

TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE

A Bajoran shuttlecraft flies past the camera. We can see that it has taken some damage -- scorched hull plating, damaged sensor systems, dangling wires, etc. A ship that's less than ship-shape.

As the ship flies away and recedes into the distance we hear, very faintly in the background, a modulated, pulsing tone, like the carrier signal of a radio transmission.

CUT TO:

INT. BAJORAN SHUTTLE -- COCKPIT

We are looking at two screens, on the starboard wall. The top one is blown out, covered in spiderwebs of fractured glass; the bottom one shows a standard status display. For a moment, we hear the same modulated tone -- then it stops, and writing begins flashing on the screen. Our angle, however, prevents us from reading it.

All is quiet for a moment, then...

TORAN (V.O.)

Ow!

We slowly pan over to see TORAN NOA sitting in the starboard pilot's seat, wincing in pain. There is a deep scratch on his left cheek, which is being tended to by ELRIS LEA.

ELRIS

Sorry.

TORAN

Do you have that dermal regenerator on setting three?

ELRIS

Setting two, actually. The medkit may have suffered damage, so I

don't want to take chances.

She works on it for a minute longer, then pulls her instrument away. Toran's cheek looks normal, except for a rapidly disappearing patch of red. Elris kisses it.

ELRIS (CONT'D)

All better.

TORAN

Thanks. Is Carter all right?

A pause, then they both turn and look toward the rear of the cockpit, where LEWIS CARTER is curled into a corner, shaking with fear. Elris looks disgusted.

ELRIS

Carter's the same as ever.

Carter looks up at the sound of his name.

CARTER

A-Are they g-gone?

ELRIS

They've been gone for almost ten minutes now, Carter.

Carter looks around, then pulls himself to his feet and looks around, wide-eyed, still trembling.

CARTER

They were trying to kill us. They were trying to kill us. Starfleet was trying to kill us. They were--

ELRIS

They didn't kill you, but I will if you don't pipe down!

Carter clamps his jaw shut. Elris gives him a contemptuous look, then sits down in the pilot's seat next to Toran.

TORAN

Yes, Lea, we did have to take him with us.

ELRIS

I didn't ask.

TORAN

You didn't have to. What about our new friends out there? Still no sign of them?

Elris looks at a sensor readout.

ELRIS

None. Looks like we lost them in the Denorios belt. They're probably on their way back to Bajor. Now if someone would only tell him that.

She jerks her thumb in the direction of Carter, who has come to look over her shoulder at the sensor screen.

CARTER

They're really gone? They're not masking their signatures somehow, sneaking up on us?

ELRIS

This is an active sweep, Carter. We're out of the Denorios belt, so there's no way they can be nearby without our knowing it.

CARTER

(relaxing a little)
So they're really gone?

ELRIS

Want a cookie?

Carter breathes a sigh of relief, and pulls himself upright.

CARTER

Wow.

(beat, rambling)

Wow! What an adventure! Did you see the way those two fighters swooped down on us? I thought we had it for sure! Were you scared, Doctor? Well of course you were scared, who wouldn't be? But what a close call it was! I have to take down some

notes on this. What a story it
would be if this ever got out--

Elris stands, whirls on him, and grabs him by the throat.

ELRIS

(slowly)

If you try to contact anyone about
this, little worm, your padd will
be stuffed down your throat. I'm a
doctor. I know how to do it.
Understand?

Carter makes a weak "urk" sound and nods. Elris lets him go
and sits down again. Toran looks at her with bemusement.

TORAN

(quietly)

I think we can contact those
fighter patrols and tell them not
to bother. You and Carter are well
on the way to killing each other.

ELRIS

I can't tell you how much I hate
that man right now. Do you know how
many times in the last 26 hours he
almost got us killed? Twice on
Bajor, at least once in orbit...

TORAN

He didn't. That's the point. So the
question is what we do now?

Carter pipes up from the rear of the cockpit.

CARTER

Not get caught.

ELRIS

He didn't ask you.

Toran sighs and calls up a status reading on his console.

TORAN

Life support and engines are in
nominal condition. I'm worried
about our hull integrity, but as

long as we don't get into any more fire fights we should be okay. I suppose the first question is where to go.

ELRIS

Vanika said that there was a resistance outpost in the Qis system. That's seven lights years from here.

TORAN

And Vanika was captured. We have to assume that they know what she knows. In fact, it would probably be safer to leave the Bajoran sector altogether.

CARTER

Um, Doctors?

ELRIS

We can't just leave! Our people are fighting for their freedom back there!

TORAN

I know. But the fact is that we're in no condition to help them. Right now Starfleet wants our heads on a platter. We'd be an liability, not an asset.

CARTER

Guys?

ELRIS

That's no reason to turn our backs.

TORAN

Lea, I know you want to do something. You think I don't? My family is back there! But there's nothing we can do!

ELRIS

Well we're going to do something, because I'll be damned if I'm going

to just stand back and let Bajor--

Carter puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles piercingly. Toran and Elris looks at him, surprised and annoyed.

CARTER

What is that?

He points. Elris and Toran look at the screen next to Toran's seat, seeing for the first time that there is a message flashing on the screen. We are now in a position to read it, and we zoom in on the message. It says,

IT'S AFTER MIDNIGHT.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR GLASS SLIPPER IS?

Their eyes widen. Toran slowly starts laughing in disbelief. Elris grins widely, whoops for joy and throws her arms around Toran.

ELRIS

He's alive!

CARTER

What? Who's alive? What are you talking about?

TORAN

The message, Carter. It means that the Captain is alive.

ELRIS

It means that Neil's alive! And we have to find him!

They look at each other as we...

FADE OUT.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE

A flattering shot of Station Epsilon. We slowly zoom in on the docking ring as the Romulan warbird closes in and docks with the station.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- DOCKING RING

NEIL CROSS and KIERAN MACGREGOR are standing in front of an airlock as the doors open. Cross looks from MacGregor to the hatch as he shuffles back and forth in anticipation.

MACGREGOR

...by the way, we also just received a signal from the convoy. The new Council members will be here in a couple hours.

CROSS

Good. The sooner we get the Charter signed, the sooner the real battle can take place.

MacGregor looks at him, eyebrow raised.

MACGREGOR

You mean the battle at the mediation table? Or is it a bit early for that?

Cross looks at him, trying to determine whether or not he is joking. Unable to tell, he turns back to the open airlock.

Then his eyes light up.

Flanked by two ROMULAN OFFICERS, one on either side, TALORA, decked out in full Romulan military uniform, appears in the hatch. Her eyes also light up as she sees Cross. Cross goes into the airlock to meet her, making as if he is going to hug her... Then he looks at the stern-looking Romulans accompanying her, and seems to think better of it.

Instead, he reaches forward and grasps her hands in his, both of them smiling.

TALORA

I see you're still in one piece in spite of my not being around, Captain.

Cross laughs.

CROSS

Just barely, Commander, just barely. Or is it Subcommander again?

TALORA

Commander is correct, in both of our systems. Captain, I'd like you to meet Subcommander Miro, my executive officer, and Lieutenant Tarvek, chief engineer of the Karthos.

Cross nods at them and sizes them up. MIRO is tall and long-faced, with a perpetual scowl, while TARVEK is shorter and has boyish features.

CROSS

You remember Councillor MacGregor, of course.

TALORA

Of course. Good to see you, sir.

She shakes MacGregor's hand. MacGregor looks at her, unsmiling.

MACGREGOR

Good of you to join us, Commander. But I'm curious about the warbird; how did you persuade the Romulan government to give it to you?

MIRO

They didn't.

MacGregor looks at the tall Romulan, startled.

MACGREGOR

I'm sorry?

TALORA

At least not officially. As you know, the Romulan Empire has a principle similar to the Prime Directive.

MACGREGOR

A principle which you have a history of breaking when it suits you.

Beat pause.

TALORA

True. But in this case, the Senate has decided to abide by it. The Empire will remain neutral in this conflict, which is by definition internal to the Federation.

TARVEK

That doesn't mean we can't take sides, though.

TALORA

Exactly. Several prominent officials in the Empire, including my father, are willing to lend support to the Coalition... I think the phrase is, "behind the scenes." As far as the official report is concerned, I took command of the Karthos and went rogue. The Senate will officially disavow my actions from here on in.

MACGREGOR

But this is it? One ship, maybe a few dozen men, and that's all they can bother to send us?

Cross coughs and looks embarrassed. Talora looks at MacGregor, her eyebrows raised.

TALORA

You must understand our predicament, Councillor. On the one

hand, the Romulan Empire wants to help the Coalition. On the other, we can hardly risk exposing ourselves. That would benefit no one.

MACGREGOR

(grunting)

It's nice that you're on our side, but I would have hoped that you'd do more than pay lip service to the cause.

Beat pause. Talora folds her arms and stares MacGregor down. Miro and Tarvek exchange puzzled glances.

TARVEK

We're not familiar with your idiom. What does it mean to "pay lip service?"

CROSS

Councillor MacGregor feels that your assistance is only nominal, that it lacks real substance. His viewpoint is his own; for my part, I appreciate all the help we can get.

MacGregor glares at Cross.

MIRO

With respect, Councillor, you are mistaken. The Karthos may be only a single ship, but you wouldn't know it to see it in battle. It has our most up-to-date defense systems, tactical simulations, and the finest crew you'll find in the Empire.

TALORA

Of course, if we're not wanted, we can take our ship and leave.

MACGREGOR

(quickly)

That won't be necessary. As the
Captain says, we need all the help
we can get.

Talora slowly steps forward until she is almost nose-to-nose
with MacGregor.

TALORA

Are you sure? We wouldn't want you
to feel insulted by our "lip
service."

MacGregor, seeming to shrink into himself, gulps and says
nothing. Talora looks at him for a moment longer, then turns
to Cross.

