

Star Trek: Sutherland Rocks and Shoals

By David Falkayn

Chapter 1

The Molari Badlands: January 6, 2373

"Contact bearing thirty two degrees mark seven." Lieutenant T'Ser, Operations Officer of the Starfleet Border Services cutter, *USS Bluefin*, announced, her face buried in the sensor hood. "Identification..." The Vulcan lieutenant reported, "Ferengi...fast freighter."

"That's interesting..." The skipper of the *Albacore*-class border cutter, Captain Joseph Akinola, a dark skinned man with a rugged, weathered face, observed as he leaned forward in his chair, "Ensign Bralus..." He ordered, addressing the young Bolian helmsman who had just recently joined the crew, "...plot an intercept course to that freighter and take us there at warp five..." As the vintage border cutter slipped into warp, Akinola's eyes focused on the tiny dot on the main viewer that was the Ferengi vessel, he muttered to his first officer, Commander Dale McBride, "I'm more than a little curious, Dale, as to why our friend out there would risk crossing the Badlands now...when the ion storms are at their peak...rather than taking the normal shipping routes."

"He could be rushing to beat a deadline..." The first officer speculated in his usual slow Texas drawl, "Or he might be carrying something that he'd rather not be caught with..."

"Could be..." Akinola conceded, "He could also be running away from someone, or..."

"He could be bait for a trap." Commander McBride said, completing his commanding officer's thoughts. Addressing the young Bolian sitting at the helm, the commander inquired, "Time to intercept, Mr. Bralus?"

"At current course and speed..." The blue-skinned ensign answered, "...three hours, twenty minutes."

"Enough time for a cup of coffee..." The captain remarked as he rose from his chair. "You have the conn, XO. If that Ferengi tries to..."

"We'll adjust and I'll comm you immediately, Skipper."

Striding into the wardroom, Dr. Calvin Baxter, the Chief Medical Officer of the *Bluefin*, immediately spotted his captain sitting in his usual chair at his usual table, in his hands a ceramic mug emblazoned with the *Bluefin's* crest and motto, "Semper Paratus". "How's the coffee, Joseph?" The white haired doctor asked in a jovial tone.

"Cookie just brewed up a fresh pot." The captain replied with a friendly grin, "Grab yourself a mug and pull up a chair."

"Hear from Morgan?" The doctor asked as he returned to the table carrying a mug of Cookie's steaming brew in his hand. Sitting down across from his old friend, Dr. Baxter quipped, "He still shaking down Picard's new baby?"

"Nah." Akinola replied as he took a swig from his mug. "He's back on the *Bozeman*..." Chuckling, the old time border skipper joked, "Got himself a new subspace romance going too..."

Shaking his head, Calvin joined in the good natured laughter, "So who's this one?"

"A doctor this time..." Akinola's laughter grew louder as Baxter's eye's widened in surprise, "He said she's the CMO of the *Sutherland*...Denise Murakawa? I think that's what he said her name was..."

"Hmmm..." The former head of Starfleet Medical vocalized as his mind raced, "Now where did I hear that name from? Oh, yeah!" He exclaimed, "I read a paper she wrote last year on something called forced biofeedback. The *Sutherland* had encountered some sort of entity that fed off of a lifeform's bioessence. Well, she and the *Sutherland's* operations officer..." The doctor explained, becoming more animated, "...developed a technique through..."

"Whoa, Calvin...whoa!" Joseph cried out, holding up his hands in mock

surrender, "I get the picture!"

"Sorry, Joseph..." Dr. Baxter said with a twinkle in his eye, "But you know how we doctors get." Smiling as he took a sip from his coffee, the white haired physician inquired, "So...did Morgan tell you how they met?"

His lips turning down into a disapproving frown, Akinola replied, "They met about six months ago at one of Shelby's 'parties'."

"Oh..." Calvin responded as the ship's intercom whistled followed immediately afterwards by Commander McBride's voice.

"Captain? Our Ferengi friend has made us and has shifted course and increased speed."

"All right..." Captain Akinola immediately responded, "Adjust our course accordingly, take us to maximum warp and bring the ship to yellow alert." Finishing his coffee, Joseph looked across at his old friend. "I hope we won't be needing your services, Calvin."

"Amen to that, Joseph."

"So..." Akinola asked as he strode on to the bridge, making his way towards the center chair now being vacated by his first officer, "...what's our fish been up to?"

"He's been running an evasive pattern..." Commander McBride reported, "...but now..." the Texan declared as he called up a plot display on the main viewer, the Ferengi freighter and course highlighted in red while that of the *Bluefin's* was shown in blue, "...he's altered course back towards the Badlands."

"Damn." The crusty old skipper cursed, "He makes it into the Badlands, he'll be hell to track down." Carefully studying the display, the experienced captain's lips turned up in a sly grin, "How's our speed compared to his?"

"No contest there." Dale answered back, "We're gaining, but..." he added apologetically, "...he'll still get to the Badlands before we can catch him."

"Not if we alter our course by one degree..." Akinola said as a broken blue line

appeared on the display, "...while at the same time increasing our speed by .5 warp."

"That'll get us to the Badlands ahead of the Ferengi..." Commander McBride observed, cracking a wicked grin, "...but you know Gralt's going to pitch a fit."

"He'll deal." Joseph chuckled as, activating his intercom, he hailed the Tellarite chief engineer, "Mr. Gralt..."

"By the fertility goddess's left teat!" The gruff voice of the chief engineer came loudly through the speakers, received by assorted snickers amongst the bridge crew, "Do I have to do everything myself? I thought I told you to recalibrate that impulse manifold, Morris! Was your brain switched with that of a Pakled's at birth or something?"

"Mr. Gralt..." Akinola repeated, adding just a bit of edge to his voice.

"Sir? What is it?" The Tellarite responded in his usual gravelly tone.

"I need you to increase our speed by .5 warp for thirty minutes." The captain declared. Hearing nothing but silence for several moments, Akinola repeated his request, "Did you hear me, Commander? I need you to increase our speed by .5 warp..."

"I heard you, Sir!" Gralt answered back gruffly. Picking up on the seriousness of his captain's tone, the chief engineer bit back the sarcastic retort that was on his lips, answering instead, "I was just checking some figures. Aye, Sir...we'll give you .5 warp for half an hour—but don't ask for more unless you want to risk overloading my engines."

"Thanks, Gralt."

"You're welcome." The Tellarite replied with a huff, "Now...unless you've got something else, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get back to work!" Moments later, the bridge crew heard through the speaker, "You heard the Captain! Time to get off your fat lazy asses and do some honest work for a change!"

Turning off the intercom, Akinola addressed his helmsman, "How long 'til intercept?"

"Forty five minutes, Captain." Ensign Bralus promptly responded as the sound of the engines took on a higher pitched tone before settling down into a low

hum.

“Good.” The captain exclaimed, “Maintain course and speed.”

USS Sutherland: January 6, 2373

“So...” Dr. Denise Murakawa asked with a playful smirk as she regarded the visage of Captain Morgan Bateson on her computer monitor, “...did you have fun playing with your new toy?” She asked, referring to the captain’s latest assignment as commanding officer of the *Enterprise-E* during its shakedown cruise.

Laughing, the bearded captain responded with a twinkle in his eye, “She’s a hot rod—no question about that! A far cry from the first ship I served on—the *Merlin*! An old *Kestrel*-class border cutter...” Her lips turned up in a grin, Denise made herself comfortable as her long distance romantic interest spun his tale of his first few days in the Border Service. Some time later, his yarn spun, the captain of the *Bozeman* looked fondly on the Japanese-Centauran woman on his viewscreen, “I’m sorry, Denise...” He apologized, a look of sincere regret on his face, “...it’s just that I get so wrapped up sometimes that I forget...”

“You don’t have to apologize...” Dr. Murakawa answered back with a warm smile, “I enjoy all your stories...I only wish I could have been there to see it happen for myself.” Fondly regarding the man on her screen, Denise said in a sympathetic voice, “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you and your crew—to find yourself suddenly ripped apart from everything and everyone you knew...flung into the future...”

His lips turning up into a sad smile, Captain Bateson replied with a sigh, “It took a bit of time...” he admitted, “...but we’ve...I’ve...adjusted. I’ve made new friends...good friends—you...” he said, his smile turning into a warm grin, “...Liz...Joe Akinola...Rodenko...Vrees...Cal Baxter...”

“Wait a minute...” Denise interrupted, her eyes wide in astonishment, “You know Admiral Baxter...Vice Admiral Calvin Baxter, head of Starfleet Medical?”

“Commander Baxter now...” Morgan chuckled, “Retirement didn’t sit too well with the man,” he joked, “So he pulled some strings and got assigned to the *Bluefin* with the provisional rank of commander.” His laughter dying down to

be once again replaced by an affectionate grin, the bearded captain tantalized, "Maybe one day I'll introduce you two..."

"I'd like that..." Denise responded with a loving smile of her own as the couple's conversation drifted to other topics until, looking up, the young doctor exclaimed, "My God! I can't believe I've lost track of time like that! I'm sorry, Morgan, but I've got to go—I'm late for my shift by five minutes!"

"Better hurry then..." The border skipper playfully chided, "You know how Liz can be. I'll talk to you later."

Her lover's image disappearing from the computer monitor, Denise hit her comm badge, "Dr. Murakawa to sickbay...sorry I'm late, I'll be there in two minutes."

"That's all right, Doctor." Ensign M'rral, the head nurse, responded. "We understand." Turning to the sickbay staff, the Caitan announced in a teasing voice, "The doctor just finished her conversation with Captain Bateson and will be here in a few minutes. Now who had forty-five minutes in the pool?"

Bajor: January 6, 2373

"So what is your prognosis?" A brown haired middle aged Caucasian human male with a salt and pepper beard and wearing a blue Starfleet uniform with lieutenant commander's rank pips asked. "What's our daughter's condition?"

"Your foster daughter's made remarkable progress, Commander Ennis..." The Bajoran psychologist, Dr. Kira Lanys replied, speaking to both husband and wife.

"Lieutenant Sito's recovery is due in no small part to your efforts..." Another woman, this one a Deltan wearing the blue uniform top and bearing the rank pins of a Starfleet lieutenant added in an encouraging voice. "Your help over the past few months has been invaluable."

"But..." The brown haired woman, wearing a red command uniform and lieutenant commander's pips, interjected, "...she still seems so much more..."

"Aggressive..." The Deltan councilor completed, nodding her head, "...angry...yes..." she concurred, "...her ordeal has left what are probably going

to be permanent scars.”

“Keeping her here any longer, Commander Foster...” The Bajoran specialist chimed in, “...would prove counterproductive. You see, she’s at the stage now...” Dr. Kira explained, “...where she needs to begin rebuilding her life—to reestablish herself as a person. And the best way for her to do that is to...”

“Get out and actually do it.” Lieutenant Commander Foster completed, nodding his head. “On one level I...we...” She said, grasping her husband’s hand, “...understand. But on the other...”

“We can’t help but feel that she’s not really ready to go out there after everything she’s been through.” His lips turning up into a wry grin, Lieutenant Commander Ennis concluded, “It’s the concerned parents in us coming out.”

“That’s a very understandable reaction, Sir.” The Deltan councilor replied, “And, to be honest, the transition probably will not be a completely smooth one for her. She’s still very guarded in her actions and responses towards those she does not know—especially strange males. She will need to continue her therapy wherever she is assigned.”

“So...” Commander Foster asked, picking up from her husband, “What sort of assignment would you recommend for her?”

“There are a variety of good options.” The Deltan lieutenant responded, “But, if she is to begin rebuilding her life, then her choice should weigh heavily into whatever her next assignment is.”

USS Bluefin: January 6, 2373

“We’ve got him!” Commander Dale McBride called out triumphantly as the Ferengi freighter grew larger in the *Bluefin*’s viewscreen.

“Load Mark 22 torpedoes.” Captain Akinola ordered, referring to the special ‘rat trap’ type torpedoes that were designed to destabilize warp fields without physically harming the ship they were fired on. “And hail that freighter—let’s see if he’s smart enough to know when to cut his losses.”

“He’s going evasive on us, Sir.” The *Bluefin*’s XO announced as the freighter began to execute a series of twisting turns and course changes.

"Fire torpedoes." Akinola ordered, "Chief Brin...have your boarding party ready to go."

"We're ready to go whenever you give the word, Sir." Senior Chief Solly Brin, the red Orion Chief of the Boat replied in a grim tone, cradling a phaser rifle in his hands.

"Torpedoes away." McBride declared as the border cutter spat out two blobs of orange energy from its tubes. Direct hit!" The Texan announced in a professional tone, "They've dropped out of warp."

Her lips curling up in a smirk Lieutenant T'Ser called out, "They're hailing us, Captain."

A sarcastic grin on his face as well, the dark-skinned captain answered back, "Put 'em on."

"This is an outrage!" The indignant Ferengi, wearing an expensive topcoat and neck covering of a daimon declared in a whiny voice, "You fired on my ship for no reason in neutral space! I demand compensation for this outrage! I'll sue you and the Federation! I'll..."

"You'll shut up, heave to at once, and have your manifests ready for inspection!" Captain Akinola interrupted, glaring at the figure on his viewscreen. "Or the next time I fire, I'll take out your engines."

"Very well..." The Ferengi grouched, "But your superiors are going to hear about this."

"You're welcome to file a protest at Star Station Echo." Akinola answered back, gesturing to T'Ser to cut the connection. Turning to his first officer, the captain grinned, "Wanna lead the boarding party, XO?"

"Love to, Sir..." Commander McBride replied in his Texas drawl, "How fine tooth a comb do you want me to use through his papers?"

"The finest one you've got, Dale." The *Bluefin's* captain replied, flashing a wolfish grin. "That bastard's hiding something and I want you and Solly to find it even if you have to tear that ship apart and put it back together again."

"Gotcha, Cap'n." The XO acknowledged, touching his comm badge as he left

the bridge, “McBride to Chief Brin. Make sure your people bring their best magnifying glasses. We’re going to be giving that ship a real close look see.”

“Aye, Sir.” The big Orion chief replied. Addressing his boarding party, Solly barked out, “You heard the boss. I want you lot to go over every micron of that ship. Now, haul your asses to Transporter Room One and let’s get to work.”

Bajor: January 6, 2373

“Hello, Jaxa.” Lieutenant commanders Foster and Ennis smiled as they gazed upon their foster daughter. Her long, luxurious blonde locks now shorn into a masculine short haircut, the young Bajoran’s Starfleet uniform, while it hid the tattoos on her right arm and lower back that she had just recently had done, could not completely hide the newly acquired muscular build of the former *Enterprise* security officer, nor could it hide the hard look in the young woman’s eyes. “The councilors say that you’re ready to go back in the field again.”

“It’s about time.” Lieutenant Sito replied in a low flat tone, “I’ve been telling them that for weeks.” Her lips curling up into a slight smile as she regarded her foster parents, a hint of her old self peeked out, “Did they say where I was going to be assigned?”

“They told us that a lot of that depends on where you want to go.” Her foster father, Lieutenant Commander Lamar Ennis said. “You’ve got plenty of options. Would you like to hear them?”

“Sure.” Jaxa responded, anticipation growing within her. “What are they?”

“Well...” Lieutenant Commander Elise Foster, her foster mother, began, “Captain Sisko said that he’d be happy to take you on as a security officer on Deep Space Nine. You’d be close to home there and he’s a good man. Also, Commander Worf is stationed there now.”

Her lips turning up in a warm smile at the mention of her old mentor, Lieutenant Sito remarked, “It’s tempting...but...I’m not sure I want to go to a space station at this time—even one like Deep Space Nine. What other choices do I have?”

"Captain Glover has said that you'd be welcome on the *Cuffe*." Her foster father replied and then sounded a cautionary note, "I don't know if this would make it good or not so good, but do you remember Jean Hajar?" Seeing the single nod of his foster daughter's head, Ennis continued, "Well, she's an enlisted crewman on the *Cuffe* now."

Shaking her head, Jaxa declared, "I don't think I'm ready to deal with Hajar right now. What are my other options?"

"Captain Picard told us that he'd love to have you back with him." Elise said with a grin. "He's taking command of the *Enterprise-E*, one of the new *Sovereigns*. Except for Commander Worf, just about all of the rest of his senior staff is going there with him, and Councilor Troi would be there in case..."

"No." The young Bajoran flatly stated, the harsh glare returning to her eyes, "I don't want to serve on the *Enterprise*—especially if Captain Picard is in command."

"You could..." Lamar said hesitatingly, not sure if he should make the offer, "...if you want to...come with us to the *Yorktown*. Captain Thomas told us that you'd be welcome aboard and we'd love to have you with us."

"Thank you, Dad...Mom..." Jaxa answered back, tears rolling down her cheeks, "I really mean that. But, I need to...I have to...do this on my own. You understand?"

"Of course we do, Sweetie!" Elise responded as both foster parents hugged their adopted daughter. Reluctantly breaking from their embrace, Lieutenant Commander Foster told her daughter, "There is another option—Captain Shelby wanted us to let you know that she'd still like to have you on board the *Sutherland*. Lieutenant Lavelle is there as is Ensign Django and the others. You'd be surrounded by friends, but..." She hesitated for a moment before continuing, "...you know Captain Shelby is something of a...picturesque...figure and the *Sutherland* has a rather controversial reputation with the rest of the Fleet. Are you sure you want to serve there?"

"Mom..." Lieutenant Sito declared shaking her head as her lips turned up into a grim smile, "You know as well as I do that with my record I'm never going to make higher than full lieutenant...maybe lieutenant commander...at best. I've got way too much baggage what with the business at the Academy and..." She shuddered momentarily, "...everything else. It'd be a miracle for me to ever get that third solid pip and as for making captain..." She laughed bitterly,

"There's no way in the hells that's ever going to happen."

Reluctantly acknowledging the truth behind their foster daughter's words, the Starfleet couple looked fondly on their young Bajoran ward. "So...I guess you're going on the *Sutherland*..." Lamar remarked with a lopsided grin.

"Yeah." Sito responded, returning her father's grin, "I guess I am."

Molari Badlands: January 6, 2373

"Daimon Golb, I'm sure you know the drill..." Commander McBride, stepping off the Ferengi freighter's transporter pad, stated in a flat tone as he gazed down on the corpulent Ferengi captain standing before him and his boarding party. "Your manifest and papers, please."

"Of course...of course..." The daimon replied unctuously. "I'm sure you'll find everything in order..." He wheedled as he escorted the commander off the pad. "I've got some tulaberry wine from the Gamma Quadrant—hard to get now! Come...try a glass..."

"Maybe later..." Dale politely demurred, "...after we've completed your inspection." Turning to Chief Brin and his crew, the *Bluefin's* XO directed, "Solly...take your people and begin your examination of the cargo holds." Turning his attention back to the Ferengi merchant as the chief led his people out of the transporter room, McBride plastered on a polite grin, "Now, Daimon...as to your papers..."

"Right..." The Ferengi replied, still maintaining an eager to please tone, "Right this way..."

As the first officer and daimon strode on to the freighter's bridge, the daimon called out, "Lem! Where is that manifest I told you to have ready?"

"Right here, Daimon Golb!" A diminutive Ferengi bearing a padd in his hands scurried up to his employer, "Here it is."

"Don't give it to me, you lobeless idiot!" The daimon swore, cuffing the unfortunate wretch cringing before him, "Give it to him!" He ordered, gesturing towards Commander McBride.

"Thank you." The commander said, making a point of being polite to the cowering figure before him. Examining the information on the padd, Dale muttered, "Name of ship...*Venture Profit*. Carrying tulaberry wine, springwine, kanar..." Looking up from the padd, the first officer noted, "I see from your flight plan and manifest that you've been doing business in Bajoran and Cardassian space...as well as the DMZ...dangerous route..."

"The riskier the road..." Daimon Glob recited.

"The greater the profit. Yeah. I know." McBride responded, "The sixty second Rule of Acquisition." Turning his attention back to the padd in his hands, the commander remarked, "Let's see what else you've got..."

"Looks like this one's clean." Crewman Taggart called out from the cargo pallet he had been inspecting. "Just like what the cargo manifest says—Bajoran springwine. Pulling one of the bottles out of its case, the young crewman jibed, "Never had springwine before. I wonder what it tastes like."

"Tastes like a week scrubbing the waste reclamation units if you don't put that bottle back where you found it, Taggart!" Brin yelled back as he closed the lid on the case of tulaberry wine that he'd been inspecting.

"I don't think there's anything here, Chief." Crewman Epstein chimed in, returning from the pallets that he had been assigned to check. "Nothing but kanar..."

"Something's not right..." The red Orion chief muttered aloud, "Have you ever known a Ferengi trader to ever play it one hundred percent straight? There's almost always something..." he said as he carefully scanned the cargo hold with his eyes. "Some angle...somewhere..." The wily chief's lips then turned up in a sly smile as his eyes fell on a faint glint coming from one of the pallets his people had just recently inspected. Holding his hand up, he motioned for Taggart and Epstein to take up positions behind the cover of two of the pallets in such a manner that their weapons field of fire would interlock in an effective kill zone. Approaching the pallet where he saw the glinting object, Solly's smile grew wider as he recognized it for what it was: a very well hidden holographic emitter concealed in the very base of the pallet. Kneeling down to one side of the emitter, the chief withdrew the large knife he carried sheathed at his hip, striking the emitter with the pommel of the blade, shattering it.

Almost immediately, the section of wall before the emitter dissolved into static before disappearing, revealing an additional cargo area. "Just as I thought." Solly muttered triumphantly to himself as he tapped his intercom twice.

Immediately recognizing the prearranged signal sent by the Orion CPO, McBride's hand fell to the butt of his phaser as he spoke to the Ferengi standing before him, "Daimon Golb? Would you like to tell me now what you're carrying in that hidden cargo space my people just found?" Spotting movement out of the corner of his eye, Dale drew his weapon, pointing it at the Ferengi reaching for the phaser concealed in his jacket. "I wouldn't..." The Texan warned, "...not unless you want to wake up with a really...really...bad headache." Watching carefully as the Ferengi slowly held his hands up in the air, Dale grinned, "Much better...now..." He motioned with his phaser, "...in front with everyone else." Touching his comm badge, the XO spoke, "McBride to Chief Brin...what did you find?"

"Compartment hidden by a holoscreen." The chief promptly replied, "Sophisticated one too. We nearly missed it."

"Have you checked out the compartment yet?"

"No...I was about to." Chief Brin answered back, "Do you want us to hold off?"

"Wait one." Commander McBride ordered as he looked down on the fat daimon standing quivering before him, "What's in the compartment, Daimon?" Receiving only sullen silence in return, Dale tapped his comm badge once again, "Chief. The good daimon isn't being very cooperative. Go ahead and proceed, but exercise extreme caution. I'll call for the captain to send over Chief Deryx and his team to help out."

"Yes, Sir," Solly acknowledged. Taking out his tricorder, the chief scanned the previously hidden compartment, his instrument immediately picking up on the two figures crouching behind a pallet. Touching his comm badge, the Orion whispered, "Brin to *Bluefin*...requesting high security transport...two lifesigns...one Rutian, the other Bzzit Khaht...presumed hostile approximately twenty meters from my location. Hearing two clicks in response, the chief held his hand up, signaling his crew to wait until he heard the tell tale sound of the *Bluefin's* transporters. Moments later, Captain Akinola's voice came through his comm badge.

"Akinola to Brin. Good work, Chief. We've got the Rutian and Bzzit Khaht locked up in the brig and T'Ser's running a check on them. Did you copy that XO?"

"Yes, Sir." McBride confirmed, "We're going to need Chief Deryx and his team to help secure the ship, Captain."

"They're on their way, XO." Captain Akinola quickly responded. Turning to his operations officer, the captain instructed, "Once Commander McBride has completed his inspection, I want you to take charge of the freighter while we take it in tow back to Star Station Echo."

"Yes, Sir." The Vulcan woman immediately responded as Lieutenant (jg) Bane quickly relieved her.

Tapping his comm badge, Akinola called out, "Dale? Did you get that?"

"Yes, Captain." The Texan replied, "Chief Brin should be done with his inspection shortly, what do you want done with the daimon and his crew?"

"Put the daimon and his first officer under arrest and bring them back here." The captain ordered, "As for the rest of the freighter's crew...as long as they behave themselves, confinement to quarters should be good enough."

"Understood, Sir." Dale affirmed as his comm badge beeped, "This is McBride...go ahead."

"Sir?" Chief Brin said, his voice barely containing his excitement, "You might want to come down here and take a look at this once Lieutenant T'Ser and the others get here."

"Damn." Commander McBride swore softly as he examined the contents of one of the containers in the hidden storage compartment. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Corillan acid." T'Ser confirmed, not even bothering trying to hide the disgust in her voice or eyes as she gazed down on the highly illegal hallucinogen. "I can't believe that damned stuff's here now."

"What is it?" Dale asked, curious, as, holding one of the green liquid filled vials

up to his eyes, he peered at its contents.

"Nasty stuff." Chief Brin interjected. "I heard about it through...a relative. It was derived from *ris-vil-ouyan*..."

"Brain blast." Dale grimaced.

"Right." Solly affirmed, "Only this stuff is much...much...worse. Unlike brain blast, it doesn't boost strength or induce homicidal behavior. It's a combination hallucinogenic, depressive, euphoric, and aphrodisiac all rolled up into one neat package that's highly addictive both physically and psychologically." His voice now a low growl, the red Orion concluded, "From what I've been told, one of its uses is to keep slaves in line...especially those working in brothels."

"Why haven't I heard of this?" Dale asked, carefully putting the vial back into its case.

"Until recently its use has been pretty much confined to the Bajoran sector." T'Ser replied, her heart beating just a touch faster as her eyes fell on the handsome face of the *Bluefin's* executive officer, "As the Chief said, brothel owners use it to keep their workers in line, but it's also gotten more popular in the border areas—and its even beginning to show up in the Core Worlds. It's an easy and potent high."

"So much for paradise." Dale remarked, shaking his head in both disgust and disbelief.

"I think paradise...or rather the illusion of it..." T'Ser answered back with a frown, "Went away once and for all with Leyton's coup."

"That's a discussion we can postpone for another time." McBride declared as he put the lid back on the container. "Lieutenant..." he instructed, fighting the smile that wanted to come to his face as he looked into the lovely Vulcan woman's eyes, "I want two guards assigned to this compartment 24/7 until Captain Akinola or I say otherwise."

"Aye, Sir." T'Ser crisply responded, motioning for two crewmen to immediately assume guard duty at the compartment entrance.

"Chief..." Commander McBride ordered, turning his attention now to the Orion senior chief, "You're with me. It's time we introduce Daimon Golb to our

brig.”

Deep Space Five: January 9, 2373

As he gazed at the image of the pretty blonde starship captain on his screen, Admiral Samson Glover smiled warmly, “Morning, Liz...you look like you had a good night’s sleep...” He teased, noticing the heavily lidded eyes of the *Sutherland’s* captain, not to mention the large mug of coffee placed before her on her desk.

“You know me...” Captain Shelby riposted as she took a sip of the warm brew, “I’m just not a morning person.” The starship captain then asked in a jovial tone that masked her eager alertness, “Is this a social call—or business?”

“Business, I’m afraid.” Samson replied grimly. “Switch to subspace channel “D” and scramble.

Moving quickly to comply, Liz waited as the squiggly lines of static resolved themselves once more into the admiral’s image, “Done, Sir. What’s this about?”

“What I am about to tell you is on a strictly need to know basis, understood?” Taking the blonde captain’s single nod of the head as agreement, Admiral Glover continued, “Remember that plan that you, Ben, and Constable Odo cooked up a little over a year ago after you ran into that Ferengi freighter smuggling weapons?”

“Yeah...” Liz replied, “The Constable told us that a faction of the Kon-Ma, with the probable cooperation of the Orion Syndicate was responsible. Unfortunately...” Captain Shelby grimaced, “...we haven’t been able to find an opening to get our man in.”

“Well, Captain...” The dark-skinned admiral smirked triumphantly, “...you’ve got one now...”

Catching the scent of her prey, Liz licked her lips in anticipation, “...tell me more, Sir.”

His conversation with the blonde starship captain terminated, Admiral Glover spoke, "Computer, first I want you to connect me with Legate Parma of the Cardassian Ministry of Justice and then I'll want to speak with Admiral Fenross at Star Station Echo. Both communications are to be priority and scrambled."

Star Station Echo: January 10, 2373

"Come in, Captain Akinola, Come in." Rear Admiral Maurice Fenross, the commanding officer of the Seventh Border Service Squadron, requested, motioning for the captain of the *Bluefin* to sit down in one of the uncomfortable looking high backed chairs in front of the admiral's desk. "Fine job you did with that Ferengi freighter, Captain...damned fine job." The admiral praised in a high pitched, condescending English accent that the nonsense former chief petty officer seated before him found both irritating and ridiculous. "You made a big catch—besides the contraband..." Wincing inwardly at his superior's reference to the highly addictive and destructive Corillan acid as mere 'contraband', Akinola almost missed the rest of the pompous admiral's patronizing remarks, his ears pricking up again as the topic turned to the two undocumented passengers on the freighter, "...belong to a cell that Starfleet is particularly interested in busting up."

"I assume they're being sent on to Pacifica for trial?" Akinola queried.

"No..." Fenross shook his head, "The Cardassian government has requested their extradition. So...as per the treaty recently signed between our two governments, you are to take them to Deep Space Nine where you will turn them over to station security there pending their eventual transfer to Cardassian custody."

"But Sir..." Akinola protested, "They were caught in Federation space carrying highly illegal—and dangerous—narcotics. We should have first crack at them."

"Not this time, old boy." Fenross interrupted, cutting his subordinate's next words off, "Admiral Glover also has some additional orders..." The arrogant admiral's expression now taking on what seemed to be an almost sympathetic look, Fenross continued as he handed a padd displaying the words 'Confidential: Need to Know' to the captain, "...and I can assure you that you will not like these orders."

Shaking his head in astonishment as he discovered that, in order to open the orders, he had to not only give his thumb print, but also submit to a retinal scan and voice analysis, the dark-skinned captain of the *Bluefin* read the text displayed on the padd. As he read, Akinola's teeth clenched as he contained his growing rage, "You're right, Sir." The outraged captain growled, "I don't like these orders. I want to know why my Chief of the Boat is being transferred to Deep Space Five!"

"Sorry, old boy..." Fenross replied; his voice genuinely apologetic, "Need to know, you understand..."

"No, I don't!" Joseph countered, "I need more than that."

"No, you don't." Fenross replied, now taking on a stern gaze as he addressed his border skipper, "These are legal orders issued by a superior officer and you will either carry them out or I will find someone else who will." His expression softening, the normally haughty admiral added in an almost conciliatory tone, "If it's any consolation to you, old boy, I wasn't told the reason for your chief's transfer either—and yes, Captain, I did ask, and received the same answer I just gave you. It's just a temporary transfer, Joseph...he'll return when he's completed whatever task Admiral Glover has set for him."

Noting the rare use of his first name by the normally punctiliously correct Fenross, Akinola nodded his head sullenly, "I'll inform Chief Brin of his change in status. When is he to report to DS 5?"

"Admiral Glover has sent a runabout for him." Fenross replied, "It should arrive within the next day or two. He'll have that long to get his affairs in order and for you to say your goodbyes." Looking up from his desk, the admiral concluded their meeting, "Unless you have something else, Captain..."

"No, Sir." Akinola answered back as he got up out of his chair.

"Very good, then." Fenross stated formally, "You are dismissed."

USS Sutherland: January 10, 2373

"Come in, Manuele..." Captain Shelby invited as she gestured at a chair across

from the mahogany desk behind which she sat, "Have a seat." Watching with a grave expression as her Tactical Officer sat down in the comfortable leather chair, the petite captain steepled her fingers, "Admiral Glover has finally green lighted our operation—you're a go."

"When?" The New Kuaian security officer asked, his ears pricking up in anticipation of the hunt.

"We set things in motion as soon as you walk out that door." Shelby replied, jerking her head towards her ready room door. "This just came in..." the captain said as she handed Manuele a padd. "Two members of a Maquis cell were picked off of a Ferengi freighter by a border cutter...the *Bluefin*...out in the Molari Badlands, along with a cargo of Corillan acid." Her tactical officer's eyebrows rising at the mention of the dangerous narcotic, Shelby nodded her head, "I had the same reaction when I found out. Looks like our old friend Gul Rejak and the Orions are at it again along with the Maquis and Kon-Ma. The big question here is: Are they working together or is this just a confluence of forces. In any event..." She said as she glanced down at her padd, "The *Bluefin* is being ordered to deliver their prisoners to Deep Space Nine—the reason being given is that the Cardassians are insisting on their extradition."

"Are they?" Atoa asked as he leaned forward in his chair.

"Yes." Liz answered. "The Cardassians were informed of their capture and they've begun the extradition process. Their names are..." Glancing down at her padd, she read aloud, "...a Bzzit Khaht named Nura and a Rutian named Larkin."

"Any details on them?" Manuele inquired.

"Yeah." Captain Shelby answered as she handed the padd to her tactical officer, "Nura is supposed to be something of a Sierra Hotel pilot and...and this is far more important...according to our intel, Larkin is involved with the leader of this particular cell—Sabrina Diaz..."

On hearing that name, Lieutenant Atoa let out an astonished, "Whoa..."

Cracking a wry grin, Captain Shelby remarked dryly, "I take it you've heard of her..."

"Yes, Sir." Manuele replied, "Captain of the *Cuffe* until she resigned her commission. I remember Nyota telling me about her and Captain

Glover's...unfortunate...experience with Diaz on Umoth VII."

"Glover got off lucky." Shelby grimaced. "She's smart, quick, and can be very ruthless if she thinks the situation calls for it."

"Yeah..." Lieutenant Atoa acknowledged, "I read where she backed Glover down by severing the finger of his Cardassian liaison."

"She would have severed a lot more than his fingers." Shelby flatly declared as she fixed her tactical officer in her gaze, "Make no mistake, Mr. Atoa, Sabrina Diaz is one dangerous bitch. She'll be watching your every step and if you slip up even just a little bit and she catches you...while she probably won't kill you unless you give her no other choice, she'll make sure that you—and we—pay a very stiff price to get you back. So, Manuele..." Liz said as she gave her security officer an appraising look, "...this is your last chance, if you want to back out, tell me now."

"What's the mission brief, Sir?" Manuele asked; his eyes not wavering from his captain's as she detailed her plan.

Chapter 2

Unnamed Planetoid in the Badlands: January 14, 2373

“That fool, Golb!” Sabrina Diaz cursed as she paced furiously up and down the tiny cubicle that served as both office and shelter on the abandoned Cardassian listening post that she and her cell had appropriated as their new headquarters. “The money we were paying him for carrying Larkin and Nura wasn’t enough! Oh, No! He has to go and pad it with a bit more money by smuggling Corillan acid! Jackass!”

“What do you expect?” Danyor Krakke, one of the members of her cell answered back wryly from his seat in front of the computer monitor. “He’s a Ferengi. He’s not about to turn his lobes away from a chance at increasing his profit margin.”

“I could care less about how he increases his profit margin.” The former captain of the Cuffe noted sourly, “...except for the fact that Larkin and Nura got caught with the acid. You know Starfleet’s going to try to tie us into the smuggling now.”

“Probably.” Danyor agreed. “And, to be honest, not without good reason. Quite a few Maquis cells have gone into the smuggling business. Hell...we’ve supplemented our income with a bit of smuggling here and there.”

“Stuff like Romulan ale—yeah.” Sabrina reluctantly conceded, “Things that aren’t really all that dangerous. And sure...we’ve gotten a bit of a rake off from a few brothels and casinos—victimless crime that also serves as a source of intelligence for us. But nothing like Corillan acid. That junk doesn’t do anything but ruin peoples’ lives.” Shaking her head, the former starship captain wondered aloud, “I’m still trying to figure out how those two got caught. Golb’s holo-emitters are good—damned good.” Shaking her head, she concluded, “Someone must have gotten lucky.”

Shaking his head, Krakke agreed, adding, “Or whoever led that boarding party was damned sharp.”

“Or...” Sabrina mused, “Someone tipped them off.”

“Possible.” Danyor conceded, “Thanks to the shooting war between the Klingons and the Federation, the number of Starfleet defections into the

Maquis has dropped—and half those who do defect belong to Starfleet Intelligence”

“Yeah...” Diaz replied with a frown, “It’s gotten to the point where you can’t trust the person next to you.” After a short, but uncomfortable silence, Sabrina cracked a smile, “Present company excepted of course.”

“Of course.” Danyor smiled back. “So...do you think they’re going to try to tie Larkin and Nura to the drugs?”

“Of course they will.” Sabrina fumed, “That’s what I’d do. Even if the charge doesn’t stick, the allegations alone will hurt us in the public’s eye. Right now, public opinion in the Federation is still pretty much on our side. Many—especially those living on frontier colonies, sympathize with our position and the rightness of our cause.” Shaking her head, the former starship captain gritted her teeth, “But once this gets out, we’ll lose all that.” Ceasing her pacing, Sabrina wheeled on her fellow cell member, fixing him with her steely gaze, “Danyor—I want you to get right on top of this. We’ve been framed. I want to know who did it and why and then I want those sons of bitches dealt with.”

“How should I proceed?” Krakke asked quietly, licking his lips in anticipation at the challenge—and opportunity—his leader had just given him.

“Go as you think best.” Sabrina replied with a cold smile. “Just keep me apprised of where you’re going and once you find out—tell me at once. I want to take whoever did this down personally.”

Gul Rejak’s Headquarters, Pullock V: January 14, 2373

“So...” Gul Rejak smiled as he poured kanar into a single goblet, “Our operation is proceeding according to plan then?”

“Yes...” The human male seated opposite him smiled as he took a sip of the liqueur in his goblet, reveling in the smoothness of the drink’s aftertaste, “Diaz’s people were caught with the shipment—providing just the distraction we needed for a much larger shipment to get through.

“Good!” The corrupt Cardassian gul exclaimed, his smile growing wider, “Plus we get the added bonus of having the Maquis tied into smuggling Corillan

acid.”

“Leaving your...public...good name still intact.” The human grinned back. “Everyone wins.”

“Except Sabrina Diaz, Starfleet, and the Maquis.” Rejak amended.

Shrugging his shoulders, the human quipped, “Does it matter what they think?”

“No.” The Cardassian responded nonchalantly and then leered, “So...Dmitri...was your superior pleased by his latest purchase?”

“Most definitely.” Dmitri Cherenkov replied. “Supreme Etrish wanted me to let you know that Liana has proven most enjoyable to him and for me to extend his thanks to you. He is also pleased with how well you’ve managed to recover from your...misadventure...not so long ago.”

His face darkening momentarily, the Cardassian quickly plastered the smile back on his face, “Dwelling on the past is a futile endeavor at best. Besides...” The gul remarked, his grin now taking on a decidedly predatory overtone, “...the Klingons are right about one thing—revenge is a dish best served cold. I will...eventually...take my vengeance on Sito Jaxa and on everyone she holds dear...but for now...it can wait. There are far more important...”

“And lucrative...” Dmitri interrupted.

“And lucrative...” Rejak agreed, “...matters to concern myself with now. Obsessing over vengeance...no matter how justified...would be...counterproductive.”

“A sensible attitude.” Dmitri responded as he rose out of his chair. “And now...Gul Rejak...I fear I must take my leave. As always, it has been a pleasure doing business with you.”

“And you as well...” Rejak replied, watching as the Orion Syndicate’s human liaison to him left his office, “When the time is right, my Jaxa...” He muttered under his breath, “You will once again be mine. You...and the dusky skinned human.”

Star Station Echo: January 14, 2373

"For he's a jolly good fellow...for he's a jolly good fellow...for he's a jolly good fellow...that nobody can deny!"

Clapping his hands and cheering for the *Bluefin's* outgoing Chief of the Boat, Solly Brin, Commander Dale McBride grinned widely as he saw the cutter's operations officer, the Vulcan lieutenant, T'Ser, laughing and singing along with the others gathered together in one of Star Station Echo's large conference rooms. Remembering how she, Sanders, Deryx, and much of the rest of the *Bluefin* crew had spent several hours decorating the room with streamers and hangings and a giant banner stretching across the room emblazoned with the words, "WE'LL MISS YOU, CHIEF SOLLY!", the XO shook his head in astonishment.

"What is it, XO?" Captain Akinola, appearing suddenly next to his first officer, said.

"Huh?" A surprised Dale, taken by complete surprise by his commanding officer's sudden appearance next to him, exclaimed as he quickly turned his head towards the dark skinned former chief. "Oh...sorry, Sir." The handsome Texan apologized, "You kinda snuck up on me there."

"Gotta keep your wits about you, XO..." Captain Akinola quipped, only half joking, "...you never know what might be sneaking up behind your back on you out here." The smile still on his face, the captain continued, "I couldn't help but notice, Dale, that you look a little...nonplussed...about our new ops officer." Giving his executive officer a probing look, Joseph asked, "Something wrong about her?"

"Oh, No!" Dale replied quickly, shaking his head as he observed T'Ser laughing at one of Chief Deryx's jokes—probably about the Preserver seeded Hellenic descended inhabitants of Centaurus V with whom the inhabitants of Centaurus III had a friendly rivalry. "She's doing a great job—terrific in fact. It's just that—well..." the Texan explained shyly, "...I'm just not exactly used to seeing Vulcans laughing and having a good time."

Laughing merrily, Joseph slapped his first officer's back in a friendly gesture, "When you've been around as long as I have, Dale, almost nothing surprises you. My advice to you XO..." the captain offered in a fatherly voice, "...is to just go with the flow. Appreciate our new ops officer for who and what she is." His smile broadening as he caught sight of the guest of honor, Captain Akinola

suggested, “Why don’t you go talk to her—get to know her better—while I spend a few moments with the Chief.”

USS Sutherland: January 14, 2373

Standing at the threshold of the *Sutherland’s* 1940’s North African themed lounge, ‘Rick’s’, Lieutenant Atoa took a deep breath as he surveyed the off duty crowd already gathered. As usual, Treasure, Candy, and the new cadet they had taken under their wing, the green-skinned Troyian woman, Atris, were gathered by the roulette wheel, laughing and joking with Lieutenant Smithurst and his friends. Seated at one of the tables near the piano were Commander Hobson and Lieutenant Rysyl, apparently involved in a private conversation, as were Lieutenant Lavelle and Ensign Django at another table. Smiling warmly as he saw the two lovers exchanging kisses, Manuele spotted his target. His smile vanishing as he saw Nyota Dryer sitting at the bar, nursing a drink, the New Kauaian approached her. *Here we go. I hope you’ll forgive me one day, Nyota.*

Passing near Hobson’s table, Atoa, recognizing the slight nod of the first officer’s head as the signal to proceed, responded in a similar fashion as he took the stool next to his assistant. “Rum and cola...” he ordered as he turned swiveled his stool to face the ebony skinned woman seated next to him, “How was your shift, Ny?” he asked in a pleasant voice.

“Not bad.” The flirtatious security officer replied with a grin, “We completed those modifications that Captain Shelby wanted done on the pod torpedo tubes. If the Klingons or anyone else attack us—they’re going to be in for a rude surprise.”

“Great.” Manuele smiled back. Taking a sip of his drink, Atoa asked in a jovial tone, “Did you hear the latest? The Federation and the Cardassians have signed an extradition treaty. Now, we’re supposed to turn the Maquis we capture over to the Cardassians.”

Still feeling the sting of Diaz’s betrayal and her humiliation by the former Starfleet captain, the formerly ebullient Lieutenant Dryer looked down at her half empty glass. Speaking in a low, dangerous tone, she growled, “Good. Serves the bastards right.”

Getting the reaction he was counting on, Manuele, gulping down his drink,

forced himself to stick to the script, "You can't be serious, Ny!" He exclaimed, raising his voice by a couple of octaves, "They're only fighting for their homes!" Atoa countered, "Their enemy's the Cardassians, not us!"

"Fighting for their homes? Don't make me laugh!" Nyota responded, shocked at her superior's words. "They were caught smuggling drugs—the same stuff that Rejak pig used to hook Sito Jaxa. They're after one thing and one thing only—payback! That's why Eddington made off with those industrial replicators on Deep Space Nine and why those medical supplies were stolen on Umoth VII."

"You know as well as I do that the Cardassians would have used those replicators to make weapons." Manuele replied, deliberately lowering his volume as he didn't want to escalate the fight just yet. "And they didn't have any choice..." *I have to get you angrier, Nyota. I'm sorry.* "...but to steal those supplies. They can't get them legally in the Federation...so what else can they do?"

"That's bull and you know it, Manny!" The ebony skinned lieutenant fired back. "Those replicators were going to be used to build rebuild ruined industries and make shelters and facilities for Cardassians displaced by the Klingons. And as for the medical supplies..." Nyota paused, straining to keep her temper in check, "...did you stop to think about what effect stealing those supplies might have on us? We're in a shooting war now! What if something happens—the Klingons attack a civilian settlement, a plague, or disaster, or something else—and there's a crying need for those stockpiled supplies? Guess what? They're not there! Most of that stuff can't be replicated and you know it! People—innocent people—could die because of the Maquis. Those bastards are nothing but thieves! They're just like the Orion raiders; the only difference between the two is that at least the Orions are honest about who and what they are!"

"Come on, Ny..." Manuele countered, "Before that damned treaty forced them to take up arms, they were Federation citizens! Many of them were Starfleet officers—people we know..." Taking a deep breath, Lieutenant Atoa dreaded saying his next words, knowing the almost certain reaction they would have, "...people like Captain Diaz! Yea, that's right! Two of her people were busted recently and they're going to just give them to the Cardassians!"

Her anger boiling over at the mention of her former commanding officer, Lieutenant Dryer spat, "Don't talk to me about her! Diaz..." she cursed, deliberately leaving out the ex-captain's old rank, "...and the rest of them are

nothing but deserters!" Nyota spat back, "They turned their backs on their oath...their friends...their shipmates! They deserve whatever they get from the Cardassians..."

Knowing the likely effects of his next words, Manuele said a silent prayer for forgiveness as he raised his voice loud enough to be heard by everyone in the bar. "Like Sito Jaxa did?"

Taken aback by her supervisor—and, she thought—friend's words, Nyota couldn't say or do anything but stand in complete silence, frozen in place. Two people, however, were not frozen by the security chief's mention of the tormented Bajoran woman who had been rescued from the hell of Cardassian imprisonment not so long ago. Out of his seat the moment he heard his friend's name mentioned, Lieutenant Sam Lavelle cleared the short distance between him and the two arguing parties almost instantly, followed close behind by his friend and lover, Ensign Maria Django. Getting into both arguing officers' faces, the Canadian helmsman warned in a low voice, "If you two know what's good for you, you'll leave Jaxa out of whatever thing you've got going now."

"Yeah!" Maria chimed in, standing protectively next to the dark haired flight control officer, "Why don't you two move this to the gym or one of the holodecks—take it out on each other in the ring or whatever it is you security goons do when you get pissed."

Recognizing his cue, Commander Hobson got up out of his chair. Moving rapidly towards the escalating quarrel, the first officer's clipped voice sounded out above the din, "Enough! Misters Lavelle and Django—either return to your table or leave the bar. Mr. Dryer—don't you have someplace you need to be?"

Taking the Iceman's hint, the ebony skinned security officer responding with a polite, "Yes, Sir," quickly cleared out of the bar.

Turning his attention to the ship's security chief, Hobson glared at the younger man, his voice now little louder than a whisper, "And as for you, Mr. Atoa. You are aware, are you not, that by mentioning the arrest of those two Maquis that you just leaked confidential information? You do know the penalties for that, do you not?" Following the script that the two officers had rehearsed earlier, the commander berated the larger tactical officer as if he were a cadet, "You are supposed to be a senior officer. That means you have a responsibility to set an example for those under your command. It appears to

me that you no longer are capable of carrying out that responsibility.” Taking a deep breath, the first officer issued his orders, “Mr. Atoa, until further notice, I am relieving you of your duties effective immediately. You are confined to quarters until you are instructed otherwise.”

“Aye, Sir...” Lieutenant Atoa answered back, his voice carrying just the slightest hint of insolent surliness. Gulping down his drink, the former security chief took his time about making for the bar’s exit.

“Now! Lieutenant!” Commander Hobson commanded in an imperious voice, “Or do you need an escort?”

Star Station Echo: January 14, 2373

“Ya’ll put together a nice send off for the Chief.” Commander McBride remarked with a grin as he approached Lieutenant T’Ser.

“Thank you, Sir.” The Vulcan operations officer responded with a smile. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” Smirking as she noticed the amused expression on the Texas born executive officer’s face, she quipped, “Bet you’ve never seen a Vulcan smile before, Commander.”

“Can’t say I have, Lieutenant...” The commander drawled in his Texas accent, “I was always told that Vulcans didn’t believe in showing their emotions.”

“We don’t as a rule.” T’Ser replied, her finger tracing the edge of her glass, “But my parents aren’t exactly your typical Vulcans and neither am I.” Smiling, she explained, “They follow a Vulcan philosophy called *V’tosh ka’tur* that encourages expression of emotions and meditation to keep our more...violent...tendencies under control. They passed that philosophy on to me.”

“That’s fascinating.” Dale exclaimed sincerely and then tentatively asked, “What do other Vulcans think of that? I can’t imagine they’d like it very much.”

“They don’t.” T’Ser answered back, her smile vanishing for a moment before reappearing again, “But I’ve learned not to let it get to me.”

“That’s a pretty good attitude.” McBride remarked, deciding not to press the issue for now with the attractive woman standing before him, “I wish more

people felt that way.”

“Well...” T’Ser replied, feeling momentarily light headed as she looked up into the handsome Texan’s eyes, “If everyone did, then we’d have a shortage of dumbasses to make fun of.”

Laughing, Dale jibed back as he grabbed a fresh beer, “Well, we can’t have that, now can we?”

“So...” Captain Akinola said as he handed his red Orion Chief of the Boat a beer, “...you’re leaving after the party, huh?”

“Yes, Sir.” Solly Brin replied with a frown, “The *Madeira’s* ready to go—I get the impression Admiral Glover wants me there yesterday.”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the former chief cautioned his old friend, “Look, Solly. I don’t know what the admiral wants you for, but I’ve got a fair idea.” Shaking his head, Akinola growled, “I hate this spook stuff—it rarely goes down the way you plan it to and has a bad habit of blowing up in your face if you’re not careful.” Fixing the chief with his gaze, Joseph both warned and pleaded, “Be careful. I want my Chief of the Boat back and in one piece.”

Touched by his long-time shipmate’s concern, Solly nodded his head gravely as he drank from his bottle, “You know I will, Captain.” A smile coming to his face, the red Orion joked, “Otherwise, you’d never find a decent sparring partner.”

USS Sutherland: January 15, 2373

“Everything’s proceeding according to plan, Captain.” Commander Hobson reported as his captain picked up a mug of steaming hot coffee with cream from the replicator niche. “The phony encrypted messages are ready to go when you give the word. Lieutenant Rysyl or Ensign Django should have no problem picking them up once they’re put into the communications database.”

“Good.” Captain Shelby replied as she blew the steam off the top of her cup. Taking a sip of the warm brew, she inquired, “What sort of encryption did you

use?”

“It’s a variation on one of the Maquis codes that we’ve broken.” Hobson answered back, “Anara or Varok should be able to crack it with a bit of work, while at the same time giving them enough of a challenge so that it would appear genuine.” Pausing for a moment, the patrician first officer inquired, “When do you want the messages inserted into the log?”

“Let’s give it a few days.” Liz replied after giving the matter several moments of careful thought. “Give time for the seeds that Ben says that Garak and Odo have been planting to take root.”

“What about the Maquis prisoners being held on Star Station Echo?” Hobson queried with a frown, “When are they supposed to be transferred to Deep Space Nine?”

“Within a few weeks or so.” The petite captain answered, taking another sip from her coffee. “As expected, they’ve filed a petition resisting extradition on the grounds of the expectation of cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Which works to our benefit as it gives us more time to build up Atoa as a defector.” Hobson noted sagely, nodding his head in approval.

“Exactly.” Liz replied. “The timing has to be just right on this. We move too quickly, they’ll never buy Manny’s cover; and if we move too slowly, we run the risk of Diaz and her people launching their own raid.” Shaking her head, Liz brushed aside a lock of blonde hair, “Assuming everything goes according to plan, it’ll still be touch and go with Manny. Sabrina is not going to welcome him with open arms. She is going to watch him like a hawk.” Gritting her teeth, Shelby admitted, “I can’t guarantee that she won’t send Manny back to us missing an appendage or two.”

“He knew the risks going into this, Sir.” Chris pointed out, adding, “It’s not too late to call the operation off, you know.”

“No.” Liz quickly answered back, shaking her head vigorously. “We need to know if the Maquis have formed an alliance with the Syndicate to smuggle Corillan acid in exchange for arms into the Federation and—short of getting someone into the Syndicate—this is the best opening we’ve got right now. If Diaz and other Maquis cells have thrown in with the Syndicate, then they’ve crossed a very important line and have to be stopped.”

"Then, we move on to phase two?" The *Sutherland* first office asked as he got up out of the chair he had been sitting on.

"Yeah." Captain Shelby responded, rising from her seat as well. "And good luck to us all."

Deep Space 5: January, 18, 2373

Pausing for a moment before the entrance to the admiral's office, Chief Solly Brin tugged down uncomfortably on his rarely worn gold with black trim uniform top. It wasn't often the *Bluefin's* Chief of the Boat wore the snug fitting black and gold duty uniform commonly seen on ships of the Regular Fleet such as the *Enterprise* and *Sutherland*, preferring instead the much more utilitarian and comfortable fatigue uniform worn by the Border Service and station personnel, but when you are summoned to a one on one interview by an admiral and you're a senior chief petty officer, you come to that meeting in your best uniform and looking as sharp as possible. Taking a deep breath as he pressed the enunciator, Solly exhaled as the door slid open. Striding confidently towards the pretty blonde haired human yeoman sitting at the reception desk, the Chief announced himself.

"That door over there, Chief." The yeoman directed with a smile as she pointed towards an already opened door on the left. "Admiral Glover's expecting you."

