

Dark Territory False Colors

By DarkKush

PROLOGUE: THE SEDUCTION OF EVE

"Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies"
- Friedrich Nietzsche

Starfleet Headquarters
Commander-in-Chief's Office
Earth 2370

Admiral James Leyton pulled the young officer close to him, holding her tightly. She shivered as she tried to control her sobs. The woman leaned into him, her tears staining his uniform, but the admiral didn't mind. "Commander Michaels was a good man," he whispered. "They were all good soldiers." He intoned solemnly, his voice cracking.

"Sir, we've got to do something about them, those butchers," the younger, porcelain-skinned woman looked up at him, anger consuming her grief. "Where is the justice for my husband or anyone else on the *Odyssey*?"

The admiral looked at the woman gently for a few minutes, unwilling to feed her the kind of officious pabulum that came far too frequently from his lips since he had left the bridge of the *Okinawa*. "Lieutenant Michaels....Renee," he said, getting angry at his awkwardness. "We don't know much about the Dominion. It...it could just be a misunderstanding," he said, though he didn't believe his own words. He had read Commander Sisko's report on the encounter with the Jem'Hadar in the Gamma Quadrant which had led to the destruction of the *Starship Odyssey* due to a Jem'Hadar kamikaze run. Thousands had died, including Captain Declan Keogh, an old friend, and Commander Jace Michaels, the ship's Executive Officer. Rarely did his old protégé show concern, but worry was limned through each paragraph of the report.

Another new, mysterious and deadly foe...just like the Borg had once been. Leyton's mind regretfully returned him the celestial graveyard of Wolf 359, the

Federation's first disastrous battle with the Borg Collective. He knew in his gut that the relentless cyborgs would make another grab for the Federation, and he could feel his guts twisting with foreboding that the Bajoran wormhole had now turned into the proverbial Gates of Hell. "We'll do all that we can to ensure that such misunderstandings don't arise in the future with them," he finished weakly. Lt. Michaels looked at him skeptically. She pulled away, her gaze hardening into an accusatory stare.

"You don't believe anything you just said," her words sliced into him. "Were you lying at the funeral service too?"

"No," Leyton said tightly, failing to keep the anger out of his voice. "I promise you that your husband, and the others, didn't die in vain."

The woman's harsh laugh scraped his insides. "That's cold comfort for me..." she paused, rubbing her flat stomach. "Or my son."

Leyton's breath hitched in his throat as he thought of all the grieving families he had seen at the funeral service for the *Odyssey* crew. He had spoken with many of them, their grief weighing him down. He had just walked the grieving grandmother of Tactical Officer Gonzalez to the transporter pad down the hall before returning to find a distraught Lt. Michaels waiting anxiously outside his office. Though it was past his normal office hours, his receptionist hadn't had it in her to schedule another appointment for the shattered young woman. Leyton was appreciative his aide's compassion. He had always picked his staff well. "I promise you," Leyton managed to say more forcefully, "I won't allow the Dominion to strike against us again." The woman's expression had hardened. She wasn't listening to him anymore, but Leyton pressed on regardless. "And if they do, they'll suffer for it."

Kedron Estate

Trill

Early 2371

"I can't believe the president blocked the defense contract for the *Inceptor* class again," Leyton seethed. "Can't you do something about it Balen?" He implored the middle-aged Trill man sitting across from him. The graying Trill's expression was impassive. He flicked an imaginary speck of dirt off his flowing white robes. "You're the damn head of the Federation Council for Pete's sake!" In response, the Trill merely glanced out at the stirring view of Bes Manev, the highest mountain on the planet. A cold wind rattled their plates and coffee cups. But Leyton's growing anger repelled the cold.

"That's technically the Deputy President," Balen Kedron replied. "A posting I might have won...if you had lobbied the rest of the Council like I had asked you to."

Leyton shrugged uncomfortably, "You know there are ethical concerns I had to take into account because of my position."

"Yet, here you are now, attempting to sway me to get the President to reverse himself," Kedron laughed, but there was no humor behind it. His nearly translucent gray eyes sized up the admiral. "It's not going to happen this year James," the man finally said.

"What about the other requests for increased spending that we submitted to the president's Budget Office?" Leyton asked pointedly.

"Some will, some won't make it," Kedron replied soberly. "We're still attempting to salvage much of the Fleet from the Borg incursion in addition to massive construction, research, and education projects spread across the Federation. Not to mention the special projects, aid to Gowron's government, aid to the Bajorans, and so forth."

Leyton snorted. "We're helping everyone else, but where were they when the Borg attacked? And where were they after the Dominion made its presence felt, at our expense?"

"Good questions," the Trill said. "But President Inyo won't be deterred from spreading alms across the galaxy, seeking good favor among the unconvinced." The councilor's tone turned derisive. "Something had to be sacrificed to allow him to fulfill his campaign promises, and the 'bloated' military budget seemed the most succulent target. We've signed an armistice with the Cardassians, the Romulans are still embarrassed over their botched attempt to annex Vulcan, the Klingons remain our allies; the Tholians, Gorn, and Tzenkethi remain on the sidelines. Even the memory of the Borg invasion is starting to fade in the public consciousness. It's quite understandable how Inyo can fool himself into thinking that we are secure."

"That's just what the Dominion wants us to think," Leyton said. Since the attack on the *Odyssey*, Leyton had immersed himself in learning everything he could about the Dominion. He had green lighted Sisko's gambit to bring the *Starship Defiant* out of mothballs to seek out the Founders and he had devoured Sisko's reports on the second encounter, his blood curdling when he learned about the shapeshifters ruling the Dominion, and how easily they had captured the *Defiant's* crew and manipulated their minds.

The Borg was a big, lumbering adversary that could be defeated with superior technology, and Leyton was confident that eventually the brains at Starfleet Tactical would discover the final chink in the Borg's armor. But the Dominion was a different beast all together. At first Leyton had thought the fanatical Jem'Hadar shock troops were the Dominion's greatest threat. After Sisko's second encounter, Leyton had come to realize that it was the Changelings, with their ability to assume anyone's identity, with their cunning and duplicitous natures that were the greatest threat the Federation had ever faced. He had made his concerns known to President Inyo, but the amiable Grazerite had chalked them up to a 'mild case of well-intentioned paranoia', an understandable, though misguided reaction to the tragedy wrought by the *Odyssey's* destruction. But it was the president who was misguided. He just didn't understand the invidious threat of shapeshifters that could be anyone or

anything and whom were committed to enslaving humanoids or 'solids' as Ben had revealed was their slur for non-morphogenic beings. The *Interceptor* class and many of Leyton's proposals had been designed to show the Dominion how lethal and prepared Starfleet was, in an attempt to be a deterrent, to make the Founders blink. But Inyo had blinked instead.

"My advice is to back off, let the issue simmer," Kedron advised. "Even that milquetoast Santiago is in favor of the *Interceptor*. Of course he knows such a project will pour money into his home system. He has Inyo's ear far more than I. I will talk to him and see what he can do."

Leyton sighed. "Thank you Councilor." He picked up his cup of coffee, and took a sip. He grimaced. The coffee had turned disgustingly lukewarm. Kedron smiled, and for the first time Leyton really felt the cold. "What is it?" He frowned.

"There is a matter where you can be a bit more direct expressing your views to the Council on a matter of gravest importance," the Trill said. Leyton sighed.

"What is it?" He repeated. Kedron fulfilled his request.

Starfleet Headquarters

Earth

Late 2371

"Having second thoughts?"

Admiral James Leyton frowned at the question and the questioner, "Aren't you? And if not, shouldn't you be?"

The other man shook his head. "I've made peace with this decision. It's the right thing to do James. The only thing, if the Federation is going to survive what's coming."

Leyton sighed, before stroking his salt and pepper beard. "I know, I know. It's just...."

"Just what?" The other man prodded.

"It's....*treason*," the admiral whispered, even though he knew it was a secure line. Now the other man sighed.

"That's one way to look at it," he conceded, "but I don't see it that way at all. The President has clearly not upheld his Oath of Office to defend the Federation. And if he won't do anything about the Dominion, then it's incumbent upon us to. I'm not worried about the judgment of history. If we don't act soon there'll be nobody around to write our history."

"You're right," Leyton nodded. "But it doesn't make me feel any better."

"Just remind yourself of all those lives we'll be saving," the other replied.

"What about the lives that we might take in this endeavor?" Leyton challenged. "Innocent lives?" The other man shook his head. He didn't have a response.

Eventually he muttered, "Necessary casualties," he offered. "If anyone does perish, their sacrifice will be for the greater good."

"That's cold comfort," Leyton remarked.

"It is what it is," the other man replied, not backing down. "The plan must go forward."

"With, or without me?" The admiral asked darkly.

The other man merely chuckled, "Of course with you, it's your plan after all."

Leyton grimaced, not liking to be reminded of how his dark imaginings had taken root and spread across the Fleet. He had been both shocked and gratified that so many others had shared his views about protecting the Federation. But he had also been dismayed that so many were as ready as he to upturn civilian rule, even temporarily.

"The only flaw with your plan is that I should be there, on Earth, or close by when it happens," the other man said.

"We've been through this before," the admiral replied, his voice gaining strength. "Martial law has to look incidental and temporary, an emergency response only. Everyone knows about you and the President's clashes. If you swoop into the *Palais de la Concorde* immediately they'll know that we have no intention of restoring Jaresh-Inyo to power. You'll come in later, after I've convinced the President to resign and make him see the reasonableness of having you as his successor."

"He'll never agree to that," the other replied. "Nor will Deputy President Phife."

Leyton smiled, but it radiated no warmth. "Jaresh-Inyo will not be an obstacle," he promised. "And Kedron will make sure that the Deputy President bows to the wisdom of your elevation to the top office." The other man leaned back, regarding the admiral with a mix of skepticism and awe. "And we won't speak of this again," Leyton said. "The plan is set. Any deviations might ruin it for us. Plus, if things go south, at least you won't be around to go down with the ship." The man tensed at the phrase, remembering something from his past.

"Bad turn of phrase," Leyton admitted.

"It's all right," the other man managed a smile. "What's past...is past."

"Yes, so we shouldn't dwell on it," Leyton remarked. "Right now the future is our main priority."

"To the future," the other said, raising an imaginary glass. Admiral Leyton followed suit.

PART ONE: THE FALL OF MAN

***USS Cuffe* Captain's Quarters Mid-2372**

"I've been dreaming about this shore leave for a long time," Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas said as he lounged on the captain's honey colored Aaamazzarite couch. "Of course I had my hopes set on Lemuria Station. Any explanations why they redirected us to Deep Space Five?"

Captain Terrence Glover looked up from the pile of requisition orders he was trying to fill out before they reached DS5. "No, but I'm not complaining." The starship had been pulled from the Portas System in the Demilitarized Zone for a more proper overhauling of its systems and to better patch up the scar running along its underside, the result of a risky game of chicken against a Breen privateer.

Pedro grinned. "I'm sure you're not, since you'll get to spend several days under the lovely Lt. Mendes." Terrence chuckled, but he didn't deny the engineer's assertion. He hadn't seen Jasmine in months and he missed her.

"What about Lt. Raeger, I remember the last time you was here you two hit it off pretty well?" Glover asked, referring to the station's communications officer. Pedro merely sucked his teeth.

"Old news. You know I'm all about new worlds, new civilizations, and all that."

"Yeah right," Terrence rolled his eyes. "I'll see how that act holds up when we beam down."

The Chief Engineer shrugged. "Probably about five seconds," he admitted.

"I'm giving it two."

Deep Space Five Main Transporter Room

Admiral Samson Glover grinned with pride. The tall, graying man grabbed his son by the shoulders and gave him a once over. "Son, it's good to see you again. You know Amaya was just asking about you?"

Terrence raised an eyebrow at the mention of his father's lovely former Executive Officer. "Really, didn't know she was interested," he joked. Samson chuckled.

"Believe me, she isn't. Never has been. Hard to fathom, but Maya was one of the few women immune to your charms," his father's eyes gleamed with merriment.

"So, where is the good captain?" Terrence looked around the empty transporter room. "I didn't see her ship docked."

"Oh, that was a couple days ago," Samson answered. "The *Agamemnon* was escorting an SCE ship here with spare parts for the subspace relay node down on Ivor Prime."

"Hate that I missed her," Terrence said. "Would love to see how she's settling into command."

"She likes it," the admiral said, a bit regretfully. "It suits her very well; Far better than being rooted on a musty old space station."

"Dad," Terrence remarked, playfully punching the admiral's arm. "You've got to get over that Empty Nest Syndrome thing of yours."

"How can I do that?" The admiral asked, his expression turning somber. "When I'm afraid that the next time I see you will be in an infirmary or worse. You've been going pretty hard after the Maquis, Sabrina Diaz in particular."

Captain Terrence Glover shrugged, trying to mollify the spike of anger prompted by the mention of his former commanding officer. Diaz had relinquished command of the *Cuffe* to him before she joined the Maquis. Coupled with the defection of his friend Calvin Hudson, the double betrayal felt like a wound that would never heal. "The Maquis want to fight, and I'm just giving them one."

The captain was disappointed that Jasmine wasn't there waiting with his father. They had been somewhat involved in a long distance, subspace relationship before the Maquis ramped up activities, and he was hoping that maybe she was as excited about his being reassigned here as she was. Then again, perhaps some engineering or mechanical problem had prevented her from being here. Jasmine was the station's Chief of Operations, and he could respect that her duty came first. It did with him. He buried his disappointment and returned his attention to his father.

"I know how vicious guerilla wars are son, that's why I wish we had never gotten involved in this one," Samson shook his head, a somber expression on his face. "We don't need to be fighting among ourselves; we've got enough enemies lying in wait as it is," the admiral concluded.

"Listen Dad, you know I agree with you but the Maquis can't be reasoned with. It's gone far beyond that stage now that they've got damn near free reign over the Demilitarized Zone, thanks to the Klingons invading Cardassian space." In another case of strange bedfellows the Federation and the Cardassian Union had been working closely together against the Maquis who were waging a campaign to overturn the armistice that had ceded several border worlds to the Union.

Conversely, several Cardassian worlds had been ceded to the Federation. Gowron's boneheaded move had shifted Cardassian resources to defend their planets and homeworld, dumping the totality of the Maquis problem on their shoulders, in addition to the concerns of the Cardassians now living on the Federation side of the line.

The admiral worked up a grin and threw an arm around his son's shoulder. "You make a salient point. But let's not talk about this right now. Really, I want to know how you've been."

"Where's Jasmine?" Glover didn't see any need for artifice. His father had been a major booster of his relationship with the engineer. "I thought she would be here?"

Samson's smile grew pained. "Sure, you aren't hungry son? I know it's been a long trip, and you can get some real food on a space station for a change, and not that replicated mess. That was one of the reasons I preferred station duty, the foods much better."

"All right Dad, why are you avoiding my question? Where's Jasmine? Has something happened to her?"

Samson's smile slowly faded away, and he shrugged his shoulders as he tried to find the right words. "She's seeing someone else, isn't she?" Terrence figured out, though he hoped it wasn't the case. Just saying the words was painful.

"Son, it's not what you think?"

"Really? What's going on?" The admiral sighed.

"Listen Terrence, I don't think it's anything serious. Once she sees you again, it'll be just like old times."

"Who?" Terrence said. "Is. It?"

The admiral reared back as if he had been struck. "Watch your tone son." But Terrence didn't back down. Fire flushed through his veins as his hurt was washed away by jealousy.

"Who Dad?"

"The station's new science officer, Lt. Bhudevi," the admiral admitted, "have been spending a lot of time together lately."

"How could you let this happen?"

Samson glowered at him. "I didn't let *anything* happen!" The older man snapped. "Jasmine is an adult, free to make her own decisions. And if you recall you wanted me to not interfere in your relationship."

"Like you could ever not do that!" Glover charged.

"Calm down son," the admiral reached out to him, but Terrence side stepped him.

"I'm going to Jasmine and find out what the hell is really going on," the captain said. He moved past his father, stomping toward the door.

"I don't think that would be wise, the admiral's warning pulled him up short. Terrence turned around.

"She's on a date with right now? Isn't she?"

"Yes," the admiral admitted after a few moments. "I thought that the date would be over by now. She had promised me that she would be here, so that she could talk to you about the new situation."

"New situation? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means we're through," Jasmine said. Both men turned around to see a heavily breathing Jasmine standing in the room's doorframe. Glover had no doubt that the person beside her was Lt. Bhudevi.

"Bhudevi's a woman?" He asked, his shock nearly closing his throat.

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post Lounge

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas had just settled on his barstool, and wrapped his hand around a stein of Ktarian beer when his compin chirped. "Damnit," he muttered before tapping the chevron-shaped communicator. "Rojas here."

"Pedro," the engineer immediately shook off his annoyance. It was Admiral Glover with an uncusomary strain in his voice. Something was wrong.

"What can I do for you sir?"

"Stop Terrence from killing my Science Officer for starters," the admiral replied.

"Where?" The admiral told him. Pedro got up and moved away from the bar. The comely Boslic bartender turned to him, a look of disappointment creasing her face as he was about to cross the threshold.

"Didn't like the drink sir?"

Pedro shook his head. "No, well actually, yes. Well...I didn't have a chance to even try it. Duty calls," he pointed at his communicator. She nodded in understanding.

"When your off duty again, please come back," she smiled. Pedro winked.

"Wild Cardassian *gettles* couldn't keep me away," he promised. Turning toward the exit he almost ran into Commander Nandali Kojo, his First Officer. The Kriosian woman looked at him as if he grown a second head. Without thinking Pedro grabbed the woman by the elbow and turned her around.

"Lt. Commander Rojas, if you don't remove your hand immediately, it will be my appetizer," she said, and Pedro knew the fierce warrior meant every word. But he maintained his grip.

"Sorry Commander, but I think I'm going to need your help on this one."

Deep Space Five

Main Transporter Room

Admiral Glover held on to his son's arm. "Terrence, this is really conduct unbecoming. Stand down!"

"So, you're a bigot on top of being self-absorbed?" Jasmine sneered. Terrence's nostrils flared with anger and embarrassment.

"No, I'm...no, of course not! It's just... Explain yourself!" He demanded.

Lt. Bhudevi stepped forward. The tall, leonine alien's slitted eyes radiated golden fire. "She doesn't have to explain herself to you...sir." She wore a skin-tight black non-Starfleet uniform, though the familiar chevron compin was attached over her left breast.

Glover tried to bite his tongue, but couldn't help it. "Shut the hell up Lieutenant, that's an order!"

"Belay that," Samson said. "Terrence, you need to cool down."

"I'm perfectly fine for a man that's just been stabbed in the back...or should I say the heart." Jasmine stepped back in front of Bhudevi.

Glaring at the station's Science Officer, he directed his words to Jasmine. "Why? Why did you do this to me? To us?"

"Terrence," anger flashed through Jasmine's caramel eyes, but it was quickly replaced by compassion. "This isn't the place."

"But it's definitely the time," he replied hotly. "Why didn't you at least give me a head's up about this?"

"I think you had more important things to be worried about," the Ops Chief said. "Like staying alive."

"You know...lately I've been fighting to get back to you," Terrence admitted, his anger morphing into a low boiling simmer.

"Oh Terrence," Jasmine bit her lip. "I...don't know what to say."

Terrence slumped his shoulders, feeling boneless as his anger spilled out of him. Samson slowly released him. "Jasmine, please can we just go somewhere and talk about this?" At that moment, Bhudevi stepped back around the wavering engineer.

"I don't think we've been properly introduced. Lt. Bhudevi sir," she gingerly stuck her hand out. "Jasmine has told me a lot about you. It's nice to finally meet you." Glover glared at the woman's outstretched hand as if it were diseased. "I believe this is the appropriate Terran gesture of greeting, isn't it?" The young scientist looked to Jasmine and then the admiral. Terrence looked to his father as well. He wasn't familiar with Bhudevi's species.

"Terrence, Lt. Bhudevi is a Barzan. She is serving here as part of the recent Officer Exchange Program Starfleet Command set up with the Barzan Planetary Republic." The admiral then turned to his two officers. "Bhudevi, you are correct that the gesture is quite appropriate," Samson wearily explained. "And under normal circumstances, when my son hadn't lost his mind, he would respectfully honor the gesture in kind."

Glover glared at the Barzan, sizing her up. She was taller than Jasmine, but willowy with deep tan skin, with her a crown of long, braided hair flowing past her shoulders. Her hairline was set back from her forehead, revealing graceful cranial ridges. Some type of breathing apparatus was attached to the lower half of her face, sweeping out from behind her head and forming two circular disks at both corners of her mouth. Terrence could just make out a fine gaseous mist when the woman spoke.

"So, you knew about Jasmine and me?"

"Well, I didn't know how involved you were," Bhudevi admitted, "But yes, I knew something had occurred between you."

"And even though you knew that, you tried to interfere in our relationship," the captain charged.

"It's not like that at all sir," Bhudevi shot back.

"Terrence, she's right," Jasmine replied. "We had an open relationship, remember?"

"Yeah," Glover admitted, "But..."

"But nothing," Jasmine said. "I don't belong to you. I'm not your property."

"Jazz, I never said you were," Terrence stepped back, stung by her words. Jasmine stepped back as well, but she continued speaking.

"Then what do you call this little tirade here? You just really made a spectacle out of something that could've been discussed rationally, but since you thought you owned me, that you had marked your territory, as soon as you saw me with another guy, you had to do the typical macho jerk routine."

"Jasmine, it's...it's..." Terrence couldn't even finish his defense. He glanced at his father. "Permission to be excused sir." Samson nodded. Slumping his shoulders, he put his head down, glancing up at Jasmine and her new friend as he walked by them.

He heard Lt. Commander Rojas huffing before the large man reached the room. Commander Kojo ran smoothly beside him, an eager expression on her face. "Captain, we came as soon as we heard there was trouble," the Kriosian said in anticipation of a row.

Glover didn't even look up. He chuckled a thumb in the direction of the transporter room. "Talk to them about it," he mumbled before he ambled away.

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post Lounge

An Hour Later...

"Forget about her," Commander Rojas said, before taking another swig of his Ktarian beer. "The universe is filled with beautiful women," he said, draping an arm around Lt. Christine Raeger, the station's communications officer. "Case in point." The blonde giggled, and snuggled closer to the burly engineer.

Captain Glover stared into the amber liquid filling his glass, oblivious to his friend's exhortations. "You know captain, the chief is right," Ensign Jean Hajar, a surprising addition to their gathering, said. "I might be young, but I know a thing or two about broken hearts." The admission brought Terrence back around. He couldn't help but smirk.

"Is that right?" He couldn't help but be curious. He had been a mentor to Hajar years ago, when she had been part of Nova Squadron, one of the Academy's premier flight teams. After he had left, the team had made some bad decisions that resulted in the death of one of their teammates and a cover up. Unfortunately Glover had left the Academy before those shameful events had occurred. He imagined that if he had been around, they wouldn't have tried to write their own page in Academy lore, like he had done when he was had been a Nova. He partly blamed himself for filling their heads with tales of his team's great exploits.

While he had been a mentor Terrence had suspected that Hajar and fellow Nova Wesley Crusher were an item, but his suspicions had never been confirmed. "Want to elaborate Jean?" The captain now pressed. Hajar pursed her lips.

"I...uh...don't think so," she said. Terrence could've punched himself for perhaps inadvertently bringing up Jean's memories of Lt. Shane Hardcastle, a promising young officer that had died almost two years ago on a mission across the Romulan Neutral Zone, a mission authorized by his father. Glover had known that Hardcastle and Lt. Nyota Dryer, a former paramour of his, had been close, but Pedro had informed him weeks after Hardcastle's death and Nyota's departure, that a romance had been stirring between Jean and Shane. Terrence couldn't be sure if he hit a nerve, but he didn't want to explore it to find out. He nonchalantly as possible Glover shrugged it off and returned to staring into his glass.

"Enough," Commander Kojo shouted, slamming her own goblet of *bloodwine* down on the table, the pungent brownish red liquid sloshing on everyone. "This is a time of celebration! Captain you have just led us through another glorious campaign in the DMZ and we should be thanking the gods for it. Not moping around."

Terrence glared at the woman. "I'm not in the mood," he said testily. Kojo glared back.

"I see," she said. "Well, I learned long ago about the danger of attachment, especially during wartime. You might be best to heed my advice," she said, though less bombastically. "I take my leave?" Glover nodded. Kojo snarled a good bye to everyone and strode from the table, clutching her drink.

With her free hand she palmed a muscular Talarian male's butt, and when the man jumped and turned around, Kojo leaned forward and whispered in his ear. The alien's surprise quickly turned into a look of anticipation. Nodding vigorously at the commander's proposition, the new couple left the bar. "She makes it look so easy," Commander Rojas said in amazement.

They passed Jasmine and Bhudevi. Pedro couldn't help but whistle, prompting an elbow from Raeger and a scowl from Terrence. Glover wanted to shrink in his seat. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"It's really not that bad sir," Jean placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "We're not going to be here that long anyways." But Terrence was no longer listening. His attention was riveted to the alluring, olive skinned Deltan female, in a tight, low cut one blood red one piece that had just entered the bar. He watched as the woman ignored the gawking from many of the bar's patrons as she made a beeline to the bar. A stocky Lurian quickly gave up his seat for her, and the pretty Boslic bartender that Pedro had been making eyes with, produced a colorful drink. The woman propped her elbows up on the bar and lowered her head toward the drink, her lips barely grazing the straw. She looked like she wanted to block out the world, and that's just how Terrence felt.

"Who is that Christina?" He asked after a few minutes of observation, the question cutting into one of Pedro's recollections.

"That's Commander Ivyse," Raeger said, her voice giving no impression about the woman. "She's our Strategic Operations Officer. Fleet Command thought it wise to station her here to help coordinate with Fleet matters, especially since we have more dealings with them because of the relay station now on Ivor Prime."

Pedro nodded. "Yeah, I won't mind taking a look at it when you get the time."

"It's nothing fancy, but sure, whenever," Raeger smiled. Glover was about to go back to ignoring them when the communications officer asked, "Captain, would you like me to invite her over? To be honest, she's been something of an introvert, which is a little strange for a Deltan, well, at least the ones I've encountered."

"Do tell," Pedro prodded, with a wink. Raeger giggled.

Trying to play it cool, Glover said as nonchalantly as possible. "Sure, building camaraderie is a good thing, especially in war time," he said, feeling something like a jerk for even expressing interest in the woman. But if Jasmine could find a new partner, so could he, Terrence told himself.

"Hey Commander Ivyse," Raeger called over the throng. The Deltan tensed, hitching up her shoulders. "Hey Commander!" The young woman called again.

"Real subtle," Glover chided gently. The Deltan looked at their table, and something electric ran through Terrence. Raeger waved the woman over, and after a hesitant pause, she glided over to the table. Standing over them, the woman crossed her arms over her chest, someone making her cleavage even more prominent. Terrence tried, and failed, not to look.

"What is it lieutenant?" She asked.

"Oh...huh....Captain Glover wanted to say hi?" Raeger squeaked. Terrence shot the woman a mean look, before turning back to the Strategic Ops Officer. The woman was now staring at him, her dark, almond shaped eyes as deep as space. Glover's throat closed, and he had to clear it several times before he spoke.

"Hello Commander," he said, standing up awkwardly. He held out a hand. The woman didn't take it. She just continued to stare at him. "Lt. Raeger was a bit indelicate, but she was correct. I did want to meet you. There have been a couple additions to my father's staff that I wanted to get acquainted with."

The woman nodded, not believing him. But she did let him off the hook. "Yes, the admiral was telling me that you were on friendly terms with many of his former staff. It's an honor to meet you sir," she finally took his hand. Whereas his skin was clammy from alcohol and nervousness, hers was cool, but smooth. She continued looking at him as she held his hand. Glover began to feel even more uncomfortable. He both wanted and didn't want Jasmine to see him with this woman.

"Please join us Commander," Pedro stepped in. "I'm Commander Pedro Rojas, *Cuffe's* Chief Engineer Extraordinaire," he said by way of introduction. Terrence was grateful. He took the opportunity to extricate his hand.

"Thank you for the offer, but perhaps some other time." She said, her eyes still on Glover. She glided back to the bar, paused by it, and then left the Hitching Post.

"Whoa, that woman knows how to make an entrance and an exit," Pedro breathed. "Oh!" He groaned seconds later. Glover caught Lt. Raeger bringing her elbow back to her side again, out of the corner of his eye.

He glanced quickly around the room, unable to stop himself to see if Jasmine saw them. He briefly locked eyes with his ex-lover, and she didn't look pleased. Glover turned away from her and smiled. *She still likes me*, he thought. *I've still got a shot at this*. But behind his satisfaction glowed the smoldering gaze of Ivyse. "Things have certainly gotten more interesting," he muttered.

Deep Space Five Command Center A Week Later....

