

# Border Dogs The Merlin

By The Lone Redshirt

## Introduction

*Border Dogs* is a TOS-era series set in Earth year 2260 and following. The series focuses on Commander Silas "Sonny" Parker, CO of the Border Cutter USS *Merlin*. The story will be presented in *noir* style - first person from Parker's perspective. (Think "The Maltese Falcon" or the "Mike Hammer Mysteries.")

The cutter is a Kestral - class refit. Here's a link to the Starfleet Museum page to see and learn more about the *Merlin*: [Starfleet Museum - Kestral Class](#)

I hope you enjoy this foray into the 23rd century. As always, your comments and constructive criticism are welcome!

## Chapter One

Most folks consider the Borderlands to be the armpit of the Alpha quadrant. Me, I tend to think of a different part of the anatomy. It's an interesting sector, to be sure. Klingons, Orions, and the Federation, all vying for the same stretch of the cosmos. My job is to help keep the peace, rescue the wayward spacer, and stem the flow of illicit materials. I'm Silas Parker, commanding officer of the Starfleet Border Cutter *Merlin*. My friends and family call me "Sonny." Don't ask why. I'm part of the fifth generation of my family living on Centauri IV, which basically means I'm shorter than average for a human but a hell of a lot stronger. Growing up on a planet with 1.8 g's will do that for you. Anyway, this is my story of life as a Border Dog on a cramped and smelly cutter.

It began on a Tuesday in June of 2260 as I recall. I was still a lieutenant commander, serving as head of the refueling depot at Starbase 17. Not a particularly exciting assignment, but considering how I had squeaked through a court-martial six months earlier, I couldn't complain. The court martial?

Well, there was this small matter of shooting my former captain with a phaser. More about that later.

As I said, I was in my office on Starbase 17, having my second cup of coffee (black) and reviewing data slates with delivery schedules of deuterium, dilithium and anti-matter bottles to various and sundry starships. Nasty materials, but necessary if you want to break the speed of light. My job was to make sure they were distributed to ships in a safe and timely manner. A fairly important task, but as I said, not terribly exciting.

I was frowning over a report stating that the USS *Exeter* needed to purge its deuterium tanks, when the comm screen beeped and the face of a bored-looking Andorian Commander appeared.

“Commander Parker?” asked the Andorian.

“That’s right. What can I do for you?” I expected a complaint about a late fuel delivery. Andorians were sticklers for punctuality.

“I am V’taavash, aide to Admiral Prudhomme. The admiral would like to see you at your earliest convenience.”

I may not have graduated at the top of the class at Star Fleet Academy, but I was smart enough to know that when an admiral said, “earliest convenience” that meant right now! I got directions to the admiral’s office, signed off, straightened my tunic and headed for flag country.

Starbase 17 is one of the larger bases, almost like a city in space. My little office is located in the “bottom” while most of the important offices are near the top of the mushroom shaped starbase. I say most, because Admiral Prudhomme’s was only three levels above mine. I wondered about this as I also wondered why I was being summoned. I didn’t know the admiral, in fact I had never heard of him. Being summoned before an admiral was usually either very good news or very bad. Considering my luck over the past two years, I was not particularly optimistic.

The turbo lift deposited me on level 26, a non-descript corridor no different than dozens of others. I made my way until I found the designated office. A small sign read, “Rear Admiral Vincent D. Prudhomme – Sector Commander, Starfleet Border Service.”

Inside, I found the Andorian commander sitting behind a desk. He rose, face impassive, and simply gestured to another door behind him. "The Admiral will see you now, Commander Parker."

"Thanks," I said, and went in the designated door.

Only twice before in my career had I been in an admiral's office. Both times I was impressed by spaciousness, nice views from large viewports, plush carpet, etc. This time I was surprised to enter a somewhat dark and cramped office with no viewport. The carpet was the same as in the corridor and looked like it needed to be replaced. Furnishings were minimal and there were few pictures, scant decorations, and no framed citations. A dusty model of an old *Paris* – class light cruiser, the USS *Port Lowell* sat forlornly on a small shelf. For furniture, there was only a desk and two chairs. One was occupied by a barrel-chested man with close-cropped grey hair, dark bushy eyebrows and steel grey eyes. The gold braid on his grey uniform tunic indicated the rank of rear admiral (upper half). The admiral stood abruptly and thrust out his hand. I took it reflexively and he spoke.

"Prudhomme!" he barked. "Have a seat Commander Parker."

I took the other chair and the admiral settled into his own chair which creaked dangerously under his weight. He leaned back and looked at me appraisingly. Producing a data slate from somewhere, he began to scroll through it, grunting to himself from time to time. I said nothing and tried not to sweat. He finally spoke.

"Graduated 47th in your class from the academy. . . Received high marks on the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario . . . Served on the *Osprey*, the *Farragut*, then the *Gettysburg* where you received several commendations as second officer. . . Served on the destroyer, *Saladin*, as executive officer until you shot the captain with a phaser . . ." Prudhomme looked up with a raised bushy eyebrow.

"Yes sir. He wanted us to fire on a civilian Caitian ship he claimed harbored Kzinti soldiers. . . The phaser was set on stun," I added as an afterthought.

Prudhomme grunted and looked back at the slate. "Too bad," he rumbled. "You should have vaporized the S.O.B."

I managed to refrain from comment, although, truthfully, I agreed with the admiral. Captain Dennison had gone around the bend during our recent

unpleasantness with the Kzin and nearly murdered a shipful of innocent Caitian felinoids. I managed to stop him and spent a year trying to save my career (and avoid incarceration) while he went quietly into “retirement,” raising flowers or whatever lunatics do. Even though I was eventually acquitted, I pretty much knew my shot at commanding a ship was gone. The powers that be considered me “damaged goods.” I briefly considered resigning but quitting is not in my nature. Besides, with the losses from the Four-Year’s War with the Klingons and the skirmishes with the Kzin, Starfleet had issued a stop-loss order, so for the short-term, no one was allowed to retire or resign. Unless, of course, you went nuts like Dennison.

Prudhomme interrupted my thoughts. “Okay Parker, here’s the deal. I’m giving you two choices. You can stay here and spend the rest of your career pumping deuterium, or you can take command of a border cutter.”

I thought I had misunderstood the admiral, because I uttered a pithy, “Beg pardon?”

“Parker, you are being promoted to full commander. You will assume command of the cutter USS *Merlin* as soon as you can shag your way out to Star Station Echo. The *Merlin* is based there as part of the Seventh Border Service Squadron.”

The admiral tossed a data square to me. “Read this on your way out there. It will explain your orders, tell you a little about the *Merlin*, and lists the ship’s crew - such as it is. It’s kind of a mixed lot, commander, but these days we in the Border Service take who we can get.” He paused, realizing how that sounded. “No offense.”

I wasn’t offended. Just the thought that I was actually being offered a command seemed surreal. But, always one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I asked, “Admiral, why me?”

Prudhomme leaned forward and clasped two meaty hands together on the desk. “Fair enough question, Parker. One, the Klingons are building up ship strength along the border. Two, the Orions are getting bolder with their smuggling and piracy operations. Three, you’ve served on a *Kestrel* - class ship and are familiar with its operation. Four, you had the guts to make a very difficult call in a dangerous situation and you were willing to face the consequences. We admirals like to call that ‘command material’ and you’ve got it.”

“Thank you sir,” I said.

“Don’t thank me yet, Parker. You haven’t met your crew. Now, there’s a runabout, the *Hudson*, leaving for Star Station Echo in about three hours. Be on it.”

I managed to get my gear together, turn the fueling job over to a flustered Lt. Commander Francis deQueen, and make it on board the *Hudson* with a little time to spare. The *Hudson* was an elderly *Progress* - class runabout that had seen hard use as a courier and transport during the war with the Klingons. She had a definite vibration as we left the starbase on impulse and by the strained noises, I wondered if she’d explode before reaching warp. After much creaking and shaking, we finally reached warp 3 and the flight smoothed out considerably. Our pilot, a very young looking lieutenant, said it would be a three day journey. Fortunately, the *Hudson* was fitted with private, if cramped, compartments that smelled faintly of peanut butter. Settled in with my boots off, I inserted the data square into the computer terminal and began to read.

I learned that the USS *Merlin* (Naval Construction Contract 1439) was built in Earth year 2224 at the Andor Ship Yards. Originally built as a light cruiser, she had seen considerable action along with her sister ships over the past 36 years. The *Kestrel* - class lost favor with the admiralty after newer, faster ships, such as the *Saladin* – class destroyers entered the service. Most of the *Kestrels* were relegated to second tier duty as escorts, couriers, or worse – transferred to the Border Service where they were refitted as cutters.

The orders sure seemed simple, if mundane. Border patrol duty! Oh well, it beat shuttling anti-matter around. I scrolled further to learn of the ship’s crew. The first officer was a Lieutenant Sharlon Brooks Erdon, of Chicago, Earth. Lt. Erdon had, herself, survived a general court martial after being charged with conduct unbecoming an officer. Nice to know I shared something in common with my new exec. I studied her picture. She was quite a beauty – dusky skin with emerald green eyes and wavy dark hair. I decided to move down the list. Having lustful thoughts about one’s first officer is generally frowned upon.

The ship’s engineer was a CPO named Dursk, a Rigellian. At least he hadn’t been court-martialed, although he was definitely a regular in the star station’s brig for brawling and public drunkenness. I hoped he was sober on duty. He was definitely not a beauty. He had a shaved head, deep-set eyes, and a nose that looked to have been broken often. Dursk didn’t so much have a neck as

his shoulder muscles seemed to crowd up to the base of his skull. Not the sort you'd want to run into in a dark alley without a charged pulse rifle.

The *Merlin* was too small to rate a doctor or even a nurse-practitioner. Instead, there was a Pharmacist's Mate, 1st Class, a skinny looking kid with big ears and a prominent adam's apple named Brody Delegal, although according to the record, everyone called him "Mutt." I wasn't sure I wanted to know why.

At least the helmsman had a clean record. He should, considering that he was fresh out of the academy. Ensign Morgan Bateson – I wonder who he pissed off to get stuck on this ship. He was a handsome fellow with wavy brown hair, blue eyes and a roguish grin. Maybe he graduated last in his class.

It was beginning to hit me that this was no dream assignment. I'd been told that the Border Service was usually the last refuge of scoundrels, misfits and ne'er-do-wells. Now I was going to command a ship full of "Border Dogs" as we called them in the regular fleet. It was going to be my job to turn them into a functioning crew policing the Borderlands between Federation, Klingon and Orion space. Oh, boy.

On the third day of the trip out to Star Station Echo, we actually had a little excitement. I had gone over the rest of the crew listing (at least, what was there), had done some sleeping, sent messages to family and friends about my new assignment and promotion, and was about ready to pull rank on Lt. Baby face for some left-seat time at the controls when the red alert klaxon began to sound. I was more excited than nervous as I bounded out of my cabin and headed for the flight deck. The deck swayed as the *Hudson* began a series of evasive maneuvers that stressed the inertial dampeners. I soon reached the flight deck in time to see a burst of focused energy flare to our port side.

"Status report!" I barked. Sure, I knew I wasn't technically in command of the small vessel, but I planned to get some mileage out of the new commander's stripes on my sleeve.

Lt. Baby-face and Ensign Smiley did not glance back at me. The ensign replied, "We've got an Orion spinner checking us out. It's pretty common on this run. They scout around for the bigger Orion corvettes and sniff out easy targets."

"Are we an easy target?" I asked dryly.

Ensign Smiley's grin got bigger. "Not hardly, sir. Torpedoes locked. Firing one and two!"

The runabout shook slightly as two fusion torpedoes shot out of the weapons pod strapped on the dorsal hull. I thanked whoever came up with that neat little add-on. The torpedoes tracked true and shortly the darkness of space was lit up by two explosions.

"Direct hit!" said Smiley. He checked his board. "They're dead in space – their warp drive is heavily damaged. Looks like they're leaking atmo too."

"Survivors?" I asked. Smiley looked at me uncertainly. "Ummm. Yes sir, six life signs. You . . . don't want us to pick them up, do you sir?"

"We don't have a brig or a security detail. Any starships in the vicinity?"

Lt. Baby-face finally spoke, "Probably not sir, but we can check. The thing is, their main ship will probably get here before anyone else can and . . ."

I got the picture. "Never mind, then. What's our ETA to the star station?" Smiley answered, "Two hours, forty-five minutes."

"Great! I'll get my stuff squared away. By the way, nice job of handling that run-in."

Ensign Smiley grinned broadly. "All in a day's work, commander."

True to his word, we were on final approach to the station in two and one half hours. My first glimpse of the station revealed that Star Station Echo was still a work in progress. Construction pods zipped around the station and there were noticeable gaps in the hull plates. I watched in fascination as a huge panel was moved into position by several work bees and floating workers in EVA suits. Dangerous work, if you asked me.

We came to a surprisingly smooth landing in a good size hangar bay. Various small-craft were parked here and there, both Starfleet and civilian in make and design. I grabbed my gear, thanked Lt. Baby-face and Ensign Smiley and headed into the station to meet my new boss, Commodore Bridgette Paski, commander of Border Service Squadron 7.

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## Chapter 2

The unfinished nature of Star Station Echo extended to its interior as well. Apparently, directional signage was not high on the priority list, so I had to ask several times for directions before finally finding the commodore's office. A temporary sign read, "7th Border Service Squadron, Commodore B. Paski." I shouldered my duffle bag and entered.

The waiting room for the commodore's office was nicer than Admiral Prudhomme's back on Starbase 17. Everything looked new and even smelled new. I suppose the yeoman seated at the desk probably smelled new, too, but I wasn't going to test that hypothesis.

"I'm Commander Silas Parker, reporting in," I said in my most practiced, non-chalant command voice. Inside, the butterflies were doing acrobatics. I was reporting for my first command! I hoped nothing was hanging from my nose.

The yeoman smiled. "Welcome, commander. Commodore Paski will be with you in a moment. Would you like some coffee while you wait?"