Taking another deep breath, Chief Brin fought down the butterflies growing in his stomach as he made his way across the room and through the open threshold. Entering the Admiral's office, the first thing that caught the Orion chief's eye was the simplicity in which the office was furnished. What looked like a tribal mask hung on one wall, alongside paintings of various classes of starships. On the admiral's desk was a monitor screen and what appeared to be three dimensional holographic images with one image immediately attracting the chief's attention: two well built dark skinned men with their arms around each other. One of the men, the admiral, Solly assumed, had white hair while the other's hair was jet black.

"My son." A voice filled with pride announced. "Terrence. He's captain of the *Cuffe*."

Turning rapidly, Chief Brin recognized at once the elderly man in the holo-

image. "Admiral Glover." The chief coming to attention, responded at once.

"As you were, Chief." The admiral commanded, waving Solly towards one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Have a seat. We have a lot to talk about." Waiting until the Admiral took his seat behind the heavy mahogany desk, Chief Brin finally took his seat. Smiling as he regarded the Orion chief petty officer, Glover remarked in a genial tone, "I know you're wondering what the hell you're doing here, Chief, and I promise, we'll get to that. But first, I want to get to know you better." Pausing for a moment, the admiral called up Solly's personnel file on his computer monitor. "You have a most impressive service record, Chief Brin. Leaving out the odd barroom brawl and other peccadilloes that aren't even worth mentioning, you have several commendations and decorations, and you've been repeatedly offered transfers to the Regular Fleet and both warrant officer and direct commissions, but you keep on turning them down." Giving the chief an appraising gaze, Samson asked, "Why?"

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat as he took in the hard face of the admiral, a face that, in many ways, reminded him of his commanding officer and friend, Joseph Akinola, Chief Brin asked, "Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

"Permission granted."

"I didn't want to take a demotion." Solly announced in a clear voice, only to be taken by somewhat by surprise as the admiral began to chuckle, "The *Bluefin* is my boat." Pausing for a moment, the chief clarified, "Yes, Sir...Captain Akinola is the commanding officer, and he's a damned good one—one of the best. He doesn't get the attention a captain like Picard or Shelby or your son gets, but he gets the job done and usually without a whole lot of people getting killed in the process. But I run that ship. I know everyone on her—officers and crew. I make sure everything that has to get done gets done whether that means kicking ass or making sure that the captain has his coffee while he's working on plotting an intercept course to catch a raider. Why would I want to give all that up to be a single black-pip ensign doing nothing but scutwork or to serve on a *Nebbie* or *Galaxy* where I'd be just one of a crowd? Also, Sir..." The chief added in conclusion, "If I were to take a commission, I'd have to attend the OCS course at Starfleet Academy, and I've always hated school."

His gentle chuckles becoming a full belly laugh, the admiral spent several minutes laughing, much to the amusement of the chief until, his laughter finally dying down, Samson nodded his head appreciatively. "You'll do, Chief."

"I'll do for what, Sir?" Chief Brin asked; a faint note of suspicion in his voice.

Picking up on the chief's wary tone, Admiral Glover remarked gravely, a stern expression on his face. "You have good reason to be cautious, Chief. What you are about to hear is Top Secret. If you talk to anyone about this without authorization, I guarantee your next residence will be Sundancer and not as a guard—you read me?"

"Yes, Sir." Chief Brin replied in a no-nonsense tone.

"As you're probably aware, those two Maquis you nabbed belong to a cell led by an ex-Starfleet captain, Sabrina Diaz."

"So..." Solly ventured, "You want me to infiltrate her cell or something?"

"No..." Samson replied, shaking his head. "Other arrangements have been made concerning her and that's all you need to know at this time. What I'm going to ask you to do is something that's probably much more dangerous. It involves the Corillan acid Larkin and Nura were caught with. You probably know that the Orions are involved in the smuggling of that crap across our borders." Taking Brin's single nod of the head as affirmation, Glover continued, holding out a padd across the desk for the chief to take, "What you don't know is that the individual we think is responsible for it is a rotten Cardassian Gul named Rejak."

Taking the padd that the admiral offered him; Solly saw the image of a Cardassian officer whose cheek had been apparently permanently scarred. "This is a very bad man." Glover cautioned, turning his monitor around so that Solly could see the image of a young attractive Bajoran woman wearing the gold and black uniform of a Starfleet officer. "He kept this officer, Lieutenant Sito Jaxa, prisoner for over a year and a half. She was rescued by Starfleet officers working covertly about a year ago." Seeing in the chief's eyes that he grasped the probable horrors that had been visited on that young woman, Samson nodded his head solemnly, "That's right. That poor thing was brutalized in so many different ways that it would turn even your stomach—and I know for a fact you've seen a lot." His eyes once again taking on the same fiery gleam that the chief recognized as coming from his captain's, the admiral declared in a quiet, dangerous voice. "I want that bastard and I want his operation shut down."

"What do you want me to do?" Solly asked as he returned the admiral's

intense stare with one of his own.

A thin smile coming to the admiral's lips, Glover filled the chief in on his plan. As Samson laid out Solly's part in his scheme, that same thin smile came to the Orion's lips as well.

Chapter 3

USS Sutherland: February 2, 2373

"Come!" Captain Elizabeth Shelby called out from desk; setting down the padd she had reading as she heard the enunciator announcing Lieutenant Rysyl's presence outside her door. The door sliding open, the *Sutherland's* Deltan operations officer entered with a concerned expression on her face and a padd in her hands.

"Sir?" The Deltan officer said as she approached her commanding officer. Holding out the padd in her hands, Anara reported, "Ensign Django and I discovered this when we carried out a routine scan of the communications logs." As the captain perused the data on the padd, Lieutenant Rysyl elaborated, "It's definitely two way traffic using a modification of a Maquis code broken a few months ago."

"I see..." Captain Shelby drawled, "Have you been able to break the code yet?"

"No, Sir." Anara admitted, "We just discovered it. We should be able to break it in fairly short order though." She added confidently, "The basic elements of the code are the same. They've just thrown in a few additional permutations and wrinkles."

Nodding her head, Liz replied, "Very good. Use whoever or whatever you need to crack it and get back to me as soon as you do."

"Aye, Sir." The Deltan lieutenant acknowledged as, taking the padd back, she turned about. Waiting until the door slid shut behind her operations officer, Shelby tapped her comm badge, "Commander Hobson?" Hearing her first officer's voice in response, the petite captain stated simply, "We're gold."

USS Bluefin: February 2, 2373

"Captain?" Lieutenant T'Ser announced as she looked up from her console, "We've received a message from Star Station Echo."

"On main viewer." Captain Joseph Akinola ordered from the center seat of the *Albacore*-class border cutter.

"Aye, Sir." The Vulcan operations officer acknowledged as the starry view that had filled the main screen was replaced by the image of Admiral Fenross.

"Captain..." The Admiral stated in his usual posh English accent, "You have new orders. You are to immediately return to Star Station Echo to pick up the prisoners and then transport them to Deep Space Nine. That is all." The message delivered, the admiral's face vanished as stars once again appeared on the viewscreen.

"Well..." Commander MacBride quipped in a slow Texas drawl, "That was short and sweet." His lips turning down into a frown, the first officer sounded a cautionary note, "I guess that means the Maquis prisoners lost their extradition hearing. Their friends might try a rescue."

"I would if I were them." Akinola mused, steepling his fingers. "For now though, we have our orders. Mr. Bralus..." The captain ordered, "Set course for Star Station Echo...maximum warp."

Unnamed Planetoid in the Badlands: February 3, 2373

"Bad news, Sabrina." Danyor Krakke growled as he entered the cramped room that served as combination office and living quarters for Sabrina Diaz, the former starship captain who led this particular Maquis cell. "I just got word from our sources in Starfleet. They say that Larkin and Nura's appeal was rejected. They're going to be transported to Deep Space Nine where they'll be transferred to the spoonheads."

"Damn!" The former captain cursed as she shot up out of her bed, her eyes growing blazing fire as she imagined her lover under the custody of the Cardassians. "I can't believe those bastards would actually do this!" She swore as she began pacing her quarters. "We keep telling Starfleet that we don't have a quarrel with them. That if they leave us alone, we'll leave them alone and they still hound us! All right..." She growled as she stopped pacing, settling instead for drumming her fingers on the table where a computer monitor screen sat, "...if they want to think of us as terrorists, then we'll show them just how nasty a group of terrorists we can be. Get Rof in here. We're going to get our people back. And if any Starfleeters get in our way—then God have mercy on them because they sure as hell won't get any from me."

Bajor: February 2, 2373

"Honey?" Pausing at the threshold of her foster daughter's quarters, Lieutenant Commander Elise Foster flashed a troubled smile as she regarded her daughter packing her meager belongings into a carry bag. "I thought you'd like to know...your orders just came through..."

"I know, Mom." Lieutenant (jg) Sito Jaxa smiled as she turned towards her adoptive mother. "I got them this morning." Her smile growing wider, the young Bajoran exclaimed, "The *Sutherland*! Sam and I talked about it on subspace earlier."

"Oh..." Elise mock pouted, "And here I thought I was going to surprise you!"

Chuckling, the long-suffering Bajoran woman rushing over to her mother, hugged her in a tight embrace, "I love you, Mom." Jaxa sobbed as she clung tightly to the human woman who, along with her husband, had cared for and watched over the former refugee for so many years. "You and Dad...you stayed with me during the..." Her sobs growing more intense as painful memories flooded her mind, Jaxa forced herself to continue, "...through the bad times. When I was..."

"I know, dear..." Elise cooed softly, gently patting her daughter's back, "And you know we'll always be here for you..."

USS Sutherland: February 3, 2373

"Got it!" Lieutenant Anara Rysyl called out triumphantly as the mixed up jumble of symbols, letters, and numbers that had filled her computer monitor now resolved itself into complete sentences. "Computer..." The Deltan operations officer commanded as she slipped in an isolinear data chip, "Record and save." As the computer copied the decrypted information on to the chip, Anara perused the data displayed on her screen. As she read, her eyes grew wide in astonishment as she shook her head in disbelief. "No..." She uttered in a soft voice, "It's impossible. Anyone but him..."

"The computer has verified the decryption with 99.8% accuracy." Lieutenant Commander Varok declared in his usual flat tone. "We should immediately

notify the Captain."

"Of course..." A subdued Anara replied. Getting up out of her seat, she pleaded, "Could you tell her, Mr. Varok? I want to talk to Commander Hobson...maybe it's not what we think it is?"

"If that is the case, Lieutenant..." The science officer answered back, his voice taking on a seemingly grandfatherly tone as he regarded the Deltan standing before him, "...it is doubtful that he will tell you. And it would be logical to assume that he will not appreciate it..." the elderly Vulcan sagely warned, "...if you attempt to garner information from him through your empathic senses."

"I won't..." Anara exclaimed, her face reddening in both embarrassment and anger—her discomfiture and ire stemming more from the fact that she was seriously considering doing just that than from the Vulcan science officer warning her not to do so. "I promise."

Nodding his head once, Varok watched quietly as Lieutenant Rysyl dashed quickly out of the computer lab, the door sliding shut behind her. Turning back to the computer, the Vulcan activated his comm badge, "Varok to Captain Shelby..."

Knowing that the punctilious first officer of the *Sutherland* always liked to pause in the Observation Lounge before retiring to his quarters for the evening, Lieutenant Anara Rysyl was already there to meet him as he walked through the door. "Commander...Chris..." The lovely Deltan said, her normally lyrical voice now carrying a more somber tone, "Mr. Varok and I have just broken the codes..."

"I see..." Commander Hobson drawled; his facial expression an icy mask. "Have you informed the Captain?"

"Yes, Sir." Anara promptly replied, resisting the temptation to reach out to empathically touch the patrician first officer. Instead, she pleaded, "Sir? Chris? Isn't it possible that this is disinformation? That the Maquis or someone else wants us to think that Lieutenant Atoa has been acting as a mole?"

"It's possible." Chris averred noncommittally in his typical nasal voice as he reached out his hand for the isolinear chip, "That will be for the Captain to determine."

Nodding her head in resignation, Lieutenant Rysyl handed the chip over to the first officer, "Here, Sir."

"Thank you, Anara." Hobson acknowledged as he turned towards the exit. "You and Mr. Varok have done good work." Pausing as he reached the door, Hobson turned back towards the disconsolate Deltan now standing alone in the lounge. His icy mask cracking just a little, the first officer promised, "Things have a way of working out, Anara. Have faith."

Taking the slender ray of hope extended to her by the stoic first officer, Anara nodded her head, her lips turning up into a slender sad smile as the door slid shut behind him. Sitting down, the lovely Deltan turned her gaze to the stars as she pondered what the future might bring.

Lying back on his bed in his quarters, hands clasped behind his head, Manuele Atoa almost missed the flashing green light on his computer console. Finally recognizing the prearranged signal, the New Kauaian sprung out of his bed and raced to the console. "Computer...Special Protocol Authorization...Atoa-Hobson Delta Tango Fifty."

"Access granted." The computer's female voice intoned as the console lit up into life.

"Execute program Atoa Sigma Nine." Manuele ordered as he took a small hand phaser out of his desk drawer. Adjusting the setting on his weapon down to the lowest stun setting as he heard the computer's confirming, "Executing," the defrocked security chief made his way quietly to the door. "Sorry, Jamie." The bronze skinned New Kauaian apologized as, thanks to the override he had just entered into the computer, the locked door to his quarters slid open. Striking quickly, Manuele stunned the security guard standing watch in front of his quarters. Dragging the unconscious form of his former subordinate into his living space, Atoa made her as comfortable as he could before slipping out, the door sliding shut behind him.

Gotta move quick. Manuele's mind raced as he made his way down the corridor in a purposeful stride, the dim red lighting in the corridor reflecting the current 'night-time' status of the ship, currently three quarters of the way through delta shift's watch. *Barat is delta shift security supervisor and he's no fool. Jaime doesn't check in when she's supposed to, he'll send someone right*

away to check on her. His lips turning up momentarily into a smile of pride at the efficiency of his security crew, Manuele spotted the Jeffries tube he was looking for. Slipping into the narrow space, his hands loosely grasping the ladder on either side, the New Kauaian, his smile returning as he remembered his days at the Academy rappelling down cliff sides, made his way down the ladder, taking several rungs with one leap until, reaching his destination, he paused to scope out the corridor. Seeing that no one was approaching from either side, Atoa stepped out into the hallway. Spotting at once the door that marked his goal, the former security chief made his way to the hangar deck control room. Knowing that only one crewman would be on duty at this time, Manuele, his phaser at the ready, pressed the access button. The door sliding open, Atoa, his eyes immediately spying the lone duty crewman, who was sitting at his station, a look of surprise on his face at the sudden intrusion, fired, at once stunning the crewman who then slumped unconscious over the console.

Rushing to the console, Manuele carefully moved the insensible crewman away. "Computer." Atoa ordered as he slipped on a filter mask, "Execute Program Atoa-Hobson Omicron Six."

"Executing." The computer acknowledged as Manuele heard bulkheads close, sealing off the hangar deck from the rest of the ship as anethizine gas filled the hangar bay. Watching as, one by one, the duty crew in the cavernous hangar space slumped down to the deck, Atoa waited until he was sure that the last of them had succumbed to the sleep gas before entering the bay. Seeing that the structural integrity field was functioning properly, Manuele opened the hangar bay doors as he made his way towards one of the *Sutherland's* runabouts—the *Moselle*. Entering the runabout and rushing to the pilot's seat, Manuele sat down, the tiny craft's systems instantly springing to life at his command. Silently and smoothly, the *Moselle* raised itself from the deck and past the structural integrity field with barely a ripple as the runabout exited its mother ship. Sparing the ship that he had, until very recently, called home, one last glance through the viewscreen, Atoa, pulling off his gold and black uniform top, commanded, "Computer...set course for Deep Space Nine...maximum warp."

"Nicely done." Captain Shelby stated as she watched her security chief's progress on the computer monitor in her quarters alongside her first officer, Commander Hobson. "Are you sure the bridge won't detect the runabout slipping out?"

“Yes, Sir.” Commander Hobson replied, “Besides being preoccupied with the exercise I set for them, the computer program Mr. Atoa uploaded should effectively mask the *Moselle’s* departure. Mr. Atoa should have a good head start.”

“Good.” Shelby nodded her head, pleased at her first officer’s report. “Mr. Barat should be checking on Crewman Saunders’ status in about fifteen minutes. Have Dr. Murakawa keep a close watch on the lifesigns of the unconscious crewmen. Tell her that if any of them even look like they might be having problems, she’s to take care of them immediately.”

“Aye, Sir.” Hobson quickly acknowledged, nodding his head approvingly. “Sir?” The first officer then asked, “Regarding Smithurst...he will need to be seen to be disciplined as he is Officer of the Deck, but I don’t think it fair that a reprimand appear on his permanent record.”

“Agreed.” Liz replied thoughtfully, “Make a good show of chewing his ass out—it’ll make him a better officer in the long run if he understands that he’s got to always be alert and expect the unexpected, but don’t record it and I’ll make sure nothing appears in his—or any of the others’—permanent record.

“Very good, Sir.” Chris answered back, again pleased at his captain’s response. “Any further orders?”

“Yes.” A chagrined Captain Shelby replied with a grimace, “Set course for Deep Space Nine, but first, I want you to immediately set up protocols to prevent anyone else from being able to pull another stunt like this. You and Atoa made this look all too easy for my liking.”

Persis IV: February, 5, 2373

Stepping out of the airlock and into the primary domed settlement on Persis IV, Solly Brin’s lips curled into a sneer as his senses took in the sights, sounds, and smells before him. The dingy, run down tenements, the smell of decayed plant and animal matter combining with the foul air being recycled thanks to the inadequate filtration system, and the shouts and screams coming from a nearby bar all reminding the red Orion of his childhood in a most painful manner. Memories of his parents and their painful deaths rushing through his head, Solly gritted his teeth as he recalled his last conversation with Admiral

Glover just before he left Deep Space Five.

As he looked into the mirror, Solly grunted at the visage that gazed back at him. His formerly smooth upper lip, chin and cheeks were now covered by a jet black mustache and beard which matched his hair. His eyes were now also a dull green instead of their normal brown. The surgeon had also given him a small scar, above his right eyebrow, just the sort of leftover reminder that a dagger or knife would leave behind.

"The doctor did a pretty damned good job, if I do say so myself." Admiral Glover commented with a wry grin on his face as he observed the Orion chief looking at himself in the mirror. "I think we were right to not go with a full facial reconstruction. Although, I still think you should have taken Dr. Tannus up on his offer of a free nose job." His smirk disappearing as the chief turned to face him; Samson continued in a much more serious voice, "The cosmetic changes should disguise you well enough. Even someone who knows you very well probably wouldn't recognize you unless you did or said something familiar—that's what you're going to have to watch out for." The admiral cautioned, "It's the little things that can get you into trouble in these sorts of operations. You're going to need to keep an eye on your gestures...how you say things...even the way you walk—any of those things can get you into trouble if you're not careful. You'll be about a week in transit to Persis IV. That'll give you time to work out these kinks. When you get to Persis IV, you'll need to latch on to one of the local Syndicate houses there. You are Tabar Estak, a bushak, an unattached gunsel."

"Yes, Sir." Solly acknowledged, nodding his head thoughtfully. "Bushaks are all over that part of space. Another one looking for work will attract far less attention than if I were to try to pose as a member of a family."

"Right." Admiral Glover affirmed, "It also means that they're going to give you scutwork for a time until you prove yourself." His eyes gazing deep into the Orion chief's, Glover cautioned, "You might end up having to watch or do some pretty rotten stuff. You have to maintain your cover at all costs. If you can find a way to safely short circuit or put a stop to whatever you see or if you can work your way out of doing whatever it is they push on you, then, by all means do so. But...if you can't...I'm empowered to tell you that you will receive a full pardon for any actions you have to do in the performance of this mission." Shaking his head, the white haired admiral confessed, "I wish I could tell you that you'll be able to get out of this with clean hands, but I honestly don't think that'll be possible. What you have to understand, Chief, is that a greater good is being served here. Never forget that."

His mind returning to the present, Solly squared his shoulders and took a deep breath as he brushed the dust off his brown imitation leather vest. His eyes taking on a look of steely determination, the burly Orion made his way towards the bar, growling as he walked, "Admiral...you better be right about that all that greater good bull that you shoveled at me."

After turning in the Ferengi type-3 disruptor he was carrying and paying the box rental to the large Gorn standing before the door, Solly entered what passed as the prime entertainment spot in Persis IV Mining Habitat 3, a hole in the wall called *The Trap*. Well...Chief Brin noted with a wry grin, *at least the name's appropriate*. Spotting at once the nude green Orion girl dancing on a stage in the middle of the establishment, Solly made his way there until he stood next to the stage. Looking up at the dancer, the red Orion chief recognized at once through the girl's blank, listless eyes and languid movements that she was high on acid. Tossing a single gold pressed latinum coin at her feet; the chief was treated to an exquisite view as she bent down sensuously to pick it up. Flashing him a brief leer, she danced closer to him, giving him a more intimate look at her charms.

"Nice view, eh?"

Turning his head quickly towards the source of those words, Solly saw a short, heavyset dark haired balding human wearing a white apron around his waist. "She's a looker, that one." The man repeated, "The boss paid a lot for her." Flashing a leer, he jerked his head toward the dancer, "If you want her for the night, I can arrange it—but it'll cost ya. Like I said, she ain't cheap."

Taking an instant dislike to the greasy looking man standing beside him, Chief Brin fought down his first impulse to grab him by the neck and throttle him. Settling instead for a simple grunt and a grumbled, "She's outta my league."

"Yeah..." The man replied, "Thought so. She is for most of the people we get here." Smirking, he gestured towards the gray-skinned dirty blonde haired Bolian waitress who was at that moment serving drinks to a table of laughing Ferengi, one of which, after getting his drink, placed a hand on her rump, "Bala's probably more in your price range—if that Ferengi doesn't get her first. Now, if you're into boys..." he propositioned, this time jerking his head towards a human male who was apparently still in his teens sitting at a table smoking a hookah, "...there's Alain over there He just started working here. Or..." the man said, this time pointing towards a pale skinned Aaamazzarite,

"...if you're into exotics...there's this whatever it is here." Shaking his head, the pimp remarked, "I'm not sure if it's male or female, but, like I always say, different strokes for different folks."

"Let me think about it, Ok?" Solly growled, "Right now, all I'm looking for is a drink."

"Yeah, sure." The man responded with a gruff snort, "Ya make up your mind what you want; I'll be behind the bar."

Taking a seat at a table in the area where the Bolian girl worked, Solly waited until she came near his table and then called out, "Hey...over here!"

Gliding over to his table, the young Bolian spoke in a tired, worn voice, her red eyes telling the world wise Orion that she, like most of the patrons of this establishment, was also slightly stoned. "What do you want? If it's me..." she remarked, thrusting out a hip, "...you're going to have to go through Dak at the bar...he handles our business."

"Right now, just a beer and a get acquainted talk..." Solly leered, "Gotta find out if you're gonna be worth the latinum."

"Oh...I'm worth it." The Bolian smirked, "I'll be back in a minute." She promised, swaying her hips as she walked towards the bar. Idly watching as she talked to the bartender, her eyes glancing at his table as she did so, Solly sat quietly until she returned, bearing a mug of a foul smelling brew that Brin assumed had to be the local ale. "Here." She said, sitting down across from him. "The beer's a quarter slip...I'm a slip every ten minutes...in advance...talking only. Anything more...you have to talk to Dak."

"Fair enough." Solly replied as he handed the money over.

"Ok..." The Bolian woman smiled, her purple stained teeth revealing a predilection towards Tyllian berries, a mildly narcotic product of Tyllia III. "You bought your time...so...what do you want to talk about?"

"First..." Chief Brin asked as he slugged down his beer, inwardly thankful that he had decided to take a broad spectrum antitoxin as he fought to keep the foul tasting brew down. "Know where I can find some work?"

"Mining company's employment office is the second building down on the right." Bala sneered as she snorted a substance out of a small opaque vial.

Taking a closer look at the red Orion seated across from her, she sniffed, "No...that's not the sort of work you want. I don't see any tattoos on you so you don't belong to any family. That makes you either a bushak or a Starfleeter."

"What if I am?" Solly riposted as he forced down another slug of his beer.

"You guys are a Fed credit a dozen down here." Bala laughed. "Ever since the Feds and Ridgies decided to start shooting each other, spies, bushaks and other mercs have been in and out of here. The bushaks and mercs think they're gonna come in here and impress Pierson and maybe even latch on to the Ershak family, and then they do something stupid and S'nurl over at the door rips 'em into pieces or Dak vapes 'em with that cannon of a disruptor of his or one of Pierson's or Ershak's other goons gets 'em and then they end up feeding the mass converter. The spies..." Bala shrugged her shoulders, "...some I see again...some I don't. The ones going after Rejak..." she sighed dejectedly, "I don't." A slight grin crossing her face, she amended, "Except for that group that got that Bajoran girl away from him. I heard they got clean away—good for them. So...whatever you are...bushak or Freddie spy..." the stoned Bolian woman advised, "do yourself a favor and go somewhere else."

"I'll think about it." Solly answered back noncommittally as he finished his beer.

"Good." Bala replied, standing up. "Your time's up now." Looking down at him, she grinned, "You look like a pretty nice guy. Tell you what...if you've got the latinum to top those Ferengi over there..." she said with a look of disgust as the Ferengi who had fondled her earlier leered at her, "...I'll make sure to take extra good care of you."

As she made her way towards the three Ferengi, Solly got up and walked towards the bar. "Dak..." The red Orion called out, getting the greasy looking human's attention, "What's the going rate on Bala right now?"

Flashing a leer, the bartender replied, "It'll cost ya. One bar and five strips of gold pressed latinum." Seeing the look of astonishment on the red Orion's face, Dak chuckled, "The Ferengi pooled their money to buy her for the evening." Bending over, he whispered conspiratorially, as he pointed at the dancing Orion woman, "You'd be better off spending your money on Alena over there...but..." he added, lowering his voice even further as Solly fought back the desire to recoil from the garlicky breath of the slovenly barkeep, "...if you can pull the money for Bala together, I'd appreciate it. She's a good kid

and Torq and his boys..." Grunting, the burly bartender gripped something underneath the bar, "...let's just say they like to play rough and she don't need that right now."

His teeth clenching as he saw a laughing Torq ripping Bala's shirt off, Solly plunked the latinum down on the counter. Nodding his head in silent thanks, Dak declared in a rumbling tone, "Go tell Torq she's yours now."

"What if him and his friends up my bid?" Solly asked, giving the bartender a warning glare. "I don't like being played."

"You're not." The bartender promised flashing a sly grin, "I played them earlier. I made sure that they coughed up everything they had." Jerking his head towards the Ferengi table, Dak remarked, "Better hurry—they're getting ready to go now."

Approaching the three Ferengi, Solly growled, "What are you three blood worms doing with my woman?"

"Your woman?" The dominant Ferengi, Torq, snarled. "She's ours—bought and paid for."

"Not anymore." Solly scowled, "I just upped your offer—now she's mine."

"Dak!" The Ferengi called out, protesting. "We paid our money—a contract is a contract!"

"Only if it's between two Ferengi." Chief Brin sneered, finishing the Rule of Acquisition. "How does it feel when you're on the other end of the shaft, toad?"

"She's ours!" Torq spat as he brandished a saw toothed curved blade as one of his two companions grabbed the Bolian woman by one of her arms, twisting it behind her back as the other one, drawing a knife of his own, took up a flanking position, ready to lunge once the red Orion committed himself. "We're taking the female, but first I'm going to gut you."

A smirk on his face, Solly immediately dropped into an informal attention stance, ready to react to any attack while at the same time not telegraphing any potential moves to his opponents. "Whenever you're ready..." The Orion invited as he kept his hands open, his arms and legs limber and ready to strike.

At the bar, Dak reached underneath for the Klingon disruptor rifle he kept for just these occasions only to be stopped by a hand on his shoulder and a voice commanding, "Wait a bit...I want to see how this plays out first."

Glancing out of the corner of his eye at his employer, a human male with long dark hair, lean and wiry, with a thin scar that ran along his left cheek causing it to occasionally twitch, the bartender responded with a grunt, "Whatever you say, Mr. Pierson."

Marking the position of the flanking Ferengi with his peripheral vision, Solly easily slipped Torq's clumsy lunge, the Ferengi's momentum putting him right where the red Orion wanted him to be as the burly chief grabbed the wrist holding the knife in a vise-like grip, twisting it behind the dominant Ferengi's back while at the same time twisting in such a way as to put Torq between him and the other Ferengi. As he tightened his hold on the Ferengi's wrist, Solly forced the point of the blade to prick into the flesh of his erstwhile opponent, causing him to howl with both real and imagined pain.

"Let go the knife and tell your boys to back off..." Solly growled, whispering harshly into the Ferengi's ears, "...or you're going to be the first Ferengi to stab himself in the back with his own blade."

Loosening his grip on the blade, Torq cried out, "Let the female go!"

"Now..." Chief Brin ordered as, taking full control of the knife, he pricked the Ferengi's back as his other arm went around Torq's neck, "Tell your people to back away towards the door...slowly."

"Do as he says!" The lead Ferengi gasped as his two companions slowly backed away.

Rudely shoving Torq at his mates, Solly spat out, "Get out of here!"

Backing away with his friends, Torq sneered back, "This isn't over, Orion!"

"Yesssss..." A hissing sound replied as a thick scaly hand gripped the Ferengi's back collar, lifting him up from the floor, "It issss..." Responding to the nod from his employer, S'nurl easily tossed the still sputtering Ferengi out of the bar, with his mates, taking the hint as the huge scarred Gorn glared at them with his crocodilian eyes, very quickly scurrying out of the bar after him. The Gorn's attention now focused on Solly, he asked, his tongue flickering, "Do we

have a problem?"

"No." The red Orion answered, keeping his voice tone carefully neutral, thankful that it didn't crack as he offered the knife to the saurian, hilt first, "I don't."

"Good." The Gorn replied, his lips turning up into a feral toothy grin that gave Chief Brin pause, "This goesssssss in your box. You can get it back with your disruptor when you leave."

"Not bad." Wheeling about quickly at the source of the voice, Solly saw a dark haired man with a scar approaching. "The way you handled Torq. Smooth...I like that."

"And you are?" Solly inquired, although he already knew the answer, having read the man's dossier while en-route to Persis IV.

"Pierson." The man replied with a calculated grin, "Lynn Pierson...but you can just call me Pierson. I own this place and a few other ventures. Nice moves. Shodo-kan?" Pierson asked, giving the red Orion a probing look.

"Yeah." Solly answered back, nodding his head. "Learned it from a shipmate of mine."

"A Starfleet vessel?" Pierson inquired, his gaze growing even more searching.

"Perhaps..." Solly responded and then challenged, meeting Pierson's gaze with one of his own, "Does it matter?"

"Not really." The ex-Starfleet officer declared with a shrug of his shoulders, "You'd be surprised at how many ex-Fleeters come through here. Maquis...mercenaries...smugglers...spies. At one time or another, they all come through here. I wonder..." He said with a sly grin, "Which one are you?"

"Which one do you think I am?" Solly riposted, his lips turning up in a slight grin.

"Doesn't matter." Pierson announced flatly. "Long as you don't threaten me or my interests. Speaking of which..." The bar owner grinned, "I have a proposition for you."

"I'm listening." The chief replied laconically.

“Like I said, I liked how you handled yourself just now. You got rid of Torq and his friends without creating a mess and you showed good sense by not pissing off S’nurl. I could use someone like you. Someone who can handle himself in a fight, but at the same time has enough sense to know when to back off or talk his way out—are you that someone?”

“Maybe.” Solly responded, not wanting to appear to be too eager. “What’s in it for me?”

“I pay good. Not as much as Ershak...” he admitted, “...but you’re less likely to end up dead working for me...long as you do your job and don’t cross me, that is. Plus, you get a roof over your head and meals—in case you haven’t noticed, rent and food’s a bitch around here.”

“I have.” Solly acknowledged crossly, “I cost me a quarter of what I came here with just for a dive for a week and swill I wouldn’t feed a targ.”

“Heh. You must be staying at Lita’s.” Pierson laughed. “Like I said...” he continued, the searching gaze returning, “...there are a lot worse places to work. So...what’s your answer?”

“All right...” Solly replied, nodding his head, “I’m in. When do I start work?”

“Tomorrow.” Pierson grinned, “You got the rest of the night off.” Calling out over his shoulder towards the bartender, the ex-Starfleet officer ordered, “Dak! Give the new guy his money back for Bala—less the employee discount, of course.” His grin grew wider as the Bolian woman, after picking up the remnants of her top, came up next to Solly, wrapping an arm seductively around his waist. “Bala’s yours for the night—the employee discount’s her normal cut.” Seeing that the chief was about to protest, Pierson cut him off with a raised hand, “Look. If you don’t take her, someone else will and you still lose the latinum. What you two do tonight’s up to you. You can sit and talk to each other all night or frinx each other silly as far as I care. ‘Sides...” Pierson quipped, his grin growing wider as he saw the Bolian woman’s hands begin to wander, “...I think Bala likes you.”

“C’mon...” The gray-skinned Bolian urged as she tugged on Chief Brin’s arm, “...let’s go.”

“Go on!” Pierson urged, and then called out as the pair began to make their way up the stairs, “By the way...I didn’t catch your name.”

"Tabar..." Solly called back, using his cover identity, "Tabar Estak."

"Welcome to the family, Tabar!" Pierson answered back, "I'll see you tomorrow." Motioning for S'nurl to come join him, the ex-Starfleet officer whispered, "Check up on him and let me know what you turn up."

"Right, Mr. Pierssssssson..." The Gorn acknowledged as he returned to his post at the door.

"Think he's a Feddie, Boss?" Dak asked from behind the bar.

"70-30 he is." Pierson replied with a sly grin.

"Think he'll be a problem?"

"For us?" The former lieutenant commander answered back, his brow furrowed with thought, "I don't think so. I have a feeling he's after bigger game. If he's after what and who I think he is..." Pierson smirked, "...then I'm all for giving him a fairly free rein so long as we don't get caught up in any blowback. We'll keep an eye on him for now though..." Pierson decided, "...until we're sure which way the coin lands."

"Right, Boss..." Dak replied as he wiped clean a glass, "We give him just enough rope..."

"And see if he has enough sense not to hang himself with it." Pierson interjected, finishing the bartender's thought.

Chapter 4

USS Sutherland

Lying on her lover's couch, Ensign Maria Django leaned into the crook of his arm, "FNN?" She asked as she rubbed sinuously against the ruggedly handsome dark haired man next to her.

"Yeah." Lieutenant Sam Lavelle, the Sutherland's chief helmsman answered back, giving his dusky skinned paramour a kiss on her forehead as he ran his fingers through her long, luxuriously fine dark hair. "I wanted to catch the Pareses Squares scores before we turned in, but first I guess we're going to have to put up with the news." He sighed as the visage of an attractive blonde haired woman appeared on the screen."

"Not her again!" Maria groaned, "I don't think that bimbo has two brain cells in her skull."

"Probably not," Sam quipped, his eyes falling on the low cut dress the news anchor was wearing, "But that's not why people watch her."

Giving her roguish companion a playful slap, Maria jibed back, "You know they're fake, don't you?"

His hands wandering as he gave his fiery lover a passionate kiss, Sam whispered seductively in her ear, "I'm happy with what I've got in my hands right now..."

"Mmmm..." Django purred as she returned her partner's kiss, "Good answer. Why don't we..." However, before she could finish her proposition, the newscaster's next words immediately broke the spell.

"And Philip Shelby, the hero of Beta Crucis, announced his candidacy for the vacant North American seat in the Terran Senate today. We take you now to his press conference..."

"Isn't that..." Maria began, only to be interrupted by the man sitting next to her.

"Captain Shelby's father?" Sam interjected, the earlier romantic mood now

dispelled. "Yeah. Let's watch this..."

"Mr. Shelby?" A stocky sandy haired balding man called out, "Hans Brinckermann, FNN News. It is rumored that your relationship with your daughter, Captain Elizabeth Shelby, is strained. Would you care to comment about that?"

"Oh boy..." Sam sighed, "I've got a feeling this is not going to be good..."

USS Bluefin

As Joseph Akinola watched the newscast in the *Bluefin's* wardroom along with his first officer, Dale McBride, and Lieutenant T'Ser of Operations, his eyes gazed intently on the image of the well chiseled former Starfleet officer speaking before the crowd of reporters.

"Ideally..." Philip Shelby responded, beginning his carefully coached reply, "...just as I'm sure everyone here would agree, I would have liked to have kept my family life private. But..." the candidate declared, "...I can understand my fellow Terrans' concerns about this issue. There's an old saying that goes something like this: 'How can you expect a man to run the State when he cannot run his own household.' To which I can only give this for an answer—something I'm sure all of you who are parents can relate to: There comes a time when you have done all you can to give your children the love and guidance they need—but they go their own way anyway. All you can do then..." He remarked, his demeanor now one of great somberness, "...is hold firm to your principles...your beliefs...and be ready to greet your child with open arms when they return. Any time my daughter seeks reconciliation..." The elder Shelby announced, his every word and gesture carefully following the script that he had rehearsed, "...then I shall be there waiting for her." Nodding his head in gratitude as he heard the scattered applause, the candidate then asked, "Next question?"

Feeling a natural empathy towards the Senatorial candidate due to his estrangement from his own daughter, Akinola grunted as, picking up his coffee cup, he stood up, "Good answer." Turning about to leave the wardroom, the *Bluefin's* captain remarked as he left, "The man deserves much better than that slut of a daughter of his."

"I don't know..." T'Ser ventured tentatively, her voice barely above a whisper as the door slid shut behind Akinola, "...I have a feeling there's more to this

than what we're seeing."

"Why do you say that?" Dale inquired, still slightly surprised at hearing a Vulcan using the expression, 'having a feeling.'

Her lips turned down into a frown, the lovely Vulcan replied in a soft, haunted voice, "Let's just say that I think I know a little bit about what Captain Shelby's going through now and that in this instance Captain Akinola might not be completely right."

"Maybe." Dale conceded, shrugging his shoulders, "Not that we'll probably ever get a chance to find out. I mean...what are the odds of any of us getting to meet—much less to know well—either Captain Shelby or her father."

An amused smile crossing her face, T'Ser answered back in a flat, stereotypically Vulcan tone, "Approximately 53,412.6 to 1. Assuming neither of us transfers to the Regular Fleet and Captain Shelby does not transfer to the Border Service and either remains in command of the *Sutherland* or moves to a larger vessel in the Fleet, and assuming she is not made admiral." Seeing the look of bemusement on the roguishly handsome Texan's face, T'Ser flashed an impish grin, "In other words, don't expect an invitation to her next orgy any time soon."

USS Sutherland

As the newscast ended, the foursome seated at a card table in Commander Christopher Hobson's private quarters turned their attention back to their game. As he cut the cards, handing the deck to the Vulcan sitting clockwise from him, Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol, the *Sutherland's* Trill chief engineer, remarked in dry voice, "You do know that was a put up question, don't you?"

"While there is always room for uncertainty..." Lieutenant Commander Varok replied as he dealt the cards around the table, "...the probability is high that you are correct. The voice inflection of the reporter asking the question as well as that of Candidate Shelby's, along with the controlled nature of his gestures does give support to that thesis."

Picking up her cards, Lieutenant Anara Rysyl nodded her head in agreement with her Vulcan partner seated across from her, "He was coached." The Deltan

woman asserted. "Like Varok said, you can tell from his body language." Turning to the host of the gathering, the lovely operations chief asked, "What do you think, Chris?"

"I think I will go with one spade." The diffident first officer flatly replied, countering the Vulcan's opening bid of one heart, a raised eyebrow the only crack of humor in his otherwise stoic armor.

"Oh you!" Anara huffed, responding when it was her turn with, "Two hearts." Pausing for a moment, the empathic Deltan pondered aloud, "I wonder how Captain Shelby is taking this?"

"Not good, I'll bet." Jadon interjected as he supported his partner's choice of suit, "Knowing the captain, she's as pissed as an enraged Mugato."

"No..." Anara averred, shaking her head, "I have a feeling she's probably more hurt than angry."

"Well...whatever...I guess you'll find out soon enough, eh, Chris?" The Trill engineer remarked, "Aren't you going to see her soon?"

"Yes." The first officer replied, "As soon as we finish this rubber, in fact." His face taking on a stern expression, he quickly added, "But do not expect any gossip from me."

"Of course not, Chris!" Tol quipped as a sly smile crossed Anara's face, "I wouldn't even think of asking you to do something as gauche as that."

Unnamed Planetoid—Cardassian Badlands

"This is where we'll spring our ambush on the *Bluefin*." Sabrina Diaz declared; her pointer landing on star system M-294. "It's the perfect spot. It has a close hot Jupiter gas giant companion that throws out a lot of radiation that'll play havoc with their scanners and an extensive asteroid belt providing the perfect cover for our raiders."

"Ok, Sabrina..." One of the Maquis cell leaders participating in the raid, a dark skinned human male, interjected, "...how are you planning to get them to fall into the trap? What's to stop them from just going on to Deep Space Nine?"

Her lips turning up into a sly grin, the former Starfleet officer explained, “We’ll bait the trap with a distress call. When the *Bluefin* comes in to respond to the call, that’s when we’ll hit them.”

“How can you be sure of that?” A lithe Bajoran woman with what seemed a perpetual sneer interjected.

“Because, Ayenga...” Sabrina smirked, “The *Bluefin* is a Border Services cutter and the priority mission of the Border Service is Search and Rescue. The *Bluefin* will answer the call.” She concluded definitively.

“He’ll probably be expecting a trap.” The ebony skinned human remarked sagely as he cupped his chin.

“Oh, you can count on that, Paul.” Diaz affirmed as she acknowledged the concern of her fellow Maquis leader, Paul Santos, a colonist displaced from his home by the Cardassians a year earlier. “While I don’t ever recall meeting the captain of the *Bluefin*, I have been reading up on him. Captain Akinola has spent almost his entire career in the Border Service and is intensely loyal to it. He’s been on the *Bluefin* for most of his service career and has formed as close a bond to that ship and crew as a captain could form. Probably too close a bond.” Sabrina opined, pausing for a moment as she remembered her time as captain of the “He’s also a cagey old fox who knows most of the tricks in the book and has invented a few of his own. I intend to use both those things against him.”

“How?” Ayenga inquired, still not convinced by Diaz’s plan. “And who are we going to use to bait the trap?”

The wicked grin returning to her face, Sabrina replied, “The Lissepians maintain a mining operation at one of M-294’s Trojan points that they’ve been working for several years—it’s a small, but lucrative operation selling rare earths and other metals and minerals to the Cardassian colonists in the Border Area”

“I’m surprised we haven’t hit it already.” Paul observed with a faint note of suspicion as he leaned forward in his chair, “How long have you known about this, Sabrina?”

“For a while now.” The former Starfleet officer admitted, “We haven’t hit it yet for the simple reason that we’ve had other—bigger—fish to fry. And...” she added with a frown, “...because even though they’re selling to the

Cardassians, the Lissepians are technically neutral and we've been trying to avoid overly pissing off Starfleet. Now..." She said, her frown narrowing to a thin line, "...we can kill three birds with one stone. We can knock out the Lissepian operation, get our people back, and send a strong message to Starfleet to back the hell off—or else."

"Ok, assuming for now that we go along with your plan..." The dark skinned Maquis leader replied, nodding his head slowly, "How do you propose we pull this off?"

"First, Paul...your wing will..." As Sabrina outlined her plan, sly grins appeared on the faces of both her fellow cell leaders. Concluding her presentation, the ex-captain asked, "Any questions?"

"No." Ayenga replied, "I think we've got everything." Her voice now taking on a more crafty tone, the Bajoran woman added, "You do realize you're going to owe us big for this, don't you?"

"Yeah," Diaz answered back with a frown, "I know." Exhaling, the lithe woman snapped, "Ok, if there're no other questions, let's get to work."

Dashing off the transporter pad of her personal raider as soon as she rematerialized, Ayenga made her way to the control cabin of the converted *Peregrine*-class courier. Leaning over, she whispered into the ear of the Bajoran man who served as her second in command and part-time lover, "Go on back to engineering and make sure that Banan gets all the info on the modifications Diaz wants done with the engines. Have him double check everything before he does a single thing—I don't want any unwelcome surprises."

"Right, Ayenga." Ral Omkar answered back as he got up out of his chair.

Waiting until the door closed behind the auburn haired Bajoran, Ayenga pressed a button on her console. Smirking as the deceptively boyish looking visage of Daras Tabor appeared on the tiny console monitor, the Bajoran woman reported, "Diaz is taking the bait—just as you figured she would."

"Excellent." The terrorist leader grinned, "You understand what you're supposed to do?"

"Of course." Ayenga replied with a sly grin, "I'm to cause maximum confusion..."

"And as high a body count as possible." Tabor finished, adding, "And don't forget..."

"I know..." Ayenga interjected, barely hiding her irritation at the patronizing tone of her superior, "...don't forget to leave the package."

"Right." Tabor affirmed, seemingly ignoring the barely hidden note of insubordination coming from the slender Ayenga. "Good hunting." He exclaimed as he cut off the transmission.

"Frinxing son of a vole." Ayenga muttered under her breath as she activated the intercom, "Omkar? What does Banan say about those mods?"

"He says they should work." Ral answered back.

"Good." Ayenga grinned, "Tell him to go ahead and implement them then and transmit the word to the others to do the same to their ships. I'm going to catch a few hours sleep before we get underway."

Leaning back in her chair, the former medical technician closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep as memories of her time working for Crell Moset in the labor camps, assisting in his experiments on her fellow Bajorans, rushed unbidden through her dreams, causing her to wake up a few hours later in a cold sweat. "Damn." Ayenga swore to herself as she felt the clammy wetness on her lap, seat, clothes, and flesh. "Prophets dammit." She sobbed, "I did it again."

USS Sutherland

"...be ready to greet your child with open arms when they return. Any time my daughter seeks reconciliation then I shall be there waiting for her."

"Bullshit!" Captain Elizabeth Shelby spat out as she punched a button on her desk, turning off the replay of her father's news conference. "Frinxing liar!" She growled, so angry that she at first missed hearing the chime announcing someone was at her door. "What is it?" She snapped, activating her intercom.

“Commander Hobson, Sir.” The voice of her first officer answered back, “We were supposed to meet to discuss current events.”

Remembering their scheduled appointment, the blonde captain replied, “Oh...of course, come in, Commander.”

Pausing as he entered the ready room, Hobson debated as to whether to proceed any further as he saw Captain Shelby in the subdued lighting, sitting behind her desk with a stack of padds and mug of coffee before her, an agitated look on her face. “Sir? I can return later if this isn’t a good time.”

“No. That’s all right, Commander.” Looking up, Liz, forcing herself out of her funk, made a face as she sipped her now cold coffee, “Come in. And while you’re up, would you mind getting me a cup of coffee—cream, no sugar—and something for yourself as well.”

“Of course, Captain.” Chris acknowledged, ordering the captain’s coffee as well as a cup of Darjeeling tea for himself. Handing the mug to the petite Shelby, Hobson took his regular seat on the other side of the desk from her, remaining politely quiet until the blonde woman sitting across from him chose to speak.

“Ah...” Shelby sighed appreciatively as she took a sip of her drink, “That’s much better. I might actually live through this.” She quipped, forcing a smile to her face as she gestured at the pile of padds stacked before her. “See what the future holds for you, Commander?” Her smile vanishing, she said, totally blocking out of her mind the recent newscast of her father, “I spoke with Admiral Glover a few hours ago. He’s pleased with our progress to date and instructs us to go on to Deep Space Nine and coordinate further with Ben and Odo.”

“Understood, Sir.” Hobson laconically replied, following his captain’s nonverbal cues and keeping to the subject at hand, “I’ve also updated the ship’s security protocols to prevent someone from repeating what I and Mr. Atoa were able to do.”

“Good.” Liz grinned, her face flushing just the slightest. “I have to admit, it’s going to be a pain having to deal with the ribbing I’m going to catch from some of my fellow captains for letting my former chief of security just walk away with a runabout.”

“Why?” Chris asked, “Have you heard from any of them?”

"Not yet." Liz replied, shaking her head. "Picard won't say anything..." she chuckled, "...cause he doesn't have much room to talk. And Ben knows the score. But..." she sighed as she took another sip of coffee, "I have a feeling when Terrence finds out, I'll never hear the end of it from him."

"Probably not." The smallest crease of a smile crossed Hobson's face as he sipped his own hot drink. "Unfortunately..." He remarked in a dry tone, "...that is the price that is paid in these types of operations."

Giving her first officer an appraising gaze, Shelby probed in a quiet, yet earnest tone, "You seem to have a fair amount of experience in this sort of thing—more than your record indicates, Commander." Her eyes not wavering from those of the man sitting before her, Liz continued, "Commander...Chris...as I'm sure you're aware..." She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, "...we all have things we'd rather not talk about for one reason or another. Out of respect for your privacy and because I realize that if you were involved in Intelligence, your activities might be classified, I've refrained from directly inquiring as to that possible part of your service."

"Thank you, Sir..." Hobson began only to be quickly interrupted.

"But..." Shelby interjected, brushing aside a lock of golden blonde hair, "...if those activities should ever affect anything involving the Sutherland or its crew..."

"I promise you, Captain." Chris solemnly swore, "That I will not allow this ship, its captain, or its crew to come into danger because of anything I might have done or been involved in that occurred in the past. You have my word."

Seeing the look of absolute earnestness in her first officer's face, Liz nodded her head once, "That's good enough for me, Chris." Shaking her head, the captain picked up a padd. "Thanks for your honesty."

Picking up on his captain's non-verbal cues, Hobson nodding his head in response, stood up. "By your leave, Sir, I'll return to the bridge." Taking Shelby's nod of the head as affirmation, the normally icy commander's face cracked just a little as he turned away, "Thank you, Captain."

Watching as her first officer walked out the door, Liz muttered *sotto voce*, "Just don't disappoint me, Chris."

"Everything is proceeding according to plan, Dmitri." Daras Tabor declared, smirking at the image of the human appearing on his monitor. "Sabrina Diaz provides the perfect distraction for our operation."

"Very good." Dmitri Cherenkov replied, "Supreme Devok and Gul Rejak will be pleased."

"I could care less about Rejak." The Kon Ma leader spat before quickly adding in a conciliatory tone, "But I am glad that the Supreme is pleased with our progress."

"You really must learn to at least appear gracious towards your allies..." the Terra Nova native reproved, "It's bad for business—especially when their assistance is a vital component of your plan's success."

"You're right, of course." Tabor began and then countered, "But you should also remember that soon I will be in the position to reward my friends and allies."

"Of course..." Cherenkov smiled indulgently, "...the Supreme seeks nothing but the friendship of true Bajorans such as you."

"I'm glad to hear that." The Bajoran terrorist replied smugly. "Tell your people we will distribute the Corillan acid to our connections and they will have their cut of the profits soon."

"Excellent." Dmitri grinned, "Once payment is received, you will receive the rest of the shipment." His grin widening, the Syndicate intermediary opined, "That should give you what you need to do what you want to do."

"It will indeed." Tabor smirked, "It will indeed."

Federation Runabout Moselle

Sitting at the pilot's seat of the *Danube*-class runabout listening to the rockabilly tune performed by the time displaced musician L. Q. 'Sonny' Clemonds rescued several years ago by the USS Enterprise along with Ambassador Offenhouse and one other cryogenically frozen person from the

early 21st century, Manuele Atoa pondered his options. "I don't know..." He said to himself as he called up Sabrina Diaz's record, ordering the computer to display it on the tiny monitor on the pilot's console. "Deep Space Nine is the last chance Diaz has to pull a rescue, but it's also a very hard nut to crack. She has to know that Constable Odo and Captain Sisko will be expecting an attack. Also, she has a history of pulling off the unexpected and has a reputation for being something of a riverboat gambler when she has to be. That's why I think she's going to pull something before the *Bluefin* even gets to DS9. Computer..." The New Kuaian ordered, "Put up on the main viewer the projected course of the *Bluefin*."

As the starry display gave way to a map with the Star Station Echo and Deep Space Nine displayed in green and the *Bluefin* showing as a flashing pale blue image, Manuele nodded his head. "Now, give me a rundown on all the systems within a five light year radius of the *Bluefin*'s route." As the computer delivered its report, the undercover security officer walked over to the replicator. Picking up the cola that he ordered, Manuele quietly listened as the computer continued to drone on until...

System M-294: F5 class star. Possesses a hot Jupiter planetary companion in close orbit and two asteroid belts rich in a variety of mineral resources. Currently, a small Lissepian mining operation has a base of operations within the system.

"Computer..." Atoa interjected, raising his hand, "Display a detailed display of System M-294, centered on the mining base." As the computer complied with his request, Manuele studied the image on his viewscreen, a sly grin slowly appearing on his face. "That's the spot." He muttered under his breath. Raising his voice, he then ordered, "Computer, set course for System M-294...maximum warp."

USS Bluefin

"How are our prisoners?" Captain Akinola, tapping his comm badge, asked CPO Deryx, currently serving as acting Chief of the Boat of the border cutter *Bluefin*.

"Quiet as you please." The Denobulan Chief responded, "The Bzzit Khaht is reading and the other guy's racked out."

“Good.” Akinola grunted, “Let’s hope it stays this way.” Touching his comm badge again, the captain called for his Chief Engineer, “Mr. Gralt? How’s work proceeding on those engines?”

“I’ll be done in thirty minutes...” The gruff Tellarite engineer answered back, “...maybe twenty. That is if I’m not constantly interrupted by people asking me how long it’s going to take to get them done.”

His lips curling up in a slight smile, the dark skinned gray haired captain replied, “Duly noted, Mr. Gralt.” Catching the smirk appearing on his Vulcan operations officer’s face, Joseph inquired, raising an eyebrow, “Something funny, Mr. T’Ser?”

“No, Sir.” The lithe Vulcan quickly responded, her smile vanishing. “All sections report normal.

