

Dark Territory Dancing with the Devil

By DarkKush

Dominion Battle Cruiser
Dreon System
Early 2374

Sarkos smiled with unrestrained glee at news from the Jem'Hadar commander on the ground. "The enemy has been eliminated," the pebble-skinned warrior's terse response was transmitted through the bridge's intercom.

"Excellent," Sarkos clapped. "The Maquis nuisance in this sector has been dispatched."

"Don't be so certain," Gil Tarim darkly remarked. "These Maquis have proven as resilient as voles."

"Perhaps for the Cardassian Militia," Sarkos sniffed, "but not for the Dominion." Tarim scowled, but didn't reply. Sarkos's smile widened.

"I must alert the Founder about this new victory at once," he said. "She will doubtless be heartened by the news."

"Yes, another feather in the cap," Tarim couldn't quite hide her skepticism. Sarkos looked at her askance, blinking his nearly translucent blue eyes.

"What an interesting turn of phrase, what does it mean?"

Tarim's dark gray skin blanched slightly. "It...umm....it was a phrase I learned from one of the human Maquis we captured. An acknowledgement of a superior enemy," the woman quickly lied, "that is what the phrase infers."

"Interesting," Sarkos said slowly. "But what does the acknowledgement of a superior enemy have to do with avians?"

Before Tarim could reply, Sarkos dismissed the question with a wave. "These humans are intriguing creatures. I look forward to exploring more of their idiosyncrasies once they have been brought to heel."

"As do I," Tarim said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"If you will excuse me," Sarkos bowed gracefully before he departed to the ship's stateroom.

Dominion Battle Cruiser
Stateroom

The warship was one of the few in the Dominion fleet with such a private conference chamber. Most business aboard Dominion ships was conducted in the open on the main bridge. However, Sarkos had been impressed with the private room on the Cardassian vessels he had toured and felt the need for some privacy from the Jem'Hadar under his command.

Though his loyalty to the Founders was bred into him, the Jem'Hadar's obedience was more conditional and tied to the *ketracel*-white enzymes he provided them. Despite their near total loyalty, Sarkos never felt they could be completely trusted. Plus he felt the reptilian warriors were merely the foot soldiers and fodder of the Dominion, and shouldn't be privy to the conversations of the gods and the Vorta, their chief emissaries.

Sarkos already had his head bowed in respect when the transmission on his databoard pinged to life. "Merciful Founder," he began. He was startled by a very familiar laugh. He looked up quickly, the surprise still on his fair-skinned face. A similar face cruelly grinned back at him. "Keilan," he said, his tone chilly, "where is the Founder?"

"Attending to more important matters than stroking your ego," Keilan replied. "I assume you are reporting that the Maquis infestation in the Dreon System has been taken care of?" Sarkos regarded her stonily.

"I take that as a yes," Keilan chuckled. "I will make sure she is aware of it."

"I can do that myself," Sarkos snapped before closing the link. He didn't know why the Founder had blessed Keilan with access to her private link, but it disturbed him. Though Sarkos knew he could never extricate Weyoun from the Founder's proverbial teat, he had hoped to make a place for himself as a great strategist and war leader for the gods. However, his accomplishments had been trumped at every turn by Keilan, the mastermind of the Federation's defeat in the Tyra System. Before that her diplomatic skills had been lauded when she persuaded the Miradorn to sign a non-aggression pact with the Dominion. She received continued praise from the Founder and even the damnable Cardassians for her efforts, and it boiled him inside. He was cleverer, more cunning, and he would find some way to prove it to Keilan, and to everyone else; but unfortunately not today. "But one day," he bitterly promised. "One day soon."

*Author's Note: The following scenes in **Dancing with the Devil** take place after Operation Return but before the First Battle of Chin'toka.*

USS Cuffe
Captain's Ready Room
Mid-2374

Captain Terrence Glover leaned forward, his eyebrows knitting in disbelief. "Did I hear you correctly sir?"

"Are you certain this is a secure line?" Vice Admiral Byram Canfield asked again, his bushy white brows, hair, and beard making his hooded gaze even more obsidian.

"Yes sir," Glover repeated for the umpteenth time, but this time he couldn't keep the annoyance out of his voice, or his concern. "You know what you are asking me to do correct?"

"I am asking you to do your duty," Canfield said tightly. "For the good for the Federation and all of the Alpha Quadrant."

"But sir..." Glover began, but the admiral cut him off.

"Despite Operation Return, we haven't had a major victory since, and the Dominion juggernaut remains intact. If the Dominion finds an alternate route back to the Gamma Quadrant this war ends quickly, and not in our favor."

"But sir," the captain began again. "You seriously think that a stable pathway back to the Gamma Quadrant can be found in one of the wormholes littering the Segomo Vortices?" Glover couldn't keep the disbelief out of his voice. The Segomo Vortices contained an interminable number of wormholes. It was a wild, unstable region of space that no one traversed. "Why not let the Dominion take possession of it. They would probably just lose a lot of men and materiel in vain."

Canfield frowned. "You're missing the point Captain," he huffed. "We must deny the Dominion ground on all levels, diplomatic as well as military. If they sign some type of non-aggression pact with the Phalkerians, or God forbid, the Phalkerian

Domain joins the Dominion, that gives them not only access to the cluster but free passage throughout Sector 443."

"The Alshain Exarchate borders the Domain in Sector 443," Glover countered. "The Dominion still wouldn't have an easy backdoor into Federation space."

"You're right," Canfield conceded. "However, it's anyone's guess what the Exarchate might do if the Dominion is breathing down their necks. So far our intelligence indicates that they remain resistant to the Dominion's entreaties to sign on. That might change with the Jem'Hadar next door."

"I see," Glover rubbed his stubble chin. The *Cuffe* was just coming off a rough stretch in the Kabrel system, defending the *ketracel*-white rich planets from Dominion clutches. The Dominion had sued for peace in a sly attempt to gain control of the Kabrel system. If they had been successful, it would've netted them an unlimited supply of the white, the enzyme that fed their Jem'Hadar legions. After talks broke down, the Dominion had decided to take

Kabrel by force. The *Cuffe* had been part of the taskforce that prevented that from happening, but they had incurred heavy losses in the process. And Glover had found himself, and many in his crew becoming unhinged, forgetting or forgoing small things at first, like shaving or hygiene, or common courtesy. By the end of the last assault Terrence had been distressed by the growing lack of morale and even discipline. Though he hated leaving the front on one hand because he felt he was shirking his responsibilities and leaving his fellow warriors in a lurch, he knew his crew needed a break. But now it appeared the break he had hoped for would be short lived. "Sir, I think having the Romulans joining our alliance trumps the Phalckerians any day," he said, hoping that the attempt to stave off the admiral's request worked.

He had a bad feeling about this mission. Earlier in the war, Admiral Ross had sent him on a similar clandestine mission into the Lamenda System to assist an assassination plot against Gul Dukat, then the leader of Dominion-occupied Cardassia. It had been a trap and the *Cuffe* had barely escaped. The mission Canfield was proposing felt a little too familiar for Glover's tastes. In fact, it made him feel queasy.

"The Romulans have been a great help to us, but we are still stalemated with the Dominion," the admiral volleyed back. "We need a game changer, a major stumble for the Dominion. They've racked up the Cardassians, the Miradorn, the Tholians, and the Bajorans. Their failure to secure the Romulan Star Empire in their column followed by another failure with the Phalckerians might keep the rest of the quadrant powers on the sidelines, and potential allies for us."

Terrence sighed. "All right sir, what do you want us to do again?"

Starbase 116

Sector 443

Admiral Canfield composed himself before transmitting his next message. Going rounds with a man as strong-willed and skeptical as Terrence Glover wasn't an easy task, but he hadn't made admiral by going the easy route in anything he did. Especially in the alliances he had made along the way.

"Are you certain that Vorta is telling the truth?" He asked his contact. "I don't like the idea of sending one of our best crew's into a deathtrap."

"Our source is reliable," the woman crisply replied, her face in shadow. Her face was always shadowed, obscuring her features. Canfield wasn't even sure that what species she was, but he knew it really didn't matter. He had had several handlers over the years. Some had been more open than others.

"And you're certain that the taint of this won't come back on the

Federation?" the admiral asked, with an exaggerated sense of hope. "If news of this gets out, we'll have a severe public relations problem, not to mention a tarnished image."

"It is a sacrifice we must be willing to make," his handler said after a pause. "Image without substance is nothing. So long as the ideals of the Federation remain, the galaxy's opinion of us means little."

"But missions like this might erode the ideals you claim we are defending," Canfield protested, surprised that he had finally voiced some of the concerns that had been bubbling inside him ever since Section 31 had revealed themselves to him.

"This debate is moot if the Dominion wins," the handler said. "The rest of the galactic community appreciates strength above all. Once we have defeated the Dominion they will come around...because they'll have no choice."

"I suppose," Canfield replied, his worries still needling him. He saw just a hint of a smile, or what he thought was a smile on the woman's face. He knew for certain he heard a smile in the woman's voice.

"That's why we came to you admiral," she said. "We knew your sense of right and wrong would never waver, and that your moral compass would help us hold fast to ours. Disagreement makes us stronger, not weaker, so long as we all realize that the defense of the Federation, which allows such free expression, is paramount."

"I've pledged my life to defend the Federation," Canfield said with fierce pride. "I will do anything to see us prevail....even if it damns me in the process."

"We're all damned...in time," the woman replied with perhaps a bit of honest reflection.

"Truer words..." Canfield didn't finish the statement before he shut down the link. He didn't need to.

USS Cuffe **Captain's Quarters**

"I don't like this," Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas admitted as he lounged back on the captain's amber-colored Aaamazzarite couch. He held a frosty mug of Meridor beer in one hand. Terrence polished off his glass of Arcturian Fizz before continuing.

"I don't like it either," the captain said, placing the glass on the table. He rubbed his eyes. "But do you think I could turn down the admiral's request?"

"Yeah," Rojas said without hesitation. "We're explorers forced to be soldiers, but we're not assassins."

"We're whatever Fleet Command tells us to be," Glover replied sternly. "And in this instance we have been assigned a mission to halt a Dominion diplomatic venture."

"We've been ordered to destroy a vessel where Dominion representatives will be meeting with their Phalkerian counterparts," Rojas riposted. "What happened to the idea of capturing the enemy and plumbing information from them? Also, how can you be all right with the idea of killing Phalkerian envoys? They aren't combatants."

Glover ground his teeth. "I'm not. But you know that civilians are often collateral damage in war."

"If that trite explanation helps you sleep at night," Pedro said with a sneer. The larger man sat forward on the couch. He slammed the mug down, it sloshed on the captain's table. "Sir, if I might be excused? I have a cloaking device to figure out." Admiral Canfield had transmitted the classified schematics of a cloaking device, which was a violation of a long-standing treaty with the Romulans, but what was one more violation on a black ops mission?

"Pedro," Terrence said quietly, taken aback. "You know they're no ranks right now. It's just us."

"Fine," Rojas sighed loudly. "If I can be frank, I think this is bullshit. We would be of better service back on the front. This is another crazy snipe hunt that will go badly if we get caught. Right now we don't need to sacrifice our principles to win this war. It's our ideals that will lead us to win this frinxing war!"

"That's all fine and good," Terrence said, leaning back in his chair, "but we've got to be real about this. If we are successful we can distract and entangle the Dominion in the Segomo Vortices, saving Federation lives."

"At the expense of Phalkerian ones?" Pedro challenged. "That doesn't wash for me."

"Listen Pedro," Glover said more coarsely than he wished. "I need your support on this."

"So, now you're pulling ranks again?" Rojas said, standing up. "You know you never could take much debate...or criticism."

"Pedro don't be like that," Terrence urged, standing up too.

"May I be excused now, *sir*?" Glover kept silent for a moment, weighing his options. Eventually he relented. Pedro did a quick about face and stomped from his quarters.

"Damn," the captain whispered to the closed door. "This mission is starting off lovely."

Phalkerian Corvette *Levena*
En route to the Segomo Vortices

“Raise your spirits,” Archduke Davgan urged, raising his goblet. “Today the Phalkerian Domain finally steps out of the shadows of the giants and onto their shoulders.”

“I wish your optimism could infect me like it has the rest of the Privy Council,” Baron Sampath glumly replied, his elfin ears twitching. “I just don’t trust these Changelings. How can we trust someone who is a shape-shifter? Their very being is transient. Perhaps they’re word is as well.” The man’s jowls shuddered as he shook his large, hairless head. He shifted his bulk uncomfortably on the chair facing the archduke, a table filled with liquors and fruits separating them.

“That hasn’t been born out by the facts,” Davgan countered before swallowing the contents of the goblet. His attendant quickly used a glimmersilk napkin to wipe the amber liquid dribbling off the archduke’s purple chin. Davgan waved the servant away. “Not only have the Dominion made the Cardassians a player again, but they have held to their agreements with the Bajorans, Miradorn, and Tholians.”

“What about the Romulans?” Sampath challenged. “They assassinated a pro-Dominion Senator. Clearly that was a terrible miscalculation on their part.”

Davgan nodded curtly. He hated being upended, but Sampath had been one of his most trusted advisors and an ally to his family for decades. “You are correct in that regard. But you can’t deny that the Dominion’s offer of technology and weaponry is too good to ignore. It will make us stronger.”

Now it was Sampath’s turn to nod. “Well, the rest of the Council agrees with you,” he conceded.

“But you do not?” Davgan asked, though he knew the answer. Sampath merely smiled.

“What do you need my support for? The Despot authorized this mission,” the baron replied.

“Yes, he recognized immediately the potential benefits of an alliance with the Founders,” Davgan replied with satisfaction.

“It is my fondest wish that his wisdom prevails yet again,” Sampath sagely intoned.

“That is my wish as well,” Davgan said, a shadow crossing his face. “Not only for the Domain, but for our sakes as well. It is a long way back to Phalkeria.”

USS Cuffe
Observation Lounge

Captain Terrence Glover swiveled in his chair to gaze out the port windows at the streaking stars. He calmly waited for his First Officer to speak.

As was her fashion, Commander Dhalamanisha zh'Shakobheto gently waded in. "Captain, I waited until after the meeting to express my reservations."

The captain smiled mirthlessly. He continued looking at the stars. "Thanks for not ripping me a new one like Mr. N'Saba or glaring at me like Pedro." The just concluded briefing had been heated to say the least. He turned around slowly, to look at the pensive Andorian woman. "Take your best shot."

"Captain, I know this war has taken a terrible personal toll on you. First, Jasmine's injuries during the Tyra campaign, and then Lt. Dryer's death...." Glover's face closed as he remembered both heart rending events, particularly the memories of when he had learned about Nyota Dryer's death at Caernarvon IV only a couple months ago. Nyota had been a close friend, and a former lover, and it had been her loss that had been the real thing driving him to take on the Lamenda mission.

"I promise you Amanisha, this isn't about that," the captain began.

"Don't be so quick to make that promise," the Andorian shyly smiled, and the frankness shocked Terrence. He still sometimes couldn't believe that his once reticent Operations Officer had blossomed into a strong, independent, and essential advisor to him.

"You're right," Terrence admitted. "I guess, I can't really get over what the damn Jem'Hadar and snakeheads have done to my family and friends, but also to so many others. That anger, that outrage, keeps me going. It...it's like a fuel I suppose."

"It can be poisonous to rely on such negative emotions," Commander Bheto warned. "It can blind you to what remains good in your life; it can turn you into a hollow shell."

Glover frowned. "I'm far from a shell. And this isn't about revenge, at least not totally for me. This is about shortening this war."

"By possibly sparking a conflict between the Dominion and the Phalkerian Domain? Our actions here might result in widening this war, not hastening its end."

"I can't deny that, but I'm not crying too many tears for the Domain," Terrence said. "The Domain is a plutocracy, with a small clique of aristocrats grounding their people and a few other worlds under their heels."

"At least they're still breathing, which might not be the case if they go to war with the Dominion," Bheto countered. "It could lead to millions of more deaths."

"Don't you think I know that?" Terrence found himself pleading, and not liking that. "I hate what we've had to do these past several months, but it

has to be done. We are fighting for the entire Alpha Quadrant and that means sacrifices have to be made. It's quite possible that both the Dominion and the Phalkerians will think that their representatives fell prey to the wormholes littering the Segomo Vortices. They wouldn't be the first victims of that patch of space."

"Well, at least you're still capable of hope," Bheto smiled. Terrence laughed softly.

"It's a miracle isn't it?" The captain's grin broadened.

"I think this mission is too risky and unnecessary," Bheto hit her main argument. "For all the reasons already expressed during the brief. However, I want you to know that you have my support and this crew stands with you."

"Thank you," Terrence nodded, "but this mission didn't spring from my admittedly fertile imagination. Someone else cooked this up and Admiral Canfield presented it to me. I couldn't turn it down. To be honest, I don't think I could trust another crew to do this right and covering up Starfleet's involvement as best as possible."

"Don't you realize how wrong that sounds," Bheto asked.

"Yeah, I do, but we've got to do everything to protect as many Federation lives as possible," Glover replied.

"At the price of our souls?" Bheto challenged. Terrence paused, considering the question.

