

# Star Trek: Sutherland Messages From Earth

By David Falkayn

## **Part 1: Making Plans**

"You did a good job with the situation on Ekos, Captain." Admiral Ross declared, his image appearing on the desk monitor in Captain Shelby's ready room.

Shaking her head, a derisive snort escaped Elizabeth as she made her reply, "I wish I could say that we did. To be honest, Sir...it was a clusterfrinx." Gritting her teeth, the blonde starship captain continued her report. "Professor Davin was murdered, and Lieutenant Rysyl, Ambassador Offenhouse and I were taken prisoner. It was only through a combination of Commander Hobson and Lieutenant Atoa's rescue teams and a good measure of luck that we were able to get out with our lives." Pausing for a moment to take a sip from her coffee, Liz continued her morose report, "And...to make matters worse, the pro-Federation government on Ekos is probably going to fall and be replaced by one that will rescind withdraw its status as an associate member of the Federation." No matter how you cut it, Sir..." Shelby sighed, "...it was a disaster."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself, Liz." Ross replied in a paternal tone. "I know Professor Davin was very important to you..." Seeing the youthful captain taking a breath to speak, the avuncular admiral held up his hand, "No...Liz...let me finish. I know you think you're responsible for what happened to the Professor, but you have to understand it wasn't your fault—there was nothing you could have done about it. Nor could you have done anything about the political fallout."

"I know you're right, Sir" Elizabeth conceded, "And I am feeling better. It's just that there are times..."

"I know." The admiral replied, acknowledging the emotional weight felt by the young captain, "And I'd probably feel the same way if I were in your shoes. I know the Professor was a lot more than just a teacher to you—he was a

mentor...and a friend. And I know you have damned few of those. But I think I can understand a little about how you feel. I might not be able to empathize—but I can sympathize. The Professor's goal was a good one—one that is still attainable. I think the worst thing that could happen would be for his sacrifice to be in vain, wouldn't you agree?"

"You're right, Sir." Liz answered back, nodding her head. Taking another sip of her coffee, Elizabeth's face twisted in distaste at the flavor of the now cold beverage, "So...what happens now? Ambassador Offenhouse is wondering when he'll be leaving. And...to be honest..." she confessed, "I'm looking forward to our next mission. The sooner I can get away from Ekos..."

"The better. I understand completely, Liz." Ross said sympathetically. A smile appearing on his face, the admiral cleared his throat. "I think you might like these orders, but I'm afraid they call for you having to put up with Ambassador Offenhouse for a bit longer."

"Sir?" The petite blonde captain interjected, surprised. "I'd have thought that the Federation Council would have wanted him back as soon as possible..."

"They do." The admiral replied, his grin growing wider. "That's where the *Sutherland* comes in." Pausing for effect, Admiral Ross announced, "Your orders are to get Ambassador Offenhouse to Earth as soon as possible."

"Earth?" Liz asked, a smile forming on her face, "Are you serious, Sir? I'd think that Starfleet Command and the Federation Council could get what they need from him through subspace rather than detailing the *Sutherland* on what amounts to a ferrying mission—not that I'm complaining, but still..."

"Switch to a secure channel." The admiral ordered as his image disappeared, to be replaced by the Starfleet emblem. Moving quickly to comply, Liz touched a button on her console. The Starfleet device replaced once again by Admiral Ross's face, the admiral cleared his throat. "What I'm about to tell you is classified—need to know only."

"Understood, Sir." Liz acknowledged.

"A diplomatic conference with representatives of the Romulan Empire is being held on Earth even as we speak." Admiral Ross announced. "The main topic of the conference will center on coordinated action against the Dominion threat." Immediately upon hearing the admiral's words, Elizabeth sat bolt upright in her seat. "I thought that would get your attention, Liz." Ross

deadpanned. “While, even going at maximum warp, you probably won’t be able to make it on time to get the ambassador to the conference; you’ll be able to get him there in time to participate in the nuts and bolts deliberations that’ll be going on afterwards.”

“I think I see...” Liz remarked, only to be cut off by the admiral.

“Right...” Ross affirmed, nodding his head, “He’ll be able to give his insights on the situation regarding possible Dominion involvement and to answer any questions that might come up.” Repressing a yawn, the admiral concluded, “Well...you have your orders, Captain. Have a pleasant trip.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Liz replied; a grin returning to her face as the admiral’s image on the computer monitor was once again replaced by the insignia of Starfleet Command. Pressing the intercom button on her desk, Captain Shelby spoke, “Commander Hobson...report to my ready room, please. We’ve got our new orders.”

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As the tunes from an old torch song, ‘Stormy Weather’, filled the air in *Rick’s*, the *Sutherland’s* lounge decorated to resemble a 1940’s era nightclub; Sam Lavelle took a sip from his bourbon and coke, “So...what are you going to do once we get to Earth?” He asked the dusky skinned woman sitting at the table across from him.

“Go home...” Ensign Maria Django replied as she took a sip of her drink, an Antarean Sunrise, “See the parents...maybe hit the beach. What about you?”

“Pretty much the same.” Sam replied as Alec, the piano player who also worked in hydroponics, smoothly switched to a Cole Porter tune. “I figured I’d go to Nairobi—see my father at the university...and then swing by Toronto and spend some time with my sister and her family.”

“You know...” Maria smiled shyly as she traced the edge of her glass with her finger, “...you could come to Rio with me—after you see your family, that is. We could go to Ipanema...”

“Sounds good.” Sam replied, flashing a roguish grin, “But what about this? Why don’t you come with me to Nairobi and then we can go to Rio...”

“Hmmm...” Maria smiled as she considered her answer. Finishing her drink,

she replied, her voice now taking on a husky quality, "Sure...why not. Sounds like fun."

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Another couple, this one consisting of the *Sutherland's* first officer, Christopher Hobson, and the operations officer, the lovely olive-skinned Deltan woman, Lieutenant Anara Rysyl, sat at another table in the bar, one close to the piano. Sipping her Trillian aurea, Anara asked, her lyrical voice accentuated by the Cole Porter song being played on the piano, "What do you plan to do with your shore leave, Chris?"

"I don't know..." The diffident first officer replied in his usual nasal tone. "To be honest, I haven't really thought about it."

"You have family..." The beautiful Deltan suggested, "How long has it been since you've seen them."

"It's been several years..." Chris began, pausing for a moment as he took a sip of his scotch, "Not since..."

Shaking her head sadly, Anara interjected, "You mean to tell me you haven't seen your family since...the accident?" Sighing at Hobson's slight nod of his head, Anara declared earnestly, "Then I'd say it's past time that you did." Not giving her companion the chance to interrupt, the Deltan continued to speak in a gentle, yet persistent tone, "They're your family, Chris. You've been punishing yourself for too long."

"Perhaps you're right. Maybe I should." Hobson replied diffidently, his lips turning up into a slight smile as he saw the pleased look on his companion's face. "What about you? What are your plans?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Anara replied with a chuckle, "I haven't really given the matter much thought."

"You know..." Chris began hesitatingly, "...you could...come along with me..."

"No..." Anara said, shaking her head gently, placing her hand on that of her companion's, "I'd be intruding...this is something I think you need to do alone."

"You're right..." Hobson acknowledged, his usual poker face returning as he

withdrew his hand from the table. "...of course. Please accept my apologies." Finishing his drink Chris stood up, "Now...if you'll excuse me...I think I'll turn in for the evening."

Watching in stunned silence as the first officer strode out of the lounge; Anara vaguely heard the muffled voice of Jadon Tol, the *Sutherland's* chief engineer and best friend of the icy Hobson, "Chris...whatever am I going to do with you..."

"Huh?" The bewildered Deltan woman exclaimed as she looked up to find the Trill engineer standing next to her. "Jadon?"

"My buddy, Chris..." The roguish Trill sighed, taking the recently vacated seat across from Anara as he gestured for the volunteer waiter to bring him a mug of synth-hol. "I've got duty in a couple of hours." The engineer explained, making a face as he took a tentative sip, "You know why drinking synth-hol is like making love in a canoe?"

Shaking her head in bemusement at the free-spirited Jadon, Anara answered back, "No...why?"

"They're both frinxing too near water!" Jadon laughed, his joke eliciting an amused chuckle from his companion. Seeing that his gag had the desired effect, the Trill engineer said in a sympathetic voice, "Don't be too hard on Chris—he's just a..."

"He's an ass." Anara completed with a frown as she sipped her drink.

"Well..." Jadon quipped, "I was going to say dumbass, but..."

"I think I like dumbass better." Anara jibed back.

"Yeah..." Jadon agreed, then, his tone gentling, he pleaded, "But don't be too hard on him...it's just that..."

"He just keeps pushing me back." Anara interrupted, her humor disappearing. "He's so afraid of allowing anyone close to him..."

"I know..." Jadon concurred and then, leaning close, he spoke in a voice barely louder than a whisper, "Look, Chris has always been the sort who kept people at a distance. When Natalie died..." Tol explained, "It was even worse. He drew so far into himself that I wasn't sure he'd ever make his way out. It took

a long time for him to finally come to grips with what happened, and to be honest, he still hasn't completely."

"I understand..." The Deltan woman replied, repressing a shudder, "I felt the pain that he went through..."

"Yeah..." Jadon conceded, "Your empathic link with him has probably made you closer to him than anyone else—including me—and I've known him longer than anyone else here."

Shaking her head sadly, Anara interjected, "Not that much closer. So much of him is still walled off." Sighing deeply, the Deltan woman added somberly, "And I don't know if I can—or even if I want to—put up with the emotional baggage..."

"You shouldn't have to." Jadon declared solemnly, "Chris has let this go on for far too long." Smiling a roguish grin at the lovely Deltan sitting across from him, the Trill engineer remarked, "You know, maybe what he needs instead of a shoulder to cry on is a good swift kick in the pants."

Flashing a wicked grin of her own, Anara rejoined, "Ok, Jadon...What do you have in that twisted mind of yours?"

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"What are your plans, Mr. Varok?" Ensign Candy Johnson asked, looking up from her computer console in the astrophysics lab.

"Excuse me, Mr. Johnson?" The elderly Vulcan responded in his usual flat tone.

"Your plans...when we get to Earth?" The bubbly ensign replied, "What are you going to do? I mean I heard that we're going to be laid up for a week or so as they do some work on the main deflector array..."

Long experienced in the human trait of incessant curiosity, Varok, bowing down to the inevitable, decided to indulge the junior officer, "I plan to meet my granddaughter—T'Pren. She is a student at Starfleet Academy."

"Oh?" Candy responded, much to the chagrin of her Vulcan superior, "What year's she in? What's her specialty?"

Taking a deep breath, Varok continued to humor the young human. "She is a third year cadet." He declared; his voice and manner not reflecting the pride that he felt deep within him for her and her accomplishment, "And is a science specialist."

"Just like her grandfather!" Candy interjected with an infectious grin. "You must be proud of her."

"Pride is an emotional response." Varok replied flatly, "And as such is illogical. But..." he added, "I do take...satisfaction...in her accomplishing her goals in the manner she has done."

"You should." Candy responded with a wicked grin as she returned to her work, "You have every right to feel that way."

Raising his eyebrow, Mr. Varok returned to his duties, silent as he remembered the conversation he had with his daughter, T'Prel, several hours earlier concerning T'Pren and some recent...illogical...decisions that she had made. Decisions that affected not just her life, but also the family honor. Decisions that he intended to discuss with his wayward granddaughter as soon as possible.

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The trite saying that goes 'Time heals all wounds' more often than not is a truism, Liz noted as the grief she had felt several days ago over the loss of Professor Davin had by now, for the most part, gone, leaving behind mostly happy memories with only the occasional painful twinge to remind her of his passing. Now, with the *Sutherland's* arrival at Earth drawing nearer, Liz began to make plans. Luxuriating in her tub, gently scented soapy bubbles tingling her skin, she smiled her first truly contented smile in days as she sipped champagne from a long crystal flute. "Computer..." The hedonistic captain ordered, "Establish a subspace communication with Sandy Moore and Jason Phillips...their subspace idents should be in my personal database."

"Idents confirmed." The computer replied, "Connection made."

"Display visual...bathroom wall monitor." Liz ordered as she set her glass down on the side of the tub next to her.

"Lizzy!" The woman, a stunning blonde wearing a blue bathrobe and lying on a large double bed grinned widely as she recognized the Starfleet captain.

"Jason! Come over here! It's Lizzy!"

"Hey Liz! Long time!" The man, a dark haired man with a goatee and wearing a towel around his waist, smiled broadly as he entered the room, joining his companion on the bed. Leering, he quipped in an English accent, "You're looking good—but aren't you out of uniform?"

"Yeah..." Sandy interjected, speaking in a sultry voice, "You look absolutely scrumptious."

"Hmmm...you two look delicious yourselves." Liz purred as she took a sip from her champagne.

"How long has it been, love?" Jason asked.

"Eight...maybe nine months..." Liz answered back.

"I can't believe it's been so long." Sandy exclaimed, "So, Baby...what's up?"

"Yeah...darling..." Jason remarked, "I hope it's nothing bad."

"No..." Liz replied, her body stiffening momentarily before she banished—for now—the memories of Professor Davin that had suddenly rushed into her mind. "In fact...it's good news. The *Sutherland* should be at Earth in a few days or so..."

"Hey!" Sandy cried out, "That means you'll be able to make it to Raul's party!"

"That's right." Jason chimed in, "You have to come, Liz...you know it's not the same without you."

"Yeah." Sandy interjected, "I remember the last time..."

"That was fun, wasn't it?" Liz quipped, "I don't think I ever..."

"Me either..." Sandy giggled.

"So..." Jason asked as Sandy began playing with his long hair, "We can count on you?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." Liz grinned as Jason kissed the back of Sandy's neck. "Hmmm..." Elizabeth remarked, flashing a brief leer as she



watched her friends growing more and more amorous, “I better let you go now. Looks like you two are getting ready to have some fun of your own.” Mock pouting, she added, “I wish I could join you.”

“You don’t have to go, Liz.” Jason protested as he undid Sandy’s bathrobe.

“No...don’t go.” Sandy added with a wicked grin as her sultry voice grew even more seductive, “We know how much you like to watch.”

“Mmmm...” Elizabeth purred, “Much as I’m tempted to, I’d better not tie up this subspace channel too long. But don’t worry; we’ll get together in a few days for fun and games.”

“Mmmm...We can’t wait,” Sandy replied in a husky voice as the man lying next to her continued his kisses and caresses.

“See you soon, Liz, darling.” Jason then said as he reached over his sensuous blonde partner to terminate the transmission. “Bye, love!” Sandy called out as the monitor went blank.

Taking another sip from her champagne, Liz lay back in her tub, “Hmmm...now, what should I wear to Raul’s orgy? I wore leather last time—I think this time I’ll go for lace. Maybe the Andorian spider-silk teddy that Garak made for me? Yes...that should do nicely.”

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Walking briskly down the corridor towards the holodeck, Denise returned the greetings of various crewmembers with a courteous smile or a hello until she made out the form of Lieutenant Atoa approaching her. Fighting down the butterflies in her stomach, the doctor smiled back as the burly security officer greeted her, “Mornin’ Denise,” Manuele called out with a grin as he took in the slender Japanese woman standing before him, “Going out for your morning run?”

“Yeah...” Denise all but stammered as she felt her whole body growing warmer while in the presence of the New Kuaian.

“So...where are you jogging this time? Boston Marathon? San Francisco? The Pythian Ridge on Alpha Centauri V? The Taelian forest on Rigel VIII?”

Smiling, Dr. Murakawa replied, “This time I thought I’d try out that program

you loaned me..."

"The cliff trail overlooking New Honolulu?" Seeing the doctor's head nodding in confirmation, Manuele smiled warmly, "Yeah...I used to love hiking there when I was a kid. I remember how my brother and I always got into trouble exploring the trails and caves..."

"You know..." Denise, forcing down the lump growing in her throat, ventured, "If you want...you can join me..."

Maintaining his smile, Manuele shook his head ruefully, "It's tempting...but...I can't right now..." He then explained, "I've got a departmental meeting in an hour...that gives me just enough time to get my stuff together and fire off a quick subspace letter to Mere..."

Upon hearing the name of the beautiful Ekosian security officer, Denise felt her heart sink as she all but tuned out the rest of Lt. Atoa's words, "...but I'd like to take a rain check if that's ok with you..." Seeing the faraway look in the doctor's eyes, the New Kauaian inquired, a note of mild concern in his voice, "Denise? Denise? You ok? You look like you're miles away..."

"Oh..." Dr. Murakawa, her face reddening with embarrassment as Manuele's words brought her back, "I'm sorry...I get like this just before a run. "I used to do it all the time just before a track meet back at the Academy..." Recovering her momentum as she spun out her lie, she further explained, "I'd get so focused on the race that..."

"I understand," Manuele interjected with a friendly smile. "So...what are you going to do when we get to Earth?"

Pausing for a moment, Denise responded, "I was planning on going to Rome...pray at the Tomb of the Saints."

"Tomb of the Saints?" The New Kauaian security chief inquired.

"Yeah." Denise smiled shyly, crossing herself. "It was built shortly after First Contact." She explained in a reverential tone. "It's a holy site for all three branches of the Catholic Church—and even some of the Protestant faiths. It's where His Holiness, John-Paul III, lies—along with the cardinals who were martyred with him."

"I see..." Manuele replied, and then, changing the subject, asked, "So...what

else have you got planned?"

"I'm not sure." Denise answered back. "I talked to my mother last night. She mentioned coming to Earth for a conference and we agreed to get together and my father lives in Tokyo. I haven't seen him in years..."

"Sounds like the perfect opportunity for a family reunion..." Manuele began and then, seeing a dark look crossing the doctor's face, the New Kauaian silently cursed himself, "I'm sorry." He apologized. "I forgot. I guess I really put my foot in my mouth this time, didn't I."

"Oh, no! Not at all!" Denise quickly replied, shaking her head. "It's not your fault. It's just Dad and I never got the opportunity to get that close and well—me and my mother have just started talking to each other again. So...getting all three of us together at the same place at the same time..."

"Might be a little awkward." Manuele interjected, nodding his head sympathetically.

"Right." Denise affirmed.

"Well..." The New Kauaian security officer suggested, "Maybe you can get together with them at different times...perhaps get an idea as to whether they'd be comfortable with each other—and whether you'd be comfortable with them at the same place at the same time..."

"Hmmm..." Dr. Murakawa responded, "Maybe...It wouldn't hurt to give it a try."

"That's my girl!" Lieutenant Atoa beamed as he glanced at the chronometer. "Oops! I better get going or I'm going to be late for my own meeting."

"Yeah...sure...go on...I'll be ok..." Denise muttered under her breath as she entered the turbolift and began her stretching exercises, "Nothing like a nice solitary run in the country to clear your mind..."

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"Approaching Sector 001." Lieutenant Lavelle announced from his position at the helm as Captain Shelby, sitting in the center chair, nodded her head in acknowledgment. "We should arrive at Earth in a few days at our current

speed.”

“Very good, Mr. Lavelle. Maintain course and speed.” Turning to Lieutenant Rysyl, the captain smiled, “Lieutenant, you might want to inform the ambassador that he’ll be leaving us soon.”

“Aye, Sir.” Anara replied, making her way to the turbolift as Manuele announced from his position at tactical.

“Captain...I’m receiving a coded signal from Starfleet Command.” He then looked up from his console, “For your eyes only.”

“I’ll take it in my ready room.” The Captain answered back as she vacated the center chair. “Commander Hobson...” She commanded as she the doors to her office slid open, “The Bridge is yours.”

Taking the seat behind her desk, Elizabeth allowed the chair to mold itself to her features before commanding, “Mr. Atoa...open the channel.” The monitor screen springing to life instantly following her security chief’s acknowledgment, the insignia of Starfleet Command was immediately replaced by the visage of Admiral J. P. Hanson, looking especially haggard. *I haven’t seen the admiral look this bad...Liz mused...since the Borg Incursion.* “Admiral?” The petite starship captain ventured, “Is everything all right?”

His lips turning up in an ironic grin, the balding admiral replied, “I’m not sure we’ll ever see all right again for some time, Elizabeth.” Taking a deep breath, the admiral spoke, “You’re aware, of course, of the conference being held with the Romulans at Antwerp?”

“Yes, Sir.” Liz responded, “We’re bringing Ambassador Offenhouse back for the follow-up discussions. Why? Has something happened?”

“You might say that.” Admiral Hanson answered back, a grimace on his face. “A bomb went off while the conference was in session.” Ignoring the shocked look on his protégé’s face, the admiral steamrolled, “It has since been confirmed that it was a changeling that planted the bomb.”

“My God...” Elizabeth gasped, momentarily shocked by the news. Recovering quickly, the headstrong captain asked, “What are our orders, Sir.”

Flashing a wide grin, the admiral exclaimed, “I knew I could count on you, Liz.” His grin vanishing, Hanson continued, “Admiral Leyton has made Ben

Sisko head of planetary security..."

"He couldn't have made a better choice." Liz observed. "So...where does the *Sutherland* fit in?"

"We're trying not to start a panic." The admiral stated, "So...for now, at least, there are no changes to your orders. Proceed on to Earth. When you arrive, you'll receive any additional orders should they be necessary."

"Understood, Sir." Shelby acknowledged in a grim tone. "What should I tell my crew?"

"Have your doctor carry out blood screenings of all personnel at once." The admiral responded quickly. "We're not sure how deeply the changelings have infiltrated our ranks." Shaking his head glumly, the admiral ran his fingers through what was left of his hair, now an unruly tangle, "You know it's bad, Liz, when you can't even be sure that your best friend isn't a changeling infiltrator." Pausing for a moment, Hanson's lips turned up into a warm smile, "I'm glad you're going to be here, Liz. I'll see you when you arrive."

Liz sat silent in her seat for several moments watching the blank monitor screen as she tried to wrap her mind around the news that she had just heard. *Shapeshifters—on Earth! I suppose it was inevitable.* She sighed as she considered the implications. *They're probably on most—if not all—of the principle home worlds—you wouldn't need a lot of them—just one or two on each world could create all sorts of chaos—and not just through sabotage.* She thought, shaking her head, *even the rumor of a shapeshifter being on a starship or a major installation could disrupt operations.* Taking a deep breath, Liz touched her comm badge, "Dr. Murakawa, I need you to report to my ready room at once...Commander Hobson...Mr. Atoa...you're to report to my ready room as well." Taking a deep breath, Liz walked over to the replicator and ordered a cup of coffee. "Playtime will have to wait..." The starship captain sighed as she took her drink, "We've got work to do now."

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## Part 2: Countdown to Crisis

As he sat down on the antique wooden bench, Admiral Leyton surveyed the almost pastoral scene before him. Well manicured gardens courtesy of the chief groundskeeper, Boothby, buildings architecturally designed so as to appear to meld in with the landscape, rather than clash with it, a deep blue sky with fluffy white cumulus clouds thanks to the weathernet, and the sound of songbirds chirping all came together to give to the admiral the perfect picture of paradise.

Sighing deeply, the bearded head of Starfleet Command grew even more pensive as he reviewed the events of the last week. *The conference bombing in Antwerp was the final nail...the admiral thought...now, more than ever, there can be no doubt. I'm right.* A steely glare to his eyes as he gazed on a snowy egret standing next to a small pond near where he sat, Leyton gritted his teeth as he realized that he couldn't be sure that that beautiful bird was in fact a bird and not a changeling *We have no choice...I have no choice. If the Federation is to be saved...if this...he decided as his eyes once more took in the panoramic view before him, is to be preserved, then I have to act.* Standing up, the admiral made his way towards the Administration building where the Commandant of the Academy, a Bolian handpicked by Leyton, kept his office. Soon, the two admirals would have a meeting...a most important meeting...a meeting with lasting consequences.

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"Assuming standard orbit, Captain." Lieutenant Lavelle reported as a familiar blue and white orb filled the *Sutherland's* viewscreen.

"Starfleet Command is hailing us, Sir." Lieutenant Atoa then called out from his position at tactical.

"Main viewer." Shelby ordered automatically, smiling as the image of Admiral Hanson filled the viewscreen, "Admiral?" Her smile disappearing, the petite captain reported, "Ambassador Offenhouse has just beamed down. What's the situation on the ground?"

"Stable for now." Hanson replied, a measure of relief in his voice. "*Concord, Eagle, and Potemkin* should arrive within the next forty-eight hours to bolster our forces—just in case those rumors of possible cloaked Dominion ships are true."

On hearing the news of the *Potemkin's* impending arrival, Lieutenant Lavelle's teeth clenched. Maria, observing Sam's reaction out of the corner of her eye, raised an eyebrow in silent inquiry. Receiving in return Sam's unvoiced "Later"; the Brazilian junior operations officer nodded her head slightly as she returned to her duties.

Ignoring the silent exchange going on between her junior officers, Liz concentrated on the admiral's words. "Also..." Hanson declared, "...the President has enacted limited security measures—ranking Starfleet officers and their families are required to undergo frequent blood screenings and we've instituted phaser sweeps of sensitive areas."

"Understood, Sir." The captain replied, "And our orders?"

"For now...maintain your current posture." His lips turning up into a wry grin, Hanson continued, "I know you and your people were hoping to just drop off Ambassador Offenhouse and take it easy for a few weeks, but until we get a better read on the situation here..."

"It's all part of the job, Sir." Shelby responded with a smile.

Nodding his head approvingly, the admiral grinned back, "Still...I'm sorry to have to rain on your parade. You all have earned a breather." Sighing, Admiral Hanson concluded, "Well, I'll let you go now, Captain. We'll meet in my office at 1100 tomorrow and discuss things further."

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Striding into the Commandant's office, Admiral Leyton extended his hand towards the Bolian admiral getting up from his seat behind the desk. "Keep your seat!" Leyton exclaimed genially as he took the Bolian's hand in his, shaking it vigorously. "I'll just take this chair over here." The Chief of Starfleet Operations said as he sat down opposite the blue skinned Commandant of the Academy. "So...how's it going, Barzhan?"

"Fine! Fine!" The Bolian replied, sitting down. "And you? How's it going at your end?"

"It could be better." Leyton grumbled, "The President still refuses to face up to the danger of the situation we're in here. The security measures he's authorized are nowhere near sufficient to deal with the threat."

“So...” Barzhan inquired in a hushed tone, “You’re saying that we’re going to have to...”

“Move on to the next phase...” Leyton completed, nodding his head, “Yes. I’m afraid so.” Giving the blue-skinned Commandant a calculating look, Leyton asked, “Are your people ready to go?”

“Red Squad’s ready when you give the word.” Barzhan replied with assurance. “They’re good kids, James. They’ll get the job done.” Pausing for a moment, the Bolian admiral tentatively asked, “What about Captain Sisko? Is he with us?”

“Ben Sisko can be trusted.” Admiral Leyton immediately responded, his confidence in his former first officer coming through loud and clear in his voice. Standing up, the bearded admiral gazed into the eyes of the Bolian admiral who had once served with him in his campaigns against the Tholians, “We’re now on the clock, Barzhan. *Operation Lights Out* commences in twenty four hours. Hopefully, then the President will then give us the tools we need to do our job. Now, I’d better get back to the office. Good luck.”

Watching as the doors closed behind the admiral, Barzhan activated his intercom, “Mr. Carroll? Have Red Squad report to my office immediately.”

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 20 hours*

Elliot Mitchell and his wife Sarah looked on fondly as their two children, Crystal and Andrew, ages five and eight, slept soundly in their beds. “They’re really looking forward to seeing their Grandpa and Grandma tomorrow,” Elliot, a junior climate technician, remarked.

“I know.” Sarah replied with a grin. “Did you see the card that Crystal made for Mom at school today?”

“Yeah.” Elliot smiled warmly. “And Andrew...his first time going on the transporter without Mommy and Daddy...he’s been so looking forward to that...”

Chuckling softly, Sarah quipped, “Of course he is...as far as he’s concerned, he’s all grown up now...” Putting her index finger to her lips as her little daughter stirred slightly in her sleep, the doting mother uttered a soft,



“Shush,” as she tiptoed over to her bed. Gently tucking in first Crystal and then Andrew, she kissed them both on the foreheads. “We better go to bed ourselves now...” She whispered, “Tomorrow’s a big day.”

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 18 hours*

“Buy you a cup of coffee, Sam?” Maria Django asked as the two ensigns assigned to relieve her and Lieutenant Lavelle at helm arrived at their console.

“Sure, Maria,” The dark haired helmsman replied as the pair made their way to the turbolift along with the rest of alpha shift, “I could use a cup right about now.”

Entering one of the *Sutherland’s* three galleys, Maria asked Sam to claim a table for the two of them as she made her way to the closest unused food replicator. Ordering an espresso for her and a coffee, sugar, no cream, for her friend, the petite young ensign handed the coffee to the dark haired Canadian as she took her seat opposite him. “So...you want to talk about it?”

After taking a careful sip of the hot beverage and setting the cup down on his table, Sam recalled, “Remember several months ago when I told you that my mother opposed my entering Starfleet Academy?” Taking Maria’s slight nod of her head as assent, Lavelle continued his narrative, “Well...when my uncle Richard—you remember me telling you he’s captain of the *DeRuyter*?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Maria said as she blew on her espresso, prompting, “Go on...”

Taking another sip of his coffee, Sam continued, “She always tells my uncle and my Dad that the reason she was so dead-set against my applying was that she didn’t want to see me get hurt...that her and her brother laying it on the line in Starfleet were enough...but that’s not the truth...” He said solemnly as he lowered his head. “The real reason is that she didn’t think I could cut it...that I wasn’t up to the job...that I wouldn’t take it seriously.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Maria replied with a snort. “Ok...yeah...you’re a nice guy and all and you’re fun to be with, but...” All traces of laughter vanishing from her face she regarded the man sitting across from her. Taking his free hand in hers, the petite Brazilian ensign declared, “...you’re also an incredibly brave,

loyal, and giving human being..." Squeezing his hand, she continued, "...and if she can't see that...then it's her who shouldn't be wearing this uniform."

