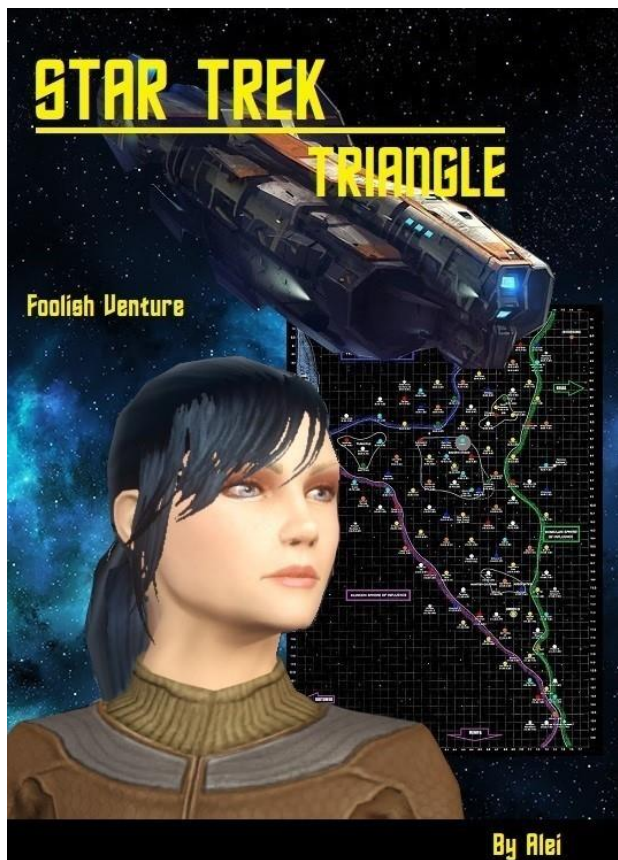


STAR TREK TRIANGLE - FOOLISH VENTURE



They say that hope is not a plan, and that wishes
are not a strategy.

But, sometimes, just sometimes,
insanity is a necessity, and a Foolish Venture
is the only card left in your hand to play.

STAR TREK TRIANGLE – FOOLISH VENTURE

Star Trek Triangle

Foolish Venture

A Star Trek Fan Fiction by
Aleí

Cover by Nate

Produced by
Cascade East Productions

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STAR TREK TRIANGLE – FOOLISH VENTURE

This book is dedicated to

Doug

and Nate

without whose inspiration and assistance, this work would
not have been possible.

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Star Trek – Triangle Foolish Venture

Scene 1

Commander Jessica Holmes
Somewhere in the Triangle
SS Smith
Stardate 28503.01



Boring. This was *boring*.

I hated being bored. Shot at by furious Klingons, that was unpleasant; getting one's posterior chewed off by a superior officer was to be avoided whenever possible, paperwork was ... well it was *boring* too, but ...

God, this is boring with a capital B!!!

Yes, despite what I might have originally thought this assignment might be like, sitting here in the Helm position, by myself, on the *Smith's* small Bridge, watching the stars go by, was the highlight of my day.

The *Smith ... God*, that's a boring name for a ship ... was currently crawling through space near the "The Affiliation of Outer Free Worlds", more commonly known as "Baker's Dozen", which represented probably the most stable and powerful government in the area of space known as the Triangle.

Bordered on by the Federation, the Romulan Empire, and the Klingon Empire, the Triangle contained around seventy or so inhabited and independent worlds that I knew of. Beyond that were any number of other worlds with a small mining or agricultural presence, not to mention God knows how many pirate and smuggler enclaves and other little secret hidey holes.

Given its position between the three major spacefaring powers in this part of the galaxy, the independence of these worlds depended on a fragile balance of power. A balance wherein a major move to consume these systems by one, could easily lead to war with the other two.

Even the Klingons are smart enough not to take on both the Federation and the Romulans at the same time ... well ... most of them are anyway.

This made operations and ... well, just about anything else happening in this region ... flexible ... and usually pretty interesting. My last stint as XO of the fleet scout *Wayfarer* had certainly been entertaining.

The *Wayfarer* had been assigned to Star Fleet's Merchant Marine Operations Command, which wasn't always regarded as the most exciting of assignments. However, here in the Triangle, the vessels of the Star Fleet's Merchant Marine Command *were* Star Fleet's presence.

Sending a heavy cruiser from say, Military Operations Command, might be too provocative, Colonial Operations ... much the same, if for different reasons, Galactic Exploration Command ... well, it was pretty much known space, not much exploring needed to be done, so what did that leave?

Well, little scout ships like the Wayfarer, of course ...

It had been fun, exciting, and different, and those were things I really loved to have in my life and career.

Star Fleet Intelligence Command on the other hand ...

Well, it had sounded like an interesting idea at the time ... yep, pulled that one over on me, didn't you, Patterson ...

So now, here I was, ferrying a Star Fleet Counter-Intelligence Agent around in what amounted to a tramp freighter.

So, yes, ok, the *Smith* wasn't *exactly* a tramp freighter on the inside, I would give her that.

To all outward appearances and most interior ones, the *Smith* was a *Travares* class light commercial freighter, with a normal crew of about four to six and room for up to four passengers. *Travares*' were everywhere, being extremely reliable, low-cost vessels to operate and reasonably cheap to purchase as starships went. They boasted a nice-sized main cargo bay which used up most of Decks Five and Six as well as a few smaller areas for specialty cargoes including a fairly large hangar bay which could easily fit her two heavy cargo shuttlecraft.

With a maximum safe operating speed of about warp five, they weren't particular speedy, but with the Series H Drives, built by the Aberdeen Consortium, they could operate near their top speed for extended periods of time. That actually made them as fast as, or a bit faster than, most merchant vessels in the category that really counted, effective operating speed.

No, the *Smith* was designed to appear, to all but the most thorough inspections, to be just what she pretended to be, a small common freight hauler of no particular note.

Hidden within her hull, however, were a lot of systems that would have raised the eyebrows or any port inspector had they known of their existence.

While the main sensors appeared, to exterior inspection, to be fairly typical merchant fare, they weren't. They were, in fact, quite powerful, especially a close range. The *Smith's* visible main computer was a typical aging L series model found in most merchants, but there was a hidden and masked compartment which contained a fully capable M-1j series system. The shielding was likewise enhanced and the design also included a pair of hidden, forward firing Series XIV medium phasers, for use in those situations where harsh language just wasn't enough firepower.

Her engines were modified as well. There was only so much one could do with the old Series H Drives, but, with all the enhancements built into them, the *Smith's* engines really weren't exactly Series H Drives anymore. If I pushed her, the *Smith* could easily reach warp seven, even warp eight or nine for a short time if I was really in a hurry.

But no, we have to pretend we're a rusting bucket of bolts inching along, so we are going nowhere, and not getting there in any particular hurry.

God, this is soooooo boring

I brushed an errant strand of black hair away from my face, irritated that it had somehow escaped the pony tail I usually wore my long black hair in.

Don't be too harsh on your hair, Jessica. Brushing stray hairs away from your face just might be the most interesting thing you do today.

I sighed. I was all alone up here right now so I could do whatever the hell I wanted to. I'd already tried screaming in frustration a couple of times just to make sure no one aboard could hear me. Yes, the soundproofing of the Bridge did appear to be operating just fine.

This is all Patterson's fault

But now ... now all I could do here was sit on my butt, fume, think of all the interesting ways I would get even with that never-to-be-sufficiently-dammed idiot, and remember how this boring tragedy had all come about.

Scene #2

Commander Jessica Holmes

Flashback

Starbase 10

Stardate 28501.03



No, No, No, NO!" Lieutenant Commander Randolph Patterson bellowed in frustration. "Starfleet is NOT going to go for this, Jess."

"Why not?" I asked. "They have before."

"Yes, God knows why, but it comes to an end here, Jess," he responded in a harsh tone.

"I don't know why," I responded. "Haven't I gotten rave Officer Efficiency Reports from each of my past assignments?"

“Yes,” Patterson responded between clenched teeth.

“Wasn’t all that training key in my last assignment? Commander Anrudael even said so in his recommendation for me,” I replied innocently.

“Yes,” he replied again in a strained tone. “He also accused you of being ‘excessively inventive’.”

“Well, he is an Andorian and ...” I began to counter.

“No, No more!!” Patterson replied. “This is not a debate. You have orders to transfer to the USS *Brenton* for assignment as her XO.”

“But I just got done being an XO,” I pled. “I’ve been there done that and besides, the *Brenton* has a boring name. Ships with boring names *never* do exciting stuff.”

“You can’t judge an assignment by the name of the starship, Jess,” the Commander replied with an exasperated tone.

“Yes I can,” I countered reasonably.

“Jess, how many times has Starfleet retrained you for a new MOS,” Patterson replied. “How many, do you even remember?”

“Of course I remember,” I replied in a mildly affronted tone. “If you don’t count Department Head and Command Schools, Starfleet has trained me in three different specialties.”

“Right, you started out as a Security Officer,” Patterson began.

“Right, on the *Enterprise*, I mean the ***Enterprise***. That was a really low life expectancy job for a security specialist,” I responded reasonably. “I wanted to live to thirty so a change was in order.”

“Alright, then you were retrained for a Helm Officer’s position,” Patterson continued.

“That’s right, but it wasn’t as interesting as it sounds. I mean, do you know how often a starship actually *turns* during a mission. Hardly ever, it is *boring*. I just had to have a job that had something happening on a more consistent basis,” I replied, still with a totally reasonable tone.

“Then Engineering,” he continued.

“Yes, now that was an interesting job and people were hardly ever shooting phasers or distrputors at you. I mean, that isn’t all that bad some of the time, you know, to spice things up, but it did give you something to do all the time and you might live long enough to do it,” I replied with a happy grin.

