

# Star Trek: Sutherland

## Unraveling Forceful Patterns

By David Falkayn

Hearing her door chime, Captain Elizabeth Shelby ordered the computer to lower the volume of the mid-22<sup>nd</sup> century neo-classical rock tune she was listening to as she looked up. "Come on in Commander," She called out as the door slid open to admit her first officer, Commander Christopher Hobson. Entering the room, Hobson paused for a moment to admire the Kama Sutra etching hanging on the wall near a replicated Degas painting.

"Do you like it?" Liz asked with a mischievous smirk as she saw her XO appraising the print.

"It's a very well done impression." Hobson replied knowledgeably, "The artist obviously made every effort to maintain continuity with the original style. However, if you look here..." He said pointing towards one of the women on the print, "...and here..." He pointed out, drawing the captain's attention towards one of the man, "...you can see how the artist, through his use of shading, allows some of his own creativity to emerge."

"I'm impressed." Liz remarked sincerely. "I can see that you've had at least one of Professor Davin's courses on aesthetics while you were at the Academy."

"Several, actually." The Iceman replied, a note of fondness slipping out from his normal patrician tone.

"I did as well." Liz agreed as she motioned for her first officer to sit down opposite her, the hedonistic captain barely repressing an amused grin as her fastidiously correct executive officer almost sighed in undisguised luxuriance as he settled into the plush and comfortable chair. "In fact, he was one of my favorite professors." Her lips turning up into a warm smile, she related. "I remember when I took his introductory course as a plebe with Jadzia; I so did not want to be there..."

“Why did you take him then?” Chris inquired, genuinely curious. “None of his courses are required...”

Chuckling merrily, Liz responded, “Two people actually more or less forced me to. Jadzia wanted to take the course, but didn’t want to take it alone and...well...you don’t know just how persistent Jadz can be when she wants to be—and this was long before she had the Dax symbiote!”

Allowing a slight grin to cross his normally icy countenance, the first officer brought his captain back to his original line of inquiry, “And the second person?”

“Boothby.” Liz answered back, her laughter now replaced by a warm smile as Hobson nodded his head in understanding. “Every time I went out to admire his roses, he would ask me the same question: ‘When was I going to finally get off my ass and take Professor Davin’s course?’” Her smile again turning into gentle laughter, Shelby finished her story, “I finally got the hints in my second year and signed up for his course. And well...one course led to another and then another...”

“I know what you mean.” Chris responded as yet another note of fondness escaped his carefully modulated voice. “Boothby also encouraged me to take the Professor’s course.”

“It’s amazing— isn’t it?” Liz observed, “At just how influential that gentle, crotchety, old groundskeeper has been in so many of our lives.” Pausing for a moment to collect her thoughts, the captain finally got to the point. “Here’s the reason why I asked you to come here, Chris.” She said as she handed a padd to her first officer. “We just got new orders from Admiral Ross...”

“Oh...” Chris vocalized as he perused the padd. “I see...well...to be honest, I’m glad to see them.” His poker face hiding the emotions seething beneath, he declared, “The ship and crew could use a break in the routine. I know that frustration has been mounting over the rules of engagement Starfleet has imposed on us since the crisis with the Klingons began...”

“Tell me about it.” Liz affirmed with a melodramatic sigh. “Those asinine rules are hamstringing us. Ships are being lost and crews are dying because Starfleet and the Federation Council insist on ‘avoiding confrontations!’” Barely keeping her volatile temper in check, Shelby spat out. “What that duranium bottom Shanthi doesn’t understand is that as far as the Klingons are concerned we’re already at war. They’re locked and loaded when they

meet up with us...there's no 'avoiding a confrontation'—it already is a fracking confrontation!"

"Well..." Hobson remarked, as he attempted to deflect his captain from yet another withering rant against her favorite bete-noire, "At least Starfleet Command did one thing right..."

"Yeah..." Liz agreed, willing herself to calmness, "They allowed us to take our civilians off. It appears they learned something at least from Wolf 359." Shaking her head, the captain brought the conversation back to the original topic. "But yes...I think the crew will benefit from this mission..."

"Agreed." Hobson acknowledged, "It'll give some of our junior officers a little exposure to diplomacy." He then asked, "Have you decided on someone to act as aide to Ambassador Offenhause yet?"

"Yes, I have." Liz replied with a mischievous grin as she carefully observed the reaction on her first officer's face, "I was thinking about Lieutenant Rysyl."

"A good choice." Hobson deadpanned, not giving away even the slightest hint of emotion. "Her empathic abilities will serve in good stead and she is interested in pursuing a command track."

"I thought you'd agree," Liz remarked, not showing any dismay at her failure to get an emotional response from the Iceman. "I also have another piece of good news for you..." she teased as she activated the monitor display on her wall, revealing the frozen image of her and Hobson's old mentor. "The Zeons are sending Professor Davin as their emissary to Ekos. Flashing a slight grin as she caught the slightest hint of anticipation in the features of her stony faced XO, Shelby continued, "I thought you might like to hear part of the letter that he sent me..."

*You have no idea how happy it made me to hear that it would be your ship that would be bringing the Federation diplomat to Ekos, Elizabeth. The Ekosians have worked so hard for this day. It has been a long, hard road for them since the overthrow of the Nazis—I am truly happy for them now that they stand poised to join the galactic community as full fledged members of the Federation. A warm grin crossing his features, he continued, I also look forward to renewing our friendship and to seeing Christopher as well—it has been too long, my former students, since we have sat and talked. Distracted by shouting in the background, the old man turned around and shouted out a brief reply. I'm sorry, Elizabeth—that was my wife and she has informed me*

*that the evening meal awaits. I look forward to seeing you and Christopher soon. Pleasant and safe journeys.*

*Same here, Professor Davin.* Liz thought, maintaining her warm smile until Lieutenant Atoa's voice, coming through the intercom, disrupted her thoughts.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. Atoa?" Shelby responded in a quiet voice as she terminated the image on her screen.

"We've picked up the *Los Angeles* on our sensors, sir and should be in transporter range in twenty minutes," The tactical officer reported.

"Very good, Lieutenant," Liz acknowledged. "We're on our way to the bridge." As she and her first officer stood up simultaneously, Shelby remarked as she motioned towards the door, "Well, Commander...shall we..."

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Nodding his head in satisfaction as he toured his section, Lt. Commander Jadon Tol, Chief Engineer aboard the *USS Sutherland* halted his progress at the station of one of his subordinates, Ensign Angela 'Treasure' Barrows, who was at that moment monitoring the operations of the massive starship's warp core, pulsating as it powered the ship through the phenomenal energy released by its controlled matter-antimatter reactions.

Glancing at the lovely blonde manning the console before turning his attention back once again to the powerful engines, the Trill engineer remarked, his voice tinged with just a touch of awe as he plastered on his usual half grin, "Takes your breath away, doesn't it, Treasure?"

"Wha..." Startled by her superior's near stealthy approach, Angela's head jerked up. "Sir..." She exclaimed in the Texas accent common to those who came from her home planet of North Star in what was once the Delphic Expanses, "...don't do that! Ya'll scared me half to death!"

"Sorry about that, Ensign." Jadon apologized, only half repentant. "I was talking about the engines. The sight and sound of them in full operation..."

"I know what you mean, Sir." Treasure acknowledged, nodding her head in agreement. "All that power..." She flirted, flashing a teasing grin, "...just strainin' to bust out..."

Chuckling, the Trill chief engineer asked as he got down to business, "So...how're your readings?"

Glancing down at her panel, the Ensign quickly answered back, all traces of her previous flirtation absent from her voice, "Just fine, sir. Matter-antimatter containment is well within tolerance levels and plasma conversion is going at the proper rate."

"Excellent." Jadon responded, then, tilting his head to the left for a moment, listened quietly. "Hmmm..." He vocalized before requesting, "Check the power transfer distribution, would you Treasure? It sounds off."

"Sure, boss..." The young engineer acknowledged after giving her superior a momentary askance look. Checking her readouts, she mumbled just loud enough to be audible, "Well I'll be..." Glancing back up from her console, Angela spoke up, "There's a slight variance in the flow from EPS tap 25 Bravo. Nothing serious but..."

"But I don't like it when my engines are off key," Tol finished, his normal affable grin not hiding his intensity. "Especially when we have Klingons on the prowl."

"I'll get it taken care of right away, sir." Ensign Barrows promised.

"That's what I like to hear." Jadon replied with a smile as he turned to leave Barrow's station. "If you need me, I'll be on the bridge." Before leaving he leaned over close enough to whisper in the young officer's ear, "Don't forget, Treasure...special staff meeting in my quarters at 2200 hours."

Flashing a sly grin of her own, the buxom ensign responded, "I'll be there..."

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Humming an ancient Andorian song as he strode down the corridor, Jadon's lips turned up into a broad grin as he spied Lieutenant Rysyl at the turbolift door. "Anara! Hold the door for me!" He called out as he picked up his pace. "Thanks!" He said as the pair entered the lift together.

"Bridge." Lieutenant Rysyl requested in her usual lyric voice. Looking up at the taller Trill, she smiled, "Where are you going, Jadon?"

"Same place." Tol answered back. "Probably for the same reason you are. Got the word that we're about to meet up with the *Los Angeles*."

"Yes." Anara frowned, "...and I was looking forward so much to going off duty until I received Manny's message.

"Long day?" Jadon inquired as the turbo lift shifted directions from horizontal to vertical.

"You could say that." The Deltan woman sighed. "Started out having to conduct a level eight diagnostic on the sensors and got worse from there. All I wanted to do when I got to my quarters was to take a long hot bath before meeting Denise for dinner. But now..." She mock groused as she shrugged her shoulders

Chuckling as the turbolift doors opened on to the bridge, Jadon quipped, "Well, Lieutenant, no one ever said that the life of a Starfleet officer was easy."

"I know..." Anara joked back, "But no one ever said that it had to be so grungy either."

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Walking on to the bridge, Captain Shelby smiled as she caught sight of the *Ambassador* class *Los Angeles* on the viewscreen.

"Looking forward on catching up on the latest gossip, Captain?" Jadon quipped from his engineering console.

"You might say that," Liz smirked. "T'Greth fancies himself a skilled card player and challenged me to a poker game..."

"So..." Sam Lavelle interjected from his station, "What happened?"

"He lost." Liz smirked as Lieutenant Atoa announced that the *Los Angeles* was hailing the *Sutherland*.

"Hello Captain T'Greth." Liz greeted with a mischievous grin as the image of the *Los Angeles* was replaced by that of its captain, a portly Tellarite who addressed Captain Shelby with a thick gravelly voice.

"Greetings Captain Shelby." The Tellarite exclaimed, a broad smile on his face. "Ambassador Offenhause will be ready to transport over to your ship in ten standard minutes."

"Excellent, Captain T'Greth." Liz replied with a smile. "Tell him we have quarters all ready for him and we look forward to his arrival."

"Will do." His smile vanishing, the Tellarite captain inquired, "Did you hear about the *Cumberland*?"

"No," Shelby replied, a lump forming in her throat. "Last I heard, it was supposed to be on patrol."

"We lost communications with it in the Twilight Zone." T'Greth said somberly, referring to the nickname given by Starfleet to the Perdita Expanse, the dangerous, yet strategically important, area of space touching the Argelius and Bajoran sectors and bordering on both Klingon and Cardassian space. "They haven't been heard from in several days."

"Damn," Liz cursed in a low voice. "Klingons?"

"No one's sure," the *Los Angeles*' captain replied, shaking his head. "You know how ships have a tendency to just disappear out there." He said, his voice dropping to a whisper as his hands made a gesture that Liz immediately recognized as a ritualistic warding symbol of the dominant religion on Tellar. T'Greth then added, the gravelly quality to his voice returning, "But it's a possibility given how active the Klingons have been recently." His eyes now taking on a predatory gleam, he declared, "After we drop off the ambassador, we're headed out there to coordinate recovery efforts."

Her eyes narrowing into angry slits, Liz spat out, releasing all her frustrations at both the Klingons and Starfleet Command in her voice, "If it was Klingons...give them a phaser blast for me."

"Consider it done." T'Greth replied in a grim tone as his intercom button beeped, "I've just been informed that the ambassador is about to beam over to your ship. He's your problem now." He then flashed a mischievous grin,

“Take care of yourself, Liz...and try to behave. I don’t want to lose my favorite poker opponent to a pissed off admiral.”

Appearing innocent, Captain Shelby rejoined, “Me...misbehave?” Seeing the skeptical look on T’Greth face, Liz amended, “Well...alright...I’ll try...but no promises!” Then, before cutting off communications, she added in a sincere voice, “And you watch yourself in the Zone, T’Greth...you still owe me from our last game.”

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Immediately after terminating communications with her counterpart on the *Los Angeles*, Shelby addressed her first officer, “Commander Hobson? You and Messrs. Rysyl and Varok will accompany me to the transporter room.” Then, turning towards Lieutenant Commander Tol, she said as she vacated the command chair, “Mr. Tol—the bridge is yours.”

“Aye, Sir.” Both Tol and Hobson replied in unison, Tol taking the chair recently vacated by the captain as Hobson motioned Anara and Varok to join him and the captain at the turbolift.

As the foursome entered the elevator, Anara ventured, “I understand that Ambassador Offenhouse has an interesting history.”

“You could say that.” Liz replied with an amused grin. “He and two others were found in cryonic suspension aboard a derelict spaceship from the 21<sup>st</sup> century that had somehow found itself near the Romulan neutral zone about nine years ago by the *Enterprise*.”

Picking up where the captain left off, Varok continued the narrative, “They had all died of conditions that, while easily treatable now, were during that time fatal. The *Enterprise’s* chief medical officer treated the medical problems and restored them to health.”

Shaking her head in astonishment, Anara then asked, “How did their ship get so far out?”

“No one knows for sure.” Liz answered back. “The current theory holds their ship most likely got sucked into a mini-wormhole that probably destroyed an experimental shuttle launched at that time.”

“That would be a logical supposition,” Varok interjected.

“But what about the shuttle?” Anara inquired, her curiosity aroused. “Wouldn’t it have been deposited near their ship?”

“Not necessarily,” The Vulcan replied. “The shuttle could easily have drifted away.” Then, further warming to the topic, he added. “Also, there are many theories regarding the nature of wormholes. For instance, while one theory does hold that there is a more or less straight path leading invariably from point A to point B—such as in the case of the stable wormhole near Deep Space Nine, there is another that contends that wormholes could also possess a variety of trunks with currents and eddies that can carry an object into a variety of different locations—possibly even into different universes or dimensions.”

“So...” Hobson joining the discussion, hypothesized, “...it should be possible to use wormholes to travel to these different universes.”

“Possible,” Varok confirmed, “But very risky.” He then explained, “The laws of physics in this universe are very finely balanced to support life. There is no guarantee that those laws would apply in another—in fact, the probabilities of their doing so are remote. For example, something as seemingly trivial as a slightly greater mass for neutrons or protons could have a deciding effect on whether life is feasible or not.”

“While this is a most fascinating discussion...” Captain Shelby said, reluctantly interrupting as they drew nearer the transporter room, “I’m afraid that we’re going to have to table it for now.” Then, turning toward her Deltan operations officer, she announced, “Lieutenant...the reason why I asked you to join us is that, if you want that third pip and eventually a command of your own, you’re going to have to get experience in handling diplomatic situations. So...” Liz said with a grin, “I’m designating you as liaison officer to Ambassador Offenhouse. It will be your duty to make sure that he’s happy and to convey to me any needs that he might have.”

“In other words...” Anara quipped, “I’m to keep him out of your way as much as possible.”

Laughing, Liz answered back, “Lieutenant, I have a feeling you’re going to go far.”

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Taking stock of the figure that had just materialized on the transporter pad, Shelby and her officers saw a human being of average height and weight, appearing to be approximately fifty years old, with an angular face and seal brown hair touched by gray and wearing a slate grey well tailored business suit. *So...that's what a four hundred year old man looks like.* Liz thought, singularly unimpressed. Taking a deep breath, she cleared her throat and announced in a formal tone, "Ambassador Offenhause? Welcome to the *USS Sutherland*. I am Captain Elizabeth Shelby and I would like to introduce you to some of my senior officers." She then motioned towards where Hobson and the other officers were gathered behind her as she introduced first her first officer and then Mr. Varok. Coming to Anara, the captain said, "And this is Lieutenant Anara Rysyl. She will act as your liaison during this mission."

"Thank you." The ambassador replied in a clipped voice as he stepped off the transporter pad. Then, regarding the Deltan woman to whom he had just been introduced, a slight smile crossed his normally severe features. "Ms. Rysyl should be most acceptable."

"Excellent." Shelby responded. "The lieutenant will show you to your quarters and help you to get settled in. Afterwards, if you'd like, she can arrange a tour of the ship for you and, if you don't mind, perhaps you can join me and the senior staff for dinner this evening."

"Thank you again, Captain. That would be delightful." Ambassador Offenhause said before inquiring, "Can you tell me how long it will be before we reach the Zeon system?"

"I've already ordered the helm to set a course for the system, ambassador." Liz replied. "At warp five we should be there in approximately thirty-six hours."

"Excellent, Captain." The ambassador replied with a perfect poker face, "I can't emphasize how important this mission is to Ekos." His lips turning down into a frown, he added, "Also, to be honest, I'm curious to see firsthand how their society is doing after Professor Gill's interference."

"I have to admit to being more than a little curious about that myself." Liz admitted. "Perhaps we can discuss this topic at length during dinner?"

"Perhaps," Offenhause replied noncommittally. "But for now...if it's alright with you, I'd like to get settled in..."

"Of course, sir," Captain Shelby, momentarily blushing at keeping the ambassador waiting, motioned for Anara to join them. "Mr. Rysyl will escort you to your quarters now and I will see you at dinner tonight."

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"You set a fine table, Captain." Ambassador Offenhouse praised as he took in the table setting. Milky white porcelain plates, gleaming silverware and translucent crystal all sitting on an immaculate white linen table cloth lent an air of elegant grace that perfectly complemented the Chopin piece playing in the background.

"Thank you, sir." Liz resplendent in her dress uniform replied as she took her seat. "We're not much for formal occasions on the *Sutherland*," She explained as the rest of her command staff took their seats, "But this is a special occasion."

"Dr. Murakawa..." Ambassador Offenhouse exclaimed on seeing the ship's chief medical officer attired in a pale blue Ionic chiton, her gold crucifix hanging from her neck. "You look beautiful in that. Centauran, I take it?"

"Yes." Denise, blushing, responded with a shy smile, "My mother's. She gave it to me while I was at home before reporting aboard the *Sutherland*." She then glanced in Lt. Rysyl's direction, "I was going to wear my dress uniform, but Anara talked me into wearing this instead."

"It's a shame that such a striking gown should stay hanging in a closet unappreciated by others." The Deltan woman explained as she gently chided the often socially insecure and shy doctor, "Beauty should never be hidden away."

'Hear...Hear!' Jadon exclaimed as he stood up. "I'd like to propose a toast!" Picking up his wine glass, he eyed each of the women at the table, his eyes pausing to linger on Anara for just a few seconds longer, much to the consternation of the stoic first officer sitting next to her, "To beauty!"

"Well..." Liz chuckled as she picked up her glass, "I'll drink to that!"

"As will I..." Hobson agreed as he looked deep into Anara's eyes. Lifting his glass, he then stated in a soft, barely audible voice, "To beauty."

As the first course, a salad made of Vulcan vegetables and vichyssoise was brought in by volunteer stewards, Anara ventured, "I am curious, Ambassador...how did someone such as yourself become a diplomat?"

"You mean how did someone born four hundred years before you were born decide to become a Federation diplomat..." Ralph interjected with a crooked grin.

Chuckling, the Deltan lieutenant nodded her head, "Yes, sir...if I'm not being rude..."

"Oh, not at all!" The ambassador protested. "Before...I was a businessman—a highly successful one," He said with pride, "Then, I...died. As you probably already know, before dying, I had arranged to have my body put into cryonic suspension," Chuckling, he quipped, "One of the others revived with me called it a 'freeze you now and heal you later' deal. When I got back to Earth, I spent some time trying to figure out what I was going to do with my new life." His voice growing more solemn, he said, "You have to understand—I spent my entire life trying to acquire wealth and power—but really, for me it wasn't the actual victory..." He went on, a predatory gleam appearing in his eyes, "...it was the struggle—the hunt if you will that mattered."

Looking around the table, he saw a look of disapproval from the Vulcan and some of the humans around the table. *No surprise there*, Offenhouse thought; *Vulcans can be so predictable and as for the human crew—what else should I expect, they've been brought up believing that they've 'grown up'. Well...let them enjoy their conceit a little while longer—if things break like I think they're going to with the Dominion, that and a whole lot more is going to get knocked out of them.* The wily diplomat also noted confused regret on the part of his Deltan aide; and, to his surprise, in the eyes of the captain and her first officer, not only understanding, but also agreement. As he exchanged looks with both Shelby and Hobson, he nodded his head gently and continued his narrative. "At first, I thought I would start a new business somewhere outside the Federation—possibly dilithium speculation..." The ambassador then sighed, "But then I remembered something that Captain Picard said about enriching myself. So...I took him up on his challenge."

"That's a fascinating story, Ambassador," Dr. Murakawa exclaimed. "I read Dr. Crusher's report about your...resuscitation. I was wondering...how did you find things on first arriving on Earth?"

“Well...as you might imagine, it was confusing to say the least,” Chuckling, he related anecdotes of learning how to cope with 24<sup>th</sup> century life where everything from sonic showers to the climate control net was a marvel to him. Then, turning serious, he admitted, “For a while I drifted—I felt like an anachronism...a relic, if you will. I needed a challenge—to match my wits against an opponent...”

“So you chose diplomacy.” Hobson interjected.

Nodding his head, Offenhouse proclaimed, “The true game of kings.”

Shifting subjects, Lieutenant Atoa asked, “Mr. Ambassador? If I might ask, how do you view Professor Gill’s interference on Ekos?”

Shifting somewhat uncomfortably in his seat, Ralph thought for what seemed several minutes before carefully replying. “You have to understand, Mr. Atoa, I’m Jewish...so I have some very real issues with the Professor’s actions.”

“How do you mean?” Anara asked, her face reflecting her confusion.

“How familiar are you with mid-twentieth century Earth history?” The ambassador queried back.

“I’m not.” The Deltan woman replied honestly.

His expression and voice taking on a grim tone, the man from Earth’s past explained about the original Nazis and the Holocaust and the legacy of hate they left behind. Taking a deep breath, Ralph then added his own reminiscences, “I remember as a child watching the march through Skokie on the television. I can still see my grandfather—a survivor of Buchenwald...I can still see the tears in his eyes...” Taking a sip of water, he apologized, “I’m sorry...please give me a moment...”

“It’s all right, sir,” Liz replied in a soft voice. “Take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you.” The ambassador responded, having collected himself. “As I was saying...the legacy of hate left behind by the Nazis was a profound one—one that took centuries for humans to move beyond...” *If we truly have done so...* he didn’t add, “One of the questions I want answered to my satisfaction before making my recommendation to the Federation Council is whether the Ekosians have truly put the Nazis behind them or not.”

"You sound like you don't think they have." Manuele stated flatly.

