

# THE BENMATA CHRONICLES

## BOOK 1: A TRUE WAY RESURGENCE



BY MICHAEL ROSADO

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## DISCLAIMER

The following fictional story is non-canonically based on Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry. It's not intended to be monetized. It draws from canonical sources in the Star Trek genre for consistency and realism, but any resemblance to actual characters from Star Trek movies, TV shows, video games, literature, or other entertainments is also unintentional. The author reserves all rights to this story. The pictures belong to their respective owners, as cited. Star Trek Online is an MMORPG owned by Perfect World Entertainment / Cryptic Studios.

## INTRODUCTION

"Personal log, addendum.

"This is the first of three fictional short stories based non-canonically on Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry. The series episodically focuses on several alien groups from different factions in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants and their struggle to maintain a working peace in the wake of the Dominion War (2373-2375 AD). Set largely in the Alpha Quadrant in April 2380 AD, this first story chronicles Starfleet Rear Admiral Davir Benmata's mission to put down a True Way resurgence in Cardassian space. In doing so, he discovers an underlying plot involving planet-killing weapons and new elements in the Klingon Empire that threaten the Federation's galactic designs. The next two stories will focus on the Klingon and Romulan groups in turn and describe how this nefarious plot plays out in the Beta Quadrant.

"Computer, end log."

## MY TREK

I'm sometimes asked why I've chosen not to write in canon. I generally prefer the liberty of my own imagination, and I don't necessarily agree with every aspect that canon dictates. Besides, even canonical sources sometimes conflict. I've listed several differences between Star Trek canon and my stories. It isn't comprehensive.

1. Correlating Star Trek's stardates is messy business. It's rather impossible to make a canonical calendar for everything Star Trek using stardates because no canonical sources describe how stardates line up with the Gregorian calendar, and there are too many exceptions. Many Star Trek calendars exist, and people disagree on their underlying assumptions, but I've decided to use TrekGuide.com's [TNG/DS9/VOY stardate calendar](#).
2. A cloaking device is a stealth technology that can hide a ship or a person from sensor detection. Notably, both the Romulans and the Klingons use it on their ships, and the Dominion uses it on its soldiers. In canon, the Romulans and the Federation made the Treaty of Algeron, which established the Romulan Neutral Zone and expressly forbade the Federation from developing or using stealth technology. While Starfleet Intelligence has been caught dabbling in it before (cf. TNG: "The Pegasus"), it's canonical that the Federation wasn't allowed to use cloaks on its ships or personnel. I find it distasteful to keep Starfleet at such an obvious disadvantage. Stealth is an intriguing plot device that helps level the battlefield, so, in my Star Trek, the only thing the Treaty of Algeron did was establish the Romulan Neutral Zone. I'll note here that my Starfleet normally uses cloaks only on its ships of the line, not generally on small spacecraft (shuttles, fighters, etc.) as they're too underpowered. Starfleet doesn't use personal cloaks either.

-- Michael Rosado  
April 22, 2020

## CHAPTER 1: THE PHANTOM

### ADMIRAL'S LOG

Rear Admiral Davir "Max" Benmata sighed as he slumped tiredly under his bed's covers aboard one of his fleet escorts, the U.S.S. Bruntil. It was a Defiant-class vessel of Federation make, and currently moored on one of Deep Space 9's lower docking pylons. He lay prone a long time, mentally fatigued and gathering his foggy thoughts together so he could make a log entry.

"Computer, begin personal log. Stardate 56722.7, Admiral Benmata reporting," he mumbled.

"The Bruntil is still undergoing repairs here at Deep Space 9 following a skirmish with two True Way Galor-class warships almost a week and a half ago. Despite taking heavy damage herself, the ship and her crew managed to cripple one cruiser and destroyed the other. The explosion severely damaged my ship before it could clear the blast, and the shields couldn't take the strain. Most critical systems failed, and the warp core was gone, so we put out a mayday. Good thing there was a friendly Cardassian Kedron-class cruiser not far from us. We salvaged the Bruntil with their help, and they towed us back to DS9. Took four days.

"Looking back on it now, I should've taken the Tandrilüs with me, too. The Bruntil was severely damaged. About the only thing that still works normally is the replicator. We're doing what we can to refurbish her, but most of the critical systems are beyond salvage, and our best estimates are that it'll be months before the Bajorans and Starfleet can get her operational again. That leaves me with a bunch of Runabouts and the Tandrilüs to protect DS9 from the True Way and Laal's Jem'Hadar raiders. The Bajorans are a brave lot, but they're not equipped to defend their planet yet. Thank space the Breen aren't a threat anymore."

He considered adding to the entry about scheduled repairs and officer reports, but that could be gathered from other logs left by his bridge crew, and he was exhausted.

"Computer, close the log," he muttered.

Above him, the interface in his bedpost chirped once in compliance, but he barely heard it because he was already drifting quickly off to sleep.

### STARDATE 56700, OUT OF SHEER DESPERATION

Everything seemed to stretch visibly and slow down, as though Davir was warping through a wormhole. Sounds were lower in pitch, and words took longer to say and hear as time itself dilated. The clamor of battle slowly rose to a raucous din as the Bruntil shuddered violently under the pounding of a torpedo barrage. The force of it nearly threw Davir from his command chair. He held on desperately until the shaking subsided, then he looked around the Bruntil's dimly lit bridge to take in the situation.

Several consoles were burning around the perimeter of the small, circular control room. The smokey air was full of the acrid stench of melting plastic and the slightly sharp tang of ozone because the atmospheric processors were offline, and the hot air was thickening. He choked on it a bit and continued his survey. An injured crewwoman was huddled in a corner near the turbolift, waiting for medical help to arrive while two other crewmen were trying to put out the fires. The remaining bridge crew had moved away from the flames and were dutifully trying to man their posts. Davir resettled himself and looked at the damaged viewer. The staticky image showed two True Way cruisers in the distance. One was crippled and leaking plasma from its impulse nacelles, obviously out of the fight. The other was moving away, having just stricken the Bruntil from behind, but it was turning, coming back around to finish her off with its forward weapons array.

"Ops, damage report!" he yelled over the wail of the alert klaxon. He never got it. Instead, the voice of his chief engineer screamed at him over the ship's intercom.

"Admiral, the containment's failing! I can't stop it! It's gonna blow any minute! We're abandoning Engineering, Sir!"

Time seemed to slow even more as the thought of losing the Bruntil settled deeply in Davir's soul like an iceberg. He'd been fighting to keep the peace in the Alpha Quadrant for the last several years. Having started that assignment with a strong fleet of Federation vessels, the True Way had whittled away at his fleet ship by ship until he had only the Bruntil and the Akira-class Tandrilüs. Both were capable escorts, but his capital ships had been reassigned to other task forces in the quadrant. He truly loved the Bruntil, and he loathed leaving her just because she was having difficulty with a marauding pair of Galors. She'd disabled one already, and he knew from the sensors the other one's shields were low.

"Pid," he shouted, referring to the engineer by his nickname, "transfer the warp core controls to the bridge first! I got an idea!"

Without waiting for a response, he addressed the conn officer next. "Tactical, what've we got left?"

The crewman glanced down at his panel. "Aft torps and forward polaron cannons – that's it, Sir. Shields at 18 percent."

*It'll have to do*, Davir thought quickly.

"Ops, drop that extinguisher and get to the engineering station. Prepare to jettison the core on my mark," he commanded.

He looked again at the viewer. Cardassian cruisers were very large and powerful vessels, but they trundled when they turned, and they didn't accelerate well. The Galor was only halfway through her turn, and not yet in weapons range, but it wouldn't be long.

Davir turned to the conn officer. "Wait for the merge. Throw everything you can at shields and weapons, and load a spread of aft torpedoes. Target our warp core. We're gonna blind 'em, then blow it up in their faces."

The crewman gulped nervously. "Will that really work?" he wondered aloud.

Davir glanced grimly at him. "Don't ask that again...unless we survive."

The Galor finished its wide turn and sped up, closing on the badly injured Bruntil at alarming speed, growing larger in the viewer with each second. Its forward torpedo bank glowed menacingly with a pale yellow light that matched its warp nacelles.

Davir gripped the armrests of his chair, noting that the cruiser was now within weapons range. *What are they waiting for?* he wondered.

He expertly judged the Galor's closure rate against the probable reaction time of his crew, waiting until the True Way ship filled the viewscreen before giving the final orders. "Full impulse, keep firing the cannons at their bridge, and drop the core," he said. "Hit it with the torps as it crosses their bow, then throw everything into the shields."

The Bruntil's impulse vanes shone bright red as the sublight drive was suddenly tasked with producing a massive amount of thrust. She darted forward while the overloaded warp core slid out of the ventral superstructure, flickering as it fell behind. Her cannons let fly with stuttering bursts of



*U.S.S. Bruntil charging a True Way Galor (Star Trek Online)*

bluish polaron fire. They did minimal damage, but they caused the Galor's weakened shield to flare, temporarily blinding the Cardassians' main viewer, and the True Way didn't see the ejected warp core tumbling towards them. The Bruntil's helmsman veered the ship sharply to starboard and down to avoid colliding with the surprised Galor just as two brilliant

quantum torpedoes shot out of her aft weapons bank. The first one hit the warp core squarely and exploded, and the second one went right through the plasma, detonating on the far side of it.

The matter-antimatter shockwave ripped through the Galor's shields and buckled its forward superstructure, causing massive hull damage and leaving fiery holes everywhere including the weapons and deflector arrays. Secondary explosions ricocheted from the stricken torpedo magazine. The Galor shuddered visibly and rolled askew, instantly disabled, but as the Bruntil's grateful crew watched it fall away in their viewer, another explosion appeared from the Galor's engineering section, a big one.

Davir recognized a warp core breach when he saw it. While the Galor's hull had protected the Bruntil from being caught up in the blast from its own warp core, there was nothing protecting her from an exploding heavy cruiser at close range. Too close. Nothing except....

"SHIELDS!" he screamed reflexively. "ALL HANDS, BRACE F...!"

A bright white flash blinded Davir's mind, and the fading memory of the rapport of rending duranium rang in his ears as he suddenly awoke, panting and sweating in his own bed from the nightmare. He sat up quickly and stared into the darkness for a few moments, still seeing the afterglow of the Galor's death in his mind.

*Just a dream,* he thought, and started to relax.

He flung the sheets back and walked slowly over to the lavatory to wash his face with cool water and to replace his now-sweaty undershirt. The chill in the floor bit through the bared soles of his feet, and he wished his quarters had carpeting instead of just durasteel plating. He turned on the sink, cupped some cold water in his hands, and splashed it across his damp forehead, then reached for a small towel hanging nearby. Bracing himself on the edge of the sink, he tried to remember the dream. Some of the details were already fading, but the gist of it was still vividly clear: by his estimate, the Bruntil should be gone and all hands with her. His decision to use the warp core to disable the Galor had been desperate but tactically sound. What he hadn't anticipated was that the damage would cause the Galor's engine core to breach before the Bruntil could escape to a safe distance.

*How'd we survive that supernova?* he wondered idly, but he realized just as quickly the answer didn't matter – he and the crew were just as glad they somehow had. Of more pressing concern was the damage the Bruntil had suffered and the repairs she now needed, but dealing with that again could wait until tomorrow.

He looked up at the mirror in time to see the reflection of the clock on the wall behind him go from 56723.0 to 56723.1 and sighed – it already was tomorrow.

*Get what sleep you can,* he told himself inwardly, and trudged back to bed. Compartmentalizing idle thoughts was second nature to him, and he was sound asleep again in just a few minutes.

## AN INTRIGUING OFFER

He slowly awoke a few hours later in his Spartan quarters. As his sleepy mind returned to consciousness, the first thing he noticed was how chilly the room was. The only noise was the soft hiss of the air conditioning system, but there was no underlying hum or gentle vibration coming from the superstructure. The ship's engines were silent.

*Damn,* he thought, *this ship feels like a morgue.*

He hoped his observation wasn't prophetic. The admiral was currently assigned to the Bajor Sector of the Alpha Quadrant. In the wake of the Dominion War, the sector was still recovering, and skirmishes between the resident factions were commonplace. Last week's close call against the True Way had been a reminder that DS9 and its nearby allies (Cardassia and Bajor) were uncertain islands in a volatile sea of resentment.

He also hoped no one needed him first thing. His bed was his only refuge for the moment, and he felt he could do with some more sleep.

The relative silence in the room was broken by the soft beep from the communication console in the bedframe, indicating just the opposite.

*Merciless.* He sighed inwardly and rolled over, reaching up to answer it without opening his eyes.

“Max here,” he muttered in a slightly groggy tone, identifying himself by his nickname as was his habit when addressing his crew. “What is it?”

“Sir,” a female yeoman’s voice greeted him from the bridge, “you have an incoming communiqué from Starfleet Intelligence. It’s flagged for you only. I’ve taken the liberty of sending it to your monitor.”

Davir raised an eyebrow at the origin. He wasn’t expecting anything from Starfleet Intelligence.

“Thank you,” he answered. “Secure the channel, please. Max, out.”

“Of course, Sir,” she replied, closing the frequency.

An oval view screen rose with a mechanical whir from its insert in the small table across the room. Max cracked open an eyelid to watch in the dim light as it turned to face him. A single green light blinked repeatedly on its face, indicating an unopened message in its queue.

Resignedly, he tossed the top of his blankets aside to roll his legs over the edge of the bed, plucked his robe off the bedpost, wrapped it over his bedclothes, and grudgingly walked over to the table. Taking a seat, he arranged his robe into some semblance of order, then ran his fingers through his thick, brown hair to do the same there as he wondered who would be calling him from Starfleet Intelligence.

*I don’t have a whole ship underneath me yet, and Starfleet’s most infamous department wants me to do what?*

He touched the answer button, checked to make sure the encryption icon was lit, and keyed his top-secret security clearance code to authenticate the receipt of the message.

The screen alit briefly with the Starfleet Command logo, then it changed to the Starfleet Intelligence logo for the same length of time. Finally, an elderly Tellarite appeared on the screen. He had a solid head of white hair framing a large-featured, kindly face with light gray eyes and a wide mouth topped with a somewhat thick moustache and a full beard. He wore a Starfleet ambassadorial badge.



*Ambassador Morlo Aegis, United Federation of Planets (Star Trek Online)*

Davir immediately recognized him. The ambassador’s name was Morlo Aegis. He and Davir went back over 20 years to Davir’s days in Starfleet’s diplomatic corps. Morlo was a fellow engineer and had been Davir’s mentor until they’d had a falling out over Davir’s decision to marry a Klingon. Things were still cordial between them, but they’d not spoken together for several years.

*Facial hair’s not exactly regulation,* Davir thought disapprovingly.

“This is a surprise, Ambassador,” he began. “I understand you have a message for me from Starfleet Intelligence?”

Morlo’s eyes blinked slowly, and his breathing appeared slightly labored as he waited for the lag in the subspace transmission to even out. It didn’t take long.

“Well met, Admiral,” he answered in a low baritone. Then he looked speculatively at Davir. “I hope I didn’t wake you?”

“Occupational hazard,” Davir said noncommittally. “What can I do for you, Ambassador?”

Morlo’s eyes refocused. “Yes, well, I’m working with Starfleet Intelligence regarding some disturbing reports we’ve been receiving from Deep Space 9 in recent weeks. Since your flag is currently assigned to that area, I thought you might be able to help with a mission?”

“Ambassador,” Davir replied, “please understand. I have only two viable ships left in my fleet, and they’re both escorts. The Tandrilüs is spaceworthy, but the Bruntil needs major repairs, and some of her systems need outright replacing. My crew stands ready, of course, but we need a ship that can withstand the remaining unpleasantness in the quadrant. I don’t know what you had in mind, but we’re really only equipped to do border patrols around the Bajor Sector in Runabouts and little else.”

Morlo nodded pensively, then he smiled slightly. “I do understand the predicament you’re in, Admiral,” he replied, “and I already have an answer to it. You know of the Sovereign’s refit, yes?”

Davir’s heart leaped in his chest. The Federation’s heaviest cruiser during the Dominion War had been the Galaxy-class exploration vessel of U.S.S. Enterprise fame, but those ships were few and far between, even for admirals like Davir. During the war, the Federation had commissioned a newer, sleeker, more militarily capable warship to replace the Galaxy as the Federation’s flagship class. The Sovereign was the first in a new line of assault cruisers designed to carry the Federation’s interests forward into the war-torn Alpha Quadrant for the foreseeable future. Years ago, Davir had managed to get a tour of a Sovereign variant, the U.S.S. Majestic, then under construction at the Utopia Planitia shipyards above Mars. The type was a grand choice for a flagship, in his opinion, and he secretly coveted such a command himself. He knew the U.S.S. Sovereign had been under refit for several months.

*Are they going to send her out here?* he wondered.

“I have,” he answered guardedly, still uncertain exactly what the ambassador intended. “I’d heard she was almost ready for space trials.”

“You heard wrong,” Morlo said. “She checked out last month and is going to be re-commissioned within the week. Flying colors, I might add, but I mentioned her only because I knew you were familiar with it. In addition to shortly re-introducing the Sovereign to the fleet, Starfleet has developed an intelligence escort to accompany the Sovereign and gather strategic information for her task force. Have you heard of a ship called the Phantom?” He raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

Davir wracked his bewildered brain, rapidly reviewing official communiques about fleet deployments and upcoming ship designs, but he couldn’t recall ever hearing about that ship. He shook his head once to clear it.

“No, Ambassador,” he answered. “What ship is that?”

Morlo nodded and lowered his tone slightly. “I’m not surprised. Few have.”

He leaned back in his chair, pressed his fingertips together, and continued.

“The Sovereign and other capital ships like her will be the type that forms the backbone of Starfleet’s heavy cruiser fleet, that’s certain, but there are those in the intelligence community who feel that the instability in places like the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants will not be quickly or easily resolved with bigger ships, larger fleets, heavier firepower, and more diplomacy from an upper hand. Besides all of that, what’s also needed to keep this uneasy peace going forward is a discreet amount of subterfuge. The Phantom is an intelligence escort, a new kind of vessel designed for strategic surveillance and tactical fleet support. At this point, only Starfleet knows of its existence, but that will change soon enough. You see, she’s passed her operational trials, too. The Alpha Quadrant’s the perfect place to deploy her, but she needs an experienced crew, you need a good ship, and I have a new mission for you.”

He paused significantly. “Interested?”

Davir sat back into his seat, slightly flabbergasted. A new ship and strategic mission did not come down the pike very often, even for flag officers, so he knew this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. For a captain, accepting the mission would ordinarily be a career-advancing move, but, as a rear admiral, Davir couldn’t get much higher in rank, so what interested him about the offer was not so much the chance to try out a new ship as the suggestive nature of the mission itself.

As a former operative for Starfleet Intelligence, Davir was well aware of the risks associated with espionage missions and the specialties required to be good at it. Most ships and captains were not well suited to the role as strategic espionage was generally frowned upon as an underhanded form of diplomacy even if you were successful in your missions.

Still, against any enemy, one need only be caught spying once to end that. Capture usually meant imprisonment or death by enemy hands. The Federation would almost certainly disavow him to protect its political position in the quadrant, and there would likely not be a retrieval mission. So the personal risk was high, but he enjoyed a challenge.

"I'd like a chance to review the Phantom's specs before I decide what's best for my crew," he countered, "but I am interested. We need something out here to give pause to the adversarial factions in the area, show them that the Federation isn't a punching bag." He looked away from the screen slightly to hide an expression of mild frustration laced with disgust, then he returned to the viewer with hope in his eyes. "Is the Sovereign coming, too?"

"Yes, Admiral, she is," Morlo replied, hiding a half-smile beneath his bushy beard. "In fact, we're sending her as part of Task Force Theta to supplement operations on Deep Space 9 and, as you say, bring a sense of...calm to the quadrant."

Davir cheered inwardly. "'Bout time," he muttered quietly.

Morlo didn't mind. "I'm transmitting the specs you asked for now on an encoded channel, along with a technical briefing. The Phantom's already on its way with a skeleton crew aboard. They'll transition to DS9 when the ship arrives. Should you choose to accept it, she and the mission are yours until further notice."

He tilted his shaggy head down and leaned forward with special emphasis. "I'll add that yours was the first name pre-selected for this, so I hope you give it serious consideration. There are very few flag officers in the Alpha Quadrant with your experience in espionage. Of course, that also means that if you fail, we'd likely lose a valuable strategic resource. So, Admiral, don't fail."

"Of course not, Ambassador," Davir chided. "I'll send my response on the same channel if I accept. I'll speak to the crew and let you know by 1500 today, station time."

Morlo nodded briefly. "Very good. And, Admiral," he added with a gentle smile, "thank you."

Davir smiled briefly back in acknowledgement, and then he closed the channel.

The screen went dark, but the file pending light was on, indicating the specs he'd asked for were awaiting decryption in his terminal.

*That'll keep for now. What a way to start the week,* he thought. *I need to check on the Bruntil's status, then get my commanders together for a briefing on this.*

He got up and turned to the small walk-in closet near the bed to select a uniform. As he dressed, he considered the Ambassador's comments about how well the admiral's background fit the mission.

Davir had always been fascinated by space exploration, so Starfleet at an early age was a natural choice. He quickly found that he enjoyed the various complexities of spacecraft engines, so he took an engineering path in his early Starfleet career and spent most of a decade working on power plants of everything from yachts and freighters to heavy cruisers. His highest post was as an assistant chief engineer on the Excelsior-class U.S.S. Charleston. Although he enjoyed being in general operations, then-Lt. Commander Benmata always knew that the most intriguing assignments went to command personnel. That's how you got noticed in Starfleet, so he switched to a command track, and never looked back.

The next two years were spent in junior command officer roles on various types of Federation cruisers, working mainly in the Alpha Quadrant. It was challenging, re-assignments were frequent, and he got the impression someone was grooming him for higher levels of command. He earned the rank of commander and had chances to prove himself on away missions where his engineering background was useful, but he knew that what he really wanted was his own ship. He was patient about it, and, as he applied himself, he kept tabs on the best officers he could find in the crews he served with, hoping that they might serve with him if he ever got a command of his own.

When the Dominion War started in 2373, Starfleet Intelligence approached him with several opportunities to work with the highest command officers then in Starfleet. He became a liaison officer for several diplomats to various factions in the Alpha Quadrant. He also went on numerous counter-intelligence missions, working to provide Starfleet with information on any happenings that had a broad impact on the quadrant. By the time the War approached its end in

2375, he was widely regarded as one of the most capable diplomats in the Alpha Quadrant with valuable insight into its sociopolitical landscape.

In 2375, given the severe attrition of qualified field commanders in the theater, Starfleet finally gave him the captain's promotion he'd been waiting for his whole life. His first command was an Akira-class heavy escort, and he took it into battle against the Dominion and the Cardassians several times in the final months of the War. After the War, the Federation Alliance was disbanded, but Davir retained captaincy of his ship, working with Captain Kurland and the ambassadorial staff on Deep Space 9 to maintain the newfound peace in the Alpha Quadrant.

That wasn't easy. In the wake of the War, many factions were not satisfied with their dispositions, and skirmishes often broke out. After several long years, the Bajorans and the remnants of the True Way (a radical and militant regime associated with the former Cardassian Union) were at each other's throats over Bajoran independence, Federation interference, and Cardassia's future in the quadrant. Fortunately, the Breen were no longer the significant ally they'd been to the Cardassians during the War, so the True Way was largely alone in its pursuits, but they still had a sizeable fleet and army. Since the legitimate Cardassian government was a long time reestablishing control of its military, rogue captains plagued the trade routes between Bajor and other friendly planets, preying on supply carriers and threatening passenger transports. Davir and other Federation captains in the area were hard pressed to defend the station and Bajor while trying to quell fights further afield.

Then Starfleet acquired verified intelligence that the True Way was based in the nearby Trivas System. Davir asked for and got permission to take command of a small task force comprised of little more than a few escort vessels and light transports modified for carrying combat troops. He got some stealth field generators from the Klingons, equipped all his ships, took a brigade of special shock troops to that system, and successfully raided a True Way outpost on one of the moons of Trivas III, completely destroying it afterwards. The True Way was very upset in the aftermath, and it was a long time before diplomatic tensions in the Bajor Sector eased off, but Starfleet Command was impressed with the operation, and Davir was promoted to rear admiral (lower half).

Now, after years of fighting the remaining True Way activists, Alpha Jem'Hadar loyal to the changeling Laas, and countless other rogue factions in the quadrant, Davir (now a rear admiral, upper half) had his doubts that a strictly military presence was the long-term answer to the Alpha Quadrant's problems. The ambassador's plans for a task force specifically including a dedicated intelligence resource was a new idea and, in the admiral's opinion, a welcome and potent change.

*I need to understand how my crew feels about the mission,* he reminded himself.

He dressed in a flag officer's standard uniform and returned to the console at the table to review the data on the U.S.S. Phantom. He spent about 20 minutes looking at summary profiles of the Phantom class, occasionally drilling down into the data for specific answers to whatever struck his curiosity. It was soon clear to him that the Phantom was designed with an emphasis on stealth. She was slightly longer and wider than the Kaiser-class Bruntil with a crew complement of nearly 100, including a contingent of marines. She had plenty of firepower and auxiliary power reserves. The transwarp drive was solid, but her shields were weaker than the Bruntil's, and the impulse engines were second rate at best.

*Always something to work on,* he thought. *I guess that's why they picked an engineer to command her.*

As he neared the end of his cursory review, the intercom whistled again, and the yeoman returned.

"Admiral Benmata?"

"Yes?" he replied.

"Sir, your senior staff are waiting to give you their on-shift reports in the briefing room."

*I'll finish it later,* he thought.

"Copy, Yeoman, I'm on my way," he told her. Then he had a thought about the upcoming meeting and changed his mind. "Yeoman, please forward the file on my [Admiral Benmata at his desk \(Star Trek Online\)](#) viewer to the briefing room, my eyes only."

"Aye, Sir," she replied, closing the channel.

Davir stood, tapping the communicator badge affixed to his lapel, and it chirped once in response.

“Computer, transport me to the hallway outside the briefing room,” he ordered.

“Acknowledged,” the computer’s female voice replied.

The shimmering effect of a site-to-site transporter beam enveloped him, and he dissolved into nothing, rematerializing in a similar manner just outside the briefing room’s doorway. The door slid open with a hydraulic swish as he turned toward it, and he slowly walked in as though he wasn’t late.

Commander Mirra rose from her chair and saluted. “Admiral on deck!”

The other officers also stood at attention, waiting for their commanding officer to take his seat.

“As you were,” he said to the small crowd in the room. “Sorry I’m late. I was speaking with Starfleet Command, and I lost track of time.”

Around the briefing room table were the ship’s commanders: the Helmsman/Pilot, the Tactical Officer, the Chief Engineer, the Science Officer/Doctor, and the Communications Officer/Intelligence Specialist. This was the bridge crew he’d picked years ago while he was working with them as a younger officer. They’d served with him during the Dominion War, and he’d spent years grooming them into one of the finest bridge crews in Starfleet. He took the empty chair at the head of the small table as they relaxed into theirs.

“I’m going to preempt this meeting,” he announced, “because I want to show you what my meeting with Starfleet was about.”

He reached forward and tapped the [Open file] button blinking on the console before him, then selected the one the yeoman had forwarded earlier.

The holographic viewer in the middle of the table came to life, displaying the detailed outline of the Phantom. It was basically a flat ovoid in shape with a pale deflector dish underneath it on the forward centerline. The impulse engines in the horizontal edges of the aft fin glowed redly, and the warp nacelles were embedded in the sides of the engineering deck’s superstructure, rather like the Bruntil’s. Its dark skin made it difficult to discern specific



*Intelligence escort U.S.S. Phantom (Star Trek Online)*

details on the surface, so it was unclear how many weapons ports it had.

“You’re looking at the latest Federation escort. It’s called a Phantom Intel Escort. She specializes in stealth tactics, strategic intelligence gathering, and tactical fleet support. This example is the U.S.S. Phantom, on her way here right now from Earth Spacedock, and she’s ours for a mission..., perhaps more.

“I told you I was talking to Starfleet Command earlier. Actually, I was speaking with Ambassador Aegis in Starfleet’s Diplomatic Corps. He wants us to use the Phantom to discover everything we can about a local faction of Alpha Jem’Hadar and True Way operatives in Deferi and Ferengi space. Apparently, there’s been a lot of weapons trafficking in that area recently, and Starfleet thinks the True Way is branching out. We’ve been offered both the Phantom and the mission to hunt down the True Way weapons dealers, track them to their base, and report our findings to Starfleet so they can send in a strike force.

“I’m also authorized to tell you that, for this mission and to bolster Federation support in the Alpha Quadrant, the U.S.S. Sovereign is being dispatched to Deep Space 9 as part of Task Force Theta. She’ll be here in a week.” He paused to let that news sink in, knowing it would color his crew’s judgement as it had his own. Looking around the room at their

eager expressions, he saw he was right. "We'll be operating as part of the task force going forward, and we will root out the True Way, the Jem'Hadar, and anyone else who threatens peace in the Alpha Quadrant."

He ended his speech with a fierce look in his eyes. "We'll review the Bruntil's status at the end of our shift, as usual. Questions?"

All the officers except Commander Nerayerku raised their hands. Davir was a little surprised: usually, the senior staff took his orders without question unless they had advice to offer. But by now these hand-picked officers understood him well enough to know he wouldn't put their curiosity aside out of turn. If they had something to contribute, he would listen.

"Yes, Commander Antyniv?" he asked, nodding to his Andorian chief engineer Pid'pen.

"Sir, I assume the ambassador sent detailed specs on the Phantom ahead? I need to review them so I know what to expect," he said.

"You're looking at everything I got, Pid," Davir replied, switching to the engineer's nickname. "I'll have them forwarded to your personal terminal. They're still classified, so keep them secure for now."

Pid'pen nodded. "Understood."

Davir turned to the Andorian pilot next. "Yes, Mirra?"

"That was part of what I wanted, too, Sir," she said. "The Phantom's an escort, so I'm curious if she handles as well as this one does...or did." A slightly wistful look crossed her face as she remembered how damaged the Bruntil was after that last fight. *She'll likely never fly the same way again*, Mirra thought.

"Well, she's slightly more massive than the Bruntil," Davir answered, "but she's got an excellent warp core. The impulse engines and maneuvering systems could stand improvement, though. I have some ideas, and I'll send this file to all of you after the meeting. Same security protocol."

The other five nodded their assent.

Next, he turned to the doctor, an unjoined Trill named Umuzoi. "What did you need?"

"A larger medbay, for one," she replied dryly.

Davir understood the root of her complaint: the Bruntil had suffered many casualties in her last engagement, and the medical facilities on escort vessels usually were not designed to be spacious or advanced, little better than triages, really. Commander Umuzoi was the only bridge officer with extensive xenobiological training, so she doubled as the ship's doctor, but she'd been pressed to her limits dealing with the aftermath of the battle as the Bruntil limped home with more than half its crew severely injured or dead.

*Maybe that's why the ship still feels like a morgue to me*, he thought.

"Much the same as the Bruntil's, I suppose. The mission profile requires a stealthy footprint, so the Maximilian is inappropriate," he answered her, referring to the largest vessel in his fleet, which came with a much bigger and more equipped and staffed medical facility.

Umuzoi looked a bit sour. "We're spying in somewhat hostile territory. How do they expect a ship like that to function if we take severe casualties like last time?"

"Well, we'll just have to be more cautious," Davir replied, nonplussed but not actually offended by her reaction. "I'll try to see about assigning a nurse to her crew to help you out."

Intelligence Officer Nerayerku, a female Deltan, diplomatically chose that moment to interrupt. "Since this is an espionage mission, Admiral, I expect we'll be intercepting a lot of encrypted comm traffic. The Bruntil never had access to the latest ciphers used by other Alpha Quadrant factions. Did the ambassador's offer include an update on that?"

Davir thought for a moment. "I don't remember if it did, so you should check for that when you get the file. At any rate, the Phantom comes with the latest Federation ciphers. If you don't get what you need, Nera, tell me, and I'll mention it to the ambassador."

"Very good, Admiral," she said.

Finally, he turned to address the tactical officer, a Betazoid named Losozola Sgiza. "What are your concerns?"

“Regarding the mission, are we expected to engage hostiles, or is it strictly reconnaissance?” Losozola asked.

“It’s primarily reconnaissance and inquiry, so I’m not expecting a fight, if that’s what you mean,” Davir answered. “We’re supposed to find out where the illicit weapons are coming from. Tactical engagements are not our first course of action, but the ship is fairly heavily armed for an escort, and there will be a security detachment aboard.”

Losozola nodded musingly. “Any specialists?” he asked.

“One,” Davir replied, “but he’s a mission specialist, not security. We’ll be picking him up later.”

Davir looked around but no one appeared to need anything else. “OK, the Phantom is due to arrive at DS9 ahead of the Sovereign at stardate 56731.5. I’ll inform the ambassador and see to our flag transfer on stardate 56734. Full dress is expected.

“Now, are there any unexpected problems with the Bruntil’s repairs?”

He waited a few moments, but no one said anything.

“Very well,” he continued, “proceed with planned repairs, and let me know if I can help. Dismissed.”

The group rose as one, and most of the bridge officers began filing towards the door, but Nerayerku stayed behind, apparently waiting for some time alone with the admiral. Davir started for the door himself, then noticed her hesitation and stopped.

“Did you need something else, Nera?” he asked, slightly puzzled.

She waited for the others to leave and the door to close, then she approached, a slightly troubled look on her face. “The True Way is getting desperate if they’re resorting to trafficking illegal weapons through non-allied space,” she observed.

“By now, the True Way has only the Jem’Hadar as allies, and Ketracel White supplies are scarce in the quadrant, so that association won’t last much longer,” he replied. “My concern is that they might be building on their experience with the Breen to make inroads with the Deferi or the Ferengi. Those are unaligned systems, not part of the Federation, and we have little political sway with those governments. If the True Way has found a way to bring in weapons and supplies to help the Jem’Hadar stay relevant as a military force, that’s a wrinkle I’d just as soon iron out, with or without Deferi or Ferengi help.”

“What’s the Cardassian government’s position on this?” she asked. “They gave us their intel about the True Way base in the Trivas System, which played out well, and they’ve been cooperative since.”

“As far as I know, they haven’t officially taken one,” he said musingly, “which is strange.”

She nodded idly. “Yes, it is. This presents a clear danger to their interests in the quadrant. I would think they’d be sooner about offering their intelligence resources on this, too.”

Davir thought about that. “I’m pretty sure they’d know about something like this and assume we would, too, and that we would act on it. Maybe they don’t want to expose what they know in case we might have to share their information with someone else who might trace it back to them? Their fleets are spread thinly right now since DS9 has little Federation support left with the Bruntil down. That’s why Task Force Theta is coming in.”

Nerayerku considered a different theory. “If they’re planning their own operation, not telling us about it potentially saves face for them. If our mission fails, they can still launch their own and take credit for the outcome. If we succeed, they can use their resources elsewhere and rest assured that the Federation observes their interests in the quadrant as long as continued peace is the result. Either way, for them, silence is golden.”

Davir was impressed. “A simple and logically elegant idea, Nera. You might be right, but only time will tell. We’ll continue with the operation as planned. Return to your station, and I’ll tell Starfleet we’ve accepted the mission and the Phantom.”

“Of course, Sir.” She smiled and left for the bridge to relieve the yeoman on duty.

*She has a point, he thought afterwards. If the Cardassians are planning something, it’d be just like them not to tell us, or the ambassador would’ve said something about it. Speaking of which, I should send my officers that file and get*

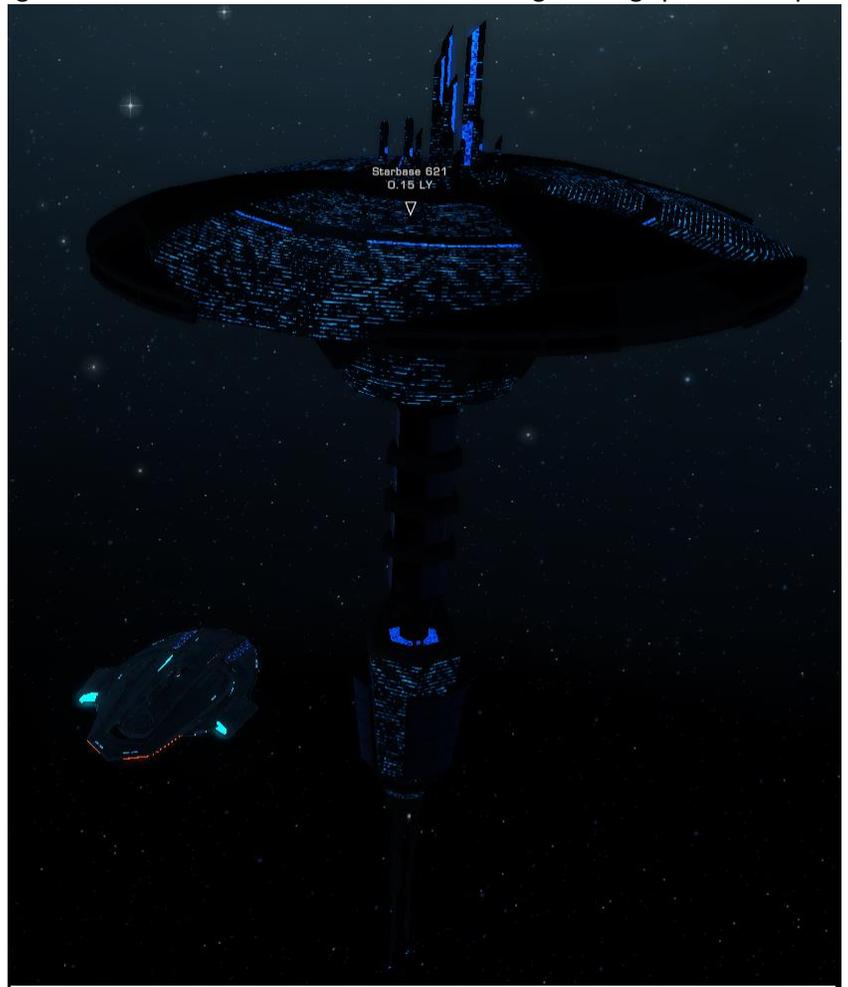
*back to him.* He took the time to use the briefing room's terminal to declassify the file the ambassador had sent him and forward it to the senior staff as promised. Then he deleted it from the terminal and went back to his quarters to call Aegis.

## CHAPTER 2: FLINZ PARPER

### STARDATE 56741, ACQUIRING ANOTHER MISSION ASSET

Several days later, the U.S.S. Phantom entered the Tzenketh Sector of the Alpha Quadrant and approached Federation Starbase 621. Ambassador Aegis' briefing had recommended picking up a mission specialist named Flinz Parper, a trader who was familiar with the smuggling routes used illicitly by factions in the Alpha Quadrant. It was hoped that Parper would be able to help Starfleet track down the nature of the illegal weapons trafficking through Deferi and Ferengi space by True Way operatives. The Alpha Quadrant's uneasy peace in the wake of the Dominion War could easily be tipped if the True Way got its hands on an arsenal dangerous enough to make them a serious threat to Bajor, the Federation, or the legitimate Cardassian government. The Phantom's mission was to conduct reconnaissance along the smuggling route(s), find those responsible for helping weapons reach the True Way, discover the nature of the weapons and their purpose, then report the evidence to Starfleet Command.

The Phantom was well equipped for the mission. As an intelligence vessel, it had a plethora of sensors designed for subspace reconnaissance, and it came with a very effective cloaking device for stealth running. Starfleet Intelligence was up to speed on many of the ciphers commonly used in the Alpha Quadrant, which satisfied Nerayerku. The impulse engines were embedded in a dorsal fin that projected aft past the oval saucer section, and the warp engine nacelles were embedded in the port and starboard sides of the saucer section itself, like the Brunttil. It was larger than the Kaiser class at 31,350 metric tons, most of which was in the length of the saucer section and the bulkier engineering spaces. Despite the increase in size, the medical bay was essentially the same as the Brunttil's, but Benmata had hired a nurse to help Umuzoi in her medical role. The increase in mass also meant that the ship tended to trundle a bit when it turned, so it wasn't as maneuverable as the Brunttil, an observation that did little to soothe Mirra's concern about the escort's effectiveness in a fight, but tactical engagements were not the Phantom's primary role. At any rate, there were four weapons fore and three aft, and the shields were adequate, so Losozola was happy with that. The FTL drive was in excellent condition and capable of warp factor 12, and most of the standardized systems could be upgraded. The Phantom had easily passed the admiral's personal inspection. He'd transferred his flag in an acceptance ceremony several days earlier, and his command staff had been studying the ship's systems and infrastructure since. Some of the Phantom's transition crew had elected to stay on as instructors to pass along their expertise to his staff as the ship continued its first assignment.



*U.S.S. Phantom approaches Starbase 621 in the Tzenketh Sector (Star Trek Online)*

Now the next stage of that mission was about to begin at Starbase 621, which was built in the same style as most other Federation deep space outposts. It was

basically a convex saucer sitting atop a long stalk. The saucer was relatively flat below with a large set of hangar doors on one side, and it housed station control, hangar operations, living quarters, and most general facilities. Power production, environmental support, long-range sensors, and subspace communications were in the stalk. It was in a corner of the Tzenketh Sector, historically a relatively quiet area of the Alpha Quadrant, about the same distance from Bajor, Cardassia, and Defera. The closest Federation system was Trill, and it was a common waypoint between Deep Space 9 and Ferenginar, which made it a favorite trading post for merchants from all over the quadrant. Once a bustling research center, it had fallen into disrepair and disrepute, the sort of locale for seedy trading and illicit trafficking, exactly the sort of place the admiral would expect to find evidence of illegal trade.

Davir glanced up at the viewer and saw the station in the near distance. It was mostly darkened. Not many of the station's windows were alit, and the lack of a local star to provide external lighting made the station seem derelict. There was no ship traffic visible around the station either, not even any shuttlecraft in the vicinity, but the hangar doors were on the opposite side of the saucer, and it was impossible to tell if there were any ships inside.

*Looks deserted, he thought, but it probably isn't. Our contact is on that station somewhere.*

Even though the Tzenketh Sector was calm most of the time, the Phantom was brand new, unknown to the area's residents, and her crew were still getting used to the ship. Davir didn't want to leave it exposed to any sudden visitors in local space, so he preferred to dock the ship inside the station for safekeeping. Federation protocol required clearance from the station controller prior to docking.

"Comm, contact traffic control and get docking clearance, please," he ordered.

"Aye, Sir," Nerayerku replied from her station aft of the Phantom's command dais.

She opened a channel on the station's approach frequency. "Starbase 621 Control, this is the Federation starship U.S.S. Phantom on approach. Do you read?"

Almost immediately, a whistle sounded softly over the ship's radio, indicating that the station's response was imminent. "Phantom, Station Control: welcome to Starbase 621. Please state your business, over." The controller's male voice was abrasive, and he had a thick accent that was hard to place.

"Control, this is Commander Nerayerku of the Phantom. Request docking clearance, over," she replied.

There was a brief pause, then the controller came back. "State your business first, Phantom."

Nerayerku was slightly taken aback by the controller's curtness.

*Unusual, she thought. It's normally easier than this to get clearance.*

She nervously brushed her long auburn hair back enough to glance over her shoulder at the dais and observed the admiral was watching her expectantly.

Davir merely nodded once.

She turned back to her station. "Control, Phantom. We're here to trade. Request docking clearance, Sir," she said.

There was an even longer pause. She was about to repeat her transmission when the radio crackled again.

"Bay five, Phantom," the controller said shortly. "Bring a shuttlecraft. Out."

*Well, that was...abrupt, she thought.*

She passed the incoming coordinates of bay five to Mirra at the helm station, who laid in an appropriate course and speed. The Phantom navigated around the station's hub to the bay doors, one of which was already open. The other door appeared to be stuck in the closed position, and its exterior lights weren't working, but the Phantom was small enough to get through the doorway. Once inside, the crew saw a couple of freighters at station keeping, an alien frigate of unknown design, and about half a dozen shuttles moving through the interior of the hangar. There was nothing wrong with the interior lighting as most of the windows facing the hangar were shining brightly. Bay five was clearly marked and expecting them, and in less than a minute, the Phantom was safely docked.

"Mooring clamps are secure, Sir," Mirra said when it was done.

"Very good, Commander," Davir acknowledged.

He turned to his newly assigned first officer, a Vulcan woman who'd ferried the Phantom to Deep Space 9 and who knew the ship better than anyone else. "You have the bridge, Commander Vaalolul," he said, getting up from his seat.

"Standard away team with me, please," he intoned, heading to the turbolift at the back of the bridge. "Let's go find our specialist."

"I have the ship, Sir," Vaalolul replied. She smoothly got up from an auxiliary ops station to one side of the command dais and sat down at command as the other officers followed the admiral.

*Still a comfortable fit,* she thought appreciatively.

She touched a comm control on the chair's armrest. "Secondary command crew, please report to the bridge."

*I'm glad Vaalolul has tactical and command training, like Losozola,* Davir thought as Mirra, Losozola, Umuzoi, and Pid'pen followed him into the turbolift. *If things go south with this specialist we're supposed to meet, we might need that kind of help getting out of a place like this.*

"Shoddy looking," Pid'pen commented idly as the turbolift's door swished closed. "Did you notice?"

"What, the ship?" Umuzoi asked, confused.

"No, the station," he clarified. "Wonder what the inside looks like?"

"Maybe that's why they want us to use a shuttlecraft," Mirra observed.

"Their transporters probably don't work," he agreed.

