

Into the Breach

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Into the Breach

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Summary

The Spoiled Princess and friends make their move against Mok and the Nausicaan slavers

Act One: Planning the Party

poiled Princess

“He’s making his move.” Shelana declared as the viewscreen focused on a Ferengi *Marauder* moving away from the station at full impulse. “You want us to intercept?”

“No.” Nelia shook her head, “If he’s smart, he’s got his engines souped up. He thinks we’re after him, we’ll never catch him. Lock on to his warp trail and cloak. We’ll let him take us to his base.”

“Good idea.” Ashley interjected, further cautioning, “We might want to call in our backup—just in case.”

“Good point. There might be one helluva reception committee waiting for us. Wouldn’t hurt to have some friends of our own just in case.” Nelia agreed, “Twes? Can you raise our friends and tell them we’re on the move.”

“Sure thing.” The Betazoid telepath responded, “Got ‘em. Feeding them our coordinates and vectors now. They’ve acknowledged and are on their way.”

“Terrific.” The roguish Orion exclaimed as she leaned back in her chair. “I’ve got a feeling it’s going to take us some time to get to where we’re going so we might as well relax. Once we arrive, we’re going to be busy enough.”

Mok's Asteroid Base

“Shit.” Ashley groaned as the Ferengi’s fortified base appeared, its Nausicaan garrison, led by a Talon battleship, hovering close to the asteroid. “That’s a big ship.”

“Good thing we brought some friends of our own.” Shelana muttered to her friend as Twesata announced.

“*Belladonna* and *D’ressa* hailing us.”

“Main viewer...split screen.” Nelia requested as the fortified asteroid was replaced on the viewscreen by two images. On the right appeared the bridge of a *Lafayette*-class recon destroyer, an attractive young woman with strawberry-blonde hair and wearing a Terran Empire uniform of gold halter top and short skirt, while on the left the image of a bridge from a *D’Deridex* class battlecruiser appeared, its captain a dignified Romulan male wearing a Republic uniform.

“Hello, dahlings.” The captain of the *Belladonna* introduced herself, speaking in a rich Hungarian accent, her lips turned up in an amused grin. “Captain Zsuzsanna Rosza, commanding *USS Belladonna*. It’s good to see you again, Nelia.” Her smile now predatory, the alternate universe Terran Empire captain inquired, “So...who are we killing today?”

“It is good to see you again, Commander Terre...” The commanding officer of the *D’ressa*, Commander Kaval declared, his smile one of friendly recognition. “It has been some time since our last meeting. How have you and your friends fared in the interval?”

“Not bad, Commander.” Nelia grinned back, giving both Zsa-Zsa and the Romulan Commander a coy wink. “And it’s been good seeing you again too, Zsa-Zsa. How’s Eliza? And that hunk of a tactical officer of yours? What’s his name again?”

“Joachim. He’s in auxiliary control right now. I’ll tell him you said Hi.” Zsa-Zsa responded with a flirtatious wink of her own. Turning about in her chair, the Hungarian captain called out, “Eliza? Nelia’s here...come over and say Hi.”

“Hey Nelia, did you get that package I sent you?” Commander Eliza Flores, the olive-skinned executive officer of the *Belladonna* purred.

“I did.” Nelia grinned back, “Next time we’re on the station, we should all give it a try--what do you say?”

“Sounds good to me.” Eliza responded, “Catch you later.”

Turning her attention back to the two captains on her screen, Nelia got down to the task at hand. “Now...to business. Zsa-Zsa...Kaval...any ideas?”

“This is going to be a tough nut to crack.” The Terran starship captain mused, “It’s not so much the battleship--there’s only one of it. It’s those fucking Syphon frigates and the battle-stations surrounding that goddamned asteroid—not to mention it’s got disruptor and photon torpedo turrets.”

“Zsa-Zsa’s right.” Kaval agreed, “We need to draw that Talon away from its support and take out the station defenses.”

“Then it is a good thing you have me.” A rough voice announced as a Klingon *K’tinga*-class battlecruiser decloaked, the human-augment captain’s image also appearing on the screen. “Korath of House Koloth. Commanding IKS *Klothos*. I was sent by Dahar master Ramir to provide assistance. Do not worry...” The Klingon laughed, “Our truce with the Federation still holds.”

“Glad to hear that, Korath, *dragam*.” Captain Rosza interjected with a laugh, “We wouldn’t want a repeat of Kassae, now would we?”

“Just as much as you wouldn’t want a recurrence of Archanis, Zsa-Zsa, my *taluhk*.” The Klingon laughed back, “As always, a pleasure to see you again, Captain. I trust you have been doing well since our last meeting?”

“You know me, Korath...” Zsuzsanna teased, “Some feasting...a little fighting...and a lot of *baszni*.”

Laughing a rich belly laugh, the Klingon captain joked back, “I see you haven’t changed since our last encounter on Risa. Who were you with then? As I recall it was Eliza and a Trill male...”

“And your par’machi was...she was an Orion woman, wasn’t she?” The Hungarian captain bantered back.

“Indeed.” Korath replied, “I am still with her and she wanted me to thank you for inviting us to your party. As always, it was deliciously decadent.” The human-augment Klingon lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “Not like the celebrations my ridged kin hold...they take themselves far too seriously...”

“Not to mention all that headbutting and bloodwine chugging. That gets rather tiresome.” Zsa-Zsa interjected with an eyeroll.

“Sounds like those two have a history.” Rana whispered to Twesata as she and her lover watched the two ship captains banter back and forth with each other.

“You could say that.” Twesata smirked, “From what I’ve heard through the grapevine, Zsa-Zsa and Korath have tangled with each other in more ways than one.”

Clearing her throat, Nelia quipped, “Sorry to interrupt this family reunion, but we do have a situation to deal with.”

“Quite right.” Kaval, who had remained silent as his fellow captains joked with each other, echoed. “Might I suggest we meet on your ship to plan out our strategy.”

“Good idea.” Nelia agreed with a smile, “I’ll tell Belen to get the lounge ready. Shall we meet in say...fifteen minutes.”

“Sounds good, dahling.” Zsa-Zsa replied, “I’ll see you then.”

“I look forward to our meeting in person.” Kaval declared, his lips turning up in a slight grin.

“I will be there as well.” Korath announced. “Fifteen standard minutes.”

Spoiled Princess—Lounge

“What’s the story on the Klingons?” Ashley asked as she and the others awaited the arrival of their guests.

“What do you mean?” Nelia answered back.

“Granted I haven’t run into too many Klingons...” The former Alliance marine replied, “but the ones I have met on Drozana station were all the same. You know...long hair...ridges...”

“Loud.” Rana interjected with a snicker.

Chuckling, the green Orion team leader responded, “Klingons are like pretty much any other species in that there’s a lot of racial diversity, but unlike humans, Andorians, Betazoids, or Orions, you see more differences in physical appearance with them than just skin color.”

“Right.” Twesata interjected, “The ones with the head ridges and long hair, but otherwise basically human-like in appearance are probably the most common group you’ll run into. They’re also generally pretty easy to get along with once you understand where they’re coming from.”

Nodding her head, Shelana agreed. “Yeah. Just remember that honor is very important to them, and that as far as they are concerned, the ultimate glory is to either win or die in glorious battle. The bigger the fight and harder the odds...the more glorious the battle. They’re very passionate and quick tempered—kinda like us Andorians...but they’ve also got a great sense of humor and...if you’re a friend...they will literally claw through hell to fight and die for you.”

“Then there are those that some humans call ‘Kling-Orcs’.” Twesata remarked, continuing her explanation from where she was interrupted. “I’m not sure where that expression came from...” she muttered as an aside before returning to the subject, “but that branch is probably closest to the original phenotype. You don’t see them as often as the first type. They tend to keep to themselves and are probably the most xenophobic and belligerent of the Klingon variants—although all Klingons are combative to one extent or another. After the Klingon-Federation War of the early-mid 23rd century, the ‘Kling-Orcs’ have tended to withdraw to themselves. Until recently, they haven’t really been seen anywhere outside of core Klingon space.”

