

# Tales of the USS Bluefin

## Ghost in the Machine

By The Lone Redshirt

### Prologue

**Stardate 54257.3 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Star Station Echo - Berth 6**

The attractive green Orion female caused heads to turn as she shouldered her way through the throng of beings in docking pod A. Certainly, she was a striking woman, with beautiful features, a trim, athletic build and shiny green hair. The fact that her pheromone suppressor was wearing off probably accounted for a few stares. Most were simply surprised to see a green Orion female wearing a Starfleet uniform.

Lt. (j.g.) K'lira Rune approached Berth 6. An electronic sign identified the docked vessel as the USS *Bluefin*, NCC-4458.

"It's been a while, *Bluefin*," she mused wistfully. Her expression was a mix of affection and apprehension. She hitched her duffle bag up on her shoulder and approached the airlock connecting the ship to the station.

A rather young-looking Asian ensign stood watch by the air-lock. His eyes widened perceptibly as Lt. Rune approached.

"Permission to come aboard?" she asked, handing the PADD containing her orders to the young officer.

For a moment, Ensign Li merely gaped at the beautiful Orion woman. Rune sighed inwardly. *I've got to put on a new suppressor patch*, she thought, torn between amusement and aggravation.

"Ensign?" she prodded, adding a hint of steel to her voice.

"Uh, oh, yes ma'am! Sorry - Permission granted! Welcome aboard the *Bluefin*."

Lt. Rune nodded. “Thanks, Ensign . . .?”

“Li. Ensign Yun Li, ma’am. May I help you with your duffle bag? Show you to your quarters?”

Rune had no doubt that the enchanted young man would follow her to the ends of the universe, if she so bade him. This time, she did allow a sigh to escape.

“No, thanks, Mr. Li, I can find my way around. This isn’t my first tour on *Bluefin*. Oh, don’t forget to log me in.” Rune gently pried her PADD from the wide-eyed ensign and entered a place she thought she would never see again.

Inside the ship, the familiar smells and sounds of a border cutter tickled her senses. She’d missed serving on a ship. It had been almost four years since . . .

She entered the turbo-lift, intending to go to the bridge and report to the Captain. She hesitated, then said, “Deck seven.”

The lift descended into the engineering section and the flight-deck level. She exited the lift, moving aft past the hangar deck toward the armory.

Before she reached NCO country, a familiar form stepped out of the armory and moved her way, stopping abruptly a few paces away.

The expression on Solly Brin’s face was unreadable – neither surprised nor pleased. Lt. Rune had seen the “mask” as she called it, many times before.

“I see you made jay-gee again,” Brin said, his voice as neutral as his expression.

Rune cocked her head at the big Orion. “Hello, Father. Nice to see you, too.”

Brin sighed. “K’lira . . . let’s keep this professional, okay? This is going to be hard enough as it . . .”

Rune’s eyes flashed. “*Hard?* Hard on who, *Senior Chief?*” She caught herself and took a calming breath. When she spoke again, her tone was low but sharp.

“*I’m* the one who went through a court-martial! *I’m* the one who lost a grade in rank! *I’m* the one who got sent into exile on a *skles’jan-ka* monitoring

station in the middle of nowhere for four years! And I sure as the *seven hells* didn't see *you* sticking up for me one . . . single . . . time . . . during any of it!"

The big Orion non-com seemed to shrink slightly. A pained expression crossed his face.

"K'lira, please understand . . . I couldn't . . ."

She held up a warning finger. "Couldn't? Or wouldn't? And it's *Lieutenant Rune*, Senior Chief – got to keep it *professional*, remember? Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get to the bridge."

Turning on her heel, Rune stormed off toward the turbo-lift.

Solly stood in his tracks, watching her walk off. Part of him wanted to hurry after her, to start over.

Far too late for that.

### **Stardate 54257.3 (13 April 2377)**

#### **The Lesser Riven Nebula**

#### **Sector 04341**

As space phenomena go, the Lesser Riven Nebula is not the most spectacular of sights. Unlike the spectacular Greater Riven Nebula, the Lesser Riven is a dark nebula, basically a massive dust-cloud only visible due to the absorption of light from embedded or nearby stars - hardly an object of wonder for romantic stargazers or amateur astronomers. From Federation space, it appears as an irregular dark blob against a star-filled background.

The nebula is situated in a relatively sparse sector of space. No inhabited planets lie near the dust-cloud, nor is it near regularly established space lanes. Its location is not considered strategically important by the Federation, the Klingons or the Orions.

Yet, for all of its dreary emptiness, the Lesser Riven Nebula has value to those who wish to escape notice. The dust cloud tends to wreak havoc on all but the most advanced sensors. For centuries, smugglers and pirates would travel light years out of their way, traversing the Lesser Riven to avoid patrol vessels of the major powers. Likewise, private freight-haulers, commonly known as "Boomers," sometimes diverted through this area of space to shake pursuing pirates and raiders. Occasionally, vessels that entered the area

simply disappeared, never to be seen again. Little consideration was given these occurrences as they were generally attributed to hostile action. The incidents were infrequent, so the area did not gain the reputation of, say, the Bermuda Triangle.

In the late 22nd century, Starfleet's Border Service began placing navigational/sensor buoys in sector 04341. These buoys primarily served to warn passing vessels of sensor distortions that could occur when traversing the nebula. Starfleet decided to make the buoy deployment more cost-effective by including scientific sensor packages on the buoys to better study the nebula. By the late 23rd century, 48 buoys were sprinkled throughout the sector, with a dozen near the Nebula.

On Stardate 54257.3, Nav-buoy LR-341-8 detected a sudden surge of triquantum waves 17.84 light minutes from its location. The dormant sensor package came to life, training multiple sensors in the direction of the energy phenomenon. High resolution cameras zoomed on the location of the surge. The sensors recorded wave distortions that fluctuated between 30 and 500 teracoehranes.

As the sensors dutifully recorded the unexpected event, the cameras picked up a sudden flash of light, followed by the appearance of four space vessels that seemed to appear from nowhere. The energy readings just as suddenly returned to normal and the bright light winked out. The ships drifted intact and apparently undamaged but dark and un-powered away from where they had suddenly appeared. Despite the darkness of the void, the sensitive cameras were able to identify the four vessels by comparing the images to the on-board data-base.

The first vessel was identified as a Vulcan scout of a design that had been out of service for nearly 200 years. A second was an Orion raider of 23rd century vintage. Third, was an *Albacore*-class border cutter that was identified as the USS *Finback*, reported missing and presumed destroyed in 2249. The fourth ship was a small, L-Type freighter which tumbled languidly along its y axis. The camera was able to zoom in on a name posted prominently on the hull:

*SS Eku.*

## Chapter One

**Stardate 54257.4 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Star Station Echo – Berth 6**

Bridge

Commander Inga Strauss sat in the comfortable command chair, a steaming cup of *Raktajino* in one hand, a PADD displaying crew rotations in the other. She usually enjoyed the challenge of keeping the shifts properly staffed, but today she was having to work through several conflicting requests from crew members, all vying for shore leave during their remaining time at Echo Station.

In addition, several replacement crew members were coming on board *Bluefin* and needed to be added to the rotation. Included were three new officers – a pair of raw ensigns, fresh from the Academy (*what am I supposed to do with you?* wondered Strauss) and a junior grade lieutenant who would take up the slack at operations once T'Ser left for the *Gibraltar*.