"Yes," he quietly replied. "I think our souls are a small price to pay."

"I'll ask you again once this is over," Amanisha said. "And we'll see if your answer is the same."

"We'll see," Glover said, with faltering confidence.

Cuellar Nor **Commanding Officer's Post** **Cuellar System**

Sarkos gazed out of one of the many port windows in the station's main office. The devastation just beyond the station was breathtaking. A metallic ring of debris, from the allied starships that had just been repulsed, surrounded the station like a crown. A halo or nimbus of good fortune from the gods, the thought, with just a smatter of humility, for the awesome blessing the gods had chosen to bestow upon him.

True, the defense of Cuellar from a furious allied assault wasn't as glamorous as Weyoun's capture of Deep Space Nine, or of Keilan's many 'accomplishments', but with the track record the Dominion had been on lately, his actions were sure to receive a positive response from Cardassia Prime.

The door chime's ringing intruded on his thoughts. "What is it?" He

asked sharply, not wishing to savor this moment of triumph with anyone. He left the door closed.

"Sir, we have a Cardassian cruiser *Selqet* inbound," Sarkos recognized the voice of his Cardassian aide Tarim. "They are requesting to speak with you immediately."

Sarkos's stomach twinged. *That didn't sound good*, he thought sourly. He squared his shoulders and exhaled softly, before calling out, "I'll take it in here."

"Yes sir," Tarim said. He detected a smile in her voice. She must've sensed his discomfort somehow, Sarkos realized, and it pleased her. He would have to do something about that later, the Vorta resolved. When the wedged shaped screen inset on the bulkhead near his desk came on, all thoughts of victory or Tarim were burned away.

Keilan's smirk grew into a wide predatory smile. "It's good to see you again too Sarkos." She laughed. "Surprised to see me?"

"Keilan," Sarkos bowed, mainly in an attempt to wipe any surprise, bewilderment, or fear off of his face. When he faced her again, he was confident that his visage was bland and neutral. "What do I owe the pleasure of your visit? I thought you were bringing more allies into our victorious coalition?"

"You're talking about the Phalkerians," Keilan said. "One of the Founders decided to take my place. They wanted to gauge the efficacy of the wormholes in the Segomo Vortices themselves, and who am I to argue with the wishes of a god?"

Sarkos nodded weakly, unable to speak.

"So, the Founder on Cardassia Prime decided to send me here to clean up your mess," Keilan added.

"Mess'?" Sarkos squeaked out.

"Yes," Keilan beamed. "This latest assault from the Federation alliance almost succeeded. If they had captured Cuellar Nor the entire system would've been vulnerable."

"We held the line," Sarkos said tightly, his defensiveness rising. "We turned back the enemy, inflicting mass casualties in the process. They will think twice about attacking this station again."

"Not from where I sit," Keilan said. "I see a significant number of Jem'Hadar and Cardassian hulks along with the allied derelicts. These types of victories we can't afford. At first I was confused by the Founders' request that I take over at Cuellar, but now...." She let the statement hang.

"I want to see those orders," Sarkos demanded.

"Sending them to you now," Keilan replied. The Vorta's stomach dropped.

"And what about me?" He asked after he was finished.

"The *Selqet* will transport you back to Cardassia Prime," Keilan said. "The Founder wants to talk to you personally about your new assignment."

Oh gods she knows, Sarkos realized, his heart thumping in his chest. But how could the Founder not know about his treachery, she was divine. What had he been thinking? How could he have let his hatred and envy so blind him? And now a Founder was going to their death, a death sentence he had set in motion. Sarkos realized he had damned himself and now had no choice but to accept the punishment. *Unless.....*

"I will transfer the station's command codes immediately," he said with renewed, though feverish energy. "I will be ready for transport as soon as you are within range."

Keilan looked at him askance. She had certainly expected a more glum response, but Sarkos didn't have time to engage in games with her now. He truly had a mess to clean up in the Segomo Vortices and time was of the essence.

USS Cuffe

Operations Officer Cabin

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Lt. Meldin said as he cautiously entered the cabin. The Benzite Security Officer couldn't help but scan his surroundings, prompting a laugh from Commander Amanisha Bheto. The normally reserved Benzite never had gotten used to how relaxed his Andorian lover could be once she was off duty. He also still thought he was dreaming at times. Meldin would never have imagined engaging in an intimate relationship with a non-Benzite, and particularly Amanisha, a person almost as fastidious as him. However he was coming to realize that war did strange things to people, sometimes breaking them and pushing them over the edge, and other times making them reach out and cling to as much life and experience as possible because they had finally seen the fleeting nature of such things. He suspected such was the case with Amanisha, and he knew that once the war was over, so would be their relationship.

She walked over, grabbed one of the man's slightly clammy hands and pulled him close. She kissed his lipless mouth. Instantly his coiled muscles relaxed and he slowly wrapped his arms around her. "We shouldn't be doing this...not now," he mumbled between kisses. "There is so much work to do to make sure we are ship shape for our mission into the Vortices."

"Oh please," Bheto said, "we both know we have a tendency to overcompensate and micromanage. We can't keep going over and over our station's systems again and again. That will likely create more of the problems that we've already solved. Plus it might knock us off our game. The captain was right to order the crew to take some downtime."

"It's about the only thing he's been right about on this mission," Meldin muttered. Bheto frowned, her nose crinkling as if she smelled something bad.

"Let's not do this, okay?" She urged. "We all had our say in the briefing, there's no need to rehash it."

"I was just saying..." the Benzite began, but Amanisha placed a finger to his mouth. Meldin's tongue darted out, licking the tip. Bheto cooed in spite of her self.

"Okay," Meldin said, with a surprising lack of reluctance, "We'll play it your way," he said, and Bheto couldn't believe that the Security Officer had relented so easily. He sucked her finger into his mouth, and her surprise was replaced by more pleasant and urgent considerations.

USS Cuffe

Holodeck One

Terrence Glover ignored the pandemonium around him. He concentrated on his target instead. He held the redcoat firmly by the throat; the man had long since given up his will to fight. Instead the British soldier glared up at Terrence, his blue eyes full of resignation and impatience.

Terrence didn't hesitate. He drove the *assegai* spear into the man's stomach several times, hoping to release the man's spirit in the best imitation of the Zulu tradition called the 'washing of the spears.' And then he threw the body to the ground and looked for his next target.

He normally disliked holodecks, and had used this program sparingly. It had been an early gift from his wife Jasmine, during their dating phase before she learned of his distaste for holographic games. But with the *Cuffe* now under subspace silence he couldn't contact her, or his father, and Pedro still wasn't speaking to him. He needed something to do to occupy his time, and he could think of no other way than to take a visit to Earth's Battle of Isandlwana.

He ducked when he heard the report of a rifle. The Zulu warrior beside him grabbed his raw, bloody throat before falling to the ground. "Too close for comfort," Terrence muttered. He had turned off the program's safeties. Even though the bullets, weapons, and men in this Anglo-Zulu War recreation were photonic they could still kill him, so he had to stay sharp.

The captain lunged forward, using his cowhide shield to protect as best as possible against knives, hands, and boots of the enemy. He had to admit that if Jasmine had never given him this program he never would've gained the appreciation of the magnitude of the Zulu's victory. It was something reading a book could never really provide.

He was dressed only in a loin cloth, with a shield, spear, cudgel, and a musket he had long since discarded because it was ineffective, and the Zulu were facing far more technologically advanced British forces, but under the

leadership of *inDuna* Ntshingwayo Khoza, the Zulu were on the verge of victory.

He gave himself over to the fray, eventually taking a rifle from another British soldier he killed. He had a hard time taking aim in the midst of fierce hand to hand combat, so he used the rifle mainly as a club, beating back any redcoat foolish enough to try to take him on.

"You humans call this a war?" The snide comment snapped Glover out of combat mode, almost causing him to get ran through by a charging British soldier. Glover sidestepped, and held out a stiff leg, mainly on instinct. The redcoat fell to the ground. Terrence moved quickly, stabbing him in the spine. But his focus and ire were completely elsewhere.

"Computer freeze program." Instantly the war raging around him stopped, soldiers on both sides locked in a death struggle. Lt. Seb N'Saba sauntered through the carnage, shaking his wooly head. The lupine sucked his sharp teeth. He looked completely out of place, a two-meter plus talk walking black furred wolfman, stuffed in a black and blue Starfleet uniform in the midst of a 19th century battlefield.

"Humans know nothing of war...of blood shed...or real savagery," the Alshain remarked. "The Exarchate's wars against the Menthar, not to mention the Klingons," he shivered. "Quite ghastly affairs."

Terrence fought hard to rein his breathing in. His almost naked body was covered in sweat and blood. "What are you doing here lieutenant?"

"I've always been curious about ancient Earth history," N'Saba said. "I had heard it was more violent than one would suspect. But this pales in comparison to my people or even the Vulcans."

"Check out a World War I, II, or III scenario, and then get back to me." Glover quipped. "This war took place in Earth's 19th century, a far less advanced time period, ergo a relatively minimal lack of casualties."

"I do find it a bit odd that you would order us to take a break from real war preparations and then indulge in some holographic bloodshed," the Science Officer remarked, a curious expression on his wolfish features. "A might strange wouldn't one think?"

"If you've got something to say, spit it out," Terrence demanded. He had never cared much for the prickly canid Science Officer, though the captain could never deny the man's brilliance. As much as he found N'Saba annoying he knew it would be foolish to ever ignore him.

"Captain I've known you a long time, long before you got that fourth pip," N'Saba said. "When we first met, you were a callow young lieutenant trying to play the role of a future captain to be. Now you've achieved that, and the responsibility and burdens are terrifying you to death."

"Alright, that's enough psychoanalysis," Glover snapped. N'Saba's words were cutting close to home, but he would never give the Science Officer

the satisfaction of knowing that. "If I needed a hug I would go to Counselor Ellan," the captain frowned, thinking of the ship's mushy Deltan counselor.

"Sir," N'Saba replied with a surprisingly deferent tone. "Doubt is gnawing at you like a heart worm. The briefing compounded it. It's very apparent. I would advise you to slay that instead of holographic soldiers. It might make you better prepared for the coming battle."

"And how do you propose that?" Terrence asked before he thought about it.

"Lt. Simus...he taught me about Vulcan meditation techniques," the Alshain began carefully. Lt. Simus had been the Security Officer on the *Cuffe* when Terrence had been the First Officer. The two men had formed a close friendship. When the Vulcan had been lost on a mission in the Tong Beak Nebula several years ago it had impacted Terrence almost as deeply as Nyota's more recent death. Simus had also taught Glover meditation techniques, but he had quit using them. Every time he had tried since, he had found himself thinking about Simus, at times even imaging the man, or his spirit, calling out to him from the beyond. It had been too unsettling. "I think they might be of some use to you."

"I'm...not so sure," Glover said, averting his gaze back to the frozen battle.

"And you think this will?" N'Saba challenged. "If anything this might leave you more keyed up and prone to make a bad, stress-induced decision when we reach the Vortices."

"Well, I don't think Vulcan meditation will work either," Terrence replied.

"Why not?"

"I....I'd rather not discuss it," Glover's voice hardened. "Care to enlighten me with any other ideas?" He asked, trying to capture the Alshain's normally snide tone. "If not, I have a battle to finish."

"I...see," N'Saba said, taken aback. "I should let you return to it." He turned quickly on his heel and made his way back through the melee.

Once he was gone, Glover sighed, collecting his thoughts and pushing back down his doubts. He returned with renewed fury to the battle.

Phalckerian Corvette *Levena* Segomo Vortices

"A quaint vessel," The Changeling remarked. Though there was a lot of similarities to the Founder that had recently been driven from her perch on the Federation base Deep Space Nine back to Cardassia Prime, Archduke Davgan's eye was more discerning. The Founder, flanked by two sturdy

Jem'Hadar soldiers, rifles at the ready, stepped gracefully off of the transporter pad.

The creature that slinked forward was more voluptuous, more definitely feminine, with a sharper, pointed chin, and a bit more definition to her face. She was dressed plainly, in a form fitting, full length dress that was the same amber color as her face and hair. A member of the Privy Council wouldn't be caught dead in such drab attire, she thought off handedly. However the aristocratic bearing was very much like the Founder on Prime that he had studied from the files collected by Phalkerian spies. Davgan gave an exaggerated bow. Baron Sampath and the rest of their retinue quickly followed his lead.

"It is an honor that such an illuminant figure has graced our vessel," he replied. The Founder regarded him coolly, her slash of a mouth upturning slightly at the edges.

"You may refer to me as Ipotane," she said, her husky voice alarmingly alluring.

"Honored Ipotane, I am Archduke Davgan and this is my court." Ipotane briefly acknowledged them all.

"Let us dispense with the formalities," the shape-shifter said abruptly. "I want to view the Vortices."

"Of course," Davgan replied gamely. He had set aside an elaborate feast for the Founder. It was Phalkerian custom to treat potential valued allies with a sumptuous feast. His people believed that a lot could be learned in an ostensive social setting. It also could provide an easy way to poison a potential threat. Their intelligence was far too scant to conclude if a Changeling could in fact be susceptible to poisoning, and Davgan would not attempt to do so this time, but a feast might give him an opportunity to discover what types of sustenance, if any, these unusual creatures enjoyed. "Right this way to our command perch. I had planned a welcoming feast, but...."

Davgan and his retinue had turned toward the door, but Ipotane and her sullen troops remained rooted by the transporter pad. "Is something wrong?" The archduke asked.

"I wish to conduct the investigation aboard my vessel," the Changeling said. "You will accompany us."

"Our ship is more equipped for travel in the Vortices," Davgan lied.

"And you can share that information with us," Ipotane said, "To ensure our safety of us."

Sampath growled in the back of his throat. The Baron didn't like this change of events either. They had thought that the negotiations would commence ship-to-ship after initial greetings, with a joint tour of the Vortices.

"Your ship will hold position, and we will maintain constant

communication with them through a string of communication buoys,” Ipotane said. “It makes little sense for both vessels to go into the Vortices where communication might be hampered or lost completely. We in the Dominion take few chances and we are appreciative of the perilous nature of this patch of space.” Davgan nodded. He couldn’t deny the woman’s logic, even if he didn’t care for her solutions.

The archduke squared his shoulders. He pointed to two of his top aides. “Prepare my wardrobe for transport. You will be accompanying me.”

“We only want you to travel with us,” Ipotane said.

“That’s out of the question!” Sampath said. “Your suggestion is a violation of Phalkerian protocol, of tradition! The Archduke is a member of the Privy Council. He will not be dictated to!” The Jem’Hadar soldiers tensed, their eyes burning holes into the feisty baron. Davgan placed a calming hand on the hefty man’s shoulder.

“It’s all right old friend,” Davgan said. “I’m among friends...correct?” The Founder dipped her head slightly.

“We will ensure the archduke’s security,” she promised.

“That’s not good enough!” Sampath said. The Jem’Hadar stepped forward.

“How dare you question the Founder!” One snapped. Sampath and the other Phalkerians moved to protect Davgan.

“Stand down First!” Ipotane quietly, yet firmly commanded. The reptilian fell back, but his eyes continued to smolder. The archduke stepped through the protective circle.

“I will go with you,” Davgan said.

“Please bring what amenities you need,” Ipotane offered. “And two of your aides. We don’t have space for any more than that.”

“You are gracious,” the archduke nodded. He turned to Sampath. “You are in command until I return.” Suspicion and doubt were roiling off of the baron, but he held his peace.

“May the Hallowed Matre guide your steps,” he said eventually.

“I wish the same of you,” Davgan said, before he snapped his fingers, jumpstarting his aides to get his things.

USS Telamon

Guest Quarters

“How did you receive that information?” His handler tried to sound harsh and accusatory, but Admiral Canfield was pleased by the hint of fear he heard.

“I have...my sources,” he said coyly. “But what I want to know is if it’s true?” The woman stared at him for almost a minute, unnerving the admiral

because he couldn't make out her features since she remained in shadow, but he felt her eyes staring at him across subspace, dissecting him, probing for weakness. "You are correct."

"Did you know this when you had me send the *Cuffe* on its mission?" He asked, hoping for a negative answer.

"We did not," she said, her voice frayed with annoyance. The admiral had thought to ask the woman how she couldn't know, but he quashed the question on his tongue. He had just learned that the section's reach wasn't as far as he thought. It was something he might be able to use for some advantage later.

Instead Canfield asked, "What are we going to do? If Starfleet Intelligence already has an undercover agent on the Segomo case, the *Cuffe*'s mission is unnecessary."

"No it isn't," his handler responded. "We have no guarantee that agent will be successful, and even if they are, the destruction of both the Dominion and Domain vessels will drive a permanent stake in the Dominion's quest for an alternative portal to the Gamma Quadrant in the Segomo Vortices."

"I thought we were all on the same team?" Canfield said. "I signed on to your section to protect Federation lives and interests, not to sacrifice them."

"What is one life? Or a hundred? Even Federation citizens, even proven patriots, in the face of saving billions of lives? That equation has not changed," his handler coldly responded. "Don't forget that."

