

# STAR TREK

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## DEEP SPACE NINE



# THE VISITATION

Prelude to "futurelife"

by David Dietz

STAR TREK:  
DEEP SPACE NINE  
Visitation

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Star Trek: Deep Space Nine  
Visitation  
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[AUTHOR'S NOTE]:

This story—which takes place during season 1 of *Deep Space Nine*—is intended as a prelude to “futurelife,” the second novel of *The Enterprise-B Chronicles*, which will answer many of the questions this story raises.

Operations Chief Miles Edward O'Brien was feeling remarkably good.

For the first time in what seemed like forever, everything on the station was functioning properly. The replicators were processing the correct food requests, the power grids were stable, and even those damn Cardassian transporters appeared to be operating within the bounds of normality.

Even O'Brien's wife Keiko, had been unbelievably chipper recently.

Word of Keiko's "school" had spread throughout DS9 and even managed to reach the surface of Bajor itself. More parents were coming forward in the hopes of placing their children into Keiko's classes. "If this keeps up," she had happily reported. "I may have to actually hire a teaching staff!"

Yes, things were indeed going well for the former *Enterprise* officer as he surveyed the Ops room of his newfound home, Deep Space Nine. When O'Brien had first arrived on the Cardassian-built space station orbiting the planet Bajor, he had had his doubts about whether or not it could be converted from the shambolic mess he had found into a viable community. Well, the discovery of the

first stable wormhole known to exist had certainly helped to change that.

Deep Space Nine had become a stopping-off point for travelers heading to and from the unexplored Gamma quadrant. The happy result of this was that the station had also become a major center of commerce, trade, and cultural exchange. It was the place to be.

“Chief?”

O’Brien was snapped from his musings by the voice of the station’s science officer Lieutenant Jadzia Dax. O’Brien glanced across the Ops room to the science station, where the attractive young Trill was concentrating on the information readout displayed on her console. A curious frown curled her lips and her deep blue eyes narrowed in bemusement.

“What is it Lieutenant?” queried O’Brien.

Dax shook her head. “I’m picking up the communications beacon of a ship entering the sector.”

O’Brien stepped down from his station and approached the science console. “I take it by that look on your face,” O’Brien continued, “that it’s not one scheduled to arrive here?”

“Affirmative.”

Dax then pressed several of the colored panels on her console, coordinating her readings. Her befuddlement only increased.

“That’s strange,” she commented. O’Brien glanced down at her console unsure of what she meant.

She then clarified her findings to the Chief. “The ship appears to be a Federation Runabout.”

O’Brien glanced up from Dax’s console. “Could it be the Commander returning?”

“Negative. The ship’s markings are inconsistent with any of the station’s craft,” reported Dax. She then stated that the ship was coming into visual range. O’Brien ordered a visual.

The control room’s main view screen, which hung several feet above the floor of the Ops room glowed to life. The familiar image of the Runabout class ship came into view. O’Brien knew the sleek design of the modified Federation shuttlecraft very well. They had been designed to cover short distances quickly yet be equipped to handle longer voyages should they become necessary. Although DS9 had three Runabouts at their disposal, O’Brien did not recognize this as being one of them.

“Chief,” called Dax. O’Brien turned as the science officer made her report. “The ship is hailing us.”

“Visual, Lieutenant,” ordered O’Brien. He was anxious to find out who was piloting the ship.

The image on the view screen changed from the exterior view of the ship floating in space to its interior. An attractive, young brunette woman sat at the controls of the ship. She was wearing a standard, red Starfleet uniform and possessed ridges on the bridge of her nose

indicating that she was a Bajoran national. It was a face O'Brien knew very well.

"Ensign Ro!" said O'Brien excitedly.

"Hello Chief," said Ro returning his smile. "It's good to see you again. Requesting docking instructions."

"Of course, of course," said O'Brien indicating to Dax to send a docking sequence to the ship. "I'll meet you at bay fourteen myself."

"Good," smiled Ro. "Because there's someone else on board interested in seeing you as well."

"Really?" said O'Brien with some surprise.

He then noticed a man stoop down into view on the screen. He had apparently been standing behind Ro's chair all this time. The older man smiled warmly at the Chief. "Miles, my friend. It is so good to see you again."

O'Brien looked curiously at the man. Despite being lined with age, the man's face still possessed a rugged handsomeness. Remarkably, the man still had a full head of hair. Snow white on the sides but gradually becoming a dullish auburn on top. O'Brien guessed that the man's hair had once been a fiery shade of the same color. O'Brien was flattered that this man who wore the uniform of a Starfleet admiral recognized him. However, O'Brien could not say the same about him.

"Have you forgotten me already, Miles?" asked the Admiral disappointedly. O'Brien said nothing but the look on his face spoke volumes to the Admiral. The man glanced over at Ro who merely shrugged her shoulders.

“Well I suppose it has been a while hasn’t it?”

O’Brien nodded slightly.

“Alright, I’ll give you a hint. You last saw me five months ago on the *Enterprise*.”

O’Brien thought a moment. Nothing came.

“Of course, I looked a little different then,” the Admiral continued. “I had a beard and looked about forty years younger.”

Suddenly, a look of shocked realization crossed O’Brien’s features. He simply could not believe his ears!

“Jack Bairnson?” said O’Brien excitedly.

The Admiral’s constant smile widened. “You got it!” he said proudly.

“I don’t believe it! We all thought we’d never see you again!”

“Well, it just goes to show you, Miles. In this universe, you never know.”

O'Brien's pulse was racing as a young girl in anticipation of her first date's would as he hurriedly strode the spider's web of corridors towards the docking area. He could hardly believe that Jack Bairnson was coming aboard Deep Space Nine, let alone that he even knew the Chief's name.

He had remembered that time five months ago when he had briefly met the former captain of the *Enterprise-B*. He had remembered wishing that he could have had the opportunity to talk more with him then, but circumstances did not permit it. Now it seemed that fate was dealing O'Brien with the second chance that so few people ever received. O'Brien had so much that he wanted to talk with the Admiral about that he wasn't sure where to begin.

O'Brien watched as the seal around bay fourteen pressurized. After several seconds, the hissing of the pressurizing units ceased and the huge, gear-shaped door rolled back to allow access to the narrow partition separating the docking bay from the rest of the station. O'Brien tensed with nervous excitement as the second wheel-like door a few feet in front of him rolled away.

Ensign Ro Laren was the first to step out of the docked Runabout. She looked as marvelous as ever. It

occurred to O'Brien how few people on the *Enterprise* ever noticed how extraordinarily attractive she was. Perhaps that gruff emotional front she always seemed to project had done something to taint the image most men on the *Enterprise* had of her.

O'Brien had never really considered her looks or how passionate she might really be until now when, to his astonishment, Ro smiled warmly at the Chief and rushed over to embrace him. She wrapped her arms tightly around the Chief and clung closely to him for several seconds. Despite his surprise, O'Brien managed to gratefully return Ro's embrace.

"I've heard what a ladies' man you are Miles, but really, can't you let some of the rest of us have half a chance?"

Ro broke off from O'Brien's arms with a chuckle. The Chief straightened out his uniform as he glanced towards the hatchway and saw the still-grinning Admiral leaning up against the right side of the arch. Bairnson joined Ro in her chuckle as O'Brien tried desperately to straighten himself to attention. Bairnson dismissed the Chief's vain attempts with a wave of his hand.

"At ease Chief," said the Admiral. "I'm sure Keiko's kept that passionate Irish nature of yours more than satisfied."

O'Brien stepped forward and heartily accepted Bairnson's extended hand and pumped it vigorously. The Admiral's deep-bellied laugh helped to put O'Brien at ease. O'Brien then led the Admiral and the young Bajoran Ensign out of the docking area and into a corridor. As they strode the corridor's length, O'Brien noticed the Admiral looking over the station as though he were on an inspection tour.

"So this is where they sent you is it?" said Bairnson.

"Not exactly the garden spot of the universe," Ro commented.

"Now Ensign," scolded Bairnson. "You wouldn't hear another officer make fun of your assignment."

"Only a Romulan would bad-mouth the *Enterprise* sir," said O'Brien.

"True," chuckled the Admiral. "But can you drop the 'sir' business, Miles? Officially, I'm not here."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that Ensign Ro and I are on vacation," the Admiral announced proudly.

"Vacation?"

"Yes. It's not so strange for officers to take vacations after long assignments, is it?" said Ro.

“Not at all,” replied O’Brien. “It’s just that... well, this isn’t exactly the first place that comes to mind when choosing where to go on holiday.”

“Nonsense!” snapped the Admiral. “I’m quite fascinated by your little station, here.”

“Not to mention he wanted to see Bajor as well,” added Ro.

“Well, yes, there was that.”

O’Brien was somewhat surprised. “You’ve never been to Bajor, sir?”

“The Alpha Quadrant is a big place,” Bairnson sighed. “And while the *Enterprise-B* did help to map out a fair-sized chunk of it, I’m afraid we overlooked Bajor.”

“Well sir,” said O’Brien. “It would seem only fitting then to begin your vacation with a visit to the Ops room.” He then extended his arm in a presentation gesture of the turbolift elevator the three were now standing before.

Bairnson glanced at his young Bajoran companion with a grin. He then motioned her to step onto the lift herself first. She curtsied slightly as she stepped onto the lift closely followed by the Admiral and Chief O’Brien. Within seconds, the lift began to rise.

