

The Horror Below

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The Horror Below

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Summary

Something sinister is going on in the depths of Drozana Station and it's up to the girls of the Spoiled Princess to find out what it is.

Notes

This episode will be almost all Trek and takes place in the Trek-verse. There will be some hopping from universe to universe now. I'll try to make things clear where the story from one universe begins and the other ends, but if you're confused or not sure, please let me know.

Prelude

Drozana Station—STO Universe Falkayn1

As Belen and his companions crossed the threshold into his nightclub, the lights flickered, bathing the club with blue illumination. Spotting movement out of the corner of her eye, ex-Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams exclaimed, "Is this place haunted or something? Cause I think I saw a ghost. Am I going crazy or did someone else see it too?"

"You're not going crazy." Twesata replied, chewing her lower lip. "I felt a...presence. I don't think it was a ghost, but it was something alien." Turning to the asari woman standing next to her, the lovely Betazoid inquired, "Did you feel it too, Rana?"

"I felt something." The asari scientist Rana Thanoptis affirmed as she repressed a shiver. "Whatever it was...it didn't belong here."

Surreptitiously taking out her tricorder, Twesata quickly scanned the bar. "Hmm...that's odd."

"What's odd?" Ashley replied as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

"I'm picking up triolic energy." The Betazoid science officer explained, "Triolic energy isn't used by many species because of its effects on living tissue. However, it is used by some species such as the Devedians to open up temporal vortexes."

"I remember attending a lecture that Captain LaForge was presenting at the Academy in my junior year." Shelana recalled, "During the talk, he brought up the *Enterprise's* experience with the Devedians."

"Right." Twesata nodded her head in agreement, "I was at the lecture with you—remember?"

"You mean you were in the back row making out with that Trill cadet." Shelana bantered back.

"I caught a little bit of the lecture between make out sessions." Twesata smoothly riposted. "Anyway..." The lovely Betazoid said as she got serious again, "...the Devedians subsist off of the neural energy...life force as it were...of humanoid species and are capable of time travel—making them especially dangerous because not only do you not know where they're going to strike..."

"You also can't tell when." Shelana interrupted, finishing her friend's explanation.

"Damn." Ashley sighed, "And I thought Saren's geth and the Reapers were bad news. At least Saren hasn't figured out how to travel through time."

"Yet." Rana cautioned as her human friend rolled her eyes.

"Thanks, Rana. You had to completely ruin my day."

"Looks like you really do have a problem, Bel." Nelia declared as the Ferengi casino owner led her and her team to the bar behind which Qwixo, Belen's assistant manager, nervously tended bar.

"Told you." Belen replied as the tiny group sat down at the bar. Speaking to his employee, the Ferengi commanded, "Get drinks for everyone, Qwixo."

"Right away, Belen." The bartender responded, moments later returning empty-handed, "Sorry, Boss...the replicators are malfunctioning again."

"That ERH still hasn't come back yet?" Belen inquired with an irritated look on his face as he stepped behind the bar and began mixing drinks by hand.

"ERH?" Ashley muttered to the statuesque Andorian seated next to her.

"Emergency Repair Hologram." Shelana answered back, "Cheaper than hiring a real repair person."

"And I don't have to put up with demands for pay increases or benefits either." Belen interjected with a smirk.

"One of the dabo girls didn't show up for work this morning either and Lorox is still missing." Qwixo declared with a worried frown. "Lorox has been gone for two weeks and Ara never misses work."

"I didn't know that you hired real dabo girls, Belen." Shelana commented with an approving tone of voice. "I thought you were like all the other casinos...you know...using the Holo-Leetas..."

"We use Holo-Leeta too..." Belen explained, "Have to...it's part of the licensing agreement. But I only use it when the girls are off shift. Customers react better to live dabo girls and when they're happier..."

"They're spending more latinum." Nelia grinned as she gave her Ferengi friend a quick caress on his lobes. "He also does it to help girls like Ara. Even in the Federation latinum talks and not every world can take care of its people as well as the core worlds, nor is every world in the Federation as tolerant or wealthy as Earth, Betazed, or Trill."

"She came here looking for a job..." Belen recalled, "And I needed a dabo girl...so it worked out well for both of us."

Nelia laughed merrily as she complimented her friend, "You're not fooling us, Belen. We know that you're really a big softie."

"Yeah...well..." The Ferengi businessman squirmed uncomfortably, "Just don't let it get around...okay. I've got an image to protect."

"We promise, Bel." Ashley chuckled as she drank her beer. The lights again flickering as blue lighting filled the room, the former Alliance marine sputtered, "I saw it again! Out of the corner of my eyes."

"I did too." Shelana replied with a grimace as she turned to Twesata and Rana, "You two?"

Rana answered for the pair as her telepathic teammate nodded her head in agreement. "We felt them. They're here and they're hungry."

"Shit." Nelia swore under her breath, "What's going on here Belen?"