"And if I do," the admiral challenged, his stomach twisting in knots. The woman paused, observing him again. Canfield fought the urge to clutch his rebellious stomach. There were days he wished he had never accepted Section 31's offer, but he had been a much younger, foolish, and ambitious man then. By the time he realized what he had truly gotten into, he had received his fifth pip, but had completely lost his soul.

"You are aware of the consequences of such disloyalty," the woman's voice was frigid. Canfield swallowed several times before he was able to push down the lump in his throat. He nodded. "Good," his handler said. "There will be no deviation in the mission. Understood?" The admiral nodded again. The woman ended the communication without preamble.

Canfield sat back in his seat, running the conversation back over in his mind. He had sent the *Cuffe* on a mission that might damage the prestige and by extension the war aims of the Federation Alliance when Starfleet Intelligence had already put in a plan in place to sabotage the talks. He couldn't help but wonder if Section 31 was engaging in some turf battle with the venerable, official intelligence agency of Starfleet, and used him as a tool in their snit. He had been around enough to know that pettiness was no respecter of organization. He also knew that the section rarely practiced the purported ideals they claimed to be defending.

He pulled off the fifth pip on his red collar. He pinched the circular pin between his thumb and forefinger. "This wasn't worth the price," he muttered, throwing it into one of the room's dark corners. More loudly, he said, "Computer, get me Captain Stallings."

Seconds later, the woman answered, sleep still evident in her voice. "Yes sir."

"My apologies, but I'm taking command of your vessel."

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

Captain Glover's fingers ran like skittish spiders down the sides of his armrests. "Activate the cloaking device." His stomach fluttered as the ship's interior lighting blinked and then dimmed. The normal computing sounds of the bridge also were muted.

"The cloak is up and working well with our systems," Operations Officer Graf said. There had been some compatibility issues with the cloaking device, but apparently Pedro had worked it out.

"Good job Pedro," Glover said. He was pained by the silence that answered him.

"I do my duty, nothing more sir," Rojas's voice was chilly, and overly formal.

"Keep it up," was the only thing Terrence could think to say. He toggled off the armchair intercom and turned his attention back to his Operations Officer.

"Is the transponder working well too?" Graf held up a fur-covered finger, running his hand through his course stock of brown fur while checking the transponder. Terrence had had Graf and N'Saba rig a false transponder signal on the *Cuffe*, masking its ship recognition codes. Once they dropped the cloak any vessel they encountered would record the starship as an unknown vessel. Glover didn't intend to give them enough chance to transmit any information that would contradict that, so if any sensors were recovered the false data would be found.

"Of course it is," N'Saba gloated at his station on the aft upper deck, behind Glover. The captain swiveled partway in his seat to regard the Alshain with a skeptical glance.

"Pretty confident of your abilities eh Mr. N'Saba?"

"Yes."

"In this case, I'm almost regretful to agree with him," Graf replied with a sigh. "But the transponder signal is functioning within parameters as well."

"Great, all everyone has to do now is sit back and enjoy the ride," Helmsman Henri Desvignes remarked with a grin. Glover allowed the young

man his attempt at levity. Normally he would've hit him with a reproachful glare for intruding on his conversation, but the captain didn't want to do anything to make the crew tenser and on edge than they already were.

"Try to avoid getting speeding tickets," the captain weakly joked, drawing out a loud groan from Commander Bheto, of all people. Her antennae drooped.

"I'm glad you're a captain sir, because comedy is not your forte," the Andorian deadpanned.

"So I've been told," Glover chuckled.

Central Command Vessel *Selqet* Stateroom

Glinn Javor buried his intense distaste. "Sir, we have entered the Segomo Vortices," he informed the Vorta sitting in the seat once occupied by Gul Dijana. Dijana had met her end at the hands of barbarous Klingons only a few weeks ago.

The *Selqet* had been pulled from the repair yards to escort the Vorta Keilan to the Cuellar System, and now another Vorta, Sarkos, had ordered them on a secret mission into Sector 443. It made little sense, but scaling the heights of the Central Command, once under the watchful eyes of the Obsidian Order, Javor had learned not to ask questions. But that didn't mean he didn't have them, nor did it mean that he had sacrificed his honor along with his bluntness.

Dijana had earned the right to sit in the chair that the Vorta now lounged in simply due to their alliance with the Dominion, an alliance many in the Cardassian officer corps felt placed them behind the Vorta and Jem'Hadar. Many also expressed private misgivings about how that dire arrangement would portend for the Union once they had conquered the Alpha Quadrant.

Javor wasn't too worried. The Union was the backbone of the Dominion forces in the quadrant; they were proving how essential they were to the Dominion's victory. If anything, the glinn was confident that Cardassia would factor as a major power within the Dominion's umbrella by the war's end.

Sarkos nodded, a ghost of a smile on his alabaster face. "Set long range sensors to detect any Dominion, Phalckerian, or other ship transponder signals."

"It will be done," Javor said. The Vorta began to turn away, but stopped once he realized Javor hadn't moved. The glinn himself came to that realization about the same time.

"Something else Glinn Javor?" Sarkos's pale-blue gaze scoured him.

"Sir...well, the soldiers...." Javor found himself stammering, trying to figure out how best to frame his thoughts. Gul Dijana had always preferred

honesty and directness, but these Vorta were creatures of appearances and double meanings. He didn't want to say anything that could be used against him at some other time.

"Continue," Sarkos prodded.

"Some of the soldiers have expressed curiosity about this mission. They don't quite see its value, and...want to return to Prime to complete final ship's inspections so they can return to the front." He felt foolishly relieved to get that off his chest.

The Vorta leaned back in Dijana's chair, pondering what he said. "And do you share those sentiments?" Javor wanted to say no, but he found he couldn't speak.

"I see," Sarkos said softly. He leaned forward, his expression hardening. "I see that you are inviting insubordination on this vessel. The Dominion does not look kindly on insubordination."

"I am not doing any such thing!" Javor said hotly.

"Are you questioning my assessment?" Sarkos's voice was colder than a Breen winter.

Javor paused, working out a less emotional response. "Yes," he said simply.

"So noted," Sarkos replied, before he pulled a disruptor from underneath the desk and fired.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

Captain Glover was on his feet. The Phalckerian vessel on the main viewer before them reminded him of a Pacifica marlin, one of the many aquatic species Jasmine had shown him on his last visit to her birthworld. He would give anything to have another opportunity to go back there with her again. But first, he had a mission to complete and a war to win.

"Any Dominion or additional Phalckerian vessels in the vicinity?" Terrence pondered.

"No sir," Lt. Meldin answered.

"But fading ion trails indicate that another vessel had been in the vicinity of the Phalckerian corvette hours ago," Lt. N'Saba added.

"Any Dominion life signs on that ship?"

"No," Meldin crisply replied.

"The ion trails are consistent with Dominion vessel exhaust," the Alshain Science Officer added again. The captain nodded in approval.

"Quick, good analysis Lt. N'Saba," Terrence said. "Get a permanent lock on that trail. We'll pursue it after we're done here." He turned around to look at Lt. Meldin. The Benzite stood even more at attention. "Mr. Meldin, ready

our weapons. Target their engines and weapons systems first.”

“Aye sir,” he said, immediately setting to work. Glover then walked over to the Ops station. He softly patted Lt. Gralf’s shoulder. The prickly Xindi-Arboreal tensed.

“Lieutenant, as soon as we drop the cloak, I want you to jam that ship’s communications.” He nodded abruptly.

Glover walked back to his seat, but he found himself unable to sit down. He sighed, squared his shoulders, and tapped the compin on his chest. “Pedro, drop the cloak.”

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

As soon as the *Cuffe* dropped the cloak, its forward phaser banks let loose a hail of fire, slicing into the unprepared Phalkerians. The *Nebula*-class starship swooped past the reeling ship, curving back around to face them bow to bow.

“Direct hits to propulsion and weapons systems,” Meldin said, as emotionally restrained as a Vulcan.

“What about their communications systems?” Glover asked, leaning forward in his seat. He had finally forced himself to sit down.

“The jamming is holding up,” Commander Bheto replied.

“They’re hailing us,” Gralf said. He looked back at the captain, awaiting his order. Their orders were to destroy all traces of the mission. Terrence knew he shouldn’t even be entertaining taking the hail, but cold-blooded murder didn’t set right with him. He was a starship captain, a soldier in a war he didn’t want to fight, but he wasn’t an executioner.

“Audio only,” he commanded.

“Unidentified vessel,” the voice wheezed over static. “We mean you no harm....we are a ship under the rubric of the Phalkerian Privy Council, on official business. Please desist from your attack. We are not your enemies.”

“Yeah right,” the captain heard a bridge officer at the engineering auxiliary console mutter. Glover pinned the man with a stare.

“Unidentified vessel,” the voice repeated again. Glover motioned for Gralf to cancel the link.

“What are your orders sir?” Commander Bheto asked quietly, the words loaded with hidden meaning. He looked at her, and the Andorian held his gaze.

“We’re not murderers,” he said softly, so that only she heard him. He swiveled around to the loose lipped bridge officer.

“Did Pedro get a trace on those ion trails?”

“Yes sir,” the penitent officer said sheepishly.

"That's the fish we want to fry," Terrence quipped. "Take out the Phalkerian's communications system and let's go fishing."

Dominion Battle Cruiser Segomo Vortices

Archduke Davgan's head ached terribly, but he did his best not to show it. It appeared that Dominion vessels weren't equipped with large view screens of any sort. They used virtual display headsets to view outside their vessels. Ipotane had instructed her longish-faced Vorta liege to supply him with one.

He stood beside the shape-shifter, squinting fiercely as he gazed out at the sea of beautifully chaotic wormholes spread before them. "In times long past, we often sent our soldiers into the Vortices to train. If they came back to Phalkeria we knew they were ready to serve."

"That is a sound training tactic," the Founder, the lens of her own virtual display device hanging out in front of her left eye. "Why did you stop it?"

"We were losing too many of our soldiers," Davgan laughed. Only his two attendants joined him. "Some still use the Vortices to dispatch of their enemies though, or so I have been told." That bit of humor fell flat on the Changeling as well.

She turned smoothly to the Vorta standing dutifully by her side. "Prepare the singularity scans." He bowed.

"At once," he promised, before scuttling away.

"My, are your servants wonderfully obsequious," Davgan marveled, eyeing his two, a lovely lavender female and a hulking deep purple-hued male. "How do you do it?"

"I am their god," the woman replied, matter of fact. Davgan already knew something of the weird religious hold the shape-shifters had instilled in both the Founders and Jem'Hadar. Unfortunately his servants hadn't been privy to such information. They looked at the Founder with gazes of shock and anger at such blasphemy. Davgan scowled and redirected their glares to him. He held them until both his servants looked away.

"Perhaps there is something I can learn from you," the Changeling said, a note of genuine appreciation in her tone. "Who ever thought a solid could teach me something new."

"Is that all we are to you?" Davgan said, more miffed than he should've been. "Are we nothing more than another inferior species to you?"

"That was not the intention of the statement," the woman calmly stated.

"Then what was it?" The archduke challenged, ignoring the Jem'Hadar starting to inch toward him. Fokus, his purple hulk, moved to Davgan's side.

"A random thought, merely spoken aloud," Ipotane said. "It means nothing...however this patch of Vortices might be extremely fruitful in our quest to forge a new way home." She placed a halting hand up for her Jem'Hadar and Davgan did likewise for Fokus.

"And the Phalckerian Domain wishes to provide as much as assistance in that endeavor as possible," the archduke interjected smoothly.

"And profitable as well," Ipotane smirked. She placed a hand over Davgan's, eliciting nasty looks from both camp's servants. "Perhaps we can speak somewhere more privately....alone."

Davgan hesitated only a second, before he realized how such hesitancy made him look weak. "Of course."

"Please, follow me," the Changeling said, continuing to hold onto his hand as she glided toward a corridor off the bridge.

Central Command Vessel *Selqet* Main Bridge

"Sir, we are picking up an intermittent tachyon pulse, some type of coded message," Gil Horgan, a far more amenable sort than his predecessor said from his station. Sarkos leaned forward in his seat.

"Decode it," he ordered.

It took several minutes, but Horgan began reading slowly. "Archduke Davgan, any Phalckerian vessels....this is the *Levena*...we were attacked by an unknown assailant and left listless in space...." Horgan paused. "The message repeats sir, and then it relays coordinates."

"Follow those coordinates," The Vorta snapped, his stomach bottoming out. More cautiously, he broached, "Did the rest of the message say anything about a second vessel being attacked? Or anything about a second vessel at all?"

Horgan shook his thick head. "No sir." Sarkos nodded, more fearful than relieved. He had to find out what happened to the Founder; he had to make this right, not only for reasons of faith, but perhaps more importantly, for reasons of survival.

***USS Telamon* Captain's Ready Room**

"I wish I had never told you about the undercover agent now," his old friend said, a sour expression on her slightly aged features. *When had that both found the time to get so old?* He wondered. "I should've known you would go off half-cocked."

Admiral Canfield grinned. "Yeah, you do know me."

"Just be careful, okay, and I'm not talking solely about navigating the Vortices, this Section 31 is a lethal organization," she remarked.

"I'm a little better acquainted with 31's methods than you are," Canfield chided her.

"I know, which still makes me shake my head in disbelief that you would ever get wrapped up in something like that," she replied. Canfield didn't really have a reply. He had been wondering the same thing for far too long now.

Eventually he lamely replied, "Desperate times...and all that jazz."

"And all that jazz," she repeated with a sad smile. "Please take care Byram," she urged him.

"You do the same Alynna," he said. He sat back for a moment, reflecting on his life and how it might very well end in the next few hours, either at the hands of the Dominion or Section 31. He shivered, and then he exhaled heavily, his body sinking into his chair as he let go of all his tension and fears.

Even if his time had come, he still had enough time to do a couple things right. He sent off the information packet he had been compiling, and then he placed one more call.

"Dad," Cadet Bryce Canfield didn't try to erase the annoyance from his voice. "I'm busy right now."

"I know son," Admiral Canfield fumbled, before he decided to cut right to the chase. "I'm sorry."

Dominion Battle Cruiser Auxiliary Control Room

"The female in your employ, she is a shape-shifter," Ipotane said, her dry words spiced with a healthy dose of curiosity.

"Impossible," Davgan said. "I've known Nixe since she was a child. She is Phalkerian."

"I am a Changeling," the woman said, as if that was proof enough of her veracity. "I know a *morphogenic* being when I see one. Centuries ago, we sent one hundred unformed Changelings out into the galaxy to learn and explore. Once they completed their travels they were to return to the Great Link and broaden our knowledge and experiential base. So far, we've recouped only a few, the most recent being Odo..." she paused, as if to remove the taint of the Founder who had sided against them off her tongue, "it is possible that this Nixe might be one of the Hundred. And if one of ours has chosen to live among your people it is a great honor indeed. If she is in fact one of the Hundred, and she validates the Domain, you will receive a vaulted place in the Dominion."

"Ahead of the Cardassians even?" Davgan was licking his dark purple lips. He had thought the best he could do was negotiate a deal and receive

some weaponry and advanced tech, but Ipotane was offering him membership in the Dominion itself, and a select position too. The Despot would reward his family handsomely for such a prize. But he hid his enthusiasm behind a blasé veneer. “And how might you go about identifying Nixe as one of your so-called Hundred?”

“We have ways,” Ipotane demurred, bowing her head slightly in a shocking sign of deference, “If you will allow me to demonstrate.”

“Yes,” Davgan said. “I will bring Nixe to you at once.”

Dominion Battle Cruiser Auxiliary Control Room

Nixe’s hackles were understandably raised, but Archduke Davgan coaxed her forward. The woman gingerly stepped to the waiting Changeling. Ipotane held out her hands. “Take them in your own,” she prodded gently.

Nixe reared back. “Why?” She asked nervously, looking to Davgan for guidance.

“Do as she says,” he urged. “She won’t hurt you.” Or he hoped she wouldn’t. Nixe slowly began reaching out. The Changeling’s arms slightly elongated to meet hers, but then Ipotane stopped. She glanced at Davgan.

“Out,” she said. “This is a private meeting.” Davgan planted his feet. He was curious about what was about to happen.

“Nixe is my servant,” he declared. “She is my property and I have a responsibility to ensure her well being.”

“It-it’s okay master,” Nixe looked at him, a small smile on her face. “I-I think I understand now. It will be all right.”

“We will call on you when we are finished. Perhaps you should return to the bridge and assist in directing the scan for suitable wormholes,” Ipotane suggested/ordered. Davgan didn’t like the woman’s tone, but he knew better than to make a row about it. Even Fokus couldn’t take on a whole shipload of Jem’Hadar.

***USS Cuffe* Main Bridge**

“There’s the big bug ship right there,” Lt. Desvignes pointed at the main viewer. “She’s a monster.” The large, swept-wing craft stood in stark relief against the colorful backdrop provided by the multiple wormholes behind it, each emitting various radiation and gases.

“And we’re monster killers,” Glover boasted, before his anger consumed him. He hadn’t been able to work up enough hatred at the Phalkerian ship, despite their collusion with the Dominion, but the sight of the Jem’Hadar

vessel brought back memories of facing similar ships only a few weeks ago, not to mention the death of Nyota and his wife's nearly life threatening injuries. "Deactivate cloak, and hit that bastard with everything we've got!"