"Things just got more interesting," Admiral Samson Glover muttered. Federation Defense Minister Conrad Haas stared down at him, and the rest of his staff, from the room's forward viewer. The older man smiled, a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Hopefully I won't be too much of a bother," he said, breaking into a smile, causing his thick white mustache to twitch. "I was out visiting our forces in the Archanis System, and as I made my way back to Earth, I've been touring our outposts. With the new subspace relay station just constructed on Ivor Prime, I couldn't pass a chance of taking a look at it."

Samson nodded in understanding. "Of course. The Corps of Engineers are to be commended. They did a great job, in record time."

"That is true, but don't be so modest. The SCE has informed the President of the assistance your able team provided in helping them accomplish their mission. To that effect, I have a special commendation I would like to bestow on your Chief of

Operations when I arrive.” The admiral couldn’t help but smile. He glanced at Jasmine. The woman tried to remain stoic at her station, but he knew she was bursting with pride.

“Thank you sir. Lt. Mendes certainly deserves it. We look forward to your arrival,” he replied, now really being able to mean it.

“And I look forward to seeing you again,” Minister Haas replied. “Until then.” Samson nodded again, counting the seconds until the screen went dark. He buried his distaste for the minister under a mound of paternalistic pride. He walked over to Jasmine’s station and patted the younger woman on the shoulder. Other members of the control room staff did so as well. “Good job,” he beamed.

“It was nothing really,” Jasmine nearly stammered. “It was a team effort.”

“Don’t be so modest,” Lt. Bhudevi stepped through the crowd. She touched Jasmine lightly on the shoulder and looked deeply into her eyes. “You deserve the praise, okay?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Jasmine looked uncomfortable.

“This time at least,” the Science Officer rolled her eyes. “But don’t let it go to your head.” Jasmine laughed and punched the other woman playfully on the arm.

“Very funny,” she said, chuckling.

“Nice couple,” Samson heard one of the bridge crew whisper to another as they passed by. Samson didn’t like the sound of that, and he didn’t like what was developing between Jasmine and Bhudevi. He cared for both women, as an officer and a father figure, but he knew in his gut that Jasmine belonged with Terrence. The look Terrence has in his eyes whenever he looked at Jasmine was the same one he held for Terrence’s mother. Though he knew he shouldn’t meddle, the admiral knew he wouldn’t be able to stop himself in an attempt to prevent both Jasmine and Terrence from making big mistakes. He would have to choose his words and his strategy carefully, but he knew he would act, and soon.

USS Cuffe

Captain’s Quarters

The door chime rang in Terrence’s head like a gong. The captain tried to sit up, but couldn’t because the room began spinning. The Saurian brandy he had imbibed was still wreaking havoc on him. He mumbled groggily, “Who is it?”

“Terrence, are you okay?” It was Pedro.

“Yeah,” he said, his mouth dry as sandpaper. “Yeah. Come in.” The doors slid open and Glover made a herculean effort to turn around in his bed. He threw his bed sheet over his lower section. The Chief Engineer sauntered in. His uniform’s tunic was extra long, ending almost at his mid-thigh.

“How the hell are you on your feet? And in officer’s dress no less?” Glover asked, wincing at the room’s bright lights. He ordered the shipboard computer to lower the illumination until it was almost pitch. “You drank more than I did.”

"True, but I was able to work it out of my system," Pedro laughed, before reaching down and patting Terrence's covered foot. "If you get my drift."

"Please spare me the details," the captain said, with just a trace of jealousy. "Christina?" He couldn't help but ask.

"Actually Christina was on duty last night," Pedro said conspiratorially. "But fortunately that cute little Boslic barkeep got off early."

"You old space dog you," Glover forced a grin through the pain. Commander Rojas took it as a compliment. "What's up with the uniform?"

"That's what I came to tell you," Pedro said. "Admiral Glover is requesting our presence. A special guest, a VIP, will be arriving at the station within the hour."

"Who?" Terrence's curiosity pushed the vestiges of drunken stupor to the far corners of his mind.

"Defense Minister Haas," Rojas said.

"Really," Glover remarked, impressed. "What is that old warhorse doing out in these parts?"

"The scuttlebutt is that he was in the Archanis Sector and decided to stop by here on his way back to Earth," the engineer informed him.

"Isn't that something," Terrence said. "Well, it's not every day that we get to meet a hero of the Federation." Glover gingerly placed both feet on the carpeted floor. He attempt to stand up, propping one hand on his nightstand while clutching the sheet to his body. When his legs started buckling, Pedro rushed to grab him by the arm and keep him upright. "Help me to the refresher. I have an antioxidant hypospray in my drug cabinet," the captain said.

After he had shakily applied the hypo to his neck, Glover felt a jolt of relief. Breathing deeply, the effects of the brandy completely gone, Terrence motioned for Pedro to leave him alone. After using the restroom, Terrence threw his sheet into a corner, donned a robe hanging by the shower, and threw it on.

"You seem pretty happy about seeing the Minister," Pedro said when Glover stepped back into his living quarters.

"And why shouldn't I be? Minister Haas has been a boon to the soldiers on the front, making sure our needs are met and are at the forefront of the Federation Council's decisions."

"Yeah," Pedro said slowly, with obvious skepticism. "Why doesn't your father share such glowing views about him?"

The question brought Glover up short. It was one of the few areas that he didn't agree with his father and Terrence rarely, if ever, liked to make such disagreements public. However, Pedro was family. "I think dad just doesn't care for Haas's politics. I know he has been a strong advocate of taking preemptive action against the Dominion."

"That really worked well for the Cardassians and Romulans," Pedro said drolly, referring to their ill fated joint assault on the Founders' home planet in the Gamma Quadrant last year.

"Dad also didn't like that Haas took his criticisms of the president's stance public. Yeah, the Omarion Nebula debacle has made the man cool his heels, and he's been lying low lately, and far as I'm concerned doing the job he had been appointed to do. So, I've got no problem with him."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to hear you say that," Rojas joked.

"Good one," Terrence said. "Let me get dressed and I'll meet you at the greeting ceremony."

Deep Space Five Command Center

Captain Glover stood with his senior staff, all of them in officer's dress, along the upper deck of the space station's nerve center. The station's command crew looked up raptly from the command well. Admiral Glover stood beside Terrence, an unusual stiffness in his bearing. Jasmine stood on his father's other side, though it felt like the woman stood a galaxy away. Terrence kept forcing himself not to steal looks at her.

"Energize," he said hoarsely. The beam whined and three figures resolved on the center's small platform. A tall, white haired human male bounded off the transporter pad, followed by a squat Saurian male and lithe Xindi-Primate female, both wearing captain's pips. The human quickly walked over toward Admiral Glover, his hand already out. He clutched the admiral's hastily proffered hand and shook it vigorously.

"I know I was supposed to come into the shuttle bay on a shuttle and do the usual song and dance but I've never been one to stand on ceremony," he grinned. "Samson, it's been a long time."

"Yes, it has Mr. Minister," the admiral replied coolly.

"Please, call me Conrad," the minister offered. "We've butted heads enough times to be on a first name basis." He then turned to Jasmine, praised her profusely and informed everyone of her commendation. After he was finished, Haas paused to chuck a thumb at the Saurian. "This is Captain My'zhark, *Starship San Martin* and Commander Dalis of the *Powhatan*." By the time Samson had greeted My'zhark, Haas had nearly finished working the line.

When he grabbed Glover's hand, the captain was amazed at how strong and assured the grip was. Haas was at least a decade younger than his father, but he looked actually a lot older. "Captain Glover, a pleasure to finally get to meet you. You know Justine has told me a lot about you, how you two were pretty fierce rivals back at the Academy. I'm glad you pushed her to her limits."

"She said that?" Glover was surprised.

"Not in so many words," Haas confessed. "But a father knows these things." The statement prompted Terrence to glance at his own father. The man's displeasure was etched on his face.

"How is Justine doing?" Terrence asked. "I haven't seen her in ages."

"She's doing quite all right for herself. Commanding the *Reprise*, but she still hasn't given me any grandkids yet. And I hope I'm not too old to be able to play with them whenever Justine decides to make a family."

"I'm sure she'll make you proud in that regard as well," Terrence offered, not really sure what to say. Haas cocked his head, looking at captain quizzically.

"I'm sure she will," he remarked before he moved on. By comparison, My'zhark's touch was dry but far warmer than his reptilian countenance. In contrast sweaty Dalis's handshake was at odds with her cool demeanor.

Once greetings were made, Haas swept down into the command well and personally greeted all of the bridge crew. After shaking the last hand, he spoke up so the whole room could hear him. "This isn't an inspection or anything like that. I'm just passing through. In a couple of days I'll be out your hair, so please just keeping doing the wonderful job you've been doing."

He rushed back up to the upper deck and wrapped an arm around the admiral's shoulder. "A word in private with you Admiral?"

"Of course," Samson gestured toward his office. He quickly made eyes with Terrence before the minister nudged him toward his own office.

Deep Space Five Commander's Office

Defense Minister Haas made himself comfortable without waiting for Samson's invitation, another strike against the man. "Listen Sam," Haas leaned forward on the couch facing the admiral's desk, his elbows on his knees. "I was less than truthful about what I told you earlier and what I told your staff."

Why I am not surprised? The admiral thought, but he said. "Please go on."

"It's true that I've been touring our battle fronts, and that I'm back on my way to Earth, but I decided to stop at Deep Space Five for a reason." Haas paused, his bushy white eyebrows knitting together as he gathered his thoughts.

"And that reason is?" The admiral chided himself for prodding his superior.

"I know you're aware of the tragedy at the Antwerp Conference," Haas said. "Well, Starfleet Intelligence has good reason to believe that Dominion infiltrators are still on Earth and plotting similar acts of terrorism." Samson leaned back in his chair, still sad about the vicious bombing, but also suspicious of Haas's claims. He suspected that men like Haas manipulated people's fears for their own gain, and he wasn't going to allow himself to be a puppet despite his concern for the Antwerp victims and their families.

"How credible is this intelligence?" Samson asked. Haas frowned.

"Does that matter? We have to take every threat or potential threat seriously; which also brings me back to why I'm here. SI also suspects that either Dominion forces might strike at our subspace relay network in an attempt to either spread

fear or advance war aims. The hub at Ivor Prime is a primary target. I've reassigned ships to monitor all of the relay network hubs throughout this sector, and both the *San Martin* and *Powhatan* will remain here until the threat has been disproven."

"So, you'll be staying as well?"

"As much as you would like that," Haas grinned. "After I'm satisfied that things are shipshape here, I'll just borrow a shuttle and cruise back to Earth; I'll be out of your hair in no time."

"Sir, don't you think that's dangerous, with potential Dominion spies lurking around."

"Sam, I spent four years in a Cardassian prison. I haven't been afraid in a long time," Haas's jocularly faded as his features drew slack and his eyes took on a faraway gaze. After a few seconds, his smile returned. "And I tell you, if I could survive the meals in that vole hole then I can handle a few shape shifters."

"Sir, I must protest," Glover replied.

"Protest all you want, but I've made up my mind," Haas said. "Now, I wasn't lying about wanting this to go smoothly, or staying out of your hair. Or what's left of it." Samson didn't join the man in laughter. "Ah come on Sam that was funny. I know we haven't seen eye to eye in the past on some things, but that doesn't mean we don't both put the Federation first. And that's all that matters in my book."

If you say so, the admiral thought. "It's all water under the bridge, far as I'm concerned."

"Glad to hear you say that," Haas replied. He stood up. "Permission to be dismissed sir?"

Samson had never been happier to say, "Permission granted."

Runabout Volta **Cargo Bay Three**

Lt. Jasmine Mendes took her time checking the runabout's systems before she disembarked. She knew who would be waiting for her. After she ran through the systems for the third time she sighed, squared her shoulders and decided to face the music.

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas was leaning against the ship's portside hull. "Man, Jasmine I didn't think you were ever going to come out of there," he replied, with his customary cheeriness. *At least he wasn't angry with me*, Jasmine thought with relief.

Mendes had just chauffeured Minister Haas and the chief engineers of the other visiting ships down to Ivor Prime to inspect the subspace relay hub there. It had been a nice trip though Pedro's shadow had loomed large over her. "If you've got something to say Pedro, just spit it out." Jasmine said without preamble.

"All right," Pedro replied, a little taken aback. "You've got every right to be involved with whomever you please, but I want you to know that I think you were wrong not to inform Terrence about this thing you have going with Lt. Bhudevi."

"Thing?" Jasmine said derisively, her cheeks warming with anger. "Bhudevi is a friend, just like Terrence is...or would be if he wasn't acting like a possessive ass."

"So, is this what it's all about, some type of game to get Terrence's goat? Well believe me you've accomplished that, and more. I've never seen the captain so out of sorts," Pedro said, his eyebrows knitting in concern. "He's hurting."

"Terrence has faced down Ferengi, Cardassians, Romulans, and on and on, and you're telling me that this is tearing him up inside?" Mendes was incredulous, but also a little bit touched.

"He didn't care about any of them, he cares about you," Pedro replied. "All I'm saying is talk to the man at least, tell him why he isn't the one, give him some closure. You owe him that much."

"Pedro...", Jasmine stopped, at a loss for words, her emotions warring inside her, "I never meant to hurt him. Please let him know that. It's just..."

The burly engineer cut her off. "I'm not a messenger. Tell him yourself." He turned around abruptly and left Jasmine to her thoughts.

Deep Space Five Operations Center

"Commander Ivyse, short range scanners are picking up an unidentified vessel, on an erratic, rapid approach vector," Lt. Bhudevi informed her. Ivyse, third in the station's chain of command, currently was on duty in the station's command well. Proximity alerts went off seconds later.

"Raise shields," the Deltan said quickly.

"Sir, we're picking up a distress signal," blurted Lt. Christina Raeger, her voice rising with her adrenaline. "It's a Cardassian vessel..."

"Put it onscreen," Commander Ivyse ordered. The station's large, central viewscreen shifted to a beige horseshoe-shaped ship. The battered vessel was listing and badly streaming plasma. "Hail them."

"I'm not getting a response," Raeger replied. "The distress call is automated and set up to repeat at prescribed intervals."

"Are you picking up any life signs Lt. Bhudevi?" Ivyse asked.

"Yes, three...Cardassian...very faint," The Barzan grimly answered. "I'm detecting a massive theta leak on the vessel. Sir, if we don't act quickly we might lose them."

"I assure you that is not going to happen on my watch," the Deltan promised. She activated her compin and alerted both Admiral Glover and Commander Rahul, the station's Executive Officer.

"How serious is it?" Glover asked, his voice filled with concern.

"I'm not sure at this point," Ivyse said. "But I think we can handle it."

"Are you sure?" Rahul asked.

"Yes," the Deltan answered truthfully.

"All right," Admiral Glover replied. "Keep us informed."

"Will do," she answered. Turning to the auxiliary engineering console, Ivyse asked, "Mr. Purcell, think you can steady that ship with a tractor beam?"

"Piece of cake," Lt. Donal Purcell, Assistant Chief of Operations, sharply replied. Ivyse smiled at the man, pleased when he turned a nice shade of red in response. He quickly looked back down at his console, his fingers flying over the instrumentation. "Tractor beam emitted and locked."

"Where is the best place to land her?" Bhudevi asked. Out of turn, but Ivyse didn't mind. Purcell shot a look at the overeager Barzan before gazing back at the Deltan.

"Best place, and the closest, is Cargo Bay Two."

The commander nodded tightly, "Do it." She pointed to Lt. Raeger. "Alert Mr. Mickelson and clear out that Cargo Bay."

"Aye sir."

Ivyse turned back toward the screen. A golden beam had caught the wayward ship like a fly in a spider's web. "Good work everyone," the Deltan said, in relief. She hadn't expected things to go so smoothly. "And we didn't even have to call on the *San Martin*, *Powhatan*, or *Cuffe* to assist us." She turned around slowly in the command well, making sure everyone saw her smile. She hadn't had an easy transition aboard the station, and hadn't gelled at all with the crew. She didn't want to lay on her praise too thickly, but Ivyse did want them to know she was pleased by their quick, professional response. She was mollified to see some of them smiling in response.

Ivyse turned back to Lt. Raeger. "Lieutenant, alert the starship captains. I think it would be a good idea to have some of their security teams supplement Mr. Mickelson." The younger woman quickly relayed the message. Less than a minute later, Bhudevi informed her of multiple teleportations into Cargo Bay Two. *Now, here comes the hard part*, Ivyse thought.

Deep Space Five

Cargo Bay Two

Station Security Chief Garry Mickelson and his security team stood anxiously by the hatch of the Cardassian vessel. The heavy radiation suit he wore feeling like a sauna. Dr. N'Vea and her medical team also stood by. The redoubtable Rigelian Vulcanoid and her fellow medics were decked in orange, bulky radiation suits. At the bay's door stood his counterparts from the *San Martin* and the *Powhatan*. They had insisted on accompanying the security detail to the cargo bay after reports came in of a Cardassian escort in need of aid. He had wanted to tell them to buzz off. Sometimes his starship-bound colleagues thought they were better than station personnel, and Garry hadn't been in the mood for off handed remarks, unwanted suggestions, or arrogant smirks at how his team did their jobs.

So far, Lt. Ayres from the *Powhatan* and the *San Martin's* Lt. Commander Moncur, a hulking Gumato, hadn't interfered. Though they both looked on with intent interest and the simian Moncur held a specialized phaser in one of his huge hands. Even though the Cardassians were tacit allies, there was still a deep reservoir of distrust concerning regarding them, and Garry shared it. Despite, Admiral Glover's friendship with Captain Sisko, he personally blamed the man for dragging the Federation into a war that it had no business being in. But he wasn't a policy maker; he was a lawyer, so he kept his opinions to himself. "Prepare to blow the hatch," he ordered.

Crewmen Selkirk skittered away from the pitted hull of the pursuit vessel after setting the charge on the small explosive. The ship had sustained a lot of damage and the last report its skipper had transmitted had stated that a theta radiation leak had occurred on the ship.

The explosive blew with a sharp crack and the hatch peeled away. "Go," Mickelson commanded, and he led the way into the ship, leaping into the opening. He quickly found a release lever for the gangplank and activated it. Dr. N'Vea thundered up the ramp.

Garry was glad he was wearing a suit when he gazed at the carnage around him. Blood streaked the walls and the floor was littered with twisted bodies, their last moments in agony frozen forever.

"Sheesh, anybody still alive on this boat?" Lt. Wong asked, wrinkling her nose as a reflex. "It looks like an abattoir in here."

"Less talk, more searching," N'Vea chided as she walked by, waving her medical tricorder like a magic wand. The heavy level of theta contamination had wreaked havoc with the station's sensors. They didn't know how many had survived, nor could they beam any survivors to the medical bay.

Garry ordered his squad to double their efforts. The one comfort was the escort was small and the search didn't take long. "Chief, we've got life signs in one of the escape pods," Dr. N'Vea's told him via his combadge.

"Don't open it, until I get there," he informed the medic.

“Sorry, but people might be dying in there,” the Tellarite responded. “My oath comes first.”

“Damnit Nevvie,” Garry snapped, but the woman had already cut communications. He glanced at his team. “To the escape pods. Double time it!”

Cardassian Pursuit Vessel Evacuation Area Aft

Dr. N’Vea cranked open the emergency release and the door leading to the escape hatch cycled open with a loud hiss. Before the Rigelian could speak, a high pitched shriek issued from the darkened pod and a body flew out at her, stabbing her several dozen times. She fell back, flailing wildly as her attacker pressed on, each stab causing an explosion of flame across her body. “Somebody help,” he muttered weakly, the taste of her own blood on her lips. She heard footfalls coming forward, the sizzle of energy beams, and loud crash and then nothing. She gazed into the eyes of the woman killing her, and saw nothing there.

“Die monster!” The Cardassian woman wailed before she smashed her blade into N’Vea’s face plate.

Deep Space Five Ward Room

“Your move admiral,” Commander Rahul, replied. The stoic Elfrosian First Officer sat back, a scowl marring his crested brow as he waited for Samson to make a move, but the admiral’s mind was elsewhere. The two men were playing chess, the original board game and not the 3-D variety, in the station’s ward room. The admiral found he sometimes did his best thinking there. Eventually though even Rahul’s patience had limits. “Is everything all right Sir?”

“Oh-oh yes, of course Rahul,” Samson tried to reassure the older man. Despite his relatively youthful appearance, the beige-toned humanoid was almost a half century older than him. The Efrosians were a long-lived species.

“I’m concerned about the Cardassian vessel too,” Rahul admitted.

“Oh, it’s not just that,” Samson replied. “I think Commander Ivyse has things under control. In fact, this might be a good thing for her, allowing her to work more with the crew, without one of us hovering around.”

“I...well, Commander Ivyse and I might be in the same...sailing vessel, you might say,” Rahul said. “Neither one of us has necessarily made much impression on the crew yet.” Samson wanted to protest the man’s observation, but he kept his lips shut because he knew it was true, and in more ways than one. The admiral had been very close to his last first officer, Amaya Donners, now captain of the *Agamemnon*. In all fairness, he hadn’t really opened up to the quieter Rahul as much as he should’ve

and his reserve had stifled their relationship in Samson's opinion. He thought about changing that now, but just couldn't find the words.

"So, if the rescue of the Cardassian ship isn't nettling you, it must be something else," Rahul asked. "Do you care to discuss it?"

"No," the elder Glover shook his head. "There's nothing."

"You are concerned about your son and Lt. Mendes," Rahul said, matter-of-fact. To Samson's stricken expression, Rahul smiled. "I am a father as well. I know these things."

"Really," Samson asked, both surprised at the Efrosian's deductive skills and a bit skeptical that he could actually help. "Care to enlighten me?"

"Leave them alone," Rahul shrugged. "They're adults. They'll figure it out."

"And that's your advice?" Samson asked, incredulous. "And how did you arrive at such a profound decision?" He scoffed.

"A lot of trial and error," Rahul said, his expression darkening. "And after a lot of misunderstandings and estrangement because of my inability to let go."

"I see," Samson regarded, quietly mulling the man's words.

"To be frank with you sir, I don't think you do," the Efrosian said, but added quickly, "However, in time I think you will."

"Good save," Samson grinned. "We'll I guess I better make a move." He picked up one of his pieces. Rahul nodded. At that inopportune moment, the admiral's combadge chirped. "What now?" He huffed, activating the communicator. It was Mickelson.

After the Security Chief finished, Samson looked at Rahul but the Efrosian was already out of his seat, a dourly knowing expression on his face. "I'm on my way," Samson remarked.

Deep Space Five Officer's Club

Terrence took the tray offered to him by the attractive Boslic bartender who had been flirting with Pedro at the Hitching Post. It appeared she did double duty at the station's more upscale and exclusive Officer's Club. "Thanks Fenella," Glover grinned. She smiled in return. Forcing himself not to dawdle and be pulled into that smile, Terrence made his way back to his counterparts.

"Thank you Captain," My'zhark said, plucking the glass filled with jade-colored Saurian brandy. He took a sip, and closed his large, bulbous eyes in pleasure. "It's almost as good as home stock."

"I'll be sure to pass that along to the barkeep," Glover glanced back at the Boslic. She winked at him, and he quickly turned away again, a familiar warmth stirring inside him. "I'm just Terrence," he said, after clearing his throat. "They are no need for ranks among us."

Captain Dalis nodded in agreement, savoring her own amber-hued beverage. "The captain....Terrence is right," she smiled. "Sometimes I just want to get away from it all. The ranks, everything, and just enjoy life a little."

"Keeping the Foreheads in line not your fancy eh?" My'zhark asked. Dalis frowned.

"No, it isn't," she said coldly. "And if it's yours, you need your head examined."

"All right," Glover called out, raising his hands, "Let's not get into this right now. Let's just enjoy a couple of drinks and talk a little shop."

"Talking about the beating war drums is talking shop," My'zhark replied. "Mark my words Terrence, those Klingons are just aching to start a war with us. I hope your crew hasn't been on shore leave so long they've forgotten to fire their phasers."

"You can rest assured that my crew can acquit themselves," Terrence tersely replied. "And what makes you so confident that the Klingons want to fight. I've served aboard one of their vessels, and I know from first-hand experience that Klingons aren't too big on holding back. If Gowron wanted a war, we would have one."

"Perhaps, but what if Gowron, isn't Gowron?" My'zhark intoned, his large eyes becoming slits. Dalis sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Here we go again," the Xindi replied.

"Listen, we don't know who is in charge on Qo'noS right now," the Saurian shot back. "For all we know a Changeling has replaced Gowron or they've secured a position on the High Council."

"Isn't that the same shaky rationale Gowron used to invade Cardassia?" Glover asked, his patience starting to fray. "So, you think we should invade the Empire now?"

"If only Command or the President had the werewithal," My'zhark sighed. Terrence was stunned. He looked in disbelief at Dalis, and the woman merely shook her head, a pitiful look on her face.

"You can't be serious?" Terrence tried to laugh but found it hard to do. "Don't you know how destructive such a war would be? Even Gowron knows that, that's why he agreed to the ceasefire after his attack on DS9 was foiled."

"Who said anything about invasion? A Special Missions team could do the job," My'zhark offered. Glover's stomach roiled.

"Now you're suggesting assassination?"

"Not necessarily," the San Martin captain replied, "Merely a mission to secure a blood sample from Gowron, the High Council members, and his chief lieutenants."

"That's pretty ambitious for covert operations. If one of those teams is captured, it would mean war, and galactic public opinion wouldn't be in our favor."

"Gowron didn't care about public opinion when he made war on Cardassia," My'zhark retorted. "Why should we? It's quite possible that Gowron isn't a Changeling and is merely doing all in his power to prevent the Founders from

gaining a foothold in the Alpha Quadrant, and we should do all in our power to achieve the same."

"At the risk of trashing our ideals and losing our souls?" Terrence asked. "I don't think so."

"You guys remind me of two punch drunk fighters slugging away at each other even though the final bell long sounded," Dalis said. Terrence smiled.

"You're a fan of Earth boxing I see," he replied. She shyly smiled.

"I was quite the pugilist in the Academy," she said.

"I would've liked to have seen that," Glover remarked, glad to be talking about something, and to someone, else.

"Perhaps I can arrange a demonstration," Dalis offered. There was something subtle behind her words but Terrence couldn't figure out what it was. He merely nodded.

"Dalis is correct," My'zhark said. "We are pounding away at each other, weakening ourselves while the real enemy lies in wait."

"The Dominion," Terrence said sourly, wishing to avoid another debate, but he knew the conversation would get cycle back to them again.

"What did Sisko tell you about his first contact with the Jem'Hadar, not the sanitized stuff from FNS or Command," My'zhark asked. "What are they really like?"

Terrence glowered. "I can assure you that Ben didn't leave anything out of his debrief."

"I didn't mean to suggest he did," the Saurian replied. "I'm really, how do you say stuffing my mouth with my foot today."

"My son...died on the *Odyssey*," Dalis said quietly, the revelation immediately dousing Terrence's annoyance. A lump developed in his throat as he reached out and squeezed the woman's shoulder. The crew of the *Odyssey* had been destroyed by a kamikaze attack during Starfleet's first encounter with the Dominion. More deaths, the most recent being the Antwerp Conference attack, had followed.

"I'm sorry that happened," Terrence said. "Ben has had the most face-to-face contact with agents of the Dominion and from what he tells me they are a very committed, borderline fanatic-at least their Jem'Hadar shock troops are-and cunning foe. They are not to be taken lightly, but Ben still holds out hope that they can reasoned with."

"Doesn't sound like his well of hope is that deep," My'zhark chortled. "He's on board with the new security requirements to detect Changeling infiltrators. Right now, there is some resistance among the Federation Council and Command that's preventing those new rules from being applied out on the frontier, but it's only a matter of time."

"Terrence do you think those steps are necessary?" Dalis asked. "And do you think we need to do more so we won't be so vulnerable against the Dominion?"

"Who says we're all that vulnerable now?" Terrence said roughly, feeling a bit like he was between the two captains' crosshairs. "We've held our own against the

Romulans, Klingons, Cardassians, and Borg. If the Dominion wants a piece of us they'll quickly realize they bit off more than they could chew," he said, but his bravado sounded forced, even to him. "Look," he said more hesitantly. "If Ben supports the new measures...then I guess they're needed. Hopefully the Changeling infestation will be contained. Leyton certainly picked the best man to do that job."

Dalis held up her glass. "Here, here." She clinked it against Terrence's before taking another drink. Glover placed his back on the table, no longer thirsty or in the mood for conversation.

"I have little reason to doubt Captain Sisko's abilities, or Admiral Leyton's judgment, but what if, despite their best efforts, they can't stop the Changelings? What if the infestation has spread beyond Earth and throughout the Federation? What if enemy agents are subverting our institutions, ideals, and even our war effort? I think we need a broader security plan in place, not just for Earth. Starting with the other core worlds-Vulcan, Tellar, Andoria, and Alpha Centauri, and spreading outward."

