

Border Cutter Silverfin Hidden From View

By Brydon Sinclair

Chapter 1

**Office of Rear Admiral T'Rona, Star Station Freedom
Tamsen System, Talarian Border
Stardate: 55201.1 (March 15th, 2378)**

Rear Admiral T'Rona, Commander of the Third Border Cutter Squadron, sat in her office looking over the latest reports on the Squadron's anti-smuggling operations—the largest such mission that had been undertaken since before the Dominion War had broken out. The operation had lasted for seven weeks and had been officially concluded, but during that time the four teams had searched eighty-nine ships, seized thirty-seven that were transporting contraband, whilst the actions of the *U.S.S. Silverfin* had uncovered the reappearance of the Chanok—a brutal species banned from Federation territory over a century ago, who now appeared to have a considerable involvement in the illegal activities along the Talarian border. A very successful mission. She had noted several commendations for crewmembers that had performed above and beyond the call of duty during the time.

Of the eight ships involved in the operation, both Aerie-Class patrol scouts as well as the *Silverfin* would be putting in for crew R&R as the ships were re-supplied, whilst the *U.S.S. Lobo* would need some repairs after chasing a Ferengi merchantman into an asteroid belt—fortunately no one had been injured and they had secured the ship, which had been carrying Ketracel White, Zyth-Raan B and various other narcotics. She had already spoken with Lieutenant Commander Greta Weir, the Squadron Maintenance Officer, who said that the *Lobo* would be back on active duty in five days. Whilst Squadron Quartermaster Henry Mitchell assured her that the *Silverfin*, *H'krii* and *K'Shod* would all be restocked within a few hours of docking—though all three ships had a minimum of seventy-two hours R&R at Star Station Freedom, the Talarian Incursion the previous year showed that they needed to be ready for any situation as quickly as possible.

Before she could dwell on the events of last year the intercom chirped. “*Kasan to T’Rona,*” came the voice of her attaché, Lieutenant JG Azaal Kasan, a highly efficient young Trill who had held the post since the beginning of the year.

“Go ahead Lieutenant.”

“Admiral, you have an incoming transmission from Starfleet Headquarters, the office of Vice Admiral Bouvier.”

Deirdre Bouvier was the Border Service Commander, although she had never served a single day on a Cutter or a Star Station—something T’Rona found most illogical for someone in her position (T’Rona herself had spent forty-nine years on Cutters before she’d accepted her promotion to the admiralty). However, Bouvier was the ranking officer and T’Rona respected the chain of command, even if she did not personally agree with Starfleet’s decision.

“Thank you Lieutenant. Put her through.”

On her screen the image of the Border Service logo replaced the report she had been reading, a moment later it was replaced with the severe visage of Bouvier. “Admiral,” T’Rona said by way of greeting.

“Rear Admiral,” Bouvier began, *“I trust that your crack down on smuggling was successful.”*

“Yes sir. I was in the process of reviewing and compiling the reports for you.”

“As soon as possible Rear Admiral,” she stated, then glanced at a PADD lying on her desk. *“I have been looking over the Third Squadron complement and decided to redeploy several ships.”*

T’Rona’s right eyebrow lifted, the closest she got to an expression of total shock and disbelief. “Admiral that may not be advisable—given the actions of the Talarians last year. We lost two cutters and two others were severely damaged. Had it not been for elements of the Fifth Fleet on tactical manoeuvres in the region, their incursion into Federation space would have been far more severe.

“Our present deployment may only have minimal effectiveness if they attack in force, with their improved weaponry,” she finished, though going by the

stern expression on Bouvier's already pinched face, she suspected that her logic would not be heeded.

"Rear Admiral, their attempted invasion was a year ago and in all that time they have shown no signs of trying again. Your Squadron will be returned to its previous levels, and the other ships will be reassigned."

"Sir, there was no signs of aggression prior to their incursion fifty-four weeks ago. Although my Intelligence Officer is being extremely fastidious in monitoring their movements, there is always the chance that they will act out with the realms of probability and 'blindsight' us once again."

"We repelled them before Rear Admiral, we will do so again," she said with an edge to her voice. *"This isn't a consultation, it's an order."*

T'Rona held back her continued argument; she knew that there would be no chance of convincing the Vice Admiral, now that her mind was made up. "What ships will be redeployed?"

"The Medusa and Thunderbird will remain with the Squadron, to replace the T'Vor and Cyclops. But the Hercules, K'Shod, Lobo, Satyr and Kukui are all being redeployed—effective immediately."

Removing the four cutters and one scout would return the Third Squadron down to its previous level before the incursion. Though it had proved to be sufficient during peacetime, the attack last year (now combined with the re-emergence of the Chanok) showed that the hostile forces in the region were testing the strength and capabilities of the Federation. She told Bouvier as much.

"Admiral, this may not be the time to reduce our forces in the region. We must also follow up on the Starfleet technology and weaponry that was being smuggled by the Orion freighter *Xeros*—which battlefields the equipment was scavenged from and its ultimate destination."

That brought Bouvier up short, and she seemed to mull over the point T'Rona had made. There was every chance that the Starfleet Criminal Investigative Service or Starfleet Intelligence would be given the assignment, but in order to get fast results a thorough knowledge of the region would be needed—and no one could beat the Border Service in that regard.

"Other squadrons are in need of those ships," Bouvier mused.

“I understand that, sir. However, reassigning all five ships may be presumptuous, given recent development. May I suggest that the Third Squadron retains the *K'Shod* and *Kukui* whilst the other three ships are reassigned. Not only were the weapons and hardware heading into neutral space in this region, but the two battlefields from which the equipment was scavenged are both within close proximity to our patrol routes.”

She saw that Bouvier didn't like the suggestion; however T'Rona knew it to be the best compromise available. “A scout could be sent to inspect each site and monitor them for any further non-sanctioned salvaging operations, whilst the *Kukui* has the speed and capabilities needed to tackle the last remnants of this smuggling operation.”

“I will consider leaving the K'Shod under your command, however Rear Admiral Fitzharris has asked for additional ships for the Fourth Squadron, so I was planning on dispatching the Kukui to Star Station Destiny.”

That didn't surprise T'Rona. Quentin Fitzharris, her peer with the Fourth Squadron, was one of Bouvier's strongest allies among the Border Service command structure, and as such got special treatment from the Vice Admiral.

For her part, T'Rona raised an eyebrow in a surprised manner. “I was unaware that there were any increasing hostilities or workload for the Four Squadron.”

That seemed to flummox Bouvier. *“There isn't at present,”* she admitted slowly.

In reality, relations between the Federation and the Gorn Hegemony were vastly improving, following an incident during the war, when a Starfleet ship helped safeguard the First Descendant (their equivalent of a crown prince) from an assassin sent by the Orion Syndicate—Starfleet Intelligence suspected that the hit had been ordered by the Dominion, but there was no proof to support their suspicions. Though the Gorn hadn't allied with the UFP in the conflict, things in the immediate region had quietened down considerably.

“I see,” she replied simply, though her tone spoke volumes.

Bouvier's eyes narrowed as she scrutinised her. T'Rona held her stare levelly, her stoic exterior never slipping, though Bouvier seemed to be going through

a variety of different emotions, annoyance and irritation being most prominent. Though T'Rona was lower in rank, she had more years of service under her belt and made sure to keep a close eye on what was happening within the Border Service and the Cutter Squadrons. Bouvier was determined to restructure the Service, with Squadron Commander's and cutter Captain's who would tow her line. T'Rona had spent ninety-two years in Starfleet, sixty-three of which were with the Border Service (the last eleven of which as a flag officer), so she knew the intricacies of the system and how it worked, and could spot an opportunistic member of the brass when she met one. Her long service history afforded her many contacts across every level of Starfleet, so she could see the way things were going back at Headquarters and what that would mean for the Border Service.

It was a dangerous path she was on, but she made sure that she couldn't be considered disobedient or insubordinate in her suggestion or the pitch of her voice. Bouvier seemed to be trying to think of way to regain control of the conversation, as it was obvious that she had already decided what she wanted and T'Rona was going against her script.

"With our current tension with the Talarians, the re-emergence of the Chanok and these scavengers working within our area of operational area, the presence on a new Sequoia-Class would show those involved that Starfleet takes the defence of this area seriously," she stated dispassionately.

The muscles in Bouvier's jaw clenched and flexed, whilst she continued to scowl at T'Rona. After a long moment the Border Service Commander finally relented with the slightest of nods. *"Very well Rear Admiral. I will allow the Third Squadron to retain the Kukui as well as the K'Shod,"* she quickly added in an almost threatening tone, *"for now."*

"Though if the SCIS or Intel opt to lead the investigation, then they will be reassigned," she finished

"Understood sir," T'Rona replied with a nod.

"I'll speak with SCIS and Intel personally. I will contact you when a decision has been reached. Bouvier out." With that the screen reverted back to the Border Service logo, before displaying the report she had originally been studying.

The conversation had gone as well as could be expected. T'Rona had known that she wouldn't be able to retain her expanded force forever, though she had expected a greater presence in the region for longer than a year. The

Hercules was on loan from the First Squadron that patrolled the Romulan Neutral Zone—just like all the other Apollo-Class cutters—whilst the *Lobo* and *Satyr* would be rotated onto another Squadron to provide further cover (whilst other ships underwent refit or upgrades). She was determined however to at least hold onto the *K'Shod* and *Kukui*, as both crews had begun to settle and had established good professional and personal relationships with the other cutter crews, as well as the staff onboard Freedom.

Part of commanding a Squadron was to look out for its best interests, to keep it functioning at peak efficiency with whatever resources were at hand, so T'Rona wasn't about to give up two ships that would be of more use to her in a region that needed the extra eyes, ears and muscle. Now that she had retained them, she was determined to keep them. In order to do that however, she would have to ask for support from the SCIS and SI representatives on Freedom.

She tapped the direct comm link that connected her office with the outer anteroom. "Lieutenant, have Commanders Macintosh and Drizuk report to my office on the double."

"Yes sir," the Trill promptly replied.

T'Rona closed down the report on her screen and brought up the details on the freighter *Xeros*, the cargo they had been carrying and the analysis that both the *Silverfin's* Chief Engineer had conducted, as well as that of Commander Weir, and the reports that Intelligence Officer Macintosh and Drizuk (the SCIS team leader that had been assigned for the smuggling crackdown) had filed during their investigations. They had proven to work well together, and before Drizuk was transferred to another sector, she wanted to make use of him and his team. She would ensure that both the SCIS and Starfleet Intelligence supported her belief that the Border Service was best suited to lead the investigation—with their full support of course.

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**Sickbay, Deck 4, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Docking Berth 2, Star Station Freedom**

Lieutenant JG Tessi Jenka RN, Acting Chief Medical Officer of the cutter *Silverfin*, ran her final scan of Crewman Nyk Drim, before shutting her tricorder and setting it back on the equipment tray. The Bolian was trying not to stare at her as he always did during their session together—she suspected

(correctly) that the Security Guard had a little crush on her, which wasn't unheard of over the course of a lengthy treatment regime.

The rookie enlistee had been injured in a fire fight onboard a Chanok warship almost seven weeks ago. The weapons the hostile forces had been using had burned straight through the armour, skin, muscle and bone of his right shoulder. It had been a horrific injury, but she had seen much worse during the Dominion War. Had he sustained it prior to the war, his career would have most likely been over, but one thing conflict was good for was the evolution of technology and methodology. New means to repair such injuries had been developed in the midst of the fighting, designed to get as many trained soldiers back onto active duty as quickly as possible. Though she hated their origin, they had saved many lives and continued to do so now that the war had ended. Luckily, the *Silverfin* was exceptionally well stocked and she had been able to save the crewman's shoulder and arm in surgery, and then spent the last seven weeks helping him with physiotherapy.

"It looks like we are done Mr Drim," she told him with a friendly smile.

"Really?" he said, sounding a little disappointed. "We seem to be getting better at this, Lieutenant, seems to take no time at all now."

She couldn't help but notice how the elongated lobes of his ears went darker when he looked at her, a response to various biochemical processes that went on with Bolian's when faced with a prospective mate—like a human's cheeks flushing. Though flattered, Jenka had vowed when she'd entered Starfleet to never get involved with a shipmate.

"I'll see you in a couple of days then," he said as he hopped down off the biobed.

"Um, Crewman, that's you're treatments finished. Period."

The look of shock and horror that crossed his round face was very touching. His treatments should only have taken four weeks, but due to an allergic reaction to some of the drugs used, they had been forced to go down a slower path, but that had now come to an end.

"Oh," he mumbled, sounding as though his whole world had just come to an end.

“I’ll let Master Chief Syva know you are cleared for full active duty,” she told him, making sure to keep her tone pleasant, yet professional.

“Oh, ok.”

Drim looked about ready to say something else, but then apparently thought better of it and then headed for the exit, his shoulders slumped and his head drooping. She watched the guard leave, then cleaned up the medical equipment she had been using and took the tray back to the trolley where all the others were kept.

Corpsman Echor was seated at the wards computer terminal, fighting to keep from smirking. During her weeks onboard, Jenka had come to enjoy working with the young Tellarite, but now she stopped and scowled at the non-com.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Echor replied quickly.

“Seriously Jili, what’s wrong?”

Echor looked up at her, a wide grin threatening to tear her face in two. “Surely you can see how much Nyk likes you.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” she lied.

“Yeah, right,” Echor stated, sounding unconvinced. She leaned forward over the console and lowered her voice—even though they were alone. “I heard from a reliable source down in Security, that Mr Drim was working up the courage to ask you out.”

“Who told you that?” Jenka demanded, moving closer to the medic.

“A reliable contact I have among my fellow non-coms down in the Armoury. Scuttlebutt has it that the kid is nuts about you.”

Jenka groaned and cover her face with her hands. She had thought it was just a crush, she hadn’t realised he was actually on the verge of asking her out—which she had unceremoniously shot down just moments ago. She would have politely declined had he asked, but rejecting him before he even did so would be tough on the rookie.

“Dammit,” she muttered to herself. “Thanks for that, Jili. I feel terrible now!”

“Here to help,” the Tellarite replied cheerfully, then turned back to her duties.

Heading through to the medlab, bypassing the CMO’s office altogether, she propped herself up on one of the stools and sighed heavily. The day had started off bad enough—it was the five week anniversary of her rejection letter from Starfleet Medical, telling her in no uncertain terms that her place on the Medical Officer’s Advanced Training Programme (an elite scheme for nurses, corpsmen and medtechs to qualify as doctors) had been withdrawn and given to another—and now she had crushed a young man’s self-confidence.

It’s no wonder they rejected me, if that’s my bedside manner, a blunt voice in the back of her mind chided.

“Just be quiet,” she muttered to herself, never realising she had spoken aloud.

The selection committee had accepted her and given her the opportunity she had wanted since she served in the war, but her sudden temporary posting to the *Silverfin* had put a spanner in the works, and the committee hadn’t been willing to give her any leeway. She could reapply the following year, but there was no guarantee that she would get in. So when the cutter’s surgeon returned from his ‘secondment’ on Betazed, she was essentially homeless.

