

STAR TREK

BANSHEE SQUADRON / USS LIBERTY



TEN THOUSAND SWORDS

A BANSHEE SQUADRON/USS LIBERTY CROSSOVER
BY RICHARD ADALBERT MERK and JOSEPH MANNO

The Danger Zone

In the days after the Dominion War, Wing Commander Lee Carter leads her squadron in the defense of those who need it, in space and on the ground.

And sometimes at Quark's Bar.

Ten Thousand Swords

Banshee Squadron / Star Trek: Liberty

by Richard A. Merk
with Joseph Manno



An "Inimitably Superfluous" Publication
Temecula, California
Visit us on the web at: banshees.merknet.com

*I thought that ten thousand swords would
have leaped from their scabbards to avenge
even a look that threatened her with insult.
But the age of chivalry is gone. That of
sophisters, economists, and calculators has
succeeded.*

- Edmund Burke

2377

The stone-faced, granite-muscled security guard prodded his mulish foot-dragging prisoner, and not for the first time. He knew this one very well, as she'd been remitted to his specialized care before.

Lieutenant J.G. Max Vasser stumbled forward, which was in actuality a carefully choreographed maneuver to bring her abreast of a very sour and disheveled Lieutenant Lee Carter marching at the head of the column of prisoners.

The infamous Banshee Squadron's wing commander cast a brief sideways glance at her troublesome XO and

muttered, "You keep provoking that security goon like that and he'll toss your ass in solitary and throw away the key. Which might be a good thing for the rest of us to be separated from you for a while."

Max didn't look the least bit chastised. On the contrary, the ferocious enthusiasm in her eyes burned all the brighter. "Quit complaining. It's been at least a couple'a weeks since I've gotten us thrown in the brig. Besides, this time it was for a noble cause."

Carter grunted disagreeably, not wanting to give Max any encouragement, but she silently agreed with the second half of Max's defense. This time they had only been protecting one of their own.

The platoon of security guards escorted the five Banshees into the security holding area foyer, and without a word and with only the requisite minimum of shoving and prodding deposited them in the largest cell, activated the forcefield, and then filed out.

The last guard paused at the door and said, "A medic will be by shortly to take care of your injuries, so don't go anywhere." Chuckling at his own imagined cleverness, he stepped out leaving the five women alone to nurse their cuts and bruises, and contemplate the error of their ways.

Ensign Jo Schmidt, the squadron egghead, dropped herself onto one of the hard benches with a disgruntled harrumph, and turned her black eye and split lip towards Max. "Well this is another fine mess you've gotten us into."

At her side, the newest Banshee recruit, Ensign Kimberly Tycho, sporting her own collection of facial contusions and ripped clothing, was looking very young

and scared. "I've never been in jail before," she said, eyeing the walls distrustfully.

"Don't worry, Kimmy," said Jo. "This is Deep Space Nine, not some Cardassian labor camp. Starfleet runs the place, not the Obsidian Order."

"What in the world were we doing at a *strip* club watching the 'Great Shimano' anyway? What will people think?!"

"Shomira," corrected Jo automatically. "Vaerth Parihn's an old friend. She flew with the Banshees for a while during the War, before you joined. The *USS Liberty* rescued us after the battle where... well, where Jazz got killed. Captain Mantovanni took us in for a while. I guess he wanted to make sure we didn't go off the deep end with shell-shock or something. I guess some of us sort of did for a while, but he managed to hold us together.

"...He's not *really* as mean as he looks," she added with a mischievous grin and wink. "I think he liked us. Well... at least him and Lee got along together."

"Anyway, several of the *Liberty* crew were assigned to fly with our squadron, including Parihn – 'Shomira' – believe it or not. We flew some hairy missions, and we became close. She's like... family.

"And as for the rest, it wasn't a strip club, it was just Quark's, and it wasn't a striptease, it was just a dance, and as for what people think... well, no one's going to think you're a lesbian just because you went to a *Shimano* show."

Kim looked momentarily confused. "Oh who cares about that! I meant that everyone's gonna think I'm the kind of girl who likes getting in bar fights!"