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After a few moments of rising steadily through metal-meshed floors and girdered walls, the turbolift

came to a soft halt. Admiral Bairnson glanced about the room while still in the lift. Seconds later, O'Brien led the Admiral and Ensign Ro out onto the floor of the Ops room.

Bairnson marveled at the size of the room, a similar feeling he had when he first stepped onto the bridge of the *Enterprise-D* five months ago. The Ops room was a bustle of activity. Officers in differently styled uniforms paced back and forth from every console, alight with power, in the room. Bairnson noticed the one or two officers who wore station uniforms similar to O'Brien's stiffen slightly as he passed. He had almost forgotten his own uniform.

O'Brien led the two visitors over to a console at the far end of the room where a pretty young brunette girl in a blue uniform sat. As she turned her head to glance towards O'Brien and the visitors, Bairnson noticed the dark brown spots which ran from her forehead down the sides of her face. Bairnson had always had a taste for women with unique features, his presence with Ro Laren indicated this, and he found this young woman's features very pleasing indeed.

"Admiral," announced O'Brien. "I'd like you to meet our science officer, Lieutenant Jadzia Dax."

Bairnson extended his hand to greet the young woman who rose from her seat. As he shook her hand, he

heard O'Brien attempt to introduce him to her. However, the young woman stopped him in mid-sentence.

"Admiral Jack Bairnson," Dax said. "I'm well aware of your illustrious career in Starfleet. It's an honor to meet you at last."

Bairnson smiled as O'Brien introduced Dax to Ensign Ro. He then glanced around the rest of the room as the pair became acquainted with one another. At the other end of the room, another Turbolift was rising. It came to a halt just as Bairnson's had, in the Ops room. From it stepped an exquisite creature dressed in the red uniform of the Bajoran military. She glided onto the floor of the Ops room carefully studying the information on the PADD she held in her right hand.

She was as striking as Ro even though she was slightly older than the Bajoran ensign. Bairnson heard O'Brien call out to her and she glanced up from her PADD. O'Brien motioned her to come over their way which she did.

"This is our second-in-command," stated O'Brien. "Major Kira Nerys."

Kira graciously extended her hand to the Admiral which he took in his own, and to her great surprise, delicately kissed the back of it. "A great pleasure indeed," said the Admiral.

"Indeed," Kira replied somewhat stiffly.

It became obvious to Bairnson that she wasn't used to this type of display as she moved quickly to the Chief's side. Kira then nervously discussed the information on her PADD with him.

Bairnson turned his attention back to the science station. He noticed Ro standing there, almost as stiffly as Kira. Ro had seen Bairnson kiss hundreds of women on their hands and understood that the gesture was just the Admiral's rather eccentric way of greeting attractive women. But for some reason, Bairnson kissing Kira Nerys's hand had unnerved the ensign somewhat. He decided to try and switch topics.

"What about your commander?" he asked. "I don't see him anywhere."

"Oh," O'Brien realized. "He and Doctor Bashir went to Bajor for a conference. They should be back tonight."

Bairnson nodded.

He then glanced back in the direction of the science station. Ro Laren noticed that the Admiral was staring at her and she smiled back at him. It was the kind of awkward smile one usually wore after running into an ex-lover at a party. In her quiet way, Ro was begging the Admiral to take her away from the Ops room. He decided it was for the best to do so. At least he could find out what was bothering her.

“Well, I can see you’re busy here Miles,” said the Admiral motioning Ro to join him. He draped his arm over her shoulders when she came to his side.

“I’ll tell you what,” the Admiral continued. “Why don’t you and Keiko meet us for dinner? Know a good restaurant?”

“Well, there’s Quark’s on the Promenade,” suggested O’Brien hurriedly, quickly returning his attention to the Bajoran Major.

“Fine. We’ll meet you there about eight.”

Bairnson then led Ro to the Turbolift. Within moments, they were descending to the lower levels of the station.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Admiral Jack Bairnson was busy primping himself before his reflection in a mirror. He and Ro Laren had found their guest quarters very easily. Being an admiral in Starfleet did have its advantages.

Bairnson pondered the smile lines on the sides of his mouth, crow’s feet on his eyes, and the slight paunch of his abdomen which even his long black topcoat could not conceal. He sighed disappointedly. Although he was merely 120 years old—the twilight of his prime by 24<sup>th</sup> century standards—he longed to appear not so worn and battered.

“Jack, stop fussing. You look fine.”

Bairnson turned his head and saw his younger Bajoran companion had entered the room. She was looking marvelous as usual, dressed in a red, low-cut V-neck gown which the Admiral had purchased on Delta many years ago. The Admiral sighed again; this time with slight arousal.

“Oh Laren,” he said. “Why do you continue to put up with an old man like me?”

“You know why,” answered Ro, walking towards him.

“There are so many young, handsome men here and on the *Enterprise*.”

“None of them could give me all that you have.”

Ro reached up and lovingly stroked the back of the Admiral’s head. With an ever so slight nudge, she pulled his face to hers. Their lips met and remained together for a moment before the Admiral broke off. He stared down into her dark eyes. Ro closed them and sighed heavily as the Admiral ran his finger down the ridges of her nose. Ro inhaled heavily through nearly clenched teeth.

“You know, it’s funny,” said the Admiral. “When I lost Janet, I didn’t mourn very long. Because I knew that, eventually, I’d find you.”

“I knew you’d come back. You always did.”

Bairnson leaned down and kissed her again briefly.

“Should we go, or do you wanna just stay here all night?” asked Ro coyly.

“Oh, I suppose we should,” sighed the Admiral.  
“Wouldn’t want to keep them waiting too long.”

Nighttime on the Promenade of Deep Space Nine brought the entire station's personnel, military and civilian, out from their daily duties and into a world where anything could, and frequently did, happen. You could quite literally run into anyone and everyone.

Bairnson had discovered to his delight, that Quark's was the most popular place on the entire Promenade to see and be seen at. The place had everything: gambling tables, holosuites, and the biggest rack of alcoholic beverages that the Admiral could recall seeing.

Word was that Quark had recently added a dance floor to the club and it was said that no matter how rare or obscure the song requested, the DJ most likely had it.

Bairnson and Ro had just returned from the dance floor where they had torn the place up doing steps to a very old Earth recording called "Shout." They sat back down at their table panting and laughing between each breath. Miles and Keiko had not yet arrived, and so they decided to have a little fun while they waited.

Bairnson then noticed the diminutive Ferengi who owned the club coming towards their table. He was carrying a circular tray upon which were two tall glasses of frothy bubbling liquid. Quark smiled as he came to the table.

"For the lady, a Bajoran Tingler."

He placed the glass containing a reddish liquid before Ro.

“And for the gentleman, Earth Australian lager.”

He placed the remaining glass of deep golden liquid in front of the Admiral. Bairnson smiled warmly as he raised the glass to his lips and took a deep sip. He swallowed audibly and quickly jerked the glass away from his mouth.

“Is something wrong?” asked Quark nervously.

“This wasn’t made by a replicator,” replied the Admiral. He brought the glass to his lips again and this time sipped it more carefully. He swished the liquid between his cheeks like a wine taster and then swallowed it. He smiled with great satisfaction.

“This is the real thing! I didn’t realize you could get it this far out.”

“I had a shipment brought in this afternoon,” sighed Quark. “Nothing’s too good for you and your guest, Admiral.”

Quark nudged Bairnson on the arm and dashed back to the bar where others were waiting for a drink. *Damn!* Bairnson was dressed in very formal but civilian attire. He wondered how many others knew he was on the station.

“I’d watch him if I were you,” a deep, ominous voice called out.

Bairnson glanced around quickly to locate the source of the voice. Finally his eyes came upon a tall,

thin, unusual looking man sitting alone at the table opposite his. Bairnson was taken aback by the man's face. It was humanoid in appearance but seemed unreal somehow.

"He's after something," the man intoned.

"Of course," replied the Admiral. "He wouldn't be a good Ferengi if he weren't."

The man bowed his head slightly at the Admiral's reply. He obviously knew what the Ferengi were capable of and that he had to be constantly on his toes when dealing with them. After several awkward seconds, the man noticed that Bairnson was staring at him.

"Is there a problem, Admiral?" he asked.

Bairnson realized what he had been doing and snapped back to reality. "Forgive me," the Admiral said. "It's just that I've never seen anyone quite like you before."

"Neither have I," the man replied, rising from his chair. He then strolled past Bairnson's table, down to the dance floor and out the main doors of the club.

Bairnson took a sip of his lager, "I hope I didn't offend him."

Ro giggled slightly at the Admiral's remark and took a sip of her Tingler.

"Having fun?" he asked.

"With you, always!" Ro replied.

"Good. 'Cause I was a little worried about you this afternoon."

“When?”

“In the Ops room.”

Ro shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“I’m sorry,” said the Admiral quickly. “Is it something you want to talk to me about?”

“Not really,” said Ro rather pointedly.

“I thought you stopped keeping things bottled up inside of you,” said the Admiral sternly.

Admittedly, Ro thought she had as well. But every now and then, something would resurface from her past that made her uncomfortable and threatened to shatter the tough image everyone had of her. She did not like feeling that way and the Admiral had helped her to overcome some of those obstacles in the past. It was only right to share her feelings with him.

