

# Tales of the USS Bluefin Cascade Effect By The Lone Redshirt

*Author's Note: This third tale about the captain and crew of the Border Cutter USS Bluefin takes place 18 months before the events in "Semper Paratus" and "Storms and Shadows."*

*Readers of the previous installments will notice a few differences. First - the XO is Commander Dale McBride, a tall, handsome, friendly human from Texas. He is the predecessor to Inga Strauss, who does not appear in this story. We will, of course, encounter Dr. Calvin Baxter as this takes place nearly two years before his death.*

*If you have not read any of the previous stories, the setting is the immediate post-Donimion War era. Captain Benjamin Akinola is the veteran captain of the USS Bluefin, a 70 year old Alabcore class cutter. The ship and crew patrol the shipping lanes of the Borderlands, the sector where Federation, Klingon and Orion space meet. Their mission is much the same as the U.S. Coast Guard - search & rescue, interdiction, and defense. You will probably recognize some systems and planets. Others, such as the Molari badlands and the Molari system come from my imagination.*

*While this is a "stand alone" story, you may want to read "Semper Paratus" and "Storms and Shadows" to get a better handle on the characters.*

\* \* \*

Calamities are often instigated by simple, often innocent acts. A driver falls asleep at the wheel of his car, loses control, crashes into another vehicle and kills the occupants therein. A child lines up dominoes in an intricate pattern, one after the other, then tips the first domino, resulting in the fall of each and every one. Some believe that a butterfly that flits its wings in China might disrupt the air in such a way as to instigate a hurricane in the Atlantic.

The concept is a simple one and understood by most cultures in the galaxy. Unfortunately, the end result of a simple root cause is often calamity. Humans

call that "Murphy's Law," - if anything can go wrong, it will. Klingons, perhaps the most fatalistic species in the Alpha Quadrant have a simpler expression, "s'hlaq lopno'q," or "shit happens."

The disaster that befell the super freighter, *SS Kanrin Maru*, began with a simple and innocent event. It was not merely the failure of a small, common sensor panel that caused the deaths of dozens and imperiled a world. It was the cascade effect that followed.

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

Berth 14, Star Station Echo

The Borderlands

Captain Benjamin Akinola frowned over the stack of data PADDs on his desk. His plans for a game of raquetball on the station with Dr. Baxter would have to wait while he signed off on various forms, requests, and reports related to the work being done on his ship, the *Bluefin*. He was pleased that the work was progressing smoothly, but he despised 'paperwork' and his XO was out of pocket.

He leaned back in his chair and looked out the viewport of his small ready room. From his vantage point, he could see space-suited workers floating around the ship as the up-rated impulse engines were being installed. Galt, his Tellarite chief engineer, had bragged that the upgrades would give the *Bluefin* a 30% increase in sub-light performance.

Akinola rolled his neck, trying to work out the kinks, when the door enunciator buzzed. Glad for the interruption he bellowed, "Enter!"

The door slid open and the XO, Commander Dale McBride entered. He was dressed in engineering coveralls, stained with various fluids. A dark streak of grease was on the left side of his sweaty face and his dark, brown hair was unruly. He grinned broadly beneath a handlebar mustache that strained the bounds of regulation decorum. "Mornin' skipper! Just wanted to poke my head in and let you know the engines are in place and ready for testin.'" McBride's west Texas drawl was quite pronounced.

"Is Galt satisfied with the installation?" asked Akinola.

"Shoot, skipper. Galt's happy enough to kiss a Ferengi!"

Akinola decided he didn't want that image in his head, so he changed subjects. "Commander, I was wondering when you planned on making an honest woman out of T'Ser?"

McBride's smile took on a sheepish aspect and his face began to turn red. "Damn, Joseph! That's pretty blunt!"

"I hope you know that your 'private' relationship is the worst kept secret in the service." prodded Akinola, who tried not to wince as McBride plopped his sweaty, dirty form into one of the guest chairs.

"Yeah - I know. And it's not like we're ashamed, or anything. It's just, well, I don't know if it's a good example for the crew for the XO and second officer to be holdin' hands in public."

Akinola grinned back at the big Texan. "Dale, it's pretty obvious to everyone on this ship, even Galt, that you two have a really good thing together. Don't worry about us. As to your future, of course that's your business. Just remember, I *am* a ship's captain and can perform weddings. Let's see now, where did I put that wedding manual?" he pretended to look through desk drawers.

McBride stood up, his hands held palm away in mock surrender. "'Don't worry, skipper. If we decide to tie the knot, you'll be the first to know!"

"I better be. Now, go take a shower - you're stinking up my ship!"

\* \* \*

*As the big freighters go it was bigger than most, with a crew and the captain well-seasoned.*

- "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by Gordon Lightfoot.

Captain Jeroice Poiroux sipped coffee on the bridge of the super freighter *SS Kanrin Maru*, as it took on freight and passengers at the Mars orbit terminal of the FreightStar Shipping Corporation. Poiroux looked around with pride and satisfaction as the bridge crew went through check-lists and ran system diagnostics on the two kilometer long, 3 million metric ton freighter.

The *Kanrin Maru* and her two sister ships were the largest private carrier cargo ships in the Alpha Quadrant. Poiroux had served on freighters his entire

life, beginning as a dockhand, then a stevedore, then able crewman, until eventually gaining his Ship Master's certification and his own command. Now in his late 60's, he was at the pinnacle of his career.

The *Kanrin Maru* was preparing to make the Mars - Molari run with a cargo of heavy mining equipment, atmospheric generators, grain and explosives. The latter troubled Poiroux only slightly. The ship's state of the art monitoring systems and fire control could handle most any conflagration. Moreover, the containers themselves insulated the tri-phosphorous explosives from external heat or energy. Still, the thought of a material that burned hotter than the sun, even in hard vacuum, caused him to be extra cautious. He had lived as long as he had by not taking short-cuts, sometimes at the consternation of his employer.

1200 meters aft of the bridge, a Bajoran stevedore named Tal Ronlik, was having a bad day. As he maneuvered the work pod and wrangled cargo containers with his tractor beams, he fumed over the events of the day. First, he had been called in from his vacation because of some sort of "viral outbreak." Ronlik suspected it was a case of "union flu" as the stevedores union negotiated a new contract with the FreightStar Corp. Then, he realized that he'd left his lunch back in his apartment on Mars. The final straw came when he found out he'd have to work a double shift. The phone call he made to Drienne was not a pleasant one. "If you break our date tonight, don't call me tomorrow!" she'd hissed.

"The bitch!" he muttered angrily as he maneuvered a red container into bay 58. His concentration lapsed, he overpowered the workpod and accidentally bumped the container against a conduit and scraped the container along the bulkhead.

Ronlik cursed in anger and a just a bit of fear. He didn't know exactly what the cargo container contained, but he knew it was nasty stuff. Tri-phospho something, he remembered. He turned the workpod's lights toward the point of collision. There was a long gouge mark along the forward bulkhead, but there appeared to be no major damage. The protocol was for him to report any such accidents. But in his current mood, he wasn't about to write up an incident report and possibly have his pay docked. He quickly backed the workpod out of the cargo bay, not noticing the sparks that intermittently flickered from the damaged sensor conduit. Neither did he notice the small crack in the cargo container itself.

At almost the same moment that Tal Ronlik damaged the cargo container and the sensor conduit, an apprentice crewman pulled a sensor panel from a control panel on the bridge. Captain Poiroux, frowned and stepped toward the youngster.

"Hey, Hey! Grelin! We never remove sensor panels during loading operations - understand?"

Startled, the young crewman replaced the sensor panel, dropping it back into place - not noticing that it did not seat itself into place with the mandated tell-tale click. Instead, he turned to the captain. "Sorry, sir. The first mate told me to check out the panels."

Poiroux nodded. "As well he should. But - not when we're loading or unloading. Is that clear?"

"Yessir!"

Poiroux smiled and cuffed the teenager on the arm. "Good lad! We'll be through loading in about an hour. Come on back then and finish up."

"Aye, sir!"

As fate would have it, a signal from cargo bay 58 should have been received on that very same sensor panel. However, the panel contacts were less than .005 mm from establishing a viable connection, a minuscule gap but enough to prevent the signal from coming through. The malfunctioning back-up sensor for the pod continued to spark ominously in the darkness of bay 58.

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*  
Berth 14, Star Station Echo  
The Borderlands

Commander McBride exited his quarters, freshly showered and in a clean uniform. He whistled a jaunty tune as he headed for the turbo-lift. When the lift doors open, his smile widened. "Well, good morning, Lt. Commander T'Ser! How were things on beta shift?"

"Bridge duty tends to be monotonous when you're in space dock, commander," she said with a slight smile.

The doors to the lift closed. T'Ser said, "Deck seven." She then turned, pulled McBride to her in a strong embrace. They kissed briefly, with warmth and promise, then released each other.

"And good morning to you too, commander," said T'Ser. "How goes the installment of the new impulse drive?"

"The installation is done and Galt is running diagnostics as we speak. We should be ready to return to patrol duties soon."

"Did you remember to ask the captain about installing a replicator?" asked T'ser.

McBride winced. "Uh, no, not actually."

T'Ser raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. "Dale, you said that you'd bring it up with him."

He sighed. "I know. And I intended to. But he got off on a tangent when we were talking that left me . . . flustered."

T'Ser's other eyebrow went up. "You? flustered?" The lift doors opened and they moved out onto the deck 7 corridor. "What did he say?"

McBride looked embarrassed. "Well, he asked me when I was going to make an honest women out of you."

T'Ser frowned in puzzlement. "I did not realize that the captain thought I was dishonest."

McBride laughed. "You grew up on Earth - I thought you would've heard that expression."

"Not in Seattle, I didn't. What does it mean?"

McBride's expression changed. He looked a bit apprehensive and cleared his throat before speaking. "It means to . . . propose marriage."

T'Ser stopped walking so quickly that McBride took three more steps before he realized she wasn't beside him. He turned to look at her. This time, his eyebrow was raised.

"T'Ser?" he asked, concern in his voice.

