

Tales of the USS Bluefin

Fatal Distraction

By The Lone Redshirt

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This chapter in the Tales of the USS Bluefin saga takes place after the events of "Cascade Effect" and before the events of "Semper Paratus." Commander Dale McBride is the XO during this story, so Commander Inga Strauss will not appear. Likewise, Dr. Calvin Baxter is CMO, so Dr. Octavius Castille will not appear.

Confused? Sorry about that! Hopefully, future stories will have a more logical order. But then, to quote a certain emotionally-inclined Vulcan, "Sometimes you just gotta say, 'screw logic!'"

If you have not read any of the previous Bluefin stories, the setting is the immediate post Dominion war period, circa Earth year 2376. We are following the lives, loves and adventures of the crew of the USS Bluefin, a 70 year old Albacore - class Border Service cutter, commanded by Captain Joseph B. Akinola, a 59 year old human of African descent.

Thanks for stopping by to read the tale. I welcome and appreciate your comments!

And now, on with the story . . .

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Star Station Echo
Level 16 - Merchants' Alley

Commander Dale McBride, executive officer of the USS *Bluefin*, was on a mission. The tall Texan worked his way through the throngs of beings crowding Merchants' Alley, the retail and trade district of the station. McBride glanced furtively around, making sure he was not followed. Following a circuitous route, he finally came to his destination. With another quick glance over his shoulder, he entered the establishment.

The shop was full of merchandise from various worlds. Exotic smells and colors offered a hint of tantalizing treasures from across the quadrant. Yet, none of these things interested Commander McBride. He saw the Bolian proprietor and their eyes met. The hefty Bolian smiled broadly and gestured for McBride to come over.

"Ah, commander. You have returned, no doubt to complete our transaction?" asked the Bolian.

"I have," said McBride. "But I hope you want be offended if I check out th' merchandise with a tricorder."

The Bolian spread his hands in an expansive gesture. "Not at all. I stand behind all of my merchandise. Of course, a tricorder cannot quantify the sheer *ecstasy* that such a thing can provide."

"For 3,000 credits, it sure better provide somethin'" McBride groused.

"Ah, but remember, if you pay in gold-pressed latinum, the item is only 2,500." said the Bolian, his eyes glittering.

"Seems I'm a bit short on the latinum," said McBride.

The Bolian made a dismissive gesture. "Not a problem. Your Federation Credits are welcome!"

"Uh-huh. How 'bout I take another gander at the merchandise."

The Bolian took a key from his robes and opened a case. He withdrew a tray covered with a cloth, then retrieved the requested item. "Exquisite, isn't it?" remarked the merchant.

McBride produced a tricorder and opened it, making a few adjustments. He scanned the item for a moment, then checked the display, grunting with satisfaction. "Yep, that's the real deal, alright!"

"You'll take it, then?" asked the Bolian, fairly rubbing his hands in anticipation.

McBride proffered a small disc. "Yep. Here's my credit disc. And don't bother wrappin' it. I'll take care of that m'self."

Mission accomplished, the commander retraced his steps and headed back to the ship.

* * *

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Berth 10

Captain Joseph B. Akinola stripped out of his sweat-soaked karate *ghee* and into the sonic shower. He enjoyed teaching the Shotokan class in the ship's gym, but he sometimes felt every one of his 59 years after the intense workout. The deep, ultrasonic pulses relaxed his sore muscles while cleaning his body and refreshing his spirit. He stepped out and put on the standard black jumpsuit with red turtleneck. He stepped in front of the mirror to rub beard suppressor lotion on his face. The face that stared back was dignified if not handsome. The years and harsh experiences had added lines to his brown face and a generous sprinkling of gray to his curly black hair. His eyes conveyed a mix of confidence, strength and depth of character. These were eyes that had seen death and danger on numerous occasions without blinking. He straightened, wiped his hands on a towel, and stode out of quarters on his way to engineering.

Main engineering on the *Bluefin* was located on deck 7 in the secondary hull. It was more cramped than was typical for larger ships, but it had an efficient layout and Chief Galt kept it clean and in peak operating shape. As Akinola neared engineering, he could hear Lt. Commander Galt, the Tellarite chief engineer in full cry. Galt was a crusty veteran who, next to his beloved engines, enjoyed nothing more than berating crewmen and arguing with senior officers. Oddly enough, these annoying traits endeared him to the officers and crew of the cutter.

"By the whore-loving second deity's dripping snout! Harding! How many times have I told you not to shut off the coolant pump like that. You could shear the impellers clean off the shaft! Even my grand-aunt's pet Yariq knows that! Now, do it right!" boomed Galt. He turned to see Captain Akinola leaning against a bulkhead, smiling at him. "And what the frak do you want? We're busy, you know."

"I just had a need to be around your happy self, commander."

Galt came over and shook Akinola's hand. "Up yours, sir. Seriously, we're pretty busy, captain. If you want to conduct an inspection . . ."

Akinola shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I just wanted to check with you about a couple of things." he paused, "Intel says the Orions have a new class of raider with type X phasers."

Gralt raised two bushy eyebrows. "Fraaak me," he said softly. He crossed his arms. "Where do you think they got those?"

Akinola shook his head. "That, I don't know. What I care about is whether our shields are going to be up to it if we run into one of these super raiders."

Gralt blew out a breath and rubbed his snout in thought. "Yes, but not for long. Type X phasers will wear down our shields fast. 'Course, we can always adjust shield harmonics, overlap over critical areas like the bridge and nacelles . . ."

"What about that idea you had a while back - generating a second layer of shields?"

"Well - yeah, it's possible, in theory, that is. We'd need to modify the backup shield generators, beef up the grid to handle the extra power . . ."

"Yes or no, Gralt. Can you do it?"

He nodded. "Yes sir. We can get it done."

"How long?"

"Two - three days if we can get into spacedock."

"Let me handle that," said Akinola.

* * *

Star Station Echo
Level 3, Starside Restaurant

Commander McBride and Lt. Commander T'Ser sat at a booth by a viewport with a spectacular view of space. T'Ser had enjoyed her Alaskan King Crab legs, rice pilaf and vegetable medley. She frowned at McBride's plate - a very nice looking steak that he had barely touched.

"Dale? Is something wrong with your food?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, no, no. It's fine."

She took a sip of wine. "You've barely touched your steak. And, you've barely said two words since we got here. What's wrong?"

McBride rubbed sweaty palms on the legs of his trousers. "T'Ser, we've been together now, what - a year?"

"One year, one month, two weeks, three days, twelve hours, six minutes and 49 seconds," she said, deadpan.

McBride just stared at her.

T'Ser smiled and reached across the table, grabbing his hand and giving it a squeeze. "Dale! I'm *kidding!* Now come on, spill it. What's wrong?"

He took a deep breath and put his large hand over hers. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, T'Ser. I know we said we didn't want to press the issue about our future, what with our kinda dangerous line of work and all . . ."

T'Ser raised an eyebrow. "But? . . ."

"But, I want you to know that whatever future I have, I want you to be part of it." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small box. "T'Ser, I hope that you will accept this . . . as a promise from me that we will have a future together."

Now T'Ser was the one who felt nervous. "Dale, I . . ."

"Open it," he said.

She took the small box with trepidation. Squeezing it slightly to release the magnetic clasp, it opened to reveal a sparkling diamond mounted on a gold ring. She simply stared at the radiant stone, momentarily speechless.

"T'Ser, I want you to be my wife. I'm not asking to set a date or even to announce it yet. But I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

T'Ser's vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. "Dale, I love you too. And the ring is beautiful. But I don't know if I'm ready for this. I'm still afraid . . ."

McBride's smile wavered. "Honey, that's okay. The idea kinda scares me too."

T'Ser wiped her eyes. "Dale, I . . . I can't accept this right now. Please understand, I'm not saying I don't want to marry you. But I'm just . . . not ready for this." She looked at him with pleading eyes, "Please try to understand!" She moved the ring box back to McBride's hand.

McBride forced a smile. "Hey! Sure I do. No problem." He took the box with the ring and put it back in his jacket. He glanced up at a wall-mounted chronometer. "Wow, look at the time. I guess we better get back to the ship."

"Dale . . ."

He looked at T'Ser with sadness in his eyes. "Thanks for bein' straight with me." He stood, seeming unsure what to do, then walked toward the exit.

T'Ser sat still for a moment. She took a shaky breath then another swallow of wine. Shaking her head, she stood. "Damn," she said softly.

* * *

Star Station Echo

Level 8, Office of Rear Admiral Morgan Bateson, Commander, 7th Border Service Squadron

Admiral Bateson stood and came around his desk to greet Akinola. "Joseph! Come in, have a seat." he indicated a comfortable looking wing-back chair by a low table. Bateson pulled up the chair's twin and sat across from Akinola. "What can I do for you, captain?"

"Sir, I'm sure you've read the intel on the Orion's new raider."

Bateson's smile faded. "Unfortunately, yes. Beastly thing, from what I've read. It's still a kludge of a design, but it makes up for that with firepower."

"And that's what concerns me, sir. You know as well as I do that our old cutters won't last long under a type X phaser barrage. My engineer, Galt, has an idea to up-rate the shields on the *Alabcores* and the *Soyuz* cutters. The problem is that it violates about five Fleet-Ops directives."

Bateson stroked his beard pensively. "And you want me to grease the skids and get the modifications approved."

Akinola smiled. "I see why they made you an admiral - you know exactly what I'm thinking."

