

Border Cutter Silverfin The Ties That Bind

By Brydon Sinclair

Chapter 1

The Bazaar, Star Station Freedom **Stardate: 55069.6 (January 26th, 2378)**

The Bazaar was bustling with activity. Captain Susanna Leijten moved between the various kiosks and stalls, where the vendors and merchants were selling various trinkets from all across the sector and beyond.

The crew of the *U.S.S. Silverfin* were enjoying a few days downtime on Star Station Freedom, after towing in the starship *Cairo*, a mysterious ghost ship they had stumbled across, four years and dozens of light-years away from where it had vanished. The *Cairo* was now under the supervision of the Starfleet Corps of Engineer, who now had the job of deciphering the mystery of the Excelsior-Class ship. Seeing as how they had returned to base prematurely, they had taken the chance to load on new supplies, as well as upgrading their environmental systems—something that Lieutenant th'Shaan had reported would need to be overhauled for the last two months.

The work had taken three days, and with it now completed, the *Silverfin* was going through systems checks and diagnostics. Leijten had remained onboard for the majority of the work, and with the ship due to launch in just over four hours, she had taken a few hours of personal time to snoop around the Bazaar. Part of the reason was to look for a bargain or two, or maybe some fresh tea, or a real paperbound book to enjoy, but on the most part it was to help her try and forget what had happened to Kolanis Daezan—her Betazoid Ops officer who had had a ‘telepathic episode’ onboard the *Cairo* and had then been sedated and transported back to Betazed for treatment, with Doctor Mbeki going along with him to assist.

The temporary replacements for Daezan and Mbeki were due to report in at 1200 hours, so she had an hour and a half to herself to take in the shops and stalls. Mysterious, exotic, spicy and sweet smells filled her nostrils and made her stomach growl—the bowl of muesli she’d had that morning hadn’t done

the job of filling her up until lunch.

She was contemplating getting some of the freshly made foodstuffs to take back to the *Silverfin* with her, when her combadge chirped. Tapping it she said, “Leijten here. Go ahead.”

“Captain,” came the booming voice of her XO, Commander Amarin, *“we have just received a message from the Squadron Quartermaster’s Office. Apparently there is an issue with some of the supplies we requested, and he’ll only speak to you.”*

Sighing, knowing that having a morning to herself would be too much to ask for, she said to Amarin, “Understood Commander. I’ll head over there now. It shouldn’t take too long, but if I’m not back before high noon, send out the search parties.”

“Consider it done sir. Silverfin out.”

Leijten chuckled to herself. Amarin often came off as quite stoic and reserved, but that was only to those that didn’t know him well. He had a quick wit and a belly laugh that could almost shake a room. Before she headed off to the Squadron Quartermaster’s Office, she stopped off at a small food cart that had among its many tasty treats, Bajoran *jumja* sticks. She took one and then headed for the nearest turbolift, nibbling on the almost-too-sweet confectionary as she walked, hoping that she could clear up the problem quickly and enjoy the rest of her morning—but knowing how pedantic and particular some QM’s could be, she didn’t hold out much hope.

Ward Room, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470 Docking Berth 7, Star Station Freedom

Harriet Llewellyn-Smyth, better known to her shipmates as English Rose, sat in the ward room enjoying a cup of camomile tea. With the ship in dock, Alpha Shift was on standby, meaning that the crew didn’t need to be at their posts until it was time to depart, but they had to remain aboard ship, and she had opted to pass the time by doing anything but think about Kolanis—

Lieutenant Commander Daezan, a sharp voice quickly corrected, and she could feel her cheeks redden. He had left the ship before they had even docked at Star Station Freedom, heading back to Betazed with Doctor Mbeki, where he

would hopefully get whatever treatment he needed and then return to the *Silverfin*.

She shook her head, trying to clear it of her concern for Daezan, or her memory of his dark eyes that seemed to look straight into your heart, or his broad shoulders and slim waist, or his nice arms.

“Stop it Harriet!” she ordered herself, unaware that she’d spoken aloud.

“Stop what Lieutenant?” came an uncertain voice from the entrance.

Her head snapped upward and she saw Ensign Jose Tyler the Fifth standing in the open doorway of the ward room. Quickly composing herself she gave him a level stare. “Nothing Ensign.”

The new Tactical Officer didn’t look convinced at her brushing off the stray thought, but he didn’t pursue it (if a superior officer didn’t want to discuss something, they you didn’t discuss it). He had been onboard for only a few weeks, and in all that time she hadn’t seen him in the ward room before, except for staff meetings.

“Would you care to join me?” she asked.

The baby-faced young officer stepped over to the replicator and ordered a Bolian tonic water, and then sat opposite her at the long mahogany table, looking a little stiff and straight. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and Llewellyn-Smyth moved quickly to fill it.

“So how are you adjusting to life in the Border Service?”

“Fine thank you sir.”

“It’s not like they teach at the Academy.”

“No sir it’s not.”

“But very rewarding though.”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay, stop that now!” she told him sternly, fighting the urge to wag a finger at him as well.

“Sir?”

“That Mr Tyler. We’re alone in here, you don’t have to call me ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’ or ‘Lieutenant’. My name is Harriet or Rose if you fancy. It’s a little difficult to have a conversation with someone who is being so formal.”

“I’m sorry sir...eh, Harriet,” he amended, looking more uncomfortable than before. “It’s just that this ship isn’t like any of my training cruises. There’s a lot to take in and adapt to.”

She gave him a warm smile. “The Academy doesn’t prepare you for life on a cutter. I remember a lecture Commander Weinstein gave on protocols and procedures, in which he spent half the time criticising the Border Service, for their lack of proper decorum in such matters. As soon as the class was over, I went to the library and started reading up on everything I could find on the Border Service. I guess you could say that I have him to thank for my being here.”

Tyler smiled softly. “I think I got the same lecture.”

They chuckled as they compared notes on the class, and found that Weinstein was almost word for word perfect, despite the six years that separated them. They then moved onto other courses they had taken, instructors they had in common, and how all of the theory they had learnt at the Academy really didn’t prepare anyone for the realities of space. It was the most she had heard the young ensign say at one time, but still the young man didn’t seem to relax. She found it odd that someone so young seemed to be wound so tightly, even his predecessor, Lieutenant Commander Ling-Na, knew when to let her hair down. No one onboard would ever forget their stop over at Star Station Destiny eight months before the war started, when the diminutive Ling-Na had faced off against two Nausicaan enforcers who had teamed up against a frail old shop owner—she was the only one left standing by the end of the fight.

Before she could probe further her combadge chirped. “*Ch’Tholin to Llewellyn-Smyth.*”

“Go ahead Petty Officer,” she replied to the Andorian shuttle control specialist.

“Any chance you could come down here for a minute sir, I’ve having a bit of

trouble with Stallion Two's nav-computer."

"Understood ch'Tholin, I'm on my way. Llewellyn-Smyth out," she closed the channel and stood up, Tyler did so too. "Duty calls, I'll see you back on bridge if not sooner Jose."

"I'd better be getting back to my station now," he quickly said, before returning his glass to the replicator and leaving the ward room.

He's an odd one alright, she mused to herself, as she put her teacup and saucer back into the replicator as well, and then headed for the hanger deck.

Squadron Quartermaster's Office, Cargo Operations Centre Star Station Freedom

Leijten quickly moved through the Cargo Ops Centre, always a busy place on any station, seeing as how they had strict schedules to keep with all the ships coming and going, and numerous cargo containers being loaded and offloaded, as well as customs spot-checks and security sweep run on every barrel and box and bag that came through. The crew paid no attention to her as she moved to the QM's office, which was just off of Cargo Ops. She stepped inside and the doors closed behind her shutting out the noise of a dozen people talking at once, whilst controls chirped and beeped.

She had had a few dealings with the Squadron Quartermaster before, a Zakdorn called Gornak, who thrived on making officers jump through hoops. He loved his paperwork and always made sure that everything was filled out properly, or you'd have to start from scratch. After the first and only time that had happened, she had made sure that everything was filled out properly, and had the *Silverfin's* administrations assistant, PO Illan Edris, triple check everything before it was submitted—and it was a rare occasion when the young Trill made a mistake.

Senior Chief Gornak was nowhere to be seen. *Great! Is this a new method of showing us officer's whose in charge down here?* He could have been in the small private head or the secure storage room that were accessed through doors at the back of the room.

"Hello?" she called. "It's Captain Leijten of the *Silverfin*. I was told there was a problem with our supply request. Gornak?"

“If yer lookin’ for ol’ Gornak, yer gonna be waitin’ a while,” said a deep Texan voice from behind her. Though she immediately recognised it, she couldn’t quite believe it.

Turning slowly back towards the door she had come through, her jaw almost hit the floor when she saw the tall, broad-shouldered man, his eyes were their usual sky blue, his face had a few more lines on it, but still chiselled and handsome and well-tanned as always, his buzz cut hair was now almost completely silver, and his easy smile grew wider at her reaction.

“Mornin’ ma’am, or do you prefer Cap’n?” Henry ‘Hank’ Mitchell asked. She just stayed rooted to the spot and stared at him. “Yer gonna be talkin’ anytime soon?”

“Oh my god!” she said breathlessly. “What they hell are you doing here?”

“Good to see you too Suz.”

She blushed at her rudeness. “I’m sorry Hank, it’s just you’re the last person I expected to see here.”

“Ah’ll try not take that personal,” he said, his lopsided grin showing that he held no ill will against her. “It’s good to see yer again though Suz. Been too long.”

“Ten years since you left Charon to go back home. How is the ranch?”

He moved further into his office and sat in the chair behind the large computer terminal, he gestured to the empty seat opposite. Leijten expected him to put his feet up on the console, and see his wearing cowboy boots. He didn’t though, and she found herself to be a little disappointed.

“Runnin’ smooth. When the war began, ah signed back up—do my duty, y’know. After it ended, an Starfleet rescinded the stop/loss order, ah decided to hang on for a bit longer. Made Senior Chief two year ago. Ah heard you made Cap’n, congratulations.”

“Thanks Hank. Didn’t feel like much to celebrate at the time, but I’ve gotten comfortable in the job now.”

“Ah always knew you would make a helluva CO.”

“Speaking of jobs and duties, I take it that there isn’t any problem with our requisition request. And that all this palaver was just to get me down here,” she stated, knowing the answer before he opened his mouth.

He chuckled softly and held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. “Have mercy ma’am. If ah called you down here, ah’d never have gotten to see the look on yer face.”

She laughed too. “I’d probably have done the same to you if given the chance.” She glanced at the chronometer. It was getting closer to noon—thanks to a breakdown in the turbolift network she’d had to use ladders and Jefferies tubes for half the trip down to Cargo Ops. “I wish I could stay and catch up, but I have to get back to the *Silverfin* and see to a few things before we depart.”

“Yer don’t depart until sixteen hundred, surely there’d be time for chow and some catchin’ up?”

Looking into his sparking eyes, she found they had the same effect on her as they always had, she just couldn’t say no to the man. “A quick bite and you’d better behave.”

“Ah’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

“I’ve heard that one before Hank,” she retorted, smiling at the fond memories of the two of them intertwined, sweating, laughing and more than satisfied. “When and where?”

“Say fourteen-thirty at the Bazaar? Ah know a nice Bolian place we can try.”

“I’ll see you there Hank.” She rose to leave, and he stood as well. His easy smile still spread across his face, and his eyes shone with the promise of mischief.

Before the doors parted, he stopped her. “Suz.” She looked back at him. “It’s real good to see yer again.”

“You too cowboy,” she said with a wide smile, and then headed out his office and back towards the *Silverfin*, her heart pounding in her chest, and feeling more than a little giddy.

Chapter 2

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 Sector 16627

The cramped bridge of the transport ship *Mirage* was quiet, aside from his steady breathing and the pounding of his heart in his ears. Jeffery Mellor, captain, owner and pilot of the old J-Class ship sat alone at the controls. The small teardrop-shaped ship—rounded at the front and then tapering aft, with a nacelle on either side—was a relic of the last century, held together through a mishmash of repairs, on the fly upgrades, and a lot of hope. But in the last month, the latter had been fading fast.

He shook away the thought and focused again on the communications panel. *Where are they? They've never been late before*, he fretted. What if they had double-crossed him, what if she was dead? *Don't think that!* He couldn't afford to think such things. Yes it had been a month, but he was doing what they wanted. Only a little longer and it would all be over.

Just then the incoming signal indicator flashed. Mellor's heart beat harder and faster, as he tapped the stud with a shacking finger.

"This is the *Mirage*," he said, his voice shacking.

"Have you got the item?" said the heavily distorted voice on the other end of the audio-only link.

"Yes. It is in secured in a secret compartment. No one would be able to find it if they came onboard."

"Would anyone have reason to board your pitiful vessel?"

"No, what I meant was—"

"Silence human! If your snivelling incompetence threatens the item, then our business is done and the contract will be terminated," the voice stated. Mellor could almost hear the smile in his voice.

"Please don't! We won't be stopped. I assure you of that!"

"Excellent. Set your course for the moon of Argaya two. We will be there in seventy hours, and you had better be too." With that the link went dead, and

Mellor was left in silence once again.

He took a moment to steady himself and then looked at the navigational display. The Argaya System was well outside Federation space, close to the Talarian border, but not close enough for them to interfere. Argaya was filled with meteoroids and other debris following the collision of two planets in the twenty-second century. No one went there, except the occasional geological surveyor. They would be totally alone.

If the *Mirage* could get there in time. At her maximum cruise speed of warp four-point-two the system was well over ninety hours away. They would have to achieve and sustain warp five for sixty-eight hours and forty-three minutes in order to get there in time. Mellor couldn't remember the last time the old ship had gone above warp four. His previous runs between Beta Rigel, Deneva and Aldebaran hadn't called for much speed.

He tapped the commlink on the helm console. "Ixaab, get ready to take us to maximum warp. We'll need to sustain it for sixty-nine hours to get to the drop-off point."

"What?!" the Bolian engineer exclaimed. "Boss, I doubt she'll be able to manage that!"

"She has to Ixaab. You know what will happen if we don't make the drop-off."

There was silence from the other end, and then a heavy sigh. He was suffering almost as much as Mellor was. Almost. "*Understood Boss. I'll make sure she'll be there. Engine room out.*"

Mellor set the course into the nav-system, selected warp five, and then tapped the engage button. The *Mirage* leapt into warp, her hull groaning with the strain of the unfamiliar speed she was being asked to travel at. Mellor knew that it would only get worse. But he didn't have any choice.

Docking Berth 7 Star Station Freedom

It was almost 1200 hours when Lieutenant Innis Kalm stepped into the corridor that took him to Docking Berth 7, where the *U.S.S. Silverfin* was located—his new posting for the next few weeks. The news that was making

the rounds through the Border Service was that she had been the ship that discovered the *Cairo*, which had quickly become one of the greatest mysteries of the century. Innis would have given anything to either have been on the initial search teams sent to the ghost ship, or to be on the S.C.E. team that were charged with unlocking its mysteries. Unfortunately that wasn't to be.

During the search, the Ops Manager had been badly injured and needed hospitalisation, so he had been transferred from the *Minotaur* to act up at Ops. It was an assignment he both looked forward too and dreaded. Albacore-Class ships were the backbone of the Border Service, and a billet aboard one was hard to come across. But he was just onboard for a temporary assignment, he'd have to get up to speed quickly and probably by the time that happened his tenure aboard would be over. Then afterwards he wasn't sure where he would next be heading, as he had left the *Minotaur* looking for a greater challenge—but every cutter already had a Chief Operations Officer, so he wasn't sure where he'd find himself.

He looked further down the corridor and noticed a slim young redhead approaching from the other direction, like him she had a duffle bag over one shoulder and carried another holdall as well. As they approached he noticed that she wasn't quite human—if the dark veins on her face were anything to go by she was from the largest moon of Beta Rigel III.

Going by their relative speeds, he would reach the docking port before her. He assumed she was reporting onboard the *Silverfin* as well, seeing as how there weren't any crew quarters on the level and there were no other docking ports in the section. He slowed his pace, so as to meet her at the airlock. He wasn't sure who she was, or how long she'd be aboard the cutter, but he was determined to make at least one or two acquaintances aboard.

As they got closer, he gave her a friendly smile. She gave him a somewhat puzzled look. When they were within speaking distance he asked, "Are you going aboard the *Silverfin*?"

"Yes. You?"

"Sure am. Innis Kalm," he introduced himself, not bothering to offer his hand for her to shake, the human gesture meaning nothing much to either of them.

"Tessi Jenka," she replied, still scrutinising him. She seemed particularly fascinated by his right ear, and the dangling earring he wore. "I thought they were against regulation."

He touched the delicate piece of jewellery, which had the Bajoran emblem carved into it. "Since Bajor entered the Federation, the regs have been relaxed a little. It's up to each CO if they'll allow them to be worn. I couldn't aboard the *Minotaur*, so I'm hoping the *Silverfin* will be different."

"Good luck to you," she said, a faint smile now tugging on her lips.

He gestured for her to go ahead of him and she did so, stepping through the docking hatch and into the umbilical that connected the ship to the station. As they neared the ship's open airlock, Innis noticed two individuals standing waiting for them, chatting to one another. Both wore command red, but that was where all similarities ended. There was a short, slim human-looking woman, with curly mousy-brown hair and soft blue eyes. He also spotted four pips on her collar. The being next to her was tall and blue-skinned, his head was bulbous at the back and sides, whilst his face was dominated by a breathing mask, with flesh tubes that went from his chin down to his chest. He had no hair and dark goggles covered his eyes. His collar had three pips on it.

On Star Station Freedom, after his new orders came in, he'd familiarised himself with the senior staff of the *Silverfin*. The pair had to be Captain Leijten and Commander Amarin. He was impressed that the ship's most senior officers had turned up to greet them at the airlock.

Jenka stepped through and quickly stood at attention and Innis followed suit. He noticed an amused look cross the Captain's face. The First Officer's expression was unreadable. *Note to self, never play poker with the XO.*

"Is that in anyway comfortable?" the Captain asked.

"Not particularly sir," Jenka replied stiffly.

"Then stop doing it," Leijten said with a smile. Innis found himself smirking, as he stood at parade rest, feeling immediately more relaxed. She extended her hand to the Rigellian first, who took it and shook slightly. "Captain Susanna Leijten, welcome onboard Nurse Jenka. I've heard a lot of good things about you."

"Thank you sir," the younger woman replied.

Leijten turned to him and held out her hand again. He took it and was

surprised at her firm grip. “Welcome to the *Silverfin* Mr Innis,” she paused and looked at the earring. “I take it you’d like to keep that on?”

“With your permission of course sir.”

“Granted Lieutenant, after all I let him—” she gestured to the man behind her with her thumb “—wear all that.”

“The breather mask is essential for my survival,” he replied in a deep resounding baritone that almost seemed to echo down the narrow corridors. “The goggles are just to make me more intimidating.”

“Let me introduce the ship’s XO, Commander Amarin. He’s the one who’ll keep you right. As I’m sure you’re both aware, these are temporary postings, but I want you to feel like part of the crew—no matter how long you are aboard for. So any questions, comments and queries please bring them to either the Commander’s or my attention.

“We’ll be departing in a little under four hours,” she continued, getting down to business, but maintaining an open and friendly air. “The Commander will show you to your quarters. You’re both on Alpha Shift, and scheduled to be on duty tomorrow morning at 0900.” Leijten looked back at Amarin. “Commander, I’ll see you back on the bridge. Lieutenant’s if you’ll excuse me,” she said with a friendly smile, and then headed off.

Innis watched her go and then looked up at the towering Benzenite officer. For a moment, no one spoke, and there was only the faint hiss of his breather mask. “Now if you’ll both follow me,” he said, gesturing in the opposite direction to which the Captain had gone.

Amarin led the way, Innis and Jenka following closely behind. The corridor wasn’t wide enough for either of them to walk beside the First Officer, so they kept pace together. “The *Silverfin* is a Mark-Three Albacore-Class ship, the last one commissioned, so there are a few differences,” Amarin began, as he led them through the corridors. “We have a standard armament, a full array of some of the finest sensors available in the fleet, a maximum speed just shy of warp nine-point-four, and our sickbay was rigged with a Mark-Three EMH. Our crew complement stands at one hundred and twenty-four, and made up of about thirty different species from across the Federation.”

He led them into a turbolift. “Deck three,” he ordered it. “There are eight decks. The lower four are engineering, cargo and most other key systems.

Whilst the upper four are where the main crew facilities are located. Deck four—which we were just on—houses sickbay, non-com and enlisted quarters and the canteen. Deck three is for officer’s quarters and the wardroom, which is where most of the officers eat—though you are of course free to use the mess hall. The rec room is also on deck three; officially all we can offer is synthehol.”

“‘Officially’?” Jenka asked.

“There are rumours of a still somewhere onboard, which I can neither confirm nor deny,” he stated, and Innis was sure he could hear a hint of merriment in his deep almost monotone voice. The turbolift opened and he led them out onto deck three. “The gym is down on deck five, and all crew are required to put in at least two hours a week to meet the minimum requirements—but Nurse, I’m sure you’ll keep everyone right.” He came to a halt at a set of doors on their left. “Nurse Jenka, these are your quarters. You’re fortunate that we don’t have a fuller crew, as you get your own room.”

“Thank you Commander,” she replied stepping to the doors. They parted and revealed the small but comfortable cabin, which combined bedroom with living space and had a small private bathroom.

“If you need any help just let me know. I’ll try to organise a full tour of the ship for later this evening, so that you can familiarise yourself with the layout.”

“That would be appreciated sir,” she told him. She nodded at Innis. “I’ll see you around Lieutenant.” She stepped completely into her quarters and the door closed.

Amorin led him a little further down the corridor, and then stopped at a room three doors down from Jenka’s, again on the interior of the ships saucer. “And this is you Lieutenant Innis. Make yourself comfortable, and if you need anything in the interim contact the Ops Centre—they’ll keep you right.”

“Thank you sir. I look forward to the tour, I’ve read a lot about Albacore’s. It’ll be interesting to see if them measure up to the stories.”

“Of that I can assure you Lieutenant. The *Silverfin* is a damn fine ship, that’s been to hell and back several times in recent years.” He then gave Innis a deep nod. “Until later Lieutenant.” With that, Amorin turned on his heel and headed back towards the turbolift.

Innis stepped into his temporary home and dropped his bag on the bed. The room was neat and tidy, with the typical style used in vacant crew quarters—giving the impression of a lived-in environment whilst also being devoid of any significant personal tastes. He set about putting away what clothing he'd taken with him, as well as putting the few holos imagers and photos he carried with him on the desk. Though the room would only be his for a short time, he was determined to make it as comfortable as he could.