Davir decided to be prudent. "Cargo bay," he said to the turbolift's computer, and the lift hummed as it carried them to deck four.

Less than a minute later, the door opened into the aft section of the cargo bay, a long room with a platform elevator occupying most of the floor. A Yellowstone-class Runabout named Old Faithful was on it. There were two doors in the squat ceiling that opened into space and a force field in the doorway to hold in the atmosphere. Cargo containers were stacked neatly along the near wall and the far wall on either side of the elevator, and the air had a slight tang to it as though it had been processed recently. The room was oddly quiet because the engines were idle since the ship was docked.

Davir and his away team got into Old Faithful, and the Phantom cleared them for launch. An alarm sounded once inside the cargo bay, indicating that the bay doors were about to open. Above them, the lights around the door flashed redly as the interior lighting dimmed, and the bay doors slowly opened. The force field remained active until Mirra confirmed that they were ready to depart. Then the atmosphere was drained off, and the force field deactivated. Now under power, the shuttlecraft lifted gently off the platform, and flew out into the interior of the station's hangar bay, heading for the nearest airlock.

The hangar bay was by far the most spacious area in the station, built to accommodate a small fleet of mid-sized vessels. Empty, it might accommodate a couple of cruisers, but there wouldn't be room for much else. The hangar bay doors weren't wide enough to permit the passage of anything bigger than an Excalibur-class ship anyway. The hangar's inner walls were deck after deck of windowed offices and crew quarters, assembly rooms, and support systems. The station's stalk came up through the hangar floor and went through the ceiling, occupying the central area of the hangar. The station's controllers operated there, and it, too, was covered with windows, small docking ports, and the like. Floating in the space around it were various dry docks designed to allow vessels to be repaired on site.

The Phantom looked out of place, given the company that was already inside the hangar. From the outside, her complexion did not reflect much light, so the hull looked almost black. Even the places that had running lights looked dark, and her markings were in subdued colors to maintain the low-contrast camouflage. Her sleek design was also a marked difference to the other ships in the hangar bay. Spindle-shaped cargo haulers and boxy shuttlecraft made up most of the traffic. The only vessel of comparable size was the alien frigate on the other side of the bay, but it was in a different class, and the Phantom was still larger than that. Overall, the Phantom Intel Escort gave the impression of mystery, sleekness, and hidden power; only her UFP markings gave away her identity.

Old Faithful docked on a small pad in the central stalk, and the away team departed through the airlock on the shuttle's port side.

Once inside the starbase, the away team observed that while all the lights were running, little else was. Trash was scattered about the foyer, the furniture was smashed as though it had failed to survive a bar fight, and the floor was cracked in many places. The stale air carried the stench of old food and urine. Some of the panel consoles on the walls were dark (indicating no power was reaching them), and about half the rest sparked incessantly.

A young woman in an unkempt, red Federation uniform with an ensign's insignia was waiting for them in the middle of the room.

"Welcome to Arnok's Emporium, gentlemen and ladies," she said, smiling sweetly. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Davir frowned. *Sloppy uniform. No salute either. What happened to this place?*

"Ensign," he began in his sternest tone, "the name of this deplorable facility is Starbase 621, and the pips on my collar mean the correct form of address is a military salute followed by 'Admiral' or 'Sir.'"

Not waiting for her to correct herself, he continued, "A trader named Flinz Parper is expecting us. Can you tell me where to find him?"

Miffed, the unfortunate girl's smile cracked. She wasn't actually in Starfleet – she was a Dabo girl in a costume. Assigned by a local Ferengi magnate to greet newcomers to the station, her uniform wasn't even a formality to her; she just needed something to wear that might impress people because the room she worked in certainly didn't. It had been years since a Starfleet flag officer had visited the station and even longer since the Federation had enforced any sort of military presence aboard. Nowadays, the station was Starfleet's only nominally, but she knew better than to rebut a Federation admiral about protocol. Instead, she addressed his question.

"Parper? Flinz Parper? Don't know what sort of business you have with that creep, but hold on...let me check something." She walked over to one of the few working panels and proceeded to use the internal sensors, looking for Parper's last reported location, but the computer wasn't responding quickly.

"Stupid datalink bypasses..." she muttered.

Davir waited impatiently, upset partly by her apparent disregard for the uniform and partly by the station's general state of disrepair. He'd understood that after the Federation Alliance won the Dominion War, Starbase 621 was deemed too small to be useful and was therefore left to fend for itself. Perhaps the advent of Task Force Theta would change that, but he hadn't anticipated that the station would be barely functional by the time it got here. He made a mental note to address the issue with Captain James Kurland of Deep Space 9 when the mission was over.

*If I get back, that is, he thought grimly.*

The computer finally returned an answer, and the girl looked up, victory in her eyes and an artificial smile back on her lips. "He's in the Emporium's Dabo bar." She rolled her eyes once. "As usual," she added past gritted teeth. "Straight back and two floors up. Can't miss it.

"Anything else?"

*If he makes me salute him, I swear I'll scratch his eyes out, she thought savagely.*

By now, Davir had picked up on her anti-military vibe without realizing that uniforms didn't mean anything to her. He also remembered that he was supposed to be keeping a low profile, so he lessened his role for the sake of the mission.

"Thanks, no, I got it," he replied nonchalantly.

He turned to his group. "Let's go."

The away team moved as one along a bright hallway that branched back into the station's interior, Davir leading and the foursome following in an arc formation, ready to provide any needed support. Everywhere they looked were signs of the same disrepair and disregard for cleanliness. It was obvious that the starbase had been designed well, but it had suffered from being ignored and by a severe lack of expert maintenance. It was sad, really.

The group reached an elevator and took it up two floors to an entertainment lounge. At least, that's what it was now. It had previously been an auditorium suitable for ceremonies or large meetings. This place was very different. Elsewhere, it was common to find leftover hallmarks of UFP technology, but this lounge had been overlaid with furnishings from a collage of other local cultures: Bajoran, Cardassian, and Deferi, primarily, but there were also signs of Ferengi, Orion, and Betazoid in the furnishings. It was very eclectic and jumbled together with no obvious sense of order. A beverage bar tended by a huge male Orion occupied the middle of the suite. Also, this part of the station was in decent repair because everything worked.

*That explains where the emphasis is on maintenance around here, Pid'pen thought grudgingly. They don't care about anything except where they want you to spend your time and money, if you have any.*

"I guess this is it," Davir said. "Let's look around and find our contact."

The away team scattered about the room, looking for Flinz Parper or his whereabouts.

*Maybe the bartender knows?* Davir wondered.

He went up to the bar in the middle of the room and took a seat on a stool at the counter.

"Barkeep!" he called, waving a hand once to get the giant's attention.

The big Orion looked up from washing a glass, saw him, and held up an index finger without smiling, indicating that the admiral could wait until he was finished.

*Maybe I shouldn't have worn a uniform, Davir thought belatedly. That's the second cold shoulder I've gotten since I arrived.*

The bartender lumbered up. "Yeah, what'll it be?" he rumbled in a deep bass.

*And the second non-protocol introduction, too. Oh well.*

"A little information," Davir replied hopefully.

The bartender leaned down a little, still towering over the admiral. "What kind of information?" he asked in a softer tone.

Davir wasn't intimidated, but he had the impression that the Orion got that question often and was used to bartering for that commodity. Davir understood the mechanism well.

"Bring me two shot glasses and a bottle of your worst Saurian brandy first," he said, having come to like it after being introduced to it years ago at the bar on Deep Space 9.

The bartender gave him a slightly crooked smile and stepped away for a few seconds, returning with the requested tribute. Without being asked, he poured a shot for Davir, then poured himself one, too, downing it in a shallow gulp.

Davir swished his beverage around his mouth and swallowed, sighing softly in satisfaction, then he coughed. "That's pretty hard stock."

The Orion nodded. "You asked."

"I'm actually looking for someone," he began. "Local merchant named Parper. Know him?"

The bartender puffed his cheeks out and stood up, returning to his full height. "That one...yeah, who doesn't know about him?" He frowned slightly. "What's your business with that cuss?"

*Why does everyone think badly of this Parper fellow?* Davir wondered.

"He has something I want," he answered circumspectly.

The bartender grunted once, looking shrewdly down at the admiral. He was fairly sure there was no harm in the Starfleet officer's intent, but he couldn't be certain. Backwater space stations were the kinds of places people tended to go to when they didn't want to be found easily, and he knew Parper was antisocial. He also knew he didn't care much for Parper's preferences.

He shrugged noncommittally. "Doesn't bother me one way or the other what your business with Flinz is. He's an unlucky cur and you're welcome to him, as far as I'm concerned. He's in the Dabo room." The Orion pointed behind the admiral to a sealed alcove on the far side of the lounge. "But he doesn't like to be disturbed when he's gambling. Says it's bad luck. Not that I care." He picked up both glasses and the liquor bottle and walked away.

Davir nodded musingly, satisfied. Getting up from the stool, he tapped the communicator on his shirt, opening a channel to the away team. “The Dabo room’s across from the bar,” he said quietly. “Meet me there.”

The away team members slowly approached the alcove. As they got close to the Dabo room, they noticed the closed door was guarded by four Nausicaans. Nausicaans were widely regarded as one of the more bellicose species in the known galaxy, and they were often hired as bodyguards, soldiers, and mercenaries. The four aliens were decked out in trooper gear and carried melee weapons for the most part. The bony ridges on their craggy faces and the spikey teeth in their mouths made them look very fierce, and each Nausicaan seemed like a larger specimen than the next.

They stepped forward a bit and gripped their weapons as the away team reached the doorway. “And just where do you think you’re going in such a hurry, stranger?” their leader asked, glowering.

Davir stood up to the Nausicaan with a deadpan look. His only weapon was an assault rifle which he wore across his back, and the away team members behind him were similarly armed. He hadn’t thought to bring a melee weapon onto the station, but he’d hoped to avoid meeting unfriendly aliens asking threatening questions. True to form, he decided to try the diplomatic approach first.

“I understand Flinz Parper is inside. I need to speak with him.”

The Nausicaan’s expression darkened, if that was possible. “Mr. Parper doesn’t want to see anybody. Go away.”

Davir started to get upset, but he contained his initial response and stuck with diplomacy. “I’m afraid I must insist. My crew and I need help with a mission, and he’s...”

“Not to be disturbed, little human,” the alien finished for him. “I won’t tell you again: go...away.” He gave Davir a rough shove in the chest, pushing him back a bit, and that’s what started the fight.

As a Starfleet officer, Davir had accepted the fact that defending himself physically might be necessary at some point. As such, he’d been trained somewhat in martial arts and melee weapons, but he preferred beam weapons to anything else. His assault rifle did, however, have a large convex blade like a battle axe underneath its barrel, so it could serve a dual purpose in a fight, but he didn’t draw it. He just reacted instinctively.

As he rocked backwards, Davir planted his foot firmly and grabbed the alien’s wrist, jerking it forward and twisting it sharply at the same time. There was a sharp cracking sound as the bones crunched together in an unfortunate way.

The Nausicaan stumbled forward with the admiral’s weight and howled as his wrist fractured. He dropped his weapon (a large, jagged knife with ceremonial markings) to the floor, then tried to catch himself with his other arm as he headed in the same direction.

Davir let the alien’s weight come forward, falling backwards onto his backside so that the alien fell past him to the floor. Then he gripped the prone Nausicaan’s upper arm and shoulder in a leg vise while holding onto the wrist he’d already broken, twisting the entire arm so that the Nausicaan could not lever himself out of the vise without help.



*Davir confronts Flinz’s Nausicaan bouncers in Arnok’s Emporium (Star Trek Online)*

The other three Nausicaans leapt to their leader's aid, drawing knives and clubs with which to attack the admiral, but the away team was ready for that. Armed with various types of assault rifles, they'd set them on stun only. Even so, Federation assault rifles packed quite a punch, and many such beam weapons were configured to apply explosive recoils on the target. Pid'pen and Umuzoi blasted the incoming Nausicaan trio with their assault rifles at point blank range, and the kick back effect threw two of them back against the Dabo room door, stunned. One of the aliens whacked his head against it with a sickening thud. Losozola intercepted the third Nausicaan before he could stab the admiral. As the Nausicaan reared back, preparing to strike downward, Losozola expertly took the alien's feet out from under him with a leg sweep from behind. The Nausicaan fell backwards, and Pid'pen whacked him into relative submission with the butt end of his rifle. The Nausicaan remained conscious, but he stayed down for the remainder of the brawl.

Meanwhile, Davir and the first Nausicaan had managed to get to their feet, the Starfleet officer still gripping the alien's severely twisted arm, ready to dislocate the shoulder if the alien offered any strong form of resistance. The Nausicaan was predictably belligerent, but he knew he was outmatched without his comrades, and he quickly gave up the fight.

"Let me go!" he screamed. "What do you want!?"

"Do you promise not to attack if I do?" Davir snarled, twisting the alien's arm for emphasis.

The Nausicaan howled in pain again. "YES!"

Davir let go, satisfied and stepped quickly out of range in case the Nausicaan broke his promise. He still didn't feel it necessary to draw his weapon. Besides, his away team had theirs drawn and aimed at the alien leader.

The Nausicaan staggered to his feet, his injured arm hanging uselessly from its shoulder socket. Breathing heavily, he limped over to the Nausicaan who'd been knocked out against the door to check on him. He was still out cold and bleeding from a scalp wound, but he wasn't seriously injured. The other two would recover themselves in time.

*I'll get even somehow*, he thought.

Holding his broken wrist close to his side, he grunted as he rose to his full height and faced the away team, temporarily defeated. "What do you want, stranger?"

Davir nodded at the door. "Locked?"

The Nausicaan lowered his head and nodded once.

"I presume you have the code. Unlock it...now," Davir growled.

"No code – it just needs a key," he replied.

"Whatever," Davir said. "Give me yours."

The Nausicaan grudgingly reached into his tunic with his good arm and produced a metal key on a short chain. Dangling it from his fingertips, he held it out. "Here."

Davir nodded at Losozola, who took the key from the Nausicaan and handed it back to the admiral, never taking his weapon off the leader.

Davir took the key and tapped his communicator. "Benmata to Phantom. We've located Mr. Parper. Maintain a transporter lock on our location."

"Acknowledged, Admiral," Nerayerku's voice said. "Transporter standing by."

He turned to his away team. "Keep this channel open and wait for my signal."

The four officers nodded their understanding, and they tapped their communicators once in compliance.

As Davir stepped past the pair of stunned Nausicaans on the floor, it occurred to him that a conciliatory gesture might smooth things over with them. "Umuzoi, see to their injuries," he instructed the medical officer.

Umuzoi frowned slightly. She didn't like Nausicaans. "Very well," she answered diplomatically.

She lowered her weapon and nodded to the leader as she fetched out her medkit. "Let's start with you," she offered.

Davir straightened his uniform and applied the key to the door. It chirped as the lock disengaged. The door swished open, and the noise within spilled out into the hallway. He stepped through the doorway, and it closed behind him.

The casino was loud with raised voices. About 15 meters square, three of the walls were occupied with gambling stations that resembled slot machines from a bygone era, but the central part of the room had two long Dabo tables, and that's where most of the action was. Both were crowded tonight, packed with onlookers, in fact. Most of the players were trying to recover their losses against the house, but a few were getting very lucky, their winnings piling up on the tables, and the crowds were cheering them on.

Not much of a gambler himself, Davir sauntered up to an opening at the edge of one of the tables and looked surreptitiously around for someone matching Flinz's description. The ambassador had been good enough to provide a holograph of the merchant from Starfleet's files, and Davir had memorized it before arriving.

Flinz Parper was a human trader in his late forties from Mars, and he had a reputation for shady dealings. He'd been in and out of Federation correctional facilities several times for minor regulatory violations, and he'd even had the misfortune of spending a couple of weeks on the infamous Klingon prison moon of Rura Penthe. Short and skinny in stature and never much for hard labor, he'd barely survived the ordeal, and likely wouldn't have except the Klingon High Council realized they'd imprisoned the wrong person and released him. After that, he'd moved to Ferenginar to turn over a new leaf in a highly mercantile culture where his dreams of striking it rich might somehow be realized. According to records, he'd been all over the Alpha Quadrant, making and losing small fortunes with equal facility by making questionable deals with disreputable folk, often involving the misfortunes of others. He had several bounties on his head by now, which is why he was laying low on an all but abandoned space station, and he was popularly known as the Rat. Davir understood that Flinz was a conman and a thief, but Flinz also had his ear to the floor about illegal dealings across the quadrant. Davir needed that insight on this mission.



Flinz (the "Rat") Parper (Star Trek Online)

Looking around, he still didn't immediately see the thin, hooded figure at his elbow with a tiny pile of chips before him until a quavering voice with an Irish brogue whispered almost in his ear: "Can you spare a slip or two?"

Startled, Davir looked down and found a narrow-faced man with quick, dark brown eyes squinting cautiously up at him from underneath the hood. The little fellow had a hooked nose, and slightly yellowed teeth in the middle of a narrow mouth surrounded by a scraggly beard and a thin moustache.

*That's him!* Davir thought. *Good night, he actually looks a bit rat-like in person.*

The mission profile was to make contact and convince Flinz to join the mission as an advisor, particularly for any information he had about weapons dealing involving the True Way and/or the Jem'Hadar in Ferengi space. Looking at him now, Davir had a quick aversion – he questioned the ambassador's logic in needing such a seedy-looking fellow at all.

*He certainly looks like the man I'm here for. I really hope the ambassador's right about him. We need the intel, and Flinz may also have contacts we can use,* Davir thought.

The admiral quickly recovered himself and reached down to grip Flinz's bony shoulder in feigned friendship. "I know what it's like to be down on my luck, so, yeah, I can spare some latinum. Come on," he invited, turning Flinz towards an Exchange interface against the far wall where there was a small crowd.

The Exchange was an interstellar consortium run primarily by the Ferengi government. Its influence was spread out across the breadth of the known galaxy, and, among other things, it provided currency exchange services in nearly

every denomination. The rate of exchange depended on the strength of the latinum market. Even though the United Federation of Planets didn't officially have a monetary currency, it realized that many of its member worlds did. As a result, Starfleet members could draw down at need on a stipend fund recognized by the Exchange, and this situation qualified.

Flinz put his meager winnings into an interior pocket and stayed near Davir as the admiral led him across the room to the interface. When they got there, Davir took off his communicator for a moment, laid it on the interface panel to verify his identity, then withdrew 5 slips of gold-pressed latinum from the Exchange's drawer. Replacing his communicator badge, Davir picked the latinum up and held out one piece to the wiry fellow next to him.

"One for now," Davir said as Flinz looked greedily at the thin piece of shiny yellow metal.

The merchant snatched it out of Davir's hand and quickly turned to go back to the Dabo table to continue his losing streak.

"Wanna earn the rest?" Davir inquired at Flinz's retreating back.

Flinz stopped but did not turn around. His heart raced in his chest almost as quickly as his mind churned in mild consternation and curiosity. *So this admiral isn't the mark he was made out to be*, he thought. *Well, he made it past my Nausicaans – that's somethin'. What else does he have to offer? And can I use 'im?*

He turned slowly to face Davir, his sharp gaze quickly taking in other details from underneath his hood. He noted one side of the admiral's mouth was turned up slightly in feigned confidence, and the officer's stance equaled that, but there was no humor in his steady stare as he played with the several latinum slips in his hand.

*He's an ace up 'is sleeve for sure. He probably thinks I won't say no to whatever he's got in mind*, Flinz thought. A rebellious streak welled up in his heart at that. He didn't like being manipulated even if he sometimes benefited from the deal – it irked him. *We'll just see who uses who the best, then*, he concluded, making up his mind.

Flinz used to be a somewhat respectable and very wealthy businessman on the Ferengi homeworld. The Ferengi Commerce Authority (FCA) was the agency responsible for enforcing the Ferengi trade code based on the Rules of Acquisition. During some of Flinz's legally questionable dealings almost a year ago, the FCA had worked with the Federation to plant an informant in Parper's negotiations. The informant's testimony included a list of Parper's offenses from various Rules of Acquisition. Strictly speaking, the Rules applied only to Ferengi, but he'd been acting as the agent of a Ferengi mogul, and that was enough to convince the FCA to convict even though he wasn't a Ferengi. His financial assets on Ferenginar had been frozen. Additionally, they'd impounded his Amarie-class vessel, which he'd been using as a base of operations. To make matters far worse, a few of the associates involved in his last enterprise had been killed, and their friends were trying to take out their revenge on him. That's why he'd been hiding on Starbase 621 in the first place, and Flinz blamed the informant (and, by association, all things Starfleet) for his adverse situation. He wanted nothing more than to escape his pursuers, return to Ferenginar, convince the FCA to reinstate him and unfreeze his assets, and re-acquire his ship (his most treasured possession) before it could be auctioned off to the highest bidder. He had to admit that none of that seemed likely to happen as long as he was being hunted by vengeful mercenaries.

*I'm gonna need 'is help gettin' off this damned station*, he thought, *but how far would 'e be willing to help me anyway? Maybe that's why Morlo sent 'im 'ere to me.*

Flinz sidled back towards the admiral. "What'd you 'ave in mind, eh?" he asked in low tones.

Davir looked around a little and spied an empty dining table near the door. "Let's sit down, shall we?" he offered, gesturing towards the front of the large room. He put the latinum in his pocket and, setting a hand on Flinz's near shoulder, led the way over, taking one of the two seats.

Flinz nervously took the other, staring alternately down at the table and occasionally flicking his gaze up to meet the admiral's.

*He's a shifty sort*, Davir thought. *I'd better watch my back. Meanwhile, I need to earn his trust if I expect him to help us willingly.*

"My name's Davir Benmata," he began. "I'm with Starfleet, obviously."

Flinz licked his lips once quickly. "Flinz Parper, and I'm definitely not."

Davir smiled slightly in response, partly because he already knew that and partly to put Flinz at ease. He decided to get right to the point.

"I understand you deal in information around these parts," he continued.

Flinz looked quickly away. "Yeah, well, there's nothin' 'appenin' 'round 'ere, Starfleet," he said, "and there's lots who'd sell you information 'bout that."

Davir stayed doggedly with it. "Yes, but I'm looking for someone with a reputation for having...connections. Someone who knows you told me there's no one better on this station."

Flinz hesitated. *What else did the ambassador tell 'im?* he wondered.

"Oh yeah?" he answered after a moment. "And who might that be, eh?"

Now it was Davir's turn to hesitate. Ambassador Aegis hadn't given him permission to disclose who was handling this mission or that Starfleet Intelligence was involved. He wasn't inclined to give away advantageous information, not even to establish trust; there were less revealing ways to do that.

"Let's just say this person trusts what he knows of you," he clarified cautiously.

Flinz looked shrewdly at Davir. "But not enough for you to trust me with 'is name, eh?" he countered. "Well, no matter, really. You, Starfleet, 'aven't told me what you really need yet. Ain't that what it's all 'bout?" He smiled crookedly and leaned forward in mock conspiracy. "Lemme guess: you're on a mission or sommat, and you need my help." He gloated knowingly.

Davir kept a deadpan look on his face. "Yes," he answered quietly.

"Lookin' for someone?" Flinz continued, now grinning.

Again, Davir gave nothing away by his body language. "Maybe. If I were, could you help?"

Flinz sat back again. "Well, that all depends, don't it?"

*Now the real negotiating starts,* Davir thought, still wearing his poker face.

"What do you want?" he asked the wily trader, trying to cut to the chase.

"Off this station, for starters," Flinz instantly replied.

*That came off a little too quickly,* Davir thought. *He's desperate.*

"Thinking your luck might change if you went elsewhere?" he guessed.

"Probably," Flinz agreed. He decided to level the bargaining field a little more.

"I need to get to Ferenginar, Starfleet," he said, "and that fancy spaceship you got is my best chance off this bucket of stembolts."

*He's hiding something,* Davir thought suspiciously.

"Go on," he invited noncommittally.

Flinz looked seriously at the admiral for the first time in several minutes. "I'll 'elp you find what yer lookin' for if you get me safely to Ferenginar first."

Davir paused, a pensive look on his face. He'd made contact with his target, and the negotiations were now at a critical point since both he and Flinz knew what the other wanted in a general sense. Flinz had even made a conditional offer to help first, which indicated that he was desperate for help himself, but Davir still wanted to understand why in case the rationale might prove useful later. From what he'd observed about Flinz, it likely had nothing to do with bad luck at Dabo.

Davir made up his mind shortly. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out the remaining four slips of latinum, toying with them between his fingers. "Safe passage to Ferenginar and the rest of my latinum: tell me why you want to leave this station first," he countered.

*Not that I blame you,* he added internally.

Flinz sniffed once, idly watching the admiral's latinum. *This is my best shot,* he thought. *Probably not gonna come 'round again in a long time.*

“Merics,” he answered simply.

“They’re all over the quadrant,” Davir noted noncommittally. “What about ‘em?”

“Yeah,” Flinz agreed, “but some of ‘em on this station are after me.”

The admiral wasn’t surprised – anyone with Flinz’s reputation would have enemies.

“You need to get away to Ferenginar,” he concluded, “and you want protection. Why us?”

“Well” Flinz answered, shrugging, “you apparently bested the bodyguards I’d hired to protect me to get in ‘ere. Seems only fair, don’t you think?”

Now Davir saw most of the big picture. Flinz, professional opportunist that he was, wanted safe passage to Ferenginar. Why, Davir had yet to discover, and who knew how long Flinz had been living on Starbase 621, but he’d been hiding from mercenaries and protecting himself by hiring thugs to prevent anyone from finding him. That hadn’t worked out so well in this case, so Flinz was killing two raptors with one torpedo, as it were, by asking for transport and better protection than a bunch of surly Nausicaans could provide. He was obviously using Davir’s combat prowess as leverage.

*Bastard thinks I owe him for besting his friends,* Davir thought. *I’d like to think I wouldn’t stoop as low, but my mission requires that I use him to find the True Way’s arms dealers. What’s the difference, really?*

The comparison didn’t make Davir feel better about the situation. He would normally regard himself above the machinations of mercenary politics, but, as an experienced diplomat, he knew how to dig into a situation with the worst of them to accomplish a mission.

*That’s probably why the ambassador chose me,* he thought grimly.

*Still,* he continued internally, *every deal has at least two sides. Time to play my hand.*

“Bad deal, those Nausicaans,” he began. “No honor in combat. Now Klingons,…”

*Klingons!* Flinz’s eyes nearly popped out of his head in silent protest at the idea.

Davir saw his consternation and smiled inwardly. *Klingon mercs?*

“Calm down,” he said soothingly, “I’ll take you safely to Ferenginar, but not for beating up your Nausicaans. They were just in the way.”

Flinz peered quizzically at the admiral and waited for the other boot to drop.

“You’re right – I’m on a mission,” Davir said, “and I need help.”

“Eh,” Flinz huffed, “what’s yer mission?”

“I’m not allowed to tell you the particulars,” Davir hedged, “but our mutual friend thinks you’re the sort of resource I need. I’m trying to find someone, but I don’t yet know whom.”

Flinz snorted. “That’s a sorry mission, even for Starfleet. What in space makes you – or yer friend – think I’d be any ‘elp at all?”

*Good question,* Davir thought wryly.

“The fact is I’m headed to Ferenginar anyway,” Davir said, “looking for an arms dealership with connections to a faction in the Alpha Quadrant. It’s a recent development, and our information suggests the connection’s on Ferenginar, but we’re not sure who’s involved. We just want to put a stop to it in the interests of securing the quadrant.”

“Yer lookin’ for illegal traders on Ferenginar?” Flinz repeated incredulously. “It’s the commerce center of the quadrant. What other kind would you expect there!?” He threw his head back and guffawed loudly enough to attract the passing attention of a few nearby gamblers who quickly returned to minding their own business.

Flinz looked back and noticed the admiral wasn’t laughing. He chuckled nervously once or twice more, but the incidental levity passed quickly, and he lowered his tone again. “Even if I knew who yer lookin’ for, what makes you think I’d ‘elp turn ‘em in?”

Davir was ready for that. “What’s it to you if you do? Cuts out some competition legally, and as long as you’re not involved in their infraction, you’re safe from me. Win, win, eh?”

Flinz opened his mouth to retort, but then he hesitated. He was already getting part of what he wanted: safe passage back to his adoptive homeworld and thereby a chance to regain what he’d lost last year. That was critical to him.

Trade wars (legal or otherwise) on Ferenginar were governed by the Rules of Acquisition, which Flinz understood rudimentarily. If one of his associates was caught breaking Ferengi law by the FCA, the same thing that had happened to Flinz would happen to him if it came to light. The admiral was right: Flinz honestly didn't care who held the phaser as long as it wasn't aimed at him. He'd still be back on Ferenginar regardless.

*War is good for business, after all,* he thought grudgingly as he made up his mind.

"Well," he acceded, "I s'ppose I could make a few discrete inquiries for you when we get there." He pointed a thin finger at the admiral in emphasis. "But first you gotta get me there, Starfleet, and that probably won't be easy, now that you've disposed of my only friends on this station."

Davir knew he wasn't going to get anything more concrete out of Flinz at this point. "We can handle that."

He held the latinum slips out to Flinz in acceptance, and the greedy trader gratefully put them in one of his pockets.

Davir tapped his communicator badge to reset the open channel. "Admiral to away team: we're done here. Get ready to leave."

"Aye, Sir," Mirra's voice said.

Davir stood and waved towards the door. "After you, Mr. Parper," he said.

Flinz got up and shuffled through the crowd towards the door, the admiral in tow.

Upon leaving the Dabo room, Davir noticed that the Nausicaans he'd defeated earlier were gone. He looked questioningly at Umuzoi.

"You were longer than anticipated, Sir. They left with their leader," she said.

He nodded in understanding.

"Let's get back to the airlock," he ordered, backtracking at a quick pace towards the turbolift they'd used to get to this deck.

As the six of them made their way through the Emporium, none of them noticed the Orion bartender's nod towards one of the other patrons, who, in turn, activated a silent alarm on the wall.

Davir, his crew, and Flinz made it to the elevator, and took it down two levels to the hangar deck where they'd docked the Runabout. Through the window, they could see Old Faithful still moored to the station. She looked invitingly close. The party started down the long gantry towards the airlock.

Suddenly, there came a loud shout from a side passageway: "PARPER!"

Flinz jumped out of his skin. "GAH!" Terrified, he instantly activated a personal shield device he was wearing at his belt, protecting himself with the thin bluish glow of an energy-absorbing field. "I knew it!" he shouted in fear.

Out of the narrow passageway thundered a group of seven bellowing Klingons, all heavily armed with bat'leths<sup>1</sup> and ceremonial knives and angry as a herd of castrated bull targs. They indiscriminately began attacking Davir and his crew, trying to get to Flinz.

The Starfleet officers had no chance to cut them down at a distance with their assault rifles – the Klingons were already too close. They quickly found themselves embroiled in a melee fight against physically stronger aliens than the Nausicaans they'd dispatched earlier. Activating personal shields of their own, they drew their weapons anyway and alternately clubbed, parried, or slashed at the Klingons with the ax-like edges of their rifles.

The fight was furious and rapid as the Klingons tried to break past the defensive line, often attacking in pairs and trios trying to overpower one of the officers. Flinz, at least, kept his head down. The officers were well trained, and their line flexed but did not break until several Klingons hit Losozola and Davir hard enough to cut through their shields. Both the admiral and the security officer were soon bleeding from deep wounds, and the others closed their ranks to shore them up and still protect Flinz.

As the fight progressed, the Starfleet officers found opportunities to shoot their rifles into the attacking crowd of Klingons at point blank range, wearing down the Klingons' own shields to the point where the beam weapons could stun

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<sup>1</sup> Bat'leth – Noun (Klingonese): Sword of honor.

the aliens. One by one, the Klingons fell prey to that tactic until the last one, still angry but sensible enough to realize he was outnumbered, turned and disappeared down the passageway.

Umuzoi instantly got to work as Pid'Pen and Mirra stood guard.

"Stay still," she ordered Losozola and Davir.

Using her medical tricorder, she diagnosed their wounds and proceeded to treat them in triage fashion. Fortunately, no major damage had been done, and both officers were on their feet in a few minutes, weakened but stable.

Davir glared at Flinz. "Friends of yours, too?" he growled.

Flinz, still scared, shook his head. "Mercs, like I said, but I'm glad they're gone. You should expect more."

Davir seriously reconsidered the deal he'd made with Flinz. There were easier ways off the station than this, but he didn't want to leave the Runabout behind. It was the only shuttlecraft the Phantom had.

*Still, that doesn't mean everyone has to use it,* he thought.

He tapped his comm badge. "Away team to Phantom," he said.

"Phantom here, Admiral. Go ahead," Vaalolul's voice said.

"I need two site-to-site transports," he requested. "Beam me and Losozola to sickbay, and beam everybody else to the Runabout."

"I'm sorry, Admiral," she responded a few seconds later, a worried note in her tone. "The station has activated a transport inhibitor. Our transporters cannot penetrate the field. You're going to have to use the Runabout, Sir."

Davir slapped his comm badge vehemently and almost swore aloud. Thinking furiously, he turned on Flinz and demanded, "What else did you neglect to mention?"

"I told you it wouldn't be easy," the trader replied in a small voice. He looked nervously ahead. "Kluthor, where is he...?"

Davir was disgusted with the whole situation. Stabbed in his left shoulder, he couldn't use that arm for the numbing agent Umuzoi had given him for the pain, and Losozola was the same with a deep gash in his right thigh left by a bat'leth. Neither could move quickly, but Davir wasn't about to leave anybody behind. His stubborn streak rose to the fore. *Not on my watch,* he thought.

Grunting, he righted himself and slung his rifle across his good arm. "You heard the Rat. Check your stocks," he ordered. "We move out as soon as you're ready."

Davir and the rest of the away team checked their weapons' energy stores, then they headed down the corridor that led back towards the airlock they'd used to board the station. It was darker than Davir remembered, punctuated by sparkling flashes from defective consoles on the walls. The irregular lighting made it difficult to see what was far ahead. Eventually, they re-entered the dirty lobby that fronted the airlock itself. The young Dabo girl who'd greeted them was gone, but they could see Old Faithful through the airlock's window. Weapons ready, they moved as one towards the far side of the room and relative safety.

"That's far enough, Admiral," a baritone voice growled.

Flinz closed his eyes and froze in place. *Kluthor!*

The away team members whirled to their right, searching the room's shadows with narrow beams from their flashlight attachments for the hidden speaker.

Davir peered blindly into the depths and thought he saw movement. A moment later, his suspicion was confirmed as a big Klingon warrior stepped out from behind a curtain covering an alcove hidden in the far wall. He was shortly followed by a dozen more aliens: Jem'Hadar, Tzenkethi, Breen, and Cardassians, all wearing Dominion shields and armor and armed in various ways. They spread slowly across the side of the room closest to the airlock as their Klingon leader walked to the center in full view of the away team.

The giant Klingon was dark-skinned with sharply drawn ridges atop his bony skull plate. Long, dark locks of unkempt hair fell halfway across his broad shoulders. Wearing Klingon armor with no markings, his imposing frame towered above even Losozola's 1.9-meter height, and he carried several melee weapons at the belt around his thick waist.

He looked like he weighed over 140 kilograms...without the armor. The crooked smile underneath his dense moustache and beard may as well have been a grimace for all the warmth it held. He kept one hand behind his back, and he swaggered a bit as he stepped into the middle of the room.

“My name is Kluthor, son of Nort,” he intoned. His voice had a gravelly edge to it. “And you appear to be absconding with my property.”

The away team members kept their weapons up, as did the aliens. Neither group wanted to immediately start a fight, but it was clear that the aliens were ready for one if their leader gave the word.

Davir watched Kluthor intently, noting the arrogance in the Klingon’s face, the confidence in his movements, the distribution of his weight (mostly on his left leg), and the fact that Kluthor’s hand was still hidden behind his back. Davir’s wife K’Lira was a Klingon Dahar Master, and she’d told him about the training regimen required to attain that rank – he saw many of those same traits in Kluthor’s manner.

*He’s had that kind of training, this one,* he thought. *Best to stay outside striking distance.*

“I’m Admiral Davir Benmata of the Starfleet vessel Phantom,” he said authoritatively, “and we’re taking this merchant with us. His services are vital to our mission.”

“As they are to me, Admiral,” Kluthor replied. “I’m afraid I can’t allow you to take Mr. Parper off the station.”

*Not good,* Davir thought grimly. *Still, he’s obviously willing to talk, but what’s his hold on Flinz?*

“Why not?” he asked, genuinely curious.

Kluthor hooked the thumb of his visible hand into his belt and leaned his sizeable frame back for a moment. “Parper is mine,” he replied simply. “And I need him to do a job for me, something only he can do.”

Davir remained confused by the cryptic answer. “What job?”

“Well now,” Kluthor said, smiling coldly, “that’s not actually any of your business, is it? The simple fact is you’re stealing from me, and I won’t let you leave until you return Mr. Parper.”

Davir was nonplussed at the Klingon’s stubbornly elusive replies. The longer they stayed on Starbase 621, the likelier it was that he and Losozola would succumb to their injuries. The mission depended on Flinz’s insight, and Kluthor wasn’t being forthcoming enough about his connection to Flinz. Davir didn’t think there was a connection there – he just needed to get his away team and Flinz onto Old Faithful since the transporter was unavailable, and his investigative skills weren’t helping. He decided to be diplomatic.

“I need Parper with me, and you need him here, but you won’t say why,” he began. “Can we bargain for his services?”

Kluthor paused musingly. “What do you mean?”

“Yeah, how’s that, Starfleet?” Flinz asked, confused by the course the conversation had taken.

Davir remained steadfast. “Our mission is of immediate concern to Starfleet, and Parper’s help is critical to its success. Do you need him right now?”

Kluthor saw that the admiral was requesting time for Parper to help complete the mission. “You intend to bring Mr. Parper back after you’re done with him.”



*Kluthor, son of Nort (Star Trek Online)*

“Yes, if that’s what he wants,” Davir replied.

“And just what makes you think I’d want that, Starfleet?” Flinz asked aggressively, incensed that they were discussing him as if he weren’t there.

The admiral gave him a deeply annoyed glance.

Kluthor sighed. “The Rat has a point, Admiral. Mr. Parper and I have a less than equitable business relationship, and he tends to disappear, which is why I’ve activated the station’s lockdown protocol.” He brought his left hand around, revealing a small signaling device in his brown palm. “No beaming until I allow it.”

He lowered his massive frame into a dirty lounge chair, then indicated with a wave of his left hand that the admiral should do likewise. “Let’s talk.”

Davir pulled over another decrepit chair and sat down, waiting expectantly.

“Your reputation as a Starfleet officer precedes you, Admiral Benmata, but I don’t trust you,” Kluthor began. “Let’s just get that straight right away.”

“OK,” the admiral acknowledged noncommittally. He didn’t really expect the Klingon to. “What are your concerns regarding Parper, and how can we address them?”

“In short, my concerns are that I trust Mr. Parper even less than I trust you and that he’ll disappear before he does what I want him to do,” Kluthor replied. “You can address that by not removing him from these premises.”

Still in the dark about the Klingon’s desire to keep Flinz on the station, the admiral needed to break through Kluthor’s stubbornness somehow. *I need leverage*, he thought. Then he reconsidered. *Actually, maybe I just need to make him a deal. He’s open – why else would he be talking with us?*

“We’ve been over this. Doesn’t work for me,” he countered again. “Like I said, we’ll bring him back. As for what he wants, he could change his mind.”

Meanwhile, Flinz was getting very worked up about being treated like a bargaining chip, but he feared Kluthor’s wrath, so he didn’t dare interrupt the negotiation process as long as there was a chance he could still get off the station. He was putting a lot of faith in Davir’s skills as a diplomat.

“I have no assurances of that,” Kluthor said. “Nor do I know how long he’ll be gone if you take him with you. As I said, he has a tendency to hide, and he does it rather well.”

The sidebar compliment shocked Flinz: coming from a Klingon, it wasn’t much, but it was the only one Kluthor had ever paid him.

*There’s the rub*, Davir thought. *Work with it.*

“Come with us,” he offered suddenly. The idea surprised even him, but it fit.

The rest of the away team was surprised, too.

Flinz’s jaw dropped: this was not what he’d expected. “Now wait just a damned minute!” he retorted. Unable to restrain himself any longer, he took an involuntary step forward.

Instantly, Kluthor whipped his right hand up, a *qut’luch* in its grip, and he aimed the tip of the jagged blade in Flinz’s direction without looking at him. He didn’t say a word – he just held the dagger there.

Flinz blinked rapidly, swallowed his objection, and stepped back, a pained expression on his thin face.

Unfazed, the admiral calmly continued. “You can watch him yourself. When we’re done, we’ll drop you both off wherever you like.”

*If Flinz wants to get away from Kluthor, let him try*, Davir thought. *I don’t mind getting both of them off the station. I just need Flinz’s information.*

Kluthor considered. His design required him to keep Flinz at hand, and he’d felt that meant preventing Flinz from leaving Starbase 621 because Kluthor’s operation was here. He needed Flinz uniquely, but his timetable was flexible.

*I see his reputation is well deserved. It’s a good compromise*, he thought.

He put the knife away and extended his right hand in acceptance. “Done.”

*That was quick*, Davir thought. *Never say Klingons can’t make up their minds.*

He shook Kluthor's hand, wincing at the bigger man's powerful grip, and stood.

Flinz's heart fell. He'd wanted desperately to get away from his Klingon captor and thought this the perfect opportunity. Having Kluthor on the mission still got Flinz off the station, but it complicated any escape scenarios he might entertain. *Patience*, he thought. *I'll have better chances out there than I ever did here.*

"My lieutenant Rodan will accompany you in my stead," Kluthor rumbled, rising to his feet. "I am needed here." He beckoned to one of the mercenaries, and a male Cardassian stepped forward. Then he tapped the device in his left hand, ending the lockdown and automatically deactivating the transport inhibitors. "You may leave, Admiral."

Flinz was only somewhat relieved that Kluthor himself was staying on the station. Having a member of that posse hovering over him was not appealing either. *But it might be easier to escape from that one*, he thought, referring to Rodan.

Davir nodded to Kluthor. "Thank you."

Kluthor chuckled. "Oh, don't do that. You haven't worked long with Mr. Parper yet."

He stepped back from the entrance to the airlock leading to the shuttle, and the mercenaries except Rodan followed him out through the curtained entrance they'd used to enter the lobby.

The away team waited expectantly.

Davir glanced once at them, then at Rodan and Flinz. "Let's get off this dump," he said grumpily.

The group made quick time to the Runabout, and Old Faithful was soon back aboard the Phantom.

## CHAPTER 3: FERENGINAR

### STARDATE 56742, EXPENSIVE ADVICE

Several hours later, the U.S.S. Phantom was in deep space enroute to the Ferenginar System in the Alpha Quadrant. The ship would be a couple of days getting there at warp four. She could reach Ferenginar sooner at a higher velocity, but Admiral Davir Benmata and Commander Losozola had been injured while escaping from Starbase 621, so they needed time to recover. Also, Davir wanted to assay Flinz Parper's knowledge in the context of the mission.

Starfleet Intelligence had recommended attaching Flinz to their mission because the infamous trader had black market contacts all over the quadrant. If anyone would be able to help determine how True Way Cardassians were acquiring illegal weapons and Ketracel White for their local Alpha Jem'Hadar allies, it would be him. What Starfleet didn't mention was that Flinz's services came with a price...two prices, actually.

Flinz had violated several of the Rules of Acquisition, the guiding principles of Ferengi law, so the Ferengi Commerce Authority had frozen his assets and impounded his ship on Ferenginar. He'd also had a falling out with a former business associate, a Breen black marketer who'd set a bounty on his capture, so Flinz had been hiding on Starbase 621 from his numerous enemies for almost a year. He still harbored hopes of returning to Ferenginar to clear his name and recover his assets, so that was his first bargaining chip: safe passage to Ferenginar in exchange for his insight on this mission.

Since his assets were frozen, he had no money other than what he could earn, beg, borrow, or steal from others. He had nothing substantial to work with on Starbase 621. He'd made an agreement with a local crime boss, a Klingon named Kluthor, and the only way to fulfill the agreement was to make good on a likely impossible task – to find and return the most iconic artifact in Klingon lore: Emperor Kahless' bat'leth.

Flinz, expert black marketer that he was, had long since learned to keep his ear to the deck and stay closed mouthed about what he knew unless he could sell his information for a good price. At least, that was what he told himself. He'd acquired information about the possible whereabouts of Kahless' famous sword from Ezri Dax, then accidentally let that slip to one of Kluthor's henchmen. Whoever had that bat'leth would hold great sway in Klingon circles of power, perhaps enough prestige to influence the Klingon High Council to permit the rise of a new and powerful House. Kluthor had just that aspiration, and he'd made Flinz swear on his life to find that bat'leth for him.

But Kluthor didn't trust Flinz, and he'd adamantly refused to let Davir take Flinz off the station. So, despite his misgivings, Davir had suggested letting one of Kluthor's cohorts, a Cardassian named Rodan, come aboard to keep tabs on Flinz and make sure he didn't escape. Davir had promised Kluthor to bring Flinz and Rodan back when his mission was completed. It had been the only way to get Flinz off the station, so that was the second price: bring Flinz back so he could fulfill his promise to Kluthor. Flinz wasn't at all happy with that arrangement, but he was still getting to travel back to Ferenginar, and it would be easier to escape from Rodan there than from Kluthor on the starbase.

Now several hours into the next leg of their mission to discover the True Way's illegal arms source, it was time to find out what Flinz knew about it and how he could help them.

