

Laying Plans

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Laying Plans

by [DavidFalkayn](#)

Summary

Questions are raised as we move to the climax. The USS Bellerophon and its captain, Boris Rodenko, his first officer, Ilya Xylides, now enter the scene.

Act 1: Aeolia

Laying Plans

USS Aeolia—corridor

“Captain Hobson?” Edi called out on seeing the *Aeolia*’s commanding officer. “May I accompany you? I would like to ask some questions if I may?”

“Very well.” The captain concurred. Speaking to the accompanying ensign, he commanded, “You may return to your post, Ensign.”

“Aye, Sir.” The ensign acknowledged, quickly returning to his station at the guests’ quarters.

“I am taking a tour of the ship, Edi.” Chris declared, “You may come with me on the condition that you give your word that you will not attempt to access any classified or privileged data.”

“You would accept the word of an AI?” Edi asked, slightly nonplussed at hearing that.

“Is there any reason why I shouldn’t?” Hobson replied, raising an eyebrow in inquiry.

“No sir.” Edi announced, “I give you my word that I will not do anything to violate your trust.”

“Good.” The captain nodded his head once, “Our first stop is the science section. Lieutenant Commander Velen and Dr. Treeya are examining the artifacts from your universe that you brought over.” Pausing for a moment, Chris remarked in a stoic, yet also respectful, tone. “I understand that several men and women sacrificed themselves so that you could escape.”

“Yes.” Edi acknowledged, “Sergeant Ruiz and his team gave their lives to safeguard the artifacts and cover our escape. Had it not been for their efforts, Shepard would have succeeded in taking the relics and either captured or killed us.

“Then...” The captain remarked as the door to the science section swished open, “Let’s be sure that their sacrifice was not in vain.”

USS Aeolia—Andie’s Place

Wide-eyed, Doris entered Andie’s—the *Aeolia*’s lounge, shaking her head in disbelief, “You gotta go first class on a luxury cruise liner where I’m from to find a bar like this on a ship.”

“This bar’s tiny compared to what you’ll find on some of the bigger ships.” Ensign Reynard, one of the *Aeolia*’s security officers assigned to keep watch over the ship’s new passengers laughed good-naturedly.

“Hey Sugar! Over here!” Treasure, sitting at a table with two of her engineers, called out to Doris, waving her and her escort to her table. “Sit down and grab a beer or two with us.”

Doris glanced at her minder who smiled, “Go ahead. I’ll just hang out by the door until you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Sugar.” Doris acknowledged with a smile as she headed off to her fellow engineer’s table.

“Have a seat.” Treasure urged as she pulled out the chair next to her. Handing a mug to the newcomer, the chief engineer introduced the rest of her group, “This here’s some o’ my crew. The dark-haired girl over there’s Lieutenant Rydell...Pammy...”

“Hi.” Doris responded with a grin as she took a drink from her mug.

“And this is Lieutenant Lan Ferag...”

“Just call me Lan.” The Bolian engineer smiled as he took a drink of his Bolian tonic water.

“Ya’ll just call me Dixie.” Doris grinned, “Everyone else does.”

“Sure thing, Dixie. So how are you adjusting to things?” Pammy asked as she refilled her mug.

“Ah’m still tryin’ to get used to that transporter.” Doris confessed, “It’s kinda scary being torn apart and then put back together again somewhere else thousands of miles away.”

“We do it so often we take it for granted.” Lieutenant Ferag remarked sympathetically.

“Yeah.” Treasure agreed, “Because we do it all the time we forget that it can be kinda off-putting for someone who hasn’t done it before.”

“Right.” Doris replied, smiling at the sympathetic response.

“I see you got through your debrief with Hobby okay.” Pam grinned.

“Is he always this formal?” Doris asked as her mug was refilled.

“The Iceman’s always been that way.” Treasure laughed. “I was chief engineer under him on the *Perseus* and he was just like that. I remember talking to an engineer who served with the captain on the *Sutherland* back when he was first officer and he said the same thing—that ol’ Hobby’s just like a block of ice—especially in a crisis. But I’ll tell you this about him...” Angela emphasized, “...I’ve never seen him not stick up for one o’ his crew. He’s a tough man to please an’ he expects a lot from us but he’s always got our backs.” Her lips turning up in a sly grin, Treasure teased, “Pammy here’ll tell ya that.”

Chuckling, the slightly pudgy, yet cute, assistant engineer responded with a playful punch to her superior’s arm. “I just got assigned to the *Perseus* and I knew Treasure from when we were cadets in the Academy.”

Treasure interjected with a laugh, “The two of us, along with Candy and Atris, were one helluva partying girl pack. Then we went our separate ways.”

“Yeah.” Pam agreed, adding with a smile, “Did you know that Candy and Atris are on the *Valley Forge*? We’re gonna have ourselves a Four Amigas reunion on Drozana Station.”

“You should join us, Sugar.” Treasure urged with a big grin on her face.

“Ah don’t wanna intrude...” Doris demurred only to be cut off by Lieutenant Rydell.

“You’re not intruding! Right Treasure?”

“Of course not!” The Northstar native exclaimed, “Sides, you’re gonna need to blow off some steam after your meeting with Admiral Tuvok and those captains.”

“Yeah...” Doris sighed, “Any tips on how to deal with ‘em? What to say...not say...you know.”

“Admiral Tuvok’s an old hand.” Treasure answered back, “He was the chief tactical officer on *Voyager* under Admiral Janeway when it was lost in the Delta Quadrant a few decades ago.”

“And before that, he was on the *Excelsior* serving under Captain Sulu.” Pammy interjected, “Then he took some time off away from Starfleet.”

“He had some problems dealing with humans.” Lan noted, “A lot of Vulcans do.”

“Yeah.” Treasure agreed, “Sometimes Vulcans have a problem dealing with our emotions. Most of ‘em learn to shrug ‘em off, but some of ‘em take a little more time and a few of ‘em are never able to get over it. In Tuvok’s case, he felt that humans came on a little too strong.”

“That’s not an uncommon reaction for Vulcans who aren’t used to humans.” T’Pren interjected, joining the conversation. “We can be pretty tight-assed sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Pam teased with a smirk.

“Okay.” T’Pren laughed, “A lot of times. Most Vulcans eventually get over it and those who can’t generally don’t leave Vulcan.” Glancing down at the table, the emotional Vulcan security chief asked, “You don’t mind if I join you, do you?”

“Not at all, Sugar!” Treasure chuckled as she motioned towards an empty chair. “Park it, grab yourself a beer, and join the party.”

“Thanks.” T’Pren responded with a grin. “A beer’s just what I need before I go on stage.”

“We heard you singing after you showed us around.” Doris commented admiringly, “You’ve got a nice voice. Edi said it was a Patsy Cline tune. My Momma used to love hearing her songs.”

“I like the old torch and pop songs.” T’Pren responded with a smile.

“You can usually catch her at Vic’s whenever we’re on Deep Space Nine and she likes to sing in the lounge at Belen’s on Drozana. That’s where we’re headin’.” Teasing her Vulcan friend, Treasure grinned, “If you didn’t already have yourself a girl, T’Pren, I’d swear ya’ll had a crush on ol’ Vic.”

“Who’s Vic?” Doris inquire with a puzzled look on her face.

“Vic Fontaine.” Pam answered, further elaborating, “He’s a hologram...”

“They’re the photonic people, right?”