She shook her head. The last thing she needed was to dwell on that, Doctor Mbeki was off-ship for several weeks, seeing to the Chief Operations Officer—who was being treated for an unknown mental trauma he’d sustained at the start of the year. *Besides, I’ve got a shattered ego and broken heart to help mend now.*

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Bridge, Deck 1, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Docking Berth 2, Star Station Freedom

With the cutter nestled safely in dock at Freedom, the crew were on some much deserved liberty, utilising the Star Station’s recreational facilities to the max. A skeleton crew remained on each shift, as per regulations, to carry out a number of minor tasks and duties that needed to be covered. As such, Commander Amarin—the *Silverfin*’s Benzenite First Officer—was supervising

just two others on the Bridge; Petty Officer Jethro “JJ” Jackson was at Ops and Ensign Jose Tyler V was at Tactical.

For his part, Amarin sat at the Engineering station. Even when he was on watch, he never liked to sit in the Captain’s Chair—to him, that was Susanna Leijten’s place, not his. Besides, after his poor judgement during their encounter with the Chanok, he didn’t deserve to occupy the centre seat. A Star Stallion badly damaged and a rookie severely injured under his command. Luckily for him, the shuttle had been repaired (though it had taken a week to bang out all the dings and repair the fried systems) and Crewman Drim was on the mend and due back on active duty when they launched; but even knowing that, he couldn’t help but kick himself at his reckless tactics and rash choices.

I told Susanna I wasn’t suited for command, he scorned himself. Three years ago, after Captain Ja-Inrosh had been killed in action and Leijten was promoted to fill the vacancy, her first act as CO had been to promote him to Commander and First Officer. He had argued against the promotion, resolute in his stand that he was an engineer, nothing more. But with high crew losses across the fleet, the chances of getting an experienced officer for a cutter were slim to nil, so he had (grudgingly) accepted, fully intending to return to his previous post when a suitable replacement could be found. But that hadn’t happened, and things only got worse after the stop/loss order was rescinded and many left the uniform behind. Over time he had grown more comfortable in his role, even enjoying the diversity it provided, but in the back of his mind, he had always hoped to return to his vocation.

I could always put in for a transfer, he mused. There are always ships in need of good engineers. That way the Silverfin would get a First Officer worthy of the position.

He shook his bulbous head. Looking for the easy way out wouldn’t help; he’d still feel as bad as he did. He had had three years in the job, yes there had been tough times and difficult assignments, but they had always managed to get through relatively unscathed. The Chanok encounter was the first time he had failed at anything in his career, it was a feeling he wasn’t used too and left a bitter taste behind.

“Commander?” stated Tyler—obviously not the first time the young human had called to him.

Amarin looked over his shoulder at the fresh-faced ensign. “Yes, Mr Tyler?”

“I’ve got an incoming transmission from Betazed, its Doctor Mbeki, sir.”

The edges of his mouth (hidden by his breather mask) tugged upwards. It had been a while since he had spoken with their Chief Medical Officer, a man who was wiser than his years and was a friend and confidante to many onboard—he had been there when Amarin had needed to vent about the change in his career track.

“Patch it through here, Ensign.”

“Aye sir.”

Turning back to his console, he cleared one monitor for the comlink. The Border Service delta appeared for a few seconds, before being replaced with Mbeki’s kind face, easy smile and shaved head (which he did to hide the fact his hairline was receding).

“Amarin. How’re things back at the homestead?”

“Good. We’ve got a few days respite, before we need to head back out,” he paused for a moment. Lowering his voice as best he could, he asked, “How is Kolanis doing?”

The smile faded and a troubled look crossed his face. *“Still no change I’m afraid. We’ve run every scan and test the centre has available, but there is no evidence of any physical trauma or neurological instability that could be causing his condition. They’ve even called on the Vulcan Institute of Neuro Science for assistance—no one knows the humanoid brain better—but it even has them stumped. So we’re having to go back over our options.”*

Amarin was saddened to hear that there were no developments. Lieutenant Commander Kolanis Daezan had been affected by ‘something’ onboard the ghost ship *U.S.S. Cairo*, which had appeared close to Talarian space, four years after being reported MIA along the Neutral Zone. He had been taken home to Betazed for treatment, which everyone had high hopes for.

“Is he any better?”

Mbeki shook his head. *“I’m afraid not. We have to keep him in a coma; otherwise he goes from screaming to crying to babbling incoherently.”*

"I'm sure I speak for everyone onboard, when I say that we're thinking of him—and you of course, Tunde."

His friend smiled softly at his attempt to lighten the mood. *"Thanks for that Amarin."* Mbeki looked over his shoulder at the relatively deserted Bridge. *"I had actually wanted to talk to Susanna. I take it she's not onboard at present?"*

"I'm afraid not. She is meeting with Hank Mitchell, an old friend who is on Freedom." Amarin noticed a slight smirk creep across Mbeki's lips. "What is it?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. *"Oh, it's nothing. I can try her again later. How long are you in dock for?"*

"We're hoping for five days R&R."

Mbeki scrutinised him for a moment, his smile slowly disappearing. *"Is everything alright Amarin?"*

Had Amarin had eyebrows, they would have shot up with surprise. Thanks to the apparatus he had to wear in order to survive in an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere his face was unreadable to most—except those he had worked closely with over a number of years. Though he considered Mbeki a friend, he had thought that he was doing a good job at hiding the little outward nuances that something was bothering him.

"It's nothing." Mbeki's eyes narrowed. "Really. I'm fine."

"You know, Amarin, as unreadable as your face is, you're a terrible liar. What's the matter?"

Sighing heavily, Amarin knew it was pointless to continue the charade for much longer, once Mbeki caught the scent of a problem he wouldn't let up. Keeping his voice as low as he could, he began to outline what had happened seven weeks ago, making sure to include the extensive damage to both Drim and the Stallion.

"What's the Captain had to say about all of this?"

"She couldn't have been better."

"And Drim?"

“His treatment has gone well and he’s due back on full active duty.”

“I don’t doubt that, but how is he?”

“I...eh...I haven’t had a chance to speak with him,” Amarin admitted sheepishly.

“You haven’t spoken with him in seven weeks? Amarin you can’t just ignore the man the rest of the time either of you are onboard. You need to speak with him, see how he’s doing, let him know how sorry you are for what happened. It won’t abolish the guilt you’re feeling, but it will be a step in the right direction, and it’ll help him in more ways than one.

“The first chance you get, Amarin, you speak to him. That’s an order,” Mbeki added.

“You can’t order me, Doctor, I outrank you.”

“Starfleet Medical regulations give me the authority as both the Silverfin’s Chief Medical Officer and a certified counsellor.”

Amarin held his hands up in mock surrender. “Alright sir. I will speak with him when I can.”

“Good.” Behind Mbeki there was a page for him, asking him to report to the psychometric laboratory. “Sounds like my tests were finished sooner than I’d expected. Tell Susanna I will comm her later, and I better hear that you’ve spoken with Crewman Drim or there’ll be trouble.”

“I will. *Silverfin* out.”

The monitor reverted to the delta for a moment, before going dark. He studied his reflection on the dark panel and found himself feeling a little foolish. He knew that he should have spoken with Drim, to see how the young Bolian was doing. Of course he’d heard from Master Chief Syva and Nurse Jenka how he was holding up, but all of it was very technical.

He was just fortunate he had a friend who was willing and able to give him a kick in the ass when he needed it.

Central Park, Star Station Freedom Tamsen System, Talarian Border

Before being demoted from Starbase to Star Station, the facilities large, domed arboretum had been considered one of the best in the sector. Under normal circumstances, as the bases were converted to meet the needs of the Border Service, the gardens were usually among the first thing to go, but in this instance the designers had had a change of heart and kept it—though slightly reduced it in size. Since becoming operational as Freedom, the unique garden had been nicknamed ‘Central Park’, which had since stuck and become its official designation.

Susanna Leijten had never spent much time in the garden, usually too busy when the *Silverfin* was docked to take a moment to smell the roses. But now she strolled along the paths, enjoying the artificial sunlight in the fake blue sky, taking in the vast expanse of flowers, shrubs, trees, grasses and streams. Despite the size of Central Park, it was sparsely populated, which gave the impression she and Henry “Hank” Mitchell were alone on their leisurely walk.

Hank served on Freedom as the Squadron Quartermaster, the man responsible for ensuring all the cutters and support ships were fully stocked and loaded before heading out, and someone she had first met twelve years ago on Star Station Cheron. During the two years they had served together, before he had retired to take care of the family ranch, they had become involved in what was arguably the most intense and fulfilling relationship of her life. Reunited seven weeks ago, just hours before the *Silverfin* had left on the smuggling crackdown, things had sparked between them once again, though neither of them had broached the issue about what was developing between them. All she knew was that she was once again spending time with a man who made her giddy and tingly, like a schoolgirl with a crush, and she didn’t want to quash that sensation by putting labels on their relationship—even though, in the back of her mind she knew that it needed to be done.

“It ain’t Earth, but its close enough,” Hank stated in his customary Texan drawl.

“Freedom does have holodecks to simulate outdoor locations,” she reminded him.

He chuckled. “Ah know, Suz. But there’s just somethin’ about this place that feels like bein’ back home.”

“I guess us space-brats just don’t understand that. Give me a viewport looking out into the blackness of space and I’m happy.”

He shook his head, tutting in an exaggerated manner. “Yer’ve been out in space too long, Suz. Yer need to get back to yer roots, with some good ol’ dirt under your feet and get yer hands dirty.”

“Serving on a cutter my hands get plenty dirty, thank you very much. Next thing, you’ll be suggesting I try getting on a horse again!”

Hank had to stop as he laughed, the bellowing noise carrying in stillness of Central Park. All the while, Leijten winced at the memory of her bruised buttocks following the one and only time he had tried to teach her to ride.

His laughing didn’t last long and he gave her a sympathetic look. “Ah’m sorry, Suz. Gus has always been a peaceable beast. Ah still don’t know what made him throw you off. He ain’t done it again.”

“Not everyone has your way with animals, Hank.”

Mitchell turned to look at her with his kind, sky blue eyes—they were perhaps his nicest feature. He held her gaze for a long moment, making her giddy once again. He was handsome, kind and open, though radiated strength and masculinity, all of which was focused solely on her—making her knees weak. He moved in closer to her, lowering his face to hers, and she knew what was coming next. His lips were gentle but with an underlying passion that he kept in check—their newfound ‘relationship’ hadn’t developed to anything physical, though she knew it was yet another area where they were both very compatible.

The kiss was long and lingering, his strong hands holding her close and the heat of their bodies was intense. Everything around her faded away as she was enveloped in their tender embrace—they could have been standing in the middle of Freedom’s Ops Centre and she wouldn’t have noticed another living soul.

The combadge Hank wore on his checked shirt chirped. “*Weir to Mitchell.*”

Slowly, unwillingly, their lips parted and he gave her a sad smile, before tapping the pin. “This is Mitchell. What can ah do yer for, Commander?” he asked.

“Senior Chief, I apologise for interrupting you on your day off,” the Squadron Maintenance Officer began, her voice tinted with a slight German accent, *“but I’ve just heard from the Sector Supply Office, that shipment that was due in two weeks will be here the day after tomorrow.”*

“What?” he asked annoyed. “Why the hell are they doin’ that?”

“They didn’t say. Just that it was en route and would be here in forty hours.”

Hank muttered a few profanities under his breath before sighing heavily. “Ah’ll meet yer in Cargo Ops in ten, Commander. Mitchell out.”

She looked up at him and gave him a knowing look, which he returned with an apologetic smile. “Sorry Suz. Ah gotta deal with this.”

“I understand, Hank. I should check back in with the *Silverfin*,” she told him, knowing that if anything came up Amorin would inform her. “Should we cancel tonight?”

“Hell no! Do yer know how hard it is to get a table in that Trill place? Ah’ll see yer at eighteen hundred.”

Her smile became an affectionate one. For the rugged and manly exterior, he was a hopeless romantic at heart. “Until then.”

He nodded before headed for the exit. He had only gone a few steps before stopping and looking back at her. “Yer know, Cap’n, yer could pull rank over Commander Weir. Order me to stay.”

Leijten laughed. “One thing you quickly learn when commanding a cutter, you *never* get on the bad side of your maintenance officer.” She pointed to the exit. “Go.”

He gave her a wink before turning and walking out the exit with his customary casual swagger. She watched him go with a cheeky smile, admiring the way his well-worn jeans clung to his glutes. Sighing to herself, she looked around Central Park once again before heading for the exit as well. She’d head back for the *Silverfin*, ensure everything was running smooth, then put a call in to Juliette, her sister, on Starbase 201. She needed some sisterly advice about Hank, about whether or not she was nuts to start things back up with him—even if it was what she really wanted. But the memory of the

thirteen months after he'd left weighed heavily on her, she had been a wreck after he left and she wasn't sure she could go through that again.

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Flight Deck, Merchantman *Tydonis* Ricktor System

Tarae'a strutted onto the cramped Flight Deck and was immediately taken aback by the foul stench of unwashed bodies. She sneered at the assault on her delicate olfactory system, glowering at the two men the body odour emanated from. Jonjong Nos and Kint, her Yridian navigator and Ferengi helmsman respectively, neither of whom had much a concept of personal hygiene (she was lucky if either of them evacuated the refresher after they'd used it) or respect for females—even those that paid for their services. She suffered them as they were both good at what they did, and trying to find replacements was too much hassle at short notice.

Making sure to breathe through her mouth she barked, "Report."

"We've arrived on the outer edge of the Ricktor System," stated Jonjong, the *bathi* stick tucked in the corner of his mouth wiggled as he talked—the smoke and spicy scent of the *bathi* stick wasn't even enough to mask the hours of sweat, bad breath of flatulence that had built up in the Flight Deck. "No active emissions on sensors."

I wish the same could be said for in here, she snarled to herself.

"I told you I could get us here without anyone spotting us," Kint stated, his whiny, high-pitched voice grating on her as it always did.

"Begin scans of the Starfleet wreckage—that's what they want," she told Jonjong, ignoring the Ferengi for the moment. The Yridian nodded his wrinkled head and got to work. She then looked at the diminutive pilot. "If our contact is correct, we shouldn't be interrupted. But keep an eye on the sweeps, just in case."

"Yeah," he replied simply, not looking back.

Tarae'a scowled at the back of his chair for a moment, before turning on her stiletto and heading back into the corridor. The doors grinded closed behind her and she paused to take a few deep lungful's of clean air, then headed for a

ladder. The *Tydonis* was built well over a century ago, at a time when cargo haulers needed to conserve as much power as possible, so in place of turbolifts the crew had to make do with stairs and ladders to get between the three decks. The top deck housed the cockpit, crew cabins and a galley; the mid deck was for the ship's computer and sensor systems, fuel tanks, and the upper level of the holds; whilst the bottom deck was for the holds and engine room. It wasn't by any stretch of the imagination comfortable or attractive, but it was hers.

Born into servitude, she had been nothing more than the plaything of master after master, all of them titillated to have a real Orion Animal Woman to violate. But Tarae'a was a sly and cunning slave, biding her time, building a secret reserve of money she stole from her unsuspecting masters and their many guests—there was no point in trying to escape without the means to succeed. At twenty, she belonged to a high-ranking Red Orion (she never knew any of their names, referring to each person that owned her as 'Master') when she was ready to make her move. As her rotund Master had her pinned under his flabby body, sweating and wheezing on top of her, she had strained her neck up and bit into his throat. As his blood flowed down her oesophagus, he gargled and groaned, unable to call to the guards that stood outside his door. Even to this day, ten years later, she could still taste the metallic tang of his blood in her mouth.