Zim's Authentic Bolian Restaurant, The Bazaar Star Station Freedom

Normally Leijten wasn't a fan of Bolian food, the idea of aged meat never sat right with her stomach, so she had opted for a vegetarian option. A platter of various vegetables, with grains and seeds in a tangy almost barbeque flavoured sauce, on a bed of purple pasta. Mitchell had opted for a variety of seafood, knowing that any meat he ordered would make her queasy.

They had chatted about everything they had been up to since he left Star Station Charon in mid-2368 to take on the responsibility of the family ranch, following the death of his father. She had met the older Mitchell only once before his death, and immediately liked the man. She had gone with Hank to Earth for the funeral, at which point they had parted company. He had spent five years working with horses and cattle before the Dominion war had begun, and he had returned to duty. Though he had intended to return after the stop/loss order was rescinded, he had instead decided to stay on a bit longer, leaving the ranch in the capable hands of Bobby, a farmhand that had worked for the Mitchell's since before Hank was born. Though he fully intended to return someday soon, for the meantime, Hank was happy to be back in uniform and serving in the Border Service once again.

She shared with him her promotion to Commander a month after he'd left, and then her transfer to the *Silverfin* in 2370. She'd touched on the death of Captain Ja-Inrosh, the tough time she'd had adjusting to her first command, and the metaphorical kick in the pants she'd been given by an old Border Dog to stop feeling so sorry for herself and take charge of her life. She told him some of the more interesting stories during her time in command, from the time the *Silverfin* had to pull a passenger transport out of a temporary anomaly that had done some very bizarre things to the ship and crew, to the time they seized a small Ferengi cargo ship that was trying to smuggle in

illicit goods to the sexual repressed inhabitants of Jhos'al VI—that one had made him laugh—and then to the mystery of the *Cairo* (or at least what unclassified information she could share with him).

During their time together, she remembered just how easy it was to talk to him, and how that had been one of the things that had drawn her to him. *Whoa there girl*, she warned herself. *Last thing you need is to get involved with Hank again!* When they had split up ten years earlier, it had taken the better part of a year to get over it. No one had his heart or his sense of humour, his strength and his gentleness, and no one had ever made her—

What did I just tell you! She quickly shook off those thoughts. They were just two old friends, catching up. Nothing more. Their previous relationship was in the past. But damn he smelt good, and the silver hair gave him a distinguished look, whilst the lopsided smile and gentle eyes were just the way she remembered them. *What am I doing? I must be nuts thinking about all this now. I leave in a few hours on a two-month tour. And besides, I doubt he still feels the same way.*

Mitchell was as good as his word, and acted the perfect gentleman, though at one point he did rest his hand on top of hers, which made them both blush. He quickly removed it, but she could feel the charge of electricity his touch caused, tingle through her fingers and hand and up her arm. She was acting like a schoolgirl with a crush, and found it to be quite a humiliating state of mind to be in.

She did notice that neither of them mentioned their love lives (or in her case the lack thereof), and decided not to press the matter. Time flew by, and as they were finishing their coffee (both of them having foregone dessert) the chronometer in the restaurant chirped 1530, she knew she had to be going. The *Silverfin* would be leaving in thirty minutes, and she had to be aboard.

They paid their bill and as they stepped back out into the bustling Bazaar, he said, "Ah'll walk you back to the *Silverfin*."

"You don't have to Hank."

"It's on my way."

Leijten kept herself from pointing out the berth seven was no where near the route to Cargo Ops, and instead enjoyed their walk out to the docking bay. They chatted about Charon and the people they'd served with, those they kept

in touch with and those who had been killed in action, more often than not during the war.

As they neared berth seven, Mitchell slowed down and she kept pace beside him. “So when yer back this way?”

“This tour is due to last seven weeks. Looks like some smugglers have managed to find a way to slip by us. We’re working with the *Hercules* to try and flush them out.”

“Sounds tough.”

“No one ever said the Border Service was a cakewalk.”

“True,” he muttered. When they reached the airlock he stepped in front of her, his eyes holding hers. “Come back in one piece Suz. Ah’d hate to face losin’ yer now.”

She felt her cheeks burn at the sentiment. Resting a hand in his bicep—taking note that it was just as solid as it had been ten years earlier—she gave him a warm smile. “We have to go out, but I always make damn sure that we come back too.”

He chuckled. “Ah’m gonna hold yer to that.” He leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Good huntin’ Cap’n.”

“Thank you Senior Chief,” she replied. Mitchell headed back the way they’d come, and Leijten looked after him for a moment before she stepped through the docking port and headed for the *Silverfin*, not sure what to make of his final gesture, but knowing she wanted to see more of him in the near future.

Chapter 3

Training Room, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 1

Syva's hands shot out in front of her, crossed at the wrists, and effortlessly grabbed the fist that was rapidly approaching her face. With a little upper body strength and quickly shifting her weight from her left to right foot, she spun around her attacker and slammed her elbow into the middle of his back.

He let out a grunt, both at the precise force she applied to his forearm, and the blow just above his kidney. Her moves delivered, she released his arm. His momentum carried him forward and down onto the mat, where he lay sprawled for a moment before looking back up at her.

Syva gave him a curt nod and then looked around the training room. Ten other men and women stood around her, watching the display, all dressed in the same standard issue off-white workout attire she was in. They were members of her security detail who were going in for more advanced hand-to-hand combat, all of them were crewmen just out of basic training except Petty Officer Henderson, who was just getting up off the ground—he had been on her team for several years and she had asked him to help with the demonstration.

"Where did he go wrong?" she asked, her tone so level that no one would have guessed that she had spent the last four minutes and fifty-three seconds testing one of her best combatants.

"You were too fast," said Crewman sh'Thoris, a tall and willowy Andorian.

She fixed her stare on the younger woman. "I was not at fault Crewman. Mr Miller made the grave mistake. What was it?"

The collection of young enlistees looked at one another. From the back a tentative hand rose up into the air. She focused in on it and its owner. "Yes Mr Drim," she said to the stocky Bolian.

"He was too aggressive sir?" he said, sounding a little hesitant.

"Correct. When in physical combat, strength, speed and aggression will not ensure victory. Technique will win against even the largest of opponents," she looked along the line up in front of her. "When engaged in hand-to-hand

fighting, your adrenaline levels and emotional state will push you more towards taking charge of the fight, to land as many hits on your opponent as possible. Though this can be an effective method, it can also be a fatal flaw. You must learn restraint, to focus your senses on whomever you may face, to anticipate their next move and be ready to counter it.

“I may be faster and stronger than Mr Henderson,” she continued, moving back to the centre of the mat, where he stood once again, flexing his muscles, “but he is trained in seventeen separate techniques, from eight planets—including five that I am not.”

As soon as she was in position on the mat, he launched an attack at her. She deflected as quickly as he swung and kicked, countering where she could. She noted, with a sense of pride, that Henderson switched from discipline to discipline with every move, karate to jujitsu to Vulcan *khil’an’ra* to Andorian *shii-so*. He had been like the crewman they sparred in front of when he’d first come onboard, during the war. His twin brother, a Starfleet officer, had been killed in action at the Battle of Tyra. Henderson, who had run a dojo in New York City, had enlisted the day after he got the news. He’d been assigned to the *Silverfin* after completing Basic Training, and had been an angry and aggressive young man. The discipline and control he’d once had were consumed by grief. But she had forced him to refocus—though not after she’d dropped him on the mat on well over eighty occasions—and he had since become one of her most reliable crewmen.

He quickly shifted into an Acamarian technique (one she hadn’t studied), and landed a solid punch on her right side, quickly followed up by a knee to her stomach. She ducked and rolled out the way and then leapt to her feet. Had she been human she would have winced at the dull throb in her gut, but her high pain threshold allowed her to move unhindered. Henderson kept up his onslaught, choosing his moves and executing them with perfect precision, which made it difficult for her to retaliate.

She was aware of the intense stares of the crewmen, the open mouths on a couple on them, whilst four others were laying odds on who would win (three were in favour of Henderson). She would have to instil in them the need for focus, she wouldn’t have members of her team be so easily distracted.

A few swift moves later, and they found themselves in a grapple, their bodies tight together—each of them trying to gain the upper hand, whilst preventing the other from doing the same. In half a heartbeat, Henderson broke through, and using a hand on her shoulder and a foot hooked behind her legs, she was

slammed onto the mat. Having been sparring with Starfleet shipmates for thirty years, and colleagues at Vulcan Security for fifty years before that, she knew how to land to avoid sustaining injury.

After a moment, Henderson offered a hand to help her up. She pulled her up he asked quietly, "You okay Master Chief?"

She gave him a slight nod. "That was new."

He smiled at her. "You taught me never to stop learning sir."

"Indeed," she replied, an eyebrow raised. She looked around at crewmen. "Pair up. One will focus on aggression and the other on technique."

"Yes Master Chief," they replied in unison.

As they scattered to the other mats, Syva and Henderson moved through the groups, assessing the rookies, offering advice on moves and encouraging where needed. Though the sparring sessions would never meet the same conditions of a real fight, they would help hone skill and push their stamina. Though they were all adequate fighters, she had always made sure that every non-com and crewman under her charge were the very best they could be.

**Sickbay, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 1**

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency," the holo-doc asked as she phased into existence in the middle of the main ward. The Mark-3 was the first female template EMH, which had since been replaced by the Mark-4 and now the Mark-5.

Tessi Jenka circled the hologram, looking her up and down. The hologram seemed a little flustered at this.

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asked.

Jenka stopped in front of her. "Not really, no. Just wanted to make sure that your programme was stable."

"The computer runs routine diagnostics on my algorithms daily. All systems

have been at optimum for the last eight hundred and thirty-seven days, since I was installed.”

“Just checking,” Jenka replied. “Computer deactivate EMH.”

As quickly as the dark-haired hologram appeared she vanished. Jenka had worked with EMH’s on the *Hippocrates* during the war, and then again on Star Station Freedom. She saw them for what they were, a useful tool. She didn’t understand people who got attached to them, after all one command to the computer could delete them completely or alter their subroutines to transform them into Mr Hyde.

Her inspection of the *Silverfin*’s medical facilities now completed, she had to admit she was impressed. Two well equipped treatment wards, a small but perfectly formed medlab, and two state of the art surgical suites. Obviously the CMO took a great deal of pride in his facilities and his people, all of whom had nothing but praise for Doctor Tunde Mbeki. She could only hope that when she got her own sickbay, her crew would be so kind about her.

That’s if I complete the course, she reminded herself. Her assignment to the *Silverfin* had usurped her original plans as she was leaving Freedom. With five years service under her belt, she was eligible for the Starfleet Medical Officer’s Advanced Training Programme, which would see her gain her MD in eighteen months to two years—depending on if she wanted to specialise or not. It was an intensive course, and one of the most difficult to get onto, but she had been accepted. Unfortunately she didn’t know where her temporary posting to the *Silverfin* left her. She might have to reapply the following year, and even if she did there was no guarantee that she would get in.

She had contacted Starfleet Medical and told them about her new posting and the extenuating circumstances, and had been told to wait until a decision could be made—after all if she couldn’t attend, another nurse or corpsman or medtech could have the vacant spot. She sighed heavily and picked up the PADD she had been reviewing before she decided to play about with the EMH. It held a full list of the ship’s crew complement and their medical records.

As impressed as she was with the ship’s facilities, she was even more impressed with the fact that for such a small ship there were so many alien races onboard. There were the usual suspects that were onboard just about every ship in the fleet (humans, Bolians, Andorians, Tellarite, Vulcans), but there were also several others that were much rarer, including a Skorr, a Nasat, a Suliban, a Kobliad, and of course Commander Amarin. She would

have to read up on their physiologies and anatomy before she would feel completely comfortable treating them, but the corpsmen onboard had been for a while and would help keep her right.

Luckily for Jenka, the crew's annual physicals weren't due for another three months, and she doubted she would still be onboard by then. However, she still wanted to read up on the more uncommon Starfleet personnel onboard the *Silverfin*. She looked over at Corpsman Echor, who was running checks on all the medical tricorders. The young Tellarite was unlike any Jenka had served with before, her pleasant and open demeanour would take a little getting used to.

"Corpsman, I'm going to catch up on the crews medical records in the lab if you need me."

"Sure thing Lieutenant. I'll comm you if anything comes up."

Jenka headed through the ward and into the lab, where she nodded a greeting at Petty Officer Donovan, and sat down at one of the other consoles. She decided to start at the top, opened up the file on Captain Leijten and began to read.

Captain's Ready Room, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470 Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 1

Susanna Leijten leaned back in her chair, sipping on a cup of mint tea as she waited for her subspace commlink to go through. She found herself floating back to the day before, and the moment she and Hank had shared at the airlock; his concern for her, the peck on the cheek, and her own giddiness. The chirping from her computer terminal roused her from the memory. She looked at the screen just as the Border Service logo vanished, replaced by the face of Captain Shane Deyz, CO of the cutter *Hercules*.

"Good morning Susanne," Deyz said with a warm smile.

"Good to see you again Shane. How are you finding the 'big chair'?"

"Finally gotten it morphed to suit my undercarriage," the Joined Trill said with a wink, which made her chuckle. Captain Deyz had been promoted into his current post only six months earlier, following his predecessors' promotion to

the Admiralty—a much less traumatic way than how she assumed command.
“We’re eager to start flushing out the quail for you.”

“Glad to hear it. Are you in position?” she asked her counterpart, who’d just turned thirty-nine.

“We’re in the Velgor System and ready to start causing havoc.”

“Excellent. You get them stirred up and we’ll mop up.” The plan was a relatively simple and straight forward one, designed to shake up any smugglers working in the region, force them to change their routes and plans at the last minute and catch them off guard. Similar manoeuvres were being carried out all along the Federation-Talarian border. A random assortment selection of sectors were assigned a pair of cutters, one would make itself very visible, stopping and searching ships, launching probes and conducting high-intensity scans, whilst the second cutter would hang back and pounce on any ship acting suspiciously.

“Copy that Silverfin. I’m looking forward to having some fun.”

“So remind me, which Host was the loud and obnoxious one again?”

Deyz laughed loudly. *“I’d say that’s a Symbiont trait and not any of the previous Hosts. We were all a bunch of mellow and happy-go-lucky people, until being Joined.”*

“I’ll take your word for it Shanei. I better leave you to it then. Report in anything of interest.”

Consider it done Suzanne. Happy hunting to us all! Hercules out.” With that the image of Deyz was replaced with the Border Service logo once again.

She chuckled softly at his enthusiasm and exuberance. She’d met Deyz just after the war, when the *Silverfin* and the *Hercules* were on a joint salvage operation of one of the battlefields. She had hit it off with the then-XO, and they had stayed in touch ever since. It pleased her to see that his dedication and ability had been rewarded with the promotion, and that the fourth pip on his collar hadn’t changed him in any way.

Finishing her mint tea, and happy that everything was in order, she headed out onto the bridge to begin their part of the plan.

Chapter 4

Cargo Hold, Orion Registered Freighter *Xeros* Sector 16628

Five hours after their mission had begun, the *Silverfin* had its first culprit, a bulky Orion freighter that had skittered on the edge of the sensor range and tried to mask its warp signature. They had pounced on the ship. Sensors revealed its hold had been reinforced to prevent scans, but a couple of Mark-22 torpedoes and a tractor beam later, Amarin and a full security team had beamed over.

With the crew under guard in their common room, the boarding team had begun to search the ship. It hadn't taken them long to get into the ship's hold. What they found stunned the Benzenite First Officer. The space was packed with ship-mounted disruptor arrays, torpedo launchers, full magazines of plasma and photon torpedoes, high-quality shield generators, crates of hand phasers and rifles from at least eight different planets, and enough explosives to take out a small starbase. The crew had been detained and beamed to the *Silverfin's* brig, whilst the boarding team catalogued the contents of the hold.

Amarin stood on the balcony of the upper level and surveyed the mountains of weaponry. The crew would be questioned as to its origin and destination, though he doubted any of them would talk. One thing he was sure about was that the *Xeros* carried enough supplies to arm a small fleet. Immediately he thought of the Maquis, who were trying to rebuild and rearm themselves after the withdrawal of the Dominion and the collapse of the Cardassian Union. They could put the weapons to good use, attacking Cardassian outposts and ships, and also any Starfleet vessel that got in their way. The new Maquis had lost all the sympathy they had once held in the Federation, after they started hijacking, attacking and even destroying unarmed UFP ships.

His combadge chirped. He tapped it, surveying the hold to see who was calling him. "Amarin here."

"*Commander,*" came the level monotone of Lieutenant JG Solvaar, the *Silverfin's* Customs Officer, "*I need to see you immediately.*"

Amarin looked for the Vulcan officer but couldn't spot him. "I don't see you Lieutenant."

"*I am in Green Section, aft. Just past the shield emitters,*" he stated. The hold

was divided into five colour-coded ten-meter sections, from brown at the front where Amarin stood, through blue, orange, purple and then green. He looked further back and noticed the Vulcan step out from behind a high stack of containers.

“I see you Lieutenant. I’ll be there in a few moments. Amarin out.”

He climbed down the ladder to the lower level and headed aft. There were four security guards moving through the bay, scanning each crate and taking note of what it contained, getting a full inventory of the contraband. They were all focused on the job at hand. Amarin smirked to himself (an expression hidden by his breather mask), at the mindset Syva had instilled into those under her command.

It didn’t take him long to reach the aft section of the hold, where Solvaar had ducked back behind the containers. Amarin’s natural sonar ability allowed him to focus in on the soft sound of his tricorder, despite the dark shadows of the hold. If the gravity was lower and the atmosphere was a mixture of carbon dioxide, argon, fluorine and oxygen, it might have reminded him of home.

When he reached the Vulcan customs inspector, he was working a PADD as he studied a series of containers. “What have you got Lieutenant?”

Without saying a word, Solvaar handed the PADD to him. Amarin looked over the data, and then went back over it again. After the second reading he looked back at Solvaar. “You’re sure?”

“Yes Commander. I would not have informed you of this without being certain.”

Amarin looked back at the PADD. It listed several items on it that could be found throughout the hold: phaser generators, torpedo launch activators, fifty torpedo casings (all still loaded), shield grids, armoured hull plating. But what made these items different was that they were all Starfleet hardware.

He tapped his combadge. “Amarin to *Silverfin*.”

“Go ahead Amarin,” came Leijten’s prompt response.

“Captain, we have a bit of a problem here.” He quickly outlined what they had found, and he could almost hear her mood change through the commlink.

"How on Earth is that possible?" she asked, her tone irritated.

Solvaar showed him the readings from his tricorder. "Lieutenant Solvaar has identified some of the vessel identification codes from several pieces, they do not match. They appear to be from several different ships."

"Have the Lieutenant transfer the VICs to Ops immediately. We'll begin trying to track down their origin. I'll also inform SCIS, it looks like we may have a breach in security somewhere in the fleet. What about the rest?"

"No other Starfleet equipment. There is a couple of Klingon disruptor cannons, Nyberrite shield emitters, Ferengi tractor beams. Everything is from numerous species across the quadrant, no way to isolate it down to one location in particular," he informed her, looking at the crates that were stacked from almost floor to ceiling. "I take it the crew aren't talking."

"Not a peep. Keep on it Commander, the Saginaw will be here in a little under two hours to take the freighter and her crew to Freedom. The SCIS can pick them up from there."

The Pamlico-Class *Saginaw* had been diverted from tending to buoys and navigational markers for the next week or two, whilst the Border Service was trying to crack the smuggling operations in the region. Her powerful tractor beams would allow her to haul seized ships back to port, and a couple of her cargo bays had been rigged out as makeshift prison blocks for the incarcerated crews. The set up allowed the cutters on patrol to keep working, whilst the Starfleet Criminal Investigative Service would deal with the guilty.

"Understood Captain. I'll keep you posted on any further developments. Amorin out." When the channel was closed he looked back at Solvaar. *"Let's get these crates open and visually inspect what's inside. There might be some clues as to where they've come from."*

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 En route to Argaya System, Sector 16628

A flashing panel on the operations console caught his eye. Tillg jans Grak saw it as well and tapped it. The middle aged Tellarite woman scowled at the display and then her face became ashen. Captain Jeffery Mellor felt his

stomach go tight, he had sat beside Grak for the better part of twenty years and had never seen her react like that—but then again they'd all been under a lot of strain in the last month.

“What?” he asked, his voice so soft it was almost lost in the silence of the cockpit.

“There’s a lot of underground subspace chatter. It looks like the Border Service has begun cracking down on smugglers. They are scanning and seizing ships acting erratically or trying to evade them,” she told him, only looking at him when she finished.

He felt sick at the news. The *Mirage* was tearing through space at her top speed, her engines already showing signs of strain—and they were still thirty-six hours away from Argaya II—if that wasn’t suspicious activity for a ship that belonged in a museum and not off the main shipping lanes.

“Are we near any of them?”

“The *Xeros* sent out a burst message, stating that they were about to be boarded by an Albacore-Class ship. They’ve gone silent now. The message came from this sector, not that far away from us.”

“Damn!” He looked at the navigational display, which highlighted their destination and the straight course they were taking to get there. Had they more time; he would have taken one that wouldn’t have attracted attention and would have kept his speed low. But they didn’t have any choice. Not with so much at stake. “Anything we could do to mask out warp signature?”

“Not at these speeds. Everything we’ve got is going into propulsion and the SIF. We can’t risk diverting power.”

“Okay. Let’s just hope that there are bigger fish out there for them to worry about.”

Mellor could feel the stress building, mixed with the lack of sleep and worry, he was skirting on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The *Mirage* rattled again, harder than the previous times. Something had to give soon, either his nerves or his ship, and when one of them did then he would lose everything.

Engine Room, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470 Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 1

The *U.S.S. Saginaw* had arrived on scene a few moments ago. Soon they would take the Orion freighter under tow and head back to Star Station Freedom, but before they did Elak ko’Parr th’Shaan, the *Silverfin*’s Andorian Chief Engineer, wanted to find out where they had stolen the Starfleet hardware from. The engineer in him hated to see that tech being wasted; if he could identify its source then it could be returned to its rightful owner. But that was easier said than done.

Every starship, runabout, shuttle and escape pod in service had its own individual vessel identification codes ingrained on every piece of equipment and component. It allowed for debris to be identified or if something went missing it could be traced. However, Starfleet had a lot of ships and shuttles and the cross check would take a while—even with computers as fast as they were.

Th’Shaan sat at one of the consoles on the upper level, where he could oversee everything that went on in engineering, whilst also having relative peace and quiet to work. Since he’d taken command of engineering three years ago, he really hadn’t needed to change much to suit his methods and style, Commander Amarin (his predecessor) had assembled a good team and they had continued to perform above all expectations.

CLANG! It was the sound of a heavy piece of equipment being dropped onto the metal deck plating.

