

Tales of the USS Bluefin

Crossroads

By The Lone Redshirt

Author's Note: The events in this story take place immediately following the events in ST: Gibraltar – "Backup."

The Liberty class ship mentioned in this story, USS Horace Greeley is named for the WW II era Liberty ship of the same name on which my father served as a young sailor in the US Navy from 1943-45.

My thanks to Samuel Redfeather for the use of characters from his "Star Trek: Gibraltar" series.

Chapter One

12 December 2376
USS *Bluefin* NCC-4458
Starbase 371, Repair Berth 5

Captain Joseph Barabbas Akinola sat at the USS *Bluefin's* wardroom table and regarded the room's new occupant with suspicion and resignation. He tried to turn his attention to the data padd before him, but his eyes kept creeping back to the bulkhead wall and the object of his distaste. A brand-new replicator was firmly ensconced in the wall. Its red stand-by light seemed to mock him.

Commander Inga Strauss, the petite blond XO, walked in and made her way to the replicator.

"Raktajino," she said.

The replicator emitted a soft hum and a steaming cup of the Klingon beverage appeared in the opening of the device. The strong but not unpleasant aroma wafted through the small wardroom. Strauss took a careful sip, closed her eyes and smiled wistfully.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said, happily. She opened her eyes and noticed Akinola regarding her with a baleful stare.

“What?” she asked.

Akinola just shook his head and sighed while forcing his gaze back to the padd. “Nothing, XO.”

She sat down across from him. “You’re still upset about the replicators, aren’t you?”

Akinola surrendered to the inevitable and put the padd back down on the table. He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Inga pressed on.

“Captain, you didn’t have a choice in the matter. Fleet Ops order 455B clearly states that all starships undergoing refit or repair are to be brought to alpha level standards, which includes modernizing environmental, recycling and replication technology.”

“Inga, don’t talk like a guard-house lawyer. It’s not becoming.”

Strauss ignored the jibe. “Captain, what do you have against replicators anyway? It’s household technology that takes up almost no space, uses little energy, and provides a variety of items for the crew. Besides, you still have Cookie – it’s not like you have to use a replicator if you don’t want to.”

“Inga, I’ve already had this conversation with Commander Nowark, who made it abundantly clear that she would not certify *Bluefin* for operations until the replicators were installed.” He sat back in his chair and remained silent for a moment. “But you’ve asked a fair question and deserve an answer.” He paused again, considering how to begin. “I guess you know that I grew up in space as a Boomer, on a freighter.”

Strauss nodded, not wishing to interrupt.

“Our ship, the *Ekū*, had been in the family for decades. My dad and my uncle were the third generation of Akinolas to crew the ship. We made the Rigel - Molari run because the pay was good, although the risks were high. Anyway, supplies were often tight since we were off the beaten path. Star Station Echo didn’t offer the amenities it does today and there were no other stations for many light years. We relied on protein resequencers for ‘food,’ if you can call

it that. Ours were old and didn't always function properly. Oh yeah, we received nourishment, but that was about it. I remember as a youngster thinking that when I grew up and commanded the *Ekku*, I'd get rid of those resequencers and bring on a cook so my crew could have real food." Akinola paused and his gaze grew distant. His mouth worked with restrained emotion. Clearing his throat, he continued.

"When I was 13 and my sister was 6, we were attacked – I suppose by Orion pirates, but that doesn't really matter now. I remember Mom waking us up and getting us into a life pod. Dad and Uncle Lemuel were carrying pulse rifles. This happened every so often, so I wasn't overly concerned. Dad was quite a pilot and had always evaded pirates before. . ."

Akinola paused again and took a sip of coffee that had grown cold. He winced at the bitter taste, and then continued. "I guess I fell back asleep, because the jolt of the lifepod being jettisoned from the ship woke me up. I don't remember a whole lot about the next days – they've faded to a blur. I do remember the next face we saw belonged to a Border Dog from the USS *Skipjack*. They did a search for the *Ekku* for a few days, but nothing was ever found, not even a debris field."

He looked back at Inga. "That's probably more than you wanted to know, commander. I didn't mean to bore you with my childhood troubles, but I always remember how I felt as a kid and my determination to provide decent, real food for my future crew, not recycled waste or matter/energy hocus-pocus. It must sound silly to you, but it's always been important to me."

Inga said nothing for several moments, not wanting to break the captain's train of thought. When it became apparent that he was finished with his narrative, she said, "Thank you for telling me this, Captain. I think, maybe, I understand you a little better now. And no, it did not sound silly to me." She reached over and squeezed his hand for emphasis.

Akinola smiled and returned the squeeze of her hand. "Thanks for listening to an old man's musings, XO." He gestured to the padd on the table. "Now, let's discuss these other system upgrades."

* * *

Starbase 371 Surface Complex
Galleria Commercial Zone
House of Java

Lt. Commander T'Ser sat at a small table of the coffee shop, watching the throngs of people walking by in the Galleria. She took in the sights and smells, which reminded her a bit of her childhood in Seattle, and trips she took with her parents shopping or to the many coffee houses of that city. As she took a sip of her Chai Latte', a voice broke through her reverie.

"Pardon me commander, may I sit here?"

T'Ser looked up and was surprised to see Lt. Sarnek, the brother of Strevel, her ex-betrothed, standing by the table with a steaming cup in his hand. She indicated the other chair. "Please, have a seat lieutenant."

T'Ser watched with guarded curiosity as Sarnek took the proffered seat. The two had what could best be described as a strained relationship, although the initial hostility exhibited by Sarnek when he came on the *Bluefin* had passed. Sarnek sat and took a sip of his beverage.

"Chlom' teek tea?" T'Ser asked, referring to a popular Vulcan blend.

Sarnek nodded. "I have found that this establishment provides a very acceptable tea, as they use actual leaves. Few replicators can do it justice."

"I see," said T'Ser.

After a few moments of awkward silence (awkward, at least, for T'Ser,) Sarnek spoke.

"Commander . . ."

"Call me T'Ser, we're off-duty."

Sarnek inclined his head. "As you wish. T'Ser, in my meditations of late, I have not found my center of calm. After some evaluation, I have determined that the source of my unrest is you."

T'Ser shot up an eyebrow. "Sarnek, I really don't want to re-open old wounds . . ."

Sarnek held up a hand. "You misunderstand, T'Ser. I have resolved the past issues between you and Strevel. I have come to the realization that neither

you nor your parents were at fault in the matter. It was illogical for my family . . . for me to react to you in such a way. For that, I ask your forgiveness.”

T’Ser hesitated for a moment before speaking. “Well . . . sure. I have no animosity toward you, your brother or any of your family, Sarnek. I’m glad you’ve been able to resolve your . . . issues.” For some reason, T’Ser felt more uneasy than if Sarnek had begun an argument.

Sarnek again inclined his head slightly. “Thank you. As I was saying, I have determined that you were the source of my unrest. As I have explored this, it has become apparent to me that you are a woman of tremendous character, courage and intelligence. While it is true that I am puzzled by your embrace of emotion, I nonetheless am intrigued with you as a Vulcan female and I would desire to pursue a deeper relationship.”

“Sarnek . . . um, just how deep of a relationship are you thinking?”

“I apologize for being imprecise. I suggest that we enter into *Talyut Kalifah*, the exploration of destinies.”

T’Ser frowned slightly. “Sarnek, forgive me, but I’m a bit weak on Vulcan cultural idioms. What exactly does “exploration of destinies” mean?”

Sarnek tilted his head in thought for a moment. “If I understand human western culture correctly, of which you are most familiar, I believe the term is ‘dating.’”

T’Ser stared at Sarnek. “You . . . want to date . . . me?!”

“I believe that is the correct analogy, yes.”

“Oh.” T’ser said. *Oh my God!* she thought, *What do I do now?*

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Starbase 371, Repair Berth 5

Commander Strauss was re-running a diagnostic routine on the weapons system, when she heard Lt. Bane mutter a mild Australian oath across the bridge at the Ops station. Intrigued, she walked over to him.

“Nigel? Anything wrong?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry Inga. I just got a bit of a surprise, that’s all.” He pointed to a display screen and scrolled it down, then highlighted a line. Inga read the display, still puzzled.

“USS *Horace Greeley*, NCC-47211, Liberty-class transport. Part of relief convoy Tango-15.” She looked at Bane. “What about it?”

“It’s my older brother Ian’s ship. He’s XO of the *Greeley*”

“Ian? The one you and your other brothers call ‘Jack?’”

Bane nodded. “I had no idea he was out here. What with the war and the aftermath, we haven’t seen each other or communicated in over two years.”

Inga smiled. “Well, since our ships will be in the same sector, maybe you two will get a chance to see each other and catch up!”

“Yeah! Maybe so,” He said with feigned enthusiasm. His face, turned from Strauss, registered a different emotion.

* * *

Akinola sat in his ready room, signing off on various last-minute reports before the ship went to departure stations. His desk terminal chirped.

“Go ahead.”

“Captain? Incoming message from the *Gibraltar*. It’s Captain Sandhurst.”

Akinola set the padd on his desk. “Put him through, please, lieutenant.”

Lieutenant Bane’s face was quickly replaced by that of the C.O. of the USS *Gibraltar*, Donald Sandhurst. Sandhurst nodded his head in greeting. “Captain Akinola, I heard through the grapevine that you and the *Bluefin* are about to ship out.”

“You heard correctly. I must say, the SCE does a fine and efficient job. My chief engineer is depressed because he can’t find fault with any of the repairs.”

Sandhurst chuckled. "As an old engineer myself, I've got to admit this is one of the best engineering outfits around. 'Course we've got a ways to go before *Gibraltar* is ready to head out."

Akinola recognized the truth of that statement. *Gibraltar* had taken a beating in its recent encounter with the Maquis - the same encounter that had damaged the *Bluefin* and laid them up for repairs to their fractured warp nacelle struts. "I'm glad to see they're making progress. Just be careful when you head out again, Sandhurst. If your ship were a cat, I'd say she's used up eight of her nine lives."

"You're not the only one to tell me that, Captain." Sandhurst paused, then went on, "Look, I just wanted to say good-bye and wish you luck. I know you're still tasked to Cardie space, so be careful out there. Also, I wanted to say thanks again for your help against the Maquis. . . That cost us both."

"Yeah, it did," agreed Akinola as the sight of burned and dying crewmen flashed before his mind's eye. "Look, Sandhurst . . . I probably came across like a hard-ass when we first met . . ."

Captain Sandhurst grinned. "Yeah, you did. And as I've had time to reflect, you were right in what you said, even if you were wrong about me. Have a safe journey, Captain Akinola."

Akinola nodded. "Thanks. And to you also, when you set sail."

The younger captain inclined his head slightly. "Sandhurst out."

Chapter Two

13 December 2376

USS Bluefin

Commander Strauss had just finished putting on her jumpsuit and was putting the finishing touches on her hair braid, when her door enunciator chimed.

“Come in,” she called out.

The door opened to reveal Lt. Commander T’Ser. “Commander, I’m sorry to drop by while you’re getting ready, but I was wondering if I could talk to you a moment.”

“Sure, T’Ser. Come on in.” Strauss indicated the chair by the desk while she herself sat cross-legged on her bed. She noticed a distressed look on T’Ser’s face. “Is something wrong?”

T’Ser seated herself and sighed. “It’s Sarnek.”

Inga frowned. “Is he giving you grief again? I thought you two had a cease-fire.”

T’Ser shook her head and laughed mirthlessly. “Hardly that.” She looked up. “Inga, he wants to be my boy friend.”

Inga was unable to conceal the surprise on her face. “You’re kidding!” She saw the look and T’Ser’s face. “No, you’re *not* kidding. Wow!” Strauss drew her legs up to her chin and wrapped her arms around them. “That’s a change! What did he say to you?”

“Well, it was pretty much to the point. He thinks I’ve got character, courage and brains . . .”

“What about looks?” teased Inga.

T’Ser rolled her eyes. “Please. Sarnek is very much old-school Vulcan. He’d drink boiling deuterium before admitting to physical attraction. Anyway, he goes on to say he wants us to enter into *Talyut Kalifah*, the exploration of destinies.”

“And that’s like boyfriend-girlfriend?”

“Well, not exactly, but close. On Vulcan, not all marriages are pre-arranged. In fact, few are anymore except between the very old, exalted families . . . like Sarnek’s. *Talyut Kalifah* is a semi-formal relationship between two Vulcans to determine if their destinies are connected. If they are, that should *logically* lead to marriage. I had to look that up, by the way. I’d never heard of it until Sarnek brought it up.”

“So . . . what did you say to him?”

“Nothing yet. He let me off the hook somewhat by telling me that an immediate answer was not required. I’ve got a week to think about it.”

“Sporting of him,” Inga said, sarcastically.

“No, no, it’s part of the ritual. Vulcans *love* ritual. Well, most native Vulcans, anyway.”

“So . . . what *are* you going to tell him?”

T’Ser held out her hands in a helpless gesture. “I can’t do this, Inga! God knows I’m not over Dale’s death. I still miss him and think about him every day! Sometimes I can smell his cologne or imagine I hear his voice in the corridor. . .” Tears welled in the lovely Vulcan’s eyes. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and took a calming breath. “Sarnek has definitely mellowed since he melded with Dr. Baxter, but he still follows the Old Ways. I’m not ready for any kind of relationship, Inga, especially with another Vulcan.”

“But? . . .” prodded Inga.

“But I don’t want to offend Sarnek either! He has really made an effort in the past couple of months to get past the baggage between our two families. He is a very capable officer and has some outstanding qualities. Maybe if things were different . . .” her voice trailed off.

Inga reached over and grasped her friend’s hand. “Tell him the truth, T’Ser. He deserves to know how you feel. I think he’ll understand.”

T’Ser smiled weakly. “I hope you’re right.”

* * *

Captain Akinola smiled as he settled into the command chair on *Bluefin's* bridge. For the first time in over a month, the old cutter and its crew would once again take to the stars.

"All stations reporting in ready at departure stations, Captain," announced T'Ser from Ops. "Starbase control has opened the outer doors and cleared us for departure at our discretion."

"Captain, all station moorings and connections have been retracted and secured. We are on internal power at this time. All airtight doors show sealed and secure. Thrusters are on stand-by, starbase control reports ready to disengage tractor beam," reported Bralus from the helm.

"Very well," replied Akinola. He touched the intra-ship comm stud on the arm of his chair. "Attention all hands, this is the Captain. I want to commend you for your hard work and diligence in getting the old girl ready to sail. Well done! Stand by for immediate departure. That is all."

Akinola turned his attention back to the bridge crew. "Commander T'Ser, notify starbase control we are ready for departure and pass my compliments to the base commander. Mr. Bralus, thrusters at station keeping. Request starbase control release tractor beam."

The view on the main screen shifted slightly as the tractor beam deactivated and Bralus acquired control of the cutter. "I have the ship," he announced.

"Thrusters, ahead slow. Take us on out, Mr. Bralus," ordered Akinola.

"Ahead slow, aye." The *Bluefin* began moving forward under its own power for the first time in weeks. It crept slowly past other, much larger starships berthed at the enormous starbase.

"Sir? We're receiving a salute via laser signals from the *Gibraltar*," announced T'Ser a hint of surprise in her voice.

Akinola chuckled. Laser signals were the modern equivalent of signal flags on old sea-faring ships. They were seldom used these days and Akinola doubted that many ship's commanders knew about them, anymore than they could read a semaphore flag or decode a Morse code transmission.

“Return the salute, Commander.”

T'Ser called up the rarely used sub-routine and entered the correct commands. Small laser ports on the bow of the cutter emitted a colorful light display in response to the salute.

“A damn fine touch, Sandhurst” said Akinola, approvingly. “Mr. Bralus, once clear of the outer doors, take us to one-half impulse until we clear the system. Ensign Vashtee, plot a course for Point Station Gamma.”

* * *

14 December 2376

USS *Bluefin*

En route to Point Station Gamma, Warp 6

Captain Akinola sat in his ready room, cutting a slice from an apple as he finished entering his daily log entry.

“We’re still six days away from Point Station Gamma at our current course and speed. The repair work at Starbase 371 was top-notch. Everything is operating smoothly, so, of course, Commander Galt has requested we not run faster than warp 6 while he runs diagnostics of the mains. It’s not often that I find Galt speechless, but he had little to say at the end of the recertification inspection. I have to admit, I feel a little sorry for him. He seems lost if he doesn’t have something over which to complain.”

He popped the slice of apple into his mouth, and was about to resume the log entry, when the terminal comm chimed softly. Frowning, Akinola said, “Computer, end recording and save log entry.” He tapped a stud at the base of the terminal. “Go ahead.”

“Sir? Ensign Mahaley here. You have an in-coming private message from Earth.”

Akinola raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. “Pipe it through, Ensign.”

The image on his viewer shifted from the Border Service insignia to the face of a pretty dark-skinned woman with shoulder-length black hair and green eyes. For a moment, time seemed to stop for Akinola.

“Hello, father.”

“Tanya?”

* * *

Dr. Castille held the dermal regenerator over Chief Deryx’s outstretched hand. The chief winced slightly as nerves began to reconnect and knit.

“Sorry,” said Castille, absently. “Tell me again how you managed to do this to yourself?”

“It was stupid, Doc. I got careless – first time in 20 years that I didn’t move my hand when locking down a cargo container. I guess I’m lucky I still have a hand.”

Castille murmured assent. “Yes, this is a pretty nasty wound. A century ago, I would be fitting you for a bionic prosthetic. But thanks to modern technology and my skill, you’ll be playing concert piano again in a couple of days.”

Deryx looked at him blankly. “But I don’t play the piano.”

Castilled sighed, “Never mind, Chief. There! That should do it!”

Deryx looked down at his hand, still with apprehension, and was relieved to see that the bloody mess he had brought in to sickbay was now healthy-looking pink and yellow Denobulan skin. “Wow! Thanks, Doc.”

Castille picked a hypo-spray from his tray and placed it against the chief’s neck. It offered a small hiss as it administered its dosage. “There you go – a broad spectrum anti-biotic with a mild analgesic. You’ll notice some tingling and tightness of the new skin and tissue for a few days, then you should be free and clear. Come see me if you notice any swelling, numbness or significant pain.”

Deryx flexed his hand gingerly, testing it. “Yeah, it does feel a little tight, but the pain is gone, bless my four wives!”

“Yeah . . . right,” said Castille. He changed the subject. “So, Chief. Do you know anything about where we’re heading?”

Deryx chuckled. “From what I hear, if the Molari Badlands is the arm-pit of the quadrant, then where we’re heading is the ass-hole!”

Castille grimaced with distaste. “Thank you for that . . . picturesque description.”

* * *

Akinola was still in a state of shock from seeing his daughter. It had been nearly 20 years since he last saw her. Since the death of his ex-wife, Akinola’s daughter, Tanya Okimbe, had rejected any overtures from him. He kept up with Tanya and her family through his younger sister, Melody, who also lived in Nairobi, United Africa.

“Tanya, this is a very pleasant surprise . . .” Akinola began, tentatively.

It was obvious that Tanya was nervous and distressed. There was a distinct tremor to her voice. “Father, I debated whether or not to contact you. My husband, Robert, and Aunt Melody convinced me that I needed to talk to you – that you had a right to know . . .”

Akinola felt a sense of disquiet come over him. “Know? What is it, Tanya? Is something wrong?”

She took a hitching breath before continuing. “Your 8 year old grandson, Thomas, has contracted a rare form of leukemia. Normally, this is an easily treatable and curable disease, but Thomas has a rare genetic anomaly that inhibits the standard treatments. His oncologist told us he is part of the .01 % of the Terran population for which the disease is terminal. We’ve sought other opinions with the same pronouncement – Thomas has about a year to live.”

