

"Mel Johnson is not the person I would have chosen to send on that mission." Chekov said after he had gotten his dinner and joined Sulu at a small table in the corner of the officer's mess.

"Why not?" Sulu asked.

"I don't know him well, but he seems to be too concerned with following regulations to the letter." Chekov said. "I believe I would have sent someone a little more flexible."

"I see your point." Sulu nodded. "But Brady has no concern for regulations at all. Mel will keep him in line. And you've never had Johnson back you up in a fight. I have. I believe his abilities will surprise you."

"Hmmm. I will be interested to see how he handles the situation."

"Face it Pavel." Sulu smiled. "You just wanted to go yourself."

"Loosen up, Mel." Brady said as they walked through the halls of Space Station New Freedom. "This isn't Starfleet."

"I am suppose to be your body guard and insurance, as you put it." Johnson replied. He scanned and cataloged each person they passed. Species from all over the Federation and beyond mixed in the open area that was the stations busy market place. "Loosening up would not be a good idea. A good body guard is on the alert at all times. When will we meet Mr. Dahl?"

"The Hawk and Dove is just ahead." Brady said. "He should be in there."

They walked into the crowded bar. The lights were a dim greenish blue, making it hard to distinguish one person from another. Several gaming tables were surrounded by a crowd of patrons. On a small stage in the corner an Orion woman sang a sultry tune. Brady led the way up to the bar. The bar tender was a short yellow hairy alien. Brady did not recognize his species.

"What will it be?" The bartender asked.

"Two Antarean brandies." Brady smiled. The bartender poured the drinks and accepted Brady's coins. "Is Ricardo Dahl around tonight?"

"Never heard of him." The bartender grumbled.

"Sure. I may have been out of circulation for awhile and I realize you don't know me. But Ricky is expecting me." Brady said. "Just tell him Brady is here and ready to deal."

The bartender grunted his protest at Brady's harsh tone, but went through a door that was behind the bar. While they waited, Brady drank his brandy. Johnson kept an eye on the crowd. When his own was gone Brady picked up Johnson's glass. The bartender returned to work but ignored them.

"Hello Matthew." Brady turned at the woman's voice. It was the singer. Her long black hair caressed her dark green shoulders. Her skin tight dress glittered gold and silver.

"Uary." He smiled. "You are a sight for sore eyes."

"It's good to see you too." She smiled. "Ricky is waiting for you. Come on."

"Uary, this is Mel." Brady said as they left the bar area.

She stopped. "Ricky is waiting for you only, Matthew. Not your friend."

"We're a package, Uary." Brady said. "Lately I've found it necessary to have someone I

trust watching my back. Since Ricky never goes anywhere alone, he of all people should understand."

"We'll see." Uary shrugged and continued to a door in the back of the barroom. Brady followed and Johnson brought up the rear. She placed her palm on the panel next to the door and it slid open. Ricardo Dahl sat behind the large antique desk in the center of the office. On either side of his desk stood a massive heavily armed guard. On the walls were several view screens so he could watch each gaming table and the bar.

"What's this, Matt?" Dahl asked. "You've always been a loner before."

"I don't know if Starfleet is after me or not." Brady sat down across the desk from Dahl. Johnson stationed himself somewhat behind Brady's chair. "With what I've got, I thought it was best to be careful. Now, shall we get down to business?"

"Sure. Uary, out." Dahl jerked his head towards the door. Uary turned, winked and smiled at Brady, and left without a word.

Brady couldn't help but turn in his chair to watch her go. There was just something about Orion women that made them hard to ignore. "She's a beautiful woman, Ricky."

"She's a lot of trouble." Dahl shrugged.

"Beautiful women always are." Brady laughed as he returned his attention to Ricardo Dahl. "Now Angel said you were ok with the ship, but I am in need of some readily accepted cash. That means latinum."

"How do I even know you have a real prefix code." Dahl said. "It's not the kind of thing Starfleet leaves lying around. How did you get them?"

"What do you want? A name?" Brady asked. "The guy is still in the service. I've got to keep his name out of it."

"I'm certainly not going to tell anyone in Starfleet." Dahl said. "But I need to know what I am buying and I need something verifiable."

"I can see that." Brady said slowly. His hesitation was perfectly timed to convince Dahl that he was thinking over his options. "His name is Lovsky. Lt. Vince Lovsky. He's angry at this captain for demoting him and putting him in the security department. Evidently that's not the fast track in Starfleet."

Dahl looked up at one of the guards. "Check it out." The guard nodded and left the room. "So, let's see it."

Brady took Chekov's small data padd out of his jacket pocket. He punched up the code and handed it to Dahl. "Doesn't look like much. Does it?"

"And where is this algorithm you told Angel about?"

"That I will keep until I receive payment." Brady sat back in his chair and smiled. "Just a little insurance."

"No payment until this little test you've set up is over." Dahl said.

"Agreed." Brady said. "I'm sure after you see how well it works, you will agree to fifteen bars of gold pressed latinum."

"Five."

"Ten."

"Ten." Dahl agreed. "If the test works out and my computer expert verifies the

algorithm."

