

Dark Territory

Dust to Dust

By DarkKush

USS Cuffe
Ready Room
(Docked at Lya Station Alpha)
2374

As soon as the door opened Captain Terrence Glover's heart stopped. He couldn't speak; he merely motioned for his visitor to come forward.

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas lumbered into the room, the natural spring in his step gone. He held a padd in his hand. Glover knew the new casualty list was on that padd. Usually his Security Chief, Meldin brought him the list each morning. If Pedro had convinced the anal Benzite to deliver the report instead of him, the captain knew the news wasn't good.

Please don't be Jasmine, or my father, he thought. Or Ben. His wife was still on Earth, the last he heard, recuperating from the injuries she incurred during the Federation's defeat in the Tyra System several months ago. Admiral Samson Glover was Starfleet Security liaison on Romulus. He hadn't heard from his friend Benjamin Sisko since the man had been forced to surrender Deep Space Nine to a Dominion invasion force.

Pedro stood before him, a blank expression on his face. The stocky man was so deflated; Glover began to wonder if it was one of his relatives that were on the list. Normally impatient, the captain decided to let his friend find his voice.

Eventually Pedro said, "It's Nyota."

"Admiral Uhura?" Glover asked. Though he revered the legendary admiral, and her loss would be missed, he was ashamed to say her passing didn't seem to rate Pedro's bereft response.

"No, not the admiral," Pedro's voice had just a hint of annoyance, which he quickly clamped down on. "It's Lt. Dryer." Glover sat back in his seat, stunned into silence, unable to comprehend, really not wanting to understand what his chief engineer had just told him. *Nyota? Gone?*

"Nyota," he whispered, holding out hope that the woman might be injured instead of killed in action. "What happened to her?" Pedro slowly shook his head.

"Where? When?" Glover failed to keep his voice from cracking. He hated his weakness.

"Caernarvon IV." The engineer replied, his voice as limp as his expression.

"Any details?" The captain pressed, trying to keep his demeanor as professional as possible.

"No sir," Pedro replied, far more formal with Terrence than he had been in months, if not years. "But I'll check into it."

"Don't trouble yourself," Glover held up a protesting hand. "I'll find out." Pedro nodded.

"Terrence," the engineer said softly.

"Don't," the captain warned, his expression hardening.

"But..." Pedro couldn't let it go.

"I said don't," Glover snapped. The chief engineer took a step back.

"Okay," he said. "When, or if you need someone to talk to...."

"Dismissed," Glover cut the man off. Without another word, Pedro turned curtly on his heel and left the room. As soon as he was gone, Terrence slumped in his seat. The tears came shortly thereafter.

USS Cuffe

Ready Room

Six Hours Later....

"She died a hero," Glover told Lt. Meldin, Dryer's former superior. Though she had never cared for the man while she served aboard the *Cuffe*, and the Benzite seemed to share the same distaste for her, he was nothing if not mournful to hear of her passing.

He bowed his slick, bald head, and his catfish-like whiskers twitched. "Lt. Dryer was a fine officer. She gave her life in the finest tradition of the service. Wherever she might be now, she must be proud of that, and so should we."

Terrence merely stared at the man. "Proud? Proud of what? Dying?" The Benzite paused.

"Well...yes," he said after a moment, a perplexed look on his face.

"There's nothing to be proud about. She died because of the incompetence of others," Glover spat. Though he had wanted to voice his observations to Captain Shelby after she told him about the rescue mission on Caernarvon IV, he couldn't bring himself to do it. The mission had ended several days ago, but Shelby's eyes had still been red rimmed from fresh tears. He didn't blame Shelby or any of the other captains for Nyota's death. He blamed the admirals and policy makers who sent such a small force to Caernarvon IV in the first place. When they had big guns like the *Enterprise* flying around on goodwill tours while the rest of the Fleet was made to bore

the brunt of fighting the Dominion. It was shameful, scandalous. And he wanted to do something about it, but he didn't know what. And that was killing him.

Terrence wanted, needed, to do something for Dryer. He had treated Nyota so poorly during her time aboard the *Cuffe*, when they had been involved in a tryst. She had wanted more from him, but he couldn't give it to her. His heart had belonged to Jasmine Mendes, at the time chief operations officer on Deep Space Five.

He hadn't spoken to Nyota since he married Jasmine over a year ago. Though he knew it had to break her heart, she had sent the couple a wedding gift. Glover hadn't even thanked her for that. He had thought he was doing the right thing by cutting off all ties, by ignoring Dryer and all of his former lovers. Now he realized how selfish and stupid he had been, and there was nothing really to do about it.

"Sir, I respectfully disagree," Meldin cleared his throat. "Lt. Dryer...Nyota...died saving others, and I think that's the highest honor, the best ending any of us can achieve. There are casualties in war sir."

"Don't you think I know that?" Glover snapped. "I don't need to be lectured by you about war. I was fighting the Cardies while you were still weaning in your incubation geostructure."

Meldin blushed a pale aqua. "Sir...I didn't mean to imply..."

"Right now, I don't care what you meant to do," Glover roared, ashamed, but happy at the same time, to have a target he could aim at. Perhaps if Meldin hadn't been such a prick, Dryer might not have felt compelled to leave the *Cuffe* in the first place. "Get back on the bridge and do your job!"

"Yes sir!" The Benzite shot out of his seat, promptly saluting the captain before he rushed to the door. He almost knocked Counselor Ellan down. The Deltan moved quickly to the side to allow the Security Chief to pass.

Glover took one look at the counselor, freezing the man before he crossed the threshold. "Don't," he said with a quiet, murderous animosity. The Deltan didn't respond. He merely backed away from the door.

USS Cuffe

After Burner Lounge

"He's been like this for days," Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas spoke more to his stein of *Meridor* than to the officers assembled around the table. "It's even worse with us being so idle."

"A bit of action might actually do the captain good," Ellan said sadly. "Even though that sounds a bit morbid."

"These are morbid times," Commander Dhalamanisha zh'Shakobheto replied, the twin antennae on her forehead drooping down. Pedro squeezed the Andorian woman's shoulder.

"The captain is very resilient Amanisha, he'll bounce back," Pedro promised.

"I've served with him long enough to know he will," the commander said. She had served with Glover for four years, first as his Operations Officer and then as his First Officer, after Nandali Kojo was fast tracked to command of the *Starship Valour*. The war had already taken an inordinate amount of talented officers, making room for a new breed. Bheto had never been interested seriously in command before, but even if she had been, the Andorian wouldn't have anticipated moving up the ladder as fast as she had. Of course, not only the war, but Captain Glover's powerful force of personality steered her course as well. She didn't want to let him or the ship down, and if he felt she was the best person for the job how could she really turn him down?

She sighed. "But my concern is that the captain is going to internalize his anger and do something rash," she winced. "I shouldn't have said that," the Andorian added, looking around, hoping no one else heard her. The world around them still bustled with the oddly normal din of eating, talking, and laughter. It hadn't come to a screeching halt, so she assumed no one had been eavesdropping.

