

"TANGLED WEB PART THREE"

Lieutenant Tom Paris hauled back on the stick, his X-Wing swinging up along the side of the asteroid. The proximity alarm shrieked at him, protesting his skimming the massive rock less than a two meters above the surface. He knew it was risky, but his adversary would be foolish to follow him.

Unfortunately, according to his rear-looking sensors, his opponent was that foolish. Paris frowned, calling up a more detailed analysis. Not only was his foe following him, he was doing so just a quarter of a meter above the asteroid's surface.

"Show-off," Paris grumbled, stamping on the etheric rudder.

His X-Wing suddenly dropped its wings toward the asteroid's surface and Paris shoved the stick away from him as hard as he could. With the fighter's new orientation, it was screaming down toward Paris' adversary. He immediately set the laser cannons to quad fire and squeezed the trigger. Four crimson laser bolts lanced through the vacuum, spattering on the other fighter's shields. His opponent immediately dodged out of the way, soaring away from the asteroid as quickly as he could. Paris smiled grimly. Now it was his turn.

With a quick jerk on the stick, Paris quickly dropped in behind his opponent. The other pilot juked and jimmied, desperately trying to keep out of Paris' sights. Unfortunately, it was working. Paris fired off a few shots that he knew would miss. He was merely hoping to rattle his opponent a little. Much to his surprise, one of the hits actually caused the other fighter's shield to flash. He must have grazed it.

"Okay, fine," he grumbled, switching to advanced concussion missiles and setting them for dual fire. "Maybe this will help."

The advanced concussion missile, while not as powerful as the other munitions at Paris' disposal, had a much better homing system. Even with the other fighter's attempt to dodge, the missiles would be able to lock on faster and track the fighter better.

Sure enough, the aiming reticle turned from a flashing yellow to a solid red, his astromech droid's acquisition tone blaring in his ears. He gently squeezed the trigger, two missiles blasting from his X-Wing on a tongue of orange flame. The other fighter immediately dove into a quick corkscrew maneuver, urgently attempting to break the lock. Paris smiled as the two missiles exploded against the shields. He glanced at the sensors, grinning wickedly. The other fighter's shields were down to fourteen percent. If he could hit him a few more times, it would be over.

Paris dove after his opponent, lasers firing indiscriminately. A few of the shots actually managed to hit the shields, shaving off a few more percentage points. Apparently the other pilot wanted to dodge asteroids again, for the other fighter dove for one of the bigger ones. Paris smiled to himself. This was going to be fun. He opened up his throttle, trying to close the distance.

Suddenly, though, the other fighter came to a dead halt. Before Paris could react, his fighter shot past his opponent. Paris bit off a bitter curse, continuing toward the asteroid as quickly as he could. He immediately switched his shields to full power behind. Sure, he may suffer some damage from micro-meteorites, but that would be nothing compared to what that other fighter could do.

Within seconds, Paris was skimming the surface of the asteroid, trying desperately to find some cover. Off in the distance, he saw what looked like a large canyon that snaked along the asteroid's skin. Paris immediately dove for it, dropping into the ravine. He shuddered slightly when he saw

how close the walls were, but he had little choice. Besides, his opponent's shields were still pretty weak. It was possible that his foe might make a mistake and ram into the sides.

Paris noticed a natural bridge over the canyon. The small area underneath was barely big enough for his fighter to squeeze through. Only a truly insane person would try to pass under it. Paris grimaced. Only an insane person....or someone being chased. Sucking in a deep breath, Paris dove for the opening.

Without warning, the threat alarm erupted in the cockpit and his astromech droid started screaming at him. Paris quickly glanced at his sensors and was horrified to see a proton torpedo screaming across the void towards his fighter. Unfortunately, he couldn't drop closer to the asteroid or dodge to either side. He definitely wasn't going to leave the canyon. That would be exactly what his opponent would want. He gritted his teeth, hoping that his shields would hold.

Much to his relief, the blue torpedo shot past him, flashing by over his cockpit. Paris gasped, surprised. There was no reason for his opponent to miss like that. For a split second, he turned back to the other fighter and laughed.

"You missed!" he taunted.

Much to his surprise, his opponent replied, "No, I didn't."

Paris whipped around, his eyes growing wide when he saw the torpedo explode against the natural bridge. It disintegrated in a large burst of flame, throwing debris in all directions. At first, his fighter was pelted with small pebbles which merely caused the X-Wing to rock back and forth. Those were followed by bigger and bigger rocks, and as they struck the ship, damage alarms erupted throughout the cockpit. Paris tried to keep track of them all, but he was failing rapidly. Laser cannons, torpedo launchers, guidance, hyper-engines, everything was damaged and going off-line. One boulder even obliterated his astromech droid. Paris fought with the controls, hoping that maybe he could complete the maneuver and find a place to hide while the systems came back on line.

Before he could even make it through the explosion, a large piece of rock smashed into one of his S-foils, knocking the ship off-course. A cry of surprise caught in Paris' throat as the ship whipped around. Paris groaned as he watched the walls of the canyon rush toward him.

"Sithspawn!" he muttered as the fighter collided with the rock wall.

His entire world went dark. Paris groaned and let go of the controls, leaning back in his chair with a frustrated moan. He closed his eyes, tired, and rubbed them.

"Computer!" he called out. "End program."

The darkness quickly faded away, replaced with the bright interior of a holosuite. The suspension field slowly lowered him and released him a safe distance from the floor. Paris dropped down and dusted himself off, trying to smooth out the wrinkles on his orange flight suit.

"Told you you couldn't beat me, Paris," a voice teased from behind him.

"Shut up, Horn," Paris growled, turning to glare at his opponent.

Lieutenant Corran Horn smiled broadly. "When are you going to learn? I'm the best fighter jockey Rogue Squadron has!"

Paris stared daggers at the other man and started for the door. Corran laughed to himself and started after the younger man. He wasn't quite done harassing him yet.

Chief O'Brien sighed heavily as he sank down on one of the barstools. It had been a long day. Three Thyferran freighters had arrived at the station today, all of them severely damaged. Apparently they had been jumped by pirates in the Anoat system and Deep Space Nine was the closest station they could reach safely. Not that O'Brien minded being a safe haven for people in

trouble. The problem was that he usually wound up fixing the ships of those people. That meant work for him.

"Need a friend to listen, Chief?" a voice asked casually.

O'Brien turned and smiled when he saw Commander Wedge Antilles standing near his stool. O'Brien motioned for the pilot to join him. As he sat, Wedge nodded to one of the Ferengi bartenders.

"Whyren's Reserve for me and a scotch for the Chief," he said.

As the waiter retrieved the drinks, Wedge patted O'Brien on the back.

"I saw the Thyferran freighters. Pretty beat up," he commented. "How long did it take you to fix them?"

"Six hours," O'Brien groaned. "Six bloody hours. I could have had it done in three, but one of them was just the whiniest little thing you've ever seen. Insisted that I use pure Hapan dilithium crystals and wanted them for regular price. As if I had Hapan crystals to begin with!"

"You could have tried to trade him for some of the bacta they were hauling. I bet Dr. Bashir would have appreciated that," Wedge pointed out.

O'Brien shrugged and replied, "Maybe. I just used regular crystals and pretended they were Hapan. Hopefully that person won't notice the difference."

Wedge smiled. He turned, though, as someone stomped down the stairs from the holosuites. Paris was carrying his flight helmet under his arm, a scowl twisted on his face. O'Brien supposed that meant that Corran Horn won again. Sure enough, Horn was hot on Paris' heels, a triumphant smirk plastered on his lips.

"Come on, Paris, admit it! You weren't ready for that move I put on you!" Horn taunted.

"Yeah, well, you're just lucky I didn't pop off another two concussion missiles while I had the chance. I figured I'd give you a break," Paris said without turning around.

Paris continued on and stormed out of the bar, Horn jogging after him. O'Brien finally turned back to Wedge.

"That's what, the fifth time this week those two have been at it in the holosuite?" he asked.

Wedge shrugged and corrected, "Six, by my count."

"Why do you let them do it? I mean, isn't that rivalry bad for them?" O'Brien asked.

Wedge shook his head and replied, "Not really. I had Emtrey crunch the numbers. For every ten sessions that Paris and Horn spend in the holosuite killing each other, their record improves by three kills. It's good training for them."

There was a familiar clanking behind them and O'Brien heard Wedge groan quietly. The Chief couldn't help but smile. All of the officers could recognize M3PO, Rogue Squadron's protocol droid, just by his footsteps. Thankfully, Emtrey, as he was called, didn't bother most officers, just Wedge. The two humans swiveled around on their stools to face the droid. Emtrey was an oddity, to say the least. He had been cobbled together years ago, using the body of a regular protocol droid but with the clam-shell head of a flight control droid. His programming was a hodgepodge as well. One minute, Emtrey would be a prissy stickler for all sorts of military codes and regulations. The next, he could scrounge with the best Ferengi there were. O'Brien almost wished that the droid would get damaged somehow, just so he could get the chance to pull him apart and see what made him tick.

"What is it, Emtrey?" Wedge asked, forcing his face to remain passive.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but there seems to be a bit of a problem with tomorrow's flight roster. You see, Lieutenant Paris and Flight Officer Sei'lar desired to change patrol schedules, but

Flight Officer Sei'lar forgot about her leave of absence to Bothawui! Now Lieutenant Paris is trying to find....."

Wedge held up his hand, cutting off the black protocol droid before it could continue. "All right, all right! We'll go to my office and straighten all of this out."

O'Brien gave Wedge's shoulder a friendly pat as the younger man downed the rest of his drink.

"Duty calls," Wedge grumbled as he got up and left the bar, Emtrey following in his wake.

O'Brien hoisted his glass in a silent toast and downed the rest of it.

Quark, the owner of the bar, watched all of the activity from a shadowed alcove. He couldn't help but smile to himself. Although he would never admit it in public, he was glad that the United Republic had driven the Dominion back through the Maw Wormhole. Quark's bar had been open when the Dominion occupied Deep Space Nine (or Terroc Nor, as they called it then). He had seen all sorts of Moffs and Admirals pass through on their way to Coruscant or Byss or some other world in the Gamma Quadrant. Grand Moff Dukat stopped in weekly to use the holosuites, maybe even try his hand at sabbac. At the same time, though, the Dominion were a horrendous lot. While Emperor Palpatine pretended to have the good of the galaxy in mind, everyone knew that he secretly hated women and aliens. Most of the systems that had been added to the Dominion since Palpatine dissolved the Senate had been through brute force and coercion. When the Dominion had controlled Deep Space Nine, there were armed stormtroopers everywhere. The oppressive, militaristic atmosphere destroyed the festive spirit in his bar, and that meant that Quark's profits had suffered as well. Now, with the United Republic, people were more relaxed and Quark's coffers were overflowing with latinum once again.

While all that was true, however, Quark couldn't admit to being happy with the current administration. That just wasn't done. Every Ferengi's bottom line was the same: profit. It didn't matter who the Ferengi got the latinum from, just so long as it was real. Ethics, personality, even personal hygiene didn't enter into the picture. Quark had made a meager profit under the Dominion, and so he didn't choose sides in the conflict.

With a sigh, he pulled out a data PADD and glanced at the cargo manifest. A Ferengi Marauder had just docked with the station and off-loaded supplies for bar. As usual, the order wasn't correct. Quark shook his head, his head already beginning to throb with pain. He knew he should sever his business relationship with his Paklit supplier, but the fool's prices were ridiculously low. This time, the moron had sent him 10,000 kell dragon steaks instead of the three cases of Whyren's Reserve and twenty bottles of Romulan Ale he had ordered. He had mistaken bar glasses for six broken hyperdrive motivators. Quark groaned. It would take at least three days to sort through all of this. He might as well get started now.

Quark quickly made his way through the Promenade. Aliens and humans of all sorts were looking over the shops. Corellians, Sullustans, Twi'leks, even a few Hapans wandered through the boutiques. The Promenade boasted just about any kind of shop imaginable. It was possible to find just about everything at Deep Space Nine, both legal and illegal. Some of the shops on the Promenade were mere fronts for criminal organizations: Black Sun, the Orion Syndicate, just to name a few. A faint smile played on Quark's lips. True, he wasn't involved with every underground activity on the station, but he at least knew about every one of them.

His eyes inadvertently darted to the Constable's office. Thankfully, Odo wasn't there. The mere sight of the Constable was enough to make Quark nervous. It seemed like every time he turned around, Odo was there. For most people, the fact that Odo was a Changeling was enough to make

most people anxious. Just the mention of the Emperor's lieutenants could frighten people in the United Republic. The evil deeds of the Changelings were legendary. People who saw Odo with his impossibly smooth facial features and detached coolness couldn't help but think of his people.

Quark had a different reason to fear Odo. He and the Constable had something of a running feud between them. Quark attempted to hide his underhanded dealings while the Changeling tried desperately to catch him at it. So far, Odo had managed to thwart a good number of Quark's schemes, but the Constable had never found solid evidence against the Ferengi. It was almost fun, but it kept Quark looking over his shoulder constantly. Just once it would be nice for one of his less than honest ventures to work out without any interference from the Station's Constable.

Within a few minutes, Quark entered cargo bay three and groaned to himself. There had to be at least one hundred crates from him to inspect. He paused for a second, absorbing the sight. It would take him a good twelve hours to check every box. Finally, he rolled up his sleeves. He didn't expect to get back to his quarters any time soon.

Captain Benjamin Sisko stared out the window of his office, tossing his baseball between his hands. He hated slow times like this. Nothing serious had happened in the surrounding ten sectors for over three months. Absolutely nothing. He had hoped that maybe the Cardassians would try something again. While they were supposedly loyal sons of the Dominion, Sisko knew that they would do anything they could to annoy the United Republic. Just six months ago, a Victory-class Star Destroyer had dashed across the Cardassians' border to harass United Republic convoys. Starfleet eventually was able to destroy it, but not before the Cardassians had obliterated six different convoys.

Sisko heaved himself out of his chair, walking to the windows. A myriad of stars shone back at him. His jaw tightened. Out there, among those stars, his life had been changed irrevocably. He could remember the battle at Wolfe 359 like it was yesterday. After Grand Moff Dukat destroyed Alderaan, he had started for Earth. Starfleet organized an ambush at Wolfe 359. They had mustered thirty starships, from Mon Calamari cruisers to state of the art Excelsior class vessels. They had even found two Interdictor cruisers to pull the massive space station out of warp. It was thought that their fleet would be enough to destroy the Death Star. That proved wrong. The Death Star was armed to the teeth. It even turned its massive trilitium laser on the attacking ships. To make matters worse, Darth Vader had tortured Jean-Luc Picard and gained classified Starfleet codes that allowed the Dominion to take command of the ships themselves. It had been wholesale slaughter. A lot of good officers died that day. So did someone more important to Sisko than anyone else.

"Jennifer...." he whispered quietly.

His wife, Jennifer, had died at Wolfe 359 as well. Sisko had tried to save her, but she had been pinned beneath a support girder in the ship's mess. He had barely escaped with Jake, his son. The last thing he had seen as the escape pod rocketed away from the doomed ship was the Death Star's green trilitium weapon stabbing through to the warp core, causing a massive explosion.

Thankfully, the Death Star had been destroyed, and Sisko's career moved on. He had been assigned to the Utopia Planitia shipyards for several years. There he worked with Verpine and Mon Calamari technicians, building the United Republic's fleet. Finally, when Starfleet had finally driven the Dominion back through the Maw Wormhole and taken Terroc Nor, Sisko was assigned as station commander.

It hadn't been easy. The Bajorans, who had been under the Cardassians' heel for many, many years, were wary of anyone claiming to be a friend, especially when that "friend" was establishing a

military presence on Deep Space Nine. They especially didn't appreciate the fact that Rogue Squadron had been stationed there either. The idea of having twelve of the best X-Wing pilots in the United Republic hanging over their heads made most of the Bajorans nervous. At first, Sisko had agreed with the Bajorans. It was too much too fast. Eventually, though, Sisko understood the necessity of having Wedge Antilles and his fighter jocks on the station. The first time a whole wing of TIE Fighters streamed out of the wormhole on a reprisal raid, Wedge scrambled his fighters in record time. Rogue Squadron had lost two pilots, but they had killed most of the TIEs. It was incredible. Rogue Squadron's record had improved even more with the addition of the *Defiant*, their support ship. Within six months of his being stationed there, Sisko had to grudgingly admit that he had found a new home.

He closed his eyes painfully. Even though his life had regained some of its previous sanity, he still felt empty. It wasn't just the loss of his wife. There was something more. The Bajorans seemed to find peace through their religion. Instead of believing in the Force, like most of the Galaxy, they believed in strange beings called the Prophets who supposedly lived in the Maw Wormhole. Sisko had never met the Prophets himself. He didn't really know if they existed or not, but he almost wished that he had a similar belief. Maybe then all of this pain would make sense.

A chime sliced through his reverie like a laser bolt. He jumped slightly, turning to the door. "Come!" he barked.

The doors hissed open and Major Kira stepped through. The diminutive Bajoran woman was the liaison officer to the Station and acted as Sisko's first officer. It had been hard adjusting to her brash and somewhat stand-offish attitude when he first arrived at the station, but their working styles eventually meshed together. They were like a well-lubed machine. She smiled warmly and handed him a PADD.

"This week's performance report," she said. "Nothing special worth noting."

Sisko took the PADD and carelessly dropped it on the desk. He turned back to the window, saying, "Thank you, Major."

