

MOON TREK TRINITY : #1 - THE BADLANDS



STORY AND CONCEPT BY ERIN WINKING

Characters based on the characters of Ranma ½, Sailor Moon, and multiple original characters. Starfleet, the Federation, and various other parts based on Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek.

READER ADVISORY: This story contains adult language, situations, and violence. Recommended for readers 16 years and older.

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CHAPTER ONE - ROUTINE

Shampoo's purple eyes slowly drifted over to Ranma. The young captain was sitting, semi-relaxed in his chair, legs crossed, one hand on his knee, the other on his arm rest.

"Shampoo not going to explain this again," the purple haired first officer softly, but sternly stated as she placed her hand on top of Ranma's right hand; causing the somewhat rhythmic tapping he was doing to cease.

"That's really annoying."

Ranma smirked and nodded. "Sorry about that. I guess I am just getting back into some old habits."

Shampoo nodded in understanding. The crew had been back out in space for nearly a year since saving the Federation and getting their new U.S.S. Benjamin L. Sisko. In that time, they had hardly done anything.

Some of the crew appreciated the reprieve from the daily near death. Others, well, had they wanted office jobs, they would have gotten office jobs.

"RANMA!" Akane screamed from the back of the bridge, startling not only her husband, but the entire bridge crew as well.

"What?" Ranma replied, quite a bit quieter.

"What exactly is going on between you and Shampoo?" Akane demanded to know as she stormed down the ramp and stood next to the CONN, burning a hole into Ranma with the gaze she was giving him.

"Huh?" Shampoo and Ranma replied in confusion before Ranma realized that Shampoo's hand was still sitting on top of his. The pig-tailed captain screeched and yanked his hand away, causing Shampoo to roll her eyes.

"It's a misunderstanding!" Ranma pleaded, regret overwhelming him the moment the words left his mouth.

Akane flailed her arms. "It's always a misunderstanding," she groaned, exasperated. Akane walked towards Ranma's ready room as she continued to speak. "I need to use your computer, okay?"

"Mmmhmmm," Ranma replied, cowering.

After the doors to Ranma's ready room slid closed, Makoto looked down to her captain. A man - this man - who had stared death straight in the eye and did not flinch. This man who had put her - a former Section 31 operative no less - in her place on more than one occasion, was now attempting to peak around the corner to see if Akane was still on the bridge; much like a naughty child attempting to avoid his parents.

"She's gone, Captain," Makoto smiled.

Ranma sat back up, wiped the sweat off his brow, and resumed his 'captain stance' in his seat, as if nothing had happened.

"Shampoo happy she don't have to deal with that!" she smirked.

Suddenly the port side turbolift slid open and Lt. Amanda Jansen shot out, barely allowing time for the doors to open completely. She began looking around the bridge frantically.

"I sensed that someone was fondling my dear Shampoo!" she bellowed, drawing nearly as much attention to herself as Akane had. Makoto and Shampoo began to lead her back into the turbolift, all the while doing their best to convince her that all was well, Shampoo remaining in the same condition Jansen left her in that morning.

Ranma, meanwhile, put his face in his hand and sighed, mumbling softly to himself. "Good lord. She's a Mousse-Kuno combo package, but female." The captain began to ponder this for a few moments, trying to figure out if that would just make her a blind, and far more attractive, Kodachi, when he was interrupted by Minako, whose terminal had begun to beep.

"Captain," she called out from her operations station, "I have an incoming, Priority One message from Starfleet Command."

Ranma nodded. "On screen."

On the viewscreen, Vice Admiral Genma Saotome appeared. He smiled an acknowledgment to his only son. Ranma returned the smile as Genma started the conversation.

"Ranma. How are things?"

Ranma chuckled as Shampoo returned to his side. "Oh, you know. The usual. Cold, vast, and empty."

Genma laughed at Ranma's joke, maybe a bit more than he probably should have. Ranma got the distinct feeling that Genma may have been spending some time with Vice Admiral Happosai and his vast collection of panties and sake prior to this call.

Once Genma finally stopped laughing, he turned stern and serious quite quickly. "Indeed. Well, I need your NEO teams for a mission. Pretty routine, actually..." Genma paused for a moment as he appeared to be typing something into his computer.

"...I'm sending you the details, but it's at Neba 3. A diplomatic function was stormed by some yahoos who are now holding several diplomats, including the Trillian representative to the Federation Council, hostage."

Shampoo looked down at the terminal next to her seat while Ranma nodded, continuing to listen to his father. "Normally we'd have Starfleet Security deal with this," Genma continued, "but with such a high-ranking diplomat and the fact that you guys are as close as you are..."

Ensign Ikuhara looked up from helm. "Five hours at maximum warp."

Ranma nodded to Shampoo who had turned her attention back to Ranma. She acknowledged the silent order and walked up to the helm station to get the ship moving. Ranma then turned back to the viewscreen.

“No problem, pop,” Ranma smiled, enjoying the informal relationship he had with his CO, “we’ll be there in five and have your Trill back in five and a couple of minutes with nary a spot scratched.”

“Thanks boy,” Genma nodded. “Good luck.”

Ranma turned to Makoto as the communication ended and the ship shot into warp.

“Set us to yellow alert and have Rei meet us in the conference room as soon as possible.”

“Aye,” Makoto nodded with a sly grin crossing her face. She began activating the ships defenses and changing the ships battle readiness from condition blue to condition yellow.

Hopefully today wouldn’t just be another ‘office day.’

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” Corporal Ian Kagurazaka nodded as Second Lieutenant Kio Yuki stumbled into the NSO briefing room.

“Mmm,” she mumbled back.

“Are you still having problems sleeping?” Sargent Anthony Schaefer asked her.

“Kinda,” Kio yawned as she walked up to the replicator and ordered herself a coffee. “I swear, this ship is louder than the Sisko was.”

“I don’t hear a difference,” Kagurazaka shrugged.

“Me either,” Anthony agreed, “but Kio is Kio.”

“What exactly does that mean, Sargent?” Kio asked, sitting down next to her team.

Anthony, a little frightened by the look Kio was giving him, grinned nervously. “Uh, it just means that you have those super-woman ears.”

Kagurazaka smirked as Kio laughed slightly. “Well done.”

Anthony beamed at his work. “Well, getting out of trouble was always my specialty.”

The two smiled at each other for a couple of moments before the briefing room doors slid open and the NSO senior staff walked in.

“ATTENTION!” Shelton called out. The room quickly stood and turned towards the senior officers as they walked towards the front of the room.

“At ease,” Rei stated as she arrived at her podium. After everyone was seated Rei began to explain the mission. She showed everyone a basic layout of the conference hall and their best way to assault it, as well as two or three back up contingencies.

“Now,” Rei finished up the presentation, “I know something like a simple hostage taking is a little too ‘routine’ for us, but remember, these are IMPORTANT hostages.”

“Nothing is routine,” Kio dryly stated. “Believing that will kill you.”

Everyone’s eyes slowly turned to Kio, then slowly back to Rei, as they prepared for the verbal decimation of the young military officer.

“That’s actually very good advice,” Rei stated.

The simultaneous clanging of everyone’s jaw hitting the deck may have been audible on the bridge.

“Complacency is the harbinger of death,” Rei added. “Stay sharp. We’ll be on target in three hours. I recommend you spend that time getting ready. Dismissed.”

The room began to empty out. Shelton shifted his gaze between Kio and Rei.

Once Kio had left the room unmolested, he turned to Rei.

“Really?” he asked, not even attempted to hide the shock in his voice.

“What?”

“You don’t have a problem with her showing you up like that?”

“She was right.”

“You still would have yelled at her.”

“She wasn’t an officer then.”

“She was an NCO.”

“Not the same.”

Shelton sighed. “So now that she’s an officer, you’re fine with her disrespecting you?”

Rei slammed her PADDs down. “What the hell do you want from me? I yelled at her, you said I was too mean. I don’t yell at her and now you say I am too lax. Just tell me how you want me to supervise, and I will do it.”

Shelton sighed again. “Well, I don’t want you to yell at her at all.”

Rei nodded as she picked up one of the PADDs and began to mockingly take notes on it. Shelton grabbed the PADD out of her hand and set it down.

“Look, Commander. I just want to make sure that everything is alright.”

Rei sighed. “She’s so much like me,” she admitted.

“Oh?” Shelton blinked.

Rei walked over to one of the briefing room chairs and sat down. Shelton followed her and sat down across from her. Rei did not necessarily make eye contact with Shelton as she spoke.

"She said something to me before as well. That I had a chip on my shoulder. That if she failed, I would fail. Again.

"I think she was right about that. And what's worse is that I think I almost caused it." Rei turned to Shelton, her dark eyes not filled with sadness, but more with disappointment and regret.

"I thought I was boosting her confidence, but then I saw me in her - a bratty, tough girl doing everything she can to hold in the pain of losing someone she loved - and it forced me to ask myself, 'is that how my confidence would be boosted?'"

Rei sighed as she leaned back, propping her feet up onto the half desk in front of her.

"And of course, the time when she really needed encouraging words from me, after Sargent Simpson was killed, I actually physically assaulted her."

"You..." Shelton stammered.

Rei shook her head to move them past the court-martial-able offenses. "I realize that I can't be her friend, you know," Rei smirked at that thought, "not that she would want to be mine anyway. But I certainly can do a better job of being her boss and mentor."

Shelton shrugged. "Well, you'll get very little argument from me." Rei gave Shelton a look that let him know that she was not exactly pleased with his reply, but he continued anyway. "That said though, you must have done something right. She's done a wonderful job."

"Yeah, I suppose," Rei smiled a bit. "She came to us good, though."

Shelton nodded. "She was - she is an excellent soldier. However, we're not infantry," Shelton reminded her. "You can't just slip from infantry to special operations seamlessly. Don't write yourself off so quickly."

Rei smiled a bit more and nodded.

Shelton motioned for the door as the pair stood up. "Come on. We have a hostage rescue to prepare for."

Lieutenant JC Devall chuckled at the scene playing out before him on his terminal. Say what you want about other forms of entertainment, but in the last three to four hundred years, the quality of animation coming out of Japan as just gotten better.

His eyes slightly drifted to an engine monitor. The plasma flow regulator slipped slightly, causing the number displayed on the screen to change to yellow. However, the computer quickly compensated for the issue and within a couple of seconds, the number was brought back into the 'green' range.

JC smiled. While it had been almost a year, and he and his team had essentially disassembled and reassembled the engines, looking for any - unexplained pieces - Starfleet Engineering still was not totally upfront with them on why or how the engines could maintain a warp field for as long as they could.

JC had assumed he would be able to reverse engineer everything, but so far, he has had no luck.

“Still worried?” a voice called to him from his office door.

JC looked over to the Sisko’s chief engineer, Lt. Commander Usagi Tsukino, and shrugged.

“No, I guess not,” he responded as he sat up in his chair and paused his anime. “I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t still suspicious of the shipyard, but like I’ve said before, we’ve been over these engines dozens of times. I’m all but certain we’re not going to shoot off into transwarp again.”

Usagi looked to JC with slight concern. “All but certain?”

JC grinned. “Well, nothing is one-hundred percent certain when it comes to warp physics.”

“Mmm,” Usagi groaned, not really wanting to think about another crash. “So, what were you watching?”

“Plasma flow-”

“No,” Usagi interrupted, already tired of talking about work. “The anime.”

“Oh,” JC replied, a bit surprised. “It’s one that came out recently called Kureiji Uchuusen Shouboushi. Based on the manga-”

“By Satsuki Konoe,” Usagi nodded, stepping a bit more into JC’s office. “Is it any good? I am always concerned with animated adaptations of quality manga.”

JC pulled up a chair next to him and silently motioned for Usagi to sit there as he spoke.

“I think they did a wonderful job of preserving Satsuki’s intents in the anime.” JC paused for a second, giggled, then continued. “They did take some liberties in order to take advantage of the comedic timing animation can give you, but all in all, it’s pretty faithful.”

Usagi leaned back, a certain, smugness crossing her face. “Glad to hear that.”

JC restarted the video and the pair sat in silence, watching the animated goodness. Occasionally they would laugh, sometimes loudly, their laughter echoing out into main engineering.

Outside of JC’s office, a couple of low-ranking engineers watched them.

“Do you really think it’s fair that they get to sit in there and watch TV while we toil away?” The first asked.

The second eyed his partner for a moment. “Toil?”

“Well...” the first trailed off.

The second sighed. “I guess it’s the advantage of being in charge. It gives us motivation to work hard and become chief engineers ourselves so that we can do that!” The first was the one now eyeing his partner oddly.

“Besides,” the second continued, “do you really want *HER* out here trying to help?”

The first engineer blinked. "I hadn't thought of that."

The second nodded, patted his co-worker on the back and started to walk off. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Ensign."

The first, who wasn't familiar with that old Earth saying, wandered off as well, mumbling, "Why would you look any horse in the mouth?" He paused. "Well, I guess if you were a horse dentist..."

He continued to ponder this as he went off to check EPS manifolds.

After Usagi and JC were done with their 22-minute episode, JC turned to Usagi, awaiting a critique.

"Well?"

Usagi nodded. "You were right," she smiled. "That was pretty much about what I would expect the manga to be if it were animated."

JC smiled back. "I tend to not read the manga or novels till after I watch the anime. I am a real fan of the visual style and everything, so I would hate for the story to be ruined."

Usagi nodded in understanding as JC checked the clock on his wall. "Look, I was planning on finishing off the series after work, but if you'd like to come by and watch them with me this weekend, we can combine anime with crew reviews."

Usagi nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like a plan."

"Excellent," JC gave the thumbs up to Usagi as the ship dropped out of warp. Both officers grimaced as the red alert klaxons sounded, their loud shrill sound echoing throughout engineering.

"I swear, this ship is louder than our old ship," JC complained.

Usagi smiled. "I have to go to the bridge."

"See ya," JC nodded as Usagi scurried out of his office. JC shut down his anime and walked into the main engine room, where he took his position at damage control.

"There should only be the Capstone and two Trillian cruisers in orbit," Minako stated.

Shampoo turned to tactical. Amanda checked some sensors, and after seeing only a single Starfleet and two Trill ships she turned back to Shampoo. "Confirmed."

"So," Ranma began, walking towards the tactical station, "the intel about the hostage takers coming from the planet's population appears to be correct."

"It would be difficult for them to escape the planet," Makoto explained. "Unless they could cloak, one of those three ships could surely destroy them, or at the very least, pursue."

Ranma nodded. "Keep sweeping for ships and set up tachyon mines around the planet. I don't want them getting away from right under our noses."

"Aye," Makoto, Minako and Amanda all replied. At the back of the bridge, the turbolift opened and Usagi walked out. Minako acknowledged her, however Makoto did not notice her as she had her face buried in her terminal.

Usagi shrugged it off and began to head down to her terminal.

"Commander Tsukino," Ranma called after her. Usagi stopped and turned towards Ranma and Shampoo, who were both walking towards her. Usagi shot both a quick nod.

"I'm not expecting it, but are the engines ready to handle a potential pursuit?"

Usagi nodded. "Running well enough to almost make my assistant chief engineer angry."

Ranma grinned. "Great."

"Establishing geosynchronous orbit over the target," Ikuhara reported.

Ranma tapped his communicator. "NEO, you are go for insertion."

Kio nodded to her group as they materialized on the backside of what was the twenty-fourth century equivalent of a car park, a hundred or so meters from the conference hall where the hostages were being held.

The five Sisko soldiers walked up to a group of Starfleet Security personnel who had assembled a makeshift command post. The highest ranking one, a lieutenant, looked at the group slightly disappointed.

"Only five of you?" he asked.

Kio blinked, pondering whether to berate this idiot or simply explain things to him. She decided, at least in this case, diplomacy would be the better alternative.

"No sir, there are two other teams that have beamed down as well."

The lieutenant looked around. "Where are they?"

Kio sighed as Anthony held in his laughter. "You don't do this very often, do you, Lieutenant?" Kio asked.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

Kio shook her head. "Where in the hall are the hostages being held?"

"As far as we know, in the main conference room," the lieutenant started, pointing it out on a PADD. "They may have moved them to the cafeteria though."

Kio nodded, then turned to point at Kagurazaka who was setting up a small transport zone. "We don't think that they have a ship overhead, but we have to worry about cloaked ships.

"One of our other teams has set up transport inhibitors around the building. The corporal there has set up a transport relay station, so once we start finding the hostages, we'll tag them and send them to you guys to secure."

The lieutenant nodded. "You want to take some more people with you?"

Kio smiled. "No, thank you. Our party size is exactly right."

Rei leaned back against a tree and checked her watch. Delta team had gotten the transport inhibitors up almost three minutes ahead of schedule. Bravo team would be inserting soon, and her team would be moving in soon afterwards.

Everything seemed to be running exactly as it should.

So why was she so damned angry?

"Tired?" Shelton quietly asked, sitting down next to her.

Rei shrugged. "Maybe."

"Or you still thinking about earlier?"

Rei sighed. "I'm going to stick with tired."

Shelton patted Rei on the back. "Well, being frumpy isn't going to scare away all your demons," he grinned. "As well, it's probably going to distract you, which will, in turn, end up getting me shot, which I can assure you, I will be very upset over."

Rei smirked, albeit somewhat forced. "These guys kidnapped a Trill ambassador at a solar emissions conference. I doubt they are the brightest terrorists that have ever existed."

Shelton shrugged.

Rei got back on her feet and pulled out her rifle. "I promise, if one of them does manage to have the brain power to point a gun at you, I will jump in front of the shot."

"That's very noble of you, boss," Shelton chuckled as he also rose to his feet and pulled out his rifle.

"Bravo to Alpha," Kio's voice came over the comms. "We're entering the building."

"Roger," Rei replied, motioning to the rest of her group to follow her towards the doorway. "Delta, you guys in position?"

"Yes ma'am," Delta team replied. "Doorways and windows are all covered. Anyone tries to flee... Pow."

Rei grinned as she and her group ran up to an emergency doorway. "Great."

Kio stopped her group. She quickly ran a scan with her tricorder; the results displaying on her eyepiece. She turned to the rest of her group, a slightly more somber look on her face than there was before.

"This room has seventeen bio signs in it," she explained, "and seven of them are Orion."

“Orion?” Anthony asked.

Kio nodded and activated her communicator. “Commander, it appears the hostage takers are Orions.”

After a momentary pause, Rei finally responded. “Interesting. Resistance will be heavier, then.”

Kio deactivated her communicator and rolled her eyes, “No kidding.” She turned to the group as she turned up the setting on her rifle. “The Orions won’t hesitate to kill the hostages. Go to heavy stun. We need to down them in one shot.”

Anthony, Kagurazaka, Yayo the medic, and Xiang the combat engineer, all nodded and adjusted their rifles accordingly. The group then waited for their leader’s signal.

Kio nodded.

It was like a game at a street fair for Bravo team as they slinked in and shot at least four of the seven in the back; two of the other three were shot as they were turning around to see what the commotion was, the final managed to fire at Bravo team, but missed terribly and was hit by three blasts from the Federation rifles.

Bravo team quickly secured the downed Orions and transported the hostages into the waiting arms of Starfleet security. Before they could move on, however, a door opened and several more Orions came in, apparently startled by the noise.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” one yelled.

“STARFLEET?!” another gasped, reaching for his weapon.

Like their brethren, the new Orions were systematically placed in an unconscious state at the hands of Second Lieutenant Kio Yuki and her team.

“There are six bio signs in the next room where the Orions came from,” Kio informed the group. “No Orions though.”

Kagurazaka smirked. “They must have all came after us.”

Kio nodded as the group stepped over the now restrained Orions and into the next room where they went to work beaming out the hostages.

“We’ve rescued sixteen,” Kio informed Rei. Rei nodded, despite Kio’s inability to see it, as the pair walked down the final hallway before reaching the main conference room.

“We’re about to go into the main conference room,” Rei responded vocally, finally. “Once you’re done checking the side rooms, head this way.”

“Aye,” Kio replied.

Rei activated her tricorder and scanned into the conference room. On her display, it informed her that there were forty bio signs. One of them was the Trill ambassador. Fifteen of them were Orion.

“Fifteen hostiles, as well as the Trill ambassador,” she told her team.

“You think we should wait for Bravo team?” Shelton asked.

Rei watched the dots in her eye piece move around. They seemed to be moving everyone to one side of the room. Something did not seem right about what they were doing.

Rei’s intuition was proven right when the forty bio signs became thirty-nine.

“No time,” she stated. “They’re executing the hostages. Move now.”

Rei activated the door and the group burst in, opening fire on the Orions who were lining up the hostages face first against the rear wall.

“STARFLEET! KILL THEM!” one Orion yelled.

Rei’s team scattered for cover as they ducked the return fire. Even though they were vastly outnumbered, Alpha team had the upper hand as one Orion after the other was hit and dropped to the ground in a single shot.

However, it was slightly slow going for Rei’s group as they were constantly having to duck and move around. Whereas their shooting was methodical and targeted, the Orions shots were sloppy and sporadic; their lack of training and the fact that they were scared was showing.

By the time Kio and Bravo team had made it to the room, there were no Orions left for them, and Alpha team was already in the process of transporting the hostages.

Kio walked over to one of the Orions to attempt to detain him, however it turned out to be a moot issue.

“He’s dead,” Kio stated.

“Yeah,” Rei agreed as she checked on the Trill ambassador. “They all are.”

Kio stood up and looked in Rei’s direction. “Heavy stun would have worked fine.”

Rei did not turn in her direction. “Our concern was the hostages, not the hostage takers.”

“What if-”

“We’re not having this conversation here, Lieutenant,” Rei snapped, turning to Yuki for a moment. Yuki nodded.

“Yes ma’am.” She paused. “The building is secure.”

Rei nodded. “Okay. Let’s get the inhibitors down then and turn things over to Starfleet security.”

Yuki groaned. “Aye.”

“Problem?”

“That guy is a yutz.”

Rei laughed. Shelton turned to her, nearly falling over.

“Sorry,” Yuki shook her head, walking away as Rei nodded, returning her attention to the Trill ambassador.

“Orions?” Ranma asked.

Rei nodded. “The group that survived is being interrogated by Starfleet Security, but so far they haven’t gotten anything out of them.”

Ranma pondered this as Shampoo came walking up to the tactical station where Ranma and Rei were standing. “If they were Orions,” she offered, “then they didn’t come from planet’s population.”

Ranma agreed and turned to Makoto. “Start scanning for Orion ships.”

Makoto nodded and began to work on her terminal. Lt. Jansen also began to work on her station as well. Ranma turned to Minako in Operations. “How long before the Trill ambassador’s escort fleet arrives?”

“Another hour,” Minako replied.

Ranma sighed. He was not that interested in babysitting a bunch of diplomats for any longer than he had to. Of course, it was not like there was anything else they had to do right now.

“Captain,” Makoto spoke up, a sly grin on her face appearing. “I have two Orion cruisers on scan, about two light years from here, heading away from the planet at warp eight.”

Rei smirked, as did Shampoo. “They must have gotten the news,” Shampoo guessed.

“There aren’t any Starfleet or allied ships in range of them,” Minako sighed.

Ranma shrugged, his lack of interest obvious to the bridge crew. “We did what we came to do. Everyone is safe,” he explained. “I am sure they will be poking their noses in someone’s space soon enough and get what’s coming to them.”

The bridge crew mumbled agreements and began to wander back off to their respective stations and duties. At the tactical station, Amanda’s terminal chirped at her slightly.

She eyed it curiously, not saying anything.

“Amanda?” Makoto asked, turning towards her.

Amanda continued to watch it for a second, till it chirped again. “What the hell?” She asked no one in particular. She quickly turned towards Kaii, on the other side of the bridge.

“Kaii, can you bring up 002 dash 726 mark 721?” she requested.

Kaii complied and brought the section up on his terminal. Both Ranma and Shampoo turned around to watch the exchange.

“Something going on?” Ranma asked.

"I'm not sure, sir," Amanda replied. "For a second, I thought I saw a Jem'Hadar ship."

"What?" Makoto gasped.

Ranma bit his lip. "It's possible. There were Jem'Hadar born in the Alpha Quadrant. However, if they have ships and they are flying around, this could be an unbelievably bad thing."

Shampoo nodded in agreement. Kaii shook his head. "It's impossible to get a good scan of anything where you asked me to," he complained. "This is right on the edge of The Badlands."

Amanda nodded. "Yeah, I know. And it could have just been a sensor glitch. Both contacts were less than a half-second."

Ranma turned back towards the front of the bridge. "Well, better safe than sorry. Keep looking. Even if we don't find anything, I'll send a request to Starfleet to have someone check the area out."

"Aye," both officers replied.

CHAPTER TWO - INVESTIGATION

Genma walked into the dimly lit Starfleet Command briefing room rather briskly, carrying two PADDs in his hands. Flanking him is one of his assistants, a Lieutenant by the name of Yuji Sasaki.

Both officers nod an acknowledgment to the various admirals and officers in the room, and head towards the commander of the Bajor and Cardassia sectors, Admiral Yuri Reshetnikov.

“Genma. Good to see you again,” Yuri smiled, clasping the older Saotome’s hand.

Genma returned the handshake and nodded. “It’s good to see you too, Yuri.”

“You had something urgent to discuss?”

Genma nodded and handed the higher-ranking admiral his PADDs. “Yes, sir. This may be nothing, but my son’s ship had two long range sensor hits that appeared to be a Jem’Hadar ship on the outskirts of the Badlands.”

Yuri looked over the PADDs for a moment. “We’ve had ships in that area for months and haven’t seen anything.”

Genma nodded. “I am aware of that, but there is a chance that there are Jem’Hadar ships taking refuge in The Badlands, which would make them invisible to most ships scanners.”

Yuri looked to Genma. “Most ships?”

“The Sisko can’t scan into The Badlands, but the sensors are very narrow banded, refined and operate at a very high sweeping frequency,” Sasaki explained. “It would make sense that if a ship hiding near the edge of The Badlands came out, even for a short bit, that the Sisko would be able to ping it, while other ships and even sensor platforms, would miss it.”

Yuri examined the PADDs further as Genma continued. “They are still tied up on the Neba 3 incident, which is why I am coming to you.”

“You want me to send a ship there?”

Genma nodded. “At least to deploy a probe into The Badlands and see what we get back from inside, or if it gets destroyed by the Jem’Hadar,” Genma sighed. “Or, hopefully, to find out this was simply a false-positive, and that there is nothing there.”

Yuri nodded. “If the Alpha Jem’Hadar are rebuilding, that is a very serious threat that is worth investigating.” The Admiral set down Genma’s PADDs and began checking out his computer terminal. “Looks like I have the Duran about five and a half hours away. I will send them that way immediately.”

“Thanks,” Genma nodded. “I will have the Sisko head that way once they are finished to render assistance if they need it.”

Yuri nodded as he began to send orders to his ship.

“Sup?” Ryouga smiled at Minako.

Minako plops down on the couple's couch next to Ryouga and groans. “You'd think the Trills, people with lifetimes upon lifetimes of experiences to help guide them throughout their journeys would be able to master the basic concept of being on time.”

Ryouga continued to smile as Minako laid across the couch and placed her head on Ryouga's lap. “Is that why we're still hanging around here?”

Minako nodded. “They said their escort fleet would be here in an hour and that was two hours ago.”

Ryouga laughed. “Well, at least you got a break out of it.”

Minako almost purred as Ryouga ran one hand through her hair, the other one held onto her hand. “Yeah,” she contently replied. “Sup with you?”

“Drills, drills and more drills.”

“Mmmm.”

“You don't actually care, do you?” Ryouga asked.

“No,” Minako honestly replied, “but I like hearing you talk.”

Ryouga blushed as he grinned. “Well, there I was, all by myself when a dozen Klingons came rushing at me!”

“Oh my,” Minako replied, moving Ryouga's hand from her hair to her face.

“Yeah, so I started shooting and I managed to take most of them down, but two of them started swinging their bat'leths at me.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes! So, I had to punch one guy so hard it snapped his neck, the next I used my Bakusai Tenketsu on him. But then they yelled at me because that ended up damaging the holo...” Ryouga trailed off as Minako moved Ryouga's hand from stroking the side of her face to the inside of her partially unzipped jacket.

“Sounds exciting.”

“Yup,” Ryouga replied as he sat there, grinning stupidly as he felt up Minako. After a few moments, Minako quickly sat up and grinned rather devilishly at Ryouga.

“Motor running,” she smiled, unzipping her jacket completely.

Ryouga unzipped his as Minako quickly straddled Ryouga. Both the green and black and grey and black jackets went to the floor. Minako pulled off her shirt, and without hesitation, began to pull of Ryouga's.

Ryouga laughed as his collar began to get stuck on his head.

"Well, whatever," Minako stated, moving to Ryouga's pants. "That's not the part of you I'm interested in right now anyway."

Ryouga continued to laugh as he pulled his shirt off the rest of the way. He began to unbutton Minako's pants but paused as he took time out to bury his face between her breasts, which were still covered by her Starfleet issued bra.

"Oh my God!" Minako squeed, laughing. "Don't do that, it tickles!"

"Oh, you're ticklish?" Ryouga asked. He bent his head down, and began to lick her stomach, and moved his tongue up and down, causing her to giggle.

"Stop!" she ordered.

Ryouga did indeed stop, looked at her for a moment, and the two kissed. They then resumed trying to unbutton each other's pants. Suddenly Minako stopped, noticing something out the window.

"Fuck me," she groaned.

"I'm planning on it," Ryouga answered.

"No, Trills are here," Minako sighed as Ranma's voice began to play out over her communicator.

"Senior officers to the conference room."

Ryouga leaned back and growled as Minako slowly climbed off him and began to put her clothes back on.

"God-damned Ranma."

Minako was the last one to enter the conference room. Ranma shot her a quick nod and motioned towards the window.

"Commander Hino's teams are still in the process of debriefing with the Trills, but that should be complete shortly," he explained. He then turned towards the conference room's main viewer and brought up a diagram of the area around The Badlands.

"Starfleet Command has ordered the U.S.S. Duran to go and investigate the sensor readings that Lt. Jansen noticed."

"So," Makoto spoke up, "they think there might be something to them?"

Ranma shrugged. "They aren't sure. There are no intelligence reports that would suggest that there are any Jem'Hadar forces inside of the Alpha Quadrant; at least none in any kind of threatening numbers. However, the idea of any here is a big enough issue to investigate."

The room murmured an agreement.

“Once we have everyone on back on board,” Ranma continued, “we will set a course to rendezvous with the Duran and provide them with any assistance they might need.”

Minako began to check her computer. “A little under twenty hours at maximum sustained warp.”

Ranma nodded. “The Duran will be there in five and will be conducting sensor sweeps and will be deploying a probe into The Badlands.”

“They won't be entering?” Makoto asked.

Ranma shook his head. “No, especially if there are the potential of Jem'Hadar warships in there. Their communications wouldn't be able to penetrate the plasma storms to send a distress call or anything.”

The room mumbled in understanding.

“Kaii to Saotome,” Ranma's comm badge chirped.

“Go.”

“The away teams are all back on board.”

Ranma nodded to Shampoo who quickly scampered off towards the bridge. He then turned to Minako. “See what you can do to tune our sensors to better compensate for the plasma in The Badlands.”

“You think we may have to enter?” she asked.

Ranma sighed. “I think we need to be prepared for that contingency.”

Minako nodded, stood, and headed towards the bridge. Ranma then turned to Makoto.

“Captain?” she asked.

Ranma walked next to Makoto and sat down next to her. “Before I joined the Sisko, there are only two times when I actually thought I might die.”

Makoto continued to look at Ranma as the ship began to move away from the planet and align itself to go to warp.

“Fighting the Borg and fighting the Jem'Hadar.”

Makoto nodded. “They don't really have any sense of purpose other than to fight, so for them to pointlessly throw themselves at an enemy in an attempt to kill him makes them quite deadly.”

Ranma nodded. “I don't worry about one ship, or even two...” Ranma trailed off.

Makoto again nodded as the ship shot off into warp. “I think we'll do just fine, assuming they don't have some kind of dreadnaught.”

Usagi, who had been sitting across the table from the pair, blinked.

“The Jem'Hadar have dreadnaughts?”

"I fucking hope not," Ranma laughed. "Anyway, we have almost a day to get ready. It's Friday night, I think I am going to turn in early."

"You're becoming a homebody," Makoto laughed. "You and Akane should come out with Gosnell and I."

"Where are you going?" Ranma asked, cautiously.

"Goz has this casino/nightclub/karaoke holodeck program he enjoys running."

Ranma pondered this for a moment. "Yeah, why not."

Makoto turned to Usagi. "You want to come?"

Usagi shook her head. "I think I have plans."

"A date?" Makoto grinned.

Usagi shook her head. "No."

"Shame," Makoto smiled, standing with Ranma right behind her. The pair walked out of the room, leaving Usagi. Once she was sure she was alone, Usagi tapped her comm badge.

"Tsukino to Devall."

"Go ahead."

"Are you done working?"

"Yeah..." JC replied, a bit confused.

Usagi sat up a bit, and inhaled. "Well, I was wondering... There's going to be stuff going on tomorrow and we'll end up being busy with work, so would you like to move up our evaluation-slash-anime event to this evening."

"Well--"

Usagi quickly interrupted. "I mean if you don't have plans. If you do, it's cool. We can do it another weekend."

"No, it's not that," JC replied. "It's just that I was going to tidy up and everything."

Usagi scoffed. "Please. My place is a mess. You don't need to do that for me."

"Well, then sure."

Usagi smiled. "Great, I am going to finish up and will be there at 19:00?"

"Okay, sounds good."

Usagi grinned as she closed the communication and bounded out of the conference room and towards her quarters.

JC stood as the door chime rang. He set down his PADD and walked over to the door, deactivating the lock, and smiled as the doors slid open. "Commander."

Usagi smiled back. The blonde headed girl was wearing a white sweater and a pink dress that went to her knees. The dress, while not too tight, was not too loose either; what Usagi thought was just the right combination.

"Usagi, please," she instructed her subordinate. "I brought some food, if that's alright."

JC nodded and motioned for Usagi to come in. "I was going to replicate us something, but I wasn't sure what you'd like," JC explained.

"Well, this isn't replicated," Usagi smiled as she set the dish down on JC's living room table. JC turned to her and stared blankly.

"You cooked that?"

Usagi was not sure whether to smirk or glower. "Yes. And I can assure you it's quite good. It's lasagna."

"No kidding," JC pondered, going to his replicator to get some plates.

Usagi removed the top from the dish as she continued to talk. "It was actually what I specialized in when I was at Starfleet Academy. Culinary." Usagi sighed slightly as JC brought over the dishes. Usagi cut out a couple of pieces of the pasta dish and placed them on the plates while continuing her story.

"Of course, with the widespread use of replicators, there were very few places you could get a position as a cook," she complained. "I really wanted to be on a starship, so they told me that I could be transferred into Starfleet Security. I got moved into Engineering shortly after that."

JC blinked. "I had to get two master's degrees to get this position and all you had to do was take a cooking course?"

Usagi glared at JC as the pair moved over to his sofa and sat down with their food.

"I didn't ask for this position," Usagi sighed. "And you and I both know I wasn't qualified for it," she admitted.

"Then how..." JC started.

Usagi looked to her feet as she spoke. "The Captain told me - after I asked him for what was probably the twentieth time - that it was out of spite against him."

Usagi sighed and shook her head. "The admiral that put me here did it so that the Captain would fail."

JC seemed perplexed and slightly outraged by what he was hearing. "A Starfleet admiral put people's lives at risk for a personal rivalry?"

"Yup," Usagi nodded. "I asked Captain Saotome if he wanted me to resign, after you came on board so that you could take over," she explained, turning to JC. JC returned the look, surprised at the

new information he was learning. "He told me 'no' and said that the best way to get back at him would be to succeed."

JC put his hand on Usagi's shoulder. "Well, we've had no warp core breaches."

Usagi smiled at JC. "I know it annoys the hell out of you guys when I am always underfoot, but it's because I want to be better at being..." Usagi trailed off for a moment. "...better at being me."

JC smiled and patted Usagi on the back. "Well, boss. I don't think you can do any better job of being Usagi than you're already doing."

Usagi eyed JC. "I may be blonde, but I am well aware of when I am being insulted."

JC grinned. "More of a 'kind-hearted joke'," he explained. "That said, any time you want to be 'underfoot', you go right ahead, and if anyone gives you any grief about it, I will deal with them."

"You give me the most grief of all of them," Usagi protested.

"To your face, yes."

Usagi blinked.

"Shall we eat?" JC asked before he made Usagi angry.

Usagi nodded and the pair began to eat. JC paused after taking his first bite.

"Wow. This is great," he said, forgetting to conceal the shock in his voice.

Usagi rolled her eyes, deciding that she would avoid confrontation. The pair ate in silence for a while before Usagi turned to JC again. "Do you like being here?"

JC paused mid-chew. "Hmm?" He mumbled.

"Do you like being here?" Usagi repeated.

JC swallowed the food that was in his mouth and nodded. "It's a very nice ship."

The look on Usagi's face made it clear to JC that she wanted further explanation. JC took a drink of the water sitting on the table and continued, after making sure that he had chosen his words carefully.

"I have gotten to do a lot of things here that I necessarily wouldn't have gotten to do on another ship," he explained. "As well, I have been given," he paused, moving his eyes away from Usagi, "added responsibility, that has helped me progress as an engineer."

Usagi chuckled, causing JC to turn back towards her. "What?" He asked.

"I just think it's funny how you were trying to be all 'innocent' when you made the 'added responsibility' remark," Usagi grinned.

"Well..." JC stammered. "...I, wasn't trying to be disrespectful."

Usagi continued to smile. "I know. It's cool. I've always appreciated how helpful you've been and how you've really stepped up and done what's needed to be done."

JC smiled. "It's no problem," he said before starting to eat again.

"If I tell you something, will you promise you won't be angry at me?" Usagi asked.

JC turned to her and nodded as he continued to eat.

"I've not been entirely..." she paused, trying to think of the proper words. "...forthcoming, in your performance evaluations."

"What?"

Usagi, this time the one who could not make eye contact, lowered her head. "I never put in anything bad, and I always gave you positive reviews. But I never actually mentioned how you've gone above and beyond constantly. How much of an asset you are, and most of all..."

Usagi looked up to JC, who was looking back at her, sadly, knowing exactly where this was headed.

"...How you were ready to become a Chief Engineer yourself.

