

Chameleon By Steven Woods

It had been a long day, there had been numerous reports of sabotage inside the various government offices and industrial installations that fell within Madia's jurisdiction and although she had no proof, she felt that Cardassian infiltrators were responsible. People were demanding action and the weight of the world was upon her shoulders.

Recent events on Starbase 410 had only added to the turmoil in her life, especially the assassination of Admiral Jat. Anarita had been in her life so long that it had seemed like forever and although there had been personality clashes as there so often is when two strong people work together, but there had always been respect and even open affection. In fact it was a common held view that they were more like mother and daughter and at this time Madia's loss was almost more than she could bear. But loss was not a new sensation and she knew that it had to be put to the back of her mind. A whole pile of communication discs marked for her eyes only were sat in front of her and although they had been scanned the priority disc from Starfleet Command kept playing on her mind. It was all basic, nonessential information, new personnel listings for 410 and although it contained personnel notes there was nothing to warrant a security classification, in fact the disc was corrupted, there seemed to be interference on the personnel files and that in itself was an enigma. But she couldn't spend any more time on this; more important duties had to be attended to.

Madia left her office and as she had a little time to spare she decided that a few moments of quiet contemplation in the Serenity Gardens would be time well spent, with an important meeting in less than an hour maybe the Prophets would grant her a little inspiration. The garden was quiet and the Prophets were silent, so she went on to the meeting. As she approached the boardroom the shouting gradually got louder and her shoulders dropped. It was a warm day and she could almost bet her life the steward had chilled the Blood Wine.

"Oh well," she thought, "let's get on with it." Madia threw the doors open and noted that the room was in turmoil. Ke'reth and b'Sel were on their feet shouting at Leigh about how preposterous something was, (she really must improve her Klingon) K'Hellenbeck was trying to calm the situation with a small level of success and all did not seem well.

Madia walked to her console, tapped in a couple of command codes and the security alarm went off briefly. Immediately everyone stood still, looking around in alarm.

"Thank you, a little order if you please, could you save this for a later time?" Madia said.

"Sure," said Capt. Leigh Brown "is this evening good for you Ke'reth?" Ke'reth smiled, which isn't necessarily a good thing.

"Please don't encourage him," said Madia, "shall we get on with this." Everyone took their seats and looked towards the communication station and it was then that Madia noticed a pair of boots poking out from under it and an empty seat at the table.

Captain Leigh Brown sighed and said, "Lieutenant Woods if you are ready."

"One moment," said a voice from under the station.

"Now!" Said Leigh. "Sorry about this Madia," he said, "he is supposedly a fine engineer but he can't walk past something that doesn't work."

Lt. Woods stood up, brushed himself down and as an afterthought stood to attention.

"Sorry Captain, Sorry Colonel, Lt. Woods reporting for duty."

"You may call me Madia as we are fairly informal as long as you do your job!" said Madia with a little coldness in her voice; she had noticed the breach in protocol by apologising to the Captain first. "I have read your service record and have noted some of your previous commanding officers comments. Now please be seated. On to business. We have been assigned a Defiant class ship the USS Victory and the mission will be to enter Cardassian controlled space to meet with an undercover operative. We will be given the location of a Dominion/Cardassian base and possible proof that the Cardies know what has been going on in Bajoran space, Bajor herself and on Starbase 410. We have little time as the threat grows by the hour, we have a crew to pick and plans to formulate. Within a short time we will locate and destroy this base and with the Prophets help return safely. Meeting adjourned. We meet in two hours aboard the Victory."

"At last." Thought Madia, "action."

USS Victory was a fine little ship. She was cruising at warp 8, cloaked and after 36 hours, approaching the rendezvous with the Cardassian spy who was going to reveal the location of the enemy base. Madia was wandering around the bridge checking at the work stations, it wasn't that she didn't trust the crew but it was as Anarita had always said sometimes delegation didn't work, if you want it done right sometimes you have to do it yourself. Also this was the most advanced ship the Federation had, the abladed armour was 5 times stronger, the shields were improved by 18% and the new warp engines while no faster were completely untrackable, no emissions whatsoever. Which was why she felt they had been lumbered with their new Chief Engineer. He had proved competent but a little scatty and she wasn't sure how he would hold up in a combat situation. But Leigh and Steve seemed to be getting on and were at present running communication diagnostics as for the last 10 minutes there had been some incoming messages that were out of band alignment.

There was loud buzz and the view screen sprang to life.

"Sorry about the delay Colonel, but the problem is that the signal has been run through a sub-space buffer so that we can't trace its origins." Madia had told Steve to call her by name on a number of occasions but he just couldn't seem to get his mind around her way of command. The view screen was fluctuating with electrical interference but the face upon it was definitely Cardassian.

"Hello Madia," said the voice.

"Do I know you?" Said Madia.