"To be honest, Mr. Atoa..." Ralph replied in a soft voice, "You're right. I don't think they have. Poison like that is not purged so easily—but we'll see..." He said quietly as he remembered the identification tattoo on his grandfather's arm, "...maybe I'm wrong this time."

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Returning to her quarters after the lengthy formal dinner, Liz stripped off her uniform as she entered the sonic shower. Allowing the vibrations to remove the day's dirt and grime from her body, she thought about what Ambassador Offenhause had said regarding Ekos' entry into the Federation. Getting out of the shower, she slipped on a translucent gossamer chemise made of the finest Andorian spider-silk. Luxuriating in the cool gentle touch of the fabric on her smooth skin, the hedonistic captain walked to her replicator.

"Mimosa...chilled." Picking up the icy cool drink, she reclined on the plush couch in the middle of her sumptuously furnished suite. Taking a sip from her drink, she then commanded, "Computer...search for and play the captain's log for the *USS Enterprise*, Stardate 2534.0." As Shelby listened to the legendary starship captain's words, her mind drifted back to the recent dinner and the topic of conversation for much of the meal—John Gill and Ekos...

"Ambassador Offenhause?" Anara asked as the volunteer stewards brought in the main course. "I still can't understand what motivated John Gill to violate the Prime Directive by introducing Nazism?"

Barely hiding her snort of derision, Ensign Django added with just the slightest touch of sarcasm in her voice, "Yeah...I'd like to know that too."

Addressing the table, the ambassador spoke in a tense voice. "Captain Kirk, in his report to Starfleet Command on the affair, stated that Professor Gill believed that bringing in a 'benign' form of Nazism would provide structure to the Ekosians' otherwise violent and anarchic culture at the time."

"His reasoning was entirely illogical..." Varok stated in his usual matter of fact tone. "...as well as factually and theoretically flawed."

"Quite correct." Offenhause agreed, nodding his head. "Professor Gill fell into an old trap with his analysis of Earth history during that period."

“How so?” Dr. Murakawa asked, her curiosity drawing her into the conversation.

“First...” Ralph replied, “He forgot that Nazism was born from the anger, resentment, and insecurity that Germans felt following the end of the First World War and second, he forgot that racism is the core component of Nazi ideology. Hitler and the Nazis played upon those feelings as well as a deeply ingrained culturally based anti-Semitism to turn Jews and other ‘undesirables’ into scapegoats for people’s wrath. In Ekos’ case, the Zeons who had come to Ekos as immigrants and who supplied the majority of the administrative, commercial, and professional class became the scapegoats.” Pausing for a moment, Offenhouse ended his discussion on a grim note, “Had Captain Kirk not acted when he did...had Melakon succeeded in his plan to invade Zeon...I’m afraid we would have been confronted with an Ekosian ‘Final Solution’ that would have been as tragic as the Nazi Holocaust on Earth.”

*“When I think about how close we came to a second Nazi Holocaust...hundreds of years and light years away from Earth...”*

Her mind brought back by the rare, mournful tone in James Kirk’s voice, Elizabeth paid closer attention as the *Enterprise* captain concluded his log entry.

*“I cannot understand why a man as good...as gentle...as John Gill could have made such a horrible mistake. A lifetime of scholarship and teaching—of molding minds—and...”* Shelby could almost see the legendary captain standing before her, wearing the gold shirt and black pants and boots of that time, shaking his head sadly as he spoke, *“...and now...the man that I looked up to as a mentor...and friend...will forever be known to future generations as the man who committed the most heinous violation of the Prime Directive in the history of the Federation...as a cautionary reminder of the danger of false pride. And as for Ekos...Daras and Eneg say that they will reverse Melakon’s policies. I wish them well, but the legacy of the Nazis is not such an easy one to undo. I told Mr. Spock that one day both Zeon and Ekos will take their places as members of the Federation...but...I fear...for Ekos at least...it won’t be in my lifetime. Conclude Captain’s log entry, Stardate 2534.0, Kirk, commanding Enterprise out.*

Yawning, Liz finished her mimosa. Getting up, she set the empty glass down on the coffee table in front of the couch as she stood up. Stripping off her

chemise, she slipped into bed. However, sleep would not come easily this night watch for Elizabeth as both James Kirk's and Ralph Offenhouse's words intruded into her thoughts leaving the troubled captain with a deep sense of foreboding.

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Walking on to the bridge, a bleary eyed Liz nodded her head at Lieutenant Nyota Dryer, the on duty tactical officer. "Lieutenant."

"Morning, Captain." The ebony skinned security officer replied. Seeing the lines on her commanding officer's face, Nyota asked tentatively, "Rough night last night, Captain?"

"Yeah...you could say that." The captain replied, giving her subordinate a slight smile. Looking at the viewscreen, she immediately recognized the planet Zeon, its largest continent currently centered on the screen. "I see we've assumed orbit, Lieutenant Dryer. When can we expect the Zeon delegation?"

"They've signaled that they'll be ready to beam up in approximately thirty minutes, Sir." The recent transferee from the *USS Cuffe* crisply replied.

"Very good, Lieutenant." Shelby acknowledged. "Have the senior staff meet in Transporter Room One in twenty minutes and ask Ambassador Offenhouse if he would care to join us." Then, turning towards her Vulcan science officer, standing at his science station, Liz gestured, "Mr. Varok, would you join me?"

"Of course, Sir." Varok replied as he turned his duties over to Ensign Johnson who had just arrived on the bridge.

As the pair walked down the corridor towards the Captain's quarters, Liz inquired, "I know it's a long shot, Mr. Varok, but...seeing as how your first assignment out of the Academy was on the *Enterprise-A* under the command of Captain Kirk, I was wondering if you might have..."

"I'm sorry, Captain." The Vulcan science officer interjected, shaking his head, "I know what you're going to ask but, as you pointed out, at that time I was merely an ensign on my first assignment. I regret I was not privy to the conversations of the senior officers."

"I didn't expect you would be..." Shelby replied, a bit more abruptly than she intended. Looking up at the placid face of the elderly Vulcan, she softened her tone. "As I said...it was a long shot." Exhaling, the captain continued, "It's just that any information I can get...no matter how anecdotal...could prove helpful." Shaking her head, Elizabeth confessed, "Mr. Varok...I know Vulcans don't believe in hunches or anything like that...but I have a feeling about this mission...a bad feeling."

"Captain..." Varok responded in a voice that seemed to Liz to be almost encouraging, "...while I might not see the logic in the human tendency to rely on intuition...I have seen in my years of service that frequently playing a...hunch...has proven most successful." He then sounded a note of warning as the pair neared the door to the Captain's quarters. "I have also seen the result of what happens when human intuition goes wrong on more than one occasion as well."

"Thank you, Mr. Varok..." Liz replied, acknowledging the older officer's words. Then, as the door slid open, she smiled, "I'll see you in about fifteen minutes."

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Entering the transporter room, Liz was immediately greeted by her entire senior staff, along with Ambassador Offenhouse. "Captain," Commander Hobson exclaimed, his face, as usual, showing no signs of emotion.

"Commander," Liz nodded her head in response. "Is the Zeon delegation ready for transport?"

"Yes Sir," The first officer replied.

"Very well, then," Shelby said, turning towards the transporter chief, "Let's get this show on the road."

Upon hearing the captain's order, the chief activated his console. Almost immediately, four of the transporter pads lit up as the delegation materialized. "Elizabeth!" The lead figure, an elderly man approximately Shelby's height and wearing a distinguished blue suit and carrying a valise, promptly called out with a smile as he immediately recognized his former student. "Quickly...what is the difference between astonishment and the unexpected?"

Smiling back at her former teacher, Liz promptly responded, "Astonishment looks outward—losing the self while being caught up in the excitement of the experience of something high, distant, and immensely powerful and is pre-modern while the unexpected looks inward -- as the self asks why it has not found what it expected, and does that unexpectedness follow the discovery of something new to everyone, or just new to self and is modern—a goal for those who make science and fashion."

"Very good, Elizabeth." The old man beamed proudly down on his protégé as he stepped off the transporter pad. "Now...do you think your officers would feel astonishment if you gave your old professor a hug—or would it be unexpected?"

"Both, I think." Liz smiled back as she hugged her former mentor. Then stepping back, she introduced her senior staff and then remarked, "You're looking good..."

"I have a wife who makes sure I eat right and never lets me have any fun." Davin playfully whined as the rest of the Zeon delegation stepped off the pad to join their leader. Turning toward Ambassador Offenhouse, the professor stated formally, "This is an important occasion for both Zeon and Ekos. We have worked long and hard with the Ekosians to make Federation membership a reality for them and now, that it is almost here, I feel a measure of both pride and relief."

"I'm looking forward to seeing what you've done." Ralph replied noncommittally as he shook the professor's hand. "And I look forward to hearing your presentation on the similarities and differences between Ekosian Nazi and Earth Nazi art as propaganda at the conference."

"Yes, Professor," Varok politely interjected. "Having followed your work, I must admit to finding your theories regarding Ekosian cultural adaptations to human socialist realist art most...intriguing."

"High praise indeed from a Vulcan as distinguished as yourself," Davin replied modestly. Smiling, he added, "We most definitely should get together—I would be most interested in your opinions." Turning towards Commander Hobson, the Zeon academic maintained his smile, "Christopher! I'm pleased to see that you're Elizabeth's first officer!" His face beaming with fatherly pride, Ledron praised, "My two best students working together...what more could a teacher want?"

“Professor,” Chris greeted back, a slight smile cracking through his normal icy exterior. “It’s a pleasure to see you again as well.”

“We must get together, Christopher,” Davin said cheerily before addressing Captain Shelby once again, “I don’t mean to sound rude, Elizabeth, but how long should it take for us to reach Ekos?”

Chuckling at her old mentor’s impatience, Liz activated her comm. badge, “Mr. Lavelle? Take us to Ekos—maximum impulse.”

After hearing her helmsman’s acknowledgement, the captain returned to her guest, “We should be in orbit around Ekos soon, Professor. So...why don’t I show you to your quarters and then later you can join me in the lounge...”

“By all means, Elizabeth,” The professor smiled back as he offered his former student his arm. “It has been too long since we’ve talked.”

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“And this is ‘Rick’s, Professor!” Liz smiled as she motioned with her hand towards the *Sutherland’s* lounge.

“Rick’s?” Davin asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is Rick the owner?”

“No...” Liz replied with a chuckle. “The former captain called it that,” She said as the pair took in the 1940s themed lounge complete with a replicated wood bar and grand piano. “It seems that he was into early 20<sup>th</sup> century entertainment and saw this movie called ‘Casablanca’ and fell in love with it.”

“I can see why...” Ledron said as a waiter, wearing a white dinner jacket and bow tie, came bearing their drinks. Taking a sip of his drink, the teacher regarded his student, “So...how have you been, Elizabeth?”

“Not bad,” Liz said as she tossed back her drink. “Took some settling in time to get used to my new command, but things are going pretty smoothly now,” The captain said as she motioned for the waiter to refresh her drink and then added with a grin, “Did you know Jadzia’s stationed on Deep Space Nine?”

“Jadzia Idaris?” The professor, his lips curling up into a grin, exclaimed. “I remember how you two were almost always either buried in your work to the point of exhaustion or you were getting into some sort of trouble or other—

usually over the young men. Although in your case....” He added with a wink, “...it was also young women too, as I recall.”

Chuckling merrily, Liz quipped, “You know me too well, Professor. Anyway, she’s Jadzia Dax now,” Shelby corrected with a grin, “And she’s even worse now that she’s been joined.”

“You mean she got the Dax symbiote?” Davin asked, surprised. “I knew that Curzon had died, but I never heard who had gotten the symbiote, although I couldn’t think of a more appropriate host than Jadzia.”

“I’m surprised,” Liz responded. “It happened about the same time I was working for Admiral Hanson. I’d have been sure someone like you would have known...”

“You’re forgetting, I’m retired, Elizabeth,” The old man pointed out with more than a little regret, “And I’ve been working so hard on the Ekos project...So I’m not as up to date as I used to be.”

Liz then spent several minutes filling her old teacher in on how Jadzia had taken a leave of absence from Starfleet, reapplied to the initiate program, and passed it—hardly ever leaving the initiate complex for three years while she underwent her training. “I mean...Professor...” Shelby said her exasperation with her friend during that period in her life showing, “I hardly ever saw her during that time—she was so driven...”

“Unlike a certain cadet I knew who, during her freshman year, never once left the Academy grounds and who spent all of her time either in her dorm, the library, or the labs...” Davin quipped with a slight smile.

“All right...All right! Point made,” Liz laughed. “So...” She asked, changing the subject, “Do you really think Ekos is ready for full membership? I’ve been boning up on my old Earth history and from what I’ve read; Earth didn’t really get rid of the Nazi legacy until after the Eugenics Wars—over a hundred years after World War II.”

“Ekos isn’t Earth,” Davin gently, but firmly, pointed out. “Even though both planets were settled with human stock by the Preservers thousands of years ago—we’re not quite the same. Ekosian culture and society evolved differently than Earth...”

"But the Ekosians very quickly accepted Nazism once John Gill introduced it," Captain Shelby rebutted, "And...even though Gill tried to institute a more...benign...form, it very quickly turned into something very similar to the way it developed on Earth—right up to the point where the Ekosians had their very own *Kristalnacht*."

"I know...I know," The old professor said somewhat testily. "My father was there—remember? His fiancé at the time was murdered by the Nazis." Taking a deep breath, Ledron took several moments to collect his thoughts. "I understand your concerns, Elizabeth... but believe me, I wouldn't have signed on to this if I weren't absolutely sure that the Ekosians have put the Nazis behind them once and for all."

"I know, Professor," Liz replied, placing her hand on top of his, "And I'm sure you're right—it's just..."

"It's a painful legacy...I know, Elizabeth," Davin said gently, "But you'll see...Ekos has grown up."

"I hope you're right, Professor," Liz said thoughtfully as her doubts returned. Finishing her drink, she uttered a silent prayer as she looked on fondly at the old man sitting opposite her, "I really do."

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"Assuming standard orbit around Ekos," Lavelle announced as Captain Shelby came on to the bridge.

"Receiving a hail from Ekosian Space Control," Lieutenant Atoa then reported from his post at tactical.

"Put them on the main viewscreen," Liz ordered as the Earthlike form of Ekos was replaced by the image of a young dark haired woman wearing a beige tunic and bearing the rank insignia of an Ekosian Space Forces sub-lieutenant.

"Greetings, *Sutherland*," The junior officer said in a polite voice, "And welcome to Ekos. I have been instructed to inform you that a reception in honor of Ambassador Offenhouse and Professor Ledron Davin will be held at 1600 hours, Ekosian Mean Time, at the ENEG Pavilion—here are the coordinates. Of course, Captain, you and your senior staff are cordially invited."

“Thank you, Sub-Lieutenant,” Captain Shelby replied with a smile, “Please express our thanks to the Foreign Ministry and inform them that we will be honored to attend.”

“Mr. Rysyl?” Liz requested after the Ekosian officer had terminated their transmission, “Please inform Ambassador Offenhouse that there will be a welcoming reception on the surface in two standard hours.” Turning towards her first officer, Shelby then said with a smile, “Commander, I’ll let you fetch Professor Davin—that’ll give you some time to spend with him...” She then added apologetically, “I’m afraid I’ve monopolized a good portion of the professor’s free time—I’m sorry...I know you were a student of his as well...”

“Thank you, sir,” Hobson replied, “I appreciate that.”

Turning her attention to Manuele and Sam, Liz smiled once again, “Mr. Atoa...Mr. Lavelle—you gentlemen need diplomatic experience if you’re going to advance—so you’ll accompany us to the reception—dress uniforms, of course.”

“Yes, sir,” Both officers replied in unison as the captain took her seat. Leaning over towards Sam, Ensign Django whispered, “Better you than me...”

Overhearing her tempestuous navigator, the captain quickly decided that another of her junior officers could use some diplomatic experience, “Oh...I almost forgot...Ensign Django—you’ll be joining us as well.”

“Yes, sir,” Maria acknowledged grudgingly as Sam and Manuele both tried without success to hide their smirks.

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Standing outside the door of his former teacher’s guest quarters, Commander Hobson activated the intercom, “Professor Davin?”

“Yes,” As the door slid open, the wizened professor smiled, “Ah...Christopher...please come in.”

“Thank you, sir,” The first officer, ever formal, stated as he entered the guest suite. “Captain Shelby sends her compliments and says that the Ekosian Foreign Ministry will be holding a reception in yours and the ambassador’s honor in two standard hours.”

"Thank you, Christopher," Ledron acknowledged with a chuckle as he appraised his former student, "Still the Alpha Squadron Leader, aren't you Mr. Hobson?" He quipped, referring to the cadet squadron that Chris had led at the Academy.

"I guess so," Hobson replied, this time managing a slight grin.

"Well...I'm glad to see you here!" The professor exclaimed with a grin as he motioned for the younger man to take a seat. "Sit down! Sit down, Christopher! We have plenty of time before the reception and I did so miss our chats."

"Thank you, Professor." Chris replied as he took his seat opposite the professor's. "I too have missed our time together."

"So..." The elderly professor asked as he handed his protégé a class of saurian brandy, "How have you been, Christopher?"

"Fine, Sir..." The diffident Hobson replied, taking a sip of his drink. "I'm...content...with my position here now..."

Chuckling softly, the wise old man retorted gently, "That's not what I asked, Christopher." His laughter vanishing, Davin gazed intently at his former student a mournful expression overcoming his formerly cheerful demeanor, "I know I'm late by several years, but I'm sorry about Natalie..."

Feeling a momentary pang in his heart as memories of his deceased wife flooded his mind, Chris confessed with a sad smile, "Thank you, Professor. I know it's been a long time since the shuttle accident, but..."

"But sometimes it feels like yesterday," The old man finished. "I know...even though my father loved my mother, sometimes...when he didn't think she or I could see...I could tell that he was thinking about his former fiancé...Marta...who was killed by the Ekosians...you could see it in his face..." Davin said sadly, his voice trailing off.

"I know, sir," Chris, placing his hand on the elderly scholar's shoulder, lowered his head.

Laughing ironically, Ledron shook his head, "I'm getting old. Here I was trying to be a father figure to you and it's the student who's providing the comfort." Then, squaring his shoulders, the Zeon academic flashed a sad

smile, "I know you'd rather be in command of your own ship, Christopher, but, I'm glad you're here. Elizabeth needs you."

Shaking his head gently, Hobson replied, "She doesn't need me, Professor. I'm just her first officer. The captain is most capable..."

"Yes...yes...I know." Davin responded with a chuckle, "She is." His laughter disappearing, the old man added, "She's one of the most strong willed, stubborn, and determined people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. But I also know that she can be rash...emotional...impetuous. She needs someone like you...someone who is..."

"Cautious?" The younger man declared in a faintly disappointed tone.

"No." The Professor responded, shaking his head. "Someone who is equally strong willed, stubborn and determined as she, but who is also more precise...grounded. Someone who can reach her when she does go out on what you Terrans call 'a limb' and pull her back to safety. Someone who can temper her fire with ice." Sighing deeply, the elderly man continued, "There is so much you don't know about Elizabeth, Christopher. When most people see her they either see the ambitious, driven—often to the point of recklessness—Starfleet officer...or they see the hedonistic pleasure seeker interested only in her own self gratification. But there's far more to her than either of those images. She's had to deal with so much heartache...so much pain. Chris..." The old man said his eyes boring into those of the younger man, "She needs someone she can trust...someone she can rely on..." Smiling, Davin patted the younger man on his shoulder, "That person...for now at least...is you, Christopher.

Shaking his head doubtfully, the former student replied, "I'll try, Sir, but sometimes..."

"I know..." The older man laughed, "She doesn't make it easy, does she? But..." Davin added as he escorted his protégé to the door, "I have faith in you...I have faith in both of you. And now..." He concluded as the door to his quarters whooshed open, "If you'll excuse me, I have to get ready for the reception. I'll see you there."

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While Commander Hobson was talking with his former teacher, another conversation was taking place in Ambassador Offenhouse's quarters where Anara had arrived to fetch her charge for the reception.

"Ah...Ms. Rysyl..." The Ambassador greeted as his door slid open to reveal the presence of his temporary aide. "I assume we're in orbit around Ekos now?"

"Yes, sir," The Deltan woman said flashing a brief smile. "Captain Shelby wants me to inform you that there will be a reception in your honor in two standard hours."

"Excellent!" Ralph exclaimed as he motioned for Anara to enter his quarters. "I was just finishing packing," He said as he closed the lid on his valise. "I've been looking forward to this..."

Tilting her head to the left, Anara asked, "Why, sir? I got the impression that it was a simple introductory reception—what Lieutenant Lavelle calls a 'meet and greet' thing. I wouldn't think any serious negotiations would take place there."

"That's exactly what it is," Offenhouse agreed, "And you're right...there probably won't be any serious diplomatic negotiations going on at the reception." He then flashed a sly grin, "But there's a human saying that goes something like this—'First impressions are lasting ones.'" Motioning for his temporary student to take a seat, the businessman cum ambassador explained, "I like to size up my opponent as quickly as possible—to look him in the eye, you might say—that way I can determine his true measure and formulate my opening moves from that..."

"You make this sound like a war, ambassador," Anara remarked dubiously.

"Not a war, Lieutenant," Ralph said condescendingly, "Think of it more as a contest. Don't ever kid yourself, Ms. Rysyl..." The ambassador lectured, "...behind all the polite words and gestures, diplomacy, like any other type of negotiation, is a battle or struggle where you're trying to get an edge on the other guy. It doesn't matter if you're negotiating a labor settlement, a hostile takeover, or a mutual assistance treaty, your main goal is to always get the best deal possible for your side because that's what your opponent will be doing."

"But why does it have to be so...adversarial?" Lieutenant Rysyl inquired, not willing to let go of the subject, "Wouldn't a mutually cooperative approach

work much better? By assuming that your opposite number is working against you, aren't you immediately putting yourself into a defensive posture, which in turn forces the other party into an adversarial mode—in other words turning the action into...what is it humans call it? A self fulfilling prophecy?"

"Maybe," Ralph conceded, "But still...I prefer negotiating from a position of strength. Like I told Picard once—I've spent my entire life making sure that I'm in control over any given situation—I don't like it when I'm not able to do something to influence events—it makes me a little...crazy..." He chuckled, "Call it an atavistic human trait if you will." Then, covering his mouth with his hand as he yawned, the ambassador said, "No...if you don't mind, Lieutenant, I'd like to grab an hour's nap before the reception—I want to be at my best when the games begin..."

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Taking a deep breath, Captain Shelby quickly took in her new surroundings. She and the rest of the diplomatic party had materialized at a transporter pad at the north end of a circular covered area, the floor a mosaic representation of the planetary surface of Ekos while on the roof was a painting of the sky—complete with clouds and the sun. Inside the pavilion, guests and Ekosian governmental officials and functionaries were already mingling—some clustered around what was obviously a bar, while others were in small groups talking and laughing.

"Some things never change," Ambassador Offenhouse muttered as he remembered similar gatherings he had attended as a businessman four hundred years ago. Nodding his head sagely as he saw a party of Ekosians, some in civilian clothing and others wearing uniforms drawing near, he leaned over and whispered into Shelby's ear, "It's show time, Captain."

Smiling, Liz appraised the group approaching hers. A man, apparently middle aged, dark haired with a touch of grey around the temples, and wearing a grey-green uniform led the procession which included both men and women. "Captain Shelby?" The man, noticing Liz's rank pips and red uniform, inquired as he addressed the captain.