“What about Korath?” Ashley inquired, “He looks human.”

“That’s because he is...partly.” Twesata explained. “In the 22nd century, the Klingons were experimenting with Human Augment Virus that they had managed to acquire and were using it in an attempt to create enhanced warriors.”

“Bad idea.” Rana shook her head, “That sort of stuff always backfires. Believe me...I’m speaking from personal experience here.”

“Yeah.” Ashley nodded her head, “Saren’s Krogan cloning facility.”

“Right.” Twesata agreed with a nod of her head, “In this case, the virus got out into the wild and combined with Levodian flu to create a fast spreading lethal bug that infected the Qu’Vat colony and then began spreading to other worlds. The Klingons were on the verge of sterilizing the infected planets—and wiping out their entire population in the process—when Dr. Phlox from the *Enterprise*, working with a Klingon scientist, Antaak, eventually found a cure. The cure resulted in altering Klingon DNA where human appearance and genetic traits were passed

on. This resulted in millions...if not billions...of Klingons essentially looking like humans with many human characteristics.”

“So...what happened?” Ashley asked.

“A cure was found for the augment virus sometime in the mid-23rd century and most Klingon-augments took it. However, a sizeable minority, for various reasons, did not. This resulted in some houses such as Koloth, Kor, and Kang splitting into two branches.” Twesata elaborated, “Korath belongs to the augment branch of the House of Koloth.”

“Fascinating.” Rana exclaimed, “I’d love to delve further into this.” Seeing the questioning looks her teammates were giving her, the asari geneticist quickly explained herself. “From what Twes told us, the results the first time were nearly catastrophic. And like I said, after my experience working for Saren, I have no intention of making that mistake ever again. I’m just curious about the research from an academic angle.”

“Good.” Ashley nodded her head, satisfied at the asari scientist’s answer. “Keep it that way.”

“Data from the Klingon side is hard to come by.” Twesata replied, “They’re very close mouthed about that particular aspect of their culture and history. There is some information from the Federation side—but again, not a whole lot. Augment research is pretty much forbidden everywhere for obvious reasons.”

“Yeah...” Nelia agreed as the ship’s comm beeped. “Oops...we’re going to have to postpone the rest of this discussion until later. Our guests are beaming in.” Just as she finished her words, three pillars of light—one orange, one blue, and one green—appeared in the middle of the lounge revealing the three captains.

“Hello, dahlings.” Captain Rosza called out in greeting as she wasted no time in heading for the bar, “I do hope you have a bottle of champagne—preferably Kristal—chilled.”

“We do indeed.” Belen replied as he gestured towards the bar, “Please, Captains...have seat and I’ll fetch your drinks for you.”

“Thank you.” Korath responded as he took the stool next to the strawberry-blonde haired Hungarian starship captain. “Your best bloodwine!”

“Greetings.” Kaval exclaimed, bowing slightly, “It is a pleasure to meet in person, Ms. Terre.”

“Nelia’s good enough.” The lovely Orion woman smirked flirtatiously. “What would you like, Commander?”

“Kaval. Just Kaval since we’re being informal.” The Romulan commander replied with a slight grin as he sat down at the bar, “And I’d like a Romulan ale if you have one, thank you.”

Pouring the blue liquor into a narrow crystal wine glass similar to a champagne flute, the Ferengi bartender joked lightly, “Do we have Romulan ale? What sort of host would I be if we didn’t have not just Romulan ale, but the best I could find and afford?”

“So...dahlings...” Zsa-Zsa bantered, her playful voice carrying a serious undertone as she sipped her champagne, “Any ideas on how we’re going to break through those Nausicaans?”

“This will not be a game of *klin-zha*.” Korath growled as he drank his bloodwine. “Trying to push through those fortifications in a head on attack—while glorious—would be futile. We need to take a page from the Earther game, chess.”

“Use diversionary tactics to pull some of the ships off and defeat them in detail” Zsuzsanna mused, nodding her head in thought. “Although, *dragam*...” she smirked as she turned her gaze to the human-augment Klingon, “Chess is probably not the correct comparison. I’d say that Tongo is the better analogy here.”

“Just what I was about to say!” Belen interjected, “Move and counter...boldness and misdirection...the art of the bluff...the key is knowing when to use which strategy to gain a full consortium and win.”

“Right.” Zsa-Zsa agreed as she sipped her champagne, “The *Belladonna* will be the bait...”

Nodding his head in understanding, Kaval interrupted, “That should draw the frigates off into a trap...” Calling up a local map, he pointed to a nearby nebula. “That Class 2 nebula. Their sensors will be scrambled...”

“So will ours.” Korath noted with some concern.

“True.” Kaval conceded, “But we will have the advantage of attacking from cloak. It gives us a further plus in that it will scramble their energy siphons.”

“Good point.” Zsuzsanna agreed, “Once we take out the frigates, that’ll just leave that Talon.”

“I don’t think the captain of that ship’s going to be too keen about moving too far away from the battlestations.” Shelana commented, “Hell...not even the four of us together can take that thing down along with those stations plus the asteroid’s defense turrets supporting it.”

“Shels has a point.” Ashley added, supporting her friend’s argument. “He’s going to stick close to those defenses.”

“Nausicaans might be loud obnoxious redbats, but they’re not stupid.” Shelana further cautioned, “We need to find a way to draw that ship away.”

Zsa-Zsa replied with a wicked grin on her face. “Let me worry about that, dahling. Before I draw those frigates away, I’m going to launch a special torpedo designed to temporarily knock out sensors and another torpedo that should temporarily interfere with their transporter buffers. That will give you the window that you’ll need to...”

Her lips also turning up in a sly grin, Nelia interrupted, "Beam down into the base and wreck it from inside."

"Hmmm...Nelia, dahling, you're as delicious in mind as you are in body." The Hungarian starship captain purred, licking her lips lasciviously.

"Strip tongo when we're back on the station?" Nelia flirted back, giving the former Empire captain a coy wink.

"You're on." Zsa-Zsa teased back, "Winner gets the prize."

"It's going to call for split second timing." Twesata, returning to the subject at hand, mused as she pondered the strategy, "But it should work."

"Not like we have much in the range of alternatives." Ashley declared. "I say go for it." She then quoted from Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, "Flashed all their sabers bare, Flashed as they turned in air, Sabring the gunners there, Charging an army while all the world wondered...."

Clapping his hands, Korath exclaimed loudly, "Well spoken! Very well spoken! Are you sure you're not part Klingon, human? You have the heart of a warrior." Sighing, the Klingon captain remarked, "I envy you...you will win much glory in this battle—live or die."

"Preferably live." Nelia quipped.

"There will be plenty of glory for all of us." Kaval wryly noted, "Those six frigates are not going down without a fight."

"Even better." Korath replied with a smirk, "Let's make this battle one worthy of song."

"That base will be heavily defended." Kaval pointed out, "It might not be a bad idea for your team to have backup, Nelia?"

"I agree." Zsuzsanna declared, "How about one security officer from each of our ships?"

"Hmmm..." Nelia pondered the suggestion before replying, "Since Belen is going to have to remain on the ship, that's going to make us short an engineer."

"Not a problem." The Hungarian captain acknowledged, "I'll send S'vol, he's a good combat engineer."

"More muscle would be a good idea, Nelia." Ashley advised, "Our scans can't get through their jamming, so we really don't know what we're going to face."

"Except we do know that Mok has a telepath." Twesata further cautioned, "Another strong telepath or a Ferengi might not be a bad idea."

"S'vol scored highly on his last psi test." Zsuzsanna replied, "He won't let you down."

