

# U.S.S. HERA



INVESTIGATIONS

THE TRIBUNAL

Fractured Fairy Tales

# USS HERA

# Investigations

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# The Tribunal

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**Fractured Fairy Tales**  
**June 2019/June 2396**

**Captain Enalia Telvan**

**Commander Rita Paris**

**Lieutenant Commander Thex sh'Zoarhi**

**Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox**

**Lieutenant Sonak**

**Lieutenant Asa Dael**

**Lieutenant Samuel Clemens XV**

**Lieutenant JG Rena Pacci**

**Ensign Varnok Jahal**



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## Prologue - The Stars Be My Destination

Laying the decorative plate into the gift box, Enalia nodded in satisfaction. She'd finished thinking over what had happened, processed everything, gone over all the reports, and even had time for a cup of tea since she'd gotten out of that fecking awful radiation treatment vice. Now she just needed to find a trio of friends and apologize to them, starting with her first officer.

"Computer, where is Commander Paris?"

With a chirrup the computer replied. =^= Commander Paris is on E deck in the forward pod lounge. =^=

"Thanks. Now to hope she stays there long enough for me to get there." Enalia grinned wryly as she tucked the gift box under one arm, knowing how fast the Commander could get across the ship.

=^= Records indicate she has not changed location for seventeen minutes and is alone, =^= the computer offered helpfully.

"That means she's about to start moving or going to stay there a while... Thanks again." Not wasting any more time, just in case, Enalia headed out the door and towards the nearest turbolift. Once inside, it was a simple command to get it moving in the right direction, but as it had to work its way through the ship the long way, it was the longest turbolift ride on the ship.

Eventually she did get there though - Intel pod, E deck. Right between the labs and the lounge. Quickly tugging down on her uniform top, she strode into the lounge and looked out at the view across the top of the ship and inside the Ceres Intel Base. They weren't real windows, but the holographics were impeccable so to normal vision you couldn't tell the difference.

"Quite the view, isn't it?" she asked as she walked up to the table Rita was at. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Not at all... it's your ship, Captain," Rita looked up in surprise, but took it in stride. She'd come up here to the reasonably remote part of the starship visited by few save for Yeoman Dedjoy, to collect her thoughts for a bit and try to plan in the mire of chaos that seemed to be their lives. But it was good to see the Captain out and about the starship. "Doc finally let you out for good behavior?"

Sliding into one of the chairs at the table, Enalia set the gift box in front of Rita. "Yeah, finally. I was in there for what? Three days? Remind me never to try out any experimental time ships again."

"Yeah, I'm supposed to be the daredevil pilot, right?" Rita joked, as both women had been pilots willing to take incredible risks in their day, and now that both were command level, neither tended to see much piloting anymore.

The spotted captain then motioned to the box. "This is for you. You apologized for yelling at me while I was in the clamps of torture but... A lot of what you said was right and I need to make amends for that. Under an alien influence or not, those feelings are there whether I like them or not. I need to settle my issues with my family and it's going to take skills and things I'm frankly not very good with."

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry. I shouldn't have crossed that line, influence or no."

There was silence for a moment as the pinup-girl of the past stared out the virtual viewport to compose her thoughts. When she spoke, it was earnest and from the heart, a bit more casually direct than she would speak if others were about. "I crossed lines too, Captain. I... worry about Dox. I've seen what it does to you when we get involved with piracy, and it worries me that she'll follow in that path. She'll be a great officer someday... and it makes me feel as though we're competing for her heart. Serving in Starfleet, piracy represents her smuggler's past, that she ran away from to join Starfleet. Just like you," Rita looked Enalia in the eye.

"You worked so hard to get away, yet you started indoctrinating one of your junior officers at the first opportunity, and it worried me, Enalia," Rita said quietly. "I was worried that she'd been a party to a trio of assassinations you had ordered in the brig of the ship, and that it was going to be the end of her career. I overreacted... but the danger to Dox was genuine. I love the Baroness, but as non-Starfleet she might have gotten

some leeway, but on your orders it endangered you too. This whole affair... I worry, Captain. I worry a lot."

"I worry all the time too, but I'm determined to get through it as a Starfleet Captain. Also, for the record? I didn't intend for those men to be killed. Schwein is normally very good at intimidation and she can usually get what she wants out of people without resorting to violence. Her torture implements are actually antique Klingon cooking utensils. The Collector on the other hand... I'm glad his base was raided before she got anywhere close to Risa." Enalia sighed softly. "As for our Dox... She has ties to my family and this was my way of giving her an avenue to reconnect with all the refugees she helped growing up. I worry too, but she's got to make those decisions on her own. We can only guide her so far."

"So in order- yes. I could see that's all Baroness planned to do, and she did it well. In hindsight I can see it all, but at the time..." Sighing deeply, Rita shook her head. "Is this what it's going to be like being parents? Raise them, teach them, guide them, then you have to trust in them to make the right decisions?"

"That's what I'm told." Enalia stared out at the other ships docked with them for a few moments before continuing. "Even if they make mistakes, we have to be there for them. Help them find where they went wrong and help them find the right path and remember that the right path for them might not be the path we chose for them."

The spotted woman then pointed to an angular science ship the same hull color as the Hera with a donut-shaped outer saucer and a smaller inner saucer with sweeping nacelles trailing behind it. "Like that ship right there. That's one of the new Intel science ships. I'm told it'll have systems we haven't even dreamed of yet but command is using our mission reports to build it from the ground up. We're helping them find the right path even though no one knows what it is yet. We just have to hope for the best."

Enalia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And I just realized I'm horrible at analogies. Open your present. My wife is great at analogies."

"You really didn't have to get me a present, Enalia," Rita objected politely. "It's very sweet, but wholly unnecessary." Opening the box and looking inside, the face of the lost navigator warmed as she took in the sight, then she carefully reached in and fetched out the wooden plaque. Embossed upon it was the legend 'FRIENDS', with the inscription below it which read, 'A friend knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you

when you have forgotten the words'.

Blinking back tears, Rita nodded. "Yep. That's why... yeah, that's pretty much..." Eventually all she could manage was an emphatic nodding. "That's... that's on target right there, Captain Telvan."

"Thank goodness." Enalia relaxed into her chair even further, relieved that the present was well received. "If I didn't have you and Maica, I would be completely lost right now."

"I think you don't give yourself credit, Captain. But thank her for me, please. This is lovely and I will treasure it. This one's for the quarters, on my wall of sentiment." Rita beamed a smile at it. She loved the message, and wood reminded her of Earth on a starship of metal and plastic and polymers.

"Speaking of sentiment, funny thing. Our little friend, the sliver of the Titan that we herded home? They left me a gift. The file of my old office is still in the holodeck," Rita explained. "I replicated a model of my old Exeter and the Farragut from the hologram for my modern office. It took my memories of the place and made them solid here. I don't know if they did it intentionally or not, but it's kind of remarkable for me. A connection to my past in a universe that we paradoxically caused to never come into creation, yet here I am, the impossible Earth girl."

Looking to Enalia, Rita laid her hand over the other woman's spotted hand. "I will try to keep you grounded, and I will try to navigate a clear course for you. I'll be your sword and shieldmaiden- I will defend your starship inside and out. I'll help you get through the battle for your own independence, and we'll do it without violating our Starfleet oaths. I will remember that underneath all that swagger and seeming omniscience is still an all-too mortal woman, frail as the rest of us. Just like me," Rita offered frankly. "We keep one another balanced, Captain. That seems to be why this works. I... will respect that I have to let them make mistakes, and that I cannot be quick to judge. Emotion must be tempered by logic."

"I swore I'd serve, and that I'd do my best. Five year mission, ma'am... this is the part where we say goodbye to Earth," Rita said wistfully. It was a paradox about the spacefarer that she strove to explore the stars, yet yearned for her homeworld, beloved in her heart. "I'll see it again in the year 2400 when I've got a date with destiny. So now, let the stars be my destination."

"Well said, Commander Paris. Well said." Enalia reached out and gave Rita's hand a squeeze as they looked out over the broad and graceful saucer of the USS Hera. "To wherever those in need cry out, that's where we'll go. And to our oaths we'll hold true."

"I will tell Kodria Mizu, eighty-something years into the future, that you work out a way to call for help, and you wait, and you don't give up hope. Because there are people out there who spend their lives answering those calls for help in the darkness when all seems lost, people like Starfleet," Rita patted the captain on the shoulder. "When she found herself all alone and in need of help, she called out into the darkness, and she didn't give up hope. Who should show up but Starfleet. Because we're the good guys, you and me and this amazing crew of mad diversity of yours."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Captain. You lead, I'll follow, and she'll fly straight and true for you, on my honor as your officer, first amongst them." Rita nodded. "Oh! I bought something. I don't imagine it's a pet for you, but Maica will probably adore it. Computer," Rita called out to the overhead. "Please beam in My Little Fuzzball."

There was the hum of the transporter, and on the table before them a tribble appeared, cooing and purring curiously.

"It's just a robot, basic programming, apparently they are kid's toys for parents who want a hypoallergenic pet who still looks organic. But it trills and rolls around. It can't climb walls, and you're welcome for that because I thought that might be a bit too close to the real thing. But I ran across them in a shop in San Fran so I got one for you. Kind of a memento of our first real adventure together."

"Oh ho!" Enalia picked up the little fuzzball and started petting it, setting off a pleasing cooing sound. "I actually thought about getting you a live neutered one before Maica suggested the plate instead. Thank you. I'll treasure it always."

For several long moments the only sound was the cooing of the tribble toy as Enalia pet it. "Hey... If it comes down to it... My mother is likely to demand a duel between starships. If so, I can't use the Hera. Would you be my first officer and tactical officer aboard my old ship?"

Without hesitation, Rita Paris replied. "I will.. but only so long as you swear to me you aren't going to kill her. Plain and simple. I'll stand on your bridge in my golden oldie

uniform and I'll show her tricks she never dreamed of and we'll make her regret ever raising an objection to your wishes. But when it's over, she lives. She has to. Because we're Starfleet, and otherwise the cost to you is too great, and I won't be a party to that." Eyeing the spotted corsair, the career Starfleet gal offered her hand. "Deal?"

"You know she's not going to..." Enalia paused, her hand half way to Rita's, her eyes narrowing. "Wait a second... You know something, don't you? Kodria did tell you something. That's why she was so nervous meeting me. Alright, but she's not going to make it easy." Finishing the handshake, Enalia eyed her first officer warily.

"This was the first time she'd ever met you. How much do you want to know?" Rita laid it on the table- if her Captain wanted to know, she'd tell her all of it. As far as she was concerned, all but one small piece of the future could tend to itself.

"Honestly, I wish I didn't know that you knew. With as much plotting as I do, I'd rather it be on my terms. After all, the future isn't... But the future has called me on my fecking viewscreen on my fecking bridge and walked into my fecking ready room more than once..." Giving a groan of defeat, Enalia buried her face in her hands and went back to petting her new tribble friend.

"It's okay, Cap'n," Rita offered soothingly. "If I don't have to tell you then I won't. If it's the only way to get you to listen and avoid catastrophe, I'll use it," Rita admitted. "But really, she's just worried because if you kill your mother you become her, and the joy in your life is just gone after that. Kodria didn't want that for you, and neither do I."

"So we play this by the book, and you and the Baroness cook up a way we can win without fatalities, and I will be very discriminating about my targeting to insure that we do not destroy but disable. After all, if we blow out her shields she can't refuse you a face to face duel then, because you can beam over. I'm confident we can do this, Captain. And I'll be right there for you the whole way. You can beat her, we can win your freedom and we can walk away clean. I know we can." If nothing else, Rita's enthusiasm and conviction were somewhat reassuring. After all, the impossible tended to somehow become merely improbable when she was around.

Enalia nodded and furrowed her brow. "Then it's time I taught you her playbook so we can prepare for it. Then prepare for her counters to our preparations. She won't use transporters - she'll use ramming style boarding actions and field disruptors. We may both use rebuilt Miranda class ships, but hers has a lot more Klingon tech while mine

has a lot more Federation allied tech. She'll be ruthless yet cunning. If she pulls back, it'll be to lure us into a trap. If she presses her attack, it'll be to push us into a trap. If she boards us, it'll be to set a trap."

"That's the basics... I'll send you replays of several of her battles later." Enalia held up one finger and waggled it in the air. "She's one of the only people that I believe could have beaten the Kobayashi Maru scenario without any sort of cheating at all and I bet you she would have started it by ramming the first Klingon ship with tractors at full hard enough to knock it into the second. Then dropped half her shields to beam all those survivors up using everything they had, even the cargo transporters. After that, she would have likely used the derelict ship as a shield and finished them off piecemeal while they finished the rescue before blowing up the freighter for good measure."

"Then we'll simply have to be smarter, ma'am. Fortunately, I happen to know one of the smartest men alive, and he is kinda fond of me, so he'll likely have a brilliant insight or two. But I will definitely study her playbook, and we'll outsmart her, ma'am. I've beaten plenty of opponents who were smarter or stronger or simply outclassed me over the years with a little planning, a little luck and a lot of improvisation when it all goes wrong. We'll beat this one too, you watch and see." Paris spoke from a position of absolute confidence- this was not a woman who had raised and intimidated her for the entirety of her life. This was just another space pirate too clever for her own good, who needed to be taken down a peg or two, and the Captain needed confidence for this. So from her First Officer, confidence is what she'd get.

For her part, Enalia could only hope and pray that they had luck on their side as well, but having Rita on her side was a blessing all on its own. Right now she had hope that they could actually win this. Smiling hopefully, she reached out and hugged her first officer. "Thank you. You have no idea what your strength means to me."

"Yes I do, Captain," Rita whispered, holding the trill captain. "We're gonna win this- you, me and our merry crew of not-pirates along with your own personal pirate. We're going to win you your freedom and you'll live on your own terms without argument. You'll have children when you decide and name your own successors and juggle both lives. You can have it all, and you will. I'll see to it personally."

While in truth Rita had no idea how she would make good on that promise, as usual, she'd figure it out. Meanwhile, the captain needed to believe it in the here and now. Rita Paris would give her something to believe in- hope.

## Four Months Later

### Chapter 1 - Pirates of the Crab Nebula

On her schedule for after-duty obligations- which Commander Rita Paris tended to schedule as well, given her busy starship life- was an obligation to meet on the Holodeck for 'pirate training'. Ideally, this was to teach those of the crew who might be taking part some idea of how piratical combat worked. Or at least that was Rita's assumption- this had been scheduled by the Baroness von Alcott, so Rita wasn't positive that it was anything of the sort. But given that the name of the engagement was 'Pirate Training' that tended to lend itself to her belief that this was preparation for the upcoming Tribunal that the Captain would face, with whom a few of the crew would be standing by her side. Although in the old-fashioned officer's mind, the fewer Starfleet personnel the better.

Piracy in the 24th century was an odd puzzle to the throwback Starfleet siren. In her day pirates were simply bad. But in the complex times in which she lived, there were pirates and there were those who hunted them, and the distinction between the two was a bit too slender for her tastes. She'd watched discipline and morals go quite lax when piracy took over from Starfleet, and thus Rita worried about how the intermingling of the two might ruin Starfleet officers. The Baroness managed the tightrope act just fine, being a pirate amongst fleeters, and the Captain always knew where her duty called her. The only serious disagreements she'd had with Enalia Telvan were over piracy intermingling with Starfleet, and they had worked it out. But that wasn't everyone who would be involved in this Tribunal, and Rita still worried.

It was, after all, a component of her job, and one she took quite seriously.

But today was about training, and ideally preparation. So Rita would approach it with an open mind and an eye for detail, and she would keep her misgivings and trepidation private. Instead, she had dressed for the occasion in a saucy pirate costume to keep in the spirit of the exercise, strapped on her billy club and cutlass from her armor, and packed herself a phaser hidden in the ruffles of her short skirt. Now to maintain an open mind, and see how this exercise would go.

Stepping into the holodeck shortly afterward was Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox. Or, more accurately, *Baroness* Mnhei'sahe Dox. Like Rita, Dox chose to dress for the occasion, but rather than a costume, she was wearing the green military-style jacket with gold epaulets on the shoulders that was her uniform as a 5th class Baroness of the Captain's Artan pirate family. A rank she was inducted into only a few months into her service on the Hera, in part due to her families connection to the Artan family.

Hew wardrobe included tall, military boots and flared black pants. Belted to her back with thick, crisscrossing black leather belts were the curved, twin Caitian short blades that were gifted to Dox from the Baroness von Alcott for the upcoming tribunal. The handles mounted at the bottom, magnetically locked into their sheaths. Around her waist, another belt with an ornate gold belt buckle that housed the hip holster with her standard issue phaser. The entire wardrobe, however, seemed slightly loose on the red-headed Romulan woman who had been losing a noticeable amount of weight thanks in part of a combination of an extremely rigorous combat workout training regimen and restored Romulan DNA.

"Hello Commander." The slightly anxious young Lieutenant nodded in greeting. She knew Rita Paris was none too happy with her involvement in the affairs of the Artan family and hoped her decision to wear the uniform in question would not exacerbate that. However, the somewhat over the top ensemble Paris herself was wearing helped to relax Dox's nerves slightly. "I figured that if this is the outfit I'm going to have to wear for all of this, it made sense to start practicing in it."

"Seems logical," Paris offered with a smile, gesturing to her own outfit. "I'll not wear my uniform on the bridge of a Pirate ship, so I just dialed up 'pirate hooker' on my replicator and here we are. As you say, this is likely what I'll be wearing, so I may as well get into the spirit of things."

Which is when the Baroness Schwein von Alcott swaggered out onto the poop deck in all her Artan Family livery, including a hat and cape to match. She was armed with just her shortsword today and there was a parrot on her shoulder. "Guten tag! This program is old but Baroness Sarika assures me that she has made it compatible with your systems. We have been running it as a training adventure for years. It has served well, ja?"

The parrot piped up in Sarika's voice at that moment. "Train hard bitches! RAAA! Train

hard!"

Poking a finger up that the parrot, Rita Paris' eyes narrowed. "Don't call me a bitch, or I'll find a delightful recipe for roast parrot..."

The door opened again as the Andorian stepped through the doors. Unsure of what she was supposed to be wearing she had chosen one of the fleets engineering jumpsuits only with a black color scheme. " Hello everyone," she said as she wove to the others.

Again, Paris' eyes narrowed as she saw the Chief Engineer of the Hera was participating in the exercise. Which meant to her mind that the engineer would be expected to participate in the Tribunal, despite Rita's desire to keep as many Starfleet personnel from becoming embroiled in what she saw as a dangerous and potentially career-ending exercise. But she ground her teeth and kept it to herself.

While she was entitled to her opinion, these officers were volunteering to likely end their careers, and she would ensure that all of them were on leave when this came to pass. Beyond that, she mentally threw in the towel. Her old-fashioned concepts of duty and honor and 'behavior unbecoming an officer' were clearly in the minority at the close of the 24th century. The crew would apparently do as they saw fit despite any orders to the contrary, and that meant playing pirate.

For not the first time she reconsidered her own promise to the captain to help, realizing that she herself was setting the worst possible example.

Schwein shoo'd the parrot off her shoulder and it landed on one of the railings not far off. "Baroness Sarika is very colorful, ja? She may have added a bit much of her own flair to the parrot." She then turned to the Andorian. "Commander sh'Zoarhi, thank you for joining us. If ze Prinzessin's old engineer was still with us, your presence would not be needed, but alaz, Frau Blucher was lost in a Syndicate raid immediately after ze Tribunal was announced. Do you have a preferred weapon? Did you bring one?"

Looking a bit sheepish, Asa made their entry to the Holodeck, wearing old-fashioned scrubs in all white. "Um, I presume I'm here to observe what types of injuries to expect?" they inquired, "I, um, well, I'm not really *good* at combat, so, well, I guess I just want to help and hope someone can show me how."

The doctor was carrying their usual medical bag, as if expecting to need to perform first

aid in spite of the safety limitations of the holodeck. Given the nature of what they were preparing for, perhaps not a useless precaution.

"Indeed," Az'Prel replied, having followed Asa in, wearing a freshly replicated, far lighter version of her old armor in earthy camo tones. "Bladed and blunt force weaponry can cause unique and traumatizing injuries that can be far more life-threatening than energy weapons. It would be logical to have you here to offer extra training for emergency first aid treatment procedures."

"All right Baroness, it looks like we're all here. What did you have in mind for this particular exercise?" While she was still far less than enthusiastic at the nature of the gathering, Rita Paris still recognized that structure needed to be maintained, so she did her part to motivate.

The Baroness grinned at the Voluptuous Commander and winked with her one exposed eye. "We fend off a boarding party, board their ship, and capture ze flag. We use zis for group battle strategies and sword fighting training in an unfamiliar setting. We often find ourselves unable to use energy weapons and in strange terrain, and zis is excellent training for zat. Once we capture ze flag in the treasure room, we win the scenario. Easy, ja?"

"Swordfighting practice under energy dampeners... all right. Ah, because the Captain's mother is famous for her boarding actions. That makes sense." Paris looked around, still uneasy about all of the Starfleet personnel present who were clearly expected to participate in the Tribunal. But that was apparently nothing she had a say in, so she had to let that go. "All right people, prepare to repel boarders. No energy weapons, we're strictly hand powered on this one. Keep it tight, watch one another's backs and protect the non-coms."

Schwein pulled free her shortsword and raised it into the air. "Computer, begin program and provide swords for those that have none!"

Suddenly, instead of the ship being on a calm sea, they were in the middle of a storm and there was another ship alongside them. The other crew were fish people that looked like they were half humanoid and half sea creatures and they started throwing ropes over and swinging across in an attempt to tie the ships together and board.

The Sarika-parrot screeched loudly. "RAAAA! Boarding bitches! Repel the bitches!"

RAAAA!"

Taking a defensive stance as the scenario came to life, Dox reached back and unsheathed her short, curved swords, muttering at the foul-mouthed Parrot. "That woman has issues."

Then leaning back over her shoulder, she addressed Doctor Dael quickly. "Try and stay by one of us, Doctor. Keep close."

Momentarily taken aback by the sword in their hand, Asa quickly came to and set about trying to cut ropes wherever they could reach, calling over their shoulder, "Can they swim? Aren't they just going to attack us from below if we dump them in the water?"

Schwein stared up at the sky for a moment before rushing over to slice at a holographic pirate near Rita and toss him into the water. "There is something wrong. The storm isn't supposed to be here."

"I'd like to say I'm surprised," Rita muttered darkly. "Computer, freeze program."

When that had no effect, Paris immediately began barking orders. "Form up! Let them aboard but don't let them flank us! The safeties are off, so fight defensively until we thin out their numbers and defend the non-coms! Goddamn pirates," Rita muttered, then glanced at Schwein. "Present company excluded..."

"Oh, of course, there is something wrong," Asa muttered to herself, "Does anything ever go *right* in these bloody things?"

Then, shaking off the annoyance at the nigh-sentient-and-grumpy holodeck, Asa continued cutting riggings of incoming pirates as they appeared, listening for the tell-tale splash indicating a member of the boarding party had fallen into the depths below. Staying close to Paris and Dox, Asa said, "So, questions remains, can these beings climb up the sides without ropes?"

Staying back in the tight formation as ordered by Commander Paris, Dox kept her guard up as she began fighting off the advancing creatures with her twin blades. "Probably... but it should slow their advance a little."

As Az'Prel and Schwein took up flanking positions to the group, the infernal parrot dropped to the deck dead and squaked once more in a voice similar to Enalia's but older and much more cruel sounding. "I hope you enjoy the modifications to this, you fleeter swine. Not even you could survive this little trap. RAaaa..."

"Just in case I had any doubts," Paris muttered. "What are the odds that this thing is set to send infinite waves until we're overcome, Baroness? You are the expert on the mindset at work here."

The silver-haired pirate flipped up her eyepatch so she could analyze the program around them. "Nein, it is hard capped at twelve at once with a respawn rate of thirty seconds. Everything changed is overlay data so I believe the waves are still set at six."

"So, we can still end the program if we get to that flag, then? Sounds like a goal to me." Dox added as she slashed away at the oncoming forces from the enemy ship.

"And I think she was expecting only me," added Shwein as she booted a fish-faced pirate to the head.

"Not in the mood to fight that many spawns," Paris muttered, sheathing the cutlass and beginning to uncurl the billy club. "Okay folks- these are not people, they are holograms, so carve them up. Capture the flag is the game, let's play to win. Az'Prel, Baroness, you're on point, Doc, Thex, watch our backs and let's try to keep close." Finishing unfurling the odd billy club, Paris bared the wide-bladed breaker sword she'd been practicing. "Landing party, move out!"

As the group began to press forward, the attacking fish-pirates brandished their own swords. Corrupted, the safety interlocks were gone and every one of those blades was now as deadly as any in the hands of the crew. Fully aware of the danger, Dox pressed harder to remember her lessons in swordplay from Baroness von Alcott and kept moving, her curved twin blades held backward in her hands as she attacked.

"Commander!". The red-headed Romulan called out, "They're attempting to lash the ships together to board... We let them and that will work both ways to get us over to their flag, I'm thinking."

Thex wouldn't admit it, but she was enjoying this. The holographic fish-man pirates were having a hard time reacting to her unusual fighting style. A grin formed on her face

as with a flying kick she sent another one of the pirates over the edge of the ship.

“Excellent point, Miss Dox. All right, let it happen front line, just keep us a clear path until they’re close enough.... Aaaaand... now! Over the side, me hearties!” Rita wasn’t sure if that was a thing pirates said, but she was trying to get into the spirit of things. “Take their foc’sle!”

Schwein laughed heartily, getting into the spirit of things as she jumped between ships, slicing through one fish faced pirate and kicking down a second. “Give them no quarter, for we shall get none from them!”

Az'Prel silently tumbled over the railings and delivered a devastating series of kicks to a pair of fish pirates, ending in a spinning move that sliced both of their heads off with the rapier that the computer had given her. Looking it over, she commented emotionlessly. “It would appear that the holographic weaponry is sufficient for self-defense.”

The portly pilot could fight and her sword fighting technique was improving, but what she wasn't was a jumper. Looking at the narrowing gap, Dox re-sheathed her swords for a moment and did her best tuck and roll from one deck to the other, landing hard.

“Imirrhllhse! Letting out a grunt and a curse in Rihan, she rolled to her feet and pulled her blades back out as she pressed on.

With a run and a leap, Asa cleared the other ships deck....and then overcorrected on their landing, winding up awkwardly straddling a barrel next to Commander Paris.

Standing quickly. Asa said to Rita, “Um, sticking close, right?” then turned to check no one was sneaking up from behind.

“You're doing wonderfully, Doctor, as always. Well, look at them go... Thex! Quite dawdling back there, we've places to be! All right Doc, let's you and I try to keep up.” As a door on the pirate ship opened, the next rush of angry sword-bearing fishmen poured out onto the deck to the rear. Laying into them with the two-handed blade, Paris was dismayed at how much heavier the weapon was without the power assist of the EVA suit, and how much less impressive the performance of the weapon when not driven by those same augmentations.

“Well, that's why we train. Cover my flank as we pull back, Doc. Miss sh'Zoarhi, WE

ARE LEAVING!" Paris called out as she swung the great sword in controlled arcs.

"On it!" Thex yelled as she threw a hammer past Rita and Asa to collide with the fishy faces of the pirates.

With a solid kick, Schwein knocked in the double doors leading below decks and the way down was clear... Other than a 20lb cannon aimed straight up the stairs right at her. Ducking out of the way, she narrowly avoided having her head taken off by a cannonball. "Watch for cannon fire belowdecks!" With that, she headed down the stairs taking out a hammerhead shark pirate that had been manning the cannon in the process.

"Aye!" Dox yelled from near the rear as she continued to slash away at the remaining attackers, making sure they weren't bottlenecked from the rear as they advanced. Using the twin blades, she found herself in a one/two rhythm of blocking a blade slash with one sword and countering with the second blade to remove the hands that held the offending weapons.

Counting in her head as she fought, when she'd reached 25, Paris called out. "New wave spawning! Az'Prel, trade out to cover our retreat, everyone belowdecks, move!" Paris took her own advice. hedging the ship's doctor to move down the steps ahead of her as she passed by Az'Prel, in whom she had more confidence could cover their retreat in such tight quarters than Paris herself with the large and unwieldy blade she was using.

Were she a better swordswoman she might begin to improvise with discarded pirate weapons. By the time-tossed temptress was an amateur sword maiden, and her improvisational skills would pale beside actual expertise. Thus her internal tactician knew the calls to make, and the buxom blonde followed her instincts, honed as they were by surviving so much of what the universe had thrown at her over time.

Staying close to Rita, Asa called over the din, "They have exposed gills at the neck and the stomach. If you land a blow there, even if it's just a really hard punch, that should incapacitate them long enough to get by. That may prove easier than using a sword in tight confines."

*It's a simulation, Rita. Drop the poor choice and start anew. Even if it was the real thing, nothing is truly lost in an age of replication.* As the El-Aurian physician raised an excellent point, Paris grabbed the crossguard and slammed it into the deck at her feet with all of her strength, and it somewhat stuck into the deck, although not really. It was

clear that the power assist of her EVA armor was what enabled that weapon to be effective, and now she knew. *Lesson learned.*

With a grunt, she raised up her leg and placed her foot on the wide-blade of the breaker sword to shove up the stairs at the incoming tide of fish-faced pirates. Rita closed her hand about the hilt of the cutlass at her belt, and drew it as the bell guard ratcheted into place around her hand. As the doctor had recommended, she readied a fist and the shorter close-quarters weapon and prepared to deal with their swarming armed opponents as they covered the rear of the expedition into the bowels of the pirate ship in the sword fighting practice game of 'capture the booty'.

A slight smirk came across Dox's face as she took Asa's advice and sheathed one of her two blades, leaving the one in her left hand out to block sword attacks as she threw herself towards a group of fish-faced pirates. When it came right down to it, while she often wasn't proud of the fact, the generally angry young Romulan woman got an inordinate amount of pleasure in fighting and was happy for the opportunity to switch to hand to hand for the close quarters combat.

An opening appeared to be forming in front of Rita, and Asa thought they saw a chest at the bottom of the stairs. Not entirely sure of what they were perceiving without the HUD, Asa called to the group, "Is that what we are looking for?" while pointing ahead.

"Ja!" Schwein called out as she punched one pirate in the neck and stabbed another in the crotch. Retrieving her short sword, she leaped for the treasure, only for it to dissolve right before she touched it and to be replaced with a door straight out onto the docking bay of a Miranda class starship with red and purple markings. The walls had flowery graffiti all over it, marking it as the property of Arenara Artan.

One of the pirates on the other side of that door laughed and took a swing at Schwein. "Hahahaha! The flag is on the bridge you stupid swine! I told you you'll never get out of this trap!" Without hesitating, the silver-haired pirate took off his head with her short sword.

"Imirrhllhse!" Dox cursed at the twist in the program as it happened. "Baroness... if this program was only prepared for you, you might not be *able* to get the flag yourself. If Arenara wasn't expecting any of US, it might need to BE one of us."

"Then I will cover the rear while the rest of you claim the flag on the bridge, ja?"  
Schwein replied.

## Chapter 2 - If An Eye Offend Thee

Peering around the docking bay, Rita Paris fished around in her brief ruffled petticoats to withdraw her phaser from beneath her skirt. Securing it in her right hand with the cutlass in her left, she prepared to commando her way across what ought to be a familiar design for her.

"I can get us to the bridge." Pointing, she indicated "Fore, aft. Access ladders are over here, stay together, stay sharp. Let's go."

Following close behind, Dox made sure Asa was between her and Commander Paris as she sheathed her other blade to make the climb.

"We have to cross these cargo bays first, which is a lot of open ground. If we take a turbolift they can shut us down and keep us there until they redirect us to the brig on Deck 7. They can't seal the access ladder hatches unless the computer senses decompression though- that's a hardwired sensor into each one of those hatches. And somehow in all of the modifications to this old girl, I'll bet she hasn't replaced those hatches. Let's go- fast, stay low, shoot to stun, assuming our phasers will work."

That was when a green disruptor bolt whizzed by, followed by a few more. "Well, if theirs work... move and fire people, let's go!"

An idea struck Asa and the doctor called to von Alcott, "Does she use any kind of privacy fields? Activating a privacy field in an area where we are not may serve as a distraction. If we make it look like we accidentally tripped a sensor of some kind elsewhere on the ship, it may buy us a bit less notice."

"Privacy fields? No, but there are smuggling panels with sensor scramblers in several of the walls. If the sim is set up as her ship is..." Schwein punched in a code at one of the wall comm panels and lo and behold, it triggered several wall panels to slide aside revealing that instead of the normal support and power systems, smuggling compartments big enough to hold several people each had been installed. "The scramblers are at either side, ja?"

Firing at the pirates who were working up a charge, Paris called out orders. Miss Dox, Miss Az'Prel, buy us some time, please. Doc, Thex, let's move, access ladders are across the cargo bay, double-time!" Paris took off in a jog, leading from the front, firing her phaser as she did so. It wasn't terribly accurate, but offered cover fire.

"Aye, Commander." Dox replied as she pulled out one blade and the phaser from her hip as she moved to engage the attackers to give the team time to do its job. "Miss Az'Prel, let's do this."

The displaced Vulcan popped one of the sensor scramblers and pulled a power cell out of the comm panel, wiring them together before tucking the makeshift device into her belt. After that, she picked up one of the discarded pirate weapons by the blade and almost casually tossed it, flipping it through the air so that it lodged itself in the chest of a puffer-fish faced pirate, nailing him to the wall. "I'm with you, Miss Dox, but I will need a ranged weapon for maximum effectiveness." Having said that, she picked up another of the discarded weapons and prepared to throw it.

Holstering her phaser for a moment, Dox unsheathed her second blade as she eyed an oncoming horde of pirates, the lead brandishing a large disruptor. "One moment, Miss Az'Prel."

With a loud cry, Dox ran towards the lead Pirate as it raised it's disruptor to fire. But before it could, she crossed her twin blades in front of her slicing off the creatures arm, disruptor in hand. As it fell, she picked it up and tossed it across the room towards Az'Prel, hand still attached."Hnaev!! Sorry. Thought the hand would have let go. Ew!"

"Thank you for the hand," replied Az'Prel, not even skipping a beat as she removed the offending appendage, assumed a kata stance with the disruptor and her sword, and started firing into the group of pirates, each shot hitting a lethal spot as she performed a dance of death, moving closer to them with each stance change.

Moving alongside Rita and Thex, Asa called out, "Lurker, 9 O'Clock!" as a previously unseen foe rose from a hiding spot well concealed in one corner of the room. Lacking a weapon, Asa did the only thing they could think to do and reached into their med bag, grabbing the heaviest vial in the bag (one that contained compressed plasma for emergency transfusions) and threw it with all their strength at the head of the would-be attacker. The vial hit the enemy directly in the forehead, and although it did not knock

him out, the assailant was stunned....which was only compounded by the vial beginning to leak and a spray of pinkish compressed plasma exploding on his face and torso.

"Ugly way to die..." Paris muttered.

The ladders were, unsurprisingly, exactly where the Constitution-Class expert remembered them being, and Paris promptly shot a pirate attempting to climb down to assault the invaders. Scrambling up the ladder with practiced ease, Paris confirmed that the deck above was clear before sliding back down to Deck 6. "Come on, people, no time to dawdle! Up the gangway, let's go go go! Miss Dox, you are in the lead, Miss Az'Prel, you have rearguard. Doc, Thex, let's go!"

As she barked orders, Paris was still staying low and maintaining suppressing fire, her phaser set on stun.

Following orders, Dox sheathed her blades and holstered her phaser and quickly scrambled up in the lead. As soon as she was clear, she pulled her phaser back out to join Paris in covering the rest of the team.

Wasting no time, Asa followed Dox up the ladder, staying close to her heels.

"Thex! Stop kicking that man and get up the ladder!" Paris ordered, eager to get to the higher decks where very few opponents would be able to get at them. But if they dallied here too long, the pirates would tumble to their plan and ambush them on the upper decks.

Schwein was up the ladder as well, still scanning with her cybernetic eye. "Ze code here looks wrong... Almost like..." With a scream of pain, the silver-haired pirate clutched at her eye and collapsed to the deck. "Ach... Visual virus... Did not expect that..."

As soon as Schwein had screamed, Asa was running to her at a trot. Dropping to one knee, the doctor scanned quickly, looking for the virus impacting the Baroness.

"That's.....nasty," Dael concluded, "This *thing* has been outlawed in every civilized system. The virus attacks cybernetic components and then go on to attack the nerves connected to the device. This," Asa said, injecting a hypo into von Alcott's thigh muscle, "Is a nerve pain blocker. The meds needed to erase the virus are in Sickbay, for all the good that will do us right now. Long and short of it, the more you use the eye, the faster this will progress. I highly recommend limited use of your cybernetic eye until we can

get you to Sickbay and get this taken care of. I'm sorry, Schwein, I didn't think to carry curatives to a virus originally designed to fight the Borg."

Crouching over Schwein's position to keep her friends covered, Dox looked at Schwein's eye, then up to Commander Paris with a concerned look but said nothing. This was exactly what the two women had discussed concerns over in their secret planning meetings: That the Captain's mother could use the cybernetics of the Baronesses against Enalia.

"That iz ok, Herr Doktor... Zis only proves... How dangerous zis woman iz..." Once Asa was done, Schwein flipped her eyepatch back down to at least limit the input to her cybernetics a bit and did her best to stand up, albeit shakily and leaning on a wall, clearly still in considerable pain. "We must press on, ja?"

Grabbing the silver-tressed space pirate under the arms, Paris got under the woman, hanging the shorter woman's arms over her neck and shoulders as she carried von Alcott on her back. "Nobody gets left behind, Baroness," Paris grunted as she bore the woman's weight. Holstering her phaser and cutlass, the courageous commander began to climb. "Up the ladder, here we go... you just hang on and we'll get you through this."

In the meantime, Az'Prel had finished off the last of the pirates on the deck below them and had made it up the ladder, her armor splattered with fish guts. "Rear guard reporting in. Lower deck clear and ready to proceed."

"Bring up the rear, Miss Az'Prel, with my compliments. Miss Dox, advance and secure the next deck, if you please," Paris remained calm, adapting to the situation as it developed. Flexible in mind and spirit, this was one of her greatest strengths- the ability to change course and continue toward the destination, replotting as the course required, and keeping her crew moving.

Taking point as ordered, Dox put her phaser handle in her mouth as she began pressing up the ladder to the next deck. As soon as she was within a ring of the top, she grabbed her phaser and held it to the ready in anticipation of an ambush.

Even on a holodeck, holographic pirates simulated breathing, so the red-headed Romulan with exceptional hearing paused to listen. A slight smirk went across her face as she picked up the sounds of shuffling and breathing from the deck above.

She could see the ceiling of the next deck, and had a fix on where the attackers were standing and stole a play from Lieutenant Sonak's book. Setting her phaser on a wide beam of high intensity, she sprayed the ceiling in a wave above where the ambush was going to come from, sending a bursting wave of instantly liquified durasteel raining down towards the pirates.

Instantly, she reset for stun as she heard the pirates cry out and rolled up onto the deck, opening fire on the small grouping, stunning them as they continued to try and rub off the Sparks. "All clear, Commander!" she called down the ladder.

Hauling up the ladder, Paris was surprised that the space pirate on her back was more lightweight than she had imagined. Somehow she assumed the Baroness would be heavier than she herself, but she was surprisingly lightweight. Arriving at the next deck, Paris ensured that the landing party was still together, and nodded. "Continue, Miss Dox, until we reach Deck 2. Then we'll make our plan to storm the bridge."

"Aye, Commander." Dox replied as she continued up to the next deck with the team close behind her. Listening again, she this time heard nothing but that silence made her nervous. Even uncorrupted by an evil Pirate queen, the Holodeck simulations *learned* in combat mode and she decided on a different tactic this time in case these pirates were just *not breathing* on the next deck up. But to her surprise, Deck three was clear as she leaned in ready to fire, her head just barely peaking in.

Still, it didn't feel right and the red-headed Romulan desperately wished she was wearing her EVA armor with her HUD display to let her know if anything was down either side of the Jefferies tube stretching out port and starboard into darkness. Instead, she decided to trust her gut which told her this was too easy.

"Commander, I need your phaser for a second. I need to test a hunch here." Dox leaned back down with an outstretched hand.

A hand came up, holding an old Type 2 pistol-style phaser by the detachable Type 1 phaser of its day, the handle protruding upward towards the Lieutenant's outstretched hand. This was not a moment to be tossing phasers about, and Paris was oddly safety-conscious at times.

Taking a breath, with a phaser set on medium spread but high power, the anxious Lieutenant brought her feet up on the higher rungs and rested her back against the top of

the interior of the hatch, just below its lip as she released her breath. Pushing with her strong legs, she slid quickly up the top of the hatch opening like a red-headed Whack-A-Mole, firing with a phaser down both ends of the darkened Jefferies tubes.

The light flared down the tubes flashing brightly as, in both directions, the beams stunned small groups of fish-faced pirates waiting in the darkness like snipers. The sound of multiple targets hitting the deck plating of the tubes let Dox know the coast was clear as she handed the phaser back down. "Okay. One more deck to go, Commander."

"Perfect. Let's regroup on Deck 2," Paris replied, insuring that the ship's surgeon and the chief engineer preceded her up the ladder, even as the enigmatic Az'prel covered their rear. Once all of the landing party were assembled on Deck 2, the curvaceous commander laid the injured Baroness down on the deck as she stretched and considered her options.

"Well, using the turnbolift shaft is a possibility, as we could pry the doors open and assault from there... but I suspect they'd be expecting that. By now they know we're coming up through the access ladders, but that just means they'll be ready to fire if we come out that hatch. In this particular case, working with what we've got..." Paris' mind raced as she reviewed their assets and considered what could be done with the materials at hand.

A moment later, the door to the hatchway access on the bridge of the Miranda class opened, with a number of phasers trained upon it. No one was there, however, save for one gold-clad arm flinging a single small object onto the bridge. It was an old-style phaser, of the era before even the Miranda class starships... an old-school phaser which was whining and cycling louder and louder until the overload it had been set for reached its zenith, and the phaser exploded on the bridge.

As it did so, a mob of angry pirates poured onto the bridge to assault the stunned and injured pirates, engaging them in swordplay and phaser fire.

Leading the charge was Az'Prel, their mirror universe refugee. She rolled in, shanked one pirate through the rear with her sword while firing her liberated disruptor in the face of another, pulled free the sword of the shanked pirate, flipped that sword through the air into a third pirate, hopped up onto the bridge rail so she could kick another pirate in the face, stepped off the back of the command chair to land on the helm controls like some

sort of superhero, and put another disruptor bolt in the forehead of the last moving pirate.

Surveying the remains of the bridge, the Vulcan woman found a suspicious chest in the command chair but otherwise it looked normal enough to her eyes. "Bridge is clear of hostiles, Commander. One suspicious package found."

"Well done, Miss Az'Prel. Please do me the courtesy of inspection and analysis, if you will," Paris replied as she climbed out of the hatchway onto the bridge, the Baroness borne on her back. "Let us assume this is a bomb, at the very least an anti-personnel device," Paris called. Bereft of any technology to do anything else with, and with the Baroness' medical tricorder out of the loop, Rita was getting the hang of this asinine pirate thing, and starting to see how it worked. "This being holographic I cannot imagine that it will give us any clues, but let's operate on an assumption of a trap."

With a nod, Az'Prel shot the lock off with her disruptor, then crouched to the side with one of the pirate swords, carefully lifting the lid away from everyone else. It didn't immediately turn into a door like the last pile of treasure and nothing bad popped out immediately, so the Vulcan woman peered inside, opening the lid the rest of the way.

Which was when the cruel laughter of a woman that sounded like an older version of Enalia began.

Inside was a chibi plush of Arenara Artan laughing at them sitting on top of a pile of gold, wearing a white pirate outfit complete with gold brocade and a silk cape. Inside was also a note.

'Congratulations on getting through this, my daughter's little piggy. Just because you survived this little trap though, don't expect to survive the Tribunal. I have other ways of dealing with you.'

"I am beginning to get a real disdain for this woman," Rita Paris muttered. "Computer, freeze program."

The computer obliged, the sounds and displays of the modernized bridge paused, and Paris looked around with satisfaction. "Perhaps in her vanity she's left us something to find."

Tapping the ancient Starfleet delta on her chest, Paris called out. "Paris to Chief Clemens. I want an intel team in Holodeck 3 for analysis, please. We're going to see if she left us any clues as to her systems, the layout of her bridge. She might just have been vain enough to give us a look around. Let's see if we can't turn that to our advantage."

Schwein pointed out one of the stations along the port side wall as she leaned against the bridge railing, looking like she was about to fall over. "There. That's her boarding controls. Next to it is her internal shield systems. Ja, this is her bridge."

Az'Prel noticed something as well and headed over to a station decked out in chrome and red metals on the starboard side. "She has an agony suppression field system." Turning back to Commander Paris, there was something in the Vulcan's eyes. Not quite fear, but something close to it. "The Terran Empire of my universe was experimenting with this technology. It can turn any pair of forcefields in close proximity into an agony booth."

"Nouhha..." Dox muttered under her breath at Az'Prel's words and the implications of it as she stepped over to help her fellow Baroness as needed.

"Baroness... she wasn't planning on you surviving this. Is any of what she did here actionable in the tribunal? Evidence that can strengthen the Captain's case? I mean, she actively tried to assassinate you." Dox asked.

Schwein shook her head, nearly falling over when it made her dizzy. As she steadied herself, she answered. "Under ze Tribunal, no... After it, ja... Zis is... a dangerous time to be without a crew as threats like zis may be made during ze proceedings. Ze weaker crews are likely to claim to side with us but vote with her in the end because of zis. Ze Prinzessin has forbidden such acts... For obvious reasons... But ze Queen ignores her in this. Az do ze first class Baronesses."

Putting it together in her head, Commander Paris stumbled across an uncomfortable question. "Baroness, pardon the bluntness of my question, but your tricorder- is it modular in nature or uniquely hardwired?"

"It was installed at the compound before I met ze Prinzessin. Ze interface goes deep into mein occipital lobe. I know of no other like it." The Baroness looked over at Rita curiously.

"See, that's a problem," Paris looked pained at the topic, but pressed on, however unwillingly. "Because we know for a fact your cybernetics have been compromised, Baroness. We need to find a way to clear them of any influence. Otherwise, I hate to say it, but you're a security risk. For all we know you're transmitting as we speak. Which we'll bend ops and science to determining. Baroness, I assume you have some antivirus software of your own as well?"

"Ja, on mein ship," the pirate replied, realization dawning on her. "Which could also be compromised. I suggest you quarantine me until I can be cleared."

"Stay here, we'll have Science and Intel cooperate to get you cleared and see if we can identify what she's using. meanwhile, if you'd be a guide to the intel teams on what we're seeing here it would be appreciated, Baroness. Doc, make her comfortable if you would, and we'll get to work. Baroness, we'll wait until you're cleared then you can lead the sweep team onto your ship." Looking over at the makeshift agony booth, Rita Paris shook her head.

"Quite the dislike for this woman..."

## Chapter 3 - Your Mission, Should You Choose To Accept It...

Pacing the upper flight deck on Deck 3, Commander Rita Paris was going over plans in her mind. While there were a great number of variables and unknowns in the mission that lay ahead, she was taking steps in the present to attempt to produce results in the future. Planning. Strategizing. Plotting.

A conversation with lieutenant Dox had inspired her, and currently she was working in the undercover Starfleet operation she would be carrying out with as few people as possible aware of it. Some parts of the plan she was being open with deliberately to appear to have her usual 'above board' appearance so that no one would suspect what else she was up to. But with the piratical Tribunal ahead, the Pirate Queen had already made it quite clear that she had no intention of playing it straight, nor of losing. So it was going to be Rita Paris' job to ensure that she never learned what Rita was up to, so that she could not anticipate nor counter it.

The curvaceous chrononaut was accustomed to being an x-factor, a variable in the formula. In this matter, she intended to capitalize on it and insure what the Pirate Queen lost because she did not expect an old-school Starfleet officer... particularly Rita Paris.

One part of her plan that she had shared with more than one person, which to her mind was tantamount to blatantly advertising it, was to send Az'Prel and Jaieh Dox off to get evidence that the Queen of the Artans had cut a deal with the Orion Syndicate to accomplish her goals. That would make her a pariah amongst the pirates, although it would be insufficient to tip the scales, as the pirate would still press things to a bloody conclusion to win a pyrrhic victory if she had to. But that proof needed to be secured, as playing the long game it would be important. Rita knew better than to put all of her eggs in that basket, however, and she was preparing a number of contingencies for this event.

As she had for months now. As she would until the moment arrived, in which case she would default to her strength, and improvise, adapt and overcome.

For now, she was pacing the flight deck, waiting for the arrival of others who were

aware of this plan. She had made the arrangements, and let people in on her machinations. Now she would watch for betrayals, to watch for the leaks which were evident everywhere in how the Pirate Queen had been maneuvering thus far. Rita disliked paranoia- but then, it wasn't paranoia when they were genuinely out to get you.

Emerging from the Fight Control Office door at the far rear of the flight deck was the aforementioned Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox. As always, the young Romulan Flight Chief was finishing up work on a PaDD as she walked. It was a habit that she had picked up emulating Paris herself while on the job and one she didn't even think twice about now.

Walking towards the gilded Commander, Dox's uniform was sharp and looked freshly tailored as the accomplished pilot, in preparation for the upcoming mission, had been working out and training quite extensively. She knew that the tribunal would no doubt require extensive hand-to-hand combat along with actual swordplay. As such, the portly pilot was getting a fair bit less round in the middle and was tightening up.

Her thick, wavy red locks had been recently trimmed back down to the short pixie cut she usually wore it in and she seemed in fairly good spirits, all things considered. A state of being almost odd in and of itself considering the almost perpetual state of anxiety the Red-headed Romulan seemed to exist in.

"Commander." The alert Lieutenant said as she came to a stop next to the Hera's First Officer, standing with her hands folded behind her back and still seeming to be far less nervous than was usual for her.

"Lieutenant," Paris responded with a nod. "Will Ensign Gonadie be joining us?"

"Aye, Commander. Ensign Gonadie is finishing up in the R&D department on the project revisions she's consulting with my Mother on. She said they would be here within five minutes." Dox replied.

The project in question was an improved cloak that would add layers of stealth to already cloaked vessels... which was technology Paris in particular saw only as a negative since Starfleet did not use cloaking devices, this such improved technology would only be used against Starfleet personnel in the future. But like the tribunal itself, Paris didn't get a vote- all she would be left to do was try her best to ensure it never saw the light of day, and ensure that Starfleet had the information and tools to combat it

moving forward.

Spending so much of her time at odds with her own people was exhausting, but it had to be for now, at least until the Tribunal was past. Rita missed the good old days when it was a joint team effort and everyone was on the same page. But the future was too complex for that sort of simple honesty, and she'd been forced to accept it.

For now. Rita Paris had very long-range plans, however, and she was closely watching every detail in the moment. When her time came to make sweeping policy changes, her arguments would be unshakable after having been thought out years in advance. Shunted to the future, Rita was determined to build a better one for the next generation.

Outwardly, she said nothing. After all, there was nothing to be gained by creating strife in the here and now. The future, however, was taking root in the present.

Mona was next to step out onto the upper flight deck, stretching as she did so. "Well, it took some doing, but the new ship should be ready."

At her side was Mnhei'sahe Dox's mother, and former Romulan engineer and Tal'Shiar agent, Jaeih Dox. As the pair entered, the two bulky security officers that followed the elder Romulan about the ship stay outside the door at their posts, waiting.

Walking with her arms folded behind her back, Jaeih nodded to the pair of officers as the four women converged. Rather than her usual gray Starfleet Intelligence uniform with the customized Romulan sigil comm badge, Jaeih was wearing a nondescript black outfit. Black cargo pants and a strapped black tunic with a high neck. And in spite of familial relationships, since her Daughter was on duty and so, technically, was she, she simply said, "Greetings, Commander... Lieutenant."

It was neither cold nor sarcastic, but simply a show of professional demeanor to which Mnhei'sahe had the slightest of smiles as she nodded back to the pair.

"I had the utmost faith in you, Miss Gonadie," Paris observed as she addressed the Romulan agent. "Mrs. Dox, I assume you have been familiarized with the craft in question?"

"I have, Commander. Ensign Gonadie brought me up to proverbial speed quite effectively." Jaeih replied.

"Excellent. Miss Az'Prel should be along momentarily, so that the two of you can get acquainted and on your way," Paris replied with a nod. "I'll brief both of you once she arrives. Have you gathered the supplies and armor you'll require?"

"I have, Commander. I have already loaded the appropriate supplies and armor in the ships hold, replicated and weathered to specifications for mission purposes." Jaeih replied with a nod.

"The enemies in this universe are not as obvious as they were in mine," Az'Prel commented as she stepped out of a nearby turbolift, her newer red armor weathered and donned and a red rugged duffel slung over one shoulder. "However, I will do all that I can to complete this mission successfully."

"I have the utmost faith in you, Miss Az'Prel. May I introduce Mrs. Dox... I'm sorry, Jaeih Dox. Somehow Mrs. Dox just sounds like a character from a spy thriller in my head. The two of you will be partnered up for this mission, should you choose to accept it, which is to follow the trail of who paid who to attack the Romulan faction of the Baronesses. Hopefully to trace it back to the Pirate Queen, in time for the Tribunal. So, no hurry. And no leads in particular. But as I said, I have confidence in you both. You are both singularly capable and competent women, after all."

Saving any pleasantries for later, Jaeih simply offered a respectful nod to the Vulcan refugee from another reality.

"If you make it back soon enough, there's an infiltration mission I've planned as well, but... it's a lit fuse, getting shorter all the time. Which means we'll have to play this by ear. So, without further ado... if you are captured, Starfleet will officially disavow any knowledge of you or your operation. As Starfleet Intelligence we need to succeed in this mission, but you can go where we can't and do what we cannot right now. Do you accept this mission?"

"I do, Commander." Jaeih replied as she then deferred to her new partner.

"Of course, Commander. This is one of the reasons I'm in this universe, after all," replied the displaced Vulcan with a nod to both the voluptuous angel in gold and her new Romulan cohort. "It is a pleasure making your acquaintance."

Raising an eyebrow ever so slightly at a Vulcan referencing pleasure in any way, the elder Dox replied. "For myself as well. The Commander and Lieutenant have spoken of your skills, but little else. I look forward to speaking with you during our journey."

The displaced Vulcan's eyebrow then raised as well. "They haven't informed you of my origins? Curious. I shall have to remedy that on our trip."

Looking over toward Paris, then at her own daughter, Jaeih replied with a slightly amused smile. "Indeed." Her response was brief to allow the Commander to continue.

"Better to let you tell one another your own stories, I am thinking, rather than filtering them through our experience," Paris offered honestly. "Well, no time like the present. Bon voyage, bon chance... and I need both of you to return to us safely after the mission. I have confidence that you will watch one another's backs and ensure the success of the mission and personal safety on both your parts. Meanwhile, tempus fugit, ladies... where is the Nihroi, anyway...?"

Mona pulled out a small remote and clicked a control on it, the modified Scorpion design shimmering into existence before them. She then handed the control off to Jaeih as she grinned like she'd achieved perfection. "I think I've proven that my cloak has zero spatial distortion. If it's removed from the housing though, it'll automatically destroy itself without my special tools."

Taking the remote, Jaeih added, "One of just a few precautionary measures to ensure that the technology is secure and unable to be replicated or stolen, Commander. What Ensign Gonadie has engineered is many steps beyond what even the Romulan Star Empire has been able to manage in generations."

"Advances in cloaking technology are never a positive to my mind, as it only encourages the shadows to grow deeper, and for those who wish to hide in them to retreat even further," Paris observed, sharing her less than positive view of cloaking technology. "But the galaxy is what it is, and I appreciate you taking pains to ensure that your work cannot fall into the wrong hands, Miss Gonadie. So ladies... off you go."

With a slightly pensive expression, Jaeih glanced over to her daughter who had been observing quietly, then back to Paris. "Commander... would you permit me a brief... indulgence before Miss Az'Prel and I depart. It will not take long." Her expression was more plaintiff than was usual for the normally stone-faced Romulan, but as she and her

daughter had been working quite hard to repair their once-fractured relationship, it was clear that she wanted to bid farewell.

Reading the room, as it were, Paris took the hint. "Of course, Mrs. Dox. Miss Az'Prel, Miss Gonadie, if you would join me in the office, I should tend to something as well." Shepherding the other two women toward the R&D office, Paris offered a subtle nod to Lieutenant Dox, indicating that the two women would have a moment of privacy.

As they began to step away, Jaeih reached out and took Mona's hand, keeping her from leaving as well. As the Miradonian engineer and Jaeih's daughters were bond-mates, that made the young ensign her daughter-in-law. She nodded with a smile to the accommodating Commander and spoke quite sincerely as Rita and Az'Prel continued. "Thank you, Commander. I appreciate this, and you."

As for the Commander in question, a simple smile and a nod of acknowledgment was sufficient. For one so verbose, Paris also knew when to let silence speak instead.

Turning back, Jaeih looked at her daughter, who only a couple of weeks ago she worried she would never speak to again with a blend of pride and love that the usually closed down Romulan woman didn't quite know how to process. When she spoke, it was in her Native language of Rihan. "Mnhei'sahe... Have no fear. I have not come this far with you to let it slip away now. We will succeed and I will be returning to you, my daughter. I will be returning to you both."

Taking her mother's hands in her own, the young Romulan woman's eyes shined slightly as a tight, emotional smile crept across her cheeks as she nodded, replying in Rihan as well. "You had better, Mother. When... when we start this family, those children will need a grandmother."

Glancing over to Mona, Mnhei'sahe shot her bond-mate a slightly awkward smile and the slightest of nods as well, with the subtle but clear meaning that the brilliantly plumed pilot understood. As the two seemed to speak without words, Jaeih was both overwhelmed by what she had just heard and yet suddenly felt self-conscious, speaking now in English.

"Oh, my dear. I apologize..." She spoke awkwardly, "I simply said..."

Mona shook her head and in her best broken Rihannsu interrupted her. "You will make a

wonderful grandmother and we will both be fruity parents." She then scrunched up her face, knowing she messed up a word or two, but not knowing exactly how to fix it.

With which, Jaeih Dox uttered a sound neither woman was accustomed to hearing from the generally confrontational and distant woman: a genuinely warm, if short, laugh. "You continue to both surprise and impress me, my dear. And my Mnhei'sahe has clearly chosen very well."

Stepping slightly back, and clearing her throat as she adjusted her top, Jaeih didn't want to allow herself to get overly emotional, though she was clearly putting effort into it. "Thank you, both."

Smiling broadly, nodding and understanding her mother's need to maintain her composure, the young Dox tapped her comm badge. "Commander Paris, Miss Az'Prel... all is ready."

In the R&D office, Paris had taken advantage of the moment to present Az'Prel with an odd gift.

"It's a phaser of my day, updated to modern specifications. It can still be set to overload like we could back in my day, and to me, the pistol grip is superior for aiming purposes. You might not need it, and it's... well, I will admit that it isn't exactly the most conventional of gifts. But I can't be out there with you... so the least I can do is send you with my weapon of choice to defend yourself." Paris' brow contorted and wrinkled a bit, as she fought a surprising wellspring of emotion within her.

"I haven't had a long time to get to know you, Miss Az'Prel. But I feel I am responsible for you, and your well-being. My people have a lot to make up for with you, and I think maybe that's part of why the Prophets sent you with me. So that maybe I can help you see that we're not all bad, and that you can build a life here, have some security, and be who you want to be, not who the universe makes you." Staring at the pistol-grip weapon of her day, Paris smirked. "So a phaser might not be the best way to convey that, but if I can't keep you safe out there, maybe this will."

The displaced Vulcan accepted the gift and checked it over, going through the controls and settings systematically like a pro before twirling it in her hand like a well-balanced knife and tucking it into her belt. "It is excellently balanced and of exquisite craftsmanship. Thank you, Commander. I will treasure it and I know it will be a good

companion. I never would have imagined that a... Human... Would become my guide and mentor someday, but you have become more than that. You have become my friend and shall always be so."

She then brought her right hand up in the Vulcan salute, which she had only done twice now since coming to this universe - in her own universe it was instant death to do so in front of a Terran. This was how much she trusted Commander Rita Paris though. "Peace and long life, Commander. I will return as soon as our mission is complete."

Raising her hand in response, Paris offered the same salute as she had offered to the Vulcan woman when they had first met on the floor of a shuttlecraft exiting the Celestial Temple of the Prophets above Bajor. Splaying her fingers in the traditional style, Paris raised herself stiff and erect. "Live long and prosper, Az'Prel of Vulcan."

Unlike her stoic husband, though, Rita Paris was emotional to a fault, and lowering the salute, she gently moved in to hug the slight Vulcan woman. Although she understood the Vulcan prohibition from physical contact, she did so all the same. Knowing that despite their friendship Az'Prel was a shell-shocked survivor, Paris moved slowly but deliberately, wrapping the slighter woman in a hug.

"Be safe out there, Az'Prel," Paris whispered, then patted the back of the refugee of a hellish reality. Stepping back, she wiped away a few tears she couldn't help but shed. She was sending the two women on a dangerous mission with no backup. But they were both very dangerous, very competent individuals, and this mission would play to their strengths. There was no call for her to be concerned... yet she worried all the same.

The displaced Vulcan returned the hug in kind as best she could, though a bit more stiffly than her human counterpart, a slight greenish coloration gracing her cheeks as they parted. "I will be vigilant in all aspects."

"I know you will. You both will." Stepping away, Paris exited the office, to reunite the two unlikely partners in espionage with their equally as unlikely spacecraft to begin their away mission.

## Chapter 4 - Blind Briefing

Cybernetics had been found to be less secure than they thought now that Schwein's had not only been compromised, but so too had the training program she had requested from Baroness Sarika. It scanned as normal, but had some nasty overlay within it, which nearly killed the silver haired pirate. It would have succeeded too, if she had been alone. Parts of the program had even been modified to further corrupt her cybernetics with an anti-Borg virus that had crippled her for days with migraines even after the code had been wiped.

This was why in this next briefing about the upcoming Tribunal extra safety precautions were being taken with Baroness Sarika, whom had not only cyber-eyes, but cyber-arms. There was no telling if she was infected with any sort of malicious code or not. Just to be sure, there were dampening fields in place in the chosen conference room and one Ensign Mona Gonadie was here, who claimed to be able to see through any lie with her Miradonian eyes.

Enalia just had to await the arrival of one of her oldest and closest friends.

Fiddling with the PaDD in front of her, she didn't like this whole game of deception with people she liked, but she knew it had to be done. She preferred it when she knew there was a good outcome or when there was a nice surprise at the end, sure... but this... This felt like her mother was forcing them to stoop to her level and she didn't like it.

“So what’s the purpose of this meeting, Captain?” Paris asked in the straightforward manner for which she was known. Paris was laboring under the assumption that anyone cybernetically enhanced was compromised since the pirate Queen of the Artans had made it abundantly clear that was one avenue of attack she was employing. Ideally if it didn’t succeed it still managed to foment distrust and suspicion within their ranks, which Paris recognized. But she had her own plans and machinations, and was determined that the queen of the Artan fleet was going to suffer an ignominious and thoroughly humiliating defeat.

Or a terrible accident; which Paris was, in truth, still debating.

"I'm told that we have a lovely update on the status of the Tribunal to look forward to and as such things are best done in person for security purposes, Baroness Sarika will be delivering the report herself." Enalia motioned around the room. "Hence the extra precautions. I just worry since her arms and eyes are both cybernetic. It may not go well at first so I'll need some help calming her down."

Standing to the side was Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox. The Flight Chief of the Hera, but also one of Enalia Telvan's chosen Baronesses for the upcoming tribunal. As such, her presence at the briefing was requested although the quiet officer felt that her presence might also be required to help calm the extremely gregarious Baroness Sarika.

Having only met once, Dox took an immediate liking to the admittedly foul-mouthed Baroness and was truly hoping that it was only her cybernetics that were at risk for corruption and not the woman herself. But she was nervous as she stood, unspeaking, near her bond-mate and assistant Flight Chief, Mona Gonadie.

"Two security teams are on standby, Captain. My best officers." Paris considered her next statement, brow furrowing as she shifted in her seat, then she pressed on. "Meaning no disrespect, Captain, but how verifiable is intel from Baroness Sarika? She's still a person of interest in one of our incident reports, is she not?"

"I trust her with my life, just as I do with everyone else in this room. However, if her cybernetics are compromised, we must take precautions. Also, to allay any suspicions that her mind has been altered, that's why Ensign Gonadie is here." Enalia set aside her PaDD and tried not to fidget any further.

"Would you care to brief us on what precautions to which you are referring Captain, or are they a secret?" Again, Rita was of the school of asking a question if you wanted an answer, and she never minded being the dumb one in the room willing to ask.

"The dampening field to disable her cybernetics and Mona to make sure she's not lying for the basics. Other than that, I'll ask her a few questions that only she and I should know. If she answers them correctly, all is well. If not... Then there's something rotten in the Nibenheim..." The spotted woman was obviously nervous, still doing her best not to fidget. "The hard part will be keeping her calm. Suddenly going blind and not having the use of your arms..."

Which is when the security checkpoint at the docking hatch reported in. "Checkpoint one to Captain Telvan. Captain, Baroness Sarika just boarded and is being escorted to your location now."

"Thank you. We're ready to receive her." Enalia straightened up in her seat and readied herself to activate the dampening field with the manual switch that had been installed just under the table.

"Captain, if memory serves, she's a hugger." Dox turned to offer a suggestion. "With your permission, I can meet her at the door and hold her so she can't hurt herself when the field activates and hopefully keep her calm."

Looking around from the Captain to Paris and back, Dox continued. "If she's still herself, she liked me and hopefully I can talk her into listening. If she's not, I'm... best suited to be between her, you, Commander Paris and Ensign Gonadie.

Enalia thought it over a moment before nodding consent, giving time for Baroness Dox to take her place by the door. "Right then, if we're ready."

Which was right before the door opened and in came the excitable woman known as Baroness Sarika. "My bitches! It is soooo good to see you all again!" Immediately she went in for a hug on the nearest person, which was the resident Romulan. "Have I got some stories for you!"

Suddenly her red cybernetic eyes went dim and her arms went limp as the door behind her sealed itself. Her now useless eyes went wide, not knowing what was going on. "What the... The FUCK IS GOING ON!!! I CAN'T SEE! YOU FUCKING BITCHES!"

"I've got you, Sarika." Dox said somewhat softly, as she wrapped her arms around the silver-haired pilot. "But I need you to listen to me and try to be calm. Please..."