Central Command Vessel *Selqet*

"Scan that vessel," Sarkos ordered. "I want to know if there are any non-Phalckerian life signs onboard."

"No sir," the sensor officer repeated. "Only Phalckerian life signs are registering." The Vorta leaned back, contemplating his next move. He knew that the Founders could literally take the form of any being or object they chose to, and would be oblivious to detection.

"That ship has incurred extensive damage," Gil Horgan said. "Should we offer assistance?"

"Hail them," Sarkos said reluctantly.

"No response," the communications officer replied. "It appears that their communication systems have been damaged as well."

"Scan the damage, see if you can determine the origin of the blast marks," the Vorta said, with increasing dread. He suspected he already knew the answer.

"The phaser damage....is consistent with Starfleet energy signatures," the sensors officer remarked, nearly choking on her own words. She looked at the Vorta and then Horgan, her eyes glazed with concern. "This ship was attacked by a Starfleet vessel!" The realization crackled like bolts of electricity across the bridge.

"Starfleet," Horgan whispered, clenching his teeth. "We must seize this vessel and interrogate the crew to find out what happened to the Starfleet vessel."

"Sirs, there are two disparate ion trails leading from the Phalckerian corvette, on nearly faded and the other far more recent." The sensor officer replied.

"Good work Glinn-Sed Erexa," he remarked, acknowledging the woman by name. The officer relaxed visibly from the recognition. It wasn't something given frequently on either Dominion or Cardassian vessels.

"Shall I prepare a boarding party?" Horgan pressed.

"No, Gil Horgan," Sarkos replied, his voice steely. "I want that vessel vaporized."

"But sir...." The thickset Gil began.

"Are you questioning my orders?" Sarkos asked with a deceptively mild tone.

"Destroy the vessel," Horgan ordered, his voice cracking slightly. The

deck plates under Sarkos's boots rumbled as energy coursed through the ship and formed deadly spears of energy that erupted from the *Galor*-class cruiser's forward array. The beams stabbed into the hapless Phalkerian vessel until it cracked apart in an anticlimactic explosion. Sarkos didn't even blink.

"Follow the most recent ion trail," he ordered.

Dominion Battle Cruiser Main Bridge

What in the Five Afterlives could be taking so long? Archduke Davgan thought, but he knew better than to verbalize his displeasure. He gave a furtive glance to the equally uneasy Fokus. His large manservant rolled his massive shoulders every few minutes, the only outward sign of his growing impatience.

The Phalkerian aristocrat tried to keep his mind on helping the Vorta and the Jem'Hadar scan the Vortices, but he was worried about Nixe, he finally had to admit it. She had been in his family's employ for years, long before Davgan had assumed mastery of his house. His father had bought her from market while he had been away on studies, serving the family faithfully ever since. He didn't like handing her over to the Founder without being around to insure she was safe, but what else could he have done?

He was under no illusions about the Dominion. He knew the Changelings took what they wanted, and the Founder asking him was a mere formality. Besides, Nixe was a slave, property that could be replaced, and this deal with the Dominion was a once in a life time opportunity, perhaps the only real chance the Phalkerian Domain had to increase its sphere of influence in Sector 443 and beyond. He hoped Nixe wasn't being sacrificed in some strange Founder ritual, but if that was the case, her loss might result in a very substantial gain for him and the Domain. He was comforted by that thought, and hoped that Nixe would be too.

One of the Jem'Hadar's resonant voices pulled him out from under his weighty thoughts. "First, I am detecting a slight subspace variance, moving on a direct intercept course with our vessel."

"I am in command of this vessel while the Founder is in dispose!" The Vorta snapped. "You will accord me the proper respect." The Jem'Hadar stiffened, but then curtly nodded his head.

A large, grizzled Jem'Hadar, the First, stepped from behind the tactical station. "Third, do not disregard protocol again," he warned. "Now, report." The Jem'Hadar

Third repeated his assessment, and both the First and Vorta went to his console, standing over his back as they read the data on his screen. Davgan was tempted to join them, but he received a few frigid stares from several of

the other Jem'Hadar soldiers on the bridge that froze him.

"It could be a cloaked ship," the First said. "I recommend we raise shields, deploy an antiproton beam, and alert the Founder."

"Or it could merely be a concentration of gases," the Vorta countered. "I do agree that we should deploy the antiproton beam, but I don't think we should disturb the Founder while she is preoccupied." The Vorta glanced over at Davgan.

The First pursed his gray, rough-skinned lips, a frown making his visage even more intimidating. But the man held his piece and issued the Vorta's orders. It only took a few seconds, before the Third called out, "Ship decloaking!" The barrage started before the warrior had completed his warning.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!" Glover bellowed, jumping out of his chair. "How did those bastards make us?"

"Captain we were never completely certain that the gases and radiation inside the Vortices might interfere with the cloaking device," Lt. Seb N'Saba explained.

"Sir, I think the more important question is how we are going to survive this," Commander Bheto said, her modulated tone an attempt to calm him. Both of the command officers were gazing out of the ship's main viewer. The large, imposing Dominion warship had already turned to face them, its forward disruptors spitting fire. The ship rattled under the pounding with such force that it threw Terrence back into his seat. It appeared that their first strike on the Dominion vessel had had extremely limited success.

"Status report!" The captain snapped. Gralf quickly ran through it. And Meldin informed him that shields were down twelve percent, but holding, and that the weapons systems remained online. Glover was relieved that more of the ship and her crew hadn't been damaged. "Ready the quantum torpedoes....let's call this one a day."

"Readying torpedoes," Meldin called out, seconds before the Dominion ship fired again. The tactical console exploded in Meldin's face. The man screamed before falling back, his face and torso in flames.

"Meldin!" Bheto wailed, leaving her seat, to be by his side. "Some one help me!" She screeched. "Oh gods!" She knelt beside him, and cradled him while another quick thinking bridge officer grabbed one of the fire extinguishers from the aft bridge locker and doused the man with foam.

"Medical emergency on the bridge," Glover informed Dr. Nemato.

"I'll send someone as soon as I can," the Antosian clicked back.

"Not good enough," Bheto said. With surprising strength that Terrence had never witnessed before the Andorian slid the unconscious Benzite over her shoulders in a fireman's carry. She stood up, her legs buckling slightly before she was able to lock them in position. "Permission to leave the bridge sir?"

Terrence really didn't want to let her go, but images of his wife, injured during the Dominion's rampage in the Tyra System flashed across his mind. How could he deny Amanisha an opportunity to do all that she could for the man she loved? It was a chance he wished he had been granted. The captain swallowed hard. "Take him, and get back here on the double." She nodded and then shifted the Benzite on her shoulders again before trudging to the turbolift.

"Can the tactical station be salvaged?" He asked, already putting Bheto and Meldin in the back of his mind.

"No sir," an extremely green Ensign Souza, the fire extinguisher still hanging in his grasp. "The panel is fried."

"Gralf, transfer control of that station to your terminal," Glover commanded.

"Sir, weapons systems are offline," the Xindi-Arboreal responded, his voice rising slightly.

"What?" Terrence couldn't believe his ears.

"Incoming!" Ensign Desvignes called out.

"Hold on!" Glover yelled. The lights flickered and several more consoles sparked fire. Acrid smoke began filling the bridge.

"Captain, I think retreat is in order," Lt. N'Saba suggested.

"Not until we finish our mission," Glover said. "Evasive maneuvers," he ordered. "And get those damn weapons back on line! N'Saba, transfer Ops to your station so that Gralf can put his full attention on rearming us!"

"Dominion warship is powering weapons," both Gralf and N'Saba said at the same time.

"Desvignes, get us out of the line of fire!" The captain roared. The *Cuffe* jinked suddenly, avoiding several disruptor shafts. "Good job Ensign," Glover said. He toggled a switch on his chair's armrest. "Pedro, how much juice do we have?"

"The warp core is undamaged. We've got full power...for the moment," the Chief Engineer tightly replied. Glover knew that the tightness was caused by stress and not due to their current disagreement.

"Thank God for small miracles," Glover muttered. More loudly he said, "On my command, I want maximum warp."

"You'll have it," Pedro replied.

"We're finally leaving?" N'Saba asked.

"No," the captain shook his head. "We're going deeper into the

Vortices.”

Dominion Battle Cruiser

Main Bridge

Archduke Davgan sat in a corner, oblivious to the frantic activity occurring around him. His head was still ringing from smacking the deck during the assault from the Starfleet vessel. The first strike had been deadly; impacting the ship a split second before the Vorta issued the order to raise shields. The beams had carved into the battle cruiser like a roast.

Though Davgan had been knocked nearly unconscious after falling to the deck in the initial barrage, he retained enough awareness to pick up snippets of conversation and glimpses of what was going on around him. He had found himself impressed, and more than a little disturbed, by how calmly the Jem'Hadar went about their duties even while the ship took heavy fire.

The Phalkerian noble didn't sense or even smell fear from them; if anything their eagerness was palpable. The archduke watched through a thickening haze as the reptilian warriors moved promptly and efficiently across the debris strewn bridge.

“Secure the Founder,” the Jem'Hadar First ordered one of his subordinates. Davgan suddenly remembered the exchange with the prissy Vorta. He looked around the bridge and spotted the man's legs; the rest of his body was covered by a bulkhead.

The dutiful Jem'Hadar pulled up short at the entrance. The door opened to reveal the Founder. She sagged against the open portal. The Jem'Hadar reached out to assist her, but then froze in deference. The archduke finally sensed trepidation from one of the creatures.

“Return to your station,” Ipotane said, her voice weak, but still ripe with imperiousness. The soldier quickly resumed his post.

The First filled the man's spot at the Founder's side. He gave a brief report. The shape-shifter scanned the bridge, her face impassive. “Have the assailants been destroyed?”

“No, but we have succeeded in disabling their weapons systems,” the First crisply replied.

“Excellent,” the Founder dipped her head. “I want that ship secured and its senior staff captured. The rest of the crew can pay for their crimes in a work camp.”

“Yes Founder,” the First replied. The Changeling dismissed him, and he turned sharply back to commanding his troops.

By that time, Fokus had made his way gingerly over to Davgan. Planting his back against a wall for leverage, he had placed his arms under Davgan's, locking his massive hands across the noble's shoulders. He had then hoisted

the aristocrat to his feet. Once he had made certain Davgan could stand on his own, Fokus pushed off the wall. He stood beside his master, trembling and swaying every so often. The large man was bleeding profusely from his side; a wicked piece of metal was sticking out of his side. "My manservant needs immediate medical attention," Davgan told the Founder. She regarded Fokus, her eyes strangely gazing over.

"Dominion warships are not equipped with medical facilities," she said, her voice more thoughtful and kind than her words. "There is nothing we can do for him."

"That's unacceptable!" Davgan snapped. His voice drew the predatory gazes of several Jem'Hadar. "This is no way to treat potential allies!" The noble was shocked when Fokus laid a large hand on his shoulder, and patted it. Normally such a violation of protocol would result in a severe flogging, but Davgan merely looked up at the man and patted the hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Ipotane said again. Fokus staggered, and he fell backward. Davgan felt the vibration in the soles of his boots when he crashed into the deck. He knelt down beside the man, but Fokus was already dead. The archduke turned his grief to rage. He whipped around on the Founder.

"Where is Nixe?" He demanded. Ipotane's features tried to approximate a look of sympathy.

"She also was killed...in the initial assault." The Changeling looked away from him, unable to meet his gaze.

"I want to see her body," he declared, not believing her. "It is my right as her master."

"You may view the body after we are finished here," the Founder promised, but he knew it was another lie.

"We are currently preoccupied with more important things," Ipotane remarked, the gush of a fire suppressant punctuating her point.

"I want to see Nixe's remains now," he said, rushing toward the entrance to the bridge. Ipotane reached out, stretching her arms to grab the man. He struggled in her elastic grip. Ipotane easily lifted him and placed beside Fokus's corpse.

"I said after," the iron in her voice brooked no challenge, and Davgan, beside himself with impotent fury and outrage, didn't.

Central Command Vessel *Selqet* Stateroom

Gil Horgan finished his report. Sarkos nodded with approval. "So, there was a massive exchange of directed energy in this area?" He repeated.

"Yes," the Cardassian replied. Sarkos nodded again. Horgan was by far one of the most agreeable Cardassians he had ever worked with, a true credit

to his race. Once this mission was over, Sarkos would recommend to Legate Damar to promote Horgan to a gulship, leapfrogging an entire rank. The Dominion needed more loyal, efficient men who understood the meaning of service.

"And both ships went deeper into the Vortices?" The Vorta asked. Horgan answered in the affirmative again.

"I see," Sarkos thought, as a plan formed in his mind.

"Shall I lay in a pursuit course?" Horgan asked.

"No," the Vorta shook his head. "We will return to the beginning of the Vortices and wait for whoever comes out of there alive. With this entrance being the most heavily mapped entryway into the Vortices, it is a good chance that they will return this way." And if they didn't, he wouldn't be too broken up about it.

USS Telamon

Main Bridge

Admiral Canfield was getting on Captain Linda Stallings's nerves more than usual. It was already bad enough that the admiral had taken command of her vessel and sent the ship into a rough part of space all while giving her only the scantest of explanations. And he even told her that the scraps of data he provided could not be shared with the rest of the senior staff or crew.

Now the man was pacing restlessly back and forth in front of the command seat he had commandeered, while she watched from the First Officer's chair. Lt. Commander Yu, her XO, sat at an auxiliary aft console.

"Have long range sensors detected anything yet?" The admiral asked every few seconds.

Finally her Ops Officer was able to give him a satisfactory answer. "Sir, we've got something," Lt. Greenlee said, with a heavy dose of relief. "There is a vessel coming out of the Vortices."

Canfield spun around. "Is it a friendly?" Greenlee paused, as she scoured the data.

She frowned, "No sir, it's a *Galor*-class battle cruiser."

"Damn," the admiral said. Stallings sat up in her seat, her stomach coiling, and her muscles tensing. She had to force herself not to stand up and issue orders. For the moment she wasn't in command, and it was needling her.

"Red alert," Canfield ordered, "Battle stations."

"Admiral Canfield," Stallings did stand up. "We can't take on a *Galor*-class warship. This is a *Nova*-class vessel, built primarily for short term planetary exploration. We won't stand a chance."

Canfield regarded her coolly for a moment, before he grinned. "My

grandfather once told me that it isn't the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog. The *Telamon* might not be able to stand toe to toe with that ship, but that doesn't mean we can't defeat it."

"All right, what do you propose?" Stallings was curious in spite of herself.

"I've got an idea," the admiral said, tapping his forehead. "There are a couple still left in this old noggin." He then proceeded to fill them in.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

The ship shuddered again. "Aft shields down to 15%," Gralf called out.

"Damn, how the hell did they catch up to us so quickly?" Glover asked. No one had an answer for him. "I thought we had hit them pretty hard."

"Obviously not hard enough," N'Saba drolly remarked, eliciting a glower from the captain. The ship rattled again.

"Aft shields are gone," Gralf solemnly informed the bridge.

"Swing us around," Terrence ordered. "We'll make a pitched stand right here." Lt. Desvignes steered the ship around, until its saucer section was facing the oncoming Dominion battle cruiser.

The captain was grateful that Gralf had at least got the forward phaser arrays working. "Fire, phaser full spread," Glover ordered. A deadly wave of energy rippled through space, enveloping the Dominion battle cruiser.

When the storm faded the battle cruiser remained in one piece, but Glover was happy to see several hull fractures venting plasma and warriors along the ship's ventral spine. The shields around the ship were crackling, but within seconds the Jem'Hadar had restored enough minimal shielding to prevent a second volley from having an equal affect. However, the enemy vessel remained stationary. "Now, back us the hell out of here, fast as you can."

"Aye, aye, sir," Desvignes smartly replied.

"All power to forward shields," the captain added. Gralf nodded.

"Sir, aren't we still going the wrong way?" N'Saba asked. "While the Jem'Hadar is doing whatever the hells they are doing, we can shoot past them and get a good lead on them in the process." Some of the other bridge crew looked expectantly at the captain, silent hope in their eyes that he would listen to Lt. N'Saba, but Terrence shook his head.

He grinned evilly, "I'm not through with these bastards yet." He got out of his seat and approached the flight control station. Glover clapped the helmsmen on his shoulder. "Henri, hit the skids, I'm driving this boat the rest of the way."

USS Telamon **Main Bridge**

“Has that *Galor* detected us yet?” Admiral Canfield asked.

“No,” the Takret lieutenant at the Tactical station remarked. Captain Stallings nervously ran her fingers through her graying blonde hair.

“This is a really risky gambit admiral. Do you really think it will work?”