Bateson snorted but had a pleased look on his face. "I know what you're thinking because I was driving a cutter before you were born." He paused, considering. "Have your engineer send me his proposal. I'll get my aide to add enough bureaucratic techno-babble in the request that it will get approved. Fleet Ops loves that kind of stuff! In the mean-time, proceed with your modifications."

"Thank you, admiral."

"Don't thank me until you find out the modifications work! Now, you're not leaving until you share this bottle of Saurian Brandy that the captain of the *Snapper* gave me . . ."

* * *

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Spacedock Berth 2

Captain Akinola strode into the crowded wardroom to conduct the staff meeting. The assembled officers rose as he entered.

"Be seated," he said, briskly. He scanned the long table, noting the presence of Commander McBride, Dr. Baxter, Lt. Bane, Lt.(j.g.) Bralus, Lt. Commander T'Ser, and Senior Chief Brin. He also noted that McBride and T'Ser were sitting apart, but he did not comment on that. "Commander Galt is on the hull with his engineering team working on the shield upgrades, so he's excused." He stood beside the large viewscreen at the end of the wardroom. "Computer, display the image of the Orion up-rated raider."

The viewscreen came to life portraying the image of a rather sinister and ugly vessel. As was typical for Orion ships, it was a hodge-podge of purchased, stolen or replicated technologies from a myriad of races. The wedge shaped hull was considerably larger than the typical raider. Two warp nacelles that looked to be of Klingon design rode on stubby angled struts and the impulse unit on the stern appeared to be from a Federation vessel.

"Highlight weapons systems," said Akinola.

The image of the vessel began to alternately rotate between its X and Y axis. Red boxes appeared around multiple ports while an oblong red rectangle surrounded type X phaser strips on the dorsal and ventral aspects.

Akinola crossed his arms and regarded his officers. "Fleet intel has learned that the Orions now have at least two of these super raiders. There's much we don't know about them, but what we do know is cause for concern." He turned his attention back to the viewscreen. "As you can see, the ship is very well-armed with point-defense phasers as well as two type-x arrays. You can also see what appear to be torpedo tubes located fore and aft. Based on the engine design and hull geometry, estimated top speed is at least warp 9."

There was a whistle and low murmurs at that. The Orions now had a ship that could keep pace with and even outrun some of Starfleet's capitol ships. The weaponry was roughly equivalent to an *Intrepid* - class starship.

Akinola continued. "Of course, there's much we don't know about these ships - shield strength, counter-measures, sensor efficiency and range, not to mention number or types of torpedoes it may carry. One thing is obvious. This ship is designed to make our lives much harder." He let that settle in a moment. "Questions or comments?"

Lt. Bane raised his hand. "Any idea where they're based, cap'n? Could we take them out with a pre-emptive strike?"

"That's been considered, Mr. Bane. However, we do not have firm intel on their base, but its almost a certainty that it will be deep in Orion space. In addition, Starfleet command cannot spare any capitol ships for a deep strike mission. Computer, display slide two."

The viewscreen changed to show a list of ships under the heading, "Task-force Vole Trap." Lt. Bralus whispered to Bane, "Who comes up with these names?"

"Do you have an insight to share, Mr. Bralus," asked Akinola with a piercing stare.

"Uh, no sir. Sorry."

Akinola called their attention to the screen. "Our mission is basically picket duty. We have seven ships assigned - the *Albacore* cutters, *Bluefin*, *Scamp*, *Snapper* and *Growler*, two *Soyuz* - class cutters, the *Bozeman* and *Ventura*, plus the warp tug, *Kilimanjaro*. We are to seek out and intercept these super raiders if they come into Federation space. At that time, we will either board or engage them. Under no circumstances are these ships to be allowed to freely transit Federation space. They are to be considered hostile warships."

"I would doubt the Orions put the time and effort into building these ships just to allow us to take them away peaceably," noted Dr. Baxter, dryly.

"You're probably right, doctor. Thus the upgrades to our shields. If we do run into one, we can count on a fight. I want each one of you to prepare your departments for this mission. Lt. Bane, if you need to tweak the sensors, now is the time to do so. Any questions? Alright, dismissed."

The officers and chief Brin picked up their PADDs and filed out. As Commander McBride was about to exit, Akinola stopped him. "Just a moment, XO. I need a moment of your time."

* * *

In the corridor as the senior officers went their separate ways, T'Ser tugged on Dr. Baxter's lab coat. "Doctor, may I speak to you - in private?"

Baxter smiled, "Certainly, my dear. Let's go to my office."

Baxter and T'Ser made their way down to deck 7 and sickbay. The white-haired CMO led T'Ser into his office cubicle and offered her a chair while he sat in his own seat. "I can tell something's troubling you, T'Ser. What's wrong?"

The Vulcan second officer did not meet his gaze at first. She hesitated before beginning. "Two nights ago, Commander McBride proposed marriage to me," she said.

"And? . . ." prodded Baxter.

"And, I said no. At least 'no' right now." She looked up at Baxter with a look of sadness. "Things have been great between us, Doc. About a year ago, I thought we had come to an agreement that we wouldn't press the future. Things are just so . . . uncertain right now."

"What things are uncertain?" Baxter asked, gently.

T'Ser gestured around her. "All this, . . . life . . . the future. You were in the briefing, Doc. You know what dangerous times we live in!"

Baxter was quiet a moment as he peered at the young woman. "That's not all of it though, is it, T'Ser?"

She broke off eye contact again and shrugged slightly. "No."

Baxter reached over and squeezed her hand. "T'Ser, you know that anything you say to me will be held in strict confidence."

T'Ser smiled weakly as she brushed a tear from her eye. "I'm afraid, doctor. Every relationship I've ever had has ended badly. Not to mention my broken betrothal that has caused an entire planet to be pissed off at me!" The last she said with a tinge of bitterness.

"T'Ser. It sounds to me that your problem is not with the future. Your problem is with the past. Do you love Commander McBride?"

She looked up at him, eyes brimming with tears. "With all my heart! I just don't want to hurt him by failing . . ."

"Stop!" Baxter said with sudden intensity. "Look at me, T'Ser. I understand you've got some emotional baggage and that must be extra hard for a Vulcan. But you cannot go through life fearing failure. I would venture to say that you give yourself too much credit for your past broken relationships. As the very old saying goes, 'it takes two to Tango.'"

T'Ser cocked an eyebrow at Baxter. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you need to ask yourself a different question, T'Ser. You've answered the question about whether you love Mr. McBride and you've answered well. Now the important question is this: do you trust him?"

* * *

"Have a seat, Mr. McBride," said Akinola as he closed the wardroom door and took a seat himself. McBride complied and folded his tall frame back into a chair.

"XO, I don't know where your mind was this morning, but it certainly wasn't on the briefing. What the hell is wrong with you?"

McBride shifted uneasily in his seat. "Nothin's wrong, skipper. I was just distracted, that's all."

Akinola's tone softened. "I noticed that you and Commander T'Ser weren't exactly holding hands this morning. Is there a problem there?"

McBride sighed and shared the events of two nights earlier at the restaurant. Akinola listened with a sympathetic ear.

"Dale, I'm sorry that didn't work out. It must hurt like hell. God knows I'm no counselor - I screwed up one marriage thirty years ago and I've blown a half-dozen relationships since then, so I'm not the one to give you relationship advice. But listen - you've got to get your head straight and back in the game. I need you, Dale, and I need you focused! This is a dangerous mission we're facing."

Akinola leaned back in his chair. "Am I coming through, commander."

McBride produced a counterfeit smile, "Loud and clear, sir."

"Good! Do what you have to do in the next 36 hours to get yourself straight. Talk to T'Ser or not - that's your call. But when we pull out of here, I expect 100% from you. I need to know now if you can't produce and I'll leave you on the shore - no hard feelings. You've got plenty of accumulated leave time."

McBride bristled at the suggestion. "I said I'll be ready, sir! I will do my job."

Akinola's gaze never wavered. "See that you do, XO. See that you do."

* * *

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Spacedock Berth 2

Captain Akinola walked through the *Bluefin*, taking in the sights and sounds as the crew prepared the cutter for departure. Crewmen moved quickly through corridors, orders were shouted, and there was a sense of anticipation in the air. Their ship was about to take to the void of space, once more.

Akinola liked to practice the art of "leadership by walking around," whenever possible. He felt that it was important to be around the crew so that they could see him and he in turn could greet, encourage and occasionally joke with his crew. He took a secret pride in knowing the names of all 122 officers and crew on the ship. There might be bigger, faster and more famous ships, but in Akinola's mind there was no better crew or ship in the fleet to command. The crew, in return, had a deep, abiding respect and affection for the "old man."

The captain finished his "walk-about" and took the ladder back to deck one and the bridge.

* * *

"Captain on the Bridge!" said Lt. Bralus, the Bolian watch officer. Bralus relinquished the command chair and took his place at the helm.

Akinola took his place in the center seat. "Lt. Bane, sound departure stations and request clearance from spacedock control."

"Aye sir!" said the Assistant OPs officer, who turned to carry out his orders.

Akinola could sense the changes in the ship as they disconnected from the spacedock connections and shifted to internal power. There were subtle hums and vibrations from air handlers and gravity coils, the thump of airtight bulkheads and hatches, and even a miniscule change in the air pressure that made him swallow to equalize his ears. He allowed himself a faint smile at the pleasure these sounds gave him.

"Captain? Spacedock has cleared us for departure, route Beta until we clear the yard limits. He advises we have incoming traffic on route Alpha."