"What was your answer to the captain?" she asked, quietly.

"I didn't give him one. I mean, we - you and me, that is, haven't really talked about that."

"Are we?"

"Are we what?"

"Going to talk about - that." T'Ser stood in place, her arms folded and her face as inscrutable as any Vulcan McBride had ever seen.

*Uh-oh.* he thought.

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru*

Sector 001, 1.5 million km from Jupiter Station

In transit to Molari IV, .25 c

The massive super freighter moved through the solar system, past the research facilities of Jupiter Station, at a leisurely one third impulse. Two escort ships, the *Miranda* class *USS Ardent*, and the *Sabre* Class *USS Cooper* kept pace with the behemoth. From the vantage point of either starship, the *Kanrin Maru* was not an elegant design, but it was certainly impressive. The shovel-nosed command section was at the front of the vessel, housing the bridge, navigational deflectors and sensors, as well as passenger and crew quarters. Just aft of the command section were the forward warp nacelles, two massive units, each longer than a *Galaxy* class ship, tied together by a massive, arcing yoke that hung over the back of the command section. This was followed by a 1.5 km long cargo section of 70 octagonal container bays, connected by dorsal and ventral access corridors. At the rear of the ship was a second pair of warp engines, as massive as the forward pair, along with the impulse drive engines and main engineering. Long and narrow, it hearkened back to the days when massive super tankers plied the oceans of Earth during the 20th and 21st centuries.

Crewman Apprentice Grelin, a young Tellarite, rode down the ventral corridor on a tram with the First Mate. He kept trying to tell the First that he had not completed the panel check on the bridge, but the First was intent on

other matters, preparing for their jump to warp when they passed the Sol system outer markers. Grelin was very much intimidated by the Andorian First Mate, so he did not press the issue. Besides, the captain had told him that "you learn more by listening and seeing than by flapping your tongue."

Unfortunately, that would prove to be fatal advice.

\* \* \*

USS *Bluefin*  
Berth 14, Star Station Echo  
The Borderlands

Captain Akinola took center seat on the *Bluefin's* bridge. He punched the inter-ship comm switch on the armrest. "Attention all hands, report to departure stations. It's time to hit the road."

Turning forward, he barked. "Status?"

"All airlock doors report sealed and secure. Station umbilicals are disconnected and we are on internal power." said T'Ser.

"All boards are green, thrusters at station-keeping, impulse ready and on stand-by. Warp-engines are on stand-by. Navigational deflectors are on-line, shields on stand-by." reported Fralk from the helm.

"Captain, yardmaster has cleared us for departure," said T'Ser.

"Thank you commander, and relay my compliments to the yardmaster. Navigator, plot standard departure course to the outer markers, then set course 112 mark 30."

"Standard departure, then 112 mark 30, aye!" replied the navigator.

"Helm, ahead slow through the yard limits, then one-half impulse to the outer markers."

"Ahead slow, one-half impulse when clear of the yard, aye!"

"Departure angle on viewer. Helm, engage thrusters."



The cutter began to move out of the cocoon-like space dock. Slowly, it moved past other berths containing ships of various classes. Work pods and shuttle craft zipped around the ship like insects around a sparrow. As they reached the designated edge of yard space, Fralk slowly moved the impulse engine setting from idle to Run 1. The new engines responded instantly, causing the bridge crew to feel the deck shift slightly. Akinola felt himself pushed into the command chair slightly as the inertial compensators struggled to catch up with the added g-forces.

"Gralt to bridge."

"Bridge, go ahead commander," answered the captain.

"Sorry about that. We're adjusting the compensators now. Go to any speed you want, but tell the helmsman to apply it slowly for now."

"Understood. Bridge, out." Akinola turned to the helmsman. "Did you catch that, Mr. Fralk?"

"Yes sir. Easy on the throttle, aye."

Akinola smiled. "I kind of liked that kick, myself. Okay, people, we've got a rendezvous with a freighter for escort duty and two days to get there. Forward angle on viewer. One half impulse, Mr. Fralk, *gently* if you please!"

The *Bluefin* smoothly picked up velocity, nearly approaching half the speed of light as it headed out of the system.

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru*  
Sector 001  
Outer Marker, Sol System

The super freighter and its two escorts reached the outer markers of the Sol System without incidence. Away from the gravity wells of the planetary bodies, the vessels prepared to jump to warp and continue the long journey to the Molari System.

In bay 58, the damaged container shifted slightly as the massive vessel changed course. The inertial dampener emitters were not properly focused after the workpod collided with the bulkhead, warping it. With each turn of

the ship, the container shifted slightly, bringing the opening in the broken casing closer to the flow of sparks from the damaged sensor housing.

The three vessels completed their course change, then, one by one, they vanished as they jumped to warp.

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

Sector 4842

En route to rendezvous point with *SS Kanrin Maru*, Warp 6

"Mr. Bane, Time until we reach rendezvous point?" asked Commander McBride.

"ETA is two hours, forty minutes at current speed." replied Bane from the sensor station.

McBride thanked Bane and turned his gaze back toward the viewscreen and the stars as they streaked by. There was not much to do at this point but mark time until they rendezvoused with the *Kanrin Maru*, where they would take over escort duties from the *Ardent* and the *Cooper*. *Bluefin* and her sister ship, the cutter *Scamp* would escort the super freighter the rest of the journey to Molari IV.

McBride's mind drifted back to the conversation he had with T'Ser earlier. Or rather, the lack of conversation. She had been unusually quiet as they ate breakfast together in the wardroom. He had told her that the captain had just been teasing about him "making her an honest woman," but since the subject of marriage had come up, she had been acting differently. He knew she was sensitive about the broken betrothal with Strevel and the problems it had caused for her and her parents. Still, he was perplexed by her reaction. After all, it wasn't as if he had actually proposed.

He sighed. He supposed it didn't matter where they came from, he'd never understand women.

\* \* \*

Captain Akinola scanned the manifest of the *Kanrin Maru* with both amusement and concern. Besides the 32 crewman and 24 passengers, the ship carried over 1.5 million tons of cargo. Much of it was pretty mundane

stuff. He shook his head when he saw the load of atmospheric generators. The Dante Mining Corporation had been attempting to terraform Molari IV for almost a century with little to show for their time and effort. The mining colony was 90% underground, the rest under pressure domes on the hot, dry surface. Molari IV was just one of those planets that did not want to be tamed. His mind went to yellow alert, however, when he saw the listing for tri-phosphorous explosives.

Tri-P as it was more commonly known, was a staple in dilithium mining. Faster than laser drilling, charges could be shaped and formed precisely to open up veins of the important ore. It was generally stable but very volatile. If exposed to sparks or flames, it could burn intensely, even in a vacuum. And fire on a spaceship was a horror, indeed. He made a mental note to have McBride run some fire-control drills.

His reverie was interrupted by the door annunciator. "Come!" he said.

The door slid open and Commander McBride appeared. "We're comin' up on the rendezvous point, skipper. *Scamp* is already on station.

"Good. Contact Captain Rodenko on the *Scamp* and give him a head's up. Has the *Kanrin Maru* and its escorts arrived for the rendezvous?"

"Not yet, but they're not scheduled for another three hours. Oh, guess who's got escort duty?"

Akinola just shrugged and shook his head.

McBride grinned. "A-hole Ahuero and the *Ardent*."

Akinola snorted. Captain Lito Ahuero was a former Border Service commander who transferred to the regular fleet. He was also an insufferable snob and a jerk, hence the nickname. He was a passable CO, but was condescending toward any and all Border Service personnel. McBride had once served under him before transferring to the *Bluefin*. Akinola couldn't stand the man.

"Thanks for the warning, Dale. Oh, have you checked out the manifest on that super freighter?"

McBride's face clouded, indicating that he had, indeed, seen the manifest. "Tri-P. And enough to send that ship and any other ships within a million clicks to kingdom come."

"Well commander, we don't get to pick the assignments, we just carry them out. But let's be ready, just in case."

"I'm ahead of you, skipper. Fire control and damage control teams are already running drills."

Akinola smiled. "Now that's what I like to hear!"

\* \* \*

In a short time, the *Bluefin* dropped out of warp and approached her sister ship, the *USS Scamp*, another *Alabacore* class cutter. Captain Akinola smiled at the sight of the other ship.

"Lt. Vashtee, hail the *Scamp*," he said.

"Aye sir, hailing frequencies open."

Momentarily, the bearish figure of Captain Boris Rodenko filled the viewscreen. "Joseph! Good to see you again. I trust you and your crew are doing well?"

Akinola smiled at the Russian captain. "Very well, Boris, thank you. Any word from the *Kanrin Maru*?"

"Yes, they are on schedule and should arrive within the hour. I suppose you know that Ahuero's ship is one of the escorts?" asked Rodenko with a pained expression.

"I heard. Best to just ignore his jibes, Boris." Akinola changed the subject, "Did you review the manifest of that freighter?"

Rodenko's face darkened. "Yes, and I'm not too happy, I must tell you! What happens if an Orion or Nausican ship decides to make an attack run? Boom! That's what happens!"

"That's why she's got us for escorts, Boris, to keep that from happening. Hang in there! Akinola out."

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru*  
Sector 4842 rendezvous point

Captain Poiroux ordered the helmsman of the super freighter to drop the ship out of warp. The leviathan vessel and its two escorts glided to a relative stop near the two Border Service cutters.

"Mr. Matthews, hail the cutters if you please," said the captain.

"Aye sir." Momentarily, a split screen image of two men appeared. One was rather large with wavy brown hair and thick, bushy eyebrows. The other was dark-skinned with salt and pepper hair and somber, brown eyes. Poiroux smiled and addressed the two cutter commanders. "Greetings, gentlemen. I take it that you'll be escorting us the remainder of the way?"

Akinola, the senior captain, replied. "That's the plan, Captain Poiroux. Any problems we should know of?"