"That'll work." Nelia agreed as she finished her drink and got up from her stool, "If we're finished planning, then I would suggest that we all get ready...we've got work to do. Shall we commence our little plan in...ohhh...two hours." As the other captains nodded in agreement, the lovely green Orion teased, "And after the fight, you're all invited here for one helluva victory party."

Act 2: Opening Moves

Chapter Summary

The assault on Mok's fortress begins

Go Time

"*Klothos in position.*"

"*D'ressa ready.*"

"*Belladonna to Spoiled Princess, You girls ready to party?*" A thick Magyar accented voice sounded from the open comm.

"Ready when you are." Nelia replied from her position at the center chair of the *Spoiled Princess*.

"*All right.*" Captain Rosza announced, "*Let's do this. Beginning attack run. Give me max impulse, Mister Barnes. Sito...*"

"*Give the word, Captain, and I'll kick those barrowbugs in the nuts.*"

Watching as the *Lafayette*-class recon destroyer darted ever closer to the frigates, Ashley muttered, "How close is she going to get before she fires?"

"Close enough to kick 'em in the 'nads." Shelana replied with a laugh as the *Princess's* crew watched the flamboyant Hungarian captain's seemingly mad attack run.

"Be ready to move." Nelia commanded, "Belen...you've got control...girls...everyone armed and armored?"

"Yep." Twesata replied, Rana nodding in agreement with her lover.

"Ready to go." Shelana acknowledged in the flat tone of a veteran who's seen her share of combat.

"Locked and loaded." Ashley declared, also in a voice tone that revealed her time in the trenches.

"I'll keep the light on for you." Belen announced, the Ferengi bartender also pleading, "Come back in one piece—all of you."

"All right." Nelia nodded, "Everyone to the transporter room. Our backup is already there waiting for us. Time to do a little gate crashing."

USS Belladonna

"Now!" Zsuzsanna ordered leaning forward on her command chair, long strawberry-blonde hair seemingly untamed as she brushed a lock back. "Target that frigate screen. Fire at will! Eliza, love..." she called out to her executive officer, "Give me a torpedo spread—maximum possible dispersion. T'Vrel...be ready with that gravity rift. I want all those *seggfej* pissed off at us."

"Firing phasers..." Sito announced, the Bajoran tactical officer's voice tinged with anticipation at the coming action.

"Quantum torpedoes away." Eliza called out as blue blobs arced towards their targets.

Smirking as the energy beams and torpedoes found their marks, destroying one frigate immediately, Zsa-Zsa commanded as the remaining five began to move towards her destroyer. "Now, T'Vrel."

"Gravity rift outgoing." The Vulcan science officer laconically replied as a beam of energy erupted from the *Belladonna's* deflector dish.

"Frigates are avoiding the rift, but we caught three of the battlestations." Elisa reported as the ship shook under the Nausicaan vessels' weapons fire.

"Shields holding at 85 percent." Pearson, the chief engineer, reported from his station.

"The frigates are taking the bait." Elisa exclaimed as the *Belladonna*, maneuvering through and around the ferocious weapons fire coming from the pirates, launched another spread of torpedoes.

"Good." Zsuzsanna purred, "Open a channel to that battleship."

"You know they're not going to respond." Sito, the communications and tactical officer pointed out.

"Of course, *dragam.*" Zsa-Zsa answered back with an amused chuckle, "But they'll hear it..."

"Communications channel open." Sito acknowledged with an eye roll.

"Captain of the Nausicaan battleship..." Zsuzsanna announced, her voice dripping with contempt, "This is Captain Zsuzsanna Rozsa of the

USS Belladonna and I say to you...*Basszon agyon a kenkoves istennyila!*"

"Ummm...Boss..." Lieutenant Sito commented with a slight note of amusement, "I don't think they understood what you just said. For that matter, I don't either."

"I told him to get fucked to death by lightning from sulfuric stones. It's an old Hungarian curse." Zsa-Zsa laughed, "Don't worry...his translator will pick up on it."

"It worked, Captain." Eliza declared as the *Talon* began to move towards the *Belladonna*. "You pissed him off."

"Good." The Magyar captain responded with a wicked grin. "Launch our special torpedoes in the next spread and then take us to the nebula—but let's not completely outrun our pursuers. I don't want them to get discouraged and turn around." Switching channels as the torpedoes sped towards their target, Zsuzsanna announced to the crew of the *Spoiled Princess*, "You're on! Good hunting!" Switching to yet another channel, she exclaimed to her fellow captains, "The party guests are coming and they're bringing their *apa* with them."

Spoiled Princess

"The torpedoes worked!" Belen announced, his voice coming through loud and clear on the comm speaker, "If you're gonna go...go now and good luck!"

"Energize!" Nelia commanded, adding as a farewell as she dematerialized, "Take care of my baby."

"Always do." The loyal Ferengi muttered in a low voice, his words unheard by his old friend. "You and the others just take care of yourselves."

Landing party

"Hit 'em!" Nelia commanded as she and the others in the assault force fired their weapons at the Nausicaan pirates manning the transporter console.

"We've got to move quickly." Shelana declared after she and Ashley secured the immediate area, clearing it of any pirates still standing.

"Now...where would a Ferengi hide during a fight?" Rana queried with a sly grin.

"Why...the safest spot on the station...of course." Twesata joked back.

"We'll cover more ground if we split up." Ashley proposed, the Orion team leader nodding in agreement.

"Good idea, Ash. You take Rana, S'vol, and our Klingon friend..."

"Malak." The ridged Klingon declared with a scowl as he brandished his bat'leth. "It is time to soak our blades in the bodies of our foes."

"Yeah..." Ashley deadpanned, "Right. Gonna be a lot of blood soaking today. You want us to take command and control, Nel?"

"Right." Nelia nodded, "I'll go with Shels, Twes and our Romulan guest..."

"R'ann." The female Romulan security officer interjected helpfully.

Nodding once in acknowledgement, Nelia continued to lay out her strategy. "We'll secure engineering and weapons. Everyone watch out for that Lethian. He's around here somewhere."

"Probably close to Mok." Shelana observed, further admonishing, "Don't let him cold-cock you. You see him...take him down at once."

"With pleasure." R'ann replied with a scowl, "A Lethian killed my niece."

"Ready, team?" Ashley called out, rallying her people to her side.

"Yeah." Let's go. Rana answered for the others.

"You all ready to go?" Nelia then asked her team.

"Let's get this show on the road." Shelana exclaimed, the rest of the team echoing her response.

The Battle of the Nebula

"Shields down to 70 percent." Pearson called out from his station, the engineer half-joking, "I hope you've got something up your sleeve, Boss."

"They're slowing down." Eliza reported, "Looks like they're gonna break off pursuit."

"Release an ion trail from the starboard engine." Zsuzsanna commanded, "All goes well...they'll think their last volley damaged us."

Sito's lips turned up in a sly grin, "Nausicaan's are so predictable. They're like a pack of sinoraptors. Once they think their prey is injured..."

"They'll rush in for the kill." Eliza finished with an even wickeder grin.

"Right." The *Belladonna's* captain smirked as her engineer carried out her last order.

"Releasing ion trail." Liam announced.

"They're taking the bait." Eliza grinned.

"We've got 'em." Zsa-Zsa triumphantly exclaimed, "Let's lead them into the trap."

Entering the nebula, T'Vrel called out from her station, "Sensors are scrambled."

"We're counting on that." Zsuzsanna replied in a calm, reassuring voice, "Switch to a lower wavelength. They'll still be scrambled, but there'll be enough for our weapons to lock on."

"They're in position." Eliza reported.

"Now!" Captain Rosza commanded, lowering her hand in a chopping motion, "180 degrees about, fire all weapons, open another gravity rift."

"Sito?"

"Signaling *Klothos* and *D'ressa*. Both ships decloaking and firing."

"Qul dah!" Captain Korath barked, giving the command to open fire. "Concentrate on the Talon."

