

There's Forty Shillings on The Drum

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There's Forty Shillings on The Drum

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Summary

The battle is joined above. Surprise skills from the waitstaff. The first relief. Ready to blow things up. The peanut gallery is heard from. The audit from hell ends.

Grinding

Decker watches the battle, trying to take in everything. Her eyes move to the graphic of the *Crusader*, along with the four bandits in reserve that the ship faces. She sees that the counter for the torpedoes now reads '70'. Her eyes shift to the boomer's opponents. There are only three now, and those three seem to be flaring red, showing damage.

Their shields must be heavier than normal to stand that onslaught, or they are more agile. She reaches down and touches that section of the Cohort screen. She feels her heart sink as she sees the damage that the *Crusader* has taken. The three attackers are heavily damaged, too, but the *Avenger*-class seems to be struggling to stay out of their sights.

She senses Chandra's presence next to her, her eyes on the same thing she is. "And the rest of the attackers?"

"They've engaged the four *Lancers*. They haven't been able to get down and attack the surface anymore. We've destroyed three and one has gone down north of the settlement."

"Send Jaiggur and the security force to check that out. If any more crash, or they start landing infiltrators, we may need to take crewmembers from the ships to intercept, after we land the marines. I'm not too confident in the local cops and the militia being able to fight off invaders."

"I know," Decker says. "The marines are the ones who've been keeping them away with their point-defense weapons."

Chandra turns to Daronex, who is at least watching the battle. "Mr. Daronex. I need you to assemble a force from the ship's crew who can be landed on the surface. Coordinate with the master-at-arms, who will go with you."

Decker sees the Edosian stand straight. His face showing something other than superior knowledge from command school.

Again, she isn't sure, from her limited knowledge of Edosian body language, but his expression looks something like abject fear.

"Aye, captain," he says.

"You know it would probably be better if he stayed here and I went," Decker says. "The Cohort crew can keep him out of trouble more than a squad made up of our non-engineering and non-weapons crew."

"Maybe. But Jaiggur's been working the hell out of them on small-arms and small-unit tactics. With the Jaunty there, he'll be okay."

At that moment, the ship shudders and heels over, the artificial gravity and power flickering.

"We've taken a hit, Group," Siobhan says from the bridge above. "Shields are down to thirty percent and not covering everything."

The computer's voice intones in its incongruous English accent. "Intruder alert. Intruder alert."

"Engineering reports intruders in the cargo spaces."

"Issue small arms, Daronex," Chandra says. She looks to Decker, who has already opened the ready small-arms locker. Decker grabs a pistol and a rifle, along with a belt.

“All hands,” Chandra says, activating the 1-MC speakers. “Repel boarders aft and starboard.”

She looks at Decker. “Get down there, Decker,” she says. “Find out who’s on my ship that isn’t supposed to be.”

Decker heads out of the CIC. As she does, she grabs Daronex by the collar as he fumbles with a phaser pistol.

Infiltration

Agon opens up the small compartment behind several beer kegs. He pulls out a phaser pistol and a rifle, both of which seem to date back to the early Kirk era. He hands a pistol to his wife, as well as another type to their server, Usura. Usura takes the rifle and checks it like an expert; for about the fiftieth time, he wonders about her and what her background was, besides being a competent server and bartender.

Theelia catches his eye, then glances at Usura. Usura had never given any idea that she knew how to handle a weapon, much less one as sophisticated as a Rifle, Pulse, Phaser (Marine)—the PPR-17—with an attached grenade launcher.

Of course, Agon hadn’t remembered putting anything in the locker as modern as the weapon he’d just handed to Usura.

She turns and fires the pulse part of it at the door. There is a bellow of pain as the pulse strikes a very large Klingon in the chest. The bat’leth clangs; Usura moves over and kicks it and the disruptor rifle away from the body. The Klingon’s yellow eyes stare at Usura as he chokes out his last.

Agon moves his gaze from the dying Klingon to Usura. She ignores him and moves out into the bar.

Theelia crouches down beside the Klingon Usura had shot. His eyes fix in death before she can figure out anything from the look that he had given their server after she had perforated his chest.