“That woman you met in Ops today,” began Ro.

“Which one?” asked the Admiral.

“Come on, don’t fake senility on me. You know exactly which one!”

*Oh, the Bajoran,* thought the Admiral. *Of course.*

“That was Kira Nerys,” stated Ro.

“Yes, so I was told.”

“You don’t understand, that was *the* Kira Nerys,” stressed Ro.

Bairnson obviously didn’t understand. Ro tried to explain it to him.

“Kira Nerys was a great hero among my people. She helped to liberate Bajor from the Cardassian occupation.”

“Oh yes,” said the Admiral. “I read about that. So what does it have to do with you?”

“Well, when she was offered the second-in-command position aboard this station, she tried to locate as many Bajoran officers as she could find to fill other key positions.”

Ro paused to let this information sink in to Bairnson’s mind. It didn’t take a genius to figure it out, but Bairnson wanted to hear her say the words.

“I was one of the officers she chose,” she said. “And I turned her down.”

Bairnson nodded. “So what’s the problem with that? You’ve got a good position aboard the *Enterprise*. Any good officer would understand your reasons.”

“The problem *is*...!” said Ro forcefully. She calmed herself before continuing, “You don’t turn down a national hero like Kira Nerys. It would be like if you declined to join George Washington’s fight for independence.”

Bairnson reached across the table and took Ro’s hands in his. “Laren,” he said softly. “Do you regret not joining her?”

Ro sat thoughtfully for a moment, chewing on her lower lip. She then looked up into the hazel eyes of this

man whom she loved and admired so much. Her own eyes were watering slightly, but a smile crossed her lips.

“No,” she finally said. “Not at all.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about,” said the Admiral. He leaned across the table and softly kissed her lips.

“Started on the main course?” a familiar voice said.

Bairnson quickly whirled his head around to see Miles O’Brien standing before him, his arms locked with those of his lovely Asian wife Keiko. Bairnson shot the Chief an annoyed look. O’Brien quickly stood at attention.

“Sir!” he nervously added.

Bairnson’s annoyed look quickly melted away and became an overjoyed grin. He laughed deeply as he and Ro rose to greet their displaced friends. They exchanged hugs and greetings and finally the Admiral invited the O’Briens to take their seats. Miles pulled out the chair for Keiko and the Admiral quickly moved to do the same for Ro. The ladies thanked their gentlemen in feigned royal voices.

When Bairnson and O’Brien took their seats, the Admiral invited the Chief to take a taste of his drink. O’Brien’s reaction to it was a carbon copy of Bairnson’s.

“Australian lager?” O’Brien asked.

The Admiral nodded. “It’s the good stuff too,” he added.

“Quark certainly knows how to impress VIPs, doesn’t he?” commented Keiko.

“He’s a man after my own heart,” said the Admiral.

“Not to mention your pocketbook!” cracked O’Brien.

“Yes, we’ve been told,” said Ro.

O’Brien wondered by whom. Ro went on to describe the odd-looking tall man who had left the club some time ago. O’Brien giggled to himself saying that the man was called Odo and that he and Quark had a kind of a love/hate relationship between them.

“Is he always like that?” asked Bairnson.

“Like what?” wondered O’Brien.

Bairnson couldn’t quite put it into words. Fortunately he had Ro with him.

“So... intense,” she said. It was a feeling they shared.

“Fraid so,” laughed O’Brien.

“Odo is... unique,” Keiko added.

“Yes, I sort of gathered that,” said the Admiral.

\* \* \*

It wasn’t very long before Quark presented the Admiral and his guests with their meal. It was a veritable feast which Quark himself had especially prepared in honor of the Admiral’s visit. O’Brien had initially rolled his eyes at Quark’s toadying to the Admiral, but even he had to

admit that it was by far, the best meal he had ever had in the club.

Rank definitely did have its privileges, the Admiral noted.

Now the group had been presented with their desserts: four dishes of a frozen green substance which, according to Quark, had been specially imported from a small planet near Pollux. Daring as ever, Bairnson tasted the sherbet and had to admit, as the cold aperitif slid easily down his throat, that he enjoyed it.

The flavor was like a combination of lime, kiwi, and spearmint, and left a very fresh, clean feeling in the palette. Satisfied that the Admiral was not going to gag on the odd-looking sherbet, Ro, Keiko, and Miles sampled theirs. Slowly, with each taste, a smile came to each of their faces.

The group was halfway through their dessert when the Admiral noticed a tall, very authoritative Terran of African descent enter the club. He wore a red uniform styled identically to O'Brien's, and although outwardly impassive, seemed a little on-edge as he approached their table.

The man greeted the group pleasantly and asked O'Brien if he might have a word with him. O'Brien rose from his seat and shot a glance towards the Admiral. "No secrets," was his reply.

“Chief,” the man began. “What’s this I hear about there being an Admiral aboard? Why wasn’t I notified when he arrived?”

“Well,” fumbled O’Brien. “You were attending the conference and everything. You left orders not to be disturbed unless it was some kind of emergency.”

“I think a Starfleet admiral suddenly arriving on the station constitutes such a situation.”

“Really, there wasn’t any need to,” interjected the Admiral.

“I think perhaps I ought to be the judge of what the priorities of this station are, don’t you?” snapped the man.

O’Brien nervously covered his face with his right hand.

“I found out he was aboard from Major Kira,” continued the man. “Now I don’t appreciate second-hand information to begin with, but I was told that you had been with him when he arrived.”

“Yes sir,” squeaked O’Brien.

“Very well, then. Can you tell me where he is right now?”

O’Brien raised his left arm slowly, his index finger extended. The man followed the line of O’Brien’s pointing finger which ended at the Admiral seated at the far end of the table. Bairnson waved playfully at the man, who upon realizing his mistake, snapped to attention.

Keiko and Ro began laughing hysterically. O'Brien took his seat slightly chagrined while the Admiral sat smiling, fully enjoying the gag.

"Sir!" said the man. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize...!"

"At ease, Commander," Bairnson said smoothly.

O'Brien felt that introductions were in order, "This is our CO: Commander Benjamin Sisko."

O'Brien then introduced Sisko to the Admiral who graciously extended his right hand. Sisko grasped it in his own and as he took away from Bairnson's grasp, the Admiral noticed that it was still shaking slightly.

"I apologize for not being here to greet you when you arrived, sir," explained Sisko.

"No need for all that," reassured the Admiral. "Miles gave the twenty-five cent tour."

"It's just that... well, with protocol and all..." pressed the Commander.

"Don't worry Commander. I'm not likely to write a bad report, let alone give one, while I'm on my vacation."

"Vacation? Here?" Sisko wondered.

"Why is it so difficult for everyone on this station to grasp the concept that I might want to take a vacation here?"

"Sorry sir," said Sisko.

“I mean,” the Admiral continued. “You have people coming and going to and from the Gamma quadrant all the time. They stop to rest here don’t they?”

“Well, yes sir.”

“Well then why can’t anyone accept that a Starfleet admiral might, in the course of his life, want to, just on a whim, take a vacation to a space station orbiting a world far from his home planet, where he could see all the wonders of the galaxy assembled in one place!?”

The Admiral heaved.

“Are you alright, sir?” Sisko asked.

“He’s fine,” Ro interjected. “He’s just never been able to get rid of that persecution complex of his!”

“And stop calling me ‘sir!’”

\* \* \*

The next day it was business as usual again aboard Deep Space Nine. The Ops room was once more bustling with activity as both Bajoran and Starfleet uniformed officers monitored the incoming and outgoing traffic of the station.

Commander Benjamin Sisko sat alone in his office pondering the information contained in the report on the PADD he held in his right hand. He had been reading it for only a few moments, but already found his eyes growing weary. He placed it down in front of his on his desk and massaged his closed eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

He heard the familiar hiss of the main doors to his office opening. He stopped rubbing his eyes and glanced up as Admiral Bairnson, dressed in his standard uniform, entered the room.

“Good morning,” greeted the Admiral cheerily.

Sisko greeted him in return.

The Admiral asked if he may take the seat in front of Sisko’s desk. The Commander motioned for him to do so.

Sisko then rose from his own seat and paced towards the replicator a few feet away from his desk. “Coffee, sir?” he offered.

“Nope. Never touch the stuff,” said the Admiral. “Besides, I’ve already had breakfast.”

Sisko nodded as he instructed the replicator to make him a hot cup of black coffee. In seconds a crystal clear mug appeared containing a generous serving of steaming, black liquid. Sisko sipped it lightly as he returned to his seat.

“I suppose,” Sisko began, setting the mug on the desk, “you had something to do with my Ops Chief not reporting for duty this morning?”

Bairnson bowed his head slightly, giggling.

“Something about him being sick?” added Sisko with a smile.

“I’m afraid Miles doesn’t handle his alcohol as well as he’d like everyone to believe!”

The Commander and the Admiral shared a laugh over the thought of the hung-over O'Brien, wallowing away in his quarters in agony.

"Did you want to see about something Admiral?" Sisko finally asked.

The Admiral sighed, composing himself from his fit of laughter. "You're right," he said. "I have been a little naughty haven't I?"

"Well, O'Brien will recover. No harm done."

"No. Not just that." The Admiral paused a moment. "I'm afraid I've been... deceiving everyone a bit."

"How so?" wondered Sisko.

