

Star Trek: Sutherland Ties That Bind

By David Falkayn

The Federation-Cardassian border near the Argaya system. Stardate 47566.7

As the Galor-class cruiser *Aldera* cut through space, its deadly form resembling, more than anything else, a scorpion, or perhaps the sting rays of Earth's oceans, Gul Danar frowned as he addressed the soldier currently manning the primary sensor station. "Time until intercept of Federation shuttle?"

"Four minutes, thirty seconds." The soldier crisply reported.

"Hmmm..." Danar vocalized, his right hand cupping his chin as his left rested on the arm of his command chair, the amber lighting of the bridge lending an almost mystical aura to his pose. Turning to his first officer, the Gul mused aloud, "I find it interesting, Lennock, that this bounty hunter should have been able to escape in a Starfleet shuttle from a Federation starship...the *USS Enterprise* no less...and with his prisoner...a Bajoran terrorist."

"He is either very good sir..." Lennock proffered with a sardonic grin.

"Or he is not what he seems..." Danar concluded his expression a thoughtful frown.

"So...what are your orders, sir?" The first officer inquired as the helmsman announced that the *Aldera* was two minutes from intercept.

"We'll let the situation unfold." Danar decided as he signaled the communications specialist to once again open hailing frequencies. Addressing the Federation shuttlecraft, he declared. "Federation shuttlecraft...this is Gul Danar of the Cardassian Union cruiser *Aldera*. We will be at your position in two minutes. Come to an immediate halt and we will tractor you aboard. Failure to follow instructions will result in your

immediate destruction.”

On hearing the Gul’s message, Joret Dal turned his head back, his eyes filled with compassion as he regarded the shackled young Bajoran woman seated on one of the benches. “It is time.” He said simply as Ensign Sito Jaxa slipped her wrists out of the unlocked fetters and stood up. “You must go in the pod now.”

“Good luck.” Sito answered back as she brushed back a stray lock of blonde hair.

“And to you as well.” The Cardassian responded his lips a grim line as the all too young officer disappeared inside the tiny escape pod. The chance of success for him was slender enough, but to expose someone so young...so full of life...to such danger. Death...or...capture and interrogation...and worse...were the possible fates faced by the brave Bajoran who had just sealed the door to the pod. Taking a deep breath, Joret pressed the button ejecting the pod into space, its small thruster jets providing a brief boost separating it from the shuttle. *Sito Jaxa’s fate now laid in the hands of her Prophets, may they watch over her*, the Cardassian officer thought somberly as he prepared to play his part in the coming drama.

Sito knew that the plan was a forlorn hope at best and that for it to have even the slightest chance for success, it would depend on a large measure of luck...luck that some sensor technician or scan sweep wouldn’t pick up the pod...or if they did pick it up, would simply disregard it as space debris...luck that the Gul commanding the cruiser would just simply buy Joret’s story without investigating too deeply...luck that the *Enterprise* would pick up her tiny escape pod. *What was that expression Sam was so fond of regarding hopeless situations...*Sito thought, a warm smile coming to her face as she recalled the rakish grin, dark hair, and boyish looks of her good friend... *slim and none? Yeah...that’s it!* Her warm smile quickly turned into a worried frown though as she remembered the rest of the saying...*and slim left town a long time ago.*

Unfortunately for both Sito and Joret, luck would be with neither one of them this day.

“Sir!” The soldier manning *Aldera’s* primary sensor console announced, “A small object has been detected near the Federation shuttle.

*Could be just a rock...*Danar thought, *or it could be something else.* Coming to a

quick decision, the Gul ordered, "Scan the object."

"Object has the dimensions of a standard Federation shuttle escape pod, sir." The technician reported, "One lifesign...Bajoran."

"So...this bounty hunter is a traitor..." The first officer growled, "Shall we destroy the pod and shuttlecraft, sir?"

Shaking his head, Danar ordered, "No...But put a lock on to the pod. I want an intensive scan of the shuttlecraft. Any signs of anything unusual?" On hearing the negative report of the sensor technician, the Gul further ordered, "Then tractor it into our shuttle bay and after we've retrieved it, beam the occupant of that escape pod into a security holding cell and then destroy the pod."

"What about the 'bounty hunter'?" The first officer asked his distaste for the probable traitor in the Starfleet shuttle obvious in both his facial expression and voice tone.

"For now...confine him in a security cell as well." Danar directed with a sly grin. "After we've fetched our prizes, withdraw and launch a sensor probe. I'm curious to see if the *Enterprise* or someone else comes looking for our pod. If no one does...then our 'bounty hunter' might be who he claims to be."

"And if someone does?" The first officer asked.

His lips turning up into a sly grin, Gul Danar replied, "Then we will have captured both a spy and a traitor for the good of the State...not to mention our careers."

As Sito rematerialized, her eyes quickly took in the cramped spartan surroundings. The exposed waste facility, hard bed, and force field barrier immediately telling her she was in someone's brig with the Cardassian soldier standing guard at once informing her as to the identity of her captors. Seeing the Cardassian speaking into what was obviously an intercom, the young Bajoran sat dejectedly down on the bed, her head down. Slim had indeed left town a long time ago.

Some time later, a Cardassian strode into the brig. Judging him to be an officer by the way in which the guard snapped to attention, Sito struggled to

her feet as he approached her cell. Recognizing his insignia marking him as a Gul, the young Bajoran forced herself to look squarely into his eyes as he glared down at the younger woman.

"I am Gul Danar." The Cardassian announced, identifying himself as he spoke in a stern tone. "You are under suspicion for committing an act of espionage against the Cardassian Union. Your cohort has been arrested and has undergone interrogation and is now making a full confession. He will be charged with treason, tried and executed according to Cardassian law." Moderating his voice slightly, the Gul now offered a carrot to his youthful prisoner, "However, there is no need for you to share his fate. You are young...with an entire lifetime ahead of you. You should have the opportunity to live...to fall in love...raise a family...to be honored in old age. I am not without some influence. If you cooperate with us...tell us who you are...what your mission is...I will see to it that you are spared the rigors of interrogation and that your captivity will be as moderate...and even pleasant...as possible." His lips turning up into a smile, he added as further incentive, "We might even be able to arrange an exchange for you."

Figuring that her Cardassian captors wouldn't be making this offer if they had actually broken Joret, Sito stared silently into her jailer's eyes, her lack of words saying volumes.

"I see..." Danar responded, his voice bearing the slightest tinge of sadness. "We will be arriving at one of our military garrisons within a few days. You have until then to change your mind. I would urge you to do so...once we arrive at the outpost then your fate will be decided." Turning to walk away, he added one final note, "Should you wish to speak with me at any time, just inform the guard."

Arriving at the outpost, Sito saw Joret one last time. Shackled with his hands behind his back as she was, his face was puffed and bruised from numerous beatings with one of his eyes lacerated. She watched in sadness as he staggered to the transporter pad, roughly handled by his two guards. Turning his head to take a look at his young Bajoran companion, the former Cardassian officer lowered his head, shaking it apologetically.

Addressing Sito, Gul Danar stated, "This is your last chance, Bajoran. Cooperate now or..." His eyes told Sito all she needed to know. Seeing that the young woman was intent on maintaining her silence, the Gul responded with a disappointed shake of his head. "You are too young...and far too

foolish. But you will learn..." He said as her guards urged her on to the transporter pad next to Joret. "...and I am sorry to say, you will learn most painfully." He concluded as the hum of the transporter beam all but drowned out his last words.

Immediately after Sito rematerialized on the planet's surface, new guards took custody of her. Brutally manhandling her, they almost literally threw her into a chair, binding her hands and feet. A Cardassian then approached as another grabbed her head and yet another forced her mouth open. Sticking an instrument into her mouth, the Cardassian pulled her tooth. Then, taking a medical tricorder, he ran it over her body. Nodding his head, the guards undid her bindings and then grabbing her roughly, threw her into a dark cell. A few hours later, the door opened as six Cardassians entered the room. That was when the beatings and the rapes began.

She never knew when they would come...day...night...sometimes they would skip a day or two...other times they would come for her several times within the same rotation. She tried to fight her tormentors at first, but after being beaten down several times she finally gave up. Now, whenever they came for her, her body just went limp as her mind traveled elsewhere. Almost always, as rough Cardassian hands slapped, hit, and pawed at her...as Cardassian boots kicked her...as her captors violated her, she would go back to the one place where she felt truly safe. As she smelt the hot breath reeking of fish juice coming from the mouth of the heavy Cardassian body pressing on her as the other Cardassians laughed waiting their turn, her mind drifted elsewhere.

She was once again with her friends on the *Enterprise*. She laughed with Alyssa Ogawa as the Japanese nurse talked about Andrew Powell. She consoled Sam Lavelle as he worried about the upcoming evaluations and whether Riker was out to get him or not or she laughed as the roguish helmsman cracked a joke, making her giggle no matter how depressed she was. Taurik, Sam's roommate, whose precocity both impressed and infuriated Lt. Commander LaForge was with her, giving her his quiet calm and strength. Finally, when she was at the point of succumbing, Lt. Worf would appear in her thoughts. Her superior officer...mentor...sensei...and friend. He gave her his strength and dignity when she needed it most...when it appeared that she was about to break. Alyssa's serenity...Sam's love of life...Taurik's steadiness...Worf's strength...all kept her alive and sane while she dwelt within her Cardassian hell.

One day, her guards came. But this time they didn't come to beat and rape her as usual. Instead they grabbed her and, dragging her out of her cell, threw her against a wall. One of the guards turned on a hose, blasting her with a steady stream of water. Working the hose up and down her body, he and the other guards laughed as the stinging jet of water cleansed the caked filth and blood and grime from their victim while at the same time tormenting her further. Curled up into a fetal position, Sito cried as the water cleansed her even as its force hammered her body even more. Finally tiring of their fun, two of the guards picked the Bajoran up off the floor, practically dragging her out of the building where a Gul stood watching. As they approached the Cardassian officer, he advanced toward Sito. Placing a hand under her chin, he raised her head up, gazing intently into her eyes. His lips turning up into a satisfied grin, he nodded his head, motioning for the two guards to take her to a nearby shuttlecraft. Feeling a hypospray against her neck, Jaxa slipped into blessed slumber.

Regaining consciousness, Sito found that she was hanging by her wrists from a crossbeam, her feet dangling a foot off the deck. Looking down, she sighed as she saw that she was still unclothed, but there was now a long scar under her left breast where previously there wasn't. Her eyes scanning the room, she quickly spotted the Cardassian Gul whom she had been dragged before earlier seated at a table, a serving of Regova eggs before him.

"Ah...you have awakened." Looking up, the Cardassian plastered on an insincere smile as he regarded his prisoner. "Give me a moment, if you please. Regova eggs are such a delicacy and not easy to attain in this sector." Cracking the egg's shell, he proceeded to calmly eat his meal as Sito, not having eaten in at least twenty six hours, watched. Taking a sip of a peach colored liquid from his glass, the Gul sighed with contentment, "And nothing washes down Regova eggs better than freshly squeezed Rokassa juice." He then frowned, "Unfortunately...this is replicated. But still...not bad."

Rising to his feet, the Gul picked up a flat object roughly the size of a padd. Approaching his Bajoran prisoner, he stated in a matter of fact tone. "Ensign Sito Jaxa...Bajoran...formerly of the *USS Enterprise*." Looking up at his captive, his voice now took on a slightly menacing edge. "As far as Starfleet...Bajor...your family...the universe...is concerned, you are dead. For all intents and purposes, Sito Jaxa no longer exists. You will remain here...in my custody...until I decide otherwise. The terms of your confinement will depend on you. Cooperate and you will earn privileges...refuse and you will

be punished. You are no longer Sito Jaxa...henceforth you will be referred to as and you will answer to the term slave as you are merely property. His eyes glaring at the young Bajoran, the Gul demanded, "What are you?"

Looking down at her new tormentor while picturing her old friends in her mind, Sito's eyes never wavered as she looked into the Gul's eyes saying weakly, "I am Ensign Sito Jaxa of the *USS Enterprise*. I am a Starfleet officer and demand treatment according to the Treaty of..." She never finished her statement as she screamed, fiery pain coursing through her body radiating from the scar under her breast, pain so intense that the young woman lapsed into unconsciousness.

Slowly regaining awareness, the young Bajoran saw the Gul still standing before her, holding the flat object in his hand up. "This controls a device that was implanted in you while you were drugged. The pain setting that you experienced was level one—the lowest setting. I can see that this will take some time, but that's all right..." He said, his lips turning up into an insincere grin. "We have plenty of time...all the time in the universe." Turning away from Sito, the Gul motioned for the two Cardassian soldiers standing guard at the door to come forward. "This creature is yours for the rest of the day." He stated, jerking his thumb in the direction of the tormented young woman. "Short of causing permanent harm, you may do with it as you will, but I want it back here cleaned and fully conscious in the morning."

USS Sutherland Stardate 49026.5

As the doors to his quarters slid open, Sam Lavelle pulled off his red and black duty shirt as soon as he entered, crumpling it into a ball and tossing it carelessly on to his bed as he walked to his desk. Seeing the flashing light on his monitor, the young helmsman commanded in a tired voice, "Computer list messages."

"One message—sender and location unknown. Time received—1300 hours." The ship's computer replied in its usual feminine voice.

Cocking his head slightly to the left, Sam ordered, "Play message."

Lavelle looked on in shock as he saw an image of a woman he had thought long dead, Ensign Sito Jaxa. She was naked; her hair stringy and matted. Cringing as he saw the purple bruises on her body, Sam uttered in a soft voice,

"No..." He watched in horror as one of the Cardassian guards punched her in the side and then, along with his companion, manhandled the frail woman, dragging her into the presence of another Cardassian, a Gul by his appearance.

As the image of the Gul's face faded, that of a Dopterian appeared on the screen. "If you wish to know where your friend is..." The alien said in a low raspy tone somewhere between a whisper and a growl, "...then come to Deep Space 9 with fifty strips of gold pressed latinum. You have no more than three standard weeks or I go...and you will never know the fate of your friend."

Starfleet Medical, San Francisco Star Date 49026.5

"Alyssa?"

Immediately on hearing her name, an attractive bronze skinned woman with oriental features and jet black hair looked up from her computer screen. Turning her attention to the source of the voice, Lieutenant Junior Grade Alyssa Ogawa smiled, "Yes Dr. Crusher?"

"A subspace message has just come in for you. You can take it at your desk if you'd like." Beverly offered graciously.

"Thanks, Doctor," the nurse responded as she instructed the computer to play the message. As she played the message, her face reflected the torrent of feelings rushing through her. Surprise...disbelief...shock...anger...sadness all played out on her face as she saw that poor abused creature on the screen which was her friend Sito Jaxa. As she watched the same horrible scene her former companion on the *Sutherland* saw, the nurse's practiced eye immediately caught the probable signs of sexual abuse on the poor woman along with the multiple bruises and contusions afflicted upon her body.

Observing her subordinate's...her friend's...reactions, Beverly's forehead creased with worry. "Alyssa?" She asked solicitously, "Is there anything wrong?"

Wiping away her tears, Nurse Ogawa sobbed, "It's Jaxa...Ensign Sito..." She voiced as she replayed the message for Dr. Crusher, "She's alive..."

As she replayed the message, Dr. Crusher's face took on a stern countenance. Shaking her head, Beverly stated in a somber tone, "She's been..."

"I know..." Alyssa said her voice barely above a whisper. Her face taking on a determined expression, the Japanese woman announced, "Dr. Crusher...I have to..."

"Are you sure?" The auburn haired physician asked, placing a supportive hand on her friend's shoulder. "What about Andrew and Noah?"

"They'll be ok." Alyssa replied, choking back a sob. "Andrew's family lives in Seattle and mine are in Nagano and both sets of grandparents just love Noah..."

"I'm sure they do, Alyssa..." Dr. Crusher interjected with a note of regret in her voice, "But what about you? I can't let you go off on some suicidal rescue mission by yourself into Cardassian space."

"I promise, Doctor..." Nurse Ogawa declared, "...I won't do anything stupid." Her face taking on an earnest expression, she implored, "Please Doctor Crusher...you saw the video...you saw what they did to her. Jaxa's my friend." Her voice now taking on a determined edge, she asked, "What would you do if you were in my place?"

Sighing in reluctant resignation, Beverly responded, "I'd try to find out what was going on." Taking a deep breath, she came to a quick decision, one that she prayed she wouldn't regret later. "All right...go home and spend some time with Andrew and Noah. By the time you get back here, your authorization to go on extended leave will be waiting." Looking into Alyssa's eyes, the auburn haired doctor said, "I just hope you know what you're doing."

"Thank you...Beverly." Nurse Ogawa said, her lips turning up into a warm smile as she stifled her sobs.

"Be careful, Alyssa." Dr. Crusher pleaded as she hugged her long time nurse and friend. Watching as the door slid closed behind her friend, Dr. Crusher spoke, "Computer, connect me with Captain Picard at Starfleet Academy."

As Captain Jean-Luc Picard observed the tortured image of the young Bajoran

woman that he had sent on that ill fated mission over a year ago being dragged by two Cardassian guards, his jaw muscles tightened as he gazed on the face of the Gul before whom Sito had been dragged. The captain couldn't help but note that, while a different individual, that Gul reminded him in so many ways of his old tormentor, Gul Madred. The video now replaced by the visage of his old friend, Beverly Crusher, Picard asked, "Are you sure that poor woman is Ensign Sito?"

"Pretty sure, Jean-Luc." Dr. Crusher responded. "Image enhancement verifies...of course it's always possible that she's someone else who has been surgically altered, but my gut tells me that this is Sito Jaxa." Taking a deep breath, she continued, shaking her head in remorse, "And I can't believe I let Alyssa go off by herself like that!"

"Why did you let her go?" Picard gently inquired, knowing from personal experience that his old friend and former CMO needed to understand and accept in her mind the reasons for her actions as well as the possible consequences that might come with them.

"Honestly..." Beverly began and then hesitated for a moment, "...I remember how bad I felt leaving you behind on Celtris III and then later on how we all felt when we found out you were captured. When Alyssa asked me what I would have done..." the auburn haired doctor stammered, shaking her head, "...I realized I didn't have any choice but to let her go," reluctantly concluding, "I don't think I could have stopped her if I wanted to. Had I rejected her request I think she would have resigned her commission and gone anyway."

"You're probably right." The wise captain agreed, granting his old friend what she most needed at the moment—absolution. "I can't tell you this officially, Beverly...but off the record, I don't think you had any choice. She would have gone regardless of what you would have said or done."

Sighing in relief as she heard her friend's words of support, Dr. Crusher looked the former captain of the *Enterprise* in the eyes as she asked, "So...what can we do to help?"

"I'll contact Captain Sisko at Deep Space Nine to let him know that she's coming and why, but other than that, there's not much we can do right now, Beverly..." the captain reluctantly admitted, "...except watch, wait, and hope that everything works out ok and that Alyssa...and hopefully Ensign Sito...makes it back safely."

"And be there for both of them..." Beverly responded as Picard nodded his head in agreement. Flashing a slight smile, she ended their conversation, "Thanks Jean-Luc...for everything."

USS Sutherland

Slumped in his chair, Sam had drifted off to sleep, the message playing in a repeating loop. Waking up with a start as he recognized the sound of the door chime, he quickly masked the Dopterian's image now on his computer monitor as he called out in as uninviting a voice as possible, "Come in!"

"About time! I've been leaning on that door chime for the past five minutes." Ensign Maria Django huffed as she entered her shipmate's quarters. "Must be nice being a department head...your own quarters and all..." The young ensign groused as her eyes swept the lieutenant's much larger room, "...while I'm stuck sharing space with Treasure. Did you know she snores louder than an Alporian mammoth? I guess that comes from sleeping on her back 'cause of her giant tits." Shaking her head at the strewn about clothing and unmade up bed, she sneered, "I'm not sure who's the bigger slob—you or her."

"Maria..." Sam began in a tired voice, "I'm not in the mood for..."

Cutting him off quickly as she saw the haggard expression on her friend's face, Django asked, "What's going on here, Enterprise? You're wound up tighter than a Vulcan going through the Seven Year Itch!" Seeing the look in her friend's eyes, the fiery young ensign softened her voice, "What's wrong, Sam?"

Wordlessly activating the monitor, Lavelle played back the message that he had just received.

"That's your friend—isn't it? The one you were telling me about..." Maria asked in low tone, receiving a single nod of the head in response.

"Damn..." Maria muttered almost inaudibly, "Those bastards really did a number on her."

"Yeah...they did." Sam agreed as he lowered his head.

"So...what are we going to do about it?" Django asked.

"What do you mean, 'We'?" Sam retorted as, getting out of his seat, he made his way to the replicator and, ordering a fresh shirt, put it on.

"If you're planning on doing what I think you're going to do..." The dusky skinned ensign remarked, "...you're going to need all the help you can get..."

"No..." Sam responded, shaking his head as he took his seat once again, "I can't...and won't...ask you to do this. Leaving out the fact that this is probably going to end up in death, a court-martial, or a Cardassian labor camp, you don't even know Jaxa..."

"No..." Maria replied in a soft voice as she placed a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder, "...but I know you...and that's enough for me. Like it or not..." She declared, a sly smile crossing her features, "...you're stuck with me."

Shaking his head, Sam uttered in a soft tone, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but...all right, Django...you're in."

"So..." Maria replied with a conspiratorial wink as she sat down beside the handsome young lieutenant, "You got any ideas how we're going to pull this off?"

After Liz looked first at the recording showing a horribly beaten Sito Jaxa and then at the most recent subspace message sent by the Dopterian, she regarded the man standing before her. Cupping her chin with her right hand, she asked, "Lieutenant, are you sure that woman in the recording is really your friend? What if she's a fake...a Cardassian agent surgically altered to look like Lieutenant Sito?"

"She might be..." Lavelle reluctantly admitted, "...but I have to be sure." Looking down on his commanding officer, he pleaded, "You understand...don't you? She's my friend."

Gently nodding her head, Liz replied, "Yes, Lieutenant, I do." Then, taking a deep breath, she inquired, "So...what are you planning on doing?"

"I was planning on going in and getting her, sir." Sam responded flatly.

"I see..." Shelby drawled and then stated, "You do realize that means probably

going into a war zone. If that is her, she's most likely being held in Cardassian territory. You'll have to dodge not just the Cardies, but the Klingons as well."

In a somber tone, the helmsman answered, "Yes sir, I understand...but like I said, I don't have a choice."

Looking her subordinate squarely in the eyes, the captain declared firmly, wincing inwardly as she saw the despondent look on her officer's face. "I cannot officially authorize any missions into Cardassian territory, Mr. Lavelle...regardless of the reason."

"But sir..." Sam began to protest, only to be silenced by his captain's upraised hand.

"Lieutenant..." She exclaimed in a sharp voice, "I said that I cannot **officially** authorize a mission into Cardassian space!" Exhaling deeply, she looked compassionately at the young officer standing before her, "Now, if you want to take some leave time...I've noticed that you've gotten quite a bit stored up..."

"Sir..." Sam replied, a quizzical look to his face, "...what does that have to do with..."

"Mr. Lavelle..." Liz interrupted, "...Sam..." She said, using Lavelle's given name for the first time, "As I said, I noticed that you have a great deal of leave time accumulated. I was just thinking that you might want to take that time...get away from the ship for awhile..."

Picking up at last on Captain Shelby's intentions, Sam's lips turned up into a grin, "I think I do, Captain. You're right..." He said, "I have been feeling kind of burned out recently...some time off would be nice." Pausing momentarily to take a breath, the young lieutenant launched himself on his second request, "Sir? A friend of mine found out about my...plans...and well..." the roguish helmsman drawled, a crooked grin on his face, "...my friend is a very stubborn person. She insists on coming along with me..."

"Uh huh..." Liz vocalized, instantly seeing where her helmsman was headed. "So...who is this friend of yours—as if I need to ask?"

"Well..." Sam replied, "Ensign Django was telling me just a while ago that she was going stir crazy here and when she found out about my...plans...she wouldn't take no for an answer."

"I see..." Shelby responded thoughtfully. "Are you sure she fully understands the nature of your 'vacation' and the possible...problems...that could happen if the two of you have a bad trip and that I might not be able to help you out?"

"Yes, sir." Sam sighed, "I explained everything to her, but...like I said..." he repeated, the crooked grin returning to his face, "...she still wants to go."

Taking a deep breath as she stood up, Liz took her helmsman's hand in hers, shaking it. "All right, Mr. Lavelle. I'll approve your leaves effective 1830 today. You're authorized to take the *Loire* as transportation." As Sam turned to leave, the captain added, her voice a mixture of warning and concern, "I expect the two of you to come back here in one piece with your...souvenir...and don't you dare get my runabout scratched—or else."

Watching as the doors to her ready room slid closed behind the young officer, Liz sighed as she activated her comm unit. "Lieutenant Dryer...First, I want you to contact Captain Sisko at Deep Space Nine and then Captain Picard at Starfleet Academy and Admiral Glover. Tell them I need to arrange a private subspace conference with them as soon as is convenient." Taking a deep breath, the captain further ordered, "And after that I want you to inform Counselor Freedman that I want to see him in my ready room as soon as possible."

"Well, here we are..." Sam said solemnly as he and Ensign Django entered the hangar bay, spotting Commander Hobson standing at the control console. A grave expression on his face, he pleaded one more time, "Maria...I have to do this, but you don't."

"Sam..." Django warned, "...we've been through this already."

"I know..." Lavelle acknowledged with a sigh, "I just don't want anything to happen to you..."

Reaching up on tip toes to kiss her friend on the cheek, Maria smiled, "Who said anything's going to happen to me...I'm coming along to keep you out of trouble. Speaking of which..." she whispered in his ear as Commander Hobson cleared his throat, "The Iceman's waiting..."

"Our leave authorization, sir." Lavelle stated plainly as he handed a padd to

the first officer.

"Thank you, Mr. Lavelle," Hobson acknowledged in his usual patrician voice, "Captain Shelby informed me about your leave." Lowering his voice, he advised, "I'd suggest that if you need anything special that you see Garak, the Cardassian tailor. Tell him I sent you." Then, fixing both Lavelle and Django in his gaze, he cautioned, "Just remember when you deal with him, *caveat emptor*."

"Let the buyer beware"," Sam replied in an equally low voice, "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

"Well...everything seems to be in order." Chris said, adding in a sincere voice as he cleared the *Loire* for departure, "I hope you two find what you're looking for."

"So Max..." Captain Shelby prompted as she observed the *Sutherland's* swarthy ship's counselor, who was at that moment reviewing for the third time the tape of Sito Jaxa, "...what do you think?"

Lieutenant Commander Maximilian Freedman ran his fingers through the curly hair on his forehead, buying time as he collected his thoughts. "I think Captain..." he drawled, a slightly nasal quality to his voice, "...that this poor woman is going to need a lot of help putting her life back together and that we're going to need someone much better qualified than I to begin what will prove to be a long process of mental and emotional restoration." Taking the slight tilt of his captain's head in his direction as a signal to continue, the counselor explained, "Ensign Sito is obviously undergoing a great deal of physical and mental abuse...I think it's safe to assume sexual abuse as well. If she follows the typical pattern, she will be distrustful of males in general...and especially of strange males—myself included."

Nodding her head in understanding, Liz asked, "So...what would you advise, Max?"

"I'd suggest..." The counselor recommended, "...that if everything does work out well...that a female counselor begin the therapy process...preferably one that Ensign Sito knows and hopefully trusts..."

"Hmmm..." Liz mused, "Ensign Sito's last posting was the *Enterprise*..."

His lips turning up into a slight smile, Max declared, "Deanna Troi. I don't think we could have found a better person for this task. Besides being a familiar figure—someone the ensign could feel safe with, Counselor Troi's empathic senses I think will prove invaluable in beginning the long, slow, and painful process of rebuilding her psychological and emotional structures."

"Do you think there's a chance she might recover from what she's been through?" Liz asked, her voice tone edged with concern for the young Bajoran.

Sighing, Max grimly replied, "I don't know, Captain. Just from what little I saw, I'd say she's been severely traumatized...both physically and emotionally. No offense to Dr. Murakawa and her fellow physicians...but while the physical scars can...if not entirely, then for the most part, be healed...the psychological and emotional scars..." Shaking his head, the counselor continued his diagnosis, "...are going to run much deeper. It will take a great deal of time and care...and I can't promise you that she will recover." Getting up out of his chair, Max concluded with a slight grin, "But from what little I've read of her...she's a strong woman...and well...there's always hope."

Sitting at the table, Sito quietly observed the other patrons in Ten-Forward, the crew lounge of the USS Enterprise, the ship to which she had just been assigned. Her only friend on the ship, Sam Lavelle, who was supposed to join her, had been called in for an extra duty shift, leaving her all by her lonesome—alone in a crowd. The chief engineer, Geordi LaForge, sat at the bar talking with his friend, Lieutenant Commander Data as the El-Aurian bartender, Guinan, wearing an elegant blue dress, her usual outlandishly high hat covering her head, served drinks. The same Commander Riker who, just eight hours earlier had, with stony face and forbidding countenance, warned the young Bajoran that he was well aware of her Academy record and that he would be watching her closely, was now laughing and flirting with a young lieutenant from astrophysics.

Sito Jaxa didn't have to worry about anyone flirting with her though—or having much of anything else to do with her either for that matter. I can't say that I blame them, Sito thought morosely as she sipped her drink. Who would want to associate with one of those who disgraced the name of Nova Squadron?

"Hey...this seat taken?"

Looking up, Sito saw an attractive human woman with jet black hair, almond eyes and a broad smile wearing the teal of the Medical branch and the single pip of an ensign. "Ummmm..." The young ensign stammered, "No..."

"Great..." The woman exclaimed, "Mind if I join you?"

Nodding her head in assent, Sito managed a tentative grin as the other woman sat down across from her. "Hi...I'm Alyssa Ogawa. Sam Lavelle asked me to come by and keep you company. He told me that you're with the new group of replacements that just came in..."

"Yeah." Sito replied softly, "My name's Sito Jaxa..." The recent Academy graduated admitted, fully expecting the person sitting across from her to get up and walk away now that she knew who she was. However, much to the surprise of the young Bajoran, the human woman stayed and talked with her...and talked...and talked...and by the time she'd left, Sito had made a new friend.

With a grunt, the Gul Rejak rolled off of the limp and unresponsive body of Sito. Fingering the radiation scar on the right side of his face, courtesy of a photon grenade tossed by a member of the Bajoran resistance, the Cardassian Gul sneered as he pressed the button controlling the pain device implanted in the tormented young woman. As the pain stabbed her body, Rejak commented, his voice a silky urbane tone, "You should be more appreciative of your status, my pet. After all, I could just as easily sell you to the Orions—and still might if your behavior doesn't improve. Oh well..." He sighed as he released Sito from her pain, "Perhaps some time with the guards will make you more appreciative of your position..." With that, he opened the door, jerking with his thumb towards the whimpering prisoner, "She's yours until I call for her again." He stated as the two guards roughly picked her up, laughing the entire way as they dragged her back to their barracks.

Addressing the blank screen, the Dopterian reported, "The message has been sent and received by two of the three individuals...the helmsman and the nurse."

"Good." The voice declared. "You are to wait until they both arrive at the space station and then you will contact them and deliver the information. Once you have completed your mission you will be appropriately rewarded."

"Understood." The Dopterian confirmed as their employer cut off the subspace connection. Turning towards his Bardeezan confederate he gloated, "Five hundred strips of gold pressed latinum each for us doing nothing more than delivering messages. This is the easiest money I've made in some time.

"I know..." The Bardeezan replied, his lips turning up into an evil grin, "But there's no reason why we can't turn this into even more money..."

"How?" The Dopterian asked, his greed warring with his caution. "Our employer might not appreciate us deviating from the plan."

"How's our employer to know?" The Bardeezan retorted. "I know this Tellarite on Persis IV who's connected with the Orion Syndicate..." he whispered. "We deliver them to him and he'll cut us in on a nice finder's fee. Everyone makes money—Barl from selling them at the slave auction and we clean up from our employer and Barl. Not a bad rotation's work if you ask me," he concluded with an evil grin.

His greed winning out in the end, the Dopterian asked, "So...how much do you think we can get for the humans?"

Unfortunately for the Dopterian and his partner, their planned double-cross did not go unnoticed. Observing the scheming pair through a viewscreen, the shadowy figure cynically shook its head as its lips turned up into a sly grin. *Typical...the figure thought its lips turning up into a wry grin...but you needn't worry. I have every intention of rewarding your loyalty appropriately.*

As Deep Space Nine grew ever larger in the transparent aluminum window that Alyssa looked out, her thoughts drifted away from the space station, its mixed angular and curved structure marking it as a product of Cardassian architecture. Gazing outward, the young nurse's thoughts returned back to Earth, to her last night alone with her husband, Andrew.

"That was nice of your parents to take Noah for the night." Andrew said, his lips turning down into a worried frown as he noticed his wife picking at her food. "Alyssa? Earth to Alyssa..." He nervously quipped, forcing a grin to his face as he waved his hand at his wife. "You there, Aly?"

"Oh..." Alyssa, startled, exclaimed as she laughed uneasily. "I'm sorry, Honey."

She apologized as she took a sip of her wine. "It's just that I've got a lot on my mind..."

"Sito?" Andrew asked as he reached across the table, taking his wife's hand in his.

Alyssa nodded her head in response. "Everywhere I look, Andrew..." she said, her voice barely above a whisper, "...I see her face...looking like she did in that message." Daubing the tears from her eyes with a napkin, she lowered her head sadly, "Her eyes, Andrew...they were so...so...empty."

Not really knowing what to say, Andrew commiserated, "I know, Aly. When you showed me the message, it broke me up too to see her that way." Squeezing his wife's hand, Andrew emphasized, "And don't worry about me and Noah. I understand why you have to do what you're going to do." His voice now edged with worry, the concerned husband pleaded, "All I ask is that you don't do anything reckless and that you come home to us safe and sound, and if you can bring Sito back you do it."

Managing a shaky smile, Alyssa squeezed her husband's hand back. "I will, Honey. I promise."

Alyssa jerked up in her seat as the voice from the shuttle's intercom startled her out of her reverie. "We will be docking at Deep Space Nine in thirty standard minutes. Please return to your seats and remain there until docking procedures have been completed. Thank you."

"Well..." Sam smiled as he turned to his copilot, "That does it...we're cleared for landing."

"Great." Maria quipped as she got out of her seat, "I was getting tired of being stuck in a damned holding pattern." She complained as she looked out one of the transparent aluminum windows on the *Loire*, pointing at the variety of Starfleet vessels near the station. "Looks like the entire fleet decided to come here."

"Yeah..." Sam agreed, pointing out, "It's been pretty busy out here since the crap hit the fan with the Cardies and the Klingons." Clenching his teeth, he concluded, "Let's hope things stay quiet long enough for us to find Jaxa and get the hell out."

“Yeah, well...” Maria jibed, “Knowing our luck, I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Sighing in relief as the circular airlock door opened, Alyssa Ogawa, along with the rest of the passengers of the shuttle she came in on, strode out on to Deep Space Nine. Immediately spotting the two people who were supposed to meet her, Alyssa waved to them. “Over here, Chief O’Brien...Keiko!”

“Nurse Ogawa!” The burly Irish chief greeted as he and his wife rushed to greet their friend, dodging the incoming passengers on the way.

“Konnichiwa Alyssa-san.” Keiko said, happy at the opportunity to speak her native language, “O genki desu ka?”

“Konnichiwa Keiko-san.” Alyssa replied in equally fluent Japanese. “Hai, genki desu.”

“It’s good to see you again.” Miles interjected as he offered to take the nurse’s carry bag.

“Same here, Chief.” Alyssa responded, smiling as the chief took her bag. Walking down the Promenade with her friends, the Japanese nurse noticing the light traffic observed, “I read the reports about the Klingon attack...”

“It was touch and go for awhile...” The chief confessed, “...but the captain pulled us through.” Taking his wife’s hand he further admitted, “I’m afraid we haven’t seen the last of the Klingons though.” Then, in an effort to dispel the gloom that had gathered amongst the threesome, his lips turned up into a broad smile, “However, there was one good thing that came out of all this...Commander Worf’s here now.”

“He is?” Alyssa asked, pleasantly surprised at the news of her former shipmate’s assignment to the station.

“Yeah.” Miles exclaimed, his grin growing even wider. “He’s our new Strategic Operations Officer. Chuckling, he added, “And he’s already making an impression here...”

“I’m sure he is...” Alyssa grinned and then inquired, “So...who do I see about temporary quarters?”

"Already taken care of." The chief replied. "We'll take you there right away and after you settle in, you can join us for dinner."

"And we're not taking no for an answer." Keiko interjected, "I'm fixing my special yakizakana and domburi with miso soup."

"Mmmm..." Alyssa vocalized hungrily, "Sounds good. I can't wait."

"Well...here we are!" Chief O'Brien proclaimed as they reached the door to the quarters that had been assigned to the former *Enterprise* nurse. "We'll leave you alone for now, but if you need anything, just let us know and we'll see you later on for dinner."

"Thanks Chief, I think I'm going to take a nap." Alyssa smiled as the door to her quarters slid open. "I'm feeling kind of tired now." Flashing a bright smile as she pressed the button opening the door, she added, "I'll see you later." However, Nurse Ogawa's nap would have to wait as the first thing the youthful nurse saw as she entered her quarters was the blinking light on the monitor indicating that she had a message. Her heart racing, she dropped her carry bag on a chair. Sitting down on the sofa she commanded the computer to replay the message.

"Go to the Ferengi's bar at the twenty third hour." The sound of the Dopterian's voice causing the Japanese nurse to sit up straight, her attention focused on every word as the voice spoke. "You will be contacted there. Do not attempt to trace this message. If you do, we will know and you will never recover your friend."