For a moment, Akinola could not breathe. A sense of fear came over him that he had never known before – for a child he had never met. Finally, he spoke in a strained voice. “Have you taken him off-world? Tanya, there are physicians on other worlds, Vulcan healers . . .”

Tanya interrupted him with a nod. “Yes, we are looking into that. We’re not giving up yet. Robert has contacts on Vulcan who are lining up a visit with a Vulcan healer who specializes in genetics. We still have hope for a cure for Thomas. There is also another possibility.”

Akinola frowned, sensing that another shoe was about to drop. “Tell me,” he said.

She leaned towards the screen and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "There is a doctor in Ogbomosho that says he can treat Thomas. But there's a problem."

"What problem?"

"The medications he needs are no longer available in Federation territory, at least, not since the end of the war."

Akinola began to understand. "And where are they available?"

She lowered her gaze, as if embarrassed. "He says that the Orion Syndicate can provide what he needs."

Akinola was quiet for a long moment. "Do you realize what you are asking?" he said, softly.

Tears brimmed in Tanya's eyes. "Father, I know I don't have the right to ask anything of you, not after cutting you off for so many years. But, dammit, you left us! You abandoned Mom and me! Then Mom died and left me alone . . ."

Akinola was taken aback by the outpouring of raw emotion and fury in his daughter's rising voice. "You had Aunt Melody . . ." he began, weakly.

"I needed YOU!" she said, weeping profusely. "Now your grandson needs you, god-dammit, and you are NOT going to let him down!" Her shoulders shook, but her eyes blazed – eyes that were so like her long-dead mother.

Akinola closed his eyes for a moment. The past had returned and kicked in his door. There was no decision to make. "What is the name of the medicine he needs?" he asked, quietly.

Chapter Three

13 December 2376

USS Bluefin

En route to Point Station Gamma, Warp 6

Captain Akinola sat for a long while staring out the viewport at the elongated stars as the cutter plowed through the void. Finally, he tapped his com badge.

“Akinola to Castille.”

“Castille. Go ahead.”

“Doctor, if you’ve got a few minutes, I’d like to speak with you.”

“Certainly. Where would you like to meet?”

“I’ll come see you. Akinola, out.”

* * *

Akinola walked into sickbay and was greeted by Corpsman Sanders, who was busy restocking medical cabinets.

“Sanders, Cookie has some hot pie and fresh coffee in the crewman’s mess. Why don’t you go grab some and take a 15 minute break?”

Sanders, to his credit, did not react to the strange request but immediately complied. Dr. Castille came out of his small office, wearing a lab coat over his jumpsuit. “Captain? Come on into my office and have a seat.”

Akinola entered the cramped office and sat down on a small chair. Castille pulled out a stool and parked himself. “How can I help you?” he asked.

Akinola cleared his throat of a sudden tightness. “I need some medical advice, Doctor. Not for me . . . for a relative of mine who’s been diagnosed with leukemia.”

Castille nodded. “Which is usually an easy fix. So there must be a complication.”

“That’s correct. He has a rare, genetic anomaly that negates the effect of all standard treatments.”

“How old is your relative? How is he related to you? Where does he live?”

Akinola rubbed his face a moment before speaking. “It’s my grandson, Doctor. Thomas is eight years old. He lives with his parents on Earth – Nairobi.”

Castille was silent for a moment. “I’m very sorry, Captain. What questions do you have?”

“I know you’re a top-notch physician and surgeon, and that you went to one of the premier medical schools in the quadrant. Do you know of *any* treatment that might help him? Any doctor or medical facility on any planet you could recommend?”

Castille crossed his arms and knitted his brow. “Please understand, Captain, that I’m not an oncologist, so this is a little bit out of my area of expertise. But having said that, what I *do* know is not good news for your grandson. If he has a genetic disorder that’s inhibiting treatment protocols, the disease is progressive and often terminal. There is a small chance of spontaneous remission, but that is not a likely scenario. I am not currently aware of any particular doctor or medical center in Federation space that would be better than what he could receive on Earth. Nairobi has some excellent medical centers and physicians.”

Akinola nodded, his face downcast. “Alright. Let me ask another question. Have you heard of a drug called Fexkel-Tripan?”

Castille started. “Where did you hear about that?”

“A doctor on Earth said it might help my grandson. Do you know anything about it?” he repeated.

The doctor ran a hand over his balding head and blew out a breath. “Yes, I’ve heard of it. When I was at Johns-Hopkins they were doing computer studies and early clinical trials.”

“Could it help my grandson?”

“Maybe. Probably. I don’t know . . .” He looked directly into Akinola’s eyes. “Look, Captain . . . if you’ve heard of Fex-Trip, then you also know it’s not available. You’re seeking a cure that no longer exists!”

“That’s not what I hear.”

Castille shook his head. “It was a very difficult drug to manufacture in the first place. It requires a rare fungus that’s no longer available – the source was a planetoid near Betazed which was destroyed during the war. I remember reading about it in the *Federation Journal of Medicine*. It can’t be synthesized or replicated and even the real thing has a very short shelf life once produced. I’m sorry you were given false hope . . .”

Akinola interrupted. “There is a source outside of the Federation.”

Castille stared at the captain. “You can’t be serious! If it *were* available, I would have heard about it!”

“It’s not available through 'normal' channels, Doc. That’s all I’m going to say about that. What I do need to know is this – *If* I can get my hands on some, how long will it last? Can we get it to Earth in time to do Thomas any good? How much would I need?”

Castille stared at Akinola. “You *are* serious! Ye gods, Captain – this isn’t like a trip to the corner pharmacy or inputting a replicator code! The stuff requires very tight environmental parameters and can’t be exposed to light. If I remember correctly, it lasts about two weeks in processed form before it breaks down. And as to dosage, I have no idea! Like I said, it doesn’t exist anymore!”

“Tell you what, Doctor. I’ll worry about whether it exists and how to get some. You find out how much we need to get.”

Castille threw his hands up in the air. “Sure! Why not? While we’re at it, let’s find the Fountain of Youth and bottle some – then, we can discover the key to immortality and invite God over for coffee!”

Akinola actually chuckled. “Damn, Castille – who wrote your text book on bedside manner? Attila the Hun?”

“Actually, it was Leonard McCoy,” he grouched. “Okay, okay, *dammit!* I’ll do the research. Make sure I get your grandson’s medical records. And I’ll need a sample of your blood, too.”

“To get an idea of his genetic history?”

“No – to inflict some pain on you for being a pain in my ass! Now get out of my sickbay before I change my mind!”

* * *

Senior Chief Solly Brin, *Bluefin’s* Chief of the Boat, looked up from replacing the phase capacitor in a phaser carbine to see Captain Akinola leaning against a locker.

“Hey Skipper! What brings you to the armory this time of day? You know the card game isn’t until 2100 hours!”

Akinola smiled and shook his head. “Not tonight, Solly. I’ve got trouble brewing and I’m about to jump in with both feet.”

Chief Brin frowned and set the carbine aside to give full attention to his old friend. “What’s up?”

Akinola sighed and pulled up a photon grenade case for a seat. Suddenly, he felt every bit of his 60 years. He rubbed his calloused hands together before looking at the Red Orion. “I heard from Tanya this morning.”

Solly’s dark eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You’re kidding! What did she have to say?”

Akinola related the entire conversation to his old comrade-in-arms, including Tanya’s request to obtain the rare drug from the Orion Syndicate.

“So, you’re going after the drugs.” It was not a question.

“Yeah, I am,” Akinola said with quiet determination. “Solly, look . . . I can’t ask you this as Captain . . .”

Brin cut him off. “Stow it, Skipper. I’m in – all the way! And I don’t care how many Syndicate heads I have to rip off along the way, I’ll help you get the medicine for your grandson.”

Akinola couldn't speak. He just nodded and grasped Brin's muscular shoulder before exiting the armory.

Chapter Four

13 December 2376

USS Bluefin

En route to Point Station Gamma, warp 6

Captain Akinola seated himself at the desk of his ready room and tapped the com button on his terminal.

"Commander T'Ser, open a hailing frequency, encrypted channel, using the comm code that I'm sending to your station. Route any reply directly to this terminal, I repeat, this terminal only, understood?"

There was only a slight hesitation before T'Ser answered, "Yes sir, routed directly to your terminal, acknowledged."

"Good. Akinola out."

On the bridge T'Ser wore a puzzled frown.

"Anything wrong, T'Ser?" asked Commander Strauss.

"No ma'am, nothing's wrong. Just . . . unusual."

* * *

Akinola considered working on an in-process wood carving of a Bajoran stellar sailing vessel, but he was too distracted to make the attempt. Fortunately, he did not have long to wait for the reply he sought, as his terminal beeped less than ten minutes after he issued the order to T'Ser. He punched the com button.

"Akinola here."

A face he had not seen in ten years appeared on the screen. It was a human face, of northern European stock, that one might consider handsome save for the hardness around the eyes and mouth. It was a wary face, one that had seen trouble and heartache. It did not now appear to be a very happy face.

"Hello, Josph. I must say, I'm surprised to hear from you."

Akinola nodded slightly. "Bjorn. It's . . . good to see you again."

Bjorn Koordsen, privateer and former Border Cutter commander, snorted, a slight smile playing on his lips. "I seriously doubt that, considering our history. So you can understand that I was a bit apprehensive when I received a transmission from you after all this time."

"I'm calling in a favor."

Koordsen regarded his former friend and colleague. "Do I owe you one?"

Akinola peered intently into the screen and spoke in a tight voice, "You know damn well if I hadn't testified on your behalf at your court martial you'd be in the New Zealand penal facility or maybe even Sundancer! Not to mention I had to drag your sorry ass off of the *Thrasher* before your warp core blew!"

Koordsen regarded Akinola with cold eyes without speaking for several seconds. "Alright Akinola, what do you want?"

"I need you to take me and Chief Brin to Verex III."

Koordsen's eyes widened in surprise. "What the frak? . . . Akinola, if you want to commit suicide, why not step out of an airlock and save me the trouble?" When Akinola merely stared at him, Koordsen continued. "Why do you need to go to Verex III? For God's sake, Joseph, you're not exactly a popular man on the Orion homeworld!"

"Let's just say I need something that only the Syndicate can get."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just contact someone in the Syndicate by sub-space?"

"You remember the Elix family, don't you?" asked Akinola, ignoring the question.

"Remember them? Hell, half the boardings we made were on their raiders. And I also know the history between them and Solly. Need I remind you that while they don't like you, they *hate* him!?"

Akinola leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "Let's say that old man Elix owes me an honor debt."

"An honor debt? What did you ever do for the old bastard, besides cut into his profit margin?"

"We rescued his son from the Romulans."

Bjorn looked at Akinola with an incredulous expression, then he began to laugh. "Okay, Joseph, fine, don't tell me. Gods! - rescuing his son from the Romulans - that's pretty funny."

"So are you going to help me out or not?"

Koordsen sighed, "Okay, okay, why not? But don't expect me to bail your ass out if the Elix family doesn't welcome you with open arms. Now, where do you want to rendezvous?"

* * *

Akinola strode onto the bridge from his ready room. "Helm, come to new heading of 103 mark 55, increase speed to warp 9."

"Coming about to 103 mark 55, accelerating to warp 9," replied Bralus from the helm.

Commander Strauss stood from the command chair, puzzled. "Sir, that's taking us a long way from Point Station Gamma, and Commander Galt requested we not exceed warp 6."

"Are you questioning my orders?" Akinola asked, sharply.

Strauss was taken aback by the captain's response. "No sir, merely pointing out..."

"Then carry them out, XO!" he interrupted, turning back to his ready room.

There was an uncomfortable silence that fell over the bridge. Bralus and Vashtee kept their attention focused on their boards. T'Ser turned and raised an eyebrow. Strauss could feel her face reddening in embarrassment and anger. She hesitated only a moment before stalking toward the ready room.

* * *

Akinola had barely taken his seat when the enunciator chimed. Rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration, he called, "Come!"

The door slid open and Commander Strauss came and stood before his desk, not quite at attention. "Sir, respectfully, what the hell is going on?"

"Have a care, commander!" Akinola warned.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Denied!"

Strauss looked stricken. Akinola sighed again. "Sit down, XO . . . Please," he gestured to the chairs opposite him. Strauss looked unsure, but reluctantly sat, still maintaining a rigid posture.

Akinola stood and stared out the viewport. Strauss could see in the reflection from the transparent aluminum that the captain wore a worried expression. That, as much as what had transpired on the bridge, caused her alarm.

"Sir?" She said in a hesitant voice, all trace of anger now gone, "are you alright?"

Akinola did not turn, nor did he answer her question. Instead he posed a question of his own. "Commander . . . Inga, do you trust me?"

The question surprised her. "Well, yes sir, of course I do."

"Then I am going to have to ask you to exercise that trust right now." He turned and looked at her. "We are en route to rendezvous with a private vessel, the *Eschaton*. Chief Brin and I will transfer to that vessel and you will assume temporary command of the *Bluefin* and continue on to Point Station Gamma as originally ordered. If all goes well, we should catch up with you within two weeks."

Strauss shook her head. "Sir, I don't understand . . ."

Akinola held up his hand. "Inga, please, don't ask me any more. All I can say is that I have something important to do that falls outside the bounds of regulations. I do not want you or anyone else on this ship involved or implicated in any way if this goes wrong. If all goes well maybe I can tell you all about it."

"What about Chief Brin?" she challenged.

Akinola offered a slight smile. "Solly and I have a long history, Inga. Let's just say he's essential to the mission and leave it at that."

Strauss still wasn't happy. "Sir, we're a crew - we're in this together! If this is important, we all should be there to help!"

"I appreciate that Commander, I really do! But that's not an option this time." He walked around the desk and laid a fatherly hand on Inga's shoulder. "I'm counting on you to command this cutter, Inga. You've got to start focusing on that. T'Ser, of course, will be your exec and Deryx will cover for Chief Brin."

She stared into his eyes. "And what if this mission of yours fails?"

"Then, commander, it's been a privilege serving with you."

* * *

14 December 2376
USS *Bluefin*
on heading 103 mark 55

"Stationary contact, dead ahead, range 115 million kilometers," announced Lt. Bane.

"Helm, drop us out of warp. Ops, do you have an ID on that contact?"

Bane checked his boards. "Harbinger-class corvette, one of the retired perimeter defense ships from the Antarean system. IFF indicates the vessel is the *Eschaton*, a privately owned ship." He paused, "Sir, they are now moving in our direction at one quarter impulse."

"Very well," said Akinola. "Helm, maintain course for rendezvous with the *Eschaton*."

In a few minutes, the privateer vessel appeared on the view screen. It was predominantly black with patches of gray and red on its wedge-shaped hull. Twin warp nacelles were faired into the main hull. It shared similar design characteristics with the Defiant-class, albeit without as much firepower or speed.

"I was not aware that the Federation tolerated privateers," said Lt. Sarnek from the helm.

"It's a holdover practice for the Antareans, from before they joined the Federation, Lieutenant," responded Akinola. "A concession they sought and received was for them to continue their own, small self-defense force. They have some rather hostile neighbors, so the concession was granted. And, in addition to their small self-defense force, they also employ privateers - armed merchantmen who serve as their "reserves" and are commissioned to engage pirates, raiders or others that the Antarean government deems as hostile."

Sarnek frowned. "Is it not redundant for them to continue such a practice, with the Border Service and Starfleet able to provide for their defense?"

Akinola smiled. "Pride and paranoia are not necessarily logical, Sarnek, but the Antareans are from humanoid stock and they have a strong self-preservation instinct."

"Captain, we're being hailed," said Lt. Bane.

"Channel it to my ready room. Commander Strauss, the ship is yours," said Akinola.

Strauss moved from tactical to the command chair. She did not look happy.

Akinola switched on his desk terminal. The image of Bjorn Koordsen appeared on the screen.

"Captain Akinola, are you still determined to carry out this suicide mission?"

"Chief Brin and I can transport over at your convenience."

Koordsen snorted. "Since when did you care about my convenience? We're ready when you are. Signal me when you're ready to transport."

* * *

Akinola and Chief Brin stood in transporter room one. They both wore civilian attire. Brin carried a heavy-looking duffel bag. As they stepped on the transporter dais, the door slid open and Dr. Castille entered, carrying a small device.

"Here's what you'll need," said Castille. "This portable stasis chamber should keep the medicine stable for two weeks, assuming you don't expose it to light or extremes in temperatures."

"Thanks, Doc," said Akinola. He placed it in his backpack. He looked around the transporter room for a moment, wondering if he'd ever see the old cutter again. Then, he spoke to Chief Deryx at the transporter controls.

"Energize," he said.

The transporter room of the *Bluefin* faded and was replaced by a smaller, darker transporter room. When the transporter effect diminished, Akinola and Brin looked around. Two people were waiting on them - Bjorn Koordsen and a severe-looking woman with some Klingon blood in her ancestry, judging by the faint ridges on her forehead. Koordsen did not offer his hand to Akinola. "Welcome aboard the *Eschaton*," he said.

Chapter Five

Ship's Log, Stardate 53165.3, Commander Inga Strauss in temporary command. We have resumed our course toward Point Station Gamma following our rendezvous with the Eschaton. Captain Akinola and Chief Brin are away on a 'special mission.'

Strauss paused the log recording and frowned. She realized that there really was nothing more to say. She had no real idea what the Captain and Chief Brin were doing, nor why. Akinola had asked her to trust him - why could he not trust her?

She switched off the terminal and leaned back in the desk chair in her cabin. She pondered the situation. Akinola had said that his "mission" was outside the bounds of regulations. That probably meant that he had not received orders from Admiral Bateson or Starfleet Command. So what had happened? Where did this originate? From whom?

She tapped her combadge. "Strauss to Commander T'Ser and Lt. Bane. Please meet me in the Captain's ready room in five minutes."

* * *

15 December 2376

SS Eschaton

en route to Verex III, warp 8

Captain Akinola and Chief Brin followed Koordsen and Ma'run Collins through a tight corridor. Koordsen stopped at a hatchway and opened it.

"Here's your quarters. You'll have to share, we're a little cramped on the *Eschaton*. Drop your gear off and follow us to the bridge," said Koordsen.

Akinola and Brin complied and followed after Koordsen and Collins forward to the compact bridge of the corvette. Though small and lacking many updates from its original day of construction, it was a well-kept ship. Akinola approved of the bridge layout, which was neat and efficient. Koordsen sat in the center seat and turned to face Akinola and Brin.

"Let's get a few things clear. On this ship, I'm in command. You're rank of Captain means nothing here. If you can't handle that, we'll drop you off at the nearest planet or station and you can find your own way back to your ship. Two, you are restricted to your quarters, the galley or the bridge. All other

areas of this ship are off-limits. Three, when we arrive at Verex III, you're on your own dirt-side. When you've finished your business, contact us and we'll beam you up and take you home. At the first sign of any trouble, we're gone. Understood?"

Akinola nodded. "Understood."

Koordsen gazed at Akinola a moment before also nodding. "Good. Let me introduce you to the rest of the crew . . ."

* * *

15 December 2376
USS Bluefin
en route to Point Station Gamma, warp 6

Strauss felt odd sitting in Akinola's desk chair, but she put aside her discomfort as she addressed T'Ser and Bane.

"Do either of you have any idea what's going on with the Captain?"

T'Ser shrugged. "Not a clue. The first odd thing I noticed was when he asked me to route a communications reply directly to his terminal. He was emphatic in that regard! I don't recall him ever doing that."

Bane frowned in thought. "There was a personal message that came in from Earth a couple of days ago. I can't remember the last time he received a message from there."

"Who was it from?" queried Strauss.

"I don't know. It was an eyes-only message. All I know is that it wasn't Starfleet. It came over a private channel."

"The Captain does have family on Earth," observed Strauss.

T'Ser shook her head. "Yes, but he only talks to his sister a couple of times a year. He has a daughter on Earth, too, but . . ." her voice trailed off.

