

Mission Two “The Banquet”



The Interrogation

Brig, USS Portland

The day before docking

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru and Lt. (JG) Jason Beauvoir

"I've already told you, I don't know what you're talking about!" Zuwtt, first officer of the freighter Asmi had been locked up the past two days, bombarded with questions. The constant interrogations weren't so much unpleasant as they were irritating. He knew not to admit to anything and there was little that Starfleet could do to convince him otherwise. The barrage of questions were a constant irritation, but as long as he kept playing dumb and telling his inquisitors that he didn't know anything, he figured he would be safe. Most of all, it irritated him to be locked up on little more than the hunch of the Captain. "Now, isn't it just about lunchtime?"

"So, you're hungry?" Lt. jg Valentine 'Val' Dubois said in his mild Southern drawl. "What is it, can we fix you today, sir?" He asked in an exaggerated manner.

"Well, I could go for some Jumbo Vulcan Mollusks, sauteed in Rhombolian butter. That would surely hit the spot," Zuwtt replied, returning Dubois' sarcastic tone. "And perhaps a Bolian souffle for desert."

"Right away, sir." He told the Bolian and then to his partner Petty Officer Zirra Kajat, a menacing-looking Gorn female. "Kajat, have the guard outside bring use some sandwiches and coffee."

"Yesss, sssir." She said and went to the door.

Once she was gone, Dubois moved closer to Zuwtt and in a conspiratorial tone said. "Impressive, isn't she? I once saw her break a Klingon in half, imagine what she could do to a little fellow like yourself."

Zuwtt snorted; he knew that Starfleet had rules about how prisoners were to be treated.

Then changing the subject he asked. "Mr. Zuwtt, do you follow baseball?" He looked him over. "Of course you, so who do you think's going to win the Federation Series? My money's on the Paris Lights."

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with this 'based ball' you refer to," replied Zuwtt in an irritated tone. "Just like I don't know anything about cloaking devices or Orions or whatever it is you're accusing me of

today."

"So the cloaking device just appeared on your freighter out of thin air? or perhaps the readings we got were from your Moonshine still?" Dubois asked disbelief evident in his tone.

"A cloaking device? You're mad! I'm a simple freighter crewman, I don't know anything about cloaking devices or this... 'moon shine'"

"I has been my experience, sir, that when a man describes himself as simple, he is invariably anything but." The security officer replied.

"I'm no simpleton, but I'm not transporting stolen cloaking devices either," replied Zuwtt, impatiently tapping his foot. "Now, are we quite done yet?"

"Stolen? Nobody said anything about it being stolen."

"Well, I didn't just buy it at the corner store!" he blurted out, immediately regretting his choice of words. "I mean, erm, everyone knows that cloaking devices are illegal for civilian use. You can't just buy them..." he trailed off.

"True. So where did you purchase yours?"

"I'm not talking to you anymore," replied Zuwtt, scowling. "Now, where is my sandwich?"

"Okay, maybe you'll be more obliging on a full stomach. Kajat, bring Mr Zuwtt his lunch."

"Yess, sssir." The Gorn said and placed a plate of sandwiches and a cup of coffee in front of the Bolian. "Bon appetit." She added.

Zuwtt bit into one of the sandwiches and then looked up at the Gorn. At least seven feet tall and with a jaw full of sharp teeth, she was physically intimidating. As she stared down at him, Zuwtt wanted to disappear. "I'm a dead man," he thought. Nervous, he took a gulp of the coffee. "This coffee tastes horrible! What did you put in it?"

"Coffee, sugar, venom of the Vulcan redbat. Slow, horrible way to die." Dubois said in an off-hand way.

"Venom? Are you completely mad!?" Zuwtt groaned, his stomach was already hurting. "It doesn't matter. I'm a dead man anyways. And however bad this venom might be, it can't be as bad as what the Orion Syndicate would do to me." Zuwtt groaned again, and sweat began to form on his brow.

"Well, if you're going to die anyway, why not go to your maker with a clean conscience?" Dubois asked.

"You don't understand. It's not just me, if they can't get to me because I'm dead, they'll go after my wife." Zuwtt bent over in pain. "I can't have that on my conscience."

Dubois took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Then Mr Zuwtt we'll have make sure the Syndicate can't find her, won't we?"

"You can do that?" he asked, breathing heavily.

"Yes, but we need something from you first." Dubois told him.

"I know who Vike is going to sell the cloaking device to," said Zuwt, realizing that between the Orions and the poison running through his veins, he didn't exactly have a whole lot of options. Starfleet could put him into the program, give him a new identity and a second chance at life. "But first, I want a couple guarantees. One, that you'll make sure my wife is safe. And two... wherever you send us, make sure it's someplace nice. I don't want to live out the rest of my days freezing half to death on Andor." He winced in pain. "And three, get me the antidote!"

"I'm sure we can swing that. But I can't promise Risa, too difficult to protect you'll there."

"The Breen." Zuwt let out a deep breath. "I don't know who his contact is, but he plans to sell the technology to the Breen."

"The Breen? God save us, if they get their hands on a cloaking device. Thank you Mr. Zuwt you've been most helpful. I'll go get the ball rolling right now. Good day to you, sir." Dubois said and headed for the door.

"Wait!" shouted Zuwt, the desperation evident in his voice. "What about the antidote?"

Turning Dubois took a small object from his pocket. "Here, these should do the trick." He said throwing the object to Zuwt.

Zuwt stared at the label on the packet. "Antacids? But you..." Suddenly, he realized that the poison wasn't poison all along. "You tricked me!"

"Of course, it's illegal to poison people, didn't your Mama teach you anything?" Dubois said with a smile as he left the room.

Homecoming
Bridge, USS Portland
Bajor System
Evening, Mission Day 1
Author: Alenis Meru

Bajor.

Here it was.

Mesmerized, Alenis stared up at the screen. The purple and blue of the Denerios belt created a hypnotizing backdrop. In the distance, Deep Space Nine slowly spun on its axis, orbiting Bajor the eleventh planet in the system, known simply as Bajor. B'hava'el, the Bajoran sun, lit up the sky and glistened off the Korvale Ocean. A yellow dwarf, it was not the biggest or brightest star in the night sky, but it is what gave the Bajorans life and was revered as such. And somewhere out there was the celestial temple, which gave the Bajorans spiritual guidance.

The last time she saw this sight was almost thirty years ago, out of the aft viewport of a stolen Cardassian shuttle. She was too young to realize then what she was leaving behind.

Since she was nine, Alenis always dreamed of returning to Bajor. Of running through the fields of the Dakhur province, or swimming in the Kola river. Of course, Bajor under the occupation was hardly

the idyllic paradise that occupied Alenis' dreams. The occupation was pervasive, infiltrating every aspect of every Bajoran's life. Even the smallest child would be lucky to have a few moments of play without the constant spectre of occupation weighing down upon them.

Of course, she could have returned long ago. Deep down, she was also afraid. Afraid of a lot of things, but mostly afraid of having to relive the traumatic memories of occupation. Growing up a refugee, she straddled a dual identity, one foot on her home of Bajor and one foot on her adopted planet of Earth. In school, she struggled to fit in and sometimes wished she could just forget about Bajor and make Earth her home. Abandoning Bajor when she was so far from home may not have sounded like a difficult undertaking, but no matter how hard she tried, blood was thicker than water. She was a proud Bajoran and couldn't just take off her earring and leave it all behind – no matter how much trouble she got into at the academy from overbearing instructors and their rigid interpretation of Starfleet dress codes.

"You have returned home," said R'vahis in a soft voice.

"Pardon?" asked Alenis.

"I said, we're approaching Deep Space Nine. Shall I request clearance to dock?"

"Yes. Request clearance." Another vision, thought Alenis, or perhaps I'm just losing it. Again. "Ensign Mallory, bring us in as soon as we get the signal."

She was finally coming home.

Bridge, USS Portland
Bajor System
Evening, Mission Day 1
Author: Jackson Mallory

There was a bit of a delay while DS9 ground control argued with the captain of a Pakled trading vessel moored in the berth destined for the Portland. It seemed the ship had been cleared to leave hours earlier, but the captain had an ongoing dispute with a Ferengi who he felt had cheated him. DS9 administrators finally got the captain to move his ship, but only after promising to continue to look into the matter. The captain then moved his vessel to a parking orbit above the station.

Once the Pakleds were clear, Mallory piloted the Portland into its assigned docking berth, and signalled for the ground crew to attach moorings. He then ran through the docking checklist, powered down the main engines, and finally signalled all clear, indicating that personnel could debark.

He was more than relieved to be back from their shake-down cruise, and not just because they narrowly escaped with their lives. He was looking forward to a break from all of the administrivia he had endured over the last few days. During the battle with the Orion pirates, Mallory had been busy with an assignment from the captain to rebaseline all of the dilithium ratios so that the ship would operate at peak efficiency at a variety of speeds. After hours of checking and cross-checking, meetings with engineering, and arguments with the computer, Mallory's would report that the new baseline would increase efficiency by an average of .04%.

Other than the power fluctuations playing havoc with the lights in his quarters, he hadn't even realized that they were in danger until hours after the daring maneuver by the *Quebec City*, when

Ensign Steel related the entire harrowing ordeal. But dilithium ratios were exciting too.

Yes, a few days of fun would do him good. Once the ship was locked down, Mallory headed for the station.

Author: Tyrlai Zade

Tyrlai had spent the entire docking maneuver in sickbay telling Jena a long convoluted story of how she had hiked the length of the shimmering cliffs on Trian V, clambered down to the lone shelf on which the Trian Wildflowers grew and assembled a bouquet of them just for Jena. Knowing full well the girl had seen her replicate them right in sickbay did not deter Tyrlai from her normal overly vivid description of the harrowing descent and how she didn't even break a nail despite the many times she was left dangling from a single precarious handhold.

She then shared the anecdote of how Thosk had been too scared to leave the shuttle the entire time over chocolate pudding. Thosk for his part pointed out that none of that had really happened, blamed her again for the fact that the Quebec City had had to be tractored back to DS9 and asked why he couldn't just go back to their office as he had a lot of paperwork to do. After the docking was complete, she promised to visit as soon as she could and complained about some boring stuffy reception she was being blackmailed into attending and returned to her quarters.

She restyled her hair with an orangey-red streak in its natural shimmering black, left to fall straight down over her shoulders. Tyrlai slipped into a flashy orange dress, a clingy number with several strategic holes, slits and straps designed to reveal more spots than she generally let show. She strapped a garter holding a comm badge around her slightly more concealed leg and grabbed her handcomp. She had never been to DS9 before but she had heard of a place called the Sunset Promenade that supposedly had dancing, gambling and more. She added a few final touches and headed for the dock.

Follow up check-up

U.S.S. Portland - Sickbay

Authors: Cmdr Alenis Meru, and Lt. JG Brad Silverton

Brad Silverton looked over the medical exam results that the Emergency Medical Hologram had conducted on Captain Alenis Meru. He wasn't thrilled with the fact that he didn't handle the exam any less than the results of an unknown growth discovered. Brad looked at the time and figured the Captain would be in her ready room alone. Good. He didn't want to make a big deal of this in front of the crew or other senior officers. Captains could be... finicky about their appearance to the crew. "Doctor Silverton to the Captain."

Alenis took a few sentences to finish typing her thought. She had been hammering out reports for at least a couple hours now, and it wasn't getting any easier. Even with Ko-ko perched on top of her monitor and a pot of one of her favorite teas, she was starting to get stressed out. "What is it, doctor?"

"Captain, I've gone over the previous medical exam you had with the EMH and I'd like to redo it myself when its convenient. No rush but sooner rather than later."

"I'll be down within the hour," replied Alenis, desperate for any escape from the drudgery of after action reports. Her relief turned to dread as she began to wonder what sort of irregularity might

prompt the doctor to redo the physical. Perhaps he found the heavy tranquilizers still in her system. Even with Ko-ko's help, Alenis had barely slept since Arvel took them away. She was irritable and having difficulty concentrating, as evidenced by the fact that she had been hammering away at these reports for what seemed like an eternity. Or maybe it was the fact that she was prescribed a bird. Or perhaps something else altogether...

An hour passed and Alenis walked into Sickbay. Brad poked his head out of his office and approached the Captain.

"Hello Captain. Thanks for stopping by. I'd like to redo your regular exam that the EMH the other day. I'm not convinced of its abilities beyond trauma care. It should only take half an hour or so tops like before. If now is a good time then go ahead and lay down on the biobed and we can get started."

"All right," said Alenis as she climbed up onto the biobed. "Brrrrrrr, it's cold in here," she said as she rubbed her arms. How are you doing, doctor?" she asked, inquiring about his recovery from radiation poisoning

"Surprisingly well actually." Brad responded while adjusting some settings on the biobed. "I'm a little sore from the radiation still but that should be gone in a day or two."

"And Jena?"

"She is recovering well. She had longer exposure than I did though I had a more intense amount. I had to put my back right up against the leak to get leverage to get her out. She still has a few red patches on her neck but I expect them to be gone shortly. She should be 100% in a matter of days."

"That sounds great, doctor." Lying down on the biobed, Alenis let out a deep breath. Her muscles ached all over. With all the happenings in the past few days, she was tense, slightly more so than normal.

Brad was looking at the results while talking, "Your cortisol levels are a bit high which is due to a lot of stress. Given our encounter with the Orions that isn't abnormal." Brad continues, "Other than that everything else looks normal so far at least."

"Are you talking any medications I should be aware of?"

"No," replied Alenis in a firm tone. "Well, not anymore. It's complicated." She knew there was no sense in trying to hide anything from the doctor. He had all her medical records and all kinds of test results anyways. "I was taking some medication until recently, but Arv-- I mean, Dr. Darze took them away." She silently cursed herself for the little verbal slip-up; the last thing she needed to do at this time was to arouse suspicion.

Brad didn't miss a beat and kept on scanning her, "And he should have taken them away. They're strong enough to tranq a Gorn who's having a bad hair day! As I am not seeing any physical signs of needing to take these over a long period of time like you have been, I'll presume you were discussing matters with Dr Darze of a more psychological nature?"

"Yes, it's... it's..."; Alenis could barely talk about it; only Arvel and a few others knew the depth of her psychological trauma. "If you look at my service record, you will see that I was at New Algiers three years ago. Since then..." She yawned, losing track of her thought. "Doctor, I haven't had more than three hours of sleep in the past three nights." Not only that, but every time she dozed off, her dream returned. "Please, can you just give me the meds?"