TALORA (CONT'D)

Well, Captain, do I get a tour?

Cross grins, offers his arm with a flourish, and escorts
Talora down the corridor. Tarvek follows; Miro stays behind
to give MacGregor an appraising look. MacGregor looks up at
the tall Romulan.

MACGREGOR

(quietly)

I really meant no offense, you
know.

Miro raises an eyebrow and says nothing.

CUT TO:

INT. BAJORAN SHUTTLE -- BACK ROOM

A small room that doubles as galley and sleeping quarters; a
pair of cots is laid out on the floor next to a computer
terminal. Elris and Carter pace to and fro as Toran comes
through the open hatchway leading to the cockpit.

TORAN

We were right. It was an overriding
all-points transmission, received
everywhere in the Federation. A
blanket signal that came up on
every terminal with a Federation
transponder.

Elris grins fiercely.

ELRIS

I knew he'd find a way!

Carter, confused, looks from Elris to Toran.

CARTER

Would one of you mind letting me in on the big deal here? What does a glass slipper have to do with anything?

TORAN

(patiently)

It's from an Earth folk tale that Lea told me about. "Cinderella." A poor woman, harassed by her step-family, is visited by a fairy godmother--

CARTER

I know the story. What about it?

TORAN

Cinderella leaves the ball as mysteriously as she came, but leaves behind her glass slipper. A way to find her after the coach has turned back into a pumpkin.

ELRIS

It's a message we arranged.

TORAN

The day before everything happened on Earth, the Captain contacted us and gave us the glass slipper message. He said that he would probably have to disappear from sight, and if and when he was secure he would find a way to send us the message.

CARTER

And it means, what?

ELRIS

"I'm alive. Come and join me."

A pause as Carter takes this in. He nods, understanding.

CARTER

And so without the message, you would have to assume you were operating completely on your own.

ELRIS

Exactly. But he found a way to get us the message -- did he ever! About a dozen of the Enterprise crew know about it, and we can now round up those who are still loyal to the Captain and join him.

TORAN

Those who are still alive.

Elris looks taken aback. A grim pause.

CARTER

So we join the Captain. Great. Where is he? And if the others are still alive, where would they be?

ELRIS

(nodding)

That's the hard part. Neil and Dojar don't want to be found. Same with Jen, Talora, Erik, Nat Stolt, Whedon, even Y'lan. These last weeks, nobody has had a clue where to find them.

TORAN

And Starfleet certainly has the motivation.

Carter sits down, shaking his head.

CARTER

You're saying that you, isolated and hunted, have to each accomplish what Starfleet Intelligence can't?

Toran and Elris look at each other.

TORAN

Put it that way, it sounds like more of a challenge than we'd thought.

ELRIS

I don't think we'll have to worry too much about that. All we have to do is get close enough to Captain Cross, and he'll find us.

CARTER

What makes you say that?

ELRIS

He told me so.

The three of them are quiet for a moment.

CARTER

This is crazy. You're putting a lot of faith in one man, you know that? He must be the most wanted person in the Alpha Quadrant, or close to it, but he'll merrily jaunt across a sector to pick you up? Is that what you're saying?

ELRIS

I'm saying I believe in him.

CARTER

I don't think that you're being--

They are interrupted by an alarm from the cockpit. The three of them exchange looks, then bolt through the hatchway into...

CUT TO:

INT. BAJORAN SHUTTLE -- COCKPIT

Toran reaches the controls first, and glances at the readout.

TORAN

Starfleet patrol ship on long range sensors.

ELRIS

Have they picked us up yet?

TORAN

No; the sensors on this tub are overdriven, so we have more range than they do. But they'll see us any second now.

ELRIS

Great. Now what?

Toran frowns and thinks for a moment.

TORAN

Quickly, shut everything down. Everything but life support and passive sensors.

Elris sits in the other seat and starts working the console along with Toran.

ELRIS

Silent running?

TORAN

It's our best shot. Cut down our power emanations, and with any luck they'll see us as just another hunk of metal in space.

ELRIS

Make sure you alter our field coil emissions, or they might match it to our warp trail from before.

TORAN

Done.

One by one, most of the screens in the cabin go dark and the lights are extinguished. In a moment, all is quiet. The three shuttle passengers are now lit only by the sensor image screen, and the stars beyond the cockpit windows. The scene quickly becomes spooky.

ELRIS

(whispering)

We should be in their sensor range

by now.

CARTER

(whispering)

How will we know if they've
detected us or not?

ELRIS

(whispering)

I guess we won't, until they change
course to intercept us.

TORAN

(whispering)

Why are we whispering?

A pause as they look at each other, then Elris grunts a laugh and the tension lifts slightly. On the sensor screen, the blip representing the patrol ship moves across the screen. Suddenly, it turns.

ELRIS

They've altered course.

CARTER

They've spotted us!

TORAN

No, wait... they're moving in right
angles from their previous course,
and not coming directly at us. It
could be a routine course change.

ELRIS

Or they could be moving closer to
get a better look at us.

Toran shrugs mildly.

CARTER

Can I just say...

ELRIS

No.

CARTER

This really might be a good time to
reconsider the "turn ourselves in"

option.

ELRIS

No.

CARTER

I mean, you've got to admit it's better than getting blown into tiny pieces by--

ELRIS

Carter, I will hit you.

Carter shuts up. The blip continues moving across the screen with agonizing slowness. After a long moment, it moves past the shuttle's blip and off the screen.

Sighs of relief all around.

TORAN

We'll wait five minutes, just to be safe, then we'll power up again.

Elris leans back and rubs at her temples.

ELRIS

That felt too close. We can't stay in this sector any longer, not if we're going to find Neil.

CARTER

Where do we go? I mean, that's the problem, Captain Cross could be anywhere. If Starfleet can't find him, how will we?

ELRIS

We won't get anywhere by staying here.

(beat)

Neil said something about the rimward sectors. That's where I'd be looking for the rebellion, especially after the attack on the Cyclops array. I think that's a good place to start.

Toran looks up.

TORAN

I've got a better idea.

ELRIS

What is it?

TORAN

Ellensworld.

Elris looks puzzled. Carter looks between them.

CARTER

The Institute? Why there? That's coreward of here, in the other direction.

TORAN

There's a saying on Bajor: an hour of planning is worth a day of acting. At the Institute we can lay low while we gather information, plan our next move.

Elris thinks, then shakes her head.

ELRIS

I see where you're going, but I don't like it. It feels too much like we're wasting our time.

TORAN

I know you're anxious to find our friends, Lea. I am too. But Carter's right -- Starfleet will be looking as hard as we will, and they'll know he's in the rimward sectors as well. We won't want to hang around on our own any longer than we have to.

Elris bites her lip, looking uncertain. Toran leans over and puts a hand on her shoulder. She looks at him.

TORAN

Trust me.

A pause, then Elris sighs, squeezes his hand and nods. Toran smiles in reassurance, then turns back to the controls.

TORAN
Powering engines, setting course
for Ellensworld.

CARTER
Remind me again why I volunteered
to go to Bajor.

ELRIS
I think you call it a "scoop."

CARTER
The scoop, right. I wanted the
scoop. Silly me.

He wanders off as the cabin lights come up and Toran turns
the shuttle toward another part of the stars.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- COMMAND CENTRE

Cross and Talora appear out of a turbolift into the Command
Centre, which contains the usual assortment of station
members at various positions.

CROSS
Last stop, Command Centre. Back
when this was a mining station,
this room was the particle cannon
control point; now it's used to
oversee operations for the entire
station.

Talora does not look particularly impressed.

TALORA
Exactly how old is this station?

CROSS
Let's see. The oldest part is the
converted mining section, and the
Sejrekans built that about, oh,
fifty years ago. The scientific
modules were added later on, but it
was all abandoned when the particle
cannon became obsolete and the

mining operation was suspended.

TALORA

Abandoned for how long?

CROSS

About twenty years, I guess. Until the Sejrekans and colonists from Kraxton II and Cassandra V came here last year.

TALORA

So the military headquarters for the rebellion is a de facto derelict space station?

CARLA

I'm sorry we don't meet with your approval.

They look. CARLA PETRUCCI has entered the CC, unnoticed. She is looking at Talora with a distinctly unfriendly expression. Cross coughs.

CROSS

Commander Talora, this is Carla Petrucci, commanding officer of Epsilon.

Talora nods politely as Carla approaches them.

TALORA

I did not mean it as a criticism; I recognize that you are doing the best you can under rather difficult circumstances.

CARLA

(dryly)

Thanks a whole lot.

TALORA

However, a Romulan organization would be much more efficient and organized. We would have a clearly defined chain of command for one thing. Also a clear network of logistical support from the worlds

who participate in this endeavour,
instead of scraping by on whatever
comes your way.

CARLA

We make do.

TALORA

I'm sure you do.

CARLA

You have to admit, however, that
our ability to remain hidden from
Federation forces is quite good.

(sarcastically)

One might say it's almost Romulan.

Cross once again looks embarrassed. Talora is unaffected by
the sarcasm.

TALORA

Indeed, your stealth is currently
your greatest advantage. It is a
tribute to your leadership that you
have remained hidden while you
gather your supplies and military
force; as things currently stand,
you pose absolutely no threat to
Starfleet.

Carla's eyes widen. Her lips tighten.

CARLA

(icy)

Captain, tell your friend that
while we appreciate her stopping
by, we don't need defeatists on
this station.

She turns on her heel and storms out of the CC. Cross shakes
his head, grimacing. Talora frowns and turns to him.

TALORA

I don't understand her attitude. I
was telling the truth, nothing more
or less.

CROSS

Sometimes the truth is the last thing we want to hear.

TALORA
(nodding)
How true.

CROSS
Don't worry about Carla. She just has a lot on her mind right now -- I guess we all do. She'll come around in time.