"It's selfish, I know," Usagi said quietly while twisting her hair between her fingers, "but I can't handle engineering without you. And I was afraid, with the shortage of qualified officers that they have right now, if they knew there was a qualified C-E candidate out there, they would take you away."

Usagi felt tears coming to her eyes. "I'm standing in the way of your career."

Much to her surprise, JC started to laugh. Usagi blinked and began to wipe the tears out of her eyes as she stared at the giggling engineer in confusion.

"That explains that then," JC chuckled.

"What?" Usagi sniffled.

JC resumed eating, explaining between bites. "My mentor, Dr. Jules Calder, said he was pretty disappointed in what a mediocre officer I had become."

"Oh no," Usagi whined.

JC laughed. "No, no. I told him that I was on the Sisko. Told him about the crash, saving the Federation, various other things that weren't classified, then told him about you and he more or less accepted that I was excelling just fine."

Usagi sighed. "Well, that's a reli- what do you mean 'told him about me'?"

JC grinned. "Well, that I had a very pretty boss who sometimes forgot to put my awesomeness into my performance reviews."

Usagi smirked. "Yeah, okay then."

"Look, I'm not planning on retiring any time soon," JC continued. "So, if I stick around here as second banana for a while longer, that's fine."

"I'm glad," Usagi concluded as the pair resumed eating.

JC was starting to become concerned. Usagi was not laughing anywhere near as much as he was. Could it be that she did not like this anime? He made her provide him with a list of her favorite manga and made a point to avoid them, given that he had also learned how much of a manga purist she was.

It only seemed to be some of the ridiculously absurd stuff that was really making her laugh.

Why do women have to be so damned complicated? He thought to himself. **Warp cores are complicated as well, but at least with a warp core you know what all the parts do and if one part isn't working you know how to fix it.**

JC nearly fell off the couch laughing at the antics on the screen in front of the pair. When he was done wiping the tears out of his eyes, he looked over to see Usagi, still leaning up against a pillow, smiling in an almost forced sort of way.

"Computer, pause," JC ordered. The video monitor paused, causing Usagi to turn to JC.

"What's wrong?"

"Good question."

"I don't understand."

JC moved over closer to Usagi and poked her in the arm. "This has got to be the funniest thing to have been produced in the last two-hundred years and you're sitting here, lumpier than my couch cushions," JC protested. "What's the deal?" he demanded to know, poking Usagi again.

Usagi swatted at JC's hand. "There's no deal."

JC poked her again.

"Quit poking me!" she ordered.

"Tell me what's wrong then," JC counter ordered.

Usagi grabbed JC's arm as he went in for another poke. She then grabbed his shirt and pulled him close to her. Usagi moved her face near his and closed her eyes.

She then suddenly felt a hand on her chest, though not in the way she might have expected, nor hoped. It was in the center of her chest, pushing her back.

Her lips, so close to his, never made contact. Her eyes opened as his face moved away, a rather dry – blank – expression painted on it.

He quickly pushed Usagi away and moved back to his end of the couch.

"I'm married, Commander," JC dryly stated, dropping all sense of informality.

Usagi blinked, realizing what exactly she had just done.

"Even if I didn't love my wife," he continued, "it would be inappropriate for us to have a relationship, seeing as how you're my supervisor."

Usagi began to cry.

Loudly.

JC began to shift, uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Commander."

Usagi shook her head. "No, you didn't do anything wrong," she continued to cry. JC, not exactly sure what to do in these kinds of situations, moved back closer to her, and patted her on the back.

"I'm such a moron!" Usagi wailed. "Why would I do that?"

JC started to get nervous. If his neighbors heard her, they might think he did something wrong and call security.

"No, no," JC patted her some more. "It happens all the time."

Usagi turned to JC and looked at him oddly as she bawled.

"Let me get you some tissues," he said, realizing his own attempts to help were not helping at all.

Usagi nodded as JC went to his bathroom to obtain the tissues. By the time he came back, Usagi's wailing had died down to a normal crying.

JC handed his boss the tissues. After she had blown her nose a couple of times, and her crying had subsided a bit, she turned to JC again.

"Please don't hate me for this."

JC shook his head. "I couldn't hate you."

"I'm just so lonely that I make such... stupid decisions," Usagi continued.

"How can you be lonely?" JC blinked. "You have friends that came on board with you."

Usagi scoffed. "Rei is too busy for me with her work, and I really question how much she likes me anyway."

"Oh."

"Makoto is also very busy, and I see her rarely. Minako only wants to hang out with Ryouga now," Usagi sighed. "Besides, that's really not the kind of 'lonely' I was talking about."

"Oh," JC replied. "I've seen you with lots of different security guys."

Usagi turned and glared at JC.

"Wow, that sounded far worse than I meant for it too."

"Not that I had sex with any of them, but I am not talking about sex either. I mean more like..." Usagi trailed off.

"What we were doing," JC concluded.

Usagi nodded. "I don't know what came over me. I guess I thought if I wanted something bad enough, regardless of whether or not it could happen; regardless of whether or not it was a good idea, I should try and make it happen."

“Carpe diem, eh?”

“I don’t speak Klingon, but I get the gist of what you’re saying.” Usagi retorted.

JC sighed, paused for a second, then grabbed Usagi, hugging her, much to her surprise. She, however, did not resist his embrace.

“Comm- Usagi, you have no idea how much I love my wife. So, this is literally how far things will go between us,” JC rubbed Usagi’s back as he continued to speak. “I very much would like to continue to watch anime with you, especially if you are going to continue to bring over yummy food.”

Usagi laughed as she rested her head up against JC’s chest.

“Deal.”

“I am so embarrassed!” Akane scowled at Ranma as the pair entered the turbolift. Ranma looked to Akane and laughed slightly at her pouting as he untied his bow tie.

“Really?”

“Yes, really!” she said, turning to him. “I mean, all those people!”

Ranma laughed again causing Akane to glare at him. He scooted over towards her and softly pushed her up against the side of the lift, while smiling.

“You are aware they are holograms, right?” Ranma asked, his hands moving up and down the Bajoran style, blue evening gown Akane was wearing. Akane pushed Ranma's hands away slightly, to show her annoyance with him, but didn't necessarily do it in a fashion that would encourage him to stop.

“Maybe so,” she acknowledged, looking to her husband. “But you're the idiot who managed to get kicked out of a holographic night-club.” Akane paused momentarily as Ranma again laughed quietly. “A holographic night-club on your own ship, no less.”

Ranma nodded as he brought his lips to Akane's ear. “Gosnell's singing IS terrible,” he whispered, making sure he blew on her ear as he spoke. Akane slipped down the wall a bit from the intense feeling that came over her from Ranma's taunting. The Captain took Akane's hand as the turbolift slid to a stop and guided her out into the corridor.

The pair barely made it back to their quarters.

“What?” Ranma asked the image of his father on the bridge's main viewer.

“The Duran is missing,” Genma repeated. “She disappeared off sensors, however she did not send out a distress call, or any other indication that she was in trouble, or under attack.”

“Maybe Duran go into Badlands?” Shampoo hypothesized.

“Maybe,” Genma acknowledged. “However, they had orders not to, so we are working under the assumption that something bad has happened.”

"We're still eight hours away," Ranma sighed.

"Can you speed up?"

Ranma looked to the engineering station. Usagi shook her head negatively. Ranma turned back to the viewer and exhaled. "Unfortunately, no."

Genma grouched. "Well, if I find anything out, I will let you know."

"Thanks. We'll keep sweeping the area as well."

Genma nodded and closed the communication. Ranma turned to operations; both Minako and Kaii knew exactly what was about to be asked and both had an answer already prepared.

"I still can't penetrate the plasma storms," Minako sighed. "If I narrow the band anymore, we'll start to see degradation in both range and accuracy."

"I have been watching the area like a hawk, sir. I've seen nothing on scan," Kaii added.

"The Duran?" Ranma asked.

Kaii sighed. "In order not to miss even the smallest glitch, I had my sensors ignoring Starfleet signatures."

"That's why we didn't notice it missing."

"Sorry," Kaii apologized.

Ranma shook his head. "No, it's fine, that's probably the smarter thing to do." Ranma walked down to his chair, sat down, and turned to Shampoo. "The Duran was a Nova class ship. She can't just be destroyed by a single shot without a distress call being sent out."

"What if they jamming communications?" Shampoo asked.

Ranma pondered this. "We may want to set up a make-shift relay point then before we approach their last known location."

"I can have Lt. Devall prepare Nighthawk for deployment," Kaii called out.

Ranma nodded. "Make it so." The Sisko's captain returned his attention to the starfield in front of him. There was nothing to do now but wait.

SEVEN HOURS, FIFTY-ONE MINUTES LATER

"Approaching The Badlands," Ikuhara reported.

"Red alert," Ranma ordered.

The ships lighting changed, darkening the bridge. Weapons, shields, and emergency systems came to full battle readiness. Marines and security personal began running through the corridors into strategic positions.

"Is Lt. Devall ready?" Shampoo asked?

"Yes," Kaii replied.

"Launch Nighthawk," Ranma ordered.

The modified Type-11 shuttlecraft departed the Sisko's aft shuttle bay and then quickly cloaked. The Sisko, meanwhile, began to push at full impulse towards the perimeter of The Badlands.

"Pretty," Shampoo commented on the massive cloud of plasma tornadoes and lightning that filled the Sisko's main viewscreen.

Ranma shrugged indifferently. Last time he was assigned here he was chasing down Maquis. It was not really his favorite assignment in Starfleet and coming back to The Badlands wasn't on his list of 'places Ranma would like to visit' either.

"Sir," Minako called out. "I am picking up ship debris 6,000 kilometers outside of the plasma cloud."

Shampoo lowered her head as Ranma sighed. "Federation?"

Minako nodded. "Yes."

"Move us towards it," Ranma ordered. Ikuhara adjusted the ships trajectory and the Sisko began to approach the wreckage.

"Captain, Commander Shampoo's theory on communication jamming appears to be right," Makoto stated.

"Yeah, I've lost our link with Nighthawk," Kaii added. "Working on reestablishing."

"Yes, please do," Ranma requested.

"Where jamming coming from?" Shampoo asked.

"I don't know," Minako replied. "I think we're being sensor dampened as well, as I barely have the Duran's debris on scan as well."

"What the hell is going on here?" Ranma asked himself quietly.

"I've reestablished a link with the shuttle," Kaii stated.

"What happened to you guys?" JC's voice said.

"Are you still in position?" Ranma asked.

"No," JC replied. "You disappeared off scan, so I came to investigate."

"CAPTAIN!" Usagi yelled. "WARP DRIVE JUST WENT OFFLINE!"

Ranma blinked. "Get it back online, fast."

"We're in range of the Duran wreckage," Ikuhara reported.

Shampoo turned to Minako. "See if you can download any and all information from their computers."

Minako nodded as both Amanda and Makoto start to yell out.

"We're being targeted!" Amanda called out.

"I am getting intermittent sensor hits of ships," Makoto reported.

Ranma turned to the viewscreen as a Jem'Hadar fighter slowly phased into the screen. Then another, then another. Then a Jem'Hadar warship. Then another, and another.

Ranma turned to Ikuhara. "GET US OUT OF HERE."

Ikuhara turned the ship around and began to move it at full impulse in the opposite direction of the approaching ships.

"So far, I have fifteen ships..." Makoto trailed off.

"Holy shit..." JC mumbled. "You have a lot more than that. There are at least twenty fighters chasing you."

The Sisko shook hard as the first ships managed to land their opening salvos.

"ALL POWER TO AFT SHIELDS AND IMPULSE ENGINES!" Ranma ordered.

Shampoo looked to Usagi. "Commander?"

"It's the environment. We can't establish a warp bubble till we get away from here."

"Dreadnaught!" JC squawked.

"Oh crap," Ranma and Makoto both whimpered as the ship rocked again.

"I have a target lock on some of the fighters!" Jansen grinned.

"KILL THEM!" both Ranma and Shampoo yelled.

The aft phaser banks and torpedo launchers on the Sisko lit up and began to decimate any fighter that attempted to get too close to her. However, the larger ships still were smacking the Sisko around, hard.

"AFT SHIELDS AT 20 PERCENT!" Makoto called out.

"If that dreadnaught shoots us, we're done for," Ranma whispered to Shampoo. Shampoo nodded, not really wanting to think about what that massive ship's weapons would do to them.

"I think they're backing off," JC called out.

Indeed, the shaking of the Sisko stopped. Usagi hopped out of her seat and raised her hands in victory.

"WARP DRIVE REESTABLISHED!"

"Ikuhara, take us one light year and hold us there. Lt. Devall, meet up with us when you can."

"Aye," both officers replied.

The Sisko shot off into warp.

CHAPTER THREE - BEACHHEAD

“Okay. So, what just happened?” Ranma asked his command staff, as well as JC and Kaii.

“Well, besides from once again proving that we have to have the most indestructible ship in Starfleet,” Makoto smirked, “I'd say we discovered a massive encampment of Jem'Hadar.”

“You wouldn't have been saying that had that dreadnaught managed to get a shot off,” JC replied.

“So why didn't it shoot?” Ranma asked as Makoto glared in JC's direction.

“It leads me to believe,” Minako suggested, “that the Jem'Hadar are as affected by their sensor and target jamming as we are.”

“So, he need to be closer?” Shampoo asked.

“Likely,” Jansen replied. “I couldn't target him, and our targeting sensors are far more precise than anything the Jem'Hadar have.”

“That we know of,” JC offered.

“Listen you...” Makoto started.

“Okay, okay,” Ranma interrupted.

“Speaking of sensor,” Shampoo asked, “why Nighthawk sensors work?”

“Oh, my sensors were as borked as yours were. But I have a nice big window in which to look out of,” JC answered.

“Glad you did,” Ranma replied.

“Should we set up cameras?” Kaii asked.

“That won't help us target,” Jansen answered. “We would need to find whatever is causing that distortion and destroy it.”

Ranma looked to Minako. “Do you have any theories?”

“I am fairly certain it's not a stationary platform,” she stated, pulling up a graphic on the viewscreen. “As you can see, we lost warp ability 3,000 kilometers from the perimeter of The Badlands, but didn't get it back till we were 7,000 kilometers from it.”

She looked to the rest of the group. “I think even the slowest of those ships could have traveled 4,000 kilometers.”

“It's an interesting concept,” Makoto pondered out loud. “It could potentially allow an entire fleet of uncloaked ships to move around, freely, without ever being seen.”

“It would explain a lot,” Ranma nodded. “There are not enough materials to build ships - at least not THAT many - inside of the Badlands.”

“Which ship would have the equipment installed?” Kaii asked.

“If Shampoo had to bet, money would be on dreadnaught. Hardest to kill,” Shampoo offered.

“Might explain why Amanda saw those two ships on scan as well,” Makoto said. “They are so much faster; they may have just zipped out of range momentarily.”

Ranma agreed with that theory. However, he was disliking the direction this whole string of events was taking. Jem'Hadar fleets warping around Federation space with impunity was not something anyone should be happy with.

“What about the Duran,” Ranma asked, turning back towards Minako. “Were you able to get anything from her wreckage?”

Minako shook her head. “Her computer core was blown to bits, and I couldn't locate the data recorders. I did confirm that she was destroyed by the Jem'Hadar though and based on the debris field and where her warp trail terminated, it appeared to be shortly after her arrival.”

“No data recorders?” Shampoo asked.

“Could have already been salvaged by the Jem'Hadar,” Kaii offered. “They destroyed enough Federation ships during the war to know where to look for them.”

Ranma sighed. “Okay. I am going to send a report to Starfleet. I don't need to hear back from them to assume that in one form or another we will likely be heading back there.”

The rest of the room nodded. “I can't imagine the Federation allowing the Jem'Hadar to maintain a presence in Federation space,” Makoto stated.

Ranma shook his head. “No. And I think it's safe to assume that they don't have that kind of fleet assembled to protect some kind of Jem'Hadar daycare.”

The room chuckled at the idea of a Jem'Hadar daycare.

“We'll maintain red alert for the time being, in case they get angry over the fact we got away and come looking for us,” Ranma added. “Dismissed.”

Genma and his assistant Yuji barely waited for the door to the war room to slide open before barreling in. Both quickly moved towards the large, oval shaped table; Genma quickly seating himself while Yuji began to program some information into the computer next to the viewscreen.

Sitting at the table were far more people than Genma talked too before. Yuri was there, but so was Admiral Kevin James, Starfleet's Chief of Staff and only five pip admiral, a couple of other four pip admirals, and a couple of Starfleet Intelligence admirals. There was also a civilian there, who nodded a greeting to Genma.

“I'm not sure we've met,” he smiled, extending his hand to the elder Saotome. “I'm Adrien Laurent. I took Councilman Young's position as Chairman of the Federation Council's Defense Committee.”

Genma forced a smile and shook his hand. Adrien chuckled at the look the Genma gave him.

"I understand your apprehension," he said, leaning back. "If it provides any kind of reassurance, the former councilman did, at one point, try and have me removed for trying to block one of his resolutions."

Genma allowed his forced grin to morph into a more natural smirk. "That guy was a power-hungry asshole."

Adrien nodded as Yuji turned to Genma. "It's ready, Admiral."

Genma nodded and began to speak as Yuji brought up the first slide on the viewer.

"Admirals, Councilman," he began, "the Jem'Hadar have established a base inside of the Alpha Quadrant."

Yuji changed slides, showing the wreckage of the Duran. "The U.S.S. Duran was sent to investigate what was believed to be a Jem'Hadar fighter that appeared on the sensors of the U.S.S. Sisko," Yuji explained. "Shortly after her arrival, the Duran disappeared off long-range sensors."

Genma turned to Yuri, then to the other admirals. "Because we did not see any other ships, we were at first operating under the assumption that they simply misunderstood our request not to enter The Badlands, or discovered something that required immediate action and went in anyway."

Yuji took over. "When the Sisko arrived seventeen hours after the Duran did, they found her wreckage outside of the perimeter of the plasma clouds."

James sat up. "So, she was destroyed by a defense turret inside of The Badlands?"

Yuri shook his head. "Nothing inside of The Badlands could target anything outside with any accuracy." The Russian admiral ran his hand through his hair and sighed sadly. "As well, that would assume that they were destroyed in one shot, which is nearly impossible to do to a Nova class ship."

One of the SI admirals nodded. "They would have sent a distress call if they were under attack."

Genma nodded. "They likely tried."

"Oh?" James asked.

Genma nodded at Yuri, who switched slides. The room gasped as Yuri began to speak.

"When the Sisko arrived, they began to approach the perimeter of The Badlands. As they got to within around 5,000 kilometers, they began to experience sensor and communication problems.

"As they got closer, targeting scanner resolution dropped dramatically," Yuji continued. "Finally, the issues peaked with the inability to establish a warp field."

"Then," Genma groaned, motioning towards the viewscreen, "that happened."

The room continued to stare at the image of the Jem'Hadar armada exiting The Badlands.

"That image was taken from the Sisko's cloaked shuttle, which had come in to investigate why the Sisko suddenly disappeared off sensors." Yuji explained. "The shuttle was no more than 10,000 kilometers from the Sisko when it lost her off sensors."

"Dear God," one of the SI admirals vocalized.

"How do they build that kind of fleet under our noses?!" Adrien asked as he turned towards the SI admirals.

"We believe," Genma explained, "that the dreadnaught is projecting a massive dampening field around it that makes it, and any nearby ships, basically invisible."

"Almost like an area-of-effect cloak," Yuji finished.

"Basically, it gives them the ability to warp anywhere with impunity, including to who knows how many moons to gather supplies for what has to be a drydock and shipyard facility inside of The Badlands," Genma finished.

"Well obviously we can't allow them to continue," James said.

"We need big ships," Genma explained. "If that dreadnaught is powering that counter-measure, it will have to be the primary target."

James began looking at his terminal. "I have three Sovereign class, a Nebula and two Galaxy class ships that can be in the area within two days." He turned to Genma. "A number of Steamrunner, Nova, Akira, Defiant and Intrepid class ships can be there in the same amount of time as well."

"This is a pretty serious threat to the entire quadrant," Adrien spoke up. "Perhaps we should also contact the Romulans, Klingons and Cardassians?"

"Hmm," James pondered. "The Cardassians have dismantled a number of their ships, so I wouldn't expect any help from them. As well, relationships between us and the Klingons have been going downhill quickly, so I wouldn't count on it."

James turned to Adrien. "Give it a try, but I am going to plan on it just being us."

"Oh, me?"

"Do I look like a diplomat to you?" James asked, causing the other admirals to chuckle.

"I'll see what I can do," Adrien glumly replied.

James turned to Genma. "You still have that big thing hiding somewhere?"

Genma grinned. "They aren't hiding. And yes, I already have them enroute."

James nodded and looked back up to the picture of the Jem'Hadar fleet. "So, what do we do once we take those ships out?"

Genma leaned back. "Send a scout in to figure out what they have, see what needs to be done and what assets will be needed to do it."

James continued to look at the screen. "What do you think they are hiding in there that they have all of those ships?"

"I don't know," Genma answered. "But whatever it is, we need to destroy it."

James nodded as Adrien sighed.

“The Romulans state that they will only save the Federation once every thousand years.”

Genma groaned.

“The Klingons wouldn't even speak to me.”

James couldn't help but chuckle.

“The Vulcan High Command offered up some battle-cruisers, but they are six days away.”

“We can't wait that long,” An SI admiral stated.

“Agreed,” James replied. “Where is the Sisko?”

“She's parked about a light-year away,” Genma replied.

“Is that safe?” Yuri asked.

“We're pretty sure the Jem'Hadar are as affected by their counter-measure as we are,” Yuji explained. “The Sisko was only attacked by the ships that got fairly close to them.”

Genma looked at his hands. “It's a good thing they were able to outrun that dreadnaught, otherwise...”

“Well,” James offered, “When we go back, we'll have a bit more for them to deal with so your boy can do what he does best.”

Genma smiled and nodded.

James began to enter data into his PADD. “I am having the fleet assemble by the Sisko. Our first order of business, once we arrive at The Badlands will be to establish a 'beachhead' of sorts to allow a scout ship to go in and determine what they are hiding.”

“The Sisko would likely be the best choice for that,” one of the SI admirals suggested. Genma turned to him.

“Why?”

“She's better armed than any of the smaller ships, she's as heavily armored as most battleships, and she has both that special operations team as well as a Marine compliment in case there is a command-and-control facility that can be easily boarded and destroyed.”

The other SI admiral nodded, as did James.

“He's right,” James said.

Genma sighed. “I knew there would be a downside to this job.”

James offered a smile to Genma. “It seems to be Ranma's destiny to be the constant savior of our quadrant.”

Genma smiled. “He's getting a lot of practice at it.”

James nodded. "Let's plan for seventy-two hours for the launch time." He turned to Adrian. "Please brief the council and the President." James paused for a moment. "I have the unfortunate feeling that while we will be victorious, we are going to pay a heavy price."

Adrian nodded, stood, and walked to the door. At the door he paused and turned back to the group.

"It's times like this I almost feel ashamed for choosing a job where I get to stay here in relative safety while people like you risk your lives to protect us."

The group blinked. Eventually one of the SI admirals started to laugh, causing everyone to turn towards him.

"I'd much rather risk my life in battle than have to have a 'diplomatic meeting' with certain people," he smirked.

Adrian smiled, turned, and walked out of the room. Genma smiled as well. "Well, at least he gets it."

The rest of the group nodded.

"Seventy-two hours," James repeated.

The Sisko's main conference room had become quite crowded. Not only were there the normal department heads, but several of the captains of the early arriving ships had beamed over to hear Ranma's first briefing and see the playback from Nighthawk.

After repeating what Starfleet Command had decided on doing regarding the initial assault, Ranma turned to his crew.

"Once we establish this beachhead, we will be taking the Sisko into The Badlands to find out exactly what the Jem'Hadar are guarding."

"Just the Sisko?" Shampoo asked.

Ranma nodded.

"Okay," Shampoo replied, not attempting to hide her disapproval of that idea.

"Combat inside of The Badlands is not very likely," Ranma explained, unsure of whether he believed that himself. "The entire place is one huge plasma storm which stirs up literally hundreds of pockets of explosive gases."

"The Jem'Hadar know this which is why they engaged us outside of The Badlands instead of waiting for us to come in."

Makoto nodded in agreement. "A misdetonated torpedo or a warp core breach could set off a chain reaction that could result in a massive detonation destroying everything within several thousand kilometers."

“There is still the problem with being unable to communicate with anyone outside of The Badlands,” Kaii brought up.

Ranma nodded. “Is there any way to use Nighthawk to our advantage?”

JC shook his head. “The cloak will nearly be useless in there.”

“What about modifying probes to act as relay stations?” Jansen asked.

Ranma looked to Minako. She pondered this for a moment before looking to Kaii. “It’s possible, but I don’t know if we can guarantee success.”

“See what you guys can do,” Ranma ordered. He then turned to his wife. “Akane...”

She smiled at him. “Yo?”

“The Infinity is coming.”

She scowled.

Ranma smirked. “I am transferring you there.”

“What?”

“They won’t be destroyed, and we will likely have a number of wounded from the initial assault, so they will be the best choice to handle major injuries. I want you to oversee triage operations.”

Akane began to object but then suddenly froze. Ranma was giving her a defacto promotion.

“Really?” she asked.

Ranma nodded. “I think your management and delegation skills will be useful for this kind of operation.”

Akane blushed. “Thank you.”

Ranma nodded then turned back to the rest of the group. “I think we’ll do the next briefing on the Infinity, since she has more room.” His remark was met with a laugh. “Let’s aim for t-minus twenty-four hours. Dismissed.”

The room began to clear out. Akane kissed Ranma before she left. Soon, the only two left in the conference room were Ranma and Shampoo, Ranma gathering up his PADDs, Shampoo, still sitting in her chair.

Ranma noticed her and moved in her direction.

“Something wrong?”

Shampoo smiled. “Shampoo just wondering if I was your lover, Ranma transfer Shampoo.”

Ranma let out a long and exasperated sigh and sat down next to her. “Don’t do this.”

“Just hypothetical.”

"Akane has gotten good at what she does," Ranma stated, a slight hit of defensiveness coming to his voice. "No, she's not a doctor and never will be. But she's a good department head. I'm giving her a chance to prove that she can handle a stressful management position."

Ranma hesitated before continuing. "Then she might have a chance at a promotion to a Starbase."

"Ranma want her off ship?" Shampoo asked, confused.

Ranma didn't answer.

Shampoo leaned towards Ranma. "No secrets," she reminded him.

Ranma set down the PADDs and leaned towards Shampoo. "She wants a kid. To be honest, so do I. But not here."

Shampoo leaned back. "Oh."

Ranma nodded.

"Well," Shampoo mumbled, "if that the case, then good luck."

Ranma looked at Shampoo for a moment. "Why are you angry?"

Shampoo shrugged. "Shampoo don't know. Guess there will always be that part that loves Ranma; that part that will be jealous when it becomes more and more obvious that Ranma will never become Shampoo's."

"I'm sorry."

Shampoo shook her head. "No reason to be sorry. It Shampoo's problem, not Ranma's. Shampoo moved on, just some parts trying not to."

"Well, you know for as long as I am here, you will be invaluable to me as my first officer. I hope that counts for something," Ranma said.

Shampoo nodded. "It does. Shampoo appreciate that."

"Kaii to Saotome," Ranma's communicator bellowed.

"Go ahead," Ranma replied.

"The Infinity has arrived, and her captain is 'demanding' to come aboard."

"This will be fun," Ranma groaned. "Tell her 'permission granted' and send her to my ready room."

"Aye."

Ranma turned to Shampoo. "Gotta go."

Shampoo smiled. "Have fun."

Ranma grumbled and nodded as he gathered up his PADDs and headed out of the conference room.

“Ranma!” Captain Ukyo Kuonji bellowed the second she burst through the sliding fiberglass doors into Ranma's ready room.

“Ucchan!” Ranma smiled back.

“Don't 'Ucchan' me!” she screamed. “What's this I hear about Akane taking over my sickbay?”

“She's not taking over your sickbay,” Ranma explained. “She's managing fleet-wide triage operations.”

“In my sickbay.”

“Yes. The Infinity has the largest sickbay and triage facility, so obviously your ship will be setup to be C-and-C for medical operations.”

“Why can't my CMO do it?”

“Because hopefully he will be treating patients.”

“He can do-”

“Look,” Ranma interrupted. “If I had a medical ship, I would use it. I don't. Starfleet put me in command of this fleet. If you don't like it, call them. Otherwise just, please, do what I ask.”

Ukyo stood at Ranma's desk pouting for a moment before speaking again.

“What is she going to need?”

“Just an office and access to a comm channel. Probably borrow an engineer to set up a feed so she can see which ships are being overwhelmed with injured so they can start rerouting the critically injured to the Infinity and the less injured elsewhere.”

Ukyo turned and began to walk to the door. “I'll see to it.”

“Ukyo, wait.”

She stopped just short of the door opening. Ranma ran around his desk to where she was.

“Can we also borrow a room for the next briefing?”

Ukyo sighed. “Of course, sir.”

“Thank-” Ranma was cut off by the doors opening and Ukyo walking out. Shampoo looked in at Ranma as the doors closed on him.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS FROM ATTACK

“I want one of these.” One of the fleet captains states as he walks into the massive conference room on board the Infinity. Several of the others agree with him as Ranma moves to the front.

“Okay, nearly everyone is here and those who aren't are with us via secured subspace,” He explains.

“The overall gist of our assault plan is pretty simple. We arrive, they come out, we kill them all,” Ranma explained. “Once that is done, the Sisko will move into the Badlands to scout and from there we will determine our next course of action, depending on what we find out.”

Ranma nodded to Makoto, who came to the front.

“For those who don't know me, I'm Commander Makoto Gosnell, the Sisko's Chief Tactical Officer and head of security. We're going to have to split up our fire here. For the larger ships, our primary target will be the Jem'Hadar dreadnaught; codenamed 'Blackout'. We believe it's the source of their jamming and dampening signal.”

Makoto showed a picture of the massive dreadnaught on the viewscreen. “Because of that technology, we're going to have to get within about 5,000 kilometers to get a solid lock on it. The only plus side to that is that they must get that close to lock on to us as well.

“The smaller ships will be attacking the fighters and warships. They will likely be coming out faster and faster, negating the dampening and jamming effects of Blackout. Larger ships, by all means, if you're not in range of Blackout and you have a target of opportunity, please take it.”

Makoto went to sit down and Akane went to the front.

“Hello, I am Commander Akane Saotome, CMO on the Sisko. I will be managing fleet medical operations. All ships will be provided with each other's shield frequencies so that shield-up transport is possible. The Infinity will have a critical care triage set up and will be handling the most seriously injured patients. Other patients may be moved from ship to ship, depending on how overloaded their sickbays become.”

Ukyo, who was leaning up against a back wall, watched Akane walk down from the front. She then eyed Ranma walk back up and begin to take questions.

Once he was done, the room cleared out. Only Ukyo and her senior staff remained.

“You look kind of angry, boss,” her first officer commented.

“I just always thought Starfleet was above nepotism,” she grumbled. “Guess not.”

Ukyo walked off. One of the other officers walked up to the first officer. “Amazing how things can change in forty-eight hours. Two days ago, she couldn't wait to see him.”

The first officer shrugged. “It'll pass.”

“What does the Doc think of this?”

“Ask me, not him,” a man standing behind them said.

The pair turned around and saw a man bearing a commander's rank standing there.

“Hey Doc,” the first officer smiled.

“Well?” the second man prodded.

“Doesn't bother me at all, quite frankly,” he explained. “Takes a lot of the burden off of me by allowing me to treat the patients and not have to worry about the logistics of it all.”

“Someone should explain that to the Captain,” The second man suggested.

“Not even if you paid me in bars of latinum,” Doc replied.

The first officer agreed. “Let it go.”

The second officer shrugged, and trio wandered off to their respective departments.

FOUR HOURS TO ASSAULT

Ranma swatted at the alarm. He was never quite sure why he did that every morning considering that he did not actually have an alarm clock.

“Silence alarm,” he mumbled.

The alarm stopped beeping. Ranma yawned and rolled over slightly. He hated sleeping alone. The bed just felt so empty. Nothing but him, his covers, and this squishy, breast like mass that he was snuggled up against.

“Squishy breast-like mass?” Ranma asked himself.

Ranma opened his eyes to see was clearly half exposed breasts in front of him.

'Akane should be on the Infinity,' his brain thought. *'Uh oh.'*

Ranma quickly sat up. He looked at the woman lying next to him.

“Akane,” he sighed in relief.

'Well, that's only half better,' his brain told him.

Ranma shook Akane, who mumbled some profanities at the person who was trying to wake her. Ranma shook harder, having to dodge a couple of sleep-punches in the process. Finally, he got Akane to wake up.

“Mmm?”

“Good morning,” Ranma nodded. “I'm not actually complaining, but why are you here?”

Akane slowly sat up and rubbed her eyes. “They said they didn't have any spare quarters.”

Ranma turned and looked out the window. In the distance he could see the Infinity; a ship that almost looked like it could fit a nearby Sovereign class in its shuttle bay.

“I see,” Ranma scowled.

“It's no big deal,” Akane explained, starting to fully wake up. “I got everything set up last night.”

Ranma turned to Akane. “What time did you go to bed?”

“02:00 or so.”

Ranma looked at the clock. 06:30. He sighed.

"Damn it, Ukyo," he quietly glowered as Akane crawled out of bed to get dressed.

ASSAULT TIME 10:30

Ranma took his place in the Captain's chair on the bridge of the Sisko. He turned to each station as he spoke.

"Operations?"

"Sensors refined as much as possible," Minako replied.

"Communications?"

"Links established with the fleet; secure channel established with Starfleet Command, though I can't assure we will be able to maintain anything once we get near Blackout," Kaii answered.

"Understood. Tactical?"

"Security and Marine teams on standby, all weapons charged and loaded; defensive systems fully functional," Makoto replied.

"Targeting systems refined, free-fire protocols programmed," Amanda added.

"Engineering?"

"Impulse and warp drive nominal," Usagi smiled.

"Damage control teams on standby," JC answered over the communication system.

Ranma turned to Shampoo. "Let's go."

Shampoo stood and walked to behind Ikuhara. "Helm, all ships. Set course 172 mark 221. Maximum warp."

"Course laid in," Ikuhara responded.

"Engage," Ranma ordered.

Within a few minutes the Starfleet counter-armada began to appear near the edge of The Badlands. Once out of warp the ships began to push in towards the perimeter of the massive yellow and orange clouds in front of them.

"Anything?" Ranma asked Minako.

"Nothing yet."

The tension in the recycled air on the bridge for the next several minutes could have been cut with the dulllest of knives it was so thick. Finally, activity.

"Contact!" Both Minako and Makoto called out.

Jem'Hadar fighters began to emerge from the Badlands and started to stream towards the Starfleet ships.

"All ships, fire at will," Ranma ordered.

Space lit up with an exchange of purple and orange phaser blasts as the smaller Jem'Hadar ships tried in vain to stop the advancing ships but were easily outgunned.

"More," Makoto reported.

Larger Jem'Hadar ships began to emerge, as well as more fighters.

"We're starting to lose resolution," Minako reported.

"Blackout," Shampoo acknowledged.

"Lost my link to Starfleet," Kaii stated.

Ranma nodded but did not verbally respond as the ship shook; several Jem'Hadar fighters choosing to focus their attention on the Sisko.

"Dammit all," Amanda scowled. "Lock is going in and out."

"They are really close though," Makoto complained.

"Warp drive offline!" Usagi cried.

"I think they can focus it too!" Minako deduced.

"Well, that's annoying," Ranma acknowledged.

"Is Blackout out of The Badlands?" Shampoo asked.

"No clue," Minako groaned.

"All our communications are down," Kaii sighed. "I'll go look out the window and let you know." Kaii scampered off towards the forward observation room. In a few seconds he came back.

"Oh yeah," he nodded. "Looks like we've lost a few ships too."

Ranma sighed, stood, and walked to Ikuhara. "As soon as one of those warships comes back into range, I want you right up its tailpipe."

"Aye," he nodded.

One suddenly appeared on the sensors and began to fire at the Sisko.

"On him," Ikuhara stated.

"Don't destroy it!" Ranma ordered.

"Aww," both Makoto and Amanda complained.

The Jem'Hadar warship began to turn away from the Sisko. Ikuhara kept on him though, expertly dodging debris that suddenly appeared on sensors at the last moment.

“Blackout on scan now,” Minako reported.

“Helm!” Ranma yelled.

“On it!”

“You can kill him now,” Ranma informed the pouting girls at the tactical station.

Makoto and Amanda grinned as she unleashed the full fury of the Sisko on the Jem'Hadar warship, obliterating it.

The massive dreadnaught suddenly appeared on the viewscreen; her shields glowing brightly from the apparent shellacking she was taking from the other Federation ships.

“Target lock?” Ranma asked.

“Yes!” Makoto reported.

“Fire at will.”

“Can you find what power that jammer?” Shampoo asked Minako, walking over to her station.

“BRACE!!!” Makoto yelled.

The dreadnaught unleashed a massive phaser blast that knocked everyone on board the Sisko to the ground. The lights flickered and areas on the master situation display shifted to yellow.

“DAMAGE REPORT!” Ranma yelled as he stood.

“Shields at 37 percent!” Usagi reported.

“It's not working right now anyway,” JC called out over the intercom, “so I am rerouting power from the warp drive to our shields.”

“God damn that was a massive hit,” Amanda complained.

“The dreadnaught is below 50 percent, but some of the larger ships have pulled back because of damage,” Makoto reported. “Their support fleet is mostly gone, but the dreadnaught seems to be able to pick off our ships one by one because we're not taking it down fast enough.”

Ranma turned to Shampoo and Minako. “Anything?”

“There appears to be a sensor array that is generating a large amount of power,” Minako noted. “However, we can't touch it while it's shields are up.”

“They're powering up for another shot!” Makoto reported.

“Not going to hit us this time,” Ikuhara stated, turning the ship into a dive bomber.

“BRACE!” Makoto screamed.

Ikuhara turned the Sisko to the left at the last second, spinning it. The massive beam of energy flew right past the ship and into open space. The crew was once again knocked to the ground due to Ikuhara's stunt flying, but the ship remained intact.

“Wheeee!” Ikuhara chuckled.

Ranma climbed into his chair. “I both want to kick you and kiss you.”

“Sisko, are you alright?” Ukyo's voice came over the comms.

“Yes!” Ranma called back. “You guys managed to break through their jamming?”

“The communication side of it at least,” she replied. “We're continuing to fire at that damn thing, but it doesn't seem to be doing much good.”