"No.. I'm sorry Major, you may call me Chameleon."

"Actually it's Colonel," said Madia. It didn't matter how many times she spoke to a Cardassian, she still had the feeling of bile rising in her throat and hate in her heart.

"Can you clean the screen up Lieutenant?" Said Madia.

"I'm trying," said Steve.

"Please prepare for incoming co-ordinates," said Chameleon, "you will also find a few other useful pieces of information. I will see you there and by the way congratulations on your promotion Madia. End transmission!"

"Well" thought Madia, "short and to the point." She couldn't help thinking that she knew Chameleon, something in the voice or the eyes.

"Co-ordinates received," said Leigh, "also a full list of armaments, defence capabilities and crew complement numbers. Mainly stats but useful none the less. In fact damn good intel rep."

Madia briefly scanned the info and ordered a change of course.

"Power fluctuations to port," said Tactical Officer Richards.

"Confirmed," said Lt. Woods, "also ship bearing 124 mark 3, its Dominion and it also received the signal."

"It may have got the whole message," said Madia, "we can't risk it. Move to intercept."

"We are being hailed," said Leigh, "and it's Klingon!"

"On screen," said Madia.

B'Sel's face appeared.

"Greetings from your true allies, we will remove the obstacle for you. Today is a good day to die.... For them."

On the port side a Klingon cruiser decloaked and sprang forward to engage the Dominion ship.

"Well I'll be..." Said Madia, "continue on previous heading."

"May the glory be yours b'Sel," said Ke'reth, "now you know why she couldn't join us on your ship. You would call it insurance."

"It would have been nice to know," said Madia.

The Victory went to warp and all knew b'Sel would be revelling in the battle, her blood lust in full flow. Madia thought she could see a hint of jealousy in Ke'reth's eyes, but she had the suspicion that his chance would come.

The co-ordinates would take them deep into Cardassian space only 20 light years from the heaviest armed base in the whole sector. Madia knew that although there still wasn't any proof, the Cardassians had to know that the Dominion were there. And who was the secretive but obviously well informed Chameleon. Once again the ship was at warp 8, cloaked and heading towards its destiny. The crew were in high spirits and all seemed to be in order.

She just wished she didn't have this feeling of impending doom.

The crew of the USS Victory had been on red alert for a full three hours, slowly moving through a blockade of Dominion scout ships. Madia was certain the Jem Hadar were not looking for them in particular, it seemed standard operational procedure to scan and re-scan section after section of the asteroid ridden space they were currently moving through. Under impulse it should only take another ½ hour to reach the small moon that supposedly hid a task force of small ships that held the weapons and personnel that had been causing havoc within Bajoran space, but even tightly focused sensors could not detect a thing. System analysis had revealed the sensors were functioning within normal parameters but the enigma remained. Madia, Leigh and Ke'reth had tried everything possible, but trying to detect and not be detected was starting to strain everyone's nerves. Madia remembered a mental exercise that K'Hellenbeck had taught her a year before.

"If you cannot find what you are looking for, look for something else," she said aloud.

"I beg your pardon," said Steve.

"Nothing," said Madia, "just thinking aloud."

"Engineers sometimes have their uses," said Steve and his hands moved quickly over his console, a green light flashed and he smiled.

"Thank you Col...Madia," he said, "I wouldn't have thought of it, there is something deep within the moon but it is laden with common lead hence the scans just stop without the beam returning, we were unable to glean any data hence missing the internal structures. What I did find was an exhaust vent releasing diox and monox very gradually."

Madia checked the data on her screen.

"Good news," she said, "we have found them, bad news is the only way in is by transport through fluctuation inhibitors. Can you compensate, Steve?"

"Only through the first level," said the engineer, "you will have to make your way by foot to the second and third levels if you need to go there."

"We do," said Madia. Touching her console she said, "Away team to transporter room. Leigh you have the bridge."

Ke'reth, Madia and six security staff materialized, it was a fair sized room, 8x10 meter's, and as had been practiced so many times before the team as one, drew weapons and spread out. Directly in front of Madia was a small hatch with a ladder leading down, a perceptible field was showing. Madia couldn't believe it was this easy. She placed a small security sensor inhibitor to one side and activated it. One by one the team dropped down the ladder, assuming defensive positions at the bottom. The team made its way room by room to the next ladder and the same procedure was performed. As Madia had expected the main computer core was situated in a small annex. She punched in a set of numbers and started reading off date's, names, targets and a host of other stats. Taking her tricorder out she started to record the facts, some of which she could hardly believe. She caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye.