"No need to apologize," Pedro offered, his voice and countenance gentle. "I've known him for almost twenty-years and I'm worried about the same thing."

"You know, both of you would've made excellent counselors," Ellan replied with a lopsided grin. "Your psychoanalysis sounds very apt."

"Sorry Ellan, but I kinda like my day job," Pedro grinned.

"Me too," Commander Bheto added. "Though some days...."

After Burner Lounge

"If you tip over anymore you're going to fall out of your seat," Lt. Gralf, the *Cuffe's* latest Ops Officer replied with his usual haughtiness. Transporter Chief Balk looked at him and snorted. In addition to being the best Transporter Chief in the Fleet, Balk was also one of the best sources for gossip.

The Tellarite contorted his bulky frame to be in better earshot of the conversation occurring in the corner. It wasn't unusual to see the First Officer, Chief Engineer, or Counselor together in the After Burner, but rarely were

their faces so intent or they were so quiet. Something was going on and he wanted the scoop.

"You're putting me to shame here," Lucas Grant, the only human at the table joked. He ran a hand through his ginger brown hair. Science Officer Seb N'Saba noticed that the human had a tendency to do that often, as well as check his reflection occasionally in the large port window closest to their table. "I'm the Fed News Service correspondent, and you're scooping me."

"Perhaps you should work harder," Gralf bluntly stated. Grant smiled.

"I think I'm doing all right, the captain hasn't reamed me lately," the reporter said.

"Which means that you're not doing your job," Lt. N'Saba jumped in the conversation, though he was more concerned about the bloody piece of meat on his plate than a fierce debate. He mainly did it to trump Gralf. The Xindi-Arboreal Ops Officer glowered at him. N'Saba's snout twitched with pleasure. "I thought the Federation News Service thrived on scandal and yellow journalism."

"That's not why I chose to be embedded here," Grant replied smoothly. "Captain Glover and, this whole crew really, are rising stars."

"And you want to get in on the action," Gralf cut in. "Hitching your yoke to our wagon as you humans say?"

"Well to be honest, yes," Grant grinned. "But there hasn't been much news lately to report anyway. The *Cuffe* hasn't seen action in almost a month. This war is fizzling quickly."

"Caernarvon IV wasn't a walk in the nature preserve," Lt. N'Saba said. "The Dominion is being very selective in their targets."

"Then perhaps we should take the fight to them," Grant replied with a sigh, "Instead of being so damned reactive."

"After the Tyra System, Deep Space Nine, and some of the other battles, I don't think we're capable of mounting a wide ranging offensive right now," Gralf said. "We've been defeated at almost every turn. Torros III was the last significant victory for us. And that was almost half a year ago." The *Cuffe* had taken part in the Starfleet-Klingon taskforce that destroyed a vital Dominion shipyard. The action had thankfully sabotaged the Dominion's war machine.

"And that was at the beginning of the war," N'Saba added. "Every other 'victory' has been nothing but a holding action." Both Grant and Gralf nodded in solemn agreement. Balk turned back to the table. The Tellarite scowled.

"Not good news?" The reporter asked. Balk shook his shaggy head. He was unusually silent. "Cat got your tongue Mr. Balk?" Grant pressed.

"My shift is about to begin," Balk pushed back from the table, his silence disturbing. Seconds later Captain Glover's voice boomed over the intercom, "Senior officers to observation lounge."

USS Cuffe

Observation Lounge

Captain Glover sighed after he finished his spiel. He leaned back in his seat and forced himself to remain quiet while his senior staff pondered what he had told them.

"This is an insane plan," Lt. N'Saba replied. "Are we truly that desperate?"

"I am forced to agree with Mr. N'Saba," Gralf said. "This is certainly a nadir in the war, but the Dominion hasn't made any inroads into the Federation's core systems yet."

"Yet," Lt. Commander Rojas said, typically rising to Terrence's defense. "It's only a matter of time. Especially if we sit back and allow them to run roughshod."

"The loss of DS9 was a major blow," Dr. Nemato clicked out an answer. The Antosian medic's eye stalks turned in opposite directions to look at both Gralf and N'Saba. "In addition to all of the other battles Starfleet has lost or incurred severe casualties. If this action can prevent more loss of life then we have to pursue it."

"No matter how risky it is," Commander Bheto replied. Glover still found himself surprised by the steel he now heard more frequently in the woman's voice. When she had been his Ops Officer, Amanisha had been a quiet presence. He had reservations about promoting her to Executive Officer, but her predecessor, Nandali Kojo had promised she had the inner strength that Glover demanded of his first officers. So far she had exceeded his expectations. "Sir I think this plan is unsound. And that is why Admiral Ross offered it to you as a volunteer assignment."

"You're correct," Glover answered, "and that is why I have placed it before you to decide. I want my staff's backing on this one." Glover generally valued his staff but he always trusted his opinions, his gut, more. But this time he wasn't sure why he was considering this mission for its merits, or lack thereof, or because of its suicidal nature. He felt he owed Nyota something, blood or sacrifice of some sort. The captain felt he had to prove something to her, though he was quite sure what that was. And he was afraid that his survivor's guilt was coloring his decision making. His officers wouldn't be so impaired and he resolved himself to abide by their decision.

"Listen people," Pedro turned up his salesman's pitch, "Almost the whole Cardassian Central Command will be at the resort. As the captain said, even Dukat might be leaving DS9 to attend. Tret Akleen's birthday is a national holiday in the Cardassian Union. He is considered the founder of the

Union after all. I'm sure the holiday will take on even more relevance now that the Cardies are in the driver's seat in this war."

"I wouldn't quite put it in those terms," Captain Glover replied. "But Pedro is correct. This opportunity is too good to pass up."

"I don't consider finding a way, or fighting a way through to a heavily-fortified Cardassian resort planet as much of an opportunity," N'Saba snorted.

"But we don't have to do that," Glover said. "We just have to be on the border at the appointed time to retrieve the assassins. Cardassian dissidents are going to actually take care of Dukat and the rest of his staff."

"I've already mapped out the route we would take to reach the border," Lt. Meldin chimed in. "Based on the intelligence we have, we're likely to encounter only light resistance."

"So basically we swoop in, make the pick up and be on our way," the captain reiterated.

"And Starfleet Command actually believes that Cardassian dissidents are capable of pulling off such a feat," Gralf's incredulousness was thick.

"There has been a dissident movement on Prime for a long time," Commander Bheto said, her pendulum swinging. What impressed Glover most about the Andorian was her ability to look at both sides of every issue. "It's not much of a stretch to assume that some of those elements are embedded in the military and even the Obsidian Order."

"And if Dukat and his generals are eliminated, it will severely damage the Dominion's ability to make war. They might even sue for peace," Pedro concluded.

"More than likely they'll just find replacements, more Cardassian lackeys," N'Saba said. "Or grow them in their vats like they do the Jem'Hadar."

"You're too damn cynical sometimes Mr. N'Saba," the engineer huffed. "Do you know that?"