“We need more damage applied against it,” Makoto grumbled.

Minako nodded pointlessly. “We've located a sensor array that we believe is Blackout's source, but we can't hit it till we get the shields down.”

Ukyo paused for a moment. “That things weapons are ripping the battleships apart. We've lost our Nebula and one Sovereign class ship already and both Galaxy class ships are heavily damaged.”

“BRACE!” Makoto yelled.

Ikuhara again sent everyone flying with his skirmish maneuvers that managed to dodge the dreadnaught's phaser blast.

“Well, we're not even making a dent in this thing,” Amanda snapped.

“Can your fighters get under its shields?” Ranma asked.

“We lost a large percentage of them in the initial assault,” Ukyo replied softly. “Even if they could breach its shields, I don't think we have enough to apply enough damage.”

Ranma began to pull on his hair as Ikuhara again spun the ship to avoid the dreadnaught's phaser attack. His concern for this assault being all for nothing crossing his mind.

“Ranma...” Shampoo turned to him.

Ranma turned to his purple haired first officer. When their eyes met, their unspoken bond that had developed throughout the last two years commanding this ship and her predecessor allowed them both to know what the other was thinking.

They were both realizing there was quickly becoming only one option.

“Withdraw our forces to the staging point,” Ranma dryly ordered.

“Captain-” Makoto began to object.

“The support fleet is mostly gone,” Ranma explained. “In another few days we will have more ships and will have repaired our damaged battleships allowing us to focus on Blackout.”

Makoto sighed. She did not like it, but the captain was right.

“Relaying orders,” Kaii said, turning to his terminal.

“Belay that!” Shampoo exclaimed, tugging on Ranma's sleeve, and pointing towards the main viewer.

Ranma turned to it and began to laugh wildly.

“We're being hailed.” Kaii smiled.

Ranma nodded. A Romulan appeared on the screen and smiled. Well, more of a smirk than a smile since Romulans don't really 'smile'.

“Captain. I am Commander Torah of the Imperial Flagship Bahran,” he introduced himself. “We are here to render assistance in the destruction of the Jem'Hadar dreadnaught.”

“Very nice of you,” Ranma acknowledged. “I was under the impression that the Romulan government denied our request for assistance.”

“They did,” Torah stated bluntly, allowing the displeasure for his civilian commanders to be apparent to the Sisko's bridge crew. “That said,” he continued in a more formal tone, “the security of the Empire is not up to the decision of politicians and bureaucrats.”

“Thank goodness,” Shampoo replied.

“You will forgive me though, Captain as I must decline in placing my fleet under Starfleet's command,” Torah added.

“Commander,” Ranma smiled, “just helping us kill that damned thing is good enough for me.”

Torah again grinned, nodded, and closed the communication. Ranma looked at the ten Valdore class battle cruisers that began to open fire on the dreadnaught and again started to chuckle.

“Resume firing,” he ordered. Ranma turned slightly doing his best to look towards Shampoo, Amanda, and Makoto. “Keep those Romulan ships alive.”

The three women nodded and began to focus on picking off the few remaining Jem'Hadar support craft that attempted to attack the Bahran and her fleet. Ranma gritted his teeth worriedly though when he and the rest of the crew saw that it only took a single shot from Blackout to obliterate one of the Romulan warships.

“Damn,” Shampoo hissed.

“WHAT THE HELL?!” Minako screamed as Ikuhara drove the Sisko straight at what looked to be the last remaining Jem'Hadar cruiser.

Amanda laughed gleefully as she opened up every forward-facing weapon, nearly destroying the smaller ship.

“Now,” Makoto ordered. Ikuhara, who had gone over this tactic earlier with the tactical officers banked the Sisko down and to the left at the last moment. Meanwhile, Makoto fired off the tractor beam, with the polarity reversed, sending the derelict ship towards Blackout.

“Wait...” Makoto instructed Amanda, whose finger was twitching above her console. Makoto watched her display, then tapped Amanda. The blonde nearly broke her finger she hit the fire button so hard, sending a full volley of quantum torpedoes towards the ship.

Ranma and Shampoo watched the viewer as Makoto and Amanda watched their tactical display. The Jem'Hadar ship floated towards Blackout on a direct trajectory towards what they thought was generating the 'Blackout' field. The torpedoes screeched in behind it.

“Blackout's shields have failed!” Kaii and Minako exclaimed as a volley of disruptor fire from the Romulans smashed into the dreadnaught.

Ranma smirked at the ingenuity of his tactical officers. Blackout began to turn as if it was trying to escape back into the Badlands. However, the fact that it had to slow down to make such a heavy, cumbersome turn was going to be its undoing.

The sparking Jem'Hadar ship was impacted by the Sisko's torpedoes. Its warp core breached. The explosion occurred within a few kilometers of Blackout, and more importantly, nearly right on top of the Blackout field generator.

Amanda and Makoto high-fived as their screen was suddenly filled with multiple other ships, both friend and foe.

“Communications reestablished!” Kaii beamed.

“All sensors online!” Minako confirmed.

“Warp systems returning online,” Usagi mentioned, slightly more subdued since she realized they were not going to be going anywhere.

Ranma looked to the main viewer. Phasers were coming from every direction and hitting Blackout, as well as hundreds of torpedoes. There was no question, Blackout was not going to make it the few hundred kilometers back to the Badlands.

“Back us off!” Shampoo ordered. Ikuhara complied and whipped the Sisko away from the imminent explosion. Plasma fires began to jet from Blackout's multiple hull breeches as more and more torpedoes and the never-ending stream of phaser fire struck the ship. Her superstructure was resilient, refusing to completely buckle; the ship making a vain attempt to coast back into the relative safety of the plasma clouds.

Finally, though it was too much for her. The Jem'Hadar ship broke in half first, the front-end venting even more plasma and what looked like an endless stream of Jem'Hadar as its momentum continued to move it towards the perimeter of the gas clouds. The back end began to spin off on its own, being the focus of most of the incoming fire.

The reality of spaceflight set in though when her warp-core breached causing a massive explosion that shook the Sisko, despite the distance they had moved. Ranma was barely able to stop himself from jumping up and cheering when the explosion engulfed the front half of the dreadnaught, leaving behind nothing but some sparking debris, smoke and the mangled remains of her crew that were not fortunate enough to be incinerated instantly.

“Fleet status?” Ranma asked as he turned to Makoto. She began to check her terminals as Amanda brought up a grid on the main viewer.

“Captain,” Amanda pointed, “a few of the smaller ships are currently pursuing a few remaining Jem'Hadar fighters back towards the Badlands.”

Ranma looked to the grid. He shook his head as he noted that they would not catch the ships before they got back into the gas clouds. “Order them to halt their pursuit,” he instructed. Amanda nodded as Ranma continued. “I don't want any ships being picked off. We need to regroup, then plan for our insertion into The Badlands.”

“Captain, the fleet reports nine ships destroyed, including two heavy ships, as well as twenty that are no longer battle capable,” Makoto informed Ranma. The pig-tailed man bit his lip. He was not sure whether that was an acceptable loss ratio-

Ranma shook his head. *'You're already thinking like an Admiral'* his mind scolded him. Ranma agreed with himself and continued his questioning.

“What about casualties?”

Makoto frowned as she read her display. “The Jem'Hadar were doing what they could to destroy lifeboats,” she sighed. “Most of the crews from the destroyed ships are M-I-A, though there is a planet not far from here they could have gone to.”

Shampoo turned to Minako. “Dispatch ship to look.”

Minako nodded as Kaii looked to Ranma.

“We're being hailed.”

“Romulans?” Ranma asked.

Kaii nodded. “On screen,” Ranma ordered. Torah, a bit more – frazzled – than the last time he spoke with Ranma appeared on the viewer.

“Captain,” he smirked.

“Commander, we appreciate your help,” Ranma bowed slightly. Torah nodded and leaned back, allowing his legs to cross and his fingers to tent in traditional Romulan captain style.

“As I said, the elimination of this facility is in as much the Romulan Empire's interests as it is the Federation's.” He looked to a console that was attached to his chair, then back to Ranma. “I trust we can leave this in your hands?”

Ranma nodded. “Assuming they don't have another one of those things on the way here from the Gamma Quadrant,” Ranma mused. “Do you need any assistance? We have repair ships enroute and a triage-”

Torah interrupted him. “Our presence here isn't authorized by either of our governments, so the sooner we return to our side of the Neutral Zone, the better it will be for my career, I believe.”

Ranma nodded understandingly. "Well, for what it's worth, I don't think the Federation will be filing any letters of protest over your incursion."

"That's most generous," Torah smirked. "We'll monitor, but don't expect us."

Ranma nodded. "Safe journey."

"And good luck to you, Captain," Torah nodded slightly before closing the channel. Shampoo leaned towards Ranma as the nine remaining Romulan warships cloaked and presumably warped towards home.

"When Ranma decide to join Starfleet, did you ever think Romulans end up being best friends?" she asked.

Ranma could not help but laugh. Ranma had indeed been saved or assisted by the Romulans far more than he would have ever imagined in the Academy, and in an ironic twist, seemed to have made more enemies within the Federation than outside of it.

Shampoo went to helm to have Ikuhara guide the Sisko back to the fleet while Ranma went to the engineering area. He looked at the master situation display, which did not really look all that bad. He was hoping his engineers would confirm that.

"So," he smiled as he stood over Usagi's shoulder, "how are things?"

Usagi paused for a second. "Well, not bad. I went with Minako the other day to play volleyball and tripped. Commander Saotome told me I twisted my ankle, but it would be alright, and I should just walk it off. Other than that-"

"WITH THE SHIP!" Ranma barked.

"Oh," Usagi blinked. JC, who had made his way up to the bridge to assist Usagi, had to bite his lip hard to keep from laughing at her. This did not go unnoticed by Usagi, who gave him an awkward look before returning her focus to the engineering terminal.

"Shields are at 56 percent but are recharging. Ablative armor is fine as most other defensive systems." She looked towards a blinking red light and tapped the screen as she pointed at it. "We blew out a few EPS manifolds as the grav plating and inertial dampeners were working overtime during that fancy flying Ensign Ikuhara was doing..."

The Ensign smirked at his EPS manifold damaging flying skills.

"...but that's an easy fix."

Ranma nodded and smiled, pleased that the Sisko was seemingly unscathed. "So, what do you guys think is the E-T-A before we can start scouting in there?"

Usagi looked to JC. He looked to Ranma. "Two hours?"

Ranma, surprised it was that low, nodded. "Sounds good."

As Ranma walked back to his seat, JC looked to Usagi. "What was that look for?"

She didn't look to him as she responded. "I really wish you wouldn't make fun of me in front of the Captain."

"Make fun of you?"

"By laughing at me."

JC sighed. "I wasn't making fun of you," he paused, thinking for a second. "It was just... Something so you."

"See," Usagi quietly said, sniffing slightly. "You're doing now."

"Doing what?"

"CALLING ME STUPID!" she yelled.

The entire bridge looked over towards engineering. JC's eyes darted around as Usagi began to cry. JC chuckled nervously before grabbing Usagi's arm and dragging her towards the turbolift.

"Excuse us," he smiled. "Warp core stuff," he continued to chuckle nervously till the turbolift doors closed. Kaii's eyes were drawn away from the commotion by his communication terminal.

"Captain, I have both your wife and your father on the line for you."

Ranma sighed. "Great timing," he acknowledged. "Would you kindly inform Akane I will get back to her."

Kaii whimpered. "Do I have too?"

Ranma nodded as he walked towards his ready room.

Minako laughed as she could hear angry growling coming from Kaii's speaker.

"Computer, hold," JC ordered. The lift slid to a stop halfway between decks seven and eight. JC glared at Usagi, essentially pushing her back against the back of the lift with his eyes. "Okay, seriously, what the HELL is your problem?" he growled.

"I'm not stupid," Usagi whimpered.

"I never said you were," JC countered.

"When you say, 'something is so me', I know what you're implying."

JC sighed. "No, that is not what I am implying."

Usagi looked at him for further explanation. "Look," he continued, "your mannerisms are cute, sometimes silly and yes on occasion you can say things that are a little dumb-"

"SEE!" Usagi yelled.

"Would you shut up and let me finish?" JC snapped. Usagi glowered at him, not particularly happy about being told to 'shut up'. However, she did as he asked and allowed him to finish.

“Just because you say something that's a little dumb occasionally doesn't make you stupid. Even smart people say dumb things.” JC looked at her a little sadly. “What is bringing this on anyway? Is it because I rejected you? If we make love really quick, will you go back to normal?”

Usagi just looked at him with a look of astonishment on her face. “You were right,” she quietly gasped. “Smart people can say dumb things.”

JC rolled his eyes. “Okay well then what is it?”

Usagi slid to the floor. “Well, it's been a lot of things, and been growing since I joined the ship, obviously, but ever since I admitted that I have been holding you back to cover my own butt I have realized how stupid I must be.”

JC slid down next to her. “Two things,” he said, tugging on her sleeve so that she would look towards him. When she finally did, he wiped the tears from her face with a tissue and smiled. “First, if I thought you were too stupid to be in the position you are in, I would do everything in my power to have you removed.”

He ran his eyes up and down Usagi and smirked. “I don't care how good looking my boss is, if she's going to get us killed, I have to insist she needs to get the hell out.”

Usagi blushed a bit as JC took her hand. “Secondly, you can't be that stupid as you came on board with no engineering skills whatsoever, and yet while I think we can both admit you're no me,” Usagi laughed and rolled her eyes, “you have developed an amazing skill set and know more than a lot of people who actually went to school for this stuff.”

“Most of that is because of you,” Usagi whimpered.

JC shrugged. “A stupid person can't learn.”

Usagi smiled. “You're pretty good at this.” JC grinned and nodded as Usagi leaned back against the wall of the lift. “Maybe we should get you transferred to help Lt. Fuchs.”

“You wouldn't dare,” JC gasped.

Usagi shook her head, sitting up. “No, I guess I wouldn't.” She looked at JC's hand, which she was still holding. His left hand. She poked his wedding ring with her fingernails and giggled. “If I get this thing off, is your previous offer still open?”

“Um-uh-Well, I don't think-” JC began to stammer as he tried to get his hand back from Usagi. Her grip was surprisingly tight, however. After a couple of moments, Usagi laughed and let him go. “Resume,” she ordered the lift as she stood. She offered to help JC up, however not wanting to risk Usagi's death grip again, he politely refused and hopped up on his own.

“She's very lucky,” Usagi stated as she turned towards the front of the lift.

“Mmm,” JC mumbled. “I'm luckier.”

“Where is she?”

“Earth,” JC answered. “She's a veterinarian.”

“Maybe I can meet her someday?”

JC nodded. “I think both her and my daughter would love you.”

Usagi blinked as the lift stopped and the doors opened allowing the pair to access main engineering.

CHAPTER FOUR - DISCOVERY

"Would you calm down please!" Ranma pleaded.

"I just cannot believe you'd put your own wife on hold!" Akane retorted.

Ranma sighed. "I told you, it was Starfleet!" Ranma rubbed his eyes before continuing. "Besides, I knew that if I dealt with them first, I could take as much time as I needed talking with you."

Akane blinked. "Oh, that's so sweet."

'Holy shit, that worked,' Ranma's brain gasped. "So, how'd it go?"

Akane looked at her hands for a few seconds before shrugging slightly. "It went okay, I think. We managed to not overwhelm any one sickbay."

She looked to a different monitor then back to Ranma. "The Ames lost power to her sickbay and Doctor T'Lase said it was nice knowing where he could send patients."

Ranma smiled. "Though," Akane continued, "it was kind of boring, not actually being able to help anyone. Just basically being a logistics manager."

Ranma lost his smile.

"So," he asked, "you wouldn't want to do this full time? Managing a hospital station?"

Akane blinked. "I- I don't know."

Ranma shook his head. "Well, anyway, is everyone being nice to you over there?"

Akane looked at Ranma a bit confused for a moment more before letting his previous comments go. "The Infinity's medical staff has been a charm to work with. They're nice and their CMO, 'Doc', said he's glad he didn't have to deal with this."

"And Ukyo?"

Akane shook her head. "Haven't seen her."

"Well, like Shampoo, she'll get used to the way things are," Ranma smiled.

Akane nodded. "I'll be beaming back soon."

Ranma bit his lip. "Why don't you stay there for the time being?"

Akane blinked. "You-"

"It's dangerous in there," Ranma explained, his head subconsciously gesturing towards the window, "and I don't know what we're going to come across," Ranma argued. He lowered his head slightly and spoke softer to Akane. "I don't want you hurt."

Akane nodded and smiled. "You always have tried to look out for me, and protect me, Ranma. Even before we were married." The dark-haired woman paused for a couple of seconds as she thought back. "Even when we fought." Akane chuckled a bit, then inhaled deeply. "But God damn it, Ranma Saotome you are one selfish son-of-a-bitch."

To say Ranma was a bit shocked by Akane's harsh words would be an amazing understatement. "Excuse me?" He asked.

"You can't stand the thought of not having me but give no concern to me living in a world without you," Akane growled. "Do you have ANY idea what that would be like?"

Ranma stared silently at Akane, unable to assemble a retort.

"No," she answered for him. "I am Akane Saotome, and my place is at your side. So, you can stop the attempts to keep me from harm because where you go, I go."

Ranma sat there for a minute, staring intently at Akane before simply responding, "Yes, Commander."

Akane grinned in her victory.

"We'll be departing in eighteen hours," he continued. "If you're late, I hope the Infinity will loan you an EVA suit."

Akane smirked. "Now you're just being a wise-ass."

Ranma nodded. "Aye."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

The communication ended and Ranma leaned back, slightly concerned with the idea of his wife coming with them on such a dangerous mission, yet at the same time pleased to know that she exhibited such loyalty to him.

He could understand it. He would not allow her to go into a dangerous place like the Jem'Hadar infested Badlands without him, but then again it was HIS job to protect her, not vice versa.

He accepted her reasoning though. He knew exactly how heartbroken he would be if he were to lose her. Akane's assessment of Ranma's thinking was accurate insofar as he had not given much thought as to how his death would affect her. Of course, Ranma did not have any intention on dying, but if it happened, he had to acknowledge that she would likely be as hurt as he would be.

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound>

Ranma looked up from the desk that sat against the wall of his quarters towards his door. He grabbed his jacket and began to put it on as he stood and walked towards the doorway.

"Come in."

The doors slid open, and Ukyo stepped in, wearing civilian clothes, a half grin on her face.

“Ukyo,” Ranma tried to ask, but more stated, as he stopped mid zip of his jacket. Ukyo nodded a couple of times and moved in a bit more, allowing the doors to Ranma's quarters to close behind her.

“Do you have a minute?” she asked. Ranma nodded and motioned for the couch that sat next to the large, forward looking observation windows. The pair walked over to them and sat down, Ranma making sure to seat himself out of any kind of hidden spatula range.

“I kind of wanted to apologize for the way I acted yesterday,” Ukyo said, her eyes moving between Ranma and the orange gas cloud out the windows. “I guess I was being kind of a jackass.”

Ranma paused for a second then shrugged slightly. “I'm not really the one you need to apologize too.”

Ukyo bit on her lower lip. “I will speak to her when I return.”

Ranma smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “She's had nothing but wonderful things to say about your staff, which is really a testament to your hard work.”

Ukyo blushed slightly and turned away as she replied. “Well, she's only been my ship for about a year, so I can't take full credit.”

Ranma nodded in understanding. “Do you want something to drink?” he asked, starting to stand. Ukyo reached over and grabbed his arm, stopping Ranma from standing. He looked down at her as moisture began to form in her eyes. “What's wrong?” he asked.

“I just don't understand,” she softly replied as Ranma sat back down. “Why her?”

Ranma sighed. He did not want to have this conversation. Not now and certainly not with her.

“I love her,” he answered.

“I love you,” Ukyo countered.

Ranma gritted his teeth. Despite the initial lies, Shampoo was seemingly able to take a blunt 'truth torpedo'. Ukyo on the other hand would likely not handle that as well and would likely need to be dealt with more delicately.

“Ukyo-” Ranma corrected himself, “Ucchan, you have been my friend for many, many years and I do love you.” Ranma inhaled deeply before continuing. “Just not like I love Akane.”

Ukyo's hand slid down Ranma's sleeve as he continued.

“I love you like my friend, like my sister. Akane is my wife, my-” Ranma allowed a small smile to slide across his face as he finished, “soul mate.”

Ukyo's hand slid all the way off Ranma and onto his couch cushion. She looked at it for a moment before looking up at him. “I guess I'm just supposed to like that?”

Ranma shook his head. “No,” he answered, “but you have to accept it.”

Ukyo simply sat in silence.

“I am still your friend,” Ranma offered.

"I don't see how that is possible," Ukyo countered.

"Shampoo and I are very good friends and work very well together," Ranma explained.

Ukyo looked to Ranma and shrugged. "I want to be your friend, Ranma-" she paused, looked at him intently, then continued, "Ranma, but it will take me some time."

"Why now?" Ranma asked. "You didn't seem this upset when you first found out."

Ukyo shrugged, turning to look out the window. "I guess it was the whole nepotism thing that really made me realize that you and she were serious."

"Nepotism?" Ranma asked.

Ukyo nodded. "Sending Akane over to manage triage when there were likely plenty of other officers more qualified."

"Your CMO was needed-"

"Not just from my ship," Ukyo interrupted. "There's like thirty ships out there that someone could have come from."

Ranma was beginning to get slightly angry but managed to keep it in check as he continued to argue. "She's plenty qualified. You don't know what this crew has done, what it's gone through over the past three years. So don't you dare judge me, them or my decisions until you've done what we have."

While his tone did not express the anger, his words did. Ukyo looked back to Ranma and nodded. "Sorry," she replied, albeit somewhat half-heartedly.

Before Ranma could speak anymore his communicator began to chirp. "Colonel Lee to Captain Saotome."

"Go," Ranma replied, hitting his comm badge.

"We're meeting for the Marine briefing in five minutes in Conference Room Six, sir."

"Thank you," Ranma said. "I'll be on my way." The captain stood, hit his comm badge and turned to Ukyo. "I have a briefing to attend."

Ukyo stood and nodded. She followed Ranma to the door, where again, she grabbed his sleeve to stop him. He turned to see her moving towards him, her lips pursed. Ranma gently put his arm on Ukyo's shoulder and pushed her backwards slightly.

"I'm not sure if you realize it or not, Ucchan," Ranma said, shaking his head, "but what you said hurt. Friends don't hurt friends." Ranma pulled away from a now shocked Ukyo and moved to opening the door. Ukyo slowly followed him out, the doors almost slamming shut behind her. As Ranma began to walk away, he called back, "Don't forget to see Akane before she comes back."

Ukyo watched Ranma walk down the corridor till he rounded the corner. Ukyo then sighed, turned the opposite direction, and headed towards the turbolift that would take her back to the transporter room.

Ranma plopped into his seat on the bridge. He quickly checked the terminal to his right and confirmed that Akane was back on board. He was hoping she would have returned last night, but she indicated that she wanted to finish up dealing with causality counts and getting the healed back to their proper ships.

He was also pleasantly surprised when she informed him that the Infinity had 'found' spare quarters for her.

Anyway, there would be time to question her about her time over there later. Right now, they had a mission to do.

"Commander Kino," Ranma called, looking up at the viewer. Makoto looked up from her terminal.

"Yes sir?"

"Have you applied those targeting sensor calibrations I sent you?"

"Yes sir," Makoto replied.

Ranma nodded. "Good. I've been here before. Chasing Maquis. I'm somewhat familiar with The Badlands and hopefully that will help us if we need to actually shoot anything."

"Certainly, couldn't hurt," Makoto chuckled.

Ranma nodded and turned to Shampoo. "Ready?" he asked.

Shampoo shook her head. "No."

Ranma smiled. "Me either."

Shampoo inhaled deeply before standing and walking up to the helm. "Ensign," she softly said to Ikuhara, "ahead one-quarter impulse."

The Sisko, already still at red alert, began to move forward towards the edge of The Badlands. Ranma gripped his arm rests as the main viewer began to flicker.

"Once we're all the way in sensors will compensate," Minako said. "They won't be super effective, and we can't see out, but..." she trailed off as the Sisko breached the outer perimeter of the gas clouds.

"If there is anything," Ranma said, "it's likely to be at one of the small planetoids."

Shampoo nodded and instructed Ikuhara to set a course for the closest one. The Badlands were thoroughly mapped, so despite the lackluster scanner resolution, the ship knew exactly which way to go.

"I have a contact," Jansen called out.

"Confirmed," Minako echoed.

"On screen," both Ranma and Shampoo ordered. On the main viewscreen a pair of Jem'Hadar fighters appeared to be patrolling. Ranma stood and turned to Jansen and Makoto's terminal.

"Can they see us?"

"They haven't turned this way," Makoto replied.

Shampoo looked to Ranma. Ranma thought about the situation for a moment before sitting back down. "Hold your course." He turned as much as he could towards the tactical station behind him. "Watch them."

"Aye," all relevant parties replied.

After about thirty minutes of traveling, the Sisko arrived at her first destination. Ranma stood and quickly moved over to Minako's station to watch her begin scanning the planet.

"Well," she said, "there's nothing there now."

"Now?" Ranma asked.

Minako nodded. "There has defiantly been activity, most likely mining."

"What composition?" Shampoo asked.

"A lot of stuff," Minako replied. "But most noteworthy is dutranium."

"Torpedoes," Makoto said.

Ranma sighed. "Okay. Next destination."

The Sisko began to move out of orbit. It did not get far before an alarm went off.

"What is-" Ranma did not get a chance to finish before an enormous explosion rocked the ship.

"STATUS!" Shampoo yelled.

"We hit a mine," Makoto reported.

"ALL STOP!" Ranma ordered.

Ikuhara brought the ship to a stop but not before another alarm went off, followed by another explosion, knocking the crew to the deck.

"Shields holding," Jansen reported.

"Cripes," Ranma grouched, standing and walking too tactical. "We're stuck in a mine field now."

"We can probably detonate any others in our path with the phaser array," Jansen suggested. "Just sweep it in front of us."

Ranma turned to Makoto and Kaii. "What's the likelihood of it detonating any of those gas clouds?"

The pair looked to their terminals and conferenced for a moment before Minako turned to the Captain. "We're not seeing any 'highly' volatile clouds nearby. If we use lower power than normal, we should be fine."

"Should," Shampoo smirked.

Minako shrugged.

Ranma nodded. "Do it."

Jansen made the adjustments to her terminal then fired the forward ventral and dorsal arrays, sweeping them across open space. Multiple explosions lit up the viewscreen in front of the Sisko as mine after mine was detonated.

After Jansen was all but certain she had gotten all of them, she deactivated the phasers and smiled. "Path clear!"

"Good work," Ranma grinned. He turned to Shampoo and Ikuhara. "Resume course. Let's try not to orbit so close as to maybe avoid any more mine fields."

"Aye sir," Ikuhara replied.

"Sir," Makoto called out. "I think we may have attracted some attention. At least eight fighters are inbound to our location."

Ranma nodded and took his seat. "When they are in range, you're weapons free."

Makoto liked the sound of that. "Yes sir."

The eight Jem'Hadar fighters were obliterated by the Sisko shortly after their arrival. That is not to say that the Sisko didn't get smacked around a bit, but this is the Sisko we're talking about here.

"Shields at 92 percent," Usagi reported from the engineering station.

Ranma nodded, more interested in the next planet. He could already tell that this one was going to be more than just an abandoned mining site. Despite being several thousand kilometers away, a facility was visible on the surface.

"Sir, this planet has defensive turrets," Makoto reported.

Shampoo turned to Ranma. "That big facility."

Ranma nodded. "We need to scan it." He quickly turned to Makoto. "Take out their defenses."

"Yes sir."

The Sisko was rocked hard as it moved in to destroy the turrets. They seemed to pack a far greater punch than the fighters did. Despite their best efforts though, the Sisko managed to destroy all three of them while only taking minor damage.

"Shields at 78 percent," Usagi reported.

"Commander?" Ranma asked, looking towards Minako.

"The building is pretty heavily shielded," she complained. "Not by shields, but just by environmental crap. It's taking me a minute to compensate."

Ranma nodded and watched the viewer.

"There appears to be another facility in orbit on the other side of the planet as well," Kaii added.

Shampoo walked back to her seat and sat down. She leaned into Ranma. "Facility look familiar," she whispered.

Ranma nodded. "Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

"Oh my God," Minako gasped.

"What?" everyone asked.

"Scanning about 800,000 bio signs in that facility. Presumably Jem'Hadar."

"You were right, Captain," Makoto smirked. "It is a Jem'Hadar daycare."

Ranma did not laugh. He looked to Shampoo who had the same solemn expression on her face. He quickly turned to Kaii. "Can we contact Starfleet?"

"No," Kaii answered.

"Set a course for the perimeter of The Badlands then," Ranma ordered.

"Ranma," Shampoo interrupted. "If Jem'Hadar come by and see defenses gone, they will fortify this facility."

Makoto and Jansen nodded in agreement. "Sir, they told us to take out targets of opportunity," Makoto said.

Ranma sighed. "I am not sure if I am comfortable killing 800,000 people."

"They not breeding them in secret with huge defense force to work as Dabo girls," Shampoo said. "They threat."

Ranma bit his lip as the entire bridge crew waited for his order.

"You're right," Ranma acknowledged. "Still though, I can't do it." He turned to Kaii. "Send Lt. Devall out in Nighthawk to request instructions from Starfleet and tell him to make it snappy."

"Yes sir," Kaii replied.

Ranma turned to Shampoo. "Take us to the orbital facility."

Shampoo nodded and moved towards the helm. Ranma slumped down in his chair, fully aware that the entire bridge crew now believed he just made the biggest mistake of his career.

The Sisko moved around the planet quickly as Nighthawk undocked and attempted to cloak. The cloak was semi-effective, phasing the ship in and out, keeping JC partially obscured, but also causing a wake in the gases as he headed full speed towards the perimeter of the cloud.

The orbital facility was also defended by defense turrets; however these were not as strong and were not as damaging to the Sisko as the others. Once they were destroyed, Minako began her scans.

"Shampoo know what this facility is," Shampoo stated.

Ranma nodded, also knowing before Minako even reported it.

"Ketracel White."

Ranma turned to Makoto and nodded. Shampoo leaned into Ranma again. "Now you just kill them slowly."

Ranma turned to Shampoo but said nothing as Makoto unleashed a fury of torpedoes and phasers on the station. It lasted two volleys before exploding. The explosion was brilliant and bright, however the Sisko crew did not think to check for gas clouds before attacking.

The explosion set off a small chain reaction which ended up detonating a gas cloud near the Sisko, sending it spinning. The inertial dampeners kicked in, but not enough to keep the bridge crew from going flying.

Ikuhara managed to climb back into his seat and regain control of the ship. Ranma ran to help Shampoo up as Kaii checked on Minako who had went flipping over the operations console.

"DAMAGE REPORT!" Ranma yelled as he helped Shampoo to her feet.

Usagi slowly crawled to her seat and began to push some buttons. "Wow, that messed us up pretty bad, Captain."

"How bad?" Ranma asked.

"Warp drive fail-safes kicked in, so warp is offline. Impulse got knocked offline. Weapons and shields are offline. Communications are offline."

"Multiple casualty reports," Minako reported. "Doesn't appear to be any fatalities."

Ranma grumbled. "We need shields and weapons and impulse back online as soon as possible."

"Aye," Usagi replied.

Ranma scowled. "I hate The Badlands."

Ranma eyed the clock above the main viewscreen. Nearly twenty minutes had passed with nary a word spoken on the bridge. He did not care for the silence coming from the engineering station, but that was countered with the pleasure he felt from the silence coming from tactical as that meant they had not yet been discovered.

"Status?" he asked Usagi.

Usagi turned around, a mildly positive look on her face. "Well, the regenerative shielding is going to take some time to get back online, but we have standard shielding back to 38 percent."

Ranma sighed. "Well, that's better than nothing."

Usagi nodded. "The engines were just fail-safed, so they are restarting and will be up shortly. Weapons should be back online shortly as well."

"Good work," Ranma acknowledged.

Usagi smiled and turned back to her station. Kaii called out to Ranma from his station. "Captain, Lt. Devall is hailing us, requesting permission to dock."

"By all means," Ranma nodded. "Get him up here as soon as he in on board."

"Aye," Kaii replied.

Shampoo turned to Ranma and smiled. "I know what he going to say."

Ranma turned to Shampoo and gave her a rather frustrated look. "I do too," he admitted. "I just needed it to not be my order."

Shampoo's smile faded a bit as she looked to Ranma somewhat softly. "Ranma okay?"

Ranma shrugged. "I know they are our enemy. Just killing so many of them, at once, from orbit..." He paused, unsure himself of why he had any hesitation. "It just doesn't seem 'right'."

Shampoo continued to look at Ranma for a moment before taking his hand. "Shampoo can issue order."

Ranma turned to her. "No," he said quietly. "It's my job and my duty to protect the Federation." He patted the top of her hand as the rear turbolift opened and JC came walking out, panting. Ranma stood, still looking towards Shampoo. "Maybe I am just over thinking things and taking the idea of a Jem'Hadar daycare too literally."

Shampoo chuckled as JC sped walked down to Ranma. "Captain," he gasped.

"Lieutenant," Ranma smiled. "I'm sorry if my instructions implied that you needed to run."

JC turned to Kaii and growled. "He said you said to run as fast as I could!"

Kaii turned to hide his laughter. Ranma chuckled to himself as JC turned back to Ranma. "No matter," JC said, his breath coming back to him. "I contacted Admiral Saotome and he said..." JC paused for a moment. "He said you were to destroy the facility and any other breeding facilities you were to come across."

"Why the pause?" Ranma asked.

"Well," JC turned away slightly, "he worded it differently."

Ranma grumbled. "What were his exact words?"

JC stayed silent.

"Lieutenant."

"Promise you will acknowledge I am only the messenger?"

Ranma nodded.

"Quote, 'tell that idiot of course he's to destroy any breeding facilities', unquote."

Ranma narrowed his gaze as Shampoo turned away from the pair to hide her laughter. JC, afraid the Captain was about to hit him looked towards the turbolift. "Sir, I should get to engineering."

Ranma nodded.

JC scurried off. Ranma turned to Shampoo. "Quiet you," he ordered. Shampoo nodded and quickly moved over to the helm station. "How are weapons?" Ranma asked.

"Operational," Makoto replied.

"Take us to the facility then," Ranma ordered.

"Sir, there are two Jem'Hadar warships on scan," Makoto reported.

Minako concurred. "They don't appear to see us and look to be headed towards the fourth planet."

Ranma nodded as the ship moved back towards the other side of the planet.

"Reviewing logs," Minako continued, "it appears that is the direction that the previous group of fighters came from as well."

"You think there might be something near the fourth planet?" Ranma asked.

"Potentially," Minako replied. "Still too much interference to tell from here though."

"We in position," Shampoo reported.

Ranma looked at the facility on the screen. It was amazing, his hesitation. Several years ago, he would have relished this kind of opportunity. To kill nearly a million Jem'Hadar soldiers in a single assault would have struck a massive blow to the Dominion.

For some reason now though it almost felt like he was abetting genocide. However, he knew what those Jem'Hadar were being bred for, and if he didn't do this potentially millions of Federation citizens would die.

"Target the facility and fire," Ranma ordered. "Don't stop until there is nothing left."

"Aye," Jansen replied locking the Sisko's weapons then unleashing volley after volley of torpedoes. It took about five full volleys for Jansen to be satisfied. She looked over to Minako.

"Hard to tell," Minako reported, "but scanning maybe 10-15 thousand bio signs now. Pretty weak, likely buried under the rubble."

Ranma looked at the smoldering remains of the facility. 'It's a cold universe,' he thought to himself. "Set a course to the third planet," he ordered.

Shampoo nodded and had Ikuhara pull the ship out of its high orbit and move it in the direction of the third planetoid sitting the orange and yellow plasma clouds of The Badlands.

With planet three being uneventful, the Sisko began its trip towards planet four. Her shields were still far lower than Ranma would have liked, only having now been repaired to 60 percent, but better than they were. As well, the ship was stuck at a maximum speed of one-half impulse, meaning it would take them at least thirty minutes to get to the rest of the fleet if things went bad.

None the less, Ranma and the rest of the senior staff decided that they needed to continue deeper as they understood there would not be a massive breeding facility if there were not other, bigger facilities further in.

"There are multiple contacts ahead," Minako reported.

Makoto looked to her terminal which began to chirp at her. "Confirm, and we have been spotted by at least two of them."

Ranma nodded. He watched the view screen as two Jem'Hadar warships turned and moved to intercept the Sisko.

"Defensive pattern gamma," Shampoo ordered as Ranma turned to Minako.

"How many contacts?"

"Hard to tell for certain," she replied. "I think I am seeing about thirty ships, but not all of them have power signatures."

The Sisko shook as the warships engaged the Sisko. Jansen and Makoto began doing their thing, returning fire on the Jem'Hadar ships.

"Divert power from warp drive to the shields," Ranma instructed Usagi.

"Aye," she replied as the ship shook again.

"At least eight more ships inbound," Minako reported as one of the warships exploded.

"Shields at 62 percent and holding," Makoto said.

The Sisko ducked and weaved as she fought off the onslaught from the remaining warships. One by one, each of them exploded but not before taking down a bit more of the Sisko's shielding.

"Shields at ten percent!" Usagi called out.

Ranma looked to the last Jem'Hadar warship as a quantum torpedo ripped through its hull, causing it to split in half before exploding, lightly rocking the Sisko. He turned to Minako. "Anymore?"

"I still have what I think are a couple dozen ships on scan," she answered. "But as I said before, they don't appear to have any power signature."

"We can't do that again with shield this low," Shampoo said to Ranma.

Ranma nodded and turned to Usagi. "How long before you can get our shields back up to at least 50 percent?"

Usagi blinked. "Not sure. We're working on diverting relays and restoring the regenerative-"

"Don't worry about the regenerative shielding," Ranma ordered. "Just get our standard shielding up as soon as possible." Usagi nodded as Ranma turned to Shampoo. "We should probably move away from this debris in case someone stumbles by."

Shampoo nodded and moved towards the helm.

“Captain,” Minako called, “there is a spot about sixty-million kilometers from here which is pretty gassy and hidden, but where I think I might be able to get a better scan on where those ships are.”

Ranma looked to the helm station. “Then that is where we shall go.”