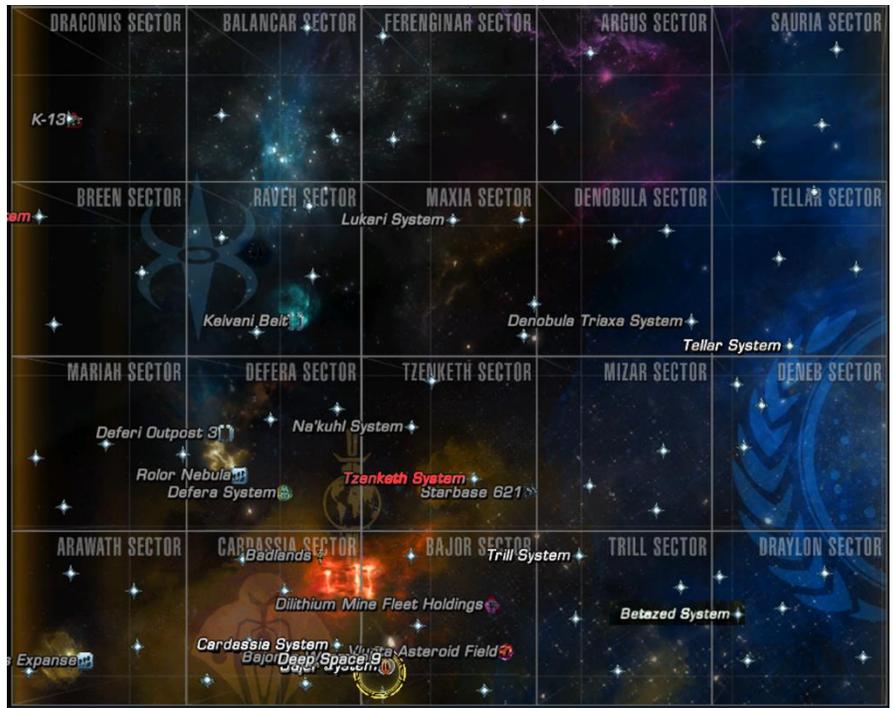
Davir and his bridge crew were in the Phantom's briefing room, which was just off the bridge, and Commander Vaalolul was running the ship. Flinz and Rodan were also in the room. Both had been afforded accommodations on deck three, but Rodan never let Flinz out of his sight for long, so Davir had resigned himself to include Rodan in the mission briefings because Flinz's input was crucial.

"So, in summary," Davir said, "the mission is to locate the True Way's black market source of military supplies, report that source to Starfleet Command, then rejoin Task Force Theta to participate in planning a strike to take out that source before the True Way and Laal's Alpha Jem'Hadar can destabilize any peaceful accords in the Alpha Quadrant. To do that, we need to draw the True Way out because we don't have time or resources to infiltrate their organization.

“This ship is designed for stealth operations, intelligence gathering, and tactical support. We can cloak indefinitely, listen to encrypted comm traffic from all over the quadrant, track ships using a variety of deep space sensor arrays, and hold our own in a firefight if we have to. None of that matters, though, if we don’t know where to start looking.

“Fortunately,” he concluded, “we have some ideas about that. Commander Nerayerku will fill us in.” Davir nodded to the intelligence specialist as a diagram of the major systems in the Alpha Quadrant appeared on the view screen at one end of the room.

Nerayerku turned her chair towards the screen and began. “The Federation has alliances in the Alpha Quadrant with the Cardassians, Trill, Tellarites, Betazeds, and the Bajorans.” The map highlighted star systems as she continued. “In the wake of the Dominion War, some of those alliances have grown weaker than we’d like, and that weakness creates an opportunity for opposing and, in some cases, unaligned factions to work against us, risking destabilization of the power structures in the entire quadrant. There are many such unallied factions that pose that danger, including the True Way, the Jem’Hadar, Breen, Tzenkethi, and the Ferengi. Defera, predictably, remains neutral in most matters of this nature. In particular, Laal’s Jem’Hadar have been trying to resurge their military presence in the quadrant since the Dominion War ended, but Starfleet, with the help of the Cardassian government, has put down several of their attempts. Now, however, the True Way and the Jem’Hadar have begun a new offensive that seems to be more effective than anything they’ve achieved since the War. The Federation suspects they’re somehow receiving help from sources in the quadrant. This hints at a connection we’ve not yet discovered. Our mission is to uncover evidence of that alignment.”



*Partial map of the Alpha Quadrant (Star Trek Online)*

Losozola interrupted. “What sort of help is the True Way receiving?”

“According to preliminary intelligence reports, specialized weaponry for their fleet and troops and Ketracel White for the Jem’Hadar loyal to them,” Nerayerku said.

“Dangerous, certainly. What sort of infrastructure would it take to provide them with resources like that, and who would have it?” Mirra asked.

“Nothing more than what the Alpha Quadrant already provides, really,” Nerayerku answered. “A thriving and inventive black market in largely neutral space fostered by indifferent local government officials who can be bought to look the other way occasionally.”

“I thought Ketracel White wasn’t illegal,” Mirra said.

“Making it isn’t,” Davir clarified. “Distributing it to Federation enemies is. There were plenty of Jem’Hadar stranded in the Alpha Quadrant after the War. Most of them surrendered peacefully when the armistice was signed, but Laal’s Jem’Hadar continued to fight. They’d be nothing without Ketracel White. Cutting off their supply line, wherever, whomever it is, is mission critical.”

“What sort of specialized weapons are they using?” Losozola asked.

“That’s somewhat uncertain at this point, Commander,” Nerayerku said cautiously. “Not all the reports we’ve collected comprise a clear picture, but it appears the True Way is equipping transports with genetic bombs with the potential to sterilize population centers from orbit.”

She paused to let the emphasis of that sink in.

“They’re making genocidal weapons platforms,” Losozola muttered in a shocked undertone.

The room was silent a few moments longer.

“I have the same question,” Mirra finally said. “Who would have the wherewithal to help the True Way build a genetic bomb?”

“That’s not clear yet,” Nerayerku repeated.

“Have they actually used one?” Pid’pen asked.

“Yes, they have,” she replied, “on several uninhabited class-L moons in Deferi and Breen space. We’ve not received any confirmations, but the chatter we intercepted so far seems to indicate satisfactory results.”

“Horrible,” Umuzoi muttered. “Imagine what a weapon like that would do to a populated planet.”

“Weapons of mass destruction have been used by spacefaring races in this part of the galaxy since before the Federation, Doctor,” Davir said casually. “The Xindi nearly destroyed Earth itself once. While the practice of genetic re-engineering has been outlawed in the Federation since the Eugenics Wars, weapons that compromise only genetic material are not actually regulated.”

“And Federation policy applies only to member worlds,” Nerayerku added.

“I don’t care!” Umuzoi retorted angrily. “Weapons like that are fundamentally immoral and should be banned everywhere.”

She turned her chair sharply around to face Davir. “Admiral, I insist we find out where the True Way’s keeping that technology and destroy it!”

Davir smiled benignly. “I’m glad you concur, Doctor.”

He turned his chair to face Flinz and spoke to the room. “Where should we start?”

Flinz grimaced slightly at Davir in disdain at the obvious segue, then leaned forward to speak. “There are several groups in the quadrant who’d have the technology to make a genetic weapon on that scale. My vote’s the Cardassians.”

He looked askance at the example sitting next to him. “No offense, Rodan.”

The Cardassian guard kept a stoic expression on his face and didn’t say anything.

“But, yeah,” Flinz continued blithely, “the Cardies, the Breen, the Tzenkethi, among others. And the Ferengi – hell, they’ll broker anything for a profit, so count them in, too, I guess.”

“Are you suggesting we start looking on Cardassia Prime?” Davir inquired dubiously.

Flinz paused for a few moments, considering. “Nah, guess I’m not,” he said.

“Look, Starfleet, if you really think the True Way’s makin’ a superweapon somewhere in the quadrant and you wanna cut off the Jem’Hadar’s supply of Ketracel White in the region, there are really only two places with enough black market presence to do both: Defera and Ferenginar.” He shrugged indifferently. “It’s your call either way.”

“That’s it?” Losozola sneered. “That’s all you can offer us?”

Flinz shrugged again. “There’s a good chance what yer lookin’ for is on one of those worlds, maybe both, but we’re already going to Ferenginar, so…” He left the obvious suggestion hanging.

“I understand you have incidental business to conduct there,” Davir said. “Does it have anything to do with the mission? Can you use your contacts in the area to ascertain if there’s been any illegal trafficking of Ketracel White or anti-genetic research materials in the last few months?”

Flinz wore an unreadable expression. “I’ve my own mission, Starfleet,” he said coldly. “To me, yers is incidental.” Then he glanced at the hardened faces around the table and softened grudgingly. “But I did agree to help you complete yers, so yeah, I can try that.”

Davir nodded slightly and turned to the rest of the team. "Maintain course for Ferenginar," he ordered. "Dismissed."

Davir watched his officers file out to attend to their duties, but as Flinz and Rodan rose to join them, the admiral beckoned to them, indicating that he had something else in mind.

Flinz had a bored look, and Rodan was slightly curious.

"Wha' is it now, Starfleet?" the merchant asked, annoyed.

Davir decided to address the Cardassian first.

"Mr. Rodan, I want you to know that you're a guest aboard my ship. While I'm prepared to afford you every diplomatic courtesy, this is a tactical Starfleet vessel. While we're on this mission, I expect you to please observe our safety protocols and avoid going into any areas marked secured unless accompanied by security personnel. I understand you've respected that so far, so I expect that you will continue."

Rodan nodded. "I will, Admiral, as long as your other guest does so."

They both turned to Flinz.

The merchant looked slightly put upon, and his tone rose petulantly. "Wha', you gonna restrict me, too?"

"If protocol requires me to do so, yes," Davir said, "and for the same reason. As long as you don't wander into any restricted areas unattended, you'll be fine. If either of you breaks that protocol, I'll restrict you both to quarters under guard. Am I clear?"

Rodan nodded wordlessly.

"Fine way to show your gratitude for...," Flinz muttered, disgruntled.

"Am...I...clear?" Davir interrupted him sternly.

Flinz settled into a funk and his chair at the same time. "Yeah, sure, whatever you say, Starfleet," he answered sourly.

"I have a name, Mr. Parper," the admiral said softly.

*Doesn't mean I have to use it,* Flinz thought.

Davir waited a moment, but Flinz was unforthcoming. He rose to his feet, grunting slightly at the ache of his recent injury. "You're both dismissed now," he said, locking down the briefing room's computer console. Without waiting for them, he left the room and headed for his own quarters.

## STARDATE 56746. FERENGINAR

Two days later, the doctor's ministrations had completely healed Admiral Benmata's and Commander Losozola's injuries, and he'd cleared them both for duty. The Phantom was approaching the Ferenginar System, and the local controller had cleared them to beam down. Davir and Flinz were in the briefing room, talking about the mission's particulars.

"I've a bit of a reputation that precedes me, Admiral," Flinz said plaintively. "Not everybody appreciates it."

*You don't say,* Davir thought.

"How does that affect the mission?" he asked.

"Well, you see, a trader such as myself tends to keep a different code and company than the average Ferengi," Flinz clarified. "While a Ferengi follows the Rules of Acquisition when doing business, foreigners like me aren't exactly bound by such as their laws."

Davir nodded. "You're not a Ferengi, so they don't apply the Rules of Acquisition to your dealings."

"Not normally, no," Flinz agreed.

"I would assume that much," Davir said testily. "What are you getting at?"

"My mission, Admiral," Flinz replied, nonplussed.

"Your mission is to use your black market contacts to help us find out how the True Way is getting supplies of Ketracel White and anti-genetics," Davir reminded him.

"That's your mission, not mine," Flinz corrected, a sly hint of superiority in his tone.

Davir glowered at the little merchant. "Explain that, mister," he demanded.

Flinz contritely wrung one hand with the other. "Look, Starfleet..., I mean Admiral..., well, I did agree to help you, and I will," he began earnestly. "But you must understand, I have needs, too, desires, obligations and such. If I'd asked you for help instead, you'd have considered what you'd get out of it, too, right?"

Davir kept his frown on, now curious what else the Rat was trying to pull. "Probably," he offered noncommittally. "What do you want?"

"My life back," Flinz muttered sidelong under his breath, a wistful expression momentarily on his face. Then he remembered whom he was talking to. "Time, Admiral, I'm gonna to need time to gather the intelligence you asked for."

"That's a given, too, Parper," Davir replied. "But don't take very long," he warned. "If the True Way is actively weaponizing anti-genetic technology, they're desperate enough to try using it at the earliest opportunity. We can't stop them until we know more about it so we can be prepared."

"Yes, well, I see that, Starfleet," Flinz said.

"Two days?" Davir suggested.

"Yeah, that should be more than enough, I hope," Flinz agreed.

"Oh," he added, "could you do me a favor, Admiral?"

"What?" Davir sighed.

Flinz smiled as sweetly as he could, but it didn't come off very well. "Would you please keep Mr. Rodan on the ship while I'm about down there? The local authorities don't like Cardassians much, and I might have to do some sneakin' around to get what you want. The less eyes on me while I'm tryin', the easier it'll go."

"The Ferengi Alliance and the Cardassian Provisional Government are on peaceful terms at the moment," Davir answered. "The local controllers have approved our landing party, and I've already asked Rodan to join it because his presence on board was part of an agreement to get you off Starbase 621, and you're his responsibility, too. So if you really need privacy to do your job, find a way to get rid of him yourself."

*Cold-hearted bastard*, Flinz thought, his expression cooling quickly as he decided to change tactics.

"Admiral, please," he tried again. "I've already sent inquiries to specific contacts from yer computers, but none of 'em will come aboard this ship, so if I'm gonna have any chance at gettin' the answers you need, I'm gonna have to work on site in some secrecy. Havin' Ferengi approval doesn't matter – I'm gonna be talkin' to folks who won't show up at all if there's a uniform or another informant in the area. Even if you went down there in street clothes, they'd likely sniff you and Rodan out. So, you see, I need to do this alone, or I probably don't stand a chance." He continued to look hopefully at the admiral.

Davir took that under advisement. He saw the point to secrecy in this situation, but it irked him to give Flinz leeway in any argument because he simply didn't trust Flinz any more than Kluthor did. If Flinz's information played out well, then Davir might consider building on that foundation, but the Rat had yet to prove to be more than a groveling, greedy annoyance. It was only the mission's need of Flinz's connections that made him indispensable, so Davir relented.

"Very well, Mr. Parper. In the best interests of this mission, I'll ask Mr. Rodan to stay aboard the Phantom," he said.

Flinz practically beamed. "Thanks, Starfleet!" He scurried out the door, practically bouncing on his toes.

## IN THE FERENGI CAPITOL

Flinz had once felt right at home on Ferenginar. As a foreign merchant, he'd worked harder than most Ferengi to succeed. He'd earned a scathing reputation as a hard-nosed magnate dealing in exotic trappings, bought a house in the

city outskirts, acquired an Amarie-class ship, and hired a crew to man it so he could expand his business ventures into the surrounding sectors. He'd made a tidy profit brokering trade agreements throughout the quadrant for several years until one of his deals with the Breen had gone south in a bad way, and the illegalities had all but ruined him. He'd been in exile on Starbase 621 since, and for most of a year he'd dreamed of coming back to re-acquire his former stature. It hadn't worked out as well as he'd hoped: he was broke, his home had been sold to somebody else, and his ship had been impounded and was due to be scrapped soon. Now that he was helping Starfleet, though, he felt the wind changing, and, like a Ferengi, he just had to position himself to take advantage of the opportunity.

Flinz spent most of the next hour communicating privately with Ambassador Aegis on a secured channel. Using his willingness to help with the mission as leverage, he convinced Morlo to mediate with the Ferengi Commerce Authority and the Board of Liquidators to clear his name, unfreeze his assets, and release his vessel from an impound yard. It had cost Flinz all the latinum he owned to pay the financial penalties from his indiscretions of almost a year ago, but the ambassador had backed his reputation up with credits and many reassurances that Flinz wouldn't violate any more Rules of Acquisition – they didn't really apply to him anyway since he wasn't a Ferengi. As soon as the FCA got what they believed they'd been owed, they rescinded their prosecution and returned Flinz's ship.

After speaking with the ambassador and the FCA, Flinz reported to the Phantom's transporter room, carrying a small suitcase of Dominion design. Inside were several small denominations of gold-pressed latinum to support any bribery attempts Flinz might have to make to get what was needed. He was wearing an overcoat and rain slickers from the ship's stores on top of his normal clothes as Ferenginar had heavy, perpetual rainstorms.

Unbeknownst to Flinz, the overcoat had a viridium patch attached to its lining for traceability. Viridium was a radioactive isotope harmless to humanoids but which could be detected by the Phantom's sensors from up to two sectors away. Flinz had adamantly refused to wear any kind of communications device for fear that his consorts would detect it and disappear before he could talk to them. Davir was loathe to leave Flinz completely out of contact for any part of the mission, so the patch seemed like a reasonable tactic. He saw no reason to tell Flinz about it, though. Rodan, Kluthor's henchman, was less than happy with Davir's arrangement that he stay on the ship rather than accompany Flinz, but he agreed that the radioactive patch was a sensible precaution as long as Flinz wore the overcoat and the ship's transporter could lock onto that signal. He'd been assured that it could.

Flinz beamed down to the Sacred Market's main transporter pad. As soon as he materialized, he inhaled a breath of relief at finally being off the Phantom, and instantly regretted it. Whereas the ship's atmosphere always had a metallic tang in the background, he'd forgotten that the air on Ferenginar stank of muck and mildew, a side effect of the extremely wet climate. He gagged slightly and squinted around to get his bearings.

Ferenginar was the name of both the planet and its capitol. The city was dimly lit, the clouds allowing just enough natural light from the system's yellow-orange star to illuminate the buildings lucky enough to be caught in its ruddy glow. He could see flashes of lightning and hear distant thunder cracking sharply. Deep shadows fell between the buildings, and the capitol gave the general impression of a blacked-out Manhattan Island on a stormy evening. Most of the buildings were brightly lit inside. The architecture was towering and curvaceous, the walls shaped like tapers atop squat foundations, and most of the buildings were dressed in earthy tones. The doorways and windows were rounded. There were many buildings in and near the Sacred Market, but the largest one by far was behind him: the Tower of Commerce soared forty stories directly overhead, stretching towards the dim clouds. It housed the most important political and legal offices on the planet, including the chambers of the Grand Nagus, the ruler of the Ferengi Alliance. Tiers of bright windows marked its levels, and yellow lamps shone down its smooth sides except for the bright skylight at the very top, which was always aimed straight up, beaming into the perpetual overcast.

The marketplace itself was bustling with traffic, both afoot and vehicular. He saw many types of humanoids, mostly Ferengi but also alien species: humans, Trill, Bajorans, Cardassians, Deferi, even a few Klingons and Orions. Ferenginar was the commerce hub of the galaxy, the bankroll behind the Exchange, and interstellar trade was its bailiwick. Its influence was pervasive, felt in every corner of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants and, some said, even beyond. Most

economic dealings of interstellar scope were represented here, and some had been brokered by the most powerful Ferengi in the Alliance. The planet was a socio-economic powerhouse with 76 million opportunistic capitalists, each reputed to be greedier than the last.

The Tower of Commerce was in the center of the city. Flinz consulted a PADD and remembered his associates were planning to meet him in an empty warehouse near the edge of the city, about three clicks south. He flagged down a taxi, prepaid the fare, and arrived at the warehouse about 10 minutes ahead of schedule.

It was a new building that hadn't been occupied yet. It was in the same style as most of the other buildings around it, stone-like materials and colors, tall, sloping sides, and short windows. It was well lit despite being unoccupied, and its main floor was covered with placement markings for cargo lifts, runways, and elevators. Since it was empty, there were no stacks of containers to get in the way, and Flinz could see the entire length of the building.

*Open venue, nice, he thought. No cover if things turn nasty, though.*

He'd contacted one of his former business partners while traveling to Ferenginar, a female Orion with whom he'd done a lot of smuggling for over eight years before he'd been illegally imprisoned on Rura Penthe. The Orion Syndicate was well known as one of the most unscrupulous organizations in the galaxy, typically involved in illicit trading of goods, services, and slaves, but Flinz had always been on good terms with it up until his false imprisonment. The matron he'd contacted was a Syndicate magnate in good standing and a well-to-do leader of her clan, known for her ruthlessness, cunning, and intelligence.

He heard the Orions arrive before he saw them. Several imposing males turned an interior corner of the warehouse and spread out to cover the area in preparation for their matron's arrival. She was shortly behind them, once the area had been secured. The green-skinned woman wore an ornately bejeweled headdress in the livery of her clan, a white, formal dress slit to her waist that accentuated her voluptuousness and matching leather-strapped sandals. She had bright hazel eyes, and, unlike most Orion women, she didn't use a lot of facial makeup. Her natural scent was light and alluring.



*Flinz Parper negotiates with Matron Adira L'alía (Star Trek Online)*

Flinz had never seen a lovelier creature in his life – nor a more formidable one.

She sauntered up to him and smiled down at the diminutive man, holding him captive with her gaze.

“Parper, dear,” she said sweetly, her dulcet voice slightly reserved. “It’s been too long.”

She noticed the suitcase he was carrying, and her tone became curious. “What’s that?”

Flinz gripped the case’s handle tighter. “Your Highness,” he muttered, bending his neck slightly in deference. She wasn’t an ordinary woman – she was a clan leader, the equivalent of a queen. “Just what I might need, nothin’ more.”

She clicked her tongue once and pouted, regarding him with fondness. “Really, Flinz, after everything we’ve been through, I think you’ve earned the privilege of addressing me by my name.”

He swallowed shallowly. “Yes, Lady L’alía.”

She chuckled at that. “Try Adira, sweetie.”

*Adira, maybe. Sweetie, never, he thought ruefully. “As you wish, Adira.”*

"That's better," she replied, satisfied.

She turned to one of the Orions. "We wish to sit down."

Instantly, two of them unpacked a pair of folding chairs and placed cushions on them for her and Flinz.

As before, Flinz deferred to her rank and waited for her to sit first, then he sat down.

Once she was comfortable, she began the meeting directly. "You need information."

"Yes, Adira," Flinz said. "Well, I need it for a business venture with a fr...associate."

"About the True Way and the Jem'Hadar," she clarified. "That's what your message implied."

"Yes," Flinz confirmed. "My associate needs to understand their weapons trafficking enterprises."

Adira was pensive for several moments. *What's he gotten himself into now?* she wondered.

"Why?" she finally asked.

Now Flinz hesitated. He'd anticipated that question, but he wanted to give her the impression that he was being cautious about that potentially dangerous subject. Treading lightly around a powerful and perceptive woman, ally or not, was always a good idea.

"My business partner doesn't want to give you the details. What I can tell you is that he...that is, we're very interested in the manner in which the True Way is recently operating in the Alpha Quadrant, especially regarding any heavy weapons they and the Jem'Hadar may be moving, testing, hoarding. You know..." He shrugged his thin shoulders as nonchalantly as possible.

Adira saw right through him. For most of a decade, she'd dealt with Flinz on a number of schemes related to her clan's operations in both the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. Those dealings were mainly in the areas of illicit goods, slaves, and certain questionable services between the Ferengi, the Orions, and a few other factions. He'd proven himself a somewhat successful smuggler and negotiator, and he'd endeared himself into her good graces because she valued his advice and loyalty. As with all her closest associates, she'd gotten to understand him very well over time, and she could tell when he was hiding something important.

*Nothing like a good mystery,* she thought. *I just hope he's prepared, or his business partner is.*

She leaned forward. "If I tell you what I know about them, what do I get out of it?" she asked.

Flinz genuinely smiled. *Always thinkin' of herself. Gawd, I love that.* He couldn't help glancing nervously down at her bodice, but he realized that she did indeed know something, so he instantly looked back up, and began negotiating in earnest.

"I have latinum," he offered.

Boredom replaced Adira's subtle smile. "So do I," she answered bluntly. "Try harder."

Flinz hesitated uncertainly. Money was always the best kind of bribe, the lifeblood of any business relationship, but there were other forms of currency. The Ferengi knew as much – so did Queen Adira.

*She has exotic taste,* he reminded himself. *I'm rich again, but what can I offer her?*

"What'd you have in mind?" he asked, openly curious.

Adira sighed wistfully and rocked back, looking beyond him for a long moment, then she mentally returned to the present. Reaching forward, she cupped Flinz's cheek in her warm palm and smiled gently.

"You, of course."

*What?*

Flinz tried to drop his jaw, but Adira still had it in her hand. Instead, he blinked several times as shock, confusion, and wonder crossed his mousy face in quick succession. He'd known Adira for 10 years, since long before she'd risen to rule her clan. She had always been eccentric, even for an Orion woman, and she was self-driven towards the betterment of her clan's stature since that benefited her own, but though she'd had several consorts over the years, she'd never kept a husband. Flinz didn't know why. He'd kept his love for her to himself all that time, thinking he had no way of impressing her. Now, just for a moment, he actually thought he had a chance. Without thinking, he put his hand over hers, turned his head, and kissed her palm, rapture in his dark eyes.

Adira clicked her tongue again. "Gods, no," she muttered, letting him go and sitting quickly back. She looked away with a faint touch of mild disgust. "Never like that, Parper," she said drolly.

She looked directly at him and clarified. "I want you to work for me again, sweetie."

Flinz's head spun in place. "What?"

She sighed again, this time in exasperation. "You know I don't like repeating myself."

Flinz still hadn't grasped how the conversation had taken this unexpected turn. "But why?"

Adira's sultry voice resumed its wistful tone. "You were the best negotiator I ever had in my employ, Flinz. You understand us; Klingons, Gorn, and humans, too. You're loyal, dedicated to your craft, and you handled some very delicate matters during my ascension. I have plenty of traders and smugglers, Flinz. What I don't have is a good diplomat with his finger on the pulse of Syndicate affairs. I want you to be my vizier."

"That's your price?" he asked incredulously.

"That's such a mundane term, dear," she said. "It's an employment offer."

Flinz thought frantically. His overall plan to procure investigative leads for the admiral and somehow get away from Kluthor and his henchmen had not included potential employment by an Orion matron, but he immediately realized the potential advantages. Adira was a queen, and being consular to Orion royalty was a coveted position in her culture. Orions were vassals to the Klingon Empire, but royal families were often afforded independent status. As vizier, he would have the best protection she could provide, all but eliminating the threat of Kluthor. In her employ, his lifestyle would be greatly enhanced. He would spend most of his time at the luxurious royal court, but he would also travel with her wherever she needed to be. He'd seen as much when he was smuggling goods and slaves for her about a decade ago, but he hadn't experienced those privileges himself. Adira had used his services often enough to make it a lucrative business for him, and now she was offering to elevate him into her inner court. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

He was sorely tempted, but something kept nagging at him. He finally realized that he was uncomfortable with the idea of cutting his ties with Earth and his fellow humans. Orions had a very different culture, matristic and bent on slavery as a primary socioeconomic norm, which was something Earth and many other Federation worlds had long since left behind. It wasn't that Flinz was morally conflicted about slavery – he just didn't want to risk jeopardizing future business ventures with Federation clients who might look unfavorably on an Orion courtier. It didn't take him long to get over that. There was only one condition left to negotiate.

"That's impossible to refuse," he said sheepishly, "and you know it."

Adira smiled confidently.

"But what about my ship?" he asked.

Adira's smile faltered. "What ship?"

Now it was Flinz's turn to exercise an upper hand. "Oh, don't give me that, Adira. I know you've had tabs on me ever since I contacted you. The Federation was good enough to get me my transport back, but it's been a year since I had the freedom to use her, and I need a crew."

"Why would you want that trash compactor back?" Adira asked. "I'll give you diplomatic quarters on my flagship. If you need separate transportation, I'll assign you the same quarters on any capital ship in my fleet. And I've a sizeable navy, by the way."

"I don't doubt that, Adira," Flinz countered, "but I'm a proud man in my own right, and I'm used to commanding my own ship."

Adira sighed resignedly. "Fine. I'll assign a crew to your ship. They're my slaves, but I'll tell them to obey you. Anything else?"

"Yes," Flinz replied, returning to the task at hand. "What do you know about how the True Way and the Jem'Hadar are handling weapons trafficking in the Alpha Quadrant?"

Adira smiled wickedly. "Not so fast, dear. What about my offer?"

Flinz looked nonplussed. "I thought I told you I accepted it?"

“Let’s review,” she replied coyly. “You want information about a very dangerous cartel. I want you to counsel me and offered you a dream job. That would have been a fair exchange for what I know, but now you’re bargaining for my slaves to man your own ship, so I’m going to need more.” She glanced down at his hands. “What’s in the case?”

Flinz saw her point. “Latinum.”

Adira was pensive. “How much?”

“Enough to buy several small ships,” Flinz replied cautiously, suspecting where this was going.

Adira got serious. “You may own your ship again, Parper, but her crew are still my slaves. You’re essentially leasing them from me.” She arched up. “I want 10% of your private earnings as long as you’re using even one of them.” She pointed at the case. “And I’ll take half of that as a security deposit.”

Flinz soured instantly. The latinum in the case was for securing the admiral’s information, so that didn’t bother him, but he detested the idea of giving up a portion of his future capital to seal this deal for the Federation. He really preferred to keep his earnings to himself. *But, he reasoned, I would still need to hire my own crew to run my ship, and, one way or another, they’d expect payment.* The practical question was whether the queen’s offer was less expensive in the long run than funding a crew himself. He did some quick figuring.

“5% and only from my off-world business ventures as that’s the only time I’d need your slaves as crew,” he countered. “You can keep the case.”

Adira looked shrewdly down at him for a few seconds. *Not too bad, she thought. That’s my Parper.*

“Done,” she agreed.

Flinz was delighted with the prospect of working with Adira and the Orions again and privately gratified that she’d been willing to reduce the price for her slaves’ services. *I still got it.*

“Now, about the information I asked you for,” he said.

Satisfied, Adira leaned forward, withdrew an isolinear data chip from her bodice, and handed it to Flinz. “What you need is on there. I’ve made sure it can’t be traced back to me, no matter what you or your associate plan to do with it.”

Flinz reached forward eagerly.

Adira gave it to him, but then she clasped his outstretched hand between hers in earnest.

“Parper, be very careful. These people, they’re not just trafficking weapons. They’re also acquiring some highly illegal genetic technology, and I fear they’re planning something dreadful with it. I can barely conceive of what, but the quantities they’ve trafficked so far are staggering, enough to do something on a global scale. People like that are capable of anything and willing to go to any extent to protect their interests, no matter how maniacal. I want you to be safe, so please don’t get too close to them, and stay out of their way, whatever else you do. Promise me.”

The desperation in her voice resonated within him. Adira was a powerful leader and a strong woman. She didn’t frighten easily, but he could see she was scared for him. That gave him pause.

He wasn’t privy to the admiral’s strategy briefings held amongst the Phantom’s bridge crew, but he understood that the mission involved discovering and returning evidence of the True Way’s supply chain of weapons. As for what they were planning to do with them, he had just suspected that they would continue the fight to restore the Cardassian Empire. He didn’t know anything about illegal genetics or how the True Way would threaten anybody with that.

*Well, at least I’ve someone watchin’ my back, and she wants me to come back safe, so that’s somethin’*, he thought.

He swallowed once. “I’ll try, love” he said gently and put the chip in an inner pocket.

Adira’s face pinched up slightly in obvious doubt. She let him go and rose elegantly to her feet. “Do that, Flinz.”

She turned to her guards. “We’re done here.”

The men broke down the chairs as Adira touched a communicator embedded in one of her bracelets. “This is Matron Adira. Energize.”

In a few seconds, the shimmer of a transporter field surrounded her and the other Orions. Her eyes never left Flinz’s as the group disappeared in patterned clouds of soft light and sound.

Flinz stood there for several seconds, staring at the place where Adira has been, wondering what would happen after he gave her information to the admiral. *Probably plannin' to stick his nose in somethin' stupid*, he thought ruefully. *Like she said, as long as it doesn't involve me.*

*Best get it over with, I s'ppose.*

With that, he began making his way back to the transporter pad underneath the Tower of Commerce to return to the Phantom.

## CHAPTER 4: KELVANI I

### STARDATE 56751, FOLLOW THE LEAD

Matron L'alia's information pointed to a Deferi outpost on Kelvani I as a trading hub for the True Way and the Jem'Hadar, among others. Several intelligence reports acquired from deep space communications arrays by the Phantom's sensors corroborated her evidence that they were moving large amounts of classified supplies and equipment through there. The departure from Ferenginar had been uneventful, and the U.S.S. Phantom was at warp on its way to the Raveh Sector of the Alpha Quadrant and the Kelvani System.

Now on approach to Kelvani I, Admiral Davir Benmata was on the bridge with his first officer, Commander Vaalolul, seated to his right. Davir's flag was normally aboard the U.S.S. Tandrilüs, an Akira-class vessel, and Commander Mirra served as his first officer on that ship, but Vaalolul's experience with Phantom-class escorts far outweighed Mirra's, so she was a more appropriate first officer for the Phantom. She was a competent tactical officer, and she'd agreed to join Task Force Theta as the Phantom's commanding officer when Davir was indisposed or not aboard.



*Kelvani I (Alpha Quadrant, Raveh Sector) (Star Trek Online, C. Fernandez)*

Looking through the forward viewer, they observed Kelvani I in the near distance. It had been discovered only recently by the Deferi in the course of exploring the nearby Kelvani belt, an asteroid field farther out in the system which served as a base of operations for several mining enterprises. Kelvani I was an M-class world slightly smaller than Earth but with a similar biosphere. It had a large southern polar ice cap and a smaller northern one. Between them, large green and brown landmasses crisscrossed its surface, most of which was covered with blue oceans and light clouds. Reports were that avian, land bound, and aquatic fauna were abundant, and the planet was quite idyllic in its temperate zones. The only Deferi outpost was at the tip of a large peninsula on one of the equatorial continents.

The ship's sensors had detected subspace transmissions between the Deferi base and several vessels already in orbit. Most of it was normal civilian comm traffic, but some of them were encrypted on waveforms typically used by the Cardassians, the Jem'Hadar, and the Breen. At least one of the orbiting vessels was a warship, and there probably were others operating in the area. The Phantom's primary mission was surveillance, and it appeared that Queen Adira's information about Kelvani I supporting True Way activity was correct. Davir didn't want to risk tipping off the True Way to the incoming presence of a Starfleet vessel.

"Keep us off their sensors, Commander Vaalolul," he ordered.

"Aye, Sir," she replied, turning to the bridge stations.

"Silent running, Nerayerku. No unnecessary transmissions. Passive sensors only.

"Mirra, make orbit above one of the magnetic poles. That should confuse any active scanners.

"Sgiza, activate the cloak."

The other bridge officers wordlessly complied.

Romulans and Klingons used cloaks on all their warbirds because they were an extreme tactical advantage. The Phantom had a hybrid cloak based on both Romulan and Klingon designs. As it came online, the ship shimmered as though it were made of clear water, then it faded from view. There wasn't even a background distortion left in its wake.

The Phantom moved into geosynchronous orbit below the planet's southern pole, taking advantage of its natural magnetic field to additionally hide from active sensor sweeps by any passersby.

*Time to get down there, Davir thought.*

“Away team to the Transporter Room,” he ordered over the ship’s internal comm. “Misters Parper and Rodan, that means you, too.

“Commander Valoluul, you have the con.”

He got up so she could have his seat, and Pid’pen, Umuzoi, Mirra, and Losozola followed him to the turbolift at the back of the bridge as auxiliary staff took their stations.

Flinz and Rodan were waiting in the Transporter Room when the away team arrived. Flinz was dressed in civilian clothing, including the coat with the viridian patch (still unbeknownst to him) on it, and he had a type II phaser. Rodan had Cardassian armor and was carrying a blaster rifle apparently of his own make. The Phantom’s officers were wearing tactical modifications on their uniforms. All of them were carrying customized assault rifles, and Umuzoi had her medkit, just in case.

“The settlement is on the edge of one of the southern continents,” the transporter chief said. “Passive scans indicate that most of the True Way’s comm traffic is coming from there, so I’ll set you down next to the main quad.”

The away team stepped onto the transporter platform, occupying all seven pads.

“Energize,” Davir said.

The chief touched a few more controls, then slid his fingertips across the energizers to engage them. Shimmering confinement beams enveloped the away team members with an audible swish and dissolved their bodies into energetic particles that were absorbed by the pads until they disappeared.

The away team rematerialized on the surface of Kelvani I behind a grove of trees. It was mid-morning and the air was warm, but the wind was strong enough to keep things cool. The hilly landscape was covered with acres of Earth-like flora that provided plenty of shade. The forest made it hard to see any significant distance, but there were sunnier areas indicating open meadows nearby. Light birdsong trilled in the air above. Overall, it was an idyllic scene, and Davir made a mental note to remember it in case of future shore leave for his crew.

*But not while the True Way’s in the area, he thought.*

“It’s a recon mission, people. No open transmissions. Keep your weapons on stun, and stow them until you need them,” he advised. “There are those here who’d likely not appreciate us starting a firefight in their hometown.”

He turned to Mirra. “Drill down on the True Way’s transmissions, and take us in.”

Mirra opened her tricorder, and took a few seconds to review the readings, then she started walking. “This way.”

Below the tree line, an unpaved road led up to a large gate in the stone walls of a small town atop a short, grassy knoll. Through the gateway, the crew saw wide sidewalks going between a myriad of ornate buildings and small parks. The top of a large spire appeared above the wall on the west side of the town, and that building seemed quite crowded. Many people (mostly Deferi but other species, too) were moving about inside the city and through the gate.

The away team made its way up the hill and through the entrance without challenge, and Mirra, still following her tricorder, turned left, away from the western spire, heading instead towards a line of shops underneath the eastern wall. Here, they were met with a diversity of stores and marketers, mostly Ferengi, yelling at passersby about the unique quality of their wares and lower-than-the-next-store’s prices. Everything from food and clothes to weapons and military supplies was on display. Davir was sure that if he asked someone the right question, he’d be invited to a back room somewhere to see the rarer stock that wasn’t open for public viewing at these prices. He turned to Mirra quizzically, an unspoken question on his face.

She glanced up. “Hard to tell, Sir,” she replied. “The last True Way signal I saw came from down there.” She pointed deeper into the marketplace. “But it’s gone now, and there are no others.”

She put her tricorder away, glanced at Parper, then returned to the admiral. “It would help if we knew specifically what to look for.”

“Biogenic signatures, for one,” Umuzoi answered for him. “Radioactive isotopes in bandwidths that indicate they’re part of the anti-genetic technology we’re looking for.”

“That,” Davir agreed, “or look for anybody who might be dealing in weapons-grade genetic supplies.” He thought twice about that for a moment, then continued. “Strike that – no one’s likely going to admit to handling that kind of product. Just look around for Cardassians. There can’t be that many in this sector, never mind here.”

Mirra and Umuzoi took out their tricorders again and started scanning for specific genetic isotopes while Davir turned to Parper.

“Do you have anything useful to add?” he asked.

“I’m not a scientist, Starfleet,” Flinz snorted. “Far as I’m concerned, this is yer show.”

Davir frowned at his recalcitrance.

Flinz rolled his beady eyes and continued, “I’ll help you look for Cardies, Admiral, but I don’t know how to find yer anti-whatevers.” He waved dismissively.

Davir decided to leave little enough alone, and turned to the only Cardassian present. “Mr. Rodan, what are your thoughts?”

“What does that matter, Admiral?” Rodan inquired, a bit surprised.

“The True Way is a movement to restore the former Cardassian style of government to power,” Davir clarified. “You are one. I presume you have an opinion about it, and you may know something about how to find other Cardassians in a place like this.”

The mercenary thought for several seconds. “Admiral,” he began, “despite my heritage, I’m not swayed by the politics of my people unless it affects any contracts I choose to undertake. In this case, I work for Kluthor, not the True Way. As far as I’m concerned, helping the Federation put an end to their foray into planet-killing genetic weaponry has nothing to do with my background or mission. I’m just here to keep the Rat in sight and out of harm’s way.”

He noticed Flinz rolling his eyes at the use of the moniker, but that didn’t faze Rodan.

“I, too, will help you find them, if I can,” he offered.

Then he turned to Commander Mirra. “May I borrow that?” he asked, indicating her tricorder.

Wordlessly, she handed him the device, curious to see what he could do with it.

Rodan began changing the parameters of the search she’d been running. “You’re just looking in normal space bandwidths,” he said. “Cardassians often use a specific set of subspace frequencies for covert ground operations, and they rotate them at irregular intervals to prevent spying like this.” He handed it back and pointed at the display. “Follow that subspace signal,” he advised. “If it disappears, you’ll have to reset your parameters several times to find it again.”

“I thought everyone knew that,” Flinz muttered under his breath, momentarily forgetting that Mirra was Andorian. Her antennae twitched and she gave him a dark look, but said nothing.

Then she turned brightly to Rodan. “Nerayerku would be proud,” she said gratefully.

“Are you picking up any indication of the correct isotopes, Umuzoi?” Davir asked.

“No, Sir,” she replied, “but they’d probably be shielded both for protection and for secrecy.”

*That makes sense*, Davir conceded, nodding.

He turned to Mirra. “Let’s go, Commander,” he ordered.

The group turned on her lead as Mirra walked ahead, tracking the subspace signal as it led them deeper into the marketplace. No one saw any other Cardassians, though.

Unbeknownst to the away team, the True Way had allies in the town. Atop the nearby wall, a pair of Breen sentries watched the hubbub and bustle below them. Spotting five Federation officers in assault gear wasn’t difficult, and the reason for the Federation’s presence wasn’t hard to deduce either, given what the True Way was doing there. One of them raised a hand to activate a communications device on his wrist.

“I think we have a problem,” he said in his own language, going on to warn of the presence of Federation soldiers.

In a nearby warehouse, a Cardassian captain named Talek heard the message and raised an eyebrow. He was sitting in an interior office with a large bay window that overlooked the warehouse floor. It was an underground building with a huge interior space littered with thousands of stacked crates and a shuttle. From his desk, he switched on a remote

camera feed coming from the market and frowned slightly as he caught sight of the away team making its way slowly towards the warehouse where he and his cohorts were. He opened the P.A. system from his desk.

“This is Gul Talek,” he ordered. “Alert stations. First Tel’ukan, secure the shuttle.”

As his voice echoed across the warehouse, armed True Way henchmen hurried about the floor space, some of them coming from adjacent rooms and others from the shuttle. All of them were of various species from the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants, mostly Cardassian and Jem’Hadar. Squads of them took up stations near the several doorways, and two squads guarded the shuttle in the middle of the building.

Outside, the away team approached the entrance to the True Way’s underground warehouse, following the intermittent signals on Mirra’s tricorder, unaware that they were being watched and expected. They came around the corner of a store front, and saw the warehouse’s main entrance, a large doorway set into a tower that was part of the city wall. There was no one outside the doorway – it looked abandoned.

Davir raised a hand, bringing the group to a halt a short distance away.

He turned to Mirra. “In there?”

She nodded once.

“Life signs?” he inquired further.

“All over the place, Admiral,” she answered.

“There are several just behind the door and more a little beyond it and further down. There are even more life signs underground, too.” She looked up from her tricorder. “I’m picking up weapons grade energy signatures along with several transporter inhibitors. Looks like they’re expecting company, Admiral.”

*We’ve been spotted*, Davir thought, disappointed. He’d hoped to do this part of the mission without incident, but it looked like it wasn’t going to be as easy as that. *How do we get in there without a fight?* he wondered.

He felt someone touch his right shoulder and turned to see Rodan at his side.

“A word, Admiral, if I may,” the Cardassian said.

He motioned to the group, and they followed him back into the shadow of a nearby alcove.

“I anticipate your dilemma, Admiral,” Rodan said.

“We need to get inside,” Davir said. “I’m sure the evidence we’re looking for is in there, but it seems the True Way’s expecting a frontal assault.”

“Indeed, Admiral,” Rodan agreed. “You’re never going to find what you need by fighting your way through a crowd. Such tactics always leave collateral damage, and you could inadvertently destroy the evidence you seek, or they will.

“May I offer a more subtle alternative?”

Curious, Davir nodded.

“Send me,” Rodan said. “They’re expecting humans, not likely Cardassians. I’ll pretend I’m a True Way operative, sneak in, and use my knowledge of Cardssian ciphers to weaken their defenses. I may even be able to get what you need for you.”

“But how would you escape if you’re discovered?” Losozola asked.

Rodan paused thoughtfully. “Obviously, in that event, you’d have to rescue me.”

Davir frowned. As the commanding officer, putting his crew in harm’s way was ultimately his responsibility. Since the away team included civilians, their safety was his responsibility, too. He disliked the idea of intentionally endangering anybody, but that risk came with missions like this. Rodan was armed, armored, and apparently willing to help. He



*An abandoned(?) warehouse (Kelvani I, Raveh Sector) (Star Trek Online)*

already looked like a True Way mercenary, and his idea was more workable than anything Davir could think of, certainly better than an all-out charge into unfamiliar territory against reinforced positions.

He looked up at Rodan. "First, get to a power distribution node. See if you can disable their power grid to take out those inhibitors. Then we can beam in reinforcements to help you out of there while we use the distraction to search for evidence."

Rodan nodded in agreement. "I'll try, Admiral."

Something else occurred to Davir, and he turned to Flinz. "Let me have your coat, Mr. Parper."

"Why?" Flinz asked, working it off his shoulders and handing it to the admiral.

Wordlessly, Davir removed the viridian patch from the coat's liner and reattached it inside the back of Rodan's torso armor, then he handed the coat back to Flinz.