"Hell if I know." The bartender replied as customers looked about nervously, a few of them beginning to make their way out of the casino. "But something's got to be done fast if I'm going to stay in business."

"Maybe it has something to do with that repair holo-thing?" Ashley suggested. "They're AI's aren't they? Think it might have gone crazy?"

"Wouldn't be the first time a hologram went psycho." Shelana concurred with a frown. "We might want to check it out."

"We've been having problems with the power before all this happened." Belen confessed, elaborating further. "This is an old Starfleet K-class station I bought third or fourth hand, and...well...replicators and holosuites eat up a lot of power so I had to do a lot of rewiring. I sent the ERH down to station's core to see what the problem was and fix it." Turning to his employee, the Ferengi station owner demanded, "And you're saying you haven't heard from him since he went down there?"

"Right, boss." Qwixo obsequiously acknowledged with a nod of his head. "His last comm was shortly after you left. And it's been getting worse since. The customers come here wanting to see Driffen's Comet but they get scared once the lights start flickering and changing colors. I've had to offer discounts and comp spins at the wheel to keep them from checking out. Sorry, Belen."

"When a customer dies ..or runs away the latinum stops coming." Belen replied with a frown. "I hate giving discounts...it sets a bad precedent. But I'd rather lose a little latinum through giving a discount rather than lose everything because guests check out and don't come back--and worse--tell their friends not to come."

"The 205th Rule of Acquisition." Nelia interjected, explaining to her new crewmembers, "Ferengi society is profit-driven with the Rules of Acquisition essentially being a holy text."

"Like the Bible." Ashley acknowledged with a nod of her head.

"Correct." Nelia affirmed. Speaking to her Ferengi friend, the green Orion rogue promised, "We'll check up on what's going on and if we find Lorox, Ara and the ERH, send them back to you."

"Thanks." Belen sighed with relief, "I'm going to stay here and try to get things at the hotel and casino back on track again." As the women finished their drinks and walked away, the Ferengi bartender cautioned, "Be careful."

Responding with a laugh and a wave, Nelia quipped, "Aren't we always?"

"No." Belen muttered under his breath as he opened the accounts ledger on his computer and frowned, "And that's what frightens me more than anything else."

"I still feel funny in this armor." Ashley complained as she saw her reflection in the mirror.

"Why?" Nelia replied with a teasing grin as she did a pirouette, showing off the dark midnight blue skinsuit that she, Ashley and the rest of her team wore. "It's designed for both stealth and protection. The armor's shielded against most known scans and, with its attached hood, has the ability to blend into whatever environment you find yourself in."

"So..." Ashley conjectured, "If I'm in a snow drift..."

"It will change color and texture to mimic that." Nelia finished, further outlining the armor's advantages, "It, and the personal shield that comes with it can stand up to most energy weapons in a sustained firefight and hold up against kinetic and bladed attacks until you either win or can get the hell out."

"It's just so..." Ashley shook her head, "I feel like I'm naked when I'm wearing it."

Laughing, Rana interjected, "Don't tell me you miss that bulky heavy armor you used to wear!"

"Yeah." The former Alliance marine replied with a mournful sigh, "I do. It saved my ass on more than one occasion."

"Your old armor might take a hit or two from an energy weapon." Shelana explained, "But anything more than that...or against something like an antiproton or polaron weapon..." The Andorian tactical officer shook her head, "You'd be nothing but scattered atoms."

"Yeah." Ashley sighed, "I know. It's just...well...I'd never hear the end of it if Joker were to ever catch me wearing this."

"Not much chance of that happening in the near future at least." Nelia quipped as she inclined her head in the direction of the turbolift. Then, seeing the somber look on her human teammate's face, apologized, "I'm sorry. I have a bad tendency of putting my...what is it you human's

say? My foot up my ass?"

"It's foot in your mouth." Ashley grinned before letting out a sigh, "And it's okay. I know you didn't mean anything bad by it. I guess it's just going to take some time for me to get used to things here and to the fact that I'm probably not going to go back home. Anyway..." The former Alliance marine let out a breath of air as she doublechecked her phaser pistol, "We've got work to do."

"Right." Nelia nodded her head as she gestured in the direction of the turbolift, "Let's get moving, girls. Time's wasting."

"So...what's the story on this station?" Ashley asked as she and her teammates exited the turbolift.

"Like Belen said, it's a K-class station." Shelana explained to the two newcomers, "Starfleet built it in the 23rd century to keep an eye on the Klingons and over the years it swapped back and forth between the two."

"When tensions eased between the Federation and the Empire during the 24th century, this sector became more of a backwater as more attention was focused on the Alpha Quadrant." Nelia interjected, joining the conversation. "Eventually Starfleet decommissioned it and the Klingons took it over for a while until they pulled out. After that, it became something of a hideout for raiders and pirates. A couple of years ago Belen bought the station and he's been trying to turn it into a neutral port of call."

"Its location makes it a good place for the powers to meet unofficially." Shelana commented, once again picking up the narrative.