"Sounds good." Brady stood up ready to go. "Let's do it."

"Not now." Dahl said. "Not until I have this Lovsky character checked out. It won't take long. Go out to the bar, have a drink, try your hand at the tables. I'll let you know when I'm ready."

Mel Johnson followed Brady back to the bar. After ordering a couple more drinks, Brady said. "It won't be long now, Mel."

"Lt. Lovsky will be interested to know he's been demoted." Johnson said softly as he sipped the drink.

"Careful." Brady leaned close to Johnson to be sure no one else could hear them. "Dahl visually monitors the whole bar. I would not be surprised if he can monitor conversations also."

"Agreed." Johnson nodded. "Here comes your friend Uary."

"Can I buy you a drink Uary?" Brady smiled.

"No thanks." Uary smiled. "So what happens after this deal with Ricky? Will you be around or what?"

"I'm getting a new ship out of the deal." Brady explained. "If you need a ride anywhere, I'd be happy to oblige."

"And just where would I go?"

"Home?"

"Back to the war zone?" She shook her head and wrinkled her nose. "No thanks."

"There is always Safe Haven." Brady suggested. "He couldn't touch you there."

"Who said I wanted to leave?" Uary asked.

"Is he listening?" Brady asked. She shrugged. "Has he hurt you again? You know a human woman wouldn't put up with treatment like that."

"But I'm not human. Am I?"

"It is illegal in the Federation." Brady said., Before she could protest, he added. "I know. This is not a part of the Federation. But I could easily take you to a place where you would be safe and he would have no claim on you."

Uary tenderly placed her hand on his cheek. "You are sweet, Matthew. But don't bring trouble on yourself because of me."

"One of Dahl's men is coming this way." Johnson warned. Uary pulled her hand away from Brady and casually blended into the crowd.

One of the men who had been in the office during Brady and Dahl's meeting walked up to Brady and Johnson. "Now. This way." He said and led them out of the Hawk and Dove. No one spoke again. The guard led them to the lift and took them to a flight deck. A small personal transport ship slightly bigger than a standard Starfleet shuttle waited in the launch bay.

Inside the ship a pilot was finishing the preflight check list. Ricardo Dahl was sitting in one of the six passenger seats in the forward section. The door to the aft section was closed. Brady sat down next to Dahl. Johnson and Dahl's guard took peripheral seats.

"Nice little ship." Brady said.

"Glad you like it." Dahl said. "If everything works out, it will be yours."

"You want to enter that change in ownership in the log now?" Brady joked.

"No."

"Mind if I look over the pilot's shoulder for a minute?" Brady asked. Dahl nodded his consent. Brady asked the pilot a few questions about power and handling. The young pilot, Nick Argyros, happily answered Brady's question. While they talked Brady familiarized himself with the control board paying special attention to the cloaking device.

"Ready, Mr. Dahl." Argyros said.

"Let's go."

Brady sat down next to Dahl again. The ship left New Freedom and cloaked. It took them less than an hour to reach the Paulson Nebula. The sensors were clear. They took up position on the edge of the nebula and waited. An hour passed.

"Are you sure about Excelsior being here?" Dahl asked.

"They'll be here." Brady insisted. "Lovsky did not have an exact time."

They waited almost another hour before the young pilot reported, "Sensor contact. Just on the edge of the net. It's a massive ship."

Brady got up and looked over the young man's shoulder. "That's her. That's Excelsior. She's traveling at full impulse. Her shields are down. She is not expecting any trouble."

"Use the code to order Excelsior to raise her shields." Dahl ordered. He joined Brady, standing directly behind Argyros.

"All right." Argyros let his breath out slowly as he sent the code. After a minute, he added excitedly. "Look at that! The shields went up!"

"She's stopping." Brady said.

"Damn, Matthew." Dahl grinned. "I didn't believe you could pull it off."

"Want to log that change of ownership now?"

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Dahl's smile disappeared as he faced Brady.

Brady forced himself to smile. "I haven't had a ship in four years. I want it! Can you blame me?"

"Ok, ok." Dahl laughed. "Argyros log the change of ownership contingent of the completion of the rest of our agreement."

"The change has been entered in the log." Argyros said. "Excelsior is sweeping the area with sensors. She's looking for us."

"Is the cloak working properly?" Dahl asked. Argyros nodded. "Good then let's try it again. Order Excelsior to deactivate all weapons systems."

"Ok." Argyros smiled and sent the order. He waited, watching his sensor read outs. The young man shook his head and frowned. "It's not working."

"It will not work." Johnson said from behind the group gathered at the control board. They all turned to look at him. He held his phaser on the guard. "Your weapon." Johnson demanded. The guard handed it over.

"What is going on, Brady?" Dahl demanded.

"You've got me, Ricky." Brady said. "What's up Mel?"

"It's Lt. Johnson." Mel informed the group. "Chief of security on the U.S.S. Excelsior. Mr. Argyros, disengage the cloaking device."

"He's Starfleet?!" Dahl suddenly turned on Brady. He punched Brady on the chin,

sending him sprawling on the deck of the small ship. Dahl's guard seized the opportunity to attack Johnson and try to wrestle the phaser from him. The pilot stayed out of the fight. Brady got up reaching for the control board to steady himself.