I accepted the coffee (black), grateful to have something to do while I waited. I gazed around the anteroom. There were paintings of starscapes and alien landscapes on the wall. I walked over to inspect a model of a *Kestrel* – class ship, just like the one I was about to command. I liked the ships; they were fast, tough and had pretty good fire-power. Of course, they were also cramped, noisy, and tended to have quirky computer systems. All part of the charm, of course. I picked up the model for a closer inspection. The support base fell off, of course, breaking when it hit the deck.

I managed to pick up the pieces of the base without spilling my coffee and was trying to get the small model to balance on the shelf when I became aware of another presence standing by me.

Commodore Paski was in her mid-fifties, a handsome woman I must say. She had collar length sandy brown hair and brown eyes that seemed to regard me with amusement. That was probably a good thing, seeing as how I had managed to vandalize her office the first five minutes there.

"Yeoman, if you'd be so kind as to fix this model again, I'd like to meet with Commander Parker." She smiled at me and gestured toward her office.



Her inner office said “flag country” loud and clear. There was a large viewport with a spectacular view of the stars and a pock-marked moon as well as several ships of various types. The carpet in here was thicker and the chair was very comfortable. She settled behind her desk and smiled at me. “Welcome to the 7th Border Service Squadron, Commander. I’m sure you’re anxious to get to your ship, but there are a few things I need to discuss with you first.”

“Yes ma’am.” I figured that to be the safest and smartest response.

“You’ve been in the regular fleet for, what? Almost 20 years now? I’m sure you’ve heard every story about how the Border Service is a dead-end, the last resort for losers and trouble-makers.”

I feigned a shocked expression, which I’m sure failed. “No ma’am!”

“You don’t have to bullshit me, commander. The sad truth is, the reputation is not entirely undeserved. We do have a few ships and captains that are probably as involved in smuggling and piracy as the Orions. And, yes, we have our share of troublemakers. But that’s not true of the whole service, Parker. I expect you to command a cutter and build an effective crew. I already know you can handle the rest of the job.”

I decided to creep out on a limb. “And just what is the rest of the job, ma’am?”

She turned in her chair slightly and gestured to the stars outside the viewport. “Patrolling the Borderlands, primarily. Of course, that involves interdiction of pirates and smugglers, search and rescue, playing ‘chicken’ with Klingons, and a few other odd jobs with which we’ve been tasked.” She turned around and gave me a pretty hard stare. “But building a crew you can command, that’s job one.”

Time to go all the way out on the limb, I thought. “Commodore, what’s wrong with *Merlin’s* crew? I read the personnel manifest and was struck by how *little* it actually told me, except for the occasional court martial and bar-room fight.”

Paski smiled and nodded as if a somewhat slow child had answered a question correctly. “Unfortunately, *Merlin* has a reputation as a troubled ship. It’s no secret that the CO you’re relieving has a severe drinking problem and struggles with depression. He’s heading for TDY desk duty on Earth until the stop-loss orders expire when he’ll get his walking papers. Your exec, Lt. Erdon

is a very capable officer. She also carries a big chip on her shoulder and has trouble with authority figures. I happen to know, but cannot yet prove, that some of the crew are involved in the Orion black market and have smuggled illegal items on that cutter. In short, commander, you're inheriting a dysfunctional, unhappy crew."

Part of me was thinking that loading deuterium hadn't been all *that* bad, but the stubborn part of Mrs. Parker's favorite son liked the idea of a challenge. I'd worked with a few hard cases before and had managed to turn some of them around. A question popped out of my mouth before my brain had a chance to catch it and wrestle it to the ground. "So, commodore, am I just another loser commander given a loser ship, or do you really expect that *Merlin* can be turned into a valuable asset rather than a collection of assholes?"

To my surprise and relief, Commodore Paski laughed. "Damn, commander, you've got spunk! Good! You'll need it on the *Merlin*. To answer your question, yes, I do expect you to turn that crew around. I need that ship, Parker, and I need it operating well. You'll get a lot of leeway from me, but I do expect results, or I'll go hunting for another CO. Are we clear?" She fixed me with a stare that would make a Klingon whimper.

I swallowed, "Yes ma'am. Perfectly clear."

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After leaving the Commodore's office, I headed off to find my ship. Once more, I had to ask for directions. I finally made my way to the docking ring and Berth 8 where I had my first glimpse of the *Merlin* through a large view port.

I was very familiar with *Kestrel*-class ships. My first assignment on the *Osprey* gave me intimate knowledge with the quirky little vessels. *Merlin* shared the somewhat odd looking Andorian designed hull as her sister ships – something of a cross between a boomerang and a battle ax. Twin warp nacelles were faired into the outer wing areas and a stubby engineering "tail" trailed aft. I have to admit, it was both a proud and nostalgic moment. Call me sentimental, but I liked the old *Kestrels* and I was like a kid at Christmas seeing *Merlin* in her light gray paint, black registry and glowing running lights.

I hoisted up my duffel bag and walked to the gangway which connected the station to the ship's airlock. As I approached the ship, I saw a crewman

leaning against the curved wall of the gangway, arms folded and snoring softly. As I neared him, I noticed a small trickle of saliva flowing from the corner of his mouth. Time to wake crewman Sleepy. I cleared my throat.

Sleepy frowned and smacked his lips before he opened his eyes. At first, he seemed to have difficulty focusing on me. He rubbed his eyes, yawned expansively, then opened his eyes again. His eyes quickly widened as he saw the braid on my sleeve and the expression on my face. These commander stripes were going to be fun!

“Oh, shit! Sorry sir – I was just resting my eyes.” Crewman Sleepy was in full cover-his-ass mode.

“You’ve got a little . . .” I gestured to the slobber on the side of his face. Sleepy rubbed his face quickly with the sleeve of his grey tunic. “Yeah, that got it. What’s your name, son?” I decided on the fatherly approach for now. Plenty of time for ass-chewing later.

Sleepy hesitated, appearing to consider making up a name. Finally he said, “Farmingham, sir. Crewman 2nd Class Josiah Farmingham. Most everyone calls me ‘Farm-boy.’” He flashed a grin I’m sure he hoped would be endearing. It wasn’t.

“Well, Crewman Farmingham, I’m Commander Parker, your new captain. Permission to come aboard?”

Farmingham seemed to consider the question for a moment, a frown of puzzlement on his face. “Uh, you’re asking me? . . .”

Being in a good mood, I didn’t get in his face and malign his ancestry back to the stone-age. Instead, I forced a tolerant smile on my face and spoke slowly. “It’s a naval custom, crewman. Someone who is authorized to come on board asks permission. You say – ‘Granted.’ A ‘welcome aboard’ would not be inappropriate.”

Farm-boy nodded as this information made the rounds in the gray matter occupying the space between his ears. I could almost see the lights flicker on when he finally said, “Granted! Welcome aboard!” His pride was palpable. I patted him on the shoulder.

“That’s good, son. Now, tell me where I can find Captain Treadway.”

At the mention of his out-going CO, Farm-boy's face fell again. "Um, sorry sir, but the captain is in his quarters and left orders he's not to be disturbed. He's de-composed."

"Indisposed," I said automatically. Where did they find this kid? I was amazed he had enough brain-power to move around. "Never mind, I'll find him." I was about to turn away when a thought struck me. "Say Farmingham, what's your duty station on this ship?"

"Environmental control and waste disposal!" he said with sincere pride.

"Ah," I said. *Dear God!* I thought, as I headed into the ship.

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The first thing I noticed as I stepped through the airlock and into the *Merlin* was the smell. It took a moment, but I realized it smelled almost exactly like the locker room in my old high school gym. My mind conjured the image of someone leaping from a doorway and snapping me with a towel. I made a mental (and nasal) note to address the smell ASAP. But first, I needed to meet the current CO and give him the bum's rush off of *my* ship!

I hopped on a rather compact turbo-lift car and announced, "Deck two." The lift rose with a noticeable vibration before halting at its destination. The double doors opened and I stepped out onto the deck containing the officers' quarters. At least it smelled better here. A brief walk around the narrow, curving corridor brought me to the CO's cabin. A small sign by the door read, "Commander Harlin Q. Treadway, Commanding Officer." I pressed the enunciator and waited. A slurred voice answered, "Go 'way!"

So much for niceties. I beat my fist against the door. "Captain Treadway? It's Silas Parker, your replacement. Open up!"

At first, I thought Treadway was going to ignore me, but then I heard him moving around. Something clunked to the deck and Treadway began muttering a few curses. The door opened and the haggard face of Captain Treadway appeared. His eyes were blood shot and his skin had an unhealthy yellow tinge. "So. You're Parker." I tried not to wince as his breath hit me full force. It made me long for the locker room smell on deck four. Treadway staggered back and gestured for me to enter with an exaggerated flourish. "Come on in. Hell, they're your quarters now."

I entered the compact cabin which was filled with storage containers and Treadway's duffle bag. At least he had packed. On the desk in the anteroom stood a half-empty bottle containing an amber liquid. The atmosphere in the room was positively flammable. Time to be charming I thought. "Nice cabin."

Treadway emitted a short, barking laugh. "You don't have t' bullshit me, commander. We both know I'm a lush." He walked unsteadily to the desk and downed a swallow straight from the bottle. He took the bottle and looked at me. "Y'know, I didn't even drink before I took command of this ship. Had a clean record, too." He snorted and looked around with a glazed expression. "This ship, these . . . people. *They* did this to me, understand? Ruined me, that's what they did."

Treadway seemed to lose energy and sat down heavily in the desk chair. I was having unpleasant memories of Captain "Looney-Tunes" Dennison, so I decided I wasn't going to listen to this loser's ravings.

"Okay, Treadway, here's the deal. I'm going to walk out of this cabin and take a tour around the ship. When I come back in an hour, I want you and your gear gone. If you haven't left the ship by then, I'll throw your sorry ass off myself."

Treadway seemed to sober up under my threat. I think he was going to object, until he noticed that my arms were probably twice the size of his. He may have been drunk, but he wasn't crazy. "Yeah, right. I'm about to leave." He waved his hand at me in surrender. I turned and left the cabin.

Part of me felt sick over what I just witnessed. Another part of me simply didn't care. Treadway had drunk his way out of command. His choice – his consequences. Now it was my job to clean up the mess he made, and I don't just mean the cabin. I re-entered the lift and said, "Bridge."

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### Chapter 3

The *Merlin's* bridge did not smell like a locker room or a bar. It smelled worse.

I stepped off the lift into a cloud of pungent smoke and the smell of burning transtators and polymers. Alarmed, I shouted, "What the hell is going on?"

"Who the *frak* wants to know?" shouted a pair of legs clad in black uniform trousers extended from the center console. I walked over, fanning the smoke from my face and restraining the urge to cough. "I'm Silas Parker. Your new captain."

"About time!" shouted the pair of legs. "Hand me a number four hyper-spanner, will ya?" The voice was definitely feminine. Even muffled, it had a pleasant lilt.

I blinked, partly to clear my eyes of smoke, and partly at amazement at the gall of whoever owned the legs. Still, I could see that work was in progress, so I looked around, saw a roll of tools on top of the OPs console and found the number four spanner. Squatting down I handed the hyper spanner under the console. "Here you go."

A rather lovely hand with tapered fingers appeared from under the console and grasped the spanner. "Thanks!" came the muffled voice as the hand disappeared.

"And you would be? ..." I cajoled.

"Busy at the moment. Hand me the flux torch."

I obliged and passed the small instrument to the hand. A moment later, the bright flash of the torch illuminated the area under the console. "If you can multi-task, do you mind telling me your name?" I managed to keep most of the sarcasm from my voice.

"Lieutenant Sharlon Erdon. I'm your XO. I prefer to be called Brooks."

"Why do you want to be called Brooks?"

"It's my middle name. I don't like Sharlon – it's my great aunt's name and she's a royal bitch."

I filed this tidbit away. “Well, Brooks, do you mind telling me what you’re doing?”

“Fixing this besotted OPs board. It’s been replaced twice and has the nasty habit of failing when we go to warp. And don’t get me started on the frakkin’ computer interface for the sensors!”

That sounded like sage advice to me. I thought it might be time to regain my balance a bit. “Lieutenant, I’d like to get a full report on all of the ship’s shortcomings from you – later. Right now I was wondering if you could introduce me to the department heads.”

Lt. Erdon finally slid out from underneath the console. I resisted the urge to ogle. The XO had stripped out of her tunic and was wearing a form-fitting black sleeveless T-shirt that accentuated her chest in spectacular fashion. She was nearly as tall as me, muscular but not overly so. Her dark, wavy hair was cut in a practical but attractive short style that framed her face nicely. In short, the XO was drop-dead gorgeous. I hoped my face wasn’t turning red.

The XO smiled, revealing a set of perfect white teeth. Her emerald green eyes seemed to twinkle. *How does she do that?* I wondered. She grabbed her gray tunic off the back of a chair and wiped a sheen of perspiration from her face, then offered her hand in greeting. I took her hand, impressed by her firm grip. I returned the pressure, but not too much. I have managed to break a few hands in my day. She seemed to give me an appraising look and nodded her head.

“You look better in person. Your personnel photo makes you look constipated.”

Apparently tact was not one of the XO’s strong points. “Are you always this reticent, lieutenant?”

“Just wait ‘til you get to know me. Let me give you the nickel tour.” She tugged the tunic over her head and over her well-formed torso. Okay, I did watch, but she was putting it *on*, not taking it off. Get over it.

Lt. Erdon went to the environmental control station and toggled a switch. Exhaust fans came on and the smoke began to clear somewhat. I looked around at the familiar layout of the *Merlin’s* bridge. Like most modern starships, it had a round bridge with a central command chair. There were fewer stations than were on the *Saladin* but enough to get the job done. The

central viewer was dark, except for some flashing text running across the bottom of the screen. Erdon must have caught my raised eyebrow.

“We’re running a level 4 diagnostics on all the computer systems. The Daystrom Mark 3 core has been a royal pain in the ass ever since it was installed. This is the fourth software upgrade this year.”