The last thought saddened her. T'Ser was the first person she met upon joining the *Bluefin* a year ago. They had grown very close – T'Ser was the only female officer on board in whom she felt comfortable confiding personal feelings. It seemed ironic that her “girl-talk buddy” happened to be a Vulcan!

Strauss heard the soft swish of the turbo-lift doors opening, but did not turn. Technicians, crew members, and engineers flowed on and off the bridge on a constant basis while they were in station – it was part of the ebb and flow of preparation for patrol duty.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Nigel Bane, seated at Ops, had stood up from his seat. She looked over at him, surprised by the shocked expression on his face. His expression would have been comical if it had not been so disturbing.

Curious as to the source of Bane's amazement, Strauss turned in her chair to see who had arrived on the bridge.

On the upper deck stood a striking green Orion woman in a Starfleet jumpsuit, a standard-issue duffel bag hung from her shoulder. Strauss could not help

notice that the woman was staring back at Bane, a bemused expression on her face.

“Hello Nigel. It’s been a long time,” said the Orion, her voice pleasant yet sultry.

“K’lira,” replied Bane, surprise evident in his voice. Apparently, Nigel couldn’t think of anything else to say. He just blinked at the new arrival.

Rune turned her gaze on Strauss and smiled. Inga had the distinct feeling that the Orion woman was sizing her up.

“I’m Lt. Rune, reporting in,” said K’lira.

Strauss nodded, feeling slightly off-balance. “Commander Strauss, Executive Officer. The Captain is in the ready room,” she said, jerking her head toward Akinola’s office.

“Thanks, I’ve been there a few times,” replied Rune as she moved toward Akinola’s door.

Strauss turned her gaze back toward Bane who was following Lt. Rune with his eyes. After Rune disappeared into the ready room, she walked over to Nigel.

“Anything you’d like to share with me, Lieutenant?” she asked sweetly.

Bane sat back down, placing his face in his hands. “Just how much time do you have?” he asked despondently.

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**Stardate 54257.4 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**On patrol - Sector 04341**

Ship’s Gymnasium

Sweat poured profusely from Captain Boris Rodenko as he plodded steadily along on the treadmill. Droplets of perspiration flew from his dark, curly hair with each step he took. His breathing was rapid but steady as he maintained a

steady, calorie-burning gait. His gray t-shirt was now dark, soaked from his exertions.

Rodenko was the commanding officer of the border cutter, *Scamp*. At age 52, he was fighting the battle of the bulge – namely, his midsection. Dr. Vordus, the ship's Denobulan CMO, had prescribed a more sensible diet and more exercise to help him regain a more acceptable weight.

*Less pleasure, more pain*, mused Rodenko darkly. The Russian Captain enjoyed good food and strong drink. Still, he was disciplined enough to follow the good doctor's orders. But he didn't have to *like* it.

As he was nearing the seven kilometer mark of his "run," he heard his name broadcast over the inter-ship com system.

*"Bridge to Captain Rodenko."* The voice of Commander Ronata Vribb, his new Bolian Executive Officer, echoed through the gym.

With a muttered Russian oath, Rodenko slowed the treadmill, and then nimbly hopped off. Grabbing a towel, he walked to his neatly folded uniform tunic and slapped the com badge.

"Rodenko here, what is so important Commander?" The Captain managed to keep most of the irritation from his voice. Vribb had the annoying habit of interrupting him at the most inopportune times. He liked the Bolian woman, but wished she had more confidence in her decision-making ability.

*"Captain, we are receiving a telemetry stream from Navigational buoy LR-341-8,"* replied the XO.

Rodenko closed his eyes and mentally counted to ten before replying. "And this is important enough to interrupt my workout, *how?*"

*"According to the telemetry, four ships have suddenly appeared near the nebula. One is the USS Finback."*

Rodenko's eyes flew open wide, his irritation forgotten. "Set a course for the position of those ships and proceed at maximum warp. Allow me five minutes and I will be on the bridge. Rodenko, out."

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**Stardate 54257.4 (13 April 2377)**  
**USS *Bluefin***  
**Star Station Echo – Berth 6**

Captain's Ready Room

"Lieutenant K'Lira Rune, reporting for duty, sir!" Rune came to attention, fixing her gaze several centimeters above the Captain's head.

Captain Joseph Akinola rose from behind his desk, walking around to stand a few feet from the Orion officer. Folding his arms, he maintained a somber expression as he spoke.

"Lieutenant, just so we understand each other, you were not my first choice to fill the Assistant Ops billet."

"Sir," she responded, neutrally.

"However," he continued, "I know you're a capable officer. You've taken your punishment and paid your dues. As far as I'm concerned, you're starting with a clean slate."

"Thank you sir, I appreciate that."

Akinola nodded. "That being said, this is still going to be awkward, at least at first – for you, for Bane and for Solly."

"The Senior Chief has already expressed his displeasure," stated Rune, sourly.

"I don't remember giving you permission to speak freely, Lieutenant. Please allow me to finish."

Rune's eyes flickered toward Akinola momentarily, but she kept her mouth shut.

"How you deal with your relationship with Senior Chief Brin is your own business. Just see that you keep any hard-feelings to yourself. Do *NOT* allow it to spill over into ship's business – *clear?*"

She nodded curtly. "Yes sir."



Akinola nodded slightly. "Your greater challenge will be serving with Lt. Bane. He's now Senior Operations Officer, which makes him your immediate superior. I expect you both to conduct yourselves in a professional matter and leave the past in the past. Can you do that?"

Akinola saw something that passed briefly across the Orion's face. Sadness? Regret? He couldn't tell for sure.

"I'll do my job, sir, and I'll give it my best. Believe me, I'm not here to cause trouble. And I do appreciate the second chance, Captain."

"If you do your job well, that's all the thanks I require." Akinola relaxed slightly, and extended his hand. "Welcome aboard, Lt. Rune! Why don't you go stow your gear and get settled into quarters - I'm afraid you'll have to share a cabin with Commander T'Ser for a couple of days, until she heads out. Do you remember where it is?"

Rune allowed herself to smile as she clasped the Captain's hand. "Yes sir, unless you've moved her since I was here."

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Commander Strauss kept her gaze on her PADD as Lt. Rune passed behind her and entered the turbo-lift. Once the lift doors closed, she quickly moved from the center seat and approached the ready room.

\* \* \*

"Come!" called Akinola at the chime of the door enunciator.

Commander Strauss entered, pausing two steps inside the doorway.

"Sir, may I have a couple of minutes?"

Akinola smiled. "I was wondering how long it would take you to get here. Have a seat Inga."

Strauss sat in one of the comfortable guest chairs, crossing her legs. She absently tapped the PADD against her thigh, wondering how to begin.

Akinola spoke first. "Have you met Lt. Rune?"

“Mmmm, sort of. I have to admit, I was curious about our new lieutenant. I haven’t uploaded her personnel data yet – could you fill me in?” Inga’s tone was nonchalant, but Akinola knew she was more than a little curious.

“I can and I will. Was Bane on the bridge?”

Inga’s eyes widened. *Bingo!* thought Akinola, suppressing a grin.

“Yes sir,” she replied, recovering admirably. “What does that have to do with Lt. Rune?”

Akinola finally began to chuckle. “Relax, Inga – I seriously doubt you have to worry about Nigel and Lt. Rune.”

“Why should I worry about them?” she asked, crossing her arms defensively.