“And now?” Patterson asked in an aggrieved tone.

“I’m thinking of going into Astrobotany,” I replied happily.

“Astro *what?*” Patterson asked.

“Astrobotany, the study of plant life in deep space,” I said in a convincing manner.

“There are no plants in deep space,” Patterson replied in a flat voice.

“*Au Contraire*, my friend,” I replied, getting into my spiel. “There’s the Orpheus spores of Caliban V, the Estiorniarian strands of Danaerius III and of course the Botchlobs of Kziniti Prime and ... “

“No, no, no, NO, Jess, this is not happening,” he replied in a firm voice. “Just *pick a career already!!*”

“Well, that’s what I’m talking about, Randy. I’m thinking I could settle down as an astrobotanist and ... “

“NO!! NO more career changes!!” Patterson snarled. “No more!! You’re going to the *Brenton* and that’s final.”

“Ok, I resign, and it’s your fault,” I replied succinctly, as I stared into his shocked face.

“I’m a pretty good officer,” I continued. “Do you think the Fleet will look on you favorably when they find out that *you’re* responsible for my resignation, *especially* with all the time and effort they’ve invested in training me?”

“You wouldn’t,” he replied.

“Of course I would, Randy,” I replied cheerfully. “I mean, how long have we known each other?”

“Too long,” he replied in a grumpy voice.

“You’re not still mad that I never went out with you are you?” I asked with a small frown.

“No ... No of course not ... that has nothing to do with this,” he replied in a flustered voice.

Yeah, right ...

“Well then, what’s the problem?” I continued. “We’re friends after all”

“Friends, *Friends*? I ... God, you are the most *insufferable woman since ...*” he replied in an outraged voice.

Ok ... maybe it’s because I went out with your girlfriend instead ... yep, that might be it.

“Well, there has to be something other than the *Brenton*. I mean, you’re tight with Commodore Grafan, put in the right word and I’m out of your hair for at least a year, maybe longer,” I replied with my most winning smile.

The redness in Randolph’s face subsided a bit as he sat down behind his desk again.

“So you’re looking for something different,” he said, as I saw the wheels turning in what passed for his brain.

“Yes, that’s right,” I replied.

“Something you haven’t done before,” he continued, the beginnings of a smile I wasn’t sure I liked forming on his face.

“That’s the idea,” I said.

“Well, I do have this one thing, but ... I don’t know, I’m not sure it’s for you, Jess,” he continued.

“What do you mean?” I said. “What’s not for me?”

“Well it is kind of specialized, you understand, I’ve been asked to look for people with only ... certain qualities,” he continued as he gazed at me critically. “I’m not sure you’re up to it, Jess.”

“Come on, Randy, spit it out already,” I responded with a frustrated tone.

“Well ... this is all classified so if I say anything it *cannot leave this room*. Do you *understand*, Jess?” he continued, leaning back and steepling his fingers over his chest.

“Ok, you got it. I am sworn to secrecy,” I replied eagerly.

“How about a short mission for Starfleet Intelligence?” he asked in a low voice. “Think carefully about this one, Jess, it’s not for everyone.”

Starfleet Intelligence? Wow, that IS different ...

“So, I’d be retrained as an Intelligence Officer?” I asked eagerly.

“No, you’d just be seconded to Intelligence for this mission. But you know, an officer like you, on an important mission, just think of the possibilities, Jess. Catch Intelligence’s eye with a successful mission and who knows what could happen,” he replied reasonably. “It’s the best that I can do. That or the *Brenton*, which will it be?”

I thought for a moment. Patterson just seemed too pleased with himself, which set off little red alerts in the back of my brain. But *Starfleet Intelligence?*

Wow, you could be just like that Janet Bond woman on the vids. Now wouldn’t that be fun!?!

Still, there was Patterson.

But he’s a friend, I mean, the whole girlfriend thing aside ... he wouldn’t steer me wrong, would he?

Present Day

I sat at the Helm station of the *Smith* and engaged in my new most interesting activity as I brushed a strand of my black hair out of my eyes.

Yes, apparently he would. You are SOO Dead when I get off this mission, Randolph, SOOO Dead ...

I punched up the Nav Screen for the billionth time in the past hour. Still one day, seven hours, thirteen minutes and five seconds out of Becket where our passenger might finally begin to do something other than sit in her stateroom ...

And maybe I can get off this tub and down to the planet for a bit ... but until then.

I screamed at the top of my lungs in frustration. After all, the soundproofing on the Bridge worked just fine.

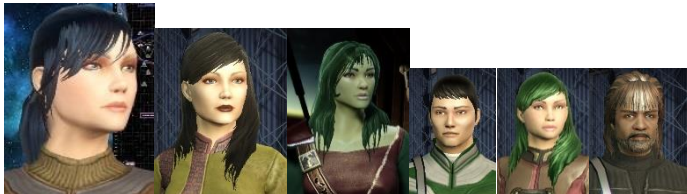
Scene #3

Commander Jessica Holmes

SS Smith

Becket System

Stardate 28503.03



I walked into the ship's small mess hall, recreation hall or ... well, just about the only part of the ship not dedicated sleeping, cargo or just the various devices which made the starship run, on the entire vessel.

Star Fleet Intelligence sure skimped on the amenities when building this baby, didn't they ...?

It was a bit crowded, what with the grav hockey table and such, but there was enough room for the small crew of my vessel as well as our "passengers".

A few were familiar to me, friends that I had worked with before, the most striking being Melisandra, a Green Orion

who was lounging on the room's only couch. She was the one non-Star Fleet member of the crew. She was a woman of many talents and a trader of sorts who definitely knew her way around the Triangle, and the Orion Frontier Mercantile Association worlds in particular.

I'd asked her to join us as a favor for saving her life ... well, a couple of times, and since the pay had been good, she'd said yes. I was wondering if she was beginning to regret that decision.

Sitting at the dining table on the far side of the room, oblivious to the looks the Green Orion was shooting him ... *I mean, how is that even possible* ... was Lieutenant Patrick Duranguil, my Chief and, really, only Engineer. Patrick was kind of a find, but my shambling hulk of a friend hadn't changed much since our time together years ago on the *Exeter*.

When I'd seen him on Commodore Whitehead's list of potentially available personnel, I'd been quick to snatch him up. Patrick might not be the most personable of people, he was too involved with his gadgets and tinkering to worry about such things as conversation, but he was a very adaptable engineer and someone I could trust to do his job when things counted the most.

Sitting next to him, trying vainly to start up a conversation, was Lieutenant Junior Grade Tina Lopez. I didn't know Tina personally but her ratings on sensor operations were off the charts and she had spent much of her time serving in Merchant Marine Command in this area of space. Her emerald-green hair was very striking and, surprisingly, natural. It seemed that she had a little Green Orion blood in her heritage which was irrelevant for this mission, but intriguing.

Ensign Eshil Chiv was someone that I had no history with. The Andorian seemed to be dourer than a normal member of his species and had been selected for me to fill the position as the Security Officer aboard the *Smith* for this mission.

Finally, there was Ensign Roger Chen, one of the helmsmen from the *Wayfarer* that I had snagged between assignments to help with this mission.

"Hi, Commander," Chen said casually. "Welcome to the party. Any idea what we're going to be doing this time?"

"Probably sitting at the Spaceport, all locked up ship side while the Intelligence geeks do whatever they do, just like the last three planetfalls," replied Lieutenant Lopez in a long-suffering voice.

“Probably not anything that interesting,” purred Melisandra from the couch. “I believe Commander Harrelson has a vast amount of experience in having no-fun-at-all. Why, oh why, did I *ever* let you talk me into this, Jess?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” I replied, very much agreeing with them ... still. “We still have a job to do people, so can it. Besides, Melis, you’re being well paid.”

“Yes,” she said, carefully eyeing one of her perfectly manicured nails. “But I may need to add a boredom surcharge to this venture.”

At that moment, the doors to the common room opened and Lieutenant Commander Eleanor Harrelson, Star Fleet Intelligence, arrived. She was tall, with a cascade of jet-black hair and a prim and proper stance which screamed “I am Star Fleet” in big neon letters. With her were her two security guards which, I assumed, were other members of Intelligence Command.

I didn’t actually know their real names, I hadn’t been provided with the personnel files for the Intelligence personnel aboard the *Smith*. All I knew was their first names were John and Fred, no last names, no nothing. I

actually had a pet theory that they might be robots of some kind, but that probably was being unfair. I was pretty sure robots talked more.

In the absence of real names, I'd come to thinking of them as Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dumber. It wasn't flattering to be sure, but my irritation at their silence, to being completely blocked out of the mission we were all on, was growing day by day. Besides, I wasn't sure the two had much between the ears and it appeared that they were here solely to provide "muscle" for Harrelson's team.

I'm just a freaking bus driver to these people ...

"Good morning, Commander," I said as politely as I could muster.

"Good morning, Commander Holmes," she replied. "Have we arrived at Becket?"

"Yes, we have. We're now in standard orbit awaiting a customs inspection," I replied.

"Good," she said. "When we've passed Customs we will land at the Spaceport and my team and I will debark. You and your crew are to remain aboard the *Smith*."

“Again?” Melisandra sighed. “This is beyond ridiculous.”

“I was not aware that I asked your opinion,” Commander Harrelson responded sternly.

“No,” the Orion replied. “But you obviously desperately need it.”

“If I may, Commander,” I intervened before Harrelson truly got on Melis’s bad side. “I believe Melisandra has a valid mission related point.”

“You do? And what experience do you have in Intelligence matters, Commander Holmes?” Harrelson replied primly.