I frowned at that news. “What kinds of problems have you had?”

She shrugged. “Everything from minor glitches and soft re-boots to a total system failure. That happened two weeks ago and we had to get towed back in. Good thing the back-up comm-system was working or . . . well, let’s just say you would have lost your command and we would have frozen our asses off.”

That bit of news concerned me. The computer core is vital to a ship’s operation. A total system failure means that a ship may die, the crew included. I added another concern to my growing list. “I served on the *Osprey* years ago, lieutenant, so you don’t need to show me everything. Let’s just hit the highlights.”

An amused expression crossed her face. “Then let’s start in engineering.”

“Lead on, XO.” I followed her onto the lift.

“Engineering,” she said. The turbo-lift car descended a moment, and then moved horizontally aft, toward engineering.

“So, my file picture is that bad, huh?” I had to know.

She gave me a pitying look. “Oh yeah! Haven’t you seen it?”

Honestly I couldn’t remember whether I had or not. For that matter, I couldn’t remember the last time it was updated. Must have been when I first went on board the *Saladin*, four years earlier. For Erdon’s benefit, I shook my head. Time to change the subject.

“Lieutenant, Commodore Paski told me she has reason to believe that some of the *Merlin’s* crew is involved in the Orion black market.” I watched for a reaction.



Lt. Erdon didn't get defensive with me. She gave me a sort of sad look and blew a lock of hair out of her face. Finally she nodded. "Yes, I believe that's true," she said.

"Any idea who's involved," I asked.

"Ideas? Plenty. Proof? None that would hold up." She stared directly into my eyes. *Good God, she has beautiful eyes!* "Captain, are you just making conversation or do you want to do something about it?"

"You do cut to the chase, don't you? Okay, that deserves an answer. Yes, lieutenant, I plan on doing something about it. My first priority is to get this crew straightened out. I've heard the sad tale about Captain Treadway and just had the misfortune of meeting the man." *Oops, that was a bit too blunt.* Erdon didn't seem offended, however, so I pressed on. "I've read the personnel files on most of the crew, including yours. You seem to have your act together and you've managed to impress the commodore. But most of the crew seems to be a collection of misfits and trouble-makers. I don't care how long it takes, I will weed out the ones who cannot or will not tow the line and bring on people who can." This time, I initiated the eye contact. "I need to know if you're with me or not, lieutenant."

The lift car came to a stop and the doors slid open. I kept up the eye contact, deliberately ignoring their beautiful shape and perfectly formed lashes. Okay, I lied about the last part.

Finally, she smiled. "Frakkin' A, captain! Let's kick some ass!"

\* \* \*

## Chapter 4

Oddly enough, the engineering deck smelled better than any other part of the ship I had visited thus far. It was on the warm side and very humid however. Lt. Erdon must have noticed my expression.

"The environmental systems are on the fritz too. 'Course, being tied in to the computer probably has a lot to do with that."

"What about manual adjustments?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You'll have to ask our engineer about that." I guess there was something she wanted me to see for myself. Okay, I could play along.

We came to the large, heavy double doors that led into main engineering. Brooks grabbed my arm to stop me. "Brace yourself," she warned. "This won't be pretty."

I moved forward and the doors opened. She was right. It wasn't pretty.

A heavy mist, almost like fog, hung in the air. The temperature was more suitable for a sauna than the engineering section of a starship. I halfway expected the call of some exotic, tropical bird to echo through the room. I actually had to stop to get my bearings before moving forward. Through the mist, a figure approached.

The figure became recognizable as a Tellarite non-com. He had an unpleasant expression on his face, which meant he was probably in a good mood. He stopped in his tracks when he saw us. "Oh, mange-ridden deities!" he murmured.

Brooks took the lead and stepped forward. She spoke to the Tellarite who seemingly had frozen in place. "Chief, this is our new CO, Captain Silas Parker."

The Tellarite non-com blinked, then stepped forward and extended a pudgy, furry, three-fingered hand my way. "Kruff!" he said.

For a moment, I wondered why he had barked at me. Then it dawned on me that Kruff was his name. I shook the proffered hand (paw? hoof?) which was hard and calloused. "Nice to meet you, Chief Kruff. Are you on duty here?"

Kruff wrinkled his muzzle, seemingly in thought. "No sir. Yes sir. That is, engineering is my normal duty post. I'm assistant engineer. But no, I'm not on duty right now." Kruff seemed anxious to leave. I decided to cut him some slack for now.

"Alright, chief, we won't hold you up." He was about to head out the door when I called to him. "Say, chief. What's with the atmosphere in here?" I gestured to the fog.

Kruff offered as apologetic a look as his porcine features allowed. "Chief Dursk likes it this way. He says it reminds him of home."

I wondered if Dursk's home was in a swamp. "Okay, Kruff. Carry on." The short Tellarite moved with impressive speed out of engineering. I looked at Lt. Erdon with what I figured was an incredulous (as opposed to constipated) expression.

"Chief Dursk likes it this way?"

The XO shrugged. "Captain Treadway let Dursk do pretty much what he wanted, especially down here in engineering."

I lowered my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Do you suspect Dursk to be involved in the black market?"

To my surprise, the XO actually giggled. It was a very pleasant sound. "Gosh, no, sir! Dursk may be full of himself and tends to bully the crew, but he's at least honest by my best assessment. And he's handy in a fight, too."

"So I noticed in his personnel file. Well, I hate to disappoint Chief Dursk, but I'm going to keep him on a short leash."

"He won't like it," Erdon observed.

"He can get over it or he can start scrubbing 'cyclers on the station. Let's go find his majesty so I can shake up his world."

\* \* \*

The XO and I made our way through the haze to the engineer's office – a transparent aluminum cubicle shoe-horned in amongst the maze of conduits, coolant pipes, and the big impulse manifolds.

We found Chief Dursk sound asleep, leaning back in a chair, his feet propped up on a case of transtator circuits. He was bare-chested and snoring softly. *Maybe something in the water supply makes them sleepy* I speculated. I decided to introduce myself by kicking the chair legs out from under him.

I must admit, Dursk had both quick reflexes and an impressive vocabulary of Rigellian curses. He was back on his feet in a flash, with murder in his eyes. He focused on me as the interruption to his slumber, and a snarl formed on his face just before he saw the braid on my sleeve. I had to admire his self-restraint as he assumed a somewhat less-threatening posture. But I could tell he was sizing me up. I was used to that, though, and it didn't bother me. Four years as the academy wrestling champ in the 95 kilo division and I'd been sized up many times. By the way, that story about me biting that Vulcan kid in the '39 semi-finals is not true! Well, not entirely true. But I digress.

"You must be Chief Dursk," I said in a pleasant tone. "I'm your new CO, Captain Parker. Sorry to disturb your sleep like that, but I have a couple of questions for you."

My approach seemed to confuse the neck-impaired Rigellian. He frowned, not quite sure how to respond to me.

"First, how long will it take you to get the environmental controls working properly? Any answer up to two hours is acceptable. Longer, and you can start packing. My second question is, did you lose your uniform tunic? You must have, because that is the only reasonable explanation I can think of to why you're out of uniform. I was going to ask why you were asleep, but I think two questions enough for now." I moved toward him and looked up into his face. He was a good head taller, so I had a marvelous view of his nose hair.

"So, what's the answer to question one?" I asked in a reasonable tone.

"Well, you see sir, the computer . . ."

"WRONG ANSWER!" I bellowed into his face. To accentuate my displeasure, I picked up his desk, which I estimated to weigh about 140 kilos and hurled it into the wall. It made a very satisfying crashing sound as data slates, odd tools and a hidden bottle of something that smelled strongly of fermented toenails

scattered across the deck. A small washer circled the deck in tighter and tighter circles, finally settling with a high ringing sound.

Chief Dursk stared at me with wide eyes. Good. I had his attention. “Now, Chief,” I said, resuming my previous calm, reasonable tone, “Let’s try that again. What is your answer to question one?”

“I’ll have it done in less than two hours, sir!” He was now standing at attention so perfectly it would have made a drill instructor cry. Very nice.

“And I’m sure you’ll locate your tunic, won’t you chief?”

Dursk looked around and spotted his tunic hanging over a chair. He snatched it and began to put it on.

“Outstanding!” I said, beaming at him. “Good to meet you Chief! We’ll talk about some of the other maintenance problems on the ship later.” I extended my hand to him. At first he looked at it as if someone were offering him a small, dead animal. Finally, he took my hand. I squeezed a bit tighter than necessary, just as a reminder of our little visit. Then I released his hand. To his credit, he did not rub his hand. He just stood with a dazed expression on his face as the XO and I left engineering to continue our little tour.

\* \* \*

“So, how did you do that?” asked Lt. Erdon once we left engineering.

“Clean living and good genes. Who’s next on our list to meet?”

“Let’s head to sickbay so you can meet Mutt.”

Oh yes, the ship’s Pharmacist’s Mate. “Why is he called Mutt?”

“He’s our dog-robber.”

I smiled. Every ship should have a dog-robber. The term is from old Earth military jargon and describes someone who has the uncanny ability to find whatever a ship may need, usually outside of normal channels. He’s the type of person that could steal a bone from under a pit-bull’s nose, hence the name.

“Is he any good?” I asked.

“What, as a dog-robber or as a medic?”

“Both.”

“He’s actually a very good medic. I believe he’d eventually like to go back to school to be an MD. But he’s an even better dog-robber.”

I was surprised at the size of the sickbay on the *Merlin*. It was nearly twice the size as the one on the *Osprey*. However, there were only three of the new bio-beds that were becoming standard on Federation starships. The rest were just standard hospital-type beds. We found Mutt in the small sickbay office, reading a medical text on the viewer. He stood quickly and smiled when we entered. I liked the kid at first sight.

Pharmacist’s Mate 1st Class Brody Delegal was a gangly kid in his late 20’s with big ears. His hair was mussed as if he had just got out of bed and his face needed an application of beard suppressor to arrest the prominent five ‘o clock shadow. But there was something about him that just put me at ease immediately. He seemed to radiate serenity and goodwill. I restrained myself from giving him a hug.

Brooks introduced us. “Mutt, this is our new CO, Captain Parker. Captain, this is Pharmacist’s Mate Brody Delegal.”

I shook his hand (carefully) and looked around the small office. While Mutt was not overly concerned about his personal appearance, the office with its supplies and instruments was immaculate as was the rest of sickbay. I nodded my head in approval.

“So, Delegal, I hear that not only are you a good medic, but that you have additional useful skills.”

Mutt actually blushed. “Well, sir, it’s not so much a skill as a gift. I’ve just always had this knack for putting people at ease. I can talk to just about anyone. And if I need something, I ask and people just, you know, give me what I need. It seems to make them happy.” He smiled again. I wanted to adopt him. This kid could rule the galaxy, but he was completely without guile.

“Where are you from, son?”

"Mom's from Betelgeuse and Dad grew up on Betazed. That's where I was born. Then we moved to Earth - Birmingham in North America - when I was still a little kid."

I knew a little about Betazoids, though I'd never met anyone from that planet. I knew they had highly developed psionic abilities. Maybe that explained Mutt's abilities. Not that it mattered.

I gestured to some of the gleaming new equipment in sickbay. "So, all of this? . . ."

He smiled again. "I just went to the quartermaster on the station and asked for it. It's always delivered the next day. I try not to overdo it, though. That wouldn't be right."

Truly amazing. "Well, Delegal . . ."

"Mutt, sir, if you don't mind."

"Okay . . . Mutt . . . I'll leave you to your studies there." I took another look around sickbay. "You just asked for all of this . . ." I shook my head and looked at Lt. Erdon. "So, XO, who's next on the list?"

"Our new navigator, Ensign Morgan Bateson."

We exited sickbay and I shook my head in amusement and wonder. "That kid's a real charmer!"

Brooks laughed. God, I loved that sound! "Wait 'til you meet Bateson!"

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5

Lt. Brooks Erdon stepped over to a wall-mounted communicator and hit the inter-ship button. "Erdon to Ensign Bateson, what's your location?" Her melodic voice echoed through the ship.

We only had to wait a few moments before Bateson's baritone voice came through. "I'm in the hangar deck, ma'am."

Erdon responded, "Stay put, Morgan. I'm bringing our new captain up to meet you." She snapped off the channel.

I had to voice something that had been nagging me. "Lieutenant, why is Bateson on this ship? Let's face it, all the rest of us have histories that put us here. Bateson is fresh out of the academy, he hasn't had much of a chance to screw up yet."

Lt. Erdon smiled. "Why don't I let him tell you?"

I couldn't let that pass. "So now you're a diplomat?"

"Diplomacy is my middle name!"

"I thought Brooks was your middle name."

She smirked. Even her smirk was gorgeous. "Don't be anal. Come-on, I'll introduce you to our hot-shot helmsman."

We took the ladder (actually, it's a circular stairwell, but traditions are traditions) up one level to the very compact shuttle hangar deck. There were four ancient but serviceable shuttle pods crowded into the small bay. The hatch to shuttle pod 3 was open and out stepped a tall, square jawed young man with blue eyes and a roguish grin. And believe me, I know roguish! Like me, his hair-line was beginning to recede, although mine had a huge head start (pardon the pun!). Mom always said, "Your hairline isn't moving back. It's your forehead that's getting bigger." Thanks, Mom.

Brooks introduced us. "Captain Parker, this is Ensign Morgan Bateson, our new navigator and newest officer, fresh from the academy."



We shook hands. I didn't give him the squeeze test like I had for Chief Dursk. I liked Ensign Bateson, though for different reasons than I liked Mutt. Maybe it was the hairline.

"Ensign," I said, by way of greeting. Time to ask the question. "Tell me, what is a fresh-out-of-the-academy ensign like yourself doing on a Border Cutter. Surely you could have found a slot on a Saladin-class or even one of the new Connies?"

Bateson's grin never faltered. I had to give him high marks for poise. "Actually sir, I requested duty on a cutter. I figured that I would have more and earlier opportunities at the helm of a cutter than on the rotation of one of the ships of the line. It seemed like a great learning opportunity!" He had a pleasant voice, with just a hint of cockiness.