Talora smiles a little, and shakes her head.

TALORA
I've met people like her on Romulus. She's the type of person who doesn't trust anyone unless they've proven themselves.

Cross looks at her.

CROSS
You have nothing to prove to me, you know.

TALORA
I know, Captain, and I appreciate that. But Commander Petrucci is a different story, and I fear that others in this rebellion will be similarly--

She is interrupted by a beeping from one of the consoles. Cross looks, and walks over to join a rating named FELIX who is standing there. Talora follows as he looks at the screen, sizing up the situation.

CROSS
Distress signal?

FELIX
Our convoy carrying the new Council members. They've spotted a Starfleet patrol -- it's changed course toward them. Interception in eighteen minutes.

CROSS

Any data on the patrol?

FELIX

Advanced Akira class, looks like full armament.

CROSS

(dismayed)

The Rubicon can't stand against that much firepower, especially if reinforcements are en route. Do we have anything else that can get there in time?

FELIX

No, sir.

(beat)

Unless you count that Romulan ship that docked a while ago.

Cross and Felix both look at Talora.

CROSS

You say you need to prove yourself, Talora. This is your chance. How about it?

Talora looks at the display screen showing the Akira closing in on the diplomatic convoy. She looks up at Cross.

TALORA

Care to come along, Captain?

CROSS

I wouldn't miss it, Commander.

They smile at each other, and Talora thumbs her communication wristpad as they walk to the turbolift.

TALORA

Miro, Tarvek, report to the Karthos immediately.

(beat)

Should we tell Commander Petrucci?

They enter the turbolift. Cross shakes his head.

CROSS

We'll surprise her. Docking ring.

The turbolift doors close and we...

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE

A trio of small vessels -- they look like passenger vessels, and no armament is obvious on them -- are moving in formation. In the distance, a Starfleet vessel can be seen approaching them.

CUT TO:

INT. PAXTON'S SHIP -- BRIDGE

A small, cramped bridge with poor lighting. Several men are sitting or standing at consoles. One of them, GEORG PAXTON, is shaking his head as he looks at main viewscreen.

PAXTON

This is not good. O'Day, still no word from Epsilon?

A crewman, O'DAY, looks up from his console.

O'DAY

Nothing. They've gone dark.

PAXTON

I don't blame them. Options?

O'DAY

We can't run, and we can't fight. I say we try to bluff our way out.

CREWMAN #2

Sir, they're hailing us.

Paxton smiles grimly.

PAXTON

Guess that's what it comes down to.
On speakers.

A crackle of static, then...

VOICE ON SPEAKER

This is the Federation starship
Mitsukake calling unidentified
convoy. Cut your engines and
prepare to be boarded.

Paxton takes a deep breath.

PAXTON

Hi there, Mitsukake. I'm Captain
Paxton, and this is my ship. We're
on a trading mission, carrying
mechanical parts and holosuite
programs to Dorias Prime. We're not
well-equipped, but if your ship is
experiencing difficulties, of
course we'll lend any assistance we
can.

A pause. O'Day groans.

O'DAY

I said bluff it out, not piss them
off.

VOICE ON SPEAKER

Convoy vessel, I repeat: cut your
engines and prepare to be boarded.

PAXTON

To what end? We're not in the habit
of stopping for strange ships.

VOICE ON SPEAKER

On the authority of Starfleet, your
vessels will be searched, and you
and your crew detained for
questioning.

PAXTON

Mitsukake, we are Federation citizens, travelling through Federation space, and as such we are protected under the Federation Charter's guarantee against unwarranted search and seizure. What is the basis for your request?

A beat pause, then on the viewscreen we see the Akira fire phasers across Paxton's ship's bow. Paxton sighs grimly.

PAXTON
So much for the Bill of Rights.

VOICE ON SPEAKER
There will not be another warning shot, convoy vessel. Cut your engines now.

On the screen, the Akira grows closer. The Bridge crew look at Paxton.

CREWMAN #2
Orders, Captain?

Paxton stands upright, sets his jaw.

PAXTON
Prepare to--

O'DAY
Captain, I'm reading a tachyon surge off our port bow.

PAXTON
Source?

O'DAY
It's... What the hell?

PAXTON
What?

O'DAY
There's a Romulan warbird decloaking 400 meters from us!

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

Sure enough, a Romulan warbird appears out of nowhere, and pulls alongside the lead vessel. As it does so, the Akira halts its approach.

CUT TO:

INT. KARTHOS -- BRIDGE

A spacious Bridge with top-of-the-line equipment. Cross stands next to Talora, seated in the command chair; Miro is at tactical, and various other Romulans are at the other positions.

ROMULAN CREWMAN #1
We're in position, Commander.

TALORA
Very good. Miro, can we extend our shields around the entire convoy from this position?

MIRO
Yes, Commander, just barely.

TALORA
Proceed.

Beat pause.

MIRO
Shields extended. The Starfleet vessel is hailing us, Commander.

TALORA
No response.

Cross looks at her.

CROSS
(quietly)
Do you plan to take any offensive action?

TALORA
No.

Cross's eyebrows furrow in puzzlement, but he says nothing.

MIRO

Starfleet vessel hailing us again,
Commander. They demand to know our
intentions.

TALORA

No reponse.

Pause.

MIRO

They're powering up weapons and
targeting phasers.

TALORA

Take no action. Ignore them
completely.

Miro looks as puzzled as Cross, but he nods.

MIRO

Aye, Commander. Take no action.

Cross leans in close to Talora and speaks to her in hushed
tones.

CROSS

What exactly are you doing?

TALORA

It's simple, Captain. In an even-
handed fight, that ship is no match
for this warbird. If her captain is
halfway intelligent, he knows it,
so he'll be doing what I would do:
try to provoke us into action so
that we'll abandon the convoy.

CROSS

(nodding)

But on this warbird, cooler heads
will prevail.

TALORA

Exactly.

The ship ROCKS just then, as the Akira fires her phasers at the warbird.

ROMULAN CREWMAN #1
Evasive maneuvers, Commander?

TALORA
Negative! Stay right where you are,
Sublieutenant! Miro, damage?

MIRO
Shields holding, Commander. They're
firing again.

The ship ROCKS again. Cross grabs the arm of Talora's chair for support.

MIRO
Shields still holding.

CROSS
(quietly)
If you continue to do nothing,
they'll take down our shields
eventually.

TALORA
Miro, how far away are the
Coalition reinforcements?

MIRO
Three minutes, Commander.

Talora looks at Cross and grins slightly.

TALORA
Not in the next three minutes,
Captain. We've diverted all power
to shields; there's no way they can
get through them before your
friends arrive. They can't win and
they know it.

The ship ROCKS under phaser fire yet again.

CROSS
So for the next three minutes, we
execute Operation Ignore and wait

them out.

TALORA

Exactly.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

The Akira and the warbird stare at each other across space, the convoy vessels huddled behind the warbird. The Akira fires a couple more times, but the shots are easily absorbed by the warbird's shields.

A long pause...

Then, slowly, the Akira backs away.

CUT TO:

INT. KARTHOS -- BRIDGE

Miro, looking at his console, smiles in satisfaction.

MIRO

Starfleet vessel moving away,
Commander.

CROSS

They don't want to be here when our friends show up. Very nicely done, Commander. You've resolved the encounter with no casualties on either side, and with us having gained a small psychological advantage -- I know if I were on that ship I'd be frustrated as all hell.

TALORA

Yes. Well, let's hope it's enough to impress them. Subcommander, contact the convoy, tell them we'll be pleased to escort them to Station Epsilon.

MIRO
Aye, Commander.

Talora looks at Cross.

TALORA
That ship will report what happened to its superiors. Starfleet will contact the Romulan government, and they'll be forced to officially tell them we're a rogue ship. You might say we've passed the point of no return.

CROSS
(nodding)
I understand. If it makes you feel better, though, you have plenty of company.

Talora smiles a little at that, and leans back in her chair.

TALORA
Set course for Epsilon.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

We are elsewhere in the Quadrant, hovering over a blue-white world that is mostly ocean. This is Ellensworld. In orbit above it, hundreds of ships from all over the Alpha Quadrant are in parking orbit; Federation ships, Romulan, Klingon, Cardassian, Tholian, and many others. A gathering of all nations, owned by none.

We can just make out a small Bajoran shuttle pull into an inconspicuous spot alongside other vessels.

CUT TO:

EXT. ELLENSWORLD, BEAULIEUX MOUNTAIN RANGE

Sheer mountains, reaching kilometers into the sky, as far as the eye can see. Nestled into the face of several of these mountains we a collection of buildings that is Ellensworld Institute.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLENSWORLD INSTITUTE -- FOYER

A spacious atrium, where dozens of people from all races are coming and going. Some are students, some are professors, some are independent scholars, and there are even a few tourists here to see one of the most distinguished centers of higher learning in the Quadrant.

Off to one side, three figures materialize in Bajoran transporter beams: Elris, Toran and Carter. No one takes any notice of them. They look at their surroundings, then look at each other.

ELRIS

Well, at least we don't attract attention to ourselves here. This is quite a diverse crowd.

TORAN

I spent a year here doing undergraduate work. Ellensworld is in Federation space, but is not actually a part of the Federation. We're in neutral territory here.

As he speaks, a pair of Starfleet security officers with phaser rifles walk past -- like everyone else, they do not notice the three of them. Carter eyes the security officers nervously.

ELRIS

Relax. Their ship is probably attached to this sector. I doubt anyone here is looking for us.

CARTER

I hope you're right. So now what?

They start walking toward one of the archways leading to other parts of the Institute.

TORAN

I suggest we split up. I should still have level two access to the library computers, so I'll grab a terminal and do some research. The two of you can mix in with the crowd, keep your ears open for information, rumors, what have you.

CARTER

Now that I can do.

