Ferengi Marauder *Greel* was a pleasant respite. Clad in nondescript civilian clothing, Legate Mintof Urlak sipped at the tall glass of kanar his host had provided. Urlak held the glass up to the light as he marveled at the color and consistency of the amber liquid. The tiny sensor device concealed in the legate's signet ring, linked to the tricorder under his jacket, had determined that the liquid was in fact the 30-year old vintage DaiMon Inish had claimed it to be. More importantly, the sensors had detected no signs of any additives which could have increased his pliability in the forthcoming negotiations. That in itself was a testament to the DaiMon's confidence in his own bargaining position.

Urlak looked across the table at the perpetually sneering DaiMon, "It's quite good, thank you."

The Ferengi bobbed his head obsequiously. "I'm glad you approve."

The large lobed DaiMon dismissed the server with a flick of his wrist. When they were alone, Inish activated the holo-emitter in the center of the table. The symbol of the Ferengi Alliance flared to life in the air above them and rotated slowly as if it were some garish corporate logo. "Now that the pleasantries are concluded, Legate, in what way may I be of assistance?"

The Cardassian leaned forward to lower the now empty glass slowly to the tabletop. He began without preamble, "I need ships; both warp-capable corsairs and trans-atmospheric shuttle fighters. I am additionally interested in purchasing shielding for capital ships. I had heard you could possibly obtain regenerative shielding of Son'a design."

The Ferengi offered a mouthful of sharpened teeth in a hideous smile. "Planning on starting a war?"

Urlak's only response was an icy stare, his gray eyes burrowing into their darting blue Ferengi counterparts.

Inish deduced that he had stepped over some unspoken line with the Cardassian general, and so the Ferengi reached out to toggle a series of commands into his interface. A succession of images appeared and cycled one every few seconds. They depicted numerous vessels of various sizes and capacities, each representing the industrial output of a certain planet or coalition.

Inish cleared his throat then launched into a well-rehearsed litany, "I've found that many of our clientele have reported favorably on the maneuverability and sturdiness of the Tzenkethi raider. It's an excellent platform. The ship's power grid is easily compatible with a wide range of Alpha Quadrant weaponry and defensive systems..."

Inish regarded Urlak cautiously as the Cardassian scrolled through the various craft listings. He would pause an image occasionally to make a notation on a padd. The legate would intermittently nod or offer only a non-committal grunt in response to something Inish had said. Eventually, the Ferengi fell silent.

Moments later, Inish caught himself drumming his fingers atop the table. For want of anything else to say, he asked, "Might I inquire as to the means of payment, Legate? Knowing the exchange rate in advance will help expedite our dealings."

His attention still on the task at hand, Urlak replied without looking up, "Three-hundred liters of bio-mimetic gel."

Despite his attempt to suppress it, a shiver of excitement ran through Inish's compact frame. Bio-mimetic gel was an incredibly rare and extremely valuable substance. A closely guarded secret of Federation medical science, the gel could be used for a variety of purposes, cloning, genetic research, and bio-warfare among them. It was rumored that the Federation so tightly restricted the production of the substance that less than two-thousand liters existed at any given time.

The Ferengi could barely contain his curiosity. He desperately wanted to know the source of this unlikely currency but knew better than to ask. What little Inish hadn't already known of Legate Urlak by reputation, he had researched prior to their meeting. The Cardassian's name was synonymous with ruthlessness, his proclivity for creative acts of vengeance legendary, even among a race of people renown for that trait.

Formerly an operative with the notorious Obsidian Order, the empire's intelligence and covert operations directorate, Urlak had proved sufficiently cunning to warrant advancement without standing out so much as to pose a threat to his superiors. He had deftly avoided the infamous joint Cardassian/Romulan attack on the Founders that had gutted the ranks of the Order. However, the ill-advised operation had inadvertently given Urlak his chance to ascend to a position of power.

His calculations complete, Urlak slid the padd across the table to the DaiMon. "That will suffice."

The Ferengi took a moment to absorb the order. His eyes widened as he processed the sheer volume involved. He had miscalculated. This man didn't want to start a war. He intended to finish one.

Inish looked up to find Legate Urlak watching him. The cold, reptilian passivity of the stare caused Inish to wonder, despite the room's automated defenses and his own personal forcefield, whether he was actually safe in the Cardassian's presence.

Urlak then spoke with a quiet intensity born of zealotry, "Our movement prefers to have a single supplier for these resources, as it decreases our vulnerability to discovery. Once our attacks have begun, the Federation and Klingons will begin gauging who might be capable of providing such assets in these amounts. Your name will undoubtedly be near the top of their lists. The Federation will put pressure on your new 'more enlightened' Ferengi government to curtail your operation. Not wanting to upset the victorious powers in the quadrant, they will comply. You'll face censure and financial liquidation, at the very least. I personally believe they will simply move to have you killed. In either case, if you intend to do business with us, you would do well to sever your ties with the Ferengi Alliance immediately."

The color drained from Inish's face as he, too, calculated the most likely outcome of this series of events and drew the same conclusion. Urlak continued in the same intense, almost hypnotic tone. "Make no mistake, DaiMon, you stand to make an astonishing amount of profit in this venture. However, the risks you run will prove considerable. The choice is yours."

Inish weighed his options. Nearly unimaginable wealth on one hand, or a quick, vicious death on the other. He was not so foolish as to believe that Urlak would allow him to live, knowing what he did, if he did not procure the man's requested items. It wouldn't be today, of course, but soon. In some nameless port on some backwater planet, a bomb, or a dart, or a collimated beam of energy would settle the matter.

The DaiMon shrugged inwardly. The reforms enacted by Grand Nagus Rom did not sit well with him, and the subsequent changes in Ferengi financial policies had resulted in a dramatic downward spiral of Ferengi markets.

The truth of the matter was that this was potentially the most lucrative deal he had encountered since before the beginning of the war. Inish would be hemorrhaging latinum while his peers sat back and bemoaned the collapse of the Ferengi way of life. *It beats a face-saving death dive from the top of the FCA tower on Ferenginar*, he thought.

His face contorted into a grinning, saw-toothed death's head as he chortled, "I'm in."

Urlak stepped back aboard the Cardassian *Hideki*-class corsair. The airlock cycled closed behind him as his ship quickly decoupled from the larger marauder. The trip back to Lakesh would take four days, and though he hated to leave his nascent rebellion for such a time, this trip had been worth the effort.

As he made his way to his cabin he fought off a vague sense of vertigo that seized him as the ship shifted into warp. The legate guessed something in engineering must be out of alignment but surmised that it was not sufficiently troublesome to warrant immediate repair. As he undressed, he allowed himself the luxury of recalling a time when the Cardassian military was afforded the best of everything their society could offer. Now that society was in ruins, and under threat from the insidious influence of the Federation.

The democratic freedoms that the Federation had promised to bring to Cardassia were anathema to men like Urlak. A strong Cardassia had always been dependent upon firm, centralized leadership, unencumbered by the petty bickering and endemic uncertainty of public opinion.

The legate believed that although both Dukat and Damar had acted in what they thought was the best interests of the Union; they had each left the destiny of the Cardassian people in the hands of others. Urlak was determined that Cardassia's future would be determined by Cardassians. He refused to be spoon-fed the righteous pabulum of their would-be Federation conquerors, who undoubtedly wished to see Cardassia de-fanged, a compliant little client state existing in the shadow of the mighty Federation's hegemony.

However, unlike other survivors of the Cardassian military with dreams of insurgency, Urlak was uniquely positioned to turn such ideas into a practical reality. The legate had been a supervisor of a secret Dominion military research complex on Lakesh, responsible for the creation of special weapons systems to be used in a last ditch offensive against the Federation.

The weapons had never been fielded, as Urlak's Cardassian forces had surprised and overwhelmed their Jem'Hadar counterparts at the outset of Damar's rebellion against their 'allies.' Following the Cardassian betrayal of the Founders, it had been a squadron of Breen vessels assigned to carry out retaliatory strikes against the population centers and military facilities on Lakesh. Fortunately, the Breen had been unaware of the hidden facility's existence, and Urlak's cache of armaments had gone unscathed in the assault.

In recent weeks, he had set about recruiting the remnants of the Cardassian military on Lakesh. The small force Urlak now commanded was meager in numbers, but they were well-trained and fanatically dedicated to driving the alien occupiers from their territory. With success would come greater support, both in men and matériel. Their plans had already been set into motion, and the first strike against their oppressors would take place before Urlak had even reached home.

Chapter 4

The stars streaked past the large curving view ports in *Gibraltar's* briefing room. In her previous incarnations, this compartment had been an officer's lounge located in the after-most compartment of Deck 2. From the windows, the primary hull sloped downward to terminate at the aft edge of the saucer where the impulse engine housing was located. Beyond that lay the warp nacelles on their pylons; their midline transparencies glowed blue from the warp plasma flowing through the coils.

Captain Sandhurst took a moment to enjoy the view before the senior staff arrived. He had allowed himself seven hours of uninterrupted sleep and felt like a man reborn. The anxiety and doubt that had crowded his mind before arriving onboard remained, but the concrete reality of his circumstances had mitigated them somewhat. Though it was an admission he would make only to himself, it had taken him an hour after his first conversation with Ramirez to work up the courage to seat himself in his own command chair. The moment had been equal parts pride and terror, and Sandhurst found himself hoping that for the sake of his crew, he proved equal to the challenge.

Gibraltar had been underway for twelve hours, on course for the Crolsa system and the Cardassian colony on Lakesh. News of the attack on *Sojourner* had arrived, and Sandhurst couldn't tell if he was more disturbed by the attack itself, or by the fact that he didn't feel worse about it. Before the war, the loss of a starship crew would have been a tragedy. In the face of the war's losses, *Sojourner's* demise was merely... regrettable. He knew that Taun'Ma and her crew deserved better, but the wellspring of sorrow at his center had run dry long before.

Attacks on Federation personnel were occurring with greater frequency throughout occupied Cardassian space, though the insurgents had concentrated their strikes primarily against Starfleet. The rebels had yet to antagonize the Klingons to such a degree, as those who had lived under Klingon occupation before the war knew that their retribution would be both swift and total.

The doors behind him hissed open to admit Lieutenant Lar'ragos. Pava made his way around the table where he claimed a seat. He was a thin man, lithe in movement, and although in peak physical condition, he was not overly muscular. His brown eyes were set beneath bushy black eyebrows, and his short-cropped black hair was tightly curled. Lar'ragos appeared to be in his early thirties, yet if his service record was to be believed, he was well over four-hundred.

Lar'ragos took a moment to gauge his captain's mood, then offered, "Are we having fun yet, sir?"

Sandhurst shook his head slowly and turned to face his old friend, "No, and I doubt we're going to have much to celebrate in the coming weeks." He rubbed the bridge of his nose, then looked pointedly at the El-Aurian. "Remind me again how the hell you're still a lieutenant after two decades?"

Lar'ragos shrugged expansively. "I'm not especially ambitious."

Sandhurst snorted derisively, "Bull."

Lar'ragos cocked his head to one side, "Okay, how about this. I don't have to be ambitious; we're not running in the same race." He settled back into his chair as he steepled his fingers over his lap, "And need I remind you, a few years back you were an engineer with no aspirations other than coasting to retirement on a nice long tour at Utopia Planitia." The older man grinned, and his voice took on an exaggerated, theatrical quality, "I assure you that I've spent my fair share of time calling the shots, my captain. I've led men in battle, I've bled and killed for my kings. I swore I'd never be a soldier again..." he gestured to his uniform, "...and yet, here I am."

Sandhurst walked over to the replicator station to order a cup of Rigellian spice coffee. "Oh, please, not again with the '*I've seen and done too much.*' I endured enough of that at the academy." He reached for the mug as the materialization process concluded, "Yes, yes, I mourn for your long-suffering soul."

Lar'ragos merely chuckled as Sandhurst assumed his chair at the head of the table. The captain sipped at the cup of steaming liquid, then bobbed his head favorably before he set his gaze back on the lieutenant. "Now you can explain why you passed up one of the most prestigious posts in the fleet in favor of this assignment."

"*Enterprise*?" Lar'ragos looked momentarily thoughtful. "Picard's a good man, and I was honored to have been offered the job, but he and his people are a bit too high profile for my taste. Also, they're a tight crew. Most of his senior staff have served together for more than fifteen years. Easing into a social dynamic like that isn't my idea of fun." He gave Sandhurst a wry smile. "Anyway, I'd rather be here, on this floating anachronism with my old chum."

The doors parted and Lieutenant Commander Elisto Plazzi entered. *Gibraltar's* chief science officer, Plazzi had retired from Starfleet sixteen years earlier. He had been one of those whose commissions were reactivated during the war, despite his status as tenured professor of planetary geology at UC Berkley. At age sixty-four, he was a heavy-set man with thick white hair and a closely cropped beard of the same hue. He possessed deep laughter lines around his eyes that hinted at a jovial disposition, and he gave off a grandfatherly air.

Sandhurst recalled that the commander's previous supervisors had noted that Plazzi was a good-natured officer, well-liked by his peers, with a quick wit and no apparent allergies to hard work or away missions. Plazzi already had a large beverage mug in one hand and cradled a data padd in the other. He nodded deferentially to Sandhurst as he plopped down beside Lar'ragos, "Captain, Lieutenant."

Sandhurst favored the older man with a smile. "Good morning, Commander."

"Call me Elisto, please, sir." He raised a curious eyebrow, "That is, unless you insist on a strict formality?"

"In fact, I don't."

Plazzi smiled appreciatively. "That's good. Makes things simpler."

The next two senior staff members entered together. Chief Engineer Lieutenant Ashok was a towering cobalt blue Bolian. His lack of hair accentuated the bifurcated ridge that bisected his facial features. He had large, deeply set eyes that looked out suspiciously from under a prominent forehead, and a mouth that seemed to be drawn into a perpetual frown. Standing well over a foot taller than Sandhurst, precious little of Ashok's broad-shouldered and well-muscled body was given over to body fat.

The captain had observed in Ashok's service record that the officer had served twice before on the older *Miranda*-class starships, and so was very familiar with the peculiarities of 23rd century Starfleet designs. Ashok had also been noted as something of an introvert, practically a pariah among a species known for their persistent effusiveness. According to his supervisors' reviews, Ashok would never be one of those engineers elevated to the pantheon of miracle workers. The Bolian was steady, reliable and effective, and on a purely selfish level, Sandhurst was secretly relieved not to have been saddled with someone whose engineering talents rivaled his own.

Lieutenant (junior grade) Olivia Juneau, Chief Operations officer, followed Ashok through the door like a moon orbiting a gas giant. She was of medium height with strawberry blonde hair and was perhaps a bit fuller figured than she would have liked. A light dusting of freckles covered her cheeks and seemed to subtract at least five years from her age, giving one the impression that she was barely out of her teens. Despite having just awakened, her hair was already fighting to escape the bun that she must have hastily tied it into before leaving her quarters, and her uniform jumpsuit appeared creased and wrinkled.

Her service jacket had identified her as a chronic underachiever, consistently setting unrealistic goals and then failing to fulfill them. She was clearly one of the crew that Lar'ragos had earlier identified as falling under the problem children heading. Juneau's wartime posting had been to a heavily fortified communications relay station in the Angarsi system, where she had apparently made something of a nuisance of herself. Her last commanding officer had been more than happy to transfer Juneau to the newly re-commissioned *Gibraltar*.

Ashok squeezed into the seat farthest from the captain, after the most cursory of greetings to the other senior staff. He looked vaguely uncomfortable and clasped his hands atop the table as though he regretted not having brought a padd or similar distraction. Juneau traded polite introductions with the others, then sat down across from Plazzi, next to the seat commonly reserved for the XO.

Sandhurst looked to Ashok and asked conversationally, "So, Lieutenant, how are the refit nacelles holding up?"

The Bolian glanced up, apparently startled to have been addressed prior to the start of the meeting. In a deep basso voice, he replied awkwardly, "They are... doing fine, sir." After a moment, he added, "The intermix ratio is still a bit rich for the new coils, but I'll have it figured out before we reach Lakesh, sir."

Sandhurst stopped himself on the threshold of offering a helpful suggestion about adjusting the base programming of the primary injectors to attenuate the problem. He reminded himself that there were few things a Starfleet engineer hated more than having another engineer as their commanding officer. Shortly after taking the XO's post on the *Venture*, Captain Ebnal had pulled Sandhurst aside and chastised him for meddling in the new chief engineer's business. Sandhurst had thought he was merely being supportive, but apparently having the exec constantly poking around the engine room was, as Ebnal so delicately phrased it, "Pissing in another man's pool."

With a few moments to spare, the ship's Chief Medical officer, Lieutenant (junior grade) Issara Taiee stepped into the room. She was a short, compact woman with a broad, cheerful face whose brown hair was cut into a low-maintenance bob. She eschewed the traditional physician's lab-coat favored by so many Starfleet medical officers, wearing just a standard duty uniform with blue departmental undershirt. The moment she entered the compartment it became apparent that Taiee seemed to possess what could only be described as an energetic aura, as if a corona of positive energy surrounded her, causing the lounge to brighten ever so slightly.

A nurse practitioner and emergency medical technician, Taiee was not a fully qualified doctor or surgeon. Her file indicated that she was not without experience, however, and had most recently served in a frontline mobile military hospital unit during the war. Sandhurst had noted that unlike most of Starfleet's physicians, Taiee had no qualms about liberally utilizing a ship's Emergency Medical Hologram to assist in her duties. She welcomed anything or anyone which could supplement her already formidable skills and knowledge.

Last to enter was Ramirez, who passed through the doors and seated herself next to the captain mere seconds before the chronometer reached oh-seven-hundred. By way of greeting she nodded to the assembled staff, all of whom she was already familiar with.

Sandhurst took a sip of his coffee, then sat forward to search the faces of his senior staff. "For those of you whom I haven't officially met yet, I'm Donald Sandhurst. This is, according to the command officer's guidebook, where I'm supposed to tell you all how proud I am to be serving with you, and how we can all look forward to distinguishing ourselves on this assignment, while endeavoring to meet or exceed the levels of professionalism established by previous generations of Starfleet officers."

This elicited a few chuckles from around the table.

"Now that that's out of the way, I do indeed want to express that I'm happy to be here." Sandhurst scanned his officer's faces again, his gaze lingering on each for a moment before moving on. "I'm especially glad to have you people on board. Without putting too fine a point on it, I'll be relying on each of you, as will the entire crew, to ensure that your individual departments are running smoothly." The captain gestured out the window, referring to *Gibraltar* as a whole, "I'm not harboring any illusions about our ability to fight our way out of trouble, or to easily outrun it. We're going to have to work together to predict trouble before it happens, whenever possible. When, on occasion, despite our best efforts the situation goes sideways, we're going to have to scheme and cheat and claw our way out of it."

Sandhurst noted a few smiles, a nod or two, and Ashok doing a passable impression of an Easter Island statue.

"I've only a few rules and expectations of my senior staff. First, if you're having personnel or resource issues, you'll take those up with Commander Ramirez. She'll make the final decisions in those areas, and I intend to give her wide latitude in making those judgments. Second, if you've got a disagreement with a course of action I've taken, you're more than welcome to discuss it with me, in private. We're fairly swarming with recent academy graduates, and I won't undermine their confidence by having their senior officers arguing on the bridge. Now, if you're absolutely certain I'm about to get us all killed, I'll have to rely on you to use your best judgment on how you're going to address that with me, and when."

The introduction complete, Sandhurst allowed himself to relax slightly and settled back into his chair. “I’m not going to try and convince you we’ve pulled a plum assignment, because we haven’t. To be blunt, we’re getting the short end of the stick. But, I’m guessing that none of us signed up for Starfleet expecting a Risan sunrise every day.” He looked to Ramirez, who returned his gaze impassively. “The situation is simple. We’re going to do our best to help stabilize the Cardassian Union and give them at least a fighting chance of establishing a functioning democracy. If we allow this region to spiral into anarchy, it’s going to destabilize the entire quadrant, and the Federation doesn’t have the resources for yet another round of border skirmishes with the Talarians, or the Tzenkethi, never mind the Romulans.”

Sandhurst paused to take a long sip from his mug as he mulled his next statement. “The commanding officer for this region of allied-controlled space is General K’Vada. Based on his reputation, I don’t have to tell you what the Klingon response will be if we can’t get Lakesh under control, and soon.”

Ramirez apparently refused to acknowledge the rhetorical nature of his statement and spoke up. “The empire will come in here and finish what the Breen started, and we won’t be in any position to offer more than a spirited objection.”

The faces around the table reflected the seriousness of the topic. *Good*, Sandhurst thought, *we’re on the same page*. He continued, “I’m not alone in thinking that the attack on *Sojourner* was somebody’s opening gambit. This wasn’t a handful of desperate thugs planting a makeshift explosive. It was a well-planned, precisely executed attack designed to hurt us in a very specific way.” The captain turned to Lar’ragos, “Lieutenant, has the *Phoenix* determined how the initial shuttle collision happened?”

Lar’ragos shook his head, “No, sir. The forensic examination of the shuttle wreckage hasn’t turned up any leads as yet. However, we’re operating under the belief that the collision was part of the attack. Unless Lakesh is encircled by a cloud of thousands of those gravitic mines, the odds that three of them just happened to be in close enough proximity to take advantage of a freak accident at just that moment are astronomical.” He added, “*Phoenix* and the civilian ships in orbit have initiated a comprehensive scan for more of those fake meteorites. No more have been located.”

Sandhurst addressed the Bolian engineer, “Mister Ashok, I want damage control teams running simulations in the holosuites on fire-control and repair utilizing the warhead yield on those mines as a baseline.”

Ashok’s reply was a terse, “Aye, sir.”

Looking to the medical officer, Sandhurst asked, “Lieutenant, how are we set up for the treatment of mass casualties?”

Taiee smiled, “Very well, actually, Captain. As I’m sure you already know, the last time *Gibraltar* was refit, she served as a hospital ship. During this latest overhaul, somebody decided she should retain some of that capability. A sizeable portion of deck four has been dedicated to medical related services. We’ve got forty biobeds, four surgical suites, two medical laboratories, and two independent fully functional emergency medical holograms.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Thank you.” He turned next to Pava, “Mister Lar’ragos, we’ll undoubtedly be required to bring up any number of sick or injured civilians for treatment. I want a thorough security screening of each and every one of them on the surface, prior to being beamed aboard.” He glanced back to Ashok, “And make sure the transporters’ bio-filters are set to maximum. I want your people looking for any signs of bio-toxins, explosives, anything a clever enemy might want to try and sneak aboard.”

The two lieutenants replied, “Aye, sir” almost in unison.

Sandhurst then addressed Juneau. “Ops, how long will it take to offload our relief supplies once we arrive?”

The young lieutenant responded without hesitation, clearly having studied up for her first senior staff meeting. “Twenty-seven hours if we rely exclusively on cargo transporters, sir. Twenty-one hours if we combine transporters with shuttle transfer to the surface, Captain.”

Ramirez cleared her throat and spoke up only after Sandhurst had nodded his assent. “Sir, I’d suggest using just the transporters. I’ve read reports from a security team on the surface that found a cache of arclight shoulder-fired missiles. One of those could easily bring down an unshielded shuttle. Three or four in concert could destroy one of our shuttles, shields or no. And we still don’t know what caused *Sojourner*’s shuttle to collide with the ship.”

“I agree.” Sandhurst looked to Juneau. “Transporters only. We’ll limit shuttle flights to emergency situations, on command approval only.”

He focused on Plazzi and the captain inquired, “Elisto, do we need to make any modifications to our sensors to better detect the orbital mines?”

“No, Captain.” The older man frowned slightly. “From what I’ve gathered from *Phoenix*’s sensor logs, the mines’ disguise was sufficient to fool routine navigational scans of the planet’s orbital region. Now that we know what we’re looking for and are using more intensive sweeps, I don’t foresee any difficulties.”

“Very well, then.” Sandhurst looked around the table. “Any further questions or comments?” There were none. Again, he surveyed the faces at the table. “I know this is going to be a challenging assignment. In a perfect world, we’d have had time to get to know one another, to learn to trust in each other’s abilities. As it is, we’re going to have to muddle through anyway. I have faith that despite whatever Lakesh has in store for us I can rely on each of you to do your duty.”

Sandhurst rose from his seat and caught the others by surprise. Before the senior staff could decide whether to stand as well, the captain called the meeting to a close. “Alright, people. We’ll reach Lakesh in thirteen hours. I want cargo offload operations prepped, sickbay facilities standing ready for casualties, and security teams on hot standby for immediate deployment. Dismissed.”

Chapter 5

The Glanisuur refugee camp had been rapidly constructed less than three kilometers from where the city of the same name used to stand. Situated at the base of the breathtaking Avendra mountain range, the growing city had been a monument to the creative spirit of the Cardassian people. Renowned throughout the Union as a haven to their culture's young and disaffected, Glanisuur had become a hotbed of political activism and artistic expression.

Even during the tenuous alliance with the Dominion, the Cardassian Central Command had frequently turned a blind eye to the wide-eyed innocence and hopeless egalitarianism that was allowed to run rampant in this small corner of their empire. Secretly, many of the military's commanding officers had once attended Glanisuur's universities, allowed to savor a brief flirtation with idealism before being submerged into the cold, linear universe of Cardassian military service.

The Breen torpedoes that had impacted here instantly vaporized most of the city. The three universities, the museums and art galleries, the sporting arena, and the community's beloved outdoor market, all were laid waste in the blink of an eye. The architecture that had been so determinedly free of the characteristic blades and spires of most Cardassian structures had been reduced to mere rubble.

The Federation relief effort for Lakesh's northern continent was concentrated here, among the sun dappled meadows and forests surrounding this provincial capital. The once serene hills were now spotted with domed survival tents and prefabricated buildings housing temporary hospitals and schools and storing various relief supplies.

