

STAR TREK HORIZON



The Needs of the One

Darin Drader

Needs of the One

By Darrin Drader

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Historian's Note: The following takes place in 2378, just after the return of the U.S.S. Voyager from the Delta Quadrant.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 55091.6. The Horizon has docked with Starbase 129 to drop off supplies and repair specialized ship systems that were damaged during our encounters at Gour II. We have been ordered by Admiral Jellico to take on two passengers who are apparently with Starfleet Intelligence, though the admiral has refused to send me their personnel files, or tell me anything further about our mission. Despite Jellico's distinguished record of serving the Federation in good faith, if not in good humor, I find myself ill-at-ease with this situation.

Captain Sheppard and Commander Turner stood in the transporter room as the two figures began to appear. As the whine of the transporter faded and the energy patterns faded, in their place stood a pair of individuals dressed in black civilian clothing. The first was female, Bajoran, with hair that was styled into a bob. Like many Bajorans he had met, her youthful face seemed to tell a tale of weariness and experience that went beyond her years.

The other was a Human man, much older than the woman— Sheppard estimated him to be in his mid to late fifties. His head was shaved bald and he had piercing blue eyes, a square jawline, and eyebrows that bore a bit of an exaggerated arch. Despite his strong countenance, the rest of his physique seemed average. There was something about him that seemed familiar, but he couldn't place the man... the mark of an effective intelligence operative.

“Permission to come aboard, captain?” asked the older of the two in what sounded like a mild Midwestern accent from the United States.

“Permission granted,” Sheppard replied, then proceeded to standard introductions. “I’m Captain Sean Sheppard, and this is my First Officer, Commander Kevia Turner.” Despite their civilian clothing, he had definitely been a part of Starfleet at some point, if he wasn't currently. People who had never served aboard a vessel never bothered requesting permission to board. In fact, most low-ranking individuals currently serving also didn't bother requesting permission either. The fact that this individual who wasn't in uniform and was requesting it implied a power play that made Sheppard immediately uncomfortable.

“I am Erik Pressman and this is Ro Laren.” Again, there was something about both of their names that rang familiar with Sheppard, but he couldn't place from where.

“Mister Pressman, do you mind if I ask the nature of your mission aboard this ship?” Sheppard asked.

Pressman gave him a disarming smile. “Unfortunately I’m not at liberty to share our mission with you. Admiral Jellico will be sending you a new flight path, which you will be ordered not to deviate from. We will leave the ship aboard a stealth probe that will deliver us to our destination, and then the *Horizon* will rendezvous with us after we have completed our mission.”

Sheppard nodded. This wasn't the first time a ship he'd been assigned to was ordered to some top-secret mission that Starfleet didn't want to divulge to its crew. On those previous occasions, he hadn't been in a position to investigate without drawing the ire of

his Captain. Now he was. If these two were going to jeopardize his ship and his crew, or if they were about to do something that went against Federation principles, he was going to find out. In the meantime, there was nothing to be gained by putting their new guests on the defensive. Sheppard gave the most genuine smile he could muster and said, “Well, we will endeavor to make you as comfortable as possible during your time on this ship.”

“We aren’t concerned with our comfort,” Ro said. “We promise to be inconspicuous guests and we won’t require special treatment from your crew.”

“Understood,” Sheppard said, again feeling slighted somehow. “Commander Turner, would you be so kind as to show our guests to their quarters?”

“Of course, sir. Follow me,” she said, extending her hand toward the door.

Their guests began to follow when Pressman turned to face Sheppard. “Captain, I apologize for all the secrecy surrounding this mission. I’d like to reassure you that this mission will not put the *Horizon* in any undue danger.”

“That’s assuming everything goes according to plan,” Turner replied as she walked through the door, not waiting for either of them.

As Sheppard watched them walk down the hallway away from him, he heaved a sigh of relief. *No*, he thought, *there is definitely something about those two I don’t trust*. He walked down the corridor, took a left, and proceeded to a different turbolift than the others had just taken. The doors parted and he stepped inside and said, “Bridge.”

A few moments later the lift doors parted and Sheppard was greeted by the familiar sights and sounds of the *Horizon’s* command center. Starbase 129 remained on the main viewscreen.

“Mister Nod, I’m assuming everyone is back aboard and we can get on our way?”

“Yes sir,” Ipesh Nod said from his station. “The ship is reading the presence of every comm badge that’s supposed to be aboard.”

“Ensign Beach,” Sheppard said to the young woman with blond hair at the Conn, who was filling in for Hernandez, their usual first shift Conn officer. “I’m venturing a guess that Starfleet has sent along a flight plan for us?”

“Yes sir,” she said.

“Lieutenant Commander Tavika, signal to Starbase 129 that we’re ready to take our leave.”

“Aye sir,” said the Romulan Tactical officer.

“Let’s get underway.”

“Aye sir,” Beach said. Sheppard felt a subtle shift in the deck plates as the inertial dampeners kicked in, and he watched as the space station on screen rapidly grew smaller.

Sheppard walked over to Nods station. “Mister Nod, could you pull up any Starfleet records on a couple of individuals?”

“Of course,” said the Bajoran chief of security.

“Look up Erik Pressman and Ro Laren.”

Nod ran a search on his console, coming up with a pair of reports a few seconds later. “Both have Starfleet personnel files, and they’re restricted to Level Eleven security clearance.”

“And of course nobody assigned to the ship has Level Eleven access,” Sheppard commented. “How convenient.”

Just then Sheppard heard the hiss of the turbolift doors opening. He looked over his shoulder to see Turner enter the bridge. “Commander, that was fast. Didn’t you offer our guests the access codes to the replicator, or a complimentary mint?”

“They *dismissed* me once they got to their rooms,” Turner replied, visibly irritated. “Who do they think they are, ordering me around on my ship?”

“Do you want me to go ask them?” Nod asked.

“No,” Turner replied. “If we’re anything other than accommodating, they’ll probably lodge a complaint with Starfleet.”

Sheppard pointed to the screen in front of Nod. “Turner, it looks like Starfleet doesn’t want us to know anything about them at all.”

“So we’re just supposed to assume everything is on the up-and-up, and do everything we’re told. Haven’t the top brass learned that starships don’t work that way?” Turner asked heatedly. “The thing is, I swear I’ve seen him before somewhere. I just can’t place him.”

“Same here,” Sheppard said. “And I don’t like it either. If this guy is this memorable, Starfleet Intelligence probably missed something when they were classifying his records. Ch’qahrok and Nod, why don’t you two work together and see if you can turn something up.”

“Yes sir,” said Nod.

“I’ll see what I can do, sir,” Ch’qahrok said. “I think our best avenue of inquiry would be to start by running his face through the recognition systems... assuming they didn’t manage to find every instance his image was captured and classify those as well.”

“Good. Just... don’t break any Starfleet protocols while you’re doing it. I don’t want to get court martialed over this.”

“Understood,” Ch’qahrok replied. “Although, you should know by now, sir, that I don’t need the warning.”

“Of course,” Sheppard replied. In truth, he wasn’t so sure of that. Beneath the Andorian’s uncharacteristically stoic demeanor, there was a talented officer who would attack a problem, often obsessively, until he came up with something they could work with. Aside from the Andorian, he could feel the anxiousness coming from Nod. If anyone could unearth some information, it would be those two.

* * *

Antonio Hernandez entered the shuttle bay and proceeded to the runabout, *Arizona*. The hatch was open, so he assumed Chief Engineer Cunha was already aboard. He bounded up the steps, entered the interior, and saw the slight woman laying on the floor, her upper torso fully underneath the ship’s control consoles.

“Lieutenant Hernandez, reporting as ordered.”

Cunha pulled wiggled out of her spot, and looked up to the *Horizon's* top Conn officer. "Oh good, you're here. Did the captain brief you on our mission?"

"Not exactly," Hernandez said. "Commander Turner caught me detouring to the holodeck for a round of Perrises Squares while I was supposed to be on duty. She made it clear I was in a bit of trouble for neglecting my duties, so she assigned me to you for the duration of your current project."

Cunha looked at Hernandez quizzically. "We were docked at a starbase at the time, weren't we? What exactly were you supposed to be doing? Watching the ship not going anywhere?"

"That was my argument," Hernandez said.

Cunha laughed. "I think Turner was having some fun with you. I asked for you specifically for this project."

"And what is this project?" Hernandez asked, feeling a wave of relief that this probably meant that a reprimand wasn't going to appear on his record.

Cunha stood up and straightened her uniform. "When *Voyager* returned from the Delta Quadrant, they brought with them a new navigational system that calculated a ship's location based on its relation to the galactic core. This was necessary due to the inability of the ship's sensors to calculate their position the old fashioned way, which was based on the relative location of commonly known stars. This was a field-development and it was tied to numerous systems that were unique to the Intrepid-class starship. Starfleet wanted the technology adapted for more widespread implementation, possibly due to their research into slipstream technology, so I've been working on that ever since we left the Gour system. The prototype is ready and you have the privilege of helping test it."

"So you want me to fly the runabout?"

"Yes," said Cunha. "I also picked you because in addition to being an excellent pilot, it looks like you started off in engineering, which will be useful in the event that we end up needing to enact repairs along the way."

“That makes sense,” Hernandez said. “Besides, I really don’t get to spend enough time on runabouts anyway.”

Cunha frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Sorry,” Hernandez said. “It’s a class of small ship I admire. It’s not small and cramped like most shuttles, and it’s equipped for long-range missions and extended stays on planets. It’s basically a recreational vehicle for space.”

Cunha nodded, “I can see how you could think that, but this isn’t that kind of mission. We’re simply going to go out five light years then see if we’re supposed to be. If it is then that will be great. If not, I’ll need to go back and make some further modifications.”

“I didn’t think it was, and I’ll help in any way I can,” Hernandez said. “Still, wouldn’t you like to find some sparsely populated Class-M and take one of these camping in the wilderness by yourself?”

“Camping?” Cunha asked. “You mean roughing it? Intentionally traveling away from civilization in a quixotic attempt to *get back to nature?*”

“Well yeah, something like that,” Hernandez said.

“I’ve never had time or inclination to leave my duties behind so I can go hug a tree,” Cunha said. “On the rare instances where I felt the need to observe nature, I’ve found the holodecks more than sufficient for such activities.”

Hernandez paused for a moment. Cunha outranked him, and disagreeing with her could invite a miserable trip. On the other hand, he didn’t want to self-censor himself into not pointing out the obvious to her. “You do know that the holodeck is just a simulation, and there are a number of ways it’s rendering of nature fails to accurately emulate true nature, right?”

“I understand that,” Cunha said. “But that fails to bother me. At least on the holodeck, I can program it not to include some of the more unpleasant things about camping, such as rain storms, stinging insects, and waking up with unwelcome creatures nestled in your nether regions.”

“I’ve never had that happen,” Hernandez protested.

“Has it ever rained on you?” Cunha asked.

“Well, yeah...”

“And have you never been stung?”

“I once had to get beamed to Starfleet Medical because of a sting from a Rhino-Persattabee sting, but I wasn’t camping at the time.”

“And have you never woken up with a strange animal sharing your sleeping bag?”

Hernandez was about to say no, but then he remembered that time he woke up with a small and very deadly scorpion clinging to his armpit. “Now that you mention it...”

“And that’s why I prefer the safety of the holodeck to experiencing nature authentically. It’s more comfortable and much less likely to result in the premature termination of my life.”

“Well, that’s your prerogative,” Hernandez said, “But it’s some of those same things that create treasured memories with friends and family.”

“Oh, I understand,” Cunha said. “It’s a traditional custom in your family to go camping as a means of interpersonal bonding. I was raised by my mother, who is also an engineer, so we mostly bonded over solving engineering challenges together.”

“So you’ve never actually gone camping?” Hernandez asked.

“No,” Cunha replied.

“Haven’t you at least been sent on a mission in a camping-like situation?” Hernandez asked. “Maybe sent to the surface of a world in a primitive area where you had to help set up scientific equipment, or spying on Romulans in the middle of some primeval forest?”

“No,” Cunha said. “I was assigned to *Utopia Planetia* immediately after I graduated from Starfleet Academy. I didn’t take on active duty until recently, after I finished contributing to the design of the Luna Class starship.”

“I see,” said Hernandez.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Cunha said, “How long have you been stationed aboard a starship?”

“Five years. Just in time for active duty during the Dominion War,” Hernandez said. “I can’t tell you how many mud holes I had to call home for the night while we were fending off the Jem’Hadar.”

“And yet you still long to return to such mud holes?”

“I prefer the memories of the good times spent in those mud holes to those of my friends dying violent, painful deaths...” He trailed off, no longer interested in continuing the discussion.

“Lieutenant, are we ready to launch?”

“I checked the navigation system and it’s installed per my specifications. I’ve also plotted a course that should take us out of the way of every charted celestial body. I’d say we’re ready to launch.”

Hernandez took a seat in front of the main flight console, reminded again of just how comfortable they made runabouts. They weren’t anything like the fast and sleek, yet small and utilitarian class 2 shuttles he’d piloted.

Cunha tapped her comm badge. “Lieutenant Cunha to Captain Sheppard.”

“Sheppard here,” came the immediate reply.

“The *Arizona* is ready to depart the *Horizon*. Permission to leave the ship?”

“Permission granted,” came the response. “Best of luck out there, Fly safe.”

“Aye sir,” Cunha replied.

