

NOVA TREK

ALTERED LIVES

The Trilogy



Includes Bonus Story:
Lost Episode:
"Crisis on Felecia"

By **mdbruffy**

Based on concepts created by
Gene Roddenberry

Author's Note

“Altered Lives” was intended to be a much larger project than it turned out to be. I originally conceived the idea formatted like a TV series. I’d do the “Season Opener” and then open it up for other writers to join in. But no one else ever did and I ran out of ideas, so we we’re left with three stories from a timeline that no longer exists.

The altered timeline presented in “Nova Trek, Book Two: Guardian’s Child” lasted for sixteen years before it was corrected. While I was working on the graphic novel, I got to wondering about the kind of life freighter Captain Janet Kirk and her First Officer M’ress would have lived.

The stories that you’re about to read are samples of that life.

In “Guardian’s Child”, Janet and M’ress have been partners for eleven years. But how did they join up? What brought them together? In “The Joining”, you’ll find out.

This story also marks the first real appearance of Admiral T’Pel. At this point in time- four years after Janet left the Academy- T’Pel and Admiral Fitzpatrick are not yet married. These stories are the only place where you’ll get a glimpse of their early years together.

The second story in this book “Broken Deals”, takes place one year later and is notable for the first appearance of a certain Andorian female named Shev.

As shown in “Guardian’s Child”, then Commodore Fitzpatrick sent Cadet Shev to Cadet Kirk to be tutored in Earth History. But, when Ben Finney went back in time and framed Cadet Kirk, she was confined to quarters, Being- basically- under arrest, Kirk couldn’t tutor anyone, so the two never met. Five years later, Chance would bring them together under very different circumstances ...

The third story in this collection, “Starship Lost”, is, basically, a rebuttal. When Star Trek: Enterprise did “Through the Mirror Darkly”, they presented a TOS era ship named *Defiant*. But there are so many differences in that ship in both technology and uniforms, that I have difficulty reconciling

it with the one presented in the TOS episode “Tholian Web”.

“Starship Lost” is my account of what happened to the ship from the original TOS episode.

Shev has her part to play in that story as well, and it was the result of how well the character worked here, that made me decide to work her into the prime Nova Trek timeline.

The events presented here cover a span of seven years from the day Janet left the Academy.

The remaining nine years are yet to be heard from.

mdbruffy 2013

What has gone before....

Aboard the *FSS Constitution* at the start of its two year trial run, Lt. Ben Finney left a circuit open to the ship's atomic pile. Lt. Janet Tamera Kirk came on shift, found and closed the circuit minutes before the ship would have blown up.

The resulting reprimand prevented Finney from ever getting a command of his own and he began plotting his revenge against Kirk. Years later, aboard the *FSS Enterprise*, now-Captain Janet Kirk was charged with the negligent death of Lt. Commander Finney during an ion storm.

But the evidence had been faked and Finney was found to be alive. Sentenced to the Tantalus Rehabilitation Colony, he used his formidable computer skills to escape- and once free, he hacked into the Starfleet data base, where he proceeded to download everything he could find on Captain Kirk- including her medical information and mission logs, which included information on an entity known as the Guardian of Forever.

Using the Guardian, Finney went back in time and planted evidence- retina scan and fingerprints- framing Cadet Kirk for trying to break into the

Program Control Room for the Bridge simulator that was to be used for her Kobayashi Maru Test the next day. But Finney hadn't planned on Kirk being in Riverside, Iowa that night attending her mother's birthday party... with fifty eyewitnesses.

The Academy's Investigating Committee examined the case for two years and was never able to reconcile the evidence with the facts. Their final ruling was "Inconclusive", leaving a cloud of suspicion hanging over Kirk and her career... which, had the effect of ending said career before it could begin, forcing her to resign and giving Finney the apparent victory.

Two years later, The *Constitution* left on her two year trial run with Lt. Commander Finney on board- and no Lt. Kirk. The circuit to the atomic pile was left open- and this time, there was no one to come in after Finney and close it. As a result, the ship exploded- killing all 429 on board- including Finney.

Not knowing the cause of the explosion- none of the flight recorders survived the matter- anti matter explosion triggered by the atomic pile's detonation- Starfleet placed the *Constitution* program on indefinite hold, relying on a modified and updated *Daedalus*-class to fill the resulting gap.

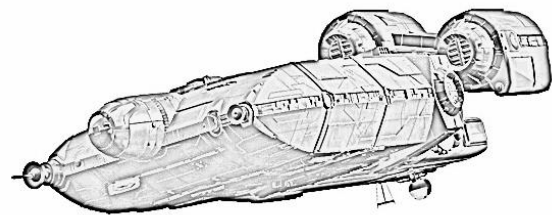
To many, this made Starfleet- and the Union- look weak and vulnerable. Now, six months after the loss of the *Constitution*, the quadrant was a riskier and more dangerous place than it had been four years earlier....

The Joining

The Orion-class freighter *Enterprise* didn't look like much, compared to the larger, corporate barges that hauled dried goods across the Federal Union of Planets. She was only two decks tall, consisting of a cockpit, Captain's and First officer's cabins on the upper level. A short ladder climb brought you down to the deck of the cargo hold- the largest interior area of the ship. Off the cargo hold, were the Security Hold, storage room for medical and food supplies (There were no Starfleet food replicators on board) and an empty room that could be pressed into service as another crew cabin or used for storage. To the back of the cargo hold- the rear of the ship, that is- was the hatch to the shuttle bay- more of a shelf actually, since it was barely large enough to hold a single *Luminance*-class scoutship bearing the name *James T.*

These were the obvious features of the *Enterprise*. These did not include the Starfleet surplus phasers mounted fore and aft- same for the force field generator- all purchased at Cygnet XIV, as surplus when the

Constitution -program was suspended. It was here that the *Enterprise's* owner also acquired the ship's A.I.-- which allowed the vessel itself to act as crew when necessary, as well as her warp engines, which were capable of a top speed of Warp Six. All of which went into creating a ship that was more than capable of standing up against any common raider it might encounter.



At the moment- and for the last four years- only one person has called *Enterprise* home- and that was her owner and captain. She was human, age 22, red, rust-colored hair in a kind of shag cut that reached to her shoulders; she had the kind of athletic build that a human female managed to keep well into her senior years. Her name was Janet Tamera Kirk. At one time, a senior Starfleet Cadet until all that idiocy forced her out four years ago. Since then, thanks to her uncle- Admiral Franklin

Fitzpatrick- she's owned and operated the *Enterprise* and managed to make a living hauling cargo and living by no one else's rules but hers.

For now, she was to be found in her cabin. Said cabin was located to the right of the cockpit hatch, coming from the cargo hold. It was small compared to Starfleet staterooms. As you entered, a bunk with storage units above and below was built in to the left hand bulkhead. A small cubicle of a restroom occupied the right-hand corner. Once past that, you'd see a two-screen work station. This made up the Captain's cabin of the *Enterprise* and at the moment, said Captain was engaged in one of the few duties she had to see to.

" Ship's Record, Stardate 4956.3. After dropping off that shipment of farming supplies for the colonists on Sierene V, I'm dead-hauling toward Cait in hopes of picking up another load there..." Turning off the log, she leaned back in her desk chair and for a moment, she simply listened to the sounds of her ship. The hum and low drone were almost impossible to hear- and disappeared under the cover of conversation, when there was any. She tilted her head slightly.

Sounded like the Number Three Warp Manifold needed checked. She'd see to it once they reached orbit. That's not the kind of work you want to try to do in open space- too much chance of being raided while you were making repairs. It was also one of the draw-backs to a "recycled" ship like *Enterprise*. You always found yourself trying to stay one step ahead of the next blown circuit.

She could still remember the day four years ago, when she handed the Cygnet XIV authorities the voucher her uncle had gotten her in order to get the work done. Such vouchers were allowed for civilian contractors, but Janet had sworn that she'd never work for Starfleet after the way they did her. "Inconclusive." She nearly snorted as she shook her head. Those idiots on the Investigating Committee didn't even have the nerve to pass a real verdict. They stayed on the proverbial fence right to the end.

At that moment, the intercom on her desk buzzed and the ship's computer spoke in it's programmed female tones. "Janet, we're receiving a signal on Starfleet channels." The scowl on Janet's face was all too clear. "Only one person would dare

call me on those channels. Put it through." One of the screens above the desk soon lit up with the image of her uncle, Admiral Franklin Fitzpatrick, who had been head of Starfleet Operations for the past year. He was in his mid fifties, even though his hair had turned grey some years ago. Janet had to admit that he had a face that some might call the face of a hero- though she knew her late mother's brother would cringe if anyone ever called him that to his face. While it wasn't that classic chiseled look- no rock-hard jaw line or anything like that- there was a strength to it all the same. Her attitude softened slightly as she spoke to the only remaining family she had.

"What do you want, Uncle Frank?" The Admiral's eyebrows rose in an almost Vulcan manner as he answered. " 'Hello' to you, too. Can't I call my only niece once in a while to just talk?" Janet met his gaze without hesitation as she answered. "Not from your office on Starfleet channels. I told you before, I won't work for Starfleet."

"Jan-"

"You have a lot of nerve- "

"Now just a minute, Young Lady. I was on your side back then- and I still am- or have you forgotten who helped you fit out that ship of yours?"

She was quiet for a long moment. "Are you calling for you or Starfleet?"

In his office aboard the station officially designated as Starbase One, yet commonly referred to as "Starfleet Command", Franklin Fitzpatrick leaned back in his own office chair as he answered. "Neither. There's a civilian medical research outpost in Sector Nine. They run a lot of high-powered experiments which forces them to go through dilithium supplies faster than expected. They'll be forced to start shutting down vital experiments in the next three days without new crystals."

Janet tilted her head and her eyes narrowed slightly. "And where am I supposed to find these new crystals?"

Fitzpatrick reached off screen to one side of his work station as he replied. "I'm sending you the coordinates now. The *FSS Horizon* 'll

meet you and transfer the crystals to you for delivery."

Janet watched as the coordinates came up on the other screen.

"Coordinates received. But Uncle Frank, why is a civilian outpost asking the military for help?"

The man sighed, "Because last week their supplier was attacked by a Klingon raiding party. They took every crystal in sight and killed half the personnel. Starfleet was the only other source with any hope of re-supplying them anytime soon."

It was Janet's turn to sigh, "Alright- but at my standard rate."

Her uncle nodded, "I'll see to it that it's transferred within the hour."

"Anything else?" Janet asked.

He leaned closer to the screen. "Are you still flying alone?"

She shrugged. "I have Computer."

"Jan-"

"Good-bye, Uncle Frank," she said. As soon as the screen went dark, she spoke once more, "Computer, lay in the course to

rendezvous with the *Horizon* - maximum warp."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Engaging now."

PERSONAL RECORD, STARDATE 4956.5. THE MORE I THINK ABOUT THIS DELIVERY, THE LESS I LIKE IT. WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH COULD A CIVILIAN MEDICAL OUTPOST BE RUNNING THAT USES UP DILITHIUM LIKE THIS? A DILITHIUM CRYSTAL HAS AN EXTREMELY LONG LIFE-SPAN. UNDER NORMAL CONDITIONS, A HANDFUL OF CRYSTALS SHOULD HAVE LASTED FOR DECADES.

SOMETHING DOESN'T ADD UP...

Seated in the *Enterprise's* cockpit, Janet turned off the log and looked out the viewport. Then she glanced around her. She had to admit the cockpit was somewhat small- it was certain that it would never be taken for a Starfleet bridge. There were four seats all together- two at the flight console and two behind them. The flight controls took up the console in front of her with monitors for the ship's status mounted beside the passenger seats behind her. It was tight quarters. You either sat

down, stood in one place or left- there was no room for anything else. But it was an original part of the ship and it had proven less expensive to repair and upgrade than to replace.

All of this had no sooner passed through Janet's mind, than Computer spoke up. "Janet, the *Horizon* has just entered scanning range. It should be in visual range in two minutes." Soon, as predicted, the *Horizon* came into view. A collection of basic shapes- a sphere in front, a large cylinder behind and slightly below, with two longer and narrower cylinders above and behind, connected to the larger one by two thin rectangles- this was the standard arrangement for the *Daedalus*-class and since the loss of the *Constitution* six months ago, it was the primary ship class of Starfleet.

Studying it as they drew closer, Janet had to admit it didn't look like much- certainly not the kind of ship you'd expect to be capable of defending a third of the quadrant from all the various threats the universe could throw at it. She shook her head and reached for the communications section of the console. "This is the

cargo ship *Enterprise* to *FSS Horizon*, come in."

"*Horizon* here, *Enterprise*."

"Standing by to receive your shipment of dilithium for the Sector Nine medical research outpost."

"Understood. Sending transporter coordinates now."

There was a 'bleep' from the console and Computer spoke up. "Coordinates received, Janet. Ready for transport."

"Understood," the redhead replied as she rose from her seat. After leaving the cockpit, a short walk and a climb down the ladder, brought her to the deck of the cargo hold and the cargo transporter set off to one side. "*Enterprise* to *Horizon*," she called as her hands moved over the transporter controls, "Energizing."

On the platform, a sparkling, shimmer took on form and soon solidified into a Starfleet storage container labeled for dilithium storage use. "*Enterprise* to *Horizon*. The dilithium's on board. I'll be leaving for the outpost momentarily." "Acknowledged, *Enterprise*- and thank you for your help. *Horizon* out."

Janet raised an eyebrow at that- not used to politeness from any Starfleet rep other than her uncle. "Computer, engage course for the medical outpost in Sector Nine- warp six."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Course is laid in and engaged."

After shutting down the transporter console, Janet turned to a nearby wall mounted storage unit and took out a scanner. It wasn't as powerful as a Starfleet tricorder, but it was good enough to do the job. She aimed it at the storage container and studied it's readings. "Military grade dilithium. The best there is. "She turned off the scanner and returned it to storage," But that's to be expected coming from Starfleet stores."

Leaving the container on the platform- no point in storing it for so short a trip-Janet returned to the cockpit and her own thoughts as the ship continued on course. But no matter how she looked at it, this thing just didn't sit right with her. It seemed as if little or no time had passed when Computer broke in on her thoughts. "Janet, the medical

outpost has just come into scanning range, But there's something strange."

The ship's captain and owner leaned forward in her seat and asked, "Strange how?"

Function lights shifted as the computer processed the information it had. "I can't scan the interior of the outpost."

"Hold station."

"Acknowledged... now at station-keeping."

"Put me through to Uncle Frank." It was only a minute or so later that the small communications screen on the console lit up with the Admiral's image. Janet didn't waste any time with pleasantries. She jumped right to the point, "Alright, Uncle Frank. What are you not telling me?"

The confusion in the male's voice was also clear on his face. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm at the outpost, "Janet told him. "They have a jammer that's blocking my scans- I can't scan any deeper than the outer hull."

Fitzpatrick slowly shook his head. "I wasn't told anything about that."

His niece sighed. "Military grade dilithium delivered in a round-about-way to a 'medical research outpost' with a military level jammer to block unwanted scans. What does that sound like to you?"

The Admiral cursed softly, "Damn it." Then he met his niece's gaze. "Be careful, Jan. If that is some kind of "black ops" set-up, they won't want you to see any more of it than necessary. I'll start digging at this end and see what I can find out."

Janet's expression softened from anger to concern for her uncle. "Just don't get yourself killed doing it."

"That goes both ways. Out."

Once her uncle's image faded from the screen, Janet's thoughts turned in a different direction. "Computer, from now on, unless our transporter is in use, I want the shields up at all times- full power."

"Understood, Janet. Shields are now up."

"Hail the outpost." When the screen lit, Janet had to blink. The

human face staring back was one she hadn't seen in over four years- not since the day Academy security escorted Janet from the bridge simulator. Amanda Stevens and Janice Rand had been the only other cadets on the scene- the boys hadn't arrived yet. Amanda still looked as Janet remembered her. A head of raven black hair that framed her face as it fell to her shoulders along with eyes that were always bright and alert- the kind of eyes that made you wonder what was going on behind them. "Amanda." Janet nodded to the screen. "You're a long way from the nearest starship."

"Janet. It's been awhile."

"Almost five years. I was told this was a civilian medical operation. What's Starfleet doing here?"

Janet's former classmate shrugged her uniformed shoulders and the collar pips announcing the rank of Lt. Commander showed up against her gold colored uniform. "There's some research going on here that could have military applications- if it's used. Starfleet wanted someone here to act as a liaison and keep them informed

of the outpost's progress. Now, what can we do for you?"

It was the redhead's turn to shrug, "Uncle Frank hired me to bring in your dilithium."

Amanda nodded. "Yes, we were told a civilian freighter would be making the delivery." She looked down and back up. "I'll send you the coordinates to beam it to."

There was an alert going off in the back of Janet's mind. Call it instinct or something else, but something was telling her to grab the opportunity while she could. "I've never seen a medical outpost before. Mind if I beam over for a quick tour?"

Amanda's momentary hesitation was clear even as she answered. "No- of course not. Come on over. I'll meet you when you arrive."

"I'll bring the dilithium with me," Janet responded, "Be there in five minutes. Kirk out."

* * *

Once transport was complete, the first thing Janet noticed was that the outpost didn't look like any Union outpost she'd ever seen. Where as

the Union's standard method of construction hid most of the technology in the bulkheads, in this case, pipes and conduits ran all over the place and the decks were actual sections of grating instead of a solid surface. The whole thing had a kind of bunker-feel to it, oppressive and a little paranoid.

The second thing she noticed was Amanda and the two Starfleet security guards standing on each side of her. The third thing was the tricorder in Amanda's hand.

"Checking me for viruses?" Janet asked over the unit's well known warble.

Only Amanda could see the device's viewscreen and it's transmitted image of the portable scanner in Janet's left jacket pocket and her communicator in the one on the right. "She's clear," the Lt. Commander stated - making certain to turn the tricorder off before handing it to one of the guards.

"Do you always greet visitors with a security detail?" Janet asked.

Hoping Janet's scanner was doing it's job, Amanda shrugged. "There are

some areas on board that require a high level of security."

Janet tilted her head slightly as two technicians with anti-grav units came for the dilithium. "This place is starting to sound more like a military base."

"It is-" Amanda paused, almost deliberately, Janet thought, then continued. "It is a civilian medical research outpost. That's all it is."

Janet met her gaze for a moment as the technicians left with the dilithium. Then Amanda waved a gold sleeved arm down a branch corridor. "Shall we?"

Janet glanced at the security guards as they started off, "If this place is as civilian as you say, then why the guard dogs?"

Amanda glanced at her as she answered. "Even in this day and age, there are such things as industrial secrets- secrets no one wants revealed. Not only do we act as liaison for Starfleet, we also provide the outpost's security needs as well."

The red head glanced around, seeing more corridors branching off and force fields sealing off various

labs and work areas. "Does that include a military level jammer to block scans?"

Privately, Amanda sighed in relief. "You noticed it."



That had not been a question. Janet turned to face her. "It was damn hard not to." Their gazes met for a brief moment, then Amanda turned down another corridor. This one had work areas too, but there

were also more labs- and one was in use.

An Orion female was strapped down to an examination table and in obvious delirium. Two technicians stood nearby in environmental suits taking scans and readings. Janet took an involuntary step toward the force field- only to be stopped by one of the guards. She turned to face Amanda. "A volunteer," the Lt. Commander told her. "Some of the diseases being researched here cannot be truly examined by computer alone. Live subjects- "

Janet stepped toward her and the outrage in her voice was clear as she asked, "Why don't you stop lying? This is an R&D base for bio-weapons- something every planet in the quadrant has outlawed- Even the Klingons won't use them!"

Amanda met her gaze firmly- she had to with security present. "It's Starfleet's duty to protect the Union."

"Not by committing Genocide!"

The raven-haired female sighed. "You're not in Starfleet." She tapped a finger against her own chest. "You're not seeing the reality. The

Orions are just the latest. We have to be prepared to act."

Janet's eyes narrowed. What was going on here? She didn't know. But she did know one thing. "You're right. I'm not in Starfleet- and for the first time in my life, I'm glad of it. Because if you're what Starfleet's become, Then I don't want anything to do with either of you."

Amanda sighed in honest frustration. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. If you had just beamed the dilithium over, you could've left and everything would have continued as planned. But you had to beam over."

Janet stared at her as if she were crazy. "If you think I'm going to let you turn me into one of your "volunteers", you're sicker than I thought."

The two security guards raised their phasers. Amanda looked at both of them, and then turned back to Janet. "You're not seeing things clearly. You don't have any choice." "The hell I don't," Janet replied, "NOW!" A second later, she was gone in a sparkle of transport.

Amanda shook her head. She was forced to play things out. "Damnit! Launch the fighters! Stop her!"

* * *

Aboard *Enterprise* even as the ship was pulling away from the outpost, Janet was reaching the cockpit. "Computer set course for Cait- maximum warp. Open a channel to Uncle Frank and send him everything we got from the scanner. He'll know what to do with it."

"Acknowledged, Janet. We have company- two one-man fighters from the outpost."

"So much for being a 'civilian' outpost, "Janet muttered, "Fore and aft phasers on-line." Janet's hands moved over the console with the ease of four years ownership as she spoke. "Release phasers to my control. Go to navigation program; Raiders 2-9."

"Acknowledged. Phasers are on line and under your control. NavPro R-29 is now engaged." As soon as the computer spoke, the ship dove and turned, twisted in her course. Her speed during these maneuvers was far less than when she flew straight

ahead, but she still moved more like a fighter than a cargo ship. Both fighters were far newer in their designs than *Enterprise*. Navigation and targeting systems, weapon control systems- all were state of the art.

Their first salvos missed completely. "What the hell- ?" Pilot Jenson shook his head in disbelief. "I've never seen a cargo ship move like that." His senior partner, Pilot Watson, was a seasoned officer. "Focus on your job." A moment later, *Enterprise* showed her teeth- her Starfleet surplus teeth- as two blue beams of phased energy sliced through space and eliminated Jenson and his fighter in a blinding glare.

Watson's voice was heard clearly back at the outpost, "Damnit! She's got Starfleet weaponry!" During this short time, *Enterprise* had turned as quickly as her bulk allowed and was headed toward Watson and his fighter, firing port and starboard weapons as she came. Both shots grazed his fighter as Watson pulled away- getting clear just as *Enterprise* passed through where he had been and jumped into warp- leaving both fighter and outpost behind.

In the outpost's command center, Amanda managed to hide her sigh of relief even as she turned to a nearby ensign. "Get Dr. Stone- then put me through to the Director."

STARFLEET COMMAND

Admiral Fitzpatrick had been pacing the office for nearly an hour now, waiting for word from his niece. He had several discreet inquiries in the works as well. No one could have built that outpost without leaving a trail somewhere. As soon as the communicator on his desk buzzed, he practically lunged for it, hitting the switch even as he sat down. He listened to Janet's message and glanced through the scans she'd gotten of the outpost. Then he went back over those scans again, studied them more closely and as he did so, he could feel his stomach tying in knots as he realized the magnitude of the mess Janet had discovered. This nightmare had to be shut down- quickly and quietly. But how?

THE PLANET CAIT

This was a world of forests, open plains, fields of green grass, blue skies

and clean, clear water- while at the same time, being one of the most advanced and civilized worlds in the Union. As Janet brought the *James T.* down from *Enterprise*- half of her thoughts were still back on Amanda as the things her friend had said- and the way she had said them- continued to wade through four years of bitterness. With all of that, it wasn't until she'd landed and reached the spaceport terminal that she started to notice a definite lack of people. When she was here a year ago, the place had been overflowing with travelers- and Caitians of all sizes and fur colors. Now... where was everyone? Taking her communicator from her belt- she'd left her jacket on the *James T.* - Janet opened it as she entered the terminal, "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"Computer here, Janet."

"Where the hell is everybody?"
"The population is there- in hiding."

The human stopped just inside the building and asked, "From what?"

"The crews of three Orion ships in polar orbit."

Janet's eyes went wide in shock. "Why the hell didn't you see them earlier?!"

"The planet's magnetic field in the polar region masked their readings," the computer answered. "It required several scans to clarify the slight aberrations I was detecting."

Janet looked around as she moved carefully into the concourse. "Are there any- never mind." She had just spotted an Orion male headed toward another exit. He was leading his prisoner by a leather-like leash attached to a metal collar around her neck. Matching manacles around her wrists were hooked together. She was Caitian of course. Her mane was a rich brown with golden highlights that reached to her shoulders. Two feline ears stuck up out of it. The tuft of fur on the end of her tail matched of course and the rest of her body- what Janet could see through the rags she wore- was like that of a Terran lion- almost the same tawny brown shade. She wasn't moving fast enough to suit the Orion. He yanked on the lead, causing her to stumble.

Moments later, with a flying kick, Janet planted her foot square in the

green-skinned male's back- slamming him face first into the concourse wall and shattering its glass-like surface.

Even as the male slumped to the ground, she grabbed the Caitian's arm, said, "Come on!" and led her toward the nearest exit.

