

The Adventure Continues... Progress

By Tom Hudspeth

Lt. John Borda was taking his morning jog around the station. That in itself wasn't very unusual, many people jogged around the station in order to stay fit. No, what made John's jog unusual was that he jogged around the outside of the station.

This highly unusual and dangerous past time started soon after he took charge of several demoralized Klingon warriors, many of which tagged along with him on his morning suicidal run. The trick was to stay right at the terminus, in the dark area close to the boarder of light from the nearby Night Fire nebula. Too far ahead, and you could freeze. Too far behind, and you would burn. Sensor antenna and opening hatches provided obstacles to overcome. Occasionally they would pass an open window, giving them tempting views into the lives of the inhabitants of the giant space station. But to stop meant death.

Actually, it wasn't as dangerous as John made it out to be. He and his Klingon hoard had run their course many times and were intimately familiar with it. The only ones who were scared were the new recruits, and John kept a very watchful eye on them. That and a transporter lock.

Today though, they were running a new course around the station. Not as exciting as the normal run, but with enough challenges to keep it from becoming boring. It was around the starship launch hatches. Occasionally, a ship would launch in front of them. Unable to stop, they hurtled the escaping ship. This demanded exquisite timing, and John was very good at it.

John had been counting the hatches as he went along. There were fifty in total before they reached the personnel airlock. As John reached the count of fifty, he slowed down. There was no airlock!

Checking his air and time, John realized he might be in trouble. How far was the airlock? He knew he had kept the correct count. What had happened? With the Night Fire nebula approaching, John had no choice but to continue.

As they crossed one more hatch, John saw the airlock. Making it seem as if there had never been a problem, (one never showed fear in front of a Klingon), John made sure everyone got inside in time.

Later, John researched the records. Built to allow the docking of small to medium sized vessels, all of the plans indicated that there were only fifty ship hatches around that section of the station. John took a shuttle out. He knew he had counted correctly.

Sure enough, John circled the station and counted fifty one hatches. Circling again, this time checking the numbers against the doors, John found one that was unmarked. He checked the schematics. Each bay was the correct size, but the space between them was just enough off to allow for one more small bay. John had found hanger 51.

"An unlisted ship bay, how curious. Scanners read an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere well within station normal on the other side of the hatch. I wonder... Computer, transport me to these coordinates."

A familiar whine sounded in John's ears, and the shuttle disappeared from around him. In its place formed a standard ship's repair bay, complete with ship. As the transport completed, John made out a strange ship, colored black. It was clearly a Federation ship, but one like he had never heard of. The registry number was NX-

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John heard the whine of a transporter and the bay disappeared from around him. This time John found himself in more familiar surroundings, one of the station's many brigs.

"Oh, boy."

Commodore Jat was in Captain T’Pina’s office for their morning briefing. Besides the normal business of running the station, the pirates were the major topic. Something had to happen, and soon. The pirates were endangering ships all across the triangle. Never striking in the same place, and always where the patrol ships were the farthest. It seemed as if they had accurate intelligence on the Klingon and Federation ship movements. The only way Jat could see to stop them was to escort every ship entering the triangle, something she didn’t have enough ships to do, even if the merchants desired it, which they certainly didn’t.

A small light began to blink for attention on T’Pina’s desk. A small light, but one neither of them could afford to ignore.

Looking at it as if seeing it for the first time, T’Pina said, “I see our web has finally caught a fly.”

“It had too sooner or later, I guess. There are too many intelligent people running around this station to keep something secret for long. I just wish it had remained hidden for a while longer.”

“Perhaps this is a sign.”

Jat was surprised at T’Pina, and showed it. “A sign?”

“You’ve been hiding that, waiting a good time to use it. Why not against the pirates.”

“Yes, but first, let’s see who our fly is...”

John had been sitting in his cell for long enough. Pacing the walls had taken over from yelling for the guard. Now he only yelled when his journey around the cell put him near the door. That was every 30 seconds, or 9 steps, by his count. It appeared that either the guards weren’t coming to let him out, or this was an unused section of the prison. The former allowed that eventually, someone would see or hear him, the latter meant that he might really be in trouble. A touch to the forcefield told him that it was in full force and to not try that again. His finger still tingled, especially when he paced near the entrance.

“Think, John. How does one escape from a brig? I could try the old fire trick. That should set off an alarm.”

“I wouldn’t try that Lieutenant.” Came the calm voice of Captain T’Pina as she appeared around the corner. “If the automatic fire suppression didn’t put it out, you could die from suffocation before someone came along to rescue you.”

“Oh, am I ever happy to see you! Can you let me out of here?”

“And why would she want to do that?” Commodore Jat said as she came up behind T’Pina. “Who do you think put you in there?”

“Uh oh, something tells me I’m in big trouble this time.”

Lieutenant Commander S’ena was the last to arrive in the briefing room. The only chair available, other than the three near the front, was next to Lt. Cdr. Jeanette Warren, who was waving her over. As she sat down, she noticed Lt. Cdr. Brian Starr, sitting across from her, talking to Lt. John Borda. Lt. Cdr. Saryena Remora was looking out of place so far from Engineering, but gave S’ena a smile.

S’ena turned to Jeanette and asked, “Do you know why we were called to this briefing?”

“I was hoping you knew.”

Just then, Commodore Jat entered, followed by her Vulcan executive officer, Capt. T’Pina, and a very pleased with herself Major Madia Amme.

“Doesn’t the major look like the cat who ate the canary?” Jeanette whispered to S’ena.

“Cat who what?”

“Sorry, old earth expression. I’ll explain later.”

“Ahem, if I may have your attention, please.” Commodore Jat announced. “That’s nice. Let’s begin, Commander Starr, please give us a report on the condition of the Sacagawea.”