"Look captain... there are lots of sleeping aids I can prescribe that won't cause long term damage to

your kidneys. What alternatives have you tried?"

"Nothing else has worked, not for the past three years. The only thing that kind of helps is..." Alenis sat up; lying down had made her nauseous and agitated the stomach pains that she had been suffering through the past few days. "I know it sounds silly, but Dr. Darze gave me Ko-ko."

"Well it does sound silly but I'll trust the professional opinion of the counselor. I have some training in that but I'm not nearly qualified to help you with New Algiers. However what I am qualified for is being your physician. No I am sorry captain I can't in good conscience give you the meds. They're for emergency battlefield trauma care not long term usage. All you are doing with these meds is covering up one problem temporarily and causing you another." Brad grabs a sighs and grabs a hand tricorder to continue the exam as his captain seems fidgety but the discussion to tell her to remain still seems to be the least of battles right now. He turns it off and sets it roughly down on a table.

"Captain, your internal organs are frankly, a mess. These meds for this long has caused problems with your liver, kidneys, and stomach so if you are nauseous or having abdominal pains don't be surprised. Its all reversible but only once you stop taking it and there is nothing I can do if you were to continue. As for your sleeping needs once we get the advanced equipment in I can get you a very powerful sleep aid. It'll get you some sleep but it will be low quality. You won't be able to dream and its also NOT long term but hopefully it can help till you and Dr Darze can figure something else out."

"No more dreams..." Alenis pondered that thought for a second. It would mean that she wouldn't have to relive the battle night after night. "Thank you, doctor," she said with utmost sincerity. "Is there anything else?"

"One other slight thing. I did see a growth on your right ovary. Honestly haven't seen this type before but there is nothing to worry about. Its completely unrelated to the tranqs and won't cause any reproductive problems. I'd like to remove it sometime soon but there is no rush. It can wait for after the reception and after we leave DS9 with only a few days of discomfort which should be over before our next mission begins."

Alenis pondered her busy schedule. The last thing she needed was yet another appointment. "Schedule it for the morning after the dinner," she replied. "Now, unless there's anything else, am I free to go? As you can imagine, I've got a lot of paperwork to deal with."

Author: Jason Beauvoir

As the ship underwent its docking procedures, Jason was finishing his report regarding his actions on the Quebec City.

When he was finished, he changed into some stylish, yet practical clothes and headed down to Sickbay.

Arriving he noticed someone he recognized. "It's Nurse Hill, isn't it?" He asked her.

"Yes, sir, how can I be of assistance?"

"I'm Jason Beauvoir, Jena's father. I've come to see her."

"Yes I remember, sir. The Doctor left orders to remind you that although you're allowed to take her out of Sickbay, she has to take things easy. He wanted me to stress that last part."

"Okay, I get the message." Jason said. "No cliff diving." And made his way to Jena's bed.

Maria just sighed and let the man go.

"How're you, Kido?" He asked.

"Really good, Old Man." She replied.

"That's good. Hey, nice flowers."

"Yeah, Tyrai went on a perilous adventure to get them for me."

"So you and our resident Diplomatic Officer have become fast friends, I see." Jason said.

"Yeah, she's a lot of fun."

"Evidently. I heard Commander Shras' office underwent a rapid and colourful redecoration, but you would know anything about that."

"I would have loved to see the look on his face when he saw, what I of course know nothing about."

"I was quite amusing." Jason admitted. And they both laughed.

Then his demeanour changed. "What are you lying around for? You promised to show me around Bajor."

"Doctor's orders" She replied. "We'll have to put it off for a few days, I'm afraid."

"I spoke to the Doc. he said we can still go on our tour as long as you take easy, so no triathlons or drinking binges, and I promised Nurse Hill, no cliff diving."

"Oww, that really spoils my plans." She joked. "But, how can I go, I don't have a change of clothes."

"You do now." He said handing her an overnight bag. "I'm sure the Doc won't mind if you change in the head. I'll be here when you're ready."

Jenny smiled, practically jumped out of bed, and headed to the head, stopping only briefly to kiss Jason on the cheek.

The morning after...

Captain's quarters, USS Portland

The morning after docking at DS9

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. (JG) Arvel Darze

Tim hurried to Alenis' quarters, putting on his jacket as he walked. He was late. Ringing the chime he straightened his jacket.

Awakened by the chime, Alenis turned over in her bed. Her partner was still sleeping like a baby. Rolling over again, she caught a glimpse of her desk chronometer. The moment the time registered, she bounded out of bed and frantically searched the floor of her bedroom for her housecoat. "One minute!" she shouted, in response to the door chime being rung again.

"Whoa! Who is calling at this hour!?" He said watching her wonderful form rise from the bed to get something on, "I mean you look wonderful, why answer the door?"

"The meeting... we're going to be late for the meeting with the Admiral." Alenis gave him a quick peck on the forehead and got out of bed.

With a blue fleece bathrobe draped over her shoulders and tied tightly around her waist, Alenis answered the door. "I'm so sorry, Tim." She apologized profusely. "Here, take a seat in my couch while I get changed. I'm really sorry, I slept in. This never happens to me, it must be my change in medication." As she stood in the doorway trying to explain her situation to Tim, behind her, out from her room wandered Arvel, his shirt inside-out.

Tim grinned at the flushed face of the Captain. "Yes, the new medication must be the reason." He chuckled. "At least I'm not the only one having trouble with his alarm clock."

Alenis glanced back at Arvel and then to Tim. She cleared her throat. "Tim, I'm sure you've met Ar- I mean, Dr. Darze. He was just..." there was no point in denying it. "Erm, allow me to get changed," she said, turning towards the sonic shower.

"Umm hey sir," Arvel said as he wore some but not all of his uniform, "I'm in a state of undress and I apologize for that... should I go?" He asked.

"Why ask me?" Tim said. "What you two do in your own time is none of my business. Just like the other way around." Tim couldn't stop grinning.

"Yes, about that..." Arvel stroked his beard for a moment, trying to think of the most tactful way to broach the subject. Fortunately, with the sonic shower running, there was no way Alenis could hear his words. "Sir, I'd appreciate it if you could keep this under your hat. Meru is a very special woman. She is strong, but she has faced many difficulties over the past few years, and she tends to try to carry the weight of her problems all by herself. I know about Starfleet regulations on fraternization, but the last thing she needs right now is for word to spread and for this to get back to Starfleet command."

"Offcoure not. Just because she is the Captain, doesn't mean she can't have a personal life. Even if it's with a subordinate. Just treat her good, Meru is also a friend of mine."

At that moment, Alenis bounded out of the bathroom and back into her bedroom. Being on starship duty, she had learned how to enjoy a warm sonic shower in two minutes flat.

Thirty seconds later, she stepped back out, wearing the red and black uniform of a Starfleet captain. It wasn't quite perfect -- the shoes had a scuff or two, and there was a bit of lint on the tunic and a wrinkle here and there, but she made the calculated decision that showing up on time without a perfect uniform was better than showing up late. She was about to head for the door when she was interrupted by a bird call. In her cage, Ko-ko was getting restless. She paused for a brief moment before heading to the cage and reaching her arm in. "Relax, Ko-ko; we're just going to go for a little walk, and meet up with a very important man." As Ko-ko perched herself on Alenis' wrist, she withdrew her arm, pulling her out of the cage. "Tim, lets go," she said as she shut the cage door. "Arvel... feel free to let yourself out at your leisure."

"You got it ma'am!" He said a little too enthusiastically. Arvel sent a quick unseen playful love tap to Alenis's bum when she passed, "You look great and I will do what I can before I leave."

Alenis chuckled as she walked out the door. Arvel was apparently back to his old playful self, and Alenis was relieved that at least someone would take care of the dishes for her.

Meeting with the brass...

Deep Space 9

The morning after docking

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru and Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse

Alenis and Tim rushed through the corridors of the station, Ko-ko in tow. Alenis led the way using a map on the PADD. A wrong turn led them through the Promenade where Ko-ko's presence caused a minor stir, but a few Federation credits to an irate fruitmonger quickly settled the dispute. Though the receptionist gave them some curious glances, she waved them right on through to Washington's office. As they stood outside, Alenis straightened out her uniform. It was barely presentable for a meeting with the admiralty.

"Tim, how do I look?" she asked, Ko-ko perched upon her shoulder.

"Did you have to bring the animal?" Tim said for the millionth time. "Never mind, you look great. Can you do me a favour, please don't mention Ellen in this conversation."

"You don't have to tell me twice," replied Alenis. She already had a lot to explain to Admiral Washington; the last thing she wanted to have to do was to discuss her Executive Officer's relationship with his daughter. Alenis took a deep breath and then pressed the chime.

"Enter!" shouted the Admiral, the power in his stern voice barely muffled by the door.

As Alenis stepped in, she took in the old world charm of Washington's office. Between the antique wooden desk, the brass desk lamp, and a 23rd century vintage star chart, the office gave off an air of conservatism that was matched only by the man himself. With a neatly trimmed white beard and a look of perpetual dissatisfaction on his face, Washington barely even glanced up from his PADD at the new entrants. "Admiral Washington, you wanted to meet in person to discuss the—"

"Yes. Take a seat," he said in a gruff voice.

As Alenis sat down, Ko-ko nuzzled up against her head, looking for attention. She held up her wrist, allowing Ko-ko to perch on her arm where she could scratch her feathers. "Admiral, this is Lt. Commander Timothy Rouse, my executive officer. I'm not sure if you've met each other yet."

Washington nodded slightly and placed his PADD on his desk, his eyes meeting Tim's as he looked up. "Mr. Rouse, would you care to explain to me why your captain has brought a wild animal into my office?"

"Oh, if I only could." Tim replied. "Apparently it is some kind of new counseling threatment." He looked at Meru. "I think she would be able to explain the situation better herself." Why didn't the man just ask her herself? She was standing next to him, for crying out loud.

"Yes, Mr. Rouse is correct," interjected Alenis. "This bird was prescribed to me for medical reasons." She didn't want to give the Admiral any more than that. "And Ko-ko is hardly a wild animal; she's actually very well behaved."

"If this bird is so well behaved," asked Admiral Washington in a stern tone, "then why does Shras' report say that she defecated on his head?"

"I can explain," started Alenis. "You see, Shras was being very... he was scaring Ko-ko, and..." Alenis trailed off. She couldn't explain.

"I read his report," replied Washington, cutting off Alenis' ramblings as he picked up his PADD. "Do you have any idea what it might say?"

"I have some idea," replied Alenis in a dejected tone.

"Stunningly incompetent, unfit to command a garbage scow, disrespectful of his work, a complete lack of regard for duty, disorderly conduct... And the list goes on." Washington stared down the two officers in front of them. He enjoyed watching them squirm. "And in addition to the aforementioned incident with - ahem - Ko-ko, he reports that lax security allowed some prankster to fill his entire office with balloons. Ms. Alenis, Mr. Rouse..."

Alenis winced and closed her eyes. She placed one hand on Ko-ko's head and prepared for her dressing down. Her first command may have just come to a sudden end.

"...that is the funniest thing I've read all week."

"Sir?" asked Alenis, confused.

"Shras is a wack job. He's had something like this coming for a long time." A faint smile appeared on Washington's face as he had a mental image of Ko-ko releasing her payload on Shras' head.

Tim released the breath he'd been holding.

"I... I concur, Admiral," replied Alenis, relief in her voice.

"Now, I heard you had a little tangle with the Orions," said Washington, returning to a serious tone.

"Mr. Rouse, I understand you took command of the Quebec City and encountered some temporal phenomena, is that correct?"

"That is correct. After our Diplomatic officer managed to guide both timelines, we were able to fire at the exact right moment." Tim tried to explain. He still didn't exactly know what Tyrlai had done, but he did know that she saved his ass on this thing.

"Good work, Mr. Rouse; from what I've read you were lucky to survive the encounter," replied the Admiral. "I'm sure you are aware that any encounter with temporal phenomena must be investigated by the Department of Temporal Investigations. Agents Chrodum and Craebert are en route to this station as we speak, along with Dr. Dengo, a specialist in the effects of time distortions on the body, so expect to be pulled in for questioning."

"I'm aware of that"

Having complimented the executive officer on his heroism, Washington turned his attention to Alenis. "Now, I understand you left port without all systems online, and as a result were at a disadvantage during the battle with this Mr. Vike, and nearly lost a member of your crew and a civilian due to radiation poisoning because of a lack of medical equipment."

Alenis gulped. "Yes, sir, but--"

"No buts, Commander. Leaving port with critical systems offline is a serious dereliction of duty."

"Sir, I was under orders to complete testing Project Mongoose, and deemed the missing systems to be superfluous to that task." Alenis was defending herself aggressively, not allowing herself to be intimidated by the admiral. "No one could have anticipated the Orion attack."

"Always be prepared, Commander." Decades ago, Washington was an Eagle Scout, and even as a Starfleet Admiral he retained the motto. As a father, he pushed Ellen to follow in his footsteps, even volunteering to be a scoutmaster in her troop. Even back then, none of the boys dared approach her for fear of incurring the wrath of her father, or Baloo the Bear as he was known to the troop.

"Starfleet lost one of its greatest captains on a shakedown cruise because someone decided that the installation of vital systems could have waited until next Tuesday. I've got half a mind to pull your command after this performance, but I suppose I can't fault you for responding to a distress signal. I'd have done the same thing myself. And more importantly, I need you." Washington's eyes for a moment fell on a pewter model of a Miranda class starship on his desk. He has a soft spot for the old ships; the USS Delphia, a Miranda class, was his first command. But even he was surprised to see decades later, COs getting their start the same way he did. "The Portland... take it easy on the old

girl. These Mirandas may not be the biggest or newest or most powerful ship in the fleet, but treat her right and she'll take you to the ends of the galaxy."

"Aye sir," replied Alenis. She paused to ponder the Admiral's words. "You said you needed me, sir? Do you have orders?"

"Not at this time," replied Washington. "We've got a special assignment for you and your crew in the works, but until that is finalized, remain docked at DS9 for repairs. Feel free to take some shore leave; I presume you know your way around the surface."

"Actually, sir, I haven't set foot in this system since I was nine," replied Alenis. "And from what I understand, things have changed a fair bit since then."