“That’s new,” his mate says, her voice as dry as Vulcan’s Forge.

“Yeah. I saw Chandra giving her a weird look, just before all hell broke loose. I don’t know what that was all about,” Agon replies.

“Are you two coming or what? I think there’s more Klingons out in the streets,” Usura says, her voice harder than they’ve ever heard it.

They look at one another, then run out into the streets. They hear the distinctive sound of Federation Starfleet-issue phasers, ones that are much more modern than the ones they carry. They come out in time to see Usura taking out attackers, as disruptor bolts fly towards Agon and Theelia. They dive for cover, lifting their rifles to return fire.

Agon notices something as he opens fire at the source of the disruptors.

None of the bolts seem to come anywhere near Usura. Only in the general vicinity.

“What the hell?” Theelia asks as she scores a stun hit on one of the Klingon, who doesn’t appear to wear military uniform, only mismatched pieces of light armor.

Suddenly there is quiet, then a loud cheer as Starfleet security forces move forward into view. The disruptor fire retreats a right angle to the two forces.

A large, light-green skinned humanoid walks up. Agon recognizes him as the Group’s security officer. “There’s a lot more,” he says. “They’re all over the place.”

Agon narrows his eyes as Theelia walks up to him. She seems to recognize the goon even more.

Jumping In

Patience Brannigan listens to the garbled comms of the battle as the *Panhandle* closes on the melee. Her XO comes up beside her command chair from the CIC below.

“Another five minutes, Captain,” Panara says. “But we may not be much of a help. Especially if we have to warp again, to pursue or to retreat.”

Patience turns and stares at her. “Why would we retreat?” she asks.

“Just giving the option. We never know what we’ll find when we get there.”

Patience gestures towards the speaker and the screen recording the comms of the Group. “Pretty much know what we’re getting into. The squadron seems to be outnumbered, defending the base and the settlement.” She touches the screen, changing the aspect to a tactical display.

Both women stare at the display. “So what is our play, Captain?” Panara asks.

Patience is silent for a moment. “There,” she replies, pointing towards one segment of the battle. Four red triangles face one blue one. She taps the blue triangle.

“Warbook says that’s a boomer, the *Crusader*. The bad guys have only sustained minor damage. She’s down about fifty percent of her ordinance. If she hasn’t wiped the floor with them, then they’ve got enhanced forward shields.”

Panara nods. “And there’s probably a cost to them, with their aft shields,” she says.

“I’ve been watching that part of the battle from the telemetry,” Patience continues. “The *Crusader* has attempted to flank them several times,

but they've always been able concentrate their fire whenever she tries it. Her shields can't last much longer. It's just a question of math."

"Of time," Panara says. There is a beeping noise from the consoles in front of them. "One minute to reversion," the conn, Ensign Faith Oguwimke says.

Patience taps on the screen for several seconds. "This is our course for reversion," she says.

"Aye, Captain," Faith says.

"Could be a gamble, if they detect us," Panara says.

"Life's a gamble," Patience replies. "Go below, Pan. Ride herd on Faith's little sister."

Panara snorts. "Patience, Faith, and Hope. All we need is Charity."

"She's back on earth," Patience replies. Panara grips her shoulder then moves to the ladder.

"Revert," she says. "Shields up. Stand by forward phasers and torpedoes."

Patience feels the shimmer of the reversion barrier to realspace. "Open fire," she says.

"One's seen us!" comes from below. "She's shifted to where her forward shields are facing us."

"Ignore her. Concentrate on the other two," Patience replies. She finds that she is gripping the arms of the command chair.

There are bursts of light and fireworks, without sound on the forward viewscreen. For a moment, the light overwhelms the pickup, but it quickly adjusts.

Another, unfamiliar voice comes over the comms. "Nice of you to finally make it, *Panhandle*," says a woman's voice, not bothering with call signs.

"A *Lancer* is never late, nor is she early," Patience replies, "but arrives just when she needs to."

"Great. She's misquoting Tolkien." A young woman's dark features come onto her screen. She is grimy and seems to be holding her arm close to her body. "Torbert. *Crusader*. Javelin 304."