"So they provide security for Belen from any raiders or pirates wanting to take the station over again—right?" Rana queried as she entered the discussion.

"Right." The lovely Andorian nodded her head. "You'll almost always see at least one Federation, Klingon, or Romulan starship in port and usually more than one from each power along with the odd Ferengi, Tal'Shiar, Imperial Romulan Navy, or other minor power's ship."

"It's all about location." Nelia quipped, shaking her head as she and her team approached the maintenance elevator door. After a vain effort at calling the elevator to their floor, the Orion engineer remarked as she opened a panel next to the doors. "Give me a moment to bypass these power conduits and I'll have the door opened. You girls might want to turn on your lights—I've got a feeling it's going to be dark where we're going."

Letting out a breath of air as she exited the maintenance lift with her team, Nelia joked as her eyes registered the cluttered debris and scurrying insectoid life, "Damn! This is a mess." Glancing at the Betazoid science officer beside her, the roguish Orion queried, "Are you picking up anything?"

After scanning with her tricorder, Twesata replied with a frown as she gestured towards a door on her left hand side. "The damned triolic waves are making it hard to get any good readings. I'm picking up something to the left though—behind that door."

Setting her phaser, Nelia murmured to her teammates who were also drawing their weapons, "Get ready. I'm opening the door." As she opened the door, two ghostly figures glided past the team, disappearing into the dark hallway. "Tell me you girls saw that too." The green Orion gasped as she pointed in the direction the phantoms had vanished.

"I saw it. Felt it also." Rana muttered, adding, "A...coldness...coming from them. Like they didn't see us as anything but..."

"Food." Twesata grimly finished, echoing her asari friend's thoughts. "I got some scans of them before they disappeared. They're definitely Devedian. Their readings match those the *Enterprise* took that are in our database."

"Why do they look like ghosts?" Ashley inquired as she and the rest of her team entered the large room just vacated by the phantoms.

"They're phase shifted." Twesata responded.

"And that means..."

Letting out a breath of air, the science officer attempted to explain, "To put it simply, Devedians exist in another dimension. However, they have the ability to shift themselves into our reality given enough energy. That's where the triolic energy comes in—they're opening up portals into our reality. That same energy also permits them to open up time portals."

"Well...shit." Ashley cursed before inquiring pragmatically, "So...how do we beat them?"

"There has to be a lot of them to open up portals like this..." Twesata speculated as her Orion companion interjected.

"That means they probably have a nest or something further down into the core." Nelia concluded ominously as she adjusted the settings on her phaser. "Let me have your phasers, I'm going to adjust them so that they'll emit a proton burst. That should help against the Devedians' phase shifting."

"Over here!" Rana called out, pointing to a body lying motionless on the floor. "I think we've found one of our missing people."

"Damn." Nelia cursed as she and her Betazoid friend knelt down beside the bodies. "That's definitely Lorox." The green Orion groaned, pointing first to an ashen hued Ferengi and then speaking to her friend. "Twes? Did the Devedians do this to him?"

"No. At least not directly." The Betazoid concluded, "It looks like he was killed by all the triolic radiation in here."

"What about Ara and us?" Ashley queried worriedly, "Will that radiation affect us?"

“Our suits protect us short term.” Nelia responded, “Long enough for us to do what we have to do, but we can’t afford to play around. Unfortunately, Ara’s not wearing a suit. Also, the triolic radiation makes it impossible for us to beam the body...or ourselves or anyone else... out now. We’ll have to let Belen know when we get back so that he can send someone to recover him.”

“Right.” Shelana nodded her head, “Let’s find Ara and then that damned nest and take it out before more people get killed.”

Act 2

Chapter Summary

The mystery of Drozana station deepens as the girls face not just one--but two--different threats.

“Shit!” Ashley swore as the last of the ghostly Devedians were dispatched. “Those things are worse than husks. At least husks didn’t disappear and reappear again.”

“We’ve got to do something about their phase shifting.” Shelana concluded as she checked her weapon. “The lower down we go...the more of them we’re going to encounter.”

“Twes?” Nelia asked as she turned to the Betazoid science officer. “Any ideas?”

“Hmmm...” Twesata pondered the situation for several moments before a sly grin appeared on her face. “I think so...Rana?”

“Yeah?” The asari exclaimed, catching her breath as she recovered from the excitement of the recent fight.

“Your biotics...they allow you to set up a barrier...right?”

“Yes.” Rana replied with a nod of her head, “But it’ll be weak and I won’t be able to hold it long. Like I said a while ago...I’m not very strong.”

“You won’t have to hold it for long.” Twesata answered back. “I can augment your barrier with a burst of quantum radiation to create a makeshift triolic pattern enhancer. It’ll shift us into the same dimension as the Devedians, making it easier for us to take them out.”

“Okay...” Nelia nodded her head, “If you’re up to it, Rana?”

