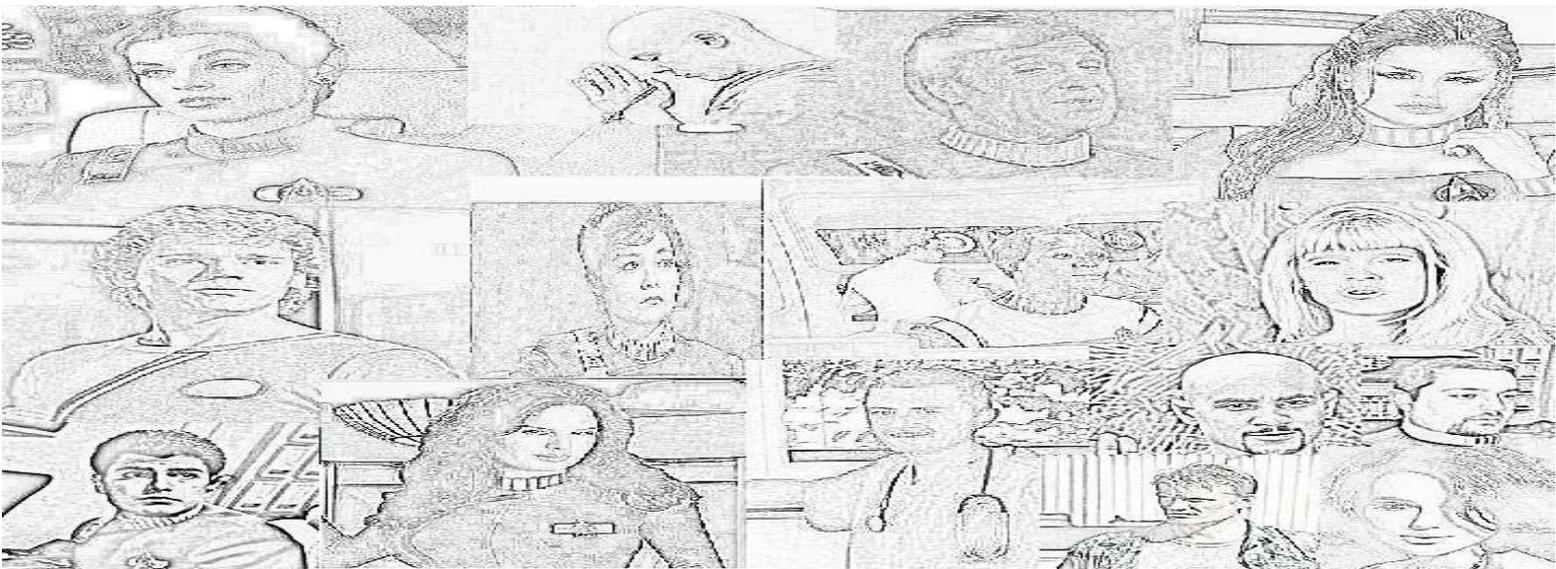


STAR TREK GRISSOM

The Price of Virtue



The Price of Virtue

Prologue

Ch'ramaki system

Beta Quadrant

Stardate 8134.6

The armada hung in orbit like the Sword of Damocles. Flanked by sister *K't'inga*-class battlecruisers was the flagship of the Imperial Klingon Fleet: *Kronos One*. The purple and gold embellishments of the flagship outshone all others, proclaiming the presence of Chancellor Kesh, leader of the Empire. Along with the battlecruisers were the bulky, functional Beachhead-class assault ships, *ChonnaQ*-class light cruisers, and numerous frigates and Birds of Prey sprinkled throughout.

D'k tahgs glistened as they had their final sharpening in the subdued lighting, the crests of the houses of each warrior embossed on the weapons proudly standing out. Body armour was checked for defects and disruptor pistols were either prepared or stowed in favour of the larger disruptor rifles. These were the elite of the Imperial Klingon First Fleet Assault Force; the best of the best, and preparing to do what they did best: planetary assault.

Troopers checked the equipment of their fellows, ensuring everything was as it should be. Many proclaimed quotations from Kahless the Unforgettable, others butted heads to fire up their adrenaline ready for the glorious battles ahead. Their assault armour was slightly heavier than the standard armour of the Empire; the armour contained everything the warrior would need and nothing more. A warrior would feed on the battle, relishing every moment; every kill would add to the cry of the warrior in their ears.

Deeper in the Beachhead-class assault ship, the leader of the assault consulted the myriad of displays. Their

adversary was preparing to meet them in battle. A snort of pleasure erupted from the General's lips. He stabbed the communications button to share the news with his troops.

"...when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger:
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect."

The general looked across at the other unit commanders in the command and control room, his bolted-on eye patch glistening in the light as if to emphasise the last line of his opening remark, his remaining eye hiding in the shadows menacingly until the last second.

The general turned to his juniors, his topknot of hair swinging as his head turned: "Commence the assault!"

The outside of the bulky structure of the Beachhead-class vessel began to change - large sections on the aft underside began to break off: the assault craft themselves. These dozen or so craft swiftly entered the atmosphere, each heading for a population centre. This would be over quickly.

Inside the assault craft, the Klingon warriors readied themselves; giant muscles tensed and flexed. A few sang anthems of war, glory and honour; other Klingons checked and re-checked their weapons, ready to use them. There was no fear, no remorse about what they were about to do. With a shudder, the craft touched down and the front ramp dropped like a stone.

The young unit commander, Kaarg, shared his last words with the troops:

"They may *look* like us, but they are *not* us."

He looked them all in the face and assumed his position at the front, as a leader should; a nod from the assault craft situation officer said they were ready.

"*Q'apla!*"

With the traditional Klingon cry for good luck they charged forwards, wild hair flailing from the crested, domed heads of the warriors. The opposition soon met them; the enemy

was cut down left and right by the *bat'leths* and disruptor bolts. Commander Kaarg was ready for this moment: he charged out of the assault craft and selected the nearest male opponents to him, shooting one with his disruptor and slicing the other with his knife blade. A few rapid slices and cuts deftly deflected the feeble attempts by his opponent who fell with an unfamiliar cry.

For a second, Kaarg looked at the fallen; they were as he had told his men. They had the ridges of a Klingon and yet they had shaved their beards off; their words were also alien to him.

The moment was over. Kaarg found his next targets and charged, leaving the blood of the dead to slowly seep into the earth.

Chapter One

USS Grissom

En route to Pacifica

Mission: to pick up crew for the classified Genesis Project.

The half-million or so tonnes of Oberth-class scout vessel *Grissom* bent the laws of physics as she bent space itself. Encapsulated in the nine year old ship were eighty lives; eighty people whose daily routine ran like clockwork and yet was so smooth no one consciously thought about it. No one except the senior staff in their daily meetings.

This morning, like every morning aboard Starfleet starships, there was a daily captain's brief; the senior staff led by the executive officer would brief the captain on the progress of each division on the ship. From this meeting, the schedule and plan ahead could be mapped out. With the recent losses on the ship there had been some changes in the roles in the senior staff as temporary measures.

Chris Chattman ran through the essentials for the briefing in his head. Since the death of the executive officer, he

had been acting head of science division. This new temporary posting had put him at the spearhead of the Genesis preparations. As communications officer, Chattman had half a dozen enlisted personnel under his supervision; now this had increased to almost a third of the ship's company.

Chattman had a passing familiarity with the full spectrum of the sciences, but now he was responsible for climatologists, neurophysiologists, botanists and liaising with a host of other divisions and departments to anticipate the needs of Lieutenant Saavik and Doctor Marcus when they arrived at Pacifica.

The more Chattman thought about all of the tasks ahead the more his mood became one of irritation; this was not why he had boarded the *Grissom*. He suddenly had found his responsibilities had ballooned and his workload had increased tenfold. He was not sleeping well. As his mood darkened, Specialist Aabin came round the corner.

"Specialist," Chattman acknowledged Aabin's presence with a nod, not wishing to talk further. The feelings he had around the enlisted Deltan were inappropriate and he didn't understand why he felt that way. He tried to continue on past but the Deltan stopped him.

"I was wondering, Lieutenant; when are we going to be given a mission briefing? I can sense that there is something important that we are to perform. It would aid in our preparations no end if we knew what it was that we are preparing for."

Aabin could sense the turmoil in the lieutenant. He could also sense his feelings. Normally he could decipher them but since their encounter at Cinera Base it was as if he had the empathic version of a headache; his focus had slipped and no amount of meditation during *Cha'uud* seemed to rectify the matter. This troubled him.