“None,” I replied. “However, I have a great deal of experience in the behavior of merchant traders and Melis has a great deal more. And with all due respect, Commander, we are *not* acting like merchants.”

“And that is important how exactly?” Harrelson replied still irritated, but at least irritated at me, not Melis. Being irritated with a Green Orion of Melisandra’s skill could be a deadly experience.

But honestly? I mean, what does “undercover” mean to these Intelligence geeks anyway ... jeez ...

I sighed. I supposed I was going to have to explain the blindingly obvious to these people.

“We are undercover, we are not on an overt Star Fleet mission, is that not correct?” I asked patiently.

“Yes, of course,” she replied.

“And we are posing, for our cover, as merchants, is that not also correct?” I continued.

“Yes, we are, I thought that would have been plain from your orders,” she replied firmly.

“So ... how many traders are there, that you know of, that never leave their ship and never trade?” I asked.

“How many merchant crews have you heard of that do not take time off on planet to peruse the local establishments, chase the girls or guys, even just do a little shopping for God’s sake,” I continued in a mildly exasperated tone.

“Commander Harelson, we are virtually *screaming* to anyone who is paying attention that we are *not* traders. We should just go outside and paint NCC dash Star Fleet all over this ship, it would be about as obvious.”

Hareelson stopped for a moment and seemed a bit thoughtful. “I guess ... I guess I can see your point, Commander, but this is a highly confidential mission, we can’t have people knowing what we are up to.”

“Commander,” I replied evenly. “If we don’t act like merchants and traders the locals will draw the appropriate conclusions and your mission, whatever it is, will be compromised, if it hasn’t been already. We are also all Star Fleet and know how to keep our mouths shut, as does Melisandra. We are here to provide your cover. Allow us to do our jobs.”

Why do I need to explain this to an Intelligence agent?

Harrelson looked momentarily at Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dumber, for all the good it did her. Then she turned back to me and said. “Very well, Commander Holmes,” she replied. “Trade and let *some* of your crew ... circulate, to create the proper impression that this ship is indeed a trading vessel. But no more than is necessary, is that understood?” she snapped.

“Yes, it is, Mr. Harrelson,” I replied, reminding the woman in front of me that, while I might not command her mission, I *did* outrank her.

“Good,” she replied, turning on her heel with the Tweedles in tow. “Inform me when we’ve landed.”

The doors swished shut behind her and I could feel the collective sigh of relief throughout the room.

“There is nothing wrong with that woman that removing the top foot or so of her body wouldn’t improve,” Melisandra said, in a dangerously casual tone.

“No, Melis, no killing the woman commanding the mission,” I replied. “As for the rest of you, let’s get through this inspection and then to our stations. We’ll get this tub landed and, just think, soon you will all be breathing the nasty air of Becket.”

That brought a general grin to all the crew, even Duranguil, as he stopped, momentarily, puttering with whatever he was designing.

“Just remember, we’re Merchants, no spit and polish saluting or yes Ma’ams,” I said.

“Yes, Ma’am, Commander,” replied Ensign Chen as he rose from his chair.

I fixed him with a warning glare.

“I mean,” he said looking a bit nervous, “sure, when I get around to it?”

“Right tone, wrong answer,” I replied with a little growl to my voice.

“Right,” he said with a grin. “I’ll get right on it, Skipper.”

“Better,” said Melis and she glided up next to me as the rest filed out the door.

“He has promise,” she purred. “This Star Fleet Intelligence paghta on the other hand ... “

“Yes, she is a mystery, that’s for sure,” I replied.

Yes, she was, and mysteries were alternately lots of fun, or very dangerous, sometimes both.

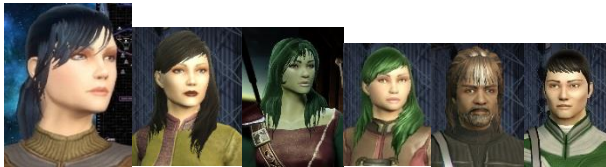
Wonder which one she is ... maybe it’s time to find out.

Scene #4

Commander Jessica Holmes

Becket System

Stardate 28503.03



“So, will this thing work?” I asked Duranguil as I fitted his tiny little gadget into my ear.

“It should, Jess,” he replied with a bright smile. “Let me know how it works.”

Great ... nothing like potentially risking your life with a “should work” device ...

Patrick noticed my expression and said “Well, if you want something tested, you’ll have to give me more than a couple of hours to throw it all together.”

“Noted,” I said looking over the rest of my crew as Patrick lowered the rear cargo ramp.

“So, Melis, who’s your trading contact around here?” I asked.

“Here?” she asked in a mildly affronted tone. “Trading is *not* the primary activity here on Becket; it’s one of the most worthless hunks of rock in the entire region.”

She was of course right. I’d been here once chasing down a particularly nasty pirate and I really hadn’t felt much of an urge to return. The people who lived here didn’t have a great deal to offer except as a place where any number of illicit transactions could be conducted.

There were, I suppose, some law-abiding citizens who managed to scratch out a meager living from the planet’s rhobidium deposits as well as a few interesting crystalline formations. However, the main business of Becket was as a transshipment point of any number of ill-gotten, but not greatly valuable, goods and information.

It was, succinctly, a mecca for the petty criminal and small time grifter.

“True,” I said. But we’re carrying what, a collection of machine parts, a few luxury items and ...

“Emergency survival food packs,” Melis replied in a flat voice. “Oh joy.”

“Well,” I said with a small smile. “I’m betting some enterprising restaurateur or grocery merchant would be willing to purchase and ... ‘repurpose’ those food packs in a place like this. I can’t imagine a better place to unload them.”

“Yes, but it’s a total waste of my talents,” she replied primly. “How ... flexible can I be in the goods or services I obtain in return?”

“Somewhat, just don’t trade for anything that will get us all locked in the brig when we get home,” I replied with a warning tone.

“You are no fun at all, Jess,” she replied. “But one works with what one has.”

“You,” she said pointing to our Andorian Security specialist. “Come along with me and watch where you step. Not everything that is brown here is mud.”

Ensign Chiv gave me a doubtful expression, but after a moment’s pause, followed the Green Orion down the ramp to the planet’s surface.

“Patrick,” I said, looking over at my engineer. “You stick with the ship but keep a channel open in case one of us needs something while we’re off ship. Chen and Lopez, you have a few hours liberty but stay close in case Commander Harrelson needs us for something. “

“Fat chance of that,” replied Lieutenant Lopez as she fiddled for a moment with her green hair. “We’ll stay close anyway though, Skipper, doesn’t look like there’s all that much to wander off into anyway. Come on, Chen, let’s go see the sights.”

I watched as she and Ensign Chen walked down the ramp, a boyish grin plastered on the young Ensign’s face.

“I see you’ve already started then,” said Commander Harrelson as she and the Tweedles entered the lower cargo bay.

“We have. You need to be careful out there, Harrelson, this isn’t New Aberdeen or one of the other landfalls we’ve visited,” I replied, watching the Intelligence Officer carefully.

“We’ll be fine, Commander, this is what we do,” she replied as she stepped down the ramp with her guardians in tow.

Ok, hope you're right, Harrelson; it will certainly make my life easier ... but just in case...

I moved back into the ship and headed toward the bow, grabbing a brown hooded robe and my gear as I went. In a few moments I had reached the access point to the forward landing gear and entered my code as the small hatch opened.

Moving quickly, I moved through the opening and down the landing gear mechanism, my feet landing lightly on the dull brown soil before I moved off into the nearby cluster of building and streets.

Wouldn't do to be seen just waltzing off the ship now would it?

I quickly flipped open my small scanner. Not a Star Fleet tricorder but a more ubiquitous and generic civilian device.

No sense being too obvious and screaming "We are Star Fleet" to everyone. Harrelson seems to be doing well enough at that on her own ...

The thing wasn't all that powerful but it homed in on the signal left by the small tracker I had surreptitiously attached to Harrelson's vest just fine. Orienting myself on her position, I began making my way towards her location as she seemed to move in a beeline toward her destination.

Ok, I'm not a Intelligence agent, but where did this woman learn her counter-surveillance techniques ... ?

I was a trained security specialist and, without a great deal of modesty, I'd been pretty dammed good at my job. Those were skills that I'd used gainfully in any number of situations and even more extensively during my time here in the *Wayfarer*. Tracking down pirates, smugglers, slavers and the general scum of society required a certain amount of skill; I guess what they'd call "tradecraft" in the Intelligence service.

But as far as I could tell, Commander Harrelson wasn't exhibiting any of that kind of training. She was making no attempt to confuse anyone who might be following her, making no attempts to surveil, observe or identify anyone who might be doing so.

I mean, is this intentional? Does she want to be followed?

It would certainly have been helpful to have *some* idea of what the Commander's mission actually was. I was, however, just Star Fleet, the transport commander, and such matters were apparently not to be trusted to such as me.

I still don't like this though, not at all ...

Eventually I caught up with my quarry. She and the Tweedles were going ever deeper into a part of the town that, even for Becket, was a **bad** place to be. Whatever law and order there might be on this rock, this was an area that it avoided like the plague. Whatever happened in the Boot District, stayed there, often quite permanently.

I knew there was a reason I never wanted to come back here.

Careful to remain casual, but unseen, I followed the three Intelligence operatives deeper into the Boot until they entered an especially seedy looking establishment and disappeared from view.

I flipped the hood of my robe up over my head and approached the bar. It was obviously run down, and if the building hadn't been made of what looked like solid, if crumbling, stone, it would have probably sagged under the

weight of years and lack of care. The sign proclaimed, in Orion, the name of the place ... Hoggs.