"I... see." Washington found that curious, but did not press the issue. He'd rather keep an emotional distance from the captains serving under him; he felt that being too friendly with them would undermine his air of authority. "Well, you're missing a fair bit. Speaking of which, I don't need to remind you that we have a banquet in honour of Lt. Zade's recovery of the Shard coming up. I expect you and all your senior staff to attend in full dress uniform. I don't need to tell you how important this banquet is, so don't screw it up." Washington's warning was meant as much for Tyrilai as it was for Alenis; he had a passing familiarity with her record.

"Yes, sir, We'll be there with bells on."

"One more thing, Commander." Washington's face turned deadly serious as he stared into Alenis' eyes. "I don't know if you are aware of this or not, but my daughter is serving on your ship. Ellen Washington is my pride and joy, and if anything happens to her while she is under your command, I will personally make sure you spend the rest of your days flying a cargo ship full of rubber dog toys out of Bolarus IX. You hear me?"

"I... uh,..." Alenis' eyes wandered over towards Tim, but she quickly corrected herself, before the Admiral could detect any hidden meaning to her glance. "Your daughter is safe in my hands, sir"

"Excellent. I'm glad we have an understanding here," he said in a stern voice. "Now, take that... that creature... and get out of my office."

Alenis quickly stood up and left, with Tim in tow and Ko-ko perched upon her wrist. Petting the bird as she walked away, she turned to Tim. "Well, I suppose it could have gone worse..."

"Well, we are still alive. I hope I will be so lucky next time. News travels fast on a ship." Tim said, relieved his death sentence had been postponed

"You got off easy this time," replied Alenis. She let out a deep breath. "Just... please treat her right. I don't want my next command to be a garbage scow."

Tim smiled thinking of Ellen. "You know, this might sound stupid, but I really care about her."

As they walked away from the Admiral's office, Alenis put her hand on Tim's shoulder. "That's not so stupid; I know exactly how you feel."

Old friends...

Deep Space Nine

The day after docking

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Rostrenen T'Sering

Ko-ko on her shoulder, Alenis strolled through the Promenade, taking in the sights. The Promenade had been remodeled several times since the occupation, and the harsh Cardassian architecture was softened by the Bajoran decor trying to cover up any reminder of the occupation. They had done a good job; while the shapes were distinctly Cardassian in origin, they were largely disguised by the warm colours and soft curves built by Bajoran plasterers, carpenters and painters to conceal the dark history and bad memories of the Promenade when the station was called Terok Nor.

Alenis felt at home; between the shopkeepers, customers, and people passing through the station in or out of Bajor, she hadn't seen this many Bajorans since she was a child. Of course, there were others; as a Federation outpost, DS9 was home to all kinds of species. But by far the majority of shopkeepers and shoppers were Bajoran. In one of those shops, Alenis was embroiled in difficult negotiations with a tea merchant. One of the challenges for buyers on DS9 was that some of the Bajoran shopkeepers had learned business practices from their Ferengi counterparts, so it was easy to overpay or get rooked exchanging Federation credits, gold-pressed latium, and Bajoran Litas. Fortunately, Alenis knew the product she was buying nearly as well as the seller. Also, it helped if you were Bajoran, and it helped even more if you had a bird on your shoulder, squawking at the shopkeeper and putting him off balance.

As she concluded negotiations and paid the merchant a handsome but not exorbitant sum for a large bundle of authentic Bajoran teas, Alenis felt a hand on her shoulder. "Captain?" asked the smooth, oddly familiar voice.

"You are a captain now?" repeated an elfine woman, peering curiously at Alenis. Though in reality she was quite short and petite, the way this person held herself up produced a sort of corona around her, which doubled her stature. She pulled her hand back and it hovered under her chin, tracing the line of her jaw idly with one slender finger. She stood evenly on both feet, but still seemed as though she couldn't be quite grounded. Her muscles all seemed relaxed, but subdued like a coiled spring, waiting for an invitation to leap out again. Rostrenen was half Vulcan, and her pointed ears were stuck with metal piercings. Her cheeks were pierced, the bridge of her nose, her lips, septim, and there were red lines like scratches symmetrical on both sides of her long pale neck. All of her piercings were small stones of Talarian jade, unblemished placeholders for other less sparse design choices. A sleeveless navy green halter dress was tied around her neck, forming a bow behind her above the symmetrical, rhythmic patterns painted into the skin of her bare back. There were stone cuffs around both wrists, but she had no trouble supporting them on lean, muscular arms. Her legs were tucked into brown patterned, patchwork tights leaning into simple black slippers. Her head was mostly shaved as a monk, except for a tuft of blue hair above her.

"It is great to see you Meru. Tell me about what you are feeling?" Rostrenen's eyes were bright and earnest, but the merest hints of emotion barely glimmered on her face.

"Ros?" asked Alenis. Rostrenen looked very different from the last time they saw each other, back in the academy. Back then, Ros' hair was shaved and the two of them met when they were both being chewed out by an overbearing instructor for wearing non-uniform earrings. Starfleet Academy demanded a very conservative dress code, and with so few Bajorans in the service in those days, even a traditional Bajoran earring was considered a violation of uniform protocol. Now, before her stood Rostrenen, with piercings, tattoos, and hair brighter than Ko-ko's plumage. Even behind her various body modifications, Rostrenen's round face with sharp, delicate features was one that was difficult to forget. And though Ros was 30 years Alenis' senior, her slow Vulcan aging process meant that she had barely aged since the academy. "It's so great to see you," said Alenis, beaming with joy.

With a shopping bag in one hand and Ko-ko on her shoulder, Alenis gave her old friend and comrade from the academy a tight hug.

"Yes, I'm a captain, as of about a week ago," said Alenis. "Well, my rank is Commander but I captain a starship... I know, Starfleet ranks, so confusing." Alenis smiled and stared into Ros' eyes. "I'm feeling..." Alenis paused. There isn't really a polite way to say that she was nearly killed in action two days ago along with the rest of her ship, that she hadn't had a good night's sleep in three years because of what happened at New Algiers, that she was suffering from opioid withdrawal since Brad and Arvel took her medication away, and that the only thing keeping her somewhat sane was a pet bird. "Well. I'm feeling well." Of course, Alenis knew that Ros would totally see through her little white lie with her empathic powers, but the rules of conversation dictate that one doesn't immediately dump all her problems on an old friend you're being reunited with after 15 years. "And how about you? I've seen your articles in the papers, I presume that you're no longer with Starfleet?"

Blinking, Ross finally put her hand around Alenis and gently stroked her shoulders until the Commander pulled away. She still wasn't smiling, but something about her seemed to glow generously. "No," she responded quite matter-of-factly. Rostrenen felt as if she might be staring, and looking away for a moment to examine the room. She'd been told by one of the publishers for the Andorian Media Council that her pupilless grey eyes were off-setting. Spooky was his choice of words, but he hadn't meant it badly. She was trying to be careful not to haunt people with them. In dealing with other species, most Vulcan children had guidance from their parents, either to be emotionally repressed, logical councilors to be sought for clear-headed wisdom, or to be friends and mentors, sympathetic ears for people's who had never developed a logical centre. With the Yv'Wrech monks, she spent months learning to be angry, years learning to be joyful, but never one lesson trying to have a polite conversation. Social protocol, she found out later, was probably the more important. She graduated the Academy with distinction, but very poor academic achievement, because her professors eventually agreed that she'd never demonstrate her ability to them in the standard way. Besides, not understanding the rules at play meant she couldn't feel disappointed in her results anyway. It since the beginning had been about the experience itself and not the resultant profile.

She looked at Ko-ko and lifted her hand, but the bird became shy and back away from her, so Ros let it be. She looked back at Alenis, who despite herself, wasn't hiding her stress very well. "Will you come with me? We will find something for your bird to enjoy. I want her to like me."

"Where are we going?" asked Alenis. But before she could even finish the question, Rostrenen had taken her by the hand and started half-leading, half-dragging her across the promenade. Zipping by the shops in a blur, all Alenis could do was try to keep from losing her bundle of tea, and try to keep Ko-ko calm. Out of breath, Alenis arrived at what was evidently their destination. "Where are we?" she asked.

Ros gave a check-in glance to Alenis before releasing her hand. They were in a non-assuming, rather dank old part of the habitation ring. Rostrenen lowered herself onto her knees, and then tried to budge one of the panels into what appeared to be an energy conduit of some kind. It was locked and gave a guttural negative sound. Undeterred, Rostrenen opened up an access port, but it was security sealed. She considered asking Alenis for a clearance code, but this was a gift to the other woman, and it stuck her as poor form to ask for a favour to perform a favour. So instead, she carefully removed one of the metal bars from one of her elongated ears, tore a bit of the leg of her tights to wrap her hand in and jammed that thing as hard as she could into the access port. There were sparks and a mechanical wheeze, but the panel opened when she tried it next.

Ros looked up at Alenis and held out her arms. "You should go first. It is not too far. But please let me

take care of your bird. Okay?"

"She's very friendly," said Alenis, as she transferred Ko-ko from her shoulder to her wrist. As she held her arm out, Ko-ko just looked back at her. "Come on, Ko-ko, Ros is a friend. She won't hurt you." With a gentle push on her back, Ko-ko jumped into Ros' hands.

The corridor was sprinkled with moist air and condensation, but it wasn't unpleasant or humid, and it was only a short way like Rostrenen had promised. On the other side, treetops. The corridor led out onto a shelf, a maintenance catwalk running the length of a huge open room, enough space to sit and dangle your feet. It was dark, and Ros followed with one hand held gently over ko-ko's eyes. Artificial light from below a canopy of dense, lively trees spilled up between the dewy leaves. Voices and chatter from below also faded and rose above the tops of the jungle flora, but it was muted and distant. Instead, the only lights were very dimly glowing tubes along the far wall, mimicing natural moonlight, and there were huge ports open in the ceiling above them. The Portland was moored in the pylon in view far ahead, the sloped ceiling facing out toward the outer ring of Deep Space Nine, and stars beyond. They were in the high climate section of the arboretum, several decks above the public entrances, which were open and lit from below. But up here, the conditions were produced to mimic a tropical night. Vapour clouds formed and deformed above the canopy of trees, swirled by jets of air throughout the large, open section. The leaves glistened slightly with moisture. Rostrenen moved her hand off Ko-ko's eyes, and the bird looked around sleepily, then took flight from Ros' bracelet, circling above the trees as far as the room extended.

The half Vulcan watched, and sat beside Alenis on the ledge as security entered on the ground floor, dozens of metres below. Someone had triggered an alarm in this section...

Alenis looked back at Ros, a horrified look on her face. "We're not supposed to be here; we should leave," she said. But as she looked back out into the arboretum, Ko-ko was nowhere to be seen. "Ko-ko... where are you? Ko-ko..." Panicked, Alenis' breathing rate increased drastically. "Ros, I've lost Ko-ko, you have to help me--"

Rostrenen tilted her head a little, trying to puzzle what the fuss was about. "Take a deep breath," she began calmly. She estimated that they had at least another five minutes before Station Security checked the climate ducts of the upper arboretum. Ros could tell Alenis needed a break, so even a little one should be helpful! As generous as ever, it was something Ros knew she'd have liked, so she thought showing Alenis up here was uncommonly intuitive. She smiled and looked out over the treetops to demonstrate, opening her arms wide and taking a long, relaxed breath. "It smells like the tropics on Bajor. This arboretum has not been on the station long, but the gravity is adjusted for the trees which grow in higher altitudes." She looked over, still composed without a smile, but Ros looked at Alenis with concern. She wondered how she wasn't helping the commander to relax.

"Halt!" shouted a security guard approaching them from the corridor. "You are trespassing in a secure area."

Half-blinded by the flashlight, Alenis raised her hands in surrender. "Trespassing? I'm sorry, we were trying to get to the arboretum and must have taken a wrong turn somewhere."

"You'll have to come with me, ma'am. You too," he said, shining up at Ros, a slightly confused expression on his face. The two of them made an unlikely pair -- a straight-laced starfleet captain and a young looking elfish woman with a punky style and many visible body modifications. "We're not saboteurs," chimed in Rostrenen at the best time, blinking.

"Look, ensign, I'm sorry for trespassing. As I was saying, we got a little lost and it was an accident. But

right now I need to find Ko-ko," pleaded Alenis.

"We can find this Ko-ko later, whatever it is," replied the guard in a strict tone. "But right now you have to come with me." The security man crawled in after them, and Ros put her hands on Alenis' shoulders to help her back up along the ledge, totally accommodating to the guard who was trying to arrest them. In an effort to drag her along, he grabbed Alenis' wrist.

"Get your hands off me, ensign," snarled Alenis as she quickly snapped her arm back, freeing it from his grip.

"Commander, please come peacefully, or I will have to use force," he said as he reached for a stun gun.

"Excuse me," said Rostrenen from behind Alenis on the narrow ledge. "Would it be helpful if I came with you? Could we then leave Alenis to find Ko-Ko, and relax which you are making very difficult?"

"Ma'am, you'll both have to come with me," said the security guard as he pulled out a pair of handcuffs, holding them up in front of the two women before him who were slowly backing away. "Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. I'd much rather do it the easy way, but--" Unfortunately for him, the climate settings in the arboretum had been adjusted to simulate a dewy morning. He barely made it two steps before slipping on the moist walkway, sending him sliding into the handrail. Worse, the improperly installed handrail gave way when it was met with the force of a falling security officer weighing over 100 kg. As the stun gun and handcuffs clattered to the floor, the security guard clung desperately to a piece of the handrail, held on only by two bolts straining against the weight of the swaying guard.

Alenis froze in horror as he stared up into her eyes. She was the closer of the two. Ros put her hands on Alenis' shoulders to snap her out of shock. Following the commander closer, Ros leaned over the railing and caught the man's hand when he swung it up. He was almost hyperventilating, but with Alenis taking one arm and Ros pulling him up with the other, he managed to roll back onto the ledge. "You are safe," she reassured, peering at him as his chest heaved up and down.

"Oh- Prophets, thank you! I- I- I- wow..." he stammered, pulling himself up to sit against the wall, away from the edge.

Ros took advantage of the direction he was facing, out toward the canopy. "I do not know if you noticed just then, but this is a beautiful spot. Do you not think so?" The shaking officer snorted a chuckle and shook his head. Ros was confused as he was.