Tucking her head over to the side of Sarika's to keep her from getting head butted and tucking her outside leg behind the Baronesses to remove any leverage with her legs, the much heavier Dox had a firm grip as she spoke.

"Arenara has compromised Baroness Schwein's cybernetics, and we believe yours as well. And even unintentionally, I cannot let you endanger the Princess, so I need you to calm down and listen to her!" The verbiage was a Gambit. Sarika was *fiercely* loyal to

Enalia, and Dox was hoping that speaking to that loyalty would get through to her as she continued to try and struggle.

Sarika paused in her struggles, realization hitting her. "Compromised?... The holo-program... Those fucking bitches! I'll fucking kill them all! No... This isn't the time for that..." Slowly, she calmed down, though her eyes were still wide and searching. "Ok... I'm... I'll be ok... I just want to skull fuck that fucking bitch now though... All the precautions we've taken, and she gets around them anyway..."

*'I want to hold her down for you.'* the red-headed Romulan thought to herself as she looked over to the Captain and Paris for the cue to continue.

"This is where we enact some sort of antiviral or signal blocking mechanism... who was in charge of this part of the plan?" Paris asked of the room.

"I've got it," Mona replied, patting a small case at her hip. "Any and all signals are being blocked now and as soon as I have the go-ahead, I can start a scan."

"Okay, I'm gonna to lead you to your seat and we can figure out our next step together." Dox said, lightening her grip just enough to move Sarika over to the open seat as she positioned herself behind the compromised fellow Baroness.

"Ok... So... It seems we both have a lot to brief each other on then," began Sarika.

Enalia nodded and leaned forward. "That we do. Sorry about all this but my mother has forced us to take some extreme measures, even with our closest allies."

Sarika grinned and shrugged as best she could without the use of her arms. "It is what it is. This is pretty much the state you found me in, isn't it? In that slave pen, waiting to die, useless cybernetics hanging around my neck. I assume you have a plan this time as well?"

The spotted woman chuckled softly and leaned back in her chair. "Just like in that bar on Setlak Prime."

"You crazy..." Sarika shook her head and leaned back as well. "Can we skip the bar fight with the Andorian Imperial Guard and get right to the Rigelian whiskey this time?"

"You're really you and fully dedicated to our side, aren't you?" Enalia finally asked, glancing over at Mona to see what her reaction to the Baroness's answer would be.

"Until the day I die, I will be your friend and would never knowingly betray you, Princess." As she spoke, Mona watched closely, but could see no hint of untruth in Sarika's voice or demeanor. She then nodded to the Captain, giving the Baroness the all clear.

"Then let's make sure your cybernetics are clean, shall we?" Enalia replied, finally smiling, the tension finally starting to drain out of her.

"Okay..." Dox let out a light breath at the signal from the Captain. She didn't have any history with the impertinent pirate beyond a few shared hugs, but was fond of the woman and recognized how important she was to Enalia, and that was enough for the anxious aviatrix to feel relieved for her Captain and friend. "...Ensign Gonadie is going to come over and Purge your system."

Stepping to the side to give Mona access, Dox nodded over to her Miradonian mate. "She's the absolute best there is. And... the Princess and I trust her with our lives... and then some. You're in good hands and we're going to make this right in no time, Sarika."

The slightly-less-portly pilot chose to wear her feelings for Mona on her sleeve in the moment, hoping that the tone of her voice would be reassuring to the incapacitated pirate and help.

Sarika nodded blindly, her eyes finally closing for a moment. "Ok, if you trust her... She's the 'donian, right? Got one in my crew. Lovely man. I'd trust him with my life."

"Yes, that's her." Dox replied, smiling even though Sarika couldn't see it. She kept her hand on the Baronesses shoulder, reassuringly.

Mona pulled out the specially prepared set of tools for the cleansing of the cybernetic parts of Sarika. She first scanned for malware, the feathers on her head floofing up as she did so. "I'm detecting malware all right. In your left eye and left arm." She then took out a cyber-key injector and linked it into Sarika's systems, downloading the suite of cleansing software and starting the process. "That should take care of it after a few minutes. It definitely has the same signature as what Schwein was infected with though."

"That explains the headaches at least..." Sarika grumbled, trying to hold still.

"How are we scanning the hardware? No offense, but compromised cybernetics with software is one thing, but cameras, recording devices and scanners could also have been installed without knowledge. What steps are we taking for those?" Again, left out of the loop, Paris asked direct question to address her concerns. After all, while she did not think like a sneaky pirate, she had certainly seen her share of espionage over the years, and this seemed reasonable to her.

"That's what this little scanner is for, Commander," replied Mona, holding up the first tool she was using. "It scans for foreign attachments and data streams as well as malware. From what I'm seeing, it used a combination of the sensors in your left eye and arm and for transmission... I assume you plug in to recharge?"

"Yeah, every night when I'm sleeping on my left... That fucking bitch... My charger is infected too, isn't it?" Sarika was barely containing her rage at this point.

"I'm guessing so. We'll need to send some equipment with you to cleanse it." Mona replied softly and reassuringly.

"While we're waiting on that, how about we begin the briefing?" Enalia prompted, trying to get things moving, but still clearly worried about one of her oldest friends.

"Yes, and you're not going to like it." Sarika flopped her right arm a bit, obviously trying to gesture with it. Instead she just ended up frowning. "Your mother decided to petition the Arbiter of the Tribunal, Captain Magnus to level the voting properly now that we have fourteen Baronesses. Since the vote would require a fraction over nine, now we need a full ten votes instead of rounding to nine. We have six solid, she has three solid... The two first class bitches are abstaining of course... The rest are undecided."

"So the problem is how we get the Romulans on our side instead of hers, and secure the three undecided votes," Sarika added. "Freedom is all nice and beautiful talk, but the older ones remember your mother and the fear and terror she wreaked across the stars."

"Fear will make people do very stupid things. Let me guess, she's currently spreading propaganda that should the captain win, that will be the end of their lives as they know it, since she will bring sweeping change and do away with their traditions. Whereas her benevolence is well known, and all who aid her will be recognized, while those who

oppose her know what will come of it?" While she knew nothing about pirates or their mindsets, people really hadn't changed over the course of Rita Paris' lengthy lifespan, and motivations by commanders and politicians also tended to follow familiar patterns.

"Also, why is the science department not involved in this operation, out of curiosity?" Paris added, as it seemed odd to her that an inventive pilot was currently acting as a science officer in this particular scenario.

"In the interest of keeping as few people involved as possible," replied Enalia, looking none too pleased with the news she had heard. "The less the crew has to gossip about, the better."

"I've also worked with cybernetics like these before. They're not too dissimilar to those of the Thunderchicken or the systems I've helped other crew members with," Added the brightly plumed Miradonian, tapping the controls of the anti-malware device. "That should do it. I'm not detecting any further compromised systems."

"May I have my eyes back at least please?" the silver haired pirate asked softly.

Standing at her side, Dox looked up silently at the Captain and Commander awaiting their answer.

Looking around, Paris realized the question was somewhat directed in her direction. As she had very little idea of what was going on, Paris shrugged broadly. "Frequency jamming is blanketing the conference room right now, so even if anything is still compromised it can't broadcast. If that's a question to me, I don't see why not."

Enalia took a deep breath and let it out slowly before toggling the switch under the table, turning the electromagnetic jamming field off. "If you're clean, then there's no point to keeping it on and depriving you."

Sarika blinked a few times and flexed her arms as her arms and eyes restarted, Then smiled at Enalia, finally able to see her clearly. "Thank you. So...I suppose this means it's even more important that we get all the other Baronesses on our side."

"We have a plan in effect for gaining some support, but it's not going to help us with the old guard." Enalia leaned forward and picked up her PaDD, once again working now that the field was down.

Sarika nodded and stretched her sore shoulders out, not used to her arms hanging limp like that. "Yeah, those old bitches really need to get with the times. We can't go around harassing people like we used to just because we think they've got some ties to someone we don't like. We can't rule the spacelanes with fear like in your mother's day. Freedom to do what you want is one thing... But..."

"When it infringes on the freedoms of another, then we have an issue," finished the Trill Captain with a lopsided grin.

Sarika grinned wider. "And that's how it should be."

"Freedom for all," Enalia chuckled heartily as she flipped the PaDD in her hands. "So now... Who are the undecided Baronesses?"

The cybernetic pirate then pulled out a piece of paper with a written report on it and unfolded it, sliding it over to Enalia. "Bloody Batra is so far abstaining of course, being first class... but I think that if we can convince her that she can kill all the Syndicate she wants with you, she'll vote for you. Flora Tyrel, no one knows what that old bitch is ever thinking. She'll likely not even show up until the last vote. Lilly Von Schtupp, the information broker, is mainly hanging around the station these days and I don't have the funds to secure a vote from her. Thankfully, neither does your mother. She's asking for either one hundred bricks of latinum or your jade fire dragon tea set."

Enalia's eyes shot up in alarm at the mention of the tea set. It was worth several moons on its own and was the centerpiece of her Swiss collection. "I'll consider it. Please continue."

The cyber-armed pirate scoffed slightly before continuing. "Marelith is concerned about the timing of the recent attacks and is worried about the future as well, but if there's no proof, she means to abstain as well. Garan and Terethis are so deeply in the Queen's pocket that I can't even get an audience with them. As for Seinae, she feels she owes her a debt and her honor demands it be repaid, even with the timing of that aid after the attacks being a bit too convenient. And of course you know Merinda von Stolina is sitting this whole thing out to act as peacekeeper as the highest ranked Baroness, just in case. Which doesn't help at all, really."

Sighing, Sarika leaned back and stretched her arms behind her head. "Which means we

have pledged support from me, Baroness Dox here, Schwein, Snodarss, Frederica von Grelica, and Mirana."

Leaning in, the anxious Romulan lieutenant interjected, hesitant at first, "Baroness Siena *swore* a life debt to my mother over twenty years ago, and if she has any sense of M... of honor at *all*... of being Rihannsu... then that debt should supercede this."

By the end of her brief statement, her nerves were mostly gone, except for pausing to stop herself from using the Rihan term for honor as it was actually her own name.

"I've an introduction and a redirection or two, if I may?" the anachronistically-uniformed Starfleet siren stood, looking to the Captain for permission, then she came around the table, extending her hand in greeting. "Baroness Sarika? I'm Rita Paris. You come highly recommended. Sorry about the subterfuge, but now you understand the necessity."

Sarika slowly stood, her eyes widening in amazement. She reached out both hands to shake the commander's hand gently. "You're *the* bloody Rita Paris... From the poster the Princess kept on her wall growing up... Her bloody Idol... In the bloody flesh... On her bloody ship... That's why she was missing for four bloody years... I thought you were just someone that kind of looked like her and the Princess had dressed in the old uniform, but, you're actually her, aren't you? Your pulse, blood pressure, air pressure, none of that wavered when you told me your name..."

Glancing over at the pirate princess turned Starfleet captain, Paris smiled, a self-effacing expression. "I am indeed Rita Paris... I'm not exactly *THAT* Rita Paris, I'm... a different edition, if you will. It's a long story. But yes, I am her, she is me. Nice to meet you, Baroness Sarika." Rita returned the handshake gently, maintaining eye contact.

"You didn't need to..." Enalia groaned, blushing bright red and doing her best to maintain her composure but failing at it. "Anyway, now that we're all introduced... Where were we?"

Trying to help the Captain change the embarrassing subject back to business, Dox, who was still standing to the side of Sarika, added, "The old guard Baronesses. And what, if anything, we can do to change their minds."

"Ah, yes, indeed." Finally releasing Rita's hand, Sarika returned to her seat, still in awe. "Ahem... Well, we could try blackmail or bribery... But I doubt any of you would go for

that, and personally, I'm not fond of it either. Which leaves us with appealing to their grandmotherly side. Garan and Terethis are both grandmothers and Therethis' only granddaughter is a member of Magnus' crew. That being the case, she has to stay out of it... However... If we can force an audience with the old bitch..."

"Considering what Arenara wants to do... force you to give her a grandchild against your will... that might be a good angle to get them to at least listen to reason." Dox added, looking to the Captain as she took a seat finally. "Bribery to get them on our side might not be a good tactic, but is there anything we have that we can give to get a sit down with them? A gesture of good faith?"

Enalia thought about it for a moment before replying. "Well, I could give her the tea set that I stole out from under her at an auction some years ago..."

"That might at least ease some tensions..." commented Sarika softly. "The one thousand year old Romulan set made of emerald china, right? I had forgotten about that."

"If nothing else, it does show just how willing you are to negotiate, captain," Paris chimed in, moving to take her seat. "She threw that out there as an unreasonable demand to see if you would come to the table to parley. While I'd wager she does want the set, she wants to test your commitment more. I'd say take a meeting with her at the very least and be prepared to pay her price if you think she's serious. Or she might be dangling that as a false hope as she doesn't ever plan to change her vote. You know these people captain- I'm just whistling in the dark."

"Yeah, but I'm relying on you to be my light in the dark," Enalia leaned back and sighed heavily. "Ok, so that's two literally priceless tea sets I'll have to give up for this... Anyone else want a tea set while I'm handing them out?"

Sarika raised one hand. "I'd actually like the tea set that we used on the Garan... If you still have it..."

"I... Yeah..." The spotted Captain smiled softly at the memories of the old plastic tea set. It had nothing but sentimental value, but she had kept it anyway. "It's tucked away in storage. The teapot is a bit melted, but all the teacups are ok. No idea how they survived, but they're yours."

"Captain, I'll not hear this defeatist talk," Paris responded sharply. "A psychological

profile of these women would be ideal, but you are the ones who have known these women for your entire lives, so in theory you should be experts on their behavior. I'm just walking in here, so when I say I am whistling in the dark, that means I am operating on practically no data, no personal experience and no foreknowledge of these people. You three have known them for literally decades. Ideally you should know them well enough to divine both their surface as well as secondary motivations, and understand how to appeal to them."

It was a bit of a sharp rebuke, but listening to Enalia already throwing in the towel instead of rising to the challenge was simply not going to do at all. If she was going to win this she had to want it, and she needed to be confident in the maneuvers she understood. Because if she showed this level of indecisiveness and capitulation to the actual baronesses, she would be finished before she started, unless she just out and out murdered her mother.

Which was one of many plans Rita Paris now had spinning in the background, which she was deliberately not telling her captain nor anyone else for a number of reasons. In this affair, she trusted her own counsel, and she had no intention of losing. But she couldn't let the captain be beaten before she began.

The spotted woman looked up at her first officer oddly before continuing. "As Commander Paris has said, we should be able to divine their motivations. So then, let's go through the list and do that."

Looking over the piece of paper Sarika had handed her, she looked at the names of the Baronesses that were decidedly on the side of her mother first. "Baroness Garan, provided I can get an audience with that tea set, is your classic Yakuza type. She prefers to rule her crews with a tight fist and a kind hand at the same time. Once you're part of her crew, the only way to leave is in a torpedo casing. If we returned to raiding merchant lanes today, she'd be perfectly happy. She's also got a soft spot for family. Of all the Baronesses, she's the only one that's ever been able to intimidate me, though I was young at the time..."

"I remember your mother beat you most of the night after that..." Sarika added softly.

"If we could just get rid of her..." Enalia shook her head and moved on. "Then there's Baroness Terethis. She's got a life debt to my mother. It's also about the only thing she takes seriously. She's also a traditionalist."

"Meaning she'll push for the head of the family to remain in your family no matter what," interjected Sarika.

"Exactly." Enalia then went on to the next one. "Baroness Seinae, we have a plan in progress to handle her. It should cover Baroness Marelith as well." Enalia glanced up and looked at the others. "Marelith has an overinflated sense of law and order and acts as a judge if there are disagreements between crews. She also heads up the task force we run that hunts down rogue pirates that Tortuga Station is tired of."

Sarika grinned and pointed into the air. "She gives them a fair trial before turning them over to Starfleet Security. Or the Klingon Defense Forces. Whomever has a higher bounty."

"Law and order among thieves..." muttered the spotted captain before moving on. "Baroness Flora Tyrel... My grandmother appointed her and I've never actually met her. She shows up to vote at functions now and then and just leaves."

Sarika nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I've only seen her once and she had a distortion field around herself so my scans and sight were fuzzy. I don't even know what race she is."

"Vulcan." Enalia interrupted, setting the paper down. "She asked my grandmother for a ship and crew for something and that's all I know. If anyone else can logic out that one, by all means..."

"Which leaves Baroness Lilly Von Schtupp, the information broker. She wants one hundred bricks of latinum or a tea set worth three times that..." Enalia sighed heavily. "If I send her the latinum, I tell her she's not as valuable as the centerpiece of my Sweden collection. If I send her the tea set, I tell her I'm desperate."

"Von Schtupp wants something else. The money or the tea set are distractions... she wants to be pursued. You've got something she wants. Information, if she's an information broker?" Paris offered, as the dual offers showed a surprising lack of focus for a secrets peddler, at least to her mind, and hinted at a deeper motivation.

"Which means she's testing our information network to see if we can figure out what secrets she's after in time..." surmised Enalia. "Good thinking."

Listening intently, Dox might have been a part of this world as a child and teenager, but its more complex machinations were somewhat beyond her. She was however, a fast learner and the ins and outs were coming back to her. "Captain. Are there any of the undecided Baronesses where getting *THEIR* favor first might sway one or more of the others. Even lean them closer to our side? The most respected or the most feared, for example?"

"That's probably one of the reasons the two first class Baronesses are abstaining for now. Most of the others look up to or fear or idolize them. Though Bloody Batra..." The curvy Captain shook her head. "If she didn't have morals, that woman would be as bad as my mother..."

Sarika nodded and sighed deeply. "That woman... On the bright side, she's had so many problems with the Syndicate that if she thought she'd have more luck going after them with us than under your mother..."

Having listened and digested, Paris felt she'd made enough connections to contribute. "Can anyone challenge a sitting Baroness for her seat? Or is it a hierarchy system where you have to be promoted to the rank? How does all of that work, because I am thinking that's another potential avenue of opportunity for motivation."

Enalia punched up the Artan bylaws and started scrolling through them to the particular chapter on her PaDD. "It's setup similar to Klingon ships. The second in command can challenge the Baroness at any time for her position. However, the Baroness chooses the duel type. I can bring them up on charges as well, but not during a tribunal, and not without due cause. If a man is ever named Baroness..."

"It's only happened once..." Sarika interjected.

Enalia's demeanor turned grim at that thought. "I think that might be half of Bloody Batra's issues, if I'm to be honest..."

"Elaborate please? If we can swing a vote just by the Captain promising sexism, that's an easy out right there," Paris opined. Out of her element she might be, but this was strategic planning, and this was somewhere she could contribute with just a little information to work with. "Also, do we know of any second in commands who might be motivatable to challenge their Baroness? It might cause a swing vote, and if nothing else fomenting dissension in the ranks sows its own chaos and will keep the Baronesses less

focused. Thoughts?"

Enalia thought on the sexism thing as Sarika chimed in grumpily. "Mine challenges me daily... That doesn't help us though. Intel like that is hard to get and the only one that might have it..."

"Currently isn't talking to us," Finished Enalia, having completed her thoughts on the Matriarchy. "I just realized that out of all of our leadership roles, the Captain of the fleet is the only one that's even allowed to be male. We're so steeped in tradition and heritage, we even took the old lessons from the old Trill Matriarchy days and ran with them like they were latinum wrapped in bacon dipped in booty. That's another thing that's going to have to change."

"As for your question though," Enalia paused for a moment in thought. "I've always heard that there was a lot of dissent in Terethis' ranks. Is that still true?"

"Not after she spaced half a dozen people and broadcast it for the whole family to see. Called it a lesson in tradition." Sarika shook her head sadly as she described the incident. "The poor souls were woefully underprepared for a raid because of bad intel and they barely made it out alive. Then she goes and blames them of being lily-livered and tossed them out the airlock herself one at a time just to make a point. The intel agent, she tortured to death. This was of course while you were missing."

"I see..." A mix of emotions was going through the Captain right now - regret at not being there to remove Terethis from her position when that happened, anger at herself for allowing this to go on for so long, sadness for the crews under people like this... She did her best to remain the impassive and strong fortress on the outside, but she was pretty sure her facade was crumbling by now.

As the Captain and Sarika talked, Mnhei'sahe's stomach tightened and her face had taken on the stern facade familiar to anyone who had known the young Romulan woman's mother. Listening, the young pilot could no longer hide behind pretty speeches from Captain Magnus or Baroness von Alcott about fighting for personal freedoms or some noble cause. This was what it meant to be an Artan Baroness. This was the world she had so willingly accepted being a part of, and in the moment, she felt disgusted. But she kept her face neutral as she listened.

"Hell of a traditionalist," Paris growled, noting the look on the face of Lieutenant Dox,

seeing this might be the first time that she really considered just whom she had thrown her lot in with, and perhaps begun to realize just why Rita had been so adamantly opposed to her joining the pirates as a 'sideline career'. "Well, if I wasn't motivated before, captains who space their crews for failure are people I like to call, 'should be removed from power and put in a hole somewhere'. So it sounds like dissent beneath the Baronesses is a bit of a strategic dead end, then?"

Sarika stood up for the Captain though. "To be fair, Magnus has been following Enalia's orders to guide the fleet and family towards a kinder and gentler path. He even brought her up on charges several times, but with the Princess missing... Well... The queen came back out of retirement and started fighting against him on things like that. Hence why we have people like them still. Most of the Baronesses aren't filthy murderous bitches unless we have to be. And even then, we uphold the code."

Sarika shook her head and continued. "As for dissent among ranks, if we had more time maybe. With the Baronesses we're talking about though, it's a good way for their seconds to get killed unless they're really sure of themselves. Plus, what if they're just as bad?"

"In this instance, the 'what ifs' are all too many," Paris grumbled, then sighed. "So, we've got strategies for possibly converting a few of the baronesses to the captain's cause, but basically this is all spinning our wheels in the mud because the captain seems certain her mother is determined to force this to a duel one way or the other. Do I have that much of the situation down, or am I missing something?"

"We're missing her plans," Enalia stated simply, setting her PaDD on the table. "And I guarantee she's been planning this from the moment she decided to demand my obedience. That's the kind of woman she is. Remember the plans I've woven around this ship and crew? Your meeting with Sonak on the flight deck, for instance? She's where I learned all that from. Unfortunately in this case, I'm well behind the curve and she knows it." Enalia grinned that piratical lopsided grin of hers though. "But I have a secret weapon. I have a far better crew than she ever will. Even if the vote fails and we go to a duel, we can win just because of that. We just have to watch out for her tricks and sabotage and make sure my ship actually works."

Feeling hesitant to say anything, Dox quelched her anxiety for the moment as she wasn't here simply as a pilot in this instant. "Even if she insists on forcing a conflict, it will be beneficial to have swayed as many Baronesses as possible, I'm thinking. You win the

duel and you... we... need that support to keep the organization from falling into chaos in the aftermath."

"Excellent thinking. Especially since two of my biggest supporters don't even have their own crews," Enalia added. "I've encouraged Schwein to rebuild, but after she lost her entire crew and all her ships... I don't think she has it in her."

Enalia wasn't entirely sure she should reveal this next part, but went ahead anyway. "Before the auction, I tried to talk her into naming you her second, even if only for the day, but she refused. Instead, she talked me into making you a Baroness ID. For better or worse, you're in this world again. Hopefully, together we can see the family through to better times and my mother can spend some time in a Federation prison. If she isn't somehow killed, that is..." She really hoped it wouldn't come to killing her, but she knew her mother. The woman would likely find a way to force her death on her daughter's hands.

"All right, so what is her plan? Some of you have literally a lifetime of dealing with her, one might imagine that would lend itself to some degree of divination of intention? And as it seems to be a foregone conclusion that regardless of any other outcome she will force this to a duel, she's going to find out that the squeaky clean Starfleet officer has entirely different rules of engagement when it comes to dealing with murderous pirates," Paris fairly growled. The entire situation stunk, and struggling to try to make sense of it while she made her own secret plans and machinations was getting on her nerves. But she was trying to keep a cool head and wring some productivity out of this meeting beyond debugging the first Trojan horse that had been sent their way in the form of the cyber-infected Baroness Sarika.

"She knows there's a legitimate chance she can lose the vote. But if she pushes for combat, it might just be... honestly... to kill you, Captain." Dox added grimly. "She needs an heir. *YOUR* heir. And if you won't give her one on your own terms, blood on a sword would give her all she needs. And we can't let that happen."

The Trill Captain nodded. "Exactly that. She's put a lot of work into my genes and she made sure the lab that did that work couldn't reproduce me or talk about it. I also made sure the samples she had of myself and my sister were destroyed. She's going to use the boarding claws on the Bloody Rose as soon as she can to latch on and try to get to me. She's also one of the three people that taught me swordplay. I've been practicing with Schwein for that reason."

"As for her preparation plans, if I were her, I'd have seeded spies, willing and unwilling, in every crew years ago. Sarika's second, Marelith's first mate, a couple of the Romulans... She already has the old guard Baronesses in her pocket, but I'd have a few of those crew seeded as well - probably the advisors. She has the holographic maids bugged so don't discuss anything around them. They've been that way since they were installed. I have the access codes though so I'll forward those."

Then another thought occurred to Enalia. "Has any of the tech from Meroset been proven safe? We confiscated quite a few of those bracers from the Amazons and Minotaurs, didn't we?"

"I've begun testing with them at the moment, yes. What do you have in mind, Captain?" Paris replied cagily. That was another one of those cards she was hiding up her sleeve- literally in this case- and she basically distrusted everyone with any of the information of what she had planned. Her ramped-up paranoia told her in this instance to trust no one- particularly anyone in the room, at least when it came to her plans for the Tribunal.

Enalia eyed her first officer for a moment, sensing that she had something up her sleeve, figuratively speaking. "Just looking for an edge. I won't be able to wear a suit of armor under my white uniform so I'll need to visit the armory again and look for more options."

"White uniform? Part of the Tribunal I assume? I mean, you weren't going to be doing this in your Starfleet dress whites I assume?" Paris asked, turning over ideas in her mind.

"No, I'll be in my Artan Royal Uniform. Remember the white, gold, and platinum thing with the cape and tassels that made me look like I was fresh out of some animated war holo?" Enalia waved her hands in the air as she described the outfit.

"Ahhh, the BIG pirate outfit," Rita nodded, then crossed her arms beneath her prodigious bosom. "All right, let's recap. Fomenting dissent with the ranks of Baronesses who are problematic, and they are old and evil tyrants, set in their ways. We can't do anything about them at this point, and we have to just watch for attacks from any, possibly all of them so they can curry favor with Mommy Dearest. Dox, you'll have to handle the negotiations with Sienae in place of your mother. As you are setting up the meetings with the ones you think can be swayed, we have to figure out what Von Schtupp wants, because it's likely to use information she's gathered- if properly

motivated she could be the key to this whole thing."

Turning, Rita eyed the spotted Captain. "You have some work to do, Captain. The old guard will be a lot more enthusiastic about someone taking over who has a plan and a platform, rather than 'I'ma wing it'. I would suggest that you start drawing up the compacts and plans for how YOU would like to see the Artan fleet run- what policies, what codes. Give them a reason to stand beside you now and follow you into the future, aye?"

Enalia nodded thoughtfully. "I came up with a one hundred year plan when I took command of the Hera and indirectly, the family and I asked Magnus to begin implementing it. I think it might be time to revisit that plan - add some details and reveal it. It was meant to revisit the ideals of my great grandmother, with a few of my own ideals I picked up in Starfleet."

For the first time in the entire meeting, Rita Paris smiled- the genuine, real deal. Nodding, she uncrossed her arms. "I am so very glad to hear that, Captain. I'd like to hear it myself when you're ready."

"We're gonna get through this, Enalia. I swear I will do my damndest to pull this off without a casualty, but that vote isn't always up to me. The one thing I'll ask of you- of all of you- is trust me. Believe that no matter what I may say or do, I have your best interests at heart. I," Rita stepped over and leaned against the table beside the spotted captain. "In turn, will believe the same of all... of you..."

It was a flaw in her character, a fault in her espionage training and an asset at times. But Rita Paris could not convincingly lie, and as she tried, the truth in her own realization overcame her delivery as she realized it herself. The smile kinda froze in place.

"My life and soul are in your hands," Enalia replied immediately, ignoring the obvious verbal stumble. She knew Rita couldn't lie, but even to reassure people like this that she trusted them? They were definitely from two different worlds, as the woman that was raised to become a pirate queen was taught how to tell a crowd a lie, get them to believe it, and even believe it herself. Thankfully, she hadn't used that particular skill since her Valedictorian speech in the academy.

"Aye! Good enough for me!" Sarika added, standing and pumping one cybernetic fist into the air.

Picking up on Rita's words and the awkward meaning behind it, Dox smiled... but it was a hollow thing. Every step she took towards Enalia's world seemed to take her further from Rita's and she felt very alone in the room for it. The young, insecure Romulan instead simply nodded, not having any words to add.

## Chapter 5 - The Target

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### Two Weeks ago...

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Sitting on the deck of her small, modified j-type ship, the Khallianen, Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox was going through a series of small crates. Crates that had been left for her as gifts from the other Baronesses of the Artan Pirate family to celebrate her induction into their ranks.

Gifts of well-wishing, mementos of her own childhood as a smuggler that often intersected with the Artan Pirates, and forgotten family heirlooms.

Reaching inside, Mnhei'sahe picked up a small, ornate red box wrapped in velvet and trimmed with gold filigree. Inside was a beautiful necklace. Swirls of platinum framing a brilliant green stone. Dox recognized the piece as a Romulan ceremonial pendant, used in years past in bonding ceremonies. Holding it up to the light, she saw a name on the inside of the lid. The small gold plaque read: "Verelan t'Rul". It was the name of her paternal Grandmother. The former director of the Tal'Shiar and current Romulan Senator that Dox has only recently learned about.

After examining the pendant, holding it in her hand for a moment, she replaced it in the box, placed that box back in the crate and continued to explore their contents for a while longer. After a time of sitting in silence, alone with her thoughts, the melancholy officer stood up, powered down the Khallianen, locked the ship up and left.

After a few minutes, in the darkness of the empty freighter, something stirred. The velvet lined box creaked open as a series of long, platinum legs reached out. The slightest green glow from the gemstone showed the hint of a shape that crept out of the crate and onto the deck. Eight thin metal legs clinked delicately, reaching out from the metal casing around the green stone. Behind it, the long necklace chain retracted, linking together and curling up over the rear of the body like the tail of a scorpion.

Skittering across the deck, the small metallic arachnid climbed up under the helm

controls where it curled up to wait.

Its Target had touched it. Activated by a scan of her DNA left behind through errand skin cells, it had imprinted on her at last.

Its Target was Baroness Mnhei'sahe Dox.

And it was waiting.

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**Three Days Ago...**  
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The hatch of the Khallianen hissed open as the small ship came to life. The overhead lights flickered on as Mnhei'sahe stepped on board. The stout, red-headed Romulan woman was wearing black sneakers, black work out pants and a snug black tank top with the word 'HERA' in gold across the chest.

The thickly built young woman looked a bit slimmer of late, as her exercise regimen in preparation for the Captain's upcoming tribunal had been intense. And it was to that purpose that brought her to her ship.

Opening up the locked weapons locker, Mnhei'sahe pulled out the crisscrossing black leather belts that held the sheathed twin Caitian short swords that she was to be practicing with today. As she shut the locker, her sensitive ears gave the generally anxious officer a momentary pause.

She looked around for a moment, sure she had heard something. A light sound of metal tapping on metal for just a second, but it was gone.

Walking down the ramp from the ships hatch, she powered down the ship and locked up the hatch behind her. Walking briskly towards the corridor, Mnhei'sahe strapped the x-shaped belts around her torso, the sounds of the busy flight deck obscured another sound.

From under the hull of the Khallianen, the platinum Scorpion peered out, watching its Target as it skittered across the deck, close to the bulkhead, following.

But the ship was a massive maze of busy corridors, and the small, metallic mechanism could only move when it was being unobserved. But it knew it's Target now.

In its green gaze, it could see where she was anywhere on the ship.

And it was patient.

Hours had passed as it moved through the Jefferies tubes. There, the platinum Scorpion could travel unseen. It had made its way slowly through the tubes. Careful to not trip any detection sensors as it made its way down from the flight deck to where it's Target slumbered. To Deck 8.

Slipping its thin legs through the hatch, the Scorpion crawled slowly down the bulkhead of the corridor, behind the edge of a panel. And it made its way to the deck, it paused.

Lifting its green torso, the mechanical creature scanned the corridor in the direction of its Target as it froze in place.

The delicate sensors in the slinky creature saw something inexplicable. 3-D scans of the corridor over fifteen meters away showed the doors to two separate Chambers. Outside of the chambers, though separated by a good distance, each door was guarded by pairs of towering women. But it was not the guards it would have to pass that caused the silent mechanism to pause.

It was the energy auras.

From the nearer of the two rooms, was a vacuum like blackness that both radiated out while absorbing it's scan data entirely. And beyond, at the other door, was a golden radiance that pulled outward in all directions.

Passing the auras would alert those that were projecting them to its presence. And the auras appeared to be of types its sensors had never encountered. It could not approach its target on Deck 8.

Scampering back to the Jefferies tube, it would wait.

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**One Day Ago...**

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On Deck 4 of the Hera, Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox was hard at work at her desk in the Flight Control Office. The room was empty but for the Romulan officer as she reviewed crew rotations on her computer. From above, however, she was being watched.

Slowly, the platinum covered mechanical Scorpion moved around the perimeter of the room, watching its target from the edge of the ceiling as it inched close, being careful to not be seen.

Moving to the ceiling behind Dox's field of vision, the sharp pointed metal legs began to move slightly quicker until it was nearly within a few feet above its target. Unfolding it from below, the links of its barbed tail began to slowly extend downward towards Dox.

Suddenly, the twin doors of the office slid open with a twist as the sensor eyes of the palm-sized Droid observed a subject unknown to it enter the room. It was Dox's assistant flight chief and bond-mate, Mona Gonadie. The platinum mechanism paused to evaluate the situation as the barb of its tale twitched above the two women.

Mona flounced in, happier than usual, and pronounced her latest trials down in R&D a success, insisting that her bond mate join her for lunch so she could enjoy the best view in the galaxy.

Before it could strike, Dox stood up, kissing the brilliantly feathered woman softly on the cheek, accepting the offer as the pair left the room together. The shiny legs of the Scorpion twitched as it scampered back into the darkness of the corner of the ceiling. Its target had escaped again. The green stone at the center of its form pulsed for a moment as the palm-sized creature pondered its next move.

The Baronesses room was inaccessible. Deck 8 had protections on it that the assassin didn't comprehend. And while it's programming allowed for collateral damage, it was ordered to be as unseen as possible in the execution of its duty. This office space was too busy. Too many sensors recording activity that were difficult to avoid. But the flight deck was different.

The flight deck where Dox's small freighter was parked was busy during the day shift, but only had one officer on duty overnight. It was quiet. It's doors easy to seal. It's security systems easy to override at night. An ideal location to trap the Romulan pilot.

There it would wait, the Scorpion decided as it skittered away to set its trap.

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**Today...**  
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It was just shy of Oh One Thirty hours, and has been her habit of late on Saturday evenings, Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox was just finishing up a particularly intense workout. Walking down the corridors of Deck 22 of the Hera's Stardrive section towards the Shuttlebay, where her personal vessel, the Khallianen was parked.

Dressed in her usual workout gear, the red-headed Romulan was still sweating with a towel draped across her neck and the black belts of her twin, curved Caitian blades in hand. She was getting much more proficient in sword fighting, which was important this close to the Captain's tribunal as those skills were likely to be put to the test for real within a few days. As such, Dox was putting in extra hours in the holodeck to practice and it was paying off.

As she walked up to the double door to Shuttlebay two, the surprised officer had to stop herself from walking right into the doors that failed to automatically open for her as usual. Momentarily confused, but not thinking much of it, the exhausted officer simply tapped the door entry pad on the side and the doors slid open with a hiss.

Stepping in, she paused for a moment at a bizarre sight. In the center of the deck was a crew member, laying face down. "Paulson?" She called out cautiously

Ensign Raphael Paulson was on the duty roster for the overnight shift, and the cavernous room was otherwise empty of personnel. Concerned, she trotted over to the center of the room, passing her ship parked to the starboard side of the chamber. On the port side, a small yellow worker bee shuttle at rest. "Paulson, answer me!"

Sliding to her knees, Mnhei'sahe was now worried. She felt for a pulse on the back of the officer's neck, but found nothing. "Paulson!?" She yelled as she turned the body over to see a small pool of blood around a sickly looking puncture wound in the side of his neck. His eyes were frozen open in a look of shock, bloodshot but hazy. Crusted foam was collected around the corners of his clenched jaw.

Tapping the comm badge on the breast of her tank top, Dox yelled out. "Medical emergency in Shuttlebay two! Dox to sickbay, Dox to security!" But there was no telltale chirp or response. She tapped her badge again, but there was nothing.

Behind her the double doors hissed shut with a loud clanking sound as they locked and in an instant, Dox found herself in darkness as the lights turned off. "Imirrhllhse!" She muttered in Rihan.

Immediately, the emergency lights came on, filling the flight deck with a dim, eerie red glow. Mnhei'sahe was crouched next to the body of her fellow pilot, squinting to let her eyes adjust to the minimal light, listening for the slightest sound. She heard a faint skittering of metal on metal to her left, against the portside bulkhead moving through the space.

Quickly, she grabbed Paulson's body and with a bit of a strain, began dragging his limp form over next to the nacelles of her small private craft, tucking him into as safe a position as possible.

Still standing in a crouch, she sidestepped toward the nose of her ship as she pulled the twin curved blades from the sheaths on her back, listening for any sign of who was in the room with her. The skittering was gone, so she tried to make her way over to the main door, only to confirm that the hatch had been security sealed.

Suddenly, there was a sharp hum of power turning on somewhere in the room. Mnhei'sahe spun around to try and see where it was coming from as she stepped slightly forward. In the dim, red light, details were all but lost, but she thought she saw movement across the room, against the port bulkhead where the work bee pod had been parked.

"HNAEV!!!" She shouted in Rihan, realizing the work bee was no longer where she last saw it. Suddenly, the twin spotlights at the top of the dome of the small yellow craft flared to Dox's left as the pod rushed forward towards her. Leaping forward, the pod rushed past her, slamming against her legs as she went spinning to the deck hard with a shout of pain.

There was a dull crack as Dox hit the deck, trying to roll back to her feet as she gave out a shout. The twin blades slipped from her grip as she grabbed at her left kneecap that had been snapped by the impact of the pod. Tears falling from her eyes, she grabbed the

only blade close enough to her reach as she pushed herself back towards her ship with her right leg. As she did, the work bee spun back around and above her, extending its servo clams towards her.

Grabbing her right ankle as she tried to scootch away, it clamped hard causing the young pilot to cry out in pain again. As it brought its other clamps forward to try and grab her neck, she twisted the blade in her hand down and plunged it hard into the rubberized joint covering of the arm holding her.

With a hiss, the hydraulics released and she scampered back away, but her sword was now stuck in the joint. Still muttering in Rihan, Mnhei'sahe tried to get up to her own good leg, but fell back to the deck. "Think! Think!" To one side, out of reach, was her second blade. Even further away to the other side was her ship. But the work bee made her choice for her by forgoing its clamp arms and flying straight down towards the deck, trying to simply cleave her in half with its mass as she barely rolled out of the way in time.

The work bee slammed hard against the deck, twisting itself into the metal floors with a loud wrenching sound as Dox pushed herself up to her one good leg and began limping in pain towards her ship.

As the work bee pulled itself free of the twisted metal of the deck plating, Dox slammed hard against the side of her ship, slapping her hand against the biometric pad next to the hatch. As the work bee hovered back around, it began flying at full speed towards her. With only seconds to spare, the hatch slid open and Dox rolled in just as the work bee slammed into the side of the ship, wedging its triangular canopy sideways into the open hatch.

The entire ship slid sideways, slamming into the starboard bulkhead as the work bee strained, stuck in the hatchway. Dox had rolled hard against the side of the interior of her ship, smacking her head against the bulkhead and seeing stars. After a second of blackness, she shook off the impact and pulled herself back against the far wall, grunting as the spotlights from the work bee filled the small interior of the cabin. "Okay, the computer may not be working in the shuttle bay, but *somebody* had to have heard that! C'mon, Security!"

Muttering to herself, Dox pulled the thick leather belt off her back and tore off the two blade sheaths. Pressing them on either side of her shattered kneecap, she wrapped the

two belts around the sheaths and pulled them tight, creating a makeshift knee brace. As she tightened the belts, she let out a gravelly scream inside the small ship. "IIIEEEAAAAGGGHH!!!!!"

Suddenly, the work bee stopped moving in the hatchway and powered down, the bright spotlights going dark. Once again, it was only the dim, red emergency lights leaking in from the flight deck that illuminated the interior of Dox's ship. With a hiss, the hatch of the work bee opened, as Dox pulled herself up to her feet. "Hnaev..." She whispered.

Limping to the storage locker, she swung the door open to grab the antique Romulan Disruptor she had purchased at auction with the captain and slapped the power cell into place as she swung it back towards the open canopy. "W... where are you?"

Expecting to see a person step out, she instead saw an empty seat as she heard that eerily familiar scampering sound again. That same metal-on-metal skittering she had heard a few times over the past week. The sound seemed to echo through the small chamber as she limped towards the cockpit of the small ship.

As her eyes began to adjust again, she saw the faintest green glow moving towards her on the floor a few meters away. Taking aim, she fired towards the glow as a green flash of disruptor fire streaked forward, punching through the deck of her small ship. But the small shape leapt back away. She could see it now, silhouetted on the deck by the red light creeping in from outside the ship. It was a small, metal creature with eight sharp, spiked legs and a barbed tail curving up the back, not unlike a scorpion.

Firing again, the creature bounded to the side and was now against the side bulkhead as it began scampering forward towards her. She fired again, missing again as it was too fast to get a bead on in the darkness. As it flew towards her face, she ducked and rolled forward onto the deck. Turning around, she saw it sitting on the console of her ship, its tail swaling like a lance about the strike. Struggling to her feet, she kept her disruptor aimed at the platinum assassin as it waited.

To her left was the open cockpit of the work bee. As it leapt for her again, she scrambled to roll into the seat of the work bee. The force of her full weight hitting the seat was enough to push the small pod free of the twisted metal of the door frame of her ship. The power was completely deactivated, so she reached up and grabbed the handles on the inside of the hatch and with all of her strength, she pulled it shut just as the creature landed on the transparent aluminum canopy.

Scampering back and forth, the small metal creature began stabbing at the canopy with its razor-sharp tail. The scritch sound was unnerving as Dox tried rebooting the power inside the work bee. "What did you do in here, you little... You overrode the entire system. Shut out the security overrides and sensors. This whole room is dark to the ship right now, isn't it? Imirrhlhse!"

There was a cracking sound as the tail strike caused a stress fracture in the canopy shield. The creature was small, no bigger than Dox's hand, but strong. In a few minutes, it would break into the cockpit for sure. Dox looked around in the cockpit trying in vain to restart the internal power.

"Think..." She muttered to herself in Rihan. "It cut the power to the entire chamber. You can't get out. You can't call for help. And since security hasn't beamed in, it's likely nobody heard the impact from before. That wound on Paulson's neck... it must be from its tail. Poison. You've still got your disruptor and you know where it is. And... the Khallianen! The door opened! It's got power!"

As she spoke, the glass fractured more as spider web cracks began to fill the canopy above the frightened Romulan officer. Looking around again, she saw the manual canopy release lever next to the seat. In an emergency, even without power, explosive bolts will blow the canopy away from the work bee. "That will give me a few seconds..."

Grabbing the lever tight, Dox tried to curl herself forward as much as possible as she brought her disruptor up as she watched the platinum scorpion digging away at the canopy glass. With one strong strike, the sharp edge of its tail punched into the glass.

"Gotcha!" Dox mumbled as its tail tip was wedged in the glass momentarily. Yanking hard on the manual release, there was a loud series of bangs as the canopy was blown off the work bee, flying up and away from the ship with the platinum scorpion attached.

As it fell back to the deck 15 meters away, the glass shattered freeing the creature. But Mnhei'sahe was already moving. Limping out of the cockpit and towards the rent door of her damaged ship. As she moved, she raised her disruptor and fired in the direction of the canopy, hoping for a lucky shot as the scorpion skittered away with ease.

Her broken knee screamed in protest as she climbed up into her ship, trying to shut the

hatch behind her. But the work bee twisted the frame too much when it rammed the doorway earlier and it only groaned in protest. But it's impotent whines proved her small ship still had power so she quickly made her way to the cockpit, powering up the small craft. With a flicker, the console lights came on. "Yes!" She exclaimed as she first tried the comm system, but it was jammed from the outside just like her own com badge.

"Hnaev... now what..." Dox slammed the console angrily as she heard the metallic skittering of the scorpion as it circled the hatchway. Trying to keep it from entering, she fired wildly at the doorway as she tried to think.

'Okay...' Dox thought to herself, looking at the console. 'No communications. Can't call for help. Sensors are blind in here but...' "A slight smile crossed her face. 'Nobody's heard the commotion in here so far, but they can't miss this!'"

Calling up the weapons console, Dox aimed at the bulkhead ahead of the ship and opened fire. The room shook violently as powerful phaser blasts hit the internal shields that the creature had erected. As they did, her sensitive Romulan ears picked up the faint sound of a security klaxon in the distance. "That did it! They know something's going AAAAGH!!!"

As she spoke, the sharp metallic legs of the creature dug into her upper back as it leapt from the door frame onto her. Scrambling, she ran her back across the edge of the pilot's seat, shaking it off to fall to the deck plates behind her, it's legs dripping with her own green blood. It was between her and the hatch now and scampering back towards her.

Turning towards the windshield of her own ship, she fired a series of shots from her disruptor that shattered the transparent aluminum glass from within as she crawled up and out of the cockpit. Rolling to the deck with a massive thud, she let out a scream as her right ankle, already damaged when the work bee grabbed it, snapped on impact. *GYAAAGHH!!!*

With both legs out of commission, Mnhei'sahe tried to pull herself back from the ship with her one free arm, keeping the disruptor aimed at the cockpit as the Scorpion skittered into view. "C... c'mon... where the hell are you?"

For a long moment, Dox stared at the mechanical assassin in the dimly lit red light of the room as it stood there, readying it's tail to strike as she could no longer pull herself any further. She squinted an eye as she prepared to fire, hoping to hit it before it could strike

with its poison filled tail like it did to Paulson. Then, without a sound, the creature skittered back into the cockpit.

"Hnaev..." Dox muttered as she could hear it crawling out of the side hatch and down to the deck plating on the other side of the ship, out of sight. "This would... this would be a great time for security to appear!" She yelled to the room, exhausted and frustrated.

Panic setting in, she was darting her eyes around, trying to see what she could hear getting closer. Suddenly, she saw a flash of light reflect off its shining platinum limbs as it flew into the air at her face from the shadows. Dox winced back in fear as she heard a shimmering sound, as when the holodeck is activated and saw a blur of green pass in front of her, snatching the platinum Arachnid out of the air, inches from her face.

At first it was a hazy outline of purple with green stripes in the shape of a very fat and fluffy cat floating in the air, a green glowing haze coming off of it and the tail swaying back and forth as there was a metallic crunching sound. Then the face of the cat turned around to show two big bright moon yellow eyes and a very wide white-toothed grin, the remains of the scorpion between the teeth. This was definitely a holographic Cheshire cat of some sort, and it was definitely Starfleet, judging by the golden patch of fur in the shape of a delta shield on its forehead.

As it studied Dox with that mad look on its face, it floated a bit closer and first turned its head upside down, then its body, grinding its platinum prey almost in half as it did so. Finally, it blinked and floated right side up, resting its head on its paws and wrapping its tail around its body. It then said one word in that slightly odd voice that the computer sometimes used. "Me-ow..."

Catching her breath, Dox looked at the bizarre sight as the sparking, platinum creature fell from the jaws of the projected feline, clanking to the ground. "M... Maru?" She muttered.

"Yes?" asked the holographic purple and green cat, the fine mist still coming off of its fur. It tilted its head ninety degrees as it waited.

Then young Romulan pilot tilted her head as the slightest of exhausted smiles cracked the corner of her lips. She had only heard Maru speak once before, when she was mind-melded with her closest friends to try and talk down the goddess Gaia. But in that link that connected her mind to that of the crew and the ship, she felt a presence in the

background. It was a presence she now understood was the entity before her, and it gave her just a bit of comfort in the moment.

"Thank you." Was all Mnhei'sahe could think to say.

Maru grinned wider, rolling over a couple times as her body seemed to fade into nothing but green mist that quickly faded away. Then her eyes closed and vanished and her smile morphed into a crescent moon that closed out to a new moon - invisible and gone, just as the first of the security teams forced their way through the doors.

As they did, power was restored to the deck and the lights came back on as Mnhei'sahe winced in pain. She tried to scooch back to a seated position but only succeeded in flumping back against the bulkhead behind her. "Aaaagg!" She hissed.

"Lieutenant! What happened?!" The first two security guards came in the door. Dox looked up, squinting at them as she fought back a wave of nausea that was coming on as her adrenaline was beginning to subside.

Recognizing the two tall women from her training sessions with security as Petty Officers Grell and Wagner, she waved them over. Wagner, a wide shouldered human with caramel skin and a short buzz cut ran over to Dox while Grell, a stockier Bajoran covered her rear trying to see if there was still a threat.

"Th... Threat is neutralized Miss Grell. That's what's left if it. Call a science team in to contain it right away, though." Dox gestured to the small piece of crumpled platinum by her feet as the pair of Amazons-in-training looked at it incredulously. After all, the pair of officers were both a head taller than the young Romulan, but that didn't stop her from putting them both down on the mat in combat training, so they had a hard time processing the minuscule creature as a threat at first.

Hissing in as her cracked ankle and shattered knee cap protested her movements, Dox chuckled lightly. "Trust me... It hits harder when it's ramming you with a work bee. Call a med team, please. And... Nouhha... Paulson."

Reaching up to grab Wagner's shoulder, she gestured with her chin to go up. "Help me up, please."

Looking at the twists in her legs, Wagner hemmed for a moment. "Lieutenant, I don't."

"Help me up!" Dox snapped back, but there was a tremble to her voice that Wagner responded to as she motioned to Grell. After calling in science and medical as ordered, a second security team entered, weapons drawn. Then Grell joined Wagner and the two women tucked themselves under Dox's shoulders and lifted the stout pilot up.

As the weight of her lower legs pulled on the broken joints, Dox winced in pain, clutching at the women's backs as she bit her lip trying to not cry out again. "It... It killed... help me over... Please. Paulson... he's over behind the ship."

Slowly, the two security officers obliged, keeping most of Dox's weight on their shoulders. Still, each step was clearly agony as they arrived at the limp, lifeless body of the young Flight Officer. Gently, as Dox motioned with her head, they lowered her down to the deck to Paulson's side. Tears down her cheeks as a medical team arrived.

Gently, she put her hand over his heart as she whispered over him in her native Rihan. "*May Al'thindor carry you on swift wings.*"

The young Romulan had never been a religious woman, but on a ship with three God's in residence, one that had just saved her life, the words came naturally to her.

Lightheaded and nauseated, she turned to the medical team and gave a simple nod. Quickly, they stepped over to help and she let them, offering no protest as they moved her gently to a grav-lev gurney for transport to Sick Bay.

As she was being moved to the door, she whispered again in Rihan, "*I'm sorry, Raphael. I'm sorry.*"

<https://youtu.be/NlzkGd7qaMY>

## Chapter 6 - What Just Happened On The Flight Deck?

Shuttlecraft Bay 2 of the USS Hera that occupied part of the aft section of Deck 22 was heavily insulated. After all, shuttles, freighters and any number of small to medium sized craft might make a poor landing on it, and had, more than once. The tritanium triple reinforced honeycomb system of interlocking layers acted as a shock absorber utilizing a polymer gel sandwiched within said honeycombs. The deck was resilient, sturdy, and reasonably crash-proof. If there could be considered a 'safest place' to crash a small starship on the USS Hera, it would be the flight deck.

As attributed by the worker bee left smoking on the deck, it's canopy hatch shattered nearby, the explosive bolts still smoking.

The blast doors were there as part of a bulwark defense. While it was nice to trust in forcefields, sometimes they failed when ships lost power, and rather than vent the entire starship via the shuttlecraft bay, sturdy blast doors lined the entrance to the Hera proper from the flight deck on both Decks 21 and 22. Which was fortunate, because the security alerts had gone off when those blast doors came under attack from heavy phaser blast from the *Khallianen*, Lieutenant Dox's personal pirate craft, which she'd taken to parking on the flight deck.

With everything else that was going on, the irritation that she felt seeing the pirate ship parked prominently on the Starfleet shuttle bay was minor, and she'd decided to let it go. Now the first officer was glad that she had. If the attacks had occurred on the flight deck, there might have been more casualties..

But then, Ensign Raphael Paulson might not be dead.

It had taken her a few moments to get up, get dressed and cross the ship to get to the flight deck, during which Lieutenant Dox had been hauled off to sickbay, and the security officers on the scene had updated the situation. Operations had already confirmed a viral worm loop in their systems that had kept the flight deck silent from sensors, and they were shunting it out now, and reported that the data from the suppressed sensors might be retrievable, and they were working on it.

Now, at just after 02:15 hours, Rita Paris was looking at the flight deck that was the scene of a murder and an attempted murder. One officer lay dead, another gravely wounded. Knee and an ankle had to hurt. Dox would live... which meant right now, Rita Paris needed answers. Because when the Captain finished checking on Dox, she was going to expect answers.

"Mr. Carrot, you're the flight deck doc, I want to know what killed Mr. Paulson. Also determine if he needs to be quarantined. I want scans, people- take that ship apart screw by screw if you have to, but if she's got any more nasty little surprises like this, I want them found in short order, identified and neutralized. I want this debris over here to be analyzed, down to the point of manufacture, and I want to know everything about it. In no small part because the fluid is eating into the deck, and that is some very, VERY tough deckplate right there."

"I want scans of the flight deck to determine that there are no more surprised lying dormant. In short, people I want you to be able to tell me what color underwear I've got on because you've scanned that thoroughly. Because something killed Mr. Paulson, and tried very, VERY hard to kill Lieutenant Dox." Paris addressed the assembled officers, chin high, brow set, resolve firm. "Not on our flight deck. Not on our starship."

"Let's get to work."

Thav nodded as he began walking forward, his eyes on the scanner and the floor as he walked in a straight line across the flight deck. Around halfway across his scanner detected something just in front of him. Stopping and getting down on one knee his blue eyes found the foreign object. A few shattered pieces of metal. Placing a marker at the sight he used a pair of tweezers to pick up the shards after having his scanner logged their structure completely. "Got something over here. The scanner shows it as part of a Yemmars energy cell." He said calmly.

"Break that down for me, Mr. Th'ovohrot," Paris replied, standing in the center of it all to coordinate, as if she were on the bridge.

"It's a small energy cell, often used in spy equipment and black market robots," the andorian responded as he sealed the evidence bag.

"Excellent," the gold-clad commander replied. "Finish gathering up the rest of the

remains there so we can seek out all the clues involved. Get that investigation launched and trace that power cel- I would very much like to know more about where our little assassin droid came from, who made it, who sells it, and how it got here. Good work, Master-At-Arms- keep it up.”

After a few minutes, the gold clad security officer, V'Nus emerged from the twisted metal hatchway of Dox's ship, the *Khallianen*, PaDD in hand as she walked up to Commander Paris at full military attention.

"Commander, I have compiled the report from Petty Officer Wagner, who was first on the scene and took the Lieutenant's first statement along with the inventory listing of the ship. The investigation team is beginning to disassemble the vessel, but initial scans have found nothing further matching the energy signature of the damaged sample we have. It left a detectible trail from one of the four crates in storage and all are being taken for further investigation."

Finishing, V'Nus handed the PaDD to Paris. "That trail should make it possible for us to determine where on the Hera it's been. And I've also compiled the past security scans of the *Khallianen* for comparison to determine how this eluded us."

That's when the silver haired, eye patch wearing, augmented human of a pirate entered the flight deck in her full Baroness livery, hat, cloak, and tasseled shoulder pads and all. She strode up to Commander Paris like royalty and looked up to the taller woman, completely ignoring the carnage around her as if it was normal. "I am here, Commander. You have need of me?"

“Someone murdered one of our crew, and tried to kill Lieutenant Dox,” Paris turned, a hint of the cold fury she was restraining leaking through in her stiff and formal manner. “I will know who has perpetrated this act. Once we have determined that information, a course of action will be determined from there. As it stands, you are the resident expert of the Artan pirate baronesses. As we narrow the focus of the investigation, your input and analysis would be most helpful and would be appreciated.”

While she couldn't order the platinum pirate to do anything, von Alcott was close to Dox, and the first officer suspected that an assassination attempt would likely anger her nearly as much if not more than it infuriated Paris.

And so it did. The Baroness clenched both her fists and her jaw at the news and took a

moment to compose herself, taking a deep breath. The smile on her face after that was not one of friendship but one of deadly intent. When she spoke, she had to force her teeth to unclench. "Do we have the means of assassination? Has it been determined how it came aboard?"

"Mister Th'ovohrot. You have the debris of the device, correct? Petty Officer V'Nus, you have scanned the Lieutenant's ship and indicated it originated in one of those crates... the ones bearing gifts from the other baronesses? Anyone else? I need an answer, an analysis determining how the assassin droid came aboard. Anyone?" While she herself was a reasonable investigator, Paris gad called in the crew of experts for a reason. Now it was time to see what they produced.

Ensign John Carrott looked up from the body of Paulson, sadness evident on his face. He shook his head as if to clear it, and scanned again, leaning closer to gain a visual inspection of exposed skin on the body. When he looked up, he was three shades greener than Kermit.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, "Gloves everyone, now please! There is evidence Paulson succumbed to a particularly virulent poison, and in the event any of it leaked anywhere...well, better safe than sorry."

Suiting actions to words, Carrott took long-legged strides to the replicator and procured protective gear for himself and the others, putting his own on and preparing to pass the rest out.

The andorian had been flicking through something on his PaDD before the ensign's words rang through his head. He'd already been wearing gloves for his search, but the words made his eyes twitch as he flicked the padd back. A certain model of assassin droid was on the page. A Scorpinox 7 model.

"I think we may have a culprit, ma'am." the Master At Arms said, handing the PaDD over to the Commander with the highlighted droid model.

On the PaDD was the technical information for the small, palm sized assassin droids that matched the small pile of twisted metal that had been collected from the flight deck.

*'Designed to replicate jewelry, the Scorpinox 7 has an advanced internal A-I and targets based on DNA scans built into a replica gemstone containing the processor and*

*scanning equipment. The platinum body converts into a series of extendable and retractable platinum legs and the linked chain converts into a powerful, retractable tail with a durasteel toxin delivery Lance.*

*The Lance can be loaded with up to 1,500 CC's of any toxin and can puncture most forms of body armor.*

*The Scorpinox 7 is equipped with dormant scan reflection technology rendering it undetectable to all but an individual, level four security scan.*

*The Scorpinox 7 can be configured and customized to match jewelry from multiple cultures for maximum infiltration expediency and is primarily used by the Orion Syndicate, the Tal'Shiar, the Ferengi Alliance and the Dominion. Of Orion manufacture.*

"Get me DNA off that thing. It'll have Romulan and human DNA that will match up with what else we have on file. I want to know who else handles it, because that might give us some clues. Where can such a thing be purchased, Baroness von Alcott?" Paris directed. "Also, you said you found traces on which crate it came from- Baroness, coordinate with Mr. Th'ovohrot. While I understand that in the wheels within wheels and worlds within worlds of espionage, it could have been slipped into someone else's crate, which likely tells us nothing, I still want what answers there are to be had."

At which point, Petty Officer V'Nus returned with another PaDD, which she handed to Paris. "Commander. The investigation team traced the point of origin on the ship to this. The box in question is still being scanned and is quarantined for the time being, but there is a name inside."

On the PaDD were holo images of the small, velvet wrapped jewelry box the false pendant was found in. Visible on the inside of the open lid was a small gold plaque that read 'Verelan t'Rul'.

While she was remaining outwardly calm, it was abundantly clear to all personnel in the shuttle bay that the Commander was In No Mood. An attack on the decks of the United Federation starship Hera itself that had murdered one officer and damn near killed another was just the opening act of getting involved with pirate scum, and the entire affair was bringing her anger to a boiling point she was working very hard to contain, as now cold logic and determination were called for.

"Has Mr. Sonak arrived as yet? No?" Tapping the comm badge on her left breast, Paris made a direct call. "Paris to Sonak, you are needed on Deck 22, Shuttle Bay 2 immediately."

"Acknowledged," came the instant reply.

Meanwhile, based on the data that she had seen so far, Schwein had pulled out one of her PaDDs and had tapped into the ArtaNet and was looking up the registry of who had given Dox each of those gifts. When she found the gift, she forwarded the data to Rita's PaDD. She was so pissed, she didn't even bother trying for common, instead speaking in German and letting the UT handle translations. "It was from one of our own. A Romulan of the name Theran T'Werska. He registered the gift as a pendant he found at Tortuga station from a Romulan vendor he knew that claimed the person in the picture to be the deceased grandmother of Mnhei'sahe."

She then easily crushed the reinforced PaDD with one hand in frustration and dropped the fragmented remains to the deck before pulling out a backup.

"Investigate this personage, please. If he is innocent, I want it proven," Paris grumbled. While she was here to represent the Artan family, the Baroness was her friend and confidante. As angry as Rita was over the situation, she wasn't about to take it out on the pirate whom she had cheerlead to chase her fiance, who had taught her swordplay and who, if she was not turned against her will, would take a disintegration for the Captain.

One of her greatest fears in the coming storm was that just such a thing would come to pass, which would destroy von Alcott, and the Captain as well. Grinding her teeth, Rita sough reserves of calm as fear and anxiety continued to try to turn themselves into anger inside her.

At that moment, the shuttlebay door wooshed open to admit the blue clad, grey-eyed chief science officer of the Hera. After a quick visual survey of the current state of the small hangar deck, the Vulcan walked straight to his superior officer who was also his wife. But none could have told it was so, looking at his deadpan, professional demeanor and hearing his flat tone of voice.

"Reporting as ordered, Commander. How may I be of service?"

Internally, a wave of relief swept over Rita Paris, although it was tempered by the

severity of the situation. But while she often doubted her own logic, Sonak's was logic which tended to be flawless, even if not always applicable. Right now, she needed his sharp, critical eye, his keen understanding of personal motivation and his threat analysis capability.

Right now, she needed Sherlock Holmes. But she had Sonak instead, who was actually superior.

First came a basic statement of the facts as they stood, then her thoughts. "An infiltration and assassination droid was slipped into the cargo of Lieutenant's Dox's private vessel, amongst gifts from other Baronesses of the Artan family. Ensign Paulson is dead, and Lieutenant Dox is in Sickbay. The remains of the android have been collected by Master-At-Arms Th'ovohrot, and at this point we have a probable representation of the manner in which it was smuggled in, by whom and it seems the culprit behind it all, if the trail of evidence is to be believed."

The Vulcan asked to see the data regarding the assassination tool and started studying it before he spoke again.

"Identifying the origin point of the device is greatly simplified by the tools we have on board. This is an investigation ship with state of the art apparatus and personel. So, as with any device encountered, our first, best bet of avenue is to identify it's molecular composition, technological design and power signature."

He contacted the different ship departments and programmed the computer for detailed analysis and correlation with their data banks as he continued.

"So far the data found seem to point to a Romulan source. But, unless we are dealing with fanatics eager to promote their agenda, the first rule of a successful assassination is to divert suspicion; as much from it's intended target as away from his, her or it's true identity. I think we can rule out fanaticism, as the manner of execution was too anonymous, too subtle and unspectacular to act as an effective socio-political message."

The Vulcan completed his programming.

"Engineering will soon confirm if this device is truly of *Rihansuu* manufacture and design. Our good doctor should also be able to send us the analysis of any residual DNA imprint and if such trace is that of the manufacturer and user or if it has been implanted

as a decoy. There is also the chemical composition of the poison used with the device, which should allow our science lab to point to its possible manufacturer and origin. Xenosociology is also studying the repertoire of known users of similar assassination methods. Correlating all those pieces of data from our various departments should give us the best possible probability of who the culprit truly is."

He stepped back to let Rita Paris see for herself the result of all those analyses and correlations as they appeared on screen.

"Theran T'Werska registered the gift as a pendant he found at Tortuga station from a Romulan vendor he knew that claimed the person in the picture to be the deceased grandmother of Miss Dox, which would stand to reason that he himself may have been used as an unwitting agent, but that coincidence is too broad to be statistically likely. Instead he was given the android by a Tal Shiar agent, and paid to sneak it into the various gifts, playing a long game. But with that line of reasoning assumed as correct, why would she be trying to murder her own granddaughter, with Mr. Paulson as an accidental casualty along the way?" While she wasn't a detective Rita could see how the chain of events and the data came together, but that was an element that eluded her.

"Romulans live in a very archaic hierarchical society where lineage is manipulated for political gains," the Vulcan answered. "In such societies, murder is often but a tool to an end. But it remains to confirm that Romulans are truly involved in this specific instance. Poison is far from being unheard of among them, but usually open challenge is more the norm. Honor is a central concept of their culture and it is harder to make a recognized claim through covert means. For most Romulans and most of their socio-political needs, this would appear counterproductive."

"Ja, I concur," the platinum haired pirate interjected. "With the timing of mein own assassination attempt, zis is too suspicious. Romulans are definitely involved, given the means and method, but I suspect as a diversionary tactic. I suspect that Theran and this supposed vendor are pawns in the Queen's plans, just as Sarika was in delivering my own means of demise." Peering up at the Vulcan with her one human eye, she studied him for a moment. "Ist that a logical enough assumption and a good starting point for mein own research?"

"The truth about the logic of an assumption can only be established through the validation of its premise. You are far more knowledgeable about your own culture than I am. If you have external data relevant to this, then you can assert the probability of you

being correct."

Looking up from his crouched position, Carrott had been letting the words wash over him while he completed his scans. His slightly dazed look became more focused as he processed what had been said. Brain and mouth finally caught up, he began to speak in his usual deliberate fashion.

"Commander, the poison implemented was not Romulan in origin. At least not in part. There are multiple layers to the neurotoxin. The strongest element is a derivative of the Borgia plant from M-113. However, it has also been mixed with the kaylo plant and a binding element from a plant native to Romulus. This was engineered. I've never seen anything like this....someone paid big bucks to have this created."