The male's bellow echoed off the walls- it was all that his fellow Orions needed. They began to converge even as Janet and her companion left the building and headed for a collection of hangars and storage buildings. "What the hell are they doing here?" Janet asked as the two ducked around a corner, "Cait's nowhere near Orion territory."

The Caitian glanced back over her shoulder as they ran. "They've been raiding our towns and villages for the past month- killing anyone who resisted." She glanced down. "They killed my family."

Janet glanced over at her. "How are you still alive?"

"When they first arrived, my father organized a resistance group to fight them," the female said. "The Orions ambushed us 2 days ago. One Orion hit me with his rifle. When I

woke, I was in an Orion camp in these shackles and my family was dead."

Janet stopped as they neared the end of the alley they'd been passing through and carefully looked around. She then waved to her companion and the two ran across open ground- a landing area- before ducking between two hangars. There was shouting behind them as the Orions continued their search. "Why hasn't Starfleet stopped this?!" she asked.

The Caitian shrugged, "Ever since their pet project blew up, the whole organization's been acting like it's in some kind of shocked paralysis." She shook her head. "I was supposed to leave for the Academy a week ago."

Orion shouts were getting louder. Janet looked around and nodded. "Come on."

"No," the Caitian said, "That way leads to a cul-de-sac." She pointed with both hands in another direction. "That way's clear."

"How do you know?"

"During school breaks, I raced flyers on the amateur circuit," the female answered, "I've raced out of this spaceport dozens of times."

Janet nodded and waved a hand in the direction the Caitian had indicated and said, "After you then."

With a whip of her tail, the Caitian lead the way, but as soon as they stepped out of the alley and into the open they were spotted. "There! There they are--this way!"

"Damn. Come on," Janet swore as she pulled the female in another direction and took her communicator in hand, "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Lock on with the transporter. When I give the word, transport two to the *James T*."

"Understood, Janet," the computer replied. "I have a lock on you and your companion."

They ducked around another corner and Janet spotted a door. "Here. In here." Once inside, they found that it was the side door of a hangar, which provided long-term shelter for various scouts and shuttles. Janet glanced around as she spoke. "What's your name anyway?"

"M'Ress. Yours?"

"Janet Kirk."

An Orion voice suddenly sliced the air. "Check that hangar!"

Janet had her communicator open once more. "Now- Energize." The sparkle of the transporter effect faded just as the first Orion barged into the hangar.

* * *

Aboard the *James T.*, Janet let out a sigh of relief once the transporter effect released them. "Good. Now we've got a breather."

M'Ress glanced around at the flight deck- the console, pilot and co-pilot seats, one other seat and a door leading to the rest of the ship. "Where are we?"

"Aboard my scoutship," Janet told her as she set to work removing the manacles and collar. It was easy to do so long as you weren't the one wearing them- otherwise, if the manacles came into close contact with the collar, they released a stun charge strong enough to knock anyone unconscious for nearly an hour. The human tossed the things into one corner of the cabin as she continued. "I have a cargo ship in orbit. How long did you say the Orions have been here?"

"A month- that I know of."

Janet sat down in the pilot's seat, one hand coming to rest on the flight console as she shook her head. "Wonderful. There has to be an answer to this. I can't spend the rest of my life watching over one shoulder for the Orion Syndicate and over the other for some shady faction from Starfleet."

M'Ress' confusion was genuine to say the least. "What are you talking about?"

PERSONAL RECORD; ADDITIONAL. I FILLED M'RESS IN ON THE PAST FEW DAYS- WHICH OF COURSE INCLUDED UNCLE FRANK'S CALL ABOUT THE DILITHIUM AND THE R&D BIO-WEAPONS OUTPOST GEARED TOWARD ORION GENICIDE. THAT'S WHEN A POSSIBLE ANSWER CAME TO ME...

Janet turned from her new friend and activated the scout's communications system. "Kirk to *Enterprise*," she said, "Beam M'Ress on board."

The Caitian's tail- which always seemed to be in motion- twitched. "What are you going to do?"

Janet grabbed up her jacket and turned toward the ship's airlock as she answered, "Guarantee your freedom, Cait's and maybe my own. But first, I've got to get captured."

M"Ress' eyebrows nearly shot off her head as the Human left the scout, "What?!"

STARFLEET COMMAND

ADMIRAL FRANKLIN FITZPATRICK'S OFFICE

Seated at his desk, Janet's uncle activated his log as he continued his work. "Personal Record: Stardate 4956.6. That niece of mine is something else. Only she would've thought to carry a portable scanner with her when she beamed aboard the 'medical research outpost' in Sector Nine. Once inside the jammer's perimeters, the scanner picked up research labs and a computer core that only major starbases should have. From the looks of these scans, not only is the outpost the origin point for the engineered disease, it also seems to have several decks devoted to the development and construction of the delivery system as well.

"No wonder they were going through dilithium so fast. And this girl, Amanda Stevens, I remember her. Same class year as Jan. Her turn in the center seat was only a month later. How'd she end up in this mess? And how involved is she?" Fitzpatrick turned off the log and turned to another section of his work station. A request for Amanda's personnel file soon had the information on his viewscreen. "...Graduated six months ago--assigned to Medical Research Outpost in Sector Nine by Admiral Michael Turner.' He looked up at that in confusion. "Why would the Starfleet Advisor to the Union President be bothering himself with dilithium deliveries and personnel transfers?" The intercom on his work station buzzed for attention and he activated it. "Yes?" It was his yeoman.

"Sir, Admiral T'Pel just called requesting your presence."

"T'Pel? Now?"

"She said as soon as you were available, sir."

"Alright, Yeoman, call her back and tell her I'm on my way."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Upon leaving the office, Fitzpatrick had something of a hike since he had to go halfway around the station. But he soon found himself standing in front of another door with a different plaque mounted beside it:

ADMIRAL T'PEL

STARFLEET INTELLIGENCE

CENTRAL COMMAND

He entered to find himself in an outer office occupied only by a humanoid female with spots that started at the edge of her brown hair and continued down each side of her face and into the collar of her uniform. A Trill. Fitzpatrick had never met one before, but the spots were a definite giveaway. She looked up from her work as he approached her desk. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Admiral Fitzpatrick. Admiral T'Pel wanted to see me."

"Yes, sir, Admiral. You can go on in. She's expecting you."

He nodded to her and entered the inner office. As he did so, the only red headed Vulcan he ever met looked up from her work.

It was hard to know how old T'Pel was just by looking at her. But Fitzpatrick had known her for over ten years now and knew her to be sixty-seven standard years- which was still somewhat young by Vulcan standards.

She held up her hand in a clear signal for silence then reached over to one side of her desk where she pressed a switch. "A jammer to block out anyone who might be listening," she explained as she came round her desk. "We can talk freely now."

"Why'd you want to see me?"

"You tripped a notification flag when you accessed Amanda Stevens' file."

"She works for you?"

T'Pel nodded and went on to explain. "Since you know about Amanda, I assume you also know about the Outpost in Sector Nine?" Fitzpatrick nodded. "At first we did not know what was going on- only that men and materials were being diverted for some project that was not part of any official program. "Then our agents began hearing rumors- personnel were being

approached and interviewed for positions in some 'Top-Secret' project. None of our usual agents were able to penetrate the operation- the only answer was that someone with high-level clearance was running background checks and finding out that they were Starfleet Intelligence.

"The only remaining option was to bring in someone with no ties to us. Amanda had just finished her third training flight. Her record showed no ties to any group or affiliation. Everything suggested that she was the one we needed. The details of how I managed to meet with her are of no importance. She agreed to work for me-knowing that nothing could be put on the record.

" Two days later, she was approached." T'Pel now stood in front of her desk. As she spoke, she leaned back against it , her arms folded. "She's been on the outpost for the last three months acting as their head of security as well as their Starfleet liaison. It was only two weeks ago, that she found the computer records for the research they've been doing."

Fitzpatrick stepped toward her. "So why haven't you shut it down?"

T'Pel gave a very human shrug as she answered. "Because we do not know yet who is behind it. Amanda was told, that in an emergency, she was to contact 'The Director'- it was his lieutenant that recruited her. If we move now, this person will only go deeper into hiding." She watched the human as he stepped away.

"And yet, you're taking a chance on telling me?"

"We have known each other for twelve years, six months, three weeks, six hours and forty-seven minutes."

He turned and met her gaze. "No seconds ?"

"I have learned to round off figures when dealing with humans," She replied in a dry tone.

Fitzpatrick smiled and shook his head. Then the smile faded and he tilted his head slightly before he spoke again. "I know who's behind it. He had me arrange a dilithium shipment for the outpost." He quickly explained about the call and how he had turned to Janet for the delivery.

He then crossed to her work station, tied it into his and showed her the scans Janet had made.

T'Pel studied the scans and then looked to her friend. "So who do you suspect?"

"Admiral Michael Turner."

The red-headed Vulcan was silent for a moment then asked, "Military aide and advisor to the President?"

Fitzpatrick nodded, "It fits. He'd have the clearance to run background checks on anyone, re-route supplies, man-power... finances- all right from the President's office."

T'Pel nodded. Then she tilted her head slightly. "Coming on top of the loss of the *Constitution*, this could tear Starfleet apart if we expose this. "She shook her head. "And yet, we cannot allow him or that outpost to continue operating."

Fitzpatrick stepped toward her. "Maybe it's time for some maneuvers of our own." As he explained, T'Pel's eyebrow began to rise.

CAIT THE CAPITAL SPACEPORT

Hidden between two hangars, Janet watched as an Orion male moved past. Then she stepped out behind him. "You guys are harder to find than a twentieth century cop."

The Orion spun around in shock and his eyes narrowed. This was the one everyone was looking for- They'd all been briefed on what she looked like. But why was she standing out in the open like this? His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What are you doing, Human? Surrendering?"

"Not quite. Where's your leader at?"

"Ballen is in the terminal building awaiting word of your capture."

"Take me to him." The Orion tilted his head slightly. This human just refused to act like the prisoner she was. "Why should I take you to her?"

Janet's eyebrows raised slightly, "Her? Okay--because I have information she just might be interested in."

The Orion carried a disruptor rifle. He now shifted it in his hands as if he intended to use it as a club. "And why

not beat this information out of you myself?"

Janet's look of disgust was not in the least faked. "Because you don't know how- and we don't have time for you to learn." She then headed for the terminal building, leaving the male with no choice but to follow.

* * *

Janet spotted Ballen as soon as she entered the building. She was standing by the Customer Service desk in an Orion flight suit that did absolutely nothing to hide every curve of her body. If Janet had taken time to consider it, she might've been a little envious. With curves like that, any male in the universe would have considered her a dream come true. Raven black hair full and flowing, reached below her shoulders and moved freely as she moved, succeeding when combined with her green skin, in actually enhancing her exotic look. She turned as they approached with the grace of a dancer and took Janet in with a single glance. "You are the human that freed the slave?"

"The name's Janet Kirk. I have a proposition for you."

Ballen watched this red-headed Human closely. "What kind of proposition?"

Knowing this would be a hard sell, Janet took a deep breath. "You free all the Caitians you've captured and never return to Cait- in return, I'll give you vital information."

The green-skinned female's eyes narrowed. "What kind of information would be worth that much?"

Janet let it fall, "Information that could save your race from extinction."

Ballen studied her for a long moment- then shook her head. "No deal till I hear more."

The Human nodded. "How about a bio-weapons outpost geared toward Orion genocide?"

Ballen's eyes grew slightly wider at that. "And you know where this outpost is?"

Janet glanced around as she answered, "I do. You can have it's location after you agree to our deal."

Ballen studied her closely once more. She knew the Human had to have something else up her sleeve.

Why else would she be so forth coming with this? Yet, if she was on the level, it was something Ballen couldn't afford to pass on. "If you are lying, human, there will be no place in this galaxy where you will be safe." She reached over to the service desk where a communications device had been sitting and activated it. "Ballen to Task Force, release the Caitians- all of them. Transport them back to the surface immediately."

One voice replied. "Commander, that'll leave our holds empty."

Ballen nodded even though the distant crewman couldn't see her. "I know, but we may have come across something more important." She met Janet's gaze as she continued, "If we've been lied to, we can always come back later. Ballen out." She spoke to Janet as she shut the device off. "You will come with us...Kirk- until I am certain you are telling the truth."

"May I call my ship?" Janet asked, "Order it to follow?" Ballen nodded and Janet took her communicator from her jacket pocket, "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"Computer here, Janet."

"I'm with an Orion female named Ballen. She's the one in charge around here. We'll be going up to her ship in few moments and heading back to the Outpost. I want you to recall the *James T.* and follow- but stay out of the Orions' way. Be ready to beam me back when I call."

"Understood."

"Kirk out." She looked to Ballen as she returned the communicator to her pocket. "Ready when you are."

PERSONAL RECORD, STARDATE 4956.7. WE BEAMED UP TO BALLEEN'S FLAGSHIP- AN ORION FRIGATE- A FEW MOMENTS LATER. IT WASN'T LONG AFTER THE LAST CAITIAN HAD BEEN RETURNED TO THE SURFACE, THAT HER THREE SHIPS AND ENTERPRISE BROKE ORBIT. AS I LOOKED AROUND BALLEEN'S COMMAND DECK, I COULD UNDERSTAND WHY THERE WERE SOME IN STARFLEET THAT WERE NERVOUS ABOUT THE ORIONS. THEIR TECHNOLOGY IS ALMOST A MATCH FOR ANYTHING STARFLEET HAS. ON THE OTHER HAND, WHIPPING OUT AN ENTIRE RACE IS NEVER AN OPTION. IF ONLY IT WAS

POSSIBLE TO MAKE PEOPLE SEE THIS MORE CLEARLY...

Aboard *Enterprise* M'Ress had made her way to the cockpit and was now seated in the pilot's chair, taking in the spread of instruments in front of her. Control lights blinked and the computer spoke, "Interesting."

"What is?" M'Ress asked.

"When Janet went aboard the bio-weapons outpost, she took a portable scanner with her that allowed me to scan past the outpost's jammer. The scanner is still in her pocket and still functioning."

M'Ress' eyes widened as her tail whipped about behind her. "What's it getting?"

"The entire lay-out of the Orion frigate- and something else."

"What?"

"If these scans are to be believed, I am detecting surgical and bio-chemical alterations throughout Ballen's body."

M'Ress leaned forward in her seat. "Are you saying she's not an Orion?"



"Yes."

"Contact Janet."

* * *

Janet looked around Ballen's command deck as her communicator bleeped. She quickly took it from her pocket and said, "Kirk here."

"It's M'Ress. Can you talk?"

The human looked around, seeing Ballen involved in running the ship. "Yes- but keep your voice down."

"Your scanner's been on all this time," M'Ress whispered, "Ballen's not an Orion. Computer's having a hard time trying to figure exactly

what she is. Get out of there as quickly as you can."

Janet glanced over at Ballen and the momentary confusion was clear on her face. "Understood, but I don't think she'll pull anything- at least until we reach the outpost. Whatever game she's playing, she has to maintain her cover as long as possible-" Janet stopped in mid sentence, then shook her head. "Damnit, that's what she meant." "Computer, when we scanned the outpost earlier, did you get any scans of Amanda?"

"Affirmative."

"Pull up her readings and stand by. Kirk out."

* * *

STARFLEET COMMAND

THE OFFICE OF ADMIRAL FRANKLIN FITZPATRICK

He looked up from his work as the door buzzer went off. "Come." He watched as the unit slid open to allow Admiral Michael Turner to enter. Turner was only a few years older than Fitzpatrick, but the lines in his face and his receding hairline made

him look far older. "Well, what rates a visit from the President's Office?"

Turner got right to the point. "Why did you switch the Third fleet's maneuvers from Sector Eight to Sector Nine?"

Fitzpatrick shrugged and replied, "Because Sector Eight has an ion storm moving through it."

"Why not Sector Seven then?"

Janet's uncle leaned back in his desk chair. "Too close to the Klingon boarder. They'd see it and assume we were preparing for war."

Turner stepped closer to the desk. "But you know there's a medical research outpost in the middle of Sector Nine."

Fitzpatrick nodded. "That's what you said. But I checked both civilian and Fleet star charts and they show nothing in that sector- not even a rogue asteroid."

The President's military advisor turned away and waved that off. "Then your charts are out-dated."

Fitzpatrick shook his head. "No. I downloaded the most current copies this morning. I don't know where

your dilithium went, "He lied, "But I will once my niece calls back."

Turner spun back to face him. "I order you to cancel the maneuvers."

"Why?"

Turner's frustration was beginning to show in his tone. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

But Fitzpatrick wouldn't budge. "You will if you want the maneuvers canceled. Half the ships involved are already in transit."

The military advisor stared at Fitzpatrick for a moment as if in shock. "Damn it, Frank! You have no idea what's going on!"

"So tell me."

"I can't- it's classified."

Thanks to Fitzpatrick's doing, the office door had remained open. Now, from where she'd arrived in the outer office after receiving word from Fitzpatrick's yeoman of Turner's arrival, T'Pel quietly stepped into the room. "Then, since I am head of Starfleet Intelligence, you can tell me."

Turner backed away from both of them as Fitzpatrick came behind his desk. "Why don't we tell you?" her friend suggested. Fitzpatrick didn't wait for Turner to answer. "When the *Constitution* exploded, it made the Union- and Starfleet- look weak in the minds of races like the Klingons and the Orions. At least that's what you thought."

The President's advisor looked from one to the other. "It does make us look weak- like we're not capable of doing our jobs anymore. The Orions have been carrying out raids deeper and deeper into our territory for months now."

Fitzpatrick's own brows came together in growing anger. At one time, he had considered this man a friend. "So instead of bringing this information to the attention of Starfleet Command, you decided to deal with it yourself! You illegally appropriated funds and materials for your own little outpost- then staffed it with researchers whose sole purpose was to create an illegal bio-weapon geared toward the total destruction of the Orion Race! My god, Mike..."

Fitzpatrick turned away in clear disgust. Turner stepped toward him- almost pleading with him to understand. "We have to strike first- especially when we don't have ships strong enough to defend us. Removing the enemy is the only option left!"

T'Pel shook her head and her red hair bounced about her shoulders. "Illogical. Such an action will not remove enemies- it will only create new ones."

Fitzpatrick turned back toward Turner and his tone was sharp. "If you use that damn thing just once, you'll alienate half the quadrant! Bio-weapons can not be controlled. eventually they affect the user as well as his victim- why the hell do you think everyone agreed to outlaw the damn things?"

T'Pel's voice remained Vulcan calm as she spoke. "Admiral Michael Turner, you are under arrest for illegally supporting an action that was in direct opposition to the Union's best interests and for supporting the use of outlawed technology."

In a practiced blur of motion, Turner had a personal phaser in his

hand. "No. I took actions that were necessary to protect the Union! I won't be sent to some damn penal colony for doing what was right!"

Fitzpatrick glanced in T'Pel's direction, then shifted his position- forcing Turner to follow his movements. "Put it down, Mike. No matter how it goes, too many people know now."

Turner shook his head. "No!" A moment later, his head twitched to one side and he slumped into unconsciousness as a result of T'Pel's nerve pinch. The two friends exchanged glances over the unconscious form as silence settled over the office.

* * *

THE ORION TASK FORCE

PERSONAL RECORD, STARDATE 4956.84. WE'LL REACH THE OUTPOST ANYTIME NOW. AS I WATCH BALLEN INTERACT WITH HER CREW, ALL I SEE IS AN ORION FEMALE DOING HER JOB.COULD THE SCANS BE WRONG? IF THEY'RE NOT, THEN WHAT THE HELL IS SHE? THE SCANS COULD BE SHOWING ANYTHING FROM

GENDER REASSIGNMENT TO A SPY. SHOULD I MAKE AN ISSUE OF IT OR LET IT GO? RIGHT NOW, I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO BASE A DECISION ON. BESIDES, SHE'S CLEARLY THE ONE IN CHARGE AROUND HERE AND IF I'M GOING TO GET AMANDA OUT OF THIS MESS ALIVE, I'M GOING TO HAVE TO WORK WITH HER...

Janet glanced around the command deck once more and then stepped toward the green-skinned female. "Ballen, there is one favor I need to ask."

The non-Orion's eyes narrowed. She knew something would come up. "And what is that?"

"There's one person aboard the outpost that I need to get out before you destroy it- a friend that told me what was going on."

Ballen shook her head. "You can leave after we have confirmed that you have told us the truth- not before."

"You'll be sending a boarding party to the outpost, won't you?" Janet asked.

The raven-haired female nodded. "Of course- with enough explosives to destroy everything on board."

Janet nodded. "Let me go with them. We can find her and she can lead us right to the research that needs to be destroyed. Then we can all go our separate ways."

Ballen thought about it for a long moment, before finally nodding. Janet wasted no time as she took her communicator in hand. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Listen up..." She then went on to explain what was going to happen.

"You're crazy!" M'Ress replied. "That outpost'll open fire as soon as we're in range- and the Orions'll shoot back!"

The computer chimed in then. "Janet, ducking and running from Raiders- even fighting them off- is one thing. But I don't have the navigational programs needed to fly in and around Orion ships, fighters, the outpost and all the exchanges of fire in order to get close enough to guarantee a transporter lock."

Janet sighed and the frustration was clear in her tone. "Now you tell me."

Aboard *Enterprise*, M'Ress' tail twitched in agitation. "I can do it."

Her communicator was closer to Janet's mouth in a second. "A cargo ship is a helluva lot more involved than a flyer! You'll be dealing with a lot more than two seats and an engine!"

M'Ress returned her frustration in equal measure. "Your computer just said it couldn't do it and you're going to be busy. Do you have someone else in mind?"

Janet could only shake her head. "You get one scratch on the hull and it's coming out of your pay. Kirk out."

M'Ress reached for the communications switch- then tilted her head. "What pay?"

* * *

On the lead Orion frigate, a crewman turned toward his commander. "Ballen, the outpost has just come within scanning range."

Janet turned to the female. "You won't be able to scan it's interior. It

has a jammer that blocks all attempts."

"She's right," the same crewman reported. "We can't scan past the outer hull." Another crewman spoke up then. "We are being scanned."

Ballen nodded and ordered, "Sound battle Alert. Bring weapons on-line." She turned to someone standing behind Janet. "Torlen, take Kirk. You'll both in the first boarding party."

Janet turned to face the being- and hesitated, for this was the same male she'd kicked back on Cait. He shook his head. "Don't worry human." Then he laughed. "You fight like an Orion!"

* * *

Aboard the outpost, the command center was in chaos as the staff responded to their uninvited guests. "Dr. Stone, the Orions are surrounding us!"

Dr. Samuel Stone was in his late fifties and a strong supporter of Admiral Turner's views. It had made sense then to put him in charge of the outpost. Someone with some command experience might have

been a better choice. Standing at his work station, his hand came down on the intercom and he said, "Stone to Stevens. Amanda where are our damn shields?"

Ten decks down, in Engineering, three crewmen lay stunned on the deck with Amanda standing over them, phaser in hand and the maintenance panel to the shield generator open. Several circuits inside were already dark. She activated a nearby intercom, "Stevens here. Don't worry about it, Doctor. I'm working on it now. Out."

She then changed the setting on her phaser, took aim on the open panel and fired- destroying connections and making sure the shields never worked. She then activated the intercom once more, "Stevens to Stone. I found the problem. There's been a massive overload in the shield generator. "There's no way of getting the shields up."

She left Engineering on the run as Stone's voice came over the PA system. "This is Dr. Stone to all personnel. We're about to be

boarded by Orion slavers. Prepare to repel invaders!"

Five decks up, Amanda left the turbo lift, headed for her security office- only to stop at the sight of several people beaming onto the station. Most were Orion- then Amanda sighed in relief at the sight of Janet. "It's about time you got back."

"Didn't know I had a deadline, "the red head replied. "Where's the research stored at?"

Amanda pointed. "Down this corridor- same as the labs you saw." With that, she led the way at a run.

* * *

In the cockpit of a certain cargo ship, M'Ress was studying the flight console- and was totally lost. This was nothing like the flyers she used to race. "Computer?"

"Yes, M'Ress?"

"I need some quick orientation. I point- and you tell me what it is."

"Understood- but it better be a short lesson. The Orions are firing on the outpost and it's shields are down."

* * *

Amanda finally brought the group to a halt and pointed left and right. "These are the labs- they have to be destroyed if nothing else is." Torlen looked through one of the viewports and saw the same Orion female Janet had seen a few days ago- only now, she was covered in sweat and far too weak to move. "By all the gods--"

He started for the lab's airlock door- and Amanda grabbed his arm. "It's too late for her. If you go in there, you'll die as well. The plague they've designed destroys the immune system. Then, while every disease you can think of attacks the body, it goes straight for the brain." She looked toward the viewport as she went on. "She's lapsed into a catatonic state. If nothing else happens, she'll be dead by this time tomorrow. Even the cure won't help if it's been over eight hours."