“Good.” Akinola replied as he turned to his executive officer, “Dale...I want you to run another battle drill. This time assume that all senior officers with the exception of yourself are incapacitated—I want to see how the junior officers respond when they’re on their own.”

“Aye, Sir.” The Texas born first officer responded. However, just as he was about to issue the orders to begin the simulation, Lieutenant T’Ser looked up from her console.

“Captain?” The Seattle born Vulcan called out, “I’m receiving a distress call from a Lissepian mining operation in system M-294.” Quickly putting a tactical display of the system on the main viewscreen, she continued, “They report that they are under attack by Maquis raiders—at least three. They’re holding their own for now, but they say they won’t be able to last long.”

“How long until we reach that system?” Captain Akinola asked, addressing his helmsman

“Approximately fifteen minutes at maximum warp, Sir.” The youthful Bolian sitting at the helm, Ensign Bralus, quickly responded.

Yellow alert. Captain Akinola immediately ordered. As the green light on the alert display turned amber, the captain addressed his helmsman, “Set course for system M-234, maximum warp.” The hum of the engines picking up in intensity with the sudden increase in speed, the captain tapped his comm badge, once again hailing his chief engineer. “I want those impulse engines

ready in ten minutes, Mr. Galt.” Forestalling the inevitable outburst from his prickly engineer, Joseph steamrollered, “And this time without the usual back and forth.”

The alert Tellarite, immediately picking up on the grave tenor in his captain’s voice, answered back with a simple and quick, “Aye, Sir. They’ll be ready.” Turning to his crew, the chief engineer swore, “All right—you heard the Captain. So unless you want to be cleaning the waste reclamation units for the next six months you’ll get those engines ready on time! Now...Move!” Watching in satisfaction as his crew moved, Galt evaluated the display on his console. *Maybe...he thought, his mind racing...if we tweak the impulse manifold by .3 dekajoules, we might be able to boost efficiency a couple of percentage points higher. Might not amount to much...but then again, it might make a difference.* Quickly coming to a decision, the gruff Tellarite called out to two of his most able assistants, “Chandler...Ahksun...get your asses over here.” As two figures wearing fatigue coveralls and PO3 rating insignia on their shoulders approached, a chestnut haired human male and a sandy blonde haired Acamarian female, her left cheek tattooed with an elaborate filigree pattern, Lieutenant Commander Galt grunted, “About time you showed up. I want the two of you...” he instructed as he pointed at the display on his console, “...to get your bulbous rear ends over to the impulse manifolds and jack their output up another .3 dekajoules each.”

“Aye, Sir.” Both petty officers responding quickly, picked up their tools and rushed out to carry out their assignment.

As the chief engineer watched them go, a slight smile crossed his face, “I’m going to have to see about putting them in for a promotion next time I talk to the Old Man or the XO—they’ve earned it.” Turning about to address the rest of his crew, the crusty Tellarite picked up his tools as he barked out, “We’ve got ten minutes, let’s get a move on you slobs!”

“Sir?” The *Sutherland’s* new acting tactical chief, Lieutenant Nyota Dryer, called out from her position at tactical, “I’m receiving a distress call from system M-294. They are under attack from Maquis raiders. Receiving another communication.” She further reported, “The border cutter *USS Bluefin* is responding.”

“Time to response for the *Bluefin*?” Captain Shelby asked, taking the center chair just vacated by her first officer. “And how long will it take for us to

arrive should they need help?”

“The *Bluefin* should be there in approximately fifteen minutes, Sir at their current speed.” The ebony skinned security specialist promptly replied. “As for us...if we go to maximum warp, we can be there in twenty.”

“Do it.” Shelby directed as her senior helmsman punched in the coordinates for their destination into his console. As the *Nebula*-class starship raced towards its destination, the petite captain, seeing the questioning look on her first officer’s face, cracked a smile. “Nothing against Captain Akinola...” Shelby remarked, “...but he doesn’t know who he’s up against here. While I’m sure he’s read up on Sabrina and even realizes that he’s walking into a trap, I don’t think he fully understands just how cunning—and how ruthless—she can be. He probably thinks that there’s still a core of Starfleet in her. Maybe he’s right...” Liz conceded, “...but she’s also incredibly loyal to her people and right now he’s the one holding them. Once she decides she’s going to get them back, she’ll do whatever it takes to do that. I have a feeling it’s not going to take long before Akinola finds himself in way over his head.”

System M-294

“We’ve got a ship dropping out of warp.” Nashoba reported from his place of concealment in the outer asteroid belt. “*Albacore*-class. Moving towards your position.” The bronze skinned, dark haired Comanche, a colonist from Dorval V, added.

“You called it, Bri...” Paul Santos called from his position in the nearer asteroid belt. “He’s coming in on full impulse.”

“Ok, everyone...” Sabrina Diaz ordered as she pulled her raider up from its strafing run on the Lissepian mining operation, the base’s shields glowing yellow as the modified courier’s phasers, firing at only three-quarters intensity, impacted. “Remember to stick to the plan. Keep your weapons at low intensity for now. We don’t want to destroy the base—yet.”

“Gotcha, Boss...” Danyor Krakke answered back as he and the raider flown by the Alshain, Rof, began their strafing runs. “Don’t ruin the flypaper.”

“You got it, Danyor.” Sabrina chuckled as she lined her ship up for another run.

"Estimate he'll be on your position in two minutes." Santos declared as he monitored the progress of the border cutter.

Cracking a grin as the rest of her team completed their attack runs, Sabrina commed her people one more time, "Pay attention everyone and you'll see why I was such a bitch about you putting in those mods on your engines and weapons systems."

"That hot Jupiter's putting out a lot of radiation." T'Ser growled from her position at Ops. "It's really screwing up my sensor readings."

"Adjust the best you can." Captain Akinola instructed as he gazed intently on the main viewscreen. "Weapons, raise shields, load up with Mark 22 torpedoes and bring phasers on line. Helm..." The captain further instructed, turning his attention to the young Bolian in the pilot's seat, "...if we're going into what I think we're going into, I'm going to need you to execute your maneuvers smartly."

"Aye, Sir." The young ensign currently manning the weapons console acknowledged, "Torpedoes and phasers ready."

"Understood, Sir." Ensign Bralus replied, his heart beating rapidly as he licked dry lips.

"Don't worry, Ensign..." Joseph remarked in a grandfatherly voice, "Just concentrate on the job and you'll do just fine."

"Got 'em!" T'Ser called out as the image of the asteroid housing the Lissepian base came into focus. Along with the base, Akinola made out three *Peregrine* couriers, converted by the Maquis into raiders, carrying out strafing attacks on the installation.

"Challenge the raiders and order them to stand down." The *Bluefin's* captain ordered as he leaned forward in his seat.

"They're ignoring us." The lithe Vulcan operations officer replied, shaking her head.

"We're in weapons range." Ensign Goldman at tactical reported.

"Fire!" Akinola ordered, his eyes riveted to the screen as two Mark 22 torpedoes launched themselves from the *Bluefin*. Moments later, following the flash of light indicating a successful detonation, the dark skinned captain grinned in satisfaction as he saw the three raiders, powerless, drifting in space. "Move us in closer." The captain ordered as he punched the intercom button on his chair arm, "Chief Deryx? You and your team take a Super Stallion and pick up the crew of those raiders." Turning his attention back to his operations officer, Joseph further directed, "Keep an eye out, T'Ser...I've got a feeling this isn't over yet."

Before his Vulcan officer could acknowledge his order, the *Bluefin* shook with such force that it almost knocked the Nigerian captain off his feet.

"Three more raiders on attack vector." Ensign Goldman reported as the ship shook again.

"Return fire." Akinola ordered as phaser fire lanced out from the *Bluefin's* turrets, the blue beams impacting harmlessly on the Maquis raiders' shields.

"They're breaking for the asteroid belt." Goldman announced as the *Bluefin* fired again at the fleeing corsairs.

"Are you sure those raiders are dead in space?" Captain Akinola, turning once again to his operations officer, inquired, referring to the three ships that had been strafing the station.

"Aye, Sir." T'Ser reported, "No signs of emissions coming from them."

"Shall we pursue, Sir?" Commander McBride asked.

"No..." Akinola replied, shaking his head, "They're trying to draw us off—there's probably another wing of raiders waiting for us in the asteroid belt. In any event, we can't risk leaving the Lissepians undefended."

Smirking as she saw the *Albacore*-class border cutter hovering in place from her place of concealment near an asteroid at one of the gas giant's Trojan points, Ayenga clicked her comm switch once, signaling her wing to prepare to begin its attack run as Santos' group turned about to make another run of their own.

"The raiders are coming about, Captain." T'Ser reported as the three *Peregrines* grew larger in the viewscreen.

"Fire Mark 22s." Akinola ordered as the EMP torpedoes took off towards their targets.

"Just like Sabrina said." Santos grinned as he saw the torpedoes racing towards his team. "Remember the plan." The Maquis leader said, speaking to his attack wing, "When they go off, kill all your systems—do not correct for drift—understood."

"Right, Boss." Rebekah Ha'aretz, a colonist from Dayan, replied just before the torpedoes detonated.

"Got 'em!" Goldman called out triumphantly, "They're drifting."

"No readings?" Akinola asked, turning once again to his operations officer, receiving in reply a shake of her head.

"You think something's up?" The *Bluefin's* first officer asked as, leaning over the lovely Vulcan's shoulder, he double checked her readings.

"I don't know..." Joseph replied, shaking his head, "...this is has all been just a little too easy."

"They probably didn't anticipate us having Mark 22s." Dale remarked with a shrug of his shoulders, "After all, the Regular Fleet rarely—if ever—uses them. Diaz probably just didn't factor them into her calculations. Hell..." He exclaimed with his Texas drawl, "If we hadn't of had them, we'd be neck deep in alligators now."

"Maybe..." Akinola conceded, stroking his chin, "But that's not the impression I got from reading her record. Still..." He said with a sigh, "...we're going to have to get those Maquis out of their ships before their life support runs out and I'm not going to risk lowering our shields to beam them to the brig." Taking a deep breath, the captain activated his intercom, "Chief, get a second Stallion and team ready to go to pick up the crew from that other wing."

"Aye, Sir." The Denobulan CPO acknowledged, "Both teams will be away in

sixty seconds.”

Entering system M-294, Atoa immediately recognized the flashes of phaser fire as well as the explosions of the Mark 22 torpedoes. Ordering the computer to mask emissions, the Sutherland security officer coasted his tiny runabout into the near asteroid belt, seeking cover by a mineral rich rock. “Now...” He said softly, “We wait.”

Watching from her darkened cockpit as the two Super Stallions departed the *Bluefin's* shuttle bay, one headed towards where Santos' wing lay drifting and the other headed her way, Sabrina Diaz flashed a sly grin. *So far, Captain Akinola, you've done everything that I thought you would.* Feeling a brief twinge of regret, the former Starfleet officer whispered in a barely audible voice, “I wish I could just ask you to give my people back, Captain Akinola. You're probably a really nice guy and a great captain, but...” her face hardening, the raven haired Maquis leader watched as the Super Stallions entered her web, “...you'd probably say no—and I am going to get my people back.” Seeing that the *Bluefin's* rescue craft were now in position, Sabrina, activating her comm, uttered a single word, “Now.”

At once, the supposedly dead raiders sprang into life, their phasers lancing at the Stallions' engines. Jostled out of his seat from the impact, Chief Deryx called out, “Coxswain! Get us back to the *Bluefin!*”

“Sorry, Chief!” The blonde petty officer called back, “They knocked out engines and weapons with that hit and our armor's down to 25%. They hit us again, we're vaped!”

Ayenga's wing, striking from their position, concealed thanks to the massive electromagnetic emissions put out by the hot Jupiter, struck the *Bluefin*, targeting its deflector shields, weapons turrets, and warp nacelles. “Grab 'em by their belt loops and pour it on! Don't let up!” She shouted into her comm unit as she and her team maintained their attack, hugging in close to the border cutter.

“Shields are almost down, Cap...Ahhhh!” Goldman cried out as her console exploded, showering the hapless ensign in a cascade of sparks and shrapnel.

"Dammit!" McBride cursed as, grabbing a fire extinguisher, he quickly put out the fire as one of Dr. Baxter's med techs rushed to the downed security officer. Looking up into the captain's eyes, the young corpsman shook his head ruefully as he closed the deceased ensign's eyes.

"Ayenga!" Diaz called out as she and her wing raced to join the Bajoran terrorists, "Have two of your wingmen break off and deal with the mining base while we get our people back. Santos! You and your people keep an eye on the Stallions—if it comes down to it, we'll trade them for Larkin and Nura."

"Understood!" The Bajoran answered back, "Tohan...Omkar...eat up the Lissepians..." Changing frequency, she added, "You know my orders."

"Right!" Her two wingmen answered back, firing one last volley at the stricken *Bluefin* as they peeled off.

Smiling in satisfaction as she lined up her shot, Ayenga purred as she tapped the fire button on her console, "You're all mine, Freddie."

Striking true, Ayenga's shot pierced the weakened rear shield of the Federation cutter, striking the left warp nacelle.

"We're venting plasma, Captain!" Lieutenant Galt called out, as, staggering to his feet, he assisted one of his crewmen back to his feet. "Warp engines off line!"

"Do we have weapons, T'Ser?" Akinola asked, turning to his operations officer.

"I can give you turret number two, Captain. I think I can divert some of the extra power Mr. Galt's people were able to coax out of the impulse engines." The Vulcan woman quickly replied.

"Fire!" The Nigerian captain ordered. "And remind me to give Mr. Galt a bonus next payday," He added, a slight smile of relief crossing his face as his confidence was, for the moment, restored.

Her aim true, the phaser beam struck Diaz's raider. "Direct hit, Captain." T'Ser smiled, "Enemy raider is venting life support."

"Damn!" Diaz cursed under her breath as she switched to her suit's life support. Activating her comm badge, she ordered, "Danyor...Rof...if I don't make it, continue the attack. Knock out that weapons turret and force the

exchange.”

“Right, Bri!” Krakke replied, ordering the rest of the attack wing, “Continue attack.” Switching frequencies, Danyor hailed the *Bluefin*. “Attention Federation starship. We have your Stallions and their crews under our weapons. Unless you cease fire immediately and prepare to beam your prisoners over to us, we will destroy the Stallions. You have thirty seconds to respond.”

“Sir.” Lieutenant T’Ser interjected, “He’s telling the truth. Both Stallions have raiders standing off them at point blank range. There’s no way we can destroy those raiders before they fire and if we drop our shields to beam the crews aboard...”

“The raiders hugging us will tear us a new one.” Akinola finished. Gritting his teeth, he ordered, “Cease fire. Let’s see if we can buy some time for Mr. Galt to make some repairs.”

“Captain?” Lieutenant Dryer called out from her position at tactical, “I’m picking up weapons fire in system.”

“I’d say the *Bluefin* and Sabrina Diaz have made each others’ acquaintance.” Captain Shelby remarked as she leaned forward in her chair. “Red Alert.” As the klaxon rang and the red light signaling general quarters blinked, the captain ordered, “Take us in, Mr. Lavelle. Mr. Dryer, I want all weapons ready to go on my order.”

“Aye, Sir.” Both officers responded, their adrenaline pumping as the *Nebula*-class vessel rushed towards the battle.

Picking up on the *Sutherland’s* entry into the system, Manuele saw his chance. Speaking on the same Maquis frequency used by Diaz, the New Kauaian made his entrance. “Sabrina Diaz. Listen to me. You’ve got a *Nebula*-class ship closing in on you. I can get you and your people out, but you’re going to have to do what I tell you to do when I tell you to do it.”

“Who are you?” Sabrina snapped, her voice edged with both anger and suspicion.

“There’s time for that later!” Manuele fired back. “You’re going to have to decide and decide now. Do you want to take your chances with me or with that Nebbie closing in on you?”

“All right!” The former starship captain, “We’ll do it your way. But I’m warning you...” Diaz growled, “If this is a double cross, I’ll gut you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Understood.” Manuele replied, “Now...I want you to tell your people to break off and leave the system.”

“What?” Sabrina all but shouted into her comm unit, “You must think I’m frinxing crazy!”

“Do it!” Atoa yelled back, “I figure you’ve got sixty seconds before that ship is in weapons range.”

“Sabrina...” Danyor, switching to another frequency, interjected, “Whoever he is, he’s lying. We’ve got the Feds right where we want them.”

“Probably.” Diaz agreed as she fingered the hand phaser at her hip, “But for now, we’ll do as he says—but not the way he thinks. I want you and Rof to return to the base and wait further orders. If you don’t hear from me within six hours—execute Plan Omega.”

“Right, Bri.” Krakke reluctantly acknowledged as he relayed his leader’s instructions to his wingman.

Watching as her two wingmen broke off, Sabrina addressed the others in the attack force, “Break off and leave system—now!” Addressing Atoa, the former starship captain declared, “All right, whoever you are, I’ve done as you’ve said. You better not be lying.”

“I’m not.” Manuele answered back as he powered up the *Moselle*. “Just be ready when it hits the fan.”

“Time to leave our packages.” Ayenga smirked as she and the rest of her wing launched their tri-cobalt warheads at the now defenseless mining installation. Smiling in satisfaction as the Lissepian outpost exploded in flash of light, the Bajoran terrorist pressed a button on her console, ejecting a small cylinder from the rear of her raider. “All right, people...let’s get out of here.”

"Captain!" T'Ser called out, her face reflecting her shock, "The mining base...it's been destroyed." Turning her attention back again to her scanner, her voice now took on a tone of relief, "The raiders are breaking off their attack. I'm picking up a Federation runabout—*Danube*-class—closing fast; and a starship, *Nebula*-class, within system."

"That explains why they broke off their attack." Akinola sighed dejectedly, cursing himself for falling into Diaz's trap. "Raise the runabout."

"It's the runabout, *Moselle*." T'Ser immediately responded, "Lieutenant Manuele Atoa commanding. He says that he was sent by Captain Shelby in case we needed immediate assistance."

"Well..." The gray haired captain admitted, "We certainly do need that. Ask him if he has any medical personnel...Dr. Baxter can use all the help he can get."

"Understood, *Bluefin*." Manuele acknowledged as the computer locked on to all three of his intended passengers. "Transporting now." With that, he activated the transporter, watching in satisfaction as Sabrina Diaz, along with Larkin and Nura, materialized in the runabout's tiny transporter room. "Computer." The New Kauaian ordered as Diaz, drawing her weapon, pointed it at Atoa's chest, "Take us out—maximum warp. Atoa One."

Maintaining his calm as he glanced down at the hand phaser pointed at him, Manuele cracked a slight grin, "Welcome aboard, Ms. Diaz. Before you get any ideas, the computer's locked to my voice command and it's currently on a course that will take us straight to Deep Space Nine. You'll find that there's no way you'll be able to unlock it before it reaches its destination. Now...the way I see it, you can shoot me—in which case you'll all end up prisoners once again when you get to DS9; or, you can tear the ship apart trying to unlock the controls—in which case we'll all die; or...we can talk. The next move's yours."

Looking on in shocked astonishment as Larkin and Nura disappeared in the shimmering blue glow of a Federation transporter, Commander McBride hit

his comm badge, "Captain? We have a problem. The prisoners have been transported off the ship."

"The *Moselle's* just warped out!" T'Ser called out from her station, her voice also filled with disbelief.

Shaking his head in dejection, Joseph declared flatly, "We're in no condition to pursue." Taking a deep breath, he inquired, "How are we?"

"Weapons except for number two turret are down." T'Ser replied, "Warp engines are out. We have impulse and life support."

"Casualties?" Akinola asked, steeling himself for the grim news.

"Dr. Baxter reports three killed in action, thirteen injured." T'Ser reported in a somber tone, "Chief Deryx reports one KIA on his Stallion, three wounded. Petty Officer Franks reports one KIA, two injured." As the Nebula-class starship appeared on the *Bluefin's* main viewer, T'Ser announced, "The *Sutherland's* hailing us, Sir."

"Main viewer." Joseph ordered in an equally grave voice.

The debris filled starry image on the main screen disappeared to be replaced by an image of the *Sutherland's* bridge, her blonde captain sitting on the center seat. "Captain Akinola?" Liz inquired, receiving by way of affirmation Joseph's slow nod of the head, "I'm sorry...we got here as fast as we could. I have medical and repair crews ready to beam over to help get you up and running and we can tow you to Deep Space Nine where they can complete repairs."

"While we appreciate the assistance, Captain, and will most certainly accept any help you can give us..." Joseph demurred in a gravelly tone, his expression a stony mask, "We don't need the tow. We're more than capable of making it to Deep Space Nine on our own once we get our engines back on line."

"Captain." Liz countered with a polite smile, "While I have no doubt as to the capabilities of your ship and crew, to be honest, you're in no condition to go it alone. Your warp engines are out...almost all your weapons are down...your deflector emitter is seriously damaged. You couldn't stand up to a single raider right now...much less a wolfpack."

"She has a point, Sir." The *Bluefin's* executive officer, dashing on to the bridge

in time to hear Shelby's words, remarked to his captain in a low voice, "Even with repairs, we're in no condition for a standup fight right now."

Reluctantly conceding his first officer's point, Joseph, turned his attention back to the blonde captain on his screen, "Very well, Captain." Forcing the words out of his mouth, the grizzled border skipper added, "Thank you for the assist."

"You're welcome." Liz replied, maintaining her polite smile, "My people are ready to beam over whenever you give the word. Also..." Shelby added, "I've taken the liberty of beaming your people in the Stallions on to the *Sutherland*. They're currently in our sickbay and will be beamed back to your ship once Dr. Murakawa says it's Ok."

"Thanks again, Captain." Joseph answered back, his anger at her not notifying him first as to her actions concerning his stranded crewmen quickly giving way to relief that they were getting the care they needed. "I appreciate it and would like to see them once things get situated better here."

"By all means, Captain." Shelby responded, "You're welcome aboard and I look forward to seeing you."

As the image of the *Sutherland's* bridge faded away to once again be replaced by the starry night, Captain Akinola turned to his first officer, "Dale, I'll leave it to you to get with Shelby's people and see that they get to where they need to go. I'm going to take a tour of the ship and then get to work on the after action report." As he walked off the bridge, Joseph Akinola sighed. For the first time, the grey-haired captain felt old.

"Aye, Sir." The Texas born XO replied watching with concern as his captain left the bridge.

"Will he be all right, Sir?" Lieutenant T'Ser asked, her voice edged with worry.

"Yeah...I think so...I hope so..." McBride answered back, shaking his head, "He's mad. Not at any of us though." The first officer amended, "He blames himself for what happened. There's an old saying, T'Ser..." The roguishly handsome Texan said in his usual drawl, only this time tinged with a note of sadness, "Some days you get the bear and some days the bear gets you. Well, today..." Dale concluded somberly, "The bear got us."

Chapter 5

System M-294

Shaking his head somberly as he made his way through the corridors of the *Bluefin*, Captain Joseph Akinola cautiously picked his way through the scattered debris and the showers of sparks given off by exposed conduits, pausing for a moment near sickbay. Gently caressed a bulkhead, he heaved a mournful sigh as he heard a stifled sob from inside the tiny cutter's hospital area, "I'm sorry, Old Girl..." he apologized, "...it's all my fault."

"Bull Pucky!"

Raising his head, Captain Akinola saw the *Bluefin's* chief medical officer, Dr. Calvin Baxter, wearing a traditional white lab coat over his uniform, approaching. "What did you say, Doctor?" The Nigerian captain growled, irritated at his friend interfering with his solitary reflection.

"You heard me." The retired head of Starfleet Medical replied in a no-nonsense voice as he ran a hand through his thick white hair. "You can either come in here, Joseph..." Dr. Baxter said, dropping his voice so no one else could hear, "...or...if you want to continue feeling sorry for yourself, you can go somewhere else."

Shaking his head, a slight smile crossed the white haired captain's lips, "I don't why I put up with you, Calvin." Akinola remarked as he crossed the threshold into sickbay. His smile vanishing as he gazed on the fully occupied biobeds, the captain inquired, "How're they doing?"

"They'll be ok, Joe." The elderly doctor replied as he placed a consoling hand on his friend's shoulder. "If it weren't for you, there'd be a whole lot more of 'em in here—and more of 'em..." he noted somberly, pointing in the direction of the stasis chambers that served as the *Bluefin's* morgue, "...in there."

"It wasn't me." Joseph demurred waving his hand first towards his wounded crew, and then in an all encompassing gesture, "It was them...and it was her." He finished, referring to the old border cutter."

"Yeah." Calvin agreed, "They did their part. But don't sell yourself short, Joe. They did it under your leadership. You held firm, you kept your cool, didn't

panic.”

“Diaz still had me dead to rights.” The white haired captain vainly protested only to once again be interrupted by his friend.

“Sabrina Diaz was one of the most talented and gifted officers in the Fleet—Regular or Border, Captain Akinola.” Baxter countered, deliberately emphasizing Joseph’s rank. “You’re not the first person she’s gotten the drop on and I have a feeling you won’t be the last. Today was her day. Tomorrow...”

“...is another day.” Joseph concluded through clenched teeth. “I guess you’re right, Calvin.” Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the grizzled border skipper clasped Dr. Baxter’s shoulder, “Thanks, old friend. I guess I needed the pep talk.”

“Don’t mention it, Joseph. You’ve done it for me a couple of times.” The retired admiral answered back with a grin, “So, what’s next.”

“Next...” Joseph grinned, “I wrap up my paperwork, tell Dale to get ready for Shelby’s people, and then I think I’ll beam over to that luxury liner of hers and see how our people are doing over there.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Calvin replied his lips turning up in a wicked grin. “Just make sure you don’t catch her at the wrong time—if even a third of what I’ve heard about her is true, I don’t think your heart could stand it. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got work to do.”

Turning her head towards the man seated next to her, Captain Elizabeth Shelby requested as she brushed aside a stray lock of blonde hair, “Chris, I want you to tell Mr. Tol and Dr. Murakawa to organize repair and medical teams to help out on the *Bluefin* as soon as possible.”

“Aye, Sir.” The chestnut haired first officer responded as he got up out of his seat, “Anything else?”

“Yeah...” The captain replied thoughtfully, “I don’t want any inter-service dustups right now between our two crews. Make sure the crew in general and those going on the *Bluefin* especially understand that they’re to keep the ‘border dog’ and ‘canoe fleet’ comments to themselves until we get the *Bluefin* to DS9.” Nodding her head in satisfaction as Hobson, acknowledging her

orders, left the bridge; Liz turned her attention to her science officer, "Mr. Varok? Are you picking up anything from the mining colony?"

"Aye, Captain." The Vulcan science officer responded. "While the raiders were most...efficient...in their attack, the Lissepians state that they have their systems back on line and have politely, yet firmly, refused our offers for assistance."

"Which means they're hiding something." Liz grimly concluded.

"Given the Lissepians' long-term relationship with the Cardassians..." Varok replied in his usual flat tone, "...that would be a logical supposition." Returning to his scans, the Vulcan science officer remarked, raising an eyebrow, "Interesting...I am detecting a small cylindrical object drifting."

"A mine?" Ensign Django interjected.

"I am detecting no signs of explosives." The Vulcan reported, "Carrying out level nine scan. Interesting..." The elderly science officer raised an eyebrow, "There appears to be a biological substance in the cylinder."

"Can you identify it?" Shelby asked, the hairs on the back of her neck standing out on hearing her science officer's report.

"Negative, Sir." Varok replied. "Further analysis will require a closer examination. I would recommend bringing it aboard for a more detailed analysis." Anticipating his commanding officer's objections, the Vulcan added, "If it is transported into one of the research labs that can be ejected and kept within a level ten quarantine/confinement field, that should eliminate any possibility of contamination."

"Very well." Captain Shelby decided, "Go ahead. I want you and Dr. Murakawa to go over that thing and what's inside it with a fine tooth comb." Her face taking on a grim mien, the petite captain declared, "If Diaz is mucking about with biogenic or mutagenic weapons, then she's taken this to a totally different level and she's got to be stopped."

"Sir?" Lieutenant Rysyl interjected, "What if she doesn't know anything about this? What if it's an attempt to make us think that she's working with these weapons?"

"It's possible." Liz conceded, "To be honest, Lieutenant, I hope you're right,

because if you're not, then as far as I'm concerned, the Sabrina Diaz I knew is dead."

Runabout Loire

"All right, Mr. Atoa..." Sabrina Diaz said, flashing an icy grin as she sat down in the copilot's seat, "We'll talk. But you better make it good." Motioning with her phaser for her rescuer to take the pilot's seat next to her, her grin disappeared as she asked, "First question—why did you help us?"

With a snort, Manuele replied, "I'm not going to tell you that I wanted to join you because I believe in the Maquis cause, because that would be a damned lie." Seeing the wry grin on the former starship captain's face, Atoa continued, "I'm also not going to tell you that I'm in it for the money."

"So...why are you doing this?" Diaz pressed, her phaser not quite pointed at the New Kauaian.

After several moments of silence, Manuele answered in a soft voice, "Because of what happened at Leyton's trial." Seeing the quizzical look on his interrogator's face, Atoa explained, "I was there at the trial. I saw the slaps on the wrist that Leyton and Benteen got while they threw Lieutenant Commander Daneeka and Captain Taras into that hellhole Supermax for ten years! Ten years for two good people who made a mistake while the leader of the coup and his aide skate with five years in Club Fed." Pausing for a moment, Manny asked, "Did you know either one of them?"

"I knew Daneeka." Sabrina confessed, "Met her a few years ago on Deep Space Five. She impressed me." Pausing for a moment, she added in a soft voice, "I met Captain Taras once too. My ex-husband introduced us. I'd just been made captain and was about to take command of the *Rochefort*. From what I've heard, he was a good officer—well liked by his crew and well respected by his fellow captains. I also remember keeping up with his exploratory missions while I commanded the *Cuffe*..." ending on a somber note, she remarked, "...he was very much an explorer at heart. It surprised me when I found out he was involved in Leyton's plot."

"He did it out of loyalty to Leyton..." Manuele replied, carefully hiding his growing confidence that he was feeling that he was beginning to at least partly gain the distrustful Maquis leader's trust, "...and because he realized

how dangerous the Dominion is.”

“I see...” Sabrina remarked sagely before further probing, “I’m not aware of you being a part of Leyton’s plot...”

“I wasn’t.” Atoa answered back, shaking his head. “And yes...I did my part in exposing it.” Taking a deep breath, the New Kauaian continued, “And I’ll be honest with you, had Leyton and Benteen gotten what they should have and Daneeka and Taras treated with a bit more compassion, I probably wouldn’t be here talking with you now. Instead, Leyton’s friends get him a light sentence and Benteen cops a plea and coasts because she used to be Captain Shelby’s girlfriend.” Looking straight into Diaz’s eyes, the New Kauaian asked, “Tell me where’s the justice in that?”

“There isn’t any.” Sabrina allowed before demurring, “What you’ve told me keeps you in one piece, but you still haven’t given me any reason to trust you beyond letting you go your own way with all your body parts intact when we part company.” A sly grin crossing her face, she added, “With or without the runabout I haven’t decided as yet.”

“Ok...” Manuele retorted, “There is something else.” Taking a deep breath and then exhaling, the undercover security officer explained, “The straw that finally broke my back was when I received a security communiqué a few weeks ago from Captain Shelby. As a gesture of support for the new civilian Cardassian government, Starfleet has decided on supplying the Cardassians with medical and other relief supplies—stuff that can’t be replicated. I...” he declared in a solemn voice, “...know where they’re being stockpiled.”

Her face darkening, Sabrina spat out, “The Maquis colonies have people dying of disease...malnourished...in need of shelter and clothing. Do you know how many human, Bajoran, and the lives of many others who used to take pride in calling themselves Federation citizens could be saved by those supplies?” Her eyes boring into Atoa’s, the former starship captain promised, “You show us where they’re being kept and I’ll consider making room for you in my group.” Her eyes now taking on a steely glint, she warned in an icy tone, “If this is a trick, you won’t live to see how it comes off.”

“Understood.” Manuele simply replied as he turned his attention to the console. “If you want to tell me where you want to go, I’ll set the course.”

Her lips once again turning up in a crooked grin, Sabrina inquired, “So...you’re still not going to release the controls? Is this how you wish to earn my trust?”

With a snort, Manuele quipped, "I trust you about as much as you trust me."

"Good to see we're on the same page." Sabrina rejoined as she, reaching over, she punched in the coordinates for her base on the pilot's console. "That's where we're going."

"All right." Atoa replied as the runabout slipped into warp in a flash of light. "Here we go."

Persis IV

"Ok, S'nurl..." Lynn Pierson, asked as, leaning back in his chair, he propped his feet up on his desk, "...what did you find out about our new 'employee'?"

"He sssseemsssss to check out, Bosssss..." The Gorn bodyguard replied, his teeth flashing in a predatory smile. "Tabar Esssstak...from an undissstinguished family."

"A bushak then." Dak, the bartender grunted. "Just as he says. So...he's clean?"

"Maybe..." Pierson responded dubiously as he read the information on the padd that his Gorn employee gave him, "But...the hairs on the back of my head tell me there's more here. Added to that..." he said as his fingers drummed the arm of his chair, "...he all but admitted to me that he was once in Starfleet. The question is...if he is a Fed...who is he working for?"

"Could be Ssssstarfleet Intelligence..." S'nurl offered helpfully.

"Perhaps." Pierson allowed, taking on a thoughtful countenance. "Or Federation Security or Special Missions or Border Service Intelligence, or any of several black ops groups I know about and you guys don't." A dark look appearing on the bar owner's face, he warned in a grave tone, "And take my word for it...you don't want to know about them either. These guys are every bit as nasty as the Obsidian Order or the Tal'Shiar—maybe even a bit nastier."

"So...like you thought, he's a Fed?" The burly barkeep inquired, "What's he doing here?"

"Corillan acid would be my guess." Pierson conjectured, his hand going

momentarily towards the scar on his cheek before it dropped back down to his side once again.

“So you think he’s going after Rejak and his operation?” Dak queried, a worried look on his face, “Could attract a lot of attention to us if we let him do it, Boss...attention we might not want.” Sounds like bad news.” Dak decided with a frown, “Maybe we should just go ahead and get rid of him? Might save us a lot of trouble in the long run.”

“No.” The former Starfleeter answered back, shaking his head, “We’re not the target and if he does belong to one of the black ops boys, they might decide to retaliate—if for no other reason than to send a message to any other...independent...operators. Better—and safer—for us just to stay out of the line of fire if at all possible. Besides...” Pierson chuckled, “I think S’nurl likes him.”

“Yessss...” The Gorn replied, pleased at his employer’s decision. “He’sssss not so bad...”

“For a warm-blood?” Pierson quipped as his bodyguard flashed a toothy grin. “I agree, S’nurl. Besides, I’m getting to like him too.” His laughter vanishing as his face took on a more menacing cast, the former Starfleet officer continued, “Also, I owe Rejak one for what he did to my ex and my little girl and I can’t think of a better way of paying the bastard back than helping Starfleet trash his operation. Finally...” he concluded, referring to the Corillan acid, “...I don’t really have any problems with helping take that crap out of circulation. Since Alena...” he explained, referring to the green Orion dancer who worked for him, “...got hooked on that stuff, she hasn’t been the same.”

“I know what you mean, Boss.” Dak agreed, “It’s like she’s just...there. Remember how she used to be when she danced?” Flashing a leer, he continued, “She used to love it...the customers did too.” Shaking his head, the heavyset bartender growled, “But since she started taking that junk...well...while she’s high...she...” he admitted, “...she pulls ‘em in even more. And well...when she’s doing her thing with the johns...as long as she’s trippin’, the tips are really...really...good.”

“That’s the aphrodisiac qualities of the drug...” Pierson interjected adding, “But, it doesn’t come without a price tag attached.”

“Yeah. When she comes down...” Dak said, shaking his head, “She comes down hard. And it’s been getting worse. Gotta be honest, Boss...I’m worried about

her.”

“Same here.” Pierson admitted, “That’s why I told you to hold back an extra twenty percent from her weekly take—I’ve been putting it aside until she’s got enough so that I can have her put into rehab.”

“So...” The bartender asked, a hopeful note in his voice, “...when do you plan on getting her help?”

“Soon.” Pierson declared, “I want to wait to be sure what our new guy’s really after first though...in case we have to move fast, but...if he is going after Rejak, I think I’ll make sure to send her...and Bala and Alain too...out of the way just in case things blow up.”

“Sounds good, Boss.”

“Great.” Pierson grinned, “So...where is our Mr. Estak?”

Chuckling, the bartender replied, “He’s watching over the girls and Alain—should be getting back soon, unless he ran into a problem with one of the Johns, that is.”

Grasping the naked cringing human by his neck, Solly slammed him up against the wall of the dingy motel room. “She said Romulan would cost you twenty extra slips...” the burly red Orion growled menacingly. “When the girls say it’ll cost you twenty slips—it’ll cost you twenty slips—no freebies. Got it? Good!” Still pinning the hapless man up against the wall, Solly called over his shoulder, “You all right, Alena?”

“My bottom’s sore, but other than that, I’m ok...” The green Orion prostitute whimpered as she came out of the bathroom, slurring her words as she spoke. “Don’t worry. Boss’ll have Doc look me over and my bum’ll be ready for tonight.”

Noting the glazed look in the green skinned woman’s eyes, Chief Brin shook his head, “Did you drop some acid just now, ‘lena?”

“Yeah...” She purred as she picked her clothes off the floor, “I’m trippin’, baby.” Holding out the vial of green liquid, she teased, “Wanna join me?”

"No thanks." Solly replied, heaving a sigh of exasperation. "Just get dressed. The others are waiting for us outside."

"Your loss." Alena mumbled semi-coherently as she slipped on her clothes.

Turning his attention back to the whimpering man in his grasp, Solly warned in a low, threatening tone as he drew his knife, causing the man to gasp in fear as he pressed the point of his blade against his groin, "Next time...I cut them off...understand?" Releasing his grip on the man's neck just enough so that he could nod his head, the red Orion CPO flashed a predatory grin as he let the man go, watching as the human slumped simpering down to the floor. Turning to Alena, the chief jerked his head towards the door, "Let's get out of here."

As Solly escorted his charges back to Pierson's bar, his actions were not going unobserved. The Ferengi Torq, along with his two companions, watched concealed from a back alley as the foursome walked past them. One of the Ferengi, drawing his phaser, aimed it at the red Orion's back. However, before his finger could press the firing stud, the lead Ferengi, clasping his flunky's hand by the wrist, pushed it down hissing, "Not now. If we kill him, it'll get back to Pierson and he'll sic his pet Gorn on us." His lips curling up in a vicious grin, the Torq whispered, "No...I've got a much better idea. This way, we'll get the Orion—and maybe Pierson and his Gorn too."

"Great." Pierson exclaimed as he got up out of his seat. Jerking his head towards the door, the ex-Starfleeter instructed his two employees, "So...unless there's something else, you two can get back to the bar—I've got some stuff to tie up here. I'll be along shortly."

As Dak and S'nurl exited his office, the former Starfleet officer activated his desk monitor, "Hey, Miriam..." Pierson grinned as his ex wife's face appeared on the screen, "How are you and Ellen doing?"

"We're ok..." The blonde haired woman replied, "So..." she inquired, flashing a wicked grin, "...what do you want?"

"I need you to do some digging for me, Sweetheart..." The dark haired man smiled roguishly, chuckling at the suspicious look on his former spouse's face, "...don't worry, it's nothing that'll compromise you or your friends in the Maquis. I just need you to get me some information on any red Orion males

that might be in Starfleet or who might have just left.”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult.” His ex-wife replied with a grin, “There’s not a whole of Orion men in Starfleet in the first place and red Orions would narrow it down even more. What sort of information do you want?” Miriam inquired.

“The usual.” Pierson shrugged, the smile still on his face, “Who they are...regular Starfleet, Border Service, or Special Ops...what ship they might be serving on...friends...associates...etcetera...et tedious cetera...”

“All right...all right.” The blonde haired woman sighed, “I’ll see what I can do. It’ll take some time though if you want me to be that thorough.”

“Don’t waste too much time.” Lynn answered, “But I’d appreciate it if you could get me what you can.”

“Sure thing.” Miriam replied with a grin, “I’ve got to go now, but Ellen says hi...and you take care of yourself you old scoundrel.

“You too.” The former Starfleet officer replied with a fond grin as the screen went blank. His hand once again going to his cheek, Pierson absently stroked his scar. “Might be dicey...” he mused, “... but if I played my hand right, I might be able to knock off several birds with one stone. But even if I can’t do that...” he decided, a self-satisfied smirk appearing on his face, “If I can help knock off one Cardassian shaped bird in particular, it’d still be worth it.”

System M-294

Immediately after rematerializing in the transporter room of the Albacore-class cutter, Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol spotted a lithe Vulcan woman wearing the black with gold trim pants and jacket that was commonly worn by both Border Service and station personnel. Noticing at once how well she filled out the uniform, Jadon’s lips turned up in a flirtatious grin as he requested, “Permission to come aboard?”

“Permission granted.” The Vulcan woman responded with a playful smile of her own as she extended her hand, “Welcome to the *Bluefin*. I’m Lieutenant T’Ser, the cutter’s operations officer.”

“Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol.” The dark-haired Trill replied, “But you can call me Jadon. I’m the Chief Engineer for the Sutherland.” Gesturing in the direction of the damage control and medical personnel with whom he arrived, Tol asked, “Where do you want ‘em?”

“Corpsman Sanders will escort your medtechs to sickbay, while Petty Officer Bron’ll take your engineering people to Commander Gralt.” With a sigh of relief, the lovely Vulcan woman added, “If you don’t mind, I could use you and a couple others on the bridge. More than a few of our systems got fried in the battle.”

“Not a problem.” Jadon answered back before turning his attention to a blonde haired woman wearing gold and black standing behind him, “Treasure? Take Philys and Snowden...” he directed, jerking his head towards the human and Denobulan engineering crewmen standing to the left of the buxom ensign, and go with the petty officer here and see what you can do to help out with engineering. “Franks and Thompson...you’re with me.” Turning his attention back to T’Ser, the roguish Trill grinned, “Whenever you’re ready...”

“Great.” T’Ser replied, “Come with me.”

“You were right, Captain.” Lieutenant Dryer said, speaking to Captain Shelby through her comm unit, “We found three different detonation devices on the cylinder: One set to go off on re-materialization, another timed detonator, and a third set to go off if you try to disarm it without entering the proper key code. While the transporter security buffers were able to take care of the first two detonators, the third one’s still hot. Diaz snagged her self one hell of a creative bomb maker here.”

“I see...” Shelby drawled, speaking from the center seat of the *Nebula*-class starship, “...do you think you can disarm that detonator, Lieutenant?”

“I don’t think so, Sir.” Dryer responded, shaking her head in regret, “This one’s way beyond me.” Letting out a sigh, she remarked in somber tone, “If Lieutenant Atoa were here, there’d be no problem—unexploded ordinance was his baby.”

“Unfortunately Lieutenant Dryer...” Liz curtly replied, “Mr. Atoa isn’t here. Mr. Varok? Do you think you can do it?”

"No, Sir." The elderly Vulcan replied, "The device has a six place key and appears to consist of multiple pathways...the odds of someone with my limited training being able to correctly deduce the correct sequence and route it through the correct pathways would be..."

"No need to give me the odds, Mr. Varok." The blonde captain quickly interjected, "I get the picture." Addressing the two officers in the lab, she said, "I'm open to suggestions."

"Maybe..." Lieutenant Dryer proffered tentatively, "One of the *Bluefin's* crew we have in sickbay might be able to help."

"Can't hurt to ask." Liz replied as she got out of her chair. "Hold tight and monitor the situation for now. If it looks like it's going to blow—don't take any chances. Eject the lab pod and destroy it."

"*V'tosh ka'tur?*" Tol queried as he walked beside the Vulcan woman towards the turbolift that would take them to the bridge.

"However did you guess?" T'Ser quipped with a wicked grin, continuing the mildly flirtatious conversation they had been engaged in since they met.

"Well..." Jadon teased back, "...your smile kind of gave it away."

"I knew that thing would get me in trouble some day." T'Ser laughed and then inquired as the pair stepped into the turbolift, "How did you know about *V'tosh ka'tur?* There aren't that many of us running around."

"My second host, Moran, was a dilithium speculator. An acquaintance of his was one." Laughing, the joined Trill remarked, "Unfortunately, he had a thing for other men's wives, girlfriends, or daughters. Moran kept warning him that it would get him into trouble, but Suvak would just laugh and go on until one day..."

"What happened?" T'Ser prompted, hooked by the roguish Trill's story.

"Well..." Jadon recounted, "Suvak comes into Starbase 31 after striking it big in the Typhon Sector. First, he stakes his claim at the assay office and he's feeling pretty flush so he meets up with Moran and the two go into this bar on

the station owned by a Centauran bartender who was a retired Chief Petty Officer.”

“Let me guess...” T’Ser interjected with a smirk, “He makes a play for the bartender’s wife...”

“No...” Tol replied with a chuckle, “But you’re close. Ok...so...Suvak and Moran wander into the bar and ol’ Suvak sees this well built dark haired woman in a Starfleet uniform talking to shorter woman who was also in Starfleet.”

“Uh Oh!” T’Ser exclaimed, “Why do I get the feeling this isn’t going to end very well?”

“Heh...” Jadon snorted, “You have no idea. Anyway...Suvak goes up to the girls and puts on what he thinks is his best moves. Both women shoot him down, but he doesn’t take no for an answer. Bad move—especially when the dark haired girl’s boyfriend shows up along with Commodore Wesley.”

“Commodore Wesley!” The Vulcan operations officer all but shouted, drawing curious looks from the other *Bluefin* crewmembers in the corridor. “Commodore Robert Wesley...”

“The very same.” Jadon affirmed, nodding his head vigorously. “And guess who was with him...”

“Who?” T’Ser asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“None other than our CMO’s current boyfriend.” Seeing the confused look on the Vulcan’s face, the Trill engineer smiled, “Morgan Bateson.”

Immediately placing the name, T’Ser responded in an amused tone, “You mean Captain Bateson?”

“Yeah.” Tol replied, again nodding his head. “Only back then he was a lieutenant. Well...anyway...they didn’t take too kindly to Suvak putting the make on the two women and asked him—nice and polite, mind you—to get the hell away from them.” Laughing, the Trill continued, “Well, for a Vulcan, Suvak wasn’t exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer—if you know what I mean. He tells the Commodore and Bateson to bugger off and that’s when it happened.”

“When what happened?” T’Ser asked, her anticipation growing.

“Ok...Morgan starts to take a swing at him, but Wesley stops him. He’s going to give Suvak one last warning, you see—but like I said, Suvak’s not the brightest Vulcan in the galaxy, so he’s going to try the old Vulcan neck pinch on the commodore. Only one problem—Wesley was the Academy boxing champ and used to spar with Vulcans. He slips the pinch and tags Suvak in his right temple.”

“Ouch.” The Vulcan woman cringed.

“Right.” Jadon replied, nodding his head. “You Vulcans don’t have too many weaknesses, but the temple’s one of them. Well, Suvak staggers, then the little Starfleet officer—the one sitting with Bateson’s girlfriend, conks him upside the head with her beer mug. While that’s going on, the bartender comes out from around the counter, grabs poor Suvak by the collar of his shirt and the back of his pants, picks him up and tosses him out of the bar!”

As the turbolift door opened on the bridge, Commander McBride turned quickly at the sound of the loud laughter coming from that direction. “Lieutenant T’Ser...” The *Bluefin*’s first officer coughed.

“Sorry, Sir.” The *Bluefin*’s operations officer replied sheepishly as she tried to get her laughter under control, “But Jadon...I mean Lieutenant Commander Tol, was telling me a story about one of his prior hosts.”

“Must have been some story.” McBride grumbled in his Texas accent as he took an instant dislike towards the dark haired Trill whom it seemed was cozying up to his operations officer. Warily extending his hand, Dale introduced himself in a flat tone, “I’m Commander Dale McBride, Executive Officer for the *Bluefin*.”

“Jadon Tol...” Jadon replied, taking the first officer’s hand in his in a firm grip. “As Lieutenant T’Ser said, I’m the Chief Engineer of the Sutherland.” His eyes taking in the damaged consoles and stations on the bridge, the joined Trill remarked, all humor in his voice now gone, “And I see we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Approaching a lithe Caitan female wearing the turquoise and black of the medical branch standing next to the biobeds containing the two seriously injured crewmates of his, Chief Deryx inquired, his voice edged with concern,

"How are they, Nurse?"

Ensign M'rral, the *Sutherland's* head nurse, upon hearing the Chief's question, responded in a sure tone as she regarded the Denobulan standing before her, "They'll be ok now, Chief." The Caitan nurse assured, a smile appearing on her face, "Their injuries are healing just fine. They should be ready to return to the *Bluefin* in a day or so, but they'll still only be able to do light duty for a week or so..."

"Hey, Chief..." Petty Officer Mitchell said in a soft voice as he looked up at his section supervisor standing by the bed, "Hear that?"

"Yeah." Chief Deryx responded, his lips turned up in the wide grin characteristic of his species, "I heard. A week of lollygagging and goofing off for you. How's that any different than normal?" He laughed good naturedly, "I end up having to go back and fix up all your frak-ups anyway."

"I think that's the lot of CPOs everywhere."

On hearing the female voice, Deryx wheeled about to see two women: one, the ship's doctor, a woman with Eurasian features wearing a sky blue medical coat over her standard uniform and the other, a petite blonde haired woman wearing the red and black of the command branch as well as the four pips of a captain on her collar. Maintaining his grin, the chief replied, "Well, Sir...it's a dirty job but..."

"But someone has to do it." Liz completed, flashing a grin of her own. "I'm glad to see that you and your people are doing better, Chief." Her smile disappearing, she added in a consoling tone, "I'm just sorry we couldn't save everyone."

"Not your fault, Captain." Chief Deryx responded, his grin vanishing as well, "We're just glad you're here." Pausing for a moment, the Denobulan CPO ventured, "Sir? When can we get back to the *Bluefin*?"

Turning to Dr. Murakawa, Captain Shelby nodded her head once, indicating to the doctor that she should speak. "You and everyone other than the two that Ensign M'rral's taking care of can go back whenever you're ready."

"But...before you go, Chief..." Liz interjected, "I'd appreciate it if you could help us out with a situation..."

"Of course, Captain." The Chief replied; glad to return the favor done to him and his people by Captain Shelby and her crew, "What's the problem?"

"I understand that you've had quite a bit of experience with unexploded ordinance." Nodding her head in approval at the attentive look on the Denobulan chief's face, Shelby continued, "Unfortunately, I've just recently lost my ordinance expert and I need someone take a look at something we've just picked up."

"I'll be glad to do what I can, Sir." The Chief promptly responded, "What are we dealing with?"

"We picked up a little package that the Maquis left behind—a bomb." Shelby explained. "We've beamed it into one of our ejectable labs and it's behind a level nine quarantine and force field. We also found three detonators on the thing..."

Nodding her head at the chief's low whistle of appreciation, the captain continued, "It gets better. We were able to neutralize two of the detonators—one set to go off on re-materialization and another with a timer, but we couldn't get the third."

"Do you know what type of detonator, Sir?" The chief asked, his mind already taking in the possibilities.

"My science officer and acting tactical officer tell me that it's key coded with rather intricate pathways..."

"How many keys?"

"Six." Shelby immediately responded.

"Hmmm..." The Chief murmured as he pondered the situation. "Difficult...but not impossible. Could I have a look at the package?"

"Of course." Liz smiled, "If you'll accompany me, Dr. Murakawa will see about getting the rest of your people released and back to the *Bluefin*."

"Lead on, Captain. I'm all yours."

Runabout Loire

"I don't trust him." Larkin growled, gesturing with his thumb at Manuele who was at that moment sitting in the pilot's seat of the runabout that he had stolen a few days ago from the *Sutherland*. "He's either Starfleet Intelligence or he's a deserter. In either case, he's a risk."

"You're probably right." Sabrina Diaz, the head of the Maquis cell to which Larkin and Nura, the Bzzit Khaht seated next to him belonged as well as his lover, allowed as she swiveled her seat to face the dark haired former colonist. "Still...if he is telling the truth about those medical supplies..."

"A lot of lives would be saved." Nura interjected. Her lips turning up in a wicked grin, the leathery skinned woman added, "Besides, he's cute. It'd be a shame to space him."

"So, Bri...what are we going to do with him?" Larkin asked, leaning over the conference table to whisper his question into his lover's ear.

"For now, nothing." Diaz decided, "Let's see whether what he's told us pans out and we'll go on from there."

"And if it does?" Nura inquired.

"Then he gets to live and we'll keep him with us." Seeing the dubious looks on her cell mate's faces, she explained with a sly grin, "Remember the old saying: keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

"Then..." Larkin replied with a dangerous frown, "...I plan to keep very close to Mr. Atoa."

Licking her lips lasciviously, Nura chimed in with a seductive voice, "So do I."

Pretending to ignore the fact that he was in all probability the topic of the animated conversation going on in the rear of the runabout, Manuele Atoa kept his attention on the console in front of him, his finger close to the button that would both disable the tiny craft's systems and send out an emergency distress beacon to the *Sutherland*. *Not that it'll do me any good.* Manuele thought morosely. *By the time the Suthy gets back to me, I'll be dead; but at least Diaz and her pals will be caught.* Hearing nothing now but hushed whispers, the New Kauaian risked a quick glance back to see Diaz flashing him a noncommittal grin, Larkin's scowl, and, most distressing to the fire-

dancer, a lascivious grin from Nura. Quickly turning his attention back to his console, Manuele heaved a sigh of relief. *If they were going to space me...he conjectured inwardly...the Bzzit Khaht wouldn't have given me that sort of look and Larkin would be the one with the big grin on his face. So, Manny...the security specialist concluded...you've bought yourself a bit more time. Lucky you.*

System M-294

"Gralt to McBride!"

Hearing the rumbling voice of the *Bluefin's* chief engineer coming through his comm unit, Commander McBride quickly responded, "What is it, Mr. Gralt?"