Kira frowned, scrutinizing Sisko's face carefully. "Are you all right, Captain?"

Sisko turned back to the Bajoran woman and smiled weakly. "Yes, Nerys. Everything is fine."

The expression on Kira's face told Sisko that she didn't believe him, but she mercifully let it go. With a quick nod, she turned and left the officer. Sisko finally sat down at his desk and picked up the PADD, glancing over the screen quickly. Like Kira had said, nothing had happened over the past week. He groaned, frustrated. He really wished that something would happen. Something that would make his life worthwhile. Just.....something.

Quark snarled to himself. As soon as he was done here, he would hire a bounty hunter to kill his supplier. Stupidity like this deserved death. Not only did the Paklit send him the wrong order, the content of half the crates didn't match the cargo manifest. To make matters worse, none of it was stuff he could use. Well, that wasn't entirely true. If he were opening a land speeder air conditioning repair shop somewhere in the Hoth system, he would be set.

"Let's see," Quark muttered to himself, glancing at the cargo manifest. "Crate number thirty-seven delta. Fifty self-locking stembolts."

Quark scanned the rows of crates, frowning. This job would have been going by much quicker if the DaiMon's crew had unloaded the cargo in any semblance of order. Unfortunately, they had just thrown it in the cargo bay and warped out of the sector. Quark not only had to try to deal with the wrong orders, he had to sort through poorly stacked crates to do it.

He finally spotted crate 37D out of the corner of his eye. Something struck him as wrong. Although he didn't have any idea what a self-locking stembolt was, he knew that fifty of them would require a much smaller crate than the one sitting before him. Not only that, but the crate had at least five different security locks, sealing it shut tightly. Quark frowned. Nothing that he had ordered would require that much security. He could already feel his lobes begin to tingle. Whatever was in that crate, it was valuable. Maybe he could arrange for the contents to disappear into Black Sun or the Orion Syndicate for a hefty profit.

"Let's see here," Quark said to himself, taking a closer look at the locks on the crate. He could probably pick two of the locks, maybe three if he were really lucky. The last two, however, would require a delicate touch. Unfortunately, there was only one person on the station with enough ingenuity to pick those locks and be trusted.

"Hello, brother!" Rom shouted as he bounded into the cargo bay.

Quark shut his eyes, already regretting calling Rom. His brother had no sense of profit, had a somewhat annoying personality, and worst of all, was married to a Bajoran female who refused to stay home and naked, like the wife of a Ferengi should. Worst of all, Rom actually enjoyed working with Starfleet. Rather than remaining neutral in the war, Rom had chosen sides. Unfortunately, in spite of all of these failings, he was the only one on the station that Quark could trust to open the crate.

"Think you can spring these locks?" Quark asked, jerking a thumb towards the crate.

Rom looked them over, muttering incomprehensible technical terms to himself in his irritating low, hollow voice. Finally, he nodded.

"I think so," Rom said, shrugging. "Why? Don't you have the security codes?"

Quark hesitated for a second. Rom's loyalty to Starfleet also translated into loyalty to the station's personnel. If he found out that Quark was trying to break into the crate, Rom might just report him to Odo. On the other hand, even though Rom wasn't all that intelligent, he wasn't exactly stupid either. Rom could see through his brother's lies with amazing accuracy. Finally, Quark decided to go for the middle road.

"Look, can you?" Quark demanded, hoping that Rom wouldn't persist in asking for the security codes.

Rom nodded and opened his tool case. He quickly selected one of the instruments and attacked the locks with a quiet concentration that frightened Quark. He had only seen the look on Rom's face on other Ferengi, and it was usually when they had their business associates in a corner and were going in for the kill. With a speed that impressed Quark, all five locks clicked open within ten minutes. Rom turned back to Quark and gave him a toothy, triumphant smile. Quark didn't say a word but slid the cover off of the crate.

Quark's breath caught in his throat. He stared at the contents of the crate for what seemed like an eternity before he finally managed to suck in a breath. With trembling hands, he reached inside and pulled out a laser rifle that looked to be in immaculate condition. Quark had seen rifles like these before. They were always in the hands of stormtroopers. From the looks of things, there were enough weapons here to arm a whole squad and have enough left over for extras.

"Brother?" Rom asked, a nervous twinge in his voice.

Quark turned around, his eyes wide in shock. That was when the noise reached his ears. It was almost like a gurgle of water, but much louder. The Ferengi's eyes darted around the cargo bay in time to see one of the crates begin to melt and turn gelatinous. Quark shut his eyes and groaned.

Within seconds, the crate had changed shape and Constable Odo stood before them, a smirk on his lips.

"Planning an insurrection, Quark?" Odo asked smugly with his gravelly voice. "Maybe we should discuss your plans with Captain Sisko."

Quark squirmed in his chair, trying hard not to look at Sisko directly. The station commander's dark eyes made that very difficult. Finally, Sisko sighed, but from Quark's perspective, it sounded like the growl of a predatory animal.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly, Mr. Quark," Sisko started in a very low voice. "You claim that these weapons you found were not purchased by you and were delivered here by mistake?"

Quark nodded, finally looking Sisko in the eyes. "That's right, Captain. You can blame this on my supplier."

"That part checks out," Odo confirmed from where he was leaning against the wall. Odo's presence in the office really wasn't necessary, but he enjoyed watching Quark squirm. "I was able to contact three other clients of the Paklit. Apparently he has trouble keeping orders straight."

"Besides, Captain, would I have Rom come and open the crate if I was trying to hide the contents?" Quark pointed out.

A sharp look from Sisko silenced the Ferengi. Quark slumped down in his chair, trying not to present too large of a target. The Captain glared at Quark for what seemed like an agonizing eternity, then nodded toward the door.

"Get out of here, Quark," Sisko snarled. "I strongly suggest that you don't order anything from the Paklit again."

Quark nodded and quickly escaped the office. As he did, he almost collided with Lieutenant Horn. The human quickly stepped out of the way, allowing Quark to blow by him. Horn stepped into the office, followed by Whistler, his astromech droid. As they entered, Odo nodded to Corran, who smiled back.

"I had Whistler slice through the cargo manifests," Corran explained, patting the domed head of the R2 unit. "Like you thought, it wasn't a mistake. Whoever ordered the weapons had them routed through a dozen different systems, but they didn't want them to go any farther than here."

Sisko nodded grimly. He almost wanted to smile. Corran and Whistler had worked with Corellian Security Force for years before they joined Rogue Squadron. Corran had an innate knack for dealing with criminals, and while Odo normally didn't like having non-security personnel working with him, he allowed Corran to help every now and then. His insights usually proved helpful.

"Do you have any idea where the weapons came from originally?" Sisko asked.

"Toreska Prime," Wedge said, nodding to the hologram. "It's deep within the Coal Sack, which means that it's in the heart of the Orion Syndicate's space. There's a small station in orbit around the planet."

The hologram of the dim dwarf star refocused, showing a small station hanging in space.

"As near as we can tell, the station has a minimal defensive array. Maybe two turbolaser batteries, an advanced concussion missile launcher, and a few fighters," Wedge explained.

Wedge looked over the pilots of Rogue Squadron. They were an eclectic bunch, drawn from various species from every corner of the Galaxy. There was Corran Horn and Tom Paris, two of the best pilots in the United Republic. Even though there was an intense rivalry between the two,

they never let that interfere with their professionalism. That was why Wedge had assigned them as the leaders for Two and Three Flights. Their backgrounds couldn't be more different. Corran Horn was born and raised CorSec. He had been one of their top agents, dedicated to bringing in all sorts of criminals. At one time, that would have included all the people in Rogue Squadron as well. Unfortunately, Corran had to flee from Corellia before a Dominion liaison officer, Kirtan Loor, arrested him. Eventually, Corran fell in with the Rogues and had become a valued member.

Whereas Corran Horn was the epitome of a law-abiding citizen, Tom Paris at one time had been anything but. His father was the infamous Admiral Paris, one of the early heroes of the Rebellion. He had helped lay the groundwork for the New United Republic of Planets, rallying the troops and leading them into countless victories. Tom was expected to live up to his father's reputation, and that was more difficult than it had seemed. He wound up rebelling on his own. Instead of holding up Admiral Paris' high ideals, Tom threw in with the Maquis, a group of radical terrorists who took the ideals that the Rebellion fought for to the extreme. Whereas the Rebellion had limited their attacks to military targets, the Maquis were willing to attack civilians. Whenever they could, the Rebellion had arrested members of the Maquis. That had happened to Tom. He was captured on his first mission, sent to a penal colony. Eventually, when the shooting war had quieted down, Wedge approached the imprisoned Paris with the option of joining Rogue Squadron. It proved to be a wise decision for both of them. Tom Paris was able to make a name for himself away from his father's and Rogue Squadron received one of the best pilots Wedge had ever seen.

The other members of Rogue Squadron had stories just as compelling. There was Nawara Ven, the Twi'lek lawyer who had joined the Squadron to bring justice to the Dominion outside the courts. Ooryl Qrygg, an insect-like Gand, was there to strike a blow against the xenophobic Dominion. Gavin Darklighter had joined because of his family. His cousin, Biggs, had died destroying the Death Star. Asyr Sei'lar the Bothan, Erisi Dlarit the Thyferran, Nog the Ferengi, Thomas Riker the "transporter clone," they all had something to prove. Each of the twelve pilots were superior in their own way.

Paris raised his hand. "Commander, how accurate is that estimate of their defenses? I mean, if this is a major smuggling den, you would think that they would want to protect it."

Tycho Celchu, the unit's executive officer, stepped forward. "Normally, I would agree with you, Lieutenant Paris. The location of the station, however, makes additional defenses unnecessary. The Coal Sack, as you know, is a dense nebula that interferes with all forms of long range sensors. The only way to find something within it is with precise coordinates. The only people who should have those are smugglers, not us."

"And how reliable are these coordinates? They have a lot riding on their accuracy. It would help if we knew how trustworthy the sources is," Corran pointed out.

Tycho and Wedge glanced at each other. Wedge shrugged.

"We received these coordinates as a gift from Talon Karrde," Tycho explained.

A ripple of surprise ran through the assembled pilots. Karrde was one of the most elusive smugglers there was. He was also one of the shrewdest as well. For him to give anyone a "gift" was surprising, to say the least. It was likely that he would expect a favor from Starfleet later, but that didn't concern them now. The mission did.

Wedge finally waved down the whispers. "All right, people, here's the drill. One Flight will hyper into the system and check the station for any additional defenses. If necessary, they will launch a volley of proton torpedoes to lower the shields. We will then warn the station personnel of an impending attack and allow them to evacuate. Two minutes after One Flight, Two Flight will arrive. Tom, you must inspect the fleeing escape pods and shuttles for weapons. If the station

personnel are trying to save their inventory, you will order them to jettison the cargo. If they don't, you have permission to fire on them."

Paris nodded grimly. "Firing on them" was a clinical way of saying that Two Flight had permission to shoot down fleeing escape pods. It was a task that Wedge wished he didn't have to assign, but it was necessary.

"Two minutes later, Three Flight will hyper in. One and Three Flights will attack the station and destroy it as quickly as possible. Two Flight, you can join in once all the escaping ships are accounted for.

"Are there any questions?"

Tom Riker raised his hands. In the United Republic, he was an oddity, to say the least. Years and years ago, the smuggler William Riker was orbiting a planet whose turbulent atmosphere normally interfered with transporters. Riker was almost trapped on the surface, but quick thinking by a Wookiee at the controls of the transporter pulled him free. At the same time, the transporter beam created a clone of William Riker. He was found only three years ago, but it turned out that his skill as a pilot hadn't diminished. While Tom Riker still harbored some resentment about being left on the planet's surface, he had adjusted and was a valued member of Rogue Squadron.

"Will the *Defiant* be accompanying us?" he asked.

Wedge shook his head, saying, "No. Captain Sisko and I have discussed it, and this mission should be relatively risk-free. Unless one of you crashes into the station, we shouldn't need a back-up vehicle."

The Commander glanced at each pilot for a few seconds before continuing. "I know this mission sounds messy, people. To be honest, I'm not too happy about the ethics either. There is one thing we have to keep in mind, though. The United Republic wants Deep Space Nine to be a controlled environment. That means that we can't have weapons being smuggled on board. We need to send a message to smugglers everywhere that we will not tolerate that sort of activity. Is that understood?"

No one argued with him. Wedge nodded, smiling grimly.

"Get some sleep. We leave in twelve hours."

Tom watched as the bright white hyperspace tunnel slowly stopped rotating and resolved itself into a starfield. He could feel his body lurch forward slightly as the X-Wing reverted back to normal space and oriented itself on a new heading. Tom immediately called up a sensor analysis of the system. Sure enough, he had arrived at a dwarf star and a small space station was in orbit. Mustang, his astromech droid, dutifully labeled the four X-Wings of One Flight. Wedge and the others were flying a holding pattern around the station.

"Mustang, are they evacuating the station?" Tom asked, scrolling through the list of possible targets.

Mustang whistled an affirmative answer. Sure enough, small escape pods were rocketing away from the station at rapid speeds. Not only that, but there were a few Tyderian shuttles and freighters fleeing the station as well. By Paris' count, there were at least twenty different targets to inspect.

Tom switched over to Two Flight's tactical frequency. "Okay, here's what we'll do. Seven, you and Eight go and inspect the escape pods." He heard two separate clicks over the speakers, meaning that Nog and Erisi were acknowledging their orders. "Six, you're with me on the larger vessels."

"Acknowledged, Five," came Nawara Ven's reply.

The four X-Wings of Two Flight quickly dove for the fleeing spacecraft. Tom gritted his teeth, targeting the closest Tyderian shuttle. He hoped that the smugglers were intelligent enough to leave the weapons on the station. The last thing he wanted to do was fire on one of them.

Tom diverted some of the power from his lasers to the engines. His X-Wing burst forward and skimmed by the shuttle at a mere twenty meters. Mustang quickly posted the sensor readings on Tom's Heads Up Display, or HUD. Thankfully, the shuttle only contained fleeing smugglers. Tom quickly targeted a small transport and dove after it.

Within minutes, Tom and Nawara had accounted for all of the larger vessels except for one freighter that was making a run for it. Tom thanked the Force that the smugglers had chosen to leave their cargo behind. All of the vessels could jump into hyperspace and Two Flight hadn't fired a shot.

"Six, on my wing. Let's go check that freighter," Tom said, dropping down behind the fleeing vessel.

Nawara clicked an affirmative reply and dropped down behind and to the left of Tom's fighter. The two X-Wings sped across the distance. As they did, Tom called up the limited sensor information Mustang could provide him. As he looked over the specs of the freighter, he frowned slightly. Some of the readings were unusual, to say the least. Most freighters were slow, sluggish brutes in real space. This one seemed to be moving faster than normal. If he were chasing a regular freighter, Tom could have cut his throttle in half and still closed the distance within minutes. This one, though, was causing him to push his engines to the max. He frowned, a nervous feeling beginning to gnaw at his stomach. Finally, he flipped on the comm channel.

"Seven, Eight, get over here as quick as you can. I don't like the looks of this freighter," he called.

"As ordered, Five," was Nog's reply.

Tom watched as his range to the freighter dropped from two kilometers to one. The numbers slowly rolled back until Tom was a mere quarter of a kilometer away.

Suddenly, the hull plating for the freighter broke away in a shower of sparks and fire. At first, Tom thought that someone from Two Flight had attacked the ship, but then he realized that the freighter wasn't really destroyed. As the large pieces of outer hull drifted away, Tom could see a slightly smaller, gray ship hiding beneath. The freighter had merely been a shell, covering the somewhat boxy, grey form of.....

"By all the stars!" Paris gasped. "That's an Escort Carrier! Evasive maneuvers!"

Tom hauled back on the stick, Mustang screaming at him in protest. Nawara thankfully was able to follow his lead, darting up and away from the Dominion ship before it could fire a shot. Mustang beeped, noting the presence of new ships in the area. Tom glanced at his rear-looking sensors and moaned. A swarm of green dots were surrounding the larger ship. That meant Dominion fighters.

Sure enough, green laser bolts sliced through the vacuum from behind, some of them splashing across his rear shields. Tom quickly shunted some of the power from his lasers to the shields and called up the closest Dominion target. His stomach sank slightly at what he saw. A TIE Interceptor was on his tail. He quickly flipped over to Rogue Squadron's tactical frequency.

"Rogue One, this is Five. We've got twelve, that's one-two, TIE Interceptors over here along with an Escort Carrier," he reported, dropping his X-Wing down through a spiral-maneuver to lose his pursuer.

"Acknowledged, Five. We're on our way," was Wedge's calm reply.

More green laser bolts shot past his fighter. Tom glanced at his rear-looking sensors and realized that there had to be at least three Interceptors on his tail, and they were closing fast.

"I could use some help here!" he called.

Without warning, another X-Wing flashed over Tom's cockpit, causing Tom to instinctively wince. Its lasers flashed through the vacuum, slicing cleanly through the ball cockpit of the Interceptor. The X-Wing shot through the resulting explosion unscathed. The pilot even through in a jaunty barrel roll before dropping down behind another TIE.

"Vape on squint," Thomas Riker cried triumphantly, using the pilots' slang for a TIE Interceptor.

"Acknowledged, Four. Thanks," Tom said, stomping on the left etheric rudder pedal.