"Well," the Admiral began, rising from his seat. "I suppose Captain Picard must've made a note of it in his log report. But anyway, the point is, Starfleet found out I was coming here. And they wanted me to have a word with you."

Sisko shifted in his own chair uncomfortably. "Sir, if this is about my initial request for a replacement..."

"Oh no, no, no," interrupted the Admiral reassuringly. "Nothing like that. It's just that..."

Admiral turned his back to Sisko with a sigh of exasperation and paced to the other end of the office. Sisko invited him to continue. Bairnson turned on his heel to face the Commander once again.

“Dammit Ben,” he cursed. “I really hate to put you on the spot like this, ‘cause I genuinely like you.”

“Thank you sir,” replied Sisko, unsure of what else to say at the moment. “Please, tell me what’s bothering you.”

Bairnson slowly approached the desk. He quietly retook his seat before continuing.

“Starfleet is... concerned,” said the Admiral.

“About what?”

The Admiral was silent a moment, trying to think of the proper word.

“Incursions,” he finally said.

Sisko nodded comprehendingly. He leaned against the comfortably cushioned back of his chair. “You mean by us into the Gamma quadrant?”

“Not exactly,” stated the Admiral.

The look on Sisko’s face pleaded with the Admiral to continue.

“Starfleet is concerned about the possibilities of an invasion from the *other* side of the wormhole,” Bairnson finally got out.

Sisko’s eyes widened at that remark. Bairnson couldn’t tell if the thought had never crossed the Commander’s mind before or if it had, had he buried it deep within the recesses of his mind. Could bringing out the thought have triggered some event in his past that he’d rather not remember? Much as he hated to do so, Bairnson had to press on.

“I mean it is understandable,” he continued. “They don’t want a repeat of the Borg incident. You ought to be able to relate to that.”

*Too well*, Sisko thought bitterly.

“And since you’re the only one who’s had any contact with beings from the Gamma quadrant, Starfleet values your assessment immensely.”

Sisko cleared the tortured images of his past from his mind. In his heart, he knew the Admiral had a point. It wasn’t reasonable to assume that every contact with the Gamma quadrant would be as benign as the few they’d had so far. Sisko sat a moment, gathering his thoughts into some coherent form which the Admiral could take with him back to Starfleet Command.

He never got the chance to say what was on his mind.

For at that moment, the claxons of the Ops room began blaring ferociously. Sisko noticed the Admiral wince slightly from the level of the decibels. He cursed under his breath, jumped out of his chair and purposefully sprinted towards the door. The Admiral followed him closely, his finger stuck in his ear trying to clear out the invisible object which had clogged it.

Sisko’s first order as he stepped into the work area of the Ops room was to shut off the alarm. When the incessant blaring ceased, he looked to Dax for an explanation of its activation in the first place.

“Sensors have registered a Cardassian warship on an intercept course,” the Trill science officer calmly reported.

“Why the sirens, Dax?” queried Sisko. “Cardassians are welcome as long as they behave themselves.”

“The ship is maneuvering in an irregular manner.”

Sisko turned his head towards the position usually occupied by O’Brien to find the source of that last comment: Major Kira. She stood there, her hands supporting the weight of her upper body as she leaned over the display panel. Sisko strolled towards her, a reprimanding look in his eye.

“Really, Major. Are we going to have this kind of display every time a Cardassian ship approaches the station?” he said.

As Kira attempted to explain the rationale behind her decision to activate the alert claxons, Admiral Bairnson had moved to Dax’s station. He smiled cordially at the pretty young brunette and asked her to display a tactical readout of the Cardassian ship’s trajectory. The Lieutenant moved her hands across the lighted panels on her console, calling up the requested information. Within a matter of seconds, the small screen on the side Dax’s console came to life with the computer-generated graphic display of the ship’s course. A tiny red dot indicated the ship’s current position relative to Deep

Space Nine, while a dotted line extended outwards from behind the dot showing where it had been in the previous few moments.

Bairnson leaned down to study the display more closely. His eyes squinted as he scrutinized the wavy, almost zig-zag pattern the ship had made as it approached the station. The pattern was familiar to him. And it most certainly wasn't Cardassian.

"Commander," the Admiral called. "Perhaps you shouldn't be so quick to condemn the Major."

Upon hearing this, Sisko whirled around to face the Admiral at Dax's station. The Admiral commanded Dax to transfer the display on her tiny screen to the main viewer high above the floor. Within seconds, the huge viewscreen came to life and the grid-like display appeared for all to see. Sisko studied the tactical readout closely, uncertain of what to think just yet.

"The Major's right," stated the Admiral. "That's not a standard Cardassian approach."

Sisko was about to debate the matter with the Admiral when a terrific explosion rocked the station. The Ops room was sent into chaos as the shock waves from the blast threw uniformed personnel to the hard metallic floor. As Sisko rose to call out for a damage report, another blast, even more powerful than the last rocked the station. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the Cardassians were attacking the station.

For a moment, it seemed that the explosions had ceased. Bairnson assisted Dax, the palm of her hand pressed against her aching forehead, back into her seat. Sisko rushed up to behind the transporter console and found Major Kira sprawled out on the floor, unconscious – blood trickling from a terrible gash on her forehead.

Sisko tapped his comm badge, “Medical emergency! Doctor Bashir, report to...”

His words ceased to be heard.

Bairnson looked over to where the Commander had been standing and saw his body enveloped by an eerie, yellowish aura. His body began fading from sight within the confines of the aura until it had completely vanished. Dax gasped audibly while Bairnson stood with a look of consternation on his face. He shouldn’t have opened the channel, Bairnson thought. They picked right up on it and beamed him over to their ship!

Bairnson then realized that he was hearing the somewhat confused voice of the station’s chief medical officer calling out to anyone who would answer.

“Report to Ops,” said Bairnson using the station’s internal communicator.

Bairnson then tried to bring the Ops room back to some semblance of order. It wasn’t an easy task. Half of the officers didn’t know how to react to the Admiral’s suddenly taking charge. With a great deal of patience on his part, Bairnson had managed to find out that the station

was not severely damaged. Just shaken up enough to cause a bit of confusion for a moment.

Ro Laren had come onto the Ops room with Doctor Julian Bashir and his medical team. While the young physician rushed to care for Major Kira and the other injured officers, Ro rushed to Bairnson's side. She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him tightly for a moment before realizing how odd it looked for a Starfleet ensign to be displaying affection for a Starfleet admiral at such a moment.

"I was worried about you," she attempted to explain.

Bairnson knew. But at the moment, there were other things to be concerned about. He came over to where Doctor Bashir was caring for the Bajoran Major. She had just begun to stir groggily from her unconsciousness. Bashir ran his medical tricorder over her injured forehead. Bairnson asked if she would be alright.

"She has a nasty concussion," the Doctor said seriously. He then pulled out a small, cylindrical device with small orange lights on the side, and ran it over the gash. It disappeared as Bashir deftly moved it along its length.

"I'll take her to sickbay, Admiral," Bashir concluded reassuringly. He then motioned one of the other members of the medical team to bring the gurney over.

Bairnson rose and surveyed the slightly damaged Ops room. Ro had moved up behind him and began running a level-one diagnostic on the transporter console. It was still at a functional level.

Suddenly, Dax called out to the Admiral. She reported that the Cardassian ship was hailing the station. Bairnson ordered her to put the message on the main viewer. Dax moved her fingers gingerly across her console, transferring the image she was receiving to the main viewer. The giant screen glowed to life and the image of the ship's commander appeared.

It was not the image the Admiral was expecting.

The usually gnarled, thin features of a Cardassian were not what came onto the screen. The face was rounder, smoother in many respects. It was very masculine and Bairnson could just make out the collar and top half of a uniform made of a reflective, silvery material. The eyebrows swept upwards from a pronounced brow, the tips of them almost touching the straight line of the bangs of his jet-black hair. The face smiled with a kind of near-sadistic pleasure which Bairnson would later swear almost made the younger man's point-tipped ears wiggle.

"I am Commander Tembak," the Romulan arrogantly stated. "I have captured your commander and disabled your station. You are powerless to resist me!"

Bairnson stepped out so that he could be seen on the other end of the transmission. "You have attacked a

civilian space station administrated by the United Federation of Planets,” countered Bairnson. “I demand an explanation!”

The Romulan on the screen was taken aback more by Bairnson’s mere presence than his reply. “Well, an Admiral,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting such a high-ranking officer to be aboard a low-priority station such as this. Who are you?”

“I am in command of this station,” said Bairnson firmly. “As ranking officer per Starfleet regulations in the current absence of Commander Sisko. And as such I demand an explanation for this unwarranted attack!”

The Romulan sneered snidely and leaned back into the comfort of his chair. “I was about to get to that,” he said, half jokingly. “You are harboring aboard this station a known fugitive from the Romulan Empire. You will remand him to my custody immediately.”

“And how is it you know that this person is on this station?” demanded the Admiral.

“His bio-pattern. I have been tracking it for several weeks now. The trail ends here.”

“Assuming I believe what you’re telling me, and that this person is aboard this station,” countered the Admiral. “What will you do if we accede to your demands?”

“If?” said Tembak, his annoyance growing. “You have no choice! Give him to me or I will destroy this station!”

“And your ‘fugitive’ as well?” said the Admiral smoothly. “Isn’t that sort of defeating your purpose?”