"Of course I do," N'Saba flashed his sharp incisors.

"That's enough gentlemen," the captain intoned. "Now, time to vote."

Dulcett Residence Cardassia Prime

Prefect Ceteena Dulcett put on her best smile. "My child," she said to her eldest daughter, now a mature woman in with an errant streak or two of gray in her hair. "What I do is best for Cardassia."

"No," Ghirta Dulcett protested. "It's best for you."

"It's best for our business interests," the woman admitted with a frown. "For your father's legacy."

"Father wouldn't want you doing this," Ghirta snapped. "Selling your soul to Gul Dukat."

"Legate Dukat is the leader of the Cardassian Union now." The elder Dulcett stated, her voice devoid of inflection. "And it's best you don't use that tone again when you speak of him. His Cardassian Intelligence Bureau is just as ruthless, and far more ubiquitous than the Obsidian Order ever was."

"I'm not afraid of them," Ghirta's eyes flashed with defiance. Ceteena laughed. She touched her daughter's softly scaled cheek.

"You are so much like your father it is scary," Ceteena said. Ghirta grabbed her mother's hand and pressed it close against her cheek.

"Mother, as head of the Detepa Council the people need your leadership, they need you to stand up to Dukat."

"And do what exactly?" Ceteena chided. "Even if we were able to remove him, the Dominion has entrenched itself on our planet. They would find a replacement or rule us outright, shattering the myth of Cardassian self-determination that Dukat has been weaving."

"So, you do understand," Ghirta said.

"Of course I do child," Ceteena replied. "Forgot how I got on the Council a few years ago, when the protest toppled the Central Command? If it hadn't been for those damned Klingons, we never would've been so humiliated that we would join the Dominion."

"You're right," Ghirta said. "But why do you still maintain the farce. There are many dissidents abroad."

"I'm aware of that," Ceteena said. "But I would never leave you or our company to be gobbled up by one of Dukat's cronies. My place is here."

"Well, I would prefer that you stayed on Prime instead of attending that gathering on Hamada."

"And why is that?" Ghirta looked away before she answered, her voice becoming almost a murmur.

"I...I don't want Dukat to use it as propaganda, to lie and tell all the Union and the outside galaxy that he has the full support of the civilian body of government, which represent the people."

"Nice lie, but I've known you even before you were born," Ceteena stared hard at her daughter. "I don't know the extent of your involvement with the dissidents Ghirta, but I'm warning you as a government official, and begging you as a mother, to let matters take course of their own. Working within this system we can make it fair and beneficial to all Cardassians."

"I wish I could make you that promise," Ghirta's voice broke with sobs. "But I can't."

USS Cuffe

Captain's Quarters

"You look terrible," Admiral Samson Glover said, concern lines etched across his weathered face.

"Thanks Dad," Glover teased. "You don't look so hot yourself."

"It's nothing I can't handle," Samson said. "The Romulans are still sitting on the sidelines, though there has been some debate in the Senate about rejecting the nonaggression pact the Praetor signed with the Dominion. I don't think that's going to happen though."

"We don't need the Romulans," Glover lied. He wasn't sure if the Romulans had found a way to hack into their secure line, and assumed they had. The captain wasn't going to give any eavesdroppers information about how badly Starfleet was faring. There was a very real fear among the Federation Council and Starfleet Command that the Romulans might ally with the Dominion if they felt the Federation was on the ropes. "We can handle the Dominion." Samson nodded, but didn't respond.

"So, Dad, what do you think of the plan?" Glover had given Samson a heavily edited version of the mission his divided senior staff had barely approved.

"Okay," Samson sighed. "If you want my honest opinion, I think this mission is foolhardy. The Fleet needs you on the frontline, not doing performing some harebrained suicide mission."

"This mission is similar to the one you ordered me on several years ago if I recall," Terrence replied, referencing the mission Samson had sent the *Cuffe* on across the Romulan Neutral Zone to rescue dissidents.

"No it's not," Samson said, his bearing stoic. "I sent you on a mission to save lives, to rescue people. Lt. Dryer is gone. There's nothing you can do for her now. What you're doing is trying to please, appease, or mollify your conscience. This isn't about you, it's bigger than you."

"I know it's not about me," Glover hotly protested. "And this is about saving lives."

"Son, we don't even know if these so-called friends are trustworthy. How do we know this isn't some type of trap or ambush?"

"Dad, I can handle myself," the captain said.

"You didn't answer my question," the older man sharply noted.

"I don't really have an answer," Terrence said, his indignation fading. "Admiral Ross seems to value our friends' veracity."

"The same Admiral Ross that ordered *Sutherland* to Caernarvon IV," Samson shot back. Terrence recoiled. "Sorry son," the admiral said seconds later. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You're right dad," the captain admitted. "But I don't know what else to do. And I don't want any of the other hundred of thousands of Nyotas out there to die so young, their promise, their potential extinguished...just like that."

"I understand your pain son," Samson said, his voice thickening. "But don't throw your life away over it. You don't owe Lt. Dryer's memory anything except your best effort and judgment. And getting your crew killed isn't that. I know that she loved you in her own way and she wouldn't want you to throw your life away."

"Sir, this mission is going to happen," the captain said tightly. "I've already informed Admiral Ross of the crew's vote." The admiral sighed again.

"Terrence, all that I ask is that you do this for life, for yours, your crews and Jasmine's, and not for death, or to bring death even on the Dominion."

The captain opened his mouth, preparing to reassure his father. But he couldn't form the words. He couldn't make the promise. Instead he said, "I'll talk to you when I return." Then he shut off the communication before the admiral responded.

Triumph Hall Hamada Akleen Sector

Legate Pinute Tarkon shifted his bulk uncomfortably as he sat down beside his svelte comrade on the steps leading to the conference room. The sounds of music and laughter pounded through the walls behind him. "Gul Keshet, why have you left the festivities?" He punctuated the question with a loud belch, wrinkling his nose at the smell of *kanar* and overcooked *taspar*.

"Though it might be impolitic to say so, I actually believed in my vows of marriage when I took them," the smaller, scarred face gul replied. "I have no desire to cheat on my wife. I would much rather be back at the front. We have the Federation reeling. Why are we not pushing our advantage while we still possess it?" Aldur Keshet's hooded, piercing eyes sliced through the older man.

"Dukat has spared no expense, importing some of the finest U'tani serpent women for our amusement," Tarkon protested. "I think perhaps we should enjoy these perks. We have deserved them. We're the new masters of the quadrant now, and we should act like it." Keshet chuckled. He squeezed one of Tarkon's thick shoulders.

"Spoken like a true patriot," he said.