Gibraltar's first away team to Lakesh materialized into a crisp autumn morning, their collective breath rising as steam into the air. Ramirez turned in a slow, three-hundred and sixty-degree arc to take in the view of the Glanisuur camp as her body adjusted to the slightly higher gravity and atmospheric density.

"I guess we could have picked a worse spot," the exec noted. The sun still shone brightly here, but if Starfleet's meteorological predictions were accurate, smoke from the fires raging in the southern hemisphere would reach this far north in a matter of weeks.

Lar'ragos checked his phaser setting for the fifth time in as many minutes. His compact Type-III phaser rifle was clipped to a sling on his tactical vest, the pockets of which had been filled with stun grenades, sensor-masking smoke canisters, and spare energy magazines for his rifle and phaser pistol sidearm. He turned to his two security men, "Ten-meter spread, stay sharp. Our fellow personnel have been here for weeks. This may have become routine for them. Try to see what they may have missed." The two specialists nodded and moved out to flank Ramirez, Lar'ragos, and Taiee.

Ramirez caught herself on the cusp of chiding Lar'ragos for being paranoid. She had read those sections of his service record that weren't classified and was well aware of his many decorations and citations. If he thought equipping himself and his security staff like an assault team was prudent, who was she to argue? She was determined not to let her anger with her present circumstances blind her to her duty, or to the precarious nature of their current assignment. Ramirez oriented herself and headed out towards the Starfleet command and control center with the away team in tow.

En route to the heavily fortified C-&-C, the team was assailed with a variety of smells more appropriate to a pre-industrialized civilization than a warp-capable one. Food cooked over open fires in front of makeshift shelters for those not yet fortunate enough to have warranted a Starfleet survival tent. Raw sewage trickled through drainage channels hastily carved from the earth with phasers, which added a pungent tinge to the mixture of wood smoke and the ozone generated by portable power generators.

The Starfleet command center was a blocky two-story prefab, surrounded by a grid of forcefield pillars that produced a skin-tingling hum as Ramirez's team approached. A security guard stepped forward. His voice carried across the shielded barrier with a tinny echo, "Identification, please."

"Lt. Commander Ramirez and company, starship *Gibraltar*. We're here to help coordinate the offloading of relief supplies."

As the guard glanced down at his padd to verify this, Lar'ragos appeared distracted and squinted off into the distance as if searching for something. Taiee gazed longingly towards the camp's medical facilities located approximately a hundred meters away, eager to begin assisting the staff there.

A series of muted thumps could be heard in the distance, followed by a strange, warbling yowl that seemed to increase in volume. Ramirez looked around, perplexed, and was completely unprepared to be thrown bodily to the ground by Lar'ragos.

"Incoming! Take cover!" The El-Aurian yelled as he flung the XO down, then moved to shove Taiee down beside her. Lar'ragos dove on top of the two to shield them as best he could with his body.

A chain of explosions rippled through the encampment, most of them centered in the vicinity of the Starfleet command building. The impacts were deafening to Ramirez and her team as the photon mortars detonated in quick succession. The Starfleet C-&-C had not yet been reinforced against an assault from above, and the building was heavily damaged in the opening salvo. The guard on the other side of the forcefield was launched into the barrier and slumped unconscious amidst the chaos.

Lar'ragos scrambled awkwardly to his feet. His ears rang and he fought against a nearly overpowering sense of disorientation. He could see frantic movement from among the shanties and survival tents, figures moving and grappling and falling. Something other than the attack itself was amiss, but in his muddled state he couldn't quite grasp what it was. He glanced down and saw one of his two security officers struggling to rise, but what remained of the other man lay still.

Lar'ragos reached down to help Ramirez and the security specialist to their feet. Taiee scrambled over to the motionless security man as her tricorder confirmed what Pava already knew. Lar'ragos tapped his combadge but was unable to hear the buzz of the device's null-function

alarm. “Lar’ragos to *Gibraltar*, the encampment is under attack. We’re taking mortar fire. The camp appears to have been infiltrated. Send down the standby security team. We can’t hear right now, so route all responses through our tricorders in text.”

Ramirez drew her phaser pistol as Lar’ragos brought his rifle up. Ramirez shouted orders to him, but the security chief simply shook his head, still unable to hear. The four remaining officers looked to the C-&-C, but behind the still active shield barrier the burning structure was collapsing in on itself. If they could deactivate the shield they could attempt a rescue of any survivors, but without the access codes they were helpless.

Before Ramirez could decide on a course of action, she saw Lar’ragos raise his rifle at a group of three armed Cardassian men who were rushing towards them. Lar’ragos judged by their dress and demeanor that they were not local police allied with the relief effort. He elected action over indecision as he took aim and pulled the trigger. The weapon refused to fire. Ramirez followed suit, but her phaser also inexplicably malfunctioned.

The muzzles of the Cardassians’ rifles flashed, and Taiee grabbed her side and pitched forward onto the ground.

Lar’ragos let go his rifle, and in a fluid motion drew a black gun-like device from a holster on his vest and fired it at the approaching men. A small puff of gas was all that heralded the flight of a dozen tiny flechettes that turned the closest of the Cardassians into a pink spray of blood and tissue.

Another burst from Lar’ragos’ weapon felled the second Cardassian, as the third man raised his rifle and aimed at Pava. The man’s weapon jammed, and he slid to a stop as he frantically tried to clear the gun.

Ramirez rushed him and hurled herself at the assailant in a body check that sent the both of them to the ground. She struggled with the attacker and moved to straddle his chest while she threw focused palm-heel strikes at the Cardassian’s head. Her opponent warded off her blows with a ferocity born of desperation. She realized as she grappled with him that despite his considerable size, the man was really no more than an adolescent, a teenager. That failed to matter, however, as he landed a solid punch and drove his fist up and into Ramirez’s chin.

She blacked out momentarily and rolled off the Cardassian. Ramirez regained consciousness seconds later and tried to clear her head as she rallied herself to continue the fight. However, her foe was no longer moving. The youth lay still, and his head rested at an impossible angle. Lar’ragos crouched over him, flechette gun at arm’s length as he scanned back and forth for additional targets.

The surviving security man knelt over Taiee and held a pressure dressing to the medical officer’s wound with one hand while he attempted to restore function to his phaser rifle with his other. Ramirez clambered to her feet and tapped her combadge, “Ramirez to *Gibraltar*. Requesting immediate beam out. We have casualties.” Her hearing was beginning to come back, although sounds were faint and muffled. She pulled the combadge from her uniform and held it to her ear. Hearing no response, she tapped it again and the no-signal buzz confirmed her worst fears. “Lar’ragos, comms are being jammed!”

Lar’ragos now had his tricorder in hand and held it up beside his weapon so as to maintain situational awareness. He shouted back to the exec, “Aye, and scans are limited to five meters. We’re getting some kind of broad spectrum jamming, but I can’t pinpoint the source. Whatever they’re using is also affecting our phasers.”

Ramirez almost wished her hearing hadn’t returned, as the shouts and screams of those fighting and dying drifted towards what remained of her away team. She reached down to take up the Cardassian’s projectile rifle. She studied it for a moment, then pulled sharply back on the bolt which ejected the spent casing that had jammed the weapon.

She hefted the rifle and called out to the lieutenant as she moved to assist the security officer with Taiee, “Mister Lar’ragos, let’s find a more defensible position.”

Gul Dien examined the machine with a sense of satisfaction. The great majority of the weapons developed in this facility had been based on Dominion designs. The Dominion’s technology was more advanced, to be sure, but this particular gem had been a result of Cardassian cunning and determination.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Dien remarked to the chief technician.

“It is indeed, sir.” The engineer was deservedly proud of the work she and her team had accomplished towards perfecting the device.

“It will strike a victorious blow against our enemies. Even the Klingons will think twice before attacking us, once its sting has been felt.”

The technician merely smiled in mute agreement and hoped that her silence would stem the flow of rhetoric spilling from the gul. Over time she had discovered that Dien spoke often, but actually said very little.

The dimensional-shift transporter unit was not especially large, but the energies it harnessed were substantial. The Obsidian Order had uncovered intelligence regarding such a device used against a Federation starship some ten years earlier. That particular device had been used by the Ansata terrorist group in an attempt to destroy the starship *Enterprise*. It was capable of transporting objects or people over great distances, and no known shielding or defensive system could thwart it. Starfleet Intelligence had tried desperately to safeguard the knowledge that such a weapon existed, but the Order had obtained the information, albeit at a high price.

The Dominion had even arranged the abduction of the scientist originally responsible for the creation of the Ansata’s device, but the man had suffered a mysterious death just prior to the execution of the mission. Rumors regarding the scientist having been assassinated by some ultra-secret Federation agency circulated widely within the Order, but no confirmation of this had ever materialized.

Thus, Cardassian and Vorta engineers had been forced to reverse engineer the device from the rough plans obtained from the Federation. Fortunately for Legate Urlak and his men, the DST had finally been completed just before the Cardassian rebellion against the Founders. The

Ansata's device had the highly undesirable side-effect of warping genetic material in living subjects, fatally altering humanoid DNA after an unspecified number of trips through the machine. Although the Dominion researchers had been unable to solve that problem, the DST had proven capable of reliably delivering explosive devices in limited field tests. Now, it would carry out that function, and much more.

As miraculous a device as the DST was, the bio-engineered pathogen it would deliver to the orbiting starships was the product of fiendish genius. Dien had no doubt that the Federation would have to seriously reconsider their continued occupation of Cardassian space following the deployment of their new weapon. Legate Urlak, scheduled to be smuggled back to Lakesh through the laughably porous Starfleet cordon in orbit, had given Dien the honor of carrying out the next attack in their continuing campaign against the Federation.

On the bridge of *Gibraltar*, Juneau passively monitored the progress of their away team on the surface. Her concentration was divided between various tasks, as she also observed departmental allocations of sensor capacity and power usage. An alarm began to trill at her station and she quickly toggled her surface scan to active mode. A surge of adrenaline coursed through her, and Juneau exclaimed too loudly, "Captain, I'm detecting explosions at the refugee camp!" Then her surface scans became a flickering kaleidoscope of random colors and patterns.

"Red alert. Shields up, standby weapons." Sandhurst stepped down into the bridge well and moved to Juneau's side as he examined the readings for himself.

The lieutenant's hands danced across her console as she tried in vain to increase resolution and cut through the interference. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what happened. Suddenly it's just garbled."

Sandhurst placed what he hoped was a calming hand on her shoulder and frowned. "It's all right, Lieutenant. The signal's being jammed. Keep trying." The captain moved back to the command chair and resumed his seat as he looked to the duty security officer at the Tactical station. "Mister Ellis, have the standby security team report to transporter room one. If they're unable to get a lock on the refugee camp due to the interference, have them report to the shuttle bay." He turned to an ensign at the auxiliary station, "Hail the *Phoenix* and let them know what's happening."

Captain Banti Awokou sighed as the red alert klaxon began blaring aboard the *Phoenix*. The *Nebula*-class starship had been the first relief vessel to arrive in orbit around Lakesh two and a half weeks earlier and had been selected as the task force command ship. As such, Awokou bore the added burden of ultimate responsibility for all Federation vessels in orbit, and all personnel on the surface.

Awokou roused his weary frame from the day bed in his ready room and tugged his uniform straight as he headed for the bridge. He had tired of the persistent tension of the assignment; the endless hours of boredom punctuated by occasional insurgent attacks like the one that had crippled *Sojourner*. Even before the assault on Taun'Ma's ship, Awokou had requested further support from Starfleet Command. However, in lieu of sending real help, they'd saddled him with a rookie captain and a crew of misfits flying a ship suitable for little more than academy cadet cruises around the Sol system.

The exec barked, "Captain on the bridge!" as Awokou strode into the command center.

He smoothly assumed his seat as the first officer vacated it, "Report."

"Sir, sensors have detected what looks to be a firefight at the Glanisuur camp. Someone has also begun jamming all communications and sensors in the vicinity of the settlement. We've lost contact with our surface teams."

Ops reported, "*Gibraltar* is signaling, sir. They confirm our readings. They say they'd just sent down an away team when this started."

Welcome to Lakesh, Captain Sandhurst, Awokou thought dryly. The captain looked to the exec, "Commander, scramble the assault shuttles, and beam our ready response teams to the surface. Put them down outside the enemy sensor blind; they can close with the enemy on foot."

His staff quickly set about carrying out his instructions, and Awokou prepared himself to oversee what might be their first stand-up fight with their frustratingly elusive opponents. After weeks of suffering hit-and-run tactics, he relished the thought of fixing the enemy in place and crushing them with superior firepower.

As he watched the first of *Phoenix*'s heavily armed shuttles depart on the main viewscreen, the captain's musings were interrupted by a brilliant white flash of light that briefly filled the bridge and caused spots to dance in front of his eyes. "What the hell?" He shot to his feet as he instinctively drew a small hand phaser from its concealed housing in the command chair. Other bridge crew reacted similarly; some stood with weapons drawn while others remained manning critical stations. He heard the XO call for a security team to the bridge, but Awokou saw nothing out of place.

He looked to the science officer, "Was that a scan of some kind?"

The lieutenant checked her readings and turned to the captain. Just as she opened her mouth to answer, the woman began to convulse and collapsed to the deck. Captain Awokou barely had time to comprehend that others around him were exhibiting similar behavior before his head was filled with a searing agony that wrenched an involuntary scream from him, as he too fell to the floor. Darkness enveloped him and Awokou awaited the final seconds of his life. To his horror, he discovered that despite his inability to move or otherwise access his senses, he remained fully, appallingly conscious.

"Damn!" The projectile rifle bucked in Ramirez's hands as she squeezed a three-round burst at the darting form of a Cardassian insurgent. The bullets cracked ineffectually into a sheet of metal covering the wall of a refugee shanty. The exec made a few disparaging comments about the Cardassian species as she waited for the last of their retreating group to clear the smoldering prefab they had been using for concealment. She

then sprinted after them.

The fight for the refugee encampment had dissolved into a hundred separate engagements. Individuals and groups stumbled into one another among the smoke and confusion, which resulted in brief but vicious clashes where surrender was not an option.

Their group had grown to nine members, including three other Starfleet personnel and two civilian aid workers. Lar'ragos had the lead, and he moved silently but quickly ahead to scout for trouble. The group dashed from building to building to avail themselves of whatever cover was present as they attempted to avoid further contact with the insurgent death squads. Taiee was carried along with them, still unconscious and clearly in need of more medical attention than they were capable of providing.

As she brought up the rear of the formation, Ramirez cursed the inaccuracy of the projectile rifle. She had trained exclusively with energy weapons since the academy and had only a passing familiarity with the operation of antique small arms. Although a part of her struggled with the relative indignity of assuming the rear-guard position, she had decided that Lar'ragos was the best choice for guiding them out of their current predicament.

The El-Aurian was leading them towards a rock outcropping to the east of the refugee settlement. From what Lar'ragos could tell through his binoculars, the area offered a more defensible position, as a narrow gulley cut by a stream snaked through the jutting escarpment. This would give their attackers a single avenue of approach, and Lar'ragos hoped to hold them off until reinforcements arrived on scene.

Lar'ragos had come to the conclusion that none of the enemy were using remote sensing devices. He guessed that the dampening field surrounding them affected the death squads just as efficiently. Thus far he had been unimpressed with the capabilities displayed by the Cardassian aggressors. They appeared to lack fundamental training in everything from marksmanship to small unit tactics and had attacked the camp more like a poorly led mob than a disciplined military unit.

Their sole advantage had been the dampening field that neutralized Federation weaponry. As far as he could tell, the young Cardassian men and women who were attacking had likely been recruited only weeks earlier. He very nearly felt sorry for them, impulsive and impressionable youth being used as someone else's cannon fodder. His empathy ended, however, where their attempts to kill him began.

Lar'ragos stopped cold as he sensed something beyond sound. He measured the brutal intent of another sentient being. He held up one hand to stop the progress of the others behind him as he took aim at a Starfleet issue cargo container some fifteen meters away. Lar'ragos pulled the trigger and let fly another salvo of flechettes just as the armed Cardassian female began to rise from behind the container. The youth and all her living potential ended abruptly as the tiny missiles found their mark.

Chapter 6

Captain Sandhurst tried not to fixate on the pulsing crimson alert lights that flared in perfect time throughout the bridge. His people were on the surface, under attack, and he was virtually helpless to assist them. Ops had been unable to cut through the sensor jamming at the settlement, and Plazzi had proved equally incapable of pinpointing the source of the interference.

So this is command, he thought soberly. Sandhurst sat in a compartment full of people and felt as lonely as if he was on a solitary trek across the Vulcan Forge. Now he began to understand why officers like William Riker were loath to give up the first officer's position. Better to be in the thick of the action than to sit and wait in impotent silence.

"Chief Townsend to Captain Sandhurst."

The transporter chief's voice seemed to boom from the overhead speakers on the tension filled bridge.

"Go ahead, Chief."

"No go on the transporter lock, sir. Do you want me to put them down outside the zone of interference?"

"Negative, Chief. Send them to the shuttle bay."

"Aye, sir."

An alarm began to sound at both the Science and Operations consoles simultaneously. Plazzi acknowledged it first, "Sir, we're detecting an anomalous energy signature. It..." he paused, his screen flickering as he struggled to divine meaning from raw data, "...it appears to be some kind of subspace disturbance, localized to several sections of *Gibraltar's* hull, Captain."

Sandhurst sat forward, "Our hull? Explain."

Plazzi scratched at his beard. "I'd love to, sir. However, all the sensors are telling me is there's been some kind of highly localized subspace disruption. It was restricted to within one-one-hundredth of a millimeter of our hull plating."

At Operations, Juneau announced, "Sir, I'm getting a distress call from the *Phoenix*." She frowned, "It looks like their automated disaster beacon, Captain." The junior lieutenant took some measure of comfort from not having yelled her observations like a panicked cadet this time.

Sandhurst stood. "Put *Phoenix* on screen." The image on the main viewer shifted and centered on the starship, a tiny silver point holding position above Lakesh's day side. "Magnify." Another shift in the display revealed the *Nebula*-class ship under her own power with running lights cycling normally. "Any information on the nature of the emergency, Mister Juneau?"

She accessed the encrypted subtext of the signal. "Yes, sir." Juneau quickly scanned the content, "It appears internal sensors detected a viral contaminant that was identified in several areas of the ship simultaneously. The crew in the affected areas collapsed, and the ship's computer automatically initiated ship wide quarantine protocols."

Sandhurst gripped the back of Juneau's seat headrest with such force that his knuckles began to whiten. He forced himself to relax his hands as he called to Plazzi, "Elisto, can you confirm that?"

From the Science station, Plazzi reported, "Confirmed, sir. Scans of the ship show negative internal movement by the crew, although I'm getting normal life sign readings. Emergency forcefields and bulkheads are in place. I'm also reading... a residual energy discharge." Sandhurst turned to look at Plazzi, the older scientist's eyes betraying a flicker of momentary terror. "It looks to be the same kind of subspace anomaly we just encountered."

The bridge fell totally silent for a full five seconds. Sandhurst then realized all eyes were on him. He managed to ask in a reasonably conversational tone, "Any sign of pathogens aboard?"

Another ten seconds of silence followed as Plazzi conducted internal scans. "Negative, sir."

Sandhurst turned and favored the rest of the bridge crew with a faint smile. "We're apparently fine, people. Let's mind our duties and make sure we stay that way."

The captain looked to Ops. "Lieutenant, what's the status of *Phoenix's* shuttles?"

"The three assault shuttles are entering the atmosphere, on course for the Glanisuur camp, sir. They don't appear to have been affected."

He nodded. "Hail them. Let their people know what's happened. I'll leave it up to them whether or not they want to continue their mission or divert to *Gibraltar*." Sandhurst resumed his seat in the center chair. "Move us to within transporter range of *Phoenix*. I want medical and engineering teams standing by in environmental suits for rescue operations."

Plazzi stepped over to the captain's chair to whisper as discretely as possible, "Sir, I'd strongly recommend calling those shuttles back and having them hold position in orbit. If the crews were exposed before leaving the *Phoenix* they could spread the viral agent to the planet's population. We've no idea how virulent this pathogen is, Captain."

Sandhurst winced almost imperceptibly, and silently admonished himself for not having thought through the problem sufficiently. "You're right, Elisto." He leaned forward in his chair as he called out to the Operations station. "Lieutenant, belay my last. Have *Phoenix's* shuttles break off and form up with us. They are to observe quarantine protocols until further notice."

Lieutenant Jonin Faltyne piloted the shuttle *Xodor* through the buffeting winds of Lakesh's upper atmosphere. He was fixated on reaching the target zone as quickly as possible, retribution foremost on his mind. The attack on the encampment had been bad enough, but now *Gibraltar* was telling him there had been a nearly simultaneous strike against *Phoenix*. The Andorian's antennae twitched with impatience as he vectored towards the Glanisuur camp. He had projected his course to carefully avoid the region in which sensors and weapons systems had been mysteriously neutralized. He hoped to set his cargo of heavily armed security officers down at the edge of the interference, take off again and then loiter on station, utilizing the shuttle's optical systems to direct long-range phaser fire in support of the security team.

Ensign Robards in the co-pilot's seat emitted a grunt of surprise as a text message flashed across his monitor. "*Gibraltar's* ordering us back to orbit, sir. They're afraid we might contaminate the surface if we were exposed to whatever bio-weapon those bastards used on *Phoenix*."

Faltyne hissed, "Not a chance. The snake-heads owe us blood vengeance. Don't acknowledge the message."

"Uh... too late. I already did, sir."

"In that case, I'll note in my report that you had nothing to do with this whatsoever. Hang on and enjoy the ride, Ensign."

Juneau looked back at the captain, clearly perturbed. "The lead shuttle acknowledges receipt of the message, but is refusing to comply, sir."

Sandhurst stifled a sigh. He had been afraid of this. Given the circumstances, he'd expected some resistance from Awokou's crew. Outright insubordination, however, was more than he would tolerate. "Put me on with them, Lieutenant."

"Aye. Channel open, sir."

"This is Captain Sandhurst to *Phoenix* shuttle squadron. You are hereby ordered to return to orbit and take up station alongside *Gibraltar*. If you land on the planet, you might infect countless people with whatever was introduced to the crew of the *Phoenix*. As much as I know you want to help your crewmates on the surface, I also know you'd never willingly endanger the lives of all those innocents."

A moment passed. Then two. "Still no response, sir."

Sandhurst turned to the Tactical station. "Have our security team board a shuttle and standby. I'll relay orders shortly." To Ops he said, "Have the transporter room begin sending emergency teams over to the *Phoenix* as soon as they're ready and have Sickbay standing by for casualties. We'll need anyone from the crew who has any kind of medical training there to assist."

"Mister Lightner, move us into position over the Glanisuur site. Tactical, get a firing solution on those shuttles and lock targets."

The ensign at the Tactical station blinked, clearly startled. To his credit, he complied with the alarming order without question.

Sandhurst sat back in his chair and felt a vague sense of disassociation, as if watching his actions from outside his own body. He observed himself toggle the comms. "*Phoenix* shuttle squadron, you will stand down or I will open fire on you. I don't want to do this, but I won't risk contamination of the planet's populace."

Dear God, please don't make me do this, he thought desperately.

Aboard the *Xodor*, Faltyne watched in disgust as the other two shuttles in their flight peeled off and began gaining altitude, rising to meet *Gibraltar* in orbit. Sandhurst was bluffing; Faltyne could hear it in his voice. If the crew of the *Phoenix* had been incapacitated in a matter of moments, it was obvious neither he nor the others aboard the shuttle had been infected. He refused to leave good men and women to die on the order of a man who was not half the captain Banti Awokou was.

"Ah'm thinkin' he's serious, El-Tee." The feminine voice behind him belonged to Senior Chief Filkins, the assault squad leader.

"I don't, Chief. Our people are in trouble down there, and Sandhurst has a poor grasp of the situation." Clouds whipped past the shuttle as the craft descended into the troposphere and the gauge on his flight controls counted down the kilometers to their destination.

"Maybe so, suh, but ah'm not willin' to bet our lives on that."

Faltyne immediately recognized the sudden pressure against his neck as a phaser emitter. His antennae began to tick spasmodically.

"We can do this in one of two flavahs, suh," Filkins drawled. "You can bring us back up... or ah will. Personally, ah'd like to spare you the headache."

Juneau looked up from her console as a relieved smile spread across her face. "The last shuttle has broken off and is returning to orbit, Captain."

Sandhurst simply gave a curt nod, and it took every ounce of self-control he possessed to reign in the deep sigh of relief that threatened to escape him. The most immediate crisis having passed, it dawned on him that much needed to be done in the next few minutes to mitigate the damage suffered by Starfleet forces. He also realized with a hardening resolve that with Captain Awokou dead or disabled, he was now in charge.

“Ops, access *Phoenix’s* command codes. Route their helm control to Ensign Babbit at the auxiliary station. Mister Babbit, plot a course for *Phoenix* to the planet’s LaGrange point with its largest moon and execute. Helm, match the ship’s course and speed.”

Sandhurst settled into the captain’s chair. He felt for the first time since he’d assumed command that he might actually belong there.

“Sandhurst to transporter room one.”

“Transporter room one, go ahead, sir.”

“Are our rescue teams ready?”

“Yes, sir. On the pad and standing by in full EVA.”

“Energize.”

“Acknowledged, Captain. Team One is away. Team Two preparing for departure.”

“Thank you, Chief. Bridge, out.”

Juneau turned from her station to address the captain. “Sir, the security team has assembled in the shuttle bay. Master Chief Tark informs me that their pilot has been tapped for emergency medical duty in Sickbay.”

Sandhurst unconsciously rubbed at his chin, a memory tickling him with the spark of an idea. “Ensign Lightner.”

Lightner stiffened in his seat, glancing back. “Sir?”

“You were on the academy’s flight team, weren’t you?”

“Yes, sir. During my plebe year. The team was disbanded when the war started, Captain.”

“You’re a qualified shuttle pilot, correct?”