The Rat deduced that they'd been using his clothing to track his whereabouts, but before he could object to that idea, the admiral continued to Rodan.

"I can't give you a Federation comm badge – they'd detect that. Set your Cardassian communicator to our frequency. Nerayerku will keep a sensor lock on the tracker I just gave you."

He extended his hand. "Good luck, Mr. Rodan."

The Cardassian shouldered his blaster rifle and shook the admiral's hand in farewell. "I'll be quick."

Rodan headed back towards the warehouse entrance. As he went, he anticipated the plan working out favorably.

*I'll tell them I'm from another True Way facility. They'll not detect anything unusual on me, so they'll let me pass. The power systems will likely be controlled from a central station, probably an office, which will be protected. I'll have better success trying to access it from an auxiliary station instead. Once the Phantom detects that the transporter inhibitor field is gone, they'll do the rest.*

His confidence high, Rodan jogged up to the doorway of the warehouse. The door slid open with a whoosh just as he reached it, and four True Way mercenaries dressed in various forms of armor stepped out to confront him.

"Stop right there," one of them said. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Rodan," he answered. "I've been transferred here recently from Cardassia Prime. I need to check in."

The True Way mercenary took out a tricorder and scanned Rodan briefly, noting his rifle but nothing else that was dangerous or suspicious. Fortunately, the viridian patch didn't put out a signature the average person would normally look for, and he missed it.

"I'll have to verify that," he said.

Rodan thought fast. "When I said 'recently,' I meant today, but the True Way on Cardassia are...inefficient. That's what happens when you're hard pressed by the Detapa Council. I doubt they've updated anybody out this far so soon, so your superiors probably don't yet know to expect me."

The mercenary frowned. "Wait there," he said.

He touched a communicator at his wrist. "Front entrance to Gul Talek. Come in, please."

Around the corner, Mirra used the Phantom's cipher software on her tricorder to intercept the guard's transmission. "Admiral, looks like they're trying to verify Rodan's credentials with a Gul Talek." She showed Davir a picture of the named True Way officer; he'd been in the upper echelon of the Cardassian military before he'd defected to the True Way, and his picture and voice were in Starfleet's records.

"Jam that True Way frequency now," Davir ordered quickly. "Use your tricorder to synthesize his voice and respond."

Mirra tapped at her tricorder for several seconds, setting up the software correctly, then she addressed the guard's message, the universal translator mimicking the True Way officer's voice in place of hers.

"This is Talek."

A burst of static came over the guard's communicator as she jammed the frequency, forcing the device to automatically switch to an alternate frequency and pick up her tricorder's transmission using the same cipher.

“We’ve a new recruit from Cardassia at the front entrance trying to check in. Says his name’s Rodan,” the guard said.

“Let me see...,” Mirra replied. She waited several seconds as though searching for something. “Yes, it’s here,” she finally answered. “Glinn Rodan from Cardassia is expected.”

Listening to the conversation while waiting at the warehouse entrance, Rodan suspected what must’ve happened and kept a straight face.

“Thanks,” the guard replied and closed the channel.

He turned to Rodan. “Do you need a guide?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” Rodan answered smugly.

The guard nodded absently and stepped aside. “Go on so we can lock this entrance down again.”

Wordlessly, Rodan quickly went inside.

A short interior corridor led to a long ramp that ended on the main floor of a huge, brightly lit cargo hold with an enclosed office on a dais to the right. Several doorways along the walls led to auxiliary rooms. Stacks of crates several containers high littered the entire area except for a recessed bay in the center of the hall. That was the only area that was relatively open. A Deferi shuttle sat on the landing pad below a large door embedded in the roof for launch. True Way mercenaries could be seen in the shuttle bay, between the crates, and in the side doorways.

Normally, a new arrival would check in personally with a facility’s commanding officer, but Rodan’s mission was to somehow drop the True Way’s transporter inhibitors, then do whatever he could to help the away team discover the evidence they needed and escape. As such, he had no intention of crossing Gul Talek’s path.



*The True Way warehouse’s office (Star Trek Online)*

*He’s probably in there*, Rodan thought, looking at the office. He steered left and walked nonchalantly away from it, towards one of the side doors. *I need to find a terminal with mainframe access*, he thought, the beginning of a plan percolating in his mind. *Subterfuge is key*.

As a Cardassian, he blended in naturally with most of the True Way mercenaries in the building, and he was already dressed the part. The guards assumed he’d already been approved to be there because Mirra’s trickery with universal translators was still undiscovered. They looked up at him as he approached, but they didn’t raise their weapons or challenge him. He simply walked right past several of them and entered a short corridor that led further into the bowels of the building, emerging into a large storeroom. Just like the hangar, it was full of storage canisters haphazardly stacked several high with irregular gaps between the stacks. It was hard to see any distance at floor level, and most of the gaps were barely wide enough for a person to squeeze through. There was a wider path that zig zagged through the stacks towards a support column in the middle of the room, and Rodan heard voices coming from that direction.

*If there’s an auxiliary console in here, it might be over there*, Rodan thought, *or it might be against a wall*.

Hoping for the latter, he made his way slowly between the stacks, angling away from the middle of the room and trying not to make any noise. A Deferi-style console nestled under an alcove appeared against the wall ahead, and he wriggled between a pair of containers to get to it. The interface was configured in the Cardassian language. It was monitoring general operations within the warehouse proper, so Rodan started poking around. He could see the main hangar had storerooms on each side. There was an active transporter inhibitor in each one, including the room he was in, and their interference overlapped the hangar in the middle of the building. They weren’t directly accessible from the console, but the building’s energy grid was, and they were drawing power from it.

*I'll overload the grid,* he thought.

First, he deleted the power grid's automatic safety overrides. Then he programmed a feedback loop into the output regulators and slaved it to the communicator on his wrist so that he could trigger it remotely. Rather than continue to power the devices in the building, the warehouse's generator would feed its own power back to itself and, given the amount of energy involved and the now-nonexistent safety protocols, overload in seconds.

*The shock wave should blow up everything hooked up to it,* he thought.

Still working the console to cover his virtual tracks, he then used his communicator to open an unencrypted channel to the Phantom. "This is Rodan. I'm about to disable the energy grid of the building I'm in. Tell your troops to wear low-light gear. It's going to be very dark in here."

Unfortunately, while he'd been using the terminal, the True Way mercenaries had routinely switched their comm network to a new frequency, incidentally the same one Rodan was using – everyone in the building heard him.

Aboard the Phantom, Nerayerku hissed between her teeth. She immediately squelched everything on that frequency to disrupt local True Way communications, then she spun her chair.

"Captain," she called, referring to acting captain Vaalolul, "they know he's in there!"

"Assault teams, stand by," Vaalolul said. "Transporter Room, is that interference field still up?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the transporter chief replied. "We've still got a lock, thanks to that viridian patch, but we can't beam anything until that field clears up."

Frustrated, Vaalolul almost slapped the console on her armchair, then she remembered her Vulcan training. "Energize the instant it drops," she said in a controlled voice. "Pick him up, then immediately start deploying assault teams to assist the admiral."

Inside the warehouse, Gul Talek's voice sounded over the public address system. "Attention! Intruder alert! Protect the shuttle."

Hunched over the auxiliary console, Rodan looked up, worried. *Not much time,* he thought. *I might be able to access the log entries.* Focused on the computer again, he started an automatic search for anything the admiral might find interesting.

Unheard, an alien mercenary spotted him and approached, curious.

"What are you doing there?" he challenged. The mercenary was dressed in light armor like Rodan, and he was carrying a blaster pistol, which he hadn't drawn.

Still working, Rodan didn't turn around. *I need time to finish searching,* he said to himself, thinking fast.

"Checking the automatic surveillance system for signs of the intruder," he replied quietly. He figured that was close enough to the truth to sound convincing. Unfortunately, Rodan had no protection against psionic attacks, and he didn't know the mercenary was a Lethean.

Letheans were psionic aliens from the Beta Quadrant. As vassals of the Klingon Empire, they often served the Klingon Defense Force as hired hands, similar to the Gorn. They were good at stealth, surveillance, and interrogation, using their telepathy to steal information from the vulnerable minds of others. In most cases, that action proved fatal to the victim.

Suspicious, the Lethean glanced over Rodan's shoulder at the interface, and noticed that the Cardassian wasn't looking at security footage – he was searching personnel logs for "anti-genetic\*." His suspicion confirmed, he decided to literally take matters into his own hands. He stepped up behind Rodan and raised his hands to either side of the Cardassian's head, palms facing inwards, preparing to unleash a lethal psionic attack on contact.

Rodan heard his footsteps approach. Still trying to maintain the illusion of a fellow True Way operative, he finally turned to face his discoverer, the beginning of a benign smile on his face. He paled when he immediately recognized it was a Lethean even though he knew the species by reputation only.

The Lethean's dark red eyes almost glowed with hungry anticipation, and his bony brow, similar to a Klingon's or a Nausicaan's, was furrowed in anger. His hands sparked brightly as the electrical energy of an impending psionic attack

discharged between his long fingers. Having momentarily lost the element of surprise, he lunged forward, trying to grip the Cardassian's head.

"I FOUND HIM!" he shouted, getting the attention of several other mercenaries in the middle of the room.

Rodan stumbled backwards as the Lethean came forward, but there was little room to maneuver between the stacks of containers and the computer console. He caught the Lethean's wrists with his hands as he bumped against the terminal behind him, and both men fell to the floor, struggling for several seconds. He heard the other mercenaries trying to find their way around the surrounding containers. Desperate to get away, he let the Lethean go, got to his feet, and drew the Klingon dagger he always kept with him. As the Lethean charged again, he drove it up and through his assailant's exposed throat, mortally wounding him.

The Lethean's momentum carried him into the Cardassian anyway, and he landed on top of Rodan, his dark blood spurting across Rodan's face and chest. As the Lethean died, his hands were still alit with psionic energy, and one of them touched Rodan's face. Instantly, the alien's attack discharged, lightning striking across Rodan's entire body.

Rodan went rigid as his mind smothered underneath the oppressive black blanket of the dying Lethean's mental power. He could barely think, breathe, or move; all he felt was terror..., and it wasn't his. It was coming from the Lethean. He realized he was sensing the alien's fear of death being communicated through the psionic attack. It didn't make any difference to the Cardassian at all – Rodan had long since accepted the risk of being a soldier for hire. It was hard to act past the Lethean's fear, but as the rest of the mercenaries finally found Rodan lying on the floor beneath their dead comrade, he remembered the computer link in his wrist communicator. With the last of his waning strength of will, he touched the control that activated his secret program.

Then he died.

In a room below the hangar bay, the reactor that supplied power to the building started glowing in an abnormal way. The True Way soldiers who were guarding it weren't watching the reactor because they were expecting a frontal attack by enemy troops from without, not a computer attack from within. There were no alarms because Rodan had deleted the safety protocols. It wasn't until one of the soldiers noticed that the ambient light in the room was increasing that he turned around to see what was happening. By the time he opened a comm channel to report the problem, it was already too late. The reactor flashed, sending a massive lightning storm across the room and throughout the rest of the warehouse. As intended, the discharge went through every electrical device in the building and overloaded them all, including the lights, computers, automated defenses, and the transporter inhibitors. The whole network collapsed.

In the office, Gul Talek found himself unable to receive reports from or issue orders to his True Way troops via communicator. Instead, the guards in the room became his couriers.

The Phantom's transporter chief immediately started sending shock troops into the warehouse interior in places where they could stage themselves.

"Admiral," Nerayerku said from the bridge, "the inhibitors are down, and our troops are on the ground. Begin your assault."

Davir turned confidently to the rest of the away team. "Let go!" Then he turned to Flinz. "Stay close to Mirra and Losozola – they'll protect you."

Flinz gripped his weapon and nodded nervously, following the two officers as the group quickly ran towards the warehouse.

The front door exploded outward as they reached it, and the same mercenaries who'd challenged Rodan emerged with blaster rifles and started shooting. Green and orange beams of disruptor fire streaked across the quad in front of the building, striking the away team's shields and armor, nearby walls, and the ground. As passersby shrieked in surprise and ran for cover, the Federation officers and Flinz pressed forward and shot back with a variety of weapons, including a few grenades for large area effect. The rappings were deafening. The mercenaries were good shots and vicious infighters, but most of them lacked personal shields, so they couldn't last long. The Starfleet officers' shields and years of experience began to tell, and the fight ebbed as the mercenaries fell one by one. It was over in less than a minute.

Umuzoi used her medical tricorder to quickly give everybody a onceover. The shields had done their job, and the away team had thankfully suffered no major injuries, but those were just the vanguard. Time was still very much of the essence, and she gave the admiral a brief nod.

“Keep moving,” Davir commanded. “Umuzoi, take rear guard. Flinz, stay with the doctor. The rest of you, on point with me.”

They moved ahead as ordered and entered the warehouse, looking for a control room, computers, isotopic radiation, and Rodan. The building was completely darkened for lack of power to the interior lights, and the away team activated their rifle lamps so they could see ahead. The ramp that led down to the warehouse floor was empty, but their tricorders were picking up life signs from the main floor and side rooms and random energy spikes from weapons fire and damaged equipment. The Phantom’s strike teams were moving from room to room, eliminating the enemy, and there was a huge fight around the shuttle. They could hear shouts, the whine of heavy weapons, and rattling explosions. The air carried a slight but distinct odor of ozone.

Mirra tapped a few buttons on her tricorder, watching the ever-changing readouts. “Control room’s down the ramp and to the right,” she said. “That’s where we’d likely find their computers, but several Cardassians and Jem’Hadar are in there.” She folded up the tricorder, resettled her rifle against her right shoulder, and gave the admiral a quizzical look.

“Ahead full,” Davir confirmed.

Determined, the away team went down the ramp and turned right. Sticking to the edges of the big room and intentionally avoiding the shuttle bay in the middle, they used the inventory stacks for cover, and walked quickly towards the office. They dispatched the few remaining True Way mercenaries who remained after the assault troops from the Phantom had already done most of the heavy hitting and moved on. They reached the interior office door, which was locked. Davir, Umuzoi, and Flinz took flanking positions while Mirra and Losozola stood in front of the door.

“Still inside?” Davir asked the doctor.

Umuzoi looked up from her tricorder and nodded wordlessly.

Pid’pen checked the computer panel next to the door, but it had no power.

“I’m going to use the emergency release,” he said. “Stand ready.”

He opened another panel in the wall, and started pumping the lever within to open the door pneumatically.

The opaque door panels slid apart in short spurts, and a hail of blaster fire erupted through the narrow opening as the mercenaries inside the control room desperately defended themselves. Their field of fire was limited by the door frame, but as the entrance widened, the True Way resistance intensified, including grenades. Davir, Losozola, and Mirra took the brunt of it with their shields at first as they were the most exposed members of the away team. Losozola caught one of the grenades as it rolled towards his feet and threw it back inside the control room, where it went off with a terrific roar and a lightning storm. Screams could be heard over the rapport. Pid’Pen and Umuzoi joined the fray with their assault rifles as the door finished opening, sending bright beams of nadeon energy flashing into the otherwise darkened control room. Finally, the weapons fire died down, and the away team entered the room, peering cautiously past their flashlights.

The control room was quite large. Deferi-style computers lined three of its walls, and a huge bay window occupied the wall opposite the door, overlooking the shuttle below. There was a slightly raised dais in the middle of the room, and a large, squat desk was located there. All the computers were dark for lack of power, like the door and lights, the smoky air stank of ozone underlaid with burning circuitry and clothing. A low groaning could be heard from the desk in the aftermath of the fight.

The away team spread out, Flinz in trail, looking for survivors. Davir cautiously rounded the desk and found Gul Talek laying on his back in a puddle of his own blood. The admiral knelt and put a finger to the Cardassian’s scaly throat. His pulse was thin and rapid, and he was barely breathing.

“Umuzoi,” he called softly.

Talek heard that and groaned aloud, reaching weakly up with both arms, flailing blindly in the near dark. He caught the admiral a glancing blow, knocking Davir's rifle aside as the doctor arrived. Davir restrained the Gul, and the Cardassian fell weakly back.

Davir turned to Umuzoi. "Can you stabilize him?"

She scanned the Gul with her medical tricorder, and pursed her lips when she saw the results. "He's been burned badly, and there are several broken bones in his neck and skull I'd have to operate on to fix, but I can dull his pain and slow the internal bleeding." She pressed a hypo to the injured Cardassian's neck, and it hissed softly as it anesthetized him.

Between the medicine and the shock from his injuries, the Gul collapsed into unconsciousness.

"That's the best I can do here," she said.

The admiral was slightly disappointed that the Gul couldn't be questioned. He'd hoped the Cardassian officer could be convinced to disclose vital information under the circumstances, but that was moot now.

He stood and looked around the room in the dim sunlight coming through the office window from the shuttle bay's skylight. The rest of the enemy were all dead, and every computer was dark, inoperable for damage or lack of power. If the away team was going to find information about the True Way's activities here, they'd need an independent power supply to access one of the undamaged workstations.

"Pid, have ship's stores beam down a power converter," he said. "Hook up one of the serviceable consoles so we can download it."

"Aye, Sir," he replied and touched his communicator badge to relay the instruction to the Phantom.

While the engineer worked, Davir approached his tactical team. "Any casualties from our assault squads?"

"Our marines report four casualties, Sir," Losozola said, looking at his tricorder. He hesitated, sighing before he continued. "And Rodan. His body was found in a storage room on the other side of the building. From this report, it looks like he was electrocuted. The body's already in the ship's morgue along with our own casualties. The assault teams are returning to the ship as we speak."

Then he frowned, studying the tricorder more closely. It briefly showed a tightly focused matter-energy stream just outside the closed door.

*Reinforcements!* he thought. *It would be just like the True Way to wait for the assault teams to withdraw before trying to retake this place.*

He quickly raised his weapon. "Shields!" he shouted, dodging away. "We've got incoming!"

Immediately, the officers took available cover around the room, determined not to let the office become their tomb as it had so recently been the True Way's.

From his crouched knees behind a chair, Losozola glanced at his weapon's settings; they were set to kill. Preparing to defend himself and the away team, he armed his last grenade and nervously watched the door, listening for any sounds that would let him anticipate the enemy's entry.

There were no footsteps from without, no hushed voices, and no sounds of forced entry, just silence.

After some seconds, he glanced over at Mirra, who was similarly placed on the other side of the room, and saw she was watching him. He gestured with his fingers to redirect her attention back to the door, but she stubbornly pointed at him, touched the tricorder at her hip, then pointed at the door.

*Do another scan,* he thought, taking her meaning.

He disarmed the grenade and cautiously opened his tricorder to re-scan the hallway outside, looking for life signs or any matter-energy signatures corroborating the arrival of additional enemy troops.

There was nothing like that – the hallway was apparently empty.

"False alarm," he said, chagrined and puzzled at the same time.

He shouldered his rifle and stood up as the other officers approached.

Davir looked at Losozola quizzically, an unspoken question on his face.

"I detected a transporter signal," Losozola clarified, "and it wasn't ours – wrong bandwidth. I thought they were sending in reinforcements."

Davir shrugged. "They still could, I suppose," he conceded.

He turned to Pid'pen. "We need that converter hooked up," he said. "Get back to work, Commander."

Pid'pen obediently returned his attention to one of the computers.

Then Davir turned to Mirra. "What did you pick up?"

She pulled her own tricorder out, checked its log, and found the same event. "It's a transporter, all right," she confirmed. "Can't tell if it's inbound or outbound, but it's orbital." She frowned. "Definitely not Federation. Possibly Klingon?" She looked up, obviously as puzzled as Losozola.

*Something's amiss*, Davir thought. *The Klingons have no stake in this. Why would they be here?*

Unable to see a connection, he glanced up, looking hopefully for their mission specialist, the one they'd been ordered to pick up on Starbase 621 and who'd convinced them to go to Ferenginar to acquire vital intel about the True Way from an over-protective Orion matriarch whose information had led them here.

Flinz Parper was not in the room.

An ugly thought coupled with a sick sensation entered the admiral's deliberations.

"Flinz?" he inquired angrily.

Mirra looked startled. "I thought he wanted to get away from the Klingons?" she asked, not understanding his meaning. "If they have him, I say good riddance!" she added spitefully.

Despite feeling much the same, especially now, Davir curbed his anger. "Not precisely," he clarified. "Orions use the same transporter technology the Klingons do.

"With the power out, the exterior doors are probably on automatic lockdown. Run a wide scan of the building's interior. Anyone in here besides us?"

Both tactical officers complied and soon confirmed the obvious: Flinz was gone.

"The cowardly bastard beamed out," Losozola growled.

"What if he was abducted?" Mirra wondered.

Davir tapped his comm badge. "Benmata to Phantom. Mr. Parper's apparently left the building without us. Did you track any transporter departures aside from the assault teams?"

"Checking, Admiral," Vaalolul replied. A few moments passed as the crew reviewed the Phantom's sensor logs. "There was an anomalous transport a few minutes ago. It was orbital, but the destination's undeterminable." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Sir. Parper's gone."

"Any ships leave orbit recently?" he asked.

He waited while she discussed something with an ensign at the tactical station.

After a minute, she returned. "A few Deferi transports, Admiral. That's it.

"What do you want us to do?"

Davir thought for a few seconds. *The mission comes first*, he remembered, *always*.

"Remain in orbit, Captain," he ordered. "We need to search the computers here. Track all outbound traffic. Record all local transmissions and await further instructions." He closed the comm channel without waiting for her acknowledgement.

He turned to Mirra. "His disappearance hardly matters now, I think," he replied, mildly disgusted. "The Rat's served his purpose, and if he thought it prudent to take his leave of us now, I don't care who facilitated it."

He turned to the engineer working behind them. "Give me some good news, Pid'pen," he said.

The engineer stood up from the console he'd been working on, dusted off his hands, and turned to face them. "Ready, Admiral," he replied. "It's coming up now." He stepped aside to make room for Losozola as the tactical officer was most qualified to search the database for relevant information.

Losozola immediately established an uplink and started downloading the console's encrypted content to the Phantom's computer for later analysis. He was searching for evidence of the isotopes the True Way had been reportedly trafficking for their anti-genetic weaponry. He found references in numerous message logs to depots throughout the Alpha Quadrant, including a research facility in Cardassian space. Its location wasn't specifically disclosed, but the activities described happening there made it obvious that the True Way was focusing a great deal of energy on isotopic tests. There were even references to specific test results.

"Looks like that Orion lady's information panned out, Admiral," he said. "It's all here. Project timelines, supply contracts, research logs, test results, everything we were looking for about their genetic weapon...except where it is."

Davir frowned. "Where are the supplies going?" he asked.

"I can't find that information, Sir," Losozola answered, mildly frustrated. "There are references to a research station deep in the Alpha Quadrant. An awful lot of data's directed at the Mariah Sector. That's the best I can do."

Davir nodded musingly. The Mariah Sector was deep in Cardassian space near a backwater edge of the Alpha Quadrant. It was sparsely inhabited, and not much was known about its planetary systems. He recalled there were four, including the nominative system Mariah, but he'd never been to any of them. Given Starfleet's lack of presence in that part of space, there wasn't a presumable reason to go there other than exploration. However, the present circumstances showed that the next locale of this reconnaissance mission was likely to take place in Cardassian space, and their government would probably object to the presence of a Federation Task Force in their area. Davir was glad he wasn't going to be the one to handle that particular problem. The commanding officer of Task Force Theta could deal with it.

"We got what we came for, and it's a start," he said. "We'll report our findings back to the Task Force, and the vice admiral will take it from there. Destroy the data on that computer, and let's get out of here."

Pid'pen logged off the console and unplugged the converter, taking it with him to stand next to the admiral and the others. Losozola put several blasts of tetryon energy through the now-darkened display, effectively disabling it. Anyone who came along wouldn't be able to collect any information on the True Way's activities in the Phantom's wake. It seemed like a reasonable precaution, given the dangerous nature of what the True Way was doing.

Davir tapped his comm badge, and it chirped once. "Away team to Phantom. Five to beam up."

A moment later, shimmering columns of light and soft sound surrounded the officers, and they disappeared into the light of the transport effect, shortly rematerializing on the Phantom's transporter pad.

They arrived via turbolift on the Phantom's bridge, and immediately assumed their duty stations, relieving the interim personnel who were there. Vaalolul took the first officer's station.

"Status?" Davir asked.

"Unchanged, Admiral," Vaalolul replied. "We're still cloaked, and we're going over the download we got from the warehouse."

"Understood," he said. "Any sign of our mission specialist or his friends?"

"No, Sir," she replied. "If he's out there, he's keeping his head down. From what I heard, that's his real specialty."

Losozola snorted in derisive agreement from his tactical station behind the admiral's chair. "Who says Vulcans don't have a sense of humor?" he muttered.

Vaalolul glanced over her shoulder at him, but she said nothing.

"Maintain cloak, passive sensors only," Davir ordered. "Helm, break orbit. Make best speed to Deep Space 9."

Mirra programmed the adjustments into the navigation computer, and the Phantom turned invisibly to exit the planetary system, preparing to go to warp.

Davir stood up. "I'll be in my office. Commander Vaalolul, you..."

Just then, the communications station beeped several times, catching Nerayerku's attention.

"Admiral, incoming transmission," she called.

Davir waited cautiously. He wasn't expecting to talk to anybody.

Nerayerku looked up in surprise. "Sir, it's Parper!"

Davir's mood immediately soured, his mind torn. On one hand, there was no doubt that the specialist they'd been ordered to accommodate had been useful. He'd found a contact whose information had led them to the True Way's outpost, but Davir also remembered the prices for Flinz help: safe passage away from his Klingon captor on Starbase 621, and Ambassador Aegis' help in Flinz's acquittal and subsequent reinstatement with the Ferengi Commerce Authority. It was also no secret that the Rat had a strong aversion to all things Starfleet, and he'd tried to indirectly alienate literally every member of the Phantom's command staff. Davir secretly hated him for the constant, snide criticisms Flinz had made about the admiral's decisions. It was clear that Flinz hadn't really wanted to be a part of the mission's success – he'd only meant to take advantage of the situation to better his own. When he'd disappeared after the assault on the warehouse's control room, the admiral had written off the Rat after trying to reacquire the mission's intelligence asset. As far as the admiral was concerned, Flinz Parper was just as good gone, regardless of exactly how that had happened. Davir certainly wasn't expecting a subspace call from him. Still, he wanted to know where Flinz was and who was helping him, if only to include that in a report to Starfleet Intelligence.

The admiral stalked back to his armchair and sat down resignedly. "Secure that channel, Commander. On screen."  
"Aye, Sir," she answered, touching a button. "Channel secure. Here he comes."

The viewscreen flickered once, then Flinz's image appeared. Unlike the last time they'd seen him, he was cleanshaven with a new haircut. Someone had even touched up his normally pallid skin. He was on a dimly lit bridge, sitting in an armchair like Davir's that looked rather too big for him.

The Rat smiled thinly. "Ello, Starfleet," he greeted in a mocking tone that was lighter than any he'd ever used before.

Davir scowled slightly at the barely acceptable moniker, knowing it for the slight it intentionally was. It was one of many pet peeves he associated with Flinz. "Mr. Parper," he replied testily, "care to enlighten us as to the reason for your departure?"

"Och, Admiral, I think you always knew that was comin'," Flinz said. "You got what you wanted, didn't you? I know I did." He glanced around his spacious ship, then returned his attention to the Phantom's commanding officer.

"Anyway, Starfleet, I just wanted to say goodbye and to thank you for all yer 'elp gettin' me back on my feet. I couldn't have done it without you," he said, placing his hand atop a large brooch he wore over his heart.

The admiral sighed. "Flinz...," he began, frustrated.

"Max, Max," the Rat gently interrupted him, trying to placate the admiral by using his nickname, "don't be angry. Yer own intelligence division uses unwitting assets from other branches to get things done all the time. That's all it is. I owed you only information for yer mission. Now that my debts are paid," he grinned gratuitously at the double entendre, "I'm a free man again! So, really, thanks." He nodded in deference and moved to turn off the channel.

"Wait," Davir said, trying to keep him talking long enough for Nerayerku to trace the signal, "there's something else I need to ask you."

Flinz hesitated, wondering what else the admiral could possibly want at this point.

"I acknowledge you've been...helpful," Davir began. *And annoying, distrustful, and spiteful,* he added silently. "What will become of you now? And how can we reach you if we need your help again?" he inquired.

Ambivalence, then suspicion briefly crossed Parper's mousy face. He hadn't told the admiral about the proposal Lady L'alia had made or that he'd accepted her employment offer before the Phantom had left Ferenginar. As he saw it,



*Flinz Parper aboard Parper's Emporium (Star Trek Online)*

that was his business alone and none of the admiral's. After that meeting, the Orion queen had assigned her slaves to crew the Rat's personal vessel, which Flinz had predictably named Parper's Emporium. That's where he was now, cruising under cloak at high warp towards the Beta Quadrant and Orion space, but he honestly had no idea where Adira's court would send him after that. At any rate, he wasn't inclined to be forthcoming.

"I don't see as it's any of yer business, Starfleet," he answered, "but I don't like burnin' bridges with potential clients. If we get the chance to work together again, I can say it'll likely be through yer intelligence folks. Just don't come lookin' for me – I'll find you. Got it?"

*Does Morlo know how difficult Parper's been? I wonder if he's used Parper before and, if so, how far back they go?*

Unable to answer his own questions, he then returned his attention to the viewer, and saw the Rat was waiting.

"I'll remember that," Davir replied cryptically.

Flinz nodded silently and closed the channel.

Nonplussed, Davir sat back in his chair and wondered how the Rat had been recommended for this mission in the first place. Parper's reference to using Starfleet's intelligence division wasn't what concerned Davir. Ambassador Aegis worked with Starfleet Intelligence, and he had assets in place to keep his finger on the pulse of the Alpha Quadrant, so his influence on the espionage mission was expected. If he intended to use Flinz in the future, that was at his discretion. Davir had to work with Starfleet Intelligence as needed and had done so many times in his earlier career as a diplomatic attaché. While he'd worked with Morlo for years, Davir had never dealt with Flinz before. He didn't mind the ambassador's attention, but he'd found the Rat's cooperation difficult, mainly because of Parper's not-so-veiled distaste for anything related to Starfleet. Good (and bad) intelligence assets came and went; some retained their value for long periods of time, others less so. If it were up to him, Davir preferred not to work with Flinz again, and he wondered at the ambassador's foreknowledge.

Now that his involvement with the Rat was done, Davir returned his attention to the larger mission. He turned to Nerayerku. "Did you trace him?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied, watching her console. "He's at warp eight, bearing one-zero-one. Looks like he's heading back to Ferenginar." She looked up. "What are your orders?"

The rest of the bridge officers waited quizzically.

"Shall I lay in a pursuit course, Admiral?" Mirra offered after a moment.

Davir thought carefully about the next move. Flinz had played his hand well and cashed out – there was nothing to be gained by chasing him. The Phantom had succeeded in tracing the trail of True Way genetic weaponry through unallied space to the Kelvani System, and it now appeared that it led even further into the backwaters of the Alpha Quadrant. The away team had recovered enough data from the warehouse to keep Starfleet's intelligence analysts busy for weeks, and the security contingent had successfully put down a secret True Way operation in the process. There had been a few casualties, but that was nearly unavoidable on missions like this one, and Davir was confident in the future competence of this ship and its crew. The larger goal of eliminating the True Way's planet-killing isotopes remained unfulfilled, but that effort would require diplomacy with the Cardassian government, and that was beyond his authority and responsibility.

*That's what task forces are for,* he remembered, making up his mind.

He faced Nerayerku at the comm station. "Encode a priority one communiqué to Deep Space 9, attention Vice Admiral Tanis Jantson, Task Force Theta. Give them everything we know so far about the True Way operation, including Parper's departure and our conclusion that the True Way isotopes are probably being funneled to a base in the Mariah Sector. Request further instructions on an encoded channel."

He then turned to the pilot at the helm. "Best speed to Deep Space 9. Time to join up with the rest of the Task Force."

Finally, he turned to Vaalolul. "Commander, maintain silent running until we leave the system, then return to normal operations. I'll be in my office. You have the bridge."

"Aye, Sir," she replied and moved to the conn.

The officers attended to their stations, carrying out his orders as the ship went to warp.

Davir walked off the dais in the middle of the bridge and stalked slowly towards a door to the right. It slid open as he approached, revealing a Spartan but comfortable room including a small desk with a multifunctional terminal, a large computer interface next to the door, a replicator in one of the corners, and a window facing starboard. The paneling was in the same colors as the rest of the ship's interior: slate gray walls and ceiling with blue and tan carpet and walnut furnishings. The wall opposite the desk had an accolades display, but this ship was so new that the only exhibit in it was a polished brass model of the Phantom herself.

*Maybe after this mission, that'll change,* he thought.

He went to the desk as the door closed behind him and sat down. He gathered his thoughts for a few seconds, then touched the comm control on the terminal.

"Computer, open an encrypted channel to Ambassador Aegis in Starfleet Intelligence," he ordered.

"Channel open," the Phantom's synthesized female voice responded in compliance.

Morlo's image soon appeared on the monitor, a look of idle concern on his old face. He'd been following the Phantom's mission reports, but he wasn't expecting her commanding officer to call him directly, and he wondered if something was wrong.

"Admiral," he greeted expectantly, "what do you have to report?"

Davir leaned forward, bridging his fingers together and resting his chin on them. "We've determined that the True Way's anti-genetic weapons were moving through a Deferi outpost in the Kelvani System. We've put it out of commission, but their research is being coordinated from the Mariah Sector. We're heading to DS9 to rejoin with Task Force Theta."

He sighed deeply and leaned back, letting mild frustration creep into his tone. "Parper was instrumental in getting the information that led us to the Kelvani System, and he was part of our away team, but he beamed out as soon as he thought it safe to escape. I suspect he planned it that way. He's headed to Ferenginar at last report, and I don't much care to see him again, personally."

He frowned slightly. "Why'd you pick him for this mission anyway, Ambassador?"

Morlo sat back and pondered the situation. Granted, Flinz wasn't one of his more well-mannered operatives, he was still one of his most well-informed ones in the Alpha Quadrant. He'd worked with Morlo several times in the 2370s, and the ambassador had found him both reliable and cooperative.

*But that was before the episode with the Breen and the FCA,* he reminded himself.

Parper had fallen on hard times after mishandling a major deal with the Breen, and the sour aftermath had robbed him of his ship, its crew, and his financial backbone. He'd since been forced into hiding in poverty on an old Federation starbase. Morlo had to help Flinz negotiate the release of his assets from the Ferengi Commerce Authority in exchange for his help on the mission. He hadn't anticipated Flinz's change of heart or that Parper's new attitude might be a problem in helping a career Starfleet team. Working in the intelligence community required a degree of flexibility on all sides, but the fact was that some assets were easier to work with than others. The offset was almost always in the value that an intelligence asset brought to a mission, and Flinz's reputation as a well-informed one was deserved, even if he'd recently soured towards Starfleet. Flinz's exit during a critical stage of the planet-side part of the mission was disturbing, but Morlo knew from earlier dealings that Flinz was a minimalist, prone to doing only what he'd been hired to do: acquire information and provide guidance. The Rat wasn't accustomed to being on an away team if it wasn't necessary, and Morlo was unsurprised at the fact of Parper's exit. He was more curious about how Flinz had managed to exit as the Phantom was the only allied vehicle present that could've transported him off the planet. Clearly, someone else with another ship had intervened, and Morlo was concerned about Flinz's continued usefulness as an asset.

*I'll have to figure that out later*, he thought, and turned his attention back to the admiral.

"Flinz was the best and most available agent for the mission, Admiral," he responded quietly. "I'd lost track of him over a year ago, and I needed to reacquire him. I didn't think he'd be a problem – I'm sorry."

Despite the apology, Davir was still disgruntled with Flinz's anti-social behavior and impromptu departure during the mission, but he also understood that Flinz was a civilian consultant, not a member of Starfleet. At the end of everything, the mission had been successful so far, thanks in no small part to Parper's information panning out. Espionage missions were especially susceptible to misinformation, and Davir was all about completing missions successfully, but he preferred to work with amenable intelligence assets, not merely well-informed ones.

"Next time, Ambassador, use a Starfleet-friendly informant," he growled.

Morlo nodded slowly, more so in understanding than in agreement. The choice of which intelligence asset to use or why was not the admiral's to make, but Morlo tolerated Davir's complaint.

"I'll take that under advisement, Admiral," he answered diplomatically. "I'll continue using Starfleet's mission reports to monitor your progress, but you may contact me if you think you need to.

"Is there anything else you want to share?"

"No, Sir," Davir said, mollified. "Thanks for taking my call."

Morlo nodded again. "Carry on, Admiral. Aegis out." He closed the channel.

## CHAPTER 5: MACHINATIONS

### STARDATE 56751, TRACKING THE RAT

In the comfort of his dimly lit office on Earth, Ambassador Morlo Aegis leaned pensively back in his lounge chair. After conversing with Admiral Benmata about the results of the mission so far, he remained concerned about the manner of Flinz Parper's exit, if not the rationale. Flinz was notably good at hiding. He'd demonstrated that for over a year on Starbase 621, but he'd been a prominent businessman on the Ferengi homeworld for many years prior to that, and that required maintaining a public image, hiding in plain sight as it were. Morlo had helped Flinz reacquire a ship, so the ambassador knew Flinz had his own transportation, but he didn't know about Parper's arrangement with Lady L'alia for a new crew and a career. He needed to ascertain Flinz's current disposition to determine if he was still a viable agent.

*Gotta find him first,* he thought.

He walked out of his office, heading down the hall outside to another doorway marked "Science B302." The door swished open at his approach, and he walked up a short ramp into a laboratory specialized for remote reconnaissance. The rectangular room was narrow, two stories tall, and dimly lit. The long walls were covered with computerized workstations aglow with streaming images from all over the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. About a dozen Starfleet analysts were watching the feeds. On the far wall flickered a holographic image of an idyllic daylit countryside, an illusion to comfort the sensibilities of those working in an otherwise dark and dreary room. A short path led from the top of the ramp to a squat dais four meters across in the middle of the room. The platform had a series of computer panels arranged in a semicircle facing the door. Suspended several meters above that was a collection of large multifunctional displays arranged in an outward-facing circle. A bright spotlight shone down from the center of the ceiling, illuminating the dais but not much else.

Standing next to a comfortable chair in the middle of the room was a lovely young woman in a blue Starfleet Lt. commander's uniform. She had long purple hair, slightly pointed ears, bright blue eyes, and a beauty model's visage marred only by several residual Borg implants. Liberated from the Collective years ago, Victoria Alain was coordinating the data feeds going to the recon workstations on both sides of the room. Her back was towards the door, but she heard the ambassador's approach and turned to face him, raising an elegant eyebrow when she saw who it was.



*Lt. Commander Victoria Alain (Star Trek Online, bberge1701)*

"Ambassador," she greeted as she saluted. Her alto voice was soft as she didn't want to disturb the attention of the analysts working around them.

"Commander," Morlo replied, returning her salute. "Flinz Parper's dossier recently needs to be updated. Seems he's disappeared again after completing his last assignment, although "completing" is arguable in this case. He beamed out of an away mission as soon as he had the chance, and this time I think he had help. As you know, I arranged with the FCA to release his spacecraft to him. He probably used it to escape, but he can't crew that ship by himself. Someone helped manufacture his disappearance, and I want to know who and why. The True Way's not finished in this by any means. I need to find Parper and strong-arm him back into the fold, if I can."

Victoria smiled. "I thought he might try that, Ambassador," she said smugly. "That's why I had the Ferengi put a subspace beacon on his ship before they released it from the impound yard. I also had them send over the ship's warp signature so we can track him even while he's cloaked."

Morlo grinned widely. "Excellent foresight!" he complimented her.

"Where is Parper now?"

She turned to her console, and quickly brought up a map of the Alpha Quadrant, pointing at a little glowing dot approaching the Ferenginar Sector. "There," she answered. "He certainly isn't trying to keep a low profile anymore. Our listening posts in the Alpha Quadrant are having no trouble picking him up. My guess is he's going to take on supplies at Ferenginar."

Morlo scowled and instantly turned to leave. "Keep him on sensors, Commander, and open a secured comm channel to that ship," he barked over his shoulder. "I'll take it in my office."

"Yes, Sir," Victoria confidently replied, saluting belatedly at his retreating back.

### CLOSING THE SNARE

Parper's ship was indeed headed to Ferenginar, presently at warp six, then to the Orion Sector. The ship's owner/entrepreneur slouched in the command chair in the middle of its tiny bridge. His was the tallest chair in the room – the other two were for the pilot and the operations chief. Three male Orion slaves worked on the bridge, but none of them had uniforms or ranks, not even Flinz. This was the only vessel he'd ever owned prior to his



*The bridge of Parper's Emporium (Star Trek Online)*

poverty-induced sojourn on Starbase 621, and he was glad that chapter in his life was over. The ship was finally his again. He was in charge, not Starfleet, the Orion Syndicate, or any other authoritarian regime. He didn't want any semblance of military protocol on board, not in the ship's name, its furnishings, its crew, or especially its mission. The only insignia he wore was a brooch Queen L'alia had given him, a symbol of her sanction as he was technically an emissary of her royal court.

*It might open some doors, he thought, fingering it idly as it sat on the lapel of his jacket. Otherwise, I wouldn't wear it.*

The ship was a civilian escort vessel in the Amarie class, but Flinz had made modifications. While crew spaces were still austere and utilitarian, the guest quarters were spacious and reasonably accommodating. The foyer to the long, large hold had been converted to a lounge with consoles dedicated to subspace messaging and galactic banking via the Exchange, musts for a mercantile enterprise like Flinz's. However, for a civilian ship, it had a paramilitary side. It was heavily armed and armored and capable of warp nine, but, like most escorts, it was agile enough for sublight combat. Flinz didn't much like that as the weapons and defenses reminded him of the risk of dying in space, but he understood the necessity of such precautions given the cut-throat nature of black marketeering.

*Better to have that sort of thing and not want it than to need it and not have it, he reasoned grimly.*

The communications station beeped as Morlo's incoming transmission arrived.

"Flinz," the chief said, "there's a secured message coming through for you on a Starfleet channel, flagged private."

Parper sat up sharply, a curious and apprehensive look on his face.

*Likely that ambassador bastard, he surmised. Still thinks he can "handle" me, does he? We'll just see then.*

"Send it to my chamber," he said, and almost ran off the bridge.

He went through the access door behind the dais, walked a short distance down the hallway beyond, and opened the door to his “chamber,” which was actually a holodeck. He’d programmed it to be easily the most luxurious suite aboard. It was a long room with curtained separations at opposite ends for privacy, behind which were his bathroom and his bedroom. The living space between those was an ordered plethora of furnishings from all over the Beta and Alpha Quadrants: mood lighting in the ceiling, wall-to-wall paneling with a virtual window built into the wall opposite the door, famous paintings near a computer panel, ornate furniture in several styles, an entertainment table, a replicator, and plush carpeting everywhere. The air was lightly scented with the aroma of flowers to match the outdoor scenery in the virtual window, and the picture in the “window” even had a shallow brook that could be heard dimly over the holodeck’s sound system. Flinz spent much of his time here, inventing holovids for himself and occasionally his guests if they pre-paid him. It was a sidebar skill he’d retained from his early adulthood and now turned to capital use.

He went to an armchair on one side of the room and turned it to face the computer console on the near wall. “Computer, open incoming communication,” he said.

“The channel is encoded,” the computer’s synthesized male voice said. “Please confirm your security clearance.”

Mildly frustrated at that, Flinz rapidly tapped a few keys on the keypad embedded in the chair’s armrest, then loudly repeated his request. “Open the damn channel!”

The viewscreen instantly displayed Starfleet Intelligence’s logo (confirming his suspicion about the sender), then Morlo’s image appeared, dour and frustrated.

“Ambassador!” Flinz greeted loudly before Morlo could say anything. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your attention today?”

“Lower your voice, Parper,” Morlo cautioned. “We need to talk, and I don’t want us to be overheard.”

Flinz obligingly turned off the brook and lowered the room’s volume. “What about?” he asked quietly, a deadpan expression on his thin face.

Morlo hesitated, now reluctant to discipline one of his most recalcitrant operatives for fear of alienating Flinz and losing his usefulness. He decided to take an indirect approach.

“I heard you’ve left Admiral Benmata’s crew behind, Parper,” he began.

Flinz’s expression darkened instantly. “Yeah, wha’ of it? They got wha’ they needed, eh?”

Morlo nodded, then continued. “You were instrumental in helping them discover the weapons trail to Kelvani. Thank you.”

Flinz softened slightly. *He always was a good sort, this one*, he thought.

“I left because I was done with ‘im,” he replied languidly, answering the ambassador’s unspoken question. “Couldn’t stand much more of ‘im, really, what with all ‘is rules and such. Honestly, all you Starfleet types are an uptight bunch, especially the commanders.”

Again, Morlo nodded in understanding. “Occupational hazard, I suppose,” he said, then he got to the point.

“I’m curious, Parper, what happened on Ferenginar after I got your ship out of the impound yard? How’d you get a crew so easily?”

Now Flinz hesitated. He and the ambassador went back over 10 years, and Flinz had come to respect Morlo’s skill as a handler, especially his insight into affairs in the Alpha Quadrant. Morlo had operatives in deep places, and there was little of major interest that he didn’t seem to see coming. Flinz didn’t know the extent of Morlo’s operation, but he knew better than to assume he knew more than Morlo did about anything important, especially where Starfleet’s operatives were concerned. The fact that Morlo was questioning him was itself a tell.