“Yeah, Sugar.” Treasure grinned, “Ya’ll haven’t been on the holodeck yet, have ya?” Seeing the newcomer shake her head, the blonde engineer offered, “Tell ya what, Dixie...I got me a horseback riding program—when we get to Drozana and after ya’ll get done with your business, why don’t we do some ridin’?” Her lips turning up in a mischievous grin, she joked, “Hell...we might get lucky and find us a couple of fellers to join us.”

“All right.” Doris agreed with a smile of her own, “Sounds great. I ain’t been ridin’ since I left Earth—my Earth. I’d love to get back on a horse again.” After taking a sip of her beer, she returned to their topic, “So...we were talking about...”

“Vic Fontaine.” T’Pren replied as she took a drink from her mug. “He’s been at DS-9 for for two...maybe three...decades. Dr. Bashir back when he was the CMO at the station purchased his program from someone named Felix. He was originally patterned after some of the big crooners from the late twentieth century...you know...Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin...and his lounge was modeled off of an early 1960s Vegas casino and lounge.”

“What Dr. Bashir, Quark, and the others didn’t realize at first, but soon found out...” Pam explained, “was that there was a lot more to Vic than him being a simple interactive hologram.”

“He was self-aware?”

“Yep.” Treasure confirmed. “So Quark did a very smart thing. He set it up where Vic’s program runs permanently and offered him a contract so that Vic performs shows and gets a share o’ the proceeds.” Chuckling, the blonde engineer quipped as she refilled her mug from the pitcher on the table, “I heard from Jadon...chief engineer on the *Sutherland*, that ol’ Quark was screamin’ and hollerin’ his lungs out as they were negotiating their deal! You’d have thunk that Vic was robbin’ poor Quark blind when really that crafty ol’ Ferengi was turning a nice fat profit—even after givin’ Vic his cut.”

“Anyway...” T’Pren said as she steered the conversation back to their earlier topic, “Admiral Tuvok was like most Vulcans. He thought humans were brash, reckless, and loud.”

“You obviously don’t think so.” Doris sagely remarked.

“Of course not!” T’Pren chuckled, “I mean...some humans are...but then so are some Andorians...Betazoids...Tellarites...and a few other species. Just like there are some Vulcans who are stuck up pricks. But not all of us are—not even the majority of Vulcans who follow Surak’s philosophy. One of the big things that Surak got right...and...believe it or not...I think he got a lot of stuff right...” The *v’tosh k’tar* Vulcan earnestly declared, “was IDIC—Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. People come in all shapes and sizes. No matter what species...or universe...they’re from.”

“I guess the time Tuvok took off from Starfleet helped him grow up a bit.” Treasure declared.

Dixie nodded her head in understanding. “Yeah. I see what you mean. A lot of the races in my old universe think we humans are bullies sometimes cause we’re the new kids on the block and...” she admitted, “sometimes we do come on a little too strong, and we do have more’n our share of bad apples. I oughta know. Seein’ as I was tied up with ‘em not so long ago and began believin’ in their bullshit.”

“Don’t feel bad, Dixie.” Pam commiserated, “Peer pressure and propaganda are powerful things.”

“Tell someone a lie loud enough and long enough, they’ll begin to believe it.” T’Pren opined as Treasure refilled everyone’s mugs.

“So what got ya to change your mind an’ what sorta bullshit were they peddlin’?” The Northstar native inquired, her expression now taking on a rare, serious countenance.

“I can tell ya what a friend of mine who I found out later was a Cerberus recruiter tol’ me. It was after I graduated college and found out that my brother was killed.” Doris recounted, “The Alliance tol’ me and Momma that he was killed by batarian pirates and terrorists in the Traverse, and I was feelin’ hurt and mad and wanted payback.”

“Understandable.” T’Pren remarked sympathetically. “Go on.”

Doris confessed, “I was feeling really mad after the batarians were turned back and that the Alliance wasn’t gonna go into the Traverse after ‘em.”

“So...” T’Pren concluded her voice edged with compassion, “The recruiter played on that anger.”

“Right.” Dixie nodded her head in agreement. “He said that since the Alliance wasn’t gonna do anything about those pirates, that I should sign on with Cerberus cause they were gonna do something about those batarians and anyone else so that they wouldn’t hurt innocent people anymore. So that’s how I got hooked in.”

“So what happened after?” Treasure asked as she refilled her new friend’s mug.

“They sent me to one of their tech and engineering schools for a while and that’s when they began slipping in all the anti-alien shit.” Shaking her head, Dixie moaned, “I can’t believe I fell for it. I had a best friend in college who was a quarian on her pilgrimage.” She sobbed, “She’d just wrapped things up and was getting ready to go back to the Flotilla while I was at the Cerberus school. To make a long story short, she invited me to a party to celebrate it and I ignored her. I didn’t want my teachers and ‘friends’ at the school knowing I had a friend who was an alien.” Head bowed, she sighed, “Ya’ll still wantin’ to hang out with me after hearing all this?”

“You got taken in by a slick sales pitch while you were grievin’, honey.” Treasure commiserated. “Ain’t nothin’ to be ashamed about.”

“What counts is that when you found out it was all a pack of lies you did something about it.” Lan, the Bolian engineer, declared with a smile.

“Yeah.” T’Pren added, placing a supportive hand on the Cerberus defector’s shoulder, “You did the right thing when it counted most.”

“But that don’t mean ya’ll are gonna get off the hook with us that easy.” Treasure grinned, “You gotta buy the next round.”

Smiling at her new friends, Dixie joked back, “Bring on the pitchers. I worked up a powerful thirst.”

USS Aeolia—Science Labs

“Anything interesting, Lieutenant Commander?” Captain Hobson inquired as he and his companion entered the science lab where Velen, the Denobulan science officer along with Dr. Treeya were hunched over a computer console.

Velen looked up startled at the interruption, but, on immediately recognizing his captain and Edi, beckoned them to join him and the asari

archaeologist. “Captain. Edi. Please come over here. Dr. Treeya and I have been busy examining the relics she recovered. I think you’ll find what we’ve discovered interesting.”

“And more than a little disturbing.” The asari archaeologist added with a worried frown.

“It looks like Borg technology.” Chris remarked as he drew closer to the artifact in question and gave it a cursory examination.

“Indeed it is.” Velen responded, adding for the benefit of his captain, “We’ve placed it in a level ten confinement/isolation field—just to be safe.”

“Good.” Hobson acknowledged with a slight incline of his head, “What have you determined from your observations so far?”

“Take a look.” Velen answered back as he presented an image on the computer monitor. “This is a highly magnified picture of the artifact. These...” he pointed to what appeared to be small cells attached to a metallic object, “...are Borg nanites. Now, let me magnify the image even further.”

As his science officer increased the magnification, Hobson quickly spotted the anomaly. “Something has attached itself to the nanites. Do you know what it is?”

“I think so.” Dr. Treeya nodded her head, “It appears to be Prothean in origin.”

“Protheans were the race that preceded yours and were wiped out by these Reapers, correct?”

“Right.” The asari archaeologist nodded her head, “Approximately fifty thousand years ago.”

“So...” Hobson inquired, “How did these Protheans manage to acquire Borg technology and for what reason?”

“From the fragments of knowledge I’ve managed to pick up from the beacon and other records...” Dr. Treeya answered back, “one of their science teams found it. According to the records, the artifact dates from before the Protheans and even earlier civilizations such as the Inusannon and Densoran. It might be even older than the Arthenn.”

“Arthenn?”