"If so, then why does it sound to me like you really mean 'spoken like an old fool'?" He croaked a laugh. "I understand your frustration Keshet. What

I wouldn't love more than to plant our flag on Earth this instant, but these things take time. We have been a defeated, humiliated people for a long time now. First we were stymied by ragtag Bajoran terrorists, then thwarted by the Federation, and most insulting we were invaded by the Klingons," Tarkon paused to spit in disgust. "For too long our people haven't tasted victory. They don't know what it means to be conquerors, to feel comfortable crushing the universe beneath their heels. They have forgotten that. Dukat, in his own way, is trying to restore that feeling of inevitability. Why strike fast? The Federation and Klingons are crumbling, the Romulans won't lift a finger to help them, and neither will the Tholians or Gorn. Not to mention the even more xenophobic powers like the Sheliak and Breen. Believe it or not, this is a sound tactic from our dear Legate." When he was finished the man exhaled a labored breath. "I didn't come out here to bore you with speeches though."

"I value your wisdom," Keshet replied.

"If you truly do, then you will come back to the party," Tarkon said. "Now is not the time to stand out. Dukat has eyes everywhere." Keshet nodded in comprehension.

"For his purported hatred of the Obsidian Order, the new Intelligence Bureau sure operates like them," the young gul scoffed.

"It's not Dukat's goons that truly concern me," Tarkon whispered, moving in close. The young gul nodded more aggressively in affirmation. He realized that the legate shared his distaste for the Dominion. Many in the officers' corps were blinded by the glittering victories, but how would they feel about the Dominion once the victories stopped? Or when, or if, the tide of the war turned against them? Would they then see how the Dominion had insinuated itself into Cardassian affairs, far more assiduously than the Federation ever could?

"I understand your concerns," Keshet admitted. "I share them as well."

"I thought so," Tarkon said, wheezing as he stood up. "Come with me. We have much more to discuss." He beckoned the younger officer back toward the ruckus. Keshet grudgingly followed.

USS Cuffe

En route to Rendezvous Point

The *Starship Cuffe* cut across the Lamenda System, for now a neutral barrier between the Xepolites and Cardassians. Captain Glover was surprised that the Dominion hadn't annexed the Xepolites and other minor entities in the border system. Or at the least created a heavily fortified buffer.

Slicing through the sector at maximum warp, the *Nebula*-class vessel was primed for battle. Terrence couldn't remember the last time the ship had been on a scientific and exploration mission. The war had consumed even his

memories. It seemed like he had merely been born to fight, and he wasn't sure if that was as terrible an existence as it sounded. He wanted to make the Dominion pay for what it had done to Jasmine, Nyota, and so many of his friends and comrades, not to mention millions of innocents. And the blood he had already spilled hadn't sated him. If Terrence were a better man he would lament the last gasps of his humanity, but he was too busy thinking of ways of killing and survival to bemoan such small things.

"Sir, long range sensors have just detected a Cardassian warship, *Hideki*-class, possibly on a scouting run," Lt. Gralf said from the Ops terminal.

Glover leaned forward in his seat. "Have they spotted us?"

"I don't think so sir," the Xindi-Arboreal replied. "They haven't taken evasive maneuvers. A *Hideki* is no match for our ship, and they know that. So they wouldn't waste time trying to engage us."

"Yes, they would call in for reinforcements," Commander Bheto added.

"We're not going to give them a chance," Glover declared. "Red alert! Battle stations!"

CCV Resolute

En Route to Hamada

"I know I should keep the secret," Gul Javin En'Roel said, his voice conspiratorial. "But you know me," he laughed. "Legate Dukat himself will award you with the Legate's Crest for your valor in the Tyra System." Gul Vom Hussar did his best to feign surprise. He stiffened in his seat, his face taking on the familiar, almost blasé grimace the unadorned man had become well known for among the Orders.

"That....is...an honor indeed," he said slowly. He had already been informed of the honor days ago. In fact that was why he had been chosen for his special mission. A recipient of the Legate's Crest would be nearly beyond suspicion.

"It is quite more than that," En'Roel crowed. "It means more land, more prestige for your family, a jumpstart to legateship for you," he said. Hussar detected a hint of jealousy in the man's last statement. En'Roel was an aggressive, ambitious officer. Though his relatively smooth, handsome features didn't bear the scars of combat like the visible reminders of Hussar's bravery. He bet that the man would give anything to lose an arm and eye as Hussar had done. A very strange man, almost Klingon in his desire to show physical badges of honor or courage, Hussar thought with distaste.

There was nothing honorable about war. He fought to survive. First against the Klingons and then the Federation. The idea that he had become the poster child of this new war was laughable. He had stood with the Detepa

Council against the Central Command during their brief reign before the Klingon invasion. He was surprised that Dukat hadn't had him executed instead of promoted once he took over the Union. And then his actions in the Tyra System made him a 'hero'. A wounded half-man was more like it in his eyes. Hussar was certain that this award was nothing more than a skillful move on Dukat's part to bring disgruntled supporters of the Detepa Council more in line with his new regime. Hussar was considered a citizen-soldier by many. His acceptance of Dukat's honor would signify that the dictator had the support of the Council. Many had acquiesced and relented, but he could not.

He had perhaps been fortunate to begin his tour of duty in the waning years of the Bajoran occupation. He saw the destitution, the pillage, the rape of that world and its inhabitants that had never been shown on the newsnets on Prime.

The actions he and his brethren conducted seared him. Hussar came to believe that the Union had strayed far from the principles Tret Akleen had espoused. He prayed that his sacrifice would lead to the return of the old ways, the better times.

"Have you nothing to say?" En'Roel asked. "Gettle got your tongue?" Hussar smiled slowly.

"Javin, you know me," he replied. "I prefer to do my talking face to face. And I wish to reserve the depth of my gratitude until I stand before Legate Dukat."

USS Cuffe **Lamenda System**

Photon torpedoes punched through the hull of the *Hideki*-class warship, severing their weapons and propulsion systems. "Weapons banks and warp engine are offline," Lt. Meldin said from the Tactical station. "Shields are at 35%." The small, stingray shaped ship was on the main screen. It had numerous perforations, but its crackling shields were keeping the ship's atmosphere and crew from being sucked into space.

"Ready a quantum torpedo," Glover ordered.

"Don't you think that's overkill sir?" His First Officer asked, her antennae coiling in disapproval.

"I don't feel like spending time battering through this ship's shields," Glover said. "It would be a waste of precious minutes."

"Sir we are well ahead of schedule," Bheto gently replied. "And they have yet to override our jamming of their communications systems. They can't send a message. They are helpless."

"Fine," the captain sniffed, rarely reconsidering a decision. "Target the *Hideki* with a continuous phaser barrage. Do not let up until that ship is nothing more than space dust."

"Aye sir," Meldin said. The *Cuffe's* phaser banks formed a triangular beam of destruction that slowly overwhelmed the Cardassian ship's shields and penetrated the hull. It took far longer than Glover had wanted, but the ship eventually exploded. He heard Bheto exhale and whisper a silent prayer.

"Let's go," he ordered, the *Hideki* already forgotten.

USS Cuffe

After Burner Lounge

Rendezvous Point

Twenty-Fours Later....

Lucas Grant made his way casually from table to table, but gleaned little information from each visit. What was overwhelming was the anxiety permeating the lounge, and the whole ship.

