

## *Through the Window Darkly*

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Orumoff?"

"No, that will be all for today, Claire," Niles Orumoff replied evenly. "Have a nice day. Say hello to Steven for me."

"Will do!" Claire beamed

He carefully watched her exit his office wherein, once again, he found himself alone.

All in all, this was a good life the man now generally known as Niles Orumoff concluded as he leaned back in his chair. Although, he further mused, next time out, perhaps he would choose his alias a bit more carefully. This one was becoming somewhat tiresome already. But identities could be changed. After all, he had done so four? Maybe five times now? Still, there was much to like about living and working on *Nexus Station*.

His office, overlooking the executive floor of the station complex commonly known as "The Mall," was about as expensive a piece of real estate anyone could occupy on the station. One look out of the sweeping panoramic window demonstrated why the area was so highly prized. He swung his chair around to view the vast cargo and personnel conduits that crisscrossed the mall. He noted how they shot straight up into the sky where they framed the luscious greens of the *Nexus Central Park* which gave any occupant a clear and unobstructed view of "The Bowl" -- the great concert hall just north of his offices. All suites in this area had acoustics such that they needed no artificial enhancements and many folks used similar offices to entertain executive guests.

For Orumoff, they provided adequate office space and not much more. The very appearance of his "wasting" such valuable real estate gave him just that extra cachet sometimes necessary to intimidate a reluctant "partner" into realizing that *his way* was in fact ultimately "the right way". The thought made Niles chuckle somewhat ruefully as he swung his chair back to face his desk. His "serious" business ventures were a long ways away from his early days as an enforcer and occasional courier in the slums of *Zabriskie Colonies*. Those days were long, long gone and the person they had shaped was a far cry from the youth only known as "Nails" to his erstwhile slum-bound peers. He had slowly but surely worked his way through the ranks, eventually rising to that of boss of his own gang and leveraged that position to get out of the *Zabriskie* by the first, if not the best shuttle available. If crime was to pay -- and Nails was certain that it would -- it would not do so in sufficient quantities in a place that the rest of the universe had most assuredly already written off.

Work was always easy to come by for people like him. As always, the thought made him smile. "People like him" back then meant someone who had no problems with the occasional murder, the frequent bribing of officials, and just about any criminal scheme devised by sentient beings across the known galaxy. Even today, it meant the exact same thing. The only difference being that no "respectable businessman" such as himself would ever have to admit to such flagrant violations of criminal statutes. After all, being rich and respectable meant having a whole raft of people who were ready and able (if not always willing) to take the rap for him. Yes, appearing respectable certainly had its advantages.

The fact that his legal enterprises could easily keep him in a most luxurious lifestyle forevermore had long ceased to be important to him. Money and material wealth were hardly the object of his interest. For Niles Orumoff was that rarest of criminals who actually enjoyed his activities for no other reason than the ability of staying one step ahead of those seeking to unseat him or bring him to justice -- something he couldn't buy.

For over thirty years, he had managed to cut a swath right through those seeking to do just that by simply working harder and staying smarter than those nipping at his heels. And at times, doing so was simply just too easy. As the Chairman and principal stockholder of Orumoff Universal Trading, one of the most prosperous trading syndicates in the system, it was at times frightfully easy to obtain material most regular citizens of the Federation could only dream off such as the document in front of him. Orumoff allowed his eyes drift towards the item on his desk: "*Combat Readiness Evaluation Report of the Flight Branch, Space Station Nexus.*"

Orumoff snorted. A typically bland title, but that was always to be expected from the military types. Their reports simply were designed to put most common folk to sleep. Perhaps the idea was that if people didn't know or didn't care about what was going on with the military, they would most likely not be able to divulge their carefully guarded readiness reports. However, with a few "concerned" calls by a person with sufficient clout -- obviously Assemblyperson Connors thought of Orumoff that way -- about the safety of O.U.T. Convoys, rarely failed to achieve their desired result. Niles grinned as he could all but hear the dialog:

*"Obsidians System? Didn't they just have a handful of exercises?"*

*"Sure did."*

*"They turn out ok?"*

*"Yep."*

*"Just leak the report to Orumoff then. Should make him happy and keep his trade routes safely in our space. Wouldn't want to lose those tolls, now wouldn't we?"*

*"Sure wouldn't."*

The price of all this? A few calls and a half-crate of old Romulan Ale. Trinkets, mere trinkets.

The late afternoon had given way to evening before Orumoff finally came across the title of the passage that provided the reason why he needed to procure this report: Operational Exercise 55313: Orbital Smuggling Station -- Search and Destroy.