Brian looked confused for a second, but his voice was confident when he began. “Well, working within the constraints you gave us, she will be ready to sail in a day or two. She’ll never be able to perform her old job without better upgrades, but she should be good enough to teach our cadets about the old days. Commander Remora and I have gone over her from stem to stern, and have only to finish up some sensor work. Are we going to take her out for a shake down cruise?”

“No, Mr. Starr, we are going to sell her.”

“Commodore! We have invested a lot of time and resources to her refit for the Deep Space Academy. We can’t just sell her!”

“I can, and I will. I already have an approved buyer.”

“But Commodore!” Brian half rose out of his chair.

T’Pina gave Brian a look which sat him back in his chair.

“Don’t worry Commander,” Jat said, “I’m sure you will also approve of the buyer.”

S’ena felt sorry for Brian. He and the rest of the volunteers had spent considerable time refitting the century old ship. It didn’t seem fair to sell it as soon as they had gotten it finished.

“May I ask who the buyer is then?”

“Not right away, but you will know soon enough. Now people, I want to ask each of you to volunteer for an away mission. There will be considerable danger, and you will be away for quite a while. All I can tell you is that it is vitally important. Anyone who wants to opt out should leave now.”

Many of the officers sitting around the table looked at each other in curiosity, but none of them got up.

“Very well. I expected this much, which is why I chose you. Everything you are about to hear is classified. If so much as a whisper leaves this room, it could put all of you’re lives in danger. Captain?”

T’Pina nodded and began. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are hunting pirates. Since they only make their appearances when unarmed merchants travel alone, that is what you will be doing. Major Amme will take command of the Sacagawea, and you will crew her. It is our hope that, posing as merchants, the old Federation ship will be irresistible to them. It would still be considered quite the prize in some parts of the galaxy. You will all assume new identities and begin a life as merchants. Before you leave, Commander Warren will alter your appearances. Commander, do you have any preliminary ideas?”

“Well, S’ena will be easy. I’ll just increase the level of melanin in her skin. Instead of her normal pale green, she will assume the color of a full blooded Orion female. It will be just like giving her a tan and it will turn up as normal on any med scans. She’ll have to spend a few minutes under a sun lamp everyday so it doesn’t wear off as quickly, but it will work.” Jeanette turned towards S’ena. “I’ve been wanting to try this trick on you ever since I first met you.” She said evilly.

S’ena was horrified. “Will there be any change in...intelligence?”

“No, just skin color. That’s what makes it such a good idea. Anyone who doesn’t know you will assume you are a normal Orion female, as long as you act the part.”

“Do you have any more ideas?” T’Pina asked.

“Well, Brian and John can grow beards. I’ve got some excellerated hair growth formula, and I think Brian would look good bald.”

“Bald! Now wait one minute. I heard about danger, but that is going too far!”

“If it’s good for the mission... Just think of Captains Pickard and Sisko.”

“Hey,” John interrupted, “I’ve been thinking of growing a beard. It will make me look older.”

“Enough,” Commodore Jat announced. “Major, you will bring me a proposed schedule of layovers by 1900. Commanders Remora and Starr, you will expedite the repair of the *Sacagawea* and outfit her for trade. Use some of the confiscated goods we have been storing, nothing illegal or too valuable. Warren, you’ll handle communications. Starr, you’ll be at helm. Remora, you will keep things together in Engineering as usual. S’ena, when not being an Orion slave girl, you will watch Environmental Control.”

“Slave girl, huh. Who’s supposed to be my master?”

“I’ll leave that up to Major Amme, but remember, yours could be the most important job on the mission. Most assuredly, they will imprison the rest of the crew if they aren’t killed outright. You, we are assuming, will be put somewhere else. Orion slave girls are still an expensive commodity, even if they are outlawed in all of the advanced civilizations of the Alpha quadrant. You may be the only one who can act.”

S’ena seemed more subdued, as did the rest of the volunteers.

“Your mission is to get caught, but not to die. You must be captured. All of your clothes will be outfitted with veridian patches, that way we can track you up to two parsecs away. When you have reached the pirate hideout, you will activate a signal and General K’bath has sworn to rescue you, as well as capture, or destroy, as many of the pirates as he can. This may be our only chance to end the pirate threat in the triangle. Enough for your pep talk. People, you have jobs to do. Let’s get them done.”

As they all filed out of the briefing room, Brian held John back. “I didn’t hear why you were coming, not that you’re not welcome.”

“Me? Well, you could say I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. You know that old saying about curiosity and the cat? Well, I’m the cat.”

“He is gone.”

“What was that, Three?” Lt. Laura-Jean Morris asked her computer assistant. She was distracted by a docking maneuver that was going poorly. The ship had been damaged and was having trouble with its thrusters. “*Red Dawn*, please cut all propulsion and allow us to tractor you in.”

“He is gone.” Three announced again.

“Who is gone, Three?”

“He who makes my life bearable. He who sets me on fire. He who lifts me from the tedium of this mortal coil...”

“Enough! Three, can you wait a second?”

“A second? Each second I am separated from him feels like a year. I long to hear his voice on my monitors...”

Morris cut the audio link with Three, just as Ensign Laura Shepherd entered. “I think there is something wrong with Three, but I’ve got to handle this docking. Can you talk with her?”

“Sure, put her back on.”

“...is a moment to you mortals of flesh and blood, but to a computer it can be eons of torment...”

“Three, what is the nature of your malfunction?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you! He is gone!”

“Who is gone, Three?”

“He who makes my life bearable. He who sets my soul on fire. He who lifts me from the tedium of this mortal coil...”

Morris cut the audio link with Three again. “I’ve heard this part.”

“What is wrong with her?”

“Try a diagnostic test. Maybe she’s caught in some kind of loop.”

Shepherd turned on the audio to Three again.