"I guess this is where they've assigned us." Sam Lavelle proclaimed in a roguish tone as he and his companion approached his quarters. "Not exactly the honeymoon suite..." he remarked, noticing the spartan accommodations, "...but it'll do."

"Don't get any bright ideas, Enterprise." Django replied jokingly as the pair entered. "We're here on business remember."

His smile vanishing, Sam answered back, all trace of humor gone from his voice, "Yeah...Maria...I know...believe me, I know."

Taking her friend's hand in hers and giving it a comforting squeeze, Ensign

Django assured, "Don't worry, Sam. We'll get her back."

Thanks, Maria..." Sam responded in a soft voice and then, dropping his friend's hand, pointed to the monitor where a blinking light indicating an incoming message was flashing. "Didn't waste time, did they?"

"You sure it's our guy?" Maria asked somewhat dubiously.

"Got to be," Lavelle responded. Ordering the computer to play, the screen came to life with the Dopterian who had first contacted Sam appearing on the screen repeating the same message calling for him to meet at Quarks at the twenty-third hour.

"Twenty-third hour, huh..." Lavelle vocalized as he stretched, "That's pretty late. It'd probably be a good idea for us to get some rest before we meet up with this guy..."

"Sounds like a good idea to me..." Django replied as she made her way to the master bedroom, staking her claim to the space. "I get the big bed..." She joked from the door, "You can take the other one."

"Thanks a lot, Maria..." Lavelle answered back grumpily as he stretched and yawned. "I'll see you later."

As the pair neared the entrance to the Ferengi's bar, Sam eye's widened. "I don't believe it!" He exclaimed with a wide grin as he recognized the oriental woman wearing a teal Starfleet standard shipboard medical branch uniform approaching the bar. "Alyssa! Alyssa Ogawa!" He called out, waving his hand, "Over here!"

Turning towards the voice calling out her name, Nurse Ogawa's face broke out into a happy smile of her own as she recognized her old *Enterprise* comrade. "Sam!"

"Long time, Alyssa." Sam uttered as he embraced his friend in a tight hug.

"Too long!" Alyssa acknowledged as she returned her friend's embrace, holding it until a cough interrupted the two friends' reunion.

Breaking away from his old shipmate, Sam introduced his two female friends

to each other, "Alyssa...this is Ensign Maria Django...she's a very good friend of mine from the *Sutherland*."

Flashing a friendly smile, Nurse Ogawa held out her hand to the dark skinned young ensign who, after a moment, took it in hers. "Hello, Maria..." Alyssa greeted, "Anyone who's a friend of Sam's is a friend of mine."

Chuckling, Maria quipped in an only slightly sarcastic voice, "Yeah, well...We'll see if you still think that way once you've gotten to know me better."

Flashing a slight smile at the confused look on his former *Enterprise* companion's face, Sam jibed as Django punched him hard on the shoulder, "Don't mind Maria...you'll get used to her." Then, turning towards his moody shipmate, he winced, "Did you have to hit me so hard?"

"You're lucky..." Maria replied with a snort, "...I was going to kick you in the balls."

Quietly observing the byplay between her two fellow officers, Alyssa smirked inwardly. *Looks like Sam's met his match*, she thought to herself as she observed the couple before her. Her smile vanishing as she remembered her purpose for being on the station, Alyssa told her former crewmate in a quiet voice, "Sam...I got a message..." Taking a deep breath, she looked up into Lavelle's eyes, "Jaxa's alive."

"Yeah...I know..." Sam replied in an equally hushed tone, "I got the same message."

"From a Dopterian?" Alyssa inquired.

Nodding his head, Sam relayed his account of the message that he had received. "I saw Sito being..." His teeth clenching with rage, the young Canadian could proceed no more.

Reaching out with her hand, Alyssa grasped that of her friend's as she acknowledged in a sad voice, "I received the same message Sam. That's why I'm here...I'm going to get her back."

Gently squeezing Alyssa's hand, Lavelle replied, "Looks like we're here for the same reason, then. We got another message from our Dopterian friend. This one was to meet him at Quark's on the twenty-third hour." Cracking a wry grin, he added, "I got a feeling you got the same message here too."

I did..." Alyssa responded, "I was on my way when I ran into you..."

"Well..." Sam drawled as he motioned chivalrously for the women to precede him, "Why don't you join us...Maybe we'll get some answers."

"Captain..." Odo reported via his comm badge as Benjamin Sisko sat down at his desk, apparently gazing intently at the baseball in his hands, "They're here and are about to enter Quark's."

"Thank you, Constable." Sisko replied, "Continue monitoring them, but don't interfere."

"Understood." The shapeshifter acknowledged as he smoothly morphed into the form of a Raphalian mouse, scurrying undetected into the bar.

Turning towards his monitor screen, Benjamin addressed the visages of the two captains occupying split screens on the display, "Did you catch that?"

"Yes, Captain..." Captain Picard replied, sounding a note of caution, "However, I must confess to still having my doubts as to this venture."

"I understand your concerns, Captain Picard..." Captain Shelby responded, "But we don't have a choice. Remember, when Admiral Glover signed off on this scheme, he insisted that Starfleet and the Federation have to be able to maintain plausible deniability. That means..." she sighed ruefully, "...that they have to be considered as acting outside orders..."

"Still..." Picard protested, "The three officers in question...while eminently capable individuals..." he emphasized, "...are young...and inexperienced. I'm not sure they're ready to carry out an operation such as this."

Flashing a sly grin, Benjamin chimed into the conversation, "I think I can do something about the experience problem at least..." Seeing that he had caught his fellow captains' undivided attention, he announced, "I've arranged for them to run into someone who I think will help in that department..."

Immediately picking up on the identity of the 'someone' mentioned by his fellow captain, Picard's lips slowly turned up into a grin as he nodded his head, "I agree...I think that his presence will prove most helpful."

As the trio were about to cross the threshold into the bar, they were met by the owner, Quark. "Oh no..." the Ferengi declared, pointing at Ensign Django, "You're not coming in here! You're a menace!" The bartender exclaimed, his voice rising by at least two octaves.

"What do you mean you're not letting me in this dive?" The fiery young ensign spat out as she balled her fists. "You gonna try and stop me, frinxface?"

"Frixface?" Sam mouthed sotto voce and then, in much more placating voice, addressed the Ferengi barman. "Quark...I thought Captain Shelby took care of everything before we left the last time?"

"She did..." The Ferengi admitted before qualifying, "But I'm making a special exception in her case!"

"What is going on here?" A deep voice resonated from behind the three humans seeking entrance into the bar.

"Lieutenant Commander Worf?" Alyssa Ogawa, immediately recognizing the voice, called out with a smile as she turned in the direction of former *Enterprise* shipmate.

"Nurse Ogawa..." The burly Klingon acknowledged and then, recognizing Sam, further greeted, "Mr. Lavelle..."

"You know, I'm getting sick and tired standing out here." Django, tired of being ignored, growled as her eyes shot daggers at the Ferengi.

Turning towards Quark, Worf glared menacingly, "Why are you keeping these officers out, Ferengi?"

"It's not the two of them..." The bartender said, gesturing at Lavelle and Ogawa, "They can come in. It's her!" He declared, pointing his finger at Ensign Django. "That female is a troublemaker!"

"What did you do?" Alyssa, eaten up with curiosity, asked the young ensign.

"She ruined my bar!" Quark shouted.

"It wasn't my fault!" Maria protested, raising her voice as well.

"Enough!" Worf bellowed, immediately silencing everyone within range of his voice. Turning towards the petite human female whose skin complexion was only slightly lighter than his, the Klingon demanded, "Who are you, Ensign, and what did you do?"

"Ensign Maria Django...*USS Sutherland*." The ensign replied with just the faintest note of insubordination in her voice. Shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly at the glare the Starfleet officer sent her way, she continued, "You want me to tell you what happened...no problem. It was a few weeks ago while the *Sutherland* was here..." She explained, her eyes locked on to those of the Klingon officer, "...before your buddies came in and trashed this place. We were all in the bar minding our own business and having a good time and then some ridge-headed Klingon decided to come on to our operations officer..."

"The Klingon..." Lavelle helpfully provided, "...had way too much bloodwine. Combine that with the fact that the *Sutherland's* operations officer is Deltan and the air filtration system in the bar was on the fritz..." He added, casting an accusatory glance in the direction of the Ferengi bartender.

"Hey...it wasn't my fault," Quark protested, "I'd been after Chief O'Brien for weeks to fix that system."

"Anyway the Klingon wouldn't back off..." Django related, continuing her story, "So I kicked him in his 'nads," she smirked, "Hard."

Lavelle and Ogawa looked at each other, then at Ensign Django and Quark, and finally at Worf as the Klingon stood silently for what seemed an eternity. Then, unexpectedly, he broke out into a rich, deep belly laugh. "I read the security report on what happened soon after I agreed to stay on the station. When I was informed that your runabout had docked..." he said, looking down on Maria, his lips turned up into a smile, "...I had to see the little warrior who caused such a big fight." His attention now focused on Quark, Worf declared, daring the Ferengi to challenge him, "They are with me."

"All right..." Quark agreed, throwing up his hands in a gesture of futility, "...all right! But if anything gets damaged here...I'm billing the station."

"Thanks Commander..." Nurse Ogawa smiled as the foursome made their way to an empty table.

"It was my pleasure," the Klingon replied with a wicked grin as the group took their seats. "However, I did not come just to meet Ensign Django..." Noticing the worried looks on the three humans' faces, he further elaborated, "You need not be concerned; the captain does not intend to prevent you from carrying out your plans..." As the trio let out almost simultaneous sighs of relief, the Klingon warrior continued to speak. "However, he has been in communication with Captains Picard and Shelby and has asked me to...join you..."

Nodding his head appreciatively, Lavelle responded, "Thank you, Commander...I know Jaxa would want you with us." Taking a deep breath, he asked, "Have you seen the video of Sito yet?" Seeing the Klingon shake his head in the negative, Sam, fighting to keep his voice from choking up, stated, "Commander...you should. They've done a number on her."

"Mr. Worf..." Alyssa interjected, barely repressing a sob, "They've hurt her...bad. She had bruises and marks all over her body...and..." her voice taking on a sharp edge as she fought back her anger, "I'd say also...from what I could tell...and Dr. Crusher will back me up on this...that she's been sexually assaulted..."

"Yeah...I was afraid of that, but I couldn't tell for sure." Sam interjected, his own anger rising as he imagined rough Cardassian hands on his old friend.

"I want to see this recording," Worf demanded in an even voice as Lavelle wordlessly handed him a padd with the message recorded on it. As the Klingon warrior sat silently watching, his blood boiled. Not only had his subordinate...and his friend...been denied an honorable death in battle, she had been captured and abused...horribly...by cowards lacking in honor. Then, as his eyes fixed on the image of the Gul before whom his lost comrade had been brought before, his fist smashed down on the table, knocking the glasses on the table on to their sides, spilling their contents in the process.

"Cardassian Pet'aQ!" He growled.

"We know..." Alyssa said in a soft voice as a Ferengi waiter quickly arrived at the table to clean the mess.

"We're going to get her back." Lavelle said in a soft, yet uncompromising voice. "I don't care if we have to cut through every single damned Spoon-head in the quadrant to do it."

“Good,” Worf replied grimly as he took out his d’k tahq. “Then we shall swear a blood oath on it.” He pronounced as he made a small incision into his palm with his honor blade. Turning his hand palm down, his blood to dripped down on to the table as he recited the ancient formula. “I swear upon my blood and the blood of my ancestors that I shall not rest until Sito Jaxa has been freed from her captivity and her honor restored.” Handing the d’k tahq to Lavelle, the Klingon warrior nodded his head once.

Taking the d’k tahq, Sam, following Worf’s lead, slit his palm as well, repeating the oath as his blood joined that of the Klingon’s. Wordlessly, he then handed the blade to Maria who, cutting her palm as well, added her words to the blood bond.

Taking a deep breath, Nurse Ogawa announced as she took the honor blade from Ensign Django, “I’m coming along as well.”

“Alyssa...” Sam responded, shaking his head, “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I have a feeling that this is going to be a bad one. You’ve got Andrew and little Noah to think about.”

“Mr. Lavelle is right, Nurse Ogawa.” Worf added, his baritone voice carrying a surprising gentleness, “You have people who depend on you.”

“I know...” Alyssa conceded, “But Jaxa’s going to need medical help...and...” she added, her expression taking on a grim demeanor, “Sam...Commander Worf...she’s my friend too. I have as much of a right...and a responsibility...to do this as you do.”

“Yeah...” Sam acknowledged in a low voice, “...I know. I just don’t want you to get hurt...you’ve got so much to lose now.” He added with a smile, “You’re my friend too, you know.”

Her lips turning up into a sad smile, the beautiful Japanese woman replied as she cut her palm with the knife, turning it down so that her blood mingled with that of her friends’, “Thanks Sam...that’s sweet of you to say. But I’m still going. “I said I wanted to help get Jaxa back, Sam, and I meant it. I’m in this all the way—no matter what happens.” Taking a deep breath, she then repeated the blood oath, binding her to the same path as that of her friends.

“Ok, now that that is over with...” Lavelle sighed. “...all we have to do is wait until our friend decides to contact us.”

Getting up from the table and sheathing his dk'tagh, Worf stated, "While you are waiting for this Dopterian, I will make the necessary arrangements with Captain Sisko for our departure."

"Lieutenant Lavelle?" A Dopterian asked in a low voice.

Immediately recognizing the Dopterian as the one who had sent him the subspace message, Sam replied as his hands went to the hand phaser concealed underneath his coat, "Yeah...."

"Do you have the latinum?"

"Yeah...do you have what I want?" Sam demanded, keeping his voice tone as measured as possible.

"If you have the latinum...I have the information," the Dopterian declared and then instructed. "You and her..." he stated, pointing at Nurse Ogawa, "...meet me in Cargo Bay Four in two hours." His eyes then swept the bar, "I will wait no longer. If you do not appear... or if you appear with anyone else...you will never see me again and you will never find your friend." He then stared into Lavelle's eyes, "Do you understand?"

"Yeah..." Sam confirmed, "We're to show up in two hours alone with the latinum. You just be sure you're there with the information." His eyes narrowing into angry slits, he grabbed the Dopterian by his shirt and, drawing him closer, threatened, "You better be on the level...'cause...if you're not...if this is a double cross, I'll make sure you live long enough to regret it." Then, releasing the alien, Sam made a production out of smoothing out the Dopterian's shirt, "Do **you** understand **me**"

Nodding his head once, the alien immediately made his exit. Flashing a wry grin, Maria praised, "Not bad, Sam...didn't think you had it in you."

"Well..." Sam said, standing up, "...we need to get ready." Turning towards Ensign Django, the Canadian helmsman requested, "Maria? Could you contact Lieutenant Commander Worf and tell him what's going on?"

"Right, Sam." The petite Brazilian acknowledged, and then, giving Alyssa a dismissive snort, added, "But I don't like the idea of you going in there with

just Mary Poppins over there as backup.”

Glaring at the young Brazilian, Nurse Ogawa bit back, “I’ve probably been in a lot more dangerous situations than you’ve ever thought of being in. So you can just sit back and cool out, Ensign...” She growled, emphasizing Django’s lower rank. “I can take care of myself and back up Sam just fine.”

Speaking quickly before Django could utter something that would in all probability result in a full scale fight between the two women, Sam declared in what he hoped would be a peacemaking gesture, “We’ll be ok, Maria. Don’t worry...” he said, flashing a wicked grin, “...we’re not going to go in there blind and dumb...”

“Everything’s set.” The Dopterian said to his compatriot as he returned to the quarters the two shared. “Did you contact Barl?”

“I did.” The Bardeezan replied. “He said he would be waiting for us and promised us an equal share of what he gets when he sells them at the auction.”

“Excellent.” The Dopterian smiled as he slapped his companion on the back. “You see...nothing to it. We did what our boss told us to do and we made a tidy profit on the side. Easiest money we’ve ever made.”

As the shadowy figure silently monitored their conversation from its screen, its lips turned up into a slight smile. *You shall indeed receive what you have earned.*

“You sure this is going to work, Sam?” Alyssa asked as she injected the subcutaneous transponder first into her friend’s neck and then into her own.

“Yeah...it’ll work,” Sam replied, putting forth as confident a front as he could muster. “If our guy sticks to his word...we give him the latinum and he gives us what he’s got on Jaxa and we go on our way.” His voice now taking on a grim edge, he completed his thought, “And if he does try something, we’ve got Worf and Maria waiting on the transporter pad to back us up.”

“Ok...” The Japanese nurse reluctantly agreed, “Sounds like we’ve got

everything covered." *I hope...*she didn't say as the pair walked together down the corridor towards their appointment. Approaching the cargo bay door, Sam pressed the button. Entering the dimly lit storage area, the two moved carefully between the cargo containers, watching carefully for any sign of an ambush. Finally, reaching the center, Sam spoke up in a clear voice, "Ok...We're here and we're alone like you said. Now show yourself!"

Coming out of the darkness cargo boxes on either side, a shadowy figure approached, pointing what appeared to be an energy weapon of some sort at him.

"Are we going to do business or are you just point that thing at me?" Sam asked in a nonchalant voice.

Laughing, the Dopterian asked as his Bardeezan companion, also carrying a phaser appeared behind the two Starfleet officers, "Do you have the latinum?"

"In my pocket," Sam replied, "Do you have the information?"

His lips curled up into a sneer as he and his companion both fired their phasers, laughing as the two humans crumpled to the deck, "We've received a better offer." Touching a button on his wrist, the two aliens with their human prisoners disappeared in yellowish transporter beams.

"Dammit!" Ensign Django cursed as the transponder signals disappeared from the cargo bay. "I knew something like this would happen."

"Are they on the station?" Lieutenant Commander Worf asked his facial expression remaining stoic even as he worried about his two former shipmates.

"Scanning..." Maria replied, looking down at the console, her thoughts solely on the task at hand. "They're not on the station..." she reported and then added, "I'm extending my scan to the ships docked and in orbit around the station."

"Very good." The former security chief acknowledged, nodding his head in appreciation at the junior officer's professionalism as his concern for his friends mounted. "Continue scanning."

Groaning as consciousness returned to him, Sam nudged his companion, receiving an answering moan in return. "Wake up, Alyssa..." He said as he took in his surroundings. The two were apparently in the rear of a small scout craft with what looked like a force barrier separating them from the front of the ship. "I think we're in bad trouble."

"You don't say..." His Japanese companion remarked in a rare display of gallows humor. Feeling her neck, she then flashed a genuine smile as she nodded her head. Repeating her actions, Sam nodded his head as well as the pair signaled to each other that their subcutaneous transponders were still implanted. *As to whether they were transmitting or not...that's another story entirely.* Sam thought as Alyssa asked, "So...where do you think we are?"

"You are in our scout ship..." The Dopterian answered as he and his companion appeared before their prisoners.

"Why are you doing this?" Sam asked, "You said you had information about our friend...why take us prisoner." His eyes narrowing into slits, he queried in a low, threatening voice, "You're not with the Cardassians...are you?"

"Hardly..." The Dopterian laughed. "It's nothing personal...we just got a better offer."

"Don't we get a chance to match it?" Sam asked hoping to appeal to the greed of the alien.

With a snort, the Bardeezan replied, "I don't think you can."

"You see..." The Dopterian said with an evil grin, "The better offer was for you."

"Got 'em!" Maria cried out triumphantly as she lifted her head from the console. They're on that Petarian scout freighter." She reported as she punched in the transporter coordinates. Leaping on to the transporter pad and drawing her phaser, she addressed the Klingon warrior still standing by the console. "Well...are you coming or am I going to have to do this myself."

Flashing a feral grin as he took his place on the transporter pad and drawing

his weapon as well, Worf looked down on the young ensign, "I think I like you," he smirked before addressing the computer, "Energize."

Materializing behind the Dopterian and his associate, Worf growled, "Drop your weapons."

"Better do as he says..." Maria smirked, "Better yet...don't." Addressing the large Klingon beside her, Maria quipped, the smirk still on her face, "You know, Mr. Worf...I'm not sure what setting my phaser's on. I thought I set it for heavy stun...but you know..." she shrugged her shoulders, "...I get excited easily. I might have cranked it up to max." She then flashed an evil grin, "You think they'll let us find out?"

"I hope so..." Worf replied a toothy grin on his face as the Dopterian and his friend dropped their weapons.

"Awww..." Django cried out, "Guess we'll never know."

"I guess not." Worf answered back, a note of sadness in his voice. Addressing the Dopterian the Klingon commanded, "Release the confinement field on our friends...now."

"All right...all right." The alien whined as he pressed the buttons that deactivated the forcefield imprisoning Sam and Alyssa.

"Thanks, guys." Sam grinned as he and Alyssa stepped out of their makeshift prison. Looking the Dopterian up and down, Sam said to his friends, "Excuse me for a moment, I've got to pay someone off." Striking quickly, his fist connected with the lower jaw of the Dopterian, knocking him down to the deck with a thud.

"Feel better, Sam?" Maria asked with a twinkle in her eye as she approached the roguish Canadian.

"Yeah...I do." Lavelle replied with a self satisfied smug.

"Good!" She smiled, "So you won't mind if I do this!" She said as the palm of her right hand impacted on the young Canadian's cheek, causing him to shake his head in surprise at the slap.

"What was that for?" Sam cried out.

"That was for being an idiot." Maria declared. "I expected Mary Poppins to get caught with her panties down." She sneered, drawing a glare from the Japanese woman. "But I thought you had more sense..."

Wheeling rapidly on the dusky young Brazilian, Nurse Ogawa spoke in a low voice, "I've about had it with your snide remarks, Ensign." Balling her fists, she threatened, her voice barely a whisper, "Next time you call me Mary Poppins..."

Her lips curled up into a sneer, Maria responded, "Any time you're ready...Mary..."

"That's enough!" On hearing the booming voice of the Klingon Starfleet officer, both Maria and Alyssa froze in place. "You can settle this later." The lieutenant commander declared as, turning his attention on the two prisoners, he glared at the Dopterian still on the deck, while his Bardeezan companion stood next to him, a look of bemusement on his face. "We have more important things to take care of..."

"I'm sorry..." Alyssa apologized, stepping away from Ensign Django. "You're right, of course, Commander..."

"Stuck up bitch..." Maria muttered under her breath only to be silenced by Lavelle's elbow digging into her ribs.

"Thanks Mr. Worf." Sam remarked, sending a pointed glare Maria's way before turning towards the Dopterian sprawled on the deck. "Ok...I want that information you said you had about our friend."

"On one condition..." The Dopterian said, trying to salvage what he could out of the situation.

"You're not in any position to make conditions." Worf replied with a sneer.

"You want to know where your friend is..." The Dopterian responded in a wheedling tone, "I know where she is. But I won't tell you unless you let the two of us go." He then smirked at the burly Klingon standing before him. "And don't think you can beat the information out of me..."

"Mr. Worf..." Lavelle said in a low voice, "Much as I'd like to take him up on his

challenge...I think we're going to have to give him what he wants. We don't have the time to waste."

"You are right, of course..." Worf conceded reluctantly. Turning to the Dopterian, he declared, "Very well...if you give us what we need, you can go free. But be warned..." The burly Klingon threatened in a low, menacing voice, "If you are lying, there will be no place in the universe where you can hide from my vengeance..."

"No lies..." The Dopterian promised; an unctuous smile on his face. "I'll tell you the truth. But first..." he added in a calculating tone as he staggered to his feet, Ensign Django watching his every movement. "I want your word both as a Starfleet officer and as a Klingon warrior that you will keep your promise and let us go."

"You have it." Worf agreed reluctantly and then swiftly added, "Provided you are speaking the truth."

Revealing a secret compartment, the Dopterian punched in a complex code sequence, unlocking the container. Presenting an isolinear rod, the alien said as he tossed it to Lavelle, "It's all here. Everything you need." Then, squaring his shoulders, he declared, "Now...I've kept my end of the bargain..."

"And I shall keep mine." Worf stated his voice and facial expression revealing his distaste at the deal he had been forced to make. Nodding his head at the other Starfleet officers, he activated his comm badge, "Worf to DS9...four to transport."

As the Klingon and his human companions disappeared in the reddish orange station transporter beams, the Dopterian turned to his companion, "I think it's time for us to go..."

As the shadowy figure watched the whole tableau unfold on its viewscreen, it smiled as it came out of the shadows, revealing itself as the blonde human-Romulan hybrid Commander Sela. "Follow the scout craft..."

"Yes, Commander..." The Romulan helmsman acknowledged, setting the cloaked warbird on a parallel course to the departing vessel.

As Captain Sisko, sitting behind his desk, listened to his strategic operations

officer's report, he nodded his head. "You did what you felt was best, Mr. Worf." He commented sagely, "Sometimes you have no choice but to make the best deal you can..."

"You are right, of course, sir..." Worf reluctantly agreed, "But still..."

"It grated to have to watch while those bastards got away, laughing..." Ben commiserated. "Believe me, Lieutenant Commander...I understand." Taking a deep breath, the dark skinned captain continued, "But if, in the process, they give you what you need to recover your friend safe and sound...I'd say it's worth it."

"We think they did, Sir..." Lavelle interjected as he handed Captain Sisko the isolinear rod that he received from the Dopterian. "This is what he gave us." The helmsman commented in a flat tone that barely hid his excitement. "He told us that it would lead us to where they were keeping Ensign Sito."

"Well..." Ben said as he placed the isolinear rod in the computer, "Let's see what it has to say." On the screen a star chart appeared with the name of one system in red.

"Pullock V." Worf growled.

"Anything special about Pullock V?" Ensign Django asked as she stared at the monitor, her chin resting on Lavelle's shoulder.

"Nothing that we know of." The Klingon strategic operations officer replied, "Before now, the only thing important about it was the fact that it was the target for the Bajoran Resistance's first off planet raid."

"So..." Alyssa inquired, "...what do we do now?"

"What the four of you are going to do..." Benjamin declared, "...is get the hell out of my office." He then gave the group a conspiratorial wink, "You all are on leave...aren't you?"

"Yes, sir!" The foursome replied in unison as they quickly left the office.

"Then go!" Sisko ordered as he watched the foursome depart his office. As Lieutenant Commander Worf exiting last of all, joined his companions at the elevator, Ben activated his intercom. "Major Kira? I need you set up another subspace conference connection between me, Captain Picard at Starfleet

Academy, Admiral Glover, and Captain Shelby on the *Sutherland* as soon as possible.”

“So...what do we do?” Alyssa asked, repeating her earlier question as the foursome walked back to Lavelle’s quarters.

“We go to Pullock V, kick whoever’s ass happens to be there, rescue Sam’s friend, and then go home.” Maria declared definitively.

“I only wish it were that easy.” Lavelle remarked dryly and then shook his head, “No...we need to plan this out carefully.”

“You are correct Lieutenant,” Worf interjected and then looked pointedly at Ensign Django, “It is a foolish warrior who rushes headlong and thoughtless into combat.” Taking the dusky skinned young woman’s slight nod of the head as a sign that she had gotten the message, the Klingon continued, “We should first gain as much intelligence as possible on Pullock V and the area around it and I can only think of one person on this station who might have the information we need...”

“I guess...” Sam quipped, “...that it’s time I got a new jacket...”

As Admiral Glover gazed into the eyes of the three captains on his monitor screen, he sighed, “It’s a risky plan, but I agree, Captain Shelby, we don’t have any choice.” Taking a deep breath, he ordered, “Very well...I’ll authorize *Sutherland* and *Defiant* to take up patrol stations on the border area near Pullock V.” Further clarifying his orders, he stated, “You are not to enter Cardassian space **unless** expressly invited by a duly authorized representative of the Cardassian government. Do not do **anything** that might draw us into a shooting war with either the Klingons or the Cardassians.” His facial expression taking on a grim demeanor, he growled, “Do I make myself clearly understood?”

“Aye, Sir.” All three captains acknowledged as the viewscreen went blank.

“That poor girl...” Samson Glover muttered in a low voice as he shook his head, “What am I going to tell Terrence? And should I?”

Once the subspace conference call had been terminated, Captain Jean-Luc Picard turned towards the dark haired woman entering his office, taking a seat on the couch near his desk. "So...Counselor Troi...what came of your conversation with the *Sutherland's* counselor?"

"Max...Counselor Freedman..." Deanna clarified, "...is correct. Should Ensign Sito be rescued, the recovery process will be a difficult one and I cannot guarantee even partial success...the psychological damage might well prove too deep—remember, she's been held under conditions of extreme duress for over a year." Exhaling deeply as Captain Picard took two hot cups of Earl Grey tea from the replicator, the Betazoid woman tried to interject an optimistic note, "However, that doesn't mean that we're not going to try. But it will be a hard road for her." Gratefully taking one of the steaming cups from her long-time captain, Counselor Troi took a moment to inhale the fragrant aroma given off by the oil of bergamot before sipping from the cup. "Counselor Freedman brings up another good point in that it would be most advisable to have someone she feels that she can be safe with and trust during the all-important initial recovery phase."

"I quite agree..." Captain Picard stated as he returned to his seat, carefully sipping his tea. "That is why I would like to ask you...Deanna...to rendezvous with the *Sutherland*. Both the *Sutherland* and the *Defiant* have been assigned to patrol the area near where it is believed that Ensign Sito is being held. Should everything succeed according to plan, Lieutenant Commander Worf's team will exit Cardassian space near these ships' patrol areas before setting course for Deep Space Nine..."

Catching on to her former commanding officer's plan, Deanna interjected, "And if they do, the *Sutherland* will be able to intercept allowing us to begin the recovery process that much sooner." Nodding her head, the counselor observed, "And the sooner we can begin the better." Rising to her feet, the Betazoid woman flashed a brilliant smile, "I'll make preparations to depart immediately."

"Excellent." Jean-Luc smiled back. "Captain Shelby has already been apprised of the situation and concurs—as does Counselor Freedman." Watching as his subordinate and friend turned to leave, the former captain of the *Enterprise* quickly added, "Good luck, Counselor."

Entering the Cardassian's shop, Lieutenant Lavelle quickly spotted the tailor standing at his table sewing a sleeve on to a shirt. Motioning for his companion, Alyssa Ogawa, to remain where she was, Sam approached the merchant. "Ah..." Garak exclaimed, his lips turned up into a wide smile as he noticed the Canadian helmsman advancing towards him, "...what can I do for you Mister..."

"Lavelle," Sam supplied his face an expressionless mask. "We have a mutual acquaintance..." The Starfleet officer remarked, "...Commander Hobson from the *Sutherland*."

"Ah yes..." Garak vocalized with just a touch of humor, "I believe I recall seeing you about the station several weeks ago..." His eyes revealing a mischievous twinkle, he jibed, "I trust you weren't too...inconvenienced...by that little disruption at Quark's?" His smile vanishing, the tailor's voice tone took on a slightly mocking tone, "I hear Captain K'Temoc was most...humiliated...by his participation in that melee."

"Commander Hobson said that I should..." Sam interjected somewhat impatiently only to be interrupted in turn by the Cardassian.

"I trust the Commander is pleased with the jacket he purchased the last time your ship was here?"

"Yes he was..." Sam replied, "In fact, he was so pleased that he told me that I should see you."

"I must thank the Commander the next time I speak to him." Garak responded as he made his way towards a rack upon which hung shirts. "Word of mouth really is the best form of advertisement." Then, picking out several shirts, he returned to the young officer, "You know, young man...one must always be careful when...and where...one shops..."

"That's curious..." Sam riposted in a dry tone, "...the Commander said exactly the same thing."

"Commander Hobson is a most shrewd consumer..." Garak replied with a knowing grin. "You would be wise to emulate him." Laying the shirts out on the table, the tailor stood back. Motioning with his hand, he continued, "One's clothing should match the occasion...and environment. This shirt, for instance..." He declared, holding up a white shirt, "Is made of Andorian spider-silk. Very fine...but not something I would wear into a rugged

environment such as Pullock V.”

His ears pricking up at the mention of the Cardassian world, Lavelle ventured, “So...what would you recommend?”

“Oh...” Garak replied, “...you would want something very durable—something like this...” He said, displaying a dark blue shirt made of a very thick and course fabric. “Feel the material...” The Cardassian encouraged, “Feel how thick it is...just what you need to avoid potentially...catastrophic...rips and tears.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Also, dark colors are most definitely in fashion on worlds like Pullock V.”

“I see...” Sam voiced, “Do you have any other suggestions?”

“Only one...” The tailor answered back, “If you’re seeking admission into any...entertainment facilities...you should understand that they all have rather strict...entry requirements. If you just show up at the door, you might find that they won’t grant you access...or worse...” He added, a strong note of warning in his voice, “...you might find that they’d be all too willing to let you in...but that they’d want to keep you so...entertained...that you’d never leave.”

“So...what would you advise?” Lavelle cautiously inquired.

“Hmmm....” The Cardassian vocalized as he cupped his chin, “I would suggest stopping off at Persis IV before you go to your final destination. Look for a man named Lynn Pierson. Here’s a little something on him you might find helpful...” Garak said as he handed an isolinear rod to the dark haired human. “The last I heard, he can be contacted at a little establishment near the port. If you catch him in a good mood and ask him nicely enough—he might be willing to help you out with any potential difficulties you might have entering...or leaving...Pullock V’s entertainment facilities—for a price, of course.”

“Thank you...” Sam said as he picked up the dark blue shirt, “I think I’ll take this...”

“A very wise choice, Mister Lavelle,” Garak replied as he took the shirt and placed it in a bag. “I hope you and your friends have a safe...and productive...journey.”

Her lips turning up into an icy grin as she observed the scoutship containing her two erstwhile employees through her warbird's viewscreen, Commander Sela queried, "Sensor technician! Are we far enough from the space station and any other vessels to avoid detection?"

His face illuminated by the green glow given off by the scanner, the Romulan technician crisply replied, "No vessels within scanning range, Commander."

"Excellent..." Sela's grin grew even icier as she ordered in a calm, emotionless voice, "Weapons Officer, target the scoutship. Destroy it."

"Yes, Commander." The Romulan Centurion acknowledged as the *D'deridex* class warbird decloaked before her prey, twin green disruptor beams lancing out from its head, immediately impacting on the barely shielded scout craft, giving the poor Dopterian and his Bardeezan companion just enough time to utter a single loud, "NO!!" as their tiny vessel disappeared in a fireball through which the warbird emerged unscathed.

Smiling smugly in satisfaction at a job well done, Commander Sela addressed her helmsman, "Resume cloak and set course for Pullock V—maximum warp." Maintaining her icy grin, the blonde hybrid spoke in a low, inaudible whisper, "Now it's time to see whether my trust in my unwitting allies has been well placed or not..."

"Hi Andrew!" Alyssa Ogawa beamed as the image of her husband came through the viewscreen, "I just called to see how you and Noah are holding up."

"We're doing just fine, Honey." Andrew replied with a smile of his own as he held up the couple's year old child. Looking down on his son, Andrew cooed, "Wave to your Mommy, Noah."

"Hi Baby..." Alyssa waved back, her eyes tearing up.

"Honey..." Andrew interjected, seeing his wife's reaction, "Is everything ok?"

"Yeah..." Alyssa assured, nodding her head, "It's just...I miss you both so much."

"We miss you too, Alyssa," Andrew replied and then asked, "Do you think

you'll be coming home soon?"

"I'm not sure," The Japanese nurse answered honestly. "I hope so."

"We do too." Her husband responded gravely and then changed the subject, "So...what's Deep Space Nine like?"

"Well..." Alyssa drawled, "Things are still pretty tense around here since the Klingons attacked. The damage has been cleaned up and all...but...well...the people here are still kinda nervous..."

"That's understandable..." Andrew replied with a nod of the head, "...with the Klingons canceling the Khitomer Accords and a shooting war going on between them and the Cardassians, I have to admit to being more than a little worried myself." A grave expression overtaking his face, he then asked, "Are you sure everything's ok with you?"

"Yeah..." Alyssa quickly replied as she recognized her husband's worried countenance, "Everything's fine." Smiling, she quickly added, "I'm going to be all right and I'll be home soon...promise."

"I'm keeping you to that promise, Dear." Andrew answered back and then, with a regretful look, added, "I'm afraid we have to go now, Love."

"I do too." Alyssa responded, "I love you dear..." and then gave a quick wave and blew a kiss, "Love you too, Noah..."

"We love you too, Honey..." Andrew replied, "Come home soon."

Brushing the tears away from her eyes, Alyssa finished packing the non-issue hiking gear that she had replicated earlier and, zipping shut the carry pack and slipping the pack's sling over her shoulder, exited her quarters to begin what she hoped would not be a one-way trip.

"Ready to go, Sam?" Ensign Django called out.

"Yeah...just a moment, Maria," The roguishly handsome Canadian helmsman answered back as he finished the last of his packing. Appearing moments later, he regarded the dusky skinned petite young woman standing before him, the carry strap to her pack slung over her shoulder. "Let's go..." He

simply said as the pair walked side by side down the corridor towards Runabout Pad "A" and the *Loire*.

Catching up to the quickly striding Klingon warrior, bath'leth slung across his back, mek'leth sheathed at his waist, Jadzia Dax queried in a level tone, "Are you sure about this, Worf? They're awful young. You sure you don't want me or the Chief to go with you?"

Looking down at the Trill science officer, Worf managed a quick grin, "They are young...but they're quite able. Thank you for offering, though."

"Ok...if you insist" Dax grudgingly conceded and then added a heartfelt, "Qapla'"

Nodding his head once in acknowledgement, Worf proceeded down the corridor, joining up with first Maria and Sam. Walking together, the trio then met up with Alyssa becoming a foursome. Together, they strode silently towards the pad where their runabout waited. Taking a deep breath, Sam regarded his comrades, looking each of them in the eye. "Ok...last chance for anyone to change their minds..."