The Romulan commander, with a single nod of his head, commanded in a level voice, "Target the Talon. Fire heavy plasma torpedo."

A vicious smirk on her face as she saw her allies decloak and fire on the battleship, the Hungarian captain exclaimed, "Now we're really gonna have fun."

Assault on the Station—Team Ashley

"We will need to cut through security holding to get to the bridge." S'vol pointed out after Ashley and her team cleared a hastily thrown together Nausicaan choke point.

His bat'leth dripping Nausicaan blood, the Klingon member of the team, Malak, wiping away traces of blood from his mouth, cautioned, "We caught this group by surprise. It would be foolish to count on that in future encounters." Turning to the blue-skinned woman standing next to him, the warrior flashed a toothy grin, "That was a brave thing you did, interposing yourself between me and that pet'aQ. He would have stabbed me in the back."

Still quivering from her close encounter with the Nausicaan now lying dead on the floor, Rana stammered, "Thank you. I was just lucky I was able to throw up a stasis bubble in time for you to take out your first opponent and turn on him." Lowering her voice so that only Ashley could hear her words, she further remarked, "I think I shit my pants."

"You did." Ashley whispered back with an amused grin, "But that's okay. We all have at one time or another. You did good. S'vol?" She called out to the Vulcan member of her team. "What's that tricorder of yours telling you? Right or left?"

"Either direction will take us to our destination and the Nausicaans have fortified both passageways equally."

"So whichever way we go we're going to have a fight." Ashley grimly responded as she checked her phaser rifle.

"Correct." S'vol laconically affirmed.

"Good." Malak grinned, "My bat'leth is getting thirsty again."

Heaving a sigh at the Klingon warrior's desire for action, Ashley gestured in the direction of the left corridor, "All right. Move out!"

Base Assault—Nelia's Team

"Shit!" Nelia grimaced as she quickly set up a shield generator to replace the one that had just died. "How many of those bastards are there?"

"Too many." Twesata replied as she fired her phaser sniper rifle, disintegrating a Nausicaan engineer as he was in the process of setting up a mortar. "Fuck." The Betazoid telepath cursed as she sighted in her next target.

"Photon grenade outbound!" Shelana warned as she tossed her grenade and ducked for cover. Quickly springing from her position moments after the grenade exploded, the Andorian soldier and her Romulan teammate fired their automatic rifles, phaser beams joining plasma bolts in creating a killing zone that mowed down any opposition foolish enough to be caught in the open.

"Corridor cleared!" R'ann, the Romulan security officer, shouted as the Nausicaans that weren't killed withdrew, leaving the passageway in the hands of Nelia and her team.

“They’ve fallen back to their next line.” Shelana cautioned, “The closer we get to engineering and weapons, the harder they’re gonna fight. We need a way to flank them.”

Spying an access panel, Nelia grinned, “I think I might have found our way around them—or at the very least to take them by surprise.”

Crinkling her nose, Twesata grumbled, “I hate crawling through maintenance tunnels. Voles nest there if you don’t keep them clean.”

“You know that clean and Nausicaan don’t go together—right?” Shelana chuckled, ribbing her old friend.

“I was afraid you were going to say that.” Twesata moaned as Nelia removed the access hatch. Her lips now turning up in an evil grin, the lovely Betazoid quipped, “You first, Shels.”

“Yeah...yeah...” Shelana grumbled as she got down on her hands and knees and began crawling into the narrow corridor. “Send the red shirt in first.”

“I’m next.” Nelia announced before also entering the tunnel. “Twes...you and R’ann bring up the rear.”

“You owe me a trip to Belen’s spa when we get back.” Twesata quipped as she and the Romulan security officer joined their friends in creeping down the passageway. Taking a deep breath, she muttered in an inaudible tone, “Please...please...don’t let there be any voles in here.”

Assault on the Base—Mok’s Safe Room

“The intruders are closing on command and engineering and our ships are engaged in battle against an enemy task force.” The Nausicaan mercenary captain announced as he entered his employer’s office.

Sitting on a luxurious chair behind his desk, his Lethian bodyguard standing on one side of him and a giant Nausicaan on the other, Daimon Mok scowled as he regarded the captain. “So...stop the invaders! And as for the starships—that’s what that giant battleship I paid too much latinum for is supposed to do! Send it out to deal with them!”

“It’s already moving towards the intruder.” The captain defiantly announced. “And as for the invaders...we’ve set up fortified defenses at checkpoints, but they’ve brought a great deal of force. They are very well trained and equipped. I think we’re dealing with commando teams.”

“I’m not paying you to whine!” The Ferengi shouted, “I’m paying you to stop them! So stop them!”

Glancing at the Lethian, the mercenary captain answered back in a belligerent tone, “It would help us if you would let us use the Lethian instead of keeping him here.”

“No! The Lethian stays with me.” Mok yelled as he pointed to the door, “Now get out there and do your job!”

“Fuck you! The loot we’re getting is not worth it.” The Nausicaan captain growled as he quickly drew his disruptor and pointed it at the Ferengi’s skull. I’m leaving and I’m taking my crew with...”

Before the mercenary could utter his threat, he froze in place. Then, as if it had a will of its own, his hand holding the disruptor turned it on himself and pulled the trigger. Watching in grim satisfaction as the Nausicaan pirate disintegrated, Mok turned to the dead captain’s lieutenant, “You’re in command now. Stop the intruders!”

Gulping nervously, the newly promoted pirate deferentially responded, bowing his head, “At once.”

After his new captain had left the office, Mok spoke to the Lethian, “Prepare my escape shuttle. It’s time to leave.”

Act 3: Brawl in the Station

Chapter Summary

The fighting both inside and outside Mok's asteroid base intensifies as the landing team takes casualties.

Team Nelia—Engineering and Weapons Control

Coming out of the maintenance tunnel behind the Nausicaan checkpoint, Nelia motioned for her companions to remain silent as she pointed at the mercenaries—all looking the other way. As her team readied to strike, she held up three fingers...then two...then one. “Now!” The Orion rogue shouted as she fired and her team fired their weapons, taking the pirates completely by surprise, ending the skirmish almost as soon as it began.

“Engineering should be down this corridor.” Shelana pointed, “No way around. We’re going to have to go through.”

Twesata grumbled and heaved a sigh. “We’re wasting time. Let’s get this over with.”

The Battle in the Nebula

USS Belladonna

Her ship shuddering under the impact of the concentrated fire coming from three of the Nausicaan frigates, Zsuzsanna growled an oath as she commanded, “Eliza...I want those fuckers cleared from my screen.”

“Fire high impact torpedoes and concentrate energy fire on first frigate.” The executive officer responded, “We take the bastards down hard one at a time.”

Smiling in satisfaction as the targeted frigate exploded in a bright fireball, Zsa-Zsa complimented her crew, “Nice shooting. One down...two to go. Lock on to number two and take it down.” Turning to her tactical officer, she inquired, “Sito? How are our friends doing against that Talon?”

“They’re keeping it occupied, Captain.” The Bajoran weapons officer responded. “*Klothos* is taking the brunt of the pounding, but it’s getting in some good shots in return.”

Laughing, Zsuzsanna joked as the second frigate exploded, “Don’t worry about Korath. He’s enjoying every second of it. What’s Kaval’s status?”

Smirking, Sito responded as the Romulan warbird cloaked after making a successful attack run. “He’s keeping the Talon busy by using hit and run tactics. Another run should bring down the battleship’s shields.”

“And provide the perfect opening for Korath.” Zsuzsanna finished, her lips turned up in a predatory grin as the third and final frigate exploded in another ball of flame.

RRW D’ressa

“Wait for it.” Kaval uttered in a calm, level tone as the helmsman’s hand hovered over his panel. “Bring us in closer...closer...”

“500 kilometers and closing.” The helmsman declared, calling out the distance to the battleship.