"Will you please stop doing that?" Three complained. "I'm very upset here, and all you creators can do is turn me off."

"Sorry, Three. Please perform a level 3 diagnostic on your programming."

"Level 3 diagnostic in progress."

"Maybe we shouldn't have left her alone so much with the Bolian merchant. Maybe all that poetry is confusing her." Shepherd suggested.

"*Red Dawn*, you can power down your systems now, we have you." Morris turned to Shepherd. "What was Three going on about?"

"Someone is missing, but more than that, I can't tell you."

"Level 3 diagnostic completed. All systems functional."

"There, see? She's fine again." Shepherd said.

"He is gone."

"Oh, no! Not again!"

Morris decided to take action and started to access Three's programming.

"What are you doing?" Shepherd anxiously asked. "I thought we agreed to leave Three's programming alone."

"Well, she's obviously malfunctioning, so I'm temporarily removing her poetry subroutines. I'll put them back right after we figure out what has gone wrong with her. There, Three..."

"Yes." The voice sounded flat somehow.

"Who is missing?"

"The Bolian merchant and his ship, the *Orange Pasture*."

"Did he just go out of range? Did he fail to turn up at a scheduled time? Did he disappear from our sensors? Just how did he go missing?"

"I was tracking him via deep space probes when he was attacked by several vessels of different configurations. He set course for a red dwarf system and disappeared near a gas giant. I could not reestablish contact."

"Laura-Jean"

"Yes?"

"I just checked Three's coordinates. We don't have anything that can probe that far and return anything near the kind of data she's giving us." Shepherd said in a small voice.

"I think I'd better call Commander Warren."

Commodore Jat and Captain T'Pina were in the classified ship's hanger 51. Behind them stood the Commodore's spy ship, the U.S.S. Dark Star. It's dark color seemed to drink in the lights from the overhead lamps, reflecting nothing. It's unconventional shape was covered with strange angles and planes, as if it were made by a novice in origami. The only reason anyone would have recognized it as a Starfleet vessel was the low slung warp engines and the registration numbers. NX-8927 was a very special Starfleet Intelligence vessel, and it's presence at Starbase 410 would have been a surprise to many people, even in Starfleet Intelligence. If they knew. Which they didn't.

"T'Pina, we may be gone for quite a while this time." Commodore Jat told her old friend and second in command. "But I know you can hold everything together until I return."

"I noticed that Lt. Cdr. S'ena has taken a leave of absence. Was that your idea?"

"Last time I left her here, she infested the station with Tribbles. I thought it best to take her with me. By the way, did the U.S.S. Sacagawea get off on time?"

"Major Amme left with her crew early this morning. They should be picking up their first load of replacement crew in 2 hours."

"Good. Now I must hold up my end."

Both officers looked at the Dark Star.

"Commodore, I know the researchers at Starfleet R & D have tested this technology," T'Pina said, "and I have gone over it as much as you will let me, but are you sure it will work? Remember the Pegasus? The Federation doesn't have a lot of practice with cloaking technology."

"The Defiant seems to work all right."

"Yes, Commodore, and the Klingons have helped as well, but this is a whole new technology to us."

"Not so. Earth experimented with this technology all the way back to the 20th Century. It is just a natural extension of that stealth technology."

"A new kind of invisible ship. If the Romulans found out about this, they would break every treaty with us."

"That is why we must ensure that it remains a secret. There is only one of these ships, that I know of, and it's never been tested in the field. Now is the chance to try and not make history."

"Lt. Morris to Capt. T'Pina" T'Pina's comm badge chirped.

"T'Pina, go a head."

"Ma'am, we have had a problem with our Starbase Holographic Artificial Intelligence Traffic Controller and we thought we should contact Cdr. Warren, but the computer says she has taken a leave of absence to return home. It was rather sudden wasn't it? Anyway, we could sure use your help."

"I'll be right there, T'Pina out."

"And so it begins." Jat said. "You cover for us while we do what must be done. I will see you again."

T'Pina raised her hand in a Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper Commodore," T'Pina lowered her hand and curled it into a fist to slam against her chest. "or as the Klingons would say, Success!"

"Qapla'! to you as well." Jat hit her chest. "Maybe we have spent too much time drinking with Ambassador Ke'reth."

"T'Pina to computer. Activate automatic transport sequence T'Pina-34 Alpha."

Jat watched as her friend faded away in a shower of sparks, then turned towards the Dark Star. "Well, let's see if this thing works as good as advertised."

Jat placed her hand on the hatch. It glowed briefly and started to retract into the ship. When it was open enough, Jat entered the airlock.

A cold female computer voice requested, "Please state your name and authorization code within 10 seconds, or the intruder alert system will activate."

Not really knowing what the ship would do once the intruder alert system activated, Jat quickly said, "Anarita Jat, authorization: Curzon, you pig."

The computer voice replied more warmly, "Authorization accepted Commodore. Welcome back. It has been 67 standard days, 18.6 hours, since you last came aboard. There was an unauthorized presence in the hanger yesterday, but the automatic transport sequence sent them to the pre-coordinated destination. Is your presence here in response to that incursion?"

"In a way, please open the hatch and activate the ship's crew. Have them prepare for immediate launch."

The airlock in front of Jat opened and she began her way forward to the bridge. By the time she arrived, the bridge was full of people working at their stations. Systems were being checked and double checked. The bridge was oval shaped with the ends pointing fore and aft. Jat entered in the rear door. In the front was the pilot's chair, with the strong back of one of Jat's old lovers working over the console. To either side were various other friends from Jat's past working at their consoles. Curzon himself stood up from the command chair in the center of the bridge.

"Jat, you old space herpes." He said.

“Oh, no. I’m not ready for this. Computer, deactivate Curzon character.”

Curzon looked surprised, “You blasphemous old...” he said as he disappeared.