Tembak was growing angrier. He had been expecting to deal with some lower-ranking, junior officer, not a Starfleet admiral. He had to admit, this old man was good at what he did. But Tembak’s duty remained, he had to give the Admiral something he wanted in return.

“If you give me what I want,” he began evenly, disguising his frustration. “I will leave this station as I found it. A little battered perhaps, but still in one piece.”

“And Commander Sisko...?”

“Don’t push your luck, Admiral!”

*Alright, Bairnson thought to himself. Feed him a bone, this is good. Find out who he wants, get them up here to the Ops room where Tembak could see him and then negotiate to get Sisko off the enemy vessel. It sounded good.*

“Alright,” the Admiral said evenly. “What’s the name of this person you’re looking for?”

Tembak paused a moment, the way one of Agatha Christie’s detectives would before revealing the name of the murderer. Finally, Tembak spoke.

“Captain Jack Bairnson.”

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Negotiations were a kind of a game. Each player would give and take something from their opponent, offering something else in return. If the opponent didn't like what was offered, he refused, causing the first player to come up with something better. This would go on, back and forth, until finally the two players reached a point upon which they could both agree. It was usually a hard-fought mental battle, the outcome of which was that both players won.

In his time, Admiral Jack Bairnson had been involved in some pretty intense negotiations. He had always enjoyed the challenge which came with these, and other types of games ever since he was executive officer of the U.S.S. *Excelsior* under the command of Captain Hikaru Sulu.

However, the negotiations he found himself currently involved in, had taken a sudden and peculiar turn in a direction which he had not foreseen.

It had come down to a simple choice: hand over one man to the Romulan Commander Tembak, or face the destruction of Deep Space Nine. This would have been a simple matter for Bairnson to resolve. All he had to do was find the man and bring him up here to the Ops room, where Tembak could see him, and then begin to negotiate for the release of the abducted Commander Benjamin Sisko. However, when the name of the

individual was revealed, and it turned out to be his own, Jack Bairnson began to rethink his strategy.

Admiral Bairnson stood there, facing the Romulan on the screen. His face was impassive, betraying none of the shock and confusion he felt in the pit of his stomach. So, they were after him. His years of service in Starfleet as executive officer of the *Excelsior*, captain of the *Enterprise-B*, and an admiral known for his quick wit and prowess at negotiations, were going to end here. On a station not far from the homeworld of the woman he loved. Well, there were worse ways to go. But something wasn't quite right.

Tembak's request was sincere and he was determined to capture his quarry, Bairnson didn't need a telepath like Deanna Troi to tell him that. But there was something odd about who he was looking for, and Bairnson couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Time.

He needed time to figure it out.

"You realize," the Admiral began. "That just by being here, you're in violation of the treaty between the Federation and the Romulan Empire?"

Tembak smiled. "But Admiral, only you and I will ever know that. That is why it was decided to use a Cardassian vessel, so as not to arouse suspicions."

"What has this man done to make you risk an interplanetary incident by coming here to find him?"

“That is not your concern!” spat Tembak defensively. “The Romulan Empire has sole jurisdiction in this matter. Turn Captain Bairnson over to me at once!”

Bairnson thought a moment. It was still bothering him.

“We need time to locate him,” he said simply.

“I give you one hour Admiral,” Tembak replied. “And do not attempt to deceive me!”

Bairnson bowed his head slightly in compliance. Tembak closed the channel and the image on the viewer was replaced by an exterior view of the Cardassain Galor class warship sitting motionless amongst a field of stars. Bairnson turned away from the screen and began to pace the spacious breadth of the Ops room. He tried to make small talk with on-duty officers by asking them for damage reports, station status, the usual things.

He glanced up momentarily and noticed that Jadzia Dax and Ro Laren were staring wide-eyed at him. He said nothing. He knew what those expressions on their faces meant, and under normal circumstances he would be more than prepared to do the honorable thing.

But these were not normal circumstances. And somehow, he found that the words which would adequately express his thoughts would not come to him. Even if they did, would the others understand?

“It seems we have no choice,” a voice said.

Bairnson turned and noticed Major Kira, an aqua-colored bandage wrapped around her forehead, standing in the far turbolift. She stepped out of the elevator and slowly and purposely began to approach the Admiral.

“There’s always a choice Major,” the Admiral replied, though he wasn’t at the moment certain whether or not he believed it himself.

“Not for us there isn’t,” said the Major flatly, now staring slightly upward into his eyes. “You heard him. If you don’t turn yourself over to him in one hour, he’s going to destroy this station.”

“I know what he said, Major.”

“And you still haven’t decided?” Kira snapped. “I would remind you Admiral, that there are other lives at stake here besides your own. Not only the civilians and personnel aboard this station, but the entire population of Bajor as well.”

“You can’t just ask him to surrender to that vlash!” blurted Ro Laren from her station.

“I’m afraid that I can Ensign,” replied Kira coldly. “As ranking officer of this station I am ordering you to give yourself up to Commander Tembak.”

“Whose side are you on Kira?” exclaimed Dax.

“But you aren’t the ranking officer here, Major,” said Bairnson evenly. “I am. And besides, you were injured and taken to sickbay where, as far as I’m concerned, you still are.”

Ro and Dax shared a smile between them, silently cheering on the aged Admiral. Kira backed down slightly, but was still insistent upon her concerns. The Admiral told her that her concerns would be noted in the station log.

Bairnson then turned to Jadzia Dax and asked her for a playback of Tembak's message. The pretty brunette rushed back to her own station and ran her fingers across the multi-colored console. In a matter of moments, Bairnson and the other officers in the Ops room, including Major Kira, were watching a replay of the previous few moments on the gigantic viewer.

Bairnson ordered the replay to cut at the moment the Romulan ceased transmission. He paced the floor of the Ops room in a circle, pondering what he had just seen. Trying to find something to link it to the unease he felt. Major Kira was not helping him to concentrate.

"So what?" she said bitterly. "We were all here. We heard what he said. We know what he wants."

Bairnson shot an evil glance at her before ordering Dax to play it again. He watched the screen much more intently this time, his eyes, ears, and mind now completely focused upon finding the incongruity. Suddenly, he heard it! And with the swiftness and intensity of bear trap closing on its helpless prey, he ordered Dax to freeze the playback.

“However many times you play it Admiral, it’s still the same tune,” said Kira, shaking her head. “He wants *you!*”

Finally, Bairnson had the ace with which to call Kira out. “Does he?” he asked her with a wistful look in his eyes.

“Dax,” he continued, “playback only the last eight seconds.”

The Trill moved her dexterous fingers across the panel, instructing the computer playback to conform to the Admiral request. Bairnson watched the image on the screen. He first heard his own voice, off-shot.

“...risk an interplanetary incident by coming here to find him?”

“That is not your concern! The Romulan Empire has sole jurisdiction in this matter. Turn Captain Bairnson over to me at once!”

Bairnson ordered Dax to pause the playback. Kira was still unconvinced. Her voice took on a patronizing tone.

“We’ve all heard it Admiral,” she snidely stated. “It’s you that he’s after.”

“No it isn’t!” Ro Laren suddenly blurted out. All eyes focused on the Bajoran ensign from the *Enterprise*. Bairnson was smiling. At last, she had figured it out!

Kira demanded an explanation for the ensign’s outburst. Ro swallowed uncomfortably, uncertain as to

whether or not she could properly express the knowledge which she and the Admiral seemed to share.

“He didn’t say that he wanted Jack Bairnson, the Starfleet admiral,” she began, glancing hopefully in Bairnson’s direction. His smile indicated that at least she was on the right track.

“He said he wanted Jack Bairnson, the captain of the *Enterprise-B*,” Ro concluded.

The Admiral beamed proudly at his star pupil. She had earned her “A” for the day. Kira on the other hand, stood with a look of bemusement across her otherwise lovely face, her arms folded. She hadn’t the faintest idea of the ensign was blurting on about, and said as much.

“So what?” Kira spat. “You were once the captain of the *Enterprise-B*. What does that have to do with what’s happening now?”

“Quite a lot, Major,” said the Admiral, dashing up the small series of steps to Ro Laren’s side. “Everything, in fact!” he added.

“He wants *you!*” Kira insisted.

“Then why didn’t he recognize the Admiral?”

Bairnson glanced over to the science station where Jadzia Dax had posed the last question. His smile widened, she was catching on as well!

Kira had moved over to Dax’s science station, the look in her eyes demanding an explanation of the last remark.

“Well,” Dax began, “presumably Tembak knew who he was looking for. Would it not be reasonable to assume that he would recognize Jack Bairnson if and when he found him?”

“I suppose,” replied the Major. “But his information could be inaccurate.”

“I doubt that,” said the Admiral humbly. “I’m too well-known.”

“Outdated, then.”

“Exactly!” exclaimed the Admiral, snapping his fingers.

“If he were any kind of intelligence officer,” Kira said, returning to face the Admiral. “Surely he could have projected your current appearance.”

“He could have. But I don’t think he has!” replied the Admiral. “I think he knows exactly who he’s looking for, and it’s *Captain* Jack Bairnson!”

The Admiral stepped down from the console to the main floor of the Ops room, his right hand clenched in an excited fist.

“We’ve got an advantage!” he said excitedly to noone in particular. The Admiral then turned in the direction of the turbolift. With the excitement of a young boy heading for the playground, he stepped sprightly towards the elevator.