Shampoo had Ikuhara sail the mighty ship into the swirling gas cloud and bring it to a stop. Ranma eyed the gas suspiciously while Makoto began to chuckle.

“Nice hiding spot,” she grinned to her friend. “A minor static discharge is going to blow us right out of The Badlands.”

“Most of us,” Jansen murmured.

Minako just rolled her eyes. “It's not **that** volatile.”

Shampoo looked worriedly at the screen, as did Ikuhara. Ranma turned to Minako, deciding to trust her theory on the non-blowing-up-ness of the cloud as he was more interested in the potential location of any Jem'Hadar ships.

“Any ships on scan?”

Minako nodded. “Yes sir, several. I am getting a better scan and they appear to be either offline or derelict as they are not powered.”

Ranma thought about this for a moment. “Is there any sign of any defenses around them?”

Minako began to run some more scans, as did Makoto. Both officers sighed as they saw their displays.

“Yes,” Minako reported. “Seeing several turrets.”

“I'm also seeing what looks to potentially be a massive reactor core of some type.”

Shampoo looked up to Ranma who was storming back to his seat. “Shipyard?” she asked.

Ranma nodded. “I can't think of anything else it could be.” Without turning around, Ranma began to address Kaii. “Lt. Kaii, please prepare a communications probe. We're going to send it out of The Badlands to inform Starfleet of the situation.”

“Aye,” he replied.

“We should move out of the cloud before launching it,” Minako cautioned.

“You said it wasn't volatile,” Makoto smirked.

“I said it wasn't *THAT* volatile,” Minako clarified.

Ranma chuckled at the thought of surviving a massive Jem'Hadar onslaught only to be killed because of the propulsion system of an otherwise harmless probe. One that he launched no less.

“Probe ready,” Kaii reported as the Sisko drifted out of the cloud.

“Send them our current status and advise them we're going in for closer scans and will eliminate the target if possible,” Ranma said.

“Aye,” Kaii answered, typing up a message. Ranma turned to the helm station after looking at the small planet on the viewer for a few seconds.

“Take us over there,” he ordered.

Ikuhara nodded and began to pilot the ship towards what was believed to be a Jem'Hadar shipyard as Kaii fired off the probe out of the rear torpedo launcher, towards the edge of The Badlands.

Ranma watched the planet start to fill up most of the view screen. He did not adjust his gaze as Usagi called out to him.

“Sir, we have shields back to 65 percent. Best we can do till we get some of the damaged generators fixed.”

Ranma nodded. “Good work, Commander.”

Shampoo looked to Ranma who was standing behind her. “65 percent enough?”

Ranma shrugged. “If it's the best we have, it's the best we have.”

Shampoo eyed Ranma intently for a few seconds. There was certainly something different about his demeanor. Something that seemed to have changed over the past few hours, but she was not sure what or why, nor whether it was good or bad. She did know, however, that Ranma was different.

Ranma did not notice her stare. His tunnel vision had him fixated on the view screen. Slowly the planet began to pass underneath them and the Sisko crew got their first glimpse of the shipyard facility.

None of them liked what they saw.

It was a massive ship making factory, complete with dry dock that seemed even bigger than the largest facility orbiting Earth. Surrounding it were several small disruptor batteries, but that is not what bothered the bridge crew the most.

In the center-most dock was a nearly complete sister to Blackout.

“The batteries are targeting us,” Makoto reported.

“Make them go away,” Ranma replied, turning to Minako. “How well can you scan that facility?”

Minako, doing her best to ignore the shaking of the ship, began to run a few computations. “I can get a pretty through scan, but it seems that the facility is armored so penetrating too deep is difficult.”

An alarm began to sound after a rather nasty impact. Ranma spun around, in the process noticing that the port nacelle on the master situation display was blinking red.

“Report!” he ordered.

“Port nacelle seems to be venting plasma!” Usagi whimpered.

“Are shields down?” Ranma asked.

“No,” Makoto replied, “but one of those fucking disruptor cannons ignited some of that goddamned gas.”

Ranma scowled. "How serious is this?"

Usagi quickly read over the report she was getting. "They've managed to contain the leak, but JC thinks we may need to go outside to repair it." Usagi sighed. "Regardless, that nacelle is useless right now."

Ranma sighed. "Which means no warp at all."

Usagi nodded.

"All shipyard defenses are down," Makoto reported.

"Reinforcement?" Shampoo asked.

Both Minako and Makoto shook their heads. "Doesn't look like it," Minako replied.

Ranma looked to the giant facility on the main viewer before turning to Makoto, then Minako. "What kind of damage do you think we'd take if we fired a few volleys at that thing?"

Minako looked to Makoto before answering. "Quite honestly sir, none. Mainly because our weapons would bounce right off it."

Ranma frowned at his operations officer as she continued. "The armoring seems to be made of a bi-hydron titanium poly-alloy that based on these readings was created just for the Federation."

"The Infinity?" Ranma asked.

Makoto shook her head. "Maybe enough 'broadsides' from her would blow off part of the station." She paused for a second before continuing. "If we are going to destroy it, we need to do it from inside."

Ranma looked to Makoto for further explanation.

"Cause a feedback in the reactor core. Essentially activate the station's self-destruct without giving them away to deactivate it. As well, all those ships are likely getting power from the station, since they are generating none, so they will all be destroyed as well."

"Can we beam through the armor?" Ranma asked.

Minako shook her head.

"But the station isn't shielded," Jansen piped up. "Also, the ships aren't armored, only the station is."

Ranma turned and looked to the station. His eyes moved up and down the giant purple reactor core that sat in the middle of the station. They then moved to the second 'Blackout' before moving back to Makoto. He nodded and motioned for her to follow him.

"Shampoo, you have the bridge." Ranma and Makoto stepped into the turbolift as Shampoo acknowledged Ranma's instruction. "NSO Operations – Deck A," Ranma instructed the lift.

CHAPTER FIVE - NO WAY OUT

The seemingly constant rattling – no – shaking of the ship was not what Kio was hoping for. She and her team had only slept a few hours and she was hoping to get at least an hour or so nap in before they ended up doing more drills or ended up being deployed.

However, every time she felt herself start to drift off, she was either jarred awake by the ship shaking or lurching, or worse yet, thrown clear off her bed and onto the deck plating.

As well, after the Sisko was sent spinning for whatever reason, the items on her desk all went flying, despite being 'secured' by what were proving to be very weak magnets.

There seemed to be some more combat outside, but right now that did not concern her. She was bound and determined to get some sleep. Short an 'abandon ship' order, nothing was going to pull her from her bed.

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound>

“Fucking...” she mumbled, looking across the room and towards the small door.

She slowly slid her legs off her bed and onto the deck. “I swear, Tony,” she quietly mumbled to herself as she stood. “Come in,” she called louder.

Kio blinked when the door opened and rather than Sgt. Schaefer standing in the doorway, it was Rei.

“Commander?” Kio asked, confused.

Rei nodded. “May I come in?”

Kio quickly nodded and began to try and pull the top of her jumpsuit over the gray tank top she was wearing.

“Commander,” Kio spoke as she fought with her sleeves that had somehow gotten twisted and knotted into each other. “I know what you are likely thinking, and I am sorry. I just thought that because we had been drilling for so many hours straight that we should rest for a little bit.”

“It's...” Rei tried to speak but Kio continued as she spun around a bit, the act somewhat amusing Rei.

“I tried to contact you for permission, but you were with Alpha team and I did not want to disturb you, so I contacted Lt. Dowis who said it was likely a good idea and you would probably agree with my assessment. I'm sorry for not clearing it-”

Rei grabbed a hold of Kio, helping her with her sleeve.

“Thank you,” Kio nodded. “As I was saying, I am sorry-”

“Lieutenant,” Rei interjected, “if you wouldn't mind being quiet for just a moment.”

Kio stopped speaking and looked up at Rei while zipping up the front of her jumpsuit.

"It's fine," Rei nodded. "It would be quite detrimental for you guys to go into a mission tired."

Kio nodded.

"Please, sit down," Rei instructed Kio. Kio did as she was asked and had a seat on the edge of her bed. Rei walked around Kio's quarters a bit. "Didn't you get larger quarters when you were promoted?"

"They offered me larger quarters, yes," Kio answered.

"You declined them?"

Kio nodded. "I'm comfortable here." She paused a bit before a small smile crossed her lips. "I know they aren't the SAME quarters, but these are the quarters I had when I joined the Sisko and the team. I guess by not accepting larger quarters I make sure I don't forget who I am and where I came from."

Rei smiled as well. She looked to some of the items on her desk. "Is this your husband?"

Kio nodded as Rei picked up a picture of Kio and a young man, both dressed in the green uniform of the Starfleet LDF. "Yes, ma'am."

"I'm sorry if I am being too personal," Rei said, setting the picture down.

"No, it's fine," Kio said.

"But?"

Kio did not reply.

"It's okay."

"I'm not going to pretend this isn't a little strange."

Rei chuckled a bit. She looked to the small clear box that held Sgt. Michael Simpson's rank insignia in it before taking the chair from Kio's desk and rolling it over to the bed, across from Kio.

"Nothing leaves this room, regardless of who says it, okay?"

Kio nods back slowly, not sure where this is going.

"You are a brat," Rei states. "You're disrespectful, you're arrogant, you're emotional and you're whiny."

Kio scowled and opened her mouth to speak. However, Rei put her finger to her mouth. "No, no. Still my turn."

Kio closed her mouth and allowed Rei to finish.

"I remember what you told me about a year ago. About having a chip on my shoulder. I think you're right. And I think I was overcompensating, and I don't know why. Despite all those things I said, you are, above all else, one hell of a fine soldier, one hell of a leader and one hell of a Starfleet officer."

Rei leaned back a bit. "Lieuten- Kio, I will gladly go into a fight without any kind of hesitation mainly because I know I have you and your team watching my ass."

Rei looked out Kio's single window. "I had no right to speak to you the way I did regarding your reaction to Sgt. Simpson's death. And I know a year later is not the time to apologize for it, but here it is." She turned to Kio.

"I'm sorry."

Kio blinked a couple of times. "Apology accepted," were the only words she could think of saying. Kio blinked a couple more times trying to think of something else to say but was still so stunned at Rei's sudden peace offering that she was rendered speechless.

Rei grinned, understanding the position Kio was in, and continued herself. "Mamoru, my husband, his death really got to me. I know you, from all I have read, considered yourself, mistakenly I might add, responsible for your husband's death. I literally pulled the trigger, killing mine."

"I didn't see that," Kio acknowledged.

"You couldn't have," Rei sighed. "He was a rouge Section 31 operative. All the logs and files have been sealed up. Just telling you this could get me thrown in prison."

"I've gotten good at keeping secrets," Kio said.

Rei smiled. "We all deal with death differently. I was pretty ashamed of myself with how I did." Rei looked to Kio softly. "I guess when I thought you might be doing the same thing I did I would deal with it in the only way I knew how. Yell at you till you did differently."

Kio shrugged. "It wasn't totally ineffective."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I mean from that point on I was in 'well, let's show that bitch what I can do' mode."

Rei laughed.

"Though Anthony's method was a bit more effective."

Rei raised an eyebrow. Kio feverishly shook her head. "No, no."

"Really? Nothing?"

"Commander."

"I told you, nothing leaves this room."

Kio sighed. "Anthony and I are close."

Rei scoffed. "Duh."

Kio rolled her eyes. "It's a bit more complicated now that I am an officer. As well, you already pointed out how emotional and whiny I am. I don't think it would make for good team cohesion if we were to have a relationship and it were to turn bad or something worse were to happen."

Rei nodded in understanding. "I can move him to another team for you."

"Please don't," Kio smiled.

Rei smiled, but then sighed quietly. "A shame to let something like that slip away."

A sly, deliberate grin crossed Kio's face. "I never implied that."

Rei simply smiled in response. There was some silence for a few seconds before Rei resumed speaking.

"How is Corporal Kagurazaka?"

"He's a fine soldier and fits well into our unit. In fact, when we are done here I am going to send a recommendation to the LDF to have him promoted."

"Ah, yeah. You can do that now, can't you?"

Kio pointed to the dull gray bar sown onto her collar. "This thing is worth something."

"Saotome to Hino," Rei's communicator chirped.

"Go ahead."

"I need you to meet me in your office ASAP."

"On my way," Rei replied, standing.

Kio sighed, looking at her pillow wistfully.

"Try and get some sleep. I will see if this is something we can do with just my team. If not, I will call you."

Kio nodded as Rei walked towards the door. She stopped just prior to it opening. "Lieutenant," she called out. Kio turned to her.

"Yes ma'am?"

"I'm not just blowing smoke up your ass. I really do respect you and your skill. I would very much like for you to succeed, not just for my own benefit." She paused a second before continuing. "You have to want to as well, and not just to spite me either," she grinned, turning away, and exiting Kio's quarters.

Kio looked towards the door and watching it for a moment before putting her head down on the pillow and finally drifting off to sleep.

Rei jogged down the corridor of Deck A of the NEO control center. As she rounded the corner, she noticed Ranma, and Makoto standing outside of her office and quickly sped up her pace.

"Sorry, Captain," Rei said, unlocking her office door.

Ranma nodded. "Don't worry, I didn't even think of calling for you till we were almost already here." Ranma smiled as he walked in with Rei and Makoto behind him. "I forget that not everyone spends the whole day in their office."

"Well," Rei half grinned as she moved some PADDs from the couch that was against one of her walls, making room for Ranma and Makoto to sit. "That is the life of an administrator."

Ranma blinked. "Yes, I guess it is."

"I guess if I spent more time in here, it wouldn't be as messy," Rei continued, moving some more PADDs around. "I have a few months of reports I still need to organize and get sent back to Starfleet."

"Sucks to be you," Makoto smirked. "I delegate that task."

Rei shook her head as she sat down at her desk. "So, what's the mission?"

Ranma spoke as Minako passed Rei a new PADD. "We've discovered a Jem'Hadar shipyard."

"Wow," Rei gasped, looking at the sensor data.

Makoto nodded. "It's too heavily armored for the ship to do anything to it. As well we don't think even the extra firepower a ship like the Infinity could bring would be able to actually destroy it, at least not before potentially summoning however many reinforcements there might be still wandering around in The Badlands."

"Is this..." Rei trailed off.

Ranma nodded, knowing exactly what Rei was talking about. "Yes, it's another dreadnaught. We cannot allow it to be completed."

Rei nodded. "What do you have in mind?"

"Overloading the reactor core will essentially cause the station to self-destruct," Makoto explained. "As well, the ships attached to the facility are being fed energy from the facility's core, so they would likely be overloaded and destroyed as well."

"Can we beam in?" Rei asked.

"To the ships, yes."

"Hrm," Rei said, understanding what was being asked of her.

"I understand this is going to be hard," Ranma started.

Rei nodded. "That is an understatement, Captain. However, what needs to be done, needs to be done."

"I can send over the Marines to act as a distraction," Makoto offered. "Perhaps have them board the dreadnaught to cause the Jem'Hadar to believe we're trying to commandeer it. This might make it easier for Rei's group to move towards the reactor core with less resistance."

Ranma looked to Rei who nodded. "Regardless of how stealthy we try and be, we're not familiar with that station. It's all but certain we could end up being bottlenecked somewhere."

Ranma nodded to both Makoto and Rei as he stood. "Plan it out. We need to get this done as quickly as possible. There are still four more planets we need to check."

"Aye," both officers replied.

Ranma turned and left the office. Makoto turned to Rei who was looking over the PADD again.

"Rei?"

Rei's eyes went up to Makoto.

"You're not sure about this."

Rei sighed and set the PADD down. "One hundred. Two hundred. We've done it." Her eyes moved towards the PADD. "Nineteen against several thousand?"

Makoto nodded. "Well, if ANYONE can do it, it's you guys."

Rei smiled slightly. "The problem is if we DO succeed, they'll send us up against a million next time."

Makoto chuckled and moved over to Rei's desk to begin to formulate their plan.

Ranma looked at his ready-room door. It was seemingly mocking him now. Taunting him, teasing him, daring him to come in. Ranma was not in the mood for its games, however and readjusted his gaze to the main viewer.

His quick glance was not lost on Shampoo though. She had grown weary at looking at the gas cloud they were parked in and had turned to talk to Ranma when she noticed him glaring at his office.

"Ranma?"

Ranma turned to her. "Yeah?"

"Why you stare at door?"

"I wasn't."

Shampoo scowled at him.

Ranma sighed. He was not sure if he'd just become a really bad liar – assuming he was ever a really good one – or if Shampoo, as his first officer, was just so in tune with him that she could see right through them.

"Do you think I spend too much time in there?"

"Today?"

"In general."

Shampoo shrugged. "Not really. If nothing else to do, what it matters whether you sit here and stare at stars or sit in there and stare at walls?"

Ranma glowered. "I don't just stare at the walls."

Shampoo raised an eyebrow.

"There is a lot of work I have to do and it's easier to do in there because of my terminal and -" Ranma cut himself off. "Oh, I see what you did there."

Shampoo grinned smugly. "Ranma being weird lately. We need to talk later."

Ranma leaned back and turned back to the view screen. "How weird?"

"Later."

Ranma sighed. She was right. Now was not the right time for this kind of conversation.

"Captain," Jansen called out.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"The Marines are reporting ready, and the NEO teams are stating they will be ready within five minutes."

Ranma nodded. He stood and slowly walked over to the engineering station where Usagi was seated. JC stood behind her, helping her with some of the more stubborn blinking lights.

"Guys," Ranma spoke softly. The pair both turned to their captain. "It is of utmost importance that the transporters stay operational. I want to be able to get all of our guys off those ships and that station on a moment's notice."

Usagi nodded. JC bit his lip a bit. "Yes sir. However, when the NEO teams enter the armored portion of the facility, there is no way at all to beam them out."

"Not even with their transport enhancers?"

JC shook his head. "All the transport enhancers in the world won't do them any good if the ships targeting array cannot get a lock on them."

Ranma sighed. "Are they aware of this fact?"

JC nodded. "I informed Commander Hino."

Ranma turned and motioned for Minako to come over to where they were. Once she had joined the trio Ranma looked to her. "Is there ANYTHING at all we can do to penetrate that armor with our sensors?"

Minako thought for a moment. "Once we get over there, I can try some more 'aggressive' tactics. I didn't want to make it too obvious we were out here, so I haven't as of yet."

Ranma nodded. "Good thinking."

"I really don't want to be a Debbie Downer," JC said, drawing a disapproving look from both Minako and Usagi, "but based on what I have seen so far, the Jem'Hadar designed the facility to be specifically anti-Federation."

"It doesn't mean we shouldn't try," Minako countered.

"I didn't say we shouldn't," JC replied, his tone becoming more defensive. "I'm just saying that we should work with the assumption that once our forces enter the main facility, they will be stuck there."

"What happens when they overload the reactor?!" Usagi asked.

"It's not going to instantly explode," JC explained. "A reactor that size will take several minutes to go critical. Worst case scenario they flee in lifeboats and we beam those aboard."

Ranma shook his head. "You obviously didn't get the pleasure of fighting the Jem'Hadar, did you, Lieutenant?"

JC shook his head.

"Yeah, they don't install lifeboats on their ships, except for one, designated for any Founder who happens to be with them."

JC blinked.

Ranma sighed and turned to Minako. "Do what you can." He turned to JC and Usagi. "Keep the transporters online. I'm going to work under a less gloomy outcome."

"Yes sir," all three officers replied.

Ranma walked back to his chair. Usagi looked to JC. "Are they going to die?"

JC turned to the blinking lights, refusing to answer.

"Captain, NEO teams report ready," Jansen called out. Shampoo looked to Ranma and started to stand but was stopped by Ranma who was already out of his seat. He walked up to the helm and patted Ikuhara on the shoulder.

"Ensign, take us to transporter range of..." Ranma paused, "...Blackout Two."

"Clever," Shampoo smirked.

Ranma smiled slightly as the ship began to move forward, smoothly. He looked down at Ikuhara. "You're too good at this."

"Miss Lt. Hibiki?" Ikuhara asked.

Ranma shrugged.

Once in range, Ikuhara slammed the ship to a halt, causing Ranma to tumble slightly, bumping into Ikuhara.

"I'm having you promoted," Ranma whispered.

Ikuhara smiled smugly as the rest of the bridge crew scowled.

"WHERE IS CAPTAIN HIBIKI?" Colonel Lee yelled as he stood back up.

“HERE SIR!”

“Okay then. Just making sure you didn't abandon us and go back to helm duty.”

The room of Marines laughed. Ryouga blushed slightly as he chuckled. A year ago, people openly mocking his piloting skills would have set him off in a fit of rage. However, having now worked with these guys for a year, he had gotten to know them, and they'd gotten to know him. He had formed a bond with them and knew that the joke, instigated by his commanding officer was all in fun, with no malice intended and that while they were laughing 'at him', he knew it was not derisive.

They had seen what he was capable of. They had seen what he was willing to do for them. They had seen what he was willing to do for his ship. What he was willing to do for the Federation. Ryouga was now part of a group. He was a Starfleet Marine.

And now this group was about to beam aboard a partially constructed Jem'Hadar dreadnaught and act as a distraction. They had no clue how many Jem'Hadar would throw themselves at the group, nor did they know if any of them would make it out alive.

All they knew is that they had to keep the Jem'Hadar busy until the NEO teams could get down to the reactor core and overload it so that the shipyard would explode.

It almost seemed as if they were being used as 'cannon fodder', but of course he knew that was not true. They were serving a tactical purpose, whereas cannon fodder is just throwing man after man after an enemy without any clear purpose other than to eventually break down their lines.

Ryouga sighed. He was tired of waiting and his backpack was getting heavy. It contained two oxygen tanks, in case the Jem'Hadar decided to cut off life support. They were told the interior decks, where they would be beaming to, were fully constructed, so there would not be any worries about decompression, so they were not in environmental suits, which he was happy about.

Fighting was hard. Fighting when your mobility was restricted was much, much harder.

“PREPARE FOR TRANSPORT!” Lee yelled.

Ryouga grabbed his rifle, powered it up and set it to kill just before the Sisko's transporter beam grabbed him.

Kio looked over her gear one last time before placing her projectile handgun in its holster on her left thigh, her modified type two phaser on her right thigh, strapping a second hybrid rifle to her back, and double checking the power cell on the one she would be holding when she beamed over.

“The Marines have transported,” Rei reported.

Kio upped the setting on her rifle and moved onto the second transporter pad where Anthony, Kagurazaka, Xiang and Yayo were staged.

“You guys ready?” Kio asked.

“No,” Anthony whimpered.

Kio smiled. "Come on now. We've fought the Jem'Hadar before."

Anthony nodded. "Yes, but there were like 20,000 of us."

"Lt. Yuki is as fearsome as 20,000 Federation soldiers," Xiang piped up. "So, I am sure we'll be fine."

"Thank you, Corporal."

Anthony simply rolled his eyes.

"Kio, you've got your plan of attack ready?" Rei called.

"Yes ma'am."

"'Kio'?" Anthony whispered.

"We'll meet you in main reactor control," she continued, ignoring Anthony.

"Great. And remember, Charlie and Delta are going to be blowing things up as further diversionary tactics, so try and stay clear of them. We don't need any friendly-fire incidents."

"Seriously, 'Kio'?" Anthony again asked.

"No worries, I'm not going to survive assaulting a Jem'Hadar station only to be blown up by my own shipmates."

Both Kio and Rei laughed, causing all of Bravo team to stare wide-eyed at Kio.

"What?" She asked.

"When we get back, we need to talk," Anthony stated.

"The Marines have engaged the Jem'Hadar," Rei reported. "We'll be beaming in momentarily."

Kio continued to look forward despite Anthony's gaze. "Uh... Sarge..." Kagurazaka began, poking the still shocked Anthony slightly, before Rei began to yell.

"WE'RE MOVING NOW!"

Kio gritted her teeth. Despite the fact that she had great confidence in her team, as the blue glow of the transporter grabbed her a thought pushed through her head that this would be the last time she saw the inside of the U.S.S. Benjamin Sisko.

The Marines arrival on Blackout Two was met with alarm klaxons and a male computer voice calling out what was likely the Jem'Hadar version of 'intruder alert'.

"AIR LOCK!" the lead Marine called. The Marines began to advance. They met light resistance on the short trek from where they materialized to where the ship was attached to the station. Any Jem'Hadar that did show up were quickly killed by the advancing Starfleet forces.

It was not long before that changed, however. More and more Jem'Hadar began to stream on board. The Marines held the upper hand though, firmly in defensive positions, blasting down the genetically engineered soldiers as quickly as they arrived.

After about the thirtieth Jem'Hadar he had personally shot and killed, Ryouga realized he was getting a very descriptive lesson in what 'cannon-fodder' was.

Ranma looked to Blackout Two. His mind began to churn a bit more after examining the display of the ship.

"It looks like it might actually have the dampening weapon installed on it," Ranma pointed out.

"Shampoo no want to think about that."

Ranma nodded but continued. "I think if it were actually 'usable', it would be in use all the time, don't you? To hide the whole space dock?"

Shampoo pondered this. "Make sense."

He turned to first Minako, then to JC. "How space worthy is that ship?"

Minako ran some scans. "It has a warp core..."

JC looked at Minako's scans from his terminal. "I certainly wouldn't want to move it very fast."

"If we stole it, could we get it into Starfleet's possession?"

Shampoo looked to Ranma.

JC looked to the scans again. "Assuming that the basic EPS junctions that control spaceflight are intact, it looks like it has enough structural integrity to hold warp two."

"Long time to Earth." Shampoo pointed out.

"It doesn't need to go to Earth," Ranma countered. "Just out of and away from here."

"I am sure Starfleet would love to get a hold of that dampening device," Makoto offered.

Ranma looked to Shampoo, who nodded. "Opportunity."

Ranma turned to Makoto. "Inform the Marines that, if at all possible, they are to keep possession of that ship."

"Aye."

"Contacts," Minako reported. "Twenty Jem'Hadar fighters inbound."

"Fire at will," Ranma ordered.

The Sisko began to fire at the fighters. However, she did not receive any return fire.

"SIR!" Makoto called out. "They're firing on Blackout!"

“STOP THEM!”

“I'm trying...” Makoto replied.

It took her a minute, but Makoto and Jansen finally got all of the Jem'Hadar fighters either destroyed or to retreat. Ranma looked worriedly at the viewer. “What is the status of the Marines?”

Makoto listened to some comm chatter coming at her. “They took some injuries, mostly from the fighters assault. A few of them are beaming back, but they seem to be okay and are maintaining control.”

Ranma sighed an audible sigh of relief. “Ensign,” he began to order, turning towards the helm. “Put us in a better position to defend that ship.”

“Yes sir,” Ikuhara answered.

Ranma turned to Shampoo. “Plan B?”

Shampoo looked to the ship. “If they come back with too many, maybe we have Marines bring them on to ship, and let Jem'Hadar kill themselves?”

Ranma grimaced. He really wanted to deliver that beast to Starfleet. However, he didn't want to lose his over half his crew in the process, which is exactly what would happen if the Jem'Hadar managed to destroy the ship with the Marines on board.

“Set up that contingency.”

Shampoo nodded and scurried up to tactical.

Kio pulled the body of the Jem'Hadar soldier, or engineer or whatever this creature's job was before she shot him in the back of the head was, into a crevice in the ship they had transported into.

The group slowly moved down the corridor towards the airlock that connected the disabled warship to the drydock. None of them were pleased with the fact that once inside the facility they would be completely cut off from the Sisko, but they understood that sometimes those were the bumps in the road life gave you.

They ran into a few more guards at the airlock and quickly dispatched them. While they had not gotten far, they had noticed resistance had been light so far. As well, the internal sensors on this ship were apparently disabled as there was no alert sounded when they beamed aboard, giving Kio some hope that their luck was improving.

Kio looked left down the hallway, then right.

“Which way?” Anthony asked.

Kio sighed. “Fuck if I know.”

“Lieutenant, incoming,” Kagurazaka reported, reading a blob of bio-signs on his tricorder. Kio pushed her group back into the ship, ready to engage them, however the ten Jem'Hadar soldiers simply ran past the air lock, full speed towards what Bravo team assumed was the dreadnaught.

“Well,” Xiang reported, “Commander Hino's team beamed into a ship on the opposite side of the facility and Charlie and Delta are too the right.”

Kio nodded. “I guess we're going left then.”

“But they went left,” Anthony complained.

Kio shook her head, patted Anthony on the head and began to move her team out. The group ran down the corridor, stopping whenever they could find cover, occasionally hiding from a group of Jem'Hadar who were running to presumably join the ever-growing pile of deceased Jem'Hadar at the entrance to Blackout II.

“A turboshaft,” Anthony noted as they arrived at a set of doors. Xiang nodded as an explosion rocked the station.

“Oh, I guess Charlie and Delta are letting them know they are there,” Yayo smirked.

Kio nodded. “Yeah, but now there might be more coming this way.”

Xiang nodded and smiled as he got the panel off the door control. He released the hydraulics on the door, forcing it open. Kio stuck her head in, looking at the turbolift car a few decks above them.

Xiang quick slid around, popped open another control panel on the inside of the shaft and after a few seconds of rigging nodded. “The lift is inoperable.”

Kio smiled, pulled out some rappelling gear from her backpack, and attached it to the inside of the turbo shaft.

“Is this a bad time to mention I am afraid of heights?” Anthony whimpered as he attached his belt to the rope.

The group chuckled at him as they all began to rappel down the shaft.

“How far down do you think we need to go?” Kio asked.

“Reactor control is likely in the middle,” Xiang answered. “I'm guessing about fifteen decks.”

The group moved down nearly the whole way when suddenly purple disruptor fire began whizzing past them.

“Shit,” Kio grumbled, grabbing her gun with her free hand, and firing back at the Jem'Hadar about fourteen decks above them shooting downwards.

Xiang quickly went to work on the closest door as Kio managed to hit one of the Jem'Hadar. The other, realizing he was unable to hit the group as they were firmly hugging the wall of the shaft, did the next best thing. He shot their rope.

The disruptor charge went through the rope, cutting it. Kio nearly screamed as she felt herself begin to fall, starting to take Anthony, Xiang and Yayo with her. However, the groups freefall was halted in a sudden jerk as they were still attached to Kagurazaka who had managed to swing over and secure himself on an access ladder prior to the rope being severed.

“Ian, I could kiss you,” Anthony whimpered.

Kagurazaka whimpered. “I’d prefer everyone just get on to the ladder themselves. Not that I am saying anyone is fat, I’m just saying, you aren’t all lite.”

Kio laughed as she basically climbed up the rope and over Kagurazaka. Anthony, Xiang and Yayo followed suit. The group then adjusted their positions to allow Xiang to finish his work on the door, which opened. Kio, not wanting to take any more chances tossed in a stun grenade. Once it detonated, she and the rest of the group dove out.

Kio looked around. No Jem’Hadar.

“Uh, Lieutenant...” Anthony whimpered.

Kio turned to Anthony and then noticed what he was whimpering about.

“Oh fuck,” she also whimpered.

The ship Rei’s team beamed into did in fact have internal sensors and it was not shy about telling any nearby Jem’Hadar that outsiders had beamed in. In fact, Rei was not sure what she hated more. The Jem’Hadar after Jem’Hadar that came to attack them, or the constant screeching of the ship.

It gave her more incentive to kill faster so that she could get off the ship and into the station. However, she knew now that they knew there was a second, and potentially third and fourth group on board, they would be seeing more resistance.

“I still think they will be more interested in the Marines,” Parker said, addressing Rei’s concerns. “The dreadnaught is a far more valuable target.”

Shelton nodded in agreement. Rei agreed as well, though took little comfort in it as there were about fifteen soldiers waiting for them at the airlock.

These Jem’Hadar were not like the ones in the war, however. Rei noticed a serious lack of discipline. Sure, all Jem’Hadar were willing to simply throw themselves at an enemy and die for no apparent reason other than because a Changeling told them to. But these did not even seem to have any tactical discipline.

A couple of them were even shot by their own kind either because they stepped out in front of the others fire or because they came running in, guns blasting without any concern for where the enemy was or where their allies were.

It was a site to see alright. And it was one that was working in the highly disciplined, highly trained groups favor as it allowed the small, five-man team to simply slaughter their enemy even when the numbers grew to at one point, forty Jem’Hadar.

Eventually the stream of soldiers stopped. Shelton and Parker checked the corridor before giving the ‘all clear’ to Rei and the others. The group quickly moved around, hiding from a few Jem’Hadar that were either running to find them, or going towards the dreadnaught.

"The reactor control room is likely in the middle of the station," the team's combat engineer, Sgt. Anderson stated. "Probably fourteen or fifteen decks below us."

"There is a Jefferies tube here," Shelton pointed out. Rei nodded and the group moved into the small crawl space.

Every now and then they would come to the end of one of the tubes and end up having to move down the corridors. The deeper into the station they got, however, the lighter the resistance was.

"It seems most of the Jem'Hadar have moved up to the docking ring," Parker said.

Rei nodded. "This is going to make it slightly harder for us to get off the station, however."

The group nodded just before they were confronted by about 30 Jem'Hadar. Rei ended up taking a disruptor blast that hit her in the thigh, but in the end all the Jem'Hadar ended up just like the others.

"Commander, let me take a look at that," the team's medic, Ensign Masters requested.

"I'm fine, we need to keep moving." Rei stood for about a second. She then dropped to the ground, tears swelling in her eyes. "GOD DAMN IT!"

Shelton scurried over to her, as did Masters. "Commander?" Shelton asked.

"It wasn't even a direct shot!" Rei whimpered.

Masters pulled away a burnt tricorder and tossed it a few meters away. "The disruptor blast caused the power cell in your tricorder to rupture. You have a second-degree plasma burn."

Rei groaned as Masters injected her with a couple of hypos and then ran one of the magical Starfleet medical devices over Rei's injury. "You're going to need to have this taken care of when we get back, otherwise you're going to have serious tissue and muscle damage that you won't recover from."

Rei nodded as Parker helped her to her feet.

"All I can do is stop the damage from spreading and disinfect it. And, of course, the pain killers," Masters concluded.

"It will have to work," Rei acknowledged.

The group continued, albeit a bit more slowly as Rei's injury caused her to not be able to walk as fast. However, they didn't meet any more resistance until they got to the deck they assumed the reactor control room was on.

"Wait," Parker stopped them. "Five in the turboshaft."

"Huh?" Shelton asked.

The door to the turbolift slid open, however there was no turbolift car. The group all raised their weapons, ready for whatever came out. The only thing to come out though was a small, blinking, device.

"DIVE!" Parker yelled.

The group tried to move quickly out of the range of the device. Rei, however, couldn't move fast enough and was caught in the blast radius. Bravo team came pouring out of the turboshaft, their weapons pointing in every which direction.

Anthony was the first to notice Rei on the ground, followed by Yayo, who quickly scurried to her as did Masters.

“Uh, Lieutenant...”

Kio turned to see Rei lying unconscious on the deck, and the rest of Alpha team peaking around their hiding places.

“Oh fuck.”

Kio stopped her pacing only long enough to turn around and assist Anthony and Kagurazaka in shooting a few Jem'Hadar who had come around a corner. She turned back and looked to Shelton, a pale, frightened expression on her face.

“I didn't think to scan for you guys...” she mumbled. “We just nearly fell down the shaft and I just wanted us on solid ground again...”

Shelton nodded, putting his hand on Kio's shoulder tight enough to signal her to stop her pacing. “I don't think it would have helped anyway. We scanned you guys in the lift, but the tricorder didn't register you as friendlies.”

Kio nodded as she ducked as the two Alpha team gunners fired on a couple of hapless Jem'Hadar.

“We need to get her out of this hallway,” Kio said.

“There's a room over here,” Kagurazaka pointed out.

“Secure it,” Kio ordered.

Anthony and Kagurazaka went to secure the room as Xiang and Kio took up defense stances around the medics working on Rei.

“Clear!” Anthony called out. The two medics quickly picked up Rei and followed Bravo team into the room. Alpha team trailed in behind them as Rei was set on a table. As she was set down, Kio noticed the wound on Rei's leg and screeched.

“OH MY GOD!”

“Shh! Lieutenant,” Shelton barked. Kio covered her mouth, then turned to Shelton. “She's going to fucking decapitate me.”

Shelton chuckled. “You didn't do that.”

Kio sighed a heavy sigh of relief. “What happened?”

“Jem'Hadar.”

Kio nodded. The medics continued to work and finally figured out the correct amount of stimulant that would not react too badly with the painkillers that were already flowing through Commander Rei Hino at the moment. Masters handed Yayo the hypospray and the Andorian medic quickly injected her.

Rei gritted her teeth and groaned as she came too. Kio looked at her, as did Shelton. "Commander?" Shelton asked.

Rei blinked a couple of times. "Whuhappen?"

Yayo looked to Masters. "Too much."

Masters nodded and began to conjure up something else as Kio meekly looked to her supervisor. "I'm sorry, Commander. I didn't realize you guys were out there and we deployed a stun grenade."

"Ohizdataall?" Rei slurred. Kio nodded, a bit confused by Rei's seemingly melancholy and semi-drunken attitude. "Da wayyouz was lookin, I thought maybe I'z dead."

"No ma'am," Kio replied, slowly. "I'm just sorry for hurting you."

"Isokay. Wasasscident."

Kagurazaka and Anthony were guarding the doorway. Both found their eyes slightly moving towards Rei before moving back towards the door.

"Com'ere," Rei motioned for Kio to lean towards her. Kio did as she was asked, becoming slightly paler as one of Rei's hands found hers. Rei pulled herself up slightly and began to whisper into Kio's ear.

"You're so'doreable when you'z scared." Rei smiled, grabbed the front of Kio's vest with her free arm and pulled her down, Rei's face contacting Kio's. Kio could do nothing but stare forward, bug-eyed, as Rei kissed her on the lips. Every hair on Kio's body stood straight out as she felt what she assumed was Rei's tongue gently trying to probe its way into her mouth.

"Oh my," Yayo blinked, quickly injecting Rei with the reformulated hypospray.

Anthony, still looking towards the door groaned. "What'd I miss?"

Parker, who was supposed to be watching the door with the group but had been distracted by the goings on across the room turned back around. "That was... Unexpected."

"What?!" Anthony demanded to know.

"Uh, Commander Hino and Lieutenant Yuki just made out."

Anthony allowed the barrel of his gun to droop. "I hate this job."

Rei, after receiving the newest injection, released her grip on Kio, allowing the young officer to shoot off in a self-propelled backwards sprint across the room to where she would be as far away from Rei when she came completely to her wits as possible.