Entering the runabout first, Ensign Django called back, "Let's get this show on the road."

"Agreed." Worf simply stated as he entered the small craft.

"Sam..." Alyssa said in a soft voice, placing her hand on her old friend's shoulder, "Jaxa's waiting..."

Nodding his head grimly, Lavelle joined his companions in the runabout. Taking his position in the pilot's chair, he activated the comm. "*Loire* to Operations...request permission to depart."

Placing his hand on the communication's officer's shoulder and shaking his head, Captain Sisko spoke, "*Loire*...permission granted. Good luck and come back soon."

As she strode on to the bridge, Elizabeth sighed with gratitude as her

operations officer, Lt. Anara Rysyl, presented her with a steaming hot cup of coffee. "Thank you, Mr. Rysyl. That was just what I needed." The captain remarked in that languorous voice that Jadon Tol, the *Sutherland's* chief engineer had once described, with a leer, as being the Captain's 'I just got laid' tone.

"Did you enjoy yourself last night, Sir?" Jadon asked in a perfectly deadpan voice from his bridge station. "I hear Rome in the holodeck is pretty this time of year."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Liz riposted with a wicked grin as she took a sip of her coffee, savoring the aroma as the warm fluid rejuvenated her. Turning to her first officer, the captain inquired, "Anything to report, Commander?"

"No, Sir." Commander Hobson replied in his usual patrician voice. "We are on course towards the Federation-Cardassian border as per orders and should rendezvous with the *Defiant* in seventy-two standard hours."

"Very good," Shelby acknowledged as she made her way to her ready room. "Maintain course and speed until further notice." Then, after entering her office and taking her seat, the *Sutherland's* captain activated the computer monitor on her desk, "Computer..." Liz ordered, "Connect me with Captain Jean-Luc Picard at Starfleet Academy on Earth."

"Next stop Persis IV!" Sam declared as he punched the course in on the runabout's navigational computer.

"'Bout time we got this show on the road!" Maria groused as she got out of the co-pilot's seat and made her way to the replicator. "Espresso...double shot," she ordered. Taking the demitasse out of its alcove, Django inhaled the aromatic fragrance. "Just the thing..." she sighed as she took a sip of the strong brew. Turning her head towards Sam, she queried, "What's Persis IV like?"

Shaking his head, Sam replied as he put the information up on a computer screen, "It's a K Class planet...one settlement under a pressure dome..." His lips turning down into a frown, he observed, "It's a good thing we brought some latinum with us...the Orion Syndicate pretty much controls everything there."

"Lovely place," Maria jibed as she sipped her espresso.

With a low growl, Worf asked, "What do we know about this contact that the tailor talked to you about?"

"Garak gave me this isolinear rod..." Lavelle replied as he stuck the rod in an open data slot, "...let's see what it says."

The image of a dark haired human male, approximately thirty years old, wearing a red and black Starfleet uniform appeared on the computer screen. "Lynn Pierson, formerly lieutenant commander...last duty posting *USS Devonshire*." Lavelle read further until, pointing to the screen, he exclaimed, "Take a look at this! He served on the *USS Phoenix* under Captain Benjamin Maxwell on Stardate 44429.6." Lavelle read aloud his voice now barely above a whisper.

Turning towards her former *Enterprise* shipmate, Alyssa recalled, "I remember—you were still in the Academy at the time. Captain Maxwell claimed that the Cardassians were rearming. He destroyed two Cardassian ships and was about to attack another when the *Enterprise* intervened."

"You are correct, Lieutenant." Worf reminisced. "I was on the bridge when it happened. Captain Maxwell wanted the Captain to send a boarding party to the Cardassian ship. He claimed that it was carrying arms, but Gul Macet wouldn't grant permission for Captain Picard to board and search it. Captain Maxwell wanted to attack, causing Captain Picard to..." The Klingon warrior grimaced, "...come to the aid of the Cardassians."

"Yeah..." Nurse Ogawa sighed, "If it hadn't been for Chief O'Brien talking Captain Maxwell down, we might have had to fire upon the *Phoenix*."

"Was the freighter carrying arms?" Lavelle asked.

"We don't know." Worf admitted, "But Captain Picard suspected that it did. He gave Gul Macet a warning and took Captain Maxwell into custody."

"Figures..." Django said with a sarcastic snort, "Picard frinxed up."

"What did you say, Ensign?" Worf asked pointedly, glaring down at the dark skinned woman.

"You heard me," Maria countered, matching the Klingon glare for glare.

"Picard screwed up. Maxwell was right, Picard knew it, and he still let the Cardassians get away with it..." Shaking her head in disbelief, the fiery tempered Brazilian continued her diatribe. "Picard deliberately lets the Cardies get away with murder...while Maxwell rots in the New Zealand Penal Colony because he had the guts to try to do something about it."

Her eyes pleading with the burly Klingon to allow her to speak, Alyssa looked into Maria's eyes. "You've got Captain Picard all wrong if you think that...." Taking a deep breath, she explained, "If he'd have done that, we'd be in a war with the Cardassians right now."

"Alyssa's got a point, Maria..." Sam intervened speaking quickly to avoid yet another exchange between the two strong willed women. "If he'd have gone along with Maxwell, he'd have had to fire on Macet's ship and that would have started the war all over again."

"Maybe it would have been better." Maria countered, "At least we would have had it out once and for all."

Surprising the headstrong ensign, Worf actually nodded his head thoughtfully before replying, "Perhaps you are right, Ensign..."

"Good morning, Captain Shelby..." Captain Jean-Luc Picard, cup of Earl Grey tea in hand, greeted, as he smiled paternally at the petite young captain looking at him in his viewscreen.

"Morning, Captain Picard..." Liz greeted back in a flat tone as she took a sip from her own cup of coffee.

"Rough night last night?" Jean-Luc gently inquired as he noticed both the voice and bleary eyed expression of his fellow starship captain.

"Anything but..." Liz, replied, a wicked grin coming to her face as she gently shook her head. "Just broke in a new holodeck program last night. I'm just not what you'd call a morning person."

"I see..." Picard, well aware of Captain Shelby's reputation for her rather exuberant and hedonistic lifestyle, remarked, his own lips turned up into a prim smile before getting quickly to the point, "I want to thank you for contacting me...I was about to call you." Taking a deep breath, he stated,

"Counselor Troi concurs with your counselor's recommendations and has agreed to rendezvous with the *Sutherland* in the border area."

"Excellent." Liz responded, striking an optimistic tone. "Counselor Freedman is looking forward to working with her." Setting down her coffee cup, she added in a slightly prayerful voice, "If everything goes well, I hope between the two of them they can help Ensign Sito."

"I do too..." Picard concurred, adding his prayers to those of his fellow captain's. His smile returning, Jean-Luc continued, "The counselor and Commander Data..."

"Commander Data?" Liz interjected, the android officer's name taking her off guard.

"Yes..." Picard replied. Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "Is there a problem with that? With all that's going on in the border area, I felt it would be safer for the counselor to have someone accompanying her and, as Commander Data is currently free and has had some experience with the *Sutherland*, I thought it would be a good idea to have him join her..."

"I see..." Liz drawled. Then, putting the best face possible on the situation, she stated in a definitive voice, "No...there's no problem." Setting down her coffee cup, she added, "Thank you for letting me know," the subtext of her statement, being, *You should have let me know about this first*. Forcing a smile to her face, Liz concluded the conversation, "Well...Captain...unless there's anything else...I'd better get busy..."

"I understand, Captain. There's never enough time on a starship, is there?" He remarked somewhat envious of the blonde captain's responsibilities. Taking a deep breath, Jean-Luc concluded the conversation, "In any event, thank you for all you're doing. Commander Data and Counselor Troi have taken the runabout *Amazon* and should be in touch with you soon to set up a rendezvous."

"We'll be waiting for them." Liz assured as she shut off the transmission. Looking into the blank monitor, Picard's lips turned down into a worried frown as he pondered Shelby's reaction towards Commander Data's accompanying Deanna to the *Sutherland*. "Computer..." He ordered, "Retrieve Commander Data's official log entries for his time in command on the *USS Sutherland*, Stardate 45020.4 and the current personnel roster for the *Sutherland*."

"I can't believe you're agreeing with her, Commander..." Nurse Ogawa exclaimed, her face reflecting her surprise. "To deliberately choose to go to war..."

"The Cardassians have repeatedly broken the treaty," Worf declared. "They tortured the Captain..."

"And are probably torturing Jaxa right now, Alyssa while we're squabbling..." Sam interrupted somewhat peevishly and then, taking a deep breath, attempted to deflect the argument. "Why don't we table this discussion for now? I think you guys might want to hear this..." Reading from the record displayed on the computer he noted, "Pierson resigned his commission a year ago and has since been tied into Maquis and a variety of other criminal activities acting as a sometime facilitator for the Orion Syndicate."

Gritting his teeth, Worf growled, "So he is a terrorist and a criminal."

"Maybe..." Sam agreed, "But we're going to have to deal with him if we want to get Jaxa."

"I wonder what he's going to want..." Alyssa asked, her brow furrowed with worry.

"Whatever it is..." Sam replied, "I have a feeling we're not going to like it."

"Well...whatever it is..." Maria smirked as she picked up a padd containing the weekend edition of the Federation News Service, "It's going to have to wait until I get out of the little ensigns' room. I've got to go take a Starfleet Command."

"Yeah...well...this time don't forget to tell the computer to scrub the air in there when you're done," Sam quipped as Maria, turning her back on the handsome helmsman, bent over slightly and lifted her skirt to reveal her firm well rounded tush..

"Kiss my ass, Sam!"

"Any time, Maria!" The roguish helmsman shouted back to the amused chuckles of the other two in the runabout she exited the control room.

"Thanks for coming in, Max..." Shelby said as she motioned for the *Sutherland's* counselor to take a seat on the other side of the desk opposite her.

"Thanks, Captain..." The wiry psychologist replied as he sat down. Taking a moment to regard his superior officer's taut facial expression, he gently probed, "So...how did it go with Captain Picard..."

Forcing a smile to her face, Liz joked, "You sure you're not part Betazoid, Max?"

Laughing, Max riposted, "Try playing bridge sometime with Jadon and Commander Hobson on the other team...you either get pretty good at reading body language with those two or you get your clock cleaned."

Her smile turning into a chuckle, Liz quipped, "I'm going to have to do something about that before our bridge tournament. I'm teamed up with Dr. Murakawa."

"She's a good player..." The ship's counselor observed before, his smile vanishing, he got down to business, "So...what's the problem, Captain?"

Shelby's smile disappearing as well, the captain declared, "It's a good news...bad news situation, Max." Taking a deep breath, she began, "The good news is that Counselor Troi is on the way and will meet up with us at our rendezvous point with the *Defiant*."

"That is good news..." Max observed, "So...what's the bad news?"

"The bad news..." Liz stated with a sigh, "Is that Commander Data is accompanying her."

"I don't know, Sam..." Alyssa said with a frown glancing towards the rear of the runabout where Ensign Django had withdrawn earlier. "I'm not sure what to think of Maria. She seems so..."

"Undisciplined." Worf asserted, yet with a twinkle in his eye betraying a

growing fondness for the hot-tempered ensign.

"Just like Ro Laren?" Sam quipped with a half grin.

"The two do seem to have..." The Klingon admitted with a chuckle, "...a great deal in common."

"What's her problem with Captain Picard though?" Ogawa asked as she took a cup of hot tea out of the replicator slot.

"You know..." Lavelle said cocking his head to the left, "...she's never told me." Taking a deep breath, he addressed his former *Enterprise* shipmates in a more serious tone, "But I do know that there are some bad feelings between some of us on the *Suthy's* crew towards the *Enterprise* in general and Captain Picard in particular."

"Why?" Alyssa queried, genuinely mystified as to why the crew of the *Sutherland* would harbor any ill thoughts at all towards the flagship of the Federation or its famous captain.

"It's funny..." Sam remarked with a wry grin, "A few months ago, when I first came on board the *Sutherland*, I asked the same question."

"So..." Alyssa pressed, "...what did they tell you?"

His smile vanishing, the Canadian helmsman answered, "There's a bunch of stuff—mostly little things..." he clarified, "...but it's the sort of stuff that can really pile up and become a problem if you let it." He then took a deep breath before continuing his narrative, "But there is one item—and it's a big one. Some of the crew...especially those that were around at the time...didn't...and still don't...like the way that Captain Picard put Mr. Data in command of the *Sutherland* over Commander Hobson during the Klingon Civil War. They believe that the commander got the raw end of the deal because Captain Picard was playing favorites."

"I see..." Max vocalized as he glanced towards the replicator. Receiving an affirmative nod from his commanding officer in response to his unspoken request, the swarthy ship's counselor walked to the replicator. Ordering two coffees, he picked the steaming mugs up out of the replicator alcove. Returning to his captain's desk, he gave her one of the mugs as went back to

his seat. "Do you really think there'll be a problem?"

Pondering the question for a few moments, Liz took a sip from her coffee before slowly replying, "No...not really. They're both professionals...they won't let what happened in the past get in the way of their jobs."

"So...what's the big deal?" Max pressed, taking a sip from his mug. Flashing a slight smile, the counselor continued, "You know...this actually might be a blessing in disguise."

"Perhaps..." Shelby thoughtfully replied, "It would give all parties a chance to get any tensions out in the open and resolve them once and for all..."

With a beatific nod of his head, the ship's counselor cautioned, "True...but the situation will need to be carefully managed otherwise it could easily make things worse." Taking a deep breath, he then pointed out, "You know, Commander Data might not even realize that there is a problem here..."

"Good point." Liz concurred. "He might not really understand why there might still be some resentment towards him by some on the crew." Taking another sip of her coffee she then asked, "Any ideas on how to handle that?"

"Yeah..." Max smiled, "I think Deanna Troi can help us a lot here too..."

"That's ridiculous!" Alyssa exclaimed shaking her head in disbelief while Worf sat quietly listening. Maria, who was at that moment at the point of ordering the door to the tiny main bridge to open, stopped immediately on hearing the last few remarks. Standing quietly, she listened intently from behind the door as she heard her shipmate speak.

Shrugging his shoulders, Sam replied, "A few months ago, I'd have agreed with you, Alyssa. But now that I've been off the *Enterprise* a while and gotten to hear the other side...I think Hobby's got good reason to gripe." A thoughtful look on his face, Lavelle continued, "Quite a few of us on the *Sutherland* feel like Captain Picard was playing favorites then...that by doing what he did he sent a message to us that we weren't as good as the people on the Big E...that we couldn't do the job on our own. That we had to have someone from the *Enterprise* there to supervise us." On the other side of the door, a smile crossed Django's lips as she noted how Sam, in his defense of Commander Hobson and the *Sutherland* had used the terms 'we' and 'us' to

describe himself, the ship and its crew.

A shocked look on her face, Nurse Ogawa, also taking note of Sam's use of 'us' and 'we', exclaimed, "Are you trying to say that Captain Picard didn't think that the officers and crew on the *Sutherland* were capable of doing their job?"

Taking a deep breath, Lavelle answered back in a placating voice, "No, Alyssa...that's not what **I'm** saying. I can't say for sure what the captain was thinking. What I'm trying to tell you though is that some people on the *Sutherland* feel that's what Captain Picard thinks of them—that's how **they** see it."

"I think I understand." Worf interjected, much to the surprise of the others in the control room—as well as of the young woman listening in from the other side of the door. Turning towards Alyssa, the Klingon smiled down warmly at the Japanese woman, "Nurse Ogawa...you haven't been away from the *Enterprise* that long..."

"I've been away just as long as you have." Alyssa protested.

Shaking his head kindly, Worf demurred, surprisingly loquacious, "But you are now at Starfleet Medical working directly under Dr. Crusher and with most of the *Enterprise* medical staff. For the most part, you haven't had to deal that much with the rest of Starfleet out in the field until now, so you've been shielded. That affects how you see the Captain and the *Enterprise*. Mr. Lavelle and I...because we've been away from Earth and mostly away from the rest of the *Enterprise* crew..."

"Chief O'Brien's stationed with you though?" Alyssa pointed out, albeit with much less enthusiasm than before.

"True..." Worf conceded, "...but he hasn't had much contact with the *Enterprise* and its crew for over three years and, I have a feeling that if he were here, he would probably agree with Mr. Lavelle and I."

"What Mr. Worf is trying to say..." Sam picked up, "...is that being away from the *Enterprise* and Captain Picard has given us a different...a broader...perspective."

"Correct." Worf responded and then reluctantly concluded, "And what I and Chief O'Brien have found and what Mr. Lavelle has also discovered is that while many in Starfleet **respect** both the *Enterprise* and Captain Picard, there

are also many who do not **like** either.”

“I’m not sure I see where you’re coming from...” Alyssa weakly protested, unconvinced, “So that’s why Ensign Django doesn’t like me...”

“So...Data...” Counselor Troi remarked, speaking from the copilot’s position of the runabout that she shared with her android companion, “Are you looking forward to going back to your first command, the *Sutherland*?”

“I am neither looking forward to it...nor dreading it...” Data answered back in his usual neutral tone. “Why? Should I be?”

Momentarily lost in thought, the half-Betazoid empath replied in a low tone as her thoughts drifted in other directions, “No...of course not, Data.”

Noticing the uncertain expression on his long-time shipmate’s face, Data solicitously noted, “You seem...troubled...Counselor...is there anything I can help you with?”

“No...” Deanna responded, her lips turning up into a slight smile. “I’m just worried about Ensign Sito and Alyssa and the others...I just hope they come back safe and sound.”

“As do I.” The android replied as he turned his attention back to the *Amazon*’s controls. “Mr. Worf and Nurse Ogawa are both good...friends...and Mr. Lavelle is a promising officer.” He then cocked his head slightly to the left, “However, I cannot say anything about the other officer accompanying them...”

Cracking a smile as she regarded her old friend, Deanna quipped, “Well, I’ve been reading up on her file...she’s definitely a very...lively...individual.”

“Maria doesn’t like anyone when she first meets them.” Sam responded with a laugh as Ensign Django gave him the finger from the other side of the door. “You should have been there the first time we met.” Giving Worf a friendly smirk, he added as the still hidden Maria gave him a silent raspberry, “I think she’s part Klingon.”

“Perhaps!” Worf responded with a laugh as Maria, in spite of herself, found her lips turning up into a smile.

“Just give her time...” Sam advised his old shipmate, “Maria’s the sort of person who thinks actions count more than words. Just be the person you are and Maria’ll come around—you’ll see.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Alyssa beamed as she placed a hand on her old friend’s shoulder. “You know...one day...” She said with a smile, “You’re going to make one hell of a captain.”

“Maybe one day...” Sam replied with a laugh as the door slid open allowing Maria to enter, “...but not for a while yet.”

“So...what you guys been talking about?” The dusky haired woman asked with a grin as she took the copilot’s chair.”

“Oh...a little bit of this...a little bit of that...” Sam grinned, “Just old friends catching up with each other.”

“That’s good...” Maria remarked with a sly grin, “Cause I could have sworn my ears were burning...”

The runabout computer chimed just as Maria had finished her last remark. Turning his attention back to the instrument panel, Sam remarked as the dingy rust colored ball grew larger in the *Loire’s* viewscreen “Well folks...here we are...Persis IV.”

Ah...that’s much better!” Gul Rejak exclaimed as he regarded his Bajoran prisoner, dressed in a translucent gown, her head lowered submissively in his presence. Cupping her chin, he raised the young woman’s head and gazed into her eyes, “You’re sure to fetch a high price at the upcoming auction, my dear...but that’ll wait. Tonight you’re to entertain a friend of mine.” Releasing her, he said in a silky voice, “Perform well and you’ll be rewarded.” Then, producing the controls to her pain implant, he smirked as he saw the former Ensign Sito Jaxa visibly cringe, “Fail to please him...and you’ll fail to please me...and you know what that means.”

"Welcome Tamar!" Gul Rejak grinned broadly as his fellow Cardassian and long-time friend strode into his office, "Sit down! I trust your flight here was an uneventful one?"

"We had a miserable time at Terek Nor..." Gul Tamar grouched, "...and then we had to dodge a Maquis vole-pack and Klingon raiders. But other than that the voyage was all right."

Pouring a thick, brown liquid into a crystal goblet, Rejak tempted, "First try this...it will improve your mood. And then..." he winked knowingly, "I have a special surprise for you for tonight."

Taking a seat in front of the base commander's desk, Gul Tamar took a sip from the goblet, his lips turning up into a satisfied grin as he swirled the liquor in its glass, "This is a most excellent kanar, Rejak."

"A present from Legate Parma." Rejak replied as he poured himself a drink before sitting down at his desk, "In appreciation for his latest...acquisition."

"Ah..." Tamar vocalized, flashing a leer, "I take it the Orion woman...satisfied him..."

"Most definitely." Rejak laughed. "He sent an entire case." Seeing a slightly dejected look on the freighter captain's face, he teased good-naturedly, "Don't worry, old friend. I haven't forgotten you." Taking the box from the guard's hands, he placed it on his desk, opening it to reveal four bottles of kanar. "These are yours."

"Thank you!" Tamar smiled back, pleased at his friend's generosity.

"And that's not all my friend..." Rejak smiled beatifically. "Remember...I promised you a special surprise..."

"Yes..." Tamar replied, his appetite whetted by the kanar.

A side door opened in response to Rejak pushing a button on his desk, revealing Sito Jaxa, wearing a transparent gown. "Come, my pet..." Rejak ordered.

Obedying the Gul's instructions, Sito walked timidly into the room, stopping before the two Cardassians, her head bent submissively, "Master..." The Bajoran slave whispered in a barely audible voice.

"Most striking..." Tamar said approvingly as he cupped the young woman's chin, raising her head up as he gazed into her eyes. "Is this the one you were telling me about?"

"Yes." Rejak replied with a grin, "It took quite a bit of effort to break this one." Turning his attention back to the Bajoran youth, the Cardassian Gul ordered, "Remove your gown."

Obeying silently, Sito slipping out of the flimsy cloth she wore, stood naked in front of the two Cardassians. Pointing at a spot just above her left breast, Rejak gloated, "My surgeon does good work, wouldn't you say? You can't even tell she's had a pain implant."

Looking closely, Tamar nodded his head as he traced a finger just above the breast where once there was a scar, "I agree..." Walking around the young woman, the Cardassian carefully appraised her, "Your surgeon does excellent cosmetic work." Caressing Sito's cheek, the freighter captain remarked, "I assume she'll be going with the others? She should fetch a high price at the auction."

"She won't be a part of this shipment..." Rejak leered, "As I said, this one's a special project of mine...perhaps later, when I grow bored of her." Placing a hand on his friend's shoulder, Rejak grinned, "But for tonight Tamar...she is yours. Enjoy!"

Smoothly setting down on the *Sutherland's* hangar deck, the doors to the runabout *Amazon* opened soon afterwards. As Deanna Troi and her companion, Commander Data, stepped down off the ramp and on to the deck, they were met by the *Sutherland's* first officer and ship's counselor.

"Welcome aboard the *USS Sutherland* Counselor Troi..." Commander Hobson greeted in a nasal tone, "...Commander Data..." the commander further greeted, a slightly frostier edge to his voice when he addressed the android officer. Gesturing towards the man standing next to him, Hobson made the necessary introductions, "This is our ship's counselor, Lieutenant Commander Maximilian Freedman."

"Deanna..." Max said with a smile as he extended his hand, "...it's good to see

you again.” Maintaining his smile, he then shook Data’s hand, “And Commander Data...it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you...” Data responded politely. However, before he could finish his statement, he was interrupted by the sound of Commander Hobson clearing his throat.

“Excuse me...Counselor...Commander...” Hobson interjected, his facial expression unchanged even as his voice grew even more formal as he addressed the android officer, “But Captain Shelby has requested that you be brought to Conference Room One as soon as you came on board.”

“Of course, Sir...” Deanna replied, her empathic senses immediately picking up on the lingering feelings of resentment emanating from beneath the carefully constructed emotionless façade of the *Sutherland’s* first officer.

Leaning towards his Betazoid colleague, Max whispered, “I see you’ve picked on the fact that we have more than one problem here.”

Nodding her head, Deanna whispered back, “I was afraid of that. Do you have any ideas?”

“We’ll discuss them later.” Max answered back as the sound of Commander Hobson clearing his throat once again drew the two counselors’ attention back to the matter at hand. “For now though, we better catch up with the others.”

“So...” Ensign Django asked as she looked down at the dingy surface of Persis IV through the *Loire’s* transparent aluminum window, “...what’s our plan of attack?”

“I’ve been giving it some thought...” Sam replied, “...and I’ve got an idea.” A crooked half grin appearing on his face he warned, “But I have a feeling you and Alyssa aren’t going to like it...”

A few hours later, Maria emerged from the back of the runabout wearing tight leather pants, a low cut top, and a wicked grin on her face. “I knew you’d think up something like this, Sam...”

“I hate it...” Alyssa Ogawa groused as she walked in moments after the dusky skinned Brazilian ensign, wearing a micro-miniskirt and a light blue

diaphanous halter top that barely covered her breasts, "This makes me look like some sort of...of..."

"Whore?" Maria helpfully supplied with a smirk.

"Maria...Alyssa..." Sam quickly interjected, again trying to head off a confrontation between the two women, "We discussed this...remember? We can't go down there looking like a cadet review. We have to at least look like we belong."

"Mr. Lavelle is correct." Lieutenant Commander Worf chimed in, "He and I will pass ourselves off as mercenaries looking for employment with you two our temporary..." The burly Klingon paused for a moment, clearing his throat in a gesture of embarrassment, "...companions."

"We get the picture." Django teased. "All right...we'll do it your way—this time." A mischievous twinkle now in her eyes, she promised, "But next time...we do it my way!"

"Counselor Troi...Commander Data..." Captain Shelby politely greeted, getting up out of her chair as the two former *Enterprise* officers entered the conference room accompanied by the *Sutherland's* first officer and ship's counselor. "It's a pleasure to see you again..." Liz stated as she motioned for the group to take their seats, "...although I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Has there been any more word from Mr. Worf or the others?" Deanna asked, her face reflecting her concern for the burly Klingon with whom she had had a brief tryst as well as for the others.

"No..." Liz replied, shaking her head, "And we probably won't hear anything one way or another for some time."

"A logical assumption..." Commander Data stated and then volunteered, "Perhaps we could send in a second team to monitor them..."

"And pull them out if we have to..." Counselor Troi quickly interjected, completing her companion's thoughts.

"I'm sorry..." Liz shook her head sadly, "We can't. "Admiral Glover was quite

clear about that. Starfleet and the Federation have to be able to maintain plausible deniability. That means..." she stated grimly, "they're on their own." Her lips then turned up into a sly grin, "But that doesn't mean that we have to just sit here with our collective thumbs up our asses. We know that Ensign Sito is most likely being held at Pullock V. While we can't go in there, we might be able to help our people in some other way." Noticing her executive officer's steely gaze whenever it rested on the android Starfleet officer, Shelby frowned. Then, turning her attention towards Data, she requested, "Commander Data...I'd like you to work with Commander Hobson, Lieutenant Commander Varok, and Lieutenant Rysyl...see if you can come up with something that might give our people a little edge if they need it without violating the letter of Admiral Glover's instructions."

"I would, of course, be glad to help out in whatever way I could." Data replied, his positronic matrix reacting positively to the prospect of being able to actually make a contribution in some form, no matter how small, towards the possible rescue of Sito Jaxa.

Turning her attention to Deanna, Captain Shelby smiled, "Counselor, I'm sure you and Mr. Freedman have a great deal to discuss as well. Addressing the entire gathering as she stood up, Liz declared, "If there are no further questions, I'll let you get to your duties."

Immediately after materializing on the transporter pad of the tiny spaceport of Persis IV, Sam and his companions were accosted by a portly Tellarite slovenly dressed, his shirt stained with the juices from his recently completed meal, the discarded remnants of bone and gristle still on the table. Flashing a brief leer as his eyes lingered on the forms of the two women standing next to the human and Klingon on the pad, the Tellarite gruffly announced, "I'm the port master here. The standard transporter usage fee is five slips of gold pressed latinum per person. Although..." he propositioned, "...I might consider waiving the fee in return for certain...considerations."

"You wish!" Maria saucily replied, getting into her role as the Tellarite laughed, "You couldn't keep up with us."

"Forget about it." Sam said gruffly, barely resisting the impulse to turn his head away from the Tellarite's foul breath as a low guttural sound escaped from the Klingon standing next to him.

"Suits me..." The Tellarite responded with snort. "If you do not like it, you're free to leave...after paying the fee." He said in a menacing tone as two Nausicaans looked up from their domjot game. "And don't even think about attempting to transport from your ship into the settlement..." he warned with a menacing growl, "...because the transporter scramblers here will spread your molecules all over this rock. This is the only way on or off this planet. So...are you staying are not?"

"All right..." Sam replied in an angry tone, maintaining his cover as he counted out the gold pressed latinum, handing it to the port master. "Hope you choke on it."

"Hunh..." The Tellarite huffed as the two thugs went back to their game, "Go on—get out of here. I've got work to do and you're in my way!"

Turning towards his comrades, as the iris door permitting access to the domed settlement opened, Lavelle said with a scowl, "Ok, guys, let's do what we gotta do so we can get out of this hell hole."

Pulling the hood on her cloak up over her head, Maria replied with a grimace of her own, "You won't get any argument from me."

Stepping into the settlement, the group's olfactory senses were immediately assailed by the odors of the small compound. "What is that smell?" Alyssa asked, her nose crinkling with distaste.

"The filtration system must be out of whack." Ensign Django surmised as she covered her own nose with her hand. "Get all these beings together in close quarters and things can get pretty ripe if the maintenance isn't kept up."

Watching a pair of male leather clad Acamarians entering a building with a dimly lit front apparently guarded by a large Gorn. "This looks like a good place to begin our search." Worf declared as he took the lead.

Quickly spotting the approaching foursome, the Gorn doorman growled as he held out his hand. "Stop!" Looking the group over, he flashed a toothy grin, his sharp teeth causing all but the large Klingon to momentarily flinch. Pulling out what looked like a tricorder, he explained, "Weapons scan..." as the device beeped. His growl now deeper and more menacing the large reptile declared, "No energy or projectile weapons permitted inside."

Opening a lock box he demanded, "Put your phasers in here or turn around and leave."

Nodding his head once, Worf removed his phaser from its hiding place in his belt, putting it in the box with the rest of the group following the large Klingon's lead. Closing and locking the box and placing it back in its holding area, the Gorn said, "You can get them back when you leave."

Entering the club, the group stood by the door momentarily, allowing their eyes to adjust to the dim light as the fragrant odors from a plethora of perfumes, exotic foods and drinks mixed with the acrid sweet and not so sweet smoke exhaled by the establishment's many smokers partaking of a wide range of hookahs, pipes, cigars, and cigarettes. Wincing as he felt a hypospray against his neck, he heard Nurse Ogawa's voice.

"Broad spectrum anti-intoxicant," she whispered in his ear before injecting the others, including herself.

"Good idea." Sam agreed as the group made their way to the bar, passing the center stage where an Orion woman danced nude, her movements tired and flat, her eyes glassy.

"She looks stoned out of her gourd." Maria observed as the foursome each took stools at the bar.

"She is." Alyssa confirmed. "Can't say for sure, but my guess is Corillan acid.

"Corillan acid?" Worf asked.

"Yeah. I read about it while at Starfleet Medical." The Japanese nurse replied as she snuggled up close to the large Klingon in an effort to both maintain their cover and ward off any possible suitors. "It's a nasty cocktail...a combination euphoric and hallucinogenic as well as being something of a depressant." Alyssa explained as the foursome sat down at the bar. "Very addictive and highly illegal in the Federation—but we're seeing more and more of it in border regions like this. The Ferengi...Lissepians...others looking for a quick slip of latinum carry it. It's easy to smuggle. You don't need a whole lot to make a big profit." Frowning, she added, "It's very addictive physically and psychologically."

"Whaddya want?" Turning his head towards the gruff voice addressing him, Sam saw a husky human on the other side of the bar. "Booze...drugs...suck-

salt...hurry up...I got other customers.”

“Synth-ale.” Sam replied as the barman snorted his disgust. Returning shortly with four mugs, Lavelle inquired in a low voice, “I’m looking for a friend...” to which the bartender replied with a single grunt.

“I’ll make it worth your time...” The young Canadian quickly said as the burly barkeep began to turn away. “Gold pressed latinum...” Sam tempted. Seeing Alyssa’s subtle nod out of the corner of his eye, Lavelle took a sip of his synth-ale as the bartender filled a drink order, handing it to a scantily clad grey skinned blondish haired Bolian waitress.

“What sort of friend you after?” He asked, leaning over the bar conspiratorially, “If you’re looking for someone to join you and your woman for a few hours or for the rotation, I can find one for you.” Flashing a leer he added, “Female...male...something else...whatever you’re in to.”

“Not that sort of friend.” Sam growled as he handed ten slips of gold pressed latinum to the bartender, “I’m looking for a human...a man named Lynn Pierson. A mutual friend of ours told me I could find him here and that I should look him up.”

“I might know how to find this guy...” The bartender drawled, “But my memory’s not what it used to be...”

“I see...” Sam responded, displaying another ten slips of latinum. “Does this bring your memory back?”

“It’s getting clearer...” The bartender said with a slight grin.

“Ok...” Lavelle replied as he took out another ten slips, “If this doesn’t jog your memory, then I guess we’ll have to find someone with better recall.”

Nodding his head, the bartender answered back as he pocketed the money, “Yeah...I know who you’re after. Wait here...he doesn’t meet just anyone who just shows up. See those sophonts over there?” He asked, pointing towards a table where the Acamarians who had come into the bar earlier were drinking and talking with a pair of Andorians, a set of male twinned Maladorns, and a large Tellarite. Responding to Lavelle’s single nod of the head, the barkeep jerked his head towards the Tellarite, “See him...you want to meet Pierson...you go through him first.”

"Ok..." Sam inquired, "Can you set up a meeting?"

"Sure..." The bartender agreed with a shrug, "It'll cost you another ten slips."

"All right..." Lavelle growled as he counted out the currency and then snatched it away at the last moment. "You get paid when we get our meeting. Now...set it up."

"Sure thing, bub." The barman growled as he made his way to the table where the Tellarite and the others were sitting. Leaning over he said something to the Tellarite who then turned around, his eyes quickly spotting Lavelle and the others. Laughing, he gestured at the others at the table who immediately dispersed. Returning to Sam, the bartender said, "He'll see you."

"Thanks..." Sam acknowledged with a false smile as he slipped the latinum in the bartender's hand. "Here's your money."

Getting up, Sam and his companions joined the Tellarite now sitting at the table alone. "We were told you were the one to go to if we wanted to see Lynn Pierson."

Draining his mug, the large Tellarite let out a ferocious belch, "Why would Pierson want to see the like of you?" He laughed as the bartender quickly brought over another mug of liquor so cold that the outside of the mug was coated with frost.

"We have latinum..." Lavelle began only to be quickly cut off by the burly alien.

"How much..." he asked, flashing a leer at both Django and Alyssa to both women's disgust.

"How much you asking?" Sam asked.

"How much you got?" The Tellarite replied as he scratched his groin.

"Enough." Sam answered back. "So...do we have a deal or not?"

"Hmmm..." The Tellarite mused as he considered Sam's offer. Flashing a predatory grin that made Nurse Ogawa's skin crawl, the Tellarite chugged

down his drink before nodding his head. "There's a warehouse here..." he said, drawing a rough map on the table. "Come in twenty minutes. Bring your latinum and I'll take you to Pierson."

"We'll be there." Sam promised as he and the others got up from the table.

"Good." The Tellarite, standing up as well, declared and then warned, his voice taking on an ominous tone, "Just be sure to bring your money."

As the Tellarite left the bar, Sam turned to the others. "Well...we've got twenty minutes to kill and this is as good a place to kill them as anywhere else." Taking notice of another Gorn bouncer, this one easily picking up a drunken patron whose hands had been all over an Andorian dancer and then chucking the rowdy out of the door, Lavelle quipped, "It's also probably safer than any other place around here too."

"I agree." Worf affirmed and then remarked sagely, "I also don't trust that Tellarite."

"I don't either," Maria agreed. "Leaving out the fact that he smelled like a dung heap, didn't you see the way he kept looking at me and Ogawa."

"Yeah," Alyssa agreed, "Every time he looked at me, I felt like throwing up."

Spotting out of the corner of his eye the Bolian waitress he had seen earlier taking money from a customer and then, taking his hand, leading him up the stairs and through a door, Sam said in a low, deliberate tone, "You're right, Mr. Worf. We better be ready for anything."

Laughing as he walked out the bar, the Tellarite turned to one of the Acamarians accompanying him. "For once that dung eater of a Dopterian was right. Those four will fetch a high price at the auction!"

"I don't know, Barl..." One of the Acamarians said, referring to the Tellarite by his name, "They don't look like the type that'll go down easy—especially the Klingon."

Placing a hand on the Acamarian's shoulder and squeezing hard, Barl leaned over towards the man's head, his breath causing the Acamarian to flinch, "That's why I want you and your friends to get to the warehouse first and get

set up.” Laughing, the large Tellarite slapped his flunky on the back, “Those Starfleeters won’t even know what hit ‘em!”

Recovering their phasers from the Gorn doorman after paying a five slip ‘box rental’, Lavelle and the rest of the group quietly made their way to the warehouse Barl told them to meet him at. Pausing at the entrance, Sam turned to the burly Klingon, “Well Mr. Worf...how do you want to play this?”

“If I were planning an ambush...” Worf conjectured, “I would have someone hiding on either side to flank us. The problem is...we have no choice but to enter as a group...” He then flashed a sly grin...at least we would have to appear to do so...”