His X-Wing's tail swung around, causing the fighter to stand up on its nose for a split second. Tom gunned the engines and snapped the stick to the right, bringing his cross hairs on his other pursuer. He tapped the trigger, sending a few laser bolts dancing through the vacuum to the Dominion fighter. The crimson bolts burned through the angled Interceptor's wings, causing one to break off in a shower of sparks and flame. The fighter tumbled off, turning in a sickening spiral until it finally exploded.

Tom breathed a sigh of relief and evened out his shields. Tapping a button on his control stick, he brought up the next closest Dominion target and started after it.

"Let's see what you boys have," he muttered to himself.

The fight was short but furious. Wedge and the rest of One Flight had joined in within seconds. Shortly thereafter, Corran Horn's Three Flight arrived in-system. Without hesitating for even a nanosecond, Corran joined the fray. It truly was an unfair fight. While the Interceptors were built for speed and maneuverability, they were outnumbered. Not only that, the X-Wings had a natural advantage: they were shielded while the TIEs weren't. The battle was over ten minutes after it started. Unfortunately, the Escort Carrier had managed to jump to hyperspace during the ensuing confusion, but that was a small price to pay. In Tom's mind, the mission had worked out for the best. True, they hadn't expected a Dominion presence at this station, but the fact that all of the Rogues survived the confrontation was a good thing.

The squadron made short work of the smuggler's hide-away. A volley of torpedos was all it took to reduce the station to a gaseous cloud of vaporized metal. As the last sympathetic explosion went off in the station, Tom swung his X-Wing around and had Mustang begin the preparations for the jump to hyperspace. As it did, Mustang hooted a mournful question to Tom, a translation of which scrolled across one of his cockpit displays.

"Yes, Mustang, apparently the Dominion is involved," Tom replied.

Mustang's next question sounded almost frightened.

"No, I don't know what that means," Tom answered honestly. "And I hope we don't find out."

Quark nervously tapped at some of the glasses displayed behind his bar. Satisfied that they were indeed glasses, he moved on to rattling a few of the bottles. He knew that his customers and waiters were staring at him, most of them wondering if he were sane or not, but Quark didn't care. Ever since he found that arsenal of weapons, he had been paranoid. While it was true that Sisko didn't suspect him, he knew that Odo would keep a close eye on him. That meant that anything in the bar could be Odo. Quark knew that banging the glasses around wouldn't cause the Constable to reveal himself, but it helped Quark feel better.

Satisfied that Odo wasn't watching him (although he was aware that decision was completely irrational. The Constable could be the surface of his bar for all he knew), Quark turned and glanced over the bar. Off in one corner were the pilots of Rogue Squadron, laughing uproariously and

causing quite a commotion. Quark didn't mind. He was actually glad the Rogues were on the station, which was a change. Usually, it was one of the Rogues who came across Quark's illegal smuggling activity while they were on patrol. Now, however, Quark felt safer knowing the Rogues were here. The tale of their reprisal raid on Toreska Prime had spread quickly throughout Deep Space Nine. It didn't take a genius to realize that whoever sent the weapons from that outpost would be extremely angry over what happened. That meant he, she, or they would be angry not only at the United Republic, but also at Quark. Not only did Quark have to watch out for Odo, now he had to keep a wary eye on everyone he came across as well.

"Quark!" one of the pilots shouted. "Another round of lomin ale!"

"Coming right up....." Quark struggled for a second to remember this hoo-man's name. They all looked alike to him. "...Corran."

Corran smiled and sat down again, launching into yet another tale about his days with the Corellian Security Force. Quark found Corran Horn the most aggravating member of Rogue Squadron. The other eleven pilots could be a nuisance, to be sure, but all they did was find evidence of smuggling every now and then. None of them had the know-how to pin the crimes to Quark. Corran Horn did. His years at CorSec had taught him how to sniff out illegal activity almost as well as Odo. If it weren't for Odo's fierce territorialism when it came to security matters on DS9, the two of them could probably uncover all of Quark's illicit activities and have him arrested. Still, Horn was a good pilot and his skills would probably save Quark in the end.

Quark almost had one of his waiters bring over the twelve lomin ales, but he decided against it. The pilots probably knew about his connection to the weapons. If Quark put any distance between himself and them, they would probably misconstrue it as guilt on his part. Best to act as friendly as possible, he reasoned.

Delicately balancing the tray on his right hand, Quark made his way around the bar and carefully started for the table in the back. Several times he had to stop short or side-step around one of his more inebriated patrons, but he didn't spill one drop. Actually, he took pride in his tray-carrying skills. Ever since he opened this bar all those years ago, he had never dropped one glass for any reason.

Quark plastered a friendly smile on his face when he was a few scant meters from the table. *Best to put the facade on now and get it over with*, he thought to himself. He was just opening his mouth to speak some banal pleasantries when a figure shrouded in a black cloak stepped in his way. The smile quickly vanished from Quark's face to be replaced with an annoyed scowl.

"Get out of my way," he snapped irritably.

The person didn't move. Instead, he reached up with gnarled hands and pulled the cloak from his face. The minute Quark saw who it was, his strength drained from his body. His knees buckled and the tray slipped from his grasp, the twelve lomin ales spilling all over the floor. Every pair of eyes in the bar were immediately on him. Some of the patrons began to snicker at Quark's misfortune. Maybe he wasn't as good as he thought after all.

Quark didn't care about his shattered reputation or even what those twelve drinks cost him. The Twi'lek standing before him had his full attention. The pasty alien draped his brain-tails around his neck carefully before glaring at Quark with his blood-red eyes.

"You will come with me now," the Twi'lek hissed, pointing one long claw in Quark's direction.

Quark didn't even bother asking where they were going. Instead, he fell in step behind the Twi'lek and followed him out of the bar. As he left, Gavin Darklighter turned to the other pilots in Rogue Squadron, a confused look on his young face.

"Who was that?" he asked, especially pointing the question to Nawara Ven, another Twi'lek.

"I can't say that I know," Nawara admitted, a puzzled look on his face. "I don't believe I've ever met the gentleman before."

"I know who he is," Corran growled, staring daggers at the door.

Nawara and Gavin shot Corran an expectant look.

"That was Bib Fortuna," Corran explained. "Jabba the Hutt's major domo. If he's here, you can bet Quark is up to no good. We'd better report this to Captain Sisko."

Quark was roughly shoved down the dusty stairs by a Gamorrean guard. Quark almost turned to protest, but the pig-like creature snarled menacingly and waved its force-pike for emphasis. He got the message: keep moving.

Not that anyone could blame Quark for being in a foul mood. After all, it wasn't everyday that Bib Fortuna showed up in Quark's bar. Nor was it a regular occurrence for the Twi'lek to literally kidnap Quark from the station, lock him in a holding cell, and transport him to Tatooine. Now Quark was being brought down to Jabba's audience chamber, and Quark could already feel his stomach begin to churn wildly. This wasn't good.

Quark had every reason to fear Jabba. After all, the Ferengi and Hutts shared a home planet. Ferengenar's damp climate was preferred by both creatures and naturally, an instinctive animosity arose between the two races. It probably had something to do with the fact that Ferengi relished eating creatures that vaguely resembled Hutts, but that was only part of the picture. Both races had an innate sense of greed and both tried to one-up the other in personal accomplishments. It was said in the rest of the Galaxy that, if you put a Ferengi and a Hutt in the same room, they would squabble over who owned everything there, including the air they were both breathing. For Quark, a Ferengi, to be summoned to the most powerful Hutt's audience chamber, was not good at all.

There was more to it than a conflict of species, though. Jabba the Hutt was the most powerful crimelord in the Galaxy. No one had more influence than he did. Not even the infamous Black Sun or Orion Syndicate could rival him. His criminal activities were an open secret in the Galaxy: the only way one wasn't aware of them was if that person was either dead or had been in a coma for the past six decades. Jabba always kept a large number of bounty hunters on retainer and had no problems with sending someone to his or her death.

Quark was finally shoved through a crowd of aliens, some of whom Quark couldn't even identify. The mob parted, most of the aliens laughing at Quark. They all knew why he was here, and they were going to take personal pleasure at watching the Ferengi squirm.

Finally, Quark stepped forward on an odd grate that was imbedded in the floor and faced the Hutt. Jabba lay on his dais, calmly smoking from his pipe. His leathery hide was dripping with slime and mucus, most of which had the most pungent odor Quark had ever experienced. The Ferengi couldn't understand how Jabba could tolerate the dry heat of Tatooine. Ferengenar was always under a constant deluge. Ever since he had arrived on-planet, Quark's sinuses had gone painfully dry and his throat was interminably parched. Quark wished he knew Jabba's secret but then, he doubted that Jabba brought him here to discuss Tatooine survival tips.

Jabba allowed him to nervously shift from foot to foot for a while before finally rumbling, "Bo shuda."

Quark frowned, not comprehending. For some reason, his Universal Translator couldn't seem to handle Huttese. Jabba snarled before motioning for a protocol droid to step forward. The silver 3PO unit did so with a pretentious little bow.

"His Excellency, the all-powerful Jabba, bids you to step forward," the droid translated.

Quark did so, carefully making sure that all of his movement were slow. He had already seen Boba Fett and a few other bounty hunters skulking in the background. The last thing he wanted to do was make a sudden movement that one of them would misinterpret as going for a weapon.

Jabba began to speak again. His voice sounded like a Tatooine dewback drowning in a bucket of its own spittle. It was a sound that made Quark sick to his stomach, but he knew better than to flinch. Finally, the droid dutifully translated.

"The mighty Jabba wishes to know why you reported the shipment of weapons to the station's commander."

For a split second, Quark didn't have any idea what the Hutt was talking about. But then, he realized exactly what was going on. Jabba was the one who had sent those stormtrooper rifles to the station! It hadn't been the Orion Syndicate but him! Not only that, Quark realized with a growing sense of doom, the station that Rogue Squadron destroyed probably belonged to Jabba as well. No wonder he had summoned Quark to see him! Quark had probably cost Jabba quite a bit of latinum and now, the crime lord wanted him to pay the debt.

Quark swallowed nervously before he stammered out, "It wasn't my fault, Jabba! You have to believe me! I didn't mean to find the weapons, and I certainly didn't turn them in! I had no idea that you were the one who sent them."

Surprisingly, Jabba didn't wait for the translator droid to interpret. Apparently he could understand what Quark was saying, for he launched into another tirade. Now it sounded like an angry dewback was drowning, but instead of sickening Quark, this time Jabba's voice chilled him to the bone.

"Jabba does not believe you and says that he should feed you to the rancor."

"The what?" Quark gasped.

That was when he heard it. A low growl echoed up from beneath the grate. Quark looked down immediately and saw an immense creature shuffling around in a shadowy arena beneath his feet. His eyes grew wide at the sight of the massive claws and razor sharp teeth that lined the rancor's mouth. Quark's eyes immediately flew up to Jabba and he threw up his hands to stop the gangster from acting.

"No, Jabba, I swear! I didn't know! Please!" Quark cried, falling to his knees.

His posture only brought gales of laughter from the on-lookers. The Kowakian lizard-monkey that sat at Jabba's feet found it particularly humorous. The annoying little creature ran to Quark's side and mocked his pose, the whole while cackling in a high-pitched voice. Quark would have loved to strangle the nuisance, but he didn't dare move. Finally, Jabba rumbled a command and the entire assembly fell silent.

Quark stayed on his knees for what felt like an eternity before Jabba spoke again. This time, surprisingly enough, it was in the Ferengi tongue. Quark's head jerked up in surprise.

"Quark, you are a scoundrel and a cheat," Jabba snarled. "I like that. Normally, I would throw you to the rancor or even the sarlacc, but I am in a generous mood today. You may go back to your pitiful little bar, but only on one condition."

"Anything! Name it!" Quark cried.

"In the future, there will be more weapons shipments to Deep Space Nine and they will be made through your bar," Jabba rumbled. "You will not interfere with them at all. They will all be labeled as Orinako Woodcarvings. Leave them in the cargo bay and they will be picked up by the appropriate people. Do we have an understanding?"

Quark almost said no. Agreeing to be the front for weapons smuggling was more than he ever wanted to do, especially now that Odo was watching for it. On the other hand, Quark was lucky to survive his encounter with Jabba. To refuse would be suicide, and Quark really didn't want to die.

"We do," Quark said, quickly getting up and heading for the stairs. "Nice doing business with you. I'll show myself out."

"And Quark....." Jabba called after him.

Quark turned, almost expecting it to turn out to be a joke. Instead, Jabba stared at him fiercely.

"Do not cross me again or...." Jabba allowed his voice to trail off.

To complete the thought, Boba Fett stepped forward and pulled his blaster from its holster. Quark got the message. Without looking back, the Ferengi turned and bolted up the stairs.

Sisko looked over the information on his officer's computer terminal grimly. When he had hoped for some excitement on the station two months ago, this wasn't exactly what he was looking for.

On a positive note, it appeared as though the Orion Syndicate or whoever shipped the weapons had meekly accepted the destruction of their station. There had been no reprisal raids, nothing to even suggest that the smugglers had noticed.

Not only that, Quark seemed to be keeping out of trouble as well. According to Odo, he hadn't found any more weapons. Granted, there was that strange trip to Tatooine in the company of Bib Fortuna, but that was hardly against the law. Quark remained tight-lipped about whatever happened there, but had returned safely. Since then, he had dutifully played the role of bartender. Odo even reported that Quark had quit most of his other petty operations as well. Sisko sighed, hoping the trend would continue. As much as he hated to admit it, he grudgingly liked the Ferengi. As shifty as Quark was, he was a decent being.

Unfortunately, there was a whole new crisis brewing on the station. A mysterious illness was spreading through the Bajoran population, one that defied a cure. Thankfully, it wasn't life-threatening, it was just an annoyance. The Bajorans contracting the illness were debilitated, unable to perform their duties. Even Major Kira had succumbed, but she stubbornly refused to be placed off-duty. She stayed at OPS, sneezing and coughing the whole while, but doing her job to the best of her ability. The rest of the personnel were able to cope, people filling in where they could. Even still, though, the strain was beginning to show.

Then there was the Dominion. Thankfully, there were no signs of overt hostility. The Cardassians stayed behind their border. Yet Sisko knew something was going on. About a month ago, a listening post in the Gamma Quadrant picked up a massive explosion a few hundred parsecs from the Maw Wormhole. Sisko had dutifully reported it to Starfleet, hoping that Intelligence would have some explanation. He had received a terse reply stating that they did indeed know the cause of the explosion, but they weren't about to share it with him. Sisko merely chalked it up to Starfleet Intelligence's usual cloak and dagger routine, but it worried him all the same.

With a sigh, he hoisted himself out of his chair and casually strode towards the viewport. Off in the distance, Bajor appeared to be a small green orb. It truly was a beautiful world. The inhabitants were a little eccentric, clinging to a primitive religion. Something about Prophets hiding in a Celestial Temple somewhere. Sisko really had no idea what it all meant or if it were true. He had never met a Prophet and had no idea what the Celestial Temple was, let alone where.

He frowned for a second. There was an odd tingling running up and down his spine. He had never felt anything like it before.....and then it was gone. He glanced around the office, wondering what had just happened. Finally, he shrugged, and returned to his brooding.

What made Bajor truly annoying were the religious leaders. None of them liked Sisko's presence on the station or even in the system. They claimed that he violated more tenets of their religion than he could even name. One of them, some annoying Vedic named Wynn, had even called him an abomination once. Kai Opaka, the spiritual leader, had chastised her for it, but Sisko knew that she probably agreed. Sisko grunted to himself. Belief in the Force, he could understand. There were Jedi and other Force adept people to back up that belief. He himself had met Luke Skywalker once, felt the power emanate from that small yet strong man. The Prophets though.....

There it was again, this time more insistent; that weird tingling sensation on the back of his neck. Sisko started to raise his hands toward his commbadge to call for an internal sensor scan of the office, when he heard it. The sound of rushing winds filled the room.....a flash of light enveloped him.....and Sisko found himself in his office.

He frowned and blinked. Yes, it looked like his office, but yet it wasn't. The sharp corners of his desk and walls were muted. A strange haze seemed to hang in the air, and every computer display was awash with strange flashes of light.

What was most disconcerting was the fact that Major Kira was suddenly in his office.

"Major...." he started to say.

"It is the Sisko," Kira interrupted.

That statement caught him short. Kira's voice sounded....different. More resonant. What was really strange was the fact that she attached a definite article to his name. He was suddenly "the" Sisko. Did that mean he should start calling her "the Kira?" And who was she talking to anyway?

"It is the Sisko, but not the Sisko," a familiar voice said in his ear, causing him to jump.

Sisko whirled around and was shocked to see his son, Jake, standing before him. But Jake was back on Earth, attending a writing school in New Zealand. He shouldn't be here.....

Suddenly, Sisko realized that he was standing in OPS. He blinked in surprise. He hadn't taken a step, yet he was there. Standing around the main table were familiar faces....Odo, Kira, Jake, Bashir, O'Brien....and two that he didn't recognize. One was a Trill woman, wearing a Starfleet uniform with lieutenant's pips. The other was a Klingon, also, strangely enough, in a Starfleet uniform with a silver baldric.

"The Sisko is confused," the Klingon rumbled.

"Who are you?" Sisko demanded, finally gathering his wits about him.

"We are of Bajor," Bashir answered dully, as if that were explanation enough.

"You are of Bajor," Odo added.

"What does that mean?" Sisko asked, completely confused.

The "people," or whatever they were, looked at each other, their faces completely devoid of expression. All the same, Sisko could tell that they were somehow....disappointed with him.

"He does not understand," the Trill woman replied.