"That sounds all well and good, but how in the hell do you think we can enforce that?" Terrence said. "Something of that scale can't just be done by planetary security forces. And we're in the middle of fighting a war."

"Let the Klingons have Cardassia," My'zhark said. Dalis sat back in shock.

"You don't mean that," she said. The Saurian nodded, his yellow eyes growing baleful.

"I think we should build up our forces, root out any Dominion agents within our borders and let the Klingons do the same for the Cardassians."

"Captain My'zhark," Glover said testily. "You are entitled to your opinion, but it's my hope that you never share them in polite company."

"These are my opinions and I share them with whomever I like," My'zhark said. Terrence stood up.

"That might be, but I don't have to listen to this garbage," he stalked out. Dalis followed.

"Terrence! Terrence!" She called. "Wait." He stopped and turned around when he felt her near him.

"How about we go somewhere with a lot less hot air."

"I think I would like that," Dalis smiled, and Terrence gulped slightly, really recognizing the woman's fair beauty for the first time.

"All right," Glover said more confidently. "Let's go." As they stepped across the threshold, his combadge chirped. After activating it, and hearing the harried message from Lt. Meldin, Terrence turned to his colleague. "Change of plans."

Cardassian Pursuit Vessel Evacuation Area Aft

Mickelson leaped without thinking about it. He crashed into the crazed woman attacking the supine Dr. N'Vea, and they both tumbled to the ground. The bloody knife the woman had been wielding fell out of her hand and slid across the floor. The security chief did his best to hold the writhing woman down, sweating with the effort. The Cardassian was feral, alternately cursing and screeching, but he was able to finally pin the woman down.

"Please, you're not in any danger," he said. "We aren't going to harm you." But the woman continued bucking. He turned his head. "Somebody checking on the Doc?" The question prompted the two guards behind him into action. Unfortunately, two beams slammed into them, knocking them back. "Shit!" Mickelson shouted. He glanced at the woman, silently apologized, and then drove his fist into her face, knocking her unconscious. He quickly rolled off her, just missing a disruptor bolt.

He ran away from the open hatch. Tapping his compin, he said raggedly. "Moncur, Ayres, and the rest of my security detail, I need you guys in here immediately. We've got wounded and I'm taking fire!"

Cardassian Pursuit Vessel Central Corridor Aft

Both Ayres and Moncur charged down the ship's central corridor, their weapons at the ready. They heard the sizzle of directed energy weapons and saw the flash of beams ahead of them in the escape pod area.

Moncur loped along, almost on all fours. The Gumato used his incredible upper body strength to propel him forward like a hairy rocket. Lt. Pasha Ayres couldn't help but remember the gorillas that used to enthrall her whenever her family took her on trips to the National Zoo in Washington, DC. The Gumato seemed totally oblivious to the theta radiation permeating the vessel, but Pasha was already starting to feel light headed.

Of course Moncur beat her to the pod room's entrance and he rolled immediately into the fray, avoiding a quiver of energy bolts as he made his way over to the pinned down Chief Mickelson. Ayres took a more measured approach. She pulled up outside the entrance, assessed the situation, and braced herself against a wall. Peering around slowly, she saw another stream of disruptor fire coming from inside the escape pod. She quickly concluded that there were at least two hostiles inside.

Moncur and Mickelson were posted behind a disruptor scorched standing console, perhaps the control board to release the pods. Dr. N'Vea and several crewmen were strewn across the floor like refuse. Thick rivers of green blood were pouring out of the Rigelian medic. Pasha didn't need her field medical training to tell her that the doctor was in serious trouble.

The young lieutenant spoke up, forcing herself not to gag on the thickening fumes. "We're here to help you. Please lay down your weapons."

"No!" A deep voice roared. "I won't let you eat my wife!" Pasha looked toward Moncur. The Gumato was also perplexed. "I've seen what voles do, what they used to do to our crops! Now, I can imagine what a giant one would do to me and my wife, my family."

"They're not voles, they're Borg!" Screeched another voice. "Borg!" Mickelson spun his finger around his temple.

"Crazy", he mouthed, but Pasha frowned.

"It's not crazy," Moncur intoned, his voice even deeper than the frightened Cardassian inside the pod. "Exposure to theta radiation can sometimes cause hallucinogenic reactions."

"I knew that," Mickelson remarked, though Pasha was skeptical. The Gumato ignored the man's assertion.

"Perhaps we should give them something to really be frightened over," he said, his grin revealing rows of sharpened teeth.

Deep Space Five Cargo Bay Two

When Samson and Rahul arrived, they discovered that the Cardassian vessel had been surrounded by a motley security team composed of station crew, and auxiliaries from all three docked starships. As soon as the Benzite Meldin saw them, he stopped talking to the ships' captains and quickly made his way over. He briefed them.

"I say gas the whole ship and be done with it," Defense Minister Haas said breathlessly, cutting through the crowd. "We can't risk anyone else getting hurt."

"I trust Chief Mickelson, and the others, to do their jobs," Samson sharply replied. "Perhaps you should do the same Mr. Haas."

Haas looked taken back. "Of course I do. They all wear the uniform. I have nothing but the utmost confidence in them."

"Then we're on the same page," Samson smirked coldly, before turning back to Meldin. He didn't mean to be snotty, but he wasn't in the mood to coddle the minister or puff up the man's ego. After Meldin finished, Samson issued several orders to the assembled security team. He wavered on the last one, but finally decided to move with it. Glancing at a chastened Haas, the admiral said, "Round up some anesthetic grenades. We might need to lob them into the ship if things go further south."

Cardassian Pursuit Vessel Evacuation Area Aft

Pasha screamed as if her life depended on it, and glancing at the snarling Moncur she could almost imagine that it did. "Husband! Lover! Help me! The beast,

the-the vole has me! It's going to carry me away!" Moncur snarled and then roared with such force that it shook the walls.

"It's the Borg! It's the Borg!" Pasha heard the sound of struggling and then a chilling disruptor report. A body dropped, and then she heard the deep voiced man again. Moncur retreated behind the console.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" A stocky Cardassian man, outfitted in a dark brown clamshell cuirass, ran out of the escape pod hatch. He looked frenetically around the room, both his eyes and hair as wild as his behavior. "Erlain! Erlain!"

"I'm here!" Pasha shouted. The Cardassian turned in the direction of her voice. He lumbered toward her, but then stopped. He turned quickly, aiming his pistol in the direction of the console.

"Crap!" Pasha muttered. She took aim and fired, hitting the man squarely in the shoulder blades. He pitched forward and hit the deck. Moncur was on him in seconds. Despite the heavy-stun setting, the Cardassian remained lucid. He struggled underneath Moncur, almost flipping him over.

"Out of the way Commander," Mickelson said, his grip steady on his phaser. The Gumato back flipped off the writhing Cardassian and the station's security chief hit the man squarely in the face with a stun beam. The Cardassian finally slumped forward.

"Good work," Moncur said, but Pasha didn't feel so good. She glanced over at Mickelson. The man was kneeling down beside the injured Dr. N'Vea.

"Medical emergency," he said into his communicator. "I need a mobile biobed in the cargo bay immediately!"

Deep Space Five

Commanding Officer's Office

Eighteen Hours Later....

"How is Dr. N'Vea today?" Terrence Glover asked.

"She's doing better son," his father replied wearily. The admiral hadn't slept in almost a day, "They had to replace one lung, and her body has been having difficulty accepting the new organ, but that problem has been rectified. Please send a special thanks to your Chief Medic Nemato for assisting in those efforts."

"Will do," Terrence said. "And what about the Cardassians? What was their story?" By the way he asked the questions, Samson knew that Glover had wished he had been able to participate, or at least sit in on the interrogations, but this wasn't his jurisdiction and Samson didn't need to expand the courtesy to him unless it was necessary, which probably stuck in Terrence's craw but at the moment the admiral didn't give a damn.

"Interesting enough, the Cardassians are pretty blameless. They were escorting a grain shipment to the Cardassian side of the DMZ when they were attacked by the Klingons. The attack caused a theta radiation leak which turned the

crew temporarily stark mad. They inflicted more pain on themselves and each other than the Klingons did. Only two survived, Glinn Chanet and Lt. Irek. I've already dispatched our counselor to assist them with grief counseling, but I don't think the Cardassians are in the mood to share their feelings at this moment."

Terrence nodded, surprised that he couldn't quite square with the idea that the Cardassians were blameless for something. "Dad...I wanted to talk about my arrival."

"You really want to do this now?" Samson asked, his voice and temperament strained.

"I just...I just wanted to apologize, I lost my head," Glover admitted.

"You do that a lot it seems," Samson chided. "Way too much for a person of your station. Get a grip on yourself Terrence and stop acting like a child. Jasmine is an adult. So are you. You both figure it out." He snapped, the frustration and anger hitting Terrence almost like a physical blow. "Sometimes you remind me so much of your mother, and that's not always a good thing," the admiral said, but his expression immediately softened. "I-I'm sorry son. I didn't mean..."

"Yes you did," Glover charged. "You meant exactly what you said."

"No, listen Terrence, I'm just tired is all," Samson pleaded.

"Tired of me?" Terrence jabbed. "Were you tired of mom as well?"

"No," Samson shook his head strongly. "Of course not. It's just that Dietra wasn't always the easiest woman to live with, and that trait she passed on to you." He smiled.

"I don't think anything you've said is funny," Terrence replied.

"Just thinking back about all the arguments I had with your mother," Samson replied. "Boy, we really used to go at it sometimes. I miss those times." He paused, and Terrence respectfully allowed him to reminisce over his dead wife while he collected his thoughts. "Both your mother and I taught you all that we could about life. But what all that really boils down to is that you've got to live life. And you are the only one who makes a choice in how you live life. Now that doesn't mean you will get everything you want, but at least you have the agency to attempt to do what you want with this divine gift." Terrence merely nodded, not sure what to say.

"Son, if you love Jasmine, and I believe you do, then you've got to go after her. You've got to tell her how you feel, but more important, you've got to show her. But let me warn you, the road you want to travel with her will be hard and there'll be a lot of unexpected things along the way. The life I envisioned with your mother never turned out the way I had hoped. She was almost consumed by her dreams, and they came first. I see a lot of her fire in you son. Are you really sure you're ready to commitment to Jasmine and make the sacrifices that people in love often make?"

"Yes...well, I think," Terrence said quietly.

"Look, this isn't an on the spot decision to make. Think about it, *really* think about it, and then make your move," the admiral said. "Any way I'm staying out of it this time."

Terrence widened his eyes in shock. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"Believe it son," Samson said. "Besides, I've got other issues on my plate. Have you noticed that Minister Haas is still here? He inspected the relay station several days ago."

"This is the closest spot for Alshain cuisine in the sector," Terrence joked, but Samson was not amused.

"No, there's something going on," Samson said softly. He leaned forward. "I've been speaking with T'Prell. She's back on Vulcan, teaching at the Vulcan Defense Institute. Her friends in intelligence have been informing her that they are rumbles in Starfleet Command about an imminent major terrorist attack on one of the Federation's core worlds."

"Her sources are reliable?" Terrence asked.

"If T'Prell didn't trust them she would've never told me, and I trust T'Prell," Samson said, and Terrence knew that to be true. The captain suspected that his father and the former Vulcan spy were more than friends. Though his father occasionally messed in his love life he was more circumspect about how he conducted his.

"So, you think Haas is hanging around because of that? Do you think Ivor Prime might be a target?"

"I don't know son," Samson remarked. "But I want to be ready in case anything does happen, well, anything more than rabid Cardassians. That's why I'm glad you're around. Nothing can stop two Glovers." He reached across the desk and squeezed Terrence's shoulder.

"Amen to that Dad."

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post Lounge

"Things have certainly picked up," Junior Grade Lieutenant Sophia Detmer remarked in amazement at the bustling scene. The establishment was almost packed to the gills.

"You're right," Ensign Jean Hajar remarked. "It looks like there's standing room only in here." Since both the *San Martin* and the *Powhatan* had docked at the station three days ago, DS5 had been abuzz, and the station's proprietors seemed pleased as punch. The other denizens not so much.

"You want to fight your way through this crowd or try somewhere else?" Sophia asked. "You know I'm intrigued by that new Alshain restaurant Lt. Raeger told you about."

Jean wrinkled her nose. "No way."

"You better not let Lt. N'Saba here you say that," Detmer joked. "I don't think he's left that place since we touched down."

“Good, that means he won’t be annoying anyone for a few more days at least,” Jean remarked, looking around seconds later hoping no one heard her comment.

“Stop being so paranoid,” Sophia said, playfully nudging Jean on the shoulder. “This is shore leave. Like Spring Break, you remember those?”

“Boy, do I,” Hajar remarked. “It was the only time I could get work done while everyone else was gallivanting about.”

“You’re a real killjoy, you know that?” Detmer asked.

“Then why do you hang around me?”

“I’ve got a soft spot for lost causes,” the junior Operations Officer remarked. “Enough of that, how do you like my new outfit?” She twirled, showing off her purple blouse with golden streaks, and bell bottom matching pants. “The clothier on Level Twelve said it was all the rage on Delta IV this year.”

“Don’t believe everything you’re told lieutenant,” the soft, breathy voice cut through the noise emanating from the club. Both young women turned around to see Commander Ivyse standing behind them. She gave Sophia a once over. “Nonetheless, you were it well.” She then turned to Hajar, her deep black eyes touching chords in Jean that she didn’t know existed, “Same too you ensign, though you could stand to add a splash of color.” Jean self-consciously looked at her old sky blue dress. “Sorry,” the Deltan replied. “Didn’t mean to intrude.” She walked past them, into the thick of the bar. Once again, a way parted for her as attention shifted in the beautiful woman’s direction.

“What a way to make us feel inadequate,” Detmer muttered. “Bitch.”

Deep Space Five

The Wolf’s Den

(Alshain Restaurant)

Lt. Seb N’Saba hated the name, but he had to admit that the cuisine was the best he had tasted in years. Even much so that he had convinced both Lt. Commander Bheto and Lt. Meldin to join him.

Meldin, as prim a Benzite as could ever be, sat back aghast as N’Saba pulled the thigh bone from his mouth, savoring the last few bits of blood and meat before throwing it back in the blood-filled pan. Though the Alshain usually ate with more refinement in the presence of off worlders, the atmosphere here reminded him enough of Alshain Proper that he felt he could relax his guard a little bit. The Science Officer was pleased that Lt. Commander Bheto seemed to be enjoying herself as well. The Andorian’s cheeks were bulging with the raw Tenerife meat.

Once she had swallowed it down and chased it with a drink of Alshain ale, the Operations Officer had replied. “Tastes like *redbat*.”

“Oh that’s enough,” Meldin said. “I can’t take it anymore.” He stood up, and waited for the others to join him. When they didn’t, he primly left the room. The elderly Alshain at the counter barked laughter.

“And he’s your security chief?” The graying Old Tooth asked incredulously. The mocking tone made Bheto frown. N’Saba spoke up.

“He’s very good at what he does,” he replied, defending the man. “If Alshain cuisine is not to his liking that is his business, not yours.” He glared at the Old Tooth for effect. Even though his artificial blue eyes had made him unworthy as a mating choice and brought some shame upon his Sept on the homeworld, N’Saba still carried enough rank over commoners like this restaurant’s owner. The Old Tooth immediately looked away.

“Would you care for something else milord?” Now, Bheto’s scowl turned to N’Saba, but he ignored her. Despite his duty to Starfleet, he also had a duty to maintain the Alshain social order.

“Yes. Have the serving wench bring us another helping of Tenerife meat,” he said imperiously.

“I think I’ve just lost my appetite,” Bheto remarked, slowly getting up. N’Saba wanted to ask the woman not to go but he felt that might look weak in front of the shop’s owner. So, he said nothing as the Andorian walked angrily out of the restaurant.

That went well, N’Saba groused. He had tried to reach out and still found a way to bungle it. He had made so many mistakes when he had initially joined Starfleet that he had largely given up on making acquaintances. But he had tried to make an exception with Bheto and Meldin. He appreciated Amanisha’s intellect and he felt a kinship with Meldin, who wasn’t much esteemed among the ship’s crew, just like him.

The wench came out of the back, holding a steaming bowl of meat, a succulent looking bone sticking out of the thick, bloody soup. N’Saba’s lip upturned in an appreciative snarl, both for the meat and the wench. The vulpine server nakedly regarded him. Leaning over as she placed the bowl on the table, she whispered hungrily,

“There are more things on the menu if you like?” She offered. “Provided your pockets are as noble as your breeding.” Though he couldn’t take a noble-born mate, nothing restricted him from mating with a Sept-less woman, or in paying for sexual favors, but N’Saba found the idea of paying for a conquest galling. He would rather go without. The Alshain Science Officer snapped at the woman’s ear. She jumped back, touching the nipped ear. She snarled a curse at him and hurried to the back. Seb grinned. “At least my ability to offend remains as sharp as my claws,” he muttered to himself.

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post

"Care for some company?" Lt. Pasha Ayres asked gently. Security Chief Garry Mickelson looked up from his drink and shrugged noncommittally. Ayres sat down. She glanced around the crowded room, her eyes lighting on the brown armored backs of one of the Cardassians they had rescued. The burly man was sitting by the bar, relieving a glass of some thick orange liquid. She swallowed hard, her memories of the bloody scene in the pursuit vessel coming back to the fore. The young woman turned away from him, back to Mickelson. The man had resumed staring into his drink. "Nice place you've got here Chief?" She tried to say as merrily as possible. After he didn't respond, Pasha said, "Caitian got your tongue eh?"

He finally looked up at her, a bemused smirk on his face. "I believe that's supposed to be cat's got your tongue."

"My mistake, but aren't Caitians just bigger cousins of Earth cats?" Ayres asked in jest.

"I don't think you should ever share that observation with them," Mickelson remarked.

"Was that almost a smile I saw on your face?" Ayres replied, smiling herself. Mickelson's expression hardened.

"Listen Lieutenant, I'm not in the mood for merriment or anything else. Dr. N'Vea is a friend of mine, and she's lying up in sickbay right now."

"But she's alive," the *Powhatan* Security Officer pointed out. "You saved her life, remember?"

"No, you and Moncur did that," Mickelson said bitterly. "I was fairly useless."

"No, you weren't," Pasha reached out to him, and grazed his shoulder. Mickelson pulled away.

"Don't," he warned.

"I really think you're being too hard on yourself. No one died; they were so cuts and bruises..."

"And a ruptured lung," Mickelson pointed out.

"But still, everyone lives to see another day," Ayres said.

"So, they can die perhaps die in this damnable war," Defense Minister Haas intoned. Both Mickelson and Pasha made to get up, but Haas remarked. "I'm not in uniform anymore. I'm a civilian now. Besides, I never was much for ceremony anyhow. Please, maintain your seats." Haas pulled up a chair and sat down. Waiting for his drink, the old veteran gazed around the bar, finding the Cardassian. But unlike Pasha, he didn't turn away from the man.

"Look at him," Haas didn't even disguise his bitterness. "It's because of them that Starfleet boys and girls recently died fighting against the Klingons, our ally for damn near a century. And it was because of them again that we almost lost some good people the other day. Damn, Cardies," Haas spat. Pasha looked uncomfortably at Mickelson. Though she heard such private sentiments on occasion, she never heard them from officials as high ranking as Conrad Haas. Pasha didn't care for the Cardassians, for what they had done to the Bajorans and others, but not because of

who they were, which she felt was the source of the minister's opprobrium. The idea of such rank bias disgusted her, but she knew when to keep her mouth shut. But when she saw Mickelson nodding in agreement, an ugly gleam in his eye, she couldn't help herself; career be damned.

"Sir," Pasha said gingerly, "with all due respect. Those Cardassians weren't responsible for their actions. They were had received a good dose of theta radiation, enough to drive anyone mad."

"It didn't simply drive them mad, it made them vicious, bloodthirsty," Haas said. "All it did was strip the bark off the tree, peeled back the thin veneer of civilization. It revealed who they truly are. Truth be told, I think we should've allowed the Klingons to do as they pleased in Cardassian space, if nothing else it would've removed one less dog nipping at our heels."

"Sir, we had a humanitarian duty to assist the Cardassians," Ayres pleaded.

"They're not human," Mickelson said darkly. "They're barely sentient. It was my friends those bastards tried to cut open yesterday. I know what fighting Cardassians is like. Do you Lieutenant?"

"Well, no," Pasha had to admit.

"It's not something I would wish on my worst enemy," Mickelson remarked. Haas nodded. "Even the Klingons hold to some form of honor, in word if not always in action. But with the snakeheads? Nothing."

"He's right Lieutenant," Haas said, with a nasty gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. "I'm glad at least someone around here sees the Cardassians for what they are. Once they use us by drawing us into war with the Klingons, they'll turn on us; Maybe even turning to the Dominion for assistance to do so."

"Sir, wasn't it the Klingons who used such reasoning to invade Cardassian space? Not only were they the aggressors, they might be the ones truly in league with the Dominion or would join them," Pasha shot back.

Haas laughed. He patted her on the shoulder. "I remember when I was so young," he smiled, his expression wistful. "My dear, the Klingons are too prideful to admit they would ever need help. My father was in the Fleet when Praxis exploded. I remember him telling me stories about how the Klingons were so prideful that they almost went to war instead of asking for our help. But cooler heads prevailed. I've never seen such sensible actors among the Cardassians. This so called armistice with them is only a stalling tactic, nothing more, until the next war," the man said darkly. "But the Klingons put a crimp in that." Mickelson nodded in agreement.

"I'm sorry you both feel that way," Pasha said. "I'll take my leave..."

"Please, don't let an old man's prattling drive you off," Haas smiled. "I'm sorry. My wife often tells me I have a big mouth and that politics is a bona fide conversation killer. I'll speak no more of it." He made a zipping gesture over his lips. "We're all adults, all patriots. We can disagree on such matters and still be civil eh?"

"Of course," Pasha said, but she didn't really believe it. Not with Haas, and sadly not with Mickelson either. But with Mickelson, she could understand. The man

was grieving. He had already returned to gazing at his now half-empty glass. She didn't get Haas at all. When she could find a way to extricate herself without offending him, Ayres intended to learn everything she could about him.

Deep Space Five The Hitching Post

"You lying capsule of space debris!" Lt. Raeger shouted, her voice riding over the din of the bar. She threw Pedro's drink into his face. "You think I wouldn't find out about Fenella? We're through!" She stomped away from the flustered engineer. He looked askance at Terrence. The captain couldn't help but smirk.

"That's your problem. Not mine." Pedro slid out of the booth. He chased after the quickly departing communicators officer.

"Baby, baby...." The captain just was able to make out. Now that he was alone, Terrence's thoughts returned to what his father had told him two days ago. It had weighed heavily on his mind since.

"I see there's an opening," a husky voice slid down into his consciousness. He glanced up to see an expectant Commander Ivyse standing by his table. Glover hid his disappointment. He was praying that it would be Jasmine. That the remote engineer had come back to her senses and was ready to apologize and patch up their relationship. At the very least he was hoping to see Dalis again, but after the incident in the cargo bay the *Powhatan* captain had retired to her ship and never left. Terrence quickly gestured for the woman to take a seat, and she slid close to him, but not too close.

The captain motioned for one of the waiters. After the Hupyrian male had returned with a new drink for the commander and a refill for Terrence, he decided to dispel the Deltan's air of mystery. "So, how do you like your posting here?"

Ivyse took a sip of her drink before responding. "It's sufficient."

"Doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement," Glover winced, feeling a pinch of displeasure at any criticism of his father's command. "Most officers love it here."

"Oh," Ivyse's eyes widened and she smiled. "You took that comment as a veiled dig at your father?" She smiled. "I assure you, it wasn't."

"What was it then?" Glover found himself pressing.

"An honest observation," the woman sighed. "To be honest, I was enjoying most posting as an attaché at Command, but then this damn war erupted and my organizational 'talents' were considered of better use out here, helping coordinate our efforts against the Klingons. It's nothing personal against the admiral or his crew. They are quite able."

"I understand," Terrence said. "Reassignment can be a trying process sometimes. But that's part of the job."

"You're right," Ivyse smiled, taking another sip. "So, what made that your first question? Have you heard about my ice queen reputation?"

"No," Glover said, surprised and intrigued by the commander's self-description. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone call a Deltan frigid." The commander laughed, her dark eyes shining. Terrence's throat constricted as the woman's aura blazed around her.

"Truly, how many Deltans have you met?" Ivyse asked. "Many of my people don't join Starfleet because they don't want to take those pheromone suppressants. And even though we are a very open people, we are also cognizant of the terrible price elicited by our contact with less evolved species."

"Less evolved?" Glover grimaced. "Ouch."

"I don't mean it like that," Ivyse's face pinched. "I mean on a...a cultural level."

"That sounds better," Terrence rolled his eyes.

"I didn't mean to offend. I meant..."

"It's all right Commander," Terrence waved for the woman to stop trying to dig herself out of her hole. "I'm familiar with some of the stories about how non-Deltans have been driven insane by intimate contact with your people. No need to explain."

"If you knew all this time why did you leave me out there twisting in the wind?"

"Haven't you heard the scuttlebutt?" Terrence asked with feigned innocence. "I'm an asshole." Ivyse sat back, studying him, trying to see if he was serious. Glover finally decided to let her off the hook. "Just joking commander...well, not really," he smiled.

"All right," she said slowly, before taking another sip of her drink.

"Look, I guess I should've told you from the beginning, don't worry about ranks," Glover said. "You can speak freely with me. I'm not your CO."

"But you're his son," Ivyse pointed out.

"True," Glover remarked. "And we're two handsome devils."

"More devilish than handsome," the Deltan replied dryly.

"You're a sharp one commander...may I call you Ivyse?"

"Actually my friends call me Ivy," she said. Glover raised his eyebrows.

"Wow, I've made it to the friendship level already," he shook his head in amazement.

"Deltans are good judges of character," Ivyse said. "We read people very well."

"So, what do your people reading skills tell you about me?" Ivyse leaned back and merely smiled.

"In due time captain."

"Terrence," he intoned. "Please call me Terrence."

"Terrence," she purred his name seductively, emphasizing the double *r*. The sound sent a shiver through him. Trying to maintain his composure, Glover thought it best to return talking shop.

"So Ivy, what was working at Command like?" The captain winced, realizing he might've brought the woman's misgivings back to the fore. "Sorry about that."

"No, what's done is done. You were right. Reassignment is part of our job." Ivyse said, sighing afterwards. "And to be honest, what I missed most....his name is Zolik, an aide to Vice Admiral Fujisaki." Fujisaki was Starfleet Intelligence's Deputy Chief. It was not a name thrown around casually.

Terrence widened his eyes, with mock shock. "Wow, you swim with some big fish." The Deltan laughed, shaking her head.

"It's nothing of the sort. Zolik is the careerist," she said, her tone turning slightly bitter.

"My apologies for making you think of Zolik," Glover said, hoping to steer the conversation away from relationship talk. It was the last thing he wanted to engage in at the moment, his own thoughts of Jasmine beginning to bubble to the fore.

"Really it's not a problem," Ivyse said. "And for me it isn't a problem...usually. It's just that you remind me of him."

Terrence couldn't help himself. "Oh...I do. How so?" "Smart. Strong. Outspoken. Ambitious," Ivyse's smile was wistful. "When we weren't making love Zolik was always talking about the future and our place in it."

Glover nodded. So far he couldn't disagree with the comparison, and he couldn't shake himself of the alluring idea of pillow talk with the Deltan. This Zolik was a lucky guy, but if the fool had any sense he would've followed Ivyse to DS5. "I take it Zolik is a Deltan?"

The commander shook her head, smiling. "Actually he's a Zaldan."

Terrence widened his eyes in surprise. Zaldans had reputations for being completely honest and blunt, with no patience for the niceties and white lies human society continued to function on. "A somewhat combustible pairing I'm sure."

"It does keep things interesting to say the least," she chuckled. "But Zaldans are immune to Deltan physiology, and I must admit that it was very liberating to at least be intimate without having to use the pheromone suppressors, you have no idea how they dampen our sensitivities."

"I don't," Terrence agreed, "and I'm sorry that your people are still subject to that archaic law," he added.

"Old it might be, but I guess there is still a need for it, among some of the Federation species," Ivyse conceded.

"I think that's bull," Glover admitted. "Not all humans are susceptible to the Deltans' physiological effects. Take me for example."

The commander pouted. "I'm sorry to hear you say that." Terrence's throat constricted, but he tried to play it off by reaching for his drink. Ivyse's touch was electric on his hand.

"Terrence, I'm really interesting in testing your supposed tolerance," she said bluntly, her naked honesty arousing him.

"Well, I...uh," the captain stammered, at a loss for words. "I see that Zolik has rubbed off on you," he said lamely.