Well, there are always exceptions, th’Shaan thought to himself and looked in the direction of the noise. It was an EPS relay box that had slammed into the deck, no doubt denting it slightly. Next to it, just as he’d expected, was Ensign Feeznar. The diminutive Girinite looked around the room sheepishly, as the rest of the engineering crew scowled at him, before getting back to their own duties. Feeznar had graduated from the Academy last year and been assigned to the *Silverfin*, and ever since then he had proven to be more of a hindrance than a help.

Feeznar grappled with the EPS relay box again, lifted it off the deck, wobbled uncertainly for a second, and then headed off to section nineteen where the replacement was needed. The small, rough-skinned, beady-eyed alien was stronger than he looked and could manage the heavy lifting, but he was clumsy and often quite lethargic, and didn’t like to do any mundane or routine

tasks that they all had to in order to keep the *Silverfin* running smoothly. Th'Shaan was all for giving people a chance—after all, Amarin had taken him on as assistant chief with only two years experience onboard the Sabre-Class *U.S.S. Claymore* under his belt—but the Girinite engineer continued to disappoint him, and he was considering transferring him out to another assignment. The problem was; would anyone else have him?

A tour onboard a Pamlico-Class might sort out his attitude, he mused to himself. The buoy tenders were at the bottom of the Border Service hierarchy, though they did an important job, it was routine and very mundane most of the time. The experience would either give Feeznar the kick in the pants he needed, or would force him to resign.

The computer beeped and th'Shaan turned his attention back to it. He had a hit on two of the VIC numbers that the boarding party had found. One of the phaser generators and three of the phaser emitters belonged to the Miranda-Class *U.S.S. Majestic* NCC-31060, whilst two torpedo launchers and twelve of the photon torpedoes had come from the Akira-Class *U.S.S. Aramaki* NCC-62780. However next to each ships name and registry number was a brief notation: *Destroyed, stardate 51226. Operation Return.*

Th'Shaan uttered an old Andorian curse and tapped his combadge as he set the computer to focus on ships lost during the war. “Th'Shaan to Leijten.”

“Go ahead Lieutenant.”

“I’ve identified two ships from the VICs sir,” he said sombrely.

“I take it that it’s not good news.”

“We’re dealing with grave robbers sir. The *Majestic* and the *Aramaki* were destroyed in 2374 during Operation Return.”

“These vultures went in a cleaned the carcasses of ships lost in combat,” Leijten said, more to herself than to him. Th'Shaan gave her a moment of reflection. *“Good work Lieutenant. See if you can trace the rest of the tech, they might have hit more than one debris field.”*

“Already on it Captain.”

“I’ll notify Starfleet. Leijten out.”

Th'Shaan turned back to his console as another name popped up on the display, then another—both lost in the war, during the mission to retake Deep Space 9. With the refined search parameters the computer would get through the list of VICs a lot quicker. Four down, only five more to go.

**Bridge, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470
Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 1**

Ensign Jose Tyler the Fifth looked over the numerous monitors and readouts on the Tactical console. Currently the computer was running a routine diagnostic of the shield emitters, the ordnance crew were checking a glitch in torpedo tube one—nothing serious but it did deviate from the optimum operating guidelines—and Tyler was studying their sensor sweeps, as well as monitoring the incoming tactical data from the *Hercules*—that had just seized a Ferengi ship themselves.

Like the rest of the bridge crew, he had heard the report from Lieutenant th'Shaan as to the origin of the Starfleet technology. Operation Return had been almost six months before he entered the Academy, but he had read up on it during his studies just as he had done with every other major engagement in the Dominion War. He looked at the Jem'Hadar's style and tactics, as well as absorbing every bit of information he could on the design and capabilities of their ships. He had wanted to do his duty and had hoped to get a field assignment so he could do his part, but the war had ended in late 2375 and he wasn't even half way through his second academic year. But Tyler—like everyone else in San Francisco at the time—had been involved in the war, when the Breen attacked Earth. On campus the gymnasium had collapsed after taking severe structural damage, and Tyler had been inside the building. He had managed to survive, though he'd punctured his left lung, and dug out fourteen classmates and three instructors with his bare hands, before he himself had needed to be taken to the medical centre.

He couldn't quite believe that someone would go through all that wreckage—a lot of which had become tombs to the crews that had served those ships—and pick them clean. What made it worse was that they had gone for the weaponry. Technology used to defend the ship and safeguard others, was available on the black market to be purchased by the highest bidder and used for who only knew what.

Feeling his irritation and anger at the situation grow, he tried to calm himself.

He looked over his shoulder at Operations on the other side of the bridge, and was a little relieved that Lieutenant Commander Daezan wasn't there to sense his feelings. Daezan's replacement, Lieutenant Innis Kalm (which sounded similar to Callum), sat looking into the scope. The Bajoran's face was in profile, his earring catching the light anytime he moved his head.

The night before, after they had left Star Station Freedom, the Captain had called together all the senior staff so that they might meet the two temporary officers over dinner. Tyler had followed this order, and been at the ward room for exactly 1800 hours. He still found the over-familiarity among the crew to be a little unsettling, and something he wasn't particularly comfortable with, but he was there to meet the newcomers and so he introduced himself to Nurse Jenka. The Rigellian seemed pleasant though a little distant, but on a temporary assignment he suspected that to be quite normal. Also in the ward room was the Captain who was talking with Lieutenant Innis and Master Chief Syva, whilst Commander Amorin joined Jenka and himself.

Lieutenant's th'Shaan and Llewellyn-Smyth came in last. When the Conn Officer saw Innis, she let out what could only be described as a squeal of excitement. They hugged and then, realising that everyone was looking at them, she explained that they had been in the same squad at the Academy.

During their meal, he had sat opposite Innis whilst Llewellyn-Smyth sat next to the Bajoran. She introduced them to one another, and when Tyler offered his hand, he was surprised the man's firm grip. As he listened to them reminiscing and answering a few questions that the newcomer asked him, he noticed that the Bajoran kept glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. The look was very subtle, and had Tyler not been a keen strategist, taking in and analysing all the information that he could, he might have missed it. He had tried to shake it off and focus on the conversations that were going on around, but since he'd was aware of it, he kept noticing, and it made him a little uncomfortable for the rest of the evening.

After the Captain had dismissed them he had excused himself and returned to his quarters, where he changed and then hit the gym. All the while he couldn't stop thinking about the Lieutenant's odd behaviour.

He looked at the dark-haired Ops Officer, with his sharp cheekbones, slim jaw, and delicately ridged nose, for a moment longer before Innis looked up and glanced at him. He flashed an easy smile. Tyler quickly turned back to his console. There was definitely something about him that made Tyler

uncomfortable, he just couldn't quite figure out what.

Chapter 5

Ward Room, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 2

Her plate was heaped with sausage, bacon, tomato, hash browns, scrambled egg and mushrooms; whilst on the side were toast, tea and orange juice. Leijten always liked a big breakfast, as it was often the only time she ate until the end of her shift, usually she was too busy for lunch—which was something that Mbeki always nagged her about. As she tucked in she was reading the latest report from th'Shaan, which displayed the full list of Starfleet ships that had been scavenged from: *Aramaki*, *Cunningham*, *Drake*, *Kumari*, *Majestic*, *Othello*, *Reykjavik*, *T'Sola*, *Tolq*.

A cold shiver ran down her spine. *Will we ever be able to move past the war?* she asked herself. Every time she forgot about what had happened over those two brutal years, something sprung up to remind her again. Now they had to deal with grave robbers. It annoyed the hell out of her, but for the meantime, their focus was on smugglers in the region. Starfleet would have to deal with the scavengers quickly and decisively, and Leijten could only hope that she was part of that assignment.

As she got to the end of the report, she chuckled softly. After his assessment of the technology and its origin, th'Shaan had included a request that—once they was no longer needed for evidence—the *Silverfin* receive the *Aramaki's* torpedo launchers and the ablative hull plating from the *Kumari* (he included a note that he wanted to reinforce the warp nacelles). She had to admire his gall at the blatant request. Leijten copied it into her official report that would be filed with Starfleet. As her mother had always said, 'if you don't ask you don't get'.

She was devouring her breakfast, moving on to the full manifest of weaponry and technology that Lieutenant Solvaar had compiled, when the ward room doors opened and Commander Amarin entered. The top of the Benzenite's bulbous head just made it through the doorway without touching.

"Good morning Captain," he stated in his deep voice.

"Morning Amarin," she replied as he stepped over to the replicator and ordered. He joined her at the table, sitting opposite. She eyed the tall mug he'd selected, with its unusual straw-like appendage on top. With the standard M-Class environment toxic to him, Amarin generally ate in his quarters, which

were adapted for his native conditions. On the times when he joined the rest of the officers in the ward room for meals, it was dispensed in uniquely designed cups with the same straw-like device, which in turn attached to his breather mask and allowed him to drink the specially blended cocktail. Leijten had once been curious about the mix and order one for herself. Though she never did taste it, the smell alone had almost made her gag.

He supped from his mug as she piled scrambled egg onto a corner of toast and munched on it. There was an easy silence in the room, neither of them feeling the need to fill it. Until he set down his mug and studied her for a moment.

Whilst taking a sip of juice she paused. “Problem?”

“You’ve been very quiet about our temps. Usually you ask for my opinion on new crewmembers by now.”

She thought about it for a while and realised he was right. Every time they received new personnel onboard, she would quiz him on his first impressions and general opinions. She set down her fork and knife and looked straight into his goggled eyes. “So Commander, what are your thoughts on Lieutenant Innis and Nurse Jenka?”

The muscles around his breather mask contorted slightly, the only sign she had that he was smiling.

“I would say that they both seem very capable and competent young officers. Innis seems very friendly and eager to please, he’s obviously trying to make a very good impression—after all once he finishes here I’m not sure where he’ll be going.”

“You think he’s trying to get assigned here permanently?”

“Perhaps. Either that or it’s his usual demeanour, though I’ve never met such an easy going and well-adjusted Bajoran before,” Amarin added. “As for Jenka, she seems a little standoffish, but I’m not surprised about that. She was supposed to be heading to Earth to earn her MD. This probably isn’t what she had in mind.”

“I’ve heard of a few ships in the fleet getting a nurse assigned as CMO, seeing as how doctors are needed everywhere right now. Looks like medical professionals are in short supply in the Border Service too. I’m just glad we got someone with some experience—you’ve read her record right?”

He nodded. “Impressive to say the least. On a hospital ship for the entire war, then requested assignment to Cardassia where she stayed for fifty-four weeks, the longest continuous billet on the books. She’s seen a lot in her career and come out stronger.”

Leijten knew of Starfleeters twice the nurse’s age that hadn’t recovered from the emotional and psychological wounds they had sustained during the conflict. She herself had been plagued by self-doubt following Ja-Inrosh’s death, which would have gotten worse if not for the intervention of one of her peers. She smiled at the memory and made a mental note to contact Joseph again soon.

They fell into the easy silence once again, and she finished off her breakfast and the reports on the *Xeros*. She looked at Amarin and noticed his brow was creased—though many others wouldn’t have noticed the subtle change in his face, she’d spent eight years getting to know all the little things about him, which helped them work so well together.

“Something else on your mind?”

“I was wondering if you’d heard from Doctor Mbeki yet?” he asked.

“I got a communiqué from him last night, saying they’d arrived late the day before and that Kolanis had been taken to Erzana for a full assessment. He said he’d keep me updated,” she told her XO. “All we can do is sit and wait to hear from them,” she continued, standing and taking her tray back to the replicator for recycling.

Amarin followed her, and as his mug dissolved he said, “Very true.”

“What do you say to getting an early start to smuggler hunting today?” she asked, trying to sound a little more upbeat to keep from dwelling on Kolanis.

“Sounds like a very good idea Captain.”

**Meeting Room 3, Erzana Centre for Psychological Analysis and Treatment
El’Nar City, Betazed**

Had he not been on Betazed for work, Tunde Mbeki would have taken the time to admire the stunning, expertly-made dark wooden table he sat at, the elegant but practical architecture of the building the table sat in, and the stunning vistas that were in every direction from the psychological centre. But with one of his shipmates, who he considered a good friend, lying in a treatment room screaming in terror, he wasn't in the mood for sightseeing.

Mbeki had spent the last full day since arriving on the *U.S.S. H'krii*, helping the doctors and scientists understand the events that led up to Kolanis Daezan's current condition—or rather as much as he understood about how the Operations Manager had wound up in such a state. He sat in a room with Doctor Ria Yuza, Erzana's senior psycho-analyst, Doctor Bentham Graxx, the centre's chief physician, Doctor Stovak, a specialist in emotional trauma, as well as Kolanis' parents Locallan and Alyana. On a large viewscreen that took up most of one wall, was Captain Sarah MacDougall, CO of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers assigned to study the *U.S.S. Cairo* (the location where Kolanis had been affected by whatever had pushed him to the brink of sanity).

"Thank you all for coming," began Doctor Yuza, who sat at the head of the table, her greying hair pulled back into a ponytail, her attire was simple and practical. "Mr and Mrs Daezan, I understand this is troubling for you, but I can assure you, we will not stop until we help your son." Kolanis' parents nodded appreciatively, both still looked worried and anxious. Mbeki had spoken with them the day before, wanting to tell them firsthand what he knew.

"Now that we're been fully briefed by Doctor Mbeki," she continued, with an air of great empathy and professionalism, "we can begin to assess Kolanis today, with a full round of physical exams in the morning and then psychological testing in the afternoon. Once we know what his current condition is, we can compare it to his previous medical records and look for discrepancies."

Mbeki had done all of that on the *Silverfin*, and had told Yuza such. But it never hurt to be thorough, and the Erzana Centre was bound to have more scans and tests they could run. He saw both Graxx and Stovak nodding in agreement and making notes on their datatables.

Doctor Yuza then turned to the viewscreen. "Captain MacDougal, I would request that we have full access to all of your findings."

MacDougal nodded. "*Of course Doctor. We will make everything available to you when we can. Including anything Starfleet Command deems classified. As a*

precaution, all of my team with telepathic or high ESP abilities have been denied access to the Cairo, just to be safe."

"A logical precaution," noted Doctor Stovak.

"What have you found out so far?" Yuza asked.

"Very little I'm afraid. Conducting a full investigation on a ship this size will take weeks, if not months. So far we have little to add to the Silverfin's initial assessment." Mbeki felt a quick surge of pride that they had preformed just as well as a full contingent of S.C.E. miracle workers. *"I can tell you that no one has messed with the ship's chronometer or databanks. All of the samples analysed so far have revealed no sign of weaponry, contaminants, or transporter activity. But we're only just beginning."*

"Captain, I have no doubt that you and your team will answer the mystery of that ship. We will keep you apprised of any relevant information we uncover here."

"Appreciated Doctor. Now if there's nothing more? I have a ship to get back to."

Yuza looked at Graxx and Stovak and both shook their heads slightly. "That will be all for now Captain MacDougal. Thank you for your time. Erzana Centre out." She turned back to those seated around the table, focusing on Locallan and Alaya. There was a moment of silence, in which Mbeki assumed she was communicating with them telepathically. He noticed them nodding, and then they rose from the table and left the meeting room. After they left she looked at him.

"Doctor Mbeki, we would appreciate whatever help you can provide." Then to all of them she said, "We will meet this time every morning to go over the previous day's findings and decide on our next course of action. Is everyone alright with that?" No one raised any objections. "Excellent. Doctor Graxx, I will let you get to work. Doctor Stovak and I will begin putting together the tests. Thank you," she said by means of ending the meeting and dismissing the doctors.

Graxx glanced at him. "Doctor, a moment please," he said as the other got up to leave. After they were gone, he came around to Mbeki's side of the table. "I would appreciate your assistance in assessing Mr Daezan. You've been his physician for three years now. Your presence may help him relax a little."

“I will do anything I can Doctor Graxx. However, the last time I revived him, he was so manic that he didn’t know where he was let alone who was with him.”

The Betazoid medical professional—who was only a few years older than Mbeki—offered him a reassuring smile. “I get the impression that you are someone who won’t give up on a patient, no matter what.” Mbeki nodded at the statement, as long as he had breath in his body, he would do all he could for the sick and injured. “Well we are cut from the same cloth Doctor.”

Mbeki gave him a faint smile. “Well then, why are we standing around wasting time?”

Graxx led him out the meeting room and towards the medical section, where they would begin their work to solve the mystery of Kolanis Daezan.

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 En route to Argaya System, Sector 16628

After a few fitful hours rest—Mellor couldn’t remember the last time he’d properly slept—he had returned to the bridge and let Grak hit her bunk. From the helm station he could see that things were getting worse. Ixaab had to pump coolant through the warp coils in both nacelles to keep them operational, but by doing that the coolant levels for the warp core were depleted, which meant that the core would be getting hotter—which increased the chances of a breach.

He looked at the chronometer. Twenty-eight hours to go. If only they had the time to drop out of warp for an hour or two, let the coils and core cool off, they could make it no problem. But they didn’t have any time to spare. They were pushing it close as it was. He couldn’t be late. He just couldn’t! If he didn’t show then he would lose Becky—or the “contract” as his employers referred to her. She was his world, her happiness and safety was more important to him than the *Mirage* itself. But he had failed to keep her safe.

When the Dominion War had ended, there were a lot of planets needing supplies and provisions, people displaced from their homes, numerous cargo ships and passenger transports destroyed. The opportunity to make some profit and do some good was too much to pass up, so he had take the *Mirage* and her crew out from the centre of the Federation to what had been the

frontlines. They started off doing Federation relief runs, filling their hold with medical supplies and food and heading to the outlying colonies that needed them. But then he had been approached by a Zakarran representative. The Zakarran were a non-allied species that had a small region of space close to Cardassian territory, during the war they had been all but ignored by the Dominion, but a few trigger happy Cardies had decimated their freighter fleet, and they were needing ships to work for them until they could be rebuilt. It had been Becky that had convinced him to take the job.

They had been at a Zakarran industrial facility, offloading a supply of durasteel and enjoying the recreational facilities the base provided. Becky had left them in one of the bars; she had to check with the dock master as to their next shipment. But she had never returned. Mellor had alerted security, but there was no sign of her on the station. Twenty-four hours after he had last seen her, the first message arrived, telling him that Becky was their prisoner and would be killed if he didn't do exactly what they said. He was forbidden from telling security, the Zakarran Cargo Council, and had only been allowed to tell Ixaab and Grak after they were a light-year away from the industrial facility. Since then, Mellor and his crew had been working like dogs to do what they demanded.

Mostly it involved going to a trading outpost, where they picked up various pieces of sealed cargo which were impervious to scans, and then delivering the cargo to a quiet system, where a ship would meet them and pick up what they had been carrying. Often it involved crossing into Federation, Zakarran, Cardassian or Lissepian territory. He knew what they were doing was illegal, but he couldn't take the chance of alerting the authorities or Becky's would be forfeit.

No, he would do what they said. They promised it would be over soon. When it was and she was safe, then they could forget about what had happened and return to their previous Rigel-Aldebaran-Deneva run. As soon as Becky was safe.

Please dear God let her be safe!

Chapter 6

Operations Centre, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 2

Though his shift had ended two hours earlier, Innis wanted to do a little independent study, and so he'd moved from the bridge down to the Ops Centre. The day had been an eventful one, they had seized a Boslic freighter trying to smuggle two-dozen Edo from their planet, no doubt heading for the slave auctions that still operated well outside of Federation jurisdiction. The ship was heading for Star Station Freedom, her crew locked up and the pre-warp Edo would be taken back to their planet. Innis could understand why they'd been taken as slaves, they were all in excellent physical condition, stunning attractive, naïve, very affectionate and dressed in little more than loincloths.

They had also stopped a transport ship and searched it, but found nothing more than a ship full of refugees displaced in the war, now trying to get home. They had helped with a small technical glitch to their navigational array and let them on their way. Two more suspicious acting freighters had been stopped, scanned, searched and cleared. Their last encounter had been with a personal runabout moving very oddly; it had turned out to be a Bolian man trying to teach his son how to pilot the small craft.

The *Hercules* had been just as busy; stopping six ships themselves, one of which had been impounded. None of the others were doing anything illegal—though one of the Captains was now threatening legal proceedings for the delays and claim that he was up to illegal activities. He chuckled to himself at the thought, glad that they had encountered relatively good-natured men and women, all of whom had—except for the Boslic—had given their support as the smugglers were eating into their profit margins, and the Border Service stopping their illegal activities in the region would be better for their legitimate business. On top of that, the *Hercules* had also gone to help a passenger shuttle that had suffered a catastrophic engine failure.

The Ops Centre was a relatively small room, considering the multiple functions it covered and its importance to the smooth running of the ship. It was situated on deck two, right above the computer core, and tied directly into the mainframe, giving it priority access to ship systems—secondary only to the bridge, and sharing the same level of access as the engine room. The room was trapezoid in shape and on two levels. On the lower level, which was

where the narrower end of the room was, were two doors opposite one. The portside entry led to the corridor, whilst starboard connected with a Jefferies tube. The bulkhead at the narrower end of the room was occupied solely by the main ODN connector between the computer core and the bridge, and allowed the Ops Centre direct access to the system to monitor and maintain the connection. The lower level also had a circular worktable with four seats. Then there was the single step to the upper level, on either side of which was a freestanding console with a stool for the operator. Behind them, on the wall opposite the ODN connector, were two large consoles, the monitors of which covered the bulkhead. Every console was multifunction and could be adapted to handle whatever the operator needed to work on, it allowed for more fluidity with the space and gave the operations specialists a quicker response time. One thing he did notice about the *Silverfin's* Ops Centre was faint odour he couldn't quite place.

Innis sat at one of the freestanding consoles, perched on the stool, whilst the rooms three other occupants carried on with their duties, unhindered by his presence in the room. Though he had read up on the staff he now oversaw, he hadn't had a chance to meet all of them, and he was terrible with names. No doubt he would get to know them just before he left.

In the meantime however, as they all but ignored him, he opened up the last service jacket on his list, that of Ensign Jose Tyler V. He was going through the senior staff files, in order to understand them better and know how to anticipate their actions. With Harriet it was easy, they had been in the same squad and spent four years getting to know each other—granted that was seven years ago, and they hadn't seen much of each other since graduation, but from what he'd seen of her, she was just the same old Harry.

The other officers had all been decorated for their duty to the Border Service and the Federation, and the ship's Chief of the Boat had by far the longest list of citations and commendations he had seen for a non-com. The last one he had to read about was the one he was most interested in. Tyler stuck out like a Klingon at a Vulcan temple. He was a spit-and-polish Starfleet officer on a Border Cutter, who obviously wasn't used to how they did things onboard. The ensign also had a lot to live up, if his family history was anything to go by.