The guard took a deep breath as he looked over the canopy. It was a beautiful sight, and though he didn't know what it was, he felt a calming feeling come over him. "Yes, in fact, it is beautiful," he said, his voice relaxed. He shook his head and took one last look out at the trees before turning back to the two women. He couldn't very well arrest them after they just possibly saved his life. "I'll let you off with a warning this time. Lock the access hatch on your way out." He turned to walk away, talking into his communicator with the rest of the security team. As he was about to step back into the corridor, he turned back to the two women. "And be careful, this ledge is slippery," he added with a smile.

"You didn't..." said Alenis to Ros. They had been friends a long time, and Alenis knew exactly what she was capable of.

Rostren opened her mouth, but reconsidered what Alenis had meant by that. "...Not intentionally,"

she answered honestly. It took a little bit of patience for someone not to let her idiosyncracies rub them the wrong way, but not too much. Whether conscious of it or not, most people will seek out effects that relax them. With decades of training to benefit from, most of Ros' projections were nothing if not benign. "Sometimes I only mimic what I sense people are already feeling," she added softly. Everyone does that, in fact.

As Alenis scanned the treetops for Ko-ko, her breathing slowed and deepened. Her nostrils filled with the smell of distinctive Bajoran trees -- Dakhur junipers, Moba trees, even some blackwood trees whose precise species she couldn't identify. It reminded her of her home, of the few precious moments of joy that a child would be afforded growing up under the... No. She didn't want to think about that. Ros, Arvel, Timothy, Brad... they were all right. She needed to relax more. "You know, Ko-ko can take care of herself," she said, still staring out at the little piece of home that was brought up to the station. "I'm sure if we wait here long enough, she'll come back."

Meet me in the temple...

Promenade, Deep Space Nine

Day 2 (the day after docking)

Author: Alenis Meru

After recovering Ko-ko and saying goodbye to her friend, Alenis went back to the promenade. It was only after they parted ways that Alenis realized that she hadn't even asked Ros why she was there.

Alenis strolled down the Promenade, taking in all the sights. But with all the flashy signs and bright displays that shopkeepers used to draw in customers, Alenis' eyes were drawn to a simple entranceway. There were no bright colours or neon lights, just a simple archway decorated with hand-carved Bajoran script. On either side of the arch, carvings of the symbol of Bajor were set into the wall. The dull exterior did little to entice potential customers, but they weren't selling anything. This establishment was offering nothing more than spiritual guidance, and asking nothing in return. Though members of other species would walk by without so much as giving it a second thought, even Alenis, separated from her home for nearly three decades, instantly recognized it for what it was: A Bajoran Temple.

"Come in, sister," beckoned a priest stationed at the entryway to the temple. It was not every day that she would see a Starfleet commander standing on the promenade, transfixed by the sight of her simple house or worship. Especially not a Bajoran with a bird on her shoulder.

"Me?" asked Alenis, though there was little doubt who he was referring to.

"Yes," replied the priest. "You look like you could use some assistance with spiritual matters."

"In fact..." Alenis thought back over the events of the past few days. She was still trying to interpret her religious experiences. "I could." The priest's hand on her back, she was guided into the temple. As she stepped through the arch, she looked around, taking in every carving, every holy book, and every religious icon around her. The temple was austere, with no gold or silver in sight. A few blackwood carvings decorated the walls, and numerous bookcases held old religious texts.

The priest reached towards Ko-ko with his hand; Alenis stepped back, hearing Ko-ko sound threatened.

"Allow me to feel your pagh," replied the priest.

"I'm sorry," said Alenis as she took the bird in her hands. "Ko-ko – my bird – has had a very exciting day."

The priest smiled. "You have not been to a temple in some time, have you, Commander Alenis?"

"How do you know my name?" asked Alenis, her eyes narrowing and her voice taking on a suspicious tone.

"I may be a simple priest," he said, "but I do not live under a rock. There is not a man, woman or child on Bajor who is not aware of the impending return of the fifth shard, to be delivered by a lost child of Bajor, no less. And there are not too many Bajorans commanding Starfleet vessels docked at Deep Space Nine. It is a simple matter of deduction." He squeezed Alenis' earlobe between his thumb and forefinger, closing his eyes as he made a spiritual connection. "Your pagh is strong."

"My pagh..." Alenis' voice trailed off. He was right, it had been a long time. Nearly three decades, in fact. She barely knew what to do in a temple; how to act, what to say, how to address a priest. "I'm sorry, it doesn't seem right that you know my name and I don't know yours."

The priest smiled. Perhaps it was her naivete, or perhaps it was her Starfleet uniform, but there was something about her that he found fascinating. "Ishan Tillar. You have questions of a spiritual matter, don't you."

"Yes..." Alenis thought for a moment. "I've had some... visions... and I'm not sure what they mean."

"The prophets work in mysterious ways," replied Ishan. "Wait, does this have something to do with the shard?"

"In fact, it does..."

Vedek, Orb and Tome part 1

Deep Space 9, Sunset Promenade Club,

The night before the Banquet.

Author: Tyrilai Zade

"Kivoli!!" The crowd chanted raising their hands, the thumping of the music, a mix of ritual Bajoran themes accented with modern stylings filled the dimly lit room. A series of low key lights flashed in a ribbon like flows across walls, floor, support struts and ceiling alike, in a variety of mixing colors. It combined in a cascade effect that flowed from the ceiling, along the walls and supports to mix on the dance floor. Synthahol made the lights a little mesmerizing.

Tyrilai moved through the crowd, her own arms raised, weaving from group to group and finding the lights very distracting thanks to a series of blue and green concoctions. As old as she was she couldn't quite remember a time or place where there wasn't dancing. In this club the current style was an informal group arrangement. Five to eight people moving as a loose collection around the floor picking up members and losing others, as couples eventually formed they spun out to the edges. Individual songs flowed into each other, the music never quite stopping. The deckplates vibrated beneath her strappy heels, orange ribbons fluttering from them as well as the hem of her dress flowing and rippling occasionally as she spun her way through the crowd.

She had four or so followers, a Korbian, two Bajorans and a Human female. Each in turn had crossed her path through the dance a bit too often to have been chance. She had narrowed her preference to

the green eyed Bajoran and the raven haired girl and had been considering pairing her way to the outside with one of them when she noticed something else at the edge of the room.

Those few not here to dance and some of the pairs that had drifted aside to get to know each other sat in tables and booths scattered around the edge of the club on both levels. There were two people sitting alone, one was a Murak, vibration and noise reminded them of home. The other was a Bajoran with an oddly styled earring. Tyrlai knew little about the earrings that the Bajorans preferred but was sure she hadn't quite seen his style before. Tyrlai slipped from one group to a second with a better vantage point, her slender form swaying to the music and occasionally keeping her eye on the odd man in the corner.

It was living on the Orion ship that had taught her to mark unusual behavior in a room, and keep an eye on people whose intentions weren't obvious. So when a man walked in, keeping his head concealed in a hood and dropped a parcel at the strange man's table, Tyrlai caught it out of the corner of her eye as she spun around pretending to be interested in a pair of inebriated Bolians. She spun twice catching a glance of parchment each time. She then swayed, in a flutter of hip swaying crossing to the closest of tonight's suitors. She paired off with the green eyed Bajoran and led him to the edge near the strange Bajoran man just as the latter headed for an exit.

"I need a second," she said glancing back to the green eyed Bajoran, already moving towards a secondary alcove. She reached for an almost unnoticeable dispenser she had clipped to a strap of her dress and popped a bluish pill into her mouth, biting down and swallowing as she darted around the corner into a dark corridor. Her vision clarified somewhat as the antidote to synthahol started flowing through her. She turned two corners and stopped suddenly, teetering a bit on her heels as she ran almost headlong into the strange man standing face to face with a bulky Bajoran with a similar earring and a tall, robed figure holding a spherical sensor in three long clawed reptilian fingers.

"Deal with her." The reptilian thing hissed. The guard turned, his hands already out to apply a restraining hold on her. She braced herself, turned and leaned back and spun into a two legged kick, her arms holding on end of a Cardassian styled archway and planting his temple into the other. She dropped deftly to the deck landing cleanly despite the unnatural heels she had chosen for the evening. He landed less smoothly in a bulky pile.

"Must be an important book if you are willing to 'deal with people' over it." Tyrlai stepped forward and caught a glance of the script on the cover 'The Prophet's Rest'. It was weathered and old and though she had no idea what it was she was pretty certain it probably wasn't meant to be switching hands in an orbital dance club.

The strange Bajoran stared at her, just looking. His earring was a mix of coppery bronze and cobalt blue. It was the blue that was the odd part, she had never seen blue in the structure of a Bajoran earring before. She felt it odd also that he wasn't engaging in her pithy banter. Her just started at her or rather just to the left of her,...

She felt the hypo against her neck just moments before she had been about to aim another kick at the figure she had just realized had been sneaking up behind her. She did manage to turn on increasingly unsteady legs and get a look at the pretty green eyed Bajoran man she had led to the edge of the dance floor.

"Yeah, okay, that makes sense." She said as she fell back, the man stepping forward to catch her and sling her gracefully over his shoulder. He had been stronger than he looked on the dance floor she thought as her mind grew fuzzy.

The lizard turned his sphere in his clawed hand and scanned her with it. "She is the one who found the shard. This is most curious, the Vedek will wish to put her to question, bring her along. Leave the fool guard, we need to be away before she is discovered missing,..."

Tyrlai faded into a blissful sleep as they started moving down the station corridor.

Wrath of the Orions
Deep Space Nine
Mission Day 2
Author: Alenis Meru

It was a mundane prisoner transfer, but with most security personnel either on shore leave or hung over, Daniel Tobin personally volunteered to do the honours of transferring Zuwt to Starfleet Command. In some way it only seemed right that he would be the one to turn him in; after all, Zuwt worked for a former colleague of his. Perhaps in some small way, volunteering for this simple task would help bring Vike to justice and him Daniel assuage his guilty conscience and atone for ever following Vike.

As they walked through the corridors, Zuwt hung his head, partially ashamed at being perp-walked through the station flanked by Tobin and a Starfleet security guard, and partially because as someone who has likely run afoul of the Orion Syndicate, he didn't want anyone to see his face. But staring at the floor, he didn't even see his attacker approach.

Rushing through the corridor, an Orion with close-cropped hair bumped up against Vike. "Sorry," she said as she hurried past in the direction of the docking ring.

Zuwt doubled over in pain, clutching his stomach. The security guard reached down to assist him, but recoiled when he felt wetness on his hand. Daniel looked down to see blue blood on the guard's hand. Immediately, he lept into action. Taking aim at the Orion with his phaser, Daniel fired two shots, both missing, before taking up pursuit.

The Orion turned and ducked into a corridor. Phaser in hand, Daniel sprinted in pursuit, coming around the around the corner, and—

"Ughh," he grunted in pain as he felt a large knife plunge into his chest. He looked up into the Orion's eyes and held up his hands. He tried to call for help, but with his lung pierced, instead of words, the only thing to come out of his mouth was a desperate cough. And blood.

Grabbing his victim by the hair, the Orion smiled as she pulled a jagged blade out of her victim's chest. For good measure, she ran it across his throat before throwing his body into the corner. As the life drained out of him, the last thing he saw was Vara smirking over his body as she dematerialized.

The gift...
USS Portland - Science Lab
MD2, 23:45 hours

This late at night, the science lab was empty. There were a few experiments running overnight, and the occasional whirr or chirp from the computers, but the lights were off and no one was home.

“Computer, open science lab, override Alenis Epsilon Four.”

Though it was her ship, the science lab was one place that Alenis wasn't supposed to be without the permission of Lt. Beauvoir. Starfleet regulations were pretty clear on that; she figured they didn't want some meathead ex-Tactical CO from bumbling in and ruining delicate experiments. Being a former tactical officer herself, she could respect that. But despite a lack of formal training in the sciences, she felt herself to be no meathead.

Still, she just didn't understand the orb visions, and the temple was no help. Ishan simply told her that the prophets work in mysterious ways, and gave her a heavy book. As for the prophecies, his theory was that it was not worth worrying about, as they would come true no matter what choices Alenis made.

Somehow, she didn't find that reassuring. So, here she was, trespassing for the second time today, wandering into a dark science lab lit only by a few active console screens and the faint glow of the shard.

She slowly walked towards the center of the dark room, stepping over what appeared to be some popped balloons – she made a mental note to ask Jason if he'd thrown Shras a farewell party – and stared at the shard, held aloft by the containment field. As she stepped closer, the shard began to give off a warm glow.

“Computer, deactivate containment field.”

Alenis took the shard in her hands and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, the warm glow had filled the room and she was surrounded by colleagues – Jason, Tim, Arvel, even Shras and Admiral Washington were there.

“Oh, prophets, I look to you for answers,” said Alenis, as she knelt down before what appeared to be the Admiral.

“But my child, you have all the answers you need.”

“But not all I seek,” interjected Alenis. “You saved the ship, a few days ago. Why?”

“The prophecy must be fulfilled,” replied the prophet appearing in the form of Tim.

“What is this prophecy?” she demanded, frustration evident in her voice.

“You will understand when it comes to pass,”

“That's not good enough!” Alenis stood up from her knees. “I want to know what is going on here.”

“You know all that you need to,” replied Shras. He was annoying even as a prophet. “Except one thing.”

“What is that?” Alenis' eyes widened, hoping to finally get some answers.

“You must accept our gift,” said Tim. “You mustn't turn it away.”

“Gift? I'm not sure what--” Alenis doubled over in pain, clutching the area of her right groin muscle. As she lie down in pain, she pulled up her shirt to see a faint glow through her skin.

Brad appeared over her. "You mustn't turn away the gift."

"Fine!" she replied, curled up on the floor, her eyes closed in pain. When she opened them, the lab was dark again and the pain was gone. Alenis knew what she had to do. She had to cancel an appointment with the doctor.

Bajor - Rol Gren Resort

Author: Jason Beaviour

After a tour of Jena's hometown and a delicious lunch, Jason decided his daughter needed some pampering, so they'd taken a shuttle to the planet's new coastal resort.

They were having a swim in one of the pools, before Jena's spa appointment, when three young woman approached. "Hey handsome." Said the human of the group. "I'm Marcia and these are my friends Gia and Rhea. We're going to have a night of drinking and dancing and who knows where that might lead. Want to join us?"