Once he went limp, she slid out from under him, took her time to wash up and dress, before leaving his chambers and telling his guards that she had worn him out and he wasn't to be disturbed. Using his security codes, she overrode the sensors to mask what she was up to, gotten into his personal shuttle and left the ship. She was half a light-year away before his body was discovered.

In the ten years since she had liberated herself, she had procured the *Tydonis* from a junkyard, hired on a small crew and started working for herself. She had quickly made a name for herself, willing to take on any job for the right price, building up a large clientele and an impressive list of plants. Her most recent job was proving to be highly profitable, whilst her latest contact was perhaps the most useful and reliable she'd ever had.

Stepping off the ladder onto the cargo deck, Tarae'a smiled to herself as she approached the last three members of her crew. Bahqo, her Lissepian engineer, was tinkering with the grapples on one of the maintenance pods, whilst D'Gal sat in the small craft going over the pre-flight checks and Kyada stood at the holds only computer terminal. Her smile widened a little

at the sight of the broad Klingon squeezed into the pod, but she quickly wiped it from her face as she approached the yellow-skinned Malvarian.

Kyada looked up as she approached and nodded her bald, elongated head in Tarae'a's direction. "Good to launch here."

Nodding at the deckhand, she then headed for the two pods that sat in the middle of the hold. D'Gal noticed her first, his dark eyes moving over the curves of her exposed green flesh—of which there was quite a lot on display. The Klingon never hid his appreciation of her voluptuous figure or jade-coloured skin—he had left more than a few teeth marks across her body over the three years he'd worked for her.

"Problems?" she asked Bahqo.

The tall and portly mechanic stood up, wiping grease and grim on his already filthy jumpsuit. He shook his head and then absently stroked one of the tendrils of skin the hung down from his chin. "No ma'am. Just recalibrating the arms."

"Good," she said simply, before climbing into her pod and running through the checks. Bahqo moved over to join Kyada, as Tarae'a fit the headset in place. She opened the comlink to D'Gal. "Ready to make some easy money?"

"Always."

She smiled then opened a separate like to Kyada. "Open the doors."

Ahead of them the large cargo doors groaned open slowly, the faint shimmer of the atmospheric forcefield visible. Tarae's sealed the pods hatch and then powered the engines. It was time for the vultures the pick the carcasses clean.

* * * * *

Chapter 2

The Bazaar, Star Station Freedom Tamsen System, Talarian Border

With the crews of two cutters, two scouts, a buoy tender and a handful of civilian freighters and transports in dock, Freedom was bustling with activity. Finding a table in an eatery was difficult and the bars were pinned, but somehow Harriet Llewellyn-Smyth and Innis Kalm had gotten lucky and snagged a couple of free chairs outside a little Bajoran bistro. The service was a little slow, but that was to be expected—besides, neither of them had anything else on for the rest of the day.

When a flustered young Bajoran woman finally got to their table, Llewellyn-Smyth couldn't help but feel sorry for her. She pulled her order-PADD out of a pocket on her apron.

"Sorry for the wait."

"That's quite alright," Llewellyn-Smyth told her, in her perfectly pronounced Cambridgeshire accent, accompanied with a friendly smile.

The server returned it. "What can I get you folks?"

"I'll have the fried shrimp with *katterpod* salad," she began, "could I also have a side order of garlic *mopa* bread."

"And to drink?" the younger woman asked as she tapped in the details.

"Is the *kava* juice freshly squeezed?"

"All day, every day," the waitress stated what was no doubt an advertising slogan.

"Put me down for one."

The server nodded and added that to her order, then turned to Innis. The young woman looked up at her fellow Bajoran and only then seemed to notice him, with his dark eyes, jet-black hair, sharp cheekbones, narrow jaw and easy smile. She blushed a little and anxiously tucked a rogue lock of hair behind her ear. Llewellyn-Smyth hid a smile, when they had first met (eleven

years ago) she had had the same reaction to his good looks, though it wasn't long before she found out he would never be interested in her in the same way—but that made room for them to become good friends.

“And, um, what can I get you, sir?”

He gave her a wide smile. “I'll have the *hasperat* soufflé, extra spicy please.”

“Our *hasperat* soufflé is the hottest in the sector,” she told him with a mark of pride.

“I'm glad to hear that,” he replied, the smile growing wider which made the servers cheeks an even darker shade of crimson. “And I think I'll have a *kava* juice as well.”

The young woman quickly entered his order on her device and looked back at him. “Sure thing. Is there anything else?”

“No thanks, Miss...?”

“I'm Naria,” she replied with a giggle.

“Thank you Naria.”

The server quickly headed off towards the kitchen to place their order, casting a longing look back at their table. Llewellyn-Smyth had to chuckle and shake her head. Innis just looked at her.

“What?”

“Don't get the poor girl's hopes up, Kalm.”

“What do you mean?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You know what I mean. It's like the Night Owl all over again! That Rigellian waitress would have imploded if you'd ask her to.”

“I'm just naturally a very friendly guy.”

“No, you're a flirt—even with women.”

He chuckled. “What you call flirting, I call being nice.”

“There’s being nice and then there’s being ‘*nice*,’” she told him with air-quotes for emphasis.

Feigning ignorance, he looked back towards Naria, who was staring at him from inside the bistro and gave her a little wave—which she return a little too-enthusiastically. “You’re just jealous that people like me more than you.”

“Except for Ensign Tyler,” she retorted and looked out into the crowds that filled The Bazaar, though out the corner of her eye, she saw his head whip back to look at her, a look of shock on his chiselled features.

He tried to cover it up. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant, and failing miserably.

Smiling, she looked back at him. It was now his turn to blush. “Kalm, there’s no point in denying it. I’ve known you too long. Jose is just your type of guy; smart, fit, blond and totally uninterested.”

Before he could retort, Naria returned with their drinks and set them down in front of them—she noted that Innis’ was slightly fuller than her own. He gave her quick smile, before looking back at Llewellyn-Smyth. A little disheartened, the server left again.

“Harry, you’re talking crazy. There’s nothing going on between me and Tyler.”

“Just my point,” she retorted with a smirk. “You’re not exactly subtle, Kalm. Tyler is always uncomfortable around you. Granted, I don’t know him that well, but he was starting to loosen up a little before you arrived, but now he’s right back in his shell.”

“But, I...eh...you see,” he stuttered, before stopping and sighing. “And here I thought I was playing it cool.”

She gave him a supportive look. “Kalm, you’ve got many wonderful qualities, but trust me, you can’t ‘play it cool’. You’ve been on the hunt ever since the get-together the night you and Nurse Jenka came aboard.”

“And you’re only bringing this up now?”

Chuckling, she reached over and patted his forearm. "I thought you might have worked it out yourself by now."

He slouched down a little in his seat. He looked out into the crowds of The Bazaar as they went about the stores and vendors in the large open marketplace, though didn't really seem to take in anything or anyone in particular. For her part, Llewellyn-Smyth sat quietly, knowing he would continue when he was ready.

After several minutes of quiet between them, he looked back at her and sat up again. "Was there even any point?"

"Sorry Kalm, I don't know what his preference is. Like I said, he was only just starting to loosen up before you arrived."

He groaned. "Great, I'm two months into an open-ended temporary assignment, and I've already made a fool of myself!"

"Aside from me, I doubt anyone else has noticed," she told him sympathetically, then quickly added, "Except Tyler, of course."

Innis groaned again. "It's a good thing you're not a counsellor!"

"Here you go," Naria stated as she suddenly appeared at their table, hold two large, square plates. "Extra spicy *hasperat* soufflé," she began, setting Innis' dish down in front of him, "and fried shrimp with *katterpod* salad and garlic *mapa* bread." With both plates on the table she looked between the two of them. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"I'm alright, thanks Naria," Innis said a little solemnly.

"So am I," replied Llewellyn-Smyth, as the tangy aroma reached her nose. "It smells wonderful."

Naria gave her a friendly smile. "Enjoy your meal."

Alone at their table again, she picked up her cutlery and started to plan her attack on the delectable looking food in front of her. She then glanced at Innis, who was staring down at his meal, looking sorry for himself.

"Tonight, what say you and I hit the bars and drown out sorrows in a pitcher or two of Samarian Sunsets?"

He gave her a low chuckle. “You and sunsets don’t mix, remember that weekend we had Armstrong City?”

“After getting off the lunar transport and into the first pub, the rest of that trip is a bit of a blur,” she admitted.

“Let’s just say it wasn’t pretty.”

“Come on Kalm, we’re Border Dogs, it’s expected of us to get into trouble in port.”

He laughed. “Oh alright then, but I’m not bailing you out of the brig this time!”

Her smooth brow furled. “What do you mean ‘this time’?”

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Captain’s Quarters, Deck 3, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Docking Berth 2, Star Station Freedom

Leijten had had a quiet afternoon onboard the *Silverfin*. As she’d expected, there was nothing to report from the Bridge and with the vast majority of the crew off-ship, the Cutter felt oddly empty. She’d checked in with Engineering and found Elak ko’Parr th’Shaan still hard at work, which wasn’t unusual for the Andorian—who often had to be ordered to go on shore leave. During their latest assignment, she had become aware of a personnel problem he was having with an officer in his section. Though th’Shaan had wanted to have him transferred out, she had asked that he try to help Ensign Feeznar get better settled. So far the Chief Engineer didn’t seem to be having much success, but was keeping at it, as per her orders.

Before she’d left, she’d told th’Shaan that they could discuss the matter in more detail, and privacy, in the morning. She hated the idea of someone slipping through the cracks on her ship, but just couldn’t understand what the problem was with the diminutive Girinite engineer. On paper, he looked to be a very promising officer but going by the reports she’d been getting from th’Shaan over the last seven weeks, that wasn’t that case. He had graduated with Ensign Tyler ten months ago, but whilst Tyler had gone into Advanced Tactical Training, Feeznar had been posted to the *U.S.S. Hiroshima* for six months before being transferred to the *Silverfin*, which had been in need of an additional officer in the engine room—though during his time on the

Steamrunner-Class ship, he hadn't had any problems or complaints against him.

It wouldn't be the first time a department chief omitted a few truths in order to get rid of a problem crewmember, she told herself, as she sat at her dresser and finished off applying her makeup.

After leaving Engineering, she'd retired to her quarters, left a message for her sister—who'd been in the middle of surgery—then caught up with a few correspondences she'd been putting on hold for the last few weeks. At 1700 hours, she started getting ready for her date with Hank, giddy butterflies clustered in her stomach, as during the afternoon she had decided to use their dinner together to bring up the topic of their current relationship—what it actually was and where they were heading. The thought of the awkward conversation made her nervous, as she'd never been overly good with romantic relationships in the past, and didn't want to screw up what she and Hank had.

She had decided to let her curly hair down, opted for natural looking makeup, and chosen a knee-length, black dress with thin shoulder straps (her favourite 'dressing-up' civvies) for the evening. Dressed, makeup applied, she picked up the delicate gold chain with a small latiumm pendant and carefully fixed it around her neck. The necklace had been the gift Hank had given to her on their two year anniversary together, how he'd been able to afford it she had never been able to figure out, but it was only something she wore for very special occasions—of which, this was most definitely one. She was just checking her hair (secretly pleased that there wasn't a single grey) when her monitor chirped.

"If he's calling to cancel, there'll be hell to pay," she muttered to herself as she moved over to her workstation and activated the monitor.

The Border Service logo appeared, before being quickly replaced by the youthful face of Lieutenant JG Azaal Kasan. "*Captain Leijten,*" the dark-haired Trill began, "*Rear Admiral T'Rona needs to see you and Commander Amarin in her office immediately.*"

Leijten had met T'Rona's new aide on several occasions and was surprised at her hyper-efficient manner, especially in one so young. She glanced down at the civilian attire then back at the attaché. "Right now?"

Kasan gave her a nod and a sympathetic look. "*Those were her orders, sir.*"

“Understood Lieutenant. Tell the Admiral, we’re on our way.”

“Acknowledged. Kasan out.”

Sighing, she picked up the combadge she’d left next to her monitor—she hadn’t planned on taking it with her—fixed it in place and tapped the pin. “Leijten to Amarin.”

“Go ahead, Captain.”

“Commander, meet me at the docking port, on the double. We’ve been called into a meeting with Admiral T’Rona.”

“I’ll meet you there,” with that the channel closed.

Leijten headed out into the corridor, knowing that whatever the meeting was about, the *Silverfin* was about to be called into active service again. Urgent summonses to the Squadron Commander’s office always meant that something big was going down, and it would fall to the *Silverfin* and her crew to deal with it.

* * * * *

Office of Rear Admiral T’Rona, Star Station Freedom Tamsen System, Talarian Border

When Leijten and Amarin arrived at T’Rona’s office, Lieutenant Kasan was taken a little aback by the Captain’s appearance, but quickly told them both to go in. Amarin followed Leijten through the double doors and into the comfortable office space, from which Rear Admiral T’Rona oversaw the operations of the Third Squadron.

As well as the Vulcan Squadron Commander, there were four others seated around the small oval-shaped meeting table to one side of the room. Amarin knew Lieutenant Commander Stephen Macintosh, the Squadron’s Intelligence Officer, quite well—having had more than a few briefings from the younger human in the last two years he been posted to the Star Station. Lieutenant Commander Mahr geven Drizuk was in charge of the SCIS team that had been attached to the Squadron for the smuggling crackdown, though Amarin had attended a few briefings with the Tellarite, he didn’t know much else about him. The last two officers, also both Lieutenant Commanders, commanded

the two scout ships that were with the Third Squadron. Ilahn was the tall and strapping Deltan CO of the *H'krii*, whilst Bethany Forbes of the *K'Shod*, was petite and raven-haired. Though he knew of Commander Forbes, Amarin had never worked with the *K'Shod*. The *H'krii* was a different story, they had had numerous assignments together with the scout and her crew, though the last time he had spoken with Ilahn had been when the *H'krii* had taken Commander Daezan and Doctor Mbeki onboard for transport to Betazed.

Aside from the Admiral, they were all surprised to see Captain Leijten stroll in wearing a black dress, though she didn't seem fazed by it. They took two empty chairs; Amarin sat next to Macintosh and opposite Ilahn, whilst Leijten was at the end of the table, facing T'Rona.

"Captain, Commander," T'Rona began, "I apologise for calling you into this meeting at such short notice, however we must move quickly on this.

"We are going to be looking into the scavenging and smuggling of restricted Starfleet technology, that the *Silverfin* uncovered seven weeks ago," she continued, getting straight to business. "The Third Squadron will be talking the lead in this operation, with the full support of Starfleet Intelligence and the SCIS." She gave the four Cutter officers a moment to take in the information, then looked at Drizuk. "Commander."

The Tellarite nodded. "Thank you, Admiral." He got up and moved over to the computer monitor, tapped in a command and brought up a graphic of an Orion freighter.

"This is the *Xeros*," he began, "the ship the *Silverfin* apprehended carrying Starfleet weaponry—among other armament from various other species. None of the crew has spoken, not that we expected any of them too—they're always going to be more afraid of the ship's master than anything we can do to them.

"It looks like they tried to delete their central processor, but our computer forensic unit has managed to retrieve parts of the data," he continued, with a hint of pride in his voice. "We have some of the locations they targeted—which we already knew from the vessel identification numbers your Chief Engineer discovered," he said with a nod to Leijten. "However, it looks like they are just one rung on this particular ladder. There are various financial transactions, which we are still trying to track down—though with gaps in the data, it is proving difficult."