Poiroux shook his head. "No, captain. It's been an uneventful journey thus far. We're looking forward to getting in to Molari IV and off-loading the cargo, then picking up a load of dilithium ore for our return trip."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Captains, when we arrive in orbit, I'd like to invite you both for dinner over here and let me give you the grand tour."

Both Akinola and Rodenko thanked Poiroux and promised to attend, if their duties permitted. Akinola was about to turn his attention to a data PADD when Lt. Vashtee spoke. "Sir? Incoming message from the *Ardent*."

Akinola rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Very well, lieutenant. On screen."

The image shifted to the bridge of the *Ardent*. A humanoid of indeterminate ancestry sat in the center seat. He was somewhat overweight for a starship commander and his skin had a grayish mottling. Captain Ahuero smiled and spoke. "Greetings, Akinola. You weren't going to leave without saying hello, were you?"

"Captain Ahuero," Akinola said neutrally. "I trust you are well."

"We're just outstanding, Akinola! But we can't hang around chatting with the minor leaguers, got to hustle to rendezvous with the *Sovereign*."

"Well then, don't let me keep you, captain. Akinola out." He signaled for Vashtee to cut the channel and the screen returned to a view of the *Kanrin Maru*.

"Asshole," Akinola murmured to himself.

\* \* \*

As the *Kanrin Maru* formed up with the *Bluefin* and *Scamp*, the damaged container in bay 58 shifted once more. The stream of sparks from the damaged sensor relay began to land around the crack in the casing of the container. A few sparks managed to get through into the interior.

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

En route to Molari IV along with the *USS Scamp*, and the *SS Kanrin Maru*,  
Warp 6

Commander McBride hesitated as he reached out to press the annunciator outside T'Ser's quarters. Part of him knew the two of them needed a serious heart to heart talk. The other part feared messing up a good thing. But Dale Tyler McBride's mother had not raised a coward, so he took a calming breath and pressed the contact. There was a momentary pause before he heard, "Enter."

McBride stepped through the doorway into T'Ser's quarters. T'Ser was standing, wearing a silk kimono that she liked to wear off-duty.

"Dale," she said by way of greeting. She did not seem surprised or annoyed to see him. Neither did she seem overjoyed. McBride swallowed, then spoke.

"T'Ser, I think we need to talk."

She indicated the small sofa and took a seat. Dale sat next to her, on the edge, with his hands draped between his knees.

"What did you wish to discuss?" she asked, calmly.

He hesitated, not quite sure how to begin. "I just . . . well, you have seemed distant since this morning in the hallway."

T'Ser lowered her head, not meeting his gaze. "I'm sorry, Dale. But you caught me off-guard with the whole idea of - the future." She looked up, searching his face. "These past six months have been wonderful. I enjoy your company, our conversations, and . . . other things as well."

Dale smiled. "Same here."

"But Dale, I don't know if I'm ready to make any plans for the future. Things are so busy and unsettled right now, and . . ." she hesitated, her face in a slight frown. She reached up and brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "I guess I'm not sure how you really feel about me."

McBride's face registered surprise. "You don't know how I feel . . . ? My God, T'Ser - that must be obvious!"

Her eyes glistened with moisture. "Dale, you're a wonderful man and you've treated me with respect and tremendous affection. But . . . you've never *told* me how you feel about me - about us!"

Realization dawned on McBride. "T'Ser, in my family, we just didn't talk about feelings much. Hell, I guess that's carried over to me too." He reached over and gently raised her chin so he could look directly into her dark eyes. "I don't know about the future either, but I know this. I do love you - very much!"

For a moment, T'Ser simply held his gaze. Then she smiled as tears spilled gently from her eyes and down her cheeks. "That wasn't so hard now, was it?" She leaned up and kissed him gently. "And just so you know, I love you too."

Though he already knew that in his heart, hearing her say it gave him a tremendous lift. He felt tears welling up in his own eyes and he quickly wiped them with his sleeve. "So, what about the future, T'Ser?"

"Now that I know that we have one, I'm happy to take things one day at a time, if you are," she said.

He smiled and nodded. "One day at a time," he agreed.

\* \* \*

Captain Akinola, Commander Galt and Dr. Baxter sat in the wardroom, finishing their meal. Akinola and Baxter finished off a grilled chicken dish that Cookie had prepared while Galt munched on a salad.

"I understand that the freighter we're escorting is loaded down with Tri-P," said Galt, still chewing.

Akinola took a sip of coffee. "You understand correctly, Commander."

Baxter frowned, "Tri-P?" he asked, puzzled.

"Tri-phosphorous explosives, Doc," replied Akinola. "It's used in some mining operations where laser drills aren't particularly effective."

"Shoulda imported Hortas," grumbled Galt.

"Actually, they did," said Akinola, "Almost a century ago. Unfortunately, the Hortas didn't like the rock on Molari IV. Tri-P is the only thing they've found that's effective."

"Is it dangerous, then?" asked Baxter.

Galt waved a fork at the doctor. "You bet your hairless, pink ass, it is! One ounce could punch through our duranium hull like it was wet paper." He turned toward Akinola, "How much is that monstrosity of a ship carrying, anyway?"

"500 thousand tons," said Akinola, evenly.

"By the third deity's syphalitic demi-son!" Galt spluttered, "That's enough to obliterate a moon or a small planet!"

"I don't think the mining company was planning on using it all at once . . ." began Akinola.

Galt shook his head disdainfully. "Tell me this, what's that ship's hull made of and how is the Tri-P stored?"



Akinola recited from memory, "Duranium hull plating with aluminum and ceramaloy structural members. The containers are ceramaloy encased in endurium."

Gralt grunted, "Well, the containers should do the job, assuming there are no breaches and no fire."

"What would happen if there was a breach?" asked Baxter.

"Well," began Gralt. "A container breach by itself would not be a huge problem. Tri-P is pretty stable. But any exposure to flame and all bets are off." He rubbed his snout in thought, then continued. "And the fire from Tri-P is highly radioactive. Getting close enough to extinguish such a fire is difficult, if not impossible."

"Thanks for cheering me up," said Akinola, sarcastically.

Gralt either missed or ignored the irony. "No problem, captain."

Baxter looked thoughtful. "Has there ever been an accident with a ship transporting this stuff?"

Gralt and Akinola shared a look. Akinola said, "About 90 years ago, a freighter was on the same basic run we're on."

"The *Blue Star*," interjected Gralt.

"Yes, thanks Gralt, the *Blue Star*. A much smaller freighter running without escort. Anyway, she issued a distress call because of a fire on board. The *USS Bozeman* responded, but picked up an enormous energy spike and thermal blossom on sensors before they could reach the freighter. The *Blue Star* and crew were destroyed. The hulk burned for months."

Baxter set down his coffee cup. "And how much of the Tri-P were they carrying?"

Akinola shrugged, "Maybe one tenth of what the *Kamrin Maru* has in her holds."

\* \* \*

The three vessels dropped out of warp as they approached the edge of the Molari system. In cargo bay 58, the damaged container shifted again. A spark traveled through the breach in the endurium casing and passed through a crack in the ceramaloy liner, landing on a bag of Tri-P. At first, nothing appeared to happen - then a slight tendril of smoke drifted from the bag.

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru*

On final approach to orbital insertion around Molari IV  
.025c

Captain Poiroux watched the orange planet grow in size on the viewscreen with a sense of relief. Though he had carried hazardous cargoes before, this was the most he had hauled at one time. He would not fully relax until the transfer was complete and they were on-loading the processed dilithium.

"Standard orbit, Mr. Olsstru," Poiroux ordered the helmsman. "Reduce speed to ahead, slow."

"Aye, sir. Standard orbit, reducing speed to ahead slow."

As the super freighter slowed again and subjected itself to the gravitational influence of the planet, the broken cargo pod in bay 58 shifted once more. The smoldering bag of Tri-P burst into flames, the fire causing the temperature in the bay to quickly rise to almost 1000 degree celcius.

On the bridge of the *Kamrin Maru*, the crewman at the operations station frowned as two warning indicators suddenly came on. "Sir? I'm reading a sudden temperature increase in bay 56 and bay 60."

Poiroux felt a sudden trickle of fear. His mind raced with possibilities, none of them pleasant. Aloud he asked, "What about other bays? Bay 58 is in between."

The crewman rechecked his board and shook his head. "No abnormal readings from any other bay, including 58."

Captain Poiroux tapped his commbadge. "Number One, we're reading temperature increases in bays 56 and 60. Get a fire control team to check it out, just to be safe." He paused, then added, "Check out bay 58 as well."

"Acknowledged. Shraas, out."

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

In standard orbit around Molari IV

Captain Akinola was reading a PADD with the latest threat assessment for the sector, when T'Ser spoke up.

"Incoming message from the *Kanrin Maru*, sir. Captain Poiroux is standing by."

Akinola felt a tingle of concern in the back of his mind. "On screen, commander."

As soon as he saw Poiroux's face, Akinola knew something was wrong. "Captain Poiroux, what can I do for you?"

"We're reading temperature increases in two of our cargo holds. I've got fire control teams en route to investigate."

Akinola frowned, "Do you require assistance?"

"Not at this time. I'll keep you posted. *Kanrin Maru* out."

"He seems stressed," observed T'Ser.

"Damn right he's stressed," said Akinola. "Mr. Fralk, bring us alongside the *Kanrin Maru*. Ms. T'Ser, contact the *Scamp* and provide a sit-rep and our intentions. Ask them to maintain their position for the moment."

He tapped his commbadge. "Akinola to Commander McBride."

"McBride, go ahead."

"Commander, assemble all fire control and damage control teams in the hangar bay. See that both Star Stallions are at ready five status and loaded out with fire suppression torpedoes."

"Aye sir, what's the situation?"

"Not sure yet, but Captain Poiroux is reporting temperature spikes in two cargo bays."

McBride hesitated a brief moment. "Understood captain. We'll be ready in five."

"Thank you commander, Akinola out." From his vantage point, the captain could not see the look of fear on T'Ser's face.