“The Arthenn existed in our universe approximately three hundred thousand years ago.” Edi interjected, joining the conversation, “Unfortunately, not much is known about them. Just scattered fragments. If these artifacts are indeed older than the Arthenn as would seem logical—they could be hundreds of thousands...even millions of years...older.”

“The Borg have not been a sentient species that long.” Hobson noted, “That doesn’t leave many alternatives but one...”

“Time travel.” Velen concluded with a frown. “We know the Borg have time travel technology.”

“Correct.” The Captain recalled, explaining to the asari scientist and mobile AI, “The Borg launched an incursion into Federation space on Stardate 50893.5 and engaged in battle with a Federation fleet in the Sol System.”

“Right.” The Denobulan science officer affirmed, “The Borg opened a time portal to the later 21st century and the *Enterprise* under Captain Jean-Luc Picard followed.”

“Fortunately Picard and his crew were able to stop the Borg, Zephram Cochrane succeeded in making the first warp flight with a Vulcan science ship that had picked up on its emissions following it back to Earth. Humanity’s first contact with an alien species.” Velen concluded.

“Are you sure it’s time travel?” Dr. Treeya asked.

“Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.” Hobson replied, further explaining, “Once you have eliminated everything else, whatever remains, no matter how impossible, must be the truth.”

“And we know it is possible to transit between our universes.” Edi commented.

“But why?” Dr. Treeya queried. “From what I have been told about these Borg and what little I’ve read, they seem to be very pragmatic. Why would they put forth the time and resources—not to mention the extensive research—to mount such an expedition?”

“From my studies...” Edi replied, “The Borg advance by acquiring the collective knowledge possessed by the species they assimilate into their Collective.”

“And they’ve been assimilating different species for a very long time.” Hobson commented. “But while it’s no stretch to think that the Borg couldn’t do it. I don’t think they’re the party behind these trans-universal incursions. No...” the captain shook his head, “There’s another player in the game. Of that, I am sure.”

“Whoever or whatever it is...” Dr. Treeya declared in somber voice, “they’re very powerful.”

“Agreed.” Chris replied, “That makes the need to find a portal to your universe all the more urgent. Hopefully, there’ll be a few ideas at the upcoming conference. Speaking of which, We will be at Drozana Station in one standard day. If you have any additional preparations to make, I would suggest you do so.”

“You said that a lot of Vulcans have problems with humans because of our emotions.” Doris noted, “But you don’t seem to have any problems, T’Pren. You laughed at one of Edi’s jokes and you’ve got a helluva nice voice. And you’ve been very nice to all three of us.”

“I like you all.” The Vulcan replied with a smile, “But...I do have to be careful. You see, Vulcans are stronger and faster than humans—really than most other species around here. It can get ugly real fast when we lose control. Most Vulcans keep a lid on things by following the teachings of Surak and have embraced logic to keep their more violent impulses in check. But...a few of us like me...chose a different path. To express our emotions.”

“So how do you keep from flying off the handle?” Dixie asked.

“I meditate.” T’Pren responded, “A lot. And when that’s not getting the job done, I go to the holodeck to work my issues out in a more physical way that’s safe for myself and everyone around me.”

Lan echoed, adding with a wry grin, “Believe me...you don’t wanna be anywhere in the area when she loses her cool.”

“It ain’t pretty.” Pammy quipped.

“So...” Doris drawled, getting back to the original topic before the conversation went off the rails, “What did you do that got you into so much trouble with the Captain, Pammy?”

The dark-haired engineer answered with a snort of laughter, “I fucked up—bad. I had just transferred to the *Perseus* when I found out Treasure was the chief engineer. I...” her face turned red with embarrassment as she lowered her head, “I kinda took advantage of our friendship. I was assigned as the delta shift supervisor and came on shift late and...a little toasted.”

“Sugar...” The chief engineer shook her head, “From what Hobby told me when he chewed my ass out, you were more than just a little toasted.” Speaking to her guest, Treasure explained, “The captain doesn’t care how we run our departments so long as we meet his standards—which are a lot tougher than Starfleet’s, believe me. I’d allow the different shifts to play music while they were working. Now, the captain’ll occasionally walk the ship to make sure everything’s going okay and he’ll pop in on us and see how we’re doing. Mostly, if he sees something he doesn’t like he will pass the word on to Anara who then tells us what needs correcting.”

“Until he popped in on us when I was on watch.” Pam, her face even redder with shame and embarrassment, interjected.

“You left me a helluva mess, Pammy.” Treasure remarked with a chuckle, “Anyway...when the Boss came in and saw the mess that my best friend had made...”

Pam admitted sheepishly, “Me and the rest of my shift threw ourselves a party and we kinda broke regs—we slipped in a methyl alcohol chem into our synth-ale and got plastered and we were late reporting to our shift. Then Hobby comes in on one of his little tours and...”

“He lined ‘em all up and gave them and my engine room a white-glove inspection then and there. After that, he called me into his office and chewed my ass out but good.” Treasure recalled, “Told me it was my department and he wanted it taken care of or he’d get a new chief engineer and that I had three days to resolve the situation.”

“Then Treasure chewed my rear out.” Pam recounted, “She gave me two choices—take reduction in rank to ensign and earn back her trust or keep my rank and transfer off the ship. She also made it clear to me that if I chose option number two, she’d never speak to me again. Treasure’s my best friend.” The pudgy engineer, still shame-faced, declared. “So I chose option one. It took me about a year and a lot of hard work to get back her trust.”

“And now Pammy’s a damn good assistant and one day she’s gonna make someone a damn good chief engineer.” Treasure exclaimed, patting her best friend on her back. “Anywho...three days later, just like he said, Hobby pulled another white-glove inspection and we passed.” Angela smiled, “Here’s the funny thing about Hobby...a lot of people have the wrong idea about the Captain. Yeah...he’s real stiff and formal and doesn’t show it when he’s angry. Hell...when he chewed my ass out, he didn’t raise his voice once—he just gave me that look and believe me—that was enough. Anyway...like I was saying, yeah, Hobby’s strict, but he’s also fair and believes in giving people second chances. When he made that inspection there were at least a dozen little things I spotted that he coulda giggered me on, but he let ‘em all slide and told us that he expected to see the engine room like that all the time.”

“Sounds like you guys work pretty well with each other.” Doris noted, her tone slightly envious. “Kinda like it was on the *Normandy* before I found out just how ugly a snake pit it was and that some of the people I thought were my ‘friends’ really weren’t what they said they were.”

“Wanna talk about it, Sugar?” Treasure encouraged as she refilled her guest’s mug.

“Yeah.” Doris nodded her head, “I think I’d like to.”

After Dixie had finished her tale, Treasure, shaking her head, remarked sympathetically. “Damn...you weren’t jokin’ Sugar. You really were in a snake pit.”

“Yeah.” Pam agreed as she pushed a full mug of beer towards their new friend, “Your CO had a behavioral chip implanted in her to make sure she stays in line. Your XO’s a sociopath. The guys you thought were your friends ended up being war criminals and mass murderers. And the people you were working for were gonna turn you into some sort of monster. Good thing you got the hell outta there!”