*He doesn’t know about the deal I made with Adira*, Flinz realized, a perverse pleasure rising in his heart. *Did I get a leg up on the old boy, then?* He loathed giving up any advantage, so he avoided the ambassador’s question.

“I have my ship back regardless,” he said, absently touching his brooch. “I’m grateful for yer help there, surely.”

Morlo equably accepted Flinz’s parry and thrust again. “What will you do now that your ship is yours again?”

Flinz’s expression hardened. “Wha’ever I please, Starfleet, as long as there’s profit in it.”

*No sense telling 'im about my new job, he thought.*

Morlo nodded thoughtfully and made one more oblique attempt to ascertain Flinz's plans, this one based on Parper's prior situation. "Yes, you're running a business again. You know, some of your enemies might not have given up. You may have a fast and stealthy ship, but living on the run from your enemies is no better than hiding from them. In our line of work, you're going to eventually run afoul of your past. Who can you count on to help you?"

*The bastard would bring that up, Flinz thought ruefully. He ain't wrong, though.*

"The Emporium can hold 'er own," he replied confidently. "She's got a cloak and a slamshot cannon."

Morlo shrugged skeptically. "Against the Jem'Hadar, Flinz? Or the Klingons? They both know how to penetrate cloaks. I hear Kluthor's finally managed to get off that station. He'll be gunning for you, and his ilk won't be the only ones, I'm sure."

"And I s'pose yer offerin' to help me there, are you?" Flinz asked aggressively. "Still tryin' to 'handle' me and get a share of my latinum in the process, eh? Well, I'll have none of it, Starfleet! You can keep yer big ships, yer admirals, and especially yer damn rules and regs out of my life!"

Again, Morlo shrugged, nonchalantly waving off Parper's fear and anger with one hand. "Flinz, no, of course nothing so...mercenary. You know the Federation doesn't use currency anyway. Keep your latinum. I have a different proposal for you."

Flinz calmed down somewhat, curious at the turn the conversation had suddenly taken. *What's he got up his sleeve now, and what's it gonna cost me?*

"I'm listening," he said cautiously.

*Hooked 'im, Morlo thought, relieved at heart. He kept his poker face on.*

Flinz was obviously a Ferengi at heart, having lived in their hyper-capitalistic culture most of his life, and Morlo knew from long association that the Rat didn't have an altruistic bone left in his body, if he ever did. Parper would sell his relatives on the Orion slave market if he thought he'd make a profit. There was no way such a man would agree to help Starfleet out of the goodness in his soul. Morlo knew he'd have to appeal to Flinz's Exchange account and mercenary nature to regain his help. Fortunately, he was ready for that.

Years ago, a pair of Starfleet officers, one of whom was Lt. Commander Worf, the only Klingon then in Starfleet, had recovered a famous bat'leth proven to belong to Kahless, the first Klingon Emperor. They'd been accompanied by a Dahar Master named Kor. Before they could return with the sword to Deep Space 9 in a shuttlecraft, Kor and Worf had fought nearly to the death over custody of it, a conflict underscoring both the artifact's cultural value and the Klingons' obsession with inheriting Kahless' honor and position. The Klingon who possessed that bat'leth would gain much respect amongst his compatriots and enough political power within the Klingon Empire to become Emperor himself. That could be disastrous if it fell into the wrong hands. They didn't trust themselves or anybody else with it, so they beamed the bat'leth into space and left it behind for the Empire's sake. Starfleet analysts had used the shuttle's sensor records and some clever modeling of gravitational currents near the beam-out point to generalize where the bat'leth might be by now, and the Ambassador's strategic intelligence group was recently tasked with its recovery.

Morlo sat back in his chair and laced his fingers together across his chest. "We found the Sword of Kahless, Flinz, right where it was supposed to be," he said quietly.

Flinz froze for a moment. He knew the Emperor's bat'leth was one of the most famous and coveted artifacts in Klingon history. It was worth quite a bit of latinum. It had been lost since Worf and Kor beamed it away somewhere in the Alpha Quadrant. A Cardassian cargo hauler had passed through the Mariah Sector last year, and Flinz had hacked its sensor logs while it was docked at Starbase 621. He'd been mainly interested in news of the comings and goings in the deep backwaters of Cardassian space when he accidentally came across a sensor reading taken near Mariah IV that strongly resembled a bat'leth. It even had an isotopic signature that matched the one Worf had taken of Kahless' sword. The Cardassians didn't know what they had or that they'd been hacked, and the transport eventually left. Flinz initially thought to keep his discovery to himself, but everything had a price, and he wanted to know what news of the bat'leth's

location was worth. Pretending to be drunk, he intentionally let it slip that he might know where it was, then waited. Kluthor, a dishonored and disenfranchised Klingon thug, heard about it and promised Flinz that his mercenaries would protect him if Flinz would tell him where it was. Flinz soon discovered that Kluthor needed the bat'leth to regain his fallen honor and, perhaps, to begin a Klingon royal House of his own. What Flinz really wanted was to regain the lifestyle he'd owned on Ferenginar, but Kluthor didn't even have a ship, never mind the power to restore Flinz's livelihood, so he declined and decided to wait for a better chance to sell the information. However, Kluthor proved to be a sore loser, and tried to forcibly annex Flinz into his gang to prevent him disclosing the bat'leth's location to anybody else. By then, Morlo's group had also heard of Flinz's discovery and was already working with him when the opportunity to debut the Phantom on a tangent mission presented itself.

*Why does Morlo still need me?* Flinz wondered, waiting silently for the ambassador to continue.

Morlo leaned forward and continued secretively.

"It's in an asteroid belt in the Mariah System, and as you gave us the lead we needed to rediscover it, we think it'd be only appropriate to let you help recover it."

The astounded look on Flinz's face said it all.

"Wha'...?" he blurted. "Wait, the Cardies found it, not me! It's in their space. Ask them for help gettin' to it."

Morlo had anticipated that, too. "While the Cardassian government is on friendly terms with the Federation, it doesn't approve of foreign exploratory missions in its space. Unaffiliated salvage operations pose no such concern. Besides, we don't want the Cardassians to know anything about this, and your ship has a cloak, so you're not likely to be detected."

"Send someone else," Flinz objected crossly. "Anyone!"

"Time is of the essence, and you're my closest operative right now," Morlo hedged.

"I'M NOT YER OPERATIVE!" Flinz screamed at the screen. "I work for me only!"

Morlo made his best move. "And with me when it suits you, I know. I meant that we can help each other here.

"Think about this, Flinz. You're a marketeer who specializes in exotic wares. The sword's an artifact the Klingon Empire would love to have back. Whoever finds and returns it will undoubtedly gain the gratitude of a powerful government in the Beta and Alpha Quadrants. That alone makes this one worth it, but the finder's fee would be enough latinum to cover your expenses several times.

"Besides that, Kluthor's the only Klingon who believes you know where it is, and your problem is that he's never going to leave you alone until he gets that out of you. Our issue is that he's an isolationist and a despot, and you know it. If he gets it, he'll become the leader of his own House, then challenge the Klingon High Council and sue to become the next Emperor. Our projections are that less than a year later, his agenda would likely result in the Klingons withdrawing most of their local support. That would threaten the political stability we've gained in the Alpha Quadrant since the Dominion War. Returning Kahless' sword to the Empire effectively removes Kluthor from the political background AND gets him off your back because you wouldn't have anything he wants anymore. Finally, since you're not a Klingon, no other Klingon can claim Kahless' right of leadership by virtue of finding his sword. The Empire would never consider bestowing that right on a foreigner. Instead, the sword would belong to the whole Klingon Empire, not a particular House or leader. That helps maintain political stability within the Empire. We all want that.

"What do you say? Once more unto the breach?" Morlo asked, confidently raising a bushy eyebrow.

The militant reference was lost on Flinz. What captivated him was the chance to be rid of Kluthor for good. The Klingon's negative attention had plagued Parper's existence ever since he'd turned down Kluthor's protection offer. Flinz had thought he was free until Morlo mentioned that Kluthor had finally acquired a ship. Without that advantage, his only protection from Kluthor was the Emporium's cloak, but Klingon ships could penetrate it if they got close enough. He couldn't run under cloak all the time – it took a lot of power, and he needed to be findable by his clients. In his heart, he knew he'd run afoul of Kluthor eventually. What he wanted most now was to be rid of every aspect of his unfortunate life

on Starbase 621 and anything that reminded him of it. Kluthor was the last and biggest vestige. Flinz took the bait, disgruntled at having been so easily manipulated.

*Feckin' gobdaw knows me too damn well,* he thought. *That's what I get for workin' with 'im.*

"This better be the last time, Starfleet," he muttered darkly.

*We'll see,* Morlo thought, satisfied.

"I'm sending you updated astrometrics of the bat'leth's location. We've compensated for the intervening drift," he said, touching a few buttons on his console.

Flinz noted the information's nearly instantaneous arrival over the secured channel. "Yeah, got it," he acknowledged. "Any advice you wanna give me?"

Morlo's tone softened again, this time in genuine concern. "Stay cloaked, if you can. Get in, beam it aboard, and get out – that's it. I'll have someone meet you at Deep Space 9 to take it off your hands. Those details to follow.

"And Parper, good to have your help...again."

Flinz looked up from reading through the data, slightly surprised at Morlo's sentiment. *I'm still worth somethin' to 'im then,* he realized. The thought made him even more uncomfortable, and he snorted dismissively.

"Don't get too attached," he admonished.

"I'll call you when I've got the sword."

He closed the channel without waiting for the ambassador's departing salutation.

Morlo stared at the blank screen for a few seconds, deep in thought. He'd managed to retain Parper's services at no cost in Federation ships, supplies, or personnel, and he accepted Flinz's explanation about leaving the away team behind at Kelvani, but he still felt like he was missing something. Reviewing the conversation, he realized Parper had deflected his first question, the one about what had transpired while he was alone on Ferenginar.

*He's hiding in plain sight again,* Morlo thought.

Morlo brought up the recording of their conversation on his computer, and replayed it a few times, but he couldn't put his finger on what was bothering him until he watched it without sound. Then he noticed Flinz absently touching a large pin on his lapel just after the first question. The ambassador knew that people often had tells they may not even be aware of, and he suspected he'd just found one of Parper's.

He paused the recording. "Computer, enlarge and enhance grid eight."

The image of Flinz's shoulder filled the small screen, and the brooch he was wearing became clearly visible. Morlo recognized the symbol on it without referring to his computer library. All of Queen Adira's courtiers wore it somewhere on their outer clothing. The manner of Flinz's early departure finally started to make sense, and Morlo guessed the rest. Flinz somehow worked for her now; his ship, probably her crew. Morlo wasn't sure in what capacity Flinz served Adira, but it didn't matter. The Orion Syndicate was not part of the United Federation of Planets, the queen's intentions in the Alpha Quadrant were unknown, and she now had access to one of Morlo's prior operatives who had limited insight into his intelligence network. That was a security risk, and its impact on future Starfleet Intelligence operations would have to be assessed.

*Is he working for her on this assignment? He worried. That sword would fetch a hefty price on the black market. I need to move fast.*

He returned to his console and started making subspace calls.

## NEW ORDERS

The Phantom was at warp about a day away from Deep Space 9. In his office next to the bridge, Rear Admiral Davir Benmata received an encrypted communique from Vice Admiral Jantson, the flag officer in charge of Federation Task Force Theta, currently stationed at Deep Space 9 in the Alpha Quadrant. Sitting at his desk, Davir read through his new orders as they appeared on the monitor recessed into the desktop.

“Stardate: 56753.8.

“From: Commanding Officer, U.S.S. Sovereign (NCC-73811), TF Theta, Deep Space 9.

“To: Commanding Officer, U.S.S. Phantom (NCC-95001), TF Theta, location undisclosed.

“Subject: New orders. C

“CLASSIFIED

“U.S.S. Phantom will immediately divert to the Mariah sector, Alpha Quadrant, and arrive one standard day ahead of Task Force Theta. You’re authorized to exceed warp five for the duration of this mission. Reconnoiter the Mariah System under cloak for signs of True Way activity, particularly related to weapons-grade anti-genetic isotopic research and development. Record all observations for analysis. Do not precipitate combat until TF Theta arrives.

“Be advised: avoid the independent salvage operation in progress in the Mariah IV asteroid belt.

“Acknowledge receipt to AlphaCom, DS9.”

Davir keyed his security clearance by way of acknowledgement, then got up and returned to the bridge to inform his officers of their new orders. Commander Vaalolul wordlessly gave him his chair back, and he sat down as she went to one of the nearby tactical stations. He touched a button on the armrest, and a yeoman’s whistle sounded as he opened the ship-wide intercom.

“This is the admiral speaking,” he began. “Our mission extension to find the True Way’s research facility has been approved. Starfleet Command has redirected us to the Mariah System where we will conduct surveillance operations until Task Force Theta arrives. On-duty personnel, resume your stations. Max, out.”

He closed the intercom and turned to his officers.

“Helm, set course for Mariah Four, best speed.

“Tactical, rig for silent running, and activate the cloak.”

The bridge crew responded efficiently, and the Phantom dropped out of warp long enough to change course towards Cardassian space. A few seconds later, it shimmered like water as the cloak came online, then it disappeared completely.

## STARDATE 56754. A PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

In the Bajor Sector of the Alpha Quadrant, Deep Space 9, the formerly Cardassian space station, was the nerve center of the Federation’s presence in the quadrant. Given the station’s importance, the Federation normally kept at least one large capital vessel on site and several small task forces (like Benmata’s) roaming around to keep the peace and express the Federation’s continued



*Task Force Theta prepares to depart Deep Space 9 (Star Trek Online)*

interests in the area. When the Phantom left on its spy mission, the station’s six docking pylons had been sparsely

occupied with only the wounded Kaiser-class Bruntil and the Akira-class Tandrilüs on station. Task Force Theta now made the remaining space around the station thick with Federation ships of the line, notably the U.S.S. Sovereign in one of the formations. Its sleek hull dwarfed everything in the area, and its presence was the general deterrent it was intended to be. The Sovereign was currently the flagship of Vice Admiral Tanis Jantson, a female Trill who, like Davir, was an experienced field commander from the Dominion War with a background in diplomacy and tactics. She was presently on the bridge, finalizing the fleet's departure to the Mariah Sector to support the Phantom and put an end to the threat of the True Way's anti-genetic weapons research.

"Task Force Theta, this is Theta One, Vice Admiral Jantson speaking. All ships, acknowledge ready for departure, and form up at the pre-arranged coordinates."

One by one, the various ships in the task force reported in and started staging themselves near Deep Space 9.

Task Force Theta was one of the best-equipped Federation fleets in the Alpha Quadrant. It was almost 30 ships strong with different types for specific functions. The Sovereign was the main flagship, but there were also two Galaxy-class dreadnoughts, each with a rear admiral aboard so the task force could be divided without breaking the admiralty's chain of command. Numerous escorts in the Armitage, Valiant, and Yeager classes were present. There were several Nova-class science vessels, and an Olympic-class medical frigate. Each crew had a veteran commanding officer, hand-picked by the admiralty.

The task force formed up in three groups.

"Helm, engage," the vice admiral ordered. "Warp five."

The starships' blue nacelles began to brighten as the task force prepared to go to warp. Then the first group shot forward into a brilliant shock of light, followed closely by the other two groups. Their ETA to the Mariah System was 56 hours.

## THE THREAT

The True Way flotilla was enormous. Floating elsewhere in space, the Jem'Hadar and Cardassian ships approached 100 in number. Most of them were escorts, frigates, and fighters, but some of them were of capital size. It was the largest gathering of True Way allies since shortly after the Dominion War, and it dwarfed everything else currently in the Alpha Quadrant.

The True Way's senior officers met in committee aboard one of the Cardassian cruisers to discuss their progress and strategic objectives. The conference room was lit with dim green fixtures in the ceiling so the giant viewer on the long wall was clearly visible in the low contrast. The viewer was divided into square sections, most of which were alit because ship captains were logged in to view the proceedings. The long table down the center of the room had a dozen armchairs around it, and most of them were likewise occupied by high-ranking True Way officers. Notably, however, the chairs at the head and foot of the table were still empty.

The conference's room door slid open, and the True Way commander, a legate named Oran Marek, came in with his entourage, including a Jem'Hadar First and a Breen Thot. The Legate sat down in the empty chair at the head of the table, and the Jem'Hadar and the Breen commanders stood behind him.

Oran looked at the faces of the officers in the room, then glanced at the viewer to include those, and smiled confidently. "Good morning and thank you for being in attendance, gentlemen," he said. "We have a short agenda today.

"As you know, our experimental isotopic weapon is a resounding success. Preliminary tests indicate near 100% lethality even after several weeks of dissipation. The most effective delivery method we have is an interstellar probe, but our research facilities are working to improve that." He raised a hand deferentially at the Thot standing over his shoulder. "The setback caused by the recent Federation attack on our Kelvani distribution facility has been overcome with the addition of new supply lines of Ketracel White from the Breen Sector, thanks to our allies.

“The True Way is now a superpower, and well positioned to remain so for the foreseeable future. Backed by the threat of our new weapon, we’ll contend with our Cardassian brothers to return our people to their former stature. Then we’ll use diplomatic means to cajole the Bajorans and the Federation into recognizing the True Way as the legitimate Cardassian government. Lastly, we’ll permanently retake Terok Nor and control access to the wormhole.

“I’ll now open the floor to the rest of our commanders.”

The next few minutes were back and forth with senior officers about the efficacy of the new strategic weapon, potential targets, projected fleet deployments, and the like. Everyone agreed that the True Way should announce the weapon to the other governments of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants, and some captains wanted it demonstrated again for emphasis. No one suggested using it against a populated world – just the threat of it was enough to force the other superpowers to seriously consider the True Way’s stature and agenda. The overall goal remained the restoration of the Cardassian Union’s former style of government and the restitution of its territories, including Deep Space 9.

“What will we do if the Federation or the Bajorans refuse to acknowledge the True Way’s legitimacy?” one of the captains finally asked. “How will we attain our long-term objectives if they retain control of the choke point between here and the Gamma Quadrant?”

The clamor in the room shifted as the rest of the officers began considering the question, but before anyone could respond, a male voice spoke from the viewer.

“With your permission, Legate Marek, I’ll address that.”

His raspy baritone was lightly accented and obviously being synthesized to make it unrecognizable. Despite his anonymity, he held great influence in the group.

Oran looked up at the viewer and noted that the speaker’s square was dark; there was no onscreen indication of the speaker’s identity or location, just a silent green light glowing dimly at the bottom of the screen to show that an encoded channel was open. A deep chill went through his gut, and he swallowed nervously. Only one True Way ally could join their briefings anonymously.

“Of course,” Oran said. “The room recognizes His Eminence.”

The new speaker waited until the rest of the room went completely quiet before he began.

“The Bajorans still depend on Federation support on Deep Space 9. Bajor will stay in the Federation as long as Starfleet’s willing to maintain a presence on Terok Nor. Starfleet acknowledges that Bajor’s under the Emissary’s protection, so the aliens and the Emissary don’t interfere with Starfleet’s use of the wormhole. To wrest control of the wormhole from Bajor and Earth, one need only sour that relationship. That is, change the Emissary’s mind by villainizing Starfleet’s involvement with Bajor. This is true even if the Federation and Bajor refuse to acknowledge the True Way’s legitimacy. When the wormhole aliens and the Emissary abandon Bajor, Terok Nor and access to the wormhole will be anyone’s for the taking. Our goal must be to make sure the True Way is positioned to take advantage of that.”

The conference room erupted with loud voices, each clamoring to be heard above the rest for several minutes. There were questions from every quarter about the best way to spoil the relationship between the Bajorans and the



*Legate Oran Marek (Star Trek Online, bberge1701)*

wormhole aliens, and the True Way's strategic role in it. After a little while, one of the newer Cardassian guls in the room loudly interrupted the discussion.

"Forgive my rudeness, Legate Marek, but why is his Eminence permitted to remain anonymous?" He looked distrustfully at the blank square with an open channel. He was clearly uncomfortable with the security risk of having a strategic planning session with unknown participants.

The rest of the audience again went silent, some from a similar distrust, others in dreadful anticipation of the answer. His Eminence offered nothing in reply, apparently content to let the legate clarify the situation.

Oran cleared his throat once. "His Eminence is granted anonymity by my authority and consent." He glared warningly at the subordinate officer.

The gul cocked his head slightly to one side, an obvious question in his mind, but he didn't speak it.

Oran guessed that there were others in the meeting that had similar misgivings about His Eminence.

*I should remind them,* he thought, standing to address the entire audience.

"His Eminence is a friend and ally of the True Way," the legate began. "His anonymity is his choice, and I honor it. None of you should disclaim it for it was he who showed us how to make anti-genetic weapons like the one that's made us powerful. We owe him a great debt.

"As for his intent, of his own words, he works to return Terok Nor to us. I know you have doubts, but I and others benefited from his assistance many times during the Dominion War, though we didn't realize it until later. Despite losing that war, thanks partly to Gul Dukat's incompetence, His Eminence remains confident that the Cardassian Union can be restored. We can win against the Bajorans, the Federation, the Emissary, and the wormhole aliens. He has shown us how that may be achieved, and I agree with him, but it is up to all of us to make it happen. I call upon each of you to renew your faith in our plan."

Oran took his seat again and gave the room a hard stare. "That's actually an order," he growled menacingly into the silence that followed.

One by one, the rest of the commanders nodded grudgingly, willing to forgo their misgivings about His Eminence since his weapon worked.

Oran smiled inwardly. *There's something to be said about carrying a big stick,* he thought.

As the meeting resumed, he paid little attention to the fleet deployments and other assignments that occupied the proceedings. Instead, his mind wandered back to 2374, to the dark days of Gul Dukat's captaincy of the freighter Groumall. Oran had been aboard as a glinn, serving as an engineer. Dukat's reputation as a former commander in the Detapa Council had preceded him, but he'd recently been demoted after it was discovered he'd fathered a half-Bajoran daughter named Tora Ziyal. Swept up in the wake of Dukat's brief return to power in 2375, Oran had been one of many officers who'd celebrated Cardassia's partnership with the Dominion to win the war against the Federation and its allies. He'd even endorsed Dukat as the de facto ruler of the Cardassian Union. After a series of successes against the Federation, Klingons, Bajorans, and Maquis, the Cardassian Union was once again in possession of Deep Space 9, thanks to their Dominion allies, and Oran had thought that his faith was well placed. All that changed in the waning weeks of the Dominion War.

The Jem'Hadar's supply lines were stretched thinly across the Alpha Quadrant, and their Ketracel White reserves were running low. They'd sent for reinforcements from the Gamma Quadrant via the Bajoran wormhole – reinforcements that never arrived because the wormhole aliens interfered at the Emissary's behest. Absent the Dominion's ability to help hold Terok Nor, the occupying Cardassians had been forced yet again to abandon the space station against invading Federation ships and troops. Dukat's daughter Ziyal had been tragically killed on the station during the retreat, and Dukat had suffered an emotional breakdown as a result. He was never the same afterwards.

Descending into despair and insanity, Dukat became obsessed with a Bajoran myth about the Pah-wraiths, a group of evil, non-corporeal aliens said to have once inhabited the Bajoran wormhole alongside the good aliens whom the Bajorans worshipped as prophetic deities. Since they were non-corporeal in nature, it was impossible to harm them

physically, and they could temporarily possess another person's body and mind. When they did so, the possessed person could display great strength and other energies for a short time. When the wraith left, the possessed person usually remembered everything that had happened, including a powerlessness to avoid anything the wraith wanted, but they were generally unharmed. Dukat had personal experience with that, and it could be a terrible ordeal. Oran thought the sheer psionic power a Pah-wraith could put out was very impressive, but controlling them was the difficult part.

The Pah-wraiths had been banished from the wormhole and cursed to live in a series of volcanic caverns on Bajor. Their sole goal was to exact revenge upon the Prophets who had banished them. Their lore was written in a tome called the Book of the Kosst Amojan (the Outcasts), which only the Bajoran High Priestess (or Kai) could read because it contained the secret to releasing the wraiths from their fiery prison. Dukat irrationally reasoned that if he couldn't have Terok Nor, he would release the Pah wraiths and let the quadrant burn in their wake. Disguising himself as a Bajoran farmer, he recruited Kai Winn Adami into joining his cult, then had her bring the book to one of the caves and read the incantation to release the wraiths. Bajoran news services were unclear as to what exactly transpired in the cave, but Federation sources reported that the Pah-wraiths were not released because the Emissary interrupted the incantation before the priestess could finish. Oran had his doubts, but what was certain was that Adami, Dukat, and the Book of the Kosst Amojan were never seen again.

In Oran's mind, His Eminence's plan to retake the station and the nearby wormhole aligned well enough with the True Way's desire to restore the Cardassian Union. Whoever controlled Terok Nor controlled Alpha Quadrant access to the wormhole. Chroniton radiation bursts could alleviate interference from the Emissary or the wormhole aliens so that passage through the wormhole would be safe for Cardassians and Jem'Hadar alike...no more displaced convoys of troops and supplies. Once Terok Nor was Cardassian again and the True Way ruled Cardassia Prime, Bajor would fall easily. If the Klingons or the Federation dared to intervene..., well, the True Way now had an additional option.

He smiled inwardly again, then looked up to realize the meeting was drawing to a close and he'd missed most of the particulars due to his idle musing.

*I'll have one of my attaches summarize this meeting for me later,* he thought, rising.

"I'm sure you all have your assignments by now and that you're as anxious as I am to put them into play. Remember: our long-term goal is to restore the Cardassian Union using the threat of our anti-genetic isotopic probes to keep the Federation and its allies at bay while we work to retake Terok Nor and the wormhole. Do not lose your focus, guls. We will regain our former glory if we hold to this course.

"Now, see to your stations. Dismissed."

Without waiting for their acknowledgment, he turned and exited the room, followed as always by his entourage.

## CHAPTER 6: MARIAH IV

### STARDATE 56758, RECOVERING KAHLESS' SWORD

The crescent edge of Mariah IV glowed in the white light of one of its stars. The binary star system (both F-class dwarves) supported six planets, many moons, and a wide asteroid belt between the fourth and fifth planets. The first two planets were little better than uncaptured class D moons. The next one was a class J gas giant in the long-winded process of dissipating in the solar wind coming from the local star, and it had a couple of tiny barren moons. Mariah IV was a large class L world and the only habitable planet in the system. It had no moon. The asteroid belt was next, followed by the two outer planets, both ringed, class J gas giants with many moons each.

A True Way task force floated in space above Mariah IV, nowhere near the size of their main fleet but still sizeable. There were a Cardassian carrier and two Jem'Hadar dreadnoughts, nine various escorts, and a cloud of fighters in support. The ships were arranged along both magnetic poles to hide their electromagnetic signatures from passive sensor scans. The True Way was prepared to defend their installation on the planet below, but it was better if no one detected their presence, especially Cardassians loyal to the Detapa Council. Mariah IV was one of several secret outposts the True Way had been building on since the late 2370s, and by now it featured prominently in their plans. The scientific outpost on the planet was their main research and development facility both for weaponizing the harmful isotopes into probes and for refining them to make them more effective. Given its clandestine importance, the True Way was eager to keep its location a secret from the rest of the Alpha Quadrant for as long as it could.

Parper's Emporium warped into the outer fringes of the Mariah System and went to impulse, staying under cloak to avoid detection. Its shields inoperable while cloaked, the ship approached the asteroid field between the fourth and fifth planets to begin searching for the sword of Kahless. Flinz Parper, the ship's captain and namesake, knew by reputation that this was a backwater system, infrequently visited by Cardassian ilk, and he didn't expect any company, but he was still cautious. At any rate, Mariah IV happened to be on the far side of the nearest star at the time, so he didn't detect the enemy fleet. However, the True Way noticed the subspace ripples from the Emporium's warp drive even though they couldn't directly detect any ships on their sensors, and they dispatched a Jem'Hadar attack vessel to investigate.

"Contact on approach, Mr. Parper," one of the Orion bridge personnel said as he noted the Jem'Hadar ship on sensors. "Our cloak is active, and there's no indication they've seen us."

Flinz resettled himself in his chair, relieved. He hadn't expected to find any other ships in the system, but it wouldn't be good to salvage the sword under someone else's scrutiny.

"What kind of ship is it?" he asked, curious.

The sensors operator rechecked his scanners and frowned slightly. The approaching ship was still a long way off, and there was an unusually large amount of background radiation in the system. It was difficult to make sense of the readings.

"Looks like a small frigate," he finally said. "Can't really tell exactly what it is from here. There's a lot of sensor interference. Looks like the Mariah star's had a solar maximum recently, so the ship's running with its shields down. It's definitely not following us."

"Keep an eye on it," Flinz said nervously.

"Have you found the sword yet?"

"Not yet," the sensors operator said.

"We're still about eight minutes away from its estimated position," the helmsman added.

"Go to full impulse," Flinz ordered. "The sooner we find it, the sooner we can get out of 'ere."

Still under cloak, the Emporium flew quickly towards a distant part of the local asteroid belt to look for the famous Klingon weapon while the Jem'Hadar frigate cruised distantly past the Emporium's wake, oblivious to her passage. As it

approached the sword's location, the radioactivity in the area began to affect more than just the sensors. Communications and the viewer were staticky, and the cloak became unstable, but the Emporium pressed on. When the ship arrived at the sword's estimated location, the radiation cloud was so thick that the sensors were useless, and the Emporium was blind.

The sensors operator shook his head in frustration.

"This is impossible," he complained. "I can't resolve anything smaller than a boulder beyond half a click. Too much interference."

Flinz's face pinched up. "How do we get better scans?"

The sensors operator sighed and shrugged. "I've already boosted power to the lateral array. If I push it beyond the safety limits, the power feeds will burn out. Maybe we can scatter the radiation somehow?" he asked.

"How about a multiphasic pulse?" one of the other crewmen suggested. "Phased correctly, enough of those should counteract the background noise pretty well."

The sensors operator nodded appreciatively. "Good idea."

He turned to Parper. "What do you think?"

Flinz merely nodded without really understanding the solution. He wasn't a scientist – he trusted his crew to implement reasonable solutions to technical issues. He was sure the question was intended in deference to his captaincy, not based on his qualifications, and he was fine with that as long as it worked.

The sensors operator began tapping the interface, setting up an algorithm to cycle through various phases until it found the most effective one for cancelling out the local radiation. He was ready in less than a minute.

"Modulating the deflector...," he muttered absently, waiting for better results. "It's working. Sensor range and resolution are increasing."

"Pilot, lay in a search pattern," Flinz ordered.

The helmsman complied, and the Emporium began slowly cruising the local space, looking for the artifact's distinctive signature. Several sweeps later, they found it on the shallow, dusty surface of a large asteroid.

"I got a hit, Captain," the sensors operator reported, mild excitement in his tone.

"Helm, come to course 280 mark 55. We're heading for that large rock to port," he said.

In the fervor of finding the lost sword of Kahless, the crew neglected to notice that the Jem'Hadar frigate was cruising by on its way to rejoin the fleet around Mariah IV, having found nothing at the edge of the system. As the Emporium approached the asteroid, the multiphasic pulses from the deflector began reflecting off the asteroid's surface, rapidly creating a pulsating area devoid of background radiation around the giant rock. The field could be mistaken for a sensor ghost were it not that it was too localized and its frequency too regular to be natural. The reflections weren't normally detectable at a distance, but the asteroid was amplifying them, and the frigate was now close enough to see them. The Vorta in command ordered a course change to investigate the anomaly.

"We've got a transporter lock on the artifact, Captain," the sensors operator said.

"Good," Flinz replied, relieved. "Beam it to a secure hold."

"Yes, Sir," the operator said, keying the transporter cycle from his console.

On the nearby asteroid's surface, the ancient bat'leth shimmered with a blue radiance as it disappeared in the transporter effect and materialized in one of the cargo bays aboard the Emporium. The transition lasted just a few seconds, but it happened outside the Emporium's cloak. The Jem'Hadar frigate picked up residual traces of transporter energy on its sensors. Although the Vorta didn't know what had just been transported, he knew transporters had a very limited range. He suspected someone was in the area, but they weren't showing up on sensors. The frigate immediately started actively scanning the area around the asteroid. That got the Emporium's attention.

"Captain, we're being scanned!" the sensors operator yelled. "Aft quarter, close aboard!"

"It's that damned frigate," the helmsman added.

Flinz dared not go to full impulse to escape as those engines notoriously bled traceable ionized gas in their wake. He knew his best chance was to remain undetectable.

“Rig for silent runnin’!” he roared, frightened.

The crew immediately shut down all the auxiliary systems, including the lateral sensor array, to reduce the Emporium’s electromagnetic signature, hoping the Jem’Hadar wouldn’t notice them.

Flinz waited for several seconds while his heart pounded in his chest. The bridge crew waited with baited breath.

“Ave they seen us?” he asked timidly.

The sensors operator looked down the length of his green nose at the console in front of him.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “They’re just...sitting there.”

The Emporium had turned off its lateral sensor array to maintain a stealthy profile, so the multiphase pulses that had been keeping the local radiation at bay stopped. The radiation returned, and a particularly strong surge swept through the area. One of the couplings powering the stealth device suddenly overloaded under the strain of the increased radiation. For several seconds, the Emporium’s shape became visible before the ship’s computer rerouted power past the failed coupling to restore the cloak.

The Vorta in the Jem’Hadar attack ship saw the Emporium briefly flash through his headset’s field of view. It vanished too quickly to recognize what type of ship it was, but he knew he’d finally found his quarry.

“What was that?” he wondered, alarmed.

“Tractor that vessel NOW,” he ordered without waiting for an answer, “and contact the fleet!”

As the comm officer sent a badly garbled transmission to warn the Jem’Hadar fleet of the intrusion, the frigate began sweeping the Emporium’s vicinity back and forth with a tractor beam until it locked onto Flinz’s ship. The local radiation made that difficult, too, and the beam flickered in and out, trying to hold its target.

The tractor beam’s magnetism and erratic behavior caused the Emporium’s sensitive cloak to fail completely. She became fully visible, oriented above and away so that her ventral area faced the Jem’Hadar ship.

“They’ve locked onto us with a tractor,” Flinz’s helmsman shouted. “I’m trying to break free, but it keeps reestablishing itself. We need to take it out so we can escape.”

Thinking frantically, Flinz remembered that Jem’Hadar ships couldn’t operate shields in heavy radiation, and, in a brief moment of inspiration, he got an idea.

Amarie-class ships were based on a very flexible design, capable of carrying various weapon pods as long as the ship had enough spare power to use them. Flinz had arranged to have the Emporium equipped with a large-bore kinetic cannon on its aft dorsal section. It used big slugs that could do severe structural damage if they scored, but it was inaccurate at best, and it reloaded slowly. Still, it was more than capable of disabling a ship if its shields were down.

“What’s their bearin’?” Flinz asked quickly.

“Eight o’clock low,” the sensors operator answered loudly.

Flinz turned next to the two stations in front of the bridge dais, his tone surprisingly assertive and authoritative, even in his own ears.

“Pilot, plot an escape vector out of the system, and prepare to go to full impulse.

“Tactical, raise shields, and lock weapons onto their tractor beam emitter. Fire on my command. As soon as we’re clear, get that cloak back up.”

Unaccustomed to hearing him sound like an experienced captain, the Orions anticipated how their peril might be averted if his plan worked. Their faith tentatively restored, the crew obeyed his orders quickly and unquestioningly.

Aboard the Jem’Hadar ship, the Vorta commander stared intently at the little visor on his headset. The sticky display made it hard to see the Emporium clearly. Frustrated, he tapped the headset with his fingertip and momentarily took his attention away from the other vessel to address one of his officers.

“Can’t you clear this up?” he complained. “I can’t see a thing.”

As the other officer began working on the problem, the Vorta turned back to the Emporium just in time to watch it roll slowly level to present its broadside profile. Fascinated, he saw the long barrel of its dorsal turret rotate quickly towards him, and he realized far too late the doom his brief negligence had wrought.

"SHIELDS!" he screamed in futility.

On the Emporium, Flinz leaned over the tactical console to watch the main cannon's targeting reticle lock onto the Jem'Hadar frigate.

*Wait for the flash, y' feckin' gobdaws*<sup>2</sup>, he thought in grim satisfaction.

He put a hand on the tactical officer's shoulder and nodded in confirmation. "Fire everythin'," he ordered calmly.

Three polaron arrays let fly with white arcs of energized



*"Wait for the flash..." (Star Trek Online)*

electrons that flashed repeatedly from the Emporium's weapons pods, striking the Jem'Hadar frigate's starboard nacelle and its strut. They ripped through the superstructure, punching a series of holes in it that burned brightly with interior fires. The slam shot cannon went off next, slightly later than expected. As inaccurate as it tended to be, that hardly mattered because the frigate was close. The Emporium trembled briefly as the big gun fired, and the Jem'Hadar's tractor beam quickly pulled the slug right into the frigate's emitter like a vacuum cleaner.

The concussion was enormous. The blast tore away the frigate's tractor beam and forward weapons array in one go, exposing the front of the saucer section to open space. Secondary explosions from the ship's torpedo magazine caused more damage as the frigate tumbled backwards, reeling wildly out of control. It struck the nearby asteroid and exploded in a brilliant shower of sparkling duranium and fiery gasses, leaving a quickly cooling funerary scar on its surface.

Per Flinz's earlier instructions, his helmsman didn't wait around to see what would happen next. The Emporium went to full impulse power as soon as the Jem'Hadar tractor beam was destroyed, and she easily cleared the blast radius before the attack ship died. The local radiation made it impossible to stabilize a warp field, and the temperamental cloak was still inoperable, but the radiation near the edge of the system was much less. The Emporium flew towards the outer two planets. Once she was clear of the radiation field, the cloak came back online, and she disappeared with the bat'leth.

### STARDATE 56758. SPYING ON THE TRUE WAY

The U.S.S. Phantom approached the edge of the Mariah System just as the Emporium was leaving. The intelligence escort was under cloak to avoid detection by passing vessels, especially those belonging to the Cardassian Union or the True Way. Rear Admiral Davir Benmata was sitting in the captain's seat, and Commander Vaalolul, his first officer, was seated to his right. The rest of his hand-picked crew, commanders all, were on duty at their bridge stations, which was standard practice when reaching a major waypoint on a mission. The admiral's orders were to investigate the Mariah System for signs of True Way activity related to the presence of weaponized anti-genetic isotopes. Task Force Theta, a large fleet of Federation warships under the experienced command of Vice Admiral Jantson, was en route and due to arrive in situ tomorrow to deal with the True Way threat. Until then, the Phantom was to stealthily surveil the area and

<sup>2</sup> Gobdaw: Noun (Irish): Dolt, idiot, moron.

prepare for the task force's arrival. Davir was also specifically instructed to avoid salvage operations in the system, but he wasn't aware if there were any.

"That's odd," Umuzoi muttered quietly as she watched the lateral sensor array from her science station. A thin line traced its way across the instrument's screen, indicative of a warp wake, but there was apparently nothing causing it. She touched a few more controls to refine the reading without using an active signal, trying to estimate what sort of warp signature she was looking at.

Vaalolul overheard that and turned to address her. "What is it, Commander?" she asked.

Umuzoi shook a stray lock of short brown hair away from her eyes.

"I think there's a ship leaving the system, Ma'am," she answered. "High warp. Course is...125 mark 0. Looks like it's headed for Bajor."

"Intel, can you identify it?" Davir asked.

Nerayerku patched in and listened to the sensor noise for a few seconds, correlating it with the list of known warp signatures in the Phantom's databanks, and the computer returned an exact match almost immediately.

"The computer says it's an Amarie-class escort registered to...Flinz Parper, Sir," she replied, turning her chair around in surprise.

Everyone on the bridge stopped for a moment in mild apprehension, not for Parper's sake but for Davir's.

The admiral had recruited Flinz "the Rat" Parper as a civilian intelligence specialist on the Phantom's prior mission. While his information had successfully led to a True Way warehousing facility on Kelvani I, Flinz had throughout the course of that operation made it no secret that he detested Starfleet. As soon as he got the chance, he abandoned Davir's away team on their recon mission to the warehouse, and never looked back. Afterwards, Davir had filed a complaint with Starfleet Intelligence about the difficulties of working with him. The crew knew how Davir felt, and they were uncertain how he'd react if he ever re-encountered the Rat.

Davir leaned forward in his chair and scratched the edge of his thin moustache in morbid curiosity. "What's Mr. Parper doing in the Mariah System? Last I heard, he was heading to Ferenginar."

"He's a long way from there," Umuzoi commented.

"Your orders, Sir?" Vaalolul asked impassively.

Davir knew Flinz's reputation as a merchant and a thief included handling exotic wares from all over the quadrant, but he knew nothing of Parper's additional mission to recover Kahless' sword. He didn't even know the famous Klingon artifact was in the Mariah System. He remembered his orders to avoid salvage operations in the area while the Phantom spied on the True Way, and he suspected Flinz's presence was somehow connected to the former. He briefly considered chasing the Emporium down to conduct an impromptu inspection of its hold to see if he was right, but he was out of Federation jurisdiction and had no probable cause to excuse doing that. In the end, his aversion to dealing with the Rat won out.

He sighed. "Keep him on sensors as long as you can," he said. "Helm, maintain course and speed."

"Aye, Sir," Mirra replied.

As the Phantom approached the edge of the Mariah System, the ship slowed to half impulse and began long-range surveillance operations. Her entry vector took her through a different part of the solar system, and the radiation clouds that had plagued the Emporium's visit were less so here. The Phantom was already rigged for silent running.

Davir turned to Umuzoi. "Preliminary scan results, Commander?"

"Scattered pockets of solar radiation are making it difficult to get accurate scans of the interior of the system, Sir, but initial surveys indicate nothing in the immediate area. We'll have to get closer to be sure."

The admiral turned to Mirra. "Helm, take us around the radiation and in towards the nearest habitable planet. If there's a base anywhere in the system, it'll likely be there or on a moon somewhere."

He looked at the intelligence officer next. "Nerayerku, open up the comm scanners, all bands. Passive only. Watch for coded bursts disguised as static."

His first-string bridge crew, the best officers he'd ever worked with over the years, went to work analyzing every signal they could find that might indicate the presence of enemy vessels. The Phantom cruised under cloak past the two gas giants and their many moons with no results. The radiation got more intense as they approached the asteroid belt, but most of it was on the solar ecliptic, and Mirra got them past it without risking the cloak's integrity. The Phantom soon began picking up chatter from the vicinity of the fourth planet. The True Way was indeed using the ambient static in the area as a carrier wave for its short-range radio transmissions. Indications were that a sizeable fleet was communicating with at least one base on the surface, and the patterns matched known True Way ciphers.



*U.S.S. Phantom approaching Mariah IV*

"Maintain silent running, and begin recording on all channels," Davir ordered. "Put us in high equatorial orbit, and see if you can locate their base."

The Phantom moved invisibly into position and continued passively recording everything it could. Visually spying out the enemy vessels was easy enough, but finding the enemy base was harder as it transmitted only intermittently. Thick layers of carbon dioxide clouds covered most of Mariah IV's inhospitable surface, and the planet's strong electromagnetic field tended to refract sensor signals. Using active sensors to resolve those issues would have given away the Phantom's presence and position. Finally, the star's recent solar maximum was exciting the particulate matter in yje area, making opaque nebulas all over the system.

Then Nerayerku found two satellites the True Way had deployed so their base and ships could communicate using the planet's natural interference as a carrier wave. With Umuzoi's help, she patched into the closest one and began using it to triangulate the base's location. The patch also gave the Phantom clandestine access to the True Way's encrypted transmission logs, and she began downloading them via one of the satellite's unprotected maintenance routines to avoid tripping any security measures to her espionage. Bandwidth was tight that way, so progress was slow, but that's what the situation offered, so she let the download run in the background while the ship's computer stored and decoded the logs. Most were ordinary, but some of them were insightful, and she eventually began to understand the big picture.

## STARDATE 56761, THE KLINGON CONNECTION

The next morning, Admiral Benmata called an intelligence briefing to review their recent findings. It was held in the admiral's office as the Phantom didn't have a proper briefing room. It was crowded, so the other bridge officers and the ship's security chief stood around the room. Davir sat at his desk while Nerayerku stood at the LCARS wall console near the door. Everyone was eager to hear what she'd discovered, and she was just as anxious not to disappoint.

She activated the computer display behind her, and it showed a tactical map of the planet and the ships in orbit.

"Their base is on a peninsular extension on the subtropical coast of one of the northern continents," she began, "probably because the planet's climate is more temperate there. It's rather small, from what we've been able to determine using passive scans. There are data bursts at irregular intervals from the surface to the flagship in orbit, but the verbal traffic is frequent enough. There's a small garrison of Jem'Hadar and Cardassian troops at the facility. Around 40 scientists are on site, working in shifts to refine their research on weaponizing the anti-genetic agent. The True Way has managed to deploy the agent into probes, and they're working on putting it into a torpedo, but there's no evidence they've succeeded yet. They've already air-tested the probes on the uninhabited moon of Mariah III because it has an atmosphere. We downloaded the test results; the weapon completely destroyed the moon's biological ecosystem in

hours, and the anti-genetic isotope was still efficacious over a week later. As far as Umuzoi and I can tell, nothing organic will ever evolve on that moon again. That's the extent of what we've been able to discover about the True Way presence here from analyzing their logs."

She paused to update the computer, and the display changed to a Cardassian officer's portrait.