“I think I understand what you want to do, Commander...” Sam replied shaking his head, “...but I’m not sure how we can pull it off.”

Flashing a feral grin, Worf explained his plan. Several moments later, he concluded, turning towards the two women. “You understand, Ensign...Lieutenant...you two have to stay close enough to Lavelle and I so that they will know you are there, but far enough away so that you can quickly take cover.” He then fixed them both with his gaze, “You must not count on either Mr. Lavelle or I to be able to help you as there is a good possibility that either or both of us will be either stunned or killed.”

“So...why are we doing this?” Maria asked, “This sounds like a high risk deal without much possibility of it working out.”

“We don’t have much of a choice.” Sam pointed out. “It’s their game...their turf. We pretty much have to play by their rules.” Taking a deep breath as he put his hand on the door, Sam flashed a nervous smile, “Well...let’s do this.”

Their eyes adjusting to the low light in the warehouse, the group advanced with both Worf and Lavelle taking the lead while Django and Nurse Ogawa followed several paces behind, hugging close to the storage crates and shelves that lined either side of the center aisle. Everyone’s eyes scouring the warehouse, Worf spotted a glint and slight sign of movement to the left. “Two o’clock...” he said in a low voice, “...catwalk.”

“I see him.” Sam responded, flashing the women behind him a subtle signal with his fingers receiving in return an acknowledging cough from Ensign

Django. His eyes spotting movement on the other side, he whispered, "Nine o'clock...packing crate."

"That's far enough." The gruff voice of the Tellarite greeted them. Stepping forward, the group spotted him in the center, flanked on either side by two of the Acamarians in the bar.

"We've got your money." Sam declared, "Now where's Pierson?"

Laughing, Barl turned towards one of the Acamarians, "What did I tell you, Odren? Typical Starfleet!" Turning back towards Sam, the Tellarite flashed an evil grin, "When Vretal..." Seeing the confused look on the human's face, Barl clarified, "...you remember, Vretal...the Dopterian you ran into on Deep Space Nine..." Seeing the flash of understanding on Lavelle's face, the large Tellarite laughed, "Now it's sinking in through that thick human skull of yours! When I didn't hear from him, I thought he'd double-crossed me." His laughter dying down now, replaced by an icy cold smile, Barl said in a low voice, "I was just about to get ready to have that worthless piece of Dopterian dung and that Bardeezan he hangs out with taught a lesson...and then you show up right at my front door!"

"Look..." Sam attempted to reason, "We can still make a deal. We've brought enough latinum to make you a tidy profit. All you have to do is point us to the guy we want." Flashing his most charming smile, Sam finished, "What could be easier?"

Laughing, Barl replied, "I think I could get to like you, human! I'm almost tempted to take you up on your offer." His laughter disappearing, the Tellarite growled, "The thing is, it's just as easy for me to take all your latinum anyway and then sell you." Flashing a predatory grin he explained as he and his companions drew old style hand phasers, "Those two..." he said, motioning in the direction of Alyssa and Maria, "...will fetch a hefty price on the Orion slave market. Don't worry females..." He leered, "I'm sure some Orion noble or brothel will buy you and after you've been conditioned put you to work." Turning his attention to Worf he said, "And you, Klingon, provided some Cardassian Gul with a grudge against the Klingons doesn't buy you so that he can turn you into his own private plaything, might do pretty good in the arena." Addressing Lavelle, the Tellarite laughed, "And as for you, pretty boy, if you're lucky, the same brothel will buy you and your female companions..."

Motioning with his phaser, Barl declared, "We can do this either one of two

ways. You can get on your knees and then, after we put these slaver collars on you, you can come along with us.” His lips then turned up into a feral grin, “Or...we can stun you, put the collars on you and carry you out. Your choice.”

“I don’t think so...” Sam answered back in a low voice as he dived and rolled, drawing his phaser and firing at Barl, barely missing the large Tellarite as he also took cover amongst the storage crates.

Letting out a primal scream of rage, Worf threw his mek’leth, striking the Acamarian square in the chest as he dove for cover on the ground near a packing crate. Lavelle, also diving for cover, pulled his phaser out from concealment as a phaser beam just missed him.

Diving and firing from the cover of a packing crate, Django cursed as she missed the Acamarian on the ledge. “Damn!” She swore as her opponent’s return fire just missed her. Moving quickly to a new position, she fired once again, watching this time in satisfaction as her opponent fell to the floor.

Dodging for cover, Barl called out to his people, “Take them down. Ten strips of latinum to the man who brings me that filthy Klingon’s head!”

Staying low, Alyssa carefully marked her target. The phaser beams impacting closer and closer to her, the Japanese nurse popped up and fired, missing her opponent as his beam impacted on her chest. The force of the beam pushing her back, she landed on the ground with a thud.

“Alyssa!” Sam called out from his cover as he saw his old friend fall.

“I think she’s ok...” Django shouted back, “Remember they want us alive!”

“Where’s Worf?” Lavelle muttered as he fired, bringing down another Acamarian.

Lieutenant Commander Worf, taking advantage of the shadows as well as his keen sense of smell, was at that moment creeping stealthily towards his prey, the Tellarite Barl. Silently the Klingon warrior sneaked up from behind his still unwary opponent. Striking, the Klingon warrior grasped the Tellarite in a headlock and twisted his head, smiling with satisfaction as he was rewarded by an audible snap.

Making for the door, the last standing Acamarian fell as the phaser beam fired by Ensign Django struck home. “I think that’s it!” She called out as she rushed

to where Alyssa lay. Taking the nurse's medical tricorder out of the satchel she kept it in, Maria ran it over the fallen woman. "She'll be ok." Django said as Sam and Worf rushed towards the two women. "See..." She remarked as the Japanese woman moaned and slowly began to stir.

"Take it easy, Alyssa..." Sam said encouragingly as he knelt down beside her.

"Stimulant...in my bag..." She whispered as Maria took out a hypospray.

"This it?" The Brazilian woman asked, holding the hypo up close to the groggy nurse.

"Yeah." Alyssa said weakly. "Inject me with it." Feeling the hypo against her neck, the Japanese woman managed a slight smile, "I'll be ok in a few minutes."

"Take your time." Sam said dejectedly, "We're back to square one."

"I wouldn't say that." A voice responded from the warehouse door. Approaching the group, flanked by two men, both armed with Klingon disruptors, the man jibed, "I guess I owe you thanks for getting rid of Barl. You saved me the trouble...he was getting to be a royal pain in the ass."

"Who are you?" Worf, standing up and facing the three approaching men, demanded as he hefted the mek'leth that he had recovered from the dead Acamarian lying on the floor where the Klingon had earlier struck him down.

Motioning for his bodyguards to stay back, the center figure approached alone. As the man drew closer, Sam immediately recognized him. The hair was longer now and there was a wicked scar on his left cheek that twitched every so often, causing the man to momentarily wince with pain. Flashing a quick grin as he saw the expression on Lavelle's face, the man explained, "Neuro-lash...a little gift from the Cardassians."

"You're Pierson." Lavelle stated flatly as Alyssa, with Django's help, struggled to her feet.

Nodding his head once, the human answered back, "Yeah. You wanted to talk with me?"

"You knew about this meeting?" Alyssa asked, her voice still weak from her injury as her eyes flared with anger, "...and didn't do anything about it?"

“Like I said...” Pierson replied with a grim laugh, “...Barl was getting to be a problem. So...when I heard about four Starfleeters stumbling around asking about me, I figured I’d sit back and see how you handled yourselves.”

“So you knew Barl was planning on selling us to the Orions?” Lavelle demanded, his temper rising as frightening images of Maria and Alyssa as brain-channeled prostitutes raced through his mind.

His grim smile, along with the twitching scare giving the former Starfleet officer a menacing cast, Pierson brusquely responded, “Nothing happens in this place without me knowing about it.” Laughing, he elaborated, “This was a win-win proposition for me. You take out Barl, then you save me the trouble of having to kill him later before he double-crosses me and I know that you’re at least half-way competent. You don’t take him out—then I get my cut from what he would have gotten from you.” His laughter growing louder, he pronounced, “You see...either way I win.”

His anger rising to the breaking point, Sam struck an uppercut that impacted squarely on Pierson’s chin, decking the defrocked officer. Getting up, Pierson worked his jaw as he motioned his men to back off. “It’s ok...” he said, addressing his men. Turning back towards Sam, he flashed a smile of near respect, “I’ll give you that one—I guess you had it coming to you.” Thinking for a moment, he came to a decision and motioned with his thumb towards the door. “Let’s get outta here...we’ll talk back in my office.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Maria asked as she looked down on Barl’s corpse and then turned her gaze back towards Pierson.

“You don’t.” Pierson abruptly replied, “But if you want my help, you don’t have a choice.” Turning around, he said over his shoulder, “You can come with me or you can go back to your runabout. Decide what you’re going to do. I don’t have all day.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Sam nodded his head. “Ok...we’ll follow your lead...for now.”

“So Tamar...” Gul Rejak inquired with a smirk, as his old friend swaggered into the office, “Did you enjoy yourself last night?”

"I did indeed." Tamar replied as he took the glass of fish juice offered to him by his fellow Gul. "She was most..." he leered, "...pleasing."

"Excellent!" Rejak exclaimed. "I shall have to be sure to reward her."

"Indeed." Tamar acknowledged, nodding his head in assent as he drank down the contents of his glass and then stood up. "Much as I'd like to stay here and talk some more with you, Rejak..."

"Quite right..." Gul Rejak affirmed, "This shipment needs to arrive at Larranjo III within the week."

"Yes...but I'll be back here for the next auction..." Tamar promised with a grin.

"I'm counting on it." Rejak replied with a laugh, "By then the next group should be ready..."

Watching as his old friend departed, Rejak smiled approvingly as Sito entered the room. "You did well, my pet..." The Cardassian said as he opened a small box, presenting the contents to the young Bajoran woman, "And as I promised...here's your reward."

"That's it..." Rejak encouraged as Sito grabbed at the vial the Gul held in his hands, and then taking it, tilted it, swallowing its contents in one gulp, "Drink it all..." Leering, he removed her gown as he whispered in her ear, the powerful drug coursing through her system, "Doesn't that make you feel much better now?" He whispered as he drew her down to the floor, "Doesn't that make you want to..."

"No, Commander Data..." Commander Hobson declared the slight edge to his patrician voice immediately picked up on by the empathic Anara as well as the Vulcan science officer Varok, "...your plan as you have outlined it is unacceptable."

"Why?" The android asked his head cocked slightly to the right in confusion as the former *Enterprise* officer also felt another strange emotion, frustration; as yet another of his proposals was rejected by the *Sutherland's* first officer. "My idea seems to meet the parameters set forth by Captain Shelby. There is a 91.6% chance that our presence would be undetected."

Pausing for a moment, Chris took a deep breath before responding, his voice tone now devoid of any edge, "It's that 8.4% that renders the plan unworkable." Seeing the quizzical look on Data's face, the *Sutherland's* first officer explained, "Leaving out the fact that Admiral Glover was quite specific regarding any possible violation of Cardassian territory, our presence, if the *Defiant* were to be detected by either the Cardassians or Klingons could, at worst, draw us into a war. Even at best..." he concluded, "...it would strain relations with both powers even worse than they already are at a dangerous time."

Nodding his head in assent, Varok acknowledged, "While Commander Data's plan would be what humans would normally call an...acceptable...risk, Commander Hobson makes a valid point in that the threat from the Dominion is a real one. As our relationship with the new civilian Cardassian government is in its beginning stages and ours with the Klingons is in what most recently has been described as a state of 'cold war', a prudent course is the most logical one to take at this time."

"So then...if we can't take the *Defiant* in—even under cloak—what can we do?" Anara asked, perplexed, as she turned her gaze to each of her fellow officers in turn.

"Whatever course of action we do take..." Chris answered, "It cannot involve any sort of obvious or open intervention that can be traced directly to us. We must be subtle about this." Standing up and stretching, the commander noted, "We've been at this for several hours now. Perhaps a break right now would be useful. We'll meet back here again in...four standard hours." Turning towards Commander Data, Hobson added with the slightest hint of skepticism in his voice, "Hopefully by then, Commander, you'll have some more ideas."

"Commander!" Anara called out as the *Sutherland's* first officer strode purposely down the corridor away from the conference room. "Wait! Please?"

Coming to a stop and turning around as he heard the Deltan woman's last plaintive request, Commander Hobson waited his face an expressionless mask as Anara approached. "Commander..." She said and then added a tentative, "...Chris..." Seeing the first officer's stoic expression melt ever so

slightly at her use of his first name, she asked, "Can we talk for a moment..."

Frowning slightly, the diffident Hobson replied, "I don't think now is a good time, Lieutenant." Seeing the crestfallen expression on the younger woman's face, Chris, much to his chagrin, couldn't help but relent, "Very well...allow me two hours and I will meet you at 'Rick's'." He said, referring to the *Sutherland's* off duty lounge.

"Thank you," Anara answered back, her lips turning up into a warm smile, "I'll see you then."

Entering the quarters that Captain Shelby had provided for Commander Data, Deanna Troi grinned, "So, Mr. Data, how has your day been so far?"

Looking up from the computer screen on his desk, the android officer regarded his old friend for several moments before cautiously replying, "I'm not sure, Counselor." Referring to his recently implanted emotion chip, he explained as Deanna took a seat on the couch to the side of the commander's work area. "I am having problems processing the...feelings...that I am currently experiencing."

"Oh?" Troi responded as she leaned in towards Data, "Why don't we talk about these feelings..."

"I don't like this..." Maria said dubiously as she and the others once again approached the bar, this time accompanied by Pierson and his guards. Shaking her head, she concluded, "Nope...I don't like this at all."

"I know Maria..." Sam whispered back, "But like I said earlier, we don't really have a choice. If we're going to get Jaxa back, we're going to need help. And..." he finished, glaring daggers at the back of Pierson's head, "...like it or not...he's the only one offering."

Arriving at the door to the bar, they were met by the same Gorn at the door who had earlier taken their weapons. "Mr. Pierssson..." The reptilian greeted in a respectful manner that surprised Lavelle and his companions.

"Evening, S'nurl..." The human answered back. Gesturing towards Lavelle

and his friends with his thumb, Pierson said, "These are new business associates of mine. Let 'em keep their phasers...I want to show our new friends that they can trust us."

"Of courssssse Mr. Pierssson..." S'nurl replied, his teeth flashing in a feral grin as he stood aside.

Entering the bar, Sam glared at the bartender who responded with a fat smile. "That's the son of a bitch who set us up." Lavelle cursed, fighting down the temptation to draw his phaser.

"Don't be too hard on him." Pierson laughed, his scar seemingly dancing as he did so. "He was just doing what he was told."

As they went behind the bar and through a door into a large office, Maria inquired, "So...you own this dive?"

"Yep." Pierson replied with a smile, "Just a bit of free enterprise in action." Then sitting down behind an old wooden desk, his smile disappeared, "Ok...I'm a busy man, so what do you want?"

"A friend of ours told us to speak to you." Sam replied, getting straight to the point. "He said you could help us get someone out of a bad situation."

"There are all sorts of bad situations." The former Starfleet officer answered back with grim smile. "What sort of situation are you talking about?"

Upon seeing Sam nod his head once, Alyssa gave Pierson the isolinear rod containing the recording of Sito Jaxa. "I see..." Pierson said as he handed the rod back to Nurse Ogawa. "So, you want to get your friend back?" Thinking for a moment, he asked, "Do you know where she's being held?"

"Yeah," Sam replied, "Pullock V."

"Hmmm..." Pierson vocalized, "That's interesting." Leaning back in his seat as he put his feet up on the desk, he declared, "You did the right thing coming to see me. You never would have gotten in there and out on your own. You see..." he explained with a wicked grin, "Pullock V used to be your standard run of the mill Cardassian slave labor camp, but about a year ago...that was when Gul Rejak took over...things began to change. They replaced the retreads they normally use as guards in those places with security troops from the Fifth Order—you don't want to play with these spoon-heads if you

don't have to." Rubbing his scar, he remarked, "One of 'em gave me this little souvenir about six months ago. You're not going to get within ten light years of that place in that runabout of yours. But..." he flashed a predatory grin, "...like I said, it's lucky that you ran into me. You see...I just might have a way that'll get you at least through the front door. After that...you're on your own."

"How?" Worf asked, his growing excitement for action tempered by his deep distrust and disgust of the disgraced former officer sitting behind the desk.

"And what are you getting out of this?" A suspicious Maria further inquired.

"There's a Cardassian freighter that makes regular runs to and from Pullock V." Pierson responded with a sly smile. "I happen to know that it'll be in this area of space in the next couple of days. I want you to hijack that freighter and meet me at an asteroid where I have a...base of sorts. I'll give you the coordinates to the asteroid if you agree to my proposition. As for what I get out of this. I don't care about the freighter—in fact; I'll even install some goodies that'll help you pass the Cardassian checkpoints."

"What sort of 'goodies'?" Worf asked, still wary.

"Stuff like emissions screens and holographic emitters." Pierson explained and then continued outlining his proposition, "What I want is the cargo the freighter's carrying."

"That's it?" Sam asked, and then, in a suspicious voice inquired, "What's the cargo?"

"What do you care?" Pierson answered back curtly, "Long as you get your friend back. Of course..." He continued, his voice now taking on a grim tone, "...you can walk out of here and try to go it alone if you want. The choice is yours...but like I said, I'm a busy man."

Looking at each of his companions in turn and receiving from them an answering nod, Lavelle turned back to the ex-Starfleet officer. "Ok...we're in."

"Good." Pierson smiled as he outlined his plan, "One of my raiders will attack the freighter and knock down its shields and the rest is up to you." Handing an isolinear rod to Sam, the former Starfleeter concluded the meeting, "Everything you need is here. And now, if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment scheduled and I'm sure you have other places you need to be."

When you take the freighter, just send a subspace message to those coordinates and my people'll be waiting."

"Commander..." The Romulan centurion reported, "Our contact on Persis IV has just informed us that our 'allies' have made contact with a member of the local crime syndicate and have secured their cooperation."

"Excellent." Commander Sela replied, her lips curling up into a smile as she observed the starry night through the transparent aluminum window of her quarters. "Keep me informed as to their progress and instruct the sub-lieutenant to prepare to play his part in this little drama."

"At once, Commander." The centurion responded, snapping of a crisp salute before departing.

Once she was sure that her underling had truly departed, the human-Romulan hybrid gasped as she softly and somberly spoke to the shade of her long dead mother, childhood memories rushing uninvited through her thoughts, "I said I would do this, Mother...and I will...but understand...this makes us even."

"So..." Counselor Troi inquired as, sitting on the couch in his quarters, she gazed into the eyes of her long time shipmate. "...what sort of emotions are you feeling now?"

Turning his head first one way and then the other, Data thought for several moments before replying, "One I think is...confusion..."

Smiling benevolently, the empathic counselor further probed, "What do you think might have you feeling this way?"

"I am confused at the reactions I am receiving from certain members of the crew...most notably from Commander Hobson." His facial expression seeming to harden, the android added, "I am also feeling what I think must be...irritation...at how the commander seems to be dismissing all of my suggestions."

"I see..." Deanna vocalized, smiling inwardly as her empathic senses told her

that she was hot on the trail. Settling in for a long session, she continued to probe. "Why do you think that is so?"

After spending several moments in deep thought, Data slowly replied, "I can only conclude that it has something to do with when I was in command of the *Sutherland* a few years ago."

"Hmmm..." The counselor commented, "Why do you think that?"

"Commander Hobson and I..." Data explained, "Did not exactly...get along well with each other...during my brief tenure as the *Sutherland's* commanding officer."

"Curious..." Deanna commented, "If you don't mind me asking, Data, what exactly happened then?"

Taking a brief moment to access his records of the events of a few years ago when he was placed in command of the *Sutherland* during the Klingon Civil War, Data answered. "When I first came on board and took command of the *Sutherland*, Commander Hobson stated quite clearly that he did not feel that an android was qualified to serve as the captain of a starship." Pausing for a moment, he further recounted, "Throughout the course of the mission, the two of us were essentially involved in a power struggle until I rather forcibly ordered him to target and fire on the cloaked Romulan ships attempting to break the blockade with low-yield photon torpedoes."

"Hmmm...I don't believe I've heard this before..." Deanna remarked, raising an eyebrow.

"I have never discussed it with anyone other than with Captain Picard." Data admitted, "To be honest, Counselor, I am surprised that the...bigotry...that Commander Hobson displayed still exists."

"Are you sure it was bigotry, Data?" Troi asked, "After all, you did say that the two of you were involved in a power struggle. Perhaps something else lies at the core of your disagreements?"

"I am not sure I am following your line of inquiry, Counselor." Data replied, his face reflecting the state of confusion being transmitted by his new emotion chip.

"What I am saying, Data..." Deanna explained, "Is that the root cause might not

actually be bigotry on the part of Commander Hobson. It might be something else...and that something else is probably what is also provoking the negative reactions you are getting from some of the *Sutherland* crew."

"In what way?" Data inquired still perplexed.

"You were placed in command of the *Sutherland* by Captain Picard...correct?" Taking Data's silent nod of the head as assent, Deanna persisted in her line of questioning. "And Commander Hobson was in charge of the *Sutherland's* refit at that time, right?"

Comprehension dawning on the android, Data exclaimed, "I think I understand, Counselor. The source of his anger lay in my replacing him." Then, lowering his head for a moment, he asked, "How should I resolve this situation?"

Her lips turning up into a gentle smile, Deanna replied, "I think Commander Hobson is the one you need to talk to about this."

As the *Loire* waited for its prey along with the modified Peregrine raider that Pierson had sent with it in the cover of an asteroid belt in the Dakar system, Alyssa shook her head. "I don't know about this..." She said ruefully as she double checked the instruments in her satchel. "And I don't trust Pierson."

"I know what you mean." Sam commiserated as he checked the readings on his control console, "But it's not like we have any choice."

"Mr. Lavelle is right." Worf agreed with a grimace, tearing open a pack of emergency rations as all but essential systems on the runabout were powered down in an effort to avoid detection. "If we are to have any chance of rescuing Ensign Sito, we will have to go through with this plan."

"Maybe..." Maria reluctantly agreed, "But I'm still going to keep my hand near my phaser whenever I'm around Pierson or his goons."

"On that..." Worf scowled as the others nodded their heads, "...I think we are all in agreement."

"Yeah...well...we better grab as much sleep as we can..." Sam remarked, barely suppressing a yawn. "So...who wants to take the first watch?"

Walking into 'Rick's', the *Sutherland's* off duty bar and lounge, Chris Hobson allowed a slight smile to cross his features. As he took in the lounge décor, an almost exact recreation of the 1940s Moroccan nightclub depicted in the movie *Casablanca*, he nodded his head approvingly. His eyes scanning the bar, the always alert first officer spied Jadon and a young female officer sitting together drinking as she laughed at one of the Trill's jokes. On the other side of the lounge, he spotted a small group of crew members, including Ensign Barrows and her friend and frequent partner in crime, Ensign Candy Johnson clustered around the roulette wheel, laughing and joking. At last, his eyes spotted the person he was searching for, sitting by herself at the bar next to the piano sipping a drink and listening to the music. The slight smile growing a little wider, Chris made his way to the bar.

"Lieutenant Rysyl..." The diffident first officer began stiffly, and then, as he took in the slight disappointment in the Deltan woman's face at the formal greeting, he quickly amended, "...Anara..."

"Hello Comm..." Smiling as she saw Hobson shake his head subtly at her use of his rank, Anara shifted her response as well, "...Chris." Gesturing at an unoccupied stool next to her, she remarked, "I'm glad you could make it."

Immediately on Hobson taking his seat, the bartender, one of a handful of non-Starfleet employees working on the *Sutherland*, asked, "What'll it be?"

"Scotch...neat..." Hobson replied in a level tone. The drink appearing almost immediately in front of him, Chris picked up and took a small, appreciative sip. "Not bad, Mack." The first officer complimented, calling the bartender by his given name.

"Just got a shipment in from New Edinburgh." The husky bartender replied with a grin. "Smooth as silk and single malt to boot..." Turning towards Anara and noticing her near empty glass, he inquired, "Can I get you another rose-wine, Lieutenant?"

"Please..." Anara responded with a smile as the bartender returned with a crystal glass filled with a pinkish liquid and then quickly and subtly withdrawing to give the couple their privacy.

"So...Anara..." Chris asked, immediately getting to the point as he took

another sip of his scotch, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Fidgeting nervously on her stool, the empathic Deltan drummed her fingers on the bar for several moments as she tried to think of how she should phrase her next several words. Finally coming to a decision, she took a deep breath, "I couldn't help but notice at our earlier meeting that there was a certain tension existing between you and Commander Data..."

"Oh..." Commander Hobson remarked, his face a stony mask as his patrician voice carried a decidedly sarcastic edge, "Did your empathic senses inform you of this fact?"

"Remember..." Anara replied, her voice reflecting her irritation at her first officer's cutting remark as she firmly stood her ground, "I shared an empathic bond with you a while back. While our link wasn't very long or strong, I do know that it left you feeling very bitter and angry."

Exhaling, Chris took another sip of his scotch. His expression softening slightly, he reluctantly admitted, "True...Commander Data and I did not get along. At the time, I did not think he was suitable for command..."

"Because he's an android..." Anara prompted.

Nodding his head, Hobson confessed, "At the time that was what I sincerely believed. I guess that makes me something of a bigot..." Chris reluctantly confessed, "Maybe that's why I'm reacting the way I am to him, now..."

"I see...but I don't think you're a bigot." Anara remarked and then inquired, "The *Sutherland* was undergoing a refit at the time, wasn't it?" Taking the first officer's nod of the head as confirmation, Anara pressed on, "And you were in command during the refit...right?"

"Yes..." Chris replied and then, seeing where his operation's was heading with her line of inquiry, he quickly added, "Are you trying to say that..."

Placing her hand over that of Commander Hobson's, Anara interrupted in a calm, gentle voice, "I'm saying that you acted in a very understandable...and human...way." Taking a sip from her wine, she explained, "That was your ship and crew...you knew them...they knew you. Then...all of a sudden, you were...for no understandable reason...replaced by Captain Picard's second officer." Smiling gently, she remarked, "I think you felt...and still do feel...resentment at how you were treated."

Taking a sip from her glass, Anara pressed on, “But, Chris, we don’t have time for that now. There’s a young girl out there being horribly treated and four people trying to get her back.” Standing up as she made ready to leave, Anara concluded, “You and Commander Data need to find some middle ground. You know you don’t have to like each other to work together—but you do need to work together.”

As Alyssa stood her watch while her friends slept, she gazed out through the transparent aluminum window as the stars peeked in and out from behind the jagged asteroids. Taking advantage of the silence, the Japanese nurse took the time to reflect on how she had decided to be a nurse and go into Starfleet. She remembered her childhood...how she loved reading about all the different worlds and the wide variety of life in the galaxy. She smiled fondly as she recalled a childhood report that she gave on the Caitans that won her first prize at her elementary school. Then, one day, while outside playing, her friend, Tomiko, suddenly went into convulsions. The school nurse, arriving quickly on the scene, quickly took care of the young girl. She calmly put something in Tomiko’s mouth to keep her from choking or swallowing her tongue and then, taking out a hypospray, injected her friend. A few moments later, Tomiko was resting peacefully in the school infirmary and then, after a few days, was back in school, her doctors having cured her illness. That was when Alyssa decided that she wanted to be nurse.

It was as a nurse that Alyssa felt that she could best help others. She was the one who usually first saw the patient in need. It was her smile...her warmth...the little things like fluffing a pillow or smiling as a patient described her daughter or his wife...she saw...she felt...how much her patients appreciated that. And, truth be known, there was very little that a doctor could do that she couldn’t do as well—if not better. She was even capable...in emergency situations, naturally, of making diagnoses and performing elementary—and not so elementary—surgery. Often Dr. Crusher had implored Alyssa to go on to medical school for her MD and perhaps, Alyssa thought, one day she might well do that. But for right now, she was happy being a nurse and for her that was all that mattered.

The decision to enter Starfleet was also a natural for Alyssa. It allowed her to combine her two greatest dreams: to see the galaxy and to help others. She enjoyed her time at the Academy and she loved the *Enterprise*. She respected Captain Picard and Commander Riker, got along well with Geordi, Worf,

Counselor Troi and Mr. Data, and absolutely adored Dr. Crusher as a supervisor, a mentor, and a friend. In a way, a part of her seemed empty after the *Enterprise* had crashed on Viridian III. It was like watching as your home burned before your eyes. But, thankfully, casualties were light and her family and friends were safe; and, if the rumors she heard were true, there'd be a new *Enterprise* soon—one of the new *Sovereign* class ships, and she intended to be on it.

As Alyssa's eyes swept the dark runabout, the only illumination coming from the instrument panels, she couldn't help but note how much she missed the clean, well lit corridors of a working starship. It's not that she was naïve—far from it—the young nurse understood full well that there was a dark underside to life in—and especially outside—the Federation. But when faced with the very real possibility of ending up a brain conditioned whore in some Orion noble's harem or in a brothel somewhere, Alyssa, a cold chill running down her spine, had to admit to herself that, for one of the few times in her life, she was honestly frightened.

Her eyes taking on a steely determination as she recalled her good friend Sito Jaxa, the Japanese nurse banished all the doubts from her mind. She was a Starfleet officer and a damned good one, and she was a nurse and a damned good one of those too. Her friends here with her on the *Loire* were depending on her; and Jaxa, sitting in some Cardassian hellhole on Pullock V also needed her. And there was no way in the universe she was going to let any of them down. Stifling a yawn, Alyssa looked down on the instrument panel, her eyes instantly registering the blinking red light indicating that the prey they had been waiting for was now within range. "Wake up everyone!" She called out, her voice tinged with excitement, "It's time!"

Feeling a strange sensation, Data paused for a moment in front of the door to Commander Hobson's quarters. "So..." The android officer commented in a low voice, "...this must be nervousness. Most...uncomfortable." His finger hovering near the button that activated the door chime, he gave serious consideration as to whether it might be better for him to disengage his emotion chip. "No..." Data decided as he pressed the button, the door sliding open in response to Commander Hobson's command to enter, "... humans do not have that option, nor should I."

Looking up from the old style hardbound book he was reading at the time, Chris made no outward show of surprise as he recognized Data in the

entranceway. "What may I do for you, Commander?" He asked in his usual flat nasal tone as he regarded his bete noire now standing before him.

His eyes quickly scanning the first officer's private quarters, Data noticed how immaculately Hobson kept his quarters—the books shelved in a most organized manner, the replicated cherry wood coffee table in front of the couch polished and without a speck of dust. Even the large book on the coffee table sat precisely dead center and was as free of dust as the table it rested upon. Deducing from his prior dealings with the punctilious commander, the android quickly decided that the direct approach would work best here. "Commander...permission to speak freely?"

Remembering his conversation with Anara, Chris set his book down as he motioned for Data to take a seat on the couch. "By all means, Commander..." Hobson replied, his face maintaining its icy exterior, "Express yourself."

"Sir...I think we have what Counselor Troi would call a...personality...conflict." Data began, "One that we should resolve as soon as possible if we are to help our friends."

"Agreed, Commander Data." Chris acknowledged, his eyes boring into those of the android's. "Perhaps we do have some...issues...that we need to work out."

The rest of the *Loire's* crew rousing quickly, Alyssa vacated the pilot's seat to Sam. "The raider's started his attack run." Maria reported from the copilot's station as the converted courier lanced towards the bulky Cardassian freighter, blue-white beams of phaser energy slicing through the cargo ship's scanty shields as the speedy raider easily evaded the weak compression beams launched at it from the freighter. "Shields are down." Django stated, "That's our cue."

"Let's do it!" Lavelle exclaimed as he powered up the runabout, launching it on an intercept course with the disabled Cardassian vessel. "Standard Cardassian military freighter." Lavelle stated, "Crew numbers from twenty to fifty."

"Hell..." Maria interrupted, "I'm picking up mixed lifesigns in the one of the cargo holds."

"What type?" Commander Worf called out.

"Human...Vulcan...Bajoran...and others." Maria replied and then paused for a moment before inquiring, "Sam? Do you think that your friend might be one of them?"

"Maybe..." Sam replied, his heart skipping a beat, "But we can't be sure." Then, cursing as he recalled one of their new ally's side businesses, he spat out, "Damn! That must be the cargo Pierson wants!"

"Sam..." Alyssa asked in a hushed tone, "Pierson's not going to..."

Sighing dejectedly, Lavelle replied in a grim voice, "I don't know Alyssa...maybe..."

"We can't..." Alyssa declared, "I won't! We're Starfleet officers...we can't let him..."

"We will not allow Pierson to do that." Worf promised, a grim look on his face, "If we did, we would never regain our honor."

"Commander Worf's right, Alyssa." Sam said reassuringly. "We're not going to let Pierson do anything to hurt those people." Then, as the freighter grew larger in the viewscreen, he asked, "So...any ideas on how we're going to do this?"

"We'll be facing ten to one odds...assuming a crew of fifty." Maria mentioned thoughtfully. "We need to cut those odds down."

"Yes." Worf replied as he passed out satchels containing grenades and other supplies to the rest of the team. "These ships have three sections: command section forward, engine section aft, and modular cargo containers in the middle. That means we need to neutralize engineering and command." He advised, "We should split up into two teams. One team will beam on to the command section and move to secure the bridge while the other will do the same thing in engineering."

"What about the people in the cargo section?" Alyssa asked.

"They should be safe in the short term." Worf replied, carefully considering the question. "But we will need to move quickly to secure both command and engineering. Should the Cardassians feel that the battle has gone against

them, they will not hesitate to kill their prisoners.”

“Damn.” Maria gasped. “We better move fast then.”

“The team going after the bridge’ll have the rougher fight...” Sam conjectured.

“Then I shall lead that team.” Worf asserted, leaving no room for dissent.

“And the team going aft will need someone who’s had at least a little experience in operations or engineering...”

“Guess that’s me...” Ensign Django stated with a lopsided grin.

Nodding his head, Worf informed the young ensign, “You will be teamed with Nurse Ogawa...” On seeing the Brazilian woman nod her head, the Klingon officer declared,

“Good. Then our plan of attack is set.” Turning towards Sam, he asked, “How soon will we be in transporter range?”

“We’re there now.” Lavelle reported as the *Loire* closed on its target. “I’ve set the ship’s computer to pull back to the asteroid belt until we hail her.”

“What if Pierson’s people try to board her while we’re onboard the freighter?” Alyssa sagely asked.

“I’ve programmed in an autodefense routine and locked the *Loire*’s command functions.” Sam replied with a wicked grin. “And they’re going to stay locked until one of us unlocks it with this password...Deltan Love Orgy.”

Snickering, Maria punched Lavelle on the shoulder, “Leave it to you to pick a pornographic holodeck program for a password.” She then asked with a playful wink, “I wonder what Lt. Rysyl would think of that...”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” Sam quipped with a wink of his own.

“I’ll let you know how much my silence will cost you later...” Maria responded teasingly as the group reached the runabout’s small transporter pad.

Taking out a hypospray and filter masks, Alyssa explained as she injected everyone with the hypo, “This should counteract any known neural or blood toxins that the Cardassians might release into their atmosphere once we board. The filter masks should also take care of any gas agents such as

anesthizine gas, neurozine or anything nastier the Cardassians might use.”

“Good thinking, Lieutenant.” Worf acknowledged, visibly impressed as he adjusted the mouth and nose filter on his face. “Is everyone ready?” The Klingon asked as he and the others drew their phasers, setting them on heavy stun setting. Seeing that everyone was ready, Worf stated simply, “Energize.”

“Gul Tamar! We are being boarded!” Glin Keron called out, looking up in alarm as the console behind him, damaged from the Maquis’ attack, sparked.

“Where?” The gul inquired, gritting his teeth in anger.

“Forward and aft sections.” His glin clinically responded.

“Release neurozine gas and send all available crew to these choke points.” Tamar ordered, pointing out the positions on a schematic of the ship.

“At once.” Keron acknowledged as he relayed his captain’s orders. Breathing deeply, the glin then asked, “What of the special cargo?”

“Is their confinement field still in place?” The gul asked thoughtfully.

“Yes, Sir.” Keron replied as he saw the green light on his console.

“Good.” Tamar exclaimed. “For now, do nothing. It’s too valuable to jettison at the first threat. But...” he admonished, “...be ready to do so on my orders.”

Re-materializing in a corridor thick with yellow-green smoke, Sam silently thanked Alyssa for remembering both the injections and the filters. Taking out his tricorder, he commented, “Neurozine gas.”

Growling, Worf declared, “I’ll take point.”

Creeping slowly towards the door at the end of the passageway, The Klingon warrior advanced several meters and then, stopping, signaled for his teammate to join him. Approaching the door, each man took either side. Nodding his head in understanding as Worf raised three fingers in the air; Sam crouched low, aiming his phaser at the door with one hand as he readied

a small flash grenade with another. Lowering one finger, the former *Enterprise* security chief aimed his weapon at the door panel. Lowering the second finger, he and his companion each took a deep breath. Lowering the last finger, he fired at the panel, smiling in grim satisfaction as, with a jerky motion, the door began to slide open. Heaving the grenade through the opening in the door, both men quickly averted their eyes as the room inside filled with noise and light.

Shouting an ancient Klingon war cry, Worf burst into the room, firing quickly as his peripheral vision spotted a figure in motion next to a console. Hearing a yelp and then a thud, his lips turned up into a triumphant smirk as, crouching, he immediately searched for a new target.

A yellow energy beam just grazing him, Sam cursed as he returned fire. Quickly crouching towards the cover of what appeared to be a console station as Worf laid down withering covering fire, Sam spotted a Cardassian barely illuminated by the dim light of the console displays. Firing again, he nodded his head grimly as his opponent dropped to the deck. "Area secured."