Major Kira called out to him, “I don’t understand! Where are you going?”

The Admiral whirled around and stepped back towards her partially, “I don’t have time to explain it all now. If Tembak calls again, keep him busy until I get back.”

“Get back from where?”

“The Promenade,” said the Admiral simply. “I just might have a way to get us out of this mess.”

The Admiral turned back towards the turbolift. Once again he stepped excitedly towards the open-aired elevator.

“I can’t allow you to do this!” called out Kira desperately.

Bairnson stopped dead in his tracks. He huffed once with audible exasperation and turned around slowly to face Kira once again. Yes, she was pretty, but she beginning to get on his nerves.

“Major,” the Admiral said evenly. “If you are incapable of following my orders... I suggest you return to sickbay and allow someone else, who is, to take your place.”

With that, the Admiral turned on his heel and stepped with a drilled, rhythmically precise pace towards the turbolift. No words of protest stopped him as he stepped onto the metal base of the elevator and activated the lift mechanism. No further words came as the turbolift slowly lowered Jack Bairnson towards the Promenade on one of the lower levels of the station.

\* \* \*

Admiral Bairnson stepped off the turbolift and onto the more ornately-decorated floor of the Promenade. He quickly glanced around and noticed that the entire area was deserted. Not surprising since the station had been subjected to a barrage of photon torpedo fire only fifteen minutes before.

Bairnson began walking. Evenly and with purpose, he knew precisely where he was going. He just hoped that the person he was looking for was there also.

A few moments later, he arrived at the entrance to Quark's establishment. The main door was open, but as with the exterior surroundings of the Promenade, the interior of the club was devoid of people. Except for one person, that was.

Just as Bairnson had thought, Quark was standing behind the bar, like any good businessmen, Ferengi or otherwise, would. He stood wiping the water spots off of a clear wine glass with a white towel, glancing up from his task only for a moment when the Admiral entered. He smiled, displaying his tiny, pointed teeth as the Admiral came right up to the bar. "Business a little slow today?" said the Admiral jokingly.

Quark chuckled briefly and returned to his task.

"The station's been attacked," Bairnson stated.

"Yes," replied the Ferengi. "I'd sort of gathered that."

Satisfied that the glass was clean enough to fill a myopic man's prescription, Quark placed it on the shelf below the level of the bar alongside other similar glasses.

Bairnson could see that Quark wasn't up for small talk at the moment. Who could blame him? Business had been interrupted and to the Ferengi mind, losing profit was like losing a loved one. He decided to get to the point of why he had come.

"I need something," said the Admiral simply.

"Why come to me?" queried the Ferengi.

"Well, a Klingon energy leech isn't exactly standard equipment aboard a Bajoran space station."

Quark sniffed humorously to himself. "And what makes you think I would have such a device...?"

"Please, Mister Quark!" the Admiral interrupted firmly. "I don't have time for these games. Commander Sisko's life could depend on how deeply your hand is dipped in the black market on this station."

Quark turned away from the Admiral and paced the length of the bar. He wasn't sure how to react. Odo had tried to bust him too many times for black market smuggling and he was suspicious of anyone he didn't know very well asking him about it. On the other hand, this was a Starfleet admiral, a famous one at that, who was asking him. The opportunity, it seemed, far outweighed any risk.

“If I could supply you with such a device,” Quark began slowly. “And I’m not saying that I can! What’s in it for me?”

Bairnson leaned conspiratorially across the bar, easing closer to Quark’s oversized ears. He wanted to make absolutely certain the Ferengi could hear him.

“If you give me what I want,” said the Admiral, almost at a whisper. “I will give you the recipe for a drink that will make your bar famous throughout this star system. And perhaps one or two more.”

Quark’s smile widened. He could feel that peculiar tingling sensation in his lobes. He gazed like a hypnotized idiot into the Admiral’s eyes. The pair enjoyed a sinister snicker between them.

\* \* \*

Quark had turned out to be most agreeable after all. Admittedly, it had taken Bairnson a little time to stop the Ferengi from drooling. Quark had even attempted to pester the Admiral into revealing the recipe before he had actually received what he was looking for. Bairnson had not fallen for the ploy.

In the end, Quark grumpily went into the dark recesses behind the club, and after several moments, emerged with the Klingon energy leech. Bairnson thanked Quark for his services. Quark asked the Admiral if he had ever once considered becoming Damon of a Ferengi freighter. The Admiral laughed, but promised he would return with the recipe at the appropriate time.

He was now roaming the empty and at the moment spacious corridors of the Promenade once again. He had one more person he needed to see before he could put his plan into operation. This was the one that was really bothering him.

He had heard the stories, but he still wasn't quite certain of whether the tales told by drunken aliens over the loud music and busy happenings at Quark's were actual accounts or hallucinogenic fantasies. At last, he had arrived at the clear-glass door of the person he sought.

The doors parted with their familiar hiss and Bairnson stepped through the now-opened archway and into the sparsely-decorated office. He obviously didn't require surroundings that in human circles would have been known as comfortable. But did he actually live here? It was only one room, big enough to be furnished only by the desk which sat in the dead center of the room.

The room had all of the usual amenities: a food replicator lodged in the side of the wall behind the desk, a chair behind the desk upon which to sit, and a tiny computer terminal atop the desk. But that was it, nothing else. No pictures of loved ones or familiar or relaxing scenes decorated the walls. No plants or animals in tiny containments added life to the room. It was by far, the dreariest room Bairnson had encountered on the whole station.

What was more, the person he was looking for didn't appear to be there as well. This struck the Admiral as being slightly odd, because only a moment ago, the main computer had told him that this was exactly where he was.

“Odo?” the Admiral called out hopefully, not really expecting a reply.

To his great astonishment, however, he did receive one. It was not quite what he had expected.

It began as a kind of swishing sound, like a washing machine filled with clothes in the early stages of its cycle. Bairnson slowly turned, his eyes scanning for the source of the sound. Then he noticed it, the only other piece of furniture in the entire office: a silvery, metallic bucket.

Something was coming out of it.

A shimmering, orange liquid slowly rose from the bucket seemingly of its own accord. Bairnson's eyes widened as he watched the liquid rise higher and higher out of the pale, until it was nearly the size of a man. The liquid then began to mold itself like the clay on the wheel under a potter's skillful touch. It started getting some color in it. Color other than orange.

Bairnson did not, could not avert his gaze. He did not even blink as he observed the sickening, yet fascinating display. First, the uniform was completed, followed closely by the hands, the comm badge on the upper right portion of the uniform, and ultimately, the

surreal humanoid face. Odo inclined his, Bairnson guessed he could call it his head as he greeted the Admiral.

“Is there something I can do for you sir?” queried the constable.

Bairnson’s expression quickly changed from dumbfounded bemusement to an excited, ever-widening smile.

“Oh Odo,” sighed the Admiral. “It *is* true. You are a shape-shifter!”

Odo cocked his head humbly.

“Able to become anything?” Bairnson asked hopefully.

“Anything I choose.”

Bairnson’s smile widened again. Odo knew this expression from watching the other humanoids aboard the station. He had even begun to use it himself upon occasion and always knew its meaning. Bairnson’s smile disturbed him slightly. It was certainly happy enough, but appeared to be more the kind of happiness one experienced when one had had too much to drink. Or was experiencing paranoid schizophrenia, he couldn’t tell which was more fitting.

Odo began to think that perhaps it was the latter when the Admiral asked his next question.

“Or any *one*?”

Now it was Odo's turn to be bemused. He cocked his head again, quizzically. Not really certain what the Admiral had in mind as he came closer.

Commander Tembak paced the length and breadth of the bridge of the Cardassian vessel. He was nervous with excitement. Acquiring the services of a Cardassian ship and its crew had not been an easy task. Fortunately, the Cardassian government had about as much affection for the Federation as the Romulans and so in the end, the ship became his to command.

Tembak noticed the gnarled faces of the bridge officers watching him with curiosity as he strode the bridge. Their quizzical looks were bottommost on Tembak's current list of priorities. Within moments, he would have the infamous Jack Bairnson in his custody. Soon he would take him home to Romulus where, no doubt, the grateful Romulan people would give him a hero's welcome.

He began picturing himself riding victoriously through the streets of the Romulan capitol, his prisoner in tow with a thick chain collared around his neck, struggling to keep pace behind Tembak's hover vehicle. The throngs of people cheering for him, calling out his name in a kind of euphoric ecstasy. The young women throwing bouquets of exotically colored and fragranced flowers in expression of their admiration to him.

With pride, he would stride the grand stairwell of the capitol building towards the Praetor, standing there casting an approving smile in his direction. He would

then present his prisoner to the Praetor who would then bestow the medal of the highest honor around his neck. Tembak smiled. It would be a glorious day for so young an officer.

\* \* \*

A call from one of the Cardassian officers snapped Tembak's attention back to the here and now. Tembak asked for a report. The officer informed him that the Admiral from Deep Space Nine was calling back. Tembak smiled inwardly to himself. At last, the moment had come!

Tembak demanded a visual and within moments, the main view screen in the extreme front of the bridge came alive with the image of the aged admiral standing in the station's Ops room. Tembak smiled with contentment as he addressed the old man.