"Very well, Mr. Bane. Please acknowledge and convey my compliments to Commander D'Riskaal." Akinola tapped his comm badge. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Engineering, Galt here."

"Commander, we're cleared for departure. What's your status?"

"Ready for departure, captain. All impulse speeds available. Warp speed available to factor 9.2"

"Acknowledged, commander, and thank you. Bridge out." Akinola turned his attention back to the bridge. "Navigator, plot course . . ." he double-checked his PADD, "233 mark 48. Helm, ahead slow on thrusters until we clear the yard, then one half impulse to the outer markers."

Both the navigator and helmsman acknowledged and began to implement their orders. There was a muffled 'clank' and rumble as the docking clamps withdrew from the cutter. "I have a green board, captain. We're clear to maneuver," said Bralus.

"Take us out, lieutenant, forward angle on in-coming traffic, please."

Slowly, the cutter eased out of spacedock and into the "yard." As they moved passed other docks, they passed the incoming *Miranda* - class starship, the USS *Halifax*, coming in for maintenance work. The *Halifax* signaled a salute with its proximity comm-lasers, which the *Bluefin* returned. It struck Akinola how many old vessels were still active and serving decades past their projected service life, *Bluefin* and her seven *Alabcore*- class sisters included.

Momentarily, Lt. Bralus brought Akinola out of his reverie. "Coming up on yard limit, sir."

"Very well. Bring impulse engines on-line and take us to one-half impulse."

Bralus smoothly advanced the controls of the twin Consolidated Starfire impulse engines to Run 5. The hum of the ion-mass drivers caused a slight vibration in the deck plates as their power was translated into thrust. The cutter quickly picked up speed, approaching 40% of the speed of light.

"Once more, into the breach," Akinola said, *sotto voce*.

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Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*
Standard orbit, Verex III.

Supreme Deven Marak-Sar, commander of the up-rated Orion raider *Salturias* and heir-apparent to the Marak-Sar Syndicate family, was growing more impatient with each passing second. He chose to vent his frustration on his second in command, a one-eyed green orion male, named Rash. "Explain to

me why the slaves haven't been properly loaded and secured, Rash! We should have departed orbit ten minutes ago!"

Rash was not perturbed by the supreme's outburst. To him, it was the just Deven's normal way of communicating. "The compound can only beam up five at a time, supreme. Then the shields have to close for five minutes before the next group can transport. It's standard protocol."

Deven fumed, "I should flog the mis-begotten idiot that implemented that protocol."

Wisely, Rash decided not to point out that Deven's father, Grand Supreme Frel Marak-Sar, was the "idiot" that had ordered the security measure. Instead, he said, "It should not take much longer, supreme. And with our speed, we will still arrive at the Vega colony ahead of schedule."

At this, Deven's mood improved. "Ha! Well-said, Rash!" He grinned broadly, revealing bejeweled teeth. "And this time, on a direct path through Federation space. No more slinking along the border, making furtive dashes in and out of their precious domain!" He whirled and settled in the command throne with exaggerated drama. "I actually hope we encounter one of their border vessels - we will carve it up like a roast *kaminga*!"

Rash turned back to his station. "Be careful what you wish for," he muttered under his breath.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Sector 10145

Perspiration glistened on Commander McBride's brow and arms as he pummeled the heavy bag hanging in the ship's gymnasium. His arms and shoulders burned and his breathing was labored, but he continued to bore into the body bag, venting his frustration and pent-up energy.

"So . . . what did the bag do to tick you off?"

McBride grabbed the bag to steady it and turned to face T'Ser who was already dressed for her duty shift. "I'm not ticked off," he panted, "Just . . . getting in some exercise."

T'Ser raised an eyebrow. "Looked pretty intense to me. I've been standing here two minutes."

McBride unlaced his gloves with his teeth and pulled them off. "What do you want, T'Ser?"

T'Ser was taken back by the flatness in McBride's tone, but she chose to overlook it. "I thought we should talk, Dale. Especially in light of what happened."

McBride snatched a towel off of a stack and wiped his face and neck. "Don't you mean over what *didn't* happen? I think that spoke volumes, don't you?"

T'Ser spread her hands in frustration. "What do you want me to do, Dale? Apologize? I thought we had an understanding that we wouldn't make any rash promises about the future!"

"*Rash promises?*" McBride looked incredulous. "There was nothing rash in what I did, T'Ser. I've thought about this long and hard. I decided to take the risk and lay it on the line - I want to spend the rest of my life with you!"

T'Ser shook her head. "So you think that a compressed piece of carbon shoved on my finger will make it happen? Get real, Dale! You think some ritual, some ceremony will make our lives more secure somehow - our relationship permanent? Let me tell you - I've got a bad track record with rituals. One nearly ruined my life once and I'm *not* in a big hurry to repeat that mistake!"

McBride looked stunned. "That was different T'Ser. You didn't have a choice in your betrothal . . ."

T'Ser interrupted, hotly, "Like you're giving me a choice now? By the Other, Dale - you're putting me in the same situation! Either I go alone with your engagement and wedding or that's it? What kind of choice do I have in that? How dare you make our relationship into some kind of a bargaining chip!" She stood closer, her face flushed emerald. "I love you, Dale, but I will NOT choose marriage as the only way of keeping you!" She spun on her heel and stormed out of the gym.

McBride watched her storm off. Part of him longed to stop her, but he stood his ground. Frustrated and confused, he turned and punched the bag, scraping the knuckles of his unprotected fist. He held his bleeding knuckles to his

mouth for a moment, then he began to walk slowly out of the gym to his quarters.

* * *

USS Bluefin

On patrol in Sector 10145

The four non-coms settled around the make-shift table in the armory for a game of poker. Senior Chief Solly Brin pulled up an ancient swivel chair, while CPO Deryx and Corpsman Sanders sat on stun grenade crates. Chief Brundy, their new comrade who recently transferred from Deep Space 5, settled his massive frame on a foot locker, which creaked ominously under his weight.

"Almost forgot something!" said Deryx, the Denobulan chief, speaking around a strongly fragrant Ferengi cigar. He walked to a corner and picked up what seemed to be a photon mortar shell. It turned out to be a hollow casing which concealed several bottles of a glowing, blue liquid. He grabbed a bottle and began to splash a small amount into the four mugs of coffee.

A slight look of concern formed on Brundy's dark, broad features. "What is that stuff?" he asked with suspicion.

"Orion Nectar," replied Chief Deryx. "It'll add a jolt to your java."

"And take a few brain cells hostage," added Sanders who held out his mug for a bigger shot.

"Who's dealing?" asked Brin. "Sanders? You start."

"Gentlemen, the game is five-card stud. One-eyed Jacks are wild," the Corpsman said as he shuffled the deck.

"So, Brundy," asked Brin, "How do you like working with Commander Galt in engineering?"

Brundy grinned and shook his head. "I thought I was back in boot camp! I haven't heard language like that since my D.I. ran us through drills. He knows his stuff, though."

Deryx snorted. "I think he makes up most of that stuff he spouts just to impress the crew. What the frak is a Yariq anyway?"

Sanders began dealing the cards. "A Yariq? It's an animal native to Tellar - kind of a cross between a mule and an alligator. Stubborn with a lot of teeth."

Brundy's eyes suddenly got wide. He bolted off the foot locker and stood ramrod straight. "Attention on the deck!" he bellowed. To Chief Brundy's consternation, his three comrades merely remained seated with bemused expressions on their faces.

Captain Akinola stood by the doorway with a mug of coffee. "Stand easy, Chief Brundy. I couldn't sleep and was just out for a stroll and wanted to see what you pirates were up to."

Brundy had a puzzled expression on his face and retook his seat.

"The Captain spent most of his career as a working man, Chief Brundy," explained Senior Chief Brin. "When I was a new CPO like you, the captain was the senior chief sitting in this very chair."

"You want in the game, skipper?" asked Sanders, who began to rise from his crate.

Akinola shook his head. "Keep your seat, Sandy. I just wanted a bit of that deuterium tank cleaner you've got hidden in the corner. Besides, Solly cheats."

Brin rolled his eyes and shook his head. Brundy again seemed agitated that the captain knew of the booze stash.

Akinola smiled at Brundy's consternation. "Chief Brundy, who the hell do you think came up with that hidey hole in the first place?"

Deryx retrieved the glowing bottle and poured a bit into Akinola's steaming mug. The captain took a swallow and winced. "God, that's awful. Where did you get this, Solly?"

Brin feigned a hurt look. "That's some of the finest Orion Nectar in the quadrant captain! It was lovingly aged on Verex IV in a mold-wood cask with a mix of Denebian-slug spleens, Ferengi ear wax, Targ piss, and filtered through the hair of a green skinned slave girl, then buried in a peat bog for a century."

"You could've saved a lot of time and effort by just bottling the Targ piss, senior chief."

Brin looked at the three non-coms. "See, that's what happens when you become an officer. You start drinking Earl Green tea and holding your pinky out from your china cup."

"That's Earl *Grey* tea, senior," corrected Akinola.

Brin winked at his poker buddies. "I rest my case, skipper."

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*
Departing the Verex system

Deven Marak-Sar strolled through the hold of his vessel, admiring the confined slaves of various races that he would soon sell on the Vega colony. He paused by one cell and leered at a stunningly beautiful green-skinned Orion woman.

"Teeva, you look ravishing. It's a shame I can't provide the accommodations to which you are accustomed, but then, that's the price for infidelity."