Eventually Grant gave up and sat by a table near one of the windows. He stared out at the cosmic stew the ship swam in. The *Cuffe* had parked itself inside of a nebula, one called Ohombri-Vox by the Cardassians. The spatial phenomena helped shield the starship from any Dominion patrols. It was the perfect perch. A shadow fell over the reporter, and he heard a grunt. He turned around to see Captain Terrence Glover occupying the seat across from him.

"Fish aren't biting today?" The captain asked.

"Interesting way of phrasing it Captain," Grant replied. "But I guess you are correct. Then again, so few of the crew knows what this mission is truly about."

"And that would be?" Glover asked coyly.

"Trying to see if I am in possession of classified information?" Grant grinned. "I don't think I'll bite. Of course, you and everyone else will see my report of this adventure as soon as we return to Federation space."

"I don't think so," Glover leaned forward, his eyes hardening. "You will not mention this mission at all, to anyone."

"Sir, I don't think you have the authority to make that demand," Grant leaned forward, his face only inches from the captain's. Glover's broad nostrils flared in anger.

"Under the Federation Security Act I do," Glover said. Grant felt his face flushing red with frustration.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before you invoked that. You've been dying to do so."

"On that we are in agreement," the captain replied. "To be honest, I think it was a dumb idea for the Federation Council to bend to the FNS and embed reporters on starships to begin with. It can have a negative influence on morale, not to mention supplying our enemy with valuable intelligence."

"I'm a patriot the same as you are," Grant huffed. "The FNS is just as valued a protector of our freedom as Starfleet."

The captain laughed. "Please," he sneered. "Don't overrate yourself. You've never had to choose between life and death; you've never put your life on the line."

"Don't be so quick to judge," Grant said. "I have covered war zones before. Without the military training or backup of a starship. Check my record if you don't believe me."

"I already have," Glover replied. "And it's not the same."

"Dying is dying sir," Grant said tightly. "Whether one wears a uniform or not. I have every right to be here and Federation citizens have every right to know about the conduct of this war. After Admiral Leyton's attempted coup there has been a general uneasiness about the motives of Starfleet. Some citizens feel that both the conflict with the Klingons and now the Dominion could've been avoided if not for warmongering Starfleet officers."

"That's bullshit," the captain spat. "We can't allow unwarranted aggression, whether it is from the Klingons or the Dominion."

"Can I quote you on that?" Grant asked, with a sly grin.

"No," Glover retorted. "This conversation also falls under the Federation Security Act. And if you don't like that file a complaint with the Federation Civil Liberties Union."

"Perhaps I will," Grant said.

"I'm certain you will, especially to free up the records for this mission you're just itching to report," the captain replied. "But by the time you cut through the red tape I'll be retired."

"Or dead," Grant added. Glover stared at him, his jaw clenching. He nodded curtly and then left the table.

Triumph Hall

Four Days Later....

"Madame Prefect, Madame Prefect!" Legate Mintof Urlak called with unusual volume. Ceteena Dulcett turned around. The older man caught up to her, elegantly wrapping his hand in hers. "It has been a long time," he smiled, sending a chill down her spine.

Despite his innocuous appearance, Ceteena knew the smallish, gray eyed man was one of the more ruthless operatives of the now defunct Obsidian Order. His surviving Dukat's purge of that outfit, and his appearance here was a testament to his cunning and dangerousness.

But Ceteena was long acquainted with Urlak's brutality. Her late husband had once been interrogated by Urlak, decades ago. All that remained of her husband was the scars and the nightmares. He had never been the same. It had forced her to take more control of their pharmaceutical business and she had slowly turned it into a fiefdom, and a competitor with Urlak's own extensive business empire. "I wouldn't want to arouse the chatelaine's suspicions," she said with feigned coyness, a reference to Urlak's long suffering wife. He chuckled, the sound obscenely avuncular.

"Think nothing of it, she is on the other side of the Union," he said. "I merely beg your acquaintance because I believe it to be the choicest spot when Legate Dukat arrives."

"What do you mean by that?" Ceteena chided herself for the nervousness in her voice. With Urlak every phrase had a double or triple meaning.

"Only that you represent the Detepa Council, the people, and I wouldn't want to be on the opposing side of the people." The legate remarked.

"You need not worry, the work you do with the Dominion is evidence enough of where your loyalties lie," Ceteena said, adding quickly, "With Cardassia of course."

"Of course," Urlak said, he gestured for her to take a seat on the front row beside a fat, medal-bedecked legate. She stiffly sat down, and Urlak more smoothly followed. Ceteena looked, across the aisle, Gul Hussar rigidly sat with several other guls, males and females that in many ways represented the best and worst of Cardassia. She was so glad that Ghirta had left the military after her compulsory service, though she was now afraid that her daughter's idealism had led her down an even more foolish path.

The heavy doors before them opened, and Legate Dukat strode into the room: Tall, lean and as arrogant as ever. Flanking him was a Vorta female and a gul she recognized as Brocha, another one of the young *gettles*. She was surprised that Dukat hadn't brought along his protégé Damar or the sniveling Vorta Weyoun. Of course she gathered that those two had remained with the Founder on Terok Nor, keeping order there. Several Jem'Hadar brutes took position by the door. Legate Dukat stepped onto the dais and moved to the podium. He bade the congregation of officers and officials rise. Everyone complied.

She sighed, resigning herself to hours of more bloated speechifying. Soon Ceteena's knees began to ache as Dukat recounted his retaking of Terok Nor and then described all of the battles since, conveniently skipping the loss

of a key shipyard at Torros III or the evacuation at Caernarvon IV, the only black marks in an otherwise nearly flawless war.

Eventually he made it to the recognition of Tret Akleen, giving a biography of the Union's founder. He spoke of courage and sacrifice. Brocha gave Dukat the case he had been holding. The legate opened it and showed the crowd the Legate's Crest. There was a loud exhalation and murmurs of admiration. Dukat, typically not wishing to cede the spotlight to anyone else for long, quickly called Hussar forth to claim his prize. The dignified gul made his way slowly down the row, ignoring the back claps and shouts of congratulations from his peers.

He stepped up on the dais, and bowed his head, allowing Dukat to place the medal around his neck. Once finished, Dukat's smile turned to a pained grimace. The man fell away from the podium, clutching his stomach. The air filled with the smell of burned ozone and cooked meat. Everyone on the podium and in the audience was momentarily stunned.

Hussar held up his remaining arm. A small, hold out blaster was in his hand. "What I did, I did for Cardassia! Throw off the yoke! Do not be deceived by these shapeshifters and their minions! They will be the death of us all!" He said, turning around to face the Jem'Hadar he must have known were rushing to meet him.

They speared him with the bayonets on their weapons. He sagged on the rifles before the brutes slung him off. The Vorta and Brocha had rushed to the side of the fallen Dukat. Some of the Cardassians in the audience had attempted to do the same, but froze when the Jem'Hadar aimed their weapons at them.

"Shall we fire on the lot of them?" One of the Jem'Hadar asked the Vorta. Still kneeling at his side, she commanded:

"Wait!"