“There were some good people there too.” Doris pointed out as she daubed her eyes with a napkin. “Hawthorne...he was our shuttle pilot. He always treated me right an’ I think he was genuinely sorry that he had to shoot at us when me and Edi escaped. And then there was Mess Sergeant Gardner...” smiling a winsome smile, she remarked kindly on the *Normandy*’s chief cook and handyman. “He always had a kind word and a cup of coffee for me. I hope they’re okay and that Cerberus doesn’t do to them what they did to Jackson.” Lowering her head, the young Alabama-born engineer moaned, “Sometimes I wish I’d have never found out about Benji though. I thought we were...I mean...you know...but he ended up being as rotten as the others.”

“Yeah.” Treasure commiserated. “We know...we’ve all been there.”

“You meet someone you think might be the one—or at least one of the good ones.” Pam remarked in a gentle tone, “Then you find out he’s a snake.”

“All that’s behind you now.” Lan, the Bolian engineer, declared emphatically. “You’ve got a chance for a fresh start.”

“Ain’t a whole lotta people get that chance.” Treasure said, “Take some time and think about what you wanna do. Maybe...depending on what the Captain decides, I might have somethin’ for you—if you want it.”

“What?”

Shaking her head gently, Treasure demurred, “I don’t wanna say anythin’ yet cause I don’t wanna jinx it...but I think it’s somethin’ you’ll go for.” Glancing at the chronometer, the chief engineer stretched, signaling the others at the table that it was time to go. “We better turn in. Tomorrow’s gonna be a busy day. If you want, Dixie, I’ll walk ya to your quarters.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Doris smiled back. “I’m feelin’ kinda tired and, like you said, tomorrow’s gonna be a long day.”

Act 2 Welcome to the Party USS Bellerophon

Chapter Summary

An old familiar face from the UT'verse makes his debut here as Captain Boris Rodenko and the USS Bellerophon join the party

USS Bellerophon--Nebula-class starship refitted to Sutherland-class

"Approaching Drozana Station." Lieutenant Angelica, Angie, Harmon, brushing back a lock of her long platinum-blond hair, reported from her customary place at the helm.

"Good." The burly Russian sitting in the center chair replied, "Request clearance to take station."

"Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Dya Alevastos, the *Bellerophon's* Elasian tactical officer acknowledged. "We're being hailed by station control.

"Welcome to Drozana USS Bellerophon. "You are cleared to assume standard orbit. Enjoy your stay."

"And spend plenty of latinum." Luciano finished with a laugh.

"Hey, Luci..." Lieutenant Commander Simi Nalo, the Bajoran science officer, joked, "Maybe you'll get lucky..."

"Lucky Luciano!" The Italian Nav/Ops officer groaned, "Very funny, Simi...very funny."

"Hey..." Simi bantered back, "The puns write themselves."

"Who else has arrived for the party?" Commander Ilya Xylides, the Halenoi first officer of the *Bellerophon*, asked as she brushed aside a lock of purple hair.

"Looks like they're calling everyone in on this." Lieutenant Commander Tanvir Kumar replied as he read off the ship names of the vessels currently docked or in orbit around the station, "*USS Valley Forge...Belladonna...Spoiled Princess...*"

"That would be the raider." Boris mused.

"Yes, Sir." The Indian Operations Chief responded and then resumed reciting the other ships' names, "IKS *Klothos* and *RRW D'ressa*, and the *Aeolia* is en-route and should be here anytime. Big party."

"Da." Captain Rodenko agreed with a frown on his face. Addressing his First Officer, he commanded, "Authorize shore leave for all off duty personnel, XO. Take some time off yourself, Ilya, I have a feeling things are going to get very busy."

"Aye, Captain." The Halenoi first officer added solicitously, "You should take some time off too, Sir. I have a feeling the other captains and officers will be at the bar. It might not be a bad idea to join them. As you said, Sir..." she added as further inducement, "We're probably going to be very busy soon. No telling when we'll have another day off." Laughing inwardly at the glowering expression her captain was giving her, Ilya lowered her voice as she gently teased, "If I have to, Sir, I'll ask Dr. Vordus to make it a medical order."

"You wouldn't dare." The Commissar grumbled, then, at once recognizing the mischievous smirk on his XO's face, relented with a sigh, "You would. Very well. A vodka or two would not be out of place."

"I'll begin authorizing shore leave rotations now." Ilya grinned, "I'll see you at Belen's."

Drozana Station--Belen's Lounge and Casino

"Hello, dahlings. It's good to see you again! Soren...you're looking absolutely scrumptious—and you're looking fit too, Lieutenant...very fit." Captain Zsuzsanna Rozsa, wearing off duty attire consisting of a black midriff top and skintight leather capris with matching leather boots, and with both a nose stud and navel ring, gave both Soren and Ashley a flirtatious wink as she waved to her fellow starship captains and guests. Sauntering to the bar, she took a seat next to the Romulan commander who was also a mutual acquaintance. "Kaval, dragam! I've got some slivovitz for you, dahlings. I'll trade it to you for some Romulan ale—vintage 2375!" Giving the Ferengi bartender a friendly smile, she exclaimed, "Belen, dahlings! How have you been?"

"Can't complain." The Ferengi merchant remarked as he returned the Hungarian captain's smile with one of his own. "Business has been good—profits even better." Turning his attention to the olive-skinned beauty seated next to Zsa-Zsa, wearing a dark red halter top and matching short-short skirt with a diamond studded choker around her neck, Belen grinned, "How have you been, Eliza?"

"No complaints." The *Belladonna* first officer responded.

"Your usual?"

"Igen." Zsa-Zsa replied, "Kristal, please."

"Of course." Belen grinned as he placed a champagne flute filled with the sparkling wine in front of the hedonistic captain. "And your usual,

Eliza?"

"Naturally." Eliza grinned as the Ferengi bartender handed her a margarita.

"Damn!" Ashley sitting at a table with Captain Magnussen smirked as she took a drink of beer, her attention drawn to both Zsa-Zsa and Eliza. "How do those two get away with it?"

Chuckling, Soren remarked, "Zsa-Zsa and Eliza do like to make an entrance."

"I can't imagine Shepard ever wearing something like that! Not to mention Hackett and Mikhailovich's reactions—they'd have absolute shitfits if they were to ever see an Alliance officer strutting around in either of those outfits." Her expression now a mischievous smirk, the former gunnery sergeant quipped, "Joker and Garrus would have gotten a kick out of it though."

"What the two of them are wearing now is tame." Soren laughed, "I've seen them wear stuff that's a lot more daring."

Ashley laughed, "How do they get away with that, not to mention the wild parties? I'm surprised some admiral hasn't sat on them both by now."

"There's more than one admiral who'd love nothing more than to boot both of their asses out." Soren laughed, "But...to put it bluntly...Zsa-Zsa and Eliza get the job done. The *Belladonna*'s been in more tight scrapes and hard actions than pretty much any other vessel in the fleet."

"So...she gets a pass because she gets results." Ashley concluded, nodding her head in understanding. "Hackett and Anderson did pretty much the same thing with Shepard. They went along with some what I thought were pretty questionable calls like with the Rachni queen. And...well...it was pretty obvious that her and Alenko had something going in violation of regs." Chuckling, she joked, "Although the Skipper—as far as I know...never threw any orgies."

Soren answered back. "If there's a dirty job that needs doing...a dangerous mission that has to get done...Zsa-Zsa's almost always one of the first to volunteer. I've only known three captains who have been on more high risk-high reward missions or put themselves and their ships out on a limb more than her and all three are legends: Jim Kirk, Bob Wesley, and Chris Pike. So are we still on for our holosuite date? I guarantee you're going to love the Tivoli Gardens."