At the Academy, the mission logs of the four previous Jose Tyler's—as well as many others in the long-serving family—were required reading, all of them having contributed hugely to Starfleet. The last one to bear the name—an uncle to the young man serving on the *Silverfin*—had been killed in action defending a colony from a battalion of Tholian dreadnaughts eighteen years

previously.

Ensign Tyler had captained both the Academy's wrestling and parrises squares teams in his junior and senior years, leading both to victory—which explained his impressive build—and as a sophomore was awarded a commendation for pulling seventeen people out from a collapsed building following the Breen attack, as well as several other merits and accolades over the course of his studies. He graduated at the top of his class and was immediately accepted into Advanced Tactical Training for a few months intensive study, which he had excelled at once again, and then surprisingly he'd been assigned to the *Silverfin*.

Though all the facts and figures his service jacket provided gave Innis a few insights into the Ensign (he was intelligent, courageous and selfless), they didn't tell him everything. Unfortunately, his psychological profile and medical records were restricted to medical personnel and even then were kept confidential. Though it wasn't in Innis' nature to take advantage of his position and snoop, but he did find the younger man to be someone of interest—and not just for his youthful face, big blue eyes or tight physique (though he did appreciate them as well). Innis could have just asked Harriet about the tactician, but he didn't want to appear too keen.

He'd have to take it easy and play it by ear. Get to know Tyler during his time onboard, and maybe pump Harriet for information in a roundabout manner—something she wouldn't pick up on.

At the grumbling of his stomach, Innis knew it was time to find a replicator and have dinner. He downloaded the personnel files of the Operations staff to a PADD, bid the Beta Shift staff a good night and headed for the wardroom.

Detention Block, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta* En route to Argaya System, Sector 16628

Drak Verr'ja, Mistress of the *Gzek'ta*, entered the detention block and sneered at the smell that assaulted her nasal openings. The air was thick with the stench of unwashed bodies, stale urine and rotting faecal matter. She never understood how the guards could withstand the smell that almost made her eyes water—but then they were mostly Underlings, so she didn't waste that much time dwelling on it.

She surveyed her immediate surroundings and spotted the one she wanted, Sub-Jhar Tahn'ok, the only Intermediate in the facility. Unlike the dull copper coloured Underlings, Tahn'ok's skin was a hue of light brass, his grey hair was shoulder length and tied back, and his sharp yellow eyes watched everything that happened around him. His right eyebrow was pierced with three silver studs that indicated his rank, whilst the tattoo around his eye socket showed him to be a Guardsman.

When he saw her, he thumped his chest with both hands and bowed at the waist—the proper sign of respect for Verr'ja, one of the Elite.

“Mistress, how may I serve you?” he asked, remaining bowed.

“The human female. I trust she had been looked after.”

“As per your orders Mistress. No harm has come to her.”

“The Underlings? Have they...occupied her?” she asked, feeling her skin crawl at the idea of the ships minions fornicating. Though they had their uses, the Underlings were still dominated by their base instincts—which was probably why they were so numerous. Had the Chanok not need the lesser race for hard labour, she would have taken great pleasure in sterilising them.

“One attempted to Mistress, I have since used him as an example for the others,” Tahn'ok informed her, still bowed she couldn't see his face, but knew he would be smiling—the Senior Guardsman always enjoyed putting down an Underling when he had an opportunity.

“Excellent Sub-Jahr. When we rendezvous with the human ship, we will return their female after we have secured our cargo. She can die with her companions.”

“A wise strategy Mistress,” he told her—not that she expected him to say anything else, unless he wanted her *t'aka* blade in his throat. “The female will be ready whenever you command.”

“See that she is,” she stated, before turning on her heel and leaving the detention block and its putrid stench behind. She was pleased with Tahn'ok's initiative in dealing with the Underling, and that he was willing to lose one of his guards to comply with her commands. He was no doubt angling for promotion, and his impressive work, first in securing the human and then in maintaining her onboard the *Gzek'ta* would stand him in good stead. Being

only a Sub-Jhar, he knew better than to suggest he made himself available to her—seeing as she was an Elite, anyone less than a Sub-Kott offering such would have been gutted alive for the insult.

Verr'ja headed back towards the Tactical Centre, there was much to do before they arrived at the Argaya System, and she wanted to ensure that they were ready to obliterate the human craft. She didn't want to miss a moment of it.

Chapter 7

Bridge, *S.S. Mirage* NTL-439

Approaching the Argaya System, Sector 16628

Mellor had eased the *Mirage* out of warp as she approached the Argaya System, and the old transport almost sighed with relief as she dropped down to impulse. Immediately Ixaab had taken the entire warp drive assembly offline to begin repairing the many systems that had worn down to the point just before breaking, whilst the super-heated plasma was vented from the nacelles and the warp coils had a chance to cool down. The young Bolian had already said they would have to put in at a station for a full refit of the warp coils. A month ago, Mellor would have thought about the expense of such work, but now all he could think about was Becky.

They were almost at the outer boundaries of the system when he asked Grak to scan ahead of them. The Tellarite ran what sensors they had ahead of them, along the projected flight path to the second planet that he had already plotted. She made a few disparaging noises and cussed in her native tongue more times that he usually likes to hear.

“Our course is littered with debris, over seventy percent of which is large enough to rupture the hull and kill us all. Reading numerous gravitational currents around some of the larger chunks of rock that will make navigation even more difficult. As well as pockets of radiation caused by uranium and dilithium in the debris field that will corrupt all communications. We should try to find another way through.”

“We don’t have the time Tilg, or I would! We can’t be late. You know what’ll happen to Becky if we’re late!” he exclaimed, all the stress and fatigue threatening to break what was left of his frayed psyche. “Any sign of the ship?” he asked before she could protest further.

“Nothing as far as I can see—but scanner range isn’t great.”

“Raise the deflectors and keep an eye on any hull-breeching chunks that come close to us.” He began powering up the impulse engines, which would need five minutes to warm up, and triple-checked their heading. The last thing he wanted was to get lost in the system’s massive debris field. They were so close.

An alarm suddenly blared on Grak’s console. Mellor leapt at the sound of the

proximity alert. They weren't in the debris field yet, so it couldn't be a chunk of rock. Maybe the aliens had opted to make the switch outside the system and save both their ships from the hazards the Argaya System presented. He shot a look at the Tellarite beside him.

"A ship is approaching," she stated. For a moment he thought it was them. But it was fleeting, as she looked back at him, the anxiety and distress clear on the porcine face. "It's Starfleet!"

**Bridge, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Patrol of Sector 16628, Day 3**

Leijten was reading over the latest reports from the *Hercules*, glad to see that her young friend was having a ball on their current assignment. The *Silverfin* had only found one ship acting strangely since the end of Alpha Shift the previous day—it looked like word was out about the searches and the more organised smugglers in the sector were falling back on contingency plans. She was considering manning the Star Stallions with boarding teams and sending them out to expand their sensor range, when there was a low chirp from Ops.

She glanced over her shoulder at the console (not realising that she didn't immediately think of Captain Ja-Inrosh's and Lieutenant Murphy's bodies) as Lieutenant Innis checked the alert. He tapped a few commands into the panel and took in the results. She was pleasantly surprised at the efficient manner in which he worked.

Whatever ship gets him after he's finished here will be lucky to have him, she decided, and made a mental note to see if she could call in a few favours either in the Border Service or the regular Fleet, and find him a posting that would benefit from his expertise.

The Bajoran looked down at her. "I've got a ship on sensors, just outside the Argaya System. Sensors are showing she's venting drive plasma and there's a lot of wear to her engines. Most of the readings I'm getting from her are in violation of Federation Shipping Codes."

"What kind of ship?"

He looked back at the readout for a second. "A small commercial transport, J-Class."

“Seriously?” asked Commander Amarin from where he sat covering at the Engineering console. “I didn’t think they existed except in museums or on intra-planetary runs. What’s one doing all the way out here?”

“Unknown Commander,” stated Innis. “The radiation from her nacelles is making it difficult to read her transponder signal. They must have been pushing their maximum warp for days to wind up like that!”

Leijten turned back to the Conn. “Lieutenant, have you got the co-ordinates?”

“Yes sir. Bearing one-six-six-mark-three. We could be there in two minutes at warp five,” Llewellyn-Smyth stated calmly.

“Punch it Lieutenant,” she ordered the Conn Officer and then looked at Amarin. “Ready tractor beams, they may be in distress, or about to do something that could land them in a penal colony for a few years.”

“Powering tractor emitters,” he replied as the *Silverfin* altered heading, her speed remaining at the warp restriction placed on all Starfleet ships.

Leijten, like every good Border Dog, knew all the secret nooks and crannies in the region she routinely patrolled. It helped when it came to hunting down criminal elements that operated in the region. The Argaya System was one of those places. Its dense debris field, gravitational eddies and radiation fields made it an ideal place for underhanded deals to be struck and illegal cargo to be exchanged—if those involved were crazy enough to risk being torn to pieces a chunks of rock the size of Australia. Granted there were occasionally survey teams and test pilots that entered (to either further their studies or push their abilities to the max) but the Border Service was always informed of such activities—as more often than not they would need to be rescued. But they had received no such information, so she had to assume they were either in trouble or up to no good, and she was leaning towards the latter.

“Lieutenant Innis, try hailing them. See if they need any help.”

“Aye sir,” he replied promptly and spoke into the communications system, his tone professional but curious as he asked them to identify themselves and if they were in distress. He waited for a few moments, listening for a reply, but then looked back at her and shook his head. “No response. Though that close to Argaya, their comm system could be affected by any of the various hazards.”

She looked back at the viewscreen and the ship that they were fast approaching. If the ship was in distress they would have found any way to call for help, even using the navigational lights to send them a message using Morse code. She was leaning more and more towards something darker.

“Keep trying them Lieutenant.”

The Bajoran confirmed her order, and she focused her attention on the viewscreen as the bridge crew went about their duties. She had found over the years that they were getting good at anticipating her orders, a knack that had saved their skin on more than one occasion since the end of the war. Even when someone new came onboard, it didn’t take long for them to become fully integrated—there were of course a few who took longer than other, Ensign Tyler being one of them, but they all got there in the end and he would be no different. She glanced over at the youngster, who was readying their shields and put the ordnance crew on alert.

When Llewellyn-Smyth announced, “Approaching the transport Captain,” Leijten leaned forward in her seat.

“Drop us out of warp. Take us in at full impulse and hold position at fifty thousand kilometres. Ensign Tyler, tactical assessment.”

“The J-Class transport is unarmed, with only minimal shielding. Of the half dozen that remain in service, none of them have registered any modifications to include even long-yield phasers. Of those ships, there is one that is out with Federation space; the *S.S. Mirage*.”

“I’ve managed to verify her transponder signal sir. Confirmed as the *Mirage*,” Innis added. “Still no response to hails.”

“Tyler, shields up—just in case. Commander, ready a boarding team. Innis, open a channel,” she ordered, standing and moving forward.

“Channel open.”

“*Mirage*, this is the Border Cutter *Silverfin*. Please identify your business in this region,” she instructed, her tone hard, letting them know that she wasn’t one to be messed with. But there was no answer from the small transport. They were definitely up to something illegal, and were probably panicking about what to do. She decided to play it tougher. “*Mirage*, I order you to

power down your engines and drop your shields. Any refusal to comply will lead to your vessel being seized and searched under Article Seventeen of the Federation Shipping Codes, as well as Border Service Regulation Twenty-Seven-C.”

Again she was answered by silence.

“What are they doing?”

“Their shields are still up, one Rat-Trap at twenty percent would be enough to disable them sir,” stated Tyler.

“Their engines are still powering up. Estimate full impulse power available in two minutes,” Llewellyn-Smyth added.

“Still no answer to hails.”

“Load a Rat-Trap Mr Tyler. Commander, prepare to engage tractor beam.” Leijten stepped down to the Conn station. “Move us in closer.” The officers complied and executed their orders. She noticed on Llewellyn-Smyth’s display the location of the *Mirage* and the rapidly closing distance between the two.

As the *Silverfin* closed in, she stopped herself before asking Daezan what he sensed from the transport crew. During his time onboard, she had come to rely on his abilities to give them an edge, but with him off the ship she didn’t have that insight anymore. She would have to rely on the ship’s sensors and her own instincts, both of which were telling her that the crew were panicked and would foolishly try to flee. The *Silverfin* would pursue, her powerful impulse engines and tractor beams allowing her to plough through the debris field, dodging the largest chunks and clearing the smaller ones, until they caught up with the renegade transport.

When they were ten thousand kilometres away, an alarm sounded from both Tactical and Ops, just as on the viewscreen she saw an amber pulse emerge from the small transport.

“Incoming!” Tyler yelled.

Leijten began to call for maximum power to shields, but before she had finished the first syllable the pulse hit them. She had expected it to be some kind of crude phaser, and gripped the side of Llewellyn-Smyth’s console and

braced for the hit. But aside from the lights flickering slightly, there was no impact or damage.

“Where are they?” she asked, looking back at Innis.

The Bajoran was frantically looking over his readouts and monitors. “I—I don’t know! Sensors are down!”

“What?” she asked, moving to the barrier that separated her chair from the upper level and studying the newest addition to the bridge, as he continued to work.

“Navigation systems are offline!” added Llewellyn-Smyth at the Conn, her usually calm slipping a little.

“I’ve lost targeting systems. Communications are out as well,” Tyler stated, sounding alarmed at their sudden tactical disadvantage.

“All stop! Amarin, can you still get them in the tractor beam?”

“Negative,” he replied from the Engineering station. “I’d say they hit us with a focused thoron pulse, it’s the only thing I can think of that would knock out sensors and communications like this.”

She slammed her clenched fist on the railing, uttering a particularly harsh Orion curse under her breath. Taking a second to kick herself she looked at her XO. “Prep a Stallion and get after them! Secure the ship and arrest the crew for their attack on a Border Service cutter!”

The towering Benzenite was out of his seat and heading for the turbolift as he replied, “Aye sir.” He looked across the bridge. “Harriet, Tyler. Get your cover up here then meet me in the shuttlebay on the double!”

Both officers replied and began tapping out a message to their relief using the ship’s internal text messaging system. Leijten moved up to Ops, where Innis continued to work fervidly on the systems they had lost thanks to the *Mirage*. She began to help out the young man, directing repair crews to where they needed to be using only the text system—realising just how much she took the intercom for granted.

As Llewellyn-Smyth and Tyler’s relief staff arrived on the bridge and the two officers departed, she set a hand on Innis’ tense shoulder and gave him a

reassuring smile. “Don’t beat yourself up about this Lieutenant. Focus on getting the old girl back on her feet.”

“Aye sir,” he replied with conviction, turning his attention back to his console.

Shuttlebay, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Pursuit of *S.S. Mirage*, Argaya System

En route to the shuttlebay, Amarin had passed two security guards. He’d ordered one to get Syva and her team together and the other one to have Lieutenant Solvaar report for the mission—he wanted to make sure that they followed the proper procedure for the seizure of the *Mirage* and whatever illegal goods she was carrying.

Entering the bay he’d found Petty Officer ch’Tholin stepping out of Star Stallion 2. The Shuttle Control Specialist said the craft was ready for departure. As Amarin stepped into the large shuttle to begin pre-flight, ch’Tholin headed to the control room. The XO had run through their propulsion systems when Master Chief Syva arrived with her team—Mycroft, Drim and Blue. She directed the three crewmen to the midship compartment to secure their equipment and strap themselves in, as she stepped into the cockpit.

“Master Chief,” he said by way of greeting, not looking up as he checked life-support, transporters, sensors and communications—relieved to see that the thoron pulse hadn’t affected the Stallion.

“Commander,” she replied and settled into the co-pilot seat and began checking the tactical systems with practiced ease.

Amarin liked working with the Vulcan Chief of the Boat. Her logical approach to situations had saved every member of the crew alive at least once. On top of that she was extremely focused and determined, very little got by her.

During his first month onboard, he had first rigged a still in an auxiliary engineering compartment—a place he thought no one would find it. Late one night, when he went in to check on it, he’d found a note from her attached to the main body of the still, advising him that without more piping and a less heat, the end product would pale in comparison to the rig down in the armoury. He had done as she instructed and wound up with a good batch—

though nowhere near as good as what they produced in the armoury.

He smiled at the memory. Despite months of trying, he never had been able to find their still and had discontinued his own after the only batch it created was finished.

As he began checking the auxiliary systems, Solvaar arrived and wordlessly went and joined the security guards. They just finished the systems checks when Llewellyn-Smyth and Tyler arrived. Immediately, Syva surrendered her seat to the Tactical Officer and headed through to ensure that her people were ready for departure—despite her great wealth of experience, she always showed the junior officers onboard the respect their rank deserved, whilst they almost always showed her the respect her experience and skills deserved (the last time an Ensign had lorded his rank over the Vulcan non-com, he had quickly found himself reassigned to remote sensor relay station for a year-long posting, thanks to Captain Ja-Inrosh's clout). Amarin moved out of the pilot's seat for Harriet, and took the engineering console behind her. Though he was a fully certified pilot, he'd asked for Llewellyn-Smyth for a reason; he had yet to see someone who could out-manoeuvre her. She quickly powered up the impulse engines.

He tapped out a message to ch'Tholin, telling him they were ready to depart. A few moments later the doors opened. With a gentle touch, Harriet lifted them up off the deck, through the atmospheric forcefield and into open space. Her long, slim fingers danced across the control panel and the Stallion quickly headed towards the Argaya System.

"I have their impulse wake," said Tyler. "Heading one-one-eight-mark-zero-seven-six. Radiation fields are masking them from our sensors at present though."

"After them Lieutenant. I'll try to boost power to the sensors. Shields up, and keep an eye out for them Mr Tyler," he ordered and set about his own task, as the Stallion darted into the debris-filled system. The hunt was on.

Chapter 8

Deflector Control, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470 Undergoing Repairs, Edge of the Argaya System

Elak th'Shaan was furious. The *Silverfin* was blind following the attack from the *Mirage*. He had called in most of the off-duty crew in order to help with repairs, all of them eager to get back underway and catch the *chiitas* that had all-but crippled them. All except for Ensign Feeznar. The Girinite was suppose to have been stripping the ODN pathways and replacing the burnt out wiring with fresh, but it had taken him the better part of thirty minutes to barely start a job that should have been almost finished. He'd ordered the Ensign to monitor the power flow in engineering, something the computer did automatically and altered the crew if there were any problems, and told the diminutive officer that he wanted a full analysis run of their energy consumption since the *Mirage* escaped. It was a pointless exercise that th'Shaan could have simply asked the computer for at any time, but he needed the ensign out of his hair.

He would deal with the lazy Feeznar after they were back on their feet, and once the *Mirage* was safely snared in their tractor beams and the crew in the brig, he would submit a request to have the junior officer transferred off the boat—if not thrown out of Starfleet. The ensign's incompetence had left him in a foul mood, as now he had to reassign a highly-capable specialist from a more tricky assignment to do the simple task Feeznar had originally been assigned to do, thus doubling the workload of someone else on his staff.

All of his people could see his stern expression and tightly coiled antennae and knew to work quickly and effectively, and not to bug him with small details. With the navigational systems being one of the worst affected by the thoron pulse, he had opted to see to it personally, and taken Crewman Claudia Blackwolf with him. The youthful Cheyenne woman was a hard worker and was more than capable of doing the work of three people at once. She had come onboard just after the war, like a gift from the gods. Whenever he could, he made sure that she was on his repair teams, as she sometimes spotted things that he missed and sorted them before he even realised his oversight—not that that happened often.

She also had an infectious sense of humour—not that he would allow himself to be cheered up until the *Silverfin* was fully operational and Feeznar was transferred out. All th'Shaan had wanted from his career was his own engine room—rank and awards and the prospect of the 'big chair' held little interest

for him. Ever since his first day at the Academy he wanted to be in charge of engineering, with a crew he could be proud of, on a ship that would offer him challenges that would push his abilities and ingenuity to the limit. At twenty-six, he had gotten just what he wanted. The *Silverfin* kept him challenged, the work they did was rewarding and often called for innovative solutions, whilst his superiors left him to his own devices most of the time (Commander Amarin still dropped in at least once a week, but th'Shaan liked and respected the Benzenite, and didn't grudge him the visits), and up until four months ago, th'Shaan would have put his life and the lives of every single member of the crew into the hands of his staff, secure in the knowledge they would do everything in their power to keep all those aboard safe. But then Feeznar arrived.

It wasn't just that he was lazy, but he rubbed all the non-coms and crewmen up the wrong way, and questioned the other two officers on the engineering staff about their techniques and approaches to problems—not that he offered any alternative solutions. Had he not been an honourable sort, he would have tried to pass Feeznar off to Operations or Flight Control, but he couldn't inflict the ensign on any of his shipmates. Another ship somewhere in the fleet, or a backwater monitoring station, no problem, but not to people he considered friends.

“Eh Lieutenant?” Blackwolf said carefully. He looked up at her. She pointed at the isolinear circuit box he was working on, checking if any of the chips were fused or overloaded. He followed her gesture and realised that he had taken out two ruined chips, scanned them and then replaced them in the circuit housing—never noticing their condition.

“By the promiscuous inbred son of the Third Deity!” he roared (remembered one of the curses he'd once heard a crusty old Tellarite engineer utter several years ago), his voice echoing through deflector control as he threw the quantum resonator onto the deck. Blackwolf recoiled at his sudden outburst—something very few people had seen onboard the *Silverfin*, or anywhere else for that matter.

Taking a moment, and several deep breathes, he calmed himself again. He looked at the engineer who stood opposite him, who looked more than a little uncomfortable.

“Claudia, I apologise. My head isn't in the game right now,” he removed the two useless isolinear chips, fished two more out of his kit, formatted them and slotted them into place. “Thanks for catching that. Could have made

things a lot worse.”

“That’s why I’m here Lieutenant, to make you look good,” she replied, her face softening, the hint of a sly smile tugging at her corners.

Despite his anger at Feeznar and now himself, he chuckled softly. “Well you just keep doing that, and I’ll make sure you have two extra days liberty when we get back to Freedom.”

She snapped off an old-fashioned salute. “Aye-aye sir.” And then quickly she got back to work.

Refocusing his attention on the job at hand, he pushed Ensign Feeznar to the back of his mind and concentrated on the repairs. They didn’t have time for stupid mistakes.

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 Argaya System

“What have we done?” Grak asked for the hundredth time since their escape from the Border Service.

It was understandable, as Mellor wasn’t overly sure what had happened himself—and he’d been the one that had fired the thoron pulse. It had all happened so fast, it was almost like a dream. From the time the *Silverfin* had first hailed them to his hitting the particle emitter control (their one and only defence) he had been filled with nothing but terror and panic. He had reacted without thought of the repercussions. But now there were starting to sink in. The *Silverfin* would be repaired, and then they would hunt them down mercilessly.