Jo rolled her eyes and smiled painfully through her split lip. "Oh. Well, on the bright side, Security will let us sit here and stew for a while, then let us out with an official reprimand on our permanent Starfleet records and no worse for the wear. It's not like this is the first time or anything."

Kim had been starting to relax under the spell of Jo's calm reassurances, but at the mention of official reprimands and permanent records, her expression reset once again to 'stricken'.

"And speaking of stewing... what's that smell?" asked Jo sniffing the air pointedly.

Across the cell, Ensign Sam Beckett turned beet red and lowered her head, letting her long blonde hair fall across her face. "Uh... that would be me..." she confessed quietly. She inserted an index finger between her neck and her collar and tugged, letting a column of acrid smoke escape from inside her uniform. "I think my arm circuits shorted out when that fat loudmouthed Lurian who was sitting at the end of the bar smashed a stool across it."

"Maybe we should have them send a mechanic along with the medic."

Sam's eyes widened, sudden alarm overriding her habitual timidity. "No!"

Jo smiled. "Oh yeah, heh, forgot. Nog would come himself. He'll run down here as fast as his little flat feet can carry him to give you his 'personal attention'."

Sam shuddered as though she could already feel the diminutive Ferengi's fingers running over her body 'inspected for damage'. "He's like a horny ferret."

That drew a giggle from Kim and a knowing smile from Jo. She knew Nog too from previous visits to DS9. He was

actually a very nice fellow and very competent at his job, but like many Ferengi, tended towards 'horny ferret'-like behavior when surrounded by human females. That sort of attention was the worst kind of torture to someone as terminally shy and neurotically withdrawn as Sam.

She elbowed Kim Tycho in the ribs. "Come on. Let's see if we can spare Sam the indignity." She doubted they'd be able to do too much for Sam locked up in the brig without any tools, but at least the work would keep Kim's mind occupied and keep the young rookie from freaking out.

Together, Banshee Squadron's egghead and motorhead got up and crossed the cell and got to work on their wingmate's damaged cybernetic limb.

That left Carter and Max.

They were sitting on opposite sides of the cell facing each other.

Carter was dabbing at the blood oozing from the corner of her mouth with a loose strip of cloth she had torn from the tattered sleeve of her uniform, and darkly contemplating her second-in-command. As far as she could see through the swelling of the magnificent shiner lighting up the right side of her face, Max had escaped the fracas at Quark's without so much as a scratch, thanks no doubt to that damned esper prescience of hers, while the rest of them looked like they'd each gone ten rounds with a Jem'Hadar First.

Carter sighed and refocused her attention on the deck between her feet. Max had always been at once her best ally and the worst thorn in her side. Without looking up, she said, "What the hell is wrong with you, Max?" There was actually a hint of uncharacteristic hurt and tired resignation in her voice, as if she'd gone over this same point one too many times and had finally had enough.

"I thought I ride you guys pretty hard, but maybe I'm wrong. Am I too easy on you? Do I give you too much free reign? Don't you have any respect at all for the chain of command?"

Max remained stubbornly unaffected by her Wing Commander's appeal. "Are you kidding? Starfleet phasered that into our brains starting the second we walked through their big shiny front doors."

"Well what then? Why do you always have to play the maverick? We're supposed to be a team, Lieutenant."

Max took a breath and explained it to her friend, enunciating each word slowly and carefully as though to a much loved but hopelessly dimwitted student. "I waited as long as I could stand it, but I had to do *something*, since my Wing Commander was content to just sit on her ass watching a pervert molest a friend, taking her sweet precious time deciding what to do."

Carter digested that for a moment, and decided that Max was probably right. "So in other words, I'm not a bad wing commander, I'm just slow."

Max grinned. "Now you're catching on."

Carter found herself grinning too, but the discomfort of the unyielding bench beneath her quickly forced the reality

of their present situation back into the forefront of her thoughts.

"Still..."

"What."

"There might have been a more diplomatic way of dissuading Parihn's... uh... overly enthusiastic admirer than smashing him face first through a table."

From outside the cell's forcefield barrier, a new yet instantly familiar voice answered. Carter's heart stopped.

"The innocent bystanders sitting at that table would probably have appreciated that."

All five Banshee heads turned in the direction of the new voice.

"Captain Mantovanni!"