"Thanks, Maria," Sam replied, squeezing her hand in response, "I think I needed to hear that."

"So..." Maria asked, "When are you going to give 'Mommy Dearest' a call?"

"I think I'll talk to Dad first..." Sam answered back, forcing a grin to his face, "Start things off on a good note before tackling Mom."

"Good." Maria declared as she stood up. Bending over, she gave her friend a kiss on his cheek, "I've got to go talk to my parents and then try to get some sleep...that is if Treasure isn't snoring up a storm!"

"Well..." Sam jibed, "If she is, you know you can always come and crash with me."

"You know..." Django rejoined with a smirk, "I might just take you up on that..."

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 16 hours*

"Mrs. Patel..." The doctor explained in his rich Australian accent, "You're right. Even a century ago, this procedure would have been considered very risky, and I won't lie to you, it is still major surgery—we'll be engaged in some very delicate work in your husband's brain, but he's in very good health for a man of his years and he stands a good chance at making a complete recovery with the operation." Pausing for several moments to give the woman sitting across from him, a slightly built Indian woman, her dark hair now mostly gray, to take in what he had just told her, the doctor further admonished, "But your husband does need this operation. The neural deterioration has reached the point where noninvasive procedures are no longer viable. Surgery is our only option here."

"I see." The woman answered back. "When do you want to do the operation?"

"Tomorrow." The doctor replied. "Just to be sure we could get him in as soon as possible, I took the liberty of putting him on the schedule." Holding out a padd for the elderly woman, the doctor requested, "I just need your

authorization here and we'll proceed."

Pressing her thumbprint on the padd, the frail woman pleaded as she stood up, "Take care of him...please."

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 10 hours*

"*Oi Mae!*" Ensign Django smiled at the woman's image on her computer monitor. Even though her skin was more than a few shades lighter than her daughter's, the older woman's dark hair and fair features easily marked the pair as mother and daughter.

"*Oi, meu filha!*" Teresa Django replied; a broad smile on her face as she regarded her daughter. "Where are you? Are you still on your way here?"

Laughing merrily, Maria answered back, "I'm already here. The *Sutherland* arrived in Earth orbit about fourteen hours ago."

"And you're still on that ship and not back home?" Teresa mock scolded, her sly wink revealing that she was merely teasing. "What sort of heartless person is your captain to keep a mother from her daughter?"

Her laughter growing louder, Maria joked back, "The type who'd have your daughter cleaning plasma coils for the next year." Her laughter disappearing, the young Brazilian added in a serious tone, "I wish we could come down, *Mae*, but we're still on alert..."

"I understand, *meu filha*." The older woman replied, her laughter vanishing as well, "I haven't seen people this nervous since the Borg Incursion. We've had half a dozen cancellations at the hotel since yesterday and *tua pai* has had some of his charters cancel out as well." Her smile returning to her face, Teresa regarded her daughter, "But I'm glad you're back and I know *tua pai* will be happy to see you too." Then, a wicked grin crossing her features, Maria's mother asked, "So...you said that you wish that 'we' could come down. Who is this other person, eh? A young man, perhaps?"

Her darkened complexion not completely hiding the blush coming to her face, Maria answered back, "Oh...all right...yes, *Mae*, it's a man." She stammered, "His name is Sam...Sam Lavelle...he's a shipmate of mine."

“Ah...” Teresa exclaimed with a laugh. “Well...bring him with you; we’d love to meet him.”

Joining her mother in laughter, Maria replied, “I’ll be sure to let him know.” Her laughter dying down to be replaced by a fond smile, the young Brazilian finished, “I’ve got to go now, *Mae*. I want to grab a quick nap before my shift. Tell *Pai* I love him and I’ll see you both soon.”

“*Tchau! Meu filha!*” Teresa quickly responded before her image vanished, to be replaced by a blank screen. Getting up out of her seat, Maria slipped under the sheets of her bed. Smiling contentedly at the fact that, for now at least, her roommate was not snoring, Ensign Django drifted off to sleep.

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“Hey, Dad.” Sam smiled as his father’s face appeared on the monitor screen. With his dark black hair and neatly trimmed beard, Michel Lavelle looked every inch the stereotypical university professor. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing fine, Sam!” Michel answered with just a slight Quebecois accent. “When are you beaming down?”

“Hopefully soon.” The younger Lavelle answered back, his smile vanishing. “Right now they want us to hold our position...”

“I understand, Son.” The older man interjected, a note of sadness in his voice, “When I found out about what happened in Antwerp, I couldn’t believe it. It’s...”

“I know, Dad.” Sam replied in a soft voice. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Mom’s ship should be here by tomorrow...”

“The *Potemkin*? It’s coming in too?” Michel exclaimed, his smile returning until he saw the distraught look on his son’s face, “Sam...don’t you think its time you and your mother settled your differences?”

“There’s nothing I’d love more...” The younger man replied, “But I’m not sure Mom wants to.”

“Now...whatever gave you that idea?” The older man asked as his image gazed into the eyes of his son.

"To be honest..." Sam admitted, "I thought we were patching things up. She seemed pleased when I got my promotion to full Lieutenant, but, when I told her I was transferring over to the *Sutherland*, she exploded."

"Why?" Michel asked, "I'll admit, I don't know that much about how Starfleet operates, but I get the impression that it was a good move for you."

"It was." Sam confirmed, nodding his head, "A very good move. I'm senior helmsman and..." He added with a note of pride in his voice, "I'm pretty sure I'm fast tracking towards my third pip."

"Now that is good news!" Sam's father declared, beaming with pride in his son. His smile disappearing, the elder Lavelle asked, "So, what has your mother so upset?"

"She hasn't told you?" Sam asked, surprised, "I thought you and Mom were getting along with each other."

"We are...we are!" Michel asserted, "It's just she never mentioned anything about it to me—except to say that you were going to the *Sutherland*." Tilting his head slightly to the left, the anthropologist added, "She also said something about it being a...trouble magnet...yeah...that's what she called it."

Chuckling, Sam quipped, "Well, it certainly is that!" His smile vanishing, the young helmsman continued, "But it's a good ship...with a good captain and a good crew." Shaking his head, the younger Lavelle grumbled, "I wish I could get Mom to see that. To see that leaving the *Enterprise* was actually the best thing I could have done."

"Your mother can be very stubborn at times." Michel commiserated, "Believe me...I know." An ironic grin on his face, the Quebec born anthropologist added, "That's both why I fell in love with her and why our marriage fell apart." Changing the subject, the elder Lavelle asked, "Do you think you'll be able to come down before you have to leave again?"

"I'm pretty sure I will." Sam replied with a smile. "If nothing happens tomorrow, I think we'll be able to take some shoreleave." His grin growing wider, the young man added, "Besides, there's someone I want you to meet."

"Oh?" Michel grinned, "And this someone would be?"

"Her name's Maria...Maria Django." Sam answered back with a shy grin, "And

I think you'll like her."

"If you like her, Son..." The older man declared confidently, "Then I know I'm going to love her."

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 8 hours*

"Come in Commander, come in!" Admiral Leyton beamed as his aide strode into his spacious office. Getting up out of his seat, he gestured towards one of the chairs facing the desk, "Have a seat. How are things proceeding?"

"We're on schedule, Sir." Commander Erika Benteen answered; the slightest hint of doubt in her voice.

Picking up on his aide's unease, the admiral asked in a fatherly voice, "What's wrong, Erika? You seem a little...tentative."

Sighing, the chestnut haired commander replied in a careful tone, "I do have one concern, Sir..."

Gesturing with his hand, Leyton prompted encouragingly, "Go ahead...you know I want my officers to feel free to express their opinions."

"It's just sir..." Commander Benteen began, "I'm not sure that we've fully taken into account the effect a total power blackout will have. Remember, when we take out the power grid, our team will be taking out all of the backup systems as well—including the climate control and other emergency systems. It could have quite a strong impact..."

"I know..." Leyton replied somberly, "I couldn't get any sleep at all thinking about it. But..." the admiral declared, his eyes now taking on a fiery gleam, "...we don't have any choice. Unfortunately, the only way this President can be made to understand just how serious a threat we face is through a powerful—and drastic—demonstration. Believe me, Erika, if there was some other way...I would take it in a heartbeat." Shaking his head sadly, the admiral concluded, "But we have no choice." Gazing into his protégé's eyes, Leyton asked, "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." Benteen answered back in a soft voice.

“Good!” The admiral exclaimed as, getting out of his chair, he walked around to where Commander Benteen stood. “Stand up please, Commander.” The admiral requested in a grave tone, taking out a small box as Erika stood. “I had these replicated yesterday. I wanted to give them to you when you officially took charge of the *Lakota* later on today, but now’s as good a time as any.” Opening the box to reveal two gold pips, Leyton beamed as he pinned the pips on Benteen’s collar, “Congratulations, Captain.”

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### *Operations Lights Out: T-Minus 6 hours*

“That’s strange...” Third Year Cadet T’Pren, eyebrow raised, opined to her green-skinned Troyian roommate, Atris, also a third year cadet, as the pair walked down the corridor towards their room.

“What?” Atris asked as she brushed back a strand of her luxurious white, mauve highlighted hair that had fallen over her right eye.

“Those two...” She said, tilting her head in the direction of two other third year cadets, both humans.

“What about them?” The Troyian cadet asked, shrugging her shoulders, “Lyman and DeWitt might be a pair of brownnosing toadies, but otherwise I don’t see what’s so strange about them.”

“They’re part of Red Squad.” T’Pren explained, “I just find it interesting that while the rest of us are confined to the dorm complex, they’re sneaking off to the Admin building again just like they did last night...”

“They’re Reddies...” Atris sneered, “You know their *drezhit* doesn’t stink. They get to do whatever they want. Besides...” she questioned in a suspicious tone, “How did you know they sneaked out last night?”

Her lips turning up into a slight smile, the Vulcan cadet responded with a shrug, “Because I followed them when they sneaked out.”

“You’re joking...” Atris exclaimed. “How did you pull that off?”

“It helps if you know how to slice into the computer...” T’Pren whispered. “I waited until they left the dorm, used the combination I got from the computer to open the door without triggering any alarms, and followed them out. They

met up with that little *nirak* Shepard and the rest of their little clique and then they all went into the Admin building.”

“Damn...” The Troyian woman swore, “You’ve got more balls than an Elasian assault commando!”

“I hope so...” T’Pren replied with a snort, “Because I’m going to need them soon. Grandfather’s coming to visit...”

“So...” Atris said, flashing a mischievous grin, “I get to see the legendary Varok. I wonder how he’s going to respond to the new you.”

“It’s going to be grim...” T’Pren answered back, a dour look on her face, “When I confirm to him what my parents have already told him, that I’ve embraced *V’tosh ka’tur*, that I have accepted my emotional self, he will probably disown me...”

“It can’t be that bad.” Atris countered, “You’re his granddaughter after all—wouldn’t that be an emotional response for him?”

“Let me tell you something...” T’Pren replied with a snort, “Don’t believe it when people tell you that Vulcans don’t have emotions. Believe me, we do. We’re also notorious for keeping grudges.” Sighing, the young Vulcan concluded, “Grandfather will disown me...and he’ll do it in a completely logical way.”

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 2 hours*

Rematerializing on the transporter pad, Captain Shelby smiled as she saw her mentor, Admiral Hanson, waiting with outstretched hand to greet her. “Welcome back, Liz...”

“It’s good to be back, Sir.” Shelby replied as she took the admiral’s hand in hers. Shaking her head, she commented as the pair made their way down a busy corridor to the Hanson’s office, “I wish we didn’t have to come under these circumstances though.” Pausing for a moment as they reached the admiral’s office, the starship captain asked, “So...how are things now?”

“Better...” Hanson declared with a smile, striking a note of confidence. “I think we’re getting a handle on it.”



“Good.” Liz exclaimed as Admiral Hanson ushered her into his office, “My people will be glad to hear that.”

“I’m sure they will.” The admiral replied, ordering two iced teas from the replicator. “Here...” he said, giving one of the glasses to Elizabeth while he took the other for himself. “Closest you can get to sun-brewed tea without it being the real thing.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Liz answered back, relaxing in the comfortable chair across from the admiral’s desk. Taking a sip from the cool drink in her hands, she asked, “So...what do we do now?”

“We’ll keep at our current level of alert for another day or two...” Hanson replied, “After that...if nothing happens...we’ll go back down to normal operations.” Taking another sip of his tea, the admiral added, “That’ll give you time to see your parents...”

Her face hardening, Elizabeth responded carefully, “That’s probably not such a good idea, Sir.”

Sighing, Hanson addressed his young protégé in a paternal tone, “I might be overstepping my bounds here, Elizabeth...but...I’ve known you for a long time and your father for an even longer time...don’t forget, I served with him on the old *Exeter*. You’re both two of the most stubborn, willful individuals I’ve ever met...which is probably why you’re both such good starship captains.” Shaking his head sadly, the admiral added as he ran his hand through what was left of his hair, “But those two traits have also kept the two of you apart for years. He’s not getting any younger, Liz...” Hanson admonished, maintaining his fatherly tone, “Not to mention your mother...Anna’s been caught in the middle between the two of you for far too long.”

“I’ll admit...” Liz reluctantly conceded, carefully choosing her words, “...that it’s been rough on Mom and...maybe...I’ve been unfair to her.” Sighing as her old mentor looked on at her, Shelby grudgingly agreed, “Oh...all right...I’ll talk to Dad...if we get the chance. But I can’t promise you anything.”

“That’s my girl!” Hanson beamed approvingly as he finished his drink. Standing up, the admiral patted his protégé on her shoulder, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to let you go now, Liz. I’ve got a late meeting with Admirals Shanthi and Paris...” he said with a sly wink, “...and I need time to firm up my shields before meeting those two...”

“Understood, Sir.” Liz laughed as she made her way to the exit. “And...thanks again, Admiral...”

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 1 hour*

Holding on to her husband’s hand, Rina Patel tried to smile through her tears as the doctor and his staff entered. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Patel...” The Australian doctor consoled, “I promise I’ll take good care of him.” Taking out a hypospray, the doctor injected it into the elderly man’s neck. Nodding his head in satisfaction as he ran his tricorder over his patient’s body, the doctor smiled, “So far...so good.” Nodding his head at one of the attendants who then touched a button on the biobed, the doctor once again addressed Rina, “We’ll wait awhile—give the anesthetic and the nutrients were putting into his system a chance to take effect and then we’ll perform the surgery.”

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“Crystal! Andrew!” Sarah Mitchell called out in an exasperated voice as her husband, collecting the lunchtime dishes, placed them into the reclamation chute. “Hurry up! Your father has to go back to work!”

Pushing the button next to the chute, Elliot smiled as he turned towards his wife, “I’ll see you later, honey.” He said as he gave her a kiss.

“Don’t forget us, Daddy!” Two voices called out behind him.

“Now, how could I ever forget my two angels!” The doting father exclaimed as, kneeling down, he embraced both children in a tight bear hug. “Now...you be good at Grandpa and Grandma’s, ok...”

“Ok, Daddy...” Crystal, the youngest, said with a shy smile as her father kissed her on the forehead.

“Don’t worry, Daddy...” Andrew declared proudly, “I’ll be sure she’s good.”

Laughing, Elliot mussed his son’s hair, “You just be sure that you behave yourself, young man!” The father proclaimed with a broad grin. Getting back on his feet, turned once again to his wife, “I better go now, honey. We’re running a new program today and I need to get in on time.”

“Ok, honey.” Sarah responded as she gave her husband another kiss, “I’ll see you this evening.” Looking down on her children, the loving mother smiled warmly, “Ok guys...time to get changed out of your play clothes. We’re going to have to get a move on if we’re going to get to the transporter pad on time.” Clapping her hands, she commanded in a voice familiar to mothers, everywhere, “Now!”

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“Pretty day, Manoel!” Joao, the first mate of the charter boat, Teresa, exclaimed as he looked up into the cerulean sky.

“It should be...” Manoel Django, an athletic, dark complexioned man, quipped, a toothy grin on his face, “The climate control net said it would be.” Cutting the boat’s engine off, the charter boat owner/operator called down to the divers suiting up on the deck. “This is the spot. You won’t find better reef diving for miles.”

As the divers entered the water with a splash, Joao asked his employer and brother-in-law, “So, did you hear from *minha irma*?”

“*Sim*,” Manoel responded with a warm smile, “She said Maria’s back.”

“She is? Is the little firecracker at the hotel?”

“*Nao*” Manoel replied; shaking his head, “She’s still on her ship—in orbit. She told Teresa that Starfleet didn’t want to take any chances so they’re keeping them on alert.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Joao agreed. “Still...I hope they’ll let her spend at least a couple of days with us.”

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 30 minutes*

“You all understand your tasks...” Cadet Riley Shepard instructed. “The *Lakota* will beam us into the global power distribution complex in Lisbon; we disable the power relay system and all the backups...”

“All of the backups?” Cadet Dorian Collins asked in a shocked tone.

"All of the backups." Cadet Shepard emphasized, "Those are our orders." His eyes focused on Collins, Shepard demanded, "If anyone does not feel that they can carry out these orders, they need to say so now." Satisfied that Collins had dropped her questioning stance, Shepard smirked inwardly, "Good. We're all on the same page." Activating his comm badge, the young cadet spoke, "Shepard to *Lakota*. Red Squad is ready for transport."

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"Captain?" Lieutenant Atoa reported from his position at tactical, "They're here." Three starships came into sight in the *Sutherland's* main viewer. The *Excelsior*-class *Concord* and *Potemkin* and the *Nebula*-class *Eagle* appeared in a triangular formation with the *Eagle* at the apex of the triangle and the two *Excelsiors* at the bases.

"And here comes Mom..." Lavelle muttered sotto voce as he immediately picked out the *Potemkin* amongst the other ships.

"Focus, Sam..." Ensign Django whispered. "Put 'Mommy Dearest' out of your mind for now."

"Two *Excelsiors* and another *Nebula*..." Commander Hobson noted dryly, "We're not bringing much to the table if there really is a cloaked Dominion fleet on its way here."

"You go with what you've got, Commander..." Liz riposted in an equally wry tone before addressing her tactical officer, "Mr. Atoa, hail the *Eagle*." Picking up the padd which sat on her lap, she quickly glanced at the personnel entry for the *Eagle*, burning the name of the ship's captain into her memory. The images of the three starships now replaced by that of a brown haired, blue eyed man sitting in the center chair, Elizabeth smiled, "Captain Owens...it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Captain Shelby..." Owens responded politely, yet stiffly, "The pleasure is mutual. What is the current situation?" The *Eagle's* captain asked, getting down immediately to business.

"We're stable for now..." Shelby replied, matching the other captain's detachment, "Admiral Hanson has ordered us to hold station until further notice—just in case."

"Understood, Captain." Owens acknowledged in a formal tone. "If there's nothing further..."

"No..." Elizabeth responded in a cold voice, "That covers it. Shelby out."

"So..." Commander Edison commented with a twinkle in his eye, "That was the infamous Captain Shelby."

"That's her." Captain Owens tersely acknowledged.

"You sound like you don't like her." Edison observed, speaking in a low tone so that their conversation could not be overheard.

"It's not a matter of liking or not liking her." Owens replied in an equally low voice, "It's just that I don't think someone like her has any business wearing that uniform—much less commanding a starship."

"What do you mean?" Edison gently probed, keeping his voice low. "It can't be just because she likes having a good time..."

"No..." Owens shook his head, "...it isn't...at least not completely." Taking a deep breath, the *Eagle's* captain said, "Look, Gene...I don't want to talk about it right now. Let's just say I have my reasons and leave it at that."

"Ok..." Edison replied, respecting his captain's wishes, "Sure. But I'd still love to score an invite to her next party."

As he looked down on his padd, a slight grin appeared on Michael Owen's face. "Get me the *Lakota*." The *Eagle's* captain ordered. Turning towards Edison, he explained, "Erika Benteen's finally made captain and got the *Lakota*. It's about time..." He then said in a much softer voice, "In fact, it's past time."

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"Stuck up prick." Captain Shelby muttered under her breath before putting the captain of the *Eagle* out of her mind. Looking down on her padd, Liz memorized the names of the other two captains before addressing her tactical officer, "Mr. Atoa, get me Captains Teras of the *Potemkin* and Lynwood of the *Concord*."

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### *Operation Lights Out: T-minus 0*

“Ok...we’re in.” Cadet Shepard whispered after he and his team beamed undetected into the Lisbon power distribution center. Walking to the main console, the young cadet nodded his head at the duty technician, a former crewman of Admiral Leyton’s on the *Okinawa*. Nodding his head in return, the technician turned around, exiting the facility. “Let’s do this.” The leader of Red Squad ordered as his people took their stations at the various consoles, inputting the codes that would soon plunge the entire planet into darkness.

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“We have to be very careful here...” The operating surgeon said; addressing the surgical residents as he carefully and skillfully manipulated the laser scalpel in his hands. “Now...this is the most delicate part of the entire operation...”

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“Grandpa...Grandma...” Little Crystal shouted out with glee as she saw her grandparents on the communications screen. “See what I did?” She asked proudly as she displayed the card that she had made in school the other day.

“It looks beautiful dear.” Crystal’s grandmother replied with a beatific smile.

“We can’t wait to see it, darling.” The little girl’s grandfather added before addressing the little boy standing next to his sister. “Won’t be long, Andrew and you’ll be taller than me!”

“I’m already taller than Frankie Munroe!” The little boy responded with a smile, “And he used to be the tallest boy in my class.”

“Elliot and I thank you both for looking after the kids.” Sarah chimed in as she gathered her children to her. “We’re looking forward to spending our anniversary in the mountains this weekend.”

“You two deserve the time off, Dear.” The elderly man replied.

“Charles is right, Sarah. We’re only too glad to look after Crystal and Andrew.” The woman added with a smile, “You two go off and have a good time and don’t worry about a thing.”

"Thanks, Mom...Dad..." Sarah replied as she gave her children one last hug. "Now, Andrew...Crystal...remember to be good for your grandparents and when you get home, you just might find a little surprise waiting for you." Smiling warmly as she gazed at her children's faces, Sarah kissed them both before guiding them to the transporter pad.

As the attendant guided the children to their positions, he smiled at the young mother, "Don't worry, Ma'am...I've been doing this for years." Smiling at the children, he asked, "Ready?"

"Energize!" Andrew ordered, acting just like the starship captain he was planning on being when he grew up.

"Bye, Mommy!" Crystal called out; waving to her mother was the attendant manipulated the controls, surrounding the young children with its blue glow.

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"Now!" Cadet Shepard called out triumphantly as he pressed the button. Touching his comm badge, he ordered, "*Lakota*...beam us up."

"We did it!" The youthful cadet gloated, pumping his fist in the air. "We brought down the entire grid! Are we good—or what!"

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"Oh my God..." Lieutenant Smithurst, the beta shift helmsman for the *Sutherland*, uttered in a low voice as he saw the bright urban lights that dotted the night side of the planet suddenly vanish, plunging that hemisphere into darkness.

"Lieutenant Rysyl?" Lieutenant Nyota Dryer called out from her position at tactical, "All communications with the planet have ceased. Power readings have ceased as well." A note of alarm creeping into her voice, she further reported, "The planetary defense grid is down too."

Anara Rysyl, sitting in the center chair as the officer on duty, immediately touched her comm badge. "Captain Shelby to the bridge at once." Turning towards Lieutenant Dryer, she further ordered, "Take us to Yellow Alert and signal the other ships in the task force." Her voice taking on a grim tone, she declared, "This might be it."

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"How are his vitals?" The doctor called out as he connected another severed ganglia.

"All green." The nurse called back. "Blood pressure is..."

Before she could finish her sentence the operating room went black.

"What the hell?" The surgeon cursed, "Where's the damned power? If we don't get life support back on now, this man is going to die!"

"There's no power, Doctor!" The nurse answered back in an alarm filled voice, "Communications are down too."

"Damn!" The doctor swore again; sweat pouring from his body as he struggled in vain to save his patient. But without power to keep the life support machines that Mr. Patel's body was tied into, his blood couldn't circulate and his lungs could no longer take in air. It took mere moments for Ajit Patel, husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather, to die.

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As the transporter effect surrounded the young children, beginning the process that would convert their molecules into data streams, everything went dark. The communications screen...the instrument panel...the transporter pad. Everything. But the transporter pad wasn't empty. Knowing what was about to happen, the transporter attendant quickly turned the now distraught mother around, clutching her face tightly to his chest.

"Don't turn around, Ma'am!" The attendant ordered, "Don't!"

"My children!" Sarah cried out, sobbing into the man's chest, "Where are my children? Crystal? Andrew?"

Turning his eyes from the two misshapen lumps of protoplasm sitting on the transporter pad where two innocent, laughing children once stood, the transporter technician, tears flowing down his cheeks, said in a soft voice, "They're gone, Ma'am...they're gone. I'm so sorry. I'm so...so...sorry."



### Part 3: Unintended Consequences

Striding on to the bridge as soon as the turbolift door slid open, Shelby called out to Lieutenant Rysyl, who, at that moment was vacating the center seat, "Report."

"We have a planet-wide power blackout. Secondary and tertiary backups are down as well." The Deltan operations officer reported as Commander Hobson entered the bridge, assuming his usual position by the captain's side. "The climate control net and planetary defenses are also down."

"Contact the other starships." Captain Shelby immediately ordered, turning to Lieutenant Dryer, the tactical officer currently on duty. As the other starship captains appeared on the main viewer in split screen, Liz addressed them, "I'm sure you've all picked up on what's going on. We need to coordinate relief efforts so that we're not tripping all over each other."

"I agree." Michael Owens, captain of the *USS Eagle*, promptly replied. "What are your suggestions, Captain?"

"*Lakota* has made contact with Admiral Leyton in Starfleet Command." The newly minted Captain Benteen interjected, earning a raised eyebrow from Shelby and a pleased look from Owens. "The President has authorized the Admiral and Starfleet to implement emergency measures. We'll be acting to transport security forces to assist in maintaining order, maintaining communications between Starfleet and other essential services, and otherwise acting on Admiral Leyton's orders." Benteen declared, putting special emphasis on the last phrase.

"Understood." Liz responded. "As for the rest of us..." the captain suggested, addressing the four other captains on her screen, "I would suggest that we divide the planet into four quadrants with each ship taking responsibility for one quadrant."

"Sounds good." Captain Lynwood of the *Concord* replied as he stroked his seal-brown mustache. "We'll take quadrant four."

"We'll take three..." Captain Taras of the *Potemkin* chimed in, his antennae twitching.

"Good." Shelby answered back. "*Sutherland* will take one."

“And *Eagle* will take two.” Owens interrupted.

“All right then...” Liz snapped, “Let’s do this.”

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*Joseph Gannon Memorial Hospital, Houston Texas*

“Dammit!” Dr. Mark Neal cursed as he continued administering CPR to his elderly patient. “I’m not going to lose you too, Olivia. Come on...you can do it.”

“Doctor...” A dark skinned nurse said in a low, sad tone, “It’s too late...there are others.”

“I know...” The balding physician replied, sighing as he reluctantly ceased his life saving efforts. “Mark time of death...” He declared as he took out an antique windup watch out of his pocket, “...at 1315.” Shaking his head as he moved down to the next patient, the doctor somberly noted, “If we don’t get power back on line soon, we’re going to lose all of them.”

Almost immediately after uttering his dire prognosis, the doctor, along with his nurse, heard the almost unmistakable sound of a transporter. Looking up, they saw three figures materialize in front of them—all three wearing Starfleet blue uniforms, the one in the middle, an apparently Eurasian woman, with a human male on one side of her and a Denobulan woman on the other. More importantly though to the exhausted doctor and nurse was what the three Starfleet officers were carrying—emergency power generators.

“I’m Doctor Denise Murakawa,” The Eurasian woman stated as she walked up to Dr. Neal and his nurse.

“Thank heaven you’re here, Dr. Murakawa.” Dr. Neal responded with a sigh of relief. “I’ve already lost three patients and I’ve got more on this wing that are going to die if we don’t get some power restored soon—not to mention the pediatrics stasis wards.”

“These power generators should restore your critical systems.” Dr. Murakawa replied as she plugged hers into a recessed wall slot. The biobeds springing to life once again, they resumed their primary function of providing the patients occupying them what they needed to stay alive as Denise watched, monitoring them to ensure their proper functioning. Addressing the two

medics accompanying her, the *Sutherland's* CMO ordered, "Go to pediatrics and stasis and get the power going there."

"Nurse Reynolds will show you where to go." Dr. Neal interjected, motioning with his hand for his nurse to accompany the Starfleet crewmen. Turning towards the attractive Eurasian doctor standing in front of one of the biobeds, the attending physician uttered, "Thank you, Doctor."

"I'm just sorry we couldn't get here sooner." Denise replied as her eyes fell upon the covered body of the patient that had just recently died. Turning her gaze away from the deceased patient, Dr. Murakawa continued, "I'm afraid I have to go now. Is there anything else you need before I have to go?"

"No..." Dr. Neal shook his head, "I don't think so."

Nodding her head, Denise managed another slight grin, "I'll leave Crewmen Phylis and Rogers with you for now..." she said as she handed the doctor a comm badge. "If you need any more help, just use this to contact the *Sutherland*." Touching her own comm badge, the Eurasian doctor spoke, "This is Dr. Murakawa, beam me up." *One down and too many more to go.*

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### *Somewhere off the Brazilian coast*

"Manoel...I thought you told me that the climate net said that we were supposed to have clear weather today." Manoel Django's brother, Joao remarked, pointing at the darkening skyline to the east of the charter boat that Manoel owned and operated. "Looks like we've got a storm brewing."