He queried the Admiral as to whether or not he had the man that he wanted. The Admiral acknowledged that he had and that he was in the Ops room awaiting transport. Tembak naturally demanded to see the man for himself. The Admiral directed the vision of the viewers to the upper level of the Ops room.

There, standing before the transporter, flanked on either side by a Bajoran constable, was Captain Jack Bairnson.

Tembak let out a contented sigh. The man looked exactly the way he was supposed to. Approximately forty years old, stocky build, auburn colored hair and beard.

He even wore the tattered remains of an old-style Starfleet uniform which sharply contrasted the crisp ones currently worn by Starfleet personnel.

Tembak could just picture the victory parade as he demanded that the Captain be placed in the transporter. The Admiral motioned the two Bajoran constables to place their captive onto the transporter's pad. The Captain offered no resistance as the two sinewy officers escorted him onto the transporter. Seconds later, the constables stepped off the transporter pad, leaving the Captain standing silently.

The Admiral then glanced in the direction of a pretty, young Bajoran ensign, whose Starfleet uniform differed slightly from the others, standing at the transporter console. The look was all the indication she required and she moved her hands along the top of the console. Within moments, the Captain's body slowly faded out of existence in a sparkling orange aura.

Tembak's pulse began racing when he heard the report that the Captain was on board his ship. He commanded the two on-duty security officers to take the Captain to the brig. Tembak was about to sever communications with the station without a further word when he heard the Admiral call out to him.

"What about Commander Sisko?" the old man demanded.

"When I have reached the safety of the Neutral Zone," said Tembak. "The Cardassian ship will return

with your precious commander. I only hope that he's still in one piece when you get him back!"

Tembak immediately cut the transmission before the Admiral had any chance to protest. He ordered the conn officer to take the ship away from the station and head towards the Neutral Zone.

\* \* \*

The officers on duty in the Ops room of Deep Space Nine watched the main view screen dumbfounded, as the Cardassian ship performed an elegant 180-degree rotation before sprinting smoothly and speedily away from the station. Only the Admiral's face remained impassive.

"Well, what did that accomplish?" demanded Major Kira vehemently.

"Phase one," said the Admiral simply.

"So what's phase two?" Kira wondered.

"We wait."

"Wait for what?" said the Major exasperatingly.

"And who was that we transported over anyway?"

The Admiral's mischievous grin was Kira's only reply.

\* \* \*

Commander Benjamin Sisko sat on the lone, hard cot which furnished his cell. It had been over an hour since he had been abducted from the Ops room and left on his own in the sparsely-furnished, grey room. His demands for any kind of an explanation had fallen on deaf ears,

and after nearly fifteen minutes of shouting as loudly as he could, he decided to spare his vocal cords anymore unnecessary wear and tear. He sat back on his cot, his ego, for the moment, deflated.

There was little else to do but sit there and think.

The thoughts raced through his mind like the 90-mile-an-hour fastballs Nolan Ryan had once been famous for. What would happen to Deep Space Nine with him gone? What did the Romulans have to do with the Cardassians? Could this be the prelude to the invasion which Admiral Bairnson and he had discussed not long ago?

Whatever other thoughts crossed his mind, they always returned to his son, Jake. If he was never coming back to the station, then Jake was totally alone now. Losing his mother to the Borg was one thing, but how would he handle his own father's death as well? Sisko knew that he might never know the answer. He thought about never seeing his son grow into the fine man he knew he would become, and that made him angry. Angrier than he had ever been at Jean-Luc Picard for the part he had played in Jennifer's death. Angrier than when he had first been given the lousy assignment of commanding of the then-run-down space station.

Fortunately, all his pondering and being angry had caused Sisko to become unaware of the passage of time, and it seemed to him that he had not been in the cell for very long when two Cardassian security officers

entered the brig area. They had a third man seemingly wedged in between them, whose arms they gripped with vice-like tightness.

At first Sisko could not make out the appearance of the man in the dimly-lit corridor, but he would have plenty of time to study his features as the two Cardassians de-activated the force field entrance barrier, and thrust the man into the cell along with him. Within seconds, the force field was activated once again, and the two Cardassians turned and together began to walk away from the cell containing their two prisoners.

Sisko then directed his attention to his new cell mate. He stood there in the corner of the cell shivering. Was it because he was cold? Afraid? Sisko couldn't tell. But then he noticed something peculiar about the man. Something familiar, in fact.

He was wearing an older-style, maroon Starfleet jacket uniform that was dirty from sweat and grime and torn and tattered in places. Sisko carefully studied the man's face. His pained expression was curious enough, but it was his features that were truly alarming. Fiery auburn hair, hazel eyes, a beard whose color was identical to the thick mane atop his head. Sisko couldn't explain how or why, but he looked exactly like a more youthful version of the...

"Admiral?" he said with some puzzlement.

"Difficult... to maintain," said the man shivering violently through clenched teeth.

“Sir, are you alright?” queried Sisko, uncertain of what else to say.

His cellmate’s shivering began to ease slightly. He stood erect now with more resolution and confidence.

“Relax Sisko,” he said. “It’s me.”

The Commander was taken aback slightly. That time his cellmate spoke in a different voice! Different, but reassuringly familiar. Sisko then noticed the man’s appearance began to slowly melt away. Little by little, the familiar features of a younger Jack Bairnson disappeared. The shape maintained a bipedal form as it gave way first to an orange, fluid-like substance and finally to the familiar, surreal visage of Deep Space Nine’s chief of security.

Sisko smiled as his friend’s appearance stabilized into the one everyone aboard the station knew so well. Sisko then demanded an explanation as to what was happening from the constable. Odo said that he had little time and dashed towards the entrance to the cell. From the pocket of his uniform, Odo produced a small, black box-shaped device with what appeared to be Klingon lettering on top of it.

Odo held the device up in front of the force field and flicked a tiny switch on the side of it. Tiny red and green triangular lights flashed on and off a tiny panel as Odo moved the device in a circular pattern around the perimeter of the entranceway. Within moments, the force field barrier blinked out with a tiny flash of orange light.

Odo motioned Sisko out of the cell hurriedly, explaining that the field would only be down temporarily. Sisko followed Odo out into the dimly-lit corridor where he asked the Constable about his next move.

“First, we take this to the engine room,” explained the Constable indicating the tiny box-like device. “Then we pay a visit to the bridge.”

Odo dashed off down the corridor with Sisko following closely at his heels.

\* \* \*

It would only be a matter of mere moments, thought Tembak contentedly to himself. Soon they would reach the Neutral Zone where Tembak and his prisoner would board a waiting Warbird for transportation back to Romulus. The parade Tembak had envisioned was becoming clearer and more defined in his mind.

“Sir!” Tembak heard one of the Cardassian officers call out. He turned to face the officer whose expression, if such a one were possible in any of his race, would have been described as worried.

“We’ve just dropped down to Warp 4!” said the officer. He then turned back to his station and ran further checks of the information displayed on his console. His panicked expression only grew greater. With increasing distress he reported the ship’s steadily-dropping warp speed. Tembak refused to believe the information he was hearing as the officer finally reported that the ship was

now cruising on impulse power alone. And even that was dropping!

Tembak, concerned that his victory parade was steadily moving further and further away from his grasp with each report, ordered a diagnostic of the ship's drive systems. When they turned out to be functioning normally, he ordered a sensor sweep for any unusual phenomena in the area of interstellar space which the ship currently occupied.

Suddenly, the main doors to the bridge opened. There was a flurry of activity as two humanoid men rushed onto the bridge. Several Cardassian officers rose to apprehend the two strangers, but were knocked down by the Cardassian phasers which the strangers brandished in their hands. Any further thoughts of attempting to subdue the two humanoids were quickly forgotten by the other Cardassian officers.

Tembak immediately recognized the man approaching his command chair, phaser pointed directly at his head, as the human commander from the space station. The other one, the one with the almost unreal humanoid face, was a complete mystery to Tembak.

"I suppose you have something to do with the energy drain my ship is experiencing?" said Tembak, attempting to maintain his facade of control.

"Me and a little piece of Klingon technology," said Sisko proudly.

“How did you escape?” spat the annoyed Romulan.

“That was my pleasure,” replied the surreal humanoid, who then bent over one of the seated Cardassian officers. He made certain that the Cardassian was aware of the phaser pointed directly at his temple, and commanded him to open a communications channel. The Cardassian nervously moved his fingers across his console panel and when the channel was open, he looked up into the horrifyingly unreal face of the man.

“Admiral?” Odo called out. “Admiral, are you there?”

“Indeed I am, Constable,” a vaguely familiar disembodied voice replied.

Tembak directed his attention to the main view screen, where the image of a star field had been replaced by that of the old man who seemed to command Deep Space Nine. He was now seated at the controls of a Runabout, and reported that he would be rendezvousing with the Cardassian ship in about fifteen minutes. He complimented Odo on a job well done.

“I should have known you would deceive me,” said Tembak to the Admiral.

“No, Tembak,” replied the Admiral simply. “You deceived yourself.”

“But I had the Captain aboard my ship! In my prison cell!”

“I’m afraid that was me,” said the strange-looking man whom the Admiral had called Odo. *Of course!* Tembak thought. He had completely written off the reports of a shape-shifter aboard Deep Space Nine as the mere hearsay of drunken space scavengers. It was a costly mistake.

“How long has it been,” Tembak heard the Admiral say, “since you actually checked the Romulan list of most-wanted fugitives?”