"Let's talk about the True Way's leadership. Their naval assets are coordinated in council by a legate named Oran Marek, an experienced flag officer from the Dominion War. He's not presently in the Mariah system, as far as we can tell, but there's a Vorta on the flagship here in orbit and another in charge of the base below. While that's not unusual, we discovered something interesting. In trying to determine their roles, we came across several transmission logs referencing someone the Cardassians simply call 'His Eminence.' It's not the Vortas because they're referred to separately, and there's no evidence it's a changeling. It's unclear who this person is because he never shows his face and artificially changes his voice, but the True Way leaders consult with him regularly. He's been giving them strategic advice on the Alpha Quadrant and helping them formulate plans against Deep Space 9 and the Bajoran relationship with Starfleet. There's also indirect evidence that most of the creative intelligence behind their anti-genetic isotope came through him. He apparently knows quite a bit about xenobiology, so they think he invented it."

The news made Davir's stomach squirm nervously. He'd known for years that the True Way was a thorn in the side of the legitimate Cardassian government. He and his fellows had been reinforcing Starfleet's presence at Deep Space 9 to repel incidents involving the True Way since the end of the Dominion War in 2375, but the enemy's chronic incursions had been scattered and uncoordinated with no overall strategy. He'd no idea that the True Way was ambitious enough to plan a direct attack on Deep Space 9 or that the Federation's support of Bajor was a specific target. The strategic shift coupled with the insight into the True Way's mysterious leadership was unsettling. He wanted to inform Starfleet Command immediately, but his orders required radio silence to keep the enemy from detecting the Phantom.

"Any idea when they might make a move on DS9?" he asked apprehensively. "And what else do we have on 'His Eminence'?"

Nerayerku fidgeted a bit, a habit when she knew she didn't have a good answer.

"We've not seen that they've set a timetable for that part of their plans yet, Admiral," she said slowly. "They're discussing it, though, or at least some of the most recent personnel logs we downloaded are buzzing about it.

"As for His Eminence, it's very difficult to determine anything of value other than his advice. It seems Legate Marek came here last month to inspect the labs, and he had a subspace conversation with His Eminence about the status of the anti-genetic agent's development. We captured the transmission file, which was audio only. His Eminence used an undocumented cipher on his side to scramble the sound of his voice, but he's an adult male, that's sure, and he speaks with a low, gravelly tone. His phonetics are hard to pin down – we're still working on that."

Davir considered for a moment.

"Did the True Way trace the transmission to its source?" he asked hopefully.

Nerayerku's lips tightened as she shook her head.

"No, Sir," she answered. "It was repeated to the legate's ship from Starbase 621's subspace array."

Disappointment and regret chased each other across the admiral's face. Starbase 621 had been a Federation outpost in the Tzenketh Sector near Deep Space 9 for many years. After the Dominion War ended, it was deemed unnecessary and largely abandoned. In the time since, it had fallen into lawless hands and was now derelict, inhabited by a combination of refugees, vigilantes, thieves, and merchants from all over the quadrant. Davir and his crew had visited it a couple of weeks ago to pick up Flinz Parper. The admiral remembered feeling aghast at the starbase's poor condition and soured reputation. He'd had no idea then that its subspace transmission logs might have held clues to His Eminence's whereabouts.

*Then again, he chided himself, we didn't know the True Way had that kind of help. Besides, the array's probably in as sad a state as everything else on the base. It might not have saved anything anyway. Still, wouldn't hurt to check.*

He made a mental note to ask Captain Kurland, Deep Space 9's commanding officer, to see into the reclamation of Starbase 621's communication logs for additional evidence.

*Maybe he can do something about the general state of affairs out there as well?* he thought.

"Very well," he said, "continue your surveillance, and let me know if anything else significant turns up."

The briefing moved on to include a downloaded layout of the True Way base itself, a current personnel roster, and a detailed analysis of the anti-genetic isotope the scientists were using. The Phantom's Science Department could not make an antidote for the isotope, but Umuzoi was writing a brief about possible lines of study that might get to that. She intended to append it to the admiral's report to Task Force Theta.

"When's the task force going to get here?" she asked.

"14 hundred hours, ship's time," Losozola, one of the tactical officers, answered.

Then he looked at the admiral. "Sir," he added deferentially.

Davir nodded, acknowledging the update.

"That gives us a little over three hours to prepare. I expect all departments to be ready for combat operations by 56762.05. That's when we'll head back to the edge of the system to meet Admiral Jantson's fleet. Until then, maintain silent running. Any questions?"

There were none.

"Resume your stations," he said, and the other officers filed out of the little room.

When the office was empty, Davir turned his chair to face the desk, and touched one of the controls on its surface.

The computer chirped once in response.

"Admiral's log, stardate..." He glanced at the calendar. "56761.4."

He summarized the contents of the meeting, then he added his expectations for the upcoming union with the Federation task force.

"According to Commanders Nerayerku and Umuzoi, the True Way's isotope destabilizes and prevents molecular bonding in organic tissue, and it insinuates itself into any biological environment. As of now, we've no way to nullify it, so if they use it on an inhabited world, we're going to lose entire populations and ecosystems. The only way to prevent that destruction is to stop the weapon before it can be deployed. I expect Vice Admiral Jantson will rely heavily on our espionage efforts and continued participation in the upcoming action."

He braced his fingertips and let his mind wander for a few seconds.

"But this 'Eminence' person especially worries me," he continued. "Our lack of intelligence on outside sources supporting the True Way really tells there. Without a solid lead on that angle, I doubt stopping the True Way's use of their weapon would be enough to end this threat. Who's to say that the real source of the isotope wouldn't turn up in the Beta Quadrant? Or the Gamma or Delta Quadrants?" He sighed nervously. "We need to find that root and pull it.

"Computer, end log."

The console chirped again in response.

Davir leaned back in his chair and closed his tired eyes, letting himself rest.

Commander Umuzoi, one of the Phantom's science officers, was deeply involved in her work at one of the bridge's science stations, following orders to retrieve any additional significant information. The Phantom was still secretly patched into one of the True Way's nearby comm satellites, and by now the ship's computer had downloaded several thousand records of all sorts. She'd searched the database for any references to His Eminence, and, among other things, it had returned a conversation between him and the local True Way Vorta about possibly setting up an inspection tour of the research base below. The recording was several weeks old. She'd seen it listed before, but she hadn't had time to watch it before the admiral's briefing. She'd selected it now for analysis and was playing it back at her station.

The video was taken from the Vorta's point of view. Dominion captains normally wore a multifunctional visor that permitted them to send and receive information about their ship, including what was outside. This was essential as most

Dominion ships didn't have viewscreens. The background in the video moved when the Vorta turned to look at something, so it was a little distracting to listen to him talk to His Eminence through the visor. Umuzoi noticed the visor had no image for His Eminence, but she already knew from other records that the mysterious True Way advisor never transmitted his image, only his mechanically altered voice. It was what made his recordings especially frustrating. If she could see who was talking, she could use that to figure out if Starfleet had any additional data about him. With only his distorted voice and linguistic traits to go on, it was almost impossible to figure out who His Eminence might be.

At some point in the playback, Umuzoi heard a distant swishing sound and watched as the Vorta turned to look at the door of his bridge as though expecting someone to be there, but there wasn't. The Dominion captain turned back to the front of the bridge while he continued speaking with His Eminence. Umuzoi realized he must've heard the door open, too, and checked to see who it was. By itself, that was a completely insignificant gesture, and anyone might have easily ignored it, but Umuzoi's sharp hearing also caught the faint sound of new voices in the background. Granted, bridges always had a certain amount of background activity, there was something...foreign about these voices on the recording. Whatever they were saying wasn't in English, but the universal translator apparently missed it, probably because it was too faint to hear clearly. Since she could still hear them even though the Vorta's bridge door was closed, she suspected His Eminence's door must've opened, and she was listening to ambient noise from his side of the transmission.



Cmdr. Umuzoi discovers the Klingon connection (Star Trek Online)

*What language is that?* she wondered.

She ran that part of the recording through several filters, isolating the sound of those voices until the universal translator picked it up; it was Klingonese.

(Heavy boots.)

First voice: "I hear the enemy's throne has fresh serpent worms. Do you want to eat?"

Second voice: "No, my next duty shift starts soon."

The Klingon voices faded quickly, and she heard the door close.

Umuzoi knew that Klingons sometimes ate meal worms (called "gagh"<sup>3</sup>) as a delicacy, but the phrase "enemy's chair" confused her until she realized the computer was translating literally. Checking the linguistic database, she realized it was English for "Jagh ghogh"<sup>4</sup>, and she deduced that it was likely a name. She realized she had circumstantial evidence that His Eminence kept company with Klingons and had likely been on a Klingon ship or base. She queried the name Jagh ghogh, and the computer said it was a Negh'Var<sup>5</sup>-class Klingon warship, but it wasn't in active service with the Klingon Defense Force. The Jagh ghogh's last recorded assignment was a diplomatic mission to various Alpha Quadrant factions over three years ago. The vessel had been diverted to the Badlands and was reported lost with all hands in an undisclosed

<sup>3</sup> Gagh – Noun (Klingonese): Serpent worms.

<sup>4</sup> Jagh ghogh – Noun phrase (Klingonese): Enemy throne or enemy's throne.

<sup>5</sup> Negh'Var – Noun (Klingonese): A class of Klingon battlecruiser.

incident. There had been no replacements since with that name. Now it had apparently turned up in casual Klingon conversation less than a month ago as though nothing had happened to it.

*Something doesn't add up, Umuzoi thought, but it's got to put into port somewhere eventually.*

She searched every database in the ship's computer for additional references, but there were none. That likely meant the Klingons had given up trying to find it or that it was operating under a different flag. She suspected it hadn't been destroyed after all, but instead abandoned and later salvaged, probably illegally. Anyone who found the wreck of a Negh'Var warship likely would've told somebody about it, then either salvaged it for parts or, possibly, restored it.

*Well, just because the Klingons don't know what happened to it doesn't mean it was destroyed, she thought. Someone, somehow, found it. Now His Eminence has it or, at least, was aboard it a month ago.*

She compiled her findings into a computer file and sent it to Nerayerku, the Phantom's other intelligence specialist, for analysis, then she walked over to Nerayerku's station to discuss it with her.

"Nera," Umuzoi began by using her nickname, "I think I found the ship His Eminence is working from. Check out the file I just sent you."

Nerayerku brought it up and read the summary, raising her thin eyebrows at the Klingon references. "It's almost criminal," she whispered. She pored through the details to make sure she understood the whole of it. "Good work, Umuzoi," she said. "We should tell the admiral."

She sent the file to the little office just off the bridge. Then she stood up and went with Umuzoi to the command station where Davir was sitting.

"Admiral," she began quietly, "we need to show you something in your office." She nodded towards the door.

Curious, Davir knew his intelligence officers well enough to intuitively trust that they wouldn't ask for a private meeting unless something warranted it.

"Commander Sgiza, take over," he said to the tactical officer. Then he stood up and followed the women into his office.

Nerayerku briefly showed him the evidence Umuzoi had discovered connecting His Eminence's to the Klingons.

Davir thought it was potentially damning, and he was cautious about questionable conclusions to be drawn.

For over a decade, the Klingon Empire had been on reasonably friendly terms with Starfleet and a key ally in the Federation's alliance against the True Way and its allies in the Alpha Quadrant. Chancellor Gowron had consistently supported the Federation's efforts to counter the True Way's expansionist behavior by bolstering Starfleet's fleets with Klingon raptors if he felt he could spare them, but supply lines from Klingon space to Bajoran space were always thin and vulnerable, so the Klingons spent most of their time on convoy patrols. This didn't sit well with most Klingon captains as convoy duty tended to be uneventfully boring and Klingons prided themselves on their prowess in battle. A Klingon captain with few or no victories was a sorry excuse for a Klingon warrior. The general tenor in the Klingon Defense Force was that there was more glory to be won in combat on other fronts. The Federation was nonetheless grateful for whatever aid the Klingons could provide in the Alpha Quadrant. Without that, the Federation presence on Bajor and Deep Space 9 likely would've failed years ago. Even though Starfleet had just sent Task Force Theta to Deep Space 9, the last thing the Federation needed now was the revelation that some of their allies appeared to be connected to the True Way.

*He might be working with a rogue faction in the Empire, he thought. That's happened before. I shouldn't presume that the Klingons who are helping us are complicit, but I wonder how far this connection goes?*

He explained his caution to his officers, then asked, "Is there any way to track down where that ship's been?"

"I tried, Sir," Umuzoi answered, "but there's no record of her putting into port anywhere."

Davir frowned as that didn't make sense to him either. "It's a starship – gotta resupply it somehow," he muttered.

"She's probably being helped by the True Way," Nerayerku offered. "We've not discovered any records of her stopping here, though."

"Maybe those Klingons working with His Eminence are helping her off the record," Umuzoi suggested darkly.

“Regardless of how they’re handling that ship, we need to find it. His Eminence is one of the most prominent leaders in the True Way at this point. He’s certainly got Legat Marek’s scaly ears bent his way. Find the Jagh ghogh, and we’ll find His Eminence. I’d love to take credit for cutting off that snake’s head myself.

“I’ll include this in my report to Vice Admiral Jantson when we meet up with the task force later today.

“That’ll be all. Thank you, ladies,” he said, saluting them once in dismissal.

As they left his office, Davir leaned back in his chair, thoughtfully bridging his fingers together under his chin. He didn’t want to risk a political incident over this, but the connection to the Klingon Empire was undeniably damning. The Federation Alliance still needed the Klingons’ support to keep functioning in the Alpha Quadrant, even with Task Force Theta’s presence. Since the situation directly affected both the Alliance and the Cardassian Union, it couldn’t merely be classified as a matter of internal Klingon affairs, but openly confronting the Klingon authorities in the Alliance with this evidence might be considered an insulting accusation that could bring the Alliance to its knees and give the True Way their greatest advantage yet. That was the last thing the Alliance wanted.

*This certainly requires delicate handling, he thought, and I know just whom to trust.*

He sat up at his terminal and wrote two top secret messages: one was a log entry about the meeting he’d just had with Nerayerku and Umuzoi, which would be copied to Vice Admiral Jantson, and the other was a message to his wife of over 20 years, K’Lira Trestian, a Klingon warrior serving the Klingon High Council.

They’d met during the Dominion War when Davir was a freshly minted Starfleet captain whose Akira-class vessel, U.S.S. Tandrilüs, was supporting Starbase 621. She was a liaison officer in the Klingon Defense Force coordinating war strategies with Starfleet against the Dominion. As they worked together during the waning months of the Dominion War, he’d fallen deeply in love with her, and they married shortly after the war ended. Over the next two decades, they’d both become very accomplished flag officers in their respective militaries. K’Lira was normally on Qo’noS, but she’d been temporarily assigned as an attaché to a diplomatic mission on Cardassia Prime. Davir was grateful for her proximity.

*If anyone has the clout to bring this up to the High Council for their help, she would, he thought.* Sharing critical intelligence with the Klingons without Starfleet’s approval would’ve abruptly ended his career, so he conditioned sending his message to K’Lira upon first getting the vice admiral’s permission.

He finished programming both reports and stood up to go back to the bridge.

Suddenly, the lights turned bright red as the ship’s alert status changed. Davir leaped instinctively towards the office door, anxious to discover what was happening, and it swished open to admit a scene of well controlled chaos.

“...found your patch!” Nerayerku was snapping at Umuzoi.

“It was the only way to keep downloading their logs!” the science officer retorted.

“Jem’Hadar recon ship inbound, port quarter, close aboard,” Commander Sgiza added quietly from the tactical station, a note of suppressed nervousness in his voice.

Davir instinctively knew the espionage game they’d been playing was up. Apparently, the True Way had somehow discovered the Phantom’s electronic presence in their communications network, killed the download Umuzoi had been running, and sent a ship to investigate the area. He bounded up the short steps to the command dais and sat down in his chair.

“Tactical display,” he barked.

Losozola touched his console, and the main viewscreen changed to display a gridwork with icons representing various objects in the Phantom’s vicinity. The large one in the middle was the Phantom herself, a nearby smaller icon was the communications satellite they’d been using to spy on the True Way, and another blip below that represented the Jem’Hadar ship Sgiza had just warned them was approaching from behind.

“Reverse angle,” Davir ordered. “Split it.”

Losozola touched several more controls, and the main viewer’s display became two sections: the tactical display was in the lower half, and a visual display of the approaching ship was in the upper half.

Davir watched carefully as the incoming enemy vessel travelled quickly towards the satellite. Larger than the beetle-shaped attack ships, Jem'Hadar recon ships were shaped like a trident. He knew from experience they were well armed and came with a plethora of sensors and detection software. The Phantom's sensors showed that the enemy ship had its shields up and weapons charged, and was actively scanning the area, probably trying to detect the presence of cloaked ships like the Phantom.

"Helm, plot a speed course to Task Force Theta's rendezvous point at the edge of the system," Davir ordered.

"Tactical, maintain silent running, but stand by on shields and weapons."

As both officers complied, the tension in the room rose while the recon ship approached. It stopped behind the Phantom, putting the satellite almost directly between them, and sat there for about a minute, silently scanning across many frequencies while it reviewed the illicit download the Phantom's patch had left in the satellite's activity log. The Phantom drifted idly nearby, still cloaked, waiting to see what the Jem'Hadar would do next.

Suddenly, the recon ship put on impulse power and spun quickly upwards in a tight circle above the satellite. As it did so, it spewed tachyon bursts from its deflector dish in as many directions as it could, flooding the immediate area with faster-than-light ions. It also let fly a number of short-range, low yield torpedoes. This was a cruder attempt of the sensor tactic acting Captain Data once used to detect a cloaked Romulan fleet in 2368. The general idea was to let cloaked ships accrete residual tachyon signatures that could be seen against the background of normal radiation in the area. The effect was temporary, and there was no guarantee it would work, but there was still a lot of extra radiation floating around from the recent solar maximum, so it was worth a try. One of the torpedoes flew past the Phantom's right flank, just above her starboard nacelle, and detonated about 1,500 meters aft. The concussion was negligible at that range, but the explosion briefly fluoresced the residual solar radiation behind the Phantom, causing a symptomatic response in the tachyons still on the ship's hull. For a few seconds, the Phantom's outline became visible, then it faded as the effect dissipated.

The Jem'Hadar ship made a quick, final turn towards the Phantom.

"Drop cloak and fire at will!" Davir yelled.

"Helm, get us out of here NOW!"

The red alert klaxon screeched in the air as Sgiza charged the weapons and shields, and Mirra whirled the ship around at full impulse. The Phantom's aft weapons bank let fly with a quick spread of quantum torpedoes more intended to confuse and blind the enemy than to do any real damage. They rippled across the recon ship's incoming flight path and flashed brilliantly as they detonated like mines. One struck it cleanly on the nose, but the Jem'Hadar's shield absorbed it easily, and the recon ship barely shuddered in response, then came straight on. It was quickly joined by three attack ships firing heavy beam cannons at the escaping vessel.

The Phantom rocked, and sparks flew from one of the auxiliary consoles at the back of the bridge.

"Direct hit on the port nacelle," Sgiza reported loudly. "We're venting drive plasma. Damage control team's responding."

"Reinforce the aft shield and keep firing, Commander," Davir ordered.

"Helm, how far to the rendezvous?" he asked.

Mirra held on for dear life as the Phantom shuddered violently again. "About five minutes, Sir!"

"Shields at 40% and falling!" Sgiza yelled.

"Evasive pattern lambda four," Davir responded desperately. He had no thought of maintaining any tactical advantage at this point. The ship wasn't expected to take on four heavily armed enemy vessels. That's what capital ships were for. He'd taken this assignment on the presumption that the Phantom's main advantage was her stealth. That lost, his only priorities were to save his crew and deliver the information they'd stolen to Vice Admiral Jantson. Using subspace would've given away their position while they'd been hiding, but that didn't matter anymore.

"Nera, put all our classified data on a probe, and send it ahead," he ordered grimly. "Then send a distress call to Task Force Theta."

*What if they're too late to save us?* Nerayerku thought. She gulped, kept her misgivings to herself, and did as she was told.

The probe flew out of the forward weapons bank and darted into deep space. The Jem'Hadar saw it leave, but it was too quick to pursue. Besides, their ire was focused on the mysterious ship they'd discovered spying on them. It was obviously a new Federation design, so they were trying to capture it, not destroy it.

That distinction was lost on the Phantom's crew, though. As the ship fled to the edge of the planetary system and the protection of the incoming Federation fleet, its rear shields drained quickly away to nil despite Sgiza's attention. The lightly armored hull took an awful beating, especially around the aft weapons array. The warp core began behaving erratically, and the impulse engines were damaged, too, so her speed was dropping off. The Phantom would soon be at the mercy of the Jem'Hadar, but it was questionable if the ship could rejoin the fleet.



*U.S.S. Phantom fleeing discovery by the True Way (Star Trek Online)*

"Time?" Davir asked nervously.

"Less than a minute," Mirra answered.

The intercom chirped.

"Med Bay to Bridge," Umuzoi's voice resounded angrily from the speakers. "We've got more wounded down here than I and my nurse can treat!"

Davir immediately cut her off. "Use the hologram, Commander," he snapped. "Bridge, out!"

He closed the channel and turned halfway around in his chair to address the tactical officer.

Suddenly, the room disappeared in a brilliant flash, the rending sound of tortured duranium, and the roar of escaping atmosphere. Someone screamed. A torpedo had penetrated what was left of the dorsal shield and punched right through the bridge's ceiling at an oblique angle, blasting away the science station that Commander Umuzoi normally used when she was on the bridge as one of the science officers. It knocked away the office door just off the bridge, dove through the floor, and finally exploded on deck two. Fire erupted from the hole and set part of the bridge ablaze. Both decks lost gravity for a few moments until the computer could put up emergency force fields and reestablish environmental control.

Davir coughed himself awake, choking on fumes from burning furniture. He tried to sit up and realized he was pinned in his command chair, having had the foresight to put on his seat belt. So had the rest of the bridge crew...everyone, that is, except Commander Sgiza. The tactical station behind the command dais was one of several standing positions on the bridge, and it didn't have a chair or a harness of any kind. Davir realized he was having trouble sitting up because Losozola's unconscious body had been flung over the top of the tactical console, and he'd landed atop the admiral's back and shoulders, pinning Davir forward with his considerable weight. Davir looked forward through the thickening smoke and saw Mirra's unconscious form slumped over the helm. The flames had already engulfed the navigation station to her right, but he couldn't see if the navigator's body was still there.

"Is everyone OK!?" he yelled over the screaming klaxon and the crackling flames. "Help! I'm pinned in my seat!"

As he struggled with his harness underneath Sgiza's weight, he heard the extinguishers activate, and clouds of fire suppressant spewed into the room, but the fires around the bridge were already fierce and kept growing, feeding on the flammable components in the furniture and fixtures. He began to feel faint as the available oxygen dropped quickly. He grunted and groaned, straining his fingers at the seat buckle that stubbornly refused to release under pressure.

Someone gripped his arm, and he shifted enough to see Sgiza's large, bruised face now awake and looking at him. "Loso!" Davir exclaimed, startled and grateful. "You're alive!"

The tactical officer pointed weakly upward, and Davir looked at the ceiling. A forcefield flickered in the giant hole left by the Jem'Hadar torpedo as it held in the bridge's atmosphere. He could see the starfield spinning crazily past in the background as the Phantom tumbled out of control near the edge of the system. He could tell the forcefield was in danger of failing due to fluctuations in the environmental control system, and his blood ran cold. If it dropped, everyone on the bridge would die of explosive decompression.

From his vantage point, he spied Nerayerku and a security officer near the aft turbolift, trying to put out fires with hand-held extinguishers. He screamed to get their attention, and she turned, limping as she did so. Their eyes met, and the look that crossed her lovely face was stricken beyond the stress of desperation. There was courage born of fear and duty, but there was also love, a byproduct of their longstanding camaraderie. She wanted nothing more than to save her commanding officer and lifelong friend, but the fire that separated them was still out of control, and she wasn't strong enough to lift Losozola's prone body by herself.

The security officer with her also turned. He saw the fire between them, the admiral pinned in his chair, the unconscious pilot, and the fire from the navigation station burning its way across the deck towards the helm. A fateful determination flashed across his face, but then his eyes brightened.

"Computer," he yelled, tapping his comm badge, "emergency site-to-site transport! Beam the bridge crew to Med Bay immediately!"

The calm tone of the computer's voice could barely be heard over the shrill klaxon. "Site-to-site transport capacity is limited to four persons. Please specify which personnel to transport."

Although he was crestfallen, the security officer didn't hesitate. "Everyone except me," he answered bravely.

The computer chirped once in compliance as shimmering stacks of blue-white light surrounded Davir, Mirra, Losozola, and Nerayerku. In moments, they disappeared.

They rematerialized on deck four in the hallway outside the ship's hospital. The door was open as crewmembers rushed in and out, ferrying injured personnel back and forth. Umuzoi's stressed voice could be overheard amidst the commotion as she diagnosed and treated patients in triage fashion with her nurse in accompaniment.

Leaving Mirra's and Losozola's prone bodies in the hallway, Nerayerku rushed to the admiral's side to help him stand, but Davir raised himself alone, now unburdened, and brushed her attention aside.

"Get Mirra in there!" he commanded sternly. "I'll get Loso."

"Make a hole!" he yelled as he hooked his hands under Losozola's armpits, then dragged him backwards towards the Med Bay door, grunting with exertion. He noticed bloody stains on the floor, but he couldn't tell if it was Sgiza's, his, or someone else's, and he didn't care. He just hoped he was in time to save his friend's life.

Nerayerku obediently did the same with Mirra's unconscious body.

Just past the sliding door, the Med Bay had a short hallway with light gray walls that led past the nurse's station/pharmacy. To its left were a pair of well-lit circular rooms, each about 10 meters across with colorful LCARS displays on most of the walls. The main room had five narrow beds where patients could either convalesce or undergo diagnosis. The one next to that was the operating room. It seemed smaller because it had six surgical beds surrounding a squat computer console that took up most of the available space in the center. The doctor's spacious office was next to both rooms for easy access, and a large, clear partition separated it from the nurse's station outside. The



*Sickbay aboard the U.S.S. Phantom (Star Trek Online)*

Med Bay had photonic projectors in the ceiling to facilitate the Long-term Medical Hologram (LMH). The Phantom's LMH was currently patterned after Doctor Julian Bashir, formerly Deep Space 9's Chief Medical Officer and still one of the Federation's most standout frontier physicians.

On any normal day, it was an environment that fostered the calm sense of wellness one could expect from the high level of precise care readily available in a modern sickbay. Today, the place was a scene of barely controlled chaos. All the beds were full, and some patients were laying on the floor for lack of bed space. People groaned in pain from injuries ranging from cuts and bruises to burns and broken limbs. Their constant pleas grated on nerves already frayed under pressure. The air carried the slightly sweet scent of blood underneath the stench of burnt clothing and hair. The lights and LCARS displays flickered irregularly as power levels fluctuated due to the severe damage the Phantom had taken to this point. The holographic doctor was working diligently on a woman screaming in agony on one of the beds in the operating room. Umuzoi was tending to patients in the diagnosis room as her nurse handled new arrivals, both working in triage fashion, their uniforms and haggard faces blotched with reddish stains.

Umuzoi barely looked up as Davir dragged Losozola through the door. She wasn't surprised or relieved at his arrival – she knew he'd survived worse situations than this. She was just glad he was apparently still able to function.

Her immediate attention was otherwise occupied trying to close a deep gash in the leg of the semi-conscious patient on the bed in front of her. Reaching into the gaping wound, she pinched shut a bleeding artery, and sopped up the remaining blood with a surgical sponge to check for other damage.

The patient groaned loudly in response despite his stupor.

"Get me an arterial regenerator, or I'm gonna lose this one!" Umuzoi shouted at the nurse.

"Put them down anywhere," she added to Davir and Nerayerku, referring to Mirra and Losozola. "I need everyone with any medical training to lend a hand somehow!"

The admiral and the commander obeyed her instinctively, Davir working on one of the other crewmen lying on the floor with internal injuries while Nerayerku took over assessing new arrivals as the nurse went to help Umuzoi.

A light tremor unexpectedly went through the superstructure, and the ship suddenly stopped tumbling. Davir's gaze snapped up, dawning recognition on his face.

*Tractor beam, he realized. They're taking us back to the planet!*

His mind instinctively went back to the nightmare he'd had over a month ago while the U.S.S. Bruntal was being repaired at DS9, and the same sense of foreboding he'd felt then upon awakening filled his heart again. The Bruntal was a familiar command and a reliable vessel. It always hurt to lose a fine ship, even temporarily, but it was especially damning to lose a young one like the Phantom. Her special features made her unique in Starfleet service, and, out of all the

Federation fleets in the Alpha Quadrant, Starfleet had specifically chosen Davir's as the Phantom's first tour of duty. She'd been a boon to both the Federation's interests in the quadrant and to his personal career path, and he'd grown to admire the Phantom in the short time he'd commanded her. A hardened nugget of pride arose at the thought of losing her to the Jem'Hadar, and he gulped against the angst of such a strong strategic asset in enemy hands. His brow furrowed and his breathing quickened.

*Not on MY watch!* he thought, shoving his fear aside angrily.

The desperately injured crewman Davir'd been attending touched his arm, and the admiral started. He looked at the crewman's eyes and was even more surprised to see the shade of something very different there: a peace born of fateful acceptance mixed with obvious concern.

"Save the rest, Admiral," the crewman whispered faintly. He convulsed as he coughed painfully, spitting blood on his uniform. Then his body slowly slumped down, and he quit breathing.

Davir froze, thunderstruck by two things.

He didn't recognize the dead crewman and couldn't remember his name. The Phantom's crew complement was a little over 100, and he knew it wasn't reasonable for any commanding officer to remember everyone on board his ship by sight and name, but when one of them died in one's arms, it somehow seemed respectful to try anyway. His inability to specifically recall the deceased crewman made Davir feel guilty, as though his failure somehow made him complicit in the crewman's passing. Another unreasonable conclusion, true, but that's how he felt.

*If Vaal were here, she'd probably tell me how illogical I'm being and why,* he thought in humorless remorse.

He briefly wondered where the ship's first officer was. In battle situations, Vaalolul's place was normally on the bridge, but this whole situation had sprung upon them so suddenly that she may not have had a chance to get to her station when the ship went to red alert, or something else prevented her.

The second thing was that the crewman's dying words had restored Davir's priorities. The admiral had been myopically focused on keeping the ship out of enemy hands, and that was still Davir's concern, but commanding officers were duty bound to protect both their ship and their crew. Obviously, the crewman knew and had accepted that his life was over. He may even have believed that the Phantom herself couldn't be saved under the circumstances. "Save the rest" meant the rest of the crew, which Davir now remembered was his highest priority. He felt cold inside at the prospect of losing the Phantom, but the ship was badly battered, the bridge was wrecked, the Jem'Hadar were towing them back to Mariah IV, and Task Force Theta was late, possibly too late. The admiral's prospects were few.

*At least our data probably made it out of the system,* he remembered.

*I can't let them have this ship, though. It's too valuable.*

He rose slowly to his feet, renewed determination on his face, approached one of the LCARS consoles on the wall, and touched the intercom.

"Med Bay to Engineering, this is the Admiral. Pid, what's our status?"

For several moments, there was no response. Then the other side of the comm channel opened, and he could hear the shrill echo of the alert klaxon, a crackling fire, and people shouting in the background. A woman's voice sounded instead, her calm, even tone at odds with the situation, as though she were trying to ignore what was happening.

"Admiral, this is Vaalolul. Commander Antyniv is indisposed.

"The ship's in dire condition, Sir, due to multiple hull breeches. Our bridge is destroyed. The warp core is unstable, and the impulse engines are damaged, but we do have thrusters. We're on emergency power only. Weapons and shields are offline. We have one working transporter and a few hours of life support at best...not that I think that'll make any difference at this point.

"What are your orders, Sir?" she asked.

Davir quickly checked the LCARS readouts for some extra information. Long-range sensors were also damaged, but short-range sensors were still operable. The last reading taken showed the Jem'Hadar recon vessel in close proximity to maintain its tractor beam, but the attack ships were keeping their distance in case the Phantom's warp core went

critical. The Phantom was very close to the edge of the planetary system. There was still no sign of the task force, but without a long-range scan he couldn't tell if it was on approach.

*Jantson's our only hope now*, he thought.

*We're still under tow, and you can't do better than half-impulse like that. It'll take the Jem'Hadar a little while to drag us all the way back at that rate*, he realized. *There's still time.*

"Commander, the Jem'Hadar are tractoring us back to the planet. Internal sensors are spotty, and without our shields they could already be aboard. We can't let the enemy capture the Phantom or her crew. I'm ordering all hands to abandon ship. I want you and Pid to rig the warp core to explode in 30 minutes, then muster everyone to the escape pods. Head for the edge of the system and await retrieval by Task Force Theta," he ordered. "Do you understand?"

Everyone in sickbay heard that, too. Most stopped what they were doing and looked up, frightened, forlorn, and shocked. Then they looked at each other, realizing some of them were unlikely to make it after all.

"Yes, Sir," Vaalolul replied in the same level tone she always used. "Good luck, Sir," she added, then closed the channel without waiting for his reply.

Davir touched the comm control again, and a yeoman's whistle sounded ship wide. "Attention, all hands, this is Admiral Benmata. This ship will self-destruct in 30 minutes. There won't be any additional warnings. Abandon ship. I repeat, abandon ship. Use the ventral escape pods. Out." He closed the intercom, then whispered, "God help us."

He turned from the panel and saw everyone looking at him. He met their collective gaze with the steely grit that had earned him his first captaincy and carried him forward throughout his career.

"You heard me," he shouted grimly, "and no one's being left behind! If you can walk, help somebody who can't. We'll use the transporter to move the immobile ones to the escape pods. Now, get going!"

Umuzoi stormed up, her ire at the desperate situation finally getting the better of her. "Wait," she yelled, "what about those under surgery? We can't move them, even with the transporter. The LMH says they'll die!"

Davir faced her as calmly as he could. "You're the ship's doctor, Commander," he said coldly, "and you outrank that program in there. Make necessary decisions, that's an order, but make them fast because the warp core won't wait, and I guarantee you the Jem'Hadar won't care about your patients."

Umuzoi pinched her lips into a thin line and glared at him wordlessly.

Davir softened, gently put his bloody hands on her slim shoulders, and looked deeply into her angry green eyes. "Help save the rest of the crew, Umuzoi," he begged quietly.

She stood there for several moments, her duty warring inwardly with the futility of the situation, the struggle evident on her face; duty soon won. She shook him off, whirled about, and stalked back into the sickbay, barking orders to facilitate evacuating the least injured patients first.

Davir sighed outwardly. He knew it was difficult to make life and death decisions, especially under enemy threat. In the course of his career as a command officer, he'd lost many crewmembers and more than one ship, but it never became easy to make decisions that were likely to lead to either, and it didn't really help that every Starfleet member accepted the risk of death and demise with their commission. Most of the time, it wasn't fair, just fateful.

*Well, those calls never should be easy*, he reminded himself sternly. *The day it becomes easy to order someone to their death is the day our compassion dies instead.*

He paused to watch the people around him begin filing out of Sickbay, most of them helping somebody else along, heading hurriedly for one of the lower decks and a chance to escape becoming a casualty of the situation.

*How many cause of death logs will I make to report this?* he wondered morbidly.

He shook his head to clear it, then turned quickly to help a nearby crewmember get up and limp out, following the crowd to deck 5 where most of the escape capsules were.

## THE BATTLE OF MARIAH IV

A few minutes later, pods began spilling out of the lower half of the Phantom's saucer section, each holding up to six crew. The ship's saucer hid them from view as the Jem'Hadar recon vessel was dragging the Phantom from behind and above, and the attack ships were already well on their way back to Mariah IV. There were enough pods to accommodate most of the crew, but some pods were carrying medical equipment for the severely injured, and those left first. The rest of the crew, including the command staff, were forced to use the remaining escape pods on the dorsal side of the ship, which was readily visible from the Jem'Hadars' point of view.

The recon vessel let go of the Phantom, and began using a transporter instead, trying to snare as many escape pods as it could.

The Phantom's crew took evasive action to the extent that they could, making generally for the edge of the system. While Federation escape pods were unarmed, they were small and quick, and the combination made for a group of very elusive targets. The Jem'Hadar transporter flailed about and managed to beam out the crew from only a few pods before the rest got out of range. Unfortunately, Davir's was one of those captured.

The admiral, Nerayerku, and several other Phantom personnel materialized on the recon ship's transporter pad. They were immediately surrounded and disarmed by a squad of Jem'Hadar soldiers. Their comm badges were removed and disabled, and the lot of them were hustled off the pad, down a hall, and straight to the brig. None of the Jem'Hadar apparently noticed or even cared that they'd captured a Federation flag officer and, likely, one of his bridge staff. There were several other Federation prisoners already in the little holding room, which was now quite crowded, but, aside from some minor cuts and bruises, none of them appeared to be seriously injured.

Meanwhile, the recon ship had recalled its escorts to track down the other escape pods and deal with the rest of the Federation crew. The attack ships were much smaller than the recon vessel and faster, more capable of handling that task. The Phantom's crew watched in fear as the attack ships closed in quickly, certain they weren't going to be so lucky as to be captured like the admiral.

The True Way ships spread out as they approached, their weapons warming up to the fray once more.

Then the table turned. A strong subspace disturbance appeared just behind the cloud of escape pods as Task



*Vice Admiral Jantson and Task Force Theta arrive in the nick of time (Star Trek Online)*

Force Theta's vanguard finally arrived, dropping out of high warp right on top of the nascent battle. The huge bulk of the U.S.S. Sovereign, easily several times the size of the recon vessel, never mind the attack ships, dominated the foreground, flanked by the Armitage-class U.S.S. Cheron and U.S.S. Akagi. The rest of the vanguard was arrayed behind that, and long-range sensors indicated that the other two wings would arrive very soon.

The attack ships slowed noticeably, now uncertain in the face of very different odds, but they had their orders, and they were stoically dedicated soldiers. The ships came on.

On the Sovereign's bridge, Vice Admiral Tanis Jantson rose to her full five and a half feet. Her wiry frame was taut with suppressed tension because she'd been watching the battle unfold on long-range sensors as her flotilla approached

under cloak. The task force had been at red alert since receiving the Phantom's distress call, and it had been all she could do to coax as much speed as she could without burning out a ship's warp drive manifolds. Finally in the thick of it, she wondered if she'd arrived too late. The hard glare in her brown eyes would've burned a hole through the enemy's duranium hull if it could get through the Sovereign's main viewer. She stepped between the navigation and helm stations, then glanced back at her communications officer.

"Ship to fleet," she said, indicating that she wanted to address every vessel in the area.

"Attention, this is Theta One. Stand by for rescue – we're engaging the enemy!" she said loudly.

"Captains, launch your fighters, then rescue those pods," she ordered the two escort carriers.

"Quito, prepare to receive survivors," she added to the hospital ship she'd brought with her.

She made a cut-off motion across her throat to indicate closing the channel, then turned to the Sovereign's Bolian helmsman. "Put us between those ships and the pods, Lieutenant, and extend the shields as far as you can," she said. "They'll have to shoot past us to get to them."

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied, touching his console to affect her instructions.

Several dozen Peregrine-class fighters poured out of the hangar bays of the Akagi and the Cheron. They formed up in pairs and quickly engaged, their agility easily more than a match for the enemy attack ships. Brilliant green and blue arcs of phaser and polaron fire flashed across the intervening space and blasted into the enemy shields, draining them off. The True Way fought back gamely and managed to destroy several fighters, but the sheer speed of the Peregrines kept them ahead of most of the enemy's weapons. It wasn't long before the True Way ships started taking hull damage. One of the Jem'Hadar attack ships rolled hard left, trying to evade four fighters approaching from that side. Unfortunately, another pair of fighters let fly with a barrage of photon micro-torpedoes that ripped right through what was left of its shields, and the bridge took a direct hit. Its control room destroyed, the Jem'Hadar vessel spun wildly about, and the flanking quartet of fighters quickly finished it off. The remaining two attack ships were soon disabled and left burning in space.

Meanwhile, the Akagi and the Cheron tractor all the pods they found into their hangars and began beaming the rescued personnel directly to the hospital ship behind them.

Once the enemy attack ships had been dealt with, the Vice Admiral turned her fleet's attention to the recon ship, which had meanwhile made some progress towing the injured Phantom and her captured officers back to Mariah IV. The recon ship was approaching the asteroid belt, dragging its prize behind at half impulse, so it didn't take long to catch up at flank speed.

Tanis had been informed that most of the Phantom's crew were being treated aboard the Quito, but some 20 officers and crew, including Rear Admiral Benmata and Commander Nerayerku, were not among them. Not willing to assume the worst, she suspected they'd been beamed aboard the recon ship before the Sovereign arrived.

*I can't simply destroy it – if they're aboard, we have to save them first,* she thought.

"Beam weapons only," she advised her tactical officer. "Drain their shields so we can get our people off of there."

The Sovereign bore down on the recon ship quickly, letting fly with six of its phaser banks, powerfully scoring direct hits all over the recon ship's aft shields. The enemy ship turned off its tractor beam, presumably to divert power to its defenses and increase its maneuverability. The Phantom's burning hulk continued freefalling towards the asteroid belt, but even as the Sovereign and her escorts attacked the recon ship, the rest of the True Way fleet at Mariah IV arrived to assist its fellow and tip the odds back in their favor.

"More enemy ships in range!" the Sovereign's tactical officer said.

"What've they got?" Tanis asked, shifting nervously in her chair.

"Short-range sensors show three heavy cruisers and, I think, eight escorts," he answered. "It's hard to tell with all the solar radiation in the area. Time to intercept...." He re-checked his console. "...Less than a minute, Ma'am."

Now it was the Federation's turn to pause. True Way cruisers were among the heaviest and most well-armed capital vessels in the quadrant. Admiral Jantson was a seasoned flag officer, but facing down one battleship was enough

to give even the most stalwart captain a reason to negotiate first and always have a retreat option available. Being outnumbered and outmatched by a True Way flotilla wasn't in her tactical plan for this engagement.



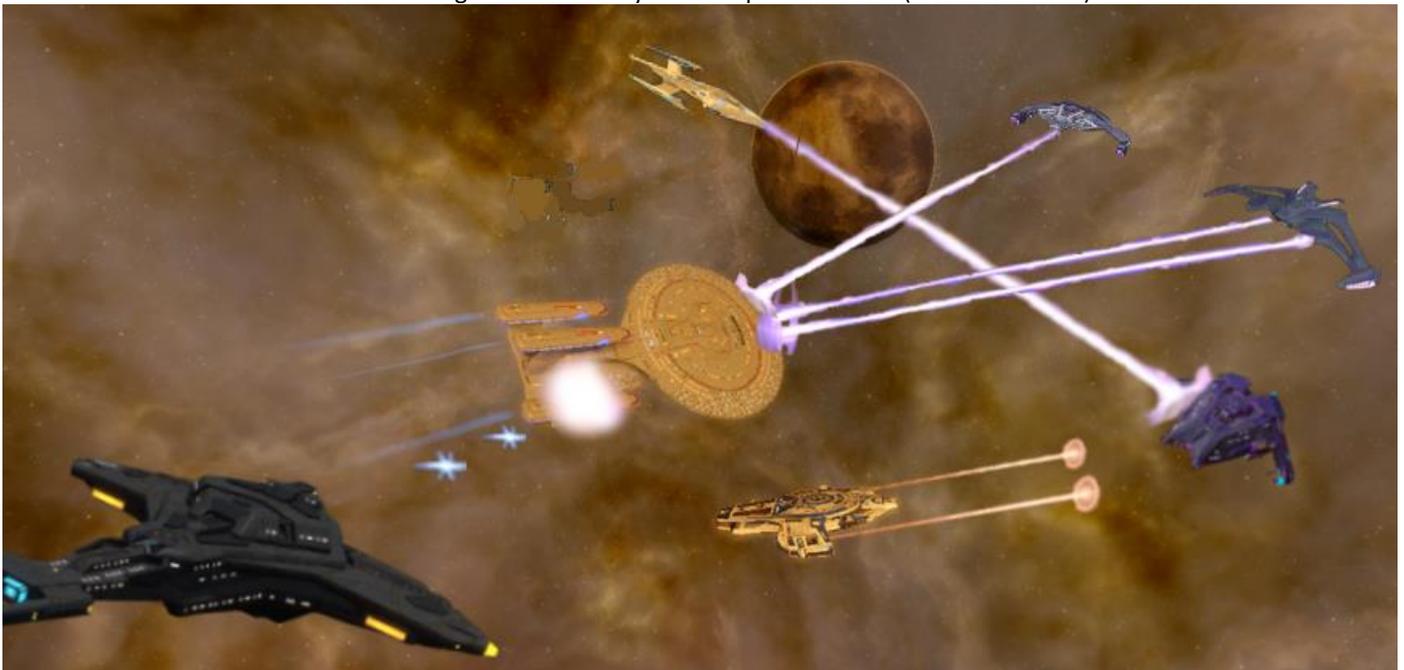
Wings 2 & 3 arrive in the Mariah System (Star Trek Online, E. Villarreal)



V. Adm. Tanis Jantson (Star Trek Online)



U.S.S. Sovereign vs. a True Way battleship with escorts (Star Trek Online)



Theta 2 vs. a True Way battle group (Star Trek Online, bberge1701)

"Wings Two and Three..., where are they!?" Tanis demanded to know, desperation edging her tone.

“CHECK SIX, THETA ONE!” someone shouted over a ship-to-ship channel, which her tactical officer had left open so the admiral could hear chatter from the ongoing battle.