Hernandez watched out the viewport as the shuttlebay lights dimmed and a pair of red lights began flashing to either side of the main doors. A moment later, the doors parted in the center and slid to the side, revealing the black of space. He waited until the doors were fully retracted, then began the takeoff sequence. The ship gently lifted off the main deck, then he piloted it through the doors, passing through the atmosphere containment field as they passed into the vacuum of space.

He looked over to Cunha. “Here we go.”

The chief engineer gave him a thin smile. “This is actually my first time in a runabout,” Cunha offered.

“I’ll try not to give you too many bumps,” Hernandez said. He engaged the pre-planned course, then said, “Accelerating to warp three-point-five.”

Suddenly the stars streaked before them as the ship left relativistic space and entered warp.

Captain Sheppard sat at his desk in his ready room looking over the previous week's department reports when he heard a chime at the door. "Come," he said.

The doors parted and Ipesh Nod and Ch'qahrok entered the room.

"Gentlemen," Sheppard said. "I assume you found something?"

Nod handed him a PADD where he saw three pictures, each showing their guests.

"I believe the results speak for themselves," Ch'qahrok said.

"All of the images we found were taken from a distance far enough away that the facial recognition algorithms missed them. After we found them, we enhanced them a bit and I'm ninety-percent certain that these are facial matches for our guests."

One image showed Pressman, wearing a starfleet Uniform that dated approximately a decade prior. Based on the gold stripe down the center and the bars on his collar, it appeared that he had been a Rear-Admiral. Pressman looked younger in the picture, and though the top of his head was bald, Sheppard could see hair around the crown of his head. The piercing blue eyes and arched eyebrows were unmistakable.

The next image showed Ro Laren in a Starfleet uniform, with a single pip on her collar. Standing next to her was none other than the legendary captain, Jean Luc Picard. Both wore red uniforms with black shoulders. Based on the rough settlement they were walking through, Sheppard assumed they were looking at a section of Bajor shortly after the Cardassian occupation ended.

The final picture showed Ro again, this time badly injured, and being extracted from the wreckage of a non-Starfleet vessel that was commonly associated with the Maquis.

"So they were both definitely Starfleet," Sheppard said.

"There's more," Nod said. "I turned to the archived reports from the civilian media and I found some things you might find interesting. It appears that former Admiral Pressman was court

martialed, though the articles only vaguely referenced some undisclosed treaty violation. The picture with Ro was attached to an article about a survivor being saved from the wreckage of a shuttle that managed to make it to Bajor following the Cardassian and Dominion offensive that almost completely wiped out the Maquis.”

Sheppard nodded slowly. “Well, that explains why Starfleet classified their records. “Thank you gentlemen. That will be all.”

The two officers stepped back out onto the bridge and Sheppard was left alone with his thoughts. If Pressman and Ro were both former officers who had turned traitor to Starfleet, or at least gotten themselves in a heap of trouble, then the fact was that they could only be in Intelligence now if they were doing so outside of Starfleet’s normal regulations. If that were the case, that suggested that they belonged to a shadowy organization he had only heard rumors of that he’d always dismissed as nothing more than conspiracy theory. If it was more than myth then there was a good chance they were there on his ship.

He started to tap his communicator badge, then paused. Any overt moves made against them could land him in a great deal of trouble with Jellico. As a relatively newly appointed captain, the last thing he needed was to land himself in trouble with his direct superior, even one like Edward Jellico, who the whole fleet recognized as stern, authoritarian, and frequently contentious with his subordinates.

Perhaps this was a situation where working the regulations to his favor were in order instead. If this was a legitimate Intelligence mission then it could be assumed that the operatives expected to come back alive. That being the case, as captain of the *Horizon*, he was entitled to assign any additional resources he saw fit to assist and support any away mission.

He hit his comm badge. “Sheppard to Lieutenant Nod,”
“Nod here.”

“Escort our guests to my ready room. If they ask, this isn’t up for discussion. Bring some security with you to their quarters, but

don't make a show of them unless they give you trouble," Sheppard said.

"Yes sir. I'll bring them right up," said Nod.

"Very good, Lieutenant." Sheppard said.

He returned his attention to the PADDs in front of him as he dug into the department reports once again. It appeared that the science labs on Deck six were closer to isolating the genes responsible for Dibbens Syndrome, which was a genetic disorder with some livestock on Tichiochi V. Lieutenant Kye wrote that she believed they would be able to synthesize a therapy within the next few weeks. Sheppard marked that report as satisfactory and moved on to the next one.

He was halfway through a lengthy report about the efficiency of the dilithium chamber when the door to his ready room chimed. "Come," he said.

The doors parted and a perturbed looking Ro Laren and Erik Pressman stood at the door, with Ipes Nod standing behind them wearing an unmistakably satisfied expression.

"Lieutenant Nod, we'll talk privately," Sheppard said.

Nod wordlessly turned and left the room.

"Captain, I demand to know what this is about," Pressman said, standing in front of his desk.

Sheppard remained seated. If this was likely to be a polite conversation, he would stand to face his guest. In this case, he wanted to make it clear who was in charge aboard his ship. Rather than say anything, he simply picked up the PADD Ch'qahrok and Nod had given him and offered it to Pressman.

He saw the former admiral look at the images it contained, as Ro looked over his shoulder. Pressman glanced at it, then handed it back. "Is this supposed to mean something?"

"By themselves, not especially, other than that you were both in Starfleet at one time. It's the rest of the stories here that I find troubling," Sheppard replied.

"And what stories would those be?" Ro asked, a sour expression crossing her face.

“Something about a court martial for breaking an unspecified treaty,” he said looking at Pressman. “And something else about defecting to the Maquis,” he said, looking to Ro.

“If you’re accusing us of criminal charges that may or may not have been leveled against us in the past, I can assure you that the Federation doesn’t feel they’re relevant to the present mission,” Pressman said.

“Nor would they be relevant to Starfleet by now,” Ro added.

Sheppard remained seated. “Believe it or not, I agree with you.”

“So why were we dragged here to your office?” Ro demanded.

“Let’s see just how well the two of you remember your Starfleet regulations. Could one of you possibly remind me of Regulation twenty-three point five-one?”

Pressman and Ro glanced at each other in confusion. “That has something to do with the captain’s discretion over away missions,” Ro said.

“Specifically what it says is that the captain may assign whatever resources to any away mission, whether it be covert or classified, at his sole discretion, and that the captain of the vessel retains purview over the mission to ensure its success,” Sheppard said.

Pressman nodded. “I believe you’re correct about that general order, but nowhere does it specify that we’re required to divulge the nature of the mission to the captain.”

“That’s true,” Sheppard said. “Nevertheless, I’m entitled by my rank to assign you additional resources.”

“Exactly what resources are we talking about, Captain?” Ro asked.

“I noticed that our flight plan takes us very close to the border Cardassian space, and as we all well know, any missions to Cardassian controlled worlds can prove extremely dangerous. You’ve also stated that you’ll require the use of a stealth probe, which happens to seat up to five. I’m assigning Doctor Bashir and Commander Turner to accompany you on your mission,” Sheppard said.

“Captain, that won’t be necessary,” Ro said. “We have this job planned out carefully. We’re more than confident that the two of us can pull it off successfully without additional support.”

“I have to agree with my colleague,” Pressman said.

Sheppard rose from his seat and looked Pressman in the eyes. “As we’ve already established, this is my call to make, so I’m making it. You don’t have to tell me why you plan on traipsing around in Cardassian space. I do happen to know that if you get hurt, you’ll need a doctor, and if things go south and you get into a phaser fight, four people are more likely to survive against a group than two. I’m assigning you the support you’ll need to maximize the chances of your mission being a success.”

“We don’t have to listen to this,” Ro said angrily.

“No, actually we do,” Pressman said. “I’m the ranking agent in this mission, and because we chose to hitch a ride to Cardassian space aboard a Starfleet vessel, the captain is well within his rights here. If memory serves, Regulation thirty point five-six also states that a ship’s ranking officer may terminate any mission at his sole discretion if he believes that mission is unlikely to succeed, or that it would violate any of Starfleet’s directives.”

“Exactly,” said Sheppard. “So, assuming that you want this to move forward, I will be sending along extra help... that is if I’m still the ranking officer aboard this vessel.”

“Understood,” said Pressman, flashing him a piercing gaze. Was that meant to be an unspoken warning? Exactly how dangerous was this man? “Will that be all?”

“One other thing,” Sheppard said. “I’ve worked alongside Starfleet Intelligence before, and they typically wear uniforms just like the rest of us, except when operating out in the field. Other than the fact that the two of you wear black, you aren’t in any kind of uniform that I recognize. Now, just like everyone else, I’ve heard rumors about some elite intelligence organization that doesn’t answer to anyone but themselves, but I’ve always dismissed that as a conspiracy theory. Nevertheless, the two of you sure do fit the bill for just such an organization. So let’s just say that so long as you’re

operating from my ship, I expect you to adhere to all Starfleet directives. That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

"None at all," Ro replied.

* * *

Julian Bashir entered his quarters. He'd been surprised at the orders to accompany the ship's guests wearing black on their mission. But then, he knew exactly what organization these two belonged to. He also knew that he's outsmarted one of them before.

He hated to take pride in the genetic resequencing he had received when he was younger. In fact, that procedure had not only been deemed unethical by the Federation, but it had also been illegal according to Federation law, and having it put him in the same dangerous category as some of the worst criminals from Earth's history, including Khan Noonien Singh. He mused that it made more sense to him to pride himself on his ethics and his self control in light of the fact that he was capable of reigning him and his ego in, in light of his genetic enhancements.

The fact that he had these enhancements and had not become a danger to the Federation, was an open secret within the intelligence community, and because of that, Starfleet had made greater and greater use of him for intelligence missions throughout the Dominion War. Given the *Horizon's* mission, he assumed that he had been selected as Chief Medical Officer so that they could tap into his special skills, though he had never openly discussed it with Captain Sheppard. Now that he was assigned to this mission, he didn't need to. It was obvious.

What was also obvious to him was that there could be no trust between himself and the agents he was sent to accompany. Going into Cardassian space, for who knew what reason, was likely to be dangerous, and he wasn't entirely certain that he trusted either the intelligence or the integrity of the people leading them in. Bashir

sighed, entered his sleeping chambers, and approached the bulkhead near the door.

“Computer, open my personal safe, code Bashir four-seven-three-nine-Alpha-Omega.”

“Opening,” replied the computer.

The holo-emitter that made the safe’s access panel appear as nothing more than part of the wall switched off, revealing a small rectangular door, which slowly swung open. He looked inside and reached for a small metal cylinder within. He hoped using this wouldn’t become necessary.

* * *

“Captain, may I be excused from the bridge?” Tavika asked.

“Is something wrong?” Sheppard asked.

Tavika steadied herself as calmly as possible. “I just need a short break. Ten minutes should be enough.”

“Very well, Lieutenant. Ch’qahrok can cover your station in the event that we get into a battle in the next ten minutes.”

“Thank you Captain,” Tavika said as she stood up from her station and walked to the turbolift. As the doors hissed closed behind her she said, “Computer, locate Commander Turner.”

“Commander Turner is in her quarters,” said the ship’s pleasant female voice.

“Deck three.”

The turbolift began to move and Tavika could feel nervousness creep unbidden into her psyche. She seldom wished to have the calm of the Vulcans, but this was one of those times. She had made her attraction to Turner known shortly after the ship launched, and she had flatly turned down her advances. While she was not interested in pushing the issue, she did want the other woman to know she cared prior to what could be a dangerous mission.

The turbolift came to a halt, the doors opened, and Tavika stepped into the corridor. She passed a couple of side-corridors,

then arrived at Turner's door. She pressed the button indicating that she would like to enter. A moment later, the door swooshed open.

Inside, Kevia Turner was dressed from head to toe in a black jumpsuit, and she was throwing belongings into a small pack.

"Tavika, I thought you were on duty."

"I asked the Captain for a short break," she replied, fighting to keep the nerves out of her voice.

"Come to see me off?" Turner asked.

"Permission to speak freely?" Tavika asked.

"Of course," Turner replied.

"You're leaving the ship on a classified mission into Cardassian space, and that could obviously be dangerous. I just wanted to wish you luck, and hope for your safe return," Tavika said. She knew her words fell short of conveying the way she was feeling, but she hoped she could pass on the sentiment while preventing an awkward conversation with her First Officer.

Turner looked into her eyes for a brief moment, then smiled. "I appreciate that, Lieutenant. I'll do everything in my power to return in one piece."

"I look forward to seeing you again in a few days," Tavika said.

* * *

The stealth probe was a cylindrical device designed to deliver passengers and cargo to hostile worlds undetected. They didn't use cloaks, because that would be a violation of the Treaty of Algeron, but instead produced a dispersion field, which was enough to fool most sensors into not detecting ships. In fact, in a now famous case from Voyager's years lost in the Delta Quadrant, a Borg cube had once used that method to hide its presence from the Delta Flyer.

The probe's exterior was constructed of an advanced alloy that was difficult to detect with sensors, it literally absorbed light into it while reflecting almost nothing, life signs aboard couldn't be detected with conventional sensors, and energy readings were

likewise nearly impossible to read from the outside. Once launched, a stealth probe could travel at up to full impulse power to a destination, and then its occupants or cargo would beam off to some location within transporter range. Most starships were equipped with several of these, though they were seldom used. As Turner crawled into the probe alongside Bashir, Ro, and Pressman, she immediately knew why. They were cramped as hell.