Nodding her head, Liz replied, "At your service."

"I'm Colonel Regar of the Ekosian General Staff. And I have the honor of presenting Foreign Minister Tana, he introduced as a woman wearing a dark blue formal dress stepped forward.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Colonel...Foreign Minister," Liz responded as she introduced the Federation and Zeon emissaries, "And please allow me to introduce Ambassador Ralph Offenhause, representing the Federation; and Professor Ledron Davin, Professor Emeritus at Starfleet Academy, representing the Zeon academic community.

"Welcome," The Foreign Minister, taking over for the Colonel, greeted. Then, addressing the ambassador, she smiled, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Ambassador. I am looking forward to working with you to facilitate Ekos' entry into the Federation."

Flashing a correct smile, Ralph smoothly and noncommittally responded, "Thank you, Minister. I'm also looking forward to getting to know the Ekosian people much better in the days ahead." *Opening move and counter move.* Offenhause thought, smiling inwardly. *So far...no surprises...we're seeing exactly what they want us to see. But that's not good enough—before I sign off on Ekos' entry into the Federation; I want to see what's lying beneath the pretty mosaic...*

Clearing her voice, Minister Tana then addressed the complete assembly. "In honor of the arrival of Federation Ambassador Offenhause..." She announced as a musical fanfare blared from hidden speakers, "President Emerita Daras has agreed to make a rare personal appearance today." As she finished her words, twelve members of Ekos' elite Presidential Guard, resplendent in their blue and gold dress uniforms, marched smartly into the pavilion, taking station opposite each other, forming a corridor. Following the soldiers, an officer, carrying a dress saber, marched through the corridor, coming to a halt at the end, then, executing a smart left turn, he marched to a position next to the lead soldier before executing an about face. Carrying out their movements in complete silence, the guards immediately presented their arms as the fanfare grew in volume. The music reaching a crescendo, an elderly woman, dressed in a simple sky blue dress and supported by guardsmen to either side of her, slowly and with great dignity made her way down the corridor to the waiting dignitaries.

"The Ekosians don't do anything half way, do they?" Ensign Django said to Sam in an almost inaudible whisper as the spectacle unfolded.

"If you had bothered to do your research, Ensign..." Lieutenant Commander Varok chided in an equally low voice, "You would have known that ceremony and liturgy are very important elements in Ekosian culture."

"Yes, sir," Maria whispered back, muttering, "Damned Vulcan ears," as Varok raised an eyebrow in response.

Finally reaching her destination, the Ekosian living legend smiled as a tear rolled down her cheeks, "Greetings, Ambassador. I have dedicated most of my life to this moment—Ekos' entry into the United Federation of Planets. And now—that it has finally arrived..." She stammered, choking up momentarily as emotion overwhelmed her, "I find that words have escaped me." Flashing a sad smile, she then finished, "I only wish that my beloved husband, President Eneg, could have lived to have seen this happen. This is truly a glorious day for the Federation...for Zeon...and for Ekos!"

The assembly cheering her presence and her words, the old woman, after a few brief moments of shaking hands, turned about and left the way she came, the thundering applause not ending until well after she had gone. Leaning over and whispering into Anara's ear, Ralph remarked approvingly, "Very nicely played."

"What do you mean, sir?" Anara whispered back.

"By bringing out Daras...probably the greatest living Ekosian and a direct link to the bad old days, Foreign Minister Tana has managed to put an emotional face to the negotiations," Ralph explained to his pupil. "If the Federation denies Ekos' petition, then it's denying the life long dream of Ekos' icon."

"I see," Lieutenant Rysyl replied and then asked, "Do you think Daras knows about her role in this?"

Chuckling softly, the ambassador answered back, "It wouldn't surprise me if the old fox came up with the idea herself." Then, flashing a smile, he addressed the *Sutherland's* captain, speaking loud enough so that the Ekosian delegation could hear him, "Captain Shelby? I think it would be a good idea if the rest of your crew were to mingle—get to know the Ekosians...while you, the professor, I and my aide get to know the Foreign Minister and her people a little bit better."

"An excellent idea, Ambassador!" Tana smiled back. "Please, Captain...Professor Davin...join us," She exclaimed as she smoothly guided the diplomatic party to a quieter area of the pavilion.

As the senior diplomatic group split off from the others, Ralph whispered into Anara's ear, "Now we start phase 2."

"Phase 2?" Anara, once again confused, asked.

"Right," Offenhouse whispered back. "We're still in the prelims, but we've gotten the introductory gambits out of the way. Now we firm up our impressions of each other and begin the process of staking out our positions. I figure we'll keep up the small talk here for about an hour or so...and then she'll suggest that we go somewhere more private." A predatory gleam then appeared in his eye, "That's when the game really gets going."

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As Manuele Atoa surveyed the scenery before him, he sighed. Formal functions such as this were definitely not his thing. He much preferred more free wheeling, casual gatherings where he could cut loose and be himself rather than having to be, as Jadon Tol once remarked in jest, 'The very model image of a model Starfleet officer.' *Well...I guess I'll never make it in Command*, Manuele sighed once again as he picked up his drink—a fragrant Ekosian nectar.

"I hope we're not boring you..."

Surprised by the female voice coming from behind him, the security chief quickly turned about. Seeing a striking redheaded woman wearing a tan uniform, Manuele stammered, "Oh no...of course not...I mean..."

"It's all right, Lieutenant..." Seeing Manuele's nod confirming that she'd gotten his rank correct, the Ekosian officer continued to speak, "For what it's worth, I find these functions painful too."

"Some things are the same no matter where you go." Atoa, recovering his equilibrium, quipped as he set his drink down. "My name's Manuele...Manuele Atoa."

"And I'm Mere Lindos...Captain...Internal Security Service," The Ekosian woman answered back with a smile.

Chuckling, Manuele remarked, "Well, Captain...it looks like we're more or less in the same line of work—I'm the tactical officer on board the *Sutherland*."

"Small universe," Manuele's Ekosian counterpart quipped, adding, "By the way, you can call me Mere." Then, flashing a grin, she said in a slightly flirtatious voice, "And I wouldn't say no if you offered me one of those nectars."

"All right then," Atoa exclaimed with a wide grin as he called the bartender over to place his order. Settling down to talk with his new companion, the New Kauaian smiled inwardly, grateful to the deities that his ancestors worshiped that they had decided to not make his night a total wash after all.

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"So...Sam..." Ensign Django remarked as she regarded her fellow conn officer, "Wanna blow this joint and go somewhere where we can some real fun?"

Taking a sip of his drink, Lavelle smirked, "What you got in mind, Maria?"

"Hmmm..." Ensign Django replied with smile, "I was thinking we could scope out the Ekosian night life. Maybe find a place where we can do some dancing and partying. Anything's got to be better than this!"

"No argument there." Sam agreed as a stately waltz tune played on the speakers. "I stay here any longer, and some paleontologist is going to pick me up as a fossil."

"Tell me about it." Maria agreed as she took the roguish Canadian's arm. An impish grin on her face, she pointed towards an exit. "Let's slip out of here." However, before the couple could make it halfway to their destination, they were stopped in their tracks by a crisp, patrician voice that they immediately recognized as coming from the *Sutherland's* first officer.

"Mr. Lavelle...Mr. Django...Leaving so soon?"

The couple coming to an abrupt halt on hearing their superior officer's words, Lavelle immediately responded, "No, Sir!" Coming up with what he hoped would be an acceptable excuse, the roguish Canadian explained, "We were just wondering how the mosaics might look from a different angle."

Secretly amused at the plight of the two junior officers, Commander Hobson nodded his head once, "I see. I didn't know that the two of you had such an appreciation for the fine arts. You know..." He said, maintaining the formal tone in his voice, "The Captain and I were planning on attending Professor Davin's seminar on the post-Nazi evolution of Ekosian art tomorrow. Why don't you join us?"

"Ummm..." Sam floundered, "...we wouldn't want to impose on you, sir..."

"No imposition at all." Chris replied, "In fact, I insist that you attend and I'm sure the Captain would as well."

Bowing down to the inevitable, the young couple responded with feigned enthusiasm, "We'd be glad to, Sir."

"Excellent!" The first officer exclaimed as he pointed his errant junior officers back towards the gathering. "Now, Misters Lavelle and Django, I think we should be returning to the reception. After all, we wouldn't want our hosts to think we were slipping away, would we now?"

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"So, Ambassador Offenhouse, what do you think of our nectar?" Minister Tana, flashing a calculated grin, asked as she called for a waiter to bring over more glasses of the Ekosian liqueur.

Responding with a similar smile, Ralph took a sip of the sweet liqueur, and finding its taste most appealing, nodded his head approvingly, "I must say it's quite good."

"I'm pleased you like it," The Foreign Minister said, maintaining her smile, "I'm sure that you'll find the rest of Ekos to be equally agreeable."

"I'm sure I will," the ambassador, also keeping up his noncommittal grin, responded. "In fact, I was hoping that we could arrange a tour of the city before nightfall." Giving his opposite number a meaningful look, he stated, "It would most definitely help me in gathering the facts for my report."

Returning the ambassador's look, Minister Tana countered smoothly, "I think that's a most excellent idea. The Foreign Ministry offices are on the other side of the capital, so...if you want...instead of simply transporting there, we could

arrange for a limousine to take you and the rest of your delegation to the Ministry.”

“And we would have free access to any Ekosians...” Ralph inquired with raised eyebrows.

“Of course, sir,” The Minister replied with a tilt of her head. “We have nothing to hide.” Her smile vanishing, she added, “We want you to see us for who we are now—not for what we were.”

“Thank you, Minister,” Ambassador Offenhouse said with a genuine smile as he permitted his opposite number to see his pleasure at her final statement. “When may we leave?”

Returning the ambassador’s smile, Minister Tana replied, “How does now sound?”

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Laughing at a joke his new Ekosian companion had told, Manuele couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such an enjoyable conversation. As his eyes drank in the statuesque beauty of Mere, Manuele couldn’t help but smile.

“You seem to be in better spirits now than you were a few minutes ago,” Mere said coquettishly as she sipped her drink.

“The company’s a lot better,” Manuele replied as he looked into the Ekosian officer’s eyes.

“I know what you mean,” Mere said in response as she placed a gentle hand on that of the Starfleet officer’s, only to notice that her wrist communication device was blinking. “Sorry!” She apologized with an embarrassed grin, “But...can you excuse me for a moment?”

“I understand,” Manuele chuckled gently, “Occupational hazard...”

Stepping away from her new acquaintance, the Ekosian security officer activated her communicator. Nodding her head, she then responded, “Understood. Will do.” Returning to Manuele, Mere shook her head as she chuckled, “That was my superior—he wants me to return to headquarters to take care of some reports.” Then, giving the New Kauaian a meaningful look, she propositioned, “I’d like it if we could get together again...”

"I'd like that too," Atoa replied with a meaningful look of his own. "Is there a way I can reach you?"

"Yes," Mere, smiling broadly, handed Manuele a slip of paper. "This is my home comm. number. Give me a call and we'll get together..." Flashing the New Kuaian a final smile, the lovely Ekosian turned around and walked away, deliberately allowing her hips to sway a little as she walked.

Shaking his head and letting out a breath of air as he watched Mere walk away, Manuele said in a low voice, "You can count on it!"

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"I want to thank you for accompanying us, Captain—but it wasn't really necessary," Ralph, sitting next to Anara and across from Shelby and Ledron in the back of the large stretch hover-limo said as he glanced out the window at the busy Ekosian street scene.

"In other words..." Liz grinned, "I really wish you didn't come, but now that you're here, shut up and let the diplomats do all the talking—right?"

Chuckling in spite of himself, Ralph acknowledged, "You're most perceptive, Captain." His laughter vanishing, he then asked, "But tell me...why did you come?"

"Curiosity, mostly," Liz admitted. "I wanted to see for myself how things had changed." She then took a deep breath, "Also...I wanted to...I know this might sound somewhat strange...but I wanted to get a true feel of Ekos—and to do that, I need to do more than just read reports and see a bunch of video images. To really know Ekos and its people, I need to experience it and them."

"That is why I've always considered both you and Christopher my two best students," Ladron said with a smile. Addressing his next remarks to Offenhouse, he praised, "Elizabeth was always one who had to experience everything with all her senses." Then he added with a smirk, flashing a glare of mock disapproval at his former pupil, "There are those who would say though, that she uses her senses a bit too much for her own good sometimes..."

“What can I say?” Liz rejoined, putting on an air of playful innocence, “I’m a sensualist.” Then, her tone turning serious, she added, “All too often we make decisions without truly getting the lay of the land—and almost always when that happens, things tend to go to hell in a hand basket.”

“You’re absolutely right, Captain,” Ralph agreed as the limo turned suddenly. Feeling the motion even through the grav compensators, the ambassador remarked, “That’s weird...I wonder why we turned like that...”

“Maybe it’s just a security precaution?” Anara speculated as the vehicle came to a stop.

“Or maybe not,” Liz cursed as the doors on either side suddenly flew open and as powerful hands pulled her and the other delegates out of the car. Drawing her arm to fight back against her assailants, she felt the needle in her neck and then very soon everything turned black.

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“Hey Chris!” Jadon called out as he spotted the *Sutherland’s* first officer sitting at the bar nursing a drink as he watched the Ekosian news feed from a large monitor. “Stuck babysitting the junior officers while the Captain plays diplomat?”

“You might say that...” Chris responded with a shrug, his patrician voice betraying just the faintest note of irritation that his old friend immediately picked up on. “One of us needs to remain here in case something happens.”

“Yeah, I know...” The Trill engineer responded, knowing that the real reason for his friend’s irritation lay elsewhere. “Sucks, doesn’t it? She’s off seeing the sights with the Ambassador while you’re stuck here.”

Sipping his drink, Hobson answered back nonchalantly, “The Captain will fill me in on all the details later, I’m sure.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure she will.” Jadon smirked as he patted his friend on the shoulder, “But I wasn’t talking about the Captain just now.”

Just as an angry retort was forming on Hobson’s lips, the image on the news screen suddenly blanked out, to be replaced by another image—that of four Ekosians wearing stocking masks and dressed in the old Nazi Party uniforms standing before a large red, white, and black flag with the swastika.

“Attention people of Ekos!” The lead figure, apparently male, spoke through a voice scrambling device, “For too long our holy land has been subject to the pollution of the Zeon swine and their alien lapdogs—but no more! We, the Soldiers of Melakon, announce that we are retaking our home! We have taken prisoner the Zeon criminal and his Federation stooges and announce that if our demands are not meant they will all be executed as enemies of the Race.” Images played of Captain Shelby, Anara, Ambassador Offenhouse, and Ledron Davin, all lying flat on their backs, apparently drugged. “To prove that we are serious, sentence shall be immediately carried out on one of the prisoners!” Pointing his finger at something off the camera, two of the terrorists left the display, only to return moments later with a prisoner whose head had been covered by a hood. Forcing the hapless soul to his or her knees, the leader drew a slug-pistol from his holster.

Aiming the pistol at the back of the head of the prisoner, the terrorist shouted as he pulled the trigger, “Hail the Fuhrer!”

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Shaking her head as she slowly struggled back into consciousness, Shelby’s body slowly began to react to the various sensations around it. Feeling the bindings around her wrists, Liz pulled at them, only to cease moments later as she realized that her struggles only resulted in them growing tighter. Hearing first a groan coming from the person lying next to her, the captain then heard a distinctly female voice as rough hands jerked her to her knees.

“The prisoners are awakening Sturmfuhrer!”

“Excellent!” A masculine voice replied as Liz, squinting her eyes, Liz made out the form of an average male humanoid from amongst the images swirling about her. As the man approached, the starship captain immediately recognized his uniform, complete with swastika armband and Sam Browne belt crossing his chest, as belonging to the outlawed Nazi Party. “Welcome back, Captain.” The man greeted, his lips turned up into an arrogant sneer.

“Who the hell are you and where the hell have you taken us?” Liz spat out defiantly, wincing as a woman standing next to her, also wearing a Nazi uniform, delivered a sharp kick to her side. *That’s one!* Liz thought to herself as she began making her payback list.

"Don't they teach you manners in Starfleet, Captain?" The man, maintaining his smug grin, snorted as he looked down haughtily on his prisoner. "No matter..." He remarked dismissively as he turned his attention next to the prisoner kneeling next to Liz, "And as for you...Zeon swine..." He sneered as he delivered a painful blow with the back of his hand across the face of the cringing old man.

"Why?" Ledron asked simply, crying out in pain as another Ekosian guard pulled back on his hair.

"Hey...bitch! Try that with someone who can fight back!" Liz shouted and then, looking up at the Sturmfuhrer, sneered, "Some Master Race—get your rocks off torturing eighty year old men..."

"Silence, Whore!" The woman snapped as she once again delivered a kick into Shelby's side, deliberately striking the same spot she did earlier. Then with a snort, she mocked, "We know all about your reputation, Captain Shelby."

"At least I'm getting some!" Liz fired back, "That's more than you can say!" She taunted as yet again the woman's sharp toed boot impacted on her side.

Turning his attention to Anara, the Sturmfuhrer flashed a lecherous grin, "What have we here? Maybe I'll save you for last, eh? I've heard stories about Deltan women—I wonder if they're true..."

Looking up at her tormentor, Anara managed a derisive snort, "I have a feeling that you would prove inadequate to the task of finding out."

*Way to go, Anara!* Liz quietly cheered on, and then winced sympathetically as she saw the back of the man's hand slash across her operations officer's face, the Deltan woman recoiling from the blow. "I'll return to you later, *stirrat*."

Reaching the last prisoner, the Sturmfuhrer grinned triumphantly, "And Ambassador Offenhouse...we're most honored by your presence, sir!" The terrorist leader mocked.

Stepping back, the Nazi leader took a central position where all of his prisoners could see him. "I am Sturmfuhrer Merok and you are prisoners of the Soldiers of Melakon, the vanguard for the eventual restoration of the Reich and Ekos. You have all been tried and convicted of crimes against the Reich—the sentence is death." Pointing at Ledron, Merok declared as two guards yanked the old man to his feet and placed a hood over his head, "The

Zeon will be executed first. He will serve as an example to all who would defy the Soldiers and the New Order.”

As the guards slipped a smelly hood came over the head of the elderly scholar, he begged, “Please...don’t...I have a wife...children...grandchildren. Don’t do this to them!”

“Don’t!” Liz cried out. “Please!” She pleaded, struggling to get to her feet only to be forced back down again by firm hands on her shoulders. “He’s a good man who’s never harmed anyone!”

“Silence!” Merok bellowed as he glared at Captain Shelby. “If you say another word, I will kill the Deltan woman as well!” As he jerked his thumb towards Anara, one of the terrorists pointed a pistol at the bald woman’s head. A cold smile crossing his features, Merok added in an icy voice, “Further, you will watch the execution of this Zeon pig. If you avert your gaze one way or the other, the person next to you on that side will be killed.” With that, Liz saw out of the corner of her eye the other guards all press their pistols on to the back of the necks of her other companions. “Do we understand each other, Captain?”

Clenching her teeth, Liz nodded her head once. Then, as the terrorist leader made his speech, tears flowed from her eyes as she recalled her final conversation with her old teacher in which he expressed his firm belief that the Ekosians had finally exorcised the ghosts of John Gill’s Nazis. As the single shot rang out and as the kindly old man’s head disintegrated into a crimson mist, her tears suddenly vanished. Intending to gloat at his actions, Merok looked into the eyes of the captured starship captain. Instead of seeing the eyes of a cowed woman, the Sturmfuhrer blinked in surprise as he saw a pair of eyes glaring at him with the intensity of a supernova. Debating as to whether to kill her now or stick to the plan, the terrorist leader, fearing the possible anger of those directing his actions, reluctantly rejected that idea. *For now...He thought, She and the others will live. There’ll be ample opportunity to deal with them later.*

As she stared into the gleaming eyes of the fanatic who had killed her mentor, Liz vowed, *If it’s the last thing I do, you son of a bitch, I’m going to kill you with my own hands.*

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As the horrible tableau played itself out on the screen before them, Commander Hobson and Lieutenant Commander Tol looked on in stunned silence. Turning towards his friend after the screen went blank, Jadon immediately recognized the cold fury hidden behind the icy expressionless face of his old friend. "I'm sorry, Chris..." Jadon remarked in a soft, consoling voice, "I know how close you and Professor Davron were." Also recognizing another source of worry for the introverted executive officer, Tol added, "She'll be alright, Chris. We'll get them out—you know that."

Nodding his head once, Hobson, fighting down his grief and remorse, looked into the eyes of his engineering officer, "Return to the ship, Mr. Tol." As his old friend moved to follow the first officer's instructions, Chris placed a hand on the Trill's shoulders. "Don't rush, Jadon. Odds are the bastards have one of their people here watching us. I don't want them thinking that they have us disconcerted. Take your time."

"Understood, Chris." Tol responded as Hobson touched the communicator pin on his chest. Walking away from his old friend, Jadon heard the first officer give the same instructions he had just given him to both Lieutenant Atoa and Lieutenant Commander Varok. Sauntering over towards where Ensign Django and Lieutenant Lavelle were standing, Tol noticed immediately that both junior officers keyed for action. Placing an arm around each of their shoulders, Jadon whispered, "Nice and easy, Sam...Maria. We don't want to let the bad guys know they've got us spooked. See how Varok and Atoa are taking their sweet time getting over to the transporter pads? We're going to do the same thing."

"How are we going to get the Captain and the others back?" Sam asked as he placed a protective arm around Ensign Django's waist.

"And what are we going to do about those bastards that took them and killed the old man?" Maria added in a challenging tone.

"Commander Hobson's on it, Ensign." Jadon replied confidently, "And you can bet that Captain Shelby and Anara haven't given up either. Knowing Chris and the Captain..." he added with a grim smile, "When those two get done, those *scyllyn worms* will wish they were never born."

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Taking advantage of the solitude of the *Sutherland's* lift cab to gather his thoughts, Chris, emerging on to the bridge, projected a strong and solid image

of self composure as he took the command chair vacated by Lieutenant Dryer.

“Sir?” The tactical officer called out as she resumed her normal duty station, “The Ekosian Foreign Ministry is online...”

“Main viewer, Lieutenant,” Hobson ordered, squaring his shoulders. As the image of an obviously shocked and dismayed Foreign Minister Tana filled the screen, Chris greeted her politely, “Madame Minister...”

“Commander Hobson...” The Minister began, her voice tone betraying just the slightest hint of nervousness. “Please allow me to apologize for what happened. This is a sad day for all of us—Ekosians as well as our Zeon and Federation friends; and I want you to know that you have my solemn promise that we will rescue your people and the ambassador and that we will punish those responsible for this outrage.”

“Thank you, Madame,” Chris replied in as affirmative a manner as possible, adding, his voice tone indicating that this was a nonnegotiable position, “And I want you to know that, while I appreciate your efforts on our behalf, we are beginning our own investigation into locating our people.” Noticing the brief expression of outrage crossing the face of the Ekosian diplomat, Hobson flashed a reassuring smile, in an effort to smooth any ruffled feathers, “Of course, we would welcome any advice you or your Security Service might be willing to provide and we will share all information with you.”