"*Sim*." Manoel acknowledged as he stroked his chin. "I'll contact climate control and see what's going on." Touching a button on his control panel, he grunted, "That's weird. They're not answering. I'll try Teresa." His face now showing signs of concern, the dark skinned charter boat owner said, "Nothing there either. It looks like all the comm lines are down."

As the clouds overhead grew darker, Joao commented as he began to suit up, "If the comm channels are down, we're not going to be able to contact the divers. I better go down and get them back up soon."

"Good idea." Manoel agreed. "Better hurry...the way those clouds are gathering, I'd say we don't have much time before the storm hits."

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### *Western Hemisphere Climate Control Net, Miami*

Elliot Mitchell looked out the window at the Miami skyline, his face etched with worry as the rain cascaded down.

"It's weird..." His coworker, Helena Thomas, commented. "The rain...this is the first time I've seen naturally occurring rain...I mean rain that we didn't have anything to do with."

"Dangerous too." Elliot pointed out as he gazed about the darkened climate control facility. "The weather patterns that we've controlled for so long are now beginning to reassert themselves. If we don't get a handle on this soon—we could be facing some very...very...dangerous weather."

Placing a hand on her friend's shoulder, Helena observed, "That's not all you're worried about."

"You're right." Elliot confirmed. "It's Sarah and the kids..."

"I'm sure they're ok." Helena comforted. "Didn't you tell me that Crystal and Andrew were going to their grandparents while you and Sarah took the weekend off?" Taking her coworker's single nod of the head as his answer, the dark haired woman continued, "Well...there you go. They're either at home with their mother or they're at the grandparents." Pointing to the Starfleet security troopers who had suddenly materialized outside their building, she smiled, "See...Starfleet's already on it."

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### *Off the Brazilian Coast*

Helping the last of the divers up on to the boat, Joao grinned as he looked up at the small craft's skipper, "All present and accounted for Manoel!" Feeling the stinging rain on his cheeks as well the increasingly choppy seas, the first mate shouted, "We better get back home now before it gets worse out here."

"Sim!" Manoel called back as he engaged the charter boat's engines. "Get our passengers inside!" He ordered as he steered a course for home. The experienced boater tried to negotiate the increasingly violent seas as waves

soaked the deck, tossing the small boat about.

"Damn!" Joao cursed as a tall wave crashed on the deck. "If we don't get out of this soon!"

"We'll make it!" Manoel shouted as he guided his boat through the squalls, a toothy grin on his face as he pointed to the shoreline, "See!"

"I see!" Joao called back, managing a shaky grin of his own as the small craft began to pull away from the storm, "But, I think, brother-in-law that I am also going to be very seasick!"

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### *Midwest Power Distribution Node: Chicago*

Materializing in the main complex of the power distribution complex, Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol, along with four of his engineering staff, greeted the gray haired woman who approached.

"I'm Cecily Richards." The woman said by way of introduction as she held out her hand. "Administrative supervisor."

"Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol." The joined Trill replied, taking the administrator's hand in his. "Chief Engineer, *USS Sutherland*."

"While I'm glad to see you..." Ms. Richards remarked, "I'm not sure what you could do here. All of our computers are tied into the main computers in Lisbon. We can't do anything until they're back on line."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." Jadon answered back with a roguish grin. "While you're right in that we won't be able to restore full power to the entire Midwest, I think we might be able to provide limited power to emergency facilities."

"If you can even pull that off it would be great..." the administrator replied dubiously, "...but I don't see how you're going to be able to do it."

Turning to his people, Jadon called out, "Treasure! Get started on that power transfer relay. Tompkins! You and M'rys tackle setting up the bypass system." Clapping his hands, Tol commanded, "Let's move it people!"

Turning back to the administrator, Jadon explained. "We're going to set up a power transfer between your node and the three other nodes in this quadrant with the *Sutherland*..."

"Can your ship meet all our power demands?" Cecily inquired; a doubting look still on her face. "That's an awful lot of power to supply to a pretty large area."

"That's why we're only going to be able to supply a limited amount of juice." Jadon replied. "Also, we have teams with portable generators providing power to hospitals and other facilities which help take some of the load off. Still, the lights are going to be out for ninety-nine percent of the population in your region," the Trill engineer admitted as the sound of thunder boomed in the distance. "But at least we'll be able to get some power to those who need it most." Shrugging his shoulders, Tol concluded apologetically, "It's better than nothing."

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*Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

"*Mae Deo!*" Joao swore as he leaped off the boat, mooring rope in hand. "We made it!"

Helping his seasick passengers off the boat, Manoel surveyed the darkened beach and buildings. "The power..." The ebony skinned skipper remarked, "What happened?"

"Changelings." A voice answered back. Turning towards the voice, Manoel quickly recognized the form of an Andorian wearing a gold and black Starfleet uniform. "Ensign Ta'var...Starfleet security." Taking note of Joao securing the small boat with the mooring line and then glancing at the lightning flashes off to sea, the young Andorian remarked, "You were fortunate to make it back."

"We wouldn't have..." one of the divers exclaimed, "...if it weren't for Mr. Django here."

"Yeah..." Another diver chimed in, "He saved us all!"

"That's good." The security officer replied before inquiring, "Does anyone require medical attention?"

"Just for seasickness, I think..." Manoel answered back with a slight smile as the divers all nodded their heads.

Cracking a smile as he motioned for two other security troopers, both human, to join him, the Andorian instructed, gesturing at one of the two officers, "These men will take you all to a medical facility and then to wherever you're staying..." As the group prepared to leave, the young ensign advised, "Once you're back at home, you'll need to stay there—there's a dawn to dusk curfew until further notice."

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### *USS Sutherland*

"All relief teams have reported in and we have initial casualty figures." Commander Hobson reported frowning as he handed his captain a padd. "It's not good, Sir."

Glancing down at the padd her first officer had just given her, Liz frowned, "At least a thousand dead world-wide." She sighed, shaking her head, "And these are just the initial numbers. I'm afraid they're going to get much higher before all is said and done." Addressing her tactical officer, Shelby inquired, "Are you picking up any readings that might indicate cloaked ships?"

"No, Sir." Lieutenant Dryer responded.

"That's odd..." Liz commented, cupping her chin. "What about Andor, Vulcan, and Tellar? Anything unusual going on with them?"

"Just normal chatter and communications coming from those worlds, Sir." Nyota replied, shaking her head, "Same thing from Trill, Betazed, Rigel, and Alpha Centauri. No disturbances of any kind reported."

"This doesn't make sense." The captain remarked as she drummed the arm of her chair with her fingers. "If one or more cloaked fleets really did sneak through the wormhole, then what is the Vorta or Founder in charge waiting for?"

"It is most illogical." Lieutenant Commander Varok interjected from his science station.

"Exactly." Liz agreed. "If I were the Dominion commander, I'd launch my

attack a few hours after the sabotage.”

“In other words...” Hobson interjected, “Right about now.”

“Exactly!” Liz exclaimed, her finger drumming ceasing as she gazed intently at the main viewer. Once again calling out to Lieutenant Dryer, she asked, “Anything now?”

“No, Sir.” Nyota replied, repeating her earlier answer. “No signs of cloaked ships.” Shrugging her shoulders, she added, “It’s just like normal.”

“Sir?” Sam Lavelle ventured from his station at the helm, “Why would you wait a few hours? Why not attack immediately?” The helmsman asked as he stared at the placid image of the Earth in orbit currently displayed on the main viewer. “I’d think that right after the sabotage would be better. They’d have the advantage of surprise and shock.”

“There is that...” Shelby acknowledged, stepping into the captain’s role as teacher as she continued to carefully eye the main viewscreen, “But by waiting for just an hour or two, I’d still have all the advantages of an immediate attack plus all the Starfleet ships in the area would be tied up in relief activities, slowing their response times. The trick, Mr. Lavelle, is to time your attack for just the right moment—you don’t want to wait so long that additional reinforcements could arrive before you secure your objective.”

“I think I see, Sir.” Lavelle replied, taking in the impromptu lesson. “So what do we do? Cease or curtail our relief efforts?”

“We can’t do that.” Liz answered back, shaking her head as the casualty figures that she had read earlier flashed back into her mind. “We’ve got people down there depending on us. Still...” she said, “Something’s not quite right here...” Turning to the ebony skinned woman manning the tactical console, the captain ordered, “Get me Captain Sisko. Maybe he has some ideas as to what’s going on.”

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### *Western Hemisphere Climate Control Net, Miami*

“I think that does it!” Lieutenant Louise Hopkins, the chief engineer of the Eagle exclaimed from the main control console as she inputted a numerical code.



"All systems reading optimal." The *Eagle's* operations officer, DeMara Deen reported. "Looks like your idea of using the *Eagle's* engines to restore the climate control net worked."

"I got the idea from the *Sutherland's* engineer." Lieutenant Hopkins grinned before warning, "It's only a temporary fix though." Turning towards the current duty supervisor, she said in an apologetic tone, "I'm sorry, but you won't be able to have the complete control over the climate that you would normally have. However, you can monitor conditions and you should be able to deal with any potentially dangerous climatic conditions such as tornadoes and tropical storms—provided you don't get hit with too many at once, that is."

"We'll take whatever we can get, Lieutenant." The supervisor replied, a smile on his face. "Thank you."

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### *Starfleet Academy*

"Something's not right..." Cadet Second Class T'Pren declared, the flickering light of a single candle combining with the low light of her padd to provide the only illumination in the room she shared with her classmate, a green-skinned Troyian named Atris.

"Oh?" Atris snorted as she circled her arm to encompass the dark room, "I wonder what gave you that idea? Maybe the fact that the power's out and we're sitting here in the dark!"

"Well...that..." T'Pren chuckled, a sight her roommate still had not completely gotten used to, "And..." she said, her laughter vanishing as she handed her padd to the Troyian cadet, "...this."

"This looks like a..."

"Transport log." T'Pren finished, "Yeah. Check the last entry." The Vulcan said, pointing at the bottom of the padd.

"Hmmm...looks like the Reddies beamed on to the *Lakota*..." Atris thought for a moment and then gasped, "Wait a minute...we're on lockdown! So what are they doing beaming on to the *Lakota* and how the hells did you get your

hands on the transport log? No..." The Troyian woman laughed as she shook her head in astonishment, "Don't tell me—I don't think I want to know. Still..." She repeated, her laughter vanishing, "What were they doing?"

"That's what I've been asking myself." T'Pren admitted. "After we split up yesterday, I followed our two pet Reddies: Lyman and DeWitt."

"So..." The Troyian woman asked, her curiosity aroused, "Where did they go?"

"Same place they went last time." T'Pren answered back with a smirk, "The Commandant's office." Pausing for a moment, the Vulcan cadet continued, somewhat smugly, "I'll bet not too many people have noticed this—the Reddies have done a pretty good job of covering their traces, but this has become something of a habit for them recently. I've counted five meetings this week alone—with this last one being the third time since the lockdown."

"So..." Atris remarked, shrugging her shoulders, "They're 'special'..." She said with more than a hint of sarcasm, "They're always getting to do stuff we mortals don't get a chance to do."

"Yes..." T'Pren agreed before countering, "But don't you think it's more than a little..." her lips curled up into a smile at her next word, "...illogical...for them to be sent off on a 'training' mission in the middle of an Academy-wide lockdown?"

"Perhaps..." Atris conceded. "But what can we do about it?"

"Hmmm..." T'Pren vocalized as she considered her choices, "I don't think going to the Commandant's a good idea—leaving out the fact that he won't like my hacking into the computer system, his office was where the Reddies were all meeting at."

"So..." Her Troyian roommate asked, "What other options are there?"

Shaking her head, the lithe Vulcan cadet responded with a wry grin, "There is someone..." Calling up a saved article on her padd, she showed it to her roommate.

"Pava Lar'ragos?" Atris questioned as she glanced down at the padd. "Now I remember!" She exclaimed, "He was the guy who went back into the Federation embassy during the Tsen'kethi crisis to bring back the flag. How do you know him?"

"I don't." T'Pren admitted, "But Grandfather knows him. They worked together several years ago on some project or other. Don't ask me what it was though—Grandfather never told me." Sighing, the young Vulcan remarked in an ironic voice, "Hopefully, Lar'ragos will at least listen to me before he has me sent to counseling."

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Once in the safe privacy of her ready room, Captain Erika Benteen, after taking a cup of jasmine tea from the replicator slot, sat down behind her desk. "Computer..." the newly minted captain ordered, "Connect me with Admiral Leyton at Starfleet Command."

On seeing the image of his former aide in his monitor screen, the bearded admiral managed a brief smile, "Erika. I was about to contact you." Letting out a breath of air, Leyton intoned, "Everything is going even better than we expected—President Inyo granted us full emergency powers, and the response of Earth's population to our intervention has been exactly what we thought it would be—they see our security patrols as what they are—a source of security and safety."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sir." Benteen responded before glancing down at the padd on her desk, "Admiral..." she began nervously, "...have you seen the latest casualty figures? Five thousand dead."

"Five thousand..." Leyton gasped, shaking his head in genuine sorrow, "We...I...knew that there would be...consequences...when we brought down the power grid, but I had no idea..."

"I know, Sir." Benteen interjected, speaking in a soft voice, "Most of the dead were elderly or critical care patients in hospital, with some deaths storm or weather related. Two of the deaths..." she said, choking back a sob, "...were two children who died when the power cut while they were beaming..." Shaking her head, Erika lamented, "It was a freak occurrence. Under most circumstances, the transport would have been aborted or they would have been stored safely in the transport buffers, but...when the power cut out..."

"They were past the fail safe point..." Leyton finished in a somber tone as he shook his head. Pausing for a moment, the admiral said, "You're right, Captain, the loss of those children...as well as the others...was a tragedy." Speaking now with increased resolve, the admiral's deep baritone voice resounding

through the monitor's speaker, "But think of how many more lives would be lost if we didn't do this—if the Federation remains placid in the face of the Changeling threat. Instead of five thousand dead...it could be five billion dead... more as two entire quadrants are ravaged."

"I realize that, Sir." Captain Benteen replied, "But..."

"It doesn't make it any easier when you see those names..." Leyton interjected, smiling beatifically on his protégé. "I understand, Captain. But you have to remember..." the admiral continued, "...that those people...those two children...didn't die for nothing. Through their deaths..." he concluded as his eyes took on an especially sharp focus, "...the Federation will be saved."

As the admiral's image faded out, Erika Benteen gazed intently at the now blank screen. For the first time since she had begun her service under Admiral Leyton, she began to doubt the rightness of her cause.

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#### *Lisbon, Portugal: Main Power Distribution Net*

As he looked on at the technicians busy restoring the power distribution grid, Pava Lar'ragos shook his head. "Whoever did this knew what he was doing." The security specialist remarked to the engineer standing next to him, who was at that moment taking a quick break.

"Tell me about it." The engineer replied with a sigh. "I don't think I've seen such a professionally done job—the changeling that did this had an intimate knowledge of our codes and system layouts."

"Yeah..." Lar'ragos answered back in a guarded tone, "...you'd think."

"Well..." The engineer said with a smile as he stretched, "Time to get back to work."

Spotting his relief approaching, Pava grinned back, "I'll see you later. I'm done for the day."

"Some people have all the luck!" The engineer quipped as he returned to the console he'd been working on, "I've been here forty eight hours straight. It'd be nice to sleep in a real bed for a change instead of a cot."

As he walked back to his own temporary quarters, Pava thought back to his brief conversation with the engineer. *Something's not right.* The suspicious El-Aurian thought. *Infiltrating the conference with the Romulans and planting a bomb? That's easily doable for any shapeshifter worth their salt. But to take down the power grid while leaving the consoles intact...that takes a different skill set entirely. Getting in wouldn't be a problem...* Pava concluded as he mused over the problem, *But our shifter would need to have either been here for a long time or would have to have been a very quick study to be able to take down the primary system and all the backups.* Shaking his head as he opened the door to his quarters, Pava muttered to himself, "Stranger and stranger."

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### *Starfleet Academy*

"I hope they get the power back on soon..." Atris remarked as she stepped out of the bathroom, holding her nose, "...it's starting to get kind of gamey in there—if you know what I mean." Her mischievous smirk vanishing, the Troyian woman brushed aside a strand of mauve tinted silvery-white hair from her eyes, "I know you're worried about meeting up with your grandfather and all, but why can't you just give the information to him? Why go through the trouble of trying to reach this Lieutenant Lar'ragos? It doesn't sound very...logical..." the young cadet quipped, her smirk returning, "...to me."

"No..." T'Pren replied, vigorously shaking her head, "...that would be a disaster." Pausing for a moment to take a breath, the Vulcan woman explained, "Even leaving out for now our...issues...it would still be a bad idea. The first question Grandfather would ask is, 'Where did I get this information?', and then, after I told him, I'd have to endure an endless lecture concerning my violation of Starfleet regulations and about the impropriety of eavesdropping. The next question would be, 'Why didn't I inform the Commandant?' and when I tell him that I think the Commandant might be behind all this, he'd ask me what sort of proof I have and when I tell him it's a hunch he'd..."

"Tell you that you're being illogical." Atris concluded nodding her head.

"And then we'd get into my embracing *V'tosh ka'tur*..." T'Pren added, her lips turning down into a frown. "And I really don't want to deal with that right now."

"I can see where that might cause problems." Atris commented sympathetically. "So..." the Troyian inquired, "How are you going to tell Lar'ragos about what you've found? All communications are monitored. If something really is going on..."

"Whoever's doing it will know that we know..." T'Pren interrupted, completing her roommate's thought. "I'll have to use non-verbal cues and choose my words carefully. Hopefully..." the youthful Vulcan quipped as a smile returned to her face, "...the reputation that El-Aurians have for being listeners is a deserved one."

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### *Lisbon, Portugal: Main Power Distribution Net*

"We're ready!" A technician called out.

"It's about time!" The Starfleet security trooper next to Pava grumbled. "Seventy two hours without power is long enough."

Shaking his head, Pava retorted in a somewhat sarcastic tone, "This is nothing compared to what it's like in the real Fleet."

Chastened by the lieutenant's words, the young human trooper apologized, "I'm sorry...I didn't mean it that way. It's just..."

Recognizing the genuine regret in the trooper's words and body language, Pava took on a more conciliatory stance as he placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder, "That's all right, Crewman. No harm...no foul." His next words, however, were cut off as all of the consoles lit up with the primary lights coming on at the same time. Feeling a cool rush of air as the climate control system started back up, the El-Aurian smiled, raising his voice over the loud cheers, "Well...looks we'll get to take a hot shower tonight."

"Yes, Sir." The crewman grinned, sniffing, "I think we could use it."

"Smartass." Pava retorted with a laugh as he made his way to a nearby security console.

"What are you doing, Sir?" The crewman asked as he noticed the lieutenant perusing the data flashing on the screen.

"Just playing a hunch..." Pava replied, his brow furrowing as his eyes picked up on the transport log entry. "I'm hoping that we might get an idea as to how our changeling got in here."

"Any luck?" The crewman asked as he attempted to peer over the El-Aurian's shoulder.

"No." Pava lied as he turned. Flashing a smile, the lieutenant asked, "Could you do me a favor? Right about now I'd die for a cup of hot coffee..."

"Sure thing, Sir." The security trooper acknowledged as he turned away, "How do you want it?"

"Black." Pava called out as he surreptitiously downloaded the information on the monitor to his tricorder. "And make sure it's Ethiopian!" Watching as the download completed, the El-Aurian nodded his head. *Now that I've got it...Pava thought...the question is...what the hell I'm going to do with it.*

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As the lights began reappearing on the planet's night face, Lieutenant Rysyl smiled from her position at the center chair. Activating the intercom, the *Sutherland's* Deltan operations officer spoke, her lyrical voice especially cheerful, "Captain Shelby? Power has been restored."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Well...well...well..." Commander Eugene Edison, the first officer of the *USS Eagle* said; a broad grin on his face as he saw the Earth's night side light up. "Isn't that a pretty sight, Nora?" He asked, addressing the ship's tactical officer, the Bajoran Nora Laas.

"It sure is, Sir." The Bajoran woman replied, "It sure is."

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Immediately after rematerializing in the same transporter hub that had days earlier claimed the lives of his two children, Elliot Mitchell saw Sarah's grandparents, both with somber looks on their faces, standing next to a chestnut haired woman. "What's wrong?" He asked in a voice strained by the fatigue of having worked almost nonstop for three days, "Where's Sarah and the kids?"

Approaching the younger man, Sarah's father placed a hand on his shoulder, "I'm sorry, Son..." He said in a grave tone, "But there's been an accident."

"An accident?" Elliot stammered.

"Andrew...Crystal..." The elderly woman sobbed, "They...they're..."

"They're gone, Son." The man finished, squeezing Elliot's shoulder.

"How?" Elliot asked weakly as he felt his knees buckle.

The woman rushing next to the stunned father, she, along with the grandfather, helped Elliot to a nearby bench. "I'm Doctor Vance..." She said in a soft voice. "Andrew and Crystal..." She said, keeping her voice soft and low, "...were killed in a transporter accident when the power went out."

"NO!" The stricken father wept as he covered his face with his hands. "That's not supposed to happen!"

Shaking her head, the counselor explained, "It was an unusual set of circumstances...the power went out at just the wrong time..."

"Sarah?" Elliot asked, his tears still flowing, "Is she?"

"She's at home...under observation." Doctor Vance replied.

"She hasn't said a word since the accident." Sarah's father interjected.

"And she stays in the children's room." Her mother added, "She goes to the beds...straightens them out...and then sits down in the chair next to their dresser."

"I want to see her." Elliot demanded as he staggered to his feet, "Now."

"We'll take you to her, Son." The older man replied as he helped his son-in-law to his feet.

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As the lights flickered back into life in their tiny dorm room, Cadet Atris Nylysa clapped her hands in delight. "All right! It's about time! Now we can



flush the toilet and I can take a real shower.” Sniffing her underarms, the playful Troyian declared, “I stink.”

“I know.” T’Pren deadpanned; the faintest hint of a smile on her face.

“You’re one to talk...” Atris lightheartedly teased as she made her way to the bathroom, “You know you don’t exactly smell like Boothby’s roses either.”

“Tell me about it.” The young Vulcan replied as she activated the communications panel on her desk. “I think I will have a long soak in the tub...” However, before she could finish her statement, the image of an attractive man with tightly curled and close cropped jet black hair appeared on the monitor.

“As fascinating as the notion of watching you taking a bath might be...” The man commented with a crooked grin, “I’m afraid I have more important things to do. If you really must have someone watch you though, I can think of a voyeur or two who’d get into the view.” His smile vanishing to be replaced by a stern expression, the El-Aurian lieutenant demanded, “Is there a reason why you’re contacting me, Cadet. I don’t believe I know you...”

Blushing green as she heard her roommate’s faint laughter from the bathroom, T’Pren fell back on her childhood teachings to center herself as she addressed the imposing figure displayed on her monitor, “I am sorry for the interruption, Sir. My name is T’Pren, granddaughter of Varok, whom I believe you once served with...”

Stroking his chin as he attempted to recall the name, Lar’ragos, finally placing name with face, grinned broadly, “Varok! Now I remember. It’s been a while—several years in fact. So...how is he doing?”

“He is well.” The Vulcan cadet answered, “In fact he is on the *Sutherland* in Earth orbit now.”

“He is...” Pava replied as he carefully hid his reaction on hearing the name of the *Sutherland*. “That’s interesting...I’ll be sure to leave him a message.” His smile vanishing, Lar’ragos once again inquired, “But I’m sure that’s not why you’ve gone through all this trouble to contact me...”

“No sir...” T’Pren admitted as she made a production of picking up her padd and placing it on her lap. “It isn’t. I realize we don’t know each other, Sir...” She began, drumming the edge of her padd with her index finger, “But...as you

served with my grandfather, I was hoping you might be able to advise me in how to approach him about a matter of some...delicacy..."

"I see..." Pava drawled, his senses immediately picking up on the young Vulcan's verbal and non-verbal cues. "You need me to advise you on how to approach your grandfather regarding you're becoming *V'tosh ka'tur*." He declared, putting a very slight tonal emphasis on the Vulcan phrase at the end.

"Yes, Sir." T'Pren acknowledged, nodding her head once.

"All right..." Pava smiled, his eyes focused on the padd on the cadet's lap. "Is the Academy still locked down?" Taking the Vulcan's single nod of her head as a yes, the El-Aurian instructed, "Very well...I'll meet you in your dorm in...Let's say two hours? That'll give us both time to wash the stench off of us." He quipped as the Vulcan woman chuckled. "I'll see you then."

*Well, well, well...Pava thought as he stripped out of his grimy uniform. I wonder what's on her padd. Stepping into the tiny shower stall, he grinned as an idea came into his head. Hmmm...Lizzy's here and she knows Sisko...maybe...maybe...it might just work. Provided...The El-Aurian's face darkened for a moment, Sisko can be trusted.*

## Part 4: The Eye of the Storm

"Admiral Hanson's online for you, Captain." Lieutenant Atoa announced as the *Sutherland's* captain entered the bridge.

"I'll take it in my office." Shelby replied, the bags under her eyes revealing her lack of sleep as she motioned for Commander Hobson to, for now at least, retain his position in the center chair. As soon as the doors to her office slid shut, Liz ordered the computer to activate her desk monitor. "Admiral..." The captain greeted as she took her seat, frowning slightly at the haggard appearance of her old mentor. "Haven't you had any rest at all?"

"I've probably had about as much as you have, Liz." The admiral replied, managing an ironic grin. Taking a deep breath, Hanson began, "I want to thank you and the other captains for your help in this crisis..."

"We were just doing our jobs, Sir." Liz interjected.

"Still...you all saved a lot of lives...and that'll be noted in your commendations." Hanson continued, waving off Shelby's protestations with a grin.

"Thank you, Sir..." The petite starship captain responded before asking, "So...what is our current status? Is there any indication of Dominion fleet activity?"

"No." Admiral Hanson replied, brushing back what was left of his hair, "And that has me and a few others worried."

"Same here..." Liz agreed, observing, "It just doesn't make sense...carrying out a massive act of sabotage like this without following it up. To throw away such a devastating tactical advantage just for the sake of causing temporary havoc! The Founders aren't fools. They have to know that from now on our guard'll be up—it'll be much harder for them to launch a decapitating strike like this in the future if and when they do decide to attack."

"That's what we intend to tell Leyton when we have our meeting with him." The admiral declared, shaking his head, "There's so much here that just doesn't add up."

"Yes, Sir." Shelby responded simply as she diplomatically decided to change the subject, "Are there any further orders, Admiral?"

Grinning beatifically at his youthful protégé, Admiral Hanson replied, “We’ll still need you and the other starships to help maintain security patrols for now and keep an eye out just in case company does come—at least until after the President’s speech, so we’re maintaining a system wide security alert, but otherwise, you and the other captains can take your ships off yellow alert.”

“Thanks, Admiral,” Liz acknowledged, flashing a warm smile for the rumpled figure in her viewer, “I’m sure the crews will appreciate that.”

Chuckling, Hanson answered back, “I’ll bet your crews aren’t the only ones happy about the news. I have to go now, Liz, but hopefully, we’ll be able to get together before the speech. Hanson out.”

Touching her comm badge immediately after her desk monitor went blank, Shelby spoke, “Commander we’re to maintain security alert status, but you can take us off yellow alert and if you would please, relay this to the other captains.”

“Aye, Sir.” Commander Hobson’s crisp patrician voice answered back. “Anything else?”

“Yes...” Shelby decided, “Off duty personnel are now authorized to go planetside for limited shoreleave. Remind them that we are still under a system wide security alert and that they are subject to immediate recall, so no civilian dress, their comm badges are to be readily accessible and they are to check in at regular intervals until further notice.”

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“You sure you don’t want to come with me?” Lieutenant Sam Lavelle asked, flashing a rakish grin at the slender, petite, dusky skinned woman walking next to him.

“Yep.” Ensign Maria Django answered, flashing a crooked grin of her own, “You’re all on your own on this one. Seriously...” the young Brazilian added, her smile disappearing as she brushed back a stray strand of her companion’s hair, “...this is something you need to do on your own.”

“You’re right.” Sam admitted with a single nod of his head. “It’s past time Mom and I settled this...”

"And you might not get another chance like this for some time." Maria interjected, completing her friend's thought.

"Right." The roguish Canadian helmsman concurred. "So..." he asked, his wicked grin returning, "You still want to introduce me to your folks?"

Maria laughed, "We'll see..." Winking at the dark haired lieutenant, Ensign Django teased, "If you're a good boy, I'll even wear my new swimsuit when we go to the beach."

"Hmmm..." Sam leered, "I didn't know you got a new swimsuit..."

"There's a lot about me you don't know..." Maria countered with a leer of her own as the pair reached the door to the transporter room. "Now...go on...get out of here...go see Mommy Dearest," she ordered as she pushed him through the open door. "I'll see you when you get back."

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Turning towards her first officer, Captain Shelby inquired, "Commander? You have family on Earth, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir." Hobson replied, his voice almost as flat as a Vulcan's, "Near Albany, New York."

"I thought so." The captain replied, "You planning on going to see them?"

"Perhaps..." The first officer began, only to be cut off by his captain.

"You should..." Liz interjected, "You know we might not be getting around here again for some time."

"What about you, Sir?" Hobson then asked, turning the tables on his commanding officer, "Aren't you planning on seeing your family?"

"Are you and Admiral Hanson part of a shared consciousness?" Liz retorted, her good humor suddenly vanishing. Taking a deep breath as she saw that her first officer had no intention of backing down, Liz brushed back a stray strand of blonde hair, "Tell you what, Chris, I'll make a deal with you. You see your folks and I'll see mine."