“Decloak and fire all weapons at 100 kilometers. Concentrate on the forward shields.” The commander coolly ordered as the Nausicaan battleship grew larger in the viewscreen.

“100 kilometers.”

“Decloak and fire!”

“All weapons firing. Torpedo impacting.” The helmsman let out a victory whoop, “Their shields are down!”

“Continue firing weapons.” Kaval ordered as the warbird rocked under the impact of the battleship’s return fire.

“Forward shield down to less than fifty percent.” The engineer called out, “Damage to forward sensor arrays.”

“Divert power to forward shields and maintain firing until we’re clear, then switch to the rear shields, lay down a spread of quantum mines, and cloak once we’re out of range.”

“Forward shield back to sixty-five percent. Damage control teams dispatched to the arrays.”

“We’re clear.”

“Diverting to rear shields.” The engineer announced.

“Laying down quantum mines.” The *D’Ressa’s* weapons officer, a petite Romulan female, exclaimed.

“The mines caught their rear shields.” The warbird’s executive officer reported, “Damage also to their aft hangar bay. They won’t be launching anymore of those damned fighters.”

“Good.” Kaval nodded in approval. “Cloak. Let’s give Korath some time to have a little fun while we line up for our next run if need be.”

IKS Klothos

“Divert power to forward shields!” Captain Korath bellowed as sparks flew from the helm console. “Weapons officer...maintain disruptor fire. Fire torpedo—maximum yield—on my mark. That pet’aQ is almost ours. Just one or two more volleys.”

Smirking in satisfaction as his Romulan ally finished his attack run, the Klingon captain heard his sensors officer triumphantly call out, “Battleship forward shields down.”

“Qul’ dah!” Korath growled, “Fire torpedo! Helm...new heading. 93 degrees Mark 30. I want us at least 500 kellicams from that ship.”

“Torpedo away!” The weapons officer called out as the *K’tinga*-class battlecruiser’s inertial dampeners strained to compensate for the sharp change of course executed by the helmsman.

“Maximum impulse!” Korath ordered as he watched the giant battleship in its death throes.

“Five hundred kellicams.” The helmsman announced. Then, as the Talon exploded, he began to sing as the captain and rest of the crew joined him, the communications officer broadcasting the victory song to their allies, “ylja’Qo...Bagh Da tuH mogh...ChojaH Duh roH...yilja, Qey’ oH.”

Listening to the Klingons sing, Zsa-Zsa quipped to her crew, “If anyone wants to join in, I’m not going to stop you.”

“Secure from action stations and let us allow the Klingons their moment.” Kaval commanded, a slight grin appearing on his face as he listened to the triumphant voices coming from all three ships.

After giving her and her allies’ crews a moment of celebration, Zsuzsanna hit her comm button. “Korath...Kaval...dahlings...we can party later, but right now we still have work to do.”

“Agreed.” The Klingon captain responded, his Romulan counterpart quickly echoing his words, “Now is not the time to celebrate victory.”

“I concur.” Kaval chimed in, “We must neutralize the base’s defenses and ensure that Mok does not escape.”

“Right.” The Hungarian starship captain agreed, “So...what are we waiting for?”

Team Ashley

Leading the way into the base’s command and control, Ashley fired her phaser at a Nausicaan standing next to a console as Rana enclosed another in a stasis bubble before launching a biotic throw at another Nausicaan, tossing him against a bulkhead before he could fire his weapon while Malak, wielding his bat’leth, charged into the room.

“Klingons.” Ashley sighed as she took cover behind a console and calmly proceeded to return fire against the surviving pirates who had hunkered down near the base’s fire control system. “We have to take that position.” The former marine gestured towards where the pirates were dug in. “If we don’t, our ships are going to get slaughtered by those battlestations and turrets.”

“Heh.” Malak scowled, “What’s so difficult? We attack.”

“A head on assault would be illogical and most likely futile.” S’vol declared, “The pirates have clear fields of fire and there is no cover once we emerge from our positions.”

“Ideas?” Rana deadpanned in a slightly sarcastic tone.

“Yes.” The Vulcan security officer responded. “There is a catwalk above their position that will permit a small team to gain an advantage.”

A smile appearing on her face, Ashley exclaimed, “Perfect. That will give us both a height advantage and flanking fire.”

Nodding his head in understanding, the Klingon warrior pointed out, “A good plan...but we will need to draw their attention with a feigned frontal assault.”

“You’re right, Malak.” Ashley acknowledged as she gazed at the battlefield from her cover. Deciding on a course of action, the ex-Alliance soldier outlined her plan of attack. “Malak...you and I will divert the pirates with the frontal diversion. We’re the heaviest hitters so that should draw their attention while Rana and S’vol make their way up the catwalk and hit them in the rear.”

Nodding his head in approval, the Klingon warrior exclaimed, “An excellent strategy. Whoever taught you...taught you well.”

Her lips turning up in a sad smile as memories of Shepard and her crewmates on the *Normandy* resurfaced, Ashley responded, “I had some very good teachers...one in particular. She taught me not only how to be a better soldier and leader...but also how to be a better person.”

“After the battle...” Malak earnestly declared, “We will drink to her over a bottle of bloodwine.”

“It’s a date.” Ashley grinned back. Then her smile fading, she took a deep breath, “All right. Let’s move out and get this job done.” After their comrades had moved off, Ashley glanced at the Klingon crouched next to her. “Okay, Malak. It’s up to us to keep those Nausicaans occupied until Rana and S’vol can get into position.”

“Then...what are we waiting for?” The Klingon warrior, hefting a long range disruptor minigun grinned back, “Let’s send these worthless pet’aQ to Grethor.”

“Works for me.” Ashley replied with a laugh as the pair laid down suppressing fire, sending a hail of disruptor and phaser bolts at the Nausicaan pirates, causing them to momentarily duck behind cover before returning fire with a ferocious disruptor barrage of their own.

Making their way unnoticed along the flank, Rana and her Vulcan teammate finally arrived at their goal—a ladder going up the catwalk. “We don’t have much time.” The asari scientist whispered, “Ash and Malak aren’t going to be able to keep it up much longer. Sooner or later the Nausicaans are going to figure out it’s just the two of them.”

“A logical hypothesis.” S’vol agreed as he began his ascent up the ladder, “It would be advisable for us to proceed swiftly before that happens.”

“Keep it up, Malak! Hit and duck!” Ashley urged as she and her Klingon teammate poured out another barrage from their weapons before diving quickly to cover to avoid the return fire. The two soldiers did that for two volleys as their teammates scaled the ladder and positioned themselves on the catwalk. “We’re in position.” S’vol whispered.

“One more time, Malak.” Ashley grinned at her Klingon comrade, “Ready?”

“Qapla!” The Klingon shouted as he popped up out of cover and unleashed a ferocious burst from his minigun.

“Now! Rana!”

The asari and Vulcan struck quickly from their elevated positions pouring down a cascade of phaser fire and biotics on the Nausicaans as Ashley and Malak maintained their ferocious assault on the front. Then, just as the battle seemed won, the Klingon warrior, wielding his bat’leth as a master, bringing down one pirate after another fought until a lucky disruptor bolt fired by the last Nausicaan struck him in the chest, propelling him backwards into a bulkhead.

“Malak! Ashley called out in alarm as the other members of her team moved rapidly to take control of the room. Rushing to her comrade’s side, the former marine, on seeing the gaping hole in the Klingon’s chest, realized at once that the wound was fatal.

“The fight?” Malak whispered hoarsely with his dying breaths, “We are victorious?”

“We are.” Ashley responded, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Do not cry.” The Klingon coughed, blood coming out of his mouth. “It was a glorious battle. One day, we will meet in Sto’vo’kor, naD, and drink that bloodwine to your friend together.”

“Count on it.” Ashley sobbed as she cradled the warrior’s head in his lap. “Is there anyone we should...”