The passenger space was a cylinder approximately five feet from one side to the other. Padded matts were mounted into the walls so that all six potential passengers would face one another. The probe was designed to follow a pre-programmed flight path, although it could be altered with a single panel touch-screen control interface that could be called to drop down between them. Luckily the plane of gravity was adjusted so that the passengers felt as though they were lying down rather than being strapped in standing up. As if to make the entire thing more appealing, the interior was lit in bright white, so they could see every pore on every face within, and they were all in arm's reach.

Starfleet Intelligence had tested this technology extensively, embedding probes within Romulan, Breen, and Tholian space, and had found them effective against detection.

To make the entire experience all the more surreal, Pressman and Bashir had had their appearances surgically altered to make them look like Cardassians. Turner felt it was a good disguise, even if they wouldn't be able to fool a bioscan.

Turner heard Tavika's voice come over the comm system. "Horizon has slowed to warp one, and we're coming upon launch coordinated in five... four... three... two... one..."

As soon as the countdown reached one, Turner suddenly felt as though her stomach was in her throat as the probe launched at three-quarters impulse power. *The inertial dampeners on this thing are weak*, she thought as her body tried to get used to the relative speed difference. Of course it was equipped with some sort of inertial dampeners, or a sudden shift in speed, faster or slower, would be

enough to turn them into paste on the forward or rear bulkhead, depending on whether they were speeding up or slowing down.

“So,” said Turner as she stared into the faces of the other three within the probe, “I think it’s time you briefed us on the mission.”

Ro looked to Pressman and repressed a smile. “Should we tell them now, or should we wait until we’re there?”

Pressman smirked. “We’re looking at an eighteen hour ride at present speed, at which time we’ll find ourselves in orbit around the planet Rakal.”

“Rakal? That’s where they keep one of their prisons,” Bashir said.

“The prison is where we’re going,” Pressman said.

“Why?” Turner asked. “I was under the impression that the Federation has long since negotiated the release of all the prisoners from the Dominion War.”

“Because the prisoner we’re after wasn’t a Starfleet officer,” Ro replied. “At least he hadn’t been for some time.”

“So he was Maquis?” Bashir asked.

“We’re going after Thomas Riker, who the Cardassians have been holding captive for five years,” Pressman said.

“Thomas Riker?” Bashir asked. “Why?”

“It was actually my idea,” Ro said. “I can’t say I appreciated his brother very much, but Thomas risked his life and lost his freedom trying to protect Bajor from Cardassian aggression. After the war ended, Federation diplomats didn’t consider him a priority due to the fact that he stole the *Defiant* and used it to expose the activities of a secret Cardassian base. The Cardassians didn’t want to release him simply because he knew too much.”

“But the war’s over now. Why is Starfleet Intelligence interested in Riker?” Turner asked.

“Because he’s found a courier within the prison system, and has slipped several messages out to us over the past few years,” Pressman said. “Between that and the fact that he was capable of stealing the *Defiant* in the first place, we feel that his talent is being

wasted sitting in a Cardassian cell. Rather, we think he'd be the perfect field operative for our organization.”

“And exactly what is your organization?” Bashir asked.

“We're not at liberty to say,” Ro said.

“Of course you're not,” Bashir said. “But you dress in black and you follow your own agenda. I've encountered Section Thirty-One before, so you can drop the charade already.”

Pressman stared at the doctor in silence for a moment. Turner looked at the other three occupants in confusion. “What is this... Section Thirty-One?”

“Spooks,” Bashir replied. “They exist outside of Starfleet, and are the equivalent of the Tal-Shiar, or the Obsidian Order. They follow their own agenda, even if their charter is to protect the Federation.”

“What do you mean they don't answer to anyone?” Turner asked.

“They govern themselves without oversight, and then get to claim that their actions are in defense of the Federation, even when those actions are illegal or against the treaties we have with other governments,” Bashir explained. “I've never known them to be up to anything remotely good.”

“Doctor, how could rescuing a good man from a Cardassian gulag be anything but a good thing?” Pressman asked.

“You're assuming it's actually him you've been hearing from,” Bashir said. “For all you know, Riker's dead and the Cardassians are playing spy games with you, trying to capture Federation operatives.”

“It's been independently confirmed that he's still alive, and at prison,” Ro said. “We wouldn't be going to all this trouble for one man if we weren't positive that he's alive.”

“So let me guess the plan here...” Turner said. “You're posing as Cardassian prison officials with a *prisoner transfer*, which would be me and you,” Turner said, indicating herself and Ro. “Once we're in, we take advantage of your assumed status as Cardassians to spring Riker out of there while we cover you?”

Pressman nodded. “I have a cover identification that I acquired, and we’ve assigned another confirmed Cardassian identification to the doctor, but otherwise yes, that’s the plan. All they need to know is that you were former Maquis, which they’re still trying to hunt down.”

“It’s a plausible enough story,” Ro said, brushing the Bajoran earring on her left ear.”

“I think there are so many ways this could go bad,” Turner said. “What if they decide to do a bioscan on you on the way in? They’ll realize right away you aren’t Cardassian. Or what if you can’t get close enough to Riker’s cell? What if the Cardassians decide to torture us the minute we walk through the door?”

“We’ve planned for those contingencies,” Ro said. “Of course there’s always a chance for failure, and that’s the chance anyone in *our* profession must face every day.”

“Well,” said Bashir, a broad grin on his face, “It’s a good thing you brought a doctor along. Someone might get hurt.”

The *Arizona* shuddered violently as it dropped out of warp two hours ahead of schedule. Cunha and Hernandez grabbed onto their seats in an effort to hold themselves steady despite the fact that the ship felt as though the field of gravity was twisting around them in a clockwise motion for the better part of a minute. Hernandez grabbed the control console and engaged several safety mechanisms in rapid succession. Cunha realized that the inertial dampeners must have been knocked out.

When the ship finally seemed to normalise, Cunha looked out the forward viewport to a breathtaking view. A vast field of pulverized rocks hung in space, trailing away from what was left of a fractured world. She couldn't tell what the world might have looked like before it had been pulverized because the atmosphere had probably burned off during the collision. The center of the planet, now exposed, glowed a baleful yellowy-orange. Odds were that this hadn't happened too long ago, but whether that had been days or years couldn't be known without further study. She just hoped there hadn't been anything living on that planet when disaster struck.

Her attention turned to the more practical matter of just where they were. *This wasn't supposed to be here*, she thought. "What's our status?" she shouted amidst the beeping and alarms coming from the consoles and other equipment aboard the runabout.

"Shields are down, warp drive is down, communications are down, and impulse is down," Hernandez said. The pilot hit control after control, acknowledging the alerts and turning the alarms off one by one.

"So what works?"

"Environmental controls thankfully, the computer, the warp core, and maneuvering thrusters. I'm going out on a limb here, but I'm guessing this isn't where we're supposed to be."

Cunha frowned. No There were two possibilities. Either the navigational system failed, or this partial planetoid had never been

mapped. “I’m going to find out. Deactivating the prototype navigational system...” She cut off the power to the navigational system she had retrofitted. She flipped open a panel and began rearranging the isolar chips she had just reconfigured earlier in the day. A moment later, she looked up to her primary console. “Rerouting power to the legacy system, and we’re...” She paused as her eyes widened as she looked over the readings.

“Yeah?” Hernandez asked.

“We’re about two light years off course,” She said as she slumped forward. Refitting this system should have been a simple matter of replicating the navigation system developed by Voyager in the Delta Quadrant, tying into like systems aboard this vessel, and turning it on. Nevertheless, the results were anything other than what was expected.

“Lieutenant, we have a bigger problem,” Hernandez said.

Cunha looked out the viewscreen and saw nothing new amiss. “What’s that?”

“The gravity of that fractured planetoid is pulling us in, and maneuvering thrusters aren’t strong enough to break away.”

Cunha’s heart began pounding. There were only two possible outcomes to this situation. Either they got the impulse drive back online before the collision, or they were going to smash into what was left of that planet. If they managed to soft-land on the portion that was mostly rock, their odds of survival were lower than she felt comfortable with, but not abysmal. If they hit the portion that was molten, their odds of survival were less than zero. “How much time do we have?”

“Not nearly enough... maybe a couple hours, if our sensors are working properly.”

Cunha could feel her heart pounding in her chest. The last time she’d felt panicked like this had been on Gour II, but that time she had Bashir and Turner present, both much more experienced officers than she was in crisis situations. This time Hernandez would be looking to her, even though odds were that he had much more practical experience aboard a starship than she did. She knew

she needed to remain calm and project an air of confidence, even if it was entirely false. “I’m assuming the replicators are still online, right?”

“I can test them out, but they aren’t reading on the damage report,” Hernandez replied.

“Good, then we have a chance. I’m going to open up the drive compartment and find the damage. If we’re lucky, we just need to reconnect it to the reactor, or maybe the computer. If we’re not so lucky, we might have to replicate some components and get it working. In either case, this is a solvable problem.”

“That’s a relief,” Hernandez said with a smile. Cunha couldn’t help but feel that he was being facetious. Could it be that he was already completely confident in their ability to handle the situation? Her practical experience amounted to what she had learned at Starfleet Academy, and while it focused on competency and remaining optimistic, that didn’t mean that Starfleet didn’t lose ships of all sizes for a multitude of reasons.

“I want you to do me a favor,” she said quickly. “Unless I need something, stay at the controls and tell me if the status changes.”

“Understood,” Hernandez said.

“Ensign...?”

“Yes?” Hernandez replied.

“Have you ever faced a situation like this before?”

“A few times... similar circumstances... Why?”

“Because you seem entirely too calm for the situation,” she blurted out. *So much for maintaining an air of confidence*, she thought.

“Our situation hasn’t reached a level of crisis,” Hernandez replied calmly.

“How can you say that?” Cunha asked.

Hernandez shrugged. “Right now we’re on a bad trajectory, but we have time to get this bucket going again. You’re the Horizon’s chief engineer. If you can’t do it, I don’t know who could.”

“And if the answer is that nobody could, given what’s left of the ship? This doesn’t make you nervous?”

“Lieutenant, we’re in deep space and we’re far from home. I’ve served aboard starships long enough to know that safety out here is an illusion. Any starship is one mishap away from destruction, and that’s assuming that we don’t catch some alien disease, get our atoms scrambled in a freak transporter accident, or get incinerated in a completely unnecessary space battle. There’s always the risk that we won’t come back,” Hernandez said.

“So how do you deal with it?” Cunha asked.

Hernandez smiled roguishly. “Nothing has killed me yet so I keep doing what I do. It’s worked so far.”

Arrogant, she thought. “Tell me, are all pilots like you?”

Hernandez laughed, which helped set her at ease. “You mean carefree yet competent? I think it’s in the job requirements.” There was something about his company that she was finding enjoyable and engaging. There was a gravity about his personality that she couldn’t deny, which was something she’d rarely encountered in her peers at the Utopia Planitia shipyards.

“Well good. Keep reminding me that we’re going to get out of this,” she said. “Now, let’s see if we can get the impulse drive online.”

She walked toward the aft and into the Command Sled portion of the ship. She turned a handle in an effort to access the impulse drive. The handles turned, but the access panel didn’t open. It should have released slowly and easily, but instead, it refused to budge. She put her strength into it, but found that it wasn’t any more willing to move. “The access panel must have buckled. Give me a hand,” she said.

Hernandez moved to the panel. “Maybe if you try to open it again, I can get my fingers around a corner,” he said.

“I’ll try,” Cunha said. She turned the handles again and tried to force the panel open. The metal pulled apart slightly and he put his fingers inside and began to pull in the same direction as Cunha. She kept pressure on it while he worked his fingers inside so he could offer more assistance.

That was when her grip failed and the access panel slammed closed again. Hernandez began to howl in pain, his fingers clearly crushed by the pieces of the panel slamming back together.

“Sorry!” Cunha yelled as she grabbed the handles with renewed strength and began pulling on the hatch again. A moment later Hernandez slipped his fingers out, but she could see the bone and muscle where the skin that had been sliced away. If it had cut any deeper, his fingers would have been cut clean off.

She looked to Hernandez’s face and saw that it was already pale, a sure sign he was going into shock. She led him to a seat at the table. The blood was beginning to flood the wound. She looked back to him. “I... I don’t know what to do.”

She could tell Hernandez was fighting through the pain and the shock. “Go under the command consoles... find the medkit.”

Cunha fought off her urge to freeze under the pressure and ran to the fore of the ship, then ducked under the console. There was a white rectangular box there, which she’d looked right at several times when installing the navigational system. She unhooked it and brought it back to Hernandez.

“Load a dose of anesthetic into the spray applicator... then release it above my jugular.”

Cunha fumbled with the various vials, finally coming up with one containing a clear liquid. She loaded it into the hypospray injector, then released it as near his jugular as she could.

A moment later, Hernandez appeared a bit more relaxed. “Alright, now use the dermal regenerator on my fingers.”

Cunha grabbed the device and activated it. She brought it close to his left hand, then paused. “I’ve never had to use one of these before,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. Just turn it on and move it over my hand. It will be able to detect what it needs to do.”

Cunha nodded and brought the device over his damaged hand. On the first pass she could see the severed meat begin moving back together. A couple more passes and the bleeding had stopped and the muscles were knitting back together.

“I suggest we use the plasma torch next time we try to open that thing,” Hernandez said with a wry smile.

“Yeah,” Cunha said. She wondered briefly how it was possible that she outranked him.

* * *

Erik Pressman took the lead, having committed the path from the beam-down site to the prison to memory prior to their deployment. He could have had them beam directly into their destination, but doing so would have put the access protocols they’d acquired to the test, and he wasn’t confident enough in them to risk it. Instead, he walked them in through a rocky path from the vacant shuttle landing pad outside the gates. This would be considered irregular, but he had a plan for that. The fact was that most people tried to break out of a prison, not into one.