“Sure.” The asari scientist replied, “We can give it a try, but like I said, I won’t be able to hold the barrier up very long—a minute or two at most.”

“That should give us the time we need.” Ashley declared, “So...we ready to move out?”

“I want to check out these control relays first.” Nelia replied, “If they’re not damaged enough, maybe I can fix them and get the station’s environmental back on track.”

“Go for it.” Shelana replied as she took up position near the door, “We’ll keep an eye on things until you’re done.”

“Thanks.” Nelia grinned as she approached the control panel, “It shouldn’t take long.” A few minutes later, the lights on the console flickered back to life as the Orion engineer announced, “We’re back...more or less. I’ve restored limited functionality, but we’re still going to need to go down to the computer core to completely fix this mess. I’ve also managed to salvage some log entries.”

“Play them.” Shelana urged, “Maybe they’re from the ERH.”

“Okay...here’s the first one.”

“Log entry, supplemental. The power fluctuations aren’t related to the problems with the power subsystems in the upper decks, so I’m looking into the possibility of feedback damage or system spikes in the environmental systems.”

“Logical.” Nelia nodded her head thoughtfully, “The repairs I just made should take care of some of that. I’m surprised the ERH didn’t think of doing that.”

“Would a VI...errr...ERH be able to think creatively like that?” Ashley inquired.

“Yeah.” Nelia nodded, “Photonic life forms are fully sentient. That should have been the first set of repairs he made.”

“So...why didn’t he?”

“Good question.” The roguish Orion replied, “Let’s see what else he says.”

“It could take some time to make repairs though—especially if I have to replicate parts and components. Belen is...reluctant...to use the replicators for anything not focused on guest entertainment.”

“That’s odd...” Nelia murmured, “Yeah, while Belen is like almost any Ferengi merchant in that he pays constant attention to his bottom line, he’s also smart. He knows that he’s not going to get any profit at all if the station falls apart because repairs aren’t made. While he would have grumbled and grouched, he’d have given permission for the ERH to replicate what he needed.”

“This is dirty, uncomfortable, and thoroughly disagreeable work. Naturally, as soon as the job involves mucking around in recycled atmosphere and waste processing, I get the short straw.”

“Looks like we’re dealing with a repurposed EMH Mk. 1.” Nelia muttered, “This could be a problem.”

“Why?” Rana inquired, “Was there a problem with the Mk. 1s?”

“It depends on your point of view.” Nelia answered back. “The Mk. 1s have a reputation for being rather moody and temperamental.”

“It didn’t take long for Starfleet to develop a Mk. 2 EMH that was much more agreeable personality-wise than the Mk. 1.” Twesata interjected, “Once they began deploying the Mk. 2s, Starfleet began repurposing the Mk. 1s—reprogramming them to work in environments too dangerous or toxic for organic workers.”

“Kind of like what the quarians did with the geth.” Rana pondered, then, seeing the questioning looks on some of her teammates’ faces, explained, “The quarians are a race from our universe. They created an artificial life form called the geth to do hard, dangerous, and tedious work. Unfortunately, they did too good a job because their creations eventually developed consciousness and so the quarians decided to act proactively...”

“They tried pulling the plug, but by then it was too late.” Ashley declared, joining the conversation. “The geth threw the quarians off their homeworld and then the Council kicked the quarians out, forcing them to become migratory.”

“Why don’t the quarians just find another world and settle down?” Shelana asked.

“Besides spending several hundred years in a sterile shipboard environment...” Rana explained, “their immune systems were weak to begin with. Rannoch, their homeworld, didn’t evolve much in the range of pathogenic lifeforms. Added to that, what microbes and viruses that were there were for the most part at least somewhat beneficial to them, leading to the development of a symbiotic relationship with their environment.”

“That would make founding a new colony problematic for them given the type of technology in your universe from what you’ve told us.” Twesata observed thoughtfully with a nod of her head. “Combine that with an apparent lack of support from the other races in your universe...”

“Quarians and krogans are often regarded with suspicion by the other races.” Rana ruefully confessed, adding in a somber tone, “I can’t help but think that was one of the reasons why Saren was able to get a lot of support from the krogans.”

“I thought they were all mercs that he hired.” Ashley interjected, “I remember Wrex telling Shepard that Saren had hired him and a bunch of other mercs to take down a volus freighter. And, the ones that we ran into on Therum and Feros were also mercs.”

Shaking her head, Rana filled in the gaps for everyone, including her human companion. “Some of the krogan clans like Nakmor, Weyrloc, Gulnaz, and a few others joined up with Saren willingly. All it took to get them to join was for him to promise that he could cure the genophage.”

“They weren’t suspicious?” Nelia queried, “One of the first things I learned was that when someone promises you the universe, the most likely thing you’re going to end up with is a sack of shit.”

“All it took was for Saren to invite them to Virmire...” Rana answered back. “He gave them a tour of the facilities—showing them only what he wanted them to see while Sovereign...”