"But what?" pressed Strauss.

T'Ser looked uncomfortable. "They haven't spoken in nearly twenty years. Not since the Captain's ex-wife died."

Strauss leaned back in the chair and frowned. "Did you save the message?" she asked of Bane.

Bane's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Well, all private messages are saved automatically until the recipient deletes them."

"I want to see that message."

"Commander," Bane said cautiously, "it was an eyes-only, *personal* message. You can't just . . ."

Strauss' eyes flashed, "The hell I can't! If it can tell us what's going on with the Captain, I need to know about it!"

"But only the Captain can authorize opening private messages," protested Bane.

Strauss slammed a palm on the desk. "Right now, I *am* the Captain, mister, and I'm giving that authorization! Open that damn message!" There was an edge of steel to her voice. T'Ser looked startled. Bane's expression was tight.

"Aye, aye, Captain." There was a note of anger and hurt in his reply.

"Very well. Get on it, Lieutenant. As soon as you've retrieved that message, send it to this terminal. Dismissed."

Bane and T'Ser stood. Bane quickly left the ready room but T'Ser lingered behind.

"Do you have something to say?" asked Strauss, a note of warning in her voice.

T'Ser was unruffled. "Just this. We're on your side, Captain. But it's our job to point out problems or alternatives. Don't try to do this alone."

Strauss opened her mouth with a retort, but closed it quickly. She gave a curt nod. "Right. Thanks - I'll keep that in mind."

T'Ser lingered a moment, gazing at her with deep green eyes before nodding and exiting the room.

Strauss still held her palm on the desk. She lifted it and saw an outline of perspiration on the ancient wood. She took a shaky breath. "Get a grip, Inga!" she chided herself.

* * *

15 December 2376
S.S. *Eschaton*
entering the Verex system.

Akinola awoke from a troubled sleep and was momentarily disoriented. His face was only a few centimeters from the dark overhead of the cabin.

"Lights," he said, but at first, nothing happened. Then, a soft click and the room lights came on.

He squinted and turned in the bunk to see Solly Brin sitting in a chair, honing a large and dangerous looking knife.

"Morning, Skipper!" The big Orion said cheerfully. "Sleep well?"

Akinola rolled out of the upper bunk and landed lightly on the deck. "Yeah, I slept fine," he lied. He walked over to a small sink and splashed water on his face.

"How long have you been up?" asked Akinola.

"About two hours. I slipped down to the galley and got some coffee and grub, then came back to get my 'tools' ready." He indicated the open duffle bag, which contained several weapons of various types - energy weapons, projectile weapons, blades of diverse sizes and styles, and explosives. Being an Orion, he could see in the dark and had left the light off as a courtesy to the sleeping captain.

"Chief, we want to do business, not start a war," observed Akinola.

Brin held the knife up so that he could sight down the blade. He smiled a smile that would make a Klingon reach for his dagger and a full-grown *Seylat* run

and hide. "Now Skipper, you know full well that with the Syndicate there's often little difference."

* * *

15 December 2376
USS *Bluefin*
en route to Point Station Gamma, warp 6

The ready room enunciator chimed.

"Come in," said Strauss.

The door slid open to reveal Lt. Bane. He took a step in to allow the door to close, but did not approach any closer.

"I've retrieved the message and down-loaded it to your terminal. You'll be able to hear both sides of the conversation." His tone was stiff and formal.

Strauss nodded. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Bane gave a curt nod, then turned to leave.

"Nigel, wait!" said Strauss, quickly, She stood up behind the desk.

Bane stopped but did not immediately turn around. He lowered his head slightly.

"Please, stay a minute."

He squared his shoulders and turned around. He walked across the room and stood before the desk, his hands folded behind his back. "Yes, Captain?"

She gazed at him, dismay in her heart, duty on her mind. "We need to come to an understanding, Nigel."

"And that would be?"

"Right now, like it or not, I'm the Captain of this cutter. That means I cannot treat you differently than any other officer or crewman on this ship, regardless of my personal feelings for you. I need you to follow my orders. If you can't do that, I'll relieve you of duty, understood?"

A muscle in Bane's jaw twitched. "Yes ma'am," he said in a flat tone.

A look of sadness came over Inga's face. "Nigel, my feelings for you haven't changed - but our situation has. Right now, this ship is my number one priority. I'm responsible for everyone on it and every move we make. If you can't understand or accept that, well . . ." her voice trailed off.

Bane hesitated, his features softened. "Captain . . . you have my full support. And more . . ." He offered a small smile. "Sorry if I gave you a hard time."

For the first time in two day, Strauss smiled. Afraid to speak, she nodded, then cleared her throat. "Thank you. That means a lot to me, Nigel." She gestured around the room. "I thought I was ready for this. For command. Now, well, I'm not so sure."

"Don't sell yourself short, Captain Strauss."

She wrinkled her nose. "I wish you wouldn't call me that."

He shrugged, "Sorry, but it goes with the territory," he observed.

"Right," she said, resigned. "Come on, grab a chair and let's review this message."

* * *

15 December 2376
S.S. *Eschaton*
in standard orbit, Verex III

Akinola stood on the bridge of the *Eschaton*, a cup of steaming coffee in his hand. Captain Koordsen sat in his command chair, staring at the image of one of the most dangerous planets in the Alpha Quadrant. Hundreds of ships from dozens of worlds circled the yellow world. Koordsen turned to look up at Akinola.

"It's not too late to change your mind, you know."

Akinola took another sip of coffee and shook his head. "Bjorn, there are some things you just have to do."

A beeping sound came from the helmsman's board. The Bajoran turned to Koordsen. "We're in range of the beam-down point," he announced.

Akinola turned to Brin, who stood in a shadowy corner of the bridge. "Time to lock and load, Chief."

Brin grunted. "Frakkin' A, Skipper! I'll lay low until you give me the signal. If I don't hear from you within an hour after you beam down, well, let's just say things will get loud and messy!" He smiled his feral grin.

Akinola slapped Brin on the shoulder. "No heroics, Chief. Try to use some finesse if you can. You *do* know what finesse means, don't you chief?"

Red eyes glittering, Brin smiled revealing sharp canines. "Sure! It means I cut off their heads *before* I blow things up!"

"Riiight," said Koordsen, from his chair. "Brin, you need to beam down in five, so head to the transporter room. We'll send down your captain in another thirty minutes, closer to the Elix compound." He faced Akinola again. "What makes you think they'll let you in?"

Akinola took another sip of coffee. "Pride, over-confidence, curiosity, probably a combination of the three. I guarantee if I knock on the door, they'll want to know why?"

Koordsen shook his head. "I hope whatever gods you pray to are in a good mood."

* * *

Strauss sat back in her seat, stunned after reviewing the exchange between Akinola and his daughter. She turned to Bane.

"You know what he's doing, don't you?" she said, alarmed.

He nodded. "He's going after that medicine. He's going to the Syndicate."

"Nigel! The Syndicate wants Captain Akinola and Chief Brin dead!" Strauss exclaimed.

Bane seemed distracted. "Maybe . . ." he said, in a distant voice.

Strauss frowned at Bane. "What?"

He looked at her, uncertainty in his eyes. "I think I can get that medicine for the Captain. Maybe before he gets into it with the Syndicate."

"What? What are you talking about?"

He placed his hands on her arms and peered into her eyes. "Inga, do you trust me?"

"Oh no! Not this again!"

Chapter Six

15 December 2376

Verex III

14 Km from the Elix compound

Senior Chief Brin materialized in a secluded clearing in the midst of a light rain. He swung the Klingon assault rifle around in an arc, checking his surroundings. He was alone. Kneeling down, he rolled up his sleeve and checked the combat scanner strapped to his forearm. There were no major life signs within three kilometers of his position.

Satisfied that he was alone and safe for the moment, he re-checked his duffle bag. He pulled out the skull cap common for Orion day laborers and tugged it on his head. He wore common work clothes for the region to blend in better in case he was sighted. His knife was strapped between his shoulder blades and a projectile pistol was nestled in a holster in the small of his back. He folded the stock on the disruptor rifle and placed it back in the bag. Checking his bearings once more, he moved off at a steady trot, swallowed by the rain and the gloom of evening.

* * *

15 December 2376

USS Bluefin

en route to Point Station Gamma

Commander Strauss gave Lt. Bane a wary look. "The last person to ask me to trust him took off to parts unknown and left me in command. I'm about out of 'trust,' Nigel."

Nigel broke eye contact with Strauss and looked down. "What I'm going to tell you may change the way you feel about me, Inga."

Strauss felt her insides tighten. "I can't imagine that, Nigel. Go ahead - tell me," she prodded, gently.

He looked back up, an almost fearful expression on his face. "I know someone in the Orion Syndicate."

"Well, that's not surprising, Nigel. After all, we do have run-ins . . ."

"You don't understand," he interrupted. "I mean, I really *know* someone in the Syndicate. And I've withheld that knowledge."

Strauss felt a chill come over her. "Why would you do that?" she asked, quietly.

Bane licked his lips. A faint sheen of perspiration was gleaming on his forehead. "Because he's family," he said, flatly.

Suddenly, Inga understood. "It's your brother, isn't it? Jack is working with the Syndicate."

Bane blew out a nervous breath and nodded. "Yeah. He is. But that's not all of it."

"Go on."

"Helena de Souza, the captain of Jack's ship, the *Horace Greeley*, and several of the officers are all on the Syndicate payroll. They've been involved in smuggling for several years. Their transport missions provide them an ideal way to move contraband about within the Federation."

Aghast, Strauss was quiet for several moments. "You knew this - and never told any one?"

"Inga, he's my brother . . ." he said, weakly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to regain her composure. "Alright. Setting that aside for the moment, how does that help the situation?"

"I can contact Jack, tell him what we need and we can get it from them. Then we contact Captain Akinola before he gets in over his head."

Strauss erupted. "*Gott im Himmel!* Listen to yourself! You just want to give your brother a call and say, 'Hey! We need to get some stuff from the Syndicate, is it okay if we drop by and, oh, by the way, have you heard from Mom lately?!' I mean, wake up Nigel! That's a frakking rogue ship!"

"What if it were your brother?" he asked, plaintively.

She shook her head. "Don't change the subject. Do you understand that your silence can be construed as collusion? Nigel, you could face a court martial! Captain de Souza, your brother, the others involved are felons!"

"Don't you think I *know* that?!" he shot back. "I found out about this by sheer dumb luck. Jack begged me not to tell anyone, for Mom's sake as much as his. He promised he was going to resign his commission as soon as the stop-loss order expired."

"And you really believe that? Nigel, for God's sake, no one just *walks away* from the Syndicate! Not alive, anyway."

The truth of that statement burst through Bane's wall of denial. He sagged in his chair. "You're right," he said, quietly. "You're right . . . oh, God, I've been a fool."

Strauss looked at him, her emotions pulling her in different directions. Finally, she spoke, her voice steady and calm. "Nigel, contact your brother. Explain the circumstances; tell him that Captain Akinola authorized this but that he doesn't know that your brother is in with the Syndicate. Tell him that we can rendezvous with them. Tell him whatever you need to say to keep his trust."

Bane nodded. "I can do that." He stood to go. "Inga, I . . ."

She held up a hand. "No. Don't say anything else now, Nigel. Just . . . make the call. But understand, this - that ship, its captain, your brother - they're not getting away with this."

Chapter Seven

15 December 2376

Verex III

1.75 km from the Elix compound

Captain Akinola materialized near a small pond in the middle of a field of tall grass. A mist hovered over the water and the setting sun created long shadows. He flipped open a tri-corder, got his bearings, and turned in the direction of his goal - the Elix compound. He readjusted his shoulder pack and began to walk. He was neither armed, nor dressed as a local. He wore a black turtleneck sweater, khaki cargo pants and khaki hiking boots. In his right boot heel was a small communicator. And in the shoulder pack was a small fortune in gold-pressed latinum.

His eyes quickly adjusted to the fading sunlight and two luminous moons helped guide his way. Shortly, he found a paved road leading in the direction he was headed. He did not walk on the road, choosing instead to walk parallel to it in the relative concealment of the dark woods.

* * *

The Elix compound was surrounded by a high wall made of stone and infested with a dazzling array of sensor devices. There were only three gates through the wall, all guarded by sentries. Captain Akinola strode up to what he assumed was the main gate. A rather ugly, green Orion male, stepped forward and leveled a phaser rifle at Akinola's chest.

"Hold it! What are you doing here?" demanded the sentry.

"My name is Joseph Akinola and I'm here to conduct business with Ahmet 'sur Tranji Elix, your Grand Supreme."

The sentry frowned at this. "You are, huh? And I suppose you're expected?"

"Sooner or later," replied Akinola, cryptically.

Akinola felt the barrel of another weapon pressed against the base of his skull. He had to admire the stealth of the second sentry - he had not heard him approach, although his presence did not surprise him. Rough hands began to search him thoroughly. He refrained from grunting when the hands probed rather sensitive areas.

"No weapons on his body," announced a gravelly voice.

"What's in the bag?" queried the first sentry, raising his rifle toward Akinola's face.

"My means of doing business," Akinola said calmly. He had ditched the tri-corder several hundred meters away.

"Open it!"

Akinola pulled the bag off his shoulder and opened it. The first sentry peered in and his eyes grew wide. He looked up at Akinola, a greedy leer on his face.

"Before you follow through on that thought, consider what your Ahmet 'sur will do to you if he finds you've stolen what belongs to him," said Akinola, reasonably.

The sentry's leer turned to a scowl. He stepped back and pulled a communicator from his vest. "This is Kargun. Someone at the north gate wants to see the Ahmet 'sur. He says his name is Joseph Akinola."

Akinola could not hear the reply. The sentry apparently wore an ear receiver. There was a palpable pause and Akinola began to consider his odds in fighting the two guards, when the first one grunted in response, "Understood." He looked back at Akinola, his rifle still pointed in his general direction but at least no longer aimed at his face.

"Someone will be here in a moment to escort you inside."

* * *

15 December 2376
USS *Bluefin*
en route to Point Station Gamma, warp 6

Commander Strauss sat in the empty wardroom, a now-cold cup of Raktajino held between her hands. She was tired, bone-tired, but she could not afford to sleep now. She looked at the wall chronometer - 2300 hours. Almost five hours since Nigel first attempted to contact his brother on the USS *Horace Greeley*.

She took a calming breath to steady herself. Between her fatigue, the heavy dose of caffeine from the Klingon brew, and her emotional state, she was fighting a bad case of the jitters - not very becoming for a ship's C.O., even a temporary one.

The door to the wardroom slid open and Lt. Bane entered. He slid onto a seat opposite Strauss.

"Jack convinced his captain to rendezvous with us," he said, a note of weariness in his tone. "Tomorrow at 1800 hours, GMT."

"Where?"

"In the Rincassa system, not more than 100 light years from here. It's off the beaten path, no inhabited planets."

"A secluded spot to complete the crime," she mused. Nigel winced.

"Sorry," she said. "Will they have what we need?"

"According to Jack, yes. I gave him a story, half-true anyway, about the Captain being desperate to save his grandson and willing to do anything for that to happen."

"Do you think he believed you?"

"Mostly. I could tell he was suspicious, but I pretty much convinced him. And I poured it on thick about how he owed me for keeping quiet all of this time."

"That's true enough," Strauss said, flatly.

Bane gazed at her silently for several moments before standing. "I've got the coordinates. I figure it won't take more than seven hours at warp 6 to get there."

"Gralt will be thrilled to hear that."

He lingered a moment, as if expecting Strauss to say more. When she did not, he left the wardroom.

Strauss rubbed the bridge of her nose, unconsciously imitating one of Akinola's habits when under stress. Sighing, she stood wearily and began to make her way back to the bridge.

Chapter Eight

15 December 2376

Verex III

Elix Compound

Akinola did not have long to wait for the escort. A rather attractive Red Orion woman came through the gate and stopped to give Akinola a look of appraisal. She was dressed in an expensive looking suit and had the air of a highly paid executive assistant. The phaser in her hand lent an edge to the serious nature of Orion business.

"Captain Akinola, my name is Trejira. I must say, your arrival is a bit . . . unexpected. Usually the Ahmet 'sur does not entertain guests without an appointment."

"I would hope that the Grand Supreme would make an exception, considering that a matter of 'honor' is involved," he replied, calmly.

There was a flash of something in the woman's eyes - anger? irritation? Akinola couldn't be sure. The look quickly passed and she offered a smile without lowering the phaser.

"Of course," she said, crisply. "The Ahmet 'sur is a gracious man and has conceded to meet with you . . . briefly." She gestured with the phaser for him to proceed through the gate. Akinola had no doubt that the woman would gladly use the weapon given the slightest provocation.

He walked through the gate, toward the main house. It was an impressive structure, reminding Akinola of Mayan temples on Earth, though on a smaller scale. The stepped-pyramid was constructed of brown stone. Few windows were in evidence, probably for reasons of security. They walked through a garden area before coming to the main entrance. Two more sentries were present and gave Akinola looks that were not exactly friendly. One inserted an electronic key in a slot, and the large doors opened. Akinola walked into a massive hall, the ceiling was dozens of meters high. The walls were adorned by an eclectic assortment of artifacts collected (stolen?) from various worlds. While the intent was to impress, Akinola found it garish and distasteful. The Orion woman led the way while one of the door sentries followed Akinola closely. They walked several meters to an arched doorway. The woman put her hand on a pressure plate, and the door opened.

The room Akinola entered was much smaller than the great hall, but no less ornate. He was no art aficionado, but he was pretty sure that he saw some Vulcan, Klingon and even Terran pieces in the room. A statue of a Klingon warrior facing some winged monster with only a club was in one corner, while a painting from the American old west hung on a wall. Akinola walked over, and saw that the painter was someone named "Remington." Still, the room gave him the same sense of being gaudy and over-done - the art work there more to impress than to be appreciated.

"From your home world, I believe," came a familiar voice.

Akinola turned to face his old adversary, Lortho Elix, son of the Grand Supreme and cousin of Solly Brin. He looked much better than the last time he saw Elix, who had a rather nasty encounter with Brin that left Lortho bruised, battered and unconscious. A smile played on Akinola's lips from that memory.

Akinola's smile seemed to disquiet Elix, who frowned and took a seat in an expensive-looking chair. He was dressed in a silk robe and was holding a goblet of some liquid.

"I'd offer you some refreshment, Akinola, but seeing as how you are an unwelcome guest, you'll certainly overlook the slight."

"You know Lortho, I can find more culture in a cup of yogurt than you'll ever have in a lifetime, so skip the pleasantries. I'm not here to banter with you, I'm here to discuss business with your father."

Elix placed a hand over his heart in mock indignation. "You pain me, Captain! And I thought you had come to apologize for the shabby and, may I add, highly illegal brutal treatment I received while on your ship." A thought came to Elix. "And where is that beast, Solly? I can't imagine you coming here without your attack dog."

"You don't strike me as having much imagination, Lortho. Now - where is your father?"

As if on cue, a side door to the parlor opened and Ahmet 'sur Tranji Elix shuffled in, aided by a gold cane. To Akinola, he looked old and tired - not the dynamic and ruthless leader of this Syndicate clan that he remembered. He also wore a robe of silk over his slumped shoulders, his face wrinkled and sagging with age. He peered at Akinola with rheumy eyes.

"So. It's true then," he rasped, "the legendary Captain Akinola has come to my home with a business proposal. I would not have thought that I would live to see that day!"

Akinola inclined his head slightly, if not out of respect, at least acknowledging the old man's authority in this house. "Grand Supreme," he began, "I am here on important business for my family and to clear the matter of honor between us."

The old man stared at Akinola and began to shake. Akinola realized that the elder Elix was laughing.

