

### *Previously...*

The war games between the 63<sup>rd</sup> Starfighter Wing and the U.S.S. *Cheron* almost ended in disaster. Raptor Two, piloted by Lieutenant Ricardo “Aztec” Hernandez and his flight engineer Petty Officer Katrina Richmond narrowly escaped their *Starhawk*-class fighter before the warp core breached—an occurrence that never should have been possible under normal circumstances.

Lieutenant Commander Powers led the usual JAG investigation into the incident, questioning each member of the Raptor Squadron as well as those *Cheron* officers that were on the bridge at the time to witness the explosion. After the interviews were concluded, Powers met with Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Thomas privately to discuss the findings. “Kim, I’m at a loss. The flight recorder is still being analyzed, but I’ve ruled out pilot error, and Petty Officer Richmond appears to have done all she could do to shut down the warp core and eject it. I’m satisfied that the maintenance crew checked out all the fighters, including Raptor Two, according to standard protocols.”

“The maintenance crew,” Thomas said, trying to remember everything leading up to the mission. She suddenly snapped her fingers as she looked Powers in the eye. “...I remember that when I was in the Raptors’ Nest, I heard a noise and Petty Officer Brooks walked from behind Aztec’s bird. When I asked what she was doing up so early, she said that she was just making some last-minute checks on the fighters.”

Powers’ eyebrows drew close together as he frowned. “I never interviewed her. Why wasn’t her name on the list?”

Thomas contacted Master Chief Petty Officer Viktor Balakin to inquire the location of Petty Officer Ralynne Brooks, and the maintenance chief reminded her that Brooks had requested a leave of absence, which the CAG had approved prior to the mission.

Thomas and Power looked at each other, both realizing that the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. Raptor Two had been sabotaged. Now they had to figure out why.

Just then, Powers’ combadge chirped. “Powers, go ahead.”

“*Commander, this is security,*” Lieutenant Commander Seamus O’Malley’s voice announced. “*The analysis of the flight recorder has been completed.*”

Powers glanced at Lieutenant Commander Thomas. “What’s the bottom line, Seamus?”

“*The warp core ejections system was disabled, and the computer was programmed to start shutting down anti-matter containment when it registered a destructive hit during the mock battle. Petty Officer Brooks’ access code was the last one used to access Raptor Two’s computer interface.*”

After a pause, Powers replied. “Thank you, Seamus.” After tapping his badge to end the transmission, the JAG officer rose from his chair and started to turn toward the exit.

Thomas got up and followed him as her suspicion was confirmed. “What now, Will?”

“We ask the admiral to send the *Cheron* after her.”

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## To Boldly Go: Vendetta

A *Starbase Gateway Alpha* Story

By Cleve Johnson

**Stardate 57619.0**

The U.S.S. *Cheron* caught up with the *Roma*, a *Sydney*-class transport vessel that made a weekly run between Pacifica, the Flora Colony, and Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. Commander Johnston sent a security team aboard the *Roma* to apprehend Ralynne Brooks, but she was nowhere to be found on the transport. The security team did discover that an escape pod was missing. The sensors had been modified to inform the ship's computer that the escape pod was still in place.

Moments after the security team returned to the *Cheron*, Lieutenant J.G. Los Carden, the Bajoran head of security, entered the bridge and reported to Commander Johnston. "Sir, it looks like Petty Officer Brooks had her escape well-planned, but since an escape pod doesn't have warp or impulse drives, another ship must have picked it up."

Johnston rubbed his chin. "Or Brooks ejected before the *Roma* went to warp."

Lieutenant Commander McNeal approached her CO. "You think she might have gone back to the station?"

"It's possible," Johnston said as he looked back to face his security chief.

"I'll contact *Gateway Alpha*," the Bajoran security officer said as he quickly turned toward his bridge station.

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After meeting with *Gateway Alpha*'s head of security, Lieutenant Ricardo Hernandez entered his quarters. "Computer, lights," he said. But the lights did not turn on. "Computer, lights," he said again, hoping that using a louder voice would activate the illumination circuits.

The door suddenly slid shut behind him, closing off the light from the corridor and making the room darker than it was. Hernandez, thinking that it might be a glitch in the lighting systems, tapped his combadge. "Hernandez to Maintenance."

There was no reply, and Hernandez started to feel like he was not alone. He focused his mind as his body instinctively prepared to go into defensive mode. And then he heard the voice.

"Communications to and from this room are being jammed, Brooks said.

Hernandez started to back toward the door, but the sensor did not open the door as he slowly drew nearer to it.

"Don't bother, Lieutenant. The door won't open for you," Brooks said. "And don't bother trying an emergency beam out. That won't work either."

“What do want, Petty Officer?”

“Just my pay once I complete the job I was hired to do.”

“And what job is that?”

“To kill you, Lieutenant.”

Hernandez’s fear grew, but what surprised him was that his curiosity grew even quicker. Why would Brooks want him dead? He decided to appease his curiosity by asking, “Why do you want to kill me?”

“I don’t *want* to kill you,” she replied. “This is just a job. It’s not personal.”