“Began indoctrinating them.” Ashley finished, her asari companion glumly nodding her head in affirmation.

“Right. After that, they couldn’t wait to give Saren all the genetic material and warriors he needed.” The asari scientist concluded grimly. “Those clans flocked to him once they thought that he was delivering on his promises, all the while not realizing that they were being used.”

“While this is a fascinating topic...” Nelia interrupted, “We’ve got work to do, ladies. So...”

“Let’s get to it.” Ashley agreed. “Sooner we’re done...sooner we’re outta here.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Twesata giggled as Shelana gave her former classmate a friendly punch in the arm.

“You’ll drink to anything, Twes.” The Andorian tactical officer teased, “Now, come on...let’s get going.”

“Door’s locked.” Twesata exclaimed as she tried without success to open the lift door.

“This was deliberate sabotage and the only one who could have done it is the ERH.” Nelia grimly concluded as she opened the access panel.

“If the ERH has gone psycho...” Shelana morosely noted before being cut off by her Betazoid classmate.

“Not only is Ara in danger...so is the station if he does something stupid like overloading the power core.”

“Then we better hurry and get that door opened.” Ashley agreed as Nelia nodded her head.

“Give me a moment.” The green Orion declared as she went to work. “Got it.” She announced, pausing for a moment to caution her teammates, “Be ready when I open that door because I’ve got a feeling all hell’s about to break loose.”

“Keep the barrier up just one more second, Rana!” Shelana shouted as energy beams fired from her and her teammates converged on the sole remaining phantom, a large and especially fearsome Devedian until, finally, overcome by the combined fire, the creature disintegrated.

Collapsing to the floor, the lovely asari scientist gasped for breath as both Twesata and Ashley rushed to her side. Taking out her medkit, the Betazoid science officer quickly administered a hypo. “She’ll be alright.” Twes said with a soft voice, reassuring the others. “I gave her a

mild stimulant. That should get her up and going soon.”

“I’m feeling better.” Rana smiled at her teammates as Ashley and Twesata helped her to her feet. “I’ve never kept a barrier up that long against that much pressure before. I didn’t think I could do it. Matron Aethyla, my old fitness teacher in secondary school, used to call me her weakest link. Guess I showed her.”

“You bet your ass you did.” Ashley grinned, the asari woman smiling in response as she joked back.

“Speaking of which…” Rana quipped, “I think I bruised it when I fell.”

“Well don’t expect me to kiss it and make it better.” The human bantered as Nelia made her way to the console.

“Give me a moment and I’ll get this working again.” The Orion engineer declared as she began the laborious process of repairing the old relays. Several minutes later, she called out triumphantly. “Got it. Check the maintenance logs, would you Twes? Let’s see if any recent entries were made.”

“Found one!” The Betazoid science officer responded as she pressed a button on the console. “I’ll play it.”

“Log entry, supplemental: I’ve upgraded a few components on this level, including remote overrides for bleed valves on environment controls, holomitters to expedite repairs, and security overrides in case of emergency…”

“Okay…” Nelia murmured as she listened to the ERH’s report, “So far nothing out of the ordinary.”

“I’m starting to suspect that the low-level radiation I’ve detected on these decks has affected the station inhabitants, and that some are showing signs of acute schizophrenia and paranoia. I’ll have to maintain contact silence for now so they don’t interfere while I repair the systems. Once I’ve cured the problem dealing with the radiation leaks, we can deal with the symptoms.”

“That doesn’t sound so good.” Ashley commented, “It sounds to me like it’s the one getting paranoid.”

“That’s why the old EMH 1s were phased out.” Nelia replied. “The original creator, Lewis Zimmerman, was something of an eccentric to begin with…”

“He was borderline paranoid.” Shelana wryly interjected.

“That too.” Nelia conceded with a nod of her head. “He programmed the original EMHs with some of his engrams…including his quirks.”

“When they’re working correctly, the Mk. 1s are kinda cute when they’re not being pains in the ass.” Twesata commented with a smirk, “But when they lose it…”

“They really lose it.” Shelana interrupted, finishing her friend’s statement.

“What model EMH do we have on the *Princess*?” Rana asked with a note of concern in her voice.

“Don’t worry.” Twesata giggled as she laid her hand briefly on her asari friend’s arm. “It’s not a Mk. 1. It’s a Mk. 4 patterned after Dr. Leonard McCoy, a famous doctor from the 23rd century. While he’s also a bit on the eccentric side…”

“Yeah.” Rana grinned as she mirrored the Betazoid woman’s earlier action by brushing her hand against her raven-haired companion’s arm, “I noticed that. I’ve heard some humans speak with that weird accent of his…”

“It’s called Southern.” Ashley replied, her initial good humor replaced by a sad smile, “I had a squadmate in the 212 from Georgia…good man…good shot with a rifle.”

“Anyway, our EMH is a lot more stable than those glitchy EMH 1s.” Twesata asserted as a voice crackled from the wall comm unit.

“Is someone there?”

