

So they were on their way to the notorious Space Station New Freedom. While it was of a similar design as most Starfleet starbases, the Federation did not run it. It was essentially a city in space built around a ship repair yard. The station and repair facilities were owned by a discreet corporation that employed a large and varied work force. Individual contractors provided other services. Several decks near the center of the station served as a market place; providing food, drink, entertainment and anything else a visitor could need.

While solidly in Federation space, the owners of the station maintained independence from the Federation. To come aboard New Freedom you had to agree to leave all wars and grudges behind. The administration offered sanctuary to all and shared any available information without question. Most Federation ships avoided the place.

Captain Sulu assembled the necessary officers in the main briefing room on deck three. The oblong table could accommodate ten people. Dr. Patrick, Commander Kyle, Lt. Johnson and Captain Sulu sat together at one end by the computer console. Mr. Kyle was at the seat with the control board. Sulu intended to gather as much information as possible without setting foot on the station.

"Have you contacted the dock master?" Sulu asked.

"According to the dock master, Mattrix comes into the station on a regular basis."

Commander Kyle reported "Not always with the same crew or listed under the same owners. But every three months, she comes in and stays for a couple of days then goes."

"Of course, they don't ask what she's doing there?" The Doctor asked.

"What they don't know, they don't have to share." Kyle said. "But if personnel keeps changing, who do we arrest? Her captain?"

"That would seem a logical start." Sulu said. "Possibly the whole crew."

"When was the last time they were there?" Lt. Johnson asked.

"Almost three months, so she's due." Kyle said. "Although I doubt they will just slip in with a starship sitting there."

"The Saratoga being there didn't seem to bother them." The Captain observed.

"The Mattrix crew was selling illegal goods." Kyle said. "They must know their market if they are not going to get caught."

"Are you suggesting that Captain Warren put into New Freedom to meet the Mattrix, not because of any life support problem?" Sulu asked.

"Well, I don't know." Johnny said. "But it does seem a possibility. Those were not regular cigarettes. Captain Warren must have known that."

"But to sabotage his own ship?" Sulu asked. No one in the room questioned that the Saratoga had actually been in need of repair. It would have been next to impossible to fool such an experienced crew.

"Addiction is a powerful motivator." Dr. Patrick said.

"Perhaps it would be helpful if one or two officers waited on the station. Unofficially and out of uniform, while the ship retreated a discreet distance." Mr. Johnson suggested. "We may be able to quietly accomplish our objective."

"That is a possibility, Mr. Johnson." The Captain said. "But we'll keep it in reserve for now. Johnny, who was the captain of the Mattrix when the Saratoga was at the station?"

Mr. Kyle touched a few controls on the computer in front of him. "He's listed as Matthew

Brady."

"Brady?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Kyle continued. "He's been in and out of detention centers for most of his adult life. He's not presently wanted for anything, but with this record that could change at any moment."

"I've run into a pirate named Brady before." Captain Sulu reached over and turned the screen so he could see it. "Might be the same person. Slippery character."

Commander Kyle nodded towards the report on Brady as Sulu read it and commented, "It would seem the witnesses against him have a habit of changing their minds."

"Is he still the captain?" Sulu asked.

"As far as we know." Kyle said. "But there is no way of being sure."

"Do you think there is anything else the dock master can tell us?" Sulu asked Kyle.

"I would be careful how much we asked." Mr. Kyle said. "As is, I'm sure as soon as Mattrix docks they will know of our interest."

"Understood. Keep long range sensors set on maximum, continuous sweep. Dismissed." The Captain stood. The other three got up and left.

The Mattrix docked at Space Station New Freedom while Excelsior was in extended orbit. She was small for a freighter and only carried a crew of eight. The Excelsior engineers estimated she could do warp six in a pinch. Sensors told them that she carried three phaser cannons. Heavily armed for a freighter, of course no match for a starship.

Captain Matthew Brady left the unloading and loading of cargo to his crew. As captain he did not attend to such mundane matters. He left that to his young and eager comrades. He headed for the gaming tables of his favorite bar. There were several on the station that he frequented. Today he honored Smitty's Place with his presence. It was a rowdy bar at any time of day with several games of chance going on at once. Smitty, a large red haired humanoid of undetermined origin, employed hosts and hostesses of several species to keep the players entertained. It was the kind of place that Matthew Brady lived for.

On Excelsior, Commander Kyle called the captain to the bridge. When Sulu joined him, Mr. Kyle was at the science station. Captain Sulu came around the upper circle of the bridge to Mr. Kyle's position. "What have you got, Johnny?"