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru*

In standard orbit around Molari IV

Shraas, the Andorian first mate, and five other crewmen, all wearing hardened thermal suits, approached the internal access ports to bays 56 - 60. Shraas eyed his hand-held scanner. "Corridor temperature is now over 100 degree celcius," he said over his helmet transmitter. He placed a probe against the hatch to bay 56. His naturally cool blood turned colder as he saw the reading. "Bridge, interior temperature of bay 56 is now in excess of 300 degrees. Shall we enter?"

"Negative," responded Poiroux. "Take a reading on the other two bays first."

As Shraas approached the second bay, his suit alarm went off. He checked the reading and was shocked to see that the corridor temperature had climbed to over 500 degrees celcius. His suit was only rated for 700 degrees. He turned to the other crewmen. "Get back to the next section, begin to seal off the fire doors!"

"What about you?" asked a Caitian crewman.

"I'll head aft toward engineering and start sealing off bulkeads that way. Go!"

The crewmen moved as quickly as they could in their hard suits. Shraas approached the hatch to bay 58 with apprehension. He moved the sensor probe toward the hatch. His eyes widened in fear as he saw the reading. He quickly activated his helmet transmitter as he began to trot aft. "Shraas to bridge!" There was genuine panic in his voice now. "Bay 58 . . . reading over 1000 degrees. . . jetison immediately. Bridge do you copy?"

On the bridge of the *Kanrin Maru*, Captain Poiroux lunged forward to the fire and damage control panel. He flipped the cover off of a protected switch, reached in and turned it hard to the right.

In bay 58, the ejection mechanism worked as it was designed. Unfortunately, the offending cargo container was no longer in the proper position to eject. Explosive bolts blew the outer hatch into space and powerful hydraulic rams shoved against the containers in the bay, with the purpose of driving the contents out and away from the ship.

Instead, one of the hydraulic rams slammed the container against the edge of the open hatch, peeling it open as one would peel the skin from an orange. The sudden compression, combined with the heat from the burning bag of Tri-P caused an explosion with the force equal to a photon torpedo.

The explosion tore through the hull of the super freighter, damaging many control systems. The dorsal corridor where Shraas and his crew occupied was instantly filled with green fire. Shraas, mercifully, never knew what hit him. His fire control team was not so fortunate as the blast wave blew the first fire hatch off its hinges, crushing two and injuring the rest. The fire quickly finished them off.

Throughout the *Kanrin Maru* klaxons sounded, lights flickered, and the entire ship shook. The powerful explosion caused the ship to skew from its course as the venting plasma acted as a giant thruster. Even as the blast effect diminished, the now open bags of Tri-P in three bays ignited with a sudden flash and began to burn ferociously.

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

500 km to port of the SS *Kanrin Maru*

"Shields! SHIELDS!" yelled Akinola as the fireball blossomed from the stricken super freighter. In a moment, the cutter was shaken violently as the massive shockwave hit them and shrapnel from the explosion sparked against their shields.

"Evasive, Mr. Fralk! Get us ahead of that ship and bring us bow-on. T'Ser, contact *Scamp*, we're going to need them here A-SAP. Get a flash message to Echo, alpha-one priority - have them dispatch all available vessels and the fire

cutter. Get ETA's when you can. And see if you can open a channel to that ship!"

He slapped his commbadge. "Commander McBride, launch the super stallions. Have them approach from the starboard, repeat, starboard side of the freighter. I want them away from that plasma fire. Stand by on transporting the fire teams until you hear from me - acknowledge!"

"McBride - acknowledged. Launching stallions, fire teams of standby in both transporter rooms."

"Good man, Akinola out." He tapped his commbadge again, "Bridge to sickbay."

"Sickbay, Baxter here."

"Doc, there's been a massive explosion on the freighter, I expect casualties - burns and radiation exposure. Get ready."

Akinola heard Baxter's sharp intake of breath, then his reply. "Understood, captain. I'll get the triage teams together."

"Thanks, Doc. Akinola out."

"Sir?" T'Ser turned from her station. "I have Captain Poiroux."

"On screen." he said, tersely.

Poiroux looked pale and his eyes were wide with fear. "Bluefin! We've experienced a massive explosion and fire. Steering controls are off-line and I've lost contact with our fire control team. We request assistance!" Behind him, multiple alarms were blaring and the bridge was chaotic as crew members tried to deal with multiple crises.

"Captain, we have fire control teams standing by. Right now, we need to start getting your passengers and crew off of your ship. We understand you've lost sterage. Can you maintain orbit?"

Poiroux turned and shouted a question to the helmsman. The reply was muffled over the din, but when Poiroux turned, Akinola could guess the news was not good. Poiroux shook his head. "The blast changed our pitch and yaw

angles. Our orbit is beginning to degrade. Without helm controls, we've got about six, maybe seven hours before we hit atmosphere."

Akinola pursed his lips. "Understood. We'll try to get tractor beams on you, maybe delay your descent until we can get helm control restored."

Poiroux exhaled a mirthless laugh. "Captain, no offense, but a 150 thousand ton cutter isn't going to have much pull on a 3 million ton super freighter. And you can forget restoring the helm. That blast took out our main control trunk. It couldn't have happened in a worse place."

Akinola breathed out hard. "Understood, Captain. However, we've got the *Scamp* arriving in a few minutes and other ships en route. Don't give up yet! Now, get those passengers ready for transport!"

Poiroux nodded. "Yes. Yes, we'll get that done right away. You'll need to use your transporters - ours are off-line."

"No problem there, captain. Just get them as far forward as you can before beam-out. The radiation from that fire is starting to affect our sensors and we don't want to lose transporter lock."

"Understood. We'll assemble the passengers in the forward observation lounge. Poiroux, out." The screen returned to the view of the wounded ship, tendrils of green fire swirled from its side. The yaw to starboard was more marked as the ship approached a 30 degree angle off its direction of travel. This concerned Akinola as he anticipated that the ship's structural integrity fields had been compromised. He tapped his commbadeg again. "Akinola to Galt."

"Galt here, I understand the *lursh* has impacted the occilator."

"Unfortunately, you heard correctly. Get up here to the bridge. I want you monitoring that ship. I don't know whether its going to burn up first or break up."

"On my way. Galt, out."

\* \* \*

Haz-Mat/Fire Cutter USS *Adair* NCC-35300  
Sector 5113

Captain Margaret Gunderson sat in the command chair on the bridge of the *USS Adair* working on an after-action report. A small orbital outpost station in the Klaamat system had suffered a small fire, causing the panicked station manager to contact the Border Service and request a fire cutter. As it turned out, the fire was suppressed by the station's automatic system before the *Adair* even arrived. The sheepish station manager had apologized profusely to Captain Gunderson, who remained diplomatically sanguine about the call. "After all," she had said, "Any station fire is potentially dangerous." She had suggested, however, that he better train the station's personnel in fire-control. Now she was left with writing the report - an activity she detested.

Gunderson was a handsome woman in her late 50's from Fargo, North Dakota on Earth. Affectionately known as "mother" by her crew (though not to her face) she commanded a rather unusual ship and unique crew. The *Adair* (also known as the "Big Red") began life as a Soyuz class border cutter in the late 23rd century. Decommissioned and stored for a quarter century, she was rebuilt and re-configured to handle hazardous material breeches, high radiation, and most importantly, fire. Her plating was strengthened and much of the interior was refitted with extra bracing and dense, radiation absorbing material. Her phaser cannons were replaced with high pressure foam cannons. She also carried a load of fire-suppression torpedos. At her recommissioning, she was named for the famous 20th century firefighter from Earth, Paul N. "Red" Adair. The *Adair* gave up a step in speed in exchange for high durability and effectiveness in extremely hostile disaster areas. In addition, her crew was trained in fire-fighting in zero-g situations and containing hazardous materials.

Gunderson was considering a synonym for "clueless" as she continued her report, when she was interrupted by the OPs officer.

"Captain - priority alpha-one message coming through from Star Station Echo." The Rigellian officer turned with obvious concern on her face. "A super freighter in orbit around Molari IV has suffered a fire and explosion." a pause, "They're carrying Tri-P."

"Oh my Lord," whispered Gunderson. She straightened, the report forgotten. "Mr. Jubartu, set a course for Molari IV. Mr. Coen, ahead Warp 8." She turned back to Lt. Ewoltun. "Dreyni, any other ships on station?"

"Yes ma'am, *Bluefin* and *Scamp*. They've begun SAR-OPs."



"Well, thank God for that," Gunderson breathed. "Call up the schematics on that freighter and wake up the XO."

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*  
Conducting SAR-OPs, in orbit around Molari IV

"Captain, The *Adair* and *Kilimanjaro* are en route." said T'Ser from the OPs station.

"Good, do you have an ETA?"

"Captain Vress said he would be on station in about 3 hours. The *Adair* is in sector 5113. It will take them at least 5 hours at warp 8."

Akinola grimaced. "By then, that ship will be hitting the atmosphere. We've got to slow down their orbit degradation."

He turned to face Galt, who was now logged in to the bridge engineering station. "Mr. Galt, if we use all of our tractor beams, and *Scamp* did the same, could we slow down their descent?"

Galt keyed in some figures on his board. He frowned as he read the display. "We might slow it for a while, but we'll have to keep the tractors at full power and use full impulse thrust. Not to mention we don't know what that blast did to their structural integrity. If we're not careful, we might begin to pull that ship apart!"

"Then we'll have to be careful. Galt, get on it. Contact the chief engineer on *Scamp* so we can coordinate this."

"Captain?"

Akinola turned back to T'Ser. "What is it commander?"

*Kanrin Maru* reports their passengers are ready to beam over. No injuries among them."

"What about crew members?"

"Captain Poiroux wants to hang on to the crew as long as possible to see if they can get any systems up and running."

Akinola nodded. "Okay, but send a reply - If the radiation levels continue to increase, transporters become ineffective. We'll have to transfer them with the stallions. When that time comes, they'll have to abandon ship."

"Aye, sir. Relaying message."

Akinola tapped his commbadge. "Akinola to Stallion 01."

On first Star Stallion, Commander McBride used his chin to activate the hard-suit's comm system. "Stallion 01, go ahead captain."