"What in the infernal hells of the death god is Big Tits and her people doing in my engineering section?" The crusty Tellarite demanded.

His lips turning up in a wry grin, the XO answered back in an amused voice, "You know why they're here, Mr. Gralt. They're from the *Sutherland*, and they're here to give us a hand."

"You can tell them..." the engineer spat out, "...that they can go back to that party boat of theirs. My people and I can do the job ourselves. I don't need a bunch of Regular Fleet Academy graduate know-it-all pansies frakking around with my frakking engines!"

Letting out a sigh of exasperation, Dale, shaking his head as he barely restrained himself from laughing, replied, "I'll be down in a moment, Mr. Gralt." Turning his attention to the Trill engineer currently hunched over a damaged console along with the *Bluefin's* Vulcan operations officer, both of them chuckling softly at some joke or other as they worked, Commander McBride's laughter suddenly vanished as he cleared his throat, "Mr. Tol...."

On hearing his name, Jadon popped his head up, "Yes, Commander?" He replied, quickly clearing the smirk off his face as he saw the annoyed expression on the human's face, "What's up this time?"

"I need you to come with me to engineering." The Texan declared, "It looks like your engineer and mine aren't getting along too well."

"They're not?" Jadon asked, somewhat surprised. Then, taking on a protective posture, he questioned, "What's the problem? Treasure's one of my best and the people with her know their stuff."

"It's not her or your people." Dale responded quickly, this time with a conciliatory smile on his face, "Gralt's just being territorial. Come on..." The executive officer insisted, secretly thanking his testy engineer for giving him an excuse to get the smooth talking Trill away from T'Ser, "...let's get going."

"Meet you in the wardroom later, T'Ser." Jadon grinned as he turned back to the lovely Vulcan, "I'm looking forward to that fresh brewed coffee you've been going on about."

"It's a date." The olive skinned lieutenant replied, returning to her work as the two men exited the bridge.

"That's it." Captain Shelby told Chief Deryx, jerking her head towards a cylindrical object resting in the middle of a chamber, the opening shimmering with the blue and yellow glow indicating the presence of a confinement field. "It's enclosed by a level nine quarantine field and this entire lab can be ejected if necessary."

Glancing first in the direction of the door, and then at a dark skinned officer wearing gold and black and an elderly Vulcan male in blue and black standing behind a console in the middle of the room, the Denobulan chief petty officer noted with a grim expression, "Whatever's in it must be pretty hot, then, Sir."

"While we cannot be certain of that at this point..." Lieutenant Commander Varok interjected in his usual flat inflection, "...that would indeed be a logical supposition, Chief."

Used to the more emotional and approachable T'Ser, it took Chief Deryx a few moments to readjust to the more typically Vulcan emotionless response of the elderly Vulcan. "Uh...right, Sir." Turning to the captain, the Denobulan CPO requested, "Could I ask you to lower the field for a moment, Captain, so that I could get a closer look."

"Or course, Chief." Liz replied with a single nod of the head to Lieutenant Dryer who then pressed a button, temporarily lowering the field. Walking into the chamber as the shimmering vanished; Deryx felt the hairs on the

back of his neck tingle as the field was restored once he'd passed over the threshold. Approaching the cylinder, the ordinance expert first did a slow and careful walkaround, noting the opened access panel that revealed a display screen with six independent numerical displays. Letting out a low whistle of appreciation as he knelt down in front of the display, the chief carefully inspected the panel, taking note first of the touchpad below the display screen and then of the myriad isolinear connections between the display pad and the detonator.

Standing up, the chief made his way back to the entrance of the chamber. Pausing until the obsidian skinned Lieutenant Dryer could lower the forcefield, Chief Deryx walked back towards Captain Shelby. "It's a tough one, Sir." The Denobulan noncommissioned officer admitted, "Whoever designed this thing knew what they were doing." A slight, yet confident smile crossing his face, the chief continued, "But I can disarm it."

"Are you sure?" Liz carefully replied, sounding a cautionary note, "I won't take any chances with the safety of this ship or its people, Chief Deryx. If something goes wrong..." She warned, her eyes drifting to the eject button on Lieutenant Dryer's console.

"I understand, Sir." Deryx responded, "But I know I can do it." His confident smile returning, he added, "Of course, I can do it much better if I had my tools."

Chuckling as she nodded her head approvingly at the Chief's quiet confidence, Liz retorted, "Don't worry, Chief. You'll get those tools. After all..." she joked, "...that's what captains are here for—to make sure CPO's have what they need to do their jobs."

Laughing, Chief Deryx, his respect for Captain Shelby growing a bit more, quipped back, "That's right, Sir. Good to see there's another captain who understands how things in the Fleet really work."

"Ah ain't tryin' to mess with how your flux ratios are calibrated, Sir!" Ensign Angela Burrows exclaimed, valiantly attempting to hold her position against the dominating presence of the testy Tellarite lieutenant commander standing in front of her, staring at her with a menacing glare. "But I've got to take 'em off line if I'm gonna replace those old isolinear relays of yours."

"You're godsdamned right you're not!" Lieutenant Commander Galt bellowed back, secretly pleased at how the young ensign was standing her ground against him, "'Cause you snot-nosed kids aren't getting anywhere near my engines! My people can do the job just fine by themselves."

"If'n you had enough time...yes, sir, you could. But what about if the Maquis come back?" Ensign Barrows persisted, "What about then? Do you wanna take that chance?"

Hearing the southwestern sounding twang coming from the attractive and buxom young ensign standing toe to toe with his chief engineer, Dale McBride flashed his winningest smile to her as he interrupted in his Texas accent, "She's got you there, Mr. Galt. I know the Captain would want us as ready as possible as soon as possible just in case something happens."

"Mr. Galt..." Lieutenant Commander Tol interrupted, coming to the defense of his subordinate, "Treasure's one of my best people. She knows better than to mess around with how another Chief Engineer has their engines tuned. You don't have to worry about her doing anything with your engines that you don't want done. From one chief engineer to another, I'm asking you to trust her."

"That's rich..." Galt grumbled, "...now the prissy Trill asks me to trust Big Boobs with my engines." Turning his attention to Jadon, the Tellarite raised his voice as he jabbed the air with his finger, "Would you trust my people with your engines?" Receiving no response from the other engineer, a smug grin appeared on Galt's face, "I thought so."

"I'd be much obliged, Mr. Galt..." Commander McBride interjected, attempting to resolve the situation diplomatically and without him pulling rank, "...if you'd do it as a favor to me."

His regard for the *Bluefin's* executive officer, combined with his respect for how well the young *Sutherland* engineer had held her cool under his verbal assault, finally making his decision for him, the Tellarite chief engineer nodded his head, "All right. They can help. But I'll be watching everything they do—and if I decide they go—they go!"

"Fair enough." Dale agreed, thankful that the situation, for now at least, had been defused.

"You still want to work here, Treasure?" Jadon turning to his subordinate,

asked in a low voice.”

“Yeah.” The buxom young engineer answered back with a grin. “He ain’t so bad, he’s just makin’ sure we understand that this is his turf, that’s all. Now that that’s settled, I think we’ll get along just fine.”

Smiling as he heard the young ensign’s response, Commander McBride nodded his head subtly towards her, giving her a slight smile as he whispered in a low voice, “Very good, Ensign. Good to see that Captain Shelby has officers with good horse sense.”

“All right.” Tol replied as he turned back towards the exit, “I’ll let you get back to work then.” Giving his Tellarite counterpart a glare, the Trill engineer added, “Just give me a call if you need me.”

“Thanks, Sir.” Treasure responded. Then, flashing the Bluefin’s XO a smile, she added, “An’ thank you too, Sir.”

“Anytime, Ensign.” Dale said, returning the ensign’s grin. “You need any help or anything—you just give me a holler.”

“What?” Captain Akinola all but shouted once he heard about Chief Deryx’s request and the reason behind it. “Who the hell does she think she is? Putting my acting Chief of the Boat at risk without asking my permission!” Pausing for a moment to catch his breath, Joseph carefully put down his pad as he turned to his operations officer, “Lieutenant T’Ser.” The enraged captain ordered, “Tell the *Sutherland* that I’m beaming over there. I’m going to personally deliver Chief Deryx’s tools to him and then I’m going to personally deliver a kick in the ass to Captain Shelby.”

Watching as her captain strode angrily off the bridge, the emotional Vulcan’s heaved a sigh of exasperation, “Irresistible force...” she quipped, “...get ready to meet immovable object.”

Chapter 6

USS Sutherland

"Ok, my dear..." Chief Deryx muttered softly to the cylinder as, kneeling beside it, he opened the black valise containing his tools, "Let's get to work." Taking out the microscanner that his section had once chipped in to buy him on his tenth anniversary in the Service, the explosives expert passed it over first the keyboard display and then between it and the detonator. "There you are." He remarked in an almost affectionate tone as, taking a marker, he carefully cut a square pattern on the cylinder. Next, he took out the laser torch given to him by Chief Akinola on the day of his betrothal to his third wife. Adjusting the torch to its finest setting, the Denobulan CPO cut along the pattern, making sure not to disturb the exposed isolinear relays behind the keyboard as the beam sliced through the device's outer shell.

As his audience watched, their facial expressions a mixture of nervous tension and fascinated curiosity, a slight grin crossed Chief Deryx's face. It wasn't often he got to practice his craft before a Regular Fleet audience, especially in front of someone with the reputation of Captain Shelby, and he delighted in the opportunity to show to them just how capable and competent those in the 'Junior' Service in fact were. Tracing the first lead, the chief took out his micro-solder and made the connection, his smile growing wider as a green light lit below the first display. "One down..." the chief muttered softly, "...five to go."

"Not bad..." Lieutenant Dryer commented in a soft whisper as she saw the first green light appear. "He's got a deft touch...that's for sure."

Looking on with a mixture of pride and concern at his chief, Joseph nodded his head as he murmured, "Careful, Deryx...careful...I don't want to have to write your wives and tell them you died showing off."

Persis IV

Lying face down on a marble slab, the very corpulent Ahmet Ershak groaned in satisfaction as his Bajoran slave masseuse kneaded a kink in the muscles in the back of his neck. "That's good, my lovely..." The green Orion, for now in a

good mood, murmured as the woman went to work on his back, "I think I might just allow you that play-pretty that I've been noticing you've been eyeing." Chuckling as he imagined his slave's reaction, Ershak remarked, "You didn't think I noticed, did you, my pet? You should know by now that I see and hear everything around me." Turning his head towards where one of his two bodyguards, a red Orion, stood, Ershak joked, "Isn't that right, Sylak?"

"Yes, Ahmet." The burly guard affirmed.

"Heh." Ershak laughed, "No sense of humor! But then..." he jibed as he tilted his head towards the Nausicaan standing guard on the other side, "...that's not what I have you and Kadrak here for."

As the young Bajoran woman began working her way down the Ahmet's legs, the door chime rang. Looking at Sylak, Ershak jerked his head towards the door. Nodding his head once in understanding, the red Orion approached the door. Pressing a button next to the door, the bodyguard activated a one way window permitting those within the room to see who was on the other side. Speaking into a comm unit, Sylak nodded once before turning back to his employer. "Dular says that the Ferengi Torq craves an audience with the Ahmet. Shall I send him away, Sire?"

After momentarily considering just having his petitioners tossed out, the Orion crime boss changed his mind, "No. Torq has been useful in the past. I suppose it's worth hearing what the little mud troll has to say before I have you and Kadrak toss him and his friends out. Have Dular escort them to the Lesser Audience Chamber and I shall be there shortly. And..." He added with a touch of menace in his voice, "...tell them that this better be important." Reluctantly rising up to a seated position, Ershak leered as he patted his Bajoran slave on the rump as the woman giggled. "And I shall meet you, Talysa, in my quarters later."

"How long is he going to keep us waiting in this antechamber, Torq?" Lom, a Ferengi with smaller than normal lobes who acted as the alpha Ferengi's valet asked, already cringing from his superior's expected cuff on the cheek.

Not disappointing his inferior, Torq responded with a backhand across the sniveling Ferengi's face as he growled, flashing sharp canines, "He'll keep us waiting here as long as he wants us to. Now shut up!"

Inwardly amused at the antics of the Ferengi trio waiting to see his employer, Dular, a plump Bolian who served as the Ahmet's major domo, easily maintained a placid expression on his face. Seeing the green light over the main entrance flash, Dular announced in a deliberately bombastic tone as the door slid open, "The Ahmet will see you now. Follow me."

Following behind the portly Bolian, the three Ferengi were led up to where the Ahmet sat behind a desk. Bowing their heads respectfully as they knelt, Torq ventured to speak for the trio, "I thank you, Ahmet for allowing us to speak with you."

"Yes, yes...I'm sure..." Ershak responded somewhat impatiently as he cut a piece of Orion kannas melon with a jeweled dagger. "So...why are you here, Torq? If it's because the Nausicaans are muscling in on your trade, I've already told you that it's your problem."

"No, Sire!" The Ferengi sniveled as he scrambled up off his knees. "It's...I...we thought you might like to know that Pierson has hired on a red Orion..."

Chuckling, the Ahmet replied in an indulgent tone, "I already know that, Torq. However..." Ershak remarked, his laughter vanishing to be replaced with a dangerous frown, "...it was poor manners of that Orion not to present himself to me first. Not that I would have hired him..." the crime boss quickly added, "...but it is tradition. Plus...Pierson has been acting more...independent...of late. Perhaps I should pay him a visit." Turning towards his Nausicaan bodyguard, the Ahmet quipped, "What do you think, Kadrak, would you like to say hello to S'nurl?" Laughing at his taciturn bodyguard's growl, Ershak turned his attention back to the three Ferengi cowering before him. Sighing, he dismissed the trio, "Very well, Torq. You've delivered your message and in return I'll forgo the pleasure of watching Sylak and Kadrak toss you out. You may go."

Mumbling their thanks as they slunk away, Torq and his friends retraced their steps out of the audience chamber. Shushing his companions to silence until they had safely left the Orion's manse, Torq turned to the whining Lom, demanding as he drew back his hand, "What is it?"

"I don't understand, Torq. Why did we go to the Ahmet? Why didn't you just let Beln shoot him when he had the chance?"

Slapping the weaker Ferengi's frontal lobes with his hand, Torq replied, "That is why you will be nothing more than my valet, Lom. Rule number 168:

Whisper your way to success. By letting Ahmet Ershak do the work, he takes all the risk while we can only turn a profit.” Seeing the confused look on his subordinate’s face, the older Ferengi sighed, “At the worst, we gain the Ahmet’s gratitude—something we might be able to cash in on later. At best, we stand to pick up pieces from Pierson’s profits once the Ahmet has had his full. Either way...we profit.”

USS Sutherland

As beads of perspiration formed on his forehead, what had started out as a fairly easy task for the Denobulan explosives expert had become a much more intricate—and dangerous—puzzle as he tried to isolate the right isolinear pathway for the fifth key code. Pausing for a moment, Chief Deryx took a deep breath. Looking up, he saw the worried looks of Captains Akinola and Shelby and Lieutenant Dryer. While Varok appeared to maintain his typical Vulcan stoicism, the sage chief thought he saw the faintest glimmer of concern in the eyes of the elderly science officer. His lips turning up into a wide grin, the chief called out reassuringly, “It’s ok! I’m just taking a breather.”

“Take your time, Chief!” Akinola shouted back, putting on a bold front as well. Turning towards Captain Shelby, the white haired Nigerian whispered angrily, “He shouldn’t be doing this in the first place.”

Whispering back, Shelby retorted, her voice dripping ice, “If you have a problem, Captain, we’ll talk about it later.”

Not wanting to air dirty laundry in front of Shelby’s crew, Joseph, memories of his estranged daughter, approximately the same age of the petite blonde standing beside him flooding his mind, nodded his head once as he murmured in a barely audible voice, so low that only his counterpart could hear, “You’re damned right we will.”

The look in Akinola’s eyes reminding Liz of that same disapproving look her father had given her on all too many occasions, Shelby, determined on having the last word, responded challengingly, “Fine. I’m looking forward to it.”

Unaware of the growing tensions between the two captains, Chief Deryx returned to his work. “Ah...there you are!” The chief cooed lovingly as he spotted the circuit pathway he was looking for. “Whoever made you hid you well.” He remarked as he saw how the proper circuits wended and weaved

their way through several misleading and false trails—any one of which had the chief traced activated that connection—would have resulted in an immediate detonation. “But I’ve got you now.” He exclaimed as he activated the correct pathway. Seeing the fifth green light flash on, Deryx declared triumphantly to his audience, “One more!”

“Last one...” Nyota muttered, watching, along with the others, in rapt fascination as the Denobulan explosives expert began the laborious project of tracing out the last pathway. “Man gets this one...I’m buying him whatever he wants to drink at ‘Ricks’.”

“Better have a lot of credits, then...” Captain Akinola joked in a gruff tone as he glanced in the direction of the obsidian skinned lieutenant standing next to him, her Swahili accent immediately catching the white haired Nigerian’s attention, “...’cause Chief Deryx can put away the beer.”

“We get through this ok, Sir...” Nyota replied, flashing a toothy grin, “...he’ll have earned it.”

“Amen to that.” Joseph whispered as he said a silent prayer for his old friend.

“Damn!” Chief Deryx swore, his voice a harsh whisper as he studied the flashing circuitry before him. “They just had to save the best for last.” Taking out his micro-scanner, the chief passed it over first one linked isolinear and then the other, taking note of the different colors given off by the data streams as they raced from one relay to another. Finally, through a laborious process of elimination, he had managed to isolate three possible pathways. “Which one?” The Chief asked himself as he stared at the pale blue, red, and yellow beams. “Which one’s going to deactivate you and which one’s going to set you off?” As he weighed his options, Deryx’s comm badge chirped, soon followed by Captain Shelby’s voice.

“Everything Ok, Chief?”

Tapping his badge in response, the Denobulan responded. “I’m not sure, Sir.” The chief answered honestly, “I’ve cleared out all the obvious traps, and even a bunch that were really well hidden, but I couldn’t get rid of them all. There are three possibilities left. One’ll disable the device. But the other two...”

Seeing where the chief was headed with his thoughts, Liz interjected sympathetically, “Understood, Chief” Pausing for a moment, the blonde captain added encouragingly, “Is there anything we can do from our end to

possibly cut the odds down?"

As he ran one after another scheme in his mind, rejecting each one in turn, the chief had almost given up hope until, struck by sudden inspiration, his lips turned up into a wide grin, "Yeah, Captain, there is! I need you to flood the chamber with polaron radiation..."

"Polaron radiation? Are you crazy, Chief?" Captain Akinola exploded, "You know that exposure to polaron radiation is lethal to humanoids!"

"Only if it is in high concentrations or for an extended period of time." Lieutenant Commander Varok interjected in his typically Vulcan level tone. Addressing Chief Deryx, the Sutherland's science officer surmised, "There are only two logical reasons for using polaron radiation. Either you suspect the presence of a Changeling, a highly unlikely possibility, or, you suspect that there is a cloaked pathway."

"Exactly!" Deryx grinned. "Whoever built this thing knows his or her craft. Each consecutive key has been harder and harder with the fifth one being especially tough. Now...three to one odds might seem like a tough choice, but...there's still a thirty three percent chance I'd get the right one—and that's assuming I just simply guess—which I wouldn't," he added smugly. "I'll bet a box of Ferengi-seed Churchills that the bomb maker wanted to be sure his baby went off...so..."

"So he cloaks the real pathway." Liz interrupted, completing the chief's statement. "Damn. The only way Diaz could have gotten something this sophisticated is either through an intelligence agency like the Tal'Shiar or..."

"The Orion Syndicate." Akinola declared. "They've got the money to buy one."

"Either suggestion is a logical possibility." Varok concurred, adding, "However, we cannot be sure without further investigation."

"Which'll have to wait until later." Captain Shelby concluded. Her decision made, she then turned towards her tactical officer standing next to her. "Nyota...flood the chamber with polaron radiation, .001 parts per million." Pausing for a moment, she then contacted her CMO, "Dr. Murakawa. I need you down here in Lab Three pronto and bring something for polaron radiation exposure." Nodding her head in satisfaction at the doctor's rapid response, Liz turned towards her acting tactical officer, nodding her head once.

"Aye, Captain.' Lieutenant Dryer moved to comply as the Nigerian captain standing on the opposite side of her gritted his teeth. ".001 parts per million."

"Not good enough." Chief Deryx called back as he shook his head, "You're going to have to boost it up."

Acknowledging Captain Shelby's silent nod of her head, Lieutenant Dryer announced, ".002 parts per million."

"How high can he go before the radiation hits lethal levels and how long can he stay in there until he's exposed to too much?" A concerned Joseph inquired.

"It depends on the concentration." A strange female voice responded. Turning towards the source of the voice, Captain Akinola saw a woman with Eurasian features and wearing a blue with black trim service uniform enter the lab, carrying a satchel under her arm. "I'm Doctor Denise Murakawa," she said by way of introduction. Glancing down at Lieutenant Dryer's console, she took note of the readings, "At current levels, Chief Deryx has five minutes before he receives a lethal dosage. For every .001 part per million increase, the maximum safe duration would decrease by half."

Exhaling as the suspect pathway still refused to reveal its presence, Deryx once again called for an increase. ".003 parts per million." Nyota called back, "You've got two and half minutes, Chief."

Seeing what appeared to be thin filaments of light flickering before his eyes, Chief Deryx called out, "Take it up another notch, we're almost there!"

"You're cutting it too close, Chief." Captain Akinola replied, "I can't let you do it."

"It's not your call to make, Captain!" Shelby interjected in a harsh tone. Cutting off all further debate, Liz turned her attention back to the Denobulan, asking, "Are you sure, Chief?"

"We're wasting time, Captain!" Deryx quickly responded.

"Right." Liz answered back, turning to Nyota as she ignored Captain Akinola's vigorous shaking of his head, "Do it, Lieutenant."

“.004 parts per million, Captain”

“One minute fifteen seconds before lethal dosage levels reached.” Varok announced as Dr. Murakawa, opening her satchel, immediately took out a hypospray and loaded it with a vial containing an amber liquid.

“Hyronolin.” Dr. Murakawa explained as she made ready to move into action.

Sweating as he squinted his eyes, Chief Deryx saw the pale luminescent traces once again appear, only this time to remain. Taking out his micro-laser, the Denobulan whispered smugly, “Got you now.”

“One minute.”

Ignoring the Vulcan science officer’s monotone announcement, Deryx applied his laser at the first isolinear juncture, gently isolating it from the rest of the network. Moving quickly, the chief moved to the next relay as Mr. Varok’s voice once again filled the chamber.

“Forty seconds.”

“Almost there.” The chief muttered as he severed the second link in the chain. Moving to the final relay, Deryx wielded his micro-laser with a jewelers—or a surgeon’s—skill as he cut the last connection. “Done!” He shouted as he rose to his feet only to collapse to the deck as soon as he did so.

“Get rid of that radiation!” Liz ordered, Lieutenant Dryer already anticipating her captain’s orders.

“Radiation level falling.” Varok declared. “.003...002...001...Zero.”

“Chief!” Joseph cried out as he lunged towards the chamber only to be restrained by Dr. Murakawa’s hand on his arm.

“He’ll be alright, Sir.” The Japanese-Centauran doctor both pleaded and consoled, “Please...let me do my job.”

Seeing the imploring look in the young woman’s eyes, the protective captain relented. Turning to Captain Shelby, he demanded, “Get that field down—Now!”

Seeing Varok’s single nod of his head, Captain Shelby addressed her tactical

officer, "Do it."

The moment she saw the energy field disappear, Dr. Murakawa rushed into the chamber where the Denobulan chief lay. Pressing the hypospray against his neck, the doctor injected the hyronolin compound into his system as she, with the assistance of Captain Akinola, pulled Deryx out of the chamber. Running her medical tricorder over his body, Denise nodded her head in satisfaction. "He'll be ok," she explained, "I'm going to beam him over to sickbay with me to run some tests to be sure, but, barring something unusual, he should be fit for light duty in a few hours."

"Thank you, Doctor." Joseph replied in a soft voice, "I think I can see now what Morgan sees in you."

Blushing, Denise stammered shyly, "Th...thank you, Sir." Recovering her equilibrium as she received her captain's confirmation, Dr. Murakawa activated her comm badge. "Two to transport to sickbay."

Watching as her doctor and Chief Deryx disappeared in a blue glow, Captain Shelby turned towards her science officer, "Get your people on this, Mr. Varok. I want to know what we're dealing with and I want to know as soon as possible." Taking the Vulcan's single nod of his head as acknowledgment of her instructions, Liz then addressed her fellow captain, "Captain Akinola? If you'll follow me, we'll have our discussion in my ready room."

"By all means, Captain." Joseph bit back, "Lead the way."

Interlude: Deep Space Nine

"The *Sutherland* has taken the border cutter *Bluefin* in tow and should arrive sometime within the next forty-eight hours." Captain Benjamin Sisko announced to his senior staff seated around the conference table for the morning briefing. "You'll need to coordinate with the *Bluefin's* chief engineer when they get in Chief so that they can get up and running as soon as possible."

"We'll be ready, Captain." The burly Irish station chief of operations declared confidently.

"You'll also need to get with both ships' security chiefs as well, Constable

Odo.” Sisko stated, giving his changeling chief of security a knowing glance, “It appears that Diaz’s Maquis cell has been especially active recently.” Taking the shapeshifter’s single nod of his head as acknowledgment, Benjamin continued his briefing. “Also, Commander...Doctor...” he instructed, now addressing the raven haired Trill seated next to Lieutenant Commander Worf and Dr. Bashir seated across from them, “...I want the two of you to get with Captain Shelby and her science officer. From her latest subspace transmission, it appears that they’ve picked up what might be a biological weapon the Maquis left behind.”

“Understood, Captain.” Dax immediately responded, the gravity of her voice and facial expression immediately indicating that the normally lighthearted Trill fully appreciated the seriousness of the situation. “I’ll get with Mr. Varok as soon as possible after the *Sutherland* gets in.”

“And I’ll do the same with Doctor Murakawa...” Julian chimed in.

“Good.” Benjamin replied, nodding his head in satisfaction. “Now...if there’s nothing else...” he stated, standing up, “...then...dismissed.” Clearing his throat as the officers gathered around the table stood up, Benjamin requested, “Mr. Worf...Chief...could you stay for a moment? I need to ask a favor of the two of you.”

“Of course, Captain.” Both men answered back in unison as they resumed their seats.

“See you later, Ben...” Jadzia smiled over her shoulder as she made her way towards the door, “I better warn Quark to stock up the bar and spruce up the holosuites if the *Sutherland’s* coming in.

“And I better check on the condition of my holding cells.” Odo added grumpily as he followed the Trill science officer out the door.

Walking over to the replicator, Benjamin, ordering a cup of raktajino, picked it up. Blowing the smoke off the steaming cup, Sisko looked down at the two men seated before him. “Gentlemen...Lieutenant Sito is coming in on tomorrow’s mid-morning shuttle from Bajor. She’ll be staying here until she reports aboard the *Sutherland*.” Seeing the looks of concern and anticipation on the faces of his two officers, the Emissary’s lips turned up in a warm smile, “I was thinking that it would be good for her to see a pair of familiar faces when she arrives.”

"I'll be glad to be there, Sir." Miles immediately piped up. "Keiko's on the station for the next few weeks—I'm sure she'll be happy to see her and make her feel at home."

"It will be good..." the taciturn Klingon warrior replied somewhat more guardedly, "...to see Lieutenant Sito again."

"Excellent!" Benjamin exclaimed, his smile growing wider, his body language indicating to the two officers that they were now dismissed, "I appreciate your help. Good day, Gentlemen." As the Irish engineer and Klingon strategic operations officer filed out of his office, Benjamin looked out the giant picture window into the starry night. I hope they know what they're doing letting her back now. He thought pensively as he stroked his goatee. If they're not—then this is a disaster in the making.

Persis IV

"How's my favorite terrorist?" Pierson quipped with a wink and a lopsided grin as he recognized the image of his ex-wife on the monitor atop his desk.

"Ducking and covering." Miriam riposted with a smile of her own. Her grin vanishing, she continued, "I got the info you wanted."

"Go ahead." Pierson urged, sitting up straighter in his seat.

"Your man Tabar Estak is really Senior Chief Solly Brin, lately of the *USS Bluefin*..."

"A Border Dog, then." Pierson exclaimed as he fingered the scar on his cheek, "I knew it!" Leaning forward in his chair, the ex-Starfleeter inquired, "Got anything else on him..."

"Yeah..." Miriam answered back, "You got a few moments..."

"Got nothing but time, babe..." Pierson responded as he leaned back in his seat, "Tell me all about it."

Emerging from his office after finishing a conversation with his ex-wife that

ended up part information trading, part witty byplay, and a part flirtation, Pierson walked back towards the bar behind which stood Dak, watching carefully as Solly arrived with the girls and Alain. Taking note of green Orion woman's disheveled appearance, the burly barkeep remarked to his boss, "Looks like Alena's had a time of it."

"Yeah, and she's tripping too." Pierson noted sourly. Drawing closer to the bartender, the roguish ex-Starfleet officer whispered, "That's not important now though. Look...we were right about our new friend—he's Starfleet..."

"I knew it!" Dak spat out. "So...who is he and what do we do about him?"

However, before Pierson could continue the conversation, his Gorn bouncer S'nurl appeared at the door, touching his nose with his finger. Recognizing the prearranged signal, Lynn shook his head, "Later Dak. We've got company." Watching as Ahmet Ershak strode confidently into the bar, his two bodyguards hovering protectively on either side of him, Lynn plastered an insincere smile on his face as the green Orion approached him. "Ahmet Ershak." The ex-Starfleet officer greeted in a polite voice, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Smiling an equally phony grin, Ershak answered back with a chuckle, "I just came by to see my old friend, Lynn!" The lecherous Orion leered as his eyes fell upon the green Orion woman who had just arrived with her escort, "Ah...Alena looks like she's a bit...tired..."

"She's had a busy day..." Pierson retorted, earning an appreciative chuckle from the Ahmet. "But I'm sure if you give her the chance to freshen up and rest a bit..."

"Heh...it's tempting, my friend...but I'm afraid I must decline." His laughter disappearing quickly, Ershak commented in a matter of fact manner, his lips turned down in a disapproving frown as his eyes focused in on Solly, "I see that my sources were right that you've acquired the services of a new employee...an Orion."

Seeing where the conversation was headed, Lynn answered flatly, "Yes...a bushak. His name is Tabar Estak. I didn't think you would mind if I added on a bit of additional muscle—as you know, business has picked up in recent months thanks to the war."

The insincere grin once again on his face, Ershak replied in a voice that was

both patronizing and condescending, "Lynn...Lynn...I'm not angry at you. After all, you're just *zahkin*...non-Orion...how could I expect you to have any real conception of respect and tradition. "But your man..." he continued, his smile vanishing as his countenance took on a subtly dangerous look, "...he should have known better. He should have come by to see me first...to pay his respects. By failing to do so, he has rendered to me an insult."

As the Syndicate boss made his pronouncement, the tension in the immediate area grew even more intense as S'nurl and Ershak's Nausicaan bodyguard glared at each other, each one issuing to the other a non-verbal challenge. Dak, under the pretense of putting away his glasses, quietly moved his hands closer to the disruptor carbine he kept under the bar. Solly, for his part, had been quietly observing the situation while appearing to be escorting the women under his charge towards a corner table. Immediately sizing up the opposition, the burly red Orion had already planned his attack as he casually slipped into a positioned himself behind the table so that, if worst came to worst, he could quickly flip it over for use as temporary cover. As he discreetly waved Alena and Bala back, he clearly heard Ershak's next words, "Where is your new man? I would like to meet him and ask him why he was so disrespectful."

"Tabar!" Pierson called out, immediately spotting Solly in his defensive position. "Come here. There's someone who wants to meet you." Pierson commanded, keeping his new employee in his steady gaze, nodding his head once as S'nurl flashed the Nausicaan an especially toothy predatory grin while Dak, his hands still under the table, seemed to the experienced *Bluefin* chief to be focusing his attention on Ershak's other bodyguard.

Taking the non-verbal cues of Pierson and his henchmen as signs of support, Solly strode confidently forward, pausing and, reluctantly, lowering his head respectfully as he came into Ershak's presence. Remaining silent, as per custom, the red Orion waited patiently until Ershak chose to speak. "Tabar Estak." The Ahmet began, shaking his head disapprovingly, "You come to my home...and yet you do not render the respect that is my due. Can you give me any reason as to why I should forgive you this insult to my name and honor?"

Even though the words coming to his lips tasted of the sharpest bile, Solly forced them out while at the same time barely managing to maintain his deferential pose, "Please...Ahmet...I beg your forgiveness. I had almost literally just arrived on Persis IV when I was first offered employment by Mr. Pierson. It was not my intention to dishonor or insult your Lordship. Kneeling down, Solly, bent his head down in a submissive gesture while at the same

time keeping his right hand close to the concealed phaser tucked under his shirt. "Please..." the fierce red Orion pleaded, "...permit me to make whatever amends you desire me to make..."

Nodding his head in satisfaction at Brin's act of contrition, Ershak announced in a magnanimous voice, "Your apology, Tabar Estak, has been accepted. I will decide later how you may make amends for your transgression. For now, though, I will accept as compensation your salary from the moment you entered Pierson's employment to the present."

Offering the latinum in his purse, Solly completed the formula of contrition, "Please accept this, Ahmet, as partial atonement for my disobedience."

Taking the gold pressed latinum, Ershak handed it to his red Orion bodyguard. Addressing both Solly and Pierson, the Syndicate boss declared in a solemn voice, "Honor for now has been restored. Let there be peace and commerce between us." Turning his attention to Solly, Ershak commanded disdainfully, "You may leave our presence now." Watching as Brin walked back towards the two nervously watching prostitutes, Ershak's lips turned up into a smile as he patted Pierson on the shoulder, signaling his bodyguards that the situation, for now at least, had been resolved. "Well, Lynn...now that that has been taken care of, I want you to send me your most recent account entries. Seeing that business has indeed improved for you, I think it might be necessary to revise your monthly tribute." Laughing heartily as he gestured for his bodyguards to accompany him, the Ahmet turned towards the door. "Take care of yourself, Lynn...and next time you speak to her..." the green Orion added with just the faintest hint of menace in his voice, "...tell your wife I said hello."

The two humans watching as S'nurl escorted the Ahmet and his escorts to the door, Dak whispered, "Told you the new guy was nothing but trouble."

His face growing crimson in anger at the veiled threat to his wife, Pierson grunted, "Perhaps, but I'm going to make sure that he's even more trouble for someone else. Tell 'Estak' when he gets done getting the girls settled in that I want to see him in my office. I'm going to make him an offer that he's not going to want to refuse."

"Yeah? What are you going to offer him, Boss?" Dak asked curiously.

"The best kind of offer." Pierson answered grimly as he fingered his scar, "Revenge."

USS Sutherland

As the two captains walked down the corridors of the *Sutherland*, Captain Akinola once again shook his head at the sight of the sheer number of crew going to and fro about their tasks on the *Nebula*-class starship.

Inwardly amused at the border cutter skipper's reaction to the size of her ship, Liz smirked, "It is big, isn't it?"

Shaking his head, Joseph replied, "Too big. On my ship, I know the name of every officer and crewman." Pausing for a moment, the older man gave the petite blonde standing next to him a challenging look, "Can you say the same thing?"

Matching the dark skinned Nigerian glare for glare, Liz responded, "Of course not. That's not my job..."

"Not your job?" Akinola interjected in an incredulous voice, but before he could continue the rant that was on his lips, the younger captain steamrolled over him.

"That's right. That's the job of their section heads who report to their department heads who report to the First Officer. My job is to command this ship to the best of my ability—not to develop a close personal relationship with all 750 plus officers and ratings on it." Stopping for a moment to take a breath, Shelby concluded, "That's a luxury that unfortunately I cannot afford." Deciding to throw the visiting captain a bone, Liz hastily added, "If it makes you feel any better, I did know everyone on the *Reed*. But then..." she emphasized, "...that ship only had a crew of a hundred and ninety unlike..." However, before she could finish her sentence, the blonde captain, spotting the inattentive ensign on a collision course towards her, quickly stepped to the side, avoiding the brunt of the collision as the stack of padds he was carrying in his hands tumbled down to the deck.

"I'm sorry, Sir..." The ensign stammered as he knelt down to pick up the stack of padds, "...I was trying to get these to Mr. Rysyl before 1330 hours and..."

"That's all right, Ensign..." Captain Shelby grinned as she knelt down to help the athletic and toned chocolate skinned young human.

"Goli, Sir." The ensign smiled back shyly, "Chunderban Goli."

"Well, Ensign Goli..." Liz admonished good humouredly as she helped the young officer to his feet, "...you better hurry if you're going to make that 1330 appointment."

"Aye, Sir." The ensign responded as he dashed down the corridor.

"And that Captain..." Liz remarked with a smug grin, "...is how it is done."

Quickly banishing the lascivious thoughts that crossed her mind as she gazed on the retreating form of Ensign Goli, Liz immediately spotted the disapproving glower on her fellow captain's face in her peripheral vision. "Contrary to what you might have heard, Captain Akinola, I don't screw the crew." The petite captain muttered sotto voce as the ensign disappeared into the turbolift.

"I didn't say anything, Captain." Akinola responded in a low gruff voice that betrayed nothing of his true feelings.

"Good." Liz tersely replied as the pair entered the turbolift. "Bridge."

As the turbolift door opened, the two captains stepped on to the bridge of the *Nebula*-class starship. His alert eyes quickly taking in the bustle of disciplined activity, Captain Akinola raised an eyebrow. Noticing the gesture, Liz chuckled inwardly as she addressed her first officer, "Commander Hobson?"

"Sir?"

"I'll be in my ready room with Captain Akinola. Once the *Bluefin* is ready, take her under tow and set course for Deep Space Nine."

"Aye, Captain." The punctilious first officer acknowledged as his captain escorted her guest to her office.

Waiting until the two captains were safely out of the way, Ensign Django leaned over and whispered in the ear of her lover, Sam Lavelle, "So...that's the *sangue bom* in charge of that old rustbucket."

"I wouldn't be so quick about calling it a 'rustbucket'." Sam whispered back, "From what I've been told, they've juiced the impulse engines on those things so much that you've got to be pretty damned good to pilot one of 'em."

"Looking to transfer over to the Border Babies?" Maria teased.

"No way!" The dark haired Canadian helmsman retorted, "I'll stick to the **real** fleet, thank you very much!"

Before Ensign Django could respond, the sound of a throat clearing followed by Commander Hobson's patrician voice immediately got the attention of the two young officers, "You may engage the tractor beam now, Mist'ers Lavelle and Django and make for Deep Space Nine at warp three...that is if the two of you can tear yourselves away from your conversation long enough."

"Aye, Sir." Both officers at once acknowledged, Lavelle's face flushing red with embarrassment as he turned his attention to his helm.

Entering his fellow captain's ready room, Captain Akinola shook his head at both its size and luxurious furnishing. Sniffing at the sight of the wood paneled bulkhead and luxuriously padded black leather couch with plush pillows at either end, the paintings hanging above the couch immediately caught the old skipper's eye, especially the painting prominently displayed in the center. As he examined the craggy face, alert eyes, and determined expression of Robert Wesley, captured as he was when he sat in the center chair of the *Lexington*, the Nigerian captain felt an instant kinship to the legendary commodore. *Wonder what he would think of how his granddaughter turned out?* The parent in Joseph asked himself. *Joseph...you're no prude and you know better than to rush to judgment. So far, all she's done is step on your toes a bit.* The Starfleet officer and former chief petty officer inside the older captain chided.

Watching with curiosity as her guest studied the painting of her grandfather, Liz remarked in a wistful voice, "My grandfather. He died before I was born. I wish I had the opportunity to get to know him."

The dull ache in his heart growing sharper as he was reminded of his own grandson, whom he had yet to lay eyes on, Akinola turned towards Shelby, seeing her with new eyes. No longer seeing the wanton woman that he had pictured her in his mind as being, he saw instead a little girl who missed her

grandfather as much as he was even now missing his grandson. His lips turning up into a sad smile, he replied, "I understand. I'm a grandfather myself."

"You must be proud." Liz responded, motioning for Joseph to take a seat on the couch. Her eyes falling on the replicator niche on the other wall, she inquired, "Would you like something to drink? I'm for coffee myself."

"No, thank you." the *Bluefin* skipper replied as he sat down on the plush couch.

Returning a few moments later with a cup of steaming hot coffee, the blonde captain grinned, "That's right, I've heard you don't like replicated foods." Chuckling at the look of distaste on her fellow captain's part, Shelby began to relax as she leaned against her desk, "I understand how you feel. Personally, I prefer the real thing myself, but..." she shrugged. Her laughter dying down, the impish look on the young captain's face became replaced a much more serious, almost apologetic expression. "Look, Captain...I think I know why you're here...Chief Deryx—right?" Taking the Nigerian cutter skipper's single nod of the head as assent, Liz continued, "That's what I figured. Understand, Captain Akinola, I'm not sorry for using him. I needed an unexploded devices expert and your Chief Deryx was already on the *Sutherland* and willing to do the job. As senior captain here..."

"Senior captain?" Joseph responded, his bad temper restored by the younger captain's words. "Captain Shelby...I was probably wearing four pips while you were wearing two—maybe even one..."

"All right...that was probably a bad choice of words on my part." Liz interjected quickly, "But, the simple truth of the matter is that my ship is the tactically superior vessel..." she trailed off, knowing full well that the captain now glowering at her was fully aware of the appropriate regulation and that it wouldn't help matters by spelling it out to him, humiliating him even more. Sighing, Shelby attempted to mollify the older man seated before her, "For what it's worth, Captain Akinola, I do apologize for not letting you know about Chief Deryx when I had the chance to do so, that was...insensitive...of me." Her eyes now taking on a steely glint, the *Sutherland* captain continued to speak in a carefully modulated tone, "But as for using Chief Deryx without first running it through you? No, I do not apologize for that—and we are both aware as to my authority to do so—and I will do it again if I have to." The disapproving gaze on Akinola's face once again reminding her of her father, Liz struggled to restrain her temper as she asked, "Do we understand each other?"

Standing up, Joseph, biting back the angry retort trying to force itself to his lips, regarded the woman standing before, now reminding more of his daughter than the little girl he saw earlier. Matching her gaze for gaze, Akinola responded quietly, "Yes, Captain Shelby, we do. Now...as our business seems to be completed, I'll return to my ship." Seeing as Shelby made ready to accompany him, the Nigerian captain raised his hand as he turned towards the door, "No...that won't be necessary. I can see my own way out."

Watching as the old man strode proudly out of her office; Liz shook her head as she quietly cursed herself. *That could have gone much better.*

Persis IV

Smiling from behind his desk as his newest employee entered his office, Lynn Pierson, his feet propped seemingly casually on his desk, his right hand hanging loosely close to the old phaser one that he kept attached concealed to the chair leg, called out, "Come In Tabar, come in. Pull up a seat..." he proffered gesturing at the chair before the desk. We have a lot to talk about, Tabar." His smile vanishing, Pierson added, "Or should I say, Senior Chief Solly Brin of the *USS Bluefin*?"

Recognizing that maintaining any pretense to his cover would be useless, Solly, his senses keyed as he measured distances within the room and carefully noted the deceptively hidden alertness of the man seated before him, moved slowly towards the chair. "How long have you known?"

"Suspected?" Lynn smirked, "Hmmm...pretty much from the moment we met. Known for a fact? Just recently—in fact my suspicions were confirmed only just before Fatso Ershak showed up to rub your nose in it for stiffing him." His lips turning up into a sly grin, the human added, "And I have a feeling that you did it intentionally." Seeing the answering grin on Solly's face, Pierson laughed, "I knew you were an all right guy! In any event..." he consoled, "Don't feel bad I tumbled on to you. If it were anyone but me..." the rogue shrugged, "...you might have pulled it off a bit longer." Seeing that the red Orion was still standing, Pierson chuckled, "Oh, do sit down, Solly! I'm not going to do anything to you and I'm pretty sure you're not going to try anything—at least not without hearing me out first. So...why don't you just relax? We've got a lot to talk about."

"All right..." Chief Brin said as he cautiously took his seat, "Let's talk."

"That's better!" Pierson grinned. His smile then vanished to be replaced by a grim expression, "Look. Ershak might be a jackass, but he's no fool. It won't take him long to find out about who you are. And once he does find out, he's going to move—against both of us."

"So..." Solly inquired guardedly, "...what do you suggest we do about it?"

"Look..." Pierson declared, "...while I know you don't hold any great love for the *ahmets* and *ahmet'surs*, I also know that you're not exactly going to go out of your way to piss on them either—with the possible exception of the Elix clan that is." Seeing the slight stiffening of the red Orion's spine at the mention of the Elix name, Lynn nodded his head sagely. "So...that tells me that Ershak isn't the reason why you're here, and I'm not the reason why you're here..."

"Why would you say that?" Solly riposted with an evil grin.

"Because I'm not that damned important to Starfleet Intelligence." Pierson laughed. His laughter fading away, the defrocked Starfleet officer added, "But I know who is."

"And who would that be?"

"The being behind the smuggling of Corillan acid in this sector." Pierson flatly responded.

"You mean Gul Rejak." Solly interjected with a sly grin.

Shaking his head, Pierson's laughter returned as he pulled a bottle containing an amber liquid out of his desk drawer and two glasses, "I really do like you, Chief!" He exclaimed as he poured the liquid into the glasses, pushing one towards the chief while he picked the other one up. "Antarean brandy." Lynn declared as he took the first sip while Solly watched, "Don't worry, it's safe."

Taking a tentative sip from his glass, Solly nodded his head appreciatively, "Not bad." Getting back to the point of their talk, the red Orion inquired, "But you still haven't told me how you can help me...or why you're even bothering."

His laughter dying down, Pierson took another drink before explaining, "I've

got plenty of reasons—and while most of them don't concern you, I think one of them might. I don't like what that stuff's done to Alena." Shaking his head, the human reminisced, "You should have seen her before she got hooked on that junk. She was so full of life...she loved to dance." Sighing, a sad expression overtook the bar owner as he almost pleaded, "Look...you help me...I help you. You make sure Alena, Bala, and the others get away to safety and that Alena gets help kicking the acid, and I'll help you take down Rejak's operation."

Seeing the look of sincerity on the man's face, Solly replied, "All right, you have a deal. So...how are you going to deliver on your end?"

"That's the fun part." Pierson chuckled, his laughter carrying a sharp edge to it, "Ershak's going to open the door for us."

"I can't imagine he'd do that out of the goodness of his heart." Solly wryly opined.

"Oh..." The human answered back, all traces of laughter gone, "He won't do it out of the goodness of his heart. But..." he added, an especially evil grin appearing on his face, "...he will do it to keep his heart—in his body and in one piece that is."

"All right, Pierson..." Solly replied, leaning forward in his chair, "Tell me how we're going to do this."

Chapter 7

"As we will be docking at Deep Space Nine in fifteen minutes, we request that you please return to your seats. As a special treat, the captain will maneuver the shuttle so that you may all have a view of the Celestial Temple, the Home of the Prophets."

Her head jerking up as she heard the automatic voice of the shuttle's computer, Lieutenant, junior grade, Sito Jaxa looked out the small observation window next to her seat just in time to see the majestic sight of the wormhole opening up right on cue. Watching in rapt fascination as an Oberth class starship exited the wormhole; Lieutenant Sito ignored the shuttle's computer voice as it once again spoke.

"And just a few degrees from the Celestial Temple, you'll see Deep Space Nine, the former Terek Nor. Once a symbol of oppression for the Bajoran people, Deep Space Nine now serves as the Guardian of the Temple and a symbol of pride and hope."

Her blood freezing as her eyes took in the Cardassian built station, Jaxa took a deep breath as she suppressed the voices rising in her head.

"I'm scared." The Little Girl cried as the structure grew larger in the window.

"Shut up!" The Huntress spat out, *"Just shut up! The first Cardassian pig who tries to touch me..."*

"Awww...you like it and you know it." The Junkie chimed in, purring, *"The beatings...the punishment...the acid..."*

"All of you..." Sito commanded, *"Be quiet! Don't forget—I'm in charge here!"*

"For now, Dear..." The Junkie replied before going silent, *"For now..."*

"There she is!" Chief O'Brien exclaimed, jerking his head towards Lieutenant Sito who, at the moment, was just emerging, along with a score of other passengers, from the shuttle airlock. As he and Lieutenant Commander Worf approached the Bajoran officer, the Irish veteran of the Setlac III Massacre

gave her an appraising look. Immediately spotting the physical changes the young officer had made since he had last seen her before his transfer from the *Enterprise* to DS9, as well as the haunted look in her eyes, the chief saw at once that he had made the right decision in talking Keiko out of joining them in meeting Sito.

"Lieutenant Sito." Worf, as senior officer, formally greeted the young Bajoran, "Welcome to Deep Space Nine."

Breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of her two escorts, both combat veterans in their own right who had experienced their own horrors, Lieutenant Sito replied with a shaky grin, "Thank you, Sir."

"It's good to see you again, Sir." Chief O'Brien added, "If you'll come with us, we'll take you to your quarters."

"Thank you." Jaxa replied as she fell in with the two men, again breathing a sigh of relief as the two men subtly made sure to stay far enough away from her so that she did not feel crowded as they walked down the corridor. Turning her head towards her former mentor, Sito addressed the Klingon warrior, "Sir...I just wanted to let you know that I've been keeping up on my *Mok'bara*."

"Very good, Lieutenant." Worf answered back in his usual deep voice, giving no betrayal as to his true emotions, "Perhaps we can spar later on."

The Huntress within her flashing a sly grin as she sized up her prey, Jaxa responded, "I'd like that, Sir."

"Here we are, Lieutenant." Chief O'Brien interjected as they approached the door to Jaxa's temporary quarters.

"Thanks again, Chief." Sito simply replied as the door swooshed open. Addressing Worf once again, the Bajoran woman inquired, "Would this evening be a good time for our bout?"

Nodding his head once, Worf replied, "That would be good. I'll meet you in the gym at 1900 hours."

Turning away as the door closed behind their young former shipmate, the Irish chief turned his head towards Worf. Regarding the Klingon warrior with a quizzical gaze, Miles asked, "Sir? Why did you challenge her to a bout? Do

you really think she's ready?

"That's what I intend to find out." Worf replied laconically as the pair walked down the corridor.

"I see..." the perceptive chief of operations nodded his head knowingly before sounding a cautionary note, "Be careful, Sir."

As both sparring partners slipped smoothly into their on-guard positions, Worf gazed into the fiery eyes of his opponent. Remembering that his former protégé always left herself open to the *vlllnHoD*, a feint named after the bird that mimics speech, Worf suddenly struck out of his *vaD*, or flexible stance, only to find that his Bajoran adversary had sidestepped him, counterattacking with the very aggressive *toq* strike, barely stopping her strike before it made contact with his body.

As the pair broke from combat, returning to the *vaD* stance, the Klingon warrior bowed formally, "Very good, Lieutenant. I was not aware that you had mastered the *toq* school. Prepare yourself!" He called out as he lunged suddenly, his fists striking rapidly in the *Qin vagh* maneuver. Momentarily taken aback by the suddenness and ferocity of Worf's attack, Sito instinctively blocked and parried her opponent's strikes, the Huntress asserting herself more and more as she countered each blow, her blocks and parries now turning into ripostes as she watched carefully, waiting patiently for the opening that would give her the killing stroke.

At once spotting the change in his opponent's technique and manner, Worf gazed into the young Bajoran's eyes as the pair exchanged blows. The fiery intensity they had possessed earlier was now replaced by a steely, icy cold purpose. Grunting as he barely dodged a leg kick from his Bajoran sparring partner, the Klingon warrior deliberately dropped his guard *pach* just a touch, giving his adversary an opening for a sudden *QIn pup* strike that, should the blow strike home with enough force, could potentially kill him. *Now we see.*

Spotting the opening left by her Klingon opponent, the Huntress flashed a cold grin as she launched her blow. Striking with blinding speed with her closed fist at her opponent's vulnerable opening, the Huntress licked her lips in anticipation at standing triumphantly over the body of her hated opponent until she heard Sito's voice call out with a resounding "NO!", checking her blow just centimeters from its target. Breathing heavily as she once again

suppressed that most violent of her split personalities, Lieutenant Sito looked up into the eyes of her opponent. Her own eyes moistening, she apologized, "I'm sorry, Sir...I didn't mean..."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Lieutenant." The Klingon warrior responded approvingly.

"But I lost control." Sito replied shaking her head, "Maybe it's too soon..."

"You are as ready to return now..." Worf interrupted, fixing the younger woman's eyes with his, "As you ever will be."

"But I almost...I nearly..."

"But you didn't." The Klingon interjected, his deep baritone voice carrying a compassionate note. "You proved to me just now that you have the strength to control your inner demons..."

"For now..." Jaxa protested softly, "But what about the next time?"

"You will always have to control that part of yourself." Worf replied in a sympathetic tone. "It will always be with you. But you must not make the mistake of viewing it merely as a weakness. See it as what it is...a part of who you are. Your inner rage can be a powerful tool...or it can destroy you. What you do with it will be up to you."

"Yes, Sir." Sito acknowledged in a low tone as she took in her mentor's words. "I'll try."

"Good." Worf responded, nodding his head in satisfaction, "That is all one can do."

"Everything is proceeding according to plan." Gul Rejak gloated as he poured kanar from a decanter into a crystal goblet. Inhaling the fragrance of the thick amber liquid, the corrupt Cardassian gul declared, "Our processing plant will soon be producing enough Corillan acid to flood the Federation if we should want, and we are nearly ready to carry out our biggest operation yet."

"Careful, Gul..." The human in the room, Rejak's Syndicate liaison, Dmitri Cherenkov, cautioned, "Lots of things can still go wrong. In any event..." he

grinned, "...it wouldn't be in our best interests to flood the Federation with our stuff. Right now, we want to keep the demand high and the supply low."

"Of course...of course..." Rejak replied airily as he sipped his kanar. Setting his drink down, the gul inquired, "Is everything ready from your end, Dmitri?"