"He is not the same Sisko," Jake replied cryptically.

And suddenly, they were no longer in OPS, but standing on, of all things, a baseball diamond. Now only Jake and the Trill woman were with him.

"The game has strayed," Jake explained. "You must get back to the game or there will be a reckoning."

"What?" Sisko growled, finally succumbing to his own exasperation. "What are you talking about? Who are you people?"

"Return to the game," the Trill woman said.

The tingling sensation at the back of Sisko's neck intensified, there was another flash of light, and Sisko found himself standing in his office. He spun around, unsure of what just happened. He tentatively tapped his commbadge.

"Major, could you please join me in my office?" he asked.

Within minutes, Kira strode in. It was obvious she was still sick. Large red bags hung under her eyes, her nose was running, and it looked like she was perpetually holding back a sneeze.

"Yes, Captain?" she asked, her voice somewhat hoarse.

"Were you just in my office?" Sisko asked.

Kira blinked at stared at him blankly. Apparently not. Sisko quickly explained what just happened. Kira's look of confusion slowly disappeared, replaced with one of awe and then of reverence.

"It sounds like you had a vision of the Prophets, Captain," Kira said in a hushed voice.

"I what?" Sisko thundered, clearly not as impressed as his first officer.

"That's the way the ancient texts describe the visions," Kira explained. "Friends and family speaking to a person, imparting wisdom. The Prophets spoke to you!"

Sisko closed his eyes, the words of the "Prophets" ringing in his ears.

"I'll tell you something, Major," Sisko sighed. "Right now, the last thing I need are for Bajoran deities to try and tell me what to do. Dismissed."

Kira appeared a little disappointed, but turned on her heel and walked out the door. Sisko glanced at the viewport one last time and snorted to himself in annoyed amusement. Prophets indeed!

Corran Horn glanced around the bar tentatively. For a split second, he mused over how odd it felt to be stepping into Quark's to relax. Just four years ago, the only reason he would even venture into an establishment like this was to keep a shady character under surveillance. Officers from CorSec just didn't go to seedy bars to hang out, that was for sure. Yet here he was, a pilot in Rogue Squadron, coming to Quark's to relax after a long patrol of Bajoran space. For a split second, he wondered what would have happened if Kirtan Loor, the Dominion liaison officer for CorSec, hadn't driven him from his home on Corellia. After a few seconds of brooding, Corran shook off the feeling. He was here to relax, not to ponder possible futures.

He quickly pushed his way through the crowd, working his way to Rogue Squadron's usual table. That caused him to smile as well. When the Rogues were first stationed at Deep Space Nine, nobody accepted them. The first time they had come in to Quark's for a quick drink after a particularly nerve-rattling battle, Corran and Tom almost got into a fist fight with several of the bar's patrons over whether or not they could be there. It had taken time, but eventually, most of the station's populace had accepted them. The fact that Rogue Squadron had their own unofficial table was proof of that. No matter how crowded the bar became, that table remained empty. The only people who could sit at it were Rogue Squadron pilots or their friends. While Corran usually hated preferential treatment, it was nice to have a place where the Squadron could always come to relax.

Sure enough, several of his fellow pilots were already seated at the table. Gavin Darklighter, Nog, and Thomas Riker were having an animated yet friendly conversation about something. Although Corran couldn't be sure, it looked like Nog and Gavin were arguing some point of etiquette with the other two. Corran smiled warmly and sat down at the table.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Just discussing the finer points of interstellar politics," Riker explained with a lop-sided grin. "At least, we will be until Erisi returns with the drinks."

Corran immediately regretted sitting at the table. For some reason, Erisi had been making advances on him ever since the two of them met. It seemed like every chance she got, she would throw herself at Corran, oblivious of what others thought. Granted, the Thyferran woman was quite attractive. She usually turned heads wherever she went. For some odd reason, though, Corran knew better than to get involved with her. There was no logical reason for it. It just felt.....wrong. It was as if he instinctively knew she was trouble. Most people would have brushed such feelings aside, but Corran trusted them. He first started having these hunches while he was still working for CorSec. His father, Hal Horn, had encouraged him to listen to his intuition. Why he did, Corran never understood. All the same, the flashes of insight never let him down.

With a little bit of effort, Corran managed to quash the feelings as Erisi returned, four mugs of synthale in her hands. She smiled brightly at Corran when she saw him.

"Well, hello, Corran," she purred cooly. "If I would have known you were coming, I would have gotten you a drink as well."

"Don't bother, I'm not that thirsty," Corran lied, that nagging feeling buzzing through his mind.

Erisi simply shrugged and sat down and handed the drinks to the other pilots. She proffered hers in toast and said, "To the ultimate demise of the Dominion."

The other pilots laughed and agreed, drinking deeply from the glasses. Under other circumstances, Corran would have joined in the toast, but something was wrong. For whatever reason, that strange insight Corran had was insisting that Erisi was lying. She didn't want the Dominion to lose, not in the least. Corran suppressed a frown. Why would a Rogue Squadron pilot not want the

Dominion to lose? Corran silently mulled that over for a few seconds. Well, for one thing, Erisi came from Thyferra, the only supplier of bacta. Rather than take sides, the Thyferrans sold to both the Dominion and the United Republic. If the war ended, the Thyferrans would lose a lucrative market.

Corran shook his head, trying to push the suspicion out of his mind. It was ridiculous. If Erisi really wanted the Dominion to win, she wouldn't be here on Deep Space Nine, fighting against them. He smiled and stood up.

"If you'll excuse me, I think I will get a drink so I can join in your toast," he said.

Erisi smiled up at him flirtatiously. Corran started for the bar, his face grim. This war was truly taking its toll on him. Here he was, suspecting one of his comrades of treason! For a split second, Corran offered up a prayer to whatever god or Force controlled the universe for a swift end to the war. It would be nice to live a normal life for a change, one where Corran could trust the people around him.

Wedge glanced up as Bashir stumbled into the Replimat, a haggard look on his face. The X-Wing pilot could sympathize. He knew how busy Bashir had been over the past six weeks. At first, this mysterious illness that was afflicting the Bajorans had been a nuisance. Then an annoyance. Now, it was a full-scale problem. For Bashir, it was even worse. The doctor prided himself as being a superb researcher. The fact that a cure of this illness eluded him wounded his ego more than anything else.

"Sit down, Julian," Wedge said with a smile. "Garak isn't here yet."

Bashir sank into the seat with a grateful sigh. He automatically rubbed his eyes, scrunching up his face. Wedge gritted his teeth slightly. He wasn't sure if he should even ask about how the search for a cure was going. Bashir, however, seemed to read his mind.

"Nothing yet," Bashir groaned. "It doesn't even respond to bacta! I'm beginning to think that it's the Bajoran version of the common cold."

Wedge's eyes grew wide with shock. The fact that the illness didn't respond to bacta treatment was especially surprising. Bacta was the cure-all of the galaxy. It could heal illnesses, close wounds, and even help comatose patients. It was every doctor's dream come true.

"Is it mutating at all?" Wedge asked carefully. The last thing he wanted to happen was to have one of his pilots fall ill.

Bashir shook his head and replied, "No, it's staying isolated in the Bajoran population, so that's a relief."

"Not surprising, Doctor," a slightly nasal voice put in.

Wedge jumped. Once again, their dining companion had snuck up on them. Garak smiled amiably as he sat down at the table, as if he relished Wedge's fright. Garak was something of an enigma on Deep Space Nine. He claimed to be a simple tailor, but most people had figured out that he was more than that. No one was quite sure what he was, though, and that was a problem. They knew that he had a connection to the Obsidian Order, the Dominion's intelligence gathering mechanism. What his role had been, though, was anybody's guess. Garak had been on the station when the United Republic took control of it. Corran Horn had once tried to track down Garak's true history, but had come across so many dead ends that he eventually gave up.

Not that Wedge held that aura of mystery against Garak. Far from it. It made the tailor an intriguing individual, which was why he and Bashir had been meeting with the Cardassian every day for lunch for the past four years.

"What's not surprising, Garak?" Bashir asked, although it was clear his mind really wasn't into the conversation. Exhaustion was.

"It's not surprising at all that the illness is isolated to the Bajoran population. I suspect that's what it's supposed to do," Garak said, glancing over a menu.

That piqued Wedge's interest. It apparently got Bashir's attention as well. The doctor stared at Garak, dumbfounded.

"What are you talking about?" Bashir demanded.

Garak looked up from the menu innocently, as if he expected both Wedge and Bashir to be following his unique brand of logic.

"Well, isn't it obvious, Doctor? This virus or whatever it is is targeting the Bajorans."

"Garak, it's just a cold," Wedge protested. "It's nothing."

"Oh, no, my dear Commander, it is something. Something very serious."

Garak looked between the two humans. He finally sighed when he realized that they weren't following him. He set down the menu and leaned over the table. His whole posture took on a positively conspiratorial air. Wedge almost laughed, unsure of whether or not he should take Garak seriously.

"Consider it this way, gentlemen," Garak said. "We have a cold, a nuisance, that only the Bajorans are catching. What's more, bacta can't cure it. Now, don't you find that just the least bit unusual?"

Bashir shrugged and replied, "There are other illnesses that don't respond to bacta treatment, Garak."

"I am aware of that, Doctor, but those are usually much deadlier than this one. Besides, even with those, bacta at least alleviates the symptoms. Bacta doesn't seem to do anything for this one."

Bashir frowned, considering what Garak had just said. Wedge studied the doctor's face carefully. True, he didn't really know the statistics, but from his limited knowledge, he knew that what Garak said was generally true.

"Go on," Bashir said, clearly intrigued.

Garak smiled mysteriously smile again before continuing.

"Tell me, Doctor, when the illness first made its appearance on the station, how many cases were there?"

Bashir shrugged after considering it for a few seconds, replying, "I don't know. A dozen or so?"

"And did you do a background check to see where a dozen or so Bajorans could contract the same illness?"

Bashir nodded and said, "I didn't find anything out of the ordinary."

Garak's smile grew even wider as he pointed out, "And that should have been your first clue. I suspect the only thing that those first victims had in common was that they live on this station.

"Now, let's consider a natural illness. One person contracts it on, say, Yavin and then brings it back here. He passes it on to a friend, who then passes it on to another and so on until you have our little epidemic here. But the point is, there would be only one person initially contracting the disease.

Two or three at the most, but not a dozen."

A look of understanding was beginning to spread on Bashir's face. He started to nod.

"So it all must be intentional," Bashir gasped.

"Exactly," Garak said.

"But why infect the Bajorans?" Wedge asked. "Nothing against them, but it would make more sense to create a disease to incapacitate the human population of Deep Space Nine."

"Perhaps," Garak conceded. "There is something you should keep in mind, though, Commander. Whoever introduced this illness probably has something far more insidious in mind than merely inconveniencing our personnel. This is just one piece of the puzzle. The question you have to answer is, what can be gained by incapacitating the Bajorans on the station? What do they do that hardly anyone else does?"

With that, Garak rose from the table. He smiled once more and silently left the Replimat, allowing the two humans to brood over that question.

Quark paced back and forth nervously in his quarters, unsure of what to do. As he promised Jabba, he hadn't said a word about or examined the incoming crates of "Orinako Woodcarvings." For all he knew, the Hutt really could have been shipping the esoteric art pieces onto the station, but he doubted it. Even though he hadn't examined the crates, though, he did know how many had arrived.

He had to since he was the one signing for them. Fifteen over the past two months. Fifteen. If they were all full of weapons, that meant that someone could be equipping a small army either here on the Station or down on Bajor. He didn't even want to know what the recipients were planning to do with them. Worse than that, he didn't want anyone to know that he was responsible either.

Quark groaned in disgust and sank into a chair, trying hard not to think about it, but that was impossible. These secret arms shipments were the only thing on his mind lately. He could even see them in his dreams; horrid dreams where stormtroopers came out of the boxes, mowing down everything in their path. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in at least five weeks, if not longer.

So what should he do? Should he go against his word and tell Sisko about the arms shipments and risk Jabba's wrath? Should he remain silent and hope for the best? Or maybe he should just

pack up his belongings and leave the station forever. Maybe he could find work as a bartender on Nar Shaddaa.....

Sisko sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He squinted around his quarters, unsure if he had heard the door chime. Sure enough, there it was again. He glanced at the chronometer next to his bed. A twinge of fear ran through him. Something horrible must have happened for someone to come to his door at three in the morning.

"Come," he groaned, slowly crawling out of bed.

The doors hissed open to admit a very excited Bashir and Wedge. Surprisingly, both of them were still in uniform, suggesting that neither had been to bed yet. Sisko stared at both of them for a second before speaking.

"Would you mind telling me what is so important that you have to wake me up in the middle of the night?"

"I think I know what's happening with the illness, Captain," Bashir said, quickly recounting his conversation with Garak. "I went back and did a careful analysis of the illness and I was able to isolate the pathogen. It's a genetically engineered virus, specifically designed to infect Bajorans.

"At any rate," Wedge put in, "that got us thinking. What do the Bajorans do on the station that hardly anyone else does?"

Sisko frowned, considering the question as well. Admittedly, the Bajorans didn't do much on the station. Most of the vital functions were carried out by United Republic personnel, who were mostly human. The Bajorans ran the shops on the Promenade, helped with maintenance in a limited fashion, and.....

The answer was so obvious, Sisko should have seen it immediately. Wedge and Bashir nodded when they saw the startled look on his face.

"That's right," Wedge said. "Most of Odo's security personnel are Bajoran. Whoever released that virus on board the station probably wanted it to disrupt security."

Sisko thought it over. It made sense.

"Do we have any ideas as to why?" Sisko asked.

Bashir and Wedge glanced at each other and shrugged.

"No, Captain, we don't. Maybe whoever it is expecting the virus to mutate and start infecting other members of the crew. Maybe they were running some sort of illegal operation on the station and wanted to try and keep Odo busy so he wouldn't notice...." Bashir suggested.

"....or it is possible that we're not seeing the bigger picture," Wedge admitted.

Sisko was about to say something when his door chimed again. He blinked, surprised. He usually didn't have many visitors this late at night. He hoped that it wouldn't become a regular occurrence.

The doors hissed open. Quark hesitantly stepped through, an extremely guilty look on his face.

"Captain Sisko?" he asked in a quiet voice. "I really need to talk to you."

Captain Sisko paced back and forth in OPS, trying hard to keep his fury in check. True, some of the anger came from the fact that he didn't get much sleep the night before. He did not want to make having conversations at three o'clock in the morning a habit. Still, it had been a productive night. A few more pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place after Quark's visit.

He glanced over at O'Brien, who merely shrugged. "It might take a while to reach someone there, Captain. It's only three thirty in the morning."

"Keep on trying, Chief," Sisko growled.

After a few more minutes, O'Brien nodded. Sisko turned back to the viewscreen and waited a few moments before it sprung to life, revealing a very irate Jabba the Hutt. The slug gurgled an indignant question, which his translator droid dutifully interpreted.

"The mighty Jabba wishes to know why you've disturbed his sleep," the tinny voice of the protocol droid demanded.

"Jabba, I know I woke you, so I'll keep this short!" Sisko snarled. "I know it was you. I know you're the one who smuggled those rifles on board this station two months ago. I know you've been doing so since then, and I suspect that you're the one who sent the engineered virus here as well."

For a split second, the gangster didn't say a word. Slowly, though, Jabba grumbled something in his native tongue.

"Jabba says that you shouldn't believe everything you hear, Captain Sisko," the protocol droid warned. "Especially when it's coming from a Ferengi."

"Who, Quark?" Sisko asked, feigning amazement. "No, Jabba, Quark didn't tell me a thing. Lieutenant Corran Horn tracked you down. He used to work for CorSec. He and his droid were able to back track the shipments to a warehouse you own on Tatooine. The rest of the pieces just naturally fell into place from there."

Once again, Jabba was speechless. Then, slowly, the Hutt began to laugh. It was a low, booming chortle that rattled a few of the viewscreens in OPS.

"Jabba apologizes, Captain Sisko, and assures you that the weapons shipments will cease immediately," the protocol droid explained.

"Good," Sisko replied pleasantly, but then took a step closer to the viewscreen, a frown contorting his face. "One last thing, Jabba. If I ever find out about you smuggling anything here again, I will personally come to Tatooine and ram a photon torpedo down your ugly, slimey gullet. And that is a promise."

Before Jabba could respond, Sisko motioned for O'Brien to cut the transmission. As the Chief did, Quark took a step out from the support strut which he was hiding behind. Quark sighed in relief, placing a thankful hand on Sisko's shoulder.

"Thank you, Captain," Quark said. "That is a load off of my mind."

Quark started for the turbolift.

"Quark!" Sisko called after him.

Quark froze in midstep, turning around sheepishly. He winced, as if expecting Sisko to drop the hammer on him.

"Stay out of trouble," Sisko admonished with a reassuring smirk.

Quark nodded and quickly escaped from OPS. Sisko turned away with a grim smile.

"All senior staff, report to OPS!" he called.

Within minutes, Sisko was surrounded by the senior officers. He took a quick moment to assess how they were all doing. Kira, unfortunately, was looking worse. Her nose appeared raw, her eyes were bloodshot, and her skin had paled considerably. Bashir wasn't looking too good either. Apparently the doctor had continued his research into the virus, trying to find some way to combat it. Wedge, O'Brien, and Odo all looked grim. They knew that they had a serious situation on their hands. According to Quark, fifteen crates of weapons could have possibly been smuggled onto the station. Based on the contents of the first crate Quark had discovered, that meant there could be a considerable arsenal somewhere on board.