"I prefer 'paraphrasing.' Brannigan," Patience replies, introducing herself. "Thanks for taking care of the asshole that turned towards us."

"Thanks for taking care of the two that didn't," Torbert says, letting a smile come over her face.

"How're you for torpedoes?" Patience asks.

"We're out except for our four ventral launchers," Torbert says. "These damned things are overmuscled."

Patience stares at the fading light of the explosions and the sparking debris of the four attackers.

"We'll stand watch for anything else, *Crusader*," Patience says. "You get down to the surface and rearm. I'm assuming they've got the boxes already to switch out?"

"Yeah. But we have surface attackers, according to our security goons. So I've got a lighter coming up with the torpedo boxes to switch them out and take the empties for reloading."

Patience smiles. "Good thinking, Captain," she says. "I think we'll cover your re-arm, then head to atmo. I'm sure the Captain (L) could use someone with phasers for those attackers."

"You would be right," comes a voice with a mix of accents. "Sending you coordinates, Hellhound 104. Tie in with our Cohort system." Chandra's voice, Patience can tell, is just at the edge of exhaustion. "Have you met the rest of the squadron?"

"No, CAG," she replies. "I haven't joined the squadron yet. Squadron formed without us. We were starting up in-processing when we got the call. Figured you could use us, instead of the paperwork."

Chandra's face appears on the screen. Patience tries to keep her reaction down, both at the woman's beauty, as well as the nasty scar on the side of her head. "Good call, Captain Brannigan," she says. "Glad you're here to join the party." She grins. "Gandalf."

As she feels her ship respond, Patience finds that she is no longer thinking about Section 31 and her grandmother's legacy.

She only thinks about the here and the now.

The Captain's Battle

Siobhan Lincolnton watches as her ships burn on a graphic representation of the battle. She feels the heat from an unchecked fire behind her on the bridge of the *Comstock*. She gets up from the command chair and seizes an extinguisher. The fire lessens, then disappears, just as one of the damage control technicians arrives from the ladderwell.

"Sorry, Captain," he says. She waves him away, then returns to her seat. That little fire wasn't the only thing that her overstretched DC teams was dealing with.

He receives more work as another computer panel explodes, sending more sparks down on them. She pushes the intercom button. "Ish, damage report," she says.

She can hear the engineer, Ishimoto, exhale as he gathers the information. "Starboard warp injectors are hit, Captain. We won't be able to warp, which may not be a problem, but we're venting plasma and it's affecting our impulse maneuverability." He sighs again. "We're working on it. You got anyone you can spare to assist?"

"I wish I could, ChEng," she says, "but I've got boarders popping up all over the place, since the shields are spotty." A thought occurs to her. She switches to another circuit. "Mr. Daronex, report to the engineer."

There is no acknowledgement. She knows that he hadn't gotten to the surface, as Chandra had directed; he'd apparently helped Decker repel the boarders. She watches another of the *Lancers* shudder under the concentrated fire of two of the augmented deuterium carriers/marauders. She glances at their own attacker and gives a brief smile as she sees it start to come apart under Decker's concentrated fire.

"Hey, Hellhound 102, this is Banshee 6," she says, after cutting off the conversation with the Engineer. "We're on our way, as fast as we can."

"It would be appreciated, Six," comes a voice with an accent she can't quite place. She realizes after a second that the voice belongs to another of Chandra's Academy classmates and ad hoc bond—the accent is from Boston in New England on their shared world.

"This is Hellhound 104," says another voice. "We've finished off the boomer's problems and are on our way, 102."

"Nice of you guys to finally get here," 102, the *San Sebastián's* captain—*Rosewarne*, Siobhan grasps—says.

"I stopped for a pedicure on the way. New place on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet," the captain of the *Panhandle* replies acerbically. "You should try it."

Rosewarne doesn't reply, but punctuates her thoughts by her single remaining phaser mount finishing off her another attacker. *That makes five that they've taken out in atmo*, Siobhan thinks. Plus the four in the black.

"Form on me, starboard echelon," Chandra says from the CIC. "We need to concentrate. We've still got three left to deal with. I don't know when the rest of the Group will get here, much less the Wing or task forces."