"Yes." The Terranovan replied in a thick voice, "When you're ready to move the acid, we'll have the weapons and latinum."

"Good." Rejak replied, his lips curling up in an evil grin. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to contact our 'allies' to make sure that they're ready to carry out their part in our plan."

"Be careful." Cherenkov again warned, "I don't trust either Tabar or Ayenga. Don't forget, deep in their core, they are still idealists and I've found that it is never a good idea to trust idealists."

"Oh...I quite agree with you, my friend." Rejak affirmed, the cold smile still on his lips. "But don't worry; I've made the necessary contingency plans should their hearts get the better of their greed."

"We'll be ready." Daras Tabar declared. Then, the Kon Ma's leader's voice taking on a threatening tone, he added, "You just be sure to live up to your end of the contract, Cardassian—or else!"

"It's late in the evening and I have no desire to listen to empty threats, Daras." Gul Rejak responded in a bored tone, "I have been told by our mutual friend that everything will be ready on their end—you just be sure that when it is time that you are ready to act. I want Starfleet's attention focused on Diaz and her gang."

"It will be." Tabar growled, staring malevolently at the Cardassian image on his monitor screen. "Once they finish analyzing the gift that Ayenga left them, Starfleet will have every resource they've got chasing after Diaz. They won't stop until she's either captured or killed."

"Good." Rejak replied, his sneer turning into an icy grin. "That's what I wanted to hear. Tell your people to be ready to move soon—very soon."

“Cardassian vole!” The Kon Ma leader growled as his screen went blank. “If we didn’t need him and the Syndicate and the latinum and weapons they’re giving us...”

“I know, Tabor.” Ayenga replied as, approaching her leader slowly from the back, she began to gently knead his shoulders. “But remember, once we get what we want from them and we liberate Bajor from its Federation puppet government...”

“Then we won’t have to rely on those barrowbugs.” Tabor agreed as his tense shoulder muscles began to relax under his second-in-command’s ministrations.

“And we can finally get our revenge once and for all against the Cardassians.” Ayenga added, the venom with which she spat out the final word being especially strong.

“Of course.” Daras grinned, pleased at how easy it was to push the former medical technician’s buttons, “But for now, as you said, we must be patient. Our time will come. Now...” He said as he rose from his chair, the insincere grin still on his face, “It’s time for you to return to Diaz to put the next part of our plan into motion.”

Rematerializing in her converted Peregrine scout-fighter, Ayenga was met in the tiny transporter room by her second in command, Ral Omkar. Walking up to his leader, the attractive auburn haired Bajoran asked in a voice touched with just a twinge of jealousy, “So...how did your meeting with Daras go?”

Smirking inwardly at her subordinate’s suspicions, Ayenga replied in a nonchalant tone, “As expected. He put up an act that he was merely using Rejak and the Syndicate...that once we get what we need, we’ll move to free Bajor...”

“So...you think he’s lying?”

“Of course, I do.” Ayenga replied bitterly. “Daras has sold his soul to the Syndicate and the Ferengi. All he cares about now is wealth and power. Oh, I have no doubts at all that he’ll take what we’re getting from this and will use it to overthrow Shakar. But afterwards?” She spat out, “Will he take revenge

against the Cardassians for what they did to us? Or against the Federation for just standing by and watching while we died? No!" She shook her head vigorously. "He'll just turn Bajor into another Velix III. A home for pirates and smugglers who'll end up eventually taking over. I'm not going to let that happen." She declared angrily.

"So..." Omkar asked, "What do you intend to do about it?"

An icy grin crossing her face, the Bajoran terrorist replied in a low, dangerous voice, "Don't worry...I have a plan of my own." Her grin vanishing, she then instructed as the pair walked out of the transporter room, "But it'll have to wait for the right moment. For now, we'll let Daras think that we're doing exactly what he wants us to do. Put us on a course for Diaz's base...maximum warp."

"I just got off the comm with Ayenga. She said that her and her people will be here in twenty four hours." Larkin reported as he walked into the tiny living quarters that he and Sabrina Diaz shared together. Seeing that his lover's attention was focused on the padd in her hands, he quipped, "Latest video from Risa?"

"Not quite." Diaz replied as she shook her head. "I was just checking up on our newest recruit."

"So...?" Larkin asked, his voice taking on a low, dangerous quality, as he sat down in the chair next to the former Starfleet captain, "...is he a plant?"

"That's just it..." Diaz answered, shrugging her shoulders, "...what I've got here doesn't give any indication one way or another. "Almost everything he's told us so far has checked out with what I've got here." She remarked as she set the padd down on the tiny table that served as desk, card table, and dining table for the pair.

"Almost everything?" Larkin inquired, raising his eyebrows as he became surer of his suspicions regarding the New Kauaian.

"Darling..." Sabrina chuckled, "I'd be even more worried if there weren't any inconsistencies. Too good to be true almost always is. The thing is..." Diaz noted, shaking her head, "...prior to Leyton's coup, nothing Atoa said or did pointed towards any sort of sympathy towards us—or any bad feelings

against us for that matter. If he had any opinions where the Maquis were concerned, he kept them to himself.”

Larkin, reluctantly playing devil’s advocate, pointed out, “True...but remember, he did say that it was the results of the trial of Leyton and his gang that pushed him over the edge. What about Ro Laren and Cal Hudson? They originally didn’t have any intentions of joining us. In fact, they were sent by Starfleet to bring us down. But after having their eyes opened up to the Federation’s hypocrisy...”

“Yeah, I see what you mean.” Sabrina interrupted. “All right.” She decided, “We’ll see how he does at the depot. If he’s ok...great. But if he proves to be a snake...well...there’s a barren rock a few light years away where we can leave him. And then I might or might not leave a message for Liz to pick him up.” Pausing for a few moments as she regarded her lover, the former captain’s face softened ever so slightly, “Oh...and thanks. I appreciate what you just did. We have to be able to think flexibly if we’re going to survive and one part of that is not giving in to paranoia.”

“Trust, but verify?” Larkin quipped with a twinkle in his eye.

“Exactly.” Diaz rejoined with a laugh.

Ignoring the curious glances and suspicious glares coming from the members of Diaz’s cell, Manuele gave the appearance of reading intently the padd containing a limited selection of novels and light reading that he had been given. In actuality, the undercover security officer was carefully studying his surroundings, especially the locations of entrances and exits and making estimates of how far he was from those exits and how long it would take him to reach one of them should events take a sudden unfortunate turn for the New Kauaian. As his eyes surreptitiously scanned the room, he spotted the man named Danyor Krakke, apparently involved in conversation with Nura, the Bzzit Khaht, and two others, both humans, carefully watching him while giving the appearance of not doing so.

Immediately recognizing what the newest member of their cell was doing while he appeared to be reading his padd, Danyor Krakke frowned as he studied the New Kauaian.

Krakke, whose real name was Ivan Cherenkov, a member of the Special Missions Branch of Starfleet Intelligence who had been working deep

undercover as a member of the Maquis for months, had concluded early on that Atoa had to be one of two things, he was either a plant or a traitor. Neither possibility pleased the deep cover agent. If he was a plant that meant that he was part of an operation that most likely did not know of Cherenkov's mission. Atoa, in attempting to carry out his mission, could easily put at risk the long term goals of Ivan's own mission—something the more experienced Cherenkov decided he would not let happen. *Better to expose him and then trust that Diaz will simply strand him on some isolated planet rather than just killing him out of hand.* The spy decided. *And if he's a traitor...* Ivan postulated, his stoic outer mask hiding the anger and contempt the Terra Nova native felt for those who betrayed their oath...*then he'll get everything that's coming to him. I'll make sure of that.*

"Didn't you hear me?"

Shaken from his reverie, Krakke muttered a confused, "What?"

"I said..." Nura repeated in an exasperated tone, "Why don't one of you big strapping heroic freedom fighters go over and say hello to the new guy?" As Krakke and Rof, a burly Alshain, looked away, the Bzzit Khaht snorted in disgust, "Well, if you two are too chicken to talk to him, then I guess I will."

Walking over to their newest recruit, Nura smiled as she looked down on where he sat reading his padd, "Hi."

Glancing up at the source of the greeting, Manuele saw the leathery skinned Bzzit Khaht woman he had saved earlier, "Huh?"

"I never got a chance to say thank you for saving me and Larkin from being handed over to the Cardassians." Nura said in a friendly voice, "I don't know about the others, but I'm grateful to you for pulling me out of that brig."

"Ummm...don't mention it." Manuele stuttered as he looked up at the Bzzit Khaht.

Taking the seat next to the burly New Kauaian, Nura remarked, a calculating expression behind her smile, "That was some pretty good seat of the pants flying you did. You a pilot?"

"Not really." Atoa responded, "The computer did most of the work, I was along for the ride."

“Well...” the Bzzit Khaht declared with what passed for a smile amongst her people, “...whoever programmed your computer’s one hell of a pilot.” Looking up, she spotted Sabrina Diaz and her lover walking together into the group’s common area. Placing a friendly hand on the newcomer’s shoulder, Nura commented knowingly as she read the expression on her leader’s face, “We better get over and join the others. Looks like stuff is about to happen.”

“Ayenga and her team...” Sabrina began as Manuele and the rest of her cell gathered around her and Larkin, “...will be here in less than twenty four hours. I’ll brief them on their part then, but for now, I want us to go over our plans for the depot. Starting with defenses.” Turning her attention towards the newest member of her resistance group, Diaz requested pointedly, “What’ll we find there, Mr. Atoa?”

Immediately recognizing the measuring and suspicious gazes given to him by all but Nura, who, surprisingly, was giving the New Kauaian a look that seemed to be supporting, Manuele responded carefully, “I can’t say for certain, of course, but...going from previous experience, I would imagine that there wouldn’t be any significant forces at the depot. These places rely on staying under the radar for most of their security. Starfleet Medical gambles that with space being so large, that by keeping them as inconspicuous as possible, these depots can remain under the radar.”

“I know all that.” Diaz replied sharply, “I was a captain once, remember? What I want to know is what sort of defenses will it have?”

“I was about to tell you before I was interrupted...” Manuele retorted, not giving an inch before the stern faced cell leader, “I’d say you’re probably looking at facing a doctor in overall command of the facility, maybe a few researchers and med techs and there’ll probably be a small security team—no more than three or four I would imagine. Total numbers...hmmm...about ten...twelve at the most.”

“That’s about what I figured.” Diaz agreed, nodding her head. “So...here’s the plan. All goes according to plan, we get away clean and no one gets hurt.”

“Damn.” Dr. Calvin Baxter cursed, shaking his head as he confirmed the test results appearing on his monitor screen. “I was afraid that was what we were going to find.”

"I can't believe..." Dr. Denise Murakawa remarked as she worriedly fingered the small gold crucifix hanging around her neck, "...that someone like Sabrina Diaz could even conceive of such a thing. It's just so..."

"Nevertheless..." the stoic voice of the Sutherland's science officer, Lieutenant Commander Varok, interjected, unintentionally cutting off the young Japanese-Centauran doctor's next words, "...the test results have been verified. We should inform the Captain as to our results."

"Of course." Dr. Baxter agreed, favoring his younger colleague with a paternal grin, "Since you're the team leader, Dr. Murakawa and since it was you who tumbled on the gene sequence in question, you should do the honors."

Blushing at the retired former Chief of Starfleet's praise, Denise activated her intercom, "Sickbay to Captain Shelby..."

"Estimated time of arrival at Deep Space Nine in three hours, Captain." Ensign Maria Django reported from her position next to the senior helmsman and her lover, Lieutenant Sam Lavelle. "That is, assuming that bucket of bolts we're towing doesn't cause us to drop out of warp again."

Stifling the rising snickers coming from most of the rest of the *Sutherland's* bridge crew with a withering glare from her piercing blue eyes, Captain Elizabeth Shelby promptly rebuked her outspoken junior operations officer with a curt, "Belay that talk, Ensign," just as the comm light on her chair blinked. Hitting the comm button on her chair, the petite captain heard, "Sickbay to Captain Shelby..."

"Dr. Murakawa?" Liz answered back, "Does your team have any news for me?"

"Yes, Sir." Doctor Denise Murakawa's strained voice responded, "But I think you should come down here to hear it."

Worried about the anxious tone of her Chief Medical Officer's voice, Shelby replied as she rose from the center seat, surrendering it to her first officer, "I'll be down there in a few minutes."

Arriving in sickbay, Captain Shelby was greeted by the three grim faces of her chief science officer, chief medical officer, and the visiting physician from the *Bluefin*. "So..." Liz asked as she approached the three officers gathered around Dr. Murakawa's desk, "...what's the bad news."

“Bad news is right, Sir.” Denise sighed as she pointed at the monitor display on her desk. “That’s the biogenic structure of the components of the warhead that Chief Deryx defused. It’s a designer variant of the Fostossa virus, only it’s been genetically modified to affect a wider variety of species. It’s extremely virulent and persistent and highly adaptable.”

“Whoever designed this...” Dr. Calvin Baxter declared as he ran a hand through the shock of white hair on his head, “...knew what they were doing and had the facilities to do it in. I haven’t seen work this precise...this...complete...in years.”

“How long would it take before the symptoms would show?” Liz inquired.

“Hmmm...normally, with Fostossa virus, the initial symptoms appear after approximately three days to a week.” Dr. Murakawa replied. “This variant, however, seems to have been designed with a longer incubation period—anywhere from a week and a half to three weeks before the first symptoms appear.”

“That explains why they weren’t interested in completely destroying that Lissepian colony.” Liz concluded, “Had they have been successful in setting that bomb off—either on one of our ships or on the colony—it would have been devastating.” As the others in the room nodded their heads in silent agreement, Shelby asked, “How long do you think it’ll take for you to find a cure?”

“I don’t know, Sir.” Denise answered honestly. “Like I said, the virus is highly adaptable...”

“We’ve tried several times already.” Dr. Baxter added, “But within a generation or two, the virus develops resistances to whatever we throw at it.”

“Perhaps...” Varok observed, “...we are taking the wrong approach to the problem. Instead of approaching the virus as something that must be attacked...” the elderly Vulcan suggested, “it might prove more advantageous to, in the words of the ancient Vulcan proverb, ‘Convince Nirak that Mount Celanya is, in fact, Mount Selaya.’”

“I get it!” Baxter chuckled. Then, seeing the look of confusion on the faces of the two women in the room, the elderly physician explained, “Instead of trying to kill the bug, we neutralize it...”

“By providing something else for it to bond to!” Denise exclaimed, cutting the white haired doctor off. Blushing red with embarrassment, the normally shy Dr. Murakawa apologized, “I’m sorry, Sir...I didn’t mean to.”

“Nothing to apologize for, Young Lady.” Calvin answered back with a toothy grin. Turning his attention back to the Vulcan science officer, the former chief of Starfleet Medical asked, “Is that what you meant?”

Nodding his head once, Varok replied in his usual flat voice, “Precisely. If a substance can be found that the virus would find more attractive than the body’s amino acids, then it would bond with that, rendering it inert.”

“But wouldn’t the person with the virus still be a possible carrier?” Liz asked with a worried frown.

“For a time, yes.” The Vulcan science officer confirmed, “But after a brief period the virus would be eradicated from the body as it would be unable to reproduce.”

“I see...” the captain responded as she chewed over her officer’s proposal. “Very well. Begin work on it. We’ll be at Deep Space Nine in approximately two hours. Coordinate with Dr. Bashir on our arrival—he might have some ideas of his own.”

“I’d suggest we start off with the guanine group.” Doctor Murakawa declared as she sat down at her desk. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and hit the jackpot right away.”

“The odds of doing so...” Varok recited, “Are approximately 863,642 to 1.”

Sighing dejectedly, Denise retorted as she ran the first sequence through the simulation, only to have it come back negative, “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Well, Denise...” Dr. Baxter grinned as he entered in a new sequence on his computer, “...maybe this’ll cheer you up. If you ever want to have some fun making Morgan Bateson squirm, ask him sometime about what happened on Stardate 1175.6 at Sloopy’s between him, Brooks Erdolan, and those Antarean strippers.”

"Ever been to DS9?" Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol asked as he handed Lieutenant T'Ser a cup of coffee.

"No..." The Vulcan operations officer responded as she gratefully accepted the cup from the handsome Trill who took the seat next to her, "But I've heard so much about it."

"Most of it's probably true." Jadon responded with a chuckle. "First thing...once we get shoreleave—I'll take you over to Quark's..." Pausing for a moment as he took a sip of his coffee, the dark haired Trill smiled broadly as he changed the subject, "I can see now why you rave so much about Cookie. This coffee's really good" His eyes taking in the oak veneer paneling and paintings of older aquatic vessels bearing the *Bluefin's* name that lined the walls of the tiny cutter's wardroom, the Sutherland's chief engineer remarked, "This place definitely has an Old School vibe to it."

"That's the way Captain Akinola likes it." T'Ser replied, her lips turning up into a warm grin at the mention of her commanding officer's name.

"You like him, don't you?" Jadon perceptively observed as his eyes temporarily locked on to the sea-green eyes of his companion.

"Yeah...I do." T'Ser answered back with un-Vulcan-like warmth. "He's a good man. He cares about this ship and its crew."

"Yeah, I have to admit I've got a good one too..." Tol replied, a wicked grin forming on his face as he quipped, "It's just too bad our bosses don't get along."

"Tell me about it!" T'Ser chuckled, her laughter quickly vanishing as Commander McBride strode into the wardroom with one of Jadon's engineers, the buxom blonde, Treasure Barrows, laughing beside him.

"And so..." Dale's Texas accent filled the room as he spoke, "...he was yellin' 'Whoa! Whoa!' at the top of his lungs, but that horse wasn't payin' any attention to him. Took him right under that tree, branches smacking him in his face. An' then the horse went right back into the corral and stood right in front of its stall!"

"Ya'll are puttin' me on!" The vivacious woman replied, the Southwestern accent of her Northstar roots providing a perfect match for the commander's own drawl. "Ya tellin' me you let him go on ahead and ride that horse even

though he was jest a tenderfoot?"

"He kept on sayin' he could ride ol' Nugget, so we figured we'd give him an opportunity to put his money where his mouth was." McBride unabashedly replied as he guided his companion to the same table where T'Ser and Jadon were sitting. "Mind if we join you?" The *Bluefin's* XO asked in an almost shy tone as he gazed down on the lovely Vulcan seated near the roguish Trill.

"Please, Commander." T'Ser responded with a nervous grin of her own as the other pair took the other two seats at the table. "We were just talking about Deep Space Nine..." She added, hoping that her companion would pick up on her desires to return to the original subject.

Reading at once his escort's wishes, the sophisticated Jadon smoothly remarked, "Yeah, I was telling her all about Quark's..."

"Yeah...Candy and I are plannin' on showing the joint off to Atris..." Treasure replied, her lips turning up into a wicked smirk as she regarded the Vulcan and Trill seated across from her, "So Boss, are you gonna introduce the Lieutenant to that new holosuite program ya'll said Quark had just gotten?"

"New holosuite program?" T'Ser inquired, raising her right eyebrow in an alluring gesture, "What sort of program is it—if I might ask?"

"Really it's just a variation of a program that Jadzia—Jadzia Dax—an acquaintance of mine—has." Jadon explained, "It's the baths on Trill—if you'd like..." the roguish Trill propositioned, "You're more than welcome to join me..."

Glancing towards Commander McBride only to see him turn his gaze away as her eyes fell on him, T'Ser exhaled before replying, "Sure, Jadon...I'd love to." Getting up quickly, the lovely Vulcan woman announced before turning to leave the wardroom, "I hate to be rude, but I'd better go—I've got duty in twenty minutes."

"We'd better get going too, Treasure..." Jadon, at once picking up on the tension between the two *Bluefin* officers, remarked several moments later, after T'Ser had left the wardroom, "The Captain's going to want us back on the *Suthy* before we dock at DS9."

"Right, Boss." Treasure acknowledged as she and Dale both rose to their feet. Turning towards Dale, the voluptuous blonde ensign gave the *Bluefin's* XO a

playful wink, “Maybe I’ll see ya’ll at the station, Sir.”

“Perhaps, Ensign.” Dale answered back, taking a deep breath as the ensign and her supervisor walked away, leaving him standing alone, with the sole exception of Cookie.

“Here, Sir.” The *Bluefin’s* cook said, handing the commander a shot glass filled with an amber liquid, “You look like you could use it.”

Tossing back the liquor, Dale allowed it to warm the passages of its throat as it went down. “Smooth...” the XO remarked, “Bourbon?”

“Yeah.” Cookie replied, “Some of the best Kentucky sippin’ whisky this side of Antares.” Seeing the troubled look on his superior officer’s face, the cook tentatively ventured as he set the bottle down on the table, “Sir...I know it’s not my place but...well...Momma told me something once—that there’s nothing worse than saying ‘I should have’. Good night, Sir.”

Nodding his head as Cookie left him alone with his thoughts, Commander McBride poured another shot of bourbon in his glass. Swirling the liquid, Dale gazed intently at the glass as images of T’Ser and Treasure alternately appeared in the liquid as Cookie’s mother’s words repeated themselves over and over again in his head. *What if you don’t know what you should do? What if, no matter what you do, you end up saying ‘I should have’?*

“That’s another thing I don’t like.” Diaz grouched as Ayenga’s ship docked, “I don’t trust Ayenga or her people. I don’t care what Laren and the others say, the Kon-Ma are not our friends here. Mark my words, Larkin—they’re going to screw us and they’re not even going to kiss us first.”

“For what it’s worth, Bri...” The Rutian answered back as he gave his lover’s hand a brief squeeze, “I agree. But we don’t have much choice here. She’s the best we’ve got where it concerns anything biomedical. She’ll know right away whether there’s anything of value in that depot or not.”

“Yeah...” Sabrina agreed, nodding her head slowly before countering, “But I don’t think we should go completely by what our Kon Ma friend says here—regarding either the depot or Atoa.” Her lips curling up into an icy grin, the Maquis leader instructed her lover in a whisper, “Go ahead and bring Ayenga in to the common room with the others and brief her on what we’ve planned

so far. I'll be along directly after I take care of a few things.

"Take care of a few things?" Larkin asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah." His lover replied, the cold smile still on her face, "I'm going to take out an insurance policy or two..." Waiting until Larkin had left the tiny quarters the pair shared, Sabrina turned towards the computer monitor, activating it. "Computer...record the following messages to be sent to these individuals should any of the parameters to be designated be triggered—Admiral Samson Glover, Captain Benjamin Sisko, Captain Elizabeth Shelby. Authorization code...Cuffe." Several minutes later, after the last of the messages had been recorded, Diaz then instructed, "Computer...establish a secure channel comm. link between me and Miriam Pierson." Within moments, Miriam's face appeared on Sabrina's computer monitor.

"Sabrina?" Miriam Pierson inquired, a look of surprise on her face, "What's up?"

"Got a few minutes, Miri?" Diaz answered back, "I need you to ask that ex-husband of yours whether he can do me a favor."

"Ok..." Miriam responded, "But you know Lynn's going to want something in return..."

"Doesn't he always?" Sabrina chuckled, "Here's what I'm going to need him to do..."

Several moments later, after Diaz had outlined her plan, Miriam shook her head, "I'll ask him, Bri...but...don't get your hopes up—he's got problems of his own right now..."

"Well..." Sabrina concluded, "If he can do it, it'll be great and I'll owe him one—but if not, that's ok too—he's just additional insurance in case Plan A doesn't work. Take care of yourself." She finished as she terminated the connection. Content now that all bases had been covered, the former Starfleet officer walked out of her office. Entering the common area, she plastered an insincere grin on her face as she drew closer to Ayenga.

"Hello, Sabrina." The Bajoran terrorist greeted with an equally false grin. "Larkin was just filling me in on the plan. It sounds solid, but there are a few things I'd like to go over with you in private..." lowering her voice, she added, "...especially as regards your new man. I don't trust him. He reeks of

Starfleet.”

“So did I once.” Diaz responded in an equally low whisper, “For now...we need him.” Her voice now taking on a mildly placating tone, Sabrina added, “Don’t worry...we’ll find out soon enough whether we can trust him or not.”

Watching the two leaders talking quietly amongst themselves and having a pretty good idea as to the topic of conversation, Manuele turning towards Nura, flashed a sarcastic grin, “You guys don’t trust very easy—do you?”

Shrugging her shoulders, the Bzzit Khaht replied, “What did you expect? For every legit defector we get from Starfleet, we get at least three phonies. Take your pick—Starfleet Intelligence...the Obsidian Order...Tal’Shiar...Orion Syndicate...Klingon Intelligence...everyone’s got someone somewhere with us.” She remarked with a snort, “Hell...I even heard that Janeway had someone in Chakotay’s cell...”

“She did.” Rof, the Alshain interjected, deliberately flashing his canines at Manuele, “Heard it was the Vulcan.”

“Figures.” Krakke chimed in, knowing full well that in fact it was Tuvok who had infiltrated the former Starfleet officer’s cell. “Chakotay was always too trusting...” The Terranovan remarked as he glared at Atoa, “And look what it got him...killed in the Badlands...”

“At least he took Janeway with him.” Rof growled.

“We don’t know that they’re dead.” Nura pointed out, “No one’s spotted any sign of wreckage from either ship...”

“They’re dead.” Krakke answered back, shaking his head, “Get caught up in one of those plasma eddies and not much gets left.” Turning his attention back towards Atoa, the undercover operative leaned over as he growled menacingly into the New Kauaian’s ear, “I don’t like you and I don’t trust you. Do anything out of line and I’ll kill you.”

Smiling as Krakke stomped away, Rof bared his fangs as he looked down on Atoa, “I only smell a little bit of fear on you—good. That means you’re not a fool. Doesn’t mean you’re not a traitor though. You prove yourself honest—then good, I’ll gladly fight beside you. But if you betray us—then I shall enjoy hunting you down.”

"In other words..." Manuele muttered as he watched the Alshain stalk away, "...put up or shut up."

"That's about the size of it." Nura agreed with a smile. "Still..." she said as she stood up, "...for what it's worth, you've got one person in your corner." Her eyes pleading, she added as she walked away, "Just don't disappoint me."

Chapter 8

As he zipped up his stealthsuit, Lynn Pierson stared directly into the eyes of his two lieutenants, “I don’t want you two doing anything stupid like trying to play hero and come after us if we frinx up. If you don’t hear from us in two hours or if you even think that Ershak is about to move on this place, I want you to get the girls, Alain, and the stuff in my safe out of here. Get to my ship, and then hightail it to the rendezvous point. No if...ands...or butts about it—got it?”

“But, Boss...”

“Got it, Dak?” Pierson repeated with increased emphasis.

“Yeah, Boss...”

“You too, S’nurl. I don’t want you going and getting yourself killed trying to take out Ershak’s entire syndicate on some vengeance quest.” Softening his voice, he added, “I need you, old friend, to keep Alena and Bala safe.”

“I undersssstand...even though I do not like it.” The loyal Gorn bodyguard replied, “I will do asssssssss you assssssk.”

“Good.” The roguish Pierson responded as he clasped a hand on muscular reptile’s shoulder. Slipping a phaser one into his boot and knife into a sheath in the other boot, the ex-Starfleet officer turned towards Chief Brin who was similarly equipping himself, “You ready to go, Brin?”

“Ready when you are.” The red Orion taciturnly replied as he shoved a phaser into his belt.

“Let’s go do this then.” Pierson declared in grim tone as he strode out of his office.

“You’ll go in first, Atoa.” Sabrina Diaz commanded, her voice coming through the *Moselle’s* intercom. “If you’re as good as you say you are, then the depot’s scanners will read you as the *Niger* making its normal deliveries. You, Nura, and Banan and Hanya...” she instructed, referring to the lean dark haired male

and petite dirty blonde haired female Bajorans from Ayenga's cell also on board the runabout, "...will then take out the flight control team and neutralize the depots shielding and weapons arrays. Ayenga and I will then follow up with our teams."

"Understand, Sabrina." Manuele replied in a grim tone as the Bzzit Khaht woman sitting in the pilot's seat gave him a supportive grin. "Don't worry, it'll work."

"It better for your sake." Ayenga's caustic voice interjected.

"Ignore her." Nura consoled, placing her free hand on the New Kauaian's shoulder. "Like I said, I trust you."

Feeling just the slightest twinge of guilt as he regarded the leathery skinned woman sitting next to him, Manuele's lips turned up in a slight smile, "Thank you, Nura. Now...you ready to go in?"

"Yeah." The ace pilot grinned back, "Let's do this."

"Remember..." Diaz's voice came through one last time as she further admonished, addressing all of the teams, "...we do this as quick and clean as possible. I don't want any deaths here."

Hearing the Maquis leader's instructions, Ayenga's lips turned up into a cold smile. Turning towards her second in command, the Bajoran terrorist inquired in a cold voice, "Do Hanya and Banan understand what they're supposed to do?" Taking her lieutenant's single nod of the head as an answer, the Kon Ma leader further instructed, "Make sure they understand that they're only to act when they get the signal. We have to make sure that the Fleeters are convinced that Sabrina is the one responsible for the package we're leaving behind...right?"

"Understood, Ayenga." Her Bajoran underling responded with a cold grin of his own. "We'll make sure that Sabrina gets all of the credit she deserves for this one."

Handing the ocular viewer back to Pierson, Solly grunted, "Sensor drones. Just like you said."

"Yeah." The ex-Starfleet officer whispered back as he peered through the oculars. "And their patrol routes overlap so that no part of the perimeter goes unguarded. Also, take one out, it immediately triggers a security bot with live guards backing it up."

"So..." Chief Brin asked with a grimace, "How're we going to get through?"

His lips turning up in a sly grin, Pierson took out two fist-sized objects. "A little something I picked up from a friend of a friend." The rogue explained with a triumphant smirk. "They have holo-emitters that fool the drones' visual sensors and also a package that'll cover our biosignatures."

Shaking his head, the red Orion replied, "I'm not even going to ask how or where you got those things. So...how much time will they give us."

"Not much." Pierson admitted. "Their batteries'll give us two minutes—maybe two and a half. We have to be over the wall and on the other side and out of range of the scanners by then."

"What about inside patrols?" Solly inquired.

"Got it covered." Lynn answered back, his crooked grin returning, "I've got someone on the inside. All we have to do is get over the wall and past the inner perimeter guards."

"All right." Solly exhaled, "Let's do it."

Activating his comm unit, Manuele spoke, "Sigma Three? This is the *Niger* approaching on a heading of one-oh-two mark thirty."

"*Niger*? This is Sigma Three Control. What happened to our usual guy?"

"Lieutenant Aiello is taking a few weeks of leave on Risa." Manuele replied, giving the cover story that had already been worked out. "I'm Lieutenant Matt Ramos."

After a few moments, the voice of the depot's flight control officer once again came out from the speakers, "All right, Lieutenant. Everything checks out. You're cleared for approach and landing on Pad Alpha. You got some people here who are really looking forward to the care packages you're bringing with

you.”

“Well...” Manuele chuckled, “I better hurry up then—I wouldn’t want to keep them waiting longer than I have to.”

“Smooth.” Nura praised as she glanced over at the human sitting next to her. “Tell the others to get ready to move while I guide us in.”

“Right.” Atoa replied as he got out of his chair. Walking to the back of the runabout, he spied the Bajoran couple who made up the rest of his assault team cleaning their weapons. Noting how professionally the pair had broken down, cleaned, and put back together their Klingon made disruptor carbines, the experienced security officer the female, Hanya, had modified the focus crystal so that the beam from her carbine would come out narrower, increasing both range and stopping power. The male, Banan, had also altered his weapon, adjusting the charge emitter so that it would put out an increased rate of fire, but at the expense of both accuracy and range. Mentally filing what he had seen in the back of his mind, Manuele called out, “Get ready, you two. We’re on our way in.”

Nodding their heads once in acknowledgement, the pair, after first slapping fresh power cells on to their weapons, stood up. Maintaining their silence as they brushed past him, the pair took their place on the tiny runabout’s two transport pads. Returning to the bow, Manuele rolled his eyes as he took his seat.

“Watch out for those two.” Nura whispered, “Especially the woman, Hanya. She’s what you humans call a ‘stone-killer’. She kills for one reason and one reason only—because she loves it. Don’t turn your back on her and whatever you do—don’t cross her.”

“Great group we’re travelling with.” Manuele observed with a wry grin.

Chuckling in response, Nura quipped, “The Kon Ma aren’t exactly known for their sense of humor, you know.” Her smile vanishing as the planetoid the depot was located on grew larger, the Bzzit Khaht remarked in a soft voice, “Get ready...it’s showtime.”

Calling out over his shoulder, Manuele alerted the Bajorans, “Ok...we’re beaming you over. Energize.”

As the Kon Ma couple dematerialized, the New Kauaian turned his attention

back to his companion, "I hope we didn't make a mistake just now beaming those two over."

"Yeah." Nura agreed, a grim expression on her face, "I do too."

"Ok, Solly..." Pierson grinned as his thumb hovered over a tiny remote control button, "...the moment I push this button, the clock starts. We have two minutes to get over that wall and past the inner perimeter before the emitters run out of juice. You ready?" Taking the red Orion's single nod of the head as assent, Lynn's thumb pressed the button, activating the two holo-emitters. Nodding his head as the area in front of portion of the wall they targeted momentarily shimmered; Pierson slapped his teammate on the shoulder, "Now!"

Leaping to their feet, the pair sprinted towards the wall. As he neared the obstacle, Solly spotted the sensor drone out of the corner of his eye drawing closer. Picking up his pace as the drone approached, the red Orion said a rare silent prayer as he and Pierson, reaching the wall, began their climb. The drone, apparently fooled by the roguish human's devices, passed the pair in silence as they scampered over the wall. Pointing at a small blockhouse thirty meters to his left, Pierson whispered, "Over there! Go! We've only got a minute left." Reaching the blockhouse, Pierson keyed in a sequence. Sighing in relief as the door opened, the defrocked Starfleet officer flashed a roguish grin as the two men stepped inside, "We're in."

"Where are we?" Chief Brin asked as he drew his phaser.

"This is a maintenance shed." Pierson explained, pointing at the various tools and devices hanging on hooks on the wall and lying on shelves. Nothing much special about the place..." Lynn smirked as he revealed another keypad concealed by a gardener's smock hanging from a hook, "...except for this." Punching in another key sequence, the rogue's grin grew wider as a portion of the floor opened up to reveal a staircase. "Ershak has a tunnel complex under his estate. This'll take us right to where we need to go."

Shaking his head, the *Bluefin* chief commented dryly, "You've been planning this for some time, haven't you?"

Nodding his head as he drew his own weapon, Pierson replied, "Yeah. Figured that sooner or later it'd come down to something like this, so I got someone

inside Ershak's organization a while ago and kept her in my pocket until now."

"Why are you doing this?" Solly asked, "You're putting everything on the line here. It can't be just for Alena and the rest. This'll burn things between you and Ershak completely. He'll have no choice but to retaliate." The red Orion said knowingly, "Otherwise he loses face completely before his people and his *Ahmet'sur*. And if you kill him, his *Ahmet'sur* would have to take you out if for no other reason than to avenge his honor. Not only that, the other *Ahmets* and *Ahmet'surs* will want to take out contracts on you—if for no other reason than to make an example out of you."

"Yeah...there's more." Pierson admitted, his face now taking on a grim expression, "Ershak made a mistake—he made it personal between us when he brought my ex into this. But you're right..." He conceded, the roguish grin quickly reappearing, "My days here on Persis IV are over anyway." Shrugging his shoulders, the human remarked glumly, "Just as well...I've lived as long as I have out here 'cause I know when it's time to pull up stakes. Things are going to get ugly in this section of space soon—uglier than they are now—and I mean a lot uglier. I can feel it. Time to get while the getting's good. I figure me, Dak, S'nurl and the girls'll find us another place to set up." Jerking his head towards the stairwell, Lynn concluded the conversation, "Look...we can talk more about this later. Right now...we've got work to do."

"Yeah." Solly agreed as the pair descended into the tunnel. "We've got an appointment with a fat green Orion."

"Flight control secure."

Hearing Hanya's icy words coming from the intercom speaker, Manuele took a deep breath. "Bring us on in, Nura."

"Right." The Bzzit Khaht acknowledged as she expertly piloted the runabout on to the waiting pad. "We're down." She said, reporting to Sabrina.

"Good." The Maquis leader replied, "Proceed with the operation."

"Well..." Nura remarked, cracking a sly grin as she got out of the pilot's chair, "Let's get to work." Her smile vanishing, she added in a more guarded tone, "I don't like leaving those two alone for too long. Between you and me..." she

whispered, "...I don't trust Ayenga. I think she's up to something."

"Yeah." Manuele quickly agreed as he checked his phaser, finding that it had been locked to a mild stun setting as per Sabrina's orders, "I know what you mean."

Moments later, as the pair emerged from the airlock into the flight control center, both Nura and Manuele found, to their deepest regret, that their suspicions regarding their Bajoran teammates were justified. Finding one Starfleet crewman, wearing the gold and black jacket of an operations/security specialist, lying motionless on the deck, a phaser in his hand, and another, this one wearing command red, slumped in her chair; the New Kauaian growled as he approached the fallen security specialist, "They're dead."

A pained look on her face, Nura flashed the Bajoran couple an accusatory look, "What part of 'No Killing' don't you understand?"

"We don't take orders from Diaz." Hanya replied haughtily. "In any event, we didn't have a choice. That man..." she said, pointing at the human lying on the deck, "...was obviously going for his phaser, and she..." the Bajoran continued, jerking her head towards the gray-skinned, chestnut haired Bolian woman slumped over the console, "...was about to trigger an alarm."

Glancing first at the fallen human and then at the Bolian woman, Manuele's experience eye immediately told him that the Bajoran terrorist was lying. Calling Nura over to him, Atoa whispered in a low voice as the Bajorans watched warily, their weapons at the ready. "Nod your head and look relieved." Following his instructions, the Bzzit Khaht listened intently as the New Kauaian spoke in a low whisper, "Hanya's lying. That phaser was placed in the ensign's hand after he was killed. You can tell by the way he's clutching it and by its position in his hand. Also, the lieutenant's hand is nowhere near the alarm."

"So...what do we do?" Nura asked, nodding her head and speaking in a low, level whisper as Manuele instructed. "Call them on it?"

"No." Manuele replied, his lips turning up into a false smile, "That'll start a firefight for sure and we don't want that. Follow my lead, ok?"

"Sure thing." Nura replied, placing her trust in the burly man standing next to her.

Turning his attention back towards the Kon Ma terrorists, Manuele said in calm, level tone, "All right. You didn't have a choice." Seeing the pair relax just a touch, Atoa continued to speak, "But from now on, we're doing this according to Diaz's instructions—understood?"

"I told you..." Hanya replied dangerously, her finger dangerously close to the firing stud of the disruptor she carried, "...we only follow the orders of Ayenga."

"Ok..." the New Kauaian shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly as he slipped unobtrusively into a combat stance, "...then I'll just contact Sabrina and we'll scrub the mission. Because, unless you agree, I'm not going to key in the access sequence and since I'm the only one who knows the correct combination..."

After a few moments of angry whispering between her and her partner, Hanya turned her attention back towards Manuele. "All right. We'll do it your way for now. But..." she added in a menacing tone as she jerked her head down at the fallen security trooper, "...give me one reason, and I'll burn a hole through you bigger than the one through him."

"Whatever." Atoa growled back in response as he moved towards the control console. Moving gingerly so as to not disturb the deceased Bolian, Manuele not only keyed in the sequences that would permit access to the rest of the facility, as well as flood it with anesthizine gas, but also keyed in another code, this one programmed to send out a prearranged signal to the *Sutherland*. Punching in the last code, the New Kauaian activated a comm signal, "Sabrina...you and Ayenga can bring your teams in now."

"Right." The former starship captain responded, "Ayenga...you hear?"

"Yeah." The Bajoran replied, "We're beginning our approach."

"They'll be at their landing positions in a few minutes." Manuele said to Nura as he slipped on his breathing apparatus, "So we better get going. We need to get to the central facility and get what we can from there."

"Right." The leathery skinned Bzzit Khaht, donning her breathing filter, answered back, adding in a whisper as she glanced back at the Bajoran couple. "You did a good job with those two, but remember what I told you...watch your back—especially with that psycho."

“Why didn’t we just gun ‘em down and be done with it?” Banan asked his companion in a low whisper, his voice muffled even more by the mask covering nose and mouth.

“We move when Ayenga tells us to and not a moment before.” Hanya replied in an equally low voice, “Besides, I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not lug around all that dead weight to the central core.”

USS *Sutherland*

“Captain?” Lieutenant Dryer called out from her position at tactical at her commanding officer, sitting in the center seat of the *Nebula*-class cruiser, “We receiving a signal—it’s faint...unknown origin. Should I put it on the speakers?”

“No.” Liz shook her head as she got up out of her seat. “Reroute it to my ready room.” Entering her office, Shelby immediately ordered, “Computer...download, decrypt and display on my monitor.” Her face taking on a grim expression as the brief message appeared on her screen, the starship captain activated her comm unit, “Lieutenant Dryer? I want you to first contact Admiral Glover at Starbase Five and then Captain Sisko. Tell the captain that I’ll need to see him as soon as we arrive at DS9.”

His phaser at the ready, Solly crouched down as Pierson keyed in the code sequence. Smiling as the door slid open, the red Orion covered his human companion as the rogue stealthily slipped into the empty antechamber. Scanning the opulent space with his eyes, Pierson’s lips turned up into a grin as he saw the slender Bajoran woman standing next to an Elasian marble statue of the third Dolman. Taking just a moment to appreciate the workmanship of the sculptor who, with artistic precision, had seemed to capture not just the woman’s beauty, but also her regal, haughty bearing, the former Starfleet captain approached his agent. “Thanks Talysa,” he smiled as he signaled Solly that it was safe to come out. “Where’s Ershak?”

“He’s in his quarters...sound asleep.” The Bajoran slave replied with a smug grin before sounding a cautionary note

“What about Ershak’s Nausicaan and Red Orion hounds?” Solly inquired as he joined the pair. “They’re a matched set.”

“That’s right.” Pierson acknowledged with a furrowed brow. “Now that you mention it...the manned security here’s a bit lighter than I expected. You know anything about it, Talysa?” The roguish human asked, turning once again to his Bajoran plant.

“Hmmm...” Talysa murmured, “Kadrak and Sylak did leave here a few minutes ago with three or four of Ershak’s goons. I don’t know where they were going though.”

“I have a pretty good idea.” Pierson replied with a scowl as he activated his comm unit. “Dak?” The bar owner called out, addressing one of his chief lieutenants.

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Get the girls to safety.” Lynn ordered, “Look’s like S’nurl’s about to have one of his dreams come true. You two are about to have some company. Ershak sent his boys over to play with us.”

“Good.” As a reptilian voice answered back, Solly imagined the Gorn’s lips turned up into a feral smile. “We will be waiting.”

“Don’t worry, Boss...” Dak replied, “We’ll take care of things over here. You just watch your ass. Bala’ll have my balls if anything happens to that red Orion CPO with you.”

“Hear that?” Pierson grinned as he turned back towards Solly, “You got yourself a fan.” Turning his attention back towards the Bajoran woman, a concerned Lynn inquired, “What about you? Can you get out of here, ok?”

“Yeah.” Talysa answered back with a sly smile. “Just give me a few minutes before you go after Ershak. The sensor drones know my biosignature so I can just walk out the front gate.”

“Good.” Pierson replied, “Make for the spaceport and wait for Dak, S’nurl, and the girls.”

“Right.” Talysa acknowledged as she gave the ex-Starfleet officer a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you two later and...” she added with a wicked grin, “...give

Ershak a kick in the ‘nads for me.”

“It’ll be my pleasure.” Solly answered back with a grim chuckle.

“Ok...” Pierson declared, jerking his head towards the corridor that led to Ershak’s sleeping quarters. “Let’s give our lady a couple of minutes and then pay fat boy a visit.”

“It’s going just like you thought it would, Bri.” Larkin grinned as he spoke to his lover, Sabrina Diaz, who was at that moment manning the transporter station on the converted freighter that she and the Rutian had flown into the depot.

Smiling as yet another lot of medical supplies materialized on the transporter pad, Sabrina Diaz looked on approvingly as the other two members of her cell, the Alshain, Rof, and a human, Danyor Krakke removed the instruments and rare medicines from the pad. Speaking over her shoulder, the former Starfleet captain responded, sounding a cautionary note, “We’re not done yet. There’s a lot that can go wrong.”

Flashing a cold grin as her people likewise removed yet another lot of medical supplies from her ship’s transporter pad, the Bajoran terrorist Ayenga inquired of her lieutenant, “How are Hanya and Banan progressing?”

“They’re nearly there.” The Bajoran, Omkar, replied in a flat tone.

“Good.” Ayenga exclaimed, “Wait until we’ve finished loading everything and they’ve downloaded the information and then give them the signal. I want to be long gone before Diaz tumbles on the fact that she’s been screwed over.”

“We’re in.” Manuele declared as he and his group entered the medical facility’s central core.

“Great.” Nura replied with a grin as the New Kauaian checked the slumbering crew slumped over their consoles. “How’re they?” The Bzzit Khaht asked, her leathery face showing her concern for the Starfleeters.

“They’re ok.” Atoa answered back. Making sure that their Bajoran teammates

were otherwise occupied checking out the rest of the downed station crew, Manuele pressed a capsule into his Bzzit Khaht companion's hands. "Swallow this. Now." He urged in a silent whisper as he slipped his own tablet into his mouth.

A confused look on her face, Nura swallowed her own tablet as she heard him issue commands, Get to work downloading the computer, Nura; I'll double check to see that we got everything we came for." Turning to the two Bajorans, the New Kauaian further instructed, "You two...why don't you do something useful and get those packs over there. They're an experimental IV for use in the field. They might come in handy for us."

Walking over and collecting the packs, Hanya knelt down as she placed the packs in her backpack. Glancing to her left, the Bajoran woman's lips turned up into a grin as she immediately recognized her and her fellow terrorist's true goal—a sealed container. Recognizing the container at the same time, Manuele called out, "Hanya—be careful with that! According to the manifest here, it contains some of those drugs I was talking about earlier—the ones that can't be replicated."

"Right." The Bajoran terrorist responded as her gaze dropped down to the chronometer on her wrist. Seeing that a tiny light was flashing a steady green, a cold smile appeared on the auburn-haired woman's lips as she stood up and turned to her partner, nodding her head once. Receiving an answering nod from Banan, the auburn haired Bajoran took one of the hand phasers that lay near a fallen depot crewman. Her lips turning up into a grin as she saw that it had been locked on stun, she aimed and fired first at Atoa and then at Nura, striking both of them in the back. Watching in satisfaction as the pair slumped down to the floor, Hanya turned to her partner. "Set the device up Banan while I get the container." She instructed as she removed the filter masks from her former comrades. "That'll keep 'em from waking up before it's too late."

"What about Diaz?" Her companion inquired as he connected a small cylindrical device to the station's air filtration system. "What if she figures out what's going on?"

"Won't matter." Hanya replied with a smirk as she cracked open the sealed container. "It's here." She exclaimed triumphantly as she carefully removed the magnetically sealed bottle containing mutagenic gel. Returning to the subject at hand, she explained, 'Ayenga has it all figured out. By the time Diaz tumbles on to what we're doing, we'll be long gone and if she waits around

here too long—she'll be as dead as these people soon will be." Watching as her partner completed his task, the Bajoran terrorist asked somewhat impatiently, "You done now?"

"Yeah." Banan answered back, "We've got a two minute timer. That should give us just enough time."

"Right. Activate it. It's time we got out of here." Hanya responded as she tapped her comm badge, "Ayenga...we're done here." Moments later, the pair disappeared in an orange glow as Manuele and Nura struggled to consciousness.

"What hit us?" A groggy Nura asked as she stumbled to her feet, "And where are our 'friends'?"

"Probably bailed on us. Had a feeling they might try something like that." Manuele replied as he staggered to his feet as well. Looking about, he grabbed a couple of filter masks lying on the floor. "Put this on." He instructed his companion, "The pill I gave you was a temporary antidote to the gas, but it'll be losing its effectiveness soon." Placing a mask over his face, the security specialist quickly scanned the room with his eyes, noticing at once the opened container and the device attached to the air filtration system. "Damn! That's what I was afraid of."

"What?" A confused Nura inquired as she situated her own mask over her face.

"They took it." Atoa growled in a low voice. "Mutagenic gel." Seeing the puzzled look on his companion's face, Manuele added as his eyes fell on the other device, "I'll explain later, but right now we've got another problem." Pointing to the tiny cylinder, the New Kauaian explained, "Looks like they've tied something into the air filtration system and I have a feeling it's not a Risan aphrodisiac."

"Can you disconnect it?" A suddenly worried Nura asked.

"Yeah. I think so." Manuele responded as he grabbed his tools, "But I'm going to have to hurry. It looks like it's set to go off in less than a minute. Working feverishly as the seconds counted down, the burly security chief struggled with the connections until, with bare seconds to spare, he freed the cylinder from its place, tossing it rapidly into the empty container as his companion

slammed it shut, resealing it. “Whew!” Manuele sighed with relief as he heard the container’s seals click into place. “That was too close.”

“What was it?” Nura asked as her partner shook his head in a mixture of disgust and dismay.

“Not sure.” Atoa answered back, “We’ll probably need someone who knows what they’re doing with chemicals or drugs before we can get an answer, but I’ve got a feeling that it wasn’t anything good.” Still shaking his head, he added, “Bitch also stole my tricorder with the information I downloaded.”

“Shouldn’t be a total loss...” Nura consoled, “After all, didn’t you transfer that information to Sabrina?”

“Most of it—yeah.” Manuele replied, “But I wasn’t able to transmit the stuff I downloaded before Hanya stunned us—and that probably includes stuff on the mutagenic gel.”

“Damn.” Nura cursed, “We better contact Bri. She’s not going to like this...” The Bzzit Khaht sighed as she activated her comm badge, “She’s not going to like this at all.”

Waiting until they were sure that Talysa had cleared the compound, Solly and Pierson made their way down the long hallway to Ershak’s private quarters. Spotting a silvery glint several meters ahead, the red Orion chief held his hand up. Motioning for his partner to stay put, Solly silently slipped the long double edged war knife he carried out of its sheath in his boot. Stealthily creeping forward, clinging to the shadows as he moved, the senior chief paused as he drew within a few meters of his prey. A human bearing what appeared to be an Orion disruptor stood guard, pacing back and forth, a bored expression on his face. Pausing, the guard took a deep breath before turning around. Seeing his opportunity, chief struck, one arm closing around the hapless guard’s neck tightly as the blade plunged deep into the small of his back. Squeezing tighter, Solly only relaxed his hold as he heard the man’s larynx snap. Releasing his victim, the red Orion watched dispassionately as his prey slumped down to the floor. Motioning for Pierson to join him, Solly grabbed the dead guard’s hands while Pierson grabbed his feet. Moving quickly and quietly, the two hid the guard inside an alcove that Brin had spotted earlier.

Resuming their stealthy advance, Pierson held his hand up as the pair neared

where the corridor made a turn towards the left. Now taking the lead, Lynn easily matched his red Orion partner in furtiveness as he neared the junction. Taking out a small, palm-sized instrument, the ex-Starfleet officer nodded his head knowingly as he signaled his partner, holding up first two fingers and then one. Immediately understanding that Pierson was telling him that there were two guards one meter down the corridor, Solly nodded his head in acknowledgment as Lynn took out a sphere the size of a baseball. His lips turning up into an evil grin as he recognized the stun grenade for what it was, Brin nodded his head once as Pierson chuckled the object around the bend. Moments later, the two men, seeing just the traces of a brilliant flash and hearing the thumping sound of two bodies hitting the floor dashed into the corridor, weapons drawn.

Smiling as he saw the two guards, both green Orions, lying on the floor, Brin clasped Pierson on the shoulder as he pointed at the large double doors. "Ershak?" He whispered in a barely audible tone.

Nodding his head, Pierson replied in the affirmative, "Yeah. You ready?"

"Oh, yeah." Solly responded, flashing a feral grin.

"Please, Ershak..." Lynn Pierson remarked with a thin smile as Solly Brin fired his phaser at the alarm button on the Orion's bedpost, boring a hole through button and post. "Give us a reason..."

"You've finally gone mad, Pierson." The Syndicate *ahmet* growled as he glared at the two men who had intruded into his bedchamber. "You're a dead man."

"Maybe." The disgraced Starfleet officer replied nonchalantly, "But the question you should be asking yourself is whether you're going to be a dead man or not by the time we leave this room."

Seeing the dark, blank expressions on both intruders' faces, beads of sweat appeared on the corpulent green Orion's face as he spoke in as game a voice as he could muster, "Pierson...Lynn..." He pleaded, his arms outstretched, a wide grin on his face, "Think about this. You know that if you kill me the price my *ahmet'sur* will put on both your heads will bring out every bushak and mercenary between here and Vexex. You'd have to go all the way to the Delta Quadrant to know even a moment's peace."

Shrugging his shoulders, Solly remarked in a flat tone as he brandished his war-knife, "Might be worth it just to shut you up."

"Hear that, Ershak?" Pierson chuckled, "My friend's not too worried about your threat. Now..." he continued, all traces of humor vanishing from his voice as his cheek with the scar given to him by a Cardassian neuro-lash twitched, "You don't tell us what we want to know, I'm not sure I could restrain him...to be honest, I'm not sure I want to..."

"What do you want to know?" A seemingly panicked Ershak pleaded. "I'll tell you anything."

"Where's Rejak manufacturing his Corillan acid?" Lynn demanded.

"I don't know...I'm telling you the truth!" Ershak cried out as the red Orion CPO approached brandishing his double-edged blade. But..." the *ahmet* pleaded as Solly scowled at him and Pierson flashed a feral grin, "...I know of someone who might be able to tell you where it is. It's Rejak's contact with the Syndicate."

"Who is he and where can we find him?" Solly asked, leaning forward, his knife dangerously close to the green Orion's throat.