“What was the *Xeros*’ role in all this?” Ilahn asked.

Drizuk shook his head. “We believe they may be salvagers and couriers. Going by their computer records, they spent between ten and eighteen hours at each site, too long for just taking on cargo.”

“So they’re the grave robbers,” stated Forbes, the disgust clear in her voice.

“One team that we know of,” the Tellarite told them, with a nod at Macintosh.

“SI believes that there may be several ships out there doing the leg work,” the Intelligence Officer began. “These people are just the middle men, hired by arms dealers to go to the former battlefields and look for specific items: Starfleet tech—due to its high-quality and the fact that under normal circumstances it’s impossible to get on the open market. Once they have it, they sell on to the dealers and then move on to their next job, whatever that may be. The dealers then go on to sell the weapons, either to a specific buyer or up for auction.”

“You sound very sure of this, Commander,” Leijten said, clasping her hands on the tabletop and leaning forward, “just how good is your information?”

Macintosh matched the Captain’s gaze. “Its sound, of that you have my full confidence.”

After a moment, she nodded then looked between him and Drizuk. “How many scavenger teams are we dealing with?”

“Not many. We suspect no more than half a dozen,” answered Macintosh, “less now the *Xeros* has been impounded.”

“Our investigations are continuing,” Drizuk added. “But as Admiral T’Rona said, this is something we need to move quickly on. They’ve already had seven weeks to alter their operations and cover their tracks, so we may catch them as they start to relax a little.”

“I take it that’s where we come in,” said Ilahn.

“Correct Commander,” T’Rona replied. “As far as we can determine, there are several battlefields without our operational limit that haven’t been targeted yet. The *H’krii* and *K’Shod* will be sent to patrol these sites, monitor them for suspicious activity.”

“Are we there to make a statement?”

“Preferably not, Commander Forbes. If these sites are going to be targeted by the scavengers, our aim is to catch them red-handed. A covert approach should be adopted for as long as possible—which is why I am sending the scouts into the debris fields, as opposed to full-fledged cutters.”

“What will our object be, sir?” Leijten asked.

“Commanders Macintosh and Drizuk believe that the weapons are being taken to neutral territory, where they either being exchanged or sold at autonomous trading stations. As you are well aware, Captain, usually the Border Service has no authority in those regions, but seeing as how it is illegal technology—of Starfleet origin—being sold, we have legitimate reason to operate within the region. However, we cannot stop and board every ship, that may give away our objective.

“The *Silverfin* will patrol the Federation border in the Armus Sector, conducting long-range scans. There are three independent outposts within range that are highly suspect,” T’Rona concluded.

“Won’t the scavengers and dealers get suspicious if a cutter just appears along the border?” inquired Amarin.

“The *U.S.S. Kukei* has been performing a tour in the region for the last four weeks. Border Service operating protocols require ship rotation after thirty days, so the *Silverfin* will merely appear to be relieving the *Kukei*.” T’Rona looked around the table. “There will be a full strategic briefing at two-hundred hours—Commanders Forbes and Ilahn, it would be advisable if both your XO’s and COB’s were present. All three ships will depart in the morning, the *Silverfin* at oh-six-hundred and the scouts three hours later.

“Questions?”

Amarin looked around at the three skippers, all of whom seemed to be mulling over the details. There were bound to be questions as to locations, secure frequencies and other such mission-specific matters, but they would all be covered later in the evening. On his part, everything seemed straight forward and sound. They were going for a two-pronged approach, the scouts looking into where the weaponry was coming from, whilst the *Silverfin* would focus on where it was heading.

He did know that they crew wouldn't be happy about their liberty being cut short, they had all been hoping for longer than the mandatory seventy-two hours R&R at Freedom. But they were tried and tested Border Dogs, they knew the drill and would do their duties like the professionals he knew them to be.

After several moments of silence, T'Rona gave a single nod. "Very well, I will see you all at the strategic meeting, which will be in briefing room two. Dismissed."

Amorin, Leijten, Ilahn, and Forbes all moved to stand up from the table, whilst Drizuk was heading for the exit.

"Captain," T'Rona spoke up when they were all on their feet, "could you stay for a moment longer."

Leijten nodded and stayed where she was. He gave her a quick look, but she merely shrugged her shoulders, before sitting back down. Amorin then looked at the other end of the table, where T'Rona and Macintosh both still sat. Obviously, there was something more going on that wasn't for anyone else's ears.

He followed Ilahn out of the Admiral's office, the doors closing behind him. He paused for a moment and glanced back at the doors, before leaving the office's anteroom and into the corridor. He would need to get back to the ship and inform the crew of the change in their orders, cancel leave for tomorrow and ensure that all system status reports were complete and signed off.

* * * * *

Leijten watched the door close and then turned to face T'Rona and Macintosh, the obvious question on her face.

"Captain, what we are about to tell you is classified, clearance level nine," the Admiral began. "Aside from those in this office, there is only one other person on Freedom that knows the following information."

Her brow furled as she studied the Squadron Commander, but she didn't push. She'd worked for the Vulcan long enough to know that she was direct and to the point on matters regarding mission operations. For her part, T'Rona looked at Macintosh.

“You asked me how good my information was, Captain.” She looked at the handsome young man. “It’s sound because we’re the ones that provided it.”

“Intel has a mole in with the dealers?”

Macintosh looked a little apprehensive for a moment. He looked at T’Rona, who gave him a subtle nod. “We did.

“SI had a deep cover operative working with an arms dealership that had moved their operation out to this region of space,” he continued after a brief pause. “Codenamed ‘Duchess’, she spent almost six years working her way into the organisation, making it into the inner circle, where she was privy to a great deal of information. Two months ago, she was put in charge of her own cell—which was made up of other deep cover agents.”

“An entire group of Intel operatives in one place? Wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“It was a risk we were willing to take. This organisation is like a resistance movement; each cell has a high degree of autonomy and is isolated from the ones above and below it. Only the one in charge is known—even then by their codename, no pictures or other data. Usually the cells are spread out across the Quadrant, but this time there were a large number focused in around this region—exactly why, we’re unsure as yet, though there may now be Chanok connections, but that is just a theory.

“With each cell being isolated, our people could control what was out there to some degree as well as amass data on their compatriots. We could then use that information to either shut down that cell, their suppliers, their buyers or all three. And it was working. We’d successfully shut down two cells, and you helped close off the supplier for another when you captured the *Xeros*.

“But it looks like a rival dealer wanted a greater slice of the profits and targeted Duchess.”

“Were they successful?” she asked, after Macintosh’s pause lengthened.

He nodded. “Yes. She was killed by a hunter probe. Fortunately the rest of the team managed to get to the dealer and apprehend him—Intel currently has him in high security lockdown. We don’t know if he managed to get news of his accomplishment out, but they’ve implemented a cover story; Duchess

was targeted and injured, though not before she was able to kill the other dealer. But this cover won't last long."

Leijten looked from Macintosh to T'Rona. "This is all very fascinating, but I don't see what relevance it has to me."

"Intelligence needs another officer to take their deceased agents place," T'Rona stated. "They have run her full biometric data through the Starfleet personnel database and identified a very close match."

She suddenly realised where the conversation was going. "The match is a member of my crew."

"Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth."

"Harriet isn't an undercover operative. Surely there has to be another way."

Macintosh leaned forward. "We've heard from our cell, that they have been given the go ahead to sell the stolen Starfleet weaponry. We had never dreamt of such a break. It's one we can't pass up."

"Admiral, my ship is already missing two key officers; I don't want to lose another one for an indefinite period of time."

"It won't be, Captain," answered Macintosh. "We would just need Lieutenant Smyth for this one operation, with it we will have more than enough to shut down this organisation permanently."

"Captain Leijten," T'Rona interjected, "I understand the request we are making of you and the Lieutenant are great, but it is necessary for the success of this mission. With Llewellyn-Smyth's assistance, we can close the loop on this weapons ring, from where the technology is coming from, to who is selling it, to who is buying it and ultimately stopping them from using it."

Leijten still wasn't convinced. It was a high risk assignment for someone who wasn't a SI operative, but rather her helmswoman. Though she could see the benefits that T'Rona had highlighted were important, Harriet was still *her* officer, someone she knew she could always rely on in a crisis, someone she was responsible for, who she had vowed to keep safe. After failing to do so with Kolanis Daezan, she was reluctant to let go of another promising young officer.

She looked at T'Rona intently. The older Vulcan had served in the Border Service for longer than Leijten had been alive, she knew the bonds that formed between a Captain and their crew, the sense of responsibility that came with the fourth pip. In the Squadron Commander's eyes, she saw all of that, whilst her face was set determined and firm. Though she may not have expressed her emotions, T'Rona knew them, but she also knew her duty and the sacrifices that each of them could be called upon to make when they served in Starfleet and especially the Border Service.

"This is a direct order," Leijten stated, knowing the answer. T'Rona nodded. "I'd like to tell Harriet myself, if I may."

"Of course, Captain. However, she is to report to Commander Macintosh's office ASAP for a full briefing, after which she will depart to meet with the rest of the team."

She nodded and then quickly moved to stand. "If there is nothing more, Admiral?"

T'Rona shook her head and Macintosh stayed quiet. Leijten headed out the door and swiftly through the outer office where Lieutenant Kasan sat. In the corridor, she moved over to the nearest computer interface.

"Computer, is Lieutenant Harriet Llewellyn-Smyth onboard?"

"Affirmative. Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth boarded the station at 1621 hours, from the U.S.S. Silverfin at docking berth two."

"Put out a page asking for her to return to the *Silverfin*."

"Acknowledged."

Leijten headed for the docking berth, knowing that wherever Llewellyn-Smyth was at, the computer would make an announcement. She wanted to get back to the ship and change before giving Harriet her new orders, after which she'd need to get ready for the briefing and their new departure time—though she expected Amarin to have already got the ball rolling.

Which just left one job that she didn't want to do. Taking a steadying breath, she tapped her combadge. "Leijten to Quartermaster Mitchell."

"Mitchell 'ere. Go ahead."

Feeling her chest tighten she began, "I hate to do this, Hank, but I'm going to have to cancel our dinner plans."

* * * * *

Chapter 3

Third Squadron Intelligence Office, Star Station Freedom Tamsen System, Talarian Border

She was nervous. It was a sensation Harriet Llewellyn-Smyth found disconcerting, as she never usually got nervous. Cautious, of course; afraid, on occasion—everyone did at some point or another—but she could never remember a time in recent years when she had been nervous. Flying a fifty-six year old cutter through an ion storm, or into a plasma wake, or barrelling towards a Keldon-Class destroyer, none of those times had she been nervous. She was sure of her abilities and those of the people around her. Some might have seen that as cockiness, but to her it was confidence and certainty, in those she served with as much as it was of herself.

But after Captain Leijten had given her the orders from Rear Admiral T'Rona, packing a few essential items and making her way onto the Star Station once again (though this time in uniform), she could honestly say she was nervous. She was being pulled from her assignment and shoehorned into an undercover op—something she had never been trained for—just because she bore a resemblance to another officer who had been killed in action.

She couldn't put it off any longer. Taking a deep breath she hit the annunciator. There was a brief pause before the door opened and she stepped into the inner sanctum of the Squadron Intelligence Officer. She had met Commander Macintosh before at a few meetings and social gatherings, but she wouldn't say that she knew the man. He was sat behind his desk, though calling it that was like a tricorder was just a compass—it was large, curved and covered in computer panels and monitors (all of which were encrypted). He looked at her as she entered, his bright green eyes taking in every detail of her in a matter of milliseconds. She was used to close scrutiny, due to her appearance, but something about his look seemed more analytical than most. Macintosh was handsome, strapping and mysterious, she knew of a few officers in the Squadron that had their eye on him, but he was no Kolanis Daezan.

Don't go there again, Harriet, she scorned herself.

She glanced at the other human man in the room, who sat in one of the two chairs opposite Macintosh. He was still looking straight ahead at the

Lieutenant Commander and hadn't seemed to notice she had entered the room.

Behind her the doors closed.

"Glad you could make it here so quickly, Lieutenant," Macintosh said, the polite smile on his face didn't reach his eyes. "Allow me to introduce you to Lieutenant Whyte." He looked down at the other man. "Whyte, this is Lieutenant Smyth—"

"Llewellyn-Smyth," she corrected.

Macintosh scowled a little, though the polite smile remained. "My apologies, this is Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth of the *U.S.S. Silverfin*."

Whyte finally stood up, squared his shoulders, turned sharply to face her, then stopped. He stared straight at her face, eyes wide with surprise. She half expected his jaw to drop open, though it didn't. By many species' standards, she was attractive; flawlessly smooth alabaster skin, dark brown hair (which when loose reached her shoulder blades), bright blue eyes, full lips, delicate features, and a slim yet toned physique, so she was used to make second glances and the occasional leer. But that wasn't what Whyte was doing. He seemed to be searching her face for something.

A little uncomfortable by the scrutiny she held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant," she said in her Cambridgeshire accented English.

That seemed to snap him out of his daze. He gripped her hand firmly. "Whyte, Starfleet Intelligence."

Macintosh looked between the two of them, before settling on the other man. "Uncanny, isn't it."

"They could have been twins."

She frowned at Macintosh. "Sir?"

"Sorry Lieutenant. You were selected because of your biometric profile, but the likeness between you and Lieutenant Commander Robbins is surprisingly close. Right down to the accent."

"I see," was all she could think to say to that. "Commander, I am here on orders. I will do whatever I can to help ensure the success of your assignment, but I wasn't trained for intel work—let alone impersonating an undercover operative."

"I understand, Lieutenant." He gestured to the empty seat. She set her bag down beside the chair and then sat down slowly, as did Macintosh and Whyte. "But we need your help with this operation. Just one job and then you'll be back on the *Silverfin*, whilst these gun runners are locked up."

"Yes sir." She looked at Whyte and then back at Macintosh. "So where do we start?"

Macintosh opened his mouth to begin the briefing, when the annunciator sounded. He closed his mouth and looked at Whyte, then turned to a small instrument panel. He tapped a key. "Yes?"

"Master Chief Petty Officer Syva, U.S.S. Silverfin," came the calm and level voice through the intercom.

He gave Llewellyn-Smyth a questioning look. All she could do was shrug and shake her head, just as baffled as he was. "What can I do for you, Master Chief?"

"I have been asked to pass along new orders from Rear Admiral T'Rona."

Giving it a moment's thought, he input a command sequence into the panel and the doors opened with a soft whisper. All three humans in the room looked up at the tall and lithe Vulcan as she entered the office, her hands clasped behind her back. She stepped in and up to the desk, the doors closing quietly behind her. At his desk, she produced a PADD from behind her back and handed it to Macintosh.

Accepting the device, he scanned over the information, paused and reread it. After the second pass, he looked up at the senior non-com. "This is some kind of joke, right?"

"No Commander. Captain Leijten was uncertain about allowing one of her officers to undertake such a hazardous mission without sufficient support. She raised the matter with Admiral T'Rona, highlighting several key matters, to which the Admiral agreed so I was issued orders to accompany Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth."

“What?” exclaimed Whyte. “Why are Border Dogs shoving their noses into a matter that has *nothing* to do with them?”

Syva turned her head and fixed the Lieutenant with a firm stare. “You have already had a Border Service officer reassigned to this mission; a mission that is an integral part of an operation that the Service has taken point on, within the operational area of the Third Squadron, where you will most likely be relying on the support and assistance of Border Cutters in order to achieve your objectives. I believe that all those factors give Rear Admiral T’Rona jurisdiction in this matter.”