The other two ships acknowledge and arc around to join her. The *San Sebastián* moves more deliberately than the fresher *Panhandle*; she is trailing plasma just like the *Comstock* is.

"Suggest *Panhandle* take the lead," Siobhan says into the command intercom. "We'll continue as Cohort Manager."

"New orders, Hellhound 104. Triangle formation, you take the lead," Chandra says without hesitation. "Decker, continue to Manage."

There is no acknowledgement from Sinclair. Instead, through the sealed hatch comes the sound of phaser fire.

The whine of a transporter fills the bridge. That sound is punctuated by a scream from Siobhan's right as she sees the quartermaster's mate dissolve into a burst of light. Her phaser is in her hand; the first figure joins Pabsoud in disintegrating into ash, before he can fully materialize.

The second figure, even larger than the first, forms and starts to run towards Siobhan, a bat'leth in his hand. She sees other columns of light, at least two others forming.

She and the quartermaster dive behind their consoles and open fire. She realizes that she is feeling that same feeling of despair that she had.

Before the remnants of the Group were taken to Vostus to rot. She opens her mouth.

Siobhan's mind locks on the words that she is about to form in her throat.

Initiate emergency auto-destruct.

Catching Up and Learning Things

Jamie Blackthorne watches with equal parts exasperation and amusement as the man known as Oscar Freetown, among other names, pilots the old *Goddess*-class into hyperspace. He thinks of the history of this particular ship.

Ava Fonseca sticks her head into the bridge's hatch and lets her eyes fall on him. He raises his eyebrows as she looks outside of the bridge, then returns her eyes to him.

He gets up and follows her out. They move through the ship, until they come to the small hangar bay. He follows her in, then makes sure that the hatches are secure.

"Major, I don't know you, but I know that you work for Starfleet Intelligence. I'm supposed to be watching these ingrates for Captain Chandra. Making sure that they're worthwhile for her group."

"Not an easy job," Croft observes. "Especially since Francis works for the Institute and D'Shaya works for God knows who or what."

Ava gives him a bright smile. "Really? I hadn't noticed." The smile fades and she is quiet. Her eyes are on the deck. He notices that her eyes are dark and look like they would be laughing, if she was doing any other job.

He decides to prompt her.

"What's going on, Commander?" he asks quietly.

“I got a call from a woman, through Agon. A Romulan criminal that they call Darkwing. She wanted me to pass something on to you. She thought we were rendezvousing with the pirates.”

Jamie says nothing, even though he had actually sent Darkwing on her mission.

“I’m not sure whether I trust her or not.”

He is quiet for a moment. The criminal in question was a loyal officer—her right hand, as it were, of Ael t’Rllailieu, Empress-Claimant of the Romulan Star Empire. He had helped her infiltrate the Federation in hopes of learning many things.

Things that could have momentous consequences on both sides of the Gold Line.

“Tell me everything that she said, Ava,” he says quietly. “I know her, and I know what she is about. I can’t say how I do, but I do.”

She nods after a moment. He is sure that she knows that he might be playing other games with them.

“She said that she met someone from Section 31. But she was sure that she wasn’t what she appeared to be. She wouldn’t tell me how she knew this.”

He nods. “She was a Romulan. Surgically altered to resemble a human.”

Ava’s eyes flash. He grins at the fire, then holds his hands up in what he hopes is a placating gesture. “I know. You wanna tell the story. And I need to hear your version of what she told you. I think that there are missing pieces here. Missing pieces that can help us figure out who is who in this goat rope.”

She nods, her eyes calming. “She didn’t say much more. Didn’t really have a lot of time, before you showed up. She had a comm with a code from the owners.”

He exhales. “Agon and Theelia.”

She nods. “As near as I can tell. I was the only one on the call, but of course the I didn’t tell them, seeing how I don’t know who they work for and you’re just a dumbass from Starfleet Intelligence.”

He snorts. “Lot of dumbassery to go around. Particularly from those ‘owners.’ Or at least one-half of them. The jury’s still out on Theelia.”

She smirks at him. “According to them, the jury may be out on your status as a dumbass.”

“I don’t deny it.”

Her face grows pensive. “You and Chandra. What’s up with you?”