“We’ll see in a few minutes,” Canfield nodded at her, a twinkle in his eye. “Lt. Commander Ouna, began preparations to generate an artificial gravimetric shear.” The Bolian engineer went about the task with grave determination. The admiral had studied the Segomo Vortices and knew that it was a stew of various radiations, one of them being neutronic radiation. He first ordered Ouna to use the ship’s Bussard collector to collect as much neutronic and graviton radiation as possible, because the admiral knew it was the perfect gun powder for the bullet he wanted to lodge at the unsuspecting *Galor*. Canfield intended to use the *Telamon*’s two deflector shields to simulate extreme differences in the gravitational coefficients of both volatile radioactive substances.

“Hostile has spotted us,” Ouna informed them. “They are raising shields and powering weapons.”

“I suggest we do the same,” Canfield said. “Also...evasive maneuvers. Let’s at least look like we’re preparing to duke it out with them.”

“Hopefully this plan of yours will work or we’ll have to slug it out with a very pissed off group of Cardassians,” Stallings grumbled.

“At least they can say we died with our boots on,” Canfield joked, but no one laughed. Not even him.

Central Command Vessel *Selqet*

The stingray-shaped ship cleaved through the soup of radiation and gases in the Vortices. Propped in the command chair, Sarkos hoped he had made the right decision. He was counting on the victor of the battle between the *Cuffe* and the Dominion cruiser would so damaged that they would be easy pickings.

But he wasn’t sure he really had the stomach for deicide. And if he was able to do such a monstrous thing, could he get away with it? Wouldn’t the Founder on Prime know what he had done? The Vorta disturbingly had to admit that he wasn’t so sure that she might, even though the Founders were omniscient, or were supposed to be. If the Founders were true gods, as all powerful and knowing as his kin were told to believe, why did the Federation Alliance retake Deep Space Nine? And why had they fought the Dominion to a

stand still? Why had the Founder not figured out how to reopen the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant, necessitating this trip to the Segomo Vortices in the first place?

For a long time Sarkos had tried to kill his viperous doubts, but he couldn't any longer. What if the Founders weren't divine? The thought seized him with an arctic fear. He looked around wildly, expecting to be struck down immediately for his blasphemous thoughts. But nothing happened. Just like nothing would happen if the *Selqet* destroyed the Dominion battle cruiser, except that his life might be saved. The Vorta reproduced via cloning, but that didn't make him covet living any less, particularly if the insights he had gained might be destroyed or deleted when the latest Sarkos model was taken from the cloning vats.

He needed to survive, to trump that smirking Keilan if for no other reason. He had to admit that he no longer believed in the Founders' divinity, and the religious fervor to claim all of the Alpha Quadrant had withered to nothingness inside him. All he lived for now was power and position. Now that he knew the truth, if he could place himself in an important, indispensable position Sarkos could one day use it to overthrow the false gods and set the Vorta up as the sole rulers of the Dominion. Was it not the Vorta who were the linchpin to the Dominion already? Overseeing the Jem'Hadar and maintaining the organizational structure of empire? It was time they received their due, the Vorta had long since repaid their debt to the Changelings for bioengineering them, turning them from primitive primates to one of the most evolved species in the galaxy. The least Sarkos decided he could do was let them survive, granted they accepted the new order he would impose.

His smile widened over his ghostly features as he imagined would be, and he resolved to himself, because there was no one else to pray to, that he would live to insure it happened. His dreams of the future were short-lived however. The screech of a proximity alarm drove the dreams away. "What's happening?" He said haltingly, still not fully in the moment.

"We've detected a Starfleet starship at the mouth of the Vortices," Horgan informed him.

"Impossible," Sarkos breathed, but he knew it wasn't. Section 31 would be as determined to cover their tracks as he was, and he was certain his change of plans had alarmed them. "Power forward disruptors and raise shields," he said confidently. "Put the vessel on the main viewer." A small, silver white starship appeared. That's the best Section 31 could do? Sarkos scoffed. "What type of vessel is that?"

"It is a *Nova*-class," Erexa replied, perplexed. "Used primarily for planetary exploration," the woman added.

"They're no match for us," a female at the weapons console sneered.

"Never underestimate Starfleet officers," Horgan barked. "I first fought against them at Camor V during the first war. They are a duplicitous lot."

"Then I suggest your crew destroy them as quickly as possible," Sarkos recommended. Horgan nodded in agreement.

"Sir, I'm detecting a massive ejection of neutronic and graviton energy from the Federation vessel," Erexa said. The Vorta looked back at the screen. A cloud of energy was forming around the starship.

"Starship is firing weapons," the weapons officer yelled.

"Prepare for incoming," Sarkos commanded, but nothing happened. The starship was pouring its energy into the cloud, and the cloud was alight, twisting, crackling, and thinning into a cord of pure, destructive energy. The cord expanded as the starship continued firing at it.

"Stop them," the Vorta said. He didn't know what they were doing, and that was reason enough for him to issue the order. "Fire on the Federation vessel! Destroy it!" The *Galor* unleashed a volley in the direction of the starship, but the writhing cord of energy consumed it.

"Energy wave is moving towards us," Erexa informed them. "At maximum warp speed."

"Transfer all power to forward shields!" Gil Horgan yelled, ignoring him. The stocky Cardassian was running along the bridge to each station, making sure they complied with his order. "Do it now! Do it now!"

"What is going on?" Sarkos said more forcefully. Horgan stopped, looked at him, and blinked. A sneer inched across his face. He flicked a thumb at the screen.

"See for yourself," he said. The Vorta's eyes snapped forward. The viewer was filled by a white crackling string of energy fast approaching them.

"What is that?"

"It's a gravimetric shear," Erexa replied. The Vorta didn't know what that was, but judging by Horgan's near hysterics and the woman's hopeless tone, he knew it couldn't be anything beneficial.

"Full engine reverse," he barked. "Full engine reverse!"

"It's too late for that," Horgan said.

"Evasive maneuvers," Sarkos replied. The fat Cardassian shook his head.

"How damaging will this thing be when it hits us?" The Vorta asked. Erexa shook her head.

"No," Sarkos pounded his fists on the armrests. "No," he muttered again. Not when he had finally discovered the truth of his existence. It couldn't end now.

"Brace for impact," Horgan ordered before the shear sliced into them.

USS Telamon

Main Bridge

The bridge watched in silent horror. Captain Stallings winced as the shear cut cleanly through the *Galor*-class ship, dissecting it before both halves exploded. "Helm, take us into the Vortices," Adm. Canfield ordered, not missing a beat.

USS Cuffe Sickbay

Commander Amanisha Bheto felt guilty about breaking her promise to the captain, but she couldn't bear to leave Meldin alone to Dr. Nemato himself had begun to attend his injuries. One of the nurses had made a quick assessment of the Benzite's burns and had had him placed on a biobed, and gave him a hypo before activating a steri-field around the bed. The Antosian Chief Medic was attending the more serious injuries pouring into the medical center first.

When he finally slid over to Meldin, he twisted his eye stalks at Bheto in a motion she recognized as a scowl. "Don't you belong on the bridge," his mandibles clacked. The rebuke was a mental slap, reminding the Andorian of her responsibilities.

"Oh, I...I just wanted to make sure Meldin would be alright," she stammered.

"We'll take good care of him," the vermicular doctor promised. "Now you go and take good care of us."

"Yes," Amanisha nodded. "Of course." She turned toward the door, looking back only once more, her heart tearing as she saw Meldin's burned face.

Wiping away tears, she ran down the hallway, rushing to the nearest turbolift. She really hadn't realized how much she cared for the man until that console had exploded in his face. Bheto had thought their relationship was merely a wartime fling, brought on by stress and a desire to enjoy what little life they might have left, but now she realized it was something much more. And she was happy about that, though she didn't know how her family would feel if she ever brought Meldin home.

She entered the turbolift. "Bridge," she called out, before she broke into a chuckle, imagining the looks on her parents' faces, all four of them, as she introduced them to Meldin. Of course they would be disappointed because Bheto was breaking her commitment to her partners, and washing her hands

of her responsibility to form a bond with four others to procreate and keep the Andorian race alive. But right now she was more concerned about her life, and she knew it would be much emptier without Meldin in it. Bheto sent a prayer to the gods as the turbolift shot upward to the bridge.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

Despite potential death in front of him and certain death behind him, Captain Terrence Glover was having a hell of a time. His fingers shot across the smooth pane of the flight control console as he input new flight directions quickly, keeping the Dominion warship that was pursuing them off balance. One of the downsides of that was the space sickness he was certain he was engendering in some of his own crew, but they could complain to him about it later.

He was a pilot at heart and his time in Nova Squadron in the Academy had been the best years of his life. Whenever he got a chance to get behind the yoke he took it. Though Terrence wasn't as good as he used to be, he knew he was still one of the best flight jockeys currently in the Fleet, and certainly the best among his fellow captains.

He flew the ship backwards, the saucer section facing the onrushing Dominion ship. Gralf still hadn't restored aft shields yet, but it didn't matter. As long as the ship's sensors were working, it didn't matter which way the *Cuffe* was turned. Glover still had a 360-degree view. One thing the Xindi-Arboreal had fortunately been able to set up was an auxiliary tactical console, which was being currently manned by Lt. Desvignes.

Glover had to admit the young man was a pretty good shot. The latest phaser fusillade smashed into the Dominion warship's shields. "They're shields are weakening," he cried out, with obvious pleasure.

"Hit them again before they hit us," the captain commanded.

"You got it sir," Desvignes replied, laying on more fire.

"Their forward shields have buckled," Gralf said before Henri could. Glover glanced back and caught the young man rolling his eyes. He grinned, before transmitting data for another evasive maneuver.

"Everyone hold on to your lunch," the captain called out as he dove the ship under the return barrage from the Dominion ship. The bridge escaped the return fire, but unfortunately a portion of the unshielded aft section was struck, spinning the ship wildly. Glover did his best to stay planted in his seat, but the blow took out the inertial dampening field, and he soon found himself against a wall, his head pounding and slick with his blood. He quickly opened his eyes to darkness. Lighting for the entire bridge had gone out, even the

emergency lights.

The captain called out, "Is everyone okay?" Only a few answered back. He tried to stand up, but his rubbery legs wouldn't support him. He crashed back down to the deck in a heap, vomit ejecting from his mouth. Wiping the remains of the burning, bitter liquid from his lips, Glover yelled, "Someone...turn on the damn lights."

In a wicked answer to his request, the bridge lit up courtesy of the still functioning main viewer. Terrence quickly realized what caused the illumination was more incoming fire.

"Shields," he shouted before his voice was drowned in a rain of destruction.

USS Cuffe **Shuttle Bay**

The light stabbed into Terrence's eyes, slicing right into the back of his brain. He tried to cover his eyes, but the light still made its way through. "Wha...." He tried to speak, but his tongue was thick and his mouth was as dry as the Sahara Desert.

"The captain is awake," Dr. Nemato intoned. "I'm sorry sir," he said more quietly. Glover steeled himself against the pain, removed his hand, and opened his eyes all the way. Dr. Nemato stood in front of him, raised on his hind legs, waving a medical tricorder over him. Though the medic was classified as an Antosian dryworm, Terrence had always thought he resembled an Earth centipede.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," an equine-faced Vorta stepped into Glover's line of sight. He immediately tried to stand and regretted it when his head throbbed painfully. "Please remain seated," the Vorta said cheerily. "I am Geirrod," he said, with a curt bow.

"What...do you want?"

"We already possess your vessel, so I guess...nothing," Geirrod said.

"How?"

"After the shields went down, they transported canisters of some type of sleeping gas throughout the ship," Glover turned in the direction of the voice. He saw that Seb N'Saba had been bound, with two Jem'Hadar soldiers standing watching over him. In fact, as far as the captain could tell Jem'Hadar were crawling all over the shuttle bay. It appeared that a good deal of the *Cuffe's* crew had been captured as well, but not all. The crew was lumped together in a large tightly packed square in the middle of the shuttle bay. He was flanked by Ensign Souza and Lt. N'Saba.

"I'm sure you are taking stock of your crew," Geirrod said, nodding. "A

wise move...it is a hallmark of your concern for the men under your command. We have rounded up several groupings of your crew in various holds throughout the ship."

"Though some remain unaccounted for," a Founder glided into Glover's view and Geirrod quickly stepped back, with an exaggerated bow. "The gas was not as effective as we had anticipated. It's only a matter of time though before they are either captured or neutralized." The Vorta remained glancing at the Founder's feet, or what passed for feet. Terrence wasn't so impressed. "Captain Glover," the Changeling remarked. "I've heard much about you. Your actions during the retaking of Deep Space Nine as well as in the Kabrel system have given us cause for great concern."

"I'm honored," Terrence said, trying not to wince. He didn't want to show as little weakness around the shape-shifter as possible. "Let's dispense with the bullshit, what are you going to do with my ship and crew?"

"Very direct...for a solid," the Founder appraised. "So I will afford you the same courtesy: I will take your vessel back to Cardassia Prime to serve as a symbol of the futility of the Federation's resistance, and after you and your crew have been interrogated, you will live the remainder of your lives supporting our war aims as slaves."

"Like hell," Glover spat. The Vorta recoiled, and then he moved in and punched Glover with such force that the man's head felt like it was split open.

"How dare you?" Geirrod said, mortified, his face twisted in hatred and disgust. "You are unworthy to breathe one second longer." He drew his sidearm and jammed it into the captain's temple. N'Saba growled, and began straining against his restraints, until the Jem'Hadar began to pummel him.

"Stop it you bastards," Terrence roared, but knew if he made a move towards the Alshain Geirrod would pull the trigger.

"Don't shoot him," the Founder said. Geirrod didn't remove the weapon. "Don't," the Changeling said more forcefully. The Vorta reluctantly moved the disruptor, and then he turned the pistol on Ensign Souza and fired.

"No!" Glover shouted, this time rising to his feet. He lurched toward the Vorta. Geirrod swiveled the gun back at him, but Terrence clamped down on the man's wrist. He twisted it hard, satisfied when he heard the bones pop and the pistol fell the deck. He wrapped his hands around the man's neck, catching one of the Jem'Hadar out of the corner of his eye too late. When he turned around to confront them, he was met with the butt of a rifle between the eyes.

USS Cuffe

Jeffries Tube above the Shuttle Bay

Commander Bheto placed a restraining hand on Pedro's beefy shoulder.

"Don't do it Pedro," she quietly warned. "Now is not the time."

"Those bastards....you saw what they did to Ensign Souza, the captain, and N'Saba!" He said, his voice thick with anger. "They're going to pay for that."

"They will," the First Officer promised, her voice as cold as an Andorian winter. "But first we have to gather our numbers and come up with a plan. We now know where they have the captain, we'll rescue him. I promise."

Lt. Commander Rojas signed. "All right sir. But I want to be the one that takes out that sniveling Vorta."

"I can't make that promise," Bheto replied. "I think the captain might get him first."

Dominion Battle Cruiser Auxiliary Control Room

In the hubbub surrounding the Jem'Hadar storming the Federation starship, Archduke Davgan had stolen away. He made his way to the Auxiliary Control Room, the last place he had seen Nixe.

Stepping across the threshold into the dim room, he called out her name. Unsurprisingly there was no response. He walked around the room, checking the dark corners, even scouring the floor for any sign of his servant. Eventually his eyes spied a pile of dark ash. He knelt beside it, running his fingers through the crumbling flakes.

The Phalkerian noble was so engrossed that he didn't hear the Jem'Hadar soldier carefully approaching him from behind. "What are you doing?" The man asked, causing Davgan to jump to his feet. He turned around, but before he could respond the soldier placed a forearm to his throat and drove him into a wall. "The Founder told you to remain on the bridge." Davgan gurgled, trying to speak, unable to, he pointed toward the pile. The reptilian soldier followed the choking aristocrat's frantic gesture. Immediately he released the man, and dashed over to the pile. He fell to his knees, and a keening wail emitted from his lips.

Rubbing his throat, Davgan's fear was momentarily overtaken by his curiosity. "Wha-what is it?" He cautiously approached the keening soldier.

The man slumped forward, all malevolence gone. "A Founder....this is the remains of a Founder."

***USS Cuffe* Arboretum**

"This is the best we could do?" Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas glumly asked as he looked at the far two few crewmen standing nervously before

him.

"It's more than enough," Commander Amanisha Bheto confidently replied. "In order to harass the Jem'Hadar we'll need to hit hard and be quick about it. Small strike forces work best." The Andorian concluded.

"We don't even have enough people for a volley ball match," the Chief Engineer complained.

"This is the strangest pep talk I've heard," Transporter Chief Balk said. The burly Tellarite, and ship's gossip hub, scowled at Rojas. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but sometimes it's better to keep your opinions to yourself." The engineer glared at him, opening his mouth to retort, but Bheto gestured for him to keep quiet.

She quickly reviewed the crew she had at her disposal: Chief Larn, the Lurian recreations officer, Technician Dokkal, an Ithenite computer specialist, Naren Chopra from Stellar Cartography, Balha, a Dimoran from the Security branch, the Grazerite Nurse Wyd, Valerie Cha and the Axanarii Risla, both assistant engineers. Only Balha and the engineers were armed. The Jem'Hadar had long since secured the armory. Wyd had a laser scalpel in his satchel. Amanisha stopped herself from shaking her head in concern. There had to be a way to rescue the captain, save the crew, and defeat the Jem'Hadar, she just didn't know how. She sighed, "Right now I need ideas people."