ELRIS

I don't know -- sounds like a waste of time to me.

CARTER

From what I can tell, the growing insurgency in the rimward sectors is one of the hot-button topics around here.

TORAN

It'll be okay. Come and find me in the main library if you find out anything, okay?

Elris nods, looking less than happy. Toran squeezes her hand.

TORAN

It'll be okay.

He smiles reassuringly, then walks away through one of the archways, quickly disappearing in the milling crowd. Elris and Carter watch him go, then turn to go down another corridor.

CARTER

You know, I hear they have an excellent cafe here. Maybe we can grab a couple of raktajinos and watch the news from there.

ELRIS

(quietly)

Carter, now that we're alone, I just want to say this...

She turns to him. He looks at her expectantly.

CARTER

Yes?

ELRIS

If you try anything, I will kill you. Literally kill you. Got it?

She turns and walks ahead. Carter's eyebrows are raised.

CARTER

(to himself)

Is it wrong that I'm totally turned on whenever she does that?

He jogs to catch up with her.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

Near Epsilon. The Karthos is docked, and as we watch the convoy ships take positions of their own at the docking ports.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- DOCKING RING

Cross and Talora are walking down the long circular corridor.

CROSS

They should be just down here. But yes, I do think Carla will be impressed with your initiative and your quick thinking.

They come around the curve and run into Carla, who stands there with arms folded, looking unbelievably pissed off.

CROSS

...or not.

CARLA

What the hell were the two of you thinking!?

TALORA

I can't speak for the Captain, Miss Pettruci, but personally my thoughts went along these lines: "That convoy may be destroyed. I should do something about it."

CARLA

Don't be a smart-ass with me!

TALORA

I was answering your question to the best of my ability. Excuse me.

She walks past Carla, disregarding her. Carla and Cross move to catch up with her.

CARLA

You went out there without authorization. You should have at least cleared it with me. And then, when you got there, you had a perfectly good chance to destroy an enemy ship, and you didn't!

They come to another docking port, where MacGregor and several station crew members are there to escort men and women in ambassadorial garb, the Councillors, as well as the convoy crew from the ships. Most of them are concerned with the offloading of vessels, but Paxton notices Talora and walks in her direction.

TALORA

We were not in a combat situation.

CARLA

The hell you weren't! I received Cross's report a few minutes ago -- that ship fired on you!

TALORA

The incident was resolved.

CARLA

And that ship may be back, and destroy who knows how many of our ships, or maybe even this station, because when you had a chance to

destroy it you didn't!

MacGregor hears the shouting, and walks toward them. Paxton looks at Talora.

PAXTON

You commanded the warbird out there?

TALORA

I did.

Paxton grins broadly and extends his hand.

PAXTON

Whatever the Ice Lady here may think, you did all right out there. You saved our bacon, and you've made at least one new friend today.

Talora nods in appreciation and shakes Paxton's hand. Carla, looking incredulous, storms off and leads a group of confused Councillors off in the direction of the main station. MacGregor looks after them, then looks at Talora and shrugs in apology.

MACGREGOR

We're on a war footing, and I guess decisions never come easy. But for what it's worth, I also think you did well out there.

TALORA

Thank you.

She looks at Cross, who grins and gives her an "I told you so" look.

MACGREGOR

Anyway, it looks like all the Councillors from the Coalition member worlds made it in one piece. That's what counts. Now we can sit down at the table and draw up a long-term strategy.

The four of them walk off together.

CUT TO:

EXT. ELLENSWORLD, BEAULIEUX MOUNTAIN RANGE

A flattering shot of the Institute.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLENSWORLD -- LIBRARY

A cavernous room, filled with bookshelves and computer terminals. There are many people in this room, but it is quiet; all activity is somewhat muted, as one might expect from a library.

From above, we close in on Toran heading toward a quiet corner of the room, away from the well-travelled part. He finds a terminal, well apart from any other computer user, and sits down. Drawing a breath and looking around to see if anyone is watching him -- no one is -- he activates the terminal. The screen lights up.

COMPUTER VOICE

Welcome to the Ellensworld
Institute Main Library. Please note
that access is restricted to
Institute members, students, and
associated personnel. If you would
like temporary guest access, please
see an assistant Librarian.
Otherwise, please enter your
identity code to proceed.

Toran taps the console. A beat pause.

COMPUTER VOICE

Identity confirmed. Welcome back to
Ellensworld, Dr. Toran. Your last
access was Stardate 77473.8. How
can I assist you today?

Toran takes another breath, another look around, then bends down to the terminal and starts working at it.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLENSWORLD -- CAFE

A large seating area with a serving counter on one end, set on an expansive balcony with a breathtaking view of the mountains. The usual throng of people are gathered here, seated at tables, milling about and chatting with people here and there. We notice Elris and Carter making their way slowly through the crowd toward the counter. As they move, we catch bits and pieces of conversation . . .

VOICE #1

...finished the geological survey report, and I must say I am disappointed with the quality of...

VOICE #2

...on the contrary, I find Drange's Final Theorem to be a compelling argument for...

VOICE #3

...saw it, but I don't understand it. These rebels can't be very comfortable going around in footwear made of glass...

VOICE #4

...the cube root of G sub h , we find that the tertiary superset consists of an astounding array of...

VOICE #5

...no, I don't take them very seriously. Starfleet will crush them in no time...

VOICE #6

...the Solos Expedition Report? It's extraordinary! The science is first rate, and it reads like a Jake Sisko novel! I'll try to get you a copy...

VOICE #7

...Dorias Sector. I hear they're buliding a fleet there, and it's

only a matter of time before they
come out in the open...

Elris stops in her tracks just short of the serving counter.

ELRIS

(quietly, to Carter)

Dorias Sector. That's the third
time I've heard that mentioned. Has
someone tracked the resistance
there?

CARTER

Beats me. I'm hearing what you're
hearing.

They step up to the serving counter. Carter cheerfully turns
to a clerk and places an order out of earshot as Elris turns
to scan the crowd. Nobody is taking notice of them. Her eyes
fall, eventually, on a pair of Starfleet officers in the far
corner. She eyes them nervously, then turns back to Carter,
who is holding a cup of raktajino out to her.

ELRIS

Thanks. I hope I'm wrong, though...
I hope they haven't tracked him
down.

CARTER

They haven't.

ELRIS

How do you know?

CARTER

Neil Cross, captured? That would be
the only thing being talked about
in this room. I haven't heard his
name once so far. I'm sure he's all
right.

ELRIS

You really do?

CARTER

Want a cookie?

And Carter holds a plate of dark blue cookies out to her. She looks at them, then at him.

CARTER

We didn't have any on the shuttle,
so I just figured...

Elris laughs, somewhat incredulously, then gives him her standard contemptuous look, snatches a cookie and turns away, biting into it. Carter hides a smile. A pause.

ELRIS

You know, it doesn't seem like
we're accomplishing much this way.
We're not getting anything but bits
and pieces, and what news we've
seen in the lounge monitors so far.

CARTER

If you have a better idea, I'm open
to it.

ELRIS

(sighing)

I don't, really. I never thought
I'd say this, Carter, but we could
use your camera right now; we could
pick things up and go back over
them later. Too bad you lost it.

CARTER

Au contraire.

Elris, frowning in confusion, looks at Carter. He smiles at her smugly, leaning casually on the counter and holding a cookie. Elris stares at him, then shakes her head.

ELRIS

What?

Carter points to a tiny label pin on his shirt collar. Elris peers at it -- it looks like a tiny Earth. No holes or lenses are visible.

ELRIS

That's supposed to be a camera?

CARTER

It is a camera. The newest innovation in nanotechnology -- the lens is less than two microns across, and the storage unit holds up to 800 hours of footage.

Beat pause.

ELRIS

And it's been recording this whole time?

CARTER

Well, on and off on Bajor -- the power unit needs recharging quite often, unfortunatly -- but it has been on since we set foot on Ellensworld, yes.

She looks at him, and slowly shakes her head.

ELRIS

Carter... all those mean things I said about you earlier?

CARTER

Yes?

ELRIS

I meant every word of them.

She turns away.

CARTER

(dryly)

You're welcome.

He bites into a cookie as Elris scans the cafe again. Once again her eyes fall on the pair of Starfleet officers...

...and one of them is looking right back at her. Elris quickly turns away. Carter, meanwhile, is staring thoughtfully into his raktajino.

CARTER

You know, just being in a room like this would make for a great "vox populi" segment on FNN. All I'd

need is some decent editing
software, and this button-cam, and
it's hello, Earth!

A pause. Carter looks thoughtful.

CARTER

It's too bad. I could really have
done some great--

Elris, meanwhile, casts her eyes back to the Starfleet
officers... who have stood from their table and are now
walking in their direction. Elris goes rigid and pulls on
Carter's sleeve. He looks around, follows her gaze to the
Starfleet officers, and goes pale.

CARTER

Oh no. Now what?

Elris looks around -- nowhere to hide, too late to run, and
it's obvious they wouldn't get far anyway. There is nothing
for them to do but stand their ground and face the Starfleet
officers as they walk directly toward them and we...

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

INT. ELLENSWORLD -- CAFE

As before. Elris and Carter look warily at the two Starfleet
officers -- they are close enough to see that one of them is
human, one is Vulcan, both are wearing gold security
uniforms. They stand in front of Elris and look at her. A
brief moment of silence.

Then the human officer grins at Elris.

HUMAN SECURITY OFFICER

Do I know you from somewhere?

Elris blinks in surprise.

ELRIS

Ah... I don't think so.

HUMAN SECURITY OFFICER

Are you sure? 'Cause you look awfully familiar to me.

Carter, puzzled, looks from the officer to Elris. Elris, a look of comprehension slowly coming across her face, smiles.

ELRIS

If we'd met before, I'm sure I'd remember.