But it didn’t matter. He had to get Becky back. Once she was safe, they could do whatever they wanted to him.

Mellor never noticed that his co-pilot was looking at him, worried about his mental state—or the apparent lack thereof. Her concern was short-lived as she had to turn her full focus onto the sensors and keep an eye out for and chunks of rock that would wind up smashing them to smithereens.

From the time they arrived at the edge of the system, to the time they had to

meet their employers, the *Mirage* had an hour and seventeen minutes to traverse the densely cluttered star system to get to the moon of the second planet. It was going to be tough, and depending on how good the Border Cutters engineers were in repairing the overloaded circuit caused by the thoron pulse, it would get tougher when the Dogs moved in to apprehend them. Mellor pushed the thoughts to the side. They would get to the rendezvous point, exchange the mystery container in their hold for Becky, and then be on their way back out of the system. Straightforward and simple.

With manic eyes, he watched over the navigation system, ready to pitch, roll or sprint out of the way of any rock that would fatal. His heart hammered against his chest and his scrawny body—he'd barely eaten since Becky had vanished—trembled.

They were so close now. He'd get her back and everything would be better. She'd make everything better, back to the way it had been, when he'd been happy.

Chapter 9

Star Stallion 2 Argaya System

Though she loved her position at the Conn, Llewellyn-Smyth enjoyed piloting the Stallions almost as much. The ships weren't pretty and being slightly smaller than a Danube-Class runabout they weren't the smallest shuttles available in the fleet, but they were rugged—just like the *Silverfin*—you could fly them through an ion storm and come out in one piece, and their combination of armament and cargo capacity made them ideally suited for their duties in the Border Service.

Since they were pursuing the transport through the debris filled system, she had opted for manual steering controls—finding that using the joysticks made the ship far more responsive than the standard LCARS panel. Amarin hadn't commented on her choice, focusing on monitoring and maintaining the shuttles systems, but Ensign Tyler had looked at her in bewilderment, though he remained quiet. He did become overzealous in reporting sensor readings and navigational hazards, even though she had a sensor screen open before her for the exact same purpose.

He's probably not used to a sentient being doing all the actual flying, she thought to herself. The flight controls of most vessels were regulated and processed by the ship's computer, it wasn't often that she got to do any real flying—except when the situation called for more delicacy or finesse than the computer could handle—and going through the Argaya System needed real-time reflexes and instinct at the stick.

Her sensor screen highlighted a chunk of rock, roughly the size of Ireland, tumbling towards them. Before Tyler could tell her, she nudged the controls and the Stallion flew underneath the meteoroid, missing it by a good thirty meters.

A control chirped on the Tactical Officer's console. She glanced at her own readouts and noticed what was ahead of them.

"Commander," the Ensign spoke up. "I've got the *Mirage*, dead ahead. Distance point-six AUs."

The Benzenite stood up and leaned between their chairs, taking a closer look

at the sensor display. “By the looks of this, they seem to be heading pretty much straight for the second planet,” he mused aloud. Llewellyn-Smyth had already checked their heading and done a few quick mental calculations to work out a few probable destinations, and Argaya II seemed them mostly likely. “Harriet, what would be our best approach vector?”

She looked at the sensor display in front of her, the radiation and dust would obscure the Stallion from the transports limited sensors—their own had been designed for finding ships in terrible conditions. Their course was more or less straight, ducking and diving to miss the largest pieces of rock, but they were only at one-third impulse. To get the advantage on the transport and their thoron pulse, they would need to come at them from the side. Ahead of them was a small radiation field that would obscure them from the *Mirage’s* sensors before they pounced.

Llewellyn-Smyth highlighted her plan to the First Officer, who heard her out and then looked at Tyler. “Will the radiation cause us problems?”

The young officer checked his readings and shook his head. “Maybe a little shield degradation, but nothing severe. So long as we’re not inside for too long.”

Amorin nodded his large oddly-shaped head, then turned his attention back to her. “Can you get us ahead of them?”

“If we go off their course and increase to full impulse, I can do it sir.”

“I don’t doubt it Lieutenant.” He gave the plan a moments thought then nodded. “Do it. Ensign, I want to collapse their shields only so we can beam over—the last thing we need is to knock out their engines and navigation systems in here.”

“Aye sir. I’ll rig the micro-Rat-Traps for a ten percent discharge. That should be enough to disrupt their shields.”

Amorin nodded again and took his seat. Towards the midship compartment, where the rest of the team were strapped in, he called, “Hang on tightly back there. This could get bumpy.”

When he was seated again, Llewellyn-Smyth decreased the inertial dampers (to give her more control), flexed her grip on the joysticks and tapped the impulse throttle panel. The Stallion sped up, and she moved them to

starboard. Her course was an arch shape, through some particularly dense patches, but she was cool and kept her movements slight and subtle.

As she Stallion cut through the debris field, she relied on her eyes and wits, knowing that Tyler would keep her covered on the sensors. Since their little chat back at Star Station Freedom, they had begun to work more smoothly, as they relaxed and got to know a little more about each other. It would take a little longer for them to become a solid team, but for now their skills proved to complement each other well.

With a tip of her hand or a flick of her wrist, the Stallion responded immediately, gliding port or starboard, rising and dipping around objects, her speed remaining constant. Had it not been as important a situation, Llewellyn-Smyth would have been smiling—exhilarated by the challenge and the danger. She shook the thought from her head as she dodged to port, then quickly pulled back on the controls, climbing over another meteoroid that was lurking behind the first piece of planetary debris.

There weren't many places in the whole of Starfleet that she could really put her skills and abilities to the test, like what the Border Service offered—which was why she had requested an assignment to an Albacore-Class ship when she'd graduated. Since then, she had never regretted her choice. She had learned a lot under Captain Ja-Inrosh, and even more under Captain Leijten. Amarin was a tough but fair XO, who gave just enough slack at the reins to let the crew flourish—just as he was now, letting her choose her course and manoeuvres. She had made some close friends aboard the *Silverfin*, though some (like Alec Murphy) were now dead, others (like Ling-Na) had left for other opportunities in the fleet, and then there was Kolanis, and the question of whether or not he would ever return.

A proximity alert warned her of a chunk of mountain, that came spinning out of nowhere towards them. She slammed the Stallion hard to port and yanked back on the joysticks, trying to pull them over the shuttle-killer piece of rock. They just made it, with less than four meters to spare, before she pitched them back down to miss a jagged outcropping that would have torn through the Stallions reinforced hull. Pushing the impulse engines for every last milligram of strength they had left.

Evading the surprise mountain, she let out a long slow breath, and saw out the corner of her eye that Tyler was a shade paler than before, and his hands clamped onto the console like a vice.

“Sorry about that,” she quipped.

From behind she heard a soft chuckle from Amarin. “A little warning next time would be nice Lieutenant.”

“I’ll try sir.”

Continuing onwards, their surprise encounter hadn’t slowed them down by too much, and they reached the radiation field well ahead of the *Mirage*. Amarin unbuckled again and stepped closer to them as they entered the field, which was indistinguishable from normal space.

“Shields only Mr Tyler. Once they’re down, lock on a tractor beam and transport us over in three teams. One to the bridge, one to the engine room and the last to the cargo hold.”

“Aye Commander,” the Tactical Officer promptly replied.

Amarin stepped out of the cockpit, to join the others in the midship compartment and suit up for boarding the *Mirage* as Llewellyn-Smyth plotted an attack pattern on the small transport ship. On the sensor display in front of her, she saw the ship getting closer.

She looked at Tyler. “Manoeuvre gamma-six Ensign.”

“Confirmed Lieutenant.”

When the *Mirage* was in striking distance, she slapped the impulse control again. The Stallion pounced head on, barrelling towards the J-Class ship. Before they had time to veer off, Tyler launched a micro-torpedo. It detonated just in front of the ship and flashed. He checked the sensors and she saw him smile as he tapped tractor beam controls and snared the *Mirage*.

“Tyler to boarding teams, prepare for transport,” he said into the intercom, as she brought the Stallion in closer to the renegade ship. After a moment, he called, “Energising.”

As she reversed thrust, to slow both ships down, she crossed her fingers for the boarding teams.

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439
Seized by Star Stallion 2, Argaya System

No matter what Jeffery Mellor did, he couldn't get the shields back up or break away from the tractor beam that held them fast. He scrutinised the large ugly shuttle through the forward viewport, finding it hard to believe that such a ship was both used by Starfleet and that it had overpowered them so easily.

He looked at Grak. "Ready the thoron pulse!" he barked, not willing to go down without a fight.

"It's out."

"What? How?"

"It runs off warp power, and with the core offline, we lost the particle emitter too," she told him, her tone suggesting that he knew that as well as she did. "It only worked the first time because there was still a residual charge left in the power grid."

Before he could reply, he heard the telltale whine of a transporter. Mellor looked over his shoulder and saw two pillars materialise just in front of the bridge's only entrance, one tall and lean, and the other short and stocky. On the bulkhead just to the right of the door was an equipment locker, in which held scanners, flashlights, a medkit, and a phaser. But the tall invader blocked it from him.

"Reading two more boarding teams," announced Grak, "in engineering and the hold."

When the two Starfleeters materialised he was faced with a towering Benzenite, his blue face obscured behind a breather mask and goggles, the breathing tubes from his chin to his chest requiring a special uniform to accommodate them, but Mellor clearly saw the red shirt and commander pips; the other was a pillbug-like Nasat, also blue in colour, her feelers quivering. Both held stocky phaser rifles aimed right at Mellor and Grak.

All he could do was stare at the two invaders; his chest tight, his stomach churning, a sense of dread filling his soul, as his already worn out mind tried to process what their presence meant for Becky.

"I'm Commander Amarin of the Border Cutter *Silverfin*," the Benzentine said, his voice deep and gravelly. "You and your crew are under arrest, on charges of ignoring an order to submit to a full inspection, attacking a Border Service vessel, evading capture, and violation of Federation Shipping Codes regarding engine emissions. You will stand down and return to the *Silverfin* with us immediately."

It was at that moment, the tightly wound Jeffery Mellor snapped. He wailed and sunk to the floor, sobs racking his body as the Nasat trained her rifle squarely on his chest. As he wept, he muttered to quietly, "You've killed her. Becky. I'm sorry. You've killed her." His mind shut off as he cried and rocked gently, repeating his mournful mantra.

Bridge, S.S. Mirage NTL-439 Argaya System

Amarin looked down at the frail looking human who was rocking back and forth, crying and muttering to himself. He had expected the crew to try and fight back or argue their way out of the situation. Seeing someone break down so completely hadn't been a possibility in his mind. Something very odd was going on onboard the *Mirage*.

He looked at the other crewmember on the bridge, a portly Tellarite woman of about fifty Earth years, roughly the same age as the other pilot. She looked down at the human with such concern and sympathy and distress, Amarin feared she would react the same way.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

The Tellarite ignored him and crouched down to her shipmate. Crewman K8 Blue shifted her phaser carbine towards her, but Amarin gestured for her to stand down. These people were no threat to them.

"Captain?" the Tellarite said softly. "Captain Mellor? Jeff, can you hear me?" Her enquiries received no response other than the rock, the tears and the muttering of before.

He tapped him combadge. "Amarin to Syva. Status?"

"The engine room is secure. Only one individual present, Ixaab Zoln."

“Master Chief, can you get up to the bridge please.”

“On my way Commander,” she replied promptly.

Amorin and Blue waited for the Vulcan COB to arrive, watching the Tellarite trying to reach her Captain who remained oblivious to her efforts and to his surroundings. He was able to make out some of what he was saying; referring to someone called ‘Becky’ and the belief that she was now dead.

Behind him the doors parted and Syva stepped into the bridge. She took in the small room and the four occupants, her eyebrow rising when she saw the only human in the room then looked up at Amorin. She pulled the medical tricorder from the kit she had secure at her lower back—her emergency medical training being far greater than anyone else on the team.

She stooped down to the man and began to run the device over him. As she worked, he looked down at the Tellarite woman again.

“Who are you and what’s going on here?” he asked, softer than before.

The Tellarite stood up again slowly, though her full height barely reached Amorin’s chest. “My name is Tillg jans Grak.” She gestured to the man on the deck. “That is Captain Jeffery Mellor. We...we are trying to save Rebecca Mellor. His daughter.”

Detention Block, Chanok Striker Gzek’ta Approaching the Argaya System

Rebecca (Becky to her father, despite the fact she hated it) Mellor sat shivering in her cell. The cold metal had long since numbed her buttocks and thighs, even through her trousers—the same pair she’d had on the day she’d been kidnapped, which felt like a lifetime ago. The cellblock she was in reeked, even after all the weeks she’d spent in her cage she hadn’t gotten used to the stench. What was worse than the smell was the way the guards—all the dull copper-coloured ones anyway—eyed up her lithe body. Though she didn’t know their species, she knew men, and the looks they gave. Every time one of them paused at the bars and looked in on her, she wanted to cry, the way they abused her with their eyes.

It was a few days after she arrived, one had entered her cell and advanced on her, the look in his eyes was feral. She knew what he would do, and that if she struggled he would likely kill her with his bare hands. As he had stood in front of her, leering at her and licking his lips, he reached out to touch her face. When his hand was just a few centimetres from her crawling skin, a short, jagged blade tore through his throat, spraying dark blue blood all over her.

The guards' body fell to the side, and a taller alien stood in his place. His skin was a light brass colour, his eyes blazed yellow and his long grey hair was tied back. Around his right eye was tattooed and there were three silver studs in the same eyebrow, that along with his smarter appearance told her he was someone of importance onboard. She had expected him to continue what the guard had started. But instead, he had retrieved the body and dragged it out of her cell, closing and locking the door behind him. For the following couple of weeks, the guards had been terrified to look in on her, but that had now passed and she feared another would try to force himself on her again.

Hours ago, her saviour had returned and told her that her father was about to finish his last job for them. After which she would be returned to the *Mirage*. Though she wanted to believe the alien officer, she knew that he could be playing with her head, trying to break her by promising her freedom, only then to snatch it away from her. She didn't even now know if her father, Grak and Ixaab were still alive or not. At the thought of Ixaab her heart ached.

Is he/they still alive? Is he/they free, or just down the hall? What's he/they going through? she asked herself. As always, she didn't have any answers. Everyday she asked herself the same questions and got the same answers. She would wonder how her father was holding up, knowing that after the loss of her mother two years ago, he had been getting more wary and tired. She had talked him into working for the Zakarrans, seeing it as a good way to make enough for him to retire somewhere comfortable and relax.

Part of her hoped that the alien meant what he said, that she was going free, so that she could give her father the retirement he so rightly deserved. But she knew not to get her hopes up. He could already be dead, or she might soon be.

Chapter 10

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 Seized by Star Stallion 2, Argaya System

Amorin had listened to Grak as she told him about what had taken the old J-Class transport away from the core planets, the prosperity they had first had, then the abduction of Rebecca Mellor and the demands placed on them, and the effect it had had on Captain Mellor. Once she was finished, Syva rose and closed her tricorder, having run a series of scans on the unresponsive human.

“Commander, using an average human male of the same approximate age as Captain Mellor, I would surmise that he is suffering from borderline malnutrition, exhaustion, weakening of the cardiopulmonary system, as well as a neurochemical imbalance that would suggest intense depression, stress and anxiety.” She looked at the Tellarite. “Would this be an accurate description of his behaviour over the last few weeks?”

Grak nodded. “We’ve all taken it hard. But the Captain was the worst. Even Ixaab had to hold himself back for Jeff’s benefit.”

“Are Ixaab and Rebecca close?” Amorin asked.

“They’re married. A month before Shirley—Rebecca’s mother—died of Naakellian brain fever, just under two years ago. He’s a tough kid, but he’s hurting just as much as Jeff is,” she paused and looked down at Mellor. “They promised that this would be our last job. After which they would return Rebecca. They told us not to contact the authorities, and said that if we were boarded then her life was forfeit.”

“What’s the cargo?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. None of us do. We were just told where to pick it up and where to deliver it to. If we scanned it or opened it, Rebecca would be killed. They had us over a barrel and there wasn’t a thing we could do.”

Amorin felt for the woman, and her shipmates. They had been put through hell over the last few weeks, the life of a loved one used as a bargaining chip, forcing them to undertake illegal and no doubt dangerous activities in secret. He was amazed they had lasted as long as they had. But he couldn’t allow this to continue, or for their ‘employers’ to continue their hellish game.

“Do you have any idea who these people are?” he asked.

Again Grak shook her head. “They only communicate on a distorted audio link. And I don’t recognise the ship configuration.”

“Can you send a copy of your sensor logs to the Stallion? We may find a match for it in our databanks,” he asked of her. She nodded and tapped a few controls on her console. He looked back at Syva. “Anything you can do for Captain Mellor?”

“Negative Commander. The medical supplies we have are insufficient for his current condition. We would need to get him to the *Silverfin* for a full analysis, though I do not know if we have the facilities needed to treat him.”

“Alright, take him back to his cabin. Get him comfortable but make sure he’s secure. The last thing we need is him doing something to harm himself or someone else.”

Syva gave a single nod. “Aye sir,” she said, before crouching down and effortlessly lifting the man up in her arms. She left the bridge, heading back towards the crew cabins, when Grak looked back up at him.

“I’ve transferred the data,” she hesitated for a moment and fidgeted with the cuffs of the jacket she wore. “What’s going to happen to us?”

Amorin gave her a firm look that, to her credit, she held. “Firstly. You’re going to show me where this cargo of theirs is. Then we’re going to come up with a plan to save your crewmember and put an end to the scheme that these people are running. After which, you will come back to the *Silverfin* with us, where I’ll explain the situation to my Captain, with the recommendation that we take you back to Star Station Freedom for a full repair job and where your people can be treated. And after all that, I hope that you will be able to return home.”

She gave him a faint hint of a smile. “Thank you Commander.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us, and not a lot of time to do it in.”

Tactical Centre, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta* Approaching the Argaya System

“Mistress,” spoke up Astronavigator Krat'jk.

“Speak,” Drak Verr'ja demanded of the Intermediate. Their caste dominated the bridge, as well as most of the other officer positions onboard the *Gzek'ta*, whilst the Underlings held all the insignificant posts. Aside from herself there was only one other Elite on the striker, Ship's Physician Ulos'an.

“We are approaching the Argaya System.”

“Slow to sublight mark three,” she instructed. From her place on the upper tier, she could look down on all those in the Tactical Centre. She glanced at Scanner Operator Ysot'la. “Full sweep.”

“Yes Mistress,” the Intermediate female replied promptly.

From the other side of the Tactical Centre, Kott Zaks'ky, her Second-in-Command, stalked over to where the Scanner Operator stood (as Mistress of the Striker, she was the only one allowed to sit in the Tactical Centre). Zaks'ky was a tall and broad Intermediate, his body scarred from many conflicts, as well as a few over-eager lovers. He stood head and shoulders above most others in his caste, and used his sheers size and bulk to intimidate all aboard the *Gzek'ta*—except for Verr'ja. Her birthright would always see to his submission, though she was sure that had she not been Elite, she wouldn't have felt his *t'aka* blade pierce her skin in the middle of the night.

Ysot'la looked up from her console. “Mistress, all possible sweep show no other vessels.”

Verr'ja leaned forward, her dark red eyes boring into the other female. “Possible sweeps'?” she scalded. “Are you so inept that I must find another to fulfil your duties?”

“My apologies Mistress,” Ysot'la quickly stated, as Zaks'ky stepped closer to her, his proximity made the junior officer shake in fear. When she spoke next, her voice was voice tight and brittle. “The debris, dust and radiation makes scanning the far side of the system difficult.”

“So,” Zaks'ky hissed into her ear, “there could be a Talarian battle fleet on the other side of the system and we wouldn't know about it.”

The Scanner Operator looked about ready to collapse. “That is a possibility Kott. However, we are well beyond their territory, why would they—”

“If I wanted an answer, I would have asked for one,” Verr’ja said, immediately silencing the other female. She looked at the forward display and then back at Ysot’la. “If your information proves to be false, I will make you watch as I tear the skin from each member of your family.” She turned away from the Scanner Operator and focused on Krat’jk once again. “Astronaut, take us into the system. Sublight mark four.”

She then looked across at Ordnance Officer Vret’ez. “Activate defence grid, maximum intensity. Charge pulse batteries. Active targeting of any debris that comes to close to us.”

“Yes Mistress,” was the prompt response.

Verr’ja settled back into her seat and watched the forward display, as the *Gzek’ta* entered the system and headed for their final rendezvous with the human ship.

Cargo Hold, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 Argaya System

After securing Captain Mellor in his quarters—though that term was probably an exaggeration for the small space he inhabited—Master Chief Petty Officer Syva had joined Commander Amarin and *Mirage* crewmember Grak back on the bridge, and then accompanied them down to the ship’s hold on the lower deck, leaving Crewman Blue on the bridge.

Though the *Mirage* wasn’t large, Amarin had time to contact the Stallion and order Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth to dock with the transport, so that the shuttle’s full facilities could be made available if needed.

They reached the cargo hold, where they joined Lieutenant JG Solvaar and Crewman Spencer Mycroft, who had begun searching the various cargo containers and found nothing out of the ordinary or illegal. Both members of the boarding team stood down when Amarin arrived. Grak went over to the other side of the hold, opened a panel that should have led to a warp plasma regulator, and removed a solid-looking container, the dimensions of which

resembled a Starfleet emergency communications relay. However the case was smooth, no sign of any control panels or hinges or any other means of getting to what was inside.

Once it was out of its hiding place, Grak stepped away from it. Amarin and Solvaar approached, but as the lieutenant reached for his tricorder, Syva spoke up. "That would not be logical Lieutenant." Both men stopped and looked back at her. "Until we know of its origin, we cannot rule out the possibility of booby-traps, or some other form of security device that may be activated by scans."

Amarin scrutinised her a little. "What about passive scans?"

"A possibility Commander. I have witnessed such devices before during my time in Vulcan Security. They are highly sophisticated and usually lethal."

"How can we identify its origin if we can't scan it?" Solvaar asked.

Though Syva could not argue with his logic, her duty was to ensure the safety of the team and if that meant leaving the container a mystery, she was more than satisfied with that outcome. Before she could answer Solvaar though, Amarin's combadge chirped.

"Tyler to Commander Amarin."

"Go ahead," the First Officer replied tapping the device.

"Sir, the computer has come up with a possible match for the ship that has rendezvoused with the Mirage," stated the young Tactical Officer, though he didn't sound overly sure about his findings. *"Going by general design principles, construction materials and energy signature, the computer says that there's a seventy percent chance that ship is of Chanok origin."*

There was silence in the cargo hold for a moment. All of the Border Service team knew the name and the history that was attached to it, and they all knew that if it really was the Chanok, then they would have bigger problems to face than just one abducted transport crewperson.