"Hello, ladies," replied the *USS Liberty's* commanding officer. His stance was relaxed, legs apart, arms folded across his chest, his eyes dark and aloof, his voice deep and sonorous, and his tone mild—though perhaps 'disinterested' was a better description.

Carter recognized that as the worst kind of disapproval from this man, a purgatory from which redemption would be difficult at best. Her spirits sank to her feet.

Why is he here? Is he going to help us?

In the months the Banshees had spent aboard the *Liberty* after Jazz's death, she and he had achieved a certain level of respect. Each saw in the other something familiar – a ferocious desire to fight for what was right, a commitment

to uphold lofty ideals that were often not easy to uphold. Sometimes that meant not playing by the rules, and each took secret pleasure in their creative interpretations of official orders when they felt justified doing so.

Unfortunately, the melee at Quark's took Carter and her squadron well beyond that. It also involved more than just being a maverick. The Banshees had behaved in a manner unbecoming Starfleet officers. Defending a fellow was one thing, but rioting was quite another.

Luciano Mantovanni stood quietly, watching Carter's self-recriminations tear at the edges of her self-confidence.

He let his severe gaze rove, lingering a few scalding seconds on each Banshee in turn, silently absorbing the bloody noses, black eyes, and ripped uniforms.

"Still committing random acts of mayhem I see..." he said finally. "And I had such high hopes for you when you left *Liberty*. I'd say you've done a share of backsliding since you left the influence of my officers."

Disappointment.

Carter's spirits drained through the soles of her boots to the depths of perdition.

"I assume you have the ever-volatile Maxine Vasser to thank... as usual."

There was a touch of wry humor in that statement and a sardonic glint in his eyes, and Carter drew a miniscule measure of hope from that. All was not lost after all.

Buoyed by her renewed optimism, she got up from her bench and faced the man she respected and admired. The thought of him being disappointed in her was unbearable, and the intensity of the shame and embarrassment she felt surprised her.

"Captain, I can explai—"

"Parihn!"

Carter's lame attempt at excusing the inexcusable was thankfully aborted by Max, who had rushed to the forcefield barrier wearing her relief like a neon sign at the sight of their newest visitor, a petite and animated Green Orion woman.

"Are you all right?" demanded Max, heedlessly steamrolling over the exchange between her superiors.

Parihn placed her clenched fists on her slender hips and turned a more lustrous shade of emerald.

It was only then that Carter realized that Max's joy and relief at seeing their old wingmate was not reciprocated in Parihn's tight-set face. Carter's eyes widened as she recognized the venomous look. She took an involuntary step backwards. "Oh crap." She wanted none of that pie. Max was on her own, the sacrosanct law of never abandoning your wingman be damned.

Parihn ignored Carter, the others, and even the fact that her own captain was standing right beside her, and focused on Max the entire force of her righteous indignation, a raging maelstrom held back by a wall of soap bubbles.

"Am I all right?" she shot back. "*Am I all right?! I was fine! What the hell were you thinking? Do you think that's the first time a drunken fan ever tried to climb up on my stage... or on me? I can handle myself, you sociopath!*"

Max blinked hard and looked like she'd been punched in the face by the unexpected rebuff, but she recovered quickly.

"Hey! Listen here, Gumby—"

Mantovanni winced at the archaic epithet, but didn't intervene. He had first-hand experience with Parihn's verbal combat skills; she used them shrewdly and with devastating effect, so he had no doubt as to her ability to defend herself. Besides, she'd probably never forgive him if he deprived her of the opportunity to give Max a pummeling.

He also remembered the Banshees' gleeful predilection for interminable idiotic banter, and so settled himself in for a long session. He'd probably have to interrupt eventually, but for now he mentally stepped to the side lest he be caught in the crossfire of supercharged estrogen. He'd finish with Carter later.

"—I was just trying to help!" yelled Max. "That guy all by himself had you outnumbered three-to-one. Saiveen males have three pairs of arms, and all six hands were groping for someone I consider a very good friend of mine, though you wouldn't know that by the gratitude she's showing."

"That's not all they have six of," chirruped Jo from the sidelines. When all heads turned towards her in eyebrow-raised astonishment, it was her turn to color a few degrees darker. "Er... I mean... So I hear." She hurriedly buried her burning face in the repair work on Sam's arm.