"A matter of honor, you say? Really! I find that amusing . . . yes," he continued his silent laughter as he gingerly took a seat. He settled into a wingback chair and glared at Akinola. "If you are referring to the return of this *slis'pul* of a son to me . . ." The younger Elix's eyes blazed with shame and anger, but he remained silent. " . . . then, I'm afraid I don't see it that way. I lost three ships and some of my best people that day! And you expect me to honor a *kl'astaj* personal debt?!" The old man's voice reached a crescendo of anger.

Akinola was unfazed. "Yes. I do. I know enough of Orion custom to know that the circumstances surrounding your son's return are irrelevant. He was taken from you. I rescued him. You owe me. It's very simple."

The old Ahmet 'sur did not answer. His chest heaved with deep, emotional breaths for several moments. Finally, he made a gesture of tapping his right eye once and his right ear twice. "So be it! But know this - there is still a cost for doing business, even in settling a matter of honor!"

Akinola took off the backpack and dropped it on a table. It fell over and several bars of gold-pressed latinum spilled out. "I figured as much," he said.

Orions are only second to the Ferengi when it comes to the love of money. Both of the Red Orions stared, wide eyed, at the small treasure before them. Lortho glanced at Akinola, partly with suspicion, partly with admiration. "Where did you get this?"

"I've got back pay I haven't collected for over three decades. Unlike you, I don't need or desire money. So, I cashed in my credits for what you see there."

"And what is it you want in return?" the elder Elix asked.

Akinola told him.

* * *

Solly Brin checked his combat scanner and plotted the location of each sentry around the compound. He was impressed with the improved security that the Elix clan had implemented since the raid by Romulan Tal'shiar agents earlier that year. Brin shook his head at the memory of that cluster frak. The only good that came from that was the opportunity to implement a serious ass kicking of his no-good cousin, Lortho.

Solly smiled at the memory and pulled an energy bar from his bag. He chewed it silently as he peered at the sentries from the woods, waiting.

Chapter Nine

16 December 2376

USS Bluefin

en route to the Rincassa system, warp 6

Sleep evaded acting Captain Inga Strauss, so she decided to work out in the ship's compact gym - hoping the fatigue brought on by intense physical exertion would serve to counter her over-active mind.

After stretching, she worked on the balance beam. Although 12 years had passed since she last competed as a gymnast, the moves came to her easily, the rhythmic and graceful routine bringing a sense of calm she had not known in two days. She concluded with a perfect dismount. The sudden, slow applause behind her caused her to turn suddenly.

T'Ser leaned against the bulkhead. "Shouldn't you be asleep?" she asked.

Strauss grabbed a towel from a stack and wiped her face. "Shouldn't you be on the bridge?"

"Bralus has the conn. He needs the experience and it's good for his ego." T'Ser paused, crossing her arms. "We need to talk."

Strauss draped the towel over her neck. "I thought you said I needed sleep."

"This won't take long," said T'Ser. She paused and gave Strauss an appraising look. "Do you know what the hell you're doing, *Captain?*"

Strauss frowned. "That's pretty close to insubordination, don't you think?"

T'Ser dropped her arms and stood straight. She was considerably taller than Strauss. "Inga, I appreciate that you want to help the Captain. But have you really thought this through? What do you think Captain Akinola would say?"

Strauss felt her face flush. "Captain Akinola isn't here, T'Ser. So his say is not relevant at the moment."

"The hell it isn't!" snapped T'Ser. "He left orders to continue on to Point Station Gamma, not go off on your own. If he had wanted our help he'd have asked for it. Now you may be taking this ship and its crew into harm's way!"

"That's highly unlikely, Commander! The captain and first officer of the *Greeley* might be cozy with the Syndicate, but that certainly doesn't mean they'd do anything insane!"

T'Ser shook her head. "Don't be naive! If they're involved with the Orion Syndicate then normal rules don't apply. Desperate people do desperate and stupid things!"

Strauss moved forward, looking up at the taller woman. She spoke slowly and firmly. "*Commander*, I believe your duty station is on the bridge. Go, now, or I'll relieve you."

T'Ser narrowed her eyes, but did not immediately speak. She stepped back from Strauss.

"Have you considered *why* the captain of the *Horace Greeley* wants to rendezvous in the Rincassa system?"

The question threw Strauss off-balance. "What? Well, it's out-of-the way, of course. No inhabited planets or traffic."

"Rincassa is a type-E star," interrupted T'Ser, evenly.

Strauss stopped. "Type-E?"

T'Ser nodded. "Yes. Which means that we will be unable to send subspace transmissions out of that system. Our warp drive will not function, nor will our Mark 22 torpedoes. If there were to be an . . . *incident* of some sort, we would have no way to call for assistance. No one would even know where to look."

Strauss mentally chided herself. She had been so eager to set up the meet with the *Greeley* that she had not conducted even a rudimentary tactical study - something that any second-year cadet would know to do. And she had not contacted Point Station Gamma about their course change. She'd have to deal with that later.

"Thank you for bringing that to my attention, Mr. T'Ser. Please report to the bridge," Strauss said, quietly.

T'Ser maintained eye-contact for a beat longer, than turned and left without another word.

Strauss stood still for a moment, the ragged sound of her breathing echoing in her ears. She felt slightly nauseous. Strauss walked over to the bulkhead. She leaned her head against the cool, smooth wall. Her thin veneer of confidence was breaking down and she wondered, *Am I in over my head?*

* * *

16 December 2376

Verex III

Elix Compound, shortly after mid-night, local time

Tranji Elix betrayed no reaction upon hearing Akinola's request. "Why do you need this drug?" he rasped.

Akinola shook his head. "That isn't your concern. The drug is not illegal, only scarce. The source in the Federation was lost in the war. Suffice it to say, I want the Fexkel-Tripan and I want it delivered here within 12 standard hours or there's no deal and the honor debt is not satisfied."

Lortho Elix laughed derisively as he lounged in his chair, earning a sharp look from his father, who shouted a single Orion word. The younger Elix immediately stopped laughing, a scowl spreading across his features. He stood and slunk from the parlor, offering Akinola a final, hate-filled glance before disappearing through a side door.

The old Orion turned to Akinola and made a dismissive gesture. "Do you think this is some *slaj-pah* warehouse where we keep everything in stock?" His chest heaved with the effort of speaking. "I've never even heard of this drug. It may take some time to locate, especially in the quantity you need!"

Akinola smiled thinly. "You disappoint me, Ahmet 'sur. I suppose the stories I've heard of your legendary resourcefulness were just tales." He stood. "If you can't help, there are other families . . ."

The old man was nothing if not proud. His pride trumped caution. "*Klaj-mosq! Trisla jhamet tris noolak!*" Tranji Elix thundered in his native dialect, his mottled red skin turning a deep burgundy. "I will not have this rotting carcass of an honor debt between you and me another day! You will have the accursed drugs." He shuffled over to Akinola, wheezing with exertion and

anger. He pointed a gnarled, trembling finger at the captain. "But know this! After this day you will no longer enjoy the protection of this debt. And on the day we meet again, I will see you die."

Akinola returned the hateful stare of the Elix clan leader with a baleful look of his own. "We all have to die sometime."

* * *

16 December 2376
USS *Bluefin*
approaching Rincassa system

"Take us out of warp, Mr. Sarnek," ordered Strauss.

The Vulcan helmsman complied and the cutter dropped into normal space, a greenish-orange sun prominent on the view screen.

"Scan for other vessels," ordered Strauss. Her palms were damp, her mouth dry.

Lt. Bane adjusted the ship's powerful sensors. "Difficult, Captain. That star is pouring out very heavy background radiation. Attempting to compensate." He continued to fine tune his instruments. Captain Strauss fought the urge to drum her fingers. How could they rendezvous with the *Horace Greeley* if they couldn't find her?

Lt. Commander T'Ser, sitting at tactical, turned and raised a quizzical eyebrow. She remained silent, but her look spoke volumes to Strauss. Strauss shook her head slightly. This wasn't the time for an argument.

Finally, Bane uttered a soft oath of triumph. "Got it! Bearing 224 mark 12, range 122 million kilometers."

"On screen," ordered Strauss, "Maximum magnification."

The view screen wavered, distorted lines of interference traced across the screen. Finally a ship appeared, small and distant. It had the familiar silhouette of a Miranda-class starship, without the roll bar - a Liberty-class variant.

"I can't get an ident code reading at this range," said Bane.

"It's got to be the *Greeley*," said Strauss with more confidence than she felt. "Can we hail them?"

Bane shook his head. "No ma'am. The stellar radiation cuts our communication range way down. We'll have to be within a hundred thousand kilometers to contact them. And it'll be a spot of trouble even then!"

A tickle of apprehension played at the back of Inga's mind. She forced herself to focus on the task at hand. "Helm, take us into the system to rendezvous with the *Greeley*. Full impulse."

The *Bluefin* thundered silently ahead. Strauss focussed her attention on the screen, ignoring the gaze of Lt. Commander T'Ser.

Chapter Ten

16 December 2376

USS Horace Greeley

Holding station in the Rincassa system

Lt. Hraalas flicked his tail in agitation. The Caitian operations officer of the *Horace Greeley* knew something was rotten with the captain and several of the officers, but he had no evidence to back that suspicion. Still, here they were at another clandestine rendezvous point in a remote star system. A muted growl escaped from his throat.

"What was that, lieutenant?" asked Captain Helena deSouza, a short, stocky woman with dark hair and eyes.

"I am rreading a faint sensorr contact, approaching from our starboard stern," said Hraalas.

"Range and speed?" queried Commander Ian "Jack" Bane, the first officer.

Hraalas twitched his whiskers in concentration. "Difficult to esablish with the interference. They arre on an intercept course at point seven fourr c."

"It would seem this Captain Akinola is prompt, wouldn't you agree Number One?" commented deSouza.

"Yes," agreed Bane. His calm voice belied the internal turmoil he felt. He had not revealed to deSouza that his youger brother, Nigel, knew of their Syndicate connection. "Lieutenant, try boosting the alpha-gain on the sensors to clean up the return."

The Caitian Ops officer complied and studied his boards again. Momentarily he purred in satisfaction. "Ident confirmed, sirr. Alabcore-class cutter. It's the *USS Bluefin*. Estimate one hour until rendezvous.

"Very good, Mr. Hraalas," said Captain deSouza. Begin hailing attempts in half an hour. Commander Bane, please join me in the ready room."

* * *

The ready room on the *Greeley* was an after-thought, tacked on during an upgrade to the bridge module some twenty years earlier. Captain deSouza eased herself into a high-back desk chair and indicated that Commander Bane should also take a seat. She tapped a button on her terminal, activating a short-range field that would scramble any eaves-dropping devices. Her features were hard as she regarded Bane.

"Jack, it seems awfully convenient that your brother contacted you about getting these drugs. Are you sure he knows nothing about our little 'operation?'"

Bane remained outwardly cool, though his stomach churned. "Relax, Helena. As far as Nigel is concerned, we simply have a lot of contact with trading ships from all over the quadrant," he lied. "And I made sure he understood that payment was required - to reimburse our supplier, of course."

deSouza eyed Bane much as a cat would a small rodent. "Of course." She leaned forward, eyes narrowing, "But remember this, Jack. I have no intention of getting caught. The Syndicate would be none too happy about that. If it comes down to it, I won't hesitate for an *accident* to occur to any of those border dogs that gets nosey, your brother included - understood?"

Bane eyed the captain coldly. "You don't have to remind me, Helena - I know damned well what the Orions would do to us!"

deSouza leaned back in her chair, a smile on her lips. "Well, then. I'm glad we had this little talk. Get back on the bridge and let me know when the *Bluefin* arrives."

* * *

16 December 2376
Verex III
Elix family compound

Captain Akinola had been escorted to a "waiting" area - basically a nicely appointed room with expensive furnishings and a locked door. He imagined that Tranji Elix was seeking some loophole whereby he could ignore the honor debt and simply kill Akinola outright. Akinola had done his homework and knew that was unlikely - an honor debt was a serious matter and Tranji would ultimately follow custom, regardless of his personal feelings.

Lortho, on the other hand, was the wild-card. Akinola was under no illusions that the younger Elix was bound by any code of honor. Once the transaction was completed, Lortho would make an attempt against Akinola, that was certain. The question in Akinola's mind was . . . When? Probably not while he was still in the compound. That would incur the old man's wrath, and Lortho didn't impress him with having the stones for that. No, more likely after he left the compound or perhaps when he was back on the *Eschaton*. Either way, Akinola was ready - he hoped.

The sound of an electronic lock opening broke Akinola's train of thought. Tranji Elix and the Orion woman he met earlier entered the room. The woman carried a dark metal case. She placed it on the table and opened it. Inside were thirty vials of an amber liquid.

"I assume you have a stasis chamber for these?" the woman asked. "They will degrade rapidly otherwise."

Akinola nodded. "Yes, I have what I need." He had no need to check the medication. Although notorious for their cruelty and violence, the Syndicate could be trusted to keep a bargain. It was the closest thing they had to religious dogma - never lie about a business deal. Violating that rule was one of the few things that could set off a war between Syndicate clans.

"Is honor satisfied?" asked Tranji Elix, in a reedy voice.

Akinola took the case and put it in his backpack. "It is."

"Then my obligation to you is ended, as is my hospitality. Leave. Now." The old man glared at Akinola and he breathed heavily from exertion.

Akinola shouldered the bag. "Suits me." He looked at the Orion woman. "How about showing me the exit?" As they turned toward the door, Akinola twisted his right boot heel, sending a micro-burst transmission from a hidden communicator.

* * *

In the dark woods outside the Elix compound, Solly Brin heard a series of beeps in his earpiece. He shed off the day laborers clothes, leaving him in a sensor resistant black uni-suit. He pulled the hood up and over his face. Now, even a direct sensor sweep would register his presence only as a small, warm-blooded creature common to these woods. He left his weapons cache,

taking only the knife with the composite blade, and slipped out of the covering foliage into the open ground surrounding the compound wall. He could feel the fire in his blood flare as he easily slipped into combat mode.

* * *

16 December 2376
USS *Bluefin*
Rincassa system

"Captain? I'm receiving a hail from the USS *Horace Greeley*," announced Lt. Bane.

"On screen," said Strauss, hoping her voice did not betray her nervousness.

The main viewscreen shimmered and a distorted view of another starship's bridge appeared. Bane worked his panel until the image stabilized. A dark haired woman in her late fifties sat in the center seat.

"*Bluefin*, this is Captain Helena deSouza of the *Horace Greeley*. Welcome to the Rincassa system!" Her voice was firm and friendly.

"Captain deSouza, I'm Inga Strauss in temporary command of the *Bluefin*."

Even through the interference, Strauss detected a subtle change in deSouza's demeanour.

"I was under the impression that Captain Joseph Akinola wished to rendezvous with us for emergency medical supplies." said deSouza. Her tone was still casual, but the friendliness evaporated.

"That's correct," said Strauss. "However, the emergency situation with the Captain's family required his presence on Earth. He asked that Lt. Bane and I pick up the medical supplies in his absence." Strauss was both surprised and dismayed by the ease with which the lies flowed from her lips. It went against her training and her character to lie to a fellow officer. She reminded herself that this "officer" was likely on the payroll of the Orion Syndicate.

deSouza seemed to consider this for a moment before replying. "Very well. Since the transporter does not work reliably in this system, I suggest you come by shuttle. Notify us when you're ready. deSouza, out."

The screen reverted to the starfield and a view of the *Horace Greeley*.

"That went well," remarked T'Ser, a note of sarcasm in her voice.

"Well enough," replied Strauss, not taking the bait. "Lt. Bane, you and I will take a shuttle over to the Greeley and pick up the medical supplies." Bane rose and moved to join Strauss in the turbo-lift.

T'Ser rose quickly from her station at tactical. "Mr. Sarnek, you have the conn," she announced and quickly joined Bane and Strauss in the lift. As the doors slid to, Strauss rounded on the Vulcan woman.

"T'Ser, what do you think you're doing?" she hissed.

"My job! Allow me to remind you that, as Captain, you have no business going on an away mission."

"This is hardly an away mission, Commander! Lt. Bane and I are going to complete this transaction and get the medicine. After that, we'll be on our way."

T'Ser shook her head. "You don't get it, do you? This isn't just a run of the mill supply run. If, as Lt. Bane believes, that captain is involved with the Syndicate, she is dangerous! We are at a tactical disadvantage - cut off from communications outside the system and unable to use non-lethal defensive measures. If Captain deSouza has a mind to, and figures out what you know, she could blow us away and we might never be found!"

"Then, Commander, I expect you to do whatever is necessary to defend this ship," Strauss said in a calm voice. "I made the call to do this and I'm going to see it through. You are to consider the Lieutenant and me as expendable. If you don't hear from us within fifteen minutes of arriving on that ship, you are to raise shields, arm weapons and withdraw from this system. If they fire on you, defend yourselves."

T'Ser was surprised. She expected an argument, but Strauss threw her off-guard with her quiet response and firm resolve. Bane looked uncomfortable, but remained quiet. Finally, T'Ser sighed. "Yes ma'am. What's your safe word?"

Strauss considered a word to indicate a problem. "How about 'Oh shit!?'"

That broke the tension and T'Ser began to laugh. "Perhaps something a bit more subtle?" she suggested.

Strauss smiled. "Let's go with, 'lovely.'"

T'Ser raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Fine. It's your ass."

* * *

Strauss and Bane exited the hangar deck of the *Bluefin* in the type-15 shuttle, *Darter*. Bane banked the small shuttle to line up with the port bay of the *Greeley*.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry," said Bane, quietly.

"Sorry for what?" asked Strauss, puzzled.

"This - Putting you in this situation, my brother's involvement with the Syndicate. I should have kept my mouth shut."

Strauss reached over and grabbed Bane's arm. "Nigel, we can't choose our families. I don't blame you for wanting to protect your brother. I suppose, if I were faced with the same circumstances, I'd try to protect my brother - even though he was a whiney brat as a child!"

This elicited a small smile from Bane.

Strauss continued, "As to our present situation - that was my choice. I could have said no."

Bane turned to look at her. "So, why did you go ahead with this idea?"

"It seemed like the right thing to do," she said simply as the *Darter* passed through the atmospheric shields of the *Greeley's* hangar bay.

* * *

On the bridge of the *Bluefin*, Lt. Commander T'Ser sat in the command chair, glaring at the Liberty-class ship hanging in space. She turned to Ensign Morgan, who was manning the tactical station.

"Ensign, I want you standing by with shields. If that other ship raises their shields, you raise ours immediately, understood?"

Morgan appeared startled by the order. He glanced at the other Federation starship then back at T'Ser. "Ma'am?"

"You heard me, mister. Now, mind your station. Ensign Vashtee, carefully monitor communications. If you get even a tiny signal from the Captain, I want to know it."

"Yes ma'am," replied the young Indian officer.

"Just get this done and get out of there, Inga," T'Ser whispered to herself.

* * *

16 December 2376
USS Horace Greeley
Rincassa system

Captain deSouza watched the incoming shuttle on the monitor in her ready room. She opened a desk drawer and removed a small, type-1 "diplomatic" phaser, which she placed in a small forearm holster on her left arm. deSouza pulled her sleeve down over the phaser, stopped to check her hair in a mirror, then exited the ready room for the hangar bay.

Chapter Eleven

16 December 2376

Verex III

Elix family compound

Captain Akinola walked behind Tranji's assistant, Trejira, flanked by two burly Orion guards. They rounded a corner and Trejira stopped abruptly, their path blocked by Lortho Elix and two other men. Lortho had a rather nasty smile on his face.

"Lortho, let us by. Your father . . ." began Trejira.

"My father," interrupted Lortho, "is a sick old man and a fool. He may feel bound by ancient tradition, but I'm not! Now run along and have a nice screw with father. I doubt he'll be around to enjoy you much longer."