Jason looked at the women, they were beautiful, but he had other responsibilities. "Thank you, for the tempting invitation ladies, but I'll have to decline. I'm here with my daughter and right now she's my main priority."

"Okay, your loss, Handsome." Marcia said and left with her friends.

Moments later an attractive Vulcan woman dressed in a Starfleet Captain's uniform walked from behind a tree.

"Interesting." She said. "It appears you have finally begun embrace you responsibilities. I would have preferred that you have begun with your career, but this is also a commendable start."

"Such praise." Jason replied. "So you sent those women?"

"Yes." The woman simply said.

"That's entrapment." Jason exclaimed.

"No, it was an experiment. I had a hypothesis and women helped me to test it. I was pleasantly surprised by the results. You were surprised with the presence of a child you didn't know existed and you have taken responsibility for it."

"Mother, she's not an 'it', she's a girl, her name is Jena and she's your granddaughter." Jason said angrily.

"I'm aware of that. I am not an imbecile." Replied without a hint of emotion.

"No, you're a cold hearted bitch."

"Easy, Jason, I'm mother, but I'm also your superior."

Seething with barely control anger and though clench teeth, Jason said. "Yes, ma'am. Would you like to meet your granddaughter now?"

"Of course, lead the way, Jason."

Moving to the edge of the pool, Jason called. "Jena, could you come here, please."

"Sure, Dad, what is it?" She asked as she left the water and approached her father and the unknown Vulcan woman dressed in a Captain's uniform.

"Jena, this is Captain T'Lisa Anderson, my mother and your grandmother."

Jena looked at Captain Anderson, she was a beautiful Vulcan woman, with blue eyes and although she was only about 2 inches taller than Jena herself, her rigid stance and her smileless expression made her appear even taller and more imposing.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am, may I say that you're very beautiful." Jena said finally.

"Thank you, Jena, it is a pleasure to meet you too." T'Lisa said attempting a smile. "I hear that Jumja sticks taste quite pleasant, how about I buy us each one?"

Jena smiled. "Yes, please."

"Jena." Jason said.

"Yes?" She asked turning to Jason who was collecting up their things. "Here take these with you." He said handing her, her shoes, sarong and shirt. "I'll see you later, I've got some things to organise before the Banquet." He didn't want to spend anymore time than he had to with the woman and the looks of disappointment in her eyes.

"Okay, see ya." She said. She felt a little bad about leaving Jason, but she was excited to learn about her grandmother.

As they walked away from the pool, Jena asked. "What should I call you, ma'am? Gran, Grandma, Grandmother? Nana?"

The captain raised an eye brow. "Call me, T'Lisa, after all, it is my name." T'Lisa said.

"T'Lisa, it is then."

Timothy Rouse's Quarters

Evening, Mission Day 1

Authors: Lt. Cmdr Alenis Meru as Maria Hill and Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse as Ellen Washington.

"Come in" Tim said as he grabbed his uniform jacket.

Maria walked in the room. "Hello Sir, Ellen said I could come by" Maria said.

"No problem, she'll be out soon." As he spoke Ellen left the other room and greeted her friend.

"Great, you're here. I've got such a great idea for our project."

"Leave her out of that!!" Tim said as he left his quarters. Ellen stuck out her tongue in his direction. They had already discussed her idea and he really didn't like it. But he didn't liked anyone using his little sister for their plans.

"Leave who out of it?" Maria asked, wondering where they were talking about, or why Ellen had called her.

"Want something to drink?" Ellen asked before she started explaining. "Tim's sister Judith is coming tomorrow and I think she would be perfect. She is coming on the Portland as a Security Advisor."

"She would be perfect for--" suddenly Maria realized what Ellen was referring to. They had been discussing their little project together for quite some time. "Oh, that is a great idea." She turned to Tim. "Don't worry, sir, she'll be in good hands. Besides, how do you know this isn't going to be something she wants?"

"I don't want to be part of this!" Tim said as he walked towards Ellen. He couldn't understand why woman needed to set up every person. He even felt sorry for the guy. He bent to Ellen and gave her a kiss. "See you later." he said softly and he left his quarters. He had to work.

As the door closed, Maria turned to Ellen, finding herself alone in the Executive Officer's quarters with her best friend. "So... have you moved in already?"

"Uhm, not really." Ellen hadn't spent much time in her quarters lately. "Officially that is" Changing the subject. "So, how are we going to do this?"

"Hmm, perhaps a blind date on the holodeck?" Maria racked her brain trying to think of an appropriate holodeck program. "Oh, I've got one... Sunset at Chez Ste-Marie." She let out a smile thinking about it. "Overlooking the Martian valleys, Chez Ste-Marie has some of the most romantic scenery on the red planet. With an atmosphere that exudes sophistication, Ches Ste-Marie features live music and polite waiters who cater to your every whim. The wine selection is unmatched on Mars, and live music adds to the sensual atmosphere." Maria was quoting almost word for word from the advertisement for the program; it was one of her favourites for a date on the holodeck. "For an especially intimate setting, reserve a small table by the window and watch the sun set over the peaks and valleys of the red planet."

Ellen tried to look at the pictures. "Aww, that looks so romantic. They will love it" She took a sip from her drink. "You know, what I heard of Tim she reminds me a lot of your little sister. A real delicate flower."

"That's so cute." Maria smiled back at Ellen. "They'd be perfect together."

Deep Space 9 - Admiralty Boardrooms
SS Brithonic docks a week before the Portland
Author: Rostrenen T'Sering

A chubby chicken BLT slides toward him on the surface of Admiral Washington's desk. Hunan Fydor across from him leans on one arm, and bobs his eyebrows. He smiles eagerly at the Admiral, then slowly reaches forward to unwrap the sandwich, exposing the lovingly made breaded chicken patty with mild veggies, Eath's own bacon and a chocolate drizzle. The Risan wets his lips expressively, his eyebrows encouraging the Starfleet Admiral to take and enjoy the offering. "This deep fried delight is from us. To you, my good friend!" he declared, pulling his hands away.

Admiral Washington peered at the sandwich, slid it away and folded his hands on his desk. "Mister Fydor," he said. "Of course, I appreciate the gesture..." Hunan cheerfully added, "...The pinnacle in

human cuisine, I believe."

"...Yes. No doubt. I'm afraid though that the Elegus has been assigned to this project and I tend to agree that it will be the best place for your school." The Risan leaned forward with both elbows on the table, the shimmering comm pin of the Federation Press Network stuck to his lapel.

"Admiral, we mean no disrespect, but this project was proposed, and we thought agreed to, as a partnership. You have to work with us here, buddy. The News Services and Starfleet haven't always been on the same page, so somebody has to break ground on that front, especially now. We- you know, this is a gesture on our part! It's like, we're not planting an agent on you, we want this to work in everyone's favour. We don't need headlines! In this galaxy? Shoot, those are a dime a dozen..." Hunan ran a hand through his golden blonde hair, calming himself.

"And honestly..." he said, opening his man-purse and fetching out a PADD. "We think Miss T'Sering and her class won't get what they need in a guaranteed-safety environment, like we're being offered aboard the Elegus. And frankly, we BOTH want these students to turn around and join one of our organisations. Since their families are agreeing to quality, we wish to ensure this by arranging the project on an active, Starfleet asset..."

Hunan places the PADD next to the BLT sandwich. Admiral Washington picked it off the desk and studied it. His expression seemed relaxed, but unsure. He wasn't completely welcoming the opportunity to make this decision, one that encompassed the futures of a group of young, gifted students. He stood up finally, wetting his mouth and opening it to speak, then pausing to pick up the sandwich and taking a thorough bite. He made a face as he chewed, not floored by the taste of chocolate mixed into the fried chicken and bacon, but... strangely not against it. Hunan of course smiled, since he properly believed no human could resist it in any case.

"No," said the Admiral. "There is neither enough notice, nor can I sanction a civilian element to be present on a ship where we will be testing experimental technology."

Hunan frowned and stood. "Admiral, you should see that as a gesture of trust." He put his hands in his pockets though, signalling that he'd submit to the ruling. "Alright Admiral... but you will need to tell Rostrenen yourself. She's outside at the moment, and I have to say she didn't expect you would say no to the proposal."

"I'm not saying no," said Admiral Washington as he moved out from behind his desk, toward the door. "The Elegus will be a safe ship to conduct this aboard, and maybe in a few years we can revisit the issue. I really think this is in the best interested of-"

A small person bumped into the Admiral. A woman who by contrast seemed quite average pulled another against her to prevent a worse collision. A third child peeked out from behind a fern in the hall. Rostrenen looked up at the Admiral, her arms around the young lady below her, lazily, but easily keeping her pinned. Almost like a vapour, a calming sensation seemed to come over everyone, and the girl in her arms started to settle, reaching up to hold onto Rostrenen's wrists before she looked up at the Admiral too. "Excuse us. We were getting exercise. Would everyone gather? This is Admiral Washington." The children gathered. They were all of different age groups, and the tallest among them was their teacher. The pointy-eared woman kept a hand on the smallest child, and reached her other hand to greet the Admiral, somehow not as emotionless as she might appear. Washington shook her hand, stunned by her appearance. Ros read his confusion. "Jillian, did you still wish to know where the school would be?" she asked, looking down at the girl in front of her. The little girl seemed to shake her head at first, then took a deep breath as she stepped forward, and met eyes with the admiral.

"Excuse me... Um, my name... is Jillian. I'm six. Could you please tell me we are getting a star ship and not..." she looked at Hunan as he appeared behind the Admiral, retreating a little and wringing her hands. She decided to finish though, and ate down her apprehension. "Please Admiral Washington," she said clearly. "I don't want to be on a tub. I want a starship. With guns and everything. I hated school on Earth."

Hunan was smiling. The Admiral looked at the other children and then knelt down, making eye contact with Ros for a moment, but speaking to the girl. "...okay. You got your starship," he said. "USS Portland."

Going Down...

Docking Port #6

Deep Space Nine

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Lt. (JG) Jason Beauvoir, Lt. (JG) Brad Silverton

Alenis glanced down at her chronometer. With a 20 minute flight ahead of them, the crew would have to leave right away in order to make it down to the surface in time for the official presentation of the shard to the Bajoran government. Seeing Jason approach with an ornate container, she smiled at him. "I take it the shard is safe and secure, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, ma'am as per orders." Jason said. He smiled back, in spite of feeling a little under the weather. Perhaps he'd got too much sun earlier.

"Ahem," Admiral Washington, who was catching a ride down with them, cleared his throat behind Alenis' back. He was anxious to get going, and subtly making it clear that he didn't appreciate being made to wait.

Straightening out her full dress uniform, Alenis looked over her senior staff. Their uniforms were all pressed and clean, ready for the banquet. Even Ensign Mallory's uniform was... passable. There was just one problem. The guest of honour was missing. She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Where is Lieutenant Zade?"

The door to the shuttle bay opened and Brad Silverton walked through. He wasn't quite sure what to make of the banquet coming up. On one hand it would probably be dull and full of speeches and process. On the other hand perhaps he would be exposed to some music from Trill or Bajor. He had been meaning to pick up some sheet music and learn about Bajor while he was here but hadn't had the chance. He looked up and noticed everyone's slightly disappointed look.

"I'm not late am I? Or were you expecting someone else. Hey where is Lieutenant Zade?"

"I haven't seen her since last night." Jason said. Then noticing the questioning stares, he clarified. "She came over looking for Jena, but since Jena was on the Canterbury spending the night with her grandmother, I told her that, she asked me to tell Jena she'd stopped by and left. She appeared to be dressed up for a night on the town."

Alenis let out an angry sigh. She could feel Admiral Washington's stare burning into the back of her neck. She tapped her comm badge.

"Alenis to Zade, respond." No response. "Alenis to Zade?" With the Admiral watching her every move, Alenis was rapidly getting frustrated. "Computer, locate Lieutenant Tyrlai Zade."

"Tyrlai Zade is in the Sunset Club"

Seething mad, Alenis clenched her teeth. Her very own Second Officer was blowing off her duties, drinking and dancing in the Sunset Club instead of attending an important diplomatic function: a banquet in her honour no less! "Computer, transport Lieutenant Zade to my location, authorization Alenis kappa three." As she waited for Tyrlai to materialize, she thought up a few choice words for chewing out her victim.

But instead of the drunken Trill she was expecting, all that materialized was her comm badge. "Where is--" She tapped her comm badge again. "Commander Alenis Meru to Deep Space Nine security. I've got a missing crew member here. Lieutenant Tyrlai Zade."

"You know, she's probably just sleeping one off somewhere," replied the voice on the other end. "You know how it is with fleeters and shore--"

"Listen!" Alenis had no patience for his excuses. "Lieutenant Zade is missing, and her comm badge was removed. She was last seen at the Sunset Club." Alenis was shouting, frustrated with the lack of seriousness on the part of station security. "She is late for an important diplomatic affair. I want you to find her, and beam her to my location the moment you do. Do you understand me?"

"Ummmm, yes ma'am, I'll be on it right away, just let me--"

"DO IT! Alenis out." She looked around to see her staff staring back at her. "Mr. Rouse, please stay behind and assist with the search for Lieutenant Zade. I don't think these slack-jawed yokels understand the gravity of the situation. Everyone else... we have a banquet to get to, don't we?"

Hearing Alenis go off at the poor Security Officer, Jason felt a little sorry for him. But he also knew that her anger stemmed from concern for Tyrlai. "Aye, ma'am." Then turning to the others present he said. "Okay, people, you heard the Captain, now get your sorry asses aboard that shuttle." A phrase that he regretted even before he finished saying it especially since those present included the XO and Admiral Washington. 'Well, it was fun while it lasted,' he thought to himself.

"Lieutenant," started the Admiral. "I'd advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head at this banquet. I'm sure your Commanding Officer has briefed you on the importance of--"

"I'll handle this," interrupted Alenis. "Take a seat, Admiral," she added, standing aside and motioning him to get into the transport. As the crew filed in, she waited for Jason who was at the back of the line. She could detect some visible discomfort emanating from him. "Lieutenant, are you feeling okay?"

"Well, now that you mention it, Ma'am, I am feeling a little strange." Jason replied. It was a huge understatement, but he knew how important this banquet was and he didn't want to bow out over something that would probably pass in the next half hour or so.