The outpost rocked, systems shorted and a ceiling support beam inside the sealed lab fell on the treatment couch, killing the female laying upon it. It took Janet's sharp tone to get the Orions moving again. "Torlen, set your explosives." he met

her gaze for a moment with a blank one, then blinked, nodded and began issuing orders to his men.

Janet then turned to Amanda. "Where did you say the research was stored?" Her friend pointed to the end of the corridor and said, "We can use that office to call it up."

The red-head nodded, "Let's do it then." They headed in that direction, only to stop at the sight of a four man Starfleet security detail coming round the far corner. Janet barely had time to shout a warning and shove Amanda to the ground before the shooting started. "We've got to get past them!"

Amanda looked at her like she was crazy as Union phaser beams and Orion disruptor blasts flew over their heads. "How without getting our heads blown off?!"

"You have the authority here," Janet reminded her, "Use it!"

Amanda stared at her for a moment more, before turning in the direction of the Starfleet forces, "Cease Fire! I'm Lt. Commander Stevens! Cease Fire!"

The male in charge of the detail waved for his men to stop firing and stepped into the open.

"Commander?"

Amanda spoke as she and Janet stood up and approached. "These men are volunteers, Lieutenant."

He looked at her, then at the Orions standing behind her and Janet and then back to her and asked, "If they're volunteers, then why are they armed?"

The two females traded glances and Janet shrugged. "Good question." As if her remark had been the signal, the two females attacked the detail with every fighting technique they could bring to bear. When it was all over, four security guards lay sprawled on the deck. Janet wiped stray hair back out of her face and turned to Torlen. "Do it!" As he and his men set to work, she turned to Amanda. "Let's go."

The outpost rocked again and the explosions were louder. Amanda glanced at Janet. "Those explosions were inside."

Janet nodded as they reached the door. "We're running out of time."

Once the door was open they ducked inside and Janet watched as Amanda went straight to the work station and started digging. The outpost rocked and the lights flickered.

"What took you so long to figure it out?" Amanda asked as she worked. "You used to be quicker."

"Four years of turning my back on an organization that turned its back on me," Janet replied with a clear edge to her voice.

Amanda glanced over at her, then back at her work. "Guess I can't blame you for that." Two data discs emerged from the console and she grabbed them both. "One for Torlen and one for us." The outpost rocked again more violently and this time when the lights went out they stayed out- replaced by emergency lighting.

A moment later, Torlen had the door forced open. "The charges are set."

Janet took one of the discs from Amanda and handed it to him as she spoke. "Get your men together. We'll beam out to *Enterprise* and then beam you back to the task force from there." She took her communicator in

hand as they headed for the corridor and said into it, "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Now."

* * *

Things shook and rattled along with the thunder of Orion disruptor blasts striking the outpost's hull. Everyone knew it wouldn't be long before things started blowing up on their own.

* * *

Seated in the Pilot's seat, M'Ress took a deep breath and said, "Alright, Computer. It's time to get this race started. Stand by to transport."

"Acknowledged, M'Ress." There was an increased hum of power as the engines kicked in and then the *Enterprise* shot into the fray- ducking in and around frigates and fighters while diving clear of phaser beams and disruptor blasts- all under M'Ress' guiding hand.

* * *

Janet, Amanda and Torlen grabbed for support as the outpost rocked to the most violent explosion yet. Amanda glanced at the ceiling then to her companions. "That was the main

power lines. That means we only have about five minutes till the core itself blows."

But as they neared the point where they'd left Torlen's men, they found a new security detail standing over their bodies. At the sound of their approach, one of the guards turned and shouted, "More of them! Open fire!"

"Use stun!" another guard shouted. "They've got Lt. Commander Stevens!"

"Damnit," Janet swore, "Back to the office- Now!" They got back to the office and Torlen got the door closed just as the first stun burst struck. Janet had her communicator in hand once more, "Kirk to Ballen."

"Ballen here."

"The charges were found- but the outpost is about to blow up on it's own. Keep pounding at it."

"Understood--Ballen out."

"Kirk to *Enterprise*. M'Ress where the hell- " The transporter effect faded just as the door was blown out of the bulkhead.

* * *

As *Enterprise* pulled away from the outpost, there was a blinding, glaring explosion and then the outpost was gone.

Aboard the cargo ship, three beings arrived on the cargo transporter platform. Janet and Amanda quickly left the platform and Janet spoke as she stepped over to the control console. "Alright, Torlen, let's get you home. Make sure you give that disc to Ballen."

"I will," the Orion replied, "And Kirk? It was good fighting beside you."

Janet nodded in reply, brought the console on-line and a moment later, Torlen was gone. By then, M'Ress had reached the guard rails on the level above and asked, "Everything alright?"

The red head sighed and nodded. "It is now."

Amanda nodded toward the feline female, "Who's she?"

Janet waved a hand toward the Caitian and introduced, "My First Officer."

M'Ress' ears twitched in surprise, "Since when?!"

The ship's owner actually checked the time on the transporter console before she answered, "A half hour ago- if you want it. It's a faster promotion than you'd get in Starfleet."

The Caitian tilted her head slightly to one side as her tail wiped about behind her as she thought it over for a moment. Then she nodded. "Alright- you're on."

Amanda turned back to Janet and asked, "So now what?"

Her friend nodded toward her new first officer. "First, we go back to Cait so M'Ress can get some decent clothes. Then we'll take you back to Starfleet Command. In the meantime, we'll call Uncle Frank and fill him in."

* * *

The Orion task force was on its way home. As for Torlen, as soon as he arrived back aboard Ballen's ship, he headed straight for her cabin. Now, she answered the door buzzer

and watched as he entered. "How did it go?"

Torlen stood before her desk, the data disc in his hand. "Kirk, her friend and I made it out. The others are dead." He handed her the disc. "The research for the plague and it's cure."

Ballen stood up in surprise as she accepted the disc. "How did you-?"

"Kirk," he shrugged, "I guess she wanted us to be able to recognize and counter it if it should surface again someday."

Ballen met his gaze for a moment then turned toward the viewport positioned behind her desk. As she did so, she laid the disc down- her hand brushing a control Torlen would never see.

On the far side of the cabin, the eyes of an erotic stature- actually custom-built targeting sensors- began tracking Torlen. "Did anyone else know you had this?"

He shook his head as the targeting sensors locked on. "No. No one."

Ballen actually relaxed with that bit of news. "Good. The Praetor'll be pleased."

This confused Torlen even as weapons began their build up toward firing. "Praetor?" Torlen started to say, "I don't--"

Two disruptor beams lanced out from the statue's eyes and struck Torlen down in mid sentence. He was dead by the time his body hit the deck.

A female hand hit an intercom switch, "Ballen to Medical."

"Bomek here."

"Send a litter team to my cabin. Torlen has died of wounds he received aboard the outpost."

"Understood. They're on their way."

"Ballen out."

After turning off the intercom, she reached over and picked up the data disc. Ballen then glanced down at the body and a slight smile came to her face as she spoke, "Don't worry, Torlen. You will be remembered for helping to preserve your race-- for the Romulan Empire."

* * *

PERSONAL RECORD, STARDATE 4956.9. UPON CONTACTING UNCLE FRANK, WE FOUND OUT THAT THINGS HAVEN'T EXACTLY BEEN QUIET AT HIS END OF THIS MESS. ADMIRAL T'PEL WAS WITH HIM WHEN WE CALLED, WHICH ALLOWED EVERYONE TO BRING EVERYONE ELSE UP TO DATE. ADMIRAL TURNER'S RECORDS HAVE BEEN SEIZED AND MORE ARRESTS ARE EXPECTED ONCE THE REST OF HIS CO-CONSPRATORS ARE DISCOVERED. I'VE GOT A FEELING THIS MESS IS GOING TO CREATE ALOT OF VACANCIES IN STARFLEET COMMAND- AND COMING ONLY SIX MONTHS AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF THE *CONSTITUTION*, IT'S NOT GOING TO MAKE FOR VERY GOOD P.R. EITHER. WE SHOULD REACH CAIT IN A FEW HOURS- PROVIDED NOTHING ELSE POPS UP IN OUR WAY....

* * *

EPILOGUE: ONE WEEK LATER

The Orion homeworld was a brown and green ball, ice caps at each end- both smaller than Earth's- with a scattering of lakes of various

sizes instead of anything approaching the size of an ocean.

In orbit around this world, was a brand new Orion frigate fresh from the dockyards- and in it's commander's cabin, sat Ballen.

It wasn't her ship though. While she was in command, it actually belonged to the leader of the Orion Syndicate named Maket. At the moment, Ballen's attention was on a section of console none of the ship's designers ever laid eyes on. She watched as the highly secretive device ran through its codes and passwords before completing the connection it was trying to make. As an image formed on the screen, she bowed her head, "Praetor."

The leader of the Romulan Empire returned her nod- and Ballen knew a great concession when she saw one. "Ballen... I have read your report. How soon can you have the plague ready to be released into an Orion colony's atmosphere?"

"My Praetor, I propose that such measures may not be needed."

He tilted his head slightly. "Explain."

His top agent took a deep breath and did so. "Since my return to their homeworld, Maket has been very lavish in his praise for the 'Hero of the Orion Race'. Not only has he promoted me to command of his personal ship, he has requested my presence every evening for somewhat... intimate visits."

The Praetor's eyebrows rose at this. "And you were able to respond?"

She shrugged. "The training and indoctrination were quite complete. He suspected nothing- in fact he is quite enamored of me."

The male on the screen lifted his head slightly. "Can you push him to the next level?"

Ballen nodded, "Without even trying. If I show him enough devotion and loyalty, we'll be married before the year is out. As his wife, I'll be able to steer him toward certain trade agreements with the Empire. Then if something should happen to him, no one will begrudge the grieving widow if she should turn to our number one ally for support- say in the form of Protectorate under the Romulan Empire?"

The Praetor nodded. "Very nice and neat and nothing the Union can interfere with. Proceed as you've outlined- and Ballen? I hope you'll come to like married life."

The being seated in the command cabin of Maket's frigate shrugged. "I believe I will be able to tolerate it until, as the Humans say, 'Death do us part'?"

The Praetor's laughter echoed off the bulkheads even as his image faded from the screen.

**SHIP'S RECORD, STARDATE 4966.7.
WE'LL BE ARRIVING AT STARFLEET
COMMAND IN ABOUT FIFTEEN
MINUTES. WE'LL DROP AMANDA
OFF, TOP OFF OUR SUPPLIES AND
MAYBE STOP IN TO SEE UNCLE
FRANK BEFORE HEADING OUT ONCE
MORE...**

Seated at the work station in her cabin, Janet turned off the log as the computer spoke. "Janet, since it appears that M'Ress will be staying on board, should I give her full access to the ship's systems?"

The red head nodded. "Yes. With her racing experience, she might have some ideas for the engines-

which reminds me, we still need to take a look at the Number three warp manifold. Let's try to do that before we break orbit. Also, give M'Ress full access to the business records. I want her to know she can check them anytime she wants."

"Yes, ma'am. We've just received a signal from your uncle. He asks that all three of you come to his office once we've achieved orbit."

"Did he say why?"

"Negative."

Janet sighed, "Alright. Make sure that M'Ress and Amanda know."

"M'Ress is in the cockpit, Amanda is asleep and Starbase One has just come into visual range."

Leaving her cabin, Janet turned right in the short corridor and reached for the switch to the cockpit hatch. Sliding it open, she found M'Ress seated in the pilot's seat- where she's spent most of the flight from Cait. "You all right?" Janet asked.

The Caitian nearly jumped out of her seat. She glared at the Human as

she drew near. "You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm surprised you have any left," Janet replied, "What's got such a hold on your attention that you didn't hear the hatch?"

M'Ress nodded toward the forward viewport and the sight of Starbase One steadily growing larger as they drew closer. Her voice was a near whisper. "I've never seen a space station that big before."

Janet leaned forward to take a better look. "You might as well start getting used to it. From what I've heard, they're all that big."

* * *

Two hours later, the intercom in Admiral Fitzpatrick's office buzzed for attention. He glanced over at T'Pel where she stood nearby as he answered it. "Yes?"

"Your niece and her friends are here, sir."

"Send them in."

The three females entered and Amanda's gaze went to the Vulcan. "Admiral."

T'Pel nodded in greeting. "You accomplished your mission with great success, Lt. Commander. We here at Command, had been unable to conceive of a method of destroying the outpost without revealing some kind of Starfleet connection."

Amanda nodded toward her friend. "The credit goes to Janet, ma'am. I was just hoping for a ride out of there before all hell broke loose. I didn't know she was going to bring in the Orion Cavalry!"

T'Pel turned to the other red head in the room. "And the Orions remain unaware that the outpost had Starfleet connections?"

Janet shrugged. "They never asked- and I never offered."

The Vulcan nodded- satisfaction as clear on her face as it could ever be. "Then I think we can consider the matter closed except for a few minor details."

"Lt. Commander Stevens, now that you have some idea of what Starfleet Intelligence is about; would you be willing to continue as one of my agents?"

Amanda glanced at Janet and M'Ress before she answered, "As long as I continue to answer directly to you, Admiral."

T'Pel nodded, "Very well. I shall see to the formal paperwork. "She turned to her fellow admiral. "Franklin?"

Janet watched her uncle as he turned to the desk and picked up an actual folder containing hard copy print-outs which he then handed her. "T'Pel managed to pull a few strings last week."

Janet glanced at the Vulcan, then at her uncle. "What kind of strings?"

He indicated the folder. "Read it and find out."

She opened the folder and began to read- then she stopped and looked up at each admiral in turn. "This is the transcript of a review board hearing."

Fitzpatrick nodded. "Why don't you skip to the summary?"

Janet turned to the last page and began to read aloud. "...In conclusion, it is the decision of this Review Board, that the investigating committee

erred in their judgment of Stardate of 4723.5, in which they stated that their findings concerning Cadet Kirk's part in the break-in of said program control room was inconclusive.

"It is clear to this Review Board that it would have been impossible for Cadet Kirk to be both at the Academy and in Riverside, Iowa at one and the same time.

"Therefore, it is the conclusion of this Review Board, that person--or persons—unknown, used cadet Kirk's biometric profile to gain access to said program control room for reasons unknown. Cadet Kirk should be considered the victim of this action- not the perpetrator and the verdict of "inconclusive" should be replaced with a verdict of "Not Guilty". Janet looked up from the transcript and met her uncle's gaze with one of near disbelief.

Fitzpatrick nodded in understanding. "I know. It took four years- but it's better late than never."

She slowly nodded and spoke as she looked down at the print out once more. "True," she looked to T'Pel, "I am grateful, Admiral. But it doesn't answer the questions of

'who' and 'why'- and it doesn't reinstate me, either."

T'Pel nodded as she stood like most Vulcans- with her hands behind her back. "As to the questions of 'who' and 'why'- those are answers which- after four years- we may never have. As for reinstatement, I believe you can be of more use to Starfleet- and the Union- as a free agent."

Janet stared at her for a moment, glanced at M'Ress, then back again. "You want us to be operatives-- agents?"

The Vulcan gave a slight shrug. "When I processed the request for the review, I called up your record. After reading it, I have no doubt that your sense of right and wrong will lead you into situations we at Starfleet Intelligence know nothing about."

Fitzpatrick cleared his throat as he leaned against his desk. "You've been on your own for four years now, Jan. Do you really want to put on a uniform and start jumping to someone else's orders now?"

Janet traded glances with M'Ress and Amanda as she stepped away in thought. "All I've ever wanted was to be in Starfleet- to serve the greater good." She turned back to face her uncle. "Now you're telling me that I can serve the greater good better by not joining?"

Fitzpatrick sighed. "If this were six months ago, I'd hand you the uniform myself. But it's a different universe now."

T'Pol nodded. "Your uncle is correct. With the destruction of the *Constitution* and the indefinite suspension of that program, Starfleet and the Union are in a position they have never been in before.

"Empires, factions, organizations that would never have considered moving against us- will now consider doing just that, thinking that we don't have the strength to stop them." She stepped over toward the office viewport as she continued to speak. "In one respect, Admiral Turner was correct in his assessment. We do need to make the first move- but not by extermination or genocide." She turned to face the others. "Moving first means gathering information on

our enemies. Finding out who they are and how they are organized. How advanced are their plans and do we have time to counter them? The process of gathering information can be just as important as knowing which end of a phaser to point at the enemy. It can also be the most dangerous. Those that gather information tend to have short life-spans. If you decide not to join us in this endeavor, I will not fault you."

Janet turned to M'Ress. "What do you think?"

The Caitian shrugged. "In a way, it sounds more important than serving on a starship. You're already captain of your own ship. If you join Starfleet, what are you then--just another crewman, right?"

Her human friend sighed, "I can't argue with anything any of you have said. There's also the little detail that most of Starfleet will never read this transcript. Even if I were reinstated, I'd still have to deal with the same hostilities I would have had to deal with four years ago," she sighed once more and nodded, "Alright. It's a deal." Janet looked to M'Ress once more, "Let's go before we end up

smuggling the Klingon Chancellor to a meeting with the F.U.P. President."

Fitzpatrick raised his hand toward her. "One more thing, Jan- a cargo run if you're interested."

She looked at him like he was crazy and asked, "After the last one? What is it--smuggling Romulan ale to Vulcan?"

Her uncle glanced at T'Pel and smiled gently, "No--a small colony on Seriann in the Durianous System. The colonists miscalculated how long it would take to make the trip and now their power supplies are running out."

Janet took a step toward him and her look was filled with frustration, "Damn it. It's never easy with you is it?"

M'Ress looked from one to the other. "Where is the Durianous System?"

"Half a light-year from the Romulan Neutral Zone," Janet told her.

"Ouch."

Janet met her uncle's gaze. "You keep this up, and I'm going to raise

my rates to include combat pay." Then she sighed. "Where's the stuff at?"

"Cargo Hold Nine," he answered.

Amanda spoke up then. "I know where that is. I can show you."

"After you have done so," T'Pel stated, "Report to my office for a formal debriefing."

Amanda nodded and as the three females left the office, Janet shook her head and M'Ress noticed. "What's wrong?"

Janet sighed. "Just thinking about how crazy the universe is. I keep hoping it'll start making sense someday- but I guess I'm just dreaming."

END

Broken Deals

MINOX- LOCATED IN THE GRAILTON STAR SYSTEM

Located in a one-sun, one-planet system, Minox was colonized by the Union just two years ago. As such, much of their supplies still had to be bought and shipped to the colony.

Thus the reason the cargo ship *Enterprise* sailed in a smooth orbit around this world while her owner and captain met with the colony leader- a human named Thomas Baxter. Janet Kirk looked down at the pad she held as she spoke. "...The last crates were beamed down just a few minutes ago, Mr. Baxter. All that's left, is for you to authorize the final payment and we'll be done." She handed him the pad as she finished.

Baxter was at least twenty years older than Janet and gray peppered his brown hair. But a gentle smile was on his face and his movements were smooth as he took the pad in hand. "With pleasure, Captain. These thermal units will be a big help next month- it gets down to a hundred below in the winter around here. I still can't believe how fast you got

here. Everyone else said it would be two months."

"We got a lucky break," Janet admitted as she watched him authorize the payment. "We were between runs when you contacted us." She accepted the pad back.

"Well, if we need anything else, you can bet you'll be the first one I call," Baxter told her.

Janet smiled. "Thank you. We'll look forward to hearing from you." She then took her communicator from her jacket pocket. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Ready to beam up." After a moment's glitter of transport, Baxter stood alone in his office.

Back aboard *Enterprise*, Janet headed for her cabin. She spoke as she entered, "Computer?"

"Yes, Janet?"

"Set course for Starbase 98," She ordered. "Starbases always have something that needs hauled."

"Yes, ma'am. Course plotted, laid in and engaged." Reaching her workstation, Janet laid her business pad aside as she sat down and picked up a stylus with the intention of

getting back to work on a sketch of M'Ress she'd started a few days ago. "Computer, bring up the Federal News feed."

"Acknowledged."

A moment later, one of the two screens above the workstation came to life in mid-broadcast. "Starfleet Command announced today, that it was officially canceling its plagued *Constitution* program." Janet looked up from her sketch to see that the reporter was an Andorian woman. Her white hair longer and more styled than the Andorian norm. Her outfit was also more form-fitting- her entire look designed to hold the attention of her male audience. "Viewers will remember that it was eighteen months ago last week, that the *FSS Constitution* exploded just two days into its two year trial run. Over the past year and a half, Starfleet- aided by several outside agencies- has run literally thousands of simulations in an attempt to find the cause of the matter- anti-matter explosion without success.

"It was the decision of Grand Admiral Michaels to cancel the program and send everything back to

the drawing board, rather than risk another crew.

"On a related front, Starfleet continues forward with the new *Dakota*-class. An upgraded version of the long-proven *Daedalus*- class, the first ship - to be named *Enterprise*- is expected to leave spacedock sometime in the next three weeks under the command of Captain Christopher Pike..."

Reaching across the work station, Janet turned off the broadcast as the cabin's lights reflected off her rusty-red hair. She then turned from the station as she spoke. "Computer, do you have enough information to create a holographic projection of the *Constitution*?"

"Yes, Janet."

"Do so." A moment later, in mid-air, the *FSS Constitution* lived again.

"So that's what it looked like." Janet looked to her cabin door to see M'Ress standing there. "I came to see if you'd heard. I was in my cabin listening to the same broadcast. "Her eyes went back to the projection as she stepped closer to it, her tail in constant motion behind her.

"Somehow- some way or another- I've always missed seeing what it looked like."

Janet nodded toward the image. "The idea of the saucer was introduced with the NX-01. I never understood why Starfleet abandoned it for the *Daedalus* sphere." She tilted her head. "This whole design's sleeker, more powerful looking than anything Starfleet has."

The Caitian walked all around the image, looking at it from different angles. "And they couldn't figure out why it blew up?"

Janet shrugged. "Probably some tiny circuit board somewhere that wasn't up to specs."

Her first officer had completed her inspection of the projection and once more stood by the cabin door. "Did I understand the report right? The first new ship will be called *Enterprise* instead of *Dakota*?"

Janet nodded again. "Sounds like they're continuing with the list of names they had lined up for the *Constitution* program. *Enterprise* would have been next."

"And that captain? Pike? Did you know him?"

Her captain leaned back in her chair. "Yes. He and my father were good friends. They were in the same graduating class at the Academy."

M'Ress leaned against the restroom cubicle, her arms folded as her tail swung lazily about behind her. "I've known you for nearly a year now, and I've never heard you speak of any family other than your uncle."

Janet shrugged and sighed. "Not much to say. When I was fourteen, Dad was first officer aboard the *FSS Sundown*. They were on a star-charting mission when the ship was lost with all hands- to this day, nobody knows what happened. Mom died of a heart attack two years after that mess at the Academy. My brother Jim and his wife were heading a terraforming team on Cestus III. They had a quarter of the planet reclaimed. Then a week after the *Constitution* exploded, a renegade Klingon named Commander Chang crossed the Neutral Zone and killed everyone in the colony. The only reason we aren't at war with the Klingons right now, is that their High

Command was as outraged as the Union was."

This confused M'Ress. "Why?"

"Because Chang attacked without orders," Janet told her. "He decided the Union was ripe for picking and dove in."

"So what'd they do?"

Janet shrugged. "With Union representatives in attendance, Chang was tried by a Klingon court and found guilty of mass murder. He was executed the following morning."

M'Ress' eyes momentarily widened at this. "So there's just you and Admiral Fitzpatrick?"

The redhead nodded- and then a slight smile came to her face. "Although, I wouldn't be surprised if I don't gain an aunt before long."

The Caitian tilted her head at this and then her eyes grew wide once more. "You mean Admiral T'Pel?"

Janet's smile grew as she thought about it. "The last few times I've talked to Uncle Frank, He's had to tell me all about some dinner date or trip they'd just gotten back from."

The Caitian shook her head. "And you don't have any problems with it?"

"Why? Because she's Vulcan?" Janet shook her head. "As long as he's sure it's the relationship he wants and they're happy together, the rest doesn't matter."

The workstation beeped and the computer spoke. "Janet? We're receiving a transmission from Amanda Stevens."

"Shut off the hologram and put her through," Janet ordered as she turned to the station and M'Ress stepped over beside her chair.

One of the screens above the workstation lit-up- but not with the light-skinned Amanda they knew. The confusion was clear in both Janet's face and voice. "Why are you made up like an Orion?"

At least Amanda's voice hadn't changed. "Because I'm on Nellux-IV- an all-Orion colony and it's easier to get around here if you don't stand out."

"Okay," Janet nodded, conceding the point. "So what's up?"

"I need your help," her former classmate stated. "How soon can you be here?"

Computer supplied the information before Janet could reply. "Two days, six hours."

Amanda nodded her now green head. "Scan for me when you reach orbit. I'll be watching for you. Out."

Janet spoke as the screen went dark. "Computer, change course for Nellux-IV, maximum warp."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Course laid in and engaged."