"Not quite so immune eh?" Ivyse taunted.

"You'll be the one asking for immunity if I take you up on your offer," Glover boasted, his confidence resurging.

"I would like to find out if that's truly the case," the Deltan challenged. "I'm game if you are."

Terrence opened his mouth to protest, to tell the gorgeous Deltan that he was spoken for, but then he remembered that he wasn't. He was a free agent again, and Jasmine had made that choice, not him. He slowly closed his lips, and nodded. "Okay....but I warned you."

Ivyse's smiled widened. "So noted."

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post

"I can't believe it," Lt. Sophia Detmer gasped, lightly tapping Ensign Jean Hajar on the shoulder. The brunette turned around in her seat and saw Captain Glover hastily making his way through the crowded bar with Commander Ivyse in tow. Jean frowned.

"The captain's about to make a big mistake," she murmured.

"Yeah, that tart is a barracuda if ever there was one," Detmer said. "If he sleeps with her he might wake up frostbitten. Think we should do something about it?" Jean looked at her friend askance.

"Look, I consider the captain a mentor and a friend. He's a grown man. He can make his own decisions. Even if they are bad ones, like going wherever he's going with her. As much as I don't like it it's not my business."

"Oh," Detmer pouted playfully. "You're a spoilsport."

"And you have a predilection for serious KP duty," Hajar laughed. "I don't think it wise to ever step between a man and his paramour, especially a dynamo like the captain."

"Well, maybe you're right," Detmer said, "But what are we going to do for fun?" Jean pondered her friend's question for a moment, her eyes searching the room. She pointed. "There." Detmer followed her finger. The young bridge officer's poked out lips stretched into a smile.

"Good idea." There were two unattached Starfleet officers, a strawberry blonde haired human male and a muscular Bolian sitting alone in a corner of the bar, both apparently ogling the Dabo girls sashaying by. "Let's give them something better to gawk at," Sophia remarked, with a wink. Jean laughed, rolling her eyes back in her head.

"I really don't know why we are friends sometimes."

“Yes you do,” Detmer replied, grabbing her friend’s hand. “It was your idea anyway. I’m just a catalyst, and now, let’s get catalyzing.”

Deep Space Five

The Wolf’s Den

Lt. Jasmine Mendes entered the establishment with trepidation. One of the things she liked about Bhudevi was that the woman was extremely curious. The Barzan Republic was a fairly closed society so Bhudevi was maximizing every opportunity to take in as much visual, mental, and physical stimuli as possible. She had finally convinced Jasmine to accompany her to the Alshain eatery, but the Operations Chief knew it was a mistake as soon as the putrid smell of rotting meat hit her nostrils. “Eww, what is that smell?”

“Why Lt. Mendes, it’s just three day-old U’roch carcass,” remarked Lt. Seb N’Saba, the *Cuffe’s* Science Officer. She hadn’t seen the lupanoid in quite some time. “It’s a delicacy on Alshain Proper.” The black-furred officer sat alone, a plate of greenish, pustule-laced meat sat on his plate. Tiny white maggots slithered across the decayed dish. He motioned for them to come over. Jasmine hesitated, but Bhudevi dove forward. An older, gnarled Alshain stepped from behind the counter, a padd in his hand.

“We’ll have two,” Lt. Bhudevi said as she took a seat in a booth beside the Alshain.

“Make that one,” Jasmine said hastily. She leaned close, but not too close to the canid Science Officer. “Mr. N’Saba, what do you recommend that might suit a human palate?”

He scrunched up his snout as if the thought was distasteful. He glanced at the waiter. The older man quickly produced a menu. “I recommend the Valtese stew,” the amiable, graying lupanoid suggested. “Though the Valtese created the recipe, we perfected it.” Jasmine looked to N’Saba to get his opinion. He growled in agreement.

“Okay, I’ll take a bowl and a glass of Antares sparkle water please.” The waiter nodded as he jotted the order down on a padd. He turned to Bhudevi.

“And what about you Lt. Bhudevi?”

“I’ll try what he’s having Rowf,” Bhudevi said. Rowf grinned.

“You are an adventurous sort,” he remarked. “If I were a Young Fang....”

“Sorry Rowf,” Bhudevi snuggled closer to Jasmine. Mendes tried not to tense, and regretted that N’Saba had seen her hesitation. “But I’m already spoken for.” Rowf glanced at Jasmine and then back at Bhudevi.

“And you’ve both chosen well,” he said, bowing before he departed into the back of the restaurant. There was an awkward silence until Rowf returned, with a steaming bowl for Jasmine and a decaying lump of meat for Bhudevi. Before the Barzan dug in, Lt. N’Saba pushed over a pungent smelling bowl.

"Try it with this mustard," he suggested. Bhudevi nodded, ripping off a piece of meat and dipping into the bowl. Jasmine tried to force her stomach not to turn as she slowly consumed her soup.

"So," N'Saba began, "You are a Barzan? I don't know much about your people. Enlighten me."

"All right," Bhudevi said, placing the nearly devoured leg back on her plate. "We are a nonaligned planet and we place a premium on our neutrality. However, that doesn't mean we are isolationists either. We explore, but we don't like to impose our way of life on others."

"And you believe that the others, including the Federation, does?" N'Saba grinned, spoiling for an argument.

The Barzan looked uncomfortable. Jasmine glared at him. "She didn't say that. Don't twist her words around Mr. N'Saba," the engineer chided.

"So, what did you mean Lieutenant?" The Alshain prodded.

"Well, actually....I do sort of think that the Federation imposes its way of life on others," Bhudevi admitted. "In a benign way of course, but it's still an imposition."

"How could you say that?" Jasmine found herself being pulled into a political discussion she really didn't want to be having. There were other more important things to make her upset.

Bhudevi smiled. "Listen Jasmine, I fully expect you not to understand, but I'm an outsider. I wasn't raised in the Federation. To me, well, to many Barzans, the expansion of the Federation gives us pause. Cultural annihilation comes in many forms," she intoned.

"Cultural annihilation? Isn't that a bit extreme?" Jasmine asked, unable to believe what she was hearing. "We would never stand for something like that. Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations isn't just a cornerstone of Vulcan society; it's a crucial Federation ideal. We respect all species and would never alter their development. That's why the Prime Directive was created."

"I beg to differ," N'Saba cut in. "But Federation history is replete with examples of just the opposite. What about the cold war between the Federation and the Klingons in the mid-23rd century when each side actively sought to prove to unaligned worlds which system was better regardless of how those aliens might have felt?"

Jasmine was speechless. She turned to Bhudevi. "You really don't agree with him, do you?"

"No, I don't see this as something sinister, just the way of things," Bhudevi replied. "It could be a lot worse. I've heard the stories about the Borg," the woman shuddered.

"Being one of the few Alshain living in the Federation, and the only Alshain in Starfleet, I've experienced what the Old Earth scholar DuBois referred to as 'double consciousness,'" N'Saba replied. When both women looked at him askance, he

abruptly replied. "Look it up. Anyway, the point is I see many points of view on this issue and they are all legitimate to some degree."

"So, where does that leave us?" Jasmine asked, unsettled and unfulfilled.

"Famished," N'Saba smiled. "Let's dine."

While the food was being served, the conversation shifted to topics far less controversial and Jasmine found herself tuning out. Her thoughts drifted to her tense conversation with Pedro, which brought her right back to the look of hurt and betrayal in Terrence's eyes when he had first seen her with Bhudevi. She hadn't been able to shake that look from her mind. It had haunted her for days.

There were too many times she had thought when Terrence had been pompous but rarely, if ever, had she seen him so exposed and vulnerable. His anger masked his fear. Jasmine hadn't seen that at the time, but the more she thought about it, the more his tantrum made sense to her. He was losing control, he was losing her, and there was nothing he could do about it. And for a guy like him, Terrence always found a way to turn things to his advantage. But this time he couldn't, so it was a blow to his ego, but also a stab into his heart. He really did love her, she realized. Jasmine hadn't been sure if that were the case. She had found Terrence a bit too self-centered, and wondered if he would ever be able to put anyone above himself. Now she was starting to realize that he just might be able to.

"Jasmine, Jasmine are you all right?" Bhudevi's concern punctured her veil of reverie. Jasmine blinked a couple times before she was able to focus back on the Barzan and Lt. N'Saba. The canid was once again dissecting her with his baleful gaze. "Something wrong with the stew?"

"No," Jasmine said quietly, trying to gather her voice and her strength. "No. Listen, I've got to go." The Ops Chief stood up. Bhudevi's concern was now etched across her face. Both she and N'Saba rose.

"Are you unwell?" The Alshain asked.

"I...I...just need....I need some air," Jasmine said.

"I'll go with you," Bhudevi offered.

"No!" Jasmine said. "No," she added, much more softly. "Please, enjoy your meal. I'll be all right." Bhudevi was skeptical, but she didn't protest. Jasmine didn't even look at N'Saba before she left. If she had bothered to look back, she would've seen N'Saba placing a restraining hand on Bhudevi's shoulder.

Jasmine felt better as soon as she left the restaurant. She walked quickly down the Main Concourse, pretending that she wasn't headed toward the Transporter Room. Hopefully she could beam aboard the *Cuffe* and talk to Terrence and let him know how she felt before the chasm between them grew too great. Approaching the Hitching Post, Jasmine pulled up, her heart leaping into her throat. Terrence and Commander Ivyse, both holding hands were hurriedly making their way out of the bar. *Oh no*, she realized. *It is too late*.

The Ops Chief began backing away, hoping she could morph into the crowd until she brushed against something hard, and hairy. She looked up into the blazing eyes of Lt. N'Saba. She turned around. The Alshain was accompanied by Bhudevi.

The Barzan looked crestfallen, and Jasmine felt even more terrible. "I didn't know how much he still meant to you," Bhudevi said. "But Seb explained it to me. Go to him."

"It's...it's too late," Jasmine pointed in the direction of the new couple. Her eyes began to water. "He's found someone else."

"Itrob droppings!" N'Saba snorted. "You and Captain Glover are meant to be together. You've caught each other's scent. Nothing or no one can change that. Actually that isn't correct. For an Alshain that is enough, but for you humans, you continually make things more complicated than they need be. Lt. Mendes, we've had this talk before on the *Cuffe*, remember?" Jasmine nodded slowly. Two years ago the Science Officer had proven an unlikely fount of wisdom during another trying time in her evolving relationship with Terrence. "You have his scent, you've marked your territory, now you must repel the interloper and claim your prize."

"Okay, that's a little primal, but I get what you're saying," Jasmine conceded.

"Then why aren't you moving?" He challenged. "Go," he pushed her gently. Jasmine looked at Bhudevi.

"Listen Bhu," she began.

"It was fun while it lasted," the Barzan said. "But I would feel terrible if I kept you from the person you truly wanted to be with. Seb is right. Go claim your prize," she said wryly, rolling her eyes. N'Saba scowled.

"Okay," Jasmine said, squaring her shoulders. "I'm going to do just that."

Deep Space Five Recreation Center

Commander Nandali Kojo drove a knee into the Talarian's washboard gut. The man dropped like a rock. She fell on top of him, kissing and biting him fiercely.

Pulling up, his blood on her lips, she said with savage passion, "That's your punishment for losing to me again Joyo," she said. "Even though I am sure I am the superior combatant, something tells me you're losing on purpose."

Joyo merely smiled. "I'll never confess."

"I wouldn't either Joyo," Defense Minister Haas strolled into the room, "Unless the reward was greater than the punishment." Commander Kojo hopped off her conquest and stood at attention.

"At ease," Haas grinned. "How many times do I have to tell you guys I'm not in uniform anymore?"

"You are still a revered warrior deserving of respect," Kojo said.

Haas chuckled, "I knew I liked you for some reason Commander," the minister grinned. "May we speak privately?"

"Of course," Kojo looked down at the still supine Joyo and nodded. The man quickly got to his feet and exited the room.

"Amazing," Haas remarked. "Everything I've read about the Talarians were they were extremely patriarchal."

"Only because they've never encountered women strong enough to put them in their place," Kojo boasted.

"I see," Haas said. He ambled over to the weapon's rack. He pulled off a Klingon *bat'leth* and threw it at her. Kojo caught it effortlessly, and sliced it through the air. The Defense Minister took two Tellarite short swords. "Care to do a little sparring?"

"I like your idea of a private conversation," Kojo replied. She bowed in respect before charging the man. He easily sidestepped the charge, his blades lightly cutting across the woman's back. Unbidden, the Kriosian growled with pleasure.

"Are you trying to replace Joyo in my bedchamber tonight Minister Haas?" The woman throatily asked.

He laughed. "I'm afraid that might truly kill me." Kojo, throwing caution to the wind once again, lunged at Haas using her speed, strength and ferocity to force the man eventually against the wall. He made a swipe at her legs, and Nandali pushed her leg upward so that the blade sunk into her thigh. She twisted it out of Haas's grip. Surprised, the man hesitated, and Kojo rammed the sharp edge of the *bat'leth* against his throat, drawing a bead of blood.

"Do you yield?" He surrendered quickly.

Once her battle lust had faded, the Kriosian immediately realized what she had done. "My apologies Minister," she said. "Shall I call a medic?"

"No, no, I've received worse," he said after catching his breath. Haas wiped away the blood from his neck. "Good bout," he said, holding out his hand. Kojo seized it. He grimaced at her grip. "Strong, firm grip you got there. Says a lot about you."

"It does?" Kojo asked, perplexed.

"Says that you're strong and honest," Haas said, "And we need more officers like you on the front lines right now." The Kriosian nodded, not disagreeing with the minister's observation. "Ever thought about commanding a starship?"

"Yes," Kojo said. "But Captain Glover thinks I still need 'seasoning'," she said, trying not to be too dismissive of her commanding officer's colloquial terminology.

"Poppycock," Haas said. "If we had more officers like you in command, this war would be over in no time, and then we could focus on our true enemy."

"And that would be?"

"The Dominion," Haas said, losing his good cheer. "You are aware of what they did to the *Odyssey*, and how they captured the *Defiant* like it was nothing. Not to mention their devastation of the Tal Shiar and Obsidian Order, or their attempt to reignite hostilities between us and the Tzenkethi."

The Kriosian First Officer nodded. She knew the litany well. The latest atrocity had been the Dominion bombing on Earth, and the latest outrage had been a brazen Changeling flaunting itself in front of Admiral Leyton and Captain Sisko also on Earth. These were dark times indeed for the Federation.

"I can tell by your expression that you understand the threat," Haas said.

"I do," Kojo conceded.

"And what do you think we should do about it?"

"I'm not a policy maker," she said.

"Are you sidestepping my question?" He challenged.

"No," Kojo said, her anger rising. "That would be...cowardly."

"So, what are your thoughts Commander?"

"My 'thoughts' are irrelevant," she surmised. "I am a soldier. I do what I am told and keep my opinions to myself."

"Well, your opinions are relevant to me, and I want to hear them," Haas said.

"If it were up to me, I would bring our rift with the Klingons to a close as quickly as possible. As much as I distrust the Cardassians, I think Gowron was in error for attacking them without substantial proof and should pull back his forces. Then I would prepare for the Dominion, because like you I believe they are coming."

"And how would you prepare for them?" He asked, an insistent expression on his face. Kojo paused, gathering her thoughts while she tried to figure out why the Defense Minister gave *petaQ* what she thought.

"This war has sharpened our focus again, but I would continue cutting away at our fat. I would secure our borders and put us on more of a war footing. I think the President and the Federation Council are taking the Dominion too lightly and not preparing the Federation for the difficult days on the horizon."

"We are in agreement about that," Haas said solemnly.

"So, are you going to challenge Jaresh-Inyo for the presidency?" Kojo smiled at the startled expression on Haas's face.

"Well...I...uh...hadn't thought about it," he stammered.

"Are you sidestepping my question?" The Kriosian challenged, prompting a grin from Haas.

"Touché," he said. "And to be frank, it has crossed my mind."

"I hope you do," Kojo said. "The Federation would be better off with a man of your character at the helm."

Haas beamed. "Thank you for saying so, and Starfleet would be in better hands with you in a captain's chair."

"Someday perhaps," The Kriosian was wistful.

"Someday soon," Haas promised. "Sooner than you think."

Deep Space Five

Habitat Section-Corridor Twelve

"Terrence, Terrence," the voice cut through his fog, and enlivened his hopes. He stopped and turned around immediately to see Jasmine rushing down the corridor. "Terrence, we need to talk," she said breathlessly.

"Is something wrong Lieutenant," Commander Ivyse replied, not hiding her annoyance.

"No...sir," Jasmine said, with a frigidness in her tone that Glover liked. "I need to talk with Captain Glover."

"Can it wait until morning," the Deltan replied. "We're busy." Jasmine looked at Terrence, and he looked at both beautiful women, neither willing to back down. But there was really no contest.

"My apologies Ivy," he said, moving away from the Deltan. "I'll talk to you later."

"Are you sure you want to go backward?" Ivyse asked.

"Never more in my life," Terrence quipped. He grasped Jasmine's hand. "Let's go."

Deep Space Five

Commander Ivyse's Quarters

The Deltan glowered at the screen. "Zolik, I did my best."

"Obviously it wasn't good enough," her lover's rebuke was cutting. "You were supposed to drug him and pump him for information. You failed miserably in that regard," he sighed. "Well, from what you were able to observe, is Glover part of the cabal or not?"

"I...don't think so," Ivyse replied curtly, biting back her anger. "And don't you think labeling this a 'cabal' is presumptuous?"

"He is friends with Sisko," Zolik said dismissively, ignoring Ivyse's question, "and Sisko is Leyton's adjunct."

"That proves nothing," Ivyse challenged.

"Sisko and Glover have been friends since they were roommates in college. Not to mention their mutual friendship with former Lt. Commander Calvin Hudson, an acknowledged traitor."

"Whose actions both Sisko and Glover have opposed either in deed or on record," Ivyse retorted. "The truth is none of our agents have been successful at divining the loyalties of Sisko, Glover, or anyone else in this supposed coup. All we have to go on is some drunken ramblings and some midnight rants from a few of Admiral Leyton's former officers. It's hardly enough to warrant legal or extralegal action."

"These are very tenuous times," Zolik intoned. "The Changeling infiltration might go far deeper than we suspect. How can we be sure that Leyton, Sisko, Glover or his father, or even the President isn't a shape shifter?"

Ivyse nodded, having to admit her paramour had a point, despite the paranoid edge in his voice. "All we can do is watch them to find out if that's the case."

"Continue to do so," he said sharply. Zolik paused, his expression softening. "Take care of yourself out there Ivy," he added, the roughness in his voice now gone. Ivyse knew that Zolik could be intense, but she knew it was because he cared, about the mission and about her.

"You do the same," she said, touching the screen before the image went black.

PART TWO: PANDEMONIUM

***Runabout Rhone* Two Days Later....**

Lt. Jasmine Mendes slinked to the cockpit, wrapping the powder blue robe snug around her naked body. "Care to turn up the heat?" She asked before leaning down and kissing Terrence on his cheek.

"I thought I just did that?" He asked in jest, prompting Jasmine to nip at his earlobe. "Ouch."

"It wasn't that fiery, or earth shaking," Jasmine said with a heap of droll.

"Hey, I thought I heard a proximity alert going off," Terrence boasted. "That's why I decided to check to see if what had made the runabout shake wasn't actually me. Guess I was wrong."

Jasmine laughed. She pulled his seat back and fell into his lap. "What am I going to do with you?" She peered so deeply into his eyes that it forced Terrence to blink.

"I think I can come up with a few ideas," Terrence quipped. "We've got a couple hours before we reach Oceanus IV." He took his hands off the ship's controls and wrapped Jasmine in a strong embrace. She wiggled out of it.

"Not so fast mister. I don't want to be all bummed out when we reach Oceanus," she said. "I hear the oceans and sea life there almost rival the ones back home."

"I've been once, briefly, and I'm not that it has anything on Pacifica, but the beaches are fantastic," Glover concurred.

"And who were you sharing those beaches with?" Jasmine pouted playfully.

"Oh, no one, just scouting them out as a future date location for you babe," Glover said. Jasmine laughed. She fell into his arms.

"Terrence why were we such fools?" The surprised look on his face told her he had been wondering the same thing.

"I don't know," he said, leaning down to sniff her hair. "We wasted a lot of time."

"You're so right," Jasmine snuggled closer to him. "But are you sure this is the right thing? What we're doing now? Just giving in to abandon, without thinking about where it's all going to lead?" She looked up at him, her gaze searching his strong, dark brown face.

"Yes," he said with absolute confidence. "I don't have a doubt in my mind."

"Well that's good enough for me," Jasmine said. *For now.*

Deep Space Five Admiral's Quarters Three Days Later....

"What's going on?" Admiral Samson Glover groggily asked. He laid on his back, unwilling to sit up on his bed. He was bone tired and he didn't want to get out of bed unless there was a damn good reason.

"Admiral Glover," Commander Rahul's voice was unusually tight. "There is a Priority One message that just came in for you." Glover sat up, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Pipe it down here," he commanded. The admiral scrambled off the bed, his joints creaking in protest. But he ignored the mild discomfort as he made his way to his desk. He activated the desktop console. The screen's blue and gold Federation background faded. An attractive young blonde, her face creased with concern, stared back at him.

"Elizabeth, what's happened?" Samson asked the woman.

"Admiral, there has been an attack on the global power distribution system in Lisbon," Captain Shelby said. "We're still tabulating the number of casualties. Right now we're lending as much assistance as we can. "

"My God," Samson gasped. "Who?"

"We're not sure yet sir, but Admiral Leyton suspects the Dominion had a hand in it," Shelby answered. "I've been on the horn with Admiral Hanson and he's following leads that a cloaked Dominion fleet might have somehow come through the wormhole and might be on the way to Earth, if they haven't arrived already."

"And what do you think Elizabeth?" Samson was glad that Captain Shelby was delivering this tragic news to him instead of one of the apparatchiks at Headquarters. Since the war had broken out, getting straight information out of Starfleet Command had become increasingly difficult. Admiral Leyton, Chief of Starfleet Operations, had a manic thing against 'leaks', no matter who was requesting the unfiltered information. "And why are you in Sector 001?"

She smiled wanly. "Long story sir, but regarding your first question, I don't know what to think. Things are very hectic right now, which hasn't left a lot of time for reflection. I was hoping to get your perspective?" Samson thinly smiled. He was one of the few flag officers Elizabeth trusted, and he was proud to have retained the talented *Sutherland* commander's trust. "Since you're not in the hornet's nest perhaps you can see things more clearly?"

"Well, we've received no information about the Klingons, Maquis, or Romulans making any moves against Earth," Samson said. "Or the Dominion. So, I'm as stumped as you are." His thoughts flashed back to his conversation with Defense Minister Haas and the secret reason for his visit to DS5. Samson didn't like not being

forthright with his friend, but she wasn't in the need to know circle and besides he didn't want to needlessly worry her. Shelby had enough on her plate right now.

Shelby frowned. "Well, that's not good."

"No it isn't," Samson admitted. "Have there been any information about additional strikes?"

"There are rumors flying, but nothing yet. That's another reason I called," the captain said. "We don't know how wide spread this is. The Lisbon attack could be the first strike and the relay hub at Ivor Prime could also be a target."

"Understood," Samson said. He paused as he saw a blinking light on his console. Rahul's voice issued over the room's intercom.

"Admiral, Defense Minister Haas is requesting a meeting with you at once." Shelby raised an eyebrow.

"Didn't know you were entertaining such a big VIP?" She joked.

"I wouldn't call it 'entertaining'," Samson said tightly. "I've got to take this, before the esteemed Minister blows a gasket."

Shelby nodded in understanding. "Sir, I've got my hands full here anyway. Just wanted to get your thoughts and give you a head's up, without the filter."

"Thank you Elizabeth," Samson smiled. "Take care of yourself."

"Only if you promise to do the same."

"Terrence is here and he won't let anything happen to me," the admiral said, eliciting a gentle sigh from the *Sutherland* captain.

"Between Terrence and Minister Haas I don't envy you," she teased.

"Ha, good bye Elizabeth," Samson chortled before he ended the subspace call. His bearing became stiff, his face solemn as he prepared for his meeting with Haas. He realized that his brief laugh with Captain Shelby might be the last one he would have in a long time.

Federation Two

Cestus System

"How was the game?" President Jaresh-Inyo asked, his placid demeanor the same as usual. "I heard the Pike City Pioneers are making a wonderful run at the pennant."

"Sir, how can you ask me about a game when you've just declared martial law?" Deputy President Phife asked incredulously. The portly Denobulan restrained himself from pulling out patches of his brown hair in exasperation at the man's coolness, or more honestly, resignation. "Do you really believe Leyton's assessment of Dominion sabotage is correct?"

"I've seen no proof otherwise not to believe him Phife," the President leaned forward, his hooded eyes receding deeper into his wrinkled face. "Have you?"

"No, no of course not," Phife said. "It's just you know how James is about the Dominion. They are his *bête noir*. He blames them for everything."

The President nodded, rubbing his chin. "That is true."

"What about a cloaked Dominion ship having something to do with this? Or that a whole cloaked Dominion fleet is on its way to Earth? As far as our intelligence was concerned, the Dominion didn't deploy cloaking technology. So, is the good admiral correct about that as well?"

"I don't know," Inyo said quietly. "I do have others, Admiral Hanson, looking into that matter."

"And what about Captain Sisko, Leyton's man," Phife asked, his hand starting to show. He didn't trust Leyton and he had been skeptical of the elevation of Sisko to head Starfleet Security. Though the captain had done an admirable job advancing Federation interests in the Bajoran sector, he was still a Leyton confederate. The old Denobulan pol couldn't help but feel that Leyton had been working to surround them with his loyalists for years. First, he had proven instrumental in placing that hawkish Conrad Haas as Defense Minister, and then he had used his position as Chief of Starfleet Operations to reassign his colleagues to key posts throughout the Fleet. Most of those reassignments, like Barzhan as Starfleet Academy commandant and Sisko had been above reproach, and criticism of them would sound petty. And Haas had been far more of a lightning rod in his public criticism of Inyo's defense policies.

Even Phife hadn't thought much about Leyton's maneuvering until now, when he realized he didn't have someone he could trust at Starfleet Command to give him an unvarnished viewpoint. At least the president had been able to reach out to Admiral Hanson.

"Admiral Leyton has done a fine job, and so has Sisko," the Grazerite intoned. "The Lisbon attack could've caused mass panic across the globe, but their quick reaction has prevented additional bloodshed and possibly prevented another attack."

Phife nodded in agreement. The president was there, and he wasn't. "What about this phantom fleet? Can we not be sure that it's Klingons or Romulans? Known rivals with such technology?"

"We can't be certain of anything at this point," Inyo replied. "We are still compiling information. However, a Dominion agent was responsible for the Antwerp attack and a Changeling infiltrator taunted both Leyton and Sisko only a few days ago, right here on Earth. That's enough circumstantial evidence to give the admiral the benefit of the doubt, and my support until things are clearer. And that is why I have also agreed with Admiral Leyton to have *Federation Two* redirected to one of our covert bases."

"Sir, I'm needed on Earth, with you," Phife protested. "And I would be there now too if Kedron hadn't suggested we take in a damn baseball game."

"No," the Grazerite shook his head. "It's better that you remain away from Earth in case the terrorists attempt to kill me. It's a good thing that Kedron,

Santiago, and several other Council members are aboard with you. If there is another attack, and I don't survive, there will be continuity of government."

"Sir....Inyo, I must protest," Phife began.

"Get in line old friend," the president smiled. "Trust me on this. Admiral Leyton has already dispatched the Yukon to escort you. He has also devised a special communication code for you to converse with the ship's commander, which I am sending to you now." The Grazerite briefly looked down as he transmitted the data across subspace. "If they don't follow the code, the admiral has also provided the Yukon's command overrides. If the ship's commander has been compromised, these command overrides will allow you to lower the Yukon's shields in order to," Inyo's stopped, his expression growing pained, "destroy her...My gods, how did it all come to this?"

For once the Deputy President didn't have an answer.

Deep Space Five Commanding Officer's Office

"I'm sorry about this," Defense Minister Haas lied. "But I think its best that I assume command of this station, per the state of emergency clause of the Starfleet Charter."

"That clause has never been invoked," Samson said, unable to douse his ire any longer. "Not during the Klingon War, not during the V'Ger or Probe crises, not during the Borg invasion. Never."

"And we haven't suffered such an attack on Earth since the Romulan War," Haas retorted. "These are unprecedented times that call for unprecedented measures."

"And President Inyo is in agreement with this?" Samson asked.

"He has instructed me to secure the subspace relay network. It is logical to assume that our entire communications network might be attacked next, with the Lisbon sabotage merely a prelude. Could you imagine what might happen if we lose the subspace network? The Klingons or Dominion could waltz right in, and gobble up a significant portion of our territory before we could marshal our forces. The very end of the Federation could be upon us."