They walked a narrow path along a rocky ridge, and they could see the lights from the facility below. It was night, and stars shone clearly in the sky above. Pressman and Bashir were equipped with lights that would help them avoid falling off the cliffside to their deaths. Turner and Ro each wore authentic looking wrist restraints behind their backs, though they were designed to be unlocked with a quick wrist movement. The entire team carried phasers under their clothing, which were hidden from sensors with small bioelectric fields.

They turned a corner in the trail at which point it began sloping steeply downward. From behind, Pressman heard a small pile of rocks kicked over the edge and slide down the cliffside. He looked back to see Turner’s lead foot dangling over the edge. Bashir lurched forward, grabbed her by the waist, and pulled her back before she could plummet.

She inhaled sharply and looked at the doctor. “Thanks,” she breathed.

“Don’t mention it,” Bashir said quietly.

“We all have Starfleet training,” Ro said testily. “We should be able to walk a path without broadcasting our position to the enemy.”

“Sorry, my foot slipped,” Turner said.

“Can we all just focus on getting down to the prison gate?” Pressman asked.

“Yes sir,” Ro replied. Pressman wasn’t certain if the two *Horizon* crew members remained silent as a means of quietly acknowledging his order, or to signal their contempt. In either case, he remained silent, letting the subject drop. He was accustomed to the distaste from Starfleet officers simply because Section 31 existed... And he was even more accustomed to it from Starfleet officers who recognized him and knew why he was forced out of the service seven years ago.

Moments later, they found themselves standing in front of the prison’s gate. They could see a razor wire-topped fence surrounding the installation, though Pressman knew that it was only used as a backup means of keeping prisoners from escaping if the power failed. Approximately a meter out from the fence was a shield generator that would deliver a shock so powerful if touched that it would send most beings into cardio failure. In front of them was the gatehouse, and they were not only already aware of their presence, but had their spotlights trained on them from twenty meters out.

“Stop where you are and state your business!” came an amplified voice from within.

“I’m Suhed Bitt,” Pressman said, projecting his voice as much as possible to be heard. “I’m transferring two prisoners from the Agiadon brig.”

“Interrogator, we’re sorry. We weren’t expecting you.” the voice replied.

“Well now you are. I suggest you open the gate and let me in before I decide to launch an investigation into the prison’s efficiency,” Pressman said. He knew that things weren’t the same in Cardassian controlled worlds since the end of the Dominion War,

but the threat of an efficiency inspection from a superior should still be enough to frighten them into compliance.

“Absolutely!” said a guard. A moment later he saw the static effect as the force field directly to the right of the gatehouse dissipated. Pressman wasted no time leading his three companions into the facility.

As they left the gate behind, the main facility rose up ominously before them. A building a dozen stories high with a trapezoid base was topped by a circular shaped main office that overlooked the entire grounds.

“It looks like they bought your story,” Bashir said quietly.

“They should,” Pressman said. “The real Suhed Bitt outranks everyone at this facility, as well as all but two officials on this entire world.”

“How do you know they won’t get on the subspace comm and verify that it’s you?” Bashir asked.

“They’ll probably try,” Pressman replied. “But they won’t get very far. The real Interrogator is currently stranded in deep space between systems on a ship with a disabled hyperdrive and no comms. It’s going to take them at least a week to restore their comm system so others can mount a rescue. By then, we’ll be long gone.”

“How do you know all this?” Turner asked.

“Because I sabotaged their ship,” Ro replied coolly. “We ran a long range scan aboard the *Horizon* and confirmed that they’re dead in space before boarding the probe.”

They covered the distance to the prison facility quickly and heavy the main doors unlocked and rotated upward as they approached.

A Cardassian guard stood inside. “Do you have a destination for these two?” he asked.

“Nothing but the finest. They get a week of solitary confinement before being allowed to join the other laborers,” Pressman said. It might have sounded harsh, even for Cardassians,

but the solitary cells were located on the tenth floor, which was one hallway down from where Riker was supposed to be.

The guard nodded. “Very well. Would you like an escort?”

“Not necessary. These two know better than to try anything stupid,” Pressman said with a meaningful gaze at Turner and Ro. Both women took his cue and lowered their gazes.

“The main elevator is just down the corridor. I assume you have the passcode to unlock the cell doors?”

“I do,” Pressman said as he began walking in the direction the guard had pointed. In truth, he didn’t have the passcodes to open the doors, but he did have the next best thing tucked next to his phaser—a tricorder loaded with a program that had been proven to make short work of Cardassian security protocols. If that didn’t work, he had a golf-ball sized device with just a few molecules of antimatter, which was more than enough to blow a hole in the wall large enough to gain access to the cell. Of course, using that would assuredly set off dozens of alarms, so he hoped he wouldn’t have to resort to it.

They stepped into the lift and Pressman said, “Floor ten.” The lift began to move, and the doors opened up to a hallway that was empty, save for the force fields blocking access to all the cells he passed, each containing two or more inmates. Most of them were sleeping at this hour. The smell of sweat, blood, and dirt hung in the air. Most of these people were forced to work the dilithium mines, and were probably lucky if they were afforded one shower in a month.

He turned a corner, at which point he arrived at the cell he’d spent so much time and effort preparing for. Two men were lying on cots within, with thin blankets pulled over their sleeping forms.

Pressman pulled the tricorder from the hidden pouch under his shirt in the small of his back and passed it in front of the access panel controlling the force field. The device automatically connected to the computer system, at which point Pressman used it to access the system. Once he located the control for the force

field, he deployed the program that had been designed to override Cardassian security codes.

As the device worked, he saw one of the figures move under the sheet in the cell. He remained still, but that wasn't enough to stop a bearded figure from sitting up in his cot within. "Who's out there?"

Pressman remained silent. He'd be lucky if Riker recognized his voice, and if he did, there was a good chance he'd be confused by his Cardassian appearance.

"I know you're not a guard," Riker said. "If you were, you'd have that force field down already."

Pressman sighed. The tricorder still didn't have access to the force field controls, and Riker was making noise, which could call attention to them and their activities. He decided that honesty would be the best way to handle this situation. "Erik Pressman. I'm here to get you out of here."

"Pressman?" Riker said in confusion. "Captain? Wait, Admiral... no. Why do you look like a Cardassian?"

"I can explain everything later," Pressman said. "In the meantime, I'm waiting for this thing to open up your cell."

"You're going to be waiting a while," Riker said. "The Cardassians just upgraded their security measures a month ago."

Pressman's eyes widened in surprise. In all likelihood, the program on his tricorder wouldn't just fail to lower the force field, but would probably also trip every alarm in the system. He hit a button and powered it down. "Damn. I really didn't want to have to blow a hole in the wall."

"You don't need to," Riker said.

"I don't follow."

"I already have the access code," Riker said. "Input four, seven, two, omega, five, alpha."

Pressman did as instructed and the force field dissipated. He looked at Riker, whose hair and beard had grown full, long, and unkempt. He barely resembled the young officer Pressman had known so many years ago. "I'm impressed. How did you manage to get that code?"

Riker shrugged. “You spend enough time in a place and eventually you learn their best kept secrets. I’ve been moving around freely at night for the better part of a year.”

“That’s impressive,” Pressman said, “But we have to get out of here. I’m worried they’re already on to us.”

“I can’t do that,” Riker said.

A wave of incredulity passed through Pressman as he looked at the man he’d come here for. Did he not want his freedom like any other normal person? “Do you understand what I’ve had to do to get here? The hours I’ve put in? The arrangements we made? You’re not going to get another chance like this.”

“This isn’t the time for bullheadedness... even if you can’t help it,” Ro said.

“Cap... Admiral...” Riker sighed. “Erik. I can fully appreciate what you’ve done to get me out of here, but I’m locked up here with several members of the Maquis. I don’t go unless they do.”

* * *

Roert Anrad’s comm panel chirped in his room. His eyelids parted a sliver and he looked around. The room was still dark. It was still the middle of the night, and they were disturbing his sleep—something all of his subordinates at the prison had been instructed not to do except in the case of an immediate emergency. In the twelve years he had held this post, it had happened three times.

He rose to his feet as the comm system chimed again. “I’m coming,” he said dourly. “Computer... lights.”

His room was immediately bathed in soft illumination, allowing him to see well enough to find his way to the comm unit without tripping over his furnishings. He stumbled there wearily, then faced the holo-camera. “This is Anrad. This had better be good.”

“My apologies, Overseer,” said a guard whose face he recognized but whose name he didn’t remember. “We may have a situation.”

“What do you mean ‘may?’”

“Interrogator Suhed Bitt arrived with two prisoners who were identified as former members of the Maquis. A short time later, a security system detected an outdated Federation program trying to hack the door to one of the cells.”

“Which cell?”

“Tenth floor, block forty-seven-B.”

Anrad frowned. He was familiar with that cell number for some reason. *Who was in that one...?* “Thomas Riker!”

On *Horizon's* bridge, Sheppard sat in the captain's chair. Ship operations had been much smoother since leaving Starbase 129 than they had any right to be, and that was something that always alarmed Sheppard. What would seem like a run of good luck with any ship usually ended with a monumental failure, such as a warp core breach, or a tribble infestation.

"Coming up on the rendezvous point with the *Arizona*," Ensign Lilly Spencer said from the Conn console.

Sheppard watched the streaking stars become pinpoints as the ship dropped out of warp. The runabout should have appeared on screen, but instead he was faced with an empty starscape. "Where is she?"

"Captain, the *Arizona* isn't on short-range sensors," Tavika said from the tactical console.

"Check long-range sensors," Sheppard said.

"Negative," Tavika said.

Sheppard frowned. The navigation system should have been fully tested by now. If it worked, they should be here. If it didn't work for some reason, they would have switched over to the *Arizona's* original navigation system, which should have still allowed them to arrive here in plenty of time. "Open up a subspace transmission," Sheppard said.

"Aye sir," Tavika replied.

"Sheppard to *Arizona*, you are not at the rendezvous point. Please apprise me of the situation." Sheppard was trying to keep the stress out of his voice. Three senior officers were off the ship at the moment, and this was supposed to be the less risky one. He waited for several moments, but received no reply. "Lieutenant, put my message on repeat and let me know if they respond.

"Aye sir," Tavika said.

"They may have gotten into some sort of trouble," Ch'qahrok said.

“I’m pretty sure of it,” Sheppard replied. “Cunha and Hernandez are competent officers, and the last thing either of them would do is take a runabout out for a joy ride. The question is what happened to them.”

“Captain, there are many possibilities, but the most likely ones are that they were diverted by an unexpected encounter, or the navigational device they were testing failed,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Even if it failed, they still had a working navigational device onboard,” Sheppard countered.

“We can scan for their warp signature and see where it leads, but that would require us to go back to their last known location,” Ch’qahrok said.

“That would make us late for our rendezvous with the stealth probe,” Nod said.

Sheppard reflected that this was quickly becoming one of those difficult command decisions that Starfleet had no easy protocols to handle. As first officer of the *Robinson*, the captain typically shielded him from having to make decisions that could result in failed missions and abandoned crewmembers. Would a delay picking up the Intelligence team result in death or capture? Admiral Jellico would tell him that their priority would be to ensure the survival of the Federation operatives. On the other hand, the stealth probe, while uncomfortable, could support people indefinitely. The lack of food would affect them before any environmental shortage. On the other hand, it was confirmed that the runabout crew was in some sort of serious danger, and if they didn’t look for it, the odds that those officers would become fatalities were high... And that brought up another potential consideration—the fact that the relatively small ship didn’t make the rendezvous point could mean they were dead already.

“Ch’qahrok, if we were to backtrack to the point where the *Arizona* left the *Horizon*, how late would we be rendezvousing with the stealth probe?” Sheppard asked.

“Unknown. Assuming we could detect their warp signature, it could take hours to follow it to their present destination, and

there's no way to ascertain how far away their ultimate destination is from the stealth probe. Given the fact that all destinations are a few hours apart, my best guess is that it would be anywhere from one to five hours."

"Captain, we could launch a shuttle to backtrack and locate the runabout," Nod suggested. "I'd be happy to volunteer."

Sheppard considered the suggestion. It was a solution that made sense and would allow them to keep their rendezvous with the stealth probe. On the other hand, if the runabout was missing because it encountered a hostile ship, a shuttle would likely meet the same fate. "I appreciate the offer, and your suggestion would solve certain problems," Sheppard said, "But that would endanger another ship and another senior officer. Right now, I feel that risk is unacceptable."

Nod left his station and approached Sheppard. "Sir, with all due respect, the *Horizon* is needed to return the other team. I'm comfortable with the risks involved in looking for the *Arizona*."

"Mister Nod, your comfort with the proposed action isn't my primary concern. What is my concern is how to bring all of my officers back safely."

"Understood sir," Nod said. Sheppard could tell that he wanted to say more, but knew that doing so would probably be a mistake.

"While Starfleet Intelligence didn't bother filling me in on the mission into Cardassian space, they did give me an estimate on how long they expected the mission to take. Our arrival at the rendezvous point is approximately five hours ahead of the expected arrival time of the stealth probe. This was done purposely so that we'd be there to deter any craft that might be following them. As far as I'm concerned, that buys us the time to track down the *Arizona*. Ch'qahrok, launch a probe and have it alert us via subspace if a ship matching the *Arizona*'s configuration arrives here."

"Aye sir," the Andorian said.