In response, a very large subspace disturbance rippled through the vicinity behind the Sovereign: two Galaxy-class dreadnoughts and about 20 Armitage, Valiant, and Dauntless escorts dropped out of warp next to the battlefield. The Federation now had the upper hand in terms of numbers, not counting fighter support, but True Way battleships were still larger and even more heavily armed than Federation cruisers, effectively leveling the odds.

“Thetas, engage at will. BRING IT!” Tanis ordered, glaring aggressively at the tactical display on her viewscreen.

“Tactical, keep draining that recon ship’s shields, and have assault teams stand by in the transporter room.”

Each wing took a True Way capital ship and its escorts, bravely standing toe to toe against the best the enemy had available, and the battle of Mariah IV began in earnest. The Sovereign, being the largest Federation vessel, naturally drew most of the enemy’s negative attention at the outset, and several torpedo barrages rocked the ship as the Jem’Hadar let fly with everything they had in her direction, trying to kill her quickly. The Sovereign’s shields buckled somewhat under the weight of fire, and auxiliary systems reported damage, but the shields held. The Sovereign returned fire using a combination of rapidly cycling phasers and both quantum and photon torpedoes at the foremost Jem’Hadar dreadnought. Some of the nadeon radiation from the phasers bled through the dreadnought’s shields, causing key systems to randomly go offline, including the targeting sensors. Jem’Hadar ships didn’t normally coordinate sensor readings amongst themselves, so that ship went blind for a few seconds. The Sovereign’s tactical officer took advantage of the opportunity by spinning the Sovereign around so that its aft torpedo bank faced the blinded ship, then let fly with a spread of torpedoes aimed at the enemy’s engines, all the while continuing to drain its shields with additional phaser fire. It worked stunningly well. The dreadnought’s shields failed next, and both of its nacelles and its drive section took multiple direct hits. An EPS main ruptured in the engineering area, spewing plasma and deadly radiation into that deck. Other damaged systems began to cause secondary explosions that rippled throughout the ship. The nacelles flickered and went dark as the engines automatically shut down for safety, so the dreadnought was effectively knocked out of the fight.

The Sovereign immediately turned its attention back to the still retreating recon ship it had been chasing, but that ship had moved to the back of the Jem’Hadar formation and was now too well protected to pursue. The enemy escorts were moving to defend their disabled dreadnought, and the Sovereign was hard put to withstand or out-maneuver their combined onslaught. Her shields began to buckle even more, and she started taking more damage. Admiral Jantson ordered her own escorts to close ranks and for the light carriers to launch more fighters. The additional support took some of the pressure off her ship, and the fight evolved into a messy slugfest with the Sovereign in the middle.

The other two Federation wings had more mixed results. Both Galaxy dreadnoughts were heavily damaged after several minutes of repeatedly exchanging torpedo salvos with the enemy capital ships, but the Federation’s escorts were handily taking it to the enemy’s support ships, even without fighters, destroying four True Way ships while suffering the loss of only a few of their own. Both Galaxy vessels were close to being disabled, but still gamely throwing phaser blasts into the enemy’s shields, trying to weaken them to the point of failure. The True Way battleships weren’t having it, rotating their shield frequencies and borrowing power from every non-essential system they could tap to shore up their weakening weapons and defenses. It was devolving into a matter of energy depletion and damage control effectiveness. Federation crews were generally trained better at the latter, but Jem’Hadar warships usually tipped the scales at the former.

Wing Two’s Galaxy dreadnought let fly with a large spread of quantum torpedoes aimed exclusively at the battleship it was attacking. Most scored directly into the enemy’s front shield, severely weakening it, but it didn’t fall. In return, several Cardassian destroyers returned torpedo volleys and disruptor fire of their own into the Galaxy’s ventral shield, burning through the shield’s remaining power and scoring hits on the engineering hull and starboard nacelle. The ship shook terribly under the punishment, and the nacelle went dark almost immediately as the ship’s power distribution system took heavy damage. Before the Galaxy’s tactical team could reinforce the damaged shield, the Jem’Hadar battleship added a combined barrage of its own into the same vulnerable area. The nacelle snapped off at the top of its

strut, slowly rolling away in a cloud of stray plasma and shattered debris. It bounced off the central nacelle as it went by, causing only superficial damage there, but it exploded before it could get outside the shield's perimeter. The fractured Broussard collector detached and shot forward, striking the starboard impulse engine's emitter vanes on the back of the saucer section. The exhaust manifold right behind the vanes crumpled and instantly caused the engine to shut down. The Galaxy's mobility and power production were severely curbed, its only power reserves being the two remaining impulse engines and the ship's batteries, which was not enough to sustain the ongoing battle. The Federation escorts closed ranks as the dreadnought backed slowly off under partial impulse power, but Theta Two was knocked largely out of the rest of the fight.

The enemy battleships doubled down on Wing Three, assaulting the remaining Galaxy-class vessel and its escorts with everything they had left. That temporarily took the heat off of Theta One, and Admiral Jantson's emergency response teams worked quickly to affect repairs to the ship's damaged systems. It took only a couple of minutes to restore the shields and weapons, but power distribution and the ship's structural integrity field were still only partially available. There simply wasn't time to do anything more because Theta Three soon sent a distress call to the rest of the task force.

Admiral Jantson responded quickly to the situation. While Wing One's escorts helped mop up what was left of the True Way's smaller vessels, she ordered her ship to stand between the Jem'Hadar battleships and Theta Three, forcing the enemy to risk going through the Sovereign to get to the remaining Galaxy dreadnought.,

The True Way made several spirited attempts to flank the Vice Admiral's ship, but at that point Task Force Theta easily outnumbered the remaining Jem'Hadar and Cardassian ships, and the enemy's capital vessels couldn't defeat the combined effectiveness of the USS Sovereign and her escorts. Thetas Two and Three were too well guarded, and the Jem'Hadar eventually retreated towards the asteroid belt, intent on regrouping at Mariah IV to defend their base from what would surely be a ground assault next.

As the enemy broke formation to return to the planet, Vice Admiral Jantson called a cease fire to give her flotilla a similar chance to review the situation and recover from the battle. Theta Two was not warp capable, had only limited impulse power, and was operating on reserves with crippling damage to some of its essential systems. It would have to be towed and escorted back to Deep Space 9 for extensive repairs. Thetas One and Three were somewhat damaged but still capable and battle ready, and most of the Federation's escorts were in a similar state.

"Wing Three escorts, take Theta Two back to Deep Space 9," she said, consolidating the task force. "The rest of you are now assigned to Wing One." She made a few adjustments to prepare her assault on Mariah IV.

"Task Force Theta, this is Theta One. Affect your repairs as you follow us in," she ordered. "Let's end this."

The remaining Federation ships, in various degrees of readiness, formed up around the Sovereign and Theta Three, crossed the asteroid belt, and moved towards Mariah IV, closing on the True Way base and its remaining fleet.

## IMPRISONED ON MARIAH IV

Two Jem'Hadar soldiers pulled a struggling Davir Benmata into a small office on the True Way base and threw him into a free-standing chair. It toppled, dumping him unceremoniously to the hard floor. He tried to get to his feet to attack the guards, but his right hip and ankle had been damaged by the fall. He grunted in pain and paused. Looking up, he saw both guards had their handguns trained on him. From the grim expressions on their scaly faces, he guessed that their weapons were not set on stun, and any overt aggression would be countered with deadly force.

"Try it, Federation pig, just once," one of them growled menacingly. "See what happens."

Davir prudently decided not to risk it. Instead, he gingerly stood up and straightened the fallen chair. Sitting slowly into it, he never took his eyes off the guards as they, in turn, watched him just as carefully.

"So, when's lunch?" Davir asked in feigned humor.

The guards silently took up station next to the door, their weapons lowered but still at the ready.

Less than a minute later, Davir heard footsteps approach the room from the corridor outside, and he guessed he was about to meet his captors. The door swished open, and a male Cardassian entered followed by a male Vorta and a female Cardassian in a white smock. The Vorta stood at the forefront, and the Cardassians stood behind him.

“Rear Admiral Davir Benmata,” the Vorta began in a contrived, almost conciliatory tone, “how unexpected to find you here, so far from the Bajor Sector. And I wonder why?”

Of course, Davir knew better than to be goaded so easily. This was just the opening salvo. He’d been caught spying on the True Way with a new kind of ship in a sector in which the Federation had no jurisdiction. He expected the Vorta already knew exactly why and wanted to discuss it, hoping the admiral would accidentally reveal something. Non-classified information was normally considered dispensable, but everything about the Phantom was classified including its existence, and he wasn’t allowed to discuss it or its mission, even under duress.

He said nothing.

“No?” the Vorta asked mockingly.

“Of course, he won’t talk willingly,” the male Cardassian said. He was wearing a Gul’s uniform. “You need to resort to...other means to get what you want.”

He looked meaningfully at the other Cardassian. “Doctor.”

Davir saw the Cardassian doctor pull a hypospray from her coat pocket as she approached. “Hold him,” she said.

The guards grabbed Davir before he could begin to struggle, and she stuck him in the thigh with it. The nozzle made a slight hissing sound as she emptied its contents, then she stepped back.

“That should keep him compliant,” she said. “Give it a minute or two before you ask him anything.” She left as the Gul and the Vorta sat down opposite Davir to wait for the drug to take effect.

After a few seconds, Davir started to swoon. His head became clouded, and his peripheral vision blurred as he found it progressively harder to think clearly. His tongue felt thick and unwieldy, and his mouth went dry. His mental defenses lowered, and his acuity weakened sharply as his head slumped. He saw the Vorta smile knowingly at the Gul and get up. Then Davir’s eyes finally closed, and he stopped remembering.

Nerayerku looked forlornly around the cell to which she and the rest of the captured Phantom crew had been transferred. It was little bigger than the brig they’d been kept in while on the recon ship, and it stank of sweat and excrement. It probably hadn’t been cleaned in months. A force field sealed the entrance, and a Cardassian guard watched them from a squat desk just beyond. Two Jem’Hadar guards patrolled the outer corridor, but she couldn’t see them from where she sat to one side of the cell.

She worried for her crewmates, especially Davir. Unsurprisingly, the True Way had recognized him on sight, and immediately removed him from the rest of the prisoners, likely for questioning. The Phantom was a new kind of Federation ship, and they were undoubtedly curious to understand its potential, but any Starfleet admiral would also be privy to the Federation’s plans in the Alpha Quadrant. She was glad the True Way didn’t know she was the Phantom’s intelligence officer, almost as knowledgeable in that regard as he was. She trusted him not to reveal any critical secrets, but she feared for his safety, and there was no telling what condition he would be in afterwards.

Their friendship went back to Davir’s time as a junior officer on the Excelsior-class U.S.S. Charleston. She’d been mindful of which officers she’d like to serve with later in her career. She’d found potential and likeability in Davir, enough to let him pursue her romantically even though Starfleet generally discouraged fraternizing among officers serving on the same crew. Their relationship hadn’t lasted, though, and they’d moved on afterwards, but they remained good friends. When newly minted Captain Benmata had been awarded command of his first ship, he’d recruited her (then a lieutenant commander) to be on his science team. At the time, she’d been concerned that he might still be carrying a torch for her. She’d been relieved to find out he was instead romantically interested in a young Klingon attaché named K’Lira Trestian. Given that, she’d taken the assignment, and had stayed with his command ever since. Now a full commander herself, she was the Phantom’s communications/intelligence officer, and she backed up the science chief, too.

The outer door slid open suddenly, and two Jem'Hadar guards dragged Admiral Benmata's limp form into the prison's foyer.

Nerayerku immediately stood up and went quickly to the cell's entry as they approached.

One of the guards saw her. "Get back," he growled, and she warily moved back a step, waving the other prisoners away from the entry.

"Open it," the guard said to the Cardassian at the desk.

The Cardassian touched a control on his desk, and the force field disappeared. Then he picked up a disruptor pistol and stood nearby.

The guards dumped Davir unceremoniously into the cell, and Nerayerku caught him as he fell into her arms, unconscious.

"Oof!" she grunted, lowering his dead weight to the floor.

The Cardassian put the force field back up, and the Jem'Hadar soldiers left.

She looked Davir over for signs of distress or injury. His face was bruised, and his upper lip was swollen and bleeding slightly, indicating he'd been beaten during interrogation. He remained unconscious, his pulse was light and thready, he was sweating, and his breathing was shallow. She lightly slapped his cheek a couple of times to rouse him. "Admiral," she said softly, then louder. "Admiral!"

He groaned a little and his eyelids fluttered, but he did not awaken.

*Did they drug him?* she wondered.

She put his head on her lap and stroked his brown hair back from his damp forehead. She leaned down until her auburn locks fell forward, shielding their faces from view. A tear slid down her grimy cheek and fell onto his, and she reached down to wipe it off with her sleeve.

"Hang on, Dav," she whispered. "I'll get help."

In the admiral's absence, she was the ranking officer amongst the Phantom's prisoners. If the True Way discovered she was the ship's intelligence officer, there was every reason to believe they'd question her next, and she was certain they wouldn't respect any accords regarding prisoner treatment. Davir's condition attested to that. She empathized, but she couldn't afford to share his situation because she was now responsible for the crew. Most of them were injured in some way from the Phantom's harrowing escape attempt, and all of them looked dejected and forlorn. The True Way apparently hadn't expended any medical resources to see to the injured, and Nerayerku's medical expertise was nil.

She gently let Davir's head off her lap and stood to approach the force field. "Hey," she called, "we need medical attention over here!"

The attendant at the desk looked up briefly, but he didn't respond otherwise.

"I said we need help with the wounded!" she yelled, frustrated. "Bring us a doctor! Please!"

The Cardassian got up and approached the cell. He glanced cautiously through the force field at the prisoners, briefly noting their physical conditions and generally downturned demeanors.

*I'll likely catch some kind of hell if that admiral dies of neglect while I'm on duty,* he thought grimly.

He stalked back to his desk and opened a comm channel. "Holding Cell Two to Medical," he said. "Have a team sent down here at your convenience. Seems some of our 'guests' need attention."

The doctor never got a chance to respond: a loud and powerful explosion suddenly rocked the entire wing.

Nerayerku stumbled to the floor, frightened and confused. The rest of the crew looked around similarly wide-eyed and scared.

"What's happening!?" one of them yelled.

Alarms echoed in the hallway, adding to the cacophony of additional explosions from all over the facility. The cell block shook to its foundation. The lights flickered as power waned, and the acrid smell of burning fixtures filled the room as smoke began leaking through the ventilation.

The guard worked his console, frantically trying to raise anybody he could on the intercom to find out what was going on and what to do, but he couldn't cut through the chaotic background chatter and static. The raucous noise from without got steadily louder.

Suddenly, the outer door to the cell block shattered with a strained crack, flinging pieces of durasteel like shrapnel into the room. The concussion knocked the guard backwards over his console, which exploded in a shower of sparks. He landed on the other side of it and collapsed in an unmoving heap. The forcefield in front of the cell flashed and disappeared, its power cut. The prisoners who could rushed towards what was left of the doorway, but Nerayerku stayed in the cell with the less mobile ones.

Two squads of soldiers dressed in Federation-style assault gear took up positions in the hallway outside as several more armed with flash-lit phaser rifles came quickly through the shattered doorway into the darkened prison. They swung their rifles to and fro, searching for Jem'Hadar.

"Federation!" one of them yelled by way of identification. "Get down!"

"Help!" Nerayerku called gratefully.

One of the soldiers aimed his flashlight towards her in response, and she blinked against its brightness.

"Over here, Sarge," he said. "Looks like we'll need the corpsman."

While a nurse attended to the unconscious admiral, the soldiers took Nerayerku and the rest of the walking wounded into the hallway where the Dominion's transporter inhibitors had no effect.

"Delta Squad to Quito, transport on my command," one of the soldiers said to the hospital ship then in orbit. "Energize!"

The transport effect shimmered around Nerayerku and most of the prisoners.

The next thing she saw were medical and security staff pouring over them on a large transporter pad aboard the U.S.S. Quito, eager to see to their needs. She stood and looked around, watching as nurses and doctors began prioritizing the escapees for treatment and ferrying them off to the ship's medical wing.

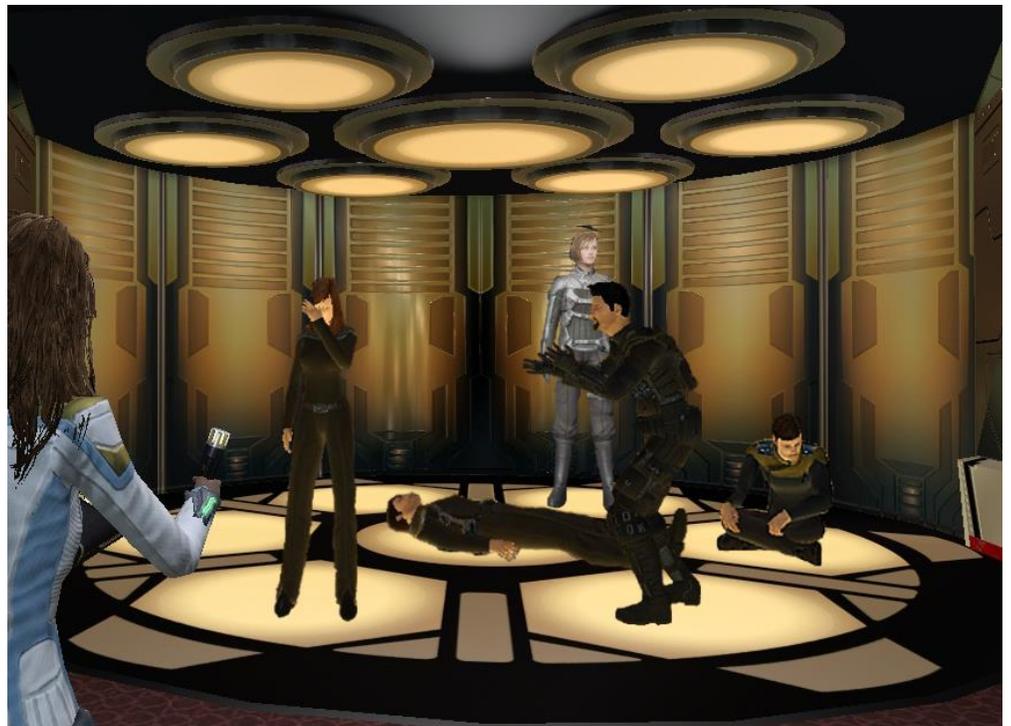
The Olympic-class Quito's transporter rooms were adjacent to the medical wing because the Quito was a hospital ship. Keeping medical resources within easy reach of the cargo bay/transporter rooms was a priority in the ship's design. The architecture was fairly austere and utilitarian, and the air had a slight tang of artificiality to it. Almost every console was multifunctional.

The crowded room was full of soldiers, medical staff and related equipment, and escapees, but Nerayerku didn't see Davir anywhere.

*Did I miss him?* she asked herself.

"Wait," she said to one of the doctors passing by, "where's Admiral Benmata?"

The doctor looked up, distracted. "What? No, I haven't seen an admiral, but we're still rescuing prisoners from the True Way. He may not be aboard yet."



*Cmdr. Nerayerku boards the U.S.S. Quito (Star Trek Online, E. Villarreal)*

He looked her over quickly, noting her disheveled and blood-stained uniform. "Are you injured, Commander?" She shook her head. "It's not mine."

He nodded. "We need the pad you're standing on to continue rescue operations. Stand over here, please." He took her gently by the arm and led her to one side of the big room near to a door that led into the hallway outside.

She sat down against the wall, grateful to finally be able to rest but still worried about her commander and friend. The doctor left to continue diagnosing new arrivals in triage fashion, and she was left to wonder what had happened in a wider sense since they'd abandoned the Phantom. It was clear the Federation had sent a fleet to rescue them and retrieve the information they'd collected. She regretted that the Phantom had apparently not survived her maiden mission. It wasn't clear if the Phantom was still intact and, if so, who had it, but it had been extremely badly damaged during its escape, so its computer banks were likely irretrievable. She hoped so as they contained classified data on many of the Federation's enemies, and she had top secret clearance.

*At least I've been rescued before the Jem'Hadar or the Cardassians could question me,* she thought.

The transporter hummed again, and she watched a small crowd of soldiers materialize on the pad, a limp form in their midst. She stared hard at the collar of the victim's uniform and saw two gold pips set in a rectangular fitting at the neckline: Admiral Benmata had arrived.

Her heart leaped in her chest, full of joy and concern, and she struggled wearily to her feet.

*Is he...?* she wondered.

A nearby doctor passed a medical tricorder over him, and his face said everything.

"He's in shock. Get him to Medical right now!" he said loudly.

Nerayerku was crestfallen: her efforts to reach him when the True Way had returned him to the prison had failed, and now it looked as though he wouldn't recover easily.

*But what happened?*

She followed the medical team across the outer hallway to one of the emergency rooms, which was already crowded with other critical patients from the prison and the Task Force. She stood outside and noticed a display on the nearby wall showing the True Way fleet, Task Force Theta, and the battle on the surface. She hadn't realized how large and well equipped the Federation's fleet was, but she was grateful it was there to handle the True Way's opposition.

A nurse rushed past her, headed back to the transporter room, and she grabbed at his sleeve as he went by. "I was with Admiral Benmata before they brought him in," she said by way of explanation. "Will he make it?"

The nurse looked haggard and worried. She was sure some of that was from the tension of the ongoing battle, but his expression didn't change, so she couldn't tell if any of it was due to her query.

"I honestly don't know, Ma'am," he replied. "He was in severe shock when they brought him in. Doctor G'Noll's with him now."

"Please let go," he asked. "I have to get back."

Nerayerku released him, and the nurse disappeared through the transporter room door.

She was left to wait and wonder about the admiral's fate as other personnel moved through the ship on their anxious errands. She recognized a few of them from the Phantom, and she was glad they'd made it, but her main concern was for her commanding officer. Given his physiological state when he'd come back from interrogation, she'd suspected the True Way had poisoned him somehow, so she was sure the medical team were working on that aftermath. Her only confidence was that Davir had a healthy immune system, and she hoped he would recover timely with proper care.

She heard voices approaching the lobby, and she overheard someone mention the name Benmata. She looked up as several medical staff walked into the room, including a female Trill wearing a doctor's comm badge atop her lab coat. Nerayerku walked up to introduce herself to the doctor, who paused as she saw the commander approach.

"Yes?" the doctor inquired quietly. "May I help you?"

"Are you Doctor G'Noll?" Nerayerku asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Are you the commander who's been asking about Admiral Benmata?"

“My name’s Nerayerku,” she replied, nodding. “Please, how is he?”

G’Noll folded her arms across her slim torso. “He was in deep shock, but he’s stable now. Do you know what happened to him?”

Nerayerku explained what she remembered about how he’d been injured during interrogation and her suspicion that he’d been poisoned.

“Cardassians sometimes use neurological agents to make people compliant for questioning, but it appears he had an allergic reaction that compromised his nervous system. The toxin had already dissipated before we brought him aboard, so there’s nothing to trace, but we’re repairing the damage now. Doctor Strauss is one of the best neurosurgeons in the Alpha Quadrant.” G’Noll put a reassuring hand on Nerayerku’s shoulder. “The admiral’s going to pull through. We’ll see how extensive the residual effects are when he wakes up so we can run some tests. Until then, there’s nothing else we...or you can do.”

Nerayerku nodded, understanding. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said. “I’m sure you and Doctor Strauss are doing your best, and that’s fine. Please let me know when he can have visitors.”

“Of course,” G’Noll answered.

“By the way,” she asked, “I understand you were aboard the Phantom?”

“I was the ship’s intelligence officer,” Nerayerku confirmed.

G’Noll took her further aside and lowered her voice a bit. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but we lost her during the fight. I’m very sorry.”

Nerayerku looked concerned. “How do you mean ‘lost?’ ” she asked.

G’Noll explained, “We chased the True Way vessel that was towing her and caught up to it just inside the asteroid field. When the Sovereign attacked, the True Way released their tow beam so they could run, but they scuttled the Phantom rather than let us have her back. I’m afraid she was destroyed.”

Nerayerku felt a pang in her chest as she momentarily grieved the loss of, in her opinion, a fine ship on her maiden mission. Then she remembered the data pod.

“Did you recover the Phantom’s probe?” she asked. “We sent it ahead as we were escaping the system. All our mission data was aboard.”

G’Noll raised her eyebrows, nonplussed. “That’s a question for security. I’m just a doctor. If they did, they wouldn’t necessarily tell me, but I’m sure the Admiral would be able to tell you that.”

Nerayerku was momentarily confused, then she recalled the task force. “Oh, you mean the Vice Admiral.”

G’Noll nodded, “Yes, Ma’am.”

“What about the rest of the Phantom’s roster?” Nerayerku inquired, steeling herself. “How many did we lose?”

G’Noll consulted a PADD she had in her lab coat pocket and smiled wanly. “The Phantom’s bridge personnel are alive and accounted for. 18 crewmembers are still unaccounted for at this time.”

Nerayerku’s heart sank again at that. Losing friends and co-workers hurt worse than losing the ship even though she’d prepared herself for the answer. At least her closest associates had survived the escape run, and she was just as grateful most of the rest of the crew had, too.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said weakly. “You’ve been helpful. I’ll let you get back to work now.”

“You’re welcome, Commander,” G’Noll replied, smiling sadly as she turned away.

Nerayerku walked aimlessly along the hospital ship’s corridors, hoping Davir would quickly and completely recover, but still uncertain of her future. The Phantom was gone, and its mission data was missing, possibly compromised. As the ship’s intelligence officer, she was its leading analyst and responsible for managing the data core’s security. She’d wiped the data core after downloading its contents to the probe they’d launched to prevent the True Way gaining access to classified Federation information about the Phantom’s mission. She wondered if the True Way had tried to recover any of it before they’d scuttled the ship and if they’d been successful. She hoped not, of course, but there was no way to confirm that hadn’t happened.

Meanwhile, the battle of Mariah IV was still raging, although the True Way fleet has been forced into disarray, most of its capital vessels destroyed or disabled. At this point, the ground battle, which had started with an orbital assault and peaked with a prison break, was winding slowly down as commandos beamed up with additional wounded and some casualties.

Nerayerku wandered between the waiting rooms and the transporter rooms for several minutes until it occurred to her to find Commander Vaalolul. She tapped the replacement comm badge she'd been given when she was rescued. "Computer, where's Commander Vaalolul?" she asked wearily.

"Commander Vaalolul is in Med Bay Five, bed six," the computer replied placidly.

She turned around, remembering that she'd seen Med Bay Five in the opposite direction.

The room was a convalescence ward with a dozen beds and a dedicated nurse station. The well-lit room smelled slightly antiseptic and was full of patients when she got there. She saw Vaalolul laying calmly in bed six with her arms folded across her stomach. The left arm was bandaged. Her breathing was slow and steady, and she appeared to be meditating or sleeping. Nerayerku couldn't tell which, but the Vulcan opened her eyes as Nerayerku approached.

"Commander," Vaalolul greeted her, whispering.

Nerayerku leaned her hip against the bedframe and glanced at the vitals on the attached biomonitor. There was nothing unusual on the readout, for a Vulcan, at least. Apparently, Vaalolul had been only slightly wounded during their episode as there was a large bandage on her left forearm, but no other obvious injuries. Nerayerku glanced questioningly at her.

"A plasma seal ruptured in Engineering, and some shrapnel gashed open my arm," Vaalolul explained softly. "The doctor says the laceration should heal quickly. The burn, not as fast."

"As long as it doesn't scar," Nerayerku quickly returned, smiling.

Vaalolul's face was deadpan. "Klingons and some humans value combat scars. I've never credited the point."

Nerayerku's grin faltered slightly. She'd built a rapport with her tactical counterpart over the last few months. Like most Vulcans, Vaalolul was outwardly emotionless and therefore hard to read. She'd always been an especially serious officer, conscientious of the quality of her work and intent on developing her career. She'd served as the Phantom's acting captain when the admiral was unavailable or indisposed, and she knew that ship bow to stern. There wasn't a more qualified command officer in the fleet regarding the Phantom class. That's why Davir had asked for her to be transferred to his bridge crew when he'd put his flag on the Phantom. Despite her obvious qualifications, she wasn't easily approachable due to her stoic personality, whereas Nerayerku was more of the bonding sort, and she'd grown to know Vaalolul. The stress of the ongoing battle outside was one thing, but losing the Phantom on the first outing stung deeply and weighed heavily on them both. They just dealt with the loss in different ways.

Nerayerku empathized with that.

"How're you holding up?" she asked.

Vaalolul easily perceived the underlying question.

"I'll recover from my injury before I recover from this mission," she said, "but I'll recover nonetheless."

Nerayerku smiled again, pleased at her honesty. As career oriented as Vaalolul was, Starfleet captaincies didn't come along very often. Although she hadn't been in command when the time came to abandon the Phantom, it hurt her to lose a ship, especially a pilot ship in a new class. It was embarrassing, potentially damaging to her career, but Vaalolul was still a capable officer and a strong-willed person. Nerayerku reminded herself that Davir had lost his share of vessels, too, and had still made the admiralty. She hoped Vaalolul was being prophetic about her recovery.

"You'll get another ship," she said consolingly.

Vaalolul didn't reply.

The Quito trembled slightly, a reminder that there was still a space battle going on. The ship was well protected, but there was still the danger that something might break through the Task Force's defenses to challenge the hospital vessel.

Nerayerku glanced up sharply.

“That’s been happening for a while,” Vaalolul said calmly. “Admiral Jantson came prepared.”

Nerayerku looked down at her friend and smiled. “Oh, I know. Not worried, just wasn’t expecting that.”

The outward danger waned as the fight wound down, but the medical frigate got busier as ground troops and prisoners continued to arrive. Nerayerku wasn’t a trained medical officer, so she felt useless there, and she wasn’t keen on waiting around the hospital anyway.

*I’d be more comfortable on a bridge because there’s a battle going on, she thought, but this isn’t the Phantom. The last thing I should do is get in the captain’s way. Guess I’ll go find some visitor quarters and wait for the doctors to call me about Davir.*

“I’ll see you later, Vaal,” she said wearily and turned to leave.

She went to a comm panel in a nearby wall, called the Officer of the Day, and got temporarily assigned to an empty cabin on deck five. It was furnished with little more than the basics the average crewman would need, but she hardly cared. She didn’t bother replicating anything to change into – she just fell asleep in her blood-stained uniform atop the bed covers.

Davir Benmata slowly awoke in one of the Quito’s recovery wards. A moaning sound was the first thing he noticed, and the cold temperature in the air was the second. The room’s dimly noisy background included the steady beeping of the monitor attached to his biobed, the quiet voices of the medical staff talking in the area, and the hum of the air conditioning vent above him. He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows and concentrated past his mental fog.

He guessed from the Spartan nature of the room and its occupants’ uniforms that he was aboard a hospital ship. He remembered feeling strange while his True Way captors were questioning him, then he’d blacked out and awoken here. He’d somehow been rescued from their clutches after they’d drugged him for interrogation. His head was still woozy, but the readings on his biobed monitor told him his vitals were normal, so, whatever had happened, he was apparently none the worse for the episode.

Another groan came from the berth next to him, and he looked over to see the bruised body of his barely asleep tactical officer in the next bed. Losozola was a big, durable fellow, and had suffered through many injuries during his career. The torpedo that had slammed through the Phantom’s ceiling nearly took his head off as it went by, knocked him out, and threw him headlong atop the command chair before exploding below the bridge. Davir had struggled to get him to sickbay before it had become necessary to abandon ship. The tactical officer had used a different escape pod than the admiral and had therefore been rescued separately. Losozola had broken several ribs and a lower shin bone during the Jem’Hadar attack, and his brain was putting cranial pressure on his skull. A nurse had set his broken bones, and a surgeon had operated on his head to relieve that danger, but Loso was still unconscious as he healed from his injuries, moaning in a dim fog of pain.

It hurt Davir’s heart to see his friend in physical pain, but the Quito’s medical staff were caring adequately for his injured crew. The Phantom’s loss was an injury they couldn’t help.

*The lead ship in her class, he mourned privately. They’ll probably make more, but she was unique, and I won’t get another one.*

He laid back and stared forlornly at the ceiling, further lamenting the loss of life at that episode, and he hoped Loso wouldn’t be added to that list. Quite unaware that Vaalolul had also survived, never mind how she felt about losing her first ship and a brand new one at that, Davir’s main concern was losing some of the crew. He was secondarily concerned with the impact the ship’s loss would have on his own small fleet, which was already spread thinly across the Alpha Quadrant. While serving in Starfleet obviously came with deadly risks (and every enlistee knew that), it wasn’t easy to recover from the stress of losing crewmembers and friends. Command officers had the additional responsibility to account for the lives of the crew under their command. He felt that weight on his soul, although no one had calculated the Phantom’s net loss. If he’d known there was still a combined assault happening, he’d have worried about that result,

too, even though he knew enough of Vice Admiral's Janston's reputation to have confidence in the effort to end the True Way's weapons research capacity.

*Did she find our probe?* he wondered. *It had all our data on it.*

There was no one in the recovery ward to answer his questions about the current situation, so he continued to worry, reclined in his bed, listening to his friend groan in his sleep, perhaps echoing Davir's internalized agony.

## STARDATE 56762, AFTERMATH

A more controlled kind of chaos reigned on the Sovereign's bridge. Personnel in yellow and blue uniforms moved purposefully amidst the glare of red alert strip lights embedded in the walls, attending to various minor crises as they arose. Nothing was burning now but the air had an acrid tinge of smoke from fires now suppressed, and the scars of battle damage were evident on many of the consoles. Subspace traffic buzzed audibly in the background, punctuated by indistinct callouts as pilots in the fleet coordinated their tactics and warned each other of dangers. The True Way fleet, by comparison, was in disarray and nearly defeated. Vice Admiral Jantson's attention was on protecting her fleet from the few remaining enemy vessels that still had the capability and gumption to attack Task Force Theta. Colonel Cliff James was handling ground operations against the True Way facilities on the surface of Mariah IV, and reports were that all the prisoners in the cells had been rescued. Many of them were injured, some worse than others, but Admiral Jantson hadn't yet been told who'd been recovered. Knowing that wouldn't likely have changed the operation, but it would've eased her mind to understand that the Phantom's senior staff were on the Quito.

The bridge's turbolift door swished open, and a Starfleet major stepped through. He went promptly to the command dais, stood at attention before the admiral, and saluted.

"I've a field update from Colonel James, Ma'am."

Tanis returned the salute without rising from her chair.

"At ease, Major. Let's have it."

The officer relaxed slightly.

"The colonel reports that rescue operations are completed. All recovered prisoners are receiving medical attention aboard the hospital ship. His squads have beamed up, and there are no personnel on the surface. His casualties were considerable, but he got them all out, too. Here's the summary you asked for."



*V. Adm. Jantson gets a field update (Star Trek Online, Logitech007)*

He handed the admiral a PADD with lists of personnel involved in the operation.

Tanis filtered through the data for several seconds. She found lists of casualties by ship for several Task Force Theta vessels lost in the space action, including the Phantom. It pained her to remember that the Sovereign had arrived too late to save that ship. Indeed, recovering the ship's data store and her crew had been a priority for the task force. Then she noticed that each of the Phantom's crew entries had a note disclosing if they'd been rescued alive or dead. The Phantom's primary bridge crew were all listed as "in recovery." Her heart warmed by degrees as that burden was relieved.

*They're alive and on the Quito,* she thought happily.

"Thank you, Major," she said. "Please return to your duties."

She gave the PADD to her first officer. “Put that in the ship’s log. We’ll debrief the fleet as soon as the area’s secure from all actions. Carry on.”

Several hours later, it was fully over. The True Way had no operational assets left in the area, and ground actions had long since ceased, having successfully rescued the Phantom’s captured crew. During the rescue, Starfleet security personnel had raided the True Way’s computer network and downloaded everything they could find about the True Way’s development of orbitally launched weapons laced with anti-genetic isotopes. The recovered data had been quickly reviewed, and the after-action reports were ready. Admiral Jantson called a virtual briefing of the task force’s flag officers, including Davir, who’d been medically cleared for visitation.

“We won, and my congratulations and thanks to you all,” she began. “While we suffered a number of losses, I’m pleased to welcome Rear Admiral Davir Benmata back into our company. He and the Phantom’s crew gathered much intelligence on True Way activities in the quadrant, which proved useful in planning today’s raid on Mariah IV. Despite the loss of that ship, amongst others, most of her crew survived, and I’ll be citing the Phantom for a meritorious service award when we get back to Deep Space 9.”

There were murmurs of common consent and nodding from the other captains. Everyone regretted losing the Phantom, but they were grateful for the intelligence she’d delivered to the task force. While nothing of the Phantom had been found amidst the battle’s wreckage, the admiralty was convinced she hadn’t survived being captured by the Dominion fleet. They’d probably scuttled her when they realized they were in danger of being overrun by the Sovereign while towing her back to Mariah IV. Admiral Jantson intended to petition Starfleet Command for a replacement vessel in the same class for her fleet as soon as one was available.

“The True Way will be years replacing the loss of this research facility and its arsenal of assets. The Federation and the Cardassian Union will work together to monitor the Mariah System for residual signs of True Way activity, but I doubt anything significant will come of that here. The information we gathered about its infrastructure from the station’s communication logs indicates that their military isn’t as structured as we thought, and their external assets are as few as we believed. Their influence in Cardassian politics, for instance, is definitely waning.”

She intentionally didn’t mention Umuzoi’s earlier discovery that (some of) the Klingons were somehow involved with the True Way. There were Klingon captains in the task force, and their government was still a trusted and vital ally. Starfleet Intelligence was still evaluating the classified evidence against that and hadn’t approved disseminating it at large.

“While the Cardassian government has officially denounced the True Way, it is, by now, aware of Starfleet’s preemptive actions against the True Way in this system and is likely sending available ships to investigate the aftermath. We need to be gone by then. I’ve already dispatched the damaged ships from Task Force Theta back to Deep Space 9 with a small escort. I’m now advising all wings to assemble outside the system as quickly as possible, and to prepare for departure.”

She easily handled the logistical questions from the commanders, then closed the channel, ending the debriefing.

## CHAPTER 7: THE LURE OF AMBITION

### STARDATE 56762: TEMPTATIONS

Parper's Emporium, the Amarie-class escort vessel owned and operated by the entrepreneur of the same name, warped into the vicinity of Deep Space 9, just in from the Mariah Sector. Flinz Parper sat in the only chair atop the bridge's command dais. He was dressed in his most princely attire, having recently found lucrative employment in the royal court of Orion matron Adira L'alia.

Flinz was to meet a contact at Quark's, the station's bar, to deliver a priceless artifact presently in the Emporium's most secure hold: the famed bat'leth of Kahless the Unforgettable. The sword had been lost in the Gamma Quadrant nearly a decade earlier and rediscovered by a Cardassian freighter in an asteroid belt, but the Cardassians hadn't recognized it, and let it lie. Flinz stole the freighter's sensor logs while it was visiting Starbase 621 and immediately realized what it was worth to the right people. The sword belonged to Kahless, the first Klingon emperor, and as such was associated with both his royal House and his right to rule the Klingon Empire. While Task Force Theta was preparing a strike against the True Way, Ambassador Morlo Aegis of Starfleet Intelligence had managed to coerce Flinz to secretly recover the sword and bring it to Deep Space 9. Flinz had and escaped the asteroid belt with the sword just before the attack began. What happened to it after that wasn't his concern.

The Emporium contacted Ops for docking clearance, and Flinz stepped out of the airlock onto Deep Space 9's Promenade Deck with two Orion bodyguards. One of them carried a long, narrow suitcase: the bat'leth was inside. Quark's was just down the hall, and Flinz led the way there, somehow managing to strut and slink at the same time.

The trio reached Quark's and entered. The narrow bar was three stories high. The bottom floor was crowded as patrons from all over the station gathered at the serving counter and the dabo table. It was warm and moderately loud, especially when the dabo wheel started spinning accompanied by hoots and hollers of hopeful luck-wishing.

Flinz looked about, furtively searching for the contact Morlo had sent to meet him. Flinz had been instructed to deliver the sword to the contact. He'd already received half his fee, and the ambassador had promised the other half upon completion of the delivery. Being the black marketeer that he was, Flinz was true to his word and eager to get the sword off his hands. His nemesis Kluthor, a houseless Klingon, had designs that included using the famous sword to regain his personal honor and perhaps rise to rule the Empire. Morlo had passed word that Kluthor was looking for Flinz's rendezvous point to capture the bat'leth for himself, so Flinz was on the lookout for him, too.

He caught the bartender's gaze, and an unspoken understanding passed between them. The establishment's owner certainly knew about every happening in his business. The bartender nodded furtively at the upstairs stairwell on the back wall, and Flinz took his meaning: they're at the top.

"Third floor," he said quietly to his bodyguards, and one of them led the way upstairs.

The second floor was unguarded and made up of several small holodeck suites, all of which were occupied: Quark's was doing well with that part of the business. Flinz was an avid holodeck programmer himself, and he made a mental note to ask the owner if he'd be interested in using some of Flinz's programs under license.

As he approached the bar's uppermost floor, the air warmed still further, and he began to sweat.

*It's a bloomin' furnace up 'ere,* he thought.

He reached the top and faintly caught the scent of orange blossoms in the air, which reminded him of springtime during his childhood on Earth. Curious, he looked around. The room was smaller than the first floor because the bar was tapered. Open seating was available at tiny tables overlooking the middle of the bar two floors down, and the ambient noise drifted up with the heat. Each table had its own tiny spotlight, so the room was dimly lit.

The table at the back of the little room was occupied; a woman sat there, and two more stood nearby. All were dressed in various fashions of heavy fighting garb. Morlo had made it clear the sword was to be returned to the Klingon

Empire, so Flinz wasn't surprised to see they were Klingons. Well, except for the one at the table; she was...different, so he looked again.

While the other two women were partially held in shadow, the lady at the table sat within the spotlight's ambience. She was heavily muscled, noticeably larger than the others, and she had a commanding presence about her that had little to do with the brigadier general's rank on her armor. She'd lit a candle atop the table, and its dim light made her tanned, brown skin glisten as she, too, was perspiring. Her jet hair shone with bluish highlights as it hung loosely in thick rivulets to her waist. Unlike every Klingon he'd ever seen, she had no head ridges; her smooth pate was full of hair, and her eyebrows were thin, not prominent. Her purple eyes captured him the moment he looked closely at her; there was quiet confidence in their depth he almost found inviting. Her slightly open mouth had even rows of pale teeth. She stood as he approached, extending her hand in human greeting, and he noted she was half a head taller than either of the other two women.

"You must be Mr. Parper," she said. Her voice was a light alto and slightly accented.

He was a little nervous. He trusted Morlo, but he didn't know who this woman was, only that Morlo had arranged to have a Klingon agent take the sword of Kahless off his hands at Quark's on Deep Space 9. Klingons were a fearsome lot, to be sure, but a Klingon woman who knew herself was an especially formidable breed. Fortunately, he was familiar with that aspect, having dealt successfully with Lady L'alia.

He shook her hand lightly and nodded.

"Aye, I am," he said.

"Please have a seat," she offered, taking hers again.

He sat.

"My name is K'Lira of House Trestian, and I understand you have an important package for me to deliver to Qo'noS," she began.

Flinz nodded once. "Aye," he acknowledged.

He kept his beady eyes on hers. "Where's my last payment for gettin' it 'ere?" he asked.

Her sharp gaze never faltered. Flinz couldn't tell what she was thinking, and he didn't like that.

"On my ship," she answered equably.

*She has her own ship*, he thought. *Well, so do I*, he shrugged inwardly.

"All of it?" he asked, hopefully raising his eyebrows.

Despite being forewarned about the Rat's predilections, K'Lira was slightly put aback by his insistence about money. As a warrior, her loyalty to the Empire was unquestionable. The sword was priceless to the Klingon people. It would be disastrous for it to come into the wrong hands. Her only concern was getting it back to Qo'noS without mishap. The High Council would decide how to deal with the impact its recovery would have on the Empire. Still, if the little weasel before her was more worried about his exchange account, she was prepared to be accommodating.

"My orders were clear, Mr. Parper. All 500 latinum bars are aboard my flagship and will be transferred to the Emporium's hold upon my confirmation of the sword's authenticity," she said.

*Flagship – she's got a fleet, not just a ship!* Flinz thought, surprised. *Morlo, you salty dawg, do you know who yer messin' with? I work fer a queen now, too!*

It never occurred to him that there was no true comparison between Klingon Dahar Masters and Orion matrons – the cultural icons were very different. Instead, he latched onto the next issue.

"Ánd how do you propose to do that?" he inquired. "Mind, I verified it myself when I got it."



General K'Lira acquires Kahless' sword from the Rat (Star Trek Online)

K'Lira sighed. "Ambassador Worf scanned Kahless' sword when he found it in 2372 before he and Kor disposed of it in Dominion space. My science officer will scan your sword. If the result matches Worf's, you will be paid."

Flinz licked his lips out of nervous habit. "And if it don't?"

K'Lira leaned back, away from the light, and folded her powerful arms across her wide chest. Her eyes looked dark gray at a distance, and her lips tightened. "I have my orders, Mr. Parper," she said quietly.

Flinz licked his lips again and pondered her response and behavior. He knew the sword was authentic, and he was indeed anxious to get paid and leave, but he never burned bridges if he could help it, and he wanted to understand K'Lira Trestian first. She was evidently a loyal officer and a powerful warrior with her own fleet. Such a contact might prove useful in future dealings with the Empire. He was grudgingly intrigued by her.

"Right..." he whispered to himself, "I'm sure you do."