“I see...” The Minister vocalized, her irritation at both the implied criticism of the competence of the Ekosian security forces and at the intrusion into Ekosian sovereignty not completely assuaged. Grateful; however for the face saving gesture offered by the stone faced Starfleet officer on her view screen, she nodded her head once. “Please allow me to contact Internal Security and I will try to arrange a meeting...would that be acceptable to you?”

“That would be most acceptable,” Hobson agreed, allowing a slight smile to cross his features. “I look forward to hearing from you soon,” he finished as he cut off transmissions. Turning towards his science officer, the first officer directed, “Mr. Varok...I want you and the other senior officers in Conference Room One in thirty minutes. I expect you gentlemen to have some ideas for me by then.”

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*Oof!* Liz grunted as she was propelled by a strong hand to the floor of her cell, followed by Anara and the ambassador. As soon as the door closed, the captain turned to her fellow prisoners, "Ambassador...Lieutenant...how're you holding up?"

"A few bumps and bruises, sir..." The Deltan woman replied, answering first, "But otherwise I am fine."

"What about you, Ambassador Offenhouse?" Liz then asked.

"I...I...I'm...alright," The time displaced ambassador replied, his cracking voice betraying the fear growing within him.

Seeing his growing anxiety in the diplomat's eyes, Liz reluctantly set aside her own feelings of loss at the death of her old friend and mentor as she moved immediately to put him at ease, "We're going to get through this, Ambassador," She stated in as confident a voice as she could muster to the man crouched on the floor in front of her. "The *Sutherland* and the Ekosian authorities will be doing everything they can to find us," She then flashed a wry grin, "We've got the easy part...all we have to do is hold on."

"Yes..." Ralph responded, his spirits buoyed, at least for now, by the captain's pep talk, "I understand." Then, cracking a wry grin of his own, he nervously joked, "You know, I never thought I'd find that executive's terrorism survival course I took back in the twentieth century would come in handy now."

Cracking a smile of her own, Liz rejoined, "That's the spirit, Ambassador." Addressing both of her fellow inmates, she instructed as she winced at the chafing being caused by the bonds tying her hands together behind her back, putting aside, for now, her grief at the loss of her old teacher. "Ok...our first order of business is survival. And I think we'll have a much better chance if we can get ourselves untied."

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Looking first at the vacant chair at the head of the table that would have normally been occupied by his captain, and then at the rest of the senior officers gathered around him, Commander Hobson cleared his throat, "Report."

"We haven't been able to raise them on their comm. badges, which indicate that they were probably removed, as expected." Lieutenant Atoa responded,

“Also, our planetary scans haven’t turned up anything.” He added his frustration evident in his voice tone and mannerisms.

“That’s to be expected.” Hobson asked, maintaining his normal poker face even in the midst of bad news. “As Ekosians are transplanted humans, there wouldn’t have been enough time for genetic drift to have made that much of a difference.” Pausing for a moment, he mused, “But Lieutenant Rysyl is Deltan. The only Deltan on the planet, I might add.”

“Yes sir,” Atoa agreed, “Which leads me to point number two, “In all probability, the terrorists have them hidden in an area that either naturally or artificially blocks our scanners. Flashing a slight smile, he continued, “Which...in a way...gives us something to work with by narrowing our search area somewhat.”

“While Mr. Atoa is correct in that this would limit our search area slightly...” Varok interjected, “We are still faced with a formidable task as, even once we eliminate the areas that we have scanned, we are still left with approximately a quarter of the planet to search—that is assuming they are still on Ekos.”

“What about that possibility?” Hobson inquired “Is there a chance that they’ve left the planet?”

“Possible...but doubtful, sir,” Atoa answered back. “Records indicate no transporter activity immediately prior to the broadcast and the Ekosian authorities have since placed tight movement restrictions—I’d bet they’re on the planet...probably fairly close to where they were kidnapped.”

“Why would you say that?” Dr. Murakawa asked.

“Partly...it’s a hunch,” Manuele admitted, “But it’s an educated hunch. You see, Sir...” He explained, “Surprise, shock and a quick and clean getaway are vital elements in a terrorist action such as this. The terrorists would know that transporter patterns could be traced as could a shuttle launch. Add to that there’s the fact that the capital city is a large archopolis with millions of inhabitants—some of whom are sure to be sympathizers who would be more than willing to offer hide outs to bad guys. That tells me that they are probably still somewhere within the city.”

“And a large urban area would also have an abundance of locations such as naturally or artificially shielded tunnels that would be difficult...if not

impossible...to scan," Varok interjected, raising an eyebrow, "A logical hypothesis, Lieutenant."

"Ok..." Hobson deliberated, "Let's limit the search parameters to the capital, then," Addressing Manuele, he inquired, "Do you think that someone within the Ekosian Foreign Ministry might have had a hand in this?"

"The Foreign Ministry...Internal Security...any of a dozen military or police agencies..." Atoa ticked off, "...could have and probably have been easily infiltrated by the terrorists."

"This would seem to imply a flaw in the social and political structure of Ekosian society..." Varok interjected, "A flaw that might very well prove a hindrance to their efforts to achieve Federation membership."

"That's for the politicians and diplomats to decide," Chris declared in a matter of fact tone. Turning his attention back to Lieutenant Atoa, the commander asked, "Do you have any ideas on who the infiltrator or infiltrators might be and how we might catch them?"

Sighing, Manuele answered back, "Not really, Sir. Although..." He speculated, remembering his encounter with Mere Lindos, "...there might be someone who might be able to help us."

Nodding his head, Hobson responded, "Follow up your lead, Mr. Atoa and let us know what—if anything—you come up with."

"Yes, sir," Atoa crisply replied.

Addressing the other officers, Chris asked, "Does anyone else have any ideas on how we can more effectively direct our search?"

"Sir..." Lieutenant Commander Tol said, immediately speaking up, "Doctor Murakawa and I were discussing something—I'll admit, it's a shot in the dark...but it just might work..."

"Well...a shot in the dark is better than no shot at all..." Commander Hobson replied dryly. "What is your plan?"

"I think I'll let the doctor explain," Tol answered back, fidgeting slightly in his seat.

“Well...” Doctor Murakawa began shyly, “First, I remembered Anara telling me that Deltan pheromones had a greater effect in closed in spaces with poor ventilation. Later on, after the incident on Deep Space Nine that Lieutenant Rysyl was involved in, I read that Deltans produce an increased amount of pheromones in stressful situations...”

“That’s all very good, Doctor...” Hobson interrupted, somewhat testily, “But how is this going to help us find our people?”

“As I was about to say, sir...” The doctor replied, her own voice carrying an edge to it, “Mr. Tol and I have found a way to modify our medical tricorders to be able to detect this increase in Deltan pheromones.”

Allowing a rare smile to cross his features, Chris speculated, “I assume that this will only work at short range—that we can’t augment it to where we can scan from the ship?”

“I’m sorry, sir...we can’t,” Denise replied, shaking her head. “The concentrations of pheromones can only be detected in close proximity to their source.”

“Well...I’ll take what we can get,” Hobson declared and then, remembering what had happened at DS 9, he asked somewhat tentatively, “What effect would this increased concentration have on the others, Doctor?”

Denise, deciding that discussing her talk with Anara would not in this instance be a violation of patient-physician confidence, responded, “I had a conversation about that with Lieutenant Rysyl as well. She said that while those who would normally have feelings of sexual attraction towards a given Deltan might feel an increased attraction, the pheromones wouldn’t make the other person do anything that they normally wouldn’t do anyway—they don’t work anything like they’re portrayed in the cheap holo-novels, sir. At worst they would prove to be a minor distraction—but nothing more.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Chris replied, relieved at the answer to his question. “I want you and Mr. Tol to begin immediately to modify the tricorders for the security details,” Turning his attention to Lieutenant Atoa and Lieutenant Commander Varok, he ordered, “You gentlemen will join me on the surface for the meeting with the Foreign Minister.” Standing up, Chris dismissed the assembly, “All right, people...you have your orders...”

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Rubbing her now free hands together, Liz ignored the increased beating of her heart as her eyes glanced quickly in Anara's direction before landing on the ambassador's, "How're you holding up, Ambassador..."

"Ok...I guess..." The time displaced man replied, and then, shooting a quick glance at his Deltan aide, he added, "It's just that I've never been in this close quarters with...someone like Anara before..." He said, giving the Deltan woman a look of apology, "And well..."

"I know what you mean..." Liz remarked sympathetically.

"I'm sorry..." Anara interjected, a note of irritation in her voice, "I don't mean to..."

"It's not your fault, Lieutenant," Shelby replied in a soothing tone. Flashing a wry grin, she added, "In any event, I don't know about the two of you, but even if I were in the mood for it, right now we've got more important things to think about than having an orgy."

"So...what do we do, Captain?" Ralph asked, his voice taking on a slightly higher pitch as he once again began to panic as he felt the control slipping away from him.

"First thing we do is we wait. We take some time to relax and gather our strength, and get the lay of the land." Liz directed. Then, in an effort to ease the ambassador's growing fears, the captain suggested, "While we're doing that, why don't you explain to us what you learned in that survival course you took. I'm sure what you learned could help us."

"Thanks, Captain," Ralph, thankful to the captain for providing him at least the illusion of having a slight measure of control, responded. "It's been a while since I took the course, but here's what I remember..."

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Immediately after materializing on the Foreign Ministry's transporter pad, Commander Hobson and his staff were greeted by Minister Tana, "Gentlemen..." She said, her more confident tone of voice reflecting her regained composure. "I'm sorry we have to meet again under these circumstances. If you'll accompany me, please, representatives from Internal Security and the Ministry of Police are already here."

Following the Minister down the corridor, the Starfleet officers immediately noticed the increased number of armed internal security troops carrying holstered the pistol gripped Federation issue 2287 type two phaser. Then, as he saw the two men standing guard at the end of the corridor bearing at port arms modern Federation standard phaser rifles, Hobson's eyebrow lifted slightly. Snapping to attention as the Minister neared their position; the guard on the left activated the door, causing it to slide open to reveal a standard conference room with all but four seats already occupied by men and women in various military and civilian dress.

"Please, Commander...gentlemen..." Minister Tana directed, motioning in the direction of three of the empty seats clustered together, "Be seated. We have a great deal to discuss."

"Thank you, Minister," Chris acknowledged urbanely as he took his seat. "If I might ask, have your people turned up any more information as to who or what these 'Soldiers of Melakon' might be?"

Letting out a sigh, the Minister explained, "The Soldiers of Melakon are part of an illegal movement that seeks to restore the Nazis. There is also another organization called the Rebirth Movement that seeks to 'purge' Ekosian society of all 'alien' elements—including the Nazis. These two groups are mutually hostile—the only thing they have in common is a mutual animosity towards outworlders—especially Zeons."

"I see." Chris replied, carefully mulling over the Minister's words. "So...how does this Rebirth Movement figure into the kidnapping of our people?"

"We might be able to use them to help find your people." Minister Tana answered back. "If for no other reason than because they wouldn't want the Nazis to gain political ascendance."

"Because they view them to be just as much a foreign intrusion as the Federation?" Lieutenant Commander Varok supplied.

"Just so." The Ekosian Foreign Minister responded nodding her head.

"So..." Chris inquired, "How do we go about enlisting the help of these...people?"

"There is also a legitimate political party called the Restoration Party that we believe has links to the Rebirth Movement." Minister Tana replied. "It's headed by Senator Durkan..."

"I'm curious, Madame Minister..." Lieutenant Atoa interjected, "Why your people haven't arrested this Senator Durkan if you know that he is linked to this Rebirth Movement?"

"The problem is..." Tana sighed, "We can't definitively prove that those links exist, and the Senator possesses a great deal of influence. You see...he comes from one of our wealthiest and most populous prefectures..."

"So...he's too powerful to risk moving against." Hobson finished and then asked, "Do you think it might be possible to arrange a meeting with Senator Durkan?"

Nodding her head, Minister Tana answered affirmatively, "We've already anticipated your request and the Senator has agreed to meet with you or whomever you wish to represent you in two standard hours."

"Please express my thanks to the Senator for taking time out of his day to arrange this meeting," Chris responded, turning the diplomatic offensive on full, "I and Mr. Atoa will meet with him." Flashing a quick polite smile, he added, "We would...of course...appreciate any help you can provide us."

"Thank you, Commander." Turning towards the new voice, Hobson saw a man wearing the tan uniform marking him as a member of the Internal Security forces as well as the three diamonds indicating general's rank sitting next to the Foreign Minister. "I am General Nerran...commander of the Ekosian Security forces for this region. I look forward to working with you..." The general said in a polite, yet standoffish manner, "...and I have assigned a liaison to work with your Lieutenant Atoa." As the door to the conference room slid open once again, the general continued, "This is one of my best officers—Captain Mere Lindos..." Then, glancing in the Lieutenant's direction, the general flashed a quick smile, "I believe the two of you are already acquainted?"

"Yes," The New Kauaian said, smiling politely, "I had the pleasure of meeting the captain at the reception."

"Excellent," The general proclaimed. Then, turning towards his officer, he directed, "Captain—would you fill our guests in on the latest developments?"

"Yes, sir," Mere replied, and then, turning towards where the Starfleet officers were sitting, she reported, "Approximately ten standard minutes ago, we received this communiqué apparently sent by the Soldiers of Melakon. It demands, amongst other things, the immediate withdrawal of all 'alien' personnel from Ekos, the immediate dismantling of all 'alien' structures, recognition of the Nazis as a legitimate political party with the Soldiers of Melakon as its legitimate private militia, and finally, the resignation of all senior officers of the current government and military and their replacement by chosen representatives of the Nazis." She then took a deep breath before concluding, "Failure to meet these demands in a timely manner will result in the 'public and humiliating' execution of the prisoners."

"They don't ask for much...do they?" Atoa, his voice dripping with sarcasm, snapped before asking, "I don't suppose they spelled out what they mean by 'a timely manner', did they?"

Frowning, Captain Lindos replied, "The communiqué said that a timetable for meeting the demands would follow shortly."

Shaking his head, Manuele remarked, "They can't honestly think that these demands will be met?"

Her head held erect, Minister Tana said, her voice reflecting both her stubbornness and her pride, "I can say with complete confidence that the Ekosian government will not agree to these outrageous terms."

"There are only two logical reasons for making such sweeping demands," Varok mused. "The first reason would be to stake a negotiating position."

"Forcing the Ekosian government to come up with a counterproposal?" Hobson interjected, "Maybe...but somehow I don't think that's the reason."

"I agree," General Nerran said, "These demands are so extreme that even if we wanted to make a counteroffer, we wouldn't know where to begin."

"Then..." Varok said, "In all likelihood, the second reason is probably the correct one—that they know their demands will not be met and so they are making them for reasons of theater."

"I agree." Chris interjected. "It's the only logical explanation. They intend to execute Captain Shelby and the others regardless of what we do."

“How do you support that conclusion?” Minister Tana inquired as she nervously took a drink from the water glass sitting on the table in front of her.

“Their main goals appear to be twofold,” Varok taking over for Commander Hobson, explained, “First, they seek to disrupt and weaken the legitimate government on Ekos. Second, they want to drive a wedge between the Federation and this planet. The public and, one would assume from the communiqué, brutal murder of a Federation diplomat, a starship captain, and a Starfleet officer would most definitely go a long way towards the accomplishment of both these goals.”

Nodding his head in agreement, the general said, “Yes...it would present a powerful visual image—that if we couldn’t protect the lives of a few visiting dignitaries, then how are we ever going to be able to legitimately claim that we can protect our planet’s sovereignty or the safety of the Ekosian people.”

“And once the Federation News Service picked up on it...” Manuele added, picking up on the second point Varok was about to make, “I’d be willing to bet that popular support within the Federation for Ekos’ admission will rapidly disappear—in fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a strong push to withdraw from any contact at all with Ekos.”

“Giving the terrorists what they want,” Hobson concluded grimly.

“So...what do we do?” Mere then asked.

“We find our people,” Hobson replied. “The rest...as far as the Soldiers of Melakon is concerned...is strictly a matter for Ekosian authorities to handle.” Looking directly into the eyes of the Foreign Minister and the general, Chris added, “Starfleet has no desire or intention of interfering in Ekosian internal affairs.”

General Nerran and Minister Tana then stood up, “Very well then...” The general said, “We know what we have to do.” Turning towards Mere, he directed, “You and Lieutenant Atoa have a great deal of work to do, Captain, we won’t keep you from it.”

Seeing Commander Hobson nodding his head in agreement, Manuele smiled at his opposite number, “Well, Captain...let’s get to work.”

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“Executing the professor was reckless...” The disembodied voice of Senator Durkan chided angrily as Sturmfuhrer Merok listened, a bored look on his face, “...and has the potential of introducing unwanted consequences.”

“Such as?” The Nazi leader retorted with a snort. Pouring a drink from a tumbler on his desk, Merok pressed his attack. “If you want the Federation off of Ekos, you are going to have to be willing to accept the need for...drastic...actions. The member races of the Federation are weak...decadent. Once they get word of what happened here and that a similar fate will befall all who interfere in Ekos’ destiny, the Federation core worlds will be forced by their own people to withdraw and leave us alone.”

“I think...” the senator persisted, “...that you are underestimating the resolve of the Federation. There is a time and place for everything...” Durkan rebuked, “...and it was neither the time nor the place for the execution of Davron. You should have kept to the plan.”

“The execution was both tactically and strategically the correct decision.” Merok countered. “I saw the opportunity and seized it—as Deputy Fuhrer Melakon once did.” The Sturmfuhrer laughed, “You just don’t have the stones to admit I am right. Now...” The Nazi leader growled as he set his drink down, “...unless you have something important to say, I have business I must attend to.”

“This is not over, Merok.” The senator snapped back, “Remember who it is you answer to.”

“For now...” The Nazi muttered under his breath as the transmission cut off, “But not for much longer, I think.” Turning towards his subordinate, he sneered as he poured an amber liquid into two glasses, gesturing for the woman standing before his desk to take one of the glasses, “Did you hear that stoneless *molak*?”

“Yes, my Sturmfuhrer.” The woman replied as she took the proffered drink. “He is obviously a weak coward.”

“But not stupid, Asil.” Merok cautioned, his lips turning up into a sly grin. “He seeks to distance himself from us should our plan fail. His smile vanishing as quickly as it appeared, the Sturmfuhrer considered his next move, “I think we should prepare for our ‘ally’ losing his nerve.” Gulping his drink down, he ordered, “Bring me Captain Shelby, Asil. It’s time we had a talk.”

"Sir?" Merok's second in command carefully inquired.

"Speak, Asil..." Merok encouraged. "You know you're always free to ask any question you wish of me."

"Why bother talking to her?" The blonde Nazi asked. "She's nothing more than a soft, pleasure seeking..."

Chuckling softly, the Sturmfuhrer interrupted, admonishing his subordinate, "Be careful, Asil. Despite the good captain's reputation as being something of a hedonist, as our associates have warned us, she's also very dangerous."

"Perhaps..." Asil partially conceded, "...provided our associates' intelligence is accurate regarding the Captain and her crew." Pausing for a moment, she cautiously advanced, "And as for our associates..."

Shrugging his shoulders, Merok replied, "I know...and I share your distaste at having to deal with them. But..." He continued, "...for now...we need them." Sighing, the Nazi leader confessed, "We need their wealth...their connections...for us to succeed. After we have reassumed our rightful place, then we can see about eliminating them as well."

"And Captain Shelby?" Asil asked, turning the discussion back to the original topic.

"Oh yes, Captain Shelby." Merok grinned. "I'm curious as to what sort of individual the good captain truly is. Can she be tempted by security and comfort? Or will she be willing to sacrifice not only herself, but also her companions for her principles?" Pausing for a moment, he ordered, "Bring her to me...let's see how she responds to my little test."

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*"Give him a chance, Liz..." Sophomore Cadet Jadzia Idaris insisted as her friend and roommate, Cadet Elizabeth Shelby settled her petite frame in the seat next to her in the Academy classroom where Professor Ledron Davin was scheduled to teach is Introduction to Aesthetic Theory course.*

*"I don't know..." The earnest young officer-candidate replied dubiously, "...this course conflicts with Captain Foster's Intermediate Tactics course..."*

*"You can take Captain Foster next semester..." Shelby's Trill companion persisted, "But Professor Davin only offers this course every other year..."*

*"Well..." Liz reluctantly conceded, "I guess the least I can do is sit in for the opening lecture...I can always drop the course and add Intermediate Tactics after class..."*

*"That's the spirit!" Jadzia grinned as a slight, wiry framed elderly human appearing figure took the stage. "That's him." The Trill exclaimed in a soft voice, directing her roommate's attention to the lecturer, who was at that moment fussing over a stack of old fashioned note cards behind the podium.*

*"Hmph..." Elizabeth snorted, "Doesn't seem like much."*

*Shaking her head in mild dismay, Jadzia gently chided, "Give him a chance, Liz...he hasn't even spoken yet."*

*"All right...All right...Jadz!" Liz sighed with frustration as she gave her friend a playful slap, "I said I'd listen to him—didn't I? Now, shut up—he's about to speak."*

*"Good morning, class!" The elderly professor introduced himself to the class, the strong timber of his voice in sharp contrast to his slight frame. "Some of you are probably asking yourself, 'Why am I here? What possible use could a class on aesthetics have for a future starship captain like me?'" As the frail old man spoke, Liz felt as if he was addressing his words to her, specifically. Shrugging his shoulders, the old man continued, "Perhaps, nothing. You might become the Commander in Chief of Starfleet and never once have a use for anything I'll teach you this semester. But maybe..." Davin held out, his voice taking on an almost teasing quality, "...maybe...you'll find that there's more to being a starship captain...and a leader...than the mechanics of leadership." The old man seemingly gazing right into Shelby's eyes, he concluded his introductory remarks, "Do you know what the difference is between a good leader and a great leader? I'll tell you. A good leader knows his people. A great leader knows their souls—as well as her own. In this class, we will attempt to look into the soul—I hope you'll stay with me for the journey."*

*As the passionate speaker finished his opening remarks, a spellbound cadet Elizabeth Shelby knew one thing—she was hooked.*

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Shaking her head, Liz cleared the memory that had rushed involuntarily into her mind, "We're all clear on what we're going to do?" Turning first to Anara, she quizzed, "All right, Lieutenant, what's your part?"

The Deltan woman whispered in response, her voice shaking ever so slightly. "I'm to act as...bait. When the guard comes in, I'm to distract him...to pull him into position...and then, once you and the ambassador jump him, I'm to secure the door."

"Right," Liz said with a quick nod of her head. Immediately noticing her operations officer's unease, the captain added in a reassuring tone, placing her hand on the younger officer's shoulders, "Don't worry, Anara. You're going to do just fine."

"Thanks Captain." Anara replied with a shaky grin, "It won't be hard, sir,"

"That's the spirit!" Shelby grinned back before turning to the other prisoner in the cell, "Ok, Ambassador...what do you do?"

Fighting down his fear, Ralph replied, his voice a little more higher pitched than he would have liked, "I try to put myself into a position where I can hit him low from his non-armed side while you hit him high and try to disarm him."

"Very good, Mr. Offenhouse!" Liz responded, maintaining her encouraging tone. "Looks like we're set then, all we need to do now is wait for the bad guys to show up." Her smile vanishing, she cautioned, "Now...if there's more than one guard or if it doesn't look like we can pull it off...we abort and wait for another chance."