I smiled back at him. Good answer. But I have a high sensitivity to bull-shit and my meter was pegging. "And? . . ." I prodded.

His smile changed slightly to one of mild embarrassment. "And . . . there was this girl back in San Francisco. Honestly, I had no idea she was an admiral's daughter."

Bingo! I clapped young Bateson on the arm, staggering him slightly. "You should fit in well, Mr. Bateson! Tell me, what were you doing in the shuttle pod?"

"Just familiarizing myself with the controls, sir. I'm also a qualified shuttle pilot, but I must admit, I've never seen one of these outside of a museum."

I gave him my most reassuring expression. "I'm sure you'll do fine, Mr. Bateson. Of course, you should know, these old shuttle pods have leaky radiation baffles. Not that it's a major problem, but prolonged exposure does tend to accelerate hair-loss". I ran my hand through my close-cropped, thinning hair for emphasis. Bateson's smile took on a faintly sick quality. I really shouldn't do things like that. It must be a character flaw.

Lt. Erdon managed to keep a straight face during the exchange. I turned toward her and gave her a covert wink. "Carry on, Mr. Bateson. I'd encourage you to spend as much time as possible familiarizing yourself with the shuttle pods. I'll be counting on you to fly some SAR missions. Good to meet you."

“Uh, likewise, sir.” Bateson turned back toward the shuttle pod with a look of trepidation; he approached it somewhat slowly, like a condemned prisoner approaching the gallows. I motioned for the XO to follow me out of the hangar.

In the corridor, she looked at me and shook her head. “That was awful!” she said. I could tell she approved.

Always keep them guessing, XO. One day he’ll command a ship and he’ll need to shake up some young ensign. Who knows? He might pull the same stunt.” I checked my wrist chronometer. It was time to see if Captain Treadway had departed in a timely manner.

“XO, if you’ll excuse me, I need to run by my cabin to see if Captain Treadway requires assistance getting off the ship.”

“You’re going to throw him off, aren’t you.” It was not a question.

“Only if he’s still here. I’ll meet you back on the bridge in an hour. You can give me a run-down on the ship’s status and we can set up a time when I can address the crew as a whole.”

\* \* \*

I was only mildly disappointed to find that Captain Treadway had, indeed, left the ship. His gear was gone too. I took a moment to survey my new quarters. They were not as modern as my berth on the *Saladin*, but having the office provided more room. The small bedroom area and head were in an adjacent room. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the rest of my gear had also arrived. The two trunks were stacked neatly by the bed.

I went to check out the desk and sat in the chair, which squeaked, but not to the point of distraction. There was a standard computer screen/communications terminal with multiple switches. I’d have to find out what the switches did. I opened the drawer to find it filled with shards of glass from dozens of broken whiskey bottles. Apparently, Treadway had left me a souvenir. Classy guy.

I took a few minutes to unpack my trunks – mostly uniforms, a few civilian clothes, and some personal items: a Klingon disruptor pistol (don’t ask where I got it), some holo-pics of my parents and siblings (two brothers, one sister, all younger), My academy wrestling trophies, and a stuffed and mounted

Centauran ridge rat ( kind of a cross between a Terran armadillo and a weasel)named Earl.

I took my personal kit and put it in the rather cramped head. At least I didn't have to share one. There was a sonic shower stall into which I could barely squeeze beside a stainless steel toilet and sink. I took a look in the mirror. (I'm not vain, I just wanted to make sure the mirror worked.) The face that stared back at me was beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Lines etched the corners of my eyes, giving me a somewhat sad expression. I've had complete strangers come up to me and ask, "What's wrong?" The close-cropped hair and regulation van-dyke beard were now more gray than brown. At least all of my teeth were my own. I knew I wasn't handsome, but at least I didn't have to wear a bag over my head.

I made a mental note to stop by the quartermaster to get linens and towels, and then I decided it was time to check out the galley.

\* \* \*

I headed down the ladder (two decks) then about 15 meters along the port side corridor, where I came upon the galley. No one was there at the moment. I assumed much of the crew was on shore leave and taking advantage of the eating establishments on the station. I went to check out the offerings from the food slots. A hand-printed sign was posted by one of the slots. It read, "For God's sake, do not order the meat-loaf, not if you value your life!" This, I considered to be very sound advice.

As I recalled from my service on the *Osprey*, pressing the first button once and the third button twice would provide a pretty decent vegetable soup. That seemed to be a safe choice. I pressed the aforementioned buttons. The lights flashed and the food slot door opened. Meat loaf. The gray, quivering mass sat there on the tray, lurking. I carried it at arms length and put it in the disposal slot where it disappeared in a soft *whoosh*. I could swear the meat loaf growled at me.

My curiosity, if not my hunger, satisfied, I decided it was time to head back to the bridge.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 6

I noticed that the atmosphere on the bridge was much clearer than my first visit and the smell of burning electronics had dissipated considerably. As I stepped off the lift, Lt. Erdon stood from the command chair and announced, "Captain on the bridge."

I must have had a goofy grin on my face with that. It was a simple gesture of respect, but I certainly appreciated it. It suddenly struck me - this was my ship, my first command. As I settled in the command chair, the sudden weight of responsibility pushed me a bit deeper into the seat. I swear that Brooks must be a mind reader, she had one of those "knowing looks" on her face. Hell, I can't describe the expression, but I know it when I see it.

Surveying my realm, I noticed two people who I had not met. Brooks again anticipated me, as she introduced them to me.

"Captain Parker, this is Lt.(j.g.) Trevor Rhys-Davies." A young, dark-skinned man stood up from OPS and nodded his head in greeting.

"A pleasure to meet you, captain," he said in a strong, British accent.

The XO then indicated a Caitian woman with reddish-gold fur and rare, bright blue eyes. "This is Ensign M'Roal. She's something of a jack-of-all-trades and is qualified on most all of the bridge stations."

"Grreetings, captain," M'Roal purred in a rumbling alto as her long tail swished languidly.

"Mr. Rhys-Davies, Mr. M'Roal, I'm happy to meet you both. Don't let me interrupt your work. XO, walk with me, please."

Brooks joined me in the lift. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee, XO, then you can regale me with all of the ship's woes."

Lt. Erdon favored me with one of her radiant smiles. Any brighter and I would have needed sun glasses. "Okay, but let's get it on the station. Our servitors are still screwed up and the coffee tastes like sludge."

"If it tastes like sludge, the servitor's fine. You don't have to worry until it tastes like swill." I followed her off the ship, anyway.

\* \* \*

We walked around to the new Merchant's Alley that was coming to life on Deck 16 of the station. I was amazed to see so many vendors already in operation despite the construction activity. Lt. Ergon led me to a small cafe' that already was filling with Starfleet types, boomers, and other spacers. I ordered Terran Colombian coffee (black) while Brooks ordered some sort of herbal tea. We took a seat at a table near the front and watched the throngs move by.

"Okay, XO, tell me what's wrong with the *Merlin*. I'm all ears."

She took a careful sip of her hot tea, then set her mug on the table. I could tell she was considering where to begin.

"Let me begin by saying that in general, the *Merlin* is a good, solid ship. The same can be said for *most* of the crew. That being said, we've got some definite problems in both areas."

"Start with the ship, then we can discuss the crew."

She nodded, then began. "Okay. The computer problem is probably our biggest single concern, 'cause it affects so many other systems. If we get the computer fixed, 75% of the other problems go away."

I pondered this bit of information for a moment. "What do we need to get it fixed?"

Brooks blew out a breath in frustration. "Seriously? A completely new core. I'm convinced that the Mark 3 we installed last year is corrupted. The problem is, we take the problem to Fleet, they pass it on to Daystrom, and they swear there's no problem, so Fleet says there's no problem."

"Have you put Mutt on it?"

She shook her head. "This is way over his pay-grade. Sure, he's great on getting supplies, spare parts, even the sickbay equipment you saw. But all of that's available on the station."

"Where else can we get a core? Besides going through Fleet and Daystrom?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Her expression told me she had an idea. "Maybe the '*Raptor*,'" she said as a small smile played on her lips.

"The who?"

"It's another *Kestrel* - class ship. The USS *Velociraptor*. It was badly damaged in an ion storm a couple of years ago. It's been decommissioned and cannibalized for parts. Maybe the core is still intact . . ."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"In a Lagrange point 5 orbit around 'Cyclops'"

I was beginning to get lost. "Cyclops? What's Cyclops?"

"A moon orbiting Molari IV. There are several old hulks parked in orbit for scrap. That's where we'll find the '*Raptor*'"

I smiled. "Sounds like a plan!" She continued on about problems with the food synthesizers, environmental controls, and the impulse engines. I listened, absorbing the pertinent points. It was hard not being distracted by this gorgeous woman. And I wasn't alone. Another Starfleet officer was so taken by the XO he walked into the door facing as he exited the cafe'. Brooks seemed totally oblivious to her affect on males. I wondered if there were any Green Orions in her family tree. Her skin lacked any green pigmentation, being more the color of light mocha.

"Okay," I said, "Give me a thumbnail of the crew. Who are the go-to people and who's going to give me grief?"

She favored me with a sly smile. "Well, I probably fit in both categories. Seriously, you've got some good officers in Rhys-Davies, M'Roal and Bateson. Of course, Bateson is still green, but I've been impressed with him so far. The non-coms are a mixed bag. Chief Kruff is steady and dependable, but he's intimidated by Chief Dursk."

"Tell me more about Dursk."

She sighed. "I don't know, captain. He can be a problem at times. Seems like he spends more time in the station brig than on the ship whenever we're in port. He knows his stuff in engineering, but I think he tends to be lazy. He's

not above bullying his subordinates and he had no respect for Captain Treadway. I don't think that will be a problem with you."

I waved aside the compliment. *Aw shucks, ma'am. Just doin' my job.* Aloud, I said, "Before, you said you didn't think he was part of the smuggling ring?"

She nodded. "I don't think he's dishonest. Just hard-headed. With some . . . guidance, he's got potential. And he's got courage too. There's no one better leading a boarding party."

"Who's Chief of the Boat?" I asked.

She grimaced. "We don't have one. Treadway didn't think it necessary, so I handled all of the issues with the enlisted personnel."

"Well, that's going to end. There are too many other things that need doing for you to tend to every crewman's runny nose. Tell you what, I want to make Dursk the COB."

I managed to surprise her with that. Her eyebrows shot up like they were on springs. "Dursk? Chief of the Boat?" She shook her head. "I don't know . . ."

"It's a carrot, Brooks. He's already got leverage with the crew. If we channel it properly, it might get him and the crew more motivated. If the carrot doesn't work, I can always break out the stick."

"Break it over his head, you mean." She paused, a troubled look on her face, "I don't know. It's a risky move, but it might work. The other NCO's will listen to him. But he needs to learn how to *lead* and not just push people around," Lt. Erdon's face still showed doubt.

"I'll make it on a trial basis. If Dursk can handle the job well over the next three months, I'll recommend his promotion to Senior Chief."

"Okay, you're the boss."

"So, tell me about the other NCO's and any problem crew members."

For the next hour, she told me about Chief Ortberg, (needs to lose weight), Crewman Hernandez (a "psycho"), Petty Officer 2nd Class Tatupu (drinking and gambling problems), and Crewman Bock (hygiene issues). There were

other issues too, but I felt like I had a better picture of the ship and crew than before our little chat.

"How soon can we ship out?" I asked.

"Well, the last rotation of crew members on shore leave should be back by tomorrow at 1300 hours. That's plenty of time to get things buttoned up and ready."

"Good. We'll plan on departing tomorrow at 1500 hours and head for the Molari system. Baby needs a new computer core!"

\* \* \*

I decided it was time to see if Chief Dursk had made progress with the environmental controls. When the XO and I reentered the ship, I noticed the locker-room smell had faded - a promising sign. Taking the ladder (I need the exercise) I made my way back down to engineering.

The large double doors opened obediently and I once more entered Chief Dursk's lair. This time, the air was much clearer. The humidity level seemed appropriate and the temperature was back to a reasonable level. Nothing like some gentle encouragement to bring about positive results. I walked over to the engineering office.

This time, Dursk was waiting for me. "Attention on the deck!" he bellowed, as Chief Kruff and another crewman quickly stood to attention."

"Stand easy, men. I just wanted to check on your progress."

I must say, I was impressed by what I saw. The office was immaculate as were Dursk, Kruff and the wide-eyed crewman. They all wore clean uniforms - Dursk and Kruff in their grey tunics and the crewman in a spotless blue engineering jumpsuit. I put my hands on my hips and looked around in admiration.

"First rate! Simply first rate!" I could see the looks of relief on the three men.

"Well done, Chief Dursk! Chief Kruff and crewman . . .?"

"Lorenko, sir!"



"Lorenko . . . would you two excuse Chief Dursk and me, please."

Kruff and Lorenko moved out of the cubicle at flank speed. I noticed a slight sheen of perspiration of Dursk's forehead.

"Have a seat, chief. I've got a proposition for you."

An expression of relief mixed with puzzlement crossed Dursk's flat face. "Yes sir?"

I pulled up another chair and sat down. "The XO tells me that the *Merlin* is without a Chief of the Boat. I intend to remedy that situation. Here's the deal - I'm giving you the job as COB. You do a good job the next three months and stay out of trouble, I'll recommend your promotion to Senior Chief."

Dursk was smart enough to anticipate another shoe dropping. "Or? . . ."

I maintained my smile, but my eyes got hard. I can't tell you exactly how I do that. It's a gift. "Or, I bust you back to crewman recruit and make Kruff the COB. I'm sure he would enjoy the irony. I doubt you would."

It's hard to tell when a man with no neck swallows, but I could tell Dursk got the message. "Yes sir. THANK YOU sir! I won't let you down." He stood and offered his hand. I was impressed with the gesture.

Standing, I clasped his hand firmly but with no rancor. "Good enough, Chief. Now we need to get busy getting *Merlin* ready to depart tomorrow. We're going hunting for a new computer core."