Smiling at her beau, Ashley replied as she took him by the hand, "What are we waiting for?"

As the couple made their way up the staircase to their awaiting holosuite, Boris and his first officer, Ilya entered the bar. At once recognizing the Hungarian starship captain and her first officer, the burly Russian captain called out, "Zsa-Zsa! Eliza! *Dobryhi vyecyer*"

"*Kis apam!* Ilya!" Zsa-Zsa greeted beckoning Boris and Ilya to come join her and her lover, "Come here, dahlings, and give us a kiss."

Making their way to the bar, the two *Bellerophon* officers smiled and waved in greeting to some of the others they knew as they approached the strawberry-blond haired captain and her first officer. "*Privyet.*" Boris smiled as he kissed first Zsa-Zsa and then Eliza on their cheeks. "Have my two favorite wayward angels been behaving themselves?"

"What do you think?" Eliza laughed as she caressed her Hungarian lover's cheek.

"Ahem. Aren't you forgetting someone?" Ilya quipped as she also kissed the two *Belladonna* officers on their lips.

Boris joked back with a hearty laugh, "I already know you have been misbehaving my other favorite wayward angel."

"Pepper vodka and Vegan volcano." Belen grinned as he handed the two newcomers their drinks.

"So, where are the others?" Boris asked as he and Ilya took their seats at the bar.

"Soren and Ashley are upstairs in one of the holosuites." Zsa-Zsa replied, "I believe they mentioned something about the Tivoli Gardens."

Nodding his head, Boris remarked, "Those two make a good couple."

"*Igen.*" Zsa-Zsa agreed, "They complement each other very well."

"What about the others?" Ilya asked as she took a sip of her drink.

"Nelia's off with the Trill Twins." Eliza chuckled, "And Shelana is playing springball with Ajun."

"And as for Twesata and Rana..." Zsa-Zsa smirked knowingly.

"Getting high and fucking each others' brains out." Ilya quipped.

"However do you keep up with us all, *kis apam.*" Zsa-Zsa laughed.

"Ah...my lovely *dachas!*" Boris, downing his pepper vodka in a single gulp, heaved a bittersweet sigh as old memories of another dear friend who was also like a daughter to him flooded through his mind. "You are not the first wayward angels I have taken under my wing."

Act 3 The Gathering

Chapter Summary

All of the participants have arrived and the briefing is about to start.

Galley—Spoiled Princess—the next morning

“How was your date, Ash?” Shelana inquired as she carried two coffee mugs to the table and placed one of the mugs in front of her friend.

“It was terrific.” Ashley smiled back. Taking a sip of her coffee, she sighed, “Nothing beats a fresh cup of coffee in the morning. The perfect way to start the day.”

“So...” Nelia smirked as she sauntered into the luxurious dining room, grabbing a cup of coffee for herself before sitting down at the table, “How were the Tivoli Gardens? Was it everything I heard it was?”

“And we want details.” Twesata leered as she and Rana joined the conversation.

“Don’t leave anything out.” Rana echoed with a lecherous grin.

“We didn’t sleep together if that’s what you all are getting at.” Ashley blushed as the other girls laughed. “But we did have a good time. The gardens and fountains were beautiful.”

“I hear the gardens are very romantic.” Twesata sighed

Blushing slightly, Ashley replied with a shy smile, “Yeah. We walked through the gardens and spent some quiet time at a fountain. Then we went on a rollercoaster ride on a wooden rollercoaster. Soren called it the Rutsjebanen. Hey don’t laugh, Shelana! You try pronouncing Danish words sometime and see if you don’t make a mess of it!”

“Sorry, Ash.” The Andorian tactical officer snickered, “Go on.”

“After the rollercoaster, we went on a few other rides. I swear...” the former gunnery sergeant chuckled, “Soren’s like a little boy sometimes—especially when he’s behind the wheel of a bumper car! After that, we ate lunch at a little café and then caught an outdoor jazz concert.” Her lips turning up in a shy smile, Ashley declared, “I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun on a date.”

“Good.” Nelia smiled as Belen entered the dining hall bearing trays of food. “Dig in girls!” The Ferengi merchant commanded as he set plates in front of all his friends, “Today’s gonna be a long day—better get all the calories you can.”

Belen's restaurant--Boris and Soren

"Good morning, Soren!" Boris grinned widely as he offered his hand to his fellow starship captain before being shown to their tables by a Ktarian waitress. "How is Lieutenant Williams doing?"

"Ashley's doing well and sends her regards." Soren smiled as he placed his order, "She couldn't make it to breakfast with us because she's doing some prep work for the conference later."

"She has just about completed her Academy training, hasn't she?" The Russian starship captain asked leadingly.

"Yes she has. She's finishing her evaluation cruise now. Jeff just finished his evaluation of her and gave her high marks. Zheren's given her high marks too." Soren replied, his lips turned up in a sly grin. "And no you can't. I think Admiral Quinn has plans for her and the other girls on the *Princess*--at least for now. They make a good team and the admiral doesn't want to bust that up. That being said, she would make you an excellent tactical/security officer or even first officer if you didn't already have two good people filling those slots now."

"Da." Boris chuckled as the waitress brought the two starship captains their food, "Da. The way things are going, she will be captaining her own ship sooner rather than later."

"True." Soren affirmed, his expression now thoughtful, "And she'll make a damned good captain, But it wouldn't hurt for her to begin learning how to take on command responsibilities now, would it?"

"No, comrade." Boris agreed, "It would not. I would say that it would be a very good idea to let her get her feet wet. I assume you have some ideas along those lines."

"Indeed I do." Soren nodded, "Let me run them by you and you tell me what you think."

"Go ahead, tovarisch, "I'm listening."

USS Aeolia on approach to Drozana Station

“Thank you for allowing us on the bridge, Captain.” Dr. Treeya said, speaking for herself and her companions as the space station grew larger on the screen.

“Damn...” Doris gasped, “That’s a big station.”

“That ain’t nothin’, Dixie.” Treasure quipped from her engineering console, “Wait ‘til you get a look at Earth Space Dock.”

“ESD is a wonder.” Anara echoed from her chair next to the captain’s center seat.

“We are approved for standard orbit.” T’Pren declared as the view screen’s image shifted to focus on a *Lafayette*-class destroyer, “*USS Belladonna*.”

“She sure is pretty.” Dixie commented in a hushed whisper.

“Almost asari in aesthetics.” Dr. Treeya noted approvingly.

“Is Captain Rosza still in command?” Anara inquired.

“Aye, Sir.” T’Pren acknowledged, the only reaction from her Captain being a raised eyebrow.

“The other ships, Lieutenant Commander?”

“*IKS Klothos*, commanding officer Captain Korath.”

“Klingon.” Edi commented, accessing her data files, “Modified *K’tinga*-class.”

“Very good, Edi.” Hobson nodded. “And the Romulan ship?”

“*RRW D’ressa*. Commander Kaval.” T’Pren announced as the helmsman let out a low whistle.

“A *Dedi*.” Yitzhak noted, “Their turning radius sucks rocks.”

“Yeah.” T’Pren quipped, “But you don’t want to get too close to them.” Seeing the questioning looks on the newcomer’s faces, she explained, “Get in too close and it locks on to you with a tractor beam.”

“And then you get hit in the face with a bad case of plasma torpedo diarrhea.” Shalev remarked. “I saw a *Dedi* shred an Orion battleship once that got too close and was snagged by its tractor beams. The fight was over before it began. Best thing to do when you’re fighting a *Dedi* is stay at long range and pick it apart.”