"Dale, what's the damage look like?"

"It's bad, captain. The blast took out a 200 meter section on the starboard side. The dorsal connector is severed. I can't tell about the ventral shaft but I imagine it's impassible. We'll have to try to dock with the engineering section, transporters are no good."

"Be careful commander. Each cargo pod from the point of explosion all the way back to the engineering section is loaded with Tri-P."

"Then I guess we'd better kick it in gear, skipper. Stallion 01, out."

McBride eased the controls to bring the Star Stallion about and head for the docking ring on the engineering section. Both the Marines and the Border Service used the Star Stallion extensively. They were much sturdier and larger than normal shuttle crafts, though considerably uglier. They were built tough, with heavy shielding, armor plating and spartan interiors to carry squads of Marines or, in this case, rescue crews and equipment. The Border Service stallions were equipped with tractor beams and torpedo tubes. Instead of warheads, however, these stallions carried Hell-buster torpedoes with a highly dense, expanding fire-suppressant.

The stallion rolled on its Z-axis as McBride used thrusters to line the small craft with the docking port. Momentarily, they felt a small bump and McBride's co-pilot reported, "Capture. I'm reading a good seal."

McBride called back over his shoulder, "Get in and get out as quick as possible. Try to get casualties aboard and secured first. Get anyone who's unhurt to help you. Move, people!"

The hard-suited SAR team quickly opened the hatch and scrambled through the tight air-lock and into the main engineering section. Their training and professionalism keeping their thoughts and fears at bay, for the moment.

\* \* \*

"Captain? We're ready to activate tractor beams. Deities know if we'll burn out the emitters!"

"We don't have a choice, Galt. Do it."

Bright blue graviton beams flowed from the two cutters. The *Bluefin* focusing on the front half of the ship, the *Scamp* from a position astern.

"All emitters at full power. Impulse engines at 75% . . . 80% . . . 90% . . . full power." As Galt spoke the last, the ship shuddered. "Increasing structural integrity fields to compensate." The shaking faded, although there was an occasional rumble through the hull.

"How long can we maintain this?" asked Akinola.

Galt shrugged. "Until we burn out the tractors, overload the engines, or we break in two."

"Then I trust you'll keep a close eye on things."

"Why not, I don't have anything better to do right now."

"Right now, buying time until help arrives is about the best we can do," said Akinola as he turned to stare at the conflagration on the viewscreen.

\* \* \*

"Stallion 02 in position. We're lined up to take a shot, captain," said Chief Solly Brin from the pilot's seat.

"Launch your Hell-busters chief," said Akinola over the comm link.

Two flashes erupted from the Star Stallion's "roll bar." The special "Hell-buster" torpedoes contained a fire suppressant material that was generally effective in extinguishing most normally fueled fires and even some plasma fires. However, it was untested against Tri-P based plasma fires.

The two torpedoes tracked toward the hottest part of the inferno. They were designed to burst at a set distance from the base of a fire to provide optimum coverage. However, the extreme heat generated by the Tri-P was now well over 3000 degrees celcius. The torpedoes detonated much too far from the center mass of the fire to do any good. The fire retardant simply dissipated before it reached its target.

From the cockpit of Stallion 02, Chief Brin reported back to the *Bluefin*. "No joy, captain. The torpedoes detonated prematurely and the fire agent missed the target."

"Acknowledged, chief. Return to the ship." Akinola leaned forward in his chair. "We need a better plan," he said quietly. "If that ship hits the atmosphere, it could create a chain reaction that could wipe out anything on the ground."

\* \* \*

USS *Scamp*  
Conducting SAR-Ops, Molari IV orbit

Captain Boris Rodenko stood looking over the shoulder of Lt. Commander Slevon, his chief engineer. Rodenko was not pleased with what he was being told.

"So, commander, you're saying we cannot prevent the *Kanrin Maru* from entering the atmosphere and possibly exploding?"

"I am saying that our ship and the *Bluefin* cannot by ourselves," the Vulcan engineer said, evenly. "I estimate that one or both cutters will experience tractor beam failure within two hours. The emitters are already heated beyond their design specifications."

"Then we've failed," said Rodenko, bitterly.

"Not necessarily, captain. We have slowed the freighter's rate of descent by 17.62%. That means we have gained one hour and twenty seven minutes more before she contacts the atmosphere. Both the *Kilimanjaro* and *Adair* should be on station and able to add their tractor beams before that time."

"Does Commander Gralt concur with your assessment?"

Slevon's face showed distaste. "I believe so. However, I sometimes have difficulty interpreting his rather colorful vernacular."

Rodenko suppressed a smile. "Why? What did he say?"

"He said, and I quote, 'If the rutting, Yarliq-spawned, emitters can hold out a while longer, we might still save that deity's whore of a rust bucket.'"

"Ah," said Rodenko.

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru*

Standard orbit, Molari IV, in distress and on fire  
Engineering section

Chief Petty Officer Deryx and Pharmacist's Mate Tom Sanders worked their way around the massive engineering section of the *Kanrin Maru*. So far, they had only found death and destruction. The blast effect had killed all of the engineering crew that they had found thus far. The temperature in the space was already over 500 degrees, fatal to anyone unprotected who managed to survive the blast. They also discovered that the damage to the impulse drive was too severe for repair, and had reported their findings back to McBride on Stallion 01. They were finishing their sweep and making their way back to the airlock when Sanders said, "Hold up, chief."

Deryx turned where he could see Sanders through his faceplate. Sanders indicated a small access panel leading to the Deuterium storage tanks.

"I don't think we've checked in here," said Sanders.

Deryx frowned. "Okay, but make it quick. The temperature is rising fast and the XO wants us out of here."

Sanders moved to the hatchway. The automatic opener was not functioning, so he began to turn the manual opener. At first, Sanders thought he would need Deryx's help, but finally, the hatch mechanism released and slid open. As it did, the form of a young Tellarite crewman slid out onto the deck. Sanders quickly wrapped the youngster in a thermal blanket and activated his scanner.

"Is he alive?" asked Chief Deryx.

"Barely," replied Sanders. "He suffering from severe dehydration, burns to his outer skin and scorching of his lung tissue. We've got to get him back to the ship, pronto!"

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the *Kanrin Maru*, Captain Jeroice Poiroux watched helplessly as a damage control team from the *Scamp* tried futilely to bring maneuvering thrusters on line. Finally, a Bajoran lieutenant turned to him. "I'm sorry sir, but it's no use. We can't route around all of the damage to restore any thrusters. The ship is at the mercy of the planet's gravity well. I recommend that you abandon ship."

"Lieutenant, thank you for your assistance. But I will not leave this ship until all of my crew members are accounted for. There are still five men missing."

Lt. Rallo took a step closer to the captain and spoke quietly but in earnest. "Sir, with all due respect, that's suicide. We're going to have to pull our crew off of here and back to our ships. Sensors aren't any good and the fire is too intense for any rescue efforts. To be blunt, if they haven't shown up by now, they never will."

Poiroux stared back at the young lieutenant for a long moment, before resuming his seat in the command chair. "That may be, lieutenant. But I will not leave without them."

Rallo shook her head in anger and frustration. She stalked away from Poiroux and tapped her commbadge. "Rallo to *Scamp*."

". . .denko here, go . . .head lieutenant." Rallo noticed with dismay that the communication signal was beginning to break up. A sure sign that the radiation levels were increasing. "Captain, we have a situation . . ."

\* \* \*

USS *Bluefin*  
Conductin SAR-OPs, Molari IV orbit

The *Bluefin* shook violently, then suddenly pulled hard to port. A loud rumbling sound filled the bridge. Multiple warning klaxons blared.

"Helm! Get us under control!" shouted Akinola. Fralk struggled to bring the rolling ship back as his fingers flew over the thruster controls. The violent motion quickly subsided as did the rumbling.

"What happened?" queried the captain.

"Frakking tractor emitter failed, that's what happened," replied Galt. "And when we lost it, the sudden release of tension combined with our engines running wide open caused us to veer hard over. I've compensated with the other three emitters, but it's just a matter of time until one or all of them fail. They weren't designed for this kind of abuse, you know."

"Thank you, commander, noted!" said Akinola with a degree of exasperation. "Helm, be ready in case that happens again."

"Absolutely!" said the shaken Denobulan.

"Captain?" said T'Ser. "The *Kilimanjaro* is hailing us."

"Talk about good tim . . ." Akinola began.

"Captain! Look!" shouted Fralk from the helm.

Akinola snapped his gaze to the viewscreen in astonishment, his blood turning to ice.

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

Conducting SAR-OPs, Molari IV orbit

Captain Akinola watched the viewscreen in horror as a geyser of green fire climbed amidships of the stricken super freighter. As the flames dissipated in the vacuum of space, the ship began to bend in the middle, the overstressed hull and structural members giving way under the hellish heat.

Akinola turned and yelled, "Galt!"

But the chief engineer was already moving to hit the emergency cut-off for the tractor beams. Ensign Fralk, as good as his word, also responded instantly at the helm. As the tension between the *Bluefin* and the *Kanrin Maru* was

suddenly released, the Denobulan helmsman compensated with thrusters, preventing the loss of control that had shaken them moments earlier.

Akinola took a calming breath and watched helplessly as the forward section of the freighter pitched forward from the burning aft section. Unfortunately, the forward section was not out of danger as evidenced by the tendrils of green flame that billowed from it as it began a slow tumble. He turned to T'Ser. "Do you have a channel open to *Kilimanjaro*?"

"Yes sir, Captain Vress is standing by."

"On screen."

The face of the Andorian CO of the tug ship, *Kilimanjaro* appeared, his expression serious. "Joseph, are you all alright?"

"We're okay, Vress, just a little shaken. Can you get tractors on that forward section?"

"Maneuvering into position now. Do you require any other assistance? Rescue or fire control parties?"

"No, thank you for offering, but we're about to recall all of the rescue and fire control teams. *Scamp* has a team on the bridge of that ship and we've got a team in the engineering section."

Vress frowned. "Casualties?"