HUMAN SECURITY OFFICER

You're probably right. A face as charming as yours would be hard to forget.

Carter, putting two and two together, looks away from them, his face a mixture of relief, bemusement and incredulity. We can almost see a similar expression on the Vulcan's placid face.

ELRIS

(modestly)

I get that a lot.

HUMAN SECURITY OFFICER

So, is this your first time on Ellensworld?

ELRIS

Yes, actually. We wanted to see the sights around here, Lewis and I.

She indicates Carter, who smiles weakly at the Starfleet officers and turns back to his cookies. The human officer gives him no more than a fleeting glance.

HUMAN SECURITY OFFICER

Well, there are some magnificent sights here. Have you walked down the Beaulieux Trail, north of the Institute? It's rumored to be the best mountain view anywhere in the sector. If you're going to be here a while, perhaps I could show you.

The grin never leaves his face. Elris looks at him, wide-eyed.

ELRIS

(slowly)

Well... you've caught me by surprise here. I mean, I don't even know your name.

The human feigns a shocked expression.

HUMAN SECURITY OFFICER

You're right! Forgive my inexcusable lack of manners. Lieutenant Paul Zacharias, starship Magellan, at your service. My companion here is Lieutenant Xirek.

XIREK

How do you do.

Elris shakes both of their hands.

ELRIS

Pleased to meet you. Danor Vanika of Bajor, and this is Lewis Avery.
(beat)
My husband.

Zacharias's smile vanishes. Carter's eyes, turned away from the officers, pop wide open for an instant. Under the counter, Elris kicks Carter's shin. He relaxes a little, then turns around, a wide grin plastered on his face.

CARTER

Charmed.

Zacharias looks at Xirek -- who looks, for a Vulcan, very amused -- and back at Elris and Carter.

ZACHARIAS

(clearing throat)

Well. I must seem like the jackass of the Federation right now.

ELRIS

Oh, not at all! In fact, I'm rather used to this kind of attention.

CARTER

You might say we both are.

ELRIS

That's right, sweetie.

Carter laughs, and throws his arm around Elris's shoulders. Elris's face freezes for instant, then her smile broadens and she puts her arm around Carter's waist. Zacharias coughs.

ZACHARIAS

I see. Married recently, then?

CARTER

Two weeks ago, actually.

ELRIS

That's right. You might say this is part of our honeymoon, in fact.

XIREK

Congratulations to you. I hope you're enjoying yourself on Ellensworld.

Beat.

ELRIS

Oh, absolutely. Just a wonderful place to visit.

CARTER

Just like I told you it would be, dear.

ELRIS

Yes you did, my sweet.

Still smiling, she turns to Carter, leans in and gives him a kiss -- a big, long, wet, sloppy, grandstanding smooch. Zacharias seems to shrink into himself. He looks at Xirek, unhappily, but finds no comfort in the Vulcan's serene face. Elris and Carter finally break the kiss and look at Zacharias, still smiling. He coughs again.

ZACHARIAS

Well. Nice to meet you both.

CARTER
Likewise, I'm sure.

XIREK
Enjoy the rest of your stay. And
congratulations once again.

ELRIS
(sweetly)
Thank you.

Zacharias and Xirek walk away together, Zacharias shaking his head. Once they're safely out of eyeshot, Elris and Carter let out sighs of relief, not looking at one another. A long moment passes.

CARTER
Well.

ELRIS
Yeah.

Another long moment. Both of them avoid looking at each other; around them, the cafe patrons carry on their business, oblivious.

ELRIS
I'm gonna go be sick.

She shrugs off Carter's arm, bolts up out of her chair and walks away quickly. Carter watches her go, and stares into space for a moment. Then he chuckles quietly and does a little shuffle on his stool.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

Another flattering shot of Epsilon among the asteroids.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- CROSS'S QUARTERS -- LIVING ROOM

This small cabin is neither as large nor as well-furnished as the Captain's Quarters on the Enterprise, but it looks cozy,

is far from uncomfortable, and commands a close-up view of several nearby asteroids.

Talora sits on the couch, looking relaxed, as Cross retrieves two Saurian brandies from the replicator.

CROSS

I remember the first time I told her about Cinderella. She wasn't that impressed.

Talora half-smiles as Cross hands her a glass and sits down in a chair opposite her.

TALORA

Neither was I, to be honest. We Romulans prefer our folk-tale heroes to be active, to achieve a desired goal through their own pains and efforts. Between her stepmother, her fairy godmother and Prince Charismatic--

CROSS

Prince Charming.

TALORA

--Cinderella was little more than a passive observer to the events in her life.

CROSS

That's exactly what Lea said. Almost word for word.

(beat)

Still, who doesn't enjoy a folk tale? In fact, our folk tales have come in handy recently -- did you know we have a Tamarian aboard Epsilon?

Talora's eyebrows raise.

TALORA

I thought the Federation didn't have official diplomatic relations with the Children of Tama.

CROSS

They don't, and it's a long story. I hope you'll get a chance to meet him -- his name is Githal, and he's a maintenance crewman. He's one of the guys responsible for keeping our replicators running. Speaking of which, we're on a limited replicator energy budget here, so enjoy that brandy.

Talora smiles, and they sips their brandies. A comfortable pause.

CROSS

When did we ever do this?

TALORA

Do what?

CROSS

This. What we're doing right now. Oh, we've had our talks in the past -- but when was the last time we lounged around in my quarters and talked over drinks?

Talora considers this.

TALORA

You're right, Captain -- I don't believe we've ever done that.

Cross winces.

TALORA

What is it?

CROSS

You called me Captain.

(beat)

It's time to face the facts,
Talora: I'm not a Captain anymore. I lost my Starfleet rank when I lost Starfleet, and I don't have a ship to command any more.

TALORA

Surely the Coalition has a chain of command with Captain in it?

CROSS

Only a very loose one at the moment. The vast majority of people on Epsilon are civilians.

TALORA

Well... you have the Magnus.

Cross looks at her, then laughs.

CROSS

I'll let you in on a little secret -- the Magnus practically flies herself! She was meant as a pleasure boat, to be flown when the Captain didn't really feel like working. The Rubicon is a bit more tricky, but still flyable by any first-year rating. I'm no Captain, not any more. You have more claim to the title than I do.

TALORA

(slowly)

Maybe you don't think of yourself as a Captain anymore. But to the people who have come to know you, you'll always be the Captain. Like it or not. It's a sign of respect, of admiration. It's who you are.

Cross looks away for a moment, thinking. Then he looks back, and nods.

CROSS

I can live with that. As long as while we're here, alone, having a brandy together, it's Neil and not Captain.

TALORA

(smiling)

Whatever you say.

She leans forward to clink her glass against Cross's, and

they drain their glasses. Cross takes her glass, stands up and puts the glasses on a nearby table. As he walks back to his chair, Talora's eyes fall on something else lying on the table. It is a leather case, satchel-sized, with something in it. She looks from it to Cross.

TALORA

Is that...?

Cross looks at the case.

CROSS

(softly)

Yeah, that's it.

TALORA

Are you ever going to take it out?

A long pause.

CROSS

I don't know.

(beat)

I suppose I will, eventually. It deserves to be hung in our rec lounge, where everyone can see it. But right now...

TALORA

(nodding)

I understand.

CROSS

Thanks.

He sinks back down into his chair and sighs.

CROSS

It seems lately that I just have two modes of existence: moody, or nasty. I'm much more active than I was... but there's a lot of pain and frustration, and instead of sulking I'm taking it out on everyone here. They respect me here, as you say, but they don't like me, and who can blame them?

A beat pause.

TALORA

You don't have a Counselor on the station?

CROSS

None.

TALORA

Well, then, I seem to have arrived just in the nick of time.

They laugh at that.

CROSS

You deserve more than to be my unpaid therapist. Look at you -- a full Commander, with a fine ship under your command.

TALORA

It was something of a political appointment. The Imperial commanders who are in on our scheme didn't warm to the thought of a D'Vorx warbird being indefinitely attached to a Subcommander.

(beat)

I always knew I'd make Commander someday, I suppose. I was just hoping that it would be on my merits.

CROSS

It is on your merits. You're the perfect person for this job, and you deserve no less than what you were given.

Talora looks uncertain, but she smiles in gratitude.

TALORA

Most kind, Neil. I suppose things have happened so fast these last few months that I haven't been able to catch up with it.

CROSS

Tell me about it. You know, the last thing that I can remember that isn't a blur is probably the peace conference with the Dominion. Or maybe... maybe it was Cardassia. Either way, it feels like I went to bed, and woke up here, on this rust bucket of a station with a rebellion to care for and a major planetary alliance to save.

(beat)

When historians look at San Francisco, I suppose they'll call it the first shot fired in the Federation Civil War.

(beat)

But it feels like a dream. None of it is real to me. Not yet.

He takes a deep, haggard breath. Talora looks at him evenly.

TALORA

There will be a reckoning with the past, Neil. It will come.

Cross looks at her.

CROSS

You're damned right about that.

As they look at one another, the doorbell chimes.

CROSS

Come in.

The door opens, admitting MacGregor into the quarters. Cross stands to greet him as he nods at them both.

MACGREGOR

Commander. Captain, the Council is about to convene in the conference room. Carla has asked for you to attend.

TALORA

(standing)

We'll come straight away.

MacGregor looks at her.

MACGREGOR

Sorry -- not you, Commander. She just asked for the Captain.

TALORA

I'm coming anyway.

MacGregor looks from her to Cross, and back to her. A pause.

MACGREGOR

Well... Just don't say I didn't warn you.

He beckons to both of them, and they both follow him out of the quarters.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- CONFERENCE ROOM

A number of the people we saw earlier are seated around the table; several of them are wearing white ambassador's robes. One of them, COUNCILLOR PETER HAMILTON, a tall human seated next to Carla near the head of the table, is standing and addressing the meeting.