"All right, people, we have a major crisis on our hands," Sisko started. "An unknown number of weapons have been smuggled on board this station. We don't know who has them or what they intend to do with them. We need to discuss our options."

O'Brien raised a tentative hand and asked, "How can we be sure that the weapons are even here? Isn't it possible that this was just a way point along a smuggling route? After all, Quark doesn't know what was done with the weapons once they arrived. Someone may have just come and moved them to a different ship."

Odo shook his head and replied, "I don't think so. Deep Space Nine is too far out of the way for smugglers to use it profitably."

"Not only that, but we can't make an assumption like that. If we do and let our guard down, we could wind up regretting it. No, we have to remain on the safe side and assume that the weapons are still here," Sisko said.

He allowed that to sink in for a moment before continuing. "Here is what we have to do, people. We need to increase the security on board. Thanks to this virus, most of Odo's security personnel are down and out. That means that we will have to pull officers from other departments to help augment what few guards Odo has left.

"What's more, we need to step up our fighter patrols of Bajoran space. I doubt whoever is behind this merely wanted to sneak a few weapons onto the station. I'm willing to bet that there's a larger plot in the works. I don't want to get caught flat-footed."

Wedge nodded and replied, "Not a problem, Captain. I'll have six fighters go out on patrol instead of the usual four. Also, you can use the pilots who are off-duty to help with security. They've all had additional training and should be able to fit in nicely."

Sisko nodded. He glanced at everyone around the table for a split second, seeing the resolve in their eyes.

"I'll be honest with all of you. I don't know what's going on nor do I know when this will all be over. I will say one thing, however. I have complete confidence in all of you to carry out your duty," he said. "Until further notice, the station will remain at yellow alert."

The yellow alert lights started flashing around OPS.

"And may the Force be with us," Sisko breathed.

Tom Paris looked around his quarters, making sure that everything was as it should be. This was an important ritual to him, one that had to be carried out every week, no matter what the circumstances were. Thankfully, even though they were in a crisis, Rogue Squadron's weekly poker game could still take place. Although it had taken Emtrely some time to juggle the schedules so the regular players could all attend, it had worked out just fine.

It had been a busy two weeks. Most of the pilots from Rogue Squadron were pulling double shifts every day. First it was four hours out in an X-Wing, challenging and checking every single ship that came near Deep Space Nine. Then, it was an hour break followed by an eight hour shift as a security guard. After that, they could catch a few hours sleep before the whole thing started over again. It was beginning to wear thin on all the pilots. Tom knew and understood that. That was why it was so important for the poker game to happen as usual. It was an anchor in an otherwise chaotic situation.

The door chimed, announcing the arrival of the first player. Tom took one last glance around the room before nodding to himself and calling, "Come!"

The doors hissed open to reveal Nawara and Corran. The Twi'lek smiled broadly, revealing a row of sharp teeth, as he proffered a small black bottle to Tom. Tom's eyes grew wide when he realized what the Twi'lek had in his hands.

"Romulan ale?" he breathed, looking at Nawara in shock. "You have some guts, bringing that here, especially with Corran in tow."

Corran gave Tom a sardonic smile and replied, "Settle down, Paris, I'm not with CorSec anymore, remember? Besides, thanks to the new treaty between the United Republic and the Romulans, the trade embargo has been lifted. That ale is absolutely legal."

Tom breathed a sigh of relief and set the bottle down on the table. Within minutes, the rest of the players arrived. Tom Riker and Erisi arrived together, followed by Nog and Gavin. Tycho Celchu was the last person Tom expected, so they were soon seated around the table, cards in hand and ready to waste a little money. The conversation started out light enough: the latest station gossip with a few bald faced rumors and innuendos thrown in for good measure. Unfortunately, though, the conversation inevitably turned back to the current crisis.

"So how long is this alert going to last, Commander Celchu?" Nog griped. "I mean, I'm willing to fly the extra patrols and stand guard on the Promenade, but two weeks on yellow alert is getting a little old."

Tycho shrugged, carefully dealing out the cards. "Your guess is as good as mine, Nog. Captain Sisko seems bound and determined not to be caught off guard, whatever is happening."

"Personally, I don't think there is a threat," Erisi commented, peeking at the cards in front of her. "I think the weapons were smuggled off the station again and we're all just jumping at shadows."

Tom noticed that Corran shot a suspicious look at Erisi. Tom frowned for a second, unsure of what it meant. Finally, he brushed it off, looking at his cards. Not too good. A pair of sevens with an ace, a Jack, and a three. He thought about it for a second. His opponents were good, but Tom had played against them so long, he knew how they would respond. Nog, while brave for a Ferengi, still held on to his latinum tightly. Unless he had a sure thing, Nog could easily be bluffed. So could Erisi. For some odd reason, she didn't strike Tom as a fighter. That extended to cards as well. Gavin Darklighter, sweet as he was, tended to be a little gullible. Even though years of piloting X-Wings had forced him to grow up, he was still just a Tatooine farmboy at heart.

Nawara Ven was another matter. He was a lawyer before joining Rogue Squadron. That meant that he could not only bluff, but see through lies as well. Thankfully, Tom usually managed to squeak a few bluffs past the Twi'lek. That left Tycho Celchu, Tom Riker, and Corran Horn. All three were tough opponents. Tycho seemed to have a knack for putting together good hands. Corran always seemed to know what cards the other players had. Thomas Riker, though, was the worst. William T. Riker, the person from whom Thomas was cloned, was a legendary gambler. It was rumored that he and Han Solo had won the Millennium Falcon in a wild hand of sabbac. Apparently Thomas Riker received the same flare for gambling. Tom was hard pressed to think of the few times he had actually beaten the transporter clone at poker.

"I'll open for twenty strips," Tom said evenly, tossing a pile of chips into the pot.

That had its desired effect. Nog took one glance at his cards and tossed them down in disgust. He was shortly followed by Gavin. Erisi seemed to consider it for a second, scrutinizing Tom's face closely before hesitantly calling his bet. She didn't raise it, though, indicating to Tom that she at least had two pair. Erisi was a cautious player, not given to flights of fancy.

Then there was the rest of them. Nawara raised two slips, Corran three, and Tycho a phenomenal six strips. It was at that point that both Nawara and Erisi folded. Tom glanced between Riker and Corran. He could see the same thing in both of their eyes: determination not to lose.

Riker seemed to play with his pile of chips for a second before tossing in enough to call. That didn't tell Tom anything. It was entirely possible that Riker was trying to lull him into complacency. On the other hand, Riker might not have the best of hands. Time would tell.

As Tycho started dealing out replacements, Corran returned to the topic.

"I disagree, Erisi. The weapons are still here," he said simply.

That caused the other players to stare at the Corellian in surprise.

"Why do you say that?" Gavin asked. "I mean, couldn't they have moved them?"

Corran shook his head and replied, "Whistler and I have been working on tracking the weapons shipments and correlating them to cargo manifests for items leaving the station. So far, we haven't found anything that indicates that the weapons left. Whoever is receiving the weapons is still here."

"But that means...." Nog started to say, his voice trailing off with a hint of fear.

Corran nodded and finished for him, "That means that we probably have a traitor on the station."

For a long time, a stunned silence hung over the room. Finally, Tom forced himself to concentrate on his hand. He dropped the Jack and the three, hoping that the ace could help him later. Sure enough, Tycho dealt out another ace....and another seven! A full house! While not the best, maybe Tom could work with it.

"But who?" Erisi asked innocently.

That same suspicious look flashed across Corran's face for a split second before he turned back to his cards. Tom frowned and made a note to himself to speak with Corran about it later.

"I'm not entirely sure....yet," Corran said, carefully reorganizing his hand. His green eyes coolly glanced at each person around the table. "One thing's for sure. It has to be a high ranking individual on the station."

"Why do you say that?" Nawara asked. "It could be anyone. A civilian, a maintenance worker...."

Corran shook his head. "Unlikely. Whoever has been receiving the weapons has to have the proper clearance codes to bypass customs. Even if the person has a set of sliced codes, he or she has to at least have a reason to possess them. I mean, if a maintenance person like Rom - no offense Nog - showed up with high level clearance, a customs official would get suspicious...."

"....but if someone like, say Major Kira or Commander Antilles showed up with the codes...." Tom finished, catching on.

"Business as normal," Corran replied, glancing at his cards again. "I believe it's your bid, Mr. Paris."

Tom grimaced. He had gotten so caught up in Corran's theory that he had forgotten about the game. He sheepishly tossed in a chip worth ten slips. Better to start out slow and see how confident the others were.

"But all of us have been cleared!" Nog insisted. "You can't really think one of us would betray the United Republic!"

Corran snorted in amusement as he rifled through his stack of chips. "Stranger things have happened, Nog. Besides, if there's one thing that I've learned, everyone can have their reasons for being a traitor."

"I do not!" Erisi countered indignantly.

That brought a dark look swimming across Corran's face. Tom could understand why. Erisi's protest had come a little too quickly.

"Everyone does," Corran insisted, somewhat harshly. "Erisi, you're Thyferran. Your people have remained neutral in the war so they can sell bacta to both sides. If you're the traitor, it could be because you're worried the Dominion will lose. You're trying to make sure the war lasts for as long as it can so your people will continue raking in the latinum."

Before Erisi could protest any further, Corran turned to Nog. "I hate to say it, Nog, but you're Ferengi. What do the Rules of Acquisition say? A Ferengi without profit is no Ferengi at all? Plenty of Ferengi have been bought by the Dominion."

An indignant look crossed Nog's face, but Corran ignored it. His gaze shifted to Gavin. "Gavin, you're the perfect spy. Young, naive, no one would expect you, even after you slipped the vibroblade between our ribs."

Corran's eyes fell on Riker. "Tom, you're the transporter clone of William T. Riker, hero of the Rebellion. You have lived in his shadow for years. Maybe you want to strike out on your own and make a name for yourself. Same for you, Paris. Being the son of Admiral Paris must wear thin."

And so it went with Corran pointing out why everyone in the room and on the senior staff had a reason to betray the United Republic. Tycho could be the traitor since the Rebellion was unable to save Alderaan, his home planet. Tycho might resent them for their inaction. Nawara, being a former lawyer, may wish to bring the Rebels to justice. Captain Sisko lost his wife at Wolfe 359, making him susceptible to grief. Odo was a Changeling, enough said. Major Kira might believe that after the United Republic is destroyed, the Dominion would leave Bajor alone. Corran was just about to assassinate Dr. Bashir's character when Erisi spoke up.

"But what about you, Corran?" she asked quietly. "Couldn't you be the traitor as well?"

Corran nodded and replied matter-of-factly, "Of course I could. Back when the Rebellion was first beginning, CorSec considered us no better than criminals. I might be seeing this gig on Rogue Squadron as one gigantic undercover assignment. The Dominion contact could be anyone....."

Corran's gaze fell on Erisi significantly before he turned his attention back to his cards. Not surprisingly, he won the next several hands easily. No one was paying too much attention to their games. They were too busy eyeing each other suspiciously.

Garak nervously glanced over his shoulder, once again making sure that the doors to his shop were sealed. It was really a stupid habit, he mused. After all, he knew half a dozen ways to break into supposedly "secure" areas thanks to his rather unique history. Because of that, he knew how to ensure his privacy.

He needed that privacy especially now. Most people on the station had already guessed that he had been a part of the Obsidian Order. It was an open secret, the same way Jabba the Hutt's criminal activities and Darth Vader's sadistic tendencies were open secrets. Thankfully, though, no one suspected how active he had been in the Order. If they did, Garak wouldn't just be a "simple tailor" on Deep Space Nine. He would be a prisoner on a maximum security penal colony or, more likely, dead. Thankfully, his years in the Order had left him plenty of contacts all throughout Cardassian space, ones that were willing to pass him information now and then.

He scrolled through a series of messages from those contacts on his private computer screen. There was something nagging at the back of his mind, something that had been bothering him for several days. The suspicion started when he talked with Dr. Bashir about the virus. Ever since then, it had grown in intensity until now, it was robbing him of his sleep. True, the smuggling of weapons on DS9 and the virus seemed small on the surface, but Garak knew something bigger was in the wind. Something far more deadly than anyone realized.

That was why he sent out the inquiries for unusual activity in Cardassian space. It was true that Starfleet Intelligence probably had access to the same information he now possessed, but they wouldn't know what to look for. Subtle trends that an analyst would dismiss as inconsequential now screamed warnings to Garak. There was a report that ten Romulan warbirds disappeared along the

Cardassian border without a trace. There was a request for more dilithium crystals to be sent to a small shipyard near Cardassia Prime. There were countless crew transfers and status reports to sift through but finally, Garak saw the name he had been dreading. The one name that was the key to

this whole situation. The one that hinted that more was going on at Deep Space Nine than met the eye.

"Damar...." Garak whispered, horrified.

The "simple tailor" quickly deactivated his terminal and sat in the darkened shop, unsure of what to do. He had built a good life here, one that he enjoyed. For the first time in his life, Garak was experiencing true peace. Well, as close to peace as anyone with his checkered past could have, that was for sure. If he said anything about what he just learned, that peace would be shattered. Everyone would know for sure that he was a former operative for the Obsidian Order. He would likely be handed over to United Republic Security, "debriefed" for months, and finally imprisoned. There was no way that Garak wanted to sacrifice his freedom.

On the other hand, if he did nothing, Deep Space Nine would surely be destroyed. There was no doubt about that. Garak had been hoping against hope that he wouldn't find Damar's name in the communiques. If he hadn't found Damar, Garak would have dismissed his nagging suspicions as a sign of old age. It was rumored that everyone who worked for the Order went through obsessive paranoia when they grew older. But now that Damar was involved....

With a sense of defeat, Garak reached over and lightly tapped the communications panel next to his computer terminal. "Garak to Captain Sisko, I have some information you might find useful...."

Corran sighed and leaned his head back on his flight chair. Three hours down, one to go. Then it was back to the station for guard duty. For a second, Corran snarled to himself. This situation was really beginning to wear thin on his nerves. One week at yellow alert, he could handle. Two, not ideal, but tolerable. Three..... Corran shut his eyes. It had been a wearying three weeks. He was hoping that something would happen soon, or else he would snap.

"You okay, Nine?" Wedge's voice asked over the comm speakers. "You're drifting a little."

Corran reddened slightly and quickly brought his fighter back into formation. The other five X-Wings continued on for a moment, then hung a gradual right, coming to a new heading that would loop back to the station. Corran tried to concentrate, but it was no use. He was so bored!

"Whistler!" he called to the astromech droid behind him. "Find me something interesting to look at!"

Whistler hooted a sour reply, indicating that he was just as bored as the pilot. Corran sighed as the droid scrolled through the limited sensor data the X-Wing collected. He shook his head. It all seemed so futile. True, there was the mysterious illness and the weapons shipments. That indicated that something was going on. But the way Sisko had been behaving, it was as if the Captain was expecting a full-scale invasion. What truly mystified Corran was why Sisko didn't call for reinforcements. The only people defending this area of space were the twelve X-Wings of Rogue Squadron, the *Defiant*, and the station itself. If the Dominion truly did come through the wormhole en masse, Deep Space Nine would only be a speed bump on their way to the rest of the Alpha Quadrant. Corran supposed it had something to do with the station commander's pride. He didn't want to admit he needed help out here. That was usually an attitude that killed people.

Corran's eyes dropped to the sensor display as Whistler tweeted a question. For a split second, a frown creased his brow. When he had asked the droid to find him something interesting, he hadn't expected anything like this. A neutrino count from the wormhole, an analysis of Deep Space Nine's subspace field, something benign like that. This was....completely different. A small disturbance in subspace was running parallel with Rogue Squadron, matching their vector and speed perfectly. That definitely was unusual.

The hairs on the back of Corran's neck stood up, a nagging feeling tugging at the back of his mind. A feeling of dread was welling up inside him, similar to the one he felt whenever he was around Erisi.....

Tom came around the corner, his phaser rifle tucked loosely into the crook of his arm. He gritted his teeth, trying to force a dispassionate look on his face. He hated guard duty. He truly despised it. If he had wanted to march up and down a corridor like a mindless drone, he would have joined the United Republic's Army, not Starfleet. He couldn't wait for this "crisis," or whatever it was, to be over. At least then he could log some serious flight time.

Nog came around the corner as well, sweeping his phaser rifle across the corridor, as if he expected an attacker to jump out of the shadows. For some odd reason, the Ferengi seemed to love this duty. Paris couldn't even begin to guess how many times Nog had annoyed him with his perfectly straight posture and crisp, military replies. Still, he had drawn Nog as his guard partner, and he was stuck with him for the duration. For a moment, Tom envied Riker. The transporter clone had drawn Erisi as a partner. What Tom would give to have the lovely Thyferran as a partner. She, at least, would probably be a better conversationalist than Nog.

Well, Tom mused, at least I'll get to see her for a few moments when I relieve her and Riker.

Tom rounded the corner to the reactor core, a big smile plastered on his lips.

"Well, Tom and Erisi, never fear, your....."

The words died in his lips. Instead of finding a bored Riker and Erisi standing guard over the entrance to the reactor core, Tom saw Riker sprawled on the ground, an angry red welt on his forehead. Tom immediately dropped his rifle and was at the fallen man's side, checking his pulse carefully. Thankfully, he was still alive. Tom slapped his commbadge quickly.

"Paris to Infirmary! Medical emergency by the reactor core!"