Looking over the location more critically as I approached, it seemed to have a number of arched entryways giving multiple points of egress and sight lines into the building. Even so, the inside itself seemed to be only dimly lit with little help from the rusty light filtering through the overhead clouds.

Selecting one of the entrances as far away for where Harrelson had entered as possible, I entered the bar. A quick look out of the corner of my eye told me much of what I needed to know.

The bar itself was set back a bit from the entryways, which were largely just open archways, some of which were closed off by light paneling, probably removable. There was room between the exterior walls and the bar itself for a group of light tables and chairs to the front and more on either side. To my left, Harrelson had seated herself at one of the tables with her back to the entrance of the bar, the Tweedles standing to either side and behind her.

Yes, let's not be too obvious, God, they stick out like a flaming Garthal in a snowfield.

I selected a stool at the bar where I could observe what was going on without having to move my head more than fractionally to do so. Fortunately, my brown cloak was much the color as the stone and blended in well with the overall decor of the establishment.

Yep, pay no attention to little old me ...

The Tellarite bartender eyed me then approached. “What do *you* want?”

I looked back and sneered softly. “Beer, or whatever it is that you serve here, I’m not picky.”

The Tellarite grunted, grabbed a grimy glass from under the bar, stuck it under a tap and filled the mug with some brown grey stuff that looked just plain awful.

“Ten credits,” he said, slapping whatever it was in front of me.

I reached in my pocket and put thirty Orion Ceelons on the bar. “Just keep filling it up until those run out.”

“Hmmp,” the Tellarite said. “That kind of day then.”

“Aren’t they all,” I replied, taking a sip of the brew.

My first impulse was to spit the stuff out. It tasted more like a mixture of turpentine and molasses than anything else, but as it scalded the back of my throat, I could tell it was obviously alcohol.

Despite my physical revulsion with the stuff, I only sat the mug back down and sighed in contentment.

The Tellarite, still looking at me, shook his head in disappointment. He then went back to looking after the few other customers in the place, apparently unhappy I hadn't spit the stuff out at first taste.

I really should have. This stuff is simply AWFUL ...

Contemplating the hideous drink, and deciding if I could survive another sip, I clicked the small control in my glove that activated the small device in my ear. Patrick had called it a "Sound Sifter" which didn't actually magnify something, but simply found the sounds you wanted to hear and excluded those you didn't. In this case we'd set the device to key off Harrleson's voice and to pick up it, and any other speech-like sounds in her near vicinity.

That is, if it worked. Duranguil's devices worked, most of the time, but there were occasions ...

I noticed, without turning my head, a Tellarite wearing expensive, but rather worn clothing, enter the bar. He looked around, and then moved to Harrelson's table, taking the chair opposite hers.

He said something I couldn't hear, Harrelson hadn't spoken yet, so the device had not yet had anything to register on, but when she replied, her voice came through quickly with only a faint scratchiness.

"Yes, I am," she said, focusing on the Tellarite. "I understand you may have some information for me. A name perhaps?"

"Hmmm," I heard his somewhat distorted response. "Perha.... do. It depends on pay."

"That depends on the name," Harrelson replied.

"One would think that transwar... ..ould be wor... .. a bit," came the gruff reply.

I did my best to keep my heartbeat in check.

That had sounded an awful lot like Transwarp there.

“It is. I can offer you ten thousand Federation credits for good information, more if the name checks out,” the Intelligence officer replied.

“HAAAH!” the Tellarite replied in a loud laugh that needed no translation. “Ten thousand credits ... *Ten* thousand credits for one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Federation!!!?”

Ok, everyone heard that ...

I took another small sip of the awful stuff in front of me and casually looked in that direction. After all, pretty much everyone else at the bar now was.

“Is that not enough?” Harrelson replied.

“Not nearly,” I heard the Tellarite reply in a far lower tone. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re a waste of my time.”

“I assure you that I’m quite serious,” she replied.

“Oh, I kn... . re.. mander Ellie H.... .. of St... elt Intelli... .. mand,” I heard, my heart beating a bit faster as the Tellarite’s voice slowly gained in volume. “You have access to a very large discretionary account, don’t you, and I think I want *all* of it!!”

I saw Harrelson's eyes go wide as the Tweedles reached for their phasers. But they were too slow. Before either could clear their weapons, the distinctive whine of phasers firing on full charge assaulted my ears as the Tweedles glowed an incandescent yellow, and then disappeared.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit ...

People began to scatter from the bar and I rose carefully, and began to back away. Almost immediately, two armed Ruddy Orions entered the bar from behind Harrelson, their phasers leveled at the unfortunate agent.

One of the Orions turned his eyes on me but I kept my hands up and continued to back slowly away from the bar.

Yes, I am VERY unthreatening, pay no attention to the girl under the cloak ... PLEASE, pay no attention to the girl under the cloak ...

"Now," said the Tellarite to the shocked woman. "Let's discuss getting those account access codes and getting all that money into my accounts, instead of yours. If you're really nice I might even keep you alive for a little while afterwards. After all, you look like you *might* be worth something on the market."

The Orion observing me turned his eyes away for a second, and that was enough.

Turning my body slightly, I brought my hands around and fired the needler darts from the small projectors attached to my wrists, hitting the Orion musclemen repeatedly with the tiny projectiles.

A full-powered needler was a dangerous weapon indeed, capable of firing a number of very small flechette darts that were exceedingly sharp and fine. Darts so sharp that they could pass through flesh as if it wasn't even there. Military grade versions of the weapon could literally shred an individual into a bloody pulp in moments.

Mine were not even close to that level of lethality. They'd been built years ago by Patrick when we'd served together aboard the *Exeter*. I'd once regaled my engineering friend with some of my stories of near death and survival while I had been serving as a security officer aboard the *Enterprise*. Somehow, that had inspired him to tinker together the small little devices strapped to my wrists, just in case I should run into any similar situations. They weren't actually Star Fleet sanctioned, but I couldn't easily count the number of times the little things had saved my bacon since.

While the rounds from my needler didn't shred what they were aimed at, Mr. Duranguil had compensated for that by having them release a significant electrical charge once inside the target. It was kind of like sticking one's finger into an uncovered power outlet ... but on the inside.

My two targets fell to the ground, jerking as their muscles reacted to the electric shocks to their nervous systems, but as satisfying as that image was, it wouldn't last for long.

I quickly moved towards Harrelson and the Tellarite, pulling my pulser from its holster on my hip and leveling it at the Tellarite. Keep my target steadily in my sights, I grabbed the shocked Intelligence agent by her collar, lifting her to her feet.

"This is *my* payday, porkchop!" I snapped, before sending a couple of stun bolts into the enraged criminal.

"You're coming with *me!!*" I said to Harrelson as I began dragging her across the room towards one of the exits.

I'd almost made it to the street when a volley of disruptor fire barely missed me.

“Shit,” I said, ducking behind the cover of one of the bar’s arched entryways.

“What are you doing here?” Commander Harrelson hissed, still not quite in control of herself.

“Apparently stealing your credit account,” I hissed back as I returned fire with my pulser. “By the way, you’re welcome.”

“They ... they killed John and Fred!” she replied in a shocked voice.

I sent a few pulser blasts toward areas where I was pretty sure our assailants were taking shelter. “Just like they would have likely done to you once they had what they wanted,” I replied matter-of-factly. “Are you armed? I could use a little help here.”

A few more distrupor blasts peppered the rock column I was hiding behind. The weapons weren’t gouging anything out of the rock surface which meant they weren’t trying to kill us, or more appropriately, not trying to kill Harrelson at the moment. After all, she was the key to getting their hands on whatever riches she had locked up in her discretionary mission account.

“No,” she said. “Fred and John were the security specialists, they were there for protection, and I didn’t need to be armed.”

“Really?” I said as I managed to catch one of our assailants with a pulser blast that sent him reeling. “How’s that working out so far?”

“Look out!!” she cried just as a phaser blast from my right nearly took my head off.

I swiveled my head and saw one of the Orions I had earlier stunned, firing at me from his prone position on the floor. I sent two pulser blasts into him which put him back on the ground unconscious as well as a few blasts to his still sleeping companion, just to be sure.

“You know how to fire a phaser?” I asked, looking at Harrelson and then to the unconscious Orions.

She looked at me and nodded before sprinting across the room and grabbing one of the fallen thug’s weapons.

Well that will help, but we are still in deep shit. There’s no way we’re getting out the front door of this place.

I sent a few more pulser blasts back at our foes, just to keep their heads down for a moment before looking over at Harrelson and snapping. “Follow me *now*, if you want to live!!”

I vaulted over the bar and headed through an opening, towards the back end of the building. Harrelson scrambled to follow me as I prayed for there was a back door to this place. I tapped my small short-ranged wristcom and snarled into it. “We need HELP!!” I snapped as a door appeared in front of me and I crashed out of it into a trash and sludge filled alleyway.

Sliding into the building wall on the far side, a mixture of disruptor, phaser and pulser fire, plus God knows what else, greeted me.

God, how much money do they think Harrelson's got anyway!?!

Harrleson skidded to a halt at the bar's back door as I looked at my scanner. Both ends of the alley seemed to have lots of angry people with weapons.

Not good, not good, not good ...

“We need a hole, right here,” I snapped pointing to the wall next to me.

Harrelson raised her purloined Type IV phaser and sent a powerful beam into the wall to my left, blasting open a satisfactory hole. “You first!” I ordered as I sent a volley of pulser fire down the alleyway to my right where most of the fire was coming from.

Harrelson nodded then sprinted across the alley, firing her phaser on a wide beam to my left as she dived through the hole.

I should have brought a phaser, I should have brought a phaser ...