"That's a little hyperbolic don't you think?" The admiral asked, his sarcasm thick with his growing anger and fear. Something was shifting under his feet, the universe was changing in some way that he hadn't thought possible and he didn't know what to do about it.

"I must do everything I can to carry out the President's orders," Haas pressed on, ignoring Samson's question if or maybe not hearing it at all. "I'm much of a micromanager. I will oversee the security measures on the station, and you can

continue with the day-to-day operations. You'll see that martial law isn't as bad as it sounds."

"So, you don't think I'm up to the job?" Samson asked.

"Sam, you're a scholar, not a warrior," Haas replied. "I've studied your record. You're great in peacetime, but you're not a wartime leader. Stick to the routine stuff and leave the rest to me."

Samson took the criticism in stride. It wasn't like he hadn't heard such remarks before, once even from his own departed wife. "I really think you're taking a hatchet to a problem that requires a scalpel. Sure, we can increase security at the subspace relay station on Ivor Prime, and around key systems onboard the station, but does that really require martial law?"

"Perhaps what you described doesn't, but the mandatory blood screenings will," Haas confided.

"What?"

"Mandatory blood screenings," Haas repeated. "It's the only way, well, the best way to discover if any Changelings are onboard the station, or one of the starships. Once we have secured the relay station and other important DS5 spots, I'm going to be running a systematic, thorough blood screening program. Everyone will get screened."

"And what about those who protest?" Samson said. "Like me for example."

Haas nodded in understanding. "I can see how some might be wary of blood screenings for a host of reasons, but I'll give them plenty of time to reconsider...in the holding cells."

"You wouldn't," Samson gasped. "You don't have the authority to summarily arrest people, Federation citizens or not."

"Read the provisions of the clause again," Haas said. "Now, Sam this is going to happen. President Inyo has already signed off on it. With your support it can go smoothly. The people here trust you, they know you won't lie to them, and if you say it's in their best interest the protests will be at a minimum."

"So, you want me to be the smiling face selling your intrusion into their privacy?"

"I want you to do your duty!" The Defense Minister shot back. "Now, will you...or not?"

"Are you threatening me?" Glover asked.

"No, I'm asking for your help," Haas said. "Deep down, you know this is a logical, rational course, whether you agree with it or not. I don't want to hurt anyone. I want to protect our citizens from harm and you do as well. Don't you?"

"Of course I do," Samson scoffed, "But..."

"There's no but," Haas interrupted. "Are you in or out?"

Samson paused, weighing his options. He knew that the emergency clause didn't give him many, and he was certain that if he didn't go along Haas would toss him in the brig. The admiral thought he might be able to stand against the Defense

Minister or prevent him from carrying martial law too far if was on the outside. "All right," he said quietly. Haas stood up, and Samson stiffly got out of his chair. Haas clapped the man on the shoulder and then grabbed one of his hands, pumping it strongly.

"You made the right choice Sam, you'll see."

"That's one thing we can agree on," the admiral mumbled, sick to his stomach but convinced he had made the right decision. At least for now.

Deep Space Five Ward Room

Tension crackled like electricity in the crowded room. Defense Minister Haas had declined Samson's offer to take his customary chair. The white-haired bureaucrat had chosen to stand, bisecting an already split screen displaying Rear Admiral Deneen Twelve, the unified head of Starfleet's Fourth Fleet, and Captain Grace, the commander of Starfleet forces in the Archanis System. Along with Admiral Glover, the officers formed a troika that oversaw the whole of the Typhon Sector and the much feared Borg vector, the likeliest pathway for Borg incursions from the Delta Quadrant. Deneen Twelve was a beautiful, fragile Eminian with olive skin and almond-shaped eyes. The small-boned woman's brow was crumpled with displeasure. Grace, a former Haas subordinate and POW, matched the woman's consternation. Senior officers from the *Cuffe*, *San Martin*, and *Powhatan* joined Samson's own. But Terrence's absence left a big void in Samson's eyes. The admiral wondered if his son even knew about Lisbon tragedy. He had tried contacting him several times, but had been unable to reach him. Samson had feared the worst, but knew he was probably exaggerating. Terrence had been adamant about spending as much time as possible with Jasmine, and he certainly wouldn't want to be distracted.

"You're all familiar with what has happened on Earth," Minister Haas intoned darkly. "At least five thousand dead as a result of the sabotage of the power grid." He paused, letting the number sink in again. "Many were patients in hospitals, or children....lost in a transporter malfunction," he said, his voice choking up. Though Samson knew that it was only two children that died, he was found himself in the thrall of Haas's emotional grasp, manipulative or not. "We must do all that we can to see that no more children die this day because of Dominion perfidy."

"So, Dominion involvement has been confirmed?" Captain Dalis asked.

"Yes," Haas said. "President Inyo informed me that Admiral Leyton's investigation into the sabotage turned up Dominion involvement."

"The news nets have so far been silent about the president's response to this," Deneen Twelve rasped. "What is he going to do?" She said, and Samson thought the woman's tone was strangely mocking.

"Good question," Captain My'zhark said. "We've got to do something about this. Got to respond in some fashion. Now is not the time to let something like this go unpunished."

"Is there ever a time?" Commander Kojo challenged, drawing a scowl from the Saurian captain. "Of course there will be a response. But first there has to be a target."

"There is," My'zhark flamed. "Perched in the Gamma Quadrant, ready to strike."

"So, what are you suggesting 'Zhark, that we go through the wormhole, phasers blazing?" Dalis replied. "That didn't work so well for the Obsidian Order or Tal Shiar. And how can we be certain that the Founders are to blame? Could it be a rogue operative or faction among them? We know so little of them, how can we be certain they act as one?"

"Captain Sisko's reports have provided ample proof that the Dominion is a dictatorship ruled by the Changelings. Nothing happens without their approval and they decide things in unison," My'zhark shot back.

"What proof does Admiral Leyton have that the Dominion was involved?" Lt. Meldin, the *Cuffe's* Security Chief, quietly asked.

"*Lieutenant* Meldin, the admiral didn't have time to lay out a legal case," Haas replied. "He's a little busy coordinating our defenses and advising the president right now. I take him at his word. Perhaps you should do the same."

"No," Samson spoke up, unable to remain silent any longer. "Lt. Meldin makes a valid point. Already Captain My'zhark is ready to declare war on the Dominion and I'm sure many others share his view, but without conclusive proof of Dominion involvement, we shouldn't be making rash judgments."

"And I assure you we want," Haas said. "But what we are going to do is implement a new security protocol at Deep Space Five and in the Fourth Fleet immediately per the president's orders."

Samson's disquiet grew as the Defense Minister outlined his plans. The looks around the table ran the gamut from relieved-My'zhark, to mildly disturbed-Dalis, pokerfaced-Ivyse, to defiant-Commander Rojas. Pedro stared at Samson, willing him to speak up, but the admiral shook his head. Now was not the time.

Pedro could hold his tongue no longer. Samson was proud of the engineer. "Is this really necessary? I can understand beefing up station security, but mandatory blood screenings? Don't you think that's invasive?"

No, I think it's being proactive," Haas countered. "I don't see why anyone would have any problem with being screened...unless they had something to hide."

"Perhaps invasion of privacy for starters," Lt. Ayres, from the *Powhatan*, chimed in.

"What about the order to observe the Cardassians and other 'suspicious' persons?" Lt. Commander Rojas asked, trying to keep his temper in check. "They've done nothing wrong and don't deserve to be singled out."

"I'm not singling them out," Haas said. "Keeping tabs on them will ensure their protection. You remember how passions can become inflamed sometimes when tragedies like this occur? Look, the President's orders give me the authority to temporarily detain people deemed suspicious. Would you rather I have them locked in the brig?"

Pedro looked again to Samson for support, but the admiral remained as silent as a statue. Rojas frowned, a light dimming in his eyes, and the admiral knew something had been lost between the men that he might not ever be able to restore. "No, I guess not," Rojas said.

"And if everyone cooperates, no will be detained," Haas promised. "Now, if no else has any additional questions, I have a few more things to discuss." Everyone retreated into somber quiet. After Haas finished the other two members of the troika signed off. The Defense Minister turned to Admiral Glover. "Care to add anything Sam?" Samson demurred. "All right then, you all have your assignments. I want each ship's security head to send down augments to Chief Mickelson's staff immediately. Dismissed."

"A word with you Mr. Haas," Samson said tightly.

"Of course Sam. What is it?"

"I want you to know that I am writing a letter of protest to the President for these draconian actions."

"Go ahead, but I think he's going to be busy for a while and might not get around to reading your letter for a few days," Haas almost smirked. Samson clenched his fists, pushing down a desire to strike the man.

"If you think things are really so serious, I need to send for Terrence. He isn't answering my calls. The *Cuffe* needs her captain in the event that something really does happen."

"I disagree," the Defense Minister said. "Sam you might be right. This could blow over in a couple days, so why bother the two lovebirds since they obviously want some alone time. Besides, I think the *Cuffe* will fare well under Commander Kojo, don't you?"

"She is a capable officer," Samson admitted. The Defense Minister clapped the admiral on the back. A chill ran down Samson's spine.

"We're in agreement then," Haas smiled. "Excellent. Look Sam, I know this is a big inconvenience for you. I'll try to stay out of your hair as best as possible, but I'm going to need a stateroom to oversee the new security procedures. Could you arrange something for me within the hour?"

"No problem," the admiral said, fighting hard not to say it through clenched teeth.

"Good man," Haas clapped Samson on the back again.

After the Defense Minister sauntered out of the door, Samson turned the console. Minutes later, T'Prell's eerily composed features appeared on the wall monitor's inset screen. "Sam, I knew you would call."

"T'Prell, what's really going on?"

Deep Space Five

Commander Ivyse's Quarters

"It's begun," she said. Zolik's scowl deepened in reaction. "So, what are we going to do about it?" Ivyse prodded.

"Nothing," the man said, his tone carefully neutral.

"Nothing?" She asked, incredulous. "Admiral Leyton's actually made a move. This coup thing is a real actuality, and we're to do nothing?"

"That's what I said," Zolik replied, annoyed. "The Directorate...is torn."

"Torn?"

"Some of the directors think a more military-oriented government might be what we need right now. Others feel that martial law is the antithesis of what the Federation stands for."

"They would be right," Ivyse said. "And what about Starfleet Intelligence? What does Admiral Fujisaki have to say about this?"

"He and Admiral Uhura are hunting down leads on the saboteurs, lining up any evidence they can find. They haven't figured it out yet. They aren't as paranoid as us," her lover's joke fell flat.

"So Zol, where do you stand?"

"That isn't our decision to make," he replied. "We're to stand down until otherwise ordered, understood?"

Ivyse cursed before replying, "Yes."

Zolik gave her a good once over. "Ivy, don't do anything rash. You can't be exposed, not at a time like this."

"I'm sorry, we're breaking up," Ivyse said, before she ended the transmission.

USS San Martin

Captain's Ready Room

Lt. Commander Moncur spoke rapidly, "Sir, we have intercepted two encoded messages from Deep Space Five, both within the last fifteen minutes." The large simianoid handed the datapad to Captain My'zhark. The Saurian's bulbous eyes narrowed almost to slits as he read the report. Minister Haas had instructed the ship to monitor all communications from the station. During the inspection of the relay station, his Chief Engineer had successfully imparted a subroutine into the relay station's primary matrix that would reroute all station communiqués through the *San Martin's* shipboard computer before going out. The captain had ordered his communications officers to be alert to coded or hidden messages."

"Was the Comm Officer able to decipher the messages?"

"No sir," grumbled Moncur, his disappointment evident. "Shall we inform Minister Haas?"

"Of course," My'zhark said. "The fact that two secret messages were issued by both the station's commanding and strategic operations officers is extremely intriguing, perhaps nefarious. We would be derelict not to inform the minister. See to it at once."

Moncur bowed. "Aye sir."

Runabout Rhone **Oceanus IV spaceport**

"Sir, we'll head back immediately," Glover said. He was already powering up the ship's systems. Jasmine had gone aft to personally check the status of the ship's propulsion system. Terrence had asked the gifted engineer to modify the runabout's nacelle intake manifolds to get a slight bump in its warp factor. When Jasmine had expressed shocked praise at Glover's suggestion, he reluctantly had admitted that he had gotten the idea from Pedro, during one of their stickier missions in the Archanis System.

"That won't be necessary Mr. Glover," Defense Minister Haas smoothly cut through Terrence's reverie. "At least you two can have fun. You deserve it."

"Thank you sir," Terrence remarked, but in his imagination he was already back on the bridge of his ship, issuing orders, taking action and solving whatever the immediate problem was at hand. "But with all due respect, I should be with my crew. They'll need me right now."

"You're correct about that," Haas said. "However, Commander Kojo seems to have everything in order. Listen Terrence, I used to be a young man too, anxious to get out there, to right wrongs, to serve the Federation every waking second, and I don't regret my decisions. However, I also knew those decisions had consequences, a marriage in shambles, an estranged daughter...." The man's voice drifted off and Terrence sat, stunned at Haas's honesty. The Defense Minister shook his head, as if waking from a dream. It took him a few seconds to get his bearings. "Now, where was I?" He smiled slowly, his face reddening. "A bit too much information eh?"

"No sir," Glover said too quickly. Haas laughed.

"I take it you're a man that keeps confidences," the Defense Minister said, and the captain nodded. "Good. Please keep that between us. Listen Captain, we don't know how long this thing might last. It could blow over tomorrow, or in a couple hours for all we know. I don't see the need to bring you back when we've got things under control."

"To be frank sir, does my father share that assessment?" Haas's smile faded. His pursed his lips.

"Probably not," the man conceded. "However, we have an understanding."

"May I speak with him?"

"Not at the moment," Haas said. "He is extremely busy and we are restricting external communications. I decided to tweak the procedures a bit because Sam had been so concerned about you and Lt. Mendes. I wanted to assuage his concerns."

Glover forced himself to nod. "Thank you for that."

"Captain, if we need you, we will call you," the Defense Minister said. "Otherwise I suggest you stay put." Terrence had given enough orders to understand when he heard one. "Understood?"

"Clearly."

Deep Space Five Medical Bay One

Dr. N'Vea massaged her fingers. She had stopped counting how many hypos she had applied hours ago. She held up the latest capsule, filled with dark red blood. The Rigelian shook it, waiting to see if the liquid would revert to the amber-colored gelatinous material that the Founders were made of. The large Talarian male she had drawn the sample from looked pensive. She doubted it was from fear that he would be discovered, probably discomfort at a woman being in control of any aspect of his life. After a minute the blood remained unchanged. "He's clear," she said.

The hulking Moncur, the security chief from the *San Martin*, grunted and allowed the Talarian to pass. N'Vea wished that Mickelson was here. The various ships' security chiefs were taking turns supervising the crowds that were being examined, and they were working in shifts. The *Cuffe's* Meldin was assisting the station's Junior Chief Medic in Medical Bay Two. Ayres and DS5's own Mickelson were off duty. She missed Mick, and wished he were here with her instead of the intimidating Gumato.

There was something more feral about the man than his appearance and it made her uncomfortable. He seemed a bit too eager to root out any Changelings that might be among them, though she doubted they would accomplish anything more than intruding on people's privacy and being a nuisance. Her unease wasn't helped by the soldiers, armed with rifles, ringing the medical bay. It felt obscene. This was a place for healing, and those weapons that caused so much injury and death didn't belong here.

But what could she do. Even Mick and the admiral were going along with this madness. And she couldn't deny that there was a real, palpable fear out there due to the tragedy on Earth. Perhaps in some warped way each person she cleared was helping lessen that fear. It wasn't much comfort, but it was the only silver lining she could pick out. N'Vea sighed, reached down and grabbed another hypo. "Next," she called.

Deep Space Five

Habitat Module Four

"What are you doing here?" Garry Mickelson whispered harshly. He peeked around the corner, hoping that no one heard him. The corridor remained empty.

"Same thing you are," Pasha Ayres shot back, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Being a paranoid ass."

"Ha," Mickelson snorted. "I'm doing my job."

"You're spying on those Cardassians," Ayres said. "They've already been tested. They're not 'shifters.'"

"But irregularities did show up in their blood work," Mickelson said. "Something's not adding up."

"Massive exposure to theta radiation might be the cause," Pasha rejoined. "Is that what your Chief Medic said?"

"So?" Mickelson shrugged. "I don't trust them, and I'm going to watch them until my next shift starts. An old fashioned stakeout."

"I thought you would say that," Ayres said. "That's why I got a little shuteye before beaming back over. Count me in."

USS Maverick

Minos Korva System

2363

Captain Conrad Haas sat in the command chair as if it were a throne. He leaned forward slightly, his gaze predacious over the sight on the main viewer. It was a Cardassian patrol ship, *Hideki*-class, and he was sure that it had been the culprit behind the attack on Minos Korva. The Cardassians had launched an attack on the planet's Federation outpost only hours before, and the *Maverick* had been tearing through space hell bent on finding them. And they finally had, right before the skunks could disappear in the large, violet hued McAllister Nebula demarcating Federation and Cardassian space.

The *Maverick* was the first responder to the massacre, and Haas had beamed down most of his medical staff, other nonessential personnel to help with rescue efforts, and a mother lode of medical supplies, before warping off in search of the perpetrators. He was sure that some of his detractors among the Admiralty would bemoan that he didn't stick around, but Haas was confident that his CMO could do a better job saving lives than he could. Plus, he wanted to teach the snakeheads a lesson. Haas had never been lulled by the fitful nature of the Border Wars between the Federation and Cardassian Union, a string of off again, on again conflicts that had been waged since the Forties. He knew that the Cardies were just biding their time, building their arsenal and waiting for the right time to strike. Minos Korva, like

Setlik III the year before, was a test, a test of the Federation's resolve, and Haas was resolved to pass that test.

"That ship is spewing a fine trail of plasma," Commander Albert Grace replied, frowning. "Almost like breadcrumbs." Haas knew that his First Officer had misgivings. He felt that the *Maverick* had been able to pick up the trail of the *Hideki* far too easily, that the Cardassians had done nothing to cover their tracks, but Conrad had argued that maybe they weren't able to. Before the outpost's defenses had been overwhelmed, they had gotten off a few shots, and it appeared that at least one of them was a lucky one.

"Shoot a glancing blow off their bow," he ordered. "That should give them pause." Lt. Commander Kasinda, his Tactical Officer carried out his orders with her usual efficiency. After half a decade serving with the tough Troyian, Haas expected nothing less. The underpowered blast wrapped the dull brown half-oval shaped hull of the patrol ship.

"The ship is dropping out of warp," Operations Officer Baum replied. Haas glanced at Kasinda, sharing a smile.

"Hail that vessel," he barked, the smile replaced by a well practiced glower.

"Aye sir," Communications Officer T'Sian crisply replied. "We're receiving an incoming message."

"On screen," Haas replied curtly. The visage of a perturbed, pock-marked faced Cardassian filled the screen.

"Why did you attack my vessel?" He demanded.

"What are you doing in Federation space?" Haas asked.

"We were having a problem with our navigational instruments," the Cardassian remarked smoothly, "It has been corrected and we have set a course for Cardassian space. An escort is not needed."

Haas laughed. "You really expect me to buy that line of bull? A Federation outpost was just attacked. Eyewitness accounts and sensor data indicate that Cardassians were responsible. Lo and behold, you guys just happen to be in Federation space around the same time of the attack. What a coincidence."

"I suppose so," the Cardassian said.

"I want you to drop out of warp now and prepare to be boarded," Haas ordered. "Once we determine that your ship didn't participate in the attack, you can be on your way."

"Unacceptable," the Cardassian replied. "I will not allow you to board my vessel."

"They are powering up their weapons systems," Baum informed him.

"Thanks Don," Haas replied before shrugging, a nonchalant expression totally at odds with how keyed up he was, "Okay, it appears our friends want to do it the hard way." He motioned for T'Sian to cut communications. He hopped out of his seat, and turned on a dime to face Kasinda, who was stationed aft of the command chair. "Make him see the error of his ways Kasi." Spears of phased energy were loosed

from the ship's forward phaser banks. The smaller, faster *Hideki* did a decent job evading most of the barrage.

Lt. Commander Kasinda muttered a curse, before inputting several new attack patterns. Haas trusted the woman enough to give her leeway in that regard. He turned to his First Officer. "Has Chief Limon finished the scan?"

Commander Albert Grace leaned over to him. "Yes sir. One of the several ion trails indentified in orbit of Minos Korva match the exhaust of the *Hideki*. It was there." The dark-skinned man frowned.

"I don't like that look Al," Haas replied. "Spit it out."

"I know what you want to do Conrad," Grace said soft enough so that only the captain could hear him. "We should bring those Cardassians to justice."

"We are," he promised. "They just won't be alive to see it."

"Sir, what about the other ion trails?" Grace asked. "Apprehending these guys might lead us to the rest of the killers?"

Conrad had to admit that his XO made sense. "Or those guys could be long gone by now and this is the last chance we got to exact some payback. We've got to send the Cardassians a message."

"Putting these guys on trial would do that," Grace countered, his voice rising with heightened emotion.

"Damn," Kasinda's curse rung off the walls of the bridge, prompting both Haas and Grace to glance in the woman's direction.

She looked at them, disappointment lining her pale green face. "The *Hideki* has successfully evaded us."

"An amazing feat of flying," marveled Flight Control Officer Lajaan.

"Impossible," Grace breathed. Everyone looked at the screen. The patrol ship was jetting toward the pulsating, iridescent nebula. Haas knew that if the *Hideki* made it into the nebula they would never be able to track it. The various gases suffusing the nebula would wreak havoc on their sensors.

He hurriedly opened a line to Chief Engineer Limon. "Warp Seven!" He snarled. "Prepare a tractor beam. We'll latch onto it when we overshoot the vessel. Limon, Baum, make it happen!" The *Korolev*-class vessel shot forward so suddenly that it took a few seconds for the ship's inertial dampening system to adjust. When the ship jerked, it knocked the captain back against his seat. His hip banged against the unforgiving seat, and Haas winced at the pain. Commander Grace hopped out of his to help set Conrad upright again, but the captain waved him off. He used his upper arm strength to push himself up, twisting his body midway so that he slid into the chair. "Once we have them, Lajaan I want you to pull up, drop out of warp, and we'll release the tractor beam."

"Release the beam sir?" Lajaan asked, clearly perplexed by Haas's strategy.

"Yes," he said with supreme confidence. "It will shake them up pretty good. While they are disoriented we will take out their weapons and propulsion systems and then they'll be sitting ducks."

"Oh." Was all the Capellan said in reply.

"We'll overshoot the Cardassian vessel in five seconds," Lt. Baum interrupted.

"Ready the tractor beam," Haas ordered. "And Lajaan keep her steady." The Capellan silently nodded, her attention squarely on the task at hand. Doing anything except maintaining a consistent course at warp speed carried a host of risks. What Haas was asking of his crew now was no exception. Attaching a tractor beam while at warp, especially to a vessel that's moving at lesser warp speed, could cause enough stress to destroy the *Hideki* and critically injure the *Maverick's* systems, and the last thing Haas wanted to do was impair his ship so close to Cardassian space. "Do it now Mr. Baum," he ordered.

"Tractor beam activated and attached sir," Baum said, with obvious relief. The ship rattled.

"Cardassian vessel is firing on us," Kasinda said. "Minimal damage."

"Lajaan, come about now," Haas ordered. He held on to his armrest as the ship groaned under the stress he had ordered heap upon it. Lajaan, perhaps a bit dramatically, leaned into the turn. Once it was complete, the captain ordered the ship released. It spun wildly away from the *Maverick*.

"Target weapons and propulsion, full phaser spread," he ordered, struggling to hold down his lunch. Beams lashed out, striking the *Hideki* until they overwhelmed its shields.

"Cardassian vessel is hailing us," Baum informed them.

"On screen," Haas ordered. The scarred Cardassian glared at them wild-eyed. "Ready to surrender now?" The captain asked confidently.

"I should be asking you that question," he sneered.

"Captain," Baum said in a rush. "Sensors are detecting a two *Galor*-class cruisers and another *Hideki* emerging from the nebula."

"Did you really think I would be traveling alone Captain Haas," the Cardassian replied. Haas blanched.

"How did you know my name?" He demanded.

"We know a lot about you," the Cardassian grinned. "And we intend to learn a lot more." The ship shook again.

"The three Cardassian vessels have opened fire," Kasinda said tightly.

"Surrender now," the Cardassian said.

"Fat chance," Haas quipped. He ordered communications cut. "Raise shields, charge all phaser banks and load all photon torpedo tubes. I want to hit every Cardassian ship in sight."

While his bridge crew was complying, Haas glanced at Grace. "Don't even think about saying I told you so," he warned.

"I wouldn't dare, not until we get out of this at least," Grace replied. "And you do have a plan to get us out of here, right?"

"Don't I always," Haas grinned.....

“Computer freeze program,” Conrad Haas replied. He walked over to his photonic doppelganger, frozen in time. He ran his hand through the simulacrum’s chestnut brown locks, and then ran a hand through his own white mane. He patted his less than taut midsection and compared it to his past ripcord body that fit snugly in the red and black uniform that he knew he could never fit in today. Haas appraised his counterpart’s rakish grin. “You really thought it was going to be easy, like it had been so many times before,” he shook his head. “What a fool I was. I can’t believe it’s been so long,” he said, feeling extremely older. “Computer, run Internment Program-Haas Five.”

Internment Camp

Lazon II

2367

Conrad Haas hung from the poles, his arms disjointed and swollen. The frigid air in the room prickled his naked flesh. He had been strung up so long this time that he was thankfully almost at a place beyond pain.

Unfortunately, spider-webs of agony crisscrossed his body at that instant, their locus a demonic device that had been inserted just above his heart. His body spasmed and then he sagged, placing more pressure on his arms. “Glad to see your still among the living Prisoner Eight,” the familiar voice stoked fear and anger in Conrad. He struggled to lift his head so that he could see the bastard in the eye when he approached.

Gul Rejak came up from behind him, with his customary oily smugness. His torturer held the damnable oval-shaped controller that activated the pain inducer that had he had used so effectively in times past. With a dry, scaly hand, he grabbed Haas hard by the chin and gave him a once over. The captain tried to pull his head away, but Rejak held up his controller. Haas hated himself for stopping. Rejak continued his inspection. Eventually he said, “He hasn’t been too damaged,” he replied. Conrad heard other footfalls.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” another voice, that sounded faintly familiar.

“What’s....happening?” He squeaked through cracked, blood-caked lips. Another Cardassian came around from behind Haas. The captain squinted.

“You?”

The scarred Cardassian smiled grimly. “You remember?” Haas nodded.

“We were never formally introduced. Gul Aldur Keshet, Twelfth Order, but I was a mere Gil when I assisted in the capture of your vessel. That action led to my promotion.”

“Glad to help,” Haas quipped.

Keshet didn’t reply. He turned sharply to Rejak. “Release him,” he ordered, his distaste for Rejak unmistakable.

Rejak scowled, and then slowly walked over to his desk. Conrad felt the presence of others. Cold, reptilian hands gently grabbed his forearms. "Get on with it," Keshet said. Rejak snorted, before he pressed a button on the terminal on his desk. The cuffs that had held Haas were released with a ringing click. His fall was halted. The two men at his side, held him, and he leaned against them, their pointed, clamshell cuirasses poking him. A Cardassian female, also dressed in military garb, stepped forward with a rough-hewn brown tunic.

"Help him into this," Keshet told the woman. While the two men continued to hold him aloft, she dressed him.

"Where....where are you taking me?"

"Fortune smiles upon you," Keshet replied. "You have been released, per our continuing peace talks with the Federation."

"What?" Haas couldn't believe it.

"You will join the others and transported to Minos Korva," the gul informed him.

"Others?"

"Despite what Gul Rejak might have told you," Keshet paused to glower at Rejak, "Not all of your crew was killed during the taking of your vessel or during incarceration."

"Oh God," Haas said, sobbing painfully, overcome with relief. At least his rashness hadn't cost everyone their lives. "Thank you." He said, hating himself for saying it, but unable to deny the gratitude he felt upon hearing that some of them made it.

Keshet was speechless. He grunted. "Very well." He motioned to his guards. "Take him to our ship."

Deep Space Five

Holosuite One Crawlspace

"You are certain that the station's security chief didn't detect our departure through the circulation shaft?" Glinn Chanet asked.

"Of course," Lt. Irek said, barely masking his annoyance. "I'm not an amateur at this."

"Could've fooled me," Chanet replied harshly. "The theta leak was supposed to be far less."

"Then it would've have been convincing," Irek retorted.

"But at the very near cost of our sanity?" Chanet remarked.

"We are sane," Irek said. "It worked, and it mitigated much suspicion on the part of the station's crew."

"Not all," Chanet said. "Mickelson doesn't appear convinced."