Dursk didn't seem surprised by my announcement. "Aye, aye sir!"

Good response. I nodded and left engineering in search of some food.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 7

I made my second foray into the galley, determined to find *something* to eat. Several crewmen were seated and began to rise as I entered. I motioned them to keep their seats and I approached the food slots, a bit wary this time.

Not wanting to look inept in front of the crew, I pretended to ponder my menu options. In fact, I was desperately looking for instructions! Then I noticed a small printed menu index which had previously been covered with the meatloaf warning. As I perused it, I noticed that the meatloaf option had been crossed off. For some reason, this filled me with a sense of relief.

Armed with new-found food knowledge, I pressed in the code for a turkey sandwich on wheat with mayo, swiss, and pickles. The requisite lights flashed and presto! My turkey sandwich appeared when the tiny door opened. Isn't technology marvelous?

I went to the beverage servitor and, despite the XO's warning, punched in coffee. When it appeared, I took a sip to test it. Sludge. Just like mom's! I happily made my way to a table.

Two crewmen were already seated at the long table and regarded me with a mix of surprise and trepidation. I nodded my head in greeting and tore into my sandwich. It struck me that I hadn't eaten in nearly 24 hours. I probably would have even tried the meatloaf, given no other option.

The crewmen continued to regard me the way a rabbit might regard a hungry coyote. I noticed one of them had a large piece of chocolate cake on his tray that was untouched.

"You gonna eat that?" I inquired through a mouthful of turkey sandwich. Okay, maybe not the most dignified thing a captain could do, but, hey, no point letting it go to waste.

That seemed to un-freeze the crewman. "Huh? Oh, no sir. Here y'go."

"Thanks! What's your name, crewman?"

"Motyer, sir. Crewman 1st Class Owen Motyer. This is Crewman 3rd Class Roxyn Kol."

I nodded to Kol, a sandy-haired young man with brown spots that started around his hair-line and disappeared down his neck.

"Where are you fellows from?" I asked.

Motyer answered first. "I'm from the Mars colony, but I've got a lot of family on Earth in central Europe."

"And what about you, Crewman Kol?"

"I'm from Trill, sir."

That was a new one to me. "I'm not familiar with Trill."

"It's in the Kalandra system. There aren't too many Trill in Starfleet."

"Well, I'm sure you'll represent your home-world well."

I savored the chocolate cake and the coffee (sludge - black). Motyer and Kol excused themselves, leaving me alone in the galley with my food and my thoughts. Again, the thought hit me that I was responsible not only for this ship, but for the lives of the crew such as Motyer and Kol. All of a sudden, I wasn't hungry anymore.

\* \* \*

My first night attempting to sleep in my quarters was a study in futility. My mattress must have been designed by a Klingon interrogator. I woke up with aches in places that had never hurt before. If I wanted any rest on this ship, I'd have to requisition a new mattress before we shipped out. Maybe Mutt could scrounge up something better.

After squeezing into the sonic shower and changing into a clean uniform, I stopped by the galley for a cup of sludge and a doughnut, then headed to the bridge.

Lt.(j.g.) Rhys-Davies was in the command chair when I exited the lift onto the bridge. He nimbly hopped up from the center seat, relinquishing the conn to me.

I settled in, brushing doughnut crumbs from the front of my tunic and balancing my coffee cup on the arm of the chair. "Well, lieutenant, anything exciting happen on the graveyard shift?"

Rhys-Davies raised a quizzical eyebrow at the colloquialism but maintained his poise. "Nothing out of the ordinary to report, captain. We're still getting things tidied up with the bridge systems, but we're nearly done. The OPS board appears to be functioning normally, and the level four computer diagnostic is completed. Here are the results."

He handed me a data slate with the diagnostic report. I scanned over it, grunting at certain highlighted portions. The core was operational but the occasional glitch still appeared, cause unknown. So much for computer diagnostics. I was reminded of the saying that a doctor that treats himself has a fool for a patient. The same held true for our computer trying to fix itself. It was a catch-22 situation.

I took the stylus and initialed the report and handed the slate back to Rhys-Davies. He gave an apologetic shrug as he took the slate and left the bridge. Well, we only needed the computer to hold together for a couple more days. That shouldn't be a problem, should it? Murphy's law began to run through my head.

I decided to familiarize myself with the bridge stations. The layout was similar to what I remembered from my time on the *Osprey*. There were a few differences, however. Instead of a science station, there was a console dedicated to the tractor beams. Communications appeared unchanged, and engineering was where I remembered, although configured somewhat differently. And OPs was where the navigator sat on the *Osprey* while navigation was merged in with the helm station. In a few hours, all of this would come to life as we headed out for the first time under my command. I wasn't nervous, exactly, but if someone had tapped me on the shoulder I probably would have hit my head on the ceiling.

Ensign M'Roal was the only other person on the bridge and she regarded me with her blue eyes. "Arre you all rright, sirr?"

I gave her a reassuring smile. "Fine, ensign. Just excited about getting under way." The felinoid ensign returned my smile, displaying sharp, white teeth. It was a bit scary, truth be told. She turned back to her console while I forced myself not to watch the chronometer. There are few things more monotonous than bridge duty when you're docked to a station.

Fortunately, I was not going to have to worry about boredom for long. The communicator in my armrest chirped, I started, almost spilling my coffee.

"Erdon to Captain Parker."

"Parker, go ahead, XO."

"Sir, I'm in the starboard cargo hold, deck five. There's something here I think you ought to see."

Grateful for something to do, I virtually lept from the chair. "On my way, lieutenant. Parker out." I bounded towards the lift. "You have the bridge, Ensign M'Roal."

"Aye, sirr."

\* \* \*

I made it to the cargo hold in less than two minutes. Not a terribly impressive feat on a small cutter. I entered to find Lt. Erdon and a crewman I did not yet know. Erdon did not look happy. "Show the captain what you found, Shaedo."

The Asian crewman indicated an open container. I walked over to stand by the diminutive woman. Peering in, I saw numerous vials of a green liquid. Curious, I picked up one and held it up. The liquid seemed to swirl and shimmer in the light.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Ris-vil-ouyan. It's a potent narcotic that the Orions like to sell on the border worlds. We call it 'brain blast.' It's fast-acting and stimulates the pleasure centers of the brain. It also temporarily boosts strength and . . . other things. An overdose can cause homicidal or suicidal behavior, coma and even death."

"What's it doing here?" I had to ask, but I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

"It's not part of our manifest," Lt. Erdon said, drily. "Somebody emptied out this crate that was supposed to hold medical supplies, and filled it with the brain blast."

I was beginning to feel my face redden with anger. "Somebody? You mean someone on this ship!"

She nodded. I turned to the crewman. "When did you discover this?"

To her credit, the crewman did not cringe under my gaze. "About 15 minutes ago, sir. I was checking the holds to make sure everything was secure before departure stations this afternoon. I noticed that this crate was not properly secured, so I opened it to see if anything was damaged. When I saw what was in there, I notified Lt. Erdon."

I nodded. "Good job, crewman . . . ?"

"Ri, Shaedo Ri, Crewman 2nd Class."

"Thank you, Shaedo. Do not tell anyone about this, understood?" I made full-bore eye contact.

She blinked and nodded. "Understood, sir. I won't tell anyone."

I favored her with a slight smile. "Crewman Ri, thank you for reporting this. And for keeping it to yourself for now. I appreciate it. You're dismissed."

Ri left me with the XO to ponder the crate full of narcotics.

"Do you want me to call station security to get rid of this stuff?" Erdon asked.

I shook my head. "No. Let's leave it here. Whoever put it here will eventually come back to get it. I want to find out who's smuggling drugs on my ship!" I paused and jerked my head toward the corridor. "What about Crewman Ri - is she trustworthy?"

Erdon nodded. "Shaedo is sharp. She'll keep her mouth shut." She looked around the room. "It would be simple to mount a small surveillance sensor in here. I could put one in that corner and one in the crate itself."

I was still angry, but I also felt a surge of exhilaration. This could be a break in rooting out the smugglers on the ship. "Make it happen, XO. But be discreet. I have no doubt that whoever put that stuff in here will be keeping close tabs on it."

"Discretion is my middle name, sir."

I opened my mouth with a smart-assed comment, but she held up her hand.  
"Please, sir, don't. It wasn't that funny the first time."

"Sorry, Brooks. Just get it done and keep me posted."

"Aye, sir."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 8

The morning slowly eased into the afternoon. As 1500 hours approached, the butterflies in my stomach went from the occasional flit to a full-blown Broadway number. I concentrated on looking calm, cool and In Charge. I'm not sure I fooled Brooks. She gave me the occasional sly smile and shook her head. Easy for her, she's not the Old Man.

At 1455, the bridge crew was in place and departure stations was announced. Brooks Erdon was at OPs while Morgan Bateson manned the nav/helm console. M'Roal was at the comm station and Chief Kruff rode shotgun at the engineering station. I wondered how my hands could be so sweaty and my mouth so dry.

Thankfully, I managed to issue orders without stuttering. "Ensign M'Roal, inform traffic control we are ready for departure."

"Aye, sirr." The Caitian turned to her work station.

"All airlocks reported closed and sealed. All boards show green. We're ready to disconnect from station umbilicals," announced Erdon.

"We're cleared forr departure, sirr. Route Alpha," announced M'Roal.

"Mr. Bateson, thrusters at station-keeping. Mr. Erdon, disconnect umbilicals, release us from the docking ring."

The XO inputted my orders into her controls. Momentarily, we heard the muffled thuds and clanks as the umbilicals disconnected and the docking clamps released. We were on our own now, floating free of the station.

"Take us out on thrusters, helm. Route Alpha to the yard limit."

With a light touch on the thruster controls, Ensign Bateson guided our ship away from the Star Station. We glided past a few other ships, some orbiting the station, others in cocoon-like repair docks. One ship in particular caught my eye.

"Willya look at that?" I said, probably sounding like a teenager with a crush.

The graceful lines of the USS *Enterprise* loomed off of our starboard bow. I've always thought that Connies were the epitome of starship design.



"Maybe they'll give the "Big E" to you after Captain Pike is finished with her, Mr. Bateson." I had noticed the wistful expression on his face, probably not unlike mine.

"That'll give you five years to get ready, Morgan," chimed in Lt. Erdon. "*Enterprise* is headed out on another five-year mission."

"Yep, Pike's second. And Captain April did two as well. I guess ten years is the magic number on a Connie," I said. I also wondered about my magic number on the *Merlin*. If I screwed up, it would be measured in days or weeks, not years. Those were thoughts I didn't need to pursue. "Well folks, let's get our attention on our five *day* mission to Cyclops. Mr. Bateson, once we clear the yard set a course for the Molari system. One-half impulse 'til we clear the gravity well, then take us to warp four."

"Aye, sir," responded Bateson as he deftly made inputs to the helm.

In a few minutes we cleared the yard and Bateson cracked open the impulse throttles. I smiled at the throaty rumble echoing through the hull and the slight vibration in the deck - typical of the Kestral-class. As we gained speed, the vibration faded and the growl diminished, though not entirely. Relieved that we made it out of the yard without scratching the paint, I stood and stretched. "You have the conn, XO. I'm going to stretch my legs a bit."

\* \* \*

I went up and down the ladders between decks to work off my nervous energy, then stopped by sickbay. Mutt was storing supplies but stopped when he saw me and smiled. "Can I help you sir?"

"No, I just wanted to thank you for finding that new mattress for my cabin. You sure procured it in short order."

The young man actually blushed. "Oh, you're welcome, sir. I just worked out a three-way deal with the station's quartermaster and the first officer on the *Enterprise*." He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial tone. "To be honest, skipper, that lady is kind of intimidating!" He straightened. "Anyway, I talked the quartermaster on the station into giving them the bio-filters they needed and in return, she gave me the mattress."

My mind reeled at all of this. I was impressed that Mutt had actually made a deal with the exec on *Enterprise*. I had not met the woman, but scuttlebutt had it that she was one intense hard case! I also felt guilty that he had gone to so much trouble over something as trivial as a mattress.

"Mutt, I do appreciate the effort, but you could have told me the station couldn't help you. You didn't have to chase a mattress down across the fleet!"

He smiled. "That's okay, sir. I like a challenge!"

I shook my head. "Well, I slept like a baby last night, so I can't argue with the results. Thanks again, Mutt!"

"Anytime, sir."

\* \* \*

I poked my head here and there, still trying to get to know the crew. Finally, I made my way down to engineering. The growl of the impulse engines was noticeably louder here. I found Chief Dursk watching over the engines like a mother hen.

"Are we set to go to warp?" I asked in a raised voice over the din.

Dursk nodded. "Ready when you are, captain. Just give the word."

"I will, chief. As soon as we clear the system. How much can you give me."

"All the way to 6.8" he said, proudly.

I was impressed! Most *Kestrels* might make 6.4 if they were sucked into a black hole. Dursk might have his faults, but he was obviously a good engineer. I nodded in approval.

"Outstanding, Chief! Hopefully we won't need that on our little field trip. How are the other systems running?"

At this question, Dursk developed a concerned expression. "Well, everything is running fine, as long as the damn computer doesn't crash. If it goes down again . . . well."

He didn't have to say anything else. That was our weak link, our Achilles' heel, or any other cliched expression for vulnerable area you might have. We were taking a risk making this run to the Molari system. While not really dangerous, the embarrassment of another shut-down wouldn't do the crew's morale any good. Mine either, for that matter.

"We just need to hold it together a couple of days 'til we get to Cyclops. Do you have everything you need to swap the cores?"

Dursk nodded. "That won't be too complicated. We'll have an EVA crew make the transfer, but the install should be pretty easy. Assuming that the core on the *'Raptor* is working. Or still there, for that matter."

That wasn't a happy thought. True, the records indicated that the *Velociraptor's* computer core was still on-board and had been functional. But someone with the know-how and want-to could bypass the security seals on the ship and help themselves. Not that there was a big market for old computer cores, but weirder things had happened. My butterflies had left, washed away by the acid now churning in my stomach.