Schwein's eye opened wide as she slowly looked over at Carrott recognizing at least the basic description of the toxin. "Was ze toxin encased in ze resin of ze dunkip trees of Setlik five?" Receiving a nod from the medical officer, she mumbled to herself a few German curses before continuing. "Zat is ze signature of an assassin I... Dispatched... Some years ago. His blades are now in the ownership of our Lieutenant Dox. Whomever obtained that recipe is not a friendly person and likely has ties to the family of said assassin. The Queen's attendant is rumored to have such ties..."

"Baroness, follow up with Theran T'Werska, if you please," Commander Paris asked, then followed it up with a twist. "Bring Petty Officer Jablonski- this is a murder and attempted assassination of Starfleet personnel. So while we would very much appreciate your assistance in navigating these waters, this is Starfleet custody they are being taken into for questioning. I assume this is clear to all involved, correct?"

"Ja, perfectly, Commander," Schwein replied, giving the buxom lass a salute and forgetting that she still had a reinforced PaDD in her hand. The remains of which shattered against her forehead and sprinkled to the floor like confetti. The platinum haired pirate just sighed and brushed the pieces from her face and uniform. "Almost time to replicate more..."

Just as Schwein was smashing a PaDD into her face, Enalia made her entrance onto the flight deck, looking like she owned the place, which, in a way, she did. "Status report, if you please." She shook her head at Schwein and the small pile of electronics at her feet, but said nothing, knowing how she could be. She also judged it to be serious by the looks of the size of the pile.

"Someone snuck an assassin droid into the Baroness gifts on Miss Dox's personal vessel," Paris drew herself up to report- this was why the investigation had proceeded as it had, after all- so the Captain could be briefed. "Apparently Ensign Paulson must have spotted it, and it killed him with a neurotoxin encased in the resin of the dunkip trees of Setlik V. After a pitched battle, Lieutenant Dox managed to overcome the android."

"We have a lead, with a myriad of potential shadow motivations behind it, including your mother's attendant. The box small, velvet wrapped jewelry box the false pendant was found in apparently bore a small gold plaque that read 'Verelan t'Rul'- Grandmother to our Miss Dox on her father's side. Wheels within wheels, Captain... which have left one of ours dead, another in sickbay, badly injured." There was no humor in the tone of the first officer- these were grave tidings.

The spotted captain closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. She then pulled the PaDD out of her pocket and handed it to Schwein who cracked the screen just accepting it. "Add that to the pile for me, please." Without another word, the platinum haired woman crushed it like paper between her hands, the remains falling to the floor in a shower of plastic and electronics.

Enalia then opened her eyes and grinned ever so slightly. "I assume you've already handed out marching orders for the investigation then?"

"Aye ma'am. The investigation is underway as we speak, and I'll keep you apprised of progress, interviews and arrests. Someone out there will pay for this, I assure you." Paris was not usually given to grim proclamations, but it was clear in this case she was rather determined. "Justice will be served."

"I swear I don't know what I would do without you. Keep up the good work." Enalia surveyed the deck once more before turning to leave but stopped long enough to reminisce about when she and her team at the time had saved the augmented human from a Syndicate raid that had wiped out her entire research colony but her. It had taken the woman some time to learn to treat the tech gently enough to not destroy it casually and as far as she knew, it had been a long time since Schwein had destroyed even one of her own PaDDs and the ease of which she had destroyed the one she gave her... She had somehow grown even stronger over the years.

Taking another deep breath and slowly letting it out, the curvaceous Captain looked

around the flight deck again, burning the image into her mind. They had been too late to save Raphael Paulson, who was likely just an innocent bystander in the way of this assassin droid. They just had to make sure they weren't too late to save anyone else. This time she knew she had the best crew in the galaxy though, so they would pull it off.

Looking up at the Commander and Captain, Carrott said, "I would like to move the body to storage in Medlab 2. No quarantine is needed as the live toxin must be injected directly into the bloodstream or muscle mass to be active, but better safe under lockdown than sorry."

"Do so. See if an antivenom can be assembled, in case we encounter this again," Paris ordered. "Seal the private ship, clear the deck and file your reports. I have to go write a letter to the next of kin." Eyeing the Captain, the Starfleet officer added, "Hopefully not one of many."

## Chapter 7 - Vanity Can Be One's Undoing

"Lieutenant Dox to Commander Paris. Commander... can you come to Holodeck 2... I think it's important."

Tapping the ancient delta on her breast, the gold-clad commander replied as she headed for a turbolift in anticipation of having to be somewhere.

"On my way."

Nodding to a few passing crewmen, offering encouraging smiles, she saved tapping at her PaDD for turbolift rides. Crew morale looked good, most were moving with some sort of sense of purpose, and all seemed well on the organized and efficient starship. Which made Rita's old-fashioned heart happy. A good crew could pull off miracles, after all.

For the entirety of the turbolift ride and much of the stroll to the theatre-sized Holodeck 2, she mused about how that relationship worked, waxing philosophically, attempting to achieve some sort of understanding or epiphany about it. Ultimately, as she tapped her command code into the entry for the holodeck, she came up with a blank. A question answered of the universe with no answer for her, at least.

Stepping out onto the bridge of the Bloody Rose, the pirate queen Arenara Artan's personal craft, Rita Paris took it in with some degree of nostalgia. "This bridge was what we thought the future was going to look like. Ahh, nostalgia."

Smiling slightly, Mnhei'sahe Dox was standing off behind the helm of the holographic replica of the Miranda-Class starship. She was still wearing her black workout pants and a black tank top, but with her crimson uniform tunic over it, hanging open. She looked a bit sweaty and a little winded, but otherwise fine and almost excited. "Well, this particular one is horrible. But the class itself is an excellent design. I've practiced a lot on a simulation of the Captain's Miranda to get a feel for her controls and it's all very intuitive. But that's not what I called you for."

Walking over to Rita's position, Dox nodded slightly. "I was working out. I wanted to make sure my injuries were healed before the tribunal, but when it was over, something happened. Maru called up a message for me from Kodria."

"Ah, one of those sublime clues our time-traveling niece left behind. I swear, I will miss that kid until the day we meet her," Rita admitted. "Which brought you back here to the bridge of the enemy, rendered in high holographic display. Okay, I'll bite. What did Kodria have to say?"

Nodding slightly, Dox's smile softened as she thought about their Android niece from the future. "Yeah, me too." But then her focus shifted back to their purpose there.

"She told me three things... Here." Pulling down a holographic display from out of thin air that she clearly had ready for this exact reason, Dox replayed the segment of the message she had just received.

On the projected screen, the image of Kodria Mizu appeared, *"There are three things you need to know. One is that you need to cherish the time you have with your mother. You only have one, young lady, so treat her well while you have her. That's what you always told me, after all. Two is that the Saurian brandy is poisoned. Three is that the evidence is where you least expect to find it."*

As the message ended, the screen vanished. "So... It's the last two is what's relevant here. The Saurian Brandy thing is self-explanatory, but I kept getting stuck on the last part. So I started thinking about what we're trying to find evidence *for*. The assassination, the tampering with Schwein and Sarika's cybernetics, and the sabotage of the holodeck to try and kill Schwein."

Starting to pace as she talked, Dox was running her thoughts out loud. "THIS holodeck. With a perfect replica of her bridge programmed on it. And Kodria said that she had Maru deliver the message to me specifically after a number of specific things had happened. Things that made it so that I would be *here*, in the same holodeck where this all happened. I thought it might not be a coincidence."

"Well, I've had Science and Intel all over it, so every nook, cranny, nut and bolt has been inspected and catalogued," The extradimensional explorer wagged her finger at the Agonizer technology which was apparently designed to be used shipwide. "Those things. Those things are the devil."

"They can make Vulcans scream."

"It feels like you're being turned inside out then that gets turned inside out. It spasms all of your muscles so that you can't claw your skin off while it feels like you're being devoured by a million ants. And you can't yank your own teeth out as every nerve ending in them is on fire, and if you're lucky you can close your eyes so you can't see what it looks like when every nerve ending in your eyeballs become pain receptors," the experienced executive explained.

"Someone who owns one of these is a sick, sick puppy. Someone who puts one on her bridge is a nasty piece of work. That's somebody staying in charge through some serious fear of failure in her underlings. Because she not only puts one of them in there," Paris was, of course, extrapolating on what she saw, but her logic was unshakable. "She makes the rest of the bridge crew listen, there at their posts. This woman's practically a Terran... ah, the mirror universe Federation earthlings."

Looking solemnly at it, Dox spoke more softly as she could see the anxiety on Rita's face. "Yet another reason we need to remove her from power and dismantle all of this."

"Science and Intel went all over this thing. We have their reports- feel like collating some data, Lieutenant?" Paris offered the helmsman with a grin. "Look for the clues we can find in the 8 second loop they could safely recover? It appeared to be 15 minutes of footage, but Sonak determined playing the loop as a full sequence was in and of itself a trap designed to space you, creating conditions of a vacuum inside the holodeck with the safeties off and the deck on full security lockdown. Ugly way to die."

"Of course it would have multiple levels of death trap." Dox grimaced as she thought of how depraved the Captain's mother was and it only strengthened her resolve. "And yes, let's see what we can see. I know I may be grasping at proverbial straws here... but I trust Kodria. She wanted us... me and you... to see something here. She would know I would have called you. I all but told her I would."

Pacing across the simulated bridge, Dox nodded. "Okay... what do we have?"

"What we have are reports. Computer, please give me a meter by half-meter screen in midair here with the science and intel reports in 16 point font on each of these panels, and give me the conclusive reports to me left and right of the captain's chair, on my

mark... mark." The old-time officer had a tendency to use precision military determination at time, but it was at least applicable when it came to some of what they did here in the far-flung future. As the requested screens all phased into being, Paris nodded her approval

"Thank you, Computer. Well done."

=^=You're welcome, Commander Paris.=^=

"So let's see what we have here... where were we headed today, Mommy Dearest?" Paris stepped down to the tactical console to check the heading, then stepped over to the helm to confirm. "Well, this is interesting. Take a look."

Walking over, Dox looked at the displayed information from both stations. "Okay. We've got the ships speed. Warp 7. Starting coordinates look like the Kabul sector where the Artan Fortress is. And we've got heading, course data and destination coordinates."

As she spoke, Dox's attention went from the hovering information display to the actual simulation of the bridge consoles themselves, reading the same information off of them as she slowly ran her hands over the controls. "But... they were... These coordinates aren't set for anyplace in specific. This is just... dead space. A rendezvous, maybe?"

"Possibly..." Paris was tapping at a PaDD in hand, confirming. "Yup, looks like nothing out there in the database but spacelanes. Let's see what else we've got." Stepping away from the helm, Rita eyed the command chair, then skimmed over the science report. "Science verified Az'Prel's theory about the agony booth, surprise. Verified the veracity of the simulation, verified the eight second rule, verified the entire starship is reproduced in this simulation. That's kinda nuts, isn't it? She wanted to make sure the Baroness was killed she holographically reproduced her entire starship as a trap for her. This is one crazy driven woman who really wanted credit for being such a bitch."

"Indeed. There was no way she was going to kill Schwein without her knowing it was her. I'm willing to bet that Schwein's had some unpleasant experiences on this ship, hence the level of detail. It's sadistic for sure." Dox had begun pacing the simulated bridge, her mind running the information available. In front of the Communication station, Dox paused looking at the data on the screens and her eyebrows knitted.

"Commander... This is the communications officers station, right? These numbers here?"

Is this the readout for subspace frequencies?" While Dox had trained herself to fly a Miranda class ship, she was far less well versed on the full functions of the model of bridge so similar to ones Rita Paris had once served on in her own era.

"Good eye, Lieutenant. First bridge post I served was at comms- I didn't have the scores to go pilot in my third year so I switched to Communications as a major. Not proud of it, but it got me through the Academy. Let's see here..." Paris hands tapped across the displays, reacquainting herself with the console. "This is the subspace frequency... it's an open channel, see, that's what it looked like on the console. All we've got is the frequency but..." Paris checked the reports hovering beside the consoles. "Nothing really significant about- oh, there we go, the channel ID on the other end is..."

Suddenly Dox cut her Commander off with a wide-eyed curse, "**Imirrhllhse!** I can't believe I missed that!"

Turning around, Dox ran back over to the data readout above the navigation workstation, scrolling through the projected data with her hand until the star maps of the ship's heading was shown. "There! Okay... That subspace frequency. It's a dead channel. Static. Except it's not. It's a smugglers channel. Code hidden under static."

Dox gesticulated with her hands as she talked. "And *THIS* isn't dead space, Commander! It's the location of the Aehallh station. It's a cloaked Romulan smuggling station. My mother and I were there... half a dozen times. That's where the Captain's mother was going when this was recorded."

"All right... setting aside the fact that there's a cloaked Romulan smuggling station out there..." Even in an investigation, Rita Paris was still keeping one eye on her duty. "Smuggler channel, smuggler destination. Still just puzzle pieces that don't connect to anything. Think, old lady, think..." Pacing past a few of the other stations, Rita scanned the reports, hunting for a clue to make the information they had gleaned make sense before returning to the comm panel.

Trying to follow along, Dox was listening intently and watching what Rita was doing as the throwback First Officer worked, calling up information at the Communications Station that she manipulated like she was born to it. "There has to be something here... ."

Dox cricked an eyebrow for a moment. "Commander..." the former Smuggler turned Starfleet Officer pointed at a sequence of numbers on the console display. "What's that?"

"That's the transceiver code of the other party..." Paris explained absently as she attempted to approach the problem from another angle. "Think of it as an identifier tag on communications, so that if you had multiple parties on a frequency you could identify them all individually. It may be a few too many years since I've manned this console or the future is a bit different, but I don't recognize that transceiver code. It's definitely not Starfleet, I know that much..."

Leaning over Paris's shoulder with one hand on the back of her seat and the other on the console, Dox stared at the sequence of numbers, her mind struggling to make the connection that was itching at the back of her mind. After a few seconds, a slight smile crept up on her cheeks. "Commander, It's not you *or* the console. It's NOT Starfleet for sure. And it's not Artan."

Standing back upright, Dox ran a finger across her chin as she talked. "I might be wrong as I've not seen these codes in years, but that 6 digit prefix at the beginning of the code... that's an Orion Syndicate prefix. When I was a kid, my orders from my Mother were to go silent and go the other way if we got too near any ship communicating on those frequencies."

"Ahaaa... well, that's definitely another piece of the puzzle. So this isn't admissible as evidence per se, but it might just lead us somewhere. We already knew she was communicating with the Syndicate and here we have more evidence of that. Let's see..." Paris poked at the rocker switches and turned a dial or two. "I can't pinpoint the location without the panel being active... let's see what Science and Intel came up with." Shifting her attention to the reports hovering over the station, Paris scanned for more clues.

"It's not admissible in a Federation court, but it's proof she's at least communicating with the syndicate." Dox added. "This could give the Captain serious leverage in the tribunal for sure. Maybe the investigation teams got us some audio or text communication. Even a snippet could be something to go on."

"We'll have to send a message to the Syndicate away team to be on the lookout for comm logs- if we could get a copy of the datafile from the Syndicate end, that could definitely clinch it," Paris turned to grin at the former smuggler turned Starfleet pilot. "Good work, Miss Dox."

Blushing a slight bit green, Dox smiled lightly back. "Thank you, Commander. I just

hope it bears fruit. Perhaps convey to them to look at the Aehallh station. It's where the Captain's Mother was heading when she was talking to the Syndicate and it's exactly the kind of place one would go to have a very private meeting. My mother knows the coordinates."

"I'll send the message out as soon as we're done," Paris promised. "Shall we finish the inspection here to see if we can make any more connections that might help our away teams?"

Nodding, Dox replied confidently. "Aye, Commander. Let's see what we can see."

## Chapter 8 - Manhunt

"So do we check out a shuttle? You know where the suspect is and where we have to go to pick him up, right?" As they stood in shuttlebay 2, the grav gurney bearing the victim, one Rafael Paulson slid past the hulking faithful security officer and the cybernetic pirate engaged to a god.

"Commander said I'm with you, so that means you know where we're going? I gotta grab a few things before we go, so where should we reconnoiter?" Petty Officer Second Class Ethel Jablonski was apparently ready for the mission, easily accepting that the civilian was there to get her to the murder suspect the command wanted picked up.

"Ja... Mein ship is... Broken, at the moment. So we will need to borrow one." Schwein reached behind her for a PaDD, then realized both of the ones she normally carried were now gone, crumbled scraps now likely in a recycler. "Ah... I need to get a few things as well. We will meet in the main shuttle hanger control room in twenty minutes, ja? We will check out a craft from there. I recommend bringing a melee weapon, just in case."

"Waaaaay ahead of ya," Jablonski replied as she lumbered off at a military clip.

Meeting in the shuttle bay twenty minutes later, Jablonski was carrying a case in each hand that were nearly the size she was, without any seeming exertion. "Okay, so since we need flexibility, I was thinking runabout. But I'm not really a great pilot, y'know? You any good?"

"Wunderbar!" the shorter platinum haired pirate started off, tapping her chest, a coffin shaped case as big as her strapped to her back. Then she thought better of it. "However... I have been having trouble controlling my increase in strength recently... We should request a pilot as well, ja? Otherwise... The controls may suffer... Accidental destruction..." Schwein looked rather sheepish as she said this and seeing Jablonski run up with twice the luggage she had did not inspire confidence in her ability to keep one of the Hera's support craft from being crumbled like a tin can between the two of them.

"Yeah, I kinda broke my sonic shower controls last week because I wasn't careful..."

okay, yeah, requisition a pilot." Setting the cases down with a pair of thuds, the wall in a gold tunic stepped over to one of the enlisted. "Hey, who's the officer on deck? I need to requisition a pilot and a runabout, pronto, Commander's orders."

Checking the computer at the dockmasters station, the young enlisted man answered groggily, which was understandable as it was barely after 03:30 hours. "Uh... Lemme see. Okay, that would be... Ensign Weiaex. And the Runabout Selune is on deck."

As he was talking, Jablonski watched the young enlisted man calling up files. "Yeah... ohmygod... Okay, here's the order from Commander Paris to accommodate your needs immediately." Suddenly, they were far more awake sounding. "Okay. Just put the orders in... Ensign Weiaex should be on her way to the Main Flight Deck. The Selune will be fueled and ready in five minutes."

"Good, good. So which one is the Selune?" the petty officer asked, and the ring set in the floor of the flight deck indicating the landing pad lit up beneath the sleek stealth runabout. "Oh... good. Okay, uh... what do I call you, anyway, eh? You don't have Starfleet rank, you're a civilian asset, right?"

As she spoke, Jablonski was picking up her two cases, clearly preparing to load up the runabout for the mission.

"*THAT*... is Crewman Steven Cho. And I'm Ensign Weiaex." From the corridor, striding in smoothly on her three long legs was a tall Edosian woman in a crimson uniform. One of the three hands was pointing at the much more awake crewmember while one of the other hands was open as if she was presenting herself. The third center hand was coming forward to offer itself for a handshake.

"Hey, Stevie." The sleek, orange skinned Edosian cocked her head to the side, flipping back a lock of mid length cream colored hair that grew from beneath the segments in her exoskeletal skin. Quickly, her large almond shaped eyes fixed back on Jablonski. "Well, your hands are a little full so..." Pulling back, she shot a quick but slightly irreverent salute to the mountain of a security officer.

Gesturing wildly with her three hands as she spoke quickly, the newcomer kept talking. "Got here as quick as I got the order. Been up and dressed since the klaxons went off a little while ago. So, you're security? You look like security. You look like most of the security team. Do we *need* a team with you around?" Her manner was light and perhaps

a bit overly friendly as her hands gestured to indicate just how big Jablonski was.

"Annyway, you need a pilot so here I am..." As she spoke, she glanced at the rank mark on Jablonski's gold uniform, "Petty Officeeeeerrr?"

Schwein's heart sank as she heard the voice of the Edosian pilot. She had forgotten they had one of the more talkative types in the flight department and for a moment, she wished Dox was going with them instead if for nothing more than for the silence. Stepping out from behind her partner so she could be seen, she introduced them. "This is Petty Officer, Second Class Ethel Jablonski. I am Baroness, Second Class Schwein von Alcott. We will be going to the holdings of Baroness, Third Class Sienae Nei'rrh to question a suspect. We expect... Trouble... Ja?"

"Ooh, trouble. So, not just a pleasure cruise, I got you." The Edosian's voice was slightly nasal, high pitched and a little shrill and she kept talking. "Well, pleasure to meet you Petty Officer Jablonski and Baroness von Alcott. Baroness, that sounds fancy. If you don't mind my saying, you *look* fancy. But, you know, fancy in that I can still mess you up kind of way."

As she spoke, she clapped two of her hands while pointing at the waiting Runabout. "She should be prepped and read, let's get this portable ass whupping under way. I don't know who this other Baroness is, but I'm suddenly feeling just a smidge sorry for her if the Captain is sending you two after her. I'm not much of a fighter, but I'm a fully rated pilot and I know my share of fancy flying moves if we get into it in space, so no worries ladies."

Unperturbed by the flurry of communication, Jablonski turned back to the Baroness to reiterate the question she had asked which had been derailed. "So I call you what, Baroness? Alcott?"

"Ah, yes..." Schwein grinned in that piratical way of hers as they headed over to the Selune. "Officially, Baroness. Schwein is enough in private, but whatever is comfortable, ja?"

"Baroness works for me. You can just call me Jablonski, we don't need to work with rank between us," the broad-shouldered security officer explained as she strode toward the Selune. Apparently, she was assuming everyone was keeping up with her, as she began briefing the pilot.

"Okay sir, the mission is to locate and detain a suspect in a murder investigation. Baroness here knows where we can find the suspect and identify him, so we'll be going in to do that. You're here because neither of us is a very good pilot, and better we have the getaway vehicle warmed up and ready in case we need to get out under fire. We're headed for the... uh, where are we going, Baroness?" The hulking petty officer paused her briefing to consult the silver-tressed buccaneer.

"There is a small station just outside the Kabul system that is the holdings of the Baroness in question, and the person in question is reported to regularly be there," Schwein replied.

"Good, good... so you got coordinates, Ensign Weiaex, and you just keep the ship safe while me and the civilian handle the rough stuff. That okay with you, sir?" Jablonski asked as she loaded her cases into the runabout, then held out her hands for the Baroness' case on her back.

The Edosian pilot stepped smoothly past the pair onto the runabout, lightly cracking the knuckles on two of her hands while waving them on with the third as she slid into the pilot's seat. "That sounds like a plan. I'll run the pre-flight check, punch in those coordinates and we can put some ions behind us."

Schwein handed off her case which literally had her entire arms and armor in it and headed to the cockpit to gingerly tap in the coordinates, hopefully without breaking anything. As for Jablonski, she settled down on the floor, as the chairs were a bit insufficient for her mass these days. Settling in, she waited for the runabout to get underway before she started breaking out and checking the gear.

"Okay..." Ensign Weiaex said from the helm, "All systems are looking good. Coordinates are set and the dockmaster has cleared us for launch. We're off, ladies." As she spoke, her hands were a flurry of activity, running over the console with dazzling dexterity. The Runabout lifted gently from the deck and cleared the Hera moments later. "We're all set and clear. Engaging maximum warp. Let's not keep your suspect waiting." With the press of a few buttons, the Selune vanished in a streak of blue light and a flash.

As the journey passed, Jablonski took the time to review her armor, which she had packed just in case, the weaponry she had brought along, and the few bladed weapons that were in the cases. As she broke down the three rifles she had brought and put them

back together, she made casual conversation with the Baroness.

"I'm thinking we'll go in plainclothes and see if they wanna play nice- no sidearms, no visible weaponry, no hard points. If they cooperate, good- we'll take our perp and leave. If not, then I'm thinking we'll leave peaceably and let them think they scared us off." The large lass grinned at that, as she slapped the dense clip back into the TR-116C she was working on. "Then we'll lock and load and come back fully geared up to make a mess. That work for you, Baroness?"

"Nein... They know all too well who I am." Schwein sat down in front of her own case and cracked it open, checking over her own gear as well. "I suggest going in with minimal weaponry just to ask questions and if they resist... Then we get rough, ja?"

"Ahhh, so no second round comeback then, huh? Okie doke. We go in ready for resistance, then. You're the native here, and the Commander assigned you to this before she tagged me for this duty, so I'll follow your lead. So long as we stick to Starfleet protocol for the arrest. That work for you?" Jablonski was remarkably easygoing as she held the reassembled rifle in her right hand, and it promptly vanished from sight.

"Ja..." As she saw the rifle simply vanish, Schwein had to do a double take. "Hurensohn... Amazon tech?"

"Yeah, Commander has me testing them out for the Sec/Tac crew. They're kinda nifty, doncha know?" the big girl grinned like a kid with a new toy, rolling back her uniform sleeve to reveal the edge of a bronze bracer beneath it. "On a mission like this, I can look unarmed, since they weapons are all stored in a... I dunno what they call it, but I got a lotta holding capacity in there. Apparently Hera's old honor guard used to wear 'em so command wants to see if they work out okay. Sounds like this mission should be a good field test. I wonder if that's why they sent me?"

"Possibly. Plus if something goes wrong, they know you can hold your own even in the worst of fights and your strength seems to be a good match for mein." As she talked, Schwein was gearing up with her short swords and phasers. "Since the Commander wants this to be a Starfleet operation, I will handle the pirates, but I will let you handle questioning and arrest protocol, ja?"

"Was kinda hoping you'd say that. You be the mouth and I'll be the muscle, right?" Grinning at the pirate, the easygoing bodybuilder turned to address the pilot. "Ensign

Weiaex, what's our ETA to the LZ?"

From the helm, the uncharacteristically quiet pilot turned slightly, "At current speed, we will be arriving in t-minus 14 minutes, petty officer. Are we doing this all official, asking for permission to dock and stuff?"

Schwein nodded as she strapped yet another weapon to herself, knowing that announcing their entry like that would likely make things harder. "Ja... This is official."

"You're strapping on harder than I thought... think I oughta suit up, or is that just gonna make this go even harder?" Jablonski was clearly operating on the understanding that this would be a violent affair and had no trouble with that. Rising from the floor, she produced an archaic hand phaser to hand over to the pilot. "You'll need a holdout weapon, ma'am."

Schwein grinned as she slipped one last knife into her boot. "That depends on how they greet us at the door. If they don't let us dock, we suit up and make an entrance. If they do... We try to negotiate peacefully."

"My job is to protect. While you're on this mission, that includes you, the Ensign and the runabout... and all of those Federation citizens we'll be interacting with out there. So peacefully is how I'd prefer it. But..." the slab of muscle on the floor shrugged those broad shoulders, looked around and lowered her voice conspiratorially, despite the fact that Weiaex was two meters away.

"I gotta admit, I do kinda hope they pick the hard way. It'd be a relief to get the chance to cut loose against something other than weights and the holodeck. I can't even spar anymore. I had to turn the augmentors off in my EVA armor because I kept jamming the servos." The farm girl from Cestes IV had no idea why she was confessing to the silver-tressed civilian, save that she'd seen the pretty pirate accidentally shatter a few PaDDs easier than even she could.

The platinum-tressed Baroness leaned in conspiratorially. "I will send you the specifications to my armor, ja? It is designed for... Augmented humans..." With a wink, she easily pulled out the gold and black torso piece of her armor suit and slapped the helmet controls, the large skull painted dome sliding into place and sealing up even without someone in it. Thankfully, the poly-duranium composites withstood the mild abuse easily, even from the much stronger augmented human. "No servos, armored

joints, same material as a starship hull. Not even Freya could get through it easily."

"I'm starting to realize why the Commander sent a civilian along," the security officer said with a grin, then offered her hand for a clasping greeting between warriors. "I'm Ethel Jablonski. Hera's honor guard, Security, USS Hera."

Schwein grinned wider, returning the clasping greeting. "Schwein von Alcott, Princess Telvan's Adjutant, Thor's betrothed. It is an honor to fight alongside you."

"Ohhh my golly, that was you?" Jablonski's small brown eyes lit up, and feeling a connection with the pirate, her mouth engaged a bit before her brain. "Scuttlebutt was that the last chief, French, had nailed the god of thunder in a threesome but it like, addled her brain and drove her boyfriend nuts, so he went on a killing spree."

Realizing how what had come spilling out might have not been in the best of taste, the hulking security officer tried to turn the conversation more toward what the expected response was more likely to be. "So, betrothed, eh? Nice, nice, good on ya. Thor... so he really exists too, huh? So when you marry him do you get a hammer, too, how's that work in mixed marriages with gods?"

Schwein did her best to ignore the first part and focus on the second. "Ah... I do not know yet, actually... If I receive a weapon, I hope it is a zweihander." She then blushed bright red, realizing the double entendre she had just walked into.

At that, Jablonski giggle-snorted like a nine-year-old. Rolling to her feet, the non-commissioned officer stepped in behind the pilot, one hand resting on the back of the pilot's chair. "Well, let's see what kinda reception these fine citizens of the Federation have planned for us today, shall we?"

"Well, you two are the girls I want to have with me at the next part I go to, that's for sure." The Edosian pilot called back over her shoulder. "Dropping out of warp now and... Yeah, saw that coming. Two seconds in their space and we have a pissy identity confirmation request. Okay."

Flipping the comm switch, the energetic, three armed pilot put on her best 'professional' sounding voice. "This is the Federation Runabout Selune, registry NCC-79010-2, Requesting permission to dock."

"State yer business, Starfleet," came the reply from the station.

Leaning over the tripod pilot, the security officer nodded for her acquiescence, then tabbed the comm and spoke up. "We're in pursuit of a murder suspect we believe to be aboard. We'd appreciate your cooperation in our investigation on behalf of the United Federation of Planets."

It was not only a textbook response, Jablonski was literally reading it off a PaDD.

The response came back after a few seconds, the voice drawling out almost lazily, the largest of the double doors on the station slowly starting to open. "I'm clearing you to dock in the main hanger. If you give us a name of who you'd like to question, we can have them escorted to ya..."

"I don't think so. Trap?" Jablonski asked the Baroness point blank.

Schwein flipped up her eyepatch and studied the opening hangar bay for a moment before the outer door cleared enough for her to realize what was about to happen. "It's a trap! Evasive maneuvers! Schnell!"

She had just barely caught the hint of the buildup of energy in the massive disruptor platform they were flying right into that the doors were just now clearing. It looked big enough to have been a main cannon array from a Klingon starbase and the glowing green emitter bigger than the Selune was definitely not a friendly way to greet someone.

Her three hands flew over the controls frantically as Ensign Weiaex pulled the nose of the Selune up and slammed on the thrusters to bring the runabout up and over the hanger door just as a massive burst of energy streaked under them. "*Evasive' is right!*"

The Runabout shuttered hard as the blast raked the bottom of the Runabouts shields and the small craft was knocked end over end for a moment until the multi-limbed pilot could right the ship. "Well, these are very unfriendly folks who clearly *ain't* in a talky mood. Maneuvering us over the top out of range of their arrays. They'd shoot themselves trying to tag us here. Oh, and there's another fun perk, ladies."

Ensign Weiaex cocked her head over her shoulder with a smirk. "In order to try and trick us into flying into their big gun, they let us *INSIDE* their shields."

"Then we armor up and show them the principals of blitzkrieg," the platinum haired Baroness replied with a grin, picking up her armor and slapping it on, the main suit piece sealing around her like some sort of Ironman suit with the arm and leg pieces magnetically pulling towards her to do the same.

Tossing the case with her armor into the transporter, Jablonski pulled out a datacard and scanned it, then beamed the armor out. Stepping into the transporter, she waited five seconds before the armor was beamed onto her large muscular form, and when she stepped out, she immediately fell to opening the other case as her armor case materialized in the transporter behind her. "Alcott, you know the terrain. What's our best approach to get inside and start tearing this place apart? Can they launch fighters? Do we need to get the runabout clear?"

Even as she spoke, Jablonski was hefting one of the assault rifles onto a hard point on her shoulder where it is plugged in and sprang to life, even as she pulled out a squarish drum that looked suspiciously like a micro missile launcher.

Schwein grinned wider as she cycled a pair of phasers at her forearms and pulled free her claymore. "Ja, but the whole of them should be no match for the Selune and Ensign Weiaex. If we transport to ancillary power control, we should be able to take them by surprise, shut down the station, and from there, station control is two decks away at the bottom of the station."

"Oh, no pressure! Okay, we're inside their shields so I can beam you literally anywhere inside. I'll deal with the fighters once they find us and... well crap." Ensign Weiaex smirked from the helm as the console lit up. "As if on cue, we've got three small fighters coming around from below the station. ETA is very fast. Beam out now while the beaming is good and you two go have fun stormin' the castle."

Grabbing a hard case of mines to snap magnetically to her left thigh, Petty Officer Second Class Ethel Jablonski grinned at the Baroness Schwein von Alcott. Grabbing and setting a standard type 3 phaser rifle almost as a sidearm, she slid the power setting up on the weapon and turned to stand to in the transporter. Busily she was rearranging her HUDs, because she hadn't preplanned for the loadout she'd requisitioned.

"The suspect is currently resisting arrest, as well as kinda having committed attempted murder on, like, Federation citizens and a Starfleet officer over there. It kinda looks like use of force will be necessary to, ah, bring 'em in."

"Energize," she said from behind the hard shell of her EVA armor's transparent aluminum polymer-coated refractory helmet.

From the helm, the Edosian pilot ran her fingers up the three strips of light that activated the transporter, and in a shimmering wave of silvery/blue lights, the two armor clad warrior-women we're gone. "Heh. I almost feel sorry for those guys down there."

"Almost."

## Chapter 9 - Wonder Boy

The fleet had assigned an assistant to the chief of Security of the USS Hera, which was, given the circumstances, something of a bother for said chief- or perhaps an opportunity.

With the pending Tribunal, an archaic rite amongst space pirates, apparently, there came some courtly votes and challenges and decisions. Which might be all well and fine were it not for the Captain being involved, which meant the Hera was thus unavoidably entangled in it all. Which might in and of itself not be so bad. were it not for the fact that, while privateers who preyed on other pirates, they were still sneaky, underhanded, lying, thieving pirates. Which meant that multiple machinations and manipulations and plans and schemes arrayed against the Captain and various members of the crew had been in motion for some time now. Therefore it would come as no surprise to anyone that Rita Paris was a touch more paranoid than normal.

In point of fact, when it came to new crew members, she was already surprisingly paranoid. Of course, that often seemed less unhealthy suspicion and more jurisprudence when it came to a number of the two-legged disasters she'd steered clear of the USS Hera. She'd be telling her grandchildren about the time she'd caught a Changeling impersonating a senior master chief- one who didn't know military etiquette.

This immediate moment, she was waiting for the shuttle bearing one Lieutenant Junior Grade Alex Strider. Who, if his service jacket was to be believed, was far, far too impressive an individual to be working in SEC/TAC. Which scored him a few extra points that aroused the fulsome first officer's suspicions just a bit more. Mastery of six martial arts meant that despite his slight frame, he was very dangerous.

Hell, he didn't even bother listing Academy Judo as one of his mastered martial arts in his service jacket.

As always, she'd approach with optimism and see how it played out. After all, apparently for fun after the Vulcan Science Academy for a few doctorates he got a doctorate from Harvard as a psychologist, making him arguably more qualified than the ship's

counselor. So in theory he would be one of the greatest minds of the age. A veritable wonder boy who was in truth an ancient.

Of course, Rita had met a few of those that didn't impress her much.

As the sleek Type 15 shuttle grew larger by the second, the lost navigator waited to see what the universe would deliver to her doorstep this time.

Which was when the shuttlecraft augered in as if someone was fighting the controls, and exploded into a fireball just before it entered the forcefield of the flight deck.

As the shockwave rolled across the deck, the mighty Hera shuddered, rocked by the explosion, but she was unbowed. Slapping her comm badge, Commander Rita Paris began barking orders, getting fire and damage control teams mobilized, scanners searching for more survivors, and more potential attackers.

There were no survivors, but no casualties other than the pilot, one Lieutenant Marston, the atmospheric systems engineer Chief C'huk and Lieutenant Junior Grade Alex Strider. As the black box was retrieved and the data analyzed, it would come out that Lieutenant Marston had apparently had a psychotic break and shot both Chief C'huk and Lieutenant Junior Grade Strider. The mortally wounded Strider was struggling with Marston for control of the vessel, which Marston planned to use to use as a suicide bomber on the Hera. As his last act, Lieutenant Junior Grade Alex Strider managed to use his Security override to self-destruct the Shuttlecraft Ghidora.

As the investigation played out, he would be awarded the Starfleet Medal of Valor, for sacrificing himself to save the crew of a vessel upon which he had never set foot. Yet his name would be immortalized alongside her honored dead, as one of their own.

What drove Lieutenant Marston, an otherwise exemplary officer, to do such a thing remained a mystery. There was nothing to indicate why or how.

No proof.

But in the guts of Rita Paris, she knew exactly who had gotten to the Lieutenant, and why. She could prove nothing, but she still knew with the surety that guided her every step, that it had been yet another assault on the USS Hera from one Arenara Artan.

Another crime she'd be called to task for before this Tribunal was through, if Rita Paris had anything to say about it.

And she would most certainly have her say.

## Chapter 10 - Barreling In

"The suspect is currently resisting arrest, as well as kinda having committed attempted murder on, like, Federation citizens and a Starfleet officer over there. It kinda looks like use of force will be necessary to, ah, bring 'em in."

"Energize."

Materializing inside ancillary power control, a dozen pirate crewmen were taken quite by surprise by the appearance of the armored juggernaut and the space pirate. In three rapid autofire shots, the room filled with tear gas and smoke. The wide beam on the phaser rifle was visible in the smoke as it cut a swath through the room, dropping four stunned men.

The other eight never stood a chance as the golden armored pirate swept them aside with the flat side of her claymore, easily tossing three of them into a wall one handed as her other hand scythed out and fired stun bolts with her wrist phaser at the remaining pirates. Her cybernetic eye and the minimalistic sensors in the armor she wore were far less advanced than the one that her Starfleet friend wore, but she had years of boarding combat experience and this was where she shined.

Glancing across the systems panels, Schwein found the controls she needed - in Ferengi, of course, because why not? These were cobbled together systems, after all. Carefully tapping the control surfaces, she transferred control to these stations and...

She pressed too hard and her finger went right through the screen...

Alarms started to blare.

Schwein turned back to her larger Starfleet counterpart. "I have good news and bad news... Good news is station power control is here. Bad news is I accidentally broke the console that controls it. Also, I may have tripped the alarms."

With a grunt, Jablonski studied the local scans. "We've got a number of hostiles

converging on this position. D'ya think we go EVA to go around them, or do we go through them? I still haven't ID'd our suspect yet." As she spoke, the Security officer shifted the phaser rifle to her left hand and reviewed the console, which confirmed the Baroness' report.

"Station's still got power and there are dozens of personnel headed this way. Me, I'm thinking we're here, we may as well rout 'em. We're the only friendlies here, so we may as well see who's got outstanding warrants. My system says three of these guys are wanted..." As she spoke, a hatch opened and disruptor fire cut short any further discussion as the angry pirates began to assault the secondary power control station.

"If they fly the Artan colors, they are protected for now... If not... Fair game." As she spoke, Schwein stabbed her claymore through the console a couple more times to see if that would disable at least some of the power, which luckily, it did. Main power kicked off and emergency power kicked on, leaving the station with minimal gravity, emergency lighting, life support on two thirds of the station, and little else according to the backup readouts, which for some reason were in Cardassian.

"That should keep them busy, ja? Let us wreck some scheisse." Schwein sounded more than thrilled as the red glow of the emergency lights made her gold and black skull painted armor look even more sinister. Grabbing one of the now shattered displays, she ripped it from its station and hurled it past the head of one of the pirates firing at them, embedding it in the wall behind him. "Tch... I missed..."

"I'm not a fan of getting shot at," Jablonski declared as disruptor bolts whizzed past them. Swapping the phaser rifle over to her right hand again, the Security officer flexed her right forearm and the weapon disappeared. Flexing it again and curling her hand, a rather large and brutal-looking studded mace appeared in her hand, one that would need two hands for a normal humanoid to wield. Flexing her left forearm, a round bluish energy shield covered in Greek writing sprang into place on her forearm that was as wide as her shoulders. "Praise Hera. What do you say we try something a little different?"

The mounting number of piratical personnel who were gathering in the hallway were just considering beginning their assault, as there was no return fire coming from the pinned-down intruders. Which was when a rather large mass of muscle behind a round energy shield that deflected the disruptor bolts came hurtling toward them, as if fired from a torpedo tube. As the armored leviathan crashed into and bowled over the front

ranks, she became a mass in motion, the large crude mace scattering her foes like tenpins even as behind her a jolly pirate followed the humanoid missile she'd hurled, and the battle was suddenly joined in the narrow corridor.

What had been a gunfight a few seconds ago was now a very close quarters battle, which caught the score of pirates quite unprepared.

Close on the heels of Jablonski was a very happy Schwein, having pulled out a slightly used cudgel from seemingly nowhere and was now swinging it almost casually, tossing the pirates that had not been bowled over aside like flimsiplast in a gale storm. Through that storm you could hear the joyous laughter of a certain platinum haired pirate.

By the time the reinforcements arrived, they were met at the hatch by it being blown inward, even as the demolition duo stepped in to blistering disruptor fire. Which might have been more devastating were it not for the fact that the hatch itself was quite suddenly torn from its hinges, and then employed as a shield by the enhanced individual who was seeing just what could be reached for were she to try.

"Well, this is lotsa fun I gotta say, but we should probably get down to the command center, eh? You wanna find the lift, or just make our own hatchway through the deck?" Jablonski asked casually as she grabbed a pirate by the ankle, and casually flung him at one who was trying to flank them.

Schwein pointed off down the corridor towards a curved doorway. "Ja. The lift is up ahead and without power, we should be able to drop straight down." She then picked up another pirate and drop-kicked him back into the control room they had just left. "Does this count as excessive force? We are outnumbered ah... twelve hundred to two... It is hardly fair odds."

"Well, we really haven't been shooting up the station," A micromissile ejected from Jablonski's shoulder launcher, swirling off on it's column of smoke to intercept a sneaky pirate with a rocket launcher. "So, y'know, me personally and professionally, I'm thinkin' since the majority of these guys'll live, sooo..."

"Nah, so far I'm thinking we're still within the boundaries of acceptable force." With that said, the captain of Hera's honor guard slung the hatch down the corridor, scattering men who were only grazed by it to receive terrible injury. Activating her force shield once more, she configured it to the size and shape of a large scutum shield to provide cover

for the Baroness and herself. As Big Ethel almost casually strolled toward the circular open chamber which held the lift, into which more troops continued to pour, Disruptor bolts whizzed by, even as grenades began bouncing down the corridor. Gifts from their increasingly desperate opponents.

"Well said, my friend," Schwein replied as she ripped one of the wall panels free and used it as a shield for their rear and lobbing a couple of stun grenades off down a group of pirates that were pouring out of the other end of the corridor. The pair of flash-bangs and stun fields scattered them and those that didn't get far enough away lay there twitching.

Flexing her forearm, the Petty Officer Second class activated her external speakers, even as she flexed her right forearm, making a flipping motion with her hand, and the mace vanished. Flexing it again, her fingers spread in a wide grip and into them settled a TR-116C. Programming it, she handed it over to the pirate even as another manifested in Jablonski's right hand.

"If it breathes, we can choke it. If it stuns, let it be stunned. On 3, rush and cover... 1... 2... 3!"

"Wunderbar!" The Baroness charged down the hall, knocking several people aside as she barreled past and into the lift, pretending to take cover behind one of the edges as she tossed the one pirate left in it out and fired back out at the ones left in the hall, the flash-bangs bouncing almost lazily for a few seconds before going off.

Then with a series of 'CHOONT!' sounds, the central column of the station filled with thick, cloying gas that would begin to circulate through the station, which would provide an irritant for months to anyone passing through the station. For now, it filled the area and covered Jablonski's somewhat plodding gait, little more than a double-time. Large and strong she was, but so too was she slow. A missile streaked off into the fog while concussions preceded her, and the turret on her left shoulder pivoted and fired a burst into the fog and two men cried out.

Slamming into the elevator, Jablonski bounced back to interpose her shield to the elevator doors as they closed. "I almost never get to do this sort of police work. It is really fun doin' it with somebody who can keep up, yannow? Whatta you say, fakeout for the guys waiting at the control center in ambush?"

"That may give them time to prepare a surprise of their own. It may be best to stick with blitz maneuvers and put them all into the lift, ja?" The Baroness wanted to make sure they had enough time to get whatever they needed from the computer and hopefully find the guy they needed before they decided to do something a bit drastic.

"Ahhh, okay. Full volley of smoke and tears, follow with the flash-bangs. Then we'll see what surprises they've come up with since they know we're coming?" Swapping the TR-116C to her left hand, Jablonski snapped into reality the phaser rifle with her right hand. "These things really are just soooo amazing. I am writing SUCH an amazing report on these when this is over."

As the lift dinged and the doors slid open, grenades began launching with remarkable precision into the central command center, followed by a series of flash-bangs as the duo stepped into the command center.

Schwein headed straight for the commander who was a bit stunned at the moment. "We are here for... Hey... Wake up..." Poking the man with the barrel of her rifle, she rolled his twitching form over to reveal that he had been hit in the chest with one of the stun grenades directly. "He will not be of help..."

"Do you feel confident in pulling data from the computer without breaking it?" the gold and black armored pirate asked her companion.

"Oh for sure. I'm strong, but not 'accidentally put my finger through plasteel' strong like you," Jablonski fired off a series of bursts, rubber bullets peppering the personnel in the command center even as she moved casually into the command deck. "How'd you get so- drop it, you little freak!"

The petty officer issued the warning not even a full second before she fired a burst of stun grenades, peppering the man in the chest and bruising him into unconsciousness, the disruptor he had been fumbling with clattering noisily to the deck. Firing off a few more rounds of tear gas into the enclosed area, Jablonski then extruded a data cable and plugged into the command console.

"I'm not the smartest body on the bench, but the software in these suits is plenty smart," the powerful petty officer explained as she initiated the break-in process for the computers. "How about I'll get to work on this, while you set up for our defense... this might take a few minutes, and I tend to think they're going to send troops that can

actually deal with us now that they know we're here. Or at least, some wearing portable atmo at the very least." With that said, Jablonski sought partial cover behind a console, and as the security software began granting her access, she sealed all the hatches in or out of the command center to buy them time.

"Well, I'm an augmented human..." Schwein paused for a moment to pick up the commander, rip one of the railings out of place and wrap it around the man as a restraint. "And then I started making love with the God of Thunder..." She then picked up a couple of the others and made sure they were out cold before kicking in a ventilation duct so she could just stuff everyone into it. "Herr Doctor and I think that that is why my strength is increasing."

"God of Thunder, huh? Nice," Jablonski casually agreed. "Thinking at this rate I'm gonna get engaged to the mag-lift bar here pretty soon. Best date I been on in a while," she added with a throaty chuckle. "I was curious how you got so over the top, but I wasn't gonna ask. Seemed rude, doncha know. Hey!"

As one of the override panels came online, a concussion grenade launched from Jablonski's shoulder with a 'phoont!' and exploded the panel into pieces. "Yep, they are not so fond of us in this neighborhood, Miss Alcott. I still got at least another three or four minutes of digging and downloading here, so we'll have to stay put. Thunder god, huh? I don't suppose he's got a brother or a sister...?"

"I think his brother, the Asgardian Trickster god, is in prison for some reason," Schwein replied as she finished stuffing the unconscious command deck crew into the air vents. She then headed back over to the commander to see if he was going to come around. "I could hook you up with one of the Valkyries. Hildr looked like she had your kind of appetites. She is also a bit bigger than you, I think."

"Well, now that sounds like a challenge right there," Jablonski grinned as she reeled out the data cable so she could move about, and she swapped out the rifle in her hands for a retro Type 2 phaser. Adjusting the beam and strength, she began welding the lift doors shut. "I didn't think they grew them bigger than me. That's kinda funny. Probably not the little brother in jail, though... I'm kind of a stickler for the rules, so maybe not the best of matches, doncha know."

As she made casual small talk, the beefy behemoth was doing a respectable job of phaser welding, indicating that clearly she was both practiced and skilled with the hand

weapon that was nearly completely dwarfed by her large hands.

Which was when thuds and vibrations began to be heard on the other side of the lift doors, as well as the overhead.

“Guess they aren’t so happy about being locked out, eh?” Jablonski quipped, even as she checked the timer on the data spool. “Still another three minutes at least. How long you figure til they get serious about getting in here... they’ve been trying to isolate the command center datastream but this software in here is pretty sturdy, and it seems to be handling it just fine. I’m just worried they’re gonna vent the compartment and kill all their own guys. So, I got sent out with you as the only way to ID my suspect... any idea how to find him?”

"I have been scanning for him with mein eye und there is no trace of him on the lower six decks. Internal sensors are down. Ze computer may know but I suspect he is not herby their reaction." Schwein headed over to the library computer systems and picked one of the side terminals for her search, very lightly tapping in the name of their suspect, only lightly cracking the screen as she did so.

As the data came up, it listed him as deceased. "Ethel... We have a problem... Theran T'Werska died in the Dre'lax mining attack. I think this whole thing is a trap. Unfortunate for them that it was us that sprung it, ja?"

Thinking it over a moment longer, Schwein came to a conclusion. "Either this record is false and Theran is alive... Or there is other proof they do not want us to have... They listed his location as here and laid a trap, which means that what we need is indeed here..." Tapping at the console a bit more to investigate the records, she got ahead of herself and accidentally put her finger through it, which made her hang her head and sigh.

“You really gotta get some inertial dampener gloves or something,” Jablonski offered after seeing the pretty pirate’s difficulties. “So, let’s see... we’re downloading the station files, but I’m no analyst, so I wouldn’t know what to look for. The detective work isn’t really my strongest suit, doncha know. So..” The large lass considered for a moment.

“Procedure says that I need to positively ID my suspect. But if he really is dead, that’s one thing. If we think he faked his death and he’s still here, it’s another. There might be evidence here, but it’s just us and we’ve had to fight our way in and we’ll have to fight

our way out. Jeez... I dunno..." the musclebound maiden was trying to walk through the procedures of how to handle this, but it wasn't a situation that was covered by her training. "Darn. What would TJ Hooker do...?"

As she spoke, the lift door was now under assault by numerous energy weapons that made it clear that it wouldn't last long. Absently, Jablonski picked up the small phaser from the console where she had set it down, adjusted the power setting and casually stunned the pirate peeking out from the matter reclamator.

"I guess if it's a trap then it's premeditated attempted murder and assault and all that, which means we're still in the clear legally, but... darn it, I shoulda brought one of the smart girls for this. I don't know what to do," Jablonski admitted.

"I am smart too..." Schwein complained as she poked another console, trying to get some more data on their suspect. "If the evidence we need is in the database, we will have it soon. If it is the person, they are here hiding... And here he is..." Schwein pulled up the grey medical report. "Ja, he is listed as dead, but he had identity change surgeries here. He is now... Kai'ser Per'manente. Deck fourteen, crew quarters J-17." With that, she gave the panel a slap of success, shattering it and sending sparks flying.

"Let's see, that means we've gotta go up a long ways... well, no trouble there." Stepping toward the welded shut lift doors that were showing more and more sign of strain, Jablonski moved with a casual surety, placing a series of proximity mines that would make taking the command center back hell for the pirates, and likely demolish the command center in the process. Once she was satisfied, as disruptor bolts began penetrating the thick doors, she refocused her phaser, pointed it at the ceiling and carved out a large oval shape, large enough for her to fit through.

As the overhead plate clattered to the deck, the hulking honor guard captain smiled. Flicking her wrist to make the phaser vanish, Jablonski interlaced her fingers and cupped her hands, leaning forward slightly to give the baroness the run-up for boosting her up to the deck above.

Which she happily obliged, easily clearing the deck plating and punching through the deck plating above as she did so with her lightly used cudgel in hand. She then tore the hole she had made wide enough for her comrade to make it through as well, easily tearing the light metals of the old station. "Two for one deal, ja?" she joked, laughing it off.

"Hooooo smokes you're strong!" Jablonski exclaimed as she fired a cable up to the overhead above, then winched herself up the two decks they'd moved. Stepping around the twisted deck plates, she pushed on one experimentally. "Yeah, wow. I thought I was gettin' strong, but that was pretty impressive right there. Okie doke, so let's move, eh? This is fun and all but a lift'll get us there... quicker."

That was when Jablonski took a moment to pay attention to their surroundings. It appeared they'd entered into a gymnasium, which was something of a native terrain for the sturdy Amazon. There were a number of people staring at them- off-duty pirates who were using the gym for a workout. None of them were particularly armed, but a few seemed pretty interested in scampering off to the locker room.

"Yeah, we should go..."

"Ja... The lift is not far." Schwein headed off towards the main exit of the gym, not even bothering with the fleeing occupants. As she walked, she pushed workout machinery out of her way like so much clutter. "You work out every day, ja? I do combat training on the holodeck. Perhaps we could work out together some time."

"Oh, for sure!" Jablonski replied cheerfully as a pirate emerged from the locker room with a disruptor. Casually grabbing a barbell in passing, the cheerful colossus hurled it without even looking at the pirate, who ducked out of the way only for the unlikely missile to strike the man behind him. That bought them sufficient time to exit the gymnasium and enter the corridor, where a half dozen piratical passersby began drawing weapons.

"We really gonna do this?" Jablonski chuckled as her shoulder-mounted variable fire rocket pod and assault rifle bot whirred to train themselves on the pirates. "Cuz the refractory coating of this armor is gonna bounce those bolts, then I'm gonna shootcha. She's just gonna dodge, but you'll make her mad and she'll putcha through a deckplate."

No one seemed particularly interested in calling Jablonski's bluff, which meant that they got to avoid hospitalization as they dropped or holstered their weapons.

"Wunderbar..." Schwein said as she almost casually sauntered over to the lift doors, running her fingers through the consoles built into the corridor walls as she did so. She then gingerly pressed the call button, cracking the screen as she did so. She could swear

she saw one of the pirates piss themselves as they ran off. "They do not build stations like they used to, ja? So fragile..."

"Huhhh huhhh huhhhh!" Jablonski's laugh was not unlike the braying of a mule, which likely explained why she seldom did so. "I think they weren't built to stand up to you is the problem. Whoop, here comes a car full of hostiles, armed and armored. Wanna go bowling?" With that said, Jablonski flattened herself against the bulkhead to the side of the lift doors, motioning for the Baroness to do the same so they could surprise the emerging assault team as the lift doors opened.

"That fills me with schadenfreude..." Schwein mumbled happily as she got into position and waited for the doors to open.

As the lift arrived, the doors opened, and six commandos in cobbled-together EVA armor piled out into the hallway. Clearly they were bereft of the sensors installed in the Starfleet EVA armor, or even the medical tricorder that served as Schwein's left eye. Because the simple act of hiding beside the lift doors fooled them as Ethel Jablonski shook her head and waded into them. Grabbing the closest one, she picked him up bodily then swung him in an arc behind her. Building up momentum, she proceeded to launch him across the deck like a bowling ball, scattering his comrades even as the duo stepped into the lift.

"Unless you wanted some melee?" the security officer asked obligingly of the space pirate.

"Nein, that was perfect. Danke..." The platinum tressed pirate was chuckling softly at how stunned they all looked as the two armored behemoths easily sidestepped them. "Deck fourteen, please. Artan override, seven alpha nein." As the turbolift started moving, Schwein broke out into full on laughter. "I have never had so much fun."

"I gotta admit, I know I'm on the job and supposed to be taking it seriously and all cuz I'm on duty, but I'm right there witcha. This is a good time... I like you, Schwein. You're a really okay gal for a pirate." The broad-shouldered security officer smiled, a genuine smile with buck teeth and all, and the two shared a moment in the turbolift before her armor's sensors started offering telemetry. "Ahhh, look at that, welcome wagon waiting on Deck 14. You sure you don't wanna do the elevator fakeout?"

"Ja, it sounds like fun. What do you have in mind?" Schwein had that glint in her eye

behind her armor's visor so she listened and when the doors opened, they'd be ready.

Thus, when the doors opened on Deck 14 and the assembled pirates were there, taking aim, fingers on triggers. prepared to eliminate the insertion team who had invaded and been all over the base. They were after somebody or something, and they'd be stopped here. Except of course that the doors opened and the car was empty.

There was some argument over whether this was the right car, although it wasn't going anywhere and the doors were remaining open. Eventually a pair of the pirates approached, looking in to find no one there. Except for a series of proximity mines that consequently exploded, deafening everyone in the area and stunning them. Great volumes of gas flooded out from the lift car before Jablonskli and von Alcott strolled casually out of the fog, firing flash-bang grenades as they moved.

"See? Climb through the escape hatch, mine it, jam the doors open so it won't go anywhere then climb the cables to get clear. The fireworks write themselves, and we just gas the scene and move in again." The Amazonian warrior casually fired a taser grenade without looking at a pirate who was leveling a heavy cannon at the pair. "Not sure, but we might have avoided any fatalities on this mission, though that one guy I went bowling with's neck looked a little bendy-wendy. Got a fix on our boy yet?"

"Ja, in the quarters listed, J-17. Life signs are a positive match, though I am reading odd power..." Schwein studied the readings her eye was picking up. It was designed as a basic bio-medical tricorder so she didn't have the sciencey stuff she needed to figure out more than that there was some power shenaniganry up ahead, but it was enough to tell them they might need to be on guard. "Can your suit get readings?"

Moving into the corridors, they were encountering more panicked personnel than actual combatants, and as a Bolian ran by in a hot pink towel, Jablonski was mostly sticking with the shock and awe tactics, gassing and stunning any resistance they encountered until behind them stepped a challenger.

"Schwein von Alcott, lapdog of Enalia Telven," the figure in the shadows declared in a mechanical echoing voice that reverberated unnaturally. As the figure stepped into the light, it was clear that there was significant cybernetic replacement involved with the speaker. "You've got the stink of Fleeters on you, and I can't say I care much for the company you keep. Fill your hand and face me, aye?"

Schwein groaned inwardly at the sound of the familiar voice. "If it isn't my old self styled rival... Uh... What was your name? Beta Bill?" She knew that getting Zeta Jones' name wrong on purpose would set him off, but she did it anyway in the hopes of trying to get this fight over faster. "Are you still flying with the... Uh... What was it? The Weasel Skunks?" As she spoke, she pulled out her claymore one handed and stowed the rest of her weaponry, casually getting ready to duel her old pain in the butt that augmented himself repeatedly just to match her strength and combat prowess. Jablonski accepted the return of the rifle, two handing it as she covered the corridor to free up the duel.

"It's the Beta-Ray Buccaneers, as you well know, Schwein," Jones drew his sword, a multifaceted crystalline cutlass that flared to life with an soft inner glow of amber. "I don't know what brought you here, or why you thought to bring a Fed with you, but you've no place here amongst honest pirates." The mechanical wrist rotated with a whirr, and Zeta Jones wove a beautiful pattern of traced light arcs with the blade.

"Face me at your own peril, house pet. I'm not the man you remember... not anymore. I've evolved beyond your limited comprehension," Jones mansplained as he settled into an en garde pose.

Schwein sighed heavily. If this were six months ago, he might have been able to best her, but now it was like he was moving at normal speed. She slipped her claymore back into its sheath on her back, pulled out her slightly used cudgel, and walked up to Jones, smacking the blade out of his hand with it with practiced ease, sending it clean through the corridor wall. "Ja? Evolved with chrome and oil? Show me then, Theta Ray of the Rat-caneers."

The one human eye of the cyborg pirate widened in shock and fear as she stepped so quickly into his personal range, how casually she had destroyed his remarkable new weapon, and how smug she was about it all. Servos whirring, he moved to grapple with the Artan retainer. "Take you apart with my bare hands...!"

Schwein caught both hands casually, crinkling the cybernetic limbs as she did so. "I am so sorry... Mein apologies... I did not mean to crush your new hands like that. I do not know mein own strength these days, you see, and..." Returning her cudgel to her waist, she tried to punch in a medical assistance request in a nearby corridor console and just poked her hand right through the screen, showering sparks all over her. "Ah... you will have to seek your own medical attention, it seems..."

"Curse you, Schwein von Alcott! I will have my revenge on you, do you hear me?" In this life or the next!" the crippled cyborg sputtered, nursing his crushed hands. "I'll get you for this, if it's the last thing I do!"

"Say fella, I don't wanna tell you your business or nothin', but you just got casually pwned," the hulking Petty Officer Jablonski opined. "If I were you, I might think about maybe quittin' while I was still ahead, before she really gets rough with ya, eh?"

"I really feel bad for him... He has spent a lot of time trying to match me, yet he is still as frail as a newborn babe to me..." Schwein shook her head and motioned for her partner and her to continue. "Our target should be just ahead."

"Yeah. Seems like I probably shouldn't arm wrestle my big brother next time I get back home, or he's liable to end up looking like that guy..." Jablonski agreed as she casually fired a few sleep gas grenades behind her, so they wouldn't have to hear the injured man's curses and threats as they departed.

"Hey, hold on now, you said YOU got a brother...?" Jablonski became a bit excited in the wake of the melancholy mariner medic. "Oh, now this you gotta give about. Is he as strong as you?"

"Nein. I am an... only child," Schwein muttered.

Still feeling bad about the man, Schwein came up to the door of the suspect they were after and pressed the door controls, putting almost her whole hand through them. With a frustrated groan, she just shoved her hands into the door and slid them open, the locks snapping like twigs. Instantly, the man that was sleeping off a few too many drinks on his couch was on his feet and freaking out. Schwein just popped out one of her wrist phasers and gave him a light stun before catching him. "DNA match confirms this is him. Time to beam out, ja?"

Reaching over, the supersized security spartan laid her large armored hand down gently upon the shoulder pad of the Baroness.

"For somebody who's going through what you're going through, I think," Without pausing, Jablonski fired a tear gas grenade into the hallway over her shoulder as nearby doors in the habitat section began to open. "You're really handling it well. This was a

super good mission, Baroness von Alcott. It's been a privilege to serve with you."

Inside the helmet's HUD, Jablonski coordinated her actions and contacted their ride as she picked up the unconscious man to hand him to Schwein before she started doing a quick inspection of the room for evidence. "Petty Officer Jablonski to USS Selune, do you copy? We're ready to check out of this roach motel, if ya know what I mean. Whattya say Ensign Weiaex, hah?"

After a brief second, Ensign Weiaex's voice came ringing over Jablonski's communicator. "I was wondering how long it was going to be, I was starting to get bored up here. Seriously, their little fighters are serious crap compared to the Selune. I'm picking up three at your location. Is this our boy?"

"Yep, that's him," Jablonski confirmed as she picked up the suspect's personal tablet and stuffed it into his go bag that had been open next to his rack. "3 to beam up... energize, eh?"

With the shimmer of the transporter, the pair of legendary figures vanished, leaving in their wake tall tales that would grow over time. Tall tales that would grow, retold from witness to witness, to slowly create the legend.

The legend of the day the Baroness von Alcott tore apart Romulan refugee station 339-A with her bare hands.

## Chapter 11 - Cleaning Crew

While engineering assistant Ensign Briaar Gavarus was skilled at her job, she was far from the ideal Starfleet Officer. She was sarcastic, confrontational, rude, overweight and something of a literal and figurative pig in some ways.

As a Tellarite, she of course resembled a two-meter, 180 kilogram humanoid pig. Her face sported a porcine snout and shaved down lower tusks that she tried to conceal. Her wiry platinum blond hair was always pulled back which just drew more attention to her slightly floppy ears and her thick, three-fingered hands were capped off with dense gray nails that were essentially dexterous hooves, not unlike her cloven feet.

But another way that she was a pig was in how she maintained her small, junior officer quarters on Deck 9. They were a tremendous mess, with upturned cargo crates used as makeshift end tables, clothes, and tools strewn about and a closet packed to bursting with a mess of unfolded clothes. And it was this particular mess that was coming back to bite the porcine young ensign in her prodigious, curly-tailed pig butt.

Junior officer's quarters, like any other, were subject to quarterly inspections. And the day before, Gavarus had forgotten about the inspection due to the weight of her workload and failed to even *pretend* to tidy her living space. As such, she was now given extra assignments cleaning the Matter Reclaimators on all common areas. It was a series of disgusting tasks Gavarus wasn't looking forward to. But she was looking forward to her more immediate task even less.

She had until the start of her shift the next morning to bring her quarters back up to snuff. And she knew this upcoming inspection was going to be especially meticulous. Standing in the center of her quarters, surrounded by grease-covered engine parts she had been working on atop a large drop-cloth spread out on the floor, wearing a pair of grimy cargo pants and a one-size too small black t-shirt with the word "HERA" emblazoned in gold across the chest, she sighed and cursed at her task. "Gods frickin' dammit! I should just have the whole room beamed into space and start over."

Which was when the door chime rang. As no one ever visited the abrasive engineer and

inspectors didn't ring the chime, that only left one person it could possibly be darkening her door.

"Computer, open hatch," she grunted, and as the door slid open, in bounced the irrepressible Fiona O'Dell. The midget Mariposian was wearing her hair tightly braided in intricate swirls about her head, although it was a far cry from her usual mop of curls she wore down and loose, or lightly tied back. As such, she looked as though she had lost a dozen kilos of mass. Wearing a pair of black lycra bike shorts that stretched to her knobby knees and a loosely-fitting emerald sweatshirt that bore the simple legend 'STEREOTYPE', she grinned at her porcine pal as she kept her hands behind her back.

"Whatcha doin' Briiiiiiiiaar?" she asked cheerfully. While she tended to be in a state of perennially good cheer, the little lass was sarcastic and smart, and was quick to turn scorn and derision upon those she deemed foolish. Which was part of the reason she and Gavarus got along so well.

"What the hell does it look like I'm doing? I'm an Officer on a Starship and I was sent to clean my room by my space Mommy. Because *that's* a vital function of starship frickin' operations!" Gavarus griped as she waved her arms around in protest.

Then she cocked an eyebrow, noting O'Dell's suspicious behavior. "What are you... what are you hiding, Leprechaun?"

"Ah heard they stuck ye in the gulag of yuir own mess, so I came ta help! And I brought bitters!" Swinging it around from behind her, O'Dell held out her hand to set the six-pack of bottled beer upon it like a presenter, eyes wide and bright and a cheery smile in place.

Taking the six pack and placing it on the cluttered kitchenette counter, Gavarus pulled out two bottles, handing one to O'Dell and taking a long drink of her own. "Thanks."

"Cheers!" O'Dell accepted the beer and took a little swig, smacking her lips at the taste. "Fuir the record, the inspection's are mostly because tis a fire hazard for alla this clutter nae ta be maintained, and we dinna need innny 'a that. Plus, it helps encourage proper hygiene and discipline... what? I had a messy roomie in the Academy and flight school, drove me bonkers! Y'see me quarters- foola crrap boot tis all clean an' tidy!"