\*\*\*\*\*

Rematerializing on the dorm transporter pad, Pava Lar'ragos immediately recognized the Vulcan cadet to whom he had spoken just a few hours earlier. "Cadet T'Pren?" The el-Aurian questioned; his face an expressionless mask.

"Sir." The third year cadet responded, coming to attention.

"Stand at ease." Pava instructed as he allowed a slight smile to cross his lips. His smile vanishing as his eyes registered the green skinned Troyian standing next to the Vulcan cadet, Lar'ragos inquired, "Who's she?"

"She's my roommate, Cadet Atris Nylysa and knows everything." T'Pren answered back.

"All right, cadets..." Pava replied, nodding his head once as he motioned with his hand, "Let's take this discussion to your room." As the trio made their way down the hall, the perceptive el-Aurian immediately noticed a Vulcan female passing the little group going in the opposite direction, studiously ignoring T'Pren as she went past. Lowering his voice to a barely audible whisper, he remarked, "It seems she doesn't like you. That was cold...even for a Vulcan. No offense..." He quipped, cracking an ironic grin.

"None taken." T'Pren responded with a snort, explaining, "V'lar doesn't exactly approve of my recent lifestyle choices."

"None of them here do." Atris interjected; her irritation at her friend's ostracism by her fellow Vulcans evident. "Pack of snotty *zylaks*."

"So..." Pava, seeking to gather insight into the character of the young cadet walking next him, gently probed, "What motivated you to embrace *V'tosh Ka'tur*? Surely you knew the reaction that would entail from other Vulcans?"

"Let's just say..." T'Pren replied in a level tone, "I have my reasons for now and leave it at that."

"Fair enough." Lar'ragos agreed as the trio stopped next to a door. "I take it this is your quarters."

"Aye, Sir." T'Pren acknowledged as she opened the door. "After you, Sir."

\*\*\*\*\*

Crossing herself reverently as she drew near the small piece of wall that was all that was left of the legendary St. Peter's Basilica, Denise Murakawa lowered her head, saying a silent prayer for all those who had fallen during the long wars of the twenty first and early twenty second centuries. Raising her head and once again making the sign of the cross, the Japanese-Centauran doctor approached the tiny chapel within which the relics of the martyrs were enclosed. Entering the church, Denise dipped her fingers in the holy water as she once again made the sign of the cross. Approaching the altar, she knelt alongside the other parishioners.

While most of those attending were human, Denise did notice a Bolian couple kneeling across the aisle from her. Recognizing her Starfleet uniform, the Bolians smiled at her before turning their attention back to the liturgy. As she heard the mellifluous chanting of the choir, took in the images of the saints and of the Virgin and Child, and inhaled the fragrance of the incense, the young doctor quickly found herself caught up in the ceremony. Joining in the responses, Denise let herself go, allowing the sights, sounds, and smells to transport her away.

"My child?"

The priest's voice bringing the young doctor back from her reverie, Denise opened her mouth to accept the Communion wafer, crossing herself as she did so. The ceremony concluded, she sat with the others as the priest preached his homily, his sermon one of thanksgiving and regret. Thanksgiving that the crisis appeared now to be over, regret at the loss of life. The priest, recognizing that he had a Starfleet officer present, also expressed his gratitude for the assistance given by Starfleet and others, causing the doctor to blush as all eyes turned to her. As the service drew to a close, Denise once again bowed her head in prayer, joining with the others as the priest gave his blessings to all in attendance.

As she turned to walk away, Dr. Murakawa heard the priest's voice once again, "My child?"

"Yes, Father." Denise responded, turning around to face the elderly man clad in his priestly vestments, "What can I do for you?"

"That's funny." The Father, speaking with an Irish accent, answered back, "I was about to ask you the same question. Please...sit...humor an old man for a while."

"Thank you, Father." Denise replied as she sat down on the pew next to the old priest. "Actually..." she stammered, "...I could use some help."

"Tell me...what is your problem?"

"Problems, actually." Denise confessed with a sigh. "First...there are my parents. They're both on Earth now, but they've been divorced since I've been a child and my mother and I have just started talking to each other again after I converted and..." Shaking her head, the young doctor laughed. "I'm sorry...I don't usually prattle on like this."

"It's all right, child." The priest smiled, "We all need to unburden ourselves. Go on..."

"Thanks Father. I think though, I've got a handle on the situation with my parents. I'm supposed to meet my mother after the President's speech and have dinner and well...Manuele...a...friend of mine...he gave me some good advice..."

"So, what else is troubling you?"

Sighing, Denise continued to unload her problems, "Father...It's...so often...I feel like all I am is an observer—that all I do is watch while everyone else does! I see all my friends...my shipmates...they're living life—they're doing things! Sam and Maria...they risked their lives to save an old friend of Sam's. My friend...Anara...all she has to do is enter a room! Manuele..." she said, her voice filled with longing and regret, "...meets someone once and they click. And then there's me! I'm sorry...I must sound so childish..."

"No...not at all, my dear..." The priest said consolingly as he patiently listened. "My child?" He asked in a soft voice.

"Yes, Father?"

"What did you do during the recent crisis?"

"I helped coordinate aid with the hospitals in the North American Quadrant." The young doctor replied. "We provided emergency power to as many hospitals as we could...and helped the staffs..." Shaking her head, Denise confessed, "But we couldn't save them all...we lost so many..."

"But you saved so many..." The priest interjected, "Those you saved would



have died had you not been there.”

“On one level...” Denise conceded, “I know that. But on another...I feel like I could have done more.”

“What more could you have done?” The Irish cleric inquired.

“I don’t know.” Doctor Murakawa admitted, “But I feel like I should have done more.”

“We all feel that way.” The priest remarked with a gentle smile. “Whenever I talk to someone...whenever I visit a sick parishioner...whenever I say Last Rites for one of my flock...I ask myself could I have done more...”

“And what sort of answer do you get?”

Chuckling softly, the priest replied, “I don’t. All I can do is have faith that I did all I could. I know it’s not much of an answer...” The priest confessed, “And probably not what you wanted to hear, but it’s the truth.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Denise allowed as she brushed back a tear.

“And about your other problem...” The priest continued, his smile returning as he placed a comforting hand on the young doctor’s forearm. “Perhaps you’re trying to force things. It sounds to me like you have many good friends. Why don’t you let them be your friends? All the rest will come in time. Don’t rush it. You’re a beautiful, talented, and intelligent woman—don’t worry about finding love—love will find you—and you’ll know it when you see it.”

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The first sight Sam Lavelle saw upon stepping off the transporter pad on the *Potemkin* was his mother wearing the blue and black of the sciences branch along with the two gold pips and one black pip on the collar of a lieutenant commander. Holding his head erect, the dark haired Canadian said simply, “Commander.”

“Lieutenant.” Lieutenant Commander Charlotte Kincaid acknowledged in a crisp tone. “Son.”

“Mother.” Sam replied in an equally frosty voice. “How have you been?”

"Better." The *Potemkin's* Science Officer replied as she motioned for her son to follow her out of the transporter room. "And yourself?"

"Pretty good, actually." The young helmsman answered back as the pair walked down the *Excelsior* class ship's corridors, moving aside occasionally to make room for a hurrying crewman rushing about on some task or other. "The Sutherland is a good ship and I'm enjoying myself there."

"I'm sure." Charlotte snorted, "If half of what they say about that ship and its captain is true, then it must be a nonstop party for you."

Coming to an immediate halt, Sam Lavelle glared at his mother. "Mom. If all you're going to do is complain about the *Suthy* and Captain Shelby, then I'm going to turn around right now and go back to my ship. I am not going to put up with the usual today. I'm not in the mood for it."

"No..." Charlotte, recognizing at once that her son meant what he said, pleaded with a sigh, "No. Don't go. Please. I promise...no more comments."

"Good." Sam replied, his lips turning up into a tentative smile. "So...where are we going?"

"Well..." Charlotte responded, a slight smile coming to her face as well, "...I thought we could talk over drinks in the crew lounge. I know it's not quite as well furnished as the lounge on your ship probably is...but it's not bad."

"I'm sure it'll be just fine." Sam answered back, deciding to give reconciliation a chance. Walking down the corridor with his mother, the young Canadian helmsman glancing out of the corner of his eye at the woman who had given him birth, hoped against hope that this time, unlike the others, she felt the same.

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"So, Mr. Lar'ragos..." Atris began only to be hushed into immediate silence by Pava's raised hand and growled, "Quiet!" Taking out a small object from his satchel, the security officer activated it. Nodding his head as the device, letting out a low hum, indicated that there were no listening devices in the vicinity, Pava set it down on the small coffee table in front of the sofa. "All clear." The El-Aurian announced, "We can talk freely here. This little jewel..." he smirked, pointing at the object, now glowing a faint yellow as it hummed, "...not only detects bugs and long range listening devices, it also puts out a field that

prevents eavesdropping." Sitting down on a chair opposite the sofa, he asked, "Ok, T'Pren...now that we've made sure no one's listening in on us, you can tell me why you've dragged me all the way over here." Pointing at the padd the young Vulcan cadet was now holding in her hands, he further queried, "I assume it has something to do with that."

"It does." T'Pren replied laconically. Taking the lieutenant's slight nod of the head as a request for further elaboration, she explained as she handed the padd to him, "It contains the transport log for the Academy beginning twenty four hours before the power blackout. You'll note..." The young Vulcan commented, pointing to the log entries in question, "That Red Squad beamed out of the Commandant's office to the *Lakota* while the Academy wide lockdown was still in effect and beamed back after the grid went down."

"Hmmm..." Lar'ragos drawled as he took out his own padd. "I downloaded this..." he said, "...from the security console at the Lisbon central distribution node. It contains a transport log—and a whole lot more." His brow furrowing, he perused the data on both of the padds, "Now that is interesting. Take a look at this..." He requested, as he highlighted a log entry on his padd as well as that on T'Pren's. "Minutes before the grid goes off line, we get multiple transports from the *Lakota* to Lisbon and then back...and then..." he continued, pointing to T'Pren's last entry, "...to the Academy. Now, cadets..." he quipped, "I'll let you connect the dots."

"Hells..." Atris swore, "...even I can figure it out. The godsdamned Reddies sabotaged the power grid." Silence filling the room as the enormity of the elite cadet squadron's actions sunk in, the youthful Troyian asked in an almost pleading tone, her voice barely above a whisper, "But why? So many died because of this..."

"That's the hundred thousand credit question." Pava replied, all traces of humor gone from his voice. "Why would the Commandant of the Academy send Red Squad off to kill the power grid in an effort to make it look like a changeling infiltration? Unless..."

"He's acting on someone else's orders." T'Pren supplied, finishing off the El-Aurian's thoughts.

"Exactly!" Pava exclaimed as his fingers danced over the padd's console.

"What are you doing?" Atris inquired, her heart racing as she saw numbers and displays appearing and disappearing on the small display screen on the

padd.

"Your roommate isn't the only one who can hack into computer systems." The El-Aurian replied with a crooked grin, "Although she is very good at it." Addressing the young Vulcan woman, he quipped, "Have you ever considered switching over from sciences into security/tactical, T'Pren? You've got the aptitude..."

"I shall..." T'Pren answered back with a wicked grin of her own, "...give it some thought"

"You do that." Pava replied, "...because if you are as good as I think you are, I might just have an offer for you..." His good humor once again disappearing as the information he wanted appeared on the data screen, Pava declared in a grim tone, "Got it!"

"What?" Atris asked, her voice edged with both excitement and concern.

"Not here." Pava said as he tapped his communicator. "We're going to need a lot of help here on this."

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"Hello, Mama." Liz Shelby said with a smile as she regarded the image of the woman in her monitor. Her strawberry-blond hair now touched by gray, Anna Shelby still looked at least a decade younger than her sixty-two years. "You're looking good." Liz remarked with more than a hint of tension in her voice. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine, *Lany*..." Anna replied with a broad grin, using the Hungarian word for daughter. "So is your father." She added; a disapproving note in her voice at her daughter's failure to ask about her other parent. "We made it through the power blackout ok." Pausing for a moment, the older woman gave her daughter an accusatory look, "It's good to hear from you. I can't remember the last time we talked..."

"Mama..." The younger woman sighed, "You know things between me and Father are still..."

"Don't you think it's time you and your father settled your issues, dear?" Anna implored, "This fight has been going on for years."

Gritting her teeth, Liz bitterly spat out, "Don't you think I've tried, Mama? But every time I hold out my hand to him, he bats it away. He's a stubborn, pig-headed..."

"Just like his *lany*..." Anna grinned, slipping into Hungarian, "...and your *nagyanya*, and your *nagyapa*."

"I get the message, *Any*!" Liz chuckled, her rarely used Magyar immediately returning to the blonde starship captain, "I'll try..." She sighed deeply, "...but I don't think it'll come to much." Shaking her head disconsolately, she concluded, "It'll go like all the other times. We'll say hello and then he'll say something or I'll say something and we'll yell at each other and then one or both of us will storm off."

"Maybe, darling," Anna conceded, "But won't you try...please...for me."

"All right, Mama, all right! You win! You can lay off the nagging Hungarian mother routine!" Liz laughed, "I said I'd try!"

"Good." Anna replied, nodding her head triumphantly, "So...when can we expect you down?"

"I have some business to take care of here first..." Liz sighed. However, before the captain could finish her sentence, her comm badge beeped.

"Captain Shelby?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Atoa?" Shelby replied with a groan, "What is it?"

"A Lieutenant Lar'ragos needs to speak with you, he told me to tell you it concerned an old friend of yours...Nyssa..." On hearing that particular code word, one used when Pava was chief of security on the *Shran*, Shelby sat upright in her chair. "One moment." She ordered. Returning to her mother, Liz smiled sadly, "Mama? This message is important..."

"I understand, *Dragam*." Anna replied indulgently, "Remember, I'm married to a retired starship captain...I know how it is. Until later."

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His lips turning up into a grin as he saw the confused look on the Troyian woman's face, Pava explained, "Nyssa is an unofficial code word we had on

the Shran. It means that there's a critical situation, but I can't talk about it on an open channel." A few moments later, Captain Shelby's voice came through the comm badge.

"Pava? How is Nyssa?" Liz asked, her voice tinged with fatigue and weariness.

"She's ok..." Lar'ragos replied, "But she misses you and would like to see you as soon as possible." Pausing for a moment, he added, almost as an afterthought, "She also told me to tell you that she'd love to see your ship."

"I think that can be arranged." Shelby replied, maintaining their coded conversation. "We can beam you up when you give the word."

"Great." Pava replied, "Nyssa also wanted to tell me that she's got two friends who'd like to beam up as well. One of them is Varok's granddaughter and she tells me that she can't wait to see her grandfather..." he said, ignoring T'Pren's glare, "And the other...well..." he smirked, "She's this gorgeous Troyian woman. I have a feeling the two of you'd hit it off...if you know what I mean..."

"What?" Atris exclaimed in a shocked tone, "I'm not...I mean...I've never...not that there's anything wrong with that..." She added hastily, knowing her roommate's gender preferences, "It's just that I like...guys..."

The sound of her laughter coming through the comm badge, the trio heard the captain's response, "All right, Pava. Nyssa's friends can beam up too." Her laughter now replaced by a much grimmer tone, Shelby inquired, "Are you ready to transport now?"

"Aye, Sir." Pava immediately responded as the two cadets drew closer to him.

"Ok. I'll meet all of you in my ready room after you transport aboard and you can fill me in on everything."

"We will, Sir." Pava answered back, "I think you'll find it very...interesting."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Like I said..." Charlotte Kincaid remarked as she and her son took their seats at a table in the *Potemkin's* lounge, "It's not as big or fancy as what you've probably got on your ship...but it does the job."

"Thank you." Sam smiled appreciatively as a waiter brought the pair drinks.

Sipping his bourbon and coke, the youthful helmsman asked, "So...have you talked to Dad?"

"Yeah." The *Potemkin* science officer replied with a grin, "I'm glad to see that Michel is doing well—and that you've talked to him already."

"Look, Mom..." Sam interjected somewhat defensively, "You weren't in system at the time..."

"I'm not blaming you for anything, Sam..." Charlotte answered back; raising her hands in a warding gesture, "Look..." she began hesitatingly, "I don't want us to fight. In fact, I'm glad you came. Something's come up that I think you might be interested in..."

"What?" Sam asked, still somewhat wary in spite of his mother's conciliatory words.

Shaking her head, Sam's mother took a sip from her rum and coke as she regarded her son, "You look like I'm about to sell you defective Ferengi merchandise." She joked, "It's nothing like that. In fact—it's an opportunity." Frowning, she reluctantly confessed, "I'll admit, Sam...that when you first applied for the Academy I didn't think you could cut it. Not because you're not bright enough..." She clarified quickly, "It's just that...when you were younger, you always had a problem sticking with what you started. You couldn't maintain stable relationships—flitting from one girl to another, you lost interest quickly in your extracurricular activities...I just didn't think that you had the strength of character necessary to make it as a Starfleet officer."

Listening quietly as his mother spoke, Sam answered in a soft voice, "You're not telling me anything I didn't already know, Mom. But you have to understand, I'm not that boy anymore. I've..."

"Grown up." His mother interjected, completing her son's sentence. "I know...now. I've followed your career from the Academy to the *Enterprise* and then to the *Sutherland*. I admit I was wrong about you." Flashing a slight smile, she continued, "In fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Something's come up that I think you might be interested in. The Ops officer position on the *Potemkin* will be opening up soon. I can put a good word in for you with the Captain, if you want."

"I don't know..." Sam demurred. Seeing the disappointed look on his mother's face, the young man quickly explained, "It's not you, Mom—honestly. It's just

that things are going well for me on the *Sutherland*. I'm senior helmsman and I should make lieutenant commander in about a year or so."

"If you take the Ops position..." Charlotte argued, "...you'll have that third pip inside of six months—probably three. Captain Taras is an excellent officer to serve under—he served with Admiral Leyton several years ago and he's pretty good about recognizing and awarding talent."

"So's Captain Shelby." Lavelle countered.

"So I heard..." Charlotte sneered disapprovingly. "Tell me...has she 'rewarded' you?"

"Mother..." Sam uttered warningly, "I told you..."

"I'm sorry, Son..." The older woman backpedaled quickly, "Like I said, I don't want us to fight." Standing up, she sighed, "Look, my shift begins in fifteen minutes. Why don't we meet again—maybe we can get together with your father and sisters and make a family outing of it?"

"I'd like that." Sam replied with a smile, taking the olive branch offered by his mother.

"Great. We'll hash out the details later." She said smiling, "And please...at least think about what I said concerning the Ops position. I know you'd enjoy it here and it'd give us a chance to get to know each other again."

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Smiling as Pava, accompanied by the two cadets he had mentioned earlier, entered her ready room, Captain Shelby stood up as she gestured at the chairs in front of her desk. "Lieutenant. It's been too long. Cadets...be seated please."

"Captain." Pava Lar'ragos answered back, flashing a roguish grin as he took his seat.

"Sir." The two youthful females responded nervously in unison as they took the chairs on opposite sides of the El-Aurian.

"So...Pava..." Liz inquired, her smile disappearing as she sat down. "What's going on?"



"Take a look at these, Captain." Lar'ragos replied as he handed the two padds to the petite captain. "I think you'll find them interesting—and more than a little frightening."

As Shelby perused the two padds, her expression went from bemusement to surprise to stunned disbelief and finally to outraged anger. Her searching gaze landing first on her former supervisor and then on his two companions, Liz, her lips pursed into a thin line, her facial expression a stony mask, questioned in a level, deceptively mild voice, "Are you sure, Pava...absolutely sure...about these?"

"Yes, Sir," was the El-Aurian's laconic reply, "I wish I weren't."

"You understand what this might mean?" Shelby stated, maintaining her outward veneer of calm.

"Yeah." Pava answered back, "I know. So..." He asked, his face also a stoic mask, "What are we going to do about it?"

Punching her intercom button, Liz spoke, "Mr. Atoa...connect me with Admiral Hanson in Starfleet Command."

Several moments later, Lieutenant Atoa's voice came through the intercom, "I'm sorry, Captain, the admiral is not available."

"I see..." Shelby answered back, her brow furrowed with concern. "Try Admirals Nechayev, Paris, and Shanthi in that order." Addressing the El-Aurian officer seated before her, the captain remarked, "If what's going on is what we think it is...then we should know very shortly."

"Captain?" The *Sutherland's* tactical officer's voice once again interrupted, "Starfleet Command reports that none of the admirals are available. They are all attending a closed meeting regarding security for the President's upcoming speech and are under no conditions to be disturbed."

"I see..." Liz drawled, "Is Captain Sisko available?"

"No, Sir." Lieutenant Atoa soon responded. "Same excuse..." The tactical officer reported in an exasperated tone, "...attending a security meeting."

"Right." Liz declared as she stood up. "I want a meeting of senior staff in my office in thirty minutes." Addressing the three officers now also rising to their

feet, she ordered, “I want you three there too. I’ve got one more call to make, and if it bears out, then we’re going to have to move and move fast.”

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“Grandfather...” T’Pren greeted nervously as Varok entered her temporary quarters. “You look well.”

“You do not.” The older Vulcan responded, raising an eyebrow. “You appear to be...disconcerted.” Pausing for a moment as he gazed into the eyes of his youthful granddaughter, the wizened science officer declared, “Your parents have informed me of your...illogical...actions.”

“So...” T’Pren glowered as she mustered the courage to stand up to the family patriarch, “You’ve already passed judgment?”

Responding with a frown, Varok retorted in an even tone, “I have made no judgments as yet. A rush to judgment would be illogical. For now, I merely seek information—and clarification.”

“Fair enough.” T’Pren responded, relaxing somewhat. “It’s just that I found that a rigid following of the laws of Surak no longer worked for me. So...after a great deal of soul searching and other...circumstances...that occurred to me and things that I discovered about myself, that, for now, I wish to remain silent about, I decided to embrace *V’tosh Ka’tur*.”

Tilting his head slightly to the left, the elderly Vulcan commented, “I fail to see the logic in your decision making processes.”

“There’s very little that’s logical about it.” T’Pren answered back, a slight note of defiance returning to her voice. Willing herself to calm down, the young cadet continued her narrative, “I want you to know, Grandfather, it wasn’t a decision I made lightly. I wrestled with it for several months—denying it—and myself—before finally accepting myself as who—and what—I truly am.”

“And what are you?” Varok asked in a quiet voice.

“I’m T’Pren.” The young woman replied in an equally subdued tone. “Your granddaughter. A Starfleet Cadet. A Vulcan with feelings and emotions and not ashamed to show them.”

“And your family? Your obligations? Your heritage?” The elderly Vulcan

questioned, "Are they not a part of you as well?"

"Of course they are!" T'Pren responded somewhat heatedly. Pausing for several moments as she found her center once again, the young cadet continued, "You just witnessed me applying Surak's teachings to calm myself. I haven't abandoned Surak, Grandfather..." The younger woman declared in an almost pleading tone, "Far from it. There is great wisdom in his words. It's just that I don't think he ever intended for us to slavishly follow them as if they were written in stone. He intended them to be guidelines...not commandments."

"That supposition is an emotional response and unsupported by text..." The older Vulcan interjected, "But do continue..."

"As for my obligations..." The young woman shrugged her shoulders, "I've sworn an oath to Starfleet Command. I will honor that oath and all others. I am not betrothed to anyone...Am I?" She pointedly asked her grandfather.

"No." The older man replied, shaking his head. "It was decided by your parents that you would be allowed to follow your own path as regards choosing a mate. It was their hope—and of your grandmother and myself as well—that you would consider the suit of S'ten, as he does come from a distinguished family and would be most suitable. However, I can see, in the light of what you have just revealed to me, that that would not be a very likely outcome and so it would be fruitless to press the issue at this time."

"Thank you." T'Pren replied in a soft voice, "You have no idea how much I appreciate that." Taking a deep breath, the young Vulcan addressed the last of her grandfather's questions. "And as for my family. As far as I'm concerned, you're still my family. As to whether everyone else still considers me a part of the family..." she stammered, "...well, you'll have to decide that for yourselves." Gritting her teeth, she gazed directly into the eyes of the family patriarch. Steeling herself for the inevitable outcome, she declared, "That's all I have to say. If you're going to disown me—do it now and get it over with."

Shaking his head, the older Vulcan responded with just, it seemed to the younger woman, the faintest note of sadness in his voice, "I have not come to disown you, my granddaughter. I came to see you because I was concerned as to your well being. The course you have embarked on will be a difficult one—a painful one. I had hoped that by convincing you to turn away from it that I could spare you that anguish. But I can see that I cannot do that. While I shall not judge you, there will be many who will. You will be ostracized...barred

entry into our most sacred shrines...and there will be those within our family who will not accept you or your choices. Are you willing to live with that?" Seeing his granddaughter's single nod of her head and hearing her soft "Yes", the elderly patriarch, placed a hand on the younger woman's shoulder, "Very well. I shall inform your parents." Stepping back, he made the Vulcan salute with his right hand, "Live long and prosper, T'Pren...my granddaughter."

Tears rolling down her cheeks, the youthful Vulcan woman raised her hand, repeating her grandparent's gesture, "And you, Grandfather..." She smiled, "Live long and prosper as well." As the older man left her quarters, T'Pren smiling through her tears, said in a soft, warm voice, "I love you."

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Answering her door chime, Liz waved her senior staff into her office. "Find a seat." The captain urged as she sat on the edge of her desk. "For those of you who have not met, this..." She introduced, gesturing towards the humanoid dressed in a beige Bajoran militia uniform, "...is Constable Odo from Deep Space Nine. His presence here is directly related to the current situation we're facing."

"What situation is that, Captain?" Commander Hobson asked as he took a standing position next to his commanding officer.

"Remember our discussion regarding the bizarre nature of the 'changeling' attack on the power grid, Commander?" Shelby asked as her office quickly filled up with her officers as well as Lieutenant Lar'ragos and the two cadets. "Well, we were right to be suspicious."

"What do you mean, Sir?" Lieutenant Rysyl asked, her empathic senses immediately picking up on the tension coming from the constable and the captain.

"It wasn't a changeling who sabotaged the grid." Liz explained, "Instead, it was Starfleet personnel."

"Specifically..." Constable Odo interjected, making his voice heard over the growing murmuring from the gathered officers, "Cadets from Red Squad that beamed down from the *Lakota*."

"Quiet!" Captain Shelby ordered as the noise grew louder. Clenching her teeth as her ready room quickly fell into silence, the blonde captain spoke, "Thank

you.” Turning towards Pava and the two cadets, Liz quickly introduced them, “I’ll turn things over to Lieutenant Lar’ragos and Cadets T’Pren and Nylysa. They’ll fill you in on what they’ve discovered.”

“Thank you, Captain.” The El-Aurian said with an inscrutable smile. His smile disappearing, Pava swiveled the computer monitor on the captain’s desk to where it faced the gathered officers. Downloading the information on both padds on to the Sutherland’s computer, the log entries appeared in a split screen display. “You’ll note here...” He said, pointing at the image from T’Pren’s padd, “...that the log records show that Red Squad had beamed aboard the *Lakota* from the Commandant’s office a full twenty four hours before the power grid went down.”

“While we were all supposed to be on lockdown and confined to our quarters.” Atris interjected.

“And how was this information attained?” Commander Hobson inquired in a nasal tone.

“I hacked into the Academy system.” T’Pren replied in a matter of fact tone, garnering slight grins of appreciation from Lieutenants Lavelle and Atoa as well as a disapproving frown from her grandfather. “I’ve also observed Red Squad sneaking off to the Commandant’s office repeatedly beginning approximately two months before the power blackout with the meetings growing more frequent immediately after the bombing in Antwerp.”

“Let me guess...” Manuele remarked with a twinkle in his eyes, “You snuck out of your dorm and followed them.”

“Precisely.” T’Pren replied laconically, her lips turning up into a slight smile.

“And this other entry, I take it...” Hobson queried, “...would be the time that the Red Squad cadets beamed into the Lisbon complex.”

As Pava nodded his head in assent, Constable Odo cleared his throat. “This corroborates what Captain Sisko and I have found out from our intercept of the Lisbon transport logs and our interrogation of Cadet Shepard.”

“Pity the *Valiant* has already warped out of orbit with Red Squad on a training mission.” Commander Hobson observed, “Awfully convenient, I would say.”

“It gets worse...” Shelby intoned as she nodded at Lar’ragos, encouraging him

to continue.

Pressing a button, the log entries disappeared from the computer monitor to be replaced by another display, this one a list of names. "This is a listing of officers who have served under Admiral Leyton in some capacity or other since his tenure as captain of the *Okinawa*. Note especially those names highlighted." He instructed as certain names appeared in a red color.

"That's the Commandant of the Academy." Lieutenant Rysyl exclaimed in a hushed tone.

"And the first officer of the *Concord*." Hobson noted.

"And Captain Taras." Sam observed, "My mother told me that he had served under Admiral Leyton when she tried to talk me into transferring over to the *Potemkin*."

"She did?" Anara asked, her eyes widening. "What did you tell her?"

"I said no, of course." Sam answered back, "I told her that I'm happy here and have no intention of transferring off."

"While I appreciate your loyalty..." Captain Shelby smiled, "You might want to tell your mother that you changed your mind."

"What?" The Canadian helmsman exclaimed, his mouth agape. "But...I thought..."

"I'll explain it to you later, Lieutenant." Shelby interrupted as she and Pava exchanged knowing glances. Turning her attention to the shapeshifter standing somewhat aloof of the group, Liz inquired, "Have you heard anything more from Captain Sisko?"