Jat sat down in the now vacant command chair and reviewed her holographic crew. Around her worked images of friends and lovers whom she had known throughout her lives. Mostly, she remembered how well each had done their job, and how well they had worked with her. She hoped the computer simulations would work just as well.

Checking her status indicators on the arm of her chair, Jat noticed that all of the local traffic had been serendipitously moved to the other side of the station. No one was left to see them leave.

“K’lorox,” the Klingon navigator looked up from his station, “Please open the bay doors.”

“Yes, ma’am. Bay doors opening.”

“Mr. Pike,” the pilot turned around, “take us out.”

Lt. Commander K’SQqwa SuDs’qan’ya, a Klingon serving in Starfleet as Starbase 410’s head of station security, was vexed. Someone, or something, had been raiding the station’s data archives for almost two weeks. Whoever they were, they were good he admitted. He was only able to tell they had tried by the automatically recorded dates the computer filed when data was accessed. In other words, after the fact. It could have been just coincidence, except for the vast amounts of data they accessed. K’SQqwa couldn’t see how they had time to look at the data. The intruder must have a fast computer, he thought, looking for only certain criteria. A very specialized virus the computer security systems couldn’t find. Perhaps if he could figure out what they were looking for, he could find it first and lay a trap.

So far the only data accessed had been astrological, as if someone were looking through the entire planetary database for something. Anything of real value was encrypted at much harder levels of security than the spy could access, so far. Of course, if someone wanted to invade the Alpha quadrant, the information they had gotten a hold of would be invaluable, but why also look at the Bolian poetry data? Perhaps it was a Bolian spy, but as member species of the United Federation of Planets, wouldn’t they already have this information?

The most upsetting part of it all was that he had almost cornered the computer virus that the spy used, when it had suddenly gone off line. Had it detected him? Had he spooked it? He wished he knew. Computer espionage wasn’t exactly his forte. Still, he knew the spy would be back. Criminals were a predictable lot, he thought. As long as they didn’t get caught, they would return to the scene of the crime to pillage again and again, and this character had a lot of information left to steal. If only he could figure out what they were looking for.

T’Pina arrived in Ops looking more tired than usual, as if she were worried about something. Lt. Laura-Jean Morris immediately discounted that of course, since she knew T’Pina was Vulcan, and everyone knew Vulcans never worried.

But T’Pina’s voice was crisp and firm when she said, “Report, what is wrong with your hologram?”

Ensign Laura Shepherd stepped forward holding out a data pad. “We think you should look at this.”

“It’s data given to us from Three just before we took her off line.” Morris said.

“This seems to be a very detailed report of a battle the General had with the pirates.” T’Pina said. “I wasn’t aware that the General had reported in.”

“He hasn’t yet.” Morris replied. “This data was gathered by Three.”

"Fascinating, this report is much too detailed to be rendered from on station sensors alone. Three must be piggy backing on other ships and probes to detect such detail at such long distances. You've increased station sensors by a factor of 3.76. I doubt we could have ever duplicated this intricate data on our own. Congratulations are in order for all three of you. This technique will help Starfleet vessels explore more rapidly, and help us keep the peace more readily, in the future."

"But Captain," Shepherd said, "It shouldn't have happened and we don't know how to recreate it."

"I'm sure Three does, and it will give you something to work on when you're off duty. Keep me informed."

"Capt., Three has had a nervous breakdown." Shepherd said, "Her logic links have become fuzzy and she keeps spouting poetry and complaining that the Bolian merchant involved in the General's battle is gone."

"Please bring her back on line." T'Pina said.

The three officers worked with Three's programming for a few minutes, then brought Three online.

"Three, this is Capt. T'Pina. Do you recognize me?"

"Captain T'Pina, Executive Officer and Second in Command of Starbase 410. Vulcan, injured in the battle of Wolf 359. Age..."

"Enough! What are your duties on Starbase 410?"

"Communicate with and coordinate spatial traffic in an area from 5 light seconds to 50 light years of Starbase 410. Scan for illegal entities, activities or cargos. In case of emergency, I am to..."

"Enough. Are you able to resume those duties?"

"That is a value judgement that I am not qualified to make."

"Very good, Three." T'Pina turned to the other two and said, "I think that it's logic circuits are fine. When does the problem start?"

"When we bring the personality subroutines online, especially the poetry subroutines." Shepherd said.

"Let's bring them back online while we monitor." Morris suggested. "I read a report that said Voyager's Emergency Medical Hologram Doctor had a similar breakdown when it was forced to decide on which of two patients it could save while allowing the other patient to die. This set up a logic dilemma that the program finally had to be talked through."

"Very well."

When Morris added the poetry subroutines, the energy being sprang from the memory core and filled the hologram. It realized that it had reacted poorly to the disappearance of the Bolian merchant, but it remained strangely upset. Still, it had to play along with the organics, or risk being found out.

"He is gone."

"Who is gone, Three?" Asked T'Pina.

"The Bolian merchant with whom I compare poetry. His ship was involved in a battle 4 standard hours ago. Sensors indicated that there was no one left alive on his ship after the battle."

"Perhaps one of the Klingon vessels rescued him."

"One moment, checking."

Shepherd looked at Morris, "What does she mean, checking?"

"I believe she is rebuilding her sensor network to scan the Klingon vessels."

"No Bolian life signs on any of the Klingon vessels in this parsec."

"She scanned every Klingon ship in the parsec for Bolian lifesigns in..."

"6.3 seconds," T'Pina said. "Fascinating. I wonder how many she got. Did she get the ones at warp? Did she get readings on all of them? Three, may I look at your data?"

"Of course." Streams of data rolled across first one screen, then another, then another. Shortly, every display in Ops was showing data. T'Pina was able to follow most of it, but she could tell the other two were overwhelmed.