"The total number is unknown at this time, but there are certain to be several. About the only good news so far is we got all of the passengers off unharmed. We know some of the crew were killed in the initial blast and that some are still missing but . . ." he spread his hands in a gesture of frustration, "we can't get to them."

"What do you propose we do now," asked Vress, deferring to Akinola, the senior captain.

"Let's evacuate the remaining survivors and try to keep this wreck from hitting the atmosphere. I suppose you've read a sit-rep and know about the Tri-P?" asked Akinola.



Vress nodded. "Yes, and I concur. It would be a disaster on a colossal scale if that thing entered the atmosphere and exploded. We calculate it has the destructive potential of three tri-cobalt bombs. Anything within a 3000 kilometer radius would be wiped out. I'm not sure even the underground installations would be safe."

Akinola looked grim as he rubbed the tense muscles in his neck. "Yeah, that's our consensus as well. Just try to get that forward section stabilized for now. The *Adair* should be on station in about an hour and we'll get Marge in on this. Maybe she's got a plan for this - I sure hope so."

"As do I. Tractors are engaged and we've stopped the tumbling, captain. We will endeavor to get the forward section to a stable orbit," said Vress.

"Good luck," said Akinola, the weariness apparent in his voice.

\* \* \*

Stallion 01

Docked to the engineering section of the *Kanrin Maru*

McBride checked the control panels of the Star Stallion, hoping that no warning lights would appear. Thankfully, the tough SAR vessel survived the blast effect of the second explosion. The engineering hull deflected most of the blast wave, but the vibration had violently shaken them. The XO could hear Chief Deryx cursing in pain. McBride figured if he could curse that well he must not be hurt too badly.

"Hang on, everyone, we're going to make a fast trip back to the ship," said McBride as he jammed the throttles forward and the stallion surged away from the burning derelict. He activated his helmet communicator. "Stallion Zero-one to *Bluefin*."

"Zero-one, this is *Bluefin*," replied T'Ser, relief apparent in her voice. "Commander are you all alright?"

McBride smiled at the question. "We're fine although Chief Deryx is complaining about stubbing his toe. Have a medical team standing by in the hangar deck. We're bringing in a survivor, a Tellarite male with burns and lung trauma. Sanders says he's critical," he paused, then continued more somberly. "T'Ser, we didn't find any other survivors."

"Acknowledged, Zero-one. Dr. Baxter is already standing by. Be careful!"

"Thanks commander, I'll see you shortly. Zero-one out."

McBride took the stallion in a sweeping arc and lined up with the landing bay at the stern of the cutter.

\* \* \*

*SS Kanrin Maru* command section

Lt. Rallo grimaced in pain and futilely attempted to rub her aching shoulder through the hard suit. The second blast had turned the bridge into the fun house from Hell. The inertial dampeners were strained to and beyond their limits as the command section began to tumble and the gravity coils failed momentarily until the backup system kicked in. As it was, the occupants of the bridge were thrown about violently before the wild ride settled down. She quickly surveyed the bridge.

Several members of the *Scamp's* rescue party were picking themselves up off of the deck. Their hard suits had protected them from serious injury. The crewmen from the freighter were not so fortunate. Two had obvious broken limbs and two others were unconscious. She moved quickly to the nearest prone body - Captain Poiroux. He was lying on his back, his limbs askew and his head at an unnatural angle. The lieutenant swallowed hard as she checked the captain with her hand scanner. As she feared, he was dead - the latest victim of this tragedy. She shook her head and took a deep breath as she stood up. "Let's load up the stallion and get back to the *Scamp*."

"What about the dead?" asked one of her team.

"No, leave them. I don't want this ship to take one more life because we stayed too long." She looked back at the still form of Jeroice Poiroux. "May the Prophets guide your journeys on the other side," she murmured in way of a prayer. Then she turned to help carry the injured to the airlock.

\* \* \*

*USS Adair*

On final approach to Molari IV, .05 c

The fire cutter *Adair* slowed as it approached the orange planet. The crew watched in silent horror as they saw the massive super freighter broken apart, whirling green tendrils of super-heated gas appearing and vanishing from the open wounds in its hull.

"Orange alert, Mr. Nakayama, all fire teams on standby. Prepare to launch stallions," ordered Captain Marge Gunderson. "Load the Hell-buster Mark II's."

"Aye, aye," replied the XO. "All fire teams report ready and standing by. Stallions ready to launch on your command. Forward tubes loaded with Mark II's. Fire cannons are manned and ready."

"Thank you, Soji. Chief Porter, open a channel to the *Bluefin*."

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

Molari IV orbit - Recovering fire control and damage control parties.

Akinola's face broke into a relieved smile as he saw the image of his long-time friend, Captain Margaret Gunderson on the viewscreen. "Marge, it's good to see you. We could sure use your expertise right now."

Gunderson's face crinkled into a warm smile and her green eyes seemed to twinkle. "Joseph, looks like you and Boris have had your hands full. Glad to see Vress arrived."

"Yeah, he got here just in the nick. Our tractors are down right now, but we hope to have them operational soon and give Boris a hand on the aft section. SAR-OPs is about completed. Unfortunately, it looks like most of the freighter crew didn't make it."

A look of sadness and regret passed over Gunderson's face. She absently brushed a lock of hair over an ear. "So the job at hand is to keep that monster from hitting the ground."

"That's the size of it, Marge. But I'm not sure even with all four of our ships using full tractors that we can tow her to a manageable orbit."

"Maybe not, Joseph. But part of the problem may be that you've only been able to pull on her," She grinned. "Maybe my ship can push! Here's what I want to do . . ."

\* \* \*

*USS Adair*

Conducting fire suppression / haz-mat disposal mission in Molari IV orbit.

Captain Gunderson noted on the tactical plotter that *Bluefin* and *Scamp* had stabilized, at least for the moment, the aft section of the wrecked freighter. The next hour was critical. Both burning sections would begin to enter the atmosphere in approximately 90 minutes, based on the current rate of orbital decay. Also, the increased levels of radiation from the plasma fire would begin to affect the two cutters while they remained in tractor beam range. It was time to implement her plan.

"Chief Porter, patch me through to the *Kilimanjaro*."

Porter worked the communications board then turned to Gunderson. "Channel open, ma'am. Captain Vress is standing by."

"On screen."

Captain Vress appeared on the viewscreen momentarily. "Captain Gunderson, we're ready for your next maneuver."

"Very well, Captain Vress. We're going to move *Adair* directly behind the command section and launch the Mark II Hellbusters. I doubt they will be any more effective than the Mark I's launched by the cutters, but we'll give it a go. We'll then open up with the fire suppression cannons as we move in and attempt to push the section out of orbit and back into space. At my signal, you will need to release your tractor beams and get your ship clear. This might not work." Gunderson left unsaid just how badly wrong this could go.

"Understood. We will disengage tractor beams and move off at your signal. Good luck to you, Margaret!"

"And to you, Vress. *Adair* out." She turned to Lt. Commander Nakayama, her XO. "Soji, have the fire cannon crews prepared to fire the suppression matrix on my command. Helm, move us in astern of the command section. Shields to maximum, stand-by to launch tubes one and two."

The old fire cutter pivoted gracefully and began to move into the raging inferno from the hull breaches in the derelict. The viewscreen dimmed automatically as the light and radiation increased. Massive hydraulic rams extended forward from the fire cutter's saucer section to make physical contact with the freighter.

"Launch torpedoes," ordered Gunderson.

The two Mark II Hellbusters streaked from the *Adair* and disappeared into the vortex of ignited plasma. At first, nothing seemed to happen, then there was a blossom of flames that expanded rapidly, then diminished. The fire was not extinguished, but it seemed less intense than before.

"Now, Mr. Gorelek, move us in. XO, activate fire cannons," ordered the captain.

The twin fire cannons located port and starboard of the ship's "wing" section began to unleash a stream of encapsulated particles, the "matrix". Unlike water or foam, which are ineffective in a vacuum, the dense particles could travel at a high rate of speed through space and remain intact until they reached the source of a fire. The heat would destabilize the particles, which in turn tended to attack and break down the source of fuel. No fuel - no fire, at least in theory. Unfortunately, there were thousands of tons of fuel, more than the fire cutter could suppress. The matrix stream did decrease the intensity of the fire as the ship approached, however, which is what Gunderson intended.

The *Adair* began to shake as it moved closer to the freighter, fighting the waves of radiation and intense heat. "Steady helm, keep us lined up for contact," said Gunderson, calmly. Gorelek, the Tellarite helmsman, expertly adjusted the pitch, roll and yaw of the ship so that the forward rams would make contact at the predetermined location. There was a rumble and gentle jolt as the fire cutter connected with the freighter.

"Radiation levels rising," intoned Nakayama. "Estimate ten minutes before shield and insulation break-down."

"Thank you XO. Helm, engage impulse engines, ahead slow, take us out of orbit."

The *Adair's* powerful impulse engines glowed a bright red as the fire cutter shoved against the immense command section of the *Kanrin Maru*. Slowly,

incrementally, as the fire cutter increased power, the derelict began to respond.

"Radiation levels approaching danger threshold. We've locked down anti-rad doors in the outer corridors," said Nakayama.

"Noted. Helm, increase thrust for orbital breakaway. XO, mind the inertial dampeners."

Like a miniature comet, the massive command section engulfed the fire cutter in a tail of swirling green gases as it began to move out of orbit and into space. The *Adair* began to pick up speed as its ion-mass pulse engines overcame the mass of the burning freighter, pressing it inexorably away from the planet.

"Helm, all stop! XO, what's our status?" Gunderson asked as the derelict continued on a course to the Molari star.

"Reading nominal hull damage, shields still firm, radiation levels falling rapidly," replied Nakayama. "Retracting forward rams and dispatching haz-mat detail to hot areas."

"Outstanding work, people. Helm, bring us about to rendezvous with the rest of our little shin-dig," said Gunderson, a small smile of pride and satisfaction on her face. "Chief, open a channel to the *Bluefin*."