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"Merok is a fool! And a murderous fool at that!" Senator Durkan swore as his fingers tapped a steady rhythm on his desk. "Killing that Zeon was not part of the plan."

"Still..." A silky smooth voice said from the shadows, "...we can turn this to our advantage."

"How so?" The politician asked, tilting his head towards the voice.

"Merok was right about one thing..." the shadowy figure declared, "...this will magnify by a considerable factor the doubts possessed by many within the Federation regarding Ekos. But you do have a point. Executing the Zeon was a sound—albeit heavy handed—tactic. However..."

"If he executes the Starfleet officers and/or the Ambassador..." Durkan began only to be cut off by the voice

"Then that will probably invite an unwelcome response." The voice acknowledged, "The Starfleet officers...they are expendable. But the ambassador—he is even more valuable as a freed hostage than a dead martyr. Dead—he's just a symbol. But alive..."

"Alive..." Durkan smiled, "His presence and his words would be a constant reminder of how unstable and untrustworthy Ekos is for the Federation. I see your point."

"And we see yours." The voice responded. "Merok does have a tendency towards sadism. There is a time and place for everything—including brutality. But Merok enjoys it too much. It seems that he relishes cruelty for its own sake. He is far too fond of chaos for his—or Ekos'—own good."

"Agreed." The senator responded, his lips turning up into a sly grin, "And I think I have found the perfect way of dealing with all our problems..."

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*"Ah...Christopher!" The elderly scholar exclaimed, getting out of his chair to greet the Starfleet lieutenant who had just entered his office. "How are you, my boy...how are you?" He inquired as he offered his hand in greeting. "And who is this lovely young woman standing beside you?"*

*"Professor Davin..." Chris announced, his voice reflecting both pride and affection, "I'd like to introduce you to Lieutenant Junior Grade Natalie Boek, my wife."*

*"Actually...it's Natalie Hobson." The young woman shyly corrected, "I come from New Pretoria..." she explained, her Afrikaans accent marking her as coming from that Boer descended colony, "...and most of us still prefer to take our husband's name after marriage. Chris..." she playfully remarked, gently chiding her husband, "...sometimes forgets that."*

*"Well...this is good news!" The old man replied, shaking first his former student's hand with great vigor and then taking the hand of the beautiful young brunette standing beside him. "It's a pleasure to meet you, my dear...I don't believe I've had the pleasure of having you in any of my classes though..."*

*"No..." The young woman said regretfully, "I'm afraid I wasn't able to attend the main Academy on Earth and so I had to go to the Pacifica branch until my senior year and by then..."*

*"Your curriculum was pretty well set..." The professor finished with a gentle smile as he ushered the young couple into his office. "Oh well..." The old man sighed as he ordered three coffees from the replicator, "My loss, I'm afraid." Handing both Chris and his wife cups of the steaming brew, the old man took his seat, "So, Christopher..." he inquired with a fatherly grin, "...are you going to tell me how you met Natalie or are you going to be your usual taciturn self and force me to get it out of her?"*

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While part of Commander Hobson's mind was busy reliving this happy memory, the other part was trying not to listen into the personal conversation being held between his tactical officer and the beautiful Ekosian liaison walking next to him.

"I'm sorry we have to meet again under these circumstances," Mere said as the two officers walked behind the *Sutherland's* first officer down the corridor of the Ekosian Senate Office Building.

"Same here," Manuele agreed and then propositioned, "But maybe...when this is over..."

"Yeah," The Ekosian officer smiled, "I think I'd like that."

Clearing his throat, Hobson interrupted the young couple, "Captain Lindos? What can you tell us about this Senator Durkan?"

"Senator Durkan? He's very well spoken...his popularity and the popularity of his party is growing...unfortunately." She said, all but spitting out her final words.

"Why unfortunately?" Atoa probed, "What exactly does this Restoration Party stand for?"

"It's a very...I guess you could call it a mixture of populist and reactionary..." Mere explained. "Its platform is 'Ekos for Ekosians' and is based on a combination of distrust towards outworlders and a variety of social reform programs for the lower classes."

"I see," Hobson replied in his usual patrician tone as they neared the door to the senator's office. As the door slid open, it revealed a large, plush carpeted antechamber with an attractive blonde woman sitting behind the receptionist's desk. Immediately noticing the two officers standing at the entranceway to the office, the secretary flashed a polite smile as she pressed a button causing a door to the left of her desk to slide open, "Greetings, the Senator is waiting for you."

Entering the equally plush inner sanctum, the three officers stopped as a distinguished looking man apparently in his early fifties, with seal brown hair touched by grey and wearing a dark blue business suit stood up to greet them, "Welcome. Please..." He said, motioning with his hand to three chairs sitting in front of his desk, "Have a seat...I understand we have much to talk about."

"Thank you; Senator," Hobson replied as he and the other officers took the offered seats, "I am sure that you have been informed about the unfortunate recent events."

"Yes," Senator Durkan frowned, "While naturally, I hope that your ambassador and the rest of his party can be found and rescued safe and sound and that the murderers of the Zeon philosopher..." He then took a moment to look at a paper on his desk, "...Ledron Davron..."

"Davin..." Hobson interrupted, the slightest note of irritation in his voice at the mispronunciation of his old teacher's name, "His name was Ledron Davin."

"My apologies, Commander." The senator replied, smoothly correcting himself. "Professor Davin. As I was saying, I want to assure you that the professor's murderers will be found and punished. His lips turning down into a frown, the polished politician shook his head, "However, I honestly cannot say that I am not surprised at this happening."

"Not surprised, Senator?" Commander Hobson interjected, his eyebrow raised in an almost Vulcan manner, "Can I ask why?"

"Commander..." The senator explained patronizingly, "...while I am sure that you have seen more than a few beautiful buildings in the capital and I am also sure that you've met many fine Ekosians such as the lovely captain here..." He then flashed an equally patronizing grin at the Ekosian security officer, "...there is so much more you haven't seen." Durkan's face taking on a grim expression he continued his lecture. "I'm willing to wager that no one told you about the unemployment amongst our youth...or about those who have lost their jobs due to the introduction of alien technologies by the Federation and the Zeons? Or about our skyrocketing crime and drug abuse rates? No..." The politician orated, raising a hand to cut off the objections from Captain Lindos, "...of course not; and of course neither you nor the Zeons intended us any harm by your actions. But tell that to the factory worker whose unemployment dole is about to expire or the young university graduate who can't find a job in their profession because it was outsourced to a Ferengi or Trill firm."

Pausing for a moment, the nationalist Ekosian leader continued his extemporaneous speech. "Also, thanks to off world cultural intrusion we Ekosians risk losing that very distinctiveness that makes our people unique. Look around you, what do you see? Ferengi owned taverns; music halls and theaters where, instead of Ekosians going to see Ekosian artists, they are paying to see Vulcan lyric poets, Klingon opera, and Terran drama! Our culture...our very essence...is in danger of being swallowed up by the Federation."

"That's why the Federation is governed by the Prime Directive, sir," Manuele interjected, "To prevent those very sorts of economic and cultural dislocations from happening."

"Of course it is," The senator replied with an ironic grin, "But then, the Prime Directive didn't stop John Gill from introducing your Nazi movement into our society now...did it?"

"No, sir," Lieutenant Atoa acknowledged somewhat shamefacedly.

"Also, at the time the Zeons introduced most of their technology; they weren't members of the Federation and so weren't governed by the Prime Directive..." The senator continued to press home his case. "So when the Federation returned, it had found the damage done to be too great to be 'fixed'. As a result, it 'magnanimously' granted Associate status to Ekos." A grim expression once again overtaking Durkan's features, he concluded,

“So...is it any wonder that many Ekosians are now willing to express their discontent with the current situation violently? Can you blame them?”

“Kidnapping and murder are never justifiable—I don’t care what the reasons are!” Atoa riposted, his anger growing as he glimpsed briefly into the eyes of the fanatic.

“Easy, Lieutenant...” Hobson cautioned in his usual clipped voice

“Oh...It’s all right.” The Senator remarked, seemingly waving off the New Kauaian’s outburst. Of course acts of violence such as what happened to the professor and your captain and the ambassador are not justifiable.” The Senator replied, smiling as he regarded the Ekosian security officer sitting next to Manuele, “I think I see what part of the problem here is. I’m sure that you’ve been told that the Restoration Party is linked to all sorts of evil—the Soldiers of Melakon...the Rebirth Movement...the Nazis...the Evil Ones themselves...” Chuckling, the senator shifted his position in his chair, “Please, let me assure you, gentlemen...” He said, the patronizing tone in his voice returning, “Remember, I told you that the primary goal of the Restoration Party is to restore Ekosian cultural values and morals—and as I have already pointed out, the Nazis are an alien intrusion into our culture—we neither want nor need them here—as far as I am concerned, Mr. Hobson...Mr. Atoa, you can take them with you when you and your people leave.”

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“They’re coming!” Anara whispered as she rushed back from her listening position near the door of the cell she and her two companions shared.

“Don’t forget...” Captain Shelby cautioned as her blood began to race, “If it doesn’t look right...we abort and try again later.”

As the door slid open to reveal two armed Ekosians and a third one, all three wearing Nazi Party uniforms, Liz frowned as she subtly turned her head, giving the abort signal. Pointing to the captain, the lead Nazi, a blonde haired woman, ordered, “You...on your feet.”

Standing defiantly, Liz looked the terrorist squarely in the eyes, “What do you want?”

Momentarily tempted to deliver a backhand to the arrogant alien, the Nazi settled for sneering derisively, "Come with us...the Sturmfuhrer wishes to see you."

Flashing her companions an encouraging look, the captain, complying with her captor's orders, fell in between two of the guards behind the leader. Walking down the winding passageways, Liz carefully noted directions and corridor markings as they passed various side tunnels and forks. "Quite a maze you have here," The captain said, her voice edged with sarcasm.

"Complicated enough to keep the entire Ekosian Security Service from finding you..." Asil replied smugly, "Not to mention the fact that the walls and ceiling are composed of duralynium..."

"Blocking any scans of whatever might be inside..." Liz finished glumly.

"Right," Asil said, maintaining her smug tone, "So you can forget about anyone rescuing you." Then, as they approached the end of the corridor, the leader, turning to her men, ordered, "Wait here." Addressing Shelby, she then directed, pointing to the door, "Proceed."

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"That's interesting..." Hobson remarked, "I was always under the impression that the Ekosian Nazis were nationalists."

"They are...were..." Durkan reluctantly confirmed. Recovering quickly, he elaborated, "Yes, they do pose as the defenders of a pure Ekos—and many in their number probably actually believe that; but as I pointed out earlier, they're all hypocrites in that they adhere to an alien philosophy."

"I'm curious..." Lieutenant Atoa asked, "How do the Nazis differ from other movements such as the Restoration Party or the Rebirth Movement—other than being an alien import, that is?"

"While the Nazis..." The Ekosian politician lectured, "...say they seek to remove all alien influences; they would, in actuality, impose an alien social and governmental structure on Ekosian society while the Restoration Party seeks to restore—hence the name—traditional Ekosian structures."

"Which were based on the clan if I recall correctly?" Hobson interjected, receiving a confirming nod from the senator.

"Just so, Mr. Hobson. Traditional Ekosian society draws its strength from the clan with the dominant family or clan governing."

"However, Senator..." Mere interrupted, "This led to civil wars and anarchy as rival clans competed for authority."

"True, that did occur in those rare..." The senator emphasized, "...circumstances where you had no dominant clan or clans to maintain order."

"As I recall from my history classes..." Mere countered, "...those rare circumstances weren't so rare..."

Chuckling softly, the politician replied indulgently, "My dear...who writes the history books? That's right...the winners. In this instance the Unionists who have dominated Ekosian politics since the fall of Melakon, along with their Zeon and Federation patrons." Pausing for a moment to take a breath, the senator continued his lecture. "The Unionists and the Nazis also happen to share one very important point in common: They both seek a 'greater destiny' for Ekos. Yes..." Durkan qualified, raising a hand to silence the mounting protests from both Lindos and Atoa, the Unionist view is a much more utopian and benevolent vision than the Nazis. The Unionists see Ekos' future as a fully participating member of the Federation while the Nazis want to see Ekos as the capital of a new empire."

"And how does the Restoration Party see Ekos' future?" Hobson queried.

"To be honest..." The senator replied, rising slightly out of his seat, "The Restoration Party wants you all gone. Dark clouds are gathering, Mr. Hobson—a storm is coming—you see it as clearly as I do, do not deny it. Whole worlds...possibly sectors...maybe even this entire quadrant...will be ravaged by the time it passes. The Restoration Party sees the best—the only—means for Ekos' survival is through a return to our traditional values and isolation. While you are being tossed about by the storm, we of Ekos will stay safely sheltered. And once the storm passes us by, we'll come out of our shelter—alive and whole. Rising from his chair, the senator once again plastered a polite smile on his face, "Now, my friends...I'm afraid that I must conclude our interview...I trust you found what you came for and once again, I wish you good hunting."

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Opening the door, Captain Shelby quickly determined that she had entered what must be the terrorist leader's office. Spying instantly the large Nazi flag and the picture of Melakon hanging on the wall behind a wooden desk and the man sitting behind it, Liz tried her best to keep the revulsion she was feeling from becoming visible in her features, "Sturmfuhrer Merok...I presume you brought me here to tell me that this has all been a horrible mistake and that you are going to let me and the others go and that you are going to surrender to the proper authorities for the murder of a harmless old man."

Laughing, the Nazi leader, standing up, motioned towards a wooden high backed chair sitting in front of his desk as he poured a clear liquid from a bottle into two glasses, "Very funny, Captain," He said as he set the bottle down, "Do sit down...we have much to talk about." As the captain sat down, Merok pushed one of the glasses towards her, "Drink, Captain Shelby...it's only water." Grinning maliciously, the Sturmfuhrer took a drink from his own glass, "Believe me...when we execute you, it won't be by so clean a method as poisoning."

"Well..." Liz drawled, "That's a comfort to know."

Laughing out loud, Merok exclaimed, "I really am going to miss you, Captain..."

"So...why am I here?" Shelby asked as she took a drink of water.

"I thought you'd like to know that we just gave the illegal government of Ekos and its Federation and Zeon masters six hours to accede to our demands," Merok proclaimed, standing up once again.

"And those demands are..." Liz prompted, and then immediately laughed after the Sturmfuhrer had stated them, "You've got to know that those terms are completely and totally ridiculous!" She said, shaking her head, "There's no way they're going to be met."

"Of course not!" Merok replied with a malevolent sneer. He continued to speak in a cold and calculating voice, "We intend to kill you and your friends as an example of our superiority and the Ekosian government's incompetence and as a warning to all the other alien invaders to get the hells off our world."

"You mean you brought me here just to tell me that you're going to kill me?" Liz laughed, "Don't you think you're taking the mustache twirling villain role a little too seriously?"

Laughing as well, Merok, pushing a button on his desk, replied as a hidden door behind the desk slid open, "Actually...you...and your people...might not have to die. In fact, life could be made pretty...comfortable...for you." Motioning for her to enter the hidden room, he said, "You see, Captain, I have a proposition for you."

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"Well...that could have gone better." Manuele growled as the three officers exited the Senate Office Building. Addressing Commander Hobson, the New Kauaian tactical officer apologized, "I'm sorry I nearly lost it back there, Sir..."

"It's all right, Mr. Atoa." Hobson replied, accepting the junior officer's apology. "Just be a bit more careful in the future."

"Understood, Sir." The tactical officer acknowledged sheepishly before adding, "However, I wouldn't say the meeting was a total wash."

"How so?" Mere asked as a slight grin crossed Hobson's features.

"Go ahead, Mr. Atoa." Chris encouraged, "I'm curious to see whether we are thinking along similar lines or not."

"Senator Durkan..." Manuele began, "...laid a great deal of stress on how the Restoration Party—and by extension the Rebirth Movement—differed from and opposed the Nazis."

"But..." Mere interjected, "All he's doing here is stating what Internal Security has known for a long time."

"Yes..." Atoa grinned, "But you picked up on how much he emphasized that point. He was trying to tell us something."

"Agreed." Hobson chimed in, "He was trying to tell us that we might be able to secure the Rebirth Movement's cooperation against the Nazis in this matter at least."

"I wonder what their price will be?" Manuele mused, "He's not going to help us out of the goodness of his heart."

"Definitely not." Hobson agreed. "My guess is that he's seeking to knock out some of the competition by having us do it for him. Also, he'll use our intervention as political fodder."

"How so?" Mere asked, curious as to how the *Sutherland's* first officer reached his conclusion.

"He'll cite this incident as an example of the dangers of increased alien contact..." Hobson explained, "...and then probably segue into his refrain about alien influence taking jobs away from native Ekosians and corrupting the Ekosian youth."

"I see..." Mere replied as the three officers walked down the busy boulevard, their attention temporarily diverted by small demonstration of youths demanding jobs, their picket line in front of the Senate Building being restrained by several Ekosian Internal Security troopers wielding truncheons.

"Hmmm..." The first officer vocalized as he drew his companions' attention towards the demonstration. "This is interesting."

"We see demonstrations like this every day." Mere sighed, "The Senator is right about one thing—Ekos does have a serious problem with its youth. Unemployment is high and there is a strong sense of alienation and hostility amongst many of my generation."

"A good source of recruits for both the Nazis and the Rebirth Movement..." Hobson observed as the police pushed back against the demonstrators. "Ekos' problems seem to run far deeper than anyone had thought."

"So..." Manuele asked as the trio reached a public transport pad, "What do we do now?"

"We go back to the ship..." Hobson answered back, "See what our people have come up with and wait for the Senator to make his move."

"Well..." Mere interjected, "Whatever we do, it had better be quick. We only have a few hours before they execute another hostage."

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"You observed?" Senator Durkan inquired, pressing a button after he was sure that his guests were safely away from his office.

"Of course." A voice responded, the same one that had belonged to the shadowy figure the senator had talked to earlier. "You played your part well, Senator." The voice praised.

"Thank you." The senator replied with a sly grin. "So...what now?"

We give them a few minutes to return to their ship." The voice answered back, "Then instruct your operative to proceed. If all goes as it should...the entire matter should be resolved most satisfactorily."

"Yes..." The Senator grinned as he contemplated the possibilities, "Merok will be dealt with...the Restoration Party will be seen by the Ekosian people as heroes...and relations with the Federation will be seriously damaged."

"And you will have succeeded in maintaining the fiction of the Restoration Party, the Rebirth Movement, and the Nazi Party being separate entities." The voice finished.

"And..." The senator added ending the conversation, "You will have what you want."

"Not quite..." The voice replied as the shadowy figure emerged, revealing a Vorta female, "But we will have made an important step towards our goal of establishing order in the Alpha Quadrant with Ekos playing an important part in our Founders' glorious mission. And you..." The Vorta concluded, smiling at the preening senator, "...as the one leading Ekos to its destiny will have an important part to play within the new order."

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"Before we begin this meeting..." Commander Hobson announced as the senior staff took their seats in the *Sutherland's* main briefing room, "Captain Lindos has just informed me that we might have a major break. Turning towards the Ekosian security officer detailed as the planet's liaison with the *Sutherland*, he gestured with his right hand, "The floor is yours, Captain."

"Thank you, Commander." The youthful security officer responded with a slight smile. Addressing the gathered officers, she cleared her throat. "My superiors have just informed me that a possible lead has been found." After a few moments of relieved sighs from the senior staff, Mere continued her briefing, "Our lead's name is Enad Gren. He's a known sympathizer and enabler of the Rebirth Movement."

"Has he been detained as yet?" Lieutenant Atoa asked.

"No." Mere responded, shaking her head. "Unfortunately, the Rebirth Movement does have sympathizers within the ranks of Internal Security. If we attempt an arrest, the probability would be high that he would learn of it and go to ground before we could catch him."

"We can't run that risk." Lieutenant Nyota Dryer interjected, shaking her head.

"Agreed." Mere responded. "But there is a way we might be able to reach him."

"How?" Chris asked, his ears pricking up as he picked up the scent of his quarry.

"He spends a great deal of time in a local nightclub popular with many younger Ekosians." Lindos replied, "A small group could contact him...possibly gain his cooperation."

"What gives you the idea that he would want to cooperate with us?" Sam Lavelle asked, suspicious at just how conveniently this lead had suddenly appeared. "What if this is a trap to get more hostages."

"The Rebirth Movement..." Lieutenant Atoa interjected, coming to the defense of the youthful Ekosian officer, "...doesn't like the Nazis. They view them as being just as corrupting an off world influence as the Zeons and the Federation."

"Mr. Atoa is somewhat correct." Lieutenant Commander Varok asserted, weighing into the discussion. "While the Rebirth Movement is opposed to us and should be regarded warily, at this time, our interests do coincide. They see us as being a useful tool in removing the Nazis. The logical course then..." The Vulcan argued, "...would be for us...in this instance...to work with the Rebirth Movement in order to regain our people."

Raising his hand, Commander Hobson interrupted, settling the issue, "While the risk does exist that this could be a trap...I think it's worth it." Turning his attention to Mere, Chris instructed, "Go ahead with the meeting. Mr. Atoa will accompany you." Addressing the assistant tactical officer also attending the briefing, the first officer further ordered, "Lieutenant Dryer, monitor the situation through their comm badges and have a team ready to intervene should you have to."

"Aye, Sir." The ebony skinned lieutenant acknowledged as the *Sutherland's* executive officer moved to the next item on his agenda. "How is work proceeding on modifying the tricorders, Dr. Murakawa?"

"The modifications have been completed..." the Japanese-Centauran doctor replied, "...and have been detailed to the search teams."

"And the search teams' progress?" Hobson followed up, turning towards the ship's science officer, the Vulcan Lieutenant Commander Varok.

"We have searched 25.335% of the capital archopolis' area, Sir." Varok replied, the faintest note of regret in the voice of the older Vulcan, "Unfortunately, we have not been able to further narrow down the whereabouts of the Captain, Lieutenant Rysyl, or Ambassador Offenhouse."

Turning towards Lieutenant Dryer, the first officer inquired, "Any luck in tracking any more leads from informers or governmental contacts?"

"None, Sir." The ebony skinned security officer replied, shaking her head somberly. "Other than the lead Captain Lindos has provided us." She noted, carefully hiding her suspicions regarding how easily and conveniently the Ekosian security officer had turned up this new lead.

"How much time until the deadline expires?" Hobson then asked, turning towards Lieutenant Atoa.

"Three hours, Sir." The New Kauaian answered. "Not enough time for us to complete our search of the city—assuming they're still within the city, that is."

"Then...Captain Lindos...Lieutenant Atoa..." Commander Hobson pronounced as he got up out of his chair, signaling the end of the meeting, "Your lead has to pan out. Barring something unforeseen, you're our best hope. Good

hunting.” Turning towards Nyota, Hobson cleared his throat, “Lieutenant Dryer? Could you stay for a moment?”

“Yes, Sir.” The ebony skinned security officer replied, her face not revealing any fear at confronting the dreaded ‘Iceman’ as the rest of the officers filed out.