Whyte stood up and went toe-to-toe with Syva. “This is a Starfleet Intelligence operation. I won’t allow Fleet rejects to jeopardise it! So you can turn around and walk out. We are on top of this.”

“I have my orders, Lieutenant. If you have a problem with them, I suggest you take the matter up with the Squadron Commander,” she told him calmly, his proximity and aggressive manner not swaying her in the slightest.

“Well you can take your orders and—”

“Whyte!” Macintosh snapped. Whyte glared at him and Macintosh shook his head. Reluctantly, the hostile officer sat back down. The situation somewhat calmed down, the Commander looked back at Syva. “My apologies, Master Chief. But we don’t have time to brief and ready the two of you for this mission.”

“That will not be necessary, Commander. Before I entered Starfleet I was with the Vulcan Security Directorate for forty-six year, three months and five days. During which time I went undercover twice to infiltrate weapon smugglers, I am aware of the procedures and protocols involved.”

“That may be so Master Chief, however you don’t have a background, which would take time to create.”

“My previous identity is still intact. Standard operating procedure for the Directorate is to maintain all secure aliases, so I will not need credentials. As for my presence on this mission, if a weapons dealer was targeted and reportedly seriously injured, logically they would employ additional security.”

Macintosh and Whyte shared a serious look. The latter obviously wasn't convinced, though after being knocked back by Macintosh, he was keeping quiet. The Lieutenant Commander on the other hand seemed in thought. Llewellyn-Smyth looked from the two intel officers up to Syva, who remained standing, her hands clasped firmly behind her back, face as unreadable as always.

She had been surprised by the senior non-coms arrival, then shocked—but touched at Captain Leijten's concern—at her new orders. In the seven years that she had been onboard the cutter, she had come to respect and trust the Chief of the Boat. Syva's wealth of experience was second to none; she always made sure that those onboard were ready for just about anything—which had saved Llewellyn-Smyth's own life more times than she cared to count. Though resolved about the fact that she *had* to go on this assignment, she found herself feeling better about its outcome with the Master Chief watching her back.

After a long moment of silence, during which Macintosh stared levelly at Syva, he finally looked away and turned to a control panel. He entered a sequence of commands and waited patiently, watching the monitor. Llewellyn-Smyth, Whyte and Syva sat or stood quietly, watching the Lieutenant Commander. It took several minutes for the console to chirp. He scrutinised the data quickly, before closing down the monitor and securing the display once again.

He looked back at Syva. "The Vulcan Security Directorate has just confirmed your credentials, Master Chief, as well as a detailed file on your alias." He looked at Whyte. "The Master Chief *will* be accompanying you, Lieutenant. She'll provide you with tactical support."

Whyte bit back on what he obviously wanted to retort. Instead he nodded. "Aye sir."

"Good. Now, for the mission profile and primary objectives."

* * * * *

**Captain's Quarters, Deck 3, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Docking Berth 2, Star Station Freedom**

The sleek black dress was once again hanging up in Leijten's cupboard, her hair remained loose, but the makeup and jewellery were both gone—the latinum pendant back in the secure lockbox she kept under her bed. She was

dressed in her old Academy decathlon team sweats, as she slouched on the small couch under the viewport, looking over the duty roster. With both Llewellyn-Smyth and Syva gone, she needed to cover both senior posts without impacting on the cutter's performance. So she had decided to have Amorin cover the Conn until Harriet returned, whilst she would move Petty Officer Ko-Raesiq's team to the primary squad on Alpha Shift—with both Syva off ship and Crewman Drim returning from seven weeks of medical leave, the team wasn't in the best shape—though Chief Shizumi would act up as Chief of Security, she wanted to keep him on Beta Shift, so as to keep the watch fully staffed.

We may have gotten rid of the paper, but the paperwork has multiplied like Tribbles!

Her attempt at humour fell flat in her empty quarters. Hank had been very understanding about her needing to cancel, disappointed but understanding. All leave had been cancelled, systems checks were well underway and due to be completed shortly, and the crew were enjoying their last night of R&R on Freedom.

Leijten could have still met with Mitchell on the station, just forgone dinner, but with two more of her crew now gone, she really didn't feel like dancing or romantic walks or the latest holonovel. She had a ship to run and (what was laughingly called) her personal life would have to wait.

Though it was almost zero-hundred hours and she had an early start in the morning, her mind was still buzzing with the knowledge of the undercover operation—which two of her crew were now a part of—the strategic briefing for the *Silverfin* and both scouts, and all the other admin work that needed to be done onboard. She had never been good at switching off, especially when people she cared for were in harm's way.

The enunciator sounded. Looking over the top of her PADD, she called, "It's open."

The doors parted and she dropped the tablet.

"Ma'am," Hank said casually. "Mind if ah come in?"

Dumbfounded, she nodded. Mitchell, dressed in casual civvies, stepped inside and the doors closed behind him. They stayed like that for a moment just looking at each other.

“Hank,” she finally said. “What are you doing here?”

He moved further into her quarters, coming towards the couch. She sat up, quickly picking the PADD off the floor and putting it on the small table. He sat down on the other end of the couch, but seeing as how it was only a two-seater, he wound up being very close to her. For a change, he seemed uncertain.

“Ah heard yer goin’ out again in the mornin’.” She nodded slowly. “Seems like ‘r timin’ leaves a lot to be desired.”

“There’s not much we can do about that, Hank.”

“Ah know, Suz. But,” he paused and looked away from her face, “but ah don’t want yer to go out there without knowin’...” he trailed off, seeming unable to finish his sentiment.

“What?” she encouraged softly, not quite sure which way the conversation would go.

He looked up at her once again, his sky blue eyes locking onto hers with an intensity she had never seen from him before. “Ah love yer, Susanna. Ah always have, but when yer left Freedom last time, it felt like someone ripped mah heart out. Goin’ out there every day, there’s always that chance yer won’t come back. Ah can’t let yer go again, without lettin’ yer know how ah feel.

“And, eh, now yer do,” he finished, with a blush.

“Hank,” she began, a lump in her throat, butterflies trying to burst out of her stomach, her heart pounding and her head swimming in euphoria. In the blink of an eye she was kissing him, releasing all the passion and longing she had been holding back. Her suddenness stunned him for a moment, as he just sat there for the first few seconds, but soon he was kissing her back, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her so tight into him that she could feel his own thundering heart.

When their lips parted for a brief moment he smiled at her. “Yer make a very good point.”

She couldn't help but laugh, cupping his handsome, weathered face in her hands. "I love you, Hank."

She didn't know who initiated the next kiss, but she knew that wouldn't be where it ended. After what felt like an age, she finally pushed away from him, got to her feet and pulled off her sweatshirt. He quickly got to his feet, untucked his shirt and yanked it off over his head, then kissed her again as they stumbled towards her bed.

Had they gone to dinner, she had wanted to find out where they were now and where they were heading. But just three little words from each of them solidified where they both were—exactly the same place they had been ten years earlier.

As they fell onto the bed, a tangle of giggling, panting limbs; Susanna Leijten allowed herself to be selfish for the first time in almost a decade. She didn't think of what was happening elsewhere on the ship, the station, the sector. She focused solely on the here and now, the man she was with and what she wanted.

* * * * *

Transporter Room 7, Star Station Freedom Tamsen System, Talarian Border

Petty Officer 3rd Class Archibald Hammond was bored. Gamma shift was always pretty quiet for the transporter operations staff, seeing as how for most ships it was the middle of the night and crews were either sleeping or out having fun on the Bazaar. But several of the Star Station's transporters still needed to be manned and it was his rotation. Room seven had been designated the shift's medical emergency unit, though it sounded exciting and important, it never really was.

Hammond had been in Starfleet since the end of the War. He had dreamt of applying to the Academy and becoming an officer, but he didn't have the patience to sit in classes for four years being bored rigid. So far his decision to enlist seemed to be paying off. After just three years he had made Petty Officer and was on a Star Station—where the crew were expected to work hard and had a higher chance of being cross-trained in multiple roles. He had hoped for a billet to a ship, but that wasn't to be—yet anyway.

A small screen appeared on his console. He tapped it open and found a text message from Phyllis McMillan, a corpsman in the station's infirmary he'd met after breaking his arm in a climbing mishap on the holodeck, and since made every excuse possible to see on his off hours.

Hey there Archie. How're things in the transporter room?

He smiled. Phyllis was the only person he let call him 'Archie', everyone else just called him by his last name. **All's quiet here. How about you?** he typed back.

Same here. In the lab tonight. Lots of computer time and test-tubes. Pretty bored, if I'm honest.

Me too. Always is this time of night, he told her, feeling a surge of delight at the fact that she had contacted him. **So what're your plans for the rest of the day?**

Not sure yet. My body clock is always shot to hell whenever I move onto a new shift. There are times I'll lucky to keep my eyes open by 0900.

Me too. It always takes me a day or two to get into it.

Good to know I'm not alone. Maybe after we've adjusted, we could have breakfast/dinner after our shift?

Is she asking me out? he asked himself, feeling a sudden rush of nerves and anticipation. Whenever they saw each other she would always smile, and when they chatted she laughed at his jokes—which he knew were terrible. His palms were sweating as he set his fingers back on the control panel, ready to type back that he would love to meet up with her after their shift sometime.

"K'Shod to Freedom. Medical emergency!" a panicked voice filled transporter room seven.

Startled, Hammond jumped, before automatically slapping the companel. "Freedom here. Feed me your co-ordinates."

"Patching them to you know. It's the Bolian lifesign. He's unconscious."

“Understood. Locking on,” he told the scout ship, opening up another comlink. “Transporter room seven to infirmary. Incoming patient from the *K’Shod*. Bolian male. Unconscious.”

“*Standing by*,” the duty nurse replied, as he established the lock, readied the transporter systems and activated the beam out sequence.

He never noticed a new message appear on his text screen, **Archie you there?**

The Bolian was enveloped by the annual confinement beam, whisked along the matter stream and then into the pattern buffer. Once there, the computer screened for viruses and other harmful contaminants, whilst also checking the integrity of his signal. A panel flashed red, indicating the presence of a pathogen. Hammond checked the readout, which brought up the data on the culprit—unsurprisingly he’d never heard of it, but then again his medical knowledge ended at how to turn on a dermal regenerator to repair cuts and grazes.

“Transporter room to infirmary. The computer has identified something called Zapatha Syndrome.”

“Understood, we’ll initiate the appropriate containment procedure. Beam him to isolation room one.”

“Acknowledged.”

As he switched the dematerialisation destination from the main ward to the isolation room, his text screen continued to have new messages appear on it. **Archie? Is something wrong?**

The new target locked, he began the sequence to beam the Bolian into the isolation room. The transporters sensors indicated three lifesigns already in the room, two humans and a Saurian. It took only a few seconds for the Bolian to go from the buffer along the matter stream and then rematerialise in the specialist medical suite. But after the procedure, he found himself feeling relieved. The entire event had taken longer than usual, due to his medical condition, but it had gone without a hitch.

Breathing a sigh of relief he turned back to his text monitor, ready to tell Phyllis all about it. On his screen he read through the messages, which ended

with, **Just forget it then Hammond,** followed by the words: user has logged off.

“Dammit!” he groaned in the empty room.

* * * * *

**Captain’s Quarters, Deck 3, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Docking Berth 2, Star Station Freedom**

“Bridge to Leijten.”

Groggily, Leijten opened her eyes whilst beside her, Hank stirred. She glanced at the chronometer by her bedside. It glowed 0432. They had only fallen asleep just after two, both of them exhausted, sweating and content.

She tapped the companel. “Leijten here, go ahead,” she said sleepily, trying to keep her voice low.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir,” said Lieutenant Frixia, the Watch Officer on gamma shift, *“but you have an urgent communiqué from Rear Admiral T’Rona.”*

“Understood. Patch it through to my quarters. Leijten out.”

Slipping out from Hank’s strong arms, she pulled on her robe and went over to the desk. She activated the monitor and was surprised to find the Squadron Commander already on the screen, waiting for her. Unlike Leijten, T’Rona was in uniform, though didn’t appear to be in her office, but rather in the station’s infirmary.

“Admiral? What’s wrong?”

“One-point-two-four hours ago, the U.S.S. K’Shod called in a medical emergency. Their First Officer, Lieutenant Zol, was found collapsed in a corridor, suffering an apparent flare up of an existing medical condition unique to Bolians. He will recover, however he is on medical leave for the next ninety hours and must be kept isolated, so that he does not spread the condition to any other afflicted Bolians onboard.”

“Is the mission being cancelled?”

“Negative. Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth’s team have already departed. The scouts and the Silverfin will have to complete their mission objectives as well. However the K’Shod is required to have two officers onboard,” T’Rona paused, an odd look crossed her face. *“I’m afraid that I must inform you that another member of your command staff is needed—”*

“What?!” Leijten exclaimed. Behind her, she heard Hank sit up. T’Rona looked genuinely apologetic. “Admiral, I have already lost half my senior officers for various reasons, and now you’re asking for another? What about Freedom or the *Lobo*?”

“Captain, I understand your reaction. Unfortunately there are no other alternatives. The Lobo is no longer part of the Third Squadron. I submitted a request for an appropriate officer from them, but that was denied by Vice Admiral Bouvier. As for Freedom, we have four senior lieutenants that fulfil the requirements, however two are Bolian, another is seven months pregnant with half-Bolian foetus, and the forth is on medical leave. It will take too long to decontaminate the K’Shod and make it safe for them.” T’Rona looked straight at her, her eyes intense but sympathetic. *“Captain, I do wish there were another alternative, but given the constraints we are under, I’m afraid there aren’t any other options.”*

Leijten, tired and irritated, sighed heavily and massaged the bridge of her nose. With Llewellyn-Smyth off the ship, there were five lieutenants that could assume the vacant position; th’Shaan, Innis, Sholi, Frixia and Mulligan. Each one had the necessary command experience and qualifications for the assignment and none of them were Bolian, but whoever was selected, she would be left with yet another gap in her crew.

“Do you have an officer in mind?”

“Lieutenant Innis would be best suited; the role incorporates the duties of Operations Manager.”

“I’ll inform him, Admiral. He’ll be onboard the *K’Shod* within the hour.”

“Acknowledged, Captain. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation. T’Rona out.”

The screen went dark and Leijten’s shoulders slumped. Now she was losing Innis, a bright young man who had worked effortlessly to fit in onboard. A man she had grown to like in a short space of time. With him gone, she would

need cover at Ops on alpha shift. Amarin was rated for the post, so he could take the station for the duration of the mission—he was more than capable of handling the responsibilities on top of his duties as XO.

As she reworked the duty roster in her head she suddenly felt a pair of strong hands on her shoulders. Automatically she tensed for a moment, before Hank started kneading out the knots that had formed. Relaxing her shoulders she let her head lull to the side as she enjoyed his expert hands for a few short minutes.

“This must be some mission, before T’Rona is dumpin’ all this on yer,” he said softly.

“It is. I just wish I could let you know, but orders are orders.”

“Ah know, Suz. Ah should be goin’. Yer got an early departure time and ah should get back to the station.”

She turned around and looked up at him. “Hopefully this will only take a few days, then we’ll be back. Maybe we can have dinner then.”