He turned to the Orion with the box. "Bring it," he ordered.

The guard stepped up to the table, laid the box upon it, then returned to his place.

Flinz unlocked it, then glanced at K'Lira. "Go ahead – open it," he chided her. "It won't bite ya."

Unphased, K'Lira leaned in to touch the latch, and it clicked open. She threw back the lid and gasped in awe at the magnificent weapon inside.

Almost two meters long, the first bat'leth was broadly curved to neatly fit an adult's arm span. Forged of minerals from the Kri'stak volcano and Kahless' own hair, it sported five long, sharp tines, a two-handed grip with single-hand grips outside of that, and ancient Klingonese runes inscribed along its entire length, attesting to its origin. Made during Earth's ninth century AD, there were scratches on it everywhere, scars of its youth, but it had been polished, so the burnished metal shone darkly in the lurid light like a living thing.

K'Lira had never seen such an excellent example of its kind. She knew its legend well. This was the weapon with which Kahless the Unforgettable had defeated the tyrant Molor and established the Klingon Empire. It symbolized his right to rule and the might with which he did so until his death 15 centuries ago. The Hur'q had stolen it, removing it to the Gamma Quadrant where it had been briefly recovered by Jadzia Dax, Worf, and Dahar Master Kor nine years ago. They'd beamed it into deep space to prevent it falling into evil hands and starting a Klingon civil war. Apparently, it had passed through the Bajoran wormhole to the Alpha Quadrant and the Mariah System. There, it had lain in wait until Starfleet Intelligence had recruited the Rat to bring it to Deep Space 9 so it could be returned to the Klingon people.

Only the question of its authenticity remained.

"B'Etera," she whispered, calling. She was so engrossed by the blade's glory that she didn't look at her science officer.

One of the other women unhooked a tricorder from her belt and scanned the sword. "Metallurgy checks out. It's definitely made of crystalized composites common to the area around Kri'stak. There are also fossilized traces of Emperor Kahless' DNA in the metal. And the weapon's patina appears to be about 15 centuries old. All consistent with what we know about the Emperor's bat'leth," B'Etera replied. "It's real."

She put her tricorder away.

"And it's here," K'Lira said rapturously, "with us. With me."

She yearned to heft it, to test its balance and strength, to see how well it fit her arm. She reached forward slowly, too eagerly.

"YI-mev<sup>6</sup>, General," the third woman said quietly, putting a restraining hand gently on K'Lira's left shoulder. "You promised."

A flash of indignation followed by a fearful dread hit K'Lira in her gut, and she stopped dead because her officer's admonition was justified.

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<sup>6</sup> YI-mev – Verb phrase (Klingonese): (You) Cease, desist, stop.

K'Lira had read Worf's mission report about his attempted recovery of this very bat'leth in 2372. He recorded that he and Kor had diametrically opposed views about its use and place in modern Klingon society. They'd come to blows over their differences, and afterwards had agreed that the same misbegotten pride they suffered from would tear the High Council apart if the sword were returned to Qo'noS. Honor often led to glory, but even the most honorable intentions might lead to the ruin of others, perhaps even of the Empire. The lure to use the mystique weapon was too great a temptation for any Klingon to resist. That's why they'd left it in the Gamma Quadrant.

K'Lira understood well the temptation to seek personal honor and glory. For a brief time in her youth, she'd been bereft of both due to an ignorant mistake she'd made as a teenager: she'd let herself be tricked into becoming an augment, a genetically modified version of Klingon who had no rights and whom normal Klingons despised. For years, she'd disguised herself to look more normal, terrified that someone might discover what she was. Her nemesis eventually returned to accuse her before the High Council, and it had taken Chancellor Gowron's understanding and forgiveness to redeem the consequences of her childhood mistake. Now, many years later, that episode still haunted her even though her reputation as a great warrior was hard to surpass. There were some who felt she might be worthy to vie for the chancellorship someday. Although K'Lira knew that wasn't in her heart, she also knew the prideful ambition of others was a similar tonic, and she sometimes caught herself wondering what it would be like to rule the Klingon Empire.

She felt that same temptation now, staring down at the famed sword of Kahless. It was said the one who possessed it couldn't be defeated in battle. Its prestige was associated with Kahless' right to rule. Although it was still called an empire, the Klingon government was now an oligarchy of the foremost heads of Klingon Houses with the chancellor at its head. There was no emperor anymore. Restoring one of Kahless' line would be pointless for the Council would never give up rulership of the Empire. But with the actual sword in play, any viable challenge couldn't be ignored, but met in battle. The Klingon people would likely demand it. To a Klingon, honor was everything. What could the Empire become with a powerful empress at its head instead of an inept oligarchy that sometimes couldn't agree on the time of day?

The dread ran cold in her heart as she silently struggled with the answer: it would fracture, then collapse into open warfare between the Houses, and likely never rise from the ashes of its self-destruction. There would be no winning side, so what would her loyalty mean then? She couldn't stand the thought of being the agent of that – she wouldn't, surely. If she returned the sword to Qo'noS, it could only be as a symbol of unity for the whole Empire, not as a prop for anyone's ambition. That had been Ambassador Aegis' condition, and she'd promised to honor it when she'd agreed to come to Deep Space 9 to retrieve the sword.

She shuddered, nodding at the officer. "Yes, I did. Thank you, Shunora."

She sighed once, gathered herself, and returned her attention to the Rat, who was watching her closely.

"I see," she said evenly. "Well, it is Kahless' sword. I owe you 500 bars."

She brought her wrist communicator up. "Talash, this is the general. Transfer the payment," she commanded.

"Acknowledged," the Ak'voh's Gorn tactical officer hissed. "Ready to beam you aboard, Ma'am."

"Stand by," she said, then she turned to Flinz.

"Please confirm the transfer," she told him. "It should be in the Emporium's hold."

Flinz conferred with his ship, and soon confirmed that he was now even richer than he'd been on arrival.

"It's been right smashin' doin' business with ya," he crowed. "I'll take my leave of ya now, if ya don't much mind."

"Thank you, Mr. Parper. Your service to the Empire will be remembered for this," she replied, standing and smiling thinly down at him.

Flinz couldn't help but be impressed with her, not only by her imposing physique but by her magnanimous nature. Without knowing her background, he could see she lived up to the honorable reputation Morlo had described of her. Flinz

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<sup>7</sup> Ak'voh – Noun (Klingonese): It's the name of K'Lira's ship.

was just as happy to be paid out and done with this whole Klingon sword business. If Morlo ever called upon him again, it would be too soon, in his opinion.

*I'll never work wi' Starfleet again, he thought, but wi' her..., I'd think about it.*

"Let's go," he said to his bodyguards, and they left, leaving the sword in its suitcase upon the table.

K'Lira sat there for a few seconds, pondering the sword's impact on the Empire's future. She didn't doubt its return would be received joyously at large, but she judged the High Council's reaction to be much more negatively biased, if not objectionable, to its return. There would be those who would try to claim it as their inheritance, a vestige of Kahless' legacy, but in the modern era, such genealogies meant little. Kahless had too many heirs scattered among the ruling Houses, and no one could claim it exclusively on that basis alone. Others would make it a prize to be won in combat, which was more akin to Klingon ways, but she was sure that would only result in a dictator. No one would tolerate that. The only way to present Kahless' bat'leth to Qo'noS was as an artifact, not a trophy, so no one could or should "own" it.

*It belongs to all the Klingon people. It should be in a public museum, not a private collection, she thought.*

She sighed resignedly and stood, shutting the case and handing it to Shunora.

"Ak'Voh," she spoke into her communicator, "wej ghojol."

The reddish glow of a Klingon transporter effect enveloped the women, and they disappeared.

### STARDATE 56764.1: TASK FORCE THETA RETURNS

Task Force Theta began arriving in the evening, straggling in a few ships at a time. Most of them had been fairly heavily damaged in the battle at Mariah IV against the True Way, so Vice Admiral Tanis Jantson had sent them home ahead of the main fleet with a few escorts. The hospital ship U.S.S. Quito arrived with several damaged support ships in tow and immediately began offloading less injured personnel to the station's medical wing, keeping the critically injured ones on the ship until it was medically safe to move them. Most of the Phantom's surviving crew, including Admiral Davir Benmata and most of his bridge staff, were transferred. Commander Losozola Sgiza, the ship's tactical officer, had been severely injured about the head and neck in an explosion, so he stayed on the Quito. The rest of the fleet, including Admiral Jantson's flagship the U.S.S. Sovereign, arrived a few hours later, largely intact and completely victorious.

The task force has been assigned to Deep Space 9 to bolster the station's waning fleet defenses and enforce Federation interests in the quadrant. Its first assignment was to deal with a rising threat of True Way insurgence. The True Way was a Cardassian and Dominion faction left over from the Dominion War (2373-2375). It had recently developed a space-based isotopic weapon capable of killing all organic life on a planet. Evidence was that the True Way had already tested it on uninhabited class L and M moons in the remote backwaters of the Alpha Quadrant, and the weapon was slated to bring the True Way to superpower status under threat of using it on inhabited worlds. The devices were being developed and stored at a True Way research facility in the Mariah Sector, which was deep in Cardassian space. With the Cardassian Detapa Council's foreknowledge and permission, Task Force Theta had launched a preemptive strike on the enemy fleet in the Mariah System and destroyed the base after recovering as much data as it could from the True Way's computers. The task force's resounding victory had removed the True Way's threatening weapon from the field and left the faction reeling. The Cardassian Union had already acknowledged the action and offered its help in dealing with the aftermath.

### STARDATE 56764, HIS EMINENCE'S VENGEANCE

The wormhole near Bajor was the only stable wormhole known to exist, and it was large enough to be the only thoroughfare between the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants. Strategically, it was the most prized resource in the quadrant, and Deep Space 9 was well placed to observe and guard it. It cycled periodically to dissipate residual energy and to admit traffic.

It was also home to a group of interdimensional aliens who lived within it. The wormhole aliens were revered by a majority of Bajorans as prophetic gods who communicated through a collection of crystalline artifacts called orbs. A series of religions had sprung up among the Bajorans based on the aliens' benevolence towards them, and that relationship was thousands of years old. By the late 24<sup>th</sup> century, something of the aliens' nature was known. They were very long lived, telepathic, ethereal, and could see slices of a person's future. They could also control the wormhole to a certain extent. In 2375, towards the end of the Dominion War, the aliens dilated the timestream of a reinforcing Dominion fleet as it travelled through the wormhole, thus delaying its arrival. By the time the reinforcements arrived in the Alpha Quadrant, several decades had passed, and the war was long since over.

In the general state of controlled confusion around Task Force Theta's return to Deep Space 9, the nearby wormhole opened briefly. The station's sensors didn't detect the passage of any ships, so it was regarded as a normal dissipation event rather than a transit event, and Deep Space 9 operations continued apace. What no one on the station knew was that a cloaked vessel had entered the wormhole.

In a diplomatic suite aboard the *Jagh ghogh*, His Eminence stood and gazed through a porthole window as the wormhole's interior swept by. Bright white bands of light streamed past, bathing the room with their ambience while contrasting against the pale blue background of the wormhole's radioactive tunnel. Verteron nodes floated by in the distance near the tunnel's wall, creating the wormhole's stability and reliability. Those could be dangerous if they hit a ship, but His Eminence trusted that the *Jagh ghogh*' helmsman knew to avoid them.



*The Jagh ghogh inside the Bajoran wormhole (Star Trek Online)*

His Eminence had never been inside the wormhole before, but this was a mission, not a tour. The aliens within the wormhole were long associated with the people of nearby Bajor, who referred to them as the Prophets. That symbiosis had resulted in religious dedication and service that he was philosophically opposed to. While the Bajorans seemed happy to be in servitude to their "deities," he knew the Prophets were just glorified aliens. They used their limited insight of the future to manipulate Bajoran society and keep it in constant need of their supernatural information and "protection." He inherently distrusted the gap between what the Bajorans gave them and what the aliens returned to the Bajorans. He also distrusted the aliens' agenda because it wasn't known. He meant to discover that and dispel the aliens' mystique to the Bajorans, thus spoiling their dependence on the aliens. He considered this an act of overdue justice.

The easiest way to address that was to deal with the aliens' emissary, Benjamin Sisko. He'd been assigned to Deep Space 9 as its commanding Starfleet officer several years before the Dominion War. It was he who'd discovered the wormhole's presence in the Bajor Sector in 2369. The Bajorans called it the Celestial Temple and revered it as the home of the Prophets. When the war ended, Sisko stayed in the wormhole, working with the aliens to safeguard the Bajorans as they rebuilt their society in the war's wake. As far as anyone knew, he was still in there. His Eminence intended to find and confront Sisko to discover the aliens' agenda and dispel the Prophets' mythological value.

A nearby console beeped, distracting him.

"Yes?" he asked bluntly.

"Your Eminence," a communications officer said, "we're approaching the Emissary's last known coordinates."

"Very well," he replied. "Begin the operation. Let me know as soon as the device acquires a target."

"Yes, Sir," the officer replied.

The Jagh ghogh came to a station-keeping stop and launched several probes. They quickly spun away, caught in the magnetic eddies that filled the wormhole. They were equipped with psionic transceivers that sent signals back to a psionic transducer aboard the ship. His Eminence himself had helped design the system, and it was sensitive to the telepathic signals the wormhole aliens were thought to produce, this from studying the orbs they used to communicate with Bajoran supplicants.

He touched a button on his wrist console to activate a neural implant that allowed him to control the transducer directly. *The waiting begins*, he began, closing his eyes as he resumed his seat, *and the Sisko...*

*...Is here*, a male baritone finished quietly in his mind.

It startled His Eminence. Despite his confidence that the transducer would summon the Emissary, he didn't think it would work that quickly.

*Was Sisko expecting me?* he wondered privately.

While he wasn't naturally telepathic, His Eminence's implant allowed him to communicate telepathically and to protect his own thoughts from other minds. That would likely challenge his plan. He took that precaution here as he didn't want either the Emissary or the wormhole aliens spying on him.

*You are not of Bajor*, Sisko observed.

The Jagh ghogh's crew already knew His Eminence's background, but as far as he knew none of them had ever been to the wormhole. The fact that Sisko knew it, too, was an indication of his perceptive prowess which justified His Eminence's precaution.

*You are not of the aliens who live here*, he responded mentally.

*I am their Emissary*, Sisko said. *We are of Bajor.*

*You are not of Bajor*, His Eminence disagreed, *and I doubt they are either. You are of Earth. Their origins are of no importance to me. Their intentions are.*

*We intend to secure Bajor's future*, Sisko said.

*Do you*, His Eminence said mockingly. *Your intentions aside, your methods are questionable, your advice is cryptic, your insight is inadequate, and Bajor's religious preoccupation is largely your fault*, he accused.

His Eminence waited for a response, but the Emissary was strangely silent, which disturbed His Eminence. He'd studied Benjamin Sisko's Starfleet dossier, and he knew the former captain of Deep Space 9 was an adequate strategist and a cunning intellectual opponent. His Eminence expected Sisko to explain his intentions towards Bajor in a conciliatory way that addressed the accusations made. Silence was not part of that context.

He wondered if Sisko was conferring with the aliens, but the transducer didn't indicate that. In fact, there was no evidence of the aliens' presence at all.

*What do you say to that?* His Eminence asked.

The mental silence continued.

His Eminence became frustrated, but just as he was about to demand a reply, Sisko finally said, *"Bajor's future is ours. The actions we've taken and will take are calculated to ensure its place. Our predictions have never been certain for our future is fluid, but we guide and protect Bajor to the best of our foreknowledge."*

His Eminence shrugged. *Not nearly, I think*, he said, then went on to explain. *The orbs the aliens use to talk to supplicants are venerated as religious icons. That's idolatrous. The aliens reveal themselves telepathically, but they don't do so existentially. That's either a choice or an impossibility, but either way, it's subjective and speaks to their impotence. The aliens speak in ethereal riddles subject to interpretation by priests who pollute the message with their own concepts and agendas. The supplicants do so, too. That's ambiguous. The aliens let Bajorans worship them though they're not gods, which is sacrilegious. Bajorans blindly believe the aliens' guidance though even you admit their insight is uncertain, which is dangerous. The religious reverence you and the aliens enjoy isn't your due. It's poisoned Bajoran society for millennia, and the cumulative effect of this misbegotten virtue has been fanatical bondage to a religious system based on false hope and blind faith. None of this is corrected, merely reinforced, monetized, and propagated.*

He waited smugly for a reply.

*Heresy*, Sisko said swiftly.

*Your opinion, born of years spent in that very system*, His Eminence retorted just as quickly, anticipating and deflecting the implied accusation. *I lack your subjectivity, so my opinion's better than yours.*

*Objectivity isn't credibility*, Sisko countered calmly. *It's merely external opinion. Yours offers no hope of improvement because you have no insight of Bajor's future. The aliens do, and we serve Bajor.*

*Whom do you serve?* he asked shrewdly.

*I'll ask you a better question, Emissary*, His Eminence said. *Why do you serve imperfect 'gods'?*

*We serve Bajor*, Sisko repeated. *The Bajorans call...*

*Yes, I understand the error in nomenclature*, His Eminence interrupted. *Regardless, why do you obey the aliens when you've already admitted their vision of the future is uncertain? Why do you trust that defect?*

*I trust their intention*, Sisko replied. *Bajorans have free...*

*Your faith is as blind as the Bajorans', Benjamin*, His Eminence argued, *for the aliens don't share their specific intentions with anybody, even you, except to say that they want to assure Bajor's uncertain future, this while hiding behind cryptic advice, garnering unwarranted reverence from ignorant followers who are themselves mired in a self-perpetuating, religious crockery. The fact that you trust that model makes you their political patsy and easy prey. I am neither.*

He touched another control on his wristband, sending a pre-programmed command to the Jagh ghogh' bridge, and the ship headed back to the Alpha Quadrant, its shields now raised.

*I think the Bajorans can and should do better*, he continued, his mental tone growing arrogant. *In fact, I know they will...without the aliens...or their Emissary.*

The Jagh ghogh reached the Alpha Quadrant's terminus and exited the wormhole amidst a glowing blue and white spiral. As it did so, it sent a signal to the probes it had laid within the subspace tunnel.

The probes exploded instantly, spewing silithium and trilithium along its length, which interacted negatively with the verteron nodes that kept the wormhole stable. Most of the nodes collapsed into nothingness while others went dark, their collective potency idled.

Outside the wormhole, the Jagh ghogh went to full impulse, clearing the event horizon's vicinity just in time to avoid being caught up in the storm of exotic energy discharges that erupted from the Celestial Temple. The now unstable wormhole tried to re-open, then it suddenly disappeared in a brilliant flash of anti-neutrinos and was no more.

The Jagh ghogh cloaked.

## STARDATE 56764, PAH WRAITH PLAGUE

The Fire Caves on Bajor were known as the prison of the Pah-wraiths, the wormhole aliens who'd been cast down to Bajor by the Prophets when they tried to take over the Celestial Temple millennia ago. The caves were so named because the Pah-wraiths were beings wreathed in flames. They could take over a person's body for short spans of time, bestowing great strength and other powers, but the wraiths' intentions were always evil. While the Prophets prevailed, the Pah-wraiths could never escape the caves. Such a release was fabled to mark the end of Bajor and its people, according to Talnot's prophecy of the final days.

Late that night, deep within the cave system, the darkened pit of the Kosst Amojan suddenly alit with a lurid yellow glow that flickered against the cave's walls. Stalagmites and stalactites appeared at the edge of the pit in the center of the cave. The firelight grew in intensity as the Pah-wraiths, now unrestricted, gathered in fearsome numbers within the pit and rose as one towards the rim. They looked like a forest of blazing pillars floating through the air, faster as they careened over the edge and headed towards the entrance, growling oddly as they went. The fiery cloud burst from the cave's opening and stopped atop a stony staircase that led down from the entrance into a thinly forested glade below.

No one was around – the caves were forbidden territory for fear of the wraiths. After a moment, the cloud split up into individual wraiths who scattered across the empty, rocky countryside, disappearing into the murky distance.

### STARDATE 56764.1, HOT PURSUIT

In Deep Space Nine, the peaceful atmosphere in Ops was shattered by an alert klaxon as the station's sensors detected a massive, anomalous disturbance coming from inside the wormhole. The viewer showed the aftermath of His Eminence's attack on the Celestial Temple as the wormhole appeared in a shower of radiation, spluttered, tried to stay open, then disappeared. There were no residual exotic energy signatures, no additional eruptions. In fact, there was no trace a wormhole had ever been there.

Captain Keeva Reanne, on night shift, burst out of her office, her short, wiry frame taugth with sudden fear.

"What's going on!?" she demanded. "Report!"

"The wormhole, Ma'am," exclaimed the Officer of the Night, "it's gone!"

Reanne frowned in disbelief. "What!?"

"It was there a few seconds ago, then it vanished," he explained. "There's no signal from our beacon in the Gamma Quadrant. No negative energy signatures on subspace scanners." He shrugged in frustration. "I don't know what happened."

Reanne was bewildered and stunned. The wormhole had been a fixture in the Alpha Quadrant for thousands of years. It's value as a Bajoran cultural icon and a key asset to traffic control between the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants was unsurpassed. Nothing affected its presence or reliability..., nothing natural anyway.

"Run a level three diagnostic on the sensors now," she ordered. "Look for any signs of software tampering."

"Already on it, Ma'am," he replied.

Knowing that the diagnostic would take several minutes, Reanne went to an ops console to review the sensors' visual log and see the wormhole's last eruption for herself. As it played out, she noticed the lack of obvious traffic or any other evidence suggesting a cause for its irregular closure.

*A cloaked ship, perhaps?* she wondered. *Who could...or would do this?*

She remembered some recent intelligence briefings about True Way issues, but neither the Cardassians or the Dominion used cloaks on their ships. The main factions in the area who did were the Federation, the Klingons, and the Romulans, all of whom were currently allies or at least not enemies. An ugly thought formed in her heart, born of her natural suspicion of all things non-Bajoran. Things hadn't always been copasetic between those groups. Just over a decade ago, the Federation and the Klingons had been opposed during the Klingon-Cardassian War. The Romulans were always a fickle lot, highly suspicious of their allies, so they did little to engender mutual trust. If any of the allies had splinter groups in their midst, no one, especially Bajorans, was safe. Stable wormholes didn't just collapse catastrophically by themselves. She was sure someone was somehow responsible.

*But why would any of them do this, assuming they could?* she thought.

The most obvious answer to the first part of the puzzle was to cut off the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants from each other. The tactical impact of that was to deprive the Jem'Hadar in the Alpha Quadrant of ketracel-white reserves and other kinds of support.

As for how, Reanne could think of several ways to collapse the wormhole.

Gul Dukat, then possessed by a Pah Wraith, had once managed to force the wormhole to close by attacking a Bajoran orb on Deep Space 9. That consequence proved to be temporary because the wormhole had been re-opened by Captain Benjamin Sisko a few months later when he discovered a new Bajoran orb on the planet Tyree.

Reanne knew little of silithium, a chemical sometimes found in asteroids and comets, except that it reacted violently with verterons. She remembered that the U.S.S. Kaiser's crew had found such a comet in the Gamma Quadrant near that end of the wormhole. They'd narrowly averted disaster by diverting the silithium-laced comet before it could

cross the wormhole's event horizon. If someone had managed to sneak enough silithium into the wormhole and set it off..., but no, they'd be trapped inside the wormhole as it collapsed around them. She didn't know enough theoretical astrophysics to anticipate what might happen then, but she was sure it would be damning, possibly permanent.

The only other way Reanne knew to close the wormhole was to convince the Prophets to keep it closed. That didn't match what she'd seen of the wormhole this time; it hadn't closed, it had vanished without a trace. It wasn't closed – it was really gone. She was sure the Prophets would never allow that.

*I have to tell Kurland*, she thought, referring to Deep Space 9's commanding Starfleet officer.

She started to open a comm channel to wake Kurland up, but the night officer interrupted her.

"The diagnostic's done – no errors, no anomalous programming detected, Ma'am," he said.

Reanne wasn't surprised. Sensor sabotage was always a possibility, but it was a long shot at best, and she hadn't been confident that the avenue would've turned up additional evidence.

"Scan the area for displaced tachyon trails," she ordered. "Tell me if anything cloaked came out of the wormhole before it disappeared. Hurry!"

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied. A few seconds passed. "There's one signal headed out of the Bajor System. Good call – another few seconds and it would've dissipated."

"Course?" she asked.

"0-8-1 mark 0-9-5," he answered. "Looks like it's headed for the Beta Quadrant."

Reanne pinched her lips into a thin line. Their best lead on who might've done this was already ahead of them and likely out of long-range sensor range by now. The newly returned Task Force Theta was still recovering from its first combat action in the Mariah System, so Vice Admiral Jantson would be preoccupied with repairing and resupplying her fleet. If Reanne was going to catch whoever had done this, she needed to act now.

"Have Captain Kurland report to Ops," she barked. "Ready the Kaiser for immediate departure. I'm headed for Dock 2." She stalked to the elevator car as the night officer worked the situation.

It took a few minutes for the Kaiser's crew to report to their stations, but she was underway in short order, chasing the Jagh ghogh's ion trail at warp 8 towards the Beta Quadrant.

"We're being followed, Sir," the Jagh ghogh's tactical officer said, observing the Kaiser's signal as it left the Bajor System. "Looks like the Kaiser's in pursuit."

The Klingon captain turned slightly in his chair. "Is the cloak working correctly?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," tactical replied, re-checking his instruments.

The captain pondered the situation for a few moments. Cloaks were good at hiding a vessel's normal emissions and reflections at most sensor ranges, but there were detection systems and other ways to penetrate even the best cloak. Every warp drive left a temporary tachyon trail in subspace. It dissipated quickly as tachyons travelled faster than photons, but the trail was detectable at long range for up to a minute or so. The Kaiser was making up ground quickly as the Jagh ghogh was at only warp 5. The captain needed time to level the playing field.

"Helm, increase speed to warp 9," he ordered.

"Navigator, set course for the Betreka Nebula. We'll lose them in there."

The Jagh ghogh gently veered towards the protection of the nearest interstellar cloud.

The class-9 Betreka Nebula was on the border of Klingon and Cardassian territory, near the edge of unexplored deep space. It was known to be the infrequent home of pirates and vagrants from all over the quadrant. The nebula's properties made it especially effective against sensors, so it was easy to hide there without using a cloak.

The Kaiser slowed to impulse as it neared the Betreka Nebula, following a tachyon trail that was dissipating quickly. Reanne knew the interstellar cloud suppressed sensors, and she didn't want to risk accidentally losing her quarry inside the nebula.

“Leave a sensor buoy near the edge of the nebula,” she ordered. “It’ll alert us if they backtrack and try to escape.”

The Kaiser stopped just outside the nebula and launched the buoy. The mysterious tachyon trail had gone cold. Reanne didn’t want to risk blindly combing through the nebula, but there were other ways to achieve her goal. She just hoped the quarry hadn’t yet gone too far afield.

“Prepare several probes with metaphasic pulse generators,” she said. “Launch them into the nebula when ready and stand by on weapons. Let’s shake the tree and see what falls out.”

The probes shot forth and disappeared into the cloud.

Reanne waited a few seconds. “Fire ‘em up,” she commanded.

Subspace tremors swept through the immediate region ahead of the ship, causing sympathetic reverberations to scatter throughout the nebula. The tremors were limited in range but powerful enough to make transiting through the nebula very uncomfortable.

Aboard the Jagh ghogh, everything related to inertial integrity suffered stress results as subspace in that part of the nebula began flexing wildly. The asynchronous pulses stretched and contracted space-time like an unstable warp field. Engineering reported that warp power was somewhat stable as the core had its own shielding, but it was impossible for the Jagh ghogh to form a usable warp field in unstable space. The ship shuddered in place, unable to escape at FTL. The impulse drives and thrusters were fine, though, as they operated on different principles.

“Make best speed to the edge of the nebula,” the captain ordered, frustrated.

The Jagh ghogh rolled, and its impulse vanes flared redly as it burst out of the nebula near the waiting Kaiser.

Reanne saw the Negh’Var battlecruiser race out of the cloud as the sensor buoy she’d left in the area likewise warned her of the intruder. A Klingon warship this close to Klingon territory didn’t surprise her at all. What did was the thought that she’d been chasing a Klingon ship ever since it had left the wormhole catastrophe’s vicinity. It disturbed her greatly to intuitively realize the damning nature of that evidence even if it was a somehow just a coincidence.

*Why would the Klingons attack the wormhole?* she thought.

She didn’t have time to ponder an answer anyway as the Jagh ghogh immediately opened fire with its overcharged disruptors and a spread of photon torpedoes that slammed into the Kaiser’s forward quarter with terrific force, severely draining that shield. The Kaiser’s forward array and lateral thrusters were damaged.

Reanne gripped the sides of her command chair as the Kaiser rocked hard. “Return fire!” she screamed.

The Jagh ghogh’s captain leaned forward in anticipation of a quick victory. His blood burned to destroy the Kaiser so as not to leave witnesses behind, but his orders were to escape to safety with His Eminence, and he had a plan. The ship had cleared the metaphasic field when it left the nebula, so warp power was available again. To escape, he needed to make sure the Jagh ghogh wouldn’t be pursued. That meant disabling the little warship before him while its shields were low.

“Come about,” he ordered. “Lay in a course for deep space and prepare to go to warp.



*U.S.S. Kaiser chasing the Jagh ghogh near the Betreka Nebula (Star Trek Online)*

“But first, let’s return the disfavor: put a gravitonic pulse through that shield, then corrupt their data core.”

The Kaiser had rolled slightly nose up, exposing its underside to the enemy. Reanne watched in anger and fascination as the Negh’Var cruiser turned tail at close range.

*Odd, she thought. Klingons never run from a fight they think they can win. Why is he...?*

She realized her error too late: this cruiser’s directional weapons were heavier aft than forward.

The gravitonic pulse struck first. Bleeding invisibly through the weakened shield, it hardly registered on sensors. The Kaiser’s warp core immediately and automatically reset itself, trying to clear stray gravitons from its field emitters, which would take some time.

The second attack was more insidious. The Klingons uploaded a virus that somehow spread past the Kaiser’s firewalls and programmatically destroyed all records concerning the Jagh ghogh. Then the virus deleted itself. The only evidence Reanne had left was her own experience.

She watched in extreme frustration as the enemy ship disappeared in a reddish flash, its destination unknown.

## CHAPTER 8: CLOUDY FORECASTS

### STARDATE 56766.7, IN UNCHARTED SPACE

Aboard the Negh'Var-class warship Jagh ghogh, the alien known as His Eminence sat at an ornate desk in his VIP quarters, watching newsfeeds on screens embedded in the desktop. There was no sound. Rather, the same cranial implant that allowed him to use telepathy provided a virtual audio feed, so he could watch the news in outward silence. Data poured in from all over the galaxy as he selected people and places to monitor. The mental exercise of keeping up to date with certain situations was second nature to him. He was practiced at memorizing the specific content he wanted to remember.

After a few minutes, he turned the news off and walked into an enclosed alcove at the far end of his quarters, locking it behind him. The small room served as his private communications room. It was dimly lit with the yellow glow of a lamp in the vaulted ceiling. In the middle of the octagonal floor was a red satin pillow, and he settled himself comfortably upon it. Before him was a squat cabinet. He opened its upper drawer and removed a facial mask with a voice modifier in it. He put it on and touched a button on the wall. The room brightened slightly as a rectangular hole opened in the wall next to him.



*The one known only as His Eminence (Star Trek Online, E. Villarreal)*

A short pedestal emerged through the opening

atop which was the communication console. He keyed a passcode into it and opened a secure, voice-only channel.

The image of a male Klingon in an unmarked uniform answered his call. “taH HoS<sup>8</sup>,” he growled in Klingonese as a passphrase prompt.

“Ej pujvetlh wlghojmoHchu'bog<sup>9</sup>,” His Eminence countersigned in kind.

“Report,” the Klingon said gruffly without using His Eminence’s title.

He let the Klingon’s disrespect slide. It didn’t matter to him much as he was not a fellow officer.

“The wormhole is no more,” he replied, satisfied. “In the absence of the Celestial Temple’s influence, the Bajoran people will develop unfettered by the disingenuous premises the aliens imposed on them.” He paused to savor the next point. “And the Emissary’s as trapped as the aliens are. No one will ever hear from him again.”

His tone left nothing to the imagination: it had been his life’s work to rid the Bajoran culture of every vestige of or need for religion and the Emissary’s flawed role in it.

“While the True Way lost the outpost on Mariah IV,” he continued placidly, “their main fleet still has some of the anti-genetic warheads in its arsenal, so the True Way remains a major threat. The Alpha Quadrant will be unstable as long as that’s the case.”

“Agreed,” the Klingon said, nodding. “We’ll use that.”

“What of the enemy fleet at Deep Space Nine?” he inquired. “Was it damaged when the wormhole collapsed? Do we still need to consider it in our plans?”

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<sup>8</sup> TaH HoS – (Klingonese): The strong will survive.

<sup>9</sup> Ej pujvetlh wlghojmoHchu'bog – (Klingonese): And the weak will perish.

“It wasn’t,” His Eminence answered, “and we may yet have to contend with the Federation’s increased presence there. Legate Marek’s still bent on reacquiring the station from them, and he’ll eventually need reinforcement, but I’ll ask him to wait for your assessment.”

Again, the Klingon nodded agreeably. “Good.

“Is there anything you wish to add, Your Eminence?” he asked deferentially.

His Eminence considered.

The Klingon High Council was comprised of the leaders of the 24 most powerful Houses in the Empire with a chancellor as its de facto head. While other Houses constantly vied for stature, the traditional way to gain a seat on the Council was to challenge and kill a councilmember in honorable combat, thereby replacing him. While not a proponent of Klingon tradition, His Eminence had significant plans to upset the balance of power in the Empire, thereby allowing certain others to arise in his stead, others he could manipulate amidst his larger designs. The Klingon before him was highly placed and still useful at this point. His Eminence was content to play the long game from his own anonymity until it no longer suited him.

“Yes,” he answered. “Tell our agents on Qu’Vat, Ty’Gokor, and Qo’noS to be careful. The Council will soon make some ill-advised decisions about the nature of its leadership that will likely inspire rebellion in certain quarters. This is expected, given their current unrest.”

The Klingon raised an eyebrow in open skepticism. He had less faith in His Eminence’s predictions than most.

“Is the war inevitable?” he asked hopefully.

“They’ll need to be ready when it comes,” His Eminence answered. “Remind them for me.”

The Klingon drew his head back slightly, again skeptical but willing. “Very well..., Your Eminence,” he said.

“That will be all. Qa’pla,” His Eminence said.

“Indeed,” the Klingon said, closing the channel.

His Eminence put the console away and removed his mask, now unneeded. Rubbing his damp forehead, he tried to rest his eyes by closing them against the glare of the lamp above.

*Klingons are so easy to manipulate once you understand what motivates them, he thought. It’s all about personal honor and glory for themselves, their families, their Houses, and their Empire. They’ll fight anybody and anything, even their own countrymen, if that’s threatened.*

He stood, tired, and opened the alcove.

Suddenly, he sensed that he wasn’t alone. His head snapped up in surprise as he quickly scanned the room, but there was nothing amiss that he could see, so he reached out telepathically with his implant.

*That is why the weak...shall...perish,* an alien, yet oddly familiar voice said in his mind.

## STARDATE 56776, NOT FOR HONOR OR GLORY

Back on Earth, Ambassador Morlo Aegis paced his office furiously, his squat porcine-like body panting as he stalked back and forth in front of his desk. His craggy, round face bore a mixture of anxious fear and deep frustration that even his massive white beard couldn’t hide. It was a good thing the office was otherwise empty as his naturally thin temper was on full display, too, and no one could’ve stood their ground against his ire anyway. He clenched a PADD in his clawed hand that was unfortunately taking the brunt of it, its cracked surface attesting to the power of his grip.

His aide and senior intelligence analyst, Lt. Commander Victoria Alain, walked in with her own PADD, saw his dour expression, and almost turned around, knowing that Tellarites loved confrontation and debate.

“WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN!?” Morlo roared as the door closed behind her. He slammed his broken PADD on the desk. “The Alpha Quadrant’s in shambles, Deep Space Nine’s not taking my calls, and I’ve got every intelligence flag officer in Starfleet begging me for advice even the Prophets don’t have!”

Undeterred, she expertly deflected his tirade by not addressing it.

“Captain Kurland on Deep Space Nine reports that their investigation into the wormhole’s disappearance continues,” she said. “The eruption just before its collapse was caused by a massive silithium explosion, maybe more than one, that nullified the verteron network that kept the wormhole stable. The explosion was likely caused by at least one cloaked ship that apparently exited the wormhole’s vicinity shortly afterward. Captain Keeva chased it to the Betreka Nebula and reported that it was a Negh’Var battlecruiser named “Jagh ghogh” or the enemy’s throne. Its affiliation was undetermined as communications were never established. The Kaiser was disabled in the engagement and its scans were destroyed, so she was unable to capture or pursue the Klingon ship. Its last known course was into deep space beyond the nebula, and it hasn’t been seen since. Klingons Intelligence has been notified, but there are no leads. The Empire promises to share any they come across, given the obvious implications of Klingon involvement.”

“Damn straight,” Morlo huffed angrily. “The Empire’s always had its share of splinter factions, but it’s not just an internal Klingon matter. The Alliance’s reputation is at stake, and no one’s been able to keep a lid on the Klingon aspect since this happened. Every Alliance member is clamoring for an independent investigation, but they each want to lead it.

“What else have you got?”

“Task Force Theta remains on station at Deep Space Nine to assist in the investigation and coordinate Federation assignments,” she continued. “Vice Admiral Jantson’s as tough as her flagship, it seems. She’s incorporated all the local fleets into a flotilla and is organizing patrols from Cardassia Prime to the Betreka Nebula. Notably, Rear Admiral Davir Benmata’s been given a commendation for meritorious service despite losing the Phantom at the action in the Mariah System a week ago. The Vice Admiral has also seen fit to award him a Galaxy-class dreadnought to replace most of the capital vessels in his former fleet that were reassigned elsewhere prior to the battle.” She glanced up at Morlo knowingly.

The ambassador’s mood finally broke a bit, and he smiled. He and Davir went way back; Davir had at one time been Morlo’s protégé in Starfleet’s Diplomatic Corps, and Morlo had watched his career development with great interest. It genuinely pleased Morlo to see his former pupil still managing to succeed despite the losses he’d suffered.

“Continue,” he said, mollified.

“In the wake of the task force’s victory, the Cardassia and Bajor Sectors seem quiet,” she said. “If the True Way has any assets in those areas, they’re laying very low...for now.”

Morlo nodded. “Let’s hope that lasts, but I suspect they’ll be back. Keep an eye on Admiral Jantson’s reports on that subject, will you?”

“Of course, Sir,” she said. “Will there be anything else?”

Morlo paused pensively.

The only other issue on his mind didn’t have anything to do with the wormhole. Kahless’ long-lost bat’leth had been recently rediscovered in the Mariah Sector. He’d arranged to have one of his agents bring it to Deep Space Nine so it could be returned to the Klingon people by one of their own, a Klingon general named K’Lira of House Trestian. He’d been told the transfer had been made, and the sword was already enroute to the Klingon home world, Qo’noS.

The related problem was more of a cultural issue than a mystery. Kahless’ sword was a national treasure and an icon of the empire he’d founded over 1,500 years ago. As such, it was associated with his right to rule. Moreover, it was said that whoever possessed it couldn’t be defeated in battle. Its mystique was obvious, its prowess legend, and possession of it a most coveted dream. Therein lay the rub: Klingons were fatally addicted to ambition, so none could own the sword. Anyone who tried to lay claim to it would risk usurping the Klingon High Council and destabilizing the Empire by setting himself up as a dictator. In sending it to Qo’noS, Morlo had emphasized that the sword must be regarded only as an artifact of all the Klingon people, not a trophy for a specific House or person. His great fear was that his intention would prove vain, someone would claim it anyway, one of the largest military regimes in the galaxy would descend into civil war, dragging the Alliance with it, and he would be blamed for his inadvertent role in it.

“Get me the Klingon Chancellor’s office as soon as possible,” he said.

“Yes, Sir,” Victoria responded and left.

Morlo sat down in his chair and considered the upcoming conversation with the leader of the Klingon Empire. Known for his abrasive personality, the Chancellor was as addicted to power as any other Klingon warrior in high standing. Morlo readily guessed that the Chancellor would be cautious about reintroducing the sword of Kahless into Klingon society as anything other than an historical artifact. The temptation its presence caused would have to be mitigated carefully, and the Chancellor himself would have to lead by example in that regard. Morlo sincerely hoped he and the rest of the Council were up to the task.

*There's going to be rebellious hell to pay in the Empire otherwise,* he thought grimly, hoping he was wrong.

THE END

## CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Story

Michael Rosado

### Pictures

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### Illustrators

Michael Rosado

Chris Fernandez

bberge1701

Logitech007

Efrem Villarreal

### Website

[LogiTreks.com](http://LogiTreks.com)

### Hailing Frequencies Closed

Aron Scott Eisenberg

Rene Murat Auberjonois

## APPENDIX

### DAVIR MAXWELL (“MAX”) BENMATA

A human in Starfleet Command, this rear admiral is currently assigned to Deep Space Nine, where his small fleet patrols the Bajor Sector and neighboring areas. He’s married to General K’Lira of House Trestian and is life-long friends with Ambassador Morlo Aegis.

[Dossiers](#)

### FLINZ (“THE RAT”) PARPER

Flinz is a well-travelled human trader who’s spent much of his life working around Ferengi and Orions. He’s a shrewd negotiator, a cunning conman, and a part-time thief. Ambassador Aegis sometimes uses him as an agent. He hates the Federation and especially anything to do with Starfleet, which makes him a challenge to work with.

### HIS EMINENCE

A alien scientist who lived among the Bajorans for several decades, he specializes in genetics and virology. He’s an atheist who opposes the Prophets and their influence on both the Bajoran Emissary and the Bajoran society. His cybernetic implants allow him to use telepathy to manipulate compatible technology. He works with rogue factions in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants to achieve his goals.

[Dossiers](#)

### K’LIRA

A Klingon augment married to Rear Admiral Davir Benmata, she’s the founder of House Trestian and a brigadier general in the Klingon Defense Force. She’s life-long friends with the Klingon Chancellor, who regards her as a trusted associate.

[Dossiers](#)

### LOSOZOLA (“LOSO”) SGIZA

Commander Sgiza is one of Davir Benmata’s hand-picked bridge officers. He’s the Tactical Officer/Security Chief on Davir’s flagship. A quiet and burly Betazoid, he tends to keep his natural empathic awareness largely to himself.

### MIRRA

Commander Mirra is one of Davir Benmata’s hand-picked bridge officers. She’s the Pilot/Helmswoman on Davir’s flagship. She’s also a crack shot with a blaster pistol, and she backs up Loso in his tactical role. A vivacious Andorian, her natural energy motivates her to excel, and she usually succeeds. She can be brash and aggressive at times.

### MORLO AEGIS

A Tellarite ambassador many years in Starfleet’s Diplomatic Corps, Morlo trained then-Lieutenant Davir Benmata as his personal attaché and a fellow diplomat. He’s distantly guided Davir’s career for two decades since. He doesn’t get along well with K’Lira, though, as he’s vehemently opposed to augments.

### NERAYERKU (“NERA”)

Commander Nerayerku is one of Davir Benmata’s hand-picked bridge officers. She’s the Chief Science Officer/Intelligence Officer on Davir’s flagship. She’s half-Deltan/half-Betazoid, specializes in communications/languages, and she normally serves as Davir’s First Officer. A quiet soul, she’s his oldest friend and one of his closest confidants.

## PARPER'S EMPORIUM

This is Flinz Parper's personal transport. It's an Amarie-class smuggler's heavy escort vessel as seen in Star Trek Online.

[Fact Sheet](#)

## PID'PEN ("PID") ANTYNIV

Commander Pid'pen is one of Davir Benmata's hand-picked officers who serves as his Chief Engineer. As such, he's normally in the Engineering Room, although he has a bridge post, too, depending on the flagship's class. An Andorian with a penchant for invention, he can fix almost anything on a starship. He's a demanding taskmaster and a stickler for accuracy.

## STARDATES

There is no single stardate calendar that works for every subgenre in Star Trek. So, for the purpose of calendarizing the events in this story and its sequels, I've used TrekGuide.com's TNG/DS9/VOY stardate calendar.

[Assumptions](#) · [Calendar](#)

## U.S.S. PHANTOM

A prototype intelligence escort in Star Trek Online, it was designed by Starfleet in the late 24<sup>th</sup> century. The Phantom is the lead ship in her class.

[Fact Sheet](#)

## UMUZOI ("UMI")

Commander Umuzoi is one of Davir Benmata's hand-picked officers. She's an unbonded Trill who specializes in xenobiology, so she doubles as a science officer and the flagship's doctor. As such, she's normally stationed in Sickbay, where she typically outranks the Long-Term Medical Hologram, but she can have a bridge station, too, like Pid'Pen. She's easily emotional and outspoken, but her heart is usually in the right place.

## VAALOLUL ("VAAL")

Commander Vaalolul isn't one of Davir's hand-picked officers. She arrived with the shakedown cruise of the U.S.S. Phantom, the prototype intelligence escort she helped design. Davir valued her familiarity with the ship and preferred a tactical officer in command when he was indisposed, so he made her his First Officer on the Phantom. She's a traditional Vulcan whose stoicism tends to put people off, but she's a brilliant officer, well suited for that and future commands.