Lightner nodded, unable to suppress a slow grin from taking shape. “Yes, sir.”

“I have a job for you, Ensign.”

Ramirez crouched next to Lar’ragos in a spot at the mouth of the gully, their position shrouded by dense undergrowth. The rest of their party had moved farther up the ravine to a location of greater relative safety.

She passed the binoculars back to the security chief. “Nothing so far. Maybe the Cardies won’t be coming.” The crackle of gunfire from the direction of Glanisuur had become progressively more sporadic and had now ceased almost entirely.

Lar’ragos grunted noncommittally and slid the optics back into a pocket of his tactical vest.

“You disagree?”

“I think that when they’re done with our people at the encampment, they’ll come looking for us. I’m not so naive as to believe nobody saw us sneak out of there. They simply had other targets of opportunity at the time... the kind that weren’t shooting back.” He gestured over his shoulder at the gully behind them. “The problem is that if we go back up in there and help doesn’t arrive promptly, we’re going to be trapped with no back door.”

Ramirez gave him a sour look. “You led us here, Lieutenant. Are you saying that was a mistake?”

Lar’ragos shook his head, “Not at all. This was our best choice for a defensible fallback position, Commander. I’m simply giving you my professional assessment of our situation. If you’d prefer I dance around throwing rose petals and declare us safe from harm...”

She cut him off and snapped, “Stow the sarcasm, Mister Lar’ragos.”

He inclined his head apologetically. “Sorry, sir. I’m just bent at having to watch our fellows butchered while we crept out of there.” He leaned back and rested against the rocks. “This war was supposed to be over.”

Ramirez’s brief flash of anger subsided and she allowed herself a moment to mourn the dead and dying. “Yeah. That’s what we get for trying to help.” She glanced at Pava’s flechette gun, now holstered. “That’s not exactly standard issue.”

Lar’ragos chuckled darkly, “Not quite.” He brushed his finger across an inert button on his still defunct phaser rifle. “I learned a long time ago not to depend on energy weapons. They’re incredibly effective, providing they work. But if they’re all you’ve got...” He let the sentiment hang as he leaned forward and picked up the projectile rifle Ramirez had liberated from the enemy. After he examined it for a moment, Lar’ragos located a small port in the butt of the rifle containing some rudimentary cleaning equipment. He removed the magazine from the rifle, ejected the round in the chamber, and began to field strip the weapon.

Ramirez scooted back and settled against the opposite side of the narrow channel as she observed him. “I don’t remember them teaching that in tactical training at the academy.”

“You wouldn’t. I picked this up in Hekosian army basic field survival.”

She frowned. “Hekosian? Never heard of them.”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t expect that you had. The Hekosian Empire was in the Delta Quadrant.”

“Was?”

Lar’ragos shrugged as he scoured the barrel of the rifle with a cleaning rod. “It’s nearly four-hundred years past. Fates willing, the empire should have fallen ages ago. It’d be no less than we deserved.”

Ramirez looked confused. “Were you a conscript?”

His laugh was a short, sardonic bark. “No, I volunteered.” He held the barrel up to the light and looked through it to examine his progress. “I’ve identified our Cardassian friend’s problem. I don’t think this rifle’s been cleaned in months. Lucky me.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but from what little I know of your people I’ve always thought El-Aurians were pacifists.”

“Peaceful, to be sure. Pacifist isn’t entirely accurate, though. Our ability to hear between the lines makes us natural negotiators; we can more easily identify the other party’s motivations. We’re simply more inclined to settle a disagreement through dialogue than force of arms. It wasn’t that my people couldn’t fight. Our abilities precluded us from having to.”

“So, how’s that explain you?”

Lar’ragos began to scrape at the receiver and worked to clear away the accumulated residue that had jammed the weapon in his favor mere hours earlier. “The Borg had just annihilated my world. Those of my people who weren’t dead or assimilated were scattered across the quadrant as refugees. I was young, stupid, and angry. I was looking for a fight, and the Hekosian Royal Armed Forces were happy to oblige me.”

Ramirez appeared thoughtful. “Did you serve long?”

“Seventeen years and four conflicts. They called them the Korsian Wars. Your basic empire building brush warfare. Encroach, infiltrate, disrupt and conquer. We were pretty good at it, too. I served with the 507th Royal Fusiliers.”

Ramirez shook her head. “Hard to imagine. I’m guessing it wasn’t the best experience for you?”

His brush fell silent and a far-away look descended across his features. “The best of times, and the worst of times. I made some incredible friendships... but we were called upon to do some terrible things.” Lar’ragos seemed to return to the here and now and shrugged wistfully. “That’s war I suppose.”

He gestured to the XO with the cleaning rod, a less than subtle attempt to change the subject. “How about you, sir? Where are you from?”

Ramirez had appeared largely unaffected by their running firefight and their present dire circumstances, but now she looked genuinely uncomfortable. “I... I grew up in the Barisa system, a stone’s throw from Tzenkethi space.”

He smiled in response, “I know the region well. I pulled a tour out there with the diplomatic corps. I should have figured you for a colonist from the provinces.”

She shook her head absently and pretended to study the rock strata Lar’ragos was leaning against. “Not a colonist, a miner.”

“Oh, really?”

“Gas mining,” Ramirez said quietly, lost in thought. “My family owns the Acheron heavy element extraction consortium. It’s been in the family for three generations. I grew up on an orbital station, surrounded by some of the toughest, hardest working people in the galaxy.”

As she spoke, Lar’ragos fell victim to his people’s unique gifts. Images suddenly flitted unbidden across his mind’s eye as Ramirez described her childhood, visions pulled from the woman’s past. It was not telepathy, at least not in the way that ability was conventionally understood, though not even the El-Aurians themselves could explain the whys and wherefores of it.

He saw a gargantuan gas-giant, black as night. A distant and unavailable father, obsessed with his family’s legacy. A vain and selfish mother distracted by the trappings of wealth. An accident... a death. An embittered young woman fleeing home for Starfleet Academy at age seventeen...

Lar’ragos closed his eyes briefly to drive the angst-ridden visions out and spoke without intending to. “I’m sorry.”

Her reverie broken, Ramirez looked at him curiously. “For what?”

As Lar’ragos searched for some cogent response, both of them heard voices nearby. Guttural shouts in Cardassian, someone issuing orders by the sound of it. The universal translators in their combadges had been affected by the disruption field, so Lar’ragos couldn’t determine what was being said.

The two officers moved to crouching positions as Lar’ragos handed the binoculars to Ramirez. He quickly reassembled the rifle, loaded it and racked a round into the chamber before handing it back to the exec. He whispered, “Remember, it’s going to kick up every time you fire. I’d suggest using the single shot setting to conserve ammunition.” Lar’ragos drew his flechette gun and checked the action and propellant pressure.

Ramirez nodded, still scanning the vicinity through the high-powered optics. She whispered back, “Mister Loudmouth is ordering a grid search of the area, teams of three. Don’t know how many people he’s talking to, though.”

Lar'ragos quirked an eyebrow. *She speaks spoon-head; that's helpful*, he mused appreciatively.

After she handed the binoculars back to Lar'ragos, Ramirez sighted in the rifle, "Take that non-regulation gun of yours and fall back to the others."

He hesitated. "Commander, I'm a better choice to remain behind."

She took aim at the head and upper torso of a Cardassian insurgent as the man pushed noisily through a copse of small trees. "We're not having a debate, mister. Go."

"Aye, sir." Lar'ragos holstered his pistol and scabbled up the dry creek bed as quietly as possible, already formulating ideas for successive lines of defense if Ramirez were to be overwhelmed.

Ramirez waited until she was certain the rebel patrol was about to stumble across the mouth of the gully. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she squeezed the trigger, accepted the recoil, switched targets and squeezed again.

The shuttle *Heyerdahl* plummeted toward the planet; its shields glowed a bright orange-red with the accumulated heat of a high velocity atmospheric entry. In the pilot's seat, Ensign Lightner handled the controls with a skill that belied his age. Behind him in the rear compartment was an ad-hoc security team made up of personnel from various departments with prior combat experience. Master Chief Tark, a stout Tellarite security NCO led the team. Prior to their departure, Tark had familiarized the group with the newly replicated projectile rifles and pistols. Plazzi had cautioned Tark that the effects of the null field on the surface might extend to interfering with collimated energy weapons, and so Tark had ordered these produced as a contingency. Now they loaded their weapons and prepared for a high-speed landing and tactical deployment.

Lightner called back to the team, "Two minutes!" A proximity alarm began to wail as two shoulder-launched missiles targeted on *Heyerdahl* flashed up from the surface within seconds of one another. Lightner smiled as he increased power to the inertial dampeners and threw the shuttle into a corkscrewing dive. The shuttle's phasers vaporized one of the missiles just seconds from contact as the second projectile raced past and detonated well behind the wildly maneuvering craft.

Lightner observed the surface rushing up to meet them far faster than he had intended. He threw the engines into reverse and pulled up violently. The shuttle's hull groaned in protest as the small craft flared out for a landing. The rear hatch slammed open, disgorging the now thoroughly rattled security team.

Tark gathered his wits about him and switched off the safety on his rifle. He tapped his combadge to signal Lightner. "Stay on station. We'll be out of communication once we enter the field. We *will* be back with our people."

Lightner waved vigorously in response as the cargo door closed behind them.

Chapter 7

Sandhurst ducked through the small hatch and eased himself into the maintenance crawlway. Despite never having been this far into the bowels of his new command, he felt immediately familiar with his surroundings. He had spent countless hours in similarly cramped Jefferies tubes on a variety of starships during his career. At times Sandhurst still felt like an interloper on the bridge. But here, surrounded by the vibrations from the pulsing heartbeat of the main reactor, this was home.

The captain reached junction room D-3 and found Ashok inhabiting most of the volume of this tiny compartment. As he squeezed in beside the Bolian, Sandhurst grinned despite himself, "They couldn't find you a smaller ship?"

"Negative, sir," Ashok rumbled, "I suffer from acute claustrophobia."

A second passed, then two. Ashok gave no indication that he'd been joking. Sandhurst opened his mouth to say something meaningful, but nothing came to mind. The lieutenant gestured down the adjoining crawlway. "It's down there, sir. I sent my scans of the device topside to Commander Plazzi. He confirmed my suspicion."

Sandhurst levered himself into the narrow passageway and crawled on hands and knees to get into position. He rolled onto his back to gaze up at a decidedly non-Starfleet mechanism affixed to the plasma flow regulator for the structural integrity grid. It was a featureless black ovoid about five inches long and three inches wide. Sandhurst fumbled for his tricorder and scanned the device for a full three minutes before he called back to Ashok. "So, you believe this thing is siphoning power from the EPS regulator?" He felt he already knew the answer but wanted to hear it from his chief engineer.

Ashok's deep voice echoed down the crawlway, "No, Captain. Plazzi and I think it is phasing a portion of the plasma energy into the subspace range, around one-hundred seventy milli-cochrans."

"To what end?"

"We're not entirely sure, sir. One of the effects it's having is a fourteen percent reduction in overall structural integrity field strength."

Sandhurst pondered that. "It's an awfully ineffective form of sabotage, Lieutenant. Why didn't we detect the drop in field strength?" By 'we' of course, he meant Ashok and his staff, and the lieutenant knew it.

The Bolian replied, "The apparatus has tapped into the ODN feeds for this plasma conduit and the flow regulator. It appears to be sending false power readings that have been fooling our monitoring and diagnostic systems. "

The captain nodded appreciatively. "Clever." He craned his neck to look down the crawlway to where Ashok squatted uncomfortably in the junction. "Opinion, Mister Ashok. Why is this here?"

"Commander Plazzi and I believe that the device is causing a minute subspace harmonic effect in our structural integrity field that is being transmitted to the hull plating. That effect is what appears to have spared us the fate suffered by *Phoenix* and her crew."

Sandhurst sighed. "I don't suppose Bolians believe in guardian angels?"

"We do not," was the terse reply.

"Yeah. Me neither."

Glinn Trevar monitored the slaughter at the Glanisuur encampment from atop a nearby hill through a pair of sturdy Cardassian combat oculars. He was flanked by five men, all seasoned veterans of the Dominion War. Trevar himself had fought the Federation many times over the decades, beginning his career as an enlisted foot soldier in the border skirmishes that foreshadowed the first Cardassian/Federation war.

Vuram, his lieutenant, noted with disdain, "Had we been allowed to participate, Glinn, none of them would have escaped."

Trevar knew that the logic behind the plan had been explained to Vuram numerous times; the man was simply irritable at having to sit out this engagement. Trevar gave the grizzled non-comm his most saccharine smile. "If I'd let you take part, old man, I'd have to suffer through the screaming and begging from one of your impromptu 'field interrogations.' We haven't time for such luxuries."

This brought muted laughter from the others as a grinning Vuram clapped Trevar on the back.

The 'volunteers' that Trevar had sent against the Starfleet and civilian personnel at Glanisuur had acquitted themselves as well as could be expected. Experienced soldiers were in short supply, and it had been decided that the most recent converts to the insurgency would be blooded in this attack. What these young men and women lacked in experience they made up for in enthusiasm.

Starfleet had fought harder than anticipated, however, especially given their severe tactical disadvantage. Trevar had also been appalled to see Cardassian citizens fighting and dying alongside Starfleet in a vain attempt to thwart the attackers. He had ordered that the Cardassians in the encampment be spared, except if they tried to resist or otherwise aid the off-worlders. The glinn wouldn't have believed so many of his own kind could have bought into the Federation's lies, and so quickly.

The sound of someone moving through the underbrush caused Trevar's comrades to turn in unison, weapons raised. It was the runner, who moved to the glinn's side as he fought to catch his breath before relaying his message. "Sir, three assault teams beamed down from *Phoenix* just before we attacked the ship. They attempted to penetrate our perimeter on foot, but our combat teams successfully repulsed them. The

survivors have fled back out of the field area and appear to be reassembling. Glinnsed Oko's team is ranging a mortar attack on their coordinates as we speak."

"Excellent."

The man's labored breathing slowed, and he continued, "We've detected a shuttle from the other Starfleet ship. We think it may have crashed just outside the zone. Glinn Weluss is dispatching a scouting team to locate any survivors from the shuttle."

"Understood. Tell the other team leaders that we have nearly finished here. We will withdraw to assembly point three in ten minutes. There we will join with the other returning teams, and then make our way back to the bunker. Is that clear?"

The runner nodded as he gulped air in preparation for his return trip. "Yes, Glinn." He turned and scrambled back down the hill.

Trevar peered through the oculars again to watch a burly young Cardassian insurgent pulling a screaming human female in civilian clothes across the ground by her hair. Tactically speaking, he knew it would be wise to pull his team out immediately, but Trevar felt it important for these raw recruits to experience the full extent of their blood lust. He was pleased to see that the dehumanizing nature of their indoctrination was paying off handsomely.

Ramirez spared a quick glance at the rifle's translucent magazine. Five rounds left. Another bullet whip-cracked past her head and glanced off the rocks next to her, sending up a spray of particles that stung her face and neck. The surrounding walls of the gully were now pocked with dozens of such small craters, the result of the poorly aimed fire directed at her from the attacking insurgents.

She had fallen into a comfortable rhythm. She allowed her combat training to take over while she observed idly from a disconnected part of her mind. In what she fully expected to be the last minutes of her life, she combed through her memories to savor the successes of her career even as she mourned the lost opportunities to reconcile with her estranged family.

Upon graduating the academy, Ramirez's career had become her most prized possession. She felt she had risen through the ranks through sheer determination, by making sacrifices and taking chances that other more cautious officers would or could not. That was all the more reason that dying here and now, cut down by ill-trained Cardassian conscripts on some remote colony offended her sense of justice. Ramirez was destined for greater things. Her own command, a chance at a real relationship unencumbered by her substantial personal baggage... *maybe even happiness, for heaven's sake!* she raged silently. Ramirez vowed that if this was where she was going to meet her end, she would take a great many of the enemy with her.

She held her fire and waited for a clear shot. She had lost track of the number of Cardassians who had fallen in the crosshairs of the rifle's scope. How many bullets had she started with? Twenty-five? Thirty? Not every shot had been a kill, but there had been precious few misses.

The battle had ebbed and surged. There had been brief periods of silence, which she'd intentionally broken by calling out in the Cardassian tongue. She'd harangued the young militants, mocking them and insinuating she'd been a Bajoran resistance member, doubtless responsible for the deaths of some of their relatives. That had worked out well for her, with two young men provoked into a screaming charge towards the mouth of the gully.

They hadn't made it even halfway to her hiding spot.

Movement in the scope caught her attention. Three insurgents crept slowly and deliberately through the underbrush trying to get themselves into an advantageous firing position. The thick scrub around Ramirez made it difficult for the enemy to get a bead on her exact whereabouts.

The fighters had finally begun firing single rounds in her direction, rather than spraying bullets blindly as they had in the beginning. Ramirez guessed they had expended nearly all their ammunition in the orgy of violence that had consumed the Glanisuur camp.

Just as she was about to pull the trigger, something dropped into the bushes beside the three Cardassians with a metallic clink. An explosion sent a fount of dirt and shrubbery skyward, along with remains of the rebels. As the echoes of the detonation reverberated off the surrounding rocks, she could discern a flurry of muffled gunfire, then silence.

A quiet keening broke the stillness, a sound torn from the very soul of someone whose demise was near. It was silenced by a barely perceptible pop. A gruff voice from somewhere nearby called out, "Omicron!"

Ramirez's body began to tremble involuntarily as she realized that, in defiance of Klingon tradition, today was *not* going to be a good day to die. She sat back hard, her knees having held her in a crouch for far too long. Suddenly, the rifle seemed to weigh a metric ton. She cleared her throat, and with careful precision, gave the proper countersign. "Beta-four-seven!"

The bushes to her front rustled, and then parted to reveal the beaming, pugnacious face of a Tellarite. "Someone called for a taxi?"

Working in an environment suit was something every Starfleet officer trained for, yet simulations had done nothing to prepare medical technician Kasmu Yoichi for the frustration that five long, chaffing hours in the sealed garment had produced. Despite the much-vaunted comfort controls built into the suit, Yoichi was sweating like a pig. The improperly fitted helmet rubbed against his neck and forehead, and delivering medical care in the supposedly tactile-friendly gloves made him feel as clumsy as a raging Targ in an Andorian ice cathedral.

He moved from one bio-bed to another as he checked readings, dispensed injections, and generally tried to stay on top of the casualties that now threatened to overflow *Gibraltar's* substantial Sickbay complex.

The most disconcerting thing was the utter stillness. Kasmu had served aboard a Federation hospital ship during the war and was not new to

treating wounded on a mass scale. He was used to the sights and sounds of a disaster scenario: the moaning, crying, pleading, and the occasional patient trying to argue his or her way out of Sickbay.

Not here.

The casualties transferred over from the starship *Phoenix* were as silent and motionless as corpses. Their autonomic systems continued to function. Heartbeat, respiration, digestion all uninterrupted by the viral contagion visited upon them. But all neural paths to their voluntary muscle groups had been destroyed by the pathogen. They were unable to move their heads or limbs, their eyes could not focus, they could not speak.

A Vulcan engineer practiced in the mental arts had determined that the effected personnel were still conscious and aware of their situation. She had been forced to cease her efforts after the second mind-meld almost overwhelmed her with the fear and panic of the victim she had telepathically contacted.

Fully two thirds of the *Phoenix's* crew had been neutralized by the contagion. Four-hundred seventy-three people had been struck down in seconds and were now totally reliant on constant medical care for their lives. *Gibraltar's* teams were helping the survivors to decontaminate the larger ship deck by deck, but the process was projected to take days.

Kasmu looked at the chronometer on his suit's forearm display. Another hour until he rotated to a non-quarantine ward. He tried not to look too closely at the faces of his stricken comrades, as he could not bear to dwell on what they must be experiencing.

Sandhurst walked into the crowded surgical suite, one of the few compartments in Sickbay not operating under strict quarantine procedures. Taiee lay atop the exam table, the clamshell surgical support frame raised over her. The EMH worked tirelessly to heal the grievously wounded officer as nurses and medical technicians attended to the other away team members.

Ramirez stood, arms crossed, her eyes fixed on Taiee. She appeared oblivious to the med-tech who swept a dermal regenerator over the cuts and shrapnel punctures on her face and neck. Sandhurst suppressed a smile as he noticed Lar'ragos, unable to sit idle, as the El-Aurian assisted the busy medical personnel by readying hyposprays for injection. *As bad as things are*, Sandhurst thought, *there are still some constants in the universe*. The captain approached the exec, "Report, Commander."

Ramirez blinked and seemed to notice Sandhurst for the first time. She gathered herself together, stood straight and answered crisply. "Sir. The camp was attacked shortly after our arrival. The enemy used some manner of disruption field to knock out our weapons, sensors and communications. We managed to take a few projectile weapons from the attackers, and along with some other survivors of the ambush, we exited the area. Lieutenant Lar'ragos identified a defensible position, and we held out until the rescue party located us."

Sandhurst nodded, "I spoke with Master Chief Tark. You all did very well under difficult circumstances." He glanced at the doctor, but the hologram was utterly absorbed in his task. Sandhurst turned back to the away team, "Unfortunately, the Master Chief's team only recovered twelve other survivors of the attack on Glanisuur. The Cardassians were brutally thorough."

Ramirez's jaw muscles rippled with repressed anger, and for want of anything better to do she abruptly waved off the med-tech who'd been assisting her.

The captain continued, "I wish I could give you the break you deserve, but the situation on Lakesh is getting worse. There have been over a dozen separate attacks on relief missions in the past six hours. Owing to the insurgents' new bio-weapon, I'm ordering the withdrawal of all Federation personnel from the surface until we can put together a plan for a workable defense."

He looked to the exec and security chief as he somberly intoned, "Pava, I need you back on the bridge as soon as you're cleaned up. This is going to get worse before it gets better." Sandhurst focused on Ramirez, "Commander, you'll be getting your first command billet. I only wish the circumstances were better. Report to the *Phoenix* as acting CO."

Chapter 8

What little remained of the Nausicaan raider drifted lazily past the Klingon battlecruiser *Kang*. The vessel had been shredded by the *Kang*'s forward disruptors during the final seconds of a last-ditch suicide run at the imperial warship. General K'Vada marveled at the audacity of their Cardassian foes, to attack a *Vor'cha*-class cruiser with only a handful of corsairs, fighters, and shuttles in support of a modified Talarian cargo vessel outfitted with capital weapons.

The insurgents here in the Esob system were not lacking in courage, K'Vada would grant them that. They had not picked their battles wisely, however. In a single engagement, the Klingon forces had destroyed a contingent of vessels that might have harried Federation and Klingon aid convoys for weeks had they not been so carelessly committed.

Cardassian rebel assaults on allied military and relief forces had been on the rise since the end of the war, but thus far they had been scattered and of inconsistent intensity. Thankfully, no single figurehead had risen up to accept the mantle of leadership and coordinate the efforts of all those Cardassians who hungered for freedom from the occupation that, in K'Vada's opinion, they so richly deserved.

The general would be hard pressed to admit it, but he was glad that the resistance was being so quickly overwhelmed. When he looked into the eyes of his comrades, he no longer saw the call of the hunt, the warrior's spirit. The war had exhausted them; it had actually managed to sate the previously unquenchable Klingon desire for battle and conquest.

These men and women wanted to return home to their families, to share their stories of courage and honor with their loved ones and carve their names into their Houses' ancestral histories.

He stood from the command chair as he nodded to Captain Yejokk, "The ship is yours. Proceed to Quedis Prime and carry out retaliatory bombardment. We'll see if these insolent back-births can be taught to heel before we're forced to expunge them entirely."

K'Vada strode off the bridge to walk the dimly lit and echoing corridors of the *Kang*. He was treading in dangerous waters, and he relished the sensation. The High Council had not given the general permission to conduct reprisals on such a large scale, but neither had they forbade it. Doubtless, the Federation would howl indignantly and insist that the many could not be made to pay for the crimes of but a few. So be it. Mercy was not the Klingon way; victors subjugated the vanquished. The conquered could not be allowed the indulgence of armed rebellion, lest others see their impudence as a sign of Klingon weakness. The Cardassians had proved too dangerous to be allowed to exist as anything other than a servitor race to the Empire and its allies.

At last, K'Vada reached his destination, the ship's strategic intelligence center. In this spacious compartment, dozens of warriors and assorted technicians hunched over computer terminals as they compiled and analyzed all manner of data collected by subspace transceivers, remote spy drones, and intelligence agents in the field. All potentially relevant information collected from throughout the sectors of space that K'Vada's 8th Task Force was responsible for was routed to this room.

Commander Vurdis held the duty watch officer's post at this hour and maintained a vigil over all SIC operations from a large console atop a raised dais in the center of the room. She stood as K'Vada ascended the steps to the platform, then executed a formal Klingon salute which brought a bemused grunt from the general. "Status?"

"Nominal, sir. Units in all sectors have reported in on schedule."

"Anything of note?"

Vurdis handed a data padd to her superior, "Yes, General. We've had some interesting subspace traffic from the Crolsa system. Decrypted intercepts indicate the Starfleet task force there is apparently experiencing difficulties with the Cardassian colony world of Lakesh. From what we've been able to gather, they've lost one starship in the past day, and suffered serious casualties on another. It looks as if they're also facing stiff resistance from insurgent forces on the surface."

K'Vada scowled as he scrolled through the report. "Why is this the first I've heard of it?"

Vurdis replied, "It appears as though Starfleet has been careful to keep this information restricted to their chain-of-command, sir."

The general snarled, "You mean they've kept this from us intentionally?"

"It would appear so, General. Either they are genuinely embarrassed about their inability to control the rebellion on Lakesh, or they fear what Klingon retaliation would mean for the population of the planet."