Yes pulsers were reasonably easy to come by, yes they were more within the range of the weapons a merchant could ordinarily have obtained, but there were reasons the Federation used phasers, not these pieces of trash. Trash or not though, it was what I had.

I sent another round of pulser blasts down the alley as I slipped through the hole Harrelson had blasted. I noted briefly that it seemed to be some sort of dilapidated warehouse as I sprinted through the stacks of indeterminate stuff in Harrelson’s wake.

I saw her open the door to the front of the structure as we both plowed into what had to be the shipping portion of the building. We had barely emerged into that area when a group of heavily armed Ruddy Orions entered from the street.

Oh Shit!!

I grabbed Harrelson as the thugs opened fire and pushed her behind a pallet. I couldn't identify what exactly was stacked there but at least it appeared solid enough.

"Honestly," I hissed. "I mean, how much money do these people think you have anyway?? It's like they have an unlimited account with Rent-a-Thug!"

Harrelson didn't answer as she rose up rose up and hit one of our assailants squarely in the chest with a phaser blast that knocked him back through the door and into the street beyond.

Well, at least she knows how to fire a phaser ...

I spoke into my wristcom again, a bit more urgently than before. "I said we were in trouble. Is anyone out there *freaking listening??*"

"I'm supposed to be selling emergency ration packs," came a reply from my comm. "I thought you told me to sell the ration packs."

"I changed my mind!!" I howled into the device as Harrelson engaged two well-armed Orions entering through another door.

"I mean ... are you sure? I was *sooo* looking forward to selling *ration packs*," Melisandra's voice from the comm unit stated.

"Melis, quit screwing around, we're in real trouble here!!" I yelled into the comm.

"Very well," I heard her say in a resigned tone. "If you insist."

I looked up just in time to see a green blur move behind the Ruddy Orion thugs, flashes of sliver in her hand as Melis used her favored double-bladed knives to slice her way through her unwary foes. Before the thugs could even register her presence, they were piled on the floor, undoubtedly suffering the effects of the Nallin-laced blades Melis typically used.

That should keep them out of commission for a few hours.

Looking down at the pile of Ruddy Orion bodies at her feet, she spat on them and then casually turned towards us and said. “They will have friends you know, maybe you should run.”

Good advice ...

I grabbed Harrelson as we sprinted towards the exits, scooping up one of the Orion’s disruptors as I passed. Outside I saw Ensign Chiv, his antenna erect, as he watched the connecting streets and alleys suspiciously.

There was little subtlety in what came next. We were fleeing, pure and simple, taking the shortest route back to the *Smith*. There was little hope that whoever was chasing us wouldn’t know where Harrelson had come from. She, and the now departed Tweedles, had been like a flashing neon light in the darkness to anyone who cared to look.

It was possible, I suppose, that my little act at the bar might have convinced someone that I was unrelated to Harrelson, that I had been there simply to steal her credits as well. That, however, was probably an empty hope, not something I could reasonably rely on.

That meant our best hope was that the muscle sent to capture the good Commander was mostly behind us. Whoever was after us had made a *major* expenditure of resources to snare Ellie Harrelson and... well, it was overkill on a significant scale.

If I was right, it might take a bit for that individual to put additional obstacles in our way. Subterfuge at this point only slowed us, and speed was really our only hope.

"Listen up everyone!" I snapped into my wristcom. "We have a hot situation, everybody back to the ship *now* and prepare for *immediate* lift off!"

Becket's port wasn't really that large, just really a modest town when you got down to it, but that was for people who weren't trying to run a goodly portion of its length. Melis, damn her, didn't seem to exert herself at all, running quickly and effortlessly ahead of us, with a grace a human ballerina would have envied. I certainly knew I did.

A number of people in the Federation didn't really understand Green Orions, assuming that they were a "slave" race of some kind. But the truth was that there were about four Greens to every five of the Ruddy Orions which largely ran Orion society.

The Greens were generally stronger, more physically gifted than their Ruddy counterparts, and some assumed, less intelligent. The Greens, to a degree, perpetuated this fiction amongst “outsiders”, but one moment in Melisandra’s presence would soon disabuse anyone of that notion.

But why does she have to run like a gazelle and never break a sweat ...

By the time we reached the landing pad where the *Smith* awaited us, I was gasping for whatever oxygen I could manage from the aridic air. My legs were turning into rubber and by looking at Harrelson, she was in even worse shape. A glance at the ship showed that the rear cargo hatch had been shut and only the starboard passenger hatch remained open. Only my Helmsman, Ensign Chen, stood watch in the hatchway with an old style phaser rifle in hand.

Where the hell did he get that?

I didn’t have much time to contemplate that question as, just then, a mixed group of well-armed Tellarites, Orions, and what looked like local police, poured into the landing pad aft of the *Smith*.

Give me a break, just one prhrathin break ...

Just at that moment, however, the *Smith's* aft thrusters fired at near full power, scattering the group of armed people, knocking many of them backwards and tumbling them into the area beyond the pad.

Ok, Patrick, that was a good idea ...

“Now!!” I snarled as I urged my spent body forward as quickly as my legs could carry me, sending the last of the bolts my pulser had towards our shocked and disorganized assailants. “Now or never!!”

Melis sprang forward like a cheetah and I stumbled forward as quickly as I could, but Harrelson's body had given all it had in it to give. Halfway to the *Smith* and safety, she stumbled and fell face first into the hard pad.

I should just leave her there, I really should.

“Chen!!” I yelled. “Cover fire!!”

This is stupid, this is stupid, this is stupid ...

I turned and ran back to Harrelson, helping her to her feet while the deep thrum of Ensign Chen's phaser rifle, and

Ensign Chiv's smaller hand phaser, provided cover. My arm wrapped around her for support, we limped, stumbled and half fell our way toward the *Smith* and finally through the hatch.

"Let's go, gentlemen," I gasped as I fell to the floor, wheezing to catch my breath. "It's time to ditch this party!!"

"Aye, Skipper," Ensign Chen replied as first Chiv, and then he, headed through the hatch and into the ship.

I thought for a moment that we'd actually made it, managed to pull it all off, until a group of Orions, who had probably been chasing us, emerged on to the pad from behind us and began pelting the *Smith* with fire. One of the stray bolts caught both Chen in Chiv in the back and sent them sprawling on to the deck, either stunned, or very possibly worse.

"Crap!!" I snarled, rising up and slapping my hand on the hatch controls which slid quickly shut.

Gasping for breath, I shouted, "Melis, we need a little help over here!! Harrelson, get to the bridge, get the shields up and tell everyone to get ready to get out of here. Those people aren't just going to stare at us all day!"

Harrelson stumbled to her feet and made her unsteady way towards the turbolift as Melisandra hurried back and began checking the two of our crew laid out on the deck. We didn't actually have a doctor assigned to this little venture, which was possibly not the most intelligent omission, but Melis had a good grounding in the basics and seconded for us in that regard.

She took a small scanner from one of the pouches on her clothing and after a few seconds said. "They've been heavily stunned, I think they will be ok, Jess, but they aren't going to be of any help for a while."

"Ok, take care of them, Melis," I said as I stumbled towards the turbolift. "I'll send help as soon as I get us off this rock."

I moved as quickly as I was able to the ship's solitary turbolift, entered, and gasped. "Deck Four."

I caught my breath for a moment, my hands on my knees, panting for air.

If I'm going to keep doing stuff like this, I need to spend a LOT more time in the gym ... well ... if we had one that is ...

The turbolift door opened on to Deck Four, where the Bridge, Transporter Room, Computer Core and the Shuttlecraft bay were located. I ran unsteadily forward to the Bridge Hatch. With Chen out for the count, I was the only Helmsman available, so we probably weren't going to be going anywhere until I reached the Bridge itself.

The hatch parted obediently on to the small control space which contained four seated stations, the Command Chair, as well as a couple of other auxiliary standing positions, not that we had the crew to actually staff them all. In front of the ship's viewscreen sat a combined helm and navigation station, then to its right, a station currently configured for sensors. Further to my right was the unoccupied Communications position and to the left, the Engineering station.

Much to my surprise, Commander Harrelson was seated at the Helm station and it already appeared that she had already brought up thruster and impulse control.

"Status!" I snapped.

"Port Authority is demanding that we cut our thrusters, lower our shields, and prepare to be boarded," Lieutenant Lopez replied, her green hair momentarily brushed aside as she looked back at me. "The system's armed customs

shuttles are in-bound at high sublight speeds. I estimate they will reach this location in approximately 95 seconds.”

“Patrick, what can you give me?” I asked.

“Thrusters and Impulse power at your discretion, Skipper,” the shaggy mass of my Chief Engineer replied.

“Mr. Harrelson, I take it you can fly this thing?” I asked in a curious tone.

“Yes, ... Yes, I can, Commander,” she replied.

So, you were a Helmsman in a previous life ... ok, not totally useless then ...

“Alright then, step on it, Mr. Harrelson, full thrusters before the locals break out something heavier than hand weapons. Don’t worry about any breakage to the pad or its surrounding structures, maximum ascent, get us out of the atmosphere,” I said.

The *Smith* shuddered violently as her enhanced thrusters lifted her off the landing pad, scattering a sizable number of armed individuals in the process.

Dear God, Harrelson, how much money do these people think you have?!!!! Who the hell goes to all this trouble over a few thousand credits??

“Armed shuttles are entering the atmosphere, port authority is demanding that we land immediately, Ma’am, or they will take us under fire,” Lopez said.

“Raise full shields,” I ordered

Harrelson looked back at me. “That will potentially reveal that we are not what we seem to be. You could blow our cover.”

