

STAR TREK BANSHEE SQUADRON

TEN THOUSAND SWORDS



RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

In the days of the Dominion War, Wing Commander Jazz Phoenix 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

Star Trek: Banshee Squadron

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*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

November, 2370

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 Max Vasser stumbled forward, which was a carefully choreographed maneuver to bring her abreast of a very sour and disheveled Commander Jazz Phoenix marching at the head of the column of prisoners.

The infamous Banshee Squadron Wing Commander cast a brief sideways glance at her most troublesome squad

member 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."

Phoenix grunted disagreeably, not wanting to give Max any encouragement, but she silently agreed with the second half of Vasser'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.

Lieutenant Lee Carter, the squadron XO, 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 Jo Schmidt, 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, Schmidt," said Carter. "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 in a jelly-joint with Ro anyway? What will people think?!"

"Laren," corrected Carter automatically. "Ro Laren. She's Bajora, which means she puts her family name first, then her own. She's an old friend. She flew with the Banshees for a while during her advanced tactical training at the Academy, right before you joined us. We flew some hairy missions, and we became close. She's like... family."

"And as for the rest, it wasn't a jelly-joint, it was just Quark's, it wasn't even jelly, and as for what people think... well, no one's going to think you're a lesbian."

Jo looked momentarily confused. "Oh who cares about that. I meant that everyone's gonna think I like getting in bar fights!"

Carter rolled her eyes and smiled painfully through her split lip. "Oh. Well, on the bright side, station 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."

Jo had begun to relax under the spell of Carter'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 the hell is that smell?" interjected Jazz Phoenix, sniffing the air.

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, Commander..." she confessed. She raised her head and in a rare moment of openness, 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 when that big fat bald loudmouthed Lurian who was sitting at the end of the bar smashed a stool across it."

"Maybe we should call you a doctor," suggested Phoenix. "Or a mechanic."

Sam's eyes widened, sudden alarm overriding her habitual timidity. "No no! Nog would come himself. He'll run down here as fast as his flat little feet can carry him to give me his 'personal attention' and then his hands would be all over me as he 'inspected for damage'." Sam shuddered as though she could already feel the diminutive Ferengi's fingers running over her body. "He's like a horny ferret."

That drew a chortle from Jo and a disapproving scowl from Jazz. 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.

Lee Carter elbowed Jo Schmidt 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 Jo's

mind occupied and keep the young rookie from freaking out.

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

That left Jazz and Max.

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

Phoenix 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 contemplating her ace pilot. 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 just gone ten rounds with a Nausicaan kick-boxer.

Phoenix sighed and focused her attention on the deck between her feet. Max had always been at once her best ally and her worst thorn-in-her-side. Without looking up, she said, "What the hell is wrong with you, Max, charging in there like that after I said wait? Don't you have any respect at all for the chain of command?"

Max raised an eyebrow. "Are you kidding? Starfleet phasered that into all 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."

"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."

Phoenix digested this new revelation, and decided that Max was probably right. "So in other words, I'm not a bad Wing Commander, I'm just too slow."

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

Phoenix found herself grinning too, her wounded pride slightly mollified, but the discomfort of the unyielding bench beneath her forced the reality of their present situation back into the forefront of her thoughts.

"Still..."

"What?"

"I would have come up with a better way of dissuading Ro's overly enthusiastic admirer than smashing him face first through a table. Like maybe dragging his ass outside and *then* doing it."

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

"Commander Sisko!" was the collective gasp.

"Hello, ladies," replied Deep Space Nine'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 'tired' or 'disinterested' were better descriptions.

Phoenix recognized that as the worst kind of disapproval from this man, a purgatory from which redemption would be difficult. Her normally-unquenchable spirits sank to her feet.

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

During their previous stopovers at DS9, she and he had achieved a mutual level of respect. Each saw in the other something familiar — a ferocious desire to fight for what he or she felt was right, a commitment to uphold ideals that were often not easy to uphold. Sometimes that meant not playing by the rules, bending them, or even breaking them, and each took secret (or not so secret) pleasure in their creative interpretations of official orders whenever they felt justified doing so.