"I didn't know!" Brady yelled. But Dahl was coming at him again. He was smaller than Brady but strong and mad. He swung his fist full force into Brady's stomach. Brady doubled over the control board. As he tried to stand up, Brady reached for the control for the cloaking device. Trying not to be obvious, he switched it off. Then he turned around and punched Dahl in the nose.

Johnson and the tall nameless guard struggled for the phaser. Lt. Johnson planted his shoulder against the guard's chest and slammed him against the bulk head with all his strength. The stunned man slid to the floor. Johnson quickly checked to be sure the guard did not have other weapons on him, then turned his phaser on the rest of the group. "That's enough. Everyone sit down."

Brady let go of Dahl's shirt and pushed him away. Dahl shook himself and straightened up. He turned to Johnson as if to attack, but stopped himself and sat down sullenly. Brady sat down as far away from Dahl as possible.

"Mr. Argyros, step away from the controls. Take one of the passenger seats." Johnson continued. Argyros did as he was told. Johnson walked over to the board and hailed the Excelsior. "Captain Sulu, I have control of the ship."

"Good work, Lt. Johnson." Sulu appeared on the small view screen. "Can you bring her home? Or are you in need of assistance."

"No assistance necessary, Captain. We are on our way. Johnson out." Johnson terminated the connection to the Excelsior and turned his phaser on Brady. "Mr. Brady, you will take the pilot's seat. We will land on Excelsior's shuttle bay."

"You have no authority to seize this ship." Dahl protested.

"To the contrary Mr. Dahl, there is a warrant for your arrest on several charges ranging from smuggling to murder. That gives me the authority." Johnson said. "Mr. Brady, the pilot's chair please."

Matthew Brady slowly walked up to the pilot's station and sat down. He couldn't tell if Dahl believed that he wasn't a part of the set up, but Mel Johnson was holding up his end of their bargain. He engaged the thrusters and edged the small ship out of the nebula towards the Excelsior.

When Lt. Johnson took his prisoners off the ship, Captain Sulu and a detail of security guards waited. The guards immediately took possession of the prisoners, freeing Johnson to make his report.

"Captain. This is Ricardo Dahl." Johnson said. "He is the only one with outstanding warrants that I am aware of. This man works for Dahl. I don't know his name."

"Kaldo Rabbu." Dahl's guard said. "I am not wanted for anything. Anywhere."

"We'll see." Sulu said. He turned to Lt. Lovsky. "Take Dahl and Rabbu to the brig. Run a thorough check on their backgrounds."

"Aye Sir." Lovsky said and took the two away.

"This is Nick Argyros who piloted the ship." Johnson continued. The young man looked

around nervously. Sulu wondered if he was even twenty years old.

"Captain, I don't know what Mr. Dahl has done." Argyros took a deep breath and looked Sulu in the eye. He was doing his best not to appear afraid. "I've only been on New Freedom for a month. He gave me a job as a pilot when everyone else said I didn't have enough experience. But all I ever did was fly."

"Lt. Johnson." Sulu said. "Check Mr. Argyros story. If he is telling the truth confine him to quarters until we reach base. If you find any evidence that he is more involved than he suggests, throw him in the brig."

"Aye Sir." Johnson took Argyros arm and led him away.

"Mr. Brady." Sulu turned to see Brady walking around the small ship he had just landed. Brady rested his hand lightly on the outer hull as he walked along. Sulu raised his voice slightly. "Brady."

Brady stopped and turned back to the captain. "She's a beauty. Isn't she?"

"Nice." Sulu nodded. "Are you suggesting it is yours?"

"Yeah." Brady nodded. "Dahl logged the transfer of ownership while we were in the nebula. You can check the log."

"Let me guess. You want me to just let you take this ship and go?" Sulu asked.

"Of course." Brady went back into the ship. He turned around and leaned out the door. "You got a problem with that?"

Brady disappeared back into the ship before Sulu could answer. Sulu followed him in. While Brady was investigating the aft section, Sulu looked over the control board. "Looks like it's got a lot of power for a small ship."

"Yeah." Brady came back into the forward section. "And she handles like a dream."

"She's equipped with an illegal cloaking device." Sulu noted. "I certainly couldn't let you leave with that."

"Oh." Brady stopped his inspection of the ship. "There's no reason that has to go into the report, is there?"

"It's already there." Sulu said. "When the ship decloaked and came out of the nebula."

"I guess that's true." Brady shrugged. He brought the ship's log up on the monitor. The last entry made by Argyros read that Dahl had transferred ownership to Brady. Brady grinned. The contingency that Dahl specified was not there. "Look at this."

"Hmmm." Sulu nodded. "Looks like this is your ship. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll have my engineers remove the cloaking device. Then you are free to go."

"Yes!" Brady laughed. "It's a pleasure doing business with you, Sulu."

"Hmm." Sulu started to leave the ship.

"You got what you wanted. I got what I wanted." Brady said. "Isn't that how the deal was suppose to work?"

"Yes." Sulu admitted. "That was the deal."

The End