"It's still nonsense. Fire suppression shielding takes care of all of that. It's just some

inane military holdover. It's got noting to do with how I do my... OW!" Stepping over to the couch, Gavarus stumbled over an errant piece of a discarded warp coil on the floor.

"No comments from the peanut gallery!" She grumbled, making Fiona's point for her.

"Well, ye kin bellyache about it all ye want, boot either ye straighten oop yuir act or ye'll be gittin transferred to some shittier assignment. And I'll have nunna that! Not my mechanic they don't!" The feisty little warp jockey shadow boxed, which looked ridiculous somehow. "So! Where do we start? Pickin' oop alla the shite offa the floor?"

Pacing around with her beer, Gavarus gestured to the collection of assorted parts on the drop cloth and griped. "This isn't shit, Fee! They were going to recycle all this in the replicator and it's all still good. That could just needs to be resurfaced and that coupling is just..."

Stopping herself, Gavaurs slumped and sighed. "Okay, it's all shit. But I like messing with it."

"Wait, hold on a tetch. There's nae reason ye canna have yuir trools and projects an' doodads. If ye hurl 'em into the replicator, it'll spit 'em back out joost like when ye threw 'em in. But even if ye don't like that idea, look about! Ye kin have a wardrobe in the room, and ye dinna. Ye can have a footlocker, and ye dinna. Ye kin have a folding closet, and ye dinna. Yuir nae takin advantage of yuir storage potential, aye?" O'Dell apparently knew the regulations well. All of the accessories she had ticked off were present in her own bricabrac quarters, covered in shawls and tapestries and framed magnetic images.

"Okay, soooo... Footlocker? Like... What? Like a Footlocker I can put here, like in front to the couch that can double as a table so I can keep the stuff in there but have it to work on when I want it?" Gavarus tried sussing out Fiona's idea. The collection of engine parts and assorted junk was *her* junk and she wanted to keep working on it when she wanted to.

"Exactly! So ye kin keep yuir crap, an' have it oot when ye want but ye have it all poot away and tidied when inspection times comes. S'how ye survive military inspection, Briaar- ye stoof it all oota sight!" Fiona took another sip of her beer, gesturing at the mess as she did so. "Order 'em from the quartermaster and ye kin even have 'em beamed into yer quarters- all it costs is matter rations, and ye were only g'win ta spend that on beer innyhow."

Chuckling as she took a swig, Gavarus replied with a smirk. "Well, at least with beer, I give some if that back to the reclamator."

"I guess in the mean time, we need to replicate up some bins to put shit in or something. Ugh." Gavarus groaned as she stepped over to the wall mounted computer console to order up a stack of large storage bins to make their job easier.

After a few seconds, a stack of five green plastic storage bins shimmered into existence in the corner of the room. "Well, that represents a few beers. You said you were here to help, so..."

"Aye! Let's pick up yuir crap!" O'Dell beamed, perfectly happy to help. "Noow, we kin do this the right way and sort everything oot, or we can just toss it inta bins to git it oot'a the way fuir now. One joost means a faster mess agin but easy clean-up noow, the other means it'll be easier ta keep it clean. What'll it be?"

It was odd to hear O'Dell being the responsible one, but in this, she was clearly experienced. Her quarters were, after all, always squared away. And in explaining it to her big round shipmate, the spindly star pilot sounded oddly maternal- clearly she was channeling her own mother for this exercise.

"Yay! Another Space Mommy." Gavarus rolled her eyes sarcastically, grinning at O'Dell. "Okay, I'll bin up the spare parts here if you want to start... I dunno.... On that corner."

As she spoke, the tubby Tellarite waved over at a towering pile of crap in the corner near the door to the bed chamber. An assortment of old magazines, used PaDD's, coffee cups, random clothes and nonsense that was nearly as tall as the diminutive Maraposian marvel, who immediately began tearing into it.

Replicating a trash bag big enough for her to fit into, O'Dell opened it up on top of a pile of boxes on the floor, then began separating the mountain into three piles- clothes, garbage and 'debatable'. As she made her decisions, all of the uniforms parts were going into the trash heap, although she did pause to pull off Gavarus' comm badge. The magazines were tossed on the 'debatable' pile, while the coffee cups, plates, utensils and odd spare parts all went into the bag. As she collected the dozen of flimsies in the stack, she piled those with the magazines, while gavarus' civilian clothes were rapidly making a pile of their own. As she went through them, O'Dell held up a pair of panties that were

far too big for her diminutive frame, but far too small for that of her porcine pal.

“Ah, ye been havin guests over Briaar?” O’Dell asked, holding up the pale pink panties of mystery?

In the center of the room Gavarus was grunting as she bent over, a considerable effort with her prodigious paunch in the way, while putting the machine parts in a bin for storage. As O’Dell began waving the panties, her face flushed beat red with embarrassment.

“What?! NO!” Gavarus reached over and snatched up the undergarments and tossed them in the trash bag. “So I’ve gained a *little* weight since transferring. So what?”

“Oi! Dinna ye be bellowin’ a’ me, eh? I’m nae the one eatin a donut while yuir partner’s runnin on the treadmill!” O’Dell snapped back. “Ye done failed yuir room inspection, so I’m helpin’. If ye canna fit inta yuir bloomers, maybe ye should think aboot that too, aye?”

"Fine! Sorry." Gavarus took a swig of her beer and finished putting the machine parts into the bin, putting the tarp over the top of everything. Closing the top of the bin, she tried to pick it up but it was far too heavy with all the heavy engine components, so she scootched it over against the far wall and out of the way. "It's just annoying, ya'know? I mean, it's all just such nonsense. It has nothing to do with my job and..."

Rolling her eyes, even *Gavarus* realized she was sounding like a broken record at this point. "Okay... enough of that. I'm starting to get on my *OWN* nerves. So, do you need any help with that shit?"

“Sure. Are these magazines for the keep or pitch pile?” O’Dell held up a magazine, which promptly fell open to reveal a trifold pin-up of an exotic and beautiful Bajoran woman who looked like she could bench press a starship.

For an instant, Gavarus' eyes went wide before she remembered who she was talking to. Letting out a snort of a chuckle, she raised an eyebrow at her diminutive partner-in-crime and flatly replied, "Keep pile."

"Ach, yuir a dirty prevert. We'll stack 'em oop an' alphabetize 'em before we stoof 'em in yuir footlocker where all the porn belongs. Under ya stripey socks an' garters." the little

lass kept at the pile, sorting reasonably smoothly as she went, tossing more and more debris into the garbage bag.

"F'r crissakes, how do ye even have a matter allowance? Alla this crap is better off not bein' crap on yuir deck, ye ken?" At that, O'Dell stood up straight and froze, then slowly turned around with a horrified expression on her face. "Blessed lady virgin, I sound like a bluidy officer. Where's me beer?"

"Ha!" Gavarus snorted as she handed O'Dell her beer from the makeshift end table. "You ARE an Officer, Ensign Space Mommy. Drink up."

Walking over, Gavarus grabbed the stack of incriminating magazines to put away in one of the bins. "Okay... Realistically, this is all garbage here." She gestured to the small kitchenette counter. "So, we can move to the Bedroom and you'll get to see where the magic never happens."

"Well if it's garbage then sweep it all inta that bag, ye great goggle-eyed slackjaw! Tis the point- we're nae doin it laaaater, we're doin' it noooooow." As she griped, O'Dell grabbed the bag and brought it over to the edge of the counter so Gavarus could sweep the entire counter clear in one swipe.

As she did, she scoffed at O'Dell. "Wait, 'Great goggle-eyed slack jaw'?" Pushing the assorted trash into the bag, Gavarus flinched slightly. "Ooh, fork. Ow... Where do you pull that shit from? I swear, its like I skipped a class at the academy in archaic, weird-ass insults, you... Wiggle-faced woozle. Yeah, see. I don't got it."

Chuckling as she talked, Gavarus shrugged. "Okay... We're making some frickin' progress."

"Oh, I dunno. 'Woozle-faced wizzle' is nae too far off the road. Aye, see? This ain't s'bad! Now howbout you fetch that stack of food containers doon there and toss 'em in here, cuz I'm too wee and frail ta be exposin' meself ta that high a concentration of hazardous bacteriological waste. After that we move to that pile a'clothes, cuz it's time to get honest an' chuck some that dinna fit, hmmm?" O'Dell took a half-step back at that. "What? I'm not bein' mean, jooost nae point in clothes that don't fit when yuir wardrobe kin be stored in yuir replicator is all!"

Rolling her eyes so hard you could almost hear them, Gavarus put the pile of food

containers in the bag. "Ya'know, there's about... YOU meters worth of room in this bag still." She chuckled as they moved on to the clothes pile.

"Oh sure, but then ye'd joost sit back down on yer arse and nae finish the job wi'oot yuir helper!" O'Dell shot back, unfazed.

Pulling over two bins, Gavarus set them down and propped onto the floor next to the pile. "Okay, this bin is for keepers, this one is for the discard pile."

"At's the way. If it don't fit and ye dinna have an emotional attachment, in the bin it goes, aye? Then we'll empty the discard bin into the bag and keep goin. Look, s'a project and we're havin fun!" Fiona tried to put a positive spin on cleaning, of all things, like thew world's most annoying little sister.

"Ohh, Wheeee!" Gavarus spun her fingers over her head in a mock display of 'having fun'. "Yeah, this is like a party on... oh sweet seven hells, I forgot this existed."

As she spoke, she pulled from the pile a black crop top with the neck cut open and arranged in rhinestones on the chest, the words 'Sexy Pig.'

At that, O'Dell nearly choked on the sip of beer she was takin. As she coughed, she covered her mouth until she could speak again, then she pointed to it. "Oh, you have GOT to wear that to 10-Forward next time ye decide to go hit on a girl!"

"Yeah, *no*." Gavarus laughed out a light snort. "You still haven't seen me as drunk as I was when I got this goddamn thing. Plus, I was still in the Academy and..."

She held up the top which looked like it would be a better fit for the miniature Mariposian, "Seven hells, I really have put on a shit of frickin' weight." She tossed the shirt over at O'Dell. "Want it?"

Taking the top and draping it over her slight form, the garment hung down long enough to be a dress on O'Dell's childlike frame, and she snorted. "Oh aye! I'll wear this next time we do civvies in 10-Forward and that won't make the lesbian rumors die down at aaaaaaall!"

Picking through the clothing, anything that was too dirty, greasy or holy Fiona was just stuffing into the garbage bag, which was starting to get full. "Alreet, so we got yuir parts

binned, we got your 'artistic inspiration' set aside, we got your clothes up. Aside from scrubbing and vacuuming, we've made a hell of a change in here, aye? Noow is there innanything in the bedroom that might scar me wee fragile mind if I should see it...?"

"I don't think so, I..." Suddenly, Gavarus' eyes went wide for a second as with a thick grunt, she pushed herself to her feet and went into the bedroom. "Uh... wait here a sec."

As the door wooshed closed behind her, O'Dell could hear the tubby Tellarite tossing things around and muttering to herself. After a moment, she came back out with a cartoonish grin plastered on her face. "No. There is nothing in this room that should be in any way problematic whatsoever." She said in an exaggeratedly drawn out fashion.

"Saints be praised fur that," O'Dell muttered. "Ye leave too many of yuir bedroom bits about, you'll fail inspection just on the trauma value alone to the inspector," O'Dell grunted as she dragged the full trash bag into the bedroom, then she stopped short. Staring at the wreck of a room, she was dumbfounded for a few seconds until she found her voice again.

"Ah, Briiar? There is a bed in there somewhere, aye...?"

"In theory, yes." Gavarus scoffed. "It's... that pile of blankets over there. Seriously, it's not *THAT* bad, is... okay. Yeah, it's a shit storm."

Shaking her head, Gavarus scratched her head. "I guess, pick where you want your body found? Bed or closet?"

"They find me wee corpse in yuir bed, that is DEFINITELY not gonna slow down the rumor mill," O'Dell chuckled. "Tell ye what, 2 piles agin. Pitch it in one, needs to be washed and/or hung up in a closet in the other. Start here wi' the debris by the door and we'll work our way in. Look on the bright side, we're halfway... ew."

O'Dell's face turned a rather pallid shade of white as she froze. "Uhhh... do ye have a pet, Briiar? Cuz something joost ran across me foot..."

"What, no?" Gavarus looked momentarily confused as she was picking up loose uniform tops from off of her bed. Suddenly, as she saw a small blur of something moving across the floor, the two-meter tall Tellarite leapt up onto the bed, squealing very much like a pig. Shrieking, Fiona O'Dell leapt up onto the bed and scabbled up the tall Tellarite like

a squirrel climbing a tree until her forearms were braved on Gavarus' shoulders.

"I think if ya have rats in yuir quarters we're in bigger trouble than yuir bloody room inspection," O'Dell bemoaned. "What're we gonna do?!?"

"How is that even a thing?!? Rats on a frickin' starship? There's literally no way that could happen, Fee!" Gavarus protested, though she did so still on the top of her bed, scanning the ground with her eyes nervously. "Lots of crewmembers have pets... Hell, I used to have a Tribble when I came on board but it died. Maybe one snuck in or something."

"We need a stick or something to poke around with." Gavarus was trying to suss out a plan of attack, forgetting full well the sensors available to them at a word.

"Well, in the oodles of crrrrap coverin yuir floor, I dinna see innnything as useful as a stick!" O'Dell observed, her brogue deepening as she panicked. "There! Somethin joost moved! I dinna ken what et is, but I'm nae gittin down ta find oot! If yuir laundry has become a sentient I dinna want to be eaten by a Horta comprised a'yuir unwashed underthings!"

"You're not gonna get frickin'...hold on. Craaapp." Gavarus grumbled as she paused mid-sentence. "Okay... I've got...something that's, uh, stick *LIKE* we can use to poke around with. It's, uh, in my nightstand."

The pixie pilot levered herself up on shaky arms, one foot planted on Gavarus' hip for support. "Look, I may not be much into sex but Ah had six older brothers. There is nooooo way I am diggin' in yuir nightstand. Okay, alreet, we need a plan. What would the Lieutenant do?"

"I don't *KNOW*..." Gavarus whined as O'Dell dug her foot into her hip, adjusting herself. "Maybe stare at the pile judgmentally until it gives up? Murder-Punch whatever it is to death? Oooh! Gimmie your shoe!"

Nimble scrambling the rest of the way up to seat herself, with one leg on either side of Gavarus' neck, O'Dell dangled her feet at chest height for her partner in crime. "Aye, that's a plan I kin get behind! S'all yuir! Farewell, me sneaker! Tis a far better place ye go now!"

Grabbing one of O'Dell's sneakers, Gavarus gingerly lobbed it off the bed towards the slightly shuffling pile of laundry. A lame, pathetic toss that nonetheless hit its target.

From the pile, there came a sad squeak, followed by a gentle trilling purr that Gavarus recognized. "The hell? No frickin' way. Get... Get down, Fee."

"Izzat... that sounds like a tribble. If there was a tribble in here we'd be up to our elbows in 'em." O'Dell swung her leg off Gavarus' shoulder then slid smoothly down her back, landing and moving smoothly alongside Gavarus. "What is that?"

Stepping carefully to the ground, Gavarus carefully lifted the sheet to reveal the slightly matted white fur of a tribble. "Holy *SHIT!*?! Cueball?!? Oh my gods, I thought you were frickin' dead. I put your box in the reclimator!"

As the tribble purred insistently, O'Dell reached out gingerly. "Ach, ye poor poor beastie... come 'ere' s'alreet... I'll nae hurt ye... there's a lamb." Picking up the tunneling tribble, O'Dell brought it to her chest and gingerly smoothed the outer edges of the alien parasite's fur. Then she looked up accusingly at Gavarus, lower lip sticking out and eyes narrowing.

"Oh, don't look at me like that!" Gavarus protested. "She wasn't IN the box. I thought she got out. The door was malfunctioning during my first week here and she was *GONE!* All I ever found was a few bits of white fur stuck in a turbolift door! I had a funeral for her goddamn box!"

The two-meter, tubby Tellarite looked somewhat ridiculous as she fidgeted in place as she tentatively reached out to pet the tiny tribble.

"Hairbroosh. Ye do own one, aye?" O'Dell asked, holding up the tribble to Gavarus height so she could see what an awful matted mess the small furball's fur had become. Peering out from behind those hands, accusing emerald eyes pierced her own. "If ye cleaned yuir quarters, ye wouldnae have lost yuir wee shaggy. At least he was in noo danger 'a starvin ta death."

"Uh... y... yeah. H... hold on." When the Porcine Engineer was legitimately nervous, she tended to stutter and she knew O'Dell was right and felt like 180 kilograms of compost as she went to grab a brush. She thought her pet was dead and it was in her literal pig-sty of a room for weeks and she didn't know.

Grabbing a brush and pulling a chunk of her own hair out of it, she rushed it back to O'Dell, sheepishly. "H... here."

Bringing the matted and shivering tribble down to her level again, O'Dell accepted the hairbrush and looked up at the properly guilty pet owner. When she spoke, it was softly. Briiar felt guilty enough already. "Alreet... d'ye know how to git tangles oot? Ach, ye poor wee thing, is that bubblegum? Nae, it's a candy, I got it. Here, let's move to the couch since we cleared it off, and we kin work together and I'll show ye how to get the nits an' knots out, aye?"

"Uh... o... okay." Gavarus muttered, nervously following behind O'Dell. "I used to have an oil that helped, but it's gone with... @\$&... I can't believe I... I thought Watson's dumb ass cat ate him or something when..."

The gigantic woman was on the verge of tears and was beyond flustered. As she followed O'Dell to the couch, she stepped gingerly on her slightly undersized hooves.

"S'alreet, Briiar. He's okay, joost a little scared, and he's nae g'win ta enjoy gettin' brooshed out, but we'll get him right as rain, aye? I'll help ye. He'll be alreet, won't ye Cueball?" O'Dell held the dirty dust bunny up to he face and beamed a smile at the tribble, which in turn trilled in a seemingly pleased manner. "See? He's nae mad, he's happy to see ye!"

At which, Gavarus' thick lower lip began to tremble. For a few seconds, the huge woman looked like an enormous child before she broke out in almost cartoonish tears. **"WHAAAA!!! I'M... I'M... I'M S... S... SORRY CUEBALL!!! IM A TERRIBLE PIECE OF SHIIIIIIIIITTT!!! WHHAAAHHH!!!"**

Grimacing, O'Dell realized that her power of guilt must be working overtime today, because she didn't realize it worked this well on Gavarus. Placing the tribble into the thick three-fingered hands, the miniscule Mariposian began brushing the tangles and bits of stuff in the tribble's fur out while Gavarus held it. "There, see? He's joost glad ye found him agin, that's all. He's nae mad, are ye Cueball?"

The tribble purred, as if in response.

"Of course yuir not. Ye still had food and tribbles don't need much water, so yuir joost

glad ta be back, aren't ye? Yes you are! Yes you are!" O'Dell spoke to the tribble as one would a baby, and the tribble purred, sending out vibrations that most races found soothing, save Klingons, who were apparently the universe's natural enemy of tribbles.

Holding the white-furred fuzzball in her hands delicately, Gavarus had begun to calm down a bit but was now at that stage of crying where, like a small child, was trying to catch her breath and talk at the same time. "I'm... So... Sorry... Cueball. \*Snort\*. M... Mommy's... Sorry. "

Catching her breath a little, Gavarus tried to chuckle a bit as she talked. "Okay... G... Good reason to keep... Keep my quarters cleaner."

"There ye go... tis alreet, Briaar. Noo harm done, and we'll git wee Cueball all cleaned up and pretty agin, then we'll finish cleanin oop so ye willnae loose him agin, aye?" Fiona's tone was soothing and soft, for the benefit of the inadvertently abused pet and their guilt-riddled owner. "After we get all the nits and knots brushed oot, we'll give him a nice wee sonic shower to git 'im all clean and fresh too, aye? S'gwin ta be okay, right? Right Cueball?"

As she spoke, Fiona's hands worked with speed and efficiency. With her own mop of curls, the little leprechaun had a lifetime of experience with this sort of thing, and in short order she was taking care of the matted fur of the tribble, turning him as she worked so that the now brushed out and healthy side was facing Gavarus, to reinforce to her that her wee pet was none the worse for wear, just in need of the TLC it was even now receiving. While it occasionally squeaked a bit and a pulled hair, for the most part, it was now settling into a calm, steady trilling to soothe the jangled nerves of his owner.

Having calmed herself down much more, Gavarus had an aggressively goofy smile on her face as she held the tiny white puffball up for Fiona. The smile only cracking a bit each time as Cueball squeaked and Gavarus winced ever so slightly. "Thanks, Fee." She said with more sincerity than was standard for their interactions.

"It's alreet, Briaar. I know ye dinna mean inny harm- ye aren't the type," Fiona reassured the stricken swine. "We'll get your wee little mate here all spruced up, and he'll be freesh as a daisy in no time, and we'll make sure he stays that way, aye? Aye, m'wee little bairn, eh? Yuir momma's glad to have ye back, that she is! And soon ye'll be able to roam freely withoot gitting lost inny more!"

"Maybe go git 'em some oat flakes from the replicator to feed him, help him remember the hand that feeds him? I think they eat grains and sooch, though I'm nae expert on alien pets." Although she was quite adroit at working with livestock thanks to her upbringing, a tribble was a new one on O'Dell. But she adapted easily- an animal was an animal, and furry and cooing made it that much easier to find them lovable. "Cueball must be one of the neutered ones, aye?"

"Yeah. Ship regulations are strict with Tribbles, so Cueball can't make any little 8-Balls." Gavarus got up as delicately as possible, gently handing Cueball to O'Dell. "I still have all the food options in the replicator program. But this was his favorite. Tribble supplement number 9."

Punching the instructions into the replicator, Gavarus came back over with two small round chromed bowls. One with water and the other with a small collection of pastry flakes on a tray. "Here you go, Cueball. Momma's got your favorite." It was almost funny to watch the towering Tellarite dote over the tiny Tribble.

"There we goo. Alreet Briaar, why don't ye take the opportunity to get yuir crap offa the floor'a yuir bedroom, since ye know what's to keep and what's ta pitch, and I'll finish getting yuir wee shaggy all fresh as a daisy, aye?" O'Dell spoke with no malice, instead hoping to use this as a motivation for the big boar to finish the field day of her quarters.

"Uh... yeah. Sure. Good idea." Gavarus nervously laid the food down and grabbed the rest of the bins and quickly went to work in the bedroom. As Fiona continued to de-mat the tiny tribble's fur, she could hear Gavarus rustling through the piles in the bedroom like a whirling dervish. And after what seemed like an extremely short period of time, considering the size of the mess, she came back out with a bin filled to overflowing with clothes.

Putting the bin near the door, Gavarus looked a little winded but more focused than before. "So, yeah. This is all getting recycled. It's all stuff that either doesn't fit or I wouldn't be caught dead in anymore. On the plus side, it will seriously boost my matter rations for beer."

"That's the spirit!" Fiona chirped as she took the tribble into the sonic shower, where she used the lightest setting to pulse away the dander and detritus from the small lifeform. In only a moment she returned, holding out the freshly-cleaned and brushed out pale white tribble.

"There ye go! All cleaned up and fresh fur mamma!" Holding out the tribble as she had earlier, now she presented the small furball to it's ostensible owner.

Gently taking the tiny, trilling Tribble into her oversized hammocks, Gavarus bit her bottom lip like a schoolgirl. "Oh, thank you again, Fee. He looks... I can't believe it."

As she spoke, she rubbed her snout gently against the tribble which cooed in response. "Momma was so upset when she thought she lost you, Cueball. But I made a new friend. Do you like Momma's new friend? Do you like Auntie Fee? You like Auntie Fee, don't you? Yes, you do!" As if it understood, the snow white furball chirped lightly.

"Waaaaahhl, Auntie Fee likes you too, Cueball," O'Dell grinned wide, scritching the little furball affectionately. "Alreet, what do ye say we finish the job, here? Let's get alla this crap to reclamation so's we kin put away what remains, wipe everything down and get it all ship-shape to pass yuir re-inspection tomorrow, aye? And we'll have ta get yuir wee bairn a nice playpen, aye? So's when mamma's gettin' her room inspected ye're nae on the ceiling or somethin..."

"Ooh, Yeah. Duh. Right." Gavarus handed Fiona Cueball again for a moment, walked back over to the replicator and called up a small, clear sided pet carrier about the size of a really big shoebox. Placing it, with the food and water tray inside, on the cleaned off Kitchenette counter, Gavarus gently picked her tiny pet back up and placed it in the case for safe keeping and closed the clear hatch. "There you go. It's a little one for now, but once we're clean, I re-replicate your old pen, okay? Okay, baby? Okay."

Straightening back up, Gavarus sighed slightly. "Well... that frickin' happened. Soooo... rock/paper/scissors for who cleans the shower?"

"Since I'm such a pal, howboot I'll clean the shower if ye'll drag alla that heavy crap to the reclamator, aye? I dinna mind getting dirty, but if I try luggin alla that down the corridor I'm g'win ta throw me back out." While it was true that the midget Mariposian would have trouble, she felt badly about shaming Gavarus over the state of her pet, and wanted to make up for it. Not being the most tidy nor clean of individuals, when it came to the finishing touches to make the room pass inspection, Fiona figured it was best she be the one to add those touches. After all, despite her desire to be surrounded by clutter, O'Dell was in her own way quite fastidious, and was in the habit of acing room inspections so they could not be held against her, since so often in her career superiors

were looking for reasons to wash her out.

"Yeah, that sounds like a deal to me. I'll get this crap settled so we've got more room to put away what I'm actually keeping." Gavarus said, only now finally no longer complaining about the chore and just happy that her pet wasn't actually dead. "Let's get this finished up so we can get back to drinking properly."

An hour later, both women sat exhausted on the couch, the cheerfully trilling Tribble between them as they clinked together their beer bottles, congratulating themselves on a job well done.

"I have ta say, I think ye kin pass room inspection now, aye? And really, I was impressed ye parted wi' soo much of yuir crrap. The place looks right spic and span!" O'Dell observed, taking another swig off her beer, the first one she'd started with. "Plus we found Cueball, so that's a definite plus!"

Reaching down to scritch on her purring pet, Gavarus smiled. "Huge ass plus."

As she scritchd, she paused for a moment to think and then sighed, taking a swig of her beer. "Craaaapp. Speaking of huge asses... there's... uh... another inspection coming up, and currently, there is no way I'm passing it, Fee."

"Thought ye said so long as ye kin fit into a Jeffries tube they dinna care?" O'Dell replied, taking another sip of her beer.

"I'm pretty sure I said that they *shouldn't* care, but..." Gavarus took a long swig of her beer, "...but we both know I'm going to fail that frickin' physical hard at this rate and..."

Leaning her head back and letting out an aggressively exaggerated sigh, Gavarus continued, "...I could use some... *help!* There, I said it."

"That's all I needed ta hear," O'Dell replied, sitting up. "So tomorrow we'll start in the gymnasium together, eh? I need to build up and ye need to slim down, and we kin do it together, aye? There's nae reason ta be ashamed of it Briiar. Besides, ye dinna think I was g'win ta give ye crap about it, didya?"

"Waahhhhl, except that yuir gonna hafta switch ta liquor instead 'a beer. But that's nae s'bad, aye?" Scritchng the little tribble between them, O'Dell spoke to it in baby talk.

"Nooo, that's not s'bad. And yuir mumma and yuir auntie will both get inta shape ere long, and soon we'll be runnin the joint, aye?"

"Oh NO! Not hard liquor! However will I survive!" Gavarus chuckled as she looked at her beer bottle. "But, in the mean time, here's to running the joint!" And she held her beer up for a toast.

"Here's ta runnin the joint!" O'Dell agreed, and the furry tribble cooed it's agreement as well.

## Chapter 12 - Infiltration

The Aehallh station was a notorious hub of illicit activity throughout the sector. For decades, the station has been the place to go for criminals and those wanting their activities to go unseen. Built and operated by a cadre of Romulan criminals, the station possessed a state of the art cloaking device that made it's location a highly guarded secret to smugglers and pirates alike.

One did not go to the Aehallh station casually, and one expected that whatever they did at the Aehallh station would stay there. It was known to keep it's secrets well. But it did keep them, and that was exactly what the Infiltration team from the U.S.S. Hera was counting on.

Slipping through the cloak in their own cloaked Romulan Scorpion was child's play for Jaeih Dox, having helped *design* the stations cloak over twenty years ago. And it had become quickly clear to the former Tal'Shiar agent that nobody had upgraded the system in that time. However, the cloak on their own ship was designed as a masterpiece of engineering between Jaeih and the Hera's R&D chief, Ensign Mona Gonadie. It's was the most efficient cloak ever designed and the Aehallh station had no idea that there was now a cloaked fighter magnetically sealed to its hull next to a ventral access port.

In the station, Jaeih Dox and her Vulcan Infiltration specialist and partner, Az'Prel, were already standing in a security sub-station in the lower decks. At their feet, were four security officers taking very unplanned naps. Two were naked, as the two women were adjusting the stolen uniforms for their own use.

"This should allow us some degree of anonymity, at least for a time." Jaeih commented as she fastened the uniform top over her light-weight body armor. "The records room, unfortunately, is on deck two. We should have about 12 decks to clear from our current location. How's our path looking, Az'Prel?"

At the security console, the refugee from a mirror dimension of horrors was scanning the multiple screens with squinted eyes, taking in all of the information in front of her and putting her logical mind to the task of planning the quickest route for the two agents.

"Not that good. If we can bypass security, we will be able to take the lift to deck four, but we'll need to make our way from there through the maintenance tubes on the other side of the deck. That's assuming we can pass the security checkpoint in front of the turbolift on this deck and on deck four. The maintenance tubes have security hatches between decks as well, which require keycards and codes..." The displaced Vulcan patted the pockets of the uniform she had quickly donned, locating a keycard on her person. "We just need a code for it then... And to get past all the patrols and stations without arousing suspicion."

Looking down at the two naked guards that were the former owners of the key cards in question, Jaieh cricked an eyebrow. "Well, we can always wake these two up and ask them in as pointed a fashion as possible. Unless you are capable of, and comfortable with, performing a mind meld to extract the information?"

The Romulan woman was stern and her focus was tight, but she also knew enough of Az'Prel's history to be sure and consider her feelings on the matter.

Az'Prel looked down at the two men in contemplation. "I am trained in this skill... I have not used it in many years though." Kneeling next to the man she obtained her uniform from, she placed her fingertips on the man's forehead, the palm of her hand covering his face, and entered a trance-like state. After a few moments, she stood and shook herself off. "The code is one two three nine seven. It rotates daily."

"Excellent... But... are you alright?" Jaeih asked, almost surprised at her own level of concern. It was something that was becoming increasingly noticeable since her time on the Hera, that she found herself more and more engaged with those that served with her daughter.

The displaced Vulcan woman paused for a moment before answering. "I was not expecting to find such a rancid mind among the denizens of this universe. I will recover. Please let us proceed."

"They cannot all be our shipmates, I'm afraid." Jaieh grabbed her own security card and straightened her uniform as the two women secured the unconscious guards in restraints and hid their limp forms in the storage compartment.

After a few moments, they were on the move. Walking professionally with body

language that projected that they belonged there. Both women were well trained at exactly how to do this and made their way without incident down the dank corridor to the turbolift indicated in Az'Prel's investigation. At the lift, they waited for only a slight moment before the doors creaked open. Inside the lift were five more Romulans, dressed not in the security uniforms of the station, but in modern military uniforms.

Without missing a beat, and appearing completely nonplussed, Jaeih commented, "Going up?" as the pair stepped in.

Those in the lift made room for them as one person stepped out, as if nothing was wrong while Az'Prel declared their desired deck. "Deck eight." The conversation in the lift then resumed - something about the latest biosynthetics verses cybernetics.

The remaining four Romulans didn't seem to have any open suspicions, but Jaeih and Az'Prel were, nonetheless, on guard. After a long, tense few moments, that lift arrived at deck eight and the doors creaked open.

As they got off the lift and entered the checkpoint, the four guards inside looked up curiously. "I don't recognize the two of you."

"We were just assigned," Az'Prel replied, swiping her card and tapping in the passcode, getting a green light from the checkpoint scanners.

As Jaeih swiped her own card and entered her code, she took on a more casual air and rolled her eyes. "We transferred over from Commander tr'Arath's private security team last week. We've been on a running rotation for a while now." Years of smuggling meant the elder Dox had been here as a client *many* times and knew the terrain and the management well enough to bluff through a checkpoint or two. "Glad to finally have a posting on something that's not constantly warping. Besides, I missed the Coffee from the promenade."

As her light turned green, the lead guard waved them through with a light smile. "It's the only thing that makes working here bearable, good to meet you."

"I could use a cup right about now, myself," added Az'Prel in an attempt to add a bit more lightness to her own character as she headed deeper into the corridor.

As the two women made their way down the corridor, once they were clear of earshot,

Jaeih whispered just slightly enough for only Az'Prel to hear her. "It actually is *exceptional* coffee. A pity we likely won't have the opportunity to have any. But duty calls."

Stepping to the side of the corridor, Jaeih looked down both directions to ensure they were alone. "Is this the maintenance tube we need?"

"Yeah, that's the one. There's a security switch on it though, so we'll have to bypass it." With a quick flick of her hand, Az'Prel had a multitool out and was prying the controls for the hatch open. Within moments she had the security bypassed and the hatch was hanging open limp. She then pressed the control panel back in place and motioned for Jaeih to enter first. "After you."

"Excellent. Thank you." Jaeih nodded as she began to climb. Her familiarity with the station made her taking point perfectly logical and the pair of women were working together like a well-oiled machine.

As warned, between each deck there was a locked hatch that required the use of their stolen keycards. Moving quickly, Jaeih swiped her card and entered the access code and they continued to their destination on deck two. "From here, pass cards may not be sufficient, I fear. The records room will be off-limits to all but the station chief as they have many, many records that very powerful people never want being seen."

"I assume they'll be using technology far advanced of what I'm used to, as well. We may have to rely on your expertise to get in and out safely while I watch our backs." As they discussed this last entry point, Az'Prel bypassed the last security door and got them to the maintenance hatch leading into the records room. Studying the systems for a moment a hint of a smile graced her features. "Or maybe I will be proven incorrect."

Pulling free her multitool again, she began working on the door controls, bypassing the higher level check for a regular check so their badges would work on it.

Looking down the corridor, Jaeih had a slight smirk on her face. "It's very difficult for a station that doesn't exist to get proper systems upgrades as often as they need."

After a tense minute and a half, the door light turned green and the hatch scraped open. "Miss Az'Prel, you are brilliant."

"When you use duotronics as a security feature..." the Vulcan began, but left it at that with a shrug as they headed into the records room filled with various forms of data storage mediums. "Now we just need to find the records we need."

As the door closed behind them, Jaeih began shuffling through the index of a series of data tapes on the nearest shelf. "According to the data the Commander sent us, the stardate of the meeting was... 59331.13. If Arenara Artan met with representatives of the Orion Syndicate, these paranoid bastards recorded it. It's one of the ways they protect themselves from reprisal from any of their clients."

"In my universe, the Syndicate is a shadow organization that works towards the good of all non-Terran peoples. They still keep immaculate records, from what I've been told." Az'Prel headed deeper in and looked for a record-keeping system to see if what they were looking for had been logged. "If we're lucky, there's a log of every single piece of data in here."

Looking across the room, Jaeih tilted her head with a puzzled expression. As she did she stepped over and picked up a bound book and flipped through it. "Az'Prel... Look at this. It's... an inventory catalog. Stardate 59400 to Stardate 59500."

The generally cynical Romulan agent let out a laugh. "Well, that's one way to keep rivals from accessing your data network. Hard disks and a handwritten filing system. Antiquated, but to steal the data you're only option would be what we're doing right now. That likelihood of which is so remote as to be nearly implausible."

Putting the one book back, Jaeih began scanning the shelf for the right volume. "There we are. 59300 to 59400." Flipping through the pages, Jaeih got slightly excited. "The complete records for the date in question is... There. The cabinet to your left. There are seven data tapes marked 98776-1 through 98776-7!"

"Flimsiplast and paper, just like in my universe. Perfectly predictable." Az'Prel pulled out her tricorder and scanned the data tapes in the cabinet. "I'm reading the data we need dumped on... These two drives, including data from all over both quadrants. I recommend we take them and get out of here as quickly and as silently as possible." Pulling out the two small drives, she handed them off to Jaeih. "Is there any other data you'd like to grab while we're here?"

Securing the drives, Jaeih thought for a long moment before replying. "Actually... yes."

Stepping back over to the shelf with the catalogs on it, Jaeih began thumbing through them. "I've been here... many times. But one, in particular, may be of possible use to the Captain as well. The Romulan Baroness, who's vote she requires, I brought her here from captivity on Romulus years ago. I don't know if there's anything useful to be gleaned, but I handed them off to the Captain's mother here with..."

Looking through the catalog, the elder Romulan found the index she needed and stepped over to the cabinet to grab the files. "... Mnhei'sahe. Hnaev."

Looking in the cabinet, Jaeih had a confused expression on her face as the drives were gone as well. After a moment of consideration, Jaeih shook her head. "Well... Let's not waste any more time and get the information we came for out of here."

"Right..." Az'Prel headed for the door out and went to repeat her trick of opening the door the same way she had on the way in, but this time, something went wrong and halfway through, the alarms went off. "Oops..." was all she said as she finished the procedure and the door swung open, letting them out. "That shouldn't have happened but we don't have much time to get to the maintenance hatch now."

"Wait." Jaeih replied as she headed down the corridor towards the hatch. "In the event of a security alert, those hatches are sealed. But... We're security. Break my nose."

Without hesitating, the Vulcan woman hit her companion just hard enough to break her nose and leave a trickle of blood across her cheek just as the sound of running could be heard coming towards them. She then slammed her own head against a bulkhead just enough to give herself a nasty bruise and look like they'd been attacked.

Wincing for the briefest of moments, Jaeih pulled out the disruptor on her belt, stolen with the uniforms they were both wearing and fired down the hall to the records room, blasting the computer console. "Az'Prel, the maintenance hatch we came up, Destroy it. Then we throw the disruptors down it and hit the deck."

The displaced Vulcan woman then ripped the control panel from the controls for the door hatch and wired it so that the hatch itself popped open on its own before she wrenched it off of one of its hinges. She then set both disruptors to overload and tossed them in. "This is not going to be a kind explosion," she muttered as she grabbed Jaeih and leapt for cover further down the corridor just as they exploded, furthering their

injuries and singing their uniforms.

It was at that moment that six more guards dressed like them rounded the corridor, weapons drawn.

Two of the guards ran over to examine the smoldering hatch opening, two ran past to the records room and the last two came over to Az'Prel and Jaeih. Leaning down to examine the two women, burned and bleeding, they propped them both up. "What happened here?!"

Shaking her head groggily, Jaeih squinted through the smoke and coughed, a trickle of green blood running down her face. "Two m... men in Black. They... They were in the records room. We... we went to see what was happening... they attacked us. Went down the maintenance hatch."

One of the guards stood back up and began shouting into his communicator. "We have two Intruders moving down maintenance hatch Delta from deck two!"

Pushing off the side of the bulkhead, Jaeih and Az'Prel played up their injuries. Grabbing her side, Jaeih winced and let out a muffled groan. One of the other security officers turned to them and looked them over. "Okay... You two get to the medical level."

Az'Prel held her head as she propped herself up, wincing in pain as she did so. "Hnaev... I think this headache is going to take more than coffee to fix..."

"Okay, get going, you two." The security officer commented as he turned to shout orders to the other officers investigating the destruction. Limping towards the turbolift, Az'Prel and Jaeih leaned on each other for support. Once inside the lift and out of sight, both women straightened back up.

"Excellent, that will provide some distraction." Jaeih rubbed her nose with a slight smirk as she called out to the lift computer. "Deck fourteen." As she did, the console lit with their destination illuminated and the lift began to go down.

The older lift creaked slightly as it moved slower than the two women were used to from the Hera, as the lift came to an unexpected stop on deck eight. As the doors opened, Jaeih and Az'Prel instantly resumed their injured postures as the four guards from the checkpoint rushed on, strapping weapons to their belts.

"What happened to you two?" One of the four asked as the lift doors closed.

"The intruders attacked us... We're on our way to medical." Jaeih replied.

Suddenly, the guards began looking at the two women suspiciously. "The attack from the intruders was on deck two. Medical is on deck six, two decks up." As he spoke, one hand lowered to his disruptor as he eyed the console of the lift that showed their destination as deck fourteen.

Reading the change in tone, Jaeih sighed as she glanced over to Az'Prel. "Oops."

The displaced Vulcan woman barely had to think about it as she reached over and slammed the heads of the closest to her into the wall of the lift, sending the two Romulan guards to the deck out cold. "A minor detail. Our persuasions are superior."

Lacking Az'Prel's Vulcan strength, Jaeih instead chose a slightly more vicious tactic. With one hand she folded her fingers into a knife strike and drove it into the nearest security officer's throat hard, sending him gasping to his knees while she kned him in the head. In the same motion, she used his limp form to press it against the second man, pushing him against the side of the lift.

As he tried to un-holster his disruptor, Jaeih brought her other hand in for a hard blow just below his right ribcage. As her blow found its target, the officer's eyes bulged momentarily as he gasped and keeled over. Keeping her hand hard against where the Romulan heart is located, she twisted slightly.

Az'Prel knew the maneuver well. Done correctly, it caused a minor cardiac arrest, rendering the victim, Vulcan or Romulan, unconscious with extreme pain. Done incorrectly, it caused death. The guard fell to the deck and groaned, unconscious but alive.

"Indeed. And I think they agree. Lay there unconscious if you all agree." Jaeih looked up with a smirk. "See. They agree. "

Az'Prel nodded, almost pleased with herself that her attempt at a joke seemed to actually land well. "Indeed, they do agree. Such pleasant hosts."

As the lift continued down, Az'Prel and Jaeih striped the guards of their weapons and kept them at the ready for further trouble as they reached their destination on the lowest deck.

As the doors opened, the corridor was largely dark and empty. With their act of misdirection on Deck two successful, they were clear to return to the rear hatch and their waiting ship.

Once inside, Jaeih disengaged the docking clamps and the small cloaked Romulan Scorpion was quietly away and safely back into warp space. Handing back the data drives to Az'Prel in the back seat, Jaeih commented. "See if you can access these with the ship's computers. Ensign Gonadie made them well and they should be able to give us playback. Let's be sure we have what we need."

The Vulcan woman hooked up the antique drives as best she could, using a tricorder to convert the antique signaling patterns to ones that the tiny ship could understand. "It is fascinating that part of their security seems to be using archaic storage medium and format. Even in my time, 1024 layer binary data was outmoded and yet here it is - data stored in terabytes instead of teraquads." Soon she had the data feeds streaming to the small screens in front of each of them, displaying the list of records on each drive.

"Seems to be a clever conceit. Using significantly older technology that their current clients wouldn't recognize. On my own, I would be quite lost as well." Jaeih commented as Az'Prel worked and the two began to study the data.

After a few minutes scrolling through recording after recording of meaningless meetings between random faces, Jaeih and Az'Prel watched the security feeds intently until eventually, something of interest appeared on the screen. As it did, a sly smile stretched across the former Romulan agents face. "Miss Az'Prel... The Captain is going to be a happy woman. Let's get this home."

## Chapter 13 - Pulling Into Port

On the bridge of the USS Hera, there was tension. In a moment, the mighty starship would come out of warp and begin her approach to the Kabul system, guided in by the system's traffic control. For now, the officers sat at their stations, and in the center chair, Captain Enalia Telvan sat, alone in her thoughts.

Though, not entirely alone, as she dictated them to a PaDD quietly. Anyone with sensitive enough ears or close enough could hear her innermost thoughts being poured into her log entry.

"Captain's personal log, stardate... Computer, autofill." Enalia paused for the chirrup to finish. "We have arrived at my birthplace and childhood home once more, but this time I'm filled less with a sense of homesickness and relief of being home and more with anxiety and... Dread... I have not faced my mother directly since joining Starfleet and in about a week's time, we will be face to face in what can only be described as a fight for the very soul of not only myself or the Artan family... But perhaps for the very essence and way of life for millions across dozens of sectors. The reach and influence of the home fleet... As well as my mother's prodigious assets... Not to mention the twelve Baronesses not aboard the USS Hera have far reaching influence and any changes will have drastic ramifications, for better or for worse."

"I just hope that in the end, most of it is for the better. My mother's return from retirement and her actions during my absence have not been... Kind... To the people under her care. She is also suspected of several actions against Starfleet and the Federation, which endanger the treaty my family has with Starfleet. Not the least of which is the murder of one and attempted assassinations of two of my crew. She's also suspected of working with the Syndicate in a plot against a mining colony run by Federation citizens as well as espionage on this vessel and others. If we are able to find proof of this... I can only think of two Baronesses that would still support her, and even they may give pause."

"Thus, while I will be greeting the Baronesses as Princess of the Artan family... During the Tribunal proceedings, I will be there as Captain of the USS Hera. It pains me to do

so, but for the sake of our principals and maintaining peace, it must be done. Besides, this... is who I am now... And they need to see that I am no longer the young pirate princess that left home so long ago. That ran from her mother and joined Starfleet in some dream of freedom."

Tapping the PaDD, Enalia ended the log entry and tucked it away before checking the ship's status. "Looks like we're about there."

"Aye, Captain..." Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox replied from the helm. The sensitive Romulan ears of the ship's Chief Flight Officer had heard every word of the Captain's report and understood fully the pressure and conflict Enalia was feeling. "Exiting warp in two minutes. Docking procedures are on standby."

"System control doesn't like anyone warping directly in, but we're not here solely on Artan business this time, thankfully. If they give you any grief for entering the system at warp, tell them to direct their complaints to..." Enalia pulled her PaDD back out and tapped at it to look up the current Public Relations officer at Intel Command. "Commodore Rosellia O'Faya of Intel Command's Public Relations Division."

"Aye, Captain." Dox replied.

"With all due respect, Captain, if their sensors are no more than two hundred years old, they should be able to see us coming as easily as we can currently scan them while at warp," stated Sonak from the main science station. "Would they have any complaint, it should be addressed at their own technicians and equipment providers."

"Their equipment is up to date. It's more of a control issue for them, Mr. Sonak." Enalia grinned over at her science officer as she explained. "They cater to a lot of rich people and they like to make sure every variable is under their strict guidance, which means they like to make people like us dance to their tune. Unfortunately for them, we're on official business so we have priority."

"Only up to a point, Captain," the Vulcan chief science officer reminded her. "Starfleet General Orders forbid us to exert authority over local governing bodies or to intervene in local matters, unless they are in violation of the Federation charter or represent a clear and present danger to galactic peace or the whole of the Federation. And even then, our involvement is severely limited to the immediate threat, until proper civilian authority

can take over. Therefore, aside from such immediate situation, we are still bound by their laws and customs... including their space traffic regulations."

"Well... they've flexed their power over my family and my ship my entire life. I think for once we have the right to barge in on official business." Enalia raised a finger to hopefully silence protests. "Even if it is a bit of a stretch. We must be in place on time to receive our investigation teams, whom are in stealth ships and are avoiding official channels like theirs, after all." In truth, she may be taking a bit of pleasure in vexing the more than obstinate System Control Authorities. After all, if a lesser pilot had been at the helm, every single approach would have resulted in severe damage to the USS Hera with the flight plans they approved.

"Captain, we're being hailed. It's the Lady Arenara Artan, Queen Regent of the Artan Pirates asking what the hell we think we're doing, and if we would like to be fired upon as a hazard to intersystem transit?" came the report from Ops.

Anyone that was watching could clearly see Enalia tense up, her fingers dig into the arm rests of her chair, and her teeth start to grind. "Please inform her that the USS Hera is here on official Starfleet business and any interference will be met with... appropriate actions."

Relaying the message, the Ops officer listened to the response, then turned back to face the captain, even as Paris spoke up. "Multiple weapons systems are targeting us, Captain, from fixed emplacements to gunships in system."

"A most predictable action," Sonak confirmed from his own sensor readouts. "The next step would logically be to send an intercepting force."

"The Queen regent says, 'Your move', ma'am..." Ops reported.

"Red alert. Slow to impulse but maintain OUR course. Relay all that is happening to Intel Command and the Starfleet Liaison for the pirates." Enalia said, standing, her fists clenched.

The red alert klaxon sounded as the bridge was bathed in shades of red. From her tactical station, the first officer reported, "Shields up, weapons charging."

"Now open a channel," the spotted Captain ordered, and when she spoke, she did so with

unmistakable steel in her tone. "Any move against this vessel to hinder our investigations will be taken as a declaration of intent that you no longer wish to maintain diplomatic relations with the United Federation of Planets as pursuant to the Charter of Kabul chapter nine, section seventeen. Stand down now, or we will be forced to defend ourselves."

There was a long, tense ten seconds until the reply came through the channel, and a voice filled with feigned friendliness came over the comms. "Might I remind you that violation of our local traffic control laws is also a violation of that selfsame treaty. But seeing as how you've slowed to impulse, in the interest of continued diplomatic good faith with the Federation, we will stand down. Perhaps if you were to lower your shields as a gesture of good intentions we might believe your official business to be a peaceable mission? Otherwise, from here it just looks like you've come to bully the civilians in their own homes... isn't that just like a Fleeter?"

"As soon as we are no longer targeted by multiple weapons batteries..." The curvy captain sat back down and crossed her legs, trying to act relaxed. "We will stand down from alert status."

"For someone who comes in peace and friendship, you certainly are defensive. Very well..." as the targeting batteries and gunships winked out, the voice on the comm continued. "We can show good faith... can you?"

Enalia tapped at the controls on her chair's arm console, returning to general alert and powering down the shields and weapons. She also sent a message to Commander Paris to watch for transporter signals. "Our shields and weapons are now powered down. Any further... Demands?"

Even as she spoke the words, a message came through on her chair's armrest screen. //Automated sense and bounce transporter protocol from Mr. Sonak just reflected a transporting landing party of six attempting to beam into the antimatter storage pods on Deck 29\

"We make no demands, Captain Telvan," there was a bit of scorn evident in the use of the captain's title, subtle but clear to any who were listening for it. "We merely ask that our personal freedoms be respected here in the Kabul system, as we are not subjects of the Federation, but a free system. We appreciate your cooperation and your clearly demonstrated respect for our customs and traditions."

Clearly this was a show, not for the benefit of those onboard, but for others who were tuned into the exchange.

"Then as a citizen of this system myself, we would appreciate your full cooperation in our investigation." Then a grin crept onto the Captain's face. "What did you say your name was again? You're one of the SCA controllers, right?"

There was an audible snarl on the channel, followed by a slow exhalation of breath, as if someone were forcibly calming themselves. "You know very well who this is. Mother to an insolent and willful daughter who spurns generations of tradition to leave the family business, then returns only to challenge the Queen in Tribunal because she is determined to let the bloodline die. Disrespectful princess who comes to lord her authority over the free-thinking folk who refuse to live under the yolk of the oppressive Starfleet, disrespecting our safety, our traditions and our laws all for a show of force that impresses no one. You know exactly who this is, Enalia. I'll expect to see you once you've docked- assuming you can muster up that much respect for your mother, if not your queen."

Again, it was not a speech meant to impress the Starfleet captain so much as appeal to those listening, to garner support for her cause before the first gavel of the tribunal had swung. Arenara Artan was no amateur, and her manipulations were already quite clearly in play, as they most likely had been for some time now in system and throughout the network of pirates who formed the alliance of the Artan pirate fleet.

Much of which was already docked at the orbital fortress, as evidenced by the starships already assembled.

The spotted captain put on her most faux surprised face and glanced over at her first officer. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't expect you to be violating the independence agreement that the SCA has with the Artans and all the other groups in the system. Or is this a side job that you took on? Is retirement really that boring? Either way, I'll be seeing you soon enough at the Tribunal, Mother. Captain Telvan out."

After a few tense seconds, Lieutenant Dox spoke back from the helm. "Captain, receiving docking instructions from system control. Proceeding on your orders."

"Ignore them. Continue on our path to the orbital fortress and wait for docking clearance

from the Fortress itself." Enalia knew it was a power play since the SCA had no authority on docking at the various private stations around the system.

"Aye, Captain." Dox replied as she entered the instructions from the Captain and kept the Hera on its course to the fortress. "We will be arriving in 8 point 3 minutes at current speed."

"Steady as she goes... Captain Magnus should be receiving us any moment now." The tension in Enalia, though she was trying to hide it, was obvious to anyone that was trained to look for it.

"I see the fun and games have already begun," Paris muttered.

But Sonak's keen Vulcan ears caught her anyway.

"Since Starfleet is the overall authority regarding space travel within the whole expanse of the Federation, this is a proper approach to clarify the authority and boundaries of our upcoming... exchange."

"As usual, Mister Sonak's got a point, Captain," the first officer offered. "Snark and political spin aside, this is going to be one long series of struggles for dominance. With the law on your side, it's best that you make your position known up front."

"She may be queen of the pirates, but here and now? You're the law. It would appear someone broke the pact, and you're here on official business to find out exactly who and why, and to determine if that compact has been voided by those actions." the comely commander paused in her grocery list to add, "In addition to you stating your case to the assembled baronesses in your case to defy her will to produce an heir that she can raise."

"I'm also the rightful current ruler of the Artan family. She's supposed to be retired." Enalia added with that piratical lopsided grin of hers. "Either way, I'm glad that I have a crew that I can trust and depend on with my life. You are all my family and I wouldn't have it any other way. Now... Let's go see just how hard my mother is going to make this, shall we?"

It was at that point that docking clearance finally came in from the Artan family orbital fortress, clearing the USS Hera at the private clamps that Enalia had had installed just for the Nebula class ship.

"Captain, Docking instructions received from the Fortress," Dox called back from the helm as she prepared to enact the Captain's orders.

"Captain, we are being scanned," Sonak reported. "Shall I enable counter measures?"

"Please do so," Enalia ordered. "They're likely looking for their sabotage team and wondering why we haven't lost antimatter containment yet."

Acknowledged," answered the Vulcan before turning to the computer terminal in front of him. "Computer; Echo Chamber sensor program Sonak 1; execute."

"Computed," answered the disembodied voice of the ship's main computer. "Sensors are now sending back to the source incoming scanning signals on all frequencies."

"At your discretion, Captain, if this proves to be an insufficient deterrent, program 2 is a targeting white noise emission from our communications array. Program 3 is a damaging EM pulse from our deflector dish," Sonak announced. "For the moment, they will not have their scanners knocked out; just hampered if they are indeed searching for their accomplices."

"Well, they are aboard, just in Brig cell D4 trying to figure out how to overcome the forcefields," Paris reported from her security feeds. After all, they were Starfleet- not like they were going to space the poor souls. "We'll get on processing and questioning them once we're in port, unless you'd like to handle the questioning yourself, Captain?"

"Let's leave it at that for now. As for the interrogations, I think I've had my fill of those." Enalia punched up their own sensor readouts and looked them over. "Maru, as soon as we dock, begin the infiltration program and install that antivirus software on all of our allies that have cybernetics, if you can." Instead of the normal chirrup from the computer, there was a soft purr.

From the helm, Dox brought the mighty Nebula Class starship to a slow momentum, using the ships thrusters to complete the docking procedures as instructions. After a moment, the Red-headed Romulan pilot leaned slightly back. "Docking procedures complete, Captain. Powering down maneuvering thrusters."

"We've arrived at Artan family orbital fortress, Captain. Mooring clamps engaged,

external power available, we have hard dock on the forward airlock, Deck 10," the first officer reported from her station, then she looked over at the pirate princess. Returned to her home port home once more, the custom docking clamps she'd had specially installed for her mighty starship welcoming Enalia Telvan home with the barest kiss of their forcefield embrace upon the starship Hera's hull.

"Any inspiring words for the crew, Captain?" The first officer prompted.

Standing, Enalia glanced around the futuristic bridge of the Intel Command modified Nebula Class Starship. "Inspiring... I think I do, actually."

She then pressed the ship wide announcement control on her chair, the intercomm emitting an ALCON whistle.

"When I joined Starfleet, it was in search of a dream of freedom that I couldn't find in my own predetermined path as the head of the Artan family. Time and time again, I've been brought back here to my home for good reasons and bad."

"On the surface, this is a fight to finally free me from the yoke of an oppressive matriarchy and my mother, but I tell you this. If we let her win this day... Or if we compromise the very basic moral fiber that the uniform that we wear represents... Then not only have we all lost... But the people of this... and all nearby sectors will feel the repercussions for generations."

"I have served with this crew for some time now and I know in my heart... Without a doubt... That each of you has the strength of character... Integrity... And dedication to your duty to see this through. I... And Starfleet... Entrusts the lives and well-being of everyone affected to the crew of the USS Hera." Enalia then tapped her chair control again, ending the broadcast.

Giving the moment a healthy pause, Paris stood to address the bridge.

"You heard the captain. Now let's see this through."

## Chapter 14 - Meeting the Baronesses

Shortly after arriving at the Artan family orbital fortress, Enalia received a message that her allies were awaiting her in the Grand Hall of the central spire of the castle and would be honored if her Highness's party would join them to discuss her plans for the Tribunal. Hence Captain Telvan, Commander Paris, Lieutenant Dox, and Yeoman Dedjoy were now riding up the outside of the central spire inside of a spacious crystal elevator with a beautiful view of the expansive lands inside of the snow globe of a fortress.

"It's a beautiful sight, isn't it?" Enalia asked as she longingly gazed out at the forest and the small lake. "There's a horse track over that way that I loved growing up. This may sound silly, but my horse's name was Potatoes because her mane was the same color as the baked potatoes we sometimes had."

Standing off to the side between Commander Paris and Yeoman Dedjoy, Mnhei'sahe Dox tugged slightly on the hem of her crimson Starfleet uniform. She was quite pleased that they were representing themselves as such in the proceedings as she was much less comfortable in the Baronesses uniform she had prepared.

"Aye, Captain." The anxious, red-headed Romulan replied someone stiffly, as she was nervous about what was to come and was more focused on that than she was the view.

The meeting with the baronesses was one that was critical, to be certain, given the upcoming Tribunal in which the votes of the heads of the various factions beneath the banner of the Artan family pirate fleet would determine their course for the foreseeable future. More specifically, it would determine the course of Captain Telvan, as the heir to the family. As her mother had come out of retirement to demand an heir, and Enalia was resistant to the idea, now would come political maneuvering and manipulations, capitulations sought and alliances tested.

The job of one Rita Paris in all of this was to observe, to watch, to judge and divine intention. In this morass of piracy which was stranger to her than the far-flung future in which she now dwelled, she had to guard the Captain against betrayal and insure that the vote proceeded according to their plans. All while watching for treachery and

underhanded tactics from all sides, monitored by an opponent who had been planning this machination literally for years now.

In over her head in strange waters, surrounded by potential hostiles and seeking a course that seemed to have no heading, Paris smirked. *Just another glorious day in Starfleet*, thought the lost navigator to herself as she smoothed out her minidress uniform that had been replaced by more modern versions 126 years ago.

"Captain, are you ready for this?" Paris asked solicitously, aiming to get Enalia's head in the game.

With difficulty, Enalia tore her eyes from the serenity of the scenery and turned towards the elevator door, tugging down on her uniform top and adjusting it as she recomposed herself. "I am. Sarika has gathered those that we know support us in this together so we can discuss our upcoming strategy and, I'll be honest... I've left a fair bit of it to the two of you. My mother knows me and can predict my moves. The two of you together are an unknown to her."

And then she grinned that special lopsided grin of hers. "And we have Yeoman Ila Dedjoy. Between the four of us, success is all but guaranteed."

Ila smiled softly and nodded, the pair of PaDDs she held clutched to her chest. "Aye, Captain. It's good to be back at your side again."

"It's good to have you back, Yeoman. From now on, maybe leave the insane plans to the professionals, right?" Paris grinned, gently patting the cybernetic woman on the shoulder.

For her part, Dox simply allowed a light smile to crack her otherwise serious face as she folded her arms behind her back and stood at attention as the lift approached its destination.

Ila grinned a bit wider and nodded again as the lift slowed and indicated that it was almost at their destination. "Aye, Commander. I'm done with trying to be a hero."

"Spoken like every reluctant hero I've ever known," Paris shot back as the lift stopped.

That was when the large filigree inlaid doors whoosed open, revealing the Grand Hall

near the top of the castle's central spire. The only thing above this level was the private levels of the Artan family themselves. Inside was an ostentatious display of craftsmanship from many worlds leading to what could only be described as the fanciest and ritziest bar that any of them had ever seen. Every chair was unique and hand carved. Every plant was unique and wildly different from the last.

The paintings on the walls and columns were unique and as far from each other as a Rembrandt and a Picasso. Towards the center was the most out of place thing. A community fire pit with grilling racks built out of what appeared to be white marble and lined with rose gold. Off to the side of that, as if it was the most normal thing, was a regular bar straight out of some seedy dive, with a pair of the fortress's holographic maids behind the counter mixing drinks. Scattered in the chairs were seven Baronesses, casually chatting.

Sarika was the first to notice that the Captain and her party had arrived and stood, placing her right hand over her heart and bowing respectfully. "Princess. We welcome you home." Within a heartbeat, the rest of those assembled followed suit.

"Thank you. It's good to be home." Enalia placed her right hand over her heart and inclined her head in a slight bow back. May I introduce my First Officer Commander Paris, my Chief Flight Controller and Baroness Fifth Class Lieutenant Dox, and my Yeoman, Petty Officer Dedjoy."

All around, Paris offered eye contact, a smile and a nod as she draped her hands on her hips confidently.

That was when someone unexpected stepped up to greet Enalia. A Trill woman wearing a white and gold dress uniform with no tassels, but a katana on her belt and her black hair in a high ponytail. She appeared to be almost as old as Enalia's mother. "Princess, it is good to see you again. Please allow me to express my sympathies over this ordeal. However, while I am not currently able to support you in these proceedings officially due to the rumors of your plans for the family, I am unable to support your mother in any capacity. If there is anything you need, please... Do not hesitate to ask."

Enalia nodded solemnly. "Baroness first class Merinda von Stolina. You've been with my family longer than anyone else, I think. I thank you for your honesty and service to the Artan family."

Standing by the Captain's side, Dox stood awkwardly, not really knowing what to say or do in the situation. As a matter of technicality, she too was a Baroness here with a vote and a say in the proceedings, but suddenly felt a bit overwhelmed by the pomp and circumstance of the moment... and more than a little out of place.

Still, as she visually scanned the assemblage, wary of potential threats, she couldn't help but take in the room itself. It was an ostentatious display of wealth and the former smuggler couldn't help but question internally where it all came from. Still, she knew she couldn't just stand there quietly the whole time, so she nodded towards the one other Baroness she had already met and spoke, "Baroness Sarika. It's good to see you again."

"Mnhei'sahe! It's so good to see you again too!" the silver haired pirate exclaimed as she pulled the Romulan woman into a hug. "Relax, you're family too. Come on, I'll introduce everyone so..."

"Sarika..." Merinda's scolding tone was both grandmotherly, yet firm as she said the other Baroness's name, causing the younger woman to clam up. "Please let them relax. They have been under a considerable amount of stress. Also, as I am the senior Baroness, it's only right that I introduce everyone."

"Yes, ma'am," Sarika replied as she continued her hug with Dox.

Turning back to Enalia, the formal woman bowed again. "If I may, Princess." With a nod from Enalia, she began.

Motioning towards a long, curly, black haired and busty woman that looked like she worked out every day and might be able to give Jablonski a run for her money. The woman's clothing was scanty at best, being the classic black buster, frilled dress, fingerless gloves, tri-point hat and gaudy jewelry that most pirates from legend were known for. "First, I present to you Baroness first class Bloody Batra."

Her haughty demeanor cracked long enough for her to bow to Enalia again. "I'm only here to see if you can prove the rumors that the Bitch Queen is sleeping with the Syndicate. If they are, we lose our Federation protections and I can't hunt the bastards anymore."

"As eloquent as ever..." Merida then motioned towards a woman that was somehow wearing even less. The pink haired human pirate was wearing a red bikini with a black

miniskirt, black boots, and a black long sleeve jacket that was missing the 'jacket' part, yet somehow still had the shoulder boards and tassels. Everything also somehow had lace and frill on it for some reason. "Next, I present to you Baroness fourth class Frederica von Grelica."

The pink haired woman also bowed, but deeper. "As I once served your sister loyally, I now devote myself to you and yours. You have my full support in this no matter what."

Merida had no words on that, instead keeping her comments about the woman's life debt to herself. Instead she motioned to the next woman to be presented - a blond haired woman wearing a white and gold version of the standard Baroness uniform. She had a bust to match Commander Paris' though. "Next, I present to you Baroness fourth class... Ahem..." Taking the glass of alcohol from the next Baroness, she set it aside for now. "Baroness fourth class Snodarss."

"Prinshess!" the drunken woman exclaimed. "You have my shupport. No one should have to put up with... Yeah! For the free market!"

The first class Baroness motioned to Sarika to guide the woman back to her seat and she got on with the proceedings, motioning towards the next woman, a half Caitian, half Trill with four extra cybernetic arms. She wore a plain military uniform that was cut to go around the arms coming off of the extra arms on her torso. "Next, I present to you Baroness third class Marelith, the Artan family Enforcer."

The eight limbed woman bowed slightly, articulating strangely with her extra limbs. "Princess Telvan, it is an honor seeing you once more. Commander Paris, Lieutenant Dox, Yeoman Dedjoy... It is a pleasure to meet all of you."

"Likewise..." Paris agreed, taking in the sight of the six-armed cyberpirate with keen interest. She'd never seen anything like it, after all, and the woman moves with a steady, flowing grace that was visually arresting.

Finally, Merinda cracked a hint of a smile as she began to introduce the last of the people there. "It is with great honor that I present to you Baroness fourth class Mirana, former attendant to your father."

As an older Caitian with an eye patch covering an obvious scar and a very stereotypical peg leg hobbled up leaning on a cane, patches of fur turning a bit grey, both they and

Enalia smiled. "You still look as beautiful as the day you left home, Enalia. Come here and give me a hug."

"It's good to see you too, you old cat," Enalia replied, giving Mirana a tender embrace. "It's been far too long."

Taking in the introductions, Dox was glad that Baroness Merinda turned the attention off of her for the moment, though she still had Sarika's arm wrapped tight around her in a friendly side hug. But it enabled the anxious, somewhat anti-social Romulan officer to collect her thoughts and observe.