Everyone looked around, avoiding her insistent gaze. "Well..." Dokkal started hesitantly, "it appears that Lt. Gralf was able to lock the Dominion out of the mainframe. It should take them hours until they figure out how to gain full control of the ship's systems."

"That is if they don't get the information from torturing Gralf or someone else," The rodent-like Balha twitched her pinkish nose in disgust.

"Perhaps we should give those horny toads something else to worry about then," Valerie Cha offered, cringing when the reptilian Risla hissed at her description of the Jem'Hadar. "Sorry," she replied.

"What do you mean lieutenant?" Bheto pressed; she could save the lecture on respecting diversity for later.

"Let's give them so much to work with that they'll be too busy to torture anyone," Cha elaborated. "I think we should take out our propulsion system."

Pedro smacked his head. "Not my babies." The Andorian smiled. Seeing the look on her face, the hefty engineer's shoulders slumped. "I have to admit it does sound like a good idea."

"I think we should go one better," the First Officer suggested. "I think we should retake Main Engineering." The doubt in the room was palpable.

"Sir, in all honesty how do you think we fare against a unit of Jem'Hadar?" Chief Larn asked.

"We have the element of surprise on our side," Pedro said.

"And we've got me," the squat, copper-hued Dokkal thumped his chest. "I might be able to do something with the power or environmental systems in Main Engineering to help out."

"Thanks Mr. Dokkal," Bheto said.

"I can see fairly well in the dark," Risla said, "and I've been waiting to sink my claws in the Jem'Hadar since Commander Rojas gave the order to vacate Engineering."

"And don't forget the crew still down there," Rojas offered. "If the crew in the Shuttle bay is awake it's a good bet that the Engineering crew is as well, and they can assist us in overpowering the Jem'Hadar."

"There could be a lot of casualties," Wyd pondered ominously.

"We don't have a lot of options," Pedro said sharply. "This is about the best of a bad lot."

"It's risky, and foolish, but it just might work," Bheto said. "Let's move out."

Dominion Battle Cruiser

As soon as Geirrod stepped off the transporter pad he made a threat. "This engine problem had truly better be worth my time or the Founder will hear of your incompetence!" The Jem'Hadar satisfactorily recoiled. But the warrior recovered his reserve quickly.

"Come this way," the Sixth gestured as he walked out of the transporter room. A Fourth stood outside the door.

"This way doesn't lead to Engineering," Geirrod balked.

"Sir, we are not going to Engineering," the Fourth revealed. "We...needed to concoct a compelling enough reason to bring you back to the ship." The Vorta blanched, stepping back. The few times the Jem'Hadar had mutinied were well known among his people. He prayed that he wasn't about to become a sad footnote in the history of the Vorta.

The Fourth chuckled. "If we wanted to kill you would be dead already," he said. "Follow us." Geirrod nodded imperiously, trying to regain the upper hand.

"Lead the way," he commanded. The two Jem'Hadar led him to the Auxiliary Control Room.

Immediately upon entering the room, the hairs rose on the back of Geirrod's neck. He saw another Jem'Hadar, a Fifth kneeling in the center of the room, a haunting, low wail escaping his lips. Archduke Davgan was cowering in a corner of the room. The man's face was covered with welts and bruises.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Vorta demanded, surging forward. He was about to grab the Fifth by the shoulder and turn him around when he

saw the pile of black ash at his feet. Instantly his legs wavered, and he sank slowly to the ground beside the quivering Jem'Hadar. "It-it can't be?"

"Our scans confirmed it," the Fourth said mournfully. "Those ashes were once a Founder."

"Impossible," Geirrod said, though he wasn't even sure it was him speaking; his mind was reeling. "The Founder Ipotane is currently aboard the Starfleet vessel, and I am sure she would've informed me if another god had chosen to bless our mission with their presence." The Fourth nodded with an unnerving understanding, before turning toward the Phalckerian.

"But this one has an interesting tale," he replied, unsheathing his kar'takin and pointing it in the quavering, purple-skinned man's direction. "Speak!" he demanded.

Davgan hurriedly repeated his story about Ipotane's suspicions that his servant Nixe was a Changeling. The pile of ash corroborated that assessment, but what disturbed Geirrod was why Ipotane would kill Nixe? Until Odo, no Founder had ever harmed another, and what could possess a god to strike down one of their kin? Could it be out of some misguided sense of loyalty that the young god Odo seems to possess, or could it be something far more terrifying? Can gods go mad? The Vorta just didn't know, and he resented Davgan for presenting him with this damning conundrum.

"What are your orders?" The Fourth intruded on Geirrod's thoughts. He wanted to lash into the man, to cry out that he didn't know, but it would be too unseemly. He needed more time to sort this out; perhaps he could find the answer to Ipotane's behavior from the Founder on Cardassia Prime. He clung to that idea like a golden thread of hope, a lifeline that kept him from falling into the abyss of madness himself.

"Tell no one of this," Geirrod demanded. "Collect the Founder's remains and personally deliver them to me." He turned towards the Phalckerian. "This didn't happen. You didn't see anything did you? Your servant died in the initial assault, correct?" The Vorta waited the man out until he mumbled in compliance. Geirrod actually managed a smile before turning back to the Fifth still kneeling by the dead Founder. "Fourth, dispose of that one. His mind is gone."

The Fourth, still holding the kar'takin, lifted it up and drove its blade into the man's neck. The Jem'Hadar Fifth spasmed silently several times before the Fourth ripped out his blade and threw the man's dead body away from the Founder.

USS Cuffe

Captain's Ready Room

His Jem'Hadar guards threw him roughly into the darkened room. Terrence crashed into a chair. "Are you alright my love?" A familiar voice called out to him in the darkness, her sweet, familiar voice totally confounding him.

"Jazz," he muttered. He looked up and saw his wife sitting behind his desk, her silhouette outlined by the starfield in the window behind her. Glover must've taken another knock to his head and was hallucinating.

"Lights, low illumination," she said softly, and the room filled with dim lighting. A tall, beautiful, dark-skinned woman, her Starfleet uniform accented by a mustard green collar, sat in his chair. She gazed at him with almond shaped, caramel eyes that Terrence had been mesmerized by since he had first met her, though he never would've told her that.

"Jasmine," Terrence said, slowly realizing what was happening. "Stop it," he demanded. The thing wearing Jasmine's face smiled, and Glover's heart twinged because the shape-shifter had captured her gestures perfectly. He wanted to look away, but he forced himself to stare at the Founder, while steeling his gaze and his heart.

"I thought you might be more amenable to this guise," the Founder said, shrugging. "But I suppose not." Jasmine's face folded in on itself as her body became a golden blob that briefly morphed into the visage of Ipotane that changed once again. Now another sepia-toned feminine face, this one with blazing yellow eyes stared back at him.

"Nice look, but I'm pretty committed to my wife," Terrence joked. The shape-shifter shook her head.

"You don't get it do you?" She said, her tone very disapproving. "I'm not a Changeling. I'm a Chameloid."

"Yeah, right." The shape-shifter sighed loudly in response.

"Not only am I a Chameloid. I'm a Starfleet Intelligence officer." This made Glover sit up in his seat. He was dumbstruck, as the woman continued. "I want to know what you are doing here because you severely frinxed up my mission!"

"Cut the crap," Glover snapped. "Because I'm not buying it."

"Humans!" The shape-shifter sighed, throwing her hands up in frustration. She then proceeded to rattle off a special identification code that only a Starfleet Intelligence operative or a high-ranking Starfleet officer would be privy to. Glover wagged a finger at the woman.

"You guys are master infiltrators. I don't think it would be too hard for you to murder the agent you took that code from and then impersonate them. That's what happened with Ambassador Krajensky which I'm sure you're aware of."

"I am, but not for the reasons you think. But his death is part of the reason why I am here. SI figured if the Changelings can masquerade as

Federation citizens, why couldn't we return the favor? My mission was to neutralize and take the place of the Vorta we had assumed would be leading this mission, with my ultimate goal being to remove and replace the Founder commanding Dominion forces on Cardassia Prime. The presence of another Founder onboard threw a wrench in that plan. I had to improvise and assume its identity."

"You're one hell of a story teller," Terrence flippantly remarked. "Care to tell me another whopper."

The woman frowned, but continued. "I hadn't expected the Founder to recognize I was a shape-shifter, and so when she tried to link with me, assuming I was a Changeling, I had to kill her, and then your ship attacked, and everything went to hell."

"On that we can agree," the captain said, retaining a mocking tone.

"Stow the cockiness," the shape-shifter snapped. "Millions of Federation lives are at stake."

"Because of you," the captain shot back.

"Captain Glover I need you to release the codes to this ship's mainframe."

"Fat chance," he replied.

"The longer we stay here, the greater the likelihood that my cover will be blown," the woman said, her voice and expression fraught with tension. "If you release the codes, I can get you and your crew out of this alive."

"So, you're saying you will help us retake the ship?" Glover asked, still skeptical.

"No," the woman shook her head. "I can't do that. I'm sorry. I can't allow my true identity to be discovered. This mission is too vital to the war effort." She looked down, staring at the polished surface of his desk. "Your sacrifice won't go in vain."

Glover clapped. "Bravo." The woman looked back up at him, confused. "Great performance," he added. She snorted.

"When this is all said and done, at least I tried," she remarked glumly.

"I assume we're done here," the captain said.

"Captain Glover, we haven't even begun," she said, her arms whipping forward from her body to knock him out of his seat, driving him against the wall. "You will give me those codes." Holding him with one hand, Glover struggled helplessly as the shape-shifter's other hand reared back, morphing into a hammer-like shape. "Last chance," she offered.

"Do your worse," he challenged, and she did.

USS Cuffe

Nacelle Control Room One

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas was disappointed. He had really wanted to retake Main Engineering, but once the team had reached the Jeffries Tube that would allow them to drop down into his station, they saw Jem'Hadar crawling over every inch of Engineering. There was no way they could take them all, and even if by some miracle they could, Pedro was certain that at least one of the horny toads would call for backup.

What galled him almost as much as the presence of the Jem'Hadar was the fact that the brutes were touching his consoles, his master systems display, and his tools. It felt like they had invaded his home, and the violation made him boil.

But as much as he wanted to shove the first hydrospanner he could get his hands on into the nearest Jem'Hadar's face, Pedro knew the way to beat them was to outthink them. The Dominion forces might have numbers and arms on him, but there were very few who knew the *Cuffe* as well as he did.

After their plan had been aborted, another idea had come to him after they had reconnoitered in the Arboretum. If they couldn't yet gain control of Engineering, they could cripple the ship long enough to keep the Jem'Hadar busy still. Though it pained him to continue, he had outlined a plan to sabotage the magnetic constrictors on the warp coils housed in the *Cuffe*'s twin nacelles. The disruption would cause a plasma buildup in each nacelle that might create a warp breach if the Jem'Hadar couldn't figure out how to solve it.

Commander Bheto had caught on quickly, and she had finished his plan as if she had plucked the idea right out of his mind. "We'll sweat the Jem'Hadar out," she had said.

"Commander, it has not been proven if Jem'Hadar have pores," Nurse Wyd had pointed out. Pedro had chuckled, but the XO had pressed on, oblivious to the unintended humor of the well meaning Grazerite's comment. For his part, Wyd's face wrinkled even more with confusion.

"We'll force them to surrender if they want to prevent the warp core from breaching," the Andorian had concluded.

"And if they don't surrender?" Pedro had asked, not for his benefit, but so that the green crewmen around him knew the true direness of his plan.

"We'll let the warp core breach," Bheto answered. She had paused, glancing around the small circle. The expressions ranged from solemn to grim to hopeless, but no one voiced any dissent. Pedro had nodded with pride. There were no whiners or quitters in this bunch, he had marveled.

"All right, we'll split up and each take out as many constrictors as we can before meeting back here in one hour," Bheto had explained. Pedro still was marveling over how easily the once demur Andorian had assumed command of the group, taking his idea and turning it into a workable plan.

He stood now, with a phaser in his hand, staring up at the large, softly

pulsating rings above him. He aimed at the metallic constrictors connecting the long string of coils, adjusting the weapon's setting. The plan was to offset the coils, knocking them out of alignment, not to destroy them. Doing that would speed up the warp core breach. He nodded at Lt. Cha, and she reluctantly raised her weapon as well. When the chronometer on his wrist beeped he nodded at her, and they both began firing.

USS Cuffe **Jeffries Tube**

"Tellarites and Jeffries tubes don't mix," Chief Balk grouched, banging his shaggy head on another bulkhead. Technician Dokkal was too busy to laugh at the hefty transporter chief's plight. He was busy using the nurse's laser scalpel to reconfigure several isolinear chips to briefly restore shipboard communications. The scalpel was an ungainly tool, and the Ithenite made a mental note to return to this section and replace the damaged chips as soon as the *Cuffe* was back under their control.

His chrono chirped. "Right on time," he said through clenched teeth. "Restoring power now."

USS Cuffe **Arboretum**

Commander Bheto cleared her throat, before she spoke. She wanted to sound as authoritative as possible. "I am Commander Dhalamanisha zh'Shakobheto of Andor, informing all Dominion forces currently on the *Starship Cuffe*: If you do not withdraw from this ship in the next five minutes I'm going to send you all to hell."

USS Cuffe **Ready Room**

The voice sounded like an angel. The alleged Chameloid dropped Terrence immediately. He fell to the ground like a sack of smashed potatoes. The Changeling took back on the guise of a Founder and she rushed out of the room.

"First mistake," Terrence said, through cracked teeth and a blood filled mouth. He tried to stand up, but his legs betrayed him. Marshalling his strength and fighting against the dark tide sweeping over him, the captain crawled to his desk. He used it to push himself up, and over to the small inset desktop. He activated it, and the screen popped up in the middle of his desk. Fumbling, his fingers suddenly too fat to hit the right keys, the captain

struggled to input the code that would release the ship back into his control.

Falling back against the seat as a ripple of darkness washed over him, the captain redoubled his efforts. Propping himself up on one elbow on the desk, he carefully put in the code restoring power. Once it had acknowledged him, Glover put in the self-destruct command, and then locked the computer again.

"And now....for my next trick," he said, but fell into oblivion before he perform it.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

"If you don't restore full power to me immediately, I will begin ordering the execution of the hostages," the Founder sternly replied. The anger, raw hatred, disappointment, and shame were palpable among the Jem'Hadar on the bridge. They had failed their god.

"You do that and we'll breach the warp core right now," Bheto retorted, her voice just as steely. "I'm giving you at least a chance to return to your vessel."

"And what's to stop us from simply retaking this ship or vaporizing you once I have returned to my ship?"

Bheto's retort was cut off by a metallic feminine voice: "Fifteen minutes before Auto Self-Destruct."

The Founder scoured the bridge crew. "How was she able to do that?"

The Jem'Hadar looked perplexed. "There was a brief activation of the ship's computer...from the Ready Room." She whipped her head back towards the closed doors.

"Glover," she snarled, prompting a laugh from Bheto.

"Can't keep a good solid down," she gloated. "I think that gives you two ways you can die now, unless you leave this vessel."

"Not if I don't squeeze the life out of your captain for the information we need," she threatened.

"You can try," a male voice said hotly. "But the captain's as tough as they come."

"We'll see about that." The Founder said, moving towards the door. She was about to cross the threshold when one of the Jem'Hadar screamed. Another body flew across the room, pushing her out of the way before the door opened, taking the brunt of the forcefield that had been erected around the door.

She reformed back to standing, without having to physically pull herself up. She glanced at the charred back of the soldier that had sacrificed himself for her, and then put him out of her mind.

Another Jem'Hadar, this one a Third, was promptly at her side. "We had detected another activation of ship's systems, and a concentration of energy around that entrance."

"Find the source of these surges and stop them," the Founder ordered. "And don't stop tearing this ship apart until you do."

Dominion Battle Cruiser

"I beg you to accede to that deranged woman's demands," Geirrod was frantic. He was glad that for audio communication only. "We can destroy that vessel from here."

"No," the Founder said. "We will not run from solids. In the early days, before the Dominion, such was the case, but no longer."

"They were savages then and savages now," the Vorta pleaded. "They don't understand your divinity; they detest your godhood, your beauty. Don't let them deny us your light."

"These solids must learn that we are superior to them in every way, and that means escaping their pathetic traps," she sneered. "Stand by to assist us."

He bowed, "Always."

***USS Cuffe* Shuttle Bay**

Second Iket'ika switched off his communicator. He turned back to the large assembly of prisoners. "On your feet!" He shouted. His soldiers moved in, prodding and jabbing some of the more recalcitrant prisoners. The large, hirsute Alshain jumped to his feet, seemingly unaffected by the beatings Iket'ika had ordered he endure, due to his consistent defiance. The Second couldn't help but give a bloodthirsty smile. He had faced Klingons and Romulans in combat before, painting the stars with their blood. Since the Alshain Exarchate was too cowardly to fight on either side of the conflict, he hadn't faced one of their warriors yet. Though in his studies of Alpha and Beta Quadrant species he had read about how the Exarchate had once been a great empire centuries ago. Perhaps there wasn't any fight left in them, if so Lt. N'Saba seemed an exception, Iket'ika had nonetheless wanted to test himself against them. Bred in this quadrant, he longed to tell stories of defeating great foes that rivaled or surpassed those of the older Gamma Jem'Hadar. So far, there had been little glory gained by the Alpha Jem'Hadar.