"He's a human." Ershak quickly answered, his eyes wide open as he gazed on the knife held inches from his throat. "His name is Dmitri...Dmitri Cherenkov."

"Where can he be found?" Pierson further inquired.

"Jacanta III." The green Orion replied. "I swear I'm telling you the truth."

"You know..." Pierson grinned, "This time I think he is."

"That's because he doesn't think we're going to be able to make it out of here in one piece." Chief Brin replied with a grin of his own.

"You know...I think you're right." Lynn riposted as he motioned for Ershak to get out of bed. "Here, Ershak. Ahead of us. If there's anyone on the other side of that door, you'll get it first."

"Wait!" The *ahmet* cried out, holding out his hands. "What if I show you another way you can get out? One I guarantee that's safe."

With a snort, Solly answered back, "You guarantee...that's rich."

"Wait a minute, Chief...Yeah..." Pierson said, noticing the look on Ershak's face, "...he's Starfleet. What...you didn't suspect?"

"Of course I did." Ershak responded and then, seeing the red Orion's glowering expression, quickly added, "I'm telling you the truth. This way will get you out of the compound without anyone noticing."

"I think he is." Lynn interjected, "Remember, I told you he's got boltholes all over the place here. Alright, Ershak...show us this way out. But remember..." the ex-Starfleet officer warned, "...anything goes wrong, you're the first one who dies."

"No tricks." Ershak promised, "I swear." Walking over to a painting, the green Orion moved it aside to reveal a keypad. After entering in a series of numbers, a small, door sized section of the wall slid open to reveal a narrow passageway.

Smiling, Pierson motioned for Ershak to take the lead. "After you."

"Bri?" Larkin called out from his console, "Ayenga's ship just took off..." Pausing for a moment, the Rutian acknowledged the beeping comm signal. His expression a mixture of anger and betrayal, Larkin added in a quiet voice, "You better take this, Sabrina..."

"Sabrina?" Nura's voice came through the speaker, "We've got a problem. Ayenga's double crossed us. Hanya and Banan stole the drugs and the information on the computer about them, stunned us, and rigged a device to pump something into the air filtration system. Thankfully..." the former starship captain could hear the relief in her Bzzit Khaht companion's voice as she uttered her next words, "....Manuele managed to deactivate it just in time."

"Lucky break." Sabrina responded tersely before commanding, "All right. You two get back to your runabout and meet us at these coordinates..." after rattling off a series of numbers, the Maquis leader further instructed, "...we'll meet you there." After receiving her subordinate's acknowledgement, Diaz turned her full attention to her lover, "It's Pallas V, a neutral system where Miriam Pierson keeps a small hideout." She explained and then ordered, "Tell

Rof and Krakke to drop what they're doing and get back on board. We're getting the hell out of here before half of Starfleet lands on top of us. After we get to Pallas V, I have some questions for our newest recruit and he better have the answers I want to hear."

"The way out." Ershak said as he pointed to a keypad beside what appeared to be a door. "It's outside my estate." Responding to Pierson's nod, Ershak keyed in the sequence. As the door opened with an almost inaudible whoosh, the ex-Starfleeter smirked as he pointed towards the exit. "You first."

"Of course." The green Orion, having regained a measure of his customary swagger, responded as he led the way out the door, with his captors following closely behind, their weapons drawn. "See..." he declared with outstretched arms, "I've kept my word." His voice lowering, the Syndicate under-boss added in a voice half defiant and half pleading, "Now...you keep yours."

Seeing his red Orion companion nod his head once, Pierson flashed a fat grin, "All right, Ershak, you're free to go..."

"Wait a minute." Solly quickly interrupted, a big grin on his face as well, "Aren't you forgetting something Pierson? Didn't you make a promise to someone?"

"Oh, yeah!" Lynn grinned, "Thanks Chief." Turning back to Ershak, the roguish human declared, "Before we go...a mutual friend of ours wanted me to give you something." Lashing out with surprising swiftness, Pierson kicked out, striking the green Orion square in his gonads.

As the pair walked past the kneeling, whimpering figure, Lynn easily heard Solly's quip, "So...was it good for you?"

"You know..." Pierson joked back, "It was." His laughter disappearing, the human then remarked in a much more serious tone. "We better hurry back to the bar—I just hope Dak and S'nurl were able to get the girls out of the way before Ershak's thugs hit 'em."

"I'm sure they did." The burly *Bluefin* CPO, having developed a grudging respect and even liking for the roguish human, remarked with as much

confidence as he could muster. "If not..." he then added, his voice taking on a much more dangerous tone, "...then we can always come back here and finish things."

"You can count on that." Pierson answered back in a tone just as grim as his partner's. Reaching his bar, the human shook his head in sadness as he saw the doors blown off their hinges, the charring from disruptor, particle beam, and phaser fire clearly evident.

"Dak?" Pierson called out, "S'nurl? You guys Ok?"

"In here, Boss!" A gruff human voice responded. Entering the bar, Pierson and Solly shook their heads in astonishment as they witnessed the scene. Ershak's red Orion bodyguard, Sylak lay face down near the bar, a hole the size of a Terran basketball through his midsection, while S'nurl stood over the Nausicaan, Kadrak's body with a gleam in his eye and a feral grin on his face.

"I know what you're thinking, S'nurl..." Lynn called out to his Gorn bodyguard in a voice half joking, half chiding, "...but you don't really want to do it. You remember what happened the last time you ate a Nausicaan?"

"Yeah, S'nurl..." Dak chimed in as he stepped out from around the bar, still wielding his particle beam scattergun, "You had a sour stomach and gas for an entire week..."

With a growl that quickly became a laugh, the giant Gorn stepped away from the fallen Nausicaan. "Grrr...tasted funny anyway....like sssspoiled chicken."

His smile vanishing, Pierson then asked his bartender, "What about the girls, Dak? You get 'em away ok?"

"Yeah, Boss." The husky bartender quickly replied, "They're ok. We got 'em and the stuff in your safe to your ship just like you told us too. And don't worry about Talysa—she make it there too."

"Great." The rogue sighed in relief as he addressed his next remarks to everyone in the room. "Boys, our strings played out here. We're bugging out."

"Where we going, Boss?" Dak inquired as he cleared what little money was left from the cash register.

"Pallas V." Lynn replied, "The ex has a little hidey-hole there. It's also a nice neutral port—the perfect place to set up shop." A grim expression on his face, the roguish ex-Starfleet officer added, "Then, me and Solly have to pay a man a visit."

Chapter 9

Deep Space Nine

"Hello, Ben." Captain Elizabeth Shelby greeted as she stepped off the transporter pad and on to the station's ops. platform. "We need to talk."

"I know, Liz." The chocolate-skinned station commander replied as he motioned in the direction of the elevator, "But first we have to wait for one more person. I believe he's on his way up now."

"Who..." Liz began only to pause as she saw the captain of the *Bluefin* and his first officer. Sparing a brief glare at the white haired border cutter skipper, Shelby turned her attention back towards Sisko. "What is he doing here, Ben? This is a classified operation."

"He's here because of Admiral Glover's orders." Benjamin answered back in a no-nonsense tone, "I'll explain everything in my office."

"You bet your ass you will." Shelby muttered as she strode angrily towards Sisko's office.

"Dale? Stay here. We shouldn't be too long." Captain Akinola instructed as he followed his fellow captains into the office. As Commander McBride watched his captain walk away, he heard a woman's voice call out from behind.

"Who pissed off whom first?"

"Excuse me..." Dale automatically responded as he turned his head towards the speaker, a tall, exquisitely beautiful raven-haired Trill wearing lieutenant commander's pips and the blue trim of a science officer.

"Dax." The woman responded with a friendly grin, "Lieutenant Commander Jadzia Dax. I'm the station's science officer." Her eyes twinkling mischievously, the lovely Trill explained, "I was just wondering who started it—your captain or my friend."

Chuckling softly, Dale replied in his usual slow Texas drawl, "Ma'am, it started the moment those two first saw each other."

"Well...I'm not surprised." Dax answered back with a shrug. "From what I hear, your Captain Akinola can be a pretty stubborn man, and Liz...Captain Shelby...well...let's just say when she gets a full head of steam going she can be a handful for anyone."

"Really?" The *Bluefin's* XO asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Oh, yeah." Flashing an impish grin as she gestured at an empty chair, Jadzia suggested, "Looks like you're going to be here for a while, so why don't you have a seat and we'll talk."

Taking one of the seats before Sisko's desk as Shelby took the other; Joseph began to speak only to have the station commander raise his hand first.

"Just a moment, please, Captain." Ben politely interrupted as he turned his attention to the petite, blonde captain sitting in the adjacent seat, "Captain Shelby...Captain Akinola is here because Admiral Glover assigned one of his men on a mission that appears to be related to our operation. The Admiral thought it best to bring the captain fully into the loop so that we aren't tripping all over ourselves and I agree."

"Captain..." Joseph growled as he warily regarded the DS9 commander, "All I know is that there's something going on involving my Chief of the Boat." Standing up and leaning forward, he fixed the younger man with the full force of his gaze as he demanded, "I want to know what the hell is going on and I want to know now."

Matching the older captain gaze for gaze, an unflinching Sisko answered back in a steady tone, "If you'll take your seat, Captain, I'll explain everything to both of you."

Taking the measure of the shaven-headed, goateed man standing before him, Joseph nodded his head in satisfaction as he sat back down again, "All right, Captain Sisko..." He said, his voice reflecting a growing respect for the man standing behind the desk, "I'm listening."

"Your senior chief petty officer..." Benjamin began, using the generally used regular fleet term for a ship's chief non-commissioned officer rather than the designation 'chief of the boat' more commonly used by the Border Service, "...was asked by Admiral Glover to volunteer for a covert mission..."

"I knew it!" Joseph growled as his fist struck the top of the station commander's desk. "Goddamned cloak and dagger crap." Pausing for a moment as he reined in his temper, the white haired cutter skipper nodded his head at the station commander, "Go on, Captain."

"His mission was to try to find out where Gul Rejak—the individual responsible for manufacturing much of the Corillan acid currently being smuggled into the Federation—is manufacturing his product and then get word back to us. The Admiral just received word from him that he might have a lead."

"What or who is this lead?" Akinola asked as Captain Shelby looked on interestingly.

"A man named Dmitri Cherenkov." Sisko replied, "Someone apparently reasonably high up in the Syndicate hierarchy who is acting as Rejak's Syndicate liaison."

"Cherenkov is also an interesting figure for another reason." Liz interjected. "We think that he's the Syndicate contact supplying weapons to the Kon Ma—that's what my man, Lieutenant Atoa—is investigating."

"So that's how he and you just....happened...to show up as we were being attacked by Diaz." An outraged Joseph exploded, "It was all a setup! You knew we were going to be attacked." Staring straight into Captain Shelby's eyes, Joseph said in a low, dangerous voice, "Three of my crewmen were killed in that attack...more wounded..."

"And two more were killed by Ayenga's people when she and Diaz raided a medical depot." Shelby interrupted in a somber tone. Turning her gaze away from the wrathful figure looming over her, the petite captain addressed her next remarks to Captain Sisko. "Manuele contacted us. He made it clear that Diaz was not responsible for the deaths. In fact he said that she made it clear that she wanted no killing. It was all Ayenga."

"Damn." Sisko cursed, his voice barely above a whisper. Speaking louder, he explained, "There's something else—Admiral Glover informed me afterwards that there was a quantity of mutagenic gel on that station."

"Frinx." Shelby interjected, "That means that that Ayenga's got it." Shaking her

head, a wry chuckle escaped the blonde captain's lips, "Daras and Ayenga are setting Diaz up—using her as a diversion while they set whatever plans they have in motion. She's being played here just like us."

"Nice analysis." Joseph replied in an ironic, yet grim tone, "Fat lot of good it does for the dead, though." Akinola snorted in a grim tone as Captain Shelby wheeled on him, her fists balled.

Staring straight into Akinola's eyes, Shelby responded angrily, "Yes, Captain, people were killed—good people. You want me to cry for them, I will—later! Right now though, we've got a bigger problem. We're trying to stop the killing of a lot more than those five people. You have any idea how many beings will die if the Kon Ma get those weapons from the Syndicate? Or if Ayenga finishes what she's got planned with that mutagenic gel? Or how many lives will be ruined if we don't do something to get this Corillan acid situation under control?"

"All right, Captain. You've made your point." Joseph replied with a grimace, not wanting to give ground to the young firebrand sitting next to him. Turning once again to the man behind the desk, he asked, "So what do we do now."

"Now..." Ben replied in his rich baritone voice, "...we wait. What we do next will depend on how Chief Brin and Lieutenant Atoa make out."

"Agreed." Shelby affirmed. "We also need to make sure that Ayenga, Daras Tabor, Rejak, and Cherenkov don't know that we've tumbled on to them. If they figure out that we have—they'll go to ground and we'll never catch them."

"That means..." Sisko interjected as he saw how Shelby's plan was coming together, "...we have to at least make it appear that Ayenga's plan succeeded. That we suspect Diaz of stealing the mutagenic gel and killing the people at the depot."

"Exactly." Liz confirmed, nodding her head. "We need time for our people out in the field to get us the exact location of Rejak's facilities and where and when Daras and Ayenga are planning on acting."

"A tall order..." Captain Akinola replied, a strong note of doubt in his voice. "The slightest misstep..."

"Could result in us losing both our people." Liz finished. "I know."

"We'll just have to be very careful..." Sisko interjected as he stood up, indicating that the meeting had come to an end, "...not to mess up, then."

As the captains exited Sisko's office, Captain Akinola raised an eyebrow at the sight of his first officer, Commander McBride, laughing and talking in a low voice with a lovely raven-haired Trill woman. Clearing his throat, the white-haired border skipper spoke, "I see you found a way to pass the time, XO..."

"Jadzia...I mean Lieutenant Commander Dax..." Dale grinned, "...and I were just swapping stories, sir..."

"Uh Huh..." Liz interjected with a wry grin as she regarded her best friend, "I'll bet..."

"Come on, Dale..." Joseph said as he gestured towards the elevator with his hand, "I'll fill you in on our meeting back on the ship over a cup of coffee." As an afterthought, the captain remarked, "We can also set up shoreleave rotations once we get back—looks like we might be here for a while."

Watching as the two Border Service officers exited the ops center, Liz licked her lips lasciviously at the retreating form of Commander McBride as she remarked in a low whisper, "Now that's what you call prime beef..."

Laughing, Jadzia replied with a gentle shake of her head, "He's all yours, Liz...I'm involved..."

Giving her best friend a quizzical glance, Shelby remarked in a surprised voice, "This isn't just a fling, is it? You really are serious about him, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Dax answered back in a low voice as she nodded her head once, "I am. And believe me, Betts...I'm totally *verklemt*. One part of me is really happy—I don't remember feeling this happy about someone since...oh...since Audrid, but another part of me is scared to death because I'm afraid that I won't be able to give Worf what he wants most from me...what he deserves."

"And what's that?"

"Everything." Jadzia replied softly. "Not just my love or my body, but my soul."

Her face clouding, the joined Trill haltingly confessed, "I'm not sure I'm ready to make that sort of commitment yet."

"No one says you have to." The blonde captain answered back as she draped a supportive arm around her friend's shoulders, "There's no rush—it's not like either one of you are going anywhere in the near future. Further..." she remarked with a grin, "...I wouldn't be surprised if he's feeling the same way about you. You can be pretty intimidating to a guy, you know..."

"Ha!" Dax laughed, "You're one to talk, Betts." Her laughter dying down to be replaced by a wicked grin, the dark-haired Trill whispered conspiratorially, "What about you and Dale? He looks like he'd be your type."

"Normally, you'd be right about that..." Liz responded with a laugh, "But..." she shook her head ruefully, "...he seems to be involved with Treasure and I don't think it'd be a good thing for me to get involved in a love triangle with a member of my crew and the XO of a ship whose bastard of a skipper I can't stand..."

"Yeah..." Jadzia replied with a chuckle, "I can see where that might cause problems." Her laughter fading away, the wise Trill commented sagely, "I think you also might be a little too hard on Captain Akinola. From what I got talking to Dale, he seems like he's a pretty good man. He's very professional...cares about his crew...and did as good a job as anyone could handling himself in that fight with Diaz and Ayenga."

"You're probably right, Jadz..." Liz sighed, "It's just that he reminds me so much of..."

"Your father?"

"Yeah." Shelby affirmed with another sigh, "And you know how well we get along..." Reluctantly rising to her feet, the blonde captain smiled down on her friend, "I'm afraid I have to get back to my ship now, Jadz. Lieutenant Sito and the rest of the replacement crew are coming aboard..."

"I understand, Betts..." Jadzia replied as the friends embraced, "Worf and I'll see you at Quarks this evening for dinner..."

"It's a date." Shelby grinned back as the pair parted.

"One last thing..." Dax admonished, lowering her voice, "You might want to

keep an eye on Jaxa. Worf told me that during their sparring practice together that for a moment he thought that she was actually going to try to kill him. She might not be as ready as we'd like to think."

As he looked out the picture window at the arid glacial plain, Manuele Atoa involuntarily shivered. "Looks ugly, doesn't it?"

Turning towards the source of the voice, the New Kauaian smiled as he recognized his Bzzit Khaht companion, Nura, the only member of Diaz's Maquis cell who had been even remotely civil towards him since their arrival here three days earlier following the raid on the Starfleet medical depot.

"Yeah." Manuele agreed, "It's too cold, too dry, and too lonely for me."

"That's right..." Nura smiled as she continued to engage the larger man in small talk, "You come from a tropical planet, don't you."

Nodding his head, Atoa felt a warm feeling flowing over him as he remembered the sound of waves crashing on to the shore as surfers rode the waves in. He remembered breezy evenings as his father taught him how to fire dance while his mother taught his sisters the hula. He recalled many hours spent with his brother and father hiking—the lush foliage...birds—both native and introduced species...and meeting and greeting fellow hikers on the trail. Just as he was losing himself in his memories, Nura's voice brought him back to the here and now.

"You were there just now...weren't you? Back home." Smiling at Atoa's nod of his head, the ace pilot remarked, "I can't say as I blame you—I was doing the same earlier." Her expression now taking on a more serious demeanor, the Bzzit Khaht finally revealed her purpose for intruding on her friend's thoughts, "I'm sorry, but Sabrina wants to see you—see us really." As she motioned towards the door, she further cautioned, "The boss has some questions—and I think you better have some answers."

"Come in, Mr. Atoa...have a seat." Sabrina Diaz instructed from behind her desk, her lover and fellow cell member, the Rutian, Larkin, sitting next to her, as she gestured at two empty chairs in front of her desk. As Manuele made his way to one of the chairs, he noticed that Nura took the seat next to him.

"We've haven't had much of a chance to talk since the raid, but now that we've settled in here and have some time..." she remarked in a deceptively polite tone, "...there are some things I'd like you to clarify for us."

"In other words..." Larkin interjected with a scowl, "...you better have some answers for us or you're going to be out there..." he jerked his thumb towards the wasteland on the other side of the window, "...all by yourself without food, water, or a parka."

On hearing the Rutian's threat, Manuele snorted, "Go frinx yourself, Larkin. I've taken all I'm going to take from that big mouth of yours." Matching both of his inquisitors glare for glare, the security specialist spoke in a deliberately insubordinate tone as Sabrina placed a hand on her outraged lover's wrist, not-so-gently restraining him, "And let's drop the 'good cop—bad cop' routine, Diaz. I've played this game often enough from both sides of the desk and probably know how it works better than either of you. If you've got questions...ask them and I'll answer them. If you've got concerns—then let's get them out in the open now, because I'm sick and tired of all this BS."

"Fair enough." Sabrina replied, her lips pursed. "All right, Manuele. First question: did you know that mutagenic gel was being stored there?"

"No..." Manuele answered back honestly, shaking his head. I didn't read, see, or here mention of any mutagenic gel. As I told you when we first met, the communications I read stated that the depot was holding perishable non-replicable drugs."

"And those were there." Nura added helpfully, "Just like Manny said."

"Can you tell me why they would be storing something as volatile and dangerous as mutagenic gel in an exposed depot like that?" Sabrina inquired, "I can see trying to slip in the non-replicable drugs under the radar, but mutagenic gel?" Shaking her head, the former starship captain remarked, "That stuff's just too goddamned hot to take that sort of a chance."

"I don't know." Atoa again answered truthfully.

"Make a guess." Sabrina prompted.

"Hmmm..." Running several scenarios through his mind, Manuele decided on sharing the one that was both most likely and less liable to risk blowing his

cover, "I'd say whoever was responsible was working with Ayenga..."

"You have a gift for stating the obvious." Larkin sneered.

Ignoring the hot-tempered Rutian, Manuele continued, "Could be a rogue operation using Ayenga and the Kon Ma..."

"I don't think so..." Sabrina replied, shaking her head. Remembering her last mission on the *Cuffe*, the Maquis leader then qualified her statement, "Not that there aren't people who wouldn't consider it, but I don't see them behind this. Too many uncontrollable variables here. No...someone else is doing this..." Before she could finish her statement, a voice calling out from the doorway interrupted her.

"I think I have a pretty good idea who that might be."

"Pierson!" Diaz exclaimed with a sigh, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Why...the same thing you are..." the dark-haired roguish human answered back, "...hiding out."

"Then, why don't you go somewhere else?" Sabrina quipped as Larkin stared daggers at the newcomer.

"Now...now...Sabrina..." Lynn replied, his arms out in a placatory gesture as he grinned broadly, "Is that anyway to talk to someone who might be able to help you?"

"How can you possibly help us?" Larkin sniffed.

"I'm glad you asked." Pierson replied as, taking a spare chair and turning it around, he sat, his arms crossed over the top of the chair back. "You see, Ducks..." he declared, now addressing his remarks to Sabrina, "I didn't come alone."

With a chuckle, the former Starfleet captain jibed, "Somehow I don't doubt that. I'm sure you brought at least one of your girls with you."

"All of 'em actually..." the dispossessed bar owner replied, "But they're not who I'm talking about." Standing up, Pierson made an exaggerated theatrical gesture towards a tall burly red Orion male standing in the doorway, "I'd like to introduce you to Senior Chief Solly Brin of the Border Service and my

friend.”

“A Starfleeter!” Larkin growled as he started to get out of his chair, his hand going for the phaser on his belt.

“Uh...Uh...bad move, Larkin.” Pierson cautioned as a large Gorn also appeared at the doorway, his lips turned up in a feral grin as he cradled a disruptor carbine tipped with a twelve inch long bayonet with serrated edges in his hands. “Besides being my friend, he’s also good buddies with S’nurl—and in case you forgot, S’nurl doesn’t like you.” His smile vanishing, the scoundrel turned to the woman sitting next to the angry Rutian. “Bri...better call your hound off...or you’re going to find out you’ve bitten off a hell of a lot more than you can chew.”

“I think you should hear what he has to say, Sabrina.” Another voice, this one coming from Pierson’s ex-wife, Miriam, called out from the hallway. “Besides...this is my turf and you’re all my guests...”

Putting her hand on top of her lover’s, Sabrina squeezed hard as she looked up, “Back off, Larkin. Let’s hear what he has to say.”

“Smart move, Ducks.” Pierson grinned as Larkin, slowly removing his hand from his phaser, slid back into his seat. “Besides...” he chuckled as he resumed his seat, “...like I said, we’re here to help you.”

“All right...” Diaz replied, her lips pursed, “Go ahead...I’m listening.”

Walking up to the ten new security replacements, the ebony skinned lieutenant flashed a toothy grin. “Welcome to the *Sutherland*. I’m Lieutenant Nyota Dryer, acting head of Tactical and Security. Some of you are probably aware that the *Sutherland* has something of a reputation.” Ignoring the stifled snickers, Lt. Dryer continued, “Yeah, we do like to play, but...” her smile suddenly vanishing, the security chief’s formerly cheerful tone became much more serious, “...just in case you might have forgotten or weren’t told, the *Sutherland* **is** a working starship, and believe me, Captain Shelby expects only the best from herself and this crew. If you came on board here expecting to serve on a warp-driven Risa, then you had best turn around and march your ass down to Commander Hobson and request reassignment right now because I guarantee you will not make it in this department or on this ship. You’re here because two members of this department transferred out due to

promotions, two due to other reasons, and six were either severely injured or killed in the line of duty. For those of you who can do basic math—that's sixty percent. Take a look around at the people beside you and think about it. We do our jobs—and often that means putting ourselves on the line. Is that understood?"

Upon seeing the grave faces and hearing the murmured "Yes, sirs", Nyota's smile returned, "Good. You've got a busy day in store for you. Those of you who have never served on a *Nebula*-class starship or who are fresh from the Academy will be given a quick tour of the ship courtesy of Ensign Gonsalves before your physicals and orientation. After that, you'll join everyone else in sickbay and then orientation. Following orientation, it's off to the holodeck where I'm going to put you through your paces with some PT and unarmed combat drill." Pausing just long enough to take a breath, the lieutenant ended her presentation with a simple, "Dismissed."

Spotting the blonde Bajoran lieutenant jg amongst the officers joining the tour group, Lieutenant Dryer resisted her initial impulse to call out to her. Instead, the security chief jotted a quick note on her padd, deciding that Sito Jaxa would be the first of the new transferees that she would meet one on one. *Should be an interesting meeting.* Nyota thought to herself, somewhat dreading the get-together, as she planned out the rest of her agenda. "Wish Manny were here..." the lovely woman muttered morosely to herself, "He'd be doing this while I'd be getting ready for shoreleave. Oh well..." she chuckled softly, "...how does that old saying go? With great power comes great responsibility? Well, as far as I'm concerned, whoever thought that line up can shove it up his ass."

"And this...for better or worse...is the social heart of Deep Space Nine..." Jadon Tol quipped as he ushered Lieutenant T'Ser, wearing, instead of her uniform, a stylish maroon dress-tights combination, into the bar, "Welcome to Quark's. Just be sure to keep your hand on your latinum at all times..." the dark haired Trill, also wearing civilian clothes, joked with a lopsided grin as he guided his companion to one of the upstairs tables.

Chuckling merrily at the triumphant call of "Dabo" from a lucky player at one of the tables as her eyes drifted momentarily to a rather cross looking Ferengi standing behind the bar, T'Ser remarked as she sat down at the table opposite her date, "Bet that doesn't happen here often."

Joining the emotional Vulcan in laughter, Jadon answered back, “Quark looks like he’s crapping tribbles. Now that his brother Rom’s no longer working at the bar, he can’t get away with fixing the wheel like he used to, so people are winning more often.” Smiling as their Ferengi waiter arrived, Jadon winked at his companion, “Trust me?”

“Hmmm...” T’Ser replied in a teasing voice, “...I guess...what do you have in mind?”

“First...dinner.” The joined Trill responded with a toothy grin, “Let’s see...since you’re not vegetarian...you showed me that when you inhaled that steak in the *Bluefin’s* wardroom a couple of days ago...”

“Hey...” T’Ser protested with a mock pout, “I was hungry! I was working all day nonstop getting those weapons systems back up to specs only stopping once to pee. When I saw that big juicy steak Cookie had cooked just sitting there calling out to me...”

“You couldn’t resist.” Tol interjected with a chuckle as he took the lovely Vulcan’s hand in his. “I know what you mean—your captain has a rare find in Cookie—he better hope that Captain Shelby doesn’t try to snatch him away from him.”

“Knowing how well our two captains get along with each other...” T’Ser quipped in response, “I have a feeling that Captain Akinola would open fire on the *Sutherland* if she did.”

“You’re probably right.” Jadon answered, “...but before our two captains order us to fight each other, why don’t we enjoy our dinner? Quark fixes a mean Bajoran shrimp scampi. After that, we’ll go to the holosuite and I’ll show you that program I was telling you about...”

“I think I’d like that.” T’Ser replied as she took her Trill companion’s hand in hers.

As his eyes wandered upwards, Captain Akinola frowned, his brow furrowed with concern, as he spied his Vulcan operations officer and the *Sutherland’s* Trill engineer enjoying each other’s company. Earlier, when the Captain had invited his executive officer to join him, Dr. Baxter, and Dr. Murakawa, the Chief Medical Officer of the *Sutherland*, for dinner, the Texas born first officer

had politely declined, saying that he had a horseback riding date in one of the *Sutherland's* holodecks with Ensign Barrows, one of the engineers who had helped with the *Bluefin's* repairs.

"Seems our people are getting to know each other pretty well..."

Turning his head towards the white haired doctor seated next to him, Joseph replied in a cautious tone, "So I've noticed."

"Is there a problem with that?" A female voice belonging to Dr. Murakawa, who was seated across from the two men, asked.

"No." The white haired border skipper promptly replied, shaking his head, "Of course there isn't. It's just that once all this is over our crews'll be going their separate ways and..."

"I don't think you have to worry about either Dale or T'Ser, Joseph." Calvin gently reproved, "They're both grownups and are more than capable of handling themselves in an adult relationship."

"I know that." Akinola exhaled, his sigh of resignation very quickly turning into a look of disgust as Captain Shelby entered the bar accompanied by the same Trill officer that Dale had been talking to earlier and a Klingon wearing a Starfleet command branch uniform and the three pips of a lieutenant commander. Shaking his head, Joseph's eyes took in what the scandalously clad starship captain was wearing: a pair of tight white hip-hugger pants cut low enough to reveal that she was wearing absolutely nothing underneath, a gold shimmerlyn midriff top that was backless and barely covered her breasts, two thin strings tied at the back of the neck the only things keeping it up, and black leather boots. Muttering "Starfleet Admiral's Princess" as she and her party walked past them, a faint snort of derision escaped the white-haired captain as he noticed the gold ring piercing the blonde captain's navel from which hung four small diamond chains, each about an inch to two inches in length.

Chuckling as he saw the reason for his friend's ire, Calvin quipped in his usual faux Oxford English accent, "Now, Joseph. There's no regulation against wearing body piercings out of uniform." Turning back to Dr. Murakawa, the retired admiral inquired maintaining his joking tone, "Please tell me that's the only thing other than her ears that's pierced."

Her face a deep crimson, Denise shyly responded with a slight stammer, "Ummm...I'm sorry, Doctor...I can't answer that question. Doctor-patient confidentiality, you understand." Then, coming to the defense of her captain, she addressed the *Bluefin's* skipper, "Captain Akinola—you've got Captain Shelby all wrong. I won't lie to you..." she declared as her fingers touched the gold crucifix hanging from her neck, "...I don't always approve of what she does either. But you've only seen one side of her, sir. You weren't in the Sol System during Leyton's coup. She was either in the center seat of the *Sutherland* or in her ready room throughout the entire crisis subsisting off of coffee and stims. You never saw the look on her face when the casualty figures came in from the blackout or how quickly she coordinated the relief efforts. Does she have her faults?" Denise asked and then answered her own question, "Oh yes. But then..." she continued, staring the older captain in the eyes, "...who here doesn't?"

A wide grin on his face as he nodded his head approvingly, Captain Akinola answered back, "Stand down, Doctor...I mean, Denise. You've made your point." He chuckled as he gave the Japanese-Centauran woman a paternal grin, "Didn't I tell you, Calvin, that Morgan is one lucky man?"

"Well..." Denise rejoined with a smug smile on her face as both Calvin and Joseph laughed appreciatively, "...that's another thing you can thank Captain Shelby for. She's the one who introduced us."

"Permission to come on board?" Commander Dale McBride, wearing, instead of his standard uniform, jeans, a tan Western style shirt, and a brown wide-brimmed Western hat grinned as he regarded the woman waiting for him at the transporter console.

"Come on down, Sugar!" Ensign Angela Barrows, known better by her nickname, Treasure, also in Western attire, her calico shirt, tied at the midriff, barely holding in her ample assets, grinned as she motioned for the *Bluefin's* executive officer to step off the pad. "Couldn't get us Holodeck One—Nyota's usin' it to break in the new security grunts, but I did manage to snag Holodeck Two for a few hours."

"Great." Dale grinned as the two officers briefly embraced once he stepped off the pad. "Where are we ridin'?" He asked as the couple walked through the door and into one of the many busy corridors of the *Nebula*-class starship.

"Northstar." The buxom engineer responded as she simultaneously greeted crewmen passing by. "It's a reproduction of where I used to ride when I was a kid. There's a really nice view I want to show you—it's a great spot for the picnic I packed."

"Sounds like a plan." McBride answered back enthusiastically as the pair neared a turbolift. As door closed on them in the lift, the Texas born XO commented, "I couldn't help but notice how easy-going everyone here is with each other—it's like the *Bluefin*."

"In a lot of ways, yeah." Treasure agreed, "But I'm sure we're different in other ways."

"I guess you're right." Dale replied, nodding his head as the door opened on their deck. "We're a smaller ship and crew, so we rub shoulders with each other quite a bit..."

"I guess you guys have to get along with each other." Treasure noted, "Can't have anyone makin' waves with such a small crew. You got personality clashes, then whoever's involved either gotta work 'em out or you gotta work 'em out for 'em real quick. It's a lot different with the *Suthy*. Take me and my roommate..." the blonde explained as the couple neared their destination, "...me and Maria are total opposites. She can't stand clutter and me—well I'll just throw my clothes any ol' place when I change. Figure I'll pick 'em up later like when I go to bed or whenever. So we usually try not to be in the room too much at the same time." A lecherous grin crossing her face, Treasure joked, "That's a lot easier now that she's shacking up with that man o' hers." Stopping as they reached a door, Angela pressed a button and then spoke, "Computer? Initiate program Barrows Three."

"Program initiated." The computer replied as the doors slid open, revealing a paddock with two horses already tacked up with Western saddles and bridles. Approaching a beautiful dark gold palomino with a snow-white blaze on its snout, mane, and tail, Treasure cooed as she gently petted the animal, "Hey Lightning...you ready to hit the trail, girl?" Giggling as the horse took a sugar cube from her hands, Angela tilted her head slightly in the direction of a chestnut and white appaloosa. "That's Rex..."

"He's a beauty." Dale remarked, nodding his head appreciatively as he approached the animal. "Are they based on horses you know?"

"Yeah." Treasure replied in a fond voice, "Lightning's my horse and Rex

belonged to my Pa.” Offering part of a carrot stick to Dale, the blonde ensign fed the rest of it to her horse as she spoke, “Give that to Rex—he likes carrots.”

“Ok.” Dale smiled as the appaloosa gelding gratefully devoured the piece of raw carrot. “Looks like he’s got spirit.” The experienced horseman remarked.

“Oh yeah.” Treasure grinned, “Figured you’d like a horse that knew his own mind.”

“You’re right.” The Texan replied, his smile still on his face, “I think horse and rider should be a team.”

“Well...” Angela smiled as she gazed out into countryside, “...why don’t we mount up and get going. There’s a lot I want to show you.”

“Let’s go.” Dale exclaimed as he expertly mounted his ride, “Don’t mind telling you I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

Watching as the youthful Bajoran handily dispatched her opponent in an unarmed combat drill, Lieutenant Dryer stroked her chin. “Lieutenant Sito?” The ebony skinned acting security chief called out, “A minute please?”

“Yes, sir?” Lieutenant, junior grade Sito Jaxa responded as she trotted over to where the temporary department head stood.

“That was a risky move you pulled just then. If you’d have misjudged his lunge by the slightest of margins, he’d have stabbed you with that knife, and if you’d have miscalculated your attack, you’d have tagged him.”

“I knew what I was doing.” The blonde woman curtly replied, “I saw the opening and I took it. Isn’t that what you said we’re here for?” Jaxa asked defiantly, “To get the job done—even if we have to take risks.”

“Yeah...” Nyota responded thoughtfully, “But you’re not going to get the job done if you get yourself and maybe someone else like me killed in the process. Taking risks is one thing—being reckless is something else.” With a shrug of her shoulders, Sito picked up a towel on the floor, revealing the tattoo on her arm. At once recognizing what the body art was, Nyota asked in a casual voice, “What’s the Andorian vengeance tattoo all about?”

"Nothing." The young Bajoran answered back, "Just thought it suited me."

Her face taking on a rare hard expression, the ebony skinned security chief leaned almost into the younger woman's face as she spoke in a soft, earnest voice, "If you're looking to settle any scores, you better tell me now, 'cause I'm not about to let you get anyone killed just so that you can get revenge. You read me, Mister?"

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Jaxa responded in an almost surly tone, "Permission to be dismissed? I have an appointment with Counselor Freedman."

"Permission granted." Nyota replied with a nod of her head, "Go grab a shower." Watching as the younger woman walked away, Lieutenant Dryer shook her head. *That woman is either going to work it out...Nyota thought...or she's going to get herself and maybe a whole lot more people killed in the process.*

"This is nice." T'Ser sighed contentedly as she relaxed in Jadon's arms in the warm water of the hot spring. "Where did you get this program from again?"

"An acquaintance of mine—Jadzia Dax." The Trill engineer replied as he gently caressed the Vulcan woman's shoulders. "Remember the dark haired woman coming into the bar with Captain Shelby and the big Klingon? Well—that's Jadzia."

"Oh..." T'Ser replied somewhat self-consciously as she recalled the statuesque Trill woman. "Were the two of you..."

"No." Jadon laughed. "Really it's our hosts—Rena and Curzon—who knew each other. To make a long story short—Curzon threw a pass at her and Rena shot him down. I don't think the old guy ever really got over it..." The Trill laughed.

Joining her companion in laughter, T'Ser commented, "You know...I don't think that's something I can ever really understand—how you can keep all those memories from all those lifetimes straight. Doesn't it get confusing at times?"

A roguish smile on his face, Jadon responded, "Remember Suvak? Moran's friend that I told you about awhile back?" Seeing the Vulcan woman's nod of her head, Tol continued his story, "Well, he asked Moran that very same question. The answer..." Jadon continued, getting somewhat serious, "...is yeah...you do when you're first joined. You know, when you're selected as a candidate for joining you go through a very rigorous process that's supposed to prepare you for the experience. Well..." the joined Trill reminisced, "It doesn't...at least not completely. It took some time for me to get everyone sorted out, but once I did...well...it really is a joining." Changing the subject, Jadon then asked, "What about you? There aren't a whole lot of *v'tosh ka'tur* running around—in fact, I've only run into one other as Jadon and then there was Suvak, of course. Do you catch a lot of grief from the more traditional Vulcans?"

Sighing, T'Ser replied, "At times. Mostly they just ignore me unless logic dictates..." she said, uttering the last two words in the cold monotonic voice of the stereotypical Vulcan, "...they speak with me." She lamented, "There are plenty of times though that I get the disdainful look...the raised eyebrow. Don't kid yourself—Vulcans can express contempt and scorn in a whole lot of wonderfully subtle and logical ways." Shaking her head, she concluded somewhat bitterly, "Sometimes I think we're the most hypocritical species in the galaxy."

Almost irresistibly drawn to the now vulnerable Vulcan woman as he gently embraced her, their lips drawing closer, he gently whispered as he kissed her, "I don't think you are."

As their horses grazed contentedly on a grassy patch, Dale stretched out on the ground, smiling with satisfaction as he looked up at the blue sky. "It's pretty..." he said as counted the white clouds in the sky, "...sorta reminds me of Palo Duro."

"Yeah." Treasure sighed contentedly as she lay down next to the handsome commander. "It's been a while since I've been home."

"Tell me about Northstar." Dale prompted, "I know a little, but not a whole lot."

Chuckling softly, the buxom engineer answered back, "Sure, Hon...what do you want to know?"

"Well..." Dale drawled as he chewed on a blade of grass, "Everything."

"Ok." Treasure laughed, "You probably know that Captain Archer discovered it while he was huntin' down the Xindi back in the 22nd century. A couple of years after that, another Starfleet ship came bringin' in supplies and people and offered to take whoever of us who wanted to go back to Earth. Some of us took 'em up on that offer, but most of us stayed—it's home, you know? We were far enough away that we didn't get caught up in the Romulan War, and after that..." she shrugged, "...we settled into life in the Federation once it formed and everyone was convinced that we'd stopped mistreating the Skagarans."

"That's right." Dale remarked, "The Skagarans had abducted a bunch of humans from the Old West, didn't they?"

"Yeah." Treasure replied, her normally upbeat tone now more subdued, "Then the humans rebelled and turned the tables on them. It wasn't until Captain Archer that they began to be treated fairly and it took some time after that before the Skagarans were fully treated as equals. Now..." she said, her smile returning, "...I don't think you can find anyone from Northstar who isn't part human or Skagaran. Hell, I'm one-eighth Skagaran on my momma's side." Nuzzling up closer to her companion, Angela inquired, "What about you? Any fond memories of home?"

"Many..." Dale smiled warmly. "I guess what I remember most was when we had dinner on the grounds at the church we went to. Palo Duro Baptist Church." The Texan exclaimed with a note of pride in his voice, "It's not big or fancy like what the original Notre Dame must have looked like when it was standin', but the people made it special. Every Easter, all the families that went to the church would bring a dish and after the service, we'd have an Easter egg hunt and dinner on the grounds. I remember running all over the place trying to get the most eggs, 'cause whoever got the most eggs got a basket filled with candy, and then tradin' with the other kids for the colors I didn't get."

"So..." Treasure prompted as she gently caressed McBride's cheek, "Did you get the most eggs."

"Of course." Dale responded with a smirk, his heart stirring as he caught a

whiff of the luscious blonde's perfume.

"Well then..." Treasure grinned as her lips grazed his, "Guess it's time for you to get your prize."

Bidding her lover a sleepy goodnight, T'Ser, slipping on her dress and tights, quietly exited the Trill engineer's cabin on the *Sutherland* where the pair had soon found themselves after their holosuite kiss. In another cabin, Dale, giving a slumbering Treasure a kiss on the forehead while almost simultaneously suppressing a chuckle at the sound of her snoring, also dressed silently before making his exit. Reaching the starship's transporter room at almost the same time, the two *Bluefin* officers, one blushing green and the other red, quickly averted their glances before Dale gathered the courage to utter the first words.

"Mornin' Lieutenant."

"Morning, Sir." T'Ser responded haltingly, her eyes looking everywhere but at her superior officer.

"Ummm..." Dale stammered, not sure how to proceed, "I guess we should return to the ship. We go on duty in a half hour, you know."

"Yes, Sir." T'Ser replied, looking down as she stepped up on the transporter pad, joining the commander.

"Energize."

The *Sutherland's* transporter operator, watching the byplay between the two officers with mild interest, shook her head as the pair dematerialized on their pads. *Wonder if those two'll ever get it together?* She thought idly to herself as she returned to her duties.

"You're being played, Sabrina..." Pierson grinned smugly as he regarded the lean and dangerous former Starfleet captain seated behind the desk. "You and all the rest of your people."

"How? Where's your proof?" The Maquis leader demanded, her eyes narrow

slits as she spoke.

"Connect the dots, Ducky." Pierson chuckled as Diaz visibly cringed at his use of that particular nickname. "Do you honestly think that it was just a freak coincidence that the hold of that freighter smuggling in your boyfriend and Sweetie over there..." he asked, winking at Nura, "...just happened contain Corillan acid as well? And what about Ayenga and the rest of her pals in the Kon Ma?" Shaking his head, the rogue remarked, "They've really come through for you recently, haven't they? First, there was that raid to rescue your people." Shaking his head, the former Starfleet officer opined, "Messy business that. Ayenga trashed that colony; a border cutter is damaged with people killed and its prisoners beamed out, and who gets the blame? That's right—you. And...to be honest..." he quipped with a shrug of his shoulders, "...they're right about that one. But what about Ayenga? I'm not hearing either her name or that of the Kon Ma being mentioned in connection with the raid. It's like they weren't even there. And that depot raid? At least two deaths and from what I've heard, if it weren't for the new guy over there..." he said, jerking his thumb towards Manuele, "...you'd all be either in a Starfleet brig or dead. Now, you've got a good chunk of both the regular Fleet and the Border Service wanting a piece of your ass..." he finished, flashing a brief leer, "...and I don't mean in the good way, while Ayenga and the Kon Ma are able to pretty much do as they please."

"I'd tumbled on to the fact that we were being set up a while back..." Sabrina reluctantly admitted, "...but..." she said, staring accusingly at Atoa, "...I figured that Starfleet was behind it...over what happened between me and Glover..."

"Oh..." Pierson chuckled, "...I'm sure that Terrence is still pissed at you and you can bet your ass that he's looking to pay you back..." he concluded, shaking his head, "...and yes, there is at least one Starfleet person that I know of in this room, and I'll bet my lucky rabbits' foot that there is at least one other, but you and I aren't the targets here. Well..." he then qualified, a thoughtful look on his face, "...you might have originally been the target, but I have a feeling our mystery Starfleeter..." he smirked, "...has sussed out by now that you're not the real target either. Frankly speaking...we're too small potatoes. In fact..." the rogue's grin grew wider, "...I have a feeling our mystery man would help you out if you were to ask him nicely enough."

"All right, Pierson..." Sabrina replied with a frown as she glared at Atoa, "Tell me why I should even bother asking him or your Border Dog friend and any other unnamed Starfleeters here for help. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't shove all of you out into that desert." She demanded, jerking her

head towards the arid landscape outside the window.

Smirking as he shook his head, the roguish human answered back, the faintest hint of menace in his voice as the scar on his cheek twitched, "Cause you're too smart, Ducks. Try and you'll find yourself in a fight that you won't win. Even if you take us all out—and don't forget..." he reminded as he gestured towards the hallway behind the door, "...I've got S'nurl and Dak out there waiting for us—I promise you that if we start shooting, you and your boyfriend won't be around to celebrate once the dust clears. You want to take your mad-on out at someone..." he finished, all traces of amusement vanished from his face, "...then take it out on the people who set you up."

"Fine." Sabrina agreed, standing down. "Who besides Ayenga is responsible and what sort of deal do you have in mind?"

His grin returning, Pierson replied flatly, "As for who—it's Gul Rejak and the Orion Syndicate probably working with the Kon Ma. Why? I don't know—but I think it'd be fun to find out. So...what do you say, Ducks?"

Coming to a decision, Sabrina heaved a sigh, "All right...let's talk about it. But first..." she declared, her attention once again fixed on Manuele, "I want to know where everyone's loyalties lie."

"Fair enough." Pierson answered back, "Here's my suggestion—a temporary truce between any Starfleeters here and the rest of us. We work with each other until we get this concluded. No backstabbing...no secret coded transmissions when the other guy's not looking...no set ups. We work as a team. Agreed?"

Watching as first the red Orion, then Diaz, and then each of the rest of her people slowly nodded their heads, Manuele decided, by nodding his head as well, to accept the truce. "All right." The New Kauaian declared, trying as hard as he could to blank out the look of betrayal on the face of the Bzzit Khaht sitting next to him, "...since we have a truce and since you probably knew all along, Sabrina. Yes, I was sent to infiltrate you and yes, I believe now that you and your group are not behind the smuggling of Corillan acid." Turning his attention to Pierson, Atoa inquired, "How do we prove that the Syndicate is tied up in all this?"

Smiling, the roguish human replied, "I'm glad you asked that. It just so happens that me and Solly just happen to have the name of Rejak's and

probably Ayenga's Syndicate contact. Does anyone here know a human by the name of Dmitri Cherenkov?"

On hearing his brother's name, Ivan Cherenkov, who had long ago infiltrated Diaz's cell under the name of Danyor Krakke, held his breath. His loyalties now torn three ways—between Starfleet, the Maquis cell leader whom he had grown to respect, and his family, the Terranovan sat listened quietly as the conference continued. Ever the loner, Ivan finally realized the truth behind the old expression, 'all alone in a crowd' as he gazed on those in the room with him. *Comrades and enemies...all the same...who to choose...who to betray...*

Chapter 10

“Since we’re now one big happy dysfunctional family...” Pierson quipped as his eyes took in the glowering faces of Sabrina Diaz’s Maquis group, “I can tell you what my plan is. We’re going to need two teams: one to squeeze Cherenkov to find out what he knows and the second to do the same with Tabor. So...who goes with me to pay our friend Dmitri a visit?” Smirking, the defrocked Starfleet officer pointed first to the red Orion standing nearby, “Let’s see I’ll take Chief Brin, Dak, and...”

“Me.” Krakke spoke up.

“Why?” Pierson asked, giving the man an appraising look.

“Because my price for cooperating with you is that one of my people goes along with you.” Sabrina interjected. “I see no problem with Danyor coming along with your group—do you?”

“No.” Pierson grinned, “Now...who’s going to pay Tabor a visit.”

“Me.” Manuele announced immediately.

“Ok...” The roguish ex-bar owner replied, nodding his head, “Makes sense...we have one ‘Fleeter on each team. So Bri...” Pierson jibed, the smug grin remaining on his face, “Who’re you going to pick to keep an eye on our friend here?”

“I’ll go.” Nura declared, sparing a withering glare for the New Kauaian.

“Fine.” Sabrina replied, nodding her head in assent. “Who are you sending, Lynn?”

“S’nurl.” The rogue answered back immediately. Turning to Atoa, he whispered as his eyes drifted momentarily in the direction of the now sullen Bzzit Khaht, “You might not think it, but I’m doing you a favor. It can be awful handy having a big Gorn with a big gun and bigger knife watching your back.”

“All right.” Diaz declared, “Both teams will leave as soon as possible—and I don’t expect either team to come back until you’ve got something solid.”

"Everything is ready from our end." Dmitri Cherenkov stated to the Cardassian gul seated across from him as he sipped his vodka. "Tabor's people will pick up the shipment of Corillan acid and pay us. Once the account is posted in our Ferengi bank account, we'll deliver the arms."

"What about Ayenga?" Gul Rejak inquired as he swirled the kanar in his glass. "I still don't trust her."

"Nor do I." The Syndicate representative concurred. "As we've already discussed, while Tabor is a realist, Ayenga is an idealist and a fanatic—a dangerous combination. And now...to make matters worse...she's obtained a quantity of mutagenic gel. We'll need to ensure that she is no longer a threat. And then there's the matter of Diaz..."

A sly grin appearing on his face, the corrupt gul declared in a confident voice, "Leave that to me. I think I know how to simultaneously deal with both of our problems."

"Very well." Cherenkov agreed as he downed the last of his vodka, "I'll leave that to your capable hands." Standing up, the Terra Nova native regarded his business partner with a calculated grin as he offered him his hand, "I'll see you on Taris III in a few days. If something should come up, I'll be on Elatra IV."

Standing up as well, Gul Rejak flashed an equally insincere smile at his associate as he took his hand, "Relax, Dmitri. Soon, we'll both have what we want. Just relax and enjoy the gift I've left for you in your quarters." Exiting the lounge, Rejak said his farewells, "Until next week."

"I figured something like this would happen." Morgan Bateson said as he shook his head. "Those are two of the most stubborn, pig-headed people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing."

"The problem is—it's like they're going out of their way to get under each other's skin." Denise Murakawa sighed as she spoke to the image of her long-distance romance on the computer screen in her office. Shaking her head, she remarked with a crooked grin, "They remind me more of battling relatives than two starship captains."

Bateson answered back, a serious note to his voice beneath the surface joviality, "You're not too far off the mark, Denise."

Her laughter vanishing as well, the Japanese-Centauran doctor pleaded, "Tell me all about it, Morgan."

Sighing as he regarded the image of the beautiful woman on his monitor, Morgan nodded his head, "All right...but get comfortable. This is going to take a while."

"Welcome to Elatra IV—the Urinal of the Universe." Pierson grinned as the two other members of his team, Solly Brin and Danyor Krakke, entered the tiny motel room that the defrocked Starfleet officer had rented. "Don't worry..." the dark haired rogue added as his guests took their seats on a worn couch, "...Dak and I have swept the area for bugs or sensors—it's as clean as a two hundred slip an hour hooker's behind."

"From what I know of some of the two hundred slip an hour hookers I've seen ..." Senior Chief Brin snorted, "...that's not saying much." His grin vanishing, the red Orion, now all business, inquired, "So...when do we make our move?"

"Soon." Pierson flatly replied, "Very soon. My sources tell me that Cherenkov has just gotten back from a meeting with Gul Rejak. We'll give him a day or so to get comfortable—and then we'll grab him. We'll get to work tomorrow." The dispossessed bar owner quipped as he poured an amber colored liquid from a decanter into four glasses, "For now though, we might as well just sit back and relax."

"Nura..." Manuele declared as he turned his head towards the Bzzit Khaht woman seated in the copilot's seat next to him, "...whatever you might think—I didn't betray you."

Shaking her head, the Maquis snorted, "And what were you going to do? Give Sabrina the Starfleet Medal of Valor?"

"Do you know what that stuff does to a person?" Atoa answered back, shaking his head somberly. "Once you've seen someone hooked on Corillan acid...seen them turned into a shell...or worse...of what they once were..."

"I'm not interested." Nura rejoined, her eyes narrowed into slits, "All I know is that Sabrina would never have done anything like that and..."

"And you and Larkin were found on a ship smuggling that stuff into the Federation." Atoa interjected, pressing his case. "What would you think if you were in Starfleet's position?" Taking a more conciliatory posture, Manuele urged, "Why don't you take a moment and look at things from a broader perspective. There's a lot more going on here than just the Maquis and their cause..."

"I don't care about the other stuff!" Nura fired back as she got up out of her seat, "All I care about is kicking the devil-spawn Cardassians off my home. Anyone—and anything—that helps in accomplishing that—I'm with. Anything...or anyone..." she declared, her voice dropping lower and considerably chillier, "...trying to prevent that...is my enemy."

Watching as the young Bzzit Khaht strode angrily to the back of the runabout, Manuele shook his head as the large Gorn, S'nurl, who had been quietly listening to the conversation remarked in a low, raspy tone, "Be careful, Sssstarfleet. You are her enemy."

Sighing, Manuele answered back, "No, S'nurl. She's just upset and angry right now. Once she's thought things through, she'll calm down."

Shaking his head, the Gorn bouncer rasped, "You are wrong, human. She thinks you have betrayed her and those she loves. She will neither forgive nor forget." Eyeing the Bzzit Khaht as she picked up a drink from the replicator in the back, S'nurl left the security officer with one final piece of advice, "My people have a saying: A female is most dangerous when she thinks her nest is being threatened."

Filling Chief Brin's glass with more of the amber liquor, Pierson asked, half jokingly, as the other two members of their group made their way back to their beds, "So Solly...you ever think about leaving the service? I could use a man like you. Pay's good...hours not too bad...and..." he winked, "...you've already sampled some of the fringe benefits."