"No, Captain." Odo immediately responded, shaking his head, "The last time I spoke with him, he was planning on informing the President about our suspicions."

"Leyton's people probably got to him first." Pava noted, receiving a nod from the constable.

"That would be my guess." Odo agreed.

"They're probably also holding Admiral Hanson and the rest of them." Liz conjectured, relating her failed efforts at trying to reach the admirals as her intercom beeped. "Go ahead, Mr. Dryer."

"Sir..." The voice of the ebony skinned security officer filled the room, "The *Lakota* has just warped out of orbit."

"I was afraid of that." Odo growled in a low voice. "Major Kira had discovered that one of the lieutenants stationed on Deep Space Nine had also served on the *Okinawa*. This man was able to manipulate the wormhole into opening at intervals..."

"Making it look like a cloaked fleet was coming through." Liz finished, "Providing the perfect pretext for putting everyone on alert."

"Right." The Constable agreed. "*Defiant* is on its way to Earth with the confirming documentation."

"Which means..." Anara gasped, "...that the *Lakota* was ordered to intercept it."

"Major Kira will not allow anything...or anyone...to stop her from completing her mission." Odo declared confidently. "Even if the result is combat."

"Do you really think it'll come to that?" Lieutenant Rysyl asked, refusing to believe that one Federation vessel would willingly fire on another.

"I think..." Odo replied, "That while Major Kira will not fire first, she will not permit Captain Benteen to interfere and will do what she has to do to get this information here."

Sighing deeply, Elizabeth stated in a low, mournful tone, "Erika will follow her orders. Even if that means firing on the *Defiant*." Closing her eyes momentarily, Captain Shelby stood up. Her head erect, she announced to everyone in the room, "We have no choice. We have to move and move quickly. Otherwise, we're going to find ourselves in a civil war. So...here's what we're going to do..."

## Part 5: Touch and Go

"Please inform our mutual associate..." Admiral James Leyton said as he addressed the middle-aged Trill on his monitor, "...that I fully intend to honor our agreement. After a year, we shall agree on the composition of a new Federation Council—one whose delegates fully appreciate both the danger of the changeling menace and the need for the Federation to return to its traditional roots. Once he is named President, I will step aside and resume my duties as Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet."

"He shall be glad to hear that, Sir." The Trill replied, "And he wants you to know that he will do likewise. Our party will give you our full support and, once he is made President, you will receive whatever you need to deal with the Dominion and changeling infiltration."

"Thank you." The admiral said as his enunciator chimed. "Excuse me, but my security chief is at the door."

"Of course." The Trill acknowledged. "Until later."

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"Commander Daneeka..." Admiral Leyton smiled as the youthful Bolian lieutenant commander entered his office, "How are our 'guests'?"

"Mad enough to split anti-matter, but behaving themselves, Sir." The gold and black clad officer responded with a grin.

Chuckling, the admiral responded, "That's to be expected, Alynna Nechayev, Owen Paris, J. P. Hanson, and Thuosana Shanthi are easily four of the most stubborn people I have ever had the pleasure of serving with." His laughter vanishing, he continued, "That's why it's important we continue to try to get them to see that this is the only way to preserve the Federation and our way of life."

"And Ben Sisko?" The Bolian security officer inquired, asking about their mutual acquaintance who had also served on the *Okinawa*. "How long do we keep him in lockup?"

With a dour expression, the admiral replied, "Sisko has made his decision." Seeing his security chief about to protest, Leyton raised his hand to silence her, "Don't worry, Daneeka, I'll keep my promise to him and let him go after



we remove the President and secure our position. I'm even thinking about retaining him at Deep Space Nine afterwards if he gives me his word that he'll take no action against us because, even with everything that's happened, he really is the best man to have out there." Shaking his head, the admiral lamented, "I think the biggest mistake I made was taking him off that station and bringing him here. I misjudged his character completely. I really thought that he, more than anyone else, would have understood the necessity of our actions."

"It's too late to be second guessing ourselves now here, Sir." Daneeka interjected politely, yet firmly.

"You're right." Leyton responded, a smile returning to his face as he stood up. "Well...I better see to our guests..."

"And I need to make my rounds..." Daneeka replied as she turned towards the exit. "Good luck, Sir."

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"Hey, Mom." Sam Lavelle smiled at the image of his mother on the computer screen. "I've thought about what we talked about earlier..."

"You mean the Ops. position on the *Potemkin*?" Charlotte Kincaid inquired, her heart beating quicker as she gazed into the eyes of her son. "Have you decided on whether you're going to take it or not?"

"Well..." Sam replied, deliberately drawing out his sentence to appear as if he was being unsure of himself, "...I have to be honest. I was going to turn it down flat..." Seeing the crestfallen look on his mother's face, the Canadian helmsman flashed a reassuring smile, "But then I thought more about it."

"And..." Charlotte prompted; hope once again rising within her.

"And well, I decided that I wanted to talk more with you about it...and maybe have a talk with Captain Taras as well...that is if it's ok with you and him."

"I'd love to!" Charlotte exclaimed, a pleased look on her face, "And I'm sure the Captain would want to talk to you..." She then lowered her voice conspiratorially, "I've been kind of laying the groundwork for you with him." Her smile growing wider, the dark haired science officer invited, "Why don't you beam on over and we'll talk and I'll see if the Captain can see you."

"That'd be great, Mom." Sam smiled back. "I'll see you in a few." Immediately after his mother's image disappeared, Sam touched his comm badge, "Lavelle to Captain Shelby. Phase One is in motion. We're on our way to the *Potemkin*."

"Very good, Mr. Lavelle." Captain Shelby's voice responded, "Carry on and good luck."

"Well, Maria..." Sam quipped as he turned about to face Ensign Django, the dusky skinned Ensign's expression a mixture of nervousness and anticipation, "Ready to meet Mom?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." She answered back as she slipped one of the padds containing the incriminating evidence concerning Leyton's plans in her satchel, "I just hope she believes us."

"So do I..." Sam replied glumly, "So do I."

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"Permission to come on board." Captain Michael Owens requested formally from the *Sutherland's* transporter pad.

"Permission granted." Commander Christopher Hobson replied in an equally formal voice, completing the traditional formula.

"My First Officer, Commander Eugene Edison." Owens introduced as the other officer, also wearing the red and black of command stepped off the transporter pad, hand outstretched.

"Call me Gene." The Eagle's executive officer said with an affable grin.

"Commander." Hobson acknowledged in his usual patrician tone as he took his fellow first officer's hand in his in a firm grip. Addressing both officers, Chris announced, "If you will accompany me, Captain Shelby and the others are waiting in the captain's ready room."

"Lead on, Commander." Owens replied as the doors to the transporter room slid open.

As the two officers from the *Eagle* made their way down the *Sutherland's* corridors, they found that life on the *Sutherland* by and large followed the

usual routine for a starship: officers and enlisted ratings rushed to and fro to and from their duty stations, officers engaging in brief conversations before resuming their routines. "Culsten's going to be disappointed." Commander Edison muttered to his commanding officer, referring to the *Eagle's* youthful Krellonian flight control officer.

"How so?" Owens whispered back.

"He was convinced that the *Sutherland* held naked races in the corridors." He replied with a chuckle.

"That's on Fridays." Hobson deadpanned as the officers transited the bridge en route to the captain's office. "Just before the alpha shift orgy."

"He is joking...isn't he?" Eugene whispered, lowering his voice even more as Captain Owens laughed quietly and as he heard discreet snickers coming from the Deltan woman sitting at the operations console.

"I think so." The *Eagle's* skipper responded somewhat dubiously as the door to Shelby's office whooshed open.

"Come in, Captain Owens...Commander Edison..." Captain Shelby called out from the large wooden desk behind which she stood with a dark haired lieutenant wearing a gold and black uniform on one side of her and a humanoid male wearing a beige Bajoran militia uniform on the other. "This is Lieutenant Lar'ragos." She introduced, motioning with her hand first towards the lieutenant and then in the direction of the other man, "And this is Constable Odo from Deep Space Nine. Please...be seated. We have a lot to talk about and not a whole lot of time."

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Stepping off the *Potemkin's* transporter pad, Sam Lavelle managed a slight smile as his mother approached, "Mom...I'd like to introduce you to Ensign Maria Django..."

Giving the dusky skinned ensign an appraising look, Lieutenant Commander Charlotte Kincaid frowned, "Why did you bring her here, Sam? I thought you wanted to discuss the ops position with Captain Taras."

"I do, Mom!" Sam answered back, his tentative grin turning into a frown as Maria glared daggers at his mother. Subtly pressing the small of the Brazilian

ensign's back with his free hand, the Canadian helmsman smoothly lied, "You should be thanking Maria, Mom. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here now. She's talked me into at least hearing what Captain Taras had to say."

"Sam's right." Maria interjected, barely maintaining her temper. "I told him he needed to think of his career first and that this was too good an opportunity to pass up without at least talking about it."

"Well, then..." The dark haired science officer declared, her attitude towards the petite ensign suddenly shifting, "...I'm glad to hear that Sam has one friend, at least, on that ship with a good head on her shoulders."

Smoothly segueing before his volatile companion could speak, Sam quickly suggested, "Why don't we go to your quarters, Mom? I've got a lot of questions to ask and I was hoping that you might give me some idea as to how to approach Captain Taras so I don't make an ass out of myself."

"Of course!" Charlotte exclaimed, readily agreeing. "After all, we wouldn't want to have a repeat of what happened between you and Commander Riker back on the *Enterprise* now, would we?"

"No, Mom..." Sam uttered, plastering a fake grin on his face as Maria gave him a sly look, "...we wouldn't want that."

"And everyone says I'm a bitch..." Maria muttered under her breath as the trio left the transporter room.

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As Captain Owens and looked over the evidence for a third time, his jaw clenched with silent rage. You're sure about this?" The *Eagle's* skipper asked for the second time, not wanting to believe the incriminating data before him.

"I wish I weren't." Captain Shelby responded with a sigh. "But yes, it is genuine."

"And confirmed..." Constable Odo interjected, "...with testimony from one of the participants..."

"Yes..." Captain Owens interrupted testily, "Cadet Shepard from Red Squad. I read the report of his interrogation."

"Captain..." Liz intervened as hers and Owens' eyes locked, "...we don't have time for this..."

"You're right." Owens conceded, nodding his head once in response, "It's just..." he shook his head, "...for Leyton to do this..." *How could you, Erika?* Michael asked to himself. *What could have made you take part in something like this?*

"I know." Shelby commiserated, "I felt the same way." Taking a deep breath as she leaned forward against her desk, resting her weight on her balled up fists, she declared in a grave voice, "We'll have time for recriminations later. I need to know and I need to know now...can I count on your help? Leyton's people control the planetary defense grid's center of operations. I need you to neutralize them while Pava's team frees the admirals and Odo frees Captain Sisko."

"We'll do our part..." Owens vowed as Commander Edison cleared his throat. "Go ahead, Gene..." Michael encouraged as Captain Shelby nodded her head.

"Sirs? I'd like to make a suggestion..." He began, "I know Commander Mark Dennison on the *Concord*. He's a good man and a fine officer. I'd hate for his life and career to be ruined here. If you let me, I think I can talk him down."

"As far as we know..." Captain Shelby mused as she considered the *Eagle's* executive officer's suggestion, "...he might be completely innocent and not even know what's going on here. He hasn't committed any open acts that I'm aware of. He'll have to answer of course, for any acts of omission should it come out that he did know details of Leyton's plot and didn't tell anyone—but I'll let the JAG deal with that." Flashing a brief smile at Edison, Shelby decided, "Very well, Commander. If Captain Owens agrees, then you can go ahead and try to talk Commander Dennison into going to Captain Lynwood on his own."

"Of course I agree." Owens immediately confirmed as he placed a friendly hand on his first officer's arm, "Good luck, Gene."

"Thanks, Captain." Edison smiled back before turning back towards Shelby, "So...when do we start?"

"Phase One has already begun." Elizabeth replied. "You can beam over to the *Concord* from here if you want. Phase Two..." Shelby continued, "...begins as soon as Captain Owens is ready."

"We'll be ready in fifteen minutes." Owens replied confidently. "Lieutenant Nora Laas...my tactical officer, will handle the operation from our end."

"All right." Liz sighed as she walked out from around her desk. "We'll commence Phase Two on receiving word from you." Taking a deep breath, the blonde captain concluded the meeting. "Good luck, everyone. I have a feeling before this is over we're going to need as much of it as we can get."

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Immediately after the door to his mother's quarters slid shut, Sam Lavelle shoved a padd into her hands. "Read this...but before you do, I'd suggest you sit down."

Taking her son's advice with a quizzical glance, Charlotte Kincaid sat down in a brown armchair, motioning for her guests to be seated as well. Making herself comfortable, the *Potemkin* science officer began to peruse the padd in her hands. The expression on her face changing from mild curiosity to disbelief to outrage, the Ottawa native swore, "Do you honestly expect me to believe this? Hell, for all I know you're the changelings and this is all part of your plot to start a civil war." Her eyes flaring with anger, she spat out as her hand hovered over her comm badge, "Give me one good reason not to call security right now and have you thrown in the brig!"

"You really are an idiot!" Maria spat out as she leaped to her feet, "The evidence is staring you right in the face and you're too stupid to see it. You think we're changelings? Ok..." She growled as she took out a hypo. Rolling up her sleeve, she placed the hypo against her bare arm. Gritting her teeth as she pressed the button on her hypo, she extracted a small sample of her blood. Replacing the ampoule with an empty one, she gestured for Sam to roll up his sleeve. Repeating the procedure with him, she turned towards the stunned science officer and smirked as the two blood samples showed no change. "Satisfied now, Mommy Dearest?" Putting in yet another empty ampoule into the hypo, Ensign Django tossed it to her companion's mother, "Now it's your turn."

Seeing the stunned and shocked expression on his mother's face at the fiery ensign's outburst and her subsequent actions, Sam, placing a restraining hand on Maria's shoulder, pushed her back down to her seat as he leveled his gaze at his mother. "Mom...do you honestly think that if Maria or I were really changelings that you'd be able to hit that comm badge of yours before you were stopped?" Taking a more conciliatory stance, the dark haired lieutenant

pleaded, "I know this is a lot for you to take in...but we're...I'm...telling you the truth here. Because of Leyton, over five thousand people are dead and if he's not stopped, that number's going to grow—by a lot. If we're wrong, then you can just say that we coerced you...that you didn't have a choice but to do what we told you to do. We'll be the ones taking the heat and your career and reputation will remain intact. But...if we're right and you did nothing—or you tried to stop us—do you really want to have that on your conscience?"

"No..." Charlotte replied in a soft voice as she rolled up her sleeve and, repeating the actions of the two younger officers, took a sample of her blood, "I wouldn't." Tossing the blood sample back to the dusky skinned ensign, the older woman remarked with a steady glare, "Satisfied?"

"Yeah." Maria responded with a smug grin as she examined the unchanged blood sample. "Now, I'm happy."

"Good." Charlotte answered back, her face taking on a grim look as she turned her attention back to her son, "So...what do you want me to do?"

"We need to get in to see the Captain." Sam replied, relieved that his mother had now come around, "Hopefully, we can convince him not to follow Leyton's orders...or if we can't...that we can stop him before more people are killed."

"Well..." Charlotte suggested, "I did tell him that you wanted to speak to him about the ops position, so he is expecting to see you..."

"Great!" Sam exclaimed with a grin. "That'll give us the perfect opportunity. So...when do we meet him?"

"Give me ten minutes to freshen up..." Charlotte replied, "...and I'll meet you in the lounge. We can go on from there to the Captain's office."

"Ok..." Sam smiled as he and Maria got up out of the chairs. "We'll see you then."

Flashing a sly grin as Maria made her way towards the door, the older woman asked, "Oh...Ensign Django...are you always this..."

"Bitchy?" The young Brazilian replied with a smug grin as she looked back at her friend's mother.

"I was going to say confrontational..." Charlotte rejoined with a twinkle in her eye, "But bitchy works just as well."

Shrugging her shoulders, Maria quipped as she exited the room, "Actually, I'm usually much worse. You're lucky. You caught me on a good day today."

Laughing as the door to her quarters whooshed open; Lieutenant Commander Charlotte Kincaid made her way to her dresser drawer. Her laughter fading away as she opened the drawer, the dark haired science officer took out the small hand phaser that she had hidden there under her clothes. Concealing it in the small of her back, the protective mother squared her shoulders as she took a deep breath. Exhaling, she recorded brief messages for her husband, children, and brother and then strode confidently out the door and down the corridor, her decision made.

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As a haggard Elizabeth Shelby took the center chair, she gratefully took the cup of coffee offered to her by an ensign wearing the gold and black uniform of operations. Taking a sip of the hot beverage, the petite captain sighed in gratitude as she noticed the green light flashing on her armrest. Reluctantly setting her cup down, Captain Shelby punched the intercom button with her index finger, "Pava...Manuele...your teams are clear to go. Commence Phase Two and..." She quickly added, "Good luck." Swiveling her chair, she addressed the young ensign who had earlier brought her coffee and was now standing at the tactical station. "Bring the ship to yellow alert, but do not charge either weapons or shields unless I say so and give the 'Go' signal to the *Eagle*."

"Aye, Captain." The young woman crisply acknowledged as she moved to carry out her commanding officer's orders.

Picking her coffee cup up, Liz took another sip. *Nothing to do now...the captain mused...but wait...and hope.*

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Glancing down at his arm rest, Captain Michael Owens, also sitting at the center seat of his ship, took a deep breath. "Bring us to yellow alert." The *Eagle's* skipper ordered as he activated his intercom, "Lieutenant Nora...Now."



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Bolting up out of his chair as two figures materialized in his private office, Rear Admiral Barzhan glowered at the human officer wearing gold and black and the young Troyian woman wearing the gray and red togs and insignia of a third year cadet. "What is the meaning of this Lieutenant...Cadet?" The Bolian Starfleet Academy Commandant growled.

"You are under arrest, Sir, for conspiracy to commit mutiny and insurrection." Seeing the admiral making a motion with his right hand towards his desk, Manuele warned as he drew his phaser, pointing it at the flag officer, "Don't, Sir. Please, Admiral. I would hate to have to stun you."

"Very well..." Barzhan sighed as he slowly raised his hands, "Where are we going?"

As Lieutenant Atoa and Cadet Atris took their positions to either side of the admiral, Manuele activated his comm badge, "Atoa to *Sutherland*. Mission accomplished. Three to beam up directly to security holding."

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"Hello, Ben." Lieutenant Commander Daneeka smiled down at her old friend from behind the forcefield of the confinement cell he had been locked up in. "How're you doing?" Benjamin Sisko, still wearing his red and black uniform, lay back on the bed, his head and back supported by the headboard, hands clasped behind his head. While he gave the appearance of being relaxed, the Bolian security specialist knew full well that her former shipmate from the *Okinawa* was carefully observing his environment, looking for any weaknesses he might exploit to make his escape. "I know what you're thinking, Ben—I'd be doing the same thing if I were in your shoes, but please, don't try. I'd hate to have to bring you down. In any event, Admiral Leyton has promised to let you go." Holding out a peace offering, the youthful Bolian added, "He even said that he'd be willing to reinstate you as commanding officer of Deep Space Nine."

"That's mighty generous of him." Sisko responded, his toothy grin not at all hiding the sarcasm of his tone.

"Ben..." Daneeka shook her head, "Why won't you understand? Jaresh Inyo is an incompetent jackass—he's totally unfit for the job."

"It's not our place to make that decision!" An outraged Benjamin Sisko retorted, rising to his feet. "Starfleet has to stay outside politics!" His anger fading, the dark skinned captain pleaded, "Don't you see, Daneeka? Once Starfleet starts down that road—once it becomes involved in politics—that's the beginning of the end for our way of life!"

Shaking her head, the young Bolian countered, "You're wrong, Ben. Admiral Leyton's way is the only way to preserve the Federation and our lives."

Sitting down on the edge of his bed, Benjamin shook his head somberly as he regarded his former shipmate, "Tell that to the five thousand people who've already died because of this. And if Leyton isn't stopped now—they'll be the first of many more."

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"Gene!" Commander Mark Dennison, the first officer of *USS Concord*, grinned as he saw the face of his old friend, Eugene Edison. Grasping his friend's hand in a firm handshake, the dark haired, bearded light skinned Dennison remarked, "How long has it been? Five years?"

"At least." Commander Edison grinned back as he shook his old friend's hand. Releasing his grip, Edison asked, "Can we go somewhere and talk, Mark?"

Seeing the serious, foreboding actually, look on his old friend's face, Dennison replied, "Sure...how 'bout our lounge?"

Shaking his head, Gene answered back, "I'd rather go someplace a bit more private. How about your quarters?"

"Ok..." The *Concord* XO remarked, a mystified expression still on his face, "What's this all about, Gene? Has something happened?"

Taking a deep breath, Edison exhaled with a sigh, "I'll tell you when we get to your quarters."

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Materializing on the main transportation pad at Starfleet Command Headquarters, Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos, along with the rest of his party, were politely accosted by a petty officer wearing the gold uniform tunic of a security specialist and carrying a phaser rifle at port arms.

"Morning, Petty Officer." Pava said with a crooked grin as he made ready to step off the pad.

"One moment please, Sir." The noncommissioned officer instructed as he signaled another enlisted rating manning a console. "Weapons scan."

"That's quite all right, Petty Officer." Pava replied in a reassuring tone as the crewman manning the console announced, "No weapons or other contraband devices scanned."

"You can step down now, Sir." The petty officer declared; his posture relaxing somewhat. "I'm sorry about the scans..." he said apologetically, "...new directives..."

"That's all right, Petty Officer..."

"Duncan..." The security officer supplied, his lips turning up in a slight smile.

"Petty Officer Duncan." Lar'ragos smiled back. "We all have our orders. Speaking of which..." His smile growing wider, he gestured towards Constable Odo and the rest of his party: Lieutenant Nyota Dryer and Cadet T'Pren, "...we're under orders to escort Constable Odo to Starfleet Intelligence for further debriefing and you know how Captain Elack gets when he's kept waiting..."

"Don't I!" Duncan sighed sympathetically, being very well acquainted with moody Bolian intelligence chief's sense of punctuality. "You're clear, Sir." The petty officer declared, waving Pava and his party through, "Have a good day."

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"What's this all about, Gene?" Commander Mark Dennison asked as he and his friend entered Dennison's quarters.

Pausing for a moment as he regarded the portrait of his old friend standing next to a blond haired man, Eugene Edison flashed a wan smile, "How's Eric doing?"

"He's ok..." The *Concord's* first officer replied, "We don't get to see each other as often as we'd like since he took that job with the Federation Development Program, but I've got some leave time coming to me and he's planning on

taking some vacation time so we're planning on meeting up at Risa the end of next month." Motioning for his old friend to be seated, Dennison remarked, "But I'm sure you didn't want to talk to me about my relationship with Eric. So...what is it?"

Handing the padd in his hands to Commander Dennison, Gene sighed, "Please tell me you don't know anything about this, Mark."

His eyes reflecting his astonishment and disbelief as he read the information on the padd that Edison had just handed him, Mark Dennison remarked in a hushed tone, "You think I'm involved in this?"

"You're saying you're not?" Gene asked; desperately wanting to believe his friend's innocence.

"Of course, I'm not!" Mark answered back heatedly as he shot up out his seat. "I'd never betray my oath like that!" He growled as he paced angrily, "I can't believe you of all people would think that I'd have any part in something as monstrous as this!"

"I believe you." Gene replied in a sincere tone, adding, "I was hoping you weren't part of this...that's why I asked my captain and Captain Shelby to let me talk to you first—before they contacted your captain. I wanted to give you the chance to clear yourself."

Calming down as he heard his friend's words, Commander Dennison sighed. "And if I were involved, to do the right thing." Taking a deep breath as his friend nodded his head in affirmation; the dark haired commander cracked a smile, "I'm glad you did, Gene. Now...let's go see Captain Lynwood and get this settled."

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"Well...that went easier than I thought it would." Lieutenant Dryer whispered once the group was safely out of earshot of anybody.

"We got lucky this time." Pava replied, his smile vanishing as they approached their destination. "This is one of the security monitoring stations." Turning towards Odo, the El-Aurian raised his hand just as the constable began to melt. "I'd hold off on that if I were you—this room is probably set up to run automatic phaser sweeps to detect changelings."

“Good point.” Odo conceded, returning immediately to his usual humanoid form. “So...how do we proceed?”

“You and T’Pren wait out here for now.” Pava instructed, “Leave this one for Nyota and me.” Flashing a wicked grin at the lovely dark skinned woman, the El-Aurian quipped, “You ready?”

“I’m always ready.” Dryer rejoined with a smirk of her own as the door slid open to reveal the solitary occupant of the room.

Turning about quickly at the sound of the door opening, the security specialist immediately jumped out of his seat, coming to attention on recognizing the insignia of the two lieutenants. “Sirs!”

“Stand at ease, Crewman.” Pava smiled as he and Nyota approached closer. “We’re just doing a security sweep.”

“Security sweep, Sir? Commander Daneeka didn’t mention anything about any security sweeps.” His expression suddenly suspicious, the crewman requested, “Wait a moment, I’ll ask her.”

“That’s all right, Crewman.” Lar’ragos replied, his lips turning up into a cold grin. Striking before the guard’s hand could touch his comm badge; Lar’ragos felled the younger man, the edge of his hand striking the back of the guard’s neck, rendering him instantly unconscious.

Picking up the slumping crewman, Nyota dragged him to the far edge of the room. “Smooth, Lieutenant.” The ebony skinned security officer remarked with a toothy grin.

“Thanks, and it’s Pava.” Lar’ragos responded as he motioned for the rest of his team to enter, “Ok T’Pren...” he quipped as he bent over one of the security consoles, “It’s time to show me how good you really are.”

“Just watch, Sir.” The young Vulcan rejoined as she quickly inputted a series of numbers and letters on to the computer station that she occupied. Flashing a triumphant grin, she announced, “All done!”

“Done here.” Pava exclaimed at nearly the same time. Turning towards Odo, he explained, “We’ve uploaded a program that disables the security alerts while at the same time appearing fully operational to anyone making a cursory check.”

“Very good.” The constable remarked, his lips turning up in a sardonic grin, “I’ll just have to make sure Quark doesn’t find out about this.”

“It won’t hold up if someone looks real close.” T’Pren cautioned, “But, so long as we avoid alerting any live guards, it should buy us the time we need to accomplish our mission.”

“It’ll be enough to get the job done.” Pava pronounced as he turned towards Odo, “Constable, you should find Captain Sisko in Security Confinement. Go back to the last intersection we passed, take the corridor going left, then the next corridor right and you should be there.”

Watching as the changeling constable exited the room, Pava turned towards the remaining members of his team. “Ok...let’s go. Leyton probably has the other admirals locked up in the main conference room.”

“Why there?” Nyota asked, “Wouldn’t it make more sense for him to put them in a cell.”

“Not really.” Pava explained. “You see, he still wants them on his side—their support would go a long way towards swaying most of the rest of the Fleet to go along with his coup, so he’s not going to want to alienate them by locking them up in a cell.” The El-Aurian’s lips turning up in a crooked grin, he concluded, “I’m betting that he’s been sweet-talking them constantly since he made his move.”

“Then...” Lieutenant Dryer grinned, “What are we waiting for? They’re probably bored stiff by now.”

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“Well...good news for a change.” Liz Shelby exclaimed, addressing her first officer as she came on to the bridge. “Manuele has just taken Admiral Barzhan into custody and I just got off the line with Captains Lynwood and Owens and Commander Edison.” Sighing in relief as she took the center seat, she continued her narrative, “Commander Dennison denies having anything to do with Leyton’s plot and a check of his subspace communications logs verifies that he’s had no communication with Leyton or any other known conspirators.”

“That’s one piece of good news at least.” Commander Christopher Hobson

agreed; his poker face still in place. "It would have been a shame to have his life and career ruined by this reckless...stunt."

"Yeah..." Liz muttered somberly as her thoughts drifted to her former lover now sitting in the center seat of the *Lakota*, "...a shame."

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"Ah...Commander..." Captain Taras smiled, his antennae twitching slightly as he rose from his seat, "Come on in. All of you..." His grin widened as he regarded the dark haired young man and dusky skinned woman who entered along with his science officer. "Be seated..." He genially insisted as he sat down again. "So, Charlotte...this is the young man you've been telling me about?"

"Yes, Sir." Lieutenant Commander Kincaid responded with a shaky grin, "This is my son—Lieutenant Sam Lavelle. And this..." She continued, "Is his...friend...Ensign Maria Django."

"Well, Mr. Lavelle..." The Andorian captain remarked as he called up the young lieutenant's service record on his padd, "Lieutenant Commander Kincaid says that you would be a good fit for the operations officer's position." His smile growing wider as he perused Lavelle's record, Taras declared, "Your Academy record and your service on the *Enterprise* and *Sutherland* as well as a recent commendation from Admiral Glover would seem to bear that out. So..." The captain queried as he gave the young human an appraising look, "Why do you want the job?"

"Sir..." Sam began, clearing his throat as he offered the captain the padd he was holding in his hands, "Before we continue, you might want to read this first."

"Hmmm..." Taras vocalized, his antennae pointing at the younger officer, "Very well...let's see what you've got."

As he read the incriminating evidence on the padd, the genial expression on the Andorian captain's face quickly vanished as his antennae twitched in a manner that the experienced science officer quickly recognized as a mixture of nervousness and anger. Her hand surreptitiously dropping to the small of her back where she had concealed her phaser, Charlotte pleaded in a somber, pained voice, "Tell me you're not a part of this, Captain...please!"

"I'm sorry, Charlotte..." Captain Taras replied as he slowly rose to his feet, grasping the phaser secured under his desk as he did so, "...but Admiral Leyton's right. If we don't do something now, the Federation is doomed."