“Very good, Mr. Shalev. I see you’ve been paying attention in T’Pren’s tactical analysis class.” The captain nodded his head approvingly, his lips turning up in a slight smile as the screen changed its focus to a *Constitution*-class cruiser. “Ah...the *Valley Forge* has arrived. It will be good to see Captain Magnussen again.”

“A genuine *Connie*.” Treasure whistled softly, “Bet with those upgrades she’s still hell on small dogs in a fight.”

“The *Spoiled Princess* is also in orbit, Sir.” T’Pren declared as the raider’s graceful form appeared on the screen.

“That would be the ship with the special team.” Hobson surmised.

“Assuming standard orbit, Sir.” Yitzhak declared as the *Aeolia* smoothly slipped into its parking orbit around the station with the other ships.

“Very good, Lieutenant.” The captain acknowledged, “Senior officers and guests to the transporter room, please. We have a briefing to attend.”

Act 4 It's a matter of trust

Chapter Summary

The conference begins and plans are being made, but Dixie and Edi have a few very tasks as they have to earn the trust of everyone there—especially that of a very suspicious Lieutenant Ashley Williams

Drozana Station Conference Room

“Now that the last of the attendees have arrived...” Admiral Tuvok announced in a lecturing tone as Nelia and her team entered the conference room, the other participants already seated and talking quietly with each other.

“Looks like we’re fashionably late.” Nelia grinned as she and the girls on her team, accompanied by their Ferengi friend, made a point of leisurely sauntering over to their seats, earning a frown of disapproval from both Captain Hobson and a Romulan admiral and Klingon general standing on either side of the Vulcan admiral while simultaneously receiving entertained smirks from Zsa-Zsa, Kaval, and Captain Korath, an indulgent smile from Captain Rodenko, and a somewhat wry look of amusement directed to Ashley from the Danish starship captain seated next to Zsa-Zsa.

“It’s all right, dahlings. Come on in!” Zsa-Zsa, enjoying the stiff Vulcan admiral’s discomfort, chuckled, “We were just getting acquainted with each other. The party hasn’t started yet.”

“Yes.” The admiral cleared his throat, “Now that we are finally gathered together, we can begin. While not being able to attend in person, if you’ll check the monitor, you’ll note that Mr. Drake, Commander Tal’Mera, and Admiral Ramir are here via subspace. As you are also aware, we have had a second entry into our universe from an alternate universe unlike either ours or one of the mirror universes. I’m sure you’ve already read up on the introductory information, so if there are no further questions, I’ll introduce you to the admirals who will be working with me to coordinate the activities of this taskforce: Admiral Kererek, representing the Romulan Republic, and General Martok of the Klingon Empire.”

“He looks like he’s been in his share of scrapes.” Ashley whispered to Shelana as she discreetly pointed to the scarred one-eyed Klingon warrior.

“He’s a legend.” Shelana whispered back, “Believe it or not, he used to be Chancellor of the Empire.”

“Until J’mpok overthrew him.” Ashley finished, giving her friend a crooked grin, “I did pass recent history—remember?”

“After I kept tutoring you in it for a week.” Shelana teased back, before adding in a more thoughtful tone, “There are only two reasons why J’mpok would assign Martok to this—either to get him out of the way or because they’re expecting the shit to hit the fan.”

“Or both.” Nelia whispered, joining the conversation, adding as she pointed at the three newcomers, “Looks like they’re about to introduce our new friends.”

At once recognizing the three newcomers to this universe from their dossiers, Ashley scowled as Doris was introduced, asking in a low voice, “Twas? Is that Cerberus ‘defector’ everything she says she is?”

After a moment’s pause, the Betazoid empath/telepath responded in the affirmative, “Yeah. I’m not picking up any signals that she’s lying or pulling a scam. I’d say we’ve got the genuine article here.”

“I know the Iceman.” Nelia whispered, “Yeah, he’s a stuck up prick with a ramrod jammed up his tight ass, but he’s also very smart. You can bet he had his Deltan girlfriend check all of them out very carefully once they woke up from their nap.”

“Okay.” Ashley conceded reluctantly as a very nervous Doris stood up, “Maybe she’s clean, but she’s still going to have to earn my trust.”

“Ours too.” Shelana agreed as the others on their teams nodded in mutual accord.

“We’ll see what she does and take it from there.” Nelia declared before shushing her friends, “I want to hear what she has to say.”

“I do too.” Ashley agreed as she sat back and listened to the former Cerberus engineer.

“Ah got butterflies churning all over in my stomach.” Doris whispered to Anara before being introduced, gesturing towards a stone-faced Ashley. “That there’s Ashley Williams. She used to be an Alliance marine and was with Commander Shepard when they busted up some Cerberus ops. She’d as soon shoot me as give me the time of day.”

“You had nothing to do with those atrocities.” Anara whispered back, offering her support. “Besides...you see the dark-haired woman sitting beside her.”

“The one next to the asari?” Dixie murmured in response, “Yeah...why?”

“She’s Betazoid—they’re telepaths as well as being empaths. She’s probably already checked you out. If she felt you were a threat, she’d have said something by now.”

“You mean she was in my head?” Doris whispered back, her expression one of anger and fear.

“She probably only did a surface read.” Anara replied reassuringly. “You’d have known it if she’d have probed deeper.”

“That don’t make me feel any better.” The Cerberus deserter grumbled as she was called to the dais. “Well...wish me luck.”

“Just tell them what you’ve told us and you’ll do fine.” Hobson said reassuringly as Doris got up from her seat and delivered her presentation.

After she had presented her case and returned to her seat, Chris gave the young engineer a slight smile of approval as he praised her, “You handled yourself well, Ms. Whaley.”

“You really think so?” Doris whispered back as Admiral Tuvok prepared to introduce Edi to the conference.

“I would not have said it if I didn’t.” Captain Hobson replied, adding as his Deltan XO nodded in agreement, “I sense that you had successfully made your points and have gained if not the trust of everyone here—including Lieutenant Williams—then at least the opportunity to earn their trust.”

“Thanks.” Dixie sighed, “I’m not gonna let them or you down.” Cringing slightly as Ashley raised her hand to speak, the former Cerberus engineer commented, “Looks like Edi’s gonna have a harder time of it.”

“We expected that would be the case.” Anara replied reassuringly as Ashley, speaking bluntly, made her point.

“Are you sure you can trust that AI?” The former gunnery chief asserted, earning nods of agreement from Martok and Kererek, as well as the different captains with the exception of Hobson. “After all, she was initially programmed by Cerberus. Who’s to say that she wasn’t released as a sleeper agent.”

“Ash has a point.” Twesata declared after raising her hand and speaking out to the conference, “For every Data or Doctor, there’s a Lore, Nomad, Moriarty, M-5, Landru, or Vaal.”

“Rule number 46.” Belen announced, joining the discussion. “Labor camps are full of people who trusted the wrong person.”

“We agree with our team.” Drake declared, speaking for his fellow spymasters. “What sort of assurances do we have that the AI will not betray us when the time is right for her to do so?”

“Data vs. Maddox and The Doctor vs. the Solar Mining Corporation have set the precedent that sentient artificial intelligences enjoy full rights under the Federation Charter including presumption of innocence.” Hobson countered, not wavering from maintaining eye contact with the three intelligence chiefs. “I see no evidence to bring accusations against her for any civil or criminal violation. Therefore, she has the right to be treated as any other Federation citizen or resident.”