M"Ress tilted her head slightly. "Wasn't very informative, was she?"

The Human shook her head. "I got the feeling she couldn't stay on the line very long."

"Maybe not even in the same place if we're going to have to scan for her," M"Ress noted.

Her captain had to agree. "She's in trouble- or will be by the time we get there."

M"Ress waved a hand toward the cabin door. "I'd better check out the *James T.* Depending on what's going

on this time, we may have to go in after her."

Janet nodded as the Caitian left and continued to sit in silence for a moment, wondering what her friend had gotten herself into this time.

Nellux-IV was what the Union considered a class-'M' world. Gravity close to Earth, breathable atmosphere, surface water in several locations. The Orions first colonized it five years ago, so it was still a new world in many ways- primarily in the fact that was only one major population center to be found here.

It was also here, that Amanda was to be found. In the room she'd been using for the last two months, she carefully and quickly hid the transmitter she'd used to call the *Enterprise* then headed for the door, looking in every direction as she moved down the hall. But it didn't matter how careful she was. They didn't bother to hide- and they didn't bother to enter the hotel. They were waiting right out in the open when she left the building.

When you work for someone like Oakene, you didn't have to worry about doing things quietly.

She paused at the sight. There were three of them- and each one would have made two of her. The one in charge stepped toward her, his green skin shining with an oily sheen as he moved. "You've been asking the wrong kind of questions."

Amanda shrugged as she tried to watch all three of them. "You can't learn anything if you don't ask questions."

The man nodded as his companions moved in closer. "But there are some things, people are better off not learning about." Then his companions grabbed her.

STARFLEET COMMAND

Franklin Fitzpatrick entered T'Pel's outer office and nodded to Ensign Dreelan. The Trill returned his nod and the admiral continued toward the inner office of Starfleet Intelligence. Admiral T'Pel looked up as he entered and a definitely un-Vulcan gleam came to her eyes. They had known each other for over

thirteen years- in it's own way, it was the longest relationship she'd ever had. "Thought I'd stop in and see if you were free for lunch," the Human said.

"Just a moment," she replied. Turning back to the work she'd been doing, she finished it, saved it and shut down her work station.

As she came round her desk, Fitzpatrick cleared his throat. "T'Pel, I'm not sure what the Vulcan way of doing this is, so I'm going to do it the Human way." He then handed her the small box he'd been carrying. "Open it." The redhead did so, to reveal a ring inside. She looked up at him in slight confusion. "It's called an 'engagement ring'," he told her. "On Earth, it's the custom to offer it to a woman when a man's asking her to marry him."

For one of the few times in her life, T'Pel was unable to hide the shock that showed clearly on her face. She looked down at the ring once more, then up at Fitzpatrick. "What do you say?" He asked gently.

She looked down at the ring again, then at the Human. "Marrying you..." She tilted her head as that

gleam returned to her eyes. "...sounds like the logical thing to do."

PERSONAL RECORD; STARDATE 5024.03. WE'RE APPROACHING NELLUX-IV. MY CONCERNS AND WORRIES ABOUT AMANDA HAVE GROWN ALMOST BY THE HOUR, DESPITE THE GOOD NEWS FROM UNCLE FRANK. I'VE ORDERED COMPUTER TO START SCANNING FOR AMANDA AS SOON AS WE'RE IN RANGE.

Both Janet and M'Ress were in the cockpit watching the *Enterprise's* flight console and Nellux-IV as the world drew closer. The Human shifted in her seat and the Caitian's tail swung about as Janet spoke. "Computer, any sign of Amanda yet?"

"I've just located her, Janet. But there's a problem."

M'Ress let loose with a low growl that was almost a snort. "Why am I not surprised?"

Janet met her gaze in silent agreement as she spoke. "What's wrong?"

"First of all, there are several other non-Orion females in the same area- an Andorian and four Caitians.

"Second, there's some kind of local jammer in effect that's preventing any transporter use. We can't beam them out."

Human looked to Caitian. "You guessed it right. We'll have to go down after them."

M'Ress nodded. "Six counting Amanda."

Captain and First Officer traded glances. "Let's go find out what's going on," Janet said as she rose from her seat. "Computer maintain a polar orbit. If you're attacked, you're authorized for independent action."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Now entering a polar orbit."

The redhead looked to the feline. "Let's go."

The *James T.* was a *Luminescence*-class scout. Pilot, co-pilot and one passenger seat on the flight deck with a cabin that could hold four in close quarters.

Even as M'Ress brought the scout down through the atmosphere, Janet found her attention momentarily taken by the sight and colors of the world below them.

As the *James T.* drew near Amanda's location, Janet noticed something else as well. "Thought Amanda said this was a colony? That place is almost as big as a palace." She reached for the console. "Computer, can you scan the building Amanda's in?"

"Affirmative, Janet. Do you wish a holographic presentation?"

"Yes," Janet replied as she turned her seat so she was facing the aft cabin door.

As with the holographic *Constitution* earlier, there soon appeared a scaled down version of their destination. It was semi-transparent, allowing Janet to see inside the structure. "Show the location of Amanda and the other non-Orions." Six white dots appeared in the image.

M'Ress glanced back at it and then turned back to her console. "Why is it, prisoners are always on the bottom most level?"

Janet glanced at her as she spoke. "Computer, add in any other lifeforms in the structure." A moment

later, over a hundred red dots appeared.

M'Ress' eyes went wide at the sight, but she kept her comments to herself this time as Janet studied the image. "Computer can you locate that transporter jammer?" A blue dot appeared in the image and once Janet saw where it was located, she nodded in satisfaction and turned to M'Ress. "Here's what we're going to do..."

* * *

The guards on the roof of the Oakene estate were bored. They had worked for Oakene for over five years- he brought them with him when he came to Nellux-IV.

No one challenged Oakene- no one made any deals or decisions without his approval. So when the strange ship dove out of the sky and opened fire on the western side of the estate, no one was prepared. As phaser beams struck the upper levels and explosions, shouts, and screams were heard , everyone's attention was drawn in that direction.

On the eastern side, Janet quietly reached the wall and glanced around

as she spoke into her communicator.
"Now."

The *James T.* pulled up and away as it swung round for another run even as M'Ress received Janet's message. Within moments, she opened fire once more. At the same time, Janet raised her phaser, took aim on the eastern wall and fired- the sound of destruction drowned out by M'Ress' battle with the guards.

Once the wall was gone and the way was clear, Janet nodded. The jammer was right where the scans said it was. Taking a quick glance around the momentarily unoccupied room, Janet fired and the jammer glowed as the phaser beam struck it. A moment later, only a melted blob on the floor remained.

A disruptor blast flew past her head, sounding like a swarm of angry bees as Janet ducked- -and the *Enterprise's* transporter grabbed her and the six other non-Orions on the lower most level. Once the transporter released her, Janet sighed in relief as she glanced around the cargo hold and took in the sight of the four Caitians, the Andorian woman- in the gold uniform of

Starfleet- and Amanda, who looked like hell. The disguised Human swayed on her feet as she looked to Janet. "Right...on time." Her friend caught her as she collapsed.

PERSONAL RECORD; ADDITIONAL. BY THE TIME M'RESS BROUGHT THE JAMES T. HOME, I HAD BROKEN OUT AN ANTI-GRAV LIFT AND WITH THE HELP OF THE OTHERS, GOT AMANDA UPTO MY CABIN. I DIDN'T NEED MEDICAL SCANNERS TO SEE THE SIGNS OF A SEVERE BEATING- BLUNT WEAPONS AS WELL AS WHIPS. APPARENTLY, ORIONS DON'T BELIEVE IN MODERN DAY METHODS OF INTERROGATION. FORTUNATELY, OUR MEDICAL SUPPLIES WERE SUFFICIENT TO GET HER STABLE AND TEND TO HER WOUNDS. SHE'S SLEEPING COMFORTABLY. NOW, ALL WE CAN DO IS WAIT FOR HER TO WAKE UP AND TELL US WHAT'S GOING ON...

Janet stood by the bed, looking down at Amanda for a moment more, before leaving the cabin and closing the door. Someone cleared their throat and Janet turned to see the Andorian and one of the four Caitians standing by the cargo hold ladder. Janet indicated the blue-skinned

woman's tattered uniform and her lieutenant's pip as she joined them. "Lieutenant- ?"

"Shev, ma'am- of the FSS Venture. I was on my way to Andor on a month's leave when an Orion scout hijacked my shuttle. Next day, I was sold to Oakene."

Janet nodded in understanding. "I'll get you back to your ship as soon as I can." She then turned to the Caitian. "And you are- ?"

"Th"Ress," The woman answered. Her mane was a darker brown than M"Ress'- who was in the cockpit at the moment. With a more orange coat and what humans would have called "freckles" across her nose. "There's something you need to know, "She said as M"Ress came from the cockpit. "There was originally seven of us- Amanda, Shev- and five of us."

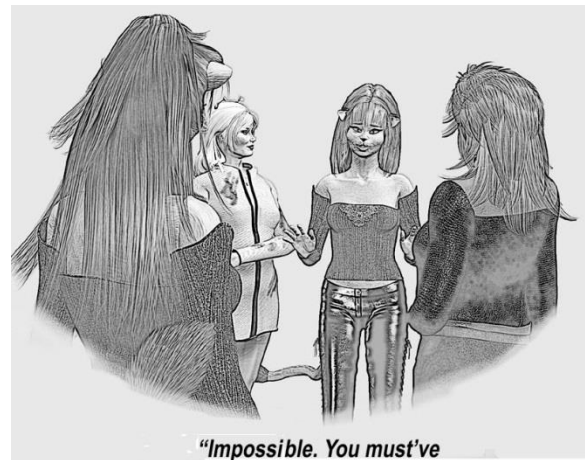
Janet and M"Ress traded glances. "Then where's the fifth?" Janet asked.

Th"Ress could only shrug. "They took her out the morning they brought Amanda in. We never saw her again."

"Did you get a name?" M"Ress asked.

The other Caitian nodded. "Sha"Ress."

M"Ress shook her head and backed away a step- her tail swinging about behind her faster than normal. "Impossible. You must've misunderstood."



"Why?" Janet asked.

Her friend met her gaze as she answered. "Sha"Ress is my sister's name- and she's been dead for the past year."

**STARFLEET COMMAND: THE OFFICE
OF ADMIRAL FRANKLIN FITZPATRICK**

He looked up from his work as the door buzzer sounded and smiled as it opened to reveal T'Pel. "Well, what brings you to this side of the station?"

"Have you heard from Janet recently?" The Vulcan asked.

The Human shook his head. "Not since she called to tell me they were headed for Nellux-IV to help Amanda. Why?"

T'Pel shook her head as she moved closer to the desk. "There is something going on, on the Orion homeworld. The reason Amanda was in Orion Territory was to confirm the rumors we had heard."

"What kind of rumors?"

"What you would call 'bits and pieces', "She answered as she stood before the desk. "All of which seem to center on our friend Ballen. "She folded her arms across her chest as she tried to figure the angles and fit the pieces together, "We know she is not Orion- even though she succeeds in passing as one. Our best analysts have not been able to identify her true race due to the chemical and surgical alterations she has been put

through- in fact some analysts are not even convinced she was born female- which would only confuse matters even more.

"From what we can gather, it would seem she has- as you humans say- 'moved up in the world'. "She glanced over at Fitzpatrick. "Like us, she intends to marry- only her intended is the Orion Syndicate leader Maket. The wedding is supposed to be in two weeks."

Fitzpatrick's eyebrows rose as he leaned back in his chair. "That would put her just one death away from ruling the entire Orion Territory."

T'Pel nodded. "There is no doubt she is preparing Orion for something- to be controlled if not conquered. The question we do not have an answer to is: Who is she working for?"

The Human thought for a moment, then came round his desk, headed for a computer console on one side of the office positioned under a viewscreen. "Seems to me, you're over analyzing things."

T'Pel's eyebrow rose. "Indeed?"

He glanced over at her. "I didn't mean that as an insult. But maybe you've become so focused on the pieces, you've forgotten what the rest of the picture looks like." Fitzpatrick turned to the console and brought the viewscreen to life with a star-chart of the sector in question. "Some one wants control of Orion. We know it's not us- and the Klingons are too far way." He looked to the Vulcan as he indicated the screen. "Who does that leave?"



"We know it's not us- and the Klingons are too far away."

T'Pel sighed. She would never admit it, but this wasn't the first time she'd felt frustrated with herself. She

noded as she met Fitzpatrick's gaze. "The Romulan Empire."

The Human nodded as he indicated the chart with one hand. "If they gain any kind of control over Orion it'll expand the Empire by at least a third."

T'Pel met her fiancée's gaze. "You should have gone into Intelligence work."

He shook his head. "No thank you. You guys think too much."

Aboard the *Enterprise*, silence had followed M'Ress' statement. Now, Janet shook her head. "Did you see her body?"

M'Ress could only shrug. "No. The Orions ambushed us. I was knocked out. When I came to, I was in the Orion camp- in shackles- and they told me my family was dead."

Her captain and friend sighed. "Never believe someone's dead till you've seen the body," The Human said. "And then make sure you attend the burial." She placed her hand on M'Ress' arm. "I'll lay odds they told all the prisoners the same thing so

they wouldn't bother thinking about escape- or rescue. If everyone's dead, what's the point in either one?"

M"Ress closed her eyes and a frustrated sigh escaped her as she shook her head. "What do I do then? If she's alive, there's a chance my parents are too, "She stepped away. "I've spent a year aboard this ship when I should've been looking for them."

Janet stepped toward her. "Look where? Until a few minutes ago, you didn't know there was anyone to look for."

Th'Ress nodded. "You're friend's right. Had you not been here, you would still have no idea your sister's alive."

M"Ress took in and released a deep breath. "But now I do know." She looked to Janet. "I have to find her- and my parents if they're alive."

"For an Andorian, family is a major part of our lives, "Shev noted. "But such a search is a major task."

Janet nodded. "Let's take things one step at a time." She looked to each of them before settling her gaze

on M"Ress. "Let's focus on your sister- then we'll go on from there."

"That's...why I called you." All four females turned to see Amanda standing in the cabin doorway.

" You need to lay back down," Janet told her as she and the others herded the woman back to bed.

But as Amanda lay back down, she swallowed and insisted on speaking. "Admiral T'Pel sent me into Orion Territory two months ago to check out rumors about your friend, Ballen. She's going to marry the Orion Syndicate Leader Maket next week." She swallowed once more, then accepted a cup of water Shev had gotten from the restroom. "Thanks. From what I could gather, it's going to be the social event of the year.

"But while I was looking into that, I started hearing about non-Orion slaves- rare, special ones. The rumors led me to Nellux-IV, where I saw Oakene- your basic, behind-the-scenes, gangster-type- arrive with five Caitians a week ago. I started asking about him- where he lived, what his staff was like- what other slaves he had." She took another swallow of water. "Guess someone

reported me. I no sooner finished calling you than three of his men were waiting when I left the hotel."

Janet looked down at her for a moment. "And they tortured you in an attempt to find out who you were working for." Amanda nodded and Janet looked to M'Ress. "Sounds like this Oakene is our first stop. We need to find out where he sent your sister and who sold him the Caitians in the first place."

She turned from the bed as she continued. "Break out some of those bunks the miners on Orlox-IX refused to pay us for and set them up in the hold for our guests."

"What are you going to do in the meantime?" Her first officer asked.

"Have a talk with Computer," Janet said as she headed for her work station.

* * *

As an Orion merchant (publicly) and colony dictator (behind the scenes) Oakene was satisfied with his lot- at least until the attack this morning.

He stood in his den- his private sanctuary, outfitted with every luxury he could lay his hands on- and shook his head once more at the attackers' plan. Attack the front and invade the rear. He'd have to remember that. As for the identities of the attackers, there were only two possibilities.

First, Rokagene was trying to back out of the deal with the Caitians for whatever reason. If that were the case, Oakene would deal with him- and show him what happens to those that try to break a deal with him.

Considering that only non-Orions were freed, the second option meant the attackers were Union- possibly friends or family of the slaves. If that was the case, it would be personal and vengeance would be a definite factor. If that proved to be the case, his own life may be on the line.

Oakene paused by one wall with a rack of program discs attached to it. Taking one of the discs in hand, he fed it into a nearby slot. A moment later a mug of Romulan ale was replicated in the small alcove above the slot. Taking the mug in hand, he sipped and shrugged. Replicated ale was never as good as the real thing.

With another shake of his head, he turned back to the matter at hand.

He'd ruled Nellux-IV from behind the scenes since the first day the colonists arrived. He wasn't about to lose that kind of power without a fight. As a result, armed guards were posted on every floor with orders to shoot anyone that didn't have a reason for being there. A low hum filled the air- the sound of a Federal transporter. Setting his mug on his desk, he ran for the corridor- were ten armed men were supposed to be on duty. No one was there.

The sound came again from the second floor, then the third floor, the fourth. Each time Oakene arrived, there was no one to be found. Finally he was on the roof. Again, he arrived to find the guards gone. He looked around, then stepped back as a human redhead stepped clear of some nearby shadows. "Now we can talk without any interruptions," she said.

Oakene watched her closely. "What have you done with my men?"

Janet shrugged, "They should wander out of the desert in about two weeks- if they're lucky."

The Orion's eyes went wide. "You're mad! Without supplies, they won't last that long!"

"Then I suggest you tell me what I want to know," Janet replied. "And I might beam them back."

"What do you want to know?" he demanded.

Janet deliberately took her time answering as she gazed out over his lands. "You came home with five Caitians. I freed four." Now she met his gaze. "Where's the fifth?"

Oakene's voice grew firm as he answered. "That information is private. I couldn't stay in business if I gave up a client every time someone demanded a name."

Janet nodded and her voice remained calm- almost conversational. "I can understand that." The transporter effect appeared, delivering M^hress and the four Caitians they had freed. Without any change in her tone, Janet continued. "Now, what you need to understand is this: If we don't get the name of the person you sold the Caitian to- as well as the name of the person you bought them from in the

first place- I'll have to let my friends question you their way."

She stepped closer and kept her tone of voice the same as she laid it on thicker. "Have you ever seen a body after a Caitian has shredded it?" M'Ress flexed her hands and feet, extending her claws for Oakene to see. "It's not a pleasant sight," Janet continued. "Clothing won't protect you- it'll be gone in a few swipes." She looked him up and down. "Body fat won't even slow them down." She leaned closer. "The really bad thing, is that they usually go right for the genitals first- because they tear off so easily."

Oakene's eyes grew wide in fear as the Caitians slowly stepped toward him- a low growl in their throats. Janet shrugged as she continued. "Eventually, once the body has been shredded and gutted, they leave it lying in a pool of it's own blood for the local maggots and insects. Of course, depending on the planet, those insects go straight for the eyes..."

"Alright! Alright!" Oakene shouted as he held up his hands. His voice actually trembled as he spoke. "I...I

sold the Caitian to an Orion Officer named Borden- but he's already left for Starlex-III."

The only human on that roof nodded. "And who did you buy them from?"

"The captain of an Orion frigate named Rokagene. I have no idea where he is now."

Janet took a step toward the man. Unfortunately, an Orion male's genitals are in the same general area as a human male- a fact Janet took advantage of when she rammed her knee into his groin. She stood over him as he doubled over and collapsed to the rooftop. "That's for Amanda," she said. "Next time you feel the need to torture someone, stick to your own race." Then the six women transported out as the vomiting began.

PERSONAL RECORD; STARDATE 5024.05. UPON RETURNING TO THE SHIP, I LEFT M'RESS WITH THE OTHER CAITIANS AND HEADED FOR MY CABIN. AS I CHECKED MY CHARTS, I SAW THAT AMANDA WAS STILL ASLEEP. THEN I CHECKED THE COMPUTER'S RECORDS...

"Nothing." Janet shook her head.
"How the hell can there be nothing?"

"What are you looking for?" Janet turned in her chair to see that Amanda was awake and had been watching her.

"A world- or a location- called Starlex-III." She indicated the charts on the cabin walls. "It's not on any of my charts- and Computer's never heard of it."

"What's on Starlex-III?"

"Maybe M'Ress' sister."

Amanda slowly sat up as she spoke. "Put me through to Admiral T'Pel." It didn't take long to make the connection, and soon Janet watched as Amanda made her report to the Vulcan admiral. She listened as Amanda told T'Pel all about Ballen's upcoming wedding. Then she told the admiral about the Caitians- and their need to find Starlex-III.

Janet spoke up when she was done. "Admiral, the problem is that Starlex-III isn't on any charts I have access to."

"That's not surprising," T'Pel told them, "And it's no fault of yours, Janet. Starlex-III is not a planet."

The two humans exchanged glances as Janet spoke. "What is it then?"

"According to our sources, it's one of three very large and very major Orion military bases," T'Pel answered. "Thus the reason it's not on any federal charts."

"Any idea where it is?" Amanda asked.

"Doesn't matter," Janet stated with a shake of her head. "It's a military base- not like Admiral Turner's bio-weapons outpost last year. That place'll be packed with trained soldiers. There's no way we'd be able to force our way in and out."

"Unfortunately, that's correct," T'Pel stated. "And while Sha'Ress is an ensign- I called her record up while we spoke- we cannot risk interplanetary war for the sake of one person. If you are going to rescue her, any plan you come up with will have to center on the people with you."

Janet sighed in frustration.
"Admiral, there's more than just one involved. How many slaves does an Orion frigate hold?"

T'Pel's eyebrow rose at this.
"According to our sources at least five hundred- perhaps more."

Amanda's eyes went wide and her confusion was clear. "Why hasn't their government said anything?"

"They probably think they're all dead," Janet replied. "Phasers, disruptors- they don't leave anything behind to bury."

T'Pel sighed and nodded. "Very well, Janet. I cannot dismiss your point. I will speak to your uncle about sending a task force to the border. They will not cross unless you call for them." The Vulcan shook her head and red hair almost the same shade as Janet's bounced about her shoulders. "Be careful. If this goes wrong, the political ramifications could affect the entire sector- maybe even lead to war."

Janet grew thoughtful.
"Political..." Amanda looked over at her. "What are you thinking about?"

Janet met her gaze. "I'm thinking about crashing a certain wedding."

"About that, "T'Pel said," We do have information that may help on that front." As she continued, Janet's eyebrows rose- then she nodded.

STARDATE 5027.4- THREE DAYS LATER THE ORION HOMEWORLD

Ballen sighed as she stepped out onto a balcony that opened off the master bedroom of Maket's estate.

Located in the countryside outside the planetary capital, it possessed an air of peace and quiet that Ballen had actually come to like. There had been so much chaos over the last two months as the planet prepared for the wedding, that she'd actually considered calling it off. But that would have created an intolerable delay in her efforts to deliver the Orion Territories to the Romulan Empire.

The Empire. When was the last time she'd actually laid eyes on it? Not by scans or viewers, but actually saw it with her own eyes? She looked down at her hands. A darker, richer green than Romulan skin- and her

body...she had a hard time these days remembering what she used to look like.

The Praetor himself had chosen her for this mission. No one else in the empire even knew she was still alive. Her family believes she died in a shuttle accident when she was sixteen. All she had was her mission and the life that went with it. In five more days, she would become Maket's wife- a roll she never expected to take on. But it was one she'd endure if her plan were to succeed.

She. Her. Ballen shook her head and turned from the balcony. The flowing- and revealing- gown she wore, swayed and flowed with every movement even as her raven-black hair swung and bounced about her shoulders and fell to the middle of her back. Upon returning to the bedroom, she passed the double-size bed and paused before a full-length mirror Maket had surprised her with three months ago. She studied the image it showed her.

That female was athletic, shapely- feminine in every way and still able to command when she had to. It was an

image Ballen had gotten used to. For the first several years after the Praetor had selected her, there had been nothing but training and surgery, then more training and injections, then more training to create the being that was now Ballen. She turned from the image and began calling for the slaves.

**SHIP'S RECORD, STARDATE 5028.2.
WE'VE JUST ENTERED ORBIT
AROUND THE ORION HOMEWORLD
AND I'VE ORDERED COMPUTER TO
START SCANNING FOR BALLEEN'S
READINGS. BEING THE MIX OF BIO-
CHEMISTRY THAT SHE IS, SHE
SHOULDN'T BE HARD TO FIND.
M'RESS WANTS TO COME WITH ME
WHEN I FACE BALLEEN, BUT I DON'T
THINK THAT'S A GOOD IDEA. FOR
ONE THING, SHE'S TOO CLOSE TO
THE SITUATION THIS TIME- I CAN SEE
HER KILLING BALLEEN BEFORE WE
GET ANY ANSWERS OUT OF HER.
THEN TOO, I NEED SOMEONE UP
HERE TO HANDLE BOTH THE SHIP
AND THE REMAINING CAITIAN...**

Janet turned off the recorder and looked to her cabin door at the sound of the knock. "Come." She watched as it slid aside for Amanda- who was up and around now- and Lt. Shev.