\* \* \*

USS *Bluefin*

Fire suppression / Haz-mat OPs, in Molari IV orbit.

On the bridge of the *Bluefin*, Akinola and his crew watched on the viewscreen as the *Adair* muscled the burning command section out of orbit and on a trajectory toward the sun. Spontaneous applause broke forth when they saw the hulk move away from the planet and the fire cutter curve back toward them.

Akinola smiled broadly, "Okay people, settle down. We've still got work to do. The aft section has more than twice the mass of the command section, so *Adair* can't pull that trick a second time."

"Incoming message from the *Adair*, captain." announced T'Ser.

Captain Gunderson appeared on the viewscreen. "Well, that was fun," she said. "But we've still got the engineering section, most of the cargo section, and less than an hour before this thing starts burning atmosphere. Joseph, I'm open to suggestions."

He looked back at her, a serious expression on his face. "Marge, I have one, but you're probably not going to like it."

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

Conducting fire suppression / haz-mat OPs, Molari IV orbit

The main viewscreen on the bridge of the *Bluefin* was divided into three images: captains Vress, Rodenko and Gunderson. Vress had a slight frown, Rodenko looked tranquil, and Gunderson looked like she might come right through the viewscreen.

"Captain Akinola, are you frakking crazy?" Gunderson thundered in amazement.

Akinola smiled. "According to my CMO, I'm sane, just irritating. Hear me out, Marge."

Gunderson leaned back in her chair, but still looked unhappy. "So, Joseph, you're saying that blowing up the rest of the *Kanrin Maru* is a perfectly reasonable course of action?"

"Think about it," replied Akinola, "It's going to be destroyed anyway. We've removed all of the survivors, and according to my engineer, if we detonate all of the Tri-P at one time, the debris field will simply burn up in the atmosphere without endangering anyone or anything on the surface."

Akinola could just hear Captain Gunderson mutter something about crazy engineers.

Vress spoke up, "Joseph, even if we were to manage detonating all of the Tri-P at once, and I'm not sure we can, what about our ships? Won't a blast of that magnitude destroy us?"

Akinola shook his head. "I'm not proposing a suicide mission. Yes, it will be risky, but you and Marge's ship can move out of range immediately. Your

ships don't have the firepower to help anyway. Point defense phasers are useless. We'll need the Mark VI warshots on the *Bluefin* and *Scamp* to provide the yield necessary to explode all of the remaining Tri-P at once."

Gunderson had a resigned expression on her face. "Okay, Joseph, suppose you try this and manage to detonate the remaining Tri-P. Sure, I can see how that will prevent problems for the folks dirt-side. But you and Rodenko and your crews will be pulverized by the blast effect. Even at full impulse, you couldn't clear away fast enough. You will be killed and your ships destroyed."

"Not if we go to warp," replied Akinola quietly.

Gunderson came out of her chair and approached her viewscreen. "While you're still in the planet's gravity well? Dammit, Joseph, you *are* talking suicide! You'll have absolutely no navigational control - you could end up inside a star or smashed against Molari IV." She stood, hands on hips, peering intently at the screen.

"We've thought of that, Marge. Galt and Commander Slevon on the *Scamp* have been working on that very problem."

\* \* \*

T'Ser entered the wardroom and saw Commander McBride seated, his head leaned back against the bulkhead. He appeared to be asleep. "Dale?" she asked, hesitantly.

McBride's eyes flew open and his chair came forward suddenly. "I'm awake!" he said, blearily, "Just restin' my eyes."

T'Ser set her food tray down across from him and seated herself. "If you were awake, what was that awful noise you were making?" she asked with a coy smile.

The XO opened and closed his eyes quickly and rubbed his face. "I guess I'm just coming down off the adrenaline overload. When that second explosion hit, I'm afraid I went to 'brown alert' and fouled, m' hard suit. We were all pretty cranked about then. After we got back, I got cleaned up and changed and came in here to just, y'know, relax a bit. Guess I relaxed a bit too much."



T'Ser reached across the table and patted his hand. Crinkling her nose at him, she smiled and said, "Dale, about the 'brown alert' thing . . . too much information."

He looked back at her with a blank expression. "Oh. Right."

\* \* \*

Dr. Baxter set the cortical stimulator down on the tray and sighed heavily. He looked up at the now flat lines on the monitor above the bio-bed. "Time of death, 14:37," he said to the attending corpsman. "caused by respiratory failure due to extreme burning of the trachea and lungs with subsequent pulmonary collapse."

Baxter looked down at the still, lifeless form of the Tellarite crewman. *So young!* Baxter thought. He looked again at the scorched name-tag on the uniform - "Grelin," Baxter said, softly, "I'm sorry I couldn't save you."

Baxter turned from the dead youngster and pulled off the blood-streaked smock, tossing it absently into a 'cyclor bin. He went into his office and leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his thick, white hair. For a moment he just stared through the transparent aluminum wall panels back at the body of the dead Tellarite. Then, he gathered himself with a deep breath and spoke. "Computer, addendum to case log 2011, subject - Grelin. Despite nano-therapy and focused dermal regeneration protocols, the subject succumbed to his burns at 14:37 hours, stardate . . ."

\* \* \*

Akinola walked over to Galt at the engineering station and spoke quietly. "Okay, commander, I've managed to convince Captain Vress and Captain Gunderson that we can survive this. How about you convincing me one more time?"

Galt nodded and indicated a display panel. "The way Slevon and I have figured it, we will each fire four of our Mark VI torpedoes, programmed to impact the engineering section simulatiously. With the yield for all eight dialed up to maximum, that gives us a yield of 1600 isotons, more than sufficient to detonate the remaining Tri-P. As soon as we both launch our last torpedoes, both ships go to warp for 14.762 nano-seconds, that will move us out of the blast zone but should keep us out of the sun or whatever." Galt crossed his arms and sighed. "Slevon figures we have an 89.3% chance of avoiding a 'fatal

collision with a transient space-born object." Galt shook his head and looked at Akinola. "He's a damn fine engineer, if only he could just get the damn stick out of his frakking Jefferies tube and speak Standard."

Akinola suppressed a grin and nodded. "Okay, Galt. You've sold me. Let's get this done."

\* \* \*

*USS Bluefin*

Tactical operations, Molari IV orbit

As McBride and T'Ser exited the turbo-lift onto the bridge, they saw the image of Captain Rodenko of the *Scamp* on the viewscreen.

"We're ready and standing by, Joseph. We've slaved our fire control to your tactical station to coordinate the torpedoes. We're prepared for warp burst as soon as the final torpedo is launched," said Rodenko. "Good luck, captain. *Scamp* standing by." The screen returned to a view of the burning remains of the *Kanrin Maru*.

Akinola glanced back to see McBride and T'Ser approach their stations. T'Ser back to OPs, relieving Lt. Bane, and McBride sitting at tactical. "Stations, everyone!" barked Akinola. "That wreck hits the atmosphere in ten minutes. We've got one shot to prevent that, and we're going to take it. Sound red alert, Ms. T'Ser." As the lights changed to red and the klaxon sounded, he hit the inter-ship comm switch. "All hands, man your battle stations. We will attempt to destroy the remaining wreckage by detonating the remaining Tri-P. For those of you who remember your academy chemistry classes, you know this is a dangerous attempt. We will make a warp-burst jump after we fire the fourth torpedo, which should clear us from the blast zone." Akinola paused for a moment, then resumed. "Just for the record, I'm damn proud of each and everyone of you. It's a privilege to serve as your captain." He punched the inter-ship switch off, then turned to McBride. "XO, initiate torpedo launch sequence on my mark."

\* \* \*

*USS Adair*

Holding station with the *USS Kilimanjaro*, approximately 300,000 km from Molari IV

Captain Gunderson sat in her command chair, hundreds of thousands of kilometers from the *Bluefin* and *Scamp*, her fingers drumming against the chair arm in nervous frustration. Moments before, she had contacted Akinola, telling him, "If you get yourself killed, I will personally hunt you down in Hell and kick your ass!" She had said it with her typical friendly sarcasm, but her heart ached with concern for her colleagues, especially Akinola.

She thought back to their short, intense relationship of more than a decade past. She had always liked Joseph and found him to be an attractive man, but she had been surprised when he seemed to reciprocate those feelings after they shared a week of shore leave together. But both she and Akinola were married to their ships - their crews were their families, and while in another reality they might have shared more, they were what they were - starship captains. Still, the feelings she had for Akinola ran deep and the thought of his possible death chilled her.

"Maximum magnification on viewer," she ordered. The image changed from a distant view of the orange planet, Molari IV, to one of the two cutters maneuvering for a torpedo barrage against the derelict freighter.

"Don't be wrong, Joseph," she whispered.

\* \* \*

USS *Bluefin*

Tactical operation in orbit around Molari IV, under red alert

"Commander McBride, execute!" ordered Akinola.

McBride tapped the fire control contact and both cutters began launching their Mark VI torpedoes. The first volley arced wide, then curved back toward the freighter. Each subsequent pair of torpedoes arcing less until the final two launched straight and true.

"Warp jump!" ordered Akinola and Ensign Fralk engaged the warp drive, pre-programmed for the necessary nano-seconds, as the *Kanrin Maru* erupted like a new-born star.

\* \* \*

Molari IV, Dante Mining Camp 17  
Muerte Mountain Range

Dralis Turk was not the brightest employee of the Dante Mining Corporation. He had the same mindset that causes people to attempt to surf in a hurricane, ignore warning signs, and stand under a tree during an electrical storm. In this case, however, Dralis wanted to see the fireworks when the burning freighter was detonated.

All of the workers in the surface pressure domes had been ordered deep underground until the crisis was resolved. When word passed down that the Border Service was going to attempt to destroy the super freighter before it hit the atmosphere, well, that was a sight that Dralis simply could not miss.

Now he stood on a rocky outcropping, staring up into the night sky. He wore a breathing mask to protect him from the sulfur and the lack of oxygen. He carried a flask of rum, some sandwiches, and a mini-corder to record the event for posterity.