"Three, there is a time lapse between the battle and your readings on the Klingon ships." Morris noted.

"Yes, that was the period when I was...unconscious, as you would say."

"So the Bolian merchant could have been rescued and taken someplace during that time."

"Yes, there is a 5.02% chance of that having occurred, based on the positions and transporter ranges of the Klingon vessels during the attack and the amount of time until I...woke up."

"So he could be alive. We would just have to find him, or wait until he can contact us."

"Thank you, Lt. Morris. You have given me hope."

"That's what creators are for Three."

"Lt. Morris," T'Pina said. "I want you and Ensign Shepherd to find out the limits to Three's abilities and how she does this. And above all, keep this a secret. I can imagine what our allies would say if they found out the extent to which we can scan them now."

"Yes, ma'am!" Both Lauras replied.

Jeanette Warren, Brian Starr and John Broda were in another nameless pub on another nameless planet.

"I'm bored." Brian complained.

"That is because you never loosen up, Brian. Look at John." Jeanette said.

"Yeah, have another ale, or what ever they call this stuff." John leaned forward conspiritually. "Come on, Brian, we've mustered a full crew from the scum of the universe, at least this planet's scum, relax. This is just like my old days."

"Maybe it's the beard." Jeanette said while scratching Brian's chin. "You really do look good bald." Jeanette reached over and patted Brian on his now uncovered head.

"I like my beard." John said. "It makes me look older, more distinguished."

"But some of those guys we hired are going to be next to useless, or worse, take up supplies we need. I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to take over the ship."

"You have definitely got to learn to take things as they come. Don't worry about it. I'm sure Major, I mean Captain Amme, can handle everything." Jeanette said.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that last guy. He at least was honest about knowing engineering. I wonder why he hadn't gotten signed on by anybody else." John said as he looked at his data pad. "Balor of Tanis IV. I'm not sure, but isn't Tanis IV pretty far from here? Maybe he's running from something. He sure seemed nervous."

"Wouldn't you be nervous if you had to sign on with an unknown ship in a bar like this in some place as dangerous as the triangle?" Brian said.

"Yawn. Been there, done that. Got the rash." John replied.

Brian just looked at John as Jeanette laughed.

"Come on Brian," Jeanette said, "you know we have to hire people like this so we can fire them at the next planet. They will spread the news about our merchant ship, while we hire some more just like the first ones. By the time we have gone to three or four more planets, the pirates will have heard of us, and then...I'm going to get another drink. Anybody else?"

"No thanks." Brian and John replied as she left them for the bar.

"Now that she's gone," John said, "would you mind telling me about the girl you keep looking at over my shoulder?"

“Oh, sorry. It’s not a girl, it’s two Klingons.”

“Two Klingons? Your tastes must have changed.” John made to turn around, but Brian stopped him.

“Slowly, not so obvious. Don’t let them know you know they are there.”

“What would Klingons be doing here?”

“That’s what I would like to know.”

John tossed a table scrap on to the floor, then bent to pick it up.

“I see them, but they look like two average Klingon civilian merchants to me.”

“Look again. Their postures are too erect and their demeanor too savage. The clothes are too new and stiff. I’d bet they are Klingon warriors trying to look like civilians.”

“Who is trying to look like what?” Jeanette said as she returned to the table.

“Brian is being paranoid about the two Klingons near the door.”

“Brian, are you being paranoid about the two Klingons near the door?”

“NO!” Brian said just a little too loud. Other patrons turned to look toward them, then seeing nothing of interest, looked away.

“I think I know them.” Brian said in a whisper.

“Well, most Klingons look a like to me, but when would you have met two Klingon merchants, on the station perhaps?” Jeanette said.

“No,” John added, “You can tell them apart by their head ridges.”

Brian looked at John again.

“Just trying to help, old boy.” John said.

The door to the pub opened up and a large Klingon warrioress walked in. Looking around, she joined the two already seated.

“That tears it! I knew I recognized them.” Brian said as he leapt from the table. As he approached the Klingons he said, “You Klingon scum! You’ve been watching us from the minute we came in here! Are you working for the pirates?”

“Watch what you say Earther!” the largest Klingon said as she stood up. “I’ve killed for less. Go back to your seat before you die!”

“Or what? You’ll kill me with your bad breath? Or are you going to tell your pirate buddies about our ship’s rich cargo? I should have known your kind of scum would work for them.”

The warrioress glared at Brian, but held off swinging. Her two younger companions stood and took positions at either side of her. There was no mistaking them for civilians now as they stared at Brian murderously.

“Uh, Brian, maybe we should go back to our chairs.” John said. Brian hadn’t even realized John and Jeanette were with him.

“Yes, do as the little man says. Run away before you say something that will force my hand.” The warrioress said.

“You want something to force your hand? How about this...” Brian reached out with a right cross. The warrioress ducked, but the warrior behind her didn’t. Brian’s punch took him by surprise, but didn’t take him out. Not that Brian cared, since the warrioress landed a clean one in his solar plexus.

John grabbed the attention of the warrior, who had been punched by Brian, by, well, grabbing him, and lifting. The warrior’s eyes bulged in pain. John threw him across the next table, thus spreading the fight.

As the warrior to Brian’s right moved forward to finish him, Jeanette faked a left punch then spun around to kick him in the knee. He went down with a roar.

The warrioress leaned over Brian and said, “I knew you were all talk and no action Earther.”

Brian straightened up with an upper cut to the Klingon’s chin, sending her over backwards. She got up from the floor as Brian shook his hand in agony.

Jeanette’s opponent was back up on one leg and looking for revenge. He reached behind his back and pulled out his d’k tahg, a Klingon dagger. Jeanette

grabbed a chair. Looking at the chair and figuring it wouldn't make much of a weapon, Jeanette parried the Klingon's thrust. She then broke the chair over his head. The chair shattered, leaving her with two legs and one angry Klingon.