“Who is this?” Nelia answered back as she spoke into the comm.

“It’s me…Ara!” The voice replied. Her voice now more panicked, the missing dabo girl pleaded, *“I need help. Please! He’s here… NOOOO!”*

Calling up a map of the old station, Nelia pointed. “She’s in Section 23…one floor down and to the right. Let’s move!”

Act 3: Conclusion

As they made their way down the maintenance corridor towards Section 23, the girls froze at the sound of a chilling voice singing, *"Bonnie-kin, bonnie-kin, I see you! Bonnie kin, bonnie-kin what will you do?"*

Twesata remarked with a grimace, "I think I just peed myself."

"Me too." Ashley replied as she scanned the corridor looking for any sort of movement in the shadows.

Moving further down the corridor, Nelia raised her hand in a halting gesture. "He's vented plasma into the corridor."

"I can jam the plasma nodes with a tetryonic pulse." Twesata replied as she made the necessary adjustments on her tricorder. Pressing a button, she grinned as the plasma nodes shut down, "Well...what do you know...Dr. Cylo's lecture on wave interference came in handy after all."

"Good to see you did more than fuck the other cadets in the back storage closet during classes." Shelana teased as she took point, leading the team down the corridor. Then, spying movement, she called out, a phaser blast barely missing her as she dodged and returned fire. "One o'clock!"

"I think I winged him." Ashley panted, catching her breath as she and the others reached the door to Section 23—the old communications center. "But God was he fast!"

"He's a hologram." Nelia explained, "Kind of like...what do you humans call it...a will of the wasp?"

"Will o' the wasp." The former gunnery chief chuckled briefly, her laughter dying out as her eyes fell on the door, "I've got a bad feeling about what we're going to find on the other side."

"I do too." Shelana grimly replied as she spoke to her old friend, "You picking up anything on your tricorder, Twes?"

"No life signs." The Betazoid scientist grimly responded.

"I'm opening the door." Nelia cautioned, "Be ready for anything."

"We're ready." Both Ashley and Shelana replied in unison as they both crouched while pointing their weapons at the door.

"Twes...Rana...flanking positions." Shelana commanded, gesturing for the two scientists to take up positions in cover on either side of the door. "Now, Nelia!"

"Shit." Nelia swore as she saw a humanoid body lying in the middle of the room. "Girls...I think I've found Ara."

"God dammit." Ashley swore as she gazed down on the battered body of the former dabo girl, a gaping wound on her chest.

Shelana growled angrily as she knelt down beside the body, "It wasn't enough for him to set his phaser to a setting that would cause the maximum amount of pain before killing her. No. He had to beat her up first."

"That synthetic bastard's going down hard." Ashley vowed through clenched teeth as the door slid shut and everyone heard the crazed ERH's sing song voice.

"Bonnie kin, Bonnie kin, all dressed in red. Bonnie kin, Bonnie kin, soon you'll be dead."

"I see him!" Rana shouted as she launched a weak biotic throw, surprising the crazed hologram, causing him to miss as he fired his phaser.

"Not bad." Shelana called out in praise as she fired her phaser.

"Didn't think I had it in me." The asari scientist replied as she dived behind a console, dodging a phaser beam.

"Bonnie kin!!"

"I've set up a photonic scrambler." Nelia declared as she activated a small device. "But for it to work, we'll need to get him closer."

"Leave that to me." Ashley responded as she took a deep breath and popped up out of cover, "Hey...light bulb! Over here!"

"They sent you! My little Bonnie-kin!" The insane hologram ranted as he took the bait and charged towards the human woman, *"To stop my work. To change my program! But you won't survive to do it, my little bonnie kin!"*

"Now!" Ashley shouted, diving behind cover just as the hologram fired his phaser.

Activating her device, Nelia called out to her team. "Everyone! Fire and don't let up until I tell you!"

"What have you done, my Bonnie kin!" The hologram cried out, seemingly in pain as he was caught up in the scrambler field. *"No! I must complete my task!"* He shouted as energy beams from four phasers converged on him. *"No!! Bye, Bye my Bonnie kin!"*

Ceasing their fire as the hologram derezzed, dropping a mobile emitter where it stood, the four women looked down on the tiny device. Kneeling down, Twesata picked up the emitter. "I think we can use this to take out the Devedians in the computer core." There's a subroutine embedded in the emitter that emits a low level scrambling field. It'll disrupt any time vortices in the room, keeping them from calling in

reinforcements.”

“That, in combination with our adjusted phasers and Rana’s barrier, should get the job done.” Nelia nodded her head as she turned to her teammates, “So, girls...ready to finish this?”

“Yeah.” Ashley replied as she looked down on Ara’s dead body. “We owe it to her.”

“And to Lorox and anyone else the Devedians killed.” Shelana grimly added.

“Then, let’s go.” Nelia commanded, pointing to the door that accessed the computer core, “Time to slay some monsters.”