Trejira's face darkened. "Lortho," she began, slowly, "don't do this!"

Lortho leveled a phaser at the Orion woman. "Or what? You'll tell father?" He laughed and gestured to the other Orion males surrounding them. "These men know who the new *Ahmet 'sur* is! The old man's life is fading and so is his influence. If you're smart, you'll keep that in mind." He stepped forward and grabbed the woman by the hair. "I'd hate to have to sell you off at auction, but you *would* fetch a nice price!

Trejira's face showed the rage and hatred she felt, but she backed down. She turned briefly to Akinola. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about this. I promise you, Tranji doesn't know."

Akinola looked at the woman. "You can tell him that I consider us even." He turned back to Lortho. "Alright, let's get this done."

* * *

16 December 2376

Star Station Echo

Office of Admiral Morgan Bateson

Admiral Bateson was enjoying an afternoon cup of coffee and looking forward to dinner with Captain Rodenko of the USS *Scamp* later that evening. He had

finished most of his "paper work" for the day and was completing log entries when his desk terminal chimed softly. The image of his Edosian aide, Lt. Relden-qi, appeared on the screen.

"Admiral, you have an in-coming message from Commander Roberts of Point Station Gamma."

Bateson frowned slightly. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Put it through."

The image shifted to that of a human male in a Starfleet uniform. Commander Alan Roberts had closely cropped, gray hair and a square face. His heavily lidded eyes gave him a weary expression.

"Admiral Bateson? Commander Alan Roberts, manager of Point Station Gamma."

"Yes, Commander. How can I help you?"

"Well, sir. One of your cutters, the *Bluefin*, is overdue. She was scheduled to arrive here yesterday. We've tried contacting her with no success. I was wondering if you'd heard from them?"

Bateson's brow furrowed. "No commander, we haven't. But rest assured we'll get on it immediately! Captain Akinola is one of our most experienced commanders - I imagine they're just having some technical problems. I'll get back with you as soon as I find out something."

"Thank you, admiral. I hope you're right. Roberts out."

The screen returned to the image of the Border Service seal. Bateson rubbed his jaw, various scenarios running through his mind - most of them not good. He leaned forward and tapped the comm button. Relden-qi's face appeared. "Yes, admiral?"

"Relden, I want you to personally go to station communications and attempt to contact the *Bluefin*. They haven't shown up at Point Station Gamma and they're not responding to hails from that end. Before you do that, give me a run-down on all of our assets in Cardie territory."

The Edosian recognized the urgency in Bateson's voice. "Right away, Admiral!"

Bateson leaned back in his chair - his coffee now forgotten. *Joseph, what the hell have you gotten into?*

* * *

16 December 2376
Verex III
Elix family compound

Senior Chief Solly Brin moved cautiously into the open area between the woods and the high wall surrounding the compound. He kept low while moving in an erratic pattern. Stopping and starting frequently. He hoped that whoever monitored the sensors would mistake him for a small animal.

* * *

"Kargun! I'm picking up movement in zone three."

The Orion sentry moved inside the guard shack and looked over the shoulder of the sensor operator. After a moment, he grunted in disgust and cuffed the youngster on the ear.

"Don't you know how to read that thing? Look at the heat signature and the movement. It's a grevoolt, hunting for grubs." Kargun reached onto his belt and unholstered his phaser. He pushed it roughly into the younger Orion's hand. "Go on and check it out. You could stand the target practice. If you bring back its pelt, I'll buy you a *tranya!*

Embarrassed and angry, but too intimidated to do otherwise; the young Orion took the phaser and slouched off into the darkness.

* * *

Lortho and two of his sentries herded Akinola along, phaser rifles at the ready. He was led to a small, windowless room with no furnishings and shoved roughly inside. The two sentries came in also, followed by Lortho. Akinola turned to face the large Orion, who leered at the cutter captain.

"I've been waiting for this a *long* time, Akinola!"

"Well, so much for gratitude," said Akinola. "I guess I should have left you to those Romulans. I understand you were crying like an infant when that Tal 'Shiar agent had you."

Lortho hit Akinola with a brutal backhand, knocking him down. Akinola spat blood on the floor and looked up, grinning. "Guess you're still sensitive about that, huh?"

Lortho Elix had recruited most of the armed thugs that provided security for the compound. He picked them because of their size and ability to intimidate others. None of them, however, had any real combat training or experience.

Captain Akinola, on the other hand, was a decorated combat veteran. He had fought the Cardassians in the first wars over twenty years earlier and had been on countless boarding raids. He was a master of hand-to-hand fighting and more than that, he was smart and patient. These Orions relied on their size, their weapons, and the self-assurance that everyone feared them.

In Akinola's case, they were badly mistaken.

* * *

From his crouched position, Solly could see a form coming toward him. It was obviously an amateur - no trained soldier would make so much noise or expose himself so readily.

Solly gripped his knife, tensing himself for the right moment to take out his target.

* * *

Akinola slowly stood, feigning more pain and weakness than he actually felt. He slumped slightly, head down in a submissive posture. Sensing weakness, the three Orion males moved in closer to deliver their blows.

Time seemed to dilate for Akinola. His senses were alive, as if he could note every movement, every sound, every breath of his opponents. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the thugs bring a rifle butt up to strike him.

Akinola struck first.

Afterward, he would not remember the fight clearly. His body seemed to work of its own volition. A boot smashed into an unguarded knee. A knife-hand stabbed into a throat. He snatched a falling rifle and swung it into the mid-section of a third. He vaguely remembered yelling at the top of his lungs.

A red haze seemed to cover his vision, whether due to a bleeding cut on his head, or the surge of adrenalin in his body, he could not say. Time contracted and expanded in a passing paradox. Finally, he was aware that he was kneeling on Lothar, who was bleeding from his nose and ears.

"*Please . . .*," croaked the injured Orion in a hoarse whisper. Akinola also became aware that he was holding a phaser rifle below the Orion prince's chin. He was fascinated to see his finger increase pressure on the trigger. Another part of Akinola's brain suddenly shouted, "*Stand down!*" The finger stopped, then relaxed. He took a deep breath, wincing at the sharp pain he felt in his left side.

Akinola stood suddenly, and dizziness threatened to overcome him. A pool of dark, red blood covered the floor. The other two thugs were down. One had a leg bent at an awkward angle. The other's nose appeared to be smashed into his face. Both were unconscious but appeared to be breathing. Akinola looked down at Lortho Elix and raised the phaser rifle. Elix held his shaking hands up in supplication. "*NO!*" he rasped.

Akinola checked the rifle's setting. It was on maximum. He thumbed it down to the heaviest stun setting and fired at Lortho, who convulsed in pain, then was still.

He stood for a moment, trying to regain his focus. Blood trickled from a scalp wound and from his nose. He coughed up a wad of bloody phlegm and spat again. He ran a shaking finger in his mouth, wincing at the pain, but was gratified to find his teeth intact.

Still fighting dizziness, he checked the two guards over, taking a communicator and electronic key. For good measure, he fired a stun round into both to ensure they remained unconscious for a long time. Bringing the rifle up and grabbing his backpack, he unlocked the door and checked the hall before moving quickly away.

* * *

Frajlar moved through the tall whip-grass, trying to spy the grevoolt. The animals weren't particularly dangerous, but he had no desire to get near one's sharp claws. As a green Orion, he lacked the acute night vision of the red race, but he felt he could see well enough.

The young Orion was so surprised by being pulled down so quickly that he did not cry out. Something sharp and heavy pressed against his throat. Even more frightening were the two, bright red eyes that peered at him from the darkness. They regarded him coldly for a moment, considering. Frajlar was certain he had met death, but he decided to meet it bravely and he glared back. He was surprised to hear a soft chuckle.

"You're a bit young, yet," said a low, muffled voice. "Find another line of work." A sudden blow put Frajlar out for the count.

Solly grabbed the youngster's communicator and phaser pistol and moved on in the direction of the gate.

* * *

"Where's Frajlar?" asked Harlorn, startling Kargun. The latter turned and faced the former Federation Marine.

"Deities, Harlorn! Must you always sneak up on folk?" hissed Kargun.

Harlorn regarded him with a withering stare. "I asked you, where's Frajlar?"

Kargun snorted. "I sent him out to catch a grevoolt."

Harlorn narrowed his eyes. "Where?"

"Sector three. He picked up a sensor blip, but it was too small to . . . hey! Where are you going?"

But Harlorn had already disappeared.

Chapter Twelve

16 December 2376

USS *Horace Greeley*

Rincassa system

Lt. Bane deftly landed the *Darter* in the port-side hangar bay of the *Greeley*. As the whine of the impulse engines faded, Strauss saw two figures approaching. One, a tall, broad shouldered human male with brown hair was obviously Nigel's brother, Jack. The resemblance was there, though Jack was somewhat taller and stockier than his younger brother.

The other was a short, stocky woman with captain's pips on her collar. Her black hair was bobbed short and her eyes were dark. They stopped just short of the shuttle, waiting on Inga and Nigel to exit.

"Permission to come aboard?" asked Inga, following timeless tradition.

"Granted," said Captain deSouza. "Please follow me Commander, Lieutenant."

Inga was not bothered by the captain's perfunctory greeting so much as by the lack of greeting between the two brothers. Beyond a simple nod of acknowledgment, there was no embrace, no handshake, no playful cuffs on the arm, not even a "long time, no see." The evident tension between the brothers Bane added to her own sense of unease, which she choked down as she followed the captain.

The four took a turbo-lift up a couple of decks until they came to a small conference room. After they entered, Strauss turned to speak, but her voice caught as she saw the small phaser in Captain deSouza's hand. The older woman looked grim.

"Sit down, both of you!" deSouza said in a harsh tone. The elder Bane looked confused.

"Captain? What are you . . ." began Commander Bane.

"Shut up, Jack! Thanks to you, our operation has been exposed - at least to these two, probably more!"

"What are you talking about?" Jack pressed.

"You said that your brother there knew nothing of our connection with the Syndicate."

Inga winced. This was not going according to plan. Jack Bane's face paled.

"If they *didn't* know, they do now! Gods, Helena!"

deSouza ignored the elder Bane and addressed Inga. "So, Captain Akinola has traveled to Earth to see about a family emergency?"

Inga nodded. "That's right - his grandson has a rare genetic condition that requires the drugs we're seeking," she said, carefully.

deSouza smirked. "That may be. But I happen to know that your Captain is nowhere near Earth. In fact, he's on Verex III to obtain the same medicine you want from us - from the Elix family!"

Strauss blanched. "How did you find that out?" she blurted.

deSouza shook her head. "My God, child! How did you ever make it to commander? The one who supplies the drugs to me also supplies them to the Elix family! When I made the request, he was surprised to have two orders in as many days. With a bit of cajoling and bribery, he was happy to tell me that a certain Joseph Akinola needed the drugs."

She turned toward her first officer, brandishing the phaser in a meaningful manner.

"So you obviously knew that the Syndicate is the only source of the drugs. And the only connection between our two ships are the Bane brothers, here." She shook her head. "Jack, I never took you for a fool! I'll miss having you as my first officer, but Lt. K'Larstin is due for a promotion."

"What are you going to do?" asked Strauss, her voice more calm than she felt.

deSouza favored her with a feigned look of sympathy. "I'm afraid that there's going to be an 'accident,' my dear."

"You don't honestly believe my crew will fall for that, do you?" said Strauss, angrily.

"Oh, I didn't mean just you. I meant your ship and crew too!"

* * *

16 December 2376
Verex III
Elix family compound

Solly Brin moved furtively through the thick whip-grass as he approached the gate to the Elix compound. He could see one sentry who appeared to be looking in his general direction. Solly knew that the young Orion he had knocked out would soon be missed. His time was running short.

He sensed, rather than heard the other guard and ducked and rolled forward. The adversary's knife missed his neck by mere centimeters.

Solly bounced up, knife at the ready, and sized up his opponent. The Red Orion standing before him was well-built but also poised and balanced. This was no common street thug.

"Nice move," said Harlorn. "I must be losing my edge."

Solly shook his head. "No, you nearly had me. I never heard you coming." He paused. "Special forces?"

Harlorn shook his head. "Fourth Marines."

Solly nodded, approvingly. "So, why is a former Federation Marine working for the Syndicate?" He began to circle toward his opponent.

"It's a long story. You're not going to live long enough to hear it." With a sudden, quick movement, Harlorn launched a throwing blade at Solly.

Solly had anticipated an attack, but not the speed of his attacker. The blade caught him in the upper left shoulder, sending a shock of pain down his left arm. His quick reaction had prevented the blade from fatally impacting his chest.

Solly kept his focus on Harlorn, countering the quick follow-up attack with a forearm block and a fist strike to his opponent's nose. Harlorn staggered back and shook his head, spitting blood. He smiled at Solly, feigned with a right, than attempted a leg sweep. Solly was able to block it, but the effort brought

on another shock of pain in his shoulder. He pulled the throwing blade out of his shoulder and hurled it at Harlorn, who avoided it with relative ease.

* * *

Kargun could make out two figures struggling in the tall grass. One was obviously Harlorn, but he could not make out the other one, who was dressed in a dark outfit. He turned to grab his disruptor rifle out of the guard shack.

A tall, dark human was standing in his way, covered with blood. Kargun had time to recognize the man as the one who had entered the compound hours earlier.

"Hi there," said Akinola, as he pulled the trigger.

* * *

Harlorn charged Solly, attacking with a flying kick. Solly was able to side-step the assault and sliced the leg of the former Marine with his knife. The two men were breathing heavily from pain and exertion. Neither gaining the upper hand, but neither giving quarter. Solly couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun!

Harlorn hopped up and glanced down at the blood oozing from a long cut of his left thigh. He smiled at Solly. "Nice move! Where'd you learn your craft?"

"Over thirty years in the Border Service."

Harlorn nodded. "A Border Dog, huh? I didn't know they taught this stuff."

Solly smiled. "Actually, they don't. But he does!" Solly pointed behind Harlorn.

"You've got to be kidding me!" snorted Harlorn. That's the oldest . . ." His voice was cut off by the discharge of a phaser rifle. Harlorn crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

"I hate to break up your fun, Senior Chief, but we've got a ship to catch," said Akinola.

"Aw, Skipper! I was just beginnin' to wear him down!" He looked down at the former Marine. "A damn, good fighter," he said, appreciatively.

"Yeah, well you two can become pen pals later. We're going to have company soon. Let's shag ass out of here!"

As if to emphasize Akinola's point, spot lights blazed on and a klaxon began to sound stridently. For the first time, Solly noticed the Captain's injuries.

"Hell, Skipper! You're hurt!"

"Better hurt than dead! Now move!"

* * *

16 December 2376
Star Station Echo
Office of Admiral Bateson

Lt. Relden-qi's angular face appeared on Bateson's terminal. "Admiral, we've got the warp tug, *Fujiyama* and the cutters *Snapper*, *Adair*, and *Akula* in Cardassian territory. But *Snapper* is in for warp core replacement at Starbase 371 and the *Fujiyama* is tasked for leading a convoy through the Grolek-gren asteroid belt."

"Any luck reaching the *Bluefin*?" asked Bateson.

"No, sir. We tried them on all frequencies and boosted the signal. No response. According to the station commander at Starbase 371, she departed on schedule. No other communication since that time."

"Hmmm. Thanks, Relden-qi. Open a channel to Captain Gunderson on the *Adair*. Patch it through to my terminal when you reach her."

"Aye, sir."

* * *

17 December 2376
USS *Bluefin*
Rincassa system

Lt. Commander T'Ser's anxiety level increased as the time passed with no word from Strauss or Bane. The fifteen minute check-in time had come and gone. She walked over to Ops, manned by Ensign Maya Vashtee.

"Maya, open a channel to Captain Strauss."

The young officer activated the subspace transmitter frequency keyed to Strauss' commbadge. After several attempts, she looked at T'Ser apologetically.

"I'm sorry, commander. She's not responding."

T'Ser looked over Vashtee's shoulder at the display. The signal was strong and the local radiation levels, while high, shouldn't interfere with such a short range transmission. Strauss should be able to respond.

Should be able, but can't? What's happening over there? she wondered. Aloud, she said, "Hail the *Greeley*, Ensign."

* * *

17 December 2376
USS *Horace Greeley*
Rincassa system

Strauss tried to focus on the situation, seeking for any opening, any opportunity to disarm deSouza and protect the *Bluefin*. But try as she could, her own her inexperience and fatigue loomed as major obstacles. She wasn't fearful for her own life - but the thought of losing the ship and crew paralyzed her.

Fortunately, Commander Jack Bane was providing a distraction.

"Helena, you can't be serious! You can't attack another Federation ship and get away with it! Besides, they'll try to defend themselves."

deSouza sneered. "You've never been one to plan ahead, Number One. I've got two quantum torpedoes loaded that will tear that ancient cutter to pieces. And why do you think I chose this God-forsaken system for a rendezvous, anyway? It could be years, centuries before anyone stumbles on the debris field! They can't get a signal out and any explosion will be lost in the background radiation. No one knows we're here, remember?"

Strauss had felt the vibration of her commbadge in silent mode, but she couldn't acknowledge, not with deSouza staring right at her. *Please, T'Ser! Raise the shields!* she thought.

* * *

"Yes, commander, what can I do for you?" asked the duty officer of the *Horace Greeley*, a Bajoran lieutenant named Mol Krasdar.

"I need to speak with Captain Strauss," she said evenly. "She is not answering her commbadge."

Krasdar smiled reassuringly. "A common problem, commander. This ship has heavy internal shielding due to the nature of some of our cargo. I'll make sure she knows you're trying to reach her."

"It's a matter of some urgency, Lieutenant. I'd appreciate you patching me through to her."

Krasdar offered an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, but Captain deSouza left orders that they were not to be disturbed."

T'Ser took a step toward the viewscreen. "*Lieutenant!* I am not *asking*, I'm *ordering* you to patch me through to Captain Strauss - NOW!"

Krasdar's smile faded. "There's no need to be hostile! I'm afraid Captain deSouza's orders supercede yours, Commander. But, as I said, I'll pass your request on through." The screen returned to a view of the *Horace Greeley* hanging languidly in space.

"You haven't seen me hostile, yet!" she muttered. She moved to tactical, displacing the flustered ensign manning that station. Her hands moved deftly over the board, calling up a schematic of a Liberty-class ship. She scrolled through several screens before stopping. A smile played on her features.

She tapped her commbadge. "T'Ser to Commander Galt."

"Galt here," came the short reply.

"Commander, I have a question for you . . ."

* * *

deSouza's commbadge beeped. She tapped it. "deSouza, go."

"Captain, it's Krasder. That Vulcan commander on the *Bluefin* demands to speak with Captain Strauss. I think she's getting suspicious."

deSouza grimaced. "I trust that you'll continue to dissuade them, Krasder. Don't contact me again unless its urgent!" Breaking contact, she raised the phaser toward Strauss and Lt. Bane. "Now, where were we?"

Chapter Thirteen

17 December 2376

USS *Bluefin*

Rincassa System

Lt. Commander Galt, the *Bluefin's* abrasive Tellarite chief engineer, folded his arms and regarded T'Ser with an incredulous look.

"Let me get this straight, Commander - you want us to *ram* that ship over there? With *my* ship? After just getting out of a major refit? T'Ser, are you frakkin' nuts?!?"

T'Ser assumed her "patient Vulcan" posture, partly to calm herself, but partly because she knew it irritated Galt.

"I assure you, Commander Galt, that I do not intend to 'ram' anything. I want to bring our hull in contact with theirs, and then extend our shields around both ships."

"Sounds like ramming to me," Galt muttered.

T'Ser pointed to a schematic of a Liberty-class ship. "As you can see, we can maneuver astern of the *Greeley* and use our tractors to draw ourselves into contact with their ship. It will be much like a docking maneuver."