Still chuckling, Akinola held up his hands in mock surrender. “Easy, Commander. I’m not sticking my nose into your personal life, but your . . . *friendship* with Lt. Bane is hardly a secret.”

Inga’s face flushed crimson, but she smiled. “No, I suppose not. But Captain, when Lt. Rune came on the bridge, I swear – it was like Nigel was *enchanted*.”

“Oh, that! – Well, I did notice her pheromone suppressor wasn’t working too well. That explains part of the reaction, I suppose.”

“Didn’t it affect you, too?” Strauss quickly clamped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. “Oh! Sorry sir, I didn’t mean . . .”

Akinola’s chuckle deepened. “That’s alright, XO. And, in answer to your question – no, it didn’t. I’ve been around Orions so long; I’ve developed immunity to their pheromones.”

He sobered and tossed her a PADD from his desk. “Here, take a look at this. It will answer some of your questions. I’ll fill in the blanks.”

Inga took the PADD and began to scroll through the personnel file of Lt. (j.g.) K’lira Rune. Her eyes suddenly widened in surprise and she stared at Akinola.

“She’s Solly’s *daughter?!?*”

“Adopted, actually, but yes – legally, she is his daughter. I’ll fill you in more about that later – keep reading.”

Eyebrows still raised, Strauss turned her attention back to the PADD.

“I see Solly sponsored her admission to the Starfleet Academy – *that* makes sense . . . finished first year tops in her class, transferred to the Border Service Academy in New London . . . graduated with honors . . . assigned to USS *Bluefin* . . .” She glanced back at Akinola who nodded and gestured for her to continue, “Excellent fitness reports . . . promoted to jay-gee . . .”

She stopped, a frown forming over her face as she read of the events that transpired four years earlier. She looked up again, understanding on her face. “My God!” she breathed.

Akinola nodded as Strauss re-read the account of how, four years ago, Lt. Rune had saved Nigel Bane’s life but killed an innocent civilian in the process.

## Chapter Two

**Stardate 54257.5 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Star Station Echo - Berth 6**

Lt. Rune made her way along the curved corridor of Deck 3, starboard until she came to her destination. The sign by the door still read "LTCDR T'SER."

Hesitating just a moment, she pressed the enunciator.

"Come in!" called a voice from inside the cabin.

Rune stepped forward and the door slid open, admitting her to the cabin that would serve as her new home on the *Bluefin*.

She smiled to see T'Ser, sitting cross-legged on the carpeted deck, sorting through personal effects. An open clam-shell case was before her, half-full of clothing, holo-cubes and other items. The Vulcan looked up and smiled.

"Hi K'lira - welcome back! Sorry for the mess. Go ahead and toss your gear on the top bunk - it's about the only clear space in here right now."

Put at ease by the warmth of T'Ser's welcome, K'lira tossed her duffle bag on the upper bunk, then took a seat in the empty desk chair.

"I guess congratulations are in order," said the Orion.

T'Ser smiled and shrugged as she folded a t-shirt and placed it in the carry-all. "Thanks! I guess it hasn't really hit me yet - going to *Gibraltar*, I mean. It's still kind of surreal." She looked around the cabin. "I'll be out of your hair tomorrow morning, though. I've already emptied out the dresser if you want to put up anything."

"I can wait," replied K'lira.

T'Ser stopped packing and clasped her arms around her knees, looking up at the younger woman.

"So, how are you doing, K'lira?"

Rune forced a smile. "Great! Couldn't be better. I'm glad to be back on a ship, even if . . ." her voice trailed off.

"What?" prodded T'Ser.

Rune sighed as she rested her forearms on her thighs. "It's kind of hard to go back to a place you're not wanted," she said, quietly.

T'Ser raised an eyebrow. "Lieutenant, if you weren't wanted, you wouldn't be here."

K'lira laughed without humor. "Commander, the Captain told me I wasn't his first choice, Solly was all . . . Solly, and Nigel acted like I had the Antarean plague!"

T'Ser stood and pulled up a foot-stool, sitting close to Rune.

"Look . . . K'lira, what's done is done. You can't go back and change the past. And I know a little something about being an outcaste . . . believe me! But if you come back with a victim mentality, well . . . you're setting yourself up for failure. Most of the crew doesn't even know you - they weren't here four years ago. The one's that were, well . . . they'll get past this too . . . *if* - you'll let them."

K'lira nodded and forced a smile. "Thanks," she said, unconvinced, "I'm sure you're right."

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**Stardate 54257.5 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**En route to the Lesser Riven nebula - Warp 9**

Rodenko was still rubbing beard suppressor on his face when he strode onto the bridge, freshly showered and in a clean uniform.

"Bring me up-to-date, please, Commander," he said, addressing Vribb, the XO.

She stood, vacating the center seat for Rodenko. "We're on course for the Lesser Riven nebula at warp 9, which should bring us to the location of the four ships in just under 14 hours."

Rodenko settled into his chair and accepted the PADD she handed him.

"Very good. Anything more on those ships?"

"Based on the telemetry we've received, the ships appear to be intact but without power readings or life signs. Currently, they are adrift, clustered within a few thousand kilometers of each other."

Rodenko grunted, disappointed.

"It's probably too much to expect to find survivors on those ships after all these years," pointed out Vribb.

"Admiral Bateson might take issue with that appraisal, Commander." He stood. "I'll be in my ready room. Call me if there are any further updates."

Rodenko entered his compact but comfortable office. It contained a large, black desk, two side-chairs with coffee table, and shelves that displayed holocubes of family and friends along with a few odd knick-knacks he'd collected in his travels.

He paused at the replicator for a moment. "Tea, black," he said. Then, with a mischievous smile on his lips, he added, "extra sweet."

*Take that Dr. Vordus*, he thought with as he settled in behind his desk.

"Tchaikovsky - collection two," he announced. The computer complied and the soothing strings and woodwinds of *Swan Lake* began to softly surround the Russian Captain.

He began perusing the data PADD, but his mind drifted to the *Finback*. He had been a young junior grade lieutenant serving on the *Albacore* when the ill-fated *Finback* had disappeared back in 2349. His first tour out of the Academy had been on the *Finback* under Captain G'lil Shartuurn - a stoic Andorian woman. He recalled how Sharuurn ran a *very* tight ship, but all in all he had enjoyed his 18 months aboard *Finback* before his transfer to the *Albacore*.

*So what happened to you, Captain Shartuurn? And what happened to your crew? Where have you been the past 28 years?*

His gaze drifted to a group of holo-pics arranged on one of the shelves. They included several images of his days serving on the *Albacore*. One depicted a very young Rodenko standing by a young, gangly non-com with dark skin. He smiled as his mind drifted back to those days on *Albacore*, or the "Big Tuna" as she was affectionately called. Joseph Akinola had been on board as a young petty officer and they had shared some harrowing but exciting experiences against slavers and pirates.

*We thought we were indestructible in those days*, Rodenko thought wryly. His eyes stole to a holo-image of himself made back in those days. The black curly hair and bushy eyebrows were the same, but he was certainly *much* skinnier in those days.

*Ah, to have a high metabolism again*, he mused. Sighing, he placed the PADD on his desk and closed his eyes, allowing the strains of Tchaikovsky to flow around and through him. In a moment, he was sound asleep.

If he had scrolled to the next page on the PADD, he would have noted and recognized the name of the L-class freighter that had appeared - the same ship his good friend Joseph Akinola last saw from an escape pod when he was 13 years old.