Teeva lunged at the doorway but was stopped by the forcefield. The energy barrier flashed with blue sparks and the Orion woman was hurled to the squalid deck. She recovered quickly and glared at him with fire in her eyes. "I should have killed you when I had the chance, you *Hosh'lorm*."

Deven's smile faltered slightly at the insult. He pressed a stud on a control device he held. Instantly, Teeva's head snapped back convulsively as the agonizer collar activated the pain receptors in her body. She gasped from the pain and the paralyzing effect of the agonizer. Momentarily, Deven released the control and Teeva's rigid body went limp.

"I'm sorry, my dear, did you say something?" Deven asked, a taunting note to his voice. "I'm sure I'll get a fine price from the Nausicaans for you. Sadly, you probably won't last long in their care. The Nausicaans tend to play a bit . . . rough with their play things. But I'm sure you will provide them with excellent entertainment value. That is, while you last." He placed the agonizer control back in a pocket of his tunic. "Perhaps we can chat again before we

reach the Vega system. I do enjoy our conversations!" He strode away, leaving the Orion woman curled in a fetal position, trembling with pain and rage.

"I will kill you, . . . Deven Marak-Sar," she gasped through clenched teeth, "with my bare hands if necessary!"

* * *

Lt. Commander T'Ser pretended to study a PADD as she sat in the command chair on the bridge, but her mind was on Dale McBride. *Why do I bother with all of this?* she thought to herself, *better to make a clean break and both of us move on.* She shook her head, realizing she was kidding herself. She was deeply in love with McBride, as infuriatingly stubborn and closed-minded as he could be. But she was at a loss as to how to resolve their impasse.

She took a deep breath to clear her thoughts and to relieve the accumulated stress. T'Ser looked around the quiet bridge. Lt. Fralk manned the helm and Ensign Vashtee sat at navigation. Most other stations were vacant, although Lt. Bane had partially disappeared under the sensor station, still attempting to tweak more range and sensitivity out of the long-range system. She walked over to his station.

"Mr. Bane, have you ever considered marriage?" she asked.

There was a muffled *thunk*, followed by a shower of sparks and a series of profane Australian colloquialisms. Bane backed out from under the console, rubbing his head and regarding T'Ser with a raised eyebrow. "Crikey, commander, you gave me a start! Did you ask what I think you asked?"

"I was just wondering if you had ever considered marriage with anyone?" she asked in a reasonable tone.

Fralk and Vashtee exchanged glances and smiles. This was going to be good!

"Ah, well, no. Not specifically, that is. Why do you ask?"

It dawned on T'Ser that she had an expectant audience. Her cheeks began to take on a greenish blush. "No reason, lieutenant. Just . . . making conversation."

"Yes ma'am." Bane said, confused. "And yourself?"

T'Ser blinked. "What about myself?"

"Have you considered marriage?"

T'Ser's eyes flashed. "I hardly think that's any of your business, Mr. Bane!" she returned to the center seat and focused her attention studiously on the viewscreen.

"Ah, right. Sorry." Bane turned his gaze helplessly toward Fralk and Vashtee, both who had become fascinated with their control boards. "I'll just . . . get back to work." He disappeared under the console once more, wishing he knew what the bloody hell had just happened.

* * *

McBride sat in the dim light of his quarters, the velvet box containing the source of all his troubles in his hand. He opened it and regarded the gleaming diamond. Such a small thing to create so much heartache. He closed the box and placed it on the dresser.

He walked to the sink and splashed some water on his face to help him wake up. Sleep had evaded him this night, but his duty shift would begin in an hour, so he had to wake up.

He considered going to the wardroom for breakfast, perhaps meet T'Ser and talk for a few minutes. But the thought of another confrontation created a gnawing sensation in his gut.

Instead, he took his mug to the cabin's servitor and filled it with coffee. Mixing in an ample portion of sugar and cream, he sat again in his desk chair and stared out the viewport as the stars and time streaked by.

* * *

USS Bluefin

On patrol in Sector 10145

McBride made his way down the narrow, curving corridor toward the turbo-life, squeezing past crewmen in the midst of the shift change. He leaned against the wall, waiting on the lift so he could continue on to the bridge. When the lift arrived and the doors opened, T'Ser stepped out and stopped when she saw McBride.

"Commander," she said, neutrally.

"T'Ser . . ." he began, then stopped, a knot suddenly forming in his throat.

The beautiful Vulcan held his gaze for a moment, then averted her eyes and began to move in the direction of her quarters. McBride hesitated a moment, then called after her. "T'Ser, wait!" He caught up with her and gently grabbed her arm. She turned to look at him, an eyebrow raised in question.

"What is it, commander?"

He swallowed. "I just . . . I want to apologize for my behavior yesterday. You didn't deserve that."

T'Ser's expression softened a degree. "Thank you," she said, simply. "I'm sorry, too, Dale. But we've hit an impasse and I don't see a way around it."

Dale nodded. "I know. But I was up most of the night - thinking about us, about what you said . . ." He winced as he realized the time. "Look, could we have dinner this evening and just . . . talk? I promise - no ultimatums."

T'Ser allowed a small smile. "Okay, Dale. But you better get on to the bridge. The captain's already there and I don't think he's in a great mood." She touched his face gently. "I'll see you later."

McBride smiled back at her. "You can count on it!" He turned and trotted back to the lift.

* * *

McBride made it to the bridge before Alpha shift began with less than a minute to spare. The captain raised a questioning eyebrow at him but said nothing. The XO made his way to the tactical station, replacing Senior Chief Brin, and logged into his control board. After allowing the Alpha shift bridge crew to get settled in, Akinola called, "Status?"

Each station reported in. The ship was patrolling at a leisurely warp 2, long-range scanners were active with no contacts, and all ship's systems were operating normally.

"Very well," said the captain. "XO, have the phaser crew run drills and have the torpedo crews load two Mark 22s in the forward launcher with Mark VI torpedoes loaded aft and on standby forward."

McBride turned to Akinola in surprise. "Mark 22s, sir?" The Mark 22 "rat trap" torpedoes utilized an electro-magnetic pulse to disable a ship's warp drive and other systems. They were effective against small ships but usually did not work against larger, better shielded vessels.

Akinola nodded. "I know, XO. It's a long-shot, but I'd rather stop one of those super-raiders quickly rather than slug it out. If they don't work, we've got the Mark VI fish to do the job."

"Aye, sir," said McBride as he turned to carry out his orders.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*
Sector 10146, running at warp 8.9

Two small, Red Orion children occupied a cell in the hold of the super-raider. 10 year old Rani and his sister, 6 year old Stori, huddled together on the lumpy, dirty mattress in the corner of their cell. It had been a few weeks, months? Rani did not know the amount of time since he and his little sister were taken by the men with the knives and guns. He remembered the shouting, the screams of their mother, the harsh laughs of the men and . . .

He could not, *would* not think of the rest. Part of him wished he had died with their mother, but Rani felt a strong protective instinct to take care of little Stori, who had not spoken since that night.

Rani had decided that none of the bad men would touch him or Stori again, not without a fight, anyway. Though small for his age, Rani was tough and smart. When they had been led on board the ship, a scuffle had broken out between another prisoner and a guard. In the brief melee, Rani had picked up a small piece of plastic and palmed it. Fortunately, the guards had not noticed, nor searched him again and he had secreted it in their shared mattress. He had spent hours working the end of the plastic against the rough metal of the toilet hole in the deck, until he had created a small, sharp dagger. He was smart enough to know that any of the bad men could overpower him should he brandish it, but it made him feel better anyway.

Rani's thoughts were interrupted as one of the keepers, Rani thought of him as the "Fat man," came to the door of the cell with a bucket and a leering grin.

"Hello, my pretty lad," said the fat green Orion. His face was marked with scars of rank and conquest as well as a sheen of perspiration. His ample green belly hung out of an open vest and over leather breeches. A wicked looking pistol hung from his belt as did a long-bladed knife. Rani could smell the man's rank body odor across the cell. He curled up closer to Stori in a protective embrace.

Fat man lurched into the cell and dropped the food bucket before the mattress. Rani didn't like the gleam in the man's yellow eyes.

"The Supreme doesn't like us samplin' the merchandise," began the pirate, "but then, what he don't know won't hurt him, will it?" He grinned a wicked grin, displaying crooked, brown teeth. "Maybe I'll just come back later for a taste, eh?"

Fat man laughed, an unpleasant, low rumbling sound that ended in a coughing spasm. He spat a wad of dark phlegm into the bucket. "Enjoy your meal, pretty ones." He hitched up his belt and waddled out of the cell, reactivating the force field.

Rani scurried over to the bucket of food, his hunger over-riding his feelings of revulsion. He brought it back to the mattress and offered a piece of grisly meat to Stori.

"Stori, you've got to eat something!" he said, plaintively. The little girl shook her head and buried her face in the mattress. Rani sighed and took a bite of the tasteless, fatty meat, trying to forget the not-so-veiled threats of Fat man.

* * *

USS Bluefin

On patrol in Sector 10145

"Sir!" said Lt. Bane, "We're receiving a message from the *Growler*. Unidentified transient vessel in sector 10146 on a heading toward the Vega system at high warp. It's beyond their pursuit range, though. Bearing 178 mark 110." Bane paused, readjusting his sensors. "That's confirmed sir, sector 10146." He looked up, "Definitely in our intercept range, cap'n."

Akinola straightened in his chair, "Navigator, lay in an intercept course on that bearing. Helm, ahead maximum warp!"

Both officers acknowledged their orders as the cutter banked onto a new course as the warp engines propelled the small ship through subspace. "Time to intercept?" asked Akinola.