Shelton poked Rei a couple of times. "Commander?"

"Ahh.. What happened?"

Yayo nodded to Masters and the pair began to back up their gear.

“Unfortunately, we happened to be right outside of a turboshaft Bravo team was coming out of. The F-o-F identifiers on our tricorders can't seem to work through these walls, so they didn't realize we shouldn't be stunned and were hit with a stun grenade.”

“Sorry,” Kio called out from the other side of the room.

Rei began to sit up. “It's okay. If I didn't have this leg injury I could have gotten out of the way.” She stopped for a moment.

“What are you doing way over there?”

“Oh, just making sure you had room to stretch out your legs, ma'am,” Kio replied, chuckling nervously. Rei eyed her oddly, wondered why there was a taste of cherry lip balm on her mouth, then began to move towards the doorway.

“We've been here far too long. We don't know what the status of the Marines are, so we need to hurry.”

“Aye,” everyone replied.

“Here's the problem, Captain,” the Marine in charge over on Blackout II stated over the sound of phaser blasts. “We don't seem to have any issues keeping them off the ship, but there have been some that have some from our flank, so we know there are some still aboard.”

“There is just no way we can both clear a ship this size AND maintain control of the airlock.”

Ranma sighed. “Understood. Maintain your position for now.”

“Yes sir.”

Ranma again sighed as he looked to Shampoo and shrugged. “I guess we'll just have to be content on destroying it.”

Shampoo's eyes darted to Ranma, then back to the viewer as a couple of the remaining fighters from before came back for another shot at the dreadnaught. Makoto did not allow them to get to close, however and destroyed them with ease.

“Any word from the NEO teams?” Ranma asked.

“No,” Minako replied.

“Any luck penetrating that armor?”

“No,” Minako again replied.

Ranma frowned disapprovingly. He did not like waiting and he didn't like not knowing what was going on.

The combined Bravo/Alpha team wandered around the deck a bit before finding a large set of doors that were nearly two decks high and over fifteen meters wide.

"I think we found what we're looking for," Parker smiled.

Kio looked through a window. "Looks to be a few people in there, not many."

Rei came up behind Kio and looked as well. The gear attached to Rei's body rubbed up against Kio's backside, sending a chill up her spine.

"Yup," Kio said, trying to squeeze her way under Rei and back into the open area in front of the door. "STRAIGHT in and STRAIGHT to the reactor core. Blow this place STRAIGHT to hell."

The group looked to Kio as she began pacing in front of the door for a couple of moments before putting herself in a position to start shooting anything and everything she saw.

"Alright," Rei said quietly. "Let's get this door open and get in there."

The teams nodded and took up positions in front of the doors. Xiang and Alpha's engineer went to work on disabling the door lock. After a moment, the seal disengaged, and the doors slid open.

Kio led her team in, quickly shooting down what seemed to be mostly Jem'Hadar engineers. A few security forces came in from other attached rooms but were quickly hot by either Rei's team or Kio's as they made their way towards the gigantic purple and blue reactor core.

One of the Jem'Hadar quickly ran towards a terminal. He began yelling into it just before Kagurazaka shot him in the back, sending him to the floor. It took only a couple of more minutes for the NEO teams to kill the remaining Jem'Hadar soldiers and engineers.

Kagurazaka walked over to the terminal where that the Jem'Hadar he had shot had activated. He looked it over, checking some things on a PADD that contained a Jem'Hadar to Federation Standard dictionary.

"Commander," he called out. Rei walked over to him and looked to the terminal. "It appears that this one was able to notify their operations center of our presence before I was able to shoot him."

Rei groaned. "Expect reinforcements."

The group took up defensive stances guarding the two combat engineers.

"Charlie to Alpha," Rei's communicator chirped.

"Go."

"We're near your position. Do you need us in the reactor room?"

"We're expecting reinforcements, so yes. Set up any kind of 'surprise' for any new Jem'Hadar that you can outside of the area first though."

"Aye."

Rei turned to the Xiang. "How long?"

“It will probably take us about ten minutes to do this.”

Anderson nodded. “Once we get the overload sequence started, we'll have about ten minutes to get back to one of the attached ships so we can be beamed out. Maybe fifteen.”

“They won't be able to stop it?”

Xiang smirked. “Not the way we're doing it.”

Rei nodded. “Okay.” She turned and looked to Charlie and Delta teams coming in the control room and taking up defensive positions. “Don't actually start the sequence till we're ready to move out. I have an odd feeling we're going to need all ten-”

Rei is cut off by a loud explosion coming from the hallway. Lt. George Carson, head of Delta team smirked. “The Jem'Hadar are here.”

The eighteen Starfleet special operations soldiers soon faced what seemed like a never-ending stream of Jem'Hadar throwing themselves into their line of fire. For every one that they killed, it seemed like three more would show up to take their place.

Xiang and Anderson were having a difficult time working as disruptor charges impacted the walls behind them; some even striking the reactor core its self; the Jem'Hadar seemingly having no concern for the collateral damage they seemed to be causing the station or its equipment.

Kio ducked down as she ejected the power cell out of her rifle. She inserted the new one and poked her head up, getting ready to fire, but noticed the Jem'Hadar seemed to be retreating.

“Where are they going?” Kio asked.

Anthony shrugged.

“To the Federation soldiers in the reactor core,” a voice bellowed from the intercom. “I am Pallor. I am the Vorta the Founders have sent to oversee this colony. Surrender and you will not be harmed.”

Rei looked to Parker who shrugged slightly. Rei turned a bit trying to see where the voice was coming from but did not want to risk standing. “I am Commander Rei Hino. You're aware this 'colony', as you put it, Pallor, is in violation of the treaty signed between the Dominion and the Federation, right?”

“That treaty was signed under duress,” Pallor replied. “It holds no weight.

“IT'S WAR!” Rei yelled. “Of course it was signed under duress. They all are.”

Pallor scoffed.

“Have you even spoken to the founders since the war?” Rei asked.

“I do not need to speak with them to know their bidding,” he replied, quietly. “Besides, if they wish to speak with me, they will.”

Rei sighed. Parker quickly showed her his tricorder which was showing a large mass of bio signs assembling outside of the door. Apparently now that the Vorta had reaffirmed control of things here, they were not going to simply stagger in, but assault the group in large numbers.

“Again, I offer you the chance to surrender so you do not end up killed like those who attempted to take control of our flagship,” Pallor smugly stated.

Rei looked to Parker with concern. Could it be that the Marine force had all been wiped out?

“Oh please,” Kio scoffed, drawing an irritated at first, but eventually amused look from Rei. “Your group of idiots haven't even come close to being able to kill us, and there's only like twenty of us. There were two hundred of them, and they weren't moving.”

Pallor growled. “Believe what you like, Starfleet.”

The communication ended. Kio set her sights on the door as she waited, knowing full well that thanks to her words they would be even more intent on killing the group.

“They don't seem to be coming in as often,” Ryouga noted to another Marine.

“Maybe they can't get past the bodies of all their buddies?”

The pair laughed. For a second it seemed rude to laugh over death, even if it was the death of an enemy, but then again this was the Jem'Hadar; beings who were bred with the sole purpose of fighting and dying.

“They're pulling back,” the Marine commander noted.

“There are alarms sounding in the facility,” another pointed out.

“Perhaps the NEO teams have been discovered and made a higher priority?” Ryouga asked.

“Seems that way,” the Marine in charge replied.

“Major, maybe we should assist them?” Ryouga asked.

The Major shook his head. “We've been ordered to maintain control of this ship.”

Ryouga sighed. He was not sure if he liked it, but those were the orders.

“I think you pissed them off, Lieutenant,” Anthony noted as he, Kio and Kagurazaka took cover from the massive blob of incoming disruptor fire. Kio nodded, acknowledging that now, rather than two or three at a time coming in, they were coming into the reactor room in lines of ten.

The group was still able to pick them off, but there were enough Jem'Hadar assembled that the flow was outpacing the amount being killed.

“Commander,” Xiang called to Rei. “The sequence is ready.”

Rei looked to the massive amount of Jem'Hadar moving into the room. She looked to Kio who could barely get a single shot off before having to duck back down again. She looked to Shelton who knew exactly what she was thinking, and solemnly nodded.

“Start it,” she ordered.

Xiang started the overload sequence with a sigh. Being blown to bits in a Jem'Hadar reactor room was not really his ideal way to go, but he acknowledged you don't get to always choose.

"Eleven minutes," Anderson reported.

"Crap," Kio complained. "We're not going to live long enough to become martyrs."

Rei shook her head and rolled out a concussion grenade, knocking back about 30 Jem'Hadar.

"You realize," Pallor started, "that as soon as they kill you, we will just stop whatever you did to the reactor core."

"We won't let you get to the reactor core to stop it," Rei replied. "Assuming your robots could even undo what we did."

Pallor growled. "How about I just jettison the core?"

"It will still explode and at least damage your station enough to allow our ships to finish you off," Rei replied.

"You are going to die, regardless."

"So be it," Rei answered.

Pallor's frustration was obvious as he closed the communication again. The room continued to swarm with Jem'Hadar, far more than the small NEO team could handle.

The Jem'Hadar, finally showing some discipline, marched across the large reactor control room towards the area where Rei, Kio and the rest were encamped.

"Welp..." Kio sighed, loading another power cell into her rifle.

"Welp indeed," Rei replied.

CHAPTER SIX – LOYALTY

Ukyo stomped around on the bridge of the U.S.S. Infinity. She was unhappy about several things, the least of which being the fact that there was not anything for her to do.

That really was not that far from the norm, however. The Infinity was not a 'normal' Starfleet ship, so she did not get sent on 'normal' Starfleet missions. She was, however, used quite often as a show of dominance when dealing with an ever-growing hostile Klingon Empire, and when the Federation wanted to remind the Dominion who won the war.

So basically, her day-to-day routine was flying from the Alpha to the Gamma Quadrant then to Qo'noS; then repeating the loop in various orders.

Regardless, now there was something to do but she was not allowed to anything. Stuck out here with a bunch of other ships, just waiting, and watching.

As well, the probe the Sisko sent out did not deliver any good news. They were going to try and destroy a Jem'Hadar shipyard from the inside out, but wouldn't be able to scan through to beam their guys out? And to top it off, they were only sending in the special operations guys?

Ukyo was not sure what Ranma was on, but she didn't quite think it was good for him.

“Captain?” Ukyo's first officer asked.

Ukyo ignored him. Ranma's words earlier were haunting her too. She had come to realize that she was not mad at him for choosing Akane to manage triage operations. Hell, she would have wanted him to choose her if she was in that position.

What bothered her was how right he was. How rude she was and how inappropriate it was for her to even bring it up at a time like this. As well, she knew this day would come, eventually. And she had a whole God-damned year to come to terms with the marriage.

There was no reason for her to be upset and certainly no reason for her to be acting like such an ass.

Ranma was her friend and friendships come before any kind of rivalries. Besides, if they remained friends, if things did not work out between Ranma and Akane, Ukyo could be there to pick up the pieces, so to speak.

Ukyo sighed. She did not like thinking of herself as a backup wife, but whatever.

She quickly turned to the first officer. “To hell with orders, we're going in to help.”

“Okay,” the first officer replied, a little confused.

“Prepare a security detachment. Those special operations guys might need some help getting a path cleared out for them.”

"Aye."

"Helm, take us in, full impulse."

"Okay," the helm replied. Once the Infinity entered The Badlands, the helm officer turned to Ukyo. "Now where?"

"Intercept the Sisko!"

"I don't know where she is."

Ukyo spun around to operations.

"They didn't include that in their report."

"Ranma, you moron," Ukyo scowled. "Well, let's start looking."

A large Jem'Hadar warship approached the facility as the Sisko began heading towards it. Makoto began to fire on it as Minako gasped.

"Sir, that ship has about 10,000 bio-signs on it."

"How the hell do they fit that many soldiers on a single ship?" Ranma asked.

"I don't know," Shampoo said, "but if they allowed to transport to station, neither NEO or Marines will survive."

Ranma nodded. "Makoto?"

The ship rocked hard as a blast of torpedo and phaser fire came from the warship and two previously unseen escorts.

"I'm focusing on their power, trying to knock out their transporters," Makoto replied.

"SHEILDS AT 39 PERCENT!!!!" Usagi bellowed.

Kaii looked down to a beeping on his terminal. "What the..."

Minako looked to him. "What?"

"I think I just saw-" he was interrupted as multiple orange and silver torpedoes blew past the Sisko from behind her and annihilated first one escort ship, and then the other.

"Nice shooting," Amanda smiled at Makoto.

"I didn't do that," Makoto blinked.

Ranma turned to Kaii, then back to the view screen as the Infinity phased into view. The Sisko took another powerful hit from the warship before the Infinity began bearing down on her.

"Well," Ranma smirked. "Nice to see them."

Shampoo nodded as the Sisko moved around, attempting to help the Infinity destroy the warship. The combined assault was quick and effective, blowing the ship into nothingness.

“How many were transported?” Ranma asked.

“They never got in range,” Minako smiled.

Ranma and Shampoo both exhaled huge sighs of relief.

“Captain,” both Minako and Kaii called out. Kaii looked to Minako's panel then pointed to her. “Hers is more important.”

Ranma nodded as Minako spoke. “The reactor core appears to have begun its overload sequence. Just based on these power readings, it looks as if the NEO teams have maybe ten minutes to make it to a beam out point.”

Ranma sighed. “Lieutenant?”

“The Infinity is hailing us.”

“On screen.”

Ukyo appeared on the main viewer. “Captain Saotome, I apologize for disobeying an order to maintain the perimeter, but your last communication made it sound as if you could use the help of a loyal friend and her many, many weapons and staff.”

Ranma smiled and nodded. “I certainly will not be issuing any demerits.”

Ukyo returned the smile. “What can we do?”

“We'd like to seize the dreadnaught. Can you transport security forces and engineering over there to take control of it and move it out of The Badlands?”

Ukyo turned to her second officer who started making things happen. “Of course.” She then looked to the readings from the power core. “How are your special operations guys?”

Ranma looked to his feet. “I don't know. The armor plating is far too strong. We can't communicate with them, scan in there, or transport.”

Ukyo thought for a moment before nodding. “I'm sending over a couple hundred to clear a route for them.”

“Ucchan, thank you.”

Ukyo nodded. “Anytime, Ranchan.”

The communication ended and Ranma turned back to Minako. “Keep a close eye on that reactor.”

Minako nodded.

“Sir, the dreadnaught is powered up and moving away from the station. The Marines are stating that they are ready to assist the Infinity's crew in clearing out a path for the NEO teams.” Makoto stated.

“Loyalty to their shipmates,” Ranma nodded. “Inform the Infinity that our Marines will be joining them.”

“Aye.”

“There are so many of them, my tricorder can't distinguish one bio-sign from another,” Anthony growled, tossing a grenade at some of the advancing Jem'Hadar.

Kio nodded and tossed her last phase grenade at the group. She then grabbed her type two phaser and set it to overload and tossed it into the advancing group, killing several in the explosion.

Delta team was doing everything they could to continue to snipe the advancing group. Charlie team was helping Delta make up crude explosive devices and was trying to throw them the best they could from their concealed position in the back of the reactor core room.

All things considered; the NEO teams had performed quite well. Multiple Jem'Hadar soldiers lay dead or dying on the floor. Besides from Rei's leg injury, none of the Sisko's special operations soldiers had yet been suffered a scratch.

In fact, if they at all believed that the Jem'Hadar would run out of soldiers before the reactor core went critical, Rei thought they might have a chance at this. But this was the Jem'Hadar we were talking about. And they did not seem to run out. They just kept coming and coming, paying no attention at all to their dead and injured compatriots at their feet.

The NEO teams were having issues as well. They were running out of grenades, limiting their ability to inflict damage on more than one Jem'Hadar at a time. As well, kill setting takes up a chunk of juice and more than one of the NEO officers had gone through multiple power cells.

They had totally expended their supply of projectile ammunition.

The forward advance of the Jem'Hadar had also forced them farther and farther back in the reactor room and now they were out of 'back' to go. Some of them literally found themselves with their backs against the wall.

It was a dire situation, but they knew that it would only last at the most, seven more minutes.

“I guess,” Rei sighed, accepting what seemed inevitable, “we just try and take out as many as we can before being overwhelmed. Despite Corporal Xiang and Sgt. Anderson's assurances, I want to make sure they have as little time as possible to attempt to stabilize the reactor.”

The rest of the group nodded. The NEO team's snipers began firing on the forward line, causing them to slow, allowing the remaining members of the team to pop up and fire off shots before quickly ducking back down as a barrage of disruptor charges came back at them.

Screaming began to echo through the reactor room. Kio looked to Rei who was unsure of whether to attempt to peak over the console she was using to shield herself to see what all the commotion was about.

“The bio signs have doubled,” Parker groaned.

Kio poked her head out. “They're turning around.”

Rei stuck her head up, quickly ducking back down as a few who were watching the Jem'Hadar flank fired at her. “Where are they going?”

Kio shrugged as her group popped up and fired, taking down a few, happily shooting several in the back. Rei and her group followed suit, not really wanting to allow them to regroup outside.

A large explosion near the doorway sent Jem'Hadar flying in every which direction. Any sense of discipline they had disappeared as the Jem'Hadar soldiers, poorly trained and seemingly lacking any further instructions from the Vorta began to scurry around looking for cover.

This gave the NEO teams the opening they needed as they began to blast soldier after soldier, without regard for whether that soldier was facing them, running or standing.

Eventually there were no Jem'Hadar left, and the NEO teams found out exactly why.

“COMMANDER HINO! ARE YOU GUYS OKAY?!” a voice called into the room.

“Major Norva?” Rei asked.

The Sisko's Marine forces stormed into the room and took up defensive positions. The Trill Marine commander walked over to where the NEO teams were massed and smiled. “We're here to assist you guys in departing this facility.”

Parker looked to his tricorder. “There's still a huge force outside...”

Norva smiled. “They are part of the Infinity's security staff.”

“Uh,” Xiang mumbled. “We should probably continue this conversation aboard the Sisko,” he pointed at the now brightly glowing reactor core. “We have about five minutes.”

Rei nodded. “Let's move, double time.”

The force of now around four-hundred Starfleet security forces ran through the corridors and to a pair of cargo turbolifts which could move large quantities of people at a time. It took two trips each, but both groups made it to the ships and were beamed aboard both the Infinity and the Sisko as the reactor core began to spark and smoke.

ABOARD THE INFINITY

“Captain,” the first officer reported. “We have several of the Sisko crew and they have several of ours.”

Ukyo ran to the helm. “We can do a prisoner swap later. Get us out of here, full impulse!”

The helm officer nodded and set a course for the edge of The Badlands as fast as the gargantuan ship could move.

ABOARD THE SIKO

"All Starfleet is off the station. Some of our crew is aboard the Infinity."

Ranma shrugged. "As long as they are safe. Get us out of here, best possible speed."

Ikuhara began to move the Sisko as fast as he could away from the station. The Infinity blew past the Sisko, as the Sisko was still damaged and could only move at one half impulse.

Ranma looked to the station as the reactor core began to spark and pulsate.

"We're not going to be far enough away, are we?" he asked.

JC looked to Minako, then to Usagi. "I'm diverting as much power as I can to the aft shields."

Ranma nodded then sat in his seat, gripping his arm rests tightly.

"All hands, brace for impact."

"Why is the Sisko still back there?!" Ukyo demanded to know.

Both her first officer and second officer shrugged. Her engineering officer on the bridge looked at his display before gulping. "She's only moving one half impulse. That might be as fast as she can move."

"Bring us about!" Ukyo demanded.

"Captain!" The first officer yelled. "We can't do anything."

Ukyo growled. She knew that. She did not like it, but she knew it.

Ranma closed his eyes as the reactor core breached. As expected, every ship attached to the shipyard exploded. The station exploded in a brilliant flash of light, sending a shock wave and debris in every direction. The explosion set off a chain reaction of gas cloud explosions.

The Sisko was first hit by the shock wave which sent her tumbling again, uncontrolled through The Badlands. Her shields were completely dismantled by the massive blast, allowing the debris that followed to pound her armor. The gas clouds that exploded did not help matters any sending more and more energy ripping into her, the environment doing its best to rip the warship to pieces.

However, in the end the Sisko, albeit battered, remained in one piece. The forceful tumbling due to the initial shock wave working in her favor by pushing her away from most of the debris and exploding gas clouds.

Ikuhara managed to stabilize her and get her pointed back towards the edge of The Badlands. Ranma, after peeling himself off the forward bulkhead, went to check on Shampoo, then his other bridge officers before looking sadly at the master situation display on the back of the bridge.

“Well, I don't need to be an engineer to know that this sucks.”

JC, still shaking off the wang to the head he took, nodded. “I'll make impulse a priority so we can get out of here.”

Ranma turned to him. “We still have four more planets to check.”

JC looked to the captain, a little shocked Ranma would even suggest such a ludicrous idea. “Captain,” he sighed. “Sir, in the shape we're in right now, the Jem'Hadar could run a shuttle craft into us, and we'd likely explode.”

Shampoo slowly moved up next to Ranma.

“Sir, we have multiple casualty reports,” Minako reported. “Some serious.”

JC pointed to the nacelle that was giving them problems earlier. It was blinking red at this point, rather than just being at the solid red state the damage control teams had managed to repair it to. “If we don't inspect this, I can't say for certain that we won't end up killing ourselves.”

Ranma blinked.

“An exposed plasma coil could very easily ignite a gas cloud that, in the shape we're in now, would kill us,” JC explained.

Shampoo looked to Ranma and whispered, “Tunnel vision.”

“God damn it,” Ranma growled.

“I'm sorry,” JC whimpered.

“Not you,” Ranma said, putting his hand on JC's shoulder. “Yes, please get impulse up as soon as possible. There are repair ships with the perimeter fleet. Hopefully, they can patch us up once we get out of here.”

JC nodded and went back to work on his terminal as Ranma took Shampoo towards his office. “You have the bridge, Commander Aino,” he called to Minako as the pair walked into his ready room.

“Sir,” Minako called after him.

Ranma stopped in his doorway.

“The captain of the Infinity is requesting to come aboard.”

Ranma nodded before allowing the door to close.

Shampoo sat down across from Ranma. “You okay?” she asked.

“When did I change?” Ranma asked.

“Change?”

“Have I always been like this?”

“Shampoo don't understand.”

Ranma sighed. "At what point did goal oriented become 'obsessed'?"

"You really want to know what Shampoo think?"

Ranma nodded. "I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

"Shampoo think it because you make mistake when you not blow up Nabiki Tendo cargo ship. Now you want to make sure that you prove not only to Starfleet, but to yourself that you can do job, emotions be damned."

Ranma looked to Shampoo for a minute. "Really?"

Shampoo nodded and continued without hesitation. "You think you disappoint father. You think you disappoint Admiral Larson. Most of all, you think you disappoint yourself. That why you no want Akane to come along. Not necessarily because you don't want her to be harmed, but because if you fail, you don't want her to see; or at least if you fail, at least you be dead and will have the whole 'died defending the Federation' thing for you."

Ranma again eyed Shampoo.

"You ask."

Ranma nodded. "I did. Kind of wish I didn't, though."

"Cause Shampoo right?"

Ranma hesitated another minute before answering. "I am unsure if I am willing to acknowledge that."

Shampoo grinned slightly. "I know you well, Captain."

"How is that?"

"Because I love you."

Ranma grinned a bit.

"Shampoo sometimes wonder what it would be like, Ranma and Shampoo, husband and wife, Captain and first officer of U.S.S. Benjamin Sisko."

Ranma smirked. "Would be awkward at times, wouldn't it?"

Shampoo shrugged. "At least Shampoo would never hit you with mallet."

"To be fair, she hardly ever hits me anymore."

"Marriage already going stale. Shampoo still have chance."

Ranma laughed. "So, what, you'd just give up on Lt. Jansen?"

Shampoo just shook her head. "No, would just make marriage more fun."

Ranma blinked.

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound Here>

"Come in," Ranma called.

The doors to Ranma's ready room slid open and Ukyo walked in. The look of concern that was on her face was obvious. It was quickly overridden by a look of shock when Ranma got up, walked around his desk, and hugged her.

"Ucchan," he said, still hugging her. "Thank you."

"Ran-" she stammered before returning the embrace. "Ranma. You're welcome. It's what friends do."

"Aino to Saotome."

"Go ahead," Ranma answered.

"We have one-quarter impulse."

"Take us out of The Badlands then, best possible speed, and have us rendezvous with a repair ship."

"Yes sir."

Ukyo tapped her communicator. "Konji to Infinity."

"Go."

"Please escort the Sisko out of The Badlands."

"Aye."

Ranma motioned for Ukyo to sit down on his couch as the ship began to creep towards the perimeter fleet.

"Had you not shown up we may have lost our Marines and I know we would have lost our NEO teams," Ranma sighed.

Shampoo nodded. "That ship was bringing ten-thousand reinforcement."

Ukyo shook her head. "Well, I am glad we came when we did then."

"The problem is that those reinforcements had to have come from somewhere," Ranma sighed. "So, there is at least another facility in here."

"We can continue the search," Ukyo suggested.

"Infinity too big," Shampoo pointed out.

Ranma nodded. "The Jem'Hadar will see you guys coming from a planet away, even through all of this mess. As well, you guys are well armed, but you must admit, she's not a skirmishing ship."

Ukyo nodded. She knew her ships limitations. She would fare well against the larger warships, but the fighters, not so much. As well, her fighters would be susceptible to gas cloud explosions.

She blinked. "What about my fighters? I could have them scout so that way you guys would know exactly where to go after being repaired."

Ranma thought about this for a moment.

"Fighters did work very well for the Maquis in here. Virtually invisible to sensors," he admitted.

Ukyo smiled. "Great, it's settled then. I will have a squadron map out the remaining four planetoids and when all is said and done you guys can go in first and we will sneak in behind you, just in case."

Shampoo giggled. "Can that thing sneak anywhere?"

Ukyo scowled. "Well, it used to be able to, till they took my cloak away."

Ranma smiled as the group all stood. The trio walked out onto the bridge, Shampoo and Ukyo following Ranma as he wandered over to the engineering station. Ranma looked to JC who seemed to be growling at Usagi.

"How are things?" Ranma asked. "With the ship?" He quickly added.

JC shook his head. "DC can't ascertain the extent of the nacelle damage from inside. We will have to send a team outside. If it is as bad as I think it is, we're looking, at a minimum, of two days of repairs."

Ranma sighed.

"It wouldn't take that long in a dry dock, but obviously we can't get to one within the next several years without warp drive," JC added.

"Understood," Ranma replied. "Well, then two days it is."

Ukyo turned to Ranma. "I'll be back on the Infinity."

Ranma nodded, but then grabbed Ukyo's sleeve as she started to turn. "Come back tonight around 19:00. Have dinner with us."

"Oh, sure. Thank you," Ukyo nodded, turning towards the turbolift.

Shampoo smiled at Ranma as Ranma stared at the view screen picture fizzling from the misty clouds of The Badlands to the waiting arms of the Starfleet armada.

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Kio didn't exactly care where she was, she was just happy to be off of that station. That said, she and the rest of her team, which had made it to an aft looking window on the Infinity to view their handy work, were horrified by the sight of the Sisko being tossed around like a toy by the explosions.

She became more and more frustrated when no one seemed to be able to give her a status report on the Sisko. None of the turbolifts would grant her access to the bridge so she could

demand answers from whoever this ship's captain was, and every attempt to contact Rei ended in her communicator buzzing at her non-compliantly.

Finally, the Infinity turned around and went back to the Sisko and the Infinity's second officer informed them that no one on the Sisko had been killed in the explosion and they would be returning shortly. Kio gathered with about thirty Marines that had been beamed aboard and waited patiently before being transferred back.

Once they were, Kio sprinted to the NEO Command Center, finding a bruised Lt. Commander Shelton returning his gear to the armory.

"Commander," Kio acknowledged.

"Lieutenant," he replied. "I am glad to see you guys made it back on board."

Kio nodded, looking towards Rei's empty locker. "Where is Commander Hino?"

"She's in sickbay, having her leg treated."

Kio quickly took off her guns, gear and various other equipment and set it on a table. She looked to Anthony before heading out of the room. "Would you mind? Thanks," she more instructed than asked.

Anthony sighed and began to put away Kio's gear as Shelton smirked.

Kio only stopped running in the turbolift that took her from the Command Center sitting atop the ship till it got to deck four where sickbay was. She thought an eight-deck trip should not take as long as it did, but of course there was also the horizontal voyage as well that many people don't take into account.

Finally, it dumped her out just down the corridor from the ship's medical facility. Kio ran to the doors, nearly smashing into them as they did not seem to open fast enough for her. She looked around frantically, annoyed that there were so many people in there.

Finally, she saw Rei's gear on the deck next to a bed. It was a familiar sight. Far too familiar. She saw the back of the same man's head.

She blinked. It was just a small leg wound.

Did her stun grenade make things worse?

Kio shoved a doctor aside as she ran to the bed.

She let out an audible sigh of relief when she saw Rei talking with Ranma. Kio snapped to attention to acknowledge her Captain.

"Lieutenant!" Ranma smiled. "Good work over there."

"Thank you, sir," Kio replied.

"No telling how many lives you guys have saved by destroying that shipyard."

Kio nodded. "It's what we do."

Ranma smiled. "And no one does it better." Ranma turned back to Rei. "Like I said, it will be a couple of days before we are able to do anything else. Hopefully anything else we can kill from orbit but be prepared for anything."

Rei nodded. "Aye sir."

Ranma nodded to Kio as he walked off. Kio looked to Rei who smiled at her.

"You're not clear across the room this time."

Kio blushed a bit. "You don't remember what you did, do you?"

Rei grimaced a bit as a doctor worked on her leg. Rei scowled at the doctor, who gave her a scowl back before resuming his work. Rei then returned her attention to Kio.

"No."

Kio bit her lip. "Well, then..." she trailed off. "I am just glad you are okay." The young soldier turned to walk off, but Rei called after her.

"Lieutenant, come back here."

Kio back peddled and turned back to Rei.

"What do you mean 'what I did'?"

Kio looked around the room a bit. "It's not important."

Rei looked Kio over. "It seems important to you."

Kio looked to the doctor that was treating Rei. Rei turned to him. "Doc, could you give us just a minute?"

The doctor sighed, nodded, and walked off. Rei turned back to Kio.

Kio leaned into Rei and whispered into her ear. Rei's face turned bright red. Kio leaned back and stood at full attention, staring at the wall straight ahead.

Rei stammered for a moment before clearing her throat. "Look, medication can do strange things to a person..."

Kio nodded.

"...and make them do things that they wouldn't normally do..."

Kio again nodded.

"...I mean, not that you're not pretty or anything..."

"Commander..."

"Well, I didn't mean it like that..."

Kio shook her head. "Commander, I'm not one to, if you will pardon the expression, kiss and tell. So, as far as I am concerned, it did not happen. I just wanted to clear up any misunderstandings."

Rei stared at the ceiling for a moment. "Things were certainly less complicated when we fought all the time."

"There has to be a middle ground between lovers and enemies."

Rei sat up, looked to Kio, and laughed. "Lieutenant, if you showed this side of yourself earlier, we probably would have not gotten off to such a rocky start."

Kio shrugged. "Like I said before, it worked out for the better, at least for me."

Rei nodded. "Me too." Rei lied back down on the bio bed and motioned for the doctor to return and finish working on her leg. "The Sisko is severely damaged. We're going to need at least two days' worth of repairs from the repair ships with the fleet. For the next twenty-four hours, no drills. No exercises. Just take a break."

Kio smiled. "I assume that order goes for your team as well?"

Rei nodded.

"Yes ma'am."

* * * *

"Who's coming over for dinner?" Akane asked, quite befuddled.

Ranma sighed and answered his wife for what he was fairly sure was the third time. "Ukyo."

"Okayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy..." Akane replied.

"Look, she saved our asses and it's the very least I can do."

Akane nodded, aware there was more to the dinner than Ranma was admitting. Ranma sensed that Akane wanted further explanation and motioned for her to join him on the couple's couch.

"She hasn't taken things very well."

Akane shrugged. "So?"

Ranma scowled at her.

"Didn't you say that was her problem?" Akane asked.

Ranma nodded. "I did, but as well I still want to be her friend. I want her to be OUR friend."

Akane wasn't sold on this idea.

"Look, aren't you and Shampoo friends?"

"Not even slightly," Akane scoffed.

"Oh?" Ranma asked, genuinely surprised by this revelation.

Akane laughed. "Just because we don't get in fist fights over you doesn't mean that we've become besties."

Ranma sighed as Akane continued.

"I care about her wellbeing as much as I care about the wellbeing of any other member of this crew. However, on a personal note, I despise her. I don't care if she is in a relationship. She could marry Jansen and I would still believe her goal in life will be to take you away from me."

Ranma looked to Akane with a disapproving look in his face. "Really now. Do you honestly believe she still wants me?"

Akane nodded. "And unless you're still as thick-headed as you always were, you have to see it too."

Ranma sighed, thinking back to the conversation he had with Shampoo in his ready room. "Well, it doesn't matter what Shampoo wants, or what Ukyo wants," he smiled, pointing to the ring on his left hand. "I've made my choice and I don't have any plans on changing my THICK-HEAD any time soon."

Akane smiled. "Thick-headed or not, you are loyal."

"It goes beyond loyalty," Ranma replied, kissing Akane. "I love you."

Akane smiled back, accepting the kiss. She then stood and walked towards the replicator. "So, what are we eating?"

"Well, I was thinking okonomiyaki, but then I realized Ukyo would just get pissed off at how the replicator would butcher it. So, I actually commissioned Lt. Commander Tsukino to cook up a meal for us."

Akane blinked. "I could have cooked something."

Ranma just looked to Akane.

"Well, I could have..." she trailed off. "I've gotten better."

Ranma continued to look at Akane.

"Shut up."

Ranma smiled. "We can't all be awesome at everything. You have enough awesome traits to make up for your..." Ranma paused to find the right word as Akane was beginning to scowl, "less than awesomeness at cooking."

Akane shook her head. "I've killed men for less than that."

"I'll consider myself lucky."

"Do that."

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound Here>

"Come in," Ranma called.

The doors slid open, and Ukyo walked in. Ranma smiled and walked towards her, giving the Infinity's captain a hug. Akane glowered slightly but was quickly stunned when Ukyo walked up to her and hugged her as well.

"Akane, I never got a chance to properly apologize to you for my behavior yesterday," Ukyo said, bowing slightly to Akane. "I'm sorry for the way I treated you and I am sorry for not respecting your abilities in managing the fleet's medical needs."

Akane stammered for a moment before nodding. "It's okay."

Ranma smiled widely. "Please, let's have a seat," he motioned for the table that was in the dining area of his quarters. "Can I get you guys something to drink-"

Ranma is cut off:

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound Here>

"Uh, come in?" Ranma called.

The doors slid open and in walked Gosnell dressed up in a tuxedo. He nodded to the two captains and Akane.

"Good evening," he smiled, speaking in his best snooty accent. "I am Gosnell and I will be your maître d'."

The entire room looked at him oddly.

"Please, sit," Gosnell instructed the group. The three slowly had a seat at Ranma's dinner table as Gosnell went to the replicator and brought them back three wine glasses. He then set down on the table a book that appeared to be about six-hundred pages thick.

"What's that?" Ranma asked.

"She is ze wine list," Gosnell answered. He dropped the accent momentarily. "The wine is replicated, so it's pretty much every known wine in the universe, so..."

Ranma nodded slowly. "Um, okay."

Ukyo began to thumb through the book as Akane chuckled. "What's the deal?" she asked.

"Madam Tsukino requested that I assist her with this event."

"And you are?"

"She knows things," Gosnell replied, again dropping the accent for a moment.

Akane blinked as Ranma shook his head. "I am sure whatever you recommend for us will be fine, since you are our expert in this field."

"Oui Oui!" Gosnell beamed. He bounded over towards the replicator to get the wine as Ukyo looked to Ranma.

"Is this normal here?"

Ranma shrugged. "It's not necessarily 'abnormal'."

Gosnell quickly returned with the wine and filled the three glasses. "Ze first course will be coming shortly."

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound Here>

"Ah! Speak of ze devils!" Gosnell smiled as he ran to the door. Both Ranma and Akane tumbled out of their chairs when they saw Makoto walk in wearing what could best be described as a 'French Maid' outfit, carrying a large tray.

She did not seem to be as gleeful in playing her role as Gosnell did, however. She had a curt, forced grin on her face as she began to place appetizers on the table in front of Ranma, Akane and Ukyo.

"Commander?!" Ranma gasped.

"Magnifique!!!!" Gosnell smiled approvingly at his wife's attire.

Makoto looked to Ranma. "Usagi asked for help."

"The outfit?" Ranma asked.

"SHE IS WONDERFUL!!!" Gosnell again declared, getting a disapproving look from Makoto.

"She knows things," Makoto simply answered.

Ranma nodded slowly in understanding as Makoto began to leave the room. Gosnell followed her out part-way before being clocked in the head with the now empty tray. He stumbled back in, standing near the table, rubbing his face.

"Good help, it is so hard to find these days."

Ukyo slowly returned her eyes towards Ranma and Akane who had already shrugged off the exchange. "Again, not abnormal?"

Ranma, who was now more interested in the delicious appetizers he was eating than he was his insane crew, shrugged. "I'll admit, the outfit was a little over the top."

Akane chuckled. "Our crew is strange, but they are fun. And good."

Ranma nodded. "We've been through hell together. I'm sure I could have gotten things changed around once I was no longer under the control of Happosai, but I won't."

Ukyo ate a bit before asking her next question. "Why?"

Ranma did not have to even think about the answer. "They are my crew. They are my friends. They have shown a loyalty to both me and each other, and I have a loyalty to them."

Gosnell quickly hopped over and refilled everyone's drinks. Ukyo nodded a thanks before prodding Ranma some more.

"There's a rumor going around that they are considering promoting you to Admiral."

Akane nearly spit out the wine she was drinking. Ranma sighed as he nodded.

"Yes, I have heard that as well."

"Well?" Ukyo asked.

"I haven't thought that far ahead," Ranma said. It was only a partial lie. He knew very well that Starfleet was considering making him an admiral. He had thought about what life would be like if he was an admiral. He hadn't thought about whether or not he would accept the position, however. He had not told Akane about it, nor asked for her input. And he certainly had not mentioned it to any of his crew.