Grak looked around them, the name meaning nothing to her. "What?" she asked. "Who are these Chanok?"

Amarin looked at her. "I'm not surprised you haven't heard of them,

Starfleet's last contact with the Chanok was in 2271, when they were banned from entering Federation territory—for any reason. Take the most violent Klingon you can think of, add a profit-hungry and unethical Ferengi and multiply by a savage Orion and you have the Chanok. They are a brutal race, who were involved in developing and selling weapons of terrible destructive capabilities, smuggling Il'tritian dust, abducting colonists and selling them into slavery or worse, as food. Some of their activities are classified, but it's safe to assume that whatever else they are involved in, it's not something you want to know about. After the Federation closed its borders to them, so too did the Klingons, the Romulans and just about every other major power in the quadrant—no one wanted to be associated with them.”

The Tellarite's face was ashen. “And we've been manipulated by them for almost a month! By the Gods! What have they made us do?”

Syva stepped towards the container and slowly walked around it. Had the *Silverfin* been close by, she would have taken it onboard and into the secure hold, where it could have been scanned and opened—and even if it was rigged to explode, the heavily shielded and reinforced compartment was designed to handle it. Though she had never heard of the Chanok using anything as sophisticated as a sensor bomb, the information she had on them was from when they had been forced out of Federation space—when she herself was just two years old.

“What are you thinking Master Chief?” Amorin asked, watching her.

“We cannot allow the Chanok to take possession of this container. Going by their previous record, it cannot be anything beneficial.” She cast a look at Grak. “We must also defend the crew of this vessel.”

“From what?”

“The Chanok. It would be tactically unwise for them to allow you leave. You would be able to identify their vessel, which would alert Starfleet to an increase in their activities close to UFP space. Which could be for any number of reasons—from terrorism to smuggling to war.”

Amorin nodded at her assessment. “I was thinking the same thing Master Chief.” He approached the container and looked at it through his goggles—which despite rumours were nothing like the VISOR technology developed to allow the visually impaired to see. “How long until you meet with them?” he asked the Tellarite.

“About forty minutes. It’ll take us fifteen to reach the moon of Argaya II.”

“Are you capable of flying this ship alone?”

“I’m a certified level-five pilot,” she replied slowly. “Why?”

“We don’t have the resources to launch a full-scale assault on that ship and secure the release of Ms Mellor. You will have to complete your business with them, just as you had planned. They get the container and you get Rebecca back. As soon as she has materialised, raise your shields and then run like hell into the debris field. They will come after you. When they do, we will strike.”

“Commander,” Solvaar spoke up, “the Stallion does not have sufficient firepower to damage that ship in any considerable manner. This would most likely be a suicide mission.”

“We may not have the weapons to defeat them Lieutenant, but if we get close enough to punch through their shields, we can board them and take charge of their bridge. Force them to surrender.”

Syva thought over the Commander’s plan. Though it wasn’t by any means foolproof, it did however stand a good chance of succeeding, due to the presence of both Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth and Ensign Tyler onboard the Stallion. But it would be difficult. The Chanok ship was roughly twice the size of a Defiant-Class warship, and they had no information regarding its weapons, defences or complement. But if they didn’t take the chance, they would lose the secret cargo that the *Mirage* had been forced to smuggle for them, as well as discovering what they were up to so close to Federation space, and the ship gave them the opportunity to gather more modern intelligence on Chanok technological developments.

“Your assessment is noted Lieutenant. Master Chief, anything to add?”

“There is a possibility of success, however I would advise caution. We do not have enough information to prepare thoroughly, so we will have to be fast and adaptable.”

“Isn’t that one of the Border Service’s mottos?” Amarin quipped, though aside from a slight smile from Crewman Mycroft, the attempt at humour fell flat—not surprising given his audience. “Alright then. Syva, break out the body armour for five. Lieutenant, I want you to stay with the *Mirage* and help out

where you can. Harriet and Tyler will crew the Stallion. Grak, you'd better get to the bridge and get us moving. I'll go the engineering and help get the shields back up. As soon as we reach the rendezvous co-ordinates, we'll have to go and take cover." He looked at Grak once again. "No heroics. Get Ms Mellor onboard and get gone."

"Trust me Commander, you don't have to tell me that twice," she replied and headed back for the stairs to the upper level, Solvaar close behind. Amarin headed aft to the engine room, and Syva led Mycroft towards the docking port, calling from Drim and Blue to join them onboard Star Stallion 2.

Chapter 11

Bridge, S.S. *Mirage* NTL-439 High Orbit, Argaya II(a)

Tillg jans Grak sat at the controls, willing her heart to steady itself and her body to stop shacking. The Border Service team had been as good as their word, repairing and boosting their shields, setting up a secured emergency channel for them to use, before they fell back behind one of the largest chunks of rock. Even knowing they were there, Grak couldn't spot them. She could only hope these Chanok couldn't either.

At the thought of the alien race that had been manipulating them for so long, she felt sick. What had they been forced to carry for the last four weeks? How illegal was it? Had anyone been harmed because of them?

The cry of the proximity alert shook her from her morbid thoughts. She looked at the sensor displays and saw the ship approaching slowly. Grak noticed they ran a thorough scan of the area, going right past the location of the Stallion without a second glance. Breathing a sigh of relief, she prepared for the comm link, making sure she had the cover story straight in her head.

The larger ship slowed as it got closer. Though not the largest ship Grak had ever seen it was big enough to dwarf the J-Class transport. Every time she saw it she shivered, put off by its non-symmetrical design, with spikes and fins all over the hull, numerous weapon ports, three nacelles in an upside down Y configuration, and lack of any windows. It filled the viewport with its bulk.

She knew she couldn't power up the impulse engines until Rebecca was onboard, but she checked that Ixaab was ready in the engine room to dump all the power he had into the reactors. Her focus was on piloting them away from the Chanok vessel, Ixaab's was to ensure that they stayed in once piece long enough to survive, and down at the transporter bay Lieutenant Solvaar stood ready at the control, he would also be responsible for the shields. Once Rebecca was onboard and he raised them, she had to be ready to get them moving.

The comm panel flashed. She took a deep breath and tapped it. "This is the *Mirage*," she said, surprising herself at how calm she sounded.

"Where is Captain Mellor?" the distorted voice asked, Grak found the sharpness of it grating.

“He was injured during an attempt to keep our warp drive stable. I speak for him.”

There was silence on the other end of the commlink and she wondered if they were buying it or not. *“A shame. I had wanted to converse with the Captain one last time,”* the voice said. Grak didn’t particularly like the way the alien captain said that. If she wasn’t certain it was a trap before, she was now.

“We have business to do,” she asked pointedly, not wanting the transaction to go on a moment longer than necessary.

“The contract is valid. Our cargo?”

Grak hit the transmit stud. “Those are its co-ordinates, as well as for our transporter.”

There was another pause. On her sensor panel she noticed an energy build up in their transporters. A few moments later, their container dematerialised from the secret cargo compartment they had returned the contraband to. For a moment Grak wondered if they were just going to blow them into dust without returning Rebecca.

“Transport complete. It hasn’t been scanned. You follow instructions well. Perhaps we could do business another time.”

“Give us Rebecca! Now!” Grak snapped, feeling sick to her stomachs.

The voice snarled. *“Watch your tongue Tellarite pig! We shall keep out end of the bargain. Prepare for transport.”* With that the Chanok ship cut the transmission.

She tapped the intercom. “Stand ready everyone.”

Detention Block, Chanok Striker *Gzek’ta* Argaya System

From down the corridor, Rebecca Mellor heard several pairs of heavy footfalls approaching. Using the wall of her cell for support, she pushed herself to her feet, ready to face whoever was coming. Her heart pounded in her chest, she

feared the worst—but between the prospect of being raped and being murdered, she would prefer the latter, at least then her ordeal would be over.

What about Ixaab? she asked herself, feeling an ache in her chest at the thought of her husband. He had lived his whole life alone, orphaned on New Sydney as an infant. He was used to living alone, his first few years on the *Mirage* had been tough on all of them, until he started to feel more comfortable around the small crew. She had been attracted to him since he came onboard but due to his mistrusting nature, she hadn't done anything about it. They had only gotten together thanks to an ion storm. The *Mirage* had been hit by a class-four storm, which had depolarised the magnetic constrictors, turning the warp core into a Tesla Coil and making the engine room into a death trap. She and Ixaab had been forced into a supply closet for almost twenty-six hours until they passed through the storm, during which time a few home truths had come out.

Of course it took him another three years to propose to her.

The sound of heavy boots on metal grew louder. Rebecca stood her ground, determined to face whoever was coming. Moments later, two of the copper-coloured aliens stepped into view and between them was the officer who had stopped their cohorts when she first came onboard. He reached over and tapped a panel beside the doorway and the bars parted. She stood her ground.

“You will come with us,” the darker skinned soldier stated.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded, not moving.

His nostril slits flared and he narrowed his yellow eyes. “You will come with us *now!*”

The other two took this as their cue and moved into her cell. The presence of their superior couldn't quell the vile look in their eyes, and when they gripped her upper arms tightly, her skin crawled. She tried to pull her arms free, but her struggle made them squeeze tighter.

“Let me go!” she cried, trying to will her weakened muscles to fight off the two bigger, stronger men.

With little effort they lifted her between them and they followed the officer out of her cell and down the passage between the rows of cells. Inside some

she could see people locked up just as she had been, many of the species she couldn't identify, but most looked terrified, a few were still defiant and some were obviously broken by their incarceration. Rebecca tried to keep her mind for descending into total panic. Her heart pounded, adrenaline pumped and her fight or flight response was weighed heavily towards flight, but held painfully firm by the guards she couldn't escape.

They left the prison block and its fetid stench, but the corridors beyond smelled of bad breath and body odour—though it was a vast improvement from her cell. They marched through three other corridors before stepping into a large lift. The officer hit the control panel and she felt her stomach lurch as they ascended. There was silence in the lift; the only thing she could hear was the heavy breathing of the guards on either side as well as her thundering heart.

The lift slowed and stopped. The officer led them out into the corridor, rounded a corner and then stopped at a large alcove, where another officer stood at a control console. She looked in the alcove and noticed the four lit panels on the deck with corresponding ones in the ceiling, reminding her of a transporter pad. It could have been some kind of torture device for all she knew, or if it was a transporter they could be about to beam her out into space, or disperse her atoms to the stellar winds.

The officer from the cells gestured to the guards, who directed her into the alcove before unceremoniously dropping her on the hard deck. They stepped back out and continued to leer at her. Rebecca climbed to her feet again, never taking her eyes from the man she assumed to be the security chief.

As terrified as she was, if they were about to kill her, she wasn't going to let them see her fear. It was something her mother had shown her, when she was being eaten from the inside out by *Naakellian* brain fever—a long and painful death. Rebecca had always hoped that when her time came, she could meet it with even an ounce of the same courage she would do her mother proud. But then again, Shirley Mellor was always the bravest of the family, the steadfast rock she and her father had been tethered to. When she had died Rebecca had been fortunate, in that she had Ixaab to help her through it. But her father wasn't one to open himself up and share how he felt. She had seen how hard it had been on him, and dreaded to think how he was coping with her abduction.

The security chief nodded to the officer at the controls and a second later a high-pitched whine filled the air and she felt the tingling effects of a

transporter beam take hold. Exactly where she would find herself was the question.

It took less than ten seconds for her to materialise on a very familiar platform on a very familiar ship, though with a very unfamiliar man at the controls. The surge of giddy relief she felt at being home quashed all questions about who the uniformed Vulcan was. She felt her legs buckle and tears stream down her face.

The Vulcan tapped a control on the panel before moving towards her as she slumped onto the deck. She expected to wake up and find herself back in the cell, but no, she was actually back onboard the *Mirage*. She hadn't expected to see the old ship ever again.

Just as the Vulcan Starfleeter reached her, she felt the deck vibrate. Having spent twenty-seven years onboard the old J-Class transport she knew what every groan and shake meant—they were at full impulse and manoeuvring sharply.

“Ma’am, are you alright?” he asked.

Before she could speak the ship banked hard right, an evasive manoeuvre—they were under attack!

Her relief turned to dread. Her captors had double crossed them. Rebecca pushed herself back to her feet, the Vulcan helping her up.

“I’ve got to help Ixaab,” she told him and headed aft, pushing aside the exhaustion and frailness of her body, and ignoring his objection. They were under attack and she would need to help her husband keep the ship in one piece, long enough for her father to get them out of the system and away from their attackers. The *Mirage* groaned under the strain of the manoeuvres she was being forced to pull off.

“Hold together old girl,” she muttered under her breath. “I just got home, and I have no intention of dying now.”

**Tactical Centre, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta*
Argaya System**

“Transport complete,” reported Zaks’ky.

Drak Verr’ja nodded at her Second-in-Command and looked over to Ordnance Officer Vret’ez. “Lock plasma cannons and load kinetic missiles. I want nothing left but dust.”

“Yes—” Vret’ez began, but was cut off by a piercing alarm from the opposite side of the Tactical Centre.

She turned her crimson eyes onto Scanner Operator Ysot’la, who was frantically looking over her readouts. The young Intermediate looked up and recoiled at the sharp eyes that glowered at her from above.

“The *Mirage* has activated their defence grid and power up their sublight drive.”

“WHAT?” she snarled, rising from her chair and descending to the lower level. She moved straight to Ysot’la, her hand closing around the handle of her *t’aka* blade, ready to end the other female’s life for such gross incompetence.

“They are moving towards the planetary debris.”

“Pursue!” Verr’ja hissed at Astronaut Krat’jk. By now Zaks’ky had moved over to join them, adding his own menacing presence to Verr’ja’s, both of them scrutinising the younger female with disdain. She glanced across the Tactical Centre. “Ordnance Officer, fire at will. Destroy that vessel!” She looked back at Ysot’la. “Monitor them *very* closely.”

“Yes Mistress,” she replied instantly, her voice tight and high with fear—she could see Verr’ja’s hand on the ornately carved handle of her blade.

On the forward display, the Mistress of the Striker *Gzek’ta* watched as the tiny Federation vessel twisted and turned—with an agility she had not expected from such an old ship—dodging the discharge from their heavy plasma cannons and volleys of missiles. She had underestimated the Federation crew, they were not the helpless fools she had thought them to be, whose compassion for their own had made them so easy to manipulate and control.

Somehow they managed to evade the worst of the *Gzek’ta*’s weaponry, only a few bolts of plasma grazed their defences—that somehow managed to remain mostly intact. They were making a mockery of her! But their defiance would be short lived, and she would exact her revenge.

As the *Mirage* ducked behind a large chunk of rock, they manoeuvred in closer in order to deliver the killing blow. The dull thuds and clangs of small chunks of debris hitting the hull resonated throughout the ship, but their hull armour was designed to handle much worse. The larger pieces they avoided. As the Striker moved past one such meteoroid, the ship rocked hard to port. Quickly followed by three other jolts.

“What was that?” she demanded.

“I...I don’t know!” replied Ysot’la, frantically working her controls.

“Mistress, a smaller ship has just emerged from behind the meteoroid,” stated Vret’ez. “It bares a resemblance to Starfleet auxiliary craft.”

“That’s n—” Ysot’la did not finish her sentence. Verr’ja’s *t’aka* blade tearing through her throat saw to that, just as the Striker lurched again. The Scanner Operators body fell forward onto her control panel.

Verr’ja looked at Zaks’ky. “Take over and see that her body is properly displayed—I will not tolerate ineptitude on my ship!”

“Yes Mistress,” he replied, as he pulled her lifeless body off the console and let it crumple to the deck plating.

“Ordnance Officer, switch target to the Starfleet vessel. Missile warheads at maximum and all available power to the pulse batteries. Astronav, evasives.”

“Mistress, the density of the debris makes it impossible to manoeuvre,” replied Krat’jk.

“Reverse engines. Continuous fire, all salvos.”

“Yes Mistress,” both Intermediates replied.

She had greatly underestimated the *Mirage*. But an ancient transport and an auxiliary craft wouldn’t last long against a fully armed Chanok Striker. Though she had wanted to avoid any encounter with Starfleet, they were now given the opportunity to learn more about their tactical advancements over the last century.

Verr’ja moved back to her seat as the small ship hit them again. Someone was

going to pay dearly for their turn of events, and she would make sure that it wasn't her.

Chapter 12

Star Stallion 2 Argaya System

Their plan had worked just as they'd hoped. The *Mirage* fled into an area of densely packed debris and the Chanok ship had pursued. But as it was, the meteoroids would make it impossible for them to manoeuvre. At which point the Stallion pounced. As Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth moved the shuttle out from its hiding place, Tyler had opened fire with their phasers and micro-torpedoes. For such a small ship, the Star Stallions packed a big punch.

At first, they had the element of surprise and he was able to batter their starboard shields with their barrage. But as soon as their edge was gone and the Chanok opened fire, whilst reversing back out into a more open region, he could only take shots when Llewellyn-Smyth got them into a firing position—not an easy feat when avoiding multiple phaser banks and torpedo launchers.

At the Academy, Tyler had read over what information they had on the Chanok (just as he had done on the Tholians, Romulans, Borg, Talarians and numerous other hostile races), but all of that was over a century old. He had never expected to come across the savage and unpredictable species in his lifetime, and was trying to recall what he could on their tactics. Unfortunately what they had wasn't much, decades out of date, and didn't include anything about how they would fight in a dense asteroid belt.

Llewellyn-Smyth slammed them into a spin as she avoided yet another torpedo, and Tyler felt his stomach sink again, quickly followed by the sense of nausea. She had kept the inertial dampeners at a low level to make the Stallion more responsive, but it meant that the crew inside felt every little movement. He breathed through the queasiness and launched another micro-torpedo at the target. He had to admit that the Lieutenant's skill at the controls was unlike anyone's he had ever seen—even the best pilot in his class couldn't compare to Llewellyn-Smyth's finesse.

She pushed the Stallion forward, towards the Chanok ship. Her movements were slight, but enough to keep them from being hit. Tyler saw on the sensors that it was close on occasion, but not enough to affect their shields. Behind them in full body armour, Commander Amorin had readied the transporters and was scanning for a beam-in site.

Tyler glanced at his readouts and saw that the *Mirage* had moved behind their pre-arranged shelter—a large stationary boulder, filled with dense metals which interfered with sensors.

“The *Mirage* is clear sir,” he reported for Amarin’s benefit, though he didn’t take his eyes away from the controls, taking several more quick shots at the Chanok vessel.

“Understood Ensign,” the Benzenite XO replied, before cursing under the hiss of the breather mask. “Their internal architecture is unlike any I’ve seen before. I can’t locate their bridge.”

Tyler felt a cold shiver creep down his spine. If they couldn’t find the bridge for the team to beam into and secure the hostile ship, their attack would be useless. There was only so long they could evade the continuous disruptor blasts and torpedoes—even with someone as good as Llewellyn-Smyth at the controls.

“Do we fall back?” Tyler asked.

“We’re dead if we do Ensign,” Amarin replied. “I’m scanning for their warp core. We can beam into the engine room and seize control from there.” He worked for a moment longer before his console gave an affirmative chirp. “I’ve got a matter/antimatter power signature, and locking co-ordinates. Tyler, lock on and prepare for transport. Harriet, get us into their shield bubble,” he ordered moving to join the four security specialists.

“We’ll be within their shields in twelve seconds,” Llewellyn-Smyth stated, pitching the ship to port and accelerating.

Tyler got the transporters ready whilst also continuing their attack with the Stallions forward phasers. He locked onto the five unique lifesigns in the midship compartment, boosted power to the annular confinement beam and pattern buffer and stood ready to energise the moment they were in position.

Llewellyn-Smyth was as good as her word, and in just under twelve seconds she punched the Stallion through the shielding of the Chanok ship. It was a rough ride, with their own shields taking a beating, but they were in position and their extreme proximity to the alien ship would render their targeting array next thing to useless and would limit them to phasers only—a torpedo detonation at close range would cause as much damage to the Chanok as it would to the Stallion.

Once inside the shield perimeter, he ran a quick scan and saw that they were relatively safe for the time being. “In position Lieutenant,” he told her as she brought them in closer to the dark crimson hull.

“Drop shields and energise Ensign,” the Conn Officer ordered.

With the tap of a single control he lowered their shields, and then activated the transporters. Behind them came the familiar hum of the transporter and he monitored the process, as the boarding team dematerialised, their patterns going through the buffer and then sent along the ACB, before materialising at the co-ordinates Amorin had specified. The process took seven seconds, and as soon as he had their lifesigns on the Chanok ship he raised their shields once again. The transporters targeting scanners kept a lock on the combadges of all five members, and he stood ready to retrieve them in case anything went wrong.

He cast a sideways glance at the pilot, and saw that Harriet was biting her bottom lip, her brow furled. In the two months he’d been onboard the *Silverfin* he had never seen her nervous—it reinforced what he already knew; things could go very badly very quickly.

Engineering Section, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta* Argaya System

Their assault on the Chanok ship had gone as he had expected it, but with Llewellyn-Smyth and Tyler at the controls he hadn’t expected anything else. Now was the time for his part in the harebrained plan he had devised.

As soon as the transporter released them the first thing that registered was the heat—at least thirty degrees (but coming from a planet with little atmosphere he was used to a much cooler environment). The second thing he noticed were two humanoids half way down the corridor he stood at the end of. His phaser carbine already raised, he got off two shots in quick succession and the crewmembers crumpled to the deck. Behind he heard three other shots fired. His scans onboard the Stallion showed that the engine room itself was heavily shielded, so he had chosen a beam-in site as close to it as he could, and opted for a four-way intersection.

“Clear,” he stated. Quickly followed by the same pronouncement from Syva,

Mycroft and Blue. Crewman Drim stood at the centre of the group, sweeping the area with his combat scanner—a device they all wore strapped to their forearm.

“There are four other lifesigns in close proximity,” he reported, gesturing in the direction Syva and Mycroft faced, “two in each direction. The warp core is thirty-eight-point-six meters that way,” he added, gesturing down the corridor Amarin faced.

Before he could issue any orders, a groaning klaxon filled the corridors. *An intruder alert? That was faster than I’d expected*, he noted. He had been relying on the element of surprise once again to get them to engineering and take control of the ship. But that wasn’t to be. He looked at Syva.

“Let’s move out Master Chief.”

She gave a curt nod. “Tactical formation Beta,” she ordered coolly, utilising the combat manoeuvres she had devised and drilled into every member of her staff, as well as all the officers and most of the long-serving non-coms on the *Silverfin*.