"Damn!" She thought. The Jem Hadar personal cloak flickered as it was turned off and she had no time to move. There was the whine of fast moving metal as a bat'leth came within millimeters of her head and on the end of it a very annoyed looking Klingon. A bloody body smashed into three more of the enemy. More and more Jem Hadar materialized and in such an enclosed space hand to hand combat was the only option. Ke'reth's battle cry rang around the room and Madia was convinced that he was laughing as he weaved among the warriors. He was up to his armpits in blood and, she could see by his eyes, ready to die with no fear and the only regret was that some of his enemy would live. Then there was pain...

She awoke slowly and realized she was tied to a table. Ke'reth was on another, with a security crew man on a third, also in the room was a Cardassian of high rank and three Jem Hadar.

"I will waste no time," said the Cardassian, "you will tell me how you came to be here, where your ship is, what it is and how many are in your crew and you will tell me NOW!"

"Blake, Lieutenant, Starfleet number," the crewman's voice was cut off as the Cardassian clamped his hand over his mouth.

"I can see I must impress upon you my resolve in this matter," said the Cardassian. He picked up the bat'leth and swung it hard. Blake gasped as the blade cut deep into his stomach, his eyes rolled up and he passed away. Madia had seen death more times than she could remember but this murder shocked her to her very soul.

"You will tell me all you know and you shall die telling me, in fact I will not let you die until you have told me." Ke'reth groaned he still hadn't regained consciousness. The Cardassian looked and smiled.

"Your Klingon pet killed 24 of y warriors before we overwhelmed him. Maybe I should let you watch as I let my servants remove his eyes and skin."

Strapped down and about to be tortured to death by a Cardassian. Madia couldn't take this. Anyone but a Cardassian!

"You do not need to know my name," said the Cardassian. He had ordered food and drink as he "worked better on a full stomach." The door behind him opened and a Cardassian servant entered and started to prepare the food. He had been toying with a small knife and had cut Madia on the legs in a couple of places but after an hour of beatings and threats he had realized that stronger measures were needed.

"Excuse me Gul, but you are wanted in communications," said the servant.

"That voice," thought Madia, "so familiar."

"I will return," said the Gul, "and maybe you shall give me the information I require and some pleasure." Madia closed her eyes as she felt the tears welling up and heard him leave the room.

"Madia," a voice said and above her a Cardassian loomed, knife in hand and lunged forward and her bonds were cut.

"Chameleon," said Madia.

"No, it's me, Anarita."

Madia looked into her eyes and could see the familiar sparkle of mischief.

"But..How..?"

"No time," said Anarita, "can you walk?"

"Yes," said Madia. Ke'reth was still out cold but Anarita administered a hypospray and his eyes sprang open. The battered and bloody pair followed the Admiral out of the room and down the corridor to the first ladder, Ke'reth went first and although obviously hurt quickly disappeared up the ladder. Madia, legs bleeding quite badly struggled.

"Quickly," said Anarita, "we have little time." As they reached the top and rolled onto the deck Anarita handed the bat'leth to Madia and helped her to stand. The three comrades moved cautiously from room to room and suddenly the alarms sounded. The static feel of a dampening field was felt, Ke'reth was making some makeshift dressing's for their wounds and Anarita was checking a small data box.

"We have 51/2 minutes," she said.

"Why?" Said Madia, but she already knew the answer.

"Charges will detonate and they can't be turned off," said Anarita, "I'm sorry." As they moved down the corridor Madia suddenly realized that the bat'leth had been left behind, she hesitated and looked back down the corridor and for an instant..."No it couldn't be." She continued forward the pain was distracting her, the ladder was 15 meters in front of her, the Admiral and Ke'reth were at the bottom 25 rungs and they could contact the ship.

She slammed forward sprawling across the ground and as she looked up there was her nemesis. The Gul looked down, knife in hand.

"Where are you going? I haven't finished with you," he gloated. "I've changed my mind about you I can just picture you as a pleasure slave or maybe I should just kill you." He jolted half a step forward and looked at his chest in horror to see two small metal points protruding out of it. There was a tearing noise as the points disappeared and he fell forward, dead. Madia sat up, the Gul lay in front of her eyes glassed, she wanted to spit in his face but her mouth was dry. She could hear a voice,

"Madia, Madia we must leave now."

"Leigh," she said, "how did you get here?"

"Ask our Lieutenant," he said. She looked up and there was a familiar black and gold uniform, bat'leth in his hand.

"I've tried engineering, thought it was about time to try some security."

Epilog.

After returning to the ship Madia was treated for injuries and blood loss that took two days in sick bay to heal and Ke'reth had to spend a week in a re-gen. tank.

The Admiral had had to fake her own death (with the aid of b'Sel) to allow her to go undercover. The enemy base was destroyed and thanks to the arrival of an Andorian task force the Jem Hadar were driven back through the Wormhole. Consequently very little sabotage to the industry or government of Bajor exists and for that we can thank the prophets and the crew of Starbase 410.

P.S. Lt. Steve Woods has requested permanent assignment to Starbase 410.