“Twes!” Rana shouted in panic; eyes agape as she witnessed her Betazoid companion’s life energy being slowly drained away.

“Feel...” Twesata gasped, “Slipping...”

“Oh no you don’t!” Rana screamed at the monster as she put all her effort into one last gasp biotic warp, ensnaring the Devedian phantom that was devouring her friend’s life force. “No one messes with my...”

The phantom’s hold weakening under the asari’s biotic assault, Twesata, putting all her remaining energy into one final psychic attack, groaned as a trickle of blood beginning at the corner of her eyes began to run down her cheeks. “Not...today...” She moaned as Rana’s biotic attack was now joined by phaser fire from Shelana, Ashley, and Nelia, all converging on the monster’s head. “Go to hell, asshole!” The raven-haired Betazoid shouted triumphantly as the phantom disappeared into the ether, disincorporated by the combined assault.

Collapsing exhausted to the floor, the lovely scientist looked up at the asari who had rushed to her side. “Your what?” Twesata teased, managing a shaky grin.

“We’ll talk about it later. When you’re feeling better.” Rana grinned back as she gently stroked her companion’s cheek, wiping away the blood trickle.

“Gonna hold you to that.” Twesata whispered before closing her eyes.

“She’ll be fine.” Nelia consoled as she took the medical tricorder from her asari teammate and ran a diagnostic over their fallen friend. “She’s just exhausted.” Her gaze falling upon Rana, the Orion team leader remarked, “You’re not looking so good either. That was a hell of a fight you two had with that thing—you did good. But, it’s straight to bed when we get back—you both need sleep.”

“Yes, Mother.” Rana bantered back, managing a shaky grin.

“Nelia...Shels?” Ashley called out, waving to her new squadmates. “You need to come over here and see this.”

Rushing to the former Alliance marine’s location, Nelia looked down at the two corpses her teammate pointed at: a human male wearing a red shirt, black pants, and boots, and a human woman wearing a pale blue miniskirt and black boots. “Starfleet...23rd century by the look of their uniforms.” The green Orion observed. “The Devedians must have brought them here from their own time through the time vortex.”

“You’re telling me that they treated those poor people like they were some sort of God damned takeout order!” Ashley exclaimed, the outrage readily obvious in her expression, “We’ve got to do something about these bastards!”

“We will.” Nelia vowed as Shelana and the others joined the pair. “But first we need to get back up to the main station and let Belen and Drake know what’s going on.”

“Right.” Ashley nodded in agreement. “If we’ve done everything we need to do here, then let’s get the hell out.”

Drozana Station—24 Hours later.

Speaking to the three spymasters sharing space on the viewscreen, Nelia inquired, “So...you’ve had time to read our reports. What the hell are we going to do about these Devedians?”

“We’ve decided on a course of action.” Franklin Drake, the enigmatic Federation representative of the triad, responded. “Report with your ship to the Beppo system. There you will meet with a special agent by the name of Daniels. He will fill you in on your mission details.”

“Our intelligence indicates that the Devedians are pawns in a much larger game.” Tal’Mera, the Romulan member of the triad interjected. “While it is vital that they are stopped, we also must ascertain the aims of their puppet masters.”

“That is where Agent Daniels comes in.” The Klingon representative, Ramir of House Pegh, declared with a grunt. “He will be able to tell you more once you arrive at the Beppo system.”

“Take care of what you need to take care of here and then get underway as soon as you can.” Drake advised, further cautioning, “This assignment will be a difficult one.”

“So we’re going to be paid accordingly.” Nelia quipped with a crooked grin on her face.

“Don’t worry.” A slight smile appeared on Drake’s face as he responded to the roguish Orion’s cheeky remark, “If you pull this off, you’ll be very well compensated.”

“What about Belen?” Nelia inquired, “We’ll probably need him for this. Having an extra engineer around doesn’t hurt.”

“You can bring your Ferengi.” Ramir harrumphed, “As far as we’re concerned, he’s part of your crew.”

“Good luck and may the Elements guide your path.” Tal’Mera remarked as the briefing ended.

Turning to her teammates, Nelia grinned, “You heard them. Anything you need to do or take care of...do it now. We’ve got twenty four hours before we take off for the Beppo System.”

“Drinks and dinner, Rana?” Twesata inquired, smiling at the asari sitting beside her.

“Sure.” Rana grinned back as she brushed her hand against her Betazoid companion’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“What about you, Ash?” Shelana inquired. “There’s a Pareses Squares match in one of the holosuites later on this evening. Wanna catch it with me? Then after we can grab some beers...maybe pick up a couple of good looking men.”

“Sounds good, Shels.” Ashley grinned, “It’ll give me time to write a couple of letters to my sisters that...Yeah...” the former gunnery chief sighed, “...I know they’ll never get delivered but...”

“The Andorian woman nodded her head in sympathy, “I understand. I’ll comm you before the match begins so that we can get good seats.” Turning to the green Orion woman standing on the other side of her, Shelana inquired, “So...what are your plans, Nelia?”