Ensign Lexrel, the Edosian navigator responded. "On current course and speed, one hour, seventeen minutes."

"Thank you, ensign. Yellow alert, people. Let's get everyone awake and ready for battle stations in one hour," Akinola ordered. He leaned back in his chair, absently rubbing his chin as his mind raced with possible scenarios.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Sector 10146, Warp 9.2

"Red alert! Shields to maximum, bring phasers on line and standby with forward torpedo tubes," ordered Captain Akinola as the *Bluefin* closed in on its quarry.

Akinola turned to T'Ser, who had relieved Lt. Bane at OPs. "Commander, open a channel to that vessel."

T'Ser turned to her console then turned back after several minutes. "No response, captain. They're ignoring our hails."

"Then broadcast a warning in the clear. Heave-to or we will open fire."

"Aye, sir."

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*
Sector 10146, Warp 8.9

"The Federation ship is hailing us again - they say they will open fire if we do not stop," said Rash to the Supreme.

Deven Marak-Sar brought a fist down on the arm of his command throne. "Arm phasers and torpedoes! Prepare to engage and destroy that ship!"

"Supreme," Rash said, carefully, "They are faster and more maneuverable. Their fire power is nearly a match for ours, perhaps we should . . ."

Deven leveled a long phaser pistol at the first mate. "Watch your tongue, Rash, or I'll burn it out!"

Rash's eyes narrowed dangerously, but he stopped speaking. He turned back to his console and brought the weapons systems on-line. "Phasers and torpedoes ready, supreme."

"Fire a spread of torpedoes!"

* * *

USS Bluefin
Sector 10146, engaging Orion Super-Raider

"Incoming torpedoes!" shouted McBride from tactical.

"Evasive! - pattern gamma delta one. Mr. McBride, target a spot between their warp nacelles and fire the Mark 22s!"

The cutter rolled sharply to port as four of the Orion torpedoes tracked toward them. Just as quickly, the cutter rolled back to starboard and two torpedoes launched from the forward bay.

"Helm, z-minus 5000 meters!" barked Akinola.

The *Bluefin* dropped suddenly relative to its previous plane of travel. It continued to roll as it kept pace with the *Salturias*. Three of the Orion torpedoes flew by, their guidance systems unable to lock on to the wildly maneuvering cutter. The fourth gained a lock, however, and tracked in, detonating against the forward shields of the primary hull.

The impact and release of energy by the Orion torpedo cascaded through the forward section of the saucer, overloading circuits and tossing the crew about. On the bridge, several boards overloaded, sending glass shards and sparks flying. A screen adjacent to T'Ser's station blew, sending fragments flying. T'Ser flew out of her chair and hit the carpeted deck. She did not move.

McBride made as if to run to T'Ser's aid but Akinola shouted, "Man your station, XO! Helm, get us directly astern of that ship." Akinola moved to check T'Ser and found a strong, steady pulse in her neck. "She's okay, just knocked out." He tapped his commbadge. "Akinola to sickbay, medical emergency on the bridge!"

"Acknowledged, captain," said an unfamiliar voice. "We're taking in casualties down here, but a team's on the way. Doc's up to his elbows right now!"

"Understood, Akinola out." He moved to OPs and checked the sensor hood. "Damn!" he muttered. "The rat traps didn't work. XO, target their nacelles and fire phasers!"

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*
Sector 10146, engaged in battle with the *Bluefin*

The Orion vessel shook as two explosions rocked the ship. "Damage?" queried the Supreme.

Rash shook his head. "Shields are holding. Apparently they detonated as electro-magnetic bursts, but all systems show normal."

"What of the Federation ship?"

Rash smiled. "One of our torpedoes hit their saucer. I am reading fluctuations in their shields."

Deven's lips pulled back in a feral grin. "Prepare to fire phasers - target their bridge!"

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

Twin beams of phased energy shot from the forward Type VIII batteries of the *Bluefin*. The bolts impacted the raider's aft shields which flared and crackled in a kaleidoscope of competing energies.

"Our turn, you bastard!" muttered Akinola, "Fire a spread of torpedoes, Mr. McBride."

As the cutter's phasers hammered against the shields of the *Salturias* four torpedoes streaked toward the port nacelle of the raider. The combined explosions overwhelmed the already stressed shields which buckled and collapsed, allowing the *Bluefin's* phasers to find their target. The port nacelle glowed red for a moment, then exploded in a cascade of plasma, ribbons of blue and white energy trailed behind the stricken ship while sparks flew and swirled like fireflies.

Immediately, the *Salturias* dropped from warp as the *Bluefin* did likewise.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

"Fire, damn you! Why don't you fire?" screamed Deven Marak-Sar.

"We've lost phaser tracking! I'm seeking to re-establish a lock now!" said Rash, as he frantically surveyed the boards where multiple warning lights flashed and klaxons sounded.

"What happened? What did they hit?"

"They destroyed our warp nacelle and aft shields are down. The explosion damaged the port impulse vent as well." He turned to the Supreme. "We're moving on momentum only."

"Fix it! I want that ship destroyed!"

Rash shook his head at the enraged Orion. "We can't - it would take a shipyard weeks to . . ."

Rash never finished his sentence as a beam from Deven's phaser vaporized his head.

* * *

"Mr. Fralk, bring us in close to that ship. I want their weapons taken out, including those point defense ports." Akinola turned. "XO, I want you to lead the boarding operations. Meet Chief Brin in the armory. I expect that they

have hostages on board, so set weapons for heavy stun. Your priority is to secure that ship first, then rescue ops, understood?"

McBride glanced again at the still form of T'Ser. He swallowed and turned to the captain. "Yes sir, I'm on it."

Akinola grabbed McBride's arm before he left the bridge. "Dale - she's going to be okay. Don't you take any dumb chances on that ship!"

McBride managed a weak grin. "Hey, skipper, you know me. Careful's my middle name!" He hurried into the lift.

Akinola returned his gaze back to the screen and the drifting but still very dangerous raider. He shook his head. "You screwed up, Akinola," he said to himself.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

Supreme Deven Marak-Sar shoved aside the headless body of Rash and seated himself at the weapons console, frowning at the failure indicators surrounding the controls for the main phaser arrays and torpedo launchers. He searched the board until he found what he was seeking - the controls to the point-defense weapons.

Without bothering to target the weapons, he activated all of the portside phasers and hit the firing control.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

The cutter shook as multiple phaser bursts from the Orion vessel hit their shields. Fortunately, the fire was ill-aimed and ineffective.

"Report!" shouted Akinola.

Lt. Bane, who had replaced the injured T'Ser, answered. "Shields holding, no damage. I think they're firing blind, sir."

Akinola's expression was grim. "Well, we aren't! Mr. Fralk, take out those weapons ports - Fire!"

The phaser batteries on the starboard side of the saucer opened up, raking across the weakened shields of the raider. A second volley penetrated the shields, wreaking havoc on the gun ports of the *Salturias*, effectively de-fanging the Super-Raider.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

The weapons console began to spark ominously and Deven threw himself on the deck before it exploded in a shower of flames and shards of ceramalogy and aluminum. He picked himself up and hit the inter-ship control on the command throne.

"All hands, this is Supreme Deven Marak-Sar. It is evident that we are about to be boarded. Prepare to repel boarders - anyone who brings me the head of an officer will be richly rewarded! Fight hard! Fight Well! Leave no Feddie survivors!"

He slapped off the inter-ship control, then walked to a locker at the back of the bridge. Reaching in, he pulled out a large Klingon-made disruptor rifle. He pulled the primer lever and the rifle whined to life as the heavy capacitors charged. "You haven't beaten me yet!" he growled.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

Commander McBride and Senior Chief Brin walked around the assembled boarding party, checking equipment, offering words of encouragement, and giving final instructions. McBride went to the front of the armory and motioned for quiet.

"You know the drill. The Orions will be heavily armed and likely will shoot to kill. They don't have anything to lose." McBride looked around the room, making eye contact with as many of the gathered men and women as he could. "Be careful, stay with your partner and don't take unnecessary risks. More than likely there are hostages on that ship. Our sensors were damaged

by the torpedo hit, so we don't have a good idea about where they are or how many. Use your combat scanners and your Mark I eyeballs. Senior Chief?"

Senior Chief Brin pumped an arm, "Team one, assemble in transporter room one. Team two, transporter room, two. Team three, you will follow after Team one. Double check your weapons - heavy stun only! Let's go - move! move! move!

The heavily armed and armored boarding teams double-timed their way to the transporter rooms, led by Commander McBride, Senior Chief Brin and Chief Deryx. McBride's team one mounted the transporter platform. He pulled the blast visor of his helmet down and held his phaser carbine with the muzzle toward the deck.

"Energize!" he said, more calmly than he felt.

* * *

T'Ser opened her eyes slowly. She was dizzy, nauseous, and her entire body hurt. She tried to sit up, but the dizziness got worse and she collapsed back onto the bio-bed.

A female voice spoke to her. "Hey! Easy, commander! You took a heavy jolt to your system when that console overloaded."

T'Ser tried opening her eyes again, this time managing to focus on the freckled face and red hair of Corpsman Janie Riley. Riley smiled and patted T'Ser's arm. You're going to be fine, commander, but you need to rest right now."

T'Ser shook her head and forced herself upright, ignoring the wave of nausea that washed over her. "Can't," she grunted, "I need to get back to the bridge."