“Mr. Harrelson, that is currently the least of our concerns. However, I suspect your ‘cover’ has already been blown,” I replied. “Regardless, we need to survive this, or it won’t matter. Raise shields *now*.”

“Aye, Ma’am,” she replied reluctantly, raising our full shields just as the first approaching shuttles entered weapons range and began to engage us.

Angry streaks of red reached out to my ship from the approaching small craft. Most of those bolts of energy missed, but I felt the impact of several that did not as my ship shook with their impact. “Damage report?” I asked.

“Minor damage to Shield Number One, Ma’am,” Harrelson replied. “Shields holding.”

“Time to exit the planet’s atmosphere?” I asked.

“Thirty seconds, Commander,” she replied.

“Very well, maintain shields, full impulse as we hit open space,” I said. “Mr. Lopez, make sure we don’t bump into anything bigger than us in the process.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” she replied.

“How’s my warp drive, Mr. Duranguil?” I queried, shifting my gaze to my engineer

“Drives are spooling up, Ma’am, I can give you warp power in ninety seconds,” he replied.

The *Smith* rocked again as the system’s armed craft began to close on us and wind down the range. These were, of course, just small shuttlecraft, and fairly old ones at that. With shields up, even a normal freighter could fend off one or two of the pesky little things. As it was, it would take a good deal more than that to accomplish much ... but

enough of them working in concert, that was a different story.

“Leaving the planet’s atmosphere, Ma’am,” Lieutenant Lopez stated. “I’m picking up another vessel in orbit, she appears to be powering up her systems.”

“Identify her, Mr. Lopez,” I replied. “Mr. Harrelson, full impulse power, Mr. Duranguil, get me warp power!”

I heard the freighter’s engines whine into life as the vessel accelerated away from the planet, her gathering group of armed shuttles in pursuit.

“Ma’am,” the green-haired Mr. Lopez responded. “Registry shows her as being the *Humra’ll*, an Orion Trader. She’s receiving narrow beam transmissions from the surface.”

Interesting ... so what are you up to ... ?

“Ma’am,” I heard a startled Lieutenant Lopez say. “They are locking sensors on us, weapons tracking telemetry detected!”

Oh, so that’s what ... guess we’re talking about a LOT more than several thousand credits ...

“Aft shields at seventy percent, Ma’am,” said Mr. Harrelson as a series of reverberations indicated multiple hits from the small craft chasing us.

“The *Humra’ll* is firing, Ma’am!!” said Mr. Lopez incredulously, her green hair bouncing as she lifted her eyes from her scanner hood. “Plasma torpedo, series F type.”

What?? How the hell did an Orion freighter get something like that??

“Helm!! Hard to starboard, put our bow into that thing, *full* reinforcement to the forward shield!!” I snapped.

The *Smith* obediently began her turn, slewing her forward and heaviest shielding into the oncoming torpedo. Series F weapons were weak and small compared to heavier variants used by the larger warships of the Romulan Empire, but for a civilian vessel of any kind, it represented major firepower.

“Patrick, where is *my warp power!!*” I snapped.

“Coming up now, Jess,” he replied.

“Push it all to the Number One Shield, do it *NOW!!*” I ordered as the red glob of high-energy plasma seemed to engulf the forward Viewscreen.

My entire ship rocked violently as the torpedo struck her, all that energy being translated into other forms, including kinetic energy as the shockwave from the torpedo hit ravaged through the ship.

The bridge suddenly tilted to a forty-five degree angle, throwing all those on the Bridge, other than me, from their stations to land unceremoniously on the Bridge’s deck. I, in contrast, felt like someone had hit me with a heavy hammer all across my face. Still I was functional enough to gain my feet and make it to the abandoned Helm station.

Our forward shields had held, barely, but we were now rapidly approaching an armed Orion vessel that very well might have other nasty surprises in store for us. That did not appear to be a particularly healthy option. But I could also see that whatever weaponry the *Humra’ll* possessed, she was still powering up her engines, apparently from a cold start, if I were reading things correctly.

That’ll take some time ... Ok buddy, this is what you get for being unprepared ...

Quickly checking the scanners for other obstacles and finding none, at least that I could see, I activated the warp drives and went to warp six, leaving the *Humra'll* and our sublight pursuers in our wake.

I looked behind me as my crew, and Commander Harrelson, slowly regained their feet. I locked eyes with her as she rose.

“Mr. Lopez, Lieutenant Duranguil, please assist Melisandra in the Infirmary. Commander Harrelson, and I, have some matters to discuss.”

Scene #5

Commander Jessica Holmes

SS Smith

Stardate 28503.03



“So, mind telling me what we are doing out here?” I asked as I sat down at the Comm station next to Harrelson.
“Because I have a *lot* of questions.”

She turned and looked at me uncomfortably. “I’m afraid you’re not cleared for that information, Commander,” she replied in a voice laced with uncertainty.

“Let me see if I can fill in some of the blanks then, and we’ll go from there,” I replied in a conversational but serious tone.

“I’ve been in security situations pretty much my entire career in Star Fleet to one degree or another. I’ve spent LOTS of time working in places like Becket looking for any

number or criminals, pirates, smugglers or just dealing with traders who want to be able to do their business in some degree of safety,” I said.

“I know how people who know what they are doing act in situations like the one we just escaped from,” I continued. “I can tell that you’ve served aboard a starship and have training as a helmsman, that’s apparent from your actions. In the same way, I can also tell that neither you, nor your two guards, had a clue as to how to deal with the situation we just escaped from. In fact, that ignorance materially contributed to what happened.”

“I always imagined that covert intelligence operatives would be far better at the kind of skills that allow them to blend in, counter surveil and generally know their way around the streets, than I am,” I said. “But you are not a covert operative, are you?”

“No,” she replied cautiously. “I am a trained Intelligence Officer, however.”

“But trained as what?” I countered. “I mean, there must be all sorts of different career paths within Intelligence Command. What was yours?”

“I ... most of my time in Intel Command has been as an analyst,” she replied with a sigh.

Oh God ... that explains a lot.

“So, as an analyst, what desk did you work at, what were you mostly analyzing?” I continued, keeping my voice friendly even as my mind reeled with the mess we were most probably in.

“I was a senior analyst on the Kzinti Desk when I was assigned to this investigation,” she said with a sigh. “I myself questioned the assignment, but ... they needed someone they could trust, someone not associated with the normal covert operations of either the Klingon or Romulan Desks.”

Kziniti, great ... an expert on a race on the far side of the Federation ... jeez.

“Any field experience? Any work in the Triangle, maybe on the Romulans or Klingons?” I asked.

“I’m competent with the Klingons, less so with the Orions or Romulans. My field experience was a while ago and wasn’t all that extensive,” she replied. “But regardless,

Commander, this mission was assigned to me and I intend to complete it.”

“Yes, about that,” I continued. “I believe your mission has something to do with Transwarp. Is that an accurate assumption?”

“*How did you ... ?*” she replied before stopping herself. “Have you been *spying* on me, Commander?”

Well, no sense lying about it ...

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did, this one time, and it was very fortunate for your ass that I did so. You’d be dead now if I hadn’t,” I said flatly.

“Yes,” she said, her anger quickly fading. “I should thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied. “I also have a couple of additional theories. The first is that ... well you do stick out like a sore thumb out there on the ground, but sticking out isn’t the same as having someone *know* you have access to a *large* spending account and I mean a **large** account. The crooks on Becket are all pretty much small time, yet that Tellarite mobilized an impressive and undoubtedly *expensive* operation to get his hands on it.”

She just sat there for a few moments in silence, obviously not willing to say anything at the present.

Time to reach a little, Jess ...

“In addition, I believe the Tellarite knew your name and rank,” I continued as I saw her eyes narrow. “Even if you had stuck out in your previous encounters, you aren’t someone anyone here was likely to have in their databases, so it wasn’t like you were going to be easy to identify, especially not by a small-time criminal, assuming he was one.”

“If that’s true, how did he know your name, Harrelson? How did he know about your account?” I said with a level voice. “Where would information like that have come from?”

I saw the color slowly drain from her face as she processed my information. She was an analyst after all.

“You’re saying that someone within Star Fleet Counter-Intelligence provided my name, my mission and the fact that I had access to a ... substantial credit account to Muskatl and his thugs,” she said.

“Yes, if what I’m saying makes any sense. I’m betting whoever it was provided your Tellarite friend, and his thugs, that information, possibly in relation to them performing some kind of service,” I continued.

“Like killing me,” she replied, her pale skin gaining a bit of color as a spark of anger flashed in her eyes.

“Of course, they would have had to know you were coming here. Is there any way they would have known that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Harrelson responded, the anger in her eyes beginning to translate into her face.

“So, here’s my logic,” I continued. “You are sent out on a mission that has something to do with Transwarp, possibly the most astonishing breakthrough in the history of warp physics, ever. You weren’t given an Intel ship crew and you were pulled from a desk as far away from this area as humanly possible. That suggests to me that whoever sent you on this mission wasn’t exactly in a trusting mood concerning Intelligence personnel in his region.”

“However, someone found out where you were going and set a trap to eliminate you and your mission, right here in the armpit of the Triangle. Either you have a serious case

of ‘loose lips sink ships’, which is not something I would expect from Intelligence Command, or you’re the unluckiest woman in the universe or “

“I was set up,” she growled under her breath. “Either that or I was *set up*, that’s what you are saying.”

“Am I getting close here, Mr. Harrelson?” I asked.

“Yes,” she stated in an ice-cold voice. “I’m afraid that was a ... surprisingly effective analysis. I’m actually disappointed that it took you to make me see the pieces.”

“Sooo,” I said. “What is it we should be doing next?”