"There is nothing to wait for," Dukat croaked as he sat up. The mortal wound across his stomach was already filling in. His face melted, turning a golden amber as his body reformed on the stage. Seconds later, one of the damnable Founders stood before them.

"It appears our ruse was only partially successful," the changeling said. "We had hoped to draw out all of the traitors among you. Now that might require some extensive interrogation techniques."

"I think one is right here," Urlak pushed Ceteena forward. "She was part of the usurper government that removed the Central Command from power and led to our times of troubles before our alliance with the Dominion."

Ceteena looked at the legate, a stunned look on her face. "How dare you! I would never betray the Union!"

"Seize her," the Founder ordered. Two Jem'Hadar jumped from the dais, and approached her.

"No!" An officer she had never seen before stepped from the crowd. His cuirass armor was unlatched, showing a bomb attached underneath. He held an oblong detonator in his hand. "Free Cardassia!" He shouted, pressing the button just as Jem'Hadar and Cardassian soldiers took aim.

Ceteena saw a brilliant white light and then nothing else.

USS Cuffe

Rendezvous Point

Six Days Later....

"Captain we are receiving a coded hail," Lt. Meldin said from the Tactical Console. "The signal sequence matches the one Admiral Ross provided."

"About damn time," Glover grouched, twisting sideways in his seat. "Send the response."

"Sir, another message incoming," the Benzite Security Officer blurted, oblivious to the captain's order, "Our allies need assistance. They are being pursued and taking heavy fire."

"I should've known it wouldn't be easy," the captain mumbled. More loudly he said, "Main Bridge to Engineering."

"This is Engineering, Captain," Lt. Commander Rojas cheerily replied. "How may we be of assistance?" Glover playfully rolled his eyes.

"Stick to decaf Pedro," the captain replied with mock acerbity. "I need you to power up the warp core. We're going on a trip and we're going to be coming in hot."

"Aye sir," Rojas said. Glover didn't have to wait for further confirmation. He had known Pedro long enough, both men starting out their Starfleet careers aboard the *Kitty Hawk*, to know that Pedro was as good as his word, especially when he was lying about something. Fortunately Rojas never pulled a fast one when it came to engineering.

Glover felt the familiar thrumming of the ship's main engines running through the deck plates.

"Sir, how do we know this isn't a trap?" Commander Bheto sounded a note of caution.

Terrence looked the Andorian woman in the eye. "We don't. But we're going in anyway."

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

"If we get through this, I promise to never take my First Officer's word for granted," Terrence Glover said, his fingers digging into the armrests of his chair as the *Cuffe* narrowly dodged a hail of disruptor fire. The nifty move by the helm officer didn't dissuade the small Dominion taskforce that had ambushed them. The Jem'Hadar bug ships swarmed over the *Cuffe's* bow, scoring the hull with their weapons.

"I'll keep that in mind sir," Commander Bheto said, her voice as shaky as the ship's deck. Structural integrity, along with shields, and several other critical systems were hanging by on a string. The Jem'Hadar ships employed some type of *polaron* beam that cut through the *Cuffe's* shields. Multiple hull breaches had already been reported across the ship, and the bridge was filled with smoke from sparking consoles.

"Photon torpedoes, full spread," Glover barked, his eyes tearing from the acrid smoke. "Let's get these gnats off our hide."

"Aye sir," Lt. Meldin said tightly, not even looking up from his terminal. Several beams erupted from the *Cuffe* in swift succession, batting back the smaller ships. Unfortunately, only two were destroyed immediately. Three ships were damaged, but still intact, and three others had escaped the salvos.

"Damn," Glover cursed softly, pounding a fist into his armrest. The Dominion had outfoxed him. Coming out of the nebula, sensors had quickly picked up the ship in distress, taking a pounding from a Cardassian *Galor* class battle cruiser.

The *Cuffe* had quickly engaged the ship, and the *Galor* had retreated. At that point Glover and the entire crew had been feeling pretty good about themselves. Doubt started to set in when no one on the rescued ship answered the *Cuffe's* hails. And that trepidation increased when Lt. Meldin detected a radiation leakage throughout the ship that was impairing beam outs. But their self-satisfaction had completely evaporated as soon as the Jem'Hadar ships screamed out of the same nebula that the *Cuffe* had used to hide in. The bastards had used Glover's own tactic against him. And the Cardassian warship had been a mere distraction. Now it sat back like a patient carnivore, ready to pounce as soon as the Jem'Hadar had sufficiently weakened the *Cuffe*.

But the captain wasn't going to allow that to happen. "Get us out of here," he yelled. "Maximum warp, back into the nebula!"

"Yes sir," Helm Officer Henri Desvignes replied. The ship lurched as the young man began wildly plotting navigation courses to evade the Jem'Hadar onslaught as best he could. On the main screen the remaining six ships formed a line across space in front of them. "They're not going to give us a straight sir. We're going to have to plow through them."

"Do it," Glover said. "Aim a quantum torpedo at the center ship, increase the explosive radius."

"But sir that will lessen the torpedoes impact," Lt. Meldin protested.

"Don't worry, we'll have plenty of chances to kill the Jem'Hadar," Glover grated, trying his best not to cough. "Right now I just want us back in Federation space in one piece."

"Yes sir," the Benzite said. Through the veil of smoke, the captain raptly watched the main viewer. Either brave or stupid the Jem'Hadar didn't scatter. They fired simultaneously on the quantum torpedo.

The explosion rocked the *Cuffe*, but the ship luckily was too far away to do major damage. Only three Jem'Hadar ships remained. The three ships quickly encircled the *Cuffe*.

"Damn again," Glover groaned. "Do these guys ever quit?"

"I don't believe so sir," Lt. Meldin said.

"That was a rhetorical question," Glover snapped.

"Even I didn't fall for that one," Lt. Seb N'Saba's voice issued somewhere from the increasingly murky bridge. The environmental systems had been one of the first casualties of the ambush.

Some way to honor your memory huh Nyota? The captain asked himself, looking heavenward. *If you're really up there, out there, or somewhere, I could really use a miracle right now,* Glover thought.

"We're getting a hail," Meldin said, his voice dropping an octave. "It's the Cardassians sir."

"Put it onscreen," the captain commanded, his mind already whirring with ways to buy time. An emaciated Cardassian gul glared at him. Triumph glinted in his space black eyes.

"I am Gul Brekis, Fifth Order. Surrender your vessel immediately, or be destroyed."

"I'm Captain Terrence Glover...." The captain said, rising slowly from his seat. He wanted to appear as unruffled or desperate as he truly was. He knew that with Cardies, you had to appear tough and cool under pressure. They were almost like a pack animal, if they smelled or detected any hint of fear they attacked ferociously. The captain made sure to carry himself like he had something up his sleeve, which he unfortunately didn't.

"We will learn everything we need to learn about you as soon as you accept our terms of surrender," the gul snapped. Glover frowned, reining in his growing anger.

"What are your terms?" He said stiffly.