Max harrumphed. "My point exactly."

"You just don't get it, Max," said Parihn. "The problem with you is that you didn't jump in with fists flying to help

me out. You did it because you were bored, and it'd been a few weeks since you'd punched somebody out. Am I right? This just gave you an excuse, you psychotic chaosmonger."

Max swept her glare around the room, daring the others to agree with Parihn. The other Banshees suddenly discovered points of intense interest in the various amenities in their cell: the hard benches, the metal floor... the hard benches... anything but their vengeful XO and the wild green Tasmanian Devil outside the forcefield.

Parihn wasn't finished flaying her victim yet though. "Not only did I not need your help, you agent-of-entropy, the only thing your rock-headed 'rescue' accomplished was to *piss off* the Saiveen, get the rest of his six-armed-and-six-other-thinged buddies into the fight, start a riot, get Quark's place smashed up, set off the fire suppression system, close down half the Promenade, and bring station security down on everyone! If you had minded your own damn business, I would have turned the creep into impotent putty with a wanton wink and hip-toss, patted him on the head like a good little boy, and booted his drunken ass back to his table all without even breaking the rhythm of my performance!"

"Why you arrogant, self-absorbed little hobgoblin! You think you're so tough. Just because you're the only Green Animal Woman in Starfleet that makes you better than everyone else. Do you think you could've taken on the whole bar without our help?!"

"I wouldn't have *needed* your help, you brain-damaged simian! You *started* the fight!"

"Why you...! If this forcefield weren't here I'd sock you so hard your clothes would be outta style by the time you

stopped rolling!" Max actually started pushing up her uniform sleeves. "You're just lucky I'm locked in here, you... you... anorexic she-hulk!"

Captain Mantovanni winced again and suppressed a grin. *Good one.*

"Bring it on, you sociopathic she-*male!*"

Ouch! Direct hit!

Apparently, the peanut gallery thought so too. From inside the brig cell, Mantovanni heard Sam Beckett and the rookie gasp a disbelieving "Check please!"

He decided that was his cue to cut the festivities short before things really got out of hand and Parihn and Max said something they'd actually regret afterwards, but he was beaten to the punch by yet another new arrival to the party.

"There! You see, officer? Look at the violence! The murder in their eyes! Come see the violence inherent in the system!"

All heads turned in the direction of the new voice.

"Quark!"

The foppish Ferengi barkeep hovered near the entrance to the holding area, still wearing the extra-garish suit he had specially donned for the occasion of Shomira's performance, though it was a little worse for the wear now. In addition, large white gauze bandages crisscrossed his bulbous forehead, and a stiff neck brace kept his head motionless. His numerous personal injuries didn't, however,

preclude a predictably lecherous, snaggletoothed leer in Parihn's direction.

He was bobbing beside a tall, wiry Bajoran officer dressed in Security brown. The deputy's hard set jaw bespoke of a longstanding personal reliance on stern judgment and a strict adherence to the letter of the law, yet his eyes told a different story to anyone practiced in reading people. They told Luciano Mantovanni that he'd rather be anywhere else but here, forced by his revered letter to be a stooge in whatever underhanded scheme Quark was undoubtedly in the midst of perpetrating.

The deputy nodded a minimalist acknowledgment to Captain Mantovanni, then turned to Carter and Max, though not without also letting his eyes linger as they passed Parihn.

He hitched a thumb at the flamboyantly bandaged Ferengi and said, "Quark is claiming to be an eyewitness to you starting the riot during ...Shomira's... performance." His eyes strayed towards the Green Orion again as his tongue lingered on her name.

Max raised her eyebrows and put on her most innocent face. In a saccharin voice that surprised everyone in the room she cooed, "Surely you don't think a few little *women* could have caused all that damage, do you, officer? There must have been some sort of misunderstanding."

Not interested in games, the Bajoran deputy cocked an irritated eyebrow and brought up a small PADD. He read slowly down the list.

"Assault and battery, carrying a concealed deadly weapon—"

At this, Carter shot Max a dirty look. She should have known. Max never went anywhere without a cricket phaser or a couple of knives tucked away somewhere on her person.