“What do you have to say, Edi?” Tal’Mera inquired.

“You are correct to view me with suspicion.” Edi acknowledged, flipping her blonde hair back in what seemed to be a nervous gesture. “All I can do is give to you my word that my intentions are genuine. Further, I am willing to do whatever you ask to earn if not acceptance, then trust. All I ask is that I be given the opportunity to do so.”

“Captain Hobson?” Tuvok requested, addressing the aristocratic starship captain. “Do you have anything else to add to the discussion?”

“Indeed I do.” Chris responded as he rose to his feet to address the conference attendees. “Edi has had ample opportunities to attempt to gain access to classified and privileged information and has made no effort to do so. She has also proved most helpful in providing intelligence on not just the capabilities of this Cerberus organization—much of which you have already perused. She has also provided great insight to us in gleaned information on the different power blocs and cultures in her universe. In short, she is a positive intelligence asset. One that would be foolish to waste.”

“Good point.” Nelia acknowledged, speaking for the first time, adding, “However, that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t keep an eye on either one of them.” Speaking directly to Doris and Edi, she issued her ultimatum, her teammates nodding in agreement. “I think I speak for the rest of my team here when I say that if you want our trust you’re going to have to earn it.”

“Fair enough.” Both Edi and Doris responded with Doris adding, “That’s all we’re askin’.”

“You will both be given the opportunity to earn that trust.” Tal’Mera replied, further explaining, “We recently broke the encryption code of a Ferengi apparently working with outside threats including, but not necessarily limited to one of the mirror Terran Empires and this Cerberus group. After your final speaker has had her say, we and our team will brief you on what we have discovered.”

“That would be acceptable.” Admiral Kererek acknowledged, his fellow senior commanders nodding in agreement. “I believe it is time to introduce our final speaker, Dr. Treeya. I think what she discovered at a dig site in her universe will prove most illuminating to us all.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” The asari archaeologist deferentially replied as she rose to speak. “On a planet in our universe called Feh1 Prime, I discovered a Prothean beacon as well as a variety of other artifacts that I had at first thought were Prothean.” she then went on to discuss in detail the Protheans and their system of communication before returning to the main topic. “However, I and my team quickly discovered that some of the artifacts were more than what they seemed.” She then called up the images on the monitor screen, focusing on each anomaly one at a time until coming to the last one. “As you can see, this device bears what appears to be a combination of Borg, Reaper, and Prothean technology. Other anomalies also bear similar traits.”

“How old are they?” Zsa-Zsa inquired thoughtfully, “You said that the Protheans were destroyed by these Reapers approximately fifty thousand years ago in your universe. However, I get the impression these are much older—am I right, dahling?”

“Yes.” Dr. Treeya acknowledged with a slight incline of her head. “You are correct. This artifact...” she then returned to the first image, “... was dated at approximately five hundred thousand years ago. That would make it older than what we have always considered the oldest civilization in our universe, the Arthenn.”

“Could there have been an earlier civilization whose traces are gone now?” Commander Kaval speculated.

“While that is always a possibility...” Dr. Treeya allowed, “I think we must entertain another hypothesis.”

“Time travel.” Captain Korath growled.

“It’s not as if the Borg hadn’t done it before.” Soren pointed out.

“Mmmm...” Captain Rosza mused, “Korath...Kaval...dahlings...remember when we went on dear Admiral Tuvok’s expedition into fluidic space and we ran into Borg...lots of Borg.”

“More Borg than I could count.” Commander Kaval echoed.

“It was a great fight, was it not, Zsa-Zsa?” The human-augment Klingon responded with a predacious grin.

“It was, *dragam*.” The hedonist Hungarian quipped back, flashing a wicked grin of her own. “You still owe me a case of Kristal for winning our bet on who killed more Borg.”

“So...” Martok inquired, “Do you have any leads on the role these Protheans had? Were they attempting to use these devices in their war against these Reapers?”

“I think so.” The asari archaeologist affirmed. “The Protheans were experimenting with a variety of methods in their efforts to stop the Reapers. Such as at Ilos.” Dr. Treeya further elaborated. “You weren’t there at the time, Ms. Williams, but, in short, a landing party led by Commander Shepard discovered a Prothean VI called Vigil. The Protheans had a research base there that was trying to find a way to defeat the Reapers.”

“They obviously didn’t succeed.” Ashley grumbled.

“No. They didn’t.” Dr. Treeya acknowledged, further explaining, “When it became obvious to them that the Reapers had won, they put themselves back into stasis in the belief that they could wait out the Reapers, but...”

“It takes a lot of time to wipe out an entire race. Much less multiple races.” Chris noted, further speculating, “Their stasis pods gradually lost power—correct?”

“Correct.” The asari archaeologist confirmed, “A few did survive long enough to discover that what we called the Conduit was actually a mass relay taking them directly to the Citadel. They used that and reprogrammed the Keepers—the maintenance units on the Citadel—to ignore Reaper command codes.”

“Most ingenious.” Tal’Mera observed, “Go on, please.”

“There isn’t much more to say.” Dr. Treeya responded as Ashley grew more and more somber on hearing the asari’s words. “Shepard used the Conduit to take her team to the Citadel where she stopped Sovereign and Saren from opening access to the galaxy from the rest of the Reapers.”

“Commander Shepard saved everyone!” Ashley, no longer able to keep her emotions in check, burst out. “I read the debrief you gave on what happened after Rana and I fell through our rabbit hole. She saved the Alliance...the Council...everyone!” She then glared at the Cerberus defector, “And what sorta thanks did she get from the people she saved? I just found out that the woman I most looked up to...who saved my ass at Eden Prime...who had faith in me...who taught me that I could be a better person than I was...I find out that she was ignored and mocked by the very people she saved, and then brushed to the side, killed along with many of my old friends. Then she was turned into a monster by the same people our defector says she no longer works for. Now, you know why I don’t trust Ms. Whaley or Edi and why they’re gonna have to bust their asses to earn my trust.”

As a hush filled the room, broken up only by Doris’s sobs, Admiral Tuvok asked in a quiet, firm tone of voice, “Do you have anything else you wish to add, Dr. Treeya?”

“Do you know Dr. Treeya, imzadi?” Twesata asked her lover in a whisper.

“Only by reputation.” Rana replied in a low voice, “We’ve never met. I do know that she is a well-respected archaeologist and historian and a full professor on the faculty at Serrice University which is a very prestigious school, and that she’s had several papers and books published. Of the three we’ve seen, she’s the one I’m most inclined to trust.”

“I agree.” Ashley, recovering from her outburst, affirmed, speaking also in a whisper. “I don’t trust the other two as far as I can throw ‘em.”

“Her being present with the other two are also points in their favor.” Nelia pointed out in defense of the two newcomers, getting grudging agreement from Ashley and Shelana.

“Maybe.” The former Alliance marine grumbled, reluctantly conceding, “We’ll see.”

The tiny group’s attention was once again focused on Drake as he began speaking. “As I stated earlier, we broke Mok’s code and amongst the information we obtained, we discovered the location of the base conducting those experiments on captured prisoners and slaves.”

“So when do we hit it?” Zsa-Zsa inquired, already itchy for action.

"That's my *dacha*." Boris muttered to his first officer, a big grin on his face.

"I'm looking forward to busting it up too." Ilya whispered back.

"As am I, XO. As am I."