“What does it matter to you?” demanded Tembak defiantly.

“Quite a lot, seeing as it pertains to me.”

Tembak’s defiant expression changed. He became noticeably confused.

“My orders pertain to the capture of Captain Jack Bairnson!” said Tembak.

“Ben, why don’t you tell him who I am?” said the Admiral.

Sisko did. Tembak became even more confused.

“I believe that if you check with Romulan central records, you’ll find that the orders for my capture were deleted five months ago,” said the Admiral.

Tembak lowered his head ashamedly. He had been so driven in the past few months to capture Jack Bairnson, that he hadn’t actually checked the Romulan central net computer to see whether or not he still topped the most-wanted list. The way things were looking now, he would probably not be receiving a medal from the

Praetor. He'd probably be lucky if got command of a garbage scow after this.

"I'm within transporter range now, Ben," reported the Admiral.

"Ready to beam off," said Sisko. "And I assume that you'll be able to explain all of this to me when we get back?"

The Admiral smiled back at Sisko before activating the Runabout's on-board transporter.

Commander Benjamin Sisko sat at one of the many stools situated before the bar at Quark's on the Promenade. He was but one of the many officers from the Ops room whom the Admiral had insisted attend a celebration he was holding at the club. Sisko's mind was racing yet again.

The Admiral had attempted to explain the complex details that had led up to the events of the past few hours. His explanation had not furthered Sisko's dim understanding. Unfortunately, the Admiral had acquired the one condition which comes with old age that young people so-often found annoying: long-windedness.

After the Admiral had been explaining the details of what had happened to him five months ago, embellished it seemed with larger-than-life descriptions of terrible, ravenous, salivating beasts and hardships fought and won single-handedly by the old man, Sisko had given up paying attention and decided to sleep the remainder of the trip back.

Now he sat alongside his compatriots from the Ops room, gazing intently as the Admiral stood behind the bar next to Quark. For the past several minutes, the Admiral had been pouring a plethora of differently-colored liquids into a large shaker, and explaining to Quark the precise measurements. Though admittedly, the Admiral wasn't following them too closely himself.

At last, the pouring of the liquids seemed to cease. The Admiral then placed a domed lid over the top of the shaker. He held the top and bottom of the shaker in either of his wrinkled hands and with violently jerky movements, shook the container.

Several seconds later, he ceased. The Admiral then removed the lid from the canister and poured the bluish liquid inside it into five tall, clear glasses. When each glass was filled almost to the rim, the Admiral handed them to each of his friends, old and new. He then invited them to take a sip of the liquid. Almost simultaneously, the assembled officers raised the glasses to their lips and allowed several drops of the bluish liquid to trickle down their throats and into their stomachs.

Quark's reaction to the liquid was a repeat of Bairnson's initial taste of Quark's imported Australian lager. After a sip, Quark moved the glass away from his mouth and inhaled deeply.

"Not too strong, is it?" asked the Admiral worryingly.

"Strong?" said Quark in-between gasps. "It's absolutely wonderful!"

Sisko and Ro Laren shared a smile. It wasn't often that a human got the upper hand with a Ferengi.

"What did you say it was called?" said Quark excitedly.

Bairnson's face contorted in thought for a moment.

“I’m afraid you couldn’t pronounce it,” he finally said.

“Why not?” demanded Quark.

“Because even I can’t pronounce it!”

The Admiral and the assembled officers, including Quark, shared a deep-bellied laugh. It had been a long time since anyone aboard Deep Space Nine had enjoyed themselves so much. And never together. After a few moments, the novelty of the joke faded, and Quark turned to the Admiral once again.

“Where does it come from?” he wondered.

“Yarzon,” said the Admiral, still chuckling slightly. “My first officer turned me on to it years ago.”

“Well, what am I supposed to call it?”

Bairnson was silent a moment as he attempted to access the name from the dark recesses of his memory. Finally, he remembered the correct term.

“Its translation is ‘Water of Life,’” said the Admiral.

Quark could see why. It certainly added life to the usually-glum bunch who administrated the space station. An idea came to his mind, and he politely excused himself from the others in the group. He then disappeared into the mass of people gathered in his club, calling out Odo’s name as he went.

\* \* \*

The next day, Admiral Jack Bairnson and Ensign Ro Laren were loading their gear back onto the refueled

Runabout in which they had arrived days ago. They were about finished and preparing to leave when, to their mutual surprise, Commander Sisko and the others from the Ops room entered the docking pylon. The Admiral and his young companion stepped out into the airlock to greet them.

“We all just wanted to say ‘goodbye,’” said Sisko simply.

The Commander extended his hand to the Admiral who graciously took it in his own and pumped it vigorously. The Admiral and the Ensign exchanged goodbye hugs and handshakes with the O’Briens, Dax, Doctor Bashir, and Major Kira. After a few moments, the airlock emptied except for Major Kira, who stood talking to Ensign Ro and Commander Sisko, who was addressing the Admiral.

The Admiral at first didn’t understand why Sisko was hanging around, but then, as Sisko talked, he realized.

“About that report you wanted me to give to Starfleet,” Sisko began.

“I’m sorry Commander,” said the Admiral. “What report was that?”

“The report on the possible invasion from the Gamma Quadrant,” said Sisko not taking the Admiral’s meaning.

“Ben,” said the Admiral, putting his arm around Sisko’s shoulders. “You have to understand something.

I'm getting old. I don't remember things like I used to. And as far as I'm concerned, I never asked you about an invasion from the Gamma Quadrant."

"But, what about Starfleet?" said a confused Sisko.

"What about 'em?"

"You said that it was important for them to know."

"Then let 'em come here and ask you themselves! I'm too old to be somebody else's damned messenger boy!"

Sisko's confusion was replaced by a joyful smile as the Admiral winked playfully at him. Sisko had to admit, despite all the trouble he had caused since he had arrived on Deep Space Nine, he liked this old man. And he invited him to come and visit any time. The Admiral said he certainly would.

Sisko then stood next to Major Kira and together they watched the old admiral and the young Bajoran ensign enter their spacecraft. Seconds later, the doors closed. Sisko and Kira stepped out of the airlock as the huge, gear-like doors rolled closed behind them with a hiss of escaping pressurization.

Kira and Sisko strolled the expansive corridors of the once-again active Promenade, pausing only once to watch a lone Runabout zoom past one of the windows and disappear into the endless black void.

\* \* \*

On board the Runabout, Ensign Ro Laren finished punching in the information on her flight console. She turned in the direction of the other seat in the Runabout's flight deck where Admiral Jack Bairnson sat; his feet propped up onto his own flight console, his hands placed behind his head and his eyes closed.

"Course plotted," Ro reported, uncertain as to whether or not the Admiral was still conscious. "We'll rendezvous with the *Enterprise* in approximately eight hours."

She turned back to her console with a smile as the Admiral sighed contentedly. A moment of silence passed between them before Ro heard the Admiral call out her name. She turned her back to him. The Admiral's position had not changed but his lips were now moving.

"What did Kira have to say to you?" he wondered.

Ro smiled to herself.

"She wanted to apologize for the way she'd been acting around me. She said that we all have to make choices and live with the consequences of them."

"So she forgave you for not coming aboard DS9?"

Ro nodded. She then turned her attention back to the flight console. Another silent moment passed between them.

"Do you really want to go back?" asked the Admiral suddenly.

Ro glanced over in his direction yet again. The look on her face slightly quizzical.

“To the *Enterprise*, I mean,” said the Admiral.

“Well,” began Ro hesitantly. “We have to, don’t we? I mean we were only loaned this ship until we finished our vacation.”

Bairnson shifted his position and faced his young companion with eyes wide open.

“I don’t know about you,” he said. “But I don’t consider stopping a Romulan incursion and rescuing Starfleet personnel to be much of a vacation.”

Ro nodded comprehendingly. It really hadn’t been how they had planned to spend their vacation aboard Deep Space Nine. She asked the Admiral what he suggested they do.

“Well,” the Admiral began. “There is the Gamma Quadrant.”

Ro’s jaw dropped in shock. “You are absolutely incorrigible, you know that?”

“Oh come on!” snapped the Admiral playfully. “Aren’t you the least bit curious as to what lies on the other side of that wormhole?”

“Starfleet would skin us alive if we went in there!”

“What ever happened to that rebellious nature of yours that I loved so much?” said the Admiral disappointedly. He sighed sadly to himself, reclining back into the plush cushions of his seat.

“It’s just that in all likelihood, I’m probably going to be stuck behind a desk for the rest of my life. Never to command a starship voyaging to discover the wonders of the universe again.”

Ro hated it when he did this to her! Even though he was considerably older, he was just like a little baby when he didn’t get his way. If she didn’t concede to his request, he would pout the entire voyage back to the *Enterprise*, and love him though she did, she was not about to put up with that again! She shook her head and sighed grumpily to herself.

“Just one little adventure,” she stated firmly. “And then we go back to the *Enterprise*. Promise?”

The Admiral perked up considerably. He nodded excitedly, “Promise!”

Maybe it was his childlike nature that she loved so much. Maybe it was the way his laughter made her heart warm. Maybe it was the authority and respect which he commanded. Ro Laren would never know for certain and it really didn’t matter much. She was just glad, as she changed the Runabout’s coordinates to head for the wormhole, that he felt the same way about her.