At her order, Mycroft moved ahead carbine raised and body poised, K8 Blue was close behind. Amarin followed on, with Drim behind him and Syva at the rear. They moved steadily and efficiently, staying close to alcoves and partitions they could use for cover if needed. Amarin could feel the adrenaline surge through his system, but experience and training tempered it. He noted that both Blue and Drim were doing a fine job of keeping on top of their feelings, given that they were the rookies on the team. Had Syva not been Chief of the Boat, he would have felt wary about having a couple of untried and untested crewmen on a mission such as this. But the Vulcan Master Chief drilled her people hard from the day they stepped foot onboard, making sure that they were capable of facing anything that was thrown at them.

They had only gone twelve or so meters when Amarin’s natural echolocation alerted him to the approaching soldiers, a half-second before the combat scanners registered the twenty-two lifeforms coming at them for all directions.

“Take cover,” Syva ordered, spinning back the way they had come and moving to what shelter she could find. Amarin and the others followed suit, he ducked into an alcove and aimed his weapon in the direction they had been heading. Less than five minutes onboard, they hadn’t even covered a third of

the distance to their target, let alone securing the engine room and then the rest of the ship, and they now faced odds of four-to-one, against an enemy whose capabilities they didn't know in an arena that was very alien to them.

Things were looking bad.

"Here they come," yelled Mycroft, before the screech of phaser fire filled the corridor.

Tactical Centre, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta* Argaya System

"Mistress, we have a security breach in the engineering section. Five lifesigns; Human, Vulcan, Bolian and two others I cannot identify," stated Zaks'ky from the Scanner station (from which the body of the previous operator had since been removed).

Verr'ja hit the comunit on armrest of her chair. "Sub-Jahr Than'ok, we have intruders in the engineering section. Eliminate them."

"It shall be done Mistress," came the Senior Guardsman's swift reply.

She turned her attention to Vret'ez. "Ordnance Officer, what about that shuttle?"

"They are still within the perimeter of the defence grid Mistress. I cannot acquire weapons lock at this range," he told her, his head bowed low.

Vret'ez was one of the best officers on the *Gzek'ta*, not an incompetent trixit like Ysot'la had been. She didn't relish the idea of having to find another efficient gunner, but that didn't mean that she wouldn't dispose of him as well if he failed again.

Since the Starfleet shuttle had punched through their defence grid they hadn't fired on them, no doubt they wanted to keep their board team safe. It was a weakness Starfleet had had before the Chanok turned its back on the fragile empire, and it looked like they hadn't outgrown their compassion. But then again, compassionate people always had one fatal flaw.

A sinister grin spread across her bronze face. "Charge the plasma cannons

again. Lock onto all the asteroids that could conceal the *Mirage*. Obliterate them,” she ordered calmly. She looked down at her Second-in-Command. “The Starfleet ship won’t expose itself needlessly. But if we threaten a civilian ship, they will move to take action.”

Zaks’ky bowed his head slightly. “Very cunning Mistress, using their weakness against them.”

Pleased that her Second-in-Command knew his place, she looked back at the Ordnance Officer. “Have all pulse batteries at maximum and ready the targeting array.”

“Pulse batteries online. Plasma cannons fully charged and targets acquired.”

“Fire.”

Star Stallion 2 Argaya System

If the Stallion were any closer to the Chanok ship she would be sitting on its hull. However, even given their extreme proximity the larger ship still took the occasional shot at them. Each one missed, her targeting systems and phaser emplacements not designed to take out a ship within its own shield geometry. But they could have had attack fighters already en route to engage them so she kept a close eye on the sensors, one hand on the joystick and the other close to the impulse power control.

As tense as Llewellyn-Smyth found it simply waiting in the eye of the hurricane, within the enemy ship the boarding team had met with considerable resistance. Amarin had ordered them only to retrieve the team if they sent an emergency signal, and so far no such signal had been sent. Tyler kept monitoring their progress—what little they had made—so she was the one that noticed the spike in energy readings.

Before she could say anything however, the ship unleashed two enormous pulses of energy from the two large emitters at the front of the ship—a design feature she had thought of as deflector dishes. The Stallions sensors catalogued the energy and identified it as massive blasts of plasma, with the same destructive yield as three quantum torpedoes. Each blast slammed into a different meteoroid, the smallest on par with a Miranda-Class ship, and

decimated them. According to the sensors none of the remains were larger than that of Workbee, with most of the rock being turned into dust.

“Those bastards,” she hissed. “They’re goading us, so that we’ll move out and into their targeting range.”

Tyler was now looking at the same readings she was. “It won’t take them long to find the *Mirage*. We have to do something Lieutenant.”

Llewellyn-Smyth looked at the readouts. They were charging for another volley. There was no telling where they would target next, but there were only so many asteroids that could hide the small transport. The hunk of rock they were hiding behind not only prevented other ships sensors from picking them up, but prevented them from picking up anything as well. The *Mirage* would have no way of knowing what was coming their way.

“Ensign, could you arm the micro-torpedoes but then deploy them like mines?”

“Yes sir, but we’d still have to be beyond minimum safe distance when then detonated.”

“Let me worry about that. Ready the torpedoes and charge the phasers,” she instructed, as she readied the impulse engines and familiarised herself with the design of the unsightly Chanok ship.

It took a few moments, but Tyler reported, “Torpedoes ready and phasers fully charged.”

“We’re going to take out those forward weapon ports,” she told him, powering the thrusters and moving towards the front of the ship. She made sure to stay close to the hull, so as to keep from presenting the Chanok with a target, dodging the multiple phaser emitters that adorned the warship.

As they neared the front of the ship two more bolts of plasma were released, and two more chunks of rock were reduced to little more than dust. As powerful as the plasma weapons were they appeared to need several minutes to recharge and fire again, which made what she was about to do slightly less crazy.

“Engaging attack pattern theta, release the torpedoes on my command,” she said, and then swung the Stallion down towards the two glowing weapon

turrets. The Chanok opened fire on them once again, but she kept the Stallion out of the kill zone and pressed on towards the energy cannons.

She pitched the ship so that the micro-torpedo launcher was aimed at their twin targets, which glowed brighter with each passing second. “Now!” she ordered, pushing the shuttle towards the cannons—their increased momentum would help the torpedoes drift into the crimson hull of the enemy ship.

Tyler launched the eight micro-torpedoes they had left. They headed straight for the two heavy weapon ports, the Stallion only just ahead of them. Once the launchers were empty she hit the impulse control and the ship lurched forward. She ducked under the ventral hull and accelerated towards the rear of the ship, using the jutting structures across the hull to offer them a degree of protect.

Behind them the micro-torpedoes reached their target, and exploded on contact with the hull. Though the micro-torpedoes were nowhere near as powerful as their full-sized counterparts, their matter/antimatter annihilation still produced a big enough punch to take out one of the forward cannons and damage the second. Despite her best effort, the resulting shockwave caught the Stallion and buffeted them off of course.

Screaming alarms filled the cockpit.

“We’ve been thrown out of their shield grid. We are in their targeting range!” reported Tyler, his voice tight.

“Impulse engines are offline, switching to full thrusters,” she stated just as the first volley of torpedoes were incoming.

Engineering Section, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta* Argaya System

The Chanok ship was buffeted hard. Syva had been through more than enough shipboard battles to know a torpedo strike when she felt it. The Stallion must have resumed their attack for some reason—no doubt something serious before Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth would risk firing micro-torpedoes.

Their own situation was proving to be dire. In addition to the twenty-two original guards, another seventeen had joined them. All escape routes were cut off and they hadn't been able to make any substantial progress.

She peeked out from her cover, fired off another quick succession of phaser pulses, before ducking back behind the partition she was hiding behind. On the opposite side of the corridor, Crewman Drim and Commander Amarin were in an alcove. The Bolian was propped up against the bulkhead, blue blood soaking the left right arm of his uniform. A Chanok phaser blast had scorched right through his body armour, through the skin, muscle and bone, then out the other side. Had it hit him in the chest it would have proved fatal, but to all intents and purposes they were one man down. Further up the corridor Mycroft and Blue continued to hold the enemy at bay, but could do no more than that.

She hit her combadge. "Commander, we must withdraw. This stalemate will not achieve anything. The longer we remain pinned here the greater the likelihood we will sustain other casualties."

"Do you have any stun grenades?" he asked, clearly not willing to give up until all options had been exhausted.

"I issued Mycroft and Drim with two each. However, their ranks are steadily increasing; four grenades will not be enough to subdue them all. It would also leave us with a fire-fight when we reached the engine room as well, and you know how dangerous that can be."

"Some is better than none Master Chief. Right now, we have to thin their numbers. We'll worry about the engine room when we get there."

"Understood Commander," she tapped her combadge again and opened a new link to Crewman Mycroft, then instructed him what to do. Across the corridor, she saw Amarin take one of the grenades from the back of Drim's equipment belt, prime it and move into position to throw. She cast a quick look at Mycroft and saw him do the same.

Before either of them threw, she and Crewman Blue ducked out again and opened fire, drawing the Chanok's attention for a few critical seconds. Amarin and Mycroft tossed the stun grenades in opposite directions, into the throng of Chanok guards—most were copper in colouring wearing simple but grimy brown coveralls, though there were a few brass coloured individuals as well who were better dressed in dark grey leather.

Instinctively, the Starfleeters ducked back into their shelter. Seconds later there was a loud throbbing noise, like a single heartbeat, followed by the sound of bodies hitting the hard metal deck.

Syva swung out into the corridor, her eyes sharp, carbine raised and took out a few of the guards that were still clinging to consciousness and the others that had been out of the blast radius.

“Move,” she instructed, once again covering the teams rear. Ahead of them, Blue and Mycroft would be clearing their way forward. Amarin helped Drim to his feet and supported his weight as they moved, the young Bolian looked as though he were about to pass out from the pain. She herself had sustained a similar injury when she was with Vulcan Security, and even with her high pain threshold and tolerance it had been one of the most agonising times in her life—a close second to the one hundred and thirteen hours of labour she had endured.

She fired off several more rounds, as she steadily moved back towards the rest of the team, the tactical scanner on her forearm showing their position and the location of conscious Chanok relative to herself. She kept up a steady spread of phaser fire, so as to keep the guards pinned down long enough for the others to get clear.

Her scanner showed that the others had rounded the corner, which was clear for the time being. When she reached the corner, she aimed at the exposed pipes that spanned ceiling close to where she had taken cover—a quick scan when they had been pinned down had shown that they were filled with a type of coolant.

Adjusting her phaser carbine to a higher setting she hit the pipes. They ruptured and greenish-yellow coolant spewed into the corridor, cutting the boarding team off from the Chanok. She set her phaser back to full stun and headed after the rest of the team, knowing that her ploy would only buy them a few minutes, before either the coolant flow was rerouted or the guards were.

The new corridor took them straight to the engine room, though there were a few passages that split off and went in other directions, the door at the far end was their objective. Ahead of her she noted that either Mycroft or Blue secured an adjoining corridor as the other moved forward, until Amarin and Drim was by it, and then repeated the action. She was close behind and made

sure that no one was coming at them from another direction.

Her combat scanner showed that the Chanok forces were mustering again and were coming around the coolant rupture, whilst another contingent was also steadily approaching. Amarin reached the door and rested the now unconscious Drim against the bulkhead, and then tried the door panel. She arrived just as he was running his combat scanner over the wall panels and shaking his helmeted head.

“Problem Commander?” she asked.

“They’ve erected a forcefield. I’ve got to try and find either its power source or emitter array before we can get inside.”

She nodded and left him to his task. “Cover the Commander,” she instructed the two standing guards and then moved to check on Drim. From the medkit at the small of her back she pulled out a medical tricorder and ran it over his ruined shoulder. He would need immediate medical treatment onboard the *Siverfin* if he were to retain the use of his right arm. She took out the hypospray and a battlefield capsule—a mixture of drugs to numb pain, prevent infection and stop bleeding—and after applying it to the Bolian she did what she could to bind his shoulder and immobilise his arm.

“Master Chief, we have incoming,” called Mycroft.

Syva looked at Amarin. He had pried off a panel and was digging around among the various conduits and circuits and wiring, looking for what he needed to get them inside. Then she approached her two remaining guards, wiping Drim’s blood on her trouser legs, before gripping her stocky rifle once again.

“We hold this position, protect the XO,” she told them in no uncertain terms.

“Aye sir,” they both replied quietly, and they assumed a firing position.

Her combat scanner told her there were eighteen Chanok heading toward them, and they would be a little more cautious this time. They could have brought explosives of their own. When they entered her field of vision she gripped the handles of the carbine tighter. Beside her, she could feel the growing nerves in both Mycroft and Blue.

But before a single shot had been fired the Chanok ship lurched hard to port,

throwing everyone off balance. It was another torpedo strike, but one far more powerful than the Stallion could deliver. Another ship was attacking the warship.

Chapter 13

Bridge, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Argaya System

“Direct hit. Their shields are at sixty percent,” reported Petty Officer Johansson from Tactical.

“Sir, I have the Stallion. Their impulse engines are offline. They’re taking fire, shields down to fifty percent,” Lieutenant Innis quickly added looking into the sensor scope on his station.

Leijten looked down at the Edosian Conn Officer. “Jelx, move us into position. Johansson,” she called back to the Tactical Specialist, “take out their weapons array.” They both responded promptly and set about their assigned tasks.

On the viewscreen, Leijten studied the warship—that Innis had determined was likely of Chanok origin, not a species she had ever expected to have to deal with (why they were there was a mystery to her, but that was something to be dealt with after her people were safe). After the *Silverfin*’s navigation, sensors and communications systems had been repaired they had moved in to the Argaya System to assist the Stallion. Their progress had been slow, given the dust and debris and radiation fields that filled the system. But when Innis had detected weapons fire, they moved in.

They had entered a dense belt of radiation that scrambled their sensors, when they had stumbled across the battlefield. There was no sign of the *Mirage*, but in its place was perhaps the ugliest ship she had ever seen, dark crimson, covered in weapon ports and various fins and spikes that seemed arranged in a haphazard manner—their exact function she couldn’t even hazard a guess at. They had arrived in time to see the Stallion hit by a shockwave and flung out of the relative safety it had found close to the ship’s hull. As a volley of torpedoes headed for the shuttle, she watched as Llewellyn-Smyth evaded them.

Leijten had immediately order the *Silverfin* into the battle, but the radiation field they were in made targeting sensors useless. They could only fire once they cleared it, which she’d ordered as soon as they were in the clear. Four photon torpedoes slammed into the Chanok warship, which tried to swing around to face them. Though their ship was smaller than the cutter, they were nowhere near as manoeuvrable.

“Innis, condition of the Stallion?”

“They’ve got damage to their shields and impulse drive. The hull is intact,” he paused for a moment, scrutinising something. “Sir, there are only two human lifesigns on the Stallion.”

She looked over at him then back at the viewscreen. “Scan the Chanok ship.”

“Aye air,” he replied and set to work. A moment later he looked back up. “I’ve got human, Vulcan, Bolian, Nasat and Benzenite lifesigns close to their warp core. We’re still missing one Vulcan though.”

“Noted Lieutenant. Helga, concentrate fire on their weapons only. I don’t want to put our people in danger.”

“Aye sir,” the petty officer replied. “Incoming torpedoes.”

The *Silverfin* rocked under the impact. They weren’t the strongest torpedoes she had ever felt, but she wasn’t about to give them time to try out their full arsenal on her ship. “Attack pattern gamma. Fire at will.”

Jelx and Johansson executed a perfect tactical manoeuvre, which took out numerous phaser nodes and torpedo launchers across the warship, as the *Silverfin* effortlessly pivoted around the lumbering hostile vessel. She felt a brief surge of pride at the effective team the Beta Shift Conn and Tactical staff made, but working together for two years did that.

“Direct hit to their forward weapons array and ventral shield grid sir,” stated Innis, “both are going down.”

She tapped the intercom. “Leijten to Shizumi.”

“Go ahead Captain,” the Assistant Chief of Security replied.

“Chief ready boarding teams on the double.”

“I have four teams readied and waiting sir.”

She smiled to herself, reminded at just how good her crew were. “Standby Chief Shizumi.” She looked over at Innis. “Open a channel.”

“Open on all frequencies.”

“Chanok vessel. This is Captain Susanna Leijten of the Border Cutter *Silverfin*. I order you to stand down and prepare to be boarded.”

There was a moment’s pause. Before she could ask about any response, the Chanok opened fire with their aft phasers. They packed a punch on par with the *Silverfin*’s own Type-VIII banks.

“Innis, are their ventral shields still down?”

“Yes sir,” the Bajoran confirmed.

“Shizumi, go,” she ordered over the still-open commlink.

“Aye sir. Shizumi out.”

The Chanok fired on them again, but Johansson quickly returned fire. “Direct hit. They’ve lost aft weapons as well sir.”

“All four teams transporting now sir,” Innis added.

Engineering Section, Chanok Striker *Gzek’ta* Argaya System

The panel Amorin had opened up was unlike anything else he had seen before. There didn’t seem to be anything that resembled an EPS relay or ODN processor or power tap or emitter circuit. Whoever designed this ship must’ve had the mental capacity of an infant. As he poked and tested everything inset into the bulkhead, behind him he heard the fierce exchange of phaser fire.

He knew that his plan to seize the Chanok ship would be dangerous, but alone in the debris field, with a civilian crew to protect and no clue when or even if the *Silverfin* would be repaired (not that he doubted th’Shaan’s ability, but from what he’d been able to ascertain before leaving, the damage was extensive to almost every circuit in the effected systems), he didn’t have many options. The Chanok had violated numerous interstellar laws, and had to be stopped. To him it was that simple.

From further down the corridor his Benzenite sixth sense detected a very

familiar energy field, the kind produced by a Starfleet transporter. Seconds later, the corridor was filled with the sound of even heavier phaser fire. The Chanok guards became panicked as they suddenly found themselves in a crossfire. Less than ten seconds after the *Silverfin*'s boarding team beamed, and it was over.

Amorin looked back as the four-man team approached and saw that it was Petty Officer Henderson's squad. The tall, sandy-haired, broad-shouldered non-com led security guards Willis, sh'Thoris and Rohkaan towards the original boarding team. Amorin immediately noticed the ion lance the latter carried.

"Rohkaan, over here," he ordered the Terrellian, who immediately complied.

Amorin and Rohkaan wrestled with the bulky piece of equipment that was designed to cut through heavily armoured hatches. It wasn't subtle or quiet, but it was effective. Behind him Henderson briefed Syva to the security situation, to which Amorin listened into as well. The *Silverfin* had arrived on scene and disabled the weapons and ventral shields of the Chanok ship, then beamed over four teams to help seize the ship. The Stallion had apparently taken damage, but from what Henderson had heard, both Llewellyn-Smyth and Tyler were alright.

"The *Silverfin* will have transporter locks on all of us," Syva stated and then stepped over to Drim. She tapped him combadge twice, activating his emergency signal. A moment later the Bolian guard dematerialised, back to the ship where we could be properly treated.

By the time he had gone, the ion lance was in place and they stepped back. He looked at Syva. "We'll need at least five minutes to get through, and they'll know we're coming."

"We'll be ready Commander," she told him, then directed her crew to resume defensive positions, issuing orders to Henderson, Blue, and Willis to be ready for immediate entry. They all acknowledged her and took their places, carbines raised, bodies tensed and ready.

Amorin hit the activation control for the ion lance, and the device screeched to life.

Tactical Centre, Chanok Striker *Gzek'ta* Argaya System

“Status!” Verr’ja demanded.

The Tactical Centre was in chaos. Consoles flickered, small fires cracked, the smell of burning metal filled the room. The Intermediates that manned the Centre darted from place to place, trying to restore functions, shouting and arguing amongst themselves, none of them answering her though.

“STATUS!” she roared, rising to her feet, one hand on the pulser on her hip, ready to draw her weapon and get their attention by shooting the closest officer to her.

Her voice cut through all the others, and they fell silent.

It was Zaks’ky that spoke up first. “The Starfleet ship has crippled our weapons and our upper defence grid. They have transported over four boarding teams.”

“Where are the guardsmen?” she hissed.

“Most had been sent to deal with the first boarding team, and there has been no contact with them since the shuttle attacked us.”

“What about the damage they caused to the plasma cannons?”

Zaks’ky looked over to Ordnance Officer Vret’ez, and she followed his gaze. The experienced looked from the Second-in-Command up to her, his expression nervous. He knew that she wouldn’t like what he had to say.

“The shuttle destroyed the portside focusing emitter and pre-fire chamber and damaged the starboard power converter. It will take seventeen hours to repair the converter.”

Fury consumed her. What should have been an easy assignment had been plagued with incompetence, and her demonstration on Scanner Operator Ysot’la had done nothing to ensure that the rest of her crew did not fail. When they returned to Homeworld, she would make sure that every single incapable ox’rey onboard would face what they deserved. But for Vret’ez, he wouldn’t live that long.

She pulled the pulser from its holster and swung it towards the Sub-Kott that she had once thought so highly of. Her attention was so focused on Vret'ez, that she never saw the aft doors open, or the two small grey cylinders—the size of clenched fist—that were tossed into the Tactical Centre. All she was aware of was a loud thud and a flash of light before she lost consciousness.

Verr'ja slumped back into her chair on the upper level of the room, the pulser fell from her hand and clattered onto the deck as the four-man team from the *Silverfin* stepped in to secure the area.

Chapter 14

Sickbay, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Argaya System

Sickbay was filled to capacity. Both treatment wards held four recovery biobeds and a central diagnostics table, and every one of them was full. But the medical facilities had quietened down following the seizure of the Chanok ship, and rescuing the eighteen prisoners onboard the ship. All of them showed signs of malnutrition and abuse—both physical and mental. The most serious cases were being kept in for observation, whilst the others had been released to their temporary accommodation.

Nurse Jenka had been very impressed with the confident and compassionate way the corpsmen handled the former prisoners, a few of which were catatonic and didn't even seem aware of the fact their torment had ended. These were the ones that occupied the biobeds, all of them strapped down securely on her order. There was no telling if they would become violent and try to hurt themselves or someone else, once they regained some perception of the world around them. Jenka had the basics of psychiatry under her belt, a requirement for nurses due to their considerable interaction with patients, but little beyond that. She had decided to sedate them to be on the safe side and consulted the EMH, which agreed with her assessment.

They were now resting comfortably. As was Crewman Nyk Drim, who had been seriously injured on the Chanok ship. The holo-doc had taken him into surgery and managed to save the young Bolian's arm. It would take a several weeks of physiotherapy and treatment, but he would regain full usage of the limb. After he'd come out of surgery at least a third of the security force, including Master Chief Syva, had come in to check on him. All of them had been relieved at the good news—even Syva, though in a very Vulcan manner. Jenka was touched at their concern for their colleague, even though he was one of the newest guards onboard the *Silverfin*. Though she had been with the Border Service for two years, that time had been spent on Star Station Freedom. She hadn't gotten to experience the camaraderie and bonds that developed when serving on a Cutter. Though the *Silverfin* wasn't where she had hoped she would be, there were definitely worse places to spend a few weeks.