"So! Hi there! Rita Paris, I'm new?" the anachronistically uniformed Starfleet siren spoke up. "So, I was thinking since we're all in this together how about somebody spell it out for the slow kid, please. Why are we all here? Not as a group, but each of us individually. I'm here because she saved me and I agreed to come. Aaaaaand Starfleet business. Which I can spell out for you as I see it so Starfleet is offering transparency in good faith."

Pausing to eye the mistress and commander of the USS Hera, Paris muttered. "Too soon?"

Enalia chuckled softly as she patted Rita on the shoulder. "Not in the slightest. Now that introductions are out of the way, we should set our motivations on the proverbial table and clear the air so we all know where we stand. My position is laid out in the Tribunal Declaration, but with it, I'd like to move the family towards being more privateers and less pirates and try to get rid a few of the old matriarchal rules we still live by. Merinda, if you would be so kind?"

Merinda nodded and crossed her arms as she contemplated the request. "We all have various enterprises and ventures that are threatened by the former head of the family's current actions. For instance, Snodarss may lose her Federation alcohol inspection seals if things keep going the way they are and if that happens, her entire business will collapse. Marelith is interested in finding proof of any of the rumors that have been circulating about her. Batra just wants to hunt the wicked and make them pay..."

"Those Syndicate slavers especially," Batra interjected, shaking a fist for emphasis. "I've sworn to slaughter every last one of those sons of motherless hamsters and free every slave I can."

"Indeed," The older Trill woman then leaned in a bit closer to the group of Starfleet women. "And then you have those that are a bit more... Fanatically loyal... Frederica was rescued by the princess's sister and she declared her life debt is now Enalia's if she'll have it. Mirana... She'd follow the princess into the depths of hades and back if asked. Sarika... I believe feels she owes the princess her life as well." Straightening back up, she finished her explanation. "As for me, I am loyal to the family and will do whatever is needed to ensure the continued diplomatic relations between the family and the Federation while maintaining the best interests of the family."

"Not far off of what I expected then." The spotted captain considered the Baroness's words carefully. "Rita, could you explain Starfleet's position? I would do it myself, but being who I am it might be seen as a conflict of interest at this point in time. Also, Lieutenant Dox, you need to come up with why you're here, it seems."

At her Captain's words, Dox knew she couldn't just stand silently anymore. Talking a breath, she nodded slightly as she spoke. "I can answer that. I'm here to protect and defend my Captain. Her personal freedoms, the future she wants for herself and this family and her own bodily autonomy in the face of an assault on all three."

"I am here to serve her both as a Baroness in the Tribunal through my vote and, if necessary, with arms... and as a Starfleet officer to serve those freedoms and protect them the right way. I'm here because it was through my Captain and my Friend, Enalia Telvan and the family that I found aboard the ship that is now my home that I was able to discover and become who I am." The young Romulan woman was slightly emotional as she spoke.

"When I joined her crew, I didn't even know my true name. But with the aid of Captain Telvan and Commander Paris, who I have chosen as a sister, that I rediscovered and reconnected with my own past, my family and my identity. I owe these two women my loyalty and my life and I will always stand with them." Then, Dox smirked lightly.

"Plus, as a smuggler, my mother and I ferried a great many former slaves from the grip of the Orion Syndicate, and I would very much like to see them and those that stand with them face justice." Finishing her piece, she turned to Rita to give her Commander the floor.

"Miss Dox, you do the command proud," Paris beamed a smile before turning to address

the collected baronesses. "As for Starfleet's interest, it begins with assault."

"The Baroness von Alcott was assaulted on the holodeck which, as laughable as that may sound, crippling malware was introduced into her cyberware and a death trap was crafted for her. Ideally these things tend to be held til trials one would imagine, but when you gloat, don't be surprised if someone's recording." With that, Paris held up the ever-present PaDD in her hand to play back the audio file. Arenara Artan's voice rang out, clear and highly recognizable.

***"Congratulations on getting through this, my daughter's little piggy. Just because you survived this little trap though, don't expect to survive the Tribunal. I have other ways of dealing with you..."***

Giving a moment for that to settle in, Paris continued. "We scrubbed her cyberware and Baroness von Alcott is fine, although she is still en route to this particular party, we expect her soon enough. Now, trying to kill the Captain's adjutant... well, attempted murder is what we technically call it in Federation terms, would be a prosecutable offense, and tying all of that evidence to the matriarch could be quite challenging."

"Which was why we were surprised when one of our officers was killed as they got in the way of an assassin droid sent to eliminate your fellow Baroness, Miss Dox." Paris turned the stage over to Dox to illuminate the next point, given her proximity to the situation. "Lieutenant?"

"Aye, Commander." Dox took over as instructed. "When Captain Telvan named me a Baroness in the Family, I was bequeathed a ship. Delivered to me by Captain Magnus and Baroness von Alcott, there were several crates on board. Crates containing welcoming gifts. Most given by many of you to welcome me and remind me of our shared past. But one was not. In one of the crates was a Scorpinox 7 assassin droid hidden as a pendant... passed off as a family heirloom."

The young pilot was now visibly angry as her raspy voice sunk slightly. "This droid was activated and attempted to kill me. In it's attempt, it murdered an Officer under my command who's sold offense was being in it's way. And after it killed him it tried to kill me by hitting me with a shuttle and nearly destroying one of our flight decks."

"A full investigation is underway that will link this to Arenara Artan. The technology can be traced to the Orion Syndicate. And a Starfleet officer is dead. Murdered on a Starfleet

vessel. All to silence my voice and my influence in these proceedings. But I will not be silent, ladies. And this will not go unpunished. Justice will be served here." The formerly quiet young woman had found her voice in the room.

As the Starfleet women spoke, several of them were close to the bar getting drinks from the holographic maids - an assortment of Rigelian, Saurian, Andirian, and Romulan drinks. Marelith had obtained an entire twenty second century bottle of Saurian brandy and was filling her own glass with it as she spoke. "Your reasons for being here resonate well with most of us, I think. After all, three of our number were slaves for a time and two under the yoke of the Syndicate. The rest of us have lost so many to them... Well, we're all family here."

"Also, if but one of these charges can be traced back to a member of the family..." Merinda began, letting the import of those repercussions sink in with the others.

"Hey, craaaaaazy rude I'm sure, but does somebody maybe have a tricorder handy to scan that brandy Baroness Marelith is dishing? Just something a little birdie mentioned to me along the way about Saurian brandy," Paris had no qualms about playing the fool or the silly girl, if it got the job done.

Yeoman Dedjoy raised one hand. "My taste receptors can analyze the chemical composition of it." She stepped over to the Baroness to offer her services. "If I may?"

"If you wanted a glass..." The serious look on the Starfleet officers' faces convinced Marelith that it was worth more than a quick joke so she handed over her glass and the bottle.

Ila then sipped at the brandy, swishing it in her mouth before spitting it back into the glass. "It is of excellent age and vintage... Unfortunate that it contains a lethal distillation of nepeta. Any Caitian that drank this would be dead within three minutes. Most Trill within thirty minutes. Humans and Romulans would be violently ill. I estimate that Baroness Schwein von Alcott may be the only one that may reliably drink this."

After a second to process what she'd heard, Marelith stepped back from the lethal bottle. Merinda was the first to bark out orders though, one arm thrown out towards the holographic maids. "Stop serving drinks immediately! Inform my second that his presence is needed here. Have him bring an investigation team for attempted murder. I will have the origins of that bottle traced. Also, scan all the rest of the drinks."

"Excellent plan," Paris remarked, then took the floor once more. "So, ladies, you now have some idea of what life has been like on the USS Hera for a while, and what your Princess has been going through... aside from the whole 'give up your genetic material so I can have another successor in the bloodline to raise as my own' demand. We have lots of leads, and I'll be frank- we still have no direct evidence. But foul deeds are afoot, and Starfleet is here to see the investigation through."

"Because if any of it ties back to the family, we would like to be certain that before any long-standing compacts are disrupted, that the specific guilty parties are found. That's my stake in this, and that's my motivation... to bring this discussion back round to where we started." With that, Paris offered a respectful nod, and sat down in one of the elegantly carved chairs. Her part in the overture was done... but there was still an entire opera yet to be sung.

"How did you know?" Baroness Marelith stepped in to loom over the archaically-outfitted Starfleet siren. "Assuming that the analysis bears out your claim, how did you know? How do we know you didn't poison the wine yourself, just to drive home your point?"

"Fair question, but I doubt you're going to care for the answer," Paris replied calmly. "Our time-traveling niece from the future offered a few cryptic warnings, some spoilers, if you will, before going back to the future. This was one-" Paris tabbed up a brief clip of Kodria offering, "Two, the Saurian Brandy is poisoned. Also-"

Eyeing the six-armed cyber pirate's expression of disbelief, Paris spread her hands and shrugged broadly. "What? I was born 163 years ago in an alternate universe! This sort of thing happens every Tuesday for me. It doesn't make the information any less valid."

Allowing only the slightest of smiles at Rita's answer to crack her lips, Dox stepped forward. "All of you assembled here today do what you do in a universe of impossible wonders. Often time, *OUR* job on the Hera takes us *beyond* the boundaries of impossible. That's our job. We confront the impossible and we defeat the impossible. And sometimes, the impossible comes to visit with a warning."

Pausing for the briefest of moments to all her words to sink in, Dox continued. "*This* is exactly how far-reaching that the decisions made in this room today will extend, Baronesses. A young woman who will one day be family to myself, Captain Telvan,

Commander Paris, and many of you came back... willing to risk temporal paradox that could undo themselves in their own time to enable a just ending to this tribunal. She is yet another reason that we are here. I will not allow her risk to be for nothing. None of us will."

Her tone was deadly serious and her eyes never wavered as she spoke to the assemblage. It was impossible- but it was also the truth, and the Baronesses could see that clearly in the face of Mnhei'sahe Dox.

Frederica shrugged it off and pulled out a tricorder, scanning a few of the bottles that were handy. "Her sister, Regina was the same way. Always making impossible dreams come true. At least, she made mine a reality." A smile graced the scantily clad, pink haired woman's face as she continued scanning the booze bottles. "This one has toxic levels of germanium in it for Trill," she added, holding up another bottle of Saurian brandy before setting it aside.

Merinda looked the bottle over for any identifying markers on it and found the inspection seal from one of Snodarss' distillery's, handing it off to the drunken Baroness, who pulled out a datapad and scanned the barcode. Upon seeing the results, she sobered up fast. "Delivered to the fortress directly via gate seventeen, which is reserved for the Queen Regent's deliveries. This shouldn't have even made its way into our bar." She then scanned the first bottle that was found to be poisoned, her expression turning even more grim. "This is from the same shipment."

Merinda placed her right hand over her heart and bowed once more to the Starfleet women. "If it had not been for that warning, several of us had likely died at this meeting and the Queen would have undoubtedly pinned the blame on you. Whatever your source, I trust it wholly. I believe I speak for all assembled when I offer our gratitude."

Bloody Batra punched one fist into her other hand. "Just let me know when we get to go hunting traitors and I'll make sure they're all pun..." Glancing around at the mix of justice inclined Baronesses and Starfleet officers, she calmed down a little. "Uh... Brought to justice and safely behind bars."

At that, Paris none-too-subtly nudged Lieutenant Dox, prompting her to speak. As the young Romulan woman's eyes sought out those of the human woman, Paris merely nodded, offering an unspoken message of confidence in her. *You can do this- you are one of them. You go and show 'em!*

Clearing her throat just a hair, Dox glanced over to Captain Telvan who had her telltale smirk well in place letting the young Romulan Baroness know it was okay. "Thank you, Baroness Merinda. And I believe I speak for us when I say that your gratitude... and your *trust*... is greatly appreciated."

Then Dox allowed her own slightly skewed smirk out as she nodded to Batra. "And thank you for your willingness to help us see this through in a way that allows us to bring justice to these proceedings we can bring real freedom to this family. It makes me very proud to be a part of this family, and as you honor us I only hope to return it through my actions in these proceedings as one of your number."

"The Captain has a plan. A way to make this family into the very best version of itself, and I am glad you all are willing to help us see this through." Dox nodded slightly and stepped back as she deferred to the Captain. As she did, she turned to Rita and gave her friend an awkward grin as she silently mouthed, *I have no idea where this is all coming from.*

Captain Telvan, whom had been silent for almost this entire meeting, finally spoke up, Prompting the attentions of every one of those assembled. "Thank you all for your support. I have loved this family since I was old enough to remember and I swear to you, I will make it the very embodiment of Freedom that my great grandmother saw it as all those years ago. Right now, that means deposing my mother and freeing this area of space of her, but once that threat has passed, I will make sure the right people are in the right places to make sure we all go forward in the right way."

With that, Enalia placed her right hand over her heart and bowed before the assembled Baronesses, who scrambled to do the same, matching or beating the depth of her bow and not rising until she did so. Merinda was the first to speak. As usual, you humble us with your words, Princess. We look forward to the day you take your rightful place as Queen and head of the family."

"Well, I already have a spouse, so I've met one of the two requirements to do so." Enalia almost seemed to waver, but held it together. "The other is to defeat my mother in a duel and I fear she may press that in this tribunal."

"I agree. Even if we find all the evidence we need and present it at the tribunal, I fear she will not submit herself and will flee, forcing us to pursue her. If that is the case..."

Merinda paused for seemingly dramatic effect. "We as the gathered Baronesses will be unable to assist you in her defeat. Only you will be able to do that."

Marelith swatted the stiff Trill playfully. "Don't depress the Princess like that... We can't help her go after her mother, but we can at least go after her assets. Keep her allies at bay so she won't have any reinforcements. Justice must be done, after all."

Enalia grinned that special grin of hers knowing that while she'd have to face her mother alone, she and her crew weren't in this on their own. "Thank you. All of you."

"So for those of us not steeped in generations of piratical lore, aside from cataloguing yet more circumstantial evidence, where do we go from here? This is my first Tribunal, after all," Paris asked, once again being the one willing to ask a dumb question.

Merinda finally grinned and showed some emotion. "I think that save for myself, who knew Queen Enalia Artan three hosts ago, no one else here has been through a Tribunal. Gather all the evidence you are able and whatever aid you require, our crews will assist you. The programming for the maids is locked out by the head family, however I believe the Princess should be able to retrieve any logs or data from them?"

The spotted pirate princess turned Starfleet Captain nodded, that lopsided grin of hers widening. "Consider that done. I had Maru sweep through the entire fortress before we arrived and we should have a database of anything suspicious waiting for us, including any activities my mother has taken. With that and the information here, our current investigation teams should have more clues to follow up on."

"Then all that is left is to finish collecting all the evidence to present at the final Tribunal Hearing in five days," Merinda proclaimed. "And watch all of our backs as we do so because our enemy is not as honorable as we are."

"And then we can hunt down some bloody traitors and keel hau... Uh... Turn them over to the proper authorities." Bloody Batra had a reputation for being firm but kind to her allies but a deadly enemy, but she was doing her best with Starfleet uniforms in the room.

"Yeah! We'll show those bitches!" Sarika declared, giving Dox another tight hug. "Wooo!"

Smiling in spite of herself, Dox couldn't help but like the silver haired Baroness and her boundless excitement.

Enalia cheered as well, hinting at the quote on the Artan crest. "We will find our dreams of Freedom, be they among the stars or among our friends!"

## Chapter 15 - A Matter of Honor

The meeting between Captain Telvan and the assembled Baronesses that support her on the Artan council had gone well.

While the concrete evidence linking the Queen Regent of the family to the numerous conspiracies of collusion with the Orion Syndicate and the attempted murders of both Baroness Schwein von Allcot and Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox was still being sought, there was enough circumstantial evidence to sow significant doubt. The seeds had been planted.

But before the tribunal could begin in earnest, there was more to be done. And this was a task that was to fall to Captain Telvan's chief flight officer, Mnhei'sahe Dox.

The anxious lieutenant walked at a brisk pace with a PaDD in her hands down the ornately decorated corridor of the Artan family fortress. Through the transparent aluminum windows on either side of the walkway was a view of a spacious arboretum that Dox caught herself glancing towards as she reviewed the data on her PaDD. At her side, matching her pace with ease was the Captain's personal Yeoman, Ila Dedjoy.

As Dox walked, she put the PaDD in her back pocket and tugged on the tunic of her crimson uniform. "I'm glad the Captain insisted that you come with me. I... I honestly have no idea how I'm going to do this, Miss Dedjoy."

Ila smiled gently and rested a hand on the back of Dox's shoulder to offer her support. "If I may offer some advice, you share more in common with the Baroness than differences. Perhaps keep that in mind when making your case. Though after your speeches in front of the others, I think you'll be fine."

Nodding silently for a moment, Dox looked down as they walked and thought to herself, *'That's what I'm afraid of.'*

Then, she took a breath to collect herself again. "Thank you. And, I wanted to say that I'm happy to see you again. I know between the Anansi incident and the Section 31 base,

we haven't exactly shared the most positive memories on the ship together, but I'm glad for the opportunity to rectify that."

"Well, there's not much threat of being eaten alive here and even if they tried to poison or stab me..." Ila chuckled softly. "I wish them luck. I even made sure I could be spaced safely, just in case. No repeats of my own twin sister's..." Clearing her throat, she glanced down at her own PaDD. "Yeah... If you need to use me as a shield, please don't hesitate."

Letting a slight smirk out, Dox was clearly uncomfortable, and not just because Ila's words reminded her of her own near-death experience of being beamed into space without a suit. "Well... let's hope it doesn't come to that. With any luck, I can remember something useful to say and not just lock up."

"So..." Dox continued, changing the subject a bit. "...how much further to... where are we meeting them, again?"

"It should be the meeting hall just ahead. The one with the tan and green columns at the entrance." Ila motioned towards the entryway that they were coming up on, the double doors opening as they approached.

"No time like the present, I suppose." Dox sighed.

Gulping, the Red-headed Romulan pilot adjusted her uniform top one last time. "Imirrhlahse." She muttered, cursing in her native Rihan under her breath as she arrived at the doorway. She was far enough from the assembled Romulans inside so her voice wouldn't carry even to their sensitive ears, but the sight was intimidating enough.

Like every corner of the Artan Fortress, the conference room was an ornate affair. A large enough room to meet with a hundred people or so, the ceiling was a dome lined with a pearl filagree running up and down the curves. The walls of the room appeared to be lined with ornate reliefs of swirling flowers on thorned vines covered in gold leaf. Yet another example of the wealth Dox knew was accumulated through generations of illicit activities.

Activities she used to be quite the part of when she was a young smuggler. When she first met the woman she was to meet with today. Baroness Siena Neirrh of the Romulan Refugee Corps. One of a number of Romulans that Dox and her mother once

transported from Romulus to freedom.

In the center of the room was a large, 'C' shaped table of reddish wood surrounded by large carved high-back chairs. And standing in a cluster near the closest part of the table was an assemblage of Romulans, talking among themselves, barely pausing long enough to acknowledge Dox's arrival.

The Baroness was easy enough to spot - most of those assembled were wearing traditional Romulan garb. Checkered tans, browns, and greens in a conservative paneled manner. The Baroness was wearing what appeared to be something that a seat cushion factory threw up with added gold shoulder boards and tassels. The pattern was an orange and green camo print with circuit-like lines printed across it. Other than that, the whole thing looked so wide and bulky and just... Out of place... Just like the old 2350's Romulan military uniforms, but somehow larger and more ostentatious.

*'Maybe I should have worn the Green Baroness uniform after all.'* Dox thought to herself as she straightened her back up and walked in, doing her level best to match that martial stride Rita Paris was known for that helped her project some measure of confidence. As she walked up to the assemblage, she spoke in the clearest and strongest voice she could manage. "Greeting. I am Baroness Fifth Class, Mnhei'sahe Dox. I come on behalf of Princess Enalia Telvan, thank you for allowing me this audience."

"Ah, the new Baroness! I had heard you would be paying me a visit." Sienae spread her arms as best she could, given her attire, greeting the younger Romulan. "Your mother and I worked together for several years. Fortunately, I was able to cut a deal with the Artan's to represent the Romulan refugees when you were young due to my experience as the commander of a D'deridex. I hear that you've done well for yourself since the Forager and your mother's mission was put out of commission by the Starfleet that you now serve alongside our Princess." Her plastic smile never wavered, but she was obviously searching for a reaction - she and the others in the room were definitely Romulan pit vipers.

"Thank you." Dox replied somewhat plainly, keeping her face neutral. "Well, the Reman uprising put our mission out of commission by allowing the Tal'Shiar to strengthen its grip upon the people. But we are hopeful that with the aid of Captain Telvan at the head of the family, that reunification can find fresh footing. On that note, my mother sends her regrets that she could not be here herself to greet you, but she entrusted me to speak on her behalf in this meeting."

"Those were indeed hard times and much has changed since then. Please, I am sure you have risked much to speak on behalf of her, the Princess, and I presume yourself as well." The elder Romulan in the Tackiest Couch Cushion motioned for Mnhei'sahe to make her case.

Nodding, with her arms crossed behind her back, Dox spoke. There was the slightest of tremors in her voice at first, betraying her nervousness more than she would have liked. "Indeed. Much *has* changed. In the last few months, we believe that the Queen Regent has, in an attempt to undermine the authority of Princess Telvan, been involved with a number of plots designed to destabilize the family's holdings. Plots designed to exploit weakness she has created in order to buttress them herself in an attempt to sway the votes in this upcoming tribunal to her favor."

"In specific, your *vote*, Baroness." The young pilot had found her voice and was projecting herself throughout the room, ignoring the questioning glares of Nei'rrh's crew and fixing her attention on the Baroness herself.

"And why is my vote in particular so critical to such a... Proceeding?" She had obviously changed her wording, instead choosing something more diplomatic, her face still that of a rigid and well trained Romulan commander.

"It is important to the Princess to resolved this matter in the *tribunal* in order to effect a peaceful exchange of power and avoid unnecessary conflict. At current count, the Queen Regent has three Baronesses declared for her. The Princess has six. There is one Baroness who is abstaining at this time and four who are undeclared. You are one of those four and the Princess would like the opportunity to present her case to you and, if possible, secure your vote."

Then Dox's tone dipped to a more stern one. "And It is my hope, that the debt you swore to my mother will, at the least, prompt you to listen to what I have to say here today. The Queen Regent is attempting to manipulate you."

"Then please enlighten me as to her manipulations," Seinae prompted, still not giving anything away.

She held up the PaDD in her hand for all to see. "17 days ago, Baroness Schwein von Allcot, the adjunct to Princess Enalia Telvan, was the target of an assassination attempt

on the holodeck of our ship. A Starfleet vessel. The holodeck program had been corrupted with malware that infiltrated the Baronesses cybernetics while the program itself had overridden the ships safety protocols with a scenario designed to kill the Baroness. Thankfully, she was not alone that day and I and the crew were able to defeat the program."

"In that program, was a threat recorded by Arenara Artan and a perfect recreation of the bridge of her own ship. An 8 second recorded loop of her actual bridge played back in detail. On this PaDD is the information we were able to collect from that recreation." Stepping up, she handed the PaDD to the Baroness who eyed it suspiciously.

"The bridge recreation used a scan of her actual bridge and as such, recorded a significant amount of data. Including her ships location, where it was headed, and who she was in contact with, and when this all occurred. As you will see, the Queen Regent was in communication with the Orion Syndicate on her way to the Aehallh station to meet. If you'll note the time stamp, Baroness, that meeting occurred a week prior to the Orion attacks that crippled your own fleet and decimated your ranks."

Watching the look on the older Romulan woman's face, Dox could see the wheels turning in spite of any efforts to not give anything away of her own thoughts. It was often said that subterfuge was second nature to the race and detecting it just as natural to them. "Oh, and it may be of interest for me to remind you that the date of my induction into the ranks of Baroness was recorded officially... only two weeks before that."

Standing with her arms folded behind her back, Dox waited for the Baroness Nei'rrh to process the information provided and come to the conclusion she knew the Romulan woman would be drawn to. There was no way that the attacks that slipped past all of their defenses as if they weren't there could now be seen as coincidence. Nor could the ease in which the Queen regent came to the rescue.

The inner workings of the Baroness's mind were spinning and not in a good way. She had expected this sort of thing to be presented to her, and indeed, this was one of the reasons she had gotten close to the Queen Regent in the first place. To be handed exactly the evidence she had been looking for though... Still, she could give nothing away, just in case the wrong people were watching.

"I suspect that this is all trickery in order to misdirect you," Sienaer stated, trying to keep her face impassive and condescending as she tossed the PaDD onto the conference table.

"Lies and deceit abound in the underworld and if you believe everything that you see and hear, you will soon be lost. Besides that, this is circumstantial and planted evidence at best. For your sake, I hope you have stronger evidence at the final hearing."

"Rest assured, we will." Dox replied, eyes fixed on Sienae's. Something more was going on here that Dox was just becoming aware of, but she had cards of her own yet to be played. "Although my being misdirected was likely not counted on... Just my death. A death that *you* were intended to be blamed for."

This news actually elicited a semblance of an emotional response from the olive-skinned woman, her eyes widening slightly. "Do please explain."

"An assassin droid, placed in a crate on board my Artan ship tried very, *very* hard to kill me and in doing so, killed an officer under my charge." Dox was angry as she recounted the incident and that anger was now projecting throughout the room.

"The droid was disguised as a Romulan ceremonial pendant, claiming to be a family heirloom. Those crates were presented as gifts to me from the Baronesses. And this crate was logged as coming from your ship, Baroness. The box housing the pendant was embossed with my Grandmother's name and a photo of my Mother, myself, and *you* standing on the deck of the Forager. Someone put a great deal of effort into attempting to create a number of false trails, but we are investigating the truth.

"This and the other charges against her *will* be proven. And when they are, it will place the Queen Regent in direct violation of the treaty and Charters the Artan Family has with the Federation. That treaty is what allows you all to conduct your business in this sector without facing charges yourself. So, I would ask you who truly has the interests of the family at heart?"

"This is indeed dire news. You have my deepest condolences for the loss of your officer." The Baroness bowed slightly, having recovered her composure quickly. She had no doubt that the assassination attempt was from the Queen Regent, but she had to cast doubt and dispersion off her herself at the very least for the time being. "But I ask you this. Would not the evidence of such a mastermind be layered several times deep? If it does truly lead back to the Queen Regent, I will look forward to such solid evidence as you provide it on the day of the hearing. Until then, I am forced to treat it as a coincidence and an unrelated incident. Perhaps it was a present from the Tal'Shiar. We both know how impressively stealthy they are and how duplicitous their threats and

words may be."

"Thank you, Baroness." Dox returned the bow, processing everything that she had just been told. The tone of Sienae Nei'rrh was somehow off to Dox's ear. A lifetime of weaving through Romulan lies gave her a decent ear for picking it up. And she was absolutely being lied to, but it was in just *what* she was being lied to about that gave her pause. Until she thought back to Nei'rrh's earlier words and the pieces began falling into place for the young Starfleet officer.

"As for your words, I will give them serious consideration as well. Misdirection... does seem to be at play here." Looking back at the senior Baroness, Dox allowed no smile to crack her facade but she hoped her meaning was understood without tipping either woman's hand.

"If I may, It has warmed my heart to see you again, Mnhei'sahe. You have your mother's ears and your father's passion. I trust that they will both serve you well in the coming days." Placing her right hand over her heart, Sienae respectfully bowed her head.

"Thank you Baroness Nei'rrh. Your words honor me and I too am glad to see you again. It is my hope to speak again at the resolution of this affair and I thank you for your time and this audience." Dox returned the gesture, placing her own hand over her heart, located on Romulans below the right breast, and bowed her own head.

Though the Romulan Baroness did not allow the Fortress's holographic maids to serve her during functions or meetings, her enemies had other ways to spy on her. Thus the Ferengi spy inside of one of the shrubbery pots that had been beamed in shortly before the meeting. Grinning widely, he knew that he had earned some extra latinum this day. Arenara would be pleased at the developments that this meeting had brought about.

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As the meeting adjourned, Dox and Dedjoy made their polite exit. Once the pair were halfway down the corridor and Dox was moderately sure nobody could still hear her as the doors had firmly reclosed, she turned to the doll-like Yeoman with a slight smile.

"Believe it or not, I actually think that went well." Dox commented, still speaking softly just in case. "She wouldn't say it out loud, but that comment about misdirection... I think she already had her own suspicions and just couldn't acknowledge them."

"I'll have to take your word on that. I don't have enough experience with Romulan culture to say one way or another. I did detect a noticeable rise in her heart rate a time or two and that was one of them, but..." Ila shook her head and glanced down at her PaDD. "I just don't have the experience to interpret her responses. I'm sorry I wasn't of more help."

While they walked, Dox turned around to look suspiciously at the room. "With most Romulans... It's what's not being said that you need to listen for. I almost forgot that myself."

Looking back at Dedjoy, Dox raised an eyebrow. "One of them what?"

"Her comment about misdirection... Her heart rate shot up. I could see it in her jugular." Ila clarified nervously. "Also when she learned of your assassination and when you handed her the PaDD."

"That all but confirms it, Ila. Thank you She did have her own suspicions, and she doesn't want it known that she knows just yet, I'm thinking." Dox whispered. "Any interesting reactions from the others in the room?"

Ila shook her head, her hair bobbling lightly. "They seemed genuinely concerned at the mention of the assassination attempt, but that was all I could really gather."

"Well, hopefully, that means that her crew is still on her side. We'll see." Dox said as the pair continued to the lift to return to the Hera. "I wish I had better news to report to the Captain. But this may be a case of the door still being open being the best news possible. And at least nobody tried to kill anyone at this meeting."







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## Chapter 1 - Opening Ceremony

This was it - the day of the actual Tribunal had arrived and the opening ceremony had begun. The Trial halls had been prepared, and arranged so that each Baroness could bring up to three crew with her. Each of the Royal family could bring up to nine crew, as per the laws by which they all abided. As for Captain Magnus, he was allowed four; as he presided over the proceedings, as hopefully an impartial party.

The holographic maids were in top form today- ushering the groups to their respective dressing rooms to prepare for entry into the trial halls. They had been remodeled from their normal knee-high black and white maid outfit and cat ears and tails, to something more akin to an ankle length warrior maid outfit. They also carried sabers, though it was unclear if they were programmed in how to use them or not. Either way, it was the only type of weapon allowed on the floor of the Trial hall and this was a constant reminder of it.

As Captain Telvan arrived with her group, she was shown to one of the two Royal family dressing rooms, where they could freshen up before being introduced to the assembly. The maid that escorted them bowed politely. "Princess, please wait here and enjoy these comforts while you wait. As procedure dictates, the fourteen Baronesses will be introduced in reverse order of rank, then yourself, then the Queen Regent. Do you find this agreeable?"

"I do," replied Enalia as she glanced at her collection of companions. "I have four late arrivals as well, if you don't mind escorting them here."

The holographic maid bowed again. "I must remind the Princess that she is allowed nine crew on the floor. However as two Baronesses are present, if they would be so kind to be introduced separately, three crew each are allowed, as per the Tribunal guidelines."

"Understood. Once they arrive, we'll work out the details." Then Enalia realized their first issue. Captain Magnus was already in there... But Dox was the first one that would be introduced since she was the very lowest ranking Baroness. Tugging down on her white Starfleet dress uniform, she turned to her Romulan Flight Control Chief.

"Mnhei'sahe, who do you want to go out with you? Or would you rather go out as part of my crew?"

The red-headed Romulan Lieutenant and Baroness was fidgeting slightly with her own white, Starfleet dress uniform as she had never had to wear it before today. Taking a brief moment, she thought on the Captain's question before answering. "As I see it, Captain, if I come out as part of your crew, the other Baronesses will view me as only Starfleet and I would be concerned that it would invalidate my own legitimacy as a Baroness."

The spotted captain grinned her usual lopsided piratical grin. "You've grown into a fine officer and, if I might add, a fine Baroness. I agree completely."

As she spoke, Dox turned to look at the crew that was her family, uncertain. The entire Command crew was present, along with the Vulcan refugee Az'Prel and Dox's mother, Jaeih. The two had been sent out on a top secret mission of Intelligence gathering and had returned successfully only hours ago.

Before the anxious young officer could speak, her mother stepped forward in her standard grey Intelligence tunic and the customized comm badge in the shape of the Romulan sigil Rita Paris had made for her. "Captain. With your permission, it would honor me to stand with my Daughter as a member of her crew." As she spoke, the stern face of the elder Romulan cricked an eyebrow and the slightest of smiles as she nodded towards her unlikely partner in espionage, Az'Prel. A questioning gesture that read clearly as *'are you in?'*

The Vulcan woman stepped forward as well, her hands at her sides. She was dressed in something resembling Artan crew livery and looked mildly uncomfortable in the fancy clothing. "It would be remiss of me to not volunteer my own services in this instance. I too will accompany you." After a slight bow of her head, she continued. "We come to serve."

As Az'Prel and Jaeih stepped behind Mnhei'sahe, Commander Rita Paris nodded silently to a gold-clad security officer, Petty Officer Lu, to go with the group to fill out the three available slots. Paris had briefed the Security personnel she'd brought on this mission, and they all knew their parts in the plan.

As she did, Mnhei'sahe shot her First Officer and friend a smile and then turned back

towards the maid. "We're ready."

Then the maid once again spoke up. "Baroness Mnhei'sahe Dox, the hall awaits you. If you and your crew will follow me."

With a final tug on her crisp, white uniform top, the young Dox turned and smiled at the rest of the crew nervously, as she knew she would have to put her best face on the second she turned back around. *'First out the door, dressed in Starfleet white. They're going to love you, Mnhei'sahe.'* She thought to herself as she turned back to the maid and followed with Az'Prel, Jaeih, and Lu close behind her.

Lieutenant Commander Thex was waiting with the rest of the group feeling nervous as she gave her Starfleet formal wear another one last look over. She was thankful for her twins not being big enough to have her body show any signs of being pregnant. She didn't want any of the Baronesses or the other pirates to know. Still, she was going to help her friend no matter the risk. She had the bracelets that would allow her to summon the armor of Achilles tucked into her pocket just in case. Not that she'd be needing them she hoped to herself.

As for Commander Rita Paris, this was the culmination of entirely too many sleepless night, miles paced in worry and concern, and plotting and planning that had made her question her convictions, her morals, as well as how far she was willing to go to protect her crew, and her Captain. In the moment, finally arrived at the situation, she found herself possessed of a preternatural calm. There was, she felt, very little that could occur in this proceeding which would surprise her. She knew their opposition, she knew what was likely going to happen, and she had contingencies and plans in motion which might or might not come to pass.

Whatever happened, she would be ready for it. After all, she'd made a promise to a little girl who very much wanted to see her grandmother when she woke up one day in the far-flung future, and Rita Paris wasn't in the habit of breaking promises to little girls. Especially not when she was all decked out in the crisp white of a modern-day Starfleet dress uniform, which made her feel like a Big Damn Hero. The soft white and gold piping looked austere, even if she wasn't quite so accustomed to having so many medals on her chest and wrists. Once she had looked them all up, she was actually surprisingly decorated as an officer.

Which was nice, but overall she was just happy they were such a vast improvement over

the dress uniforms of her own era, which she recalled with an involuntary shudder.

This situation was a tightrope she didn't want to walk- but aside from that promise, this was for Enalia. The woman had saved her life, and given her a port when most would have thought her useless. She was her captain and her friend, and she wasn't going to allow this to destroy her. She'd take a disruptor bolt for the woman, and damned if she'd let a controlling old murderess ruin her friend's life any further.

At her side stood Sonak, seemingly quite at ease in his formal wear. The whiteness of the upper portion made his greenish-copper skin stand out glaringly, which in turn made his steely grey eyes almost luminescent under his blue-black typical Vulcan haircut. As it were, he looked more stern than any of the judges would be. But the glint in his eye was that of the curiosity of the exosociologist observing from a privileged standpoint the laws and customs of an alien people; not judging, but observing, studying, understanding; but most of all ready to stand by his commanding officer. There was no emotional involvement, only logic. But loyalty was the logical stance of a Starfleet officer towards another.

Lieutenant Samuel Clemens, the USS Hera's Intel Chief, stood there at parade rest, in the gleaming white of a Starfleet dress uniform, his bright blue eyes rapidly scanning the room in some detail from under his bushy brows. What the shorter, wiry man was searching for, he did not disclose in present company, but his gaze was that of an eagle, awaiting the other shoe to drop.

"Ok, with luck, Schwein and Jablonski will get here before they're called." Enalia pursed her lips thoughtfully as she considered their next steps. "Since she still has no crew... I think Jablonski should go with her as a show of force. And since she's Hera's honor guard, and no one else here should technically know who she is..."

Enalia had more to think on this, but was interrupted by the holo-wall display springing to life with the proceedings in the Trial hall being broadcast. The round mahogany chamber was centrally lit and sparsely furnished, compared to the rest of the fortress, having instead relatively simple handrails, furnishings, and no plants whatsoever. Even the walls were blank white, with just mahogany trim around the doors that led to each of the pseudo balconies.

Fourteen were arranged on a lower level around the main floor with two on either side for the royal family members and their crew on a slightly higher level. At what could be

called the head of the round room was another balcony at the same level as the two royal ones - the only one with a desk. The five seats were already occupied by Captain Magnus and his chosen four crew, one of which was his own daughter.

In the center of the room one of the holo-maids announced the first of the Baronesses to enter. "I present to you, Baroness fifth class Mnhei'sahe Dox, of the Artan ship Khallianen and the Federation Starship USS Hera... and her crew." She then held out her arm towards the doorway and the balcony that they were assigned just as Dox and crew stepped out and took their seats.

The holo-maid then moved on to begin introducing the next Baroness in line, but Enalia interrupted the holographic playback. "Computer, volume ten percent." With the volume subdued, they could at least discuss their plans, but still have an eye on the opening ceremonies.

"Well, Commander? What are your thoughts? Is there a third that should go out with Schwein?" Enalia asked, turning to her first officer, just as Schwein and Jablonski were escorted into the room by one of the holo-maids.

The eye patched pirate was fussing with her white and gold Baroness dress jacket with the cape as she entered, which seemed to fit a bit more tightly than the last time she wore it. "Mein apologies for our tardiness, Prinzessin. We have what we need."

"For the Baroness von Alcott, no mere retinue would do," Paris declared. "It's good to see you both, and I'll trust that you have good news for me. I'll also trust you to deliver it at the appropriate moment, Baroness. For now, Jablonski, you're with the Baroness. But why don't we request the attendance of our VIP suites 11 and 13 to attend as the remainder of the Baroness' retinue? It will be interesting to see who can 'pierce the veil' as it were."

"Agreed," Enalia grinned as she knew few of the Hera's own crew could see one of their own guests, and the other, while powerful, was somewhat unassuming.

"A logical approach," commented Sonak.

"Thank you, Mister Sonak. Jablonski, pass on my orders and get them down here on the double. And it goes without saying, this is a hostile negotiation and I expect treachery, so remain on high alert. As I said, swords only until I give the word, understood?" Paris

fired off her orders in shorthand, but the stout guardian understood, and started calling the Hera for reinforcements for the Baroness.

Sonak, of course, was not wearing any sword nor phaser, since both were not part of Starfleet's formal dress code. But as a Vulcan, he was allowed to wear something of his own culture as a part of it. Hence why his hips were belted by his *anh woon*, the inconspicuous-looking twin length of weighted leather that could be used as a most bewildering whipping and entangling weapon, in the hands of a *kolinahr* master like himself.

It only took a moment from that point for Taxes to make the trip from the Hera with both of its riders. Though to most it looked as if Hera popped into existence while dismounting an invisible horse, those that could 'pierce the veil', saw the pale horse arrive with both riders through some sort of deathly film and step off with the surety that comes from genuine practice with such animals.

Hera moved to greet her favorite person with open arms. "Rita, my darling. You look divine. You all do. I'm told that we are to accompany the Baroness von Alcott?"

Gratefully accepting a Hera hug, Rita Paris smiled at the matron goddess. "Thank you for coming. Yes, if you would be so kind, ma'am. The Baroness lacks a crew, and I can think of no better retinue for the next Asgardian in this instance. Petty Officer Jablonski? Whatever happens here today, not a single hair on her head. We are in accord?"

Stepping forward, the hulking captain of Hera's honor guard nodded once. If trouble erupted, she would fight til her last breath to ensure the safety of her charge, as would any good defender. Standing behind the goddess, the Amazonian Security officer stepped in protectively close, and it was clear to Paris that her orders would be carried out to the letter, no matter the cost. It might have been a trick of the light, but Rita could swear Jablonski swelled up a bit as her brows set and she hovered protectively over the goddess.

After Rei patted down Taxes, she dismissed the pale horse and turned to the collection of officers, wondering just how many would be able to see her during these proceedings. And if they could... How they saw her.

Clemens' parlor perusal paused, as he heard the hoofbeats incoming. A wide grin crossed his face, as he turned toward the sound, and saw not only the lovely Lady Death, but

also the loyal Taxes, and the surprise passenger, the Goddess Hera. Sam gave a slow head nod to the arrivals, and with a twinkle in his eyes, returned to the micro-monitoring of the room for any potential hostile developments. "Should've brought an apple for Taxes..." he mused.

"He would enjoy that," Rei softly intoned, curtsying before the southern gentleman. "I hope you don't mind that I will be escorting a Baroness this eve."

The man with the eye of the tiger caught her gaze as he continued to be vigilant, and said in a low tone, pitched for her only, "I would never presume to infract upon your duties, sweet Rei. I look forward to seeing this affair through with you nearby." He swept past her countenance as though nothing had passed between them, continuing to divine what treachery might come, a slight upturn of his mouth incrementally betraying his improved humor.

"So it looks like the musicians are in place, the orchestra is tuned, and the singers are ready to take the stage. Captain?" Paris turned to the Trill woman and placed one hand on each of the white uniformed shoulders, and she peered directly into the eyes of the pirate princess. When she spoke, her voice was low and soft, for these words were for Enalia alone.

"All of your life has led to this moment," Rita Paris began, searching for the words that might inspire her captain, to lend her fortitude in the trial ahead.

"This is your one moment in time, when you are racing with destiny. You are stronger than you know, cleverer by half, and you have a crew who are willing to lay down their lives all out of loyalty to you. Not rank, not orders- we're all here solely because here and now, in this time and place, you need us. So whatever happens out there, remember- you earned our allegiance, one and all. Which makes you light years better than someone who rules through fear and murder. We've assembled a solid case, we've used teamwork and trust, we've planned for the contingencies and we're all here to stand beside you."

"A crew and a family, and I admit I don't see a difference between them." The Pirate Princess Turned Starfleet Captain took a deep breath and adjusted her dress jacket once more before addressing everyone. "My mother may have designed me to be what I am, but because of my time with everyone else, I am *who* I am. I am also not alone in this. *We* are not *ever* alone. Even in our darkest moments, we rise up because of our

peers and those behind us, pushing us forward to be better than who we were yesterday. To be the best versions of ourselves."

"The Queen Regent does not see that, and cares nothing for true morals or principles. She cares about power and holding onto it. She always has. That is why we must be the best that we can be today. To show her and everyone assembled that while we do indeed work in the shadows, there is a better way and that in the end, the principles and morals of the Federation do win out every time."

With that, Paris led a cheer, "Hooray for the Captain!"

The cheer caught on, and the assemblage all joined in, in their own ways. "Well said, Captain. Wait'll they get a load of you, eh?"

The holo-maid spoke up, motioning towards Schwein. "Baroness von Alcott, it is time for you and your crew to be introduced. If you would please follow me."

As Schwein stepped forward, Hera, Rei, and Jablonski took their places with her and were led out of the room, only to appear on the holo-screen moments later as they were introduced to the ten other assembled Baronesses. There was a bit of a fuss with a few of the Baronesses, as there was a disconnect between a select few being able to see Rei, and everyone else reporting only two crew with her.

"So if they can see her, does that mean they're not long for this world, or they're just a little too chummy with Death?" Rita muttered.

Making a delayed entrance and looking freshly washed, Doctor Dael entered quietly, waiting to be seen and signaled if needed. The doctor had just come off an 18 hour shift in sick bay delivering a child that had been loathe to enter the universe. After a quick wash to refresh body and mind, the doctor stood, ever ready, med-bag in hand, waiting for instructions.

"I suppose it would be a bit of both," Enalia mused, making a mental note of those that reacted to the presence of Death. As Enalia waited, she turned back to the remaining crew and marked out who would go out with her. "Rita, Thex, Sonak, Asa, Sam, Rena, and the two Wil'TAms sisters. I think that should be a good showing."

Maica leaned in, giving her wife a good, long, passionate kiss. "I think it's a marvelous

selection. I'll keep an eye on things here and cheer you on."

"Thank you, my love," the Trill woman replied softly, her hand softly caressing her green holographic lover's cheek.

"In step, move as a unit, drill formation flying diamond, people," Paris ordered, and quickly lined everyone up for the Captain's entrance. With everyone arranged, Paris called the cadence. "We all step out on the left, and let's show these freebooters a bit of Starfleet coordination and discipline, shall we?"

Leaning in to the Captain, Paris nodded. "Is the word given, Captain?"

Just then the holo-maid spoke up. "Princess Enalia Telvan, it is time. If you and your crew will please follow me." She then motioned for them to proceed out and towards the chambers.

"The order is so given," Enalia confirmed, adjusting her uniform one last time and taking her place at the head of the procession. As they stepped out into the spotlight shining on the large double doors leading onto their balcony, Enalia stood at military attention as she waited for everyone else to take their places in front of their seats. Then as one crew, they all sat down together.

Meanwhile, the holo-maid acting as an announcer in the center of the audience chamber was calling off the announcement of the Captain and her crew. "Ladies and Gentlebeings of the assembled Tribunal. I present to you the Ruling Princess of the Artan Pirate Lineage. Savior of Haslak nine. Defender of The Fortean Rifts Alliance. Scourge of the Syndicate. Passion of Starfleet Academy. Exterminator of the Twin Suns Pirates. Breen Bane. Defender of the Unified. Protector of the Free. Princess Enalia Telvan!"

A few cheers went up as the announcement was finished, but a couple dirty looks were also tossed their way.

Then it was the Queen Regent's turn. She came in with as much hatred and vinegar in her veins as a Disney villain. Of her chosen nine, most looked like life had chewed them up and spat out the worst parts as gristle and pirate stereotypes. One man stood out though - he wore a gold and red uniform similar to those in the mirror universe's Terran Empire and though the emblem on his chest was that of the Artan family, there was no mistaking the dagger at his hip for anything but a relic of that universe.

Over in Dox's balcony, Az'Prel stiffened visibly and leaned in towards Jaeih. "Him..." she said, indicating the oddly dressed man in the Queen's retinue, the venom barely concealed in her Vulcan tone. "That is the father of my daughter."

Setting her eyes upon the man from the mirror universe, Jaeih replied with a discreet whisper only Az'Prel and Mnhei'sahe could hear. "Then we know who needs to be asked some questions before this is over, Az'Prel. Will any luck, we can ask him in as unpleasant a fashion as is possible."

The holo-maid announcer, if it was possible, seemed slightly less enthused about announcing her entry. "Ladies and Gentlebeings of the assembled Tribunal. I present to you the Queen Regent of the Artan Pirate Lineage." She then began listing off title after title, each one sounding worse than the last.

After several minutes, Arenara waved it off. "That's enough. You may dispense with the rest of my accomplishments as we would be here all day."

With a slight bow, the holo-maid continued. "Queen Regent, Retired, Arenara Artan!" Unlike for Enalia, there was no celebratory noise making, other than the possibly collective sigh of having the introduction over with.

Captain Magnus then raised his gavel and slammed it down twice. "I hereby call this, the third tribunal of the Artan Family to order."

"If there are any objections or grievances, let them now be aired..."

## Chapter 2 - Parliamentary Procedure

The dignified and staid Captain Magnus raised his gavel and slammed it down twice. "I hereby call this, the third tribunal of the Artan Family to order. If there are any objections or grievances, let them now be aired." The pirate lord, known to be tough but fair, eyed the assembled crews and Baronesses of the Tribunal. Letting the gravity of that proclamation settle in, he paused for a moment before proceeding.

"Then we shall proceed as laid out in the articles of Artan law. First as she who is the accused, Arenara Artan, will be allowed to make opening arguments and present evidence. Then the accuser and challenger, Enalia Telvan will be allowed to do so. Then it will be an open floor for anyone with pertinent evidence to present it. After that, both parties will be allowed to present closing arguments before this council will make a final determination." Captain Magnus half-turned, to confer with his own crew.

"Here's to parliamentary procedure... time for some law and order," Rita Paris muttered.

For all this time, Sonak had been silent, acutely observing and studying this peculiar culture at work, his xenoscience interest peaked with the bewildering display of intertwined ancient mores and modern behaviors in one of the rather few humanoid matriarchal societies observed in the galaxy. His wife's remark made his eyebrow arch up slightly.

"It is a fact that parliamentary procedure, a cornerstone of democratic societies, requires much time and complex structures. Allowing for opposing points of view to be heard and debated peacefully, if even hotly, before implementing a solution, one best suited to the situation and all persons involved, is not an easy process. Hence why it is so much more common to encounter autocratic rules in so many cultures throughout the known galaxy. Authoritarian regimes get results quickly and efficiently, only because they serve but a very small elite to the detriment of the majority."

His gaze went to the assembly.

"It is most interesting to observe how this community handles it's version of democratic

rule and law, while they still adopt the trappings of autocratic aristocracy, and individualistic anarchist tendencies. I think there was once a place on your Earth called Tortuga that worked in much similar ways."

He stopped his voiced musings when he heard the head magistrate speak.

Meanwhile Asa was trying to dismiss the feeling that someone was staring at them from just out of sight. Of course there were numerous eyes on the assembled party, but Asa had a persistent feeling of dread they hoped was only their own nerves and not an inkling of things to come. Wishing they had the ability to scan the assemblage without being noticed, the doctor sat back to noting each face along with how they moved and how much attention they seemed to be paying. One never knew when knowing that an enemy had a slight limp or that a delegate had been asleep during the speeches might come in handy. The sound of the magistrate's voice also caused them to return attention to the proceedings at hand.

"I would remind those present that only the Royal family and the Baronesses may object at any time and that procedure must be followed for such objections. Now then..." Magnus then motioned to the Queen Regent's side of the round hall. "Queen Artan? If you would be so kind as to present your opening arguments and evidence, your grace."

Rising from the large and ornate throne she'd had crafted for herself decades ago, Queen Arenara Artan drew herself up to her full height, her purple and crimson livery flowing about her, the Dalmatian mink cape trailing behind her as she came to stand at the railing of her balcony. Looking out over the assemblage, she moved with the surety born of a lifetime of rulership, and nodded with satisfaction at the ruling houses that flew the Artan banner. When she spoke, her voice was clear and strong, ringing out across the great hall.

"You know who I am," she began, "And you know my deeds. You've shared in the plunder from my spoils, and eaten hearty at my table. I have led this family now for nearly 50 years, and I've steered us through good times and bad, attacks upon us and revenges gained." She paused for some piratical chortling, from quite a few corners of the hall. "You know who I am, and you know my word is bond."

"So heed me while I take a moment to explain why we're all here today. Why my willful and stubborn daughter, who turned her back on the family business brought us here. She who turned her back on piracy, and all of you. Who refuses to marry flesh and blood,

dallying with holograms who can never even generate genetic material to sire an inheritor for the Artan family lineage. All I asked was that she sire an heir, to carry on the family line. To keep our traditions alive," the pirate queen's voice rose at that, and there were cheers from the hall, as well as polite applause.

"Traditions like scouring the spaceways clean of slavers and pirates. To free those oppressed in chains. To make the galaxy a better place to raise our families. But she turned her back on all of us, to join Starfleet, to look down on we pirates. Though it breaks her mother's heart, still do I not interfere and let my willful princess have her way. Yet still does the family need an heir." Looking out over the assemblage, the pirate queen changed the tempo, pacing in the relatively small space.

"I asked, I cajoled, I entreated my daughter to produce offspring, but over and over she refuses. Now, I will admit," The queen half-turned, as if being conspiratorial. "I would not be so desperate were she wed to an actual biological life form. Nature often finds a way, as well some of us know." Shooting a glance toward Captain Magnus, she continued.

"Entreat I do, but still she refuses. So I asked her for at least some of her genetic material, so that I could find a donor and welcome the next generation. To be brought up here, amongst all of us, in the bosom of our family. Steeped in our traditions, and trained from birth how to lead this family to the next generation of greatness." At that, she scoffed.

"But no. The high and mighty Captain Enalia Telvan has no time for traditions or family or piracy. Oh, she'll be happy to take her leave of the family station and enjoy the fruits of our labors. But she's just too good to let herself contribute to the family, even if it's just half the genetic code for a future generation. No no, that would impugn her rights as a Federation citizen, and she just cannot have that." Shaking her head as she paced, the dramatic pirate queen chuckled to herself.

"So here we are, my friends, captains, lord and ladies. My daughter the selfish, my daughter the snob, my daughter who is just too good to be associated with anything that smacks of piracy and tradition, except when it suits her. She comes before you today to plead her case, to tell us all of how violated she feels to have this asked of her, how upset it makes her, how it fills her with the self-righteousness that only Starfleet can instill. Your part-time princess has come to tell you how being asked to pull her share is so very unfair to her, and how you should make her feel better. Who cares about the

Artan family line? Who cares about tradition? Who cares about all of this," Arenara waved her arm dramatically, as if to encompass the entire gathering. "When it might inconvenience one Starfleet Captain named Enalia Telvan."

"Let it all end, let the line die here, because she went and got both her father and her sister killed, so now it's just she and me. Since she betrayed us all to piss off to Starfleet, then there's only me. I hoped for at least a legitimate grandchild and to not have to try to carry a child to term at my age," she paused to see if there would be a laugh there, but no one dared. "So that's what's really at stake here today, and there sits the architect. All of you who are losing money sitting here in port for all of this? Look at her. Itchy formal uniforms? She called the Tribunal, not I. It all sounds a bit ridiculous, like someone should just grow up and face some responsibility for a change, does it not?" Arenara Artan whirled to fix her daughter with a piercing gaze.

"Because from where I'm standing, that's exactly what this looks like. This entire situation has but one author, and there she sits." Pointing to her daughter, a sardonic smile settled onto the thin lips of the aged privateer.

"Now, that is my primary grievance. But since I've reluctantly agreed to this Tribunal, a number of calamities have befallen myself and my crew. There was an assassination attempt on my second in command and my chief scientist, from a mysterious poison whose origins seemed to be the signature of an assassin long dead. I can't prove it was my daughter, but the timing certainly seems suspicious." Queen Artan traced her finger along the railing as she spoke, dramatizing her point.

"The Romulan refugee starbase 339-A was all but destroyed by two of the Starfleet officers under Captain Telvan's command," she continued, the sneer entering her voice as she mentioned Starfleet, adding up that many more emotional discreditations for the Fleet. "That resulted in the deaths of dozens, and the kidnapping of an innocent man, of whom the Federation seems to have no record. According to them, they don't have him. But they took the station, so..."

Leaving the point to hang, the Queen changed course, tacking into the wind. "We've also received reports of stolen records from the hidden Aehallh base, a Romulan records keeping station not far from here. The primary suspects are two more of Captain Telvan's Starfleet thugs, officers posing as guards. On top of that, my two closest allies in this matter, Baronesses Garan and Terethis, were almost poisoned by tainted Saurian brandy just yesterday on this very facility and my evidence points back to, once again,

her officers." Pausing to fix the assemblage with a smirk, she cocked her head slightly, the great plume of her hat bobbing as she did so.

"It's almost as if Starfleet is desperate to find some way to avoid all of this, because when all is said and done, even they know Enalia's being unreasonable. Even they can see what a spoiled, petty child she's become, and they're desperately trying whatever schemes they can to make her look better. Hell's bells, I'd wager she'll even try to accuse me of misconduct and treachery next, just so that she can maintain her precious individuality... which is worth more to her than our entire family, all our traditions."

Leaning over the rail, the Queen fairly spat out the words. "She values herself more than this entire family. Her deeds speak for themselves, as she sits there in pristine Starfleet white, flanked by her obedient drones. That's the future she wants for the Artan fleet- she can say whatever she wants, but her colors make it clear where her allegiances lie. And it is quite clear to any with eyes and ears those allegiances are not with us."

With that said, the pirate queen of the Artans took her seat, resting her elbow on the armrest of her chair as her fingers supported her chin, and she shot Enalia a glance that silently challenged, quite clearly, 'your move'.

At the end of the Queen's opening speech, Magnus, cleared his throat and began speaking. "Next is the list of evidence presented by the Queen Regent. As I understand it, her Chief Scientist will be presenting the recordings and evidence we're about to watch. I recognize..." He had to glance down at a PaDD to make sure he got the name right. "Davo Mudd, Queen Regent's Chief Scientist."

"You gotta be kidding me... Mudd?!?" Rita whispered, clearly recognizing the name, but the Terran continued before she could elaborate.

Clemens knew the surname from basic Intel classes, and immediately set about pulling all relevant files for the previous records of any parties with that moniker from the copy of Fleet Intel records he'd copied locally. His scowl deepened as he noted the expensive accouterments the man with the weasel eyes wore. For a brief moment, he wondered if this grease stain had the capability of being anything as fierce as a lion. He resolved to keep track of him if at all possible. He made note of certain aspects of the room's construction as he continued sweeping it.

From the small balcony that Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox occupied as one of the

Captain's Baronesses to observe and eventually vote on the Tribunal itself, the Vulcan refugee Az'Prel, Dox and her mother Jaeih watched silently.

Looking over at Az'Prel, Jaeih could all but feel the anger simmering off of the normally emotionless Vulcan as they watched Mudd stand. The man was not just another survivor of her own doomed universe, but the father of Az'Prel's missing daughter. Jaeih shifted her glare to Mudd, narrowing her eyes with anger for what her newfound and unexpected friend must be going through in that impossible tense moment.

"Thank you, Captain Magnus," The well-groomed Terran said as he stood, the spotlight now focusing on him. The man was dressed in an unmistakable gold and black Terran Empire uniform, red piping along a few edges of a black bodysuit, replete with a crimson sash at his waist. While the symbol he wore on his breast may have been that of the Artan family, the mirror universe dagger clipped to his sash was unmistakable. Neither was the haughty attitude that he spoke with, nor the slight femininity that his motions revealed.

"First, I would like to thank you personally for this time to..." Mudd began, before Magnus cut him off.

"You're not here to make speeches, Mudd. You're here to present evidence." The way Magnus said the word 'evidence' almost seemed like he didn't believe that any of it would be real, but he allowed it to be seen, none the less.

Mudd seemed a bit flustered, yet continued. "Yes well... First, I would present to you security footage from Aehallh Station of the two suspected intruders."

Clicking something on his PaDD, security footage began to play in the center of the room showing two Romulan men leaving the records room of the station. Both had well defined forehead ridges and were obviously not Jaeih and Az'Prel.

As Mudd started to speak again, Sarika stood and pointed violently. "OBJECTION! My cybernetic eyes detect tampering in the feed of that data stream!"

The look of shock on both the Queen Regent's and Mudd's faces realizing that the one person that was able to see through their creative edits was now no longer under their control was priceless, but they quickly composed themselves.

It was Merelith that ran a scan on the datastream presented and confirmed it though. "If it pleases the court, I am able to confirm this. This is actual footage... But the time-stamp markers have all been changed. Also, the faces of the two have been obscured with other faces. If I run one of my reconstruction algorithms..." A moment later, the footage changed and the time-stamp was that of the day that Arenara supposedly met with someone on the station and the two men were obviously Trill, one of which was sitting at Arenarra's side. "And there we have it."

Magnus studied the unfiltered footage. "Thank you for your assistance, Baroness Merelith. Baroness Sarika, in light of this new unedited footage..."

"I now withdraw my objection, your honor," Sarika stated, returning to her seat.

Clearing his throat nervously, Mudd continued with a nervous glance at his PaDD. "My next piece of evidence is the testimonies of both Garan and Terethis, both whom were almost poisoned by tainted Saurian Brandy."

Before he even had a chance to play the footage, Merelith was the one to object. "OBJECTION! We have already traced the source of both bottles, as that trick was tried on two of the Princess's other supporters as well. One of Snodarss' shipments was hijacked by commandeered holo-maids from the Bloody Rose, delivered to one of your suites, tampered with, and distributed throughout the fortress, including to Garan, Terethis, myself, the common halls, and a few bottles back into the original case lot. The data logs of the holo-maids have been recorded and I submit them for study as counter evidence."

"Objection sustained," Captain Magnus declared, slamming his gavel with a hint of pleasure. "Mudd, your next piece of evidence, please?"

A bit more flustered, the Terran clicked at his PaDD before proceeding. "Then I present evidence of the attempted assassination of both myself and the Queen Regent's second in command." He then put up security footage of a tiny droid attacking the two in some sort of lab, using its contents against them.

Again came the loud "OBJECTION!" and finger pointing from Sarika. "That holographic recording is filled with holograms. Not a single person in it has a heat signature or fluctuating vital signs."

Schwein had flipped up her eye patch and was studying the holo-imagery as well. "Ja, wahrheit- das is holograms being recorded."

The six-armed Baroness Merelith ran a scan on the footage and also confirmed it. "It's true, your honor. This whole holovid is fake."

Almost gleefully, Magnus slammed his gavel down again. "This evidence is inadmissible then. One more like that, and I'll hold you in contempt of this Tribunal and have you clapped in irons!"

"Aye, sir." Mudd visibly gulped as he brought up the last of the footage. "The last is security footage of the Romulan Refugee station 339-A."

He then began playing back choice pieces of destruction, clearly showing Schwein in her armor and Jablonski in hers wrecking the station from multiple views. "If this is fake, I apologize. We obtained it from a man named... Ah... Beta... Zeta Jones. A survivor of the attack whom is now crippled for life and will now require extensive reconstructive work to his cybernetics due to the mistreatment he suffered at the hands of the invaders. They killed no less than two dozen of our own and kidnapped an innocent man."

Exchanging puzzled expressions, Petty Officer Jablonski shrugged and held her hands palms upward, then leaned in to whisper into Schwein's ear. "Rubber bullets and tear gas, how did we kill two dozen people...?"

"EINSPRUCH! OBJECTION!" Schwein called out, also pointing dramatically, as was tradition. "I offer in counter evidence the sensor logs of mein own eye and mein comrade's suit to prove that we used non-lethal means and we only did so after first declaring our intentions and being attacked trying to dock and question a murder suspect. A man that is linked to the murder of a Starfleet officer aboard a Starfleet vessel! The act of which will bring into question the very pact that makes our privateer actions and profits admissible under the Federation!"

This brought about a goodly amount of muttering and murmuring, as Schwein's bold accusation rang out across the great hall.

Pulling out a poly-duranium lined PaDD, the Platinum haired pirate punched up the sensor logs and submitted them in full, allowing those assembled to study them as they

saw fit. "Also, we found our suspect. They had undergone identity change operations, but they confessed to the crime, and admitted to whom he received the means of murder and attempted assassination on Baroness Dox!" Tapping again, she submitted the interrogation in the Hera's brig.

The Baroness Merelith immediately set out, scanning the submitted records, ensuring that they were clean and untampered with. It only took her a moment before she looked up. "Your honor, these records show no sign of tampering. They are legitimate and admissible as evidence."

At the end of both sensor feeds during the Starbase 339-A invasion, the death count total read at one. "Ah... Ethel... It seems we did lose one after all..." She rested a hand on her comrade's shoulder in sympathy, as the hulking petty officer looked devastated to have inadvertently caused the loss of a life in the pursuance of her duties.

Magnus then brought his gavel down. "As both members that took part in this have admitted to the destruction, and have provided the evidence of their own actions, and are apparently in the crew of the Baroness Schwein von Alcott, it is the judgement of this court that she and her crew are to make reparations to the Baroness Seinae Nei'rrh regardless of the outcome of this Tribunal."

He then slammed his gavel again before motioning towards Enalia's side of the hall. "Princess Enalia Telvan, It is now your turn to present your opening argument and any evidence you may have."

"You can do this, Enalia," Rita Paris said in rapid hushed tones, trying to bolster her Captain's spirits. "Speak from your heart, say what you know to be true, and prove to these people that you are still THEIR princess, as well as Starfleet. You are here literally fighting for them... you can do this. I believe in you."

Clemens took special care to run a full structural scan of the area the Captain was about to utilize for her speechifying.

Enalia flashed her piratical smile for just a moment as reassurance. This was what she'd been practicing for. The Trill woman then stood, regal and matronly - a pillar of marble as the lighting focused on her. "Thank you, your honor."

"Ladies and Gentlebeings of the assembled Tribunal... my family. Since my mother's

retirement, when I took command of the USS Hera and was able to dedicate a portion of my time to indirect management of the fleet, you have known my policies and my love of freedom."

"Many of you watched me grow up. Some of you knew me as crewmates before my time in Starfleet. Thus you know that I pride myself on certain values. Integrity. Excellence in all I do. Service to freedom of all. This is why I wear this uniform with pride. Not to sully the family name, or to spit in the face of tradition; but to bolster it with something new."

"To build upon our traditions, and take us into a new era. The days of Matriarchal lineages are coming to an end. If my mother is too blind to allow us the freedom to enter the future with our own passions and our own free will, then she has no place being in power."

"It is true that what finally resulted in this Tribunal is that she wanted a biological grandchild from my genetic code... My AUGMENTED genetic code. Of which she has no backup, because I destroyed it. She killed the doctor that performed the augmentation shortly after my sister was born. Shortly before I joined Starfleet, I destroyed the samples my mother had of both myself and my sister... just in case."

"But now she wants a new heir. One more to her liking. One that she can control, and train to be just like her and drive this family to its grave like she tried to do. Let us recall some of her titles for a moment. Some of her proudest moments in life."

"Scourge of Tortuga. She got that title by wiping out thirteen rogue pirate groups in one week. She lost half of her own fleet in the process. Devil of Getlik three. She took seven ships and bombarded a colony from orbit because they owed her money. The planet still hasn't recovered enough atmosphere to sustain life. Rat Whore Bitch. The Klingons gave you that one, didn't they? I could go on, but your kill count is higher than even I can believe at times and I'm your daughter."

"That being said, I'm here not just as the Artan Princess and the Daughter of Arenara Artan. I am here as a Starfleet Captain." Straightening her jacket, Enalia recomposed herself, the momentary emotion in her eyes becoming as of steel for the evidence she was going to drop.

"As such, it is my duty to present evidence that Arenara Artan has colluded with the

Orion Syndicate against Baroness Seinae Nei'rrh. Furthermore, we have proof that she attempted to assassinate Baroness Schwein von Alcott and Baroness Mnhei'sahe Dox, a Lieutenant aboard the USS Hera, the latter of which resulted in the murder of one of my officers. On top of that, significant espionage was performed in the cybernetics of our allies in this tribunal, as well as the near fatal poisoning of several of the Baronesses closest to my personage."

Enalia straightened up and motioned for Commander Paris to transfer the evidence.