"I'd prefer if that didn't leave this room," Ranma quietly said. "You too, jabber-jaws," he grumbled, turning towards Gosnell.

"I am ze best secret keeper on ze ship!"

Ranma glared at him.

"Yes sir," he answered, dropping the accent.

The trio ate in silence for a moment before Akane turned to Ukyo. "So, what have you guys been up to since we last worked together?"

Ukyo nodded a thanks to Gosnell as he filled up her glass again before turning to Akane. "After spending a month giving the Romulans back their cloak, Command decided that we would make a good 'peace through superior firepower' toy by sending us around to places that they thought might try and start stuff with the Federation."

Ukyo leaned back in her chair as Gosnell cleared the empty plates off the table. "Spent some time in the Gamma Quadrant letting the Founders know that we had indeed rebuilt our fleet. Visited Qo'noS to let them know that the Federation was not averse to building warships. Said hi to the Breen a couple of times."

"Sounds..." Ranma paused. "Aggressive."

Ukyo shrugged. "I believe in the core principles of the Federation as much as you do, Ranma. However, there must be people like us, and ships like yours and mine to make sure that the people who simply want to live free and happy are allowed to do so."

Ranma nodded.

"I think it's a testament to our values," Ukyo continued, "that we have these massive instruments of war, yet only use them for self-preservation."

Ranma again nodded, understanding Ukyo's point.

"Well said," Akane smiled.

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound Here>

“AH!” Gosnell beamed. “Ze main course has arrived!”

“That appetizer was so big I don't know if I am still hungry,” Akane laughed.

“Oh,” Gosnell squawked. “Don't tell Master Chef Tsukino that. She will grow angry and hit me.”

Ranma shook his head in disapproval as Gosnell went to the door. A moment later Usagi came in pushing a tray that was loaded with food. However, it was not the spread that got everyone's attention.

Usagi was dressed in a very extravagant 'chef's uniform' that was topped off with a chef's hat that had to have been at least two-thirds of a meter tall. The hat near tumbled off her several times, being saved only by the quick reflexes of the alien maître d'.

“I hope everyone likes fish!” Usagi beamed.

The trio nodded slowly as Usagi passed out the dishes, Gosnell securing her hat the whole time. After she was done, she began to walk towards the door, turning towards Gosnell.

“Summon me when it's time for dessert,” she ordered quite sternly.

Gosnell nodded, fear in his eyes.

Ranma, Ukyo and Akane ate in silence for a while, Ranma doing his best to slow his eating to keep pace with the two females in his company. He had heard rumors of Usagi's cooking abilities and knew this was her specialty at Starfleet Academy, but was still amazed at how good everything tasted.

In fact, he could not remember enjoying a meal this much since he had had dinner with the Prime Minister of the Western Valarian Republic. He might consider hosting more dinner parties and having Usagi cook for him if he were not afraid that she would end up emotionally scarring whichever members of his crew she got to assist her.

“So,” Ranma decided to engage in some more small talk as Gosnell refilled everyone's glasses, “Ucchan, I apologize for not keeping better track of your record, but where were you before the Infinity?”

“I was the executive officer on the Saint Louis,” Ukyo replied. “In fact, I served on her for quite a while, joining eight years ago as a weapons officer, then becoming chief of security then XO.”

“I know the Saint Louis,” Akane acknowledged.

Ranma nodded. “Yeah, they were with us – we were both stationed on the Loami – during the first Chin'toka siege.”

Ukyo nodded and smiled. “If I knew you guys were over there, I would have said hello.”

Ranma and Akane smiled as well. “Likewise,” Ranma replied.

A few more moments went by before Ukyo turned to Ranma. "So, how is married life?"

Akane eyed Ranma intently, preparing multiple responses to whatever his response might be. Ranma allowed a sly grin to pass to Akane. "It's good. I enjoy it and it's nice knowing that regardless of the pip count, there is still someone on the ship who outranks me."

Both Akane and Ukyo laughed, although Ukyo's seemed a bit more forced. She did turn to Akane though, "Is he still any fun?"

Akane shrugged. "Occasionally. When he's not being thrown out of holo-karaoke bars."

"Hey," Ranma grouched, "I will not stand idly by and allow a quality song to be butchered, regardless of where we are."

"I'm standing right here you know," Gosnell grumbled.

The trio laughed at poor Gosnell's expense before finishing up their dinners. Gosnell quickly cleared off the table and set new menus out in front of them all.

"Ah, now we have ze dessert menus!" he beamed.

Ranma opened his up. "There is only one choice."

"Yeah, that's because she only made one thing for you."

"Then why give us a menu?" Akane asked.

"Look, I'm just doing my job here."

Ranma again shook his head disapprovingly and pointed to the one item on the menu. Gosnell took the order on his PADD and moved to Akane who also pointed to the single item. He stood behind Ukyo who looked at him for a moment.

"Ma'am?" he asked.

"Just bring the damned desert," Ranma snapped.

Gosnell mumbled something to himself and started to wander off. He hit the communicator attached to his lapel. "Gosnell to Tsukino, they're ready for dessert."

"I'm sorry, who are you calling?" Usagi's voice replied.

Gosnell sighed heavily. "Gosnell to chef pâtissier Tsukino, they are ready for dessert."

"We're on the way!"

"We?" Ranma asked.

"Makoto again?" Akane asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Gosnell replied.

<Nifty Star Trek Doorbell Sound Here>

Gosnell paused, trying to place himself into character again. His enthusiasm for this gig having dried up over the past hour.

“Ah! Ze deserts! She has arrived!”

Gosnell went to the door and opened it. Again, both Ranma and Akane were sent to the deck when both Minako and Ryouga came pushing in carts, both in chef's uniforms that were like Usagi's, however for whatever reason Usagi had Minako in a skirt that barely covered enough to make it legally count as a skirt.

Both wore white berets with the Starfleet emblem on them. Ryouga appeared to be QUITE displeased with not only the outfit he was wearing but by the whole concept of having to serve Ranma, simply nodded to the Captain.

“Ryouga, you're looking good,” Ranma snickered.

Ryouga shot him a look that in any other circumstance would have gotten him court-martialed. Ranma let it slide though, assuming that his current task was punishment enough. Minako was trying to both serve the group and make sure the 'skirt' did not expose anything she didn't want it to.

“What in the world?” Akane finally asked.

“She knows things,” both officers replied before turning and walking away, Minako with her hands behind her, holding the back of her skirt against her backside.

“SO CUTE!!!” Usagi squealed from the hallway.

“Get away from me,” Minako growled.

Usagi quickly moved past the pair and into Ranma's quarters. Gosnell again quickly moved to make sure Usagi's massive hat did not fall off her relatively small head.

“I hope everything so far has been delish!”

The group nodded as they began to eat the strawberry desert that was brought in for them.

“It's great, Usagi,” Akane acknowledged. “You're very talented.”

Ukyo nodded. “I appreciate all the work you put into this.”

“Oh, it was no problem at all!” Usagi beamed. “It's not often we have another ship's captain over for dinner, and even less often we have one of the Captain's ex-girlfriends!”

Both Ranma and Akane shot Usagi a look that likely could have killed a lesser woman.

“Oh snap,” Gosnell said, bolting to the replicator to get another bottle of wine.

Ukyo laughed, however. “That's the rumor mill for you. Ranchan and I are just very old, dear friends.” She turned to Ranma and smiled, although how sincere the smile was, Ranma could not tell. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

Ranma nodded in agreement. Usagi blinked a couple of times as Akane was still glaring at her, murderous intent clearly visible.

"Well..." Usagi mumbled, "I will stick to talking about what I know of best then! Food and the engine room!"

The glare from Akane changed to a look of exasperation. Ranma patted Usagi on the shoulder and smiled none the less though. "Speaking of which, you guys will have us ready to go in forty-eight hours, right?"

Usagi stared blankly at Ranma. "Yes?"

Ukyo just looked at Usagi. Ranma gave her a thumbs up as Akane began shoveling food into her mouth to ensure she did not say anything she would later regret; or worse, something that would send Usagi into a loud bawling frenzy.

Usagi smiled at the group, bowed, which caused her hat to fall to the floor with a thump, and left the room. Gosnell quickly picked up the hat and chased after Usagi, returning a few seconds later.

"She's your Chief Engineer?" Ukyo asked.

Ranma nodded.

"How are you guys still alive?" She looked to Akane for a second. "I don't mean any disrespect, but Akane isn't a doctor, but she's your CMO. Your chief engineer is a cook - a seemingly insane one at that." Ukyo looked to Gosnell for a second, "I don't know what the hell he is," Gosnell began to weep softly as Ukyo turned back to Ranma, "Shampoo is, well, Shampoo. And I understand Ryouga used to be at helm?"

Ranma nodded. "This crew is a lot different under pressure than they are just sitting around." Ranma looked to Akane. "They evolved too. Akane still isn't a doctor, but she's closer to being one than she was when she started. Usagi, for all her faults, knows far more about engineering than anyone else who came out of Starfleet Culinary."

Ranma chuckled a bit. "Ryouga is still Ryouga, which is why he's now a Marine. And believe it or not, Shampoo has proven to be one of the most loyal and trusted friends and co-workers one could ever hope to have."

Ukyo ate in silence as Ranma continued.

"I felt the same way you did when I first had this ship pulled out of space dock, Ucchan," Ranma sighed, thinking back. "For God's sake, we rear-ended another ship and then blew a god-damned hole in it."

"THAT WAS YOU?!" Ukyo gasped.

Ranma nodded.

"But I had a goal. We were set up to fail. So, our goal was simple. We wouldn't fail. And we haven't."

Ukyo nodded. "Well, that's for certain. You and your crew are the heroes of the Federation."

Akane smiled to Ranma, despite him shrugging nonchalantly. "Heroes are people who go above and beyond. We were just doing our jobs."

The trio all turned to Gosnell who was crying profusely. "That was beautiful, Captain."

Ranma just shook his head as he smiled.

The three finished off their desert and chatted among themselves for a bit longer. Finally, stuffed to the gills, Ranma turned to Gosnell.

"My compliments to the chef."

"Ah, madam will be pleased!" Gosnell replied as he cleared the table.

Ukyo looked to the clock on Ranma's wall and began to stand. "I probably should be getting back to my ship."

"Are you sure?" Akane asked. "We were going to the karaoke club tonight."

"Without me?" Gosnell asked.

"Yes," Ranma dryly replied.

Ukyo shrugged. "I guess I can stay a little later."

Gosnell grumbled. "What do I care. My hot wife has a hot new outfit." He quickly finished clearing the table and walked up to Ranma.

"Ahem," Gosnell cleared his throat.

"Yes?" Ranma asked.

"AHEM." Gosnell again cleared his throat louder and adjusted his eyes to draw attention to his hand which seemed to be extended.

Ranma looked to Gosnell's hand then back to his face. "Are you freaking kidding me?"

Gosnell said nothing and only continued to motion towards his hand with his eyes.

"I'm sorry, but I left my latinum in my other pants," Ranma stated.

Gosnell continued to stand there, determined not to take no for an answer.

Ranma rolled his eyes and hit his comm badge. "Security to the captain's quarters."

"It's been a pleasure serving you," Gosnell smiled as he quickly departed Ranma's home.

CHAPTER SEVEN – FORTY-EIGHT HOURS

There wasn't a thing in the report that the repair ship, the U.S.S. Arava, issued that was making JC feel like the likelihood of meeting the self-imposed forty-eight-hour deadline to have the ship ready to go back into The Badlands would actually be met.

Ignoring the issue with the nacelle there were several hundred outer hull breeches. A majority of the Sisko's shield emitters were either damaged or destroyed. Hull plating was compromised. Ablative armor was compromised. Power relays were damaged all over the ship. Repairing all of this would take massive work and massive coordination.

Yet for some reason he was not entirely upset that the Chief Engineer had spent the first several hours of damage control 'golden time' cooking dinner for the Captain, rather than helping him.

What he said to her was true. She had gotten better at her job. He really felt that she had grown as an engineer, and he would be content having her on his engineering team.

Of course, what he did not mention is that he'd prefer to have her in some low-level position as a Petty Officer.

In this kind of situation, he really did feel it was better for him to be in control. Again, he did not mind having her underfoot, learning - under normal circumstances. But when time was of the essence, and when there were an additional couple of hundred engineers from a repair ship – and a few dozen from the Infinity - on board that needed coordination, that was not the time for teaching or worse yet, a power struggle.

“Lieutenant,” Ranma called to JC from across engineering.

JC looked up from the terminal he was working on and acknowledged Ranma. He quickly scurried across the room and nodded.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning,” Ranma replied. “How are things going?”

“Well, we've ascertained what all needs to be repaired,” JC answered, looking down at a PADD that he was carrying. “That pretty much took all night. Now it's just a matter of fixing things, highest priority downward.”

Ranma nodded before looking around. “Where is Commander Tsukino?”

JC motioned for Ranma to follow him into his office. Ranma did and JC shut the door. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Ranma nodded, despite not wanting to. It never ended well when people asked him that.

"I understand that she is the Chief Engineer, but..." JC paused, making sure he phrased this in just the right way. "...but right now is not the time for her to be 'the Chief Engineer'."

Ranma sighed. "Lieutenant, I understand your concerns, but-"

"Captain, I don't want to be rude, but Usagi cannot handle this kind of incident."

"What about after the crash? I understand she was a help with that incident."

JC nodded. "Yes, but we had a single system to deal with. Power. It was far easier to contain her."

"Contain her?" Ranma asked.

"She wants to get her hands in everything."

"As Chief Engineer isn't that her job?"

JC sighed. "If she knew what she was doing, it would be one thing."

"Lieutenant, I'm not going to demote her. The whole reason I haven't gotten rid of her was to allow her to grow and succeed."

JC nodded. "And she has. That said, she still does not think people believe she's qualified to run engineering, so she has to micromanage everything."

"However did she get that impression?"

JC paused.

"Look," Ranma continued, "I appreciate your concern. I want the ship fixed in forty-eight hours and if it's not, it's not. However, if you have an issue with Commander Tsukino and how she's handling things down here, then you need to work that out with her. I'm not going to usurp her authority unless you bring me something more concrete than 'she gets in the way'."

Ranma sighed. "If that was a reason to get rid of people, I wouldn't have half my senior staff."

JC nodded. "Yes sir."

Ranma put a reassuring hand on JC's shoulder. "Look, if I didn't have faith in you guys, I would just say 'to hell with it' and just worry about the nacelle so we could get back to a shipyard."

JC nodded. "Forty-eight hours."

Ranma grinned and left JC's office. Usagi slowly walked in a couple of moments after Ranma left. "What was that all about?" she asked.

JC shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I'm just curious, where were you just now?"

Usagi pointed to a cross-section of the ship on one of JC's monitors. She tapped the area near a forward torpedo launcher. "Well, I'm not good at much, but the crash made me really good at fixing power relays, so I was helping with those."

JC brought up the power flow diagram and noticed that the once red launcher was now green.

"Dammit, I'm a fucking idiot."

Usagi looked at him strangely. "Why?"

JC plopped down in his chair and turned away from Usagi. "I asked the Captain to find something else for you to do till we were done with this because I thought you'd just be in the way."

"Oh," Usagi softly replied.

"I don't have any right to think of you that way," he continued. "And even if you do push yourself into things, it makes you better. So, what right would I have to stop you?"

Usagi ran her hand through JC's hair and smiled. "Ha! We're both stupid now."

JC laughed, despite not wanting to.

"The Federation's greatest starship. Her engineering department run by Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum," Usagi continued.

"Which one am I?"

Usagi pondered this for a minute. "Which one was the boy?"

JC just put his face in his hand before pointing to another red spot near one of the ventral phase cannons. "There are some blown out power relays down here."

"We're on it!" Usagi smiled heading out and grabbing a couple of engineers.

* * * *

It was not an abnormal sight to see the NEO teams in what they referred to as the 'southern' part of the ship. They conducted counter-mutiny drills with the security forces as well as 'control reacquisition' drills that Rei felt were better run in the actual corridors, Jefferies tubes and turboshafts rather than the NEO holodecks.

However, it wasn't that often that any of them were seen 'down under' in a more relaxed mode.

Kio and Anthony got a couple of looks when they entered the lounge not dressed in their combat jumpsuits but rather their gray, black and green duty uniforms.

"Lieutenant, Sargent," Gosnell smiled at them as he walked up to the table where they sat down. "What can I get for you?"

"Green tea, please," Kio smiled.

"Coffee, thank you," Anthony answered.

Gosnell looked a bit disappointed that they didn't want anything exotic. He'd expected a couple of battle-hardened soldiers like them to drink something strong. Topped off with a stern order of 'leave the bottle' or something along those lines.

He sighed and wandered off to process their order. Kio looked out the window at the swirling clouds of The Badlands in front of the Sisko. She turned to Anthony who appeared to be thinking the same thing she was.

"I was pretty sure that was it," Kio said.

Anthony nodded. "If it hadn't been for the Marines and the Infinity's security officers, it would have been."

Gosnell returned with the drinks. Both Kio and Anthony nodded a thank you before Gosnell scurried off to deal with some engineers from the repair ship who had come in for a quick break.

"It's funny," Kio said, taking a sip of her tea.

"What is?"

"It's not that I am afraid of dying," she adjusted her gaze back and forth between Anthony and the gas cloud. "It's just that I didn't think I was done yet."

"Done?"

Kio shrugged slightly, drinking a bit more. "Done with whatever I was created for."

Anthony smirked a bit. "I never knew you were so philosophical."

Kio again shrugged, her dark eyes lingering on her glass a bit. "Don't you think you have a purpose?"

Anthony nodded. "Yes, but as far as I am concerned, I dictate my purpose."

Kio leaned back in her chair. "So, what is it, oh wise sage of the Sisko? What purpose does Anthony Lawrence Schaefer have in this universe?"

Anthony chuckled a bit at Kio's sarcasm. "Well obviously it's to keep Miss Kio Yuki alive."

Kio rolled her eyes. "Well, based on your last performance, you might want to look for a new purpose."

"Hey, you're not dead now, are you?"

"No thanks to you!"

"You don't know that. Perhaps I willed those Marines to us!"

"If anyone did, it was the glorious spirit of our dear, departed friend, Sargent Michael Simpson. Watching over us and protecting us as he always did."

Anthony raised his glass. "To Mike."

Kio raised hers. "To Mike."

The pair clinked their glasses together and took a drink. After a few moments of silence, Anthony vocalized another question that was on his mind.

“So, how did you and Commander Hino become such good friends all of a sudden?”

“Friends?” Kio scoffed. “What ship are you on?”

“Please,” Anthony scoffed right back. “She’s referring to you now as ‘Kio’, she hasn’t scolded you once in the last two days-”

“I haven’t done anything wrong!” Kio objected.

“Never stopped her before.”

Kio scowled.

“And I am not even sure what was going on over there,” he said, pointing towards The Badlands. “I mean, Lt. Parker said you guys were making out-”

Kio spit the tea she was drinking all over Anthony.

“Well, okay then...” Anthony mumbled trying to wipe off the tea-slash-Kio-saliva from his uniform. Gosnell, upon hearing the commotion walked over. He looked to Kio, who had tea dripping down her face, then to Anthony who had quite a bit more tea dripping down his face.

“You’d be surprised how often this happens,” he smiled. “I’ll get a towel and some refills.”

Gosnell scampered off for a minute and returned with two towels and two new drinks for the pair. He nodded and then walked off as the pair attempted to dry themselves off.

“Look,” Kio said quietly after cleaning off her face. “Keep your mouth shut about that. They over drugged her, and she didn’t know what she was doing.”

Anthony looked to Kio inquisitively. “It doesn’t seem like someone would do something like that, even when high, unless there was an underlying reason.” Anthony turned away a bit before finishing quietly. “Or attraction.”

Kio sighed. “It’s irrelevant. Even if she is...” Kio slowed down and spoke softer, “like that, I’m not.”

“I know,” Anthony nodded. “I was very good friends with Nik, you know.”

Kio’s eyes very slowly moved to Anthony and burned a very, very deep hole into him. “What do you mean by that?”

Anthony realizing he was getting into territory best left untouched diverted the topic slightly. “Okay well ignoring that, there is still the other stuff. What gives?”

Kio pondered demanding what her late husband told Anthony about her but decided that it was not worth potentially starting an argument about, especially considering the man she should be mad at for spilling the beans was dead. She leaned back again, sipping on the new tea.

“She came to my quarters the other day.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows.

"If you think I won't kill you in front of all these people..."

"Sorry, sorry..."

Kio scowled a bit before continuing. "She, of course, took a few minutes to insult me, but then she apologized to me. What was weird was that it felt genuine. She went on to talk to me about what she went through with her husband and his death, and I honestly felt..."

Kio leaned forward and looked Anthony straight in the eyes. "I felt bad for her." Kio shook her head, laughing slightly. "I mean, I have hated that woman since nearly the second day I met her yet suddenly here I was feeling like she was on the same level as me. I could relate to her. I could understand what she went through and on some level, I could see how she could feel what she was doing was right, even though she knew it wasn't."

Kio leaned back and smirked. "And at the same time, I realized to myself that despite her doing everything wrong to make me a better leader and a better officer candidate, she actually made me a better one by forcing me to succeed for no other reason than to spite her."

"Wow," Anthony remarked.

Kio half shrugged as she took another drink. "Of course, I know now that we can succeed on our own, as a team, but it won't be as fun anymore knowing that it won't irk her."

Anthony laughed. "Maybe you should have died over there, as your purpose was to piss off Commander Hino?"

Kio laughed as well. "Maybe." She looked out the window towards The Badlands. "Still time. The job's not done yet."

Anthony frowned. "Don't say that."

"Would you miss me?" Kio grinned.

"There's that," Anthony acknowledged. "But if you die it means I likely died as well, which I am not cool with."

"We all have our time."

Anthony grumbled. "Is it all that green-tea you drink? Is that what causes you to go from Happy-Kio to Morbid-Kio so damned quickly?"

Kio smiled. "Not sure. But it does keep my hair nice and shiny."

"Smells nice too."

"That's my shampoo," Kio acknowledged. "And really, you shouldn't be smelling my hair. That's just weird."

Anthony shrugged. "Gotta smell something."

Kio laughed at her friend as the pair continued to drink and chat.

* * * *

Ranma, Shampoo, JC, and Makoto sat down in the main conference room of the Sisko. Ranma and Makoto both looked to JC who dumped about thirty PADDs onto the table in front of him, before Shampoo pointed out the obvious.

“Lieutenant,” she said, cautiously watching him try to rearrange the PADDs in whatever order he thought they needed to be in, “Admiral Saotome asked for department heads.”

JC nodded. “I know, but Commander Tsukino asked me to deal with this as she wanted to make sure DC on the shield generators was running smoothly.”

Ranma eyed JC suspiciously. “Lieutenant...”

“I swear, Captain,” JC turned to Ranma. “You can ask her. I believe her exact words were, quote, I don't have time to ramble off a bunch of 'gobblyt-goop', unquote.”

Ranma scowled. JC shrugged a bit, seeing how upset Ranma was at Usagi disobeying the instructions of Starfleet.

“Captain, I know SHE was the one who was supposed to be up here, but now she's got something to prove to the other engineers and herself...”

JC noticed Ranma still staring at him.

“And I guess, to me, that she's not just some idiot who is always in the way.”

“How is she doing?” Makoto asked.

JC nodded approvingly. “She's doing fine.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “I'm not going to lie and say that she's doing as well as someone who went to the academy to be an engineer, but nothing she has repaired has failed or exploded or otherwise went awry.”

Ranma smiled. “Well, I guess then we can let this slide.”

“To be fair, I have been 'coordinating' things, so I am a bit more familiar with the over all status and issues,” JC said, not wanting to sell himself short.

Ranma nodded, still smiling. “Fair enough.”

“Aino to Saotome.”

“Go,” Ranma replied.

“Admiral Saotome on encrypted subspace.”

“Patch him through.”

Minako closed the channel and Genma appeared on the viewer. He smiled brightly at Ranma and the officers in the room.

“Ranma!”

“Hey pop-” Ranma cut him off and smiled. “Good evening, Admiral.”

Genma smiled. "How are you doing?"

"We're beaten up, but-"

"No," Genma interrupted. "How are YOU doing?"

"Oh," Ranma blinked. "I am good, thank you."

Genma nodded. "I am glad. You're not stressing yourself too hard, are you? I remember very vividly what happened last time you had a very important mission."

Ranma remembered as well. Well, most of it that is. "No, sir. As well, this respite has given me time to rest. Slept very well last night, as a matter of fact."

Genma nodded approvingly. "I am glad." Genma picked up a PADD and began to go over it. "Before we talk about your ship and what we will do, I thought I would let you know some things we found out, based on the information you sent us."

"Oh?" Ranma asked.

"Pallor, the Vorta that Commander Hino mentioned in her report, he wasn't in any of our databases. So, we contacted the Dominion and demanded to know who he was. Fortunately we managed to speak with Odo, so the conversation was not hostile," Genma explained.

"Pallor oversaw a small battalion of some of the Alpha Jem'Hadar. However, he was never successful in battle and the Founders planned on having him..." Genma cleared his throat, "...eliminated. However, he and his task force fled and were not seen again for the rest of the war."

"Do you think they held out in The Badlands?" Makoto asked.

"It's possible," Genma nodded. "They may have found an old Maquis base there."

"Still doesn't explain fleet," Shampoo said.

Genma nodded. "I asked Odo about Blackout and the device. He said it was something the Founders were designing during the latter parts of the war, but never completed before their surrender. As far as he knew, there shouldn't have been a way for Pallor to have the schematics for either Blackout or the device."

"Perhaps there is a Founder with Pallor?" Ranma hypothesized.

"That's possible," Genma nodded. "I personally find it hard to believe that a single Vorta could control upwards of a million Jem'Hadar by himself."

"Potentially more," Makoto replied. "They were bringing reinforcements. There might be another breeding facility. We haven't yet gotten scouting reports back from the Infinity's fighters."

"If there is a Founder, Ranma," Genma continued, "I would like, if possible, for it to be captured, rather than killed."

Ranma nodded slowly. "I understand. Though, now that Pallor knows we're here, and knows about how much force we have, I am wary about simply sending over the NEO teams. They barely made it out from the shipyard."

Genma nodded. "Well, if you can do nothing but destroy him, then what has to be done, has to be done. Though, wasn't Pallor killed on the shipyard?"

Ranma shrugged. "The NEO teams never saw him, only heard him. There's no guarantee he was ever on there to begin with. As well, we wouldn't have been able to see an escape pod in the interference of the plasma clouds."

Genma sighed. "Very well, tell me about the status of your ship."

Ranma turned to JC who cleared his throat.

"The worst damage is to our port nacelle," JC said, looking to a PADD. "It took a hit from a gas cloud that exploded between the nacelle and our shields, which actually caused the force of the explosion to be directed back towards the nacelle, intensifying the damage. It was then damaged again when the shipyard exploded."

JC moved to another PADD. "We had to get people outside to survey the full extent of the damage. We cannot fully repair it in space. However, we can fix it enough to make us warp capable. Though to avoid any catastrophic," JC sighed, "incidental damage to the ship, we're having to remove the affected plasma coils which will seriously nerf our warp speed."

"What will your top speed be?" Genma asked.

"Warp four," JC replied. "And only for about eight hours at a time, with about an eight hour cool down."

Ranma whimpered as he slid down in his chair as JC continued. "Unfortunately, because we don't use normal engines, we have to limp back to Chii to have everything repaired, rather than just limping to the nearest shipyard."

Genma nodded. "So, what you're saying is after this mission I can forget about using you guys for what, a month?"

JC nodded. "Plus repair time."

Genma quietly swore to himself before nodding. "Well, it could be worse."

JC nodded. "At least we have a warp core." Ranma, Shampoo and Makoto all nodded in agreement.

"How is everything else?" Genma asked.

JC looked over his PADDs before turning back to Genma. "There are a few hull breaches that we're likely just going to have to seal off with the emergency bulkheads, but they aren't that big of a concern, assuming we're not as close to an exploding space dock as we were again."

"Impulse will be fully restored, shields will be fully restored, weapons as well. The ablative armor and hull plating took a pretty nasty beating and won't be 100 percent by the forty-eight hour deadline, but will be acceptable."

"Excellent," Genma smiled. "Your engineering team is doing great."

JC smiled. "We'll, it's Lt. Commander Tsukino's team. And we couldn't do it without the Arava's and Infinity help."

Genma nodded. "Where is Lt. Commander Tsukino?"

"She's probably headfirst in a junction box, trying to help get us going again," JC smiled.

"Literally," Makoto smirked, drawing a stern, yet sly grin from Ranma.

"Very good," Genma smiled. "Well, I am immensely proud of you guys. Keep me updated on your status and I will contact you back again in about thirty-six hours."

"Yes sir," Ranma smiled.

Genma ended the transmission. JC began to scoop up his PADDs but wasn't having much success in getting them all into his arms.

"Do you want me to have someone to help you with that?" Ranma asked.

"Oh, no sir," JC smiled. "I can get them." JC, after a couple of minutes finally managed to get them all, albeit sloppily in his arms, and walked out of the conference room and onto the bridge. From the conference room, a sudden crash is heard, followed by JC screaming.

"GOD DAMN IT KAIL, YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE!"

Shampoo laughed as did Ranma and Makoto. Ranma turned to first Makoto then to his XO. "A month."

"Like Devall said," Makoto chuckled, "at least we have a warp core."

Shampoo nodded. "Though as often as we say that now, it feel like now destiny to jettison it."

Ranma glared at Shampoo for a moment before the door to the conference room slid open again and Ukyo walked in. Ranma nodded to his friend as she walked up to him. "Hey!"

Ukyo smiled. "Hi. They said you said for me to stop asking for permission to come on board."

Ranma nodded. "You're always welcome on board the Sisko, Ucchan."

Makoto and Shampoo nodded.

"Well, still a courtesy," Ukyo smiled.

Ranma nodded and pointed to a chair. Ukyo moved to the chair and sat down. "What brings you by?" Ranma asked.

"I have reconnaissance from the remaining four planetoids."

“Ukyo expression does not fill Shampoo with feelings of easy victory,” Shampoo sighed.

Ukyo shook her head and tapped her communicator. “Kuonji to Lt. Kaii, would you please transfer the Infinity recon reports to the conference room?”

“Yes, Captain,” Kaii replied, the sounds of JC still swearing slightly audible in the background.

“Did all your fighters make it out okay?” Makoto asked.

Ukyo nodded. “Despite a LOT of Jem'Hadar ships roaming around, as expected the fighters were unnoticed. They spent longer than planned in there as they mapped out tactical coordinates so that we could assist with orbital defense turrets from outside of normal targeting range.”

Ranma patted Ukyo on the shoulder. “That's quite clever. I wouldn't have thought of that.”

Ukyo smiled at Ranma. “We figured it would be helpful for the facility we dubbed Alpha Base.”

“That it?!” Shampoo blinked, looking at a massive, planetary facility on the screen.

“No,” Ukyo sighed.

Ranma looked it over. “That's another breeding facility.” He turned to Ukyo. “Could the fighters scan it?”

Ukyo shook her head. “They don't have that kind of sensor power.” Ukyo changed the image again. Ranma nodded as did Shampoo.

“Of course, with breeding facility they have another White facility,” Shampoo stated.

“That planetoid was guarded by four warships and about a dozen fighters,” Ukyo reported.

Ranma shook his head. “Damn.”

“We're going to go with you, rather than stay behind,” Ukyo said.

Ranma nodded. Ukyo looked at him rather surprised. Ranma noticed this.

“What?”

“I didn't expect to win that easily.”

Ranma laughed. “At full strength, that would be tough for us. We're damaged and we still will be going into this. I'd be a moron to not accept your assistance. In fact, I should almost make you go in first.”

Ukyo smirked as she advanced to the next image. “The sixth and seventh planets were empty, however as you can see, they appear to have had some activity on them at some point.”

Shampoo nodded. “We noticed mining on one other as well.”

Ukyo advanced to the last one. Ranma blinked. On the planet there was a small facility, barely visible.

“That's Alpha Base.”

“What that?” Makoto asked. “Our Runabout could destroy that.”

“Not before this got you,” Ukyo said, advancing to the next slide. On it was a massive net of orbital defenses; no less than about a hundred turret and torpedo batteries. Also sitting in orbit were thirty warships and fighters.

“FUCK!” Makoto barked.

“What that, bank?” Shampoo asked.

“The Founder,” Ranma dryly stated.

“Founder?” Ukyo asked.

Ranma nodded. “There is likely a rogue Founder in here as well. Starfleet would like it captured if possible.”

“Well,” Makoto said, leaning forward and taking a better look at the small facility below the gaggle of orbital defenses, “a small building like that will be much easier for Rei's team to storm than that shipyard was.”

Ranma nodded. “Alright. We move out in thirty-six hours.”

Ukyo nodded and stood with the rest of the room. Shampoo and Makoto left, however Ranma grabbed Ukyo's arm and kept her in the room. Once the doors to the conference room had closed, Ranma smiled at Ukyo.

“Ucchan, thanks again for everything.”

“No problem, Ranchan,” she smiled back. “That's what friends, and fellow Starfleet officers are for.”

Ranma nodded, leaned forward, and kissed Ukyo on the cheek before walking to the doors and out and onto the bridge. Ukyo blinked a couple of times before smiling slightly, still upset that she had lost a lover but content in knowing that she did still have a friend.

* * * *

Minako panted a couple of times before rolling off Ryouga and looking up towards the ceiling of their quarters. The pair both continued to breathe heavily while staring upwards for about a minute before Minako finally wiped some of the sweat from her face and adjusted herself, so she was facing Ryouga.

Ryouga also wiped off his face, but only turned his head to face Minako. He allowed his eyes to run up and down her still naked body slowly, drawing an approving grin from his wife.

“I did good,” Ryouga commented.

Minako smirked, her eyes moving up and down Ryouga. She allowed her eyes to linger below Ryouga's waist a bit longer than necessary though, causing Ryouga to blush slightly.

“I also landed a prized piece of pork,” she smirked.

Ryouga glowered a bit. Minako laughed quietly at his discomfort. "You're still too sensitive about that," she continued to laugh.

"You would be too."

Minako grinned before moving a bit more and laying one of her arms across Ryouga's chest and wrapping her legs around one of his. "Mind if I ask you something?"

Ryouga shook his head. "Not at all."

"Were you scared?"

"When?"

"On that Jem'Hadar ship or when you went onto the shipyard."

"No," Ryouga answered without hesitation.

"Not at all?"

"Nope."

"How is that possible?"

"Because I knew I had three important things on my side," Ryouga explained.

"And those were?"

"My training," Ryouga said, smiling slightly. "They have taught me a lot over the last year."

"You were already pretty tough."

Ryouga nodded. "Yes, but I think we can both agree that I lacked a bit of discipline."

Minako nodded, thinking back to the two times he beamed off the ship, without permission, in idiotic attempts to try and rescue his then crush, Akane.

"The second thing," Ryouga continued, "is that I had my fellow Marines with me. We all have each other's backs, so I knew that I would be safe."

Minako again nodded. If there was one thing the Marines had a lot of, it was loyalty and camaraderie.

"Finally," Ryouga allowed his smile to grow wider as he turned towards Minako completely, pulling her arm around him before running his hand through her mangled mess of hair, "I knew I had you waiting for me, and I knew we were destined to be together, so I knew that no amount of Jem'Hadar could stop me from returning safely."

Minako leaned her head up against Ryouga's, a single tear forming in her eye.

"Were you scared?" Ryouga asked.

"For you?"

Ryouga softly shook his head. "No. Here."

Minako paused for almost a whole minute. She wanted to say something as wonderful as what Ryouga has said, but she couldn't. It would not be true.

"Yes," she finally answered. "When I realized we wouldn't be outside of the blast radius of the shipyard, I thought the ship would be destroyed."

Ryouga again ran his hands through Minako's hair before kissing her softly. He then chuckled a bit. "Things like that make me glad we're down in the bowels with no windows so we don't know it's coming."

Minako forced a grin upon herself. Ryouga hugged her tightly when he realized that she was genuinely upset.

"A few kilometers one way or the other would have made all the difference," Minako said softly, while letting Ryouga continue to hold her.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

Minako looked at Ryouga. "Second thoughts?"

"Do you want to leave?"

"No."

"You don't have to stay."

Minako lay there in silence for a moment. "No, I love this work. I love this ship; the people, the adventures," she sighed before looking back to Ryouga. "I guess when you actually sit and THINK about how close you were to forcefully acknowledging your mortality, it's strange."

Ryouga nods, before laughing a bit. "We've faced the Kunos twice, been blown out of an atmosphere, took on a Klingon battle force, crashed on a planet, survived an entire army's nuclear assault, battled a Vulcan armada, saved the Federation and now fought off an unholy number of Jem'Hadar." Ryouga began to laugh a bit more. "I don't think our immortality is in question anymore."

Minako chuckled. "You sound like Makoto."

"Great minds think alike."

Minako chuckled again before allowing her gaze to move past Ryouga and blankly towards the wall behind them. "I usually don't think about it. Not that I am ignoring it, you know," she added, sighing, "it's just that there's no point in thinking about something you can't control."

"Of course you can control it," Ryouga countered.

Minako looked back towards him. "How? How could we have controlled it had we still been in the wrong part of the blast radius of that station?"

"We weren't in the blast radius of that station," Ryouga argued.

Minako sighed. Ryouga just wasn't getting what she was trying to say. "If we had been—"

"We weren't."

"If we--"

"We weren't," he repeated.

Minako scowled. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

"Why are you dwelling on what could have happened rather than on what did?" Ryouga asked. "You could have been killed in a transporter accident beaming up here from shore leave. I didn't hear you rambling on about that."

Minako glared at Ryouga. Ryouga, for his part, simply shook his head and again ran his hand through Minako's hair. "Look, we controlled our fate by moving far enough away. We controlled our fate by being strong enough to defeat our enemies. And we will control our fate by choosing to go in there again and confronting what is left of them."

Minako's glare softened to a simple look as she nodded. "You're right."

Ryouga nodded. "It happens," he said.

"You have to acknowledge, though," she argued, "that when we crashed on Valarie, we had no control over that."

Ryouga thought about that for a moment. "I guess I can concede that one."

Minako happily grinned as Ryouga climbed on top of her. The pair began to kiss passionately; Ryouga's hands moving up and down Minako's body before he lined himself up.

<Nifty Star Trek Communicator Noise>

Ryouga paused and glared at Minako's communicator. Minako also gave the communicator a glare before grabbing it from the table next to the couple's bed and tapping it once.