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Entering the room, Liz first noted the door on the opposite side of the room and then the fresh fruit and decanters of liquors placed on a large table in the center. Her eyes also spotted at once the man and woman reclining on cushions near the table. The man, tall and well muscled first caught the hedonistic captain’s attention, but it didn’t take long for Liz’s appraising eyes to fall on the woman as well. Curvaceous and well proportioned, with pouty lips, deep blue eyes, and raven hair cascading down to her shoulders, Liz shook her head. *Merok doesn’t miss a trick.* Barely managing to keep her anger in check, Shelby fumed inwardly; *this guy really is a tool. He honestly believes that all this would make me forget what he did to the Professor.* Sorry, Jackass, she swore inwardly, as she saw out of the corner of her eye the Nazi leader gauging her reaction, *but I’m not that sort of girl.*

“So...” Shelby drawled, “I take it this is where you make me the offer I can’t refuse?”

Laughing, Merok replied, “Captain. I could get to like you! For an alien female, you have an almost Ekosian male’s set of stones on you. Here...” he tempted, pouring amber colored liquor into two goblets. Handing one of the goblets to Shelby, he took a sip out of the other. “The fruit you see on the table comes from the finest produce on the planet...and this brandy is a good twenty-five years old.” Giving the man and woman a subtle cue, a leer appeared on the Sturmfuhrer’s face as the couple walked seductively away, each of them giving Liz an alluring grin.

“Who are they?” Liz then asked innocently as the pair walked out the door.

“Beautiful creatures, aren’t they?” Merok enticed as he sat down behind his desk.

“Very nice, Sturmfuhrer.” Liz replied dryly. “I take it this...” She inquired waving her hand over the table, “...and those two who just left are what I get if I agree to whatever deal you’re wanting to make with me?”

Nodding his head, the Sturmfuhrer answered back, "That's just the initial payment. There's far more than that." A sly grin crossing his face, he explained, "If you agree, you'll have your heart's desire. Fine art...wines...liquor...cigars...cigarettes—tobacco and otherwise...the best holo-programs...men...women...whatever you want!"

"And Lieutenant Rysyl and Ambassador Offenhouse?" Liz asked as she picked up a greenish-yellow Ekosian fruit vaguely resembling an apple, "What about them?"

"The same." Merok replied.

"But..." Liz pointed out as she stalled for time, "...we'll still be prisoners."

"For now, yes." The Sturmfuhrer confirmed, "But...it'll be a gilded...a very...very...comfortably gilded cage—if you cooperate."

"I see..." Liz drawled, "So...what does my 'cooperation' entail?"

The sly grin still on his face, Merok answered back, "To put it quite simply, we need someone with wealth of experience to assist us when the time occurs—and it will—where we must defend ourselves against Zeon and Federation aggression. You can help us in the formation of our new navy. You see, while there are those who will help us once we've gained our independence, it would be better if we had someone who understood how the Federation and Starfleet think...and that someone could be you."

A smirk appearing on her face, Shelby probed, "Why do you even need me—these anonymous allies of yours could do the job just as well as me and I'm sure you have starship captains of your own."

Nodding his head, Merok replied, "There are a few captains in our movement, and you're right, our allies do have experienced individuals. But, as I said, we have no one with your working knowledge of how Starfleet and the Federation work."

"I see..." Liz answered back, still stalling for time. "So...who are these new allies of yours?"

Laughing loudly, Merok slapped his hand on the table, "I knew I could get to like you, Captain! His laughter vanishing, the Nazi shook his head, "But...I'm

sorry...right now I can't tell you. Maybe later...if you agree to my proposition..."

Seeing that the meeting was coming to an end, Shelby tried one last delaying tactic, "You understand I can't give you an answer right now. I need to talk it over with my people..."

His grin vanishing, the Sturmfuhrer stood up, "Your people are rapidly running out of time, Captain. Regardless of what you decide, there will be an execution—whether it's a real one or a staged one is of no concern to me, but surely your cooperation is worth a life of comfort for yourself—and the rest of your party? Go ahead...talk it over with your friends." As he concluded his remarks, he pressed a button which immediately summoned the two guards waiting outside the office. "Take her back to her cell," He ordered as he stood up and once again addressed the captain, "Think about my offer, Captain Shelby—but hurry, your time is limited."

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"Lieutenant Dryer..." Hobson inquired, his patrician voice not giving any hint as to his true emotions, "I'd appreciate your feedback as to our Ekosian liaison and the new information she just gave us..."

"What do you mean, Sir?" The deputy tactical officer asked, her voice tone reflecting her wariness.

"I want..." the first officer stated, maintaining the neutral expression on his face, "...your analysis as to both the possible validity of the information as well as the source."

"If you're asking whether Captain Lindos is working for the opposition, Sir..." Nyota carefully replied, "...then I'd have to say that I think it is a possibility. As to whether the lead she got is a good one or not—I'd have to say it's a fifty/fifty chance of it being good."

"Fifty/fifty?" Hobson asked with an amused look on his face.

"Yes, Sir." The security officer answered back with a slight smile of her own. Then, her smile vanishing, she explained her answer, "If she's on the up and up, then either she's being duped or the information is valid. If she's with the Rebirth Movement, then it's probably valid and they want us to do their dirty work getting rid of the Nazis." Pausing for a moment to catch her breath, she

concluded, if she's with the Nazis, then the information is definitely invalid and she's leading Manny into a trap."

"So..." Hobson probed, his icy expression returning, "Which way would you say the coin's landing?"

Sighing, Nyota took several moments to consider her answer before carefully responding, "To be honest, Sir...I think the lead's genuine. I don't see how the Nazis acquiring more hostages could possibly aggravate the situation any more than it is already. I'd almost certainly say that it came from someone within the Rebirth Movement. As for Captain Lindos..." Pausing for several moments as she weighed both the evidence and her own instincts, Dryer cautiously ventured, "...while I don't think she's with the Nazis...I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't a Rebirth Movement plant. We know that they've infiltrated a good chunk of the Ekosian security services and the movement is especially popular amongst the young."

"Good points, Lieutenant." Hobson observed before inquiring, "In your estimation, Lieutenant...can we rely on Captain Lindos?"

"In this instance, Sir..." Nyota replied, nodding her head in the affirmative, "...yes...I believe we can. However, I wouldn't trust her with anything sensitive." Then, after several moments, she reluctantly added, "I'd also recommend that Lieutenant Atoa be cautioned as to her possibly shaky loyalties."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Chris acknowledged, giving no indication as to whether he accepted or rejected the final piece of advice his security officer had given him, "I'll take your suggestion under advisement. For now though..." The first officer ordered, ending the interview, "...I'd suggest that you and your people coordinate with Lieutenant Atoa and Captain Lindos for the meeting. Dismissed."

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The booming bass from the recessed wall speakers drowning out his voice, Manuele Atoa put a hand on the dark haired Ekosian security officer who was his companion as they stood at the entranceway of the Ekosian nightclub where they were supposed to meet the Rebirth Movement contact. Leaning over, Atoa had to nearly shout to make himself heard, "Where is this guy?"

“Upstairs!” Mere shouted back, pointing towards the upper floor of the establishment.

“Gotcha!” Manuele shouted back as, hand in hand, the pair climbed the stairs. Feeling as well as seeing the hostile stares his presence was drawing from the young Ekosians in the bar, the New Kauaian, whispered once the sound of the music had died down, into his companion’s ear, “We’re attracting lots of eye tracks, Mere.”

“I was worried about that.” The young Ekosian sighed as the pair made their way to an empty table. “A lot of the younger Ekosians who go to this club are unemployed or unable to get good jobs and they blame the Federation and the Zeons for their problems.” Taking their seats, Mere cautioned, “We should be all right as long as we don’t do anything to attract any attention.”

Nodding his head as Manuele voiced his agreement to Mere’s words, “No argument from me there. I just want to get the info we need from our guy and then get out of here ASAP.” Then, as he spied four Ekosian males advancing slowly towards their table, the *Sutherland* tactical officer gently elbowed his companion in the side as he remarked, in a low tone, “I hope he’s with that group coming towards us...”

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As Shelby left with the two guards, Asil regarded her superior. “Do you really intend to keep your promise to her if she agrees to your terms?”

“Of course not.” Merok replied an evil grin and nonchalant shrug of the shoulders. “We’ll keep her and her people long enough to get whatever information they have off of them—and then they’ll be executed as enemies of Ekos.” Finishing his drink, the Nazi leader summoned his deputy to his side, “Come, Asil...it’s time now.” He declared as the pair made their way towards the mysterious door that Shelby had seen earlier. “There’s something I want to show you—something I think you’ll appreciate.”

Entering the secret chamber, Merok and his assistant both grinned in satisfaction as they set their eyes on the cloning chamber in the center of the room, attended by two individuals wearing white unitards with swastika armbands,

“You’re cloning someone!” Asil exclaimed. “Who?”

“Of course,” Merok grinned, “Now, I want you to look into the chamber...”

Drawing closer to the tube, the blonde Nazi woman gasped in astonishment as she gazed into the eyes of the clone. “Is that...is that who I think it is?” She asked in a hushed, almost reverential tone.

“Yes.” Merok replied triumphantly. You see, Asil...every movement must have someone larger than life to lead it—so who better to lead ours than the greatest of us all—Melakon himself! This is the true purpose of the Soldiers of Melakon—to bring back our true Fuhrer. Very soon the maturation process will be complete and our Leader will be ready to appear before his people once again. Once they see him—they will rally to his side. Then, with Melakon restored to his rightful place, none will dare stand against us. Even Senator Durkan will have to bend his knee to our Fuhrer.”

“Durkan on his knees...” Asil snidely remarked. “That is a sight I would like to see.” Then, looking into the chamber, the blonde Ekosian Nazi observed, “How soon will our Leader be ready?”

“Not much longer,” Merok answered back. “While the Deputy Fuhrer has all but finished his physical maturation; mentally, he is still a blank slate.” Taking a deep breath, the Sturmfuhrer flashed a triumphant grin, “We will begin the process of implanting memory engrams very soon.”

“And then...” Asil concluded, her eyes blazing with the fire of the fanatic, “...we will have our Fuhrer back.”

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As the gang of young Ekosians approached Manuele and Mere, the two security specialists got up out of their chairs. Both officers unobtrusively slipping into combat stances, Manuele, a friendly grin plastered on his face, asked in as genial tone as he could muster, “What can we do for you?”

One of the young men, whom Manuele judged to be the pack leader, replied with a sneer, ignoring Manuele as he addressed his remarks to Mere, “What are you doing with this off-worlder, Sister?” Flashing a brief leer, he mocked, “You should be with real men...”

“I already am...” Mere riposted, flashing a sweet smile as she glared at the lead male. “All I see here are four stoneless *rintas* honking and braying.”

Snarling with rage at Mere's insult, the lead male suddenly lunged at her. Easily dodging his charge, the Ekosian security officer grappled the thug's arm, twisting it as she brought it up behind his back, jerking it up.

"Uh...Uh...boys..." Manuele warned, brandishing his phaser 1 at the other three toughs who looked ready to join the brawl. "You three stay right where you are unless you want headaches."

Forcing the bully to his knees, Mere bent over and whispered in his ear, "Where is it?"

"In your hand..." He answered back, also in a whisper as he winced in pain.

Feeling the small piece of paper in the palm of her hand, Mere whispered back, "Very smooth...must have slipped it to me as I was taking you down." Speaking louder now so that her voice carried, she mocked, twisting the man's arm just enough to elicit another grimace, "Had enough, *rinta*?"

"Yeah...yeah..." He cried out, "Just let me go."

"Get up." Mere growled as she jerked the hapless would be tough to his feet. Shoving him back towards his compatriots, she sneered contemptuously, "Now...get out...all of you."

"You heard the lady..." Manuele smirked as he motioned subtly with his phaser, "Now...scoot!" As the four young men quickly disappeared down the stairs, the *Sutherland* security chief flashed a grin at his companion, "You looked pretty good there, just now..."

"Thanks." Mere replied simply, returning her partner's smile.

"But..." Manuele then said, his smile turning into a frown, "I'm afraid we probably scared off our contact."

"Oh..." His Ekosian companion responded, her smile growing wider as she held out the tiny piece of paper in her hand, "I wouldn't be so sure of that. You see...that was our contact."

Laughing, Manuele quipped, "Smooth, Mere...real smooth." Then, taking the paper from the Ekosian security officer's hand, he noted a series of numbers written, "These numbers...they look like they might be coordinates."

"They are." Mere confirmed. Taking out an Ekosian mini-comp from her purse, she entered in the numbers. A few seconds later, she showed the results to her partner. "It's a location in the industrial district. It's a good bet that that's where your people are."

Touching his comm badge, Manuele immediately spoke, "Atoa to *Sutherland*. I think we've found them."

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As she walked back to her cell, accompanied by her two guards, Liz mentally processed her conversation with the *Sturmfuhrer*. *Well, Merok, you're not going to let me go regardless of what happens. Even if I were to agree to your 'proposition'—which I have no intention of doing, once you've gotten everything I know out of me, I'm dead. And I don't believe you for a moment when you say that Anara and the ambassador's lives will be spared. So...what's one tough, yet cute and sexy starship captain to do?* Seeing that this time the guards had their phasers holstered and recognizing that they were approaching a section of the passageway which she remembered led to a series of branching tunnels, an evil grin crossed Liz's features as a plan took shape.

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"Our agent reports success." Senator Durkin gloated as the Vorta female smiled beatifically. "It shouldn't be long until the Federation hostages are released and Merok and his group of thugs are dealt with once and for all." His smile growing wider, the Ekosian senator quipped, "I had better get ready for my press conference."

"What if the hostages are killed?" The Vorta asked, curious as to how her ally would respond to sudden changes. "I thought we agreed that the Ambassador should be rescued."

"True." The senator responded, "It would be best for Ambassador Offenhouse to survive the attempt. That's why this is going to call for very careful timing on our part. We need to make sure our inside person in Merok's camp understands that Offenhouse is to be spared—the others, as we already decided, are expendable. But..." Durkan qualified, "...we cannot give Merok enough time to escape the trap. We need him dead as much as we need Offenhouse alive." Pausing for a moment, the senator added, "Also...we need to decide what to do about this new piece of information we've just obtained..."

"Yes..." The Vorta acknowledged, "...the clone of Melakon. That could be a threat to your position should the process be completed."

"I'd thought of that." The senator conceded, "But at the same time, it could be made to work to our advantage."

"This requires more thought." The Vorta replied, uncertain as to the new situation. "We should discuss it in more detail later..." The Vorta then added in an almost regretful tone, "However this turns out, it is a pity that you might lose two of your agents..."

"One..." Durkan acknowledged, "...almost surely. But the other..." A smile crossing his features, he demurred, "...she's surprised me in the past with her abilities. I have a feeling she'll surprise us again."

"Perhaps." The Vorta remarked. "In any event, this whole unpleasant affair should be over shortly with the Ekosian people not even realizing that the Restoration Party is nothing but Melakon's Nazi Party under another guise."

"Only in part." Durkan corrected. "Yes...we are the true heirs of Melakon's legacy. However, we also reject the legacy of John Gill and Earth's Nazis. Our path to glory will be built on Ekosian purity."

"And your Dominion allies..." The Vorta added in an unctuous voice, "...desire only for you to reach that goal with us at your side."

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Watching as Commander Hobson beamed down along with Dr. Murakawa, Lieutenant Atoa, with the Ekosian security officer, Mere Lindos, on one side of him and his assistant tactical officer, Lieutenant Nyota Dryer, on the other, reported, "Sir? We're ready to begin."

"Very good, Lieutenant," The Iceman acknowledged in his usual clipped tone, "Time is of the essence. It won't take long for the enemy to realize that we're on to them." Sweeping the area surrounding the entrance to the underground maintenance tunnels that were serving as the Nazis' hideout, Hobson ordered, "We'll try to catch the terrorists in a pincer. Mr. Atoa, you take Captain Lindos and Dr. Murakawa along with one security team and work your way towards grid coordinate 95 Alpha Green from the west; while I take Lieutenants Dryer and Talis and another team and work towards the east."

“Rules of engagement, Sir?” The New Kauaian asked as he smoothly caught a photon grenade launcher tossed to him by Lieutenant Dryer.

“Standard rules.” Hobson answered back, noting out of the corner of his eye that Dryer was now cradling the other grenade launcher in her arms. “Set phasers to heavy stun. We don’t want casualties unless there’s no other choice.” His eyes now taking on a steely look, the stone faced commander added, “But, the lives of our people come first. If there’s no other way—then you have my authorization to use deadly force.”

“Understood, sir.” Manuele replied, nodding his head once.

Motioning with his hand towards the entrance, Hobson quietly uttered a single word, “Now.”

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Feeling the vibration coming from the necklace she wore around her neck, Asil took a deep breath and then rushed into the Sturmfuhrer’s office. Seeing Merok sitting behind his desk, decanter of liqueur in hand, the blonde Nazi woman blurted out, “Intruders, Sturmfuhrer! Activating the wall monitor, Asil pointed at the combined Starfleet-Ekosian security force storming their hideout. “Somehow they must have discovered our positions.”

“That...” Merok growled as he holstered his pistol, “...or we’ve been betrayed.” His eyes narrowing into slits, the Nazi leader spoke in a low, dangerous voice. “But first...we deal with the Federation. We will discover the traitor soon enough.” Coming around the desk, he put his right arm on his subordinate’s shoulder, “Go now...execute the ambassador and the Deltan woman.”

“What about Captain Shelby?” Asil asked with a sneer.

Activating his wrist communicator, Merok spoke, “Naed? Now.” Turning back to the blonde woman, the Sturmfuhrer’s lips turned up into an evil grin, “Captain Shelby is being taken care of even as we speak. Now...go take care of the others.”

Her right arm coming up into a crisp salute, Asil acknowledged, “At once, my Sturmfuhrer!”

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“Our agents have received their signals and are now playing their parts in our little drama.” Durkan declared with a smile as he addressed the Vorta woman standing before his desk. “Now...all we have to do is wait.”

“Excellent.” The Vorta replied. “But while we wait, there is so much more we need to discuss...about Ekos and how your new partners, the Dominion, can help you.”

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Gradually slowing her pace as she and her captors entered the intersection that she had memorized earlier, Shelby heard the tell tale beep of an incoming call signal coming from the first escort’s wrist communicator. Motioning with his other hand for her and the other guard to come to a halt, the first guard activated his communicator, nodding his head as his hand went to the pistol holstered at his waist.

Immediately recognizing the probable content of the message that her escort had just received, Shelby moved quickly. Lashing out, she undercut the legs of the guard standing next to her with a kick to the knees. Snatching the downed guard’s phaser, she fired just as the other guard’s weapon cleared its holster. As the beam, set to maximum, totally disintegrated its target, Liz turned towards the other guard. A grim look on her face as she pointed the lethal weapon at the cringing terrorist, Liz growled, “You want the same thing your friend got?”

“No!” The guard cried, shaking his head violently.

“Good.” Shelby replied, her lips now turned up into a cold smile. “All you have to do is answer my questions. First question: How many guards between here and where the others are being held and where are they located?”

“Two.” The guard quickly responded. “One guard at the intersection three *decons* ahead. The other guard is a roving guard—his route is irregular...” Seeing the cold look in the eyes of the Starfleet captain, the guard pleaded, “I’m telling you the truth—honest! Please! Believe me!”

Trusting her judgment that the guard was telling the truth, Liz replied, "All right...I believe you." Watching in satisfaction as the guard visibly relaxed, Liz continued her interrogation. "How many more guards have phasers up ahead?"

"No more." The guard replied. "The only ones with phasers are the Sturmfuhrer, Asil, us, and a few others. The rest of us just have slug throwers."

"Good." Liz responded, nodding her head. "One more question—are there any special surprises or traps I should know about?"

"No." The guard said, shaking his head. "This far back there aren't any. The Sturmfuhrer didn't think they'd be necessary."

Dialing the setting on both of the phasers she had taken down to a heavy stun setting, Shelby smirked, "I'm going to let you take a nap now. But...if you lied to me..." she threatened, motioning with her phaser, "I'll be back...and I promise you...what happened to your friend will be nothing compared to what I'll do to you." Pulling the trigger as the guard nodded his head, the Starfleet captain looked on as the would-be executioner slumped to the floor. "Ok, Liz..." the captain muttered, "Phase One accomplished. Now we go on to Phase Two."

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Motioning downward with his hand, Manuele Atoa crouched as his team neared a T-section in the corridor they'd been following. Creeping up to join him, Dr. Murakawa took out her tricorder. However, before she could activate it, she was stopped by a firm hand grasping her wrist. Turning her head in Manuele's direction, she saw him shake his head firmly. Nodding her head in understanding, the doctor quietly replaced her tricorder as Mere Lindos joined them. Taking out a small hockey puck shaped object, the Ekosian security officer smiled as she pressed a button and then tossed it. "Eyes!" Lindos whispered urgently as she turned her head away. Averting their eyes immediately on hearing Mere's warning, the two Starfleet officers' vision was spared as the stun grenade went off in the center of the intersection.

"Now!" Atoa ordered as he and Mere rushed forward, with Dr. Murakawa and the rest of the team following close behind. Reaching the intersection, Manuele's lips turned up into a triumphant grin as he spied the downed

terrorists. Addressing a security trooper, he ordered, "Crewman Dunn...put restraints on these guys."

Moving to follow his superior officer's orders, Dunn smoothly went from one terrorist to the other, binding their hands behind their backs. "That's the last of 'em, sir."

"So far...so good." Manuele said in a cautious tone. "But I've got a feeling it's going to get rougher from here on out."

"I fear you're right." Mere replied as Doctor Murakawa went from one bound prisoner to the other, checking their vitals.

"They're ok." Denise reported. "They should be out for at least a half hour."

"Good." Manuele responded. Glancing first down one corridor and then the other, the security chief gritted his teeth. "I hate to do this...but we don't have much choice. We're going to have to split up. "Mere..." he directed, pointing in the direction of the corridor going to the left, "You take Dr. Murakawa and two troopers and go that way. "I'll take the others and go the other."

"Right." The Ekosian security officer acknowledged professionally. "Look out for yourself." She added as she and her team began to move out.

"You too." Manuele threw back with a wide grin, "Don't forget—we've got a date!"

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After first easily dispatching the first guard mentioned by her prisoner, and then evading the roving sentry, Shelby found herself crouched in an alcove ten meters from her former cell. Spotting the single sentinel at the door, Liz raised the antique phaser in her hand, and, taking careful aim, began to squeeze the trigger until the sound of footsteps coming in her direction caused her to lower the weapon as she withdrew deeper into the shadows.

The sound of her boots striking the deck echoing throughout the corridor, Asil approached the sentry guarding the cell containing the Federation prisoners. "The Federation and their lackeys are attacking us!" She declared as she drew her phaser from its holster. "Sturmfuhrer Merok has given orders for the Deltan prisoner to be executed at once!"

"What about the Federation ambassador?" The guard asked as he turned towards the keypad next to the door and began punching in numbers.

"Our leader..." Asil replied, an evil grin crossing her otherwise lovely features, "...thinks that he might be useful should we need a hostage to cover our retreat. I'm to take him..." the blonde smoothly lied, "...to the Sturmfuhrer."

Listening intently to the terrorists' conversation, Shelby grimaced as she weighed the odds against her. *Not much choice.* Liz sighed inwardly; *I'm only going to get one shot here if we're all going to get out of this alive so I better get it right the first time.*

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"Damn, they're putting up a fight!" Nyota shouted as she downed yet another of Merok's terrorists.