"—creating a public nuisance, disturbing the peace, indecent exposure—"

At this, Sam immediately clasped together the front of her uniform, which had been ripped halfway open by a frenzied Morn at some point during the fight.

"—disorderly conduct, destruction of public property, inciting a riot, menacing, terroristic threatening, wanton endangerment, criminal mischief, littering, harassment, attempted arson—"

"Arson?!" exclaimed Carter, glaring angrily. "We didn't commit arson! What the hell is going on here? *Littering?!*"

The deputy ignored this interruption as he had all the others, and continued.

"—failure to disperse, resisting arrest, contributing to the delinquency of a minor—"

"I turned twenty-one last week!" squeaked Kim.

"—destruction of private property, loss of revenue, theft of services—"

"Let's not leave out severe mental anguish, grievous emotional distress, personal bodily injury, an impacted lobe, and whiplash," interjected Quark as he hobbled further into the foyer, making sure everyone noticed his debilitating limp. "I can personally testify to every one of the charges on that list." The melodramatic spasms of pain on his lips and the small pathetic groans he emitted didn't quite obfuscate the sly gleam in his eye.

"I'll bet you can," muttered Carter, not liking the looks of that gleam in the least.

From behind her in the cell, Kimberly Tycho jumped from her bench and said, "Wait a minute! Those aren't 'official reprimands on permanent records'. Those sound like real charges! This can't be happening to me!"

Quark's sly gleam sparkled brighter, and it was the color of latinum.

Carter caught the stench of avarice in the air and began to clue into the real situation here. She and her squad were about to become victims of an ancient and revered Ferengi legal tradition – plea bargaining.

"Our carrier group ships out tomorrow, Quark," she said. "If we're locked up here facing a bunch of ridiculous trumped up charges, we'll miss it."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lieutenant," replied Quark as *insincerely* as Carter had ever heard words spoken. "Really I am. I wish there was something I could do, or some ...arrangement... we could come to that would solve all our problems, but the law is the law, and I have to do my part as an upstanding citizen to uphold it." He left the unspoken suggestion hanging in the air for Carter to contemplate.

She favored Max with a particularly scathing look, and Max had no trouble translating.

'You'll be paying for this one for the rest of your life.'

A quick glance in Captain Mantovanni's direction made it clear that no help or pity would come from that quarter. Rather, his expression made it clear that he was finding a good deal of amusement for himself in this unexpected plot twist.

Carter swallowed her ire and the microscopic particle of self-respect remaining her and said, "What do you want, Quark?"

Quark's lascivious grin grew more pronounced. He unconsciously reached up and stroked his unbandaged lobe while he made a great show of sauntering slowly around the deputy, the very picture of smug confidence.

"Nothing much. Just a little business proposition involving you ...and my holosuites."

Carter recoiled instinctively. "If you're about to suggest we let ourselves be digitized for one of those vile sex programs you pander, you can forget about it!" she snapped. "I'd rather rot in here and take my chances in the Bajoran courts, and I think I speak for all of us."

Carter was sure about three of her squad, but she found herself turning to check how the rookie was taking this latest downturn.

For a split second, Kim Tycho stood wide-eyed, looking like a little trapped squirrel, but she screwed up her courage and sat herself down on her bench with a finality that defied Quark or anyone else to try and come between her and her loyalty to her wing commander.

But Quark waved off the suggestion as though the very thought of exploiting the Banshees in that way was the most offensive thing he'd ever heard. "Nothing like that, I assure you," he said.

"Here's the deal. Lately, I've had more and more call for... what do you hyoo-mons call them... 'thrill rides'." He made a disgusted face and shook his head, forgetting that his neck was supposed to be immovable inside its brace.

"Anyway, since Starfleet took over the station, there's been a lot more... *children*—" that said brimming with distaste "—running around Deep Space Nine. They've practically worn out my 'Bajor-8 Pod Racers' and 'Berengarian Battle Dragons' programs."

He momentarily changed tracks. "I'll never understand you hyoo-mons... Innocent and completely natural and beautiful biological functions are decried as vile and disgusting, but wholesale slaughter and bloody violence are just fine for young and old alike. Pick up a sword, chop your way through a thousand Hur'q and slay the dragon! Bring the kiddies!"