"Yeah," grunted Galt. "Except neither ship is designed to dock with the other! One wrong move and we'll rupture both hulls! And let's not forget that our structural integrity fields will prevent our hulls from actually making contact - until they overload. And that much overload would compromise the hulls. It may be slow, but it's still ramming!"

T'Ser mentally counted to ten before continuing. "That brings me to my question." She pointed to the shield generator location of the *Greeley*. "If those were . . . removed, could we not make physical contact between the two ships?"

Galt frowned and rubbed his muzzle. "Well, yes, of course. But how . . ." he stopped and something akin to a smile played on his porcine features. "Heh! It'll be like pulling the wings off a slar-bug!"

T'Ser wrinkled her nose in distaste. "A morbid, but apt analogy. Once we make hull contact, we can use our transporters - the system's radiation interference won't be a factor. And, they won't be able to use their weapons once we envelope both ships with our shields."

Galt looked doubtful. "What makes you think they won't try to stop us?"

T'Ser smiled. "It seems their captain is preoccupied. And the current bridge officer does not strike me as either imaginative or aggressive. If we move quickly, we can do this before they can react."

"You're taking a big risk, T'Ser," said Galt, gruffly.

"No bigger than the one Captain Strauss and Lt. Bane took." She turned to the bridge crew. "Mr. Sarnek, prepare for some close maneuvering - and I do mean close! Mr. Galt, I'd appreciate it if you would man the tractor beams." She tapped her comm badge. "T'Ser to Chief Deryx."

"Deryx. Go ahead, ma'am."

"Chief, I need you to prepare a full boarding party - armored and fully loaded out. Be in the transporter rooms in ten minutes."

"Yes ma'am! What's our mission?"

"You will seize and secure the USS *Horace Greeley*. They have been operating a smuggling operation for the Orion Syndicate. Also, it is likely that Captain Strauss and Lt. Bane are being held against their will. We're going to attempt to extract them with the transporter, but if that fails, your priority is to rescue them first, then secure the ship."

There was only a moment's hesitation before Deryx responded. "Yes ma'am, understood. What's our R.O.E.?"

T'Ser considered her words carefully as to the rules of engagement. "Chief, you are to consider anyone on that ship as a potential hostile. Lethal force is authorized if necessary."

There was a silence before Deryx replied. "Acknowledged. We'll be ready, ma'am."

"Good. I'll have schematics of the ship downloaded to your combat scanners. T'Ser out."

T'Ser sat in the command chair. "Ensign Vashtee, on my order, begin using active sensors to scan for Captain Strauss and Lt. Bane. Time will be critical, so I will require your best effort, understood?"

Vashtee swallowed. "I won't let you down, commander."

T'Ser smiled. "I know." She picked up a PADD and made some calculations. "Mr. Sarnek, I'm downloading the coordinates to your board where we want to contact the *Greeley*. It is critical that we make physical contact, so don't worry about scratching the paint."

Sarnek regarded her with a raised eyebrow. "Commander, there is only a 56.32% chance of success with this maneuver."

"Actually, 42.78% if you factor in an unexpected maneuver by the *Greeley*." She straightened in the center seat. "Stations, everyone! We go to red alert in eight minutes. Mr. Galt, stand by with the tractor beams and shields."

"I'm on them like an Arcturan leech," he muttered.

* * *

17 December 2376
USS *Horace Greeley*
Rincassa System

Captain Helena deSouza kept the phaser pointed at Strauss and Nigel Bane. "You should have kept your nose out of our business, young lady! You picked a bad time to try and impress your C.O." She gave Inga an appraising, leering look. "And there are easier ways for a beautiful girl like yourself to move up."

Strauss could feel her temper flare, but she forced herself to remain calm. She had to stall, to give T'Ser time . . . time for what, she didn't know. But their only hope was for T'Ser to take action.

"At least tell me one thing Captain deSouza - *Why?* Why throw away a career in Starfleet to work for the Syndicate? My God, it's a rare privilege to be a starship captain!" exclaimed Strauss.

"A privilege?" sneered deSouza. "What? To command a rust-bucket like the *Greeley*? To haul around dirty, bleeding, complaining refugees?" She laughed derisively. "You really are naive, little girl! Do you think I'll ever command a ship of the line? No, because I don't have the *connections*! I was just a nobody from Guadalajara with dreams of going to the stars! I'd read the stories of Pike, Kirk and Wesley - I wanted to be a starship captain like them, to explore new worlds and all the rest." She paused a moment, as if caught in another place and another time. She shook her head and peered at Strauss with hate-filled eyes. "But I wasn't considered 'command material!' My *Kobayashi Maru* score said I didn't have the 'temperament or imagination' for command."

deSouza gestured around the room, as if to encompass the ship. "But fate had other ideas. The war losses were so severe that even *I* was granted a command - such as it is. By then, I'd already learned that I could have *real* influence and power by working for the Syndicate! A couple more successful transactions and I'll be an *Ahmet* with a Raider of my own - no longer at Starfleet's beck and call!"

* * *

Lt. Krasder was lounging in the command chair of the *Greeley*, imagining the day that he would command his own ship, when his reverie was broken by the tactical officer.

"Lieutenant? The *Bluefin* is maneuvering!"

Krasder frowned. "Be more specific, ensign! And prepare to pursue."

The young tactical officer's voice went up an octave. "But sir, they're not maneuvering *away* from us!"

"What!" Krasder stared at the viewscreen, his mouth agape, as the cutter continued to grow in size on the screen. He could now see individual port holes of the cutter, the ship's name and registry, and the blue glow of graviton beams. The sight transfixed him. He watched in speechless fascination as the *Bluefin* bore down on the *Greeley*.

"Sir? What are your orders? Sir? *SIR!*"

* * *

Strauss felt sick. This warped woman was only interested in power and profit. She cared naught for anyone else, including her fellow Starfleet officers. She turned to Jack Bane. "What about you, Commander? What's your excuse?"

The elder Bane winced slightly. "I . . . I have my reasons," he said, glibly.

deSouza interrupted. "Enough of this! It's time to rid ourselves of our problem . . . all of them!" She turned her phaser toward Jack Bane. "You let me down Jack! You've become a liability to me and to the Syndicate. Actually, I'm doing you a favor by killing you before the Syndicate . . ."

A sudden rumbling vibration rose in intensity through the deck plates. A Padd on the conference table jittered across the surface and crashed to the deck. deSouza looked around at the ceiling, as if expecting it to come crashing down.

"What the . . . ?" she began.

Jack Bane took advantage of the distraction and grabbed for deSouza's phaser. Nigel ran around the table, as did Inga, hoping to disarm the enraged captain.

A sudden blue flash, accompanied by the tell-tale warble of a phaser discharge dazzled Inga. She hit the deck, dazed, but not hurt. The phaser beam missed her and left a scorched mark on the wall near her. She struggled to her feet, then stopped.

deSouza lay motionless on the deck, eyes closed. Nigel was cradling his older brother, whose left side was smoldering where the brunt of the phaser blast had hit him. Jack's face was pale and his hands were trembling. Inga moved forward just as she felt the familiar tingle of the transporter effect.

* * *

Sarnek had guided the *Bluefin* in a masterful bit of piloting, expertly bringing the cutter's bow to rest on the aft dorsal hull of the *Greeley*. The cutter rumbled as the two hulls made contact.

"Maya, scan for the Captain and Lt. Bane! Gralt - raise our shields around both ships!"

Gralt cracked a toothy grin, amused at his work with the tractor beams. The aft shield emitter nodes of the *Greeley* now mere space debris floating gently away from the two ships. "Shields up and firm," he reported. "Aft tractors now engaged to the *Greeley's* warp nacelles. They're not going anywhere!"

Ensign Vashtee turned to T'Ser. "Commander! I've got them! But I just registered a phaser discharge!" she said, urgency in her voice.

"Noted." T'Ser tapped her comm badge. "Transporter room one - Emergency beam out from the coordinates just sent to you. Activate security protocols and deactivate all weapons." She tapped her comm badge again. "T'Ser to sickbay - medical team report to transporter room one!" A third tap. "Chief Deryx, once transporter room one is clear, beam over and secure that ship! Round up any senior officers and put them in the brig!" She took a deep breath, willing the surge of emotion and agitation to abate. It was times like this that she wished she had learned some of the Vulcan disciplines.

Chapter Fourteen

17 December 2376

Verex III

Akinola struggled to keep up with Solly as they ran through the forest, away from the Elix compound. His side was on fire, he was having difficulty breathing, and a dull ringing had begun between his ears. He kept pushing forward, knowing that the entire security force of the Elix clan would soon be on their heels.

He stumbled over a tree root, sprawling in the cool, matted leaves and rough *kraani* cones that littered the forest floor. The pain flared in his side like a hot poker, causing him to grind his teeth against the pain.

"Skipper? Sir! We've got to keep moving! We're still several clicks from the beam-out zone. We're still under the shield dome here!" said Brin.

Akinola nodded, coughed and spat bright red blood on the ground. Solly frowned, realizing that the captain probably had internal injuries. Without a word, the Orion scooped up Akinola like a child, and began running once again. Akinola tried to protest, but his consciousness faded and he gave in, mercifully, to the black.

* * *

17 December 2376

USS *Adair*

Sector 10488

Captain Margaret Gunderson absently brushed a lock of wavy brown hair behind an ear as she perused a report from engineering on a Padd. Satisfied with what she read, she pressed her thumb to the screen, adding her electronic signature, and handed it to the waiting ensign.

Captain Gunderson was an attractive woman in her mid fifties who hailed from the upper Midwest of North America on Earth – Bismarck, North Dakota to be exact. She commanded the haz-mat/fire suppression cutter, USS *Adair*, a refit Soyuz-class ship named for the 20th century fire fighter, Paul N. "Red" Adair. Next to Joseph Akinola, she was the most senior of active Border Service cutter commanders.

"Captain? Incoming message from Star Station Echo. It's Admiral Bateson," announced Lt. Commander Ewoltun, the Ops officer.

"On screen, please," replied Gunderson. She smiled at the image of her boss and friend, Morgan Bateson. "Admiral, it's good to see a familiar face! I hope you're about to order us back home to the Borderlands."

Bateson's face lacked its characteristic humor. "I'm afraid not, Marge. The *Bluefin* is missing. She never reported to Point Station Gamma and they haven't responded to our hails."

A chill came over Gunderson, but she set her emotions aside. "What do you want us to do, Admiral?"

"Begin search protocols. I'm transmitting the last known course and heading to give you a starting point." He paused, "Marge, it's probably just a technical glitch. There's no indication of anything wrong." Both of them recognized the hollowness of that statement. Akinola was a veteran commander. He'd find a way to make a rendezvous, technical problems or not.

"We'll find them, Admiral - I promise you that." said Gunderson with more confidence than she felt.

Bateson offered a weak smile. "That's what I'm counting on, Captain. Bateson out."

Gunderson released a pent-up breath. "Mr. Jubartu, input the coordinates and give us a starting point. Mr. Coen, get us moving - maximum warp!"

Joseph, what have you gotten yourself into? she thought to herself.

* * *

17 December 2376
USS *Horace Greeley*
Rincassa system

Lt. Krasder was in a state of shock as collision alarms blared. That cutter had actually rammed them! He was dumbstruck - surely, it must have been an accident. He slowly became aware that members of the bridge crew were

trying to gain his attention. He slumped back into the command chair, ignoring them. This was just too much for him to process!

He slapped his comm badge. The Captain had warned him not to bother her unless it was urgent. Well, this certainly seemed to qualify! "Krasder to Captain deSouza!"

There was no response. Puzzled, he was about to slap his comm badge again, when a noise on the bridge caught his attention. It grew in intensity and several columns of light formed and coalesced into seven armed, armored and dangerous looking Border Service crewmen. One of them, wearing the rank of CPO on his collar, pointed a phaser carbine in Krasder's direction.

"Border Service! Everybody, STAND DOWN, and you will not be hurt," the chief bellowed. "We are taking this vessel and placing this crew under arrest. Any resistance will be met with force!"

One of the *Greeley's* bridge crew, with more guts than good sense, pulled a phaser from under a console, only to catch a heavy stun charge for his effort. The crewman crumpled to the floor.

"Anyone else want some?" growled Chief Deryx.

* * *

USS Bluefin **Transporter Room one**

Dr. Castille ran a medical tri-corder over Commander Jack Bane's unconscious form and grimaced. "Ventricular tachycardia, massive thoracic trauma, respiration shallow . . ." He glanced up at the transporter operator. "Beam us directly to sick bay - Now!"

Castille and Jack Bane disappeared as the transporter effect faded. Corpsmen Sanders and Rice tended to the others.

"How is she?" asked Strauss, indicating Captain deSouza.

"Unconscious, but her vital signs are strong. She has some head trauma - possibly a concussion. Did she hit her head?" asked Sanders.

Strauss didn't want to admit that she had closed her eyes when the phaser discharged, so she was grateful when Nigel answered. "Yeah, when Jack plowed into her, she went down pretty hard." Nigel picked up the now-useless Type one phaser off the transporter pad.

Strauss felt her comm-badge vibrate. "Strauss, go ahead."

The relief in T'Ser's voice was evident. "Captain, are you alright?"

"We're both fine, Commander. But Nigel's brother was shot with a phaser. Dr. Castille just beamed him to sickbay. We have Captain deSouza, who's unconscious but stable. What's our status?"

"We've beamed over three armed boarding parties. Deryx has secured the bridge and engineering is also under control. Apparently we caught them off-guard. I've ordered the round-up of their senior officers and put in our brig."

Strauss closed her eyes in relief. "Thanks, T'Ser. I owe you, big time!"

"Yes, you do. T'Ser out."

Relief gave way to disgust as she looked at the still form of Captain deSouza.

"And you call yourself a captain, *little girl*?" Strauss muttered, sarcastically.

* * *

17 December 2376

Verex III

After running three kilometers carrying Captain Akinola, Solly stopped to rest and to check out the Captain.

He eased Akinola onto the ground, then grabbed the duffel bag he had recovered during their run through the woods. He found the first-aid kit and pulled out a small smart-hypo. Brin placed it against Akinola's neck. There was a pause as a tiny scanner read the captain's vital signs, before there came a hiss of injected stimulants, pain-killers, tri-ox and healing agents.

Akinola's eyes fluttered open. He attempted to sit up, but the pain caught him and he collapsed back down.

"Easy, Skipper! Give that stuff a minute to work." He pulled out a water bottle and gave Akinola a few swallows, which the Captain took, gratefully.

"Sit-rep, Senior Chief," rasped Akinola.

Brin checked the combat scanner on his fore arm. "We've got a fair lead on our pursuers, Captain. I've got about a dozen armed goons showing roughly 1500 meters to our six. They're not moving very fast, probably because a couple of 'em tripped some mines I'd planted." Brin said this with a grin of satisfaction.

As if on cue, a muffled *KRUMPH* echoed through the woods. Several startled avian creatures took flight in a flurry of dark feathers.

"Make that three," continued Brin, his grin widening to display menacing gold fangs. He pulled the Klingon Infantry rifle out of the bag, unfolding the stock and ramping up the power settings to full disrupt mode. "Feeling any better?"

"I've felt worse," said Akinola. He gingerly got to a sitting position. The pain had abated and the buzzing in his head was gone. He felt a curious detachment, almost euphoric in nature. "Whatever you gave me seems to be working. Let's move while I still can."

"Aye, sir." Solly helped Akinola to his feet and helped support him as they pressed on to their destination.

* * *

17 December 2376

USS Adair

Conducting SAR-OPs in Cardassian Occupied Territory

Captain Gunderson sat in her Ready Room, drinking hot cocoa and trying not to think dark thoughts. She attempted to complete an after-action report of their recent rescue operation involving a Bajoran freighter with a nasty chemical leak. Her gaze was drawn, however, to a holo-pic of a certain cutter captain with his arm around a younger Captain Gunderson.

How long ago was that Christmas party? she wondered. *Fifteen year? Eighteen?* It had been right after she had received her fourth pip, so it had to be eighteen.

She and Akinola had been an "item" in those days. Though their relationship had not developed into anything permanent, she still held a special place in her heart for him. She was pretty sure that he still had strong feelings for her as well. She sighed, and tried to focus on her report. The beep of her terminal's communicator broke her train of thought.

"Yes?" she answered. The face of a young Andorian officer appeared on her screen.

"Captain? We believe that we've picked up the *Bluefin's* warp signature. It appears that they headed for the Rincassa star system," replied Ensign Werissh.

Gunderson frowned. "I'm not familiar with that system."

"It's well off any established shipping lanes. We show a Type-E star, four uninhabited planets. No stations or outposts."

"Very well," replied Captain Gunderson. "Alter course to the Rincassa system. Maintain current speed and begin hailing at fifteen minute intervals."

"Acknowledged. Captain, you realize that a Type-E star will render long-range communications inoperative. If they're in that system, they won't be able to send or receive."

"Try anyway, Werissh. Maybe we'll get lucky." *Or maybe they will.* She thought, silently.

Chapter Fifteen

17 December 2376

Verex III

Akinola staggered to a stop to catch his breath. Solly pulled up and jogged back to him, concern on his face.

"You okay, Skipper?"

Akinola nodded. "Yeah . . . Just hard . . . to catch my breath," he gasped. The pain in his side, dulled by the pain-killers, was beginning to flare again. "Must have some busted ribs. I'll make it, though."

Brin checked his combat scanner. "We've opened up a pretty good lead over our pursuers. Those mines slowed them down. But if they muster any air support, we'll be in trouble. We need to get to the beam out zone ASAP."

"How much . . . farther?" gasped Akinola.

"Less than two clicks. That should put us clear of the Elix's atmospheric shields."

"Good. Move on out, Solly . . . I'll keep up."

Solly wasn't paying attention to Akinola. His gaze was fixed on an object approaching at tree-top level. He cursed and shoved Akinola down, just as an energy beam slashed past them, splintering a tree. The smell of ozone and burning wood assaulted their noses.

A small, barbell-shaped drone whizzed overhead, spouting tendrils of phaser fire as it passed. Solly returned fire from the disruptor rifle, to no avail.

"We've got to get to cover," Brin hissed as he half drug Akinola toward a downed tree trunk. He shoved the Captain underneath the massive trunk and activated the targeting scanner on his rifle.

"Damned thing moves like a Rigellian fire-bat," he grouched, trying to lock in on the wildly gyrating drone. Fortunately, the drone's targeting system was none too effective as none of its shots did them any harm.

Akinola joined Solly in returning fire, but to no avail.

"I think it's just trying to pin us down until the troops arrive," said Solly. "I'll try to draw its fire away from you. Maybe you can get off a clean shot."

Akinola tried to protest, but couldn't catch his breath well enough to speak. His vision was beginning to cloud and spots began to appear before his eyes. He blinked rapidly to clear them as Solly sprinted out from behind cover into a clear area and began to wave his arms at the drone.

Sensing movement, the drone pivoted in mid-air and dove toward's Solly's position, firing bursts from its phasers.

Akinola steadied the phaser carbine on the tree trunk and began to squeeze off bursts in front of the drone. Finally, one of his shots struck true, just as one of the drone's shots hit Solly, who flew back several feet, sliding through the leaves and remained still. The drone, trailing sparks and smoke, spun around slowly, trying to gain altitude. Akinola easily dispatched the machine with another round from the carbine. He then hobbled over to Solly, fearing the worst.

"Solly?" he wheezed, painfully. "Dammit Solly . . ."

"AW, Frak!" groaned the Orion. "That HURT!" Solly rolled to a sitting position. The front of his stealth suit was melted away to reveal a charred but intact armored vest. He released the catches on the vest and tossed it aside. Already, dark bruises were forming on his dark, red torso. He grimaced. "THAT's gonna leave a mark!"

Akinola let out a painful breath in relief. "You scared . . . the hell out of me, . . . Senior Chief!"