"I don't think so." The red Orion replied as he downed the fiery liquid in one gulp. "I like it where I am just fine."

“Oh well...” Pierson grinned, shrugging his shoulders, “...I had to try.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to...” Solly ventured as he refilled both glasses, “Why did you desert? You were first officer on the *Devonshire*. From what I’ve read about you in your file, you’d have had your fourth pip by now if you’d have stayed in.” His exposed canines giving his toothy grin a frightening appearance to someone unfamiliar to the red Orion, the chief continued, “Was it because of what happened on Allios II?”

“What do you know about Allios II?” Pierson replied guardedly, his eyes narrowing into slits as he sipped his drink.

“Only what was in your dossier,” Solly answered back. “Allios II was a colony in the disputed zone. Your ship answered a distress call from the colony...”

“And when we arrived we found they’d been massacred.” The former Starfleet officer interrupted, “Every man, woman, and child. I led the landing party. The Cardassians killed them all...”

“There was no proof...” Solly began only to be cut off by an angry Pierson.

“It was the damned Cardies! You’re no fool Chief—you know it had to be them.” Exhaling, Chief Brin, now just sipping his drink, stayed silent as the man sitting next to him at the bar continued his tale. “It was so efficient...they were all lined up facing the wall. All of the colonists were accounted for. You know as well as I do, Solly, that if it were Orions or Ferengi slavers they’d have at least taken the younger women and children. But they didn’t...they killed them all.”

“And then what happened?” Solly asked in a quiet voice.

“And then nothing.” Pierson replied in a grim tone. “Starfleet did absolutely nothing. It was completely covered up. You see...the Federation and the Cardassians were just about to close the deal on the demilitarized zone and the diplos on both sides didn’t want something as ugly as a massacre queering their peace treaty. So it was all hushed up and ‘unknown pirates’ got the blame. A few months later, the Cardies even executed a few Ferengi ‘pirates’ who ‘confessed’ to carrying out the massacre—Cardassian justice at its finest. Anyway...” Lynn sighed, “...a few days later, someone claiming to be from ‘Starfleet Intelligence’—let’s just say that I have my suspicions as to who he really works for and leave it at that—came by and made it very clear to the

captain and the rest of the senior officers and those on the landing party what would happen should the truth slip out. After that and the little demonstration the Cardies put on, the ex and I decided we'd had enough and took off and I haven't looked back since."

"So..." Solly probed further, "What made you leave the Maquis and go into the bar, pimping, and smuggling business?"

"That...my friend..." Pierson chuckled as he downed the last of his drink, "Is a story for another time." Getting up and stretching, the human yawned, "For now, though, I think I'm going to turn in. I'd suggest you do the same. The next few days are going to be busy."

"So..." Nura asked, with just the faintest traces of a sneer, "How do you plan on us getting into Tabor's base?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Manuele grinned, "I figured I'd just go up to the front door and announce ourselves."

"You're joking!" A dumbfounded Nura exclaimed, and then shaking her head when she saw that the man sitting next to her was serious, whispered as the large Gorn standing in the back flashed a predatory grin, "You're not joking. You're serious."

"Of course." Atoa answered back, this time with a straight face. "As far as Tabor's concerned, we're after Ayenga—not him. And he'll continue to think that way—unless we give him reason not to." Looking the Bzzit Khaht straight in the eyes, Manuele declared in a grave tone, "If you really want to get back at me, Nura, this'll be your chance. You won't have to worry about wasting your time scheming or backstabbing—you can do it to my face. Or...you can wait and see if I'm telling you the truth or not. It's your call." With that, the New Kauaian turned away from his leathery skinned companion and turned his attention back to the runabout's controls. "We should be there in about half an hour."

Entering the Station gym with Chief Deryx, Ensign Bralus, and the rest of his *Shodokan* class, all wearing ghis, Captain Joseph Akinola, also wearing a ghi, tied with a black belt, paused at the doorway, his eyebrows raised in both curiosity and interest as he saw a Bajoran woman and the Klingon Starfleet officer, Lieutenant Commander Worf engaged in a fast and furious martial

arts contest.

“Captain?”

Turning his head towards the Trill science officer calling out to him, Joseph quickly recalled her from their brief meeting in the Station’s operations center a few days ago. “Lieutenant Commander Dax?” The *Bluefin* skipper responded as he kept his eye on the contest.

“Yes, Sir.” The raven haired beauty affirmed, her smile immediately lighting up the room.

“Mok’bara?” Joseph inquired curiously, nodding his head in approval as the Bajoran skillfully blocked the Klingon warrior’s slashing attack, turning the force of her opponent’s attack against him.

“Yes.” The Trill responded with obvious pride in her voice. “Worf is a *pln’a* of the first order.”

Nodding his head in appreciation at the dedication and skill it took to reach such a high rank, Akinola remarked approvingly, “He’s definitely a practitioner of the raised claw school while his opponent seems to prefer the spear thrust technique.” Turning towards his class, the wizened skipper pointed out, “I want you people to watch closely. While possessing some similarities, Mok’bara isn’t quite like *Shodokan*. Mok’bara movements are faster...rougher.”

“Not a bad comparison.” Dax observed before apologizing, “Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t know our time had expired.”

Before she could call out to her friends, Joseph quickly interjected, shaking his head. “No...that’s all right. Actually we’re a little early.” Regarding the two contestants with a practiced eye, the martial arts master remarked, “They’re going at it pretty hard—even for Mok’bara,”

“Yeah.” Chief Deryx chimed in, “If he’d been just a bit slower or clumsier in his move...”

“I know.” Jadzia responded, a note of worry in her voice. “But Worf insists that this is the best way for Jaxa to learn to control her anger...”

Winching as the Bajoran woman connected with a glancing blow that would

have felled an ordinary human, Joseph rejoined with a note of concern in his own voice, "Perhaps...provided she doesn't kill someone first."

Regaining control as her fist glanced off her sparring partner's side, Lieutenant Sito stepped back, assuming the waiting stance as did her opponent. Recognizing his par'Machai, waving to him from near the doorway, Worf bowed ritualistically to his opponent, declaring, "I think it is best that we end this session. Others desire to use the gym."

"Aye, Sir." Sito responded, bowing as well. As she straightened up, she apologized, her voice taking on a despondent tone, "I'm sorry, Sir. I did it again."

"What do you apologize for?" The burly Klingon replied as he draped a towel around his shoulders. "Hitting me—or losing control?"

"Both...Sir..." Lieutenant Sito responded, somewhat sheepishly as she walked beside her former supervisor towards the exit.

"You have nothing to apologize for in hitting me. It is I who am at fault for not guarding myself properly." The Klingon warrior declared before sagely adding, "Losing control, however...that is another matter. I accept your apology for that. Remember always, a true warrior fights not only with her body and heart, but with her mind as well."

Nodding his head approvingly as he heard the Klingon's last words, Joseph almost missed the Trill woman's introductions.

"Worf? You remember Captain Akinola, don't you?"

"Of course, Sir." The lieutenant commander greeted, nodding his head respectfully, Jaxa doing likewise. "This is Lieutenant Sito Jaxa from the *Sutherland*."

"Commander." Joseph nodded back in return. "Lieutenant. You both exhibited fine technique."

"Thank you, Sir." Both officers responded in unison, the wise border skipper at once noticing the Bajoran woman's body language—how she subconsciously kept a distance between her and all of the men in the room—even her Klingon friend.

"This is a Shodokan class I lead on the *Bluefin*. You're welcome to sit in if you'd like?" Joseph invited, smiling as he spotted the gleam in the Klingon's eyes.

"I'm sorry..." Lieutenant Sito replied, "But I have duty in half an hour."

"And I..." Dax responded with a mischievous smirk, "Have a date with Captain Shelby and Lieutenant Rysyl in one of Quark's holosuites." Reaching up on tiptoes to give her lover a peck on the cheek, Dax smiled as she turned to leave, "You go ahead and play with the boys, Worf—I'll make your excuses to Liz..."

"Thank you." The big Klingon responded, almost bashfully, his voice also tinged with relief. "Much as I love you, par'Machai, I was not looking forward to spending the afternoon in a mud bath."

Watching as the lovely Trill walked away laughing alongside Lieutenant Sito, Joseph commented with a grin, "A mud bath?"

"Yes." The Klingon responded in a rumbling tone that was part growl and part laugh, "A mud bath."

"Well..." Joseph laughed, "At least there's no mud here."

"Good." Worf responded in a deadpan manner. "I hate mud."

"I believe we did it!" Cal Baxter exclaimed, slapping his two assistants, Dr. Denise Murakawa and Lieutenant Commander on their shoulders. "That's the right sequence."

"It's working." Denise replied with a smile on her face as she observed the viral sequences being successfully disrupted. "I'll run a few more tests to be sure, but if they go the way this one does, I'd say we have a vaccine."

"There is another problem, though." The elderly Vulcan science officer interjected, "If Ayenga is in possession of mutagenic gel."

The wind seemingly knocked out of her, the *Sutherland's* Japanese-Centauran CMO looked up, her dread reflected in her eyes, "If she bonds her virus with the mutagenic gel into a biogenic weapon..."

“The results would be catastrophic.” A suddenly glum Dr. Baxter concluded. “The rate of mutation and the possible permutations would be...”

“Astronomical.” Varok completed. “We cannot allow Ayenga to either complete or use a weapon of this magnitude—assuming that that is her goal.”

“I think it’s safe to assume that she intends to do just that.” Calvin declared, “We need to inform Captain Sisko and the others about this—now.”

Immediately on rematerializing in the empty room where they were told to transport down to by Daras Tabor, Manuele and the other two members of his group were met by a pair of Bajorans, each carrying Klingon disruptor rifles leveled at them. Remaining motionless as one of the Bajorans removed their weapons while the other stood guard, Atoa declared, sparing his Bzzit Khaht a sideways glance, “We were sent by Sabrina...now take us to Daras.”

The guard standing watch tapping what appeared to be a comm badge on his chest spoke into it. Nodding his head in response, he spoke again and then turned his attention back on Atoa and the others. Motioning towards the door with his disruptor, the guard ordered, “This way.” After being led through an interminable maze of tunnels, corridors, and false rooms, Manuele and his group finally came to a halt before a door. As the door slid open, one of the guards jerked his head towards it, “In there.”

Leading the way, with Nura and S’nurl slightly behind and on either side of him, Atoa entered a large office. Inside, a Bajoran man with brown hair sat behind a desk. Getting up as his guests entered, the terrorist leader frowned, “You must be the people Diaz sent.” Motioning at the chairs in front of his desk, he invited, “Have a seat...” Pausing for a moment as he took in the sight of the large Gorn accompanying Manuele, he amended, “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid your friend will have to remain standing. I regret we have no chairs that can accommodate him. As you probably already know, my name is Daras Tabor and we have a lot to talk about. Ayenga hasn’t just betrayed you...she’s betrayed me as well.”

“How so?” Manuele asked guardedly as he sat down, gesturing for Nura to do likewise.

“I didn’t know about the mutagenic gel.” The Kon Ma terrorist glibly lied, “But

somehow she did. She's planning on using it along with a virus she's genetically engineered to contaminate Rejak's Corillan acid production facilities, along with the acid we're picking up to smuggle into the Federation. Needless to say, this can cause unwanted complications with Starfleet—complications we don't want at this time." Leaning over in his chair, the Bajoran declared, "Not that I give a Prophet's damn about Starfleet or the Federation—but now is a delicate time and neither Sabrina nor I need Starfleet barging in here. We've almost got what we want—the Cardassians are being pressured hard by the Klingons, our raids are hurting them and we're beginning to drive them off our lands, and..." he smiled, "...soon we Bajorans will be reclaiming our rightful birthright."

Unable to resist the urge to see if he can pry out more information, Manuele inquired with a smile, "If you're not looking to attract Starfleet's attention, Tabor, why are you attempting to smuggle such a large amount of acid into the Federation. If I were a Vulcan, I'd say that was...illogical."

Chuckling, the Kon Ma leader responded, "Under normal circumstances you'd be right. But..." he continued, his laughter fading away, "...it's a necessary risk. If we succeed...then we'll have accomplished our task—the Cardassians will be driven out of this entire sector—not just driven out, but humiliated—and Bajor's prosperity will be assured for all time."

Sensing that pressing his host further might prove counterproductive, Atoa then asked, "So...what do you want us to do about it?"

"Ayenga has to be removed from the equation." Daras flatly announced, "Or all is lost." Handing a padd to the New Kuaian, the terrorist leader declared, standing up, "She's probably hiding here. Get to her...take her out...before she's able to put her plans into motion. It will take her some time to prepare, but not much. If I were you, I wouldn't waste too much time."

Standing up as well, Manuele replied as he and his compatriots made ready to leave. "Very well, Tabor. Thank you."

Waiting until his guests had left the room and the door had slid shut, Daras Tabor activated his computer monitor. Smirking as he regarded the Cardassian gul on the screen, the terrorist leader declared, "I've sent our hara cats after their prey. But what if Ayenga defeats or eludes them?"

"Not to worry." The corrupt gul stated with an oily grin. "I've arranged for a warm...reception...for whoever survives the encounter. I shall meet you at

Taris III in a few days and we will complete our transaction. Soon...my friend...we will have both accomplished our goals and in the process make ourselves rich beyond avarice."

As the runabout sped away from Tabor's asteroid hideaway, Manuele turned towards the Bzzit Khaht woman seated next to him. "So...Nura...you had the perfect opportunity...why didn't you point me out to Tabor?"

Looking the attractive New Kauaian straight in the eyes, Nura answered back in a soft voice, "Don't think I've forgiven you. Let's just say that—for now—I'm willing to wait and see whether you're telling the truth or not. But..." she warned, this time her voice filled with menace, "...if I find that you are lying to me...if you do anything against Sabrina...I'll kill you."

"Fair enough." Atoa replied as he turned his attention back to the controls.

"Tabor will doublecrosssssss ussssss..." S'nurl, relaxing slightly now that the danger had seemingly passed, "You know that, human."

"Yeah." Manuele answered back, nodding his head. "That's why I'm calling in the cavalry."

"You mean Sabrina?" Nura asked.

"Of course..." Manuele replied, gazing straight into the eyes of the Bzzit Khaht. "I gave my word that I wouldn't go behind her back on this if she didn't go behind mine and I intend on keeping it. But..." he added, "Even with Diaz, we're not going to be able to do this. No..." the New Kauaian declared, shaking his head, "...we're going to need more muscle—and I know just who to call."

"You sure about this, Boss?" Dak asked his employer as the pair watched a green Orion woman performing a sensual striptease.

"Looks like Alena before she got hooked on acid, doesn't she, Dak?" Lynn Pierson remarked wistfully before answering his long-time bartender's question. "Yeah. Hacking into his system's a no-go—besides being smart enough to not put that sort of info where someone else can get at it, where are we going to find a slicer here who'd be willing to run the risk? And we'd never get away with snatching him in his villa—it's much better guarded than Ershak's and we don't have S'nurl for heavy muscle. Can't get him in transit—so it has to be here and it has to be now. It's dark...crowded...and pretty noisy.

But, we have to do this quick and clean.”

“Pierson’s right.” Solly interjected. “Here’s the best place. As long as we don’t make too much noise, we’ll be able to walk out with him.”

“But first we have to get him away from his bodyguards.” Krakke pointed out, jerking his head towards the Andorian and green Orion standing near a celebrating Dmitri Cherenkov, who, at that moment, was enjoying himself with a scantily clad, fire-haired, Kataran woman situated on his lap. “How’re we going to do that?” *And how am I going to make sure that I keep you alive, Brother, without you ruining our plans.* Krakke, otherwise known as Ivan Cherenkov, asked himself.

“Lucky I thought of that.” Pierson grinned as he held three dermal patches out in his hand. “We wait until Cherenkov has to go drain the lizard. His goons’ll follow him in and we follow them. Slap one of these on each of the guards and in a few moments, they take a nap. It’ll look like they’ve had too much to drink or whatever and the bouncer’ll toss ‘em out. Slap another one on Cherenkov and then we carry our drunk friend out. Any questions?”

“Nope.” Solly grinned back as he took one of the patches. “I’ll take out the Orion.” Handing another patch to Dak, the *Bluefin* CPO instructed, “You take out the Andorian...”

“No...” Danyor interjected, taking the patch that Pierson held out, “I’ll take the Andorian—I know where best to put it so it takes effect quicker.”

“All right.” Pierson replied, shrugging his shoulders. “Then me and Dak’ll get Dmitri.” His grin growing wider as the Terranovan Syndicate operative rose to his feet, the former bar owner remarked, “Looks like he’s about to go water the daisies. Let’s do it.”

“And the guards are following right on cue.” Solly remarked as he stood up. Jerking his head towards Krakke, the red Orion remarked, “We’re up—make it good.”

Nodding his head once in response, Krakke and Solly staggered towards the restroom door, now guarded by the Orion and Andorian. Laughing and talking loudly, the pair put on a pretty convincing performance as drunken revelers as they drew closer to their intended victims.

“And shoooo I tol’ her...” Krakke all but shouted, slurring his words, “...to put

out or get out!”

“So wha’ she do?” Solly answered back, also slurring his words as he staggered towards the green Orion.

“She put out, o’ course!” Krakke laughed, “Wha’ else wash she gonna do? Get out an’ walk? We was out in deep space goin’ at warp four.”

As they neared the door guarded by the two hoods, the Andorian sneered, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“We’s gotta take a leak.” Solly replied as he stepped closer, “Wha’ else you think we gonna do?”

“Not now you’re not.” The green Orion retorted as he made to push Solly back.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Solly slapped the dermal patch in his hand on a piece of exposed skin on the Orion’s forearm as Krakke, lurching forward, did the same to the Andorian, only placing his patch near the neck. Almost instantly the sedative contained in the patches took effect. Catching the two goons in their arms, Solly and Krakke gently lowered them to the floor, signaling the other two members of their group as they did so.

“That’s it.” Pierson grinned, “Let’s go pay Dmitri a visit.” Walking past their two cohorts standing watch over the slumbering guards, Dak and Pierson entered the restroom. Quickly spotting Cherenkov standing in front of one of the urinals, the two men approached, one on either side of the Syndicate hood.

“Who?” Dmitri demanded only to be quickly cut off as Dak slapped a dermal patch on the back of the Terra Novan’s neck.

As Cherenkov slumped into his arms, Pierson groused, “God, is this guy heavy! Get that coat and hood on him, Dak, so that we can get the hell out of here.”

“Right, Boss.” The burly barkeeper replied as he slipped a coat with a hood on to the Terra Novan. Making sure that the hood masked Cherenkov’s features, the pair staggered out of the bathroom, their unconscious victim between them. Nodding his head at Solly and Krakke, Pierson and Dak began to make their way out of the bar with Cherenkov between them, the other two members of their party several steps back. Approaching the exit, Pierson jibed to the Orion bouncer standing guard at the door, “Our buddy can’t hold

Saurian brandy worth mugato crap!"

"Get him outta here, then." The bouncer ordered, jerking his thumb towards the outside.

As the group made their exit from the bar, Pierson directed, "Ok, let's get him back to our place fast—before his goons wake up."

"How're we going to get him to cough up where Rejak's going to pull off the exchange?" Solly inquired, "Not that I don't mind roughing the man up—but I don't think he's going to talk that easily, and like you said, we don't have a lot of time."

"We don't have to get rough with him." Pierson replied, "I've got a hypo back at the flat with a Romulan derived truth serum. He'll spill the beans...I swear."

"And then what?" Krakke asked as the group, still putting on a performance as a bunch of drunken partiers, made their way back to their apartment. "Do we kill him?"

"No." Pierson replied, much to Danyor's relief. "He's too highly placed in the Syndicate for us to knock him off without them taking reprisals. We'll dope him up with enough chemicals to keep him out for a couple of days and then, before we leave, slip word where he is. As far as the Syndicate is concerned, he got kidnapped by two bit hoods who, after finding out who he was, panicked and took the better part of valor."

"Sounds good to me." Krakke responded, urging, "Let's hurry up. The sooner we're done, the sooner we're out of here."

"Lay him down on the couch." Pierson instructed as he went into his room. Returning moments later with a hypo in his hand, the former Starfleet officer explained, "I picked this up a while back—thought I was going to have to use it on you..." the rogue grinned as he turned towards Solly, "This is pretty new stuff, so it's doubtful anyone's come up with an antidote to it yet. The Tal'Shiar uses this when they need to get information quick from someone who's probably not immunized to truth serums or deep conditioned."

"What if the Syndicate did deep condition him?" Solly inquired, "After all, he's pretty high up."

“Not **that** high up.” Pierson answered back. “I’m gambling that as long as we keep our questions limited to what’s at hand and not go digging too deep into the Syndicate’s or his *ahmet’sur’s* inner workings, we’ll be ok. Otherwise...” the rogue shrugged his shoulders, “...we’re all out of luck. I don’t have the life support machinery here to keep him alive long enough to wring what we need out of him before he dies.”

“Is there another way?” Krakke asked, fearing not only for his brother’s life, but also that Dmitri, under the effects of the drug, might well give away the relationship between the two men.

“I’m open to suggestions.” Pierson replied as he readied the hypo.

“Maybe I can convince him to cough up the information.” Krakke offered.

“I doubt that.” Pierson responded, “He’s not going to willingly tell us anything.”

A sly grin crossing his face, Danyor continued to press his case, “I think I can make him give us what we want.”

“How?”

“By threatening to wring him dry.” Krakke replied. “System shock from deep conditioning isn’t a very pleasant way to go. I think that if we give him the choice of selling out Rejak without being implicated in doing it or having to go into system shock, he’ll spill.’

“Maybe.” Solly interjected as he turned to Pierson, “It’s worth a try at least.”

“Ok. Won’t hurt to try.” Pierson responded as he replaced the vial containing the truth serum with another vial on the hypo. Looking up at Krakke, he stated, “This is a stim shot...it’ll bring him around. Then you can talk to him.”

Pressing the hypo to Dmitri’s neck, Pierson injected the contents. Moments later, the Syndicate middleman struggled back to consciousness. His eyes scanning his new surroundings, Dmitri started when he saw his brother’s face inches from his. “I....” he began only to be quickly cut off by Ivan.

“Listen to me, you goddamned digger.” Krakke growled, using the family codeword for danger, taken after the name of a small Terra Novan burrowing animal, “There is very little time and you must tell us what we need to know.”

Immediately picking up on his brother's use of the family code, even in his near stupor, Dmitri groaned in response, "I can't I'm..."

"You're not that deep conditioned." Danyor responded, "If you cooperate, we won't ask you anything that'll trigger your body to go into arrest. But if you don't..." he warned, his eyes staring straight into the eyes of his brother's as he told his half-truth, "...my friends will dig—and we've brought along life support machinery that keep you alive long enough to get the job done."

Gazing into his brother's eyes, Dmitri nodded his head. "Good." Krakke exclaimed, letting out an inaudible sigh of relief. "We just need to know one thing—when and where is Rejak planning on making the exchange with Daras Tabor and do you know what Ayenga might be up to?"

"If I tell you..." Dmitri stammered, "Rejak will know..."

"No he won't." Pierson interjected, "We've set it up where you'll come out of this completely in the clear—if you cooperate."

"All right...all right." Dmitri sighed. "The exchange will be on Taris III—where Rejak makes his Corillan acid. Tabor's supposed to meet him there in a couple of days and then Tabor will smuggle the stuff into the Federation..."

"With Diaz taking the blame." Krakke declared.

"Right." Dmitri agreed.

"What about Ayenga?" Pierson then asked, "How does she figure in all this?"

"She's a loose cannon." Dmitri answered back, "Once she got her hands on that mutagenic gel, she bolted from Tabor. I don't know where she is, but Rejak's going to set it up where she gets taken down—he didn't tell me how he was going to do it, though." The Syndicate operative quickly added.

"I think that's as far as we can push him." Krakke declared, catching a brief smile of relief from his brother.

"I agree." Solly concurred, "Let's drug him and get out of here."

"What do you mean—drug me?" Dmitri exclaimed, his eyes widening, "You promised."

“And we’re going to keep our promise...” Krakke quickly replied, placing both his hands on his brother’s shoulders. “The drug will only knock you out long enough so that we can get away and so that you can’t contact Rejak or anyone else in time.”

“Right.” Pierson chimed in, “All you have to do when you’re freed is tell your bosses that some two-bit hoods kidnapped you thinking you were some sort of rich border merchant from the Triangle and that when they found out who you were they decided to cut their losses and let you go.”

“That’s all you have to do and your part in this Great Experiment will be over.” Krakke added in an almost inaudible whisper, his brother immediately picking up on another family code phrase, this one telling him that Ivan and the others were telling the truth that he would be safe.

Relaxing slightly on hearing his brother’s assurances, Dmitri nodded his head once, “Very well...get it over with.”

Nodding his head at Pierson, Krakke stood aside as the former Starfleet officer injected his brother with the sedative. Watching silently as Dmitri slipped off into unconsciousness, Danyor nearly missed Pierson’s call.

“Let’s get packed and get out of here, everyone. We need to be out of here yesterday.”

“Come on, Krakke...” Solly growled as he grabbed the Terra Novan by his elbow, “We gotta get moving.” Looking back at the unconscious form of Dmitri lying on the couch, the red Orion asked, “Did you know him? You two look like you’re acquainted...”

Sighing, Danyor responded with another half-truth, “We were on the same freighter once years ago—but we never kept in touch...”

“I see...” The red Orion replied, not satisfied with the answer he just received, yet at the same time not wanting to make an issue of it. Filing it in the back of his mind for now; Solly made a mental note to inquire further into Danyor Krakke when he next reported to Starfleet Command.

“We know where and when now...” Pierson remarked as he and his compatriots beamed back on board their Maquis raider, “...but what are we

going to do about it? Rejak's going to have at least his *Galor* and her escorts in orbit around Taris III and those, along with what he and Tabor are going to have on the ground..."

Grinning, Solly Brin declared in a smug tone, "It just so happens that I know some people who might be able to give us a hand."

"What are you talking about? They'll throw us all into Sundancer!" Dak exclaimed

"Not necessarily." Pierson grinned, "Not if we arrange it just right..."

"What do you mean, Boss?" Dak asked, his voice still tinged with doubt.

"First let me make a call to my ex, Solly..." Lynn grinned, "...and then you can call your friends and we can all pay Rejak a visit that he'll never forget."

Entering Sisko's office together, the two captains kept their distance from each other as they took their seats opposite the station commander's desk. Frowning as he noticed the strained relationship between Akinola and Shelby, Benjamin deciding, for now at least, to keep his counsel, went straight to business. "I take it you're both aware of the messages received by Chief Brin and Lieutenant Atoa?" Taking the two captains' single nods of their heads as an affirmative, Sisko continued with a smile, "Well—I've got good news for you. Admiral Glover has approved of your leading a task force into the war zone to Pallas V, Captain Shelby." Ignoring the glower appearing on Akinola's face at the mention of Shelby being named task force commander, Benjamin continued his narrative, "You're to take the *Sutherland*, *Bluefin*, and *Defiant* to Pallas V and from there take whatever action you deem necessary so long as it doesn't result in a reopening of hostilities with the Klingons or straining relations with the Cardassian government."

Smiling on hearing the news, Liz responded as she rose to her feet, "Thanks, Captain. We'll get underway as soon as possible."

"I'm not so sure you should be thanking me, Captain Shelby." Benjamin replied in a grave voice, "You do realize you've been given enough rope to hang yourself with?"

"Of course I do." Shelby replied, her smile gone now. "Admiral Glover has to maintain plausible deniability for Starfleet and the Federation. Sparing a

sideways glance to her current *bête noire*, Liz stated, “I think both of us know that.”

“Good luck and good hunting then, Captains. Commander Worf will command the *Defiant*. He’ll be ready to warp out when you give the word.”

Chapter 11

“Where is Cherenkov?” Gul Rejak demanded as he paced up and down in front of his desk in his Taris III office. “He was supposed to be here by now. Tabor is due in the morning.”

“We don’t know.” A green Orion Syndicate factotum replied. “We haven’t heard from him in over twenty four standard hours. Perhaps we should call off the exchange until we know more?” The Syndicate operative suggested.

“No.” Rejak replied, ceasing his pacing as he poured a glass of kanar from a crystal decanter on his desk. Shaking his head, the corrupt gul explained, “We’re too far along to pull back now. Starfleet wouldn’t take the risk of striking here anyway—we’re too deep into the disputed territories—they won’t run the risk of confronting the Klingons.” Swallowing the contents of his glass in one gulp, Rejak declared, “We continue the exchange as planned. But...” he qualified as he refilled his glass, “...I think I’ll take a few additional precautions—just in case.”

“A very wise move, Gul Rejak.” The green Orion acknowledged with a sycophantic grin. “I’ll inform my employers that they can expect their payment on time. They will be most pleased to hear that.”

“Much as I hate to say this...” Captain Elizabeth Shelby said, addressing the scrambled image on her desk monitor, “...you’re right. This is the only way we can be sure that this is ended once and for all. All right, Pierson, I agree. So long as Diaz and her people behave themselves, we have a truce.”

“Good. I’ll let Bri know.” Pierson replied, added a jaunty goodbye, “See ya on Pallas V, Lizzy.”

Gazing at the now black screen, Shelby tapped her intercom, “Commander Hobson...Chris? Come into my office, please, we need to talk...”

“Getting signals and what appears to be life signs.” Nura announced as the *Moselle* drew near the asteroid belt surrounding a dim red dwarf star. “Looks

like Ayenga's still here."

"I'm not so sure..." Manuele Atoa demurred as he piloted his 'stolen' runabout towards one of the larger planetoids.

"What do you mean?" The Bzzit Khaht sitting in the copilot's seat asked. "This is where Tabor told us she'd probably be hiding..."

"It's too easy." The tactical specialist replied, "Too pat. Yeah..." he conceded, "Everything looks right...the signals are what you'd expect from bleed-over even with security precautions...but..."

"You sssssensse a trap, human..." S'nurl interjected, his voice coming across more as a hiss, "Ssssoooo do I..."

"Then you better let me pilot this ship." Nura declared, "Of the three of us, I'm the best pilot here. That's not bragging—it's the simple truth."

"Point taken." Atoa nodded as he turned manual control over to his copilot, "All right, Nura...it's all yours. Let's see if Ayenga's here or not."

Pausing for a moment at the threshold of *Rick's*, the name the previous *Sutherland* captain had given to the 1940s North African cabaret themed bar, Sam Lavelle took in the scene before him. Lieutenant Alec Mikelson, from hydroponics, sat in his usual position behind the piano tickling the ivories as Lieutenant Commander Tol and his current fling, the *Bluefin's* Vulcan operation's officer, Lieutenant T'Ser, sat listening and talking softly amongst themselves. Other off duty members of both crews were either congregated near the roulette wheel or were otherwise laughing and enjoying themselves. All except for one lonely figure sitting at the bar by herself nursing her drink. Immediately recognizing his old friend, Sito Jaxa, at the bar, Sam shook his head sadly before approaching her, calling out her name before he drew too close.

"Jaxa? All right if I join you?"

The tormented Bajoran woman tilted her head slightly towards the empty seat to her right as she silently sipped her drink.

Taking the stool next to her, Sam, raising his hand, got the attention of the

bartender, "Hey Mac! Canadian on the rocks!" Turning to his old friend, the dark haired helmsman then prompted, speaking in a low voice, "Wanna talk?"

"You know..." T'Ser remarked, tapping her feet gently to the music as she regarded the Trill sitting opposite her, "...there's one thing I don't understand about joined Trill..."

"And what's that?" Jadon asked with a roguish smirk as he took a sip of Saurian brandy.

"How do you keep all those voices inside you from consuming you?" T'Ser asked, genuinely curious. "Vulcans—being a long-lived species—tend to accumulate a lot of memories—a **lot**! But joined Trill...the symbiotes can live for centuries—but hosts..." she sighed as she shook her head, "...live about as long as humans. To suddenly be confronted by generations worth of memories and experiences and maintain your sanity—I don't think even a *kolinhar* master could do it."

"Well..." Jadon smiled, "I can give you the boilerplate explanation of how all candidates for joining are exhaustively screened by the Symbiosis Commission and undergo years of training—generally from childhood—and that the majority of candidates—even after going through all that training—wash out, but..." he shook his head, "...that's not really the truth—at least not the whole truth." Exhaling deeply, the roguish Trill warned, "This could take a while..."

"Got plenty of time." T'Ser smiled, placing a hand over the hand of the engineer, "I don't have to be back on the *Bluefin* for a couple of hours yet. Go on..."

"Ok..." Jadon began, "You're right...it isn't easy at first. No matter how much you think you're ready for it...how much the Symbiosis Committee thinks you've been trained for it...those first few moments after the symbiote has bonded with you...the cascade of memories...of lives." Pausing for a moment, the normally loquacious Trill seemed to struggle for words, "Think of it like this...you're floating on a lake. It's a clear, summer's day...no wind...white clouds overhead...that's your mind before the joining. Then comes the symbiote and all at once the waves swamp you, the wind howls, the clouds turn dark and the sky turns gray and boiling. You're flailing about trying to keep afloat as all those voices start pulling you into the water..."

Shivering at Jadon's description, T'Ser remarked in a low whisper, "That's...how do you..."

"Then..." The Trill smiled, "...just as you think you're about to drown, the symbiote steps in and helps you pull it together."

"Wow..." T'Ser gasped, "I never realized..."

"It's a Trill thing..." Jadon chuckled, "And there are other things that help. For instance the *zhian'tara* ritual really helps to put everything in focus. By getting the chance to physically interact with the symbiote's prior hosts, it gives you the opportunity to see that while you might be part of a greater whole, you're still your own person—a unique individual."

Visibly impressed, T'Ser asked, "But does it always work out so smoothly?"

"No." The Trill engineer confessed, shaking his head. "Sometimes the Symbiosis Commission makes a mistake—someone who looks like they'd make an ideal candidate actually isn't. Or...one or more of the prior hosts could be so strong...that they end up overpowering both current host and symbiote and for all intents and purposes take over. When that happens..." Tol shook his head, "...things can get very bad for all concerned—host and symbiote—sometimes both end up lost."

"Damn," was all T'Ser could say as she regarded the man across from her, "And here I thought just having one voice inside me was tough."

"You get used to it." Jadon laughed, turning the conversation back to a lighter note as he offered the Vulcan woman his hand, "Now...since this is going to be our last night together...why don't we just drink and dance the night away?"

"Sounds like a plan to me!" T'Ser laughed as she took the Trill's hand.

"So..." Sam ventured, waiting for his friend to make the first move.

"So..." Sito replied as she sipped her drink. Then, after several moments of silence, the young Bajoran remarked, "Nice place."

"Yeah..." The Canadian helmsman agreed, "We like it."

"Where's Maria?"

"She'll be here in about an hour." Sam replied, "She said she had some stuff she had to take care of."

"Oh."

Taking a deep breath, Lavelle decided that it was time to finally address the elephant in the room, "How're you holding it together, Jaxa?"

A thin smile coming to the security officer's face, Sito answered back, "I'm glad someone other than Counselor Freedman has finally decided to just come out and ask me that question."

Chuckling for a few moments, Sam gently pressed, "So...how are you doing?"

"I have my good moments and my bad." The tormented Bajoran woman confessed. Touching her temple with her index finger and gently tapping it, she continued, "They're still there...but they usually stay quiet now. It's better when I keep busy..." Recoiling automatically as a male crewmember accidentally brushed her as he walked past where she sat, Sito clenched her teeth. "It really isn't as bad as it was. Not so long ago, I'd have either tried to kill that crewman or I'd be in a ball in that corner over there. Hells..." she exclaimed as she tossed back her drink, "...a few months ago, in a place like this, I might have..." She shuddered as the Junkie tried to push herself to the fore, "I might have..."

"Hey..." Sam consoled, "...Jaxa...it's ok. You just remember that you're amongst friends here."

"Thanks, Sam." The Bajoran responded with a shaky smile as she stood up. "I think I needed to hear that."

"Anytime." Lavelle answered back, flashing a toothy grin. His smile disappearing to be replaced by a look of concern, the Canadian inquired, "You gonna be ok? If you want...I can walk you back to wherever you need to go."

"No..." Jaxa replied, shaking her head vigorously, "That's all right, Sam. I'll be ok. But thanks anyway." Turning to leave the bar, she said over her shoulder, "Tell Maria I said Hi."

Watching as his friend left the bar, Sam shook his head sadly. *It's not fair. She should be sitting here now and not me...*

"You ok, Sam?"

Turning towards the bartender, Lavelle managed a shaky grin, "Yeah...I'll be all right, Mac." Sighing, he said as he sipped his drink, "I was just feeling old."

"Huh..." Mac snorted as he plucked a gray hair from his head, "Wait 'til you get a few of these. Then you can say you're feeling old. 'til then, enjoy being young while you can."

Shaking his head sadly, Sam replied, "But what do you do, Mac, if someone takes your youth away from you?"

"Sensssor contactssss..." S'nurl hissed from his position as the runabout picked its way through the asteroid field, "Two sssssshipssss..."

"*Hidekis.*" Atoa swore. "I was afraid of that."

You're crazy!" Nura exclaimed with a sneer, "Why would Ayenga want to work with the Cardassians?"

"I can think of any number of reasons." Manuele replied, "But I don't think she called them in. Might have been Tabor..." the New Kauaian speculated, "...using the Cardies to do his dirty work for him. That way he gets to take out both of his problems all at the same time."

"They're closssssing on our possition at maximum impulsseeee..." The Gorn hissed, his voice taking on a note of urgency.

"All right, Nura." Manuele declared, "Let's see if you're as Sierra Hotel a pilot as you say you are."

"Just watch me do my stuff." The Bzzit Khaht answered back, her feelings of betrayal and distrust momentarily forgotten as the adrenaline coursed through her system. "I hope you've kept up the maintenance on your inertial compensators—by the time I'm through they're going to be getting one hell of a workout."

“Dayum!” Treasure exclaimed as she polished off the last of her ribs, “That Cookie of yours sure knows his BBQ—an’ Texas style to boot! I ain’t had spareribs this juicy...” Seeing the far off look in her dinner companion’s eyes, the well-endowed engineer quipped, “Earth to Dale...Earth to Dale...”

“Oh...” Commander Dale McBride exclaimed as he snapped out of his reverie. “I’m sorry, Treasure...”

“What’s up, Hon?” Angela asked with a look of concern on her face. “You look like you got the weight o’ the universe on your mind.”

“It’s just...” The Texas born XO said with a sigh, “...that once we’re done here...” shaking his head, his lips turned up in a nervous smile, “I’m afraid I’m not very good at this...”

“That’s ok, Sugar...” Treasure replied, her voice now taking on more of a gentle, consoling tone, “I think I know what you’re wantin’ to say and I gotta feelin’ that’s why you had Cookie fix up this special spread for us—‘cause this is gonna be our last night together. After tonight, we’re goin’ to be busy finishing up with Rejak and all, and after that we’re goin’ to be goin’ our separate ways.” Smiling, she placed her hand over his, “An’ that’s ok. We had fun. You’re a nice man an’ one day you’re gonna make T’Ser a great husband—that is if’n she’s got the good sense to realize that...”

Startled at the young ensign’s perceptive read of the situation, Dale’s eyes widened, “What...how...”

“Honey...” the North Star native chuckled, “...a girl knows these things. I could see it in your eyes whenever the two of you were together.” Leaning over, the buxom blonde whispered in his ear, “An’ I’ll let you in on a little secret...she’s got that same look.”

“But I thought...” Dale stammered, “Her and Commander Tol...the way they were laughing and all...that...”

Her chuckles turning into gentle laughter, Angela interjected, “Her and Jadon—long term? Naw...neither of ‘em wants that. No...” she said, her

laughter slowly fading as her voice once again took on a tender tone, "...she's only got eyes for one guy—lucky stiff!"

"Frak!" Manuele cursed as a green disruptor bolt fired from one of the pursuing Cardassian frigates just missed them, shattering a nearby planetoid. "That was too damned close."

"Going to get a lot closer." Nura retorted in a low voice as she piloted the tiny runabout between the space detritus, weaving in and out and between with an almost reckless abandon. "Hold on!" She shouted as she pitched the craft up on its Z-axis, reaching the cover of one of the larger planetoids just as yet another disruptor beam lanced towards them.

Seeing a metallic glint on one of the smaller planetoids nearby, Manuele quickly glanced at his sensor display. "Get outta here—NOW!" The New Kauaian yelled as Nura, her reflexes instinctively taking charge, turned sharply about as the planetoid exploded, setting off other explosions causing the runabout to shake as rocky and metallic fragments struck the shields, straining them to their max. One of the frigates, however, was not as fortunate as it found itself caught right in the middle of the blast radius. It now drifted powerless in the belt, undergoing a pounding as planetoids impacted on it.

Watching as its sister ship slowed down, Manuele nodded his head, "Get us out of here, Nura. Ayenga's long gone and is probably already on her way to Taris III."

"Where are we going?" The Bzzit Khaht asked as the runabout slipped smoothly into warp, leaving their pursuers far behind.

"Taris III, of course." Atoa replied, "We've got to stop Ayenga, Rejak, and Tabor."

Her laughter taking on an almost hysterical tone, Nura exclaimed, "You mean the three of us? One Starfleet officer, a pilot, and a bar bouncer are going to stop the Kon Ma, Gul Rejak, and the Orion Syndicate all by ourselves!" Shaking her head, she spat out, "Are you sure you're not the one on acid?"

"You two don't have to come along if you don't want to." Manuele said in a low voice, addressing both the Bzzit Khaht sitting next to him and the large Gorn standing in the back. "I have to do this, but you don't. There's a nearby system I can drop you off at if you want. From there, you should be able to get back to

Pallas V.”

“Ssssssmart move would be to leave...” S’nurl hissed, “But if I go, I will misssss a good fight. I think I will ssssee thisssss through.”

“Ok, S’nurl.” Manuele grinned, “Glad to have you aboard.” Turning towards his copilot, Manuele asked, “What about you, Nura? Want me to drop you off?”

“No.” The young pilot shook her head, “I’ve always been one for lost causes. ‘sides...” she said, a thin smile crossing her face, “I have a feeling Sabrina’ll be there too.”

Sighing, Atoa uttered in an almost inaudible voice, “I hope someone’s there, ‘cause we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“Assuming standard orbit around Pallas V.” Lieutenant Lavelle reported from his position at the helm.

“We’re being hailed by the planetary authorities.” Lieutenant Dryer interjected. “They want to know what we’re doing here and when we’re going to get the hell out.”

“Yeah, I guess they would be pretty jittery about having a *Nebula* and an *Albacore* suddenly popping in on them...” Liz quipped as she leaned back in her chair.

“They’d really crap a brick if they knew about our other little surprise.” Ensign Django snorted, referring to the *Defiant* that had remained cloaked under Shelby’s orders.

“I think we’ve given the cockroaches long enough time to scurry for cover.” Captain Shelby remarked as she gestured at the acting tactical chief, “Tell Pallas Control that we’re not going to be here long and then send the signal to Chief Brin.”

A few moments later, Nyota looked up, “Chief Brin’s confirmation signal received. We’re on.”

“Very good. Contact Captain Akinola and tell him if he wants to join us he better be ready now, ‘cause I’m not waiting on him.” Shelby declared as she

hit her comm button, "Lieutenant Sito? Report to Transporter Room One for landing party duty at once." Noticing the dubious looks coming from her first officer and tactical officer, Liz explained, "I need to see how she's going to perform in the field sooner or later..."

"Sir?" Hobson inquired, lowering his voice so that only his captain could hear, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"We discussed this earlier, Chris." Shelby replied in an equally low whisper, "And we both agreed that...no matter how distasteful it is...that there really isn't any alternative—not if we want to put an end to this once and for all."

"It's just, Sir..." Hobson pointed out, "...if certain admirals were to ever find out..."

"I know, Chris...it'll make their day 'cause they'll finally be able to roast me alive." Liz interrupted; a sad smile on her face as she looked up at her first officer, "I'm open to suggestions. Give me something—anything—else that even has a remote possibility of working and I'll take it." Receiving only silence in return, Liz sighed, "It's like we talked about...there really isn't any choice. If we don't take care of the problem at its source—it'll just keep coming back."

"Aye, Sir." Commander Hobson reluctantly agreed as his captain finished issuing her orders.

"Keep a lock on our comm frequencies, Chris and be ready to yank us out at the first sign of a double-cross. Also, after we beam down, I want you to contact Mr. Worf. Tell him, to get ready to receive some guests soon."

Immediately upon rematerializing, Captain Shelby and her landing party were confronted by Larkin and Rof, both armed with phasers pointed straight at them. "You two ought to know that we've left our comm frequencies open—my ship is hearing everything that's going on right now. So, you can either lower those weapons..." Shelby ordered in a crisp voice as both Sito and Akinola drew their weapons as well, "...or you're going to know what it feels like to be transported into deep space." Noticing that the two Maquis members showed no inclination to lower their weapons, Liz took a deep breath, but before she could speak to issue her command, a voice quickly called out.

“Larkin! Rof! Stand down—now!”

“I thought we had a truce, Sabrina.” Shelby remarked as the Rutian and Alshain reluctantly complied with their leader’s order.

“We do.” The former starship captain replied as she gestured towards the door that she had just come in from, “Larkin was afraid you were going to try a double-cross.”

“Funny...” Liz quipped wryly as she and the others joined the Maquis leader in walking towards the door, “I thought you were going to pull the same thing.”

“I keep my word.” Sabrina replied simply as the door slid open to reveal a makeshift conference room where Pierson, his wife, Danyor Krakke, Dak, and Chief Brin were already waiting.

“So do I.” Liz retorted, but before she could continue, Captain Akinola, recognizing his Chief of the Boat even through the plastic surgery, interrupted.

“Boats? Is that you?” Shaking his head in disbelief, the border skipper, relieved at finally being reunited with his long-time friend and shipmate, joked, “Damn! I can’t believe it! They actually made you look better!” His smile growing wider, the white-haired grizzled mustang captain remarked with genuine affection in his voice, “It’s good to see you again, Solly.”

“You should have seen what they wanted to do with me, Skipper.” Chief Brin joshed back, a big toothy grin on his face at seeing his captain once again. “Good to see you to again, Captain.”

“While I’m enjoying this little reunion as much as everyone else here is, I think we’ve got some stuff to deal with.” Pierson remarked as he fingered the scar on his cheek.

“Lynn’s right.” Miriam chimed in, supporting her ex-husband. “We have a lot to talk about. So...let’s get started. How are we going to take care of Rejak, Tabor, the Syndicate, and Ayenga?”

“Ok...” Shelby agreed as she took a seat, “It just so happens I have a plan that’ll allow us to do just about all of those things at the same time. The only hitch...”

The petite blonde captain confessed, "Is Ayenga. I haven't heard from my man yet..." Turning to Sabrina, Liz asked, "Have you?"

"No." Diaz admitted with a frown. "Nor have I heard from Nura."

"I haven't heard so much as a hiss from S'nurl either." Pierson added, tapping his fingers on the table. "And that has me more than a little worried."

"They might be maintaining silent running." The experienced Akinola pointed out. "Not wanting to risk their transmission being intercepted."

"That's possible." Shelby allowed. "Knowing Manny..." she speculated, "...he'll have concluded that time's at a premium, so he'll probably head straight to Taris III..."

"Gutsy..." Joseph remarked approvingly, nodding his head.

"Stupid." Larkin sneered, "Smart play would be to come back here."

"Manuele's thinking about more than just himself." Shelby fired back, "He knows that if Ayenga gets away with doing what we think she's going to do, then all hell's going to break loose in this sector and probably beyond."

"And what is she going to do?" Diaz inquired, raising her eyebrows in a mixture of curiosity and skepticism.

"If my doctor and science officer and Captain Akinola's doctor is right, then she's going to contaminate Rejak's Corillan acid shipment with the mutagenic gel she stole." Shelby replied flatly; Joseph silently nodding his head in agreement at the younger captain's pronouncement.

"Damn." Miriam whispered, "I always knew Ayenga was crazy...but I never figured..."

"So..." Pierson inquired, "What's your plan?"

As Shelby laid out her scheme, Captain Akinola shook his head in amazement as both Pierson and Diaz grinned. As she continued to set out her stratagem, the space-wise skipper listened more intently. *It just might work.* He thought, much to his surprise. *But...she's left out one detail.* Waiting until the younger captain had finished her presentation, the white-haired skipper cleared his throat. "Captain. I can't believe I'm saying this, but your plan is a good one.

But...there's one little thing you didn't take into account..."

"By all means, Captain Akinola..." Liz replied, with just the faintest of sarcastic grins, "...enlighten me."

"With pleasure." The older captain grinned smugly as he pointed out the single slender, yet potentially critical, deficiency in Shelby's plan, "You didn't account for the possibility—however slight—that Rejak would anticipate that move and have something ready. I'd suggest that you do this..." Joseph continued as he outlined his proposal, "...that way, if Rejak does have an ace up his sleeve, you'll be able to counter it at once."

Chagrined at her lapse, Shelby bit her lip as she nodded her head, forcing herself to confess, "You're right. I should have taken that into account." Looking the older man straight in the eyes, the petite captain offered a simple, yet genuine, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." A surprised Akinola replied.

"Now, I suggest we get ready—I want us to warp out within the hour. Captain?" Liz requested as she turned her attention back to Captain Akinola, "I need to borrow Chief Brin for a short while, if I may?"

A somewhat mystified Captain Akinola, taken by surprise by Shelby's request, inquired in a skeptical tone, "Why?"

"It's all right, Skipper." Chief Brin quickly interjected, speaking softly so that only his captain could hear, "She probably just wants to debrief me so that she can get a better idea on what her man might be up to. Can't say as I blame her..." he added, maintaining a respectful tone.

Nodding his head, the Nigerian border skipper agreed, "All right, Chief. I'll see you back on the *Bluefin* when you're done." Tapping his comm badge, Akinola called out, "Dale? Beam me up."

After Captain Akinola dematerialized, Liz again spoke, "Pierson? I'll want you too."

"Anytime, babe..." The rogue leered as Shelby, smirking, touched her comm badge.

"Shelby to *Sutherland*--Energize."

Rematerializing on the *Sutherland's* transporter pad, Liz again activated her comm badge, "Mr. Worf? Would you mind beaming on to the *Sutherland*? I need to see you in my ready room as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sir." The Klingon's rich baritone voice responded.

"If you'll follow me..." Liz directed to her guests and Lieutenant Sito, "...this won't take long."

Minutes later, the little group, now joined by Lieutenant Commander Worf, sat in Captain Shelby's office, the captain sitting on the edge of her desk. "I want to make one thing perfectly clear—nothing said in this meeting will appear on the ship's log, nor is it to appear in any personal logs. For those of you who aren't in Starfleet..." she declared, her eyes fixing on Pierson, "...it's our word against yours. All I have to say here is that even though I might not be the most liked person in some circles of Starfleet, you're even less liked." Catching her breath, Liz continued, "Now that that's out of the way, if anyone here is uncomfortable with this—you can leave right now—no questions asked and nothing further will ever be mentioned."

Nodding her head in satisfaction as no one walked out, Liz laid out her plan. "I'm tasking you people with a special mission—one that I think will appeal to you. You will have one objective and one objective only—Gul Rejak." Smiles appeared on the faces of everyone in the room on hearing the captain's words. "Your job will be to neutralize him so that he is no longer a threat."

"Neutralize, Captain?" Chief Brin inquired, wanting to be sure that he read Shelby's unstated objective correctly.

"That's right, Chief." Liz replied in a calm, level voice, her face devoid of expression as she laid especial emphasis on her first word, "Neutralize him."

"That's what I thought you said." The Red Orion said with a feral grin. Glancing out the corner of his eye, he spotted a similar grin appearing on the face of the young Bajoran sitting next to him.

"If anyone has a problem with that—let me know now, and you can leave—again, nothing will be said." Hearing only silence in response, Shelby nodded her head grimly, "Good. Now...as to how you're going to get to your

objective...that will depend on whether he's on the planet's surface or on his ship. Mr. Worf—it'll be the *Defiant's* job to determine that. Once we know for sure where he is, we can proceed from there. I won't lie to you..." she confessed, "...this might very well be a one way trip—but I think we're all in agreement that it has to be done. Any questions?"

"Lizzy?" Pierson waved, flashing a roguish grin, "I've got a pretty good idea how we're going to get to him if he's on a ship, but what about if he's on the planet's surface? He'll have transporter buffers in place so we can't beam down and if we go by shuttle, we'll be shot down for sure..."

"I'm glad you asked me that question." Shelby replied, flashing a mischievous grin, "Tell me, Lynn...have you ever dreamed you were a bird?"

After everyone had a few moments to recover after hearing Shelby's plan to get them to the planet's surface, Liz stood up, "All right, let's get to it—we've got a lot to do and not a whole lot of time to do it in. Report to holodeck one to practice your ingress techniques for both contingencies—regardless of how it goes down, you're only going to get one shot at this and you better get it right."

Chapter 12

"Daras Tabor...you know *Ahmet* Nihal, second of the Niholim family of the Orion Syndicate?" Gul Rejak said, gesturing to the green Orion seated across from the Cardassian's desk.

"Personally, no." The Bajoran terrorist replied as he was ushered into Rejak's luxuriously appointed office by an aide, "But we have spoken a few times through subspace." Taking the unoccupied seat next to the Orion, Tabor presented a padd. "We're ready to conduct the exchange. Once we take delivery of the drugs, I'll authorize the transfer of funds to the bank of your choice—I believe you mentioned the Borqu Bank on Ferenginar?"

"A good choice." The Orion declared approvingly, "Like any good Ferengi, Borqu takes his cut, but he keeps his security protocols up and is very discreet." Pausing for a moment to take a sip of springwine, Nihal continued, "Once I receive word that the goods in question have reached Federation space, I will turn over control of our freighter and its cargo to you." A sly grin crossing his face, the Syndicate liaison concluded, "I think you will find them sufficient to carry out your purpose."

"I'm sure I will." Tabor responded, "So...when do we begin?"