He shook his head again.

But after that brief slip into quasi-moral certitude, Quark's real motivations quickly reasserted themselves. His avaricious sneer grew more brazen. He leaned closer to the forcefield and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "It's a gold mine," he gleefully confided to Carter as though the others couldn't overhear. "You wouldn't believe what teenagers will pay for fifteen minutes battling holographic monsters." He chuckled at his own cleverness.

Carter wasn't particularly interested.

"So where do we fit in your grandiose schemes to fleece the Federation's youth?"

"They want more!" declared Quark. He could hardly contain his delight. His injuries were completely forgotten. "They want blood! They want danger! Excitement! The thrill of the hunt! Life and death situations! They want to feel their adrenalin pumping!"

"I still don't see where we come in," said Carter.

"I happen to know that one of your *men*—" and the leer Quark gave Jo made it clear that he would like nothing better than to personally disprove that statement "—is some sort of science geek or something. A real wiz-kid with the computers."

"Yeah... so?"

Quark suddenly became very focused.

"So... if I were compensated for the damages to my bar caused by the riot, say, for example, oh, I dunno... by her designing a custom space combat flight simulator holo-program based on the exploits of your squadron of lovelies during the Dominion War, and maybe fixing a few broken barstools, maybe then I might come to my senses and realize that it wasn't you five that started that nasty riot after all."

Vaerth Parihn snorted in contempt. "That's low, even for you, Quark," she said.

"Business is business. So, what do you say, Lieutenant?"

"'Never place friendship above profit', eh, Quark?" sneered Carter.

"Rule of Acquisition twenty-one."

"We *can't* stay here playing hologames with you. I already told you our carrier group leaves tomorrow."

"I'm sure something can be arranged with Starfleet. Wouldn't you say so, Captain?"

Mantovanni was not a big fan of Quark's, especially after the whole affair with Parihn's dance at his bar, but he was glad that at least someone had remembered he was still in the room. The Banshees had such a tendency to bulldoze everyone else out of a scene.

But there was just *such* a sense of poetic justice to the Ferengi's proposal that he found himself already calculating which proverbial strings he would have to pull to get the Banshees reassigned to DS9 for the time it would take Schmidt to program a custom flight simulator. Plus, it might also demonstrate to some Bajorans that Starfleet wasn't the band of infidel barbarians they saw it as if the Banshees actively worked to redeem themselves.

Carter caught the introspective look in his eyes and realized what it meant.

"Captain! You *can't* be seriously considering this!"

"It seems that spending a little time here doing penance is the least objectionable alternative you have open to you, Lieutenant."

"But sir! We can't—!"

"You most certainly *can*, Lieutenant. I won't give you any direct orders one way or the other, but I think I know you well enough to know that you'll do the right thing. Or is my confidence in you truly misplaced?" He gave her a long, hard, penetrating look that would have shriveled the bony hide of a protoKlingon.

Carter knew she was trapped, cornered by her own scruples.

She didn't blame the Captain; it wasn't his fault. He was just looking out for Starfleet's best interests, and maybe use this incident to teach her one more valuable lesson on the subject of Command just like he had back when the Banshees were on the *Liberty*.

It wasn't Quark's or Parih'n's fault either. The Ferengi was just being true to his DNA, and the Green Orion's performance, while sexy and almost irresistibly enticing to

the male population of Quark's Bar, had never strayed beyond propriety and the limits she set for herself.

It wasn't even Max's fault. Her XO had her own strict set of ethics and code of conduct that she lived by, and it had required her to respond to a perceived threat to a friend. A little self-restraint for a change would have been nice, but that was water under the bridge.

Carter blamed no one but herself. She may not have personally started the fight, but she was the wing commander – that made it her fault. She knew it. Mantovanni knew it.

Her arms fell to her sides and she hung her head.

"We'll do it."

The others filed out of the Security holding area, grudgingly freed by the deputy upon Quark's sudden happy recollection that it had indeed been someone else who had started the riot, until only Captain Mantovanni and Lieutenant Carter remained.

Mantovanni broke the awkward silence between them, but instead of the scathing denunciation she was expecting, he cracked a crooked smile.