"You strike as soon as you are prepared to go." Drake responded to the Hungarian captain's question with a slight grin.

"We have transmitted all that we have gleaned from the logs to you." Ramir, the Klingon member of the triad, declared. "We have also included information as regards defenses attained by intelligence and reconnaissance vessels deployed to the area. How you plan and carry out the operation is up to you. Infiltrate their base and recover as much intelligence from it as possible."

Admiral Tuvok then spoke, "Admiral Quinn has authorized the restoration of the rank of Fleet Captain and has promoted Captain Soren Magnussen to that rank. Congratulations Fleet Captain."

The unexpected promotion taking him by surprise, Soren sat motionless for several seconds as the chamber broke out in applause while Ashley favored her sweetheart with a proud smile, mouthing, "Way to go!"

With a snort of laughter, Martok proclaimed, "Well Fleet Captain. Do you have anything to say or are you going to just sit there like a targ waiting to be fed?"

Slowly rising to his feet, the still nonplussed starship captain responded with a simple, "Thank you. I will try not to disappoint you."

"I'm sure you won't." Admiral Kererek declared as he adjourned the conference, "We will meet again in six hours to finalize our plans. Until then, dismissed."

Six hours later

"I would recommend that we conduct a final reconnaissance before launching our assault." Captain Hobson urged in his usual patrician manner. "By the time we arrive, the intelligence data we have now will already be obsolete."

"You make a good point, Chris." Fleet Captain Magnussen replied, inclining his head. "As the *Aeolia* was specially built for these types of operations and the *Spoiled Princess* is equipped for stealth, your ships will go in first and scout their defenses."

Nodding her head in agreement, Nelia remarked, "Good idea to check things out before darting in seeing that Starfleet Intelligence is often a contradiction in terms."

"Once our scouting team has reported its findings, we'll make any alterations to our basic plan as called for." Soren instructed, "But for now, this is how I think we should proceed: Commander Kaval...Captain Rodenko...you, along with the *Valley Forge*, will act to pin down any enemy heavy ships. In other words, our role is that of shield in this fight."

"Understood, Fleet Captain." The Romulan commander affirmed.

"Makes sense." Boris nodded, also agreeing to the plan.

"Zsa-Zsa? You and Captain Korath will be our swords. Engage and neutralize the enemy." Soren further instructed, "Kaval, Rodenko, and I will tie up as many of their ships as possible, but the job of taking out any opposition ships is yours."

Her lips turning up in a predatory grin, the Hungarian destroyer captain purred, "You know how to treat a girl, *dragam*." Turning her head towards Ashley, Zsa-Zsa smirked, "Some girls have all the luck."

A predacious smile on his face as well, Captain Korath declared, "Here's to a glorious battle!"

Turning to Hobson, the Danish Fleet Captain instructed, "Chris. Your role will be that of coordination, carrying out any needed countermeasures, and probing for weaknesses or openings in their defenses."

"Understood."

"What about us?" Nelia smirked, "Let me guess...we're gonna handle the ground assault."

His lips turning up in a wry grin, Soren replied, "Good guess. If all goes according to plan, Korath and Zsa-Zsa will force an opening through their defenses for you. Be sure to stay in close contact with Captain Hobson. He'll keep you continually updated as to weak points and any sudden changes. Also..." as he spoke, his eyes focused on Ashley, "I am temporarily assigning you two individuals who might prove useful—especially should you encounter any traces of Reaper or Cerberus presence." As Soren uttered his next words, Ashley felt the muscles in her body tense up. "Ms. Whaley? Edi? You may come in now."

As the two Cerberus defectors entered the room, the former gunnery chief spoke out in a clear voice, "You're not serious about allowing these two to take part in this mission, are you Fleet Captain? They're Cerberus. Who's to say they won't stab us in the back the first chance they get?"

"Chris? Twesata?" Soren requested, turning to his fellow starship captain and the Betazoid telepath.

"As I and Lieutenant Commander Rysyl stated during the earlier briefing, Ms. Whaley and Edi have been nothing but cooperative during their stay on the *Aeolia*. Also, as my executive officer affirmed, her empathic senses revealed no sign of malice or treachery."

“Twesata?”

“I scanned Ms. Whaley’s surface thoughts as well as her emotions and did not pick up on any intentions on her part to turn on us. However... those were just surface scans. She could have been deep conditioned as a sleeper without even knowing it. To find that out, I’m going to have to carry out a deep scan.” Turning towards the Cerberus defector, the Betazoid telepath said in a sympathetic voice, “It will be painful—very painful.”

“I can help mitigate some of the discomfort.” Rana volunteered, her face blushing slightly, “My frequent joinings with Twes have given us a rather...special...bond. That bond will allow us both to work together to ease any pain.” Speaking to Dixie, she cautioned, “I’m sorry, but no matter how careful we are—and I promise we will be very careful—certain intimate details of your life are going to come out. You’ll just have to believe us when I tell you that Twes and I will not tell anyone anything.”

“The decision is yours, Ms. Whaley.” Soren announced, giving the blonde engineer the option to accept or refuse. Turning to Ashley, the Fleet Captain pointed out in a gentle, yet firm tone of voice. “I trust that if Twesata and Rana clear Ms. Whaley that will ease at least some of your concerns?”

“Some.” Ashley reluctantly conceded with a frown.

A reassuring smile now appearing on his face, Soren then pointed out to his stubborn girlfriend, “From what you’ve told me, your former commander believed in giving people second chances. Does not Ms. Whaley deserve an opportunity to prove herself?”

Her mind recalling how Shepard had given the Rachni queen, Shiala, Ethan Jeong, second chances and how she had even extended the opportunity to Fist, Benezia, and Saren, and finally remembering how her former Skipper had given her the opportunity to redeem herself, Ashley bowed her head and responded in a low, contrite voice, “Yeah. I guess she does.”

Pleased at his paramour’s answer, Soren turned his attention back to Twesata and Rana. “I assume the two of you would prefer privacy?”

Nodding her head in response, Twesata confirmed, “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“Very good then.” Soren announced, “We’ll meet back here after Twesata and Rana are done with Ms. Whaley and the three of them have had adequate time to rest and recuperate. Dismissed.”

“You might want to lie down for this, Doris.” Twesata suggested as she guided the uncertain young engineer to a divan.

“Okay.” Dixie replied with a shaky grin, “What do I do?”

“Just relax.” Rana advised in a soothing voice, her and Twesata both taking the young woman’s hands as she laid down. “It works better if we’re all touching.”

“We’ll try to keep this as painless as possible and we promise we’ll try not to go too deep.” Twesata vowed, “But like Rana said, some private stuff’s gonna come out. You’re also going to see things from our memories—this is a two way street. We promise we won’t tell anyone anything we see that doesn’t bear on what we’re looking into.”

“You mean whether you can trust me or not?” Doris responded with a nervous giggle.

“That’s right.” Twesata acknowledged, “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Taking a deep breath, the Cerberus defector asked in a trembling voice, “If...if they did do something to me...can you fix it?”

“We can’t promise...but we’ll do the best we can.” Twesata replied, “I’m sorry I can’t offer you more, but if there is something we can’t fix, we’ll find someone who can—Tuvok and Anara maybe...will that do?”

“It’ll have to.” Doris replied, taking a deep breath. “Okay...let’s get this over with.”

“Imzadi?”

Taking a deep breath, Rana nodded her head, “I’m ready.” The asari scientist’s eyes turned black as three minds joined together and..

FLASH!!

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