"Yeah, me too," grumbled Solly. He winced as he stood up. "We better move before another of those things show up."

* * *

17 December 2376

USS Adair
Occupied Cardassian Space
En route to the Rincassa system

"Captain! I'm picking up a sensor contact coming out of the Rincassa system," reported Lt. Ewoltun, the *Adair's* Ops officer.

"Course and speed?" queried Captain Gunderson.

"Heading in our general direction, ma'am, course 76 mark 48, speed is sublight, point two-five cee."

"Can you identify it?"

Ewoltun furrowed his bony brow as he peered into the sensor hood. "That can't be right," he muttered.

"What's that?" pressed the captain.

"It appears that there are two ships forming one sensor contact. I believe they must have docked or collided some how."

Gunderson frowned. "On screen!" she ordered.

At first, the image was too distant to identify. Captain Gunderson ordered maximum magnification. When the image cleared, there was a moment of surprised silence on the bridge.

Finally, Ensign Jubartu spoke. "Well, *that's* something you don't see every day!"

"It looks like they're . . . mating," said Lt. Coen, from the helm.

"Alright, belay that talk," said Gunderson quietly, although in all honesty, she had to agree with Coen's assesment.

On the screen was the image of a Liberty-class vessel moving toward them with an Albacore-class cutter on top of and behind it. It did look a bit . . . obscene. Gunderson shook the thought from her mind.

"Hail them, Dreyne," ordered Gunderson.

"Which one?" asked Lt. Ewoltun.

"Either! Both! I don't care - just get someone on the channel so we can determine what the blazes is going on!"

* * *

USS Bluefin
Occupied Cardassian territory
Sickbay

Lt. Nigel Bane stared at the pale, still form of his older brother. The bio-bed beeped a reassuring tone, indicating that Jack was at least alive. Dr. Castille walked over and ran a Feinberger scanner over the elder Bane's body. He glanced at the reading with a frown and grunt.

"How's he doing, Doc?" asked Nigel.

"Stable, but not out of the woods," replied the CMO. "He was lucky she only had a type-one phaser. If he'd been hit like this with a standard issue phaser he'd already be dead. Still, he caught a nasty charge and the shock of it has affected his heart's rhythm. And, there are deleterious effects to his nervous system as well. The burns at least, are easy to repair."

"So . . . will he make it?" pressed Nigel.

Castille folded his arms regarded the young officer with a penetrating gaze. "He should. But he has other issues than just this phaser wound."

"What other issues?"

"I've discovered traces of Corillan Acid in his bloodstream."

The news did not shock Nigel, so much as sadden him. "I guess I'm not surprised, Doc. It would explain a lot - especially why he got tied up with the Syndicate. It was probably the only way he could get a steady supply."

"You do understand the highly addictive nature of this drug, Lieutenant? Without it, your brother will go through a hellacious withdrawal period. And, in his weakened condition, I'm not certain he can survive it."

"Isn't there something you can do, something you can give him to help?"

Castille shook his head sadly. "Not really. I can offset the physical pain that will come, but not the intense psychological pain. There's a good reason why it's highly illegal to use or traffic the stuff." The doctor regarded the still form of Jack Bane and shook his head. Whether in pity or disgust, Nigel couldn't tell.

* * *

"Report!" barked Struass as she stepped onto the *Bluefin's* bridge.

T'Ser stood from the center seat. "We're exiting the Rincassa system, all systems functioning normally. Engineering says we suffered no structural damage in our 'rendezvous' with the *Greeley*. Chief Deryx reports that his boarding parties have secured the ship. Apparently, they surrendered without a fight."

Strauss looked surprised. "You're kidding!"

T'Ser shook her head. "Not at all. Apparently, most of the *Greeley's* crew is unaware of their captain's involvement with the Syndicate. However, until we can sort this out, we're maintaining an armed presence on that ship and some of our people are manning the bridge, engineering and auxiliary controls. The *Greeley's* senior officers are currently detained in our brig."

"Good. Well done, T'Ser."

The Vulcan officer did not look particularly happy. "Did you accomplish your mission?"

Strauss looked down. "No. No, we didn't. Captain deSouza lied to us - she didn't have the medicine that Captain Akinola needs."

Before T'Ser could respond, Ensign Vashtee spoke up from Ops. "Captain! Incoming message from the USS *Adair*. Captain Gunderson wishes to speak to Captain Akinola."

"Have fun explaining," said T'Ser, quietly, before she took her place at tactical.

Chapter Sixteen

17 December 2376

USS *Bluefin*

Occupied Cardassian Territory

"On screen, Ensign," said Strauss, steeling herself.

Captain Margaret Gunderson appeared on the main screen. A slight frown formed on her face when she saw Strauss in the center seat.

"Commander, I'm Captain Margaret Gunderson of the *Adair*. What is your situation? And where is Captain Akinola?"

"Captain Akinola is away on a . . . special mission. I'm Inga Strauss in temporary command."

The crease in Gunderson's brow deepened. "Well, then, Mr. Strauss. Would you be so kind as to explain why your ship has attached itself to the *Horace Greeley*?"

"Ma'am, it might be better for us to discuss this face-to-face. It's kind of complicated," said Strauss.

Gunderson nodded. "I just bet it is. I'm beaming over to the *Bluefin*, Commander Strauss, and I better like what I hear! Gunderson out."

* * *

17 December 2376

Verex III

Akinola and Brin made it to the beam-out point with no further encounters with drones or any of the Elix clan's henchmen. Brin activated his communcator.

"Brin to *Eschaton*! Two to beam up!"

The two materialized on the transporter platform of Bjorn Koordsen's ship. The Klingon-Human first mate was waiting for them.

"We need to get the Skipper in your sickbay! He's busted up pretty bad." said Solly. The first mate and the transporter crewman helped Akinola down the corridor aft to sickbay. Solly trotted forward toward the bridge. He arrived to find that Bjorn Koordsen had already ordered the ship to leave orbit.

"Welcome back, Brin. How's Akinola?"

"He's pretty banged up. Probably some broken ribs and a lot of bruises, maybe some internal bleeding. But all in all, we got out of there pretty easy," replied Brin.

"We're not out of this yet," said Koordsen, as he checked a sensor monitor on his chair. "Helm, we've got two inbound raiders, moving fast! Evasive pattern fox delta one!"

The impulse engines of the Antarean corvette howled as the helmsman firewalled the throttle and began a series of seemingly random and erratic maneuvers.

"Solly! Man the weapons station. We may be in a firefight in a few minutes."

Solly seated himself at the weapons console, powered up the phaser banks and activated the targeting scanners. He wished he had a couple of torpedoes but the corvette had none.

"Weapons hot! Shields up and firm," reported Solly.

"Come on you damned pirates," Koordsen murmured, "You'll find out we're not nearly as helpless as we may look." He raised his voice. "Helm! Time 'til we can go to warp?"

The Rigellian helmsman glanced at his console. "Eleven minutes, twenty eight seconds."

Koordsen grimaced. "Too long. This will be over one way or the other by then!"

* * *

Akinola gritted his teeth in pain as the First Mate, Ma'run Collins, helped him onto the only bed in the tiny sickbay. A Bajoran entered the cramped space and produced a medical scanner that looked like it came from a museum.

“Captain Akinola, this is Jir Krelis,” said Collins. “He’s technically not a doctor, but he’s kept us patched up and alive. You’ll be in good hands with him.”

Akinola merely nodded. The adrenaline rush and the pain killers had faded. It was an effort just to breathe.

Krelis ran the ancient medical scanner over Akinola for about a minute. He frowned at the readings. “It appears that you have three broken ribs, a badly bruised sternum, multiple haematomae, and a broken nose. I’m also reading some internal bleeding from a tear in your spleen which is your most serious problem. It is vital that I repair the damage quickly. Do you understand?”

Again, Akinola nodded. Krelis’ voice seemed far away. The room was becoming fuzzy and indistinct.

Krelis looked up at Collins. “Ma’run? I’m going to need you to assist.”

* * *

17 December 2376

**USS *Bluefin*
Occupied Cardassian Territory**

Captain Margaret Gunderson stood in the *Bluefin’s* wardroom, staring at Strauss, Bane, Dr. Castille and T’Ser with an incredulous expression.

“My God! Joseph and Solly went to the Orion homeworld to buy this, this . . . what did you call it, Doctor?”

“Fexkel-Tripan,” replied Castille.

Gunderson shook her head in amazement. “Those damned fools! They should have asked for help!”

“Captain Akinola was afraid of involving anyone else besides Senior Chief Brin. I believe he thought that Admiral Bateson would refuse permission for him to go if he asked.” Strauss paused. “It would be hard for the Captain to defy a direct order.”

“Easier to get forgiveness than permission,” agreed Gunderson. “Yes, that sounds like Joseph all right, blast him!” She shook her head again, as if still not comprehending what she had been told. Finally she directed her gaze at Strauss.

“But that still doesn’t explain what you were doing in the Rincassa system. Admiral Bateson told me you were overdue at Point Station Gamma. And I can’t wait to hear about your ‘rendezvous’ with that transport!”

Taking a deep breath, Inga related the whole story of reading Akinola’s private message, Nigel’s revelation of his brother’s Syndicate involvement, and their plan to obtain the medicine from Captain deSouza before arresting them. She also told how things had nearly gone very wrong.

Gunderson was silent for a long moment as she stood with her arms folded. Finally, she spoke. “That’s a pretty amazing tale, Commander Strauss. You took a huge gamble today and it nearly cost you your life and the life of Lt. Bane. You also placed your ship in unnecessary peril.”

“Captain,” Inga interrupted, “We just wanted to help . . .”

Gunderson cut her off with her hand. “I’m not questioning your motives, Commander. I’m questioning your judgment. If Commander T’Ser had not acted when she did, you’d both be dead!”

Inga lowered her head. She knew all too well that Gunderson was correct.

Gunderson sighed and her voice softened. “Look, Strauss. It was a foolhardy stunt, but you were lucky today. You’re not the first starship commander to do something dumb. To be honest, I don’t know whether to relieve you or recommend you for a commendation! The fact that you captured a rogue ship helps your case.” She leaned forward and stared directly into Inga’s eyes.

“But God help you when Joseph finds out!”

* * *

17 December 2376
SS Eschaton
Verex system

“The raiders are within firing range!” announced Solly.

As if to punctuate his statement, the corvette shuddered as phaser fire impacted the *Eschaton's* shields.

"Aft shields at 85%" said Solly.

"Return fire!" ordered Koordsen.

Twin blue beams lashed out from the aft emitters of the Antarean vessel, striking the lead Orion ship. The two raiders pressed on relentlessly towards their quarry.

Solly grunted in disappointment. "Direct hit but no apparent damage."

Koordsen slapped the comm switch on his chair as another barrage struck the corvette. "Engine room! Can you give us any more speed?"

"Negative, Captain! We're dangerously close to overheating the engines as it is!"

"If those raiders catch us, it won't matter, will it? Run them 'til they bleed! Koordsen, out."

Solly turned toward Koordsen, a grim expression on his face. "They've uprated their shields. We're not making a dent in 'em."

"Captain!" Yelled the helmsman, "There's a third vessel approaching on an intercept course - bigger than the other two!"

Solly checked his board and cursed. "It's a super-raider. We don't have a chance in *Sto 'Vo-kor* against that thing."

Koordsen made a decision. "Helm, come about! Bring us in between the two lead raiders. Maybe that will dissuade that super-raider from firing."

"Right," muttered the helmsman, "And maybe Hortas will fly."

Chapter Seventeen

17 December 2376
Orion Raider *Lag'yut*
Verex system

Lortho Elix glared at the image of the Antarean corvette as it dodged and juked to avoid the fire from his raider. The pain in his body did not nearly match the pain his ego suffered from being humiliated by Akinola. This day, he vowed, both Akinola and Solly would die.

"More speed, you misbegotten *slis'puls!*" he growled at the crew in the raider's control pit. "Destroy that ship before it can jump to warp!"

The *Lag'yut* shook slightly as return fire from the *Eschaton* flared against the raider's shields. Lortho's face broke into a leering grimace, cracking scabs on his split, swollen lips. Blood stained his teeth and gums. "We finish this now, Akinola," he murmured.

"Ahmet!" called one of the raider's crew. "Another ship is approaching at high speed. It is the *Eli'tosh!*"

Lortho's feral grin faded into a scowl. "Blast that old man! Father should leave this to me!"

"The *Eli'tosh* is hailing us, but . . . it's not your father, Ahmet."

Lortho's expression changed from anger to puzzlement. "What? Who then? . . ."

As if in answer to his question, the viewscreen shifted to the bridge of the super raider. A familiar, lovely form occupied the command throne.

"*Trejira!*" he growled through clenched teeth. "I'll have your pretty little head! Now, back off - Akinola is mine!"

The erstwhile administrative assistant of Lortho's father smiled. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Lortho. The *Ahmet'sur* has ordered that you break off this attack. He's rather upset about your rather boorish behavior and your recent, brash actions at the compound."

Lortho bristled with rage. "My . . . behavior? If that old fool wasn't bound by worthless, ancient traditions, we would already be rid of Akinola and Solly! My mistake was in abiding by his wishes in the first place!"

The view of the super raider's bridge widened to reveal a hunched form seated to one side. Tranji Elix leaned forward on his cane, eyes burning with indignant rage.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell your father yourself, Lortho. He's right here," said Trejira.

* * *

SS Eschaton **Verex system**

The *Eschaton* maneuvered wildly between the two raiders, strafing the Orion vessels with accurate, if ineffective phaser fire.

"They've stopped firing at us!" announced the helmsman.

"So I noticed," said Koordsen, dryly. "Solly, did you manage to take out their weapons?"

Solly shook his head, puzzled. "No. I doubt we've done much to weaken their shields. They've just . . . stopped."

Koordsen frowned. "Not that I'm complaining, but why? . . ."

The small Asian woman seated at Ops had remained silent thus far, with little to do but hang on. She suddenly turned to her boards, pressing an earpiece to her head. "Captain? We're being hailed by that super raider - the *Eli'tosh*."

Koordsen gestured at the main viewer. "Alright, Yi Soon, on screen."

The face of a striking Red Orion woman appeared. "*Eschaton*, this is *Ahmet Trejira* of the *Eli'tosh*. Please respond."

Koordsen glanced at Solly, who shrugged. "Ahmet, I am Captain Bjorn Koordsen of the *Eschaton*. What do you want?" He expected a demand for surrender and was prepared to order Solly to open fire, futile though the gesture might be.

"Captain, I offer you safe passage out of the system. Our two raiders have been ordered to stand down. You have twenty standard minutes to leave the system." She did not need say more.

Koordsen could scarcely believe their good fortune. "Very well, Ahmet. May I ask why you called off the attack?"

Don't push our luck! thought Solly.

Trejira smiled. "Let's just say that Captain Akinola did me a favor, which I'm now returning. However, please convey to him that it would be very bad for his health to return to Verex III." Her gaze shifted slightly. "The same goes for you as well, Solly Brin." She maintained her pleasant smile, but there was something in her eyes that gave Solly pause. Solly merely nodded.

"Your terms are acceptable," said Koordsen, quickly. "We were just leaving."

"Then I will not delay you," said Trejira. "*Eli'Tosh*, out."

The screen reverted to a view of the three Syndicate vessels.

"Helm, hard about to original course - maximum impulse," said Koordsen crisply. "Solly, keep a close watch on those ships in case they change their minds."

"I'm on it," said Solly, wondering what the hells had just happened?

* * *

18 December 2376
USS *Adair* - Captain's Ready Room
Occupied Cardassian territory

Captain Gunderson sipped her hot cocoa as she watched with bemusement the various emotions that played across Admiral Morgan Bateson's face. She had relayed to him all that Strauss had told her, to his amazement, relief and exasperation.

"You've got to be telling me the truth. No sane person could make up such a story," he finally said.

"I don't think I left anything out, Admiral. The question is, what do you want me to do with them?"

Bateson stroked his Van Dyke beard in thought. "I'll send a warp tug to bring in the *Greeley* and her crew. Have Strauss bring the *Bluefin* to Echo with the Greeley's senior officers. We'll have to sort out which ones are involved with the Syndicate and which ones are innocent. I want you to head to the designated rendezvous point with the *Eschaton*, take Akinola and Brin on to Earth to deliver the medicine to his grandson's family, then bring him back here to me."

"Understood." She hesitated, then pressed on. "Morgan, what are you going to do to Joseph, to Strauss?"

Bateson looked away from the screen a moment, wrestling with his emotions. "I don't know yet, Margaret. I'll be honest with you - it hurts that Joseph couldn't trust me with this!"

She nodded in sympathy. "No doubt, but he was dealing with the life of his grandson, Morgan. What would you have done if the situation was reversed?"

Bateson's features softened some and he sighed. "Yes, yes, you're right of course. And, placed in the same set of circumstances, I might not have done any differently."

"And Strauss? What of her?" pressed Gunderson.

He shook his head. "I don't know yet, Marge. But I think letting her sweat a bit until I do come to a decision will be character building, don't you think?"

Gunderson smiled as she took a sip of cocoa. "Yes. I do think."

* * *

19 December 2376
SS *Eschaton* - sickbay
approaching Occupied Cardassian territory

Jir Krelis, the *Eschaton's* ersatz physician, checked Akinola's vital signs and grunted with approval. Senior Chief Brin occupied a chair by Akinola's bed.

"How's he doing?" asked Brin.

"Quite well, actually," said Krelis, as he pressed a hypospray against Akinola's neck. "The ribs have knitted nicely and the spleen repair was a success. Now his body has to recover from the shock and stress it received. I'm giving him an immuno-booster along with some mild pain killers to help the healing process."

"He's been asleep a long time," observed Solly, a note of concern in his voice.

"All part of the healing process, Senior Chief. Don't worry, he's going to be fine."

Ma'run Collins, the *Eschaton's* Klingon-Human first mate, stuck her head in. "Still sleeping?" she asked.

Krelis nodded. "Yes, but improving steadily."

Akinola stirred, his brow furrowed. He licked his lips then murmured, ". . . Promises to keep . . . Miles to go before I sleep . . . Miles to go . . . before I . . . sleep." His face relaxed again as he drifted to a deeper state of slumber.

Solly frowned. "What was that he said?"

Ma'run nodded knowingly. "He was quoting a poem from the Klingon warrior poet, Q'Ralj."

Krelis rolled his eyes, then winked at Solly, who suppressed a smile.

* * *

20 December 2376
SS *Eschaton*
Occupied Cardassian territory

Face drawn and haggard, but on his feet, Joseph Akinola stood on the Antarean corvette's bridge, sipping coffee and feeling almost human again.

"Contact, bearing 210 mark 67," announced the helmsman.

"Right on time," remarked Koordsen.

The Ops officer frowned slightly. "Captain? It's a Federation vessel, but it's not the *Bluefin*."

Akinola and Koordsen exchanged puzzled frowns. "Identify that contact!" ordered Koordsen.

"Wait one," said the Asian woman. "Soyuz-class cutter. Ident code shows it as the USS *Adair*."

"Uh-oh," said Akinola and Brin, simultaneously.

* * *

USS *Adair* Occupied Cardassian territory

Captain Gunderson stood impatiently in transporter room one, torn between a desire to embrace Joseph and a desire to punch out his lights!

The transporter chief activated the console. Momentarily, twin columns of light shimmered on the transporter dais, coalescing into the forms of Joseph Akinola and Solly Brin.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?" queried Akinola.

Gunderson's sarcastic reply was caught in her throat when she got a good look at Akinola. His face was drawn, and multiple bruises and contusions - while faded, marred his face.

"My God! Joseph, you're hurt! Chief - contact sick bay . . ."