"Come on in." The redhead looked to the Andorian as she spoke. "Do you know how things stand, Lieutenant?"

The Andorian nodded. "Lt. Commander Stevens has explained your connection with Starfleet Intelligence and Admiral T'Pel. She's also briefed me on the current situation.

"Do you really think Ballen knows where the other Caitians are?"

"I intend to find out one way or the other," Janet told her. "If she doesn't know, she still has more resources to use in tracking them down than we do. But I think they're still on the same frigate they were on a year ago."

"What makes you think that?" Amanda asked.

"For one thing, the only rumors you heard about were centered on Oakene, right?" Janet asked. "You didn't hear about any Caitian slave markets or anything?"

The disguised human shook her head. "No- no auctions either."

Her friend nodded. "I think Captain Rokagene's been selling them

a few at a time whenever he needed the credits. By keeping them on his ship, he controls the only supply. There's no way to steal them and he can keep them secret longer than trying to hide them planet-side somewhere."

Janet turned to Shev once more. "You were hijacked and enslaved yourself. I won't force you to join in on this if you don't want to."

"But at least five hundred Caitians may be counting on us," Amanda noted. "We're the only chance they have of ever getting their freedom back."



"With numbers like that, you have to ask? Of course I'm in."

The cabin's lights reflected off of Shev's white hair and her antennas wavered and shifted as she looked

from one human to the other. "With numbers like that, you have to ask? Of course I'm in."

Janet nodded. "Good."

The computer spoke up then. "Janet, I've located Ballen."

The redhead nodded once more, rose from her chair and walked over to one of the storage units above her bunk. From that unit, she handed Amanda and Shev civilian versions of the Starfleet type II phaser, while taking a type I for herself and placing it in her jacket pocket. After closing the unit, she turned to face the other two. "Let's go pay our respects to the bride."

* * *

At Maket's estate, a room just off the master bedroom had been pressed into service as a fitting room. Ballen was there now, once more trying on the wedding gown while it's designer and his aide made final adjustments. It was sleeveless and low-cut, semi-transparent in a shimmering material that reached to the floor in flowing folds that did not hide her figure. As Ballen stood before a full-length mirror and

watched the two work, she could find no remaining fault with it.

"That looks incredible- it really does." Ballen turned at the voice to see Janet and two women she didn't know come from the bedroom- after beaming down to the balcony.

"You?!"

"I came to pay my respects," Janet told her. She indicated the gown. "I meant what I said. That's an incredible gown- you really do look good in it. I just hope the bridegroom gets to see you wear it."

Ballen's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying?"

The redhead indicated the dressmaker and his aide. "We need to talk- in private."

Maket's bride looked to the males. "Leave us."

Janet looked to Amanda and Shev. "Watch the doors." As the four moved off, she glanced around. "Is this room secure?"

Ballen studied her just as she did a year ago. "It's checked twice a day- the entire estate is. It's clear."

Janet sighed and nodded. "Then I'm going to lay my cards on the table- and trust you to do the same. Last year, when I was aboard your ship, you never had me searched. You know about the communicator I had in one pocket. What you don't know about- and what I had completely forgotten about- was the scanner in the other pocket. "Ballen's eyes grew slightly wider as Janet took a data disc from her pocket. "Scans of you- showing the surgical and biochemical changes you've been put through." She handed the disc over.

"Why give- ?"

"-you a copy?" Janet asked. "To prove I'm on the level. I know you're a Romulan agent- which means you're here carrying out some kind of plan to bring Orion in under the Romulan wing.

"All of which is beside the point at the moment."

Ballen watched her closely. "Then why are you here?"

"You made a deal with me," Janet reminded her. "You'd free all the Caitians in return for the location of that bio-weapons outpost."

Ballen nodded. "And I ordered their release- you heard me."

Janet returned her nod with one of her own. "But one of your captains- Rokagene- disobeyed, and kept the Caitians his crew captured. He's been selling them a few at a time ever since."

Ballen stepped toward her. "How do you know this?"

Janet explained to her about the last few days- leaving out Amanda's connection to Starfleet Intelligence. "...We freed the four on Nellux-IV, but one had been sold to an Officer Borden stationed on Starlex-III."

She stepped toward the Bride-to-be. "Am I correct in assuming that both then and now, you're head of the Orion Military and answer directly to Maket?" The green-skinned woman nodded. "Then you're facing a renegade officer who disobeys orders whenever it suits him- and this time, it's brought the real possibility of war right to your doorstep."

A look of worry began to surface on Ballen's face. "What do you mean?"

"Even as we speak, a Federal task force is assembling on the Orion border," Janet told her, "A task force ready to wage war to free the Caitians Rokagene never released."

Ballen stepped away as her mind raced with what she'd heard. She had no reason to doubt what Janet had said. A task force on the border would be easy to confirm with a simple call to the border outposts. Reports of such a task force were probably on their way to her already.

Janet stepped after her. "Somehow I don't think the Empire would appreciate having a sector-wide war dropped in their lap." Ballen spun round to face her. "Help me head it off," Janet urged. "Help me stop it before the shooting starts."

Ballen took a deep breath. "How?"

The Human standing before her nodded and began to explain.

STARDATE 5029.01- THE NEXT DAY

The San Francisco Navy Yards had played a long part in Earth's history. That part continued to this day as the planet-side base for Starfleet's orbital dockyards. The workers watched from supports and grids all over the spacedock as the inanimate object before them started coming to life. Lights on the warp nacelles and the lower hull lit, their beams falling on the red and yellow pendant of Starfleet. The lights on the sphere lit-spotlights casting their glow on the vessel's name:

F.S.S. ENTERPRISE

The engineers watched and nodded as the first of the *Dakota*-class slowly made it's way out of Spacedock. On the ship's bridge, Captain Christopher Pike glanced around as he sat in the command chair, the ceiling lights reflecting off his dark brown hair as he took in the sight of everyone at their stations. At the helm console, a human woman with long black hair glanced back at him. "We have cleared spacedock, Captain."

"Address Intercraft," He ordered.

The crewman at the communications console hit a switch as he replied. "Intercraft open."

"Captain to crew," Pike began, "I know you were expecting a few more days to get things squared away. To be honest, so was I. But I'm afraid we'll have to finish things up in transit. As some of you might have noticed, we're also running short-handed right now, so I'll be posting a revised duty roster shortly."

"Our destination is the Orion homeworld by way of Vulcan. Our timewarp is factor six. Captain out."

The helmsman looked back at her captain. "Course plotted and laid in, sir."

Pike nodded. "Engage."

A low hum filled the bridge. Then with that always strange transition to light speed, the ship was on it's way.

* * *

STARFLEET COMMAND

Admiral T'Pel looked up from her work as the door buzzer went off. "Come."

The unit slid aside to allow Franklin Fitzpatrick to enter. "Enterprise just left for Vulcan. She should arrive this time tomorrow."

She nodded and shook her head. "We have so many pieces in motion..."

"I know," he said. "If anything goes wrong anywhere along the line..." He left the rest unsaid. There was no need to say it. If anything went wrong, the whole sector would know it.

PERSONAL RECORD; STARDATE 5031.2. I WISH I KNEW HOW TO FIGURE BALLEEN. SHE'S A ROMULAN AGENT- AN ENEMY OF THE UNION. YET, WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE, SHE SEES REASON AND DOES THE RIGHT THING. IS IT BECAUSE SHE'S ACTUALLY CONSIDERING THE IMPACT ON THE EMPIRE'S PLANS OR IS SHE REALLY CONCERNED WITH WHAT'S RIGHT? SHE JUST CALLED. BOTH ROKAGENE AND BORDEN ARE DUE IN HER OFFICE IN TEN MINUTES. I'VE ALSO BEEN INFORMED BY THE TASK FORCE, THAT THE *FSS ENTERPRISE* CARRYING AMBASSADOR SAREK WILL REACH

**ORBIT IN ABOUT FIVE MINUTES. THE
STAGE IS SET FOR THE FINAL ACT. I
JUST HOPE NOBODY BLOWS IT UP...**

Ballen paced her office. The wedding gown of two days ago, replaced with a military jumpsuit that seemed to hug every curve of her body. She glanced to one side of the room where Janet and M"Ress stood, then to the office door where two Orion soldiers stood on each side awaiting her orders. The door buzzer sounded. "Come in," she ordered.

First through the door was Captain Rokagene. He was- in human terms- husky in build and moved like a twentieth century wrestler. He was aware of the guards even though he never looked in their direction. Then came Borden; Tall and athletic without a doubt, but not as broad in the shoulders as Rokagene.

Borden's companion- brought on Ballen's orders- was the surprise. She was Caitian and there was enough similarities in her face and appearance, that she could only be one person. "Sha"Ress?"

At the sound of her name, the feline turned in shock and her eyes went wide. "M"Ress?!"

The two sisters met halfway, talking over each other. "They said you were dead--the whole family was dead."

Ballen heard it all, and it only made her angrier. "M"Ress, take your sister and go- now."

Borden looked from the Caitians to his commander. "But she is mine."

"She is a Federal citizen," Ballen stated clearly, making certain that every word was clear. "She belongs to no one."

Janet looked to her friend. "Go on."

As soon as the two beamed out, Rokagene turned to leave- and Ballen's voice rang loud, "Stand where you are- Traitor." He slowly turned to face her as Borden quietly moved to one side. "A year ago, you disobeyed my direct order to release the Caitians- all of them. Now we face the threat of war with the Union because of your stupidity!"

He stood straighter. "I am an Orion. I am a slave Hunter. I refuse to return from a voyage with an empty hold!"

"We were dealing with issues far more important than full hold that day," Ballen declared, "We were fighting for the survival of our race that day- and if releasing the Caitians was the price of that survival, then it was a small price to pay!"

Silence hung heavy in the office as Ballen stepped toward the male- who was physically larger than she in every respect. "Now, thanks to you, there is a Federal task force sitting on our border, just waiting for the order to attack- to wage war in order to rescue those Caitians!" She looked him up and down and the disgust was clear in her voice. "You disobeyed a direct order- from me." She turned away as one hand went to the belt of her jumpsuit. "You know what the punishment is for Treason."

With a bellowing roar like some great beast, Rokagene lunged for her-

--light reflected off the knife Ballen pulled from her belt—

--and Rokagene's eyes went wide as she spun and planted that knife in his chest-- clear up to the hilt. Even as the light in his eyes began to fade, she met his gaze one last time. "The punishment is death." She then stood

and watched as the body fell dead to the floor.

She looked to the guards, who had taken a step toward the two, their hands on their weapons. Ballen nodded toward the body. "Get that out of here." She then looked to Borden. "You had no part in the events last year- still, you knowingly bought a non-Orion for a slave. You are reduced two levels in rank- dismissed." As the males left, she turned to Janet. "We will board Rokagene's ship and make certain every non-Orion slave on that ship is released."

Janet nodded. "Ready when you are."

THE *FSS ENTERPRISE*

Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan had a long history of service to both Vulcan and the Union. He had managed agreements and treaties most had considered impossible. This last minute wedding invitation was a new twist, but once Admirals T'Pel and Fitzpatrick had explained, there was no way he could have refused the mission. Now, he stood beside

Captain Pike's command chair and watched as the Orion homeworld drew near.

Pike himself, glanced back over his shoulder at the communications officer. "Open a channel."

"Aye, sir. Channel open."

"This is Captain Christopher Pike of the Federal Starship *Enterprise* to Orion Space Command, requesting permission to enter orbit."

"Orion Space Command to Captain Pike: Welcome. Is Ambassador Sarek with you?"

Pike looked to the older man as he spoke. "This is Ambassador Sarek."

"Orion welcomes Ambassador Sarek. You have permission to enter orbit, *Enterprise*. Standby for visual communications with Mistress Ballen."

A moment later, the forward viewscreen came to life with the image of an attractive Orion woman in the flight suit of the Orion Military. Pike's eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of the human red head standing behind her and off to one side. "I am Mistress Ballen. I am addressing

Ambassador Sarek and Captain Pike?" Both men nodded and she continued, "You are the first official Union representatives to reach our world. I welcome you both."

"As you know, I am to marry our syndicate leader Maket in two days. It is with his blessings, that I take the following action: A year ago, when Orion... visited Cait, 600 Caitians were not released when I ordered it. This has just recently been brought to my attention. As Commander of our military, I tracked the offending captain and his ship down- in fact I am calling you from that ship. I am determined to see to it that these federal citizens are released and sent home. I am told that under emergency evacuation conditions, your vessel is capable of handling a population that large?"

Pike nodded, understanding now, why his ship had been understaffed. They were going to need the room. "Yes, Ma'am, we can."

Ballen nodded in return and began to operate a console located just out of view. "I am sending you their transporter coordinates now. You may transport when ready."

The captain looked back over his shoulder. "Alert all 4 transporter rooms. Tell them to begin transport as soon as the coordinates are received."

"Aye, sir, coordinates received--relaying them now."

"Ambassador, Captain," Ballen called, "I look forward to meeting you in person at the wedding."

Sarek was the one that answered. "The honor will be ours, Mistress."

She nodded, "Until then." A moment later, the screen went blank.

Pike spoke as he rose from his command chair, "Number One, call Sickbay and inform Dr. Boyce of what's coming in. He may want to check the Caitians in case they need medical attention."

The helmsman nodded, "Aye, sir."

"Let me know as soon as transport's complete." She nodded once more and watched as the captain and ambassador left the Bridge.

* * *

Aboard the Orion frigate, Ballen turned from the console as a crewman spoke. "Transport has begun, Mistress."

"Inform me once it's complete."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Janet stepped toward her then. "Got a moment to talk?"

Ballen met her gaze, then glanced around and said, "Not here- your ship." She then turned to the crewman that had spoken earlier and said, "You can reach me aboard this human's cargo ship."

The redhead then had her communicator in hand, "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Beam Ballen and I directly to my cabin."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Energizing now."

Once transport was complete, Janet indicated her cabin, "It's not much, but it's home."

Ballen glanced around, taking in the various sketches on the bulkheads, before meeting the Human's gaze. "What did you want to talk about?"

"The way things have been going." Janet leaned against her work station as she continued, "Tell me- honestly- just between the two of us, how long have you had to exist as an Orion?"

Ballen stepped away. "Sometimes it seems like forever," She paused, "Twenty-three years."

Janet's eyebrows rose. "For a human, that'd be a big chunk of our lives. Your Praetor must have recruited you when you were- what-- fifteen--sixteen? Do you even remember what the Empire was like? If you went back now, do you really think you'd be able to live there? For twenty-three years, you've had to live, act, think like an Orion- stand up for Orion ways and customs." Janet stepped toward her as Ballen stood with her back to her. "I'm assuming there are several trade agreements and treaties in place now between Orion and the Empire. Have they worked out?"

Ballen nodded. "They have proven beneficial to both sides," she told her.

"Because of your efforts," Janet noted. She stepped around to face the green-skinned woman. "Do you see what's happened? Are you even

aware of it? You're not a Romulan anymore, Ballen- not completely. You're an artificially created half-breed, and like any natural one, you have a foot in each world. You know the best and worst of both, and in a few days, you'll be in a position where you can bring the best of both together and create something better than either one." Janet paused for a moment then asked, "Tell me... if it were totally up to you, would you still want to see Orion allied with the Empire? Knowing both sides as well as you do, would such an alliance really benefit Orion?"

The Romulan/Orion met her gaze for a moment... then turned away, her eyes going to the various sketches and drawings once more. "In some ways, the mind sets are similar," She finally said, "And the Empire would be more tolerant of Orion slave practices than the Union would be."

Janet nodded. "All right then--do it. But don't short-change your race- either of them. Right now, both sides are getting what they want- there's no need for that to change."

Ballen faced her. "You are talking about--"

"--maintaining the balance," Janet told her, "Form your alliance- only don't let the Empire ride rough-shod over the Orions. If you do it right, you can pull both sides together and create something this quadrant has never seen before."

Maket's bride-to-be turned away and her voice was a surprising whisper. "I wouldn't even know how to begin."

"If you truly care- and I think you're starting to, whether you want to or not- then let Ambassador Sarek help," Janet suggested.

Ballen looked to her in shock, "Sarek? How could he possibly- ?"

Janet held up her hand for silence. "I don't know the male personally. But he has a reputation as the most open-minded diplomat the Union has." She stepped toward the other woman. "Once he understands what's going on, he'll do whatever he can to help- even if that means negotiating an alliance between Orion and the Empire."

"He can help you make sure that both sides come out ahead." Janet did something then she had never done. She reached out to Ballen, resting her hand on her arm. "You know as well as I do, the only other option- Imperial dominance over Orion- will only result in war. It may take 2 years or 10- but it'll come. If you care about either side- or both- you know the choice you have to make."



"If you care about either side- or both- you know the choice you have to make."

Silence settled over the cabin for a moment before the computer spoke. "Janet, we're receiving a signal from the Orion frigate for Mistress Ballen."

"Put it through," Janet said as she nodded to the bride-to-be.

"This is Ballen. Report."

"All of the Caitians have been transported to the Federal ship, Mistress."

"Very well. Inform the First Officer that he commands for now- and that I will carry out a Level One inspection in 2 hours. If I find any traces of non-Orions aboard that ship he will suffer the same fate as his late captain. Ballen out. "She looked to Janet as the computer broke contact." I wish to return to the surface. I must think about what you've said."

Janet nodded. "Computer, transport Mistress Ballen down to her bedroom."

"Yes, Janet. Energizing now." In a sparkle of transport light, Ballen was gone- followed soon after by a knock on the cabin door.

"Come." The redhead watched as the door slid aside to allow M"Ress to enter. "Got a second?" her first officer asked.

"A few. What's going on?"

"The other *Enterprise* just called," the Caitian said as her tail shifted about behind her, "They've found my

mother among the 600," she shrugged, "Lucked out- she was among the first ones Dr. Boyce examined. Sha"Ress and I want to go to her."

Janet nodded and went to her. "Of course."

M"Ress took a deep breath. "We... want to go home with her- help her get settled."

The Human watched the feline for a moment, "So this is good-bye?"

"Only for a couple of months," M"Ress assured her. Then she shrugged, "A girl's gotta work. Sha"Ress is taking time too- an extended leave."

Janet nodded once more, "You go ahead. Family comes first. I'll swing by in two months and see if you're ready to hit the space lanes again."

They shared a hug then that only good friends could share, then M"Ress stepped back. "Don't think I'm leaving you short- handed." She stepped over to the cabin door and opened it to allow Shev to enter.

Janet's eyebrows rose at the sight of the Andorian. "Don't you want

some time off yourself? Or get back to the *Venture* ? They must be wondering what happened to you."

Shev nodded toward the Caitian, "M'Ress helped me contact the *Venture* while you were on the Orion frigate. I gave the captain a full report and requested a two month leave."

"And you'd rather spend that time hauling cargo instead of resting on your homeworld?" Janet asked.

The blue-skinned woman shrugged, "I can be bored anytime." She indicated the feline, "Based on what Lt. Commander Stevens and M'Ress have said, serving aboard your *Enterprise* will be a lot more interesting."

Janet had to laugh at that and shook her head. "That's not quite the way I'd describe it..." Still smiling, she offered her hand. "Welcome aboard."

As they shook hands, there came the sound of the cockpit hatch opening and closing, then Amanda stepped into the cabin. "I was starting to wonder where you disappeared to," Janet told her.

The temporarily green-skinned human shrugged. "You were busy in

here, so I used the comm system in the cockpit to contact Admiral T'Pel and fill her in on things."

"What'd my future aunt have to say?" Janet asked.

Amanda smiled as she folded her arms. "At first, she just shook her head in disbelief. Then she said- and I quote-"I can only marvel at Janet's ability to pull rational solutions out of illogical situations"- unquote."

Janet and M'Ress laughed at that, then the Caitian shrugged. "Well, I guess I'd better get packed," she looked to Shev, "Come on, you can use the cabin while I'm gone." She then looked to her human friend, "Janet? Thanks."

The redhead nodded. "You're welcome- and I'll see you in two months."

Amanda watched the two non-humans leave the cabin, then turned to Janet. "Packed? Where's she going?" She listened as Janet explained and nodded in understanding. "You can't really blame her."

"No," the ship's owner said with a shake of her head. "I'd probably do the same."

The computer spoke up then. "Janet? There's a message for you from Mistress Ballen. You've been invited to the wedding- and she requests your presence when she meets with Ambassador Sarek day after tomorrow."

Janet looked to Amanda and smiled as her friend's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Call her back and tell I'm honored to be invited and I will attend. Also tell her that I'll gladly sit in on her meeting with the ambassador- just tell me when and where."

"Acknowledged," the computer replied. Then it spoke again. "Another message, Janet. This one's from the Federal *Enterprise*. Captain Pike requests a visit at your convenience."

"Wonder what he wants?" Amanda asked.

"He was a friend of my father," Janet replied with a shrug. "I'll find out when I get there."

THE F.S.S. ENTERPRISE – 15 MINUTES LATER

Janet's gaze was everywhere as the ensign led her from the transporter room to the captain's quarters. The deck lay-out wasn't too different from the smaller *Daedalus*-class, but with 606 Caitians on board, it was definitely crowded.

Pike looked up from the report he was reading and turned toward his cabin door as the buzzer went off. "Come." He nodded as the two entered. "Janet. Thank you ensign." As the crewman left and the door slid closed, the captain shook his head. "I thought it was you standing behind Ballen when she called."

Janet's eyebrows rose. "I didn't realize I was still the pickup's visual range."

"It's been a long time."

"Yes, sir. Almost 9 years," Janet replied.

He waved a hand toward a chair. "Please." As they both sat down in that slightly curved cabin, Pike laid the report aside as he studied her face. "How have you been?"

Janet shifted in her seat. "All right, I guess. Things have gotten a little easier lately."

Pike watched her face for a moment. "There's no need to be tense. I read the Review Board transcript- and agree with it. The original investigation was flawed from the start."

The redhead sighed and visibly relaxed. "You're the first person in Starfleet I've come across other than Uncle Frank and Admiral T'Pel that have actually looked at it. I had to deliver some equipment to Starbase Eight last month and the base commander couldn't pay me and get rid of me fast enough."

"Well, this isn't Starbase Eight and I'm not Commander Stone," Pike told her. "What I want to know is, why aren't you back in uniform?"

Janet shrugged. "It's a long story."

**PERSONAL RECORD;
SUPPLEMENTAL. CAPTAIN PIKE WAS
PROBABLY THE ONLY OTHER LIVING
PERSON I COULD TRUST WITH THE
ENTIRE STORY. SO, BEGINNING WITH
THAT DAY A YEAR AGO, WHEN
UNCLE FRANK CALLED, I TOLD HIM**

**EVERYTHING ABOUT ADMIRAL
TURNER'S BIO-WEAPONS OUTPOST,
AMANDA, M'RESS, THE CAITIANS,
BALLEN-- ALL OF IT. BY THE TIME I
FINISHED, HE- LIKE ADMIRAL T'PEL-
WAS SHAKING HIS HEAD IN
DISBELIEF....**

"...I'd heard rumors of factions like Turner's, "Pike said after Janet had finished. "But to know they actually existed is more than a little frightening."

Janet shrugged. "Well, thanks to the Orions, that one doesn't exist anymore."

Pike leaned back in his chair. The atmosphere in the cabin was much more relaxed now than it had been. "And it sounds like T'Pel was right. Considering what's been going on here, you've accomplished a lot more than you might have in uniform."

The redhead shrugged. "None of it was intentional. I was just trying to straighten out whatever mess I ended up in."

Her father's friend smiled his well-known crooked smile. "Sometimes, that's all anyone can do." It was then

that he noticed the time. "Dinner time. Care to join me?"

Janet nodded. "I'd like that."

As they stood, she watched as he opened the door. "Maybe we can throw in a tour later," he added as they started down the corridor. "Since you were there, you know I've been invited to Mistress Ballen's wedding?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir. So have I."

Pike glanced over at her. "Care to accompany someone in uniform?"

She smiled and nodded. "It'd be a pleasure."

* * *

PERSONAL RECORD; STARDATE 5032.09.

BALLEN AND MAKET'S WEDDING WILL BE SPOKEN ABOUT FOR YEARS TO COME. HAVING SEEN THE WEDDING DRESS, I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED THE ELEGANCE OF THE TEMPLE AND THE FINERY WORN BY THE TITLED ORIONS IN ATTENDANCE.

THIS IS A WORLD WHERE PAGEANTRY STILL PLAYS A LARGE PART IN SOCIETY- AND WHEN IT'S HANDLED AS WELL AS IT WAS TODAY, IT'S STILL A SIGHT WELL WORTH SEEING. BALLEN LOOKED MORE RELAXED THAN I'D EVER SEEN HER. I HOPE IT WASN'T AN ACT. I'D LIKE TO THINK SHE'S MADE THE CHOICES SHE NEEDED TO AND IS READY TO LIVE WITH THEM.