Dr. Baxter came over and placed a restraining hand on the obstinate Vulcan. "Commander, you need to lie back down, right now. You suffered a nasty electrical shock - fortunately, your Vulcan physiology enabled you to survive - but if you don't behave, your recovery period will just be longer. Now, I mean it - lie down! That's an order!"

T'Ser acquiesced and allowed Corpsman Riley to assist her back into a prone position. Momentarily, she heard the hiss of a hypospray at her neck and the world disappeared once more.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

McBride materialized into a scene from Hell.

Phaser fire erupted at the boarding party before they fully materialized. A stray bolt ripped the commbadge off McBride's armored vest before he could bring his weapon around. The impact knocked him back and he staggered over the prone figure of Crewman Ikuzo, dead from a phaser shot to the throat.

McBride quickly rolled off of the dead man and returned fire in the direction from which the green bolts flew.

"Take cover!" McBride shouted, a rather superfluous command as those that had survived the beam-in were already doing just that. As the boarding team's fire became more effective, the incoming Orion fire began to lessen. McBride looked around to get his bearings. They were at a junction between two corridors in a space about four meters square. He consulted his combat scanner, strapped to his forearm. There were five lifeforms with energy weapons 10 meters ahead, in the direction of the bridge. He also read a dozen more lifeforms, also with energy weapons approaching from the corridor on the right. Using hand signals, McBride indicated for the surviving team members to move down the opposite corridor. He raised up and fired a burst from his phaser carbine, allowing the team to move out. He maintained his fire as he ran after them.

* * *

Rani hugged his little sister, Stori tightly as the ship rocked and the lights dimmed and flared. He could hear shouting and what he thought was weapons fire in the distance. He had no idea what was happening, but the experience was terrifying.

"I won't let anyone hurt you, Stori, I promise!" he whispered fiercely into her ear. He reached under the mattress and pulled out the small dagger that he had fabricated, grasping it tightly against his chest. He silently prayed to the gods and goddesses of his clan that he could keep his promise to Stori.

* * *

Teeva had a much better idea of the situation than did Rani. The Green Orion woman had survived space battles before and figured that the ship was involved in a fight for its life. She hoped it was a Federation ship. If it was a Klingon vessel . . . well, no point dwelling on that!

The ship lurched much harder this time and the lights in her cell went out. Emergency lights came on, emitting a sour, yellow glow. Teeva heard a soft "click" from the agonizer collar. Hesitantly, she reached for the damnable torture device and gave it a tug. The collar opened and she quickly removed the offending item from her neck.

She stood and cautiously moved to the door of her cell. She tossed the collar, expecting it to stop in a shower of sparks. Instead, it sailed on through the doorway, landing with a metallic clank.

Her heart beating rapidly, she eased out of her cell. Looking both directions, she ran forward into the darkness.

* * *

Chief Brin and team two materialized in a storage room filled with crates. He checked his scanner and found the outside corridor to be clear. "Sanders, you're with me. Gandy, Torleson and Vormish, you three head aft to engineering. I want the shields down and the weapons off-line. I don't care how you do it, but I want it done yesterday!"

The team acknowledged their assignment and moved quickly out into the corridor and headed aft. Senior Chief Brin and Corpsman Sanders headed forward toward the bridge, their stubby phaser carbines in the ready position. Solly reached down with his left hand and drew a vicious-looking knife from a sheath on his thigh. A small smile of anticipation formed on his face.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

McBride and the three surviving members of Team one stopped near another junction between corridors.

"What is this, a maze?" asked Crewman Ali, in a frustrated tone.

"Probably designed this way to slow down people like us, crewman," responded McBride. He checked his scanner again. "Looks like left is a dead-end and right goes in the wrong direction."

"Straight ahead, sir?" asked petty officer Lucy Rice.

"Straight ahead it is," replied McBride. "Ali, take point. Lucy, you're on me. Thorm, you've got our six. Let's move!"

The boarding team moved ahead quickly toward the bridge of the raider.

* * *

Teeva moved furtively toward the ship's bridge, being careful not to be seen. She came toward a junction and froze. Several bodies were lying on the deck. Two were wearing dark coveralls and armored vests. Looking around, she moved up on the scene of recent battle. She came to the first body and turned it over, grimacing at the hole that had been burned through the man's throat. She ignored the eyes, still fixed in a look of surprise and shock. Searching him quickly, she found a phaser pistol and a knife. She grabbed both, setting the phaser on it's highest setting, before moving forward again, dancing past the corpses of the raider's crew.

* * *

USS Bluefin

Akinola resisted the urge to drum his fingers on the arm of the command chair. He watched, impatiently, as Lt. Bane and Lt. Commander Galt conferred over their sensors, or lack thereof. Bane fiddled with his controls, trying to regain some of the sensitivity that had been lost in the battle. Galt simply shook his head.

"Bane, you can't just make adjustments to get the frakkin' system to work. The best parts of the sensors are floating along beside us in little pieces!"

"I'm aware of the, commander," Bane said patiently, "but if I can get the targeting scanners to do a bit more than they're designed for, we may get a better picture of the inside of that ship."

"Targeting scanners?" asked Galt incredulously, then he paused, rubbing his chin. "Huh, hadn't thought of that. Deities! That might work! Move over, Bane!"

Akinola shook his head. Galt and Bane were the two biggest "tech-heads" on the ship, but they spent more time arguing than anything else. "Galt, how are the repairs coming up front?"

Galt turned, "What? Oh, they're coming along fine, sir."

"Good. Why don't you see if you can put a fire under them and speed it up some."

Galt, never one to miss an opportunity to chew ass, smiled a wicked smile. "Now there's a fine idea! I'll attend to that *right* now!" The Tellarite moved toward the lift, a look of gleeful anticipation on his face.

After the lift doors closed, Bane said, "Thanks, cap'n!"

"Don't mention it, Mr. Bane. Just get us some eyes and ears so we can follow the action," said Akinola, leaning forward but keeping his eyes on the drifting raider.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

McBride felt his scanner vibrate and he checked the screen. A text message informed him that engineering was secure and that all of the weapons and shields were off-line. His satisfaction turned to sadness, however, as the message also informed him of two more casualties among the boarding party. He tapped an acknowledgment, then sent a message to Senior Chief Brin, requesting an update. Brin indicated that he and Sanders were nearing the bridge, apparently in a parallel corridor. McBride passed along Team one's status report, "*Two KIA, remaining team also headed to bridge. Will rendezvous with you asap.*" Crewman Ali was about to move forward, when McBride stopped him and pointed at his scanner. Ten lifeforms were approaching quickly.

McBride moved the team back to a better defended point where they took up firing positions.

* * *

Teeva found the maintenance corridor she had been seeking. Before her fall from favor with the Marak-Sar clan, she had been one of the principal designers of the ship. She knew it like the back of her hand and that knowledge would give her an advantage over that bastard, Deven. She squeezed into the corridor, crawling on her hands and knees toward the bridge.

* * *

McBride gave a quick hand signal, and Team one opened fire on the Orions. Their first volley took out four of the crew, but the rest quickly ducked back into alcoves and unleashed a furious volley of their own.

McBride cursed, realizing that he had opened fire too soon. Now, they were about to be pinned down by a force still superior in number and firepower. He looked around and spotted a ladder alcove less than five meters.

"Ali!" McBride whispered loudly. The crewman turned with a questioning look. McBride signaled for him to lob a stun grenade down the corridor, then to follow.

Ali pulled the grenade from his vest, set the timer, and hurled it down the corridor to a chorus of shouts and curses. Team one quickly headed down the ladder as the grenade exploded in a cacophony of sound and light.

* * *

McBride lost his footing on the narrow ladder and half slid, half fell most of the distance, landing on Petty Officer Rice.

"Sir? No offense, but get the hell off of me!" said Rice.

"Sorry!" said McBride, rubbing his shoulder. He looked around at their surroundings.

McBride and his team were in a dark, dank corridor, lit only by emergency lanterns. As his eyes adjusted, McBride realized that they had stumbled onto dozens of holding cells. The smell was pretty intense. Most of the cells still gave off a tell-tale blue glow of a security force field. A few, however, appeared to be open. McBride turned to face his team.

"Okay, engineering is secure and Chief Brin is on the way to the bridge. Let's make a quick check of the cells before working our way forward. Don't worry about releasing anyone yet, unless you see someone in serious distress, understood?"

He received a chorus of affirmatives.

"Ali, you and Thorm head back that way while Lucy and I check out ahead. Meet back here in five," McBride ordered.

* * *

Rani heard furtive footsteps in the hallway. He tried to stay still, holding Stori tightly. Maybe whoever was there wouldn't see them in the low light.

Suddenly, a large, dark figure appeared in the doorway. Rani froze at the apparition. Whoever, whatever it was towered in the doorway, silhouetted by the faint light from the corridor, a weapon of some kind was in the creature's fist. Rani's heart began to pound in terror and he tightly squeezed the dagger in his sweaty hand.

* * *

Senior Chief Brin and Corpsman Sanders had managed to move forward without encountering any resistance, thus far. Rather than being pleased, Solly was becoming concerned that they were heading into an ambush.

As if on cue, green disruptor bolts began to impact the deck plating at their feet and scorch the bulkheads. One bolt ricocheted and hit Sanders in the chest plate of his armored vest. He went down with a grunt of pain and surprise. Solly grabbed Sanders by the collar and drug him into a shallow doorway as the disruptor fire continued, unabated. He held his phaser carbine around the corner and squeezed off several shots, blindly. A taunting voice came down the corridor.