Chattman held Aabin's gaze for a second more than he should. Reaffirming his concentration, he replied quickly, "I'll see what I can do. If you'll excuse me, I need to get to the Captain's briefing."

Chattman's conversation about his feelings would have to wait for another day; you do not keep the captain waiting

for his briefing. Aabin was left in Chattman's emotional wake as he quickly disappeared down the corridor to the turbolift. Aabin stood looking down the corridor after Chattman disappeared, thinking about the feelings he felt in himself and the lieutenant; something didn't feel right. He thought about the matter for a second longer before turning on his heel and headed for the gym.

Another officer heading for the briefing whose responsibilities had increased was Stephanie Ottair, the chief engineer. Ottair was acting-Executive Officer and was now responsible for the needs of the crew, not just her own engineering division. As with Chattman, this meant that suddenly her workload had increased in the light of preparations for Genesis.

Every evening, Ottair chaired a meeting with the heads of all of the divisions; this meeting was to review the current status of preparations and projects. Normally, Ottair would have attended the meeting as one of the division heads; now she chaired the meeting with the captain's needs in mind. The outcome of the meeting would be the captain's briefing at 0800 hours the following morning. As acting-Executive Officer, Ottair ensured she arrived at the briefing room first: she wanted to be certain that the meeting attendees were all present before the captain arrived and she also wanted a moment's peace to go over in her head what she wanted to say.

The briefing room of the *Grissom* had photographs of Virgil 'Gus' Grissom, and his various NASA missions, on the back wall. The room looked back over the rear of the ship; the glow from the impulse deflection crystals gave the windows an ethereal blue tint. The room was dominated by a large table with a built in computer and holographic system. This was the room in which the practicalities of how to execute the mission, the ethical debates and resource management would all be discussed. The salmon-pink carpet matched the upholstery of the chairs.

The silence of the briefing room was broken by the quiet whisper of the door opening and the figures of Lieutenant Cassas and head of Security Operations Thoresen – a Swedish giant of a man known to his crewmates as 'Thor'. Both were

engaged in a somewhat animated discussion.

Thor's spiked blonde hair waggled slightly as he gestured with huge hands, "I still don't see why you call it cheating..."

"You cannot pretend to be hurt and then attack your now-concerned opponent – it just isn't sporting!"

"Well, whilst onboard ship you can play by rules; off ship the only rule is there are no rules! We improvise and do what we need to in order to resolve the situation quickly and with no loss of life."

Casas was fuming, the Latin blood of the Spaniard boiling as he argued against the massive form of Thor. Both stopped arguing when they noticed Ottair at the back of the room staring out of the window at the blue glow outside. Unlike what the two men expected, she didn't react to their heated debate, choosing instead to keep her thoughts to herself even when she turned to face them. Casas and Thor looked at each other and took their seats ready for the meeting.

The next to arrive was Captain Esteban, cup of coffee in hand.

"Good morning – ready for another day of preparations?"

"As I'll ever be," noted Ottair, wagging the PADD in her hand.

The flustered form of Lieutenant Chattman then arrived, spilling into the room and almost dropping one of his PADDs before assuming a seat at the table.

"Got everything?" Thor joked dryly at the collection of PADDs in front of Chattman.

The reaction was somewhat different from what was expected when the lieutenant quietly growled something about more material being needed for sciences on a science vessel than security and security ops combined would ever need.

Thor said nothing – the lieutenant was obviously feeling grouchy today – and simply looked at the others in the room, opening his eyes wide to express his thoughts.

Doctor S'Raazh was the next to arrive, in the company of

the petite captain's yeoman Arunie Fernando. Their conversation abruptly stopped as the door opened and Fernando quietly made her way to the seat next to Captain Esteban. Yeoman Fernando's role was vital for the fluid operation of the ship; her job was to act as the administrator for the captain, recording what was proposed or agreed in the meeting and assisting the captain in keeping track of who said what.

Last to arrive was the hulking form of the logistics officer and head of special services division Graav. The Tellarite entered the room in his usual foul mood; yet again his pristine cargo bays were being disrupted by the preparations for Genesis. The captain obviously did not understand his need for an orderly, organized set of cargo bays. It had now reached the stage where items were even being transferred from one cargo bay to another. This was insufferable. Any and all attempts to greet the Tellarite were met with sniffs of disdain.

The meeting started with the usual appreciation of the situation. The clock was ticking for the rendezvous with the remaining Genesis team at Pacifica. Preparations were well in-hand on the ship: training schedules were now in place for the crew to get equipment up and running as well as procedures for arrival at the Genesis planet. Protocols had been drafted for approval over a year ago, but these still remained with the Federation Science Council. These drafts were hurried to Captain Esteban after the detonation of the Genesis device by "terrorists".

The examination of the Genesis planet was to take place in stages: stage one was an examination of the planet by climatologists, geologists, seismologists and planetary scientists to assess the stability of the planet. Stage two would be probes and sensors to look at the life forms and conditions on the planet surface ready for an initial landing party. Stage three was the initial pioneer landing party which would pave the way for full landing teams in stage four. Grissom was to execute stages one and two with stage three as a possibility. Full survey teams were still subject to Science Council approval.

"Now that we're all here..." Esteban said with a mildly rebuking look at latecomers, "...let's get this moving."

Ottair's distracted musing at the blue glow of the impulse engines was blown out the airlock as she realised she'd neglected her own self-assigned tasks, and she mentally shook herself to scatter the wool she'd been gathering and refocused on her duties.

"Captain, if I may...?" Chattman immediately spoke up.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Esteban allowed.

"On the issue of Genesis, when are we going to brief the rest of the crew on this?" Chattman raised Aabin's concerns. "The science personnel aren't going to take long to piece together what we are up to – if the terraforming specialists haven't already."

Esteban mused for a moment. "I suppose we were only going to keep a lid on this for a short time," he directed his gaze at Chattman. "Brief your teams on Genesis – but only for as much as they need to know. The rest of the ship we'll take on a need-to-know basis for now. Now..."

At that moment the meeting was interrupted by the chirp of the communicator. Duty communications specialist Al-Rashid politely apologised for her intrusion into the meeting in her usual dulcet Lebanese accent, *"Sorry to interrupt, Captain, but I have Admiral Morrow on hyper channel for you."*

"Put him through."

The lights in the briefing room were dimmed already from the various three-dimensional holographic displays that had been used to demonstrate data from the *Enterprise* and numerous probes to the Genesis planet. Now these displays were replaced by the dark features of Admiral Harold Morrow, his scowl and trademark moustache instantly identifiable.

"I am sorry to gate-crash your briefing, Jonathan, but we have had a situation arise. Station Epsilon Five picked up a couple of ships crossing the neutral zone from Klingon space. We determined they were not warships but small merchant vessels. A liner from Epiphany Tours, the Arcadia, was diverted to the ships when distress calls were received."

"Klingons fleeing into our space?" queried Esteban.

"Now there's the issue, Jonathan." Morrow's lip curled slightly as if amused. *"The captain of the Arcadia reports the refugees appear to be Klingon, but don't actually speak Klingonaase..."*

Chapter Two

USS Grissom

En route to SS Arcadia

Mission: assess the refugees and report to Starfleet Command.

Space curved around the powerful warp nacelles of the Oberth-class scout vessel. The briefing room now buzzed with an energy that was almost as charged as the propulsion system driving them forward. Esteban had ordered an intercept course to the *Arcadia* at warp six. The yellow alert was a formality; he had no idea who these people were but they had crossed from Klingon space. After the recent incident with that Klingon shuttle, perhaps they had returned. In force.

"What do we know about the *Arcadia*?" queried Esteban, his brow furrowed.

Ottair pressed a few buttons on the table and, after a brief pause, a holographic image of a ship appeared along with some data.

"She is a *Fantasia*-class liner of the Epiphany Tours company operating out of Deneva—"

"'Epiphany Tours: not so much a holiday as an epiphany'," interjected Yeoman Fernando.

After an awkward second where Ottair looked coldly at the young woman, the XO continued. "Yes, one and the same, Yeoman. She masses far more tonnage than us, has state-of-the-art suites with holographic simulators, fitness facilities, health spas, theatres, casinos - all of the things one could want for a tour away from it all for three months. One hundred twenty-seven crew and passengers

embarked, Captain Ri'tarxx currently the master."

Captain Esteban mused over the information for a second. "Commander, I am leading a team onto the *Arcadia*, supported by Mr. Thoresen and his squad. I want Doctor S'Raazh with Seipeal and a couple of paramedics to assess the condition of the refugees, once it is determined to be safe to do so."