Materializing in the aft section of the freighter, the women encountered the same yellow-green fog of neurozine gas that the men had faced. "Looks like they're ready for us." Maria remarked in a grim tone as she peered through the haze. Gritting her teeth, she turned towards her teammate, reluctantly praising "Good call, Ogawa. You were right about the gas."

"Thanks," Alyssa responded graciously as she pointed towards the sealed door at the end of the corridor. "But don't you think we better wait 'til later before we pat each other on the back?"

Her lips curling up in a sly grin, Maria whispered, "Cover me," as Nurse Ogawa, nodding her head in assent knelt, her eyes scanning the corridor while Ensign Django slowly proceeded towards the door, halting and crouching low after advancing about fifteen meters, motioning with her hand for her teammate to join her. "I'm going to have to jury-rig this door circuit to get it to open." She said as she pried open the panel next to the door, revealing the circuitry beneath. "The moment that door slides open, lay down fire and lay it down hot and hard—got it?" Django whispered, her voice taking on a hard edge as she delivered her instructions.

"Yeah...I understand." The Japanese woman responded as she crouched low.

Nodding her head, Maria completed the circuit, dodging quickly as the door slid open and Alyssa simultaneously opened fire, laying down a steady stream of phaser bolts. Hearing the satisfying thump of a body hitting the deck, Maria slipped into the room, her eyes quickly picking up the form of a Cardassian kneeling by a console, disruptor in hand. Her eyes registering a flash of light as her ears heard a high pitched scream coming from her own mouth as everything went dark.

On hearing Maria's anguished cry, Alyssa sprang into action. Jumping up out of her crouch, the *Enterprise* nurse, holding the firing button to her phaser down, zigzagged down the corridor, firing wildly as she did so. Bursting into the room, she saw the Cardassian lying on the deck with Maria lying a couple meters away. Rushing towards the dusky skinned woman, Nurse Ogawa, touching her fingers to the ensign's neck, sighed with relief as she picked up a steady pulse. Moving quickly, she took out her hypo and, placing the end on Maria's neck, activated it nodding her head as the tell tale hiss indicated that the chemicals had been injected into the injured woman's system.

Taking out her medical tricorder, Alyssa ran it over the groggy ensign. "Take it easy..." the Japanese nurse said in a low voice, "You've been grazed by a disruptor beam. I've injected you with triptacoderine for the pain and I'm about to inject you with a couple of cc's of kelotane. That'll help with the burn..." Taking out her dermal regenerator, Alyssa explained as she ran it over Maria's wound, "...and so will this."

"Thanks," Django said weakly as Nurse Ogawa helped her sit up against a console. "What about the Cardies?"

"Oh...don't worry about them..." Alyssa replied with a wicked smile. "I injected them with enough anetrizine to knock them out until next week."

"Great." Maria answered back, managing a grin of her own. "Now..." She said as she tried to get up, only to stumble, "...can you give me a hand up."

"Not so fast..." Alyssa cautioned as she gently, but firmly, guided the impulsive young ensign back to a sitting position. "It's going to take a bit of time for the meds to kick in. Sit back for now, I'll take a look around here." Getting up, Nurse Ogawa examined the console shaking her head, "I wish I understood Cardassian..." She said ruefully.

"Here." Maria weakly replied as she handed her teammate her tricorder.

“Scan the panel with this. It’ll give you a translation.”

As Alyssa ran the tricorder over the Cardassian panel she flashed a triumphant grin. “It’s an environmental control panel.” Then, cursing under her breath she added, “But it appears to be locked out.”

“That’s ok...” Maria answered back. “While we probably won’t be able to bypass all the lockouts, I think we might just be able to fiddle with the temperature controls. We knock the temperature down enough; we can make it more uncomfortable for the Cardies than for us.” She said as the sweat rolled down her forehead, stinging her eyes.

“I can go with that.” Alyssa rejoined as she wiped the sweat from her brow. “So, what do I have to do?”

“The intruders have broken through sections one and four!” Glin Keron called out as he looked up from his console, a note of alarm in his voice.

“Bring the emergency protocols on line.” Gul Tamar responded, ordering his executive officer to call up the subroutine that would eject the contents of the ship’s cargo holds into space.

“At once, Sir.” The glin replied in a grim voice as his hands pressed the necessary buttons on his console. Moments later, he reported, his finger hovering over a flashing red button, “Program online.”

“This appears to be a security monitoring area.” Worf stated, his lips turning up into a slight grin underneath his filter mask.

“Great!” Lavelle exclaimed. “Hopefully...we can use this station to cut the bridge off from the rest of the ship...”

Investigating one of the consoles, the former security chief shook his head, “QI’yaH!” Worf cursed. “I’ve found the Qovpath console, but it has been locked out...”

“Damn!” Sam swore. “We need to get it online. It probably won’t be long until that gul sitting up there on the bridge decides that its time to cut his losses by spacing his cargo.”

"I agree." Worf said as his hands flew over the console. Shaking his head in disgust, the Klingon officer growled, "QI'yaH! Nothing."

"Maybe one of these guys might help us?" Sam suggested, pointing at the Cardassians lying unconscious on the floor.

Nodding his head abruptly, Worf quickly spotted an individual wearing officer's insignia amongst the prisoners. "This one will do." The Klingon as he yanked the Cardassian to his feet, roughly shaking him into consciousness. Holding his mek'leth to the hapless prisoner's throat, he growled in a low, menacing tone, "You will unlock this console, Pet'aQ and you will do it now or I will slit your worthless throat just as I would that of a targ."

"I'd do what my friend says." Sam added in gentler tone, playing 'good cop' to Worf's 'bad cop.' "There are a lot of innocent people in that cargo hold...including maybe a friend of ours...and it would make Mr. Worf...and me too...**very** angry if something were to happen to them."

"All right!" The Cardassian cried out between deep sighs. "I'll do it." Recovering something of his equilibrium, the young subaltern tried vainly to shake himself free of the Klingon's hold. "You don't have to force me either." Taking a deep breath as Worf released him from his grasp, the officer explained as he pressed the necessary buttons to unlock the console. "Not all of us here agree with what Gul Tamar is doing. Some of us..." he declared, holding his head high, his pride evident in his eyes, "...are still Cardassians of honor."

"Then why are you here...on this ship?" Lavelle challenged as Worf snorted his derision at the subaltern's words.

"Because we are soldiers and Cardassians follow orders and I was ordered to serve here." The young officer said simply as he coded in the final sequence. Stepping back, he announced, "It is done. You now have access. I've cut off the gas as you have ordered and have called up the emergency ejection routine and I've also downloaded the ship's command codes."

"Excellent." Worf replied as the karate chop he delivered to the back of the Cardassian's neck rendered him once again into a state of unconsciousness.

"What did you do that for?" Sam asked, "He was cooperating with us and we might still need him."

"No..." Worf answered back, "...we don't." He then explained, "I am familiar with this model Cardassian security console, and I am not completely...assured...of his...change of heart. In any event..." The Klingon added, "...it would be better for him this way...he can claim that he was taken prisoner along with the others, giving him some cover."

"Well...that ought to cool things down some..." Alyssa quipped with a wry grin as she knelt down next to Ensign Django.

"How cold will it get?" Maria asked as she felt the temperature begin to drop, along with the humidity.

"It should get down to around ten degrees Celsius—maybe cooler." Alyssa replied and then, injecting the ensign with another hypospray, explained, "Stimulant...it'll help with the cold." Taking out her medical tricorder she passed it over Django's wound. "It's healing nicely." Rising to her feet, the Japanese nurse offered her hand to Maria, "Here...you should be able to move about ok now."

"Great." Maria responded as she stood up. Grasping her phaser in her hand, she turned to Alyssa, her expression revealing a new found respect for the nurse. "Ready to get back to work?"

"The intruders must have taken over life support!" Glin Keron reported as the temperature on the bridge grew noticeably cooler.

His teeth grinding in anger, Gul Tamar ordered, "Eject the cargo. Should our intruders prevail, then their victory will taste of ashes."

"Yes, Sir." Keron acknowledged as he reluctantly pressed the button.

"Pet'aQs..." Worf swore. "They must have activated the routine from the bridge." He declared as the light on his console changed from green to yellow.

"How much time do we have to override it?" Sam asked.

"Not much." Worf replied as his fingers flew over the console.

"Gul Tamar!" Keron cried out, "The signal is being overridden. The intruders must have gained control over an unlocked security console."

"That or one of our officers is a traitor." Tamar spat out and then ordered, "Lock them out!"

"They're trying to bypass the console." Worf growled as he countered the Cardassian executive officer's moves. Smiling, the Klingon shouted a victory cry. "It's done. They're locked out."

"I can't!" Keron replied. "They've overridden our command codes." Shaking his head ruefully, the Cardassian reluctantly reported. "The intruders have gained control over most of our security protocols." Sighing, he added, "Someone on the crew must have helped them...there's no other way they could have done it this quickly."

"Of course there's a traitor!" Tamar all but shouted, "What did I tell you?" Taking several deep breaths to calm down, the gul then announced, "They will be coming here soon. We should prepare to resist them."

"I guess we're going to have to do this the hard way then." Sam concluded with a grimace as he made his way towards the sliding door on the other side of the room. Taking position at the side of the door and crouching low as he readied his phaser, he said, "Ready when you are Mr. Worf."

Nodding his head, the burly Klingon exclaimed, "Now!"

As the door slid open, Sam sighed with relief as no hostile fire was received. Taking the point, he crept down the corridor until he heard a scraping sound coming from where the passageway ended in a T-junction. Holding his hand up, he stealthily backtracked to Worf's position. "Company on the other side," he whispered and then spotting what appeared to be an access panel on one of the corridor walls, smiled. "Help me get this off, if this leads to what I think it does, we might be able to bypass our reception committee."

"An excellent idea." Worf smiled back as the strong warrior easily tore off the

access hatch, revealing a narrow crawlspace. Moving to one side so that his smaller teammate could take the lead, both men entered the conduit, crawling slowly down the constricted space until they reached a grated access panel. Looking through the narrow grating, Sam spotted two pairs of Cardassian boots standing in front of the grate. Freezing in position, the two men remained absolutely motionless for what seemed an eternity as a minor itch on Sam's foot slowly turned into first an irritant and then, at last, into a full blown pain as the Canadian helmsman remained frozen, not daring to move even an inch.

The Cardassians finally moving away from the panel, Sam risked a silent exhale as he signaled his Klingon companion. Seeing Worf's confirming nod, Lavelle pushed against the panel, knocking it down to the deck with a loud ringing sound. Moving quickly, Sam launched himself out of the conduit, firing his phaser as he did so. Taking the Cardassians by surprise, he downed the first of the guards before the Cardassian could even draw his weapon.

The other Cardassian, however, had his disruptor trained on the young officer. His lips turned up into a smug grin, the Cardassian's finger tightened on his trigger as Sam drew up his phaser in what he knew was a futile gesture. However, before the Cardassian could fire his weapon, Sam was momentarily blinded by a flash of light as he heard a loud thump hit the deck. Clearing the spots from his eyes, Lavelle saw Worf halfway out of the conduit, phaser in hand, the Cardassian lying stunned on the deck near him.

"Thanks, sir." Sam said simply as the two men, taking out their hyposprays, injected the two stunned figures lying on the deck.

"Don't mention it." Worf replied with a feral grin, "It was my pleasure." Taking a moment to get his bearings, the Klingon stated, pointing down the corridor, "This should take us to the bridge."

"Brrrr..." Sam shivered as he and Worf drew closer to the freighter's bridge. "It's gotten cold here quick."

"I know..." Worf responded with a frown. "It is most...uncomfortable."

Knowing that Klingons had a much lower tolerance to the cold than humans, Sam said with a note of sympathy in his voice, "Must be the girls...they probably figured that it would hurt the Cardassians more than us."

"It was a good tactic." Worf noted approvingly, "I can endure the cold far

better than any Cardassian Pet'aQ." Then, motioning for his human comrade to hold his position, the Klingon warrior said as he pointed at the sliding door facing them. "We have reached our goal. Do you have the charges?"

"Yeah..." Lavelle replied with a fat grin as he produced a small package. "This should be enough to crack the door."

"Good." Worf answered back with a grin as he produced a stun grenade from his satchel. "Then let us begin."

As the two women approached a large double door, Maria, shivering from the cold, remarked, "Well...this is it." Taking out a similar package to the one that Sam had taken out, Ensign Django slapped it against the door. Nodding her head to her Japanese teammate who had withdrawn a safe distance back, Maria set the timer to the detonator. Rushing back to her teammate, she grinned as she crouched down low, "Party time!"

As the timer on both explosive charges neared zero, the grim expressions and clenched teeth on the faces of each of the strike teams spoke volumes. The charges detonating, forcing open the doors, both teams sprung into action.

Tossing his stun grenade on to the bridge as his Klingon companion let out a blood curdling roar, Sam rushed on to the bridge. A disruptor bolt barely missing him, Lavelle dived and rolled, snap firing his own weapon towards the source of the discharge. Hearing a satisfying thump, the Canadian helmsman quickly made for cover as Worf burst on to the bridge, mek'leth in hand.

Spying a Cardassian drawing a bead on Lavelle, the Klingon, calling out a guttural war cry, struck first, his mek'leth digging into his opponent's side. Withdrawing the blade, Worf's eyes cast about for a new target as Sam began to efficiently lay down covering fire.

As the door to engineering blew open, the two women also sprung into action, simultaneously tossing their stun grenades into the room. Bursting into engineering, the women were greeted with the sight of all but one of the Cardassians lying either slumped at the consoles or on the deck. As they trained their phasers on the sole standing engineer, he sullenly raised his

hands, "I surrender."

Glaring at the human and Klingon who had so brutally burst on to his bridge, Gul Tamar reluctantly dropped his disruptor as he raised his hands in a gesture of defiant surrender. "One day you Maquis pirates will pay for your outrages," his eyes involuntarily focusing on the sight of the mek'leth the savage Klingon was currently holding in his hand, still dripping with the blood of members of his crew.

Activating his comm badge, Lavelle announced with a satisfied grin, "Bridge team to Engineering team...objective achieved."

His smile widened as he heard Maria's answering voice, "Engineering team to Bridge...mission accomplished here too."

Speaking up, Worf then ordered, "Ensign Django...Nurse Ogawa...once you secure your prisoners, move on to the cargo section."

"Aye, Sir." The Japanese nurse responded.

Before terminating the communication, Worf cautioned. "Be careful...there might still be Cardassians unaccounted for."

"Understood." Alyssa acknowledged as her eyes fell upon the unconscious Cardassians. "I've given them enough anesthizine to knock them out for hours. More than enough time for us to get to the prisoners and back."

"Let's go then." Maria responded, "The sooner we get this over with...the better."

Approaching the executive officer's station, Lavelle attempted to call up the ship's manifest. Unsuccessful in his efforts, the young helmsman turned towards Gul Tamar, a grimace on his face. "I want the names of the prisoners you're transporting," Sam demanded as Worf tightened his grip on the Cardassian's throat. "You better tell me..." Lavelle encouraged, his voice taking on a low, threatening tone. "You might be carrying a friend of ours and my friend isn't exactly known for his patience." His face darkening, Sam added menacingly, "And I'm not the most tolerant person in the galaxy right now either."

"No." The Gul sneered, refusing to be intimidated by either the human's threats or by the large Klingon's hand squeezing his throat. "You have your prize...for whatever good it will do you."

Growling in frustration, Worf fought back the almost irresistible temptation to twist the smug Cardassian's neck.

"He's not worth it, Sir." Sam asserted in response to the gul's smug statement of defiance. "The girls will be there soon and we'll get everything we need to know from them."

"You are correct, Mr. Lavelle." Worf acknowledged with a growl as he delivered an uppercut to the gul's jaw, knocking him immediately into unconsciousness.

"Well...that takes care of him, but I think I've got a better way of knocking out the others." Sam quipped as his eyes took in the sullen forms of Glin Keron and the two surviving bridge crew members. Taking out a hypospray from his satchel, he placed the end of the hypo on the Glin's neck, "Shall I do the honors, sir?"

"Feel free..." The Klingon grinned as the hiss of the hypospray was soon followed by Keron and the others slumping down to the deck.

Addressing his Klingon companion, Sam observed, "Sir? It'll probably take too long to get this tub operational again. The longer we stay here, the more we risk a Cardassian or Klingon ship tumbling on to us. Also..." He added, his voice now edged with concern, "...we need to come up with something if Pierson's planning either to do something to the prisoners and/or double cross us."

"A good point, Mr. Lavelle." Worf responded, concurring with the Canadian officer's point. "Do you have a suggestion?"

"Yes, Sir." Sam replied with a grin. "I'll call the *Loire* over here. Then I can beam on board and use the runabout's transporter to move our prisoners to an empty cargo area where we can keep them secured. Also, we can use the *Loire* to tractor the freighter to the rendezvous point. We'll have to travel at reduced warp so it'll take a while for us to get there. That'll give us enough time to think up something should Pierson turn out to be a snake."

"And if he does keep to his word..." Worf finished, "Then he'll be able to get

the freighter repaired.”

“Right...” Sam confirmed, his lips turning up into a grin as he activated his comm badge. “Lavelle to *Loire*...Lavelle Alpha-Tango 3...Deltan Love Orgy...release command functions.”

“Command functions released...” The runabout computer responded, its feminine voice coming through on Sam’s comm badge.

Spotting the *Loire* growing larger in the viewscreen, Worf advised, “Mr. Lavelle...the runabout has arrived. Beam on board and carry out your plan. I will be with Nurse Ogawa and Ensign Django in the cargo section.”

“So far...so good.” Alyssa remarked as her and Ensign Django entered the freighter’s cargo section. “No Cardassians.” A note of worry creeping into her voice, she voiced, “I wonder why? Didn’t Sam say these ships had a crew of fifty?”

“Twenty to fifty.” Maria corrected. “And this ship might not even have twenty. Don’t forget, the Cardies are up to their neck bones in Klingons out here. They’re probably pulling everyone they can for service on their warships. The ones who get assigned to these ships are losers, boobs, and people who’ve pissed off the wrong people.”

“I see...” Alyssa replied as the pair approached a sealed door. Taking out her tricorder, Nurse Ogawa nodded her head. “They’re behind the door.” She said softly. “Six of them...no Cardassians...” She added a note of relief in her voice.

“Okay...” Maria said as she opened a side panel next to the door. “Give me a moment to jury rig this door.” Then, as the door slid open, Django turned towards her companion flashing a smug smile, “Am I good or what?”

Entering the dark cargo hold, Maria and Alyssa swept the room with their flash-beams, stopping as Ensign Django picked up on movement in the corner. The two beams converging, both women’s teeth clenched as they saw the figures of six women wearing nothing more than dirty shifts, huddled against a wall, a sixth figure turning her head away from the bright lights as she held a teenage girl close to her.

"Who are you?" The woman asked, her voice tired, yet still with a measure of defiance. "Your not spoonheads. Did Lynn send you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Ogawa..." Alyssa replied, "...and this is Ensign Django. I'm a nurse." She stated as she slowly approached the women.

Her voice tinged with both doubt and caution, the woman repeated her earlier question. "Did Lynn send you?"

"You mean Lynn Pierson?" Maria asked.

"Yeah." The woman replied.

"Don't worry." Alyssa smiled reassuringly as she slowly took out her medical tricorder and a hypo. "We won't let him hurt you."

Laughing weakly, the woman quipped as Alyssa ran the tricorder over her body. "I'm not worried about Lynn." Seeing the quizzical look on her two rescuers' faces, she explained, "Lynn might be a liar, a cheat, and a son of a bitch, but he'd never do anything to hurt me or Ellen over here..." She said as she smoothed the teenage girl's blonde hair, "...and he won't hurt those other girls either."

"Why are you so sure about that?" Maria asked curious as Alyssa, nodding her head in apparent satisfaction at the condition of the two women, went on to the others.

Smiling weakly, she replied with a faint grin, "Because he's my ex-husband and Ellen's father."

Arriving at the rendezvous point, Sam Lavelle shook his head in disbelief at the impromptu family reunion he and his companions witnessed as Pierson, his ex-wife, and teenage daughter were reunited. After kissing his daughter and exchanging good natured, yet acidic barbs with each other, Pierson and his ex turned their attention to the rescue party.

"I'm sorry your friend wasn't with us." Pierson's ex-wife, named Miriam, said in a consoling voice.

One of the other women, an Orion, then chimed in. "I'd heard of her though."

Shaking her head sadly, she explained, "Rejak took a special interest in her..."

"What do you mean 'special interest'?" Lavelle inquired.

"From what I heard..." Miriam interjected, "...she held out for a long time...a very long time...before she finally broke."

"Yeah..." One of the other women, a human, spoke up. "I heard the same thing. It made Rejak angry at first...he doesn't like it when you resist him...he takes it very personal."

Wincing at painful memories, Miriam nodded her head sadly, "Bethany's telling you the truth. Rejak has a big ego and doesn't like being defied. At the same he loves a challenge. From what I heard from some of the others being held there, your friend was especially strong. You see...Rejak..." Miriam sobbed as Pierson placed an arm protectively around his ex-wife, "...takes special pleasure in breaking people like her."

"Damn." Maria swore softly as one of Pierson's lieutenants gently led Miriam and the other women away.

"I want to thank you for what you've done." Pierson stated with genuine gratitude. "You guys kept your end of the deal and I'll keep mine. My people should have this tub fixed and ready to go within twenty-four standard hours. We've changed its identity codes and inputted some phony identities for you in the log and manifest. I've given you and Mr. Worf identities as members of the Orion Syndicate. I'd strongly suggest that you don't let the Syndicate know that—they take a really dim view of people posing as them."

"What about Alyssa and me?" Maria asked, already anticipating...and dreading...the answer.

A grim look on his face, Pierson responded, "You...my dear...and your friend...are the cargo."

"What?" Alyssa interjected in an outraged tone.

"Think about it, sweetie." Pierson answered back. "To get to your friend, you're going to have to get into Rejak's compound where he keeps his prisoners. Now, there's no way you can get in there...and out...with phasers blazing." Pausing for a moment to let that fact sink in, Pierson then continued to outline his scheme. Thanks to that Cardie gul you brought back with

you...and an old Klingon mind sifter I just happen to possess...I've found out that Rejak is planning a slave auction next week. This will provide the perfect cover for you to infiltrate his compound." His eyes especially hard, the defrocked Starfleet officer warned, "That'll get you into the joint. How you get out is up to you...in any event...it won't be easy."

"His plan is a sound one." Worf remarked sagely as he looked into the eyes of both women. "But, as he said, it is not without risk—and most of the risk will fall upon you." A grave look on his face, he stated, "The decision on whether to proceed further or not will lie with you. You both have already proven your honor time and again on this mission. Mr. Lavelle and I will respect whatever choice you make."

"There's no other way we can do it?" Django asked, addressing her question to Sam.

"I don't think so." Sam replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

Turning around, she and Alyssa both looked at each other for several moments. Nodding their heads once, both women turned their attention back to Sam and Worf. "All right..." Maria said in an unusually soft voice, "We'll do it."

As the *Sutherland* continued on its patrol route on the Federation-Cardassian border near Pullock V, Captain Shelby sat at her desk, cursing as she eyed the stack of padds on top of the desk awaiting her attention. Breathing a sigh of relief at the sound of the door chime, she called out an enthusiastic, "Enter!"

Smiling broadly as Commanders Hobson and Data approached, Liz gestured with her hand for the two officers to be seated. "So...I take it you've come up with a plan?"

"Yes, Captain." Hobson replied, "But there is an element of risk and it will require both Commander Data and I working together to carry it out."

"Very well..." Liz responded as she leaned forward in her chair, "Tell me all about it."

"Ah...my pet..." Gul Rejak smirked approvingly as Sito Jaxa shuffled into his

quarters, her eyes meekly downcast.

"Yes, Master..." Sito replied in a quiet submissive tone as an uncontrollable shiver ran up and down her spine, causing her head to jerk up momentarily, her body breaking out into a cold sweat.

Chuckling at his slave's trembling, Rejak soothed, "Ah...you thought I forgot, my dear." Approaching the young Bajoran, the Cardassian gul held out a small vial with the greenish liquor that contained Corellan acid. "But I didn't." He said as he placed the vial in Sito's hands, his laughter growing louder as she quickly gulped down the contents. "You know I reward those who do well and you...my pet...have done well indeed." Rejak preened, taking pride in his subjugation of the Starfleet captive standing before him. "Yes..." He decided, "I think you are ready now."

"Ready for what, Master?" Sito asked as the powerful narcotic took control of her body, mind and soul, its euphoric and aphrodisiac qualities lending a sultry quality to her voice as the drug took hold, its hallucinogenic qualities now presenting her psyche with an image of Sam instead of that of her Cardassian owner. Her body responding as her face grew flush, she smiled as she spoke in a husky tone, "You know I'll do...anything...you want. Anything you desire..."

"I know..." Rejak leered, "And you will...soon." He stated in a condescending tone before announcing, "But I also have a special surprise for you." Grinning, he explained, "Soon, you will belong to a new master."

"Why, Master?" Sito cried out, her voice now tinged with despair, "Have I displeased you? Please...give me another chance" She begged, her eyes wet with tears as she slipped out of her gown, "I promise I won't disappoint you."

"Of course you won't!" Rejak laughed, "But it will soon be time for you to go and please someone else as you have pleased me." His laughter vanishing, he looked down on his slave. "Please him as you have me and I shall be very happy..."

"Yes, Master..." Sito replied submissively as Rejak took her hand, guiding her to his bed while in a tiny space in Sito Jaxa's consciousness that part of her that still remained unconquered looked on sadly. Powerless, unable to control her body from inside the mental prison that had been created by all the mental and physical tortures that had been inflicted upon her as well as the powerful drug that she had become addicted to, she could do nothing

more than watch in despair as her body, acting under the influence of the Corillan acid, tingled at the touch of her Cardassian rapist, responding hungrily to his touches and kisses with caresses and kisses of her own. As her body lost itself, what remained of Sito Jaxa cried.

Watching through the main viewscreen as the confiscated freighter, *Pursuit of Commerce*, took position just off the *Sutherland's* port nacelle, Captain Shelby addressed the two officers standing next to her. "This plan of yours better work..." Liz cautioned Commanders Data and Hobson, "I owe Captain Sisko big time for pulling strings with Admiral Glover to get that Ferengi ship released.

"It should work, Captain." Hobson asserted.

"I concur." Data interjected. "While the chance for failure always exists, we...thanks to the help of Mistery Varok and Tol...have reduced the odds of failure to less than five percent."

"The *Pursuit's* engines and structural integrity fields were already highly tuned." Hobson stated, his voice betraying just the slightest irritation at being interrupted by the android officer, "So it should be able to handle the speeds and evasive maneuvers that might be required by our plan..."

"And its identity as a Ferengi vessel..." Commander Data added, a small portion of his positronic brain clinically taking notice at how...satisfied...he felt at his interruption causing discomfiture to the punctilious Hobson, "...should provide Starfleet and the Federation the plausible deniability that Admiral Glover insists upon."

"And if you're boarded?" Liz inquired.

Answering promptly before the android officer could formulate a reply, the *Sutherland's* first officer said, "Remember Captain, the *Pursuit* was outfitted for smuggling contraband as well as legitimate cargo. We can make use of the holographic emitters as well as a variety of other hiding places and surprises that its former owner had equipped it with."

"All right..." Liz exclaimed, "You and Commander Data have got the green light. You can go. I believe Mr. Tol and Lieutenant Rysyl should be finishing their work of the *Pursuit's* systems by now."

"Aye, Sir." Commander Hobson acknowledged as he and Data left the bridge. Avoiding eye contact with each other as they walked down the corridor towards the transporter room, the tension between the two rival officers was palpable until Commander Data, seeking to ease that stress, paused for a moment. "Commander..." The android began as the *Sutherland's* first officer turned in his direction, the steel gray eyes of the human boring into those of his rival. "I would like to thank you for your assistance. I do not believe that this plan could work without your participation."

His mask momentarily slipping, Hobson replied in a strained voice that revealed the surging tensions beneath. "Let me make this clear to you, Commander Data." He stated, his face now the still mask that he usually presented to the outside world. "This plan gives us the best chance of success should our intervention be necessary. I did not agree to it in order to ease any...feelings...between the two of us. Our relationship is totally irrelevant to the matter at hand. The only thing I am interested in here is the successful return of Ensign Sito and our people...do you understand me, Commander?"

Pausing for a moment as his emotion chip processed the wildly surging and conflicting emotions of anger, sadness, and embarrassment that his failed effort at reconciliation brought about, Data simply nodded his head. "Understood." He stated softly, a note of regret in his voice. "I will not bring up the subject any further."

"Good." Chris declared as the pair reached the transporter room. "I believe they are waiting for us on the freighter."

Flashing a smug grin as he stood up, Rejak regarded his Bajoran slave lying on the bed looking up at him, her eyes dimmed with the effects of the drug to which she had become addicted. Adjusting his cuirass, the Cardassian gul, noticing the flashing light on his desk, spoke into his comm device. "What is it Ferar?"

"Your...appointment...has arrived, Sir." A disembodied voice replied in a deferential tone.

"Understood." Rejak replied, his lips turning down into a frown. Looking down on his slave, the Cardassian commanded, "Get dressed and return to your quarters, my pet. I will send for you when it is time."

"Yes, Master." Sito acknowledged in a dull voice as she listlessly complied with her owner's instructions. Exhaling heavily, Rejak finished dressing silently, all his energy and thoughts now concentrated on the coming meeting.

Returning to her sparsely furnished quarters, Sito Jaxa dragged herself to her cot. Her head bowed, the tormented young woman sobbed as her hand clenched the empty vial in her hand.

"Have we fallen so far?" Looking up, Sito saw herself standing before her, wearing her gold and black uniform.

"Go away." Sito weakly replied. "You're not real."

"How do you know?" The phantom replied, her lips turned up into an ironic half grin. *"How could you even tell?"* *Maybe you're the ghost..."* The apparition stated a grim look on her face, *"You behave as if you're little more than one."*

"Who are you to judge me!" Sito cried out throwing the now empty vial at her spectral tormentor, shattering it as it struck wall.

"I'm the best person to judge you..." The ghost responded as Sito's anguished cry died down into uncontrollable whimpers. *"I'm you...I'm the part of you that's still alive..."* She declared, her voice gentle now as she promised, *"...and I'm not going to leave you."*

Rising from his desk as his guest entered his office, Gul Rejak smiled his winningest grin, "Greetings Sire Davni..." He formally intoned, bowing slightly to the ornately dressed Orion merchant prince striding into the prefect's headquarters. "I am honored that you chose to come personally."

"I was curious..." The heavysset Orion said with just the slightest hint of danger in his otherwise honeyed voice as he sat down opposite the Cardassian, the prefect's large desk between them, "...as to what you've been doing here with my latinum."

"I'll be glad to show you." The Cardassian responded as an orderly entered bearing a tray with a bottle and two glasses. As the servant set the tray down

on the desk and poured an amber liquid into each of the goblets, Rejak handed a data padd to the Orion. "If you'll take a look at that..." he directed, "...you'll see exactly what your latinum has bought."

"Hmmm..." Davni vocalized, carefully perusing the data on the padd as he stroked his chin. "I must admit you have done well. Gunrunning...slaves...smuggling...all provide lucrative revenues. However, what I find most interesting is how you are able to corner the market in sale and distribution of Corillan acid." His lips turning up into a sly grin, the merchantman said, "I'm curious as to how you were able to accomplish that. This drug was unheard of until you introduced it." Pausing for a moment as he gave his associate an appraising look, the Orion probed, "Where did you find it? Or did you have it biogenically engineered?" Laughing now, he admitted, "Our scientists attempted to analyze it, of course, but while we were able to ascertain most of its contents, there were certain elements that were...beyond...our ability to synthesize."

"I'm sorry..." Rejak replied with a wily grin of his own, "But as a businessman surely you understand the need to maintain trade secrets."

"Of course." Davni conceded with a laugh as he took a sip from his goblet. "As long as I and my associates receive our percentage, how you do business is your own concern."

"Excellent." Rejak exclaimed as he stood up, signaling the ending of the meeting. "My aide will show you to your quarters and I will see that you are appropriately...entertained tonight." Pausing for a moment as he refreshed his goblet, the Cardassian further tempted, "I think you'll like her. She was something of a personal...project of mine, but I've since grown bored with her and so will be putting her up at the upcoming auction. If she pleases you, perhaps you might consider placing a bid on her..."

"We'll see..." The merchant responded noncommittally. "While I'm always on the look out for a new addition to my harem, she would have to be pretty special to top my Thressa."

"I'm sure you'll be pleased." Rejak stated confidently as he showed his guest out of his office, "Until later."

Rematerializing alongside Commander Data on the bridge of the Ferengi

freighter, Commander Hobson allowed a slight smile to cross his face as he saw Lieutenant Rysyl bent over a console. Straightening up as she recognized the *Sutherland's* first officer, the Deltan operations officer smiled back, "Commanders..." She greeted in her lyrical accent. "I'm just about completed here and Mr. Tol and his people have just finished in the engine room." Pausing for a moment to take a breath, Anara completed her report. "He should be up here shortly."

"Thank you Lieutenant." Chris responded, his patrician voice revealing just the faintest note of fondness as he addressed the Deltan.

Approaching the console, Data carefully examined the instruments, nodding his head in satisfaction at the work. "You have done excellent work, Lieutenant Rysyl." The android officer remarked, offering genuine praise.

"Thank you, Sir." Anara responded, pleased at the *Enterprise-D* officer's recognition. Making her way towards the helm, she addressed the first officer. "And Commander Hobson, we were able to reconfigure the helm as you requested.

"Very good." Chris replied as he took the helmsman's seat, his hands and eyes carefully evaluating the Ferengi controls. "Yes...this should do nicely..." He remarked as his lips once again turned up in a slender grin.

"As sensitive as a Risan girl's..." Turning about at the sound of his chief engineer's voice, Chris barely repressed a smirk at the yelp of pain that came out instead of the word his friend had intended.

"Sorry, Sir..." Ensign Barrows apologized, barely repressing a grin. "My elbow must have slipped."

"I'm sure..." Tol rejoined, wincing slightly as his hand went to his side. Approaching the helm and navigational console, the Trill addressed the two commanders. "The two of you will be able to control all the ship's operations from here." The crooked grin he normally wore returning to his face, he explained, "I didn't have to do too much in the way of juicing up these engines—the previous owner had them pretty well tuned to begin with—which makes a lot of sense seeing as he was into smuggling and gunrunning."

Looking down at the controls, Data noticed a flashing green light. "What is that for?" The android inquired.

"I'm glad you asked..." Tol quipped with an evil chuckle. "It's a little fail safe I came up with if you two should find yourselves backed up against the wall with no way out." Handing both Hobson and Data a small device with a recessed button only slightly larger than a comm badge, he explained, "It's set to a transponder frequency emitted by these two devices you're holding in your hands and will only respond to commands coming in on that frequency. Press that little button on either of your devices once, and it sets in motion a matter-antimatter cascade effect in the engines that will blow this ship into the next galaxy within five minutes unless you press the deactivation sequence." He then pushed the button once quickly, then two long presses, and then two short ones. "Remember that sequence." The Trill warned all traces of humor gone from his voice. "You get one do-over if you screw it up. Mess that one up and the reaction immediately goes critical." Nodding his head as he saw that both officers understood his instructions, Tol further admonished, "Also, the reaction goes critical if you don't punch in the deactivation sequence before the last thirty seconds of the countdown."

"Understood." Hobson acknowledged as took the hand his friend had extended, shaking it.

"Good luck, you two." Jadon remarked as the rest of the *Sutherland* work crew joined him.

"Take care of yourself, Commanders..." Anara added, her gentle smile burning itself into Hobson's memory as she, Jadon, and the rest of their crew dematerialized.

The two officers taking their station at the helm, Chris touched his comm badge. "Hobson to *Sutherland*...request permission to depart.

A voice Chris immediately recognized as Captain Shelby's replied, "*Sutherland* to Hobson...permission granted. Good hunting and good luck."

Hearing the sound of the door sliding open, Commander Sela turned away from the view of Pollock V that she had been admiring from the transparent aluminum window of her cloaked vessel. "Ah...Sublieutenant..." She smiled as she recognized the figure approaching her, the Vulcan that Sito Jaxa had once known as Taurik. "I have a very special mission for you...one that I think you will want to go on..." As she outlined her plan, the blonde Commander noted with satisfaction the young defector's growing enthusiasm for the rather

special role she had planned for him. On completing her briefing, Sela's deep blue eyes fixed on those of the sublieutenant's, "Do you understand the mission?"

"Yes, Commander," Taurik immediately replied; his Vulcan training keeping his growing enthusiasm in check.

Chuckling, Sela gently admonished, "Relax Sublieutenant...it is permitted to smile here. Amongst us you are no longer bound by the rigid teachings of Surak. Feel free to explore that emotional and passionate part of your soul. You might find it...liberating."

"I shall...endeavor to do so." Taurik solemnly promised as his commander's laughter grew.

"Very good Sublieutenant," She responded with a rare twinkle in her eyes. "Dismissed."

As the youthful defector disappeared behind the closing door, another figure emerged from the shadows. "Are you sure we can trust him, Commander?"

"To accomplish this mission, Kobar...yes...I believe we can." Sela replied as she took a goblet of kali-fal from the Romulan officer wearing the uniform and rank insignia of a Tal'Shiar major. Inhaling the heady aroma, Sela explained, "Of course I don't believe his 'defection' is real. However, if we wish to convince our Vulcan brothers and sisters that our appeals are genuine, then we have to at least appear to accept him. By giving him this mission, we accomplish the goal of convincing him that he is being accepted while at the same time not compromising our security."