“Sounds good,” he told her, then leaned down and kissed her once again. When they parted, he quickly got dressed. At the doorway, he looked back at her with a small smile. “I love you.” With that he passed through the exit and the doors whispered closed behind him.

Leijten smiled to herself as she got a clean uniform out her closet, dressed, then pulled on her boots. She had to go give Innis his new orders, which she refused to do over a comlink. For a last minute assignment like this she needed to tell him to his face. She downloaded the written orders T’Rona had included in her transmission onto a PADD then, her hair still loose, she headed for the exit.

In the corridor, she headed aft. Her cabin was located at the very front of the *Silverfin’s* third deck (where the officer and senior non-com quarters were located), which allowed her a spectacular view. Innis’ were on the starboard side. The ship was quiet, most of the crew would be resting up after been pulled off of leave. No doubt rumours were already abounding about their latest assignment, but that was just what they would need to remain. Only the most senior members of the crew would be apprised of the situation, even then only what they needed to know.

She always hated classified missions; the secrets and silence were just too much hassle. Usually she did everything possible so as to avoid being dragged into them, but like so many things that had happened over the last few hours, this was one such assignment in which she had no choice.

Following the curve of the corridor, she soon reached Innis' cabin and stood in front of the door for a moment. He would probably be asleep; resting up for what he had assumed would be a normal shift onboard. Unable to put it off any longer she tapped the annunciator and waited. It took a few minutes for the doors to part.

Innis stood in the doorway, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and blinking at the brightness of the corridor lighting. He was dressed in just a pair of pyjama pants, which hung from his sculpted hips. His bare torso was lean and toned, not surprising as he had captained the Academy swim team. When he saw who it was, his eyes were wide open and his posture stiffened.

"Captain? Eh, is there something I can do for you?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Lieutenant, but I've just spoken with Rear Admiral T'Rona. There's been a medical emergency on the *K'Shod*, which has incapacitated their First Officer," she handed the PADD to him. "The Admiral has temporarily reassigned you to the *U.S.S. K'Shod* for this mission."

"What?" he asked, his brow furled as he took the device. "I don't understand."

"The *K'Shod* and the *Silverfin* are on a joint operation, the details of which are on there. I'm sorry Kalm, but you're needed over there ASAP. It should only be for a few days."

He glanced at the datapad, quickly scrolling through the information. "This is big, isn't it, sir?"

She nodded. "It looks that way."

"Let me just grab a bag and then I'll beam over."

"Thank you, Kalm," she said, smiling softly.

"I'll see you when we both back then, sir."

She gave him another nod, turned and headed away from the Bajoran's quarters. Though she didn't know the exact time, she suspected it to be around 0445, which meant they would be departing in just over an hour. In that time she could try to get some more sleep, though knew that she would just toss and turn, now worrying about Llewellyn-Smyth, Syva and Innis (on top of Daezan and Mbeki), or try and do something a little more constructive. She opted for the latter and turned down a corridor that would take her to a turbolift and then onto the Bridge.

* * * * *

Chapter 4

Transporter Bay, U.S.S. *K'Shod* NCC-32415 Docking Berth 4, Star Station Freedom

Tired and flustered at the early wakeup call, followed by the hasty packing and trot to the transporter room, Innis Kalm wasn't exactly feeling at his best in order to meet his new shipmates. He hoped that the Captain was right about the assignment, in that it would only be for a few days. Though his post aboard the *Silverfin* was short-term, he had come to like it onboard the old cutter.

As he materialised on the *K'Shod's* platform, he shook the thoughts from his head, instead focusing on the two figures in front of him. The human woman in front of him was short and raven-haired, a composed look on her face and arms clasped firmly behind his back. At the controls stood a tall and broad-shouldered Napean man, with dark brown hair and a vicious looking scar running over his artificial left eye. He also noticed that the transporter dais opened directly into a corridor, like on Defiant-Class ships, which wasn't surprising giving that space on a scout was at a premium.

Keeping his posture straight and voice level he stated, "Lieutenant Innis Kalm, reporting aboard, sir."

"Lieutenant Commander Bethany Forbes," the woman introduced herself simply. "Welcome to the *K'Shod*." She then looked at the scarred Napean. "This is Chief Petty Officer Yaneth Haru, senior non-com."

He gave each of them a nod. He noticed her eyes narrowing as she focused on the earring he wore on his right ear. "Lieutenant, I'll have to ask you to remove that whilst you are on duty."

"Of course, sir," he replied, reaching up and removing the delicate piece of jewellery. Ever since Bajor had entered the Federation, Bajoran officers had been permitted to wear the cultural icon at the discretion of their CO's. Some, like Captain Leijten, were quite happy with letting him keep it on, whilst others preferred to uphold the Starfleet dress code.

"We still have a few hours until we depart," she told him, "Chief Haru will show you to your cabin and give you a brief tour."

With that, Forbes turned and headed down the corridor. Haru stepped forward, his face impassive and unreadable. He looked after the Lieutenant Commander until she turned at a junction and disappeared, before looking back at Innis.

His face softened a little. “Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. You’ll have to excuse the Commander.”

Innis couldn’t help but give him a small smile. “Thank you, Chief. I was beginning to think I had offended her in some way.”

“Follow me,” Haru gestured in the opposite direction. “Commander Forbes is very much a stickler for regulations. Most people think that life on a scout would be more relaxed than on other ships, the *K’Shod* is different. Don’t get me wrong,” he quickly added as they moved through the narrow corridors—which seemed smaller than the ones on the *Silverfin*, “she is as sharp as a tack and knows how to get the most out of the ship, she just isn’t a ‘touchy feeling’ kind of leader.”

“I’m with you, Chief,” he told the Napean, as he looked around the corridors. The usual streamlined finish he’d come to expect on ships wasn’t there, the deck plating was metallic, pipes ran above his head, the bulkheads were filled with access panels, computer monitors or equipment lockers. The hatches were all narrow, single doors, with a ledge on the bottom the crew would need to step over. It made an Albacore-Class look lavish.

“The *K’Shod* has four-ish decks, though only the middle two are really used by the crew. The top deck houses most of our sensor and communications arrays, it’s packed pretty tight up there so if you’re over one-point-seven meters then you’ll need to duck. The bottom deck is where our cargo bays are, as well as fuel tanks and most auxiliary systems. The last two levels are known as the main deck and the crew deck. The crew deck is above the cargo level, and is pretty self explanatory; quarters, mess hall, sickbay. No holodecks, but coming from an Albacore you’ll be used to that. The main deck is below all the sensors and is where the Bridge, engine room, computer cores, and transporter bay are all located.”

As he explained about the ship layout, they went down a flight of stairs and continued through the cramped hallways. Innis took note of what Haru was saying, as well as everything that he passed. They reached a door and Haru stepped through into a small cabin. The room was like the corridors, small and utilitarian. There was a bed set into the bulkhead, with storage lockers

above and below and a closet next to it. Opposite the bed was a small desk and chair, with a work terminal and a small sink in the corner, with a mirror and a few shelves.

He set his bag down on the bed then set the earring on the desk. Haru stood to the side as Innis looked around his new room.

“We’ve got a crew of twelve onboard—which is pretty large for an Aerie-Class—but we can accommodate up to twenty, though I wouldn’t say that would be comfortable. Unlike most other ships, we work a two shift day. So you’ll be on duty for twelve hours then off for twelve. It’s a long haul if you’re not used to it, but it works best for us. You’ll soon get the hang of it. First shift starts at 0400 and the second at 1600.”

“I’m sure I can manage it.”

“I don’t doubt it, Lieutenant.”

Innis perched on the edge of the desk. “So what happened to Lieutenant Zol?”

“To be honest, no one knows,” Haru admitted. He had been in the mess hall with most of his shift, then left to go to his cabin. He was found about fifteen minutes later by Danny—deckhand Daniel Reese—sprawled out on the floor close to his room. The rookie panicked and called in the emergency beam out. We’ve checked everything we can, but haven’t found what could have set off his Zapatha Syndrome.”

“Strange.”

“Sure is. Fortunately, he was the only Bolian onboard. From what I understand about his condition, it affects children but stays with them for life. Most don’t have a problem, but some do experience the occasional flare up. Once that happens, it becomes highly contagious and even healthy adults can become infected.

“Right now we’re quarantined to all those with Bolian blood types. Corpsman Jayme Copeland will be running the standard decontamination process whilst we’re on mission, so we’ll be cleared by the time we get back to Freedom,” the non-com explained.

“So we’ve got nothing to worry about, except for hunting down scavengers in remote and heavily distorted debris fields,” Innis mused. “I feel better already.”

Haru chuckled. “Good to know, Lieutenant. Would you prefer to settle in here first?”

Innis looked around the room. “I’d say that I’m as settled as I’ll ever be. Shall we get started on the tour?”

“Sure thing. I’ve asked the rest of your shift to meet us in the mess hall, so that you can meet them. If you’ll follow me.”

Following the Napean once again, it was a short trip from his cabin to the mess hall (though ‘hall’ was most definitely an exaggeration, as the room was only about three times larger than his quarters), which had a set of double doors and no ledge. Inside were five men and women seated around two of the four tables; all but one human woman (who wore blue) were in gold uniforms. They all looked at the door as Innis and Haru entered.

Immediately they were all on their feet and standing at attention. Part of him wanted to laugh at their reaction, if he wasn’t so weirded out by it. He was far more use to a more relaxed style on most of the other ships he had served—definitely so on the *Silverfin*. It took him a moment, looking at each non-com and crewman, before he finally cleared his throat.

“At ease. I’m sure you’ve all heard that I am Innis Kalm; I’ll be covering for Lieutenant Zol for this mission. Though our time together will be short, I hope that we can work well together to ensure a successful outcome.”

He moved over to the closest table, where the blue-clad NCO sat with a Deltan in gold. “You must be Corpsman Copeland,” he said to the woman, offering his hand.

She gave him a friendly smile and gripped his hand firmly with her own. “Yes sir, I am.”

“I understand you’ll be decontaminating the ship.”

“I’ll be getting started as soon as we leave dock. It should only take a few days on a ship this size.”

He nodded and turned to the Deltan. This time he didn't offer his hand, as in some regions of Delta IV that was seen as a proposition.

"Petty Officer Nael, engineer," the bald headed man stated in a lyrical voice.

"Good to meet you, Petty Officer."

He then moved onto the next table, where there was an Andorian woman and two humans, one male and one female. He looked at the tall and muscular Andorian first, as she was the ranking individual.

"Suri ki'Vahs sh'Thol, tactical specialist."

"So it'll be you and me on the Bridge then?"

"Yes sir."

"I guess we'll get to know each other pretty well then."

"It would appear so, Lieutenant," she replied promptly, giving him the impression that that might not be the case. He then looked at the two crewmen, starting with the woman, who was the older of the two. He shook her hand.

"Crewman Fei Yen Tam, deckhand, security guard, general dogsbody," she stated with a sly smile.

"A woman of many talents?"

"You'd be surprised, Lieutenant."

Sh'Thol scowled at the crewman. "Tam," she said in a low, warning tone.

Innis smirked at the human, already liking her sassiness. He then looked at the last member of his staff, once again extending his hand. The young man, who looked barely old enough to shave, let alone enlist into Starfleet, did the same, his hand shaking slightly.

"Cr...Crewman Danny R...Reese, sir," he stuttered, his cheeks flushing a little.

"Hello Mr Reese. You were the one who found Lieutenant Zol, right?"

“Y...yes sir.”

“I’ll hopefully get to see more quick thinking from you on this assignment.”

“I...I will do m...my best, sir,” his blush darkened.

He looked back around at the rest of the shift, then at Haru, who remained standing stiffly next to the exit.

“Well the only other thing I have to add is that if I can help anyone out with anything, you just have to do is ask. I will see you all at sixteen-hundred. If there’s nothing more, I’ll let you get back to your downtime.”

He then headed back for the exit, Haru moving just ahead of him once again. He passed through the doors and heard them close behind him. The Napean looked back at him. “Nicely done, Lieutenant.”

“Thanks Chief. I’m not a fan of public speaking.”

“You shouldn’t have to do it again. I’ll introduce you to everyone else during the tour.”

“Lead the way.”

* * * * *

Aft Cabin, Shuttle *Cheimh* **Location Classified**

The cramped, grubby cabin was as far removed from Starfleet as possible. The shuttle was Rigellian in origin, but at least eighty years old and appeared to have fallen into disrepair—though Lieutenant Whyte assured them that she had it where it counted. It was split into two sections, the cockpit at the front, where Lieutenant Whyte and Syva were, and the aft cabin, which had a couple of cots, a few storage compartments and the refresher. They had almost a day and a half on the shuttle before they rendezvoused with the rest of Whyte’s team.

Llewellyn-Smyth only had that time in order to try and get up to speed with the operation and the woman she would be impersonating. Included in the records was an image of Lieutenant Commander Robbins (or ‘Duchess’ as she was known for the mission), and Llewellyn-Smyth had to admit the

similarities between them were startling. Duchess had had different coloured eyes, a slight bump in her nose, a few wrinkles and lines, but aside from those minor differences, they could have been identical twins. Before leaving Star Station Freedom, she had visited the infirmary, where her features had been altered to match those of Commander Robbins. As far as anyone else was concerned, she was Duchess. There was one small problem however; she had no idea how to pull it off.

The hatch opened and Syva stepped into the aft cabin. She looked up at the older woman. “Is something wrong, Master Chief?”

Syva gave her a serious look, eyebrow raised.

“Dammit,” Llewellyn-Smyth scolded herself. “I mean, T’Han. Not sure I’ll get used to other identities.”

“It is something that comes with time, ma’am,” Syva replied, utilising the form of address that Duchess had preferred—which Llewellyn-Smyth just found odd.

“All of this is just too much. I’m a pilot; I trained hard for four years at the Academy in order to get assigned to an Albacore-Class ship, but now I’m being told to stick a pin in all that and become a professional liar and actress!” she admitted to the other woman. “I’m barely getting to grips with the details of the operation, I haven’t even thought about how to approach pretending to be an Intel officer, pretending to be a gun runner. Any advice?”

Syva sat on the bunk opposite her. “I’m afraid that to be proficient at clandestine operations takes considerable training and experience. All I can suggest for the time being, is to remain focused on who you are meant to be. Understand Duchess so that you can mimic her, then let the team handle the mission.”

Llewellyn-Smyth nodded at her logic. She was on the mission because she looked like their former CO; it wasn’t expected of her to assume her duties and responsibilities but rather to support the team, to help them achieve their objectives. Looking back down at the assortment of PADDs, she put down the one she had been reading over and picked up Robbins’ log entries (which had been decrypted for her).

As she read, Syva stood and returned to the cockpit, leaving her alone in the aft compartment once again.

* * * * *

**Main Engineering, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470
Tamsen Sector, En Route to Armus Sector**

Everything was quiet; eerily so. Elak ko’Parr th’Shaan didn’t like the unusual stillness, not when he had an engineer like Ensign Feeznar on his staff—someone not known for being quiet and focused. The engine room was usually staffed by himself and five subordinates on alpha shift (there were also two engineers assigned to both the impulse monitoring room and environmental control), with another one of his crew keeping an eye on things from the Bridge console. He did a quick headcount: Pazai at the MSD, Dirix by the warp core, De La Cruz on the upper level, and Blackwolf seated at the central console; everyone but the troublesome Girinite officer.