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**Stardate 54257.5 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Star Station Echo - Berth 6**

Commander Strauss hesitated before entering the armory. Part of her felt like she was intruding in a personal matter. But as Executive Officer, she had primary responsibility for crew issues - even if it involved the Chief of the Boat. Still, the armory was "NCO country" on the ship - traditionally considered off-limits to officers, a haven of sorts for the senior enlisted men and women on the *Bluefin*. Of course, the rule didn't apply to Captain Akinola - as far as the NCO's were concerned, he was still one of them.

Chief Deryx was in the process of reassembling several phaser carbines when Strauss entered. He straightened, surprised by the presence of the XO in the armory.

"Commander? Can I help you?" he asked. Strauss expected him to add, "*Are you lost?*"

Inga smiled. "No thanks, Chief - I just need to see the Senior Chief. Is he around?"

Solly suddenly appeared from behind a bank of weapons lockers. "Right here, Commander. Come on in."

He gestured toward his office. Inga walked in and took a seat across from his somewhat battered desk. He walked over to a beverage servitor and poured a mug of coffee.

"Coffee, Commander?"

"Thanks! Black is fine."

Solly poured another mug full and handed it to Strauss. He moved around the desk and settled into his desk chair.

"How's the jaw?" she asked innocently, breaking the ice.

Brin chuckled and rubbed the side of his face. "I gotta admit, ma'am, you pack a pretty mean punch. I've gone up against Nausicans that didn't hit that hard."

She smiled. "Sorry about that. I guess I had an unfair advantage at the time. Did Sanders tell you?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands. "No ma'am. Sandy didn't rat you out. In fact, he was pretty upset when he found out that *I* knew. But it wasn't hard to learn the story, what with all of the blow-hards on this ship." He took a sip of coffee before placing the mug on his desk.

"But I'm betting you didn't come down here for a friendly rematch, did you?" His tone was still pleasant but there was a guarded look around his eyes.

Strauss shook her head. "Senior - I don't really want to pry into your personal affairs, but, well - it would help if you could give me some background about Lt. Rune, from your perspective.

The big Orion non-com nodded absently, a thoughtful look on his face.



"Fair enough, Commander. Though I don't know how much it will help the situation. To say that Lt. Rune and I are 'estranged' would be putting the soft spin on it."

"Just tell me what you can."

"I'll do my best, Commander. But please understand – Orion culture is very different from human culture. It's . . . complicated."

"I'm a good listener – humor me, Senior Chief."

Solly knitted his brow, obviously considering how to begin.

"Okay, just – bear with me. This may not make a lot of sense, but, here goes."

"I was born into the Elix family on Verex III. You know them *all* too well. My father was Tranji Elix's younger brother. Unlike his brothers, Father wasn't involved in the Syndicate and tried to shield me from it." He paused, a distant look on his face.

"In Orion culture, when a child reaches about 12 standard years of age, the Syndicate can claim the child and place him in one of their training schools - gangs, really, unless the parents can pay the *Nal-klisa* - 'free ransom' is about the best translation. Father had worked and saved money, so when Tranji and some of his thugs showed up, he presented the payment."

Something came across Solly's face - a look of sorrow intermingled with anger. It gave Inga a chill to see it.

"The short version is that Tranji refused the *Nal-klisa* – claimed it wasn't enough. He demanded that Father turn me over to the clan *Ahmet-sur*, which was my grandfather, Nokul Elix. My father refused, and Tranji slid a blade into his gut."

He paused again, his yellow eyes narrow and dangerous. "My mother had feared something like that to happen, so she had me hidden away with some friends who helped us both get off-planet. For about a year, we stayed on the run – planet-hopping refugees really – until we ended up on Verex IV."

Inga frowned. "Didn't Elix follow you? They just let you go?"

Brin shook his head. "Not exactly. Another thing you need to know about Orion culture - we're a superstitious lot. Verex IV is the *last* place any Orion wants to go. And not just because of the harsh climate. In our language, it's called *V'ores katul* - the place of no souls. The ancient belief is that any Orion that steps foot there is damned. That's why the Syndicate leaves it alone - there's no profit in going there for them. In their mind, any Orion that goes to Verex IV is more than in exile - they're in the waiting room for *V'ores dur*, our version of Hell."

Strauss, was stunned by this revelation. She hadn't known that about the Orions. "So . . . what do *you* believe, Solly?"

He smiled and shrugged. "I don't follow the old Orion traditions, if that's what you're wondering. But I won't lie to you - it's something in your head that follows you all of your life." He paused, getting back to his original point.

"Anyway, it was pretty tough for my mother and I, but we managed to survive a day at a time. The turning point was when Mother met Kaldor Brin. Kaldor was one of the first Orions to serve in the Border Service. They hit it off and went through the equivalent of your marriage ritual. I took Kaldor's name, of course - I didn't want anything more to do with the Elix clan."

Inga nodded, fascinated.

"Kaldor was good to my Mother and tough but fair with me. I learned a lot from him - how to handle myself in a fight - believe it or not, I was small for my age as a child - but also about integrity and doing the right thing. He also talked about looking out for those who can't help themselves." A look of regret came over his face. "I still miss him - he died not long after I joined the service."

Solly took a sip of coffee, and then continued. "When I was home on leave one year, I came across a group of thugs messing with a little girl. I could tell she was scared to death and the little punks had mayhem on their minds - so I intervened."

Strauss had no doubt that Solly's intervention entailed administering extreme physical pain to the thugs. She almost wished she could have witnessed it in person.

“The little girl was maybe 7 or 8 standard years old. She was scared, filthy and half-starved. I managed to coax her out of her box and found out her family was dead – she was all alone.”

He glanced up at Inga. “Understand, Commander – on Verex IV, there are no social agencies, no orphanages – nothing like’s available in most of the Federation. Children like that either learn to survive or they die. It happens every day.”

“So,” interrupted Inga, “what made you help *this* girl?”

“I guess I did it to honor Kaldor. I think it would have pleased him.” He took a deep breath. “By taking her in and offering her food and protection, I became her *Met-sando*, her near-father.” He paused again, the memories flooding in.

“My mother agreed to take care of her while I was away. I now had some money to cover both their living expenses. K’lira turned out to be a very bright and beautiful girl - full of mischief and curiosity. We were very close, even though we didn’t get to see each other in person very often,” Brin paused, pursing his lips.

“She wanted nothing more than to follow in my footsteps. But she was so smart! By the time she was of age to enlist, I did some checking, called in some favors, and got her a shot at the Academy admissions exam. And she passed it easily!” he said, with obvious pride. “She excelled at the Academy, graduating with honors. The Skipper pulled a few strings and got her assigned to *Bluefin*. Everything was great . . .”

The animated look on his face faded. He suddenly seemed aware again of the Commander’s presence. He also seemed embarrassed.

“Well. That’s the back-story – at least part of it. If you want to know more, there’s someone else you should talk to.”

“The Captain?”

Solly fixed Strauss with a piercing gaze. “Lieutenant Bane.”

## Chapter Three

**Stardate 54257.9 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**En route to the Lesser Riven nebula - Warp 9**

Captain Rodenko sat in his command chair on the bridge, rubbing his neck and mentally cursing himself for falling asleep in the ready room. Ever since going on the Doctor's damnable diet, he'd found himself nodding off easily when he sat still for long – a bad habit he intended to break!

“Captain?” Commander Vribb straightened from her seat at operations. “I’ve found the archived file you requested – the last transmission from the *Finback* before they disappeared.”