"I hope you are correct about that." Major Kobar interjected as he took a small sip of his kali-fal, a note of smug reproach in his voice, "Remember, it was only the intercession of Proconsul Neral that saved you from your last...misstep."

Gritting her teeth in silent rage as the smug Tal'Shiar officer reminded her of the Vulcan debacle that nearly cost the hybrid officer her career, not to mention her life, Sela responded coolly, "Eventually, we probably will have to deal with him. But for now he serves our purposes as well as those of Starfleet Intelligence in his current status. And who knows..." She added, a faint note of optimism in her voice, "...in the interim his explorations of Romulan life and culture might result in his coming around to our point of

view.” Flashing a smug smile, she concluded, “Ambassador Spock isn’t the only one who can play this game of cultural superiority, you know...we can do it too.”

“For your sake, Commander...” Kobar warned, a grim finality to his voice as he set down his kali-fal on the table, “I hope you are right.”

So do I... Sela said to herself, a cold chill running down her spine as the Tal’Shiar officer departed her office. Turning back to the starry field outside her window, the youthful Commander spat out angrily as she gazed into the inky blackness, “I hope you’re satisfied, Mother.”

“I would recommend that we proceed no further.” Commander Data advised as he took note of the Ferengi freighter’s position just within the Pullock V system. “Any further and we risk triggering the Cardassian detection grid.

“Agreed.” Commander Hobson concurred from the pilot’s position as he brought the freighter to a halt in the proximity of an ice dwarf and its lonely companion, a moon barely the size of a boulder. Powering down the freighter’s systems, Hobson observed in a low voice, referring to Lavelle and the rest of his ad hoc rescue team, “Now it’s all up to them.”

“Nice...” Sam quipped, his facial expression a mix of amusement and lustful appreciation as his female cohorts entered the bridge of their commandeered Cardassian vessel each wearing nearly transparent gowns that just barely covered their bodies.

“Enjoy the show while you can, Sam...” Maria retorted, “Cause you know the old saying about payback...”

“I am sorry Ensign...Lieutenant...” Lieutenant Commander Worf interjected, his voice reflecting his growing awkwardness at the situation, “However...”

“We understand, Sir...” Alyssa interrupted with shy grin. “It’s just that these...outfits...are awfully...”

“Drafty?” Ensign Django supplied helpfully, her lips now turned up into a crooked grin.

"Exactly." Alyssa readily agreed as Sam took out two objects that both women instantly recognized as slave collars. "Are those what I think they are, Sam?" The Japanese nurse asked, her smile instantly vanishing.

"Yeah," Lavelle replied as he approached the two women. "I got these from Pierson. I think he got them from someone's intelligence agency. Whose..." He quipped, his lips turning up into a wry grin, "...I have no idea and he didn't say." Holding out one of the collars, he continued, "He told me how they work." Pointing at one of the small ovals that nominally served as one of the collar's pain transducers, transferring the electronic impulses sent by the operator of the collar's control to the victim's nerve endings, he explained. "This is a dummy transducer. In actuality, it's a small stun grenade. And this one here..." He continued, pointing at another oval, "Is a smoke grenade. Watch where you toss these little jewels..." He warned, "They have a limited range and pack a mean punch."

"What about the others?" Maria asked, pointing at the other ovals on the collar.

"They're the real deal." Sam replied, "Only they won't transmit at full strength." He added as both Maria and Alyssa let out sighs of relief. All humor absent from his facial expression, he continued, "Here's where you might need to put on the acting performances of your lives. They'll transmit neural impulses of varying intensities. Those impulses will give you a rough idea as to what setting the operator is using. It'll be up to you to fool whoever it is that thinks he's giving you the shock. Screw it up..."

"We know, Sam..." Alyssa interjected in a somber tone.

"Right." Sam said in a soft voice. His smile returning, he declared, "But don't worry, You've got plenty of time to get used to the tingles and to work on your performances. Touching a rectangular section of the collar, he explained its purpose, "This is a communications transmitter. You won't be able to send out any vocal messages..."

"That would be too easily detected..." Lieutenant Commander Worf added.

"But they will transmit a brief signal and they'll also pinpoint your location." Sam said, picking up where he left off. "Touch once if you find Jaxa and if she can move. Touch twice if you find her, but she's unable to move on her own." Pausing for a moment, he finished, "Touch three times if you're not able to

extract her or if she's...dead."

"What if we get into trouble?" Alyssa asked as she momentarily drummed her fingers against her thigh.

His smile vanishing, Sam pressed the side of what was supposed to be the square locking mechanism at the front of the collar, sliding the front of the mechanism off to reveal two ampoules hidden in a tiny recess within the phony mechanism. "If you're in a situation that you know you're not going to be able to get out of and you're pretty sure that Mr. Worf and I aren't going to be able to help you, then you have one final option." He stated as he pointed at one of the ampoules, "Nogatch hemlock. It's painless, instantaneous and there's no known cure. You each have one for yourselves and one to give to Jaxa if you need to. If it all goes to hell...well...it's an option...maybe not a good one..."

"But better than the alternative..." Maria said, Alyssa nodding her head in agreement. Choking up momentarily, the petite Brazilian reached up on tiptoes, kissing her fellow crewman on the cheek. "Thank you, Sam...I mean it."

"Let us hope you do not have to use it." Worf declared as the two women put the collars on.

"Well..." Lavelle said exhaling deeply, "Now that that's over with...are there any questions as to the rest of our plan."

"Not really..." Django answered back, "A lot of it's improv to begin with."

"We have no choice." Worf replied. "We won't have the opportunity to carry out a proper reconnaissance."

"Mr. Worf's right, it has to be pretty flexible if it's going to work." Alyssa interjected as she outlined her and Ensign Django's role in the scheme. "We're to work from the inside...see if we can get an idea as to where they might be keeping Jaxa."

"Right..." Sam affirmed, nodding his head in agreement, "...while Mr. Worf and I, posing as members of the Syndicate, will do the same from the outside. Once we locate Jaxa, then we'll concentrate on getting her out."

"Once we get her out..." Maria remarked, picking up the narrative, "...we call

up the *Loire* which will be waiting just out of the Cardassian's sensor range..."

"And we get the hell out of Dodge as fast as we can." Sam concluded.

Shaking her head, Alyssa quipped, "You know this plan is crazy..."

"Yeah, I know..." Sam replied with a chuckle, "But like Mr. Worf said...it's not like we have much of a choice."

Pausing for a moment, Worf declared in a no nonsense tone, "We have much to do and little time to do it in."

"Agreed, Sir." Lavelle answered back as he began to make his way to the exit. "I'll go down to the hangar section and run another check on the *Loire's* systems. Turning towards the Klingon, he asked, "Would you care to join me, Mr. Worf?"

"While you guys are doing that..." Alyssa remarked as she and her companion also made their exits, "Maria and I will practice our routines..."

"Very well..." Worf acknowledged as he joined Lavelle. "We will meet here in four hours to make final preparations."

Hold on, Jaxa... Sam pleaded internally as he and the burly Klingon made their way to the hangar deck. *We're coming. One way or another, it'll all end soon.*

Her fitful sleep disturbed by the snores of the Orion master that she had just finished pleasuring; Sito Jaxa turned her head to the side, at once seeing the phantom that had been plaguing her in between her drug induced trips. Reaching for the vial on the floor next to the bed, Jaxa sneered at the apparition as she gulped down the contents. Looking on sadly, the ghost cried as she said in a soft, gentle tone. "*Not much longer...not much longer...*"

"Ok...we're good to go." Sam announced from his position at the pilot's chair of the Cardassian freighter that he and his teammates had recently commandeered. "The *Loire* is in position in the asteroid belt."

"Are you sure it'll be safe there, Sam?" Alyssa Ogawa asked as she adjusted

the fake slave collar around her neck. "What about Cardassian patrols?"

"There's always that risk, Nurse Ogawa..." Lieutenant Commander Worf interjected, "...but it's in a region heavily populated by debris and so should be safe unless a patrol happens upon it."

"Mr. Worf's right." Lavelle assured, "Its systems are almost completely shut down and with the high albedos of the ice dwarfs in the area, it'll be hard to detect visually. The Cardies'll literally almost have to run on top of it." Pausing for a moment as he regarded both Alyssa and Ensign Django, he asked, his voice edged with concern, "Are you girls sure you're ready for this?"

"As ready as we'll ever be, Sam." Maria replied putting as much confidence into her answer as possible.

"Yeah, Sam..." Alyssa chimed in, "Let's get this over with."

"All right." The Canadian helmsman grimly replied as he turned his attention to the control console of the Cardassian vessel. "We're on our way."

"Freighter *Lujak* transmit your authorization codes for transit in system," The Cardassian patrol craft ordered, the commanding gul's orders coming through loud and clear through the commandeered vessel's speakers.

"Well..." Sam said, speaking to no one in particular, "I guess we're about to find out whether Pierson's people are as good as he says they are or not..." Taking a deep breath, he replied to the Cardassian hail, the modifications made to the communications system by the mercenary's technicians hopefully disguising any non-Cardassian accents or elements in the human's voice. "This is *Lujak*. We are transmitting our codes now."

After waiting for what seemed like an eternity under the patrol craft's weapons banks, the freighter's speakers came to life once again. "You are cleared to proceed..." The voice declared as a rush of air escaped from Sam and the others, "Maintain course and speed until you reach Pullock V where local control will direct you to an orbit."

"Understood." Sam tersely acknowledged as he laid in the appropriate course and speed. Turning to his friends, his lips turned up into a half grin, "We're in. We should be at Pullock V in about two hours." His smile disappearing he

directed his next remarks to Maria and Alyssa, "You girls might want to take advantage of the down time before we get there."

Observing through passive sensors from their hiding place, Commander Hobson noted as the Cardassian patrol ship cleared the freighter, "That's the third craft in six hours. For such a backwater system, it's been rather busy here."

"I would agree." Commander Data replied, his voice tone carefully neutral. "This has been the second Cardassian freighter. There has also been two Orion, one Lissepian, and one Ferengi." After a moment, the android speculated, "Perhaps one of those freighters are carrying Mr. Worf and the others?"

"Perhaps..." Hobson concurred before adding in a somewhat challenging tone, "It is the sort of creative solution that I would expect Mr. Lavelle or Ensign Django to come up with..."

Partly rising to Hobson's bait, Data rejoined, "While I am unfamiliar with Ensign Django, Mr. Lavelle, during his tenure on the *Enterprise* was an attentive young officer. It would be reasonable to surmise that he would have learned from the example of Captain Picard and Commander Riker..."

"Maybe..." Chris conceded in a nasal tone, "However..." He remarked, his own lips curling up into a sneer, "I would also like to think it is because both officers have learned how to make the most of the limited resources they have available as do most Starfleet personnel who do not have access to the assets of a *Galaxy* class starship." Turning his attention back to his instrument panel, Hobson softly hummed a Strauss waltz as he imagined his android companion's positronic circuits having a meltdown.

"Are you ready, Sublieutenant?" Sela inquired as she entered the transporter room where Taurik, dressed in a non-descript tunic and trousers, his head covered by a hood, stood waiting.

"Yes, Commander." The Vulcan defector replied, taking comfort in both the Romulan disruptor tucked into his trousers and the satchel he carried containing within the explosive charges and instruments needed for his

mission.

"Excellent." Sela smiled back. "You understand your orders? You're to remain as inconspicuous as possible, carry out your assigned missions, and then, when you are ready, signal for immediate transport."

"Understood, Commander." Taurik acknowledged. "I will not fail you."

"I know you won't," Sela replied, smiling beatifically as the young Vulcan disappeared in a green glow. "Good luck..."

As their freighter assumed orbit around Pullock V, Sam listened quietly as he received his instructions from the Cardassian space control station located in geosynchronous orbit over the planet's primary installation, "Understood, Control..." Sam acknowledged, "We will transport our cargo in five minutes to the coordinates you have given us and then my partner and I will transport down." Drawing nearer to Maria, Sam looked down fondly on the petite ensign as his hand brushed her cheek. "That's our cue, Django..."

"Hey...don't worry about us, Enterprise..." Maria responded with a nervous laugh, "We're going to be just fine...right, Alyssa?" She declared as she glanced over at her companion.

"Right, Maria..." Nurse Ogawa answered back with a nod of her head. Then, taking out a hypospray, she injected first herself and then Ensign Django. "It won't help us if we're exposed to anything exotic, but it should prove good enough against most of the stuff in their medicine cabinet."

Looking down fondly at both women and then at Sam, Lieutenant Commander Worf uttered in a voice reflecting the pride that he felt in his companions a simple and heartfelt, "Qapla'!"

"You too, Commander..." Maria replied, her eyes misting. Turning towards Alyssa, she snorted as she pointed in the direction of the transporter pads, "We better go now, Mary Poppins..." Her lips turning up in an amused grin letting the Japanese woman know that she was only kidding, "...or our hosts might start the party without us."

Clenching his teeth as the women's molecular patterns dissolved in the reddish-orange light common to Cardassian transporters, Sam felt a firm

hand on his shoulder. "They will do fine..." Worf said, his rich, confident baritone filling the small room. "They are both brave women—they will not fail."

"I know..." Sam replied in a soft voice as he exhaled. Forcing a grin to his face he strode towards the transporter pad, soon joined by his Klingon partner. Before giving the command to the ship's computer to energize, he turned towards Worf and smiled, "Let's go get Jaxa, Sir."

Immediately after Maria and Alyssa had rematerialized, they heard a gruff voice. "Eyes down!" Feeling the mild tingle transmitted by their fake collars, both women cried out as they bowed their heads.

"Much better." The voice, belonging to a Cardassian glin, remarked as he approached the two humans. Looking down at his padd, he leered, "You're lookers...both of you. I'm tempted to bid on you myself, but...I have a feeling you're going to fetch too high a price for someone like me. No..." He laughed as he motioned with his hand for two guards to approach, "You'll probably go to some brothel in the Orion Sector." Addressing the guards, now on either side of the two women, the glin ordered, "Put these two with the others." As the guards each grabbed one of Maria and Alyssa's arms, the glin further commanded, a chilling note in his voice, "And don't even think about playing with them...you know what happens to those who touch the merchandise without Gul Rejak's permission."

Maintaining their cover, the two Starfleet officers allowed their Cardassian guards to take them to a sparsely furnished holding cell. As one of the guards deactivated the force field containing the four women already in the cell, the other pushed Maria and Alyssa in. Watching with dejected looks on their faces as the field shimmered back into life again, the duo turned about to face their fellow prisoners. "How did you end up here?" One of the prisoners, a Kataran woman, her bright red hair hanging loose about her shoulders, asked.

"We're university students..." Maria lied, using the cover story that she and the others had come up with. "We went into a bar on Bortus III and...we met this guy...we thought he was a really nice guy." She scowled, her face feigning disgust, "Yeah...right. He slipped a drug in our drinks or something 'cause the next thing we knew we were in a cell with him and this huge Klingon laughing at us."

“Shanghaied, huh?” Another one of the prisoners, this one a dark skinned human, remarked with a snort, “A pair of spoiled Core Feddie kids decide to go slumming in the Borderlands and get more than they bargained for.”

“Shut up, Rachel!” Another woman, this one a Bajoran, snapped. She then gave an appraising look at the newcomers, “These women are going to go through enough—they don’t need you adding to it.” Approaching Alyssa and Maria, the Bajoran’s lips curled up into a sly grin as she muttered, “I have a feeling there’s more to you two than what meets the eye.” Lowering her voice to a barely audible whisper, she directed her next words to the two new arrivals, “Why are you two here—really? You reek of Starfleet.”

Laughing softly as she saw the stone faces both women were giving her, the Bajoran directed them to an unoccupied corner of the cell. Motioning for the two humans to sit down on the tiny cot, the Bajoran joined them. Still speaking in a whisper, she introduced herself. “My name is Dona Telara. I’m Maquis—a Cardassian patrol craft got lucky and took out my courier ship a few months ago.” Pausing for a moment as she held back a sob, Telara continued her story, “The Cardassians interrogated me...it was pretty rough...” She stammered. “They threw me into a labor camp for awhile, and then Rejak got a look at me.” Taking a deep breath, she sighed mournfully, “My bad luck. After he got everything he wanted from me, he put me here.” Her eyes probing searchingly at the two humans, the Bajoran woman repeated her earlier question, “So...now that you’ve heard my story...it’s your turn. How did you two really end up here?”

The two humans looked at each other and then, Maria nodding her head, Alyssa took a deep breath, “You’re right, Telara. We’re Starfleet. I’m Lieutenant Alyssa Ogawa and this is Ensign Maria Django. We’re looking for a friend of ours...a Bajoran...her name is Sito Jaxa.” Her expression one of nervous anticipation, the Japanese nurse asked, “You wouldn’t know anything about her...would you?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t...” Telara sighed and then seeing the looks of dejection on the two Starfleet officer’s faces, added, “But I think I might know someone who does.” Turning towards the dark skinned human, she called out, “Rachel? You want to come over here?”

Joining Telara and the newcomers, the dark skinned human glowered, “What do you want?”

“These two want to know about Rejak’s special prisoner.” Telara replied,

gesturing towards the humans.

“Why?” Rachel retorted with a dismissive shrug of her shoulders, “What’s it to you?”

“She’s a friend of ours.” Maria came back with a challenging glare, “Want to make something of it?”

“Take it easy...” The Bajoran woman admonished as she placed a restraining hand on each of the fiery tempered women. “Save it for later—you’ll need it.” Addressing her next remarks to Rachel, she continued, “These two aren’t who you think they are. If you know anything about their friend, tell them.”

Pausing for a moment to take a deep breath, the dark skinned human narrated, “Yeah...I know about her. I know that she was Rejak’s toy for a while...but from what I hear he’s gotten bored with her—guess he’s found someone else to play with. Myasa over there...” She said, referring to an Orion woman sitting next to the Kataran, “Told me that she heard from one of the guards that Rejak was putting her up at this auction.”

“Do you know where she’s being kept?” Alyssa asked

“No...” Rachel replied with a shake of her head, “But they’ll probably bring her either here or to another cell close by.”

“This is a holding area.” Telara interjected. “The auction chamber is down the hallway. But forget about trying to contact her.” Taking a deep breath, she explained, “Those of us in here’ll most likely go in the first lot or two, but Rejak’s probably going to hold your friend back ‘til later so that he can get a better price.” Shaking her head, the Bajoran woman remarked with regret, “You probably won’t even get a chance to see her before you’re put up on the block.”

A grim expression on her face, Maria whispered, “I guess that’s when we’ll have to make our move.”

Materializing on the Cardassian transporter pad, Lavelle and Worf were greeted by two Cardassian guards, their disruptors trained on them. “Your identity codes...” The glin behind the counter ordered in a gruff voice.

Moving slowly so as to not alarm the guards, both Sam and Worf presented the glin with two data padds. Reading the padds, the glin nodded his head in apparent satisfaction as he motioned for the two troopers to lower their weapons. "You're clear. Go with them." He commanded, gesturing with his thumb towards the soldiers as he gave Sam and Worf's padds back to them. "They will show you to your quarters, the auction chamber, and to the guest's lounging area. All other parts of this facility are forbidden without proper authorization." Glaring at Worf, the glin warned, "Klingon...remember you are an enemy alien. You make one wrong step..."

"Yeah..." Sam, hearing the low guttural growl coming from his companion, quickly interjected, "...we get the message..."

"Good." The glin sneered. "Now...go and take your beast with you before I forget that you are guests here."

"You're the boss..." Sam quipped to the stone-faced glin as he and Worf exited the transporter room, accompanied by their escorts. As they walked down a series of corridors, one of the guards pointed towards a closed door on the right. "That is the lounge..." The then pointed towards a door on the opposite side, "...and this is the room where the auction will take place. After traversing yet another series of corridors, the guard stopped in front of another door. The sentry opened the door to reveal a sparsely furnished, yet somewhat comfortable room with two beds. "These are your quarters. Remember...here, the lounge and auction room are the only areas in which you have access. If you are found anywhere else without authorization..."

"Thanks." Sam replied, the faint note of sarcasm in his voice going unnoticed by the guards. "We understand..."

The door closing as they entered the room, Worf quickly took out a small palm sized device that emitted a faint hum. "The room is secure. There are no listening or monitoring devices here and this device..." He declared as he placed the gadget on a small table in the middle of the room, "...generates a field that will scramble most long distance listening devices."

"Well..." Sam drawled as he plopped down on one of the beds, "Phase One's accomplished. We're in. Now we need to scope this place out."

"Agreed." Worf replied as he stood up and opened the door, "We should start with the lounge."

“Good idea.” Sam agreed as he stood up. “That’ll give us a chance to see who else is here and what we might be up against.”

Silently rematerializing in an empty corridor, Taurik noted with approval how efficiently the Romulan infiltration program had worked as he made a mental note to mention it in his next report to Starfleet Intelligence—provided he’d get the opportunity to make that report, that is. Glancing down at the map on the padd that had been purchased by Commander Sela from a disgruntled drunken Cardassian glin, Taurik quickly pinpointed the location of the auxiliary computer room he was looking for. Moving swiftly and silently down the corridor, the Vulcan spy had almost made his way to his destination when he heard the sound of voices and footprints coming towards him from the other end of the hallway. Slipping into an open storage room, Taurik melded into the shadows, remaining absolutely motionless as the sounds grew closer.

“The lounge is over here...” A voice familiar to the Vulcan as his old roommate, Sam Lavelle, exclaimed.

“Good.” Another familiar voice, this one the deep baritone of the *Enterprise’s* old tactical officer replied.

His heart beating faster, Taurik fought down his initial impulse to reveal himself to his former crewmates. Instead he inched even deeper into the shadows.

Pausing in mid-stride, Sam glanced in the direction of the open storage alcove. “What is it?” The Klingon asked as he turned his gaze towards the storage room as well.

“I thought I saw something moving in there...” Sam replied with a laugh. “It was probably just a vole though.”

“Most likely,” Worf agreed, the pair resuming their walk towards the lounge. Risking one last look at his old shipmates as they walked away, Taurik waited patiently until they turned the corner, disappearing from sight and sound. Cautiously leaving his hiding place, the young spy crept slowly down the corridor until he reached his destination. Opening the door, he quietly slipped in, undetected by the bored sentry sitting at the computer console whose attention was wholly fixed on the holo-vid he was watching.

Creeping up stealthily behind the guard, the Vulcan quickly rendered him unconscious with a simple nerve pinch. After dragging the limp form of the guard to a storage closet, locking the door behind him, Taurik took the sentry's seat at the computer console. Taking out a Romulan designed instrument from his satchel, he placed it on the console. Activating the instrument, he watched silently as the infiltration program, after several moments of trial and error, gained access to the Cardassian computer's database. Nodding his head in satisfaction as the device first downloaded the information and then uploaded a specially designed virus into the system as a parting gift, Taurik waited patiently until it had completed its task. Taking out a tricorder, he then made a duplicate of the downloaded information. Lastly, he slapped a detonator charge on to the console and, activating it, nodded in grim satisfaction as a single green light flashed on and off. This part of his mission completed, the youthful Vulcan slipped out of the computer room, carefully retracing his steps as he plotted his next moves.

"Commander! Transmission coming in from the surface." The Romulan specialist reported from his communications station.

"Excellent." Commander Sela replied from her command chair, risking a smirk in the direction of the Tal'Shiar major standing next to her. "Transfer the transmission to my console"

As the information from the Cardassian computer flashed on her monitor, the blonde Romulan Commander nodded her head in satisfaction. "Very good, Taurik..." She purred and then announced to the Tal'Shiar major standing next to her, "We have the base shield codes—and a whole lot more." Taking a deep breath, she ordered, "Prepare to transmit the codes and override the shields on my orders."

The specialist's fingers flying over his console, he promptly responded, "Awaiting your orders, Commander."

Entering the lounge area, Worf and Sam immediately spotted a large bar.

"Looks like that's where the party is." Sam remarked as he pointed towards a gathering of Cardassians, Orions, and others gathered either at the bar or

clustered around a dabo wheel where an Orion woman wearing a slave collar and little else flirted with the customers as she spun the wheel.

Hearing the groans of despair coming from the losers as one lonely voice, belonging to Cardassian, exulted, the Canadian helmsman quipped, "How much you want to bet the wheel's fixed?"

"I would not care to take that bet." The Klingon laconically replied as the pair began to make their way towards the bar, only to be interrupted by a voice coming from behind them.

"And you would be a wise man not to!" The cheery voice declared. Turning about, Sam and Worf saw a stocky, richly dressed Orion merchant accompanied by two other Orions whom the Starfleet officers both recognized to be bodyguards. Leaning forward, the Orion stage-whispered, "I have it on good authority that the wheel is indeed fixed." Laughing at the bemused look on the human's and Klingon's faces, the Orion introduced himself in an insincerely fatuous voice, "Oh...how rude of me! Allow me to introduce myself, I am Ahmet Davni of the Girellus Family, and who might you be?"

"Stephen Marek..." Lavelle replied, using the cover identities that Pierson had supplied for him and Worf, "...and this is my business associate, Karge..."

"Ah..." Davni vocalized the smarmy smile still on his face, his oily voice revealing just the faintest note of suspicion, "Your names are unfamiliar to me...and here I am thinking that I knew all the participants here at Rejak's little auction..."

"This is our first time here..." Sam admitted, "We're members of the Krulak Family. Our ahmet sent us here at the last minute when he found that his normal...emissaries...wouldn't be able to make it."

"I see..." The Orion merchant answered back, his smile growing wider, "Then you must know of Ahmet Luchak. How are he and his brother?"

"They are both fine..." Sam replied, saying a silent prayer that the information that Pierson had provided them was accurate. "The Ahmet has returned to the home system for a...business meeting...while his brother runs the business here."

"Well...that's good to hear!" The merchant exclaimed as he slapped the young

human on his shoulder. "I really must go and pay my respects to him soon." Sighing melodramatically, Davni grinned once more, "Much as I have enjoyed talking with you, I'm afraid I simply must go to prepare for the auction." His expression now taking on a calculating look, he finished, "I'm sure that I will see you there."

Watching as the Orion departed, Sam whispered to his companion, "That was too close..."

"I agree..." Worf responded as he turned his attention back to the business at hand, "We should complete our mission here as soon as possible."

"You're right about that..." Sam agreed as the pair approached the bar. Spotting a Ferengi sitting alone at the bar, the human took the seat to one side of him while Worf took the other.

Looking up from his drink, the Ferengi growled, "What do you want, hewmon?"

"Just a little conversation..." Sam replied, his lips turning up in an insincere grin.

"Go away." The Ferengi bit back, "Don't have time for conversation."

"Not even for some latinum?" Sam tempted as he manipulated a pair of slips of gold pressed latinum with his fingers.

"The 106th Rule of Acquisition..." The Ferengi quoted, "There is no honor in poverty." Giving the human sitting next to him a wary glance, the Ferengi asked, "What do you want?"

"Not much..." Sam replied as he put one of the slips on the counter next to the Ferengi. "We're new here and we're curious about how the auction here works compared to what we're used to back where we're from..."

"It's an auction...what's there to talk about?" The Ferengi snorted as he snatched up the slip of latinum. "They bring the merchandise out...you bid on it...if you win, you pay for it and take it away..."

"We're interested in bidding on particular woman..." Sam declared as he put another slip of latinum on the counter. "A special woman...one that we hear that Gul Rejak is personally putting up..."

“Oh...” The Ferengi leered as he scooped up the latinum, putting it in his pocket, “That one...the Bajoran...” Seeing the human male nodding his head, the Ferengi cleared his throat.

“Sorry...” Lavelle interjected, fishing out more latinum from his pocket, dropping first one...then two...and finally three slips on the counter. Flashing an evil grin as the Klingon sitting on the other side of the Ferengi growled, Sam cautioned, “Remember the 192nd Rule...Never cheat a Klingon...unless you can get away with it.” Watching as Worf placed his hand on the Ferengi’s shoulder, squeezing hard enough to make him wince in pain, Sam’s smile widened, “And believe me...you’re not going to be able to get away with it. So...”

“Uh...” The Ferengi stammered, “...yes...”

“The woman...” Sam prompted.

“Oh...” The Ferengi vocalized as he pocketed the latinum on the table. “Yes. They won’t auction her off in the early rounds...they’ll wait until the bidding gets up before they bring her out.” A rueful look on his face, he remarked dejectedly, “Doesn’t matter though. I won’t be able to bid on her—and you probably won’t be able to afford her either. No...she’s for some fat Orion ahmet or Cardassian gul or legate...”

“Thanks.” Sam replied as he and Worf got out of their seats. Putting another slip of latinum on the table, Lavelle remarked as they left, “You’ve been a big help.”

Looking up from his desk as his aide entered his office, Gul Rejak inquired, “Is everything prepared?”

“Yes, Sir.” The aide, snapping to attention, answered back.

“Excellent, Elock!” Rejak beamed as he got up from his desk. Pouring a glass of kanar, the corrupt gul instructed, “Have my pet taken to holding cell three. We’ll auction her off in the third lot.” Drinking down his kanar, his lips turned up into a grim smile, “Although I’ll be sorry to see her go, she should bring a most...fetching...price.” Smiling with satisfaction as his aide departed to carry out his orders; Rejak poured another glass of kanar. Holding the crystal

goblet containing the amber liquid up to the light, he grinned in satisfaction. "Yes...a most fetching price indeed."

"We better hurry..." Sam urged as he and Worf strode down the corridor. "They're going to be starting the auction anytime and the girls might need us..."

"Patience, Mr. Lavelle..." The Klingon counseled, "We have plenty of time." As the pair turned the corner, they immediately recognized the Orion merchant, Davni, once again with his two bodyguards on either side of him, only this time, both guards had their disruptors drawn and pointed at the former *Enterprise* officer and his human companion.

"Ah...Mister Marek and his associate..." The Orion exclaimed with an evil grin on his face.

"What can we do for you, Mr. Davni?" Sam asked in as placating a voice as possible.

Chuckling, the Orion responded, "You can raise your hands and put them behind your head, Mr. Marek...or whoever you are..."

"What is this all about?" Worf exclaimed in a dangerous voice.

His laughter disappearing, Davni's expression now took on a cold, calculating demeanor. "Control your beast..." The Orion warned in a menacing tone, "Or I'll have my guards kill him where he stands."

Hearing the sounds of footsteps rushing up behind them, Sam whispered to his Klingon partner, "We better do what he says, Mr. Worf..."

"I hear them too..." Worf responded as two Cardassian soldiers, their weapons drawn, appeared behind them.

As both men complied with Davni's orders, the Orion's laughter returned, "You shouldn't blame the person who supplied you your intelligence. It really wasn't bad. Had I not been here, your cover story probably would have passed even Gul Rejak's scrutiny. However, there was one crucial flaw..."

"What was it?" Sam asked, genuinely curious.

"It's a small thing, really...something that came up just recently...less than a standard week ago, Federation time." Davni replied and then further explained. "You see, Ahmet Luchak had to return to this sector. His brother...well...let's say his brother's ambition got ahead of his family loyalties..."

"Oh..." Sam vocalized.

His smile returning, Davni continued in a voice of false regret, "As I said, something your intelligence wouldn't have picked up on immediately...but something that...had you been members of Luchak's family...or someone closely tied into the higher echelons of Orion syndicate operations such as myself...you should have known about." His smile vanishing, the Orion inquired, "So...who are you two really?" As he looked into the stony faces of his human and Klingon prisoners, Davni shrugged his shoulders, "Personally...I think you're Starfleet Intelligence, but if you don't want to tell me, that's fine—although it would go much easier for you if you did. Gul Rejak has a wonderful talent for getting the truth out of reluctant informants." Gesturing towards the auction chamber, the merchant commanded, "Now...let's go." With a sarcastic snort, Davni quipped as the group made its way down the corridor, Sam and Worf surrounded by the armed guards, "You wanted to see the auction, didn't you?"

"So...we're all on the same page?" Maria asked, looking into the eyes of Alyssa and the other women gathered around her.

Laughing bitterly, Rachel tugged at her collar, "Aren't you forgetting something? The moment we try anything, they're going to activate these things and we're going to be on the floor screaming our lungs out."

"She's got a point there." Telara said, reluctantly agreeing with her fellow captive. "We can't do anything as long as we're wearing these damned things around our necks." Shaking her head sadly, the Bajoran woman announced, "I'm sorry, we're not going to betray you..." The other women all nodded their heads in agreement at their leader's words, "...but we can't take the risk of helping you either."

"We understand." Alyssa replied, a strong note of compassion in her voice, "We don't expect you to risk yourselves." Taking a deep breath, she vowed,

“And I want you to know that we’re not about to leave you behind.” As Maria firmly nodded her head in agreement, the Japanese woman swore, “I promise we’ll do everything we can to make sure that you...and everyone else here that we can find...gets away with us.”

“Don’t make any promises you can’t keep.” Rachel responded bitterly, the other women nodding their heads in agreement as she stood up, “We’ve been lied to enough.”

Just as the dark skinned human stood up, two Cardassian guards walked up to their cell. As one of the guards deactivated the force shield, the other one gestured towards the women with one hand while his other held the device controlling the slave collars in his other hand, “It’s time...come out of the cell one at a time.” As the women slowly filed out, his companion handed each prisoner a small capsule. “It’s a mild euphoric.” The guard explained with an evil grin on his face, “You want to look and act nice and pretty for the customers, don’t you.” His smile vanishing as his thumb drew closer to the activation button on the control device, the guard ordered, “Now...swallow it!”

As Django and Alyssa palmed their capsules and pretended to swallow, Maria noticed out of the corner of her eye Telara doing the same thing. Carefully mimicking the behavior of the women who had taken the medication, the threesome allowed themselves to be led into the auction chamber where they were placed in the middle of a raised dais. Before the dais, a Cardassian glin stood in front of a control console. The door on the other side sliding open, individuals from different races—Cardassians, Ferengi, Lissepians, Orions, even a few humans and other races apparently from the Federation, all resplendently dressed, filed into the room, each taking a seat before the dais.

Still feigning the effects of the euphoric drug, Telara chanced to whisper, “They’re waiting on Rejak and the big players to come in. That’s when the auction starts. If you’re going to do anything—you better do it then.”

As the buyers filed into the room, one amongst their number wore a cloak hooded to cover his features. That figure, the Vulcan spy, Taurik, immediately spotted his old friend Alyssa Ogawa standing clustered with the other women. Taking a deep breath, he took his seat, placing his finger near the button of the detonator that he carried concealed under his cloak.

Entering the auction chamber, Rejak sat down on a large throne like chair. Pleased at the sight of the women standing on the dais, the gul leaned over and whispered to his aide, "Not a bad beginning. This has the makings of being a most successful auction." Signaling the auctioneer with his hand, the Cardassian officer motioned for the Kataran woman to be brought forward.

"As you can see..." The auctioneer proclaimed as he began his spiel, "This is a most lovely specimen! Just look at that glorious red hair..." Turning to the Kataran he ordered her to remove her gown. "Look..." He exclaimed, gesturing with his hand, "Absolutely no marks or blemishes...and her skin...a perfect alabaster." Taking a deep breath, he announced, "The bidding will start at no less than twenty bars of gold pressed latinum!"

As she saw Sam and Worf being led into the auction hall, surrounded by armed guards, Maria cursed under her breath as she gently nudged the Japanese woman standing next to her, "Hell. They've got the guys."

Glancing down, Alyssa's heart sank at what she saw—the Orion merchant, Davni, approaching Gul Rejak followed by Sam and Worf, guards on either side of them with their disruptors trained both Starfleet officers. Drawing near the Cardassian gul, the Orion merchant grinned his most fatuous smile, "Forgive me, Gul Rejak...but I think you'll find this interesting." Stepping aside to reveal Sam and Worf, Davni exclaimed, "I found these individuals passing themselves off as members of Ahmet Luchak's family." His lips curling up into an evil grin, the Orion concluded, "They weren't very forthcoming as to their true identities..."

"Don't worry about that..." Rejak replied with a smirk on his lips, "I'll find out who they are soon enough." Addressing his prisoners, he spoke, "You have this one opportunity. Tell me who you are and why you are here and your punishment will be as light as possible. Otherwise..." The evil grin on the Cardassian's face making it clear as to what the fate for failure to comply would most likely be for the two prisoners.

"Damn." Alyssa cursed her voice a raspy whisper as she looked down at the captured men. "What are we going to do?"

Quickly deciding on a course of action, Maria whispered back, "Follow my lead." Turning towards the Bajoran woman standing on the other side of her, Ensign Django whispered, "Get ready...it's about to hit the fan."

Looking on, Taurik took in a deep breath as he spotted his former shipmates

in the custody of the Cardassians. Deciding on his course of action, the thumb of his left hand rested on the activation button of the detonator he held in that hand as his right hand grasped the butt of his disruptor. Sparing a glance in the direction of the dais, he raised his left eyebrow as he saw the right hands of both Alyssa and the petite dusky skinned woman standing next to her draw up in an almost casual manner towards the collars around their necks. Their courses of action determined, Taurik and the women waited their cue for action.

That cue wasn't long in coming. Standing up in disgust as he received nothing but silence in response to his offer for clemency from his prisoners, Rejak jerked his thumb towards the door, "Take them away..." He ordered, "I will deal with them after the auction." As two of the guards moved to grab the prisoners by their elbows, the women on the dais made their move. "Now!" Maria called out as, ripping off her collar, she tossed one of the smoke grenades hidden in it in the direction of Sam and Worf. Acting on her teammate's lead, Alyssa quickly tossed a concussion grenade at the guard at the control console just as he activated the slave collars. The other women falling on their knees in pain, Alyssa and Maria leaped off the dais, each one of them targeting one of the guards covering the men.

Tackling her victim to the deck, Maria struck quickly, punching once...twice...thrice...in rapid succession at the guard's face until all movement ceased.