HAMILTON

And it is my understanding that, by signing the Charter, we are at the same time declaring our independence from the United Federation of Planets. This Charter, therefore, becomes an historical document in several ways; it is important that we take our time and do it right.

Another councillor speaks up.

COUNCILLOR #1

Time is a luxury we may not have, Mr. Hamilton. With the Cyclops Array destroyed, Starfleet has a general idea of where this station is -- we may only have months,

maybe weeks.

HAMILTON

With all due respect to the
commander and crew of Epsilon...

(nodding at Carla)

...this station is, ultimately,
expendable. Our larger concern is
planets; the member worlds of this
Coalition.

COUNCILLOR #2

That's true. When I sign this
document on behalf of Kraxton II,
it becomes a target. We can hide
Epsilon, but we can't hide Kraxton
II.

CARLA

Your world will be defended,
Councillor.

COUNCILLOR #2

With what? Those pea-shooters
you've got parked around back,
against Starfleet? You'll have to
do better than that!

HAMILTON

And we will. For now, let us
discuss--

The doors open, and Cross, MacGregor and Talora enter the
conference room. There is a mutter of surprise and several
people stand at the sight of Talora. Carla doesn't stand so
much as she rockets out of her seat.

HAMILTON

Commander, I'm sorry but this
meeting is closed to the--

CARLA

(shouting)

What in the blue hell is she doing
here?

TALORA

(to Hamilton)

Councillor, I am the Romulan Empire's ambassador to the Coalition of Federalist States that is about to be, as well as the commanding officer of what is, unless there's something you haven't told me, the Coalition's greatest military asset. I think my presence would be prudent, don't you?

CARLA

What would be prudent is for you to leave now, before I call Security to throw you out.

As she speaks, another councillor, a serene-faced Sejrekan woman named AIA, stands and faces Talora. Along with the white robes, we see that she is wearing a pair of odd-looking gloves on her hands. When she speaks, her voice is halting and variable, as though from one who is unaccustomed to speech.

AIA

You are the commander of the ship that escorted us here?

TALORA

I am, Councillor.

Aia nods, then begins gesturing with her hands. As she does, a computer voice comes out of her right glove and translates her gestures into spoken language.

AIA

(signing)

I wish to thank you for what you have done. It is because of you that this conference can proceed as scheduled, and the Charter of Coalition can be signed. Myself, my fellow Councillors, and all Sejrekans owe you a debt of gratitude.

TALORA

(bowing)

It was my pleasure, madam.

As Aia continues to sign, Cross leans in toward MacGregor.

CROSS
(whispering)
She's deaf?

MACGREGOR
(whispering)
No, she's Sejrekan. They've evolved
a gestural form of communication on
Sejreko -- sign language. Aia can
speak, but it's easier for her to
speak with her hands.

Cross nods, and they turn their attention back to the room.

AIA
(signing)
I would be honored if you would
join us at this meeting.

COUNCILLOR #1
As would I.

There are nods, and someone says "hear, hear." Everyone looks
at Hamilton, who hesitates, then nods.

HAMILTON
Commander Petrucci, I think we can
make an exception in this case.
Please, Commander, join us. Captain
Cross, we're happy to have you here
as well.

Talora nods, Carla fumes, and Aia beckons the trio of
newcomers to chairs around the table.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLENSWORLD -- LIBRARY

The library is quieter now, and the sunlight through the
windows is more muted. Toran sits in the same terminal as
before; words we cannot quite make out are scrolling across
his screen. He reads them intently.

Then he looks up, and sees Elris walking toward him. Toran quickly presses a button, and the screen changes to something else entirely -- it looks like a star chart. Then he stands and walks to meet Elris.

TORAN

Hi there.

ELRIS

Kiss me.

TORAN

What?

Rather than repeat herself, Elris grabs Toran and pulls him in for a long kiss. Toran kisses her back, then gives her an odd look.

TORAN

What was that for?

ELRIS

Oh... I just needed to get rid of a bad taste in my mouth. How's it coming?

TORAN

Slow, but I think I'm getting somewhere.

He leads her back to the terminal, where the star chart is displayed on the screen.

TORAN

I compiled this from a set of intelligence records I found on a less-than-secure Federation database. Those systems marked in red are suspected locations of resistance movements in the rimward sectors. So far there are thirty-three.

ELRIS

I think I can narrow it down for you. How many of those systems are in the Dorias sector?

Toran types something into the terminal, and the red-marked systems disappear except for a patch in one corner.

TORAN

Nine. You think the Captain is in one of those systems?

ELRIS

I think so -- there's a lot of buzz out there about the Dorias sector. Nothing specific.

Toran nods and looks at Elris, who looks tired.

TORAN

(concerned)

How are you holding up?

ELRIS

It's been a long day. But I can go on as long as I have to.

Toran looks at her a moment longer, then nods again.

TORAN

Okay. You'd better get back, then, and keep an eye on Carter.

Elris rolls her eyes and shakes her head, clearly not wanting to talk about that subject.

ELRIS

I'll see you later.

She kisses Toran again and walks away. Toran watches her leave, then sits back down at the terminal and hits a button. The screen switches back to the words we saw before. Toran begins to read again.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- CONFERENCE ROOM

The same people as before are gathered around the conference table.

HAMILTON

So we're agreed to keep the governing council for the Coalition, for the time being, said council to assent to or veto proposals from the military branch by a simple majority.

There are nods all around. Hamilton turns back to his padd.

HAMILTON

Now on to the issue of the Coalition's initial mandate for the military, which we have decided will be incorporated into the Charter document. Miss Petrucci?

Carla stands.

CARLA

Councillors, our task is clear. The Federation has spent vast amounts of resources for the sole purpose of curtailing liberty and breaking the peace, both within and without its borders. We have long since passed the point where the Federation Council and Starfleet will listen to reason; nothing but direct action will be sufficient. To that end, I propose that the Coalition fleet take steps to weaken the Federation and Starfleet as much as possible, as quickly as possible. We must act as though our actions will decide the fate of the entire Quadrant -- which I believe it will.

She presses a button, and writing appears on the conference room viewscreen behind her.

CARLA (CONT'D)

I have here a series of proposals for military action that should give this Council an idea of what I have in mind. This is a series of raids, skirmishes and, in some

cases, outright attacks against Federation ships and assets. These were designed with the goal of maximizing damage to the Federation while minimizing exposure and risk to our own ships.

Talora raises her hand, signalling for attention.

TALORA

May I speak?

HAMILTON

Please, Commander.

Talora stands.

TALORA

I agree with Commander Petrucci about our task, and I understand the need for an emphasis on military power in the Charter. I respectfully suggest, however, that these proposals are misguided.

CARLA

(glowering)

Respectfully, how so?

TALORA

Our focus -- by which I mean the focus of the Council and of the military -- should not be on war.

AIA

(signing)

Commander, it is our consensus that war, at this point, is inevitable. Do you disagree?

TALORA

No, madam. War is inevitable. But if there is one lesson to be taken from history, it is that war should never be an end unto itself. War itself should not be our focus.

MACGREGOR

What, then, should be our focus?

TALORA

Coalescence. We should use the energy and resources that we have at this time to recruit and bring together our forces, both military and political. This Coalition will start out with only nine worlds. We need more. We must supplement our military strength, and at the same time we must work on ways to spread information about our cause throughout the quadrant, as well as counter Federation propaganda.

CARLA

What a wonderful idea, Commander. Noble, in fact. We can hammer out the details while Starfleet overruns our worlds.

Talora stares at her.

TALORA

You and I both know that, if they chose to do that right now, we would have no chance of stopping them. At this point, for our own safety, we shouldn't make ourselves a more prolific target than necessary -- which means we shouldn't attack Federation assets more than is necessary. Perhaps right now, we are nothing more than a nuisance in the grand scheme of things. If we can stay that way until the time is right, we will succeed.

COUNCILLOR #3

(standing)

May I just say at this point, it is not the unanimous opinion here that war is inevitable. I still think it is possible, and best for all concerned, to resolve this affair

peacefully.

CARLA

Coward.

The Councillor slowly turns to look at Carla.

COUNCILLOR #3

I beg your pardon.

CARLA

I called you a coward. You're
afraid to face the enemy.

The Councillor looks as though he has never been so insulted
in his life.

COUNCILLOR #3

Remember whom you are addressing!

CARLA

I know whom I am addressing. A
weak-spined--

AIA

(aloud)

Enough!

They turn to look at her.

AIA

(signing)

Both of you, be seated.

The Councillor sits down. Carla looks around the room, finds
a crowd of less-than-friendly faces looking back at her, and
sits down as well, still glowering.

AIA

(signing)

I know that time is of the essence,
but we must be cautious. Right now,
we are indeed in a precarious
position. I, for one, think that
Talora's idea has merit. What do
you think, Captain Cross?

She looks at Cross expectantly. Cross is startled. He looks

from Aia to Talora, who looks back at him evenly. He looks at the rest of the Councillors, and clears his throat.

CROSS

Well... Personally, I don't like the idea of sitting around and doing nothing. I believe it's bad for morale, and it gives the Federation time to gather its forces as well.

(beat)

But Talora's right. Right now we are more vulnerable than many of us would care to admit. I have to agree with her.

AIA

(signing)

Then I'd like to propose that that be our mandate for the military, and I request a consensus on the issue.

Carla jumps out of her seat.

CARLA

I don't believe this! I put my life, everything I've ever worked for on the line, and it turns out I've thrown in my lot with a bunch of cowards! I'll have nothing to do with this Council.

She storms out of the room. Cross, Talora and the Council members look uneasily at one another as we...