Unfortunately, the melee at Quark's took Phoenix and her squadron well beyond that. It involved more than just being a 'maverick' or a 'loose cannon' — those qualities that both Phoenix and Sisko shared and appreciated. The Banshees had behaved in a manner unbecoming Starfleet officers. Defending a fellow was one thing, but rioting was quite another.

Benjamin Sisko stood quietly, watching Jazz'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.

Disappointment.

Phoenix gritted her teeth, and felt her spirits drain out through the soles of her boots.

"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 Sisko's eyes, and Phoenix drew a miniscule measure of hope from that. All was not lost.

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

"Commander, there's a good reason—"

"Ro!"

Phoenix's awkward attempt at excusing the inexcusable was mercifully aborted by Max, who had rushed to the forcefield barrier at the sight of their newest visitor, a slinky Bajora woman wearing Starfleet red.

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

Ro Laren placed her clenched fists on her slender hips and glowered at Max, making her Bajora nose wrinkle even more than it already was.

It was only then that Phoenix realized that Max's joy and relief at seeing their old wingmate was not reciprocated in Ro's tight-set face. Phoenix's eyes widened as she recognized Ro's venomous look as the one reserved only for special occasions. She took a 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.

Ro Laren ignored Jazz Phoenix, the other Banshees, and even the fact that Commander Sisko was standing right beside her, and focused on Max the entire force of her righteous indignation as only a Bajora could pull off.

"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 drunk ever tried to climb on top of me? It was a daily occurrence back in the labor camps! 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, ripple-nose!—"

Commander Sisko winced at the crude racial slur, but didn't intervene. He'd had first-hand experience with Bajora verbal combat skills from his second-in-command. They were used shrewdly and with devastating effect, so he had no doubt as to Ro's ability to defend herself.

"—I was just trying to help!" yelled Max. "That guy single-handedly 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, and after inviting us to her Academy graduation party!"

"That's not all they have six of," chirruped Jo from the sidelines. When all heads turned towards her in eyebrow-raised astonishment, she turned a few degrees redder. "Er..."

I mean... So I hear... Oh crap." 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 Ro. "I'm talking about motives here. 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. The other Banshees, except for Jazz, who remained rock-steady at the edge of the forcefield door, suddenly discovered points of intense interest in the various amenities in their cell: the hard benches, the metal floor, the hard benches... anything but the vengeful ace pilot and the unpredictable Bajora outside the forcefield.

Ro 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 patted the impotent creep's head like a good little boy, and booted his drunken ass back to his table, and gone about my own business!"

"Why you arrogant, self-absorbed little...! You think you're so tough. Just because you're the only Bajora 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 Starfleet token-alien!"

Commander Sisko winced again and suppressed a grin. *Whoa. Good one.*

"Bring it on, you psychopathic she-male!"

Ouch. Direct hit.

Apparently, the peanut gallery thought so too. From inside the brig cell, Sisko heard Sam Beckett and the rookie Jo gasp a disbelieving "Oh crap!"

He decided that was his cue to cut the festivities short before things really got out of hand and Ro 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. Large white gauze bandages crisscrossed his bulbous forehead, and a stiff neck brace kept his head motionless.

He was bobbing beside a tall, wiry Bajoran officer dressed in Security brown.

The deputy's hard jaw line 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 Jazz Phoenix that he'd rather be anywhere else but here, forced by duty and his revered letter of the law to be a stooge in whatever underhanded scheme Quark was undoubtedly in the midst of perpetrating.

The deputy nodded a minimalist acknowledgment to Commander Sisko, then turned to Phoenix.

He hitched a thumb at the flamboyantly bandaged Ferengi and said, "Quark is claiming to be an eyewitness to your crewman starting the riot on the Promenade.

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 fooled for an instant, the Bajoran deputy cocked an irritated eyebrow and brought up a small asymmetrical PADD. He started at the top of a long list and read slowly down.

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

At this, Phoenix shot Vasser 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, Beckett immediately clasped together the front of her uniform, which had been ripped open by a frenzied Morn at some point during the big fight.