"On my way," was Dr. Bashir's reply.

After a few seconds, Riker groaned and slowly sat up, gingerly rubbing the back of his neck.

"Erisi...." he rasped.

"She's not here," Nog said, scanning the corridor carefully.

"No....." Riker groaned, falling back to the floor. "She....I.....stunned me. Could be anywhere....."

Riker collapsed on the ground, lapsing back into unconsciousness. Tom's eyes grew wide with shock. Erisi? She stunned him? But why?

Everything came crashing into place. That was why Corran was eyeing Erisi so suspiciously over the past few weeks! He suspected her all along! For a second, Paris directed a few ugly thoughts toward the Corellian. If Corran would have said something, none of this would have happened. Erisi would have been in a holding cell instead of roaming free on the station with an entire arsenal at her disposal.

Corran bit his lip, his feeling of dread growing. So far, that weird spatial anomaly had matched every maneuver Rogue Squadron made, never varying for a second in speed. It was strange. At first, Corran had suspected that it was a sensor echo. After all, how else could one explain an anomaly that could track an X-Wing that perfectly. Unfortunately, Whistler checked the sensor calibration and shot down that theory. The sensors were working just fine.

For a second, Corran was tempted to just shut down the sensors and ask Zraii, Rogue Squadron's Verpine technician, to give his X-Wing a thorough diagnostic once they were back. For some

reason that he couldn't fathom, though, his hand refused to flip the switch. An insistent buzzing was building in his ears. There was definitely something wrong, but he couldn't figure out what.

He quickly switched on the targeting computer, powering up his laser cannons at the same time. He dumped some power from his shields to the engines to keep up with the rest of the fighters, but turned his attention back to the mysterious anomaly. Flipping a few switches near his right hand, Corran had the targeting computer lock on to the anomaly. The strange blip on the sensors didn't respond. It simply continued to shadow Rogue Squadron, acting as if it really wasn't there. The buzzing continued to grow louder.

Suddenly, the comm channel came to life. "Sisko to Rogue Squadron, heads up. It appears as if something is happening on the station. We're going to red alert. Be prepared for anything!"

Corran winced to himself. Whoever had been receiving the weapons had obviously made their move. It had to be Erisi. There was no one else that made sense to Corran. He had surreptitiously checked everyone's records, finding no true motives for treason. Yet Erisi seemed guilty. At least, that's what his hunches told him. Now those same hunches were telling him that this anomaly was a threat as well. There had to be something he could do.....

Bashir pressed the hypospray against Riker's neck, a small hiss indicating that the stimulant had been forced beneath the other man's skin. Riker groaned softly and began to stir on the biobed. He was lucky, Bashir mused. If Erisi had been any closer to him when she shot him, Riker would be dead, not just stunned.

The doctor turned back and dropped the hypospray into its place. His eyes darted out the window to the Promenade. As a medical doctor, he could understand why everyone on the station was dragging. Constantly being on the alert for three weeks had begun to wear thin on everyone. The human body (or alien body, for that matter) could remain vigilant for so long. After that, exhaustion set in. Tempers would flare, emotions would run high. If something didn't happen to justify the alert and soon, the entire station could erupt into vicious fights.....or worse.

Bashir frowned when he saw a group in black robes enter the Promenade. He had never seen them before. All of them were men with hard chiseled features and passionless, dull eyes. He was still wondering at their identity when he heard a blaster click behind his head. He slowly turned, only to find himself staring down the muzzle of a stormtrooper rifle. For a while, Bashir could only stare at the weapon. Finally, though, he forced his gaze up to the owner of the weapon. Shock and surprise rippled through him.

"You!"

Tom glanced around the corridor, sweat beginning to trickle down his back. Harsh red alert lights flashed up and down the walls, giving the hallway an almost hellish pall. His grip tightened around the phaser rifle slightly. A grim, thin smile danced across his lips. For weeks, he had been hoping for the conclusion to this crisis. Now, though, he wasn't so sure.

"Tom!" Nog shrieked, almost causing Tom to leap out of his skin. "Get over here!"

Biting off a curse, Tom dashed down the corridor. Rounding the corner, he found a very frightened Nog standing in front of an open maintenance locker, pointing into it with a quaking hand. For a split second, he almost chided the Ferengi for snooping around. The reprimand died in his throat when he saw what Nog had found.

There, thrown ignominiously in a heap on the floor, lay Erisi Dlarit, a blackened phaser burn in the middle of her chest. Her eyes stared open in mute shock, her face contorted in pain. A thousand thoughts began to whirl through Tom's mind. At first, he thought that the crisis was over.

The traitor had been found after she had accidentally killed herself. For a split second, Tom tried to reconcile what he was seeing with what Riker had told him. According to the transporter clone, Erisi had stunned him and then run off. Yet here she was, dead. Why would Riker have lied to him unless.....

The more rational part of his mind, the one that wasn't addled by three week's worth of exhaustion, forced the pieces together. A chill spread through Tom's bones as he slapped his commbadge with a trembling hand.

"Paris to OPS, we have a serious problem...."

Corran gritted his teeth. There was just no denying it any more. That anomalous patch of space meant trouble, and there was only one way to prove it. Corran stomped on the etheric rudder pedal with his right foot, causing his X-Wing to swing around in a sharp angle. Whistler howled a protest which Corran ignored.

"Uh, Nine, what are you doing?" Ooryl's hesitant voice filled the cockpit.

"Checking on a hunch, Ten. Be right back," he growled, shutting down the comm circuit.

"Whistler, target that anomaly. We're going to see what happens when I shoot it."

There was a tense silence in the cockpit for several seconds before Whistler rattled off a dozen reasons why Corran shouldn't even think of shooting an unknown subspace phenomena, most of them having to do with their own death and destruction. Corran ignored them, punching up the power to his shields.

"I don't care, Whistler, do it anyway!"

The astromech droid let out a mournful hoot, the anomaly suddenly appearing as a rounded blob on the HUD. Corran brought the ship around, the cross hairs bisecting the anomaly. Corran tensed, watching the numbers scroll down as he closed the distance between himself and the abnormality. At two and a half kilometers, the aiming reticle glowed a solid red, indicating that Whistler had locked on to the target. Finally, when Corran was a mere kilometer from it, he opened fire. Crimson laser bolts sliced through space, stabbing deep within the heart of the irregularity.

The result was more than he had expected. The anomaly erupted into a fiery explosion, debris flying in all directions. Corran had to quickly jerk the stick to one side, his fighter barely missing one of the larger pieces by mere centimeters. He craned his head around, startled at what it was.

Tumbling through space was the warped but still recognizable solar panel of a TIE Fighter.

"Uh, Rogue Leader....." Corran started.

He never got the chance to finish. The space around him began to boil and throb, almost like a living creature. Then, slowly, shapes began to form outside the cockpit. Within seconds, the distinct white arrowhead shape of five Imperial II class Star Destroyers appeared before Corran. That didn't worry him. What had his full attention was the fifteen squadrons of TIE Fighters that boiled out of them.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Wedge barked over the comm channel. "Stick with your wingman and hang on tight. This is going to be rough!"

Bashir's head jerked around at the sudden explosion outside the Promenade. Thomas Riker's eyes darted to the viewports as well, a surprised look on his face. That slowly melted into one of grim determination.

"All right, boys!" he shouted. "Looks like the party is going to start a little early!"

The black-robed individuals suddenly threw off their cloaks, revealing the uniforms of Dominion commandos. Each man had a stormtrooper rifle in his hands along with a belt bristling with other weapons. Bashir couldn't be sure, but he counted at least fifty commandos in this part of the Promenade alone. There was no telling how many others were scattered throughout the station.

Without saying a word, the commandos opened fire, picking off the security personnel present and firing indiscriminately into the crowd. The civilian population of Deep Space Nine scattered, fleeing in terror before the onslaught. Bashir glanced at Riker's face. The clone's eyes danced with wicked delight as he watched the carnage unfolding around him. Bashir took his momentary distraction to dive behind a biobed. Riker noticed the sudden movement and opened fire. Angry red laser bolts burned into the wall over Bashir's head, leaving blackened scorch marks. The doctor frantically looked around, hoping that something near him would present itself as a weapon. If he couldn't fight back, he was good as dead.

Sisko felt the floor of OPS rock beneath his feet as the five Star Destroyers opened fire. The station's shields held up admirably under the turbolaser fire, but he knew that wouldn't last. According to the reports that were filtering in, at least a hundred Dominion commandos were engaged in firefights all over the station. Odo's security officers were handling the crisis admirably, but they were severely outnumbered. Not only that, but according to the station's sensors, one of the fighter squadrons attacking DS9 were composed entirely of TIE Bombers. Sisko knew that most fighter pilots considered the hulking double-hulled bombers to be something of a joke. True, they were heavily armored and could carry some truly nasty ordinance, but they were insufferably slow and easy prey to the United Republic's faster fighters. Unfortunately, the six X-Wings of Rogue Squadron were already preoccupied with the other fourteen squadrons. The TIE Bombers would soon be within range and ready to fire their payload at the station.

"Chief!" Sisko called. "Try to lock on to the TIE Bombers with some of the phaser banks. Have all other weaponry focus on one of the Star Destroyers. We probably won't put much of a dent in it, but we have to make it look good. While you're at it, signal Commander Celchu on the *Defiant*. Have him back up Rogue Squadron as much as possible."

O'Brien acknowledged the order. Sisko turned back to the viewscreen and shook his head. The leader of the Dominion forces had planned this out all too well. The weapons shipments, the genetically engineered virus, having the station on edge for three weeks to dull their response time. It was all too perfect. Only one person could have come up with a strategy that intricate.

Gul Damar stared out from the bridge of the lead Star Destroyer with grim pleasure. It had been a long time since he had been to Terroc Nor. Far too long, by his reckoning. He had been there five years ago when the Dominion was driven from the station and back through the Maw wormhole. Damar had barely been able to escape back behind the Cardassian border. Most of his companions weren't as lucky. At the time, Damar swore that he would return some day and have his revenge. A grim smile played at his lips. It looked as if that time was now.

"Feeling a little nostalgic, Gul Damar?" a voice asked from behind.

Damar turned and nodded to the figure seated in the command chair. The owner of the voice slowly stood, adjusting the meticulously pressed white Grand Admiral's uniform with his blue-skinned hands. Glowing red eyes swept over the efficient bridge of the *Chimaera*, absorbing all of the officers as they went about their business. Finally, those eyes came to rest on Damar. He squirmed slightly. He hated it when Grand Admiral Thrawn stared at him like that.

"Well don't," Thrawn said evenly. "We are here to destroy Deep Space Nine, not retake it."

Thrawn took a few steps and stared out the viewport as well. The barest hint of a smile played at the corners of the alien's mouth. That only sent another chill up Damar's spine. He would give anything to know how Thrawn's mind worked. Damar had been assigned to the *Chimaera* only a year ago, but he had seen Thrawn break just about every accepted strategy the Dominion had. What made it truly amazing was that everything the Grand Admiral did seemed to succeed. He was able to conceive elaborate strategies that never failed. For many years, Thrawn had used his skills to help tame the Unknown Region on the other side of Cardassian space. Now, though, the Emperor had uses for Thrawn's expertise here.

Thrawn pointed at the small circular shape of a United Republic starship. Damar glanced at it, identifying it as the *Defiant*. It was a small ship, but it packed a lot of power. It was rumored that the *Defiant* had gone up against four Dreadnaught cruisers alone and defeated them without taking any damage itself. That was impressive, to say the least. Not that Damar was worried about it now. The small ship was clearly outmatched by five Imperial II Star Destroyers.

"What about it?" Damar asked.

"Unless I am mistaken, Lieutenant Commander Tycho Celchu is in command of that vessel. He is a Trill," Thrawn explained.

Damar frowned, unsure of what Celchu's race had to do with anything. Thrawn turned to the communications officer.

"Have the *Eradicator* and Theta Squadron execute a Phinehas Strike maneuver against the *Defiant*, but have the *Eradicator* keep its superstructure towards the *Defiant*," Thrawn instructed.

The comm officer seemed confused for a second or two, but relayed the orders. Damar stared at Thrawn, thinking for a second that the Grand Admiral had gone insane. The Phinehas Strike was an extremely basic maneuver. It was taught to cadets their first year at the Academy. Just about everyone had heard of it and there were at least six different countering moves. Thrawn met Damar's gaping look with a bemused smile.

"Watch, Damar, and learn," Thrawn whispered, nodding towards the battle.

Damar turned back to the viewport and watched as the *Eradicator* carried out its orders. Slowly rotated, pointing its superstructure straight towards the *Defiant*. At the same time, the TIE Fighters of Theta Squadron formed a ring around the *Defiant*, orbiting the vessel at high speeds. Occasionally, two of the fighters would dart in, peppering the United Republic official with green laser blasts. Suddenly, though, all the TIEs swooped in, blasters screaming. The *Defiant* was able to wing a few, but soon, the TIE Fighters had cleared the larger vessel. Then the *Eradicator* struck. It opened fire, ion cannons and turbolasers striking together. Damar expected the other ship to respond with a brutal attack that would lay the *Eradicator* to waste, but the smaller ship simply sat there, accepting the punishment. Damar's jaw dropped open in shock. It had worked! He turned back to Thrawn, amazement shining in his eyes. The Grand Admiral only smirked.

"Know your opponents, Damar," Thrawn stated simply. "Study them. Then you will be able to get them to do anything you want. Take Captain Sisko, for example. A proud Terran, never wanting to admit defeat or ask for help. Sisko is not someone that you attack directly. You must wear him down. Divide his attention in many directions. By having him deal with supposed arms shipments and a mysterious illness, I made him unsure of what to expect. By making him wait three weeks, I made him and his forces tired. And now, I can defeat him with little difficulty."

"You mean the Dominion can defeat him," a voice pointed out from behind the Grand Admiral.

Damar whirled on Weyoun, the Vorta observer for Thrawn's fleet. Damar hated the sycophantic creatures. They had been specifically bred by the Changelings to be the Emperor's eyes and ears

throughout the Galaxy. It was rumored that the Vorta even considered the withering dictator to be a god. Thrawn leveled his red eyes on the Vorta.

"Of course, Weyoun," Thrawn said coolly. "But for now, I am the Dominion. Don't forget that."

The Grand Admiral turned back to the communications officer.

"Signal TIE Bomber squadrons Gamma and Delta. Instruct them to begin their run on Deep Space Nine. Have the *Imperious* and *Iron Fist* stand by to bombard the station once the shields have dropped."

Thrawn turned back and stared at Deep Space Nine, the faintest hint of a smile playing at the edge of his lips.

"Soon, the glory of the Dominion will return to the Alpha Quadrant!"

Bashir nervously peeked over the edge of the biobed. On the bright side, Riker had left the Infirmary. Unfortunately, that was the only bit of good news. A fire fight had erupted on the Promenade, and Bashir could tell that the Dominion's commandos were winning. Beyond the massive viewports, Bashir could see two Impstar Deuces moving in closer to the station. Things were not looking good for Deep Space Nine.

The doctor quietly stood, carefully creeping across the Infirmary towards his office. He had a small holdout blaster hidden underneath the console. True, it wouldn't do much good in a fight like this, but Bashir wanted to have it ready, just in case.

Kneeling down behind the computer terminal, Bashir searched for the weapon with one hand. He was so intent on his search that he almost missed the sound of an access panel opening behind him. Bashir froze, imagining that more Dominion commandos had been crawling through the access tunnels and were now going to attack him from behind. Well, they weren't going to take him without a fight. He ripped the blaster from its position and spun around, letting out what he hoped sounded like a vicious war cry.

Nawara Ven threw his hands up in surprise, his phaser rifle dropping to the floor.

"Relax, Doctor!" Nawara hissed. "It's only me!"

Bashir let out a sigh of relief, lowering his own weapon. He watched as the Twi'lek pulled himself out of the hatch and sealed it behind him.

"What were you doing in the crawlspace?" Bashir demanded quietly.

"Trying to get here. There are commandos all over the place down near the reactor, so I figured that this would be the safest route," Nawara explained, glancing out at the Promenade.

"What about the reactor? You didn't leave it unguarded, did you?"

Nawara shook his head and replied, "Nog, Gavin, and Paris have that place pretty well covered. I thought maybe I could help up here."

"Between your phaser rifle and my holdout blaster, I'm sure we'll be able to make a big difference," Bashir commented sardonically.

"Do you have a better idea?" Nawara demanded.

"Actually, I might," Bashir replied, pulling out a tricorder. "But we'll need a....biological sample first."

Nawara blinked his blood red eyes, confused. Bashir sighed.

"We'll need one of the commandos."

Corran hauled back on the X-Wing's stick, barely missing another TIE Fighter by mere centimeters. Whistler screamed in horror as Corran lined up another shot, firing the lasers. Twin

crimson laser beams lanced out, puncturing the ball cockpit of a TIE Bomber. The heavy ordinance in the bomber exploded, sending debris in all directions. He gritted his teeth.

"Whistler, how many more TIEs do we have?" he shouted over the roar of the battle.

The droid's answer scrolled by on one of the cockpit's terminals. Corran's spirit fell. By his count, he had vaped ten TIEs already. The other six pilots of Rogue Squadron were probably doing just as well. Unfortunately, there were still more than fifty Dominion fighters in the area, with more being launched by the Impstar Deuces. Incredible odds were nothing new to Rogue Squadron, but this was a losing battle.