"I'm sorry too, Sir." Sam interjected as he and Maria stood up, "But, per Captain Shelby's orders, we're going to have to place you under arrest."

Sighing, the Andorian captain drew his phaser, pointing it at Sam and Maria, "I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that." Punching his intercom button, Taras spoke, "Number One? I need a security detail in my office immediately." Turning his attention back to his guests, his smile returned, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to confine you to our brig for now. I promise your confinement will be as brief as possible."

Drawing and firing her phaser, Charlotte Kincaid cried out as her captain's body slumped on to his desk, "I'm sorry, Sir." Dropping her weapon as the first officer and two security guards stormed into the ready room, a tearful Charlotte, responding to the executive officer's demand to know what had just happened, pointed to the padd on the captain's desk.

Picking up the padd and reading it, the Potemkin's XO frowned, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, Sir." Lieutenant Commander Kincaid responded, nodding her head.

"Captains Shelby and Owens will confirm it." Lavelle added as both he and Maria stood under the phasers of the two security guards.

"We'll see..." The first officer responded, "For now..." He ordered, motioning to his security officers, "Confine them to the brig and take the captain to sickbay." Pausing for a moment, the commander further instructed, "And then inform the doctor that Captain Taras is to be restricted to sickbay or his quarters until I get to the bottom of this." Seeing the confused look on the two guards' faces, the commander barked, "Now, gentlemen!"

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Entering the security monitoring station, Lieutenant Commander Daneeka frowned as she saw that the specialist who was supposed to be monitoring the consoles was not at his station. "Crewman?" The lovely Bolian called out as she cautiously advanced further within the room. Looking about, she very quickly found the man in question slumped against the far wall, arms crossed



on his chest. Shaking her head, Daneeka rushed to the crewman. Shaking him back into awareness, she barked out, “What happened here?”

“I don’t know...” The crewman groggily replied as he struggled back to consciousness, “There were two lieutenants...security officers...and then...” As the crewman slumped back to the deck, Daneeka touched her comm badge, “Security alert. All levels. At least two intruders wearing Starfleet security uniforms. All individuals not carrying proper authorization are to be immediately apprehended.” Approaching one of the security consoles, Daneeka called up a diagnostic check. Immediately recognizing the tampering, the young Bolian growled, “Attention all security personnel! Ignore all security alert monitors—they have been tampered with.” Nodding her head as a trio of security officers burst into the monitoring room, Daneeka spat out, “You’re with me. I want the bastard and/or bitch who did this.”

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*Security alert. All levels...Attention all security personnel! Ignore all security alert monitors—they have been tampered with.*

“Well...they’re on to us.” Nyota remarked as she and her companions moved cautiously down the corridor.

“Then be thankful we’re almost there.” Pava replied as the trio advanced to within sight of the main conference room.

“Hopefully...” T’Pren interjected, “We can get the admirals and Admiral Leyton in one go.”

“First things first...” Lar’ragos cautioned as he pointed to the two security guards standing in the corridor. “This time we’re not going to be able to bluff our way past them.”

“So...” Lieutenant Dryer asked as she readied her phaser, “Do we take them out now?”

“Wait.” Pava said, his lips curling up in a sly grin. “I have an idea.”

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“Admiral Leyton?” Daneeka called out, touching her comm badge, “Respond please.” Growling at the lack of response from her leader, the Bolian

lieutenant commander turned towards two of the three security guards accompanying her. "Go to the admiral's office..." she ordered, "...find out what's going on and tell me yesterday." Turning to the remaining specialist, she commanded, "You're with me—we're going to the main conference room."

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Pava and Nyota advanced towards the two security guards, their phasers trained on the young Vulcan woman walking between them. Coming to a halt before the guards, Pava announced, "We caught this individual with an accomplice."

"Where's the other?" One of the guards, an Andorian, asked, his antennae twitching suspiciously as the other guard trained her phaser on the three standing before her.

"Sickbay." Lar'ragos promptly replied, maintaining his usual crooked grin as he surreptitiously sized up the Andorian standing before him.

"Why don't you check in to be sure?" Lieutenant Dryer thoughtfully suggested as she made ready to strike.

"Just one moment." The Andorian replied as his hand moved to his comm badge.

Seeing their opening, Pava and Dryer simultaneously struck as T'Pren snatched the phaser out of the human security officer's hand. As both officers slumped to the deck, the trio heard a voice coming from behind them. "Not bad! Too bad you're not on our side." Pivoting about, weapons drawn, they saw a Bolian security officer with another trooper standing beside her, their weapons leveled at them. "I wouldn't..." She quipped, "Waking up after a heavy stun blast is a bitch and a half." Smirking triumphantly, she motioned with her weapon, "Your phasers...drop them...now."

Catching Nyota out of the corner of his eye, Pava flashed a crooked grin, making as if to drop his weapon. "Sure...whatever you say." Seeing that his ebony skinned companion was in position and that T'Pren had steeled herself for what was about to happen, the El-Aurian sneered as he and Dryer dived for the cover offered by the intersecting walls, "Come and get them!"

Firing simultaneously, T'Pren's phaser hit the security trooper accompanying

Daneeka as the beam from the Bolian hit her square on the chest. Snapping off return shots, both Dryer and Pava cursed as the lieutenant commander took cover behind a corridor wall.

"Damn." The El-Aurian swore, "We can't afford to let that Bolian bitch tie us down."

"I think I might have an answer." Nyota grinned as she dragged the stunned female trooper back behind the cover of her wall. Searching the security officer's satchel, the ebony skinned woman smirked triumphantly as she presented a tiny photon grenade. "Found it!" She exclaimed as she set the grenade to a heavy stun setting.

"What are you waiting for?" Pava cried out as a phaser beam narrowly missed him, "Throw the motherfrinxing thing!"

"Damn!" Daneeka cursed as she just missed the tricky El-Aurian. "Stay still, why don't you." Then, hearing a clanking sound beneath her feet, the Bolian woman looked down to see the photon grenade. "Frinx me." She uttered as the grenade went off, sending her slumping down to the floor.

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Shielding their eyes from the light flash, Pava and Nyota listened carefully from behind their positions before taking a tentative look. Peering around the corner, the El-Aurian grinned, "You got her, Nyota."

"Hope she's ok..." Dryer responded, flashing a toothy grin of her own. "Even on stun settings it's rough getting slammed by those things."

"Eh...she'll be all right." Pava replied with a grin of his own, "That woman is too tough to kill." His eyes falling on their fallen comrade now being tended to by Lieutenant Dryer, the El-Aurian asked, "How's our future security chief?"

"She'll be ok..." Nyota replied confidently as the young Vulcan stirred, "Take it easy, dear..." The ebony skinned woman said, speaking in soothing tones, "You just got hit by the equivalent of a charging mugato."

"You did good, Cadet..." Pava said, adding in his praise, "...taking one for the team like that." Watching with concern as Dryer helped the youthful T'Pren to her feet, the El-Aurian asked, "You sure you're up for this?"

"I'll be fine, Sir." The cadet replied in a shaky voice. "Just give me a few moments to catch my feet."

"No can do." Lar'ragos said with a rueful grin, "We need to get to the admirals now before Leyton can send more troops to stop us." Motioning for Nyota to help the younger woman, Pava made his way to the conference room door. Receiving no response as he punched the enunciator, the El-Aurian cursed as he removed an access panel. "I'm going to have to hotwire the door." Jerking his head towards the corridor, he ordered as he removed and replaced chips and relays, "Keep an eye out for party crashers." Several moments later, Lar'ragos cried out triumphantly as the door slid open, "Done!"

Entering the large chamber, weapons drawn, the three officers found the four admirals as well as the President of the Federation seated at a large circular conference table. As all three officers lowered their weapons, Pava called out respectfully, "Mr. President...Admirals..."

Admiral Nechayev spat out angrily, "Who are you? And where is that bastard Leyton?"

"You can tell that son of a bitch..." Admiral Hanson spat out, "That we haven't changed our minds."

"We will not support his coup!" Admiral Thuosana Shanthi declared, her nostrils flaring.

"You can tell your superior..." Jaresh-Inyo declared in a soft tone, "...that neither I nor these other officers will comply with his wishes."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sirs..." Pava replied, flashing his winningest grin, "But we're not with Leyton."

"We were sent by Captain Shelby..." Lieutenant Dryer interjected as she guided a still groggy T'Pren to a nearby chair.

"The lieutenant's right." Pava confirmed, "We were sent to free you."

"Shelby...rescue..." Shanthi mouthed, her voice reflecting her relief at being freed as well as her distaste at the fact that the author of her freedom was the captain she despised so thoroughly.

"I knew we could count on Liz!" Admiral Hanson slapped his thigh

triumphantly. "Didn't I tell you Alynna?" Cracking a crooked grin, he added, "...Thuosana?"

"Are all of you all right?" Lieutenant Lar'ragos inquired as he made his way to a communications console.

"We're fine." Admiral Paris responded, "But what about everyone else?"

"Just a moment, Sir..." Pava replied respectfully, "...and I'll find out." Smiling victoriously, the El-Aurian activated the comm channel. "Sirs, I've raised Captain Sisko. One moment and I'll put it on the main monitor."

Moments later, the image of Captain Benjamin Sisko filled the monitor screen. "Mr. President...admirals..." the dark skinned officer declared respectfully, a smile on his face. "Admiral Leyton..." He said, gesturing with his hand at the sullen admiral seated beside him, "Is in my custody and *Defiant* has just arrived along with the *Lakota* with additional information regarding the admiral's conspiracy..." Pausing for a moment, his smile vanished as he continued his report, "I regret to inform you that both *Defiant* and *Lakota* suffered severe damage with loss of life on both ships."

On hearing the news, the earlier ebullient mood within the conference room became much more somber as Shelby and Owen's images appeared on screen as well, "We received Captain Sisko's communication the same time you did..." Captain Shelby politely interjected, "And we're glad you're all safe and sound. We've taken Admiral Barzhan in custody and Captain Taras is being held in confinement on the *Potemkin* as well as my people and the *Potemkin's* science officer who aided them. *Potemkin's* first officer has further informed me that he would not release any of them until he receives confirmation by Command."

Turning towards Pava, Admiral Hanson ordered, "Get the *Potemkin* for me, Lieutenant." Addressing Shelby, the balding admiral grinned, "Don't worry about your people, Captain, I'll get them out for you."

"Thanks, Sir." Liz smiled. "I appreciate that."

Adding his voice to the discussion, Captain Owens reported, "Lieutenant Nora Laas and her team reported that they were able to successfully retake the planetary defense center from Admiral Leyton's people with no loss of life on either side."

"That is good news." The President sighed as he struggled to his feet. "Captains..." He declared in a solemn, dignified voice as he addressed the images of the three officers on the split screen, "You and your people have rendered the Federation...all of us...a great service. We are in your debt." Pausing for a moment he added in a lower, gentler tone, "I am also personally indebted to you..."

"You should all be proud." Admiral Nechayev added, a rare smile on her face as she regarded the three captains—all quite different in temperament and individual style, yet all equally loyal to the Federation and its values. "What you and your officers and crew have done today will be remembered by us all. A great deal of work though..." The admiral declared, her smile vanishing, "...still remains to be done. Stand by for further orders." Turning towards the El-Aurian and Lieutenant Dryer, the Russian admiral smiled, phrasing her order as a request. "I would appreciate it if you two would remain on hand to assist us in coordinating our efforts to restore order." Glancing down at the still dazed cadet, Nechayev further ordered, "And if you would, please see to it that this young lady receives immediate medical attention."

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Nodding her head as Liz acknowledged the orders she had just been given, the petite captain turned towards her first officer, "Commander Hobson? Tell Lieutenant Atoa to send as many security troopers as he can spare to Starfleet Command. Captain Owens is doing the same for the planetary defense network."

"Aye, Sir." Chris answered back in a crisp voice, tapping his comm badge. As the first officer relayed his captain's orders, the young ensign standing at Lieutenant Atoa's normal station interrupted, "Sir? I've just received a message from the *Potemkin*. Commander Akala says that he has just received confirmation from Admiral Hanson to release Commander Kincaid, Lieutenant Lavelle, and Ensign Django. The lieutenant and ensign will be returned to the *Sutherland* as soon as possible." Pausing for a moment, the crewman added, "I'm also receiving a message from the *Defiant* from Commander Dax. She says that she is unable to speak now, but wanted to let you know that she is fine as is Captain Benteen."

On hearing the good news regarding both her best friend and her former lover, Liz sighed in relief, allowing her command chair to possess her weary body. "Sir?" Commander Hobson's voice snapping her out of her reverie, the youthful captain looked up, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah..." Liz replied with a tired grin, "I'm Ok...just tired...very, very tired."

"It would seem, Sir..." Chris observed, "That the crisis has been averted."

Nodding her head, the captain took a sip from her now cold coffee, making a face at its bitterness, "Yeah, Chris..." She agreed in a sleepy voice, "We dodged a bullet. Now..." She remarked as she set down her cup, "...comes the hard part. We have to try to put everything back together again."

## Part 6: Picking up the Pieces

*Shelby-Benteen*

"There's no other way, Jadz..." Liz Shelby sighed as she handed her old friend a cup of raktajino before sitting down next to her on the comfortable leather sofa that occupied the left wall of the *Sutherland* captain's ready room, "...but for Starfleet to go public on this." Shaking her head, the captain took a sip of her replicated Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee, "Too many people know about what happened for the Fleet to keep it 'in house'. Besides, if Starfleet tries to cover it up..."

"When it gets out..." The raven-haired Trill finished as she blew steam off her Klingon coffee, "...and it will...public trust in Starfleet will drop even lower than it is now."

"Exactly!" Liz exclaimed, "We have to be seen cleaning up our messes here."

"So..." Jadzia asked, "...what about Red Squad? Do they get away scot-free?"

Sighing deeply, Shelby answered back, her anger at the admirals' decision evident in her voice, "Yeah...looks like they do—for now at least. The official line is that the *Valiant* is on an extended mission circumnavigating the Federation and so any action against Red Squad will have to wait until they return."

"I hate to say it..." Jadzia remarked, "But I'm not surprised."

"It's bullshit and you know it!" Liz bit back bitterly, "Those brats should have to pay for what they did! Five thousand people dead! Hell, I even offered to go chase them down for Admiral Hanson when I confronted him with this."

"So..." Jadzia asked, placing a comforting hand on her friend's forearm, "What did J. P. say?"

"He said..." Shelby replied, calming down slightly, "...that another scandal involving Academy students happening just a few years after what happened with Nova Squad could cause irreparable harm to the Academy at a time where the need for good officers has never been greater."

"Well..." Jadzia remarked, taking a sip of her raktajino, "...I hate to say it, but he does have a point. Two scandals involving elite cadet squads within a five



year period..."

"Doesn't speak well for discipline at the Academy." The *Sutherland's* captain finished.

"No, it doesn't." Dax agreed, "Which is another mess Starfleet Command is going to have to clean up." Seeing the look of consternation on her friend's face, Jadzia gently asked, "Have you seen Erika yet?"

Shaking her head, Shelby responded, "No." Head bowed, the starship captain continued, "I got her message begging me to come see her." Her eyes moistening, Liz looked up into the eyes of her dear friend, "Jadz...you should have seen her. She's lost everything."

"All the more reason for you to see her, Betts." Jadzia answered back, calling her by the name that Shelby only permitted those closest to her to use. "She could use a friend now."

"Even a former lover who screwed her over?" Liz asked.

Nodding her head, Dax answered in the affirmative, "Especially an old lover who once made a mistake and understands how important it is to be forgiven."

"Ok, Jadz..." Liz promised, her lips turning up into a shaky grin as she daubed the tears from her eyes, "I'll go see her."

"Good." The lovely Trill answered back as she finished her raktajino. Standing up, she smiled, "Thanks for the coffee, Liz, but I'm afraid I've got to get back to the *Defiant*."

"I understand." Shelby replied, her lips turning up into a warm smile, "And thanks for letting me use your shoulder to cry on."

"Anytime, Liz..." Jadzia smiled back, "I've used yours often enough."

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After submitting to an identification and weapons scan carried out by a human lieutenant manning the security console, the door providing access to the confinement wing slid open. Tilting her head towards another security trooper, the lieutenant apologized, "I'm sorry, Captain Shelby, but an escort

must accompany you at all times while you're in the ward."

"I understand, Lieutenant." Liz replied in a flat tone. "Thank you." Walking down the corridor with her escort at her side, Shelby observed out of the corner of her eyes the prisoners in their cells. Admiral Barzhan, the Bolian former Commandant of the Academy, looked straight ahead, a vacant look in his eyes. Captain Taras of the *Potemkin*, an officer with, until now, a distinguished and spotless record, well liked and well respected by all his peers, sat at the edge of his bed, his head in his hands, sobbing. A Bolian woman unknown to Liz stood defiant, her eyes shooting daggers at the petite blonde captain as she walked past. "Who's she?" Shelby asked, jerking her head in the direction of the Bolian woman.

"Lieutenant Commander Daneeka." The crewman replied with just a touch of sadness in her voice, "She used to be head of security here."

"I take it she was well liked?" Liz inquired.

Nodding her head, the crewman laconically responded, "Yes. Very."

"I see..." Liz drawled as they reached the cell containing her former lover. "Lower the forcefield." Shelby ordered. Seeing that the crewman's hesitancy, the captain added a stronger edge to her voice, "Lower the field. You can raise it again once I enter."

"Aye, Sir." The specialist acknowledged in a flat voice.

The field lowered, Liz stepped into the cell. The moment she cleared the threshold, the humming returned, indicating that it had been restored. "Liz?"

Looking down at the source of the forlorn voice that had just called her name, Liz saw Erika Benteen, sitting down at the edge of her bed, looking up at her. As she gazed down on her, Shelby's heart melted at the sight of Erika's tearstained, red eyes. The sight of her former lover, a woman as strong willed and determined as she, now nothing more than a shell of her former confident self, took the petite blonde starship captain aback. "Oh, Erika..."

Her eyes momentarily flashing defiance, Benteen cried out bitterly, "I'm surprised you showed up."

"I am too." Liz spat out as she turned her back, preparing to walk away only to stop at the heartfelt cry of "No!" from the tormented woman sitting on the

bed. Turning about, Shelby sighed as she sat down next to the disgraced captain, "I need to know why you did it?"

Holding her head erect, Erika explained, "I...we...thought it was the only way to save the Federation..."

"Do you know how many times I've heard that this week, Erika?" Liz interrupted; an impatient edge to her voice.

"It's the truth!" Benteen cried out. "I know what you're thinking...that I did it for the same reason you stabbed me in the back—for ambition." Liz's face reddened with shame as she remembered how she had betrayed the trust of her former lover for a promotion back when they were both stationed on the *Hornet*. "But that's not the way it was. I honestly thought that Leyton was right. That we weren't taking the Dominion or the changelings seriously enough..."

"Liz..." Erika sniffed as she looked up at her ex-lover, "I'm sorry for all those people who we...I...hurt and killed because of what we did. But I'm not..." She said, her eyes once again flashing that look of indomitable will and determination that had drawn the blonde captain to her so many years ago, "I'm not sorry for believing that Admiral Leyton was right about the Dominion. I believed then...and I still do...that it is the greatest threat we have faced since the Borg Incursion. In some ways..." Benteen declared, her eyes and face reflecting the conviction of her beliefs, "...it's an even greater threat in that unlike the Borg, the Dominion intends to stay."

Shaking her head, Elizabeth replied, "For what it's worth, Erika, I agree with you and Leyton that too many in the Federation Council and in Starfleet Command don't take the Dominion seriously enough and that it's going to bite us in the ass soon enough. But..." The blonde captain admonished, "What you did was wrong. It was not Starfleet's decision to make. The Federation President and Council proposes...Starfleet disposes. That's the way it's always been and that's the way it has to be." Shaking her head, the blonde captain asked, "What I want to know...what I need to know..." she asked, her face now taking on a stern expression, "Is why you went along with that goddamned power blackout? You had to have known that people were going to die because of that? Why did you do it?"

Her face reflecting her guilt, Benteen confessed, "I asked the admiral if we really had to go through with it. I expressed my concerns to him about it. I asked him if he...if we...had fully taken into account what would happen."

"And his response?" Liz inquired, pressing her interrogation.

"He said that we had no choice..." Erika recalled, "That it was the only way to make the President understand how serious the threat was." Shaking her head, the forlorn captain sobbed, "But I never...ever...thought that...all those people...those little children...it wasn't supposed to happen like that!"

"It never is..." Shelby whispered softly as she gave her shoulder for her former lover to cry on. Looking down on her former lover, Liz asked in a soft, gentle tone as she ran her fingers through Benteen's chestnut brown hair, "What else did you want to tell me?"

"I'm scared." Erika whimpered, "Look..." She explained, her sobs dying down into sniffles now, "I...I know I have to pay for what I did...but...but Liz..." Her face now taking on a panicked look, the tormented woman pleaded, "I don't want to go to Sundancer! I've heard stories about that place...we all have. I'd die if I have to go there!"

"No one's talking about sending you to Supermax, Honey." Liz consoled as she continued to stroke the other woman's hair. "There are a lot of penal colonies—true, there are some that are easier than others," she admitted, adding, "There's no reason to think that they're going to send you to a hell-hole like Sundancer."

Shaking her head as she pulled away from the other woman's embrace, Erika Benteen flashed a brief, shaky smile. "They have to make an example out of somebody. If for no other reason than to serve as a warning to the rest of Starfleet." She declared, "They won't send the admiral there. Even after all that's happened, he's got enough powerful friends to ensure that he'll be sent to New Zealand or some other comfortable penal colony. But me..." She shrugged, "I was Admiral Leyton's aide. I knew most of his plans. He made me captain and gave me the *Lakota* as a reward for my loyalty. And..." She concluded, her eyes once again tearing, "I engaged the *Defiant* causing the deaths of a lot of good men and women." Daubing her eyes, she finished, "You see...I'm the perfect candidate. They're not just going to send me to Supermax—they're going to toss me under it."

Sighing as she admitted to herself that her former lover made perfect sense, Shelby, gazed deep into her frightened doe like eyes. "I can't promise anything, Erika, but I'll try. I'll talk to Admiral Hanson..."

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"Sir..." Captain Shelby pleaded as she sat down opposite her old mentor, "Captain Benteen sincerely regrets her part in the loss of life that took place. Neither she nor I are asking that she not be punished..."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." An uncharacteristically grim Admiral J. P. Hanson responded with a grunt.

"It's just that..." Liz continued, "...she's afraid she might be sent to Sundancer..."

"She's got good reason to be afraid." Hanson replied, "Seeing as she was Leyton's right hand." Looking on his former protégé, the old admiral allowed his stern demeanor to slip just a little, "Liz...I know how close you and Captain Benteen were once and I sympathize with you. Hell...I'm not a monster; I know how much of a hell hole that place can be." Shaking his head, the admiral declared, "I don't want to send her there either, but a strong message has to be sent."

"I understand that, Sir." Shelby replied, "But I think there is a way in which that message could be sent, while at the same time keeping Erika away from Sundancer..."

"Very well, Captain." The admiral responded as he shifted about in his seat, "I'm all ears."

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"Here's the deal..." Shelby announced as she looked down on her old girlfriend sitting at the edge of her bed, "Reduction in rank to crewman recruit and five years in the New Zealand Penal Colony. After the completion of your sentence, an evaluation will be made as to whether to restore you to active duty with the rank of ensign, if you wish to remain in the service, or to separate you either voluntarily or involuntarily from Starfleet." As the chestnut haired woman sitting before her sighed audibly in relief, Liz continued, "In exchange, you're to plead guilty and take the stand against Leyton and the others. You also have to fill out a deposition in which you reveal everything you know about Leyton's plot and all of the conspirators involved with it that you have knowledge of." Taking her former lover's silent nod of her head as understanding of the terms, Liz concluded, "Erika...if you knowingly leave anything out...if you say or do anything that's contrary to the

terms of this agreement, Admiral Hanson has instructed me to tell you that you will be, and, I quote, 'Sent to Sundancer where you will be put in with the hardest of the hardest cases'." Exhaling, the petite captain asked pointedly, "Do you understand and accept these terms?"

"Yes." Erika replied weakly, gratefully accepting the lifeline provided her.

"Good." Liz said, "I'll tell Admiral Hanson."

As her old lover turned to leave the cell, Erika Benteen called out, "And Liz...thank you...I mean it!"

Smiling a sad smile, Shelby responded with a sigh, "I owed you one, Erika. Think of this as my way of making up for what I did to you." Turning about, the blonde captain said before she left, "Please, Erika....don't let me down like I did you."

### *Lavelle—Django*

"Thanks for coming, Mom." Sam Lavelle said as he and his mother entered 'Rick's', the *Sutherland's* lounge. "Here's a good seat", the roguishly handsome Canadian flight controller smiled as he guided his mother to a table close to the bar.

Sitting down at the table, Lieutenant Commander Charlotte Kincaid uttered in a flat tone as she flashed an insincere grin, "Nice place."

"Mom..." Sam responded, raising his voice just a touch, "We're trying to get along—remember..."

"I'm sorry, Sam..." The dark haired *Potemkin* science officer apologized, "It's just that with everything that's happened..."

"How is it on the *Potemkin*?" Sam asked, his anger vanishing as he saw the look of consternation on his mother's face, "Is it that bad?"

Taking a white wine from one of the volunteer crew waiters, Charlotte sighed, "Right now, everyone's in a state of shock and morale amongst the crew has plummeted to rock bottom. You have to understand..." She said, leaning across the table towards her son, "...just how much everyone on the *Potemkin*

loved Captain Taras. We'd all give our lives for him."

"I'm not surprised." Sam commiserated, "I felt the same way about Captain Picard when I was on the *Enterprise* and about Captain Shelby now. It seems..." The younger man observed, "...that the really good captains always get that response from their crews."

"I guess so..." Charlotte allowed, for the first time acknowledging that her son's faith in his captain might well have been well placed. Shaking her head, the older woman declared somberly, "I'm not looking forward to testifying against the Captain. I feel like..." she confessed, moisture coming from her eyes, "I feel like I'm stabbing him in the back."

"No, you're not, Mom." Sam reassured, placing his hand over that of his mother's, "Mom, believe it or not, I do understand what you're going through. I read through the part of Captain Taras' record that is public knowledge. And you're right—he's done a lot of good. He's added to our scientific knowledge and his exploratory voyages rank right up there with the best of them. Hell, I would have considered it an honor to have served with him some day. And I also know that he never intended for any harm to happen to those people and he had nothing to do with the blackout. But..." Lavelle pointed out, "...he did know about the plot and he was a part of it—and he has to stand account for that. All he had to do Mom..." the dark haired young man asserted as he squeezed his mother's hand, "...was come forward when he found out about it. If he'd have done his duty when he had the chance, then maybe those five thousand plus people who are now dead—including those who were killed on the *Lakota* and *Defiant*—might still be alive today and their families instead of grieving for them might now be laughing and talking and playing with them."

"I know..." Charlotte admitted, "And you're right. It's just..." She shook her head, "I've served with Captain Taras for four years and..."

"It's almost like having to testify against me or dad or the girls..." Sam empathized, "...in a way he's family." His lips turning up into a sad smile, the young Canadian concluded, "But then, really, all of us who put on this uniform are kind of a family, aren't we?" Seeing his mother nodding her head, he continued, deliberately emphasizing the parallels between his mother's experience with Captain Taras on the *Potemkin* with their own experiences as mother and son, "Let's say that you found out that I was involved in the plot, what would you have done?"

"I'd have confronted you about it." Charlotte immediately answered.

"And hoped that I did the right thing." Sam completed, smiling as his mother nodded her head. "But what if I didn't? What would you have done then?"

Fidgeting uncomfortably in her seat, Sam's mother responded, "I honestly don't know...but..." She quickly pointed out, "...you're more than just a Starfleet officer, you're also my son—that makes a big difference!"

Nodding his head, Sam conceded his mother's point, "I understand where you're coming from, Mom, but..." He contended, pressing his argument home, "Here's the situation: I've broken my oath, put thousands of lives at risk, and my actions could possibly start a civil war. What would you do if I did not turn myself in after you gave me the chance?"

Sighing, the older woman bowed her head as she confessed, "I'd have turned you in."

"And you would have been right in doing so." Sam remarked, smiling fondly at his mother. "It doesn't mean you don't love me...in fact, your doing so is actually a far better proof that you did love me. It's the same way with Captain Taras. He made a mistake and now he has to pay for it. That doesn't mean you have to cut him out completely. Although..." he admitted, "...the captain's Starfleet career is probably through. But that doesn't mean that he can't continue to make valuable contributions once he's done his time."

"You're right." Charlotte acknowledged, her lips turning up into a sad smile, "It's just going to take some time."

"I understand, Mom." Sam replied in a sympathetic tone, "I think it's going to take a while for all of us to get over this one."

"Tell me about it!" Charlotte sighed. Then, taking a sip from her wine glass, she changed the subject, "So...where's your friend?"

Momentarily nonplussed at the new topic of discussion, Sam stammered for a moment before answering, "Oh...you mean Maria?" Cringing inwardly at the wicked gleam in his mother's eye, the younger man continued, "Well...she went home...to Rio...to spend some time with her folks. I'm supposed to beam down and meet her later on today." His face turning a brilliant scarlet, he confessed, "We're planning on spending the day at Ipanema..."

"Uh Huh..." Sam's mother grinned as the rest of their conversation turned to



less weighty and more mundane matters until, looking at her chronometer, she gasped, “Damn! I’ve got to go—I’ve got a duty shift in half an hour!”

“I’m sorry to keep you away for so long, Mom.” Sam apologized as he helped his mother out of her seat.