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

"Arson?!" exclaimed Phoenix lividly, 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 Jo.

"—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 Phoenix, not liking the looks of that gleam in the least.

From behind her in the cell, Jo Schmidt 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.

Jazz Phoenix 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, Commander," replied Quark as insincerely as Phoenix 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 Jazz 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 Commander Sisko'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.

Phoenix swallowed her ire and thrust her pride behind 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."

Phoenix 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 Bajora courts, and I think I speak for all of us."

Phoenix 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, Jo Schmidt stood wide-eyed, looking like a trapped animal, 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 Phoenix. "You wouldn't believe what teenagers will pay for fifteen minutes battling holographic monsters." He chuckled at his own cleverness.

Jazz 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 Phoenix.

"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 you and your squadron of lovelies, and maybe fixing a few broken barstools while you're at it, maybe then I might come to my senses and realize that it wasn't you five that started that nasty riot after all."

Ro Laren snorted in contempt. "That's low, even for you, Quark."

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

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

"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." He turned to Sisko. "Wouldn't you say so, Commander?"

Sisko was not a big fan of Quark's, 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 Bajora that Starfleet wasn't

the band of infidel barbarians they saw it as if the Banshees actively worked to redeem themselves.

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

"You can't be serious! Commander!"

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

"But sir! We can't—!"

"You most certainly can, Commander. I'm not your direct superior, so I won't give you orders one way or the other, but if your Starfleet training was worth a damn, you'll do the right thing." He gave her a long, hard, penetrating look that would have shriveled the bony hide of a protoKlingon.

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

She didn't blame Sisko; it wasn't his fault. He was just looking out for Starfleet's best interests, and maybe use this incident to teach her a valuable lesson on the subject of Command.

It wasn't Quark's fault either. The Ferengi was just being true to his DNA.

It wasn't even Max's fault. Her ace pilot 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.

Phoenix may not have personally started the fight, but she was the Wing Commander—and that made it her fault. She knew it. Sisko 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 Commanders Sisko and Phoenix remained.

Sisko broke the awkward silence between them, but instead of the scathing denunciation she was expecting, he managed a slight smile.

"I had heard there had been a disturbance on the Promenade and that some Starfleet officers had been arrested during Ro Laren's graduation celebration. 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!"

Phoenix was silent for a long time.

Overweening pride had always been her major personality fault, and she knew it, but she made it work for her, whether she was dealing with a wingmate or an opponent. Her over-the-top style tended to cow friend and foe. In this situation though, it would do her no good.

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 Sisko, and she hated that almost as much as she hated the fact that she found herself actually giving a damn about his opinion of her.

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

She raised her chin, squared her shoulders, and asked, "What are you going to do, Commander?"

Sisko 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, Commander, 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. I know that, to a large extent, you and she are cut from the same cloth, but as her commanding officer, it's your job to look at the bigger picture. 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. "You've chosen the path of wisdom, and though you'll all have to spend a month mopping the floor at Quark's while Schmidt reprograms the holosuites, the Banshees will survive."

He smiled again and gave Phoenix a not-unsympathetic squeeze on the shoulder.

"It's the nature of linear existence."

With that he turned and walked out, leaving Phoenix to ponder the quixotic nature of the universe.

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

A few hours later, Ro Laren 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 Bajora temple, the Will of the Prophets, or the funky incense wafting from 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."

Ro 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!" Ro tapped the new rank pip on her collar with an index finger. "I just graduated from the advanced tactical training class, remember?"

Max snorted and smiled ruefully.

"So you really didn't need my help."

Ro 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?"

Ro's nose wrinkled with distaste at the memory. "The Saiveen was a gaoler at the resettlement camp where I lived when I was a child," she replied. "Let's just say he didn't get what he wanted from me, and didn't take it too well, the

sick pervert. 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 those four extra arms weren't four extra brains."

After walking another dozen yards, Ro 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, Commander Sisko is making arrangements for the Banshees to stay on DS9 and work off their debt to Quark, Jazz 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...!"