K'Vada growled with disgust, "Fools! Resistance must be met with overwhelming might, not words." He leaned forward and pounded his fist on the comms switch. "Bridge, new orders. Inform the *Yaku* and *Vaj'la* to continue with the present mission. Set course for the Crolsa system immediately, best speed. Tell the *Grolkam* they will escort us." He abruptly severed the channel and then looked to Vurdis. "It was a mistake to entrust Cardassian worlds to Starfleet supervision. Better that we had conquered the Union ourselves four years ago. The Dominion would never have gained a foothold in the Alpha Quadrant."

The general jabbed at the control interface to call up an image of Lakesh on one of the room's master view screens. "Whoever is responsible for these attacks must not be allowed to capitalize on their success."

He turned and stormed back down the steps as he headed for the exit. "If we must save Starfleet from their own incompetence, then that is how it shall be!"

Vice Admiral Salk's stern countenance filled the viewer on Sandhurst's desktop terminal. The Vulcan flag officer was stationed on Starbase 375, the closest major Federation outpost other than Deep Space Nine. The captain had just spent the last half hour updating Salk on the perilous Federation situation on and around Lakesh.

At Sandhurst's insistence, the seven Federation supply ships and four other non-aligned relief vessels in orbit had withdrawn to positions at the LaGrange points between Lakesh and the planet's two moons. The personnel wounded by the bio-warfare attack on the *Phoenix* had been transferred to some of the recently emptied civilian cargo ships and had been placed in medical stasis chambers. The industrial replicators on the surface had been reprogrammed to produce the components necessary for the stasis tanks, before *Gibraltar* and *Phoenix's* retreating security teams destroyed the invaluable devices to prevent them from falling into insurgent hands.

Salk was, to put it mildly, unimpressed with Sandhurst's strategy. "I am curious as to the logic behind a complete retreat from the surface of the planet, Captain." The Admiral's vocal inflections were irritatingly precise, and Sandhurst wondered if they were intended to produce the level of frustration he was currently experiencing. The Vulcan's unwavering gaze continued to bore into the captain from lightyears away.

Sandhurst made sure to keep his tone calm and even as he formed his rebuttal. "With respect, Admiral, the security situation of our forces in orbit had been compromised. Even without the bio-weapon used on *Phoenix*, we'd have been hard pressed to maintain an effective peacekeeping presence on the ground. I can't say for certain that the enemy has us outnumbered, sir, but I am sure they are fielding advanced weapons and sensor countermeasures that we haven't encountered before, not even at the height of the war. Given the losses suffered in the past twenty-four hours and our enemy's apparent ability to strike us at will, I felt the only sensible recourse was to pull back, study the situation, and reconstitute our assets."

Reconstitute our assets? Sandhurst felt as if he were making a cadet's presentation in an academy strategic command course.

The admiral appeared unmoved by Sandhurst's argument. "You would have me believe your only option was to evacuate the entirety of the Federation presence on Lakesh, leaving control of the planet in the hands of what is assuredly a tiny, militant minority? I presume you realize that such action will only encourage similar uprisings among other like-minded groups?" Without waiting for a reply, Salk admonished, "I would caution you that historically speaking, a single such event can be the proverbial spark that ignites an inferno."

The captain held an exasperated sigh in check. "I understand your concerns, sir. In fact, I share them. We've been on the defensive since *Gibraltar* arrived in orbit. Right now, we're in an untenable tactical position. We're fighting the enemy on their terms and time table. As acting on-scene commander, I believe our best hope of success under these circumstances is to gather intelligence on our enemy while making ourselves as difficult a target as possible."

"So noted. I have documented my objections for the record, Captain" Salk returned dryly. "I will not attempt to micro-manage this mission from here. However, in the eventuality that your conduct on this assignment results in further review by Starfleet Command, I have logged my formal opinion of the decisions you have made to date."

Abruptly changing tacks, the admiral held up an isolinear optical chip, which he then inserted into his terminal. "We have analyzed the information gathered by your sensors during the attacks on your ships, and Starfleet Intelligence has made some interesting discoveries. It appears the *Phoenix* has fallen victim to what we'd hoped to be a peculiar technological dead end."

Still on the defensive, Sandhurst remained silent, waiting for his superior to elaborate.

The captain's monitor now displayed a split screen, with Salk on one half and technical schematics overlaid with text on the other. "More than a decade ago, a little-known terrorist organization on the planet Rutia IV created a device utilizing a spatial fold as an alternative to standard matter/energy transport..." The admiral went on to explain how the device had been used, and how Starfleet Command had ordered all data regarding that particular line of research classified.

Well, the captain mused, that explains why Elisto couldn't find anything similar in the Federation database. I'd almost begun to doubt his competence.

Salk finished his brief, then raised an eyebrow in an expression tantamount to a look of complete incredulity on a human. "Captain, can you explain how a device that seems to have no other purpose than to create a defensive barrier against just such a dimensional shift has simply appeared aboard your ship?"

Sandhurst answered without hesitation. "I cannot, Admiral. Lieutenant Ashok assures me that he inspected every meter of maintenance conduit in the ship prior to leaving drydock. He personally oversaw the final phase of *Gibraltar's* refit. If he tells me it wasn't there when she left Starbase 234, it wasn't there." Sandhurst clasped his hands together and rested them in his lap to prevent a bout of nervous fidgeting. He didn't like where this was going.

"In which case you have a saboteur on board. I trust you are taking appropriate measures to identify the culprit?"

"Yes, sir. My chief of security is conducting interviews as we speak. However, I'm not so sure the intent was sabotage. Had the person or persons in question planted a bomb on that same flow regulator instead of the mystery device, it would have seriously compromised our structural integrity field. As I see it, whoever did this appears to have saved my crew from a debilitating bio-warfare attack."

Admiral Salk paused to digest the captain's comment before he delivered his acerbic reply. "Your conclusion is based on defective reasoning, Captain. The presence of the device aboard your ship indicates a fundamental collapse in your onboard security and safety protocols. To trust in the intentions of parties whose objectives are unknown is illogical in the extreme."

Sandhurst rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Be that as it may, sir, that's my decision." He raised his eyes to the screen again and forged ahead. "I could use any assistance you could provide by way of more ships or resources."

Salk consulted a padd. "I have routed the starship *Soval* to your coordinates, but it will not reach you for another five days. I regret that no

other Starfleet assets can currently be diverted from ongoing assignments."

Terrific, the captain thought bitterly. *Nothing from command but criticism and empty promises. I guess we go this alone.*

Banti Awokou's ready room aboard the *Phoenix* was a comfortably outfitted office, meticulously decorated with cultural artifacts from dozens of worlds which, despite their divergent origins, somehow managed to complement one another. Taguan death masks hung alongside Hutu tribal idols. A replica of a pre-Surak Vulcan sand sculpture sat next to a detailed model of humanity's first lunar base. The captain's forceful personality was stamped into every book, tapestry, picture, and bauble in the compartment, and their presence only served as a reminder to Liana Ramirez that she was trespassing here.

As she sat at the desk reviewing progress reports on *Phoenix's* ongoing decontamination operation, she mused that this was not precisely how she'd envisioned her first command experience. The crew was still in shock from the severity of the attack, and the grotesque nature of the injuries inflicted on the victims. The pathogen had effectively decapitated the vessel's command structure and had infected the entire senior staff with the exception of one person, the chief operations officer, Lieutenant Faltyne.

The crew's distress at their collective loss was only magnified by the perceived indignity of being placed under the command of *Gibraltar's* XO. Ramirez was tempted to wonder if Sandhurst really needed her here, or if this was pay back for her attitude upon his taking command of *Gibraltar*. Considering the meeting she was about to have, the irony was thick enough to choke on.

The door chimed, and Ramirez sat a little straighter in her chair. "Enter."

Faltyne, the Andorian lieutenant responsible for the abortive mini-mutiny among *Phoenix's* shuttle flight to Lakesh, walked in and came to attention, flanked by two security officers. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

His statement was clearly meant as sarcasm, but Ramirez let it slide. She could not help but feel a certain kinship for the man. In many ways, Faltyne's career had mirrored her own. Beginning his service in the Security/Tactical branch, he had demonstrated a gift for leadership early on. Each of his service evaluations had contained greater praise than the one before, and in preparation for an eventual rise to the command division, he'd transferred to the Operations branch. He had been pegged by his superiors as a rising star, one of the up-and-coming young officers destined to one day captain his own ship. His fit of temper and blatant insubordination following the attack on the *Phoenix* had called all those assumptions into question, however. Now, his future as a Starfleet officer was hanging by a fragile thread.

Ramirez motioned to the chair facing the desk, and Faltyne sat. She dismissed the two guards, who took up station just outside the doors as they hissed closed. "Lieutenant, I want you to hear me out before saying anything. Captain Sandhurst has authorized me to drop all charges of insubordination and conduct unbecoming that you're currently facing, providing you agree to his terms."

Faltyne looked intrigued but maintained a defiant posture.

"I need someone to function as my first officer, and your name is at the top of the list. The crew knows and trusts you. However, before I make my decision, I want assurances from you that you're done running off and trying to play by your own rules. I won't have someone's thirst for revenge jeopardizing the safety of the crew."

Faltyne's blue skin darkened with a blush as his antennae waved in short, frenetic bursts.

Ramirez had attended the academy with an Andorian cadet who had become a close friend and knew from experience with their non-verbals that the lieutenant was wrestling internally with extreme agitation. "Permission to speak candidly?"

Ramirez nodded wordlessly.

"I should be sitting in that chair, not you."

"You probably would be," she responded icily, "if you hadn't violated Captain Sandhurst's orders yesterday. Honestly, after your little performance, you should be in the brig instead of restricted to quarters. However, with so many of your crew out of commission, the captain felt we'd be better served with you doing your duty." She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table, hands intertwined. "You owe him, Lieutenant."

Faltyne looked unconvinced. "You're saying that if I tow the line and do my job, he's going to forget about the whole thing?"

Ramirez nodded slowly to emphasize the point. "That's what I'm saying. The man could end your career with a single incident report, but he's not going to do that unless you force his hand." She fixed the steeliest gaze on him that she could muster, but Faltyne met her eyes unflinchingly.

"The deal is this: You become my XO. You follow my orders, and we follow his orders. It's a nice, cozy little chain-of-command." She rested back in the chair to observe the lieutenant as his antennae now cut slow, thoughtful arcs through the air. "Does that work for you, Mister Faltyne?"

Faltyne's expression was a mix of resignation and relief. In truth, despite his bluster he was grateful to have been given a second chance. His actions on the day in question seemed so alien now, so completely unlike him. He'd let his anger and his warrior ethos guide his hand, and his quest for vengeance had temporarily overridden his common sense and his dedication to duty. The Andorian was also thankful that Sandhurst wasn't any more enthusiastic than he to publicize the incident.

"I agree, sir."

Ramirez reached out and toggled the intercom to address the waiting security officers outside. "Gentlemen, thank you. You're dismissed."

She stood to extend a hand. “I’m looking forward to working with you, XO.”

Faltyne rose as well and took her hand in a firm grip. It was less a mere handshake, he thought, and more the confirmation of a sacred clan pact. Having witnessed what he believed to be the end of his career, he found himself pulled back from the precipice, spared the indignity of a court martial and a return to Andoria in disgrace. “As am I, sir.”

Legate Urlak looked on with approval as his captains put the finishing touches on the next phase of the insurgents’ resistance strategy.

Guls Dien and Panor had devised an impressive attack plan for the modest squadron of ships available to them. They would begin by confronting the depleted Starfleet presence in orbit of Lakesh, and would eventually move outward, taking their fight to the occupiers’ forces system by system.

For the initial attack, the Cardassian ships would emerge from a holographic sensor blind established in a crater of Lakesh’s largest moon. They had remained undetected there since before the arrival of Federation ships to the Crolsa system weeks earlier, protected by the same sensor dampening field that had been employed in the Glanisuur operation.

Urlak hoped the Klingons would soon appear on scene. More so even than the continued attrition of Starfleet forces, the Empire’s presence would serve to give the insurgency assured longevity. The legate believed that only when the inevitable Klingon reprisals began would the average Cardassian, already wearied and traumatized by war, understand the necessity of continued resistance. This was to be a fight for the very survival of their species.

A Klingon campaign of attempted genocide against the Cardassians would poison the Empire’s relationship with the Federation. At the very least, the alliance between the two powers would crumble as the Federation worked to distance itself from Klingon atrocities.

The most fortunate outcome in Urlak’s opinion would see the two governments going to war over the issue. The legate relished the idea of pitting the Federation’s sense of moral superiority against the Klingons’ codes of honor and tradition.

Holographic symbols that represented the insurgency’s three *Hideki*-class corsairs trailed thin lines through the air to join with the icon representing their single *Galor*-class warship. A cloud of *Ordis*-class fighters, small one-man craft, enveloped the image of the Federation starship *Gibraltar*. As the four larger craft concentrated their fire on the *Phoenix*, Gul Panor continued his presentation, a running commentary on the battle strategy on display overhead. “While the fighters harass *Gibraltar*, we will focus our firepower on the *Nebula*-class ship, clearly the greatest enemy threat. We will utilize the dimensional shift transporter to beam photon torpedoes inside the ship’s shield bubble. If successful, this tactic should result in our disabling of the *Phoenix*.”

Urlak knew that Panor had included the proviso ‘if’ because of the DST’s failure to successfully deliver the engineered virus onto *Gibraltar*. The technicians still had no definitive explanation. The best they could come up with was that perhaps the DST had delivered the pathogen off-target and had missed the ship entirely. The competing theory was that the virus had arrived on time and on target, but that the interdimensional transit had warped the virus’ DNA to such a degree that it was rendered inert. Regardless, Urlak now had serious doubts about what had been the movement’s most promising new weapon.

Panor continued, “Once *Phoenix* has been dealt with, we will make short work of *Gibraltar*. After we have neutralized both starships, our forces will attack the civilian relief vessels holding at the moons’ LaGrange points. We estimate these ships contain sufficient foodstuffs, medical and survival supplies to support our cause for the next year.”

That brought mutterings of approval from the assembled insurgent leadership. “We’ll take those ships we believe can be retrofit with weapons, and we’ll scuttle the rest.”

Urlak smiled, “Well done, gentlemen. Your plan is approved. How quickly can we implement it?”

Dien spoke up, “Twelve hours, sir. We only need to finish the installation of the DST onboard the *Vintar*.”

The legate rose from his chair. “Proceed.” He took a last look at the plan, then turned and walked away. *Better not to over think things*, he thought. *Events will transpire as they ought to. The future of Cardassia depends on it.*

The maintenance bay was located just off main engineering. Captain Sandhurst, Lt. Commander Plazzi, and Lieutenant Ashok were gathered around the central worktable, under the glare of lighting directed at the surface from overhead. Atop the table was a partially assembled device bearing a striking resemblance to the apparatus joined to *Gibraltar*’s plasma flow regulator.

Sandhurst was irritated. Reverse engineering the multi-phasic distortion generator, as they had come to name it, was proving more difficult than anticipated. They had detailed scans of the device’s internal components and structure, and Sandhurst had felt certain their understanding of how the mechanism operated was sufficient to enable the three of them to build a working reproduction. So much for his vaunted engineering skills, he thought soberly.

Plazzi examined the schematic displayed on the wall-mounted view screen. He scratched idly at his beard as he tried to puzzle out one of the more mystifying attributes of the device, namely how it managed to infiltrate the ship’s monitoring and diagnostic computer subroutines. He gestured at what they had all agreed was probably the central computational nexus, “You see these tubule looking structures here? I’m betting these are what the device extrudes in order to penetrate our optical data network. They appear very similar to Borg technology, both in design and function.” He traced a finger along a circuit pathway, “And this processor here, this is a Bynar design.”

Ashok spoke up, his voice booming unexpectedly in the confines of the work bay. “The programming that I managed to download from the original contained a series of complex algorithms. They were in a Vulcan programming language, if I am not mistaken.”

"I hate to say it, but if a foreign power built this, they based it on a great deal of Federation know-how." Plazzi shook his head.

The captain frowned, as if having come to a difficult conclusion. "I think we built this."

Plazzi gave the captain a sidelong glance. "And by 'we' you mean?"

"The Federation. This thing was constructed by someone using our techniques, utilizing technology only we have access to." The captain sat down on a stool at the table and looked thoughtful. "Somebody who either knew or suspected that we'd encounter the dimensional shift transporter technology put this thing on our ship."

Plazzi appeared confused, "Why not simply tell us? Why the secrecy? If we'd been notified, we could have more easily integrated the device into our systems."

Sandhurst shrugged. "I don't know. Whatever the reason, it's damn troubling." He shook his head sadly. "And why only us? If they'd placed one of these devices aboard *Phoenix*, we might not have four hundred plus people in cryo-sleep now."

Ashok's imperturbable visage cracked slightly, and the huge Bolian actually looked annoyed. He struck his sizeable fist against the top of the table, which rattled the assorted tools littering its surface. "Regardless, we need to finish this. Until we can safely maintain orbit of the planet, we are effectively useless."

Plazzi quirked an eyebrow at the engineer's outburst. He winked at the captain as he set back to the task at hand. "Right, Lieutenant. To work, to work."

"No argument here, Mister Ashok." Sandhurst raised his hands in a good-natured gesture of surrender.

Chapter 9

A pall of smoke hovered above what little remained of the Glanisuur refugee encampment. The structures erected by Starfleet had been set ablaze, as had the much sought after survival tents. The attackers had expended little effort distinguishing between those buildings supplied by the Federation relief groups, and those simpler structures cobbled together by Cardassian survivors. People here rooted through the debris, scraping through ash, twisted metal and melted polymers in search of food or water or usable refuse.

Tel Hizeal, a Cardassian physician, stooped to check yet another fallen relief worker's neck for a pulse. Nothing. Tel marveled at his own species' seemingly endless talent for dispensing death and destruction.

The Cardassian survivors of the insurgent attack on the camp wandered through the smoldering wreckage in a daze. Ruins and anguish. These had become the constants in their lives since the end of the war. Every time these hardy refugees had begun to dig themselves out from under the rubble of the past, even greater evils were visited upon them. Tel wondered idly if this was the universe's revenge for the Cardassian occupation of Bajor and other vassal worlds. Perhaps there was some great karmic pool of energy somewhere beyond the stars, which had focused the sum off all the torment the Cardassian Union had caused the rest of the galaxy back onto his people. He could more easily believe that than the more mundane notion that the agony he and his countrymen were suffering was a result of something as obscure as galactic politics.

He found a shovel, clutched in the hands of a Betazoid medic. Hizeal wrenched it free of the man's death grip as he silently apologized to the recently deceased for the horror that had been their reward for their good works. He began to dig a grave, the first of many. As he slung scoop after scoop of dirt, Tel swore to himself that the deaths here would not be in vain. Cardassia must have a future in which personal freedoms and peace were things to be embraced rather than shunned. When the insurgents next appeared, he vowed, they would find themselves facing at least one more enemy.

"Bridge to Comman... uh, bridge to Captain."

Ramirez was at her desk in the ready room, deep into a Starfleet Tactical primer on counterinsurgency operations. She rubbed her bleary eyes, "Go ahead."

"Incoming message from Captain Sandhurst, sir."

"Put him through."

Sandhurst's face sprang to life on her viewer. He inclined his head, "Morning, Captain." Ramirez was momentarily flustered. Sandhurst had said it without a trace of sarcasm or irony.

"Good morning, sir."

"How's the decon coming?"

She reached for her mug of coffee and took a swig. "Better, actually. We're close to being six hours ahead of schedule. Seventy-six percent of the ship is now habitable."

"Good to hear. Anything else you need from me on this end?"

Ramirez said, "Not that I can think of, sir. Any luck with your new toy?"

Sandhurst smiled. "Yes. That's one of the reasons I called. We're putting the finishing touches on it right now. I'll be sending Ashok over to assist with its installation."

"Are we absolutely sure there's nothing buried in the programming that we don't know about?" Ramirez's expression was tinged with concern.

"I've had Plazzi and Ashok sift through the programming line by line," Sandhurst replied. "It's a complex code, but they haven't seen anything that would indicate a booby-trap." The captain leaned closer to the screen in an unconscious attempt to convey sincerity through proximity. "I wouldn't dare place this device aboard *Phoenix* if I had any doubts as to its safety."

The acting captain of the that ship found herself nodding, "Understood, sir."

Sandhurst sat back and his mood grew visibly more somber. "Seeing as you're our resident expert on the Cardassians, I wanted your opinion of our current predicament. Who are we dealing with here? What's their endgame?"

Ramirez pondered the question for a long moment before answering. "My experience would lead me to believe that we're dealing with military holdouts. Extremists who can't stomach the idea of Cardassia existing under the authority of any foreign power." She took another sip of coffee. "As for their endgame, that's easy. They want control. They refuse to live in a free society where they don't get to make the rules. They don't want the Federation or Klingons in charge, and they don't want to see a civilian government put in place. These guys are traditionalists, and in Cardassian society nothing is more traditional than despotism"

"They don't care about the consequences of their actions for the rest of their people?" Sandhurst shook his head in near disbelief.

Ramirez's expression darkened. "These monsters don't think like rational sentients, Captain. In their eyes, the average Cardassian citizen is

chattel. They've no compunctions about sacrificing as many of their people as necessary if it gets them what they want."

Sandhurst winced at the assessment. "Nice." He glanced at a padd on his desk, which contained the latest updates from Medical on the state of *Phoenix's* injured crew. "Any ideas as to how they got their hands on all the hardware they've been using against us?"

She looked less sure of her answer this time. "That I can only guess at, sir. I doubt they're producing the weapons and countermeasures themselves. What industrial capacity the allies didn't destroy during the war, the Jem'Hadar were more than happy to finish off. Somebody must be funneling these weapons to them, except I've never seen anything like these systems offered on the interstellar arms markets. I've been pouring over everything Intel has on weapons brokers and mercenary groups, but I haven't found any matches."

The captain shifted in his chair, frowning. "Conjecture?"

Ramirez gave a barely perceptible shrug. "Under normal circumstances, I'd say that maybe the Romulans were responsible. But I can't see where supporting a Cardassian rebellion would help them, especially now. They'd have to know anything they started in our zone of control would only spill over into the areas of Cardassian space they've annexed."

"I see. Well, maybe we've got a new player somewhere behind the scenes."

"That's always a possibility, sir."

The red alert klaxons on both *Phoenix* and *Gibraltar* began to sound within seconds of one another. As both ship commanders rose from their seats, they shared a resigned look before they terminated the connection.

Sandhurst stepped onto the bridge and moved to the command chair. Lar'ragos had already left it in favor of his post at the Tactical station. "Report."

His friend responded, "Sensors just detected multiple threat vessels emerging from the far side of Lakesh's larger moon. We are at red alert. Shields are up, all weapons standing by."

"Type and number?"

"Reading one *Galor*-class cruiser and three *Hideki*-class pursuit vessels."

Sandhurst sat forward slightly in his chair. "Helm, place us between the threats and the civilian ships."

Ensign Lightner sprang from the turbolift. He maneuvered past the captain's chair and hurried down into the well, where he seamlessly replaced the duty helm officer as he called out, "Aye, sir. Coming to 272-mark-041."

"Tactical, issue challenge. Warn them off." Sandhurst looked to Plazzi at the Science station. "Elisto, where did they come from?"

The older man appeared genuinely perplexed. "Unknown, Captain. We've scanned that moon at least a dozen times since arriving in orbit. Unless they're equipped with cloaking devices, the enemy's done one hell of a job of hiding them."

From Operations, Juneau announced, "Now reading additional targets inbound, Captain. Looks like... seventeen single-seat fighters... Cardassian design, *Ordis*-class." She checked her readings again. "*Phoenix* is matching our course and speed."

At Tactical, Lar'ragos called out, "All inbounds running with shields up and weapons hot. They've received our challenge hails but are still closing."

A warning chimed at Lar'ragos' station. "They're locking targets on *Phoenix*."

The captain toggled a control on his armrest to open a channel to the other starship. "Sandhurst to *Phoenix*, you are weapons free. Repeat, engage enemy targets at will."

Sandhurst watched the approaching ships on the view screen as his mind raced with various tactical calculations to include closing speed, maneuverability, pull from the planet's gravity well, shield power, competing weapons yields and ranges. He was not a natural tactician, but he had always found combat simulations to be relatively straight forward. They were equations of a sort and contained a limited number of variables in a given situation.

"Mister Lar'ragos, set photon torpedoes to proximity detonation, maximum dispersal pattern. Let's take out those fighters before they can get at the civilians."

"Aye, sir. Firing."

Gibraltar's opening salvo sent four photon torpedoes into the formation of interceptors. The projectiles blossomed brightly as the fighters executed violent evasive maneuvers and attempted to avoid the detonations.

Phoenix took advantage of her superior weapons range to loose a volley of five torpedoes at the enemy before she herself was in range of their weapons. Two torpedoes flared briefly against the forward shields of the *Vintar*, while the other three tracked towards the more maneuverable Hidekis, registering one hit and two misses.

Lar'ragos assessed, "Three enemy fighters destroyed, two disabled, and four others with varying degrees of damage."

Sandhurst gritted his teeth. His blood pounded in his ears as his pulse increased in tempo. "Concentrate phasers on the fighters when they

come in range. Target the Galor with torpedoes.”

The Galor and Hidekis opened fire in unison, their destructive energies targeted exclusively on *Phoenix*. Multiple disruptor blasts and two torpedoes slammed into the *Nebula*-class starship’s shields. From somewhere on the bridge, a voice brittle with tension said, “Shields holding at eighty-three percent.”

Ramirez clung to the command chair as the ship jolted from enemy fire. She watched as the Hidekis maneuvered to envelope *Phoenix* while the Galor continued to bear down on them, trading blow for blow. She looked to her tactical officer, previously the ensign who manned the late watch, now the senior member of his department. Ramirez spoke to him in her most reassuring voice, “Keep up the fire on the cruiser, we’ll worry about the corsairs later.”