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

INT. ELLENSWORLD -- CAFE

Beyond the balcony railing, the Ellensworld sun is beginning to set behind the mountains. Carter is sitting at a table with an elderly Idanian PROFESSOR, looking sullenly down at his coffee. The Professor, a hearty sort of character is holding forth:

PROFESSOR

...but, of course, my colleagues disagree. They believe it must be caused by a G-surge in the solar cycle. Either way, the polyneutrino count in these systems is elevated by eleven orders of magnitude. Eleven orders! Can you imagine that?

CARTER

(not paying attention)
Fascinating.

PROFESSOR

Indeed! Which is why I say we must launch a survey expedition in the Dorias sector.

CARTER

So you've said.

PROFESSOR

Oh... Yes, I suppose I have. Forgive me, I tend to ramble on when I am excited. Say, young man, did you say earlier that you were a journalist?

Carter looks up at him.

CARTER

I was. I'm... well, semi-retired, I guess you could say.

PROFESSOR

Ah. Shame.

Carter perks up at this.

CARTER

Why do you say it's a shame?

PROFESSOR

Why, we need people to take an interest in the universe! I'm telling people about a G-type star that puts out the intensity of a hundred billion suns, and nobody cares!

Carter blinks.

CARTER

Well... I suppose most people just have more important things to worry about.

PROFESSOR

More important! You're probably from Earth -- what do you suppose would happen if Sol began to emit even a fraction of the polyneutrinos found in system S14-97?

CARTER

No, you don't understa--

PROFESSOR

No more Earth! The planet would become a scorched, irradiated wasteland! The entire Terran system would become uninhabitable!

CARTER

Yes, yes, that is important. What I'm saying is that people don't care about how things are, or how things could be. They only care about how they want things to be.

(beat)

And that's reflected in the mass media, isn't it? That's why news channels, even FNN, are dominated by politics. Popular culture. And money, of course. If there's a story out there that makes FNN Corporate look bad, then FNN News downplays it, or doesn't air it at

all. It's the world of political and corporate media, and you really just can't trust it anymore.

A pause. The Professor nods grimly.

PROFESSOR

I see what you mean. Shame, isn't it?

CARTER

(quietly)

Yes, it is.

PROFESSOR

For my part, and I'm sure you'll agree, I think that journalism should be motivated by purer factors. A search for and a reporting of the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be to one personally. We need to live in a world where truth, not money or political agenda, is the bottom line. Don't you agree?

CARTER

I do.

PROFESSOR

Well, then! Perhaps you could come out of your "semi-retirement" and work to change that!

Carter looks at the old Idanian, startled.

CARTER

Ah... well, it's a bit complicated right now. I mean, my personal situation is a bit... precarious.

PROFESSOR

(raising an eyebrow)

Young man, are you denying your calling because it is inconvenient, or are you denying it because you are afraid?

A pause.

CARTER

Both, honestly. It's inconvenient,
and I'm afraid.

(beat)

Anyway, the mass media has an
enormous inertia. I don't see it
could be changed by one man -- and
even if it could, I'm certainly not
that man.

The professor chuckles, finishes off his tea, and stands up.
He puts a paternal hand on Carter's shoulder.

PROFESSOR

It was just a thought anyway. Two
fellows talking over drinks.

(beat)

But if you change your mind, young
man, here's a bit of unsolicited
advice: believe in yourself. That's
all. I've lived almost a hundred
years, and I'm here to tell you
that that's all there is to it.

He pats his shoulder and walks off into the crowd. Carter
watches him go, looking dazed in the glow of twilight. He
shakes his head.

CARTER

(muttering)

This has just been a long day.

He stands up, pushes his chair in, turns around... and
Zacharias is standing there, smiling. Carter flinches in
surprise.

ZACHARIAS

Mister... Avery? Is that right?

A pause as Carter regains control of himself.

CARTER

Yes, Lieutenant.

Another pause as the two men regard each other. Then,
Zacharias holds out his hand.

ZACHARIAS

I just wanted to apologize for my behavior earlier. It was not very honorable of me.

Carter blinks, then cautiously shakes his hand.

CARTER

It's nothing, really.

ZACHARIAS

No, it is something. But really, who could blame me? She is a stunning woman.

CARTER

Er, yeah. She is.

ZACHARIAS

Anyway, I just wanted to apologize, and find out if there was any way I could make it up to you.

The grin never leaves his face. Carter, becoming terrified, looks around desperately. Then he spots Elris near the cafe entryway, waving her hands to catch his attention.

CARTER

Ah... maybe another time -- Danika is calling me now. Excuse me, please.

Zacharias nods graciously, and Carter slowly walks away from him and joins Elris at the doorway.

CARTER

(quietly)

I think you saved my life.

ELRIS

Really? I wasn't trying to. Noa thinks he's on to something.

They leave the cafe. Behind them, through the thinning crowd, we see Zacharias looking after them, still smiling.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLENSWORLD -- LIBRARY

The sunlight in the library is all but gone, and the overhead lights have come on, shining down upon a library that has mostly emptied out now. Toran is at the same terminal, hunched over it. He looks up and sees Elris and Carter approaching. He looks down, where the image of a person, a shady-looking figure, is displayed on the screen.

TORAN

(quietly)

I have to go, they're coming. I'll see you on Zol Prime.

He turns the screen off before the shady figure can respond, then stands and walks over to meet them.

TORAN

Any more luck, Carter?

CARTER

(shaking his head)

Not really. Just the same rumors floating around over and over again, like debris in a Tlexidan whirlpool. I think we've learned about all we can learn here.

He reaches up to his collar and removes the lapel camera pin shaped like a tiny Earth.

CARTER

Once we get back to the shuttle, I can download the information from here and see if there's anything we missed.

TORAN

Well, I think I've got a lead for us. I was just talking to someone on Zol Prime, someone with connections to the rebellion in Dorias. He may know where the Captain is.

ELRIS

Did he tell you?

TORAN

No, he didn't want to say anything over a comm circuit. We're going to have to meet him.

ELRIS

On Zol Prime? That's way out of our path!

She gestures with an open arm and accidentally hits Carter's hand, knocking the pin out and sending it flying down a row of bookshelves. Carter gives Elris an annoyed look and goes off to retrieve it. Elris hardly notices.

ELRIS

What about that list of systems you were working on in the Dorias sector? Haven't you narrowed it down?

TORAN

Not far enough. They could still be in any of seven systems, and that's too much area to search.

ELRIS

It just feels like we're wasting our time. Zol Prime--

ZACHARIAS (V.O.)

Good evening, Dr. Elris.

Elris and Toran whirl around, surprised. Zacharias and Xirek are approaching, phaser rifles aimed at them. Zacharias is wearing the same freakish grin from before.

ZACHARIAS

I'm sorry -- it's Vanika, isn't it? Or is it Danika? It's hard to keep your story straight.

Elris and Toran look at each other, then back at Zacharias.

ELRIS

Listen, young man, I don't know what kind of game you've got going this time, but I think the two of you had better just turn around and

walk out of here before I report
you to your commanding--

XIREK

That's no longer necessary, Dr.
Elris. Your likeness matched a
Starfleet security bulletin we just
received on suspected collaborators
of the terrorist Neil Cross. In
fact, you were part of his crew.

(to Toran)

Dr. Toran, I presume? You were also
in that bulletin. I was wondering
if we would find you here.

ZACHARIAS

(shaking his head)

You thought you had me going,
didn't you? You thought you would
lull me into a false sense of
security, and pull me into your
clutches.

ELRIS

(annoyed)

Oh, please! You're so full of
yourself, it's a wonder you even
acknowledge my existence!

The plastered grin disappears from Zacharias's face, replaced
by a look of anger, even hatred.

ZACHARIAS

You just want to watch your mouth,
lady.

ELRIS

(to Xirek)

Honestly, how do you cope with
having a sociopath for a partner?

Xirek looks at Zacharias, as though he is wondering the same
thing himself, then turns back to Elris and Toran.

XIREK

All right, that's enough of that. I
am placing you under arrest for

suspicion of terrorism. You'll be
taken back to our ship, where--

There is a loud THUD -- Xirek lets out a "whoosh" sound and collapses to the ground. Behind him stands a nervous-looking Carter, wielding a large, hardbound copy of "Things To Make Us Go" (Kolar's translation, 3rd ed.). He looks down at the Vulcan he hit with it, almost disbelieving.

Meanwhile, Zacharias turns, starts to bring his rifle up to bear on Carter. Elris lunges forward, grabs the phaser rifle from him and pushes him back.

At her feet, Xirek is recovering and reaches for his phaser rifle. Carter quickly snatches it away. Still dazed, Xirek looks around, spots Elris, and makes as though to stand up and attack her. Elris fires the rifle, stunning him. Xirek collapses to the ground again.

Then she looks up at the disarmed Zacharias, who sneers at her.

ZACHARIAS

Bitch.

ELRIS

Oh, take a cold shower.

She hits his head with the butt of the phaser rifle, knocking him out cold. Then she turns to Toran.

ELRIS

I think--

Just then, a LIBRARIAN comes around the corner, carrying a stack of books under one arm. She puts a finger to her mouth.

LIBRARIAN

Shhhh!

Then she disappears the way she came from, apparently having been completely oblivious to the weapons or the unconscious Starfleet officers. They look after the librarian in confusion, then Elris shakes her head and turns to Toran again.

ELRIS

I think Ellensworld has lost its

charm, dear. Why don't we head out?

Toran nods, pulls his commbadge out of his pocket and taps it.

TORAN

Toran to shuttle computer. Three to beam up.

CARTER

Excuse me, can I--

But he is cut off by the transporter beam, which vanishes them from the library, leaving two unconscious Starfleet officers.

CUT TO:

INT. BAJORAN SHUTTLE -- COCKPIT

The three of them have rematerialized in the cockpit. Toran sits down at the helm and taps the controls.

TORAN

Setting a course for Zol Prime. We need to get out of this system before those guys wake up.

CARTER

Not so fast.