"Ensign Spencer, plot a course to the last known location of the *Arizona*, warp nine."

"Aye sir," came the helmsman's reply.

“The probe is launched, sir,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Very good. Ensign Spencer, engage.”

* * *

“Try firing up the impulse drive,” Cunha called out to the runabout’s cockpit. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been working on the drive. Once they had managed to gain access to the engines, she found it open to the vacuum of space after having been almost completely pulverized. Fortunately, it had been easy enough to reroute the shields to keep the atmosphere from leaking out. Bringing the engines back online hadn’t proven so easy. Half of the parts that made it an engine had either been damaged, burned out, or were simply not present because they’d been sucked out into space.

“Firing up the engine,” Hernandez said from the primary control console.

Cunha watched a light activate on the primary power conduit near the back of the unit, which told her that it was receiving power. The first system it ran to was the particle acceleration array, which she’d had to replicate. She hit a button that would allow power to access that device. A small red light turned on, indicating that it was online. So far, so good. She was about to hit the button to initialize the main drive, then paused. This was the fifth time she’d gotten to this stage only for the engines to still fail. She suppressed a shudder, then hit the button.

The engine sounded healthy enough as it powered up. She could hear the various components making the sounds they were supposed to make. This was encouraging. “Forward one quarter impulse,” she called out.

“One quarter impulse,” Hernandez echoed.

As the engine should have propelled them forward, instead energy arced from it to the nearest bulkhead, missing her arm by inches. “Shut it off!” she called out as she recoiled.

The energy abruptly stopped arcing as the power terminated. “What this time?” Hernandez asked.

“I’m honestly not sure,” Cunha replied. “Massive energy spike that got directed outward.”

“I think you need to take a break,” Hernandez said.

“I do that, we die,” Cunha said.

“If you don’t do that, you’re liable to make another mistake that’ll get us killed anyway,” Hernandez said. “Give your mind a rest and then go back into it fresh,” Hernandez said.

Cunha sighed. *Perhaps he was right*, she thought.

She backed away from the access panel and moved to the vibro-washer to clean her hands. Convinced that she wasn’t going to leave grease and carbon stains all over the seating, she moved to the front of the runabout. The shattered planet with the debris field trailing away from it was noticeably larger than it had been when they’d started working. “Six tries and nothing,” she said.

“Six tries in less than an hour,” Hernandez replied. “You may not have gotten us going, but you’re making good time.”

Cunha smiled. “Has it really been less than an hour?”

“Fifty-four minutes, thirty-nine seconds,” Hernandez replied with a smile.

“That’s half the time we had available from the outset,” Cunha said, exasperated. “We’re running out of time!”

“And yet, I have every confidence in your abilities,” Hernandez said. “You’re the chief engineer of a Sovereign class vessel. You’re the most accomplished engineer onboard. If anyone can get a runabout working again, it’s you.”

“I wish I shared your optimism,” Cunha said.

“You’ll do it,” Hernandez said. “And if you don’t, we’re now overdue for our rendezvous with the *Horizon*, so if you can’t get this bucket working again, I’m sure they’ll find us.”

“Not in time,” Cunha said.

“I don’t follow,” Hernandez said.

“If we just missed the rendezvous then the only way they’ll be able to find us is by going back to the point where we left the ship,

and then scan for our warp signature. They'll then have to follow the trail to here. Even at maximum warp, they can't get here until about... two and a half hours after we're set to crash into that broken planet in front of us."

Hernandez paused for a moment. "What if we're approaching this from the wrong angle?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Cunha said. The only angle she was aware of was getting the *Arizona* working again.

"We still have maneuvering thrusters," Hernandez said.

"We've already tried plotting that course," Cunha replied. "We can't achieve a stable orbit with them."

"Not a stable orbit, but suppose we do a maximum burn away from the planet. If nothing else, that would put some distance between us and it, and will buy us some time."

Cunha considered it for a moment. He was right. It wouldn't be enough to save them, but it might be enough to keep them alive long enough for the *Horizon* to find them. She accessed LCARS and pulled up the navigational display. She checked the liquid fuel reserves, then input that along with a continued burn away from the planet. The computer displayed the new course they would be looking at. "According to this, we'd be dead in five hours."

"And that would give *Horizon* enough time to find us," Hernandez said.

"That's assuming that they come looking for us," Cunha said. "We aren't the only team they need to rendezvous with."

Hernandez smiled. "One thing I know about Captain Sheppard is that he doesn't leave people behind. We do this, it'll give you more time to get the engines going, and it will give them time to find us. I think it's the only logical thing to do."

Suddenly the runabout shuddered. It felt as though they'd been struck by something. "What was that?" She asked,

"We just entered the debris field. We're likely to take more hits like that," Hernandez said.

"Let's go with your idea! Get ready to initiate the burn."

“Exactly how many former Maquis are here with you?”
Pressman asked.

“My cellmate, and two others,” Riker replied. “And why do you say *former*?”

“Thomas, since you’ve been incarcerated, the Dominion has been defeated and the Cardassians went down with them... but not before they wiped out the Maquis. There is no Maquis anymore.”

Riker felt as though he’d been struck. He knew about the end of hostilities, but had no idea the Maquis had paid such a high price. He looked to Ro. He’d known her after she left Starfleet to help the Maquis. “How are you here then?”

Ro sighed. “Not that we have time for all this pointless banter, but after I abandoned Starfleet, I was considered a fugitive. Captain Picard had been willing to let me go, especially since he sympathized with our cause, but he’s not the only captain in Starfleet. The *Bozeman*, under the command of Captain Bateson, tracked me down in a Maquis camp and arrested me.”

Riker looked to his former captain. “And you were arrested for violating the treaty of Algeron. You were both serving long sentences not very long ago. Why are you here?” He paused. Something was clearly amiss. By all rights, both of them should have been in a cell. Nevertheless, they were accompanied by Doctor Bashir, who, last he’s seen of him, had been serving as the Chief Medical Officer aboard Deep Space Nine. The woman with the cybernetic implants was unknown to him.

“Thomas, we really don’t have time for this. You’re just going to have to trust me,” Pressman said. Despite the Cardassian disguise, Riker could see the anxiety in his former captain’s eyes.

“And the Maquis?” Riker asked.

“We only have room for one more,” Pressman replied. “We didn’t come here to rescue Maquis prisoners.”

“Why did you come for me?” Riker asked.

Pressman looked as though he was about to reply when they heard the sound of booted feet running down the corridor toward them. Pressman pulled the phasers from the pouch in the small of his back and handed one to Riker. Turner and Ro escaped their faux cuffs, and they were all armed.

They heard the booted feet stop just short of the corner, providing the Cardassians with cover. "I know you're not Suhed Bitt," came a commanding voice.

"Sure I am," Pressman said. Riker knew this bluff wasn't going to work. It wasn't even a good bluff. But then, Pressman never had been very good at poker.

"The real Suhed Bitt wouldn't have tried to hack open a door using a completely traceable Starfleet tricorder. Apparently your intelligence was off when they sent you in here if you thought that was going to work."

"Look, we're only here for one prisoner. Let us leave and nobody will get hurt," Pressman said.

"Threats. That's not very Starfleet of you," the voice said.

"Maybe you shouldn't assume we're Starfleet," Pressman retorted.

"It's irrelevant to me," said the voice. "What is relevant is that the prisoner you're attempting to free causes me enough headaches that I won't feel bad killing him while trying to escape."

"Anrad," Riker called out, "I'm not trying to escape. I have nothing to do with this."

"It's too late for that," the voice said coldly. "I've had enough of you Human and Bajoran scum cluttering up my orderly prison."

So that's it, Riker thought. This is just the excuse he's been looking for to execute me, in cold blood or otherwise. He checked, made sure that the weapon was set to stun, and fired at the corridor the Cardassians were hiding behind. "Follow me," he said to the others, and started running down the hall.

"Thomas," Pressman said as he jogged alongside him, "The lift is the other way."

“The lift isn’t safe,” Riker said. “Nothing is stopping them from shutting that down once we’re moving. We need the stairs, which are this way.”

“Would anyone like to explain to me what happens now?” Turner asked. “Did you have a plan to get us out of here in case your plan went bad?”

“Of course there’s a backup plan,” Pressman said as he ran.

“Care to fill me in?” Turner asked,

“We need to get back outside the dampening field, then beam back to the probe,” Ro said.

“So we’re just going to march back through the main gate?” Bashir asked incredulously. “You don’t think they’ll be waiting for us?”

Riker could hear the sound of booted feet pursuing them as they reached the door to the stairwell. He threw it open, then began bounding down the stairs. They turned the corner at the landing for the ninth floor, and kept going down. “I really have to hand it to you,” Riker said over his shoulder. “So far this is an amazing rescue.”

“We planned the operation as well as possible,” Ro said. “Unfortunately no one can plan for every eventuality.”

“Look, if we want to have any chance of getting out of here alive, we need to lay low for a while,” Riker said.

“Any ideas off the top of your head?” Turner asked behind him.

“A supply closet the next floor down. I can get into it, and they’ve never been able to find me there, so I can only assume the sensors don’t cover it. We can access the ventilation shafts that run air from the roof to the mines below,” Riker said. In truth, he’d been working on an escape plan since the day he’d arrived here. His cell no longer could contain him, he could freely roam about the prison, but the one thing he’d never had before now was a way off the planet. He could get them as far as the front gate. From there, it was just a matter of whether or not they could fight their way out. They had weapons, which was something he hadn’t had before now. It might be enough.

He led them out of the stairway and into a corridor much like the one they'd been in above. When he reached the door to the supply closet, he punched in the access code and threw the door open. The others followed him in and he closed the door behind him. The closet wasn't enormous, but it was large enough for the five of them to crouch around a pile of replacement lights.

"Not everyone here is acquainted, so let me do the honors," Pressman said. "Obviously we know each other already. I believe you already know the doctor."

"We've met," Bashir acknowledged.

"Ro Laren, former Starfleet."

"I served with your brother," Ro said.

"Is that why you're here?" Riker asked.

"No. We didn't really get along," Ro replied.

"Finally, Kevia Turner, first officer of the *Horizon*."

"And why are you here?" Riker asked. So far this was making no sense. If this was a Starfleet operation, he was pretty sure Ro and Pressman wouldn't have anything to do with it.

"My captain ordered me to join them," Turner said simply.

"Alright, somebody had better start making sense," Riker said. "I don't like puzzles, and if I'm going to trust you to get me out of here, I'd like to know what's going on."

Turner laughed sarcastically. "It's a section thirty-one operation. Of course we weren't told that up front."

"Alright," Riker said. "Why me?"

"Because we're hoping that once you're out of here, you'll want to join us," Pressman said.

Riker looked at them incredulously. Starfleet and the Federation had abandoned him a long time ago and left him to rot on this Cardassian penal colony. That hadn't even been the first time he'd felt abandoned by them. Now they were actually committing resources to getting him back? That just didn't seem like his role in the universe. "How did the two of you end up in Section thirty-one?"

Ro spoke first. “After I was captured, they argued for a while about whether they should send me back to Bajor and let my people decide what to do with me, or to send me to a Starfleet stockade. Because I had been a Starfleet officer, they decided on the stockade. After I’d been there for a couple of years, I had a visitor who offered me a way out. She told me she liked that I was willing to break the rules to do what was right, and she knew that I was familiar enough with Starfleet defense protocols to sneak on and off a starship without getting caught. I wasn’t sure I wanted to serve the Federation again, but it beat prison, so I decided to join. It’s been far more rewarding than serving aboard a starship.”

“And you already know half my story,” said Pressman. “After Starfleet court martialed me, I was looking at the rest of my life in a stockade. Starfleet threw away the key. Then I had a similar visit to the one Ro had. They like people who take action for what they think is right, even if they aren’t necessarily following the rules.”

“In other words, they like to recruit criminals,” Turner said.

“Not everybody in Section thirty-one has a criminal background,” Ro said.

“But I bet a lot of you do,” Riker said.

“Many, yes,” Pressman said. “They like people who screwed up and did the wrong things for the right reasons.”

“Like someone stealing a Federation vessel to reveal a secret Cardassian base...” Riker said.

“And we don’t take just anyone. You have to have the skills to pull this kind of thing off in the first place,” Pressman said.

“Thomas, it’s a second chance,” Bashir said.

“Actually it’s a third chance,” Riker said.

“Well, it’s a hell of a lot better than the way people with a criminal history get tossed in prison and forgotten about,” Bashir retorted. “Even when they do get released, they have that hanging over their heads for the rest of their lives. They’re never really accepted back into society after that. You’d think that as far as we’ve come as a civilization, we’d do better than that.”

Riker nodded. It was a lot to take in, and there were still unanswered questions. What if he allowed them to get him out of here but he refused their offer to join? Would they let him leave in peace? What if he wasn't convinced that he had the skills to join them in the first place?

"Just think," said Turner, "You'll be able to do what you want and you won't be accountable to anyone? You could steal another Starfleet vessel and if you get caught, next time they'll just meet you at the detention facility, let you out, and then you can go on to assassinate someone, or conduct unauthorized scientific experimentation, or infiltrate a foreign government..."

Riker could detect the sarcasm in her voice, and it was pretty clear that she disagreed with the entire notion of Section thirty-one. "Article fourteen, section thirty-one of the original Starfleet Charter," Riker said. "Which allows for extraordinary measures to be taken in times of extreme threat, thereby sanctioning the existence of a shadow agency that operated above Starfleet's laws. Most Starfleet officers I know who even know what it is don't like the fact that it exists at all."