"Nine to Rogue Leader, what's the story?" Corran asked. "Has Captain Sisko called for any reinforcements? Can he at least scramble the rest of the Squadron?"

"Negative, Nine," Wedge replied. "Everyone else is trying to contain some Dominion commandos. Keep after the TIE Bombers. We can't afford to let any through."

Corran's X-Wing rocked violently as a TIE exploded nearby. Another X-Wing roared overhead.

"So what's going on?" Corran demanded. "We can't hold them off forever!"

"I don't think we'll need to," Wedge answered. "From what Captain Sisko has told me, he has the whole situation well in hand."

The deck plates bucked violently under Sisko's feet, displays exploding around him. O'Brien immediately latched on to his station, trying to hold himself upright. The lights dimmed slightly, sputtered, then surged back to life. Sisko gritted his teeth. Deep Space Nine couldn't take much more of this.

"Shields are at thirty percent and falling rapidly!" O'Brien cried.

Sisko nodded to himself, considering it. This had gone on long enough.

"Hail the lead ship," Sisko growled. "Ask for Grand Admiral Thrawn personally."

O'Brien stared at Sisko in surprise. He quickly shook himself and activated the transmitters.

"Sir!" the communications officer called. "Captain Sisko is hailing us. He is asking for you personally!"

Damar blinked in surprise. Sisko was asking specifically for Thrawn? So far as he knew, the Starfleet captain should have no idea who was commanding the Dominion fleet. How would Sisko know that Thrawn was here? Damar quickly pushed such thoughts aside. Obviously, Sisko wanted to just speak with the admiral or captain in charge, not Thrawn specifically. The Terran probably wanted to surrender. A grim smile spread on Damar's lips. That would be a futile gesture. Thrawn wouldn't stop until all that remained of Deep Space Nine were free-floating molecules.

"Put him on screen," Thrawn instructed.

The bridge's main viewscreen lit up, showing a very somber Benjamin Sisko.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn, I presume," Sisko growled.

Damar's stomach twisted into a knot. Sisko had known who was in charge of the fleet after all. How was that possible? Was there an intelligence leak on one of the ships? Thrawn apparently chose to ignore the revelation, stepping forward.

"You presume correctly, Captain. If this is in regards to any sort of surrender, hold your tongue. We won't stop....."

"Actually, Grand Admiral, this is to discuss your surrender," Sisko shot back confidently.

Damar almost laughed. Thrawn, surrender? It was inconceivable! Thrawn actually chuckled, a low, throaty laugh that chilled Damar to the bone.

"Surrender? Me? My dear captain, you must be joking. We have you out-numbered, out-gunned, and we already have troops on your station. There is no way for you to win."

"Actually, Thrawn, you're the one out-gunned."

"Admiral!" a frightened voice called. "There's a massive tachyon surge! There are ships decloaking!"

"Where?" Damar demanded.

"All around us!"

Damar turned back to the viewport. Sure enough, he could see large areas of space pulsating. For a second, he wondered if more Dominion ships had stolen Romulan cloaking devices and were coming to join the fight. Instead of the white arrow-heads of Star Destroyers, the newcomers were all a uniform green. Damar's heart skipped a beat when he realized what the new ships were.

They were all Klingon Birds of Prey.

Corran jumped, startled, as a Klingon bird of prey swooped over his head. The Klingons didn't waste any time, green disruptor bolts lancing out and destroying a TIE Bomber. He craned his neck around and watched as more of the Klingon ships swarmed around the Star Destroyers, firing disruptors and photon torpedoes. He cried out triumphantly.

"Can it, Nine, we still have TIEs out here," Wedge chided. "But I agree. It looks like we're in the clear."

Bashir ran the tricorder over the fallen form of the Dominion commando. Thankfully, Nawara had taken the request for a "biological sample" quite seriously. The Twi'lek officer had snuck out into the fray, stunned one of the commandos, and dragged him back into the Infirmary. Bashir gritted his teeth. He still wasn't sure what he was looking for. He only hoped he would know when he found it.

Bashir's genetically enhanced brain leapt into overdrive. That was one thing that no one else knew about. Bashir had gone through a round of genetic enhancements when he was very young to correct some birth defects. His parents had hoped it would help him excel, and it had. The only problem was, the procedure was highly illegal. Bashir had to keep his true nature secret for years. As far as he knew, the only people who knew about it was himself and his parents.

The tricorder warbled slightly as it picked up on a series of cellular imperfection in the man's heart. Bashir frowned, surprised at the readings. So far as he knew, these imperfections were caused by an extremely rare condition called Wayfarer's Syndrome. His augmented memory quickly ran through everything he knew about malady, hoping that there was something that he could exploit.

Thankfully, there was only one cause for Wayfarer's Syndrome. There was a chemical accident on a Dominion controlled world called Wayfarer's Haven about a year ago. Everyone that had been stationed there contracted the disease. Bashir's mind raced at the implications. Wayfarer's Haven was close to Deep Space Nine. It was perfectly conceivable that these commandos had come from there. If he could find some way to incapacitate someone with Wayfarer's Syndrome, he would be able to take out most, if not all, of the commandos.

Bashir's mind latched on to one thing. His eyes widened when he realized what he had to do. Without saying a word, he leapt over to his computer console, pulling up the command pathways for environmental control.

"Have something?" Nawara asked hopefully.

"I think so," Bashir said, explaining what he had discovered.

"So?" the Twi'lek prompted, his brain tails twitching nervously.

"So, people who suffer from Wayfarer's Syndrome can only live in very specific environments. True, they can handle most Class M environments, but if the atmosphere gases don't meet certain requirements, they tend to pass out," Bashir replied. "So.....computer, this is Bashir, Delta seven four one. Raise the level of nitrogen and carbon dioxide on the station by twenty percent and lower the pressure by three kilobars."

The computer chattered to itself for a few seconds. Bashir tensed. If this didn't work.....

Nog peeked up over the tipped over tool cart that he, Paris, and Gavin were using as cover. Thankfully, they had managed to pick off several of the commandos who were trying to get past them. Unfortunately, there were still fifteen commandos, all of whom were remaining out of sight, only appearing long enough to fire several laser bolts at them.

Paris fired again, his phaser rifle leaving an ugly scorch mark along one wall.

"We can't hold them back much longer!" he growled.

Suddenly, the blaster fire ceased. Nog frowned, expecting it to be a trick. He peeked over the edge of the cart again, expecting to catch a laser blast between the eyes. When nothing happened, he cautiously stood up, looking around the corridor in surprise. All of the commandos were lying on the floor, gasping for breath. Slowly, one by one, they collapsed into unconsciousness. Paris and Nog exchanged confused glances before the human shrugged and tapped his commbadge.

"Paris to OPS, the attackers appear to have been neutralized."

"Thank you, Mr. Paris," Sisko replied before turning back to the viewscreen. The burning red eyes of Thrawn stared back at him venomously. It almost caused Sisko to laugh.

"Did you hear that, Thrawn?" Sisko asked. "You're the one out-numbered, your commandos have been neutralized, and within moments, your shields will drop and the Klingons will beam aboard. I can guarantee you that they'd like nothing better than to kill a few Dominion troops. Face it. It's over."

Thrawn snarled, pushing some of his blue-black hair into place. The bridge of the *Chimaera* had descended into chaos in a matter of a few minutes. The Klingons had managed to disable most of the Star Destroyer's weapon systems and its shields were beginning to buckle. What was worse, the TIEs were beginning to report significant losses as the Rogue X-Wings and Klingon ships were picking them apart. Damar knew that if they remained here much longer, they would be the ones that were free-floating atoms, not Deep Space Nine.

"You may have won this time, Captain," Thrawn spat. "But mark my words, the next time, you won't be as fortunate."

Thrawn slammed a hand down on the communicator's controls and turned to the helm officer.

"Order a retreat immediately and withdraw to Cardassia Prime."

Corran watched from his X-Wing as the TIEs scrambled for the Star Destroyers. The Dominion's capital ships were slowly turning to flee. He let out a sigh of relief. The battle was over.

"All Rogues, return to the station," Wedge ordered. "I think we can finally rest."

Thomas Riker looked around the Promenade in a panic. Most of his collaborators lie unconscious around him. So far as he could tell, he was the only Dominion agent awake. His

breathing was becoming more and more ragged as the implications crashed down upon him. Within seconds, Odo's meager (but conscious) security personnel would be swarming over his position. He would be arrested, tried, and executed as a traitor. He couldn't allow that to happen. Nor would he. He had prepared for this seemingly impossible situation.

Riker tapped his commbadge and whispered, "Computer, execute program Riker, alpha one."

He began to chuckle as the familiar effect of a transporter beam washed over him. Thrawn might have failed to destroy the station, but he wouldn't.

Sisko smiled triumphantly as the last of the Star Destroyers leapt into warp, retreating from the station. He turned to O'Brien and smiled.

"Chief, secure from red alert. Send my thanks to General Martock for his assistance. Also, check with all the security teams to make sure the commandos really have been neutralized...."

The words died in Sisko's throat as the lights in OPS flickered and then went out. For a split second, he was worried that Thrawn had changed his mind and was willing to risk the Klingons' wrath. After a quick check of the still functioning sensors, he discovered that wasn't the case.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Someone's cut power to the main computer. It also looks like they've disabled the transporters," O'Brien explained.

Sisko's commbadge chittered. He slapped it, annoyed.

"Sisko here."

"Captain, this is Flight Officer Nog. Someone has beamed into the reactor core and jammed the lock. It appears as if they're trying to disable the cooling system."

Sisko's body went numb with fear. If that individual succeeded, the reactor would overload and the resulting explosion would destroy the station.

"Try to get in there and stop them, Mr. Nog," Sisko barked, heading for a jeffries tube access hatch. "I'm on my way."

Paris pried open the access port next to the reactor room's door, exposing a series of power cables and isolinear chips. He bit his lower lip, scanning the contents. When Sisko ordered them to get into the reactor room, he obviously didn't know what a complicated task that was. Hot wiring the door was not going to be easy, especially since whoever it was that was in there had jammed the opening mechanism. Paris bit off a curse as one of the cables sparked at him.

"How's it going?" Gavin asked.

"Just let me work!" Paris snapped, pulling out another isolinear chip.

"You know, this looks a lot like the locking mechanism for my sister's door back on Tatooine," Gavin commented.

Paris shot an annoyed look at the young man, hoping that he would take the hint and shut up. Gavin seemed to notice the unspoken message, but he ignored it.

"See, she used to lock herself in her room all the time. She wouldn't open the door for anything, so we always had to pick the lock," Gavin explained.

"What does this have to do with anything?" Nog asked, looking up from his tricorder. Paris had ordered him to keep an eye on the intruder. So far, whoever it was hadn't succeeded in doing too much damage, but he or she still had a lot of time.

"Well, if you just do this...." Gavin said, reaching into the access hatch.

Before Tom could stop him, Gavin latched on to one of the power cables and yanked. It came free, releasing a shower of sparks. Tom fell backwards, startled, but was even more surprised when the door obediently opened.

"....it should open right up," Gavin finished, satisfied.

Tom blushed, giving Gavin a sheepish look. Gavin nodded. He understood. Tom quickly scooped up his phaser rifle and started into Deep Space Nine's reactor core.

In retrospect, Tom realized that he shouldn't have been surprised at who the saboteur was. Thomas Riker was hurriedly patching and repatching circuitry together, causing safety indicator lights to flash from green to a very angry red. Paris tensed, hoping to get the drop on the transporter clone. Unfortunately, as Nog entered the room, he accidentally brushed a tool box, causing it to tip over and the contents to clatter across the deck.

Riker spun, snatching up his blaster, and fired. Red bolts lanced through Nog's shoulder and clipped one of Gavin's arms. The two pilots fell to the ground with a pained cry. Paris leapt aside, ducking behind a console quickly. He spun around, back to the wall, and quickly primed his phaser rifle.

"Give it up, Riker!" he shouted. "You'll never make it off this station alive!"

"Neither will you!" Riker returned, a tinge of insanity in his voice. "That's the whole idea! My survival doesn't matter. Nothing does but destroying this station!"

Paris gritted his teeth. Maybe, if he could keep him talking, he could keep Riker distracted long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

"So why are you doing it, Riker? Was Corran right? Are you doing it because you're a transporter clone of William Riker? Are you jealous?"

Riker laughed, an unbalanced giggle that sent chills racing up and down Tom's spine. He had to finish this, and quickly.

"Don't make me laugh!" Riker snorted. "Transporter clone? What a load of nerf dung! Only an idiot would think that a transporter clone could exist. I'm a real clone, one formed from a spaarti cylinder, you moron!"

Paris' breath caught in his throat. A spaarti cylinder was a relic from the Clone Eugenics War. It was able to create clones at phenomenal speeds, but those clones usually were mentally deranged. No one was entirely sure of why, but most of the cylinders had been destroyed at the end of the War. Obviously, it wasn't enough.

"Thrawn made me three years ago and had me infiltrate Rogue Squadron. He said that I would probably come in handy some day. I certainly did, didn't I?"

"You were the one receiving the weapons shipments?"

"Of course! And I was the one who allowed those commandos on the station. And led the attack. And now, I'll be the one who destroys Deep Space Nine!"

Paris took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. What he was about to do was extremely foolish, but he didn't have much of a choice. With one final glance towards heaven, he spun around the corner....

.....only to find himself staring down the barrel of Riker's blaster.

"Drop it," Riker hissed dangerously.

Paris did as he was told, his phaser rifle dropping to the deck. Riker began to back away towards one of the control panels. He pointed at one flashing red switch with glee.

"All I have to do is touch that button," he said, "and boom! No more DS9!"

Riker's hand stabbed towards the button. It never made it. One of the panels suddenly seemed to come to life, bubbling upwards and latching on to the clone's hand. Riker struggled against it,

but another part of the panel seemed to turn gelatinous, forming into a tentacle that lashed out and wrapped itself around Riker's neck. The clone struggled for a few seconds, desperately trying to claw it away from his throat. With one quick motion, the tentacle snapped his neck with a sickening crunch and dropped his limp body.

Paris watched as Odo dropped from the panel, his body quickly re-forming. He looked down at Riker's dead body with a grim smile.

"I knew it would be a good idea if I kept an eye on the reactor core," Odo rumbled.

"Captain's log, Stardate 51847.3. Yesterday's attack by the Dominion has left us all a little numb. On the one hand, we are relieved that the crisis is finally over. On the other, we all know that they were trying to eliminate us for a reason. Until that reason surfaces, we can't let our guard down. On a positive note, the Bajoran personnel are getting better, and Starfleet is sending us the Ninth Fleet to help blockade the Wormhole. On a less than ideal note, our friend, Mr. Garak, seems to have left the station....."

Sisko walked into Garak's shop, examining the many racks of clothing. For a short moment, Sisko smiled in amusement. For years, he had known Garak. True, he always suspected that the "simple tailor" was more than that, but he never had any proof. It was ironic that Garak was the one that furnished the proof. It had surprised Sisko when Garak contacted him a week ago, letting him know that Grand Admiral Thrawn was probably responsible for the weapons shipments and illness. It had been Garak that suggested contacting the Klingons as hidden back-up.

Unfortunately, Garak had used the chaos that followed the battle to steal a Tyderian shuttle and escape from Deep Space Nine. That shouldn't have surprised Sisko. Obviously, Garak had the skills to steal a ship. It wouldn't surprise Sisko if Garak could steal a Dreadnaught without anyone noticing. It shouldn't have surprised him that Garak had fled either. They both knew what Starfleet would have done with someone formerly connected with the Obsidian Order. "Debriefing" was merely a polite term for it. Garak might never have been free again.

Once Sisko had learned of Garak's escape, he had Corran and Whistler look over the "simple tailor's" computer files. Naturally, he hadn't expected Garak to leave much. Nothing incriminating, to be sure. That was why Sisko was surprised when Corran reported that Whistler had found an encrypted file addressed specifically to him.

"Sorry to disturb you, Captain," Corran said with a lop-sided smile. "I was just as surprised as you that Whistler found something like this. Unfortunately, he hasn't been able to slice it open yet. According to a connected file, you'd know the password as a dearly beloved person."

Sisko frowned, thinking it over for a second. A smile tugged at the side of his mouth and he said, "Computer, access file, password Jennifer."

Garak's computer chattered to itself for a few seconds, the viewscreen suddenly coming to life with the image of Garak. The Cardassian smiled broadly, his intense blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Ah, Captain!" Garak said cheerfully. "If you're reading this, this means that my escape attempt was successful. I'm sure you understand why I had to leave Deep Space Nine. That doesn't mean, however, that I can't be of more service to you. Attached to this file is a list of everything I know of Dominion operations in the Alpha Quadrant. It should give Starfleet Intelligence something to chew on for quite a while. You may wish to note that Thrawn has ten cloaking devices, not just five. I'm not sure what he did with the others, but you can be assured it is nothing good."

"Good-bye, Captain. I'm not sure when I'll see you again. I have some.....personal business to attend to, something that will help the United Republic in the long run. Please give my regards to the good doctor and Commander Antilles for me. I will miss our lunches together."

The viewscreen went dark. Sisko shook his head and chuckled.

"Lieutenant Horn, please transfer that attached file to my office," he sighed, leaving the shop.

Corran nodded, patting Whistler on the head. "Good job."

The droid gave a short series of self-satisfied hoots that caused Corran to smile. He was about to stand when the shop doors hissed open. Tom Paris stepped through, looking over the suits whimsically.