Esteban turned his chair as he turned his attention. "Mr. Chattman, I want you to translate this language; if it is a previously unheard Klingon language variant or a new language altogether I want it deciphered. Lastly, I want an empath onboard to assess the mood of these 'refugees'; Specialist Aabin is on the team. Dismissed."

The briefing room quickly emptied as the senior staff dispersed to prepare for this unexpected rendezvous. Chattman's stomach was still unsettled at the mention of the specialist's name.

* * *

The clacking of boot heels echoed around the shuttle bay as the quartet approached the shuttle. Clive Saunders was conspicuous in his non-Starfleet attire; he wanted to distance himself from the organisation which – in his eyes – had usurped Genesis away from Carol and the 'proper' scientists at Regula One. He was only here at the impassioned request of Dr Marcus. Doctor Liebmann had whined sufficiently to Starfleet at yet another delay to his pick-up enough to send a shuttle to fetch him. Saunders looked on it as a chance to escape from the regimented atmosphere of the science vessel; it also afforded him the chance to spend time with some of the more attractive members of the *Grissom's* crew – and that was no bad thing!

"So go on, Doctor, tell us what this is all about? I hate all of the cloak-and-dagger that's being played out". Asked McLoughlin; she had never been shy about coming forward with her questions – or her opinions – and this had gotten her held back at the Academy already.

Lieutenant Sato half-turned to the cadet; "You know better than to ask a question like that, Cadet."

"It doesn't mean you don't want to know, Lieutenant". Replied Saunders, defending the young Irish cadet.

"Well..." stuttered Sato.

"It also doesn't mean I can tell you." He added, teasing them.

Cadet Wood was quiet in the middle of the group; she was carrying a PADD with a book or two stored on it for studying on the trip. McLoughlin caught a glimpse of the PADD as they boarded the aft ramp of the shuttlecraft.

"Swotting up for exams again, Rachel? You *have* permission to mingle and learn something on this trip, you know?"

Wood regarded her rebellious colleague for a second, contemplating her reply. "Perhaps I want to pass these exams? There will always be plenty of time for socialising before Pacifica. I don't want to get held back for any reason."

The jibe wasn't the most subtle, but the point was made.

"Now, now ladies; there's no need to squabble. I'm sure you can study *and* talk on this trip. I for one will be *glad* for a chance to get away from meetings and protocol: at least for a day." Saunders tried to diffuse the tension with a smile as they buckled in.

It then dawned on Saunders how confined the shuttle was; if they were going to spend hours on this shuttle he hoped that the girls would be talking to him more than bickering with each other.

McLoughlin was wondering what Saunders was up to; he had defended her question and seemed to be friendly enough. *Too friendly, perhaps?* She mused.

Cadet Wood sat and flicked on her PADD. *This is going to be a long trip*, she thought dejectedly. She had exams to pass and yet they had been quick to pick her for this trip,

still, it was going to be useful experience. *Still, I wonder what was going on with that liner.* She thought.

Sato straightened herself in her chair, glanced around the controls and then – once satisfied that the doors were secured – she pressed the comms button. “Shuttle ready for launch”.

“Safe trip to Pacifica, and careful of those sharks!” joked Estaban. “See you in a few days”.

The shuttle eased through the doors and quickly accelerated towards Pacifica.

* * *

Four hours later the *Grissom* emerged from warp space, slowing to impulse speeds. Yawing around, she quickly came alongside a massive liner with her name proclaimed large across the bows and a garish, oversized logo on the flanks proudly displaying her owner’s name. Although she was many times the size of the Oberth-class, in truth this was a medium-sized liner which took a select few passengers on tours to nebulae, stars, planets and places which people couldn’t dream of. For the civilians unable to make the grade *this* was the closest they could get to Starfleet.

Like the liners of the ancient early 20th century on Earth, this was a slow cruise on which the voyage was perhaps more important than the destination. Ploughing the stars from planet to planet, liners like the *Arcadia* took the young and the old, couples and loners, away from their mundane life to a place where they could dress to impress and live aspects that they could not ordinarily do.

The transporter room of the *Grissom* hummed with the unique warble of all Starfleet transporter machinery. Estaban stood on the platform, flanked by Thor and two of his security specialists. Liisi Tamkivi was a fiery Estonian woman of slight build but no trace of anything but muscle; Sohrab Saberi, an impassive, bearded Iranian from the city of Masjed Soleiman, stood beside her. Both had undergone some of the most rigorous training that Starfleet had to offer and they had both exceeded all expectations. Both wore the indigo quilted collar and cuffs of Security Operations; ready to protect Starfleet personnel off-ship

in any environment.

Doctor S'Raazh and her team of medics stood to one side in the small chamber that was the *Grissom* transporter room. Lieutenant Chattman hurried in, tricorder slung over his shoulder. He joined the assembled party, trying not to look in the direction of Aabin, whose presence he could feel even if he couldn't see it.

Esteban looked across at S'Raazh and then at Commander Ottair at the transporter controls, "I'll see you in a short while. Look after my ship whilst I'm gone. Energise."

* * *

The lobby of the *Arcadia* was ornate with plants and water features, complimenting the wall paintings and sculptures; the *Arcadia* was designed to impress as well as relax. The captain's party materialised in an electric blue aura; ready to greet them was the master of the *Arcadia*, Captain Ri'tarxx. Ri'tarxx was Saurian and regarded the new arrivals with his reptilian eyes. After a moment he offered his hand to Esteban.

"Captain Ri'tarxx. You must be Jonathan Esteban? Your reputation proceeds you, Sir."

Captain Esteban looked for a moment as if he would blush, but instead grasped the Saurian's hand.

"Pleasure to meet you, Captain." He looked around for a moment, then commented, "It's nice to be aboard a starship that doesn't make you feel as if you are living in the closet."

"I believe you are here to meet our new 'guests'? This way please." The Saurian captain gestured down the corridor. Esteban and his party trailed behind him.

As they walked through the large reception area, many of Esteban's team took the opportunity to look out of the large windows at the *Grissom* as she stood alongside. On some of the higher decks, overlooking the reception area, Thor could see some of the passengers rubber-necking downwards at them, curious as to who the new arrivals were – and who the guests were that they had brought onboard.

"So, Captain, when did you meet your guests and how did

they end up on here?" asked Esteban as they walked along, Thor hovering protectively over his captain's shoulder.

"We were contacted by station Epsilon Five to investigate a signal being received heading through the Neutral Zone. The patrol vessel USS *South Georgia* was too far to get to her in time and their sensor scans indicated this was a merchant vessel and that she was transmitting a distress signal. The signal was unintelligible. Interstellar law states all vessels must respond to distress signals, so we responded."

The lobby leading from the reception area split into smaller corridors, Captain Ri'tarxx took the party down a passageway that seemed more for the use of the ship's crew than the passengers. He continued relating the tale of how they had met the refugees like an old sea captain spinning a yarn.

"We came across this beaten up old merchant ship of a design we didn't recognise. The reactor was of an old fusion type and was going critical. Our engineers were unfamiliar with their technology and didn't have the time to understand it before criticality; they expected Klingon and got a language and a people we don't understand."

"So are they Klingons?" pressed Esteban.

The answer came when they arrived at cargo bay nineteen.

The door opened. In the corner, amongst the remaining cargo containers and detritus of lifeboats from their own ship, were the refugees. Thor went in first, shielding Esteban protectively as the party cautiously walked over to the shabby newcomers.

"Nunnekk. Te'ambre Ch'balamerek Ch'ramak am toh."

Esteban looked at Chattman. Chattman pressed a few buttons of the linguistic tricorder. "It's not Klingon."

Esteban's eyebrows raised slightly. "You *think*? I can tell that *without* a tricorder. Now can you synch us into what they are saying?"

The bedraggled refugee looked at Esteban. The look was one of puzzlement, perhaps a little frustration at the language barrier that stood between them. He looked back at one of

the others and started chattering in their alien dialect. Esteban knew this was a good thing. The more the newcomers talked the more the linguistic tricorder could start to piece together the language.

There was something jarring about these refugees; although they had the ridged heads and swarthy features of Klingons, they did not have beards, only moustaches. They also had strange markings painted onto their left cheeks. Their robes looked more fitting for a peasant than a Klingon warrior.

"I have a rough translation now, Captain," offered Chattman. "It will still have trouble with a few words, but it should give you the general idea, Sir." He shrugged at the accusing look Esteban then gave him. "Best I can do this quickly."

"I Ch'balamerek am. Ch'ramak am from. Ah, translating my language you can now do. Excellent."