"But it is an effective way of dealing with messy problems," Bashir said. "And sometimes it allows situations to be settled with a minimum of bloodshed."

Pressman smiled. "That's very forward thinking for a Starfleet doctor."

"Let's just say that you're not the only ones here who have had a visit from our friends who wear black. In the end, I played them rather than the other way around."

Riker sighed. They were making sound arguments. Just as importantly, it was the chance to belong to something again, and serve the Federation in a manner he didn't completely disagree with. "Well, you've given me something to think about. I'll show you to the ventilation shaft."

"Before you do that, could you show me to the nearest lavatory?" Bashir asked.

“You have to go at a time like this?” Pressman asked incredulously.

“One does not always get to choose when nature calls,” Bashir replied.

“Follow me,” Riker said.

* * *

This situation is rapidly spiraling out of control, Bashir thought as he entered a stall. Pressman and Ro might be optimistic about their chances of making it out alive, but if that were possible, it wouldn't be without a great deal of bloodshed.

He sat down on the toilet seat and removed the metal cylinder from his boot.

* * *

Tavika sat in the Twilight Lounge, nursing a Samarian Sunset that had long since turned to red, and was well on its way to turning orange. Seated at a table on her own in the corner sent the clear message that she wished to be alone with her thoughts. Not surprisingly, too many officers in Starfleet took that as an invitation to intrude, as she could see Ch'qahrok was about to do.

The Andorian walked slowly to her table, stood behind an empty chair and asked, “Is this seat taken?”

“Not exactly,” Tavika replied.

“Do you wish to be alone? I'm not here on ship's business,” Ch'qahrok said innocently.

“More likely, you're sticking your blue nose somewhere private,” Tavika said sharply.

“You do not have to allow me to sit, nor are you required to speak to me if you do not wish to. Nevertheless, it is my experience that sometimes a heavy burden is made easier when shared with others,” Ch'qahrok said, his tone infuriatingly neutral.

Tavika let out an audible sigh. She could send him away, but clearly he was trying to be helpful. Truth be told, he was one senior officer that she hadn't yet spent any time with socially. She'd even had a drink or two with Ipesch Nod, who she had detested upon their first meeting. "Take a seat," she said.

Ch'qahrok slowly lowered himself into the chair and took a sip of the clear liquid in his glass. "You do not appear to be in a good mood, Lieutenant," Ch'qahrok said. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"Not really," Tavika said.

"Very well. What shall we talk about?" the Andorion asked.

"I don't know. You're the one who sat here," Tavika said. Her comment was met with silence. She sighed. "You're aware that I'm Romulan, right?"

"Of course," Ch'qahrok said. "As I'm sure you're aware that I'm Andorion."

"You don't act like one."

"Please tell me, do all Humans act alike?"

"Point taken," she said, taking a long sip of her drink. "No. Of course not. I apologize if I offended you."

"I am not offended," Ch'qahrok said. "What I am is a fellow officer who sees someone who is apparently experiencing some sort of anguish and I wish to offer comfort."

Tavika smiled. "Thank you, Ch'qahrok, I appreciate that. And, if you must know, I'm concerned about a member of the crew, and feeling foolish at the same time."

"Does this member of the crew know how you feel?"

"I'd be pretty surprised if they don't."

"And how exactly do you feel? Friendship? Love? Do they return your feelings?"

Tavika sighed. "And there's the problem. I may have expressed interest in this person early on, and I may have come on too strong. They're caught up in something dangerous right now, and all I can think of is that I hope they're okay. Does that make sense?"

“Perfect sense,” Ch’qahrok said. “So tell me, if this person were to get caught up in this dangerous situation and something bad happened to them, how would you feel?”

Tavika paused for a moment. It was the fear of loss that had led her to the lounge to contemplate in solitude in the first place. All other feelings were secondary. “I think I’d be very upset for a long time.”

“In addition to trying to initiate a relationship early on, have you and this other person interacted on a friendly basis?”

“Yes.”

“And did this person seem annoyed with you?”

“No, never,” Tavika replied.

“So this person has never rebuffed your friendship on a platonic level?”

“No, they haven’t.”

“Regardless of whether you feel like there could be a greater emotional bond between you, your relationship could at least be described as *friends*.”

“That’s right,” Tavika replied. “I think it’s safe to say that we’ve become friends. I mean, we don’t spend time in each other’s quarters without some kind of other social function happening. We don’t tell each other our secrets, but this person does seem to enjoy talking about the latest ship’s gossip, or the latest news around the Federation. Sometimes we talk about our families...”

“Tavika, I’m obviously not the most emotional Orion you’ll ever meet, but one thing I understand implicitly is that there are different levels of friendship, and sometimes two people can share a friendship even if they don’t both feel exactly the same way about the other person. If this person is your friend, then I’m sure they do not mind any concern you might show over their safety or well-being.”

Tavika was silent for a moment. Who would have thought the best member of the crew to discuss an emotional matter would be one of the few members of the crew who showed no emotion whatsoever? “Thank you, Ch’qahrok. I appreciate your insight. I

think that helps clarify my feelings. By the way, what was that clear stuff you were drinking?”

Ch’qahrok stood up from his chair, taking his empty glass with him. “Water,” he replied. “I’m glad I was able to offer some help,” Ch’qahrok said. He began to walk away then stopped and turned back toward her. “And I’m sure Commander Turner appreciates your concern.” With that, he set his glass down on a tray among other empty glasses, and he exited the lounge.

The *Horizon* dropped out of warp and Sheppard watched the viewscreen as the stretched streaks of stars resolved into pinpoints. “Long range sensors... is there any sign of the *Arizona*?”

Ch’qahrok ran a long-range sensor sweep, then replied, “Negative on contact with the *Arizona*.”

Sheppard was hardly surprised by this result, but if they had been able to detect the ship directly, it would save them the sleuthing work of following their warp trail. “Scan for its warp signature.”

A moment later, Ch’qahrok said, “I’ve found it.”

“Put it on screen,” Sheppard said.

Ch’qahrok tapped several buttons on his control panel and a three-dimensional star chart appeared on the bridge’s main screen.

“Does that match their initial flight plan?” Sheppard asked.

Ch’qahrok’s fingers flew over the panel in front of him and a second flight path appeared, which diverged immediately from the course that had been approved.

“No sir. If this were intentional, their flight path wouldn’t diverge from their departure from the *Horizon*,” Tavika said from the tactical station.

“I’m inclined to agree, but what’s your reasoning?” Sheppard asked.

“There is no turning at warp speed, at least not without taking the chance that you’re going to destroy the ship, so, if they were attempting to go off on an unapproved expedition in the *Arizona*, they would have had to start out along their approved flight plan, waited until they were well away from the ship, dropped out of warp, and then headed off along a different trajectory,” Tavika said.

“Deviating as soon as they left the ship suggests that the navigational system they were testing isn’t functioning as expected,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Are there any systems within five light years of here along their flight path?” Sheppard asked.

“I could give you a better answer to that from Stellar Cartography,” Ch’qahrok answered. “After all, it’s completely normal for a warp path to cut through several systems. The real question is whether there would be anything large in their way that would cause them to drop out of warp.”

“Mister Ch’qahrok, give me your best guess based on the data you can pull here. Feel free to double-check it in Stellar Cartography if you think you can come up with a more complete answer,” Sheppard said.

Ch’qahrok was silent for a moment as he examined all the stars that lie near the *Arizona*’s flight path. “I may have a possible theory on what happened to them,” he said. “Two point three light years from here is the exact point in space currently occupied by Odonus IV. That area was marked with a warning beacon following a recent collision with a smaller planetoid. This resulted in a large amount of debris scattered throughout the system. A ship at warp would automatically drop to normal space before hitting what’s left of the planet, but not necessarily before encountering some of the debris.”

“So for all we know, they could have struck a huge space rock at faster than light speed,” Ipeshe Nod said from his Security station. “They might have been crushed on impact.”

A cold knot formed in the pit of Sheppard’s stomach. It was still a young crew, with only a few months behind them, but the thought of losing Cunha or Hernandez in something as trivial as a space accident worried him. They both had promising careers ahead of them, and the thought of seeing their lives brought to such senseless, untimely ends struck him as both tragic and unfair. “Set a course for Odonus IV. Engage!”

* * *

The thruster burn had bought them some time from their impending collision with the debris field, but not enough. Cunha slammed her phasic sequencer into the bulkhead as the impulse drive once again stubbornly refused to turn on. “I swear, I’ve

practically rebuilt this thing from the ground up since we started working on it and it's still not coming online!"

"Stay calm. Try again," Hernandez said from the cockpit.

"How much time until we enter the debris field?" Cunha called out to him.

"We crossed into it about three minutes ago," Hernandez replied. As if to accentuate his point, she heard the concussive sound of a space rock impacting with the Arizona's hull. The entire craft shook. She lost her footing and was hurled to the floor. She put her right knee and her hands out to stop the fall, and pain flared up as she struck. "Aah!" she called out.

The lights flickered off again. *Not a good sign*, she thought. A moment later, the artificial gravity gave out. *If only that had gone out a few seconds ago*, she thought, clutching her knee. "What's going on?" she asked.

"We just got clobbered by a big chunk of rock and we've lost main power," Hernandez said.

Cunha pushed away from the impulse drive, kicked her feet out, and propelled herself toward the cockpit. As she floated into the control area, she looked at Hernandez, who was likewise untethered. "So all systems are down. Power, life support, propulsion..."

"Yeah," Hernandez said. He was keeping his voice low, but she could hear the defeat, along with the fear that hadn't been present before. "If the debris doesn't kill us, we're still on a collision course with the planet."

"How much time do we have left?"

Hernandez cracked a wry smile. "We're already on borrowed time. We could get smashed to pieces right this second, or we could hit the planet in about an hour or so. Life support is out, so we might just freeze to death or suffocate first. Your guess is as good as mine."

"I don't want to die like this," Cunha said.

"Do you think I do?" Hernandez asked.

“No, I suppose not,” she replied. For the first time in her life, she felt truly helpless. She no longer could do anything to change her fate.

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other’s silhouettes against the fading light of the planet. Cold was already beginning to set in. She could feel it in her toes, and she could see it in the frost coming from her mouth as she exhaled. That didn’t take long...

“It’s getting cold,” Cunha said. “There’s cold weather gear stashed in one of these storage areas.”

“Check the mid-compartment,” Hernandez said.

Cunha pushed herself back. She heard a couple more smaller impacts on the hull, but they didn’t sound as though they were strong enough to puncture. She floated down into the mid-section of the runabout and she maneuvered to the left side where the survival gear should be stored. She quickly opened the storage unit and within were a pair of coats that would be enough to survive sub-zero weather. She pulled them out and hurled one of them toward the pilot. She then pulled hers on over her torso, zipped it on, then pushed herself back into the cockpit.

“Since we’re going to die, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?” Hernandez asked.

Oh no. Not this. Not now, she thought. “Go ahead.”

“If you were back aboard the *Horizon*, what food would you want to eat?”

Cunha thought about it for a moment. She enjoyed a lot of food, but there was one dish she would definitely like to have again, if she had the chance. “Chicken Mozambique, just like my mother used to like to make. Chicken over rice. It’s orange, with lots of butter and garlic and crushed red pepper. Not replicated. I’d make it myself. What about you?”

“Spaghetti with meatballs,” he replied quickly. “Honestly, I don’t care if I made it myself, or replicated it, or had some that was made in the galley.”

“That’s a good choice,” she said.

“I have a confession to make,” Hernandez said.

“Alright?” she said.

“I volunteered for this mission.”

“Why?” she asked.

Hernandez sighed, and paused. “I’ve always considered myself a lower decks kind of guy. I’m lucky to have a bridge assignment. Anyway, ever since the *Horizon* launched, I’ve seen you around. I know you’re a senior officer, but I wanted to see if the two of us would hit it off. I’d very much like to have that plate of chicken mozambique, in your quarters, with the lights dimmed, and some guitar music in the background.”

“You’ve been crushing on me!” Cunha said with a slight giggle.

“Well yeah,” Hernandez replied. “I mean, who wouldn’t?”

“I guess I’ve been focused on my duties to think about much else,” Cunha said.

“Do you mind if I ask you another personal question?”

“You might as well. We’re going to die here.”

“Are you... attached?”

Cunha laughed. “No. Definitely not. I haven’t seen anyone... romantically... since well before I left the Utopia Planitia shipyards.”

“I know you outrank me, and this is all very improper....”

“No. What does rank mean right now? Does it matter if you have one pip or two?”

“Well, you know there’s no sex in Starfleet,” Hernandez quipped.

“Says you,” Cunha replied. “I’d counter that with personal experience, but I don’t think that’s quite the response you’re looking for right now.”

They were silent for a moment, and Cunha moved closer to Hernandez and looked through the darkness and tried to see his eyes.

“I guess what I’m asking is if circumstances were different, would you be interested in seeing me on a more casual basis?”

Cunha moved closer to him. She reached out and pulled him close. It was getting colder, and they should conserve their body heat together as a means of basic survival. “I hadn’t given it a lot of thought, but... I’d be willing to get to know you better.”

Hernandez leaned forward. Cunha could feel his warm breath on her face. Their lives were about to be cut very short, so what did she have to lose? She pulled him closer. She found his lips with hers, and she pressed them together and closed her eyes.

The compartment seemed to sparkle around her. She felt slightly faint. There was a warm blue glow surrounding them, and then... warmth.

Her body hit the floor. It was suddenly light. She looked around. They were sitting in the transporter room of the *Horizon*. Captain Shephard was looking at them with a bemused expression.