"The Mattrix came in and docked at air lock seven without hesitation." Mr. Kyle reported. "As if she didn't even see us or she didn't care."

"Commander Rand, hail the Mattrix." Sulu said taking the center seat. "Let's try the direct approach."

"I have the connection, Sir." Rand said.

"On screen."

A young Tuscana man appeared. He was tall and muscular with long light brown hair held in place by a leather band across his forehead. He wore a sleeveless leather shirt to show off the scars and tattoos on his upper arms. They were a testimony to his coming of age ceremony. His skin had a darker blue tint than average for his race. "I am Fallcar, second officer of the Mattrix."

"This is Captain Sulu commanding Excelsior. I am in need of information and would like

to speak to your captain."

"Captain Brady is not on board." Fallcar said. "How much will you pay for this information?"

"When will your Captain return?" Sulu asked well aware that he was insulting the young officer by ignoring his question.

"He may never come back." Fallcar said. "You would be wise to deal with me."

Sulu leaned back in his chair and calmly asked, "Now what information would a second officer of an independent freighter have that would interest me? Where can I find Brady?"

"Look for him where the drinks are cheap and the women cheaper." Fallcar said and terminated the connection. It was a standard insult in the Tuscana culture, meant to belittle both the person asking for the information and the subject of the discussion.

"So much for the direct approach." Mr. Kyle said.

"I wouldn't give up yet." The Captain said. "How many bars on this station?"

"Six." Kyle said after consulting his files.

"Really?" Sulu was surprised. He stood up. "Well Johnny, we haven't been bar hopping together since the eve of your wedding."

"A night I'd rather forget."

"I thought you did." Sulu said heading towards the turbo lift. "Lt. Lee bring us into a standard orbit, keeping airlock seven in visual contact at all times. Commander Rand, contact the administrator. Secure transporter coordinates. Lee, you have the bridge."

"Aye Captain."

By the time Captain Sulu and Commander Kyle reached the transporter room they had relived the entire embarrassing evening prior to Mr. Kyle's wedding. As they walked into the room, Mr. Kyle was saying. "Unfortunately, Jane did not approve."

"Ensign, did we receive coordinates?" Sulu asked.

"Aye, Sir. Along with a reminder of the condition of universal sanctuary on the station." She responded.

"Subtle." Kyle said.

Sulu just nodded and climbed the two steps to the pads. Kyle followed him. "Energize."

They materialized on a transporter pad on the edge of what appeared to be a shopping area. There were people of all shapes and sizes going about their business. Children ran through the crowd chasing each other. Vendors offered food, clothing, jewelry, and technology. As they strolled through the crowd, the Captain saw a bracelet of gold with amber gems that Jimmi would have loved.

They went into the first bar they came to. It was dark and crowded. The two Starfleet officers stood out from the crowd. They knew what Brady looked like from his file. They did not see him and the bartender contended that he had never seen anyone that answered to his description. The next three bars turned up the same results.

"I don't know, Captain." Mr. Kyle said as they walked up to the next bar "I think this is a wild goose chase."

"Only two more to go, Johnny. Patience." He said and walked into Smitty's Place. A cheer went up from the crowd around one of the gaming tables. Sulu smiled as he caught sight of Brady through the crowd. Matthew Brady had just left one of the tables and was working his

way through the crowd to the bar. He had his arm around a scantily clad woman who was laughing and whispering in his ear. Sulu and Kyle arrived at the bar at the same time as Brady.

"Another whiskey, Smitty!" He ordered loudly.

"Captain Brady?" Sulu asked.

Brady turned and looked at him. He did not seem surprised. He grinned widely. "It looks like the cavalry is here." He said much to the girl's amusement. "What can I do for you, Commodore?"

"I'm Captain Sulu of the starship Excelsior. I'd like to talk to you privately, if I may?" Sulu said calmly.

"Take a walk, Darling." He said to the girl. She shrugged indifferently and left them. "I have never known Starfleet to be so polite. Join me at a table, Captain."

Sulu followed Brady to a table in the back of the bar away from the crowd. He was taller than Sulu with deep blue eyes and dark hair. He wore a full beard and an earring in his left ear. Mr. Kyle waited by the bar watching, while Brady took the seat with his back to the wall.

Brady stared at Sulu intently. "You seem familiar, Captain. Have we met before?"

"Formally, no." Captain Sulu said. "But I piloted a Starfleet shuttle through a mine field near Romulan space some time ago. And a pirate named Brady played a complicated part in the events that followed."

"I remember." Brady sat up straighter and studied Sulu. But the Starfleet captain did not elaborate. "What can I do for you, Captain Sulu?"