He motioned for his soldiers to step back and take aim. Lt. N'Saba strained against his shackles. "So, this is how mighty Jem'Hadar warriors execute their enemies, without giving them a fighting chance? I thought you creatures were real warriors, bred for combat."

"We are," Iket'ika said, holding up a hand. "I think we have proved that so far in this war."

"If that were the case, the Dominion flag would've been planted on Earth by now," N'Saba riposted. "The last time I checked I didn't see it there." Several of the *Cuffe* crewmen snickered, stoking the Jem'Hadar's anger. The Alshain guffawed loudly. On one level the Second knew what that the prisoner was trying to goad him, he also knew what First Omara'Klen would do: he would ignore the prisoner and carry out the Founder's orders. But Omara'Klen was a Gamma Jem'Hadar, and Iket'ika was an Alpha. He knew these species better than his superior, and Iket'ika understood the importance of earning their fear and respect.

"Release the lupine," he ordered. The soldier nearest the beast, an Eighth, hesitated. Iket'ika repeated the order more forcefully. The warrior rushed to comply. "Hold your fire until this one is down." The Second gave his disruptor rifle and his *kar'takin* to another subordinate. He moved in slowly, flexing his limbs. The Alshain approached him likewise, but in a low crouch.

N'Saba grinned, revealing rows of sharp teeth. He ran a long tongue over them. "I haven't had a snack in a few hours. I hope you're not as stringy as you look."

USS Cuffe

Jeffrey Tube Junction-13

Third Rokata'Son led his troops through the tight crawlspaces spread throughout the ship. He had taken up the rear of the unit. Several other units had also entered the tubes at different entry points, looking for the saboteurs bedeviling the Founder. Each of the warriors' had activated their shrouds, making them invisible to any Starfleet crew they would encounter, which would lessen the chance of their being able to resist them before the Jem'Hadar eliminated them. Rokata'Son regretted that slightly. The *Cuffe* had been exceedingly easy to secure. He was spoiling for a fight, but he guessed he would get one once he had returned to the front. At best, he could let the mechanical drone of the voice counting down the ship's last minutes, get his heart pumping. However deadlines, even terminal ones, were no match to having a live enemy with a disruptor or blade pointed at you.

"The Sixth has detected bio-signatures in an adjoining tube," the chain of information whispered back to him. The Sixth was on point. Rokata'Son smiled. At least he would share in the glory of eviscerating these nuisances. In the intervening minutes since the auto-destruct had been initiated the saboteurs had been wreaking havoc with various ship systems. Several Jem'Hadar had died as a result of their accidents and Rokata'Son was burning with a desire to avenge his fallen brethren.

"Prepare to engage," he sent the command back up the chain.

USS Cuffe

Nacelle Control Room One

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas wiped the sweat from his brow. *So far, so good*, he thought. Not only had the plan moved smoothly to a second phase, with Dokkal not turning on and off systems at will, Chief Balk had retaken Transporter Room Three. The Tellarite, aided by a force-field created by Dokkal, was picking off as many Jem'Hadar as possible, beaming them into space. Unfortunately the Ithenite and Wyd couldn't set up fields around all of their positions because the power output needed would force him to open access to the mainframe possibly long enough for the Jem'Hadar to hack into the system. Plus, it would be like painting a big target over their positions. Currently the wily Dokkal was creating random forcefields, confounding the Jem'Hadar hunting them as best he could.

Pedro continued presiding over the destabilization of the magnetic constrictors with Lt. Rislá. Valerie and the greenhorn Chopra were in Nacelle Control Room Two, leaving Commander Bheto, Balha, and Larn in the Arboretum. He tried to hide his nervousness as he watched another disk slid out of alignment, bathing the room with deadly radiation. He put the thought of radiation sickness out of his mind, and continued with his mission. The plan was to control the rate of destabilization as best as possible. If things went well, they wanted to be able to quickly realign the magnetic constrictors and restore full power to the ship's engines.

A loud crash on the door disabused Pedro of his foolish hope. "Again," he heard a gruff voice shout. The door bulged inward, but it didn't give way. "Use your disruptors."

"Pedro to Balk," the Chief Engineer said hurriedly, as angry as he was afraid. Those frinxing Jem'Hadar always had lousy timing. "Two to beam...on my order." He quickly input a command to demagnetize three of the constrictors. When the Jem'Hadar finally entered the room they would be showered with deadly radiation. The smell of burned metal filled the air as the soldiers cut a neat hole in the middle of the door. Pedro could just see the feral eyes of a Jem'Hadar soldier. A disruptor beam shot into the room, but it went wide.

He smirked as he gave the order to depart. And he bowed to the incoming enemy as the beam took him and Rislá to safety.

USS Cuffe **Arboretum**

The Jem'Hadar unit gathered quietly around the door. First Omara'Klen motioned for the traitors Bannister and Talja to step forward. Despite their usefulness the First couldn't hide his disgust at haven broken them.

"Input the manual security override," he ordered. The human Bannister quickly moved to do so, while the Tiburonian nervously wrung her hands. As soon as the doors slid open, Omara'Klen grabbed the anxious Talja, using her as a human shield as he barreled into the room.

"Frix!" One of the Starfleet crew cursed.

"How did they find us so fast?" Cried another.

"Fire!" Shouted the Andorian, his main target.

"But-but he's holding one of ours," a rodent-type alien hesitated, the phaser wavering in his hand. Omara'Klen and his soldiers didn't hesitate. With his free hand he aimed his disruptor pistol and fired a hole cleanly through the rodent's forehead. That spurred the Starfleeters. They returned fire. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bannister peel off down the corridor. The First made a mental note to track the human down and gut him later.

"Shroud!" Omara'Klen shouted, throwing the hapless Tiburonian into the incoming volley. His body tingled as the invisibility field covered him. The rest was easy.

USS Cuffe **Shuttle Bay**

The fight was furious. Even Omara'Klen's tales of battle against the Riishtin'Pah could not compare to the ferocity of the Alshain's attack. Iket'ika reveled in it. And he inflicted as much punishment as he could. The creature had stifled a howl when he had gouged out one of its weird, blue mechanical eyes. But it hadn't slowed the monster's attack.

If anything Iket'ika was impressed by the varied assault. He recognized several Alpha Quadrant martial arts fighting styles, but the Alshain had blended them together in a chaotic, lethal mix that left the Jem'Hadar on the defensive far too much for his liking.

The Alshain swung wide, and Iket'ika went beneath him, preparing to turn around and deliver a devastating kidney punch. But the Alshain was quicker. His massive boot slashed out, cracking the Jem'Hadar's kneecap. His leg buckled and he fell to the ground. Silence enveloped everything. Before Iket'ika could get back on his feet, the Alshain had retrieved his *kar'takin*. He

held it aloft and his roar shook the room. Afterward he glared at the room full of shocked Starfleeters and Jem'Hadar alike. "Some help here would be appreciated," he said tartly. The rebuke spurred his compatriots to action. Many dove at the nearest Jem'Hadar they could find with a suicidal zeal that the Second could admire.

"Kill them all," Iket'ika snarled, favoring his injured leg, and the battle was rejoined.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

"The latest team has reported, saboteurs have been routed in the Arboretum and one of the Jeffries Tubes," a dutiful soldier reported. "Both nacelle control rooms have also been secured. The magnetic constrictors in both control rooms have been stabilized. However, Control Room One is filled with radiation. The unit dispatched there didn't survive, but they did accomplish their mission."

"Is that all of the saboteurs?" The Changeling asked, but it was a question the Jem'Hadar warrior couldn't answer. She waved away his obligation to answer seconds later.

"Founder," another Jem'Hadar, at the tactical station, interrupted her. His voice was almost breathless. "There has been a riot in the Main Shuttle Bay. The Starfleet prisoners have taken control of the bay and have begun pouring out into the ship proper. Shall I have all available units converge on them?"

The ones that haven't been vented into space yet? She thought with morbid humor. She shook her head slowly, surprised at the warrior's obvious dismay. With the death clock still ticking, she knew when it was time to retreat. "It doesn't matter. We still haven't found a way to unlock the ship's computer. Prepare to beam back aboard the battle cruiser."

USS Cuffe **Ready Room**

"Back for more punishment eh?" Glover croaked, after the slap brought him back to wakefulness. He cracked open his eyes, grimacing as the light poked his eyeballs. A large, blurry shape stood before him.

"Captain, captain," a somewhat familiar voice cracked through the haze. "It's me Pedro. In the flesh, courtesy of Chief Balk."

"Pedro?" He asked.

"Damn, I wish I had a hypo to wake you up, but we really need your help."

"What...do you need?"

"We need to shut off the auto-destruct."

"Good one."

"Huh?"

"You already posed as Jasmine, so now you're pretending to be Pedro." Glover opened his eyes fully. Terrence realized that he had been placed on the couch in the room. He sat up, ignoring the pounding in his head. He saw his friend, or the shape-shifter posing as his friend flanked by an Axanarii.

"Oh, I get it," Pedro said. "But listen Captain, I'm the real deal."

"Prove it," Terrence challenged.

"Listen Captain, we really don't have time." He heard a voice echo through an intercom:

"One minute to self-destruct."

"I'm still waiting," the captain said.

"Captain, listen, if I was a Changeling, why would Risla be here with me?"

"Not convinced," he shook his head.

"Okay, you remember that time we ran into those Nuvian masseuses on Vega Colony..."

"Here's the command code."

Dominion Battle Cruiser

As soon as the Founder materialized on the bridge she ordered the ship to raise shields and pull back to a safe distance from the explosion of the Federation starship.

She waited for the *Cuffe* to explode, but the time stretched out far longer than it should. "What is the status of the *Cuffe*?"

"The ship's impulse engines are now online. They are moving towards us," the soldier replied. "Sensors are detecting a massive power build up. They are diverting it to the ship's main deflector dish."

"Back off quickly," the Founder demanded. "They are trying to take us along with them. Raise shields and move out of the blast radius." The bridge erupted in smoke and flames. The shape-shifter fell to the desk, flattening her body to absorb the shock. She reformed quickly. She could feel the ship listing, klaxons were blaring and a fire roared across the bridge. She was highly resistant to the flames, but the Jem'Hadar weren't as durable.

"Founder," she heard Geirrod's ragged voice through the smoke.

"I am here," she called. The Vorta staggered toward her, the skin on half his face was sheared off, revealing a pulpy red mess underneath. With his one remaining clear blue eye he blinked frantically at her. He fell to his knees, hanging on to standing terminal to remain upright. "What is our status?"

"Shields down, but we have weapons and propulsion systems. We are still calculating the number of soldiers lost."

"What happened?"

"It...appears that the enemy diverted the excess plasma that had been built up from their previous sabotage and relayed it through the main deflector to use against us."

"Clever," she conceded. "Now do something about this fire!"

He nodded. "At once Founder." He tried to stand up, and then fell backward into the flames. The Changeling shook her head. Moving past him, she was stopped when his hand shot out and grabbed her forearm.

She leaned down, blinking through the blinding smoke. He gasped.

"Are you? Are you?" He said weakly. The Founder yanked her arm away. She moved to the environmental control section, stepping gingerly over Geirrod's body and avoiding the walls of flames as much as possible.

"The *Cuffe* is attempting evasive maneuvers." She heard another gruff voice reply through the blaze. "They're trying to escape."

"What?" The Founder extended her neck to the sensor terminal, to observe the data with her own eyes. "How is all this possible? The ship was about to self-destruct. We had just restored their nacelles minutes ago!"

"I...I am uncertain," the soldier answered.

"Stop them!" She shouted. "Disable those engines!" She could've let them go, but she knew she had to remain in character. The deck plates rumbled under her feet.

"No impact," the Jem'Hadar at the tactical station informed her.

"Starship has engaged warp engines."

"Warp engines?" She asked, truly exasperated and once again impressed by the *Cuffe* crew's resourcefulness and ingenuity. The shape-shifter hated having to destroy them. "Lay in a pursuit course."

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas didn't feel right in the captain's chair, but he was the senior ranking officer now. Captain Glover had slipped into a coma and he hadn't been able to raise Commander Bheto by combadge. The engineer really wished he had paid more attention in his Combat Tactics class now.

The bridge had quickly repopulated with some of the crew. Lt. N'Saba had assumed the First Officer's position. The lupine was especially grim with one eye missing and his black fur matted with blood. Lt. Desvignes, thankfully none the worse for wear had returned to the pilot's seat. N'Saba had told him that Gralf had received a vicious stab wound during their melee in the Shuttle Bay, joining the hundreds of other wounded crewmen. The ship was operating with half its crew, in one of the most deadly regions of space, being fired on by a Dominion battle cruiser. *Wouldn't have it any other way*, Rojas wryly thought. With Risla taking command of Main Engineering via the auxiliary console aft of the bridge, Pedro knew it would up to the four of them to get the *Cuffe* home safely. He just wished he felt truly up to the task.

"Aft shields restored," N'Saba replied.

"So are aft phasers," chimed Ensign Tshengo at Tactical.

"Good, keep up the fire," Pedro said. "If we keep swatting at them, maybe it'll keep them off their game and allow us to get out of these Vortices alive."

"One can only hope," N'Saba snorted. "But if that deflector shot didn't take that leviathan out I wonder what can." Pedro didn't have an answer. All he had was a prayer, and it kept it to himself.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"We can't keep this tit-for-tat up," Ensign Tshengo replied as the ship rattled again.

"Noted ensign," Pedro snapped. "But we can't engage the enemy either. They still have more firepower than we do."

"Not to mention our shields are still not full strength," N'Saba added.

"Sir, I've got a recommendation," Lt. Desvignes ventured.

"Let's hear it," the Chief Engineer winced as another salvo impacted the ship. He didn't even feel like asking for another status report. Rojas knew it would be worse than the last one.

"Sir, I think we've made a key mistake," the helmsmen said. "We're in a patch of space littered with wormholes and we're not using them."

"For good reason lieutenant," N'Saba reproached. "You do understand that the gravitational pull of many of these singularities could destroy us."

Desvignes sighed, his dark-skinned face scrunching up. "I am well aware of that sir. But what if we can somehow trap the Dominion vessel?"

"How?" Tshengo asked, without permission. The young woman immediately demurred. The helmsmen looked at her and smiled.

"Perhaps we can lure them into a wormhole. We head toward one and at the last second we skirt the event horizon, hoping that the wormhole's

gravitational pull and the other ship's own momentum will carry them into the singularity."

Rojas rubbed his chin. "Are you that good? If the captain was at the helm I would feel more confident, to be frank." Desvignes nodded.

"Well, I think the idea is too dangerous," Lt. N'Saba weighed in. "Not only is the likelihood that Mr. Desvignes won't be able to make the split second calculations necessary to avoid being captured in a black hole, but we'll also have to transfer all power to engines, leaving us vulnerable until we find an appropriate singularity."

"Well...yeah, that was the other part." The helmsmen said. Pedro stared hard at the man.

"Do you really, really think you can do this?" Rojas asked.

"Yes sir," the young lieutenant said without hesitation.

"Let's do it." Pedro decided. "We've only got our lives to lose."

Dominion Battle Cruiser

"Founder, the *Cuffe's* shields are down," First Omara'Klen reported. "Shall I prepare a boarding party?" She knew he was smarting from the drubbing the Starfleet crew put on them.

"The starship has changed direction. It is now headed toward a large singularity," another Jem'Hadar reported. On the virtual head display the Founder saw a large, starless rip in space before them, surrounded by a jagged corona of multicolored gases.

"Are they attempting to destroy themselves?" Omara'Klen asked, confused. "Are so frightened of us?" He asked, hopefulness and regret mixed in his tone.

"No, there is some other type of gambit afoot," the shape-shifter said. "Disable their engines. Do not fail me this time." Lances of directed energy struck the starship's nacelles, mangling one and cleaving half of the other. The ship spun wildly, but it was still spinning toward the vortex. "Tractor beam!"

"We are not within range," the First said.

"Get us within range," she ordered.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"That didn't go well," Pedro said, picking himself up off the deck. He made a quick check of the bridge. Lt. N'Saba had clawed himself to the First Officer's chair, and Desvignes remained at his post. Tshengo was down and Risla was slowly getting back up. "Damage report!" Pedro called out, wincing at his sore jaw.

"In short, we can't take another hit like that again," N'Saba replied dryly.

"We still got propulsion? Are we still headed toward the singularity?" The engineer asked.

"No, and yes," Desvignes replied grimly.

"We'll be caught in the black hole's event horizon in a couple of minutes."

"Risla, can power be restored to the engines before then?"

"Sir, it would take me almost a day to restore power, there's nothing we can do." Pedro always had liked how the Axanarii gave it to him straight.