Once again, Sam made certain that there were no unduly-stressed areas in the area his friend and Executive Officer was utilizing.

Standing, Rita didn't bother introducing herself. Either they knew who she was or it didn't matter to them, and either way, this had nothing to do with her. Instead she was here to serve as the member of the Captain's crew to deliver the evidence and corroborate it with witnesses and evidence, so she dove right in.

"With the Pirates of the Crab Nebula program, when Baroness Sarika transferred the latest mod to Baroness von Alcott, both were infected with cyber espionage that would offer false input, falsified recording, and according to the USS Hera's chief medical officer, 'a thing has been outlawed in every civilized system- a virus which overloads cybernetic components, then goes on to assault and overload the nerves connected to the device', as you will see from the medical report."

As she spoke, Paris tapped out the data backing up what she was saying, complete with sensor logs and trideo of snippets of the scenario. This was no speech- this was a multimedia presentation of evidence.

"When Baroness von Alcott offered to help the crew of the USS Hera learn swordplay by participating in her leisure program, which I understand is a standard game of 'capture the flag' amongst the Artan family, installing the program into a holodeck on the USS Hera then become deliberate sabotage of a Federation starship. Not by the Baroness von Alcott," the curvaceous commander clarified, "who was the unwitting carrier, but by the author of the customized modified program who introduced it to her systems."

"The holodeck safeties were shut off, and the numbers of opponents were plentiful. Had it only been the Baroness, she still might have fought her way through- she is Schwein von Alcott, after all." The crusading commander paused at that, allowing time for some

chuckling and muttering from those who knew Schwein by reputation or personal experience, who could attest to the supersoldier's strength, stamina and skill. "Or at least she might have, save for the visual virus that spiked a needle into her brain and crippled her. How did that go?"

Tapping a button on her PaDD, the broadcast went out across the Tribunal, in an amplified voice unmistakable as that of the Queen Regent of the Artans. "I hope you enjoy the modifications to this, you fleeter swine. Not even you could survive this little trap."

"Does she wring her hands and twirl her mustache while she says things like that? One wonders," Paris paused to let that one settle in before moving on, pointedly ignoring the daggers being glared at her from the Queen Regent's box. "Of course, we have verification of that vocal print as a match, as you can see. According to United Federation law, sending a program designed to kill someone by locking them in a holodeck and turning off the safeties is classified as attempted murder, unless it works."

"Objection," said the matriarch calmly.

"No proof of the source of the program modification nor the virus! This is a baseless accusation!" came the call from Captain Artan's box, from the man known as Mudd.

"Don't be so hasty! The proof is coming, so keep your pants on, Terran," Paris dismissed, to a few more chuckles from the gallery even as Mudd himself looked a bit surprised to be called out.

"So, given that the virus does trace back to the Queen Mother, that officially racks up 6 counts of attempted murder; 4 of whom were Starfleet officers. But let's not dwell, we've got a lot more ground to cover. Baroness von Alcott, do you corroborate this story, and I believe the chain of evidence passes next to you for the cyberware espionage charge?"

Standing, the augmented human pirate straightened her jacket, looking none too pleased with what she had been hearing from her side of the court about the man named Mudd. "Ja, I confirm and submit my own cyber-logs and recordings of the events."

"What was supposed to be a fun and entertaining group training exercise, turned into a near lethal simulation," The platinum-tressed pirate eyed the crowd with her one organic eye. "With the anti-Borg virus in my cybernetics, I would not have made it through the

extended program alone. Even if I had made it to the end goal of the bridge of the Bloody Rose, the simulation was programmed to end after several minutes by venting the bridge into space, after those taunting words were spoken from the relocated treasure chest."

"Such hospitality," Paris snarked.

## Chapter 3 - Confessions

"There was rather an extended look at the bridge of the *Bloody Rose* once we could freeze the program and look around. It was quite the act of vanity to use a holo of her actual bridge, but we were quite appreciative for the opportunity to look around it."

"If your collected graces will note, here is that particular holo image, complete with an analysis of the stations. I present to you, the bridge of the *Bloody Rose*, for those unfamiliar with it." Winding up for this one, Rita couldn't suppress a bit of a wicked close-lipped smile, even as she could sense the rage building from the irate pirate queen. Showing off her bridge to everyone present was a bit of a violation, and Paris knew it fully well.

The pirate queen wasn't the only one who knew how to push buttons.

"Now, on that diagrammed tour of the bridge of the *Bloody Rose*, you'll see a device marked as 'Agony Device', which is a Terran invention from the Mirror Universe. If you are not familiar with that term, here's the Fedepedia page, complete with a description of their traditional 'Agony Booth', which causes every nerve ending in the body to suddenly register pain, on a sliding scale of intensity. It can and has killed people by destroying their will to live, through inescapable, inexorable, unbearable agony." The ancient astronaut peered at the crew that accompanied Captain Arenara Artan, and a few of those minor officers at the back shuddered a bit when she spoke of the device.

Clearly, they had felt the effects of the device themselves.

Which, while it was confirmation of their theory, was still a shame. Rita would really liked to have been wrong about that, and she felt badly for those poor officers. The extradimensional explorer's eyes flickered to Az'Prel, to lock eyes with the woman who knew the horror of such a device intimately. Then she gazed across the assemblage of pirates and crews, letting that explanation sink in for a few seconds.

"This model is an extrapolation on that base principle, and instead uses the starships SIF generators to simply inflict the 'agony' effect at will, upon anyone and everyone

simultaneously, anywhere across the ship. It's a leap forward in the technology, and a brutal abomination that shows you just what sort of a captain sits in that chair. They are known and highly illegal in Federation territory, bearing a charge akin to a war crime. Which would make the inventor of such technology a war criminal, Mr. Mudd."

The crowd went into excited gasps and murmurs at all of that, particularly as the information was digested by the assembled Baronesses and crews. While Rita didn't have a shred of proof, guessing who built the new and improved agony booth didn't take a kolnahr to figure out. The noose was already tightening, and there might just be time for an investigation and interrogation and she strongly suspected a plea bargain. But that was then, this was now. *Time to redirect again- change course now that you've tacked into the wind, sailor.*

"Baroness Sarika, being made aware of the situation with Baroness von Alcott led you to a bit of an unpleasant discovery about your own cyberware, of which you also have logs and evidence to corroborate?" Paris redirected to the next link in the chain of evidence, building the case methodically, but most certainly without tedium.

Standing and leaning against her own balcony railing, it was obvious that she was pissed. "Indeed I do, as well as a confession! Since the Tribunal had been declared, I had been bothered by headaches and pain. I thought it was due to the stress because my workload had shot up considerably and my cybernetics are not known for their stability at times."

"However, when I was escorted to a meeting with the Princess aboard the USS Hera and entered a dampening field, explaining that Schwein had been hit with a nasty bit of malware, I allowed myself to be scanned for such things. Much to my surprise, in one of my arms and eyes, a small AI virus was festering in them, causing not only my headaches, but changing my actions and what I saw on the fly!"

"When I returned to my own holdings, I investigated this further on my own and found that those aboard the Hera were correct in assuming that the main virus was in my charging station. I immediately had a new one made and quarantined the old one for these proceedings and launched an independent investigation into how it was delivered."

It turns out that my second... The man that I trusted for four years... Had been bribed and turned to the Queen's side with the promise of being given my Barony!" Sarika then motioned for her former second to be brought out for the confession.

Two large guards escorted the effeminate man in stocks to the center of the room where he was forced to kneel before Sarika's balcony and repeat his confession. "It was me! She paid me to plant that virus! Four months ago, she paid me in ores and promised me your barony. I kept up our daily challenges just as a joke at that point."

As Sarika glared down at the man, she obviously wanted to murder him right then and there. Instead, when she spoke, there was venom in her voice. "I believe there is still a Klingon bounty on your head. If Starfleet doesn't want you, I'll be turning you into them."

She then motioned that he be removed. As he was dragged from the hall, it dawned on him how much he messed up and he screamed and yelled for Sarika to please forgive him, but she turned her back, her cybernetic arms clenched to herself as a soft murmur went through the other balconies wondering if the others present had similar viruses.

That's when Enalia stepped in, softly shushing them. "Ladies, if you were experiencing headaches or other abnormal physical signs of fatigue from your cyberware, then you were infected. I have had the antivirus AI of the USS Hera extend itself to the fortress at our arrival and apply the antivirus in as many places it could."

"According to reports, there is now no sign of infection in any system connected directly or indirectly to the Fortress for the past three days." She then motioned for Rita to continue as she still had the most important of the evidence to present.

"Thank you, Captain. Next on the list of charges is the attempted assassination of Baroness Mnhei'sahe Dox, or *Lieutenant Dox*, as she's known on the Starship Hera," Paris added, unable to pass up the opportunity for identity reinforcement. "In amongst the crates of welcoming gifts from various baronesses was an assassin droid, armed with a particularly virulent toxin, which is quite distinctive. During the course of the assault, one Ensign Rafael Paulson was murdered, and Lieutenant Dox barely managed to overcome the assassin and escape with her life."

"The droid was traced back to one Theran T'Werska, and when a team was dispatched to bring him in for questioning, the Starfleet Security officer accompanied by Baroness von Alcott encountered hostile resistance. He was brought in, and stands prepared to testify today, knowing full well the penalties that he faces according to UFP law." Paris paused to offer a nod to Petty Officer Jablonski, who made the call and the prisoner was

escorted into the room flanked by a pair of Amazonians in Starfleet gold uniforms.

“While there has been talk of clemency in exchange for testimony, no deal has been struck with Federation prosecutors. I want that established now, as Starfleet is determined to bring full transparency to these proceedings,” Paris explained. “There are far too many systems currently monitoring the perpetrator for anyone but a true sociopath to effectively lie at this point, and many of you possess your own means of divining truth from falsehood- so let’s hear that testimony. Mister T’Werska, please address the Tribunal and tell your story.”

Stepping forward was a tall Romulan man, looking to be somewhere in his mid-twenties. He was dressed in a neutral gray one-piece prisoner's uniform. His hair was the standard Romulan bowl cut, with pointed bangs framing the forehead ridges more and more common among their people. From across the room, Mnhei'sahe Dox's already rapid Romulan heartbeat quickened and she felt her blood run hot.

This was the first time she had gotten to look at the man that was responsible for the death of Ensign Paulson, and the man that very nearly caused her own death not long ago. This was the first time that she had even heard his name. She squinted, shooting daggers across the room at the man as her mother put a calming hand on the young officer's thigh.

His voice was steady and controlled as he spoke. "My name is Theran t'Werska. For 6 years I have served on the crew of Baroness Sienae Nei'rrh as an engineer. 4 months ago, I was called into a secret council meeting with Julla Poam, the Queen Regent's second, to discuss the matter of the upcoming tribunal and the appointment of a Starfleet Officer to the position of Baroness, in order to sway votes in the favor of Princess Telvan."

"In that meeting, I was given instructions to procure a Scorponex 7 Assassin droid, and instructed to provide this droid, disguised as a pendant, in a box with the name of the Baroness' maternal grandmother as a gift. I was provided with a down payment and the funds necessary to purchase the droid with the remainder to be delivered upon completion. Whereupon I would be transferred to the Romulan Refugee Station 339-A to be extracted and paid." t'Werska's attention was focused directly at Captain Magnus as he made a concerted effort to avoid eye contact with the Queen Regent, who was seething in her ornate throne.

Across the room, Dox scoffed quietly. For all her anger, he was little more than a delivery boy. It was the seething Queen Regent that truly deserved her rage, which she worked overtime to keep in check.

“Thus we expand the charges to include the Conspiracy to commit murder in regards to the Pirates of the Crab Nebula incident, as well as the attempted murder- another charge- of Lieutenant Dox, as well as the murder of Ensign Paulson.” Paris was trying to be dispassionate as she went through the charges, but only partially succeeding. “Now, there was that poisoned Saurian brandy as well as a few more tainted bottles that were found. As that evidence has been detailed by others already, we will just mention that too is attempted murder and conspiracy, again, another eleven counts.”

“By the same token, the shuttlecraft that attempted to suicide-bomb the USS Hera’s flight deck, killing Lieutenant Junior Grade Alex Strider, Chief Petty Officer C’huk, and Lieutenant Marston, who we believe may have been biochemically compromised. As yet, we’ve no proof to tie that crime to the Queen... but the timing is a bit coincidental.”

“OBJECTION! Speculation,” the Queen of the Artans called out, fed up with being stalled and hearing her name besmirched by the truth. But before the magistrate could rule, Paris held up her hands.

“Withdrawn, your honor. Let’s instead look to the collusion between Arenara Artan and the Orion Syndicate, shall we? That is in no way shape or form speculation, after all.” Having chummed the waters with the minor charges, Rita had saved the best for last. Many of her crimes listed up til now might be considered piratical hi-jinks or offenses that earned a fine from the pirates. But this one broke the one unforgivable rule of the Artan family fleet- to consort with the enemy.

"You see, there was that raid on the Romulan Refugees mining colony at Dre'lax by Orion slavers. A brutal attack that was so precise, it was almost as if they had inside information. Now, those slavers were driven away by the surprisingly timely arrival of Arenara Artan's forces, right after the attackers had successfully hauled away an entire year's worth of minerals and ore. Frau Blucher, the former chief engineer of Princess Telvan's own starship, the Manticore, was in command of the defense of that colonies and was lost right as the attack began. Not from outside fire, but from a plasma bolt to the back of the head. We'll get back to her tragic loss in a moment, though."

"This attack occurred immediately after the public announcement of Captain Telvan's

request for a Tribunal," Paris explained. "Timed as a distraction, as well as the sealing of an unholy alliance, complete with payoff to the slavers. Which might sound like a fanciful tale or an outrageous accusation... unless you had seen proof. Mrs. Dox, I believe you have something to share with the Tribunal?"

From their separate booth halfway across the room, Mnhei'sahe Dox turned to her mother and gave a nod, giving her the floor. It was the most minor of adherences to the pretense of parliamentary procedure in play among the pirates, but Baroness Dox offered it all the same.

Rising with a PaDD in hand, Jaeih Dox stepped to the front of the balcony, nodding first to her daughter then to Commander Paris. For them, she had the slightest of smiles that immediately vanished as she looked out across the Tribunal chamber. The terse elder Romulan woman looked around the room with thinly veiled contempt on her face and truncated the expected introduction with a blunt and slightly sarcastic, "You all know me."

Pulling up her PaDD, Jaeih Dox called up the file, which appeared on every evidence screen PaDD in the room for all to see. "Procured from the Aehallh Station, time-stamped Stardate 59331.13. Observe." She spent no time with any speeches, choosing to let the evidence and her tone speak for itself. As the recording began to play, she turned slowly to lock eyes with the Queen Regent. It was a hateful glare, making it abundantly clear that any former friendship between the two women was long gone.

One the screens was a meeting room on the Aehallh station. Standing behind a long, empty conference table was a tall, stockily-built jade-skinned humanoid male with thinning, close-cropped blue-black hair clad in a black military-style jacket. Flanked by two burly green-skinned security officers, there were audible murmurs from the assembled Baronesses as they all immediately recognized the man as Joran Herran'dor. After all, he was well-known to be a high-ranking member of the ruling council of the Orion Syndicate, and a dangerous operative.

Across the room, the doors whooshed open creakily, and Arenara Artan entered. Flanked by two security officers of her own, in the holo she was dressed much more subtly than she was here today, clad in a tight black leather jacket rimmed with gold-pressed latinum trim and buttons.

After eyeing each other for a long moment, the two grinned slightly as Arenara crossed

the room and offered her hand.

As the two individuals who were supposed to be mortal enemies shook hands smiling on the screen, in the tribunal chamber there was an eruption of loud gasps of shock and outrage. Then the gasps began turning to first murmurs, and then into a cacophony of increasingly angry voices as the outrage of the Tribunal made itself heard.

“OBJECTION! This is obviously a fabrication-“ the Queen Regent began, before she was cut off by Captain Magnus, who brought his down, slamming the gavel hard.

“ORDER!” the commanding voice of the pirate lord rang out, the growl of menace in his voice making it abundantly clear just how angry he himself was in the moment. Magnus struggled to maintain order in the formal Tribunal, even as the evidence onscreen indicated that the entirety of the Artan family of pirates had officially been sold out to their worst enemies.

“**THERE WILL BY THE GODS BE ORDER**, if I have to stun the lot of you to have it! You will SIT and be SILENT, and let the evidence be heard!”

The last few words were directed specifically at the captain and crew of the Bloody Rose, and raw emotion was clear to all in the raw, roaring voice of the pirate lord, who was practically shaking with barely-restrained rage himself.

As the individual balconies returned to order, the tone of the room had become an electric thing. Whatever was yet to transpire, what they had seen thus far was a massive betrayal of the Artan code, and rather strongly held personal opinions were already bringing sneers and snarls to faces across the hall, and hands to the hilts of weapons.

"TACTICAL SYSTEMS ENGAGED" came the overlay in Clemens' vision field, in blood red lettering just out of the main field of his enhanced vision. "F.R.I.D.A.Y. Initiative auto-engaged." Sam nodded slightly, and blinked to clear the overt messages down to status indicators along the base of his view. He quietly noted that the augmentations were a comfort, rather than a distraction, at this point.

As the footage continued, Arenara produced a PaDD and handed it to the Orion slaver and spoke. Her recorded voice echoed through the deathly silent room as her treason was laid bare.

“Master Herran'dor. What an absolute pleasure to see you again, I must say,” the pirate queen practically purred the words, honeyed venom that she was sharing with one of the most wanted men in the galaxy. Particularly amongst the Artan pirate fleet.

“I am pleased to find you... healthy, and clearly your... coffers have not been suffering thanks to our... alliance.” As she stood before the slaver, Arenara’s hand traced delicately across the forearm of the verdant-skinned slaver, who turned his hand over to take hers in his own as they spoke.

It was a gesture that, to nearly everyone present, suggested... intimacy.

"You honor me with your presence, Queen *Regent*." Herran'dor Gon leaned just a tiny bit on the word 'regent', the slightest of power plays. "Your messenger implied that this was a matter of some urgency. Should I perhaps presume that this has something to do with the tribunal your wayward daughter has just called forth? Duel to the death, you pirates are all so passionate about your traditions..."

“How very perceptive of you... I see that bad news travels fast in the underworld, the pirate queen admitted, sliding her rear onto the table to sit quite close to the slaver lord of the Kolari. Lowering her voice, she brought it down to a murmur which would be hard to hear from any distance. Fortunately, the room's sensors were excellent, and not a word was lost.

"Yes... Enalia, despite my gifts and guidance, is refusing to comply with the simplest of requests which means absolutely nothing to her. But so determined is she to deny me that she's willing to challenge me for the throne. While I appreciate determination, this headstrong position she is taking is... inconvenient. Of course, it's bad news for both of us, if you consider it." The raven-haired pirate leaned in closely with a grin spreading across her face as she shared bad news.

"Should Enalia take the throne, our business dealings would most certainly come to a halt, because she'd sooner turn you over for the reward, or just because it's her duty or some such notion. So without me, all of the advance warning of raids, intelligence on plum targets for you to pursue and shared profits between us would be no more." The buxom middle-aged woman sat back up and spread her hands to her sides, palms up.

"Instead we would return to the adversarial and destructive relationship we once shared. Which only the hardliners of my organization still desire. The elder Baronesses are too

old and tired to be chasing about the galaxy, and the youngsters are all filled with righteous fury, never realizing the simple adult truths of the universe. Not truly understanding profit... or loss."

"Profit trumps whatever code they delude themselves to live by or whatever honor they think their actions glean It's all just pomp and pageantry, an excuse to play dress-up and fulfill childish fantasies monogamist the stars." Sliding off the table the leather-clad pirate queen in the designer coat took a few steps away, then looked back over her shoulder at the Orion Syndicate gangster.

"While they play their shadow games of chasing slavers, the slavers stay one step ahead... unless they displease their master. In which case they won't have long to regret it when the bloodthirsty privateers catch them. Like your man Alejandro Quirz... whom we fed to the dogs, you and I." Naming an infamous slaver who had been killed by Bloody Batra while resisting capture nearly five years ago, gasps and muttering radiated out like shockwaves across the tribunal.

In that moment it was established that this betrayal was not new- the timeline of betrayal was much longer than anyone could have imagined, and that was assuming that was as far back as it went. But still the recording continued, pouring forth damning evidence from the lips of the guilty party herself in a confessional she had never intended for public consumption.

"Enalia would end all of that. She's already left Magnus in charge, with his stick up his arse all the way to his brain. Left to their own devices they would dispatch my fleet to hunt slavers and root them out, to eliminate pirates who prey on the merchant fleets, and bring 'honor' to themselves," Arenara's lips curled into a scornful sneer at the mention of the word. "Honor to the Artan fleet. What does she know of honor? The willful wench who ran off to join Starfleet, of all things."

"So..." the slave master said with a slight smirk, sitting down on his side of the conference table and tenting his fingers. "As you say, it is in our best interest to keep you where you are, then. And obviously, you have some need of my services, to ensure that this transfer of power does not come to pass? Am I correct?"

"My daughter, ever the impetuous strategist, has maneuvered circumstance to her advantage. She's recruited the daughter of an old ally, and granted her a Barony. Now she has another vote under her thumb, and it's connected. Years ago the Baroness Sienae

Nei'rrh led a group of reunificationists, a Romulan refugee corps, as it were. Jaeih Dox smuggled them out, so Nei'rrh owes her that whole debt of honor thing. Enalia's elevated her brat to pull at Siena's heartstrings to sway her vote. She'll spin them one by one."

Pacing slowly about the room, the sensor view shifted as it apparently followed the movement of the people in the room. "Schwein's her lapdog- if I can slaughter her little piggie, that will throw her off guard, and give me an advantage. Do you have any particularly nasty viruses for cybernetic eyes?"

"Visual code- they scan it, they've accepted the virus onboard their systems. You can plant it in a holoprogram, make it flash and they'll fall for it every time. We use it on prisoners, particularly liberated Borg, to make them behave when they're in transit between transactions." The slaver spoke casually of making sentient life chattel- yet it bothered Arenara clearly not at all. Waving his hand dismissively, the Syndicate sinister offered his simple guarantee. "No matter how mighty, no one can do much while they feel like they've got an icepick jammed into their eyesocket."

"Name your price, but I'll want a package deal on this. I need an override for the cybernetics- a virus I can introduce that will let me edit the input and the logs. Hacking it on the fly, scanning for recordings I want edited or erased, create... blind spots for them. Anything like that?"

As everyone was watching the remarkably overconfident confession play out, Commander Rita Paris looked over to the Baroness von Alcott's balcony, catching the eye of Jablonski, who was watching the viewing box of the Queen Regent of the Arta Fleet. The petty officer glanced over to Paris for orders, who simply nodded and cocked her head slightly toward the grand balcony next to the Captain's. The message was clear, and Jablonski was not paying attention to the case. The surprised spacegirl realized, as she looked, neither was anyone in the balcony with the Baroness von Alcott's 'crew' watching the evidence.

They were watching the crew of Arenara Artan, patiently awaiting trouble from the criminals whose deeds were being laid bare.

Catching the eye of Hera, Rita caught a silent 'be careful'. Nodding, she turned her attention back to the rest of the Tribunal, to watch the reactions of the assembled Baronesses.

"So the virus and the transmitter are in the charger, which is the only external part of their systems. They'll run antivirus til the stars go out, and they'll never realize they've still got it. Price they pay for being unnatural, eh?" The green-hued humanoid smiled, a wide and wicked thing as he spread his arms wide.

As she strode slowly around the far end of the conference table, Arenara cocked an eyebrow. "I happen to know you're not... all natural."

"Well, that's because I'm an abomination. But I've embraced it."

"The rest I deal with through politics or poison... the pirate way. Thank you for your time, Master Herran'dor..." The pirate queen made to depart, but the slaver made a clicking noise that caught her attention.

"What you need is a show of strength. You need to remind them all that you are their protector, their avenging angel. A mighty force amongst the stars to be reckoned with. You need to reinforce their loyalty to you, the woman who is here taking care of the family business instead of playing Starfleet. The Federation. So much hypocrisy they had to invent replicators to keep it all fed."

"The Romulan Refugees mining colony at Dre'lax are the purview of Baroness Nei'rrh," Arenara slung a small tablet down the table, sliding to a stop before his hand. "it's defenses are managed by the chief engineer of the Manticore, Frau Blucher. Blucher serves me well, but her loyalty is to Enalia. She needs to be silenced at the beginning of the attack, so that Nei'rrh can see that I am her one, true Queen and savior."

"It's all there- access code rotations, manpower, sensors, blind spots. You can keep all you can carry, just be mostly gone by the time I arrive. That should do nicely... thank you so much for volunteering. Such an accommodating business partner."

"Would you like to see just how accommodating I can be?" the slaver asked as a lascivious and cruel expression settled onto his face.

"I've a few minutes before my shuttle returns..." Arenara Artan smiled then, the smile of a cobra eyeing a fat mouse with a broken leg.

At which point, the video paused. PaDD in hand, Jaeih spoke. Her harsh raspy voice, much like her daughter's, echoed across the silence. "It keeps going. The Queen regent

has betrayed this family. Betrayed my bond-sister, Baroness Nie'rrh. Betrayed her Chief engineer, Frau Blucher. Betrayed the most central Tennant of the Artan family Creed. Do with this what you will, but let it be just."

With that, the former Romulan smuggler slapped the PaDD down in front of her, nodded to Captain Magnus and back to Commander Paris and Enalia before sitting back down.

Clemens just shook his head, silently but overtly expressing the physical version of '...that ain't **right**...'

The reactions in the room were initially of stunned silence, then of angry betrayal from several of the Baronesses. Bloody Batra looked ready to leap over her railing, her sword drawn and one foot already on the railing, screaming obscenities in at least a dozen languages bad enough that it would make a Klingon blush with shame as she was held back by all three of her crew.

The Romulan Baroness Sei'nae was relaxing peacefully and grinning like a cat that had finally caught a canary, her fingers interlaced in front of her somehow, despite the gargantuan seat cushion of a uniform jacket she was wearing that this time looked like an olive drab brick wall that had been splattered by orange drink by an insane asylum escapee. The red and gold medals lining the right breast area did nothing to help break it up.

The cybernetic Baroness Merelith was staring in shock at the evidence, trying to process it all. She was doing her best to keep up, but this bombshell was a bit much even for her justice oriented mind. The implications of it... Shaking her head, she set back to work analyzing every angle of the data.

The outraged and betrayed Captain Magnus, on the other hand, was finding his gavel useless for trying to bring order back to the court and was about to bring out the big guns- a system of air horns designed to drown out anything and everyone. Removing the safety cap from the button, he pressed and held it for three seconds, sending a long, loud blare through the room's intercom system, immediately silencing everyone.

Captain Magnus then rose and cleared his throat. "My apologies for the air horn. Now... Princess Enalia's sec... Ahem... First Officer? Commander Paris, I believe, still has the floor." He then motioned towards the Princess's balcony and sat back down, a grim look on his face.

All this time, Sonak observed the proceedings. Of all the assembly, he alone had not reacted to the blaring of the loudspeakers. The events unfolding since the start of this court and what they revealed of this society could have only led to this. He had even been expecting a phaser shot or a flash photon grenade to go off so as to restore order through a violent and loud surprise effect. Klingon judges used a powerful electrostatic spherical gavel to crash an assembly with a thunderous retort when an audience erupted during a tribunal. But the air horns used here were safer and even more efficient.

All creatures having the sense of hearing would instantly freeze in place when a sudden loud noise would happen; it was a basic physiological reaction. Even foreknowledge through logic, attentive observation and decades of self-mastery for an emotionless kolinahr master had barely allowed him to control this reaction in himself.

The emotionless kolinahr master leaned near Rita's ear. He chose to speak aloud instead of using his telepathic touch, so that his captain could also hear his words.

"It seems this kind of behavior is well known, if not expected within this society. We must be ready for much stricter, harsher and direct measures in the event of a more extreme crowd reaction; which at this point is also to be logically expected."

His hand lightly touched his communicator, suggesting to open a channel to the ship. The pretty prosecutor nodded subtly, briefly making eye contact with both Sonak and the captain, offering her acquiescence for the sensible course the somber scientist suggested.

## Chapter 4 - Chaos Erupts

"Speaking of the unfortunate Frau Blucher, may she rest in peace, another reason for her execution was a more long term strategic maneuver. You see, she would have dropped everything to leap to the Princess' aid were she to end up in trial by combat. So while the Manticore was in mothballs, and Frau Blucher was definitely not coming back, the time was also ripe for some subterfuge."

"As the engineer who knew the ship best was now murdered, no one else was likely to notice the thorium bomb with a remote detonator someone planted next to the warp core, guaranteed to cause a breach that would leave no trace of sabotage. The thorium bomb under the captain's chair, I must say, seemed like a bit of overkill. But better safe than sorry, right?" Paris snapped her fingers, then wagged it at the Captain's mother, as she was wont to do. "Oh, we also found the torpedo designed to lodge in the tubes to blow the magazine- nice touch, and you get points for multiple contingencies."

"But, unfortunately for you, Starfleet engineers are surprisingly thorough, particularly when they know they are looking for sabotage." Paris turned and offered a slight bow to Thex, for her diligence in combing over the Captains pirate vessel. "Well done, Lieutenant Commander sh'Zoarhi."

"Now, I will admit, this part? We can't prove she did this part- not yet. We don't have active sensor logs, and even once we find the agent, tracing the money of chain of command back to the Queen Mum over here isn't something we've managed to accomplish just yet today- we kind of just got here." Paris paused for a long breath before beginning a series of broadside volleys. "Baronesses one and all, you must admit, it just seems suspicious. Because why would anyone want to booby-trap Enalia Telvan's personal pirate vessel when she was out gallivanting around with Starfleet?"

"Only someone who knew they could get her captain aboard the Manticore, and get her to put out to space."

"Someone who planned to duel her, in the traditions of her people."

"OBJECTION! Speculation and poppycock-" the spider at the center of a very rapidly unraveling web began to thunder, but Paris was on a roll. She had an audience, she had all the proof the crew had gathered, she had the culprit and she could almost smell justice in the wind. Shouting down her opposition in the sharp, concise voice of command she had learned from the commanders of yore, Rita Paris would not be denied.

"Someone who was so afraid that even after all her plotting and scheming, she still didn't believe that she could win if it came down to a fair fight! So she stacked the deck just a little more in her favor, so she could simply murder her own daughter once she'd goaded her into a space duel whenever the urge struck her," Having abandoned any pretense of impartiality, she had the floor, and Paris was now winding up one of her patented impassioned speeches that might just win her an Emmy.

"Murder. Her own daughter. Sure, the rest of the crew too, a great loss, but I ask you- who goes to all of this trouble, manipulating and plotting and murdering and thieving and lying, only to set as their endgame 'if all else fails I'll blow you to hell'."

"Her. Own. Daughter."

"I don't know what sort of codes you pirates have about this sort of thing, but in the United Federation of Planets we call that, once again, conspiracy and attempted murder. Three counts, one for each bomb," Paris added with a cheery smile in the Queen Regent's direction. "No need to count in all the attempted murder charges for the number of crewmen- eventually the greater charge encompasses that."

"I do admit, again, we have not proven it was Arenara Artan who was behind the sabotage. After all, we only found the bombs an hour ago, and while we're very good, connecting the entire bomber to the rest of the conspiracy is probably going to take us a day at least." While she paused there, no one was laughing.

These were serious allegations, and Rita expected that Mommy Dearest was only sitting through it all because in the end, when she crushed this little rebellion, she would show that all the evidence in the world couldn't take her down. Which was only going to make her appear that much more invincible after she smashed up Enalia's starship.

"That concludes Captain Telvan's opening arguments and presentation of evidence, magistrate," the buxom blonde bombardier offered a nod of respect to Captain Magnus. "I thank you for your indulgence, and I swear by the stars from which all life is made, I

have spoken nothing but the truth."

The Starfleet siren couldn't resist taking that last dig at the embattled Queen Regent, as she shone a dazzling smile at the woman. Which was as close as she was going to come to making a rude gesture at the mother of Captain Telvan, who now had plenty of reason to dislike the old-school officer.

Which suited Rita Paris just fine, although against all logic, she hoped the woman would surrender peacefully. Reaching out with unerring precision, her hand sought that of Sonak's. *That... was something. I've never done anything like that before...*

*An excellent display of facts and evidence, his mind assured her. Hence the reactions it brought forth. In these circumstances and settings, a loud display of opposition is to be expected. This is much more a test for this society than it could ever be of you and us. Hence why we must always be cautious...*

Again, his finger touched his commbadge, to remind her that his channel to the ship was still open. Paris nodded in acknowledgement, and grinned at the sensible scientist. It felt good to be working together, watching one another's backs and improving on one another's plans, just like the old days.

With the bulk of the evidence presented, Merelith took a few minutes longer to process it all, but as she did so, and the data was reviewed in front of them, a murmur went through those assembled. Even Sarika was silent as she watched each piece processed. Eventually, Merelith looked up. "It all checks out. This is all untampered and admissible."

As Magnus raised his gavel to bang it once more, Enalia continued. "In that case, until this Tribunal is settled, by the power vested in me as a Starfleet Captain, I declare Treaty Hector Nine Seven Two Gala Bravo between the Artan Family and the Federation to be... in abeyance."

The twinkle in Clemens' eyes blossomed into a full-blown grin. But only for a moment, as he kept scanning the room, looking for clues in the faces in the crowd.

The large, battle scarred man with the gavel was too stunned to bring his gavel down for a moment, instead pausing in mid-air trying to figure out what to do. He didn't have to think too hard as the last of the swing votes had all changed in the last few seconds as

indicated by the terminal built into the desk before him. The votes were now twelve to two.

Narrowing his eyes, he wasn't fond of what he was about to do, but he knew he had to do it. Bringing his gavel down once more, he declared the vote. "Final vote is twelve to two. Considering the evidence I declare Arenara Artan a rebellious element of the Artan family and no longer representing the interests of the family at large. It is the judgement of this Tribunal that she and her allies be stripped of their titles, assets, and be turned over to Starfleet for..."

That was as far as he got before Arenara pulled off one of her pieces of jewelry and tossed it into the middle of the hall, resulting in a bright phosphorescent flash and the sound of steel and hidden weapons being drawn from Arenara's, Garan's and Terethis' balconies.

Sonak at this moment spoke into his combadge.

"Sonak to Hera; belligerence situation confirmed. Keep lock on; ready for red alert."

His logic and silent attentiveness had prepared him, and the ship, for just such a sudden violent outburst. His Vulcan third eyelid had protected him from the sudden glare of the exploding jewel. Thus, before anyone could even start a step toward the Starfleet group, he had already moved to place himself between his commanding officers and the threatening assembly, one hand ready to whip out his *anh woon* if needed. The other was tingling with the telepathic pulse of a ready Vulcan nerve pinch.

"Hera waiting for orders," he announced to Enalia and Rita. "Crew and all transporters ready."

As the room went white, from her balcony, Dox's first reaction was to rise from her seat. But before she could move, she felt her seat pulled slightly back along the floor from behind.

As the flash faded, she saw her security escort, Petty Officer Liu, standing tall despite her somewhat diminutive stature. Standing at the edge of the balcony, she had interposed herself between Dox, her mother, and Az'Prel. The left arm of the fireplug butch in the bowl cut was raised in defense, clad in a brilliant bronze bracelet with a shimmering blue field of energy extending outward as a shield.

In the Captain's box, the Klingon Wil'l'Ams sisters had done the same, rising to put shields between the Queen Regent and the Captain and Rita. Mek'leth's drawn seemingly from nowhere, they stood bulwarking the calm yet fully prepared Vulcan officer, who moved with the surety of a starship commander himself.

In Baroness von Alcott's box, none could be seen past the massive petty officer, Ethel Jablonski. Interposed between the threat, the faithful guardian had stationed herself, even as a rather large and imposing sword had seemingly materialized in her great right hand. None would get past her, for she had a duty to uphold, a promise to keep- not a hair on Hera's head would be harmed while she drew breath.

In an instant, faster than it seemed possible, the impeccably trained security force of the USS Hera had erected in an instant sections of unyielding gold uniforms armed with blue energy shields to stand between danger and the crew of the U.S.S Hera.

His F.R.I.D.A.Y. systems already engaged, Clemens sped off in the direction of the flash. Almost immediately, there were brief reports coming from the opposite balcony and bleachers areas, accompanied by a series of loud \*CLANGS\*, as though a hammer were impacting metal, over and over, on the other side of the chamber. A groan of tortured metal sounded out, and the entire section dropped to the floor of the chamber in a twisted mass.

"AMAZONS! TO ARMS! Defend your charges!" Paris called out as she recovered from the flash, strobing after-images of the flash still blinding her delicate optic nerves. But her voice was clear and calm, and held no fear. Her Security officers were well-trained and determined, and had known this was a possibility. As for Rita herself, she knew Sonak was here, and while she might not be able to see, the implacable Vulcan suffered no such hindrance, and would allow no harm to come to his shipmates as they recovered.

From the balcony containing Lieutenant Dox and her group, the gold-clad security officer flicked her right wrist, and from the golden bracer emerged instantly the young Romulan pilot's twin Caitian ceremonial blades.

Petty Officer Liu handed the short, curved swords to Dox with the slightest of smiles. After all, the Hera's entire security force had trained extensively with Dox, and knew her capabilities as a fighter. "Lieutenant... the Commander though you might want these.

They've been modified to your specifications."

"Thank you, Miss Liu." Dox took the blades and pressed small buttons that had been installed in the hilts. In an instant, a thin blue shimmer flowed up each blade: force fields that created an impact controlled stunning force she had design into the otherwise deadly blades. Smirking as she spun the blades in her hands, Dox thought to herself, 'Rita really does think of everything.'

Turning back to her mother and Az'Prel, Mnhei'sahe watched as Jaeih pulled a small handle out of her sleeve and with a flick of her wrist, it extended into a two meter long bo-staff. Smirking up at her daughter, Jaeih commented with an unexpectedly playful bit of sarcasm. "Please. Your crew can take care of themselves, Baroness Dox."

As Az'Prel could fight with nearly any weapon and preferred unarmed, she was already ready. However, she slipped a pair of daggers free and threw them through the space Mudd was in just as he and Arenara's crew dissolved in transporter beams. The Vulcan rage that washed off of her was hard to contain, but she took a moment to do so, expertly flipping another pair of daggers into her hands.

From the other side of the chamber, there was singing, the tones blurred by the Doppler Effect...and a bit of Missourian twang...

*Rising the flag on the masthead ... The sails and the ropes' holding tight ... The gunners are eager to fire ... Well prepared for the fight ... Fight, flee or surrender ... Defeat you can't deny ... Better give up in the first place ... Or drown in the blink of an eye ... Gold, jewels and diamonds ... The price we'll have to claim ... Noble rogues are standing ... We'll never quit in the game ... We gonna ride the sea, we pray to the wind and the glory ... That's why we are raging wild and free ... Come sing along with the pirate song ... Hail to the wind, hooray to the glory ... We're gonna fight 'til the battle's won ... On the raging sea ... No way to move your deadlocked ... Nailed down by feu-eclair ... Lead is carrying fire ... Victory's noble and fair ...*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU7cfQ4oXoQ&fbclid=IwAR0temhdj6UghZdzrwT3Qe6qZajmbgcBSc-pAVT9riAnd3jXTp27fjnSLm0>

"Time to kick some pirate ass," Thex let out a slight sigh as she flicked the two bracelets

onto her wrist. Sidestepping slightly till she was apart from the group, the chief engineer of the starship Hera clasped her arms across her chest and yelled: "Protect!"

Within a second Thex was gone, and standing in her place was the fabled Armor of Achilles. The visor lifted slightly as she gave the group a wide and somewhat mischievous grin. "Okay, lets kick some ass."

With the renegade pirate Queen Regent and her allies already having beamed out past the transporter blockers, from numerous entryways mercenaries were flooding into the chamber armed with sabers and chemical propellant projectile weapons. The holo-maid system was also offline so there was no help from them.

The mercenaries themselves seemed to be part of the Wild Geese. A loose affiliation group that often hung out at Tortuga Station, looking for people hard up on their luck. Thus the sellswords flooding the great hall were a mix of just about everyone looking for a few quick credits.

Enalia's voice rang out in the chamber loud and clear. "These are mercenaries loyal to money! Stun and disable only! Magnus! Disable the dampening fields!"

"We'd love to oblige you, but the controls aren't responding!" Magnus reported as his crew were already working on just that.

"An EM Pulse should allow us to disable any nearby system," Sonak suggested just before a pair of mercenaries rushed them.

His anh woon flicked out of his waist like a living snake and, holding it by the middle, he entangled both of their raised wrists with the weighted ends of the long twin leather length. He slid on his back right between them, forcing both their firearms down as they shot, sending their discharges right at the ground; and then both of them a moment later, face first. His Vulcan strength made sure the impact was hard enough to knock them both out cold.

The next one to close in met his nerve pinch, not at the neck but right under the jaw, cutting off brain impulses to his body and sending him also crashing to the ground. Then the anh woon recoiled once more into his other hand.

As Lieutenant Dox watched the mercenaries flood the chamber, making a beeline to the

Captain, she worked out a basic strategy.

"Miss Liu. Our box is positioned Midway between the bulk of the advancing hostiles and the Captain. We're the closest. Let's flank them in. Narrow their path of attack. Force them towards Miss Jablonski and the Wil'I'ams sisters." Dox raised her weapons and began moving to leap the meter down to the main floor of the hall. It was the same basic strategy the Baroness von Alcott had trained Dox and Paris in on the holodeck facing simulated zombies months ago now.

"Aye, Lieutenant. Stay behind my shield as much as possible." With that, the group of four leapt from their box to the floor and moved to meet the oncoming hoard. Liu blocked incoming projectile fire while the Romulan Mother-Daughter pair moved to meet the raised swords of the mercenaries.

With a flash, the shielded blades of Dox's swords blocked the oncoming swords and the battle was joined by the four women who began incapacitating the mercenaries. With her well trained technique, Dox blocked a strike with one blade while making contact with the other under the attackers defenses. But instead of a blade slicing flesh, the field flared and the attackers fell back, stunned by an electric discharge.

On the other side of Liu's shield, Jaeih was doing much the same, if a bit more brutally, jabbing hard with her staff to disable the oncomers.

The displaced Vulcan, Az'Prel, had all but vanished, her daggers cutting weapons belts and pants belts alike as she moved through the throng of invaders almost unseen, yet staying near her charge of Lieutenant Dox.

But the strategy was working, as the bulk of the advancing conscripts and roustabouts were being forced into a more narrow attack path where their numbers had less power.

With one flank of the pressing mercs being held down by the ship's team, a grin spread over the Andorian's face as she turned to the others. A group of Gorn, Klingons, Remans and some nasty looking species with four arms glared menacingly at the armored Andorian.

"Shall we dance, boys and girls?" Thex said as wings erupted from the back of the armor. A few of the faces were puzzled for the brief second before a sound not heard in millennium filled the great hall of the Artan fleet, as Thex sped towards them colliding

with the group.

The Andorian juggernaut heard one of the Gorn's primary ribs collapse under the weight of her impact as she went to town on them. She heard a few fist and weapons strike the armor, many breaking in the process judging by the screams of pain and sounds of men cursing filling her ears.

The 24th century bearer of the legendary Armor of Achilles moved as gracefully as if she wore nothing but dancer's silks, despite being clad in such unbreakable armor as she dodged, punched, wove sinuously and high kicked her way through the mob.

"I have this flank dealt with... is everyone else okay?" They called into her commbadge as she worked the crowd, secure in her invulnerability, men swarming her trying to bring her down.

"The situation is not yet under control," came the calm reply of the deep voice of Sonak.

In contrast to the noisy, rib cracking, howling commotion around the Andorian, there was an eerie silence around the Vulcan as he displayed in full his mastery of Suus Mana, the martial art of telepathic combat from his homeworld. Devised many thousands of years ago in a time of utterly savage violence, it combined precise strikes with telepathic contact.

In those days, it was meant to destroy an opponent's central nervous system from without and within simultaneously. But in this day and age of logic driven, peaceful Vulcan, it was a most effective method of disabling even the strongest opponent with the merest touch. The moment the hands and feet of Sonak touched an opponent, that opponent fell noiselessly unconscious behind him as he already moved to a new one.

His anh woon also came into play, whipping at legs and arms to entangle them just long enough for his psionic touch to silence them. But now, some of the attackers became wary of his bewildering fighting prowess and opted to strike from a distance, using crossbows, spears and throwing blades he was hard pressed to dodge, unable to reach them.

"Ma'am, would we be offending tradition if Security-" Paris began before she stepped over to intercept a trio of crossbow bolts with a glowing blue energy shield, interposing it between the deadly missiles and her Captain. The round Grecian-style shield was

sufficient to stop the bolts, even as the bronze bracers she had worn beneath her dress uniform peeked out from under her sleeve. "Sorry. Would we be defiling tradition to use more than blades, Captain?"

There was a bit of a struggle going on inside of Enalia at the moment. She wanted to free her family of many traditions, yet she knew that there were some that just shouldn't be let go of just yet. After a careful moment of inner reflection, she had her answer, her voice rising so that at least the nearest of the Baronesses and her first officer could hear her clearly. "My mother has defiled these chambers and broken yet another of the laws allowing these heathens in here with firearms! Commander Paris, we stick to our honor as members of Starfleet! Melee weapons or unarmed only!"

"Aye ma'am, as you say," Paris acknowledged the Captain's order, then double tapping her comm badge to the Security channel, she issued her orders. "Security, hand to hand and melee weapons only- no firearms nor armor, shields up!"

## Chapter 5 Ballroom Blitz

Tapping her comm badge three times, Rita broadcast to everyone with a comm badge nearby, which included the pirates. "Protect the locals- Thex, you're on Baroness duty, port side of the hall. They're civilians and they need our help. Plus you can reach all of the balconies. Jablonski, Baroness, you two are to protect the starboard Baronesses. Chief Clemens, this would be easier if those mercenaries would stop pouring in, attend to that if you please. We'll hold this position, as it seems we have agro. Miss Dox, if your crew could help reinforce the Captain's position here?"

Tapping her comm between sword strikes, the red-headed Romulan officer replied, "Aye, Commander." Then, with a shout, she kicked off an advancing mercenary. "People. We're falling back to the Captain's position. We're adding some bricks to the wall between them and her."

In an immediate response, from the other side of the chamber, cutting through the din like a sonic lance, came a blood-curdling call, and it sounded somethin' like this: "Ah-yeeeeeeee-hawwwwwwwwwuh!!!!!!", altered eerily again by Dopplerization, echoing from every surface. A flash of Starfleet White could be seen, arcing upward.

The sound of hammer to anvil rang out, again, from the peak of the chamber, and a massive, thick tapestry came down from the ceiling, right on top of a large cadre of mercs, who were making a concerted push to overwhelm the Hera crew protecting Captain Telvan.

Muffled shouts turned into terrified grunts, as Clemens dropped from above, into the trash pile that used to be the bleachers. He came out of the pile carrying long, jagged pieces of steel in his hands, which he quickly proceeded to slam with astounding force into the edges of the tapestry, pinning it down like tent stakes, methodically, quickly trapping the henchmen, turning the mass into a giant plug, stalling the influx of invaders- literally causing a traffic jam at the aft entrance.

A grinning Clemens turned toward his comrades. He laid a finger aside his nose with a wink and a nod, and turned toward the aft hatch, launching into a leap that shot him over

the struggling pinned invasion force, landing in a tumble that took him to the docking ring hatch. He dove through it, body-slamming the remaining mercenaries trying to work their way into the room backward, through the hatch. He stood and kicked at someone on the other side of the hatch, before shoving his way through, yanking the hatch shut behind him with a \*CLANG\*.

As she spoke, Rita was planting those platform explorer's boots with the chunky heel in the faces of snarling mercenaries. While Enalia was laying about with righteous fury and terrible anger, waves of men were still rushing the pirate princess's balcony. While Rita Paris maintained the glowing energy shield and used it inexpertly, it was still doing a surprisingly good job of protecting her as the mod miniskirted mistress of trouble fought barehanded, not bothering with a sword. As a mercenary pointed a pistol at her, Rita snickered.

"Don't do it," she cautioned, then interposing the shield, stepping into the man to plug the barrel, which he proceeded to fire anyway. The impeded weapon exploded, causing him to run shrieking as a missing finger spurted blood. Somewhat sheepishly, the Starfleet siren called after the mauled mercenary. "To be fair, I did warn you..."

Moments later, another wave of mercenaries tried rushing Paris's position before a staff to the back the next took down the lead attacker. Jaeih Dox put her full weight into the blow as the massive humanoid squealed in pain. "Oh, do hush." The elder Romulan smirked as she nodded to Rita Paris. "Hello, Commander."

Breaking into a smile, the first officer of the Hera turned her attention back to their attackers. "Mrs. Dox, a pleasure to see you. Particularly considering the circumstances. How are you enjoying your assignment so far?"

Spinning around, the elder Romulan woman brought her staff down in a low arc, sweeping the legs of two attackers rushing them from behind. As the two mercs fell hard, the gray-clad woman kicked one in the face while whipping the tip of her staff against the head of the other, knocking both out cold.

"I can't remember the last time I enjoyed my work quite this much, Commander." Jaeih replied with a wry grin before returning to said work her daughter's side.

"Okay, people. Nobody gets past us to the Captain." Lieutenant Dox shouted out as she wrapped her shielded blades around a mercenary's neck from behind, pulling on it like a

noose as the stun field dropped him like a sack of wet potatoes.

Quickly the four women put their backs to the Captain's balcony and began pushing back to buttress their defense.

Death called for her pale horse, and offered her neighbor a lift, that was gratefully accepted, freeing up Hera's guardian to wreak havoc on the invaders. From there, she retreated directly with Hera in tow, having marked several of the mercs and pirates for death that night. She would be back for them soon enough.

Scrambling across the open center of the great hall to reach some of the embattled Baronesses, Jablonski lagged behind the much quicker Baroness Schwein von Alcott. Instead, she made up for it by forming a living obstacle to herd the scrambling invaders. Having snatched up a rather large 4-meter bench, she drove it before her like a snow plow, knocking down the invaders in her path.

Those that remained on their feet the burly bodyguard herded them forward until she made it to the other side of the hall, impacting the 14 men she'd trapped with a number of painful and long-healing injuries- but they would live, as would those whom she'd knocked over.

The Wil'T'Ams sisters worked in concert, switching between attack and defense fluidly. When by orders the Klingon women had begun training with shields, they had complained of the defensive nature of the weapon and shield style. With the addition of the featherweight energy shields they now wielded through miracles of interdimensional microcircuitry, the two women were taking a cue from their Commander. Both were fighting barehanded in concert with their shields, in scutum configuration to give the shield wall from which to operate in tandem as if they'd been doing it all their lives.

Disarming their opponents and using their weapons against them was a favored tactic, although occasionally they would render their opponent stunned, then take away their weapon to use it as a projectile on another approaching threat. Often the next missile hurled by one of the snarling and overjoyed security officers was the aforementioned stunned mercenary, in rather impressive displays of strength.

Hearing her friends words in her ear the Andorian nodded and took off to aid the friendly baroness. Grabbing a very confused Klingon woman merc to use as a missile the Andorian flung her into one of the crowd assaulting one of the baronesses before

charging in herself.

Having heard the order, Sonak switched tactics to use his ahn woon in it's most surprising and basic way; crowd control. Swinging both ends around him like a double flail, the weighted ends struck in every direction and angle, around shields and raised parries, whipping legs and heads. The Vulcan became a tornado of whirling motion, disrupting formations and charges, dispersing and throwing down people, effectively creating a void around the captain's position wherever he moved between her and their assailants.

The twirling of his long leathery bands went so fast, it even created some sort of a shield against projectiles, striking more than a few of them in mid-flight as they entered their uninterrupted double revolution.

It could not last forever of course; but neither would this conflict. He was buying time for the security force to act and for their company to escape to safety.

Meanwhile, as the mercenaries assaulted the balconies, behind them, Petty Officer Jablonski began assaulting the roustabouts pursuing Baroness von Schtupt. Mostly hiding and taking pot shots over her balcony, Jablonski scooped her up, as well as the three crewmen she'd brought with her, two of whom were wounded. Stacking them in a fireman's carry over both shoulders, Jablonski instructed them politely. "Hang on, ma'am. I'm Starfleet, and I'm going to get you to safety, so hold on."

With that, Jablonski leapt back down to the ground, landing on a climbing mercenary in the process and driving the wind from his lungs. Then she began charging like a rhino across the hall, showing men and mercenaries out of her way or simply bowling them over until she arrived below the Captain's balcony. Assisting a setup with Lieutenant Dox to make an opening, the bulky petty officer scrambled up to vault up onto the Captain's balcony. Shedding the four people she had carried to safety including the Baroness von Schtupt, Jablonski reported. "Two wounded, going out for more!"

Taking a running leap, the bulky bodyguard hurled herself at the tide of men below, the energy shield springing into place a meter radius around her writs, bright blue light flaring to light, highlighting the symbols and letters rotating on the shield as her bulk drove men to the ground in her passing, like a cannonball in humanoid form. Plowing ahead, shield held before her, she cut through the crowd just like a wedge.

It was about that time that Baroness Schwein von Alcott finally got spun up into the mix. For the first time, she was pissed and she had a target in front of her. Rather than one of her swords, she pulled out the slightly used cudgel that her fiance had given her. She let her rage at the Queen build for a moment, then raised it into the air and just yelled, electricity arcing from her to the nearby consoles.

Schwein then leaped down from her balcony in almost slow motion, the lightning following her and cascading across the mercenaries before her as she touched down, sending them flying backwards, stunned. She then almost casually walked over to Magnus's who was holding off a throng of attackers by wielding short swords while his crew used shields and sabers. As she walked, those brave enough to come near her, she casually swatted aside and sent flying. "Magnus! I'm getting you out of here!"

That was when Enalia called out over the throng, using the hall's PA system. "To me, my family! Form up on my position and together we shall drive these vermin back!" She then took up a random sword and raised it in the air and attempted to join in the fray herself.

Asa was holding an impromptu tourniquet closed on a downed middle-aged looking trill man wearing Artan family regalia consistent with the first officer on a smaller vessel, gripping the taut material of what had previously been the man's belt tight with their teeth while Asa worked to use their medical tricorder to heal what damage they could from a gushing wound on the mans leg.

After the tricorder whirred off, Asa spat the belt out and began tying the tourniquet off until better treatment could be provided, muttering all the while about, "Crazy ass pirates all honor bound to bleed out on the bleeding carpet instead of using energy weapons like normal freaking people."

Their work complete, Asa stood and offered a hand to the dazed-looking Artan officer, offered an encouraging smile and said, "Well, you heard her. I gotta rally. You need to find somewhere safe and hunker there until we can take care of you. Actually, you know what? " Not waiting for an answer, Asa slapped their comm badge and said, "Doctor Dael to Hera, Please beam the person I'm touching directly to sickbay as soon as possible. Dael out."

"There, now go rabbit until you are safely on the Hera." With that, the doctor took off at a trot, helping people to their feet as they went to converge on the location of their

Captain.

"As they bring the Baronesses in, your team clear a path for them, Miss Dox. Looks like it's time to play 'Queen of the Mountain'. If we add more people... should we move to the queen's box, Captain?" Paris was still improvising tactics and plans on the fly, as she tended to do in her own classic style.

"Aye, Commander." Dox replied quickly as her team of herself, Liu, Az'Prel and her mother moved from a defensive line to form an offensive wedge and began pressing forward.

Meanwhile, Magnus and his crew had clambered down off of their two-meter high balcony and joined Schwein. He then pointed with one sword at the ornate chandelier hanging over the room. "The transport inhibitor is in there. Think you can bring it down with your... Uh... lightning?"

Without a reply, the platinum-tressed woman spun up her slightly used cudgel and fired a large arc directly into the chandelier, causing it to flicker and go dark, leaving the only room lighting left to the wall panels. "Done," was her only reply as she led the group onward towards the Captain's balcony, picking up several groups of Baronesses on the way.

"Captain Telvan to the Hera, priority beaming immediately. Wounded directly to sickbay regardless of alignment." The Starfleet Captain then considered something else as the sound of Starfleet transporter beams could finally be heard. "This is the center of the fortress. If they're this far in and the holomaid system is offline, then the entire security system is compromised. They're an integral part of it, after all."

"If the entire security system is down, what does that mean for us, Captain?" Paris asked, high kicking a mercenary back off the balcony even as the remaining baronesses converged on the Captain's balcony.

"I'm betting more than these mercs are on the way," Enalia explained. "I'm betting that Syndicate shit has a fleet on the way in an attempt to take the fortress whole and they're just a distraction. We need to get the security back online before they get here."

She then tapped her comm badge. "Maru, do what you have to override the fortress systems and make sure the defenses are online. There's probably another virus in place."

After a soft meow and purr, the comm line went silent.

On group at a time, like a linebacker running a football but with stacks of people, Jablonski ferried the loyal Baronesses and their crews to the Captain's balcony, using the open path that was going forced wider by Lieutenant Dox's team's efforts.

The red-headed Romulan Officer had a slight smile on her face as she continued to fight her way through the oncoming waves of mercenaries. "Okay, people. Let's start pushing back. We need to give them time to get the system defenses back on-line."

Flipping her shielded twin blades backwards, Dox spun around slamming the hilt of one blade hard into the nose of an attacker, causing it to explode in a burst of red blood that sprayed across her already worn, white dress uniform. As he hunched over, squealing to grab his face, Dox kicked him over to knock down another two mercs with a loud shout and in spite of the chaos, she had the slightest of smiles on her face.

Clemens had been steadily working down in the docking bay area, after dispatching the few left on what was, for them, the **very** wrong side of the hatch. After confirming that the mercenary crews, having been invited in, after all, had simply locked up their ships and disembarked to the Tribunal area willy-nilly, he made great sport of the project of quickly slapping deadlock seals on each of the hired guns' ships, so they couldn't be used for escape or mischief. He then headed back to the Tribunal area at top speed.

After a text few moments as the mercenaries continued to push back against the Hera officers defenses, there came a soft purr and a meow over the comm frequencies. Captain Telvan flashed a crooked grin as she realized that it meant that the Maru had completed their task.

A second later, a phalanx of the stations holomaids reappeared. Surrounding the mercenaries, now with swords of their own drawn and clearly programmed in exactly how to use them. It was enough to give the hardest mercs pause as the violence stopped for just a moment. But a moment was all that Enalia Telvan needed.

"Gentlebeings! You're obviously in a bad situation! Your employer has been branded a traitor by this family and you are now fighting a decidedly losing battle where you will lose to the last man! On top of that, your employer will no longer be able to afford to pay you as her assets will shortly be seized by the Federation!" Enalia paused for just a moment for her words to sink in. "Join me for double the pay and help defend this

fortress or take your chances with her!" With that, she pointed to the Baroness von Alcott, whom still had some sparks sizzling off of her slightly used cudgel.

"Wha' abou' our wounded you done beam'd away?" one merc asked boldly.

"They are being treated with the finest medical services Starfleet has to offer and will be returned to you regardless of your decision," declared Enalia, trying to sweeten the deal.

One of the other mercenaries near the front of the group, with Lieutenant Dox's twin blades crossed in a defensive posture towards him, sneered and spat on her blood splattered white Starfleet uniform. "Screw off, 'Fleeter scum!"

All Dox did was smirk lightly and wait as one of the other mercs grabbed the surly man, pulled him into the center of the cluster and threw him to the ground. "Quiet, fool! A Princess latinum is just as good as a Queen's!"

Sheathing his sword in his belt, the larger man put a foot on the other man's neck. "I can't speak fer no one but my crew, but for that price, you've got our swords."

Sonak moved besides his commanding officer and nodded.

"Mercenaries do not fight out of cause or loyalty, only for personal profit. Your logic is impeccable, Captain; and admirable, as it shall minimize and end all this violence all the more quickly."

"Well played, Captain," Paris clapped the Starfleet captain on the shoulder in congratulations, then, as Paris was wont to do, she asked the question that needed to be answered most. "So what now? The Queen Regent and her crew are on the run. What's our plan to bring them to justice, Captain Telvan?"

Magnus was the next to interject with an idea before Enalia could. "Princess, if I may." With her nod of approval, he continued. "We have the assembled ships of all the Baronesses here, as well as the home fortress fleet. Give the word and we will gladly handle Garan, Tethis, their assets, and Arenara's Assets. That would leave going after your mother to you and your crew."

Enalia nodded solemnly, knowing that it would be seen as dishonorable if she didn't do this herself. Besides, Arenara Artan was now a wanted Federation fugitive, and as a

Starfleet Captain, she had a responsibility to fulfill. "That sounds like a good plan to me, Captain. Commander Paris, we launch in the Hera to track down the Bloody Rose. She can't have gotten far. Schwein, will you man the Manticore and act as backup for us?"

"It would be mein honor, prinzessin," the electric Baroness replied with a bow.

Once pristine uniform now covered with various hues of blood from helping downed mercs, Artan's, and security personnel alike, Asa went to where Commander Paris was standing, not wanting to interfere with the Captain's dramatic moment, and said softly, "Permission to return to the Hera? I have a feeling Sickbay may need me..."

"We're all beaming up in a moment, Doctor. Prepare Sickbay... I have a distinct feeling that you are going to be very busy in the coming hours," Paris muttered grimly, knowing this would not be solved bloodlessly, although she was determined to do her best to prevent bloodshed.

The invincibly armored Thex landed beside her shipmates, covered in blood and other fluids of half a dozen species. Taking off the helmet she smiled at her family. "The friendly Baronesses made it to their ships. No injuries that can't be dealt with in the medical bay."

"Then we have a course and a plan. Let's get moving!" Enalia pointed off in the imaginary distance with the random sword she had picked up dramatically.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewFBuYHldeY>

## Chapter 6 - Operatic Space Battle

The Tribunal Trial had ended mere moments before and now the crew of the USS Hera were now underway with the Miranda class Manticore as backup and support. On the bridge of both ships, the crews were confident that they could tackle any surprise that Arenara had waiting for them, yet knowing that the flight plan that she had taken out of the system directly into the Engstrom nebula would put them at a bit of a disadvantage.

For one, the stealth system would be unusable due to the isogenic particles. On top of that, the same particles would destabilize warp fields so they'd be limited to about warp 2.3. That meant no torpedoes or type nine probes either since they relied on warp fields to carry them to their targets. Most ships wouldn't even have reliable shields either, but the Hera and Manticore were outfitted with the standard Starfleet grid array that had been in use since the systems were invented, so they would be strained, but okay as long as they weren't rammed.

Everyone on the bridge seemed confident, yet inside Enalia was nervous. She knew exactly why her mother had chosen this nebula. She loved ramming tactics and she was bound to have some other ship or ally in there waiting for them. She just hoped that they had enough edge on her to win out in the end.

"Steady as she goes," Enalia ordered, as they followed the plasma trail heading deeper into the nebula towards a rogue planetoid. "She's bound to have left a trap for us so let's be ready for it when we see it."

"Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox replied from her station at the helm of the massive, Nebula-class starship. Her white dress uniform still stained with blood from the combat with the mercenaries that ended only minutes before, but none of it hers for a change. "Course and speed steady."

"All systems are looking good. I've activated the anti-boarding procedures as well, Captain." Thex said from her engineering station. The Andorian had stored the Armor of Achilles down in the armory, though she had kept the bracelets with her. Just in case.

In the Intel Pod, Clemens was finishing up details on two projects that he'd proposed to the command staff during pre-Tribunal meetings. The first, a plan to use the cargo transporters, set to a low resolution for speed-beaming of dense materials, to beam common nickel-iron asteroid chunks directly into the path of enemy vessels as they attempted maneuvers without shielding (due to the nebula's composition), had gone off without a hitch, as the materials were easy to procure along the way with tractors, and stored in the vast empty that was the rough cargo storage areas of the Hera. He'd set up a command and control system to network all unused cargo transporters (including those on the non-deployed shuttles) together, to further enhance the speed and accuracy for launching the kinetic speed bumps, coordinated through the Ops station as though it were a standard torpedo launch system.

The other Dirty Trick, also outlined to and approved by command, was in-place, and ready to invoke as a non-lethal anti-boarding measure, designed to reduce risk to the defending crew. It also wasn't conventional, which, hopefully, would make countering it on the fly quite difficult.

For his own part, he'd run his systems through thorough diagnostics and kept a topped-off charge on his storage cells, in preparation.

At the science station, Sonak addressed the command dais.

"Captain, I have a tactical recommendation. Torpedoes may not be effectively fired, but they can be deployed as mines on a predetermined flight pattern we could lure them in. Either on target or because the enemy spots them and neutralize them, they would also act as flares for our targeting sensors. Even in a sensor hampering nebula like this one, we would detect them while giving them a false target to shoot at."

"They don't call him a genius because of the way he brushes his teeth," Rita Paris wisecracked from the tactical station as her fingers danced across the control panel. "I've plotted the course, sending the navigation pattern to you now, Lieutenant. If we drop a proximity mine every time we change course that should do the trick. I need to have the course tight beamed to the Manticore so they can stay with us and avoid the mines, Miss Pacci. In fact, open a secure tight-beam channel with them."

"Yellow alert, Captain?" the fulsome first officer suggested.

Which was when an explosion rocked the Hera, destabilizing the inertial dampeners and

hurling everyone to starboard as the great ship shuddered and groaned.

"Red alert. Reduce speed to half impulse. Full power to sensors." Enalia had a good idea what hit them. Her mother was keen on using mines as well at times and though they still had her on the far ranges of sensors, this would slow them drastically. "Let me guess, she laid out some welcoming presents with sensor scattering in them?"

"Velocity slowed, Captain," Dox replied from the helm.

"We've struck a proximity mine amid ships, Captain. Damage reports coming in from decks 13 through 17 including hull breaches, casualty reports incoming," Paris reported once she'd gotten back up off the floor.

"There is a way to detect those cloaked mines... and them as well, without being traced back through our active sensors." announced the Vulcan. "Although sensors are distorted within the particles of a nebula, those same particles themselves will be disturbed by the presence and movement of any mass; like a mine... or a ship. If we focus our sensors on those particles, we will see such hidden objects as dark spots within displaced stellar dust; much like we would see underwater rocks disturbing waterflow. Tractor beams should then be able to sweep the mines... and our weapon systems to lock on target."

Enalia took a moment to figure out what Sonak was saying in simpler terms since science wasn't her strong suit, tapping at her chair's console for a moment as she did so. "So you're saying... The mines and enemy are where the nebula isn't? And that you can track them by particle wave motion inside the nebula? Excellent thinking, Mr Sonak. Reconfigure the sensors however you need to."