The refugee looked pleased at his new ability to communicate.

"Our translators are a few models behind yours," confessed Ri'tarxx "We managed a word or two but it would be a day or so to input a new language; they are designed for existing languages."

Esteban dismissed the sheepish apology and turned back to Ch'balamerek. "I am Captain Jonathan Esteban of the starship *Grissom*. Can you tell me why you have come to Federation space?"

Chapter Three

Personal Log, Captain J. T. Esteban recording. When is a Klingon not a Klingon? When they are a Ch'ramaki. In all my career I never thought I could pity someone who looked Klingon; too many of my friends have died at their hands, too many tales of the deeds of Klingons have reached my ears. Even those tales did not prepare me for this day...

Now that a dialogue had been started Captain Esteban immediately summoned Doctor S'Raazh and her team of medics, ensuring that the wounded were seen to quickly. It was soon

apparent that these people were klingonoid, but not Klingon. As the doctors and paramedics began to treat the twenty-nine refugees, Esteban went back to talk to their leader, Ch'balamerek.

"Now let me make sure I got this straight, Ch'balamerek. You say that the Klingons used to trade with your world for grain and other foodstuffs before the invasion?"

Ch'balamerek nodded. "We were renowned throughout the surrounding sectors for the bountiful crop of foods that our world can produce. We traded with the Klingons, the Hydrans, the Orions and so many other peoples. The Federation of Planets is one organisation that we seem to have never traded with; your Neutral Zone cuts you off from us. Then, a few weeks ago, the Klingons decided that trade with us was not enough..."

Deep breaths punctuated the recollection as Ch'balamerek kept his boiling emotions under control.

"I am the last survivor of the ruling clans of Ch'ramak – or at least I think I am. I was a junior member of the ruling clan, supervising the Hi'teesh territory's food and grain supplies: an aide to Gh'eremev'rek. I only rarely stayed in the Hall of Elders in the capital, Ch'rami."

Ch'balamerek seemed to be gazing into infinity as the memories of days past came back to him like a torrent down a mountainside.

"I was there at least once when the Klingons visited and traded for food. Being on the outskirts of the Klingon Empire, Ch'ramak has never had too many dealings with the Klingons beyond some of their outer colonies. The presence of our world has allowed the Empire to expand more easily after our food was located."

Ch'balamerek began to seem restless, shuffling uneasily in the spot where he sat; Estaban rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder. The Ch'ramaki continued:

"All this ended some weeks ago when the regular visitors in the Birds of Prey and battlecruisers stopped. There were rumours of war and members of other races that visited us began to warn of potential danger from the Klingons. The K'lemiik – our priests and oracles – began to have visions

of destruction and death. Despite this, the Elders held sway that wisdom told them the Klingons would need the food to feed their armies and would not harm our world."

A tear escaped from his eye and rolled down his cheek.

"How wrong we were."

Quickly, he wiped the tear away from his cheek and recomposed himself.

"I was in the second city of Birizani when the word came through of the arrival of the Klingon First Fleet. Before the invasion, we had traded with peoples visiting from beyond our star system for centuries, and had decades ago acquired interstellar spaceflight ourselves, which allowed us to trade outside of their system. The arrival of the fleet was accepted by us as something to be cautious about, but when hails were ignored and a smaller fleet of what were unmistakably assault craft began to descend on the planet, panic began to set in to my people.

The destruction which befell the capital was related to me by a bleeding, dying servant who managed to escape the carnage. The skies above the capital had been darkened by the form of a Bird of Prey. Some of the Elders had assembled at the foot of the steps leading up to the meeting hall; they had seen warships such as this before and were expecting a commander to emerge, all puffed up with self-importance and loud words. As the disruptor fire reduced them to ashes and their meeting hall to rubble, the Elders realised how naïve and over-trusting we had been."

The Bird of Prey had fired the opening, decapitating shots of the invasion; the battle plan which General Chang followed was one as old as Kahless himself. The first rule was to exterminate all of the ruling class; they would not be needed in the new Klingon colony. The next step was the elimination of military resistance. This stage was completed swiftly as the farming world of Ch'ramak had never possessed a competent military force after discovering that, by working together, they could trade with worlds beyond their own and live a far richer, better way of life.

"No one lived to tell the tale of the destruction of the military forces," Ch'balamerek continued his recollection,

having sipped some water and regained some of his composure, "Where disruptors had been used to eliminate the Elders, so carefully aimed, precisely charged photon torpedoes obliterated our garrison towns and their armies. The Klingon visitors and their spies had carefully charted where our military might resided and those towns were wiped off the map. The Klingons needed food, not armies. Survivors from surrounding villages have spoken of the immense explosions and the mushroom clouds which consumed those people whom they had relied upon to defend them."

The assault craft brought the third phase of the invasion plan into action. These craft swooped in and landed in the centre of the major towns and cities, disgorging their troops out from the forward ramps. These were the Imperial Klingon First Fleet Assault Force: crack assault troops of the Klingon Empire, all fired up to taste blood and face death. Death was coming, but only for the Ch'ramaki on this day.

"The shock troops emerged, armed with disruptors, *bat'leths*, *mek'leths*, and *d'k taghs* and started blasting and hacking away at anyone who stood in their path. We were shot or cut down left, right and centre. The Klingons did not differentiate between men, women and children: all were in the firing line of those adrenaline-fuelled warriors. Murderers!"

The pacific crop-growers of Ch'ramak were no match for these trained murderers; precision cuts and shots inflicted gory, fatal wounds on the helpless civilians.

Esteban listened, grim-faced and stolid, as the Ch'ramaki tale of woe unfolded. *The Klingons have so many words for blades*, he mused with distaste, *matched only by the number of types of blades they actually have.*

Quickly the Ch'ramaki got the idea: surrender or die. The survivors began sitting down together on the ground, their hands behind their bowed heads.

Ch'balamerek continued: "I was lucky: my junior position meant that the Klingons did not recognise me as a member of the Council of Elders, and this saved my life. That, and the fact that the assault team in Birizani was smaller in number than in the capital and did not possess the General

or his aides.

"The dying servant had related to me how the general leading the assault had himself beamed down into the capital square to face the surviving Elders. Amongst the leaders was a military general who leapt forward to attack the Klingon leader. The response was one which chilled the blood of both the servant and myself: the one-eyed general smiled! The Ch'ramaki was given a knife and the Klingon general drew his own. The two tussled, but the Ch'ramaki was no match, even with both eyes.

"The Klingon general had goaded the Ch'ramaki, encouraging him to try to take his life. The Ch'ramaki had lunged, but the Klingon had blocked him and simultaneously speared the Ch'ramaki in his heart. He'd laid the dead Ch'ramaki on the floor then spoken strange words, words that had stuck with all those who'd heard them for their very strangeness:"

*"This was the noblest Roman of them all:
All the conspirators, save only he,
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;
He, only in a general honest thought
And common good to all, made one of them."*

Ch'balamerek was, by now, in tears. Esteban comforted him, saddened by the experiences that Ch'balamerek had both witnessed directly and experienced through others, made worse by the guilt that he now felt in surviving.

Whilst Esteban was having the story of Ch'balamerek retold to him, Doctor S'Raazh was tending to the wounds of another survivor. Her patient was a farmer's wife called Rin'tuh'behtah; her scars, realised S'Raazh, went far deeper than the physical ones which marred her face and body.

Rin'tuh'behtah spoke in a quiet voice, her spirit obviously broken. "I lived in the deep countryside away from the cities, it took a few hours for the events in the cities to become clear. We saw flashes of intense light far brighter than the sun across the fields of crops, and minutes later deafening explosions rumbled across the skies, chasing their brighter heralds- shockwaves from the destruction of the garrison towns." the latter part added in a single

breath, as if she couldn't be hurt if the memories were thrown out quickly enough. "I had been out in the fields with my husband Gh'ouzamek; the light startled us in the fields, and the explosions were strong enough to knock the young and infirm off their feet and to whip the hair of the rest of us.

I was sent back to the farmstead buildings," Rin'tuh'beh'tah unconsciously cradled her belly, "my pregnant state meant I needed to rest after the shock. Gh'ouzamek seemed to know what the explosions foretold and in the following hours he was shown to be right. Stories abounded of the massacre of the garrisons, and the assault force was known to be advancing from the cities and making its way towards our farms. Off-duty soldiers, retired soldiers and the fitter members of the farmsteads all assembled ready to make one last stand against the invaders."