"I know." Hobson replied with a worried voice as he fired his phaser once again, causing yet another Nazi to slump down stunned to the deck. "How many does that make so far?"

"I counted six." Dryer responded grimly, "We must be making a dent though...their fire's starting to die down a little."

"Unfortunately, they're making a dent on us too." Hobson declared with a frown as a high pierced shriek came from one of the Ekosian troopers accompanying the Starfleet party.

As the medic rushed to assist the wounded trooper, Nyota observed, her lips turning down into a worried frown, "We're taking too long. I'm afraid that if Atoa's run into similar problems..."

"We'll get to them, Lieutenant." Hobson quickly interjected, his face taking on a determined look. "But we're going to need to flank these bastards."

"Leave that to me, sir." Nyota grinned as she spotted a debris pile out of the corner of her eye. Signaling a trooper to join her, Dryer called out, "Just keep those sons of bitches pinned down."

"Go." Hobson ordered as he and the rest of his team laid down a withering covering fire with their phasers.

Moving swiftly, Nyota and her partner dashed towards a debris pile that she had spotted moments earlier. Diving under cover as the phaser fire between Hobson's group and the terrorists picked up, Nyota cracked a sly grin as she took in her position. "Perfect!" The security officer exclaimed as she and her partner took careful aim at the remaining terrorists crouched under a hastily erected barricade. "Now!" Blue light lanced from their phasers, bringing down the surviving terrorists in one blow. Waving her hand towards Hobson, the ebony skinned lieutenant called out in an exultant tone, "We got 'em."

"Good." Hobson called back. Then, after motioning for two of the Ekosian troopers accompanying them to carry their wounded comrade back to safety, the commander pointed down the recently cleared corridor. "Let's move, people. Our time's running out."

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Willing herself to relax as the door opened, Anara saw Merok's blonde deputy standing next to the door guard, the blonde with her phaser drawn and pointed at the Deltan woman. "Where's the Captain?"

"You'll see her soon enough." Asil responded with an evil grin. Seeing Ralph out of the corner of her eye, she then ordered, "You! Step towards the back of the cell and get on your knees. Following the blonde Nazi's instructions, the ambassador did as he was told. "Now..." Asil gloated as she pointed her weapon at her female prisoner, "Your friends will see for themselves the cost of defying us."

"You're a fool." Anara responded defiantly. "This isn't going to accomplish anything." Seeing the male guard's weapon wavering ever so slightly in his hand, Anara smiled inwardly. Looking past her female captor, the Deltan operations officer addressed the rest of her remarks to the other guard, speaking in a low, seductive tone, "You don't really want to hurt me...do you? I'm much more valuable to you alive..."

"Comrade Asil..." The guard stammered, beads of sweat on his brow, "Are you sure that the Sturmfuhrer..."

Wheeling about quickly, Asil backhanded the guard with her free hand, "Shut up, you fool! Can't you tell that alien whore is influencing you with her pheromones?"

Seizing the opportunity provided by Anara's distraction, Shelby fired her weapon, the blue beam lancing out from her phaser striking the blonde woman, stunning her at once. However, before she could fire on the other guard, Anara lashed out, her kick sending the hapless sentry's weapon clattering across the cell as she struck again, this time with the flat of her hand, impacting on the bridge of the larger Ekosian's nose, forcing him backwards in pain, the stun beam from the captain's phaser soon rendering him unconscious as well.

"Good job, Lieutenant." Liz complimented as she stepped out from her alcove.

"Thank you, sir." Anara replied with a shaky grin as she turned towards the Federation diplomat cringing in the back, "Are you going to be ok, Ambassador?"

"I...I guess so..." Ralph groaned as he staggered to his feet. Shaking his head glumly, he said in a pitiful tone, "I'm sorry...I'm afraid I wasn't much help to you just now."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, sir." Anara replied in a compassionate tone. "I was afraid I was going to die as well."

"But you..." The ambassador feebly protested, "At least you were able to do something! While I didn't do anything but..."

"Ambassador..." Liz remarked encouragingly as she joined her newly freed companions, "You had two stone cold terrorists pointing phasers at you. We got lucky in that Anara's pheromones were able to distract one of the guards long enough so that I could get in a shot and Anara could act. Otherwise..." She shook her head glumly as she remembered that most of the calculations that she had ran earlier had ended with at least one, and often with two, deaths, "...I'm not sure all of us would have gotten out of this."

"Thank you, Captain...Anara..." The ambassador replied, grateful to the Starfleet officers for their face-saving gestures. "So..." he asked, looking out the cell into the corridor, "What do we do now?"

"We lock these two clowns up..." Shelby growled, barely overcoming the temptation to kick the female Nazi lying at her feet in her side as she had not so long ago done to her, "And then..." Liz concluded, her lips turning up into a grim smile, "We pay a certain Sturmfuhrer a visit." Seeing the inquiring looks

on both Anara's and Ralph's faces, Liz frowned, "I've got a score to settle with that bastard."

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Motioning with her right hand for her team to stop, Mere pointed towards a slender trip wire. Tracing the wire, the Ekosian security officer smirked triumphantly as she recognized the phaser emitters on either side of the corridor.

"Nasty." Denise remarked as Mere disarmed the trap. "That would have gotten us all."

"Yeah." Mere acknowledged, "No question—they were ready for us."

Taking out her tricorder, Dr. Murakawa gestured towards the activation button. Receiving Mere's nod of consent, the doctor activated the device, prodding the Ekosian woman with her elbow as the tricorder began beeping, "I'm picking up traces of Deltan pheromones."

"Can you get a location?" Mere asked as she looked curiously at the medical device.

"Yeah," Denise replied. "It's coming from about a hundred meters ahead."

"Let's go then, but keep an eye out for any more surprises." The Ekosian officer ordered as she and the rest of her party began to proceed down the corridor.

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"Sir!" Lieutenant Dryer called out, pointing towards the floor beneath him. "An access panel."

As Commander Hobson and the rest of his party clustered around the panel, their weapons drawn, the *Sutherland's* executive officer addressed his subordinate, "Are you picking up any lifesigns, Lieutenant?"

"No sir," Nyota reported and then added a note of caution, "But don't forget sir, these materials do a pretty good job of blocking our scans."

"Which means that we could be facing a small army in there," The Iceman grimaced. Coming to a quick decision, the commander addressed his team, "Once we open that panel, we move smart and fast." Addressing his security officer, Hobson said in a dry voice, "All right, Lieutenant Dryer...let's see what's inside."

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Hearing the sound of running feet, Liz put her right hand in the air, gesturing for her two companions to halt. Taking a quick peak around the corner, she quickly ducked back under cover as five Nazis ran down the corridor. "Looks like things are heating up."

"Our people must be getting close." Anara whispered as she clutched the phaser in her hand.

The sound of phaser fire ringing out from the end of the corridor the guards rushed down, Liz smiled back, "I'd say you're right, Lieutenant." Then, peering again around the corner, this time seeing only an empty passageway, Liz motioned with her hand, "Let's go."

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"Sounds like we're really screwing up their day!" A crewman shouted as Lieutenant Atoa brought down yet another Nazi terrorist with his phaser.

"Yeah, sir..." Another crewman called out. "Looks like their fire's dying down."

"I don't think it's just us," Atoa replied, "I have a feeling they're dealing with another problem."

"You're right, Lieutenant! Look!" The first crewman called out as Mere approached with her team from a side corridor.

"Told you!" Manuele chuckled as the beam from his phaser impacted on the body of a terrorist. "Hey, Mere!" The New Kauaian called out, "Fancy seeing you here!"

"Nice to see you too!" The Ekosian captain shouted back as her team drew closer. Smiling as she approached the New Kauaian, Mere reported, "Dr.

Murakawa found signs of Deltan pheromones, but when we got there, all we found were two prisoners trussed up and locked in a cell.”

“They must have got away.” Manuele concluded with a smirk.

“That’d be my guess.” Mere replied, a grin forming on her own face. “So...what do you want done with the prisoners?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Atoa answered back “Leave them where they are—they’re not going anywhere.” Pausing for a moment to consider his options, the *Sutherland* security chief declared, “Right now we need to find our people and link up with Commander Hobson’s group.” Turning towards Dr. Murakawa who had also joined them, Manuele asked, “Can your tricorder pick up any signs of Deltan pheromones now?”

Taking her tricorder out and activating it, Denise scanned the area, “Got it.” She announced triumphantly. “Faint traces moving in a north-northeasterly direction.”

“All right, people!” Manuele called out as he shouldered the photon grenade launcher, “Let’s move out.”

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“Damn!” Ralph shouted as Anara shoved him to the floor, a phaser bolt passing through what would have been his midsection had he have remained standing.

“Sorry, sir,” Anara apologized as she returned fire, “But there wasn’t time.”

“It’s ok,” Offenhouse said with a grimace as he crept back behind the Deltan woman’s position. “How many of them are there?”

“Too many,” Shelby replied grimly as another burst of phaser fire wracked their position. Seeing the terrorists preparing to rush their position, the petite starship captain took a deep breath. “Get ready, you two. Things are about to get dicey here.”

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“Sturmfuhrer!” One of the terrorist’s underlings, panic growing in his eyes, called out as he rushed into the Nazi leader’s office, “The prisoners have escaped and our defense perimeter has been breached.

Merok, his eyes showing not an ounce of panic, replied in a calm voice as he took hold of the messenger’s shoulder in vise like grip as he fixed his eyes on that of the frightened young man, “What does our leader, Melakon say in his *Writings*?”

Gaining strength from his superior’s confidence, the youth answered back, “That our victory is inevitable.”

“Why?” Merok prompted as he gazed into the younger man’s eyes, taking his measure.

“Because we are the Race!” The young man responded. Seeing his leader nodding his head approvingly, the young man finished, “Even though some might have to sacrifice for the good of all...”

“That’s right, my boy!” Merok grinned approvingly, deciding that he wouldn’t have to kill the young man for cowardice. “Now...get out there and show us all that our Leader was right.”

“Yes sir!” The young man, his flagging spirits buoyed by his leader’s pep talk, rushed back out into the corridor determined to give his life and soul for the party and the cause.

As the young man left, Merok, pushing the button hidden beneath his desk, walked into the cloning chamber as soon as the door slid open. Waiting until the door was securely closed and locked behind him, the Sturmfuhrer turned his attention to the lead scientist, “How long until the memory process is complete?”

“Fifteen minutes, Sturmfuhrer!” The scientist responded.

“We might not have fifteen minutes,” The terrorist leader replied, the grimace on his face reflecting his anger at this news. “You have five minutes or...” Pulling his pistol, Merok warned in a low, dangerous tone, “I’m going to get a new lead scientist.”

“Yes...Sturmfuhrer...” The scientist stammered as he immediately went back to work on his console.

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"Dammit!" Nyota spat out as a green energy bolt slashed between her and Commander Hobson, bringing one of the Ekosian troopers to the deck screaming as he died. "They've got a frinxing disruptor cannon! Where the hell did they get a frinxing disruptor cannon?"

"Probably the same place they got all these damned hand phasers." Hobson deadpanned as he plastered himself to the side of the corridor, another green bolt just missing him.

"Flash grenade?" One of the Ekosian troopers asked as he produced one of the hockey puck shaped devices.

"Not going to work this time..." Nyota sighed, "They've got helmets with full face anti-glare visors." Taking a deep breath, she declared in a grim tone as she took the grenade launcher that she had slung earlier behind her back, "Only one way to take out that cannon and clear this corridor. It's the lowest yield grenade we've got, sir." She said as she loaded one of the round projectiles into the weapon's chamber. "Still...it'll kill everyone within a fifteen meter radius, trash that damned disruptor cannon, and knock those doors they're guarding clean apart."

"Agreed. But we've got to do this by the numbers, Lieutenant." Hobson affirmed before calling out to the terrorists, giving them one last chance to give up, "Attention! This is the only warning you will receive! Cease firing! Drop your weapons and march out into the corridor with your hands up and none of you will be hurt!"

In response, the corridor lit up with disruptor bolts as a young man shouted out, "Hail to the Fuhrer!"

"Well..." Lieutenant Dryer remarked in a grim voice, "Looks like we got our answer."

"Very well, Lieutenant Dryer..." Chris commanded in a cold voice as he received a confirming nod from his Ekosian liaison, "Kill the bastards."

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Hearing the tell tale sounds of a quick exchange of phaser fire and then silence, Ambassador Offenhouse asked, "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Liz responded in a hushed tone only to feel a tremendous weight lift when she heard a familiar voice calling out commands from the end of the corridor. Hearing the sound of footsteps approaching their position, the captain and her companions knelt down and aimed their weapons, ready to fire the moment a target appeared. Her finger on the trigger, Shelby breathed a sigh of relief as she recognized the gold and black clad form of her chief tactical officer. "Don't shoot!" She called out, her words intended for her compatriots just as much as for the rescue team taking defensive positions. "We're friendlies."

"Captain?" Manuele called out. "Is that you? Is everyone safe?"

"Yeah!" Shelby called back. "Anara and the Ambassador are with me and we're unhurt!"

"That's good news!" Lieutenant Atoa replied as he and his team moved forward to join their lost shipmates.

As Dr. Murakawa quickly ran a medical tricorder over the rescued officers, the captain instructed, addressing Anara and the security officers in Atoa's party, "Anara...I need you and the others to round up the prisoners we have and make sure the Ambassador gets back to the ship safe and sound. Dr. Murakawa, you go with them." Turning towards Atoa, Shelby declared, "We've got to get to Merok's office before that son of a bitch gets away."

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Rushing the Nazi redoubt, Nyota Dryer looked on at the destruction caused by the little photon grenade as her commanding officer, Commander Christopher Hobson, arrived on scene. "Damn." The ebony skinned security officer swore as her eyes took in two massive doors literally blown off their housings, while the disruptor cannon that had caused them such grief just moments ago had been reduced to nothing more than a few shreds of twisted metal. As the medic approached, Nyota waved him off, "Don't bother..." she said in a grim voice as she pointed at a set of shadowy figures on the wall, "That's all that's left of 'em."

"Let's keep our wits about us." Hobson urged in his usual nasal tone as he motioned forward with his hand. "Go."

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"This is the spot." Shelby declared as they neared the Sturmfuhrer's headquarters, surprised at the lack of guards at the entrance. "Looks like someone else got their attention."

"Probably Commander Hobson and his team." Manuele surmised. "Earlier we heard a large boom that I think might have come from one of these jewels." He smirked as he held up a photon grenade.

"Serves the bastards right." Liz spat out as the image of her fallen professor once again intruded on her consciousness. "Mr. Atoa..." She commanded, "...you're with me." Turning towards the Ekosian security officer, the captain further instructed, "Captain Lindos...you and the others cover us."

"Understood." Mere responded as the captain and her security chief crept forward into the corridor. Speaking softly, pointed towards a junction. "Ok, there's only one way in and that's straight ahead." Gritting her teeth, the captain turned towards her New Kauaian tactical officer, "You ready, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir." Manuele responded, the adrenaline pumping through the system. "Just give the word."

"Now! Liz whispered, the pair rushing through the door into the Sturmfuhrer's office.

"Looks like the rat's escaped." Manuele cursed as his eyes scanned the room.

"Maybe..." Liz replied dubiously, "...but I have a feeling..." she muttered as she walked over to the area that she had spied the first time she was in this office. "Ah!" The petite starship captain cried out triumphantly as she traced out the lining of the secret door with her fingers, "Here it is!" Shaking her head as she looked for a control panel, Shelby asked rhetorically, "Now...all we've got to do is get the damned thing open."

"Maybe Mere might have an idea." Manuele suggested as he motioned with his hand for the Ekosian security officer and the rest of her group to come into the room.

Entering the office, Mere looked about, "Merok sure knows how to live well." The raven haired Ekosian remarked, the contempt in her voice obvious to all.

"If my instincts are right..." Liz replied as she picked up an expensive looking vase, "...he's got some powerful people backing him up so that he could afford all his little toys." Hearing footsteps approaching, the captain held up a hand. "Shhh...company's coming." She whispered as she and the others crouched down behind the office furniture, ready to turn the entranceway to the office into an instant kill zone for anyone foolish enough to blunder into their trap. Listening closely as the footsteps and voices grew louder, a broad smile broke out on Shelby's face as she heard Hobson's nasal twang.

"Dryer...ready a flash grenade. On three..."

"Wait!" Elizabeth called out. "It's Captain Shelby."

"Captain?" Hobson's voice rang out, a mixture of suspicion and relief. "If that is you, come out slowly so that we can see you."

"All right, Commander, I'm coming out!" Liz shouted back as she emerged from the office with her hands up.

Seeing that it was in fact the captain standing before him, Hobson nodded his head, "It's good to see you again, Captain." Looking about and not spying Anara, the *Sutherland* first officer inquired, his normal nasal voice not able to completely hide his anxiety for the Deltan operations officer, "Where's Anara...and the Ambassador?"

"She's fine. They're both fine." Liz replied, a slight smile on her face as her senses picked up on the note of concern in her first officer's voice towards the Deltan operations officer. "I sent them back to safety."

Almost visibly sighing in relief, the normally stoic first officer then asked, his voice now taking on an almost acerbic quality. "Where is the leader of these 'Soldiers of Melakon'?"

"In here, I think." Liz, motioned with her hand as she went back into the office, followed rapidly behind by Manuele, Hobson, and Lieutenant Dryer. "There's a door over there..." She said, pointing towards the location of the secret door, "Unfortunately...I haven't been able to find a way in."

Taking her tricorder, Nyota scanned the door. “That’s a solid duranium door. It’ll take us hours to phaser our way through,” she concluded, shaking her head in dismay.

“Damned.” Liz cursed. “Well...” The captain said as she considered various options, “...if we can’t go through, then we need to look for a key. Someone like Merok is sure to leave a way out for himself in case something happens and he couldn’t get out by transporter...”

“Like the villain in a bad holonovel...” Manuele interjected with a grin.

“Exactly.” Shelby replied, nodding her head in assent.

The problem is...” Chris observed as he began feeling his way along the side corridor’s walls, “...the key might not be activated by touch—it could work via retinal scan or by a light signal...”

“Yeah...it could...but I don’t think so...” Liz demurred as she began to inspect the desk, picking object up and setting them down and feeling about the desk with her fingers. “I’m betting that there’s simple method—if nothing else as a fall back to the fall back.”

“I’ve found something!” Manuele called out as he pressed a recessed area of the wall to reveal a valve mechanism.

“So did I!” Liz grinned as her fingers rested on a small button located underneath the desk.

“It might not be a good idea to push that button, sir.” Chris warned as he approached the desk. “Assuming it is, in fact, an access button; it might be booby-trapped.”

“I agree, sir.” Manuele chimed in. “If Merok did use it to get that door opened, it makes sense that he’d make sure no one else could use it.”

“Good point, gentlemen.” Shelby conceded as she walked towards the valve that Atoa had discovered earlier. ““That’s our way in,” She said, turning the handle as the other two officers readied their weapons as, with a hiss of escaping air, the door slid open.

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Readying a stun grenade, Liz tossed it into the secret room the moment the door opened wide enough to admit it. “Now!” She shouted as the grenade went off, she and the others rushing into the room, phasers drawn and ready.

“What is it?” Manuele asked, spying an empty cylinder with two men wearing white lab coats slumped down, stunned, next to it.

“I’m not sure.” Hobson answered replied, “But whatever was in it was taken out not so long ago.” He noted as he pointed at the fluid that had still not drained out of the chamber as yet.

“Where’d they go?” Lieutenant Dryer asked as she and Manuele scanned the room looking for an alternative way out.

“I think I have an idea.” Liz replied glumly as she pointed at a transporter pad.

“Transporter console.” Atoa interjected as he examined the control console, “And...” he smiled, “...it seems the last coordinates are still in the system.”

“Could be a trap.” Chris pointed out, “We could end up materializing inside a cell or in the middle of a kill zone or in a wall.”

“Possibly.” Liz allowed, “But I don’t see as how we have a choice. But...” She smiled as her eyes fell upon the satchel containing photon grenades carried by Lieutenant Atoa, “...I think we can at least throw ‘em a little surprise.

Smiling slyly as his captain held out her hand, Manuele took out one of the little grenades, placing it in her hand. “Here you go, sir. You can set it for up to ten seconds by pushing here.” He instructed, pointing at one of two recessed buttons on the otherwise smooth service, “This button will...”

“Thanks, Manuele...” Shelby interrupted with a grin as she held the tiny explosive in her hand, “But I think I remember how to use one of these—it wasn’t that long ago that I was in security.”

Walking towards the transporter pad, the captain announced, “Ok...here’s the plan. After the grenade goes off, Manuele, I want you to transport me to the same coordinates.”

Interrupting, Commander Hobson cleared his throat, “Sir...”

"I know what you're about to say, Chris..." Shelby steamrolled, cutting off her executive officer, "But the answer is no—I've got to do this alone."

"Sir..." Hobson persisted, his icy veneer cracking as a pleading look appeared in his eyes, "Professor Davin was my friend too."

Pausing for several moments as she and her first officer silently looked into each other's eyes, Liz nodded her head slowly, sighing, "Very well, Commander Hobson...you can come along—we'll let the court-martials sort themselves out later."

"Thank you, Captain." Chris replied, a rare smile appearing on his face.

"Don't thank me yet, Commander." Liz answered back, a wry grin on her face, "By the time Admiral Ross gets through with us, we're both liable to be ensigns permanently assigned to waste disposal duty in a cargo freighter." Setting the delay to the maximum ten seconds, Liz placed the grenade on the pad, "Energize!" She ordered as Manuele operated the transporter controls, sending the tiny package on its way to its detonation.

"Well..." Liz quipped as she and Commander Hobson took their places on the transporter pad, "...our little present should have said hello by now." Addressing Manuele once again, the captain ordered, "Mr. Atoa, if you don't hear from us after ten minutes, I want you to return to the ship and report back to Admiral Ross."

"But sir..." The New Kauaian protested only to be silenced by Shelby's raised hand.

"No buts, Lieutenant. And no rescues." The captain emphasized, "If you don't hear from us, follow your orders and get back to the ship. Understood?"

"Aye, Sir." Manuele reluctantly acknowledged.

"Good." Liz replied as she and Commander Hobson drew their weapons, "Energize."

"Energizing." Lieutenant Atoa acknowledged as he activated the transporter controls, saying a silent prayer as the captain and first officer both dematerialized before him.

Turning towards her superior, Lieutenant Dryer asked, "What now, Manny?"

“Now...” Manuele replied laconically, “We wait.”

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Rematerializing in the empty room, both Shelby and Hobson noted with grim satisfaction the shadowy figures burnt on to the surrounding walls.

“Looks like Merok had a little greeting party set up for us.” Liz noted as she pointed with her weapon towards the closed door.

“So it would seem.” Hobson replied, nodding his head as he took position to the side of the door.

Seeing her first officer’s nod of the head, Liz moved to the other side of the door. Mouthing wordlessly a count to three, the captain pushed a button next to the door, guessing correctly that it was the door control. The door quickly sliding open, the two Starfleet officers stormed into the room.

“It’s all over, Merok!” Liz shouted, diving for cover as she stunned two of the terrorist’s lackey’s as her partner quickly moved to a flanking position behind a control console, a phaser beam barely missing him.

“Not yet, Captain,” The terrorist replied as he returned fire, causing both Starfleet officers to duck behind cover, giving the Sturmfuhrer the time he needed to dart out a back opening.