"You'll have to do better than that, Freddie! I've got lots of guns and lots of time. Why don't you lay down your weapon and I'll kill you quick, saving me the time of skinning you alive!"

"Skin this!" shouted Chief Brin as he banked a stun grenade off the opposite wall. It clattered in the direction of their tormentor and detonated with a deafening *BLAANG!*

Solly checked Sanders, who was alive but unconscious, the armor saving the corpman's life. The senior chief tapped Sander's commbadge and whispered, "Emergency beam-out." Momentarily, the corpsman disappeared in the shimmering energy of the transporter beam.

Brin checked his scanner, and found that it had been damaged in the fire fight. Disgusted, he stripped it off his forearm, put his head near the corner and listened.

No sound emanated from the dark corridor. He reset his carbine into the "kill" range, and slid out in a low crouch. No one was visible in the murk. The smell of ozone from the brief battle tickled his nose. He began to move forward in a crouch.

Out of the darkness, a large, Green Orion man appeared, running straight at Solly, brandishing a large sword. He screamed a war cry of challenge at Solly, who calmly shot the man in the face. The Green Orion ran several more steps before realizing he was dead and collapsing at Brin's feet.

"Asshole!" said Solly, with contempt. Stepping over the corpse, he moved forward, carbine up and ready.

* * *

McBride was stunned. In the dim, foul-smelling cell were two small children huddled in the corner, their eyes wide with terror.

"Goddamn *bastards!*" he fumed in a cold rage. In a softer tone he said, "Hey kids! It's alright, my name is Dale. I'm with the Border Service. You're both safe, okay?"

He knelt down and removed his helmet, setting the phaser carbine on the deck and gesturing for the two children to approach. McBride did not realize that his commbadge, which contained the universal translator, was still lying on the deck where they beamed in. The two children did not speak Standard, so McBride's booming voice was threatening and confusing, rather than reassuring.

* * *

Though frightened, Rani knew this was probably the only chance he had to defend Stori. The creature had knelt and was gesturing to him. Rani was all too familiar with such a ploy. Bad things awaited him. But this time, *he* could make bad things happen. Cautiously, with the dagger hidden behind his back, Rani began to approach the huge man.

* * *

McBride smiled. "That's it. Good! Come on over here, I won't hurt you!" He watched with relief as the boy, a young Red Orion, cautiously stood and moved slowly toward Dale. McBride nodded encouragingly to the child. "Good, good, that's it! We're here to help you son. We just want to take you home, okay?"

The wide-eyed boy approached more closely, still silent and obviously afraid. At that moment, his scanner vibrated with a message from Team three. He took his eyes off of the boy to acknowledge.

* * *

Rani didn't know what the box on the man's arm was, but he heard it buzz softly and the man's attention was diverted.

Suddenly, with a cry of fear and fury, Rani swung his arm in a wide arc, bringing the make-shift dagger around with surprising speed and force into the side of McBride's exposed neck.

* * *

McBride felt a hard jolt of pain in his neck and fell over under the surprise impact. He instinctively reached to his neck and felt something hard and narrow protruding from it.

Rani's aim could not have been better for him or worse for McBride. The small piece of sharpened plastic pierced McBride's carotid artery and the point punctured his trachea. Arterial blood began to pour down his airway, making breathing difficult.

Still in shock and confusion over what happened, McBride made a fatal decision. He grabbed the offending dagger and pulled it from his neck.

Instantly, blood geysered from the wound. McBride futilely tried to staunch the flow, but already his vision was fading and his pulse, thready. He turned his gaze upon the small boy, and before his throat completely closed off with blood, he gurgled, "'s okay..." Then Dale McBride's vision went dark and he fell over, absolutely still.

For a few minutes, Rani watched in rapt horror and fascination as the flow of blood ebbed and began to pool.

Then, Rani began to scream.

* * *

Petty Officer Rice had checked the other cells ahead of McBride, finding several occupied by women of various races who cajoled and cursed her as she passed, and one cell that was empty. She was finishing her check when she heard a shrill, thin scream. Immediately, she raced down the corridor, protocol be damned.

"Commander! Commander McBride! Where are you?"

She ran past the cell where McBride lay, before skidding to a halt and running into the cell. She was shocked with what she saw.

"Oh God, No! Commander! - Sir? SIR?"

Throwing down her weapon and kneeling in McBride's blood, she tapped her commbadge hard. "Rice to *Bluefin*, medical emergency! Two to beam out, NOW!"

Rice cradled the mortally wounded commander as the transporter effect took hold. Rani watched in both horror and fascination as the two black-clad figures shimmered and disappeared into thin air.

The Orion boy simply stood still for several minutes, a large, still spreading pool of blood surrounding his bare feet. He then slowly moved back to his wide-eyed sister. He sat by her, trembling, and put an arm around her. A tear cut a trail down his dirt-smeared cheek.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

In Sickbay, T'Ser suddenly sat bolt upright in her bio-bed, sleep displaced by a sudden overwhelming sense of loss and dread.

"Something's wrong!" she said in a tremulous voice.

* * *

USS Bluefin

Akinola finally gave in to impatience and stood over Lt. Bane at his station. "Any luck, Mr. Bane?"

Bane frowned in concentration as he tweaked focus and gain controls on his console. "Some, sir. The targeting scanners aren't designed for life-form readings. I'm having to reprogram them and make crude adjustments." He turned and gave Akinola a meaningful look. "And, in the meantime, we won't be able to target our weapons."

Akinola patted Bane on the shoulder. "Understood, Mr. Bane. Hopefully we won't be needing weapons any time soon. If we do, well . . . we'll do the best we can."

Seated next to Bane at the auxiliary comm station, Ensign Maya Vashtee suddenly stiffened and held her earpiece tightly to her head. With a distraught expression, she turned. "Sir? Petty Officer Rice just beamed over with Commander McBride . . . The commander is," she hesitated, tears welling up in her eyes. "It sounds real bad, sir."

Akinola felt a chill of dread. "Thank you, ensign." He tapped his commbadge. "Bridge to sickbay."

There was a noticeable pause before a voice answered, "Sickbay, Riley here." There was a note of anxiety in the corpsman's clipped words and the background noise of near bedlam.

"I understand Commander McBride has been injured. What's his status."

There was another pause. "Sir, we're swamped right now. All I can tell you is that Dr. Baxter has the commander in surgery and that we're doing everything we can," Riley spoke to someone else, "No, no, put R'mirt in bed

one. Sanders, Sanders! Get back in that bed, dammit! Sorry, sir, got to go. Sickbay out."

Akinola swallowed. He wanted to rush down to sickbay, but knew he couldn't abandon the bridge while the operation on the raider was still underway. With a sick feeling in his gut, he sat once more in the command chair and stared at the image of the battered raider, wondering how many of his crew would die today.

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

Senior Chief Brin came to another junction in the corridor. He frowned at the lack of lights in every direction. Without his scanner, he was walking blind.

His sense of smell probably saved his life. A sudden, pungent odor from his right alerted him to the presence of someone else. He began to turn and duck, as a large knife skimmed across the back of his vest, cutting the webbing. The impact threw Solly off balance and he lost the grip on his phaser carbine when he hit the deck. He rolled quickly and hopped up, knife at the ready.

A very large, fat, Green Orion stood before him holding a Klingon *d'k tahg*, with its three deadly blades. The fat Orion hacked and coughed, spitting a nasty wad of phlegm on the deck. "So, little man," he wheezed. "You want to fight me, eh? So did the Klingon who gave up this blade to me. You don't look nearly as tough!" He grinned, revealing stained teeth.

Brin grinned back. "That blade's a counterfeit. I can tell by the rust on it. A real *d'k tahg* can't rust. You must have bought it from an old woman at a bazaar!"

The fat man's smile faltered a bit. "It will serve my purpose. Do yourself a favor and surrender now. I'll make it quick for you."

Brin's expression became cold. "No. And you don't need to surrender either. I have no intention of making this quick." He crouched slightly, holding his knife in the ready position. "*Kurala tosh vara!*" Solly growled, using an old Orion phrase, part challenge, part insult.

Fat man roared in anger and indignation and moved forward with surprising speed. *Kurala mar veit!*

The sounds of the fight reverberated down the corridors for several minutes, followed by several more minutes of anguished screams and wet sounds, then silence.

* * *

USS Bluefin

"Doctor, I can't get a blood pressure reading . . ."

"Open up the other femoral artery, too - his blood volume is nil! . . ."

"Still flat-line on EKG and EEG . . ."

"Cortical stimulator . . ."

"Push the plasma Mendez. Move! . . ."

"Doctor, don't you think . . .?"

"If you're not going to help, get the hell out of my way!"

"20 cc's of Cordrazine . . ."

"No response to cortical stimulator . . ."

"Turn it up again . . ."

"Doctor . . . Please, doctor. He's gone! You've got to stop . . ."

* * *

Calvin Baxter walked out of the small operating theater, a dazed look on his drawn face. He leaned against the bulkhead for a moment, eyes closed, trying to gather himself.

Baxter took several deep breaths, then straightened. He ran a quivering hand through his disheveled mane of white hair, and steeled himself. He walked around the corner into the pandemonium of the main ward. All of the bio-beds were filled with the wounded and the dying. Corpsmen were moving frantically from bed to bed, ministering to the injured.

In bed four, T'Ser sat. A haunted expression on her face. Baxter made eye contact with her and felt his throat tighten with barely contained emotion. He moved through the chaotic scene toward her. She began to shake her head slowly.