"My husband had told me, *"You must go with Bh'lemerek to the freighters to the north; it is the only chance for you and our children, my wife."* "

Tears stung in Rin'tuh'behtah's eyes as she remembered identical tears saying goodbye to her husband, the memory seared into her mind as if by hot metal, never to be forgotten.

Rin'tuh'behtah recalled between half-choked sobs and gasps of breath "I had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, from my husband... I realised that would be the last time I would see him alive. As I was dragged to the far side of the farmstead buildings, the Klingons arrived."

She daubed the tears onto her sleeve as the doctor comforted her, listening with fascinated horror, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a motor car.

"The farmers had only their farming tools to defend themselves with, and some of the remaining soldiers had plasma rifles. The Klingons arrived on floating armoured personnel carriers, which deposited the adrenaline-fuelled warriors into the fields. The crops almost hid the Klingons from sight, almost hid the ensuing bloodshed, but there was so much that the sights will haunt me forever. Crimson blood arced across green crops, splattering leaves and

soaking into our rich soil..." The memories overwhelmed her as she recalled the sightless eyes staring skywards from moustachioed faces, never to see the faces of their loved ones again.

The battle was over. The Klingons divided the farmstead survivors into two groups: those that could tend the farm and those that were not needed. A young cry brought Gh'ouzamek and Rin'tuh'behtah to their senses: it was their child Ch'alabek, being dragged into the farmyard by the scruff of his neck.

Shaking the boy like he was a flag in the wind, the Klingon had smirked and announced, *"I found this one hiding in the fields in a drainage pipe. He's a strong one, just like a son should be; he can stay and work the fields."*

Ch'alabek was thrown into the crowd which included Gh'ouzamek. They were quickly reunited. The joy was short-lived as Gh'ouzamek had instinctively looked out for Rin'tuh'behtah, the blood from a cut over his left eye occasionally causing him to shake his head, leaving red streaks down his cheek. Eventually he'd seen her pregnant form being hauled away by the Klingons behind the farmstead and out of sight. That was the last time Rin'tuh'behtah saw her husband and son.

The bedraggled group had then been taken to the far side of the farmstead and the elderly and infirm separated from the rest.

"We were loaded into an antigrav transport and taken away. In the receding distance, I was just able to see the Klingons executing the infirm and wounded people we had left behind

The transport had quickly moved away from my farmstead, through fields pocked with the smouldering, evil smoke of last-ditch battles. Occasionally the scenery had been blotted out by huge machinery that the Klingons were moving in the opposite direction.

Just as all had seemed completely lost, an explosion rocked my transport, forcing it to abruptly stop.

Amid frenzied yelling from the Klingons in the transport and those attacking from the fields, a hand had grasped

mine and hauled me out from the wrecked transport. I could see other Ch'ramaki escaping into the fields as the Klingons were kept occupied fighting off the pocket of soldiers which had ambushed them."

She shook her head "After that it is just a blur of resting in fields and ruined houses and eating cold uncooked meals. Eventually, we joined a cluster of dirty, ragged refugees and hid ourselves in a crop freighter. We were later attacked after we made a run to the Neutral Zone and it was this ship that your *Arcadia* has rescued us all from."

Rin'tuh'behtah sagged under the weight of expelled memories. She had lost her husband and son; now that she had told her story she no longer cared what happened to her.

Doctor S'Raazh decided that Rin'tuh'behtah had recalled more than enough. She was exhausted and needed to rest. The baby was still fine within her swollen belly and the running, combined with the trauma, had driven her to her limit. She sedated the farmer's wife, paused for a second to regain her professional composure, and then moved to the next case.

She was a little surprised at how open the refugees were being about their experiences, but a quick glance across the cargo bay confirmed her theory. The presence of their Deltan crewmember Aabin was artificially calming the occupants of the bay, using his species' pheromonal abilities to good effect. They were also affecting the *Grissom* crew, as even Chattman was more relaxed than he would have been normally.

At the back of the cargo bay sat the lonely figure of Lh'chi'rannah. Shunning the others, she was busy cutting apart a stem and some leaves, allowing the sap to pool on the floor. Chattman noticed the activities of the woman and tried to approach her; a hand stopped him in a gentle but firm manner.

"Who is she?" Chattman asked the Ch'ramaki who stopped him
"I was just going to see..."

" She is Lh'chi'rannah, the surviving K'lemiik; these are

the priest/oracles of the Ch'ramaki people."

Lh'chi'rannah had seen all this in the juices of the Jaarvid plant that she had spread from the cut stem many, many times before to see what the future held in store. Her appearance was as dishevelled as the others; her once-proud robes were tattered and torn and her face bloodied and battered.

The stranger continued to tell Chattman about the ragged priestess whilst keeping him at bay, "Her treatment at the Klingons' hands was one of indifference to her religion and role in her society; her function as part of that society was seen by them as unproductive and a challenge to their authority. After our Elders had been eliminated, the Klingons did not want another group of individuals filling the power vacuum in their place. They said our clerics were to fulfil a practical role like the rest of us; if they could not, they were to be eliminated."

The stranger guided Chattman to a clear space in the cargo bay and sat him down to talk further without disturbing the K'limiik.

"I am Kh'tumarek. You seem curious about us, I shall try to explain so that you can understand us and why you need to help us." He offered Chattman a drink.

"Lh'chi'rannah had lived in the outskirts of the capital, Ch'rami. From her temple she says she saw the destruction of the great meeting hall; the pattern had all fallen into place as she had foreseen. It wasn't long afterwards the shock troops had arrived, casting her sacred ornaments onto the floor, beating and shoving both her and her attendants out of the building to report for roll-call. The Klingons wanted to know who they had, or who had survived.

The Klingons had some sort of administrative member-race which they used to catalogue all us survivors, our age and occupations. The burly guards then moved us off to different camps depending on our usability. It was here that Lh'chi'rannah met me, a sales representative for the crops. Like Lh'chi'rannah, I knew that my role would be redundant under the new regime: the Klingons did not want to trade the grain under a third party, they wanted it for themselves to eat or trade as they saw fit."

The Ch'ramaki seemed to gain a little more self-respect in his eyes, straightening his back and looking directly at Lieutenant Chattman as he recalled:

"I conceived a plan for a way out: the crop freighters that I traded with. I took Lh'chi'rannah with me; my respect for her demanded that I act to save her from the mining or farming work that the Klingons were demanding people do, or from simple execution for being 'surplus to requirements'. It was through a chain of accomplices that we managed to get our K'lemiik onboard and hide her."

"What's with the plant?"

"That is the Jaarvid, our holy plant. She is looking in it for the pattern of future events."

Lh'chi'rannah concentrated on the pattern of juices on the floor, occasionally running her finger through the creamy liquid. She furrowed her brow; the pattern that was forming was disturbing, and she was fearful of what was to pass.

Thor and his people hovered around Esteban and the medics, ever alert to the new arrivals. No matter their appearance, they still looked Klingon and that was unnerving.

Ch'balamerek had regained his composure after reliving his experiences with Esteban.

"Thank you for your hospitality and help, Captain Esteban. I hope that you can convey the plight of our people to your Federation Council. I hope that you can send a fleet to our world to set our people free."

Jonathan Esteban now had a difficult subject to broach.

CHAPTER FOUR

Esteban sat in his chair in the tiny closet they jokingly referred to as his Ready Room. He reclined the chair as he mused over the stories that Ch'balamerek and the others had related to him; he pressed a finger onto one of the integrated display buttons on his desk and a holograph appeared of Admiral Morrow.

"Something I can help you with, Jonathan? Not like you to call out of the blue."

Esteban chose his words carefully. "Well, I can tell you one thing: they are *not* Klingons." Esteban raised his eyebrows to emphasise the point. "They call themselves the *Ch'ramaki* and they claim to be a farming people on what was the edge of the Klingon Empire. They are apparently new 'entrants' to the Empire; all the usual atrocities."

Morrow nodded and stroked his moustache thoughtfully. "The wrong side of the Neutral Zone and occupied by the Klingons? The *last* thing we need right now is to escalate this." A cluster of troughs appeared on his forehead; this was a feature of too many nights spent worrying, "I'm sorry Jonathan but the Prime Directive applies here as much as on any other occasion; we can grant them asylum, but that's it."

Esteban leaned forwards "Is there something you're not telling me, Harry? I've learned to recognise that face."

The admiral knew better than to try poker-faced denial to the *Grissom's* captain. "The *South Georgia* was supposed to rendezvous with you to take the refugees off your hands..."

"But..?"

"..But a Klingon Bird of Prey decided to arrive at the Federation side of the Neutral Zone, demanding the return of the subjects of the Empire." Morrow then added in an ominous tone, "Or else."