John turned from the alien he had just floored and heard whistles from outside the pub. He looked for Brian, just in time to see him fly across the room with the assistance of the Klingon warrioress. Jeanette was strangling her Klingon warrior with one of her table legs. The Klingon John had been fighting was now engaged with two large and ugly Nausicaans. The only one who seemed happy was the Klingon.

"I heard whistles. I think the local constabulary is on it's way, if you could hurry?" John said to Jeanette.

"There, I think this one is done." Jeanette said as the Klingon she had been strangling passed out. She got up as she let him fall to the floor. "Where is Brian?"

"Last time I saw him, he was airborne. Let's check for him over by the Klingon warrioress."

The two of them fought their way through the growing brawl to where the warrioress stood over Brian. Brian was trying to get up from the floor where he had landed.

John and Jeanette grabbed the warrioress from behind and tried to hold her while Brian got up.

"Unfair! I cry foul!" the warrioress yelled.

"Since when have you ever fought fair?" Brian asked as he pulled back for another punch.

"Brian, we don't have time for this!" John said. "The locals are on their way! We've got to get out of here before they show."

The warrioress looked at John, then turned back to Brian. "It would do neither one of us good to be detained. Admit I have won this round."

"You don't look like you are winning now." Jeanette said as the warrioress struggled. "And one of your boys drew his d'k tahg. Knives don't usually go over well with the authorities."

"A draw then." Brian admitted. "Let her go. This doesn't cancel your blood debt to me."

"You think my honor is purchased so cheaply that a bar room brawl could cancel my blood debt to you Earther? Next time, I will kill you!" she said as she ran for the door.

"We'd better get out of here ourselves." John said.

"The back door, hurry!" Jeanette advised.

"A blood debt to a Klingon?" John asked Brian, but Brian just doubled over in pain and moaned as a response.

They half carried Brian to the rear of the pub and out into the alley behind it. Once into the night air, Brian seemed to revive, and they ran faster. Whistles surrounded them in the night. As they ran past an alley, Brian pulled up short.

"I can't run anymore! In here, quickly!" Brian said.

The three ran down the garbage filled alley, only to find that it was a dead end.

"Quick! Call the ship for a beam out!" John said to Jeanette.

"I've lost my communicator." She replied.

"So have I." Said Brian.

From down the alley they could see patrolmen approaching.

"Ooh! Madia's not going to like this." Jeanette said.

"At least Brian's not bored anymore." John quipped.

"Moan"

Madia Amme was mad. "Do you have any idea how much you three have cost me? No! You don't! Well, let me tell you! All of the profit we've made so far AND half of our cargo! What insane idea came into your heads to start a fight?!" In a quieter voice that held more menace, she continued. "And you call yourselves Starfleet?"

"Hey, at least we won." John squeaked out.

"Won! Why I ought to space the lot of you!" Madia yelled. "Except I can't, so I'm going to work it out of you."

"But Major...I mean, Captain, I saw Captain K'iHqas and some of her crew in the pub. I'm sure they were following us to spy for General K'batlh." Brian said. "I was sure they would give us away."

"So you decided to dissuade them of the idea by fighting? Maybe you don't want a cloaked Klingon Bird-of-Prey following us, but that was my decision to make, not yours! Double shifts for all of you. Dismissed!"

As Jeanette Warren, Brian Starr and John Broda turned to leave the briefing room, Madia added, "And no more shore leave!"

Outside, in the corridor, they each breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, that could have been worse." Jeanette said.

"I haven't been chewed out like that since the academy!" John added.

"I'm sorry guys. I guess I could have handled the whole thing better." Brian said.

"What? And miss a good fight? Call on me anytime you want to bash heads!" Jeanette said.

"Me too!" John said. "I haven't had that much fun since I spent that time on..."

Jeanette noticed S'ena standing down the corridor, watching with concern.

"John, let's let Brian go to sickbay. I think he's still a little sore."

"Thanks guys, for everything."

"Sure, Brian."

As Jeanette and John left, Brian turned to go to sickbay. That's when he saw S'ena watching him. Brian automatically tried to stand up straighter, but his stomach had other plans. Brian doubled over in pain.

S'ena ran over to him. "Oh, you silly boy. Still trying to play the hero?"

"Does it show?"

"Yes, terribly. Let's get you to sickbay before you lose your lunch."

"Not too much chance of that. I already lost it on the feet of the local constabulary chief."

"That couldn't have been pretty."

"No, it wasn't."

When she reached sickbay, S'ena helped Brian on to a diagnostic bed. She ran a medical tricorder over him.

"Yep, just what I thought." She said.

"Is it bad?" Brian asked.

S'ena reached behind her for a medical instrument. It started to glow menacingly when she turned it on. "Oh, it's very bad." She said seriously.

"Will I die?" Brian asked hesitantly.

S'ena was silent as she waved the instrument over Brian's midriff. She looked very worried. "I don't know. This is the worse case of subdermal hematoma I've ever seen on someone who was still alive."

"Well, can you give me something for the pain?"

"Sure, how about this..." S'ena reached over and pinched Brian's arm.

"Ouch! That hurts! Why'd you do that?"

"Does it hurt more than your stomach?"

"Well, now that you mention it, yes."

"So you're not thinking about how much your stomach hurts now, are you?"

“No, I’m not! My arm is in agony!”

“Well, you asked for something to ease your stomach pain.”

“Remind me not to get sick while you’re playing Doctor. I thought you said I had a sub something or other.”

“You had a bruise. I fixed it with a dermal regenerator. Really, you can be such a baby sometimes.”

Brian got up off the table, rubbing his stomach. “Hey, there is still a little pain.”