He looks back. Elris gasps in surprise and backs away from Carter, who is aiming Xirek's phaser rifle at them, looking wide-eyed.

CARTER

I'm sorry, but this is the end of the line. I've had enough. You're not going anywhere with me.

A long, stunned silence.

ELRIS

(slowly)

Carter, I don't know what's going on right now, but put that thing down and we'll talk about it. Okay?

CARTER

There's nothing to talk about! Beam me back down to the surface! Now!

ELRIS

You might be captured!

CARTER

I'll take that risk.

ELRIS

But we can't!

CARTER

You don't have a choice! Beam me back down!

TORAN

(standing)

Excuse me, can I just interject real quick?

Carter whirls on him, his faced becoming more crazed by the second.

CARTER

What!?

TORAN

Your safety's on.

Carter looks at him, then looks at the rifle.

He checks something, checks something else, then completely forgets about holding the rifle on them as he examines it; it becomes obvious that he has no clue where anything is on it. Toran and Elris exchange half-amused glances.

Finally, he sighs, throws down the rifle and leans against the wall. He clutches his head with his hand; as he does, the tiny camera-pin falls out and rolls into a corner, unnoticed.

CARTER

Oh, who the hell am I kidding? I wouldn't hurt you guys anyway, and we all know it.

ELRIS

Carter, what has gotten into you?
Why do you want to go?

CARTER

Don't you see? I'm not a freedom
fighter! I'm what you're expecting
me to be! I can't even handle a
Federation phaser rifle -- how the
hell am I expected to help
overthrow it?

(beat)

I belong with a camera. The old guy
was right.

ELRIS

What old guy?

CARTER

In the cafe. You weren't there.

(beat)

Look, the point is that I'm not cut
out for this. I'm a journalist.
That's what I do. Maybe I'm not a
very good one -- hell, maybe I'm
just as bad as all the others,
whatever I tell myself in the
mirror. But that's what I am. My
job is to cover the news, not
create it.

(beat)

I want to go back to Earth. I want
to go back to work for the FNN. I
want to do my job again -- even if
I never get better at it, even if
nothing ever changes, it's all I
know.

Toran slowly walks up to him.

TORAN

Carter.

(beat)

Lewis. Don't you see what's
happening here? There's going to be
a war. You know they're the bad
guys -- why do you want to go off
and work for them?

ELRIS

He's right.

Toran looks at her. Elris is looking at Carter with pity, but also with some sympathy.

ELRIS

He's right, Noa. He never signed up for this, and he doesn't belong where we're going. We'll let him go.

Carter looks up at Elris, questioningly, then with relief.

TORAN

Are you sure?

ELRIS

Trust me. But Carter, if you even accidentally think about telling them where we've gone, I swear to the Prophets I will hunt you down and--

CARTER

And do unpleasant things to my anatomy. I understand. Don't worry, my lips are sealed. Just beam me back down to the surface; I'll disappear into the crowd, and book passage to Earth.

Elris nods, then looks at Toran. Toran looks between them, sighs, and sits back down at the console.

TORAN

Stand by to beam down.

Carter nods, stands in the middle of the room, and looks at Elris one last time. A look of understanding passes between them.

CARTER

Thanks.

Beat pause.

ELRIS

I hope you find what you're looking
for, Carter.

Carter nods.

CARTER

You too.

And with that, Carter vanishes in a transporter beam, leaving
Elris and Toran alone in the shuttle. They say nothing for a
moment.

ELRIS

You know what?

TORAN

What?

ELRIS

I really hated that guy.

Toran chuckles softly.

TORAN

Believe me, it shows.

(beat)

Time to go. Setting a course for
Zol Prime.

He lays commands into the console again. Elris sighs and
stands next to him.

ELRIS

Noa, I can't say I like this. I
still think we should go directly
to the Dorias sector. I know Neil's
there.

Toran looks up at her, and takes her hand.

TORAN

Do you trust me?

She looks into his eyes.

ELRIS

You know I trust you.

He smiles at her, squeezes her hand and kisses it. Then he taps the console.

TORAN
Engaging impulse engines.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

The Bajoran shuttlecraft pulls away from the other ships and leaves the orbit of Ellensworld. No other ship makes a move to follow it.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE

Epsilon, drifting among the asteroids.

CUT TO:

INT. EPSILON -- LOUNGE

It's not a large room, certainly not compared to the Rec Lounge of the Enterprise, but it looks comfortable enough. There is a bar on one side of the room, and monitors with various information and programming fill the walls. Cross, Talora and Captain Paxton are sitting at a table by the large picture window looking out on the stars.

PAXTON
...then O'Day said, "Are you sure we want to be following that Romulan ship back to Epsilon?"

TALORA
What did you say?

PAXTON
I said, "Look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn't follow a Pakled ship if it came around to save our bacon."

Talora and Cross laugh. As they do, MacGregor, Hamilton and

Aia enter the lounge from the far doors and join them at the table.

HAMILTON

Captain Cross, Captain Paxton,
congratulations. As of ten minutes
ago, you are no longer Federation
citizens.

They look up at him.

CROSS

The Charter's been signed?

HAMILTON

It has.

AIA

(signing)

Welcome to the Coalition of
Federalist States, gentlemen.

(to Talora)

You should also know that the final
draft of the Charter included your
proposal for a military mandate.

MACGREGOR

That's right. The Federalist
military will take up a defensive
posture around our worlds while we
coalesce our forces.

PAXTON

That's a good idea.

Cross looks at Paxton, surprised.

CROSS

I thought you'd be opposed to it. I
thought it would be bad for morale.

PAXTON

How much worse for morale will it
be if Starfleet kicks our asses
from here to the Delta Quadrant?
This way, when the real war begins,
it'll be on our terms.

HAMILTON

Let's hope we have the time. Also, we're going to be electing a First Councillor soon. Personally, I think the lovely Aia here has the job in the bag -- but she might have some competition, Commander, if you were to submit your name for the job.

Talora looks at him.

TALORA

Thank you... but I think you, Mr. Hamilton, should have that job.

HAMILTON

(startled)

Me?

TALORA

Absolutely. You have leadership qualities that have helped us in the past. You were instrumental in helping to draft the Charter. You work quietly, behind closed doors, rather than for publicity and prestige. The people on this station, and throughout many of the Coalition worlds, know you and trust you. You would be perfect.

Hamilton laughs a little, looking embarrassed.

HAMILTON

Well... I mean, it's a big responsibility.

AIA

(aloud)

I think you're ready.

Hamilton looks at her. She is smiling.

MACGREGOR

I concur. I'd be happy to serve under you, Councillor.

PAXTON

Yeah, what are you worried about?
The worst thing that can happen is
you'll be assassinated!

He throws his head back and laughs at his own joke. The others are giving him an odd look. Paxton clears his throat and composes himself.

PAXTON

Seriously, Talora has been talking to me and the other Captains about you, and we're ready to follow you.

HAMILTON

Thank you; but under the Charter, the Council won't have such direct control over the military fleet. Besides, I'm not a military man -- I wouldn't know how to handle it.

Paxton grins, stands up, throws his arm over Hamilton's shoulders and leads him off to the bar, a grinning MacGregor in tow.

PAXTON

That's no problem at all, Pete -- can I call you Pete? First thing you gotta remember, independent ship captains tend to have an ego the size of...

As they walk out of earshot, Talora looks up at Aia.

TALORA

By the way, I'm sorry about Miss Petrucci. I didn't mean to put her out like that.

Aia shrugs and smiles.

AIA

(signing)

She'll come around. I've known her for a while, and she always comes around in the end. Sometimes she just needs to go off and sulk for a while.

CROSS

Sounds like someone I know.

AIA

(aloud)

Excuse me.

Aia walks away. Cross and Talora turn back to one another.

CROSS

You know, I think Hamiton is right. You would be a perfect First Councillor. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider the job?

TALORA

Thank you, Neil, but I'm quite sure. Diplomacy may be one of my talents, but it's not where I belong right. I belong on my ship, out there among the stars.

CROSS

(nodding)

I know the feeling. It's become hard for me to sit and do nothing.

TALORA

And there's more.

Cross looks at her questioningly.

TALORA

Janus. He's still out there somewhere. You and I know that nobody takes him more seriously than we do.

(beat)

That's why I belong out there. I have to find Janus.

Cross looks at her for a long moment, then nods.

CROSS

I think you're right.

(beat)

But are you sure that Peter is the right man to be First Councillor?

TALORA

Quite sure. Trust me.

Cross smiles and raises his glass.

CROSS

Of course I trust you. And that's why we're both here, isn't it? The Federation has sown seeds of distrust throughout the Quadrant.

TALORA

(nodding)

And that is their biggest mistake.

CROSS

Interesting to hear that coming from a Romulan.

TALORA

(smiling)

We've started something great here, something that could be very powerful in time. We must be careful not to repeat the Federation's mistakes. If we do win this fight that's coming, it will be because of people like you, Neil, and people like Hamilton, Aia, even Paxton. People who have earned our trust, and continue to earn it every day.

CROSS

I'll drink to that.

As we zoom away from them, Cross and Talora clink their glasses together and drink. Our POV recedes through the picture window as we see Paxton, Hamilton and MacGregor return to the table, and the five of them are talking as we zoom out to a wide shot of Station Epsilon, linger on it, and...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BAJORAN SHUTTLE -- BACK ROOM

Toran is sitting by himself at a communications terminal in the back room. The shady figure we saw before is on the screen.

TORAN

(quietly)

We're on our way. We'll be at Zol Prime in a few days.

SHADY FIGURE

Is she with you?

Toran looks through the open hatchway to the cockpit, where Elris is sitting by herself out of earshot, looking out at the stars. He peers at her through narrow eyelids.

TORAN

(quietly)

Yeah. She's with me.

On Toran's grim face, we slowly...

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FOUR

THE END