“Captain Korath will inform my par’machi and family.” Malak wheezed as Rana and S’vol rushed to join their comrades. “Do not mourn me, naD. I die as a Klingon should—in glorious battle. This body is a mere husk.” With those words, opening his eyes wide, the brave warrior mustered his remaining strength for one last shout of defiance. “Beware...a warrior enters Sto’vo’kor!”

Team Nelia—Engineering

“They’ve got us pinned down.” Nelia shouted as she quickly dove for cover, a fusillade of disruptor bolts barely missing her. “Ideas?”

“We need a distraction.” Shelana replied as she fired her autorifle, its phaser bolts disintegrating a Nausicaan wielding a neuro-lash, who, supported by two of his companions, was charging towards their position.

Flashing an evil grin, Twesata took out the device that she had purchased earlier. “I’ve got just the distraction. Bought it from an old friend of mine—Lexi—when we were on Starbase 80. When activated and thrown it emits a holographic image.” She explained, “It won’t fool ‘em for long and I’ll have to be careful where I throw it. Too far from the pirates and they’ll ignore it. Too close and they’ll know it’s a phony.”

“They will also see through the ruse if it just suddenly appears on their flank or their rear.” R’ann pointed out, her eyes focused on a console several meters to the left. “I can draw their fire while you toss your distraction on the opposite side. They’ll think they’re being encircled.”

“That’s awful risky.” Nelia remarked with a shake of her head, “There’s a lot of open ground between here and that console.” The Orion engineer’s lips turning up in a sly grin, she suggested, “I can modulate your shield’s frequency where it’ll take more hits before failing. But...it’ll wear down faster.”

“Trading off temporary increased resistance for lesser durability.” The Romulan security officer concluded, nodding her head in understanding.

“Right.” Nelia affirmed, “So you’re going to need to move fast.”

“It’s worth the risk.” R’ann grinned back. “Make the modifications.”

“Give me a moment and we’ll be set.” The Orion engineer said as she began to work. Then, just as she completed her task, her comm badge beeped.

“Belladonna to landing party. Respond please.”

“Nelia here.”

“Williams here.” Ashley’s voice answered also, the former Alliance marine hearing the call at the same time.

“Good.” The Magyar accented voice of Captain Rozsa responded, “I have you both. We took down the pirate ships and are on our way back to you. Can you do us a favor dahlings and take down those annoying battlestations and turrets.”

“Already ahead of you.” Ashley responded, “We’ve taken fire control.” Her voice taking on a mournful tone, the ex-marine added, “Could you please tell Captain Korath that Malak has died?”

“How did my warrior die?” Korath interrupted.

“He fell in battle.” Ashley responded, “He took down at least two Nausicaans in hand to hand combat before he was killed by a disruptor.”

“And what of the cowardly pet’aQ who fired the disruptor?”

“I killed him.” Ashley grimly responded. “My team and I killed all the other pirates as well.”

“Then Malak died well...as a Klingon should.” Korath declared with a note of pride in his voice. “You and your comrades have carried yourselves with honor today. Do not mourn for our fallen warrior for he is in Sto’vo’kor even as we speak drinking bloodwine and winning glory in endless battle.”

“Yeah.” Ashley responded in a winsome voice, “He said we’d drink to my old commanding officer over a bottle of bloodwine in Sto’vo’kor.”

“And so you shall.” Korath declared proudly.

“And we’re making our final push in engineering.” Nelia announced as she returned to the conversation.

“Good.” Zsuzsanna replied, “Once their defenses are down, we’ll start beaming down reinforcements. Rosza out.”

“You heard her.” Nelia commanded, “Let’s get this over with.”

Moving quickly, R’ann darted towards the cover on the flank, drawing as intended the fire of the Nausicaans while Nelia and Shelana did the same, giving Twesata the time and space she needed to toss the holographic emitter that sprung into life, revealing the image of a Starfleet security officer firing his phaser, surprising the pirates and causing them to leave their position exposed. Unfortunately, R’ann, before she could make it to the safety of cover fell to a Nausicaan disruptor bolt in her side, its charge knocking her to the deck, a hole where the kidney on a human would be.

“Shit.” Nelia swore as the Romulan security officer went down, “R’ann’s down!” The green Orion shouted to her teammates. “I’m going to try to get to her! Give me cover!”

“Move it, Nel!” Shelana yelled back as she tossed a photon grenade at the now exposed pirates.

“We’ve got ‘em!” Twesata shouted as she fired her phaser. “There’s only one or two more...one more...”

“No more.” Shelana added laconically as the last of the pirates went down.

Reaching R’ann, Nelia shook her head gloomily as her friends joined her at the side of their fallen comrade. “I was too late.” The green Orion lamented.

“She was dead the moment she hit the floor with a wound like that.” Shelana consoled.

“Shels is right.” Twesata remarked, adding her voice in an effort to console the somber Orion woman. “The tissue damage caused by that disruptor is too severe.”

“We need to deactivate those battlestations.” Shelana declared, making herself heard over the countdown. “Or it’s going to get grim for our friends.”

“You’re right.” Nelia nodded her head as she closed the Romulan woman’s eyes. Standing up, she quickly made her way to the main console. After several anxious moments, the Orion engineer tapped her comm badge. “Nelia to Belladonna. The defense grid is powered down.”

“Very good.” Zsuzsanna’s thick Hungarian accented voice came through the comm. “We’re at the station. Beaming down additional troops to engineering and command. I’d suggest you see to the prisoners in holding while we’re doing that.”

“Hear that Ash?” Nelia queried.

“I heard.” Ashley responded, “We’re on our way.”

Mok and the Lethian

“The battle goes poorly.” The new Nausicaan leader reported to his Ferengi employer, his heart racing as he gazed at the taciturn Lethian standing beside the Ferengi with a glower on his face. “The intruders have taken both engineering and command and our ships have been defeated. The enemy ships even now are beaming down reinforcements.”

“Go to where the prisoners are being held and activate the termination sequence.” Mok commanded his bodyguards, “They’ve deprived me of my profit...so I will deny them their victory.”

A sly grin appearing on his face as his minions did as they were told, Mok commented sarcastically as he made his way to his private shuttle. “Muscle is easily available and affordable, but I will miss the Lethian. Good telepaths are hard to come by, but...compassion is no substitute for a profit, and profit is the better part of valor.”

Act 4: Endgame

Chapter Summary

The fight draws to an end with a daring hostage rescue and Ashley forms a sisterly bond with one of the prisoners--a Bajoran teen named Ajun.

Chapter Notes

Two of Ashley's most important--and endearing--character traits that many players of Mass Effect so frequently ignore because they focus on her early--emphasis on early--antipathy towards aliens is her loyalty to her comrades and the importance she places on family. In the game, if you take the Paragon path with Shepard and actually talk with Ashley and bring her with you on missions instead of leaving her in the armory and then knocking her off at Virmire, you can alter her views towards aliens to a more open and accepting one. In the Raptorverse, not only did Ashley benefit from having a Paragon Shepard who was patient with and worked with her, she's also spent several years in the Star Trek universe with non-human friends.

Also, family is very important to Ashley. Now cut off from her mother and sisters, she's found an adoptive sister in Ajun who is also now orphaned and alone.

Endgame

“Shit.” Nelia swore as her team, now joined by Ashley and her group, confronted their next obstacle as they entered the prisoner area—the Lethian and a Nausicaan standing before five kneeling prisoners, their weapons pointed at the back of their heads.

“That’s far enough.” The pirate shouted, “The cells holding the other prisoners have been rigged with explosives, this room is shielded by transporter buffers, and I hold the detonator in my hand. Do as I tell you and the prisoners still in their cages will be free.

“What do you want?” Nelia shouted back, simultaneously gesturing to her team.

“We want a shuttle and safe passage from this system.” The pirate demanded.