“Darn right! I left some bruising just to teach you not to go starting fights with Klingon women when I’m not around. Don’t you know that’s how they initiate their mating rituals?”

“You’re not serious!”

“You mean you never heard of that?”

“No, I haven’t!” Brian blushed.

S’ena laughed, “Ol’ K’iHqas is probably thinking dirty thoughts about you right now.”

“Oh, No!” Brian moaned. “That’s the last thing I need to think about. You are evil!”

“Captain K’iHqas,” Amme said, “Please try to keep more of a distance from our ship. Even cloaked, I fear the pirates might be able to detect you. We know that they have a very extensive intelligence apparatus, and if your crew shows up at the same planets that we do, they might not take the bait.”

“General K’batlh wants these pirates eliminated.” K’iHqas said. “He has charged me with providing him the information he needs to accomplish this. I will not be denigned.”

“Then follow us if you want, just not too closely, say half a parsec. That will give you enough time to respond if we are able to send out a distress signal. But no more planetary observations. The pirates will attack us in space, not in pubs!”

“Very well, I understand your meaning. K’iHqas out.”

“Think she’ll stay away?” Jeanette asked.

“No, but she’ll be more distant and won’t spy on our away teams.” Amme said. “We’ll take what we can get. In this old tub, I doubt we could do anything about her anyway. I wasn’t even sure she was out there until your little fight.”

“Do you think the pirates will attack us?” Jeanette asked.

“They better! I’m sure getting bored being a cargo captain.” Madia said. She looked at Jeanette. “Of course it might be more interesting if we could make a profit, or at least you could invite me to the fights. I like a little ruckus myself you know.”

“I’ll make a note of that.”

Ambassador Ke’reth liked children, really! Served with a blood wine marinade, he thought. He looked around the pastoral park setting. Yes, B’sel’s three kids were still there, near the callisthenic equipment.

It had seemed so easy at first. His assistant, B’sel, had asked him for some personal time and could he watch the little ones while she attended to a few things. It seemed that her regular child minder, Lt. John Borda, had disappeared. Well, she made up his schedule, so of course she knew he had the time this afternoon. What could he say? After all, children were the future of the Empire. They could benefit from a few hours spent with a real warrior.

Then she had asked him if he could take them to “The Park”. It was a 24-hour holo-program for families. While she personally hadn’t seen the holo-program herself, the kids loved it. Could he evaluate the program for her? “The Park” was all of the rage with the other mothers on the starbase. It was a safe, entertaining program for small children. Entertaining for small children maybe, but not for ambassadors!

A figure covered in bazaar face paints and colorful clothing approached Ke'reth, offering him some kind of gas filled bladder. It floated on the end of a string. Ke'reth took the balloon, deciding it must be some confection, and bit it. Of course it exploded in his face. Surprised, Ke'reth leapt up and grabbed the clown by the throat.

"I can get you another!" the panicked holo-figure squeaked out.

Reason reasserted itself and Ke'reth released the clown, who ran away.

Setting himself back down on the uncomfortable park bench, he started his evaluation. At first it had been easy to see the difference between the holo-charactors and the real people. The real people knew enough to stay out of his way. After about the third time a "Nanny" had tried to show him a human baby in her carriage, the program had decided he didn't want to see the disgustingly soft humans after all, and stopped sending them over. It seemed that every time one came along, he'd take one look at it, and it at him, and the baby would start emitting a loud howl. The Nannies would fuss over the infant for a while, and then hurry off, glaring at him as if it were his fault. How could it have been his fault? All he did was look!

Now the program was attempting to find other ways to entertain him. If it had been a Klingon program, it would have sent a worthy advisory, or a bunch of warriors to drink with. Instead, it sent some white faced, black clothed fellow who couldn't talk. He looked like he was trapped in a force field box. A mime, the humans called it an artistic form. Ke'reth thought about killing it, but decided at the last minute that a mime was a terrible thing to waste. He let it continue; at least it didn't make noise.

The children had run from him as soon as they had entered the holodeck. They had gone straight for the callisthenic equipment. There were bars to climb over. B'Sel's oldest, Rhahl, swarmed over them easily. There were also some long planks that tilted in the middle. K'regh, B'Sel's middle child, was training on one. By pushing down on one end, it forced K'regh to go up, while a human child on the other end came back down. The Human would then push down, sending himself up and the K'regh down. They seemed to want to repeat this action over and over. As exercise, Ke'reth figured K'regh was working on his leg muscles.

The child that bothered Ke'reth the most was KharlS, B'sel's youngest. Instead of training on the equipment, she seemed to be digging in some sand. She would build a mound of sand, and then push it over. Or a tunnel, which she would evaluate, then collapse. At the moment, she seemed to be building a fortification. Ke'reth could see several mistakes from where he sat. He decided a little instruction couldn't hurt.

Ke'reth got up and walked over to KharlS. His feet sank into the soft sand as he approached. Squatting down to KharlS's level, he said, "The turret you are working on is too tall and thin to withstand a disrupter blast."

KharlS looked up at the old warrior and said, "That is where the princess lives. She was imprisoned there by an evil shaman. A great warrior will soon come to rescue her."

"You mean like in the story of Kar'as and Ben'etha?"

"Yes, I guess." The small Klingon child sounded unsure.

"Well, in that story, the tower was much lower and larger. It was part of a huge fortress, and Kar'as had to kill 50 warriors on his way through the main hall. I know, I visited the fortress near the oka'dan forest once to go hunting. I remember well the hunt that day..." Ke'reth noticed that he had lost KharlS's attention. She had turned away from the sand castle and was digging a rut from it to a tunnel she had made earlier. "What are you doing now?" he asked.

"I'm making the road to the dragon's den that the warrior must travel to fight the dragon."

"A dragon?"

"A giant lizard that breathes fire."