"This is a delicate situation, Captain Brady." Sulu started quietly. "I understand you have done business with Captain Warren of the Saratoga."

"I delivered a package to Warren about six months ago." Brady sat back in his chair. He seemed relaxed. "I was strictly a middleman in this case. What else can I tell you?"

Sulu hadn't been expecting this kind of cooperation. "Everything."

Brady smiled widely. "Everything? That is asking a lot, Captain. I'd appreciate a more specific question."

"Fine. Did you know what was in the package?"

"We are a freighter, Captain. I don't ask what is in a package. I just deliver it for a fee. It is the nature of my work." Brady explained. "Captain Warren must have known. Have you tried asking him?"

"That could be difficult." Sulu said watching Brady's reaction carefully. "He's dead."

"Sorry, I didn't know." Brady seemed surprised. He looked Sulu in the eye. "Are you investigating his death?"

"Yes." Sulu said. "Where did this package come from?"

"I don't remember." Brady said "I carry a lot of cargo in six months."

"But you remember Captain Warren?"

"I don't do much business with Starfleet." Brady answered. "They said the Saratoga was here for repairs. But my orders were to deliver the package to him here."

"And where do these orders come from?"

"The company that owns the ship." Brady answered without hesitation. "I am just an employee."

"And what company is this?"

"The Lando Rykker Cooperative Corporation. It operates from Rigel Four. I'm sure your computers have more information on the company than I do." Brady said, taking a cigar pack out of his jacket pocket. He took one out and lit it with a flameless lighter. He offered one to Sulu.

"Argan?" Sulu asked.

"Cuban." Brady smiled. Sulu took the offered cigar. Brady slid the lighter across the table. Sulu lit the cigar and slid the lighter back towards the pirate.

"I need to know where this package came from." Sulu said blowing his smoke in Brady's direction. "I'm sure your ship's log has the information."

"I'm sure it does." Brady said easily. "I'll return to my ship and transmit the information to you. Anything else?"

"I may require further information. How long will you be here on the station?" Sulu asked.

"A couple of days." He leaned back in his chair smoking the cigar. Brady studied the Starfleet officer. He seemed calm and unhurried. But Brady was sure this was just a front. At least he was a man who understood a good cigar. And their history was not bad. Perhaps there was an arrangement that could be reached. "But I do have a deadline to meet in sector fifteen."

"My superiors may have other requirements on your time." Sulu said softly watching Brady's every move.

Brady leaned across the table speaking confidentially. "Captain Sulu, surely we can take care of any questions here and now. I don't make my run, I don't make a living."

"Captain Brady, I will do what I can. You have cooperated with my investigation." Sulu said "And you have proved helpful in the past. But I have my orders."

Brady smiled scornfully. "Orders. We all have those." He stood to go. "I'll transmit that information to you."

Sulu also stood up. "Thanks for the cigar." Brady nodded and left. Sulu quickly joined Commander Kyle. He pulled out his communicator and left the cigar on the bar. "Let's get out of here. Sulu to Excelsior. Two to beam up."

Before Brady even left the bar, he had pulled out his personal communication device and punched in a code. He did not wait for the person on the other end to say anything. His tone was urgent when he said, "Hankler, we are going now. Meet me at the ship right away."

On Excelsior, Sulu and Kyle headed directly for the bridge. Once they were in the turbo lift, Kyle asked, "What happened?"

"He talks a good game. Very cooperative. But I think he's going to make a run for it." The Captain said as they stepped off the turbo lift onto the bridge.

"If he does," Kyle said. "We have him. There is no way he can out run us."

"We are receiving a transmission from the Matrix, Sir." Commander Rand reported. Sulu swung his chair around to face her. "Data only. It just says Kountrah Three and Oriah Betre Helb."

"Oriah Betre Helb? Is that a person or a place?" Lt. Gonzoles asked from the navigation station.

"I've never heard of it." Lt. Lee said to Gonzoles.

"Lt. Lee, keep a sharp eye on the Matrix. I want to know the minute she starts departure procedures." Sulu said. He turned to Kyle. "Pull up any information we have on something called the Lando Rykker Cooperative Corporation. Cross reference with Kountrah Three and Oriah Betre Helb."

"Aye, Sir."

On board the Matrix, Brady and his crew were frantically readying for departure. The last of their new cargo was boarded, including the three passengers. His first officer Rykker took her station at the helm. She was half Klingon and half Romulan, a formidable combination. She was smart and strong, but arrogant. Brady and Rykker were often at opposite ends of an argument. Since she was nearly as tall as Brady and he had seen her fight, he did his best to keep their arguments from becoming physical.