"No, no, no . . ." T'Ser said softly as tears began to spill down her cheek.

Baxter came over to her and, unable to speak, wrapped his arms around her tightly. T'Ser's body began to shake as she began to weep.

After a moment, Baxter found his voice. "T'Ser, I am so sorry. So, so sorry. I tried. Lord knows, I tried. He was just too far gone . . ."

* * *

Orion Syndicate Vessel *Salturias*

Brin grimaced as he held a hand tightly over the wound on his shoulder. It hurt like the seven hells, but at least he was alive and functioning. The same could not be said for the remains of his assailant.

The senior chief took no pleasure in the carnage before him. He had given in to battle-lust and taken out his rage on the Green Orion, who now lay dead and dismembered on the blood-slick deck. Now, he was weary, and alone. The screams of the dead man reverberated in his head.

But Solly still had a mission to complete. He pulled a bandage from a thigh pouch and sealed his shoulder wound, before wiping off the blade of his knife and replacing it in its scabbard.

He was reaching to pick up his carbine, when a voice called, "Don't bother. You won't be needing that. Step away from the rifle."

Solly cursed himself for losing focus and awareness of his surroundings. He'd allowed someone to sneak up on him. He slowly raised and turned toward the voice.

The young Red Orion male that came out of the shadows was brandishing a Klingon infantry disruptor rifle. Solly had no doubt that if the young man pulled the trigger that he'd not only kill Solly but possibly blow a hole through the side of the ship.

Deven Marok-Sar frowned slightly at Solly, perplexed to see an Orion in a Starfleet uniform. "You! What clan are you?"

Solly snorted. "I rejected my clan before you were born, whelp. My adopted name is Brin, Solly Brin."

A small smile of recognition formed on Deven's face. "Oh, yes. I've heard of you, Solly Brin. I'm sure the Elix clan would pay handsomely for your head. Alas, the situation does not allow me the time for such endeavors. You will, however, make a fine hostage as we leave together in my private shuttle."

Solly allowed himself a small, insolent grin. "So, you are the Supreme of this vessel? Your clan must be a minor one to allow a pup barely weaned to command such a vessel."

Deven did not seem perturbed with Solly's insult. "Actually, I did have to kill my two older brothers. My father rewarded my shrewdness with this ship." He raised the weapon, taking aim at Solly. "And, seeing the trouble you've caused me, I think I will forgo taking you as hostage and kill you now, instead."

Brin saw the flash and heard the high-pitched warble of an energy weapon. The sound was completely wrong for a disruptor, Brin observed in a detached fashion.

Deven Marak-Sar writhed in momentary agony, then faded to nothing as the full-power phaser blast destabilized his molecular integrity and he ceased to exist.

Teeva walked around the corner, phaser still held at the ready. She glanced at the small, scorched mark on the deck where Deven had stood a moment earlier. "I told you I'd kill you!" she said in a tone of defiance. She aimed the phaser toward Solly for a moment, assessing him, then she lowered the weapon.

"You must be the fleeter," she said.

Brin nodded. "And you are?"

"Teeva will do," she said. "I'm a *former* employee of the Marak-Sar family."

Brin gestured forward. "Anyone else that way?"

Teeva shook her head. "The second officer seems to have lost his head."

Brin regarded her with amusement. "You don't seem too shook up by all of this."

Teeva flashed a brilliant smile. "Honey, for me it's just another day at the office." She began to move past Brin, cautiously.

"Where are you going?" asked Brin. "We need to evacuate you off of this vessel."

"I've got my own ticket off, thanks anyway!" Teeva winked and trotted down a corridor.

Brin shook his head, weariness once again washing over him. He tapped his commbadge. "Brin to *Bluefin*."

"*Bluefin*, Vashtee here."

"Ensign, I've lost my scanner and have no idea where anyone else is. Can you get a fix on my position and tell me what the hell is going on?"

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

Captain Akinola gazed at the pale, still form of Dale McBride, still lying on a gurney in his blood-soaked uniform. Akinola's arm was around T'Ser, who was quiet and composed. She finally broke the silence.

"Somehow, I knew this was coming," she said, quietly.

"Sooner or later, it comes to all of us, T'Ser."

"I know. But I really had a sense that Dale's time was coming soon. It's nothing I can put my finger on, captain - just a feeling."

"Is that why you turned down his proposal?" he asked, gently.

T'Ser shrugged. "Partly, maybe. I just wanted to spend our time in the 'now.' He was always caught up in the future." A tear trickled down her face. "Now, there is no future."

Akinola squeezed her closer. "I don't believe that, T'ser. Don't you believe it either. There's always a future. And I don't know what's on the other side of this life, but I'll bet you anything that Dale McBride will be there waiting on you."

T'Ser smiled sadly. "That's a beautiful thought. I wish I could believe that."

Akinola looked at the Vulcan woman. "We all need something to hope in, T'Ser." He looked back at the body of his dead friend. "I choose to believe that somehow, someday, there's something else, another chapter. Whatever that may be."

T'Ser nodded slowly. "I'll consider that, captain."

* * *

EPILOGUE

Five Mark VI torpedo cases were draped with Federation flags on the hangar deck. The crew of the *Bluefin* sat in chairs, facing the make-shift coffins and the podium where Captain Akinola was concluding the memorial service for their fallen comrades.

". . . Let us, then, remember with pride, affection and honor, our fallen crew mates . . . Crewman Kari Ikuzo, Petty Officer Second Class Lars Torleson, Crewman Francis Poleque, Petty Officer First Class Vormish L'Sahlaarn, and Commander Dale McBride."

Akinola looked around at the somber faces of his crew, his family. Some were stone-faced, others tear-streaked, while others reflected profound loss and sorrow.

"Today is a day of mourning. But we will best honor these brave souls who gave the ultimate sacrifice by how we conduct ourselves from this point on. I have no doubt that, could they speak today, they would tell us, 'Carry on, carry on, keep fighting the good fight, don't give in to sorrow but remember us through your deeds.'"

Akinola turned in a very old book. "One of the ancient texts from Earth has a very appropriate phrase: 'Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.'" Akinola looked around at the gathered crew. "Always remember, these fallen comrades died doing what they loved. They would do it again to protect anyone of us or any innocent being." He paused a moment, again scanning the faces of the crew, pointedly making eye contact with as many as possible. "I am so very proud of them, as I am very, very proud of you. Please join me in a moment of silent reflection before we dismiss."

Senior Chief Brin, stood up ramrod straight and barked, "Attention on the deck!"

As one, the gathered crew of the USS *Bluefin* hit the deck and stood at attention, eyes fixed ahead, lost in their private thoughts. Akinola stood with his head bowed for a minute, then nodded at Solly who barked, "Dis-missed!"

As the crew filed out, Akinola noticed that Admiral Bateson had been watching from the back of the crowd. Akinola went over and shook Bateson's hand. "Thank you for coming, admiral."

Bateson's eyes were misty with barely contained tears. "Fine job, Joseph. A damned hard thing to do. Well done."

Akinola shook his head. "They preached their own funeral through the way they lived, admiral." He turned away slightly, his throat tightening. "I've lost crew mates before, admiral. Hell, we both have. But this time . . ."

Bateson nodded and squeezed Akinola's arm. "Sometimes are just harder than others, Joseph. I hope you listen to your own advice - what you just told those men and women. Carry on, Joseph, carry on."

* * *

Palo Duro, Texas, Earth
Two weeks later . . .

T'Ser stepped out of the rented hover-car into the west Texas heat. A small, white frame church, centuries old, sat by itself on the arid land, surrounded by scrub brush and trees that swayed gently in the dry breeze.

T'Ser took in the vista for a moment and raised her face to the warm sun, basking in the dry heat. It was the best Terran weather she had experienced in her life.

She walked across the parking lot to the front doors of the church building, her footsteps raising puffs of dust off of the unpaved parking area. An eclectic variety of vehicles surrounded the church - luxury hover-cars, econoskimmers, a-grav lorries, and even an old, wheeled truck emblazoned with a rusting "Chevro-Lectric" badge on a battered tail gate.

T'Ser paused at the double doors of the church. A small sign on the building identified it as "Palo Duro Baptist Church." It identified the pastor and listed the schedule of services. T'Ser ran her hand over the sign, then pushed the door open.

The air inside was markedly cooler. She came into a small foyer where a few people were gathered, speaking in soft tones. A few regarded her with puzzled looks, but most did not notice her presence. She remembered the custom of signing the guest register, then walked into the sanctuary.

The building had a high, vaulted ceiling with exposed wooden beams. An aisle bisected the wooden benches that lined both sides of the room. At the end of the aisle of burgundy carpet stood an open casket containing the empty shell of the man she had loved. Lost in the moment, she moved forward toward the casket where a tall man and shorter woman with sad expressions stood by.

She came to the open coffin and looked down at Dale, now in a dress Starfleet uniform. His color was no longer pale, but he appeared waxen, his hair too neat, his expression too blank. Though she had promised herself she would not cry, tears began to blur her vision.

T'Ser felt a gentle hand on her arm and she turned. The woman who had been standing by regarded her with compassionate eyes, eyes that looked like Dale's. The woman smiled and spoke.

"You're T'Ser." It was not a question.

"Yes ma'am, I hope you don't mind . . ."

The woman embraced T'Ser tightly and T'Ser tentatively put her arms around Dale's mother, slowly but steadily returning the embrace. The tall man whose

tear-stained, weather-beaten face so resembled Dale, put his arms around both women.

They simply stood there, holding each other, for a long time.

END