"You know, I had brought an outfit in to Garak just two days ago for alterations. I suppose they'll never get done now, will they?" Paris asked good-naturedly.

Corran shrugged and replied, "Probably not."

"I hear you nailed fifteen TIEs yesterday, Horn," Paris said.

Corran nodded, saying, "I would have gotten more if the Klingons hadn't shown up."

"I'm sure," Paris replied sardonically. "You know, if I had been out there, I would have gotten twenty."

The Corellian snorted in amusement. As far as he was concerned, that was unlikely. Of course, he was biased. The smile on his lips died as a revelation struck him. Paris noticed the change and frowned as well.

"What is it?"

"You may have an opportunity to back up your claim, Paris," Corran said quietly. "I don't think this is over yet."

"What do you mean?" Paris asked. "Riker's dead, we've found all of the smuggled weapons, Thrawn has tuckered tail and run. It's over, Horn. Pure and simple."

Corran gave Tom a condescending look, replying, "This is far from over. Why do you suppose they were attacking Deep Space Nine in the first place? Just for the hell of it? No, this was part of a much larger operation. They were trying to get rid of us for a reason."

"But why?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure we're going to find out."

Captain Sisko obviously felt the same way. Even though the obvious threat had passed, he still kept the station at high alert. Thankfully, it wasn't a constant yellow alert, but it was just enough to keep people on their toes.

That sense of readiness had infected Commander Antilles as well. In the week following Thrawn's attack, he had scheduled twice as many drills and training flights as usual. Rogue Squadron usually found themselves in the cockpit of their X-Wings, flying against each other in mock battles. True, the pilots didn't mind all that much. It gave them a chance to do what they loved best: fly. At the same time, though, it was beginning to get old.

"Here we go again," Paris muttered under his breath as the X-Wings were launched from the station by a small catapult. Mustang growled its assent, swiveling its dome head around to look at the all-too-familiar stars.

"*Defiant* is away and proceeding to way point alpha," Sisko's voice reported over the radio.

That, in and of itself, was surprising. For the first time ever, Sisko was insisting on joining Rogue Squadron during their exercises. Chief O'Brien and Dr. Bashir also went out with the *Defiant*, leaving Kira and Odo the only senior officers on board. Tom wasn't really sure what the Captain was trying to accomplish. After all, Commander Celchu was perfectly capable of handling

the *Defiant*. True, Thrawn had shot up the battleship pretty badly, but Chief O'Brien had managed to repair the worst of the damage. Maybe Sisko just wanted to make sure the ship was running as it should. Not only that, but Tycho was also piloting an X-Wing for the time being. Riker's "unfortunate" death had created an opening in the Squadron. Until a suitable replacement could be found, Tycho was more than happy to pilot an X-Wing again.

At any rate, Tom fell in with the rest of the fighters, heading for way point beta. In this exercise, the *Defiant* would pretend to be a Carrack class cruiser and simulate an attack run on Deep Space Nine. Rogue Squadron was to intercept the "cruiser" and disable it, not destroy it. Considering the X-Wings didn't have ion cannons, disabling any ship would be difficult to say the least. That, Tom supposed, was the point of the exercise.

"All right, Rogues, we're taking this by the books," Wedge's voice sounded over the comm system. "One Flight, we hang back by the station. Two Flight, take down the cruiser's shields. Three Flight, have your astromech's target the engines with your photon torpedoes."

Obviously, the X-Wings weren't loaded with real photon torpedoes. Launching live ordinance at a United Republic ship was frowned on to say the least. In reality, the fighters' targeting computers would send information to the *Defiant*'s computer and vice versa. The computers would tally up the hits and respond by making the fighters or *Defiant* sufficiently "damaged."

"All right, Three Flight," Paris sighed. "Form up on me. You all have your astromechs working?"

Three affirmative clicks sounded over the comm channel. Paris rolled his eyes in disgust. These drills were becoming so boring! Sisko and Wedge seemed to play them completely by the book. The same tactics, the same mindless attacks, with no creativity or originality. For once, Tom wished that Sisko would try something new other than Dominion regulation tactics. Anything would be better than this....

He frowned, glancing over his shoulder. It appeared that the wormhole had just flickered, almost as if it were preparing to open. That was unusually, to say the least. The exercise had been scheduled specifically for a time when there would be no traffic in or out of the Maw. What could....

Suddenly, the wormhole flared open completely. A cold knot began to form in Tom's stomach when he saw what was coming through. A Victory-class Star Destroyer, then an Imperial-class. Then an Impstar Deuce. Then another Impstar Deuce. It seemed like there would be no end to them.

"All astromechs! This is Commander Wedge Antilles, clearance code Gamma seven three nine enable. Clear simulation parameters and allow for full power to lasers!" Wedge's voice cried.

"Commander, what about our torpedo bays?" Nog sounded afraid, and with good reason. The Dominion ships were still pouring through the wormhole. According to Mustang, twenty Star Destroyers had come through, and it appeared as if more were on their way.

"No time, Seven. Besides, Captain Sisko informs me that the *Defiant* will go after the capital ships while DS9 provides us with cover. We just need to keep their fighters busy."

Tom almost laughed. If all the Star Destroyers launched their TIEs, the eleven X-Wings of Rogue Squadron would be overwhelmed within seconds. Still, he gritted his teeth and prepared to go after the first TIE that presented itself. Before he could request Mustang to target an enemy fighter, though, the droid warbled, clearly frightened. Tom looked up. The cold knot in his stomach began to churn.

Exiting the wormhole was a Super Star Destroyer. No, make that two. Tom's spirits were completely destroyed when he saw the third SSD leave. Mercifully, the wormhole closed behind

them, signaling that there probably weren't any more Dominion ships on the way. Unfortunately, the ones in Bajoran space were more than enough.

Almost instantly, half of the Star Destroyers launched their TIE Fighters. It appeared as if the space around the larger ships had suddenly come alive. It looked like flies swarming around a carcass. Unfortunately, the "flies" had soon turned their attention to Rogue Squadron. Tom braced himself as the first wave of TIEs approached. This was going to get messy.

Sisko gripped the sides of his chair angrily, staring phaser blasts at the Dominion ships. So this was what Thrawn had been up to. He was supposed to obliterate Deep Space Nine so the Dominion could launch a major invasion of the Alpha Quadrant. Well, they were in for a surprise. The Ninth Fleet was a mere half hour away. Even though it seemed like a lost cause, Sisko was bound and determined to hold off the enemy fleet until reinforcements arrived.

"Chief!" he shouted, turning to O'Brien. "Execute attack pattern omega. Lieutenant Dexter," he turned to the officer at tactical, "target the lead Star Destroyer with a full spread of quantum torpedoes. Once we batter down their shields, switch to ion cannons and aim for their engine assembly."

The star field on the viewscreen shifted as Chief O'Brien carried out the gut-wrenching maneuver. The targeted Star Destroyer appeared on the screen, the white quantum torpedoes sailing through the vacuum. They exploded against the Star Destroyer's shield, their combined fury causing them to blink out of existence. Blue ion blasts followed, dancing across the larger ships engine housing. What looked like a lightning storm flashed over the hull and soon, the Star Destroyer hung in space, virtually dead. Sisko smiled and clapped his hands together. One done, thirty-two to go.

He was about to order an attack run on a different target when O'Brien cried out in surprise.

"Sir! The wormhole's opening again!"

Sisko slowly collapsed into the command chair. He hadn't expected the Dominion to send more ships. If it was a sufficiently powerful force, he doubted he would be able to hold them off long enough.

"On screen," Sisko breathed, not sure he wanted to see who the newcomers were.

The viewscreen blinked from a view of the battle to the unmistakable image of the wormhole opening. Instead of the expected Dominion ship, though, what appeared to be a badly battered United Republic vessel sailed out. Sisko's jaw dropped open in surprise. Unless he was mistaken, that was *Voyager*! But it had been destroyed years ago....

"Sir," O'Brien said, turning to him with a confused look on his face. "The....*Voyager* is hailing us. Captain Janeway is asking to speak with you personally."

Sisko nodded. The image of a very frightened Katherine Janeway appeared on the screen. Sisko gaped at her for a long time, not sure of what he should say. By all logic, she and her entire crew were supposed to be dead. He almost demanded to know what was going on, but Janeway didn't give him the chance.

"Captain Sisko, I'm sorry for our intrusion, but...."

"Not at all, Captain Janeway. I must admit that I'm a little surprised to see you here, but we'd welcome any help you....."

"No, you don't understand! We have to....."

"Captain! The wormhole is opening again!"

Janeway closed her eyes, moaning softly.

"We're too late," she whispered.

Tom's X-Wing rocked violently as another TIE exploded nearby. He bit off a curse, swinging his fighter around. He had a particularly stubborn TIE Interceptor in his sights, and the Dominion pilot was good. Almost as good as Tom was, but not quite.

The aiming reticle flashed to a solid red and Mustang's acquisition tone sounded in his ears. Tom squeezed the trigger, four crimson laser bolts slicing through space. They perforated the black solar panels of the Dominion fighter, but the enemy pilot managed to avoid major damage to his ship. The Interceptor continued on, seemingly undamaged.

"Break right, Five," Corran's calm voice ordered.

Tom did as he was told. Suddenly, the Interceptor exploded in front of him and Corran's green and white X-Wing flashed by, right where Tom's fighter would have been.

"Thanks, Nine," Tom breathed.

"So how many have you gotten so far?" Corran asked, almost casually.

"Fourteen. You?"

"Thirteen."

"I'll keep that in mind. You can buy the drinks at Quark's today," Tom commented grimly, acquiring another TIE.

"That has yet to be seen," Corran chuckled.

Tom smiled as he lined up a shot on the new TIE when he noticed it. The wormhole seemed to be writhing. Instead of simply opening, the Maw wormhole sputtered, expanding and then contracting. It was as if something was stuck inside and the wormhole was desperately trying to spit it out. Finally, after a brilliant light show that lit up the entire sector, the wormhole irised open to fifty times its normal size. A rounded shape began to appear and began to grow larger and larger until Tom was finally able to identify it.

"Mother of God!" Corran breathed.

"Sithspawn!" Tom spat.

The unmistakable shape of a Death Star glided free of the wormhole, which closed immediately. Tom stared at the monstrosity for several seconds before he finally snapped back to reality. Apparently Wedge was recovering from his initial shock as well.

"All Rogues! On me! We're going to attempt a trench run!"

"Is that a good idea, Rogue Leader?" Tycho's voice chimed in. "We don't even know if this thing has a trench...."

"We have to try, Four," Wedge said. "Let's go."

The Emperor had risen from his throne and was looking out a massive viewport, staring at the battle that raged around his new Death Star. Darth Vader and the female Changeling kept a respectable distance behind him, also observing the combat clinically.

"It would appear that Grand Admiral Thrawn has failed," Vader rumbled. "Deep Space Nine still exists."

"I can see that, Lord Vader," the Emperor snapped. "No matter. That pitiful station is no match to us."

The Emperor turned and crept back to the throne. He thumbed an intercom switch.

"Commander, target Deep Space Nine," he growled. "It is time to show these Rebels who they are up against."

Wedge gritted his teeth as his X-Wing dove towards the massive Death Star. As near as he could tell, this one was many times larger than the original. He grimaced. Size didn't matter. He was the leader of Rogue Squadron. He and his people would do the impossible or die trying. Unfortunately, Wedge suspected the latter would be the case, but it didn't matter. It had to be done.

"Uh, Rogue One....." Gavin said hesitantly. "It looks like the Death Star is turning."

Wedge craned his neck upwards, trying to locate some point of reference. Sure enough, he could see the large weapons dish moving.....towards Deep Space Nine.....

His entire body went numb with fear. He wasn't even aware of what his body did as he hailed OPS.

"Major, this is Antilles. Evacuate DS9 immediately....."

The words died in his throat. Green trilitium beams shot from the Death Star, easily stabbing through Deep Space Nine's shields. The station exploded in a brilliant fireball, tangled and melted wreckage flying in all directions. Wedge choked back a startled sob, trying desperately to find an appropriate emotion. None was forthcoming. The only thing Wedge could feel was numb shock.

"Rogue One, it's turning again....."

Nawara's words barely registered. He finally blinked, forcing his eyes to look up at the weapons dish. Sure enough, it was moving again, reversing direction, but steadily moving. Wedge frowned, not sure of what was happening. There was no way that trilitium weapon could hit an X-Wing. The *Defiant* was too maneuverable. Even resurrected *Voyager* was too tiny to make a good target. The only thing nearby was.....

The realization struck Wedge just as the massive battle station fired again. This time, the green energy beam lanced through the tranquil planet of Bajor. It bored straight through to the core. Molten lava spewed from angry red cracks that appeared over the surface of the normally green planet.

Within seconds, the planet exploded, a white hot plasma ring sailing in all directions. Large chunks of rock tumbled off into space. Wedge closed his eyes in pain. All those people.....

Captain Sisko slumped in his chair, his jaw open in shock. In less than a minute, the Death Star had not only obliterated his station, but it had destroyed the planet he had sworn to protect as well. This wasn't just a defeat. This was a personal failure. The faces of Odo, Kira, Kai Opaka, everyone who had just died flashed before his mind's eye and the words of the "Prophet's" rung in his ears. There had been reckoning.

"Captain, what should we do?" O'Brien whispered.

For a second, Sisko didn't respond. Finally, he looked down, not wanting to face his failure anymore.

"Order all craft to retreat."

The Changeling watched in detached silence as the Emperor chortled over the demise of Bajor. These silly solids. They were so amused by their toys. That was one of the many reasons that the Changelings were superior to the solids. They weren't concerned with such petty playthings as Death Stars. They existed to impose order on the Galaxy.

Palpatine met that need for now. But the female Changeling knew that he was only temporary. The Emperor had deluded himself into thinking that he and he alone was the supreme power in the Galaxy. True, his mastery of the mystical Force demanded respect. Even with that, the Emperor was still ignorant of so many things. He believed there were only twenty-five Changelings in the Galaxy.

She knew better. There were millions....and only one. The Great Link existed, as it always had for millennia, on the hidden planet of Mrkyr. The Emperor had yet to discover the Link, and that would only lead to his demise.

The Emperor believed that the stormtroopers and Vorta revered him as a god. True, they did, but they held higher reverence for the Changelings themselves. The stormtroopers and Vorta would bow low to Palpatine's will, but only until the Changelings were ready to assume full control of the Dominion from him. It wouldn't be long now, but the Emperor and his lackey, Vader, would be put in their proper place. The Changelings would fulfill their destiny, and the Galaxy would finally know true order, the order that only the Founders could impose.

"What now, your majesty?" the Changeling asked in her low voice. It frustrated her, having to resort to vocal communications. She much rather preferred the speed and unity of the Great Link. How she longed to return to her place. Soon, so very soon.....

"We proceed to Earth," Palpatine said, returning to his throne. "We will strike a blow to the very heart of this so called United Republic. Then the Dominion will be supreme in this Quadrant once again."

"Very good, sire," the Changeling said, bowing low.

She turned to leave when Palpatine's withered voice called, "One thing more."

The Changeling turned to face the aging Emperor, trying hard to conceal her annoyance at being detained. That feeling changed to a twinge of fear when she saw the hatred radiating from the Emperor's yellow eyes.

"Are the Changelings really as loyal as you claim?" Palpatine asked calmly.

For a split second, she thought the Emperor would strike her down where she stood. Instead of panicking, though, she calmly steeled herself and replied, "Of course, your majesty. Completely loyal."

"And you would hide no secrets from me?"

"None."

"Oh really?" the Emperor snarled, pointing a gnarled hand towards the viewscreen.

The Changeling turned. If she had to breathe, she would have gasped at what was displayed. There, displayed on the main viewscreen of the throne room, was the surface of Mrkyr. She could see the collected mass of the Great Link undulating gently in the peaceful twilight. In the distance, she could hear the distinctive chirping of the ysalamiri, a native life form that the Founders had found quite valuable in hiding from the Emperor. Her mind raced, wondering how the Emperor had discovered the location of their home world. It didn't appear on any chart. He couldn't have detected it through the Force. The ysalamiri had the unique ability to create Force-free zones. That was the reason why the Great Link was located on Mrkyr in the first place. There was no way for the Emperor or Vader to detect the gigantic union of the Changelings.

"You see, my dear, there is no secret that you have that I cannot discover," Palpatine cooed coldly. "I do not tolerate deception in my servants. You shall have to pay the price."

As if on cue, harsh green turbolaser bolts slammed into the Great Link. The Link writhed, trying desperately to shield itself from the barrage. It was no use. More blasts followed. Although she couldn't be certain, it was likely that the Emperor had sent an entire fleet to bombard the surface. The Changeling watched in stunned horror as more and more turbolaser blasts sizzled into the Great Link, vaporizing more and more of her kind. She could almost feel their death throes, even though they were light years away. Finally, when all that was left of the Great Link was a smoldering crater, the viewscreen went dark.

"I trust that the lesson has been learned and will not have to be repeated," the Emperor chortled.
"You may leave."

The Changeling tore her eyes from the darkened viewscreen and glared at the withered old man. If she had been adept at the Force, he would be dead, incinerated in an inferno of pure hatred. Because of his hatred and anger, he had just committed genocide, and it didn't even give him pause. The scene of her kind being destroyed glimmered in her memory. As she turned and left the throne room, she forced herself to focus on one thing. Palpatine had to pay. There would be a reckoning.

TO BE CONCLUDED.....

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The idea was mine, so there.

E-mail me at j*****u and let me know what you think of the story

God bless!