Akinola waved his hand dismissively. "Belay that Chief. . . Marge, I'm okay. They patched me up pretty well on Koordsen's ship. But you still haven't explained why you're here instead of the *Bluefin*?"

Captain Gunderson eyed Akinola with uncertainty, but jerked her head toward the corridor. "Alright, come along - you too, Solly. You have no idea the headaches you've created!"

* * *

Ten minutes later, in Gunderson's comfortable ready room, Akinola and Brin sat with mugs of hot coffee and expressions of surprise on their faces.

"Let me get this straight, Marge. Inga took *my ship* and went after a rogue starship that was on the Syndicate's payroll? What was she thinking?"

"Apparently, the same thing you were thinking. You needed the medicine, the Syndicate had it, she was going to get it."

"Yes, but confound it! I gave her strict orders to proceed to Point Station Gamma!"

"A fine example *you* were in that regard," said Gunderson, drolly.

"She hacked into my private communiqués!"

"She showed initiative in helping her commanding officer," countered Gunderson.

"Why are you taking her side?" asked Akinola sharply.

"Because I've had some time to reflect. Joseph - you put your exec in an untenable position. You took off without giving her all the facts. Yes, she got in over her head, but if *you* had asked for help from Bateson, from *me*, then maybe we wouldn't be sorting through this mess and you wouldn't have gotten beaten up!"

"I didn't get 'beaten up,'" he said, petulantly. Brin was absolutely fascinated with the artwork in Gunderson's office.

"Moving beyond that," continued Gunderson, reasonably, "Morgan wants me to take you on to Earth so you can get that medicine to your grandson. After that, well . . . the Admiral will want your explanation face to face."

Akinola nodded. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Gunderson looked at Solly. "Senior Chief, thank you for keeping the old reprobate alive. Why don't you see Senior Chief Gillespie and he'll get you bunked in?"

Taking the hint, Solly rose. "Yes ma'am. Thank you." He looked at Akinola. "Let me know if you need me, Skipper."

Akinola reached up and grabbed the Orion's large hand. "Always, Senior Chief, always."

When Brin departed, Gunderson circled her desk and took the seat by Akinola. She leaned forward and grasped his left hand. "Joseph. For the past three days, I didn't know if you were dead or alive. And I told myself that if you *were* alive, that I'd give you the ass-chewing of a life time."

Akinola merely nodded, steeling himself for the tempest to come.

"But," she continued, "I think you've been through enough. To be honest, I'm very proud of you for laying down everything for the sake of a grandchild you've never met."

He smiled. "There are some things that just have to be done, Marge."

Her eyes shown with held-back tears. "You'd charge hell with a snowball for a friend, Joseph." She kissed him on the cheek. "Okay, away with you now. Let's get you some quarters before the crew begins to talk!"

* * *

24 December 2376
Nairobi, United Africa, Earth
The Okimbe residence
1820 hours, local time.

"I'll get it!" shouted young Thomas Okimbe, as the door chimed a second time. His parents were busy with decorating their Christmas tree.

The eight year old was tall for his age, but dark circles under his eyes betrayed his frail health. Still, he was a happy, optimistic child excited about Christmas and the gifts he would open the next morning.

He came to the comm panel and pressed it. "Who is it?" he asked. The face of his Aunt Melody appeared on the screen. Standing next to her was a tall, dark-skinned man he didn't know.

"It's Aunt Melody, Thomas. Let us in, we've brought a surprise for you!"

Thomas tapped the unlock pad on the screen and the door opened with a click. Aunt Melody bent down and scooped up her great-nephew. Thomas regarded the stranger warily.

"Who's he?" he asked, quietly.

Melody smiled. "That's my big brother, Joseph. He's your grandfather!"

Thomas' eyes widened. "You're a starship captain!" he exclaimed, awe in his voice.

Akinola chuckled at his grandson's expression. "That's right, Thomas. I wanted to come by and . . ."

He was interrupted by a lovely woman with dark skin and green eyes. "Thomas, who is . . ." Tanya Okimbe's voice trailed off when she saw her father at the door.

"Hello Tanya. Merry Christmas," said Akinola, quietly. He had faced myriad dangers throughout his long career, but he had never felt so nervous and afraid as at this moment.

Tanya stared at her father for a moment. "You . . . did it, didn't you?" There was both hope and fear in her voice.

Akinola held up an aluminum case and nodded. "It's here, Tanya. Enough to treat Thomas and as many as twenty others."

Tanya's hands flew to her mouth as her eyes brimmed with tears. "He's going to be okay, then? My baby is going to live?"

Akinola nodded, unable to speak. Suddenly, Tanya threw her arms around her father's neck and clung to him, crying. The old captain hesitated, then slowly embraced his daughter as tears flowed from his face.

Thomas looked quizzically at his great-aunt. "What's wrong with them?"

Melody Akinola smiled at her great-nephew with tear-filled eyes. "Nothing's wrong, little man. In fact, I'd say that everything is fine! Just fine!"

Chapter Eighteen

29 December 2376

Star Station Echo

Office of Admiral Morgan Bateson, Commander-Border Squadron 7

Tap

Commander Inga Strauss stood at rigid attention, eyes fixed on a point 18 inches above the seated Admiral Bateson.

Tap

Admiral Bateson studied the padd containing Strauss' after-action report of the *Bluefin's* recent encounter with the *Horace Greeley*, his face impassive.

Tap

Inga winced internally each time Bateson brought his stylus down on the edge of the padd. If he was trying to unnerve her, she would be damned if she would show it!

Tap

Bateson finally set the padd down on the desk, leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. He stared at Commander Strauss without speaking for a protracted amount of time, his expression neutral. Inga thought the office was unusually warm.

"I am in a quandary, Commander Strauss," Bateson said, at last.

"Sir," uttered Strauss. It was the most innocuous thing she could think to say.

"I don't know whether to write an official reprimand or an official commendation."

Strauss decided silence was the best answer at this point.

"You see, on the one hand, you disobeyed your commanding officer's directive and took your ship into a potentially hazardous situation. You did so without notifying your squadron commander, that being me, or any other senior commander who could provide you with back-up! That was reckless,

immature, and stupid!" Bateson's voice rose in volume and intensity. Still, Inga did not flinch.

The Admiral glared at her for another moment, before resuming. "But, on the other hand, you did manage to capture and arrest Syndicate operatives on a Starfleet vessel. Those involved had been acting unbeknown to us and with complete impunity until you intervened. You and your crew showed courage, initiative and some creative thinking in capturing that rogue ship quickly with no loss of life and no significant damage to either ship."

"Sir, it was Lt. Commander T'Ser's quick thinking . . ."

"SILENCE!" Bateson roared. "I'll tell you when you can speak!" He paused as the echo of his voice in the office faded. "I am fully aware of Commander T'Ser's part in this. It is not lost on me that she, in fact, probably saved your life and that of Lt. Bane. She most definitely will receive a commendation for her actions."

Strauss was both relieved and pleased to hear that. It would make whatever punishment befell her more bearable.

Bateson stood from his chair and walked around the desk, standing before Strauss with his arms folded. At 6 feet three inches, he loomed over the petite Strauss. She swallowed and focused on his commbadge.

"I do have one question for you, Commander," he said, his tone softer.

"Yes sir?" she replied.

"Your after-action report is very detailed, save for one point. You neglected to say how you knew there was a Syndicate operation on the *Horace Greeley*."

Strauss swallowed. This was the question she had feared.

"Sir, with all due respect, I wish for my source to remain confidential."

Bateson lifted his eyebrows, but no eruption came forth.

"I could order you to answer," he pointed out, not unkindly.

For the first time, Inga's face faltered slightly. Her mouth twitched with barely concealed emotion.

"Yes sir. You could," she said softly.

Admiral Bateson continued to gaze at the young woman's face, then nodded slightly. "Very well, Commander. I'll let that pass - for now." He moved back to take his seat.

"As I said. You've left me with a quandary, which I must resolve. Therefore, my decision is to neither reprimand nor commend you for your recent actions. You are clear to return to your duties as Executive Officer of the *Bluefin*."

A feeling of pure relief washed over Inga.

"However!" his voice again took on an edge of steel. "If you *ever* act in such a precipitous manner, I'll have your pips and you'll get your walking papers! Are we clear?!"

Strauss came to even more rigid attention.

"Yes sir!"

"Good!" Bateson growled. Now, get out of here and ask your Captain to come in!"

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Star Station Echo, berth 12

T'Ser stood before the door to Lt. Sarnek's quarters and hesitated. She took a deep, calming breath, not wanting to show the turmoil of emotions that churned within her. She pressed the enunciator.

"You may enter," came Sarnek's voice.

T'Ser walked into the Vulcan helmsman's quarters. As she had anticipated, it was austere decorated, in keeping with traditional Vulcan sensibilities. The temperature was very warm and the air very dry to more closely approximate the planet Vulcan's arid climate.

Sarnek stood, hands clasped behind his back, his face neutral. He inclined his head in greeting.

"T'Ser," he said. For the first time that she could recall, Sarnek had not used "Commander" when initiating conversation with her.

She nodded in return. "Sarnek, I've come with my answer."

Sarnek said nothing, but merely stood impassively.

"I must decline your offer of *Talyut Kalifah*," she said, managing to keep a tremor out of her voice.

Sarnek's expression did not change, though she thought she detected a slight upward tick of an eyebrow on his forehead.

"Very well," he replied, with no acrimony in his voice. "May I ask why you have decided to decline?"

It's not you . . . it's me . . . suddenly flashed into her mind. She fought the urge to giggle nervously. She pursed her lips, again calming herself. "Sarnek, I understand that this is an 'exploration of destinies.' Well, to be truthful, I am very unsure of my own destiny at this point in my life. Look . . . can we sit down?"

Sarnek indicated the sofa. She sat and he did likewise, albeit rigidly. She took a chance and reached for his hand. This time, his face registered surprise.

Giving his hand a squeeze, she continued. "Sarnek, I'm more Human than Vulcan in how I live, how I think, how I *feel*!. And at the moment, I'm feeling very confused." She gazed into his dark eyes. "I've come to value you as a person, Sarnek, not just as a competent officer. If things were different in my life, then . . . yes, I might be open to exploring our destinies."

"Different in what way?" he asked, quietly.

"If I had not loved and lost Dale McBride," she began, "if our families were not at odds, if I had grown up in a different place or time . . ." her voice trailed off.

Sarnek's face showed he was listening intently, trying to understand. "A Terran once wrote of two ships that pass in the night."

She smiled at him. "From what I remember, it was part of a pretty cheesy song."

He frowned, puzzled. "Cheesy?"

She laughed. "Never mind. Your quote is appropriate, Sarnek. Our destinies seem to lie in different directions. Impulsively, she kissed him on the cheek. He looked startled and he put his hand to his face.

"Please explain the significance of this action," he said.

T'Ser smiled. "On Earth, we call it 'letting you down easy.' It means I would still like to be your friend." Smiling, she stood. He also stood, still looking puzzled, but nodding.

"That is acceptable," he said. He lifted his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, T'Ser of Earth."

She returned the salute. "Peace and long life, Sarnek of Vulcan."

* * *

Star Station Echo

Office of Admiral Morgan Bateson, Commander-Border Squadron 7

Akinola entered Bateson's office with a cup of the Admiral's premium coffee in hand.

"Should I set this down, or does the cat o' nine tails come later?" asked Akinola.

"Shut up and have a seat," grouched Bateson. "I see you helped yourself to the good stuff."

"Your aide offered it to me."

"I've got to talk to him about being a better judge of character." Bateson leaned forward and clasped his hands together on his desk. "Joseph, what the Hell were you thinking?"

Akinola sighed and shifted in his chair. "Honestly? I'm not sure that thinking played a big part in it. Tanya contacts me out of the blue, the next thing I

know I'm off to Verex III for some medicine I've never heard of. All for a little boy I never met until a few days ago."

"So, how is the boy?"

Akinola smiled. "I spoke to them this morning. He's already showing a positive response to the medicine. In a few weeks, they can address the leukemia. His outlook is excellent."

"Good, glad to hear it," said Bateson. He stood and walked over to the viewport, his back to Akinola.

"Why didn't you tell me what you were planning to do?" Bateson asked, quietly.

"I knew what I had to do, Morgan. I also knew that it would probably be dangerous and possibly illegal. If I told you, and things went sideways, that would make you culpable," Akinola shook his head. "I couldn't have that."

Bateson turned. "I appreciate that, Captain, but I can't have my cutter commanders taking off on every personal whim or vendetta that comes their way!"

"Do you want an apology? Okay. I'm sorry I put you in such a position."

Batson's eyes flashed. "Dammit, Joseph! Don't be flip! You took off and left your XO in the dark. She had to dig to find out what you were doing, for which I don't blame her! Then, she goes off on her own crusade to try to help her CO! That's *your* fault, Captain! You abandoned your ship, your mission and your crew without so much as a by-your-leave! And you kept me completely out of the loop - that is **TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE!**"

Akinola took the tirade stoically, but a realization dawned. Bateson wasn't so much angry as he was hurt.

"You're right," said Akinola, quietly.

"What's that?" asked Bateson.

Akinola raised his head. "I said, you're right, Admiral. I screwed up. I should have told Inga what I was doing and I should have let you know too." He fixed his eyes on Bateson. "But I would do it all over again, if I had too."

Bateson glared at Akinola, then sat at his desk, pulling a padd from a drawer. "I'm filing a formal reprimand, Captain. You may, of course, request an inquest if you wish to challenge this."

Akinola shook his head. "No sir. I don't wish to challenge."

Bateson nodded as he took his stylus to the padd. Without looking up he said, "Dismissed."

Without another word, Akinola stood and exited the Admiral's office.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Star Station Echo, berth 12

Commander Strauss entered the bridge for her duty shift. T'Ser stood from the center seat.

"The Captain wishes to see you," said T'Ser. There was a look of sympathy on her face.

Inga nodded. "Thanks," she said flatly. *We who are about to die salute you*, she thought, with gallows humor. Steeling herself, she walked to the door of Akinola's ready room and touched the enunciator.

"Come!" came the muffled reply.

Taking a deep breath, she entered to face the encounter she had most feared.

Captain Akinola was seated behind his antique oak desk eating a bowl of ice cream. He gestured to one of the chairs opposite him.

"Have a seat, Commander," he said as he scraped the last bit of cherry-vanilla from the bowl and set it aside. Strauss sat on the edge of the chair, her body tense.

He leaned back in his chair and regarded his young XO. His features were relaxed and his eyes serene. Strauss was puzzled, having expected a repeat of Admiral Bateson's reading of the riot act. Akinola noticed the puzzled look on her face and chuckled.

"At ease, Inga. I'd be a first level hypocrite to take you to the mast after you've received your tongue-lashing from Captain Gunderson and Admiral Bateson."

"Sir, may I ask - how is your grandson?"

"You may ask - he is doing very well, thanks. It looks like the medicine is going to do the job. The oncologists predict a full recovery for him."

Inga smiled. "I'm very glad to hear that, sir."

Akinola nodded. "Thanks." His expression became somewhat more serious. "We do need to talk about what happened, though. We both made mistakes for which I must bear the responsibility."

"Sir, with respect, I'm willing to face up to my own errors."

Akinola nodded. "I know that, Commander. And you made some big ones. But you did so because of the position in which I placed you." He cleared his throat as he struggled to parse his thoughts.

"Inga, I make no apologies for what I did regarding my grandson. It was a breach of protocol and I accept that I've got to take my lumps for that. So be it." He turned in his chair to face her fully. "But I do apologize for putting you in the position of defending me."

Strauss frowned. "Defending you? I'm not sure I understand."

"You took a big risk to help me, Commander. Part of that was risking my anger over violating my privacy and reading private communiqués."

Inga felt her face redden, but she remained silent.

"And I was angry - at first. Marge - Captain Gunderson helped me realize that you did it because you *had* to. In a strange way, it demonstrated your loyalty to me. That loyalty is what got you in too deep."

"Sir, we were concerned for you. Your actions were so . . . out of character."

Akinola smiled. "I guess they seemed that way, didn't they? But you didn't know me back when . . . well, that's another time." He stopped to gather his thoughts. "Inga, I want you - us, to learn from this. I appreciate, and am

grateful for the loyalty that motivated you to try to help me. That's very commendable. But a commander's primary responsibility is to his or her ship and crew. I didn't set a very good example for you when I took off so suddenly. Perhaps if I'd explained what I was doing more fully . . . if I'd *trusted* you as I should have, you might have thought through your actions a bit more."

Inga considered his words. "Yes sir. I suppose that's true."

Akinola leaned back and laced his fingers behind his neck. "I am curious as to how you discovered the Syndicate operation on the *Greeley*."

Strauss swallowed. "Respectfully sir, I'd rather not."

"It was Bane, wasn't it?"

Strauss' expression showed surprise. Akinola grinned. "You've got to work on your poker face, Inga! You're like an open book."

"How did you know, sir?"

His smile faded. "Nigel told me himself. He came by this morning, told me about his brother's Corellan acid addiction and how he got caught up with the Syndicate. Nigel felt torn between his loyalty to Starfleet and love for his brother. He offered his resignation."

Strauss started. "He did?"

Akinola nodded. "I refused to accept it. I think I understand how family can make you do strange things. He agreed to take some time to consider his future."

Inga nodded. Nigel had not shared any of this with her.

"He was also concerned that he had hurt your career by his actions." Akinola gazed directly at Strauss. "I assured him that was not the case."

Inga was silent for a moment, pondering this. She looked up at Akinola. "Captain? What did the Admiral . . . what did he do to you?"

Akinola shrugged slightly. "A formal reprimand and a royal chewing-out. Nothing I can't live with."

Strauss' face fell. A formal reprimand basically ended any chance that Akinola would reach flag rank. The captain noticed her expression and smiled.

"To be honest, he did me a favor. I would resign before I'd accept a promotion. I'd go nuts behind a desk on a station somewhere. I'm doing what I know best." He glanced at an old wooden chronometer on the bulkhead. "I best let you get to the bridge - you're late relieving Commander T'Ser."

She stood, her mind still not processing the surreal nature of the meeting. She walked to the door, then stopped and turned.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"Thank you for the second chance."

He nodded. "You're earning it. See you later, Commander."

* * *

"Have a seat, T'Ser," said Akinola. The Vulcan Ops officer had come by after Strauss relieved her.

T'Ser sat primly in the proffered chair.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Captain. I know you're trying to get settled back in, but . . . I wish to request leave."

"You've certainly got enough accumulated, T'Ser. What do you have in mind? A week on Risa might be good for you."

"Actually, I need some time . . . to think. I'd like to visit my parents on Earth." She looked up. "If possible, I'd like to take extended leave . . ." She looked past Akinola out the viewport at the stars. "I . . . don't know if I belong out here any more."

Akinola's face registered concern. "You've never really had a chance to grieve Dale properly."

She tossed up her hands in a helpless gesture. "No . . . maybe . . . I don't know. That's part of it, sir, but I just feel - unsettled."

"You know," began Akinola, "you have the seniority and experience to make a fine first officer on any ship in Starfleet. You showed a lot of poise and savvy against the *Greeley*! Lord knows, I'd hate to lose you, but you should keep your options open. You're name's on the short list for full commander. And scuttlebutt is that the stop-loss order will end soon. A lot of positions will be opening up."

T'Ser gave a slight smirk. "Sounds like you're trying to get rid of me."

"You know better! I'm just saying, this ship may hold too many memories for you - good and bad. Go on and visit your folks. I'll approve a three month leave of absence for you. You've got more time than that accrued."

T'Ser nodded. "Thank you, Captain - I appreciate it!"

"Don't mention it. Get some rest."

T'Ser smiled and exited the ready room. As she did, Akinola's smile faded. He turned and stared at the stars through the viewport. The familiar stars of the Borderlands were a comfort to him. But change was coming - of that he was certain. He did not fear it, but neither did he welcome it.

END