Sweat glistened on the ensign’s forehead, but he nodded and maintained his concentration. From somewhere off-screen, two photon torpedoes from *Gibraltar* flashed past and pummeled the Galor’s starboard shields.

Gul Panor opened a channel to his fighter squadron and directed them to make a strafing run on the old *Constitution*-class, then break off and make a dash for the civilian relief ships. He surmised that should be enough of an inducement to draw *Gibraltar* away from the main fight long enough for them to finish *Phoenix*.

Panor grunted as *Gibraltar*’s torpedoes struck and threw him sideways against the armrest of his command seat while further sapping their precious shield strength. The warship trembled under *Phoenix*’s withering phaser fire. On his viewer, *Vintar*’s spiral wave disruptors answered in kind and lashed out at *Phoenix* again and again. *Just a bit closer*, he urged silently. “Prepare to engage the dimensional shift transporter,” he ordered.

“Target now in range,” his weapons officer declared.

“Forward and starboard shields are weakening,” proclaimed the engineer as his voice betrayed a hint of alarm. The new regenerative Son’a shields were a vast improvement over standard Cardassian technology, but repeated hits from high-yield Starfleet torpedoes and the constant phaser barrage were taking their toll.

Panor smiled mercilessly, “Initiate transport.”

The Cardassian fighters swarmed over *Gibraltar* and peppered her shields with a fusillade of plasma blasts and guided missiles. The older ship’s phaser banks did not cycle as quickly as Sandhurst would have liked, and in the rapid exchange of fire *Gibraltar* only managed one kill and another fighter disabled.

From Ops, Juneau noted, “Sir, the attack squadron is breaking off and heading for the civilian ships.”

Sandhurst was momentarily torn. He wanted desperately to pursue the fighters in order to prevent any further civilian casualties, but he knew that the Galor must be dealt with first if they had any chance of surviving the engagement. “Ops, hail the task force. Order the most vulnerable ships to run while those with weapons keep the fighters busy.”

“Aye, sir.”

He turned his attention back on the Galor and ordered, “Target all weapons on that cruiser and fire.”

Two torpedo casings emerged from within brilliant white flashes of light to materialize inside the perimeter of *Phoenix*’s shields. The first detonated just meters away from the ship’s triangular dorsal-mounted weapons pod. The resulting explosion decimated both the fore and aft torpedo launchers. The second device exploded on contact with the starship’s navigational deflector, and the initial blast reacted with the negatively charged anti-protons on the surface of the dish. The secondary hull of the *Phoenix* vanished in a concussive detonation that sent the vessel’s severely mauled saucer section spiraling away like a broken discus.

The blossoming explosion on his view screen heralded the end of the starship *Phoenix*, and although it had not been Gul Panor’s intent to destroy the vessel completely, he was far from disappointed. His attack force was taking more damage than anticipated. However, with the *Nebula*-class ship finished, the battle would soon be over. “Bring us about, 301-mark-187. Route auxiliary power to shields and wea...”

Vintar bucked violently as another broadside of four photon torpedoes hammered her aft and starboard shields, followed by a phaser beam that punched through the Galor’s failing starboard grid and scythed across her engine blade.

Gibraltar had landed a solid blow on the enemy, but Sandhurst took no satisfaction from it. He had just witnessed *Phoenix* torn asunder with what appeared to be contemptable ease.

From behind him, Plazzi remarked, “Registering dimensional rebound deflection, Captain. That cruiser’s equipped with a DST.” Admiral Salk’s classified data on the dimensional shift transporter had come complete with the techniques pioneered by *Enterprise-D*’s crew to track and pinpoint the use of the device.

“Keep up the fire, Mister Lar’ragos. I don’t want to give them opportunity to use it on us.”

“Aye, sir.”

Vintar wheeled about to turn her wounded flank away from the oncoming starship and expose her most robust shield grid. Her *Hideki*-class escorts raced to her aid and battered *Gibraltar*’s defenses with a sustained fusillade of disruptor fire. This forced the Starfleet ship to break off its attack run and reposition for a follow-up assault.

As she withdrew, *Gibraltar* launched a salvo of torpedoes at the three corsairs from her aft torpedo tube, an advantageous addition of the recent overhaul. Two of the torpedoes struck their targets, destroying one *Hideki* and damaging the other.

Panor studied *Vintar*’s damage control board and noted that they would have to finish this battle quickly. The insurgency’s available resources for ship repair were minimal, and the damage accrued by the cruiser thus far would take weeks to fix. He read his tactical display and felt a vague sense of relief that the *Hidekis* had driven off *Gibraltar* for the moment. For a relic, the *Constitution*-class ship was proving surprisingly tenacious. He would have to do something about that.

“Charge the DST for another transport. I want you to put a torpedo onto their bridge with a five second delay.” He knew it was both petty and tactically unsound, but Panor wanted *Gibraltar*’s captain to have time to recognize his terrible fate before being consumed by the violent matter/anti-matter reaction.

Ramirez had been thrown from the captain’s chair by the unexpectedly ferocious impact, only to crash headfirst into the base of the Operations console. Although still conscious, she was dazed, and didn’t immediately recognize the face that now appeared over her, its features distorted by her swimming vision.

“Sir, we’ve got to go.” Lieutenant Faltyne pulled her to her feet and allowed Ramirez to steady herself against him as she struggled to regain her equilibrium.

“Go? Where?” She was confused. The bridge was bathed in blood red emergency lighting, with intermittent strobe-like flashes from shattered, sparking consoles. The air was an acrid mix of smoke and the smell of charred flesh. Faltyne began directing her towards the emergency access hatch located behind a wall panel at the back of the bridge.

Ramirez struggled weakly against Faltyne’s grip. “I don’t understand. Why aren’t we returning fire?”

The lieutenant remained calm as he continued to assist her and guided her over the body of a fallen crewman whose features had been wrecked by an exploding console. “Sir, the ship is gone; we’re going to the escape pods.” He paused at a wall-mounted comms panel and activated the ship’s public address. “This is the XO. All hands, abandon ship. Report to designated evacuation areas and board the escape pods.”

The Andorian had lost a ship once before, in a doomed attempt to re-take Betazed from the Dominion’s clutches just hours after the Jem’Hadar had seized the planet. It wasn’t proving any easier the second time around. He took some small solace in the fact that most of *Phoenix*’s crew who had been struck down by the contagion days earlier were safely encapsulated within cryogenic stasis chambers aboard the civilian relief ships. At least Sandhurst had possessed the forethought to remove the injured from the two starships, the most likely targets of further attacks.

He helped Ramirez through the hatch and into the lifeboat access compartment. The lieutenant urged her towards the closest pod and then sealed her inside the tiny craft. Faltyne quickly input commands into the touch-pad beside the hatch and set the escape capsule for atmospheric entry and landing. The way this battle was going, a Federation lifeboat drifting helplessly in orbit might soon become a tempting target for victorious insurgent ships. *Phoenix*’s survivors would have better luck on the surface.

He pulled on the manual release lever which caused the explosive bolts holding the escape pod in place to discharge. This initiated the thrusters on the pod and launched the lifeboat away from the wreckage of the doomed ship. His task complete, Faltyne turned back towards the bridge. There were still others there too injured to reach the pods themselves, and he would be damned if anyone was going to be left behind.

Gibraltar continued to spar with the nimbler *Hidekis*, exchanging fire with the corsairs as she turned to make another run at *Vintar*.

Sandhurst gripped the armrests of his seat as the ship was buffeted by disruptor impacts. *Gibraltar* was outnumbered, outgunned, and the momentum of the fight was shifting in the Cardassians’ favor. He stole a glance over his shoulder at Lar’ragos, who was working his Tactical console like a concert pianist, targeting and firing weapons, modulating shield strength, and generally giving a better account of the old ship than anyone had a right to expect. The captain noted that Pava was smiling to himself. *The silly bastard’s actually enjoying this*, he thought with grim amusement. Sandhurst envied the El-Aurian’s ability to lose himself in his duties despite the direness of their predicament.

He turned back to the viewer and forced himself to concentrate on their plight. Sandhurst crunched the numbers in his head, but repeatedly drew the same conclusion. *Not enough time, not enough firepower, not enough speed*. There were no easy answers here. *If we had another ship. If only Sojourner hadn’t been...*

The idea occurred to him like a lightning strike, a blazing white-hot kernel of inspiration. Sandhurst stood, “Helm, initiate evasive maneuvers. Tactical, keep up the fire on those pursuit ships.” The captain staggered across the trembling deck plates and seated himself at an unoccupied auxiliary console. He accessed *Sojourner*’s command codes and linked to the wounded starship’s main computer. He called up a quick diagnostic on the vessel’s operational systems which caused his heart to jump in his chest as the screen indicated that the *Nova*-class ship could still move under partial impulse power. Sandhurst silently thanked the engineering teams from the *Phoenix* who had restored some of *Sojourner*’s key systems before they themselves had been attacked.

Sandhurst started a slow power buildup in *Sojourner's* impulse engines and hoped that the Cardassians would be too fixated on his ship to notice. He tied in the smaller ship's reaction control thrusters, planning to squeeze every ounce of propulsion that he could out of the craft. He looked to Helm, "Mister Lightner, bring us within one kilometer of *Sojourner's* bow, then hard turn to 042-mark-320 and reduce speed to one-sixth impulse. I want them in tight behind us."

After he routed the other starship's helm control to the interface on his command chair, Sandhurst resumed the center seat. "Lieutenant Lar'ragos, I want a full spread of torpedoes in the aft launcher. We're going to employ Tanner's gambit."

"Aye, sir. Programming torpedoes now." Lar'ragos didn't bother to look up from his console. He set the warheads so that their detonation would translate mostly into electro-magnetic shockwaves, rather than kinetic force. This technique had first been used by a United Earth starship captain in the late 22nd century, Irene Tanner, in order to blind a pursuing Romulan warbird. The lieutenant deduced that it was the captain's intent to confuse the Galor's sensors for a few seconds, though he couldn't guess why. "You've got a plan?" Lar'ragos asked. He sensed a surge of confidence in the captain's tone and demeanor.

A grim smile took shape on Sandhurst's lips. "Indeed, I do."

Gul Panor watched *Gibraltar* flee before him. He surmised that her captain must have finally realized the seriousness of his predicament. The starship could still escape, of course, but what ship's commander would be allowed to retain his rank after leaving helpless civilians behind to be slaughtered? No, Panor thought, this one would stay until his defenses had been whittled down and his options exhausted. The Cardassian had seen it before, during the war. Starfleet captains who, in their final moments, succumbed to panic and fear after running out of clever ideas.

Men and women who had made perfectly competent explorers and diplomats had been reduced to flailing like wounded animals because in the end they had not known when to cut and run. The gul could now see the telltale shimmering of *Gibraltar's* weakening shields as a Cardassian torpedo punched into the retreating starship's aft grid. "Status of DST?"

"Almost there, sir. Eight seconds remaining on the recharge cycle."

"Elisto, focus all sensor jamming capacity we have back at the Galor, every watt you can give me."

"Aye, Captain." Plazzi routed all available sensor power to the aft arrays and prayed quietly that the new captain knew what he was doing. The battle hardened Cardassians they were facing didn't seem the type to show leniency to an inexperienced captain and crew.

Sandhurst watched the hulk of *Sojourner* grow larger on the main viewer. "Pava, aft torpedoes on my order..."

"Gul, recharge cycle complete. Standing by to initiate transport!"

"Do it." Panor felt the accumulated tension in his body ebb, and he settled back into his chair to watch the fruition of his efforts. He only wished he could see the Starfleet captain's facial expression when their surprise package arrived.

"Transport complete." A pulsing alarm at the weapons officer's station caused Panor to look askance at the man. The younger officer's face was a mix of disappointment and disbelief. "Sir... it looks like our transport has somehow been refracted away from the starship's hull!"

The combat information officer announced, "They're trying to jam our tactical scans."

Panor's neck ridges tightened as his face contorted into a mask of dark rage. *Not a miscalculation*, he seethed. *They have a defense against our most potent weapon. This ends now.* "Weapons, all batteries forward." He leaned forward and raised a clenched fist, "Fire!"

With surprisingly little force behind the words, Captain Sandhurst uttered, "Fire aft torpedoes."

Lar'ragos gladly compensated for his friend's lack of enthusiasm. He grinned wickedly as he announced, "Torpedoes away."

Lightner tapped the conn control pad which initiated a nearly ninety-degree turn, "Coming to 042-mark-320, decelerating to..." His sentence terminated abruptly as Brett was thrown forward against his console in an impact that drove his breath from him. The deck lurched and bridge lighting flickered as a cacophony of thunderous impacts shredded what remained of their aft shielding. Crew went sprawling across the bridge, consoles sparked and died, and a clamor of panicked voices filled the compartment.

Somehow, Sandhurst managed to stay upright in his seat, his eyes fused to the abbreviated helm controls and sensor window displayed on his armrest console. Oblivious to the frenetic activity surrounding him, he watched the three torpedoes flare dazzlingly as they radiated interference across the electromagnetic spectrum. Sandhurst counted to five; the seconds grinding past in an excruciating torpor. Finally, he depressed forward thrust tab and sent the starship *Sojourner* on her final mission, in valiant defense of her older sister.

Gul Panor braced himself as *Gibraltar* launched three torpedoes aft towards *Vintar*, an instant before the Cardassian cruiser's salvo bludgeoned the old starship and sent her careening off course in a lateral spin. To his surprise, the missiles did not impact their forward grid, but instead erupted some hundreds of meters ahead to wash out the view screen and tactical sensors in a storm of electrons.

“Direct hit, sir. Their aft shields have failed.” The weapons officer shielded his eyes against the glare before the screen automatically adjusted to compensate. “We’ve lost sensor contact. Reading partial depolarization of the main sensor array.”

Panor leaned further forward in his seat as his taut muscles unconsciously yearned for some kind of physical release. This was it. The Starfleet captain’s final ruse. It was an old trick, one practiced by every star-faring species bred to war. Blind your opponent, then run like hell.

Gibraltar intended to confuse their sensors, cut behind the drifting hulk of the *Nova*-class ship, and accelerate away. Apparently, he hadn’t given the human commander enough credit; the man did know when to quit. Panor hoped *Vintar*’s last strike would delay the starship’s escape until his sensors cleared. “Conn, maintain course and speed.” He looked to the combat information officer, “Shut down the primary array and begin immediate restart cycle on the sensors. Uncover the auxiliary sensor node and power it up.”

A gasp from somewhere in the command center sent an unexpected chill through him. Gul Panor turned to the crackling, static filled view screen. A shadow loomed there, taking shape with frightening speed. Just as his mind identified the specter for what it was, a starship on a direct collision course, he was thrown off his feet by an impact that washed away all consciousness.

Chapter 10

The crippled starship and the Cardassian cruiser had met almost head on. *Sojourner's* mass proved more than sufficient to pierce *Vintar's* already battered shields. The science vessel's duranium hull plunged into the larger warship's interior as it crumpled, shearing away load bearing struts and opening deck after deck of the cruiser to vacuum. Gouts of flame boiled from *Vintar's* catastrophic wounds and were quickly suffocated for lack of oxygen. The combined momentum of the two ships very nearly cancelled each other out, leaving the fused spaceframes, wed in devastation, to spin slowly in the penumbra of the tortured planet below.

For a brief moment, silence reigned on *Gibraltar's* bridge. Sandhurst sat motionless in the captain's chair, head bowed as he struggled to reign in the torrent of conflicting emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. Part of his mind acknowledged the sound of someone weeping nearby, but he found himself momentarily unable to focus completely on anything exterior. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to cry. Neither urge was appropriate under the circumstances.

Sandhurst found his reaction strange because he had been in combat many times before, and this was not his first narrow escape. Being in command, however, had somehow changed the timbre of the experience dramatically. Someone, perhaps Lightner, called for medical assistance to the bridge. Sandhurst struggled internally to rouse himself. *Come on. Pull it together. You just snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. What the hell's the matter with you?*

Olivia Juneau sat mutely at the Ops station as her console displays flickered randomly. Tears streamed down her face as she cradled her visibly broken left arm in her lap. Her breath came in great juddering sobs.

Ensign Lightner deftly brought the ship back on course as he stopped the lateral spin that had resulted from *Vintar's* final attack. "Helm control reinstated, Captain. Back on previous heading, speed holding at point-one-six impulse."

Plazzi pulled himself back up into his chair at the Science station with assistance from another crewman. The older man's hand was pressed firmly to his forehead to staunch the blood seeping from a gash he had suffered when he was tossed to the deck. He looked at his console and squinted to try and clear his blurred vision as he checked the readings. He cleared his throat and announced, "Captain, the cruiser has been neutralized. They've lost main power, and all weapons and defenses are offline."

Plazzi winced and bit back a groan as his head pulsed with pain. "Looks like auxiliary power is failing over there, sir. I'm picking up approximately fifteen life signs aboard, most of them quite weak." His report complete, Plazzi pushed back his chair, leaned forward, and vomited loudly beneath his console. As he tried not to spatter his boots, the scientist reflected mordantly that he'd not had a single such concussion during his years away from Starfleet.

At the engineering station, Ensign Audette reported on their status. "Captain, we've sustained moderate damage to the dorsal section of the secondary hull and the starboard nacelle and strut. Lieutenant Ashok reports we're still warp capable, but we won't want to push it above four-point-five or so, sir. I'm also showing three of our four shield generators for the aft grid have overloaded and will need to be replaced."

Sandhurst didn't respond, so Lar'ragos broke the silence. "Can we compensate for the shortfall in the aft grid by overlapping the laterals?"

"Yes, sir. However, I estimate we'll get less than thirty-percent coverage on our aft quarter."

"Do it, then," said the El-Aurian.

The roar of a fire extinguisher discharging finally snapped Sandhurst back to life, and he craned his head around to see Lar'ragos spraying down the smoldering remains of a ruined console. The lieutenant glanced up at him to give the captain an inscrutable look as he handed the extinguisher off to a crewman, then moved to resume his post at Tactical. He assessed his board, "The two remaining corsairs and seven fighters are withdrawing, sir. Shall we pursue?" His message was clear. *The fight's not over, Captain.*

Sandhurst hesitated. The Cardassians were vulnerable. He wanted to chase them down, to capture or destroy the remaining ships and spare anyone else the misfortune of an insurgent ambush. However, he felt his first responsibility was to the survivors of *Phoenix* and his own wounded.

Finding his voice once again, he queried, "Status of the civilian ships?"

Lar'ragos answered crisply, "Reading light to moderate damage on a number of the civilian ships, sir, but they're all intact. It appears some of the larger cargo ships may have bloodied the interceptors' noses." He touched a series of controls and noted, "Sir, I'm picking up multiple distress transponders from Starfleet lifepods. I'm scanning upwards of twenty escape vehicles in orbit and on the surface."

Two medical technicians carrying a backboard and loaded for bear with several satchels of first-aid equipment arrived from the turbolift. The captain stood, his legs feeling decidedly rubbery beneath him. He moved down into the well and gently turned Juneau's chair so that she could more easily be removed from her station. Sandhurst called back to Lar'ragos, "Negative on the pursuit. Track their progress; I want to know where they're going to ground. Helm, plot a course that will allow us to rescue the *Phoenix* survivors in the least amount of time and execute."

"Aye, sir."

As he braced himself against his console with one hand in between bouts of nausea, Plazzi asked, "What about the Cardassian survivors aboard the cruiser, sir?" One of the med-techs swept the gray-haired scientist with the sensor wand from a medical tricorder while injecting him with an analgesic.

Sandhurst answered coldly, "If they're still alive when we're done recovering our people, we'll pick them up as well." The captain assisted the other med-tech in placing Juneau atop the backboard as gently as possible. He gestured to a nearby crewman, who then picked up one end of the board as the med-tech lifted the other. The two men carried the lieutenant into the turbolift, then paused to wait for Elisto as the second

medic escorted him into the car.

Sandhurst turned back to Lar'ragos. "You have the conn. Carry out recovery operations and oversee the reformation of the task force. Make sure they circle the wagons, Lieutenant." The captain stepped up to the upper deck and through the parting doors to the ready room, "I'm available if needed."

He had been expecting the chime. Pava had given him nearly thirty minutes. Sandhurst had expected him in half that time. "Enter."

Lar'ragos stepped into the ready room and moved just far enough into the compartment to trigger the doors to close behind him. "I have a status report, sir."

Sandhurst reached out and toggled his computer terminal off. He'd been assiduously avoiding writing the report detailing *Phoenix's* destruction. The event was too fresh in his mind. He needed both time and emotional distance from the incident before he could chronicle it in the sterile prose of a Starfleet missive. "Proceed."

"We've begun recovery ops for the escape pods, and we've identified a largely intact section of *Phoenix's* primary hull that was thrown clear of the explosion. Science's life scans of the wreckage are indeterminate, so I've ordered search and rescue teams beamed over."

The captain's expression was unreadable, but to Lar'ragos' ear his friend's vocal inflections were saturated with competing levels of angst and regret. "What of the surviving Cardassian ships?"

"Sensors tracked them to the Crolsa system's asteroid field, where we lost contact. I don't know if the interference was a natural byproduct of the asteroid debris, or if they're employing more sensor countermeasures."

Sandhurst nodded distractedly, turning away in his chair to look out the large circular viewport behind him. "Any word on Commander Ramirez?"

Lar'ragos remained at parade rest, feet shoulder width apart with hands clasped behind him. "No, sir. None of those rescued from the pods so far were from *Phoenix's* bridge. However, it sounds as if her exec was the one who gave the order to abandon ship."

Sandhurst closed his eyes tightly, then opened them to find Lar'ragos scrutinizing him. He swiveled back towards his security chief and said, "Casualty report?"

"Eight injured; two of them seriously. Sickbay reports that all are expected to recover fully."

Even that news seemed to bring Sandhurst little relief. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Is that all?"

There was a barely perceptible hesitation before Lar'ragos responded. "That's all I have to say in my capacity as the ship's Tactical officer, sir."

Sandhurst shook his head. "Pava, I really don't have time for..."

The lieutenant cut him off, "We lost you for a little while out there." He smiled disarmingly.

Sandhurst met Lar'ragos' eyes tentatively and looked pained. "Yeah. Not quite sure what that was about."

The El-Aurian's smile transformed into a conspiratorial smirk. "Well, if you're going to freeze up, I'd rather it be after the crisis has passed than squarely in the middle."

"I didn't say I froze up, Pava." The captain bristled.

Lar'ragos inclined his head, as if conceding the point. "Perhaps not. I'll say it, then."

Sandhurst stood suddenly and brought his hands down on top of the desk with sufficient force to make his computer terminal jump. "Is there a point to this conversation, other than intentionally pissing me off?"

"Good, there you are. Glad to have you back." Lar'ragos looked strangely relieved.

Sandhurst exhaled loudly as he visibly deflated. He sat back down in his chair. "I don't know what the hell happened. It's as if I didn't expect to live through that engagement. When it ended in our favor, it caught me off guard." He glanced at his data terminal, where Ramirez's image and service record had been displayed moments before. "That poor woman didn't have a chance. It was bad enough that I shanghaied her into this assignment, but I've taken every opportunity available to place her squarely in the enemy's sights."

Lar'ragos relaxed his stance and stepped forward to pull out a chair and seat himself. "She did her duty. Liana knew the risks of wearing the uniform. You delegated necessary tasks to your first officer; don't beat yourself up because things didn't turn out the way you'd hoped." He steered the conversation back to the incident on the bridge. "I don't think anybody else really caught on to your little 'episode.' Nevertheless, if you want this crew's confidence and respect, you have to play the part of the captain, regardless of what you're actually feeling."

Sandhurst pursed his lips and looked as though he'd just tasted something especially unpalatable. "Thank you for that brief yet oh-so timely refresher from Starfleet Command Officer's training."

Lar'ragos glowered at his captain. "Don't. Don't dismiss what I have to say. I'm speaking from experience. No one really knows how much of the aura of command is pure theater until they're sitting in the big chair."

“Your point?”

Lar'ragos looked as though he were addressing a particularly dense pupil. “You just saved the ship against incredible odds by pulling that stunt out of thin air. What you should have done was acted as though you never had any doubt that it was going to work. Swagger off the bridge like an anointed demigod for all I care, but don't you dare let those kids out there know how close we just came to cashing it in!”

Sandhurst folded his arms across his chest as he fought the instinct to toss Lar'ragos out of his ready room. He weighed their years of friendship in the balance and forced himself to listen to the other man, as damning as his words were. “So, it's supposed to feel like this? Command, I mean?”

“Absolutely.” Lar'ragos nodded. The lieutenant's features softened, and his voice assumed that easy, conversational tone that he reserved for his pep talks. “Look, your problem is that when you were serving with Captain Ebnal, you always had a safety net. Sure, you had to make some tough calls on your own on occasion, but you knew you'd have his backing when the dust settled. Now, you're truly on your own for the first time.” Pava leaned across the table, his expression conveying an unusual amount of earnestness for the typically lighthearted officer. “You're out there, hanging in the proverbial wind. I know it's scary as hell, having to play the part of someone you're not. In time it'll be easier, but until that time arrives, you're going to have to paint on your best captain's face and be the man your crew expects and deserves.”

Sandhurst digested this. Lar'ragos had more than his share of quirks, but unwarranted candor was not in his repertoire. Sandhurst had been coming to the slow realization that since he'd accepted Admiral Covey's offer of the *Gibraltar* commission, he'd been waiting to become ‘the captain.’ It was as if he expected to suddenly undergo a miraculous transformation whereby the confidence and knowledge exhibited by those captains from his past that he so revered would be bestowed upon him.

“I should see to the crew.” Sandhurst stood abruptly. He rounded the desk and moved towards the door. He broke stride to pat his friend on the shoulder. “You're a good man, and I value your advice.”

Lar'ragos, still seated, grinned up at him. “But?”

“But if you come in here aiming to set me off again, I'm going to have Tark shoot you.” Sandhurst very nearly smiled. “A lot.”

“Yes, my captain.”