"We'll deal with that when we get there, chief. Let's just make sure we do get there first. Carry on!" I left engineering in a somewhat less good mood and made my way back toward the bridge.

\* \* \*

We made the jump to warp without incident and the ride was very smooth. Thus far, *Merlin* had performed flawlessly. I was just beginning to relax when the lights on the bridge flickered and several warning lights began to flash at OPs. Lt. Erdon let loose with a string of colorful curse words as we dropped out of warp.

"Status!" I barked, fearing the worst.

"Partial computer shut-down. Not as bad as last time, but bad enough." said Erdon.

I resisted the urge to bang my fist on the arm of my chair. "Alright, we've dropped out of warp, what else have we lost?"

"The mains are off-line but we still have impulse. Shields and weapons are off-line as are external sensors. Life support and environmental are okay." She

frowned. "It seems that besides the warp drive its only the defensive and security systems that are down."

The hair on the nape of my neck began to prickle. This was just too convenient. "Ensign M'Roal. Send a security team to the starboard cargo hold on deck 5. Tell them to stay put until I get there and not let anyone else in or out."

"Acknowledged," M'Roal turned back to her station.

"What the hell? . . ." Erdon exclaimed suddenly as she scanned her board.

"What is it, XO?"

"I'm picking up an incoming transporter beam. Deck 5, starboard." She turned to me with a meaningful look. "We've got company!"

I hit the klaxon button on my chair. "Intruder alert, deck 5. I repeat, intruder alert, deck 5. Security teams respond on the double." I slapped off the switch. "M'Roal, you have the conn. XO, you're with me."

We quickly entered the turbo lift. I grabbed the control handle. "Deck 5!" We dropped quickly. I looked at Erdon. "It seems that someone has been expecting us."

Erdon was ticked. "Damn! I should've thought of this. It's not just a computer glitch. This is sabotage."

I was mad, too, but my mind was working. "This is a step up from just playing the black market, XO. Someone is deliberately placing this ship in danger. When I find out who it is . . ." I let the thought dangle in the air. Visions of torture and slow, painful death played through my mind.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 9

Erdon and I exited the lift at a trot. We followed the curved corridor until we came to the cargo hold. Three crewman with phaser rifles were standing by, waiting on us. I indicated for two of them to hand the XO and I phaser pistols. So armed, we readied ourselves to enter the cargo hold.

"Heavy stun," I said to the security detail as I twisted the barrel of the phaser to a higher setting. "Shoot first, we'll ask questions later."

I took the lead position at the door. I know, it's not protocol, but I was pissed! Erdon gave me a questioning look and I shook my head. No time for arguments. Holding up my fingers, I counted down from three, took a deep breath, and entered the cargo hold.

I crouched low and swung my phaser around, seeking a target. There were no targets. In fact, the cargo hold was bare. Completely and totally empty. The narcotics case - gone. The rest of the cargo was also gone. No one had beamed in after all. They, whoever they were, had merely transported the cargo off the *Merlin*.

"Son of a . . ." I began, but held my temper in check. Blowing up in front of the crew wasn't going to help, even if it made me feel better.

Turning toward the security detail, I started barking orders. "You three head to the other cargo bay. No doubt we were cleaned out there too. XO, I need you to get on the computer shut-down. Warp drive has top priority."

Erdon gave me a startled look. "Not weapons and shields?"

I shook my head. "Whoever pulled this off could have already blown us away if they wanted to. Get the mains back on-line, then shields and weapons. I'll be along in a while - I've got some thinking to do."

"Okay, I'll get on it," she said as she headed back to the bridge.

Looking around at the empty cargo bay, I shook my head. We'd been royally had. No. *I* had been had, not we. I had made the cardinal sin of underestimating our opponents. That was something that would not happen again! While Erdon was trouble-shooting the computer, I had some pondering to do. The wall communicator beeped, startling me out of my funk.

“Devereaux to Captain Parker.”

I stepped over and stabbed the comm button. “Parker, go ahead.”

“Sir, we’re in the other cargo bay. It’s just like you said it would be – empty.”

I took cold comfort in that. “Thanks, crewman. You all can return to your normal duties.” I took another look around the cargo bay. The emptiness mocked me. *You screwed up, Parker. Your ship is a sitting duck, your supplies are gone, and you still have a saboteur on board.* With those happy thoughts ringing in my head, I headed for my quarters.

\* \* \*

With the lights at their dimmest setting, I sat in the outer office of my quarters, looking through the small viewport at the stars and the distant Molari Badlands. My mood and my stomach were equally sour. I didn’t have the time nor the luxury to wallow in self-pity and reproach. I had to figure out who was playing me like a cheap piano.

Turning to my desk, I activated the library computer. At least it was still up and running. After staring at the Border Service logo for a few seconds, I called up the *Merlin’s* manifest of 78 officers and crew. Taking the most logical tack, I searched for the crew members with computer skills. 20 names appeared with levels from 1 to 4. Seeing that three of our crew held level 4 computer ratings surprised me. Usually someone with that high a computer rating would serve on an explorer ship or large starbase, not a border cutter. The three names were Ensign M’Roal, Lt. Rhys-Davies, and the lovely Lt. Brooks (Don’t call me Sharlon!) Erdon.

I blew out a breath in frustration. That still didn’t tell me much, if anything. On a hunch, I called up the time-line of computer malfunctions with the arrival of new crew members. The glitches dated back about 20 months. This time, three names appeared. Lt. Rhys-Davies, Lt. Erdon, and a third name that caught me by surprise. “I’ll be damned . . .” I muttered.

Using my command access, I was able to call up Captain Treadway’s personnel file which had not yet been deleted from the ship’s computer banks. This hunch proved eerily correct. Treadway’s mental and emotional decline started about the same time as the computer problems and the addition of the two officers and the one crewman – some twenty months ago.

Before that time Treadway had an exemplary record. Coincidence? I didn't think so.

But so what? All I had were suspicions, guesswork, and a tenuous time-line of events. Nothing with which to make any kind of accusation, certainly. Hell, I still didn't really know what was going on. But my gut was telling me I was on to something, although I wasn't happy about where my suspicions were leading. Frustrated, I turned off the viewer and headed toward the bridge.

\* \* \*

"Report!" I barked as I stepped onto the bridge. Lt. Erdon was busy at the Ops console and turned to me as I sat in the center seat.

"Everything's back up and running. We've got warp drive, weapons, shields, the works."

She obviously saw the surprised expression on my face as she continued, "It wasn't anything I did. It just all came back up a couple of minutes ago. I've been running system diagnostics and everything seems fine."

"Could the one responsible for sabotaging the computer core set it on some sort of schedule?"

She shrugged, "I don't see why not. It would be easier than the hack job itself."

"Where can the core be accessed? From any terminal?"

Erdon shook her head. "No. There's only four places on board where you can access the main computer core subroutines – there's an access terminal at the core itself, here at Ops, engineering, and auxiliary control. But you still need an access code to change any programming or override any system protocols.

"Who would have that?"

Erdon gave me a funny look. "The commanding officer. You."

Damn! This was getting complicated. I decided to go with another gut hunch. Yeah, I know. One day my gut is going to get me killed. "XO, you and I need to have a talk in private." It was time for a come to Jesus meeting.

\* \* \*

One of the disadvantages of the Kestral-class ships are their lack of ready-rooms or conference rooms. Finding a place for a private conversation can be dicey. I wasn't comfortable meeting with the XO in my quarters, enticing as the idea was on a certain level. Instead, we went to auxiliary control.

We entered the small room, finding it empty as was the norm. I indicated for the XO to sit in one of the two available chairs. I took the other and dove in.

"Lieutenant, why are you on the *Merlin*?"

A delicate eyebrow rose on the XO's forehead and she crossed her arms, which served to accentuate her chest. I willed myself to maintain eye contact.

"You've no doubt read my personnel file, captain. You know I was court-martialed."

"And acquitted," I continued. "Been there, done that. I need to know what happened, lieutenant."

I thought she was going to protest, but instead she actually blushed and her eyes fell. "Okay. It's not like it's a secret." She took a deep breath to compose herself. "I was serving on the *Baton Rouge* as Ops officer and was up for promotion to lieutenant commander. The second officer – an admiral's son with more connections than brains was . . . infatuated with me. I had repeatedly warned him off – told him I wasn't interested. Anyway, several of us were on Rigel IV on shore leave. You ever been there? Yeah, it's a rough place. I was in one of the bazaars looking around when there he was – drunk with a gleam in his eye. I tried to move past him but he grabbed me, pushed me into an alley and told me all the things he planned to do to me." Erdon paused a moment, out of anger or embarrassment I wasn't sure. "Instead of getting scared, I got mad. Who the hell was he to force himself on me? When he had me against a wall and was tearing at my tunic, I lost it. When it was over he had three broken ribs, a broken jaw and probably sang soprano for a week."

"So why did you get in trouble for that?" I asked, "It was self-defense on your part."

"I was stupid. I didn't file a report. The whole incident seemed like a bad dream that I just wanted to forget. I figured he'd learned his lesson and would be too embarrassed to tell anyone what happened. I figured wrong." She took



a deep shuddering breath. "Before I knew it, I was being accused of assault and battery along with conduct unbecoming an officer. The captain saw a political hot-potato and hung me out to dry. Thank God my JAG counsel was sharp enough to get me off. But the damage was done. The word got out that I was 'unstable, promiscuous, uncooperative, etc. etc.' I had a choice between duty on a subspace relay station or the Border Service." She spread her arms and looked around, "So here I am! That's the sordid tale captain. Satisfied?" Her voice had a tremor of barely contained emotion.

I nodded. "Yeah, Lieutenant. I am. Sorry to bring up painful memories, but I needed to know if you were for real. I think you're playing it straight with me, but I need to ask you another question." I leaned forward staring into those emerald eyes. "Did you sabotage the computer, lieutenant?"

For a moment, our gazes locked. Then, she shook her head slowly. "No sir. I did not!"

Sarah Barnes Parker and her three sons may have their faults, but any of us can spot a liar a mile off. I knew the XO was telling me the truth. Don't ask me how – I'm not a Vulcan or Betazoid. I can't read minds, but I seldom lose at poker and I can find my ass in the dark with both hands.

I kept my gaze steady. "Alright, XO. I believe you."

To my shock and surprise, the XO hugged me. Not that I minded of course. And it was a purely platonic hug, so get your minds out of the gutter.

Erdon quickly released my neck and blushed again. "I'm sorry . . . I'm just – relieved and grateful that you believe me. The worst part of my experience on the *Baton Rouge* was when the captain didn't believe me. He accepted that scum-bag Style's story instead."

I felt a little awkward myself. "Um, that's perfectly alright, XO. No problem." It was time to get back on track, so I explained what I had discovered from the personnel files. She frowned as I told her of my suspicions.

"I don't know, Sonny. That seems pretty thin. And none of them have done anything I would call suspicious."

I noted that she called me by my nickname for the first time. Apparently some bridge had been crossed in this encounter. "If they're involved, they're smart

enough *not* to draw attention to themselves. Besides, who else could have pulled off the computer hack job?"

"To be honest with you, I'm not sure I could have done it, even with a level 4 certification. And like I told you on the bridge, you need the command codes to override the programming."

I nodded. "That's right. And I think they have the codes – at least the old ones."

"You mean Captain Treadway's codes?"

"Think about it – Treadway's problems didn't begin until the time you all joined the crew. Suddenly he's having problems with drinking, depression, and begins a mental and emotional slide. What if something happened to cause that slide?"

"What – blackmail? Somebody drugged him? Mind-control? Sonny, this is getting kind of far-fetched, isn't it?"

"No more far-fetched than someone hacking our computer at will and all of our cargo stolen from under our noses!" I sighed. "Look, we'll talk later. But I want to keep an eye on those three. Anyway you can keep tabs on them when they're off-duty?"

She looked doubtful. "Our internal sensors aren't that finely tuned. I can put sensors at all of the critical terminals, but you know how well that worked in the cargo holds."

I winced at that, but Mrs. Parker's youngest son has a stubborn streak. "Set them up anyway, just make sure they're well hidden. I'm heading back to the bridge."

She gave me a look I couldn't read. "What are you going to do?"

I smiled, "Try and track down that other ship. They've got a lot of stuff that belongs to us!"

\* \* \*

## Chapter 10

After Lt. Erdon left Auxiliary Control, I sat down at the sensor console. I'd learned a few things over the course of my convoluted career - one of those being how to find and track warp signatures.

I had planned to go to the bridge and work, but I still wasn't certain about Rhys-Davies or M'Roal, both on duty up there. They were still on my short-list of possible moles. No point in letting them in on what I was doing.

It took a good bit of concentration to rig the sensors where they could search for a warp signature. I never heard anyone come in behind me 'til I noticed a shadow move on the bulkhead, then someone turned off the overhead lights and tried to turn off mine.

I rolled out of the chair just as an energy beam sizzled past me, impacting the sensor panel which exploded in an impressive shower of sparks and flames. So much for the last hour's work! Part of my mind that wasn't in the "save your ass!" mode, realized that the sound of the weapon was odd - not a phaser, but still familiar.

I expected another bolt to head in my direction, but nothing happened. Curiosity trumped self-preservation and I peeked around the console I was using as cover. No one was there.

Pulse pounding from the adrenaline rush (it's amazing how your body reacts when someone's trying to kill you), I grabbed a fire extinguisher off the wall as a make-shift weapon. Okay, not the best choice against a beam-weapon, but better than nothing.

I had the presence of mind to go to the wall panel to call for help. But slapping the switch only brought silence - the wall comm was off-line. I was on my own.

Keeping low, I moved into the corridor and quickly looked left and right. The curvature of the hallway limited my field of vision. Eenie-meenie-miney-mo, I chose left.

I had only moved about six meters when I came upon a prone body sprawled in the middle of the corridor. The smoldering blast wound on his chest told me he'd be of little help explaining what happened. Lying next to him was a familiar artifact - a Klingon disruptor pistol. In fact, it was *my* Klingon

disruptor pistol that supposedly was in a locked trunk in my locked quarters. Not good.