“Ohhh...” The lovely rogue smirked, “A little drinking...a little dancing...some dabo...and probably a lot of fucking.”

Twesata and Rana

“Thanks, Rana.” Twesata smiled at the blue-skinned asari seated across from her as she took a sip of her tulaberry wine. Her smile fading away, the lovely Betazoid recalled their recent encounter with the Devedians. “I don’t know if you were able to see what I saw when I looked into that monster’s mind...”

“What did you see?” Rana asked as she took a nibble of Romulan mollusk with Talarian greens, washing it down with a sip of wine.

“It saw us purely as food.” Twesata shuddered as she set down her wine glass, “Livestock. It felt no remorse...no regret...at what it was doing. We weren’t even worth its contempt. But...” the Betazoid empath/telepath again felt a shiver, “I felt something else too...”

“Fear.” Rana interrupted in a soft voice. “I felt it also. It was afraid of something...someone.”

“Yeah.” Twesata nodded in agreement. “Maybe that’s what Drake’s sending us after?”

“I hope not.” Rana replied, a shiver running up her spine as well, “What little I picked up from that thing...” the asari scientist shook her head, “...it scares me worse than Saren and the Reapers.”

“Sooooo...” The lovely raven-haired Betazoid drawled, changing the topic to a much happier one.

“Sooooo?” Rana grinned back at her companion as she took a sip of wine.

“Us.” Twesata smirked.

“What about us?” The asari answered back with a coy grin.

“There’s obviously something...but...I’m not looking for anything permanent. At least not right now.” The Betazoid remarked, with a flirtatious smirk.

“Same here.” Rana acknowledged, “How about this...we take things as they come and see what happens. Work for you?”

“Works for me.” Twesata responded, further tempting, “Wanna join me in my quarters? I picked up some Tiberian incense last week.”

“Oh?” Rana flirted, “What does it do?”

“It’s like floating on a cloud.” Twesata answered back with a wink, “Oh...and it’s also a super aphrodisiac. So...interested?”

“What are we waiting for?”

Nelia and Belen

“I sent Ara’s things to her sister on Terranova.” Belen announced to his Orion friend as he mixed her antarean sunrise and placed it on the bar

in front of where she sat.

“And Lorox?” Nelia asked as she sipped her drink.

Shaking his head, the Ferengi bartender replied, “He didn’t have a family. His Moogie died a few years ago and no siblings. He paid his debts off—there weren’t very many to begin with...mostly what he owed me and...” the Ferengi lowered his voice to barely a whisper, “I wrote them off a long time ago.”

Smiling fondly at her friend, Nelia lifted her glass, “I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thanks.” Belen’s lips turned up in a sad smile, “I’ve got a reputation to protect, you know. I’ve also arranged for his remains to be properly desiccated.”

“You’re not going to just put them up on the Exchange, are you?” Nelia inquired, knowing that the deceased Ferengi’s remains would not fetch a very high price, therefore diminishing the chances for him buying his way into the Great Exchequer.

“Of course not!” Belen protested, “I’m using a dummy corporation to purchase the remains and then donate the proceeds to the Nagus’s scholarship fund for aspiring merchants at the University of Ferenginar.”

Nodding her head slightly in approval, Nelia remarked in a low voice, “You really are a softie. So...you sure you want to come with us tomorrow? I don’t know what Drake’s got in store for us, but I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be very dangerous.”

“Couldn’t keep me away.” The Ferengi bartender grinned, “Someone’s got to look after the *Princess* while you girls are stirring up shit. Besides you need me to fix your drinks when you come back.”

“We do indeed.” The roguish Orion replied as her eyes drifted to a handsome human male accompanied by a very attractive Kantarean woman playing dabo.

“See something you like?” Belen quipped with a slight smirk on his face.

“Mmmm...hmmm...” Nelia smirked, giving her Ferengi friend a wink, “I think I’m going to play some dabo...see you later, Bel.”

“I know better than to tell you to behave yourself.” Belen laughed, “So have fun and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ashley

Hi Sarah!

Just checking in with you, Sis. You keeping up with your classwork? Still planning on going to college after you graduate. You better be. I’m getting used to how things work here now—even getting used to taking the transporter to get where I need to go. I was scared to death of it at first, but now, it’s not that big a deal. Just got back from a hairy mission—we ran into some trans-dimensional ghosts that suck out your life force. Scary, huh? Yeah...it was scary for us too. We also found out that they might be the puppets of someone else—maybe the same people that made those gateways like the one that brought me here. And that takes us to our next mission. Me and my friends are heading out tomorrow. Don’t know what we’re going to find, but I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be wild. Well...I gotta go now. I’m meeting up with Shelana and we’re going to catch a Pareses Squares match in one of the holosuites and then after...if all goes well... a few beers and maybe a little dancing with a couple of good looking guys. Talk to you later, Sis. Behave!

Love, Ashley

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