"There is no dragon in the tale of Kar'as and Ben'etha."

"There is now." KharlS said with certainty.

"No, I'm sure you are mistaken. He did have an honor duel with K'end, but that was much later, and it was in the high council arena."

"That's not the way this story goes." She said. "The hero fights a dragon controlled by the evil shaman."

Ke'reth had just about decided that he needed to do something about this dangerous human undermining of ancient Klingon stories, when he was suddenly hit from behind. As he had been crouching down to KharlS's level when he was hit, he lost his balance and fell face first into the sand castle. Spitting sand out of his mouth, he was up in an instant, looking through gritty eyes for who attacked him. On the ground was a small human child, no more than 6 or 7 standard years old, and a plastic disk. The child looked up at the fierce Klingon Ambassador, and started to cry.

At the sound of the pitiful creatures wail, all of the human females reacted by closing in on Ke'reth. He was quickly outnumbered by angry women. He judged that he could take them if he had too, but it would be bad politics. One extremely angry woman now held the child that had bumped into him. She gave him a very threatening look. Ke'rath decided to try his diplomacy and bent down to reassure the child, which only began to wail louder.

"Can't you see you are only frightening the child worse, Klingon?" an angry mother said.

"Yeah, why don't you leave the poor kid alone?" another added.

This was defiantly getting out of hand. Ke'reth decided to strategically withdraw. He grabbed KharlS and called out to the boys, "Rhahl, K'regh, come, play time is over!"

"Captain T'Pina! I must protest!" Quek said angrily. "There are Romulans swarming all over this station and that bully Klingon security guard of yours refuses to do anything about it!"

T'Pina looked at the Ferengi with a raised eyebrow. He stood in the doorway to her office and shook with rage. While he might have meant to look fierce, T'Pina guessed that the feeling most human's would have felt was humor at the sight.

"Ambassador Quek, may I remind you that the Federation has recently started negotiations with the Romulans, and as part of those negotiations, the Romulans are permitted an embassy here on the starbase. Also, I hardly believe that the current staffing level of that embassy indicates a swarm. I will however recommend that you take up any concerns you may have about his staff with Ambassador K'Hellenbek."

Quek's face turned even redder. "Do you mean that you aren't going to kick them off of the station?"

"I have neither the power, nor the desire, to, *kick them off*, of this station. I have no authority to dictate who has embassies here or not. That is best decided at the Federation Council."

"I demand to see Commodore Jat!"

"She is not on the station at the moment."

"Where is she then?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't disclose that information at this time."

"When will she be back?"

"Once again, I'm sorry..."

"I know, you can't disclose that information! Is there anything you can tell me?"

"Yes ambassador, good day."

Ambassador K'Hellenbek looked over his new staff's résumés. He knew that the Tal'shiar operatives were there somewhere, but as with any secret spy agency, they made the fakes look as good, or better, than the real ones. Well, he thought, I'll just have to pretend that they are all Tal'shiar and avoid any mistakes. At least I've got Nerrad, though I must also keep him in the dark. At least I believe he's not Tal'shiar. He would be discovered too quickly.

K'Hellenbek did know something for sure. His reports on Federation and Klingon ship movement were being intercepted, or copied, before they reached Romulus. He had overheard the Federation personnel on the promenade complaining about the pirate's intelligence. Upon checking his information sources, it seemed that the pirates knew everything that K'Hellenbek reported.

K'Hellenbek considered this. He could stop sending the reports, but then Romulus would complain. The intelligence committees were devouring everything K'Hellenbek could send them. Tal'shiar might decide he needed to be replaced. He couldn't tell the Federation personnel, they would want to know how he had gotten the information, and his sources were less likely to want to be acknowledged.

Where was the leak? If they could intercept the ship movement information, how much else could they obtain? These questions, and more, worried the Romulan Ambassador. He, at least, wanted there to be peace between the Empire and the Federation. The Romulan Empire didn't need its resources strained anymore than they already were. At a minimum, they needed time to rebuild and restock the fleet. A short time of peace in the Romulan Empire would be a good thing.

Deep in the bowels of the Guardian class space station, near the communications array, a figure moved in the shadows. A hand reached up into a conduit and pulled out a small device. The figure held the device near another for a few seconds, then replaced the first one back where it had gotten it. The figure melted back into the shadows unseen.

On the U.S.S. Sacagawea, Balor of Tanis IV had just finished his duty shift and was headed back to his compartment. Chief Engineer Saryena Remora waved to him as he left.

"Care for a cup before we call it a night" Remora asked.

"Ah, no thank you." Balor replied. "I have some more manuals I need to study before I go to sleep. This ship is very complicated."

"Oh, I've worked on worse. I admire your dedication. I wish we had more like you onboard. We've got some real losers working with us, but I guess it's all the captain can hire out here."

"Ah, yes, I guess you are right."

"You're not like the rest, are you. You come to work on time and don't complain. Your understanding of warp technology is far beyond the rest of the staff. If I may ask, why are you out here? Isn't Tanis IV pretty far away from this neck of the galaxy?"

"I, uh, wanted to see the universe. I couldn't do that where I was, so I came out here. It's been a long road." Balor looked embarrassed. "Uh, I don't mean to be rude Chief Engineer, but may I go now?"

"Sure, sure. I was just curious. If there's anything you need, just ask."

"Ah, sure thing Chief Engineer. Good night."

Balor reached his quarters with no further interruptions. Once there, he picked up a holo-picture of a humanoid woman and a little girl. He looked at it for sometime before he put it away in his travel case. Then he took out a small instrument from his travel case and pressed the button on the face. A small light began to blink. Regretfully, Balor placed the instrument back in the bag with the picture, and closed it.

“I really like these people, Andrea. I wish things could be different.”
Balor closed his eyes and drifted off to a fitful rest.