Footsteps approached. I whirled and raised the fire extinguisher to strike.

Crewman 2nd Class Shaedo Ri dropped the data solids she was carrying and held up her hands in surprise and fear. Her eyes were wide as she stared at her captain brandishing a fire extinguisher like a bludgeon. I quickly lowered the cannister and was about to speak, when her eyes fell on the corpse in the corridor. She let out a strangled scream, looked at me again, then turned and ran.

"Crewman!" I called after her to no avail. Great! I had a dead man lying in the corridor, likely dispatched with *my* disruptor pistol, and now one of the crew thinks the Captain is a homicidal maniac!

And the day had started so well!

I found another comm panel in the corridor. This one worked when I hit the button.

"Parker to Lt. Erdon,"

There was a pause before Brooks came on. "Erdon, go ahead Captain."

"We've got a . . . situation outside of Auxiliary Control. Get Mutt down here and a security detail on the double!"

Erdon's voice tightened with alarm. "What's wrong?"

"I just about got fried with a disruptor. One of our crew wasn't as lucky as I was. He's lying in the corridor with a hole bigger than my head in his chest."

"Who is it?"

It dawned on me that I hadn't checked. Shaedo Ri had come up on me before I had done so.

"Didn't get a look at his face yet. Get on down here. Oh, and if you see Crewman Ri running around the ship, you might need to calm her down a bit. She thinks I'm trying to kill her."

"What?" Erdon's voice took on a comical note of surprise.

"Just . . . get down here," I said, the adrenaline rush fading a bit as I punched off the comm panel.

I've seen a few dead men in my day, so I don't spook easily. Still, I didn't relish the task of identifying the poor guy sprawled on the deck.

Steeling myself, I moved back to him and knelt down. The sickly smell of charred flesh stung my nostrils and my stomach lurched. No, I didn't puke. Oh yeah, I recognized him.

It was Lt.(j.g.) Rhys-Davies.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 11

In under a minute, I heard footsteps running in the corridor in my direction. Crewman Devereaux and a female security crewmen, rounded the curve and skidded to a halt when they spotted the late, lamented Lt. Rhys-Davies.

"Mother of God!" whispered Devereaux, as he crossed himself. He looked up at me. "Captain? You okay?" he asked in his soft, Cajun accent. The other crewman kept her phaser up, sweeping it around for some unknown threat.

"Yeah, I'm okay, but someone took a shot at me in Auxiliary Control. Probably the same one who shot the Lieutenant."

Lt. Erdon trotted up at that point, her cheeks flushed with exertion. She also carried a phaser. Her features knotted in a frown when she saw the body on the deck. "Aw, damn!" she muttered. She looked at me with a quizzical expression. "Did you see who did it?"

I shook my head and recounted the attack. "Never saw who did it. They flipped off the lights before firing." I frowned at that. "Which is probably why I'm alive. They could have easily shot me without my ever knowing it. When the lights went out, the hairs went up on my neck and I hit the deck. That's when someone shot out the panel where I was working."

Erdon knelt down and looked at the disruptor lying by the corpse.

"That would be mine," I said, eliciting a surprised look from Erdon.

Devereaux looked uncomfortable. "Uh, sir? We'll have to bag that for evidence and get a formal statement from you."

I nodded. "Do what you have to do. And while you're at it, check the locks to my cabin - see if someone's tampered with them. Somehow, someone got into my quarters to get that disruptor." I didn't mention that I thought that mine would be the only fingerprints on the disruptor. No point in giving Devereaux any thoughts of clamping me in irons.

Mutt showed up with a medi-kit and a shocked look on his face. "Whoa!" he said, sounding like someone had knocked the wind out of him. He looked at me then at Erdon. "What do you want me to do?"

I felt sorry for the kid. He was more used to dispensing bandaids and fixing hang-nails than dealing with corpses. Lt. Erdon answered first.

"Get him bagged, tagged and in the main stasis chamber 'til we can get back to the station."

Mutt knelt down by the corpse and checked for a pulse. Considering that I could see the deck through the man's chest, I thought it to be a rather futile gesture. Mutt continued a perfunctory examination of the body, then looked up.

"There's something in his right hand."

Erdon, Devereaux and I all peered down where Mutt was pointing. Sure enough, a small piece of printed flimsy was clutched in his fist. Mutt pulled a pair of tweezers from his medi-kit and pulled it out. A series of numbers and letters were printed on it.

Erdon looked up at me. "It's a prefix code! I'd bet my ass that it's the core access code."

Tempting as it was, I decided not to take the bet. "You're probably right. Check it out - see if it works."

Devereaux cleared his throat. He still looked very uneasy.

We looked up at him.

"Uh, sirs? Protocol says that the officer in charge of security should conduct all internal investigations and maintain the chain of evidence."

"Okay," I said. "Who's over security?"

As one, Erdon, Mutt and Devereaux all looked down at the still form of Rhys-Davies.

"Don't tell me," I sighed.

\* \* \*

Mutt and the security detail got Rhys-Davies' body delivered to cold storage. Erdon and I headed for the bridge.

"So, Rhys-Davies was involved in this," stated Erdon.

"So it would seem," I mused. " 'Course, whoever shot him could have easily put the flimsy in his hand." This was starting to feel like something from a cheap mystery novel. All I needed was a trench coat, a cheap cigar and a beautiful dame. Well, Brooks Erdon certainly qualified for that last part.

"That's true," she acknowledged, "but it doesn't explain what he was doing down there. He was supposed to be on the bridge."

"I guess we'll just have to ask," I said as the lift doors opened onto the bridge.

Erdon moved to Ops as I went to the vacant center seat. Lt. M'Roal was at her station and Ensign Bateson was at the helm.

"Mr. Bateson, why are you on the bridge? It's not your duty shift," I challenged.

Bateson turned, a look of surprise on his face. "Sir? Lt. Rhys-Davies called me to relieve him. He said that you had called him to meet him in Auxiliary Control."

He seemed genuinely surprised by my question and I was inclined to believe him. But the paranoia demon was squeezing my insides like a python, so I wasn't ready to accept his word just yet.

"Lt. M'Roal, can you verify that?" It's hard to read a Caitian's facial features, but I think she was startled by my question.

"No sirr. The Lieutenant *did* contact Ensign Bateson - that I can confirm, but my comm log shows no rrecord that he rreceived any communication frrom you."

I felt a degree of vindication at hearing that. So Rhys-Davies *did* lie to Bateson. How many other ways had he deceived us? "Where was the Lieutenant stationed before he left the bridge?"

"He was at Ops."



Erdon was way ahead of me. She called up the recent internal sensor logs. A satisfied smirk formed on her face. "He was scanning deck six," she announced.

Deck six - Auxiliary Control. Right where Erdon and I had been talking. *Damn!* he had probably heard everything we had said!

"That still doesn't explain who killed him. Or why someone went to the trouble of trying to implicate me!" I felt like we were going in circles while someone on board was screwing around with us. A possibility flickered into my mind. The process of elimination was culling the potential suspects. As unlikely as it seemed, I thought I knew who the culprit might be. I looked up at Erdon, a cold smile forming on my face.

"I think I know who our killer is!"

My moment of dramatic triumph was cut short when the proximity alert light on the helm console began to flash and beep, demanding our attention.

"The shields just activated!" announced Bateson. "Contact, bearing 101 mark 23 and closing fast."

"On screen!" I ordered, "Get me an I.D. on that ship!"

Erdon and Bateson both turned to their boards as did M'Roal. I settled back in the center seat, trying to get my head into tactical mode. The image on the screen told me what I needed to know before the others could get a sensor reading. The telltale, spinning shape of the Orion ship grew rapidly on the screen.

"Well, this saves us the trouble of looking for them," I said. "Red Alert, if you please, Mr. M'Roal."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 12

Orion "Spinners" have a deceptive beauty that can hide their lethal teeth. Most are armed with heavy lasers or even phaser banks. They are fast but also fragile. Often a single shot from a starship's phasers will put one out of commission.

With that in mind, I had to admire the sheer gall of the Orion ship that was approaching us. Usually they turned tail at the sight of a cutter. Their Captain was either brave, stupid, or thought he held all the cards. I suspected the latter.

A sudden realization made me sit bolt-upright in my chair.

"XO! Bateson! Go to manual override, NOW!"

To their credit, neither Lt. Erdon nor Bateson hesitated at my sudden order. Even as their hands flew across the boards, several alarms began to sound. Brooks turned to me, her eyes wide.

"Core shut-down!" she announced, her voice tinged with shock and anger. "If we hadn't gone to manual . . ."

"Yeah," I replied, "We'd be sitting ducks. Let's don't shatter their illusion. Mr. Bateson, don't correct for drift or bring back the shields just yet! We want to appear dead in space for our friends out there. XO, what *do* we still have?"

Brooks checked her display. "We've got impulse maneuvering, weapons and shields, along with short-range scanners and communications. We've lost warp drive, subspace communications and long-range sensors. Life support is functioning on back-up."

I winced. It was better than I'd feared but not as good as I'd hoped. If the Orions got spooked and jumped to warp, we couldn't pursue. But at least we weren't helpless. The *Merlin* still had teeth! And we could still maneuver at sub-light.

M'Roal turned to me. "Captain, we're being hailed by the Orion ship."

"Wait one, Mr. M'Roal." I figured playing indignant and helpless was my best bet. "XO, you're going to have to manually target that ship. We may only get one shot. Helm, be ready for evasive maneuvers when Lt. Erdon fires a salvo. I intend to royally piss them off!"

Looking back at M'Roal, I indicated for her to respond to the hail.

The main viewscreen shimmered as it shifted from a view of the stars and the Orion ship to that of a Red Orion male seated on a raised chair overlooking a control pit. The Orion had three diamond-shaped scars under his right eye and his long black hair hung over his shoulders. He wore a brightly colored, multi-hued robe. Did I mention he was smiling?

Time for the bluster. "Unidentified vessel, this is the USS *Merlin*, Silas Parker, commanding. State your identity and intentions!"

The Orion's eyes narrowed into yellow slits. For some reason, he reminded me of a cat about to hurl a hair-ball.

"I am *Ahmet* Sango Elix, Supreme of the *Daksomir*. My intentions are to retrieve my associates from your ship before I destroy it!" He said this with the casual air of someone discussing the weather.

Normally, I liked people who cut to the chase. In this case, I was hoping for someone who liked to gloat to give me more time to think. Oh well.

"Any hostile actions taken against this vessel will be met in kind!" I blustered. Brooks rolled her eyes loud enough to clink.

Elix looked bored. "Captain, we both know you're bluffing. My associates have disabled your computer core. You're adrift and helpless. Consider your imminent destruction a favor to save you from the shame you would surely face if I allowed you to live."

"Your associates - you are speaking of Lt. Rhys-Davies?"

Bingo! Scar face's eyes widened. I had definitely zinged him! He recovered quickly, though.

Elix waved his hand in a dismissive manner. "It is of no consequence that you've discovered one of our operatives. He was - how do you Earther's put it? Expendable."

"Yeah, well we're about to put his friend in the brig, too, but don't worry - we'll save room for you!"

Elix sighed. "This has grown tiresome. Since they're both expendable, I won't waste time retrieving him. Do you have anything else to say before we close this matter?"

"Just one thing," I said, casually. "Fire!"

Lt. Erdon's aim was spot-on. The twin phaser cannons on the forward edge of the hull erupted with blue beams of lethal energy. The Orion spinner rolled as our fire impacted her shields. Bateson firewalled the impulse engines and the *Merlin* surged forward to engage the *Daksomir*, which retaliated with her own weapons.

The *Merlin* rocked under the incoming fire and the bridge lights flickered, but the shields held. I hung on as best I could and barked orders. "Maintain, fire, XO! Target their engines - I don't want them running off!"

Brooks must be a distant relative of Annie Oakley. Targeting a moving ship when your own ship is twisting and turning is dicey even with computer assist. It's nearly impossible in manual mode, yet every shot she fired impacted the Orion vessel.

"Their shields are failing!" She said. I think she was really enjoying this!

Bateson followed the Orion ship move for move. He was as tenacious as a bulldog, not allowing the spinner a chance to maneuver out of range. I was impressed with the kid's piloting skills - we had ourselves one damn fine helmsman!

The Orion ship's shields flared a final time, then collapsed for good. Erdon methodically took out their weapons ports and their engines, leaving the *Daksomir* tumbling helplessly and venting plasma.

"Do we have tractor beams?" I didn't want to lose the quarry.

Erdon gave me an apologetic look. "'Fraid not. It went down with the other systems."

Blast! "Mark their position and trajectory, XO. Maybe we can get the tractors working and haul them in." With subspace communications off-line we couldn't call for back-up.

M'Roal interrupted. "They're broadcasting a distress signal Captain. They're seeking reinforcements."

"Jam their signal, M'Roal. We got lucky this round. We're not ready for a pitched battle with more ship!"

M'Roal regarded me with her jade eyes. "Sorry, sirr. Jammerrs arre off-line."

I made a snap decision. "M'Roal, you're with me. XO, you have the conn. If that spinner makes a move, space 'em!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm taking M'Roal to the computer core. Maybe she can get it back on-line. Then I'm going to find our mole." *Then I'm going to rip off his balls and shove them down his throat - just before I read him his rights.*

Mom always said I needed to control my temper.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 13

In the turbo-lift, I turned to face M'Roal. Her green-gold eyes with elongated pupils were alien, yet I could still read confusion there.

"Sirr? What is going on?"

I was fairly confident she wasn't involved in the cluster frak, so I decided to risk candor. If I was wrong, I was pretty sure her claws could turn me into hamburger in short order.

"We've got Orion Syndicate operatives on board. It seems that Rhys-Davies was one - he's dead, by the way."

M'Roal's eyes widened even further and her jaw dropped, revealing needle sharp teeth. I *really* hoped she was one of the good guys.