"You surrender or you die," Brekis smirked. "I thought I made that clear earlier."

"It's clear as crystal now," Glover said. "May I have a few minutes to inform my crew? To prepare them to be boarded?"

"No," Brekis said. "Lower what remains of your shields and prepare for immediate boarding." The signal containing the Cardassian communication

fizzled out. Seconds later it was replaced by a new, more chilling visage. A gray skinned, horned Jem'Hadar glowered at him.

"Gul Brekis does not speak for the Dominion," the Jem'Hadar soldier grated.

"So, are you going to board us instead of the Cardassians?" Glover asked.

"No, we are going to destroy you," the Jem'Hadar said, matter of fact.

"Why?" The captain asked. "We are cooperating."

"Our orders are clear," the Jem'Hadar replied. "You are to be destroyed."

"Cardassians hailing us again," Lt. Meldin whispered. Glover kept his gaze on the Jem'Hadar while he gestured for his Tactical Officer to put the message through.

The main screen split between the Jem'Hadar and Gul Brekis. The cadaverous Cardassian was clearly annoyed.

"First Komad'adar," he shifted his gaze at the Jem'Hadar. "I believe we are missing the opportunity to gather valuable intelligence from this vessel and its crew which will aid our war effort."

The Jem'Hadar's expression remained implacable. "Our orders are to destroy this vessel." He repeated, with just a thread of frustration surfacing in his gruff tone.

"The Central Command rewards initiative. The knowledge Captain Glover alone provides could save men and materiel. And think of the psychological blow to the Federation once the captured ship is shown on our newsnets." Brekis argued.

"I care nothing for political maneuvering and gamesmanship," the Jem'Hadar snarled. "The destruction of this ship will send the appropriate message. The loss of men or ships means nothing to us. More Jem'Hadar can be grown as easily as our shipyards create warships." Glover watched the back and forth as if it was a fierce tennis match. Using hand signs he gestured for Commander Bheto to take action. Off screen, the woman began tapping her armrest console.

"Cardassians aren't grown in vats," Brekis said, his voice indignant. "Preventing the loss of additional Cardassian soldiers brings us closer to ultimate victory."

"Our orders stand," Komad'adar stated bluntly. "Stand down Gul Brekis or you will also be destroyed."

"You wouldn't dare!" Brekis sneered. Komad'adar's face remained impassive.

"Jem'Hadar vessels are powering their weapons. They are taking aim at both us and the Cardassian vessel." Meldin said quietly.

"Engines ready?" Glover said out of the corner of his mouth. Commander Bheto looked up at him, curtly nodding. Stuck in the middle of the standoff between the Jem'Hadar and the Cardassian cruiser, the captain prayed for a miracle. He hoped the Cardies showed some spine and stood with him against the Jem'Hadar. Together their two vessels could dispatch the three remaining bug ships with a rough certainty.

"Cardassian vessel backing off," Meldin whispered.

"Damn," the captain muttered. "Engines, full reverse." The ship lurched backward, straight at the retreating *Galor*. The captain planted his feet firmly on the deck, though he stumbled twice before he was able to take root. Glover was proud that his crew trusted him enough to not balk at his unexpected orders. They had served with him long enough to know his penchant for risk. The Jem'Hadar ships took chase, firing wildly, hitting both the *Galor* and the *Cuffe*.

Gul Brekis returned fire on the Jem'Hadar. "Yes," Glover crowed, pumping a fist in the air. He quickly ordered Lt. Desvignes to dip below the Cardassian vessel. Glover quickly took his seat. Proximity alarms screaming, the ship dove beneath the Cardassian vessel. As the Jem'Hadar attempted to do the same, *Cuffe* unloaded its quantum torpedoes. Glover had held off on using the rest of the powerful weapons before due to the agility of the Jem'Hadar ships. But now the *Galor* provided a big enough target for the torpedoes to zero in on. "Full speed ahead," the captain commanded as he watched the missiles streak toward the hapless Cardassian cruiser. "Maximum warp!"

The resultant explosion clipped the aft portion of the starship as it jetted back into the nebula, twirling the *Cuffe* around as if it were a spinning top. Desvignes was able to right the vessel after frantic, nauseous minutes, halting a destructive spin through the gaseous expanse. "Good work Mr. Desvignes," Glover said, clutching his stomach.

"Thank you sir," the young officer beamed.

"Now, get us the hell out of here," the captain said, sending a mental missive to Nyota: *Thank you*.

Dulcett Residence Cardassia Prime Two Weeks Later...

"We failed," Legate Pinute Tarkon admitted. A large gash indented one side of his forehead. "However, our backup did allow for us to escape largely unscathed." Ghirta Dulcett's gaze was venomous.

"At the expense of my mother's life," she said softly, her voice breaking into sobs. "I pretty much signed my mother's death warrant and we accomplished nothing."

"Legate Urlak had already fingered your mother," Tarkon said. "Believe me; a painless death was far more preferable to what they had in store. If they had interrogated her she might have implicated all of us."

"She knew nothing conclusive about my part in this," Ghirta protested. The stocky Cardassian looked at her with a mocking incredulity. "She wasn't a member of our group and she only voiced suspicions about me."

"Your mother was no fool. She knew about your anti-Dominion activities. I suspect that her willingness to support Dukat stemmed in part from her trying to shield you."

"Oh my," Ghirta covered her open mouth, her mind reliving the last several months with her mother. "I didn't realize..."

"And she didn't turn you in," Tarkon smirked. "What a strange woman."

"She was a real patriot," Ghirta wasn't in a joking mood. She was still reeling from her mother's death, and the failure of Hussar to remove Dukat. Of course, it really wasn't Hussar's fault. The Changelings had infiltrated their cabal and set a trap for them. And the conspirators had blithely traipsed into it. "My mother believed in the old ways, before military rule." Tarkon frowned. Of course the man merely wanted to restore the Union, not plant seeds of democracy. In normal times Ghirta would find the man's political views repugnant. But the desperation of the times had made them unlikely allies, bound by their love of a Cardassia free from any foreign influence.

"I am disbanding the cabal," Tarkon said after a few minutes of awkward silence.

"What?" Ghirta was stunned. "We can't give up now. There will be another shot at Dukat. It's just going to take time and patience."

"I wish it were so simple," Tarkon smiled. "But we don't know who we can trust at the moment. Plus, several cabal leaders died on Hamada, and several more in the war last week. We need to replenish our numbers, and develop a new strategy."

"You can't do that if you're disbanded," Ghirta pointed out.

"You're thinking like a human, short-term," Tarkon chided. "I want the furor over Hamada to die down, for Dukat to become complacent and vulnerable again. It's only a matter of time before his arrogance leads him to make a catastrophic mistake, and then we can reemerge to take advantage of that miscue."

"Now, who's being overly optimistic?" Ghirta asked.

"In any event, you are to disassociate yourself from me and the rest of the group," Tarkon ordered.

"You don't have the authority, or the right," Ghirta declared. "I owe this to my mother..."