"It no longer matters," Irek replied. "All that matters now is the mission."

"On that we agree," she said. She turned back toward the grid screen over the crawlspace. Irek sidled up beside her. They watched Haas walk around a good facsimile of a Cardassian interrogation chamber. "He's got quite an eye for detail."

"He should," Irek shrugged. "He spent several years as a guest of the Cardassian Militia."

"Guest?" Chanet chuckled. "I don't think he would see it that way."

"Does it matter?" Irek said. He snapped together the pieces of his rifle, and checked the charge. "May I take position now?" He asked. Chanet moved aside, and Irek moved the disruptor node through one of the grid's holes. He waited for the order.

"I wonder if this is the best course?" Chanet asked. "Perhaps we should let Haas take down the Federation. They don't support the Cardassian people, only the ineffectual Detepa Council."

"The Militia has sworn its allegiance to the Council," Irek replied. "And President Inyo's government supports the Council. A regime change at this moment, placing reactionary forces in control of the Federation, Haas particularly, will deny us the one ally we have in our war against the Klingons." Irek paused to get Haas in his sights. "Even now, with the Federation thrown in crisis by his hands, Haas returns to his imprisonment. He's stuck there, he's never left that cage and he won't stop until he has engaged us."

"Perhaps," Chanet said. "But it doesn't matter. We've received our orders and they are to save the Federation from itself. Prepare to fire."

Irek shifted his rifle, getting Haas back in his crosshairs. His finger curled around the rifle's trigger.

"Minister Haas! Minister Haas get down!" Irek hesitated as a voice shrilled in the holographic chamber. He saw Lt. Ayres rushing into the room. "Get down!" She shouted again, prompting Haas to look around wildly for threats to his person.

"Take the shot," Chanet hissed. Irek took the shot, and his shot found purchase. Unfortunately it sliced through the shoulder of a flying Lt. Ayres. The woman crashed into Haas pinning him on the ground.

"Drop your weapons!" Mickelson's voice rang in the cramped crawlspace. Gil Chanet turned, pulling her pistol. Mickelson fired and her body was covered by a halo of golden energy. Irek dropped his rifle and grabbed at his sidearm. "Don't," Mickelson warned. The man was on one knee in the crawlspace, his aim steady. Irek moved his hand from his sidearm. The human fired anyway.

Deep Space Five
Detention Center
One Hour Later...

Lt. Commander Garry Mickelson stood grimly over the kneeling Dr. N'Vea. The Rigelian deftly ran another scan over the two prone figures on the cell's floor. She looked up, her face creased with concern. "They're both dead. Poison."

"Are you sure foul play wasn't involved?" Moncur asked. Along with the San Martin Security Chief, Lieutenants Meldin and Ayres were in the cell.

"It appears that both Cardassians ingested poison capsules hidden inside hollowed out teeth," N'Vea replied. "All signs point to suicide."

"I thought your team had inspected the prisoners?" Moncur turned to Mickelson. "I knew I should've let my men handle it."

"Are you implying that we didn't do our jobs?" Garry shot back, angered by the Gumato's accusation of incompetence, or something more sinister.

"Perhaps your incompetence was on purpose," Moncur vocalized Mickelson's fear. The charge energized him. He stepped toward hulking Gumato, staring up at him. Moncur bared his fangs and flexed his huge biceps.

"How about you say that in my face?" He challenged. Lt. Ayres rushed to Mickelson's side, but it was N'Vea who placed a restraining hand on his forearm.

"Cool it Mick," N'Vea said. "Comport yourself with some dignity. I'm sure that Security Chief Moncur isn't implying anything untoward, correct Commander?" She looked up at the Gumato as well.

"That remains to be seen," was all he said. "I will bring in my forensics specialists to conduct their own investigation," Moncur said. It wasn't a request.

"Do what you got to do," Mickelson said, "And I'll be waiting for my apology when they're finished."

Deep Space Five Old Commodore's Office

"Isn't this proof enough that the extra security measures were needed?" Haas groused.

"The security measures were designed to stop Changelings," Admiral Glover countered. "Neither of these Cardassians were shapeshifters and didn't confess to a relationship with the Dominion."

"Because of their convenient deaths," Haas pointed out. "Which were a little too convenient if you catch my drift?"

"No, I don't," Samson's expression hardened. "Spell it out for me."

"I have reason to suspect that Mr. Mickelson might have been compromised," Haas replied.

"What?" Samson replied, nearly choking with exasperation. "The chief just saved your life."

"Believe me I am grateful," Haas replied. "But a security check on the *Powhatan* has revealed that Lt. Ayres has been reviewing a lot of information about me in the last couple days. I know that she and Mr. Mickelson have grown close. And

they were conveniently on the scene to stop the Cardassian assassins, who just as conveniently died in the custody of Mickelson's men. Until I can ascertain why she was researching me or if Mickelson has been compromised, they are both persons of interest. I've placed Mr. Moncur in charge of the investigation."

"This is insane," Samson replied. "I must protest."

"Do what you must," Haas said. "But I'm in charge and this is the way it's going to go. I would rather have your help in this instead of resistance. Listen, perhaps I can leave his questioning to you. I understand that Moncur, despite his effectiveness, can be a little gruff."

"Gruff?" Samson scoffed. "The man is a brute."

"That's a bit insensitive don't you think?"

"It has nothing to do with his appearance or species, merely his behavior. How he become a senior officer is a surprise to me."

"Simple," Haas shrugged. "He gets results."

"Well, so does Chief Mickelson, and the insinuation that he would ever have been involved in this is outrageous."

"It's obvious that I don't know the man as well as you," Haas conceded. "You might be correct, but there are lingering questions. How did he know what the Cardassians were planning to do?"

"He's already told us," Samson grated. "He had a hunch and he followed it up."

"Hmm," Haas replied. "Sounds a bit too convenient to me."

"Not if you knew Mick."

"Well, I look forward to getting to know him very well, very soon."

USS Powhatan

Captain's Ready Room

Dalis's face flushed crimson with anger. "On whose authority did you detain Pasha? It certainly wasn't mine!"

Lt. Commander Helen Reese, her First Officer, stood rigidly at attention. "Sir, Minister Haas had concerns about Lt. Ayres little side investigation into his background. He was concerned that she might uncover something that would prove problematic to our plans."

"And he chose to share his concerns with you, and not with me?" Dalis asked, aghast.

"Well, sir....he knew how attached you are to the senior staff, and he was afraid that your reluctance might be a sticking point. He needed her detained, quickly before she could cause more damage."

"The woman just saved his life," Dalis said. "I'm sure whatever Pasha was doing can be explained."

"I am too sir, but perhaps it's best to keep her under lock and key until after the Minister has returned to Earth."

"I don't think Pasha will be that cooperative," Dalis scoffed.

"If she is unconscious, she won't be a problem," Reese said. "I have placed her in a stasis tube."

"What?" Dalis was appalled. "Don't you think that was extreme?"

"Sir, Minister Haas wanted her out the way and I wanted her not to be hurt, so I thought it was the best course."

Dalis stared at the woman for over a minute. Commander Reese maintained eye contact, her expression impassive. "She wasn't hurt when you apprehended her was she?"

"No," Reese shook her head. "Dr. Royce took care to administer a mild sedative to Pasha's medication. She fell asleep and we placed her in stasis, no problem."

"No problem?" Dalis rubbed her temples. "How can you be so blasé about this Helen? This slope just keeps getting more slippery."

"Sir, we're doing the right thing," Reese said, with no hesitation. "It's unfortunate that some lives have been lost, and others injured, but we've got to keep the big picture in mind. If the admiral is successful, the whole of the Federation will be strengthened because of it, and it will ward off the Dominion."

"I truly hope that's the case," Dalis said, placing her aching head in her hands. "But sometimes....I doubt."

"Now is not the time for doubts," Reese replied, and the *Powhatan* captain was certain she detected a warning in the woman's tone. She looked up at her First Officer. The expression on the woman's face was neutral. She had served with Helen for years, and the woman had saved her life several times. Helen had even asked Dalis to officiate her wedding. She had never doubted Helen's loyalty...until now.

"Dismissed," she said, placing her head back in her hands. She rued the day Leyton had ever approached her, but most of all, she despised the vengefulness that had led her to this precipice.

Deep Space Five

Admiral's Private Quarters

For the first time in a long time Admiral Glover felt his age. Barely being able to keep his head lifted or to continue speaking, he asked, "This can't be true? Can it?" But he knew it was. And he knew that Conrad Haas was involved. What else could explain the man's dictatorial behavior and the way he had splintered Samson's staff, taking control of the station and placing Garry Mickelson under arrest on trumped up charges?

T'Prell's frown looked like it had been permanently etched across her face. "I'm confident about my sources. Deputy President Phife and half of the Federation Council have been taken to an undisclosed location. It appears that several high-ranking admirals, including Admiral Hanson, one of the few independent voices investigating the sabotage, have disappeared as well. We've also heard reports that Captains Sisko, Owens, and Shelby are following trails that lead not to the Dominion, but to a reactionary faction in Starfleet itself as the real saboteurs."

"God no," Samson breathed. "This is just like Admiral Cartwright." At Starfleet Academy, Samson had poured over the then recently declassified accounts of Admiral Cartwright, the Chief of Starfleet Operations, and his role in the despicable assassination of Klingon Chancellor Gorkon and his framing of Captain James Kirk, two events that had almost thrown the Federation into war with the Klingons. One of T'Prell's eyebrows arched sharply at the reference.

"The Gorkon assassination," she replied, a hint of emotion in her voice. "I had just joined the V'Shar during that period. The idea of such a conspiracy gestating inside Starfleet, along with the idea of a young Vulcan being one of its instruments, remains almost too shocking to fathom...even almost a century later." The woman paused, staring right through the screen. "And I am concerned that it's happening all over again."

Deep Space Five

Old Commodore's Office

Defense Minister Haas read the information on the datapad again. "Captain My'zhark you really don't think that Sam Glover, or Commander Ivyse are threats do you?"

"Sir, I don't know what to think." The Saurian was standing over the Defense Minister, looking down at him with such expectation that it unsettled Haas. It made the man wonder what forces had been unleashed in the last few hours and could they ever be placed back in Pandora's Box. "But the fact remains that both Admiral Glover and Commander Ivyse made unauthorized, encrypted communications to unknown recipients at a time of grave peril. A second communiqué was intercepted from Admiral Glover's quarters only a few minutes ago. At the very least they need to be detained and interrogated."

"If I make that move, I can't go back from it," Haas intoned.

"Sir, I've known you for many years, hesitation isn't your strong suit," My'zhark replied. "If either one of them are a threat, or gods forbid a Changeling, we can't leave them in secured places where they could do terrible harm not only to this station's denizens but the entire subspace relay."

Haas grinned. "You've got it all figured out huh? You should've been a lawyer instead of captain 'Zhark."

"The law is a pastime of mine," the Saurian admitted, punctuating the admission with a small bow. "In any event sir we can't allow Admiral Glover, Commander Ivyse, or Captain Glover an opportunity to wreck our plans."

"I'm way ahead of you on the Captain Glover front," Haas said. "Have Moncur round up the other two."

Meropis Café

Oceanus IV

"Don't be so glum," Jasmine lightly touched Terrence's chin and lifted it up. She smiled at him, the waning sunlight catching its brilliance. He rubbed her hand, her rich chocolate skin smooth beneath his fingers.

"I'm sorry Jazz, it's just that this feels wrong," he admitted. Jasmine looked around the small café, perched on a cliff overlooking a perfect azure sea.

"What's wrong about *this*?" she asked, laughing. "This is about the closest thing to paradise you're ever going to get."

"You know what I mean," Glover hated his sour mood, but he couldn't help himself. A knife was twisting in his gut. He didn't like being cut off from his father, and he liked being cut out of the action almost as much. "Martial law on Earth for starters. Now, I can't even talk to my Dad, or Ben."

"Terrence I know how you feel," Jasmine reached out and grabbed his hands, squeezing them. "But maybe what Minister Haas said was for the best. This thing might be over soon. And I know you've got confidence in the admiral to keep Haas in line. I do."

The captain grinned. "Yeah, I guess you're right." Making Jasmine worried wouldn't change things so Terrence did his best to bury his feelings of concern. They ordered and ate, talking about everything except the most important thing going on in their lives. Despite that, Glover was pleased. He had been dreaming of spending time with Jasmine like this, and he finally got his wish. But there was another thing nagging him. "Jazz," he started slowly, "Are you sure that things are over between you and Lt. Bhudevi?"

Jasmine's luster dimmed. "Terrence, I thought we were through talking about that. Bhu and I are friends, and we will remain so."

"Jasmine, there are different kinds of friends, and I have to know what type you will be."

"The kind you don't have to concern yourself about, okay?" The engineer said, a bit too defensively for Terrence's taste. He wasn't satisfied with her answer, but he didn't want to spoil the evening even more than he had already.

"Perhaps we should go, and take another walk along the beach. It'll give us a chance to clear our heads," he suggested. Jasmine looked at him suspiciously for a few seconds before slowing nodding in agreement. Glover glanced around, looking for the waiter. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed an Yridian studiously look

away from him, shrinking in his seat by the bar. Immediately Terrence's hackles rose. Something was amiss.

"Excuse me," he said, before hopping out of his seat. He made his way to the bar. The Yridian looked up, saw him coming, and shrieked. The small alien held up his sleeve, the clothe falling away to reveal a wrist communicator. He screamed into it.

Terrence began to run, and startled patrons hastily got out of his way. He snatched the Yridian before he could bolt. The café was abuzz with curiosity and dread. "Terrence, what's going on?" Jasmine asked.

Terrence held the skittish man up. "How about our friend here tell us why he's been watching us and who he was just talking to?"

"Leave me alone!" The Yridian squealed. "Stop accosting me!"

"I haven't even started," Glover said, pressing down on the man's wrist. "But you're trying my patience."

"Hey, leave him alone!" Glover heard a few scattered voices and grumbles. "Leave him alone!" A booming voice cut through the crowd. A hulking, four-armed Terellian strode forth, an attractive platinum haired Nuvian hanging onto one of his arms.

"Leave them be Marav," she was saying to no avail. "This isn't your fight." Marav roughly pulled away from her.

"That's my call to make woman," he said, his nostrils flaring. Terrence turned toward the man, but kept his grip on the struggling Yridian.

"Perhaps you should heed your friend's advice," Glover said. "This doesn't concern you."

"It does now," Marav said.

"You promised no fighting on our anniversary," the Nuvian whined. "Are you going to break that promise?"

The Yridian nodded vigorously. "If you do sir, I will make it worth your while."

"If you do, I'm gone Marav," the Nuvian declared.

"You can buy a dozen just like her with what I will pay you," the Yridian promised. Glover twisted the man's wrist, causing him to scream in pain.

Marav charged, running headlong into a bottle. It shattered over his face, jagged pieces of glass lacerating his flesh. He crumbled to the ground, frantically checking to see if anything had pierced an eye. The Nuvian knelt beside him, helping him pick the glass out of his face. "What did I tell you," she chided.

Glover looked at Jasmine, completely floored by the hard breathing woman. She held the remnant of the bottle in both hands. "Damn Jazz, thanks." The engineer merely nodded, unable to speak. "Now, who are you and who did you call?"

The Yridian writhed futilely before Terrence slapped him across the face. He asked again, and he could feel the Yridian starting to break. Before the man could speak, several shafts of red light accompanied by a familiar whine filled the room.

Three armor-clad, helmeted Breen appeared. The tallest Breen stepped forward. He looked down at Terrence, his visor a bright green slash. He spoke, his words a garbled mishmash that eventually resolved into a rough approximation of Federation standard, "Captain Terrence Glover, I believe you've been asking about me."

Deep Space Five Admiral's Private Quarters

When the door chime rang, Admiral Glover knew he had run out of time. "Damn," he muttered. He hadn't expected them to be on him so fast.

"Admiral Glover, are you in there sir?" It was the guttural voice of Moncur, the *San Martin* security chief. "Admiral?" The door began to open. Haas had been given access to the station's key systems per issuance of the emergency measures. Samson glanced at the phaser on his desk. He could try to shoot his way out, but how far could he go before they caught up to him? And how would that play into whatever charges they would make against him?

He hit the send button on the subspace message. And then he placed the phaser under a stack of papers. As the doors whined open, the admiral stood up calmly, and smoothed the front of his uniform tunic. Moncur swept into the room, his weapon draw. "Admiral Glover," the Gumato said with a disturbing relish, "You are hereby under arrest."

Deep Space Five Commander Ivyse's Quarters

Though he knew the feeling was perverse, Lt. Meldin wished that he had been assigned the mission to apprehend Admiral Glover. At least then he knew that nothing untoward would happen to the man. With Moncur in charge, Meldin couldn't be sure.

Instead he had been assigned to bring in the station's Strategic Operations Officer for questioning. She hadn't yet answered his summons, and after the sixth ring, he glanced at Specialist M'Lur. "Blow the override." He commanded softly. The Caitian quickly complied.

The Benzite led his team into the room. It was as he suspected. Empty.

Runabout Volta

Commander Ivyse eased the runabout through the widening gap between the shuttle bay's doors. She had bugged the Commodore's Office that Haas had set up shop in and knew that he planned to arrest her. She couldn't allow that to happen.

She had planned out an escape from the station months ago, when her main worry had been the station's crew learning she was really a member of Section 31. Now, she was worried about not only that, but also being eliminated for knowing the truth about Leyton's coup.

There was only one person she felt she could turn to for help, and the Deltan was debating just how much she should reveal to him to enlist her aid. She knew it might mean certain death to her, as much as him, if she told him about the extralegal intelligence organization. At the same time Captain Glover would make an invaluable asset.

The Deltan pondered the variables for a few more seconds before she passed through the doors and into space. She swung around the dull gray-green *Regula*-type station, its hull always reminding her of a slowly spinning top.

She quickly figured out a way to enlist Glover without revealing her true affiliation. Before she set course for Oceanus IV, she activated the computer virus to shut down the station's power system. Then she activated the transporter.

USS Cuffe **Executive Officer's Quarters**

Commander Kojo hopped out of bed quickly as she heard the buzz from her computer screen. Someone was sending her a high priority, coded message. She opened it, scouring its contents. "Impossible," she gasped, her face blanching before her blood began to boil.

Runabout Volta

Admiral Glover lurched forward, his hands manacled behind him. Commander Ivyse rushed out of her seat to catch the man. She eased him to the cockpit's adjacent chair. "Let me see if I can do something about those cuffs," she said. She began tapping a random series of codes, until finding the right one to unlock them. The older man rubbed his wrists, looking at her in wonderment.

"Commander, just who the hell are you?"

USS San Martin **Main Bridge**

"Captain, we've got an unauthorized departure of a runabout from the station's primary shuttle bay," his Operations Officer said. My'zhark, already keyed up about the arrests of Admiral Glover and Commander Ivyse, shot out of his seat.

"Onscreen," he said. The main viewer shifted to a view of the receding shuttle bay doors. "Move to engage," the Saurian ordered.

"Captain," his Executive Officer, a human male named Nash, alerted him. "Lt. Meldin's just reporting in sir. Commander Ivyse was not in her quarters, and is presently unaccounted for."

"This must be her then," My'zhark pointed at the screen. "Prepare the tractor beam, and power weapons as a fallback."

"Sir!" Nash chimed in again. The man looked up from the screen inset in his chair's armrest, a worried expression on his face, "Moncur is reporting that Admiral Glover has just been teleported away."

"Damn that witch," My'zhark said softly. More forcefully he commanded, "Activate tractor beam on my mark."

"Sir," Nash interrupted again.

"What is it now?" The Saurian turned on the man. "What?"

"The station, sir, its lost power," Nash replied.

"What?" My'zhark didn't think he heard the man correctly.

"The station's lost power," Nash repeated.

"Sir, the runabout is engaging warp engines," the Tactical Officer said, snapping the Saurian back to reality.

"Lay in a pursuit course," he snapped. "I'm sure that Minister Haas can restore power without us."

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

Commander Kojo had watched the strange dance between the runabout and the *Excelsior*-class *San Martin*, unable to reconcile herself with her hesitancy. Their sensors had picked up the beam out as well as Meldin and Moncur's reports. She knew Admiral Glover was on that ship, and she knew who Admiral Glover believed to be the real culprits behind the Lisbon attack were as well, but would she really have engaged the *San Martin* if they tractor beamed the runabout?

Perhaps this could all be settled peacefully, she thought for a second. Perhaps the Defense Minister could be reasoned with. Maybe he wasn't as deeply involved as the admiral suspected, the Kriosian tried to convince herself. While she still struggled, the runabout made a sharp turn and warped away. The *San Martin* immediately gave chase.

Lt. Commander Bheto, serving as temporary Executive Officer, looked to Kojo for guidance. "Sir, what are your orders?"

Kojo bit down on her lip so hard that she drew blood. She licked it away, along with her doubts. "Follow the *San Martin*."

Meropis Café **Oceanus IV**

"Who the hell are you?" Glover asked, not backing down. The lankiest Breen chuckled; the sound reminiscent of scraping metal.

"Rool, commander of the *Rapine*," he answered. "Now do you remember?"

"Nope, still doesn't ring a bell," Terrence quipped. Jasmine moved beside him, and squeezed his bicep.

"Terrence, don't antagonize them," she softly chided, but Terrence's focus was on the three Breen, Rool in particular.

"You nearly destroyed our vessel," the shortest of the Breen charged. "You cost us men and profit."

"And you must pay for that," the third Breen said.

"Sorry, all out of credits," Glover replied.

"Come with us now and I'll spare everyone in the café," Rool said, waving his pistol around, sparking a wave of gasps and a flurry of flinching and ducking among the frightened patrons.

"I'm not going anywhere," Terrence planted himself. He glanced around the room, trying to figure out a way to extricate himself. He casually placed his hands in his pockets. His communicator was there. With a tap he could activate it and order the *Rhone's* computer to transport them to safety, but he wasn't sure he would be able to do that before any of the Breen could fire. Plus, he wasn't sure what the Breen would do to the rest of the patrons without him to focus their ire on.

"Remove your hands from your pockets," Rool warned. He moved forward and jabbed the barrel of his gun sharply into Terrence's ribs. The man gasped in pain, quickly removing his hands. He had palmed the compin.

"Come with us now," Rool repeated, "Or we will kill everyone in this cafe."

"No," Jasmine said, stepping in front of Terrence. The captain's stomach twitched with fear.

"What are you doing Jazz?" He said, through clenched teeth, as he tried to push her behind him, but Jasmine didn't budge.

"I'm not going to let these thugs take you away," she declared.

"You are his mate," the squattest Breen declared, his voice leering.

"No, she isn't," Terrence lied, finally able to push Jasmine behind him. "She has nothing to do with this."

"She does now," Rool said. "Both of you, come with us," he motioned for them to step forward.

"Do as he says humans," the third Breen snapped. "Or I will kill the woman." She aimed her pistol at Jasmine. Terrence flinched and Jasmine gulped.

"There isn't going to be any killing today," a voice Terrence hadn't heard in years sang out over the still crowd. The Breen turned in unison and Glover's gaze followed them.

A tall, rangy blonde female captain, surrounded by a security team, filled the entrance to the café. They all had weapons pointed in the bounty hunters' direction. "Justine?" Terrence asked, dumbfounded, "Justine Haas?"

With her free hand she waved, "Long time no see huh Fly Boy?"

Runabout Volta

Admiral Samson Glover did his best to hold down his lunch. The runabout jagged again, barely missing another phaser bolt from the *San Martin*. He hesitated before he inputted another firing sequence in response. Despite the fact that the *San Martin* had taken off the gloves in their attempt to disable the *Volta*, Glover remained repulsed by the idea of firing on fellow officers.

"They're going to overtake us in thirty seconds," Commander Ivyse said. "I'm an intelligence officer, not a pilot," she added. Samson wasn't as shocked as he thought he should be by Ivy's earlier admission that she doubled as a Starfleet Intelligence operative. But the admiral was troubled by her revelation that SI had been cognizant of a potential Starfleet coup for months and had sat on the information, waiting to see how or if such an event might develop. He also wasn't pleased that Ivy had been spying on him personally, to determine how loyal he was to the Federation. But for the moment, he had shelved his disquiet. His main goal was to get to Terrence and from there to his other ace-in-the hole. But his planning would be for naught if they were captured.

"Admiral Glover, this is the *San Martin*, come to an immediate all stop and prepare to be boarded," Captain My'zhark's voice issued over the runabout's intercom.

Samson opened a hail. "You've got a choice captain. You don't have to go down this route. You've made an oath to Starfleet, to the Federation, don't shred it now."

"I'm not the traitor sir, you are!" My'zhark shouted back. The runabout shuddered and consoles inside the cockpit blinked on and off. "That was the last warning shot," the Saurian replied. "Drop out of warp now."

"Screw you," Samson said, prompting a laugh from Ivyse.

"What?" The admiral asked.

"Nothing sir, it's just I never heard you use such language," the Deltan replied. "Though you might not agree after my confession, I thought it was an honor serving with you."

"It's not over yet," the admiral said. "You've got to have faith." Another blast slammed into the *Volta*, making the ship spin wildly.

The interior lights went black, the cabin lit up by a cord of electricity that swept through the bank of terminals. Samson jumped back, but Ivyse wasn't so fortunate. The cockpit filled with the smell of cooking flesh and the woman's horrid screams. The admiral rushed to pull her away from the sparking console, but shrank back from the electrical feedback. He could only watch in horror as the electricity lashed the woman. She eventually slumped over onto the blackened terminal. Samson cradled her tattered, smoking body. He looked heavenward and gave a

prayer. "Please, if you've got anything in Your divine bag of tricks, I could use it now."

Meropis Café

Oceanus IV

"Fly Boy?" Jasmine whispered.

"Later," Terrence whispered back.

"I'm in a charitable mood," Captain Haas said. "If you guys beam back aboard your garbage scow I'll let you go."

"And if we don't?" Rool challenged.

"Sir, I have an *Akira*-class starship in orbit, with your vessel in our crosshairs. I don't think you want to challenge us." The shortest Breen male muttered something unintelligible to Rool. The Breen commander cursed in response.

"Next time," Rool promised, his visor pointed in Glover's direction; the captain guessed the man was staring at him. Rool detached a boxy communicator from his belt. "Three to transport!"

Once the Breen were gone, the tension in Terrence's chest vanished. "Justine, it's been a long time," he grinned. "But your time has never been better."

Justine grinned in kind. "Terrence, you and Lt. Mendes are under arrest." She gestured to the stocky, bald man at her right. "Mr. Gilroy, take them both into custody."

"What, this is a joke right?" Terrence asked, stunned.

"I wish it were," Haas's smile had disappeared. "Let's not make this harder than it has to be, okay?"

"Like hell," Glover said, the tenseness returning. "If your man touches me or Jasmine, he's going to regret it." The threat gave Gilroy pause.

Haas sighed. "I knew you were going to make this hard." She pointed her phaser at Glover. "I'm sorry it had to be this way," she said before firing.

PART THREE: PARADISE REGAINED

Deep Space Five Commanding Officer's Office

Defense Minister Haas had taken over Admiral Glover's office after power had been restored. Fortunately the computer virus that had infected the station's systems had been mild, and Lt. Purcell was able to purge the systems fairly easily. The virus had only been intended to be a distraction, but it was enough to solidify Haas's position. He wasn't so sure about his compatriots.

"I can't reach Leyton, so you tell me what the hell is happening on Earth?" Haas asked Barzhan, Starfleet Academy's commandant.

"Things are starting to unravel," the nervous Bolian remarked. "Sisko, Shelby, and others have discovered Red Squad's role in bringing down the power distribution grid."

"Shit," Haas spat. "Where are Sisko and the others now?"

"Leyton says he has things under control," Barzhan said, with pronounced skepticism. "He has authorized starships loyal to us to neutralize the *Defiant*, *Sutherland*, and *Eagle*. He also believes he can still force President Inyo out of office."

"What do you think?" The Defense Minister asked.

"I don't know," the Bolian answered truthfully. "I think we have overreached."

"Damn," Haas cursed again.

"What do you think we should do?" Barzhan asked. "If Leyton fails, there's not much that can be done for us, but you're safe...and so are the others. I suggest you cut your ties to us now."

"That's not an option," Haas said.

"Conrad, tamp down on the heroism and noble sacrificing. Even if we fall here, we're going to need friends untarnished by Leyton's gamble."

"That's not it," the Defense Minister added. Barzhan scowled but didn't press. Haas didn't elaborate. How could he admit that he had overreached himself by dispatching his daughter to arrest Captain Glover? Detaining Admiral Glover and Ivyse could be explained, especially in light of their unauthorized communiqués, but the move against the admiral's son, a son who was a close ally to Captain Sisko, couldn't be as easily dismissed. It would bring up too many questions; most he wasn't prepared to answer. "We might pull through this one yet, especially if Leyton shows the spine to deal with Sisko and the others."