"As soon as we land, get some kava root tea," replied Alenis, remembering an old home-remedy for nearly any ailment. "It'll calm your stomach and calm your nerves. And make sure it's the real stuff; I know how you feel about replicated teas," she added with a warm smile.

"Thank you, I'll do that." Jason said returning her smile, before taking his seat.

The Return
Near Bajor
Right before the banquet

As the transport passed by a large celestial object, Alenis immediately recognized it as Endalla, the largest and closest of Bajor's five moons. Since she was a child reading the fairy tales of the five celestial children, the moons of Bajor had held a special place in her heart. One of her last memories of her father was standing outside on a clear night and watching Endalla eclipse Derna. They said if you made a wish at the precise moment that they eclipsed, it would come true. Alenis wished to leave the occupation behind; little did she know that two weeks later, she would find herself hiding in a cargo bay as a stowaway on a Lissepian freighter - and that her father would be left behind.

"Enjoying the view, Commander?" Alenis was interrupted by a stern and familiar voice.

"Yes, thank you, Admiral. It's been a long time since I've seen the moons of Bajor."

"Indeed," replied Washington. "I trust that our guest of honour will be coming down to join us?"

"Yes," replied Alenis. "I'm sure that Mr. Rouse will get to the bottom of this issue," she added, hoping that Tim would save her bacon once more. She glanced back at her crew, all seated in the transport. Jason in particular was looking a little worse for wear – sweating, fidgeting, and surrounded by an aura of restlessness. Alenis chalked it up to him holding a priceless artifact in his hands.

As they broke through the clouds, the city of Ashalla came into view, looking very different from the days of the occupation. In those days, it was a drab, depressing place. The architecture of occupation was everywhere – walls, fences and guard towers protected the Cardassian installations and kept the Bajorans divided from one another. Curfews made the city eerily quiet at night, with the exception of Cardassian patrols. "Dead zones" where entire communities had been evacuated at gunpoint were sprawling neighbourhoods of desolation, the dilapidated structures collapsing in on themselves after years of disrepair. All the waterways were polluted, and a dense cloud of smog hung over the city at all times.

But now, it was a lush, green city whose very existence defied the occupation. Anything reminding Bajorans of the occupation – walls, buildings, statues, work camps – had all been demolished, replaced mostly with parks, amphitheatres, and open-air marketplaces. The pollution was cleaned up, and citizens could even swim in the river if they so desired. The arts flourished with the generous support of post-occupation governments, eager to strengthen the Bajoran culture that the Cardassians tried to wipe out.

The transport circled the city a couple times, waiting its turn to land and giving the occupants a tour of the city – the tall spires of the city centre, the rooftop gardens of the outlying areas, and the waterfront, whose theatres and galleries were a cultural hub for all of Bajor.

It was outside a large banquet hall on the waterfront that the transport finally set down. Peering out the window, Alenis could see a crowd of thousands lining the pathway between the landing pad and the hall, all wanting a peek at the shard. She knew that one day she would again set foot on Bajor; she didn't expect there to be thousands of people and an army of photographers watching her do it. She got up from her seat and made her way to the door. First to exist would be her and Admiral Washington, with Jason in tow carrying the shard. Then the remainder of the Portland's senior staff.

The doors of the transport opened to reveal a smattering of dignitaries, led by two figures who Alenis recognized instantly. On the left was Kai Pralon Onala, the long-serving head of the Bajoran faith. On

the right, Jeero Zusak, the First Minister. Of all those assembled, perhaps none were more grateful than Jeero. With his popularity waning and dissatisfaction with his government growing from nationalist, independentist, and religious quarters, his coalition was on the verge of fracture. For him, the return of this shard would be a good PR opportunity and a chance to give his political fortunes a much-needed boost.

Alenis slowly stepped forward, descending the staircase, before pausing on the last step. Incredibly nervous, her legs were like jelly, and as she took the first step onto the red carpet, they collapsed beneath her. Tears of joy in her eyes, she embraced the ground. She was finally home.

Without saying a word, Admiral Washington extended his arm to help her back up. With arms locked, they approached the Bajoran dignitaries.

“Kai Pralon, First Minister Jeero, I present to you the fifth shard of Tolic.” The Admiral was the first to speak, reciting perfectly his prepared comments. “May the return of this shard be a symbol of the bonds of friendship between Bajor and the Federation, and may these bonds remain strong and unbroken.”

“Admiral, I welcome you to Bajor,” replied Jeero. “With the return of this shard to the Bajoran people, our friendship will only deepen. Bajor owes the Federation a debt of gratitude far more valuable than you know.” As he finished speaking, two Vedeks stepped forward to take the shard from Jason’s hands.

As Washington spoke with Jeero, Alenis’ eyes locked with those of the Kai. Without saying a word, Pralon squeezed Alenis’ earlobe. “Your pagh is strong, my child.”

“My pagh...” Overwhelmed with emotion, Alenis trailed off, not knowing what to say.

“Welcome home, Meru.”

Vedek, Orb and Tome part 2

A grimy freighter

The morning of the Banquet

Tyrlai Zade woke up way sooner than they had expected. She assumed the pill she took to wipe the sythahol from her system and done at least partial work on whatever they had drugged her with. ‘Another bonus of synthahol’, she thought to herself. When her eyes fluttered open she was in a sickbay, a low rent sickbay, something a Ferengi would have labeled a fixer-upper. It was a couple different shades of grimy brown, getting darker at the seams and corners which did their best to blend in with the shadows. She had been relieved of her comm badge and her credit chip, but had just left her lying on the bioslab, she refused to call it a bed.

She cautiously raised her head, and seeing nothing by way of guards or even monitoring software she kicked off her heels and quietly stood, reaching underneath one arm to fiddle with her undergarments. She pulled out the small wire she’d had programmed into her replicator pattern for that particular garment. It was a seeker wire, an Orion contraption pre loaded with Ferengi intrusion software. She located a medical terminal and brought up the internal sensor grid. There were four lifesigns on the bridge and two in engineering. There were ten crew quarters, a mess hall, sickbay and four other rooms tucked into the Spartan design of what she had decided to call the SS Stupidcrapfreighter.

She looked around the room and spotted someones com rig. She took the earpiece and slaved it to her intrusion device after wiping it off twice. She then set the device to a fifteen minute slag timer, after which it would breach the capacitor and melt itself. Tyrlai made a mental note to take the earpiece out before then. She wiped it off one more time and turned on the auditory feed from the internal sensors.

"...should be over the Capitol in thirty seconds." She hoped it was the Bajoran Capitol, she hated having to hitch a ride back to her starship, which seemed to happen a lot more than they had led on at the academy.

"Once we're in position beam him up. How is the security feed from the station?" The lizards voice was unmistakeable. She did a quick residular scan and located his cabin, moving quietly towards it.

"Not a chirp, our passenger hasn't been missed yet."

"Once he's aboard get down there and restrain her, she took Abid out a little too easily for my comfort."

Tyrlai crept into the reptillians chambers and looked the place over. She had just decided to try and open a cabinet when the second voice spoke again. "Vinar is ready for transport in ten." She saw his orb shaped thing tossed onto his sleeping rock and grabbed it, running as quickly and quietly as she could for what she hoped was the transporter room. She got lucky tapping the reciprocal code for two way transport and dashing onto the platform. There was a shimmering and for a moment Vinar was standing next to her, he was a tall, lean bookish looking Bajoran with a mixture of surprise and a scowl on his face. She waved at him. The next moment she was facing a trio of Bajorans in a run down apartment that looked like it may be one of the few locations that hadn't yet repaired the damage from the occupation.

Tyrlai crossed her arms and glared at them menacingly. "The Lizard sent me down, he's not happy with the quality of work around here."

The lone female Bajoran shouted to the others. "Kill her!"

Damnit! Tyrlai thought as she scrambled for the stairs, grabbing the handholds for support as her bare feet slipped on the artificial wood surface. She scrambled down the stairs three at a time, swearing in Trill as the railing was vaporized by the only bright red beam the Bajorans got off at her, burning her hand. She turned her ankle a little as she turned onto the street and tried to blend in with the crowd.

The crowd was about seven Bajorans clad head to toe in earth tones while she was a six foot tall Trill woman in a bright orange and ribboned club dress that concealed somewhat less than fifty percent of her body, shaking her stinging left hand. She gave up the concealment plan and ran as the whine of the transporter returned and she heard the unmistakable voice of the reptilian. She was just able to dart around a corner just before another red beam vaporized a chunk of it.

She kept running weaving around any corner she found, right then left the right and so on. At one point she darted through a marketplace, spotting a sign for the transport station she moved in that direction. Slowing somewhat and breathing heavily. She walked and trotted a few more blocks and found her way to it. She did a quick look over from the corner for any sign of Vinar, the trio, a reptile or the pretty one and deciding it was safe headed for the shuttle departure board. Pausing only to pull the screeching earpiece out as her seeker wire melted itself.

USS Portland - Hallway

Tim was roaming the ship trying to find the Portland's second officer. What was it with this ship, especially with the woman on board? Couldn't they for one moment do what they were expected. He had spent more time dealing with odd situations then with his actual job. He was getting tired of it. But on the other hand, it did made things more interesting, as long as no one knew that he secretly liked all the craziness going on. He wouldn't get bored soon. He slowed his pass as he saw Ellen approach him, reading a padd that apparently was very interesting. She didn't saw him.

"Hello Gorgeous." He said with an obvious amusement in his voice. He would never get enough of looking at her.

Ellen looked up in surprise. "Tim," she looked around to see if anyone else was in the hallway. "What are you doing here? I thought you had a banquet to attend?"

"Oh, I do, I just have someone to track down first." He tried to grab her padd, curious what was so interesting. "What are you reading?"

She turned her back to him and held the padd to her stomach. He couldn't see it. It contained step two of the plans she made with Maria to set up Judith. "Just some boring medical stuff." She said, hoping he would give up.

He pulled her to him and gave her a kiss in her neck, hoping to distract her so he could read it. He wasn't stupid. That padd didn't contain medical files. When he attempted a second time to reach for the padd his commbadge scirpted. "Tim, what's your status?"

Tim put his hand before Ellen mouth to shush her giggles while he continued to hold her to his body. "Uhm, no luck so far. I looked at the lieutenant's private quarters and her officer. No sign of her."

"Roger that. Update security on DS9 and come on down. We've got a banquet to enjoy," sounded the Captains voice through the combadge.

"I'll be down in 5. Have something I need to do first." He said before he closed the channel. He turned Ellen around and looked in her eyes.

"Five minutes he." She whispered.

Tim laughed. "I like your thinking, but there is no time for that. Just this." And he took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Cocktail time!

Waterfront Hall

Anhalla, Bajor

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. (JG) Brad Silverton, Lt. (JG) Jason Beauvoir

Glass of springwine in hand, Alenis surveyed the crowd of Bajorans and Federation personnel mingling with each other. The Bajorans, trying hard to impress their guests, were pushing hors d'oeuvres, insisting that they try all the different flavours of Bajor. With all the attention being focused on the shard, fortunately, it seemed as though no one noticed yet that the guest of honour was missing.

"Commander Alenis," said a familiar authoritative voice. Alenis hadn't seen the Admiral approach alongside her.

"Admiral," she replied, not taking her eyes off the crowd but nodding to acknowledge his presence.

"Where is Lieutenant Zade?"

"I'm sure she'll be down shortly." With everyone enjoying their drinks, Alenis figured she had maybe an hour before Tyrlai's absence would be noted by their hosts. "I've got my best man on the case."

"Well, I hope for your sake she is," replied the Admiral, his tone slightly threatening.

"Go get yourself a drink, sir," replied Alenis, brushing him off. She didn't care. Whatever the Admiral's concerns were, they paled in comparison to the joy she was feeling to have finally returned home. Shaking his head, the Admiral walked towards the bar.

Brad made his way through the crowd mingling casually. He enjoyed other cultures especially their art and music. He had hoped to have time to do a little sight seeing and shopping on Bajor. Authentic shopping not the Federation tailored shops on DS9. He eventually came over to Alenis. "Captain, wow this is some gathering. This is my first dignitary function. Are they always this... popular?"

"Not usually," replied Alenis. "The return of this shard is a momentous occasion for the Bajoran people. The Tears of the Prophets -- Orbs as you may know them -- are the most sacred relics in the Bajoran religion. They were literally handed down to us from the prophets." Alenis thought it funny; she was surrounded by Bajoran Vedeks, dignitaries, and academics, and here she was, someone who hasn't even set foot on Bajor in nearly thirty years, explaining the ways of her people. "This shard represents the fifth of six pieces of a lost orb. If we track down just one more piece..." Alenis trailed off. She had just remembered something she needed to tell the doctor. She looked around, making sure no one was listening in, and then leaned in. "Speaking of the orb, we need to cancel my appointment tomorrow. I'm not getting this growth removed."

Brad looked visibly hurt and tried to recover. At least she lowered her voice to not tell others. He responded in a near whisper, "I see... Captain I... I know I probably didn't make the best of choices during our first mission and all but it is a very routine procedure so Ensign Washington or Hill could do it. Or if you'd prefer to have the DS9 doctors remove it that would be fine too. The choice is yours of course on who does the procedure."

"No, no, no, you don't understand. Doctor, it's not you, it's me," replied Alenis, horrified at having unnecessarily caused him distress. "What I mean is... I've elected not to undergo the procedure."

"What? Wait you're serious? Captain I haven't been able to find a cause and with Federation cancer research what it is... that just shouldn't be. While it appears benign now there is no telling what will happen in the future. Why in the world would you want to ignore this?"

"The orb," stuttered Alenis. She knew how little sense she was making to Brad. As a Starfleet doctor, he was trained in the scientific method and would have had Federation ideas of rationalism and enlightenment drilled into his head. Even though Starfleet was supposed to respect other cultures and honour the prime directive, Alenis always felt that underneath, there was a dismissive attitude towards what they saw as primitive religious and cultural beliefs. Many a Starfleet officer saw the Bajoran religion as little more than a bunch of quaint stories about a wormhole, whose secrets can only be discovered through probes and scans rather than visions and holy texts. "I... I had a vision.

The prophets came to me and told me not to go through with this operation. I'm sorry, doctor."

Excusing herself from the conversation, Alenis stepped to the side and tapped her comm badge. "Tim, what's your status?" she asked in a harsh whisper, trying not to be heard.

"Uhm, no luck so far. I looked at the lieutenant's private quarters and her officer. No sign of her."