Spitting out a curse as the murderer of her old mentor took off, Liz pursued, Commander Hobson close on her heels. “This way!” The captain called out as she pointed down a lengthy corridor. “It’s the only way he could have gone.

“Right, sir!” Chris agreed, but then, placing a hand on his commanding officer’s shoulder, he advised, “But first...” Picking up what looked like a padd, the first officer tossed it down the corridor. Both officers shielding their eyes as a torrent of sparks erupted from where the padd landed, Hobson observed, “The deck’s electrified.”

Pointing at what looked like a locker, Liz flashed a sly grin, “I bet we’ll find what we need in these...” She said as, opening a locker, she found a pair of rubber boots on the bottom. Finding a similar pair in the adjacent locker, both officers quickly changed into the safety boots. “Good catch.” Shelby complimented as the pair resumed their pursuit.

"Thank you." Chris replied simply as they reached a closed door at the end of the corridor. "No sign of a lock or access panel." Hobson muttered, shaking his head.

"We'll burn our way through, then." Liz responded as she pulled the trigger of her phaser only to have nothing happen. "Hand me your weapon." She requested, taking Hobson's phaser and firing it at the door, only to find that it didn't work either. "Damned." Shelby cursed, "He must have activated a dampening field."

"We've come too far to be denied now." Chris remarked, his expressionless face barely hiding his growing frustration at not being able to catch the elusive terrorist.

"We're not done yet, Commander." Shelby declared as she looked carefully around the door. "I don't believe it!" She laughed, pointing at a small, almost imperceptible, imperfection on the far right side of the door. "It's a magnetic seal," She explained as she probed with her fingers, finding four tiny protrusions. "That's our way in!" She proclaimed triumphantly.

"Are you sure, Captain?" Hobson asked, "This looks to be far too convenient for my tastes."

"It could be a trap." Liz admitted, "But...I don't think we have a choice." Motioning for her first officer to take the other side, the captain pressed the protrusions simultaneously, a smug smile crossing her face as the door slid open. Rushing in, Liz and Hobson, seeing Merok and a hooded man making for what appeared to be a transporter pad, lunged at the pair. Catching Merok by his knees in a flying tackle, Shelby brought the Nazi leader down, the impact of his hand hitting the deck causing the Sturmfuhrer to loosen his grip on his slugthrower.

Striking quickly, Liz pried the weapon from the Nazi's grasp, sending it sliding across the floor. Her rage at the murder of her dear friend pouring out of her, Shelby pounded at the now prostrate Merok, striking him again and again.

His lunge missing his target, Hobson, picking himself from the floor, chased after the hooded figure, picking up the Merok's slugthrower in the process. Finally catching up to the hooded man, Chris cursed as the stranger disappeared in the transporter. Rushing to the control panel, the normally

stoic first officer uttered an especially vile oath as he saw that the destination coordinates had been erased this time.

Dejected at his failure and with slugthrower in hand, Chris retraced his steps back to where he had left the captain, expecting her and the terrorist leader to still be locked in their struggle only to watch in stunned amazement as his captain had the now helpless Merok down on the deck, ferociously beating him with her fists. "Captain!" The first officer vainly called out, his voice having no effect as Shelby drew her hand back for what Hobson knew was a killing stroke at Merok's windpipe. "Captain!" Chris called out even louder, finally getting Liz's attention just before she launched the fatal blow.

"He killed Ledron!" Shelby cried out, her face moist with tears, her hand hovering dangerously over the Nazi's windpipe.

"I know, Captain." Chris replied in a low, soft voice, "But this isn't the way." He said, gently shaking his head, "The Professor wouldn't want his death to be avenged. Not in this way. He wouldn't want you to throw away your career...your life...for someone like this."

Her hand wavering as she looked down on the cringing pathetic figure beneath her, the red haze slowly disappeared from Liz's eyes. "You're right, Chris. Thank you." Liz sobbed as she rose off Merok's prostrate form. "Take the bastard—he's all yours."

Exhaling in relief as Shelby rose to her feet; Hobson yanked the Nazi leader up. Ripping the Sturmfuhrer's shirt off of him, the *Sutherland* first officer bound the Nazi leader's hands behind his back with the torn fabric. "There's a transporter room at the end of the corridor." Chris remarked as he pushed Merok ahead of the pair. "The other man got away, I'm afraid, but we should be able to use it to beam back to the surface."

"It's all right, Commander." Liz consoled as she placed her hand on her first officer's shoulder, "The Ekosians will get him."

"I'm sure, Captain." Hobson answered back as he entered in the coordinates for the surface into the transporter console. Taking his place on the pad on the other side of Merok, the first officer asked as the transporter began the dematerialization process "I wonder who he was."

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“Melakon!” Liz gasped in astonishment, “Are you sure?” Shaking her head, the blonde captain chuckled wryly at the expression on her Vulcan science officer’s face, “No...forget I asked.” Her laughter disappearing, Liz continued in a much grimmer tone, “I only wish you were wrong.”

“DNA analysis from the fluid remnant in the chamber was conclusive.” The elderly Vulcan affirmed from his seat on the other side of the conference table. “It matches the genetic drift one would expect from cloning.” Pausing for a moment, Varok added, “The cloning technique was also very advanced—more advanced than one would think that the Ekosians would be able to develop on their own.”

Nodding her head slowly, Captain Shelby continued the Vulcan’s chain of thought, “I think we’re following similar lines here, Mr. Varok.” Turning to Manuele, she asked, “Mr. Atoa? Remember when I told you and Captain Lindos that Merok had to have something backing him?” As the tactical officer nodded his head, Liz addressed the officers at the table, “With this new information regarding this clone of Melakon, I think it’s safe to assume that we know who this backer is...”

“The Dominion.” Commander Hobson concluded as Shelby nodded her head.

“The Dominion isn’t the only power capable of advanced cloning.” Manuele pointed out. “The Orion Syndicate...the Romulans...even disgruntled groups within and without the Federation...all either have or are capable of obtaining such advanced cloning technology.” Pressing on, the New Kauaian argued, “Who’s to say that Merok and his people didn’t just buy it from the Ferengi?”

“You raise some good points, Lieutenant.” Ambassador Offenhause said, speaking for the first time, “But I’d have to go with Captain Shelby and Commander Hobson’s hunch.” Pausing for a moment to take a breath, the time displaced former businessman explained, “Ekos is too far away from the Romulan sphere of influence for them to want to really put out a whole lot of effort here. As for the Orions...” The ambassador continued, shaking his head, “...there’s no real gain for them here either.”

“What about the Ferengi?” Sam Lavelle asked, picking up for Lieutenant Atoa.

Nodding his head, the ambassador conceded, “Oh yes...the Ferengi would be more than willing to sell the technology to Merok and his people—provided they could afford it. But...” He demurred, raising his hand, “...it’s not just the technology...”

“It is also the trained personnel that are needed to successfully clone from DNA over one hundred years old.” Varok interjected, pointing out, “However, at this time we cannot prove Dominion involvement.”

Shaking his head somberly, Ambassador Offenhouse replied, “I concur, Mr. Varok. While I will state mine and the Captain and Commander Hobson’s suspicions concerning possible Dominion involvement, I’m afraid that will have little impact as regards Ekos’ status.”

“What do you mean?” Anara asked, speaking up for the first time.

Smiling beatifically at his temporary aide, the ambassador explained, “Until they show us they’ve gotten their Nazi problem under control, we can’t risk granting them full membership.” Shaking his head, Ralph continued somberly, “It’s as I expected. For years they’ve tried to deny the Nazis and how deeply they rooted themselves in Ekosian society rather than tackling them head on. Also, like it or not, Durkan and his people do have a point—the Ekosians have a large youth population that possesses deep feelings of alienation and rage—that has to be addressed before Ekos can even be considered for full Federation membership.”

“Have you informed the Ekosian Foreign Ministry as to your recommendations?” Captain Shelby asked.

Nodding his head, the ambassador responded, “Yes. As I expected, they didn’t take it at all well.”

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“This was just the response I was looking for!” Senator Durkan gloated as he took a sip of Ekosian nectar. “The leaking of the Federation ambassador’s recommendation against full membership for Ekos due to ‘internal political instability’ and stating that Ekos has to deal with the ‘still present influence of Nazism’ has both thoroughly discredited the Unionists and antagonized the Ekosian population.” Beaming, the senator stood up as he addressed the female Vorta sitting in the plush chair on the other side of his desk, “And now, I have to give my speech in which I will be sure to stress not only the arrogance of the Federation, but also its hypocrisy.”

“By pointing out that it was the Federation in the form of John Gill who introduced that ideology in the first place. Very nicely done...” The Vorta

praised as Durkan continued to enjoy his triumph. "But, there still seem to be some loose ends such as the possibility of either your agent Asil or Merok talking to the authorities" The Vorta qualified.

"Not to worry..." Durkan replied with a sly grin, "That has already been taken care of. Much as I hated to lose Asil, I'm afraid that she has died of a heart attack thanks to my other agent on the scene. And as for Merok...well, he was found hanging in his cell, apparently he decided to commit suicide rather than face up to his actions—courtesy of a few other agents of mine in the Security Service."

"Ah..." The Vorta explained, pleased with the senator's answer. "But there's still the question of the clone of Melakon—I'm not really sure why you need him as a rallying figure—you seem to be accomplishing that task quite well on your own."

Chuckling, the senator replied, "What better rallying figure can one ask for, my friend, than a martyr?"

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#### *24 Ekosian Hours Earlier*

"We'll take these people into custody now." Captain Mere Lindos of the Ekosian Security Service told Lieutenant Anara Rysyl as the Ekosian officer took charge of the captured terrorists.

"That one there..." Anara said, pointing to where Asil, stood, amongst the other prisoners, "Was Merok's deputy. You might want to keep a close eye on her."

"Thank you," Mere acknowledged with a grin as she motioned for the Ekosian security troopers to separate out the blonde woman from her fellow Nazis, "I'll take charge of her personally. Tell Manny..." The raven haired beauty requested with a warm smile on her face, "...that I'll be in touch with him tomorrow or so to set up our date."

Approaching Asil, the Ekosian captain took custody of her prisoner, checking her restraints, no one noticing as no one noticing as the barb in her ring penetrated the blonde Nazi's shirt, stinging the flesh as it injected its poison. "This way!" Mere directed, guiding her charge into the waiting vehicle and then, before entering her vehicle, she pressed a button on her wrist

communicator. Receiving an answering beep, Lindos pressed the same button again and then, entering her ground car, the Ekosian officer spoke to the car's computer, "Central Holding Facilities. Our work here is done."

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### *10 Ekosian Hours Earlier*

Ex-Sturmfuhrer Merok sat fuming in his cell. Betrayed by both his former allies, he decided that he would not go down alone. He would take Senator Durkan and his alien allies with him. Calling for the guard, Merok decided that now was as good a time as any to make his confession. The guard finally arriving, accompanied by another officer, Merok stood up. But, as his words formed on his lips, they were suddenly silenced as the first guard presented a stun pistol, firing it. Merok's last bitter thoughts consisting of but a single word, *Burn!*

A short time later, the leader of the 'Soldiers of Melakon', the man who was to lead Ekos to its glorious future, was dead, hanged from the neck, strangled by a noose made from his bed sheet, his death officially recorded as a suicide.

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Smiling warmly as he saw the image of the fountain near where they seated reflected in the eyes of his lovely dinner companion, Manuele, ignoring the glares sent in his direction by Ekosians seated at the other tables, quipped, "This is a lot better place than those tunnels."

Laughing gently, Mere, this time wearing, instead of her uniform, a striking dark blue evening gown with a plunging neckline decorated by a silver necklace, replied coyly, "I thought that you'd prefer having dinner out of doors underneath the stars."

"Well..." Manuele, wearing civilian clothes as well—a beige long sleeve shirt with puffed sleeves and brown trousers with brown half boots, remarked, "...you guessed right." Reminiscing for a moment, he said, "This place—the weather...the atmosphere...the stars...they sort of remind me of home."

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" Mere said, her foot gently grazing that of the New Kauaian's.

"Yes, it is," The New Kauaian answered back, readily agreeing as he reciprocated his partner's foot play.

"So..." The raven haired beauty said as she sipped her wine, "How long can you stay?"

"Not long," Atoa said with a sad shake of the head as a gentle lyric tune wafted through the breeze, "We're warping out tomorrow morning."

"Then..." Mere said as she stood up holding out her hand, "...we need to make the most of the time we have...dance with me?"

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As she entered the *Sutherland's* lounge, 'Rick's', Anara immediately spotted Ambassador Offenhouse sitting next to the piano, nursing his drink. Approaching him, she could hear him order the piano player to, "Play it again, Sam."

"Sam?" Anara asked, confused. "His name's not Sam. He's Alec Johannsen and he works in hydroponics." Addressing the piano player, Anara grinned, "Hi Alec."

"Hi yourself, Anara." The pianist grinned back as he played the tune that the ambassador requested, 'Time Goes By.'

Chuckling, Ralph downed his drink, and then pushed the glass forward for a refill. "I know. But that's what you're supposed to say in a place like this."

Shaking her head, Anara asked as the bartender set out her usual drink on the bar, a Trillian aurea, "What's going to happen to the Ekosians?"

"I don't know," Ralph replied honestly as he sipped his drink. "You caught the local news broadcasts?" As Anara nodded her head, the ambassador continued, "It doesn't look good. It's obvious Durkan has people high up—very high up—in the Foreign Ministry, that's the only way that report could have been leaked. And with the holes in the Security Service..." the ambassador concluded, shaking his head, "I doubt the leaker will ever be discovered."

"So..." Anara asked, "What can we do?"

"We'll do everything we can to keep Ekos engaged, of course..." Ralph replied, "...but with the Unionist Party now in tatters and the Restoration Party making massive gains thanks to what happened...I would expect Senator Durkan to call for a vote of no confidence in the Ekosian Assembly in the near future."

"Do you think they'll renounce their associate status, then?" Anara asked as she sipped her drink

"Yeah," The ambassador affirmed in a somber tone, "I think they will. And after that, we'll have no choice but to honor their decision—after all, it is their world."

"And then what?" Lieutenant Rysyl persisted.

Sighing, Ambassador Offenhouse finished his drink, "We'll strengthen our presence on Zeon while keeping the door open for the Ekosians. But..." the ambassador continued, stifling a yawn, "I'm afraid the Dominion...or whoever else is behind this...has won this round. Shaking his head, the time displaced diplomat concluded, "The coming days and months...maybe even years...are going to be very dangerous—for Ekos and the Federation. If we're going to get through them, we're going to have to be very sure of what we're doing because I don't think we're going to get too many do overs here."

"I fear you are right, sir," Anara agreed as the pair left the bar, "Still...I have faith..."

"Loan me some of yours then." The ambassador joked grimly as they walked down the corridor together, "Because I seem to be a little short at the moment."

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"Where's the captain?" Hobson, spotting his friend, Lieutenant Commander Jadon Tol, in the corridor, inquired in his usual nasal twang.

"She mentioned something about dancing and frinxing the night away in the holodeck," Jadon answered back with a laugh. Placing a hand on his friend's shoulder, the Trill engineer spoke in a low, earnest voice, "Chris...I'm glad Anara made it back safe and sound." Seeing his old shipmate's nod, the joined Trill continued to speak, now in a rare hesitating manner, "Look Chris...I

know you've been more than a little irritated at how I've been...flirting...with Anara..."

"Jadon..." Commander Hobson quickly interjected, "You don't have to apologize or explain anything to me. There's nothing going on between me and Lieutenant Rysyl. In any event, she's taken the Oath, so the whole 'flirting' issue is irrelevant..."

Chuckling, the worldly Trill answered back. "You're not fooling me, Chris. I've known you for too long and I've had five lifetimes of experiences—as both a male and a female—in this sort of thing. I just wanted to let you know that you've got nothing to worry about from me." Cracking a sly grin, the chief engineer jibed, "Besides, there are plenty of other 'treasures' in the sea."

A slight smile momentarily crossing his features, Hobson rejoined, "Thank you, Jadon—although, as I told you, there's nothing going on between the two of us."

"Whatever!" The jovial Trill exclaimed in a teasing voice as he walked away laughing. "I'll see you later!"

Shaking his head, Chris made his way to the holodeck feeling at least a little better than a few moments ago. But...there was still one more thing that needed to be taken care of...and talking to the captain would be the only way to resolve that issue—for both of them.

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Standing before the holodeck door, Hobson debated as to whether he should enter. The reserved first officer was a private person and as a rule preferred to respect the privacy of others. But, as his mind flew back to that moment in the Sturmfuhrer's hideout where he saw the captain, her rage overtaking her, poised to deal the death blow to the man who had killed their mentor and friend, Chris knew that he wanted to speak with her. He had to talk to her about that kindly, gentle old man. He knew that they both needed to grieve. The simple truth of the matter was, Hobson admitted to himself, that the Professor was right. The two of them needed each other. Just as she needed him in that hideout to pull her back from the brink, he needed her now so that he could feel. Making his decision, he ordered the door to open.

As the doors slid open, the commander was immediately assaulted by a cacophony of noises, sounds, and images. Allowing his eyes to adjust to the

gyrating shapes and strobe lights as his ears adjusted to the loud music, Chris eventually spotted his captain on the dance floor, her movements primal...almost animalistic...even predatory. The normally standoffish first officer stood mouth agape as he saw his captain, wearing a tight tiger striped minidress move about the dance floor, first rubbing sinuously against a leather clad man, and then doing the same to a woman wearing jeans and a tight halter top. Momentarily tempted to turn and leave, Hobson shook his head as he called out, "Captain?"

Pulled from her revels, Shelby snapped back, her voice dripping with anger and rage, "What? Who the hell is it?"

"It's me, Captain!" Chris called back, "We need to talk...about Professor Davin."

The name of her old professor once again snapping Liz out of her frenzy, Shelby took a deep breath, "Ok, Commander." Motioning to the balcony, she ordered, "Upstairs."

As he reached the second level, Chris noticed, much to his relief, that the loud music had lost a considerable amount of its volume. "Over here..." Shelby said, pointing to an empty booth. Then, sitting down, she handed her first officer a drink. Taking out a pack of cigarettes from her purse, she lit one up as she sipped her drink. "The booze is real..." The captain warned, an amused grin on her face at the surprised look on Hobson's face after he had taken a tentative sip, "...everything else is fake." Exhaling a steady stream of smoke, the expression on the blonde captain's face changed to one of great sadness as she placed one of her hands over that of her first officer's, "Ok, Chris. Let's talk about the Professor...I think I'd like that."

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After bidding Manuele a sleepy good-bye, Mere withdrew back to her sleeping quarters. Looking down at the recently occupied messed up bed; a warm smile crossed the dark haired Ekosian woman's face. Turning towards her vanity, Mere sat down and took out a circular object approximately the size of a makeup compact. Opening the compact, The Ekosian security officer spoke, "Open Channel 'D'."

Moments later, an image of a distinguished looking mahogany skinned man appeared wearing the uniform of a Starfleet admiral. "How did it go, Mere?" Admiral Samson Glover asked of his ace intelligence operative.

"It's a mixed bag, I'm afraid." Mere reported back. "I can personally confirm that we are looking at Dominion involvement here—I got a look at the Vorta pulling Durkan's strings myself. We also got the Ambassador and the others back safe and sound—although, to be honest..." her lips turned up into a wry grin, "...Captain Shelby and Lieutenant Rysyl did a pretty good job getting out on their own..."

"Still..." The Admiral pointed out, "...they wouldn't have made it out without your help or that of the rescue teams." After a momentary pause, Samson urged, "Go on with your report..."

Sighing, Mere continued her narrative, "While we got our people out ok, unfortunately I wasn't able to keep either Asil or Merok alive."

"What's the story on them?" Glover inquired as he took a sip of coffee.

"I didn't have a choice but to carry out the sanction on Asil." Mere declared flatly. "Durkan personally ordered me to do it—if I didn't, I would have risked blowing my cover."

"It was a hard call, my dear..." the admiral remarked consolingly, "...and for what it's worth, I think you made the right decision." Taking a deep breath, he then asked, "What about Merok—I thought he was in a special security lockdown."

"He was." Mere confirmed. "He was in isolation and with supposedly politically reliable guards. Unfortunately..."

"Durkan found a way to get to him." Samson completed, his lips turning down into a frown. "That's too bad. His testimony in an open court or in a publicized confession would have proved invaluable—the good Senator must have had a fit when he discovered that Shelby and Hobson had taken him alive."

"He did." Mere chuckled, but then her laughter suddenly vanished, "For all of three seconds. Then he began making plans." Her expression taking on a grim tone, the intelligence operative warned, "Don't make the mistake of underestimating him, sir. He's capable and he's ruthless."

"A dangerous combination." Glover agreed with an equally somber expression as Mere continued her report.

“We also have another complication...” Mere began, pausing for a moment to catch her breath, “...we found a cloning chamber in Merok’s hideout. DNA analysis confirms that they were cloning Melakon...”

“Melakon?” The Admiral gasped; a look of astonishment on his face, “Now that’s an unwelcome name from the past if ever I heard one.”

“Right.” Mere agreed. “Durkan has apparently gotten to him—I’m not sure what the Senator has planned for him yet, though.”

“You need to find out.” Samson directed, “Whatever it is...it can’t be good. You’ll also might have to be ready to carry out either an extraction—or a sanction—if need be.”

“I understand, sir.” Mere acknowledged, “You realize that my cover will most likely definitely be blown here.”

“I know.” Glover replied, giving the young woman a grandfatherly smile, “I know it hasn’t been easy for you Mere. I can’t imagine doing what you’re doing—being a triple agent. Young lady—you’ve got guts to spare.”

Mere answered back with a snort, “More like I’m incredibly stupid...”

“I think that’s a job requirement for all of us going into this business...” Samson retorted with a slight chuckle of his own. “Still...” he asked, his expression taking on a much more serious aspect, “...do you understand why I might need you to do this?”

“Yeah.” Mere answered back equally solemnly. “We can’t have Melakon acting as either a rallying figure for Durkan’s movement—or as a martyr. I’ll do what I have to.”

“I know you will.” Samson replied confidently. Sighing, he concluded the conversation. “Don’t worry, Mere. Durkan and the Dominion might have won this round—but the bout’s not over yet. Just keep your chin down and your guard up.”

“I will...” Mere responded with a grin, “...and you do the same.”

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Shaking her head in sadness as she watched Senator Durkan's speech and the crowd of young Ekosians chanting, *For Ekos! No...No...No...Federation...No...No...No...Zeon!* in loud voices as they pushed against the police barricades, cheering their new spokesman; Daras sighed, grieving for her people. Tears rolling down her cheeks as her attendant helped her into her bed, the elderly Ekosian icon remained silent until after her attendant had left. Turning her head to the side, Daras saw the shades of her dead husband, Eneg, and the Zeon, Isak. "I'm sorry, my husband...my friend. I tried...I truly did...to realize our dreams—but I failed." Tears rolling down her cheeks, she continued her apology, "I failed you and I failed our people." Sighing, she looked up at the ceiling, "Now...I fear for the future..."

Her breath coming slower and shallower, Daras closed her eyes, passing into sleep one last time. Soon, her chest rose and fell for the last time, Ekos' living icon alive no more—her dream unfulfilled as the ghosts from the past resurfaced to once again unleash their hate.

**The End**