Standing on the surface of Lakesh for the second time in less than a week, Liana Ramirez wondered what she'd done to anger the fates so. Most of her harrowing escape from the burning remains of the *Phoenix* was a jumbled blur, which she attributed to the head injury she'd sustained in the explosion. Five hours and three hyposprays later, her vision had cleared and her searing migraine had subsided to a dull ache.

Her life pod had set down on a small but verdant island somewhere in Lakesh's equatorial region. The skies overhead were choked with clouds, and a light rain of soot and ash filtered down from the beleaguered grey mass above. It was clear that although she might go undetected by the Cardassians for some time here, she would not be able to survive on the island for more than a few weeks at best. The foliage was already beginning to brown and wilt with the reduced sunlight caused by the growing layers of dust and smoke in the planet's atmosphere.

Ramirez was in pure survival mode. When, on occasion, her mind wandered to the topic of *Phoenix's* destruction, she found herself largely numb to the event and its repercussions. Instead, she focused exclusively on the matter of endurance. She had assessed her emergency survival supplies, and determined that with strict rationing, she could stretch her water and foodstuffs for a month. Unfortunately, the escape pod had no refrigeration or stasis capability, so it would be impossible to gather and preserve any of the island's edible fruit or vegetables to stave off the inevitable demise of the local flora.

As far as Ramirez could tell, she was the only person on the island. The lifepod's sensors failed to show anything else of note except several varieties of small marsupial and avian analogues. She didn't know if her apparent isolation was by accident or design but surmised that whoever had programmed the final destination of the lifepods might have wanted them scattered as widely as possible across Lakesh, to better increase the odds against their all being wiped out by a single attack.

She carefully packed up her survival rations as she resisted the urge to finish off the energy bar she'd consumed half of. Unexpectedly, her combadge crackled to life; “*This is the Gibraltar hailing any survivors of the USS Phoenix on coded emergency channel 38.7. Please respond on this channel, utilizing encryption matrix Zed-Alpha-1.*” Ramirez froze, uncertain if she was hearing something genuine, or a ploy by insurgent forces to locate any survivors. It seemed unlikely that the *Gibraltar* might have survived the pitched battle in orbit. The message was repeated, and Ramirez decided that she would have to take the chance that it was real.

Forgoing the delicate task of opening and reconfiguring her combadge, she climbed back inside the escape vehicle and accessed the pod's communications system. She set the appropriate encryption and pressed the transmit toggle, “This is Lt. Commander Liana Ramirez to *Gibraltar*. Repeat, this is Ramirez, do you copy?”

“*We read you, Commander. Good to hear your voice. Standby for transport.*” She recognized the voice as belonging to Ensign Browder, the Beta-watch Operations officer.

“Hang on, I'll need to gather my things and set the pod's self-destruct.” Ramirez didn't want Federation encryption ciphers falling into the hands of the enemy. She quickly gathered up the pod's ration stores and then set the destruct mechanism on a five-minute delay. Her task complete, she tapped her combadge, “Ramirez to *Gibraltar*, one to beam up.”

Ramirez vanished and left the slowly dying island behind.

Sickbay was once again a crowded place. The most recent upsurge in the facility's cycle of feast or famine owed to the destruction of the

Phoenix, many of whose survivors now rested in the bay's bio-beds.

Sandhurst entered only to pause just inside the door at the unsettling sight of nearly every bed occupied. He had made a habit of avoiding Sickbay in the course of his career, as a trip to Sickbay that didn't involve a routine checkup usually meant that somebody somewhere had screwed up. Now, he was expected to perform an obligatory good-will tour through the bay. Sandhurst quashed his own discomfort as he caught the attention of a nearby nurse from whom he inquired as to the general wellbeing of the patients.

The Bajoran man smiled diffidently, "They're doing well under the circumstances, sir. The *Phoenix* survivors are still shaken up, but that's to be expected after all they've been through." The nurse gestured behind him to one of the ship's two medical holograms, currently with its back to them as it studied something on an oversized medical padd. "Old Doc Photonic isn't much of a ship's counselor, as you might imagine. I guess their psychological needs will have to wait for a starbase, sir. Physically, though, they're on the mend."

Sandhurst thanked him and moved on. As he wound his way between the beds, he made idle conversation with those patients who were awake and tried not to disturb the others. He spotted Juneau who slept peacefully with her left arm encased within an ostio-regenerator cuff. The device hummed softly as it worked to knit her fractured humerus back together.

The captain found Plazzi resting idly beneath a neural scanner. The device hung above his bed on an armature and emitted a greenish beam that swept back and forth across his forehead. "Elisto, how's the head?"

The geologist grinned, "Apparently composed of duranium, or so they tell me. My brain, alas, seems to be somewhat more fragile."

"So I see. Any idea when we'll have the honor of your presence back on the bridge?"

The older man attempted a shrug and winced with the effort. "Tough to say. I guess I don't heal as quickly as I used to."

Sandhurst nodded amiably. "I'll tell the medical staff to hurry up. We need you back."

"Thank you, Captain."

A few beds further, Sandhurst happened upon Taiee. The Chief Medical Officer was sitting up in bed as she pushed against an isometric pulley system as part of her physical rehabilitation. Her expression brightened as she saw the captain. "Hello, sir."

"Evening, Lieutenant. Good to see you up and awake." Sandhurst seated himself somewhat awkwardly at the foot of the bed. "Interesting strategy you've come up with for observing your staff at work."

Taiee laughed, "Getting shot, you mean? And here I was hoping nobody would catch on." She fell silent long enough to finish off a set of five isometric presses. "I like that idea much better than the thought of needing remedial training on away team survival skills."

Sandhurst shook his head. "There's no shame in being caught up in a bad situation, Lieutenant. I'm just relieved that you pulled through. The EMH said it was touch-and-go there for a while."

Taiee glanced over at the hologram, her expression thoughtful. "The Mark-I's are competent surgeons, I'll give them that. Obviously, in that regard I'm grateful to have them. As a resource, they're terrific. I'm less comfortable having them running the whole show in my absence. If the nursing staff doesn't up and quit *en masse*, it'll be a miracle."

Sandhurst raised an eyebrow. "You want me to modify their interpersonal communications subroutines? I could make them as meek and compliant as you'd like."

The lieutenant flashed a devious grin. "I'm tempted, sir, but no. The consensus among the Fleet's medical community is that the longer you leave them running, the more their adaptive programming has a chance to learn. It's better if we let the holograms and the nursing staff work this out on their own; hopefully their dispositions will be better for the experience."

The captain stood, "Suit yourself, Lieutenant. Just remember, the offer stands."

"I will, sir. Thank you."

"Take care... Doc." Sandhurst walked on and mused that it sounded strange to call the CMO anything other than that. He made a few more stops along the way to visit with some of *Phoenix's* crew, but as a group they gave him a reticent reception. He couldn't be sure if that was because he wasn't their captain, or simply due to the recent trauma they had all shared.

"Transporter room three to Captain Sandhurst."

Sandhurst toggled his compin. "Go ahead."

"Sir, we've located Commander Ramirez. We're beaming her up right now."

"Fantastic, I'm on my way." Confident that he'd at least made the attempt, he stepped out of Sickbay and left the medical professionals to their work.

The captain entered the transporter room to find both medical and security personnel giving Ramirez thorough examinations. She appeared to be suffering them patiently, and the exec directed a raised eyebrow at Sandhurst as he stood by for the specialists' results.

"She's cleared security screening, Captain."

The medic, however, was less obliging. “I’m reading a low-grade concussion, sir. She’ll need to be seen in Sickbay. Shouldn’t take long, though.”

Sandhurst nodded. “Very well, I’ll walk her down there.” He turned to the XO and inquired, “You up to it?”

Ramirez grinned, still reeling from the relief of her unexpected liberation. “I think I can manage that, Captain.”

The two stepped out into the corridor. As they walked, Sandhurst glanced over at her, his expression pensive. “It’s good to have you back, Commander. We thought we’d lost you.”

He registered that the two of them were momentarily alone, and Sandhurst stopped. Ramirez went another few steps, then turned back with a confused look.

“Sir?”

“Ramirez, all evidence to the contrary, I want you to know that I’m not trying to get you killed.”

She chuckled, “Tell that to our Cardassian friends. They seem to have it out for me.” She took a moment to fully register Sandhurst’s earnest expression. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Every time I give you an assignment it seems that you just barely survive it.” He frowned, not liking how that had come out. “I don’t... what I mean to say...”

Despite the fatigue that had arrived on the heels of her ebbing adrenaline she mustered a smile. “It’s alright, Captain. I know what you’re trying to say.”

Sandhurst rubbed the back of his neck absently with one hand. “Look, you’ve already endured more on this assignment than anyone could have expected of you. Whatever the outcome of our mission here, I’ll get you back to Starbase 71 and Admiral Covey. You’ve more than earned it.”

She nodded. “Thank you, sir. I’ll hold you to that.”

Chapter 11

The headquarters of what Legate Urlak had christened the Crimson Order had begun as a Cardassian military ordinance depot. Constructed beneath the towering Avendra mountain range and taking full advantage of the region's fistrium-laced geology, it had been designed to be both undetectable and impenetrable. With the coming of the Dominion and their wondrous engineering aptitude, the Vorta had expanded the facility and turned it into an advanced weapons research outpost.

Dominion engineers had installed an experimental interphase generator, which shifted the entire facility point-zero-four millicochranes into the subspace realm. A series of complicated interphasic 'airlocks' had been created to transition persons from the base to the outside world safely. Without them, the abrupt transition from one dimension to another would have been instantly lethal. Submerged as it was in the nearer layers of subspace, the base was now completely hidden and utterly impervious to attack.

The cavernous chamber that held the facility's meeting hall roared with the dissonant clamor of angry voices. The whole of the Lakesh insurgency's leadership had gathered to discuss not only the aftermath of Gul Panor's failed attack, but the larger issue of the movement's future outside the confines of the Crolsa system.

Legate Urlak presided over the ill-tempered crowd with a sense of barely contained fury. He harbored no illusions as to the true agenda here; his enemies wished to debate his continued leadership of the movement. Panor's defeat had done much to undermine Urlak's position, and those who desired to challenge his authority were now capitalizing on his lack of active military experience.

Although Urlak had attended the Union's most prestigious military college in his youth, he had been recruited away from a more mundane career by the Obsidian Order. He had become a spymaster, with vast knowledge of intelligence procedures and planning, but little experience with more standardized military operations. His current rank had been awarded him when the Dominion had selected Urlak to co-administrate the Lakesh research facility. As such, many of the hard-core militants accepted his leadership only grudgingly.

Gul Javin En'Roel, potentially next in line to command the movement's military wing, had the floor. Decades Urlak's junior, En'Roel had been a promising young warship commander at the outset of the Dominion War. In the intervening two years he had become something of a legend among the rank and file in the armed forces, a man who led from the front, unafraid to confront any threat himself that he would send his men against.

En'Roel's personal charisma was something Urlak couldn't match, as he had made a career of blending into the background and presenting himself as more average than the median. The legate could be sufficiently menacing when necessary, but he possessed little in the way of the kind of appeal that would inspire men to throw themselves into battle with his name on their lips.

"We have followed the dictates of Legate Urlak since the inception of this rebellion." En'Roel turned dramatically to engage his audience as he mixed oratory and movement in a stylish synthesis that the assembled insurgents found captivating. "And while I agree that the legate cannot be held totally accountable for Gul Panor's disastrous failure, Urlak *was* the one who selected the officers responsible for planning and executing the attack!"

En'Roel scanned the faces of his fellow soldiers, his expression beseeching them to hear his words. "He has chosen to keep us confined here, limiting the scope of our operations and denying our brethren the fruits of the wondrous technology left to us by the hated Dominion." The gul reached out his arm to point an accusatory finger at Urlak in a gesture so theatrical it made the legate's stomach turn. "Instead, he uses the quantities of bio-memetic gel and ketracil-white we took from the Founders by force and uses them to bargain with the likes of Ferengi and Lissepians. He squanders what should be the birthright of a new, more powerful union! Our union!"

Arms outstretched, En'Roel turned a complete circle and looked every bit the ringmaster of a Ravalian Carnival. He called out to the audience in barely tempered desperation. "I ask you to walk with me! My path will lead us to victory! His path has been proven one of half-measures and compromise, ultimately leading to defeat and supplication before the Federation and their Klingon dogs! Are we to become brothers to the Bajorans? Cousins to the Vulcans? Are we simply one among many as the Federation would have us believe, or are we as a people destined for something greater?"

Murmurs of assent rippled through the crowd.

The hint of anguish in his voice lessened, and En'Roel's features hardened. "Others have already tried to unite the scattered bands of resistance fighters. The True Way movement was once our greatest hope, yet now it clings to life by a thread. Gul Keshet's cell of brave soldiers will be sacrificed on the altar of greed and deception unless we take up the banner of their cause! No other groups possess our resources, our courage, or our determination to see the enemy driven from our homeland finally and forever!"

A respectable wave of applause met the conclusion of En'Roel's presentation, and Urlak took some relief that the crowd had not roared in approval. Gul En'Roel yielded the central podium to Urlak, and the legate took his time in mounting the steps to take his place at the rostrum.

This would not be any easy or pleasant task. He used an intentionally somber tone and sought to differentiate his performance from that of his melodramatic challenger. "Although I take exception with the quality of Gul En'Roel's performance, he does make some salient points which I will attempt to address."

As he looked out across the auditorium, he yearned to feel some deeper sense of connection to the people he had led and hoped to continue leading. Instead, he felt nothing. For all his words, these men and women were little more than ciphers to him. The idea of a strong and united Cardassia was the only thing that warmed his heart, much as he might wish otherwise. If En'Roel experienced some manner of genuine camaraderie with these men, then he was to be envied as well as despised.

"Do not forget that it was I who led our successful rebellion against Dominion control of this facility. It was my planning that allowed us to overwhelm our supposed allies with minimal casualties and collateral damage."

The legate held himself fully erect and tried to eke out every millimeter of height. “I acknowledge that these actions alone are not sufficient to warrant my continued leadership. Instead, you must take into consideration who has the more realistic vision. Gul En’Roel speaks of great victories against the enemy and the unquenchable fire of the martyr’s spirit. These are poetic notions that bear little resemblance to the realities we face.”

“I will not fill your heads with such foolishness. I offer difficult, dangerous work that may see the end of many of us. Mine is the more demanding road of hard won, incremental gains. We will fight when it is to our advantage, striking our enemies when and where they are weakest. When we are not engaging the enemy on our terms, we will hide. This is not glamorous or noble, but it is how insurgencies are fought.”

Urlak paused to assess his audience, most of whom seemed to be paying close attention to his words. “We will not seek great victories against our enemies, for we haven’t the resources to engage them in bold frontal attacks. Instead, we shall prey on their vulnerable underbelly, bleeding them when they can least afford it until they have grown so exhausted of wasting lives and treasure on us that they will declare victory and leave.

“And although we will be both valiant and vicious when engaging our foes, I cannot and will not promise you victory in every battle. As soldiers in this cause, you deserve to be told the truth, and those of you with military training will doubtless know the old axiom that no plan ever survives contact with the enemy.” Urlak noted the nods and murmurs of assent in the crowd.

“The gul is correct when he accuses me of ‘conspiring’ with the likes of the Ferengi and Lissepians. I have used them as intermediaries in the spread of our resources to our countrymen. I have purchased ships and weapons that will be distributed not just on Lakesh, but throughout the worlds of Cardassia! Schematics and samples of the devices we have captured from the Dominion will accompany these arms, so that others may join our cause. These actions were taken in great secrecy, as the very future of our race may depend on their success.

“Let me say in closing that I understand your frustrations. We are a great people facing the darkest of times. The old guard betrayed us to the Dominion, and as a result we now face slavery, perhaps even genocide, at the hands of the Federation, the Klingons, and the Romulans. So long as you and others like you refuse to bow before our enemies, Cardassia will remain forever strong. I ask only that you help me lead us to the day when we may stand and gaze upon the flag of the Union and know that every meter of our soil has been freed from oppression and occupation!”

The legate finished and his body trembled with the effort. A moment’s silence reigned before the crowd seemed to rise to their feet in unison. Some clapping and a few cheers met his conclusion, but nothing like the thunderous ovation he’d hoped for. The assembled leadership moved *en* mass towards the privacy cubicles where they would cast their votes.

So, it will be decided, he observed gravely.

A sensor contact alert beeped at the Operations console. Ensign Browder called back to Lar’ragos, who was seated in the command chair. “Lieutenant, a Klingon warship has just decloaked twenty kilometers from the hulk of the rebel *Galor*-class ship.”

Lar’ragos sat forward. “Identify.”

Browder tapped at his console. “*Vor’cha*-class... receiving transponder ident code now.” The ensign glanced back at Lar’ragos. “It’s the *Kang*, sir. General K’Vada’s flagship.”

Lar’ragos grimaced, and then announced with a decided lack of enthusiasm, “Yay. The cavalry’s here.”

“Now reading transporter activity, sir. It looks like the Klingons are sending boarding parties over to what’s left of the *Galor*.”

The lieutenant frowned as he reflected that *Gibraltar* should have done the same thing hours earlier. *Donald needs to start thinking with his head instead of his heart*, he assessed. “Hail the *Kang* and welcome them to the scenic Crolsa system, where no good deed goes unpunished.”

“Aye, sir.”

Lar’ragos said, “Bridge to Captain Sandhurst.”

“*Go ahead*.”

“Captain, we’ve got company.”

The column of energetic particles coalesced into the imposing form of General K’Vada, undisputed leader of the Allied 8th Task Force, Cardassian Administration Command. He wasn’t especially tall for a Klingon, nor was his Defense Force uniform adorned with the various medals and emblems customary for one of his rank. Nonetheless, from the moment he regained corporeal substance he took command of the room and those within it.

Master Chief Tark blew a piercing tone on the boatswain’s whistle, and Lar’ragos issued a terse, “Atten-shun!” that brought the assembled honor guard snapping into formation in unison.

The Klingon’s eyes searched the compartment as he scanned for unseen opponents and dangers despite the obvious presence of his allies. K’Vada was a creature of habit, and the warrior’s training could not be undone. His gaze finally settled on Captain Sandhurst, who, like his officers was standing at attention. K’Vada decided impulsively to invoke Klingon tradition for the sake of nothing other than his own amusement. He growled, “Who is master of this vessel?”

Sandhurst was caught flat-footed. He tried to keep his expression neutral, and he replied with as much passion as he could manage. "I am, sir."

From beside him, Ramirez managed to address the captain *sotto voce* without breaking ranks. "...*I yield to you, General.*"

"But I yield to you, General." Sandhurst parroted as he stared at the back wall of the transporter pad, careful to avoid eye contact with his belligerent superior.

K'Vada grunted, secretly amused that the humans had enough presence of mind to cope with his mercurial nature... thus far. He stepped down off the pad unbidden to take measure of the crew of the only Starfleet vessel to survive the perils of the Lakesh operation. He scrutinized the senior officers present and finally set his unyielding gaze back on the captain. "So, you are the one who allowed our enemies to escape." K'Vada then swept past Sandhurst declaring, "I would speak with you alone, Captain." With that, he strode through the parting doors and into the corridor.

Unable to maintain his poker face, Sandhurst blushed fiercely as he followed the general out of the compartment. He looked mad enough to chew neutronium, and Ramirez and Lar'ragos exchanged worried glances before falling into step behind their CO.

As he stalked down the corridor behind K'Vada, Sandhurst asked in a tone tight with emotion, "Does the General require an explanation?"

The Klingon wheeled around, his hand instinctively moving to grasp the handle of his *d'k tagh* blade, sheathed on his uniform belt. Sandhurst came up short, uncertain if an attack was forthcoming. K'Vada spoke calmly, but the menace in his voice was unmistakable. "If and when I require an explanation, Captain, you will know it."

Lar'ragos stepped forward to stand abreast of Sandhurst as his eyes took in all of K'Vada at once. Sandhurst could sense his friend's anticipation, the man's body coiling like a spring. The Klingon and El-Aurian locked eyes and gauged each other in a long moment of tense silence.

Sandhurst smiled wanly, and said by way of introduction, "This is my Chief of Security and Tactical, Lieutenant Lar'ragos." To Pava he murmured, "At ease. Everything's fine here."

K'Vada scowled; the expression accentuated his prominent cranial ridges. "If your man does not yield, I will soon take offense." The hiss of his *d'k tagh* sliding halfway out of its scabbard raised the hairs on the back of Sandhurst's neck.

Sandhurst offered Lar'ragos the slightest of nods and the Tactical officer stepped back a pace. "With your permission, Captain, I'll resume my station on the bridge."

"Granted."

Lar'ragos about-faced and left, very much against his better judgment. Ramirez remained a few steps behind and tried to look as innocuous as possible under the circumstances.

After he had regained some of his composure, Sandhurst began again. "You said you wished to speak with me, sir. I'd suggest my ready room, unless you've any objections?"

He drove his blade back into its sheath and K'Vada said, "Lead on."

Sandhurst had spent the better part of forty-five minutes reporting on the current situation in the Crolsa system, largely the same report he'd given to Admiral Salk less than forty-eight hours earlier. As luck would have it, K'Vada's expression was almost as inscrutable as the Admiral's, which left Sandhurst to deliver his account in the absence of feedback.

He decided to hold nothing in reserve, and so the captain delivered the most accurate description possible, blemishes and all. "...and we were able to arrange a collision between the cruiser and *Sojourner*. I then ordered a recovery operation for the survivors of the *Phoenix*." The captain hesitated, despite his wariness of overemphasizing his next statement. "I felt it more important to rescue our people than hunt down the remnants of the insurgent attack wing." Sandhurst met K'Vada's stony visage and finished, he thought, rather lamely. "And that's where you arrived."

K'Vada sat in silence for a full minute, clearly mulling over all he'd heard. When the general was finally moved to speak, Sandhurst found himself unable to read the Klingon with enough accuracy to prepare for praise or damnation. "You and your crew fought well, Captain. That is no small thing." He rose unexpectedly from his chair and K'Vada loomed over Sandhurst. "However, allowing your enemies to escape the field of battle to fight another day is inexcusable. Were you one of my captains, my blade would now be buried to the hilt in your chest."

Sandhurst cleared his throat. "Then I'm thankful I'm not a member of the Defense Forces, General."

Ignoring the captain's glib reply, K'Vada continued. "I am also displeased with your lack of foresight. Despite telling me that you knew there was an interdimensional transport device aboard the Cardassian cruiser, you've taken no steps to secure anything that might remain of it."

Sandhurst's face colored but he held his tongue, as much because of his concern for the Klingon's reaction as for the fact that the general's words rang true.

The warrior's arms were folded across his chest and the full weight of his glare was directed at the human. "In spite of your neglecting the *Vintar*, my soldiers have managed to recover not only the remnants of the 'DST' as you call it, but two survivors from the ship's wreckage. I am informed that both require more medical care than our doctors are capable of providing."

Without thinking, Sandhurst quickly snapped at the bait. "I'm sure we could be of assistance in that matter, sir."

A brief smile was all that announced K’Vada’s pleasure at the small victory. “It will be so. The prisoners will be transported over shortly. It would have been a shame for them to expire before having been thoroughly interrogated.”

I stepped right into that one, Sandhurst fumed. We fix them up so he can torture them for information. Lovely. I’ve got to stop thinking of this guy as some half-witted thug.

Out loud, Sandhurst merely said, “Indeed.” The captain stood and moved to the replicator station recessed into the ready room’s wall. “Would you care for a beverage, General?”

The Klingon refused with a terse grunt as the captain fiddled with the replicator controls manually. Sandhurst stalled and tried to make his next question sound as inoffensive as possible. “Have you decided on our next course of action, sir?”

“I have.” With Sandhurst out of his chair, K’Vada took the opportunity to move behind the desk and look out the viewport at the shadowy disk of Lakesh’s night side. “I am a believer in the old ways, Captain. My people were subjugating alien worlds when humans still fought with swords and primitive firearms. We will take and fortify a foothold position on the surface, and then expand our sphere of influence incrementally. I will install a planetary overseer who will implement martial law among the civilian populace.”

Sandhurst turned back towards the general, cradling a mug of Rigellian spice coffee in his hands. “And the insurgency?”

Still examining the faint outline of the planet through the transparent aluminum partition, K’Vada smiled darkly. “Such movements do not exist in a vacuum. The rebels undoubtedly draw resources from the general population, including new converts to their cause.” The general turned to look at Sandhurst, clearly intending to measure the captain’s reaction. “We will identify those civilians with ties to the insurgency, and we will apply the necessary pressure to exploit that information.”

Sandhurst carefully controlled his facial expression, determined not to show further weakness in front of this man. “And how will you respond to additional attacks?”

“That is a simple matter. For each of my warriors killed by the cowards’ hands, I shall terminate a hundred civilians. If that proves insufficient, I will increase the number of retaliatory casualties until I achieve positive results.”

And there it is, Sandhurst sighed inwardly. He couldn’t have drawn a clearer line in the sand had he wanted to.

The captain steeled himself for the next exchange. “With due respect, General, the Khitomer Accords specifically forbid mass retaliation against civilian populations, even in wartime. Such policies are the underpinnings of the alliance between our peoples.”

K’Vada laughed; a harsh sound devoid of humor. “Perhaps the Starfleet captain who laid waste the surface of the Cardassian colony on Loyal was unaware of this?”

Sandhurst blanched. Not only did he know of the incident K’Vada alluded to, he was personally acquainted with the captain who’d given the horrific order during the waning days of the Dominion War.

“That was wartime, General. It was spilt second decision that saved the lives of tens of thousands of allied soldiers.”

Captain Terrence Glover of the starship *Cuffe*, aboard which Sandhurst had once served, had led an allied attack group which had been caught in the crosshairs of a giant planet-based vadian cannon. An abortive attempt to knock out the weapon with tactical fighters had failed, and in a last desperate gambit, Glover had invoked the infamous ‘General Order 24’ that had reduced the surface of Loyal to scorched rock and carbon.