Alenis held her head. If Tyrlai wasn't on the Portland, her fate was now in the hands of the redneck security outfit on DS9. But she knew that Tyrlai was one of the most creative officers she had ever met. If anyone could handle herself, it was Tyrlai. "Roger that. Update security on DS9 and come on down. We've got a banquet to enjoy," she said, the exhaustion in her voice indicating that she wasn't completely enjoying the situation. 'What else could go wrong?' she thought.

"I'll be down in 5. Have something I need to do first."

Alenis identified a slightly mischevious tone in Timothy's voice, but ignored it. She had more important things to deal with than his minor machinations. "Understood. I'll meet you down here."

Meanwhile, Jason sat in the corner sipping his Kava root tea and watching people pretend to enjoy themselves. It wasn't helping much. Then a thought struck him, one that made his fevered blood run cold. Pon farr. That little gift courtesy of his maternal grandfather. He had to get out of here. To find somewhere to meditate, before the fecal matter collided with the atmospheric systems.

Discarding the tea, he rose and headed purposefully for the exit. He was only half way across the room, when a young Bajoran man in the robes of a Prylar approached him. "You're the one that brought the Holy Shard back to us, aren't you?" He asked.

"It was in my care, yes, but Lieutenant Zade was the one who found it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go."

"What was it like to spend so much time with it? Did you experience any visions from the Prophets?"

"I'd be happy to talk about this later, but I must leave, now."

"Come on just a few minutes, please?" The man said blocking Jason's path.

"Please, get out of my way." Jason said though gritted teeth as aggression.

"Can, I at least feel your Pagh?" The Prylar asked reaching for Jason's ear.

"Out of my way!" Jason roared and threw the insistent young man into a side table, before fleeing the room at a run.

Once out in the corridor he made for the doors out into the garden. Before he could reach the handle, an authoritative voice said. "Stop right there, sir. "

Jason did so, as he could see two security officers with phasers drawn. reflected in the glass of the doors. "I've got to go. Please let me go." He pleaded.

"I'm sorry, I can't do that." The guard replied. "Now, move away from the d...."

Before he could finish his order, he was on the ground and as he lost consciousness, he witnessed

Jason pick up his partner, as if he were a rag doll and throw him though the wood and glass French-style doors.

Jason followed. Once in the garden, he sniffed the warm night air. His animal urges taking command of him, as he went in search of a mate.

Into the garden...

Waterfront Hall

Ashalla, Bajor

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Rostrenen T'Sering

Seeing her science officer lose his cool, Alenis shoved her drink into the hands of a stunned Vedek and took off after him. She thought she had lost him for a moment before hearing a crash coming from the corridor to the garden. Rounding the corner, she was shocked to see a security guard lying on the ground. Alenis quickly knelt down beside him to see if she could offer any assistance. Feeling his pulse, she looked up at the shattered remains of the glass door. The guard would be fine in a few minutes; she had to find Jason. She'd never seen anyone suddenly start acting this way; she wondered if he had been drugged, was being affected by some sort of parasite, or perhaps he just simply snapped.

Quickly, she ran into the garden. Trying to follow the sounds of running and heavy breathing, she quickly got lost in the winding paths in the massive garden. As she came to a fork in the path, she realized that she had lost Jason's path as well.

"Jason?" she called out, looking around for any sign of him. But it was no use; it was a moonlit night and there was no artificial light where she was. To her left, she heard a twig snap. She immediately snapped her head in the direction, peering into the shadows. "Jason? Are you there?" A faint rustling. "Jason, please come out?"

After hearing a familiar voice, Jason moved out into the moonlight. Green blood dripped from his tightly closed fist, as he drove his finger nails into his palm, in an attempt to focus the maelstrom of his mind. "Stay back, Alenis, I don't want to hurt you.

"Jason, I want to help you," said Alenis as she cautiously stepped forward. The moonlight glistened off the sweat on Jason's forehead. He was visibly distressed, looking as though he could barely contain his emotions. "Tell me what's wrong." Silence, as Jason's tortured expression intensified. Alenis took another couple steps closer. "Jason, I care about you, but I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on."

"Stay back." Jason pleaded. His body shaking from the strain and sweat pouring from his body. "It's the Pon farr, you're not safe around me. The mating urge is so strong. I can't hold it off much longer. Please go."

"Pon farr?" Alenis wasn't familiar with the term. But it was unmistakeable what he meant when he referred to the urge to mate. She let out a smile as she took a couple steps closer. "Well, perhaps I can help you with that. I've seen the way you look at me, Lieutenant. And your invite for tea... You wanted to share much more than tea, didn't you?"

"Yes." He said honestly. He looked and with last of his reason he asked. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Then not waiting for an answer, he moved towards her.

Alenis reached for her side, but Jason moved faster than she anticipated. Giving in to his animal lusts, Jason quickly took her down to the ground between the bushes. Before she even knew what was happening, he was on top of her, groping at her and tugging at her clothing. "Jason... Jason, stop, you're hurting me." But he didn't even slow down as he ripped into the tunic of her dress uniform.

Alenis was vulnerable. Her gambit had failed, and not even her skill in Hal'Kereth, the Bajoran martial art, could get Jason off of her. He was just too strong, and with his hands gripping Alenis' wrists, there was little she could do. As she was about to resign herself to what was to happen next, out of the corner of her eye, Alenis spotted an opportunity. "Slow down and kiss me, Lieutenant," she said in a sultry voice.

Detecting the difference cadence of her voice Jason, reasoned, as much as he was able at that moment, that she was giving in to him, so he loosened his grip on her.

Alenis took advantage of the opening and with her right arm she reached for the object that she had dropped when she was taken down. "I'm sorry, Jason," she said as she brought the stun baton she had taken from the unconscious guard to his neck and pulled the trigger. 40,000 volts, enough to stop a charging Gorn, coursed through Jason's body. With her other hand, Alenis was able to free herself from underneath Jason's limp body. Seeing him try to get up, she shocked him again for good measure. "I'm really sorry," she said, standing over him, stun baton at the ready, both their figures illuminated by the beams of flashlight being carried by approaching guards. Jason lay on the ground groaning. There was little else he could do with his spasming muscles refusing to obey his brain's commands.

"Alenis!" Tim shouted, arriving first. "What the hell is going on here?" he said as he rushed to them, shocked at the sight in front of him. The back of Alenis' uniform - or what was left of it - was covered in dirt, and she stood over her Chief Science Officer, brandishing a stun baton.

"Timothy! Thank the prophets! I..." Alenis looked down at her science officer, writhing on the ground. She was at a loss for words. Fortunately, it was Tim and not a Bajoran guard or police officer who would insist on arresting Jason. "It's a long story. I'll explain later. Right now we need to get him back to the ship, and get him some medical--"

"Hold on, ma'am," interrupted one of the guards, short of breath from running through the garden. "This man is under arrest for--"

Alenis turned to the guard, her eyes shooting daggers at him. "No. He's part of my crew, and he needs medical attention. He's coming with me." She was very protective of the people serving under her, and that included Jason, even though just a few moments ago he was wrestling her to the ground.

"Ma'am, he has committed a crime on Bajor, and under the terms of the treaty of Hendrikspool, law enforcement on the surface of Bajor is the sole purview of--" With Bajor and Deep Space Nine fast becoming a federation hub in the sector, the guard had to deal with his fair share of Starfleet officers, though most cases involved drunken rowdiness from young officers who had a few too many. He had a standard lecture for any fleetier who thought he was above Bajoran law. "Wait a minute, are you that Starfleet captain who returned the Tolic shard?"

"Does everyone on this planet know who I am?" she asked, rhetorically. "Never mind. I don't have time for this. I'm not pressing charges, and I'll personally pay for any damage he caused to the hall." Her voice crescendoed in volume as she quickly tired of dealing with this guard. "I'm taking him back to my ship and if you have a problem with that, call the consulate, because I have a banquet to get

to." Without waiting for a response, Alenis tapped her comm badge. "Alenis to Portland, beam Lieutenant Beauvoir directly to the brig."

"Ma'am?" asked R'vahis on the other end. Drawing the short straw, the poor Caitian was left with the job of sitting in the center chair while everyone else enjoyed the banquet. He didn't mind though; a bit of command experience, even if it is just commanding a ship docked at a station while everyone else is at dinner, would go a decent way to advance his career.

"You heard me. And get security and a medical team down there, there is something clearly wrong with our Vulcan friend."

"Aye captain," replied the voice on the other end of the comm badge.

As Jason's figure shimmered in the transporter beam, the guards dispersed to return to their regular duties. Alenis turned to Tim, one question on her mind. "Mr. Rouse, have you ever heard of something called pon farr?"

"I have," chirped Ros, half her face hidden behind the lense of a handheld camera. She lowered it, turning it over to flick it off. She almost seemed to sigh. "I will probably have to delete the footage in that case..."

"Ros, this isn't what it looks like." Though she was glad to see her friend again, Rostrenen had picked the worst possible time to show up with a camera. "I was just... the Lieutenant was..." Alenis stammered, trying to figure out how to explain the situation. Her face was as red as ripe Alvas berries as she frantically tried to figure out how to explain being caught in such a compromising position -- on film, to boot. "It's not what it looks like."

"He attacked you," Ros blankly observed. She didn't know it mattered to Meru, but there was no real footage of the confrontation, only of Alenis jamming the stun baton into her already incapacitated assailant. Ros had run up following the Bajoran police. If she'd thought Alenis had been in trouble, she would have charged in herself. Ros knew her friend could handle herself though. That's why she commanded a ship.

"I admit that I hoped it would be something I might be able to cover... it is too bad. I can make this go away if it is related to somebody's pon farr." Ros looked over to where Jason had been beamed back to the ship. She had no pity for him, and it wouldn't have been clear in her voice anyway. She didn't know Jason at all, but her Order held the position that the way pon farr was treated on Vulcan was utterly backwards. She had to respect an individual's privacy in this case, but for him to put so many people, and even his commanding officer in danger seemed terribly negligent to her.

"Oh, but I did not mean I would prefer for you to get hurt though," she added, peering innocently at Alenis.

"I'm not hurt," she replied. "Just my uniform." As she bent over to dust off her pants, she felt a terrible pain on the right side of her chest. "And I think I cracked a rib."

"Commander, you need to see a doctor," replied Tim, in a serious tone. Having known Alenis for two weeks, he still couldn't figure out if she was merely headstrong or insufferably so.

"Later," replied Alenis with a wave of her hand. "Help me get back to the hall; the show must go on," she added, wincing in pain.

The show must go on...

Waterfront Hall

Ashalla, Bajor

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. (JG) Jason Beauvoir, Lt. (JG) Brad Silverton

As they walked back to the hall, Alenis tried to explain to Timothy and Rostrenen what just happened. Out of nowhere, her science officer just started behaving in a hyper-aggressive animalistic manner. Then he tried to mate with her. She glossed over the part where she used her feminine charms to subdue him, but figured that Timothy didn't need to know everything. She hoped that Jason understood that everything she did was to try to help and protect him. She couldn't just let him wander the city until he found a mate to prey on or until he ended up in a Bajoran jail cell. It was for the best that he was in the brig of the Portland; there he was safe under Alenis' custody, and he could get the medical help he so clearly needed.

They both paused at the entrance to the hall. Alenis looked down at her clothes; they were completely ruined. The white coat was stained brown with dirt, and her undershirt and skirt were both torn in ways that showed slightly more skin than the standard Starfleet dress uniform. She tried to straighten her hair as best she could, pulling out a couple of leaves in the process.

"Well, Tim, how do I look?" she asked, trying to find some humour in the situation.

"Like you just took a rumble in the bushes. Oh wait..."

"Ah, a wise guy. Well, for the record we never--"

"Commander Meru?" Asked a tall Vulcan female in a Captain's uniform as Alenis and Tim re-entered the room.

"It's Commander Alenis," replied Meru, wondering who this Vulcan was. Her features looked vaguely familiar, though Alenis was sure she'd never seen her face before. "And you are?" she asked, extending a hand, torn sleeve and all, for a handshake.

"Captain Anderson of the Canterbury." T'Lisa said taking the Commander's hand and briefly shaking it. "I believe you have the dubious honour of my eldest son as your Chief Science Officer." Making a cursory survey of the room. "Speaking of whom, where is he?" she asked.

Tim choked in his wine at the last question, turning around to hide his laugh.

"Lieutenant Beauvoir is..." Alenis paused for a moment, trying to think of a diplomatic way to put things to the Lieutenant's mother. She glanced down at her dirty and torn dress uniform. "He has... taken ill. Rather suddenly, in fact."

T'Lisa was about to inquire further into her son's condition when a Bajoran official approached the podium at one end of the room and the room went quiet.

"Ladies and Gentleman, May I have your attention" the voice of the prime minister sounded. "We like to start the official part of the ceremony. While no one person can take sole credit for the fruits of Bajor's relationship with the Federation, there are a few people who deserve special mention for the return of the shard. Admiral Washington, for his support of the Federation initiative to return lost treasures to their rightful home."

Washington stood from his seat, accepting the applause. As the clapping died down, he glared across the room at Alenis and Tim before retaking his seat.

..."and Commander Alenis, who not only transported the shard back to Bajor, but herself has returned home for the first time in almost thirty years. Welcome home, Commander."

Alenis froze as the spotlight fell on her. Those in attendance were somewhat astonished at the state of her dress, but clapped politely anyways. She managed a subtle acknowledgment before a spasm of terror ran down her spine. The show must go on, and the guest of honour, the one she promised the Admiral would attend, was still missing.

The crowd all came in the direction of the podium. "Finally, there is the officer who tracked down the shard and recovered it. Lieutenant Zade, can you please come forward?" Tim looked around the room, hoping the Lieutenant arrived by now.

While the others were speaking, an unusually tall Bajoran serving girl stepped from behind the dias carrying a pitcher of tulaberry wine. She stepped gracefully, strands of her long red hair peeked out from the servants headdress. Moving down the row she smiled and refilled a few of the dignitaries' drinks, most of them were too busy looking expectantly at the crowd. It allowed her to pause within a foot of the prime minister and whisper to him.

"Hello there, my name is Tyrlai Zade. I believe you are missing a holy book. That man there and the pretty one to his right are primarily involved." The tall red haired and green eyed woman pointed to a Vedek and another shorter Bajoran in the middle of the reception. She leaned a little too close to the podium and said, now audible to the entire room. "The big one is actually a lizard."