“Release the hostages in front of you first!” Nelia countered as Ashley, taking Twesata’s sniper rifle, took aim at the Lethian while Shelana targeted the Nausicaan and Twesata and S’vol prepared to mentally strike at the Lethian, hoping to land the first blow before the master telepath could act.

“These are our insurance policy.” The pirate retorted. “They stay with us until we get to safety. Once we’re clear...we’ll release them.”

Needing to buy just a little more time, Nelia rebutted, “How do we know you’ll keep your promise?”

“You don’t.” The pirate laughed, “You have no choice. Either let us leave with five or be responsible for the deaths of not only these hostages, but all the rest. Decide now.”

Before Nelia could give her signal to attack, the Lethian cried out, “They’re lying!” as S’vol fell to the deck.

“Now! Concentrate on the Lethian!” The green Orion screamed as Rana simultaneously encased the pirate in a stasis bubble.

“Try me, bastard!” Twesata cursed as she engaged the Lethian in mental combat. Blood flowing from her ears and nose, the Betazoid telepath continued the mental struggle as she fell to her knees, screaming in pain.

Shouting to the hostages to run away, both Ashley and Shelana concentrated their fire on the Lethian, phaser bolts and beams converging on the mercenary telepath, rendered unable to counter thanks to Twesata’s efforts.

Breathing in relief as the Lethian, succumbing to the combined onslaught, collapsed dead to the floor, Rana gasped, “Hurry...I can’t hold the bubble much longer!”

Racing to the main console, Nelia deactivated the transporter buffers and then, with a final flourish, activated the transporter beaming the pirate and his detonator into deep space. Sighing with relief, the Orion adventuress explained to her friends, “I had to take a big gamble that transporting him far enough into space and at maximum molecular dispersal would prevent the bombs from going off.” Glancing down at the prostrate form of S’vol, currently being tended to by Twesata and Rana, she inquired, “How is he?”

“Alive...but comatose.” Twesata responded, shaking her head. “His mind has been damaged. I’m afraid if I try to probe too deep, I could cause even more harm.”

“We need to contact Captain Rosza.” Shelana said in a whisper. “She should know.”

“Right.” Nelia responded as she tapped her comm badge and passed on the news.

“Thank you.” Zsuzsanna replied in a grave tone, “Commander Kaval and I are sending medical teams to your location. They’ll take care of Ensign S’vol and the prisoners.” Speaking candidly, the Hungarian starship captain admitted, “I’m not sure there’s anything we can do for Ensign S’vol except make him comfortable until he can be transported to Vulcan. Hopefully, they’ll be able to do something for him there.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Nelia responded, “What about Mok? Were you able to catch him?”

“No.” Zsa-Zsa declared, “The halfasz must have had a cloaking device on his shuttle. He got clean away. But don’t worry...he’ll fuck up and we’ll be there to catch him. Take care and I’ll see you soon. Rosza out.”

Moments later, several pillars of green and blue light appeared heralding the arrival of the Starfleet and Romulan medical teams. Moving quickly, the medics began work on the prisoners as a Vulcan woman with long dark hair and wearing a skimpy blue Terran Empire uniform, approached. Kneeling down next to her fallen shipmate, his head still resting on Rana’s lap, she introduced herself, “I am Lieutenant Commander T’Vrel, Chief Science Officer of the *Belladonna*.”

“Rana...” The asari scientist responded, “Rana Thanoptis. I’m more or less the *Spoiled Princess*’s medic—although really I’m a geneticist. I did a medical scan on S’vol. Here’s what I picked up.” She handed her tricorder to the Vulcan woman kneeling down next to her.

“Hmmm...” The Vulcan science officer mused as she read the results of the scan. “It appears that his qui’lari...the focal point in a Vulcan’s bioelectric field...has been cut off from the rest of his mind by the Lethian telepath’s assault. This has left him...in human terms...lobotomized.”

“Can his mind be restored to him?” Rana asked, lamenting, “My people have the ability to join our minds with those of other species. If I were a matriarch, I might be able to join with him and help repair the damage, but I’m only a maiden—still in the first stage of my life. I’m not sure I could do it.”

T’Vrel replied, “To make such an attempt one would also need to have an intimate knowledge of the Vulcan mind and would also require either that the person doing the joining be a highly skilled telepath or have the presence of a knowledgeable Vulcan to serve as an anchor.”

“And I’m not anywhere near familiar with Vulcan anatomy or thought processes.” Rana confessed sadly.

“And I am not skilled enough or wise enough to serve as an effective anchor.” T’Vrel also admitted.

“So...what can be done for him?” Rana asked, her query as much plea as question.

The Vulcan science officer responded, “The best course of action at present is what Captain Rosza told your friend. To return him to Vulcan. There, he will be in the care of specialists who might be able to help him. I will beam back to the ship with him.” Inclining her head at the asari scientist, T’Vrel held up her hand in the traditional Vulcan salute as she gave the command to beam up, “Live long and prosper, Rana.”

“We’ve been talking to the prisoners...” Shelana and Ashley reported gloomily to their Orion teammate.

“It’s horrible.” Ashley growled, “All the female prisoners were naked. The other starships are beaming down blankets for them so that they can cover themselves until we can replicate enough clothes for everyone. What sort of sicko would do this?” She finished in a plaintive voice.

“Mok is old-school Ferengi.” Nelia explained frowning, “They believe that all females should be naked.”

“Belen doesn’t believe that.” Ashley observed, “Neither do any of the Ferengi I’ve met so far...although...” she added thoughtfully, “I’ve only met a few.”

“Most Ferengi are like Belen now.” Nelia pointed out, “The last two Grand Naguses...Zek and Rom...began a series of reforms that have essentially emancipated Ferengi women—allowing them to wear clothes and engage in commerce. It’s taken some time and a lot of work, but most Ferengi are on board with the program now—they might grumble a little now and then, but they’ve accepted it.”

“However there are a few holdouts.” Shelana pointed out sourly, “They cling to the old ways. Mok’s one of those.”

“Right.” Nelia nodded her head as Twesata approached, accompanied by an adolescent Bajoran female wrapped in a blanket.

“Nelia?” The Betazoid telepath called out, “This is Kora Ajun. You might want to hear what she has to say.”

Seeing the frightened teenager, Ashley’s protective instincts quickly rose to the surface. “It’s okay, Ajun. You’re safe here. You can talk to us.”

“She’s been repeatedly whipped by a neuro-lash.” Twesata grimly stated, “I was with a Romulan team at the time. The guards were using her as a plaything.” The Betazoid telepath scowled, “They kept her naked in a cage and brought her out when they wanted to...”

“I get the picture.” Nelia replied in a soft voice, “I’ve seen shit like this before. That’s one of the reasons why I have no problem killing slavers.”

“Yeah...” Ashley grimaced, “These assholes are as bad as the batarians.”

Turning her attention back to the newly freed prisoner, Nelia’s lips turned up in a compassionate smile. “No one’s going to harm you here, Ajun. Can you tell us what you told Twesata.”

“Yes.” The Bajoran youth stammered, “I overheard something. It was just after a couple of the guards...” the young woman broke down sobbing as Ashley held her in her arms.

“It’s all right, Ajun. No one’s going to hurt you anymore. We won’t let them.” The former Alliance marine, stepping into her other role as

elder sister, gently cooed, "Take your time. We're in no hurry."

Slowly recovering, the Bajoran girl looked up at Ashley, smiling wanly, before speaking in a haunted voice, "The guards were talking about where the next lot of slaves were going."

"Healthy men and women often end up in some dilithium mine in neutral or uncharted space or as gladiators in someone's arena." Nelia explained, "However, the more attractive and younger males and females..."

"Go to brothels or private buyers—mostly Orion, Ferengi, or Nausicaan." Shelana interrupted with a scowl on her face. "Although it's not unheard of for humans, Andorians, Trill, and other races to go into the slave trade."