Then one of her favorite thoughts hit the spotted captain and she grinned just slightly at her inside joke. They were a Nebula inside a nebula tracking nebula gasses.

That was when something else hit them. Not a mine, but something green flared on their shields and rocked the ship to port. They had been shot with a plasma torpedo from a shuttlecraft!

Just then a tight beam comm signal came in from the Bloody Rose, taunting the Hera.

"Why Enalia, my darling daughter! Come to huff and puff about the law, or perhaps your brand new conveniently discovered morality?" The voice on the other end of the

transmission taunted in a voice of honeyed venom. "Or perhaps you've come to bring the evil queen to justice? You'll have to do better than that, my willful little girl. I've mined the nebula, but I know where they are and I can stay here quite cozily while you cheat in a duel of honor, bringing back up and an entire Starfleet vessel. You never could play by the rules... got your sister and father killed that way, as I recall..."

At that, the Manticore was rocked by an explosion as she struck a mine, which was far more devastating for the older and smaller starship than it would have been for the Hera.

Now she was making it personal. Enalia definitely blamed herself for the death of her father, since he tried to protect her during her kidnapping when she was on her maiden mission. The Syndicate had slaughtered him like livestock before her, and she still had nightmares about it. With these memories came the realization that her mother had been working with the Syndicate even back then... and thus was likely behind her kidnapping, as well as her father's murder.

As for her sister, she was definitely responsible there. She had cleared her and her crew to assist the Commodore on a covert mission that was supposed to just be a discussion with a possible target which had ended poorly, resulting in everyone but the Commodore dying and being eaten by large demonic dogs.

At first Enalia was stunned and numb, then another feeling began building, bubbling up and blowing to the surface before she even knew it was there, her face red with frustration and anger as she screamed with anger. "**ARENARA!** I will have your head! You will ROT in a Federation penal colony for the rest of your days! Do you hear me?"

"Oh, are we on a first name basis now?" The voice was that of a parent scolding a naughty child as the matriarch of the Artan family pumped up the verbal venom level to unbalance her opponent- another favored tactic of Queen Artan. "Realllllly Enalia, you are such a child, throwing a tantrum now that you've found out how the world really works. Did you think privateering and claiming the spoils of slavers paid for everything and kept the family afloat all these years? Naïve little girl. This fleet has run on subtleties and nuances and deals you never knew about because you were either too stupid to understand or too stubborn to accept."

"So here we are, dueling in the nebula, in a classic climax of good versus evil in your mind, I suppose, where you keep so desperately trying to overcompensate for your failings by painting yourself as the hero- just like your father," she added to twist the

knife a bit. "When this is all over and I have to show the Starfleet doctors how you were always chemically unbalanced and how you manufactured all of this evidence against me, it will be such a sad end to your dismal Starfleet career... at best, a footnote in history while the Artan Family Fleet will sail on from this, to bigger and better things"

"After all, it'll be easier once you're dead..."

"Incoming plasma bomb, hard to port evasive Miss Dox!" Paris called from tactical.

"Aye, Commander!" Using the far more delicate manual controls at the helm, Dox leaned hard into the stick and the Hera responded in kind, tilting deftly on its center axis to avoid the plasma bomb without hitting any of the surrounding mines. As she did, the starship shuddered from the shockwave of the bomb's explosion. Far enough away to do no damage, but still be felt.

When he heard the queen's taunt, Sonak instantly recalibrated his sensors and looked intently before turning towards the command chair.

"Pride is every warrior's weakness. Captain, I have located a motionless mass suggesting a starship, four point seven million kilometers aft, bearing 180 mark 34. If she mined the entire nebula as she boasts, then we could send rapid phaser bursts in a conical pattern in this direction. This should detonate a significant number of them towards and near her position... and open a direct path for us to reach her while her shields are overwhelmed and her sensors blinded by the detonations... and her anger."

"Make it so, Mr Sonak. But be wary of traps as you do so." Enalia was seething and struggling to get herself to calm back down. Knowing full well how deep her mother's betrayals had gone was like being repeatedly stabbed in the back and as much as she wanted to kill the woman herself, she knew if she did that, she would be stooping to her level and she'd be no better than her at that point.

Already the proposed telemetry was coming in from Sonak at the science station, and Paris aligned and measured the energy output for the appropriate response from the phasers. It would take considerable phaser energy to be sufficient to rattle the mines on such a wide firing arc, but Sonak had already run the calculations for the power output required to be effective. Thus all the Starfleet siren had to do was monitor the power flow and firing arcs, while insuring that helm control did not overshoot their cleared area.

“Point four impulse power, Miss Dox, on the revised heading I am sending... now.” The forward phasers lanced out, clearing a space before them in the nebula even as the Hera’s shields were rocked by a distant mine explosion. “Let’s take this slow and easy so they don’t realize we can do this at twice the speed, Miss Dox.”

Allowing herself the slightest of smirks, Dox replied from the helm. "Aye, Commander." While the instances were limited, the red-headed Romulan pilot greatly enjoyed working with Rita Paris from her tactical station. The two had developed through simulation training a solid rhythm more in tune with Paris' own era where Tactical and Navigation were one station that was next to the helm. "Point four on the revised heading."

Leaning into the Captain, Paris muttered, in a voice low enough that only the Captain and the more sensitive ears on the bridge might hear. "Two can play at this game, Captain, and the facts are on your side. Perhaps it’s time for you to goad her into making an angry mistake, ma’am? After all, she thinks she’s going to walk away from all of this smelling like a rose, and she doesn’t even realize she’s finished..."

Enalia took a few deep breaths to finish calming herself, before nodding and hitting the comms again, a grin on her face and her voice modulated to match her mother's. "Mother DEAREST, who do you think gave me this brain? I've fooled Starfleet for these many years. Do you really think I wouldn't have plans to eventually take you down? Just like you took down grandmother? I've met great-grandmother Enalia Artan, my namesake... I traveled in time to do it. I'm the one that destroyed Selen six, and gave her the details so she could build the family fortune that you squandered and had to rebuild with your slutty little deals with the Syndicate."

"And my independent wealth? More time travel shenanigans. I had six coins sold back then, invested it all, then had the coins land back in my possession a few months ago. I now have enough latinum to buy half a dozen more fortresses, each more lavish than the last and each with a personal fleet larger than the Artan family combined."

"Really, Enalia. Your grandiose-" the queen began, but Captain Telvan was having no more of it. Her mother's lips were moving, but smack talk was less effective when your opponent could be put on mute. Enalia continued, uninterrupted.

"Do you know what that makes you to me?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"You have been less than a blip on my sensors for most of my life now. The one time you forced your way back into my it? This time? I'm afraid you're going to regret that choice. You could have stayed a petty criminal, but no. You had to piss me off. Demand my genetic code to make a 'better' offspring... that was rude. Demanding it was your mistake. Because then you started giving me a reason to take a good hard look at you. Once I started looking, there were all sorts of sloppy secrets you've been hiding."

"I honestly would have left you alone, live and let live. But no. You had to reach past your little corner of the sector and try to be more than the waterflea that you are." Enalia was breathing heavily now, having gotten a lot of pent up emotion out and in the open.

"Oh, and if Starfleet releases any of your seized assets, they will be returned to the Queen of the Artan family... Which will no longer be you..." Enalia added just to add insult to injury.

"Verified," called Paris from tactical. Modern texting between stations and multiple communications channels open at once on broad and easy to read screens really had been a challenge for the gal from the 2260's to adapt to, but she had persevered, and it was glorious. The entire bridge, Main Engineering, the Intel Pod, whatever information they could possibly wish to know to man the starship was at their fingertips. Which made communicating in moments like this, under audio silence, open comms to the opponent.

CDRPARIS: Am I reading the projected size of that mass we're coming up on, Mr. Sonak? Slow to point two and give me a scanner pass at an orbital distance around that mass, Miss Dox.

LTDOX: Velocity at point two on revised heading, account for mine placement. In scanning range now.

LTSONAK: Affirmative; mass and volume of particle displacement decisively suggesting enemy starship location..

LTDAEL: Sickbay is treating 48 injured persons, have suffered 5 fatalities and 3 individuals that will perish soon. One of them was an officer with our adversary, and has advised the bombs we are bypassing are programmed to follow at a distance, and upon

destruction of the Bloody Rose will convene upon us and detonate a gamma radiation enhanced explosion. Recommend helm take measures to avoid.

LTSONAK: Recommendation; activate all tractor beams on inverse polarity with auto-connection to tactical sensors and link to extended navigational screen to maximum range. Should act as an effective repulsor field for mine-sized objects. Computing program to implement procedure following.

CDRPARIS: I'll mine our wake with proximity warheads to help out, and we can collect any survivors after the battle. Why is that planetoid venting plasma to space?

CDRPARIS: Something tells me this is a decoy or a trap. Stay alert, folks.

Out in the gaseous swirling clouds of the nebula, green and blue goutts of plasma fire spurted forth as hints of red electric shocks could be seen through the distortion on the viewscreen. As the USS Hera drew near to the mass ahead of them it became clear that this was no ship, but a space born creature that had been collared by Arenara with agonizer tech. Resembling the old mythological Tarrasque, it had the shell of a turtle, tail of a scorpion, legs of a great space bear, and the head and mane of the old spacefaring lion-whales of old. The red and black spiked agonizer collar on it did little to imply a sense of control over it.

In short, this was straight from an old kaiju movie.

And it was pissed off.

With the Hera in its sights and several mines exploding in its plasma breath, it launched itself towards the nebula class vessel in an attempt to dig its claws into the tasty looking oyster-hull.

"Helm, full reverse, rear phaser emitters online for minesweeping..." Paris started setting the orders in motion to keep the ship at a safe distance from the cosmic legendary beast that somehow was and yet was not so much of a surprise to her. Thus was life in the 25th century. As the tactical sensors started lighting up with warnings, she noticed a significant buildup of specific plasma energies around the creature's mouth.

"What is it doing, it is going to launch a conical breath weapon of plasma at us..." Paris muttered before her eyes grew wide and she bellowed a command. "DOX! Evasive

maneuvers, warp hop, now!

The Hera was already pulling itself backwards at full impulse along the path it had approached upon when Rita Paris's order was shouted out across the bridge. Running her hands across the helm controls deftly, Dox glanced at her tactical readouts to make the most rapid, manual warp course she had ever call in her head as a pilot. "AYE! Brace yourselves!"

The red-headed Romulan pilot tilted the Hera's nose down as the mighty starship quickly stopped pulling backwards. A warp hop would be tremendously dangerous in the nebula, but the maneuver was something of a specialty of the almost peerless pilot, and Rita Paris knew it. Dox let out the slightest of breaths as she shoved the manual throttle controls forward and the glowing, purple nacelles of the ship flared to life.

In the exact instant the creature let loose it's conical breath weapon in a manner rather precisely as Paris had predicted, a spewing array of green/blue plasma fire that at it's base could have easily consumed Starbase One. In that instant, the Hera all but vanished from that location in space in a streak of light and color. In it's wake was the plasma belch, whose length and breadth was now of sufficient size to be measured on the AU scale, flailed about with the spray of plasma in frustration. Which in turn was now causing a plasma storm in the area that would take years to dissipate.

As the space they had formerly just occupied was torched, the fragile and unstable warp field that had just propelled the starship away, also pulled the swirling energies of the nebula and the surrounding mines in on itself, crushed inwards in the warp field to cause a rather spectacular exit from warp for the starship.

## Chapter 7 Charges of Tarrasque Abuse

There was a massive explosion in the space that the Hera had just been in as the nearest mines slammed into each other, pulled into the warp wake of the ship as, on the other side of the creature, the Hera reappeared less than a second later.

As the starship dropped out of warp, Dox put her into a hard turn that resembled something akin to a skidding stop that brought her nose back along the path they had just taken. The wake of their unstable warp field blew out around them, pushing the gasses of the nebula and the mines closest to their new position away from them in a wave.

On the screen, from nearly two hundred thousand kilometers away now, the creature seemed to be searching, confused, for its former target for an instant. But the Manticore was still in its sights.

Sonak turned towards the command chair.

"Captain; animals, even the fiercest predators, panic and flee when in pain. This creature is igniting plasma. If we were to fly by at emergency impulse and vent our own plasma in our wake close enough to it, just before it breathes again..."

The ship's engineer had been quiet but listening as she organized the ship's repair teams and kept everything running. An idea popped into her head as she looked at the results of the scans. "Captain if we charge the plasma to a certain temperature we may be able to fry parts of the creature's collar circuitry. Without control, it may back off."

"An even better application of my proposal," congratulated the Vulcan. "Taking into account the natural resistance of this cosmozoic entity, it would require less energy than what would be needed to hurt it and achieve a similar goal; and without actually hurting it. Excellent reasoning, Lieutenant Commander."

"Mister Sonak, please find me a weak link in that collar," Paris ordered as she let loose a pair of photon torpedoes and a planetary flare to get the behemoth's attention away from the more fragile Manticore. "Chief, get me that plasma ready to dump on the captain's

orders. Miss Dox, you are on free flight for this, plan your own strafing run." Fingers flying across one of her tactical screens, Paris was working up how to tight beam focus as many of the phasers as she could bring to bear at once.

Which, given the forward-facing angle she needed, the Starfleet legacy officer transmitted to Dox at the helm to coordinate with her strafing run. That completed, the busy bombardier began plotting the same firing resolution for the Miranda class USS Manticore.

"Baroness, have you copied all of this, how are you faring?" In truth, Paris was overstepping her authority on the bridge, and she knew it. But she needed to keep the Hera in the fight, even as the captain struggled to control her rage at her own mother's perfidy, and just plain meanness throughout this literal trial which had now become quite literally a trial by fire.

Over the comms came the familiar voice of the augmented silver-haired pirate. "Ja, we copy." She paused, the concern for Enalia clearly evident in her voice before pressing forward. "Our systems are reduced to about thirty percent range so we will act as backup and support for whatever actions you take. Phasers, transporters, and tractors are locked to your sensors."

"Weak point located," announced the chief science officer after a moment. "As logically expected, right where this restraint has been affixed on the entity's body. Transferring sensor lock to targeting scanners. Fire when ready."

Taking the data from tactical and science, Dox swung the Hera around and made a run straight towards the massive creature while its attention was focused on the smaller Miranda-Class ship. "Internal inertial dampeners adjusting for attitude shift. Tactical, your target will be in optimal range in 9 seconds."

"Engineering, plasma dump on my mark please... mark!" Paris ordered

As the Romulan pilot called back, she pulled up on stick as the Hera all but ran up the Tarrasque's back at full impulse speed. At the last second, she tilted the starship its center axis and hit the starboard maneuvering thrusters at maximum which sent the ship rolling sideways in space in what almost resembled a somersault over the rear of the creature's neck, lining up the full array of the forward weapons directly over their target.

All of the phasers on tracks around the ring of the hull of the starship came together to form one large beam, on both the dorsal and ventral hull. Thanks to the daredevil flying of Lieutenant Dox, both could be aligned for the shot, wherein Paris manually compensated to keep the phasers on target for the maneuver. As the twin phaser beams lanced out, they ignited the plasma trail, lighting up local space with coruscating fire that burned even in airless space. The creature roared, whether from pain or surprise it was unclear. But the Hera now most definitely had its attention, as it turned to regard the offending starship.

“Manticore, pull back, that’s an order!” Commander Paris barked, even as a sudden plume of plasma roared out toward the now much-closer Hera.

"Hnaev... Brace yourselves!" Dox muttered to herself in Rihan before shouting out a warning as she yanked hard to port while hitting the central starboard thrusters making the Hera essentially roll over on it's side in space, skirting just around the powerful plasma blast. The ship shuddered hard from the energy as it brushed the ships weakened shields.

Even with the internal inertial dampeners on full, the crew still lurched hard against the roll, but everyone stayed in their seats.

"Nice flying Lieutenant... shields at forty six... five... four... three, forty-three percent. That plasma chews right on through them. Mister Sonak, how's that collar looking? We gave her all she's got with the phasers to go with that plasma burn, any effect? Is it still operational?" Even as she spoke, Paris was launching torpedoes from the aft launchers in an explosive spray designed to disorient the beast, rocking him with near misses.

"Get me coordinates for the Bloody Rose, people. All, this is still a decoy action so she can choose her moment to strike, so stay alert-"

The sentence would remain unfinished as an earthquake struck the USS Hera, jolting everyone not seated to the nearest bulkhead. Those who were seated but not strapped in found themselves rolling across the deck. As the crew struggled to right themselves, the sounds of shrieking duranium were heard and felt across the Hera as another impact struck the mighty vessel.

In a red alert situation at the helm of the starship, Mnhei'sahe Dox was strapped in, because she was prepared for this contingency. Without waiting for an order, the focused

pilot called up the tactical readout on the holographic heads up display built into the helm to see what was happening.

"*INCOMING!* she shouted from the helm as she saw tactical holograms of four boarding pods streaking at the Hera. "They're targeting the deck ten impulse engines, deck 17, the bridge, and... Imirrhlhse!"

Cursing again in Rihan, Dox saw the final pod heading straight for the Hera's deflector dish. An impact there would cripple the ship, so that was her priority. With four incoming projectiles and an enormous plasma spewing creature still attacking, Dox had to act.

Pushing the starship's maneuvering thrusters to their limit, the hull of the ship strained, making a sickening twisting sound as she set the ship into a spin, like an antique record album on it's center point as she pulled down on the stick and flew dangerously close to the gaping maw of the Tarrasque.

With a loud wrenching sound, the port ventral thruster twisted out of it's housing on the exterior hull and deactivated as two of the four boarding pods slammed into the ship. The pod aimed for the bridge now hit the side of the Hera's Intel pod, exploding on impact as it hit broadside. The pod that had been aimed at the deflector dish hit the port nacelle strut, locking hard into a bulkhead with nowhere to empty it's boarding party.

The other two pods screamed past the ship as it turned out of range, one to crash against the neck of the Tarrasque, and the other to be caught by the forward tractor beam of the Manticore.

Ears ringing, Rita Paris blinked away a mental fog as her vision blurred, then slowly began to refocus. Grabbing at the nearest solid object, she hauled herself up to her knees at the science station, stubbornly struggling to pull herself to her feet. "What... what hit us? Mines? Personnel carriers?"

With a Vulcan's strength and a husband's care, Sonak used one hand to help Rita get back on her feet while answering.

"We were impacted by two boarding pods bearing each twenty-one heavily armed space pirates. Internal sensors are picking up one coming up from Deck 3 obviously intent on attacking the bridge; one having penetrated near main engineering. External sensors

detect more pods incoming."

Sonak's strength and sensor monitoring had allowed him to see it coming, and to stay in his seat when the ship was hit. He was thus quite ready to send directives to the computer.

"Computer; link all unbadged life signs on deck 3 and engineering to all transporter systems. Site to site transport to cargo bay 4 then implement level 10 forcefield around the area and flood the entire cargo bay with neurazine gas. Alert and allow security to pick up the boarders once unconscious."

The computer chirruped, then responded.

=^= Unable to comply. Unbadged life signs are equipped with transporter lock scramblers. Transporting would exceed safety parameters ^=^=

Staggering back to her post, Paris shook her head to clear it, then oriented herself. It looked like she'd been the only one dumb enough to not be strapped in. *Way to set an example, Commander Rita.*

"I need to know the point of origin of these launches, Mister Sonak, if you please." Paris was coming around now, getting a grip and moving forward. "Security, stand by to repel boarders. Computer, seal all hatches to the Bridge..." it was then that Paris realized the Captain hadn't said a word for quite some time.

"Captain...?"

The Trill woman was silent, but far from still, however. That last jolt had nearly knocked her out of her seat and only the armrests and training had held her in place - even at times like this, she refused to use the restraints because she saw them as a sign of weakness. As for what she'd been up to, tapping on those armrest consoles, she'd been running a backtrace on those transmissions with Maru, and had come up with something. "I think I found where she was just transmitting from. Maru located a rogue planetoid about a megameter along heading one four nine mark seven four five where the transmission originated from. Almost directly above us."

"Calculation of pods trajectory confirms the location," the Vulcan science officer stated with a look at his readouts.

"If my mother is holding true to her idiom, her boarding teams are using the cheapest of transporter inhibitors. If our security can tag them, we can transport them."

The news didn't faze the Vulcan at all.

"Logical precaution for a people traditionally favoring boarding action. Captain, we could deactivate gravity plates at a specific approach point once they reach it. Boarding assault, especially when short of the objective, relies on speed of movement first and foremost. They will not have activated their magnetic boots if they wear any. By the time they recover and activate them, an ambushing security team could have completed the tagging."

"As for the Bloody Rose, if she's using her old Klingon cloak in this soup, it should be a simple matter of using doppler shift on the nebulous gasses. Mister Sonak, does that check out?"

"Affirmative; sensors detect a ship-sized object of the correct mass fifty-three million kilometers moving at full impulse, bearing 53 mark 15 and moving to 270 mark 30; a flanking maneuver, Captain. Sending signal to tactical sensors for lock on."

On the bridge of the starship Hera, the first officer poked at a blurry tab onscreen. Transmitting the telemetry of the target and the order to use the doppler shift for location purposes, she had given every advantage she could. Summoning the best voice of command she could muster, she transmitted to the R&D department on Deck 3 the command phrase preset to launch the counterstrike she'd prepared.

"Operation: Thunderchicken is a go!"

Almost immediately, a commtext ran across Commander Paris' local screen:

LCDRCLEMENS: As previously discussed, the Special Surprise Gifts are awaiting intruders in all corridors. They are coded to be friendly to all pre-authorized crew and guests, and a big mess of trouble for anyone else. It's Duck Season.

Enalia grinned that lopsided grin of hers proud of remembering a few tricks she'd learned. She also seemed more calm and in control - no longer the pissed off mess she was mere moments before. "Commander Paris, please continue to provide C&C as you

see fit. I apologize for becoming emotionally compromised during the heat of battle."

"Just glad to have you back, Cap'n," Paris replied as she settled back into her station. "I'm reading the intruders are engaging with Engineering and Security crews on Deck 24, and they are bottlenecked on Deck 2. Mister Sonak, please cut the gravity on Deck Two. Petty Officers Wil'TAms, I am activating the turbolift. Any that are obliging, give me a firing line with transporters tags and let them come. And I know you prefer to work the old-fashioned way, but armor up so we can feed you telemetry- that's an order."

As the two Klingon Security officers rolled their eyes, they nevertheless complied. With a clanging of their bronzed bracelets together, both were clad in the EVA armor that was standard issue for all Hera extravehicular engagements, although now they were equipped with the large TR-116C rifles. As the telemetry came streaming in to them, they could now see and pre-target the pirates who were managing to crowd into the zero-G turbolift whose doors were awaiting them invitingly.

As the turbolift bearing 8 pirates moved from Deck 2 to Deck 1, gravity kicked back in, driving them all to the deck in a heap. Which, as the turbolift doors opened on the bridge, made them easy targets for the transporter-tagging Security officers. A few random disruptor blasts squeezed off, demolishing an Engineering station and scoring a hole in the back of the Captain's chair, but while one ricocheted off the overhead to crack the main viewer, their assault was ineffectual. As the lift cleared of invaders in a shimmer of transporter lights, Paris gave the order.

"Proceed to Deck 2 and finish off the rest, then report back," the chief of Security ordered the efficient defenders, who both marched into the turbolift, their sensors already targeting the freefall invaders below as their boots magnetized to the deck.

With grim resolve, Captain Telvan nodded. "Now... Let's finish this. My mother has a nice cozy brig cell waiting for her."

"Baroness, I am coordinating telemetry now. Miss Dox, please give me a firing resolution," Paris ordered as her fingers flew across her console. As her vision was not fully cleared and she was still a bit muddle-headed, she couldn't afford weakness right now. The ship was in danger and lives were at stake. "I want that beast off our backs before we engage in starship combat. Transmit a flight path and firing trajectory to the Manticore, and we're going to pour all our phaser power into that weak point on the collar!"

From the helm, Dox nodded and replied calmly, "Aye, Commander." As she spoke, she called up her tactical heads up display all the while continuing to dodge the lunges of the attacking creature. With one hand, she began manually tracing a finger over the holographic display, muttering math to herself in Rihan under her breath.

A very few short seconds later, the focused pilot punched in a flight plan and sent it to the Commander's tactical station *and* Baroness Schwein on the Manticore. "Commander, course and targeting run entered and forwarded to the Manticore. Ready to engage on order..."

The Manticore was ready and waiting, having not been considered a threat in the battle and mostly unscathed so far. The torpedo launchers weren't loaded with photons, but with EMP missiles and the phasers were primed and ready, the prior stray boarding pods having been dealt with already. Schwein's voice came over the comms just for a moment. "Manticore is ready for the attack run. We have a wunderbar present that should help."

-Main Engineering-

Thex had heard the warning and activated the security measures around engineering. By the slight thump, she could hear the Houdinis had begun to go off, sending the pirates into all sort of chaos. One invader, after being blinded by one, suddenly found himself glued to one of the other pirates as a pair of them went off, but the team pressed on.

The doors to engineering had been sealed but one of the attackers a big gorn with more cybernetics than flesh began prizing the doors apart.

Thex let out a sigh as she pulled on the bracelets. One more power pack before she'd have to ditch this for a while.

"Protect." She yelled as the doors sprang open. The gorn had a look of glee on his face before the armored andorian slammed into him going at the speed of a train. The corridor outside buckled as the lizard slammed into it. The pirate attack team had barely any time to react before the andorian was on punching and kicking her way through them.

-Bridge-

The Captain nodded and gave the order. "Fire at will. Take out that collar, and let's see if this Kaiju is a bit friendlier without it causing it constant agony."

With the order given from the Captain, Lieutenant Dox pressed forward on the manual throttle of the Hera, maneuvering the mighty starship in a counterclockwise arc around the neck of the colossal Tarrasque. Meanwhile, the flight instructions transmitted to the Manticore had the smaller but more maneuverable Miranda class vessel taking a clockwise path as the two ships corkscrewed up the outer edge of the creature up to its neck where the collar was located.

Flight paths were one thing, but with a moving target, both ships had to make adjustments on the fly to avoid its flailing limbs and flaming breath before converging over the rear of its massive head revealing their mutual target: the locking mechanism that kept the pain-inducing collar in place and activated. As they twisted in space, Dox called back from the helm to Commander Paris' tactical station. "Targeting Apex in 3 seconds, on my mark... annnnd..."

Crisscrossing positions, both ships were in place at the same moment to deliver a blow to the collar at the same instant. As they reached their respective apexes, Dox shouted back, "**MARK!**"

With the weapons system of the Manticore slaved the those of the Nebula class USS Hera, both vessels poured concentrated phaser power into the weak point identified by the chief science officer. While the two thick beams of the Hera lanced out to produce pressure on the enormous collar that must have cost a queen's ransom to craft. Then the Manticore pulsed her phasers, into the same targeted location, but rattling the already under-pressure materials to vibrate them beyond their stress tolerances.

The pain increased, and the beast flailed, causing both ships to pull back. Yet they did not change attitude nor alignment, phasers still firing until with an explosion, the perversion of science that had chained a great beast was broken. Grappling with it, the Tarrasque blasted the links in it's hands, as apparently the legendary life form was immune to it's own plasma. What survived that onslaught was caught in a chain reaction which caused link after link to burn, plasma greedily consuming all it touched.

"Couldn't do THAT in a Constitution class!" Rita Paris beamed a smile, seeing the creature cheerfully rending the remains of the Agony Collar, even as out of the nebula,

more boarding pods raced their way. "Here we go again..."

"Creature's control unit has been rendered inoperative," confirmed Sonak from his scans. "It is now free to act on its own volition. Tractor beam output now connected to deflector field. This will repel from the entire vicinity of the ship any object up to the mass of a shuttlecraft."

"Outstanding Mister Sonak, thank you. Now, what do you say let's wrap this up," Paris expressed as she turned her attention to the matter at hand- dealing with the Bloody Rose.

"Where's that bloody pirate..."

## Chapter 8 - On The Launchpad

As soon as the landing party had beamed down for the beginning of the Tribunal, Ensign Fiona O'Dell had been on duty, suited up in her EVA armor and sitting inside the cockpit of the Thunderchicken. The surface of the experimental multipurpose craft was now covered in the same dark pearlescence as the hull of the Hera herself, with ultraviolet crimson internal accent lighting which caused the entire craft look surprisingly sinister.

Standing on the modified transporter unit, Ensign Briaar Gavarus had set up to accommodate both the pint-sized pilot and the starship that converted to become powered armor, the walker mode had been engaged. Of all of the modes, O'Dell favored this one, the hybrid between fighter craft and robot. She still had arms and legs to manipulate, but she flew more like a VTOL fighter jet. Shifting slightly, the robot reached over to scratch it's shiny metal ass.

"Ye know what woulda made this duty more enjoyable?" O'Dell called from the cockpit to the monitoring station, where she could see Gavarus through the transparent aluminum viewport. "Beer."

"Don't frickin' remind me, Fee." The grumpy Tellarite engineer grumbled from her post. "Three frickin' days dry is three days too many."

Days ago when the pair had received their secret orders for this mission from Commander Paris, it came with the explicit instructions to not drink for the duration of the mission and its preparation. Clearly, their reputations preceded them as much as their skillsets.

"So, uh, look... while there's nobody around and ye kin edit this oot of the logs... if something happens to me, I want you to have me liquor cabinet. And me good beer flagons. And me squeezebox, because even you could learn how to play it," O'Dell casually rattled off a few of her personal belongings in amongst the load of knick-naks and instruments and collected yet organized clutter that constituted her quarters.

"Two things... One, I planned on taking that beer flagon at some point anyway. And

two... You're going to be fine." Gavarus could hear the very real concern in her best friend's voice and wasn't going to let her stress if she could help it.

"That thing is the most sturdy small craft in Starfleet right now. You are going to kick ass and we will get shitfaced later and you can tell me how much you made them piss themselves when you tore the dome off of that shit ass bridge."

"Aye... aye, that's how it'll goo..." O'Dell murmured, as the mech shifted, the left arm crossing over to hold the right one by the elbow, a pose that looked oddly familiar to Gavarus as petite pilot tended to do the same thing when she was nervous or apprehensive about something. "How d'ye think it's going down there? Maybe it'll all get settled in court and I willnae have to go, aye?"

"Well, if there's anyone that can talk someone literally to death, it's Paris. That woman could win an argument with a black frickin' hole." Gavarus shrugged, picking up on O'Dell's continued anxiety as she kept trying to bolster the confidence of the pint-sized pilot.

"But however it goes down, we've got this worked out from every angle. We've got three layers of modular shielding as strong as the Hera's own. Diffusive paneling to take almost any impact and weapons out the ass."

"Aye, aye... 'll be safe as houses..." O'Dell murmured, followed by a long moment of silence. When she spoke again, the tinny chirp of the little leprechaun's voice was nearly a whisper, although the comms picked it up just fine. "Kin... kin I tell ye a secret, Briaar? It's... not exactly the best time for it, but... I feel like I ought to maybe tell someone, ye know?"

Trying to decide if she should keep trying to diffuse Fiona's anxiety or just be sincere, the usually gruff and sarcastic engineer decided to put a lid on her usual smart-assed answers. "Yeah. Of course. What's going on, Fee?"

"I've... I've nivvir killed innystone, Briaar. I know, I know, I'm in Starfleet and sometimes that means duty and alla that and this is a dangerous situation and I'll be defendin' me ship and crew but... I've never killed anyone, and I'm gonna be blowing my way onto a bridge that might joost decompress as soon as I do, and alla those people will be dead then, and that'll be on me. Or they might be ready for me even though the Commander

thinks this is all g'win ta be some greet surprise fuir the pirates, but... what if it's not? What if they're ready for me? What if they joost shoot me and that's that and..."

The anxiety of the miniature Mariposian was abundantly clear, and the more she talked, the faster she talked, which meant that she was winding up, getting more and more nervous about her pending mission, until, very quietly, in a voice quavering with a fear that was far from her casually cheerful and sarcastic approach to most things, O'Dell stated the simple fact of the matter.

"I'm bloody terrified, Briaar. I'm tryin' nae ta be, boot I'm so scared I'd run away reet noow if I thought I could git awee wi' it," O'Dell admitted, her voice getting a bit squeakier as it was evident that in giving voice to her fears, she had begun to cry. "I dinna want to kill innystone and I dinna want to die. I know pilots are supposed to be ace combat flyers, and in sims I do great but... these are real people. And I could really die, and I dinna want ta die. I dinna."

Listening intently, Briaar Gavarus nodded as her best friend bared her soul. As soon as O'Dell finished, the tubby Tellarite replied in a voice that was calmer and more even-keeled than O'Dell had ever heard from her best friend.

"The primary weapon you have in there is transporter tags. They're programmed to transport any organic object they hit instantly to our brig. If their force fields hold the air in, you can peg them at your leisure. If the room decompresses, hit rapid fire and you will spray them all. The matter load for the ammo tags will allow you to fire up to ten thousand of those little friggin things in a few seconds." Gavarus commented, running down the technical specs of the enhancements made to the Thunderchicken's weapons.

"And no handheld weapon I've seen on file for these assholes can damage that armor you're in without sustained fire for nearly a minute. I've tested the shields and armor on our own best weapons. But even if, by some miracle, they can crack that armor, well there's this." As she spoke, the engineer's thick finger pressed a single button on her console.

In less than a second, with a rapid burst of blue light, O'Dell appeared in a seated position on the cargo transporter pad to Gavarus's side.

"Emergency transporter." Gavarus replied with an uncharacteristically warm smile. "I programmed this myself. It's cycling through the ship's main computer, keyed

specifically for you and you alone. It's allowed 300 percent more energy and computing power than the standard pattern buffers. One second evac with one button activation."

Big green eyes wide with surprise, Fiona O'Dell blinked a few times as she processed it all, then stood, patting herself down in the EVA armor before looking up at her flight engineer and best friend. Eyes filling with tears, the little lass in the EVA armor stepped over to hug her friend who was looking out for her, arms not making it around the thick tinkerer's waist, but she held the hug for a few seconds.

"Thank you," the panicked pilot whispered, a statement encompassing not only the technological preparations, but knowing that the usually unflappable underdog would likely be terrified going on this mission, and that O'Dell would need reassurance. In receiving it, the tiny test pilot showed her gratitude to her bestie in a manner very much not like an officer. It was, however, quite thoroughly heartfelt.

For her part, the usually prickly pig just smiled that same smile she had, looking down at Fiona. "You won't have to let anyone die. And you sure as *HELLS* aren't dying on me. I've got one friend and I don't know how to clone you just yet. So I've gotta keep you where I can see you."

Releasing her porcine pal from the hug, O'Dell stepped back and her face shield retracted, the helmet stowing itself into the back of the Extra Vehicular Atmospheric suit, hard-armored though it was to make it more armor than spacesuit. Inside, O'Dell's mop of curls was stowed beneath the black cowl of the pressure suit, even as a few of them managed to escape to frame the tear-stained face of the talented test pilot. Mopping at her eyes with the back of her armored hand, O'Dell sniffled.

"Some fearless Starfleet officer, huh? Ye kin, ah, edit the logs so the Lieutenant and Commander or nobody else sees alla that, aye?" O'Dell joked as she fished around for some composure, cheeks burning with embarrassment. Hotshot pilots in revolutionary new spacecraft did not break down crying in terror while they waited for the mission to start, after all, and it certainly wouldn't do for her superiors to hear her whining like a little girl before she was to be beamed into a war zone.

"Yeah, of course." Gavarus said, matter-of-factly as she ran the Thunderchicken's command sequence to return it to vehicle mode and open the canopy so O'Dell could get back in. In all reality, as she worked, she had no idea how to actually edit the ships logs.

"But it's like you said to me, she didn't give us these jobs because she didn't think we could do it, right? And even Ensign Gonadie and Lieutenant Dox can't match your numbers in the Chicken. You've got this, Fee. And I've got you, so @\$& everything else." It was clear that Gavarus was nervous as well. This assignment was all kinds of terrifying for the two, untested young junior officers.

"Aye, yuir right. I'm really in nae a lotta danger, strewth, and I might joost be able ta do this wi'oot killin innyone. Which I guess is oop ta them, really. Me shields are waveform, aye? Hugged to the hull?" The nervous little test pilot looked around. "She's on the pad ready ta go, if ye change her back too walker mode. Ye kin beam me in, and dinna think I canna scramble oop that arm ta climb into the cockpit, I'll show ye a thing or two."

"But fur noow what do ye say we git a cup of coffee, aye? We're nae more'n twenty paces from our stations, but we've nae got to literally be in position unless tis red alert, y'ken? So let's take a break?" The little leprechaun had calmed down considerably, but even after all that chatter she was still a bit jumpy- a bad thing for a test pilot about to take an experimental spacecraft into combat.

"Yeah, that's fine. Pretty sure we just need to be ready, not hovering. But I don't think *you* need anything with frickin' caffeine." Gavarus replied, smirking as they walked over to the replicator. "We don't need the Chicken mimicking your every hyperactive twitch."

"Well, I canna hae' inny whiskey, which is likely fuir the best, and I canna have inny beer on the Commander's orders- plus bein' on duty and all. What'm I supposed to do? Drink tea like a Sasanach?" As they moved to the small break room the R&D department had set up, which also overlooked their little chunk of the Deck 3 flight deck, O'Dell fell into her usual two steps to one of Gavarus, familiar patterns soothing her jangled nerves. "I canna eat innything or I'll hurl in me helmet from nerves, aye?"

"I dunno, ginger ale and soup? If you want coffee, have coffee. Besides, tea has just as much caffeine anyway and..." Gavarus cricked an eyebrow up in mild confusion. "Wait. What the frickin' hell is a 'sasa...' whatever your said. A Sasquatch?"

"Sasanach. S'what the Irish call the British. Me Da allays said it, and I had ta look it oop at the Academy. Turns oot tis a thing," O'Del climbed up onto one of the fixed chair seats attached to the break room table, a standard Starfleet design that enabled both very

differently sized officers a table both could fit at comfortably.

"Yuir right. Me orders are for demolition, but the targets are literally marked before I get inside, all I have to do is cut loose and hope nobody's in me firing arc. I'll have height advantage, so there's that at least. And the squad to back me oop if the crew vents to space."

"This is a well-planned mission," O'Dell realized as she started stacking up the points, reviewing the mission parameters. "I'm piloting the premier in personal bloody war machine technology. I've got me own flight engineer monitoring and ready to beam me oot in the wink of an eye. Hell, beam me back in too, if I'm needed. I've practiced in that big goony bird- I know what I'm doing oot there. And we both been runnin' every day, so e'en if it turns into a runnin battle, I kin keep oop fuir a while, I can. This is g'win ta work, this plan. Those poor pirate bastards are nivvir g'win ta know what hit 'em, aye?"

At that, O'Dell had walked herself full circle on her own logic and come out the other side with a positive mental state and emotional attitude, baring a toothy grin to match.

Chuckling, Gavarus walked back to the table with two coffees, and placed them both on the table. "Oh, they'll know what hit them. You don't get your bridge dome tore off by a big ass robot every day. It's going to go in the frickin' record book. I'm actually looking forward to seeing it."

"Waaaahhl, blown open, really. Commander said she wants this agony thing taken oot first, so that's me point of entry- I'm comin through that wall with plasma grenades eatin me way in and the phaser cannon meltin what's left ta slag. Or it explodes oot at me, in which case, evasive maneuvers, like ye do," O'Dell explained casually. "Squad's comin in behind me, they're bein beamed oota the Armory apparently, and usin maneuverin jet packs to get to the hull and magnetize. They're to tag any civilians that fly by, and march in if I get into trouble on their bridge. Apparently the squad twill be Coach Jablonski and a pack of her wayward girls with significant musculature."

Taking a sip of her coffee with a wry smirk, Gavarus replied. "Well, now I *absolutely* will be watching that feed." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively before returning to a more serious tone.

"You doing okay, Fee?"

"Yeah!" O'Dell nodded, then looked up at Gavarus. with a less confident smile. "I'm... I'm still kinda scared. Even knowing alla the safety precautions in place it's... I dunno. It's stupid, but I canna help it. I'll do the job, but all I kin think of is something I learned in a Starfleet ethics class. S'a quote from an ancient earth philosopher named Campbell. It goes, '*A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.*' I'm no hero, Briaar, but I feel like this is somethin' bigger'n meself."

Sipping her coffee, Gavarus smiled. "Yeah. I remember that crap too. Very dramatic and romantic. I argued with the professor for, like, an hour over it."

"And considering how many times you've pulled my ample ass out of trouble, that already qualifies you as giving your life to something bigger. I'm a lot damn bigger than you." It was about as close as the gruff engineer could get to calling O'Dell her hero.

"Awwwww," O'Dell rolled her eyes. "I think if ye look at it I'm usually the one gettin us into trouble, really. But tis sweet of ye to say all the same." The deflections rolled off easily, but O'Dell thought about it for a moment. "I guess I kind of have. We spend every waking moment pretty much together, and half the time we pass oot at one another's places, so even a lot of the non-waking moments. I guess... I have given me life over."

With that train of thought put out on the table, O'Dell cupped her coffee cup with both hands and blew on it, not really sure what to say next.

Instead, Gavarus picked up her coffee mug and tapped it against O'Dell's and took a sip. "Me too, Leprechaun. And it frickin' works for me."

Looking up, O'Dell smiled at the easy acceptance, and her eyes misted up a bit. Which was when the red alert klaxon sounded throughout the starship, and the mighty vessel shuddered with an impact.

"AGH!" The pixie pilot fell off her stool, hit the ground then immediately scrambled to her feet like a mongoose. "Gotta git oop, gotta goo goo gooo!"

Bolting for the door, the armored astronaut yanked it open and scrambled for her mech, which stood awaiting her on the large transporter pad.

Running right behind, Gavarus rushed to her console station and entered her security code to unlock the station for ready mode as she shouted out to the pint sized pilot. "I

can beam you right back in the cockpit. It's all pre-programmed. Just sit like you're in there."

"Nae, I toldye..." O'Dell, true to her word, scrambled with ease like a spider monkey up the arm of the mech, even as she transmitted instructions from her armor to unlock and open the cockpit for her. Smoothly she hopped into the cockpit, landing with surprising precision.

"Alreet, sealin systems, let me get hardwired," Reeling out the contact ports for the small starship from her EVA armor, Ensign O'Dell plugged the ports into the ship's computer and the ship's backup computer. As the systems aligned, her helmet snapped into place over her head, as the pilot of the Thunderchicken had to be prepared to lose cabin pressurization at any point.

Thruster systems came online and the hybrid robot/spacecraft hovered off the transporter pad, even as weapons systems lit up and shields sprang into being, their frequency already synched with the transporter signal.

The unlikely partners in crime were as ready as they were ever going to be. Now all that was left to do was wait for the order to deploy.

## Chapter 9 Operation: Thunderchicken

On the bridge of the starship Hera, the first officer poked at a blurry tab onscreen. Transmitting the telemetry of the target and the order to use the doppler shift for location purposes, she had given every advantage she could. Summoning the best voice of command she could muster, she transmitted to the R&D department on Deck 3 the command phrase preset to launch the counterstrike she'd prepared.

"Operation: Thunderchicken is a go!"

The pipsqueak pilot who could make the Thunderchicken dance offered a thumbs-up to her porcine partner in the booth, the mechanoid mimicking the motion. The duo had put the experimental, transforming craft through its paces and they were as ready as they were ever going to be.

From the control booth, Gavarus had gotten into the zone and her thick, three-fingered hands danced across her console. "All systems are green. You are good to go and I've got your back from here."

With a smirk, the grouchy technologist ran her thick fingers down the three lit amber sliders on the console, and a shimmering hum of the Hera's cargo transporters enveloped the Thunderchicken as it began to transport. "Kick their frickin' pirate asses, Fee!"

Two decks down, on Deck 6 in Transporter Room 3, the armed and armored Security force were standing on the pad, accompanied by the Hera's resident spook. The Master At Arms was commanding this away team, whose purpose was to provide backup to the mech that would ferry them in through the ship's shields. If all went according to plan, it would gain them entry to the enemy bridge. Which might or might not result in his squad tagging space pirates hurtling to their frozen doom with transporter tags. If not, then their job was to take the bridge and stand down the HMS Bloody Rose.

The hulking Petty Officer Jablonski stood at the back, a phaser rifle in one hand looking like a large-ish pistol to her, with the TR-116C2 slugthrower slung over her left shoulder.

Bumping fists with Petty Officer Lu, Big Ethel nodded to Wagner and Grell, offering them thumbs-up. While they were no space marines, the security force of the USS Hera was well-equipped, well-trained and well-disciplined. They knew the danger, they knew their jobs, and they were prepared.

Clemens had prepared for this mission by loading up a combination of kinetic, energy, concussive, restrictive, and explosive munitions, both onboard his cybernetic limbs and slung over his shoulder. His grav-units were engaged, in case they beamed into a screwy-situation, and his IDF and life support systems were active. His Friend or Foe ID tags were active, so the rest of the team's munitions would try to avoid him, if possible, even if he needed to activate his holographic cloaking systems. His virtual intelligence subsystems were active, so semi-independent operation of medical, offensive, and movement systems would keep him free from distraction during the fight.

As soon as the comms announced the Executive Officer's go orders, he sent a commtext response...

**LTCLEMENS:** As previously discussed, the Special Surprise Gifts are awaiting intruders in all corridors. They are coded to be friendly to all pre-authorized crew and guests, and a big mess of trouble for anyone else. It's Duck Season.

Master-At-Arms Thav moved his neck to work out a kink, before closing his helmet and looked at his team. "Okay, people- we're here to kick some pirate ass and keep them off the mech. We don't know what surprises they might have for us over there, so I want everyone's suits synched-up. Watch each others' backs and remain calm, and we'll get through this," he said calmly, with the tone of someone who had done this many times before.

Sam added, "Remember, ya'll- use everything you got t'make these folks regret their choice of vocation, and do what ya hafta to take this ship out their toolbag. They asked for this mess, and they're gonna foot th'bill. We're th'things that bump in their night."

"Uhhhh, question?" Jablonski raised her hand. "Begging your pardon, Lieutenant, but the Commander said we were to capture the queen alive at all costs and do our best to minimize casualties. And she really stressed that 'at all costs' part. So are we here for maximum demolition, or a capture mission?"

The last lawful order superseded any other order save a standing order, after all.

"Capture the Queen, Petty Officer, with minimal casualties," the Andorian Master-At-Arms said, speaking up. "We're Starfleet, and we won't be sinking to the level of pirates."

Clemens stared at Jablonski for a moment, and added, "...did y'all not hear Herself? Killin' em' is like givin' someone a styrofoam graduation cake. Sure, th' icing's sweet, but once it's gone, it's all empty air," he shook his head, with a haunted look. "...that shit'll ruin a kid's life, it will..."

He blinked, and further clarified, "You folks got skills... don't do anything that Thex or th'Doc can't fix. But make sure these people decide that th'path they're on is **A. Bad. Idea.**"

"Coordinates are coming in now," the transporter technician reported, verifying that everyone was ready on the pad, as helmets snapped shut over heads and weapons warmed up. At a nod from the Master-At-Arms, the technician declared, "Energizing!"

Which was when the transporter room slipped away, and the boarding / landing party found themselves hanging in empty space. Well, mostly empty, as the experimental variable mode fighter craft dubbed the 'Thunderchicken' was moving in on them with the 'boot' thrusters engaged.

"Alreet, everybody grab hold and secure yuirselves," came the squeaky voice of the pilot over the specific comm channel of the mission. "We're already on Plan B since our target is on the move. I kin catch 'em, but we're g'win ta be doin it at impulse power, so ye'd best be attached, because if ye fall off we'll have the devil's own time trackin ye doon in this soup!"

With that, the pearlescent and oddly humanoid vehicle hove into view, it's dark underlit hull standing out boldly in the colorful nebula, the arms opened wide even as the thrusters in the 'feet' of the mech pointed forward to brake the momentum she had gained moving into position. While in flight it looked somewhat ridiculous, the assault vehicle moved with precision and surety. In one 'hand' was a larger version of the TR-116C2 carried by the Security forces, while on the dorsal of the mech, behind the cockpit, was a phaser cannon. On the starboard 'shoulder' was mounted a can that all involved recognized as a variable fire rocket pod.

It was abundantly clear that the war machine offering the boarding party a ride to their target was well prepared for a battle. Even if visible inside the cockpit was perhaps one the USS Hera's smallest officers, one Ensign Fiona O'Dell, who was clad in her own small suit of EVA armor like the rest.

An alert flashed on Clemens' HUD as soon as the transport completed, alerting him that the target ship wasn't where it was projected to be. The rest of the display told the story, and he immediately launched a grapple to lock onto the hull of the mech, just port of the phaser cannon, amidships, and reeled himself in at high speed, to avoid fouling maneuvers with the cable. He landed with a **\*THUNK**, his gravplates locking to the hull, and hunkered down, using the phaser cannon's outer casing for cover and a forward fire position.

"Clemens t' O'Dell. I'm aboard an' secured, aft of ya."

"Aye, I seeya there Lieutenant. I've got one heck of a lot of room fuir displays in here and sensors like the eyes a'the Almighty himself." Even as she chattered, Jablonski grabbed Wagner and Grell, while Petty Officer Lu latched onto Lieutenant Junior Grade Th'ovohrot and rather ably, the tiny test pilot scooped them into the arms of the mech, giving them something to brace themselves against.

"Ach! Steer clear'a that manifold, Lu, it's aboot to get hot, that's one on me impulse drive... Jablonski, get ye a grip but dinna ye be crimpin me hull noow. Alreet, we all secure, everyone got a gravlock, aye?" The little stereotype paused to insure everyone was ready.

Clemens signaled ready via the FOF interface, and reeled out just enough line to give himself a grav lock with the grappler, as a backup tether to keep him with the tiny ship (or huge EVA suit, depending upon one's POV), even if he got smacked off it.

"Alreet... get ready for a ride ye'll tell yuiur grandkids aboot... assuming we should live s'long." With that said, the pixie pilot punched it, as the impulse drive glowed to life and began to propel them through the particles of the nebula. A small wedge before them seemed to part the dust and small meteorites they were rocketing past, as the deflector screen of the craft cleared their path... but not by a very wide margin. Jablonski, even hunkered down, was still pinging particles off her back. Her bodily volume was simply too large for the deflectors to fully cover.

His HUD indicators giving him a visual of the particle flow over the local area, Clemens could see the abrasive stream raking across the big Security officer, and knew it could only go downhill from here.

Leaving his grapple in place, he kicked loose his grav pads while initiating a forward tuck and roll, to bring him within reach of Jablonski's heel as he landed in a flattened crouch behind her. "Hang on, Ethel, and lean into it!"

"Maureen! Life'n'Limb Protocol, auto-adjust for additional load, on mah mark!" he barked, as his left hand came down on Jablonski's armored ankle, while his grav locks reengaged, locking him to the hull at triple their normal intensity, as he bawled out, "**MARK!**".

Immediately, the SI field around him rippled forward, engulfing "Big Ethel" Jablonski, with a thicker concentration over her leading edge, to divert the incoming particle spray up and over both officers, splashing down over the hull in their wake.

"*Engaged, Samuel- we've got you, Petty Officer,*" a matronly voice advised, as the buffeting smoothed out with the artificially improved fluid dynamics of the hull.

The hulking petty officer breathed a sigh of relief- tough she was, but she couldn't survive her EVA armor being compromised. Over the comms, not terribly the talkative type, she simply offered a heartfelt, "Thanks L-T."

In the distance, the shadowy form of the Miranda class starship with the bloody roses painted on the hull was picking up speed, but O'Dell was having none of it. "Ach! Ye harridan, ye'll nae git away from me s'easily. We've got a mission, and yuir nae g'win ta make Mister O'Dell's wee girl look bad today, ye bluiddy pirate!"

With that said, O'Dell pointed the unique starcraft at a point in space where there was nothing nor did it appear to be an intercept trajectory. But as the two ships drew closer, it was clear that the little leprechaun knew what she was doing, as the two ships drew close.

"Alreet- we get to the hull, I'm goin' in first. If the bridge dinna seal behind me, ye get the bridge crew wi' transporter tags, aye? Dinna worry- once I'm inside their shields won't last long. If it seals, ye gimme an eight count to lay waste then ye follow me in, aye?" While in truth O'Dell likely would have been terrified under normal

circumstances, she was here with backup. Muttering to herself, she tabbed off her comms briefly to work herself up as the small spacecraft approached the aged starship of days gone by.

"Yuir a fighter pilot now, Fiona, and ye kin do this. Yuir fast and strong and quick as a fox, and ye're an officer leadin' a boarding party in the best one-man fighter the Federation's ever built. Ye kin do this." Self-confidence bolstered, that was when a bright red sparkling star ejected from the starship, followed by another.

Flipping the comms back on, O'Dell squeaked, "Photon torpedoes this close? They're bluidy *insane!* Whist!"

The Thunderchicken quite suddenly picked up speed, as O'Dell had been far from giving her all she had, trying to ensure that she kept her shipmates attached. With the flip of a few switches and a tabbing of a few buttons, the dextrous damsel of daring in the cockpit began pushing the experimental craft to perform rather extreme evasive maneuvers. Changing course, she swung wide and high to draw the torpedoes away from their point of origin, even as the rocket pod opened and started firing. "Here's some chaff, ye spalleens..."

In their wake, one torpedo exploded, the shockwave battering the boarding party even as it hurtled them forward toward the Bloody Rose, as if the tiny terror had planned it that way. The explosion was surprisingly close, as the pixie pilot played a game of chicken with the remaining torpedo, letting it get closer and closer as she closed, not on the bridge, but on the port nacelle of the Bloody Rose, whom had fired upon them. As the boarding party approached, phaser fire opened up on them from the Miranda class that was obviously aware of their approach, causing the anthropomorphic aerospace craft to pinwheel as she flew in, deftly dodging the energy beams as she made her move.

The refractory coating and small size made her hard to get a target lock-on. Adding in her hyperkinetic piloting, and the tactical officer on the Bloody Rose was simply unable to draw a bead on the Thunderchicken, or her charges.

As the sparkling crimson point of death closed in on them, O'Dell added one last burst of speed to loop three-quarters of the way around the underslung port nacelle, then she paused there for three seconds, watching the sensors to time her maneuver. At seemingly the last second, O'Dell launched herself at the starboard nacelle. She managed to interpose it between them and the port nacelle, with just enough time for the torpedo to

impact the starboard nacelle, causing a massive shockwave. The interposed nacelle between them softened the blow, but the starship itself was thrown into them, causing red warning lights to light up on her consoles.

At her control console back on the flight deck of the Hera, while the mighty starship was engaged with drama of its own, the Tellarite Engineer pumped her thick, three-fingered fists into the air and let out a loud "**WOOOO!!!**"

The enthusiastic grunt from the porcine Ensign Gavarus startled the two security officers on duty standing near the bay doors for a second, as she continued to monitor the Thunderchicken's status from her control board. They were running without an active comm system under red alert, so the inventive engineer could only extrapolate what was happening from the detailed feedback systems designed to assist her in monitoring the flying mech, but what she saw had her shouting.

**"YES! @\$% those Mother#\$%&ing pirates UP, Fee! Take them to #\$%^ing SCHOOL!"** It was far from professional conduct, but this was her best friend flying into combat for the first time while she watched, and the emotions had gotten the better of Ensign Gavarus.

As the Bloody Rose limped into a slow turn, the Thunderchicken looped around the much larger craft, settling on the saucer section of the vessel's hull next to the dome of the bridge. Discharging her passengers, O'Dell coordinated her efforts. "Alreet, a bit more to the fore if ye will, and mag yuirselves down. I'm aboot to make an entrance, and I do like to make it loud."

With the landing party in position, O'Dell pointed the large rifle in the mech's right hand, and a series of plasma grenades ejected, pummeling the hull in rapid succession as the pint-sized pilot followed her orders. Creating a half-circle of around 4 meters wide and tall, she began breaching the bridge of the enemy starship with plasma weapons that ate through the duranium hull. While the shields would have prevented much of the damage, with the mech so close to the hull, the shields were a non-issue. As the plasma began to do its work, the phaser cannon lit up and carved a great 'X' through the center of the scorched and damage area from which atmosphere was already beginning to vent.

Which was when O'Dell raised one large booted 'foot' of the mech, to kick down the burning Duranium hull section, followed by her marching onto the bridge of the Bloody Rose. The emergency forcefields kicked in, maintaining the atmosphere, but they did

nothing to stop the tiny terror in the experimental war machine from stomping onto the bridge.

Disruptor fire abounded, bolts bouncing out of the hole in the hull where the Agony Device had formerly resided. As the Thunderchicken went to work, O'Dell cued up a sound file that was far more fearsome than her own squeaky, shrill voice.

**“PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPON! YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO COMPLY!”**

Even as she spoke, the firearm in her right hand belched hollow point rounds, chewing through the helm and tactical stations, even as the pirates using them dove for cover. Which in turn led to the lithe and somehow familiar figure in the Captain's chair pressing a button on her command chair, and a transporter effect began shimmering over the variable fighter craft.

Which would have been quite the catastrophe for anyone whose personal armature did not include starship shielding.

Fortunately, the Thunderchicken was more starship than armor, and it protected the miniature Mariposian in the pilot's seat by preventing the transporter from achieving a lock and taking hold. As the mech turned to fire two plasma grenades at the turbolift, the pixie pilot switched to the comm channel.

“That blasted harpy's got transporters rigged as disintegrators, so take out the personnel!” she conveyed to the boarding party as the mech spewed more hollow point rounds, demolishing the engineering console even as the phaser cannon rotated slightly and powered up, pointed directly at the Captain's chair.

The Andorian Master-At-Arms didn't need to be told twice, as he fired out three shots from his TR116C2, dropping several of the pirates with narcotic stun rounds. The stunned pirates disappeared as the holo tags activated, sending them right into the Hera's brig. With his team taking down the pirate bridge team, he turned his attention to the transporter. The Andorian began firing hollow point rounds into the deck, sniping the power cables running under the bridge. *Let's see the pirate queen use those traps with no power.*

With a literal snarl, Clemens flipped forward off the back of the Thunderchicken, landing with a loud **\*CLANG\*** on the deck, directly in front of the shocked would-be-

Empress, his pearly-white teeth bared in a near-feral rictus. Before her hand could even twitch, the obviously-enraged Intel agent had darted forward, his hands a blur, and grasped the old-design Starfleet Command Chair's arm restraints, meant for securing the occupant in the event of rough maneuvers.

Looking her dead in the eyes, he slammed both clamps down so hard that the latch mechanisms shattered, leaving them locked down tightly over her arms.

Without another word, he reached down to the chair base, and bent the sides inward, wrapping her up in the durasteel frame, like some sort of modern-day iron maiden, being careful not to crush her in the process.

He leaned in, then, as though they were friends, and there was nothing else in the universe but the two of them, and spoke very softly to her, the metal making groaning sounds, as his fingers dug into it, his brilliant blue eyes twinkling like a pair of incoming photon torpedoes.

"Yer daughter has friends, you *strumpet*. You just tried to **murder my team** in th'most horrible way **possible**. Yer gonna rot in prison, an' eventually, in th'bowels of **Hell**. Ah'll call ahead 'n have 'em gitchyer room ready."

He straightened up suddenly, and spun on his heel, headed back for the team.

"...ya filthy animal..."

## Chapter 10 - The Agony Of Defeat

Eyeing the bionic boulder with contempt, the Queen Regent of the Artan family empire sneered. “Doctor Mudd, there are intruders on my bridge. Should I perhaps panic, as they are casually firing ordinance, ruining my command chair and calling me names?”

The Terran scientist stepped in next to his captain, placing his hands on either side of his temples. “It doesn’t sound like something to lose your head over, ma’am.”

With that said, he casually removed his head, whereupon his headless body tossed it at Clemens, who instinctively caught it as the goateed head in his hands quipped, “If I was rich, I’d be sipping kippers on a beach!”

Which was when his cybernetics short-circuited, locking him up even as his biological parts were struck by crippling agony, as if every nerve ending in his body were firing at once, screaming in urgent, abject agony. As the Intel chief grimaced and struggled not to scream, Jablonski made to smack the head out of his hands, only to be struck by the same effect. Despite her massive size and musculature- or perhaps because of it- the peerless petty officer was driven to a knee as she gritted her teeth and fought to control her body, to finish off the robotic head which was still agonizing both of them as a mocking chuckle came from the command chair. But like Clemens, she could not move as her muscles refused to respond, and they both found themselves helpless in enemy territory.

“You think I wouldn’t have prepared for this? You think I wouldn’t have known you’d try to turn the tables after I presented such a tempting target as showing you my bridge? Please.” As the walker mech turned the rather large hand cannon to point it at the pirate queen’s head, she laughed. “By all means, fire away. But you should know that there’s a hostage involved in this crisis. After all, you Starfleet types are all about the preservation of life, aren’t you? So I wonder what you plan to do about this little hostage... show them, Doctor Mudd.”

The headless android body produced a PaDD from behind its back and held it out before him to show another Doctor Mudd, who was holding a screaming baby. A baby with

raven black hair, and delicate spot patterns along its temples.

“I was thinking of naming her Ailane... so she’ll be the reverse of everything her mother ever was,” the pirate queen asked, her voice filled with silky menace. “Which is a much nicer name than ‘hostage’ or ‘sacrifice for the greater good’. What do you think, Enalia?”

Transmitting her sensor feed from the Thunderchicken to the Hera, the footage was quickly routed through to Captain Telvan.

Back on the bridge of the Hera and watching the feed, Enalia stood in shock. The resemblance was definitely there, though how her mother got a DNA sample was beyond her. She'd been beyond careful. Either way, whether this child was related to her or not currently did not matter. It was a hostage and from the look of the room around the feed, she knew just where on the ship they were.

Sitting back down, the spotted captain's face was hard as she gripped the arms of the center chair. "They're in auxiliary control. Lock tractors on the Bloody Rose. Have the Manticore unload those EMP warheads when ready. Transporters at the ready. I want Arenara and Mudd in the brig. Now."

On the shattered bridge of the bloody Rose, Thav was conflicted. He was keeping his rifle locked on the pirate queen, but also keeping his eye on his team. Every inch of him wanted to shoot her and go to help his team, but he couldn't. As his helmet read the captain's instructions, he switched his rifle to fire five of the transporter trackers into the pirate queen. The moment the shields were down, she'd be over to the Hera's brig in a heartbeat.

Clemens had gone through the Intel training courses, intended to provide whatever hardening possible to stave off some of the more brutal interrogation techniques available to his home universe's denizens, but no anti-interrogation/torture technique can stand to a technology specifically-devised to create pure, chaotic, unending pain, that never stops, never does physical damage to the body (after all, can't have the punished unable to work after a booth session, can we?), and is so without pattern that getting used to it is literally impossible.

Even unconsciousness will not stop Agonizer pain- it shares that property with human migraines, and specialists who have worked to understand the technology have

suspicions that it may have derived from the study of them.

Regardless of its origins, once it hit him, the fire spread from his hands to the rest of his body like the crawling and biting of fire ants, which also were made of acid, could make him smell burning and rotting flesh, the smell of hospitals and nursing homes, and hear the screams of the damned, along with fingernails down corrugated tin, and anything else he'd ever felt viscerally-repulsed-by.

Later, while trying to sort it all out, Sam would develop a theory that the agonizer accessed all the personally-disturbing memories he had, and distilled them down into the worst sensory medley possible, crafted just for him.

Standing above them all on the bridge, the Thunderchicken seemed to almost bristle. "Alreet.. alreet, ya win, ye blackguard," the pearlescent black mech said aloud, in the tinny and chirpy voice that very much did not fit the fearsome countenance it presented. "I'll evacuate the bridge and take me crew wi'me."

Stepping toward the gaping hole in the bridge that appeared for all intents and purposes to be open to space, the whirring mech motioned to the Security team. "We've been ordered ta stand down," the pixie pilot explained as the orders came across her HUD screen, along with detailed schematics. "C'mon ye four, 'tis time for us ta piss off. Orders are ta leave the L-T and petty officer on the bridge. She's got hostages, so we're ta withdraw."

Thav scowled but followed his orders. Slowly backing up he didn't take his rifle off of the bandit queen until he was clear and out of the bridge.

While the security officers were hesitant to leave their fellows behind, orders were orders. Thus they dutifully attached themselves to the mech, even as messages came across the HUD of Jablonski's suit and Clemens' internal systems.

**CDRPARIS:** Stand by and wait for your moment.

Not that they could read that while their eyeballs were afire and their brains were trying to explode out of their skulls and their innards had seized to prevent them from soiling themselves as every muscle tried to tear itself off the bones that felt like they were filled in their marrow with lava...

Flipping a rather skillful robotic bird to the Queen in the rather crumpled throne, the Thunderchicken retreated to the gaping hole in the aft of the bridge from which she had made her entrance, and the variable fighter vanished from sight, skimming out across the broad saucer section of the Miranda class warship under impulse speed.

“Now I wonder why she left you two behind...?” Arenara mused as she watched the two Starfleet personnel writhing in agony on her bridge. “She must have a reason... “

As she mused, the sadistic queen dispassionately viewed the agonized individuals as one might look at specimens on a petri dish. She might have had more musings, more ponderings on the nature of just what sort of strategy her daughter was playing at. But that was all she managed to get out before a shudder wracked the starship.

In stellar combat, kinetic weapons could be repelled by the deflector- but not at point-blank range with a coordinated strike from the Thunderchicken and the Hera's best security team. With detailed schematics available, the observation deck that served as the forward viewscreen of the auxiliary control center on Deck 9 was breached. The attack was quick and efficient, firing not energy weapons, but plasma grenades in a simultaneous coordinated attack with the Security team still hanging off of the mech's legs. They knew what to do and they were moving in synch. After all, sealed systems made for closed comms unless you chose to broadcast. And while life didn't come with a HUD, the EVA armor most certainly did.

With professional precision, the security officers moved in through the opening, sealing it behind them with emergency foam. They were staged for a storm and rescue of the hostage if necessary, and all sensors were seeing Mudd, who appeared biological to their scanners, as did the rather unhappy newborn baby, who was very unhappy indeed.

“What the bloody hell is it now?” the dark-haired pirate queen rolled her eyes from the bridge, hearing the chaos of her ship being torn into from below.

The variable fighter mech had moved around to a position where, rather than pound the hull with plasma, she magnetically affixed herself in position, and utilized her sensors to corroborate the data sent to her from the Hera. This enabled her to target the exact conduit junction needed, and execute a computer-guided surgical strike using the vehicle's phaser cannon on the main plasma conduits from Engineering. Which in turn began a rather exciting and energetic plasma fire on Deck 8.

Not that such a vulnerability was a well-known fact about such starships. Not if you knew precisely where the vulnerable location was on the starship. In which case one would have been an expert on the class, and knew just where to strike. To breach the power conduits which fed the auxiliary control panels, to be precise. Which was exactly what Enalia Telven, owner of a similar vessel, was considered- an expert.