"What is the meaning of this,..." The flustered prime minister stood. The CO of the Portland looked at the serving girl without an ounce of recognition.

"Oh yeah," The serving girl said, still completely audible to the room. "This is a holodisguise." She tapped her chest twice and suddenly the tall raven haired and blue eyed Trill stood in a tattered orange evening gown covered with a silver jacket. "My name is Tyrlai Zade and those two are thieves of religious artifacts." She pointed at the tall Vedek and the pretty man beside him.

The taller Bajoran hissed in an entirely unnatural way for his supposedly mamillian voicebox and pulled a large hand disrupter and levelled it towards the podium while the pretty one mumbled something into a device at his wrist. The very best of Bajoran crowd security leapt into action and covered the Prime minister and were already leading him away when the Vedek fired, the blast of energy disrupting his holodisguise for a few moments, revealing a near seven foot reptilian beneath.

The blast slammed into Tyrlai's midsection knocking her to the floor with a high pitched yelp. More security charged towards the two intruders just as the shimmering waves of the transport beam enfolded them. Tyrlai looked down at the arcing energy as it burned a wider hole in her silvery jacket. Her head fell back to the floor and she gasped, her hand reaching towards the hole, hoping very much that nothing had gotten through the ablative armor. The pain was profound, but she could still recall what Gylara Zade preferred for breakfast so the symbiont was at least okay.

Brad wasn't the quickest to react. Others went to try to grab the attackers but that wasn't his style nor his primary concern. Tobin had died recently and now Tyrlai had been shot. Later on he'd have to have a talk with Arlen about Alenis and now about himself but that could wait. That thought wouldn't cross his mind until later. No now he just rushed forward and finally reached Tyrlai.

"Doctor Silverton to the Portland. Two to beam directly to sickbay"

Tyrlai winced and tried to speak but wasn't quite able to make words join together sensibly or audibly. "They, thought,... will.. lizard." She tried to gesture but couldn't think of one that would explain the issue.

--Portland to Doctor Silverton, there appears to be a beam dissipator at your location we can't get a lock on anything in the building--

Tyrlai grabbed the doctor's arm wincing. The pain from what portion of the disruption beam had made it through her ablative jacket was starting to grow. "What the voice said." She squeaked out. She then panicked and fumbled with her jacket, "the orb, have to trace." She pawed, her movements jittery as she searched the pockets of the jacket.

Seeing the large reptilian knock out two Bajoran security guards, Alenis leaped into action. While most of the crowd tried to retreat, she bounded forwards towards the reptilian one, attempting a running tackle. But with a swing of his arm, the Gorn sent her flying into a dinner table, breaking the table in two and shattering the glassware. She held her side in pain; being thrown into a table wasn't exactly good for her cracked rib. She tried to get up but the Gorn was already on top of her. The next thing Alenis knew, he had pulled her off the ground and had his bulky, scaly arm around her chest. "Nobody try be a hero, or the Captain gets it," he grunted, holding Alenis tightly with one hand and holding a disruptor against her head with the other.

Tim was standing back to the whole happening as he was still conversing with the brig officers on the Portland involving Lieutenant Beauvoir. At hearing the threat he nudged a security officer standing next to him to give him his spare, and signaled him for his plan. Using the confusion of the Gorn's overtaking of the Captain he stepped closer to the two, setting his phaser to stun, aimed for the Captain and shot. As expected the Gorn removed his arm, dropping the captain, and raised up to see where the shot had come from. Seconds later the other security officer, who had crossed the room in the meantime shot the Gorn with his phaser set on the highest stun. He hit him and the Gorn tumbled down. Tim immediately rushed to the Captain while saying to the multiple security officers that had approached. "Keep him under shot and if needed shoot him back to lalaland" Kneeling beside Alenis he looked up trying to find the doctor. "Silverton, where are you?"

Brad grunted in frustration. Having to take care of patients without proper equipment and improvising was already getting old. Brad would have to start carrying around a hypo everywhere, diplomatic formalities in not carrying equipment to functions be damned. However that would be for the next time and Tyrlai may not make it to then. The disruptor blast to Tyrlai's abdomen didn't look as bad as he had feared. In fact it looked awfully, metallic? He moved her clothes to the side and found the ablative armor, ruined, but having done its job. He pulled that out and tossed it to the side to look at the real damage. Some of the energy had gotten through caused severe burns. It wasn't good but it wasn't lethal.

Tyrlai was trying to say something and search around for something she had hidden on her that much was certain but Brad couldn't make out what. He started to pat her down to help her search and found it. A hypo? Tyrlai seemed to plan for a multitude of contingencies. Brad looked at the readout and chuckled. Cortropine was a strong stimulant and he wasn't sure what she had originally planned for it but it should be enough to let her bare down and ignore the pain enough to get focus till they could find that damned transport dissipator. He injected her with it then started looking around to what had happened to the others.

Coming to, the first thing she saw was Tim's pants as he knelt over her. She had a terrible pain in her side, and immediately after regaining consciousness, coughed up a small amount of blood. Grabbing a tablecloth on the ground next to her, she quickly wiped it away before anyone but Tim noticed. "You shot me," she said, staring into his eyes, before being racked by another painful cough.

"I saved your life!" Tim said in reply. He knelt beside her. "You're welcome."

"If it's not too much trouble, perhaps next time you could be a bit more gentle." Alenis tried to offer him a smile, but only a cough came out. "Is there a doctor in the house?"

Brad quickly came over to Alenis to diagnose the damage. The phaser hit wasn't bad only being on a low stun meant to surprise the Gorn more than do damage. At about the same time the prime minister came forward surrounded by several guards.

"Captain Alenis, my men tell me they have found some of this Gorn's compatriots outside manning disruption equipment. They have searched and believe the area is secure. As for our safety in here... you and your crew are to be commended for their efforts. This is now a second time that Bajor owes you much."

Alenis smiled through the pain as she got up to her knees. "No, Bajor is my home. If anything, I owe Bajor."

Tyrlai patted the prime minister on the shoulder as she passed, "not a Gorn by the way, something close but not Gorn," having somehow wiggled through his private guard. She was still clutching her abdomen, though the pain was lessening. She reached over and pressed Brad's comm badge, not currently in possession of her own. "Zade to sickbay, have an emergency team beam to these coordinates. Bring something for treating disruptor and phaser wounds."

Looking over at the doctor while she waited for the medical team to arrive she smiled. "So is synthahol good for disruptor pain?"

"Get me a glass too," added Alenis.

"Synthahol is a miracle cure for a great many ailments ranging from mild disruptor blasts to stressed nerves of watching what you thought was a dying patient." Brad smirked at Tyrlai.

"Then synthahol all around."

Diplomatic Prowess...

Waterfront hall

Ashalla, Bajor

Authors: Cmdr. Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Tyrlai Zade

As the various dignitaries mingled for after-dinner drinks and dancing, Alenis approached her first officer who was standing in a corner, drink in hand, contemplating the craziness of the evening.

"Well, I suppose things could have gone worse tonight," she said. "You think that your pompous, uptight father-in-law to be will court martial me for this or just bust me down to ensign?"

As Alenis spoke, Tim saw Admiral Washington approach Alenis from behind. A look of horror appeared on his face as he poked Alenis with his elbow. "Trouble on his way"

"Ow!" Her ribs were still tender; she suspected that Tim might have done it on purpose. Alenis closed her eyes and let out a deep breath, hoping the Admiral didn't hear her comments. "I guess I'll find out soon enough," she said as she turned to face the music. "Admiral Washington, are you enjoying the music? I love the belaklavion; in fact I play it myself."

"Right..." Washington started. "Commanders, do you have a moment? It's about your new mission."

"Of course, Admiral," replied Alenis, breathing a sigh of relief. He wouldn't be briefing them on their next mission if he was planning to fire them. Unless he was very desperate.

"Meet me in conference room 2A in five minutes. Down the hall, to the right." He looked over to see Tyrilai dancing flirtatiously with a couple young Vedeks. "And bring our 'guest of honour.'" He shook his head at Alenis' tattered clothes before turning to leave.

"Well, that went better than expected," said Alenis to her right hand man the moment Washington was out of earshot.

Four and a half minutes later...

As they entered the meeting room, Tim saw his sister standing on the other side of the room, together with another woman. "Jud, what are you doing here? I thought you weren't supposed to arrive till a few days."

Judith smiled at her brother. She liked to surprise her brothers, especially Timmy. He hated it. "Hadn't I told you my assignment was postponed?" Keep smiling Judith, keep smiling, she said to herself. She was leaning on the chair in front of her and couldn't wait for the whole group to sit down. She had been without her medication for 24 hours now, and her back was killing her.

"Oh yes, I forgot. You're family." Washington said before Tim had the chance to respond. "Commander Alenis, Lieutenant Zade, meet Captain Judith Rouse. Ms. Rouse is a consultant with the Marines, who will be training your security details in tactical combat and riot control."

"Riot control?" asked Alenis. "Are we expecting riots on this next assignment."

"Possibly. Commander, are you familiar with the lost tribes of Bajor?"

"The lost tribes?" asked Alenis. "Of course; legend has it that in the past, a number of Bajorans, for whatever reasons -- war, famine, religious persecution." In some ways, ancient Bajor wasn't as idyllic of a place as everyone thought. At certain times in Bajoran history, the church had too much power. There were dark ages of d'jarras, Inquisitions, and crusades. A few people wanted to go back to these times; though they were a marginal political force, they had the potential to be a kingmaker "But what does that have to do with -- wait, did you find one?"

"Yes, on Gamia III. Actually, we had found them some time ago, but they are not a warp-capable society, so we were prohibited from interfering by the Prime Directive."

"The Prime Directive?" asked Alenis. "Admiral, with all due respect, is that what's important here? All children of Bajor should be able to return home. This is a lost tribe; they've been separated from Bajor for centuries... millennia, even. We have to make contact."

"You... didn't let me finish," interrupted the Admiral. "They have reached out to us. This is Tora Celes,

foreign minister of the Bajoran Republic. We are to open diplomatic negotiations with the Gamians, with the goal of reuniting Bajor with the lost tribes. Ms. Tora and her delegation will be your guests, and seeing as you've proven yourselves to be quite..." Washington cleared his throat and looked at the three assembled senior officers of the Portland. The Chief Diplomatic Officer was out of uniform, wearing a bright orange dress more appropriate for a nightclub than a diplomatic function. The captain's uniform was torn and tattered, and the rumour floating around the banquet was that she had snuck out into the garden with a junior officer. The only one who looked halfway competent was the first officer "...tactful in diplomatic matters, you'll be representing the interests of the Federation."

"Wait a minute," Tyrlai said raising her glass and hand, "did you say Gamia III?"

The Admiral looked at her as if barely containing his impending rage. "Yes, miss Zade."

Tyrlai pulled the spherical metal comm device she had stolen from the Reptilian's chambers out from her dress. "This has been broadcasting to Gamia III, it's a subspace communicator and a damn peculiar design at that. I would say we aren't the only ones who have been invited."

"So your friends,..." The Admiral began.

"Religious thieves,..." Tyrlai corrected him.

"That you brought here to,..." He continued.

"They were chasing me,..." Tyrlai interrupted again.

"Have you been drinking?"

"It's a party," Tyrlai motioned towards where the dancing was going on, "and I have a prescription."

"A prescription for green drinks?"

"Yes dermal regenerators, pain inhibitors and tropical fizzes." She raised her glass and took a drink, "Compliments of good doctor Silverton. I was shot by religious terrorists and a Reptilian."

"Well he is in custody and I'm sure we can,..."

"No, he escaped by now." Tyrlai said sagely with grim certainty.

"And what makes you so sure,...?"

"He had a personal remote transport device grafted to his arm."

The Admiral looked flustered. "And you didn't feel a need to mention that to Bajoran security when they were taking him?"

Tyrlai looked down at the Admiral as if he were somehow addled. "I had just been shot. I don't know what you understand of basic disrupter technology, Washington, sir, but let me assure you from a scientific perspective, they hurt like a bitch."

Alenis stood in front of Tyrlai at that point giving her a careful nudge towards one of the stools.

Judith chuckled at the discussion between the Admiral and the diplomatic officer. Looking up to Tim she saw he was trying very hard not to laugh and in the meantime giving her a look saying to stop chuckling herself. If this conversation was any sign of the way the Portland worked, she was going to have a blast of a time.

"Yes, I'd... imagine they would," replied the Admiral, a look of disgust upon his face. The staunchly conservative Admiral disapproved of swearing. "These are some disturbing revelations, but it still doesn't change our mission. Investigate this attempted theft while you are there, but do not let it jeopardize your primary objective. The Bajorans and the Federation both agree

"Gamia III..." Deep in thought, Alenis furrowed her brow, her Bajoran features becoming more pronounced. "Isn't the Gamia system quite the strategic piece of real estate?"

"It is." Judith answered leaning on a chair in front of her. "The Gamia system is located near Cardassian space, and a presence there would greatly help protect our flank in case relations with the Cardassians sour. That's why it is so important we send someone who knows how to deal with former Bajorans, but also a ship that has the potential to fight back in case any other interested show up. No offense." The last said in the direction of the Captain.

"I object," replied Alenis. As a former tactical officer, she was fully aware of the Portland's meagre tactical capabilities, but already she had built some emotional attachment to the old ship. "She may be an old ship, but she's saved all our lives only days ago. Once we finish repairs and refits, I'm sure she'll be able to handle herself in any case."

"Yes, I agree. That's why she is being sent on this mission. And to give her a benefit we need, they send me" Judith said, suddenly feeling very confident.

The corners of the Admiral's lips curled slightly at Alenis' impassioned defense of her vessel. It reminded him of his first command, which, like Alenis', was a Miranda class. The USS Cape Verde was considered to be obsolete even then, but he would defend her to the hilt if anyone were to say so. The old ship saved his life many a time, before finally being destroyed during the Dominion war. But even in death, the old ship gave him and his crew one last gift -- it held out long enough for nearly all on board to make their way to the escape pods. Even thinking about the old ship over 15 years later brought a tear to his eye. "I'm sure the Portland will be a great choice for the mission. We didn't want to take a too aggressive tack by sending a warship and I'm sure your..." Washington looked over the assembled officers "...diplomatic prowess will be a great asset on the mission ahead."