“That’s ok, dear.” Charlotte replied as the pair made their way out of the lounge, “It was...nice...getting to know you again. We’ve been apart for too long.”

“Same here, Mom...” The younger man answered back with a smile. “Thanks for coming.”

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Walking hand in hand with Maria, Sam Lavelle, wearing a pair of surfer baggies, his shirtless chest showing off his lean, well-muscled physique, took in the sights, sounds, and smells of the beach. Two children building a sandcastle, their parents nearby reclining on folding loungers, sipping pina coladas as they laughed at their young ones’ antics. On the water, Sam spotted the tell-tale sales of windsurfers navigating their boards amongst the waves, the odd surfer miscalculating and falling into the water as his fellows laughed. Closer to the shoreline, men, women and children played in the water, splashing each other or snorkeling. And all under the umbrella of the protective sunscreen that carefully filtered out the dangerous ultraviolet and other radiation.

Smiling, Sam turned towards his companion, “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah.” Maria Django, wearing the skimpiest red bikini that Sam had ever seen, remarked in a fond voice as a flock of gulls sounded their calls off the shore, “I didn’t realize how much I missed it—I spent so much of my time as a child and teenager here.”

“The beach isn’t the only thing that’s beautiful...” Sam remarked as he regarded his attractive companion.

“Oh...” Maria replied flirtatiously as she pirouetted, showing off the revealing bikini—the top really nothing more than two triangles that only just covered her breasts, with the bottom a very narrow triangle that barely covered her front, and a thin string in the back that covered absolutely nothing. “You like what you see?”

"Hell yeah!" Sam exclaimed, flashing a leer as he drank in the dusky skinned woman's beauty, her natural scent stirring his emotions even more.

Her lips turning up into a triumphant grin, Maria spotted out of the corner of her eye two women sunbathing topless on the beach. A mischievous twinkle in her eye, the impetuous Brazilian native reached back, and, undoing her top, slipped out of it. "Now how's the view?" She asked sweetly as she dangled the top from her index finger, chuckling merrily at her companion's open mouthed astonishment.

"Uh...Duh...Ummm..." Sam stammered as his eyes took in Maria's small firm breasts. "They're...Ummmm..."

"They're real..." Maria grinned as she slipped an arm around her red faced friend's waist, "...and they're fantastic. Now come on!" She laughed, "I want to walk some more...there's a spot I want to show you."

"Ok..." Sam answered back as the pair resumed their walk. While the young Canadian couldn't help but continue to sneak glances at his near naked companion's breasts, they did manage to find other things to look at on the beach. Coming to a pier, he asked, "Is that the spot?"

"No..." Maria responded, but it's close. "Come on though...it's been years since I've been on it." Arm in arm, the couple walked down the pier, Maria chuckling with amusement as she caught Sam's eyes continually drifting towards her chest. Flashing a crooked grin, she teased as they reached the edge of the pier, "These things are better than tractor beams." Pausing for a moment at the edge, the experienced diver quickly judging the depth of the crystal clear water and finding it adequate dived in headfirst, executing a flawless dive, barely leaving a ripple as she entered the water.

Surprised at his impulsive companion's sudden act, Sam's heart skipped a beat she broke the surface, laughing. "Come on in, Sam!" She called out, "The water's perfect!"

Shaking his head in amusement, Sam, much more cautiously, entered the water feet first, reveling in the touch of the cool water on his skin. Swimming over to his dusky skinned friend, he laughed, "You're right! It is perfect!"

"See..." She teased, "I told you." Pointing at some shells on the bottom, she asked, "How well can you hold your breath?"

“About as well as anyone else.” Sam replied, a curious look on his face. “Why?”

“Take a deep breath and don’t let go my hand.” Maria instructed, “There’s something I want to show you.”

After taking several deep breaths to oxygenate their blood, the pair dived down, Maria guiding her companion to where a blue and yellow invertebrate lay near rose and yellow coral. Rising to the surface, the swimmers drank deeply of the fresh air. “What did you think?” Maria asked; a broad smile on her face.

“It was beautiful.” Sam replied, “What was it?”

“Sea slug.” Maria responded with a laugh as she saw the suddenly downcast look on her friend’s face, “Don’t let the name bother you.” She teased as the pair tread water, “They’re really very beautiful. They come in all colors and some of them get quite large.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about the subject.” Sam remarked, barely able to restrain himself from immediately gathering the woman swimming next to him into his arms as he drank in her intoxicating fragrance.

“You forget...” Maria laughed, “*Meu Pai*—my father—owns a dive boat. I used to go out with him all the time...” she chuckled, “Except when *Mae* caught me first. Then she’d put me to work in the hotel.” Laughing, she pointed to the beach. “Race you to the shore!”

Falling quickly behind the much more experienced Maria, Sam settled for watching her body as she glided effortlessly through the water. Breathing deeply and then exhaling, Sam’s face broke out into a wide grin as he continued to follow behind until finally, reaching a point where he could now stand up, he saw Maria already at the shoreline, smiling smugly.

“Slowpoke!” She called out to him playfully as he drew closer to her until, reaching her; he scooped her up into his arms. Her arms around his neck, her lips centimeters from his, she whispered, “I could get used to this.” Without a word, Sam’s lips touched hers, gently, tentatively at first and then, feeling her eager response, hungrily. The pair remained for what seemed hours like this, their lips locked, with her in his arms as the waves lapped at his feet until, reluctantly breaking contact, she put her feet back on the ground. Putting her arm around friend, she said in a low, breathy voice, “C’mon, Sam...there’s one

more thing I want to show you.”

The couple walked together wordlessly for nearly an hour, the sun slowly drying them off as it made its way closer to the horizon until they near a set of small sand dunes. Breaking free of her companion’s embrace, she smiled shyly as her hands went to the slender ties holding her bottom in place. Silently, she pulled at the ties until, the knots loosened, the bottom slid to the sandy beach, leaving her completely naked. Her smile now more of a mischievous smirk, she bent down seductively. Picking up the tiny piece of fabric, she tossed it at her totally flabbergasted escort. Laughing merrily, she called out temptingly as she raced towards the dunes, “Catch me!”

Mouth agape and eyes wide open, Sam stood dumbfounded, one hand clutching the red bikini bottom as he watched Maria’s naked form race towards the dunes. Shaking his head in wonderment as his lips turned up into a broad grin, the youthful Canadian took off after her, ignoring the resistance offered by the thick beach sand as he drew ever closer to his prize until, reaching the dunes, he caught her. Rushing to her, he grasped her in his arms for another hungry kiss.

Looking up into his eyes as they broke from their kiss, Maria breathed huskily, “Now that you caught me, what are you going to do with me?”

His lips curled up into a smile as he pulled her down behind the dunes, Sam whispered as he tossed the bikini bottom aside, “This.”

*Shelby—Bateson—T’Pren—Atris*

“Sir?” Looking up from her desk at the sound of Lieutenant Atoa’s voice coming through her comm badge, Captain Shelby responded, “Shelby here. What is it Lieutenant?”

“Captain Bateson of the *Bozeman* would like to come on board, Sir.” The New Kauaian tactical officer replied.

“Tell him I’ll meet him in the transporter room.” Liz answered back as she got up out of her seat, a broad smile of anticipation on her face at meeting the time displaced captain. Walking down the corridor, she greeted the various members of her crew as they came and went about their duties. Then, spotting Lieutenant Lavelle exiting the quarters Ensigns Django and Barrows shared, she flashed a wicked grin, “Nice tan, Lieutenant.”

"Ummm...thank you, Sir." Her senior helmsman stammered, his face flushing red with embarrassment.

Maintaining her smile, the captain decided to let the floundering fish off the hook, "Carry on, Mr. Lavelle." Chuckling softly as the handsome Canadian took off down the corridor at a fast walk, Liz continued on her way to the transporter room. The doors whooshing open, the petite captain entered the chamber.

"Captain Bateson signals he's ready to beam over, Sir." The transporter technician reported as the captain took her place next to the console.

"Energize." Liz ordered, her smile growing wider as the form of the bearded, balding sandy haired captain materialized.

"Permission to come on board, Sir." Bateson asked, reciting the traditional formula.

"Permission granted." Captain Shelby answered back, completing the ritual as she extended her hand, "It's good to see you, Morgan."

"You too, Liz." Captain Bateson smiled back as he took the hand of the granddaughter of the man he had once served under on the old *USS Lexington*.

As the pair walked down the corridor, Shelby nodded her head in greeting as Ensign Barrows passed them going the other way, eliciting a quick reaction from the roguish captain as he glanced down at her ample chest, receiving in return a sly wink from the impish engineer. Chuckling softly, Liz whispered, her voice audible only to the man she was talking to, "It's ok, Morgan. You can quit pretending that you weren't looking at Treasure's tits just now."

"I can see why you call her Treasure." Bateson chuckled as the pair entered the turbolift. Once in the privacy of the lift cab, Morgan apologized, "I'm sorry we came too late to help out..."

"Don't be." Liz replied softly, "It's a bad situation, Morgan. With the arrests of Captain Taras and Admiral Barzhan, morale's in the crapper on the *Potemkin* and in the Academy. Plus, arrest warrants have been issued throughout the fleet for the rest of the conspirators. And..." She added somberly, "Erika's scheduled to testify tomorrow at Leyton's court-martial against him and the others."

"Damn." Bateson swore as the lift doors opened on to the bridge. Striding wordlessly across the bridge, the two captains walked into Shelby's ready room. Gazing at the portrait of Robert Wesley, looking just as he did when he was a commodore and the commanding officer of the *Lexington*, Morgan shook his head sadly, "I'm glad the Old Man's not around to see this. It would break his heart."

Sighing deeply as she regarded the portrait of her long dead grandfather, Elizabeth nodded her head. "Grandmamma wouldn't have been too pleased about it either."

"Tell me about it." Morgan replied grimly and then chuckled softly, "Aliz would have ripped Leyton a new one."

Chuckling softly, Shelby walked over to the replicator, ordering two saurian brandies; the petite captain motioned for her guest to sit on the sofa. Handing one of the goblets to him, Liz took a sip from the other as she sat down next to him. "You know..." She confessed ruefully, "I wish I could have had the chance to have gotten to know them. Poppy died long before I was born and *nagyanya* died before my second birthday. All I have of her are pictures..." She said as she got up, walked to her desk, picked up one of the holographic images on her desk, and then returned, "...like this one." Smiling, she passed the image over to Morgan, who also smiled as he saw the three dimensional image of Wesley, now wearing the burgundy, black, and white uniform of an admiral from the later 23rd century, standing next to and with his arm around his auburn haired wife, Aliz, who looked radiant in a long green dress, her ever present medallion hanging around her neck. "And..." She smiled as she regarded the man next to her, "...stories."

"So..." Morgan smiled as he took a sip from his saurian brandy, "You want another story about your grandmother from her days on the *Lexington*, eh?"

"Yeah..." Liz smiled. "And please..." She begged, "Could it be a funny one? I could use a good laugh right about now."

Bateson smiled warmly as he looked down on the young captain sitting beside him, her face resembling more than anything else to the time displaced captain that of a little girl. "Ok...I don't think you've heard this one. This happened when I was still involved with Aliz's friend, Jennifer Watley." He chuckled, "It happened about six months after that crap with the M-5. The *Lady* had just put into orbit over Argelius for some rest and recreation and

the three of us decided to go on shore leave together..." As Morgan spun his yarn, Liz's smile became a snicker, and then giggles, then a chuckle, and finally full blown laughter. "After we got out of there..." He guffawed, "Aliz walked over to this street vendor, picked up two Thalian chocolate mousse pies, paid for them, calmly walked back over to where me and Jennifer were standing laughing our asses off—all without saying a word, mind you, and then proceeded to shove both of those pies in our faces warning us that if we ever pulled a stunt like that again it wouldn't be chocolate that she'd be throwing at us next time!"

Laughing out loud, Elizabeth gasped, "Thanks Morgan, I needed that!"

"You looked like you did, Liz." The bearded captain replied with an almost fatherly grin.

"So..." Shelby queried as she refilled their glasses, "How long are you here?"

"We're going to be here for a while." Bateson answered back with a wide grin. "While they're upgrading the *Bozeman*, I and my crew will have a new assignment. His eyes gleaming, the time displaced captain declared, "I'm taking temporary command of the *Enterprise-E*. We'll be taking it out for its shakedown cruise—break it in for Jean-Luc."

"That is good news!" Liz exclaimed as the two officers touched their glasses together in a toast. "So they're taking you out of the Border Service?"

"No..." Morgan replied, shaking his head. "And, to be honest, I'm in no hurry to transfer back into the regular fleet. I've done plenty of 'exploring strange new worlds' and 'seeking out new life and new civilizations' and 'boldly going where no one has gone before', and I've served with the 'best of the best' and even the not so 'best of the best'. Don't get me wrong, Liz..." Bateson quickly added, "I've loved every minute of it. But you know, what we do in the Border Service is important too..."

"I know, Morgan..." Liz quickly interjected, not wanting her friend to think that she was belittling his service, "...without you guys keeping things going, everything would fall apart. Hell, I've read the reports of what some of the border cutters and their captains like this Akinola I read about recently have done with what they have and I've got to say, I'm impressed—and you know I don't impress easy. It's one thing going up against the bad guys in a *Sovvie* or a *Galaxy* or a *Nebbie*, its another thing entirely when you're looking down the guns of an Orion or Cardie smuggler or a wolfpack of Maquis raiders or a

Klingon bird of prey out for an easy kill and you're in an *Albacore*—or a *Soyuz*." Liz concluded; a note of deep respect in her voice as she regarded the captain sitting next to her.

Hearing the younger captain's words, Morgan replied modestly, "Thanks Liz, although we don't have to take on Borg Cubes or Romulan warbirds or have to deal with life force sucking cosmic entities like you do. It balances out in the end—we all do our part." A toothy grin forming on his face, he then quipped, "I'm not sure what would happen if you and ol' Joseph ever got together, although I'd love to be there if you do. I have a feeling you two would either hit it off at once and become fast friends, or you'd try to kill each other the moment you met, and there's no way in hell I'd make a bet on which one it would be."

Laughing, Elizabeth barely heard the enunciator. Her laughter dying down as Lieutenant Lar'ragos' voice came through, the captain turned apologetically towards her guest, "I'm sorry, Morgan...I got caught up and..."

"That's all right, Liz." The bearded captain replied with a grin, "I can see myself out."

"No." Shelby smiled, "Stick around; I want you to meet these people." Pushing a button on her desk, her ready room door slid open admitting Pava and the two cadets. "Come in. Be seated." The captain directed, gesturing at the chairs in front of her desk. "I'd like you to meet Captain Morgan Bateson of the USS *Bozeman*. Captain..." She introduced as she stepped back behind her desk, "This is Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos..."

"The man who brought the Federation flag back from the embassy at Tsenketh," Morgan interjected immediately recognizing Pava from the newsfeeds. Taking the El-Aurian's hand in his in a firm grip, he pumped it enthusiastically, "Well done, Sir. Very well done!"

"Thank you, Captain." Pava replied simply as Liz continued the introductions.

"And this is Cadet T'Pren..." She said, gesturing at the lithe Vulcan woman "...and Cadet Atris Nylysa." She concluded, introducing the impish looking green skinned, white haired Troyian woman. "They played a big part in helping resolve the recent unpleasantness."

"Good work." Bateson praised as he shook both women's hands before returning to his seat on the sofa.



"Now, Cadets..." Liz began as she took her seat behind her desk, "As to the reason for my asking you here." A slight smile crossing her face, she said, "I've entered commendations in your records for your participation in the current crisis and have a proposal for both of you." Immediately catching the young women's attention, Shelby continued, "It just so happens that when the time comes for you to take your fourth year cruises, I'll have a couple of slots open for cadet trainees." Her smile broadening, she proposed, "Your grades are high enough to permit you to go out into the fleet instead of having to do your cruise on one of the dedicated cadet ships. How would you like to do your tours on the *Sutherland*?"

"Hell yeah!" The Troyian woman, leaping to her feet, responded enthusiastically, until, remembering her place, she quickly settled down, concluding with a sedate, "Yes, Sir," as she resumed her seat.

"And you, Cadet T'Pren?" Liz asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"While I'm definitely tempted..." The young Vulcan responded, her voice filled with genuine disappointment at having to turn down the captain's generous offer, "...my appearance on your ship might create undue tensions and I wouldn't want to be responsible for that."

"While I'm sure that Mr. Varok would be able to make the adjustment..." Liz replied, accepting the youthful cadet's reasons, "I can understand why you might want to give both of yourselves time to adjust..."

"Captain?" Morgan tentatively interrupted, not wanting to push himself into a situation where he might not be welcome.

"Yes." Shelby answered back, her smile and nod of the head signaling to the other captain that his intrusion was not unwelcome.

"I might have a solution for you and the young cadet." He smiled, "By the time she's ready to go on her cadet cruise, the *Bozeman*'s refit should be completed and we should be done with our shakedown cruise of the *Enterprise-E*. If Cadet T'Pren is willing, I'm sure I could find room on the roster for a promising young officer. That is..." He concluded, giving the young Vulcan woman an appraising gaze, "...if the young lady doesn't mind serving on an old *Soyuz* class border cruiser crewed by a pack of 23rd century dinosaurs."

"It'd be a good opportunity for you..." Shelby prompted. "In the Border

Service on the *Bozeman*—especially if you switch over to tactical/security, you'll get a much better and more intensive hands on experience—you'll actually be participating in—and possibly leading—boarding parties and, you'll take an active part in a lot of the other activities that come with running a starship. You'll also have plenty of opportunities to use your initiative..."

"I can guarantee you that..." Captain Bateson interjected, "So, Cadet, interested?"

"I'd strongly recommend that you take the captain up on his offer..." Pava said, joining the discussion. "And then afterwards, provided of course that you receive a favorable end of cruise evaluation from Captain Bateson, and you're still interested, then I'll be happy to sponsor your application for Advanced Tactical Training. It'll take you a little longer to get out into the regular fleet..." Pava grinned, "...but when you do you'll come in as a Lieutenant, JG rather than an ensign and you'll get that second solid pip that much quicker than you would otherwise."

"What do you say, Cadet?" Liz asked; her smile still on her face as everyone awaited the young Vulcan's response.

Her lips turning up into a wide grin, the emotional Vulcan replied with an enthusiastic, "Yes, Sir!" Turning first towards Captain Bateson, her smile taking the time displaced captain by surprise at first before he recalled that one of the officers on his fellow Border Service skipper's ship was also a Vulcan who showed her emotions, she said, "I would be honored to serve on your ship." Then, turning her attention towards the El-Aurian, T'Pren grinned, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I look forward to attending the school after my tour, and I'll have my request for a change in specialties submitted as soon as I return to the Academy."

"Great!" Shelby exclaimed with a wide grin on her face. "Now that we've got everything settled here, everyone...scoot! Get out of my office—I've got work to do!"

"Yes, Sir!" Pava grinned, snapping off a jaunty salute as he shepherded the two young cadets out of the captain's office, "I'll see you later, Captain."

"I better be going too, Liz." Captain Bateson remarked after the others had left. "I've got a stack of paperwork on my desk too. Thanks for the drinks and the conversation."

"Thank you, Morgan!" The petite captain responded, standing up on tip toes, giving her guest a chaste kiss on his cheek. "I didn't realize how badly I needed the cheering up."

"Anytime, Liz..." The time displaced captain blushed as he made his way towards the exit, calling out over his shoulder, "And don't forget, if you need anything—just call!"

As the door slid shut behind the time displaced captain, Liz's eyes fell first to the portrait of her grandfather on the wall and then to the holoimage of her grandparents sitting on her desk. Sighing mournfully, she pondered the cruelty of the fates for denying her the opportunity to ever get to know those two very special people. Picking up a padd, an image appeared in her mind of her grandfather, sitting in the center chair of his starship, data slate in his lap filling out a report as her grandmother sat at the helm of the *Constitution* class ship, steering it towards whatever the fates had in store. Her lips turning up into a slight smile as she turned to her own reports, Shelby remarked in a voice barely above a whisper, "I guess it's true. The more things change...the more they remain the same."

### *Paying the Piper*

"And when was the decision made to execute the sabotage of the Lisbon power distribution center?" The prosecuting attorney, Captain Phillipa Louvois, queried of the woman currently sitting in the witness dock, Captain Erika Benteen as Elizabeth Shelby, sitting in the crowded spectator section of the courtroom looked on, giving her former lover an encouraging smile.

"Immediately after Admiral Leyton and Captain Sisko's meeting with President Inyo." Benteen answered, "When the President authorized only limited security measures."

"Instead of granting to the admiral the full control that he wanted?"

"Yes." Erika replied, nodding her head.

Addressing the three admirals sitting on the tribunal: vice admirals Hayes and Patterson and the full admiral occupying the center chair, Admiral Marcus Holt, brought back from retirement just for this trial, the prosecuting attorney announced, "I would like to enter these log entries made by Captain Benteen

as evidence.” Pausing for a moment to take a breath, Captain Louvois continued her examination, “Captain Benteen, according to your personal log, you stated that the original planning to carry out the blackout occurred three months before the Antwerp bombing. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” On hearing her affirmation, low murmuring began to break out amongst the courtroom. Captain Jean-Luc Picard, sitting amongst the spectators with Doctor Beverly Crusher, shook his head sadly as the red headed doctor placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. Elliot Mitchell, the father of the two young children who had died in a transporter mishap that occurred as a result of the sabotage of the power grid looked on silently, grim faced as his wife, Sarah, her eyes totally devoid of life, looked on with a vacant stare, totally unaware of her surroundings.

“So...” Phillipa emphasized, framing her observation as a question, “...the planning behind Admiral Leyton’s plot took place at least three months prior to the bombing?”

“Yes.” Benteen affirmed as the murmuring grew louder, eliciting in response a bang of the gavel from the presiding judge, Admiral Holt and a call for order.

“Who else was aware of the plan to sabotage the power distribution net?”

“Besides Admiral Leyton and myself...” Benteen replied as she began ticking off names, “Admiral Barzhan, Captain Taras, Lieutenant Commander Daneeka...”

“Thank you, Captain...” Louvois interrupted, presenting another padd after Benteen had listed several other names, “This is a total listing of the conspirators who were aware of the blackout. I would like to enter this in as evidence.”

The examination and subsequent cross examination of Captain Benteen proceeded for the next few hours until, finally completed, Admiral Holt directed the witness to return to her seat. Banging his gavel, the admiral adjourned the court for a brief recess before the final statements. As the defendants filed out of the courtroom, Lieutenant Commander Daneeka, seeing Captain Shelby sitting in the audience, muttered under her breath, “I should have let Shelby sit on my face—maybe then I could have gotten sent to New Zealand.”

Returning a few hours later, Admiral Holt, ringing the ship’s bell, once again

called the court into session. Taking a deep breath, Captain Louvois began her closing statement, her voice resounding throughout the courtroom, her passion growing with every word she uttered. "Admiral Leyton, Admiral Barzhan, Captain Taras, Captain Benteen, Lieutenant Commander Daneeka, and all of the other conspirators stand accused of a litany of crimes. Conspiracy and incitement to mutiny...sedition...manslaughter...kidnapping and wrongful imprisonment...sabotage...the lists goes on. But all of these crimes stem from one act—an act that these individuals, not under the influence of any form of physical or mental duress, chose to do of their own free will, while fully aware of the consequences of their actions. That act was the deliberate, premeditated violation of their oath as Starfleet officers. Had Admiral Leyton not chosen to violate his oath, we wouldn't be here today; and had even one of the individuals sitting amongst the accused or now currently being charged had fulfilled the obligations of their oath and come forward with this plot, then over five thousand beings who are now no longer with us would be with their families and loved ones now. All of us who put on this uniform..." She uttered, pulling at the fabric of her red and black top, "...have been given a weighty trust by the people of the Federation. Yes, exploration and the expansion of our body of knowledge is an important mission for Starfleet. But even more important is Starfleet's relationship with the people to whom it has pledged its service. And the worst thing...the most damaging thing...that can happen...is for that trust to be abused. These people..." She declaimed, pointing her finger at the figures sitting on the other side of the courtroom, "Have violated that trust and must be punished!"

As the prosecuting officer sat down to a smattering of "Hear...hear's" and applause, Admiral Holt once again gaveled the courtroom to order. Addressing the defense attorney, he invited, "You may now make your closing statement." Several minutes later, after the defense attorney, finally took his seat after a relatively lackluster speech, the admirals conferred amongst themselves for several minutes before Admiral Holt once again rang the ship's bell.

"The accused will stand." He announced in a grave tone as the defendants all rose to their feet. "This court finds the accused guilty of all charges. Captain Benteen..." He began, "...this court will confirm the prior agreement reached between you and the Judge Advocate General's office. You are hereby immediately reduced in rank to crewman recruit and sentenced to a period of imprisonment not to exceed five years. Sentence to be served in the New Zealand Penal Colony. You are also reminded that the terms of your plea agreement remain in effect throughout your imprisonment—failure to honor those terms will result in your immediate transfer to the Sundancer

Maximum Security Prison Colony on 61 Virginis II.”

“Lieutenant Commander Daneeka. You are hereby immediately reduced in rank to crewman recruit and sentenced to a period of imprisonment of no more than ten years. Sentence to be served in the Sundancer Maximum Security Prison Colony on 61 Virginis II.” On hearing her sentence, the young Bolian woman let out a breath of air as if she had been punched in the gut. Recovering quickly, she took a deep breath, her defiant spirit returning as she glared first at ex-captain Benteen and then at Captain Shelby, knowing that the deal brokered by the blonde captain for her former paramour had, as one of its consequences, the result of her being sent to the Supermax facility to serve as an example for the rest of the Fleet instead of Leyton’s former aide.

“Captain Taras...” On hearing his name, the shamefaced Andorian officer looked up with tearstained eyes. “You are hereby immediately reduced in rank to crewman recruit and sentenced to a period of imprisonment of no more than ten years. Sentence to be served in the Sundancer Maximum Security Prison Colony on 61 Virginis.” Collapsing to his seat on hearing the harsh sentence pronounced on him, Taras’ silent tears turned into uncontrolled sobbing as the admiral continued to issue his sentences.

“Admiral Barzhan...” Holt began, his voice taking on an especially stern tone, “You were given a position of extreme trust—that of educating the next generation of Starfleet officers—and you abused that trust horribly. Therefore, you will immediately receive a dishonorable discharge from Starfleet with the rank of ensign and will be sentenced to a period of imprisonment not to exceed ten years. Sentence to be served in the Tantalus V Penal Colony.”

“Admiral Leyton...while it is clear to all that you bear the responsibility for orchestrating this plot, your prior record of distinguished service to Starfleet and the Federation must be taken into account. Therefore, you will receive a general discharge from Starfleet with the rank of captain and are sentenced to a period of imprisonment not to exceed five years. Sentence to be served in the New Zealand Penal Colony.” Gaveling the court to order as many within the audience expressed their displeasure at the lenient sentence handed out to the originator of the conspiracy; Admiral Holt announced in a loud and clear voice as he rang the ship’s bell, “These proceedings are hereby closed.”

Turning towards his good friend, Captain Picard, standing up, remarked somberly, “In all my years, Beverly, I don’t think I’ve ever been more ashamed of this uniform.” Shaking his head, he noted sadly, “What Leyton

planned...what he did...I'm not sure which is the worse act...his scheme—or Admiral Cartwright's plan to start a war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire.”

“What counts, Jean-Luc...” Dr. Crusher consoled, “...is that in both cases Starfleet officers of principle stood up and took action. Don't ever forget that.”

“You're right, Beverly...” The distinguished captain responded before sounding a cautionary note. “But what happens on that day when there is no one there—either through cynicism, apathy, or fear—to take action?”

“I don't think that day will ever come.” The red headed doctor answered back confidently, “But if it should...” She amended, carefully considering her answer, “...then on that day we are truly lost.”

*Reunions: Shelby—Anara—DeMara*

“Goddammit to hell, Jadz!” Liz Shelby cried out, pacing angrily up and down her ready room in front of the luxurious black sofa where her best friend, Jadzia Dax sat looking on with an amused expression on her face and a glass of Trillian aurea in her hand. “Frinx! I knew Leyton was going to skate and it still pisses me off every time I think about it!”

“You know...” The raven haired Trill remarked, “I just had this same discussion with Captain Sisko.” Coolly sipping her drink, Jadzia commented, “It sucks...I know. But what other outcome did you expect? It's obvious that Leyton had people outside Starfleet supporting him—powerful people.” Drawing off her prior hosts' Lela's and Curzon's experiences in the political arena, Dax speculated, “I'd bet that some of those friends of his are sitting right now on the Federation Council.”

“Yeah...” Liz replied, calming down as she ordered a rum and cola from the replicator, “You're right.” Shaking her head, the blonde captain joined her friend on the sofa, “I suppose we should be grateful that his coup didn't succeed. Otherwise we could be finding ourselves in the middle of a civil war right now.”

Nodding her head in agreement, Jadzia took another sip from her glass, “Yeah. The Founders would have loved that—us doing their work for them.” Finishing her drink, she set it down. “So...what's on your agenda for the day? The beach?” She smiled, “A casino? Dancing?”

“I wish!” Liz sighed melodramatically. “No...my day's about to get even worse

than it is already.” She groaned, gulping down her rum and cola, “I’m going home to see my father.”

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“Welcome to The Nest!” DeMara Deen smiled as she escorted her old friend from the Academy, Anara Rysyl into the *Eagle’s* lounge, both Tenarian and Deltan attracting more than their fair share of eyetracks as they made their way to a nearby table. “How long has it been, Anara?” DeMara asked, brushing back a stray strand of golden hair as she smiled warmly at her former classmate.