“I hope we didn’t interrupt anything,” he said.

Cunha looked at Hernandez, then at Sheppard. If she was dreaming she was back aboard the *Horizon*, she didn’t want to wake up. She suddenly began to laugh hysterically. Then she began to cry.

* * *

As a veteran of the Dominion War, this was not Kevia Turner’s first time in a Cardassian prison. She had seen one from the inside when she had been taken prisoner on Olmerak II. She had seen a couple others from the outside when she provided artillery support from the outside while others carried out raids to recover prisoners of war. In those cases, they had been at war, and the actions she had been carrying out were a part of the war they were fighting. In this situation, hanging from a rusty ladder that felt barely anchored to the concrete walls, she wasn’t even sure that their actions were legal according to Federation law.

She moved a hand and a foot down to the next rung, and she swore she could feel the ladder pulling away from the wall. Below, the bottom of the shaft was lost in the darkness.

Thomas Riker had been sentenced to this prison because he had joined the Maquis, stolen a Federation starship, and then used it to attack a hidden Cardassian base. At the time, he had been legally extradited to the Cardassian authorities, tried, and imprisoned. While it was true that a large number of Starfleet officers disagreed with the way the matter was handled, and many of them sympathized with his cause, any further actions on his behalf by the Federation should have been handled by diplomats and lawyers, not spies. At least that was the way she interpreted the law as a commissioned officer in Starfleet who, as the first officer aboard one of the most advanced ships in the fleet, might have to uphold such laws herself one day.

Between those issues, and the fact that the nature of the mission had been kept secret from Captain Sheppard, she wasn't comfortable with her role in this operation. *At least, she thought, if they decide to court martial me, I have the defense of being here by captain's orders.* Of course that wouldn't happen. Either they would be successful, in which case they'd hide under the protective shield of Section Thirty-One, or they'd be dead, in which case court martial would be irrelevant. In any case, the only one here who had nothing to lose was Thomas Riker, who was destined to spend the remainder of his life in this prison unless he found a way to escape.

And that brought up another thought. She'd been told that Riker had found a way to send messages to the Federation from the prison. That meant that he had to have had a contact at least within Intelligence to begin with, if not Section Thirty-One itself, and he was definitely trying to encourage them to launch some kind of effort to get him out of here.

She knew her unease with the mission was also exacerbated by the fact that their cover was already blown, they were outnumbered by the Cardassians, and the only reason they weren't already in Cardassian custody is because they didn't think to check the ventilation shaft... That was assuming that they hadn't already run a scan, figured out their escape route, and were simply waiting to apprehend them once they reached the bottom.

The descent continued. Ground level wasn't just within sight, but they were getting close to it.

"Out of curiosity, do we have a plan for making out the front gate after we leave the ventilation shaft?" Turner asked.

"Section Thirty-One magic!" Bashir replied sarcastically.

"I still have a few tricks up my sleeve," Pressman said.

"Well, you might want to share with us what those tricks are before we simply decide that you're going to use us as bargaining chips to get yourself out," Bashir said.

"What—you think the Admiral here would just sacrifice us all to save his own skin?" Riker asked.

"Alright, there's history here, and I want to know what it is," Turner asked. "When was he an admiral, and why isn't he any longer?"

"It's a long story," Riker said. "But the part you need to know is that back when I was just out of the academy, he used the *Pegasus*, the ship he commanded to break the treaty of Algeron. The crew mutinied, the ship was lost, and I had to protect him by force as we fled like rats off the ship. Starfleet didn't know anything about this until much, much, later, at which time he was arrested."

"Your brother was responsible for the truth coming out," Pressman said.

"I know," Thomas said. "Never mind the fact that he and I are a little more than just brothers. If I would have been in his position, I probably would have told Picard the truth about you myself."

Pressman snickered. "Well, both of you were responsible for saving me from my crew aboard the *Pegasus*. Neither of you want anything to do with me, but I still owe you a debt, and I'm here to repay it."

"You're here to repay my helping you all those years ago?" Riker asked.

"Okay, forget it. I don't care what this is about," Turner said, sorry that she asked the question in the first place. "We need a plan, and forgive me if I don't trust you to have already worked out all the details."

“Commander Turner, are you familiar with the Carbomite Maneuver?” Ro asked.

“Of course, we studied all of Kirk’s missions in the academy,” Turner replied. She also knew that the *maneuver* in question was merely the bluff of mutually assured destruction.

“So you understand the psychological value of having a deterrent that the enemy believes is real,” said Ro. “One of the things Section Thirty-One is especially good at is using the enemy’s psychology against them. In the case of the Cardassians, they are by necessity extremely paranoid. It’s mostly valid paranoia, given the fact that for most high-ranking officials, there really are people out to kill them. At any rate, a bluff is even more effective on Cardassian than Human psychology.”

“I thought part of bluffing is establishing that sometimes you’re telling the truth in order to make them unsure whether or not you’re lying,” Turner said. Basing their survival on a bluff seemed to her a foolish tactic to bet their lives on.

“I can appreciate the strategy,” Riker said. “A well played bluff is much more effective at getting your opponent to fold than being dealt a good hand.”

“And as I said,” said Ro, “Cardassian paranoia makes the bluff more likely to succeed, by about twenty percent over Human subjects.”

“Say they don’t buy it. Then what?” Turner asked.

“Then we fall back on our combat training,” Pressman said. “And it’s far better than what Starfleet teaches you in the academy.”

“Meaning what?” Turner asked.

“Meaning they know thirty ways to kill you with a combadge,” Bashir said cryptically.

Pressman was the first to reach the ground floor, followed by Ro, Bashir, Riker, and finally Turner. Across from the ladder was a doorway with an access panel next to it. Riker stepped up to it, entered a code, and the door hissed open. “The main gate’s just down the hallway,” Riker said.

“And my bet is they’re there waiting for us,” Pressman said with his phaser drawn. He began walking forward, making as little noise as possible. Turner followed, her own phaser held at the ready. It didn’t matter how many hostile engagements she’d participated in, there was always a sense of anxiety and dread as she neared danger. That was where training kicked in. During the Dominion War, when hostilities broke out, in her mind she was already as good as dead. Her body was trained to react in a certain way when faced with phaser fire, or pulse grenades. It wasn’t until after she had survived it that she would allow herself to shake uncontrollably, or just start crying. And it wasn’t just her who reacted that way. Most officers she’d fought alongside had similar reactions. It was the ones who didn’t—the stone cold soldiers who actually seemed to enjoy fighting—that she worried about.

Just ahead, she could see the reinforced double doors that were made of transparent aluminum, and the panel that controlled them. From her position in the hallway, she could see the back of one Cardassian at the controls, though she knew the area it occupied was large and provided space for several more Cardassians who didn’t want to be seen.

As they entered the room, her suspicions proved true. The Cardassian at the controls spun around, a spiral wave disrupter in his hand. She recognized Onrad, the prison warden immediately. As he stepped forward, so too did five other Cardassians, each of them armed with their own disruptors.

“I’d freeze if I were you,” Onrad said.

“Put that away,” Pressman said impatiently, almost as though the warden was little more than a minor nuisance.

“And you would have me step aside and allow you to go free, along with my favorite inmate?”

“That’s what I’d recommend, yeah,” Pressman said.

“And what would possess me to do that?” Onrad asked.

Ro stepped forward, a small black device in her hand that Turner hadn’t seen before. “Because if you don’t, we’ll all die together.”

Pressman's left hand produced a similar device from his pocket. "She's right. We're all equipped with one. All one of us has to do is activate this and the craft waiting for us in orbit will unleash a bombardment of torpedoes that will flatten this entire facility."

"And can you explain why we haven't detected this vessel?" Anrad asked.

"New technology adapted from Borg that the U.S.S. Voyager encountered in the Delta Quadrant, thereby circumventing the Treaty of Algeron," Pressman said.

"A cloak?" Anrad asked.

"Not exactly," Pressman replied. "It's easy enough to locate if you know what you're looking for. Of course... you don't know what you're looking for, and you're wasting precious time. We can activate it at any time, and that will be the end for everyone here."

"Suppose I don't believe you," Anrad said.

Pressman shrugged and smiled. "That's your prerogative, I guess."

"Yes it is. In fact, once we realized you weren't Cardassian, we located your stealth probe and vaporized it. Even if you escape this prison, you have no way off this world. I suggest you drop your phasers or my men will open fire," Anrad said.

Pressman sighed, dropped the device in his left hand, fired his phaser at the warden as he lunged for the entry controls. The phaser struck Onrad directly in the chest. His chest glowed briefly, and he fell to the floor in a lifeless heap.

Pressman activated the main gate controls. Then, as the double doors began to open, he fired at the control panel, which exploded into a shower of sparks, permanently inoperable. "Let's go!" he yelled.

Turner began to run, passing through the main gate in less than a second alongside the others. They were back outside, in the dirt and gravel outside the prison. A short sprint more and they'd be clear of the shield and able to beam back to the stealth probe.

She heard the unmistakable sound of disruptor fire behind them, and she knew all she could do now was hope they could find cover before taking any shots.

Pressman suddenly cried out and fell to the ground. She looked behind her to see the former admiral lying on the ground, clutching his lower torso. Riker spun around, lowered his shoulder, grabbed Pressman, and slung him over his shoulder. “Don’t wait, just go!” Riker yelled.

Turner heeded that advice and kept running. There were some large boulders up ahead that would make good cover... if she could make it that far.

Thomas Riker crouched behind a boulder and lay the smaller, lighter form of Erik Pressman on the ground. It was night, the air was crisp, and he could see his breath coming out in puffs of steam. The sky was cloudless, and he could see the distant stars. Behind him, Bashir, Turner, and Ro were firing their phasers at the pursuing Cardassians, providing him with cover, if only temporarily.

“Sir?” Riker asked, nudging Pressman.

Pressman’s eyes fluttered, then fixed him with a piercing glare. “Did we... Did we make it out?”

“We’re out,” Riker said.

“Good... good,” Pressman said. “How bad is the damage?”

“Sir, I’m really not sure I should...”

Pressman held up a hand, indicating that it was alright for him to stop talking. Riker realized the former Admiral most likely knew that his injuries were fatal. “I took a disruptor blast to the chest. I know what’s happened... and what will continue to happen to my internal organs for the next few minutes.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Riker said, legitimately feeling remorse about the impending fate of his former commanding officer. “Just tell me one thing. Why did you come back for me? Just to recruit me?”

Pressman smiled. “I think you know the answer to that. Aboard the Pegasus, you saved my life. Well, you and your brother hadn’t been split in that transporter accident yet, so it was both you and Will who saved me that day. When it... came out... what had happened, I still felt gratitude, even if he had turned his back on me.”

“You know that even if I did leave Starfleet, I would have done the same thing Will did,” Riker said. “I wouldn’t have protected what you did aboard the Pegasus.”

Pressman coughed, and a few drops of blood landed on his face. “That never mattered. Will has been doing well in his career

while you sat in this prison for committing a crime that benefited the Federation. He didn't need my help. You did."

"Thank you, sir," Riker said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Take the offer we're making," Pressman said. "You have another chance. Take it. You've earned it."

"Yes sir," Riker said. "Sir? Is there a backup plan for getting off this planet?"

Pressman smiled weakly. Riker could tell that the disruptor damage was spreading within his torso. He was nearly gone. "You don't think the Cardassians who run this place have been stranded, do you?" He paused again, trying to cough, but clearly not strong enough to. "Steal a shuttle... make... a run for it."

"Aye, sir," Riker said.

"Now... go," Pressman said. "Don't... give... them time to... gather more forces."

Riker heard the other man's breathing becoming shallow. There was little time left before the other man passed, and there was little to be gained by waiting here until the bitter end. Pressman's eyes were already focused beyond Riker, as though he were staring into the darkness of the universe beyond. "Let's keep moving," Riker called out to the others.

"How is he?" Ro asked between phaser shots.

Riker didn't reply, but he just shook his head sadly.

"What's our next move?" Turner asked.

Riker replied, "We find their shuttles and steal one."

"That's not a very practical plan, given that they're right on top of us," Turner said.

"No, it's a terrible plan," Bashir said.

"Then what do you suggest?" Riker demanded. "I've been out of it for so long, you know I can't be of much help."

"Are we out from under the shield?" Bashir asked.

"We have about another fifty meters to go," Ro replied.

"Then I suggest we get there," Bashir said. "I suggest we hurry."

Riker took one final look at his former commanding officer. Even as he lay dying, there was much he regretted about his time serving with Pressman. And yet, he now owed the man a debt he would never be able to repay. “Okay, let’s go,” he said.

Ro, Turner, and Bashir stopped firing at the Cardassians and began to run up the trail, back to the area they had beamed down to. Riker knew it might be fleeting, but for the first time in years, he could feel the freedom he’d been denied for so many years. Even if a disruptor blast caught him at this point, at least he could say that he lived his last moments somewhere other than a Cardassian prison cell. Even with those feelings of hope and triumph, he also knew that he was leaving others behind... people like him, who had chosen to fight the Cardassians and the Federation in a war he knew had been right at the time.

As they ran, Riker could see the flashes of disruptor fire hitting the ground around them. He estimated that they were about fifty meters ahead of their pursuers, who were racing to catch them. Fortunately, that meant their aim would be poor, which was the best hope they had of making it beyond the shield... for whatever good that was going to do them.

Riker saw a disruptor bolt hit the ground less than a foot from him, causing the rock it struck to explode. He felt tiny pebbles embed themselves in his ankle. It hurt, but he could tell that they didn’t go any deeper than the flesh. A few seconds later they covered the remaining distance and passed through the outer edge of the shield. As they emerged, they were surrounded by shimmering gold-colored energy.