The doors to the ward opened, and she pushed all thoughts of her future and whether she'd ever make it onto the Medical Officer's Advanced Training Programme. She looked at the entrance and saw two very familiar faces enter.

Well not yet at least, a small hopeful voice said in the back of her mind. She smiled softly at the faint glimmer of optimism she secretly still held onto, and then focused on her work terminal and all the medical files that needed to be completed.

Captain's Ready Room, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470 Argaya System

It was getting late, very late. Usually at such an hour, Susanna Leijten was in her quarters either working on personal letters or hobbies, or already sound asleep. But the events of the day meant a lot of reports had to be filed, official logs submitted, communiqués from every admiral in range. The emergence of the Chanok after over a century of silence had a lot of people worried, especially after the Talarian Incursion almost a year ago—which the *Silverfin* had missed, as she had been undergoing an overhaul of their antimatter containment system (not the kind of job that could be rushed).

She had dealt with all of the questions as best she could, but they were still trying to find out the answers to many of them. The Chanok crew had been secured in their own brig, seeing as how there wasn't enough room onboard the *Silverfin* for the ninety-six officers and crew. She had set up a rotation of personnel to stay on the warship—which they had learnt was called *Gzek'ta*, who had been one of the most notorious Chanok captain's at the time the Federation had severed all ties with them—in order to guard the enemy crew and ensure their health and wellbeing.

With all the official work seen to, she was catching up on some of the smaller shipboard matters that had slipped. On top of the pile was a personnel report from Lieutenant th'Shaan on his newest addition, Ensign Feeznar. Something she found a little odd. Feeznar had graduated in September the year before, making him a classmate of Ensign Tyler, and had glowing letters of recommendation from a few of his professors. But she had heard of grumblings from engineering over the last few months, she just hadn't expected it to be as bad as Elak reported it—poor performance, dereliction of assigned tasks, a detrimental effect of the other engineers. She wasn't used to seeing such a report on one of the officers aboard the *Silverfin*, and made a note to follow up on it.

The enunciator sounded and she called for the doors to open. When they parted she looked up and saw Amarin step into her ready room. The looming

Benzenite looked as tired as she felt, but like her, he wasn't one to rest until the job was done.

"Commander, I wasn't expecting to see you up here at this time."

He handed her a large PADD. "I thought you'd want to see my full after action report as soon as it was finished."

She set down th'Shaan's report and took the one her XO presented. Since his team had successfully gained control of the Chanok engineering section, he had been back and forth between it, the *Silverfin* and the *Mirage*. She had managed to catch a few words with him here and there, covering all the essentials of their mission into the Argaya System, catching up with the renegade transport, and then the encounter with the Chanok.

Though she was still waiting on reports from Llewellyn-Smyth, Tyler, Syva and the rest of the team, she had asked for them to be ready by 0900 tomorrow. Though she had no basis for comparison, she found Amarin's report to be very self-critical. She paused in reading it and looked up at him.

As always, his breather mask and goggles made it hard to read his expression, though there was a slight quiver in his breathing tubes—a very subtle hint that he was anxious or unsettled.

"This is a little harsh isn't it?"

"It is the truth Captain. Because of my actions the Stallion was badly damaged and Crewman Drim was severely injured. I could have waited for the *Silverfin* to arrive and formulated a plan that wasn't quite so insane. The Stallion then wouldn't need thirty hours of repair time and Mr Drim wouldn't be facing weeks of rehabilitation."

"I'll admit, your plan was a little gung-ho, but you made a tough decision based on the information you had available to you. The Chanok couldn't have been allowed to leave the system with their cargo, or get away with what they put the *Mirage's* crew through, not to mention they violated the exclusion zone established when we cut all contact with them.

"As for the damages," she continued setting the PADD down and giving him her full attention, "repair work has started on the Stallion, and Nurse Jenka informs me that Drim will be back on full-time duty in four to five weeks—and that his treatment can be carried out onboard. He'll be restricted to light

duties in the meantime. But he is still living, as are the crew of the *Mirage* and the eighteen prisoners we freed from the Chanok's holding cells."

"The ends outweigh the means then?"

"Not always. But given the risks involved and what was at stake, I'd say we got off lightly."

He still didn't look overly convinced. "Perhaps. But it just doesn't make me feel any better sir. Drim is a good kid, and I get him injured."

"He's just like everyone else onboard Amarin. He knows the risks involved with wearing the uniform. But if you want to blame yourself for what happened, then I'll assign you to the Stallion repair detail effective immediately."

"I was planning on helping out anyway," he told her.

Leijten smiled softly. "Amarin, I don't see anything wrong in what you did. You took a gamble and it didn't pan out quite the way you thought it would, but sometimes that happens—hell, it's happened to me more than once. The thing to do now is pick yourself up, dust yourself off, remember this for the next time, and keep on going."

The Benzenite standing before her seemed to give this advice some thought, just as she had done when it was given to her a few years ago—but if you were going to plagiarise, then you might as well do it from the best. After a moment he nodded his large head slightly and looked back at her.

"I will Captain. I just didn't want you to feel that I acted needlessly, or without consideration of the consequences."

"In the eight years we've served together I've never once thought that, so I'm not about to start now," she told him with an encouraging smile, before it was broken by a yawn. "That's it. I think I'll have to call this a day now."

"Agreed Captain."

She returned the now cold mug of tea back to the replicator and then went to stand by her XO. "Tomorrow, I want Innis and Tyler to go through the Chanok database, to see what they can find out about their actions. I get the feeling that ship isn't new to this region of space."

“I’ll have them briefed and ready to beam out by 0915.”

“I don’t doubt it Commander,” she said as the doors opened onto the bridge. She switched the lights off and together they headed for the turbolift.

Tactical Centre, Chanok Striker *Gzek’ta* Departing from the Argaya System

The bridge—or Tactical Centre to give it the Chanok title—of the alien ship was hot and stuffy. Vaguely circular in design, consoles surrounded the outer bulkheads whilst another row were freestanding and faced in towards what could only be described as a throne on a pedestal. Using the universal translator, they had been able to identify each console and what its basic functions were. But between two of the aft stations they had found something that looked very out of place, a bright white container roughly shaped like a Starfleet emergency comm relay—which, going by the description given by Commander Amarin, was what the *Mirage* had been carrying.

Aside from one small open panel on top of the container—how it had been opened he couldn’t even hazard a guess at—it was smooth and completely flawless. Two wires connected it with the two consoles it sat between, one labelled as Computer System Operation and the other as Intelligence Analysis. Innis sat at the former, whilst Tyler was running scans on the device itself.

He had been thrilled at the opportunity to work with Tyler on a smaller scale, but they had been studying the box and the consoles for an hour, and every avenue of conversation outside of their assigned task were quickly closed off by the younger man. Innis had since resolved himself to the fact that Tyler wasn’t one for small talk and focused on the computer screen. He decided at the earliest opportunity, he’d ask Harriet about the Tactical Officer—hopefully she wouldn’t catch on to him.

Focusing fully on the console once again, he tried another decryption algorithm in order to gain access to the Chanok computer banks. But just like the others it was rejected. He groaned at the fifteenth defeat he’d suffered since they started. Massaging the bridge of his ridged nose, which always grew tight when he was frustrated, he turned away from the console and leaned against it—since it didn’t have a chair he could sit on.

“This is probably the toughest system I’ve ever had to crack! The security lock outs at the Academy were a cakewalk compared to these!”

Tyler stopped scanning and scrutinised him. “You hacked the secure database at the Academy?”

Innis blushed and suddenly felt a little sheepish. “Well...yeah I did. Everyone said it couldn’t be done, so I just had to try it for myself. It’s not like I changed my grades or stole test papers. I just got into the server to test myself.”

“There was an urban rumour that went round when I was on campus about someone hacking the database, but we all thought it was just someone being overly boastful. You really did that?”

“Wasn’t all that hard really. I just piggybacked on an active user interface into the system and...” he trailed off, the beginnings of an idea forming in his mind. He turned back to the station he was working on and quickly uploaded the same tracer programme he had used back at the Academy from his tricorder—after weeks of work developing it, he made sure that he always had the tracer with him.

“Ensign, see if you can find an active terminal interface. It doesn’t matter what it is, just as long as it’s still open and has an outstanding command input.”

Tyler didn’t ask any questions and followed his new order. He went between the consoles, checking each one. It was the fourth one he tried, that he called out, “Got one. It’s for Environmental Regulation.”

“Excellent. Give me a sec, I’ll link up with it,” he said as he worked his tricorder and the alien console. After a moment he had established a telemetry link between them. “Ok now, I want you to initiate that command—so long as it’s not going to kill us.”

He nodded and then tapped a stud. Immediately Innis’ tracer went to work, attaching itself to the active data stream and then into the central computer. From there it began to search for and unlock the encryptions from the inside out. Innis monitored the programme on his tricorder and its progress on the terminal, aware that Tyler had come back to join him and was looking over his shoulder at the results. Though more than aware of the humans’ proximity, Innis concentrated on the hack.

After less than five minutes, the tracer programme completed its task and the

entire database was made available to them. "Yes!" he cheered, and set about checking the last series of commands and databases the console had been used to access. But after a few seconds he paused and looked back at Tyler.

"Eh, I hope you don't mention my Academy antics in your report."

There was the faintest hint of a smile on Tyler's youthful face. "It's best not to dwell on the past Lieutenant."

"Glad to hear it Joe," he replied and turned back to the screen, just as a large block of data appeared. Paused the scrolling readouts, he looked for the data's origin, and was surprised to see that it had been downloaded from the white container. How could something so small have the same processing power as the computer on a Defiant-Class starship?

As he pondered the question, something caught his eye in the densely compressed data packet. He focused in on it and felt his eyes go wide. Ship names, classes, crews and capacities. Detailed maps of shipping lanes and freighter loads. Border Service patrol routes and communications protocols. Lists of codenames and scrambled subspace frequencies. Exchange rates and stock market data from across the Quadrant.

"I think we've just found who is at the centre of the increase smuggling operations along the border," he said to Tyler, who had leaned in closer to read the masses of data. He tapped his combadge. "Innis to Leijten."

"Go ahead Lieutenant."

"Sir, we've just found something you're not going to believe."

Chapter 15

Main Engineering, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 On approach to Star Station Freedom

Behind him he heard the doors open. Th'Shaan glanced up and saw Captain Leijten enter the engine room, her stroll was casual and she looked around the room, taking everything in. He was bent over one of the diagnostic consoles, checking up on all the repairs they had made to the sensor, communication, navigation and computer systems that the *Mirage* had fried with their attack. He was fortunate to have such a good crew under him, as everything looked to be at optimum performance standards, which meant they wouldn't need any dry-dock time.

Satisfied that everything looked good, he left the console and approached the Captain, who had moved over to the warp core and watched as it throbbed. It was a sound th'Shaan had always found relaxing, to the point that it unsettled him when the core was off-line or he was forced into taking leave.

"Everything alright Lieutenant?" she asked, looking at him as he approached.

"All systems check out sir. As soon as we drop off the Chanok we'll be good to go."

"Glad to hear it," she said and then looked around at the staff that were working. When she looked back at th'Shaan she lowered her voice so as to not be overheard. "I read the report you submitted on Ensign Feeznar. I'm sorry to hear he's causing problems down here—going by his Academy record, I would have thought he'd be an asset to your team."

"On paper he looks to be a gifted young officer, but he's one of those officers that may be exception in the classroom but has little practical skill in the field. He may be better suited to R&D work," he explained. When he'd submitted the report to Leijten he had still been running on emotion, but now that he'd have a chance to relax he didn't want to jeopardise the young Girinite's prospects.

Leijten nodded thoughtfully. "That maybe so, but I'm not sure time on a buoy tender or monitoring station would be of benefit to someone like Feeznar."

"Meaning?" he asked, not liking where she seemed to be going with her train of thought.

“Transfer denied Lieutenant.”

“But Captain—” he began, his raised voice brought a few looks from the engineers.

She held up her hand, silencing him. “Do you know anything more about Feeznar, other than what’s in his service jacket?”

“I’ve tried Captain, but he’s not exactly warmed up to the *Silverfin*, or anyone in the engine room—myself included. He just doesn’t seem to fit in here,” he quickly explained, his voice lower than moments ago. “Granted, transferring him to a tender or backwater outpost might be a bit harsh, but there are bound to be other assignments out there that he could be of use.”

“It would leave you a man short down here.”

“I know sir, and I know that getting a replacement would be difficult, but my people and I are willing and able to put in the work to make up for it.”

“I know you would. But whose to say these problems wouldn’t follow him to elsewhere in the Border Service or the Fleet?” she looked around engineering once again. “You’ve gotten to know all of your staff pretty well Elak. I suggest you do the same with the ensign. Help him get comfortable here. Try it for a few months, and if you’re still having the same problems, then I’ll submit the paperwork for transferral.”

Th’Shaan felt a throbbing headache come on at the Captain’s advice. He didn’t know if he could handle a few more months of Feeznar—especially when he had to try and bond with him as well. But he also knew that her recommendation was more an order than a suggestion, and he wasn’t the kind of officer to disobey an order.

He nodded slowly. “Very well sir. I’ll try it for a few months, but what might he learn in that time that he hasn’t in the five he’s been onboard for?”

“It takes some people time to get truly comfortable somewhere. And as department head, it’s your responsibility to make the effort and help them out.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She gave him a supportive smile. "If you need any help, remember that my door is always open Elak. Also keep me apprised of his progress."

"Will do."

With that, she headed back the way she came and left him to contemplate his new assignment and just how he'd tackle it. "Computer, locate Ensign Feeznar."

"Ensign Feeznar is in Jefferies tube juncture F-17."

He managed to stifle a groan. Feeznar was supposed to be running inventory in the engineering storage room. This was going to be a lot tougher than anything he could have imagined.

Rear Admiral T'Rona's Office Star Station Freedom

"From what we've been able to determine, the Chanok ship were the ones behind a third of the smuggling runs going on in the region," Susanna Leijten explained to Rear Admiral T'Rona, the Third Cutter Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Commander Macintosh, the Intelligence Officer assigned to Star Station Freedom, and Lieutenant Commander Drizuk, the leader of the SCIS team. "It looks like they have been shipping anything and everything into and out of Federation space, trying to establish business links with some of the more disreputable species out there."

"Such as?" Macintosh asked, looking up from the PADD she had given to him.

"The Nausicaans, Chalnoth, Brez'ek, Prii, and also a few Orion factions. None of the major races. Even the Ferengi want nothing to do with them—I'd say it looks like Grand Nagus Rom is interested in improving relations with the Federation."

"Well it is his son that was the first Ferengi to join Starfleet," commented Drizuk. "Captain, what about this device that your crew found in the Tactical Centre?"

"I had my Ops Officer and Chief Engineer run every test and diagnostic they could think of on it. As far as they were able to determine it looks like some

kind of intelligence gathering device. Its sensors are on par with the *Silverfin*; its communications system has numerous decryption and infiltration protocols built into it; and computer processing power greater than a Defiant-Class ship. It looks like once the device is deployed it continuously scans its surroundings and intercepts all comm traffic in its range, all that data is then stored until it is retrieved and downloaded. From the data we were able to go through, it looks like this unit has covered about a sixth of Federation space, being transferred from ship to ship at regular intervals.”

“Impressive,” said Macintosh. “It’s a good way of gathering data without putting any of your own people at risk, or exposing yourself to detection.”

“Indeed,” agreed T’Rona, “however, the question is: was that ship acting on orders from the Chanok government, or is it a rogue operation.”

“Unfortunately, the officers are remaining silent on that matter, and the general crew don’t have a clue,” said Drizuk, stroking his beard, a serious look on the Tellarite’s lined face. “We will keep trying, but I doubt any of them will crack—they all seem more afraid of their Captain than anything we say.”

T’Rona nodded thoughtfully. “Thank you Commander Drizuk. Mr Macintosh, I want a full intelligence report of ship activity in the region, utilising all long-range sensor relays to their full capacity—there may be other Chanok ships operating in the region. Unless the crew are anymore forthcoming with information, they will remain here until transport can be arranged to a proper penal facility. I will have Lieutenant Commander Weir begin a full analysis of that vessel, the more technical and tactical data we can gather on modern Chanok ships would be of great benefit.” She looked back at Leijten. “Is there anything more you wish to add to your report?”

Leijten shook her head. “Negative Admiral. Everything pertinent is included on the PADDs.”

“Very well Captain. We shall not keep you any longer. When will the *Silverfin* be ready to resume her duties?”

“We’re taking on a new stock of isolinear chips, once that’s complete we will rejoin the *Hercules*. No more than an hour or so.”

“Thank you again Captain. Dismissed.”

Leijten left the Admiral’s office, where she remained with Macintosh and

Drizuk to discuss the more confidential matters of the *Silverfin*'s findings. That suited her just fine. She had four pips on her collar and one hundred and twenty-three people to focus on, and didn't want to go any higher than that. In the outer office, Lieutenant JG Kasan, T'Rona's attaché, gave her a friendly smile.

"Good day to you Captain," the young fresh-faced Trill said, her voice soft and lyrical.

"Thank you Lieutenant Kasan."

She stepped out of the outer office and waiting area and stopped cold. Opposite the entrance, leaning against the bulkhead in a casual manner was Hank. All that was missing were his Stetson and cowboy boots. The doors whispered closed behind her.

"Ma'am," he said by way of greeting.

"Hank, I didn't expect to see you up here."

"Ah guessed as much Suz. Seein' as how the *Silverfin* comes into dock and ah don't get a call from yer."

She felt her cheeks flush. "Yeah, sorry about that. We've only been in for an hour and due to leave pretty soon. If I'd had more time onboard I would have commed you."

He pushed off from the wall and stood in front of her, close enough to catch the faint scent of his aftershave—a subtle fragrance it had taken her a month of dating him to detect (and since she had, she found that it was one of the first things she noticed about him). Like a schoolgirl with a crush, she felt her heart flutter as he moved closer to her.

"Ah know it's only a stop-off. Who'd yer think had to fill the request for the replacement isolar chips, as well as restocking the *Mirage*?" he said with an easy, lop-sided smile.

She gave him a bittersweet smile—thrilled that he was keen to meet with her, but at the same time thinking about the *Mirage*. The transport ship had come through the battle without a scratch, and Rebecca Mellor was doing well considering her captivity. It was her father that was suffering now. Despite her best efforts, Lieutenant Jenka hadn't been able to do anything for the

civilian captain, and even the medical facilities on Star Station Freedom were stumped. The crew of the J-Class transport had elected to return to the Federation core, and take Jeffery Mellor to a hospital where he could get the treatment he needed. But the prognosis he'd been given wasn't good. After weeks of worrying about saving his daughter, he wasn't even aware that it was her that was holding his hand every free minute she had.

Though not a religious person, Susanna Leijten had prayed for his recovery and for the crew of the *Mirage* to have a quiet life after the hell they had faced.

"Thanks for that Hank. They need all the help we can give them. I'm just glad that the Admiral and Commander Drizuk accepted the extenuating circumstances, and decided against filing any charges against them."

"T'Rona's logical but fair," he agreed. "As for Drizuk, well ah reckon that he's a little intimidated by her." Hank paused and looked up and down the empty corridor. "As for the supplies, well ah never could refuse you Suz. But don't think that just 'cause yer're in for a flyin visit that ah wouldn't want to see yer."

Before she could reply her combadge chirped. "*Amorin to Leijten.*"

She tapped the pin on her chest. "Go ahead Commander."

"*Captain, all the former prisoners from the Chanok ship have been off-loaded, and our supplies are being transferred as we speak. We'll be ready for departure in less than fifteen minutes,*" the Benzenite stated, sounding a little surprised at how quickly things were going.

"Understood Amorin. I'm heading back now. Leijten out."

Leijten looked back at Hank Mitchell. "Good to see you're as efficient as you used to be."

"The sooner yer finish this mission, the sooner yer get to have some R&R on the station," he paused, suddenly looking a little unsure of what to say next—which was unusual for the confident and self-assured Texan.

She was about to make her goodbyes and head for the nearest transporter room, when he suddenly lunged in and planted a soft but passionate kiss on her lips. It was a short, sharp shock to the system, that she never had a chance to realise what he was doing—let alone return it. After the brief moment of

blissful confusion, he held her face in his rough hands.

“Be careful out there Suz. Ah’ve just found yer again, ah don’t want to loose yer.”

She looked into his sparkling blue eyes for a moment. Her mind was whirling in confusion; old feelings she had thought herself long over came back to the surface, memories of the good times they had had together, her misery after he left, her sense of duty and obligation to her crew. A week ago, she hadn’t even thought about Henry Mitchell, but now her emotions were at war—all because of the only man she could say that she had truly loved.

“Hank,” she began, having no clue how to end the sentence.

“Patterson to Mitchell,” the intercom chirped. *“Senior Chief, we’ve got a problem with the manifest system down in bay twenty-two.”*

“Ah’ll be there in a moment,” Hank replied, dropping his hands.

She smiled at him. “You’re timing sucks Hank.”

He chuckled. “Well it’ll give yer a reason to come back here.”

“I need a reason for that?” she asked in mock seriousness. “When I get back in, we really need to talk.”

“Sure thing.”

She wanted to say something more, but her head was still muddled, her ship was waiting and there were still a job to be done. Neither of them had the time to say some of the things that really needed to be said before their respective crews started looking for them.

“Ah’ll speak to yer soon Cap’n,” he said after a beat of awkward silence.

“I look forward to it Chief,” she replied, sounding a little overly formal. They turned and headed in opposite directions down the corridor. Her stomach was clenched tight, and her heart pounded in her chest. Only Hank could make her so confused and vulnerable and giddy, all at the same time.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, and saw that he was doing the same. He smiled at her and she returned it. Leijten held onto the moment for as long as

she could, but then she had to turn off the main corridor and head back to the *Silverfin*.

What the hell am I getting myself into? she asked herself as she headed into a transporter room. As she stepped up onto the dais and gave the operator her destination, she tried to organise her thoughts, putting aside the Pandora's Box that Hank had opened up, and concentrate on what was at hand: her ship, her crew, her mission. All of them took priority over her personal life—besides, she knew how to handle them and what to do to achieve success, unlike her rather disastrous love life.

Materialising on the *Silverfin*, she stepped off the platform, thanked Crewman Peters at the controls, and headed for the bridge. *Focus on one thing at a time Susanna*, her father's voice rung in her head. *Sometimes to appreciate the 'big picture' you have to take time and nitpick on the little things first.* It was sound advice that had helped her out many times in her career, and she would follow it now as well.

END