“Play it back – audio only,” directed Rodenko.

In a moment, the Captain heard a voice he'd last heard 30 years ago - the nonsense voice of Captain Shartuurn. He frowned as a faint chill ran through him.

*“Finback to Star Station Echo,”*

*“Echo control – this is Commander Farringer, go ahead, Finback.”*

*“Commander, this is Captain Shartuurn. Be advised, we are altering course toward the Lesser Riven nebula. Sensors have picked up an anomalous energy surge approaching 500 teracochranes in intensity. Are you aware of any vessels in the area?”*

*“Stand by, Finback . . . Finback, this is Echo – negative on other ships. No flight plans have been filed for that sector. Of course, you’re aware that a lot of traffic flows through there unauthorized.”*

*“Thank you, Commander, I was aware of that. We will investigate and report back to you. Finback out.”*

“That’s all of it,” said Vribb, apologetically.

Rodenko nodded, a frown on his broad face. “Thank you, Commander.” *So, the same high-level energy waves were present when the Finback disappeared as upon its return.* He thought, concern creeping into his mind.

He turned his attention back to the PADD containing the data transmitted from the navigational buoy that had first noted the appearance of the four ships. He re-read all of the data regarding the *Finback*, which was scant enough. He scrolled through the rest of the data, seeing if there was further knowledge to be gleaned from the other ships.

As he came to the fourth vessel, an L-type freighter, he frowned in thought. *I've heard of this ship before – the Eku, but where? And when?*

He puzzled over the not-quite-memory for several moments. Absently, he noted Master Chief Petty Officer H'runda walk toward the tactical officer with a PADD. His eyes fell on the non-com's rank insignia and a switch connected in his mind.

"Joseph Akinola!" he breathed, his eyes widening. "The *Eku* was his parents' ship!"

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54257.9 (13 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Star Station Echo – Berth 6**

Officers' Wardroom

The festive spirit of the going-away gathering partially allayed the underlying sense of sadness in the hearts of the assembled officers. The Captain, Commander Strauss, Lt. Commander Gralt, Lt. Commander Simms, Dr. Castille, Lt. Bane and of course, the guest of honor, Lt. Commander T'Ser, crowded around the long table which was heavily laden with food and drink. Balloons and streamers hung overhead, wishing T'Ser "Good Luck" and "Congratulations!"

Akinola began to tap his champagne glass with a fork. "Alright, everyone – listen up a second – I've got a couple of important presentations to make. T'Ser, come on up here!"

The rumble of conversation died down as T'Ser made her way toward the Captain, suddenly self-conscious. She approached, carefully holding her glass of wine, eyebrow raised in a perfect parody of Vulcan propriety.

Akinola placed a fatherly hand on the Vulcan's shoulders. "For the last seven years, it's been our great privilege to have T'Ser serving alongside us on board *Bluefin*. When she joined us, she was still a lieutenant and served as assistant ops officer. In a short while, she was made senior operations officer, then promoted to Lt. Commander. She has earned numerous commendations for bravery and she has bled for us on more than one occasion. More than that, she has earned our respect, our admiration and our deep friendship. You will be missed."

There were numerous murmurs of agreement and a "Hear, hear," from Bane. T'Ser looked like she might cry.

"Now, in recognition of your leadership abilities, you go now to serve as executive officer of the starship *Gibraltar*. Captain Sandhurst has chosen well. Our loss is *Gibraltar's* gain."

There was gentle applause at this and nods of agreement. T'Ser surreptitiously brushed a tear from her cheek.

"Before you leave us, however, there are two things you need to carry. One is some heavier hardware – Commander Strauss?"

The XO came forward carrying a PADD and a small box. T'Ser's eyebrow slid up once more. Strauss handed the PADD to Akinola, who began to read from it.

"Attention to orders!" he began, "The President of the United Federation of Planets, acting upon the recommendation of the Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet, has placed special trust in the loyalty, integrity and abilities of Lt. Commander T'Ser. In view of these special qualities, and her demonstrated potential to serve in the higher grade, Lt. Commander T'Ser is promoted to the grade of Commander, effective Stardate 54257.9, by order of the Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet."

T'Ser's eyes widened in surprise, a tinge of olive coloring her cheeks.

"Commander Strauss," continued Akinola, "would you please step forward and pin on Commander T'Ser's new rank?"

Strauss opened the small box, removing a gold pip. She removed the black and gold third pip from T'Ser's uniform, replacing it with the new one.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Commander T’Ser, Executive Officer designate of the USS *Gibraltar*.”

The applause was louder and longer this time. Nigel shouted, “Speech! Speech!”

T’Ser smiled broadly. “Here’s a speech for you – Shut up, Nigel!”

There were appreciative chuckles. Bane feigned an affronted expression.

“Thank you all! I really don’t know what to say, but . . . it’s been a very real honor to serve with you. Some of you I’ve known all seven years – others more recently, but you’re like family to me. I’ll miss you guys . . .” she paused, to clear her throat, “and I’ll think of you often. But I have to admit, I’m excited about the opportunity to serve as first officer on the *Gibraltar*. Thank you all for . . .” her throat tightened with emotion and she was left speechless, a tearful smile on her face.

Akinola smiled. “Alright, everyone – time for us to wrap this up. T’Ser, after everyone comes by, please accompany me and the XO to the ready room.”

The senior officers filed by T’Ser, offering hugs, words of encouragement and their fare-wells. More than a few tears were shed. Even Galt, the crusty Telarite chief engineer, gave T’Ser an awkward hug.

“I guess you weren’t a total disaster as second officer,” he grouched.

T’Ser planted a kiss on the short Telarite’s snout. “I’ll miss you too, Galt.”

Soon, the wardroom was empty, save for Akinola, T’Ser and Strauss. “Come on commanders, we’ve got one more presentation to make.”

\* \* \*

### Captain’s Ready Room

Once inside the Captain’s compact office, the veteran Captain handed T’Ser a gift box.

“Go ahead, open it up!” urged Akinola.

Intrigued, T'Ser carefully opened the fasteners to the ornate box and lifted the lid. Her breath caught momentarily as she gazed at the contents.

"Oh wow!" she exclaimed, softly. It's beautiful, sir – Thank you!"

Strauss lifted up on her toes to peer into the box. Nestled inside on a blanket of blue velvet was a hand-carved model of the USS *Bluefin*, captured in gleaming Myrtlewood. A small engraved plaque at the model's base read,

*"To Commander T'Ser from the Captain and Crew of the USS Bluefin: May your journeys be filled with joy and wonder as you go where no one has gone before. Semper Paratus."*

Impulsively, T'Ser gave Akinola a fierce hug. "Thank you, sir," she whispered, "for *everything!* It's been more than an honor!"

Akinola patted her gently on the back. "The honor has been mine, T'Ser."

The Vulcan released her embrace and smiled at Strauss, who was doing an admirable job of not crying.

"Try to keep him out of trouble!" said T'Ser, jerking her thumb at the Captain.

"It's a full-time job," answered Strauss with a straight face.

"You two should take your comedy act on the road," remarked Akinola, dryly. His terminal suddenly chimed for attention. He walked around his desk and keyed the reply stud. "Akinola – go ahead."

*"Incoming message from Admiral Bateson, sir,"* came the voice of Ensign Vashtee.

Akinola glanced at the chronometer, surprised that the Admiral was calling at such a late hour. He gave an apologetic look to T'Ser and Strauss.