Esteban felt a twist in the pit of his stomach; crossing the Neutral Zone was *technically* an act of war. The Klingons obviously took the fleeing of their subjects across the border *very* seriously.

"Who is the captain of the *South Georgia*?"

"Raekwon Okigbo; he is a fine upcoming officer and, according to his ex-C.O. on the *Essex*, a fine diplomat befitting his name." Morrow looked at Esteban's puzzled look, adding: "since 'Raekwon' means 'one who is gifted with words' in Nigerian. He might be a new captain but he'll be fine. I have dispatched an auxiliary to your location; let them take the new arrivals to the nearest Starbase."

"Do you think an Okinawa class patrol ship can stop a

border violation?"

Morrow nodded unconsciously, "It seems the High Council has stopped their warship from chasing these refugees into Federation space and starting a war in the process. It seems our fledgling peace might still be on the table."

Esteban wondered, *Why is nothing simple anymore?* He then recalled from his lectures at the academy that 'it wouldn't be Starfleet if it was simple'. He smiled to himself.

"You just love making my life interesting, Harry."

Morrow's face broke into a smile of friendship. "Do something useful and go scan something".

After the customary jibes and farewells, Esteban sat back again in his chair and mused, *This could escalate into something more serious.*

Back onboard the *Arcadia*, the stories of the survivors continued to be told and recorded onto tricorders for later analysis. The *Grissom* crew could not help but be touched by the plight of these farmers and traders who, in the face of vastly superior firepower and aggression, had no choice but to drop everything and literally flee for their lives. None of them knew the fate of those they had left behind.

Thor had downgraded the security presence in the light of the non-belligerent nature of the refugees; these people were sat in the dirty, torn clothes that they had fled in, hardly the sort of people to start a fight. Meanwhile Doctor S'Raazh had managed to treat the wounded amongst the refugees; all that remained were the mental scars. *Only the psychologists can help them now*, she thought.

Aabin had a reassuring hand reach down on his shoulder: it was Chattman.

"Having you here has been helpful; I don't know how the Captain and the others would have learned so much without your help."

"You're welcome, Lieutenant. As a Deltan, I cannot allow a person to feel pain when there is something I can do to relieve the situation." Aabin explained with typical Deltan

modesty.

Chattman reasserted the reassuring hand. "Well, thanks anyway."

Captain Esteban rejoined the party after returning from his talk with Admiral Morrow. Ch'balamerek had regained his composure after reliving his experiences and approached Esteban, his head bowed humbly as he had a difficult question to ask.

"Thank you for your hospitality and help, Captain Esteban. I hope that you can convey the plight of our people to your Federation Council. I hope that you can send a fleet to our world to set our people free."

Esteban was embarrassed at the shortcoming of his answer, but it was the only one to give.

"The Federation always seeks to help those asking for help; however this help has to be tempered with our own rules and experience. We can offer you all asylum, pending the Federation Council for Refugees and Asylum-seekers finding member worlds willing to house you all. The Federation cannot fight for your world, the Prime Directive – our highest law in Starfleet – forbids us in interfering in the affairs of others. We are here to learn from other cultures, but not to interfere in their affairs; we cannot fight a war for you."

Ch'balamerek looked at Esteban for a few moments, mulling over the words. As a diplomat, he understood that sacred laws were there to uphold; on the other hand they were talking about his world and his people; his culture was at risk of extinction.

After some thought he replied "Can you not even help other refugees escape from the oppression now descending on my world?"

Esteban sadly shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, no."

Ch'balamerek shuffled away, lost in his thoughts and memories. He felt useless, alone and worn out; for a young man he bore the weight of ages on his shoulders.

Others had seen the conversation from the back of the cargo bay; their response to the words and attitude of Esteban

was at odds with the broken man shuffling away from the captain.

Ch'aikamek was one of the few veterans of the military still left alive. He had survived the destruction of the garrisons because he had been on exercise with his squad. He kept very quiet at the back of the room with Gh'avourmek and Kh'alazek, the only other military survivors from his squad. Ch'aikamek was the equivalent of a corporal, always putting the well-being of his men before everything else. Ch'ramak had never fought wars and so their training was theoretical and more geared to dealing with thieves and pirates.

They had fought alongside the other surviving soldiers, farmers and their families such as the mud-smeared Lh'ootamia; the mud dampened down her hair and covered her beauty, fading her into the bulkheads just as she desired. Once the ferocity and professional slaughter of the Klingons had come to light, Ch'aikamek had tried to extract his group. In truth his mind had been broken by the realization that they could not stop the onslaught. They ran.

Ch'aikamek now had plans; he sought to gather an army of people allied peoples to destroy the Klingons and remove them from his world. He wanted to hurt them; he wanted to destroy everything that the Klingons held dear: just as the Klingons had done and were doing to his culture now.

Ch'aikamek waited until the evening to discuss his plans with the others. He knew that he needed the guards present to relax and rotate; that leader of the guards was competent, he could see it in his eyes. That disarming smile and easy attitude did not disguise from Ch'aikamek that this human man with the blonde ruffled hair had eyes like a Rafferian eagle and a physique that showed he kept in top shape.

Ch'aikamek eyed Ch'balamerek with disdainful eyes, "You cower and feel sorry for yourself as our people suffer. All of us – all of us have lost friends and family; those that are back on our world, what of them now? They are slaves to the Klingons or worse!"

Ch'balamerek was about to open his mouth to reply,

Ch'aikamek cut him off with a dismissive rising of his hand to Ch'balamerek's face.

"Do not insult us all with your passive mewling. You may be the sole survivor of the council of elders but you are a *junior* member. You try to fill big boots with your small feet and cowardly shuffle. We need the people of this Federation to feel our pain, to understand what we are fighting for; if we do not fight then our world and our culture will die."

"We will not last long against these Starfleet personnel; there are more of them and they have more firearms than us." Gh'avourmek respectfully raised his concerns in a whisper.

"We only need to make a point, my friend. Time is all we need, just a little time."

Specialist Paulo Ferriggi had joined the *Arcadia* as part of the third landing party, relieving Thor and the original medics. He was an explosives and demolition techniques specialist who also had a knack with equipment. Thor had left him on the *Arcadia* in the company of Specialist Nipa Chatterjee. The two of them had been socializing with the *Arcadia* crew and talking with those Ch'ramaki that felt like it. Winning hearts and minds was a policy that went back centuries.

The plan sprang into action quickly; with twenty-nine refugees all looking the same to the inexperienced eye, Paulo Ferriggi never saw that when Nipa Chatterjee went for a coffee that the three ex-soldier Ch'ramaki all converged on Ferriggi from three sides stealthily through the crowds. Powerful hands grasped Ferriggi, he threw the attacker over his shoulder but the sheer strength and numbers of the soldiers who had an unseen amount of supporters, soon overwhelmed Specialist Ferriggi under a storm of blows and kicks.

Simultaneously a group of Ch'ramaki, inspired by Ch'aikamek's words, descended on engineering. By keeping to the shadows they reached their goal: the impulse reactors. The liner engineers put up a fight with spanners and other tools being used as improvised weapons, but the brute force of the desperate Ch'ramaki soon subdued them into a pile of

bruised and bleeding hostages. Now that they were in control, a couple of the Ch'ramaki began to use the controls; a lone engineer got up with a start and pressed the one control that he had been trained to: the antimatter bottles were ejected into space, crippling the warp drive and depriving the liner of a system-wide threat.

Ch'aikamek had timed the move to perfection, despite the rapidity of execution. The passengers were enjoying a meal in the main dining halls above; the Ch'ramaki burst into the halls and quickly herded the surprised passengers into a corner of the room. One of the passengers, a former security guard, ran at the Ch'ramaki but was quickly beaten to his knees. Wiping the blood from his nose and chin, he skulked back towards the crowd. Ch'aikamek arrived, preceded by security operations specialist Paulo Ferriggi at gunpoint from the phaser the Ch'ramaki had recovered from him. Ch'aikamek assumed his position next to the captain of the *Arcadia*, who was sat at his table with his fineries on.

"We apologise for the disruption to your fine meal," he lazily stuck a finger into the soup and sampled it with a smile. "Nice. We thank you for your hospitality but what we want you refuse to give to us: help for our brothers and sisters on our home world."

Ch'aikamek strode slowly round the table, keeping a watchful eye on the two Starfleet security personnel. He was calm and in control, this wouldn't last forever so he needed to make his point and move on.

On the *Grissom*, Juan Cassas reacted suddenly on the Bridge.