She sat there for a few moments, obviously trying to think things through. “I’m not completely sure,” she said.

“Muskatl was the last contact I was given. He was supposed to provide me with the name of the person I was looking for.”

“Well, if it was a name for anyone of any real importance, Mr. Harrelson, you weren’t going to find it on Becket,” I said. “Anyone, I mean *anyone* with anything of real value to sell, *isn’t* going to be selling it there.”

“I guess not,” she said.

“Tell me this, Commander Harrelson,” I began to ask, “Is what you are looking for out here of critical importance or is it just on a ‘would be nice to know’ basis?”

“Critical,” she replied, a look of determination settling over her face.

You know, she actually kind-of looks cute like that ... that little nose scrunched up and ...

Oh come on, Jess, FOCUS!!

“So,” I continued, trying to stay on point. “You are now a team of one. A Star Fleet Intelligence Analyst of the Kzinti, dropped in the middle of the Triangle to do on the ground covert agent stuff with something of critical importance hanging in the balance. So, analyze that, Commander. What are your chances for success?”

She thought for a moment, I could almost see the gears spinning in her head as she thought out the angles, but, to her credit, it didn’t take long until I saw a look of resignation settle upon her face. “Practically none at all, Commander,” she replied. “I see your point. There’s nothing gainful I can do out here on my own.”

“No, Mr. Harrelson, that’s not my point. My point is, you’re not alone,” I replied. “We aren’t Intelligence, but all of us have skills and know our way around this area of space. We know how things work; we very probably have contacts and skills that we could use to help give this mission, whatever it is, a chance. If it is truly critical, we might be the best chance you have. That is, *if we knew what the mission was.*” I said forcefully.

“Either that, or we can just point the bow towards home. Getting you killed out here to no good purpose isn’t going to help anyone,” I said with finality.

She looked at me critically for a several more moments, then shook her head and said. “Alright then.”

She began to talk and I had to admit the whole “critical” thing was not in any way an understatement.

Holy crap, how are we going to pull this off?

Scene #6

Commander Jessica Holmes

SS Smith

Krangle System

Stardate 28503.12



I looked with pride at the new paint job and external modifications that the yards of the Krangle Swarm had made to the *Smith*. Gone was the uniform grey with blue highlights of her original paint scheme, now replaced with areas and bands of distinctive garish orange, all created with such expertise as to appear weathered by a good deal of hard use.

Other structural additions had been made to the hull which broke up the ship's visual outline nicely. The yard had also made some additions, of Lieutenant Duranguil's invention, which would further distort the *Smith's* power and warp profiles to the scanners of other vessels.

Nope, no one, probably not even Star Fleet Intelligence, would be able to easily associate this vessel with her older plain-wrapper self.

Ok, the yards here are doing highly illegal stuff, but they sure do good work ...

“So, does it meet your specifications, Captain Reay?” the shifty Centaurian factor said.

“I believe so, Mr. Carwet. I’ll have my engineer inspect her, of course, but your yards are as advertised, competent, inventive and ... I trust, discreet,” I replied, still working on getting used to my new cover name.

Kylie Reay, has a nice ring to it. I’m getting closer to the whole Jane Bond thing every moment now ...

“Is her new registry as competent and complete as your yard work?” I asked with a firm tone. “I wouldn’t want there to be any ... misunderstandings.”

“Yes, of course, Captain Reay,” he responded, handing me over the registration chips. “Your vessel is now registered out of Stork’s Rest and it is all legitimate. With all the nastiness going on in that unfortunate area, the officials

there are quite ... motivated to accept such offers, and you have been most generous in your ... contributions.”

“Well, I am just a civic-minded kind of girl, Mr. Carwet, just a civic minded kind of girl,” I responded. “And the cargo?”

“Well, yes, loaded as per your factor’s instructions. I say, she is an amazingly competent Green, and one with a shrewd eye I must say. I don’t suppose you would consider exchange her contract for something of significant value would you?” he asked.

“If you had her contract, would you part with it, Mr. Carwet?” I asked.

“No,” he said with an accepting smile. “I would not.”

“I’m afraid we could not offer more with the ... items, left over from the previous owner of the vessel,” he continued. “I am gratified to see that its new owner has more refined tastes.”

“Yes, sadly, he just didn’t have a nose for lucrative trade, Mr. Carwet,” I replied with a knowing smile. “I will let you know when our inspection of your work is complete.”

“Very good, Captain,” the short wiry man responded.
“Perhaps, we might do business together in the future.”

I turned and flashed a winning smile at him. “On that you can rely, Mr. Carwet, on that you can rely.”

I entered the vessel through the side passenger hatch as the yard workers were applying their final touches to the ship’s artwork, in this case, the vessel’s new name. As I entered the Lower Cargo Bay, I found my crew waiting there for me along with Commander Harrelson, most of them looking somewhat frustrated.

Melis looked at me curiously. “I think it’s beyond time that you told us what you are up to, Jess, or Kylie, or whatever you are calling yourself. You know, I put a lot on the line bringing you here.”

Indeed, she had. I’d long suspected the existence of this place, sort of a haven for smugglers and others who were in need of some very specialized, if often seedy, services. We’d tried to track down its location several times during my tour on the *Wayfarer*, but it had always eluded us. Melis had only relented when I’d virtually pled with her for its location and my solemn promise to wipe the ship’s memory banks of any trace of its existence when this was all over.

But for us, in our current predicament, it had been a godsend.

“And it is about to pay off, Melis,” I replied sweetly. “I owe you one.”

“More than one ...,” she grumbled, still obviously unhappy.

“Commander,” Ellie Harrelson said. “You have spent an awful lot doing all of this, and I suppose I can understand why we want to not appear as we did, but I honestly can’t authorize any further spending until you tell me what you are up to.”

“Then you’re about to be very pleased, Commander, because there is a method to my madness and I do, in fact, have a plan,” I responded. “If you will all follow me to the briefing room.”

I heard a small groan from both Ensign Chen and Patrick. They had both had experience with my brilliant ideas in the past. They probably also recognized that I was particularly pleased with myself which spelled a more interesting future for them than the probably would have preferred.

I grinned from as we all piled into the turbolift, eager to begin.

In a short time we were all seated in the ship's recreation room, which, now at least, was not the only common space on the vessel. I'd taken our time here at the Krangle facilities to turn a portion of the Upper Cargo Bay into a fully equipped gym, as well as another separate recreational area so that we weren't bumping into each other all the time.

Still, the main mess and rec area was where Star Fleet Intelligence had hidden the entire set of drop down high-definition displays and concealed holo tank for briefing purposes.

"I know all of you have been curious as to what we've been up to and, just as importantly, what our mission actually is," I said with a smile as I motioned to Commander Harrelson. "Please brief the crew, Commander."

"The entire crew??" she said somewhat shocked. "You want me to brief *everyone?*"

"In for a penny, in for a pound, Commander," I replied. "If this is going to work, everyone needs to know what we are

doing. There are going to be no passengers on this mission.”

“You haven’t even told *me* what the plan is, Holmes. I haven’t even *approved it yet*,” she said with emphasis.

“Have you come up with a plan of your own?” I asked sweetly.

“No, not one that will work,” she replied with a frown.

She really does have pretty eyes and ...

Come on, focus, Jessica!!!

“Ok, then the only plan we have is my plan, and that means we need to brief the crew,” I said with an even bigger smile.

She glared at me for a second but finally relented and hit some controls, dropping the display screens into place.

“On Stardate 28501.01, New Year’s Day back on Earth, someone managed to breach the High Security Engineering Division Computer Core and downloaded the following,” she said, gesturing to the screen.

On the viewer appeared an image which was undoubtedly a Federation starship, generally similar in shape to the *Constitution* class family of designs, but one that was distinctly different, and much larger than any anyone here had seen before.

“This is the *Excelsior* project,” Harrelson continued. “She mounts a new generation weapons system, computer cores, defensive systems, systems so advanced that they will become the standard for Star Fleet vessels for decades to come. Each of these systems, and their design specifications, are considered Purple Level Classified Materials of extreme importance. But beyond these systems is this.”

The image focused down on the ship’s strangely arranged warp coils and warp core.

“This is the reason for the project’s existence,” Harrelson said pointing to the odd design. “It’s called ‘Transwarp’ and it is intended to rewrite how space travel is done. If successful, it could mean journeys which would today take weeks, could be done safely in days, maybe even hours.”

“It could open the galaxy in a way the Federation has never experienced,” she said. “It could also, in the wrong hands, put a Klingon or Romulan war fleet in Earth orbit in a

matter of days from the time of a Neutral Zone penetration.”

“So, who stole it?” Lieutenant Lopez asked, her fingers brushing a lock of emerald-green hair from her eyes.

“We don’t know precisely,” Harrelson responded. “What we have determined is that the theft was perpetrated by someone within Star Fleet Intelligence Command Headquarters. This individual, or individuals gained access to the biometrics and security codes of a Flag ranked officer to use an undetected ‘back door’ to gain access to the system.”

“Star Fleet Counter-Intelligence, which has the duty of monitoring Intelligence Command activities, believes the thief has several, as yet, unidentified accomplices within Star Fleet Intelligence,” she stated. “Hence, the reason we are here with a mostly Star Fleet crew rather than an Intel Ops team.”

“Oh, this just keeps getting better and better,” Melis said from her normal perch on the couch.

Harrelson spared a small glare for the Orion but then continued. “The amount of stolen data is so massive that it

can't be easily transmitted without detection, nor can it be moved easily in say, a conveniently portable device."

"Counterintelligence has hard information that the information is being physically transported from the Federation's core to a buyer in the border regions of either the Klingon or Romulan Empires. Further, Counter-Intelligence strongly believes that the transfer will take place here, in the Triangle," she continued.