"Immediately." Gul Rejak answered back, "We'll have to use shuttlecraft to transport the cargo though—as an additional security precaution in the event Ayenga manages to elude the little trap I set for her, I've activated the planet's transporter buffers."

"A sensible precaution." Nihal quickly interjected before the Bajoran terrorist could protest. "It won't hurt us to spend a few extra hours on the surface."

"Of course not!" Rejak grinned, snapping his fingers. As the door opened to reveal a pair of scantily clad women—one an Andorian and the other apparently human, the Cardassian leered, "You're my guests! Ketala and Tania will see to all your needs!"

"Cloak's operating at normal parameters." Chief O'Brien reported as the *Defiant* neared Taris III.

"Take us in. Begin passive scans." Lieutenant Commander Worf ordered as the tiny warship drew closer to the third habitable planet of the G2 star.

"One *Galor* class ship..." Jadzia Dax reported, "...four *Hideki* class patrol ships, a pair of modified *Peregrines*—those might belong to Tabor or his people, a pair of Orion raiders—and..." she added, a smile crossing her face, "...two freighters. Looks like we caught them in time."

"Good." Worf replied, "Any indication as to whether Rejak is on the surface or on the *Galor*?"

"It appears he's on the surface." Dax replied, "There's a lot of traffic emanating from these coordinates to the two freighters." She reported as she downloaded the location into the *Defiant's* computer.

"We have him then." Worf declared. "Transmit the information to the *Sutherland*." Hitting the intercom button, the Klingon then ordered, "Landing party prepare for insertion." Turning his attention back to the lovely Trill sitting at the helm, he instructed, "Mr. Dax, the conn is yours."

"Aye, Sir." Dax acknowledged, an unspoken, '*be careful*' tacitly understood by the Klingon warrior as he nodded his head when their eyes met.

"Transmission from the *Defiant*, Captain." Lieutenant Dryer stated as she relayed the results of the *Defiant's* reconnaissance.

Nodding her head, an unusually reflective and somber Elizabeth Shelby responded, "Very well, give the Go signal—all units to move according to plan. Red alert." The bridge now suddenly awash in red light as the alarm klaxon sounded, Shelby ordered, "Prepare to take us in, Mr. Lavelle."

"Adjust for planetary rotation." Lieutenant Commander Dax ordered as she tapped the intercom button on the command chair, "We're in position, Worf." After a moment's hesitation, Jadzia inquired in a worry-filled tone, "Are you sure about this, Worf? If Rejak raises his shields before you touch down..."

Taking a deep breath, the Klingon warrior led his assault team into the

airlock. Receiving confirming nods from the human, red Orion, and Bajoran that would accompany him, Worf answered back in a surprisingly gentle voice, "I know. We all know. Depressurize and open."

Grimly nodding her head at a young human ensign manning the starship's tactical console, Jadzia imagined the airlock door opening into space at the same time as the force field dropped, exposing her par'Machai and the rest of his team to the vacuum. She then imagined them stepping off into space, the retro-thrusters in their suits firing as they began their harrowing descent.

"That's it!" Sabrina announced into her comm as a green light on the control panel of her raider blinked. "We're going in. Remember, people, our job is to draw those patrol ships off—let the starships do the heavy lifting here."

Answering his beeping comm unit, a complacent Gul Rejak asked, "What is it?"

"Sensors have picked up several Maquis raiders at the outer edge of the system closing rapidly."

"Then send the patrol vessels to chase them off!" Rejak gruffly ordered.

"They're taking the bait, Bri..." Larkin called out from his raider as his scanners picked up the oncoming *Hidekis*.

"All right..." Sabrina ordered, "Remember to keep to the plan, people. "Draw 'em out as far as we can."

Darkness surrounding her, Sito Jaxa felt her chest rise and fall as she breathed. Her suit impellers firing automatically, the young Bajoran felt the gentle tugging of the planet's surface as she, along with her comrades, began their long descent. Zero-G freefall—that most dangerous of maneuvers—normally carried out by only the best of Starfleet's Marines and commandoes, along with a few foolhardy adventurers, Sito Jaxa was now making her first dive with only a precious few hours of holodeck training. Her odds of surviving were not good.

"Fun—*isn't it?*" The Huntress grinned as the laws of physics took effect.

Ignoring the voice in her head, Sito ran the calculations in her mind. An object falling freely at one earth gravity falls at 9.8 meters per second squared and Sito and her comrades began their descent at five hundred kilometers above the surface of Taris Three. Without the anti-grav units in their suits, she and her friends would have reached terminal velocity long before even nearing the surface. But that wouldn't have been an issue as they would have burned up anyway due to atmospheric friction if not for the dissipation screens and ablative coating of their suits. Of course, should any of those elements fail...well, Jaxa didn't want to dwell on the consequences of that. Instead, she fantasized about how it would feel to finally eviscerate Gul Rejak—the look on his face as she plunged her knife first into his groin. As she and the rest of her team entered the planet's stratosphere, she smiled, not even sure—or even caring now—if it was her—or the Huntress—who was smiling.

Watching intently as the Cardassian patrol vessels, taken in by Diaz's ruse, sped off towards the raiders, Shelby nodded her head. "Signal the *Bluefin*—now!"

"Signal coming in from *Sutherland*, Captain." Lieutenant T'Ser reported, "Now."

"All right, Ensign Bralus, take us in." Joseph ordered, "Prepare Mark 22s to fire on my mark."

Disruptor bolts from the pursuing *Hideki* barely missing her, Sabrina Diaz pulled her tiny raider into a steep climb. Her vision now a blurry red haze as her maneuvers strained the modified *Peregrine's* inertial compensators to their limits and beyond, the former Starfleet captain fought to reach the firing button on her console before she passed out, touching the button just as the red haze began to turn black.

"They're charging their disruptor banks, Captain." Lt. Dryer reported as twin yellow beams lanced out from the *Galor*. The *Sutherland* shaking lightly from the impact, Captain Shelby ordered, "Return fire, all phasers. Helm, take us to course two-four-five, mark three, then fire photon torpedoes two and four."

"Aye, Captain." Sam Lavelle acknowledged as he piloted the *Nebula* class cruiser as its phasers impacted on the Cardassian ship's shields. "Torpedoes away."

"One impact." Nyota declared, "Their shields are holding."

"Concentrate on their lower quadrant, Mr. Lavelle—that's where they're weakest." Liz instructed as the *Suthy* shuddered once again under the Cardassian ship's fire.

"Gods!" Ensign Bralus whispered in awe, partially distracted by the lethal *pas de deux* of the two capital ships as explosions from the impact of beams and torpedoes on deflector shields filled his screen.

"Mind your helm, Mr. Bralus." Commander McBride ordered, somewhat in wonder himself at the display of raw power he was witnessing on his viewscreen, as the border cutter shuddered under the weapons fire from one of the Orion raiders.

"Fire the Mark 22s." Akinola commanded in a sharp, clear voice that immediately brought his bridge crew back to the task at hand, "Then switch to the photons."

"Torpedoes away." The young Bolian, his mind now back on the job, acknowledged.

"The freighters are down." T'Ser reported as the 'Rat Traps' exploded near their targets, "But the raiders are still active."

"They must have hardened their systems." Akinola concluded as he stroked his chin. "Looks like we're going to have to do this the hard way. Attack plan Tango-4, target the lead Orion, all weapons—Fire!" The Nigerian captain ordered as he lowered his arm in a chopping motion.

"Direct hit." The Vulcan operations officer reported, "They're drifting."

"Good." Joseph replied, "Shift target to the lead Kon Ma raider..."

"Divide and conquer?" Dale inquired with a grin.

"Let's hope so, XO..." Akinola replied, managing a grin of his own, "Otherwise, we're going to be in for a long day."

Rolling as he hit the ground with a thud Solly disengaged his parachute. Rising to his feet, his phaser carbine at the ready, the red Orion chief petty

officer scanned the landing zone, grunting as he saw the rest of his team recovering from their landings. Their presence masked by both the darkness and their stealth suits, Solly nodded his head. *So far...so good. Long way to go though.* Approaching Lieutenant Sito who was still tied up with her 'chute, Brin drew his knife, making as if to cut the lines only to be rudely rebuffed by the Bajoran.

"I've got it." Jaxa snarled as she took out the Andorian war knife sheathed at her side and swiftly slashed the cords.

"So I see." Chief Brin replied in a flat tone as he backed off.

"Chief? A moment..."

Recognizing the deep voice of the Klingon placed in command of the assault team, Solly nodded his head as Worf approached, "Sir?"

Speaking in a low, confidential tone, Worf inquired, "How aware are you of Lieutenant Sito's situation, Chief?"

"I've read the official reports and Admiral Glover discussed it somewhat with me, but..." The red Orion admitted, "I have a feeling there's still an awful lot I don't know."

"You're right about that." The Klingon warrior bluntly replied, "Did the report or Admiral Glover tell you that besides Cardassians, the ones most frequently abusing her were Orions?"

Chief Brin clenched his teeth before grimly responding, "I think I understand both her reaction and what you're trying to say, Commander. Don't worry. I'll be careful around her. And..." he added, a note of determination in his voice, "I promise I won't let anything happen to her and I won't let her do anything she might regret later."

"Good." The Klingon replied, most satisfied with the chief's answer. Turning to the young Bajoran woman who was keeping her distance from the red Orion who had earlier come to her aid, Worf commanded, his deep voice bringing her back at once to the task at hand, "Lieutenant Sito? Are we within that building's defense perimeter?"

Her training at once kicking in, Jaxa took out her tricorder. Nodding her head after a quick scan, the security specialist replied, "Yes, Sir. We're well within

the shield wall, but we're still open to possible weapons fire from the building itself."

Jerking his head in the direction of Rejak's compound, Worf, along with his team, began their stealthy approach. "Then we should move quickly before they find out we're here."

"I'll second that plan." Pierson declared sardonically, fingering the scar on his cheek. "The sooner we get there...the sooner we can deal with Gul Rejak—once and for all."

"What's going on here?" *Ahmet* Nihal demanded as he rushed half-naked and breathless into Gul Rejak's office.

"What do you think?" Daras Tabor replied with a sarcastic voice, "We're under attack."

"It seems Sabrina Diaz and Starfleet reached an accord." Rejak responded in thoughtful tone, "And at the most...inconvenient...of times."

"So..." the *Ahmet* demanded, "What do you plan to do about it?"

"Why..." the corrupt gul shrugged his shoulders, "I intend to destroy the attacking vessels...what else?" Tapping his comm badge, Rejak then ordered, "Prokan...raise shields and prepare ground defenses."

Assured that the Worf's team had begun its assault, Jadzia Dax ordered, "All right, Mr. Nog...time to give the *Sutherland* a hand. Take us one hundred degrees mark six. Prepare photon torpedoes and phasers. As the *Galor* loomed larger in the *Defiant's* viewscreen, the raven-haired Trill cupped her chin. "Come in on their lower front quadrant, Mr. Nog...that way we'll be able to catch them in a crossfire."

"Aye, Sir." The Ferengi cadet acknowledged.

"All right..." Jadzia stood up as she felt the sudden rush of adrenaline, "Decloak and fire!"

Skirting the fighting, Ayenga smiled triumphantly as she piloted her raider closer to the drifting freighter carrying the cargo of Corillan acid. "Transmit the recognition code."

"What if Daras has changed the code?" Her Bajoran copilot, Omkar, inquired with a worried frown.

"Of course he did." Ayenga smiled back, "That's why I gave you these codes—got them from our inside source just before everything started blowing up here." She declared triumphantly as she dodged a random disruptor bolt.

"All right..." Omkar replied, "Transmitting." Sighing in relief, Omkar reported, "Their systems are still down because of the Federation torpedoes, but they can manage to get their shuttle bay doors open."

"Good." Ayenga exclaimed, "Tell Hanya and Banan to get ready and signal Tohon to board the Orion. We do this right, we'll make off with both freighters before Daras, Rejak, or the Starfleeters know what's happening."

"Which one?" Nura asked as she pointed at the tactical display. "They've split up—one of 'em's going to each freighter. Which one's the one with Ayenga?"

"That one." Manuele decided, picking one of the freighters at random. "We've got a fifty-fifty shot..."

"Better oddsssss than in mossssst casssssinossss I know..." S'nurl quipped, his toothy grin lending the Gorn a fearsome appearance.

"We're in transporter range." The Bzzit Khaht pilot declared, "We won't have any problems beaming over thanks to those 'rat trap' torpedoes."

"All right...let's go." Atoa ordered as he pressed a button on the runabout's control console. "I've just sent a tight beam locator signal to the *Sutherland*. That way they'll know we're here and they can make sure the *Bluefin* or anyone else on our side doesn't shoot us down."

Cradling his disruptor carbine, S'nurl hissed, "Let'ssssss go....we are wassssting time."

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.” Manuele quipped, flashing a sardonic smile as he stepped up on the transporter pad, joining his comrades. “Energize.”

Her lips turning up in a smile as she witnessed the *Defiant* joining the fray, Liz muttered under her breath, “Bout time you joined the party, Jadz.”

“Signal coming in...” Lieutenant Dryer reported, at first in a detached voice. But then, a broad grin appeared on her face, “It’s from Manny! He’s going after Ayenga, but there’s a problem...she’s going after both freighters and he can only chase one of the teams.”

“Relay it to Captain Akinola.” Liz ordered as the *Sutherland* shook under the onslaught of the *Galor’s* disruptors and photon torpedoes. “Course one-six-five, mark thirty, Mr. Lavelle...execute. Nyota, fire photon torpedoes, pattern Sigma—Now! Let’s see if between the two of us we can get that Cardie to break off.”

“Torpedoes away! The Cardies have launched too.” The ebony skinned tactical officer exclaimed as four balls of red energy shot out of the *Suthy’s* tactical pod, racing past an equal number of blobs launched by the Cardassians. “Brace for impact!”

“Shields!” Liz commanded. Lieutenant Rysyl, manning the operations console moved instinctively to comply just as the Cardassian torpedoes detonated, sending the *Nebula* class vessel into a convulsion of shakes and shudders. Her console erupting into a fury of sparks, Anara screamed as she covered her eyes with her hands in a vain effort to keep the sparks away from her face and eyes.

“Anara!” Hobson called out, the expressionless mask he normally wore in public shattered as he saw the Deltan woman writhing on the deck in pain. Rushing to the fallen Anara’s side, Chris kneeling down tapped his comm badge, “Medical teams to the bridge, stat!” He ordered as, with surprising gentleness, he removed the Deltan’s blood stained hands away from her face, taking care not to disturb the metallic fragments embedded into her flesh. Sighing in relief as he noted that none of her facial injuries were deep or serious, Chris managed a reassuring smile, “You’ll be all right, Anara...help is on its way.”

“Get those fires out, now!” Shelby ordered. Calling out to her tactical officer, the blonde captain commanded, “Return fire—all phaser banks!”

“Firing!” Nyota replied as Maria and Varok, quickly grabbing fire extinguishers, moved to put out the fires that had erupted on the operations and sciences consoles.

Watching the Cardassian ship, now drifting helplessly in her viewscreen, Liz turned her attention to Commander Hobson, “How is she, Chris.”

“I think she’ll be all right.” Her first officer replied as he fought to regain his normal equilibrium. “I’ve stopped most of the bleeding, but she’s going to need medical help.”

“They’ll be here soon, Chris.” Liz replied reassuringly as she heard her tactical officer call out to her.

“Captain? The *Defiant* is hailing us.”

“On screen, Mr. Dryer.” Liz responded as she turned back towards the viewscreen. Seeing the face of her long time friend, the blonde captain managed a shaky grin, “Thanks for the assist.”

“Don’t mention it.” Jadzia responded, “How’re you doing?”

“They got a lucky hit on us in their last barrage.” Shelby answered back, “But I think we’ve got everything under control...”

“Sir?” Maria Django interrupted, “We’re picking up unusual fluctuations in the warp engines!”

Alarm klaxons ringing, Jadon heard the voice of one of his engineers cry out in pain. “On my way! The Trill engineer shouted as he rushed towards the injured crewman, whimpering as he laid on the deck, his legs crushed by a piece of fallen conduit. “Help’s on its way, Son.” He said reassuringly as he tapped his comm badge, “Medical teams to engineering...”

“They’re on their way, Jadon!” Denise Murakawa’s voice responded, “We’ll get there as fast as we can.”

“Boss!”

His head jerking up as he heard Angela’s scream, a single word escaped the Trill’s lips...

“Treasure!”

Chapter 13

“Holy...” Dale murmured as the viewscreen automatically adjusted for brightness. “Trea...”

“I’m sure she’s all right, Dale...” Joseph declared in a reassuring voice as he clasped the younger man’s shoulder, “Right now, we’ve got our own matters to tend to. Target that raider in quadrant three...”

“You’re right, Sir.” The Texan replied, nodding his head. “Photon torpedoes...Fire!”

“It’s all right, Sir” Crewman Phipps groaned as Jadon looked first towards the sound of Treasure’s voice and then back down on his injured crewman. “I’ll be ok ‘til someone gets here—go.”

“If you’re sure?” Jadon replied, patting Phipps on the shoulder as the injured man’s eyes flashed a determined look. Getting up and rushing towards the young ensign’s console, Jadon frowned as he saw the bloody gash on her forehead. “You all right, Treasure?”

“I’ll be fine.” The North Star native responded, “We’ve got bigger problems though—look!” She exclaimed, pointing at her sparking console. “That lucky shot’s caused a cascade effect. If we don’t get those flux capacitors realigned in the next minute or two...”

“Boom.” Jadon completed as he took over the console. “Right...let’s get to it.”

“I’ll get my tool kit and get down there...”

Shaking his head, the Trill chief engineer made as if to speak only to be cut off by his buxom subordinate.

“Boss...we’ve got to get those warp-flux capacitors back online and the only way we can do that is for me to go down there and do it. Please...let me do my job.”

Grimly nodding his head, Jadon sighed, “Go ahead, Treasure. Watch your rad.

dosage, get the job done and get out of there as fast as possible.”

“You know it, Sir.” The younger engineer exclaimed with a big grin on her face as, clutching the tool kit in her hands, she dashed down to the warp core, ignoring the blaring klaxons as she ran.

“Shelby to Engineering...”

“Engineering...Tol speaking.” Jadon answered his voice straining as he watched his young protégé begin the process of repairing and realigning the flux capacitors.

“What’s going on down there, Jadon?” Shelby inquired, her voice barely betraying her growing worry, “We’re picking up dangerous fluctuations in the warp matrix.”

“The capacitors are offline.” Tol gloomily responded, “Treasure’s down there trying to fix them.”

“Understood...” Liz replied, fully aware of the implications of her chief engineer’s words. “Shelby to Murakawa...I need radiological specialists in Engineering right away.”

Having already received a report from the medical team that she had already dispatched to Engineering earlier, Dr. Murakawa responded, “They’re already on their way, Captain.”

“You hear that, Jadon?”

“Yeah.” The Trill engineer responded somberly as his worried eyes gazed first on his rapidly redlining console and then on the young woman feverishly working while being simultaneously bombarded by dangerous radiation. “Thanks.”

“Who did we lose? Sabrina called out as she witnessed one of her raiders explode under the disruptor fire of the last of the *Hidekis*.

“That was Rof.” A solemn Danyor Krakke responded as he raked the Cardassian’s hull with phaser fire. As the patrol vessel exploded, the Terra Novan grimly declared to his deceased compatriot, “I know it doesn’t bring

you back, old friend, but now, at least, you've got someone to hunt in your hunting grounds"

"What do we do now, Bri?" Larkin's voice called out from the intercom, "We've lived up to our end of the bargain. I say we get out of here before Shelby decides to change her mind."

As the part of Sabrina Diaz that was once a Starfleet captain waged an internal battle with the Maquis terrorist that she had become, Sabrina gritted her teeth. Finally reaching a decision, she announced, "We've still got work to do. Set course for Taris III."

"What?" A surprised Larkin exclaimed as an equally pleased Danyor Krakke responded with a simple, "Sounds good to me, Sabrina."

"You heard me, Larkin." Diaz replied sharply. "If you want to bug out, you can go, but I'm going in. If nothing else, we owe 'em one for Rof."

"All right...all right!" A reluctant Larkin responded as he brought his raider in formation with the other survivors of Diaz's team. "You win. Now, let's go before I change my mind."

Firing as they exited their raider, Ayenga and Omkar quickly downed the two Kon Ma fighters in the hangar deck. "Move!" Ayenga hissed as Hanya and Banan joined them, Banan cradling a cylindrical container. "We don't have much time."

As Ayenga and her team exited the hangar bay and made their way towards the cargo hold containing the Corillan acid, Hanya raised her hand. Hearing the sound of voices coming from the other side of the door, Ayenga nodded her head as the pair listened.

"Our raiders covering us have all been either disabled or destroyed and it'll be some time before we can restore shields, so we should expect boarders soon. This cargo in not to fall into their hands. The moment they board, the captain will activate the self-destruct sequence. Once that happens, you will have two minutes to get the hells off this ship before it blows up. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Kadan."

"Good. I'll be in the hangar deck. Daras wants Ayenga disposed of and I want to be there to see the look on her face."

Her eyes flashing with anger as she heard the disembodied voices words, Ayenga motioned for Hanya to take the other side of the door as Omkar took cover behind a pallet of what appeared to be medical stores. Pressing herself flat against the wall, the Bajoran terrorist held her breath as the door swished open. Waiting until her intended victim had crossed the threshold and the door had once again closed, the ex-medical technician sprung out, grasping Kadan in a chokehold, her disruptor pressed against the small of his back. "Make a sound..." she hissed, "...and you're dead." A cold smirk appearing on her face, the Bajoran woman sneered, "You like the look on my face now? I'm enjoying the look on yours."

Facing the door now, her prisoner serving as her shield, Ayenga nodded to Omkar who had now moved up to her old position at the side of the door. Acknowledging his leader's non-verbal command with a nod of his own, Omkar touched the door control. As the door slid open, Ayenga pushed her prisoner at the two men standing guard, firing with her disruptor as she did so with Omkar and Hanya firing as well. Watching nonchalantly as the three Kon Ma gunmen slid to the floor dead, Ayenga wrinkled her nose as the smell of charred flesh wafted towards her. "Leave it to Daras to rely on fools." Striding into the cargo hold, the Bajoran woman pointed at one of the canisters containing Corillan acid, "Here." She announced, "That's where we'll place it. Now hurry...we're wasting time."

The alarm klaxons blaring, Treasure winced as salty sweat dripped into her open wound. Pulling out the damaged capacitors, the young blonde engineer ignored the dosimeter on her chest as it changed color first from green to yellow then to orange and now the orange beginning to darken into a lethal red. Replacing the old units, the ensign slipped the relays back into place. Closing the access panel, Treasure tapped her comm badge. "They should be good to go now, Boss. Cross your fingers, I'm gonna restart 'em." Taking a deep breath as she placed her hand on the touch display, she called out, "How're the readings?"

Glancing down at his console, Jadon frowned as, at first, the flux readings stubbornly remained in the red zone. Saying a silent prayer to whatever deities there were that he didn't believe in anyway, the Trill pushed the reboot button on his display. Letting out a sigh of relief as the readings began

to drop down and then stabilize, Jadon all but shouted into his comm badge, “You did it, Treasure—now get the hell out of there!”

“Don’t have to tell me twice, Boss!” The lovely engineer responded as her dosimeter turned a brilliant red. Staggering towards the door, Treasure slumped to the deck, a rushing Jadon catching her in his arms just as she fell. Setting her gently down to the deck, Tol looked up as the medical team rushed in.

“We’ve got her, Sir.” One of the medtechs said gently as she ran a medical tricorder over the unconscious ensign. Taking out a hypo, the medtech injected Treasure in the neck. “Hyronolin.” She explained. “It’ll stabilize her until we get her into sickbay. Tapping the intercom, the young woman spoke, “Mya to sickbay...emergency radiological transport.”

Watching as his engineer and the medtech disappeared in the blue transporter effect, Jadon ignored the other medtech who was that moment tending to his wounds. Tapping his comm badge, the Trill spoke in a flat tone, “Tol to Shelby...systems are back online.”

“I can see that!” A smiling Shelby replied from the Bridge. “You have my thanks.”

“Don’t thank me.” Jadon responded in a strained voice, “It was all Treasure. She did it.”

“I see...” Liz replied in a soft voice. Turning to Lieutenant Dryer, the captain ordered, “Have security teams board that Cardassian ship. Once it’s secure, you can start transporting spare damage control and medical teams over.” Nodding her head at her tactical officer’s acknowledgement, Liz now turned her attention to the Trill woman on her viewscreen. “Can you take care of Rejak’s, Jadzia? We’re going to be tied up for a while dealing with his flagship.”

“Of course, Captain.” Dax responded, “Can we provide assistance?”

“No...” Shelby smiled back, “I think we’ve got it. But you better hurry—we’ve got Rejak on the ropes and I don’t want to give him any time to regroup.”

Before Dax could respond, another voice, this one belonging to Sabrina Diaz came through the intercom, “Don’t bother. We’ll take care of Rejak’s surface installations. You two have enough to keep you occupied.”

"Well, Liz?" The raven-haired Trill quipped.

"Sir?" Commander Hobson whispered, "It wouldn't be a bad idea to keep the *Defiant* in reserve in case Rejak did manage to call in reinforcements."

"Good point, Chris." Liz replied, concurring with her first officer's observations, "Very well, Ms. Diaz..." Shelby responded, "You have the go-ahead. Take out those facilities."

Rushing back to cover, Pierson and Lieutenant Sito dived into the gully where the other two members of their team were already crouched. "Three..." Pierson gleefully counted down, "Two...one..." followed by a muffled crump and a brief flash of light." That should do it." The rogue grinned as he cautiously raised his head. "Now!"

Rushing through the breach, the assault team dived for cover behind a pallet of containers as a squad of Cardassian soldiers appeared in response to the explosion. Quickly firing her phaser, a slender grin crossed Sito's face as her shot struck one of the troopers on the chest, downing him at once. Silently cursing the fact that her weapon was merely set on stun instead of kill, the Bajoran security specialist quickly set her sights on a new target as her teammates joined in the firefight.

Lost in the exhilaration of battle, Worf almost didn't see the Cardassian aiming his disruptor at him, until, nearly too late, he caught a glimpse of metal. Diving just in time as the disruptor beam passed over where his head would have been, the Klingon warrior nodded his head in appreciation at the red Orion who had downed the Cardassian with his own phaser.

"Don't mention it." Solly said with a toothy grin as the last of the Cardassians fell, "You owe me one." Feeling the building shake, the *Bluefin* CPO exclaimed in surprise, "What the hell was that?"

"That would be the *Defiant*." Worf replied confidently, not realizing that it was actually Sabrina Diaz and her people actually carrying out the attack. "Eliminating Rejak's weapons emplacements and labs."

"Good." Solly answered back with a grin, "Now, let's go get the head snake."

"That's the last of 'em." Sabrina Diaz declared as a building housing the equipment to manufacture Corillan acid exploded under the fire of her weapons. "Let's go home." Switching comm frequencies, the former starship captain spoke, "Diaz to Shelby. We just took out the last of Rejak's surface facilities." Pausing for a moment, she concluded, her last words taking on an almost challenging tone, "We've held up our end of the deal...now...are you going to hold up yours?"

"Captain?" Commander Hobson interjected, "This is probably the best chance we've got to capture Diaz and her people..."

"No...Chris..." Liz replied, lowering her voice to a whisper as she shook her head. "She's right...she did keep her end of the bargain. She could have easily bugged out while we were occupied with the *Galor*, but she stuck around. She didn't go back on her word, and I'm not going back on mine." Raising her voice to a normal volume, Shelby addressed the former captain, "You can go, Sabrina and thank you. Oh..." the blonde captain added, her voice now taking on a harder edge, "...one other thing. Don't let me catch you in Federation space or I'll see to it that you get a free room with a view in the Jaros II Penal Colony."

"Gotta catch me first!" Sabrina responded with a laugh as she and her team sped off, their part done.

"That's the last of 'em, Sir." Dale announced as an Orion raider exploded in the *Bluefin's* viewscreen.

"Good, XO." Captain Akinola acknowledged, "Tell Chief Deryx and his people to prepare to board those freighters. Mr. Bralus...bring us in transporter range."

"Aye, Sir." The young Bolian helmsman responded as he steered the aging border cutter towards the drifting freighters.

Materializing on the bridge of the Maquis freighter, Manuele and S'nurl both aimed their weapons at the three men who comprised the bridge crew of the

tiny freighter.

"You're too late." One of the terrorists declared with false bravado as he tried in vain to keep the look of fear from his face as he stood covered by a very large snarling Gorn carrying an equally large disruptor carbine. "This ship is going to explode and its cargo with it and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Nura..." Manuele called out, pointing at the flashing console. "Can you do anything about that?"

"I think so." The Bzzit Khaht replied as she quickly examined the display. "You go ahead and check out the cargo hold—I'll get this."

"What about them?" S'nurl asked, "We can't leave them alone..."

"I've got 'em." Manuele replied as he stunned the bridge crew. "Now...let's move."

Waiting until the door closed behind Atoa and his Gorn companion, Nura tapped her comm badge. "They're on their way. I'll finish deactivating the self destruct and meet you in the hangar bay."

Nodding her head as she heard the Bzzit Khaht's words, Ayenga replied, "Good. Be ready to beam us directly to our raider when I signal." Pushing a button on the cylinder that she had attached to one of the cargo canisters, the Bajoran terrorist declared, "The device is activated. When that bomb goes off, it'll give off a gas that'll penetrate through anything—including the containers holding the acid. I don't need to tell you what'll happen if you get exposed to the mutagenic and viral compounds released in the gas." Hearing a noise coming from just outside the cargo hold, Ayenga, acting on instinct dove just as a phaser beam sliced through where she had stood.

"Give it up, Ayenga!" Manuele called out as S'nurl fired his disruptor, shattering a container next to where Omkar crouched, showering the male Bajoran with plasticine fragments from the container.

"I don't think so, Starfleet!" Ayenga challenged as she tapped her comm badge. Smirking, she boasted as she and the rest of her people were surrounded by the red glow of a transporter, "Next time don't believe the person you just stabbed in the back when they tell you that they've forgiven you."

"Nura hassss betrayed ussss..." S'nurl growled. "We musssst leave...the sssself desstruct..."

"No." Manuele disagreed, shaking his head as he pointed at the cylinder Ayenga had attached to one of the canisters of acid. "Remember, Ayenga wants to contaminate the acid—and anyone caught on the ship when the bomb goes off. I'm betting she told Nura to go on ahead and deactivate the self-destruct.

"A dangerousssss risssk." The Gorn remarked.

Atoa replied as he rushed towards the device, "You better go on and beam back to the runabout. I'll take care of things here."

"No." S'nurl answered back with a hiss, "I will sssstay and cover you in cassse ssssomeone triesss to sssstop you."

"Thanks." The security chief replied, flashing a half-grin as he began work.

"Let's get the hells out of here!" Ayenga exclaimed as she took the seat next to her newest recruit.

"Taking off." Nura replied as the raider slipped away. "We got a problem..." The Bzzit Khaht declared, "Looks like a border cutter..."

"Can you evade?"

Nura answered back with a sly grin, "Just watch me."

"Captain..." T'Ser announced as she looked up from her sensor panel, "I'm picking up a Maquis raider pulling away from one of the freighters at full impulse.

"Mr. Bralus...pursue. Lock phasers, Mr. T'Ser." Captain Akinola calmly ordered as the *Bluefin's* impulse engines sprang to life.

"The raider's gone into evasive action, Sir." The Bolian helmsman reported, shaking his head, "Whoever's piloting that craft is either very good—or completely crazy!"

"Or both." Commander McBride commented. "Do you have a lock yet, Mr. T'Ser?"

"No, Sir." The Vulcan woman responded, shaking her head, "That pilot keeps shaking us before the computer can get a full target lock.

"Maintain pursuit." Akinola commanded, "And target manually. Let's see if we can do any better with the good ol' Mark One Eyeball."

The sweat beading on his forehead, Manuele looked up at the Gorn standing watch. "I can't do it." He declared somberly. "Ayenga learned from the last time. She's put in so many traps and blind connections that it's impossible to deactivate it before time expires." Making a decision, the New Kauaian instructed his companion, "Beam back to the runabout. See if you can raise one of the starships and then transport the freighter's crew."

"What about you?" The Gorn inquired.

"I'm going to make my way back to the bridge and trigger a warp core explosion. Whatever else happens..." the New Kauaian said with a sad smile, "Ayenga's virus can't be allowed to spread.

Shaking his head, S'nurl pointed, "There'ssssss not enough time..."

"Then we better move." Atoa rejoined, "Time's wasting."

Nodding his head, S'nurl tapped his comm badge, uttering, before he disappeared in the blue transporter effect, "Good luck, Human."

Coming out of what was obviously an armory bearing three pistols in her hands, Lieutenant Sito announced, "Projectile weapons. Since they've got an energy damping field, I figured Rejak would keep some of these around." She explained as she handed a weapon to each of her teammates.

"Good thinking." Pierson commented as he examined his weapon. "Cardassian D-24. Gas operated semi-automatic." He noted as he racked back the slide. "You don't see 'em too much these days, but some of the lowest conscript orders still use 'em. They're not much use against high-tech forces, but...they get the job done just fine when you want to plunder a bronze-age culture."

“And you can bet that Rejak and his pals’ll have theirs with them.”

“Where’s Rejak and the others?” Worf demanded as he held a Cardassian glin by his neck, his snarling visage mere inches away from the glin’s face as the Klingon warrior held his mek’leth in his other hand. “I am losing my patience.”

“Better tell him.” Solly grinned Glancing down at the Cardassian soldier lying stunned at his feet, and then at a grim-faced Lieutenant Sito, the Red Orion remarked, “Klingons aren’t the most patient of people—and neither am I or that Bajoran woman over there for that matter...”

“All right! All right!” The Cardassian whimpered. “They’re in the third chamber, but the entry is sealed with a coded lock...”

“Access code!” Worf growled as he tightened his grip on his prisoner’s throat.

“35291!” The glin quickly answered and then warned, “But your phasers...”

“Won’t work.” Sito interrupted with a sneer. “We know—he’s running a damping field. Slipping her pistol into her belt as she drew her Andorian war knife, the Bajoran woman smirked, “That’s why I picked up those projectile weapons and brought this...”

“We’ve got what we need.” Worf declared as he head-butted the Cardassian, smiling grimly as the unconscious glin slid down to the floor. “Let’s go.”

“Not bad.” Solly remarked with a lopsided grin. His grin vanishing as suddenly as it appeared, the Red Orion growled, “Now, let’s end this.”

“Almost got her, Sir.” Lieutenant T’Ser exclaimed as her manually targeted phaser shot barely missed the dodging raider. Her reticule lining up, a slight grin appeared on the Vulcan woman’s face until a hissing voice came through the *Bluefin’s* intercom.

“Any sssstarssships...emergency...need asssisstance.”

“This is the *USS Bluefin*.” Captain Akinola announced, “Who are you and what’s the nature of your emergency.”

"My name isssssss S'nurl. One of your officersssssssss issssss needssss help...the freighter he isssss on isssss about to sssself desssstruct.

"Captain?" Lieutenant T'Ser inquired, "I almost have a lock."

Taking a deep breath and then exhaling, Joseph Akinola came to the only decision he could. "Our primary mission, Lieutenant, is Search and Rescue. Set course for that freighter, Mr. Bralus...maximum impulse." Watching dejectedly as the Kon Ma raider flashed into warp, the white-haired border skipper shook his head, "Looks like this is going to be Ayenga's lucky day after all."

"I'll enter in the code sequence." Sito volunteered as the rest of her team took cover. Punching in the code, the Bajoran security officer smiled in satisfaction as the door slid open. Rapidly taking cover behind the wall on the side of the door, Jaxa heard the crack of the bullets as they whizzed by her.

"Yup." Pierson noted dryly, "They're waiting for us."

"Then, let us not disappoint them." Worf responded as he fired his pistol, ducking back down as a return volley from Rejak and his accomplices came his way.

"Let's hope they run out of bullets before we do." Solly commented with a crooked grin as he joined the firefight, noting wryly, "Thankfully they're lousy shots."

"We're not much better." Sito countered as she let loose another three round burst.

"Well..." Pierson riposted, "When was the last time you fired a projectile weapon?"

"Last week." Sito responded, "You?"

"Can't remember." The rogue responded as he fired his weapon.

"Will the two of you..." Worf called out in a voice that sounded almost amused, "Keep your mind on the task at hand." Noting the sudden lack of fire coming from the other room, the Klingon gambled, "Now! Before they can

reload!"

His fingers flying over the engineering console, Manuele successfully keyed in the sequence that would remove the matter—anti-matter containment bubble, bringing about an immediate cascade effect that would destroy the ship and its soon to be contaminated cargo. Smiling in satisfaction, the New Kauaian leaned back in his chair as the countdown approached zero.

*Five...four...*The Bajoran numerals flashed on the screen. *Three...two...*Just as the final digit displayed; Manuele felt the unmistakable tingle of a transporter effect.

One

The *Bluefin's* viewscreen erupted in a brilliant flash causing everyone on their bridge to avert their eyes as the screen automatically adjusted for the sudden brightness.

"Did we get him?" Captain Akinola asked.

"Yes, Sir." T'Ser acknowledged with a grin. "He's in the transporter room."

"Good." Keep him there for now until Dr. Baxter certifies that he's not carrying any contaminants. Then..." The Nigerian skipper declared, flashing an amused grin, "...if he clears, take him down to the wardroom and tell Cookie to fix him whatever the hell he wants." Pausing for a moment, the captain then inquired, "What does Chief Deryx have to report?"

"The Orion freighter—and the weapons it's carrying—are all secure, Sir." Lieutenant T'Ser reported. "The Chief reports some mild opposition at first from the Orions, but it died down pretty quickly. He adds though..." she said with a crooked grin, "...that a lot of them will be waking up with headaches."

"Serves 'em right." Joseph replied with a snort. "All right, Mr. Bralus. Looks like we're just about done here. Take us first to the runabout so that we can pick up that Gorn's prisoners and transport Mr. Atoa back and then to the freighter. After we take it into tow, bring us up with the *Sutherland* and *Defiant*."

“Aye, Sir.” The Bolian helmsman responded as the border cutter’s impulse engines once more sprang into life.

Lunging at the green Orion who was at that moment attempting to bring his handgun up to meet the onrushing threat, Solly, thanks to both his greater muscle mass and his momentum, easily brought the *Ahmet* down. Striking quickly, the red Orion CPO stabbed his knife deep into Nahal’s chest as his other hand knocked the pistol out of the Syndicate leader’s hand. Feeling the green Orion twitch under him, Chief Brin twisted his knife as he extracted his blade. “Go to hell.” Solly cursed as Nihal’s life slowly ebbed away.

Smirking, Daras Tabor raised his weapon at the human facing him. However, before he could pull the trigger, the Bajoran terrorist’s eyes widened as he saw the hilt of a dagger thrown by his would be victim imbedded in his wrist. Howling in pain, Daras dropped his pistol as Pierson’s wrist snapped back once again, releasing another projectile—this one puncturing the Kon Ma gangster’s neck.

“Now it’s your turn.” Lieutenant Sito declared as her eyes fell on the one who had so wronged her. Her Andorian war knife gleaming in her hands, the Bajoran woman advanced towards her prey.

“Now!” The Huntress exulted, “*We have him! Kill him!*”

The other three members of the team, looking at each other questioningly, all came to agreement. “Gentlemen?” Pierson declared, “Why don’t we let the lady take care of business?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Solly agreed.

“It is justice.” Worf concurred, nodding his head grimly.

“No one to protect you this time, *Palukoo*.” Sito declared, flashing a cold grin as she brandished her knife. “Now you answer for all the pain you’ve caused over the years—for the lives you’ve destroyed.”

“I’m sorry, my dear...” Rejak grinned as he tapped a button on his wrist, “But not today.”

Crying out as she saw a red field surrounding Gul Rejak, Jaxa threw her knife

at her hated enemy—only to watch as both Rejak and knife disappeared.

“No!” The distraught young woman cried out as she sank down to her knees.

“NO!!!!”

Epilogue

Looking down sympathetically at the sobbing Bajoran woman, Pierson remarked with a scowl, "The bastard had an out—he always has an out."

"How?" Chief Brin inquired, "The transporter buffers are still in place."

"He obviously left a frequency band open so that he could snake his miserable ass out if he had to." Lynn replied, not even bothering to hide his anger.

His heart going out to the distraught Lieutenant Sito, Worf tried to console his former protégé, "Maybe your knife struck home, Jaxa. It did dematerialize along with him..."

"Maybe..." Solly chimed in and then inquired, "So what do we do now?"

"We download everything we can from Rejak's computers." Worf instructed, "Maybe he's left something there that will force the Detapa Council to finally take action against him."

"Don't bet on it." Pierson remarked. Looking first at Sito and then at the Klingon Starfleet officer, the roguish human suggested, "Me and Solly can handle this. Why don't you stay with the young lady—she knows and trusts you. Come on, Solly—let's get to work."

Barely standing up as a Cardassian soldier removed the knife from his chest, Gul Rejak winced as another, this one a medical technician, sealed the wound. Hearing a chuckle coming from behind him, the corrupt gul turned around.

"Didn't I warn you about Bajoran women, Rejak?"

"Gul Dukat. Thank you again."

"Don't thank me yet." The Cardassian rebel smirked, "At least not until you hear how you're going to repay your debt to me for saving your life."

"Shelby to landing party..."

“Yes, Captain Shelby?” Lieutenant Commander Worf replied as he heard the captain’s voice coming through his comm badge.

“Report, Commander.”

“Rejak has unfortunately escaped...” The Klingon admitted ruefully.

“How’s Lieutenant Sito?” Shelby asked, her voice filled with concern for the young Bajoran.

“She is...understandably...distraught at the turn of events.” Worf confessed as he looked down compassionately on the young Bajoran security officer who now seemed to be slowly recovering from having her enemy snatched away from her so abruptly. “But I think she will be fine.”

“You’re sure, Mr. Worf?” Liz asked solicitously.

“Yes, Captain.” The Klingon warrior replied with a strongly confident voice.

“Very well. That’s good enough for me.” Shelby declared, affirming her confidence in the Klingon’s judgment. “Do you have anything else to report?”

“Yes, Sir.” Worf, glad to change the subject, replied. “We have deactivated the transporter buffers and Chief Brin and Mr. Pierson are currently downloading information from Rejak’s computers.”

“I see...” Shelby replied, “Continue what you’re doing. Once you complete the downloading, we’ll transport you back to the *Sutherland* for debriefing. We’ll also begin transporting security teams to pick up any prisoners and gather evidence.”

“Understood, Sir.” Worf acknowledged as he received a nod from Chief Brin. “We’ve just completed the downloading.”

“Very good. Prepare for beam up.”

“She’ll be all right...” Dr. Murakawa said with a smile as she addressed the cluster of officers standing before her, “Although she’s still a little groggy—so only a short visit—understood?”

“Yes, Doctor.” The officers replied in unison as Denise’s smile turned into a mild chuckle.

“All right—go on in and say ‘Hi’.”

As the officers filed into the patients’ ward, the first of them, Commander Dale McBride smiled, “Hey Treasure. I heard about what you did. That was some damned fine work”

“Thanks, Dale.” The North Star native answered back, her voice shaky and weak. “How’re you and...”

“We’re getting together later on for coffee...” The Texas born XO replied with a shy grin.

“Good.” Angela smiled back, “Just you remember...don’t rush her. Just take it one day at a time an’ you’ll do fine.”

“I’ll do that.” Dale promised as he bent over to kiss the young engineer on her forehead, “You just get better now, you hear.”

“Hi Boss.” Treasure grinned as Jadon stepped forward, “How’re the engines?”

“Purring like kittens.” The Trill chief engineer responded.

“That’s good.”

Smiling down at his hairless junior engineer, Jadon gently teased, “So...you going Deltan now?”

Her chuckle causing her to wince, Treasure retorted, “Yeah...once Doc Murakawa puts in those pheromones you an’ the rest o’ the guys down there better watch out.” Her laughter dying down, she replied more seriously, “Doc says that once I’m feelin’ better, she’ll inject me with a follicle stimulator an’ I should have my regular hair back in about a month.”

“Well...” Jadon grinned as he presented Angela with a small jewelry box, “You hurry up and get better, ‘cause when you get back you’re going to have to wear these babies.”

Opening up the jewelry box, Treasure gasped as she saw the two black pips.

"It's not official yet..." Jadon admitted, "But Captain Shelby's putting in the paperwork and she's sure that it'll go through. So..." he smiled, "...looks like we're going to have start calling you Lieutenant Barrows."

"I like the sound of that, Boss."

"Ahem."

Looking up, Treasure was surprised at seeing Lieutenant Commander Galt from the *Bluefin* standing next to her bed. "Sir?"

"Ensign..." His lips turned up into a slight smile as he noted the jewelry case the youthful engineer clasped in her hands, "I mean, Lieutenant...I just wanted to tell you..." The gruff Tellarite nearly stammered, "I just wanted to tell you that you can work in my engine room anytime you want."

Knowing at once how high praise that was coming from an engineer like Galt, Treasure felt a lump in her throat, "Thank you, Sir...I really do appreciate that."

"You just let me know if that prissy Trill gives you a hard time and I'll knock him on his ass for you."

"I'll do that, Sir." Angela replied, wincing once again as she laughed.

Appearing at the door, Dr. Murakawa gestured with her thumb, "All right—visiting hours are over. My patient needs her beauty sleep, so everybody out—now."

Pursing her lips as she addressed the officers seated about her desk, Captain Shelby remarked, "Well...I spoke with Admiral Glover and Captain Sisko a few minutes ago. It's unfortunate that we could not catch either Rejak or Ayenga..."

"But we did stop their plans, the weapons going to the Kon Ma were confiscated, and Daras Tabor was killed..." Lieutenant Atoa pointed out. "That counts for something."

"That's what Admiral Glover and Captain Sisko told me a few minutes ago in a

conference call I had with them.” Liz admitted, “And you’re right. We did accomplish a lot—an awful lot. Still...I have a feeling those two people are going to cause an awful lot of damage before they’re done.”

“You’re probably right, Captain Shelby.” Captain Akinola agreed, nodding his head sagely, “But there’s nothing we can do about it now but be on our guard.”

“So...what happens next?” Manuele asked.

“Now...we go back to Deep Space Nine, repair our damage and turn our prisoners over for trial.” Shelby answered back as she rose to her feet. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

As the officers filed out of her office, all save for one, Liz waited. Once the door had closed behind the last of them, she turned to the *Sutherland’s* counselor. “Thanks for staying behind, Max.”

“My pleasure, Captain.” The curly haired, swarthy, mustachioed counselor grinned back, “What can I do for you?”

“How’s Lieutenant Sito holding up?”

“Surprisingly well.” Counselor Freedman replied. “Even though he escaped, I think that giving her the opportunity to confront her tormentor allowed her to work out a lot of her self-hatred and anger. Even though...” his facial expression took on a somewhat disappointed countenance as he regarded the captain, “...I still think the circumstances under which she went were not the best.”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Liz briefly turned her eyes away from the psychologist as she responded in a soft, almost shy voice, “You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

His look now one of concern, Max inquired in a gentle voice, “Is there something you want to tell me, Captain?”

“No.” Liz replied, shaking her head as she forced a smile to her lips, “It’s just something I have to work out on my own...”

“All right...” Counselor Freedman reluctantly conceded, “But if you ever need to talk...”

"I'll know who to come to." The petite blonde completed, her sad smile now becoming more of a fond grin. "Thank you, Max."

"We almost got him." The Huntress exulted, *"Next time...we will."*

"No." Sito replied, *He got away...he always gets away."*

"That's because you hesitated." The Huntress declared accusingly. *"Let me take over. Then...no one will ever harm you again."*

"No!" Jaxa exclaimed aloud, standing up. "I am in charge here...do you understand?"

"For now..." The Huntress grinned evilly, *"For now..."*

Hearing her door chime, Jaxa called out, "Yes?"

"It's Chief Brin, Lieutenant. May I come in?"

"Don't let him in..." The Little Girl begged, *"He's one of the bad men."*

"No, he's not." Sito gently replied, *"He's ok."*

"He's a prophets' damned Orion!" The Huntress swore, *"You should have gutted him when you first saw him."*

"Shut up!" Jaxa ordered, taking command. Speaking aloud, the security specialist called out, "Come in, Chief."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Lieutenant." Chief Brin said as he slowly entered the Bajoran's room carrying a small box in his hands, "But I thought...since...well...since you lost your knife back on Taris III, that I'd give you a replacement from my collection. Here..." The burly red Orion grinned as he set the box down on a small table by the door. "It's Andorian make...just like your old knife." He said as Sito admired the blade, gently caressing its hilt. "I picked it up years ago back when I was a crewman."

"Thank you, Chief." The young Bajoran replied with a genuine smile. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome." Solly smiled back. "I better go now...the *Bluefin* will be warping out soon and it's not a good idea to keep Captain Akinola waiting. "Take care of yourself."

"I will." Sito promised as the door slid shut, "And...thanks again."

"Well Lynn..." Shelby grinned as she escorted the roguish Pierson and his Gorn bodyguard into the transporter room. "I guess it's time for you to go." Turning to the transporter technician, the captain ordered, "You can go now, Crewman...I'll handle this."

"Yep." Pierson grinned back. His smile disappearing as the crewman disappeared behind the closed door, the ex-Starfleet officer consoled, "Hey, Lizzy...don't kick yourself over sending us down to get Rejak. It was the right call. It might not have been the Starfleet call...but it was the right call to make. That bastard's got the Detapa Council, Central Command, and most of the intelligence spooks in this sector looking out for him. There's no way to take him down by the book. Besides which, he's as slippery as a damned vole."

"Heh." Shelby snorted, "Then why can't I get a decent night's sleep."

"Because you've still got that nasty streak of morality in you that you've always had." Pierson replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "I guess you inherited it from the Old Man." He said, referring to Shelby's grandfather.

"Him and Grandmother too." Liz conceded. "Well..." she said as she moved behind the transporter control, "You better get going."

"Yeah...you're right." Pierson agreed as he joined S'nurl on the transporter pad. "Next time you're in the neighborhood, swing on by. I'll have a box of those Nuevo Habana seed maduro panatelas you like and a bottle of Clos de Mesnil Krug Champagne chilled. We can talk about old times..."

Shaking her head as she activated the transporter, Liz exclaimed, "You're irrepressible!"

"No..." Pierson replied as he began to dematerialize, "I'm Pierson."

Entering 'Ricks', the *Sutherland's* 1940s North African cabaret-themed lounge, Manuele Atoa waved, smiled, and nodded his head at friends and acquaintances as he slowly made his way into the lounge. Seeing one figure in particular seated at the bar, the New Kauaian took the seat next to her. "Mind if I sit here, Nyota?"

"Manny?" The lovely New Kenyan security officer gasped, "I'm...no...not at all...have a seat."

"Look, Ny..." Manuele began, "I know I said some harsh words to you the last time..."

"Hey..." Nyota interrupted, "You didn't mean 'em. I know that now. It's all right...honest."

"Great." Atoa grinned as he picked up his drink, "So...want to fill me in on all the gossip that I've missed since I've been away?"

"All right!" The ebony-skinned Lieutenant Dryer grinned back, "But I gotta warn you—it's going to take awhile."

"Got nothing but time, now that I'm back home."

"We'll tow the freighter and its cargo back to Deep Space Nine, Captain Shelby." Joseph Akinola said as he addressed the blonde captain's image on his viewscreen.

"Thank you for your help and for recovering my tactical chief." Liz replied.

"Don't mention it." Joseph coughed, "He's a good man and he did good work. I'm just sorry we couldn't get Ayenga."

"Me too." Shelby confessed. "Thanks again and take care, Captain"

"You too, Captain." Akinola replied as Shelby's image was replaced by stars.

"Gettin' soft on her, Captain?" Commander McBride quipped with a roguish grin.

"No." Joseph shook his head, "I don't like how she lives her life and I don't approve of the way she treats her father. But..." he reluctantly confessed, "She does know how to command a starship. I wouldn't want to know her socially, but I would want her with me going into a fight."

"Well..." Dale grinned, "I guess that's as close to a ringing endorsement as she's ever going to get from you." Addressing the blue-skinned Bolian sitting at the helm, Commander McBride ordered, "Take us out, Mr. Bralus...warp three."

Sitting alone in her darkened office, Liz barely heard her intercom beep. "Captain? *Bluefin* and *Defiant* have just warped out. Lieutenant Commander Dax wanted us to tell you that she looks forward to seeing you again on Deep Space Nine."

"Thank you, Ensign Smithurst." Liz sighed. Looking at the painting of her grandfather, Commodore Robert Wesley, the disconsolate starship captain shook her head, "What would you have done, Poppy?"

"*I don't know.*" The shade of her grandfather, seated on the couch underneath his picture responded. "*I wasn't there.*"

"Not much of an answer."

"*What sort of answer did you want me to give you? Are you asking for absolution?*"

"No! Yes! Maybe! I don't know." Liz confessed. "I'm not sure what I want and that scares me! I've never second guessed a decision before. But now..." She shook her head.

"*Now you're confused.*" Seeming to chuckle, the phantasm continued, "*Welcome to the club, Spitfire. It only gets worse from here.*"

"How do I know what to do...how do I go on?" Liz begged, "Can't you give me something here?"

"*Do better.*"

"Do better? Is that all you've got?" Liz exclaimed.

"That's all you need." The apparition that was the blonde captain's conscience replied, "But it's up to you what you do. You can sit there and wallow in self doubt and self pity or you can..."

"Do better." Liz completed. "Guess that'll have to do." As she exited her office to return to her quarters, Shelby paused for a moment as she passed her grandfather's portrait. It seemed to the lovely captain that, for the briefest of moments, the ruggedly handsome figure in the painting smiled at her. Looking at the picture again, Shelby saw that it looked just as it always did. Chuckling under her breath, Liz muttered to herself, "I really do need a good night's sleep."

The End