THE ROMULAN AMBASSADOR WAS THERE, WHICH WAS TO BE EXPECTED. HE WAS A LITTLE SURPRISED TO FIND HUMANS AND A VULCAN IN ATTENDANCE- AND IT WAS SOMETHING OF A SHOCK TO SEE HIM. THE RUMORS OF VULCANS AND ROMULANS HAVING A COMMON ANCESTRY CAN NOW BE CONSIDERED FACT.

THE RECEPTION WAS EQUAL PARTS NEW YEARS EVE AND DINNER PARTY WITH SEVERAL ORION SLAVE GIRLS DANCING ON RAISED PLATFORMS IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE HALL. BALLEN TOLD ME LATER, THAT EACH GIRL WAS ACTUALLY A BODYGUARD FOR MAKET- AND WAS FULLY TRAINED TO KILL WITH THEIR BARE HANDS IF NECESSARY.

AS SOON AS THE RECEPTION WAS OVER, CAPTAIN PIKE HAD THE *FSS ENTERPRISE* OUT OF ORBIT AND HEADED FOR CAIT- LEAVING ME AND MINE THE JOB OF TAKING AMBASSADOR SAREK HOME WHEN THE TIME COMES. ONCE I TOLD SHEV ABOUT THIS, WE SPENT SEVERAL HOURS GETTING THE SPARE CABIN FIXED UP. THE LAST THING I EXPECTED TO HAUL WAS AN AMBASSADOR...

Janet handled the transporter console herself while Shev stood nearby. It was only a few sparkling moments later, that Ambassador Sarek stood on the platform. Janet spoke as she shut down the device. "Welcome aboard, Ambassador. "He nodded to her and she glanced around the cargo hold. "I'm afraid she's not as fancy as a Federal starship, but she gets the job done."

Sarek glanced around as he spoke. "You are too modest, Captain. I have seen far worse. A Tellarite shuttle is not to be endured. The atmosphere aboard those vessels is not for the weak of heart."

Janet glanced at Shev and smiled. "Thank you, sir." she pointed. "Your

cabin is over there. There's a workstation and the computer's been told to give you access to any communications channel you might need."

"To be honest, Captain, I think I would prefer to rest," the older man said. "It has been a long day with another long one facing us tomorrow."

Janet nodded. "I understand, sir. I'll see you in the morning then."

Sarek nodded to each of them and both Janet and Shev watched as he took his one case in hand and headed toward his cabin.

The redhead sighed. "I'm kind of tired myself, so I guess I'll turn in, too. 'Night, Shev."

"Goodnight, Janet."

PERSONAL RECORD; STARDATE 5032.02.

THE AMBASSADOR AND I BEAMED DOWN TO MEET WITH BALLEEN RIGHT AFTER BREAKFAST. WE ARRIVED IN FRONT OF THE MAKET ESTATE AND WAS SHOWN INTO A LIVING ROOM WITH DOUBLE DOORS LEADING OUT ONTO A PATIO.

**IT WAS ONLY A FEW MINUTES
LATER, THAT BALEN CAME IN FROM
THAT DIRECTION...**

The jumpsuit Balen wore fit her to perfection and hid nothing.
"Ambassador Sarek. It is a pleasure to see you again. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me." He bowed as she turned to the redhead. "...Janet. I am glad you agreed to come." She waved a hand toward the double doors.
"Why don't we talk outside?" As they stepped out onto the patio, Sarek was first to speak. "I admit to being somewhat at a loss to understand the reason for this meeting, Mistress Balen."

"I'm afraid it's rather involved, Ambassador." She indicated chairs around a table and as Sarek and Janet sat down, she took a deep breath.
"Janet says that I can trust you- that you are...she said 'the most open-minded diplomat the Union has.'"

Sarek glanced over at Janet as he replied. "I am honored that she believes so." He then looked to Balen.

She in turn, looked to Janet. "This goes against all of my training."

Janet could only shrug. "You also know it's the only way."

The green-skinned woman sighed.
"I am... not a natural Orion, Ambassador." The raised Vulcan eyebrow was Sarek's only visible response. "Indeed? What are you then?"

She met his gaze squarely, "I was born Romulan." Hesitantly, she went on to relate her story of surgical and bio-chemical alterations and being 'seeded' into the Orion population 23 years ago. "...since then, I have had to be an Orion in every way possible in order to survive and get where I am today. In doing so, I have had to set the Romulan aside until now, I am neither one or the other- and yet I am both."

Balen turned to face the first Vulcan she'd ever laid eyes on. "The original plan was to have Maket assassinated. Then his 'grieving' widow-" she tapped a finger against her own chest-" would turn to the Empire for assistance in the form of 'Protectorate' status under the Romulan wing." She stepped toward the table. "That would be the death-knell for the Orions. Within a year,

they would cease to exist as an independent state.

"Over the past year, I have managed to redirect things somewhat into various treaties and trade agreements where both sides have benefited, yet I am not sure how much longer I can succeed in such things."

Sarek looked from one woman to the other. "You wish me to negotiate an alliance between Orion and a recognized enemy of the Union?"

Janet nodded. "If the Praetor gets tired of this peaceful cooperation, he might try to hurry things along with an invasion. A war between the Empire and Orion will almost certainly draw the Union in on Orion's side. We'd end up with a galactic war on our hands."

Sarek sat for a moment, thinking it over. "Whereas a true alliance between the two, allowing them to co-exist and share their resources, would maintain the galactic peace and possibly lead to something more positive." He thought for a moment more. "There is something I will need- for myself- before I agree. A

show of sincerity," he met Ballen's gaze, "From you."

The confusion was clear on her face. "What?"

"I would ask you to mind meld with me," Sarek said. "To confirm what you have told me. Since there are no other sources to go to in order to confirm or deny your story, I must know your thoughts before I decide."

Ballen looked to Janet, then back to Sarek. He was willing to help, but he needed proof she was telling the truth. Where else was he going to get it? She swallowed and nodded. "Very well. What must I do?"

Sarek indicated an empty chair near him. He turned it to face him. "Sit- and do not resist."

Slowly, Ballen sat down. She tensed for a moment, when Sarek reached for her, then forced herself to relax as he placed his hand upon her face. "My thoughts to your thoughts..." For a moment, Janet thought they'd been frozen in time- in fact; she wasn't sure how much time had passed when Sarek finally broke the meld and leaned back in his

chair. "I am... at your disposal, Mistress Ballen."

PERSONAL RECORD; STARDATE 5039.04.

IT'S BEEN A WEEK SINCE SAREK AND BALLEEN'S MIND MELD AND THE TWO HAVE BEEN IN ONE MEETING AFTER ANOTHER - BOTH WITH AND WITHOUT MAKET. THE SYNDICATE LEADER APPEARS TO TRUST HIS WIFE COMPLETELY AND IS SATISFIED TO LEAVE TREATIES AND ALLIANCES TO HER. FOR ME, I'M STARTING TO WONDER HOW MUCH LONGER WE'RE GOING TO BE HERE. I'M PAST READY TO BE ON THE MOVE AGAIN...

As Janet turned off the recorder, the computer spoke. "Janet? Ambassador Sarek has called for beam up."

She nodded as she rose from her cabin chair. "Beam him up then."

Leaving her cabin, she met Shev coming from the cockpit, where she's spent most of the past week studying the flight console. The two reached the upper guardrails as Sarek materialized on the transporter

platform. "Ambassador?" Janet called, "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "No, Captain, not at all. But since this was not a scheduled mission, I could not stay any longer. I have given Mistress Ballen what advice I can for now and I have told her I will return in two weeks' time."

"Do you think she'll be able to avoid a war, sir?" Shev asked.

"I believe it is possible," the Vulcan replied. "We can leave for Vulcan whenever you are ready, Captain."

Janet nodded. "Yes, sir. Computer?"

"Yes, Janet?"

"Lay in a course for Vulcan- Maximum warp."

"Acknowledged. Course plotted, laid in and engaged." A moment later, *Enterprise* was headed for Federal space- and home.

END

STARSHIP LOST

Ship's record; Stardate 5112.02: Two days ago, we picked up cargo on Villox-IV for delivery to Orlan mining colony number five on Billian-III. The company's owner, Milas Orlan, suggested a flight plan he said would be quick and uneventful. He was half right...

Phaser beams flashed past, reflecting off the hull plates as *Enterprise* ducked and dove under M'Ress' hand. In the pilot's seat, with her red hair reflecting the cockpit's lights, Janet Kirk lined up the aft phasers and returned fire.

Behind the two, with her own silvery-white hair reflecting the console lights, Shev monitored the ship's systems, her Andorian antennas almost shivering as another phaser beam shot past. "I said it before; life aboard this ship certainly isn't dull!"

Janet glanced back at her with a crooked smile. "You're the one that likes a little excitement in her shore leave." The ship rocked from a near miss and everyone grabbed for a hand hold.

The *FSS Venture's* helm officer glanced toward the human as she responded, "I think I may change my mind."

The three attacking ships split up as the *Enterprise's* aft phasers fired again, grazing the hull of one of the attackers. "What I want to know, "M'Ress said as she altered course once more, "Is where did these guys come from? Orlan said this was an empty sector- 'Not even a rogue asteroid', he said." The ship rocked as enemy shots struck the shields.

Shev's eyes were on the monitors as she spoke, "Well, all I know is, if the shields and phasers hadn't been Starfleet surplus, we would've been dead by now."

"Remind me to send Uncle Frank a 'thank you' note," Janet replied as she fired the aft phasers again- destroying one of the attackers.

"There's only one way this makes sense, "M'Ress stated as she put the *Enterprise* into a tight, climbing turn that no normal cargo ship of her class could handle.

Janet nodded, "They were waiting for us."

Shev looked over at her. "That means someone gave them our flight plan."

The redhead nodded once more. "Orlan. I thought he agreed to terms a little too easily."

M'Ress glanced over at her as *Enterprise* reached the top of her turn and started back down. "You're saying he never intended to pay us?!"

Her friend of three years nodded. "He expects his men to scuttle us and salvage his cargo. All he's out is the operational cost of those fighters- which he'd probably put down as a 'business expense'."

Shev shook her head and her antennas shook slightly with her movement. "Makes me glad I went into Starfleet instead of following my family into the corporate sector."

The *Enterprise* completed its turn, coming in behind the two remaining fighters. Phaser beams shot forth, hitting and destroying one as the other dove clear. "he's breaking off, " M'Ress noted.

"Just as well, "Shev noted. She looked over at Janet." The shield emitters took a beating. Another ten

minutes and we would have lost the shields entirely."

"Computer, do you have any information on those fighters?" Janet asked.

"They're not space-based craft, " the computer replied. "Their design allows for atmospheric maneuvering. The closest planet they could have come from is Billian-III."

Janet looked to her friends. "That ties it to Orlan even more."

"There's more, Janet," the computer added." I've identified their point of origin based on materials used and method of construction. The ships are Andorian built."

Shev felt a sudden tightening in her stomach. "Computer, there are only three major shipyards on Andor. Were you able to determine which one was the actual manufacturer?"

"Affirmative, Shev," the computer replied. "The Tar'laren Shipyards."

Janet and M'Ress both looked back at Shev and they could see the anger in her face. "What is it?" Janet asked.

"Tar'laren is my family name, "Shev told her. "Give me an hour at your work station and I'll have all the information you need to bring Orlan down for this."

Janet just nodded as M'Ress' attention was drawn back to the flight console and the readings it was showing her. "Your family concerns may have to wait," the Caitian noted.

The ship's owner and captain turned toward her. "What is it?"

"Something just came into our sensor range, "M'Ress said. She looked over at Janet as her tail whipped about behind her. "Something a lot bigger than we are."

Shev pointed toward the viewport. "There- that white shape."

The three watched as the object drew closer and Janet's brow furled. "It... can't be, "she whispered.

M'Ress glanced at her, then back at the object- and her own eyes went wide. "Not possible," she whispered.

"I thought they finally shut down the program last year, "Shev noted.

Janet's eyes were on the object as she answered, "That's what was reported."

"Could they have continued in secret?" M'Ress asked. "Once out of the media's spotlight they'd be free to slow down- take their time to do things right."

But Janet shook her head. "No. You couldn't hide something this big- there'd be a paper trail somewhere." She pointed. "There- look. The ship's name." The three women looked at the name, in blocky Starfleet letters.

It read:

U.S.S. Defiant

"U.S.S.?" Shev asked.

M'Ress shrugged. "Maybe Starfleet changed the designation- from "Federal Starship" to "Union Starship"?"

Janet shook her head once more. "No- they'd have to go back and change every ship in the fleet to match."

The computer spoke up then. "Janet, I'm not scanning any lifeforms aboard that vessel."

The three females traded glances. "If this one's like our *Constitution*, it should have held a crew of 430," Janet noted.

"Could this have been an automated test flight?" Shev asked, "Considering what happened to the *Constitution*..."

Janet glanced back at the Andorian as she answered. "That still doesn't tell us where this one came from. You don't build something like this without someone finding out about it.

"Computer, is there an atmosphere aboard that ship?"

"Affirmative, Janet. According to my scans, it's Union standard."

Janet looked to Shev, "All the same, break out a couple of environmental suits just in case."

The Andorian nodded and as she left the small cockpit, Janet looked to M'Ress. "I know, I know," the Caitian said, "I'll watch the ship."

The redhead shrugged. "At least till we can afford an environmental suit that can accommodate your tail."

M'Ress' frown was unmistakable. "Next time we're on Cait, I'm going to buy one if I have to take out a loan." Then she met Janet's gaze. "Be careful over there."

The Human nodded. "You can come over as soon as we confirm the computer's scans."

In the cargo hold, dressed in an environmental suit, except for her helmet, Shev looked up from the transporter console as Janet came down the ladder. The Andorian handed her a matching EVA suit as she nodded toward the cockpit. "She doesn't like staying behind."

Janet shrugged as she pulled her suit on. "I know- but it can't be helped right now." Once she too was suited up except for her helmet, she stepped over to the console and activated the intercom. "Computer, compare scans of the *Defiant* with our records of the *Constitution*. Is the ship's main bridge in the same location?"

"Affirmative, Janet. According to my scans, everything matches."

Janet glanced over as Shev as she spoke. "Continue your scans and let

us know the moment you find something that *doesn't* match."

"Understood."

The sparkle of transport faded, leaving Janet and Shev standing on a bridge neither had ever seen before. Everything was sleeker, more streamlined than the *Daedalus* and *Dakota*-class bridges they knew. Yet, it was clearly a descendant of those designs. Light blue walls, red railing, red helm console trimmed in black. No goose-neck viewers sticking up out of the consoles- and a square viewscreen dominated the forward bulkhead instead of one with a thick frame and rounded corners. There were skeletons, too- lying everywhere.

"What's left of the crew?" Janet asked in a hushed whisper. She felt like she'd beamed into a tomb.

"Must be," Shev replied in an equally quiet tone. "But the uniforms are not right."

She was correct. Instead of the collar pips to indicate rank, the skeletons all had various amounts of gold braid on their sleeves- and the male crew wore pants that ended at the top of their boots.

"So close and yet so different," Janet muttered. She indicated the crews' remains. "Looks like a power struggle- or mutiny."

Shev looked around this strange bridge- seeing it as the battlefield it had been. "Wonder which side won?"

As they traded glances, Janet's suit communicator - built into her helmet- bleeped. She reached for the switch, located near her faceplate. "Kirk here."

"Computer, Janet. I've completed my scans of the *Defiant*."

"What'd you find out?"

"Materials used, method of construction- all match the records for the *Constitution* program. "The *Enterprise's* computer paused before it continued." Analysis of the ship's hull, however, suggests that it has been drifting for 42 years."

Janet and Shev traded glances once more. "Not possible," the Andorian protested.

The redhead glanced around. "Maybe not. The "USS", the uniforms, the hull's age- and I've followed Starfleet close enough through Uncle

Frank to know there's never been a mutiny..."

"No," Shev declared, "There hasn't been. You can't keep news of something like that quiet."

She studied her friend. "What are you saying then?"

Janet shrugged. "I don't know...a "gut feeling" that this ship isn't one of ours- it doesn't belong- maybe not even in our universe." The Human looked around as she spoke into her comm unit. "Put M'Ress on."

"M'Ress here."

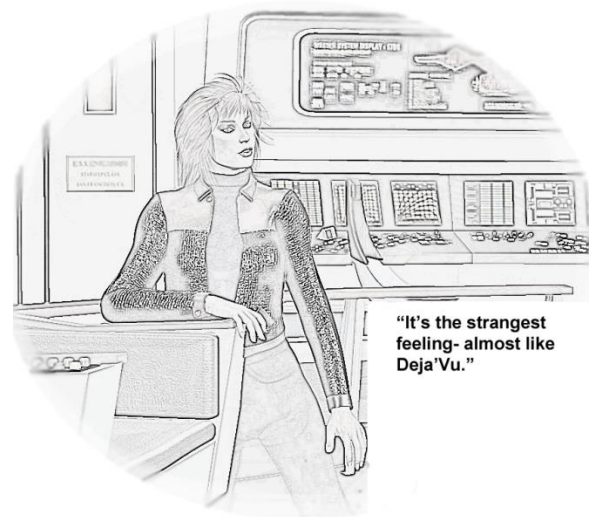
"Contact Uncle Frank," Janet told her. "Send him everything we've got so far- and tell him he better get a couple of ships out here as quickly as he can, because if anyone else shows up to claim this thing, we don't have the firepower to hold on to her. "Then grab every scanner you can find, put computer in control of the ship and get over here. I want to do a complete scan- inside as well as out- before someone does show up. We're too damn close to the Klingon border here."

"Understood," M'Ress replied. "be there as soon as I can. Out."

"Out." Janet turned off the comm unit and glanced around, her gaze coming to rest on the command chair. Slowly, she approached it, resting one gloved hand on one arm. For a moment, she just looked the chair over- the buttons, the brushed silver metal, the black leather and real wood arms- then she closed her eyes and shook her head.

Shev couldn't help noticing. "Are you all right?"

Janet turned at her call and shrugged. "The strangest feeling- almost like Deja' Vu. "She shook her head. "Probably just a result of all the time I've spent studying the *Constitution*." She looked around the bridge once more- and shook her head again.



Personal record; Stardate 5112.03.
As I move through this visitor from another reality, I can't shake my feelings of unease. It's like walking through a haunted house with a ghost at your shoulder- you know it's there, but you can't see it or touch it. There's more to what I'm feeling than a simple case of Deja' vu- like a dream turned nightmare, I can almost put my hand on the problem- but it's always gone before I can touch it. As I near the captain's cabin, I find myself hoping the answers are waiting inside....

Janet paused when she reached the cabin that once belonged to the captain of the *Defiant*. Part of her wanted to go in- and part of her was almost afraid of what she'd find. Shaking her head, she reached for the switch and watched as the door slid aside. Once through it, she paused as the unit slid shut behind her. She looked all around, taking in the sparse work area and sleeping arrangements. A frown came to her face. It fit the layout in the plans for the *Constitution*, but for some reason she was expecting something more.

She slowly walked through the cabin, seeing one of those circular

storage units set in a corner. There were no viewports and the realization of that made Janet feel almost claustrophobic. Turning back to the work area, she slowly sat down at the desk. The silence was overwhelming.

She reached for the desk top monitor, hitting a switch at random. There was the clatter and click of computer relays that made Janet jump after the silence. "Dammit," she whispered.

"That-did-not-compute."

The human's head came up and around, "The computer's still functional?"

"A-firm-a-tive," the system answered in a stilted, female tone.

"I wasn't talking to you." Janet shook her head, "Can you play back the captain's last message?"

There was the hum and click of relays, "Wor-king," the computer stated. "Both the ship's log and the Captain's personal log are available. Please spec-i-fy."

Janet leaned back in the chair, convinced now, that there was no

immediate threat. "Ship's log first, then the captain's."

"Ack-now-ledged." There was more clicking and clattering before the monitor lit up with a shot of the bridge and an older human male sitting in the command chair. Janet listened as he told his story: The star charting mission they'd been on, the distortion/rip in the very fabric of space, of being trapped in that rip and being helpless to do anything as the damage to the very fabric of space slowly drove his crew mad. The final entry consisted of gibberish and paranoid rants as the captain himself succumbed to the madness.

Janet turned off the monitor in mid-rant. "My God..." Then she swallowed. "Computer, when was that last entry made?"

"Unable to respond to query," the computer replied, "Scans of known stars on which to base temporal calculations are only 0.9657 percent accurate. Conclusion: Vessel is not in known space."

"Give me your best estimate then."

There came the clatter and click once more. When it stopped, the computer said, "Seven months, Seven days, six hours, twenty-three minuets, fourteen seconds ago."

Janet's eyebrows rose. The *Enterprise's* computer said *Defiant* had been drifting for 42 years, "I guess time passes differently wherever you call home." Her comm unit bleeped and with her helmet removed- she'd taken it off upon entering the cabin- she reached over to where she'd laid it on the desk to activate it. "Kirk here."

"It's Shev. I need you down in Main Engineering."

Janet rose to her feet as alarms began going off in her mind. "What's wrong?"

"It's M'Ress," the Andorian said, "She just... attacked me. It's like she's gone crazy!"

Janet's gaze went to the monitor, her mind to the captain's story- then she ran from the cabin.

* * *

As she ran for the turbo lift, Janet's mind was racing... Was the *Defiant* still caught in the spatial rip? Did M'Ress wander into a fragment or pocket of distortion? Could there be others? Janet shook her head as a wave of dizziness swept over her and her vision blurred. When she could see again, she stopped in her tracks.

She wasn't on the same deck she'd been on a moment ago. She was in some kind of ship board lab with crewmen walking past and moving around without even acknowledging her. A blond female crewman reached toward her- and through her- to a shelf behind her. "Here it is, Doctor." They couldn't see her. She didn't exist here- wherever here was.

She quietly turned and reached for the same shelf the woman had reached for- and Janet's hand went right through it. "How in the hell-?"

"How much time do we have left, Doctor?"

"Hard to tell, Christine. Maybe only a few hours. After that, this damn madness will have us all."

Janet turned back around at that. Madness? Was she on some past version of the *Defiant*? "If only the *Defiant's* doctor had been able to leave some sane record of his work," the nurse- for that was what Janet now took her to be- was saying.

"It would have saved some time," The doctor replied with a sour expression. Janet stepped toward them- and her comm unit bleeped. Realizing only then that she'd grabbed her helmet as she left the captain's cabin, she activated it even as she noticed that no one around her had heard the bleep. "Kirk here."

"It's Shev. Where in the name of the gods are you?! I just had another run-in with M'Ress. It's like tracking a wild animal."

"I'm not on the *Defiant*."

"Then where are you?!"

It was then that Janet's gaze fell on the container the nurse had reached for earlier. Now open, the lid lay to one side- the ship's name conveniently stenciled upon it in clear black print. "I'm aboard the *USS Enterprise*," she told Shev. "There must be pockets of spatial distortion

throughout the ship. I'm close enough to their dimension to see and hear them, but they can't see or hear me." Janet stepped closer to the doctor and looked over his shoulder as he worked. "It looks like this *Enterprise* is fighting the same madness that got to the *Defiant's* crew- and M'Ress."

"Any chance of a cure before M'Ress slashes my throat?"

"Even if there is, the only things I can touch are the things I brought with me," Janet answered as she put her hand through the doctor's head, "If they find a cure, I'll have to memorize the formula and hope *Defiant's* sickbay is just as well stocked."

"Provided you can get back," Shev pointed out.

Janet shrugged, "If I go back exactly the way I came, I should end up back on the *Defiant*."

"Computer cutting in, Janet. Long-range scans are showing two Klingon battle cruisers approaching."

The redhead swore. "Dammit. How long till they get here?"

"Two and a half hours at most."

Janet sighed in frustration. "Alright. Understood. Shev, keep looking for M'Ress- stun her down if you have to."

"If she doesn't slash my throat first," the Andorian replied.

"Kirk out." As she lowered her helmet, Janet looked to the *Enterprise's* doctor. "Alright, Doctor, how fast are you at finding an unknown cure for a previously unknown disease?"

Personal record, Stardate: unknown. A half-hour- as I measure time- has passed since I ended up on *this USS Enterprise*. I've learned that our unsuspecting benefactor is Dr. Leonard McCoy- the ship's chief medical officer. He's determined to find a cure- and he's worked non-stop since I've been here to accomplish it. As for me, I'm helpless in this ghost-like state. i couldn't even help when the doctor's own orderly attacked him. I hope something turns up soon- I'm running out of time too damn fast....

THE DEFIANT

Shev moved carefully as she entered Main Engineering once more. She had searched the rest of the section and even now, her antennas twitched as she strained to pick up any sound of another presence. The lights were dim and there were far too many shadows to hide in.

"M'Ress?" The Andorian swallowed in a frightened throat. Walking around in the dark was NOT her favorite pastime. "M'Ress, it's Shev." She tried to move quietly, sensitive to the slightest sound. A bare paw on the deck plate, claws clicking against the deck- or a low growl from around a corner.