Apparently I was a good judge of character. "What can I do to help?" she asked.

"First, we're going to pick up a couple of phasers. There's one more operative on the loose. I want you to try to get the warp core back on line. I'm going after our rogue."

"Who is it?" she asked.

I told her.

"You've got to be kidding!" she said.

\* \* \*

We stopped by a weapons locker and grabbed two phaser pistols and two communicators.

"Set it on the heaviest stun setting, M'Roal. Don't hesitate to use it if you have to." We moved quickly to the core access located in the central Jeffries tube. I checked first to make sure our "friend" wasn't hiding in ambush. He wasn't. M'Roal made her way up the core, then turned back and gazed at me with her feline eyes. Now I knew how the canary felt.

"You suspected me, didn't you?" It wasn't really a question.

I shrugged. "Yeah, you're one of only four people on board who could pull off hacking into the core routines. One's dead, two I've been able to clear - you and Lt. Erdon, leaving one."

She nodded, accepting that. "Be careful captain. Good hunting."

Somehow, the way she said that gave me a chill. I most definitely wouldn't want M'Roal hunting *me!*.

I considered calling for reinforcements, but I was afraid my quarry would over-hear and find out I knew his identity. This was going to be one-on-one. And I didn't plan on fighting fair.

My problem was going to be locating him. I knew he wasn't on the bridge, which left six decks to search. I headed down the port-side ladder toward the hangar deck. Time to start from the bottom and work my way up. I kept the phaser pistol attached to my back where it was less noticeable. With my luck, I'd run into Crewman Ri and she'd have a coronary.

The hangar deck was deserted, save for two crewman servicing a shuttle-pod. I made casual conversation - the short, "Keep up the good work, carry on," speech designed to inspire the crew. I knew for a fact that they'd share a look and a laugh after I left. Not that it bothered me - much. Besides, my quarry was elsewhere.

I scurried up the starboard ladder to deck six - engineering country. My hackles were raised as I made my way toward main engineering. At least the atmosphere was clear of the swamp-like fog that had hovered here a couple of days ago.

It was hard to realize what a short time had passed since we'd shipped out. I had gone for well over 24 hours without sleep. Thankfully, my physiology worked in my favor, but fatigue was most definitely beginning to creep in.

I entered the large, double-doors to engineering. Everything seemed to be in order. I moved around to the engineer's cubicle where I had first introduced myself to Chief Dursk and tossed his desk against the bulkhead. In hindsight, that may have been excessive, but, hey! it got results.

An inner alarm was beginning to sound in my head. I drew the phaser and held it in front of me as I peered into the cubicle. Chief Kruff was lying on the

deck in a small, congealing pool of blood. I looked around, but saw no one else, so I slipped inside, and checked for a pulse. To my relief, he was alive but by the look of the gash on the back of his head, he'd wake up with one nasty headache.

I decided it was time to call in the troops. I reached for the communicator and flipped it open, when a reflection in the transparent cubicle walls caught my attention. Too late, I swung my phaser around as a flash of light knocked me back against the bulkhead. My vision began to fade and I struggled to stay conscious. Pain radiated everywhere, like a total body cramp. My ears were ringing and the taste of blood filled my mouth where I'd bit my tongue. I wanted to throw up. I wanted the sledge hammer pounding in my skull to stop. I wanted to know where the hell I'd dropped my phaser.

I worked my eyes, trying to focus on the blurry figure standing over me. My eyes finally focused on the phaser in his hand, then up into his face. Oh yes, I knew the face. I first saw it when I boarded the *Merlin* the first time. Only that time, the face had looked far less intelligent and far less dangerous. Two dark eyes focused on me with burning malevolence.

I managed a wan smile. "Hello, Farm-boy," I croaked.

For his part, Crewman 2nd Class Josiah Farmingham did not return my smile. Oh well.

\* \* \*



## Chapter 14

As I tried to regain my wits and the feeling in my extremities, I maintained eye-contact with Farm-boy, Farmingham, or whoever the hell he really was. My antagonist was breathing heavily and the phaser in his hand shook slightly. That was good and bad. Good, in that he was nervous and might make a mistake. Bad, in that his finger might switch and vaporize my head. My head may not be much to look at, but I'm kind of attached to it. Okay - that was pretty bad, but let's see you do better after being fried with a heavy stun blast.

"You just had to stick your nose in where it didn't belong," Farm-boy said, a tremor in his voice. Gone was the hang-dog, aw-shucks demeanor. He was angry and scared.

I coughed and held up a trembling hand of my own. In fact, I was feeling better. Folks from Centauri III are notoriously thick skinned and tough. The shot I took would put a Human from Earth out for hours if not days. My head was pounding, my tongue bleeding and I hurt all over. But I've had worse hang-overs. No point letting this S.O.B. know that.

"Seems to me that as Captain, my nose was right where it ought to be." Another cough - might as well keep up the act. "So, how long have you been a stooge for the Syndicate?"

He grimaced at that. I needed to be careful not to prod him *too* hard. Just keep his attention on me and stall for time. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my communicator lying on the deck - the grid up and the channel open. Hopefully, someone was listening to our little palaver.

"I grew up on Verex III as a slave. My . . . overseers gave me an opportunity to gain my freedom - by working for the Syndicate. It was pathetically easy to enlist in the Service with forged ID papers! And what better cover than that of a half-idiot waste-disposal operator!"

"Oh, I don't know about the *half*-idiot part," I said. My phaser was two meters away. So close, but so far. He'd vaporize me if I made a move for it.

Farmingham smirked. "Laugh it up, *Captain*! In a few minutes, my ship will arrive to extricate me, then you and the *Merlin* will be nothing more than a drifting debris field."

"Your ship? Oh - the one we just blew away you mean?" I offered an apologetic look. "Gee - sorry about that!"

He blinked, then the smug look returned. "Not a very original bluff, Captain."

I shrugged in return. "Sango Elix said to tell you that you were 'expendable.' I guess we did you a favor, kid."

That struck home. His eyes narrowed and he licked his lips. "In that case - you're my ticket out of here. You and I are going to take a shuttle pod . . ."

"And go where?" I interrupted. "Give it up, kid! A shuttle-pod has limited range and no warp drive. You won't make it very far."

He shook his head. "I don't need to get very far. If you've destroyed the *Daskomir*, other ships will come. They'll pick us up and finish off the *Merlin*!" He gestured with the phaser. "Get on your feet - you've had enough time to recover."

"Alright, alright," I waved my hand in mock surrender. "I slowly got to my feet. "One question - Why did you kill Rys-Davies?"

Again with that smirk. God, I wish I could rearrange his teeth!

"He was getting cold feet - afraid that you might be on to our identities. And his conscience was starting to bother him. He was fine with making money off of smuggling, but he got queasy over the plan to scuttle this tin can. I hoped breaking in and stealing your disruptor might divert your attention if I could implicate you in his death." A dismissive shrug. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Now, enough talk - move!"

As I was surveying my meager options, another voice called out. "*Farmingham!* Drop the phaser!"

I had to give credit to the kid - his reflexes were lightning-fast. He turned toward the sound and fired three quick blasts from the phaser. I made my move toward my own weapon, grabbing it and rolling behind the overturned desk just as Farm-boy fired my way. The blast hit the desk, but it afforded my just enough protection. I say "just enough," 'cause I still caught part of the blast effect. It felt like an electrical shock, but not as bad as the first one. I could hear more phaser fire from Farmingham and return fire from outside the cubicle.

"Give it up, Farmingham! You're cornered!" came the sound of Brooks Erdon's voice. Have I mentioned how much I like the sound of her voice?

"I've got the Captain in here!" he shouted. "Back off, or we all go up."

I heard a ratcheting sound and the unmistakable, high pitched warble of a phaser on over-load. Let me tell you - that sound will make your butt pucker in a heart-beat! We had about 90 seconds until his phaser exploded - taking us and most of engineering with it!

Realization suddenly hit me. Farm-boy really was an idiot. I stood up from behind the desk. "Hey, ass-hole!"

He looked at me, startled, aimed the whining phaser at me and pulled the trigger. Of course, nothing happened. You can't fire a phaser in over-load mode. Shaking my head, I leveled my own phaser and fired, sending his body flying against the bulkhead and his phaser clattering against the deck.

I can move pretty fast when properly motivated. My old track coach would have been proud! (Although, truthfully, I was more of a discus and shot-put guy at the Academy). I scooped up the phaser and twisted the barrel counter-clockwise. Immediately, the whine began to fade and I started breathing again. I hoped I hadn't soiled myself.

Erdon, Devereaux and Chief Dursk quickly moved into the cubical, weapons at the ready. When Dursk saw his scorched and battered desk, his face fell. I patted a massive shoulder. "It's alright, Chief. We'll get you a new one."

Lt. Erdon was holding a phaser on the prone form of Farmingham. She looked like she wanted to take target practice.

"Easy, Lieutenant!" I said, gently, reaching over and lowering her arm. "He's not going anywhere and we need him in one piece for interrogation."

She nodded. "Then we can throw him out an air-lock."

"Um. We'll see. For now, get him to the brig and have Mutt check him out."

Brooks eyed me with concern. "I will. *After* Mutt checks you first."

I felt like I'd been in a bar fight with a dozen Klingons. "No argument, XO. No argument."

\* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

Four Days later . . .

I sat in the ante-room of Commodore Paski's office for the second time in a week. Yeoman Beehive was busy at her desk, looking efficient and pretty. After meeting Brooks Erdon, though, she seemed kind of ordinary - even with the weird hairdo that was becoming popular for Human females in the fleet. It looked like someone had molded her hair in the shape of a flower pot and placed it up-side down on her head.

Her terminal beeped to which she efficiently responded. She favored me with an efficient smile and indicated that I could enter the Commodore's office.

Commodore Paski was seated behind her desk, reading a data slate. She waved me to a chair as she continued reading. I sat in silence, waiting for the inevitable inquisition. *Captain Parker - are you insane? . . .* Well, under the circumstances, it would be a reasonable question.

Finally Paski tossed the slate on her desk and rubbed her eyes. She gave me an unreadable look for several seconds, then opened a desk drawer to produce a bottle of an electric-blue liquid and two glasses. Without speaking, she poured two glasses, sliding one to me. She raised her glass.

"Here's mud in your eye!" She tossed back the liquid in one, quick draught.

I did likewise, and nearly choked. I managed to catch my breath and inquired in a hoarse voice. "That's very . . . good. What is it?"

She frowned and looked at it, as if unsure. "It's blue," she said, finally, and deposited the bottle back in the drawer. "Back when I was a cutter driver, I found a case of this stuff when we boarded an Orion ship about ten years ago. Scanner indicated it wasn't lethal, so I stashed a few bottles for special occasions." She leaned back in her chair and favored me with a faint smile.

"I know I told you that you might have to deal with Orion smugglers on your ship, Captain, but . . . *damn!*"

I shrugged. "It seems that all of *Merlin's* problems were related, ma'am. Rhys-Davies and Farmingham were hacking into the computer core at will, leaving the crew distracted and disheartened. They also managed to tamper with the

beverage servitor in Captain Treadway's quarters. Apparently, they introduced a drug that created a sense of paranoia and alcohol dependency."

I stopped at that, remembering how I'd treated Treadway. He had been right - it was the crew that had done him in. Two of them, anyway.

Paski was reading my thoughts. "Don't blame yourself, Parker. We all thought that Treadway had brought on his own drinking problem. You'll be glad to know that with the information you've given us, Treadway's addiction can be cured. In time, he may be fit for duty."

That did make me feel better. It also made me realize how close I had been to the same fate. Thankfully, I hadn't spent much time in the cabin and never used the servitor.

"What happens to Farmingham?" I asked.

Paski pursed her lips. "He'll face more interrogation, of course. If there were Syndicate operatives on the *Merlin* it's likely there are more serving on other ships. After that, a trial and most likely, a long stay at the Tantalus Penal Colony." She looked up and smiled. "All in all, you and your crew did a hell of a job!"

I wasn't so sure. Yeah, we managed to catch our moles and disable an Orion spinner, but our cargo was still gone and we still had that damn glitchy computer core.

"Ma'am, I credit our crew for doing their jobs and keeping their heads in a stressful situation. In all honesty, I was making it up as I went along and I'm damn lucky I didn't get my crew killed and my ship destroyed."

Paski nodded. "That may be true, Captain. But the point is, you rode the razor without getting cut to pieces. A good commander has to think on his feet and you certainly showed you can do that. Plus, you seem to have made some progress in turning that group of pirates and misfits into something resembling a crew."

I lowered my head a bit at that. I was afraid my face was turning red. *Aw, shucks ma'am! It was nothin' . . .*

"Now," she continued. "About these supply requests . . . a computer core and a desk?" Her eyebrows rose.

"Yes ma'am," I said, deadpan. "Course, if you can't help with that, I can always send Mutt around to the other ships . . ."

Paski picked up her stylus and initialed the data slate. "No need for that, Captain. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got urgent paper-shuffling to do. I'll be in touch within the next couple of days concerning your next patrol assignment."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She waved a hand at me, indicating that I was dismissed. I left the office, receiving a smile from the ever-efficient Yeoman Beehive and exited the Commodore's office. Brooks was waiting outside, leaning against the corridor wall, smiling. It was amusing watching Starfleet officers walking past her and doing double-takes. She appeared not to notice.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Okay. No firing squad today."

"How about keel-hauling?" she asked, with a smirk. Even her smirk was breathtaking.

"Sounds kinky! But no, the Commodore was actually pleased with how all this turned out. And, we're getting a new computer core and Chief Dursk is getting a new desk!"

"He'll be thrilled," she said, as her smile widened to reveal perfect, white teeth. Ah, the face that launched a thousand ships . . .

She walked over and slipped her arm in mine. For some reason, "Beauty and the Beast" popped into my head. "Let's get dinner - I'm buying!" she said.

"Sounds good! What do you have in mind?"

"There's a brand new bar and grill called *Sloopy's* that just opened on deck 16."

"Lead on, Brooks!"

**END**