“Six years.” Anara smiled back warmly as she regarded the woman seated across from her. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to make it to your awards ceremony.” The Deltan woman remarked ruefully, “But I did read your paper—even though I couldn’t understand most of it.”

“That makes us even for you making me sit through that lecture on Vulcan art.” DeMara laughed as the *Eagle’s* bartender, Bensu, came to the table bearing drinks.

“An Antarean Sunrise for you, DeMara,” The bartender cheerfully announced, placing a glass containing the colorful beverage in front of the young Tenarian woman, “And for your lovely guest, the mysterious bartender grinned, “Mareuvian tea.”

“So...” DeMara asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, “Is it true what they say about the *Sutherland*?”

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Materializing before the front door of the large Wyoming ranch house that Phillip and Anna Shelby called home, Elizabeth Shelby, pulling down on her red and black uniform top, took a deep breath and exhaled before pressing the enunciator beside the front door. “Mama...” She called out announcing herself, “It’s me...Liz...”

Moments later, the door slid open to reveal a still attractive woman whose athletic and youthful appearance completely belied her over sixty years of age. Short in height, lithe, her hair mostly auburn lightly touched by just the faintest traces of gray fell loose about her shoulders. Her eyes falling upon the petite blonde Starfleet officer standing at her threshold, the older woman



cried out in joy as she embraced her daughter in a tight hug, "*Lany!*" Stepping back, Anna Shelby giving her daughter an appraising look, immediately spotted the lines around her eyes, "You've been working too long and hard, *Dragam.*" She observed disapprovingly. "Isn't that why you have a first officer?"

"Mother!" Elizabeth sighed melodramatically, "In case you haven't noticed, things have been a bit...hectic recently."

"I'm sorry, dear." Anna apologized, "It's just that..."

"I understand, Mama," Liz interjected, giving her mother a fond grin. Looking in the house, the prodigal daughter asked, "Can I come in?"

Her face flushing a bright crimson in embarrassment, Anna replied, "Of course, my *lany!* I'm sorry...it's just I'm so glad to see you..."

Entering, for the first time in years, her old home, Elizabeth's eyes moistened as she whispered in a soft voice, "I forgot how beautiful this place is."

"You're always welcome here, dear." Anna answered back as she guided her daughter to the sofa.

"Where's father?" Elizabeth asked, her voice taking on a slightly harder edge as she sat down on the plush couch, "I thought he was going to be here."

"I'm sorry, dear..." Anna replied regretfully, "He's got someone with him right now..."

"I see things haven't changed at all." Liz growled as she began to turn back towards the door, "I'm sorry, Mama...I knew it was a mistake to even try."

"No!" Anna cried out, her eyes moistening, "*Dragam...*wait! Please. He'll come out. I haven't seen you in such a long time. Please..." She begged, patting the sofa next to her, "Sit down...talk to me. I want to hear all about what you've doing..."

Brushing the tears from her eyes, the younger woman walked back to the couch. Sitting down next to her mother, Elizabeth's lips turned up into a sad smile, "Sure, Mama..."

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"Is what true about the *Sutherland*?" Anara asked in a playful tone as she sipped her drink.

"I was just curious about all the stories I've heard." DeMara replied with a grin. "Whether there was any truth to them or just the usual tall tales that you hear."

"Probably a little bit of both." Anara quipped, laughing merrily. "If you want to know whether it's a nonstop party on the ship, then the answer is most definitely, no. We're like any other ship—we have our good days and our bad days and our jobs come first. But..." she added, her voice now taking on a note of fondness, "...we do like to relax after our work is done and well..." the olive skinned Deltan said in a teasing voice, "...we can be quite...creative...about how we have our fun."

"I'm sure!" DeMara laughed and then commented with a wide grin, "I think that's good." Her thoughts now turning nostalgic, the young Tenarian asked in a fond voice, "Have you seen or heard anything from Jonar?"

Her mind flashing back to her years in the Academy, Anara, after several moments of reflection, finally placed the name with a face. "Jonar Arik?" Seeing her old classmate's nod of the head in response, Anara replied in an apologetic tone, "Not since graduation. I believe..." she recalled, "...that he was assigned to the *Columbus* and that they were going on a long range exploration mission into the Beta Quadrant.

"Oh!" DeMara exclaimed, "That's right! Still..." she said in a slightly wistful tone, "It'd be nice to hear from him—he was...comfortable...to be around."

Chuckling, Anara jibed, "I think that's the first time I've ever heard of one of us being described as being 'comfortable' to be around." Smiling gratefully as Bensu replaced their drinks, the olive skinned Deltan inquired of her old friend, "So, DeMara...how have you been doing?"

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Laughing at a story her mother had told her about her youth, Liz looked at her chronometer, seeing how much time had passed, she shook her head as her voice took on a grim tone, "Mama...he's not coming."

"No, *Lany*...don't go!" Anna pleaded as she stood up, motioning towards her

husband's combination office-den towards the rear of the house. "Come on..." She entreated with renewed determination, tugging at her daughter's sleeve, "I don't care if he's still in his meeting, we're interrupting him."

"All right, Mama!" Elizabeth sighed resignedly, "We'll go..." As the two women walked towards Philip Shelby's office, they heard two voices, one belonging to a stranger, while the other's was most definitely that of the Shelby patriarch.

*"So...can we count on you?"*

*"I'm not sure..."* Shelby's father replied, his voice taking on a skeptical quality, *"While I do agree with a lot of your goals...I'm not sure I'm what you're looking for."*

*"You're exactly what we're looking for!"* The stranger exclaimed, his voice flattering and unctuous. *"A retired starship captain—the former captain of the USS Roosevelt—the man whose actions played a pivotal role in the defeat of the Tsen'kethi at the Battle of Acheron! You'd be the perfect candidate!"*

"Candidate? Candidate for what?" Liz whispered to her mother as the two women withdrew out of sight range while still remaining close enough to listen in to the conversation. Taking her mother's shrug of the shoulder and shake of the head as an 'I don't know', the young daughter continued her eavesdropping.

*"Still..."* Philip Shelby demurred, his voice now taking on a harder edge, *"Even should I decide to run...there's the issue of my...daughter..."*

Immediately picking up on her father's scorn as he mentioned that word, Elizabeth almost turned and walked away, stopping at the last moment as the stranger once again spoke. *"Don't worry. Dealing with her situation is easy. We'll just have one of our planted reporters ask you about it once you announce. All you have to do then is publicly declare that you've had nothing to do with her for the past ten years and that you will continue to have nothing to do with her as long as she insists on engaging in her scandalous behavior, but that if she repents and promises to reform herself that you'll welcome her back with the open arms of a loving father. That'll immunize you from any opposition attacks while at the same time putting forth the image of a loving, longsuffering father willing to forgive his prodigal daughter. It'll be great for votes."*

Not wanting to hear the rest of the conversation, Liz, tears rolling down her cheeks as she turned away, dashed out of the house, her mother close on her

heels. "Lany! Lany! Please!" Anna cried out sobbing as her daughter moved her hand to her comm badge. "Wait!" Hesitating for a brief moment, Elizabeth brushed the tears away from her eyes.

"Mother..." The younger woman sobbed, "Did you know?"

"About what just happened?" Anna replied, shaking her head, "No."

Then, her forehead crinkled in thought, the older woman continued, "But a lot of his recent behavior makes more sense now."

"What do you mean?" Liz asked; her hand dropping from her chest to her side.

"He's had a lot of meetings with people recently—most often with this Trill..." Anna said, "This is the first time they've met here though. Normally they go into town. And this is the first time I've ever heard him mention even the possibility of running for any sort of political office."

"I wonder what sort of office he could be running for? Unless..." Liz conjectured, "It's for one of the open seats for the planetary council. And from there..." The blonde captain gasped, "...he could be eligible to run for the Federation Council." Shaking her head in disbelief, she exclaimed, "But he's never shown any interest in politics before!"

"That changed..." Anna explained, "...when all this stuff with the changelings and the Dominion began. A year ago he began talking about how dangerous the Dominion is and how weak and soft the Federation had gotten. I just ignored it. Do you think?" Anna gasped, her eyes widening in panic, "That he might have had something to do with what Leyton did?"

"No." Liz quickly responded, squeezing her mother's hand, "His name wasn't on any of the lists and he wasn't mentioned by any of the other conspirators."

Sighing in relief, Anna, tears rolling down her cheeks, squeezed her daughter's hand in return, "Thank you, *Lany*."

"Mama..." Liz said in a low voice, "I have to go now. But please, do me a favor?"

"Of course, *Dragam*!" Anna answered back, smiling through her tears, "What is it?"

"Let me know if you find out anything else about these friends of father's, would you? I might not care too much for him..." She growled, barely restraining herself from sneering in front of her mother, "But, for what it's worth, he is my father." Her harsh expression gentling, she added, "And I do love you." Her expression hardening once again, "And I've already decided that I hate them." She concluded, referring to her father's mysterious friends. Taking her mother's gentle nod of the head as assent, Liz kissed the older woman on the cheeks as she touched her comm badge, "Shelby to *Sutherland*...one to beam up."

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"I've been doing well." DeMara replied, smiling as she took another sip from her drink. Captain Owens...Michael...is a great captain and I love working with my crewmates. There's just so much to do and see!" She exclaimed enthusiastically, her smile broadening. Turning the focus back on her companion, the Tenarian asked, "So...is there anyone special in your life right now?"

"You know I've taken that damned Oath." Anara answered back, the faintest note of venom in her voice on her mentioning the Celibacy Oath.

"I know how much you hate that thing and how much more you hate the inhibitors, but that's not what I asked." DeMara countered with a teasing grin, "I asked you if there was anyone—or anyones—special in your life right now!"

"Maybe..." Anara replied, a slight tremble to her voice, "If he can ever let go of his past..."

Reaching across the table, DeMara took her friend's hand in hers, "It's hard, isn't it, competing with a memory."

"You have no idea..." Anara sighed, "And what makes it worse is that I can remember every feeling he's ever had for her...her smile...her laugh...the softness of her skin. And I can remember his pain when she died and the emptiness that's filled his soul since then."

"Have you talked to him about it?" DeMara gently probed, brushing back a stray lock of her hair.

"It's not something you can easily talk about..." Anara said, shaking her head,

"The intensity of his feelings...the depth of his loss. He keeps it all locked in behind a mask of stoicism that would rival that of even a *kolinhar* master."

"Then..." DeMara said in gentle, sympathetic tone, "You have to make a decision. Is being with him worth the pain and difficulty that chipping through that mask of his is going to take?"

"I know..." Anara responded as she and her Tenarian friend stood up, "And it's a decision I'm going to have to make on my own." Smiling at DeMara as the pair made their way out of the Nest and towards the *Eagle's* transporter room, the olive skinned Deltan said her goodbyes, "Thank you, DeMara...it has been good seeing you again."

Smiling back at her former Academy classmate, DeMara Deen answered back, "It's been good seeing you too...only next time...let's not wait six years before we talk to each other again."

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Stepping off the transporter pad, Liz strode straight towards her quarters, looking neither left nor right as she made her way through the corridors of her ship, acknowledging her crew's greetings with a brusque nod or muttered "Hello." Her thoughts raced as images of Leyton, Erika, Sisko, Daneeka, Professor Davin, Admiral Hanson, her mother, and her father, her grandparents, all flooded her mind, each calling out to her. Reaching her accommodations, the captain first ordered champagne from the replicator and then commanded the computer in a sharp voice, "Connect me with Sandy Moore and Jason Phillips in New Greenwich Village, New York and display on my wall monitor."

"Lizzy!" Sandy called out as she saw her lover's image on her monitor. "Jason's not here, Honey—he's performing over at The Cycle. Are you all right, Baby? We've been following what's been happening on the newsnet—that's why we haven't bothered you—we figured you were too busy and all..."

"I'm ok, Sandy..." Liz answered back as she set her champagne down on the end table by her bed, "I'm better than ok..." She grinned wickedly as she pulled off her top. "In fact, honey...I was thinking...that since Raul had to cancel his party, we should have one of our own..."

"You mean..." Sandy squealed as her eyes took in the sinful look on the blonde captain's face.

"That's right, baby..." Liz answered back, "We're going to have the biggest blast of the year!"

### *Pajama Party*

"A pajama party!" Jadzia Dax exclaimed, blinking as she looked up from her seat on the comfortable sofa in her friend, Captain Elizabeth Shelby's, ready room. "Are you sure that's such a good idea, Liz? You remember what happened the last time you threw one of those? Tom Paris crashing the party and you not knowing he was a cadet at the time..."

"Or that he was Admiral Paris's son..." Liz blushed as she sipped her drink, "Yeah...yeah...I know..." Her lips turning up into a wicked grin, she quipped, "As I recall you were having a good time too with that Andorian..." Looking down at her old friend, Liz pleaded with her eyes as well as her voice, "Come on, Jadz! Say you'll come...please! It won't be the same without you!"

Letting out an exasperated sigh, the raven haired Trill, tossing down her drink, agreed, "All right, Liz...I'll be there! You know I've never been one to turn down a good party."

"Great!" Shelby grinned, "You can go on ahead and tell Ben, Nerys, Julian, and the Chief they're invited too."

"Ok..." Dax agreed, "But I don't think Ben'll be able to make it. He wanted to spend some more time with his father before we had to ship back out again." Holding her hand out as her friend freshened her drink, Jadzia asked, "So...who else are you inviting to this little party?"

Her grin growing even wider, Elizabeth answered, "Well..."

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"Hmmm..." Commander Eugene Edison vocalized as he opened the message that he had just received from Captain Shelby, "Computer?" He inquired, "What is a 'pajama party'?"

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"This sounds like fun!" DeMara Deen chuckled as she showed her invitation to Captain Michael Owens. Seeing a copy of the invitation that she had just received in the *Eagle's* captain's hands, the golden haired Tenarian asked, "So...what are you going to wear?"

"I'm afraid I can't make it..." Owens replied. Seeing the crestfallen look on the younger woman's face, Michael smiled warmly, "I've already made plans to meet up with some friends and go diving off the Great Barrier Reef. But..." He said, his smile growing wider, "You go and have a good time."

"You sure?" DeMara asked, her voice wavering.

"Yes." Owens affirmed, nodding his head vigorously. "Go on and have a good time and don't worry about me—I can promise you that I'm going to have the time of my life."

"Ok..." The youthful Tenarian replied, reluctantly turning away from the man who had become almost a father to her, "If you're sure." Her smile returning, she giggled, "I've got to go find something to wear."

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"That will definitely make an impression!" Pava Lar'ragos leered from the comfortable double bed in which he lay as Nyota Dryer modeled a white lace corset for him.

"You sure?" The lovely ebony-skinned New Kenyan replied flirtatiously, thrusting her chest out at him, "I was going to go with a chemise..."

"No...no..." The El-Aurian quickly responded, "It's perfect. Now..." He said, his leer returning, "Why don't you slip out of it and get back in bed?" As his beautiful bed-partner slowly stripped off her corset, Pava, admiring her sensuous movements smirked inwardly, *Terrence Glover...you let this one get away from you? You really are an ass.*

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"What is a pajama party?" Atris asked as she looked up at her Vulcan roommate who had also received an invitation.

Chuckling, T'Pren answered, "It's a party where you come dressed in your nightwear—hence the term 'pajama party'.



“But...” The young Troyian giggled, “You know I don’t wear anything when I go to bed. And I don’t think it’d be a good idea for me to go to the party naked...”

Her lips curled up in a wicked grin, T’Pren quipped, “While I don’t think Captain Shelby would mind, it probably wouldn’t be...appropriate...for this occasion.” Calling up a display on her padd, she showed it to her roommate, “Why don’t you try this one on?”

“Oooohhh...” Atris replied, “That looks nice.” Handing the padd back to her roommate, she asked, “What are you going to wear?”

“I was thinking about this...” The young Vulcan answered back, showing her friend the image that she had called up.

“This is going to be fun!” Atris exclaimed as the two young cadets began making their plans.

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As a pensive Morgan Bateson read the invitation in his hand, the wise captain nodded his head knowingly. Turning towards his executive officer, Bateson cleared his throat, “Gabe? I’m going to have to take a pass on our card game tonight—I just got an invite to a party.”

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Her body flowing with the beat, Liz, for the first time in days feeling truly, genuinely free danced as one of her lovers, Jason, playing a replicated Fender Stratocaster, looked down on her and Sandy, the Junoesque blonde woman dancing with her that both lovers shared. As he and his band launched into an extended dance instrumental, the dancers’ movements became even more sensuous as the rhythm from the bands’ music took control until, their number finished, the band finished with a final flourish that left nearly everyone breathless.

Leaping off the stage, Jason rushed towards his lovers, kissing both of them. “So, loves...how were we?”

Sandy, wearing a pastel blue babydoll nightie lined by faux fur, squealed as she hugged the dark haired bearded musician, “You were great baby!”

Coming up on the other side of the musician, Liz, at her most decadent tonight, wearing the almost transparent Andorian spider silk teddy that she had bought from Garak, along with a thin gossamer wrap, also embraced him, kissing him softly, "Honey...that was unbelievable."

"Thanks, Loves." Jason replied, kissing both his lovers. Scanning the room with his eyes, the British musician smiled at the revelers having a good time. "Well, Liz...looks like you did it again."

"Don't I always, Baby?" Liz responded as she hugged both of her paramours. Breaking her embrace as she spotted her Trill friend coming towards wearing a purple nightgown and with two full glasses of champagne in her hands, the petite captain called out, "Jadzia! Over here!"

"Great party, Liz!" Jadzia exclaimed as she handed her friend one of the champagne glasses. Turning towards the roguishly handsome bearded Englishman standing to one side of her friend, the raven haired Trill complimented, "Great set, Jason."

"That was nicely done." A voice with an English accent interjected. Turning towards the source of the voice, Jason and the others saw a blonde haired, hazel eyed man conservatively clad in simple pajamas accompanied by a golden haired Tenarian woman wearing a pink low cut, chemise.

Immediately recognizing the blond Englishman from his time at Julliard, a wide smile appeared on Jason's face, "Gene, old boy! It's been too long! So...what are you doing now?" His eyes then resting on the fair features of the Tenarian woman, the British musician asked, his manner now slightly flirtatious, "And who is this lovely woman?"

"DeMara...DeMara Deen." The young Tenarian replied with a smile.

"She's the *Eagle's* science officer." Eugene supplied.

"So, Gene..." Liz interjected, smirking inwardly as she noticed her male lover beginning to flirt outrageously with the Tenarian woman, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"It's different..." Eugene replied, shifting about uncomfortably as his eyes took in the blonde captain's dress...or rather lack thereof. "But fun." He quickly added.

"Come on, Gene...isn't it?" Jadzia Dax prompted taking the Englishman by the arm as she chuckled inwardly at his vain efforts at hiding his discomfiture, "I'm famished, want to come with me to get something to eat?" Not giving the first officer, now looking over his shoulder protectively at DeMara, who was at that moment laughing at a joke the charismatic Jason was telling her, a chance to protest, the raven haired Trill led him away. "You look like you needed rescuing." She whispered conspiratorially, "Don't worry, Liz won't hold it against you." Her expression now taking on a more concerned demeanor, she added, "And don't worry about your friend. Jason won't do anything she doesn't want to do. Besides..." She chuckled, "If he did, Liz and Sandy would kill him."

"Oh, I know." Eugene smiled back, "I know Jason from before I joined Starfleet. He's an outrageous skirt chaser, but he's also a gentleman."

"I see you do know Jason." Jadzia quipped back, laughing. "So tell me, Gene...what's life like on the *Eagle*?"

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"That was fun!" Nyota Dryer grinned as she led her companion for the evening, Pava Lar'ragos to a quiet area where a small group of people were gathered sitting or lying on cushions.

Making himself comfortable one of the larger cushions, the El-Aurian security officer pulled his lover for the evening down on his lap. Smirking as he observed a door sliding shut behind a couple, he joked, "At least this time Liz made sure there are plenty of rooms for people to sneak off to."

"Yeah..." Nyota smiled back as she snuggled up close to the curly haired Pava, "I've got a great boss, don't I?"

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Licking her lips as she took in the sight of Manuele Atoa, the bare-chested Sutherland tactical officer who was at that moment juggling flaming torches to the beat of drums, Atris Nylysa was having the time of her life. "Mmmmm..." The white haired Troyian beauty purred as idle fantasies rushed through her head. "I'd love to start with that chest and work my way down..."

“Forget it, Sugar...” Her reverie broken, Atris pouted as she turned her head towards the voice, a tall, blonde haired buxom woman wearing a white babydoll nightie held up only by the woman’s ample chest. “That hunk of beef is already spoken for.” Seeing the confusion on the green skinned woman’s face the other woman flashed a wide, friendly grin, “Hi! I’m Angela...Angela Barrows, but everyone calls me Treasure and this here...” Her smile growing wider, she motioned towards another woman, also blonde haired, wearing a fringed chemise; “Is my best friend, Candy.”

“Hi...I’m Atris...” The lovely cadet replied, shaking the other women’s hands. “Are you two from the *Sutherland*?”

“Hell yeah!” Treasure answered back, her smile still on her face, “Hey...I think I heard about you! You’re that caydet that’s gonna be joinin’ us in a few months—right?”

“Yeah...” Atris said, nodding her head.

“Well then, Sugar, welcome aboard. But don’t you have a friend—a Vulcan girl?” Treasure asked, her eyes scanning the giant hall

“T’Pren...” Atris supplied helpfully, “Yeah...” She said, a smirk forming on her face as she spotted her roommate cozying up to a human female, “But I think she’s kind of busy right now.” She said as she saw the young Vulcan and her new acquaintance make their way towards the back rooms, arm in arm.

Laughing, the buxom engineer quipped, “Yep...looks like she’s gonna be busy for a while.” Then, spotting several attractive young men laughing and joking, she grinned, “What say we go over to those guys and see if we can’t get ‘busy’ ourselves?”

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“Looks like everyone’s having a good time.” Sandy whispered as she nuzzled Liz’s neck.

“Mmmmm...” The blonde starship captain purred, gasping in pleasure as her female lover nibbled her ear. Moaning in protest as Sandy pulled out of their embrace; she was soon consoled by a gentle caress.

“I’ve got to go powder my nose and then hunt down Jason, Baby...” The Junoesque blonde sculptress purred, “Then I think it’s time for us to sneak off

to one of the rooms.” Her eyes twinkling mischievously, she added in a hopeful voice, “Maybe he’ll bring along that Tenarian girl and her friend?”

Remembering what she had read and heard about Commander Edison and his companion, Liz smiled as she shook her head, “I kind of doubt they’re going to want to join us...but...” she smirked as she saw another couple...an attractive man and woman whom she didn’t recognize as being members of her crew, “....maybe they’ll want to join us?”

“Hmmm...” Sandy vocalized, “That’d be nice.” Giving her lover a kiss, she smiled as she turned to walk away, “We’ll be back!”

“Good party, Liz.”

Turning at the sound of the familiar baritone voice, Shelby grinned widely, “Morgan! I’m glad you could make it!”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world!” The bearded captain replied with a toothy grin. His smile vanishing, he asked in a quiet voice, “Can we go somewhere and talk?”

“Sure.” Liz replied as she led her friend to an unoccupied balcony. Motioning for him to sit down next to her on a short white marble bench, she asked as she looked up into his eyes, “What’s wrong?”

Taking a deep breath, the time displaced captain responded, “I talked with your mother yesterday...shortly after you left her. She told me all about what happened.”

Sighing, Liz took a sip of her champagne as she looked fondly on the man beside her, “Yeah...I kind of thought she’d give you a call.” Shaking her head, she said in a sad voice, “I don’t know what to say, Morgan. Every time I’ve tried...every time I’ve reached out...and...did Mama tell you what he said? The way he said...’daughter’...it sounded like he was spitting the word out. Like he wished I didn’t even exist.”

“Yeah...” Bateson sighed, “She did. I don’t know what to say, Liz...”

“I’m not going to change because of him.” Shelby declared, her eyes flashing defiance. “If he can’t accept me for who and what I am...then...”

“Then that’s his problem. Not yours.” Morgan finished, nodding his head in

agreement. "All you can do, Liz..." The time displaced captain advised, "Is be true to yourself. You've got plenty of friends and people who love you...and your mother loves you too." His face now taking on the demeanor of a loving father, Bateson pleaded, "Whatever you do, Liz...please...don't cut her out of your life."

"I won't." Liz promised as she wiped away a tear, "Not anymore."

"Good." Bateson smiled, "Now, I think we need to get back to the party, don't you?"

"Yeah." Liz replied, returning her friend's smile, "Jason and Sandy are probably waiting for me and..." She said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, "There's someone I want you to meet."

"You trying to set me up, Liz?" Morgan asked in a playful voice.

"Mmmm..." Shelby teased as she shrugged her shoulders, "...could be..."

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"Morgan Bateson...this is Denise Murakawa..." Elizabeth introduced, "Denise is my chief medical officer."

"Doctor..." Bateson uttered, politely offering his hand.

"Denise...please..." The doctor replied, her attractive floor length lacy black nightgown along with the silver crucifix hanging from her neck giving the Japanese-Centauran woman an air of elegance.

"Denise it is then." The bearded captain smiled, "And it's Morgan here."

"Well..." Liz grinned as she spotted Jason and Sandy waving at her, standing beside the couple her and Sandy had seen earlier, "I'll let you two get better acquainted." Hugging Morgan tightly, she kissed the time displaced man on the cheek. "Thank you, Morgan—for everything."

"Any time, Liz..." He whispered back, "Any time."

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"Well...look at what the cat drug in!" Captain Owens remarked as first DeMara

Deen and then his first officer lumbered bleary eyed into the Eagle's mess area, both of them heading straight for the replicators. As DeMara ordered a cup of hot tea and Eugene ordered a huge mug of black coffee, he asked, "Did you two have a good time?"

Taking a sip of her tea, the Tenarian woman smiled, "Yeah...it was fun."

Shaking his head as he remembered Shelby dressed in the spider silk teddy and then her walking off with her two lovers and another couple into one of the rooms, Eugene groaned through his hangover, "It's true, Michael...it's all true..."

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Waking up next to her El-Aurian lover, Nyota gently kissed him, "C'mon baby, it's time to go."

"Yeah..." Pava replied with a wry grin, "...you're right. All good things..."

"Must end..." Nyota finished ruefully as she looked down on the attractive man lying next to her. "But..." She smiled as she caressed his cheek, "I guess they can wait one or two more hours."

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Lying next to one of the young men she had met at the party, Atris smiled as she remembered how easily she had bonded with both Treasure and Candy, very quickly becoming the third member of their little group. *Yep...she thought as she lay there, watching as her lover's chest rose and fell, I'm going to like it on the Sutherland.*

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As T'Pren lay in the arms of the red headed human woman she had met at the party, she sighed contentedly. For now, for this moment, the anger of her parents and family and her ostracism from Vulcan society did not bother her. For this moment, all was right with the universe. The moment wouldn't last, T'Pren knew, but while it did, she was going to enjoy it. Looking into her lover's eyes, the young Vulcan woman's lips turned up into a slight smile as she gently kissed her. This moment, T'Pren decided, belonged to her.

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Waking up next to her good friend, Dr. Julian Bashir, Jadzia Dax quickly looked down, sighing with relief as she discovered that both of them were still fully dressed—well—as dressed as two people wearing their night clothes could be—she thought wryly as she nudged her friend back into wakefulness, “Come on, Julian...wake up. We’ve got to find Chief O’Brien and get back to the *Defiant*.” Shaking her head, she added in a slightly worried tone, “And let’s hope he didn’t do something he shouldn’t have. The last I saw of him, he and Treasure were on the floor dancing.” Several moments later, Jadzia sighed in relief as she spotted Chief O’Brien slumped over the bar, peacefully sleeping off the night’s revelry. “Thank heavens!” Jadzia exclaimed as she woke the chief up, “For a moment I was afraid I was going to be the cause of you and your wife’s divorce! Come on...we better get back or Ben’s going to have us all up on charges.”

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Feeling the warmth of its rays, Denise Murakawa gasped in delight at the sight of sun rising on the horizon. “I can’t believe we talked all night!” She exclaimed, turning her attention back to the man sharing the marble bench with her.

“I’m sorry...” Morgan Bateson said apologetically, “I didn’t mean to keep you up all night...”

“No...” Denise protested, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it gently, “I had fun...I enjoyed it and I loved your stories...especially those about your time on the *Lexington*.”

Chuckling, the roguishly handsome captain replied with self effacing modesty, “I think you and Liz are the only ones who do.”

“Well...” Dr. Murakawa pronounced, “That means that I and Captain Shelby are the only ones with any taste. Seriously...” She said in a soft voice, “I enjoyed myself.”

“I did too.” Morgan replied with a gentle grin as he stammered, “I hope...well...I know it’s not always the easiest thing...but it would be nice if we could...get together again.”

“I think I’d like that.” Denise answered back, her lips turning up into a shy smile as Morgan gently tilted her head up and kissed her tenderly, their lips



gently grazing.

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Waking up naked in the middle of the bed that she shared with Jason on one side of her and the woman they had just met on the other, Liz glanced down to the foot of the king-sized bed to see her other lover, Sandy, in the embrace of the man—David—Liz recalled as she remembered the night of complete abandon they all shared. As she looked up at the ceiling, Liz replayed the conversation her father had with the strange man that she and her mother had overheard and then her mind flashed back to the talk that she had with Morgan Bateson.

Her eyes taking on a determined look, the blonde captain vowed, speaking softly so as not to awaken the others slumbering peacefully, “Father. I will not change for you or anyone else. If you love me—then love me for who I am. If not—then you can go to hell. I am my own person and for better or worse, whether you like it or not, I’m going to be who I am.”

**The End**