"The cargo is secured." Rykker reported.

"And the passengers?" Brady asked. She nodded. "Let's get out of here before that Captain realizes just how much of a line I fed him."

"He can't touch us while we are on the station." Rykker said as she selected the proper settings on her control board. "I don't see what the hurry is. The cargo is not perishable."

"I've dealt with these Starfleet types before." Brady said as he leaned over her shoulder and adjusted the navigation computer controls. "If you are going to cut and run, you better do it quick or you won't get a chance."

"But the answers you gave him should keep them busy for awhile." Rykker insisted. She hated to run even when she was outgunned. Fallcar finished his adjustments to the engineering station and slid his chair to the next station down the line.

"Trading in those cigarettes was your idea." Brady said to her angrily. "So far I know of three people who have died from them. Now Starfleet is looking into it. Murder is not something I plan to go to jail for."

"How was I to know it would kill the Humans?" Rykker asked. She glanced over her shoulder to Fallcar. He nodded and moved his chair to the next station. "It never affected the Cardasians that way."

"Let's just get out of here." Brady said. "Are all systems on line?"

"Aye." Fallcar answered from the weapons station.

"Good." Brady settled in the captain's chair. "I want to jump into warp as soon as we've cleared the station."

"Course?" Rykker asked.

"Directly away from the Excelsior." Brady said. "How soon will her orbit carry her to the opposite side of the station?"

"It won't." Rykker said, showing the orbit on the screen. The Excelsior had changed orbit so that she never lost sight of air lock seven.

"Damn him." Brady said. "We'll need some luck."

"The Excelsior is hailing us." Fallcar said as he slid his chair back to the communication station.

"On screen, Fallcar." Brady said. Captain Sulu appeared on his screen. He was not smiling.

"Captain Brady." Sulu said. "I have a few more questions. Would you beam aboard the Excelsior so that we can talk face to face?"

"I don't think that would be wise, Captain Sulu." Brady said. He forced himself to at least appear calm, as he looked the image of the Starfleet captain in the eye.

"Why is that?" Sulu asked. Now he was smiling.

"I believe if I did I would be giving up my right to sanctuary." Brady said.

"Do you need sanctuary, Captain Brady?" Sulu asked.

"Captain, I am sure you checked my record. And you know that Starfleet and I have not always seen eye to eye. I prefer to remain here." Brady said. "I hope you won't misread my apprehension. Go ahead and ask your questions."

"As far as I can tell, the company that owns your ship does not exist. Although I do find the names Rykker and Lando among your crew members." Sulu said. "Now how do you explain that?"

"The Mattrix engines are at full power and she has released from the airlock." Mr. Kyle reported.

"Lando and Rykker are among the owners of the ship." Brady explained as his ship started to float free of the station. "I am not. If they have not registered their co-op with the proper Federation authorities, you will have to take it up with them."

Rykkker stood up and took two steps towards the captain. She growled at him "What have you done? What other information have you given him?"

Brady turned towards the woman and spoke deliberately. "Return to your station."

Sulu watched wondering if the drama was real or just for his benefit. The last time he ran into Brady there was a power struggle on that ship too. No matter. "Lt. Lee, tractor beams."

"She hasn't cleared the station yet, Sir."

"The second she has, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Sir."

Brady spoke quietly and evenly to his first officer. "I am still captain of this ship. If you want to live you will do as ordered. Station." Rykker sat down. Brady looked at Fallcar.

"Terminate connection."

The screen on Excelsior went blank. Mr. Kyle reported. "She's cleared the station and is accelerating fast."

"The tractor beams, Lieutenant." But before she could execute or acknowledge the order, the Mattrix disappeared before their eyes. Sulu stood up, stunned. "A cloaking device?! Damn it!"

"She's gone, Sir. Nothing for the tractor beam to grab onto." Lt. Lee reported.

"This is not over." Sulu said quickly. "Mr. Kyle, get any information you can on their next scheduled stop. Ask that dock master every conceivable question. I also want a run down on Rykker, Lando and anyone else you can think of. And the rest of the information regarding Kountrah Three. I want a briefing in two hours."

Sulu left the bridge before anyone even had the chance to acknowledge his orders. He was angry at Brady and himself. How could he have let them get away like that? It had never occurred to him that the Mattrix could be equipped with an illegal cloaking device. That was not in the files. Not in the ship's registration information. But Brady had one in their last encounter.

He should have known. Because of his incompetence, they had slipped through his fingers.