He turns away. “Nothing,” he says. He sees Chandra’s face as they had said goodbye after the gas giant dive.

When he looks at Ava again, he is sure that she doesn’t believe him, but doesn’t press.

Instead, she says, “I have a lot of respect for her. She got me out of an impossible situation.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah. I was XO of the *O’ Bannon*. I seemed to be spending most of my time trying to assuage two gigantic fucking egos, between my CO and the marine major.”

He nods. “I don’t know your captain, but that’s a shitload of assuaging for that particular jarhead.”

“Oh, there was plenty to go around. I think Fortescue’s a fairly humble guy, but Starros might bring out the worst in him.”

“He certainly brings out the worst in me,” Jamie replies, his voice dry even to his ears. “So what else did Darkwing tell you?”

“Just that she’s now a card-carrying asset of Section 31. Or at least one that is the asset of one segment.”

He nods, his mind traveling to all of the possibilities.

“She wants you to meet with her. She said to meet her at the resort that you both stayed at. She said you’d know where.”

He looks away.

Ava narrows her eyes at him, then rolls them. Apparently the look had aroused her suspicions.

“Is there anyone you haven’t boinked?”

He says nothing. She snorts in something like disgust. “You’ve apparently learned well from Chandra.”

She still follows him into his quarters, though.

Response

Ahava Rosen stares at the BUPERS civilian in her quarters. She seethes as the man stands there. “Can you please tell me why I’ve been

brought here to Antares?"

"I told you, Commodore. I'm doing a random audit of junior flag officers," he says blandly.

"Then get on with it," she says, coming close to snarling.

"In due time," he replies. He looks down at his belt as something beeps on there. He lifts what looks like a communicator of some sort from it and asks, "May I?"

Something about his manner gives her pause. She narrows her eyes at him. She makes a quick decision. "No."

"What?" he replies.

"No. You can't tie in your communicator to my ship's system. I don't recognize that device. It's not standard issue, especially for some civilian personnel weenie."

"It's the latest technology," he replies. "You may not be familiar with it, being out on the frontier."

She feels her eyebrow raise at that. "Is that a slight?" she asks. "For someone out on the frontlines?"

"The frontlines of what, Commodore? We're not at war. Maybe you're paranoid. I'll note that in my report." He says this with something that sounds suspiciously like triumph.

Her intercom beeps. "Yes?" she asks, activating it.

"We've got a distress call coming in, Commodore. Its the 17th. Merlin is under attack."

Ahava nods, then looks up at the civilian. She directs her next to him, as much as the 'com. "Make preparations for getting underway. Maximum warp when we've cleared the system."

"The audit isn't over yet," the civilian says. "You know the penalty for refusing to respond to BUPERS?"

"Nope. But I can only imagine. There's probably a strongly-worded memo in my future." She narrows her eyes at him. "It's probably nothing near as serious if I let people under my command die when there was something I could do."

The hatch opens. Her XO and two security officers step in. "Escort him off of my ship," she says. "Also, confiscate his comm. Run some tests on it, without tying it into our systems."

"You can't do this," he says, shoving one of the guards as they come up to him. He twists the other's wrist in a move that doesn't look like they taught it at personnel-weenie school.

The lieutenant j.g. that he had shoved reacts, recovering. She slams him face-first into the table.

"You'll pay for this," he gasps.

Ahava watches him, amused. "No. I won't. I think."

"I checked with a contact at the Admiralty, as you asked, Commodore. BUPERS has never heard of him."

"Then put him in the brig, instead," she replies. "Search him thoroughly. Put any devices you find in an isolation field."

The officers, the j.g. and an ensign exit with their burden, frog-marching him to the hatch.

She looks at the XO. "Thanks, Jim. Get me Commander Stone-Hunter on the Reed, as we're headed to FOB Merlin. She's probably already on her way there."

"Aye, Commodore."

Ahava gets up, pulling her tunic off. When she is alone with her thoughts, she takes off the command-white undershirt and lifts the working blue pullover. Something that isn't generally worn on regular duty on a starship, even though she's tried to get her crews to go below the Service Dress-Charlies and Deltas.

You're in the Border Patrol again. Time to look like you are.

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