"I had heard there had been a disturbance on the Promenade and that some Starfleet officers had been arrested during Parihn's performance. I came down to see if everyone was all right and to see if I could help... or at least to make sure honest justice was dispensed. And I'd say that it has—

"—with a vengeance!"

Carter was silent for a long time. She didn't look at Mantovanni, instead keeping her eyes on her boots. Self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness had been her personal demons ever since she had inherited command of the Banshees when Jazz had died. Usually, she kept them securely locked behind warded doors in the basement of her subconscious, but right now they were sitting on her back and riding her hard.

For the first time in she didn't remember how long she was feeling less than 100 percent in control of her world, and she hated that feeling almost as much as she hated disappointing Mantovanni. Maybe Command was just too much for her. She was only twenty-eight, for goodness sake. That was too young for anyone to be in command of an entire starfighter squadron. She was no Tryla Scott, after all. She wasn't even a Jazz Phoenix.

Usually, Max would snap her out of her depression by telling her what a dumbass she was being, and the demons would flee back to the cellars, but this time Max was the source of her problems.

"What am I supposed to do, Captain?" she asked finally.

Mantovanni didn't call her a dumbass. He pondered the question a few seconds, probably guessing at least part of the motivation behind it, and gave her the best answer he knew how.

"You've got one of the best starfighter pilots in the Galaxy on your squad, Lieutenant, but that comes with a heavy price tag. Max will never change. She'll fly circles around anyone else, but she'll always think with her fists, shoot first and ask questions later, rush in where brave men fear to tread, and she'll forever be getting herself and you

and the others in trouble because of that. As her commander, it's your job to cover her ass, to fly her wing, so to speak, just as she covers your wing out there—" he pointed vaguely in the direction of space. "It's your duty to take care of the people under your command. That's the mark of a good commander."

He paused a moment, considering his next words, and when he spoke, Carter wondered if he had somehow read her mind. Or was her face that much an open book for people to so easily read?

"You don't know this, but I knew Jazz Phoenix, and I know she would never have backed down. You, on the other hand, chose the path of wisdom, and the Banshees will survive, though you'll all have to spend a month mopping the floor at Quark's while Schmidt reprograms the holosuites."

He smiled again and gave Carter a not-unsympathetic, 'I feel for your plight, comrade' squeeze on the shoulder.

"Well... Until next time, Lieutenant."

With that he turned and walked out, leaving Carter to feeling a little better about the universe.

"Thanks, Captain," she said quietly after he was gone.

A few hours later, Vaerth Parihn and Max Vasser were strolling slowly through Deep Space Nine's Promenade, though on the opposite side of the station from Quark's Bar.

It might have been the spiritual vibes emanating from the Bajoran temple, the Will of the Prophets, or the funky incense drifting out the open doorway that left her momentarily lightheaded, but Max broke the silence that

hung between them with what passed for a confession from her.

"He had a knife, you know."

Parihn shot a quick sideways glance at her friend and let an impish smile sneak onto her face. "Three, actually," she replied.

That caught Max completely by surprise.

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew." Parihn tapped her forehead with an index finger. "Empath, remember?"

Max snorted and smiled ruefully.

"I *did* forget about that. So you really *didn't* need my help."

Parihn shrugged, and her smile grew warmer. "I appreciated the thought, Max. Really. All for one and one for all," she recited.

"Do you know who he was?"

Parihn's nose wrinkled with distaste at the memory. "The Saiveen was a ...client... a long time ago," she replied. "Let's just say he didn't get what he wanted, and didn't take it too well, the perverted crybaby. He swore revenge, but I never thought he'd actually grow a backbone and try something, least of all a knife attack in public. Too bad his extra arms weren't extra brains."

After walking another dozen yards, Parihn asked the next logical question.

"Max... if you knew about the knives, why didn't you mention anything back in the holding cell. If you were trying to prevent a murder instead of just causing trouble, you wouldn't have wound up in the brig. But instead, right now, Cicero is making arrangements for the Banshees to

stay on DS9 and work off their debt to Quark, Lee is taking a helluva lotta crap for you from her superiors, and everyone thinks you're a freakin' psycho."

The dark fire returned to Max's eyes along with an evil grin.

"I have a reputation to uphold, after all."