"Go ahead," she dryly stated.

"Minako!" Usagi cheerfully chirped, obviously oblivious to what she just interrupted. "I need your help dealing with the trio-feral bell-packs in the targeting system."

Ryouga, still perched over Minako looked at her oddly.

"What?" Minako asked.

Usagi could be heard talking to someone in the background, before yelling at them, then speaking to Minako again. "Bio-Neural Gel packs."

Minako sighed. "Can't someone from engineering help you?"

"There isn't anyone available, and we're afraid we're going to miss our deadline."

Ryouga looked to Minako sadly as she simply dropped her head onto her pillow. "Okay, I will meet you in Operations Control in about ten minutes."

"Okay!" Usagi said, happily. "Where is that, anyway?"

Ryoga rolled off Minako and covered his head so that his laughter would not be audible. Minako looked to her communicator in frustration. "Deck seven."

"Thank you!" The communication ended and Minako sat up. She looked to Ryoga who was also sitting up.

"Damn Ranma," Ryoga scowled while laughing.

"Ranma?"

"Well, I can't be mad at Usagi."

"What are you going to do?"

Ryoga blushed. "I have to do something about... that," he answered, pointing towards his lower body.

Minako slid down on the bed, brushing the hair off her face. "It won't take me ten minutes to get to deck seven."

An exceptionally large grin crossed Ryoga's face.

* * * *

Gosnell was pleased seeing all the additional people on board the ship. It was great for his business. It would be even better if anything cost money in his establishment and he was making a profit, but he acknowledged that he wasn't in it for financial gain.

He just like serving people.

It was a good thing too. Globbs and globbs of both engineers from the repair ship and the Infinity had been over to assist the Sisko's engineers in getting her fixed up and they all wanted drinks. Gosnell and his staff were working non-stop. In fact, for the past forty hours, Gosnell had kept the lounge open so that regardless of the time, the hard-working officers and enlistees would have a place to come and take a break.

They all seemed to appreciate it too. He had gotten several messages complimenting him on his staff and the service.

That might be why he had the extra skip in his step as he jaunted down the corridor towards the lounge around 05:35 that morning. His positive attitude is likely why he did not notice someone waiting for him.

"Help me," a voice spoke as a hand grabbed the back of Gosnell's shirt and pulled him into a crevice.

Gosnell nearly screeched like a small child till he was spun around and found himself face to face with Lt. Jeff Fuchs.

"You scared the hell out of me," Gosnell growled.

“Sorry,” Jeff said, looking around nervously. Gosnell also began to look around nervously, thinking the pair of them were about to be ambushed by something.

“Come with me,” Jeff demanded, grabbing Gosnell by the arm, and taking him into the corridor.

“I have work,” Gosnell protested. Jeff ignored him and drug him down the corridor and to the turbolift.

“Deck five,” Jeff instructed the lift.

“I was already going that way. You could have just ambushed me there.”

“Look, I made a mistake and I need your help to fix it.”

“What kind of mistake?”

“Jaxson- Lt. Kaii-”

“Oh!” Gosnell smiled. “How are things between you two?”

Jeff glared at Gosnell.

“Oh.”

The lift doors opened, and Jeff began to drag Gosnell out.

“Look,” Gosnell snarled, “I'm not going anywhere, you can stop dragging me.”

Jeff sighed, stopped, and let go of Gosnell. Gosnell looked to Jeff, who was obviously flustered, frustrated, and sad.

“What the hell is wrong?” Gosnell asked.

“Kaii isn't gay,” Jeff said bluntly.

“Awkward,” Gosnell blinked.

Jeff nodded. “Yes. Especially when I tried to kiss him.”

“I thought you... You know... brain scanned him.”

Jeff turned and glared at Gosnell again. “I honestly thought I sensed homosexual tendencies from him.” Jeff turned away and sighed. “I guess I was wrong.”

“But you guys have been... hanging out...”

“Kaii is very sociable.”

“You two were sitting very close together at Commander Aino's wedding...”

“He's also apparently quite oblivious to overt flirting.”

Gosnell rubbed his head and sighed. “Well, okay. But what do you want me to do?”

“Fix!”

Gosnell shook his head. "I don't do that, you do!"

"I can't!" Jeff groaned. "I broke!" Jeff snarled at Gosnell for making him use incomplete sentences before looking down the hallway towards Lt. Kaii's quarters. "Please, just see if you can clear things up. You seem good at talking to people. I figured if anyone other than me could talk to him, it would be you."

Gosnell sighed. He really did not want to have any kind of weird, awkward conversation this early in the morning, but at the same time he couldn't abandon the poor councilor in his hour of need.

"Fine," he finally relented. "Stay here."

Jeff nodded as Gosnell walked down the corridor and stopped at Kaii's doorway. He inhaled deeply and moved his finger towards the buzzer but stopped just shy of it as he saw JC.

"Lt. Devall!" Gosnell called.

JC looked to him. "Hey."

"You busy?"

"Very."

Gosnell sighed. "Damn."

"Why?"

"No reason," Gosnell said.

JC nodded and continued on. Gosnell went ahead and pushed the button. After a moment, the doors slid open and Kaii, still only partially dressed in his black pants and gray undershirt opened the door.

"Hi, Lieutenant. How are you?" Gosnell asked.

"Uh, good morning," Kaii replied, a little surprised. "I'm good, thank you. What can I do for you?"

Gosnell adjusted himself a bit and cleared his throat. "Um, I was wondering if we could have a conversation?"

Kaii scratched the ridges on his nose before nodding slowly. "Sure, come on in."

Gosnell smiled and followed Kaii in.

"Would you like something to drink?" Kaii asked. "I was just having breakfast."

Gosnell shook his head. "No, thank you." He paused for a second. "How come you don't have breakfast at my establishment with the rest of the bridge crew?"

"My morning prayers have to be done right before work, so I eat before them. You're not open early enough," Kaii explained.

"I see," Gosnell said. "I didn't know I was alienating our Bajoran crew members like that. I will have to make adjustments."

Kaii shrugged as he brought his drink over to his couch and sat down next to Gosnell. "I normally don't like to get up too early before my shift anyway, so I wouldn't call it 'alienation'," he smiled.

Gosnell nodded.

"So," Kaii said, turning to Gosnell, "what is it you would like to talk about?"

"Hmm?" Gosnell asked. "Oh, right. I heard Lt. Fuchs tried to kiss you."

Kaii, who had begun to take a drink of his orange juice began to choke on it. Gosnell began to look around worriedly.

"Should I call sick-bay?"

Kaii shook his head negatively as he coughed a few times, getting the orange juice he inhaled out of his lungs. Once he was finished, he turned to Gosnell.

"Who told you that?"

"Lt. Fuchs."

"Did he send you here?"

"Are you going to throw me out if I say yes?"

Kaii sighed.

"He feels really terrible, Lieutenant," Gosnell said. "He misunderstood and he wants to be your friend. He--"

"Look," Kaii interrupted. "He didn't misunderstand anything."

Gosnell looked to Kaii confused. Kaii cracked his knuckles a bit nervously before leaning into Gosnell. "I am gay."

"Oh. Then, why--"

"Because it's not as tolerated on Bajor as it is in the general Federation population," Kaii explained. "My father is a very prominent Vedek there and if it were to get out that he had a homosexual son, it would not do well for him."

"So, why didn't you just tell Lt. Fuchs that instead of lying and saying you weren't gay?"

"I never said that," Kaii said. "He assumed that when I told him 'we can't do this'."

Gosnell scowled. "For God's sake."

"I don't have any problem hanging out with him, or being with him," Kaii sighed. "I just cannot have a relationship with him, or really anyone."

Kaii looked to Gosnell. "You'll explain that to him?"

Gosnell shrugged. "I doubt I'll have to. I know he's right outside with his ear up against the door."

Kaii looked to the door. "Jeff?"

The door slid open, and Jeff walked in. He looked to Kaii and sighed.

“Sorry,” Kaii said.

Jeff shook his head. “You really shouldn't have to put your own happiness behind your father's.”

“You're making assumptions again.”

Jeff walked in further allowing the doors to close. “Oh?”

“You assume I am unhappy,” Kaii stated. “I am not. I was – I am happy with you as a friend, I am happy with all my friends here. I do not need sex or really any kind of 'physical' contact to be happy.”

Kaii stood and walked to Jeff. “Would it be nice to be able to openly express myself? Sure. But we all make certain sacrifices. I mean, we both traded some of our freedoms to wear this uniform.”

Jeff nodded slowly, understanding Kaii's point. However, being born and raised in the quite liberal Federation, he wouldn't agree with the restrictions placed upon his friend. He conceded, however, that he would respect them, as that is what his friend desired.

“Okay,” Jeff finally answered. “Sorry for not asking first.”

Kaii smirked. “Thanks for wanting to, at least.”

Jeff nodded, smiling.

“Well,” Gosnell said, standing and walking towards the door. “My work here is done. Off to my real job now!”

“If you do start opening earlier, let me know,” Kaii said to Gosnell.

Gosnell nodded as he walked out, followed by Jeff. Jeff walked with Gosnell as the alien headed towards the ship's lounge.

“Thanks,” Jeff meekly said after a few minutes of walking.

Gosnell nodded and smiled. “Happy to help.”

“You're pretty good,” Jeff added. “I may use you as an assistant on some of my harder cases.”

Gosnell again nodded, but then suddenly stopped. “Fine, but if you do, simply summon me. Next time you grab me in the hallway, I am calling my wife and her goons.”

Jeff laughed as he resumed walking with Gosnell.

CHAPTER EIGHT - REENTRY

Ranma stood on the aft section of the bridge and looked over the master situation display. The reflection of his blue eyes shone back at him in the plexiglass cover of the giant monitor as they moved up and down the ship. The only point on which they lingered was the nacelle, which – unlike the rest of the ship – remained red.

There were only two other areas of the ship that were colored, one in the stern of the ship. A hull breach that would have to be repaired in dry dock. That section had been secured by bulkheads, but none the less it concerned Ranma as that section also contained two of the ventral lifeboats.

Ranma had all non-essential personnel moved from the surrounding sections as well, just to be on the safe side.

Another breach was near engineering. He had been assured that a full breach into engineering was unlikely, but none the less, he was concerned. Not just for the engineers that worked down there, but for dangers of anti-matter containment rupturing, plasma ruptures, or any of the hundreds of other things that could end up destroying the ship if they managed to mix into each other.

Ranma sighed. Spaceflight was a dangerous business. He had decided to make it even more so by joining Starfleet and putting himself in harm's way to defend others.

"Captain," Kaii called from operations. Ranma turned to him.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"All of the Arava engineers have departed."

Ranma nodded once. "Good. Please send their captain our thanks for their hard work."

Kaii nodded as Ranma took once last look at the weapons systems on the MSD. His eyes quickly shifted to tactical where Makoto and Jansen were conversing before turning back to Kaii.

"Hail the Infinity."

Kaii again nodded and in a couple of seconds, Ukyo appeared on the main viewer.

"Time to go?" she asked.

Ranma nodded. "You ready?"

Ukyo gave Ranma a thumbs up as both Kaii's and Makoto's terminals chirped.

"I've sent over the mapping data from the fighters," Ukyo explained. "While it will probably be best if we hit the defense platforms over Alpha Base while you keep any defense ships off of us, figured if you guys want to send in some torpedoes of your own, you might want those."

Ranma smiled. "Sounds good."

"See you inside," Ukyo said before closing the channel.

Ranma turned to the helm station as he headed back towards his seat. "Ensign Ikuhara, take us back in, best possible speed."

"Aye," Ikuhara called back as he began entering commands into his console. "Re-entering The Badlands, full impulse."

The Sisko spun up her impulse engines and then pushed into The Badlands, the Infinity a few thousand kilometers behind her.

"Our first target is at the fifth planetoid," Ranma said.

Ikuhara nodded and adjusted the Sisko's course slightly.

"Can we contact Infinity?" Shampoo asked.

"At this range, it shouldn't be an issue," Minako replied.

Ranma watched the viewscreen as the Sisko cut through the gas clouds like a knife. Without changing his expression or gaze, he spoke to his communications officer.

"Ask the Infinity to deal with the orbital facility. We'll handle the breeding facility."

Shampoo's eyes slowly moved towards Ranma as Kaii responded.

"Aye."

"Redemption or retaliation?" Shampoo whispered to Ranma.

Ranma continued to stare at the viewer in silence.

Neither ship was confronted as they moved through The Badlands. As they began to approach the fifth planet, the Infinity began to launch torpedo after torpedo, firing upon a yet still unseen target.

Eventually the Sisko came upon the remains of three orbital defense platforms. Ranma smiled, grateful that he brought the larger ship along.

"High orbit," Shampoo reminded Ikuhara. Ikuhara did remember the mine field from before and had established a high orbit for the Sisko and nodded to Shampoo in acknowledgment.

"Scan the facility," Ranma ordered.

Shampoo again eyed Ranma worriedly. At first, he was concerned he was abetting genocide. Now it seemed that he wanted to make sure he knew exactly how many Jem'Hadar he would be killing.

Shampoo had many concerns about Ranma, but what concerned her the most was that the Ranma that she knew; the Ranma Saotome that she loved and that most of all, the crew loved, was disappearing. The worry that the honorable, compassionate warrior that made up Ranma's heart and soul was giving way for vengeance.

The ordeal and the near death of the NEO and marine teams had gotten to him. He would not admit it, but Shampoo was able to read Ranma. He wore his emotions on his sleeve, sort of. The more he said that something about him or how he felt wasn't true, the more it likely was.

She did not know how to stop this vengeance from taking him over, though. What she did know was that this was not the time to confront him. 'Time and place', she told herself. 'Time and place.'

"A little over a million bio signs," Minako reported.

Ranma nodded. "Fire at will," he ordered.

Jansen noticed it. Makoto noticed it. Everyone on the bridge noticed it. There was far more callousness in his voice in that order. It was not that any one of them had any issue with blowing up a million Jem'Hadar. They all knew what they were here for.

It was the change in Ranma. The tone in Ranma's voice made it clear that this was payback for the shipyard. Shampoo frowned as she watched Ranma stare coldly at the Sisko's torpedoes obliterate the facility.

Jansen sent a sixth volley this time to be certain that no one would survive. Ikuhara pulled the ship out of orbit and brought it along side of the Infinity. Ranma stood when he noticed one of the Infinity's nacelles offline.

"Hail her."

Kaii did as he was instructed. Ukyo popped onto the screen, a very irritated look on her face.

"Are you okay?" Ranma asked.

"Yes," she said. "When the facility exploded it detonated a gas cloud which hit us."

"Damage?"

"None, except for fail safes," Ukyo explained. "But for the next ten minutes we're kind of stuck."

Ranma nodded. "Well, we'll be right here."

"Thanks, Ranchan."

Ranma nodded and the channel closed. Ranma turned back to first tactical, then Minako. "Have you seen any Jem'Hadar ships?"

Both officers shook their head. "No sir," Minako said.

"They're likely all positioned to defend Alpha Base if there is indeed a founder there," Makoto offered.

Ranma nodded. "Well, hopefully we can draw them out once the Infinity starts hitting their defenses."

Makoto nodded. "Yeah. We go anywhere near that place with those defenses still intact, I don't think the ships will even have time to shoot at us."

The bridge remained silent for the next ten minutes, with only a few quiet conversations going on and the occasional panel chirping and the air ducts blowing. Eventually Kaii looked up and smiled.

“Infinity reports ready and suggests we stay behind her, so we know where to stop.”

Ranma nodded from his seat. “Ensign, follow that ship.”

Ikuhara nodded and began to follow the Infinity as she began to pull away and barrel full speed towards the eighth and final planetoid.

The rear turbolift of the bridge opened and Rei, dressed in her combat jumpsuit and gear, walked out, and came down to the CONN. She pushed a button allowing a retractable bench to slide out and sat down to the left of Ranma.

Ranma smiled to her. Rei smiled back. “I was bored.”

Ranma nodded. “We're almost there.”

Rei looked to the viewer which was nearly filled by the backside of the Infinity. She turned to each bridge station, looking at each officer who was deeply immersed in their job.

Sometimes she missed this part of the job, but then again, none of them got to do what she did, which is why she did not miss this part of the job.

“Whoa-” Ikuhara said as he slammed the Sisko to a stop, causing a few people to shift slightly, then pulled her around to the side of the Infinity. “That thing needs break lights.”

Ranma couldn't help but smirk.

“Maybe you shouldn't be tailgating?” Kaii called out.

Ikuhara tried to stammer out a response, but simply sighed. Minako grinned to her assistant before his panel began to chirp.

“Captain, the Infinity is reporting several Jem'Hadar ships between here and their firing point,” Kaii reported.

“I didn't think we were there yet,” Ranma said. “How many is 'several'?”

“Forty,” Kaii answered after waiting on a reply. “At least ten are warships.”

“Well,” Ranma said, cracking his knuckles. “We have to go that way.”

Kaii's terminal chirped, and the young lieutenant looked to Ranma. “She's hailing.”

“Plan?” Ukyo asked, a bit of concern for the small armada of Jem'Hadar blocking their path.

“The warships can't keep up with us. We can draw the fighters off, allowing you to take out the bigger ships.”

Ukyo bit her lip. “Okay.”

Ranma nodded an attempt to assure her it would work.

"After you then," she smiled.

It was Ranma who gave Ukyo a thumbs up before closing the channel this time. Ranma first turned to tactical, "I want fire as focused as possible. Take those bastards out as fast as you can."

"Aye," both Jansen and Makoto replied.

Ranma then turned to Ikuhara. "Try and draw the warships into both the Infinity's forward and aft banks fire arcs. Let her broadside them with all her phasers."

"Aye," he nodded.

"Let's go."

Shampoo scurried up behind Ikuhara to keep an eye on things. Ranma turned to Rei as the ship started to move.

"Hang on."

Rei nodded, but frowned a bit when she noticed that the seat she had chosen had no arm rests for her to hold on to as the Jem'Hadar armada came into view.

"They're hailing us," Kaii said.

"What?" Ranma asked.

Kaii shrugged.

"Put it up."

A male Vorta, who did in fact appear to be on one of the ships bowed slightly.

"Good day to you. I am Pallor. I serve the Founders in all things."

"How nice for you," Ranma said. "You are illegally occupying Federation territory. If you and your fleet scurry on back to the Gamma Quad--"

"I don't get to know your name?" Pallor asked, cutting Ranma off.

"I'm Captain Ranma Saotome of the U.S.S. Benjamin Sisko."

Pallor blinked. "The Benjamin Sisko? Is that the same--"

"Yup."

"How ironic!"

"You could say that."

Pallor smirked. "Well, you are assuming ironic for the wrong reasons, Captain. As for scurrying back to the Gamma Quadrant, I am afraid we won't be doing that. You see, the Alpha Quadrant belongs to the Dominion and the Founders as well, so we have every right to be here."

"I take it you don't get the nightly news here in The Badlands, do you, Pallor?"

"Oh, I know of the alleged surrender," he scoffed. "I also know it was a fabrication. Propaganda if you will. Gods don't – gods have no need to surrender, especially to the likes of you and your pathetic Federation."

Rei rolled her eyes. "First it was under duress, now it's propaganda..." she mumbled.

"It wasn't just the Federation," Ranma growled.

"Yes, yes. Your ever so holy alliance," Pallor laughed. "How is that working out for you? Our fleets have returned of news from the Klingon border. Already there are skirmishes between your two forces.

"And I am sure the Federation and the Romulans will be best friends till the end of the universe!" he mocked.

"If only he knew," Shampoo mumbled.

"You can barely keep your core planets in your Federation!" Pallor gloated. "Oh, poor Vulcan. So persecuted."

"Okay," Ranma snarled, "do we have a point here anymore or are you just stalling for time?"

"Hm? Oh, yes well I wanted to give you a chance to surrender," Pallor said. "I assure you that you will not be executed, despite your slaughter of hundreds of thousands of brave Jem'Hadar. You will be given a chance to rebuild what you destroyed."

Ranma paused for a moment, before laughing. Pallor appeared to be quite irritated by this and began to stammer to find words before Ranma began to speak, keeping Pallor from doing so.

"Counteroffer," Ranma said as he continued to laugh. "Hand over yourself and the changeling you're protecting, and we'll allow the remaining Jem'Hadar to return to the Gamma Quadrant unharmed."

"Why-" Pallor continued to stammer. "Such insolence! The Jem'Hadar would never abandon their God for one and secondly-"

Ranma turned to Kaii and silently ordered him to close the communication. Kaii complied as Ranma returned to his seat.

"Fire at will," Ranma ordered.

Ikuhara began to move the ship as the Sisko's weapons laid into the first Jem'Hadar fighter, cutting through it like it was made of cardboard. The Jem'Hadar ships began to give chase, resulting in a trail of Jem'Hadar debris following the Sisko around.

Ranma scratched his head in confusion.

"Not that I am complaining," he said, "but why are they exploding so easily?"

Both Makoto and Jansen shrugged indifferently as the two women had the time of their lives picking ships off left and right.

As per their plan, the Sisko drew the warships towards the Infinity. As planned, the first warship began to pass to the side of her, firing a shot in her direction that bounced right off her shields. The Infinity fired her fore and aft phaser banks, four beams in all, and one shot a warship into nothingness.

"Okay," Ranma said watching the warship explode into vapor, "now I know THAT shouldn't have happened." He walked up to Minako who was one step ahead of her Captain. She chuckled a bit as she began to read her sensor display.

"They must have run out of," Minako paused, "...good material building that shipyard."

"Oh?" Ranma asked.

Minako nodded. "These ships are poorly constructed and half of them don't even have shield emitters."

Ranma face palmed. "Where were THESE Jem'Hadar during the war?"

"Sir," Makoto called out. "One warship is moving back in the direction of Alpha Base."

Ranma sighed. "Pallor."

Minako nodded. "Likely. And his ship IS well built and has shields."

"Why someone who can be cloned so chicken?" Shampoo asked.

"Probably no cloning facilities here," Rei said.

Ranma chuckled a bit as he walked back to his seat. "He'll probably demand you arrest him then."

Rei smiled.

"All gone," Makoto high-fived Jansen.

"Already?" Ranma asked.

Makoto shrugged. "They were made out of chocolate, sir."

Ranma nodded.

"The Infinity is hailing us," Kaii reported.

"On screen."

Ukyo appeared on the screen with much the same look Ranma had regarding the easy destructibility of the Jem'Hadar fleet.

"You didn't tell me they were so easy to blow up."

Ranma sighed. "The first batch weren't."

Ukyo smiled. "I guess we missed the fun part then."

Shampoo rolled her eyes as she directed Ikuhara to pull back behind the Infinity. "Yeah. Fun."

"To Alpha Base then?" Ranma asked.

Ukyo nodded and closed the channel. The Infinity began to move forward, the Sisko right on her tail. Again, the group was confronted by another batch of Jem'Hadar ships, but again, they ended up being more of the poorly constructed, 'chocolate' ships as Makoto called them and were destroyed quickly by the two Federation ships.

Ranma watched the Infinity slow to a stop about a million kilometers from the final planetoid.

"Pull up beside her," he ordered.

Ikuhara nodded and maneuvered the ship. Ranma looked to Makoto who nodded as she knew what Ranma was going to ask.

"I have some targets laid in," she smiled.

"Fire away," Ranma ordered.

Both the Infinity and the Sisko fired their forward torpedo bays. The torpedoes flew off, well past where they could see them and detonated into the orbital defense platforms over Alpha Base.

"Continue firing," Ranma ordered.

Makoto nodded. Both the Sisko and the Infinity continued to fire on the still unseen target, launching torpedoes as fast as their launchers could load.

"The problem is that we won't know if we got them all until we go over there," Makoto sighed.

"Captain," Minako said. "I'm getting sensor hits."

"Incoming?" Shampoo asked.

"I think so," she replied.

"Stop firing," Ranma ordered. "Get ready to defend the Infinity."

Makoto nodded and adjusted her console for dogfighting. Ranma and the rest of the bridge crew stayed silent, waiting for whatever caused Minako's sensors to ping to show themselves.

"THERE!" Minako called out. "0-8-3 mark 1-1-3!" she cried. "Ten fighters."

"Ikuhara," Ranma ordered.

"On them!" the helmsman replied.

The Sisko turned and moved down towards the ten ships. Makoto and Jansen began to fire on the ships, groaning in frustration when they discovered that these were not made of chocolate, but apparently were some of the better built ones.

"Don't let them drag us too far from the Infinity," Ranma reminded his crew.

"Aye," Ikuhara said, doing his best to keep on the fighters, while keeping the Infinity close by.

The Sisko shook violently as she was hit, most of the bridge crew either being knocked over or out of their seats.

"STATUS!" Ranma yelled.

"Damn," Ikuhara whimpered, realizing what just happened.

Shampoo stood and looked to Ikuhara's console. She grumbled at the ingenuity of the Jem'Hadar.

"Shields at 74 percent," Usagi reported from the engineering station.

"The fighters," Shampoo said. "They drag us out in front of Infinity, and we got nailed by a salvo of her torpedoes."

Ranma rubbed his face in frustration. He had a terrible predicament here. He went too far one way he would leave the Infinity in a bad position. He went too far another way he could get drug to where the orbit defense platforms were.

And now he realized if he went in another direction, he was going to be hit by his friend's torpedoes.

"The Infinity realized what happened and has ceased fire," Kaii reported.

"Warships inbound," Minako added.

"Take out those fighters, please," Ranma ordered.

Makoto nodded as she did her best to cause the Jem'Hadar ships to explode.

"Captain Saotome," Pallor's voice piped up over the communications channel. "What you're doing is an exercise in futility. You will not access our facility and you will not succeed. Surrender your vessel."

Three Jem'Hadar ships exploded almost simultaneously as the Infinity nailed a weakened warship, destroying it; the resulting warp core breach destroying two nearby weakened fighters.

"Pallor, do they purposely make you Vorta so annoying, or is that just a by-product of having to be around changelings all day?" Ranma asked.

"You're starting to aggravate me, Saotome," Pallor growled.

"If I am just starting," Ranma smirked, "then I have failed at my job."

Kaii chuckled. "He closed the channel."

"I bet," Ranma smiled as the last Jem'Hadar warship exploded.

Kaii's console chirped. "The Infinity."

Ranma nodded and Ukyo appeared.

"Ranma, I think we should have gotten the majority of those platforms."

Ranma nodded.

Ukyo looked to something off screen for a second, then turned back to Ranma. "We're going to push ahead and check, since we could take a few salvos from any that remain without any major issues."

"Sounds like a plan," Ranma nodded. "We'll be right behind you."

Ukyo nodded and closed the channel.

Rei looked to Ranma, patted him on the shoulder and stood. "I guess I should go to the transporter room."

"Good luck, Commander."

Rei nodded, waved to her other friends on the bridge and scampered off. Ranma turned to watch the Infinity roll towards Alpha Base.

The next six minutes seemed to take an hour to pass by as the crew waited to hear back from the Infinity. Shampoo, understanding that Ranma was worried for his friend on board, didn't even yell at him when she grabbed his hand to stop him from rapping his fingernails on the arm rest.

"Sorry," he smiled.

Shampoo nodded and released his hand as Kaii's terminal beeped.

"The Infinity is reporting that all the ODPs are down," he reported.

"Take us in," Ranma ordered to Ikuhara.

Ikuhara complied as Kaii continued. "They are also reporting there is one Jem'Hadar warship in orbit, but it did not engage them. It appears to have been abandoned."

"Commander Kino, can you knock out its engines without destroying it?" Ranma asked.

"Yup." Makoto smiled.

"Do it," Ranma nodded. "I don't want them escaping; however I wouldn't be that upset if they did happen to beam into a disabled ship."

Makoto nodded and waited for the Sisko to get into range. Once there, she carefully targeted the ships phasers and fired a few times. After she was complete, she looked to Ranma and smiled.

"Mission accomplished," she reported. "I also knocked out their shields and weapons."

“Good work. Have the Marines on standby to board that ship, should it become necessary,” Ranma ordered.

Makoto nodded. Minako turned to Ranma. “I am scanning 50 or so bio-signs in the facility.”

“That all?” Shampoo asked.

“They probably didn't think we'd get this far,” Ranma said. “Overconfidence is a changeling trait.”

“The Infinity is asking if we want assistance in the facility,” Kaito said.

“Ask them to have teams on standby,” Ranma said. “Right now, though, I think Rei can handle this.”

Kaito nodded.

“Thanks, Minako,” Rei said before hitting her commbadge. She turned to her group assembled in the NSO transporter room. “50 or so in the facility, and we can assume one is the Vorta and one is the Founder.”

Kio looked to her gun. “Which setting on her actually kills a Founder?”

The room chuckled despite a disapproving look from Rei. “We don't want to kill it. We need to capture it.”

“I guess the better question is then, how?” Kio asked. “Do handcuffs work on shape-shifters?”

Rei was about to bark at Kio but then realized she did not know that herself.

“Good question,” she admitted. “I guess we'll try and stun it, and hope that will keep it from shifting, then beam it directly into the brig.”

“Good an idea as any,” Kio smiled. “I'm going to just shoot all the furniture, just in case as well.”

Rei smirked. “On the pads. We need to go.”

The two groups got onto the two transporter pads. Rei nodded to the Delta team officer who was manning the transporter station to energize. Within seconds the group dematerialized and was on their way down to Alpha Base.

CHAPTER NINE - INCONVENIENCE

Ranma stormed into the NSO transporter room, a look of both anger and confusion on his face. He quickly pried Lt. Yuki off Lt. Beckham who was the Delta team officer working the transporter and brought him back to the transporter console.

Shampoo quickly came in behind Ranma. She looked to where Ranma was talking to Lt. Beckham, then towards Kio, who was being physically restrained by the rest of Bravo team. Unsure of where to go, she decided to go speak to Lt. Yuki.

"Lieutenant, calm down," Shampoo said.

"He lost Alpha Team!" Kio growled.

"I didn't lose them!" Beckham cried.

"What did happen," Ranma asked.

"I plugged in the coordinates I was given for both groups," he explained. "I activated the sequence, but as it started the first sequence, Alpha's, alerted me that the targeting sequence was being redirected. I attempted to abort at that point, as I didn't want anyone to end up on the uninhabitable area of the planetoid, which is why Bravo rematerialized here, but Alpha's had already completed."

Ranma sighed. "Well--"

"Aino to Saotome," Minako called out.

"Go ahead," Ranma responded.

"Two things, first they are in the facility. I have found their comm signatures."

"Can you--" Shampoo started.

"No," Minako stated, cutting Shampoo off. "They are in some kind of transport inhibited area."

"How did they get in there?" Ranma asked.

"Well, that's the other thing," Minako replied. "Pallor wants to speak to you."

"They did this, didn't they?" Kio snarled.

"Probably," Ranma replied.

Anthony, fairly sure that Kio wasn't going to start choking Beckham again, let go of Kio. "Good thing you aborted that transport when you did, otherwise we'd be trapped too."

Kio sighed. "Sorry I overreacted, Lieutenant."

Beckham nodded. "Girls have attacked me for less."

Kio smiled.

Ranma turned to Kio. "Go prep a Runabout. Find Lt. Devall. He's a pretty good pilot."

"Yes sir," Kio nodded before she and her group ran off. Ranma turned to Beckham and patted him on the shoulder. "You did good."

"Thank you, sir."

Ranma and Shampoo scurried out of the transporter room and back to the bridge.

* * * *

From the moment Rei materialized she knew things were not right. First off, they were right in the middle of a large room. Secondly, Bravo team did not materialize with them. And thirdly...

"Commander," Shelton whimpered, "I am reading about twenty Jem'Hadar coming at us quickly."

"Take cover!" Rei ordered.

"Where?!" Parker asked as the group looked around.

It was a valid question. There was nothing in the room to hide behind. The room was completely open. No furniture, no boxes, only a single doorway that they assumed the Jem'Hadar would be coming through.

"Position along the door!" Rei ordered. "We'll flank them as they come in!"

Rei and her group began to move along the side of the door; however they didn't realize that they were not alone in the room. The Jem'Hadar had the ability to 'cloak' themselves; hide in plain sight, and that is what they did, as they began to move, several Jem'Hadar soldiers appeared behind them and opened fire.

Rei's group turned around and fired, but as they did that, more came through the door.

Within a few moments it was over.

Alpha team was down.

"You are not Pallor," Ranma said looking at the humanoid figure of what he assumed was the Founder that was in Alpha Base.

"Very astute, Captain," he responded. "I am Sor. I command the Dominion forces based here in this area of the Alpha Quadrant."

"Ah, so you are the one I need to tell to go home then?" Ranma asked.

Sor smiled. "This is my home now. Granted it doesn't have the same charm as the Great Link does, but even 'gods' can be nostalgic, can we not?"

Ranma simply rolled his eyes.

“Captain, I am willing to make a deal with you,” Sor explained. “I do not want you to think I am unreasonable, and I would hope that it will make your people realize that living underneath Dominion control is not as bad as you all make it out to be.”

Ranma eyed the shapeshifter curiously. “What is it?”

“I will return your captured soldiers to you,” Sor turned and nodded off screen. A Jem'Hadar walked up, dragging a semi-conscious Rei. He propped her up for Ranma to see. A small amount of blood trickled down her face.

“Unfortunately, they were slightly injured in their apprehension, but have been otherwise treated well within the norms for prisoners of war,” Sor said.

“I can't say the same for our citizens, some of which were children, who you brutally slaughtered from orbit while they ate, slept, and learned.”

Ranma narrowed his gaze at Sor. “You said a deal, so I assume you want something in exchange?”

Sor nodded. “I want both you, to pay for the crimes you have committed against the Dominion, and our stolen dreadnaught back.”

“I am no longer in possession of your dreadnaught,” Ranma said.

“Have you no ability to contact Starfleet?” Sor laughed. “You have an hour before we kill them.”

The communication closed. Kaii looked to Ranma. “Shall I ready a communications probe?”

“No,” Ranma dryly replied. “Even if we were going to consider this, Starfleet would never exchange that ship for five officers.” Ranma walked over to Minako. “Have you been able to find an access point for the rescue team?”

Minako nodded. “There is a docking area, but it's likely guarded.”

“What about a window?” Makoto asked.

“Window?” Ranma queried.

Makoto nodded. “They could probably just latch the Runabout to the side of the building, cut through a window and go in there.”

Minako looked to her scans. “There does appear to be less people on the north end of the facility.”

“Pass that along to the group,” Ranma nodded.

* * * *

“I'm going to let you know right now,” Kio said to JC, “I do get motion sick.”

JC shrugged. “No atmosphere. Should be fine.”

“Though,” Anthony added, “if we have to dodge weapons fire, we'll be all zip, zoom, zag, woosh, weeeee!”

Kio glared at Anthony as Kagurazaka loaded up the last of the equipment on the ship. Ryouga and another Marine also boarded.

“Full house,” JC smiled.

“Someone has to protect you,” Ryouga smiled.

“Saotome to Satii, you are go.”

“Roger,” JC smiled as the doors to the Runabout closed and sealed. The forward shuttle bay on the ship opened and the small craft zipped out and headed down towards the facility.

Kio looked out the window towards it. She stared at it with disdain. She had not seen the image of Rei, blood on her face, but Makoto had told her about it. She had quietly contacted her; a personal request to make sure that Kio brought her friend back safe and sound.

Kio promised that she would. Kio also felt that it was important that she did for her own personal reasons as well. Not just for the obvious ones, such as that it was her job, and that Rei was a fellow Starfleet officer, but there was something more now.

It made Kio's stomach churn just a little bit, but Kio was beginning to think she was starting to like Rei as a person. She was beginning to see Rei as a somewhat decent human being, and not just as the squawking, nagging crow constantly pecking at her.

Kio's stomach churned again when JC whipped the Runabout around so that the dorsal airlock would line up to the building. He gently placed the small ship up against the side of the building, allowing the magnetic locks to grab hold and an airtight seal to be formed.

Kagurazaka opened the airlock and quickly began cutting the transparent aluminum that the window was made from. Once he was complete, he was pulled away by Kio who kicked the now cut, faux glass out and began to move into the building.

“Uh, Lieutenant-” Anthony called.

Kio moved into the opening, promptly falling once she was no longer under the pull of the Runabout's grav plating.

“Grr...” Kio groaned as she looked to the window where the rest of her team was more carefully crawling out and hopping down to the floor.

Anthony quickly moved to help Kio up as Bravo team checked the area for Jem'Hadar. “You okay?” Anthony asked.

Kio nodded and looked out the window at the Runabout mounted sideways on the side of the building.

“What happens when they pull away?” she asked.

“Explosive decompression,” Xiang said. “Which is why they need to stay there until we find the others and beam them out.”

JC poked his head out. “We're sealing the airlock to make it harder for any Jem'Hadar who do come this way to get on board.”

Kio nodded and motioned for her group to come with her as JC sunk back into the scout craft and sealed it up.

* * * *

Pallor looked over some of the weapons that the Jem'Hadar had taken from Alpha team. He was not familiar with most of them. He had known that the Federation had experimented with projectile weapons, but normally they were too docile to use equipment that did not at least give the operator the option of not killing their target.

He looked to some of the body armor as well. It was designed to work well against Jem'Hadar polaron weaponry. He smirked a bit. Well, but not perfectly. Of course, it was not necessarily the shooting that had done in the group of interlopers, as a couple of the group had been beaten pretty severely by the Jem'Hadar flanking.

“What are you doing?” Sor asked the Vorta, startling him.

“Founder,” Pallor said, spinning around and bowing. “I was just investigating the equipment that was found on the Starfleet group that assaulted your base.”

“And?”

“This equipment is not what I would call 'standard Federation issue',” he explained.

Sor nodded. “No.” Sor moved past a quickly back-pedaling Pallor with his two Jem'Hadar guards and picked up Rei's rifle. He examined it for a moment, before turning and firing it, shooting a nearby wall.

“These seem to be...” Sor paused for a moment, “special soldiers with newer equipment. That round moved at extremely high velocity.” He turned to one of his guards. “Bring me the leader.”

The Jem'Hadar nodded and ran off as Sor looked to the rifle some more.

“Are they a threat to the Dominion?” Pallor asked.

Sor glared at him, causing Pallor to cower slightly. “Of course not. If they were a threat, do you think they would be locked in our containment cells?”

“No, Founder,” Pallor whimpered. “Of course not.”

“That ship,” Sor said, “is different as well. An Akira class ship should not have survived as long as it did. As well, I have never seen the other one before.”

“We should capture them,” Pallor suggested.