"All right, I'll inform the crew," Rojas gulped, before opening a channel. He relayed the information and then sat back in the command seat, his body suddenly boneless. His life flashed through his mind as he watched the ship tumble helplessly towards the gaping black maw, thoughts of his parents and his sister Juanita, all of the fun he had had, the cosmic phenomena he had seen, and he realized that it had largely been a good life.

"Commander Rojas," a voice squawked through the comm system. He recognized it instantly as a member of his department.

"Bannister," he said, with a sliver of hope. "Report."

"Sir, I am going to initiate a cold start of the ship's engines." Pedro leaned forward.

"It's too risky," he admonished. "I would rather take my chances in the wormhole than be certainly ripped apart if something goes wrong."

"Sir, I understand that," Bannister said, his voice almost a mewl. "But I need to do this. I have...to do something."

"I don't follow you Lieutenant," Rojas said.

"I'm sorry is all," Bannister was crying. "I'm truly sorry."

"Don't do this," Pedro said. "That's an order." But the distraught young man didn't respond. "Get him back on the horn, or somebody down in Engineering damn it!"

"Sir, Bannister has already begun the cold start. Full power will be restored in thirty seconds."

"Leaving us a tidy half-minute window," N'Saba remarked. Rojas felt angry, elated, terrified, and frustrated. He was pissed that the young lieutenant had countermanded his orders, and he was certain that he had had help from the other members of the Engineering team, but he was proud too that his subordinates refused to give in, or accept the inevitable, something even he had been willing to do.

"We'll let's do what we can to help the young man," Pedro said. "Lt. Desvignes, plot a course out of here that takes us the furthest range from the Dominion warship."

"On it."

“Good,” Rojas nodded, gripping his armrests. “Now, let’s prepare for the wave.”

Dominion Battle Cruiser

The Founder gave the order. “Initiate tractor beam.” She smiled with satisfaction as the green beam latched onto the *Cuffe*. “Now, reel them in.”

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

“What else can go wrong?” Rojas threw his hands up as the tug of the tractor beam caused the ship’s struts to groan.

“Five seconds to cold start,” Risla replied.

“How did Bannister move up the time so quickly?” Pedro asked, with a frown. Risla didn’t know, but by the time the Axanarii had shrugged his shoulders an idea had taken root in the engineer’s mind. He gave a course correction to Desvignes, and then he hoped for the best.

Dominion Battle Cruiser

“Founder, the *Cuffe*’s engines have restarted!”

“Impossible,” The shape-shifter said, whipping her head forward once again to view the information with her own eyes.

“Power the weapons and take out those engines,” she snapped, coiling one arm around the neck of the Jem’Hadar at the weapons console and twisting it. The First rushed to take his place. But it was too late.

The *Cuffe* lurched forward, with the battle cruiser tagging along, connected by the energy tether of the tractor beam. The starship curved forward, dragging the Dominion vessel toward the mouth of the black hole. “Disengage the tractor beam, full reverse...full reverse!” The Changeling cried, so filled with terror that she momentarily lost her guise.

“Who are you?” The First grumbled, his hand hovering over his holster. “You’re not a Founder. You are the one who murdered our god!”

The shape-shifter resumed her disguise. “Don’t be preposterous,” she spat. “Now, do your duty and save us from the abyss.”

“We have already crossed into it,” The First declared, “when we allowed ourselves to be blinded by your deception. We dishonored the gods. We don’t belong to live.” He glanced at the crew, and to a man they each pulled a weapon and shot themselves through the head. Left alone on the bridge, the shape-shifter gave up all pretenses. She morphed back to her more humanoid appearance. She had to figure out a way to complete her mission. She began

scouring ship systems, asking for assistance, but no one responded. They couldn't have all killed themselves? Could they? She glanced at the corpse of Omara'Klen and saw a personal communicator in one outstretched hand. He couldn't have transmitted his allegations shipwide, could he?

"Nixe? What did you do to Nixe?" Archduke Davgan ran/stumbled onto the bridge about a minute later.

The Chameloid smiled, twisting her features to take on the appearance of Nixe. "I killed her months ago and replaced her. You didn't even notice," she replied, with a faint mocking tone.

"You killed my servant and you led me to ruin," the archduke's voice quivered with rage and fear. He shakily held up a disruptor. She turned away from the man.

"I'm occupied trying to save our lives right now," she said. "Make yourself useful or stay out of my way." Initially the Chameloid didn't even feel the first beam that sliced through her neck, and by the time the searing pain began to register, she had little time to feel anything else at all.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

Pedro raptly watched the aft viewer. The Dominion battle cruiser was slowly devoured by the wormhole, the gravity breaking the ship apart into small chunks before sending them down the anomaly's gullet. He didn't think he would ever forget the image of the ship as it was consumed.

After a few moments of morbid watching, he turned away from the screen. "I want a damage assessment and damage teams assembled at once."

USS Cuffe **Arboretum**

Lt. Seb N'Saba's snout twitched at the aroma of carnage. The corpses of Commander Bheto, Balha, and Larn were spread across the blood room, their limbs and even some of their organs ripped from their bodies. At least they were able to take down a few Jem'Hadar, the feral side of the Science Officer reasoned. They drew blood, he realized, but what true little consolation would that matter to Lt. Meldin, the captain, or anyone else. He shook his shaggy head. Another recovery team had already found the bodies of Lt. Cha, Lt. Chopra, Nurse Wyd, and Tech Dokkal. Commander Rojas had informed him that it had been that small team that had saved the ship. "Bag these bodies and transfer them to the morgue," he ordered. He had more bodies to identify.

USS Cuffe
Main Engineering

Lt. Commander Rojas donned a bulky environmental suit, spiting Dr. Nemato's warnings. "It could be a corrosive mix of toxins in Main Engineering."

"I'm well aware of that," Pedro had restrained himself from snapping at the well-meaning medic. It hadn't taken him long to figure out that Bannister had removed safety restrictions on the intermix chamber to spark a faster mingling of matter/anti-matter. By doing that he had flooded Main Engineering with lethal radiation.

When Rojas trudged down the hall, Risle at his side, both men saw almost a dozen engineers standing outside the closed doors, many with dazed or distressed looks on their faces. A few were openly crying. Pedro went up to a Coridanite assistant engineer. "Did everyone make it out?" The woman shook her head.

"Neal didn't," a sobbing man spoke up. "He stayed behind. He told us all to leave. He-he said he would take care of things...and he did. He saved us all." Pedro nodded his head in sympathy. Lt. Neal Bannister was a recent addition to the ship, a transfer from the *Vincennes*, a ship destroyed in the Kabrel campaigns. The man had only been aboard for a few weeks and hadn't seemed to make many friends. Pedro had decided to give the man time enough to adjust to a new crew after his loss. But now he would never get to know Bannister, however, he vowed that no one aboard would forget him. The man was a true hero. Pedro stepped away from the group. "I need everyone to clear the corridor." He waited while his team ambled away, some having to grab an elbow or what passed for one for some of the crew and lead them away. Once the hall was empty, he released the manual override and stewed into the radioactive fog.

USS Cuffe
Main Bridge
Three Days Later....

Pedro pulled up short when he stepped onto the bridge. "Captain, what are you doing here?"

"It's my ship," he shrugged before turning around. "Glad to see you too," he laughed, before wincing. He ran a hand from the back of his neck to his forehead. "Damn headaches."

"Captain did Nemato authorize your release?" Rojas's happiness at seeing his old friend again was tempered by his concern for the man's well being. Dr. Nemato had had to perform surgery to decrease the swelling on the

captain's brain only two days ago.

"I was able to convince the good ol' doctor that sitting in the center chair was the best therapy there was for me, and since we're overflowing with casualties right now, he wasn't in the mood to argue the point."

"I see," Rojas said, skirting around the center seat to sit in the adjoining First Officer's seat. That felt even worse than when he had first sat in the command chair. He still couldn't shake himself of expecting to see Amanisha on the bridge each time he entered it. He wasn't sure he ever would.

"What's the latest damage report?" The captain asked. He nodded throughout as Pedro gave him a summary. Among the list of bad news the cloaking device had been irreparably damaged as well as the fake transponder generator, leaving them pretty open to whatever might be waiting for them inside or outside the Vortices. After the report Glover turned away from the engineer and stared blankly at the screen. Rojas's concern deepened, but he held back from intruding on the captain's thoughts or inquiring about his health. He took a wait and see approach.

The engineer watched as Glover went deep within himself, issuing commands, signing off on orders, but not fully in the moment. Pedro couldn't help but replay their last argument about this mission through his head. He knew this mission hadn't been worth it from the start, and now the captain did too.

After a few hours Gralf intoned, "Sir, sensors are picking up a Federation starship." That news pulled everyone out of the doldrums.

"On screen," Terrence commanded. The main viewer shifted to a small, silver-white starship.

"Registry posits it as the *Telamon*," the Xindi-Arboreal added. "*Nova*-class."

"What is a *Nova* doing out here?" Pedro asked.

"Hail them."

"They're already hailing us," Gralf replied.

"Put them on screen." Admiral Canfield's grim visage filled the screen.

"The mission?" He asked.

"I need to speak to you in my ready room in person, now," Glover said, already half out of his seat. The admiral looked perturbed, but he replied:

"I'll beam over immediately."

Ignoring him, Terrence turned back to Pedro. "Coordinate with whoever runs that boat and get as much help as they can spare. I'm going to be busy for a little while."

USS Cuffe

Captain's Ready Room

"I advise you to watch your tone captain," Canfield replied testily.

"Or you'll do what?" Glover challenged, half rising from behind his desk. "Because I can promise you what ever punishment you devise will pale to the hell you just put my ship through."

"This is a war captain, and sometimes in war, there's sacrifice," the admiral retorted.

"Don't feed me that bullshit," Terrence riposted. "There was something else going on here. When I was being interrogated by the Founder, she told me she was a deep cover SI agent. She even gave me an identity code."

"Founders are expert infiltrators. That data was no doubt fake or taken off of an agent she replaced," Canfield offered. Glover nodded his head.

"I thought that too, until I did some digging, and you know what? I believe her now...even though that doesn't do much good for her."

"I wouldn't be spreading any wild conspiracy theories if I were you captain. I think that would slow the steady progress of your career thus far," the admiral warned.

"I did some digging on you too," the captain dropped his major card. The admiral immediately tensed. "You've got ties to SI."

"I'm an admiral," he shrugged. "Name me one who doesn't...your father included."

"I've linked your name to authorization orders to some very shady dealings, operations that skirt the law," Glover pressed, "black operations."

"And how did you get that information?" The admiral asked. Terrence shook his head. "I could order you to tell me?"

"You could," the captain let the statement hang. "But I'm not here to skewer you. I just want answers; I need to understand why my XO and so many others gave their lives, while interrupting an SI mission already running?"

"Listen son, I didn't know about that mission," Canfield admitted. "Why do you think I'm here? When I found out, I tried to contact you but you were under radio silence. I had hoped to catch up to the *Cuffe* and ward you off from the Vortices to allow SI to complete their mission. Then we encountered a damaged Phalkerian vessel. I recognized the phaser markings. I knew it was your work."

"What happened to the Phalkerian ship?" The captain asked, but he already knew the answer.

"Maintaining the secrecy of this mission was of utmost importance," was all the admiral said. "But I wouldn't have had to do that if you had followed orders."

"I'm not an assassin," Terrence had to force himself not to shout. "Save the wet work for someone else, because I'll never undertake a mission like this again."

Canfield sat back in his chair. He exhaled. "I'm glad to hear you say that son. There might be hope for you after all."

USS Cuffe

Executive Officer's Cabin

"May I come in," Glover asked. Meldin looked up from the large box he was packing.

"Of course captain," the Benzite said.

"Need a hand?"

"Actually, several of the crew have been exceedingly helpful in gathering up the Commander's personal affects. Commander Rojas just left a few minutes ago."

"I know, I saw him at the lift," the captain said before he began packing. The two men worked silently, gathering up many of the items that Commander Bheto had collected over the course of her life and career in Starfleet. Going through her things Terrence learned even more about the woman, so much so that he realized that he barely knew her at all.

"Wow, I didn't know Amanisha had a pair of these," he held up two shiny, wicked curved blades. "I wish she had whipped these babies out when we were doing our sparring sessions. I know Nandali would've, when she had been here."

"Yes, the Commander was quite fond of the more coarse aspects of Andorian culture, including the *Ushaan* combat ritual."

"May I ask you a question Mr. Meldin?" Glover ventured gently.

"Of course captain," the man replied, more stiffly than usual.

"Why are you referring to Amanisha as 'Commander'? I know she meant more to you than that."

Meldin was silent for a long while before he answered. "Yes...she was." He didn't say anything else. The captain helped him finish packing, stripping the room of all of the personal touches and personality of its former occupant, turning it into a stark, empty place. Glover imagined that was pretty much how Meldin must feel right now.

"Captain," the Benzite said softly. "I...remember your reaction to my response when I learned of Lt. Dryer's...Nyota's death. I had recoiled inside at your rage, the bottomless fury. Now...I understand it. I-I've never felt something so...consuming before."

Glover nodded. "I'm sorry," he shook his head. "If I had known things would turn out so badly...."

"You still would've ordered us on this mission," Meldin said. "You had a duty to perform, as we all did. It's not you that I am angry with. It's not even the Jem'Hadar who butchered Amanisha. It's everything. It's this sick universe

that constantly locks species in war, after countless war; that seems to delight in mass suffering. On Benezar, everything is ordered, structured. I wish the universe was more like home."

The captain squeezed the man on the shoulder. "So do I."

Starbase 116

Sector 443

Admiral Canfield thought he would never touch foot on the space station again. He was certain that Section 31 would've rigged a transporter malfunction, if not destroy the *Telamon* entirely for his defiance. Despite his fear he knew he had done the right thing, or attempted to do the right thing. However, it didn't really feel like it. The *Cuffe* was nearly destroyed and Starfleet Intelligence's agent was killed.

He was brusque with his staff, largely ignoring them. The admiral hadn't expected to survive and had sent out a packet detailing his involvement with Section 31 to be disseminated upon his death. He was terrified that the packet might be opened regardless, and Byram knew if the Directorate became aware of his security breach he was certainly dead.

He rushed straight to his quarters. "Lights," he called out once the door closed behind him. They didn't come on. "Lights," the admiral repeated.

"I prefer it dark," said a disembodied voice. He recognized it immediately. It was his handler. The admiral planted his feet, and smoothed the front of his uniform.

"You know, despite your interference, the mission proceed almost flawlessly," she replied. "The Phalckerian Domain publicly rejected the Dominion's overture." She was sitting on the couch in his living room. "I had almost convinced the Directorate to forgo a punishment." She flicked her hand, and an object flew at him. On instinct the admiral reached out and caught it. He blanched when he realized what it was: It was the packet he had sent out. "You know Byram, I really liked you."

"Listen," he said, hating himself for pleading for his life. But his fear energized his tongue. "Nothing has been revealed. All the loose ends have been tied. I just want out."

"You know....that I can arrange." Strong arms grabbed him from behind. He struggled briefly before he felt the cold sting of a hypo on his neck. The hands turned gentle as they laid him on the carpeted floor of his cabin. His heart froze instantly and he didn't feel a thing.

Antares Ship Yards

Federation-Bajoran Sector

Glover angled the shuttle *Traveller* around his starship. The *Cuffe* was encased in giant docking clamps that sat atop the damaged ship like a huge spider. It would take at least a month for the *Cuffe* to be space worthy, but the captain was mollified that Commander Ra-Mitri, who had designed the *Cuffe* at Utopia Planitia, had been brought in to oversee the refitting. Terrence knew that Pedro was not quite as pleased, but he did his best to hide it.

"You've got to see this dabo girl, she's magnificent," Pedro had already availed himself of the ship yards diversions.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay without me for a month? You sure you can handle Ra-Mitri? I heard he can be a handful."

"Listen Terrence, go to Earth, and spend time with Jazz. She needs you."

"I need her," the captain corrected. He hadn't seen his wife in months, and he missed her terribly. He felt sort of bad about being given a month off, until he remembered all the lives lost and irreparably harmed on their mission. He also thought of the taint he felt covering him because he had allowed the *Cuffe* to be used like a death squad. If anyone could help him wash the stain on his soul away it would be Jasmine.

"Yeah, that's true," Pedro nodded. "And while you're there, give Juanita a peck on the cheek for me too."

"She's almost done with her studies now isn't she?" Glover asked.

"Yeah, more meat for the grinder," Pedro said darkly.

"Don't look at it that way Pedro," Terrence urged, but he couldn't blame his friend. The war had already taken an arm from his wife, a former lover, and far too many friends and colleagues. "I'll make certain that Juanita is placed on a good command."

"And how can you do that?" The engineer skeptically asked.

"I'll work my magic and get her assigned to the *Cuffe*."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, I'll bet she'll just love being under the watchful eyes of her big brother," Terrence chuckled. Pedro joined in.

"Well, before you go, let me buy you a round. Vexie wants to meet you anyway."

"Vexie?"

"The dabo girl," Pedro explained.

"She knows I'm married right?"

"If she didn't, and you conveniently forgot, I would make sure to remind you," the engineer quipped.

The captain clapped his burly friend on the shoulder. "Of that I have no doubt."

THE END