Despite the personal enmity that existed between he and Glover, Sandhurst had often wondered if he himself possessed the necessary fortitude to have issued such a command under the circumstances.

“Yes, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of ‘innocent’ Cardassian lives. It proves that your own people have committed similar acts when such measures were warranted, Captain. That officer was cleared of any wrongdoing by your own admiralty, so do not presume to flaunt your human morality at me.”

Sandhurst shook his head slightly, the gesture so minute as to almost go undetected. He set the untouched cup of coffee on the corner of his desk; his thirst now forgotten. “I won’t stand here and debate such actions on a case-by-case basis, General. I can only say with conviction that war crimes of that nature go not only against my training as a Starfleet officer, but every fiber of my being.”

K’Vada smiled and his mouth contorted into a toothy grimace that merely hinted at the horrors the general was capable of inflicting. “Then it is fortunate that I have no intention of ordering you to participate in this operation. As far as I am concerned, Captain, your responsibilities here at Lakesh have been fulfilled.”

He glanced down at the carpet for a long moment before he raised his eyes to once again meet the general’s. Sandhurst felt what little control he had over the present situation slipping away from him. “Those orders would need to come from Starfleet Command, sir.” That was a formality, a stalling tactic, and it was blatantly obvious to both of them.

“And so they shall.” K’Vada turned his back on the planet to grip his uniform belt as the well worn leather of his uniform creaked. “Before you leave, I require the schematics of the plasma modulating device that you discovered aboard your ship.”

Sandhurst was still trying to wrap his head around his summary dismissal from the crisis that had so enveloped him and his crew for the past week. He replied in an absent murmur, “I can do one better, sir. We’ve put together a prototype copy of the device that I’d intended to put aboard the *Phoenix*.” He fought to regain focus and added a bit more forcefully, “Of course, it would need to be modified to adapt to your systems, but that shouldn’t take long.”

“Very well, Captain.” The general stepped out from behind the desk and moved toward the door. He paused on the threshold to turn back

towards Sandhurst. "The mission to rebuild Lakesh may have ended in failure, but you have survived everything the enemy has thrown at you. It does not taste like victory, to be sure, but it should give you some solace."

With that, K'Vada stepped out onto the bridge while the captain followed behind. "Commander Ramirez, please escort the general to the transporter room." Sandhurst looked to Lar'ragos, "Lieutenant, a moment of your time." He turned and stepped back inside as Ramirez and the Klingon entered the turbolift.

Lar'ragos found the captain in the same position held by K'Vada moments earlier, his back to the door as he examined the bright crescent of the planet's impending sunrise. "As bad as I think?" the El-Aurian posited.

"Worse, probably."

"What'd he say?" Lar'ragos looked skeptical.

Without looking back at the Tactical officer, Sandhurst sighed. "Take your pick of the most notorious Klingon occupations of the 23rd century. He's a fan of the classics."

Lar'ragos blew out a breath. "Great. Where's that leave us?"

Sandhurst was silent and continued to stare out the viewport. After a few moments he replied, "K'Vada will contact Starfleet and inform them that he's taking command of the situation here. Admiral Salk will be only too happy to wash his hands of this mess and will order us out of the system. We'll either be replaced by the *Soval* and her compliant Vulcan crew, or Starfleet will abandon the Crolsa system altogether, leaving these people to the tender mercies of their Klingon overlords."

"When you say it like that, you make it sound so sinister," Lar'ragos noted dryly.

Sandhurst laughed despite himself, but the gesture was weighted with irony. "Don't I, though?" He turned back to pull out his chair and settle into it. Hands clasped over his lap, the captain scrutinized his friend for a long moment. "So, you think you could take him?"

Lar'ragos appeared surprised by the question. "K'Vada? I don't know." He side stepped and took a seat on the small couch facing the desk. "Maybe not."

Genuinely shocked at the admission, Sandhurst looked nonplussed. "You're kidding. You're the most dangerous man I've ever met." He cocked his head to one side thoughtfully, and Sandhurst amended, "Alright, second most dangerous after Terry Glover. He kills planets."

Lar'ragos smirked as he shrugged lightly. "Hey, I spent my youth studying painting, poetry, and philosophy. The general spent his youth with a *bat'leth* in hand, kicking the shit out of friend and foe alike." Pava leaned back to drape his arm over the couch. "I've done my share of scrapping in the interim, but that man's bred to battle." He gave Sandhurst a suspicious look. "Why, you want me to challenge him to a duel?"

He shook his head and Sandhurst gazed down at his hands. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't considered it." He turned to look out the viewport again. "He even got me to agree to treat the two Cardassian prisoners they fished off that Galor. Even latinum says he's looking to us to render them hale and hearty enough for a good bout of agonizer assisted questioning."

"That sounds right." Lar'ragos trained his inherited senses on the captain, prepared to dissect every nuance of Sandhurst's reply. "So, what do we do about it?"

"I don't know that there's anything we *can* do, Pava." Sandhurst glanced up at his friend, looking self-conscious. "Remember my Directive Number One from the academy?"

"Of course. Birds fly, fish swim... and Donald follows orders."

Sandhurst bobbed his head, looking morose.

"Personally, I think you need to bring Monica in on this."

Sandhurst's head snapped up as his expression shifted at near light speed to one of alarm. "Admiral Covey? Why? She's got nothing to do with this sector."

"Perhaps, but unlike Salk she's got a conscience she'll admit to. If nothing else, she can let the rest of Command know what's going on out here before Salk and the Security Council wrap this sector up in so much 'eyes only' secrecy that you'd need a presidential order to admit that we were ever here."

"I'll... think about it."

Lar'ragos stood. "Good. In the meantime, I'll start coordinating with my Klingon counterparts, let them know everything we've discovered about our enemy so far."

As he directed another glance out the viewport, Sandhurst mused, "You think K'Vada can wreak so much havoc with one ship?"

Lar'ragos gave Sandhurst a dubious stare. "That 'one ship' has over a thousand battle hardened Klingon ground troops aboard, and that's aside from the vessel's own crew compliment. And I'd remind you, we only *see* one ship in orbit. I've always believed you have to worry more about the Klingons you can't see than the ones you can."

"You're saying the *Kang* isn't alone?"

Lar'ragos nodded curtly. "Count on it."

Chapter 12

Jonin Faltyne hated water. He had come from the sub-arctic world of Andoria and had learned from an early age to swim as a matter of course. Despite his racial heritage, he despised the liquid medium. The feeling of his body gliding through water was more alien to him than soaring through the cosmos at warp speed. Streams, rivers, lakes or oceans, it made no difference.

Faltyne had found the mandatory swimming courses at Starfleet Academy's enormous aquatic facility outside Tokyo to be a particularly arduous portion of his training, one he'd sworn never to repeat if it could be helped.

As he clung to the side of the mortally wounded escape pod, bobbing helplessly in the coastal waters off one of Lakesh's Cirensa islands, Lieutenant Faltyne had plenty of opportunity to reflect on his hatred of water. After leaving the stricken wreckage of the *Phoenix*, Faltyne's life pod had collided with a debris field, causing serious damage to the vehicle. It had held together just long enough to survive atmospheric entry, veering off course and slamming into the ocean in a superheated state that had sent great plumes of steam thundering into the air. It had begun taking on water immediately, which forced the lieutenant to scramble out of the pod with those few survival supplies he could gather amid the rising water.

The Andorian figured he was perhaps two kilometers from shore. The water temperature hovered at about seventeen degrees Celsius, and Faltyne judged by the creeping numbness in his limbs that he needed to get the rescue raft inflated, and soon. The raft's auto-inflation mechanism had been damaged in the crash, and with deadening fingers, he struggled to join the gas cylinder to the receiver port. Jonin fought back a sense of panic as he wrestled with the mechanism, treading water frantically as the life pod began to sink beneath the waves beside him.

I survive a space battle, the destruction of my ship, burning into a planet's atmosphere out of control, he lamented, and now I'm going to drown?

With a final desperate burst of energy, he forced the cylinder into the port and held it there as the air screamed into the raft, filling it rapidly. His task complete, Faltyne used his remaining strength to push his survival pack into the small craft and pull himself in after. Exhausted and freezing, he wrapped a thermo-blanket from the survival pack around himself. He rifled through the survival pack and found the emergency subspace transmitter hopelessly shattered. He reached for his combadge, only to discover it missing, undoubtedly torn away in his hurried egress from the pod. Facing a deficit of options, he slept. For how long, he couldn't say.

Faltyne awoke to the sounds of voices and water lapping against a wooden hull. He roused himself with great effort and tried to steal a quick glance over the edge of his raft, cursing his obviousness of his antennae. He was relieved to see what appeared to be a small fishing boat, crewed by men who looked to be Cardassian civilians.

Within moments, Jonin was safely aboard their craft, a metal cup of hot fish juice in hand. As they headed back towards the nearest island, the captain of the fishing trawler told Faltyne that the people of his village had observed his escape pod's fiery descent and had launched their boats in hopes of rendering what assistance they could. The lieutenant thanked them profusely.

Suddenly a dark shadow fell across the small boat with a roar, and Faltyne dropped to the deck as a Cardassian military skimmer hove into view above the trawler. Even with his reflexes slowed by cold and exhaustion, Jonin managed to ramp his phaser to maximum and let go a sustained burst that sizzled harmlessly off the skimmer's shields. As the stun beam engulfed him, Faltyne knew that worse things than water would soon be in store for him.

Much worse.

Pava Lar'ragos was addicted to the Starfleet TacNet. On average, he spent at least an hour every other day interfacing with the interactive tactical network utilized by security personnel throughout the Fleet to communicate and disseminate information. Officers needing ideas on anything from finding a cloaked Romulan warbird to how to deal with an obstinate subordinate could post their queries on the TacNet and avail themselves of their peers' collective knowledge and experience.

Lar'ragos had posted a 'hypothetical' query on strategy and tactics based on the circumstances they'd faced here at Lakesh. He'd just been reading a flurry of interesting responses; unfortunately, the consensus of his colleagues was that there was no easy way out of their current predicament.

The door to his quarters chimed, rousing him from his correspondence. "Come in."

The door slid open to reveal the disheveled form of Liana Ramirez, hair in disarray, clad in a rumpled uniform that had clearly been thrown on as an afterthought. "I'm sorry to bother you, Lieutenant." She remained standing in the doorway, looking very much like she might bolt at any second.

Clad in a loose-fitting tunic and pants, Pava stood, looking curiously at the exec. "Something I can help you with, Commander?"

"I... " She sighed, "I'm not sure."

"Well, I don't think we're going to find out with you haunting my doorway. Why don't you come in?" He gestured to a sitting chair across from the cabin's couch. Ramirez moved slowly, taking the proffered seat with an air of hesitancy.

Lar'ragos moved to the replicator, recycling an empty mug and withdrawing an identical one filled with steaming chamomile tea. "Something to drink, sir?"

Ramirez shook her head, her tousled hair waving vigorously.

Lar'ragos couldn't remember seeing Ramirez this vulnerable before, it was like observing an entirely different person.

He took a seat on the couch facing Ramirez. Lar'ragos sipped at his tea while focusing his senses on the younger woman. "Trouble sleeping?"

"You could say that."

Lar'ragos offered a friendly smile. "You've come to the right place. Rumor has it I'm a good listener."

After a moment's silence, she raised her head and trained her gaze on the El Aurian. "In the past two days I've survived losing a starship and hundreds of crew under my command, and yet all I can think about is..." she fell silent, struggling with the next words.

"...the boy." Pava finished for her. Her eyes widened and she stole a glance towards the door, fighting the urge to flee. "No, I can't read your mind, Commander," he said soothingly. "Think of it as... acute intuition."

He set the mug down on an end table. "Something about that incident is still bothering you?"

She nodded. "He was just a kid. About the same age I was when I ran away from home." She ran a hand through her hair, brushing it away from her eyes. "Who knows. Under different circumstances, he could have been headed to the academy. He might have had a future."

"Maybe so." He leaned forward, encouraging her to reestablish eye contact as her head dropped. "Life is choices, sir. That boy made a series of decisions that led him to confront our away team on that day. He's responsible for his own fate."

"I know that. Rationally, I know that."

Lar'ragos observed her silently for a moment. "But emotionally..."

"I can't get his face out of my head. Every time I close my eyes, he's there." She rubbed her eyes, as if trying to extinguish the image. "I probably killed a dozen people that day, and the only one who's giving me trouble is one I didn't." She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "At first, he was so angry. After I tackled him and we were fighting, he just seemed... terrified."

"That terrified boy knocked you unconscious and then tried to stab you."

That caught Ramirez's attention. "He did? I didn't know that."

Lar'ragos sat back. "Yes. After you fell off of him, he pulled out a rather wicked looking knife and was about to drive it into your chest."

The exec took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. "Did you shoot him?"

"No," the older man shook his head fractionally.

"What happened to him?"

Lar'ragos tried to sidestep the question. "Look, I really don't think going into the details is going to hel—"

"I have to know, Lieutenant."

Lar'ragos sat still for a moment. "If you must know, I broke his neck."

Ramirez shuddered, overwhelmed by the events of the past few days. "Such a waste. All of it. After everything these people have been through, that they should have to suffer this." She wiped away another tear. "And the crews of *Phoenix* and *Sojourner*. To have survived all the death and devastation of the war, only to be killed on a mission of mercy."

"That's why our task is so important, sir. We have the opportunity to at least try and improve their situation. The Federation doesn't always succeed, but at least we have the moral wherewithal to try. That's more than can be said for most governments in this quadrant."

In a small voice she murmured, "I couldn't save them, Lar'ragos."

He resisted the urge to lean across and touch her. They weren't friends. They were barely shipmates. Nonetheless, he sought some words of comfort that might help the younger woman put her recent experiences in perspective. "You know, the captain who delivered the commencement address when I graduated the academy gave us a quote that's stayed with me. He said, 'It's possible to do everything right, and still lose.'"

The lieutenant knew that all the logic in the universe couldn't salve the pain of losing a ship and crew, but if Liana could hang on long enough to get time and distance from the incident, there was hope for her and her career. He continued, "They had a weapon we couldn't defend against. Even if you'd been equipped with one of those mysterious plasma modulators, it would only have prevented torpedoes from being placed inside the ship, not inside the shield grid. The result would have been the same."

She nodded weakly. "I suppose." She sat in silence for a few moments, Lar'ragos leaving her alone with her thoughts. Then, slowly, a determined glint took hold in her eyes. The tears stopped, and she straightened. Ramirez stood, looking embarrassed as her hands tried valiantly to smooth the wrinkles from her uniform. "Thank you for your time, Mister Lar'ragos."

Picking up his tea and padd, he smiled amiably. "Any time, Commander."

Ramirez made a hasty exit, still very self-conscious but feeling better for having given voice to her fears. She hoped that the lieutenant could be trusted to keep his mouth shut. The last thing she needed was the crew laughing about her insecurities behind her back. On top of all the other humiliations she'd been forced to endure on this assignment; that would simply be too much.

She returned to her quarters and slipped into a fitful sleep that promised neither rest nor escape from her nightmares.

Sandhurst stepped onto the bridge from the turbolift and was pleased to see that Plazzi had resumed his post at the Science station. As he moved around to the geologist's seat, the captain greeted the older man warmly, "Elisto, good to have you back."

Plazzi smiled. "Thank you, sir." On his display, a sensor overlay of Lakesh's northern continent was highlighted in primary colors.

Sandhurst gestured to the screen as he queried, "Any luck?"

The older man shook his head. "Not as such, Captain." He tapped at his console, enhancing the image of the Avendra mountain range. He pointed to the formidable crests and the scientist noted, "I've been trying to scan for any kind of geological formations which could help disguise a subsurface installation, batholiths and the like. Unfortunately, there are high concentrations of fistrium in the rock strata that inhibit sensors."

Sandhurst looked perturbed as he asked, "Something like nature's own cloaking device?"

Plazzi nodded glumly.

"Is there anything else we can try? Could we modify some of our sensor probes to penetrate the rock?"

The commander frowned. "Negative, sir. I've already crunched the numbers for that. Even heavily shielded, a probe wouldn't be able to dig deep enough for our purposes. And even if it could, the fistrium in the soil would prevent our getting any meaningful data."

Sandhurst leaned his back against the edge of the console. "What about... using our phasers to burrow beneath the fistrium layers, sort of like drilling test wells?"

Plazzi turned in his chair to face the captain, chuckling lightly. "The Avendra range is still volcanically active, though it hasn't had an eruption in close to two centuries. It's tectonically unstable, Captain. Using either phasers or torpedoes to punch into the strata could set off some very severe seismic events."

Sandhurst pondered that with a deep breath. "Right. Not really what they need down on the surface at the moment."

"My thinking as well, sir."

As he pushed away from the console, Sandhurst patted Plazzi on the shoulder. "Keep on it, Elisto."

"Aye, sir."

A stiff breeze blustered across the plains of Ensid, sending additional ripples through the already undulating fields of *uebwi* grass that seemed to stretch for endless kilometers in all directions. The sun crested the distant mountain range to bathe the scenery in the surreal golden glow of a new day. The village of Kendarsi appeared placid, if not entirely deserted. It was for perhaps that reason that Kendarsi had gone untouched during the Breen orbital bombardment of larger population centers.

The township was unremarkable in most respects and consisted of a collection of off-white or gray structures ranging from one to three stories in height. The community's only recent notoriety had come as the result of being selected by the Federation relief teams as an excellent location for a food and medical distribution center. Those plans had been delayed indefinitely when the relief operations were rolled up and evacuated by Starfleet following the attacks on the orbiting starships.

Covert surveillance sensors left behind by *Phoenix's* withdrawing security personnel had registered several instances of anomalous activity. Upon further scrutiny, this activity seemed to be consistent with the movement of resources and personnel in support of insurgent operations.

QaS DevwI' M'Sharv was the equivalent of the Klingon ground force's Sergeant Major. He was clad in traditional Klingon battle armor whose tones had been muted to more reliably approximate the color of the ubiquitous *uebwi* grass. The bulky optical scanner clutched in his gloved hands was a source of constant irritation for him because it stubbornly refused to reveal anything not already known about the village and its occupants. Even at five hundred meters, the device should have been able to tell him something about what they were facing. As he turned to look askance at Lieutenant Lar'ragos, the old warrior grumbled, "Nothing. Passive scans indicate the village is deserted, and yet we've seen movement among the buildings."

Dressed in a covering of mimetic holomesh over a suit of Starfleet Class-4 combat armor, Lar'ragos' furrowed brow was clearly visible through the raised faceplate of his helmet. "The people we've seen scurrying between buildings could be holograms, trying to draw us into an ambush. Or they could be employing that sensor dampening field again." He glanced at M'Sharv, smirking as the impatient Klingon struggled with the resolution on the field glasses. "Only one way to be sure."

M'Sharv sputtered with barely contained frustration and tossed the binoculars over his shoulder as he turned to inspect his troops. Fifty of *Kang's* finest warriors knelt among the grass, their disruptors and bladed weapons held at the ready. Accompanying them was a small detachment of security personnel from *Gibraltar*, led by Lar'ragos and Master Chief Tark. Everyone, Klingon and Starfleet alike, carried backup projectile sidearm and edged weapons, ever mindful of the potential for the enemy to employ their power nullifying field.

The *QaS DevwI'* bared his teeth at Lar'ragos, sneering. "What? More probes? Perhaps you'd like to sneak up and poke the nearest building with a stick?"

Lar'ragos returned his stare impassively, ignoring the quiet snorts and guffaws of those Klingons within earshot. "I was actually going to

suggest that we attack. Whatever awaits us in that village, sitting here any longer won't help us figure out what it is." He flipped the faceplate of his combat helmet down and his voice took on a distant, digitized quality. "But, if you feel an assault on the target is too bold a plan, I'm familiar with any number of Romulan youth brigade camping songs. We can join hands and sing to the Praetor's health."

"Bah!" M'Sharv's eyes bulged as he forced himself to refrain from rushing the El-Aurian. The shoulders of several nearby warriors shook with silent laughter. "When this is over, little man, I think you and I will come to an understanding. If you are fortunate, it will not involve my feasting on your heart."

Lar'ragos turned away from the burly Klingon to communicate his intentions to his security team with a flurry of quick hand gestures. "Hate to disappoint you, *QaS DevwI'*, but ask any of my subordinates; a heart is something I'm lacking." The security team, still crouched low, moved to climb aboard five two-seat combat SWIFTS.

The Special Warfare Interceptor/Fast Transport was a large, shielded hover cycle that had been fielded near the end of the Dominion War. Fast, quiet, durable and well-armed, the transports had found favor among Starfleet's Special Forces community. Just prior to their mission to Lakesh, Pava had managed to appropriate five SWIFTS in the eventuality that the mission required a quick response platform for surface patrols. Each unit boasted two forward facing phaser emitters, controlled by the pilot. The cycles then supported either an under slung gatling-style pulse phaser cannon, or an automatic photon grenade launcher operated by the passenger in the rear seat.

Lar'ragos turned back to M'Sharv as his armored personnel quickly carried out pre-mission checks on the cycles. "If you've no objections, we'll flank the village from the east. I'm correct in thinking you're going to use a two-prong frontal assault with a diversionary feint to the west?"

The *QaS DevwI'* growled, his mustache and beard flecked with spittle. "Yes, damn you! Go, before I forget who my allies are supposed to be!"

He offered M'Sharv a jaunty salute, then moved to his SWIFT at a low crouch, sliding up and onto the pilot's seat. Lar'ragos initialized his helmet's communications and engaged the short range, heavily encrypted transmitter that allowed him to speak to his team covertly. "Strike Group Alpha, saddle up. Vector approach to the target, formation Theta. I want to hit them just as they're getting their first glimpse of the Klingons."

As he throttled up, he kept the SWIFT no more than a meter off the ground as he led the other four craft plunging through the sea of grass towards the enemy.

Glinn Trevar was sweaty, dirty, and exhausted. He and his thirty-seven man contingent had just completed moving nearly two tons of weapons and supplies into the rural Kendarsi village. The powered sleds that had carried the men and cargo through more than two-hundred kilometers of underground tunnels from the insurgency's primary base had offered little in the way of creature comforts.

Trevar's advance party had set up one of the portable sensor inhibitors which created a disruption field that extended out for five kilometers from the village. Within that area scanning devices would not function beyond a few meters. The glinn had requested to bring one of the insurgency's invaluable area-effect energy siphons, but his superiors had denied him. Thus, if attacked, he would have to weather the full force of his enemy's ranged weaponry.

He hoped that the sensor inhibitor would be enough. With the Klingons now in orbit, the possibility of an engagement with the fearsome warriors was a distinct possibility. In Trevar's view, fighting Starfleet was bad enough, but the Klingons were another matter. Federation forces could at the very least be counted on to show a modicum of civility to their prisoners. In Klingon hands, at best he might suffer a quick end fighting the brutes for sport or training purposes. At worst he would be slowly tortured to death for information.

Now he sat atop a crate of photon mortar tubes on the ground floor of some displaced family's home, sipping water and taking his first real break of the morning.

Sed Grinnt ducked through the low doorway of the structure behind him and called out in a subdued voice. "Glinn, we've spotted movement outside."

Trevar took a long draught from his canteen and inquired, "Where and how many?"

Grinnt stooped to pick up another energy cell for his rifle from an open crate. "Not certain, sir. The sentries on the western wall reported what looks to be organized movement among the grass. Too ordered to be a herd of animals."

Klingons... and so soon. Trevar toggled his wrist communicator. "Zandol, close and secure the entrance to the tunnel, make sure the holoemitter camouflage is functioning. If we're overrun, detonate the charges and collapse this end of the tunnel." As he received an affirmative from his second-in-command, Trevar quickly scooped up his phaser rifle, flipped off the safety catch and checked the charge. He followed Grinnt back outside, shielding his eyes against the glare of the rising sun. The glinn sensed movement around him an instant before he perceived his own soldiers, crouched low and moving for cover, filtering silently into this quadrant of the settlement.

As Trevar moved to a firing position behind a low mud brick wall, he caught a glimpse of motion from within the sea of grass. Then a series of greenish flashes danced among the swaying blades. Disruptor bolts whipped past him, ripping into stone, wood, and flesh. Those of Trevar's men left untouched by the Klingons' opening volley returned fire, their bright yellow beams reaching out towards the enemy. Klingons fell from the ranks of the charging warriors, some pin-wheeling backwards as others vanished entirely as their bodies were consumed by swirling eddies of molecular entropy.

Trevar took aim at one of the advancing Klingons, his sights set on the soldier's armored breastplate. Without warning, the earth around him and the wall he sheltered behind seemed to explode with cacophonous sound and blinding light. The glinn was thrown into the air, then landed

with a bone-jarring thud that drove the air from his lungs. He coughed spasmodically, momentarily unable to catch his breath as the cloud of dust around him began to settle. Something roared past him through the veil of drifting soil, and Trevar registered a glimpse of some kind of cycle-like conveyance, two bodies crouched low atop its back.

Starfleet. They had been flanked by Starfleet. He reached for the comms transmitter on his wrist, wheezing into it ineffectually as he tried to order his men to fall back and regroup. He mustered what strength he could and rose shakily, croaking orders into the communicator as his breath returned to him.

Petty Officer Dunleavy, seated behind Lieutenant Lar'ragos on the team leader's SWIFT, pressed down on the firing stud as she locked her firing solution in her helmet's heads-up display. She sent a stream of pulse phaser blasts screaming into the midst of a group of Cardassian soldiers whose attention was centered squarely on the approaching Klingons.

The walls, buildings and trees they were using for cover exploded in a wave of withering shrapnel. Lar'ragos increased the SWIFT's forward shields and plunged ahead through the swirling cloud of dust and debris while firing phasers to clear his path. As the SWIFT shot through the haze, he caught a fleeting image of an insurgent lurching unsteadily to his feet, screaming into a comlink affixed to his gauntlet. The rear stabilizer fin from Pava's cycle sliced cleanly through the man, who fell backwards before parting ways with the other half of his body.