Alyssa, however, had a harder time of it as the Cardassian she attacked easily threw her off him. Rolling to absorb the fall, the Japanese nurse looked up in horror to see the guard leveling his disruptor at her. Gritting her teeth as she said a final farewell to her husband and baby son, Alyssa looked on in astonishment as Telara, a loud war cry on her lips as she fought the pain coming from her collar, sprung at the guard. Seeing her chance as the guard turned about to face his attacker, Alyssa struck, aiming her punch at the unprotected small of the Cardassian's back. As he fired his disruptor, the Japanese woman's punch struck home, driving her opponent to his knees in pain. Moving rapidly before he could recover, The Japanese nurse, fixing a sedative on to her hypospray and placing it to his neck, quickly injected him.

As the Cardassian slumped down unconscious to the deck, Alyssa rushed to where Telara lay. Kneeling down next to her, she held the Bajoran woman's hand as Telara's lifeless eyes looked up at her. Gently closing her savior's eyes, Nurse Ogawa, barely holding back a sob, rushed back to where the Cardassian guard lay. Taking his dagger out of its sheath, Alyssa, her eyes

now clouded with rage, looked about for a target, soon finding one—the Orion merchant, Davni. Hefting her blade, the Japanese healer now had one thought on her mind—revenge.

Moving simultaneously with the women, Taurik pressed the button on the detonator. The explosion coming from the auxiliary computer control station immediately setting off alarms as those in the auction room began to panic. Spotting Rejak's aide drawing his weapon and taking aim at Alyssa, the Vulcan spy quickly drew his own disruptor, striking the Cardassian before he could get off a shot.

Taking advantage of the smoke and confusion, both Sam and Worf lashed out at their captors. Sam struck first with a quick stomp kick at the instep of his opponent, bringing about a howl of pain and rage. Then, before the Cardassian could respond, he followed up his kick with a jab at the neck just above the guard's cuirass, shattering his opponent's larynx. Hearing with grim satisfaction the guard's death gurgle, Lavelle quickly spun about, hoping to spot either Rejak or the Orion merchant.

Moving with lightning quickness, Worf promptly turned the tables on his guard. Grabbing the Cardassian's arm, the Klingon warrior jerked and twisted using a Mok'bara move, his lips curled up into a feral grin as he heard the snap of bone breaking. Releasing the arm, Worf snatched his opponent's disruptor as he struck again, this time at the small of his opponent's back, propelling the Cardassian forward and down on to the deck where he lay limp and motionless. Wheeling quickly about, the Klingon sought further targets as the noise and fighting raged about him.

As he recoiled from the blood and tissue from his aide sprayed on to his face and body, Gul Rejak drew his disruptor while at the same time simultaneously dropping to the deck—just in time as a disruptor bolt passed over where his head would have been. The Orion merchant, Davni, coughing through the smoke, smiled in grim satisfaction as he spotted Maria standing astride the body of one of the guards, his disruptor now in her hands. Aiming with his weapon, the Orion's finger tightened on the trigger, but before the finger could complete its action, the merchant gasped. Looking down, he noted with astonishment the point of a dagger protruding from his chest.

"That was for Telara..." The quiet voice, devoid of all emotion, stated as she withdrew her blade, quickly wiping the blood off with her skirt.

Looking on with great sadness at what the gentle soul who was Alyssa Ogawa

had just done, Taurik saw that his former comrades apparently now had the situation well in hand as most of the Cardassians—as well as the other women in the auction—were either dead or wounded. Reluctantly recognizing that his part in the drama was now over, he touched his communicator.

“The signal...” The Romulan specialist called out from his sensor console.

“Send the code and beam the Sublieutenant up.” Commander Sela ordered; the specialist at once carrying out her commands.

“Gul Rejak!” The voice came loudly through the Cardassians communicator as he prepared to take a shot at the hooded figure firing on him. “Our shields have gone down!”

“How?” Rejak replied in a raised voice.

“We don’t know.” The voice answered back as the hooded figure disappeared in a green transporter effect that the Cardassian gul immediately recognized was Romulan.

“Find out.” Rejak spat out, but before he could give the order to scan for cloaked ships, or say anything else, he was immediately jerked up to his feet by a large hand. Looking up into the enraged eyes of a giant Klingon warrior the Cardassian gul vainly repressed a shudder.

“Sito Jaxa...” The Klingon growled as he held Rejak by the throat. “Where is she?”

“Kill me...” Rejak gasped, “And you’ll never find her before she dies.” A smile appearing on his face as the Klingon relaxed slightly his hold on the Cardassian, the gul explained, “If you kill me, you’ll never find her cell before the neurogenic gas now being released throughout the compound kills her...and you as well.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that...” Alyssa smirked as she quickly injected her teammates with her hypospray. Turning to Worf, the Japanese nurse explained, “This is just an inhibitor—it’s not a cure. It only buys us a little time.” Her lips turning down into a frown as everyone in the room heard the hissing of gas escaping from vents in the ceiling, the nurse warned, “And Jaxa doesn’t have it.”

"What about the other women?" Sam asked as his eyes surveyed the dead and wounded bodies lying about the auction chamber.

"I already checked..." Alyssa replied somberly, "They didn't make it. Disruptor fire killed some of them...the others were killed from system shock caused by the slave collars they were wearing."

"I'm sorry..." Sam declared in as consoling a tone as possible. "I wish we could have..."

"Yeah...I know..." The Japanese woman interrupted as she looked down at the bloodstained dagger in her hand.

"So..." Rejak grinned as his confidence began to return, "Your friend is still alive. What do you do, Klingon? Kill me...or save her?"

"Very well..." Worf replied, the bile coming up to his throat, "Take us to Sito Jaxa and you will be spared."

"Your word..." Rejak demanded.

"My word." Worf reluctantly agreed his stomach turning at the thought of letting the Cardassian go free. Pushing Rejak towards the door, the Klingon growled, "Now...take us to her...before I forget my promise."

A sly grin on his face, the Cardassian gul led his captors towards their prize. Pointing at a cell door, Rejak smirked, "She's in there."

"Open it." Worf commanded, shoving the Cardassian towards the door as Lavelle and Django, kneeling, took covering positions.

"Better get that door open soon." Sam called out, thick yellow gas spreading throughout the corridor, "The gas is getting worse and worse."

Putting his mek'leth up against Rejak's throat, Worf threatened in a low voice as the blade drew the smallest trickle of blood. "You have one chance and one chance only to open the door."

Taking the Klingon at his word, Rejak did as he was told, punching in the correct key code sequence on the first try. The door sliding open, Alyssa barely repressed a sob as she saw her old friend, Sito Jaxa, wearing next to nothing, sitting at the edge of a barely adequate cot. Hearing the door slide

open, the Bajoran woman slowly lifted her head. Immediately making out the form of her master amongst the others in the room, Jaxa bent her head submissively, "Master..." She greeted, choking as she inhaled some of the gas flowing into the room.

Rushing into the room, Alyssa immediately pressed a hypospray against the neck of her old friend, injecting her with a dose of antitoxin. "Jaxa!" The nurse called out as she took out her medical tricorder, "It's me Alyssa..."

Following quickly behind Alyssa, Sam, his facial expression reflecting the war raging inside him between relief at seeing his old friend again and anger at how she had been treated, called out, "Jaxa! It's Sam! I'm here too...we're all here..."

"Sam?" The Bajoran responded in a weak voice, "Alyssa?" In a lost voice, she asked as she began to strip, "Are you here to play with me?"

Gently grasping Jaxa's hands with his, Sam stopped her from removing her gown. Smiling compassionately, he fixed the shoulder straps of her chemise back where they belonged as Alyssa ran her tricorder over her friend's body. Shaking her head solemnly at the medical instrument's results, Alyssa cupped Sito's chin, raising her head so that she could look into the Bajoran woman's eyes. "Damn!" The Japanese nurse cursed softly, "I was afraid of that."

"What?" Sam asked, his concern for his old shipmate mounting.

"Sito..." Alyssa replied in a somber tone, "...is on Corillan acid."

"Are you sure?" Sam asked, glaring at the Cardassian gul whom Worf had just pushed into the tiny cell.

"Yeah..." Alyssa responded gravely. "My tricorder readings...her eyes...her demeanor...all indicate that she's addicted." Turning her attention towards Rejak, Alyssa scowled, "Are you responsible for this?"

As the Cardassian officer stood speechless and motionless, Maria delivered a harsh jab to his side with her elbow. Smirking with satisfaction at the grunt her blow elicited, the young Brazilian turned towards the Klingon standing behind Rejak. "Can I borrow that knife of yours, Mr. Worf?" She asked in a grim tone, "I promise when I get through with him he won't do anything like that to anyone else ever again." Turning her attention back to Rejak, the youthful ensign scowled savagely, "Pig. I think I'll start by cutting your 'nads

off and hanging them around your neck, and then I'll go on from there."

"I won't say anything if you don't, Mr. Worf..." Sam interjected in a harsh voice as he hovered protectively over Sito while Alyssa Ogawa, ever the healer, one who in so many ways reflected and believed in the idealism of both her captain on the *Enterprise* and of the Federation and its principles, silently turned her back on the Cardassian, giving her tacit consent to whatever the Klingon decided.

Sensing the very real danger he was now in from these young Starfleet officers, especially the dusky skinned woman glaring at him, Rejak pleaded to his Klingon captor. "Remember your promise...I kept mine...now I ask that you keep yours..."

His eyes falling on his former pupil sitting on her tiny soiled cot, Worf fought a brief, but intense, war within himself.

"The animal deserves it!" The Klingon part of Worf calling out for revenge asserted. *"Give the mek'leth to Ensign Django—let her disembowel the Cardassian Pet'aQ. No true Klingon warrior would see your breaking your word to such filth as an act of dishonor. They would see it as what it is—justice!"*

"No..." The other part of him—the Starfleet officer who served under Captain Jean-Luc Picard and the adopted son of Sergei and Helena Rozhenko protested. *"You gave your word—as both a Klingon warrior and a Starfleet officer. If it is truly justice you seek..."* the voice within pleaded, *"...then take him with you and let him stand trial."*

Coming to a decision, the Klingon warrior bodily lifted Rejak, hurling him against the far wall of the cell as he bellowed, "No!" As the Cardassian gul slumped down to the floor, Worf continued in a much calmer voice. "We will take him with us to stand trial for his actions." Then, addressing Sam, the Klingon directed, "Mr. Lavelle...contact the *Loire*. We are leaving this place."

"Done, Sir." Sam replied as, touching his communicator, he relayed his commands to the runabout lying dormant on the outskirts of the Pullock system. "*Loire* should be here soon. All we have to do is wait here 'til it arrives."

"What about Ensign Sito?" Worf, turning towards Nurse Ogawa, asked.

"She should be ok for traveling." Alyssa responded as she gave the tormented

Bajoran another injection. "I just gave her a sedative—it should help keep her calm."

Shaking his head groggily as he recovered from the Klingon's blow, Rejak, seeing that the danger had passed him by, flashed a sly grin as he pressed a small button on his gauntlet.

Turning towards Maria, Worf ordered, "Ensign Django, you are to take charge of our prisoner..." However, before he could complete his sentence, Rejak disappeared in the reddish-orange glow of a Cardassian transporter.

"Damn." Maria swore in a low voice as she addressed Mr. Worf, "You should have let me gut him while we had the chance."

Reappearing on a transporter pad in the main station control room, Rejak stormed off the pad. "I want every available man sent to cell block three!" He ordered, shouting out commands to his staff. Turning towards a soldier manning one of the consoles, he called out, "What is the status on our shields?"

"Still down, Sir." The soldier replied, a note of fear in his voice. "We have not been able to free our computer from the virus the intruders have infected it with.

"Tell me that you have at least restored communications..." The gul stated sarcastically as he looked down menacingly on the hapless soldier.

"Yes, Sir." The soldier responded, sighing inwardly in relief that he had at least some good news to tell his commander. "We were able to reroute communications through an uninfected subroutine."

"Good." Rejak smirked. "Have all available ships converge on Pullock V. They are to immediately attack any unidentified vessels in system." Taking a deep breath, he further instructed. "Also have them scan for cloaked vessels."

"Understood, Sir." The soldier acknowledged as he moved to comply with his commander's orders.

"Federation runabout..." Data stated, reporting from his console station, "...moving at high speed for Pullock V."

"That'll be the *Loire*..." Commander Hobson answered back as the Ferengi freighter's systems immediately sprang into life.

"Cardassian patrol vessels are in pursuit..." Data further reported, "...and are gaining."

"Looks like it's time to see whether Mr. Tol's modifications are sufficient enough to get the job done..." Hobson declared as he set the *Pursuit of Commerce* into motion at maximum impulse, his facial expression and body language still maintaining the surface stoicism that had earned him his well deserved nickname, 'The Iceman'. "I will bring us just within weapon's range of the patrol ships..." Chris stated, "...the rest is up to you..."

"Understood..." Data acknowledged as he turned his attention to the weapons console that the *Sutherland's* chief engineer had just recently modified. "We should be within phaser range in approximately 3 minutes."

"Federation runabout class vessel approaching Pullock V." The Romulan sensor technician reported. "Cardassian vessels in pursuit..." Then, the faintest note of concern in his voice, he added, "Tachyon scans emanating from the planet's surface."

"Take us out of range of their scans." Commander Sela calmly ordered as the warbird's helmsman moved to immediately comply with her instructions. Turning her attention to the sensor technician she further directed, "Maintain passive scans...but do nothing to risk our detection."

"Yes, Commander." The technician acknowledged as Sublieutenant Taurik, now wearing the standard grey-green uniform of a Romulan officer, walked on to the bridge. Nodding his head at Sela's hand gesture, the Vulcan defector immediately took his station next to the Commander's chair.

"Well done, Sublieutenant." Sela cooed approvingly. "Your actions—as well as those of your former friends—have created quite the stir."

"It would seem so..." Taurik deadpanned.

Chuckling merrily, the blonde half-Romulan Commander quipped, "I see you still possess the Vulcan gift for understatement, Sublieutenant. Very good..."

Before she could complete her sentence, the sensor technician interrupted. "Ship detected in pursuit of Cardassian patrol vessels."

"Identity of ship?" Sela immediately responded.

"Ferengi—fast freighter..." The technician quickly answered back and then added, "Unusual power levels detected."

"Interesting..." Sela mused as she turned towards the Vulcan standing next to her, "It would seem that your old friends are far more ingenious than we had thought..."

"Indeed..." Taurik replied, his stony expression hiding the barely suppressed feeling of pride he was at that moment feeling for his former *Enterprise* shipmates. *I only wish...* He thought with just the faintest note of...regret...*that I could be with you now.*

As a disruptor bolt whizzed above her head, barely missing her, Ensign Django called out, "Sam! How much longer are we going to have to hold out?"

"Not much..." Lavelle replied as he returned fire with his hand phaser. "*Loire* should be in range at any moment."

"Can't be soon enough for me." Maria replied as she returned fire with her own weapon at the rapidly closing Cardassians, the blue beam emanating from her weapon bringing down one of the attacking soldiers as the others drew ever closer.

"How's Jaxa doing?" Sam yelled, addressing his question to Lieutenant Ogawa who was at that moment tending to the object of the group's concern now lying on a tiny cot in the cell room where they had found her just recently.

"I had to sedate her again." Alyssa replied with a tired voice, remember how she and Lieutenant Commander Worf had to, just moments ago, physically restrain a drugged and hysterical Sito. As the burly Klingon warrior held the crying and thrashing Bajoran woman down on the couch, Alyssa had injected her with a hypospray. Turning her attention to her former *Enterprise* crewmate, the Japanese nurse took a dermal regenerator out of her medical bag.

"Here..." Alyssa said as she ran the medical instrument over the Klingon's forearm. "That should take care of it." Shaking her head, the nurse remarked sadly, "That was a vicious bite she gave you."

"Yes..." Worf replied, shaking his head, "It was as if she was an animal..."

"It's the Corillan acid..." Alyssa noted. "One effect of the drug is that it can bring about drastic emotional sensations and responses. That's part of the reason it's so popular...it acts as a grade 'A' aphrodisiac..." Taking a deep breath, she continued, "But there's some ugly side effects such as this—what they used to call in the later twentieth century, 'bad trips.'"

Bending down to examine her patient, Alyssa's heart skipped a beat as she heard Sam's voice call out once again through the ongoing whine of disruptor bolts and phaser beams, "*Loire's* here! The young Canadian shouted, "Get ready for immediate beam up!"

As the Cardassians stormed into the cell, the glin commanding the force gritted his teeth in frustration as he saw his would be prisoners disappear in a bluish transporter effect. Activating his comm device, he reported. "Gul Rejak...I regret to report that the intruders have escaped with the Bajoran woman. Yes, sir...by transporter." A crestfallen look on his face, he ended the communication, "Understood, Sir." Turning towards his sergeant, the glin stated in an unemotional voice, "The squad is yours now...I have been relieved of command."

His fist clenching in rage as he heard his glin's report, Gul Rejak fumed as he relieved the officer of his duties. Turning towards his aide, the gul inquired, "How long until our defenses are back up again?"

"Another two minutes, Sir." The aide replied, the slight cracking of his voice betraying his growing nervousness as his commanding officer's mood grew increasingly fouler. "The technicians are working as fast and efficiently as possible."

"How much longer until the patrol vessels are in range?" Rejak then asked, fixing his gaze on the hapless executive officer.

"One more minute, Sir." The Cardassian replied, his confidence somewhat returning as he was able to report good news for a change. "Also, the *Linesa* will be in position by then as well."

“Excellent. I will beam aboard the *Linesa* as soon as she arrives.” He declared, referring to the *Galor* class vessel that served as his personal flagship. “I want to personally oversee the capture or deaths of these trespassers.”

Rushing off the transporter pads immediately after rematerializing, Lavelle and Worf quickly took their seats in the pilot’s and copilot’s positions as Maria helped Alyssa carry an unconscious slumping Sito Jaxa to a rear bunk. Kneeling down next to the sleeping Bajoran woman, Alyssa, taking out her medical tricorder, smoothly and efficiently examined her old friend.

“How is she?” Maria asked as she looked over the Japanese woman’s shoulder.

“Not good.” Alyssa frowned. “There are a lot of toxic chemicals in her blood system—Corillan acid and probably other designer drugs. She’ll need to have her system virtually flushed clean when we get back—I don’t have the facilities to even think about doing that here.” Sighing mournfully, she looked down on her old friend, “And there’s evidence of broken bones and internal injuries that have been more or less adequately treated...and...” she remarked somberly, “...it’s just as we thought...she’s been subjected to repeated incidents of violent sexual abuse.” Shaking her head, Alyssa further reported, “She also has a something...judging by its location above the heart, I’d say it was a pain implant.”

“Damn.” Maria swore in a soft voice as the runabout suddenly shook violently, forcing the young ensign to grab a nearby handhold to maintain her footing. “What the hell?” She called out to the pilot’s section.

“We’re under attack!” Sam yelled back as he took the *Loire* through a series of violent turns and jukes. “Hold on to your seats, we’re in for a rough ride...”

“Continue firing!” Gul Tersel, the Cardassian Gul commanding the two patrol vessels pursuing the Federation runabout, ordered as yellow disruptor beams lanced out from both craft, impacting on the rear of the *Loire*, highlighting the bubble of the tiny craft’s shields.

“Cardassian vessels are firing on *Loire*.” Commander Data reported in a

clinical tone. "The runabout's shields are currently holding, however, they have weakened considerably." Pausing momentarily as his positronic brain took in new information, the android remarked, his voice coming across to the human officer sitting next to him as being one of...surprise. "That's interesting..."

"What is?" Hobson inquired as he almost physically urged the commandeered Ferengi vessel he piloted to draw closer to the Cardassian patrol vessels firing the *Loire*.

"The *Loire* has taken no hostile fire from the planetary defenses and it is well within their optimal firing range..." Data noted, raising an eyebrow, "...nor are planetary shields up."

"Maybe our people knocked them out?" Hobson supplied as the distance between his vessel and that of the Cardassians closed.

"Possible..." Data conceded as he looked down at his instruments and then remarked in a matter of fact tone. "We are now within weapons range of the first Cardassian vessel." .

"Then, by all means, Commander..." Hobson remarked dryly, still maintaining his icy exterior as his heart raced. "Fire."

"Weapons targeted and firing." Data coolly responded as a pair of reddish phaser beams launched from the Ferengi ship, impacting on the rears of both Cardassian vessels.

His ship shaking from the impact, Gul Tersel called out, "What was that?"

"We have been hit by a Ferengi trader ship." The weapons officer called back, "No damage...shields holding."

Growling, the gul was about to order the second patrol vessel to turn back on the Ferengi vessel and engage it when the communications technician called out to him, "Receiving message from the *Linesa*."

"On main speaker." The gul commanded.

"This is Gul Rejak." The voice of the system prefect rang out, "I will deal with the Federation vessel. Your orders are to destroy the Ferengi craft."

"Acknowledged." Gul Tersel affirmed, deliberately leaving out any honorific for Gul Rejak, whom the young gul detested. Addressing his next words to his crew, he commanded, "Helm, bring us one hundred eighty degrees about. Weapons officer, fire immediately upon weapons lock."

"It would seem our actions have had the desired effect, Commander Hobson." Data quipped in a dry tone as the Cardassian ships broke off their pursuit of the *Loire*.

"So it would..." Hobson agreed as he saw the two Cardassian patrol ships begin their turns. "Now we begin Phase 2."

"That should prove most..." Data deadpanned, "...interesting."

"It will indeed." Hobson answered back, his smile still in place, "It will indeed."

"Don't know who those people in that Ferengi ship were..." Lavelle remarked as the *Loire* settled down from the shaking that the Cardassian ships had given it, "But I'm glad they showed up." Then, looking down at his console, he swore an especially vile oath, "Damn. I spoke too soon. We've got a bigger problem now..."

"What?" Worf, manning the tiny runabout's weapons console, asked.

Letting out a sigh, Sam responded, "*Galor* class vessel now in pursuit—must be Rejak himself." Shaking his head, Lavelle quipped, "It's nice to be appreciated." A frown returning to his face, he announced as he activated the runabout's warp drive, "Going to warp. They're following us—no surprise there."

"Got any bright ideas?" Maria asked from her position in the copilot's seat next to the roguish Canadian.

"Just one." Sam replied with a wink. Turning towards the rest of the crew, he declared, "I've put us on a heading towards the Tellak Nebula. If we get there first, we can duck in there and buy some time..."

“Hmmm...” Worf vocalized, “We might be able to do more than that.” A smile crossing his face, the Klingon warrior outlined his plan to an astonished Lavelle and Django.

“You’re crazy!” Maria exclaimed as a broad grin crossed her face, “I like it!”

Shaking his head, Sam remarked in a more cautious tone. “It’s risky, but I don’t see as we have a choice—we can’t win a flat out race against that ship—we have to do something to slow ‘em down and I can’t think of anything else.” Calling out to the other member of their group who was now taking care of the unconscious Sito Jaxa, Sam asked, “What do you think, Alyssa?”

“Whatever we do...” Alyssa Ogawa replied, “We need to do it soon. Jaxa needs to get to a proper sickbay as soon as possible.”

“All right...” Sam declared, “Let’s do it.”

“Federation runabout has altered course...” The Cardassian sensor operator on the *Linesa* reported, “It is now headed for the Tellak Nebula...”

“Just like a vole...” Rejak mused as he tried to divine his enemy’s plan, “Diving for cover. Our sensors will not be able to track them easily in the nebula—forcing us to waste considerable time and effort.” Taking a deep breath, he commanded, “Increase speed. Fire torpedoes the moment we are in range—do not allow them to enter that nebula!”

“It looks like your plan has succeeded, Commander Hobson...” Data quipped as the Ferengi freighter shuddered under the impact of yet another Cardassian barrage. “Shields down to thirty percent.”

“Thank you, Commander Data...” Hobson riposted, a faint note of mockery in his voice as disruptor beams lanced out from both of the pursuing patrol vessels, “...for your acute observation. Now, we get ready for the next part of our plan...”

“Understood...” The android officer acknowledged. “Course set for Beta Illara Four...”

"Very good..." Hobson replied with an icy grin as he entered the system's coordinates into the ship's computer. "Let's hope the Cardassians take the bait..."

Watching as the Ferengi vessel altered course, Gul Tersel flashed a sly grin. "A good move, my friend...one I would have made myself." Addressing his helmsman, he ordered, "Maintain pursuit."

"Into the asteroid belt?" The helmsman asked a look of surprise on his face.

"Yes." The gul confidently answered back. "That Ferengi ship doesn't know it yet, but they've just sealed their fate."

"We've made it..." Sam reported as the tiny runabout shuddered violently under the impact of the *Galor* class Cardassian warship's disruptors. "We're in the Tellak Nebula. They'll have a hard time locking on to us while we're in here."

"Just in time!" Maria Django shouted back from the smoking engine area. "They almost knocked our engines out with that last volley."

"Can you get 'em fixed?" A worried Sam called back over his shoulder.

Putting out the flames with her portable fire extinguisher, the young Brazilian woman surveyed the smoking circuitry. Sighing, she answered back, "We've got impulse as long as you don't strain the engines, but it'll take me some time to get the warp engines back on line—I only did a year in engineering before being transferred into ops."

"Do the best you can, Ensign." Worf called out reassuringly. "I will see to the repair of the shields and weapons."

"How's Jaxa doing?" Sam then called out to Alyssa Ogawa, still at the side of the unconscious Bajoran woman who was the reason for them all being here now.

"She's still out..." Alyssa replied, "But I'm getting worried about some of the latest readings I got...her heartbeat and breathing are irregular and her perspiration rate has increased."

“Should we be worried?” Sam inquired, his voice tinged with worry for his old friend.

“I don’t know...” Alyssa responded in a quiet voice as she looked down on her patient, “I’d feel better with her in a proper sickbay...”

“So would I...” Sam responded before calling out to Ensign Django, “Give me a moment and I’ll come back and give you a hand, Maria. I’m no engineer either, but I did spend some time working with Commander LaForge while I was on the *Enterprise*.”

“I’ll take all the help I can get.” Maria called back as she returned to her task of repairing and replacing circuits.

“Some of these asteroids are rich in tylium deposits.” Data noted as Hobson brought the *Pursuit of Commerce* to a standstill near one of the planetoids. “While the tylium will affect the Cardassian sensors, should a disruptor beam or torpedo strike the wrong one...”

“It could initiate a chain reaction blowing everything up.” Hobson finished. His lips turning up into a smirk, the patrician executive officer quipped, “Why, Commander Data, are you getting cold feet now that things are getting interesting?”

“My feet remain at the same consistent temperature they always have.” The android riposted, and then, responding to the human’s dig, remarked smugly, “I just wanted to remind you that, for our plan to succeed, it will require the utmost in precision.”

Not rising to the bait, Hobson, still with his icy grin, smoothly replied, “That, Commander Data, is why you are here.”

Watching as the two Cardassian vessels drew ever closer, Data remarked in an emotionless tone, “Then, Commander Hobson, let us hope that the Cardassians understand their part in our plan.”

“We’ve lost them, Sir.” The sensor technician on board the *Linesa* reluctantly informed his commanding officer.

"That is to be expected." Gul Rejak replied smugly. "Launch spatial charges. We will not play their game by going into the nebula. They will either be forced out...or we will shake them to bits."

"Dammit!" Maria swore as her head hit the top of the tiny engineering crawlspace. "What the hell's happening out there?"

"The Cardassians are firing spatial charges at us." Worf replied gruffly.

"They're trying to smoke us out." Sam interjected from where he lay next to Maria in the crawlspace. Turning to the woman lying next to him, he asked, "Can you finish things down here?"

"Yeah..." Maria replied with a sigh, "If you can keep the Cardies from shaking us to pieces then I think I can get us going again."

As Sam returned to his position at the pilot's chair, a voice came through the ship's speakers. *"This is Gul Rejak. You have committed crimes against the Cardassian Union. Surrender now and your lives will be spared."*

"Don't respond." Worf counseled from his position at the weapons console. "They can triangulate on our signal."

"I had no intention of giving him the satisfaction." Lavelle replied his lips curled down into a frown as yet another spatial charge rocked the tiny runabout.

"Good." The Klingon warrior nodded his head approvingly as he swore an oath, "We will not surrender. We will all either make it out together or we will die together."

"I'll second that." Sam affirmed in a grim tone. He called out over his shoulder at the women, "What about you, Maria...Alyssa?"

"Agreed." Alyssa said grimly as she took out a hypospray, loading it with a lethal cocktail of cyalodin and Nogatch hemlock—enough for herself and everyone else on the runabout—and then set it aside next to her, quietly swearing, "I won't let them do to us what they did to Jaxa and I won't let them get their paws on her again either."

Rushing back from the engine area, Maria declared, "If it comes to it, I'll die

before letting that pig Rejak get anywhere near me, but we're not dead yet!" Returning to her station at the copilot's chair, the young Brazilian called up the display. As the warp engines indicators changed from red to yellow to green, she remarked smugly, "Am I good, or what?"

"Oh, you're good..." Sam quipped, flashing his companion a quick leer, "You're damned good." Turning towards the large Klingon sitting next to him, the Canadian helmsman asked, "You ready, Mr. Worf?"

His lips turned up into a feral grin, the Klingon replied, "Yes...it is time we gave Gul Rejak our answer."

"Why are we entering the asteroid belt, Sir? Why not simply fire at the asteroids...surely we will eventually destroy the Ferengi vessel and without any risk to ourselves?"

Turning towards his executive officer, Gul Tersel responded, "We cannot be sure. The tylium deposits effectively deflect our scanners at all but the closest of distances. There is no choice but for us to come within close range." Pausing for a moment, the young gul added, "Also, I would like to try to take our mysterious assailants alive—I have a feeling we're going to find that they are not Ferengi." Turning towards his sensor technician, the gul ordered, "Pay close attention to your scans—you'll only catch them for a moment through all the clutter."

"Understood, Sir." The technician responded as he hunched over his console.

"Now..." The gul stated in a flat tone, "We root our quarry out. There is nowhere for them to go. They can hide—but only for awhile—and we will be there when they come out."

"The Cardassian vessels have closed and begun scanning." Data reported as Commander Hobson cupped his chin.

"This Gul seems to be very patient and methodical." Chris noted approvingly. "Note his search pattern...how he and his partner are gradually sweeping the area. He's in no hurry."

“But we are...” The android officer noted. “The longer we stay out here, the more likely reinforcements will arrive.”

“That’s why we’re going to have to get his attention...but do so subtly.”

“I believe I have a solution.” Data declared. “There’s an asteroid with a rich tylium vein approximately fifty thousand kilometers away at bearing ninety degrees. I can modulate the impulse engines to leave a distinct trail. The Cardassians will assume the trail to be the result of engine damage.”

After a few moments considering his rival’s plan and not finding any noticeable holes in it, Commander Hobson nodded his head in assent. “Go ahead. When you are ready, I’ll lay the course in for the planetoid.”

“No response from the Federation runabout, Sir.” The *Linesa’s* executive officer declared.

His lips curling up into an icy grin, Gul Rejak replied, “I didn’t expect one.” Shaking his head in an almost rueful manner, the corrupt gul pressed a flashing red button on the arm of his chair as he muttered to himself, “Ah...I’ll miss you my pet...but...I’ll find another toy...maybe...should she survive...the dusky skinned human who dared to threaten me?” Addressing his weapons officer, Rejak ordered, “Escalate the barrage.”

“Yes, Sir.” The weapons officer responded as four spatial charges launched from the warship dispersed, arcing their way towards the nebula, their explosions appearing as orange flashes on the viewscreen.

Taking yet another reading from her tricorder, Alyssa’s heart skipped a beat as she noticed the sudden spike in her patient’s heart rate. “What the hell?” The Japanese nurse swore as her Bajoran patient suddenly began to scream and thrash about.

“What’s happening back there?” Sam called out, his finger hovering over the button that would activate the *Loire’s* warp engines.

Quickly injecting her patient with a sedative, Alyssa responded, a note of alarm in her voice “I think it’s Jaxa’s pain implant—I believe it’s overloading.”

"How is she?" The helmsman asked, his voice edged with concern.

"She'll die...." Alyssa answered back, shaking her head as the tormented young woman thrashed about, "...unless that implant is removed."

Recovering his seat after the *Loire* was shaken yet again by the near impact of the Cardassian spatial charges, Lieutenant Commander Worf declared, "They are getting too close...we have to go now." Turning towards Nurse Ogawa, the Klingon officer asked, "Can you remove the implant?"

"I'm...I'm..." Alyssa stammered, "I'm not sure...I'm not a surgeon..."

Looking with compassion on the Japanese woman, Worf declared in a voice filled with confidence, "You can do it. You've always handled yourself well in emergencies and you have learned from the very best. Just do the best you can...no matter what happens...Ensign Sito will understand."

"Thank you, Mr. Worf." The young nurse, regaining her confidence, answered back in a soft voice. Turning towards Ensign Django, she called out as she tried to hold down a thrashing Sito Jaxa, "Maria? I could use your help for a moment. If I'm going to operate on Jaxa, I'm going to need her restrained, and I can't do it alone."

Catching Sam out of the corner of her eye nodding his head, Maria got out of her seat, "I'm on my way, Alyssa." Quickly rushing back, the Brazilian woman knelt down beside Alyssa. Struggling, Maria held down the thrashing Sito as Alyssa first tied down her arms and legs and then her mid-section.

Shaking her head at the heaving Sito, Alyssa injected her with another sedative, stating as she laid out the surgical instruments contained in her emergency medical kit, "That should calm her down long enough."

"Do you need me for anything else?" Maria asked, gulping, as Alyssa grasped the exscalpel in her hands.

"No..." The Japanese nurse responded with a wan smile, "You better get back up front—they're probably going to need you there soon."

Inwardly sighing in relief that she wouldn't have to actually assist in the surgery, Maria put her hand on the nurse's shoulder, "Good luck, Alyssa—I know you can do it."

"Thanks." Nurse Ogawa said in a soft voice as she activated the exoscalpel. Pausing for a moment to say a silent prayer, she prepared to make her incision as she heard Sam's voice.

"Here we go!"

As the patrol vessels closed on their prey, now drifting stationary in the asteroid belt, Gul Tersel addressed his sensor technician, "Power readings?"

"Minimal." The technician promptly responded. "Readings and visual evidence indicates damage to the engines supporting the evidence we saw from the trail we followed."

"Possibly..." The cautious Tersel conceded as he cupped his chin, "Or perhaps our foe has prepared a little surprise for us..."

"Your orders, Sir?" Tersel's executive officer asked as the patrol ship's weapons officer's finger hovered over the button that would discharge the craft's disruptors towards its foe.

Deciding that the possible rewards coming from the capture of whoever was in the disabled craft outweighed the risks, the young gul commanded the officer in charge of the second vessel, "Tractor the Ferengi vessel a safe distance away from that asteroid and send a boarding party to it. Take control of the ship and anyone on board it."

His lips turning up into a smile at both the prospect of action and at the glory that accrue to him for securing this prize, the gul commanding the second vessel immediately and smartly responded, "At once, Gul Tersel."

Observing the two Cardassian ships through the Ferengi vessel's viewscreen, Commander Hobson remarked in a wry tone, "Now we see what sort of being the Cardassian officer is."

Cocking his head to the left, Commander Data inquired, "I do not understand, Commander."

His lips turning up into an icy grin, Hobson explained, "How he reacts here will determine what we do and the probabilities of our getting out of this situation intact."

His positronic brain swiftly computing the various permutations, the android officer nodded his head in understanding. "I see. If he takes an ultra-cautious stance he will pull back to maximum weapons range and open fire on us."

"Correct..." Chris responded. "If he does that, we'll need to get the escape pod before their fire can breach our shields..."

"And hope that the resulting chain reaction explosion caused when the *Pursuit* explodes near the tylium covers our escape rather than destroying us in the process." Data interjected, completing his human companion's thoughts.

"Precisely." Hobson agreed, pausing for a moment before continuing. "But if he's the reckless and foolish sort..."

"Then he'll order both vessels to close to transporter range." Data stated, once again completing his teammate's thoughts. "In which case both ships will be either severely damaged or destroyed in the chain reaction that will result from the *Pursuit* self-destructing, giving us a clear route of escape—provided we make it to the escape pod in time."

"Right again." Hobson affirmed, and then detecting motion coming from one of the vessels on the viewscreen, the human officer's lips turned down into a frown. "It looks like this gul knows his craft. He's ordering the other vessel to close with us while he stays back. Now, if that second vessel locks on to us with a tractor beam..."

"That would be the worst case scenario." Data surmised as Hobson nodded his head in assent.

"Right, Commander." Hobson replied. "If he does that, we'll have no choice then but to immediately get to the escape pods and activate the cascading effect before the tractor beam can take us too far away from the asteroid."

"Leaving us no room for error." Data remarked. "I estimate our odds should that scenario come to pass as being approximately two hundred thirty thousand to one."

Shaking his head, Chris managed a wry smile, "That's why I never play dabo." Watching as the Cardassian vessel drew even closer, the *Sutherland* First Officer remarked, "Hmmm...looks like the commander of our second ship is the impatient sort—good for us." Getting up out of his seat, Hobson pressed the button on the device Tol had given him. "We had better hurry, Commander Data...if Mr. Tol is right...and he usually is about these things, then we have at most five minutes until this ship explodes."

"Hail Gul Resev!" Gul Tersel called out in an angry tone as Resev's ship drew ever closer to the Ferengi vessel. As Resev's smug visage came on to the viewscreen, Tersel swore, "Why are you disregarding my orders to engage your tractor beam?"

"There is no risk." Resev replied confidently. "The power readings on the Ferengi vessel are minimal. It is no threat to us." His lips curling up into a sneer, Resev remarked, "Tractoring it would just be a waste of time. We will board it, restore its systems and then take it back to Gul Rejak as a prize."