"Madre de Dios !"

At the exclamation, Captain Esteban turned quickly; his instincts telling him something was amiss.

"Report."

"The *Arcadia* just dumped her antimatter bottles and her terrorist attack beacon just came on."

Esteban rose to his feet "Red alert! Check on the status of our crew over there."

Over on the *Arcadia*, the image of Esteban appeared on the

screen at the captain's table.

"Captain, we read your terrorist beacon and see you have dumped your antimatter. Can we be of assistance?"

The captain did not answer. Instead the gruff, controlled voice of Ch'aikamek replied:

"All we want, Captain Esteban, is the same thing we wanted last time: our planet liberated and our people set free. I am not here to cause unnecessary suffering, but be warned that my people have seized engineering; any attempt to lay siege to this ship before our needs are met will result in the fusion reactors being overloaded. Do you understand me, Captain Esteban?"

The counter-terrorism training which Esteban received returned to mind seamlessly.

He remained perfectly calm as he responded "I understand. Can I ask to whom I am speaking?"

"This is Ch'aikamek."

"I am relieved that you do not wish to harm the people there, Ch'aikamek. I will see what I can do with getting your message further. Esteban out."

Seconds later, another communication bleep sounded. "Specialist Nipa Chatterjee is calling us." Chattman informed Esteban.

"On speakers."

The echoic sound of Nipa Chatterjee's voice could be heard on the speaker, broken up by occasional static. "I managed to evade the Ch'ramaki, Sir. I have managed to ascertain there are eleven terrorists."

"You sound like you are in a drain, Specialist." observed Esteban.

"Jeffries tube, captain." Corrected Chatterjee, "I heard Ferriggi being overwhelmed and headed for cover until I could tell how many of the Ch'ramaki were involved."

"What about the others?"

"They are sat in the cargo bay, Captain. I don't think they

approve of what is being done.”

“Right, carry on observing and take care, Chatterjee.” Jonathan Esteban turned to Cassis: “Get Thor up here now; I want a plan to retake the *Arcadia* on my desk in thirty minutes.”

Chapter Five:

Captain's log, Stardate 8138.6.

Desperate times bring desperate measures. Some of the Ch'ramaki have taken it upon themselves to make a point about their plight. They have taken the Arcadia hostage and have primed the impulse drive fusion reactors as a bomb, just to deter any attempt to assault them.

Whilst I sympathise with the Ch'ramaki and feel their pain, I cannot condone their actions. Starfleet standing policy is not to negotiate with hostages and I am not prepared to have terms negotiated whilst innocent lives are in danger. The Arcadia engineers have managed to eject the antimatter and disable the warp drive; now I have assembled Security Operations to plan a recapture of the liner.

Historically, hostage situations are fraught with dynamics that are difficult to control and can change rapidly if things get out of hand. I have to decide whether we have a fringe of the refugee population or if all the Ch'ramaki share the violent genes of their Klingon cousins. In Thor I trust we have the man who can achieve the impossible and save all lives – civilian, Starfleet and Ch'ramaki.

The holograph hovered in the air with an exploded diagram of the *Arcadia* disassembling itself slowly. On the diagram were a set of dots: red for the Ch'ramaki, blue for the two Starfleet personnel and yellow for the rest. As the diagram rotated, the progress of the Ch'ramaki in engineering could be monitored; one reactor was now primed to be detonated, with others to follow. One of the Starfleet Security Operations specialists, Nipa Chatterjee, was moving slowly among the thread of Jeffries tubes; the other Starfleet personnel were stationary, caught in place by the sudden action of Ch'aikamek.

Sat amongst the remaining Ch'ramaki in the cargo bay was Doctor Seipeal. Seipeal was tending to the refugees when Ch'aikamek made his move; experience told her to do nothing except protect those under her care. To her surprise, none of the Ch'ramaki touched her. She was told, almost with sincerity, by Ch'aikamek:

"We aren't animals, doctor; we do have ethics, no matter what you may think of us."

Once the crowd had left for the passenger section, Seipeal reached for her communicator and called the *Grissom*. Her call was one of many received almost simultaneously by the *Oberth*-class scout. Back in the briefing room, Thor was in full planning mode.

The presence of separate divisions called security and security operations on Starfleet starships and starbases often confused non-Starfleet individuals. The usual short explanation used is that security personnel wear the dark undershirt of Windsor green and are responsible for defending the ship itself; security operations personnel wear indigo undershirts and are responsible for defending Starfleet personnel in the dynamic, unpredictable environments off the ship or starbase. The close synergy between the two divisions often led to confusion of the perceived roles, but in truth there was anything but. This was a mission led by Thor to retake the liner, *Cassas* was there to defend the *Grissom* herself from any perceived danger; specifically the jury-rigged fusion bomb.

Having Specialist Chatterjee in the Jeffries tube system was an additional aid; she was able to identify the major players and where the real dangers were: the Ch'ramaki with the phaser in the dining room, Ch'aikamek and the other soldier and the Ch'ramaki in engineering. Specialist Paulo Ferriggi had been useful as well; although he had been overwhelmed and his weapon taken, he had opened a communication channel unseen by the others. This was now providing audio coverage of Ch'aikamek and the dining room, allowing a certain monitoring of the situation.

Commander Stephanie Ottair stood with the towering form of Thor, advising him about the improvised reactor-bomb and how best to defuse it; and how to avoid damaging sensitive equipment therein.

“What about beaming in here?” Thoresen gestured to a position just behind the reactor, “the reactor noise can disguise the beam-in?”

“There is too much interference from the reactors to beam in; too long to materialise before they can press the button.”

Captain Esteban settled uneasily into his command chair on the bridge. Unlike other situations where he liked to lead from the front, this time his role required that he stay on the *Grissom*, buying time for Thor’s team to get into position ready to put the plan they had assembled into action. As he sat in the chair, he caught a glimpse of the ship’s dedication plaque and read from the motto “the exploration of space is worth the risk of life”; *hopefully today will not cost any lives*, he thought.

Lieutenant Chattman pulled his head up from the azure glow of the hooded science scanner “They are in position, captain.”

Esteban nodded; he could co-ordinate the assault from here whilst distracting Ch’aikamek for a few valuable seconds. Hopefully those seconds would be all that would be needed for the hijack to be all over. “All call-signs, standby” he announced over the coded channel.

“Five.”

One of the passengers, a woman in her fifties, sobbed uncontrollably. All she could think of was her young grandchildren and whether she would get back to Deneva to see them. Her greying brown hair pulsed in waves with each sob as she tried to regain her composure.

“Four.”

In the Jeffries tube, Nipa Chatterjee looked through the ventilation shaft, signalling information to her colleagues. The cramp in her left leg was spreading, but she put the annoying sensation to the back of her head as the adrenaline started to flow into her veins. She drew her phaser pistol and slowly brought it round, ready to use.

“Three.”

Liisi Tamkivi shuffled down the Jeffries tube in her

lightweight armour; engineering was going to be tough. Sohrab Saberi and she had been assigned to secure the fusion reactors; Grissom's advanced sensors meant they could tell where the Ch'ramaki were. She got into position quietly, assembling the sniper rifle and slipping the sights on silently. The fuzzy image of the Ch'ramaki over the reactor console sharpened into focus.

"Two"

In an adjacent Jeffries tube, Sohrab silently prayed to Allah to give him the strength to do what he had to; he prayed that no one would be hurt. His breathing reverberated around the helmet; he raised his head and focussed on the terrorists, they would be stopped.

"One"

Thor's muscles flexed as he readied himself for the single word that would now follow; he had trained endlessly with these people and knew they would do their best, regardless of the events of the Cinera Base incident. Thor knew what he had to do; it would take bravado, distraction and all the skills he had. His mind was cool and calm; he was ready.

Esteban looked at Chattman and gestured with a dropped finger. "Go."

The grille of the Jeffries tube gave a narrow view of the Engineering section; the muzzle of the shortened phaser rifles could just peer through the mesh at their desired targets. The Ch'ramaki over the reactor control was conversing with his accomplice, discussing how long they thought they had before a reaction from Starfleet would occur; this was ironic timing as the phaser beams from two Starfleet rifles whined in a dulled, hollow way from the Jeffries tubes. The Ch'ramaki near the reactor controls slumped to the ground, beating the thud of the second stunned Ch'ramaki by a second.

Sohrab burst the mesh out of the grille and dropped quickly into the room, the sudden clang of falling metal across the Engineering section suggested Liisi was now also in the room. The Iranian security operations specialist quickly

headed for where the engineering personnel were being held, eager to beat the predictable response of the Ch'ramaki to their comrades being stunned.

