

STAR TREK BANSHEE SQUADRON



ABSALOM WEST AND THE HIJACKERS

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Star Trek: *Banshee* Squadron
Absalom West and the Hijackers

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"They say explosive decompression is a nasty way to die, but it was the price they paid for their assumption," drawled West. He casually leaned an elbow on the worn metal countertop of the bar and when he caught the barkeep's eye pointed at his empty beer mug before returning his full attention to his audience.

The bartender, a Ferengi named Quark, cast a brief, disapproving glare at West, but proceeded to refill the mug at the tap. At any given hour of the day or night here at Deep Space Nine's most popular watering hole, braggarts and con artists plied their trade of separating fools from their latinum, and to him West was no different than any other hyoo-mon, or if he was, it was perhaps that West's tales were a bit more flamboyant than most, and his aim usually wasn't to relieve some poor fool of quite all his earthly possessions. He did have an unfortunate tendency to start fights however, but Quark was used to rough clientele smashing up the furniture. That was the price he paid for his assumption that running a bar on this old Cardassian

mining station would be profitable. He sighed. At least West always paid his bar tab.

Meanwhile, the nearest of the bar's patrons, a disheveled Yridian, turned with alcohol-induced sluggishness towards West and remarked without much interest, "Whaddaya know 'bout essplosive deconspreshum, West. This another one o' yer stories 'bout how you slayed a dragon on Berengaria er found 'e lost sword o' Kahless?"

West maintained his amiability despite a few mean-spirited guffaws from the bar crowd, most notably from the large, bald Lurian sitting at the end of the bar. "Of course not, Shmutt!" he replied. "This is a true tale of danger right in our own backyard which happened not more than ten A.U. from this very spot!" He flashed a quick glance around the dimly-lit bar and saw that most within earshot were listening. To his 'friend', he said, "Come, let me buy you a drink and tell you my harrowing saga...."

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The raucous blaring of the proximity alarm jangled me from my sleep, (said West, waxing eloquent as he usually did after he'd had a few drinks). Just my rotten luck; always when I'm sleeping. You'd think the *Rocinanté's* computer could choose to demonstrate its vigilance some other time. There's only one possible explanation, of course: the universe hates me. That's my ship, by the way, the *Rocinanté*.

There was no time for self-pity though. Given the vastness of space, an actual collision wasn't likely, but no use taking chances. As quick as my still-sleepy brain could manage, I tossed the covers aside, jumped out of bed, and ran through the hatch and into the cockpit.

The shifting glow from the cockpit's instrumentation bathed the small cavity in a deep sea-green radiance, bestowing on it the character of a grotto at the bottom of the ocean of Argo. (West was really warming up now.) I checked the sensors and saw that there was indeed a blip; another ship drifting alongside mine where none had any business being.



I looked out the window. The view was dominated by Bajor XII, the undisputed giant of the system, but then I spotted the intruder, almost imperceptible against the

planet. Superimposed against the ammonia and methane cloud-tops was a ship like none I had ever seen before. It was long and narrow, with a huge, spherical bulge at one end, a smaller one at the other end, and four radial arms with warp nacelles at the ends. Looking closer however, I realized that the arms were bent, and the distant sun's feeble reflections revealed a barely perceptible nimbus of ice crystals suspended around the vessel — the telltale sign of a bad leak somewhere.

Micro-meteor damage? Cardassian attack? Was this a derelict ship left in a decaying orbit around Bajor XII? Maybe it had been abandoned when it became clear the damage was too severe to make salvage worthwhile. No... As I watched, a side hatch opened on the alien craft and three bulbous, spacesuited figures emerged, and, with the aid of thrusterpacks, began the long traverse across the bottomless gulf between the ships. It was clear they were heading for my own airlock.

What were these clowns up to? Why had they, whoever they were, not signaled? Had their subspace radio been damaged in the same catastrophe that had wrecked their ship? On the other hand, maybe the three figures even now jetting towards the *Rocinanté* were pirates or Cardassian renegades. Time would tell.

I wouldn't be meeting them completely unprepared though — I had a plan. I always have a plan. I made sure Gromit — that's my tribble — was safely inside his airtight cage, then adjusted the *Rocinanté's* life support settings, then headed aft to greet my visitors. Never let it be said that West has bad manners. (West paused here to take a drink from his beer.)

Through the soles of my feet I felt the Rocinanté's outer hatch thump closed and watched as the inner slid open, and I was suddenly staring down the long black barrel of a Varon-T disruptor rifle, one of the most vicious weapons ever invented. There were only a few illegal specimens in the entire Federation. These guys must have robbed some hapless Tzenkethi.

Even before any of them took off their helmets, I could tell I wasn't dealing with run-o'-the-mill Cardassian renegades here — these guys were way too fat. My guess was confirmed when the leader de-opa-qed his visor. Pakleds!

I could read the lead figure's lips as he spoke within the confines of his space helmet. "Hello. We will take your ship. We need it to make us go. Do as we say and we won't hurt you."

Straight and to the point, I noted calmly, allowing myself the momentary luxury of admiring their practiced efficiency. These guys weren't as dumb as they looked. Nodding assent, I raised my hands in the universal gesture of surrender. When the Pakled motioned me back with a threatening jab of the Varon-T, I complied, stepping back against the opposite bulkhead, careful not to move too suddenly or unpredictably, lest his trigger finger develop an itch.

Keeping a wary eye on me to make sure I didn't try anything funny, the foremost Pakled released the latches on his space helmet, yanked it off his head with a quick jerk and tossed it aside, his two rotund henchmen automatically following his example. A split second later, however, as the icy chill of space gripped their exposed faces and their

breath exploded from their lungs in great puffs of steam, they realized their fatal mistake. In a desperate panic, the unlucky trio scrambled for their helmets, but it was too late. Ten seconds later, they blacked out, and it was all over.

Seeing me standing there before them without a space helmet, they had made a terrible assumption.

That I hadn't swallowed a tri-ox pill two minutes before!

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A chorus of groans erupted from West's audience, and he had to duck a beer mug someone had aimed at his head.

"You don't expect us to buy that load, do you?" demanded the indignant Yridian Shmutt.

West looked hurt. "It's the gods' honest truth!" he swore, but the crowd was wandering off, disappointed by the implausibility of West's claims. He watched them disperse, each returning to whatever he'd been doing before, all of them mad at West for wasting their time with another of his outrageous lies.

When the last of the stragglers had cleared out, Quark strolled down the length of the bar and stopped across the counter from West. Wiping idly at a dirty beer mug with a rag, he casually commented, "I heard the funniest thing today."

West cast a carefully neutral glance in his direction. "Is that so?" he said.

Quark nodded. "Yes. It seems that some anonymous do-gooder turned in a Varon-T disruptor rifle this morning at

the Station Security office, and three Pakleds suffering from exposure mysteriously appeared in the infirmary."

West smiled but didn't reply right away. He stood from his barstool and pulled on his leather jacket. Finally he said, "Interesting coincidence." He flipped Quark a strip of latinum and winked before sauntering out.