Shaking his head, Gul Tersel muttered under his breath, "Fool." Addressing his sensor officer, the young gul ordered, "Keep a close watch over your readings. I want to be informed of anything out of the ordinary...no matter how slight."

"The Federation vessel!" The helmsman of the *Linesa* called out as the *Loire* darted out of the nebula above the Cardassian cruiser. Its phasers and photon torpedoes arcing towards the much larger vessel's engines as the tiny runabout quickly dashed away leaving an enraged Gul in its wake.

"Pursue at once!" Rejak bellowed as the *Linesa* quickly recovered from the *Loire's* surprise attack. "Maximum warp."

"Warp engines not engaging, Sir." The helmsman reluctantly reported as the Federation runabout grew ever smaller in the viewscreen as the voice of the ship's engineer came through the ship's intercom, "Warp engines are temporarily off line..."

Maintaining an outward calm while seething inside, Gul Rejak asked in a

dangerously still voice, “How long until the warp engines are repaired?”

“No more than five minutes, Sir.” The engineering officer promptly replied.

“You have two minutes.” Rejak rejoined, his voice now carrying a menacing tone, “Or I will have a new chief engineer.”

Grunting at the engineering officer’s prompt reply, Rejak addressed his helmsman. “The moment our engines are back online, you are to pursue at maximum warp. Turning towards his weapons officer, the incensed prefect further commanded, “Fire the moment you are within range—I want that ship and everyone on board it destroyed.”

“All right!” Sam called out triumphantly as the *Galor* class vessel disappeared behind them. “We did it.”

The feral grin that had been on his face now replaced by a frown, Lieutenant Commander Worf, speaking from his position at the weapons console, cautioned, “We are not safe yet. Our actions have only bought us a few moments of time.” Turning back towards Nurse Ogawa, the Klingon warrior asked, “How is Ensign Sito?”

Hunched over her patient, wielding an exscalpel in one hand as she carefully probed for the implant, the young nurse sighed, “Her heart rate is weak and irregular.” Momentarily triumphant, she added, “I think I’ve found it,” only to fall once again into despair seconds later as she cursed, “Damn. The implant is so deeply tied into both her circulatory and nervous systems.” Pausing as she barely held back her tears, Alyssa cried out despondently as she held the surgical instrument loosely in her hand, “I don’t think I can do this...”

“Yes you can!” Sam exclaimed, rushing to the nurse’s side as Ensign Django took over the controls. Placing a comforting arm around friend’s shoulders, the Canadian helmsman gave her a brief hug, “I know you can do this. Remember...you’ve learned from the best.”

Grateful for her friend’s support, Alyssa managed a wan smile, “Thanks, Sam...” She said softly as one hand gently caressed his cheek. Gripping her scalpel, the young nurse turned back to her patient, “I just hope it’s enough.”

"Damn." Chris swore as he eyed the two Cardassians guarding the access to the torpedo bay.

"We have only ninety seconds left..." Data observed as he silently counted down the time until explosion.

"Just what I always wanted..." Hobson remarked a rare scowl on his face as he took aim with his phaser, knocking out the guard on the left, "To spend my last moments with a walking chronometer."

Firing his phaser at the guard on the right, Data commented, an almost wry tone to his voice, as the Cardassian crumpled to the ground, "I thought that you appreciated precision, Commander Hobson."

Fighting to keep the smile from his lips, Hobson stated in his usual patrician voice, "I do...and by my calculations, we have less than a minute."

"Forty-five seconds to be precise." Data corrected as Hobson, shaking his head, led the way into the torpedo room.

"This is our way out." Chris declared as he opened the access panel of the torpedo that Tol had modified. Most of the interior that normally carried the warhead and its circuitry had been gutted, leaving just enough room for the two Starfleet officers to lie in, along with life support for Commander Hobson. Wriggling into the tube first, Chris lay on his side as he placed the oxygen mask over his face. Quickly keying in the launch sequence, Data clambered in afterwards, replacing the access cover just moments before a klaxon sounded.

Striding confidently on to the bridge of the captured Ferengi freighter, Gul Resev smirked triumphantly as he approached the flashing display on the pilot's console. *Tersel was a fool. He should have taken personal command of this expedition. Now I will claim the prize, the prisoners when they are captured, and the thanks of Gul Rejak.* Glancing down at the flashing display, the smug gul looked curiously at the flashing Ferengi characters. Calling out to one of his soldiers, he commanded, "Bring that tricorder here." Using the tricorder to translate the Ferengi script, Resev caught his breath. "5...4...3..."

"Frinx me."

"Launching now!" Data exclaimed as the torpedo carrying him and his human

teammate darted out into space, racing just ahead of the inferno caused by the exploding starships.

Looking on at the conflagration taking place on his main viewscreen, Gul Tersel shook his head at the sight of the debris field before him. "Resev was reckless." Tersel declared in a solemn voice. "He acted like a Klingon—too impatient for glory. He should have done as he was told."

"So why did you let him continue?" His executive officer, a long-time friend of Gul Tersel's, asked, curious. "You could have relieved him of command or took personal command of the salvage operation."

His lips curling up in an ironic grin, Tersel replied, "The humans have an old expression... 'Giving someone enough rope to hang themselves with'...I believe is how it goes. That's just what I did with Resev. Besides being ambitious, he was always trying to curry favor with Gul Rejak..."

"You don't need to say anything more, old friend." The executive officer replied with a frown. . Taking a deep breath, the executive officer was about to suggest beginning rescue operations for the injured patrol ship when the sensor technician called out, "An object has been detected moving at high warp speed. Approximate size...that of a large photon torpedo."

"Your orders, Gul Tersel?" The executive officer asked.

This is all Gul Rejak's doing. The young gul thought as he cursed the prefect's name silently. His actions...his 'arrangements' with the Orions...and others... have soiled all of us—myself included. If I had my choice, I would send a case of the best kanar I could afford to those in that pod and their friends on that Federation runabout for all the humiliation they are causing Rejak. A thin smile crossing his lips, Tersel made his decision. *I might not be able to buy you that kanar just yet...he said inwardly, addressing his thoughts towards whoever was in that escape craft...but I can do this much for you.* Taking a deep breath, he shook his head, "Disregard it...it's probably nothing more than debris."

Sharing his commanding officer's contempt for Gul Rejak, the executive officer nodded his head. "Understood, Gul Tersel. Rescue operations commencing." Leaning close, he whispered in Tersel's ear, "Don't worry, old friend...I will make sure that the log entry records that we detected nothing but debris."

I'm still alive! Commander Hobson exulted inwardly as he breathed through the oxygen mask. Lying literally nose to nose to Commander Data, Chris unconsciously stiffened.

"I apologize for violating your 'personal space', Commander." The android officer, picking up immediately on his human companion's discomfort, stated contritely.

"Nothing you can do about it." Chris replied, a note of genuine gratitude in his voice. "We knew space would be tight to begin with." The *Sutherland* First Officer said as he activated the emergency transponder.

"Thank you." Data answered back, responding to Commander Hobson's thoughtful gesture. "If it would make you more comfortable..." he offered, "I can temporarily shut down my systems."

"No..." Chris replied, "I have a feeling we're going to be out here for a while. Some conversation until we are rescued would be welcome."

"Closing to weapons range." The executive office of the *Linesa* reported as the *Loire* grew larger in the Cardassian cruiser's viewscreen.

"Then by all means..." Gul Rejak ordered, "Fire!" Disruptor beams and torpedoes lanced out from the Cardassian warship, racing towards the tiny Federation runabout that was their target with the corrupt gul watching in satisfaction as the viewscreen was peppered with explosions.

"Dammit!" Alyssa Ogawa cried out as the *Loire* shook violently. "Keep shaking this ship like this and I'm going to lose Sito!"

"Sorry!" Sam called back, "But we're under attack!"

"I've got the inertial dampeners set to max!" Maria declared, shaking her head, "That's the best I can do."

His fingers flying over the weapons console, Worf announced in a gruff tone, "I've fired the last of our torpedoes." Shaking his head as the torpedoes impacted harmlessly against the Cardassian cruiser's shields, the Klingon warrior reported in a toneless voice, "No effect," as the tiny runabout shook

yet once again from the near impact of the Cardassian weapons.

"I'm about to remove the implant." Nurse Ogawa stated as she severed the last remaining connections of the pain device to Sito Jaxa's body. Then, the young Bajoran convulsed as Alyssa cried out as she reached for the cardiostimulator, "Dammit! I was afraid of that. That motherfrinxing device was tied in so much to her circulatory system that it was taking over the functions of her heart!" Taking the cardiostimulator in her hand, the Japanese nurse shook her head in dismay as the young Bajoran's heart remained still. "Work, dammit!" Alyssa swore as she quickly readjusted the instrument. Shaking her head as the medical device still failed to work, Nurse Ogawa, setting it down with a scowl, rapidly began to massage her old friend's heart. "C'mon, Jaxa...we're almost there..." She begged as her fingers tried to coax her friend's heart back into life, "Don't give up on me now!" Then, after what seemed like an eternity to Alyssa, but was in fact mere moments, her medical tricorder beeped as the young Bajoran woman's heart once again began pumping on its own.

Sighing in relief, a warm smile appeared on Nurse Ogawa's face as she reached for the autosuture, "That was too close, Jaxa...don't you dare put me through that again."

"They're gaining on us!" Sam shouted as the tiny ship was rocked by yet another volley. Executing a violent turn, the Canadian helmsman sighed in relief as a spread of photon torpedoes barely missed. "If we don't do something, they're going to catch us before we make it to our side."

"I might have an idea." Maria declared as she got up out of her seat, "But it's an all or nothing thing."

The lights dimming as the runabout was shaken yet again, Sam quipped, "Right now I'd say we're at the all or nothing stage—go for it!"

"On it!" Maria shouted as she rushed back to the engine area. As she popped the access panel, she detailed her plan, "I picked this up while I was in Engineering back on the *Ulysses*..." she said, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, "...before I got transferred to the *Suthy* for threatening to punch out that a-hole of a gamma shift duty officer I served under. Old Kalach might be a tight-assed old Efrosian, but he knows his stuff where engineering is concerned. By remodulating the anti-matter flux so..." She said as she worked, "...and recalibrating the matrix, I can give us a quick burst of speed...hopefully enough to get us to our side of the line before the Cardies catch us. But..."

“But?” Sam interjected, cocking an eyebrow as he put the *Loire* through yet another series of maneuvers that would have left him and the rest of his team splattered against the walls of the tiny runabout had it not been for the inertial dampeners.

“Yeah...there’s a but.” Maria confessed as she finished her adjustments. “That’s where the ‘all or nothing’ comes in. It’s like adding nitrous oxide to the fuel mix of an internal combustion engine.”

“We get a sudden burst of speed...” Sam began, only to be interrupted by his Brazilian shipmate.

“But it’ll exhaust all of our fuel in the process.” She said, adding a final note of caution, “Or it’ll blow us up—fifty/fifty as to which.”

“So we need to wait until the last possible moment to use it.” Lavelle concluded as he flashed a grin, “Gotcha.” Then as Ensign Django returned to her seat next to him, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, “Thanks.”

As weapons fire once again bracketed the runabout, Worf called out, “The enemy is gaining.”

“How far are we from our side of the line?” Sam asked as his finger hovered over the flashing green button that would activate Maria’s all or nothing gamble.

“Close enough,” was Worf’s laconic reply as Sam pushed the button.

“Our last barrage almost had them.” Gul Rejak declared a triumphant grin on his face. “Continue pursuit and maintain weapons...” However, before he could complete his statement, the tiny Federation runabout disappeared from his viewscreen. “What happened?” The Cardassian prefect demanded, “Did we destroy it?”

“No, Sir.” An astonished sensor technician answered, “Our instruments recorded a sudden build up of energy and then they record the craft proceeding at ...warp eleven.” Returning to his sensor readouts, the technician further reported, an audible sigh escaping his lips at the fact that this time he had good news to report, “The craft has left a matter-antimatter trail that can be traced.”

“Do so.” Rejak ordered as he leaned back in his command chair, “I want that ship and its crew.”

“Gul Rejak,” The *Linesa’s* executive officer tentatively interjected, “We will soon be crossing into Federation space...”

“I don’t care.” Rejak replied in a grim tone. “We will catch and destroy them and be back on our side of the line before Starfleet even knows we are there. Proceed!”

“We cannot afford to remain in this area much longer, Captain.” Lieutenant Commander Varok, the Science Officer of the *USS Sutherland*, now temporarily acting as its First Officer, stated in his usual flat Vulcan monotone.

“I know...” Captain Shelby responded, her lips turned down into a worried frown, “But the *Loire* and Commanders Hobson and Data still have a bit more time in their window, and I intend to give them every second I can.”

“Understood, Sir.” Varok replied as Lieutenant Atoa reported from his position at Tactical.

“Picking up weapons discharges from the Cardassian side...and...” His lips turning up into a wide grin he continued, “An object moving away at a very high rate of speed towards the Federation border.”

“Notify the *Defiant*, put the ship on Yellow Alert, and set course for those coordinates—maximum warp.” Shelby ordered as she sat back in her chair, her worried frown now being replaced by a slight grin of anticipation.

As the *Loire* cruised to a stop, Sam Lavelle leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head. “Well...we’re on our side of the border...all we can do now is wait and hope that our people get here before the Cardies do.”

Still monitoring her patient, Alyssa asked, her voice edged with concern, “Do you think they’ll cross?”

"Rejak will." Worf promptly answered. "We humiliated him. Make no mistake...he will seek revenge." Turning his attention towards Maria, the Klingon warrior added for her benefit, "He will especially seek vengeance against you, Ensign Django."

"Why?" Sam asked, his voice tone a mixture of curiosity and concern for his friend.

"Because I threatened to cut his balls off." Maria responded, an evil grin on her face.

"Ensign Django is correct." Worf interjected and then explained, "By making that particular threat, she attacked what a Cardassian male holds most dear—his virility...his ability to have a large family."

"I see..." Sam replied, and then turning his attention to Alyssa, asked, "How's Jaxa doing?"

"She's stable, for now." Nurse Ogawa replied, with a frown. "But I don't know how long her condition will hold without proper facilities."

As she finished her words, an alarm flashed on Mr. Worf's board. "The Cardassians..." The Klingon warrior announced in a grave tone, "They've crossed the border."

"Cardassian vessel...*Galor* class...has crossed the border, Captain." Lieutenant Atoa reported. "They will be at the runabout's location in approximately three minutes."

"Our ETA?" Liz asked the Ensign Rodriguez, currently filling in at helm.

"At least five minutes, Sir." The young ensign replied dishearteningly.

"Mr. Tol..." Captain Shelby commanded, calling the Chief Engineer on the ship's intercom, "I want you to push those frinxing engines of yours to the max. Get me to my people before the damned Cardies!"

"Aye, Captain!" The Trill engineer responded. Turning to his crew, he called out without a trace of his usual levity, "Treasure...Lythwar...everyone...I want every microjoule out of these engines. Let's see how far we can really push

‘em.”

“Gul Rejak!” The Cardassian sensor technician called out, a note of alarm in his voice, “A Federation starship...*Nebula* class...is approaching target coordinates.”

“How soon will they arrive?” Rejak inquired with a scowl.

“We will arrive well ahead of them.” The sensor technician responded with a triumphant grin.

“Excellent.” The corrupt gul exclaimed. “This will make my victory all the more sweet. We will either destroy or capture our prey before the very eyes of Starfleet with them being unable to do anything about it. It will provide an object lesson to both Starfleet and the Federation.” Leaning back in his chair, Rejak commanded, “Maintain current course and speed. This matter is almost at an end.”

“Well guys...” Sam said with a deep sigh as, getting out of his seat, he joined Alyssa and Sito, taking both women’s hands in his, “We did our best—that’s all anyone could ask.”

“I’m sure Jaxa understands.” Alyssa replied consolingly as she squeezed Sam’s hand while gently caressing her unconscious friend’s cheek with her other hand.

“At least we got her out of that hell hole.” Maria remarked, a defiant tone to her voice as she joined Sam and Alyssa at Sito’s side, “I don’t know about anyone else here, but I’d rather die with friends than live a life like that.” Taking the suicide pills from the slave collars that she and Alyssa had worn earlier, she handed them out to everyone. “You guys can do what you want, but they’re not taking me alive.”

Joining the others, Worf looked down protectively at them. A warm smile on his face, the Klingon warrior declared in a heartfelt voice, “It has been an honor to serve with such noble warriors. Taking Ensign’s Django’s hand in his, the son of Mogh advised, “Wait until the last moment. When the time comes...we will die together...but not until then.”

Her intercom beeping, Captain Shelby responded, as she heard her Chief Engineer's voice, the Captain remarked, "Tell me that you can get me there in time, Jadon."

"I've given you everything I can, Captain." The joined Trill replied with a sigh, "As to whether it's going to be enough or not...I can't say."

Exhaling deeply, Liz consoled, "Thanks, Jadon. I know you did the best you could." Addressing her helmsman, the Captain inquired, "How soon?"

Shaking her head, Ensign Rodriguez answered back, "I'm not sure, Captain."

Nodding her head, Liz turned to her tactical officer. "Take us to Red Alert, Mr. Atoa. Shields up and weapons charged. If those damned Cardies do anything to my people...we're going to hunt them down and take them out...understood?" As her eyes fell upon each member of the bridge crew, she was rewarded with nodding heads until she came to her Vulcan acting First Officer who simply raised an eyebrow. Addressing her next remarks to her Science Officer, the headstrong captain stated in a kindly voice, "I'll understand if you feel the need to lodge a protest at my actions, Mr. Varok..."

"It is a potentially dangerous action, Captain." The elderly Vulcan officer replied, counseling prudence, "And could involve the Federation in a war with the Cardassians at a most inopportune time."

"I know." Liz acknowledged in a soft tone, "And I'll understand and will not hold it against you if you feel strongly enough about it to where you feel you need to leave the bridge."

Shaking his head, Varok replied in an almost grandfatherly voice, "You are my captain and this is my ship. With your permission, I will remain at my post."

Her lips turning up into a smile, Shelby nodded her head as Ensign Rodriguez interrupted, "Captain. We are at the coordinates—and so are the Cardassians."

Liz's attention now focused on her main viewscreen, she saw the *Loire* drifting in space, a *Galor* class cruiser closing in on its location. "Hail that cruiser. Tell them to back off or else."

"Sir!" The Cardassian communications technician called out, "Federation starship is hailing us. They are instructing us to break off our pursuit or they will attack."

"They will, will they?" Gul Rejak replied in a dismissive tone. "How close are they to our position?"

"We are well within their weapons range, Sir." The sensor technician reported before adding, "Their weapons are charged and shields up."

"Yahoo!" Sam exclaimed as the *Sutherland* appeared on the runabout's viewscreen. "The cavalry's here." A broad smile on his face, Sam hailed the Federation starship. "*Sutherland*...this is *Loire*! It's good to see you!"

"Good to see you too, *Loire*." Captain Shelby responded. "How did your vacation go?"

"Well..." Sam replied, all traces of humor gone from his voice, "We found our old friend...only she's not in very good shape."

"I see..." Liz responded, "How's she holding up?"

"Nurse Ogawa says that we need to get her to a sickbay as soon as possible." Sam answered back.

"We'll do the best we can." Shelby promised, "But you're going to have to wait a bit...as you can see, we've got to get rid of some party crashers first and we can't lower our shields to beam you aboard."

"Understood, Captain." Sam replied. "We'll see you soon, but before you go...I'm uploading our logs to you...I think you'll find what's on them—especially the stuff regarding the Cardassian Prefect, Gul Rejak—interesting."

"I'll make sure to take a look and don't worry, Sam..." Liz promised, "We'll get you out of this. Count on it." Turning to Mr. Atoa, she ordered, "Get me that Cardassian vessel—let's see if he really wants a war..." Nodding his head, the *Sutherland's* tactical officer once again hailed the Cardassian warship

hovering on the viewscreen, its weapons trained on the tiny runabout.

“Gul Rejak! The Federation starship is hailing us again.” Responding to his commanding officer’s curt nod of the head, the Cardassian communications technician answered the *Sutherland’s* hail, putting Captain Shelby’s image on the main viewscreen.

“Cardassian vessel.” Captain Shelby announced in a firm voice, “This is Captain Elizabeth Shelby, commanding the *USS Sutherland*. You are in Federation territory with your weapons charged and targeted at a Federation runabout. Explain your intentions...Now.”

Scowling at the voice tone of the impertinent human woman glaring at him, Gul Rejak replied in as disdainful a voice as he could muster, “This is Gul Rejak. The occupants of that vessel have committed crimes against the Cardassian Union. I demand that they be immediately turned over for trial.”

“I see...” Liz replied in a deceptively sweet voice. “Well...we wouldn’t want problems between our two governments, now would we? So...what sort of charges are we talking about?”

His lips turning up into an insincere smile, Rejak responded, this time honeying his words, “I’m glad that you are willing to listen to reason, Captain. I regret that the individuals in question...I would suspect that they are Maquis...who have obviously commandeered Federation property...have caused such problems.” Magnanimously, he declared, “I will be happy to remove them from your hands now.”

Her lips now curling up into a sneer, Liz answered back, “I don’t think so, Gul Rejak. You see...the individuals on that ship have evidence that a certain Cardassian prefect who shall go unnamed—for now—has been engaged in a variety of criminal activities including...” Shelby then ticked off her fingers, “...murder, rape, torture, kidnapping, trafficking in slaves and drugs and narcotics...shall I go on?”

“Then it appears that we are in an interesting dilemma, Captain.” Rejak retorted, his scowl returning. “I am not going to leave without seeing the prisoners either in my custody or their ship destroyed.”

“And I will not let you do either.” Liz promptly riposted.

Coating his words with honey once again, Rejak replied, "Come now, Captain. Our ships are evenly matched. Even should your ship triumph—by no means a foregone conclusion—I will have first destroyed the runabout and all aboard her and severely damaged your vessel. Plus, my government will take a very dim view of your protecting criminals and terrorists. Are the people on that small craft really worth risking hundreds of lives, your career, and a possible war?"

Smiling as a light blinked on the control panel on the arm of her command chair, Liz put on her sweetest smile as she responded to Gul Rejak's threat, "You made one major mistake in your analysis, Gul Rejak..."

"Oh?" The Cardassian replied, the smug grin still on his face, "By all means, Captain Shelby, do please enlighten me."

"With pleasure, Gul Rejak." Liz replied as she pressed the flashing button on her chair arm. "You see, your calculations rest on us being the only ships here. The problem with that is that I didn't come to the party alone" Shelby announced with a deliberate flourish as the *Defiant*, decloaking with shields up and weapons charged, suddenly appeared beside the larger *Sutherland*, "Say hello to my little friend..." Her smile vanishing, the blonde captain challenged, her voice tone now taking on a menacing cast, "So...Gul Rejak...you still wanna dance?"

"Not today!" Gul Rejak growled as he turned away in disgust from the viewscreen. "But mark my words, Captain Shelby...there will be a reckoning." Motioning for his communications officer to cut off transmission, the humiliated Gul, along with the rest of his crew as well as the crew on the *Defiant* and those on the *Loire*, heard the human captain's final taunt as the *Linesa* turned about to return to Cardassian space.

"Pussy."

Watching with satisfaction as the *Linesa* retreated rapidly back the way it came, Captain Shelby activated her comm. "Thanks, Major Kira, I'll see you back at DS9."

Still laughing at the final insult that Shelby had given the Cardassian gul, Kira Nerys responded; "My pleasure, Captain. See you back at the station."

“Doctor Murakawa?” Liz requested as she activated her intercom, “Get your people ready—you’ve got patients incoming.” Turning towards Lieutenant Atoa, she ordered, “Manuele? Have the people on that runabout beamed directly to sickbay and then tractor the *Loire* to the hangar bay. Anara...maintain scans...Chris and Commander Data have to be out there somewhere—I don’t want to miss them.”

“Aye, Sir.” Multiple voices acknowledged as they hastened to comply with their captain’s orders. Several moments later, Anara’s lyrical voice rang out, “Captain...” The Deltan woman said in a voice tinged with relief, “Starfleet transponder signal detected...it’s them. I have a transporter lock.”

“Excellent!” Liz exclaimed as she leaped out of her seat. “Have them beamed to sickbay as well. Seeing the pleading expression on her operations officer’s face, Shelby beamed beatifically, “Yes, Lieutenant, you may accompany me.” Turning towards the Vulcan science officer as she and Anara made their way towards the elevator, Liz declared, “Mr. Varok...you have the con.”

As soon as the crew of the *Loire* materialized in the *Sutherland* sickbay, Doctor Murakawa and her people sprang into action. Rushing to the biobed containing Ensign Sito, Denise passed a medical tricorder over the young Bajoran. Immediately spotting the scar from Alyssa’s recent surgery, the *Sutherland* CMO called out to the young nurse, “Are you the one who performed surgery?”

“Yes, Doctor.” Alyssa replied uncertainly, fully expecting to be chewed out for what she was sure the doctor would consider a botched and rushed job.

“Good work.” Denise said, her lips turned up in a genuine smile. “I could use your help here...” the doctor requested, “...if you’re sure you’re up for it?”

“Sure!” Alyssa beamed as she joined Dr. Murakawa at Sito’s bedside. “What do you want me to do?”

“First...” Denise said as she prepared for work, “You can fill me in on the patient and we’ll go on from there.” Shaking her head, the young doctor remarked somberly, “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Watching as Doctor Murakawa and Nurse Ogawa began the long healing

process for his old friend, Sam turned towards Lieutenant Commander Worf and Ensign Django, who were both at that time being fussed over by medical technicians. "Well...we did it." He sighed, "We brought Jaxa home."

"Yes." The Klingon warrior replied, "We did. She is now back where she belongs—amongst friends."

Shrugging off the medtech's ministrations, Maria walked over towards both Sam and Worf, hugging each of them, "Hey...we did something good." Her lips turning up into an uncharacteristically shy smile, Maria said in a soft voice that only her two companions could hear, "This is why I really joined Starfleet and why I stay in and put up with all the BS..." Her eyes now gazing at the prone body of Sito Jaxa on her biobed, the young Brazilian whispered as she brushed away a tear, "It's for people like her."

"She's passed the crisis phase—physically speaking, that is—and is resting now." Doctor Murakawa said to the little group gathered in her sickbay as she and Nurse Ogawa, both looking haggard, stripped off the red surgical gowns they were wearing. "We've flushed the drugs out of her system and removed all traces of the pain implant." Denise reported as she wiped the sweat from her brow, "But it wouldn't have happened without Nurse Ogawa's work." The *Sutherland* CMO declared as she addressed her next remarks to Captain Shelby, "I'm putting her in for a commendation and I'd like to ask that she be considered for promotion to full lieutenant—after all she did out there, combined with her previous record, I think she's more than earned it."

"I agree, Doctor." Liz replied as an astonished Alyssa looked on, her friend Sam's hand on her shoulder. "Once you've gotten everything written up, give it to me and I'll forward it with my recommendations."

"Way to go, Alyssa!" Sam exclaimed, cheering on his friend as Maria gave her a hug and Worf a congratulatory hand clasp. "You've earned it."

"And don't think I've forgotten the rest of you." Captain Shelby interjected as she addressed her next remarks to the rescue parties. "You're all in for commendations." A note of caution in her voice, she clarified, "Not that you'll ever be able to tell anyone what those commendations are for..."

"That's ok, Captain..." Sam modestly replied. An earnest expression on his face, he added, "We didn't do this for commendations anyway—we did it for

our friend.”

“I know...” Liz acknowledged with a compassionate smile, “...and it speaks highly of Ensign Sito that she has such good friends.” Pausing for a moment, the captain concluded, “Well...I have a ton of paperwork to submit before we get to Deep Space Nine, so I’ll take my leave. Until further notice you are all off duty—take some time to be with your friend and decompress. Mr. Worf...” Liz offered, addressing her next remarks to the Klingon officer before departing, “I’ll have temporary quarters assigned for you. Counselor Troi can show you the way, if you’d like?”

“Thank you, Sir.” The DS9 Strategic Operations Officer replied diffidently as Deanna approached her former lover, gently taking his hand.

“You and everyone here have done so much for Ensign Sito...” The Betazoid counselor remarked in a heartfelt voice, “But now she needs rest.”

“I’ll second that.” Doctor Murakawa chimed in. Then, seeing the determined look on the Bajoran girl’s rescuers’ faces, the doctor reluctantly conceded, “All right. One of you at a time can stay with her until we reach Deep Space Nine.”

“I’ll stay first.” Sam volunteered. The others, understanding Lavelle’s especially close ties of friendship to Ensign Sito, nodded their heads in unspoken agreement.

“Now that that’s settled...” Denise declared, her tired voice filled with affection for the little group, “...the rest of you...Shoo! Go get some sleep. Doctor’s orders.”

“You heard the Doctor.” Commander Hobson asserted in his usual clipped patrician voice. “Get out before I forget the Captain’s remark about you all being off duty until further notice.”

“Aye, Sir.” The group chorused as they each departed, Maria embracing Sam in a tight hug. “I’ll see you later.” The young Brazilian said as she kissed Lavelle, this time on the lips, their kiss lingering for several moments. Chuckling softly, she fended the handsomely roguish Canadian off with a gentle push, “Go...be with your friend. You know where you can find me.”

“I’ll come by and relieve you in a few hours, Sam.” A worn out Alyssa Ogawa remarked. A mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she teased, “You better get some rest...I have a feeling you’re going to need all the energy you can get for

later.” Laughing, she called out to the departing Ensign Django, “Wait up, Maria...you got time to show me this ‘Rick’s’ that you and Sam have been telling me about?”

“Sure, Alyssa!” Maria replied with an impish laugh, “It’ll give us a chance to talk about what Sam was like while he was on the *Enterprise*.”

“You need some time off yourself.” A solicitous Anara stated as she looked into Chris’s eyes. “I know you don’t like to show it...” The empathic Deltan declared, “...but you’re exhausted too. Come on...” She urged as she took the First Officer’s hand in hers, “I’ll make a deal with you—I’ll take you to Rick’s for a drink if you promise to go to your quarters and get some sleep.”

Watching as the others left, Sam looked down on his old friend. Bending over, he kissed his old friend on her forehead. “I’m sorry Jaxa for all that you’ve been put through.” Shaking his head, he held the young Bajoran’s hand in his, “We shouldn’t have left. We should have tried harder. I hope you can forgive us...that you can forgive me.” Sitting down in a chair that one of Doctor Murakawa’s nurses had thoughtfully provided for him, Lavelle drifted off to sleep, still holding on to his friends hands. As sleep finally overcame him, he didn’t see the slight smile briefly appearing on the Bajoran woman’s face, and then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone.

“That’s correct, Sir.” Shelby confirmed as she completed her report to the dark skinned admiral currently appearing on her monitor screen. “Her system had to be almost entirely flushed out due to the presence of Corillan acid and other drugs—not to mention what happened with the pain implant the Cardassians put into her. She never would have made it if hadn’t been for Lieutenant Ogawa’s quick thinking.” Her smile returning, Liz continued, “In fact they all performed admirably.”

“All right...All right, Elizabeth! You win!” Admiral Glover chuckled, “I’ll put through the commendations for all of them.” His laughter vanishing, he cautioned, “I’ll see what I can do about pushing through Nurse Ogawa’s promotion to full lieutenant, but I’m not sure it’ll get through—Thuosana will probably say that she hasn’t had enough time in grade.”

“Just don’t tell the admiral I recommended her...” Liz jibed with a crooked grin.

His laughter vanishing, Samson addressed the youthful captain, "Let me give you a piece of advice—old admiral to young captain. I don't know what happened between you and Admiral Shanthi and I'm not asking or ordering you to tell me..." he advised in a grandfatherly manner, "...but you need to resolve it somehow." He then sounded a note of caution, "It's not a good idea to stay on any admiral's bad side for too long—especially someone like Thuosana."

"I know, Sir, and you're right, of course..." Elizabeth diplomatically acknowledged before changing the subject, "So...has Terrence heard about Ensign Sito yet?"

"No, not yet." The admiral shook his head. "I'm going to tell him after we finish our conversation. *Cuffe* has just completed its latest mission and her crew is due for some R&R. I'll clear him to take it at Deep Space Nine. You should still be there when he arrives—it'll give you a chance to fill him in personally."

"Thanks." Liz replied. "And tell him that Lieutenant Dryer is working out excellently here. She's fit in just fine as our beta shift tactical officer. Mr. Atoa can't speak highly enough of her. I'm sure she'll be ready to take over as tactical officer somewhere else very soon."

"He'll be glad to hear that." Samson answered back before glancing at his chronometer. "Well, Captain, I better let you go now. Take care and..." he teased with a wicked grin, "...try not to have too much fun."

"There's never too much fun, Sir." The hedonistic captain riposted as the monitor went blank. Pausing for a moment to take a breath, Liz addressed the ship's computer, "Connect me with Captain Picard at Starfleet Academy."

"So...how have you been, Worf?" Deanna asked as she and her companion walked side by side down one of the *Sutherland's* corridors, the petite Betazoid and burly Klingon making a most incongruous pair.

"Better." The Klingon officer replied, his former lover and old friend listening intently to his every word, "For too long after the *Enterprise* was destroyed I...drifted...not sure of where I truly belonged."

"But now..." Deanna prompted.

“Now...” Worf continued, a warm smile on his face as he looked down on the counselor, “Now, I think I have found a home.”

“On Deep Space Nine?” Troi asked, returning her companion’s smile with one of her own.

“Yes.” Worf replied as the pair reached the door to his quarters. An affectionate smile still on his face, he asked diffidently, “How is Commander Riker?”

Chuckling softly, Deanna replied, “Will is fine. He’s currently at Utopia Planetia, overseeing the work on *Enterprise-E*.” After several moments of uncomfortable silence as the couple just stood out in the corridor, she asked in an uncertain tone, “Do you have any regrets?”

“About us?” Worf asked, receiving in response a gentle nod of the head from his Betazoid former lover. Shaking his head, the Klingon warrior-poet responded with a warm grin, “No...what we had together was...good...but it wasn’t enough for a long-term relationship. And we both know that.” Taking the counselor’s single nod of her head as assent, he continued, “I will always treasure our time together as par’Machai, but we were never fated to remain such. What is most important to me is that we are still friends. That is something that will never change.”

“Thank you.” Deanna replied as she repressed a sob. “I needed to hear that.” Hugging her former lover close to her, she sighed, “And I want you to know I feel the same way about you.”

“See...” Anara teased as she sat opposite Commander Hobson at Rick’s, the *Sutherland’s* crew lounge, decorated in the fashion of the 1940s era North African casino made famous by the ancient movie, *Casablanca*. “I told you...”

“Told me what?” Chris riposted as he sipped from his scotch—neat, single malt, specially ordered for the occasion.

“I told you that if you tried hard enough you could work with Commander Data.” The Deltan woman replied, flashing a triumphant smirk as she sipped her Antarean Sunrise.

"We are both Starfleet officers and professionals." Hobson primly replied, "Of course we would find a way to work together—regardless of our...personal...issues."

"True..." Anara conceded, "But still, I know from personal experience that it can be hard to overcome certain...feelings." Then, a mischievous twinkle to her eyes, the lovely Deltan woman leaned over and whispered into the First Officer's ear, "So...what did the two of you do while you were locked up so close together in that photon torpedo tube?"

Taking her leave of her old friend, Deanna Troi ran into another old friend as she was making her way to sickbay. "Data!" The counselor called out, "Over here!"

"Counselor Troi?" The android officer responded as he made his way towards his former *Enterprise* shipmate. "How are you?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing." Deanna answered back with a grin. "From what I've heard, you and Commander Hobson had quite the adventure."

"It did have its moments." Data deadpanned as the pair walked together.

"So..." The impish Betazoid asked, "What did the two of you talk about in that torpedo tube?"

Arriving in sickbay after she and Data said their good nights to each other, Deanna looked in to see Sam Lavelle fast asleep next to the slumbering Ensign Sito. Catching sight of the *Sutherland's* counselor, Max Freedman, standing next to Ensign Django, also looking on, she joined the pair.

"He's been with her all night." The curly haired Max said.

"I didn't have the heart to wake him up." Maria interjected with a sigh. "Alyssa went on to bed." Shaking her head, the young Brazilian said, "I couldn't get to sleep so I came back here."

"Why don't you take him to his quarters?" Deanna suggested, "We'll keep an

eye on her while you two get some sleep.”

“It’ll be all right, Maria...” Max threw in, adding his voice to that of his fellow counselor’s, while at the same time being careful to not make it seem to the temperamental young ensign that they were ganging up on her. “Besides, Sam would be more comfortable in his own bed. Ensign Sito’s safe now.”

“Yeah...you’re right.” Django conceded as she walked over to where Sam sat slumped in his chair. Nudging her friend awake, she walked him towards the door. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

As the young pair departed, Max sighed. “Were we ever that young, Deanna?”

“Speak for yourself!” Troi teased. Then, turning her attention back towards the Bajoran woman lying in the bed before them, her laughter vanished, “Ensign Sito has a long road ahead of her, you know.”

“Yeah.” Max replied, all traces of laughter gone from his voice as well. “But she’s not going to have to walk it alone. She’ll have plenty of friends to help her out—she’ll make it.”

Opening the door to Sam Lavelle’s quarters, Maria guided her semi-comatose friend to his bed. Stripping off his boots, the fiery young Brazilian snorted, “I’m not taking your clothes off.” Sighing as she took off her own boots, she slipped in the bed next to him. “Scootch over.” She growled as she nudged him in the side receiving a barely audible snort as an answer. “And don’t even think about getting any ideas, Enterprise...” she whispered as she began to drift into slumber, “I’m too damned tired right now.”

The End