The engineers of the *Arcadia* had been gathered together into the far end of the engineering section. A single Ch'ramaki had been placed to watch over them; thankfully this guard was merely a farm-worker who had been chosen for his enthusiasm rather than his actual skill. Through the door his attention was drawn to the sound of two marble-sized spheres rolling across the floor.

The stun grenades burst almost in the face of the curious Ch'ramaki as he turned to see what the noise was; seconds later, Saberi and Tamkivi burst into the room, securing the hostages and the Ch'ramaki; Specialist Chatterjee signalled from the engineering section that the reactors were now safe: the bomb threat was neutralised.

The dining area was expansive; the fine crockery and cutlery was in disarray, matching the state of the passengers and crew. The imposing figure of the armed Ch'ramaki stood over the captured security operations specialist Ferriggi; nearby the brooding, cerebral form of Ch'aikamek sat contemplating how this would all end. He abruptly stood up.

"Look at you! Look at you all, how you sit amongst this finery. None of you understand the universe that lies outside these transparent aluminium walls. Death, war, disease, famine - the Federation has consigned these to history at the expense of forgetting there are still these things out there! Ch'ramak was free of these things until the Klingons brought them all back to us."

Ch'aikamek threw the nearby candelabra and floral display across the room in disgust. It was at this second that a phaser shot threw his armed colleague to the ground. Thor walked confidently into the room, alert and keeping Ch'aikamek firmly in his eye-line. Paulo Ferriggi threw down the shackles which he had been working on silently for the last few hours. Ch'aikamek rounded on Thor like a child whose part had been cancelled.

"It's over, Ch'aikamek; the reactor has been secured and the other Ch'ramaki have surrendered."

Hatred burned in Ch'aikamek's eyes. "You lie!"

A quick stab on a communicator and static in reply confirmed the man-mountain's words.

"As a rule, Starfleet officers do not lie."

"You should listen to him." Esteban entered the room, flanked by Saberi and Tamkivi with their Ch'ramaki prisoners from Engineering. "It's over."

Ch'aikamek sneered a very un-Klingon sneer. He knew Esteban was right; he just hoped that he had done enough to make his point, for now. "It isn't over, not for the Klingons. it will never be over for them."

Ch'aikamek made one last grandstanding speech: "I swear now, before you *all* that it will never be over. I swear an *abi'di'batah* on the Klingons. Whilst they stain the soil of my world with our blood, *nothing* of theirs is safe. We shall destroy their statues, their monuments, their leaders, their temples, their paintings, their *children* - all will be crushed underfoot. As they have destroyed my world, so the Ch'ramaki will destroy their *empire*, brick by brick. It isn't over!"

Thor stood beside Ch'aikamek, leading him away along with the others. Captain Ri'tarxx stood up, straightened his jacket and looked at Esteban: "It's over, thanks to you." He offered his hand to shake.

Esteban looked at Ri'tarxx with sadness in his eyes and an understanding that came with the uniform "No, captain, it isn't. If history has shown us one thing, Ch'aikamek and his people will make good their promise; if not today, then tomorrow; if not by Ch'aikamek then by his children, or *their* children."

* * *

Jonathan Esteban sat back in his chair, sharing a rare coffee with Commander Ottair. The Ch'ramaki terrorists were secured in the *Grissom* brigs by Lieutenant Cassis, with the assistance of Thor and his team. The *Arcadia* antimatter bottles had been retrieved by tractor beam by the *Grissom* and reactivated by a team led by Ottair. With the *Arcadia* now operational again, thoughts could now be directed

towards the fate of Ch'aikamek and his people.

Ottair sipped on her coffee "So what of the Ch'ramaki? Do we give them asylum?"

"A difficult question; they took hostages to make their point and threatened to detonate a liner. On the other hand," he gestured with an upturned palm, "the Klingons have been screaming for their subjects back. The *South Georgia* is still negotiating the situation; handing the refugees back to the Klingons is a certain death sentence." He raised his coffee cup for a sip.

"What about the terrorists? Surely they have forfeit their asylum?"

Esteban lowered his mug. "They are farmers; scared, hurting and homeless farmers. Their soldiers never had to fight anything more dangerous than thieves and pirates; they have never faced a professional army like the Klingons. No one was seriously hurt in this, let's take some relief in that: it could have been much worse."

Ottair scowled slightly, voicing concerns she would never have done publicly "You almost sound like you are *excusing* their actions, captain."

"This is one of the prices of virtue, Stephanie. We have a rule, the prime directive, that says we do not interfere in the affairs of others, no matter how well-intentioned that interference may be; in short, we sit back and watch bad people do bad things to good people, as we are not the people to play god."

"That sounds like one of the moralistic lectures at the Academy, however.."

"There is *no* difference here to the classroom. We cannot let our feelings dictate our actions, especially in matters such as this. The Federation Council for Refugees and Asylum-seekers will have to deal with this matter. A Starfleet auxiliary is en route for all of the Ch'ramaki. Let the bureaucrats sweat over this matter, Stephanie; we have Genesis as our own personal cross to bear."

Esteban raised the mug of arabica coffee to drink from again; as the bitter smell of the hot coffee attacked his

senses, his mind swept from the beginnings of something here, to the matters of Genesis. They had been side-tracked by events but there was no escaping the mission to Pacifica had to be prioritised. Lieutenant Saavik, David Marcus and a team of scientists were awaiting them, along with Doctor Liebmann. He and Ottair had matters to address concerning briefing the crew, and the time for procrastinating was now over.

EPILOGUE

The harsh face of the Governor filled the screen; in the background was the banner of the Klingon Empire and a bat'leth, proud emblems that would reinforce the speech that was about to be made. The governor had a selection of scars across his white-bearded face; the grey furry robes were adorned with medals from old campaigns.

"The Klingon Empire welcomes the people of Ch'ramak to the Empire. Under our rule, you can expect prosperity, security and..."

The broadcast filled with static until it became completely swamped, where upon the display froze.

A balding, greying Starfleet captain in a maroon Starfleet jacket with flush, lower collar walked through the frozen static of the holograph, the blue of his eyes accentuated by the projection as he burst through the fuzz like a figure emerging from fog.

Science officer Judith Peers and the Deltan First Officer Ilani sat up to look at Captain Nathaniel Hawkins.

"Reviewing the Ch'ramaki data, I take it?" queried Hawkins as he entered fully into the social sciences laboratory. "Looks like interesting stuff."

"This was the first Governor, K'plex, declaring the Klingon colonial hub operational. Stardate 8312.5, a year after the Klingons conquered Ch'ramak. The facility was demolished and the governor buried." Ilani informed Hawkins smoothly.

"Just the beginning," noted Hawkins, "I recall during one of Captain Okigbo's many tales when I first joined the *Sheffield* as Executive Officer, about his first command on

the *South Georgia*; they started as farmers and over the intervening twenty-seven years have learned how to make bombs from fertilisers and use their farming tools as weapons.”

“And now they have taken their fight to the Klingons assassinating Koord on Nimbus III?” mused Peers in her Fife accent.

Hawkins’ brow furrowed as he thought about it. “That’s what I need you to confirm; if they did then this takes things to a new level.”

Peers nodded seriously, worried eyes showing her understanding. This was a dangerous new development; if Earth history taught anything then this fight would go on for generation after generation, with the indigenous population never giving up until they were either completely wiped out or they achieved all the goals. If experience with the Klingons taught anything they did not tolerate uprisings and would start executing ever-larger swaths of the population until they broke the will of the resistance or eradicated them completely.

It seemed like this situation was just a question of who would back down first, and how many needed to die in the process...

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The Price of Virtue

Dedication: Thank you first to Sean, for letting me play in his sandpit for a few months; to Andy, for being as ruthlessly efficient with his red pen as always; thanks to Lorraine, for putting up with this trekkie spending evenings typing this up; lastly: To Anna Politkovskaya, murdered for telling the truth.

Plot: Adrian Howard Jones
Script: Adrian Howard Jones
Script Consultants: Joseph Bonice and Brad Hathaway
Editor: Andrew Brown

STAR TREK GRISSOM PRODUCTIONS ESPECIALLY THANK:

- ◆ Adrian Howard Jones
- ◆ Joseph Bonice and Star Trek Lexington Productions
- ◆ Brad Hathaway and Star Trek U.S.S. Hathaway Productions
- ◆ Brian Childers
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- ◆ The cast of Star Trek Grissom audio
- ◆ Bodo Hartwig