It was pretty easy to spot the burning ship as it trailed across the night sky. It looked to him much like a comet he saw once during his childhood, when he lived on Rigel IV. He took a swig of rum, savoring the liquid as it burned down his throat, then took a bite of a sandwich. He stopped chewing as he noticed a flash, then the night sky turned to day.

Dralis watched in slack-jawed amazement, ignoring the stinging in his eyes, as a new sun appeared overhead for just a moment, then, just as quickly faded away. Day receded back to night. Suddenly thousands of tiny lights began to flash through the sky, leaving quick, staccato streaks like meteorites.

Dralis jumped up and danced a drunken jig. "Whoo-hoo!" he shouted at the spectacular light show.

\* \* \*

*USS Adair*

On station, 300 thousand kilometers from Molari IV

The bridge crew watched in stunned amazement at the massive burst of light that flared then faded.

"Holy crap!" said the young navigator.

"Belay that, mister," said Gunderson, a bit too sharply. "XO, report!"

Commander Nakayama leaned over the scanner hood and made several fine adjustments. "The remains of the freighter have been completely destroyed. The remaining fragments are burning up harmlessly in the planet's atmosphere."

The bridge crew let out a few whoops while the helmsman and navigator exchanged high-fives. Gunderson let this pass, she knew that the job was done and done well. But a question remained. "What of the *Bluefin* and *Scamp*?"

The Japanese officer frowned in concentration as he worked the sensor controls. Finally, he turned to Captain Gunderson, a stricken look on his face. "I can't locate them anywhere."

\* \* \*

USS *Bluefin*

Location: currently unknown

Akinola blinked in confusion. One moment he was watching the first sets of torpedoes streaking toward the burning remains of the SS *Kamrin Maru*, now all he saw was the same orange planetary surface, but the burning freighter was gone. "Where are we?" he asked.

T'Ser bent over the sensor hood for a moment, that stood and turned toward Akinola, an eyebrow raised. "It would seem that we are still in orbit around Molari IV..."

Akinola frowned. "How could that be? If we had remained, we'd have been blown to kingdom come! Besides, where's the debris field from the freighter?"

T'Ser patiently finished answering, "Sir, as I was saying, we are in orbit around Molari IV, but we are on the opposite side of the planet from our previous position."

The rest of the bridge crew turned and stared at T'Ser as if she had grown a second head. Akinola felt a shiver in his spine. "But that would mean..."

T'Ser nodded. "That we transited through Molari IV. That would be correct."

"Whoa!" said McBride, "You're saying we went *through* the planet on this little warp jump? But we could have..."

"But we didn't," finished the captain. "A miss is as good as a mile, as the old saying goes. What about *Scamp*? Do you have a bearing on her?"

T'Ser turned back to her scanner hood and adjusted the sensitivity levels. For a moment, she said nothing and Akinola began to feel a sense of dread. Finally, she spoke.

"I have them sir! They're in the Molari asteroid belt."

"That far? What's their status?" asked Akinola with concern.

It would appear that they are intact. In fact, I'm receiving multiple hails as we speak, including from the *Scamp*."

For the first time in many hours, Akinola allowed himself to relax as he slumped back in the command chair. "Put them all on-screen commander."

\* \* \*

USS *Adair*  
Standard orbit, Molari IV  
24 hours later

Captains Akinola, Gunderson, Vress and Rodenko sat at a table in the *Adair's* lounge. Fire fighting paraphernalia from years past and from several cultures adorned the walls. Akinola was regarding a model of an early 20th century Coast Guard fire boat when he felt an elbow in his ribs.

"Joseph? You were wool-gathering. Vress asked you a question," said Gunderson.

"Sorry," said Akinola, "What were you saying, Vress?"

"I was wondering how your ship and Boris' managed to be so far apart, yet you used the same duration warp burst. I am intrigued."

Rodenko, who was already two sheets to the wind, merely shrugged and took another slug of vodka. Akinola swirled his snifter of Saurian brandy. "No way to know for sure, Vress. Galt says that it's something to do with the randomness of going to warp in a gravity well. Now we know why it's a dangerous stunt to pull."

"It damn near got you killed!" said Marge, her eyes sparking. "In astro-metric terms, you missed reappearing inside of that planet by a hair. We'd still be searching for you if that had happened."

"It would have saved the price of a burial," said Akinola, reasonably. Boris snorted with laughter.

Marge shook her head. "Both of you need your heads examined."

Vress stood, "If you will excuse me, I must return to *Kilimanjaro*. This little exercise has put us two days behind on our rendezvous with the *USS Anzio*. They lost a nacelle in an ion storm and are limping home. We need to give them a tow."

The other captains stood as well. Rodenko and Akinola shook Vress' hand warmly. Marge gave him a hug. Rodenko looked at the chronometer. "I must leave as well. Joseph, Margaret, it is good to see you again. He kissed Margaret on both cheeks but restrained himself from doing likewise for Akinola when he saw the raised eyebrow on the senior captain's face. Then Akinola broke into a wide grin and hugged the Russian, who clapped him on the back in return.

"Take care of yourself, Bear," said Akinola.

"Da! You do the same, Joseph Ivanovitch." Boris lifted the half-empty bottle of Vodka and swaggered from the lounge.

"Looks like the party's over," said Gunderson, with a grin.

"Yeah," said Akinola, "Too bad we can't get together more often."

Gunderson nodded. She suddenly stepped toward Akinola, raised up on her toes, and kissed him firmly on the lips.

Akinola was caught off guard, but quickly recovered and returned the kiss as he embraced her. Momentarily, they stepped apart.

"That was for being right and getting us through this in one piece," she said with a coy smile.

Akinola was going to respond when she suddenly hit him hard in the mid-section. The sucker punch caught him totally off-guard and he doubled over. He struggled to catch his breath.

"And *that*," she said in a low, intense voice, "is for nearly getting yourself and your crew killed and scaring me to death!"

Akinola coughed and managed to straighten without any further violence from Gunderson. He held his hands up in mock surrender. "You do know that striking a superior officer is a court-martial offense?" he said with a crooked grin.

"*Superior* officer? Dammit, Joseph, you're only six weeks senior to me." She had her arms folded in mock indignation.

"Senior is senior," he said, then feigned fear and ducked as Gunderson held up her fist to him. Then her face broke into a smile and she embraced him warmly. "Please be careful, Joseph. I don't want to be there when your luck runs out."

He held up her chin and gazed into her eyes. "I'll try, Marge. But sometimes the job gets dangerous."

She smiled back at him. "Not nearly as dangerous as you, I think. Come on, I'll walk you to the transporter room."

\* \* \*

## Epilogue

### *USS Bluefin*

Standard orbit, Molari IV

Captain Akinola sat in his ready room. Although he was bone weary from the events of the past two days, sleep would not come to him. He had left his quarters and made his way to his ready room to work on an unfinished wood carving. He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a rolled-up piece of canvas. He untied the draw-string and unrolled the bundle, revealing his set of carving knives and gouges. He eyed the ship model on which he'd been working and selected a 25 degree V-groove gouge. Methodically, he began to remove narrow strips from the basswood.



His computer chimed, signalling an in-coming message. He sighed and sat down the wood and carving tool. The day had been filled with reports and interviews with the Federation Transportation and Safety Board, The Interstellar Commerce Commission, and various and sundry representatives of the Molari governing authority and mining commission. Now that the crisis was over, everyone wanted to second guess his actions.

He considered ignoring the chime, but finally reached over and activated the viewscreen on his desk. A man he did not know with greying hair and piercing blue eyes stared at him from the screen.

"Captain Akinola?" the man asked.

"I'm Akinola," he said, guardedly. "And you are? . . ."

"Mendus Palmer, captain. I'm the CEO of FreightStar Corporation, the owner of the *Kanrin Maru*."

Akinola steeled himself for the questions, the veiled accusations or even threats of legal action as he had received earlier in the day from others. "How can I help you, Mr. Palmer?"

Palmer hesitated and looked down for a moment, as if unsure what to say. He finally looked up and Akinola was surprised to see tears in the man's eyes. Palmer's voice had a quaver of deep emotion. "I just wanted to tell you thank you. You and your crew and those other ships . . . for saving the passengers, for trying . . ." He paused for a moment to compose himself and cleared his throat, "For trying so hard to save the crew on my ship. You and your colleagues risked so much and you managed to save so many."

Akinola felt ashamed for his initial reaction to the man. "Mr. Palmer, I appreciate it, but you don't have to . . ."

Palmer held up a hand. "Please, captain, let me finish. I read the reports and know the risks you took. One case in particular - your men tried so hard to save a young Tellarite crewman."

Akinola remembered, "Yes sir, Grelin, I believe?"

Palmer nodded. His lips were trembling. "I just had to thank you for trying. You see . . . Grelin was my adopted son."

Akinola was unable to reply.

\* \* \*

Areopolis, Mars  
Red Sands Apartments, Unit 14B

Tal Ronlik was having a good day. His union rep had finally come through for him and raised holy hell with FreightStar about cutting into Ronlik's vacation and the extra hours he had pulled. His girlfriend, Drienne had gotten over her mad spell with him and last night had been, well, *spectacular!*

Now he was about to collect a nice sum of money since his team won the sector Parrises squares tournament on Mars. He sat, drinking scotch and feeling very good.

He decided to check the news on the holo-vision. The top story on the Federation News Service was about the destruction of the *SS Kanrin Maru*. He stopped suddenly with his scotch halfway to his mouth. This was the first he had heard of this.

The news anchor, a serious-looking Centauran, related the horrible tale of tragedy and destruction. "Nearly a quarter of a billion credits worth of cargo and explosives were lost in the explosion, not to mention the loss of life. Officials with the Molari IV government and the Dante Mining Corporation have hinted that the Border Service mishandled the crisis and have demanded an investigation. Strangely, the FreightStar Corporation has not issued a statement."

Ronlik shook his head and snorted. "Frakking Border Dogs probably screwed up," he said with disgust. "Too bad they didn't have someone competent handling this." He downed the rest of his drink and tuned into a holo-movie.

**END**