He groaned softly and massaged the bridge of his nose. He had lodged a request with Captain Leijten to have Feeznar transferred off the *Silverfin* in order to make way for a more competent and deserving officer, but she had shot it down. Instead she asked him to get to know Feeznar, find out what problems he was having and try to help him out. Not one to disobey orders, th’Shaan had done just that, in fact he had done everything possible to bond with the younger engineer, but no matter what, Feeznar remained sullen and lethargic.

Making his way slowly over to Chief Pazai, he leaned against the console, keeping a watchful eye on the rest of the room—not that he expected any other members of his crew to be slacking. The Denobulan cast him a sideward glance.

“Lieutenant?”

“You didn’t ask Ensign Feeznar to see to something, did you?” he asked the diagnostics specialist.

She shook her head. “No sir. The ensign doesn’t much like being us non-coms giving him ‘suggestions’.”

Th’Shaan rolled his eyes. Feeznar was very much of the mindset that officers were above all others, regardless of the experience, knowledge and skills the non-com specialists and enlisted technicians possessed—which in the Border

Service was like ignoring a starship and trying to fly through space by flapping ones arms.

“You couldn’t track him down could you?” the exasperation clear in his tone.

She gave him a sympathetic smile. “Sure thing.” On her console she imputed the ensign’s combadge signal and had the internal communications network pinpoint its position, before running a sensor sweep to confirm Girinite life-signs. “Got him sir. He’s in the workshop.”

“Thanks Chief. Engineering is yours,” he told her, before stepping over to the ladder and climbing up to the second level. He gave Crewman De La Cruz a nod before stepping through the double doors and into the corridor.

The workshop, located on deck six, was the place that th’Shaan and his staff used to manufacture parts, diagnose technical problems, and devise new gadgets that were needed. It was unmanned until it was needed, then as many hands were called upon to deal with whatever was on the table until finished. Presently there was nothing needing seen to, so exactly why Feeznar was there was a mystery, but he had abandoned his post which, for th’Shaan, was the last straw—seeing as how the younger man had been repeatedly told to remain at his duty station unless told to go elsewhere.

It took only a few steps for him to reach the entrance to the workshop, but in that time, his frustration had turned to annoyance and then to anger. Normally a very peaceable man, he never liked to give in to his ‘violent’ Andorian tendencies, preferring to rise above them and find another way to work out his feelings—but Feeznar had pushed him too far now.

Storming into the workshop, he found Feeznar perched on a stool next to the table, curiously studying something on top of the sensor pad. He looked up at th’Shaan as he entered; his expression remained the same as he looked at the tall and broad Andorian, whose antennae were tightly curled, muscles tensed.

“What the *tarzak* are you doing in here, Ensign?” he bellowed, looming over Feeznar.

The Girinite cocked his head, his little black eyes narrowed from their deep sockets. “Pardon?”

“You are addressing your superior officer, *ensign*. You will stand at attention and address me as ‘Sir’ or ‘Lieutenant’. Am I understood?”

It took the diminutive engineer a few moments to take onboard what th'Shaan growled. He hopped down off the stool and stood stiffly, his head not even reaching th'Shaan's chest. "Yes sir."

Th'Shaan scowled at him for a moment longer, but it appeared that the Girinite wasn't going to elaborate. "Well?" he pressed an uncommonly harsh edge to his usually soft voice.

"Well what, Lieutenant?"

Repressing an angry growl, he squared his already broad shoulders. "You've deserted your duties and I want to know why. Now!" he snapped.

Feeznar jumped at that—given another situation, th'Shaan might have found that amusing, but his mood was too foul.

"I'm working on—"

"No. If you were working, you'd be in the engine room tracking that glitch in the plasma relays. Not playing about with," he gestured to the odd object (whatever it was) on the table top scanner, "whatever that is!"

"That's the work of a junior technician, sir. What I have here—" Feeznar began, his mood picking up as he glanced back at the hunk of metal he'd been working on when th'Shaan had entered.

But he didn't let Feeznar finish. Elak th'Shaan had finally reached the limit of what he could take; the laziness, the constant neglect of his duties, the borderline insubordination, and now insulting *his* team—the men and women he had worked hard beside for years, ensuring the *Silverfin* came through every close call and tight spot in one piece.

"ENOUGH!" he roared, his voice somehow echoing in the small workshop. The Girinite stopped immediately, cowering slightly. "Ensign Feeznar, as of this minute you are relieved of duty. You will be denied entry to the engine room, the workshop and all other engineering sections, your access codes will be suspended, and I am reporting you to the Captain—with a recommendation you be reassigned immediately. Dismissed!"

"But—" Feeznar began.

“Get out. Or I will call Security and have you thrown in the brig.”

Feeznar paused for a moment, in the manner he always did, as though thinking up analyses and simulations. It didn't last long however, as he slowly slipped by th'Shaan and out the door. Once the panels closed behind the ensign, th'Shaan spun on his heel and with the full force of his anger behind it, slammed his clenched fist into the bulkhead. Though he heard the unmistakable sound of one of more bones breaking, the adrenaline that pumped through his veins suppressed the pain.

His fury diminishing he breathed deeply, his fist remaining in the indented bulkhead, as he tried to calm himself once again. It took him a good five minutes to finally get his breathing and heart rate back to somewhere close to normal levels, in which time he stayed perfectly still. Only once he was starting to feel a little more like himself did he move his hand, wincing at the sudden jolt of pain.

With a weary sigh, he headed for the corridor, cradling his busted right hand. He wouldn't be able to return to his duties with the injury, so instead he headed for sickbay. En route, he called Chief Pazai and told her to stay on top of things for a little longer. Sensibly, she didn't ask how his meeting with Feeznar had gone, or where he was now going.

In the turbolift up to deck four, he made a note that the ascension stabilisers were out of alignment, making the carriage whine slightly. Once he was finished up in sickbay, he would have one of his crew see to it, he would need to go and speak with the Captain.

Stepping off the turbolift, he headed through the corridors of the saucer section until he reached the doors to sickbay. Someone had once done a study a few years before the war, in which it was proven that next to medical staff it was engineers that most frequented a starship or stations medical facilities, due to the variety of bumps, scrapes and other hundred of so minor injuries they could sustain during the course of a normal day—security was a close second.

The ward was quiet; Corpsman Asel was the only person present. She looked up as he entered, then, on seeing him holding his badly bruised hand, her left eyebrow raised in a questioning manner.

“Lieutenant?”

“Corpsman,” he began, suddenly feeling foolish for letting himself get so worked up. “I had a little accident.”

Asel always believed in being prepared, as such she always had medical tricorder on her belt. Removing it from its holster, she stepped over to him and quickly ran the scanning wand over his right hand. She thoroughly scanned his throbbing fist, scrutinising the small display. After several long moments she closed the device.

“You have broken three proximal phalanges, two metacarpals and trapezoid bone, as well as fracturing one intermediate and one proximal phalange, two metacarpals—one in two separate places—and the scaphoid,” she told him. “May I ask; what were you doing, Lieutenant?”

“It was just a little accident, corpsman. Nothing major.”

“This will require minor surgery, Lieutenant. An accident report will need to be filed.”

“Isn’t there some way we could skip that?”

Both Asel’s eyebrows shot upwards and her eyes widened slightly. Th’Shaan had worked with enough Vulcans to know a look of disgust when he saw one. Before she could start reeling off medical protocols, Nurse Jenka entered. A surprised look crossed her face to find the two of them standing in the middle of the ward.

“Is there a problem here?” she asked.

“Just a little accident,” he quickly interjected.

Asel fixed him with a serious look before turning her attention to Jenka. “Lieutenant th’Shaan has sustained several breaks, fractures and deep tissue damage to his right hand. However he refuses to release the details pertaining to how he sustained the injury, without which the proper accident report cannot be filed.”

Jenka looked from Asel to th’Shaan, who gave her what he hoped was a pleading look, that also hinted that it was better not to ask, then back to the Vulcan medic.

“Thank you, corpsman, I’ll take it from here.”

Nodding, Asel desisted. "Very well, Nurse."

"Can you fetch me the bone infusion kit, then I believe Donny was needing help in the lab."

"Of course, sir."

As Asel headed off to the equipment store, Jenka directed him to one of the biobeds. He hopped up onto the firm but comfortable padding and the nurse fetched a tricorder and hypospray, by which time Asel returned with the necessary tray of medical instruments. After giving him another serious look, she turned towards the medlab and departed the ward.

"Thanks," he said when Jenka stood in front of him.

"Don't mention it, Lieutenant," she told her, her voice reassuring, as she pressed the hypospray against his neck and injected him with a painkiller—a very good painkiller. The combination of throbbing and shooting pains diminished to a dull ache. She ran her own quick scans of his hand and wrist, frowning slightly at the readings.

Looking back at him, she tucked her short copper hair behind her ear, exposing more of her dark veins—a common trait of full-blooded Rigellians from the largest moon of Beta Rigel III. "Whatever possessed you to punch a bulkhead?"

"What? How did you...? Crap," he groaned. "What gave it away?"

"I've seen one or two in the past. The injuries are consistent, combined with the traces of duranium composite in a couple of the cuts makes it pretty obvious what happened."

He looked down at his busted hand and only then realised the number of small cuts and dried blood on his knuckles. "Wow, I really did a number on myself."

Jenka picked up the first tool, then taking a gentle hold of his hand, held it a few millimetres over his blue skin and activated it. He was surprised at the smoothness of her skin and the tenderness of her touch. There was quiet as she worked, precisely positioning each device and taking her time. He found it a little strange, more used to the chatter of the corpsmen or the nagging of

Doctor Mbeki whenever he checked into sickbay in the past. With Jenka he found himself watching her skilfully work, the care and attention she paid to his hand reminded him of how he would work on an ODN relay or isolinear processor. He smiled to himself.

She must've caught the expression, as she asked, "What?" though never stopped her treatment.

"It's nothing—just that aside from the fact that you ever became disenfranchised with working on living things, you'd make a good engineer."

Smiling softly she paused in what she was doing. "I'll take that as a complement."

"As it was intended, Nurse."

Resuming her trade, there was another brief pause before she spoke again. "So what made you punch a wall then?"

"Personnel issues," he said simply.

"Well at least it was just a bulkhead and not a skull, they're much more difficult to put back together."

He paused for a moment, not quite sure he was hearing what he thought he was hearing. "That's it?"

"What happens down below is your domain, Lieutenant, I'm not about to start poking my nose in. I'll log an excuse for you, but whatever is the underlying cause I'd suggest you see to it sooner, rather than later."

"I have. Though I'm pretty sure the Captain won't like it," he sighed heavily. "Computer problems, mechanical glitches, battle damage. All that is the easy stuff when it comes to engineering, it's getting the right people in place to see to them that's the issue."

"It's been my engine room for the last three years, and in that time I've managed to assemble a crew I'm damn proud of. But all its taken is one rookie who I can't figure out to disrupt everything!" th'Shaan admitted.

She set down the instrument she was using and looked him in the eye. “I wish I had an answer for you, Lieutenant. Unfortunately, this is just one of those things you have to figure out yourself.”

“I know and I’m sorry for dropping this on your doorstep, it’s just frustrating.”

She patted him on his right bicep. “Sometimes all we need is a good moan.”

Surprising himself, th’Shaan chuckled. “I guess you’re right. All I have to do now is speak with the Captain.”

Picking up the last tool she had yet to touch, a dermal regenerator—the only one he could identify—she ran it over the cuts and grazes. In a matter of seconds, the cuts were sealed, with only a series of dark blue lines where they once were, and the bruising was gone. She ran one more scan. Satisfied, she snapped it shut and set it on the tray.

“Good as new, Lieutenant. Just take it a little easy with that hand for a few days, and don’t go punching any more bulkheads.”

“Yes ma’am,” he retorted with a smirk.

“That’s better and I didn’t even have to give you a lollipop.”

His antennae perked up at that. “You’ve got lollipops?”

This time it was Jenka who chuckled.

* * * * *

Captain’s Cabin, Merchantman *Tydonis* Ricktor System

Tarae’a entered her small cabin and collapsed into an old, overstuffed chair that faced the small viewport. They had been working mercilessly to get through the wrecked hulls and drifting debris, looking for the technology that was needed. Her employers had been very specific about what was needed, so they had ignored the Klingon and Cardassian technology—worth a fortune in its own right—and focused on the Starfleet remains. Exhaustion had finally made her call it a day and hand over to Kyada to continue their salvage, whilst she went to rest up—they were on a tight schedule and needed to be on time for their transferral.

Though she was loathed to agree with the Ferengi, she had to admit that war *was* good for business—hers at least. The thought of the Ferengi made her skin crawl, as once they were finished in the Ricktor System she would have to meet with Daimon Bek—who happened to be Kint’s cousin, but when compared with her helmsman, Kint came off as a proper gentleman. Bek was vulgar, rude and lustful. Every time they met to do business, he took it as an invitation to try and force himself onto her—which was why she never met him without a dagger secreted on her person and a heavy disruptor on her belt. But like her, he was a part of the chain, necessary to keep the Corp safe. That didn’t mean however that he was irreplaceable.

They had agreed to meet in the Vehlen System, which was just on the edge of Federation space. Though it was risky location to meet (especially seeing as how the Border Service had been cracking down on smuggling recently) it was the halfway point for both of them, and still allowed Bek plenty of time to get to their rendezvous point.

Thinking of the repugnant little Ferengi was making her feel dirty (not the good kind). She needed a shower, to try and wash him away. Unzipping her thigh-high stiletto boots, Tarae’a left them by the chair and stood up. Like the rest of her wardrobe, her current outfit was showing off as much as her jade-coloured skin as possible, leaving little to the imagination but securely concealing enough to tease those that leered over her voluptuous figure. In only a few seconds, the thin straps that had been her attire were on the deck and she was heading for the compact private bathroom she, as Captain, possessed.

She was just at the entrance when a distinctive chirp sounded from her computer. Her ears perked up at the noise and a bright white smile spread across her green face. The shower forgotten about, she strutted to the terminal and activated it. Automatically the system separated the pulled the distorted communiqué from the background noise, compiled it into a single data stream and then decoded it—a lot of work to go through for a signal, but given its origin, the process was necessary.

Standing naked in her quarters, she made no attempt to cover herself up, as the comlink was always audio only, as per their agreement—they were far easier to disguise and hide. Once the computer finished its delicate work, the monitor just depicted the data of the signal amidst the background.

"Are you there?" the voice asked. Heavily distorted and manipulated it was impossible to determine sex or species, had she not met her contact personally she would never have known who it was she was talking with.

"Of course," she retorted.

"They're onto you. The Third Squadron has dispatched scouts to monitor and patrol several debris fields, with orders to remain concealed as much as possible."

Tarae's brow tighten. She had heard that the Border Service had seized another salvager, but nothing had happened afterwards so it was generally assumed that they had never managed to track down the origin of the scavenged equipment. Obviously they were more devious than she had given them credit for.

"What are their targets?"

"Each ship has been given several sites to inspect; details are encoded with this signal." She entered a command into her terminal to retrieve the additional data. *"You have to stand down for the time being. If they find you, they will engage."*

"I've got customers who want their salvage, and want it done now. You'll have to stall them."

"I might be able to slow down one, but the other is heading in the opposite direction. But I'll have to be careful; there was a close call with Zol—"

"You were compromised?" she hissed, her temper flaring.