"Ladies, I apologize, but I better take this."

T'Ser smiled. "Thank you, Captain. I'll see you in the morning before I leave."

"Goodnight to you both, then," replied Akinola as he seated himself behind his desk.



As soon as the door closed behind the departing officers, Akinola activated his terminal screen. Morgan Bateson's face appeared.

*"Joseph, I'm sorry to disturb your going-away party for T'Ser, but something rather extraordinary has come up that you need to know about."*

"No problem, Admiral – we were wrapping up, anyway. What happened that's so 'extraordinary?'"

*"Are you sitting down?"*

Akinola frowned, a vague sense of unease coming over him. "Yes sir."

Bateson took a breath before beginning. *"Several hours ago, four ships suddenly appeared out of nowhere near the Lesser Riven nebula. All of these ships were reported missing long ago. One is the USS Finback."*

Akinola leaned forward in surprise and excitement. "The *Finback*? My God, they disappeared, what? Nearly 30 years ago?"

*"Boris Rodenko is on his way to investigate with the Scamp. They should be on station in about six hours."* He hesitated, *"Joseph, there's something else you need to know?"*

Akinola felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to rise. Yet, he did not dare to hope. "What's that, Admiral?"

*"One of the ships . . . it's the Eku, Joseph."*

## Chapter Four

**Stardate 54258.0 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Star Station Echo – Berth 6**

Akinola sat in the semi-darkness of his ready room, staring at an old holo-pic of his family taken when he was about nine years old and his little sister, Melody, was just one. It had belonged to his grandparents and was the only image he had left of his parents.

In the picture, they were back on Earth during one of their infrequent visits to their home-world. The Kwa Falls of Nigeria served as a spectacular backdrop as Joseph's father knelt by young Joseph. His mother held little Melody in her arms, shielding her face from the sun with her hand. They were all smiling except Melody, who was asleep.

Akinola smiled at the memory. He had enjoyed the month they spent in Nigeria, visiting with grandparents and other family members, and traveling across the continent of United Africa. The vast plain of the Serengeti had been a particularly awesome sight to a young lad who spent most of his days in 100 meter long cylinder.

He wiped his face, surprised at the sudden moisture from his eyes. Briefly, he considered contacting Melody and alerting her to the discovery of *Ekú*. He discarded the notion after a moment's reflection. He'd wait until he'd had a chance to look over their old ship first, to see . . .

*What?* he wondered, *What will I find on Ekú? It's been missing for 47 years!*

More disturbing were the implications of the discovery. For all these years, Akinola had assumed the ship had been destroyed by pirates or raiders. It troubled him that he still could not recall the details of what actually happened on that fateful day. His old friend, the late Dr. Calvin Baxter attributed the memory lapse to traumatic amnesia.

*"You were just a youngster, Joseph,"* Calvin had said, *"Your mind was simply overwhelmed by what you witnessed and the amnesia is a defense mechanism. It's perfectly understandable that you don't remember the events."*

Akinola had accepted Baxter's reasoning, though somehow, it didn't quite ring true.

*And what about the nightmares?*

Oh yes – let’s not forget the god-damned night terrors! They teased and tormented him with disjointed, fleeting images that he could not *quite* recall upon waking. Castille had been bold enough to suggest that Akinola see a counselor. Akinola had told Castille where he could shove his Feinberger scanner.

*So why haven’t you gone to see a counselor, Joseph, old man? Afraid of what they might find locked up between your ears?*

He didn’t want to think about that just now.

The Captain stood and made his way to the ready room door. He stopped momentarily, realizing he still carried the holo of his family. Placing it carefully back on the shelf, he moved on through the door and onto the bridge.

\* \* \*

Lt. Commander Delta Simms was surprised to see Akinola exit the ready room. She had assumed that he was asleep in his cabin so very early in gamma shift.

“Can’t sleep, Captain?” she asked.

Akinola flashed a weak smile. “Nothing new about that, Delta,” he said. “Do me a favor – see who we have that’s still out on shore leave. I want us to get underway by 0800.”

Simms looked surprised. “0800 *this* morning, sir? I didn’t think we were due to depart for three more days.”

“Change of plans, Commander. We’re going to rendezvous with the *Scamp* near the Lesser Riven. We’ll need to transmit a recall signal to any crew that are still out and about.”

Akinola’s tone was conversational, but Simms could detect a note of impatience in his voice.

“Aye, sir. I’ll get right on it.” She hesitated, then ventured out on a limb. “May I ask what’s going on?”

The Captain still appeared distracted. “It would seem that some wanderers have returned from afar,” he answered, cryptically.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.1 (14 April 2377)**  
**Star Station Echo - Berth 6**

T’Ser stood at the transparent aluminum view-port, watching the *Bluefin* back slowly from its berth at the star station. Red and green navigational lights strobed cheerfully on the cutter’s hull while accent lights illuminated the ship’s name and registry.

*It always looks bigger on the outside than it feels on the inside, she mused. She wonder if the Gibraltar were as cramped.*

The moment was surreal for the Vulcan woman as she watched her home for the last seven years gracefully pirouette and move away from the station. On board were the people she knew and loved the most, next to her own parents.

She watched the cutter’s impulse vents suddenly glow red and the small ship moved rapidly away. Soon, it was a mere point of light approaching the outer navigational markers of the space which surrounded the station. Her keen eyesight caught the tell-tale flash as the *Bluefin* jumped to warp, and was gone.

T’Ser stared out the view-port for a few moments longer. A work pod scurried past and a *Miranda*-class ship slid slowly by, though she did not note its name, her mind replaying her final words with Captain Akinola.

*“I guess this is good-bye, Commander. Let us know how you’re doing when you get a chance.”*

*“I will,” she had promised, though they both thought that unlikely.*

*Akinola then gently grasped her arm and peered into her eyes. “Be careful, T’Ser.” Then he had abruptly turned and vanished back into Bluefin.*

“Be careful,” she said to herself, quietly. “Not, ‘good-luck’ or ‘best wishes?’” For some reason, these two words gave her pause. Sure, she knew *Gibraltar* was a troubled ship, but heck – after the war *every* ship had its share of troubled crew members.

*Don't read so much into it, she chided herself, he's just distracted and wants to see about his family's old ship.*

Pushing her troubled thoughts to the back of her mind, T'Ser shouldered her carry-all and made her way to the bank of turbo-lifts. Her runabout left in fifteen minutes and she certainly didn't want to miss it.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.4 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 - Near the The Lesser Riven nebula**

“Maximum magnification on the viewer, Mr. Eerdman,” ordered Captain Rodenko. The *Scamp* was running at one-half impulse, quickly closing on the drifting ships.

The image shimmered slightly, then refocused. All eyes on the bridge turned and marveled at the sight of the USS *Finback* as it drifted dark and silent in the void.

“See if you can enhance the image, please,” said Rodenko, a hint of excited fascination in his voice.

The operations officer complied, and the dark image became much clearer as the computer amplified the scant starlight, giving greater illumination to the vessel.

The *Finback* appeared to be in pristine condition, at least externally. There were no traces of damage – no hull breaches or scorch marks from weapons' fire were evident. All of the escape pods were still in place.

Rodenko frowned slightly. The hull, in fact, appeared *too* clean for a powerless vessel that had drifted for 28 years. There should have been a coating of dust particles, meteor damage – *something* to give evidence to the passage of time.