Master Chief Tark, seated on the back of Ensign Diamato's SWIFT, peppered the southeastern quadrant of the village with a flurry of photon grenades set for airburst stun detonation. A rippling wave of concussive blasts rocked the target area, sending insurgents reeling. Those not rendered immediately unconscious were so disoriented that when they were finally able to function, they found themselves staring down the barrels of Klingon disruptors.

The Klingon warriors, heedless of their reputations as dull-witted thugs, searched the structures of the village with a quickness and precision that left even the highly trained Starfleet security detachment impressed. Rapidly frisking any civilians for weapons, they left them bound but otherwise unharmed. Within a matter of minutes the village had been swept and cleared. Those remaining insurgents who chose to resist were dispatched with relish by the Klingons, who favored bladed weapons for the Cardassians' last, desperate engagements.

Chapter 13

Ramirez looked over the large-screen medical display, and then directed an impatient frown at Lieutenant Taiee. “Okay, I give up, what am I looking at here?” She was standing in one of *Gibraltar*’s operating theaters, which also doubled as an isolation exam room. On the two tables behind them lay the Cardassian survivors of the *Vintar*, rescued a day earlier by Klingon forces during their search of the vessel’s hulk.

The nurse practitioner stepped forward to point to several locations of the Cardassian’s scan highlighted on the display. “The other patient’s injuries appear consistent with exposure to rapid decompression and prolonged oxygen deprivation, but this one’s a different matter.” She tapped at the display’s control interface. “This is a cross section diagram of his prefrontal cortex. The spots that I’ve marked in orange are regions of synaptic degradation.”

“That a result of head trauma?”

“No, sir. Blunt force trauma would show up differently.” Taiee turned to fix a concerned expression on the XO. “If I had to guess – and mind you the EMH agrees with me – what we’re seeing here is the result of exposure to direct synaptic stimulation.”

“So, some kind of brain scan?” Ramirez looked bewildered.

Taiee nodded. “Yes, a very specific kind. The technical term for it is ‘invasive neuro-synaptic induction,’ more popularly known as the Klingon mind sifter.”

Ramirez’s expression darkened. “I thought use of that device was outlawed in the Khitomer Accords.”

“It was, sir.”

The exec turned to look at the Cardassian, feeling an unaccustomed swell of pity for the man. Even for a Cardassian, for an insurgent fighter, to have your intellect ripped asunder... layer by layer, memory by memory. “They’ve tortured them. They’ve tortured them, and now they want us to patch them up and send them back for more.”

“So it would seem, sir.” Taiee was no stranger to the many kinds of cruelty sentient species could visit upon one another. During the war, her mobile surgical unit had been the closest facility to a liberated Cardassian prisoner-of-war camp. The Starfleet personnel and Federation civilians that she treated had been horribly brutalized. At the time, Issara had secretly wished to see such violations inflicted upon the Cardassians in return. That she could have harbored such thoughts, however fleeting and understandable given the circumstances, shamed her now. “I won’t allow it, of course. I don’t care if the head of Starfleet Medical herself orders them released to the Klingons.”

Ramirez’s eyes narrowed. “Not going to happen.” She moved for the exit. “Do what you can for them, Lieutenant.”

QaS Devwl’ M’Sharv walked along the line of kneeling prisoners, his *d’k tagh* clutched tightly in his left hand. “You are now prisoners of the Klingon Empire!” he bellowed. The burly warrior paused at the end of the line just long enough to belt one of the Cardassians across the back of the head with the spike studded end of the blade’s handle. The man fell forward with a grunt, arms still secured tightly behind him.

Lar’ragos looked on, his security team arrayed behind him. The lieutenant held up a hand, stopping the team’s medic in his tracks as he had started towards the now injured Cardassian. The rest of the Starfleet contingent shifted uneasily in their armor, less from rising heat of the midmorning, he imagined, then from what they were observing.

For Lar’ragos the scene held a powerful sense of nostalgia. How many cities, towns, and villages like this one had he conquered or laid waste at the behest of his former masters? He realized with a sudden thrill of familiarity why he loathed M’Sharv so potently, despite having just met the man. Four hundred years earlier it had been Lar’ragos giving this rousing little speech, or one very much like it.

The grizzled Klingon continued, “For those of you who do not understand the concept of empire, allow me to explain. You and your fellow Cardassians are now servants to the Klingon race. You are now and for all time *jeghpu’wl’*. Serve us well, and you will survive to enjoy some semblance of the lives you once knew. Disobey us... or worse, and you will be slaughtered like livestock, your bodies and those of your loved ones left for carrion birds!” He walked to a position from where the ranks of kneeling insurgents could all see him. “So there is no misunderstanding, you are less now than the Bajorans once were to you.”

One of the prisoners spat loudly towards M’Sharv, his effort falling short by meters. The man’s expression radiated a hatred so visceral that the air around him almost seemed to oscillate with it. The *QaS Devwl’* drew his disruptor pistol with blinding speed, vaporizing the offending insurgent where he knelt. M’Sharv holstered his weapon slowly. “Let that be your first lesson.” The eyes of the other Cardassians lowered, none among them willing to chance M’Sharv’s wrath.

It took every ounce of control Lar’ragos possessed to stay his hand. He ached to intervene, to step up and confront M’Sharv. He seethed with the desire to humiliate the *QaS Devwl’*, to break the man in front of his warriors. But Lar’ragos knew that Klingon honor would demand satisfaction for such an act. The likelihood was that after Pava and his team had been dispatched by M’Sharv’s men, *Gibraltar* and his crewmates would end up paying the remainder of the tab.

Instead, he flipped his helmet faceplate shut, activating the long-range comms. “Lar’ragos to *Gibraltar*, I need to speak with the captain immediately.”

“Enter.”

The door to the captain's ready room opened to admit Ramirez. As soon as Sandhurst glanced up, he could tell she was angry. He waved her towards the chair sitting opposite his desk. "Have a seat." She clearly would have rather remained standing but sat anyway.

"The Klingons have been torturing those prisoners."

"I know." Sandhurst met her gaze evenly.

Her eyes blazed. "And you're just going to hand them back? Knowing what they'll be subjected to?" The challenge in her tone was unmistakable.

The captain leaned back in his chair, content to keep his own counsel for the moment.

"This is outrageous! I can't believe you're going to allow the Klingons to walk all over us!" The expression on her face was a mix of disbelief and contempt.

He observed her silently for another moment, trying to decide how far he should push this. "You're talking about the people who shot the *Phoenix* out from under you, Commander. Are you so sure you want to defend their rights as prisoners of war?"

Ramirez sat forward, her anger palpable. "How *dare* you ask me that! Nobody's more aware than I what these people have cost us. That doesn't excuse our turning a blind eye to these prisoners being tortured by our *honorable* allies. I swore an oath on the day I earned this uniform, the same oath you took..."

She came up short as Sandhurst began laughing spitefully.

"You really don't understand me at all, do you Commander?" He shook his head, his disappointment evident. "I've no intention of allowing those Cardassians to be transferred into Klingon custody. In fact, Starfleet regulations specifically prohibit rendering prisoners to the supervision of any third party who isn't a signatory to the Seldon Convention governing treatment of detainees." He moved forward suddenly to stand and brace his arms on the desk as he glared across at Ramirez. "But you just assumed that I'd knuckle under to K'Vada." He sneered, "I'm so glad I've earned your confidence."

In response to Sandhurst's aggressive posture, Ramirez rose to her feet as well. Despite his size advantage, Ramirez was undaunted. "Maybe I'd know that, *Captain*, if you'd spend any time at all talking with your first officer! Whenever you want to bounce ideas off somebody, instead of looking to me you lock yourself away in here with Lieutenant Lar'ragos." A flicker of uncertainty shone in the captain's eyes, and sensing vulnerability, Ramirez forged ahead. "What happened to you *needing* me on this mission? You've asked for my input on the insurgency exactly once. The rest of the time you seem content if I stay out from under foot."

His malicious reply evaporated on his tongue. Sandhurst's shoulders sagged, and he pushed back from the desk, resuming his seat heavily. "*Touché*, Commander."

Caught off guard by Sandhurst's abrupt change of mien, Ramirez nevertheless held her ground.

Sandhurst rubbed the back of his neck absently as he muttered, "For what it's worth, Ramirez, I'm glad you haven't let your personal feelings about the Cardassians influence your ethics."

She regarded him warily. "And you feel you have?"

Sandhurst fought back a defeated sigh. "I think that I've made far too many compromises here, while failing to do anything proactive. We came here to help these people. Now, their planet is burning down around them, and all we've to show for it is hundreds of civilian and Starfleet dead."

Ramirez offered, "Our own personal *Kobayashi Maru*?"

"Something like that."

"*Bridge to Captain Sandhurst.*"

"Go ahead."

"*Sir, priority message from Lieutenant Lar'ragos on the surface.*"

"Acknowledged, put it through."

There was a brief pause before Pava's voice announced, "*Captain, we've got a situation developing down here. Our attack on the suspected insurgent position was a success, and we've netted seventeen prisoners. However, the commander of the Klingon contingent has already executed one of them, and if we don't act soon there's sure to be more unnecessary casualties among the POW's.*"

Sandhurst stood, rounded the desk and made for the door. "Understood, Lieutenant. Are the prisoners in an area where we could beam them all out at once?" He passed through the parting doors and onto the bridge, Ramirez on his heels.

"*Negative, sir. The POW's are all in one location, but we've yet to pinpoint the sensor jamming device that prevented us from scanning the village prior to our assault. It's very doubtful you could get a transporter lock on any of us.*"

Sandhurst murmured, "Of course" under his breath as he took his place in the center seat. "Transporter room one, can you get a positive lock on anyone inside the village?"

"*Stand by, sir. Scanning... No, sir, sensor interference at those coordinates is preventing us from getting an accurate lock.*"

“Acknowledged.” The captain looked to Ramirez, who had assumed her seat in the well. “Thoughts, Commander?”

She pondered the question for the briefest of moments, then replied, “I’d recommend a two-part strategy, sir. First, we have Lar’ragos and his team look for the sensor scrambler. Meanwhile, we talk with K’Vada, try and get him to rein in his people. If nothing else, we might stall them for a bit.”

“Good idea.” Sandhurst tapped at his armrest display. “Commander, you get in touch with Lar’ragos and relay his new orders.” He stood. “Open communications with the *Kang*.”

“Aye, Captain. Channel open.”

His guts knotting with tension, Sandhurst wondered how he might sway the imposing Klingon general. K’Vada shouldn’t give a damn what a Starfleet captain’s opinion was of his tactics, but perhaps there was some way he could make the man see reason.

General K’Vada appeared on screen, looking dour. “What do you want, Captain?”

And here we go, Sandhurst steeled himself. “General, it appears we have a developing situation on the surface. Some of your ground forces are abusing the prisoners in our joint custody. This makes our participation somewhat problematic.”

K’Vada looked pained. “Speak plainly, Captain. I have no stomach for subtleties.”

Sandhurst pursed his lips. “Fine. I request you order your troops to stop killing the Cardassian prisoners, sir.”

“You’ve made your feelings clear on this matter, Captain. If you are uncomfortable with how we treat those we’ve conquered, I suggest you withdraw your surface team.”

Sandhurst felt a growing surge of anger. “The Cardassians aren’t a conquered people, General. If you’ll remember, they joined our cause and helped turn the tide against the Dominion at the last minute, paying a terrible price in the process. Our occupation of their territory is merely to help stabilize their government and economy.”

“That makes them all the more dangerous, Captain,” K’Vada growled. “I would have more respect for the Cardassians had they *not* betrayed their alliance to the Dominion. They proved beyond all doubt that they cannot be trusted and will turn their backs on any pact if it suits their whims.”

Sandhurst floundered, fighting for purchase in the face of K’Vada’s indignation. “I believe we can still work together to accomplish something on Lakesh, General... salvage something worthwhile from all this chaos.”

He poured every ounce of conviction he could into the next statement. “But as long as your men continue to torture and execute helpless prisoners, I can’t offer you any further assistance.”

K’Vada sat back slightly in his throne-like command chair and inclined his head. “Your actions at Lakesh have been duly noted. Your continued presence here is not required.”

“I’m sorry?” The captain frowned uncertainly.

“You are ordered to withdraw from the Crolsa system, Captain. You may gather your civilian transports and depart.”

His face reddened, and Sandhurst countered, “I thought we had addressed this issue, sir. I’ll need confirmation from Starfleet Command before I can—”

K’Vada cut him off, “It would be a mistake to treat this as a request, Captain Sandhurst.” He gestured sharply to someone off screen.

An alert warbled at the Operations station. Ensign Browder announced, “Sir, a Klingon *K’Vort*-class cruiser has just decloaked directly astern.”

The general looked entirely too satisfied as K’Vada observed Sandhurst with detached amusement. “I am certain confirmation from your admiralty will be forthcoming. In the meantime, *Grolkam* will provide an escort to the edge of the system.”

“General, we still have Starfleet personnel unaccounted for on the surface. I would ask for time enough to recover our people.” Sandhurst’s expression hardened.

“Request denied, Captain. You may be sure that if we find your missing crew, they will be well cared for and returned to you as soon as is practical.” K’Vada seemed to consider something for a moment. “Before you depart, you will beam the two prisoners aboard the *Kang*.”

“With respect, sir, I will do no such thing.” Sandhurst’s reply was immediate, and he took pleasure in standing his ground.

For an instant it appeared as though K’Vada would press the issue. Then he smiled that same unnerving sneer that Sandhurst had seen in his ready room. “No matter. We have others now who will give us the information we need.” He waved a hand dismissively, “I bid you farewell, Captain.”

As he considered the dwindling options open to him, Sandhurst weighed taking a stand on moral grounds against starting an interstellar incident with the Klingons. It was a battle he was sure to lose. Both his crew and the survivors of the *Phoenix* had been through enough. This planet and this mission had already bled Captain Awokou’s original task force white.

Sandhurst refused to sacrifice anyone else on the altar of his own pride. He gradually became aware that the entire bridge crew awaited his next command with baited breath. “Commander Ramirez, recall our away team. Ops, order all relief ships into convoy formation and have

them standby for departure.” He turned back to the view screen and the captain frowned at the image of K’Vada. “It appears I have little choice other than to comply with your instructions, General. For whatever good it does, be advised that I take this action under protest, and will lodge a formal complaint with Starfleet Command regarding your treatment of prisoners of war.”

“Words, Captain. Merely words. On the day the Federation comes to realize that a single decisive act is more potent than all the words ever spoken... on that day you will become worthy allies of the Empire.”

The *Kang* terminated the comlink, leaving Sandhurst staring at the blank viewer.

As he sat back down in his command chair, Sandhurst muttered, “I *really* dislike that man.” He took measure of his bridge, and the captain saw that the assembled officers and crew were beginning to relax now that the chances of an armed confrontation with the Klingons appeared to be dwindling.

Chapter 14

Lar'ragos and his team fanned out through the village of Kendarsi, using their tricorders as crude Geiger-counters. They used the sensor interference itself as their guide, moving towards those areas where their devices were less functional in hopes of stumbling across the offending device.

Lar'ragos and two of his officers forced their way into a small outbuilding adjoining a family cottage. As Petty Officer Dunleavy's tricorder burned out with a crackling gout of sparks, Lar'ragos noted, "I think we may be getting close."

From behind him one of the security NCO's said, "Lieutenant, check our six."

Lar'ragos turned as a group of Klingon warriors approached, led by an especially severe looking M'Sharv. The lieutenant fought the urge to raise his weapon, his instincts insisting that something was very wrong here. Still, he could not resist baiting the man. "Done playing grand inquisitor, M'Sharv?"

"Starfleet, it appears you will be leaving." The burly Klingon actually looked disappointed. "And before we have had our reckoning."

The *QaS DevwI'* rested his hand on the grip of his holstered disruptor pistol.

Just then, Lar'ragos' helmet comm crackled with Ramirez's voice. "Gibraltar to away team, stand by for immediate beam-out. Move out of the zone of sensor interference double-time."

"Acknowledged. On our way."

The Klingon contingent surrounded the Starfleet personnel and shepherded them back to their equipment where they were reunited with the others from the away team. When they were safely outside the scrambling field, the lieutenant signaled their readiness for transport.

As he stood next to his SWIFT, the El-Aurian raised his faceplate and fixed his gaze on M'Sharv. "May the gods forgive you for what you're about to do here."

M'Sharv's reply was a coarse laugh. "Fool, our gods are dead and theirs cannot help them."

Pava's response was lost in the hum of the transporter field that swept the away team home.

The stars fell behind him as smears of light in the blackness. Captain Sandhurst found that he could barely stomach the sight of himself reflected in the viewport. He was running away. There was no other possible explanation, and no rationalization he could find would make the experience any more agreeable.

He sat in his ready room brooding, hating the feeling of failure that seemed to permeate the entire ship. He realized that he had been completely unprepared for that possibility on this, his first mission as captain. Sandhurst had thought that he and his crew would somehow find a way to resolve the situation. Perhaps they might have located the secret insurgent base, enlisted the aid of the remaining civilians to their cause, something. But the miracle solution was not to be, and the mission ended in disaster. Two starships destroyed, hundreds dead or horribly crippled, and for what? The very people he had been sent to help would now be crushed under the boot of a vindictive Klingon military.

Less than an hour after the Federation convoy departed the Crolsa system, Admiral Salk's orders to withdraw had arrived by subspace. A nice, neat little wrap-up to Starfleet Command's silent complicity in the Klingons' actions. Despite Sandhurst's determination to throw the light of public scrutiny on the situation, he knew no matter how embarrassing the episode proved to be for the Federation government, the Council would not risk war with the Klingon Empire. The peace would be preserved, whatever the cost in Cardassian lives.

His door chimed. He turned in his desk chair to face the entrance but said nothing.

Another chime. He sighed heavily and grumbled, "Come."

A freshly showered Lar'ragos entered, having spent the past half hour washing away the last remnants of Lakesh from his person. Sandhurst stared at him silently for a moment before practically snarling, "What?"

Lar'ragos quirked an eyebrow as he settled onto the couch. "Word has it you're in a bit of a snit."

Sandhurst glowered at the El-Aurian. "I don't remember inviting you to have a seat."

"Funny, neither do I."

The captain's voice was laden with warning, "Really not in the mood."

Lar'ragos gauged his friend's candor, then nodded slowly. "I know, so I'll be brief. You've been making some discrete inquiries that are getting some very important people rankled."

The captain settled back into his chair to fold his arms across his chest in an unconsciously defensive posture. "Regarding?"

"Regarding the device in engineering. I've been asked by interested third parties to warn you to back off."

“Third parties?”

Lar'ragos scowled, “Don't be obtuse, Captain. You know precisely who and what I'm talking about. You've set a great many things in motion behind the scenes. Talking publicly about what we found in engineering could endanger those investigations.”

Sandhurst's face hardened, and he leaned across the table. “Pava, did you put that thing on my ship?”

Lar'ragos flinched as if struck, looking utterly incredulous. “You think I'm capable of such a thing?”

Sandhurst smirked wickedly. “Don't play the wounded bird; you're not that good an actor. I know for a fact that you've done far worse in your time.” His temper rising, he jabbed an accusatory finger in Lar'ragos' direction. “I haven't forgotten listening to your impassioned speeches at the academy. On and on about how the Federation was unique in all your travels, how it was the one bastion against the imperialism and chaos that consumed much of the rest of the galaxy. I believe your exact words were, *‘It must be protected and preserved at any cost.’*”

Lar'ragos met his captain's gaze steadily. “Let me make this absolutely clear. I did not place that device aboard the ship. I am not at present, nor have I ever worked for Starfleet Intelligence in any capacity.”

He eased back into his chair and Sandhurst frowned. “I'd almost feel better if you were. At least then I'd know who among my crew was harboring divided loyalties.”

Lar'ragos gave the captain a pessimistic shrug and looked apologetic. “From what little I know about how these people operate, by the time we figure it out, whoever planted it will be long gone.” The old soldier looked down for a moment, rubbing his hands together. “Anyway, the powers-that-be strongly suggest you let this go.”

Sandhurst scratched the back of his neck, observing his friend for a moment. He turned his chair and his back on the Tactical officer and uttered, “Get out.”

Lar'ragos departed without another word, leaving the captain alone with his thoughts and the retreating stars.

Ramirez awoke from a troubled sleep to the insistent beeping of her data terminal, the double chime of the alert signaling a priority communiqué. Bleary-eyed, she staggered over to her work desk and slid into the chair, toggling the viewer on.

Rear Admiral Monica Covey appeared on screen, smiling wistfully at Ramirez's appearance. “Commander, sorry to have woken you.”

She rubbed her eyes before sweeping her hair back and away from her face. Ramirez muttered, “S'alright, sir. What can I do for you, Admiral?”

“I just received Captain Sandhurst's request for your reassignment to my staff, and I wanted to discuss it with you.”

Ramirez brightened noticeably. “That's wonderful news, Admiral. We're on course for DS9 with a brief stopover at Epsilon. I can catch the next available transport from the station to Starbase 71.”

Covey paused, mulling over her next words. “Liana... I'd like you to consider remaining on the *Gibraltar* for the time being.”

A look of complete disbelief washed over Ramirez's features. “I'm sorry, sir... you what?”

The admiral appeared momentarily uncertain, then her resolve seemed to firm. She focused her dark brown eyes on the younger woman. “Donald needs you as his right hand.”

Ramirez's face colored, “Respectfully, sir, I have no desire whatsoever to continue serving on this ship.”

“I'm fully aware of that, Liana, but sometimes the needs of the service outweigh our personal ambitions.” Covey's expression softened. “I'm asking for one year. *Asking*, Liana. I won't order you to do this. However, at the end of that year, it would be accurate to say that you'd have a flag officer who owes you a favor. A big one.”

Ramirez fought to calm her breathing. “How big?”

“You could come back to my staff, if that's what you want. Or, I could offer you the first available XO's billet on a *Galaxy* or *Sovereign*-class ship. Perhaps command of a smaller vessel, an escort or deep space scout?”

Her shoulders slumped in resignation. Ramirez stared at the admiral. “If I'm going to sign on for this, sir, I need to know why.”

Covey gave her a questioning look.

“Why is Sandhurst so important to you? What the hell makes him so worthy of all this effort?”

As she gave the younger woman a wry smile, the admiral replied, “It's nothing I could explain to you in a few minutes. I very much hope that by the end of this next year, you'll be able to answer that question for yourself.”

Still looking unconvinced, Liana pressed, “But why me? He's got Lar'ragos. Hell, he'd be delighted to promote the lieutenant to the executive officer's post.”

“Lar'ragos is Donald's most glaring weakness, Liana. As a cadet Donald worshipped the man, and still does in some ways. Pava has his strengths, of course, but he's a deeply troubled man who refuses to confront his demons. He can't be trusted with a command level position,

and fortunately to some degree he seems to know this.” Covey shook her head in amazement, “I even opened the door for him to the *Enterprise*, but he wouldn’t bite. He passed up the flagship to serve with your captain. That, in and of itself should tell you something about Donald’s uniqueness.”

Ramirez closed her eyes as her hopes and expectations for the next year seemed to evaporate.

“And as for you, Commander, you’re exactly what the captain needs in an XO. You’re capable, fearless, and brutally honest when it’s required. Your strengths counteract Donald’s weaknesses. In my book, that’s the definition of an effective command team.”

Reluctant but committed, Ramirez said, “Admiral, sir, you have yourself a deal.”

Captain’s Personal Log, SD- 53172.6

Gibraltar’s first mission has ended in failure. I sincerely hope this ignoble beginning will not affect our future assignments. I’m increasingly pleased with the caliber and fortitude of my crew, despite their being labeled a ‘gang of misfits’ by others in the Fleet. These people might not be the most celebrated officers and enlisted personnel in the service, but they have performed with distinction and do credit to Starfleet.

Starbase Deep Space Nine

Sandhurst found speaking through a Betazoid intermediary to be a uniquely surreal experience. He was drawn to the telepath’s dark eyes as he attempted to speak through him to another who might as well have been a corpse.

Captain Banti Awokou lay immobile, eyes open but unseeing, atop a biobed in DS9’s infirmary. The male Betazoid sat beside him, giving voice to Awokou’s thoughts.

Regardless of his own discomfort, Sandhurst had specifically requested this meeting. Dr. Bashir had brought Awokou out of stasis so that Sandhurst could give him a full report on the fate of his ship and the mission to Lakesh. It had not been easy to tell the celebrated captain that his beloved *Phoenix* had been lost, struck from the sky in a single instant of violence.

Nonetheless, Sandhurst felt that he owed Awokou that much. Ramirez had wanted to do it, feeling equally obligated, but Sandhurst had taken up the task himself.

“... regret that it ended this way, Captain. She was a fine ship with a first-rate crew.” Sandhurst fell silent, looking down at Awokou’s inert features. His words, however heartfelt, were totally inadequate.

The Betazoid spoke with a kind of detached calm, “*I understand, Captain. Tell Ramirez not to blame herself. This assignment was botched from the beginning.*”

“You really think so?”

“Absolutely. These people had an arsenal at their disposal. We’d have needed twenty starships laden with an occupation force to pacify Lakesh. Instead, we had thee and me. Perhaps it’s not politically correct to say so, but I feel I’ve earned the right... I hope the Klingons burn that planet down.”

As Sandhurst rose to leave, he murmured, “Of that I have no doubt, Captain.”

“*Was your first command what you’d expected?*”

The question, posed so innocently, caught Sandhurst off guard.

“No.” He turned back, and his eyes tracked from Awokou to the Betazoid intermediary. “I thought the pressure would be nearly overwhelming; the responsibility so awesome as to defy description.” Donald Sandhurst turned and passed through the door onto the Promenade, “I had *no* idea.”

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