"M'Ress?" Walking past the huge Engineering Dynamos, Shev paused and her antennas twitched once more. Turning, she spotted M'Ress crouched down between the large pieces of equipment, looking more like a wild animal than any intelligent being. "M'Ress? It's Shev. You remember me, right?" The Andorian carefully moved toward the Caitian, fully aware of her extended claws and her own ripped clothing from their previous encounters. There was an uneven gleam in M'Ress' eyes as she glared at this blue-skinned being.

A low growl in her throat brought Shev to a stop. "Okay. I won't come any closer. But you've got to fight this- we don't have time for it. Think. You're an intelligent being- fight whatever this is. I know you can." The Caitian tilted her head, first one way and then another as a second growl escaped her. She reached for her head and closed her eyes as if in pain. "You're not going to hurt me..."

**"M'ress? It's
Shev."**



"Of course not," Shev told her, "I wouldn't hurt my friends."

M'Ress shook her head as sanity and madness warred within her. Then with a scream and a roar, she lunged...

Meanwhile, Janet continued to pace the *USS Enterprise's* lab as Doctor McCoy and Nurse Chapel worked. At the moment, they weren't doing much. McCoy shook his head, "The hardest part of all this is waitin' for the results." At that point, the lab door swooshed open and a technician in a pair of coveralls came in and handed McCoy some kind of tablet. "lab results, Sir." McCoy barely glanced at the tablet before he started nodding. "Good, good, Mike. Tell the lab to start to work on it immediately. I want it given to Chekov first- then everyone else depending on the severity of their condition."

"Yes, sir."

As the crewman ran out, Janet stepped over to see the tablet and her eyes went wide. "How in the hell am I supposed to memorize all of that?!" She raised her helmet and activated the comm unit. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"Computer here, Janet."

"Listen up." The redhead then went on to read off the formula- finishing just as Nurse Chapel picked up the tablet and moved it to one side. "...Did you get all of that?" Janet asked.

"Affirmative."

"Good. I'll be asking for it in a little while. Kirk out." Stepping back, Janet turned and walked back over to where she first arrived. She then walked through the area-- -- nothing happened. She glanced around. Nothing had changed. "What the hell?" She was still stranded on the *USS Enterprise*.

Shev ducked and dove to one side, avoiding M'Ress' claws by centimeters. She rose to a crouch to see the feline hunched over- nearly on all fours as she watched the Andorian's every move. "This is definitely not good," Shev muttered.

M'Ress shook her head, bared her teeth and lunged again. Shev dropped and rolled, once more barely avoiding claws by the smallest margins. Her back was to the grill covered viewport showing the

impulse engines. As she watched M'Ress, Shev's eyes narrowed slightly.

The beast that had been M'Ress lunged again- going low in anticipation of her prey's expected maneuver. Except that Shev jumped as high as she could and did a summersault that allowed her to land on her feet behind the crazed Caitian. "I think I'll take my next R&R someplace safe and quiet," Shev muttered. "I've heard Quo'nos is nice this time of year."

The crazed gleam in M'Ress' eyes was unmistakable as she howled in fury -- and lunged. There was a ripple in the air-- Shev dove to one side--- and Janet tackled M'Ress in mid-leap! There was a scream of insane anger and then the sound of a Caitian head striking the deck--and M'Ress was out cold.

"Where's you come from?!" Shev demanded as the Human knelt by the Caitian.

"That other *Enterprise*," Janet told her, "I couldn't get the distortion to work until I remembered that when you called me, I ran from the captain's cabin. My heart was beating

harder, more adrenalin was being pumped. I had to let myself be lost in all of that again before I could get the distortion to work." She looked around, "And it still didn't work right."

"I'm not going to complain," Shev replied.

Janet nodded as she checked M'Ress' pulse. "How much time do we have before the Klingons arrive?"

Shev shrugged, "About an hour and a half."

Janet activated her suit's comm unit. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Beam the three of us to *Defiant's* Sickbay."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Energizing."

Personal record; additional; As soon as we arrived in the *Defiant's* Sickbay, Shev and I carried M'Ress to a bed and strapped her down. we then headed for the nearest lab and with computer reading back the formula I'd read to it earlier, we carefully recreated the antidote Doctor McCoy had devised. After that, it was just a matter of Shev and I taking a dose as a preventative and then filling a hypo for M'Ress....

M'Ress was conscious again and fighting against the restraints. For a moment, Janet just looked down at her, then across the bed at Shev. Then she leaned down and applied the hypo. The hiss of the device was loud in the silent room. M'Ress closed her eyes and shook her head. She winced as if in pain, eyes closed tight against the gentle lights of the ward. She cried out and then all the tension seemed to leave her.

Her eyes opened with restored sanity as she looked from Shev to Janet. "What happened? last thing I remember is just stepping off the lift onto the Engineering deck."

"Nothing major," Janet replied as she and Shev released their friend. The redhead then looked to the Andorian. "But now, we've got to get to the bridge. We've only got thirty minutes before the Klingons show up to figure out how to fly this bird."

"Do we dare try to make it up there on foot?" Shev asked. "There are bound to be more of these pockets of distortion all over the ship."

Janet nodded as M'Ress sat up and took her helmet in hand, activating

the comm unit as she did so. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Beam the three of us to the *Defiant's* bridge."

"Acknowledged, Janet. Energizing now."



Upon returning to the *Defiant's* bridge, all three females turned their attention to the helm/navigation console. Janet shook her head as she took in the lay-out. "This is about three generations beyond me," She admitted. "Even if it is labeled in Union standard. Shev, can you make sense of it?"

The one member of Starfleet in the room, sat down at the console as Janet and M'Ress gathered round. "The *Venture's* new bridge module's a little different," she said as she carefully moved her hands over the

controls without touching anything. Then, slowly, she nodded and looked to Janet. "I can do it. It's mostly the same kind of difference as there is between old and new- only we don't have time for the Owner's Manual."

"Take the time to look it over good," Janet told her. "Considering what happened to the *Constitution*, don't even bother with the warp drive- leave that to the experts. Just see if you can bring up the Impulse Drive and get us moving deeper into Federal Space. With any luck, we'll meet Starfleet ships half way." Shev nodded and turned her attention back to the console. Janet then turned to M'Ress. "Try the communications console. See if you can contact any Starfleet ships."

The Caitian nodded as she looked around. "Alright," she looked to Janet, "Which one is it?"

The redhead pointed to the console behind the command chair. "I'll see if I can get the shields up."

As Janet moved off toward the engineering station, M'Ress slowly approached communications. Like Janet earlier, she felt a strange... moment as she stood before the

console. Then she shook her head and sat down. For a moment, she just took in all the buttons and switches. Then she turned to the only human on the bridge. "Janet, can we access the computer through the intercom?"

"I think so. Why?"

The Caitian indicated the console, "It knows how to do all of this, right?"



Janet nodded as she joined her, "When I spoke to it earlier, it didn't respond like ours- it's not an A.I. like ours." She reached for the intercom on the console- the obvious replacement for the goose-necked comm units the *Daedalus*-class had. "Computer?"

"Wor-king."

M'Ress' eyebrows rose at the sound, "Sure doesn't sound like a very advanced machine- does it?"

Janet ignored her as she continued, "Can you operate the communications equipment? Contact other ships?"

"A-ffrim-a-tive."

"There are two Klingon ships heading towards us," Janet said, "Do not contact them. Scan for any other ships in the area."

"Wor-king."

Shev looked up from the helm console, "Janet, I've got a course plotted. We can get underway whenever you give the word."

The redhead nodded. "Do it."

Then the computer spoke up, "Short range sensors are detecting three vessels. One is a small cargo ship. No lifeforms detected."

"Skip that one," Janet ordered. "What about the other two?"

"They are approaching on course 125 mark 3. Vessels bare some resemblance to *Daedalus*- class vessels, but size does not conform."

M'Ress glanced up at Janet. "Counting the *Defiant* at least we'll have some edge over the Klingons."

"Computer, identify those two ships," Janet ordered.

The click and clatter already seemed normal as the *Defiant's* computer carried out the order. "Vessels' registry reads *FSS Hood* and *FSS Lexington*."

"Contact the *Lexington*," Janet ordered.

M'Ress saw the change on the console first. "There's a channel open."

"This is Captain Janet Tamera Kirk to the *FSS Lexington*. Do you read me?"

"This is Captain Robert Stevens of the *Lexington*. We read you, Captain. Are you the one that found the *USS Defiant*?"

"My crew and I, yes," Janet replied. "Captain, we're moving deeper into Federal space on Maximum Impulse. Considering what happened to the *Constitution*, I didn't want to risk the warp drive."

"Understood. We have you on our screens. We're changing course to intercept and we should join up with you in forty-five minutes."

"Then we have a problem," Janet replied, "We've got two Klingon cruisers closing on us. They'll be in firing range in twenty minutes."

"We can confirm that, Captain. They've just entered our scanning range. We're pushing our engines to maximum- that'll cut our time down to about the same as the Klingons- it's going to be close, but it's the best we can do."

Janet and M'Ress traded glances. The day had turned into a race- with the *Defiant* as the prize. "Captain, I only have two people with me: Lt. Commander Shev on leave from the *Venture* is manning the helm and my first officer is sitting at communications.

"Do you have any recommendations? Other than prayer?"

"I wish I did," the *Lexington's* captain replied. "But I've never laid eyes on a *Constitution*-class ship. As much as I hate to say it, I'm afraid

you're on your own till we can reach you."

"Thanks," Janet replied with a clearly sarcastic tone, "Out." She then turned, her gaze going over the bridge. "Shev, according to the *Constitution's* plans, she didn't have any aft weapons. Does the *Defiant*?"

Shev searched the console in front of her, "Not that I can see. Phasers- forward, port and starboard- and torpedoes." She looked back at Janet. "That's it."

"Can you use the maneuvering thrusters to turn us around?" Janet asked as she stepped down beside the helm console.

The Andorian looked at her for a moment. "I'm not crazy about flying backwards, but you're the captain." She stared at the console for a moment, then spotted the thruster controls.

Janet's gaze went to the main viewscreen as the star field seemed to pull from left to right, then back away instead of rushing toward them. Shev sighed. "Done."

Janet then crossed to the command chair and reached for the

intercom she'd seen there earlier.
"Computer explain how to bring the ship's weapons on-line and prepare them for firing."

"You-are-not -author-ized-for-that-information." Janet's eyebrows rose in irritation, "Computer, your crew is dead. All you've got is the three of us. You've got 2 Klingon cruisers heading towards you- you do recognize the Klingons as enemy aliens don't you?"

"A-ffirm-ative."

"Then tell us how to use the damn weapons before they blow you out of the sky."

"You-are-not-author-ized-for-that-information."

A suspicious sound- like a cross between a chuckle and a snicker came from M'Ress' direction, but Janet tried to ignore it.

Shev looked back at the Human.
"We've got ten minutes before they're in firing range."

Janet nodded- then an idea came to her. "Computer, explain the phaser control system for a *Constitution*-class starship." Shev's eyebrows rose,

then both she and Janet smiled as the computer began doing exactly as it was told.

Four minutes later, the lecture was done and Shev was looking at the console in a different light- a light that would not have been possible without her own Starfleet training to support what the computer had said.

Standing by the navigation side of the console, Janet spoke once more. "Computer, explain the operation of a *Constitution*-class deflector shield control system. "A moment after the computer had finished, Janet pressed one last button and sighed. "Well, at least they can't board us now- or blow us up with their first shots."

M'Ress spoke up then, "Janet, we'd have more of an edge if we'd bring *Enterprise* into this. She's small, but she still packs a punch."

Janet nodded. "Yes, she does. But I'd rather hold her in reserve. "She glanced back at the Caitian. "She does pack a punch- but she's also home. Let's not burn the house down till we have to."

M'Ress nodded and a bleep from the communications console called

for attention. "If I'm understanding this thing right, the Klingons are trying to contact us." She worked for a moment, "Janet, their leader- a Commander Kang- wants to talk to you."

"Try to put it on the Main screen."

The screen that took up most of the forward bulkhead blurred and jerked before settling into the image of a Klingon bridge with a male seated in the command chair that Janet had to admit was handsome by the standards of any race. "I am Commander Kang, of the Klingon Imperial Cruiser *Ka'tan*. You will surrender the *Defiant* now."

Janet glanced at M'Ress and Shev as she stepped round in front of the helm console. "Commander, there are two things I think you're overlooking. First, there are two Federal starships approaching- you probably have them on your screens by now. Second, you're trespassing in Federal space. If anyone's in the wrong, here, it's you."

"We salvaged *Defiant* in Federal space. If we choose to keep her or turn her over to Starfleet, that's our choice. Now unless you want to face

odds of 3 to 2 against, I suggest you go home."

Kang actually laughed. "Do not try to bluff when you do not have the cards, Human. You have not been aboard that vessel long enough to learn it's secrets. Surrender it now and I will let you leave alive. Refuse and your two starships will find nothing but a debris cloud when they arrive."

"We know enough about her to defend ourselves," Janet replied, "And if we're forced to do so, we will. We will not surrender her."

Kang actually nodded as if he expected her answer, "Very well then. I would have preferred to take the *Defiant* intact. But if I must destroy her to keep her out of Federal hands, I will do so."

Janet's eyes narrowed, "Commander you are in Federal space without Union permission. Any attack you launch will be considered an act of piracy- if not an act of war. I don't know if you're acting on orders or not- but I ask you to remember what happened to the last Klingon to cross the border without orders. I

believe Commander Chang was executed was he not?"

Kang's eyes narrowed, "How do you know this?"

"There were Union representatives at his trial," Jan stated. "Plus my brother and sister-in-law were among the Cestus III colonists he butchered."

Aboard the *Lexington*, Captain Stevens and his bridge crew had been listening to the conversation. The helm officer looked back at his captain and asked, "Do we open fire, sir?"

Only the captain's eyes shifted to meet the younger officer's gaze as he answered. "No, Mr. Mathews. For one thing, we won't be in range for another two minutes. For another, I won't be the one that starts a war. The ball's in Kirk's court right now."

The ship's first officer stepped over to the command chair from his post at engineering, "But sir, Kirk isn't trustworthy. She was forced out of the Academy for cheating."

Stevens did turn then to meet his gaze. "And four years later a review board cleared her of those charges. I

looked up her record when we got our orders for this assignment. If things had been different, she'd be wearing the same uniform we are- and I suggest that all of you remember that." His thirty year old gaze traveled around the bridge, "We're on the edge of war right now- and only Kirk can prevent it."

On the *Defiant*, silence had followed Janet's statement. Now, she continued, "This... machine isn't worth starting a war over, Commander. But if one is started, it won't be the Union shooting first. Is the Empire ready to wage war over one ship? Is this machine worth the lives of thousands of Klingon warriors that would be lost in a needless war?"

The other Klingon ship was the *Gar'tag* under the command of Captain Korag, who was growing restless in his command chair. Like the *Lexington's* bridge crew, his crew had been listening ,too. "Why is he wasting time with this human?" Korag growled. His beard almost twitched with his agitation. "We can take *Defiant* and use it to crush the Union," he squirmed in his chair,

"Ch'Pak all this talk! Weapons officer, open fire!"

Shev had kept her eyes on the helm console. Now, her training kicked in as her hands moved over its shinny black surface. "Incoming!" A switch was hit-- and blue beams of phased energy lashed out, slicing through defenses designed to stand up to *Daedalus*- class weaponry. Even as disruptor blasts exploded harmlessly against the *Defiant's* shields, the D-6 *Gar'tag* was destroyed.

"Hold your fire!" Janet shouted as she regained her feet after the shock wave of the disruptors hitting the shields threw her to the deck. "Commander Kang, did that ship fire on your order?"

"No Captain. It did not."

"Then consider yourself lucky," Janet told him, "You've seen what *Defiant* can do. You have no means of taking her or destroying her. Go home, Commander. Before this goes beyond anything we can stop- before any more lives are lost."

For a long moment, Kang stared back from the viewscreen as if

studying the human female standing before him. Then he looked off to one side and barked something in Klingon that the universal translator didn't catch. His image was replaced by a debris cloud and a view of the *Ka'tan* turning away and heading back toward Klingon space.

Janet watched the screen for a moment, then turned to Shev, "Shut those phasers off."

M'Ress turned from the communications console. "Janet? Captain Stevens is calling." She nodded toward the viewscreen.

Janet turned toward the screen as the image of a *Dakota*-class bridge came into view with a human male in his early 30's seated in the command chair, "Congratulations, Captain. I don't know anyone in Starfleet that could've done any better."

"Thank you, Captain," Janet replied, "But can we please take this lady some place safe? After seeing what she's capable of, she makes me a little nervous."

Stevens smiled." Certainly. They're waiting for her at Starfleet Command."

Janet raised her hand halfway.
"We do need to make one stop first."
Stevens raised an eyebrow as Janet went on to explain.

**STARDATE 5112.05- THE NEXT DAY
PLANET BILLAN III THE OFFICE OF
ORLAN MINING COLONY NUMBER
FIVE**

The atmosphere of Billan III contained various gases that were deadly to humans. But inside the colony, inside the tunnels and living quarters and administration compound, recycled air filled the lungs of every employee. Milas Orlan would have preferred it otherwise. He would've preferred that only the living quarters and admin compound had air. He would have preferred that the miners used EVA suits in the tunnels. But the miners' organizations wouldn't go along with that, so Orlan had to put out three times the amount in credits to pump air into those tunnels- allowing the sheep to breathe without the suits. A "safety precaution" they had called it. Milas Orlan called it a waste.

But then Orlan was a slob- a rich slob that made his fortune on the

backs of his employees. His mining operations allowed him to live as he liked- good food, good wine- none of it replicated- and both a wife and a mistress. At the moment, he was pacing his office in frustration- the one thing he would have gladly done without. His surviving fighter pilot had returned that morning with news of how their attack on the *Enterprise* had gone. It was not good news. Who would have expected a damn cargo ship to fight back like that?

He turned his overweight form as the sound of a Federal transporter was heard to see that Kirk woman and a man in a gold Starfleet uniform arrive with two other men in red uniforms behind them. "Can I help you folks?"

Janet scowled, "Are you saying you don't know who I am?"

"No, Ms. Kirk. I know who you are."

"Good, because we have business to finish," she held up her tablet, "Twenty crates of equipment for your mine."

"No such order was ever placed."
Janet and Stevens traded glances

before she turned back to face Orlan. "Then how do you know who I am? I have your thumbprint on the contract."

"Faked. I signed no contract."

Janet's jaw tightened as she stepped toward the man, "Then you won't mind if I send these twenty crates of life support equipment into the sun- because it's a certainty your fighters'll never see them."

"Fighters?"

"That's right." She took a data disc from her jacket pocket. "We were attacked by three fighters as we followed a course you recommended. We analyzed them before we destroyed two of them and found out that you bought them six months ago." She took another step toward him and tossed the disc on his desk. "Fighter number 3 is sitting on your landing pad right now- with two shuttles from the *Lexington* to keep it company."

Captain Stevens stepped up beside her as he spoke, "In case it's escaped your notice, Mr. Orlan, Piracy- and attempted murder- are against the law- and since they both happened in

space, the whole matter falls under Starfleet's jurisdiction.

"Now I suggest you pay Captain Kirk what you owe her- then contact a good lawyer- 'cause you're going to need one."

As Janet held her business pad out to Orlan, Stevens signaled his security detail, who in turn, took a step forward. With a scowl on his face, the mine owner grabbed the pad from the woman and authorized the payment before tossing it back to her. She checked it and closed out the file as she spoke. "Be grateful we ran into the *Lexington* when we did." She looked up then, meeting Orlan's gaze, "Because my crew was ready to come in here and blow this mine to hell and back- with you in it."

"Take him up to the ship," Stevens told his men, "Put him the brig. Make sure the Chief reads him his rights. We don't want his lawyer using some loophole we've overlooked to get him off."

"Yes sir," one of the guards replied. It was only a few moments of glittering transport later, that the two captains were alone.

"So, where are you off to next?" the Starfleet officer asked. Janet shrugged. "Once *Defiant's* safely tucked away, we might pay Uncle Frank and Aunt T'Pel a visit. Then we'll set course for Cait. "She met his gaze as a crooked smile came to her face. "I promised my first officer that as soon as we had the funds, we'd get her an environmental suit that could handle her tail."

Stevens raised an eyebrow at that. "Sounds like you have an interesting crew."

She shrugged. "Sometimes." She looked down at her pad. "So...how long do you think it'll be before we see our own *Constitution*-class ships?"

The *Lexington's* captain could only shrug in return. "Not for a while. Starfleet will want to analyze the *Defiant* down to its last molecule. It maybe a decade or more before they even ask permission to start up the program again." He watched her for a moment.

"Was there something else?" She asked.

He nodded, "I was wondering if you'd accept a dinner invitation if I made one," he said gently.

It was Janet's turn to watch him. "Are you making one?" He nodded. "Invitation accepted," she replied with a relaxed smile. He took his communicator in hand, issued the beam-up order and a moment later, the office was empty.

END

Author's notes; Part 2

In a way, we now return to your regular Nova Trek timeline.

I say “In a way” because, this next story was intended to be one of the graphic novels that make up the main Nova Trek narrative. It was written down along with all the others way back in 2005.

But somewhere along the line, it got left out. Today, I don't remember exactly why-though it may have had something to do with all the furred characters you're about to meet.

Even today, I cringe at the idea of trying to get all the textures that would be required for this one to come out looking half-way decent.

But, as a prose story, that concern doesn't matter.

Where would this story have fit in the narrative? It would have gone between “Book One: Gains and Losses” and “Book Two: Guardian's Child”.

Since the “Altered Lives” stories have a large percentage of M'ress in them, I figured this would be a good place for this “Lost Episode” to surface...

mdbruffy 2013 again.

Crisis on Felecia

CAPTAIN'S LOG, STARDATE 5934.03.

**ORBITING A WORLD CALLED
"FELECIA". THIS WORLD IS HOME TO
A FELINE RACE THAT HAS A LONG-
STANDING REPUTATION FOR BEING
SOMEWHAT WITHDRAWN
TOWARD NON-FELECIAN RACES.**

**AS SUCH, WHEN THEIR REQUEST
TO JOIN THE F.U.P. REACHED EARTH,
THE *ENTERPRISE* AND OUR CAITIAN
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER GOT
THE CALL.**

**LT.M'RESS HAS BEEN ON THE
SURFACE FOR TWO DAYS NOW,
DEALING WITH HER FIRST TASTE OF
POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS- AND
HANDLING IT ALL QUITE WELL.**

**ACCORDING TO HER REPORTS, IT
APPEARS THE FELECIANS ARE READY
TO SIGN ON THE BOTTOM LINE AND
IT'S ALL DUE TO OUR YOUNG
LIEUTENANT...**

The *Enterprise's* transporter room

The sound of an incoming call reached Mr. Scott as he stood by the

control console. "Lt.M'ress to *Enterprise*. Request beam up."

"Scott here, Lieutenant. Is there a problem?"

"No, sir. I just need to consult with the Captain on details concerning the final signing ceremony."

"Aye. Understood. Energizing now."

As transport began, on the Bridge, Sulu looked up from his helm.

"Captain, we have a Felecian vessel approaching."

"Their president was supposed to have grounded them while we were here," Jan noted. "By her own choice."

Spock looked over at his captain and wife from his science console. "Their weapons are active."

Before Jan could react, the Felecian opened fire- and *Enterprise* was slammed.

In the Transporter Room, lights flashed and circuits shorted as the faint outline of M'ress began to appear in the chamber.

On the Bridge, Jan's orders were crisp. "Raise the shields! Return fire! We'll defend ourselves now and ask questions later."

The ship fired back-and the Felecian ducked, came round and fired again, striking the larger ship's shields.

In the Transporter Room, pads began to smoke and explode and Scotty's curses filled the air as he fought the equipment. "Computer, auxiliary power to Main Transporter Room- Priority One."

The ship rocked again as the room's lights flickered...

Enterprise turned, phasers fired-
-and the Felecian ship was destroyed.

Jan's hands came down on her chair intercom. "This is the Captain. Cancel Red Alert. Beta and Gamma shifts can stand down. Return to General Quarters. Kirk out."

"Scott to Bridge."

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I had M'ress in the transporter beam when we were

attacked. Something the Felecians did ripped the insides out of the equipment."

Jan glanced at Spock as he came over and stood by her chair. "Were you able to bring her in, Scotty?"

"Aye, but....you'd better check with Dr. McCoy."

"Understood. Kirk out." She looked to the helm as she rose from her chair. "Sulu, you have the Bridge. If the Felecians start any more fights, you have my permission to finish them."

He nodded as Jan and Spock headed for the turbo lift. "Yes, Ma'am."

Sickbay

McCoy had no sooner entered the outer office and rested a hip on the corner of the desk, than Jan led Spock through the door. "Bones? Scotty told me. How is she?"

"Alive."

Jan tilted her head. "Is that all? How badly was she hurt?"