Yet, their sister ship looked as if had just left from a fresh refit at space-dock.

“Give her a full sensor sweep, Mr. Eerdman. Helm, bring us in dead-slow and activate the spot-lights – let’s give her a careful look over.”

“Captain,” announced Lt. Eerdman, a note of puzzlement in his voice, “No life signs of any kind, however . . .” He tapped a control stud several times, “I’m picking up very low-level energy readings on board. It seems that emergency battery power is still operating.”

Commander Vribb glanced at Rodenko. “That shouldn’t be possible!” she exclaimed.

“*Nyet*,” the Captain agreed, more to himself than to Vribb. “Those batteries are rated for six months – give or take a few weeks. Certainly not for 28 years!”

A surprised oath from operations caught Rodenko’s attention. “You have something more to share, Lieutenant?”

“Uh, yes sir, just let me double check . . . this *can’t* be right!” he muttered.

“I’m not getting any younger, Mr. Eerdman,” said Rodenko, his thin patience rapidly waning.

Frustrated, Eerdman rubbed a hand through his thinning brown hair. “According to my readings – and I’ve checked them twice – *Finback* fired her phasers very recently. Based on the decay of residual photonic energy at the emitters, I estimate anywhere from 18 to 24 hours ago.”

The bridge was quiet for several moments at this astounding and seemingly impossible pronouncement.

*If the vessel is deserted, who fired the phasers? And what were they shooting at?* wondered Captain Rodenko, his bushy brows furrowed.

Finally, Rodenko spoke. “Ensign V’Shev, raise shields. Commander, take us to yellow alert. We will operate under the assumption that nothing we are seeing is as it seems. Helm, back us off 500 thousand kilometers and hold station at that point.

Vribb leaned in to speak with Rodenko.

“Do you expect trouble, sir?”

He snorted. “Trouble is what I am seeing now, Commander. None of this makes any rational sense.”

“Are we going to send over a boarding party?” asked the XO.

Rodenko rubbed his chin in thought. “All in good time, Commander - the *Bluefin* and *Scioto* will arrive in a few hours. We will pool our information and resources and attack this mystery together.”

He stared at the image of their derelict sister ship, his initial excitement tempered by these new, disturbing revelations. Dark thoughts swirled through his troubled mind.

## Chapter Five

**Stardate 54258.7 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – En route to the Lesser Riven nebula**

Akinola listened carefully as Boris Rodenko related the unusual findings from their initial scans of the *Finback*.

*“I must say, Joseph, this gets stranger the more I ponder it. Right now, I have far more questions than I do answers.”*

Captain Akinola took a pensive sip of coffee. “Have you scanned the other ships?” He tried to keep his tone nonchalant. He failed badly.

Rodenko regarded his friend over the subspace link. *“To answer your real question, Joseph – No, we have not done a thorough scan of the Eku. However, to be blunt – our initial assessments do not indicate the ship has power . . . or any life readings.”* He paused, *“I’m sorry, my friend – I know that’s not what you wanted to hear.”*

Akinola forced a smile. “No apologies necessary, Boris. The odds of my parents or my uncle and aunt still being alive after all these years . . . well . . .” His voice trailed off.

Rodenko nodded, *“In any event, I feel strongly that you should be the one to investigate Eku. It is your ship, after all.”* He glanced off-screen at a PADD. *“Captain Phralnis and the warp-tug Scioto should rendezvous with us shortly after you arrive on station. How do you want us to proceed?”* The Russian deferred to Akinola, the senior captain.

“Why don’t you continue to investigate the *Finback*. We’ll take the *Eku* and let Phralnis and his crew check out the Vulcan and Orion ships. He can easily tow both of those vessels back to Echo while we handle one each.”

*“Da! Yes, that works for me.”*

“And Boris? Based on what you’ve told me, better have your boarding teams carry side-arms. Maybe I’m just getting old, but something about this definitely doesn’t feel right.”



*"Then we both are getting old together. I agree – we will proceed with due caution. Scamp, out."*

\* \* \*

Fifty-four minutes later, the *Bluefin* dropped out of warp and began approaching the *Scamp* and the deserted vessels.

Commander Strauss stole a glance at Captain Akinola from her customary seat at the tactical station. His expression was rapt as he peered at the viewscreen, seeking a glimpse of his old ship – his childhood home.

In truth, Strauss was concerned for the Captain. She knew of the nightmares that afflicted him and their tenuous connection to the disappearance of the *Ekú* so many years ago. She wondered how the same vessel, suddenly appearing from nowhere, might affect him.

"I have it, sir," announced Lt. Bane. "Bearing seven degrees off our port bow, negative 12 degrees, z-axis."

"Take us in slow, Mr. Bralus," said Akinola, his voice restrained and quiet. "Commence scanning, Mr. Bane."

Nigel stole a glance at Inga before replying. "Aye sir. Beginning active scans now." He hesitated before adding, "I have it on visual, Captain,"

Akinola took a quieting breath. "On-screen."

The viewscreen shifted and zoomed in on a slowly tumbling object, still too distant to be discernable.

"Increase magnification," said Akinola. He absently rubbed his palms on his uniform pants.

The view shifted once more. On the screen, an oblong spaceship slowly spun, like a long spoke of a Ferris wheel. It was yellowish tan in color with a prominent red stripe along its length. Seven intact cargo pods were attached to the belly of the ship. At the bow was an old-style deflector dish. Aft, were the impulse cluster and engineering section with two stubby warp nacelles attached. Roughly amidships was a prominent conning tower that rose above the dorsal midline – the bridge and primary airlock. On the fin-like tower was a civilian registry number and the ship's name, *S.S. Ekú*.

For a while, no one spoke. Some watched the small freighter slowly rotate while a few stole glances toward the Captain.

Joseph Akinola's face was unreadable, though a faint crinkle in his brow might be construed as a frown or perhaps, mere puzzlement.

The Captain cleared his throat, breaking the silence. "Are you getting any additional readings, Mr. Bane?"

Bane scrolled through several sensor bands, determining not to miss anything of importance.

"The ship is intact, sir. I'm reading a breathable atmosphere, although it's a bit on the chilly side. Now picking up low-level power readings, consistent with emergency battery power, as Captain Rodenko reported about the *Finback*."

Akinola frowned at this piece of news but did not comment.

Bane continued with his report. "All major systems are off-line at present, though I imagine they would operate with normal power restored."

He scrolled to the bio-metric scale and stopped, surprised. He adjusted the gain on the sensor return and frowned.

Akinola noticed. "Something, Mr. Bane?"

"I'm picking up a life form reading, Captain."

Akinola snapped his head toward Bane. "Human?"

The operations officer shook his head apologetically. "No sir, no – definitely not human. I can't get a positive I.D. – it's coming from engineering, though – there seems to be some low-level interference, residual radiation perhaps, but not at dangerous levels."

"Keep at it, Mr. Bane. Please inform me if you get a positive I.D. on the life reading."

He rose from his chair. "Mr. Bralus, move us in close to the *Ekú*. See if you can get a tractor beam on her and stop the tumbling. XO, my ready room, please."

Strauss rose from her chair at tactical and followed the Captain into his office.

Akinola walked to the small viewport of the ready room, clasped his hands behind his back and stared out at the stars.

"Inga, I'd appreciate you sharing any thoughts you have about the situation," said Akinola.

"Sir," she began, carefully, "I can't imagine what you're feeling right now . . ."