"You only owe your life to your mother," Tarkon interrupted. "And even though I didn't know her well enough I believe Ceteena would've wanted you to live. I promise you Legate Urlak is now carefully looking for any links between you, your mother, and what happened on Hamada. Now is the time to tread cautiously."

The legate's last warning chilled Ghirta's ardor. "But what am I to do?"

"Nothing, but continue to conduct business as usual," Tarkon said. "It is in your favor that Legate Dukat has not broadcast this incident. Hamada was a message to us, the officers and officials disgruntled about Dukat's regime. I doubt he cares for a public trial or witch hunt, but don't give Urlak any opportunity to make those things necessary. He is a very dangerous, very ambitious man."

"What will you do then?" Ghirta asked. Tarkon regarded her with a jaundiced smile.

"Win this war," he said. "Another war with the Federation was inevitable. It is better to use the Dominion to eliminate the threat Starfleet poses on our territorial claims. However, once that task is completed, the Dominion must then be ousted."

"They'll be even more entrenched by then," Ghirta grimaced.

"And we'll be even more determined to remove them," Tarkon countered. "And with the people behind us the Founder will have no choice but to return with her legions to the Gamma Quadrant. Despite the Dominion's array of weapons, they can't kill us all."

A shiver coursed down Ghirta's back at the legate's confident statement. "I pray that you are right."

"I do as well," he said, following it with, "Once again, my condolences."

Starbase 375 Lounge

Captain Terrence Glover was surprised how relieved he had been when Captain Sisko adjourned the meeting. Captain Ben Sisko, Terrence's old roommate from Starfleet Academy, had hatched a bold plan to retake Deep Space Nine from the Dominion.

Glover had immediately volunteered his ship to participate in Operation Return. But as strategy sessions drug on for days, he often found his mind wandering, and his thoughts frequently turned to Nyota Dryer and her last stand.

He was thinking about her now, in far happier times when she had been a member of his crew. Lt. Dryer had been so full of life, a woman not afraid to lead with her heart. He wished he could always have been so brave.

The captain's reverie was disturbed by someone clearing their throat. He turned around to see a prim Captain Shelby standing before him. Normally vivacious, the blonde captain's face was drawn, her smile seemingly gone forever, lost inside the tight line her lips had become. Glover had also heard stories about some of the revealing, scandalous outfits Shelby wore almost every time she stopped at a station or went planet side when she wasn't on the job. Today, she wore her black and gray uniform as if it were a burial shroud. "Terrence," she said without the usual devilish merriment. "Ben told me you would be here."

He flicked a thumb at an empty chair. Shelby sat down. "What's up?" Terrence tried to ask nonchalantly, but he realized his tone was flat as well.

"It's about Nyota," Shelby said. "She left something for you." Glover sat up in his chair, his attention piqued.

"What was it?"

"It's onboard the *Sutherland*."

"Permission to come aboard sir?" Glover asked, only half-serious.

"Of course," Shelby said dryly, Terrence's weak joke going completely unchallenged.

USS Sutherland **Captain's Ready Room**

Glover held the crystalline spider aloft, with a delicate grasp. "It's impressive," he said. "I didn't know that Nyota was into crystal sculpting."

"Neither did I," Shelby replied. "There were a lot of things I didn't know about her, and now I wish almost more than anything to have a few hours with Lt. Dryer to talk about them all."

"Me too," Glover said, his throat starting to close. He got up from his seat. "Thank you." He said, not wanting the woman to see him cry. It was bad enough she saw him this distraught.

"That's not what Nyota left you," Shelby said. "That representation of Anansi is for me," she said. "Dryer left remarks in her will that she saw some resemblance between me and this trickster-god of ancient African lore," the *Sutherland* captain smiled. "I did a little reading up on him. I'm flattered."

"You should be," Glover said. "I thought I would've fit Anansi far more than you." Shelby rolled her eyes.

"Can it Terrence," she replied. "She didn't leave you a sculpture. She left you a message. I was going to send it to you by courier, but I thought it would

be better to hand it to you in person.” Shelby slid the small, oval-shaped holocom across her desk to him. Glover slowly, reluctantly took it. He knew that when he activated the holocom Terrence would then be forced to really accept Nyota’s death. At the moment he didn’t think he could do that. He didn’t want to.

“Th-thank you,” he said. “I’ve got to go.”

“Oh, alright,” Shelby said, clearly disappointed. Terrence knew the woman was curious about Dryer’s message to him. But it really wasn’t any of her business, despite the obvious regard Nyota had held for Shelby. “Take care of yourself out there Terrence.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said, “I’ve got a guardian angel looking out for me.”

Starbase 375

Commanding Officer’s Stateroom

Lucas Grant thought something like this might occur, but he hadn’t expected they would bring out the big guns. He had sauntered into Admiral Ross’s ad hoc office, with a cocky façade for the bulky admiral.

Ross had been waiting on him, fuming as Grant expected the man would be. However, Grant had been completely surprised to see the man standing at Ross’s side. A tall, dark skinned human, known only as Morgan, looked coldly at him.

Grant quickly lost his insolent expression. He straightened his posture and deadened his demeanor. “Sir, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I’m sure you weren’t,” Morgan said, his deep voice was topped by a rich African accent. “You’ve been misbehaving.”

“It’s not what you think,” the reporter said.

“No,” Ross snapped. “It’s worse. You used my likeness to send the *Cuffe* into a trap. Several hundred dedicated officers and crew could’ve been lost or captured; a serious blow to the war effort, and you did it in my name.” The large man stood up from his seat, his height impressive and menacing. “Give me one good reason not to wipe the floor with you?”

Grant looked at Morgan. The African replied. “I’m waiting too.” He sighed.

“I couldn’t let this moment pass,” Grant answered. “The larger threat to Section 31 is not the Dominion, but officers like Glover who still cling to a saccharine view of the Federation. When the time comes these officers will not do what is required to protect our way of life. So I thought it was better to eliminate him.”

“This was a personal vendetta, plain and simple,” Morgan said. Ross looked at the African, a perplexed expression on his face, but he remained

silent. "I wish you had at least been honest about that." The dark-skinned man reached toward his belt. He took a small device that resembled a small communicator from the belt and pointed it at Grant. Before Grant could protest, he activated the device.

Grant's body was lashed with electricity, his body quaking with seizures. He fell to the floor, flopping madly, spittle flying from his mouth as his bowels unloosed. Morgan stopped the assault sometime later. Grant didn't know when because he was in a place beyond time.

The African leaned down to the quivering man, speaking softly only so that he could hear. "Put your vendetta on hold Mr. Laurent," he warned. "Your working with the Dukat regime in order to hatch your plot was treasonous. Why the Directorate has chosen to spare you I haven't a clue. But you're off the *Cuffe* effective immediately."

Lucas Grant, formerly Gennaro Laurent, nodded weakly, unable to speak. But in his mind, and deep in his viperous heart, he knew he would find another way to exact revenge against Terrence Glover. It was only a matter of time and patience.

THE END ?