"We are attempting to search vessels bound for these regions to locate the missing data. However, the number of ships precludes us from searching more than a small percentage of likely targets so there is a high probability that the information will reach here without being intercepted," she stated. "It's like trying to find a particular needle in a stack of needles."

"We do also have one additional piece of information," Harrelson continued, looking away from the display screens and to the crew. "It is highly likely that the thief has a contact here in the Triangle, one of our covert operatives in fact. We believe that operative, is likely the individual who will act as the contact between the buyer, and the thief."

“While there are thousands of ships out there which could potentially be carrying the information to the Triangle, there are a much smaller number of covert agents operating here. This provides us with an information choke point of sorts,” she explained. “It will be a lot easier to figure out which agent is the go-between, than it will be to figure out which ship is carrying the plans to him, or her.”

“Anything else ... I mean, that can’t be all you have,” Melis said, with a measure of disbelief. “You must have ... dozens of agents here at least.”

“Quite a few more than that, actually,” Commander Harrelson replied with an uncomfortable tone. “I was given a list of contacts to speak with. None of them had any useful information and, the last of those contacts ... “

“Yes, I know, was a baited trap,” Melis said with disgust. “I was told you Intelligence types were supposed to be smart. Wait till the Clans hear of this, they will be eating your lunch for the next century at least.”

I rose and looked over the crew and said firmly. “Alright everyone, Commander Harrelson is a highly regarded analyst with some field training as well as Star Fleet experience. While she is not a field agent as we might have

earlier assumed, she has a great deal of relevant experience that we can use as well as access to information which will prove invaluable to us.”

“She and I are in agreement that it is possible this mission was not as well thought out and assembled as it could have been. However, the stakes here are high and this is not a mission the Federation can afford to have fail,” I continued.

“Our mission, people,” I said seriously, “is to locate the agent who is acting as the go-between, intercept the stolen data, and, hopefully, capture the traitor responsible for the theft.”

“Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, contact Counter-Intelligence and let them know that we are out of leads?” asked Ensign Chen, his young face showing concern. “Maybe they could send some *real* operatives out here. No disrespect, Skipper, but we aren’t covert ops nor, as you said, is Commander Harrelson.”

“No,” I said firmly. “No, we should not. We already know, from the ambush on Becket, that it’s likely the bad guys were told in advance about Commander Harrelson’s identity and her mission. The most likely source of that information was someone on the inside ... probably in Star Fleet Counter-Intelligence.”

“Oh, that’s great, Jess,” replied Lieutenant Duranguil in his deep voice. “We have enemies in Star Fleet Intelligence so we can’t contact them, we also have people gunning for us in Counter-Intelligence so they are suspect as well, and the Fleet has no knowledge of what we are doing and probably wouldn’t believe us even if we told them.”

“Oh, don’t forget, Patrick,” Lopez said. “This is all Purple Level Classified material. I think they still shoot people for letting that stuff leak. How would you convince anyone in the Fleet to believe us without revealing a LOT of details we can’t reveal? Even if we did tell the Fleet, and they agreed to help us, we’d spend the rest of our existence in the brig, at a minimum.”

“Ok, this stinks,” said Ensign Chen seeming a little paler than a moment before. He was still a bit wobbly from the heavy stun blast he had taken on Becket so he was already a bit pale to begin with. I just hoped what I had to say wouldn’t make it even worse.

“So,” said Commander Harrelson turning to me. “You say you have a plan, what is it, Commander?”

I looked over everyone for a second, attempting to judge their reaction to what they had already heard. I could

sense a bit of shock and trepidation, except from Melis, who was just shaking her head as if she would never understand humans. But they were all paying attention to me, which was a good sign, considering the lunacy I was about to unleash on them.

“Ok, all of us are either traders or Star Fleet, not trained covert Intelligence agents. We are never going to be successful beating someone who could pull something like this off, by playing the game by their rules,” I replied. “So, we are going to play the game by a different set of rules.”

“What exactly does that mean, Ma’am?” Patrick, my shambling hulk of an engineer chimed in.

“It means we are not going to be able to find the go-between by talking to contacts, meticulous research, and low-profile covert operations. That is their realm of expertise, and we cannot beat them there,” I said. “Even if we could, we’re running out of time. That information was stolen three months ago and it’s on its way here. We have a very limited amount of time to work with here.”

“So, how do you plan to figure out who the traitor is? I mean, we need to gather evidence somehow, question sources, stay out of sight until we can build a profile,” said Harrelson in confusion.

“No,” I said. “We need to do exactly the opposite.”

“*What?*” Harrelson asked with a confused look. “What do you mean by *opposite*?”

“Everything,” I replied seriously. “We will not hide in the background. We are going to do everything possible to be noticeable. We are going to be the neon light in the dark that *everybody* knows about.”

“*Why?*” responded Harrelson. “What do you hope to accomplish by that?”

“Leveling the playing field, Commander,” I replied. “We are going to force them to come out of the shadows and dance to our tune, not theirs.”

“Ohhh ... Ohhh this is good. You’re planning on making our target come to us, aren’t you, Jess?” Melisandra said with a satisfied nod. “But you don’t have any bait.”

“But we do,” I said, looking over at Harrelson.

“No!” she responded, her eyes widening. “Absolutely Not!!”

Ohh, she’s fast on the uptake, I like that ...

“We have to, Commander. If we offer what we have for sale, it’s going to attract his or her attention,” I said calmly.

“It will get us all *killed* you mean,” she replied angrily.

“Well, this is *interesting*, ladies,” said Melisandra with a fascinated tone. “Exactly what do you think would be enough to draw your hidden traitor out of hiding, hmmm?”

“Their name,” I responded with a smile. “As part of our mission, Commander Harrelson was given the names and files on every Federation Intelligence Agent in the Triangle. which would include ...”

“The name of the traitor,” Melisandra replied with a broad smile and a musical giggle. “Ohhhh, Jess, I do believe you should have been born an Orion, this is just too good, too good!!”

“Don’t encourage her!” snapped Harrelson.

“But Eleanor,” I said reasonably. “What do you think the traitor will do to keep their name secret?”

“Just about *anything* as will just about everyone one else in Star Fleet Intelligence that thinks we have their files as well,” she said angrily.

“Well, we could always offer to sell the plans for the *Excelsior*,” I said innocently. “You were given those as well to authenticate the stolen data if we should recover it.”

“NO!!” Harrelson snapped. “Are you *mad!!!*? Are you actually suggesting we *sell* the exact thing we are here to *keep from being sold?*”

“Yes,” I replied with a happy grin. “That would drive down the market value of those plans dramatically. Whoever is out there trying to sell their copy would probably be highly motivated to remove the competition.”

“You mean, remove *us*,” Harrelson snapped.

“Are you two going to engage in a physical altercation??” Melis asked expectantly. “I’ll take ten credits on the Intel geek at three to one odds!!”

“Melis!” I snapped.

“Well, I was giving you three to one odds, Jess,” she replied innocently.

“Not helping,” I snapped at my friend.

“The point here,” I said, turning my attention back to the crew, “is we have no way of finding the go-between in time on our own. The only way we are going to find them is to make them come find us. To do that, we need something they absolutely *must* have, and we need to make **sure** they know we have it.”

“They won’t be the only ones looking for us, you know,” said Harrelson, still with a cross tone.

“No, they won’t, but *they will* come looking for us,” I replied. “They can’t afford to have the information we have fall into **anyone** else’s hands.”

“And where are you going to start at, hmmm? Maybe, Kronos or Romulus?” Harrelson asked.

“No, nothing so dramatic, I was thinking about Baker’s World,” I replied with a happy smile.

“Are you *Nuts!!?*” Harrelson responded. “There’s an active Star Fleet Intelligence Station there!!?”

“Can’t think of a better place to spread the word to our traitor than to offer to sell our wares to Star Fleet, can you?” I responded.

“You are nuts!” Harrelson grouched. “Absolutely, certified, hopelessly, *nuts!*”

“I didn’t hear you say ‘no’ that time,” I responded with a wink as she glowered at me and Melis giggled.

“Ok, Ma’am,” said Ensign Chen, his face showing both a tad of trepidation, but also a measure of trust. He was, at least, reasonably used to my particular brand of insanity. “We can’t just go flying around in a starship named the *Smith* if we can’t trust Counter-Intelligence, and Star Fleet is going to know our names and identities.

“Well as for our names, we all now have the best cover identities money can buy, so you’ll need to study them and practice them until they become second nature. I’ve also given the *Smith’s* name a bit of a makeover.”

“You decided to rename a Star Fleet starship, on your own authority? Fake registry and everything I suppose. Do you have any idea how many regulations and laws you’ve just broken?” Harrelson asked.

“No, but I can look it up,” I replied with a grin.

“So, Jess,” Patrick, my engineer asked. “Just out of curiosity, what did you name the ship? Nothing ... well, you know, off the wall weird. I refuse to be aboard *another* vessel named the *Pink Fluffy Pajama’s* again. That was embarrassing.”

I grinned ear to ear. “There is nothing to worry about, my friend. I was professional and circumspect, as well as unusually appropriate this time around. You now stand upon the deck of the starship *Foolish Venture*.”

“Oh Quilar!!!” giggled Melis and she fell to the floor laughing madly. “I take it all back, this trip has just become very *interesting!!!*”

“We are all going to die,” said Lieutenant Commander Harrelson glumly, watching the Green Orion roll on the floor, giggling in glee.

“Very probably,” I replied. “All right everyone, let’s get up, it’s time go out and get our own, very personal, bullseye.”

Star Trek – Triangle will return with “Inside Straight”