“Assassin, huh? Who hired you?”

“A Cardassian. It would go against my professional ethics to give his name.”

*Professional ethics? Who does this girl think she’s kidding?* “Why would this... nameless Cardassian want me dead?”

“You killed his brother.”

“I have never killed anyone except during the war, and that was in the line of duty.”

“Exactly,” Brooks said. “You fired the killing blow that led to the destruction of a Cardassian warship at the first Battle of Chintaka. My employer’s brother was in command of that ship.”

“So, this is a vendetta, and you are the gun to avenge his brother.”

“That sums it up, Lieutenant. In the line of duty or not, there are consequences to your actions.

“Well, before you shoot, will you answer one more question?”

“Certainly.”

“What happened to the real Petty Officer Brooks, or was there ever one to begin with?”

“She had a little accident. I’m afraid that she will not return to duty...ever.”

“Then who are you? Are you human? Changeling?”

“That’s a second question, Lieutenant. You said you wanted to ask one more.”

“Si, I did; however, your answer led to another question.”

“Malurian. I have been surgically altered to pass as a human.”

“I thought your star system was destroyed over a hundred years ago.”

“It was, but a few thousand were off-planet when that happened. Fortunately, my second-before parents were among those.” The Malurian, unseen by Hernandez, lifted a phaser to point it at the pilot. “Are there any more questions before I vaporize you?”

“Only one. Do you know for whom the bell tolls?”

Hernandez dove to the side and used his couch for cover as the door slid open and several phaser beams sliced through the air, impacting against the would-be assassin. The Malurian slumped to the floor after he was only able to get off one shot that hit and partially destroyed a picture of a Twenty-first Century F-35 aircraft that hung on the wall next to the door. The wall did not fare well either.

Lieutenant Commander Seamus O'Malley, Gateway Alpha's chief of security, entered the room, followed by three enlisted security crewmen. O'Malley took Hernandez by the hand and helped him off the floor while the other members of the security team picked up the Malurian's phaser and lifted the alien as he unsuccessfully tried to resist through the groggy aftereffect of the stun beams.

"Gracias, Commander," Hernandez said. "You had my back just as you said you would. And your idea to use a code phrase was brilliant."

"Just doing my job, Lieutenant." O'Malley turned toward his men and the Malurian assassin. "Take him to the brig."



Lieutenant Commanders Powers and Thomas were sitting in the officer's lounge when Lieutenant Hernandez entered and approached their table. "May I join you two?"

"Have a seat, Aztec," Thomas said.

"I'm glad you're here, Ricardo," Powers said. "Saves me a trip."

"Sir?"

"The Malurian gave us the name of her employer. Glinn Tanar."

"I never heard of him."

"He's a military officer—currently the executive officer of a Galor-class warship assigned to the new Second Order," Powers said. "His ship was last reported patrolling the border near the Badlands. It turns out that his brother was Gul Renet who commanded the *Troynir*."

"That was the ship that you destroyed." Thomas reached over and grabbed Aztec's arm. "He will probably try again when he finds out that his hired assassin failed."

"I've notified Starfleet Intelligence," Powers said. "I have a friend who specializes in covert surveillance, and he has promised to keep a close eye on Glinn Tanar and track his movements."

"Is that necessary, sir?"

"It's...prudent," the JAG officer said. "It never hurts to be cautious, Aztec."

Hernandez nodded in acquiescence and smiled. "I suppose you're right, Eagle. In the meantime, I'm without a ship."

Thomas smiled as she patted her XO's arm. "Don't worry. I've already put in a request for a replacement. I've also requested to keep three of the *Peregrines*. I think they will still be useful."

"I agree, CAG," Aztec said. "Waste not, my father always said."

Commander Carl Johnston entered the lounge and, seeing the trio, walked toward them. "CAG, we didn't have a chance to find out who would have won our mock battle."

"No, we didn't, did we?"

"I think that we should remedy that," Johnston said.

"I think you're right, Commander," Thomas said.

"I'm curious how it would turn out," Lieutenant Commander Powers added.

Hernandez wondered how it would have turned out, too, but it was due to his fighter's destruction that stopped the war games. It wasn't his fault, but he still felt guilty.

Thomas noticed the look on Hernandez's face and imagined what he was probably feeling. She wanted him to know that he was not at fault for what had happened. "Commander Johnston, As soon as my XO gets his new starfighter, we will find out if the *Cheron* can survive against the Raptors."

Johnston smirked. "Care to go with me to Admiral Sjögren's office to schedule the rematch?"

Thomas stood up and smiled. "Right with you, Commander."

The two exited the lounge as Powers and Hernandez watched. Powers patted Hernandez on the back. "Aztec, I'm going to look forward to the next round."

"Hernandez returned the JAG officer's grin. "So am I, sir. So am I."



A week later, Glinn Tanar received word that the Malurian had failed and was taken into custody. Tanar could only assume that his intended prey was aware of who had hired the assassin and would be on the alert for another attempt. As a Cardassian, Tanar could be patient and bide his time, but he determined that a day would come when he would avenge his brother.

**To be continued...**