Sor again glared at Pallor, again causing the Vorta to cower behind one of the Jem'Hadar soldiers. "How exactly do you suggest we do that? While the Federation is no match for the Dominion, they do currently control access from the Gamma Quadrant," Sor sighed. "Until we can rebuild our forces here, we will have to be content on simply having Saotome."

"You do believe they will agree to the swap?"

Sor nodded. "The Federation will not allow their people to die to us. And if Saotome is like any other Starfleet captain I have met, he will sacrifice himself to save his crew."

Sor laughed slightly. "They don't understand the point of a soldier is to be sacrificed for the larger goal."

"The Founder is wise," Pallor beamed. Sor simply rolled his eyes as his Jem'Hadar guard returned, dragging Rei behind him. Sor pointed to a chair next to a small table. The guard nodded and tossed Rei into the chair, Rei grunting in pain as she landed in it. The guard quickly tied her arms to a light fixture above her head.

"What is your name?" Sor asked Rei.

Rei ignored him.

"Please, let's not make this dirty," Sor said, a slight tone of frustration crossing his voice. "To make this clear, for every act of insubordination you give me, I will punish one of your soldiers, not you."

Rei looked up to Sor, a narrow, defiant gaze on her face.

"Fine," Sor said, turning to one of the Jem'Hadar. "Go find the lowest ranking of the group and see how they enjoy plasma-shock treatment."

The Jem'Hadar nodded and began to walk off.

"Wait..." Rei said, softly but angrily.

Sor held up his hand, halting the Jem'Hadar. "Will you talk to me now?"

Rei glared at Sor again. "Commander Rei Hino."

Sor smiled. "I am glad you have decided to cooperate. Which of those two ships overhead are you assigned to? Or are you part of Starfleet Intelligence?"

"I am assigned to the U.S.S. Benjamin L. Sisko," Rei stated, in an almost robotic tone.

Sor again nodded. "What were your orders when you attempted to breach our building?"

"Your arrest."

Sor laughed. The nearby Jem'Hadar and Pallor followed the Founder's lead and laughed as well. Sor gave them all angry glares, which shut the entire group up before holding up Rei's rifle and turning back to her.

"This is not a normal Federation phaser. Where did you get it?"

Rei did not answer.

Sor sighed. "I guess I shouldn't expect you to answer something like that, as it would be giving information to your enemy." Pallor looked to Sor oddly, finding it strange that he was not infuriated that Rei refused to answer him.

Sor looked over the rifle, flipping some of the switches. "I must say, I find this a remarkable device and look forward to equipping the Jem'Hadar with them. Has both a phaser setting..."

Sor turned, pointed the rifle, and shot Rei in her right leg, the phaser setting placed on high stun. However, since it was not a direct shot, and merely hit her in the leg, it simply burned and caused a great amount of pain, forcing Rei to grit her teeth to not vocalize her discomfort.

Sor smirked a bit. "Despite not having any 'armor' on, you are still protected. The Federation should thank us, because if it were not for the war, you would still be wandering around, unprotected and with those tiny little phasers that could barely kill a cat."

Rei grimaced. "Are you insane?"

Sor shook his head as he made some more adjustments to the rifle. "No, not at all. In fact, throughout history some of the greatest technological advances in many, many species have been made because of war or for military purposes."

Sor finished his adjustments and pointed the rifle at Rei's left leg. "Let's see how your suit does against the projectile round."

Rei screamed as Sor fired, the round ripping through her leg, the muscle, the bone, and out the back.

"Not as well," Pallor smiled.

Sor smiled as well. "No, not as well indeed." He handed the rifle to Pallor. "Get these replicated. If they beam in anymore, I don't want them captured, I want them killed by their own weapons."

"Right away," Pallor responded, taking the rifle, and scurrying away. Sor moved up to Rei and ran his hand through her hair before wiping away some of the tears off her face.

"Now, now. Don't cry. In just another forty minutes you will either be safe aboard your ship, or you will be dead. Either way, the pain will be gone, and you won't have to worry about things anymore."

Rei's hate filled stare was not lost on Sor. He chuckled a bit at it, till Rei spit on him, at which point he simply shook his head. The changeling turned to the Jem'Hadar. "Let's keep her in here but play with her a bit more." Sor pointed to Rei as he continued to bark orders. "Get that suit off of her."

The Jem'Hadar complied as they began to untie Rei. Rei struggled, but it was futile as soon she was tied back up and down to the tank top and shorts that she was wearing under her jumpsuit.

“That wound doesn't look so bad,” Sor commented on the small entry wound on Rei's left leg. He looked to the back of her leg and noticed a similar, small exit wound.

“I bet all the damage is on the inside,” Sor commented to himself. “Oh, you clever, clever Starfleet.”

Rei continued to glare at Sor as a Jem'Hadar approached her with what looked to be a large 'cattle-prod' that had a fiery glow on the end of it.

* * * *

The shot and the scream could be heard from Kio and Bravo's position. The group decided that they would not work under the assumption that it was an execution because if that had been the case, there would be no scream.

You shoot someone in the back of the head when you execute them. There is no scream.

Regardless, despite the urgency there was before, there was now additional urgency surrounding the situation. Their friends were being tortured and the longer it took them to get to where they were, the longer they would suffer.

All five of them knew that moving slowly was no longer an option.

Another scream echoed through the corridors causing the grip Kio had on her rifle to tighten.

Kagurazaka, who had taken the lead quickly held up his hand. He motioned for the group to back into a small doorway. They did and they waited. Two Jem'Hadar came walking around the corner. Kagurazaka leapt and grabbed one, Anthony was about to grab the other, but Kio beat him to it, wrapping her arm around his neck and bringing her knife to bear, running it across his throat.

Jem'Hadar blood sprayed everywhere as his arteries were cut. Kio felt the blood cover her gloved hands and her arms, but she did not care. To her, right now, it was simply a victory trophy. The more Jem'Hadar blood she could be covered in today, the happier she would be.

Kagurazaka was simply content in jamming his blade into the Jem'Hadar's back and in through his heart that way. He was as dead as Kio's, but far less messy, and far less personal.

Kio motioned for the group to keep moving but Xiang held them back.

“Lieutenant, we might have an issue,” he said.

Kio turned to him and noticed what he was holding up.

“Are those Alpha team's weapons?” Kio asked.

Xiang ran his tricorder over it and shook his head. “It's the same kind of weapon, but it's been replicated.”

“Crap,” Anthony said. “They've armed the Jem'Hadar with our weapons.”

“Then we know what we have to do,” Kio remarked, moving her group again as Xiang picked up the two Jem'Hadar's rifles. “Kill them before they can kill us.”

The group nodded and continued forward. To attract as little attention to themselves as possible, they were doing what they could to avoid confrontation, and when they did come across a roving patrol, they would kill them using stealth, hand to hand tactics, rather than firing their weapons, which might alert the Founder to their presence.

It was a successful tactic. The group made their way through the facility to the area where they thought Rei and the others in Alpha team were being held for the most part unmolested. They only came across a couple of patrols and were able to kill those without any alarms being sounded.

Anthony was becoming a bit worried about Kio. He was concerned that her anger towards the Jem'Hadar and the changeling holding their compatriots was going to end up clouding her judgment. He realized he might have to step up and reel her back in if he thought she was going to put them in a bad position.

He did not want to say anything though. He knew she was an emotional person, but he also knew she had grown and had developed a keen sense of leadership. He didn't expect her to put them in a bad place but feared what might happen if they stumbled upon Commander Hino... dead.

"Lieutenant," Kagurazaka whispered, "I am reading multiple bio-signs a few meters this way."

Kio nodded and moved the group slowly towards a door. She began to consider the plan of attack in her head as Kagurazaka ran more scans.

"They appear to be about fifteen meters below us as well," he reported.

Kio looked up. "Down one deck?"

Kagurazaka nodded. "That appears to be the case, but I am not seeing a floor impeding my scans through this room."

Kio nodded. "Stay here, I am going to take a look."

"Kio," Anthony objected.

"I am just going to peek in," Kio assured him. Anthony nodded reluctantly and took up a defensive stance to protect her as she opened the door.

Kio cautiously investigated the room. She saw nothing to the left, and nothing to the right. Ahead about ten meters she saw what appeared to be a balcony. She slowly crawled over towards it and looked into the main control room of the facility.

There she saw about thirty Jem'Hadar either guarding entrances, manning stations, or keeping an eye on what Kio assumed were the cells where Alpha team was being held.

Farther in the back, however, Kio saw her. It took her every ounce of effort she had not to gasp audibly. She saw her commanding officer, tied up and stripped down. She looked like she had been kicked around quite a bit, as even at Kio's distance she could plainly see several large bruises and burns on Rei's body.

Kio quickly shuffled backwards to the door and informed the rest of the team of the situation.

“Make every shot count,” Kio ordered bluntly. “They have Commander Hino in a very vulnerable position, so we need to make sure the guards by her are killed first.”

The group nodded, replied with quite 'yes ma'am's', and followed Kio back into the room. Kio quickly pulled out her binoculars and looked around again, trying to find the Founder. She noticed a man who had been identified to her earlier as Pallor, and then another whom she assumed was the Founder, both were by Rei.

“Don't shoot the changeling unless you have to,” Kio said. “They want it alive.”

The group nodded.

“Three,” Kio began counting down.

“Two... One...”

Kio nodded.

Bravo team opened fire from their perched positions. Pallor looked up and saw them before grabbing Sor and pulling him behind some Jem'Hadar to act as shields.

The Jem'Hadar returned fire with the confiscated Starfleet weapons, the shots hitting above and below Bravo team. The team was having to duck and move around to avoid being hit by the super-sonic projectiles but were able to avoid the shots thanks to their better positions and better training.

Jem'Hadar were being dropped left and right. Sor growled at his soldiers being mowed down and smacked Pallor.

“WHY DID THEY GET HERE?”

Pallor cried as he responded. “They must not have beamed in!”

Sor hissed at the sniveling Vorta and barked orders at a Jem'Hadar soldier. “Kill her,” he said, pointing to Rei.

The Jem'Hadar nodded and placed the barrel of the rifle to Rei's forehead. Before he could place his finger over the trigger however, his head literally exploded as several rounds from Second Lieutenant Kio Yuki's rifle impacted his skull.

Sor shook his head. “Let's go,” he told Pallor.

Pallor nodded and hit some buttons on a terminal. Both he and Sor beamed away, as well as a half dozen Jem'Hadar who were near the pair as guards.

It did not take long for Kio's team to finish off the remaining group of Jem'Hadar. A couple came through the door behind them but ended up walking into a photon mine Xiang had set up, and were stunned.

Kio stood, walked to the two Jem'Hadar who lay stunned on the ground. She kicked them both a couple of times before pointing her rifle at them firing two shots, killing them both.

Anthony's eyes followed Kio as she moved towards the edge of the balcony. Kagurazaka began to pull out a rope and attached it to the edge, however Kio did not wait. She vaulted over the edge, dropped about ten meters to the top of a terminal, then bounced down the remaining five to the deck below.

"I can't do that," Anthony said, as he began to rappel down.

Kio ran over to Rei and quickly cut the rope holding her arms up. Rei smiled weakly as she dropped her arms down, allowing them to rest on Kio's shoulders.

"Are you okay, Commander?" Kio asked.

Rei nodded a bit. "Yes," she quietly lied. Rei was not alright, and it did not take a medical tricorder to see that.

"Good work," she added.

Kio turned to Anthony and Kagurazaka. "Check on the others."

The pair nodded and ran to the cells as Yayo began to scan Rei. The young medic grimaced at what she saw.

"She's pretty bad," Yayo said. "We need to get her to the ship."

Kio nodded and attached a transport enhancer to Rei. "Yuki to Sisko, one to transport directly to sickbay."

"Acknowledged," Minako replied.

Rei allowed her hand to slide down and hold Kio's hand for a moment as she smiled. Kio smiled back before leaning in and kissing an incredibly surprised Rei on the lips.

"Turnabout," Kio smiled as Rei dematerialized.

Anthony walked back around the corner with Kagurazaka and headed over to Kio. "The other four were a bit shaken up, but for the most part, uninjured," he explained. "We sent them back to the ship."

Kio nodded and moved towards the terminal Pallor was working on. Yayo poked Anthony and grinned. Anthony blinked.

"What?" he asked.

"You missed it again," Yayo smiled.

"Missed what?"

Yayo grinned even more.

"No way," Anthony gasped.

"I think Lt. Kio Hino has a nice ring to it, don't you?" Yayo whispered.

Anthony glared at Yayo with a look that very well could have killed a lesser woman. Yayo simply chuckled and walked away. Anthony, feeling a bit dejected, moved over towards Kio.

"So, boss," he said. "What now?"

"Well, it appears they beamed to that ship in orbit."

Anthony nodded. "The ship isn't going anywhere."

"Nope," Kio agreed.

"Another job well done!" Anthony smiled.

"We're not done," Kio growled.

Anthony cocked his head a bit. "We're not?"

"Our job was to capture the changeling and that is what we're going to do."

Anthony shrugged. "Sounds good."

"What's wrong?" Kio asked, noticing a lack of enthusiasm in Anthony's voice.

"Well, I'm all for not leaving a job incomplete," he said, "but if you'll pardon me for saying this, I am worried that you might be more out for revenge than for successfully completing the mission."

Kio sighed. "Can't it be both?" she asked honestly.

Anthony shook his head. "I think you and I both know how you reacted after Mike died. The last thing I need is to see you flip out and get yourself killed trying to avenge what they did to Commander Hino."

Kio nodded. "I appreciate your concern. I promise I won't flip out for no other reason than you missing me."

Anthony rolled his eyes. "Just once I would like to be taken seriously."

Kio smiled slightly. "But then you wouldn't get all huffy."

"Huffy?"

Kio nodded as she hit her communicator. "Yuki to Sisko."

CHAPTER TEN - RESOLUTION

Ranma walked out onto the bridge and turned to Minako. Minako nodded to him as she activated the communications terminal.

“Lieutenant Yuki,” Ranma greeted, “what is your status?”

“Captain, Commander Hino's team has been secured and transferred to the Sisko,” Kio answered. “However, the changeling and the Vorta have managed to elude us and have transported to the ship overhead.”

Minako nodded. “I am scanning eight bio-signs on board now.”

“Very good,” Ranma said. “The ship has been disabled and both the Sisko and the Infinity have tractor beams on it, so it won't be going anywhere for a while.

“We will be dispatching security to deal-”

“Captain,” Kio interrupted, “If it's all the same, I would request that we be allowed to finish what we started.”

Ranma pondered this. Obviously beaming over three hundred security officers between the Sisko and Infinity's security details and Marine detachments would make for a quick and easy end to things, but he had a lot of respect for Lt. Yuki's team and their desire to see this through to the very end.

He would honor their request.

“Make it so,” he ordered. “Let us know when you're ready for transport.”

“Checking their computers, it looks like they might have the same transport rerouting ability on that ship,” Kio reported. “It will likely be better if we take the Runabout.”

“Okay,” Ranma said.

“As well,” Kio continued, “They managed to replicate our weaponry and have schematics for our munitions, armor and other equipment that Alpha team was carrying. As soon as the Runabout is clear, I suggest we destroy this facility as quickly as possible.”

Ranma turned to Makoto who nodded. “Targeting coordinates already laid in.”

“I have begun to upload their computer core to the Sisko,” Yuki continued. “It should be complete by the time we get to the Runabout.”

Ranma smiled. “Keep us informed, and good work, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The communication closed. Ranma turned to Shampoo as he walked towards the turbolift. "You have the bridge." He paused as the lift doors opened and turned to Makoto. "As soon as the Runabout docks with that ship, obliterate that facility."

"Yes sir," Makoto replied.

Ranma walked into Sickbay to find most of the staff hovering over Commander Hino. Akane noticed Ranma and smiled to him as he walked up to her.

"How is everyone?" Ranma asked.

"Most of them are fine," Akane answered.

"Most?"

Akane sighed and motioned for Ranma to follow her. Ranma did and once they were alone, Akane began to speak softly.

"They apparently shot Commander Hino in the leg at close range. It's likely the fact that it was such close range that the damage wasn't worse as the round pretty much went straight through her leg and didn't expand as it's designed to do."

Ranma nodded, waiting for Akane to get to the point.

"However, the shot did basically disintegrate a part of her tibia as it went through, and I am unsure if we're going to be able to regenerate it properly."

Ranma sighed. "So, what are her chances of a recovery?"

Akane looked down as she spoke. "As it looks now, I'd say she's going to live, but she won't be able to walk properly anymore."

Ranma growled. "Does she know?"

Akane nodded.

Ranma walked over to Rei and looked down to her. Rei looked up at her Captain and smiled.

"I'm sorry we couldn't get you out sooner," Ranma apologized.

Rei shook her head. "It happens." Rei looked around the room a bit before turning back to Ranma. "Where is Ki- Lieutenant Yuki?"

"The Founder and the Vorta beamed themselves to the ship we disabled. Lieutenant Yuki and her group were not content with only partially completing their job and are on their way to capture him."

Rei smiled. "She will make a good replacement."

Ranma sighed. "I think it's too early to file your long-term disability papers yet, Commander. I've seen people recover from worse."

Rei nodded. "Yes sir."

Ranma patted Rei on her shoulder, flinching a bit when Rei groaned.

“What did they do to you?” Ranma snarled.

“What is important,” Rei answered after shaking off the pain, “is the fact that they won't be able to do this to anyone else.”

Ranma nodded, walked over, and shook hands with the rest of Alpha team, and began to walk out of sickbay before being confronted by Akane and two doctors.

“Captain,” the doctor called out.

Ranma turned around, only to be once again drug off into a corner by Akane with the two doctors in tow.

“Yes?” Ranma asked.

“There is an... experimental... procedure that we can try that could likely give Commander Hino full mobility again,” the doctor explained.

Ranma raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

The other doctor looked around a little shifty-eyed, but then nodded. “Some have called it unethical, but I guess it's how you look at it.”

“Details, please.”

“Well,” the first doctor said, “basically you take the last good transporter record from the pattern buffer-”

“I already don't like where this is going,” Ranma sighed.

“No, no,” the second doctor said, understanding Ranma's concern. “You don't actually materialize a whole... second person. Just the...”

“Just the part you need,” the first bluntly stated.

“You mean we would just 'replicate' a new leg for her?” Ranma asked.

Both doctors shrugged. “More or less, yes,” the first nodded.

“We could then go in, remove the damaged tibia from Commander Hino, and then replace it,” the second doctor explained.

“And then she'd be fine?” Ranma asked.

“When it has been done, successfully, patients had a 92 percent full recovery rate. The other eight percent only had minor drawbacks,” the second doctor explained.

“Successfully?” Ranma asked.

“The doctors that tried this were trying to fix major problems like neurological disorders,” the first explained. “Replacing a brain is a far different task than replacing a leg bone.”

Ranma sighed. Akane looked to him and tugged slightly on his arm. "If nothing else, Ranma, just... look the other way."

Ranma looked to Akane. "You're okay with this?"

"The information in the pattern buffer..." she said, quietly. "It's just ones and zeros. If it can help her, and not harm anyone..."

Ranma exhaled deeply. "They are her ones and zeros. If Commander Hino agrees, I won't object."

The doctors nodded and scurried off. Akane leaned up and kissed Ranma. Ranma smiled a bit and walked out of sickbay. He was certainly hoping that they were almost done as he was quite sick of having to make ethical decisions for the week.

* * * *

Once again, Lt. Yuki did not consider that the Runabout's airlock was on the top of the craft and the docking hatch was on the side of the Jem'Hadar warship, which led to her tumbling out and onto the deck.

"Dammit," she swore as she hopped up and looked around. Alarms were sounding, letting the emerging group know that those on the ship knew they were there.

Kio was not concerned though. She was quite certain that the changeling would keep most, if not all the Jem'Hadar with it to secure his safety.

The facility had been destroyed. The group saw the amazing explosion as they were docking. There was now no place for their enemies to go. Either they were going to capture the changeling, or they were going to force it self-destruct the ship to avoid capture.

Either way, it would no longer be a threat, and the job would be complete.

The airlock sealed behind Yuki's team and the Runabout headed back towards the Sisko, Kio's faith in her transport enhancers ability to get them off the ship even if the Jem'Hadar managed to get the shields back up convincing JC to return with the two Marines.

However now that meant that if anything DID block their beam out, they would be stuck until the small ship could return.

Kio decided not to think about that and rather to concentrate on the task at hand. The group easily moved down the corridors of the ship, deciding to stop at engineering where they removed the dilithium from the warp core, making sure that even if the engines went back online, the ship could not warp anywhere.

"There are several self-maintenance programs running," Xiang noted.

"They're likely trying to fix the ship, only without a crew," Kio smirked. "Will take forever."

"We should probably still hurry," Anthony suggested.

Kio nodded and moved her group forward some more. Xiang looked to his tricorder as they walked. "Lieutenant, I tapped into their computer. It appears that they mirrored some of that facility's work up here, so some of our data is on board this ship."

Kio nodded. "The Sisko will probably destroy this ship as well then," she noted.

They continued to walk, getting closer to the ship's bridge. A few hundred meters out, Kio stopped the group. "Wait," she whispered.

Kio raised her rifle and looked forward. She could see nothing, but she could swear she heard something.

"Kio?" Anthony asked.

Again, she heard it. Kio opened fire down the corridor. Three Jem'Hadar dropped their cloaks and began to fire back, however they were quickly all gunned down by Kio and her group, as they were unprepared to be fired upon; their ambush being foiled.

"Damn Kio," Anthony smiled. "Love those ears."

Kagurazaka nodded in agreement. Kio smiled at the adulation and motioned for the rest to start moving again. They were down to five enemies now, two of which they knew would be unlikely to put up much resistance.

The group turned a corridor and found a door. Kagurazaka scanned it and noted one bio-sign. Bravo team all readied themselves. Kio hit the button to open the door. The group gasped at what they saw.

Just past the door was... Rei? Hanging from the ceiling, a noose around her neck. She was stripped down, even further than she was before, cuts, bruises, and burns all over her body.

Kio moved forward; her eyes wide open. "Co-Commander?"

"KIO!" Anthony yelled, trying to grab her and pull her back. What was now obviously a faux Rei opened her eyes and smiled, her body morphing a bit and grabbing Kio by the neck and pulling her off the ground.

Bravo team opened fire, but their projectile ammo passed right through the changeling, not causing it even the slightest bit of discomfort. As well, it was starting to position Kio to try and use her as a shield, all the while doing what it could to choke her.

Kio dropped her rifle and struggled at the creature's 'arms' that were wrapped around her neck much like a python. Now about a meter off the deck, she began to kick at it, fruitlessly, as she gasped for air.

"HEAVY STUN!" Anthony ordered the group as they switched their rifles. They began firing at the changeling, but unlike before where it simply shrugged off their assault, the heavy stun setting of the Federation phasers did hurt it. It took several shots, but finally it let go of Kio, allowing her to drop the meter to the deck, and morphed into a goo, escaping through the ship's ventilation ducts.

Anthony and Yayo ran up to Kio as she coughed attempted a couple of time to stand.

"Kio!" Anthony said, rubbing her back. Yayo ran her tricorder over Kio, checking her vitals while Kagurazaka and Xiang stood guard.

"I'm fine," Kio coughed, finding her rifle, and finally, successfully standing up. Anthony looked to Yayo who simply shrugged, not really thinking anything she could say would convince Kio to go back to the Sisko at this point.

"I'm going to fucking kill that thing myself if he tries that again," Kio grumbled, moving forward. "Let's go."

The group nodded and moved with Kio to the control room. Kio pulled out a smoke grenade and set it on the ground. She activated the timer before opening the door. The grenade went off and she kicked it in.

It was an effective screen. Shots came flying through the doorway. Kio and her group, however, did not go through the door. They waited. After a moment, the Jem'Hadar came out to look at what they assumed were several dead Federation soldiers.

Instead, they ended up being shot and killed by Bravo team.

"Two left," Kagurazaka smirked.

Kio stood and started to move but was grabbed by Anthony and pulled back.

"Don't think that Founder doesn't have a weapon," he said. "They don't usually put themselves in harm's way, but him attacking you means he's a bit more aggressive than they usually are."

Kio nodded. "Good point."

The quintet moved in slowly and found Pallor standing in front of Sor. Sor, for his part, was working on a computer terminal, while Pallor had his arms spread out in a somewhat feeble attempt to make a last stand attempt to defend his god.

"Back!" Pallor demanded. "Do with me what you will, but you will not harm the wise and noble Founder!"

Sor looked up and to Pallor. "Do you really expect to hold them off like that?"

"I only need to stop them long enough for you to escape, Founder."

Sor sighed. "You are very loyal, Pallor."

"You are too kind, and wise."

Kio groaned.

"I share your annoyance, Starfleet," Sor smirked. "I really wish my brethren had not made the Vorta so... what is your term? Such ass-lickers?"

"Ass kissers," Anthony corrected Sor.

“Ah, thank you.”

“Look,” Kio growled, giving Anthony a stern look. “No one else has to be harmed here. Surrender and I assure you we will treat you better than you treated Commander Hino.”

“You say that,” Sor said, turning towards Kio, “yet if I remember correctly it was the Federation that attempted genocide with the disease you infected my people with.”

“The acts of a fringe group do not reflect the whole,” Kio replied. “This is why we're not holding the Dominion responsible for your behavior.”

Sor laughed. “My dear, I am the Dominion. I am a Founder. I was placed here to lead this sector of space.”

“The war is OVER!” Kio barked.

“No, it is not,” Sor retorted. “My people may have had to withdraw for strategic reasons, but the war will never end until the Dominion is in control of the entire galaxy.”

He pointed to his computer. “I have sent a request for reinforcements. Soon they will blow through your blockade and arrive to quash your tiny ships and lead us to nothing but undeniable victory.”

Xiang shook his head and whispered, “If he transmitted anything, there is no way it got out of The Badlands.”

“The Founder is wise!” Pallor beamed.

“Oh, for goodness...” Sor groaned and shot Pallor in the back. He then blinked and grumbled. “Now look what you made me do. Until I get my dreadnaught back, I don't have any cloning facilities for him.”

“You...” Kio stammered. “You are insane.”

“Everyone keeps saying that today,” Sor said, looking out the window, presumably for his expected reinforcements. To his surprise, he still only saw the Sisko and the Infinity.

Kio looked to the rest of the group and nodded. They all opened fire on him, hitting him several times, their rifles set on high stun. Sor screamed from the pain, his ability to hold his humanoid shape failing. As he was being stunned, Kio quickly ran up, tossed a transport enhancer into his goo and hailed the Sisko.

“Yuki to Sisko, one to beam directly to the brig.”

“Acknowledged.”

Sor dematerialized.

“Saotome to Yuki, the Founder has safely arrived in cell 2-A.”

Kio grinned. She looked down to poor Pallor, a look of utter shock on his now lifeless face.

“Let this be a lesson to you, Tony,” Kio said, turning to him. “Sucking up to the boss will get you nowhere.”

Tony quickly moved up next to Kio and leaned into her. “What about kissing her?” he whispered.

Kio turned bright red as she turned to Anthony. “I... I... I... She... She was badly hurt. I...”

An exceptionally large smile crossed Anthony's face. “You are so unbelievably sexy when you're embarrassed.”

Kio stammered a bit more till Anthony, after making sure the rest of the team was not looking, quickly kissed Kio softly. He then moved back to her ear. “I know it can't happen now, Lieutenant, but regardless, you will always have me as your best friend.”

Kio turned to Anthony, smiled, and nodded.

Anthony again leaned in and whispered, “And for God's sake, the next time you're going to kiss her, tell me. I would LOVE to see that.”

Anthony had no idea how such a small woman could send a man his size so far across a room.

* * * *

Captain's Log: Stardate 62340.5. After Lt. Yuki's team returned from the Jem'Hadar ship, we decided it was best to destroy it, rather than risk an automated transmission protocol being programmed into it and bringing it out of The Badlands.

The bulk of the fleet assembled to confront this threat has dispersed. While we were successful, we did in fact pay a heavy toll. Nine ships were lost, with a total of 3,900 brave Starfleet officers and enlistees giving their lives. Fortunately, the vast majority of the missing lifeboats were found, the Blackout's jamming keeping the Jem'Hadar from picking them off like they usually do.

Ranma sighed. It really seemed like a horrid thing to do, even in war, to destroy escape pods. It seemed like it was the equal to bombing hospitals or ambulances, but the Jem'Hadar had little regard for their own lives. Why should they have any more regard for the lives of their enemies?

Starfleet Intelligence is on their way to pick up Sor. The Federation again contacted the Dominion and demanded to know their role in all of this, but they have disavowed any knowledge of Sor's actions. They further claim that all changelings were instructed to return to the Great Link, so any that may be running around are doing so of their own volition and have their own agenda.

For what it's worth, they apologized for the inconvenience caused.

Ranma thought to Rei, who was still confined to Sickbay, then grumbled.

“Inconvenience.”

Once SI arrives, we will be – slowly – heading back to the Lincoln Park yards to have our engines repaired. I will once again be arguing for our engineering staff to be fully educated on ALL aspects of the engines so that at a minimum, we can return to any shipyard and our engineers can repair them.

The Infinity will be departing soon as well. Ukyo will be joining us for a celebratory dinner before she leaves, however. I have once again commissioned Lt. Commander Tsukino to cook, however though I have decided to have the dinner in the holodeck so that she can torment some holographic people, rather than my crew.

“End recording,” Ranma instructed the computer. The console complied with a chirp. Akane walked up behind Ranma and wrapped her arms around him, kissing the back of his neck. Ranma placed his hands on hers and looked to her reflection in his computer monitor.

“Latinum for your thoughts.” Akane offered.

“I don't think I am going to accept any offers of Admiral they present,” Ranma said.

“How come?” Akane asked, knowing the answer, but asking anyway.

“I like making a difference,” Ranma replied.

Akane nodded. “You'd be bored anyway.”

Ranma nodded in agreement. “What about you? What if they offered you something better?”

Akane tightened her grip on Ranma. “Nothing they could offer could be better than this.”

Ranma smiled. It was moments like this that he knew exactly why he loved Akane.

* * * *

There were several tables set up in holodeck two. At first Ranma had argued for one large table, but then after seeing it he thought that it felt too 'mid-evil', so he decided to accept Gosnell's suggestion that they make three smaller tables.

Of course, then there was an issue as to the seating arrangements. Ranma insisted that he be placed where he would be able to talk to any of the three tables, and Gosnell agreed that would be a good idea. However, Gosnell also suggested that they do not segregate the groups by division, department or rank, which then would also mean that some people would end up sitting next to people that they didn't really know.

Minako then began to complain that Ryouga was not on the guest list. Ranma's logic was that it was just the NEO teams and bridge officers, but then Minako pointed out the Marine involvement. Gosnell interjected to ask then if all the Marines should be invited as that would only be fair, to which Minako yelled at him.

Akane finally intervened, to mediate and said that spouses should be allowed. Gosnell and Ranma relented, but then Usagi grumbled as that meant she had one more that she had to cook for. Gosnell suggesting that her objections were more because she did not have a spouse were met with flying dishware.

Finally, the time had come, and most people were seated. The final two to arrive were Rei and Kio. Rei had her arm wrapped around Kio as the pair walked in. Rei, limping quite a bit paused and looked quite shocked as the room stood and gave her a standing ovation.

“Unexpected,” she smiled.

Kio smiled to her as she helped her get to her seat two seats away from Ranma.

“How is your leg, Commander?” Ranma asked.

“Hurts like hell, sir,” Rei responded, chuckling. “Mostly from the surgery.”

“Will you recover okay?” Ukyo asked.

Rei nodded. “They say that I need about two months of physical therapy to get it working right again, but I should be fine.” Rei looked to Akane and smiled. “They managed to attach everything properly, so thank you for that.”

“Don't thank me!” Akane laughed.

The room laughed as well. The food started to trickle in. Before everyone started to eat, Ranma stood and tapped his glass. Everyone fell silent and turned to him.

“Again, I find myself in the position of pointing out what a spectacular group of people I have the good fortune of working with,” Ranma smiled. “But I would be very selfish if I did not point out that without the help of our good friends aboard the Infinity, we may not be here to enjoy this meal.”

Ranma turned to Ukyo and raised his glass. “To the Infinity!”

“To the Infinity!” everyone repeated.

Ukyo smiled and raised her glass back. “The Sisko is a special ship,” she said, looking towards first Rei and then towards Kio and her team. “We cannot do what you guys do. But always know, we will be there for you whenever you are in a situation that requires a sword, rather than a scalpel.”

Rei nodded and smiled.

“I thought that was our job,” Ryouga grumbled.

“Ryouga, you're more like a wooden club,” Ranma chuckled.

The room laughed. Ryouga scowled a bit before chuckling himself. Minako ruffling his hair helping him to lighten up slightly.

The room ate and chatted for a while. Ukyo watched Ranma and Akane chat, obvious love in their faces as they talked. It still bothered her. Not as much as it did a few days ago, but she acknowledged that she could not just turn it off.

Shampoo noticed Ukyo. Ukyo felt Shampoo watching her and turned to her. Shampoo allowed a slight smirk to cross her face. Ukyo shook her head before turning away, albeit just for a moment before turning back to Shampoo.

“Does it ever go away?” she whispered to Shampoo.

Shampoo shook her head. She looked to Jansen who was in a very animated conversation with Makoto, likely about ships being blown up. Shampoo scooted closer to Ukyo before speaking again.

“If you let it consume you, it only hurt more.”

“Why her?” Ukyo asked, a bit sad. “Why not me?”

Shampoo shrugged. “Why not Shampoo? Why not Rei? Does it really matter?”

Ukyo sighed. “I guess not.”

“Shampoo love Ranma. Will till the day I die. If something ever happen and Akane no longer in picture,” Shampoo grinned, “Shampoo will pounce.”

Ukyo looked to Shampoo, both disgusted by and in awe of her honesty, as the Sisko's first officer continued. “That said, Shampoo love him enough to let him be happy. Ranma happy, so Shampoo happy.”

Ukyo slowly nodded.

“Besides,” Shampoo said, checking again on Jansen who was still waving her arms around to emphasize whatever point she was trying to make to Makoto, “we friends and unlike lovers, friends forever.”

Ukyo had not thought of it like that. While it was certain that a friendship did not have the level of invulnerability to it that Shampoo was implying – Ukyo had nearly learned that lesson the hard way earlier that week – it certainly was a lot more stable than a 'relationship'.

“Thanks,” Ukyo smiled.

“What are you guys talking about?” Ranma asked, noticing Ukyo and Shampoo.

“Oh, she was just giving me some advice,” Ukyo smiled.

Shampoo nodded. “World is topsy-turvy. Romulans helping Starfleet, Shampoo helping Spatula-Girl, what next? Cats marry dogs?”

Ukyo laughed and shook her head, ignoring the spatula-girl comment.

* * * *

“Commander,” JC called after Usagi as she walked down the corridor from engineering towards a turbolift.

Usagi stopped and turned around. She smiled to JC as he scurried to catch up with her.

“Hi!”

“Do you have a minute?”

Usagi nodded and motioned for JC to follow her. “I’ve got an appointment to get my hair done soon, so I hope you don’t mind if we talk and walk.”

JC shook his head as the pair moved into the turbolift.

“So, what’s up?”

“Well,” JC said, sheepishly, “I just wanted to make sure we were cool.”

“Cool?”

JC nodded.

“I didn’t know we were ever ‘uncool,’” Usagi said.

“Uh…”

The lift doors opened and Usagi walked out. JC trailed behind her a bit, listening to her as she spoke.

“I overreacted,” she admitted. “I understand that when you sound and act like an ass, you don’t actually mean to.”

JC blinked. “An ass?”

Usagi nodded. “Yes. But it’s fine.”

“Well,” JC said, running up in front of Usagi and stopping her, “I don’t think it is. Not if you think I have been an ass.”

“Hrm,” Usagi mumbled, pulling a small PADD out of her pocket and looking it over. “This thing is all wrong.”

JC ripped the PADD from Usagi’s hand and began to read. “Ten ways to make a man fall in love with you?”

Usagi shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”

“Number six, accuse him of being an ass…”

Usagi again shrugged.

“Who writes this crap?”

Again, Usagi shrugged.

JC took the PADD and put it in his own pocket, making sure Usagi did not get a chance to use number four; one that mentioned physically assaulting a man. From first glance it seemed to be written for Klingons, not humans.

“Look, when we get to the shipyard, there will be a week while they disassemble the engines and we won't have anything to do,” JC explained. “Would you like to take a trip with me to Risa-”

“OH MY GOD!” Usagi screeched.

“Please let me finish,” JC sighed.

Usagi groaned sadly. “Okay.”

“Would you like to take a trip with me to Risa and meet my wife and daughter?”

“Wouldn't I be a third wheel? Isn't Risa a super-sexy lover's paradise?”

JC chuckled a bit. “You've never traveled with a child before, have you?”

Usagi shook her head.

“Yeah, there's not a lot of super-sexy stuff going on when they are around.”

Usagi smirked. “I see what you're doing.”

“Oh?”

“You think I will have so much fun with your daughter that you and your wife can sneak off for all kinds of naughty activities.”

JC smugly grinned.

“Does she like manga?”

“She's five.”

“So...”

JC shrugged. “I'm not certain her reading comprehension is to the point where manga makes much sense yet.”

“I should help her with that.”

JC nodded. “A noble task.”

“I agree to your terms,” Usagi said, stretching out her hand.

“Excellent!” JC smiled, shaking Usagi's hand.

“If nine months from now you have another daughter, I am going to insist you name her after me.”

JC chuckled nervously. “Actually...” JC quickly positioned himself to where he could make a quick dash for the turbolift if necessary, “...we already have an 'Usagi' in our household.”

“Oh?”

JC nodded, moving farther away from his boss.

“Yes, a beautiful little cat.”

“What a coincidence!”

“Yes...” JC stammered. “Coincidence.”

Usagi suddenly realized why JC was moving away. She started to move towards him.

“What's he like? Clumsy?”

“It's not the most graceful cat, no.”

“Loud?”

“He meows quite a bit...”

“What else?”

“Loud noises make him hide...”

Usagi glared at JC as he swiftly moved backwards away from the advancing chief engineer.

“When did you get it?”

JC looked around, turned and sprinted towards a turbolift.

“Last year!!” he called out as he fled.

Usagi considered pursuing JC but instead decided to simply continue to her hair appointment. There would be plenty of time between now and their trip to plan her revenge.

Yes, she would have her revenge, and it would be sweet.