"No," her contact assured her firmly. *"He was getting nosy, but didn't learn anything. I assure you. He's incapacitated for now—I shot him full of a nice little narcotic cocktail that should make him forget whatever he found."*

Tarae glared at the telemetry on the monitor, for the first time wishing there was a visual look so she could glower at her plant within the Border Service. The latest addition to her list of moles and contacts was a valuable one, but still new. If they had roused suspicions already she may have to rethink the arrangement, the last thing she needed was the Border Dogs snapping at her heels.

But all she told the voice was, "Very well. I'll leave you to deal with the matter. Do what you can to disrupt matters; otherwise your cut will be far less than what you expect."

"Of course. I'll do what I can, and contact you if anything comes up."

With that the comlink ended. Draping herself into the chair in front of her console, she studied the static on the screen and drummed her fingers on her bare thigh. The latest contact she had made—the one she had been most proud of—was proving to be a liability. Despite the great care that was taken when making contact, they were sloppy. Obviously not used to the cloak and dagger methods needed to get ahead in Tarae'a's line of work. That was unfortunate...for them.

Leaning forward, her hands danced across the controls as she accessed the communications array and sent out a narrowband signal. She then had to wait for several minutes before the response came and her monitor came to life. It was filled with the wide, ashen face of a Nausicaan male, whose nasal bones were more prominent than most others, the tusks around his mouth were stained and filed into sharp points, and two of the four horns on his forehead were broken. Though she was still in a state of undress, his eyes gave her just a cursory glance—unlike many other races in the galaxy, the Nausicaans showed no interest in Orion females (something Tarae'a was pleased with, seeing as how their entire culture was based around violence and inflicting pain, not that she had any problems with sadomasochism—so long as she was the one in dominance).

"Yes?" he stated in an almost accusatory manner.

"I need to hire a few ships to protect a debris field," she told him, smiling politely.

"You want us to safeguard junk?"

"There is salvage to be claimed and I want to be the first one there. So all you would need to do is engage any ship snooping around, until I arrive."

The brut scowled. Not known as the brightest race in the quadrant, they were terribly good at picking fights and winning—a solitary scout ship wouldn't stand a chance against a wing of Nausicaan raiders.

"How many ships?"

“Four should be more than sufficient.”

He grinned at her, showing off his rotting teeth. *“Expensive. Three bars of latinum, per ship.”*

“Twelve bars of latinum! I could buy a ship at auction for that. I’ll give you nine.”

The Nausicaan scoffed. *“Enough for three ships.”*

Her eyes narrowed as she studied the man on the monitor, he was obviously far shrewder than she had given him credit for. “Do I have your assurance that you will defend my interests, no matter who may venture into the debris field?”

“You pay full price, we won’t leave until you arrive. No one else will survive their trespass.”

After a moment’s thought she nodded. “Alright, I’ll pay you the full twelve.”

“Transmit your payment details and the co-ordinates.”

In the time she had been waiting for the Nausicaan to respond, she had already picked out exactly which site she wanted them at—one where her contact would be, and where they would meet an untimely end. She sent through the details he asked for. Upon receiving the data, the Nausicaan cut the transmission.

Just twelve bars for four ships and an end to an untimely loose end, not a bad rate—she had expected it to be a lot more. She would have to sweet talk Daimon Bek out of twelve more bars which wasn’t as difficult as it sounded. Humans had a saying; a fool and his money are easily parted.

With a throaty chuckle, Tarae’a headed for a much needed shower.

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**Captain’s Ready Room, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Tamsen Sector, En Route to Armus Sector**

After spending the night with Hank, then the very early wakeup call from Admiral T'Rona, Leijten had gotten little rest and was now suffering the consequences. She was known for pushing herself hard, sometimes to the point of exhaustion before she finally had to admit defeat and get some rest. This time however she was tired and anxious. Her unease stemmed from the fact that so many of her crew were elsewhere, on important and potentially dangerous missions of their own, and she was powerless to do anything to help them. She was still worried about Daezan and what had happened to him onboard the *Cairo*, now she had Llewellyn-Smyth, Syva and Innis to add to her list of woes.

Since speaking with Innis early in the morning, she had spent the time of the Bridge, overseeing their departure preparations on top of all the usual business. When he came on shift, Amarin had been keeping a watchful eye on her from ops. It was only when he had noticed her start to droop, that he suggested she relax a little. Knowing her First Officer was right, she had handed the ship over to him and retreated to her ready room—she was still on duty after all.

With soft music playing, she slouched into her chair and attempted several relaxation techniques she had picked up over the years. She wasn't looking to sleep, but rather to calm her anxieties and refresh her tired mind. Or at least that was her intention, the door chime prove otherwise.

Her eyes snapped open and she sat up. The chronometer on her desk showed that she'd napped for only around ten minutes, but she kicked herself for the slip. Sitting up once again, she looked at the door.

"Come in."

She was a little surprised to find th'Shaan standing on the other side of the door panels. Had she been better rested, she had intended to speak with him about the situation down in engineering. As he stepped inside and over to her desk she took note of his tense posture and twitching antennae, something was definitely up with the usually composed Andorian.

"Have a seat, Elak," she offered. He accepted and sat directly opposite her. "Can I get you something?"

"No thank you, Captain."

For a brief moment she considered getting herself some tea, but decided against it—given th'Shaan demeanour. Instead she focused directly on him, her hands resting on her lap.

“What’s the matter, Lieutenant?”

Before he began, he sat a little stiffer. “Captain, I wanted to inform you that I have relieved Ensign Feeznar of his duties.” From his trouser pocket he produced an isolinear chip and handed it to her across her desk. “I am once again, resubmitting my petition to have him transferred off the *Silverfin* as soon as possible, as well and a request for his replacement.”

Shocked at his sudden action, she accepted the chip but set it beside her desktop monitor. Th'Shaan was an officer who never acted out of malice or impulse, when he had first come to her and asked for Feeznar to be assigned elsewhere, she had asked him to wait for a while and try to resolve the problem—which he had done without complaint.

“May I ask why?”

“Same reasons as before, sir. He’s lethargic, mulish, disrespectful to lower ranking crewmembers, borderline insubordinate at the best of times, and continuously defers duties and tasks he sees as ‘beneath him’. Honestly Captain, I know we’re suffering a personnel shortage, but I’m shocked he got through the Academy.”

She listened to him patiently. Since promoting him to Chief Engineer, she had never had cause to question his methodology or command of his section—in both, he was equal to Amorn when he had been in the post—so she trusted his judgement when it came to the latest addition to his staff. She had only asked him to delay his previous request about Feeznar, so as to give the ensign the benefit of the doubt, to let him get better acquainted with the ship, her crew and how they did things, hoping that he would adapt and contribute. But apparently that wasn’t to be.

Leijten glanced at the isolinear chip on her desk and then back at th'Shaan, before giving him a nod—almost immediately she noticed his hunched shoulders lower slightly and his tense jaw muscles relax.

“I’ll read over your request and then submit it to Rear Admiral T’Rona. By the time we get back to Freedom, all the necessary paperwork will be in place and Ensign Feeznar will be reassigned to another ship.”

“Thank you Captain.”

She gave him a supportive smile and dismissed him. Th’Shaan headed for the exit, but as the doors parted he looked back at her.

“I did try, sir. But for whatever reason I just couldn’t get through to him.”

“I know you did, Elak. I’ll keep you posted.”

Looking more at ease than when he entered, th’Shaan stepped onto the Bridge and the doors closed behind him. Leijten sighed wearily, picked up the chip and inserted it into her computer.

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Chapter 5

Cockpit, Shuttle *Cheimh*

Location Classified

Stardate: 55206.6 (March 17th, 2378)

The cockpit comprised of three consoles (helm at the front, navigation on the port side, and auxiliary controls to starboard) with uncomfortable seats and a couple of lockers on either side of the hatch into the aft cabin. Unsurprisingly, Llewellyn-Smyth was piloting the ship and looked more relaxed than Syva had seen her since they had first been briefed on the mission back at Star Station Freedom. She herself was seated at the auxiliary systems station, which could be rigged to oversee engineering status, weapons or flight control. Lieutenant Whyte sat opposite her.

Very little had been spoken during their journey; Whyte choosing to grunt in confirmation or refutation if posed a query by either of the Border Dogs, Llewellyn-Smyth—or Duchess as Syva would need to refer to her as for the foreseeable future—had stayed in the aft cabin trying to learn more about the role she was to play, whilst Syva had opted for quiet meditation.

They had dropped out of warp less than ten minutes ago to traverse a planetary system, where their new ship had been awaiting their arrival. Aside from the name, Syva knew nothing more about the *Cerberus*.

A sensor relay chirped from navigation. She looked at Whyte as he addressed the readings. “She’s holding position above the magnetic south pole of that moon,” he said (the longest statement he had made to then since departing the station) gesturing toward a barren brown-grey moon they were fast approaching. Llewellyn-Smyth nodded and altered their approach vector.

Syva glanced at the limited sensor telemetry she had but still couldn’t get anything on the ship, which was using the magnetic pole as a natural cloaking field. It was only when they reached high orbit of the moon that she caught a glimpse of the ship they were en route to meet. Though she didn’t feel the emotional impact of surprise, she did find their choice curious. A relatively flat silhouette except for the impulse fins at the aft end, the warp nacelles were integrated into the wide body which tapered to a smaller head section, two wings made it equally effective in a planet’s atmosphere as it was in space, whilst the entire ship had an almost unfinished look to it; all tell-tale

traits of a Ju'day-Class freighter—the type of ship once popular with the Maquis, before the war.

Llewellyn-Smyth looked back at Whyte. “That’s your ship?” she asked, her tone registering her astonishment.

“Yes. And?”

“I thought you were trying to blend in with a crime syndicate, using an old Federation ship must surely make that difficult?”

He scoffed. “Hardly. Ju'day’s are numerous, easy to modify and cheap to run. Why do you think the Maquis favoured them?”

Obviously still not convinced, she shared a look with Syva before returning her attention back to the small cargo ship. She kept her eyes on the sensor display as Whyte sent a coded signal to the *Cerberus*, which was quickly confirmed.

“Take us under the main hull, then cut the engines,” he ordered.

Effortlessly Llewellyn-Smyth performed the manoeuvre. They drifted slowly underneath the old converted freighter, which looked battle-scarred and grubby, heading towards the opening cargo hatch. As soon as the *Cheimh* was underneath the loading bay it lulled forward as the shuttles forward momentum was suddenly stopped dead—the result of a tractor beam. Within four minutes, the shuttle had been pulled inside the larger ship, the cargo doors sealed once again and they had been set to rest on the deck. The operation was all very smooth and organised, very Starfleet in its execution.

Whyte was the first one to make a move, flipping the console board up and securing it into the bulkhead once again (a space-saving measure in the cramped cockpit), before heading into the aft compartment where the exit was. Syva secured her console as well, whilst Llewellyn-Smyth completed the post-flight checks and shut down the shuttles systems. She left the lieutenant to her duties and went aft.

She wasn’t surprised to find that Whyte had already collected his duffle bag and disembarked. Picking up her own bag, which held nothing more than a few days’ worth of clothing, cleansing products, and a Vulcan *sihraa* blade (a weapon she had always carried with her when going undercover in the past), she ducked through the exit hatch and stepped onto the deck of the *Cerberus*.

The main hold should have been almost fifteen meters in length, but the bay she stood in was just over half that—barely large enough for the six meter shuttlecraft. She surmised a partition bulkhead had been installed, so as to create the hanger without losing some measure of cargo capacity.

Her cursory assessment was concluded quickly, as there was little else to see other than the bulkheads, two hatches, tractor emitter in the ceiling, lighting fixtures and a computer panel next to the port side entryway, where Whyte stood. The air had a metallic tang to it and seemed too quiet.

Llewellyn-Smyth emerged from the shuttle and stood next to her, likewise looking around the drop bay.

“This place makes the *Silverfin* look spacious,” the conn officer commented, her voice didn’t echo which made the oppressive silence disconcerting.

“Indeed,” Syva agreed.

“You coming?” asked Whyte.

They headed after the intelligence operative, who stood in the open doorway. Stepping over the ledge, she followed him into a compact lift scarcely large enough for the three of them and what limited baggage they carried. There was silence as they headed up two decks, then out into another narrow corridor. Though she appreciated quiet, Syva had become accustomed to a certain degree of banter and interaction with her shipmates, whether related to the cutters status, their current assignment, or personal matters. Whyte’s brisk manner was not uncommon for specialists in his field, they were trained to observe, listen and assess, not entertain others, but there seemed to be more to it than just his career choice. She doubted however, that they would be onboard long enough to build up a sufficient rapport with the man to determine exactly what else was troubling him.

He led them to another hatch, which was marked: BRIDGE. He stopped and input a code into the access panel. The door chirped then hissed open and once again Whyte led the way inside. Llewellyn-Smyth gestured for Syva to go first, which she did. The Bridge was little more than a cockpit, though larger than the one on the *Cheimh*, with a similar configuration to newer Danube-Class runabouts; two forward consoles, one on both the port and starboard sides and then a freestanding one in the middle of the deck.

Only three were occupied (operations, engineering and tactical), though not by individuals she would have expected. A tall and wiry Red Orion stood at the weapons console in the middle of the deck, his head was shaved bald and he wore a pair of well-worn leather trousers and tight vest—exposing his surprisingly well defined arms and shoulders. Another Orion male (though this one had bright jade skin) sat at the portside engineering post, but he was shorter and far more muscular than the first, whilst his hair was raven black and unkempt, and the brown jumpsuit he wore was grubby. Orions in Starfleet were not that uncommon to be shocking, two on the same posting was rare though, however it was the last officer at the operations station that was the most surprising. The hulking brute barely seemed able to fit in the chair and Syva couldn't even determine the individual's gender; their long coarse hair fell down to the middle of their back, little green eyes peered out from under a heavy brow, small bony-white horns tusks stood out against its tough greyish-brown skin. She had never heard of a Nausicaan being accepted into Starfleet—let alone one working for Intel.

The three crewmembers turned to face the doorway as they entered; they nodded at Whyte, scowled questioningly at Syva, but when Llewellyn-Smyth stepped through the hatch they all shared the same look of shock and bewilderment.

Whyte stopped next to the Red Orion and looked back at the two new additions to their team. “This is the new Duchess,” he began—it had been agreed that the team wouldn't be given their real identities, for added security, “and this is T'Han, who will be supplying additional tactical support.”

She nodded her greeting. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Llewellyn-Smyth squirm at the scrutiny she was being given.

“This is Verin Tahl, intelligence operative,” Whyte resumed the introductions, beginning with the Red Orion, then moved onto the other Orion, “Kel-Daros, technician and equipment specialist; and Rycien Krag'or, telemetry analyst and cryptographer.” Before either Syva or Llewellyn-Smyth could greet any of the crew, Whyte turned to Tahl.

“Are we ready?” the senior Intel Officer asked.

Tahl tore his dark eyes away from Llewellyn-Smyth and focused on Whyte. “Yes sir, all systems checks have been completed. We have also received our new directive from Control; heading is already locked into the navicom.”

Whyte gave him a nod and then proceeded to the conn station, not saying another word to anyone. Tahl focused on his console once again, as detached and focused as his superior, but Kel-Daros and Krag'or kept glancing at their new additions, both of them clearly surprised and unsettled by the development. Syva surmised that they weren't from Starfleet Intelligence, most likely seconded to the team due to their specialities.

Standing close to the exit, all the two Border Dogs could do was watch as the small crew went about their duties in practiced efficiency.

* * *

to be continued ...