"Time will tell," the commandant said with far less confidence.

"That it will," Haas said. All he could do now was ride it out.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

Commander Nandali Kojo smashed her fists against the armrests of the captain's chair. "We're too late," she said. On the main viewer, the runabout was hanging dead in space with the *San Martin* perched over it like a vulture. "Any life signs on the runabout?"

"There is one," Lt. Detmer, at Ops, said. "Human."

"The admiral," Kojo breathed with relief. "Hail the *San Martin*."

The screen shifted to an angry Captain My'zhark. "Commander Kojo, what are you doing here?"

"I was pursuing the runabout, like you," she calmly replied.

"We have things under control," the Saurian said. "Return to the station."

"It doesn't look like you have things under control to me," Kojo said. "It appears like you were able to destroy the runabout. That wasn't the order, was it?"

"Return to Deep Space Five *Commander*," My'zhark repeated.

"I'm not going to let you destroy that shuttle," Kojo replied, standing up. "To ensure its safety, we are going to take the shuttle and you can escort us both back to DS5."

"Unacceptable," My'zhark said. "We are going take Admiral Glover into custody."

"Now that's unacceptable to me," the Kriosian retorted.

"Back down, right now," My'zhark warned. "Leave this instant and we'll sweep this under the rug."

"I'm leaving with the admiral," Kojo said. She looked at Lt. Meldin. "Beam the admiral aboard." The bridge rattled.

"Captain, the *San Martin* just fired on us," Meldin informed them.

"What the Hells was that?" Kojo thundered.

"A warning shot," My'zhark said. "Don't force us to fire on you again."

"Initiate the transport," Kojo ordered.

"The *San Martin* is blocking us," Meldin replied.

"That's it," Kojo said. "Raise shields, and power weapons."

"Are you sure you want to take this course sir?" Lt. Commander Bheto asked.

"They've left us little choice," Kojo snapped. "Target their weapon and propulsion system. Prepare to fire on my mark."

"What are you doing?" My'zhark asked, incredulous. "Would you fire seriously fire on my ship? Think about the lives you're about to put in jeopardy, not even the fact that you're throwing away your career."

"Fire," Kojo said without hesitation.

USS Reprise **Detention Center**

"You really know how to impress a girl," Jasmine said with a relieved smile. Glover tried to return the gesture, but winced. He had just woken up and his head was still spinning. He tried to sit up, but Jasmine gently held him down. She was cradling his head in her lap, "Not so fast. The effects of the stun might take a few minutes to wear off."

"I know," he said, more harshly than he intended. "So she stunned me huh? I guess it's better than the alternative. Where are we?"

"The brig on Captain Haas's ship," Jasmine answered. "They teleported us straight into a holding cell."

"The *Reprise*," Terrence remarked. The *Reprise* was an *Akira*-class, one of the Fleet's newer tactical cruisers; a very formidable ship. Almost as formidable as her captain. "Are you okay?" He asked, his thoughts shifting back to Jasmine.

"Yeah, I'm not the one who got stunned," she joked. Glover fought off the disorientation to sit up. Jasmine used her hands to support his head.

"I'm really sorry about this," he said.

"You've got nothing to apologize for," Jasmine replied. He kissed her, and she kissed him back.

"I'm going to get us out of this, I promise," Terrence declared. "I won't allow anything to happen to you." He hugged her, before fully sitting up on the bench they shared. He looked past the almost clear energy screen holding them in to the observant Aquan security guard watching them. "Guard, get me Captain Haas," Glover ordered in his most imperious voice.

"I've already alerted her," the guard replied. "She wanted to be informed the moment you woke up."

Terrence nodded. "Now, we'll get some answers."

USS San Martin **Main Bridge**

"I can't believe this," Captain My'zhark said, as Commander Nash read off the damage report. The first volley from the *Cuffe* had been surgical, but devastating. Shields were down twenty percent, one nacelle was severely damaged, and the ship's main deflector had been fried. The Saurian had confidently not raised shields, daring Kojo to respond and she had in force. He was surprised that she hadn't atomized his ship, and he'll make her pay for that oversight. "She's seriously taking us on. She's thrown her lot in with the rest of the weak-kneed traitors and she'll suffer their fate."

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

"*San Martin* is coming about, their weapons systems fully charged," Lt. Commander Bheto replied.

"What kind of poor shooting was that?" Commander Kojo upbraided Lt. Meldin. "I told you to take them out. You merely crippled them."

"Sir...I was taking into account the amount of casualties such a course might engender. Those are our colleagues on board," the Benzite stammered in reply.

"Our so-called colleagues are about to kill us," Kojo retorted. "The only lives you need concern yourself with are ours. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," Meldin replied.

"Evasive maneuvers," the Kriosian ordered.

Runabout Volta

Admiral Glover watched helplessly as the two starships turned on one another. He knew the signatories to the Federation Charter, nor the succeeding generations could have ever imagined a day like this, with starship against starship, officer against officer, both destroying the Federation in their attempts to save it. He had to do something to prevent this. One person had died already and that was far too many. Samson's fingers worked the dead instrument panel to no avail. He got out of his chair and pulled off a panel beneath the console, thrusting himself into the mass of wires, many of them charred, until he was able to spark some juice back into the *Volta's* engines.

He reclaimed his seat, his muscles stiff, his heart heavy, but more determined than ever to stop the two ships now slugging it out before him by hopefully providing the *San Martin* a better target. He aimed the runabout like a dagger and powered up its engines.

USS Reprise **Detention Center**

"You two really do make a cute couple," Captain Haas said. "Not as hot as we were, but pretty cute nonetheless." Jasmine looked askance at Glover. The *Cuffe* captain swallowed, tugging at his tunic's collar. Haas laughed. "Don't worry Lt. Mendes, it was nothing serious. Just a fling between old friends."

"Old rivals is more like it," Terrence said.

"Yes," the *Reprise* captain's gaze grew wistful. "Of course you were right. I still watch the vids of our battle over the Rigel Cup."

"It was one of the best competitions in the history of the Cup," Terrence said. "And the Novas smoked Red Squad's ass." Captain Haas lost some of her good cheer.

"What is this about Justine?"

"You tell me?" She challenged. "You're the one behind bars after all?"

"I'm guessing it has something to do with all the madness happening on Earth," Glover said. "Please don't tell me you've gotten wrapped up into something you can't get out of. It would hurt your father deeply."

Haas laughed. "Terrence, you have no idea."

Deep Space Five Commanding Officer's Office

"It appears you have a choice to make then Captain Dalis," Haas said. "The President's order still stands and I remain the authority in this sector."

"Sir," Captain Dalis's eyes flashed with fire. "Those orders were made while the President thought the Dominion had attacked Earth. Now, we are hearing otherwise."

"I expressly ordered radio silence," Haas said. "Why did you disobey my orders?"

"Reports are out that Admiral Leyton masterminded the Lisbon attack and that he and his fellow conspirators are being rounded up. Sir, I believe it stands to reason that you should relinquish command of the station to Commander Rahul until President Inyo retracts the state of emergency; perhaps there is time to still save ourselves."

"I fail to see the logic in that," Haas said. "And could your sources be wrong Captain? Have you ever stopped to consider that? Maybe they have been compromised. Since you disobeyed my orders, I know they are not official sources. Further, maybe Admiral Leyton was replaced by a Changeling for that matter. I will stay in command until the President tells me otherwise."

Dalis frowned, clearly not pleased with the outcome. "Sir," she said gently, "I think your erratic behavior as of late has not helped the situation."

"The blood screenings are going well," he riposted. "Admiral Glover and Commander Ivyse chose to escape instead of being detained and interrogated, a sign of obvious culpability, and the *Cuffe* rushed off with them, against my orders."

"I think that Admiral Glover might have a different perspective, same as Commanders Ivyse and Kojo," Dalis said.

"You saw the evidence that My'zhark had uncovered," Haas pointed out. "They were hiding something."

"Maybe sir," the Xindi-primate replied. "Or maybe they were just looking for unrestricted information about the crisis on Earth and you overreacted."

"Are you calling me unstable?" Haas challenged.

"Of course not," Dalis said. "It's just...."

"What?" He challenged.

"You said this would go smoothly, that the transition would be bloodless," the captain remarked. "I never would've agreed to this..."

"Sometimes sacrifices have to be made," Haas said, as tenderly as he could.

"Were those five thousand people who died because of us collateral damage to you? Were their lives less valuable than those from the *Odyssey*, even my son's?" She challenged. "How can you be so callous? The goal was to protect Federation citizens, not to murder them!"

"I've heard enough," the Defense Minister held up a hand. "Have you Lt. Commander Reese?"

"I have sir," the woman's voice issued from an overhead bulkhead. Startled, Dalis looked up.

"Helen, what's going on?"

"Commander Reese, you are hereby given command of the *Powhatan*," Haas said. "Take whatever measures are necessary to secure your vessel."

"You can't do that," Dalis snapped. "You don't have the authority!"

"Don't I?" Haas smiled. Dalis looked upward.

"Helen, don't do this! Don't you know this is mutiny?"

"Sir, I'm following orders from a superior," Reese said. "I'm sorry."

Dalis tapped her communicator. "One to beam." But nothing happened.

"I think she's cut you off," Haas said. He pressed a button on the desk. "Moncur, I need you in this office immediately."

"This is outrageous! You won't get away with this," Dalis promised.

"Save it for the tribunal," Haas said, though he knew he could just as easily be talking about himself.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

Ensign Jean Hajar wiped the bead of sweat rolling from her hairline down to her nose. She was dodging the relentless onslaught from the *San Martin* as best she could. She was happy that Commander Kojo was showing uncharacteristic reserve. Junior Lt. Valz, the Bolian she had met several nights ago, served in the *San Martin's* Engineering department.

With each return volley, she imagined him being caught in the damage they were wreaking on the *Excelsior*-class, and she wondered if he was having similar thoughts.

"Captain, the runabout is powering up its engines," Lt. Commander Bheto replied, her twin antennae knotting in confusion. "And the ship is jetting away."

"Good for the admiral," Kojo said. "He won't have to see what comes next."

USS San Martin
Main Bridge

"Sir, the *Volta's* engines have restarted and the ship is angling back on its original heading," Commander Nash informed him.

"We'll secure it later," My'zhark said, his large eyes reduced to slits as he eyed the more promising prey before him. Unexpectedly the *Cuffe* had refused to fight for any sustained period, its only offense so far had been mild blows of a deflective nature after their first devastating punch. It seemed that the much vaunted warrior Kojo had lost her nerve, and My'zhark would make her pay for it as he promised. The *Nebula*-class ship took off in the opposite direction of the runabout, a naked attempt to lure his vessel away from the admiral. It worked.

"Continue pursuing the *Cuffe*, keep pounding away at her aft quarters until her shields buckle," he ordered. "This will be over soon."

USS Reprise
Detention Center

"Level with me Justine, what is this really all about?" Terrence asked.

"You tell me," she repeated, starting their dance again. "When was the last time you talked to Captain Sisko?"

Glover shrugged, perplexed. "Why? Does this have something to do with Lisbon? Is Ben okay?"

"If you consider ordering a warship to attack Starfleet Command okay, then he's peachy," Haas retorted.

"You've got to be joking," Glover said.

"I assure you I'm not," the *Reprise* captain stated.

"You're mistaken then," Terrence offered. Haas shook her head in the negative.

"How about you just fill me in then," He asked. His counterpart sighed before she began:

"Captain Sisko blames Admiral Leyton for the Lisbon sabotage and his starship, the *Defiant*, is en route to Earth with the 'proof'. Of course it won't get there."

Glover tensed. "What do you mean by that?"

"The admiral isn't going to let a ship with possible Dominion agents near Earth, not after what just happened. Sisko's betrayal is bad enough...if it even is Sisko."

"What's happened to Ben?" Terrence asked, his mouth turning dry. He approached the invisible, but deadly barrier separating him from Haas. Despite the field, Haas took a step back.

"Who knows," she said. "But once the *Defiant* has been neutralized, I'm sure that the admiral will deduce if Sisko is really the same man or a Changeling. For his sake, if he is the genuine article, I hope Leyton can find whatever is controlling him. I can't believe that a man with his record would side with the enemy."

"Justine do you realize how crazed you sound right now?" Terrence asked. "If someone's mind's been tampered with, it might have been yours."

Haas's laugh was soft and cold. "I know what I'm doing. I'm a patriot, just like my father."

"Minister Haas knows about this," Glover asked, with a dawning fear.

"Who do you think ordered you to be apprehended?"

Deep Space Five Wardroom

"Commander Rahul, I am moving to the *Powhatan* where I will conduct affairs from there," Defense Minister Haas said. "You will continue to oversee matters here. Martial law remains in effect."

The Efrosian Executive Officer nodded. Haas wished the rest of the senior staff were so accommodating. "Just what the hell is going on here?" Dr. N'Vea said hotly. "You detain Commander Mickelson. You arrest the admiral and Ivy, then you arrest Captain Dalis and half of her senior officers, and what does any of that have to do with what happened on Earth?" Moncur, standing stalwartly beside Haas, growled with displeasure.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that," Haas said.

"Well, find someone who is," Dr. N'Vea rejoined. "This is ridiculous. Sir, none of this makes sense."

"It's a matter of perspective," he said. "If you sat where I do, you would understand."

"Minister Haas, I am an outsider here," Lt. Bhudevi said. "But from what I have observed, all the declaration of martial law has done has made people more fearful and distrustful. It's made many, including some of us, less compliant. Transparency in your decision making is needed. Perhaps if we did understand the threat as you see it, we can explain things better to our colleagues and the station's residents."

"I understand," Haas said, trying to look as empathetic as possible, when truly he wanted to vacate the station to review his options. His last bit of news from Earth wasn't good. Sisko and the other traitors had prevailed and now Leyton was in custody. Leyton's protégé, Captain Benteen had refused to fire on the *Defiant*, and their evidence had led to the admiral's downfall. It was only a matter of time before he gave up the rest of the conspirators. At least, Commander Reese remained loyal and had perhaps even more to lose than he did.

"Quite frankly sir, I'm not sure you do," Lt. Raeger spoke up. "With the continued communication blackout we don't have any other data source about what's happening on Earth except your word."

"Is that not good enough for you Lieutenant," Haas hissed.

"She didn't mean to imply such a thing," Rahul looked at her, his gaze reproachful.

"Of course not," Haas forced himself to smile. "I do understand how difficult this situation is for all of you. But it is almost over, just hang in there a little longer. Things will be clear very shortly." He nodded in punctuation, but he saw that his peppy ending had mollified none of them. He turned back to Rahul. "Commander Rahul, I'll take my leave of you."

The doors to the wardroom slid open, and a striking, ebon-hued woman strode through them. There were audible gasps from several of the station's senior staffers. "Defense Minister Haas, you're not going anywhere. You're under arrest!" In response, Moncur pulled his weapon and fired.

USS Cuffe **Main Bridge**

The deck trembled as the ship pitched to and fro under the *San Martin's* steady assault. Ensign Hajar fought to keep control of the bucking vessel, wanting to do something, anything than follow the commander's orders to maintain course.

"All stop," Kojo ordered. Hajar blinked and then shook her head.

"Excuse me sir," she asked.

"All. Stop," The Kriosian repeated more forcefully. The helmsmen reacted without thinking. The ship stopped so suddenly that it threw Hajar onto her console. Other officers were splayed across the deck. Proximity alerts blared.

"Sir, the *San Martin* is on a collision course," Meldin said, his modulated voice cracking slightly. "We have to move," he suggested.

Kojo grinned, "I guess you've never heard of the Earth game called chicken."

USS San Martin **Main Bridge**

Captain My'zhark shouted, "Alter course! Alter course!" The helm officer quickly complied, and the ship whined, its inertial dampeners and structural integrity pushed to its limits as the ship made an abrupt dive.

The move launched the captain and Commander Nash both from their seats. The Saurian's fall was halted only when his head cracked against the back of the Op Officer's chair. Thick blood poured from a gash in his head, and he swam upstream against onrushing waves of blackness. "Captain, captain are you all right?" He heard Commander Nash's ragged voice.

"I'm....fine," My'zhark said wetly, spitting out blood. He tried to sit up, but pain lanced through his head. Nash steadied him. "What happened?"

But Nash wasn't paying attention. He was looking at the screen. "What's happening?" He asked, tugging frantically on the man's tunic. The Saurian tried to stand up, but was frozen in agony. His Exec finally looked down.

"You don't want to know," he said.

USS Cuffe

Main Bridge

When the *San Martin* deviated, Commander Kojo had been ready. When the ship veered below them, she ordered Meldin to lace its primary hull and nacelles with a barrage of phaser fire. The surgical strikes broke through the already stressed shields, bringing the entire field down and leaving the *San Martin* defenseless.

The Kriosian then ordered Ensign Hajar to bring the ship about to face the *San Martin's* bow. "Hail them," she ordered, unable to keep from smiling in triumph.

A battered human male appeared onscreen. "I'm Commander Aaron Nash," he said.

"Where's Captain My'zhark?" The man briefly looked down, before facing her again.

"The captain has been injured," he replied, his eyes smoldering with anger.

"Is he conscious?" Kojo asked.

"Yes," Nash said, through gritted teeth.

"Yet he won't face me and accept his defeat," Kojo scoffed. "He is a coward." Lt. Commander Bheto leaned toward her, and whispered:

"This isn't helping commander." As much as Kojo wanted to argue with her, she knew the Andorian was correct.

"Are you prepared to cease hostilities?" Nash looked down again, nodded, and stepped to the side. My'zhark rose slowly, pushing away Nash when he tried to help him. Rust-colored blood was spread across the Saurian's face, and one of his eyes was swollen shut.

He spoke slowly, a rattle in his throat, "We will stand down."

Kojo nodded, a modicum of respect returning for the man. "We will render medical aid. Prepare to be boarded."

"We take care of our own," Nash lashed out.

"You've done a wonderful job of that I see," Detmer whispered loud enough for the commander to hear. Even though Kojo agreed with the young woman's assessment, she growled to silence her.

"No," My'zhark said. "This has to end some time, it might as well be now. We'll be proven right in the end."

Kojo didn't know what he was talking about, and she didn't care. "Standby for boarding. If you have any plans on not honoring your cessation, I suggest you disabuse yourself of them now. You will remain in our sights until we return to DS5 and I will not hesitate to destroy you."

The Saurian looked at her with his one good eye for a long time. He nodded solemnly. "Of that I have no doubt."

Deep Space Five Wardroom

Rough hands grabbed Captain Amaya Donners, pushing her out of the way seconds before the phaser bolt singed by punching through the door she had just entered. First Lt. Beatiar sh'Fhane, commander of the Marine contingent she had brought with her, was already taking aim. Her Security Officer, Lt. Meri'ab, had done one better. The Aurelian had taken flight and was upon Moncur before the large Gumato could get another shot off.

The ferocious simianoid roared, throwing his weapon away and charging at Meri'ab. Before the Aurelian could get his bearings, Moncur had seized the man by his wings and broke them, a loud sickening snap echoing through the stunned room. He tossed the injured Meri'ab away like he was a piece of garbage, opening himself up to a barrage of directed energy from sh'Fhane and her Marines. The Gumato roared, pounding his shredded chest, before leaping onto the table. He snatched Commander Rahul and held the Efrosian in front of him as a shield. "Put down your weapons or I will kill him." Moncur roared.

"Listen Lt. Commander," Donners used her most soothing voice. "It doesn't have to end this way. Put down the commander and I'll put in a good word for you."

He sneered. "Your word means nothing. My life is over, but it should be you traitors on trial!"

Momentarily as transfixed as everyone by the unfolding drama, Haas wisely took the opportunity provided by Moncur, to hold up a wrist communicator. "Helen, beam me up." Everyone momentarily looked at the dissolving sparkles of light, including Moncur. It was probably the last image his brain processed. When he turned back to the captain, Meri'ab took a well aimed shot that drilled through the large man's skull. He fell backward, crashing onto the deck with such force that it rattled the deck plates. Donners turned on the Andorian.

"I didn't give you the authorization," she snapped.

The Andorian woman stood at rigid attention. "I'm sorry sir," sh'Fhane said. "I had the shot. I didn't think I would have another opportunity."

"How about you follow my orders next time, okay?"

"Yes sir."

Donners quickly scanned the room. "Is everyone all right?" After they nodded, the captain made eye contact with Dr. N'Vea. "Listen Nevvie, I don't have a lot of

time to get reacquainted right now, but could you take care of Lt. Meri'ab until I return.

"Of course Amaya," the Rigelian said, already getting out of her seat. "We'll have him good as new in no time."

"Thanks," she smiled before turning back to sh'Fhane. "Lt. sh'Fhane and the rest of you guys, you're with me." She tapped her combadge, issued orders, and was whisked away by a transporter beam seconds later.

USS Reprise

Captain's Ready Room

Captain Justine Haas pounded her desk. "How could this happen? How could it all unravel so fast?"

"I knew Leyton didn't have the stones to do what was necessary to remove Inyo from office," Conrad Haas snorted. "If he'd listened to me, I would be in the *Palais de la Concorde* right now, those traitors would be detained, and the Federation would be secure!"

"Dad, we've bet on the wrong horse. What are we going to do now?" Justine tried hard to keep the whine out of her voice.

"First, we're going to rendezvous at these coordinates." He sent them. "I'm attempting to corral the rest of our compatriots. Perhaps together we can make our way to Earth and still force Inyo to resign, or at least adopt our security prescriptions."

Justine shook her head. Her father's plan was insane, and for the first time she saw the ugly gleam of zealotry in his eyes. Had he become unhinged? Had Leyton's plot done something the Cardassians hadn't been able to do: Break her father? "Dad, perhaps...we should turn ourselves in?"

His face contorted with rage. "Are you turning on me too? What would your mother think?"

"What will she think?" Justine asked, for once not backing down to the man she admired more than any other being in the galaxy. "What we've done will break her heart."

"Your mother understands," Haas said, calming considerably. "She always has. She married a patriot, and she raised one as well. She understands the principle of Federation First better than anyone."

"Do you think she'll see this as putting the Federation first?"

"I...why shouldn't she?" Haas asked, though his voice was shaky. "President Inyo was, is, pissing away our security. Someone had to take a stand, for the Federation, for all who have given their lives in defense of our ideals. That is what Leyton did, and that is what we have done."

"But at the cost of five thousand innocent lives?" Justine asked, still appalled by the casualty reports she had received.

"Bah!" Her father roared, his anger back to full strength. His face reddening, he raged, "I've survived two wars, with body counts far larger! I understand war! I understand sacrifice and I've got the scars to prove it! No one can lecture me about that!"

"Dad," she said softly, "And so you're proposing we start another war, this time a civil war? Don't you think the Dominion would just love that?" Her father opened his mouth to reply, but couldn't. He stared at her, his mouth still agape. Realization slowly dawned in his eyes.

"My God, what have I done?" He asked. "To you, to the Federation. I've played right into their hands." He grabbed his head, and screamed. His anguish tore at Justine. "I'm so sorry, so sorry," he babbled, his words broken by sobs.

"Dad," Captain Haas placed her hand against the screen. "It's going to be okay."

"Yes, it will," he said. "But I made a promise to never be placed behind bars again, and I intend to keep that promise."

"Dad, what are you talking about?" Justine's voice filled with dread.

"I'm sorry I failed you," he said, his voice distant, his gaze vacant. "I was always so damned demanding, never kind enough. I...I never told you how proud I am...of you."

"Dad," the captain's tears flowed freely. "I knew."

"It's not the same," he protested. "I should've said it. Now, I am saying it. I'm proud of you Justine. Tell your mother I love her."

"Dad!" She screeched, alarmed by the resignation in the man's voice. "Don't go. Don't leave us!"

His smile was sad, but serene. "Continue to do me proud." The screen went blank, and Justine slumped in her seat, her body wracked with a pain born in her soul. She lost track of time, frozen in that agonized limbo until the metallic voice of her Executive Officer summoned her fully back to the plane of the living.

"Captain Haas," Commander Sabin was calling her. "Captain Haas?"

"I'm here Sabin," she said, after clearing her throat, and wiping the tears from her eyes. "What is it?"

"Sir, a runabout is approaching. They've hailed us. Admiral Sam Glover is aboard. He is requesting to speak with you." Haas's heart caught in her throat. What was Terrence's father doing here? How had he found *Reprise*? Did the admiral know about her involvement in the coup attempt? Of course he did. He was too sharp not to know who her father was, and he would also be cognizant of the fact that the *Reprise* had no legitimate business in this sector. A dark spidery thought spun around in her mind. She could destroy the vessel, claim it was a Changeling onboard, even though her father had informed her of the admiral's escape from custody. But if she did something so vile, it would truly make her no better than Leyton...or she had to admit, her father. Besides, she couldn't hurt Terrence. Though she had never told

him, she had enjoyed their rivalry, and cherished the brief time they had been more to each other.

She had cherished it so much that she had ran away from him in order to preserve that moment, so that it could be frozen in her mind, a pleasant memory of what could've been if her ambition hadn't compelled her so. Justine had also known that Terrence had similar demons, and she hadn't wanted to shackle either one of them to the other, perhaps preventing them both from reaching their potential. But that was all for naught now. Her career was in ashes.

Justine toyed with the handle of the phaser holstered to her waist. A clean, quick death was promising, but she was a Haas, and she had a legacy to uphold and a family name to repair.

"Captain Haas," Sabin interjected again.

"Yes," Justine replied. "Put the Admiral on."

USS Agamemnon

Main Bridge

"If they won't respond to our hails," Captain Donners grimly announced, "Then we have no choice but to disable them." She swiveled to the Tactical station behind her and gave the order to the officer standing in for Lt. Meri'ab. The deck plates rumbled beneath her as two shafts of energy shot from the ship and slammed into the retreating *Powhatan*.

"Minimal impact," Lt. Commander Texx said dryly, the Bolian's normally jovial demeanor tamped down considerably.

"Fire again, full spread," Donners ordered. A fan of energy spread from the ship's weapon's banks, buffeting the *Powhatan*. The *Cheyenne*-class ship made an about turn, and the captain's breath hitched in her chest. The starship approached the *Agamemnon* slowly.

"The *Powhatan* is powering weapons," Tactical Officer Trevino replied.

"Red alert," the captain commanded. The bridge dimmed blood red. "Standby to return fire." A hushed, dreadful silence filled the bridge. "Lt. Trevino, hail them again." She wanted to head off a battle before any more lives were lost due to Leyton's power grab.

"No response," Trevino replied. *Now the ball's back in my court*, Donners thought. *And the clock's ticking...*

USS Powhatan

Detention Center

Defense Minister Haas had actually thought he could go through with it. He had held a phaser up to his temple, its cold emitter node biting into his flesh. He had

thought activating the weapon would be simple, but it had been one of the hardest things he had ever attempted.

And Conrad realized why. However history would come to judge him, his accusers couldn't peg him as a coward. He would face the music and he wouldn't let his daughter be punished alone.

After the ship came under fire, Haas knew what he had to do. The minister swept into the ship's detention center, with an air of authority that he didn't know he could summon again. "Lower the forcefield," he commanded. The guard on duty balked at first, until Haas repeated the order more forcefully. When the field deactivated, Captain Dalis, Lt. Ayres, and several other officers warily stepped out.

"What's happening to my ship?" Dalis asked roughly.

"Something you can prevent," he said. "If you'll come with me."

"Why should we trust you?" Ayres asked.

"Because this ship is being pursued by the *Agamemnon*. I know her skipper's record and she's not one to trifle with. If Captain Dalis doesn't resume command, Helen's going to try to slug it out with her. She's going to lose and people will die."

"Fair enough, but if you don't mind, I'll lead the way," Dalis said.

USS Reprise

Captain's Ready Room

The Glovers hugged. Samson held back his tears. He had wondered if he would ever see his son again. Terrence looked similarly grateful and humbled. Admiral Glover turned to Jasmine and pulled her into a hug. She complied. After he released her, Samson turned to Captain Haas. His posture stiffened and his expression hardened. "Captain Haas, I will have to relieve you of command, pending an investigation into your role in the coup attempt."

"I...won't resist," Justine said. She turned to Terrence. "I'm sorry Terrence. I really am."

"Keep proving it by taking responsibility," Terrence replied crisply. "I just don't understand Justine. Why?"

"It's a long story," Justine began, but surprisingly Jasmine cut her off.

"I believe the least you can give Terrence is an answer, for all the hell you just put both of us through," the engineer said, causing both Glovers to give the normally reserved woman appraising looks.

Justine nodded. "Okay," she felt herself deflating as she began. "I thought the threat posed by the Dominion was pervasive enough that direct, immediate action was necessary. President Inyo wasn't supporting Starfleet enough. He was leaving us open to attack, a clear violation of his Oath of Office. All we...all I wanted, was for the president to do his job. To keep us safe by giving Starfleet what it needed."