* * *

Bashir blinked as his eyes adjusted, having just been beamed from the dark of night to the brightly lit room he now found himself in. Turner, Riker, and Ro had appeared next to him on a transporter pad, though he could tell right away that this was no Federation vessel they’d been beamed to. The colors were darker, and he recognized the architectural style as being distinctly

Cardassian. Across from him, standing behind a chest-height control panel, was the unmistakable gray skin of a Cardassian, and he was dressed in their typical charcoal colored military garb.

Bashir raised his hands in the air, realized that he was still holding a phaser, and slowly set it down on the floor. The others followed his lead and did so as well.

Just then, the doors hissed open and Bashir saw a familiar Cardassian face. “Hello, Doctor, it’s been a while!”

Bashir breathed a sigh of relief. The device had worked, even through the shield. “Garak! How did you get here so fast?”

“When I received your message, I knew I needed to act fast. Fortunately, I happened to be aboard the Zantar a mere light year away. Of course, being the head of the new Cardassian government, I am required by my station to demand to know just what in the Hell you thought you were doing breaking into one of our prisons.”

“They came to rescue me,” Riker said.

“Ah yes,” Said Garak. “Weren’t you put away for stealing a Federation ship and attacking one of our bases?”

“The war is over,” Riker replied. “Maybe we should just leave all the broken pieces from that conflict where they lie.”

Garak nodded. “I couldn’t agree more.” He motioned them to follow him out of the transporter room and into the ship’s corridor. Bashir noticed that there was a distinct lack of security, despite the fact that they had just been engaged in hostilities with Cardassians on the surface of the planet. It was nice to have connections.

“Never mind the fact that only one of the four of us actually knew what we were getting into when we embarked on this mission,” Bashir said as he walked alongside his old friend.

“Be that as it may,” Garak said, “Now that I have you, I suppose I need to decide what to do with you.”

“I assume another jail cell,” Ro commented glumly.

“Garak, would I be correct in assuming that we’re aboard a Galor class starship?” Bashir asked.

“You would,” Garak replied.

“How did you manage that without dealing with all the military red tape?” Bashir asked.

“When I returned to Cardassia, there wasn’t much of the Obsidian Order left. What there was, I quickly assumed control over and was placed in charge of certain military assets that were overlooked by the main assembly. The end result is that if I need something done in a hurry, I’m able to do it.”

“And you consider that ethical, given the reforms you’re trying to implement?” Bashir asked.

“As you should well know, Doctor, very little in this universe is as subject to interpretation as ethics,” Garak said. “Nevertheless, I’ve been careful not to use it unless it’s absolutely needed, and never for things like the consolidation of power, or assassination. Mainly, it’s for activities such as this, where I need to take care of a problem *quietly*. Incidentally, using that subspace communicator I gave you was the smartest play to make. I can only assume that your next play would have been to try and steal a Cardassian shuttle, and we calculated your odds of success at twelve percent. Not good odds, if I were a betting man.”

“Garak, why are you still holding Maquis prisoners?” Bashir asked.

Garak was silent for a moment, obviously choosing his words carefully. “My dear Doctor, every Maquis prisoner we hold not only costs Cardassia precious resources, but also opens us up to diplomatic incidents... much like the one I’m presently dealing with.”

“So why not let them go?” Riker asked.

“Let them go?” Garak asked, clearly feigning surprise. “Let them go? Well, there would be all sorts of procedural barriers for that. One cannot simply open up their prisons and let everyone free, now can they? That would be irresponsible.”

“If they’re all political prisoners who no longer pose a danger to Cardassia, I hardly see why that should be a problem,” Riker said.

“The Federation doesn’t want them back, and some on Cardassia would argue that they do still pose a risk. Who’s to say

they won't try to strike out against us out of anger, or some need for revenge?"

"Given the brutality of the Bajoran occupation and the way the Maquis were treated by the Cardassians during the Dominion War, maybe they deserve some revenge," Riker commented.

"And that is the kind of thinking that will snatch war from the jaws of peace," Garak said. "To be completely honest, given everything else that's been going on, I hadn't given much thought to the handful of Maquis prisoners we still have in our jails. On the way here, however, I drafted a treaty, if you will. Any Maquis prisoner within the Cardassian prison system will be released, on the condition that they sign a non-aggression pact."

"And what are the conditions of that pact?" Turner asked.

"Very simply this: a condition of their release is that they will not pose an active threat to Cardassian holdings. Should they violate this agreement and be arrested again, the prison sentence will be permanent."

"What happens if some Cardassian official causes the trouble and the former Maquis prisoner is just defending themselves?" Riker asked. "Sounds like a bad deal to me."

"I wouldn't sign it," Ro volunteered.

"They'll have a choice, and if they want their freedom after all these years, I think they'll take it. In the meantime, I'll have my office try and relocate these individuals, and their families if necessary, so they're far away from Cardassian space. They can lead long, healthy lives outside of our sphere of influence, so the only way they'll get in trouble is if they come looking for it," Garak said.

"I'd imagine some concessions will need to be made before you can fully implement it," Bashir said. "But it's a vast improvement over keeping these people imprisoned forever."

"Exactly, Doctor. Now, given that we haven't had one of our most enjoyable conversations for some time, how would you feel about resuming this discussion over lunch?"

"Is it lunch time?" Bashir asked.

"Somewhere, Doctor. Somewhere."

* * *

“Mister Hernandez, it’s good to have you back at the helm,” Sheppard said as the newly returned helmsman took his seat.

“Thank you, sir,” Hernandez replied.

Sheppard was still amazed that the testing of the new navigational system had almost ended in tragedy for two of his valued crewmembers. He tried not to think about close-calls though. There were enough incidents aboard Federation ships that did not end happily for those involved, and he’d had to oversee too many of those during his time as a first officer.

“We’re approaching the rendezvous coordinates,” Ch’qahrok said.

“Initiate a long-range scan. Let’s see if they’re there waiting for us,” Sheppard said. Given the missed rendezvous they’d had earlier, this one was making him nervous.

“There’s something there,” Ch’qahrok said, “But I can’t confirm that it’s the stealth probe.

“Well, it’s a stealth probe,” Sheppard said. “They aren’t supposed to announce their presence.”

“Coming out of warp,” Hernandez said.

Sheppard watched the viewscreen as the ship re-entered normal space. “Put the ship on visual.”

The screen shifted and Sheppard immediately recognized the wedge shape of a Galor class Cardassian ship. His eyes widened in shock. Although he hadn’t been briefed on the mission, he was pretty sure that stealing a Cardassian warship was not part of the plan. “Yellow alert. Have power to shields and phasers ready. Hail the Cardassian vessel.”

“They’re responding,” Tavika said. “Putting them on screen.”

The screen shifted from the starfield to what appeared to be a middle-aged Cardassian. “This is Captain Sean Sheppard of the *U.S.S. Horizon*.”

“Elim Garak, of the Cardassian government.” Sheppard thought he recognized the man, but he had never met him, even when he’d been living aboard Deep Space Nine as a refugee from the Obsidian Order. Despite having not met him, he was well aware of his history. “I seem to have found some of your officers. I’m honestly not sure how they managed to get lost.”

“You haven’t harmed them, have you?” Sheppard asked.

Garak gave the most charming smile the captain had ever seen on a Cardassian. “Certainly not! They have been my guests for the past little while. Doctor Bashir and I have been friends for many years. As a matter of fact, if the Federation wanted a tour of Cardassian prison facilities, you should have asked him to contact me directly.”

“Thank you for returning them.”

“Captain, it’s very important for interstellar relations that we respect one-another’s borders. I suggest you help your officers stay in their own space from this point forward, as our worlds can still be dangerous places for Humans. I believe the older gentleman who was with them failed to return intact.”

Sheppard assumed the one Garak was speaking of was Pressman, since he’d been the most senior member of the team. He wasn’t particularly upset to hear of the man’s demise, given what few things he knew about him. “I’m sorry to hear that,” Sheppard said.

“As am I,” Garak said. “It was quite unnecessary.”

“As a representative of the Cardassian government, I also have twenty-three other individuals aboard with me who have been *guests* for the past several years. I would like to transfer them to your care, as they’ve worn out their welcome on our worlds.”

Sheppard assumed the others Garak was speaking of were Maquis prisoners from the Dominion War, or earlier. “I’d be happy to offer them passage to Federation worlds, though I’m not sure how easy it’s going to be for them to integrate back into Federation society, if they are who I think they are.”

“Captain, that consideration is beyond my ability to remediate.”

Sheppard bristled but refrained from commenting further on the subject. Behind him, the door to the turbolift opened. Sheppard looked back to see Turner, Bashir, Ro, and surprisingly, the unmistakable but bedraggled looking Riker step through onto the bridge. “Mister Garak, thank you for everything you’ve done today.

“My pleasure. Garak out.” The viewscreen reverted to the starfield as the Galor class ship jumped to warp.

Sheppard looked at Riker. He’d seen the captain of the Titan enough times, but this man had long, wild hair, and was skinnier, and there was a hard edge to his visage that he’d never seen before in Will Riker. “If I’m not mistaken, you’re Thomas Riker,” he said.

Riker nodded in response.

“What happened to Erik Pressman?” Sheppard asked.

“He was killed in action,” Ro replied. “The Cardassian government decided to allow us to beam his remains back to the *Horizon* for a proper burial.”

Sheppard looked to Turner. “Are you okay?”

His first officer made eye contact with Tavika at the tactical station. “It was a tough assignment, but we pulled through... most of us anyway. I’m anxious to resume my duties aboard the ship,” she replied.

“As am I,” Bashir said.

Epilogue

Adriana Cunha smiled as the plate of pasta was placed in front of her by the lounge server and she looked across the table to Antonio Hernandez. “Thanks for inviting me here,” she said with a smile.

Hernandez returned the smile and held her gaze. “I have to be honest with you. I really didn’t think we were coming back from that mission.”

“I’ve been on two away missions now, and both of them could have resulted in my death. Is this what serving aboard a starship is really like?” Cunha asked.

“It can be,” Hernandez said. “But other times it’s nothing more than tending to your regular duties for months at a time, day in and day out.”

Cunha was quiet for a moment. “So are we going to talk about what happened?”

“The kiss?” Hernandez asked.

“Yeah, the kiss, and the fact that you said you’re interested in a romantic relationship with me,” Cunha said.

“Is that something you’re open to?” Hernandez asked.

“You know I outrank you,” Cunha said.

“Yes, but that’s not relevant since I don’t report to you,” Hernandez replied.

“Well,” Cunha said, “Do you know of any holodeck programs we should check out?”

“When was the last time you saw Paris in the fall?” Hernandez asked.

“I’ve never seen it,” Cunha said.

“Well, then maybe we should go after we’re done eating.”

“I think I’d like that,” Cunha said with a mischievous grin. “Or, maybe we could skip that and go check out the Risa program.”

“Do holographic Horga’hn’s work the same way?” Hernandez asked.

“The only way to find out is to give it a try,” Cunha said.

* * *

Tavika stood outside of Kevia Turner's quarters and tapped the chime button. A moment later, the door opened, and she looked beyond and saw a tired looking Turner sitting on her couch, a cup of coffee at her side. She stepped inside, but stopped by the door.

"I just wanted to stop in and see how you're doing. It sounds like the mission wasn't easy." She immediately worried that her motivations were obvious, and that her methods were awkward at best. Still, Ch'qahrok's words echoed with her, and it was still better to offer her friendship and support, if nothing else.

Turner climbed to her feet and approached the Romulan woman. She approached slowly, reached out and took her hand gently. "Don't say anything. Don't expect that this is going to go anywhere. But tonight, I can really use your company."

Tavika moved in closer and slid a hand around to caress Turner's back, then touched the First Officer's lips lightly with her own. She remained silent.

* * *

Thomas Riker looked at himself in the mirror. For the first time in years he had a proper haircut, his beard was trimmed, and all the dirt and grime he's been forced to tolerate in that damnable prison had been washed away. The soil on his soul would probably take much longer to wash away, but like so many other things, he would assimilate this experience as well and move on with his life. It was only marginally worse than the years he'd spent alone on Nervalia IV.

It had been suggested that he don black garb to go with his new station, and he decided to implement that immediately. He didn't belong in a Starfleet uniform, and he'd been all too eager to get out of the prison uniform.

"Computer, locate Ro Laren," Riker said.

“Ro Laren is in the *Twilight Lounge*.”

Riker left his quarters and made his way to the lounge. Upon entering, he saw the Bajoran woman sitting at the bar, drinking something he couldn't identify by sight. He walked up to her and took a seat next to her.

“I've spoken to Command, and the two of us will not be sharing the same assignments,” Ro said quietly.

“Why not?” Riker asked, flashing her the most charming smile he could muster.

“Section Thirty-One assigns resources as efficiently and effectively as possible,” Ro said.

Riker moved in closer. “Well then, I guess the two of us only have a little while to get to know each other.”

Ro pulled away and shot him with a fierce glance. “Don't bet on it.”

“Is this because you served with Will?”

“Absolutely. I know what you're about, Thomas Riker. I did my duty under Erik Pressman and nothing more. Don't think of me as a friend, don't think of me as an ally, and don't think of me as one of your conquests. Best yet, just don't think of me at all.”

Riker backed off. “Understood.” He stood up, decided that it would be best to simply leave the lounge and avoid his Section Thirty-One counterpart for the time being.