The notes on the exercise were nothing extraordinary. The units assigned performed their duties well enough, dispatching their mission objectives -- including the spontaneous interdiction of relief forces that had showed up, but he expected as much from most any Federation unit. It could have certainly all been one big, happy coincidence, but Niles Orumoff rarely wrote off such matters to being coincidence without first investigating all angles.

The issue at hand here was quite simple, for there *was* in fact an orbital smuggling platform in planetary orbit and even more intriguing, it had been cloaked and equipped with military grade defenses. Orumoff grimaced over the assumption that it was outfitted with the shoddy Klingon crap the exercise planners had presumed, but in reality, he had installed the most recent Romulan technology.

The Rommies had always been more than willing to deal with people such as him. After all, anyone willing to give the Federation a hard time was just dandy with them -- though the steep prices they demanded for their military technology certainly made the giving just that much easier. The orbital platform had served as a waystation for some of his more delicate operations for nearly eight years now. It didn't come entirely as a surprise that someone might have clued into its existence by now, but if so, why this charade? Why the pretense of an "exercise"? Why not take it down and posture for the press for maximum nest feathering like most politicians?

*No*, he considered as he tapped the report, *there is something else going on here*. He and his associates had warily watched a holovid *Nexus Nightly News* report on a "fictional" smuggling platform being blasted from the sky. The fact that this report had been done as a special that just happened to be distributed far and wide didn't help matters. It had been enough to send several of his more reliable sources looking for a somewhat lower-profile port of call. The less

reliable sources had all but disappeared. Whoever had implemented this exercise had done so with a maximum amount of forethought as to just what sort of reaction it would evoke with its intended audience. That much was obvious given the fact that military exercises generally were off limits to civilian observers -- especially those of the so-called "free press."

The report listed the primary authors of the exercise as "K. Argent" and "J. El Jafeer." The newly installed station commander wasn't much of a surprise. He was an old-school soldier and one of those folks who relished the stench of combat. Orumoff generally avoided entanglement with such individuals for their capacity for corruption was nearly nil. Fortunately, he was married and with his wife at work in a very public area of the station, the exertion of subtle pressure on Mr. Argent would most likely be quite easy if that became necessary. But while his career background in fightercraft made him look like the obvious brains behind this little exercise, his career was almost entirely bereft of work in the fields of intelligence analysis or countering. No, Argent was not the source of his current shortfall, though it was certainly easy to assume he was.

Mr. El Jafeer though was a bird of a different feather. His service jacket stated in no uncertain terms that he had never even taken any courses in tactics, intelligence gathering, or applied strategy. It was most reassuring in its certainty that this person was in fact a career bureaucrat, destined for one station-side assignment after another until the ever-so inglorious end of his undistinguished career.

So, why was *he* of all people suggesting high-profile mission parameters? After all, this little exercise smacked of an intelligence operative at work, no doubt about it.

Orumoff suddenly put the report down and frowned. Someday he surely would lose and someone crafty like Mr. El Jafeer -- he shuddered to think that it would be some faceless thug and that was most assuredly not how he planned to go out -- would in fact bring him down. But as always, he would not go without a fight. Now that the great game was once again afoot, Orumoff sighed with a serene sense of relief. It had been far too long, after all. Every time he passed a mirror, he couldn't help but notice the specs of gray that now were interwoven with his once black-as-space hair. Challenges such as this made him feel young again but as always, he needed to be prepared. He made a mental note to have a *complete* dossier compiled of all station personnel currently assigned and to be assigned.

He quietly stood and sauntered over to his liquor cabinet to pour himself a splash of saurian brandy which, along with its rare crystal decanter, was in all likelihood worth more the Mr. El Jafeer could expect to earn over the next year or so. Glass in hand, he walked over to the window to observe the children

playing in the fading light of the mall's artificial daylight. It was most fitting that they were playing "Cops and Robbers," for not far from where they toiled with youthful abandon, a far bigger and far more dangerous version of that very same game had just been initiated.

"And may you be a worthy foe, Mister El Jafeer," Niles Orumoff toasted his erstwhile opponent before emptying his glass in one smooth stroke. He continued to muse over the fact that while most of the kids playing their game in the park below would never amount to half the person he already was, they nevertheless had something he never had.

Though in the end, he finally concluded as he put his glass down on the desk, having a last name seemed to be vastly overrated anyway.

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Next: *Back in the High Life Again*

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