“So, you thought putting Starfleet’s interest over the Federation’s was the way to go?” Terrence asked.

“Starfleet defends the Federation,” Captain Haas countered. “Without us, the Federation is nothing.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong,” Samson intoned. “It’s the other way around. We’re servants, and your father forgot that.” The mention of her father made Justine tear up. Samson’s harsh mien softened. He paused, “What’s wrong Captain?”

“My father...I think,” she couldn’t finish. She broke down and cried. Terrence hesitated only a second before he went to her. He gingerly wrapped his arms around her. At first Justine was resistant, but she slowly moved into his embrace. “I...I think,” she managed between sobs, “He’s done something to himself.” She then retold their last conversation.

Terrence looked to his father for guidance. Samson’s expression was as troubled as he felt.

“I hope that’s not the case Justine,” Samson said, the empathy in his voice palpable. “Let’s get back to DS5.”

USS Powhatan

Main Bridge

“Get them off the bridge!” Lt. Commander Reese snarled. The woman had turned around in the captain’s chair, her eyes flashing at the site of Minister Haas. Her face turned blood red. “Now!” The command prompted two of the bridge officers at less vital aft consoles into action. Defense Minister Haas began to step forward, but Captain Dalis placed a restraining hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Crewmen Eisner and Akbar, stand down!” She intoned. “And that goes for everyone else. I’m reassuming command.”

“Like Hell,” Reese sprang out of her seat, ripping a phaser from the holster clipped to her belt. “Restrain them!” She ordered. “Minister Haas too! They are Changelings!”

Several of the bridge crew now stood up. Reese had wisely had them all armed. But Dalis had anticipated such an occurrence and made a detour to the armory before she came to the bridge. Lt. Ayres moved protectively in front of her. Minister Haas moved in closer to her left flank, and Chief Engineer Gavish and Dr. Bhajjal completed the cocoon around her, each armed with a phaser. Two more security officers also provided additional protection. Dalis didn’t know whether to be flattered or miffed that they were so protective. The bridge crew loyal to Reese began to inch toward them, while the neutrals remained diligently at their posts. Dalis knew they would be the tipping point. She pushed away her sadness at the realization that she had engendered so little loyalty among her crew, but the Xindi-Primate knew that it had been her fault. She had allowed her grief and paranoia about the Dominion to infect her crew, and now Reese’s ranting made sense to a

great deal of them. Hells, it might've made sense to Dalis to a few weeks ago, before she saw how callous the coup plotters were regarding the lives of Federation citizens.

The deck rocked and the captain recognized the familiar impact of phaser rounds. Seconds later, she recognized another familiar voice. "*Powhatan*, this is your last warning to end this with minimal casualties," Captain Amaya Donners said, and Dalis knew well the strain in the woman's voice. The warning had momentarily distracted Reese and her cabal.

"Let's go," Haas whispered in a rasp. He lunged forward, his phaser firing. The whine of the phaser snapped Reese back into the moment. The bridge filled with the ping of phasers and the smell of burnt ozone. The woman just ducked the phaser bolt before firing one of her own. Haas grunted before crumpling to the ground.

Dalis saw a dark stain forming beneath the man. They aren't using stun! She realized, appalled. Gavish screamed as his shoulder exploded, pieces of his shoulder bone cutting Dalis's face. The blast had turned the sturdy Tellarite around in a half-circle. He got off two errant shots before falling.

Lt. Ayres grabbed her, and dragged her behind a console. Dalis chanced to look up, searching for her former First Officer through the gaps in the bridge's terminals. She couldn't allow the slaughter to continue. "Helen, stop this now!" She said over the din. Lt. Commander Reese called back:

"Surrender and I'll make it painless." The Exec was kneeling by the command chair, using it as an impromptu shield.

"Helen, what's happened to you? Look at what you're doing, we were more than a crew, we were family," Dalis pleaded.

"No, we're soldiers," Reese said, "And our job is to defend the Federation at all costs. That's what we've forgotten, and that's why we've become weak. I won't let us go back there again."

"You don't have a choice," Lt. Ayres called out. The woman threw a grenade in the direction of Reese's voice. She yanked Dalis down. "Close your eyes sir," she snapped. Despite having her eyes closed, the intense brightness seared through. She heard several loud thumps. After half a minute, Ayres said, "I think everything is safe now."

The young Security Officer helped Dalis stand up. The woman's legs were stiff and shaky. She quickly surveyed the bridge, with its scored consoles and bodies strewn about like confetti. While Dalis made her way to the command chair and Commander Reese, Ayres checked on the rest of their team. Dr. Bhajjal and Security Officer Tanaka were still standing; Officer Dawson was on the deck, with Haas and Gavish. Bhajjal was already moving to render aid to the downed trio.

Dalis made her way over to Reese. The woman lie face down by the command chair with the phaser still clutched in her hands. The captain removed it before flipping the unconscious woman over. She brushed the hair from Reese's face. "What the Hell happened between us?" She whispered. Perhaps she would figure it out

during her long prison sentence, but she doubted Helen ever would. She nudged the woman to the side and retook her seat. She toggled open a line to the *Agamemnon*. "This is Captain Dalis. I'm back in command and we're standing down."

Deep Space Five

Main Sickbay

The waiting room was nearly empty. Admiral Glover had allowed Captain Haas to be released from the *Agamemnon's* brig to be near her father. Dr. N'Vea, with an assist from the *Cuffe's* Dr. Nemato, had been working for hours on Minister Haas. The man had sustained severe internal injuries.

Terrence sat by Captain Haas, a comforting hand on her shoulder. He held a mug of coffee in his other hand. He had gotten it for Justine, and every so often she would remember to take a sip. Samson was moved by his son's compassion. He rarely showed it, but the admiral always knew it was present and just below the surface.

With no news in the last hour, Admiral Glover decided to get caught up on the latest developments. He left the waiting room and made his way to his office. Stepping out of the lift onto the upper deck of the command center, he saw a pensive Commander Rahul look up from a console. Samson had barely said a word to the man since he had returned. Honestly, he didn't quite know what to say. Rahul had followed the orders of a superior, which was commendable, but at the same time, the man had not displayed the insightfulness or courage to know how unhinged Haas had become or how wrong his orders were. Samson wasn't ready to make a decision yet about what to do with the Efrosian, or if he was going to do anything at all. So he decided that it was best to let the man stew for a while.

He opened a line. Captain Donners smiling face appeared. "Amaya, you don't know how good it is to see you again." The *Agamemnon* had been ordered to transport the coup plotters to Earth, and was waiting for Dr. N'Vea to release Minister Haas.

"Sir, you saw me a few hours ago," Amaya remarked, pursing her lips.

"You can never get enough of a good thing," Samson rejoined.

"What's with the sweet talk, Terrence rubbing off on you," Donners replied, drawing a laugh out of the admiral.

"Who do you think taught Terrence his tricks?" Samson winked, causing Donners to roll her eyes. "I don't think I properly thanked you for coming to my aid."

"Once I received your message, how could I not?" Donners asked. "Even though I have my own crew to watch over, I still consider DS5 crew family."

"You'll always be welcome here," Samson said. "I wish you were still here," he admitted. "Perhaps this stuff wouldn't have happened." His mood darkened as he thought of the charred remains of Commander Ivyse. Her body currently lain in the

station's morgue. Even though he knew Rahul had nothing to do with it, he needed someone to focus his anger on.

"Admiral, I know you well enough to understand your frustrations...about Commander Rahul," Donners replied, "But honestly sir, I probably would've done the same thing he did. He was just following orders."

"That excuse has led to some of mankind's greatest historical tragedies," Samson intoned, "And now you can aid recent events on Earth to that list." His scowl deepened. "And don't feed me that line about you doing the same thing. Coming to my aid proved you wouldn't."

"True," Donners nodded, "But I wasn't there...like him. All I'm saying is hear the man out, and see what he has to say before you decide what his fate will be."

"Fair enough," he said. "Did I ever tell you that you remind me of Dietra? She was always making me see things I didn't want to acknowledge too."

"More than once," Amaya grinned.

"Well," Samson said, winding up the conversation. Sadly, he said, "I have some business to take care of. Make sure you schedule a dinner with me before you warp off to Earth."

"Count on it," Donners said. After they exchanged goodbyes, Samson put in a call to Vulcan.

"Samson," T'Prell was wide-awake, even though he knew it had to be around midnight on Vulcan. He had never caught her less than alert, in all the decades they had been friends. "Good to see you still in one piece."

"Anything new?"

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post

The bar was full, but the mood was anything but joyous. It was somber, almost funereal. The shock of the attempted coup hadn't receded, and Ensign Jean Hajar didn't think it ever would. She stared down into her half-full beer stein.

"Cheer up," Lt. Sophia Detmer said, even though she was glum herself. The nice, strawberry blond man she had hooked up with days before had been implicated in the coup and was in the *Agamemnon's* brig. Lt. Valz, the Bolian that had caught Jean's eye, hadn't been involved, but he had refused to speak to her. The whole *Cuffe* cleaning his ship's clock thing might've been the reason why, she guessed.

It made her feel even more awful that Valz's rejection was the most important thing on her mind when five thousand people had recently died on Earth, Ivyse had been killed, and Starfleet had averted a civil war. Even though the Deltan hadn't been her favorite person, she hadn't deserved to be murdered, and in such a gruesome fashion. Lt. Meldin had let it slip that the woman had been electrocuted, literally cooked alive.

"Excuse us ladies, are these seats taken?" Both women looked up and saw two handsome young men standing a bit awkwardly in front of them. The brown skinned, broad shouldered one quickly extended a hand to Jean, and she took it. It felt a bit clammy, but not too unpleasant. "Wayne," he said, with a nervous smile, "Lt. Wayne Daystrom, Chief Science Officer, *Agamemnon*."

"Ensign DeSoto, Robert DeSoto," the other man said, pumping Sophia's proffered hand. Sophia sucked her teeth, and whistled. She glanced at Jean and winked.

"A Daystrom and a DeSoto? I think we've hit the jackpot." Jean sighed loudly and rolled her eyes.

"Please forgive my friend," she began, but looking up into Lt. Daystrom's chocolate eyes, Jean thought that Sophia might be on to something. In any event, things were starting to take a turn for the better.

Deep Space Five

The Hitching Post

"On why did I come in here," Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas mumbled, wishing he had back up. "I should've known this was a trap." The stocky engineer froze in his tracks, and pivoted.

"Freeze," Lt. Christina Raeger ordered. He turned around slowly. Both Christina and Fenella were sitting at a table in the crowded bar. Both of the women were achingly beautiful, Christina dressed in a low-cut golden metallic dress and Fenella in a skintight purple body suit.

"I thought you were calling to patch things up," Pedro said. "Not ambush me."

"I am in a way," Christina remarked, giving a sly glance to Fenella. The Nuvian wicked devilishly. Raeger motioned him forward, patting an empty seat that had certainly procured just for him.

"I'm in big trouble aren't I?" Pedro said as he slowly sat down. He was expecting to be doused with some beverage or have to dodge a glass at any second.

"Listen Pedro, I let my emotions get the best of me the other day, but I'm not apologizing for that," Raeger said.

"I apologized...to Lt. Raeger," Fenella replied, "Because I didn't know you two were an item."

Pedro tugged at his collar. "Item? I think that's a little too strong a word."

"Really?" Christina's eyebrows knit together in consternation. "What were we then?"

"Oh, ah, well...I...umm," Rojas stammered. Both of the ladies laughed, but it didn't make him feel any less uncomfortable. "This...is really hard for me."

"It should be, you jerk," Raeger replied. "I know what this is between us; we're like ships passing in the night. You think you're the only friend I've got?"

Rojas pushed down the hard lump in his throat. "Ah...well, I never really thought about it."

"At least I have the decency to spend time with you when you're here, and not try to spread the wealth," Raeger replied. "I don't mind an open relationship Pedro," the woman shrugged. "Hell, how can it be anything else when I don't see you sometimes for over a year? But I detest lying and cheating."

Pedro chuckled. "Baby, it wasn't like that at all." Fenella clucked in disapproval and Raeger held up a finger. Rojas shrugged. "I-I'm a guy."

"Yes, and it appears males of every species seem to suffer the same affliction," Fenella intoned. "Well, I won't be a part of it."

"Me either," Raeger said.

"Christina," Pedro pleaded, "Fen, come on. I apologize. It'll never happen again. I promise."

"Oh, we'll make sure of that," both women said in unison. Pedro's collar felt like it was choking him.

"Okay," he squeaked. "I guess I'll be going." He started to get up, but Raeger's hand shot forward, grabbing his. He raised his eyebrows, perplexed.

"Think we're letting you get off the hook that easy?" Raeger asked.

"Oh boy," Pedro muttered. "How many pounds of flesh do I have to extract to get out of here?"

"It's not flesh we want," the Nuvian giggled.

"Like I said, I'm into open relationships," Christina repeated. Pedro smacked his head.

"You've got to be kidding me, right?" He asked, forcing himself to pick his jaw off the floor.

"Those aren't the games I like to play and you know that," Raeger winked. "Listen, after what we've just been through I thought it might be best to just start over and have a little fun." Fenella nodded.

"You're a dog, but you're our dog," Fenella grinned.

"Okay," Pedro said, wishing Captain Glover was here, not to join in, but so that he could witness Pedro's lady killing abilities. He grinned, the tension draining from him as he sat back down. "Ladies, I am the most accommodating sort."

"We'll be the judge of that," Raeger replied.

"And we'll judge hard," Fenella added, raking the nails of one of her six-fingered hands across Pedro's face. He squirmed from the pain and pleasure.

"Lock me up and throw away the key," he crowed.

Deep Space Five

The Main Concourse

Security Chief Mickelson walked slowly, struggling to find the appropriate. "Ah screw it," he said. "I was a jerk." He told Lt. Ayres. The younger woman's eyes widened in shock.

"No need to apologize," she said. "Let's save the recriminations for the boards of inquiry," she joked.

"I need to get this off my chest," Mickelson said. "I let my bias against the Cardassians infect me like a virus and it left me vulnerable to be preyed up by Minister Haas. You're much younger than me, and with a load less experience..."

"I thought this was an apology?"

"Sorry, but you know what I mean. I was just trying to say that I should've seen something wasn't right about Haas or his henchmen, but I was too focused on the Cardassians."

"Well, they did try to murder Haas, so you were right to suspect them."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that too. Why did they try to kill him? It was almost as if they knew what he might've been planning and we're going trying to prevent it."

Lt. Ayres's brow furrowed. "I've been thinking along those same lines, but why wouldn't they tell the admiral or someone what they knew about the coup?"

"Perhaps they didn't trust us," Mickelson remarked. "And I didn't give them a good reason to."

"Right now it's one of life's little mysteries," Ayres remarked.

"I don't like mysteries," Mickelson huffed. "That's why I got into this business."

"Perhaps you'll feel better if I give you something else to unravel," Ayres chuckled. He wrapped his hand around hers and squeezed it, before pulling her close for a kiss.

"If I had missed that hint I would've retired on the spot," he laughed.

Deep Space Five

The Wolf's Den

"Mind if I join you?" Lt. Seb N'Saba asked. Lt. Bhudevi shrugged. The large Alshain sat across from her. "What are you eating?" He asked, pointing at the bowl. Though his keen sense of smell had already told him it was Valtese stew. When the woman affirmed his guess, Seb asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's that obvious?" He figured that the corners of the Barzan's mouth had upturned, though they were covered by the breathing apparatus.

"You miss Lt. Mendes I take it," N'Saba said, and the woman nodded.

"I've never wanted to be an obstacle, and I could tell that she wanted to be with Terrence, but I can't help but wonder if I should've fought harder," Bhudevi admitted.

"Why would you want to do that?" N'Saba snorted. "Lt. Mendes is quite attractive....for a human, but you would've grown bored with her eventually."

"And how can you be so certain of that?" Bhudevi asked. N'Saba leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"She's something of a prude, I'm sure you saw that?" The Barzan shrugged, before looking away. "Exactly," N'Saba gloated.

"You're a bastard," Bhudevi snapped.

"Yes, I know," Seb replied, "Isn't it a turn on?"

Bhudevi tilted her head, looking at him askance. "Actually...it sort of is."

"Perhaps I can take your mind off Lt. Mendes, a least for a little while," the Alshain offered. At that inopportune moment, the Old Tooth made his way over to their table to take N'Saba's order. The Alshain Science Officer stilled the older man with a raised hand. "What do you say Lieutenant Bhudevi?"

Bhudevi pursed her lips together, giving N'Saba a thorough once-over. "Rowf," she said, her eyes still on N'Saba's muscular frame, "Could you wrap up my soup to go?"

Deep Space Five Commanding Officer's Office

"Admiral Glover, we're receiving a communiqué from Captain Grace," Commander Rahul said through a bulkhead intercom.

"Pipe it in here," Samson said. Captain Albert Grace greeted the admiral before saying:

"Admiral, I can't believe all that's transpired on Earth or DS5. Conrad has been a friend of mine for a long time, but I never suspected he would do something like this; Nor Admiral Deneen Twelve." Naturally Grace had been under suspicion. Leyton had moved friendly officers into key positions throughout the Federation, and Samson suspected that Haas had implored the man to place Deneen and Grace in this sector as a counterweight against him. Deneen had surrendered shortly after news of Haas's arrest had reached her. So far no evidence had been found linking Grace to the cabal, but Samson remained wary.

"It's amazing what people will do when they feel they have no choice," the admiral replied. "But there is always a choice. Always," he said, hoping the man caught the underlying meaning.

"How is Conrad?" Grace shifted gears, and Samson wasn't sure if the man caught his drift or not.

"Still in surgery," Samson replied. "But if anyone can bring him through it's my CMO." Grace sighed.

"I hope so, Conrad's still a good friend, and Olivia and Justine are as much family as my own flesh and blood. I don't know everything that happened on your

station sir, but I want you to know that Conrad's a good man, despite it all. He only wanted to do the right thing."

Samson nodded. He knew there was a kernel of truth in what Grace was saying. Haas pulled back from the brink, came to his senses, and helped Captain Dalis retake the Powhatan. The admiral had resolved to make the tribunal aware of that, just as he was going to inform them about how the minister's actions had led to Commander Ivyse's death. "I'll tell the tribunal the truth, and I advise you to do the same captain."

The man looked mortified, but nodded. "I could do no less."

Samson looked at him, trying to divine the lie in the man's words or bearing. He couldn't. Eventually he nodded, "Make sure you do."

Deep Space Five

Main Sickbay

Dr. N'Vea walked slowly into the waiting room. Her red smock was stained down the center with blood that looked obsidian. Captain Haas tensed, and Glover held her lightly. The Rigelian shook her head. "He didn't make it." Justine started to cry, but no sound came out. She crumbled into Glover's arms and he held her for a long time.

Deep Space Five

Morgue

A Week Later...

Admiral Samson Glover and Commander Rahul stood mutely as Commander Zolik kneeled beside the smooth black casket that held the body of Lt. Commander Ivyse. He muttered a few words, perhaps prayers Samson guessed. Then the man stood up abruptly, tapped his combadge and initiated the transport of the casket to the *Runabout Marne* that the Zaldan had flown here from Earth. He had insisted on making the journey and carrying Ivy's body personally back to Delta IV, an action that made Samson doubt the man's assertion that he and Ivy had only been coworkers. The admiral had thought to puncture the man's lie and offer more meaningful words of condolence, but stopped himself.

It would be disrespectful to question the man's honor, and if detachment helped him cope, who was Samson to take away his coping mechanism? Plus he knew that most Zaldan despised human kindness as dishonesty. After the casket had disappeared, Zolik turned stiffly around to nod at Samson and Rahul. "Permission to disembark sir?" He asked, his voice hoarse.

"Permission granted," Samson replied. Zolik nodded and then reactivated his shipboard transporter. Before the last of the man's atoms had sparkled away, Samson said, "Rahul, I need to talk to you."

The Efrosian curtly nodded. "Sir, I can give you my resignation letter within the hour."

"You know Rahul, a couple days ago I would've accepted it," Samson replied, "I had already started the procedures to reassign you, but put that on hold. The way I see it, you were doing your duty, and it wasn't personal. Am I right?"

"Yes," Rahul said. "I didn't know about Haas, honestly."

"That's all ready been established," Glover said. "And to be honest, I didn't do a good job of integrating you or Commander Ivyse into the crew, making you part of the family, gaining your trust," he sighed. "It's too late to do that for Ivyse, but you still have a place here. If you want it."

The Efrosian shook his head, "Sir, I think there is enough blame to go around on all sides in this mess, and yes, I would like to stay."

Samson smiled. He stuck out a hand and the First Officer grasped it. "Welcome aboard."

Deep Space Five

Astrometrics Lab

A Week Later...

Captain Glover's reaction was far more sanguine this time. He made his way to Lt. Bhudevi, and held out his hand. The woman cautiously took it. "I'm so sorry," he replied. "I-I just lost my head for a moment, but it was no excuse."

"No, it's understandable," the Barzan said. "When one feels as strongly as you do for Jasmine, it's not something easily bottled or caged."

"I guess it isn't," Terrence sheepishly admitted. He stood awkwardly for a few moments, not sure what else to say. Bhudevi merely watched him, and the captain could tell that his nervousness was amusing her. Eventually she turned back to her console.

"I think we're done here. I'll tell Jasmine you stopped by," the Science Officer said.

"I...I would prefer if you don't," Glover replied. "I didn't do this to appease Jasmine or appeal to her. I did it because it was the right thing to do." That caused Bhudevi to turn back around. Her smile was more genuine.

"Jasmine was right, you do have a silver tongue," she laughed. "Perhaps all three of us can be friends? I've heard that type of thing is catching on around here."

Glover mulled over the offer for half a second, recalling the stories Pedro had told him. The tall, lithe Barzan was quite fetching. "I think she would kill me," he truthfully replied.

"It would be a glorious death," she purred.

"Now that might be actually be a good day to die," Glover quipped and the two former rivals buried the hatchet with laughter.

USS Hakata
Captain's Ready Room
Archanis Sector

Captain Albert Grace glanced out of viewport at the starship alongside it. The vision of the graceful frame of the *Galaxy*-class *Tshwane*, and the captain whom he had had to relinquish command of the fleet to, filled him with rage. He drove back the impulse to order his ship to fire on the vessel. Catching it completely unawares he could destroy it easily, but that's something Melek Urlak, the Obsidian Order operative would do, and would be an action totally out of character for the good Captain Grace. Sometimes, he hated his job.

Urlak wished he were home on Prime, wished he could look into a mirror and see his real face again, wished that he could hug his wife and children again. He wondered if they were even alive. The almost complete decimation of the Obsidian Order after the Omarion Nebula debacle and the subsequent Klingon invasion had disrupted his lines of communication. He was now operating largely solo. He hoped his handlers approved of his attempt to head off Leyton's coup. Even though Irek and Chanet had failed, Leyton, Haas, and the rest had proven so inept and weak-willed that they were discovered regardless. He took some comfort in the fact that the Federation remained sympathetic to the Cardassians' plight though he wished he could move President Inyo toward taking more direct action.

He had hoped to continue to nudge Haas in such a direction and use him as a conduit, but the man had become enamored by Leyton's plan, and had become an obstacle. Urlak had hoped to eliminate him before Haas's role was discovered. Now, Urlak was under suspicion, though he had covered his tracks pretty thoroughly. The operative knew that Starfleet investigators would find nothing tying him to the coup attempt, but the association to Haas alone forced him from his perch in the Archanis Sector, where he could pass vital information about Klingon troop movements back to Prime. They had reassigned the *Hakata* to cataloguing gaseous anomalies in the Beta Quadrant, far from the Klingons, Cardassians, or anything important.

His desktop console trilled. He turned to it, regarding it for a few seconds while he pondered whether to activate it. Sighing, Urlak sat down and turned on the screen. Grace's wife smiled at him. He worked his features into a grin. "Albert, how are you honey? How did things go?"

"Just fine," he remarked nonchalantly, amused that the woman had never figured out that the man who had returned from Lazon II hadn't been her husband. But if she had never caught on after all these years, Urlak guessed he was in good stead. He would remain a viper nestled in the Federation's bosom until the right time came to strike.

USS Cuffe

Captain's Ready Room

"You did a damn fine job Commander Kojo," Captain Glover replied. He clapped the woman on the back hard. Terrence knew she would be disappointed in him if he hadn't tried to dislocate her shoulder.

"I did my duty," the Kriosian replied simply. "After Admiral Glover informed me of what was really occurring how could I not do otherwise?"

"You could've made another choice or no choice at all," Terrence said. "Minister Haas was still in charge. You could've run the information by him, or later on, you could've followed My'zhark's orders and stood down, but you didn't. Your instincts, your gut told you otherwise, and that's the hallmark of a good leader, of a captain."

Kojo allowed herself a small smile at the praise, "Thank you sir."

"I've already submitted my report, with a commendation recommendation for you," Terrence said. "You've earned it."

"I appreciate that sir," Kojo replied.

"Keep it up and you'll be getting one of these before long," he pointed to the fourth pip on his lavender collar. Nandali's grin widened.

"Challenge accepted."

Deep Space Five Chief of Operations' Quarters

Jasmine zipped up the front of Terrence's tunic. "It seems like you just got here," she said, pursing her lips in displeasure.

"I know," Glover said, "But duty calls. In fact, we should've been gone about a week and a half ago, before Leyton's gambit." Jasmine pulled him to her. She kissed him.

"Let's not talk about that okay? It's all over the nets, plus it's all anyone else is talking about at work and on the station, I would rather spend the last few minutes you got talking about something else."

"Like us?" Terrence pondered.

"I wouldn't be opposed to that," Jasmine smiled. Now Glover kissed her.

"I'm not going to let you get away again," he declared.

"Terrence, I don't want to make you out to be a liar. The universe is a big place, and I think it's best that we be realistic about that," Jasmine said, pulling away, but Glover stopped her.

"I meant what I said," he replied.

"We'll see," Jasmine rejoined, "We'll see."

Kedron Estate Trill

Late 2372

"I'll take your request under consideration," Councilor Balen Kedron said. Garth Logan grinned, running a hand through his mop of curly chestnut brown hair. Logan was Federation Councilor Martin Santiago's campaign manager. After President Inyo had informed everyone that he wouldn't seek a second term, the race to succeed him had begun in earnest. The two front-runners were Santiago and High Commissioner Shavesh of Andor. Logan took a careful sip of the amber wine, a special brand from the Kedron vineyard, before responding:

"You'll do more than that," his smile turned nasty. "You'll endorse Santiago for President today."

"What if I choose not to," Kedron was no stranger to playing hardball. "What could you do to me?"

"I know about your role in Leyton's coup, and how you've escaped prosecution. While the rest of your comrades are languishing in jail or buried; their careers over, you're still on the Federation Council."

Kedron chose to play it cool. "What proof do you have that I was involved? It's been several months since Leyton's coup attempt, and it seems odd that you're the only person that claims to link me to it."

"Let's just say that I have some powerful, well connected friends," Logan's grin turned Cheshire. "Even more powerful than you and they felt it was in their interest to keep you around."

"I see," Kedron said, swallowing the lump in his throat. Could the human really have evidence linking him to the coup? Grace had told him that he had taken care of all that. Had the man made a mistake along the way? "It's no secret that I've been opposed to many of Inyo's policies, that doesn't make me a traitor. That being said, Santiago is cut from the same liberal cloth. With war drums beating from Qo'noS, I don't think he's the right person for the job, and an endorsement by me would seem extremely strange."

Logan nodded. "My friends understand your reservations. Many of them have expressed similar doubts about Santiago's liberal approach to foreign policy. But I assure you that his fresh approach is needed to restore the faith of the citizens. He's on record for being a critic of the size and reach of Starfleet, whereas Shavesh has been an avowed proponent of Fleet expansion. That's not the best message right now, for our citizens or the Klingons."

"The Klingons are one of the reasons I support Shavesh," Kedron replied. "We don't need someone willing to cede ground to Gowron, or cower before his bullying."

"You've worked with Martin for a long time; do you really think he's a coward?"

"Of course not, but I know he's a man that abhors violence and will go to great lengths to avoid it, even long after it's become the only, logical course or response."

"We're not in disagreement in that regard," Logan admitted. "However, Santiago can be reined in. That's part of my job," he laughed. "And what better way to push a hard line agenda than through an ultraliberal candidate."

"Just who are these friends of yours?" Kedron asked.

"That's none of your concern," Logan replied, his smile frosting. "But understand that my friends believe in your value more than I do."

Kedron rubbed his chin as he weighed his options. He hadn't scaled the political heights by being a poor judge of people, and he could tell that Logan wasn't lying. After an interminable time, the Trill sighed. "You've got my endorsement." Logan held out his hand. Kedron looked at it for a few seconds before responding.

"You're not going to regret this," Logan promised.

I already do, the Trill thought.

THE END