"It's a dirty little secret that most people living in the core Federation worlds like Earth, Vulcan, and Trill don't have to encounter..." Nelia began only to be interrupted by Ashley

"Out of sight...out of mind." The ex-marine scowled.

"Right." Nelia acknowledged, "The core worlds don't know what's really going on and don't really want to know. However, if you live on the frontier, you become very familiar with its existence. Sometimes...unfortunately...too familiar." Nelia remarked with a worried frown, "I'm not sure which is worse...getting sent to a whorehouse or getting bought by a private buyer. Some of what I've seen and heard—let's just say the brothel is often better. There are some real sickos out there. I mean...yeah...I turn tricks and perform in 'adult' holonovels and all... but I'm a free agent. No one's forcing me into it, and you better believe I'm making good latinum from my clients and...usually...having fun doing it. And if I don't like a particular client or they're into something I won't do, I'll tell them to go fuck themselves and back it up if I have to with a knee to the vitals or a phaser. That's different from being a slave where you have no choice and are forced into it."

"What about the older ones?" Ashley, still hovering protectively near her new charge, inquired, "What happens to them?"

"The lucky ones end up in domestic service." Shelana replied, "The not so lucky...the mines."

"So..." Ashley asked gently as she stroked her newly adopted sister's hair, "Where were they sending the slaves?"

"Some of them..." Ajun stuttered, "most of them...like your friend said...were being sent to the mines or brothels. A few of the tougher ones—I think they might have belonged to some militia—were going to someone's private arena. But there were some...mostly Romulan...but also a few humans and others and a small group of Gorn that they had recently taken from some freighter..." the young Bajoran choked back a sob before continuing, "The guards were laughing at me...teasing me...telling me that what they were doing to me and where I was going was a lot better than those being sent to the mines or going where those others were being sent."

"Did they say anything about what was going to happen to those people?" Nelia softly inquired. "Where they were being sent?"

"No." The Bajoran girl shook her head. "I overheard them saying that not even Mok knew for sure. Except that the ones taking them were Romulan and human—and that the humans wore clothing similar to...but not quite the same...as the Starfleet people here." She finished, pointing to a nurse wearing a 23rd century Terran Empire skirt and top.

"Sounds like Tal'Shiar and maybe a Terran Empire from one of the Mirror Universes." Twesata concluded, further speculating, "But why were they together? The Mirror Empires usually don't work and play well with nonhuman races."

"And the Tal'Shiar aren't exactly fond of humans." Nelia exclaimed. "Maybe we'll find what we're looking for in those encrypted files Mok has. Bastard probably took the key with him."

"Can our friends break the encryption?" Ashley asked, "Whoever's doing this sick stuff needs to be shut down."

"Maybe." Nelia replied, her brow furrowed, "Let's contact them and see what they say. We need to debrief before the party anyway."

"What about Ajun?" Ashley said, still hovering protectively over the teenage girl. "What's going to happen to her?"

"Do you have any family, Ajun?" Twesata gently inquired, "On Bajor or another colony world maybe?"

"No." The young woman sobbed through her tears, "My parents were killed when the pirates took our ship. I don't have anyone back home. We were going to a new colony being founded in the Archanis Arm when the pirates attacked. They lined us up...some of us they kept. Others...like my parents who resisted or were too old or too young...they killed."

"Sons of bitches." Ashley growled before asking, "What's going to happen to her, Nelia?"

"Most likely she'll be sent back to Bajor..." the green Orion replied, "...where she'll be placed in an orphanage until and unless someone adopts her."

"What are the odds of that happening?" Ashley asked, her protective instincts still dominating.

"Depends." Twesata replied, "Bajor is a member of the Federation, however, not everyone on Bajor is happy about that."

Nodding her head in agreement, Shelana echoed her friend's remarks. "Twes is right. While Ajun will be well taken care of and will receive a proper education and counseling, there's no guarantee she'll be adopted due to her age and what she's been through."

"We can take care of her." Ashley pleaded, "I'll make sure she keeps up with her coursework and help her when she needs it."

Giving her friend a look of compassion, Shelana gently shook her head, "I know how close you were to your sisters, Ash, and how much you miss them, but think about what you're asking...really think about it. We're almost always going into harm's way—do you really want her to

be exposed to that? Besides...doing what we're doing...she's not ready for that yet." Her lips turning up in a gentle smile, she reminded her friend, "You know how crazy Twes and Rana can be."

"Hey!" Twesata interrupted with a huff. "Just because we don't have sticks up our asses—unlike some other people!"

Laughing, Ashley shook her head and then offered a second alternative. "You're right. She's not ready for that, yet. What if she stays on Drozana Station? We can get our bosses to set her up with a tutor and counselor and I'm sure Belen can find something for her to do other than tend bar or work the dabo tables."

"I don't know..." Nelia replied hesitatingly.

"Why don't we ask her?" Ashley insisted, "After all...we're deciding where she's going to spend the next few years—doesn't she have a say in it?"

"Yeah." Nelia conceded, "She does." Turning her attention to the Bajoran girl who was clinging close to her human rescuer, Nelia inquired, "What do you want to do, Ajun? Go to Bajor or stay with us on Drozana Station?"

The Bajoran girl declared, with a steely glint in her eyes. "All of my family on Bajor are dead. I don't have anyone there and don't want to go back."

"All right." Nelia conceded, with a nod of her head. "I'll talk to Belen about getting something for you to do around the resort—maybe waiting tables or clean up or something like that. We'll also talk to Drake and the others about setting you up with school and counseling—but—you're going to have to promise us something in return, Ajun."

"What?" The teen replied as she squeezed Ashley's arm in an unspoken request for support.

"You've got to promise us that you'll complete your classes and attend all your counseling sessions." Nelia demanded, "This is not open to negotiation. Do you promise?"

"Yes!" Ajun exclaimed enthusiastically, "Yes!"

"Okay." Nelia chuckled, "I know when I've been beaten. I'll talk to Belen when we get back to the ship and we'll find a job for you on the Station. When we meet for our debrief session, I'll also squeeze Drake and make him set you up with a school and counselor. Get ready to beam back to the ship with Ashley and the others." The green Orion added as an afterthought, "We're going to need to set you up with quarters."

"How about the ones next to mine?" Ashley volunteered, receiving in return a big smile from her newly adopted younger sister.

"Please!" Ajun begged, "I promise I won't be a problem."

Nodding her head, Nelia agreed, "That'll work." Motioning for Rana to join them, the roguish Orion instructed her team, "You all, except for Twes, beam back to the ship. Twes? I need you to help me download Mok's files. I don't want us to get hit with an ugly virus or other countermeasures."

"Good idea." The Betazoid science officer replied, "Lead the way." Giving her asari girlfriend a goodbye kiss, Twesata quipped, "Be a good girl and I'll replicate something special for you."

"Hmmm..." Rana purred, "Can't wait. Don't take too long."

"C'mon, Twes." Nelia chuckled, "Sooner we get done, the sooner you and Rana can fool around."

"Ready to go to your new home?" Ashley grinned as she placed a sisterly arm over the Bajoran teen's shoulder. "Tell you what..." the ex-Alliance marine tempted, "...after you get settled in and get some sleep, Shelana and I will take you to a baseball game in the holodeck and then we'll treat you to a hasperat soufflé for dinner. Does that sound good?"

Smiling up at her new big sister, Ajun replied, "After I sleep for a day or two."

"Deal." Shelana grinned as she joined her friend and the young Bajoran girl, "After your physical, you get plenty of sleep and then we'll go see the Pike City Pioneers take on the Bajoran Prophets, and follow that up with dinner."

"Ashley to *Spoiled Princess*. Twes and Nelia have some stuff they need to wrap up here, but we're ready to go. Oh...you might want to get the quarters next to mine ready...we've got a guest coming with us."

"Guest?"

"We'll explain when we get there." Shelana replied, "Four to beam up."