“You know, I have had enough of you people. Havren!” The computer chirruped in recognition, and she laid out her command. “Start the self-destruct countdown, twenty seconds!” the coldly furious betrayer of her family and of her fleet declared as two of her enemies struggled and writhed, which didn’t even bring her any pleasure. “I’ll not rot in some brig while my idiotically naive daughter struts like some Starfleet thug before me. I’d sooner burn in hell!

Which was when the lights on the bridge flickered, then suddenly the emergency power came on. Because ship’s power had been disrupted by the machinations of the midget of mayhem. While battery power kept the lights and many of the systems operating, that most definitely meant that the shields were down.

As the lights went down, the Security team burst through the door, with Thav in firing position. The panicked Mudd turned in horror, looked, and held up the squalling infant as a human shield. Tags struck the Terran scientist in the elbow, the groin and kneecap, as the Master-At Arms was steady, and aim was true. For his part, Mudd grunted as he struggled to remain upright. At the signal from the Master-At Arms, both the scientist and the hostage were beamed aboard the Hera to a cell in the brig.

In the cell in the brig, Doctor Davo Mudd looked around wildly, then rolled his eyes in exasperation. Bringing the infant, who had ceased crying when transported, up to eye level, he smiled. “Well, at least I’ve still got you, my chubby little hostage! Gootchie goo?”

Which was when the giggling infant disappeared in a twinkling of transporter lights, and Mudd clawed at the empty air where his trump card had just been, raging at the unfairness of it all. “I used to **be somebody**, you know! A scientist, an artist, a genius appreciated for his work! And now look at me... stuck playing footstool for a bloody pirate. There’s irony in this, I’m so very certain...”

With that, Mudd dropped his ass onto a bench in the brig to mope. Sooner or later someone would come along, and open the door. And therein lay opportunity, and the

chance to make a deal. After all, Doctor Mudd knew all sorts of interesting facts that were often the sort of things people wanted to know. This wasn't his first jail cell, and it likely wouldn't be his last. But he'd gotten out of them all. After all, he *was* an *escape artist*...

Back on the bridge of the Bloody Rose, the angry Artan pirate queen snarled as she looked about wildly. Panic was a new look for her, and it was one she hadn't known in a very long time. At the moment she wasn't finding it a welcome state of mind.

“No! No no no no no! This cannot be happening! I will not allow it!” Vainly she struggled against her own ostentatious captain's throne, which had been warped and bent around her in a gesture she'd thought practically comical until she was alone on her bridge, cut off from her crew and with only a headless Muddbot to help her. And without its head, the bot wasn't even that much use.

There were so many contingencies she could activate, *if only she could move*. Of course, with half the panels smashed, that truly did limit her options, she realized. Sighing to herself, she realized this game was lost. Time to fake her own death and build anew. “I'm done. Beam me to my escape craft, Hav-”

Which was the exact moment when the EMP warhead assault from the Manticore struck, frying electronic systems, circuits, and demolishing the majority of the ship's computer systems. And suddenly, the Agonizer built into the Mudd robot head was no longer functional, as the delicate circuitry of the complex, yet unshielded android fried, along with nearly every system on the ship. If not for the safety feature of an immediate shutdown of the warp core, it would have blown them all to space dust.

The bionic systems of Lieutenant Samuel Clemens the 15th, however, were EMP hardened. Which meant that he could once more unlock his wondrous cybernetic limbs, while his mind and body cleared of the effects of the agony. Though for both officers, it was an experience that would most certainly make rather strong memories and opinions about such technologies from that point on. An Agonizer experience did one of two things for a person- either it made them want to put their enemies in one, or it made them swear to never let another living being experience such a thing.

The order had been given to ‘wait for his moment’, and given that the pirate queen hadn't beamed out just yet, this appeared to be it.

After confirming that Jablonski appeared to be functional, via his sensors, he decided to address the issue at hand, having gotten an exact reading on exactly how much atmosphere was available, and how long the forcefield would hold.

Sam decided that he really didn't give a goddamn about learning anything from the head in his hands.

"**NIAGARA FALLS!!!**" he shouted, suddenly.

Slowly, he turned. Step by step. Inch by inch. He walked up to her. He **smashed** the Muddbot's head against her chair. He hit him, he **bonked** him, he **bopped** him, he **socked** him, and he **mashed** his face on the last flat surface on the chair. And then, he **knocked** it across the room, with a mighty backhand, **embedding** it into the Engineering console, **shattering** it and the panel into tiny fragments.

Sam locked eyes with the former Queen. "Right now, I don't **care** about orders, good or evil, right or wrong. Madame, I must say, you're an evil **bitch**, and I daresay yoah dangerous to every lifeform around you. You have to be **stopped**, because you Won't. Stop. On. Your. **Own**."

He took a step forward, and his right arm shot out like lightning, a finger extended, with a spinning drill bit extended, a fraction of an inch from her pale face, and grinned at her, like a loon.

"Don't... don't *do* it... Lieutenant..." Jablonski gasped, voice muffled inside her helmet with no comms, as her EVA armor had been fried as well. From her knees, she reached feebly for him, still trying to catch her breath and recover motor function. It seemed the more in tune with your physicality, the better the Agonizer worked on your physique. As a bodybuilder, nutritionist and all-around Amazon, it had laid 'Big Ethel' quite low. Now she lacked the strength to rise, to stop the Chief Spook from ending the threat to galactic society.

"You wouldn't DARE," the pirate queen hissed, unflinching.

The bit stopped and retracted, and he **poked** her forehead, bouncing it back against her headrest.

"Boop!"

"Clemens to Captain Telvan. We have the package, and it's wrapped for the freezer," he said, still grinning, as he winked at the prisoner.

There was no response, save for a shimmering of a transporter effect, as the deposed Pirate queen spat at Sam... spittle which would land on the floor of the brig of the USS Hera, in a cell specially prepared for the prisoner. Images adorned the walls- some familiar, like her deceased husband and daughter. A Starfleet ensign, and many more. Rolling her eyes, she sneered at the wall of victims that had been prepared for her. Unrepentant to the end, this simply firmed her resolve. Her smug daughter would get her comeuppance yet, even if she had the upper hand now. Arenara would simply bide her time for her revenge.

Clemens noted the headless android, and realized that it might still have functions that could be useful. Unfortunately, it was impossible to know exactly whom it would be useful to, at the moment. He fired off a few transport tags, encoded with a cyber-hazard warning, and signaled the Hera's transporter ops group to sequester it until he could get a better look at it.

Back on deck 9 of the Bloody Rose, while the EMPs incapacitated the armor of the security officers, all of them would have sufficient air to survive a few moments, and the power assist systems would kick back in once the hardened power backup rebooted the systems. And the well-trained experts knew to be prepared when the pulse hit. But after a brief moment, they were back up and in action again, taking the pirate ship corridor by corridor. The dispirited pirates, who served out of fear rather than dedication, offered only token resistance.

The Bloody Rose, scourge of the spaceways, had been crippled and captured- with injuries, but without the loss of a single life. A feat most would have deemed impossible.

But then, most weren't Captain Enalia Telvan, who commanded the crew of the USS Hera.

## Chapter 11 - Come Home To Roost

Securing the enemy starship and evacuating the crew to their cargo bays was handled without her. The small support craft followed orders, performing visual scans as well as active scanner sweeps. All of this would be evidence introduced in court later, and after having acted as prosecutor, Commander Paris had muttered at the end of the orders that she'd be damned if she was going to blow the case on detective work. So Fiona O'Dell, the tiny test pilot who has mastered the Thunderchicken, followed orders, and took a long look around one messed up old junker.

"Lookit alla that crrrap oot there in space. Why would ye even have an antique like this? I dinna get it, Briaar. If I was a dirty pirate queen who'd been playin both sides against the middle, I'd own me a bloody dreadnaught fuir when I got inta trouble, not a bloody relic like this." O'Dell wasn't impressed by antiques.

For her part, the tubby Tellarite manning the control console at the flight deck of the Hera had a different perspective. "Screw a Dreadnaught. Those things are engineering nightmares. The Miranda class has been in active frickin' service for, like, a hundred and thirty-something years, Fee."

Working at the console, collecting and collating the data from the Thunderchicken's sweeps, The Porcine Engineer continued, "The modular construction makes upgrades crazy easy, it can run with a crew of, like, twenty-some-odd people, it's maneuverable as hell, and she's designed to be as close to *idiot-proof* as possible. I mean, shit. These dumbass pirates kept her flying."

On the rollbar shuttle bay the pilot with the call sign 'Leprechaun' found a warhead in Bay 2, which was filled with so much toxic waste and radioactive material that whatever the quantum torpedo driving it all outward didn't destroy, the sheer amount of hyper-radioactive materials in the dirty bomb could irradiate an entire system over time, rendering it hostile to most forms of life. A science and security team beamed over, and in five minutes, they had the thing deactivated and contained for travel Disposal would apparently be another issue.

"Score one for the visual inspection- here's ta bein' anal retentive," the midget Mariposian mused over the R&D channel as she continued her inspection, finding nothing else out of the ordinary. The Manticore moved in to tow her, which, again, O'Dell wasn't impressed. "I mean, I guess they figured out that our configuration is superior, but lookit what they're doin ta their warp signature, aye? It's like they're aiming for the drag coefficient, but joost nae managin it."

"So long as she fits in her own warp bubble, she'll fly just fine. Plus, that drag coefficient doesn't factor for her maneuverability in ship-to-ship combat." Gavarus replied, clearly more impressed by the antiquies design far more than her diminutive partner-in-crime.

The next voice to come across the line was that of Lieutenant Pacci, who ordered, "Thunderchicken, you are ordered to return to the roost."

"Aye, an' copy that, Hera!" O'Dell chirped. Calculating speed and trajectory, the pixie pilot brought up a sound file and began piping it through the R&D channel. Traditional Marisposian music blared forth, even as the small stereotype aimed the craft on a smooth flight back to the flight deck of the USS Hera.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBATrLRWySg>

ENSO'DELL: Play me onta the flight deck, Briaar!

From the control console, Gavarus snorted out a laugh and rolled her eyes as she began to prep for the re-docking sequence and turned towards the ranking Flight Officer, Assistant Chief Mona Gonadie. "On your orders, Ensign Gonadie."

Mona rolled her eyes, knowing that if she didn't give permission for a little celebration, she'd hear no end of it from them and if she did, she'd hear no end of it from command. She just sighed and took responsibility, pulling out a small music deck, plugging it into the flight deck PA system for Gavarus. "Permission granted. Dance your jig and have some fun, but promise me you won't break anything at the last minute?"

Calling up the perfect time, Gavarus hit 'play' and messaged O'Dell with a grin and a chuckle. "You heard the Chief. Dance like you've got to clean up the mess, Leprechaun!"

Gliding into the flight deck, the half-spacecraft, half-armor suit took it's time, waving

first to one side of the flight deck, then the other. As the music came up across the flight deck, the mech began to clap its hands in time to the simple music, which had the ability to strike a chord easily. Complex music was a matter of taste, but simple tribal music such as this was evolved enough to appeal to a sophisticated taste, yet simple enough to be accessible to anyone.

As the crew on the flight deck began to clap, the Thunderchicken ignited its boot jets lightly, just enough to produce a bit of an energy trail, even as her engines pushed to keep her in place. With that showy effect accomplished, hovering there over the flight deck, Fiona Margaret Mary Josephine O'Dell, flush from a victory the likes of which she'd never dreamt, took up a task with which she'd once been challenged.

Inside the cockpit of the experimental starcraft dubbed the Thunderchicken, the atomic aerospace ace began to move the legs of the hunched over humanoid shaped mecha. In time to the music it began to tap its toes and heels, as the pearlescent neon dark variable mode fighter began to dance a jig. There, in midair above the main flight deck on Deck 4, where she wouldn't damage the mech or the deck, in time to the music. As the feet moved, the left trails from the thrusters, adding an additionally surreal element to the spacecraft with arms and legs dancing a merry jig.

Likely no one would ask, but she'd even played all of the instruments, laying down multiple tracks.

Of course, while drunk in her quarters, O'Dell had played most of the instruments in question for Gavarus's entertainment, so the pilot's Tellarite bestie knew the origin of the music all too well. Regardless, though, she clapped along, tapping one of her hooves on the deck in time with the music.

The tension of the actual mission had been all but unbearable, and in the moment, this was exactly the release of that tension that the tightly wound flight crew needed as the room erupted in smiles and genuine laughter.

While everyone laughed, she kept it up for a good twenty seconds before stopping, swaying a little, then taking a few bows before cutting the thrusters and gliding smoothly to her landing pad, whereupon she turned once in a circle, then rotated back for a half circle, facing the control room. As the mech touched down, O'Dell engaged all of the safeties, locked down the weapons control and powered down the vehicle itself, leaving the left arm outstretched, hand open, palm up, nearly a meter off the deck.

As she popped open the cockpit, O'Dell's helmet was already down, and her bright red mop of curls was wet with sweat, her face was shiny with it too. But the lithe little lass clambered out of the cockpit like a spider monkey and ran toward the stern of the craft. Scrambling across the shoulder and walking out onto the arm, O'Dell stood on the palm of the hand of the mech, then began jumping up and down excitedly.

At this elevation, when Gavarus arrived O'Dell would actually be the right height to give her partner in crime a hug at her own height for a change. Or at least she would be, if she could stop jumping up and down and hooting out unintelligible gibberish.

Not giving a good god damn about protocol, the generally grumpy Gavarus was just so glad to see her best friend in the universe return unharmed that she stomped her hoof to the deck and let out a loud "**WOOOOOP!**"

Running over, Gavarus grabbed the tiny test pilot in a pig-sized bear hug. After all, if Mona Gonadie could get away with making out with Lieutenant Dox on the bridge, they were hardly going to get court marshaled for a damn hug. "C'mere, you dumbass genius! You frickin' kicked their mother@#\$&in' ASSES, Fee!"

Knees kicked up, O'Dell squealed with delight as Gavarus swung her around, EVA armor and all and she clung tightly to her best friend. "Didye see what we did oot there, me and our baby? We joost took oot a starship! Well, wi' a security team, sure, but looka what we did! And I brought her home wi' nary a scratch! We're the dog's bollocks, we are! Chief built 'er, ye worked oot the bugs and look what she kin do!"

While a smaller person might have tried to take sole credit, O'Dell was a pilot who knew she was only good as the spacecraft and her engineers, and she had no trouble at all making her victory their victory. This was a win for Chief Gonadie, a win for Briaar and her, and a win for the whole flight deck, for the whole Hera. But the not-terribly-humble O'Dell was gracious in victory.

As Gavarus let her back down to the deck, O'Dell ran to the edge of the smaller upper flight deck. There at the edge, where the overhead of the chief flight control office met the traffic control booth, the pint-sized pilot squeaked her cry of triumph over the flight deck. Arms upraised in victory, she shouted, "Pog me thoin, ye pirate poseurs! Thunderchicken, hooooooo!"

Watching, Gavarus let out a snort of a laugh as she walked over to the Variable mode fighter dubbed the 'Thunderchicken'. She had no PaDD in hand, but instead simply ran a thick, three-fingered hand over the surface of its outer hull. O'Dell was right. The shield enhancements worked better than expected and to a lay-person, she didn't even look like she had been flying, much less in combat.

The Tellarite engineer's eyes saw minor points of stress fatigue on the joints and some surface pitting here and there. The minor wear and tear of basic operations. Walking around with her, making a similar visual inspection, was the chief of the R&D department, Ensign Mona Gonadie, who Gavarus was pretty sure was happy as well. "We'll have to run a few full diagnostics... Post-mission refurbishments... but just from that dance alone, the motor systems all look to be in perfect order, Ensign."

Mona ran her hands over the parked craft as well, a slight smile on her face. "Yeah, I think we might be about ready to come out of prototype stage. What do you think of the name Banshee? Too on the nose? I was thinking of reducing the size about fifteen percent for the production run and remove all the experimental stuff. Ah, but we can talk about that later. For now, let's be happy we won and with flying colors, right?"

"O'Dell will *love* the name. Though she does like it big. But if we streamline her down, we can boost efficiency by a near equal percentage up." Gavarus commented, too excited to not think about the details. "You built one beauty of a *beast* here, Chief."

"I just hope the other pilots aboard are able to handle the controls..." Mona mused, pulling out a PaDD and making a few post-battle notes.

"I've thought about that, Chief." Gavarus commented. "I think that if Fee... Ensign O'Dell... does a tutorial with one of the other pilots from scratch, we can record it and create a kind of... holographic, interactive training simulation. We just need to go through the process and record the steps and suss out all the potential questions."

"I know the Commander hates the name, Chief," O'Dell chimed in from below. "But tis Starfleet tradition- whatever the name of the first production model is, that's the name of the line. I've given it thought, and the Thunderchicken is what ye named her, Chief Gonadie, and me vote's that we should keep the name, aye? Banshee is something that willnae makes fighter pilots roll their eyes, but it'll forever stand that she's was named that by her creator, and they can stoof it if they dinna like it."

"At least, that's me two pence worth," O'Dell amended. While she was still high on adrenaline and victory, she was a bit bolder with her superior than normal, but she didn't want to push her luck, either.

"And she is a work of love. I made her for my Minay and that name was meant for her and myself." Mona smiled that secret smile she kept for her secret projects and Dox as she ran one hand along the nose of the Thunderchicken. "But with a remodel and the experimental stuff being removed... And my cloak... Should come a production name rather than a project name. Banshee is as good as any. After all, this is the prototype and not the first production model, right? Now let's stop wasting time trying to rename her and go run those diagnostics! We've still got work to do!"

"Aye mum, yes mum, sorry mum!" O'Dell replied, looking around for where she was needed in the process. "Where should I be doin what noow? I got alla the telemetry downloaded in realtime and the sensor logs are downloadin. So... uh..."

"Get them to science, ops, and intel so they can scrub the data as well. We performed operations in hostile territory so we need to make sure everyone has access to all the logs just in case someone misses something." Mona was all business now and though she was interested in performance and analysis, the mission logs came first.

Mona then turned a bit softer as another issue popped into her head. "Also, you were in combat. I need to know if you have any signs of PTSD at any time, ok? I don't know what exactly what happened, but if you need to talk about anything at all, I'm here, Gavarus is here, Asa is here... You have a lot of friends, ok? There's no need to face anything alone. That goes for anyone that goes through anything traumatic."

Trying to Match Mona's more professional demeanor, Gavarus nodded as she grabbed a PaDD to start collecting the data from her console collected during the mission. Aye, Chief. We will, right Ensign?"

The two of them were riding adrenaline highs at the moment still, but we're both emotional messes just prior to launch, so even the generally dismissive Tellarite was giving Mona's words some thought. Though those thoughts centered mostly on how a metric ton of alcohol after the end of their shift might just be the therapy they were both craving.

"Aye mum. If I hae nightmares or canna sleep or I'm more messed oop than usual, I'll

report it. We have our own ways a'dealin wi' stress for the most part, but if I'm nae okay I will say something, I promise!" O'Dell held up one hand as if making a pledge then held the other over her heart. But she couldn't keep a straight face for long.

"Boot didye see it? They fired photon freakin torpedoes at us! And I fooled a torpedo, which is bloody brilliant, then I fricking dodged one by usin their own ship for cover! That was the most incredible thing I've ever done! And didya see me on the bridge? I was like, pchow, pchow, pchow!" As she spoke, O'Dell made gun fingers and pointed to distant points, supplying the sound effects of her mission.

"Then I booted me way in like the king of the hill and just chewed up their control panels, and didye see? Didye see? When the Commander told me ta fall back, I lied and bluffed like a Ferengi explainin' his stolen goods to the customs officials!" Clearly, O'Dell was having no difficulty congratulating herself. In truth, this had far and away been the most exciting experience of her life, save perhaps for the time she and Gavarus had almost died when an early prototype Cyclone fighter had experienced and encounter with a quantum string that blew out most of their systems.

But this was different. This had been combat against an armed and dangerous opponent. This had been a piloting feat no Starfleet officer had ever performed. This had been a critical mission in a starcraft that was untested, and a pilot who had never been in live combat before. This was the crowning achievement of Fiona O'Dell's life, and she was unable to contain her excitement. No experienced and jaded officer who had seen it all, the pixie pilot had never been prouder, even when she'd been accepted to the Academy, or even when she had graduated flight school. This was Big Damn Hero stuff, and she was practically on overload.

"Kin we get a holo? Of all three of us and the Thunderchicken? So's I kin hang it on me wall and tell me grandchildren about it someday? Please mum?" O'Dell pleaded with her R&D section chief.

"Oh, of course," Mona replied, already having made the preparations from her PaDD as the spot where the thunderchicken was parked and the trio were currently, began a slow descent down into the maintenance bay below the main shuttle deck. She pointed down at the holographic security systems she'd installed some time ago in the R&D lift and held up her PaDD that showed the live feed of them riding the lift with the Thunderchicken down. "Smile for the Camera."

In a more characteristic display of grumpiness, Gavarus rolled her eyes and sighed. "Really? Pictures. *Ugggh..* I hate getting my..." But before she could even finish her grouching, she looked down at O'Dell, who had already unleashed her greatest weapon against the towering Tellarite: her big, puppy-dog eyes and a heaping helping of Irish-Catholic guilt that Gavarus was completely defenseless against. "Oh, for @\$%'s sake... fine."

What followed was a montage of holo snapshots as the hyperkinetic O'Dell jumped from one idea to the next, changing their positions, hopping up in the Thunderchicken's hand to get into the shots, and in one inspired moment moved the fingers of the mech to form an 'H' in gang sign, leaving it parked that way so that they could all look 'street' next to it.

But the best shot, and the one she would frame on her wall, was O'Dell grinning ear to ear, standing in the outstretched hand of the Thunderchicken. Which made her tall enough to lean on Gavarus' shoulder, who looked somehow put out but still complying. While beside them, Mona Gonadie looks half long-suffering, and half proud as punch of her baby, which would revolutionize personal vehicular technology in the 25th century. The image that O'Dell liked best would be part of the historical record of the development of the craft, featured in history texts in only 20 years time.

The framed image from O'Dell's personal collection would one day hang in the Smithsonian air and space museum, immortalizing the genius who revolutionized spacecraft design.

Along with the two loose screws who helped her test the fruits of her innovative mind.

## Chapter 12 - Brig Visit

As the Captain entered the brig with Rita, Az'Prel, and the two Wil'TAms sisters behind her, she maintained her decorum and bearing, walking up to first the cell that had Doctor Mudd in it, the man waggling his fingers at them before she moved on to the cell she was most interested in. One that had been specially prepared. One that had held her own mother.

The displaced Vulcan lingered momentarily at Doctor Mudd's cell for a moment, her emotionless eyes studying him for any signs of deceit or betrayal before moving on as well. As for Mudd, he blew kisses at the rigid and stoic Vulcan.

"Hello, Mother. It's good to see you in an appropriate habitat for once. I trust your accommodations are not to your liking?" Though her verbal jabs were harsh, her voice remained impassive, as if she were speaking to any other inmate.

"On the contrary, they are precisely what I expected," Arenara Artan replied without turning to make eye contact, instead choosing to stare at a point on the overhead. "I see you've upgraded the Starfleet brigs. And beaming away all clothing and materials that might possibly be a threat was a nice touch. These lovely paper coverings," she plucked at the disposable top, bottom and slippers she had been issued as had all the piratical prisoners, "certainly spare no expense for your guests."

"So what does the walking talking embarrassment to the Artan family want now? Is this where you've come to gloat? If so, don't bother. I won't give you the satisfaction of a display," the elder Artan waved dismissively.

"Actually, I'm here to tell you what's going to happen to you next in the Federation judiciary and penal system," Enalia began, clasping her hands behind her. She was trying to do this as dispassionately and as sterile as possible. As if the prisoner was anyone. It was hard not imagining herself behind that forcefield though.

"The evidence arrayed against you will be presented in a Federation court and if you so request it, you will be granted counsel. If there is sufficient doubt in your case, you will

be granted a full trial and be judged by a panel of your peers... If there are any... Once convicted, you will serve your sentence inside of a Federation correctional facility if it is deemed you are able to be rehabilitated. If it is deemed you are not, you will spend the rest of your life in a penal colony."

"For your sake, I hope we neither send you to Facility 4028 nor allow you to be extradited to either the Klingons nor the Romulans." Enalia paused and let the mention of Starfleet's deepest, darkest prison that it sent its worst and most dangerous prisoners to sink in. It was rumored that there was a changeling prisoner there and they were the least of the prisoners stored at that facility.

"Mmmm, I hear there's cold storage on Luna, on the dark side. I've always loved the cold." Drawing in a long inhalation, the captured matron eyed her daughter.

"Brought the whole entourage, I see. Afraid to face me alone, or are they here to make sure you don't drop the forcefield and go for it?" It might have been a taunt, but it was an honest one. If anyone understood Enalia Telvan, it was her mother.

It was only rumored to be on Luna - the actual location was much further away in the Ayala system secreted away in an asteroid field and Enalia suspected that her mother knew this. She decided not to play that little game though, instead rising to the other game she had presented.

"The latter, actually. They're here to provide support, should I become emotionally compromised speaking with you," The spotted Captain took a step closer to the forcefield. "And I have been very... emotionally compromised... A clone as a hostage? I thought you better than that. And where did you get that Mudd? Even I didn't think you would stoop so low as to ally yourself with a Terran scientist."

"An asset is always to be cultivated," Arenara shrugged. "He came to me through... unusual means, and he proved himself to be resourceful inventive, and surprisingly loyal once I found the right motivator. Say what you will- respect may motivate, but fear gets the job done. Why are you here, Enalia?"

Cutting to the heart of the matter, Arenara swiveled in her seat and rose, even in the shapeless paper clothing every inch a queen in attitude and deportment. "My lawyer will explain procedure to me, and you coming down here to blather that garbage at me should be beneath you. They're here to stop you... the throwback and the two guard

dogs..."

At that Petty Officer S'Rina moved forward with a growl, to be restrained by her sister with one arm thrown across her chest and a glare that would not be denied. Paris didn't look back, secure that her officers wouldn't rise to such simple bait that wasn't even aimed at them.

"Along with your little friend who came from the same place mine did, which makes you wonder. All this 'restraint' on hand just to read me my rights and follow procedure? You know they covered all of that already, you've read the reports by now. No, you came down here because you had to see me in person. You had to face your own personal demon and look her in the eye."

Stepping up to the forcefield, Arenara Artan stood practically nose to nose with her daughter, like mirror images of one another- same height, same build, similar features and bone structure, even. Tilting her head down to look out from under her brows, the forcefield lending her features an underlit effect, the defeated and captured captain of the HMS Bloody Rose smiled, a rather sickly affair.

"Ask me. Ask me all the questions, all those things you think you know but you're afraid to ask because you know you don't want the answers. Go on. Ask me. I'll answer, here and now, just for you, this time and this time only. I'm your prisoner, Enalia," The way that she said it in such a mocking tone made it seem as though she wasn't taking her impending trial and incarceration seriously at all. "I'm at your mercy. So go ahead. Ask me, if you've got the guts.

Silently Rita Paris reached for the shoulder of the captain, to launch into a speech about never giving a troll the satisfaction, but Enalia waved it off, without ever breaking eye contact with her manipulative mother. The bait had turned her stomach, but instead of rising to meet it this time, she waited a moment, then stepped back from the forcefield and leaned against one of the security consoles. "You're right about one thing. I wanted to see you in here. To see if after all this time you could be reasoned with."

"I guess I hoped that in the end you weren't the sadistic, backstabbing monster I always knew you to be and that somewhere in there was a mother. Someone that I could actually relate to. Instead all I have are the memories of the beatings and the drills. Of constant training from as young as I could remember. Sure I had every luxury... But I paid for them with blood, sweat, and tears." Enalia paused a moment as she struggled to

contain the emotions raging within her. "There's a better way, you know."

The spotted captain then straightened back up and adjusted her uniform jacket. "As for questions, I'm sure your interrogator will have plenty for you. I think I have the answers I came for."

That elicited a long peal of mocking laughter as the deposed pirate monarch shook her head in amusement. "Oh, Enalia. I give you one chance to ask me anything, and I'd give you the greatest treasure of all- truth. And you take the opportunity to wallow in mawkish sentiment. I taught you better than that."

"Since we'll be continuing this conversation later, I'll tell you this for free. I'm unconcerned about your little show of force, your little moment here. Because this is just one small move in a very much larger scheme... one of which you are blissfully unaware, and I suspect will remain so until... time... runs out for you." The regal regent strode back to the bench of her cell, and lowered herself back onto it in a ladylike fashion, crossing her legs at the knee and perching her elbow on her knee, to cradle her temple with her fingertips.

"There are forces at work here you cannot comprehend, and stakes so high the universe itself is the prize. We'll meet again, my flawed little experiment. In time, you'll beg to bend the knee to me."

Enalia sighed and rubbed at her temple, straining to fathom the depth of her mother's delusions. "Commander Paris, please make sure there are no further plots..."

That was when the lighting in the room dimmed and all the power in the brig seemed to go out all at once. Not even the backup systems were kicking on, though the pale blue bioluminescent panels were slowly glowing to life as several things happened at once.

"Oops... Was that me?" Mudd hopped out of his cell to be met by Az'Prell, who immediately put him in a restraining hold. "Azzie, darling! You know I love it when you play rough..."

Arenara leapt to her feet and attacked her daughter, a sword seemingly appearing from nowhere.

Enalia first fended her off with a PaDD and a chair before reaching the now unlocked

personal effects locker and whipping out her mother's own filigreed longsword and defending herself with it. "Get control of the other prisoners!"

"Always playing with toys that aren't yours," Arenara laughed as she hurled the blade in her hand with surprising accuracy, pinning Rita Paris to the bulkhead, the quivering sword driven through her shoulder.

Even as Paris cried out in pain, the formerly captive pirate queen artfully dodged a few skillful sword swings and thrusts before another blade, a duplicate of the one currently keeping Paris out of the fight, materialized in her hand. Bringing it up, she eyed her daughter across crossed swords.

"Society is a lie the weak convince the strong to go along with so they can survive and thrive. You'd be surprised how easy it is to peel away and make civilized men into savages."

With the power unstable and the forcefields down, the bridge crew of the Bloody Rose were also free, and suddenly they too began materializing blades and weaponry. Which was when the familiar PHOONT PHOONT PHOONT of the TR-116's grenade launchers was heard in tandem. Tear gas that could drop a Mugatu began filling the compartment, as the armed and armored Wil'I'Ams sisters moved in to begin pacifying the bridge crew while their captains fought.

"And that would make you the queen of the savages? You certainly deserve the title." Enalia had practiced long and hard with the sword since she had taken command of the Hera and now she hoped she was at least her mother's equal. If Schwein had trained her hard enough, perhaps she was more... The speed at which she was parrying her mother's attacks seemed almost too easy though.

"All those you call weak deserve to live happy lives as well, but more than that, they provide purpose and meaning to those of us that are strong enough to defend them from those like you. They keep civilizations running so that we have something we're proud to defend." A bit more confident with her mother's sword, she began going on the offensive, attacking using an older Royale style that Schwein had taught her.

As the paper-clad pirate turned a riposte into a disarm, she was surprised by a punch across the jaw, followed by a boot to the stomach, staggering her back. "Oh ho, I see you've been spending time with your naughty little piggy, who seems to have picked up

a few tricks of her own. But no matter- this is serving it's purpose." Rising, the previous Pirate queen renewed her slashing assault upon her daughter, even as rubber bullets and phasers quickly took the fight out of the bridge crew, their acrobatics and swordplay no match for a trusty phaser.

"So... you know... there might be a place for you in the new Empire we're to raise. You could have your old job back," Mudd grunted as Az'Prel applied a choke hold to the man reminding her of the time she spent as a concubine. While she had brought it up here, it had just made people uncomfortable, she realized, and no one here saw her that way. But Mudd, here, now- it was too much to be a coincidence. Forces were clearly at work. Which was what Az'Prel was thinking when Mudd's Terran officer's dagger materialized in his hand, and slammed into her thigh, penetrating the femur. As the sword battle raged behind them and the smoke choked and blinded them both, Davos Mudd loomed over Az'Prel.

"You are MINE! You belong to ME!" Mudd shouted between coughing breaths. "You will ALWAYS be-"

His declaration of ownership of the only woman to ever free herself from his control was cut short by a phaser beam on heavy stun, as Rita Paris finished his sentence. "Free. She will... always be... free..."

Gritting her teeth in determination, the fearless first officer struggled to use both hands, slick with her own blood, to turn up the output of her phaser up to full power. Hands shaking, she held it out from her body and twisted her wrist to aim it at the guard of the blade pinning her to the bulkhead. Disintegrating it with a concentrated burst, she began pulling herself away from the wall, centimeter by centimeter, dragging herself forward along the blade in an effort to free herself.

"Ah, it seems we're out of time, my disappointing daughter," Arenara fended off two more blows before a particularly angry roar erupted out of Enalia Telvan, and her blow shattered the pirate queen's blade, driving her mother to the deck. Looking up, there was a maniacal gleam in Arenara's eye.

"Do it... go on, girl, if you have the stomach for it. Go ahead and do your old mother in, carve out my black heart, cut off my head and mount it in the prow of your starship. Show me your mettle, Princess Pansy."

In the soul of Enalia Telvan, a conflict waged, one far more brutal and furious than the deadly duel she had just engaged in with her mother. The years of insults, of backhanded put-downs, the endless expressions of disappointment. The death of her father, for which her mother had consistently laid the blame for at her feet, along with the death of her sister. Which now, she realized, might even have been her mother's merciless machinations, which she had used for years to manipulate Enalia. The beatings. The punishments. The betrayals. The double-dealing. The sheer lack of compassion for any sort of life forms whatsoever. The casual cruelty that all added up to one sum in her heart and soul.

No matter the cost, the universe would be much better off without Arenara Artan in it.

As the disguise of fair nature slipped away, to be replaced by hard-favored rage, Enalia's grip on the intricately inlaid and ostentatiously beautiful blade that belonged to her mother tightened, until the tip of the sword itself was vibrating, and slowly she raised the blade. In her mind she knew that she should say something, some final farewell to the black-hearted pirate who had robbed her of happiness for most of her life.

"I wish I could come up with a reason to let you live... but I just can't. Goodbye, Mother..." Enalia said through gritted teeth, her lower lip quivering as she raised up for the final strike. Arenara, still sprawled on the deck, seemed excited to the point of being positively delighted by the turn of events. Either she was completely mad, or this was, in some bizarre manner, part of her plan. Perhaps her last revenge on the only woman to ever defeat her.

"Captain Telvan, commander of the USS Hera!" rang out a voice of confidence and surety, a voice that could marshal morale and change the course of a battle. It was a voice of command which had been handed down from generation to generation, until it had come to the latest in its line- one Rita Paris.

"You're better than this," Paris declared, her right arm hanging limply at her side. A steady stream of blood dripped from her hand from the wound in her shoulder, which she had aggravated by dragging herself off the blade that had pinned her. Her right sleeve was rapidly turning from gold to crimson. But this was why she was here- this was one of those moments the universe had seemingly randomly deposited her here, decades beyond her own lifespan and a universe away from her origins. The Lost Navigator, the wild card, the unpredictable Starfleet siren who served as commander, counselor and conscience to the embattled captain whose soul was balanced on the

razor's edge.

“Please... Enalia... don't. She's not worth it,” Paris pleaded, barely able to stand yet persevering because never was her old-school optimism and unswerving moral compass needed more than right here, right now.

As the spotted Trill captain's hand quivered, a lifetime of righteous rage battling the literal voice of her conscience, she became oddly calm, and realized this was what her mother wanted. For Enalia to murder Arenara Artan in Starfleet custody, to wound her daughter one last time- by goading her to commit matricide.

That quirky pirate's grin settled onto the face of the spotted captain, as she lowered the intricate runeblade her mother had commissioned to proclaim her wealth and position. The gaze of the Starfleet captain never strayed from her mother's eyes which were now filled with maddened cold fury.

“No... she most certainly is not worth it,” Enalia sighed as she felt the rage and tension leave her, a peaceful calm taking its place. Half-turning to regard Paris, she smiled at her faithful first officer, who was perhaps the greatest risk she had ever taken, who had changed her life for the better.

Which was when Arenara Artan scrambled from the deck with a sneer and a snarl, hurtling herself toward the outstretched blade. Without thinking, Paris reacted, raising her phaser and firing. In the heat of the moment, there was no time to consider, no chance to reason with a madwoman, no time to change course.

No time to change the setting on the antiquated-appearing phaser in her hand.

Throughout all of this, everything was going according to plan. Enalia had genuinely surprised her with her assault on the bridge of the Bloody Rose. This fight, the implanted extradimensional access devices to store her swords and Mudd's disruption device, all coming together. It would be perfect- this body would die, and the circuitry would swap their personalities, their essences, their souls- however one referred to the brain engrams of a sentient being.

Poor weak Enalia would murder her, then Arenara would be the one holding the blade, in her daughter's body. Watching the light go out in the eyes of her aging body, taking her own brand of vengeance upon her wicked, willful daughter. Of course, the righteous

Captain Telvan would be exonerated. Whereupon Arenara would walk away scot free, with the starship of secrets, while once the queen of the Artan fleet. She'd had a speech prepared about how she would bring about change and trust and a return to the old traditions. It would have been moving.

All of Arenara's plans and plots were in place, and in time she was going to be the bloody empress of a star empire of brutal thugs.

The only thing she had to do was goad her daughter into killing her. Hell, throw herself on the blade while it was in Enalia's hand would do.

Which she would have accomplished, if it hadn't been for that meddling Rita Paris.

In a flash, Arenara Artan was lit up by the blue beam of the anachronistic phaser, which caused her entire form to glow a bright blue-white. The expression on her face was one of shock and surprise- while she had seemed to be desperate to hurl her body to impale herself on her own blade in the hand of her daughter, she was not expecting the upright and moral Rita Paris to fire upon her with a phaser. She particularly did not expect the officer who consistently espoused a kinder, gentler approach and rehabilitation of even those who seemed irredeemable to disintegrate her.

If she had any last words, they were lost as her silhouette flared bright blue-white, then vanished.

"I... I still had it set... on kill..." Paris slumped to the deck, the phaser clattering to the deck from her numb fingers. "I didn't... I didn't mean to... I killed her."

As the glow faded from her vision, Enalia dropped to her knees. She hadn't killed her mother, but she was dead nonetheless. Her now numb fingers let go of her mother's sword, allowing it to clang against the floor. "Somehow... I always knew it would come to this... But... I thought I would be the one..."

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Captain..." Paris managed to get out before she collapsed to the deck, her uniform more red than gold as her severed brachial artery continued pumping the life force out of her body. As blood loss got the better of her, murmuring her regrets over her actions, she could no longer cling to consciousness.

## Chapter 13 - Regrets and Recriminations

In her dream, she had done something terrible. Something that she couldn't take back, though she so desperately wanted to. There was a flash of light, and in her stomach the pit of fear and regret yawned like a chasm, making her feel awful, desperate to deny it. She felt the calm, soothing touch of Sonak in her mind, but it was fleeting, in passing. Voices provided a background chorus upon which she could not focus, while pain and discomfort came and went.

The nightmare wouldn't stop though, until it clarified in her mind. The Captain was in danger, and Rita Paris had to act. But she had been too slow, her mind not sharp, her senses unfocused, and she had made a terrible mistake. Something... someone important, someone who had to be preserved, who she could not let the Captain throw her life away over. Kodria... Kodria had warned her.

*"Well..." Kodria got a bit evasive at this point, averting her eyes and shuffling her feet a bit. "If you promise not to tell and to not act on it..."*

*Stepping closer to Rita, she tugged on the taller woman's arm so she could whisper into her ear. "I was told that after some sort of tribulation or tribunal thing, she really wasn't the same person in private... She did find happiness in her daughter though. My mother..."*

*Stepping back, Kodria clasped her hands behind her back and stared down at her feet. "That's why I'm scared. I don't know who I'll meet and I've never met her before. I've never even met Telvan before..."*

*"Well... There are a lot of things... Most of them I shouldn't say because of the future..." Kodria stared down at her hands for a moment before looking up at the captain. "But I will say this." Switching to the Trill language, she continued. "We shine brightest during our darkest hour."*

*"She kills her mother in the tribunal, doesn't she? She kills her and murders some part of her soul in the process, and she becomes what she's always been afraid of all these*

years, doesn't she?"

*Still crying, Kodria could only nod in affirmation before reaching out for a PaDD. Tapping into it with her palm receptors, she downloaded an image into it of a much older Enalia Telvan in civilian garb standing with Maica looking as young as she was now. Between them was a teen girl that looked like a cross between them.*

*While Maica's smile looked as bright as the sun, Enalia's looked forced, as if she hadn't smiled in decades. Underneath the picture was an obituary article for Enalia Artan/Telvan dated about thirty years from now.*

*So which matters more to you, Rita? The here and now and the immediate future, or the kid from 96 years from now who's so fraught about this she knows she's endangering her own existence. And she still feels so strongly about it she's doing it anyway? If you think you had a hand in raising her someday, then she knows exactly what she's doing here. The question is, do you respect her enough to trust her, or are you just a rulebook in a miniskirt?*

*"I'll bet I lectured you about this too, didn't I? How you can't change the past just because you want to save someone you love from being hurt, didn't I?" At the nod from the weeping young woman, Paris nodded. "Guess I also taught you to do what was right, and to trust your heart, huh?"*

*"I'll... I'll do what I can to save your grandmother, Kodria. I'm convinced the universe dumped me here for a reason, in this time, on this starship. I know that, and I know that she needs me, for a lot of reasons. But not the least of which is to remind her that she's Starfleet, not a pirate... no matter what your great-grandmother may try to drive her to do."*

*"I can't promise you that I'll save her from herself- but I can promise you I will do everything in my power to not let that light go out in her eyes." Looking up at the young android Paris managed a rueful smile. "We do what we can with what we have where we are, eh?"*

The shocked expression on the face of Arenara Artan turned blue-white, then she simply was no more, transformed to energy by a full strength phaser beam.

"NOOOOOOO!" Rita Paris sat bolt upright in the bed in Sickbay, thrown awake by the

nightmares her subconscious had been conjuring. Panting, she looked around wildly, slowly orienting to where she was, blinking blearily.

Startled awake from the chair next to Rita's biobed, Enalia jerked her head up, blinking the sleep out of her eyes. "You're finally awake! Oh thank goodness, you're finally awake." Not giving the buxom first officer a chance to get any further, she threw her arms around her in a bear hug, grateful that Rita was once more among the living.

"Oh. Ahhh! I'm... oh, gosh, hi Captain. You okay?" Paris stroked the Trill ship's commander hair, making shooshing sounds.

*Gotta act fast, in no shape to tussle, have phaser in off hand and fire oh wait what was  
O GOD THE SETTING*

There was a twitch that ran through her body, then Rita froze up a bit as she remembered what had happened. Panic bubbled toward the surface, but the fearless first officer pushed it back down. There was a clear path from here, but she didn't have to be in a hurry to get there. For now, she was needed.

"I'm, um... I'm sorry that I... ah, shot your mom," Rita managed to get out before she burst into tears. "I didn't expect her to try suicide, and I wanted to stun her or wing her but my hands were so slippery and the blood loss was making me woozy. I should have stayed pinned to the wall but... but you were in the way. She always kept you between me and her, so I had to move so I shot off the end of the sword and got off it and I thought we'd won."

The rambling recap paused as Rita pulled back to look Enalia in the eye. "You did it. You showed her mercy, and the mercy of the law. You refused to strike in anger no matter how much she taunted you. You beat her, Captain." Paris broke out in a dopey middle of a cry close-mouthed smiles. "You beat her, fair and square, once and for all. I'm so proud of you, ma'am."

Enalia was crying now too, brushing her hands through Rita's hair and pressing their foreheads together. "Listen. It's ok. You saved me. There was some sort of device in her sword. If I had stabbed her, it would have swapped our minds. You saved me, ok? You did the right thing. Everything is ok now."

Watching with tearful eyes from the corner was the young Romulan Lieutenant,

Mnhei'sahe Dox. Rita Paris was the sister of her heart and there was no way she would have left that room until Rita was okay. So she had been shocked awake from her uncomfortable chair in the corner the same the captain and watched her two friends embrace, smiling slightly that Rita was alright.

The buxom bombardier sat up a bit straighter in the bed and side-eyed the captain. "Wait she..." Big blue eyes popping open, Rita wagged her finger in front of her. "She was trying to get you to kill her so that she'd have your body and you'd be dead OH! OHHHHH!"

"That evil... I mean, that's monstrous... I guess poetic justice in a way, if by killing her you literally destroy yourself and hand your entire life over to her OH!" Rita's eyes got a little bigger and she glanced around nervously. "You wouldn't kill her- that's why she dove for the sword? That evil, horrible woman. It doesn't excuse what I did, but I will say I don't regret stopping her. Not one bit. OH!"

Blinking rapidly, Rita paused to rub her eyes. "All of this realization is drying out my eyes. Kodria... she said after the Tribunal, Enalia was never the same in private. OHHHHHH. Aw..." With that, Paris pulled her friend and captain close and enveloped her in a grateful hug, glad she'd escaped a fate worse than death. "Ohhhh, the symbiote... you'd still be in there with her OHHH that dastardly nefarious woman!"

"Exactly," Enalia nodded, continuing the hug. "I'm still myself thanks to you and Kodria. The future has changed of course, so we'll have to make sure Kodria is born ok, but I for one couldn't be more grateful. I owe you my life."

"That... doesn't change the fact that I was negligent. That was manslaughter, Captain," Rita admitted, the truth of the situation needing to be addressed. "Accidental it might be argued, but still a crime. I'll have to stand trial, even if it did save your life. I could have stunned her, and your mother would be alive today. It... it happened so fast..."

"Exactly. It happened so fast," The Trill captain kissed Rita's forehead and pushed her back onto the biobed so she could rest. "It happened too fast and you had to react and no one else did and you did what was in the best interests of preserving the life of your captain. Therefore there's no case. I'll forward a report to the Commodore with my recommendation, but I doubt she'll see it any differently. If anything, she'll want me to prove that I'm really me."

Brows furrowing and a frown settling onto the face of the anachronistic astronaut, she eyed the captain. There was the possibility to fight her on this, and that would be an appeal to the admiralty which, Rita had noticed, was results oriented. Given the situation and the circumstances, she might even be acquitted in a court-martial. All of which was moot, because Captain Telvan was determined not to press charges. Trying to insist that she do so would be an insult to her command.

Thus there were only two dilemmas.

"You honestly aren't at all angry that I disincorporated your mother's material form into energy?" Rita asked honestly, asking what she really wanted to know. "This is going to look bad to your pirates, isn't it? Me killing her while she was in Starfleet custody? Admittedly during a jailbreak, but still, it really does make us look bad, doesn't it?"

Enalia sighed heavily and sat back down, taking a moment to address the questions. "As a prisoner, she challenged me directly... And lost. I spared her but she insisted upon further hostilities. Under Artan Law you are completely within your right to have executed her as a nuisance or to preserve my life."

"As for my mother being... Disincorporated..." The spotted woman paused a moment, the scene playing out in her mind again, the look on her mother's face burned into her memory. "I think I'm still in shock about that, but I'd rather have you hale and hearty."

"For what it's worth, Enalia... I did mean to just stun her. I will never apologize for protecting you, and now that I know what she had in store for you, I definitely don't regret stopping her. I just... I should have found a better way. So if you forgive me, and the Artan Fleet and Starfleet both clear me... then it's just my own guilt I will have to deal with. But you," Rita reached up and brushed the dark locks back to stroke the Trill captain's cheek. "You were better than her."

"You beat her, on every level, and I think there at the end she might have realized that. Whether she did or not isn't that important though, because you... YOU were better than her, in every way. I think only the Baroness might be as qualified to say this, but I have never been prouder to serve under you as I am today," Rita explained softly, being sure to emphasize the important part here... that Enalia had won a victory- not of violent force, but a moral victory on every level.

"As my captain and as my friend, I am incredibly proud of you and your actions. You

were genuinely great out there today and, well, for what it is worth... you upheld those old-school Starfleet principles that I do go on and on about. And you made all of those forebearers, all those noble starship captains throughout history proud out there today. You did great." Rita couldn't help but smile. The distant and aloof woman she had met when she had come aboard, who kept to herself if not oversharing, who stayed distant from her crew, who seemingly couldn't decide if she was a pirate or a Starfleet captain, was not the woman who hugged her so fiercely here in a biobed in Sickbay.

Today there was no doubt- she WAS a Starfleet captain, and one of the greats. She would live, she would bear children in her own time, and she would someday have a delightful granddaughter, whom she might just meet someday. While her guilt over the accidental death she had caused would stay with her, Rita Paris knew the living needed her here and now, and she could flog herself over her carelessness on her own time. Which was when she noticed Dox sitting quietly in the chair in the corner.

"Why Miss Dox, you fly on the wall. You've been sitting there since they brought me in, haven't you? Come here and get a hug, Lieutenant. I'll live, and I am okay. So come here and let that stoic dam of yours burst for a bit, eh?" Rita waved over the redheaded Romulan who had become family as well in this strange and wonderful universe in which she had found herself thrust, where it seemed the universe wanted her to remain.

With a smile, and eyes clearly puffy from fighting back tears, Dox gladly stepped over for a hug, trying not to rush. With Rita in her arms, she chuckled as she replied to her Commander's somewhat rhetorical question, "Yeah. Thankfully, the Captain didn't *order* me to leave, or I'd be facing disciplinary actions over refusing to obey."

Unlike Dox, Thex had been forced to leave sickbay. First having to oversee the repairs of the ship, then arranging safe storage of the sword and a few other nasty items that the pirates had made, and now her condition was starting to affect her. Having just nipped out to visit the faculties a smile was spread over the Andorian engineer's face as she stepped back into the small room.

"Rita!" Was all she managed to say before she ran over and hugged her friend.

"Oh, Hey Thex! Hey, it's okay, I'm okay, just a little puncture wound and a lot of blood on the deck... I'm okay, I'm okay," Rita reassured, hugging the family that had come into being on the Hera. "If someone could please inform my sensible husband, who has likely stayed out of the way of the Sickbay professionals until I awoke in my own time,

that his emotional bride is once again awake and asking for him, I would be very appreciative."

Meanwhile, she hugged Dox and Thex as she held Enalia's hand. "I'm okay... WE'RE okay, all of us. You were all amazing today... er, yesterday, I guess. I am so proud of each and every one of you... that was one for the history books, all right."

As the EMH looked over the biobed's readouts and tapped at his PaDD, he called out. "Computer, please inform Lieutenant Sonak that his wife is now awake and pining for his touch." The computer's chirrup was almost a giggle at the holographic life form's little joke. "Oh, Commander... Captain... While you're both here and awake... I was wondering if you could approve my name request. I've finally had one come to me.

Pulling a small PaDD out of his lab coat pocket, the EMH handed it off to Commander Paris, the Sentient Commission Naming Convention form filled out on the front. In the request box was the name Doctor Adam Power.

Glancing to Enalia for the silent nod of approval, Paris thumbed the order, signing her name with her finger in that careful, precise script she had practiced for so many years yet seldom used. "Doctor Power, it would be an honor and a privilege. Welcome to the Named, my friend."

Once Rita finished, Enalia added her signature as well, sealing the request. "Congratulations, Doctor Adam Power."

Thex gave a polite smile to the new named doctor. "I'll have your files transferred to a private server, Doctor Power." She said with a serene smile, cradling her baby bump.

Standing by the side of Rita's bed between her Commander and Captain, Dox couldn't help but be happy for the EMH. Like most of the members of the crew, he had saved her life a good couple of times now and as someone who not too long ago chose to her own name to Mnhei'sahe, she appreciated the importance of that moment for the Doctor and was extremely happy for him.

The door to sickbay wooshed open to admit Sonak. As he entered he moved to the bedside of his wife, but not without first discharging his duty to his commanding officer.

"Ship still at station keeping, Captain. Lieutenant Clemens is assuming bridge officer

duty."

The Vulcan then turned to his wife.

"It is agreeable to see you in good health and spirits, Commander. I have been told a full recovery is assured. This is good news."

From the Kolinahr master, this simple assertion sounded like someone else's crying with relief. But if he could not feel any emotion, he could still understand the emotional needs of others, thanks to his wife. And of all people, the needs of his wife most of all. but until they were back in their quarters and off duty, this was the most he would allow to show. A mindmeld with his mate would be more appropriate later.

Holding out her free hand, the human girl who had found the perfect man amongst the stars reached for the center of her universe. So long as she could orient herself to him, she could wander far, Boyer would always find her way back. To Rita Paris, Sonak was the fixed point of her universe. The steady constant of pure logic and curiosity all wrapped in a capable and irresistibly handsome Vulcan.

Rubbing her thumb across his knuckles, she moved his hand to place his palm against her cheek. *I felt you when you checked on me... thank you. And thank you for staying on duty to relieve the others. You are as considerate as you are thoughtful, he who is my husband.*

*I am your husband and I am a Starfleet officer, came the returning thought of the Vulcan. There would be no logic in accepting both responsibilities when unable to properly assume them equally.*

He extended his two longest fingers in response to her gesture. Although a most intimate gesture between mates on Vulcan, there was no need to show restraint in the presence of Captain Telvan, Chief Engineer sh'Zoarhi, and Lieutenant Dox. After all they had shared together between life and death, duty and friendship, they were nothing less than family.

Thus within his mind, her heard her request, and expanded his telepathic contact to include them all. A lesser skilled Vulcan likely could not have accomplished such a feat- but this was Sonak of Vulcan, whose gits had once been much greater, though the years of skilled dedication remained. Thus, at his wife's behest, all could feel one another within the link, and all felt awash if the deep and abiding love they felt for one another.

Together they shared that moment, each knowing and feeling what the others thought and felt, elevating communication to far more than mere expressed words and gestures.

Which was when Rita Paris spoke aloud, to bring them back to the issues at hand.

"So I guess we should talk about that baby on board, hm...?"

## Chapter 14 - The Innocent

Standing at the window of the newborn nursery, looking in at a small spotted baby with an unruly mop of dark hair, most of the command staff of the USS Hera stood, contemplating the fate of the innocent who had been thrust into conflict and used as a pawn, a bargaining chip. Now that the criminals had been captured and those who had created her solely to be a hostage were no longer in command of her destiny, a different question posed itself.

"So do we know if she really is a clone of you, Captain?" Rita Paris asked, still clad in the simple Sickbay pajamas that Doctor Dael had insisted upon. After all, they weren't that happy about the recovering Commander being up and about on the Hera in the first place, and they knew that if given her uniform and her freedom the ship's first officer would simply return to work. Thus Asa was holding Paris' anachronistic uniform hostage to ensure that the wounded warrior woman would return to her sickbed when this particular challenge was confronted.

The spotted Captain Enalia Telvan pressed her forehead to the window, and was lost in thought for a moment before replying. "No. She's a flawed clone of my mother. Asa says she has about a month to live at best." The soft sorrow in the Trill woman's voice was almost palpable, but she didn't let herself cry in front of the others. "I haven't told Maica yet. With how hard we've been trying to have a child between us..."

She then let out a shuddering sigh as she stared at the black haired baby in quarantine. "Asa and the EMH... Doctor Power... They're looking into a few things. They're even going so far as to ask Hera's advice, I think."

"Asa will figure it out, Captain." Lieutenant Mnhei'sahe Dox spoke softly, her hand on the glass as she couldn't take her eyes off of the baby. "They put my own DNA back together. If anyone in the universe can find a solution, they can. I know it."

"The greater question here is not if we can save her, I think," Rita opined, draping her arm across the Captain's shoulders to offer emotional support while it, in turn, helped Rita herself remain upright. "The real question in my mind is what next? Assuming we

can save her, what happens to her then? It wasn't her fault how she was created, or with whom she shares genetics. In all of this, she's an innocent."

"She is innocent..." Enalia began, her face taking on a more determined look. "And she's family. Clone or not, she's still part of my family and that's all there is to it. However long she lives, she'll be my daughter from this day forward. My mother gave her a name, but I don't think it was very fitting. I think... If she can survive... Schwein once told me about her training buddy at the colony she grew up on with a name I think is fitting. It meant shared fate."

"Well, if she's a Telvan, then she's guaranteed to make it," Rita said softly, squeezing the captain's shoulder a bit. "I've never met a more determined bunch in my life. So what will you name her, Enalia?"

"Moira Artan," Enalia declared, standing up straight, determined to see this through.

Which was when a strange meowing chirrup came from one of the sickbay consoles. On it was a waiting message addressed to both Rita and Mnhei'sahe.

The EMH, Doctor Adam Power was the first to it. "It seems there's a message waiting for both Commander Paris and Lieutenant Dox on this console from... The computer?" Shaking his head, he moved off to continue studying the scans of the baby.

Cricking an eyebrow for an instant, Dox looked over to Rita as her eyes went slightly wide with the possibility of what this could be.

"Hmmm... I had thought that the further we went in changing the timeline, the fewer of these that Kodria recordings would pop up," Rita opined. "But changing the future doesn't change the past, so regardless of what we change moving into Kodria's possible future, I suppose her messages will still pop up from time to time. So, possible spoilers ahead for those of you who concern yourself with such things, and you may leave the room if you wish to not be potentially burdened with foreknowledge. Otherwise, Doctor, if you please?"

Doctor Power tapped the message and playback began. As they thought, it was Kodria in one of the Hera's guest rooms just like the others. As soon as it started, she smiled that innocent, child-like smile of hers and waved at the camera. "Hey! This message, if it's triggered, means that you changed your future and my past. It also means that of the one

hundred eighty messages I recorded, you've likely skipped around half a dozen of them and at least three dozen more won't be delivered."

Taking a deep breath, the young android continued. "That being said, congratulations on fully winning the Tribunal. If this triggers properly, you should have a baby clone of great-grandma Arenara aboard with about four weeks left to live, and Enalia has just declared her new name. One of the stories about my mother that always bothered me was that Enalia just knew exactly where to find the right donor for the right DNA after the Tribunal, and it just made no sense to me. I'm going to entrust that story with you and let you sort it out, in case something changed, and that information is needed to make sure I'm born."

Looking down at her hands for a moment, Kodria collected her thoughts before continuing. "About a week after her mother's death, Enalia sent out a team to The Drelax Club on Inris four. There's an Orion woman working there that's supposedly the model for Maica. Supposedly they talked her into making a donation of blood, but I never could confirm that. What I do know is that my mother has both Trill and Orion DNA."

"This probably breaks several articles of the Temporal Prime Directive, but... Well, if I wake up and still exist, they can charge me for breaking it." Kodria smiled that innocent smile of hers again before reaching out and ending the message.

"So the messages *are* keyed to specific events in the timeline," Dox all but muttered to herself, thinking aloud as she processed everything that was said. It was a message for the Captain, but addressed to herself and Rita. And as the red-headed Romulan was learning, that was usually for a reason. Whatever the outcome, Rita and herself would likely be required to execute it. "In preparation for the tribunal, I studied the region extensively. Inris Four... That's under Syndicate control. We aren't exactly welcome there as Starfleet *OR* Artans."

"Then I guess we'll have to go as private citizens," Rita declared. Under ordinary circumstances, she would have been suspicious, but Kodria genuinely had the Captain's well being first and foremost in her mind. As evidenced by how she had prepared these illegal little time capsules like breadcrumbs, telling them only vagaries and key points. As she was trying to improve the lot of those she cared about rather than profiting herself, the young android's altruism was easy to believe. In short, Rita trusted the kid from the future who was going to be sleeping it off for the better part of the next century. So when she named who would be able to supply the other half of her creator's DNA,

Paris believed her.

Not that she herself was in any shape to go on a covert mission to Syndicate space, after having been stabbed and nearly bleeding out after. She'd have to wait until at least tomorrow. Which recalling that she'd accidentally murdered the queen regent of the Artan fleet immediately gave her pangs of guilt. Which she determined she would help assuage by saving this innocent, who had been created almost as an afterthought by the monster Rita had disintegrated. It made her feel no better about what she'd done, but it might at least help balance the scales a bit.

"My mother would have sent people that would be expected," Enalia began, her brows furrowed. She'd been searching for the woman mentioned for years and neither she nor Maica could find her. Now she knew why. "We won't be able to send anyone from the command staff, will we? Plus we'll need to know a few bits of information that my mother knew. Do you think we might be able to get it out of Mudd?"

"I guarantee it, ma'am. You just tell me what you want to know from him. And I believe I know a few private citizens who might be willing to volunteer," Paris offered with resolve. "Well get this done. No innocent should ever have to suffer if it's preventable."

"I agree... least of all this one. She hasn't had a chance to even figure out who she is yet, and I'd like to see her given that chance." Enalia nodded and turned to look at the assembled crew before her, hands on her hips and a determined look in her eye. "Okay then. We have the start of a plan, and we know where to look. Now we just have to make things happen."

Sonak was listening and thinking in utter silence, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. It was at this moment that he finally spoke.

"For all intent and purposes, DNA is like a language; a sequence of components with a defined order to produce a defined result and transmit that sequence in a definite manner. Here it is proteins that are used as building blocks to whatever organism is concerned. And it so happens that the entire genome sequence of all known sentient corporeal entities in the Federation is on record, as well as that of many individuals; most notably, unusual hybrids and anyone who ever used a transporter at least once."

He looked at his commanding officer.

"If we use the transporter biometric analyzer to record the child's specific genetic makeup and then of the most compatible genetic donor, we could use the ship's computer to map out a corrected genome. We then could use this as a blueprint to eliminate the genetic defects and ensure the child's viability for the long term."

"Excellent idea, Mr. Sonak. While you work on that, I'll contact the away team and brief them, see what resources they might need and get them on standby to get underway, just to cover all of the bases," Rita confirmed, turning to look at the newborn struggling for life on the other side of the window. "Time isn't on our side for little Moira, so we'll need to give her every chance we can."

At that, Rita leaned on Sonak's steady broad shoulder, her injuries and limited energy catching up with her. "Or maybe you should brief them, Captain..."

As Rita spoke, Dox listened and realized that one of the civilians that she was talking about was very likely her mother, who was now working as a free intelligence operative for the Hera. And as she thought of that, her thoughts went to another of Kodria's messages. A message that hinted that she might have only a short time left with her mother.

"Uh... Commander. Captain. I know this might not be the best time, but... Uh... before you ask them to go, there was something I wanted to ask."

Enalia sensed it was something important so adopted a more concerned look, hoping it wasn't something bad. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No, not something bad, per say." Dox replied anxiously, "It's just... I didn't want to rush this but I'd like to do this before... well, assuming my Mother is going to be asked to go on this mission... I'd like her to be here for..."

The nervous lieutenant had hoped to wait until a better time to ask her Captain, but she dreaded the idea of the idea that her mother might not be there. "I... Mona and I... we wanted to hold our bonding ceremony while we were here. We've been talking about it for a while, and... well... before she leaves... I would like my mother to be there."

"And I know it's asking a lot, all things considered..." Dox straightened herself up to attention, "...but there's nobody else I would want to perform the ceremony."

"I would be honored to perform the ceremony," Enalia grinned from ear to ear. She was overjoyed at the extra good news. She'd heard rumors that they were planning something, but didn't know if anything had been set in stone yet. "Do you have plans already laid out or... Do you need a party planner?"

As the captain offered the services of her wife as a party planner, it was understood that would make Maica happy to be able to throw another wedding, this time a lavish one. When Rita had wed Sonak she had robbed the Captain's holographic bride of her grandiose plans with her desire for a simple chapel wedding. While she was sad to have hurt the woman's feelings, Rita and Sonak had exchanged their vows in their own way, in their own little chapel. This time Maica would be allowed to indulge her creativity, which would certainly perk her up.

As for Lieutenant Dox's anxiety, the first officer understood. Kodria had perhaps forecast, as had Death, that her time with her mother could be limited. Now every mission she undertook might be her last, which was something that would have to be addressed- assuming said predictions did not come true. But for now, she wanted her wedding to be held in short order, before sending the Romulan and Vulcan agents back into the field.

It was a selfish request, and Dox knew it, which was why she was so hesitant to ask. But were they to send Jaieh off, never to return, and she were to miss the wedding... it would cast a pall across their entire marriage. Sonak had a plan that might circumvent the necessity for the manhunt for the Orion woman, so that possibility was quite distinct. And little Moira Artan was an innocent in all of this, but she had the best care Starfleet could muster, and she would have every chance to stay the hand of Death.

"Can we do it in a week?" Rita asked. "If the infiltration team are to have enough time to go, find the sample and return in time, little Moira's on a bit of a time clock. But your point is well made, and frankly, Lieutenant, you've never asked for anything for yourself in your entire service on this vessel. I'm inclined to grant it, if we can work quickly. Captain?"

Enalia thought it over a moment and nodded. "I think we can have it done that quickly. We have the resources of a fortress and the ship, after all. Then we can send the away team out after that in our fastest runabout. If that's ok with you and Mona?"

Dox nodded. "Absolutely, Captain. Mona has everything planned and we can get it done

in no time. And In the meantime, I'll make sure every Runabout we have is prepped and ready."

"Civilian craft, not a runabout," Paris corrected, then wobbled a bit on her feet. Grasping Sonak's shoulder with a bit more urgency, locking her hands together as his hand slid about her waist to keep the injured officer on her feet. "Okay, that's the sign for me to get back to Sickbay before Doc Dael chews me out. Wedding bells ahoy..."

"Right, you need to get some rest." Enalia waited for Sonak to carry his wife off before turning back to Dox. "And she's right - the away team will have to take a civilian craft. We have a large number of them to choose from, but they're all registered to the family. The only one we have to choose is the Kalia... Something... Please tell me you've put it back together?"

"The Khallianen. Yes. Well, Commander Paris had it reassembled just prior to the tribunal just in case she'd be needed. But she's fully operational, Captain." Dox replied.

"Excellent. Guess who just volunteered to be the point of contact for the mission?" The spotted woman grinned like a cat that just ate a canary.

"Aye, Captain." The perpetually anxious Lieutenant replied, snapping slightly to attention as she did, beginning to grasp the gravity of Captain Telvan's words. "I'll make sure they're ready."

"They'll have to be," she said, her gaze straying back to the innocent caught up in this interstellar game of thrones. A game that Enalia Telvan had been literally born and created for- a game of lies, betrayal, and murder that was meant to end only one way. But thanks to the unlikely family aboard the impossible starship that the Trill Captain called her home, she had found a way to change that game.

The delta of Starfleet led her like a compass to a new destination, and a new hope. Enalia Telvan and her new family had found that new horizon, and she was now free to take both of her families, Starfleet and the Artans, into an unknown future as she locked eyes with the innocent baby that represented that future.

"We'll all have to be ready... for her sake."