“Depends on your definition of the word,” the doctor replied. “Whatever happened, scrambled the transporter signal in such a way that...”

Jan stepped closer. “Say it, Leonard.”

“She’s not totally Caitian anymore,” McCoy stated. “If I didn’t know for a fact, that it was biologically impossible, I’d say she’s half human.” He nodded toward the recovery ward. “She’s been unconscious since Scotty pulled her in.”

Jan glanced at Spock, then stepped past the doctor. Once through the exam room, she slowed her pace as she entered the recovery ward and her gaze went to the one occupied bed.

On that bed lay what appeared to be at first glance a young human brunette in her mid 20’s. Where Caitian skin- almost like an Earth Lion had once been , what now looked like Human Caucasian skin could now be seen.

As Jan stepped up beside the bed, the lieutenant’s eyes- Caitian eyes- fluttered open. “Wha- ?”

“Take it easy, M’ress,” the Captain said gently.

“What happened?” She turned to look at the captain. “What happened to me?”

“Just as you were beaming up, a Felecian ship opened fire on us, “Jan told her. “ It resulted in a transporter malfunction.”

The Caitian raised her hands and stared at the ten fingers in front of her instead of the normal 6. Jan could see the panic rising in her and took one of those hands in hers. “You’re alive, “She told the feline. “You can still function- and you know Spock and Scotty won’t rest till they set things right.”

Jan gently laid M’ress’ hand down on the sheet that covered the girl. “Now, you just rest and do what Bones tells you, all right?”

The Caitian slowly nodded and watched as Jan left the ward.

Once back in the outer office, the redhead nodded back toward the

room she'd just left. "She's scared to death- and I don't blame her." She looked to her husband. "Well? I know you haven't just been passing the time?"

His eyebrow rose at her tone as he responded. "Indeed. I checked the sensor logs. The operational frequency of the Feleican ship's weaponry overlaps that of our transporter by several degrees. The moment they opened fire, some sort of disruption was to be expected."

"So you're sayin' that M'ress was the target?" McCoy asked.

"Perhaps not the *intended* target," Spock replied. "But I have no doubt that whoever is behind the attack would accept news of her death with the same relish as he would accept news of ours."

Jan had been pacing the deck as Spock spoke. Now, she turned to face him and McCoy. "I'm going down there and get some answers."

Surprise was clear on McCoy's face and in his voice. "Are you crazy? They're not going to let you beam down."

"I'm not going to ask their permission." She looked to Spock. "You and Scotty get to work on getting things fixed up here." She then turned to the nearest intercom. "Kirk to Bridge."

"Sulu here, Ma'am."

"Any more uninvited guests, Mr. Sulu?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Call the Felecian Premier and tell her I'll be in her office in ten minutes- whether she likes it or not. Then tell Transporter Room 'B' I'm on my way."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Kirk out."

THE OFFICE OF THE FELECIAN PLANETARY PREMIER SHELLAN- TEN MINUTES LATER.

Dressed in her sleeveless top and slacks, Jan arrived in the office to find only the Premier. Her fur was an overall shade of grey with white on her nose, neck and chest. "No guards waiting to arrest me for barging in?" Jan asked.

The feline shook her head. "No, Captain. Our own observation stations detected the vessel as soon as it opened fire. You have more than sufficient reasons for being angry and to demand answers."

"Weren't all of your ships supposed to stay on the ground during our visit- by your own order?" Jan asked.

Premier Shellan nodded as her tail swayed about behind her. "Yes. No one was supposed to leave the surface till day after tomorrow."

"Who would have had the authority to give them clearance for launch?"

"I could have," the Premier replied. "There is also Commander Ransley- he is head of our space service."

There was a 'bleep' and both females turned as the office door opened to allow another feline female to enter, hand the Premier a report and leave. "I sent for the records of all surface to ship communications back to midnight yesterday."

Jan watched as she searched through the report, which consisted of actual hard copy print-outs. The Premier then handed it to her. "According to that, Ransley contacted that ship an hour ago." Shellan then crossed to her desk and activated the intercom located there. "This is Premier Shellan. I want Commander Ransley brought to me at once- in chains if need be."

Jan then raised her hand. "Premier, a suggestion..."

FIVE MINUTES LATER...

Another 'bleep' was heard and two guards entered- both of white fur with black stripes- with Ransley between them.

To describe Ransley in a way humans could understand, would be to describe him as a walking, talking Siberian Tiger with an attitude. He shrugged off the guards' hold on him and turned to face Shellan. "You wanted to see me, Premier?"

"Yes. There was a confrontation in orbit a short while ago. One of our ships attacked the *Enterprise* without my authorization."

“Then the Treaty Signing is off,” the Commander said with a clear sigh of relief. “ And Feleica will be left alone to pursue it’s own destiny.”

From where she’d been standing by the door, out of Ransley’s sight when he entered, Jan spoke as she stepped into the open. “ I hate to disappoint you, Commander, but the *Enterprise* is alive and well.”

He turned in shock and growled in growing anger. “Even if you had destroyed us, “Jan continued, “It wouldn’t have ended there. Another ship would have come to find out what happened- and another if need be until you were run to ground.”

“Why, Ransley?” Shellan demanded. “You launched an attack without my authorization, risk war with the Union- a war you know we could not win- all for what?”

“To preserve Felecia,” the male answered. “ To protect my people.” He pointed at Shellan and his claws were clearly extended. “*You* are condemning us ! Condemning us to an invasion of mongrel aliens that will only enslave us!”

Jan stepped toward him. “One of the most basic rights of any Union citizen is the right to face their accuser. Who said this? Whoever it was, lied to you.”

“*NO! T’Lar showed me proof!*” Ransley roared as he shoved the guards away and lunged for Jan.

She ducked his claws, spun and kicked- catching him in the stomach. He went down only to assume a crouch and begin stalking her-

-The big cat stalking his prey. The gleam of growing madness in his eyes was clear as he lunged-

-Jan grabbed his uniform-consisting mainly of a harness of strapping- and sent him past her to go sprawling in the floor.

He let loose with a roar that shook the room as he came off the floor-

-Jan spun and kicked once more, slamming her boot into his face. There was the crunch of nose cartilage and Blood flew as he went down. “When you attack my crew, my *ship*, you attack me,” she told him as the guards took the commander in hand. “And Mister, *I fight back.*”

“Confine him,” Shellan ordered.
“He will be interrogated,” she told Jan as the guards took Ransley out.
“We will find the rest of his conspirators. Please believe me, Captain, when I tell you his are *not* the prevailing views of my people.”

“I sincerely hope not, Premier,” Jan replied. “May I assume then, that the treaty signing is still on?”

“Yes- definitely- and if Lt. M’ress feels up to it, I would be honored if she could attend.”

Jan nodded and tapped her communicator. “Kirk to *Enterprise*. Beam me up.”

C APTAIN’S LOG; STARDATE 5934.05.

UPON RETURNING TO THE SHIP, I INFORMED M’RESS OF PREMIER SHELLAN’S REQUEST.

MY COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER WAS A LOT QUIETER AND MORE WITH-DRAWN THAN I’D EVER SEEN HER...

Sickbay

Jan watched as M’ress- now wearing a hospital gown- stood at the foot of the recovery bed- holding on to it in fact. Then she shook her head.
“I’m sorry, Captain. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

M’ress turned to face her. “Look at me.”

“I see a young female that’s still capable of living her life, despite what’s happened to her,” Jan replied.
“If you don’t want to go the ceremony- a ceremony *you* worked so hard to bring about, fine. But refuse for the right reasons.

“I won’t order you to go- or to live your life. You can refuse the one- but you’re still going to have to deal with the other whether you want to or not.”

Jan then turned and left, leaving M’ress standing in the middle of the ward alone.

Main Transporter Room

Scotty was on his back, under the control console with various pieces of equipment all scattered around him as he worked. Spock was standing behind the console, checking readings and making adjustments. He looked to the door as Jan entered the room.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Slowly," Spock replied. "Analysis of the Felecian operational frequencies, has resulted in numerous needed alterations we have never attempted before. As such, we are having to stop and run simulations with every change."

She looked from one to the other as Scotty got up from the floor. "Any chance of a test before the treaty signing?"

"Ach, no, Ma'am," Scotty replied. "It may be weeks before we can try it."

"Mr. Scott is correct, "Spock added. "The alterations are many and very delicate. They will require a great deal of time."

Jan could only nod. "All right then. Keep at it- and keep me posted."

The intercom on top of the console buzzed. "M'ress to Captain."

Jan glanced at Spock as she responded. "Kirk here, Lieutenant."

"Captain, may I request a shuttlecraft for transport to the surface for the ceremony?"

Jan smiled. "Request approved. I'll meet you on the hanger deck in one hour."

"Yes, Ma'am. M'ress out."

Spock's tone clearly showed his puzzlement. "Jan, as you well know, Transporter Room 'B' is fully operational."

"Yes, I know, "Jan's replied. "But considering what M'ress has been through- and is going through- I think a shuttle's justified."

One hour later

The doors of the *Enterprise's* hanger deck slowly and silently slid open onto the void of space, allowing the shuttlecraft *Galileo II* to glide out away from the starship.

A moment later, a Felecian ship *faded* into existence and opened fire on the shuttle.

Jan's hands flew over the controls as she put the small ship through evasive maneuvers. Up, down, turn and twist as the *Enterprise* tried to provide cover fire. Finally, the Captain hit the communications switch. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Two to beam aboard."

M'ress' eyes went wide in sheer terror. "*Captain- !*"

"I'm sorry, "Jan replied as the shuttle shook from a near miss. "There's no choice."

A moment later, the shuttle was destroyed in a blaze of Felecian fire.

Onboard the *Enterprise*, Scotty swore as he struggled with the transporter once more as the ship and the Felecian exchanged fire.

On the bridge, Spock was seated in the command chair, Sulu and Chekov at the helm as they faced off against this enemy.

Under Sulu's hand, the *Enterprise* turned and maneuvered, blocking the

Felecian's attempt to escape. Phaser fire exploded against the enemy's shields.

In Transporter Room 'B', circuits exploded and pads erupted as the transporter effect *filled the chamber*. Arcs of power jumped from pad to pad.

The rebel Feleican ducked and dove as it tried to fade away. But damage taken in the battle prevented it as the *Enterprise* fired once more- and took out an engine.

In the transporter room, Jan's form finally began to solidify normally- allowing her to finally dive off the platform as another pad exploded and another form began to take on shape.

"Ach, Damn, "Scotty swore. "That Felecian ship is scrambling the blessed signal every time they fire.!"

The Captain could only watch with eyes wide as one faint shape dissolved and another, more primitive form began to take shape- only to see that form dissolve as another pad exploded. Then she turned to Scotty. "M'ress' original pattern from when she first came

aboard- call it up. Maybe that'll help reinforce her signal."

Scotty's hands flew over his console as he obeyed and brought the pattern into play. "Aye, I've got a piece of her."

On the bridge, Sulu glanced back at Spock. "Sir, a second Felecian ship is arriving." They watched as the new arrival opened fire on the rebel ship- finishing what the *Enterprise* started in a brilliant flash of destruction.

In the transporter room, the chamber flashed and whined as strained systems struggled to work. The whine grew in intensity as a blinding glare began to fill the chamber.

There was a final flash- and Jan's hand slapped the wall intercom. "Medical Team to Transporter Room 'B'- *On the Double!*"

CAPTAIN'S LOG; STARDATE 5934.07

FOR THE SECOND TIME IN A MATTER OF HOURS, WE HAVE COME UNDER ATTACK BY FELECIAN SHIPS CREWED BY A FACTION OPPOSING

F.U.P. MEMBERSHIP. I'M STARTING TO THINK THIS FACTION IS LARGER THAN PREMIER SHELLAN SUSPECTS- AND THAT THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE BEHIND THE SCENES STIRRING THEM UP.

COMMANDER RANSLEY SAID SOMEONE NAMED "T'LAR" HAD SHOWN HIM PROOF OF FELINE RACES BEING ENSLAVED BY THE F.U.P. THE NAME *SOUNDS* VULCAN, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING- AND ONLY ONE RACE I KNOW OF HAS THE TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE A SHIP APPEAR AND DISAPPEAR.

COMBINED WITH THE ATTACKS ON CLONDOR VI AND CESTUS III, A ROMULAN HAND IN THIS SEEMS TO BE ALL TOO CLEAR. YET, THERE HAS TO BE MORE TO IT THAN JUST STOPPING FELECIA FROM JOINING THE UNION.

BUT WHAT...?

Sickbay

Jan stood in the outer office- forcing herself not to pace the deck. She turned at the sound of McCoy coming

from the recovery ward. “Well? How is she?”

“Unconscious,” he replied. “But her condition appears to be stable and normal. Using her original pattern to reinforce the transporter signal seems to have done the trick. I’ll know for sure in a little while.”

Spock entered at that point and Jan turned to face him.” Send a message to Premier Shellan. Tell her I want to meet with her again.”

Spock met her gaze evenly as he spoke. “That may not be the wisest move.”

“Why not?”

“The Rebel ship was in communications with the surface during the battle,” Spock told her. “We were able to pin-point the transceiver they were in contact with.

“It’s located in the Premier’s office.”

Jan met his gaze, then stepped away. “It doesn’t add up. Ransley said someone named T’Lar had shown him proof- and Shellan seemed as upset about the whole mess as I was.”

She turned back to face her husband. “Grab your tricorder and met me in Emergency Transporter Room 1. We’re still going to go talk to the Premier- unannounced.”

To say Shellan was surprised when they materialized in her office would be putting it mildly. “Captain? What- !”

“I’m not going to play games with you, Premier,” Jan stated. “Another rebel ship attacked us- “

“I know. It was on my order that the second ship went to your aid.”

Jan was quiet for a moment. She glanced at Spock when she did speak again. “That rebel ship was in contact with someone during the fight- someone at this location.”

Shellan was quiet for a moment. Then she noticed Spock’s tricorder. “Use your scanners, Commander. You will find that the only communication equipment in this office is geared toward surface contact. If I wish to send a message off-planet, I need to go- “ She had been raising her hand toward the door as she spoke. Now she dropped her voice to a whisper.

"The outer office. There is a complete comm system out there."

"Confirmed," Spock announced after scanning in that direction. He then looked to Jan. "And it's in use."

"Can you tap in?" Jan asked.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Captain are you suggesting we..."bug" the room?"

She smiled and nodded. "Damn right I am."

Spock adjusted his tricorder and all three listened...

"...T'Lar, the others have failed. Shellan sent a ship to aid the *Enterprise* and it destroyed them."

"Then you know what must be done, Tyline. I told Ransey what would happen if Felecia joined the Union. Do you enjoy the idea of being enslaved?"

"Of course not. But assassination doesn't taste very well either. She has led our people well for many years."

"And I intend to go on leading our people for many more years to come."

Tyline turned to face them even as she reached for a weapon on a nearby table.

Jan shot it out of her hand as the viewscreen the feline had been using went dark.

Shellan met the younger female's gaze squarely. "Who were you talking to, Tyline? Who is this T'Lar?"

The brown furred female wouldn't meet her Premier's gaze. She kept her eyes on Jan's phaser as she answered. "A speaker of truth."

"Who's truth?" Jan asked. "Whoever it is, has been feeding you nothing but lies."

"No," Tyline protested as she shook her head. "I've seen the tapes."

"Show us these tapes," Shellan ordered.

Tyline turned to her work station and-using a high security code provided by Ransley- called up the images- scenes of Caitians being treated like slaves- pets and animals.

Jan's voice was filled with disgust. "Do you know where the original tape is?"

"We don't have it," Tyline stated. "T'Lar transmitted these images to us."

Jan looked to her husband. "Spock, can you do anything with these? Any way to analyze them?"

"Possibly," he replied. "Any discrepancies in the original transmission would be carried over into any copies."

"Download them," his wife said. "And take them and Tyline to the *Enterprise*- I want her to witness every step of the analysis so there's no question of the results."

"Acknowledged."

A 'bleep' was heard, followed by the entrance of a guard, who handed Shellan a message. She read it, then dismissed the guard with a nod as she turned to Jan. "We know where the faction's base is. According to information gotten from Ransley, there is only one cell- apparently, this T'Lar's poison hasn't had time to spread any further."

Jan looked to Spock. "Hurry with that analysis. "

Once Spock and Tyline had beamed out, the Premier spoke up once more. "Captain, under the circumstances, I cannot trust my own military- not entirely. I must ask if you would assist me in shutting this faction down."

Jan shrugged and raised her hands in helplessness. "I'm afraid it's against Union law to give military aid to un-aligned worlds, Premier."

Shellan nodded in understanding, then tilted her head to one side. "I believe I know a way around that."

As she explained, Jan smiled.

**CAPTAIN'S LOG; SUPPLIMENTAL.
HAVING AGREED TO THE PREMIER'S
PLAN, WE WERE QUICK TO PUT IT
INTO EFFECT.**

**EVEN AS SPOCK CONTINUES HIS
ANAYLSIS OF THE SLAVE IMAGES-
WHICH WE KNOW TO BE FAKE- THE
PREMIER IS MAKING PREPERATIONS
TO SHUT DOWN THE MOST
DANGEROUS CHALLENGE TO HER**

RULE SINCE SHE TOOK OFFICE FIFTY YEARS AGO...

Sickbay

Jan looked around as she entered and stepped into the recovery ward doorway. The only patient was M'ress and the Captain started to turn away- then turned back at the sight of the Caitian's eyes opening. Jan smiled as she spoke. "Well, welcome back."

McCoy came in at that point and headed for the bed. "What are you doin' pesterin' my patient, Cap'n?"

"Your patient seems to be making an excellent recovery."

McCoy looked down at M'ress as he spoke. "'Course she is- that's the only kind I allow." Then his smile grew. "You, young lady, are normal in every sense of the word."

"If that's true, Leonard, then I'd like her to help Spock and Tyline."

McCoy turned on the Captain in frustration. "Damnit, Jan at least let her get out of bed before ya start throwing assignments at her!"

Jan stepped further into the room as she replied. "There may not be time." She then went on to explain "...Tyline, Ransley and who knows how many others think the Caitians are enslaved because they're not human. M'ress can tell them otherwise."

The Caitian started getting up. "It's all right, Doctor. I've spent enough time in bed lately."

The doors to Sickbay opened at that point allowing Lt. Commander Therran to enter. "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

Jan nodded to the Andorian male as she replied. "Yes I did. I want you to put together a twenty man security detail and have it in Emergency Transporter Room 1 in twenty minutes. In five minutes, I'm beaming down to join Premier Shellan in a raid on the rebel faction's base. I'll leave my communicator open. When I give you the word, I want your team down there before the echo of my call fades. Clear?"

He nodded. "yes, Ma'am."

The wall intercom whistled for attention. "Spock to Captain."

"Kirk here."

"Analysis of the images is complete. Their fallacy is confirmed."

"Does Tyline agree?"

"Tyline here, Captain. Yes, I agree. We've been taken for fools."

"All right. Bring your findings to Emergency Transporter Room 1 in five minutes. Kirk out." Jan turned off the intercom, then looked to M'ress. "If you're coming, you better put some clothes on."

The Caitian looked down at the hospital gown she was still wearing then at Jan and nodded. "yes, Ma'am."

CAPTAIN'S LOG; SUPPLIMENTAL.

UPON RETURNING TO THE SURFACE, WE WERE MET BY PREMIER SHELLAN WHO INFORMED US THAT COMMANDER RANSLEY HAD ESCAPED- OVER POWERED HIS GUARD WHEN FOOD WS BROUGHT TO HIM.

THANKS TO THIS DEVELOPMENT, WE HAVE TO MOVE QUICKLY. IT

DOESN'T TAKE THREE GUESSES TO FIGURE OUT WHERE HE'D GO...

The faction's base was little more than the stereotypical warehouse near the capital city's spaceport. At the moment, all of it's members were present in response to Ransley's summons.

He stood before them, explaining the situation as he saw it. "...The moment Shellan signs those membership papers, the Union will sweep in and enslave us all. The only way to stop it- the only way *left* to stop it- is to kill her before the ceremony."

A low murmur ran through the gathering and Ransley raised his hands for silence. "I share your reluctance. She has led this world for fifty years and led us well. But this time, she is- "

A door was blown out of the wall by phaser fire.

The Premier, Jan, Spock, Tyline, M'ress and a handful of carefully chosen guards entered. It was Jan that had blown the door open, but it was Shellan who spoke. "Your

rebellion is over, Ransley. You have been acting on false information.”

“No!” the former commander declared. “No- I know what I saw.”

“What you saw were lies,” M’ress told him.

Ransley growled down deep in his throat. “No!- *You* lie for your Slave Masters!” He lunged toward them.

Jan called out, “Now, Mr. Therran!”

There was the hum and sparkle of the transporter-

-And a wall of security personnel- all with phasers drawn- formed between the two groups.

Tyline pushed past Therran as she spoke. “They’re telling the truth, Ransley. I watched as they analyzed the images. They *are* false.”

“You are responsible for the deaths of your fellow Felecians,” the Premier stated. “But you were misled into thinking you were acting to save your people.

“I will make certain that is taken into account.”

Jan stepped forward as well. “I’ll speak to the judges. I’ll recommend

that as part of your punishment, you be sent on a tour of the Union- any worlds you name- so you can see for yourself how we treat our citizens.” She holstered her phaser. “Don’t force a confrontation when you’re not sure of your facts.”

Ransley looked from one to the other, every muscle in his body tense and ready to pounce. Tyline stepped up to him and gently placed her hand on his arm. “Please, Ransley. I’ll even go with you.”

He looked over at her as he spoke and his voice was a low growl. “I would see this analysis before I make up my mind.”

Spock handed him his tricorder and Ransley was soon scowling for a different reason as he looked upon the truth of the matter. “I have been a fool.” He handed the tricorder back and looked around at his followers. “It is over. It should never have begun.”

At Jan’s signal, the security guards put their phasers away. She then turned to the feline male. “Ransley, who’s T’Lar?”

"I do not know," he replied as the Premier's guards took up positions around him. "Whenever we talked by viewscreen, her face and head were always in shadow- but I saw enough to know she was not feline. She claimed to be a Union citizen that didn't want Felecia to suffer the same fate as Cait."

"Cait is proud to be part of the Union," M'ress told him. "Felecia will be, too."

The Premier nodded to the guards and as Ransley was taken away, she turned to Jan. "Now then, Captain, I believe we have a *public* signing to attend."

Spock looked to Jan. "'Public signing', Captain?"

Jan smiled. "Yes, Mr. Spock. Felecia became a member of the Union in a *private* signing ceremony witnessed by me and the planetary council an hour ago."

Somewhere near Felecia

"...an hour ago."

A female hand reached out and turned off the transmitter. A frustrated sigh was heard in the cabin even as her hand came down on an intercom switch." SaMal, the mission has failed. Set course for home."

"As you order, Commander."

Commander T'Lar of the Romulan Star Empire then leaned back in her seat in frustration.

CAPTAIN'S LOG; SUPPLIMENTAL.

THE GENERAL FELECIAN PUBLIC KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT THE PRIVATE TREATY SIGNING. ALL THEY KNOW OF IS THE PUBLIC SIGNING THAT TOOK PLACE A SHORT WHILE AGO WITH THE PLANETARY COUNCIL, M'RESS AND MYSELF IN ATTENDANCE AS PREMIER SHELLAN SIGNED THE PAPERS A SECOND TIME.

IN A SURPRISE FINAL TWIST, IN THANKS FOR HER EFFORTS IN THE TALKS AND THE TRAUMA SHE WAS PUT THROUGH, THE PREMIER PRESENTED M'RESS WITH FULL FELECIAN CITIZENSHIP- THE FIRST

**SUCH HONOR TO BE BESTOWED IN
THEIR PLANET’S HISTORY- AN
HONOR THAT IS MORE THAN
DESERVED.**

**I WISH TO ADD MY OWN
RECOMMENDATION AS WELL.
DESPITE THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL
DISCORD SHE WAS PUT THROUGH,
LT. M’RESS CONDUCTED HERSELF
WITH THE PROPER DECORUM AND
IN THE BEST TRADITIONS OF
STARFLEET...**

Seated at her desk in the
Command Suite, Jan turned off the
recorder as the door buzzer went off.
“Come.”

The unit slid open to reveal M’ress.
“You wanted to see me, Captain?”

“Yes, M’ress. Come in.” Jan
continued as the Caitian did so. “Dr.
McCoy tells me you passed your
physical with flying colors. He’s
cleared you for duty starting with
your next shift.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“I also wanted you to know that in
consideration of the events of the
last few days, I’m putting you in for a

commendation. Negotiating is
another form of communicating and
you communicated with the Felecians
very well in deed.”

M’ress looked down for a
moment, then she looked up again
with a slight smile. “Thank you,
Captain- for that and for what you
said in Sickbay the other day.”

“You’re welcome. Dismissed.”

M’ress nodded and left the cabin
with Jan’s approving gaze fully upon
her.

END