He snorted. "I'm not sure what I'm feeling myself, to be honest."

She continued, "But I've no doubt you're eager to see your ship."

She caught the reflection of his smile in the viewport.

"No doubt," he agreed, in a dry tone. "But I need to be careful not to let my . . . *eagerness* over-ride good judgement. I've been guilty of that of late."

"Captain, we're all probing in the dark here. There are many questions that remain unanswered. Our job, as I see it, is to try to find some answers. But at the same time, I recommend caution. I have to wonder not only how these ships arrived here, but *who* sent them – and why?"

"Questions upon questions," murmured Akinola. "The same ones have crossed my mind as well. I have a feeling there is some dark purpose behind the appearance of these ships."

He turned. "Barring any hazardous discoveries from our sensor sweeps, I want to place boarding parties on all of these vessels – check them out from stem to stern before we take them back to *Echo*. Do you concur?"

Strauss nodded. "Yes sir, I do. But let me remind you, there is the matter of the un-identified life-form on *Ekú*."

"Point well taken - we'll go well-prepared, Commander. I'll contact Captain Rodenko and have him proceed with boarding the *Finback*. Captain Phralnis has well-trained salvage teams on *Scioto* - I'll ask him to check out the Vulcan and Orion ships."

"Yes sir. I'll put together an away team for the *Ekú*," said Strauss.

Akinola nodded. "Fine. Just one thing, Inga."

"Sir?"

"I'm leading it."

She stifled a sigh. "Yes sir, I already guessed as much."

## Chapter Six

**Stardate 54258.8 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Officer's Wardroom

Commander Strauss and Lt. Bane carried trays laden with Cookie's fine fare, but both were more tired than hungry.

Strauss ordered a cup of Raktajino from the replicator. Bane gestured at the cup of strong, Klingon brew when she sat down.

"You'll never get to sleep drinkin' that Klingon java. Wouldn't you be better off with a nice cup of decaffeinated tea?"

Inga made a face. "De-caf! God, whose idea was that? Must never have served on a starship."

Bane smiled. "The XO's work is never done, eh?" He became more serious. "So . . . how's the Skipper doing?"

She shrugged as she distractedly shoved some potatoes around her plate. "Okay, I guess. He and Captains Rodenko and Phralnis are being very methodical in their approach. In that sense, I think he's being very prudent."

"But? . . ." prodded Bane.

"Well, how would *you* feel, Nigel? The Captain has always assumed his ship was destroyed all those years ago - now, it conveniently shows up, batteries working and atmosphere still breathable, which shouldn't be *possible*, mind you. Not to mention the small matter of an unidentified life form lurking about!"

Nigel grimaced. His inability to identify the mysterious life form was a sore point for him and tugged at his pride.

"I guess I wouldn't know *what* to think," answered Bane. "But I'd sure as hell want to get on that ship to see for myself!"

"As does the Captain," said Strauss. She pursed her lips and looked down at her food tray.

"Nigel, I need to ask you about Lt. Rune."

Inga sensed rather than saw a subtle change in Bane's mood.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I talked with Solly, trying to get a handle on our new officer. I figured her adoptive father might shed some light on her history. He did - up to a point - he gave me her early background and how he came to be her father." She smiled wanly. "I think that's the most Solly has said in one sitting since I've been here."

Bane took a swallow of milk. "Did he tell you what happened four years ago that got her court-martialed?"

"No. He said I should ask you. So, I'm asking."

Bane sighed and moved his tray aside. He clasped his hands together and tapped them against his chin, apparently searching for a way to begin.

"If you're wondering if K'lira and I had a relationship . . ."

"I wasn't asking about that, Nigel," she lied.

"We did . . . briefly. I reckon it was less of a relationship than sort of a flirting duel. Sure, we liked one another - that is, I liked her as a friend and shipmate - but I didn't consider it a *serious* relationship."

"And Lt. Rune?" asked Strauss, quietly.

"Ah." Bane sighed. "That was another . . ."

He paused as Ensign Drii A'nshill entered the wardroom. She offered a nervous smile as she ordered a hot Andorian beverage from the replicator, then quickly scurried from the ward room.

"Cute kid," commented Bane, amused by the rookie helm officer.

"Adorable, but she's still intimidated by all the other officers. Don't get off-subject."

Nigel sighed. "Okay - I didn't realize it at the time, but K'lira was apparently a *lot* more interested in me than I was in her. I still thought her behavior was just, y'know, part of her personality. I mean - green Orion girls? Bonzer!" Bane winked.

Strauss' smile was glacial. "We'll discuss her behavior and *your* sexist attitude later. Right now, I need to know about the incident where she killed a civilian. I understand you were there."

Bane sobered. "Yeah - I was there, all right. Damn near had my ticket punched, too!" He gazed into Inga's eyes. "Oh yeah, she screwed up royally, no doubt about it. But if she hadn't, I'd be dead, fair dinkum!"

\* \* \*

#### Transporter Room One

Captain Akinola entered the transporter room to find Senior Chief Brin already present. Chief Deryx was behind the control console. Lt. Commander Simms was also present, carrying a small tool-kit and engineering scanner.

Akinola frowned. "Where's . . ."

The door to the transporter room swished open and two figures entered. Dr. Castille had a medical tri-corder on his belt and a smug expression on his face.

"Doctor? I don't recall requesting you to accompany us on this away mission," said Akinola, clearly displeased.

"CMO's prerogative," he answered, abruptly. "Since we don't have a counselor on board, I'm the next best thing. And, considering where you're about to go, *somebody* needs to keep an eye on you!"

Akinola bit off a retort and nodded curtly. "Fine. Just . . . keep out of the way." He looked at the second person.

"Glad you could join us, Lt. Rune. You were expected five minutes ago."

"Sorry, sir. I thought it was a mistake, so I double-checked." She gave a meaningful look at Senior Chief Brin whose face was like granite.

"Next time, show up on-time and you can clarify it then. Your name happened to be at the top for away team rotation. Is there a problem?" Akinola's voice was neutral but he allowed his gaze to drift meaningfully between Lt. Rune and Senior Chief Brin.

"No problem, sir," replied Rune, perfunctorily.

Akinola raised an eyebrow at Solly, who merely shook his head slightly.

"Good. Let's go then."

The five took their places on the transporter platform. Akinola paused fractionally before speaking.

"Energize."

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.9 (14 April 2377)**

***SS Eku***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Five figures materialized in a dimly lit corridor of the small freighter. Emergency lights provided meager illumination in the narrow space.

"And I thought *Bluefin* was cramped," muttered Castille, instinctively ducking from the overhead conduits, pipes and air ducts.

Captain Akinola stood silently for several moments, waves of memories washing over him like an in-coming tide. A momentary bout of dizziness threatened to drop him to his knees.

"Captain?" Dr. Castille asked, sharply, noticing Akinola's dazed expression.

Akinola blinked. "I'm fine Doctor. Just . . . give me a moment."

He took a few tentative steps forward on the tile-covered deck, peering around as if expecting the ship to vanish like some cruel mirage.



Bane and Simms had their scanners out, sweeping in all directions.

"Atmosphere is good," Delta announced, "In fact, it's well within the normal range," she finished, her voice tinged with surprise. "After all these years, it should have gone stale."

"Stale?" murmured Akinola, "It should be un-breathable." He sniffed the air, a puzzled expression on his dark features. "You smell that?"

They all tested the air. "Something burning?" ventured Lt. Rune.

"Yeah," agreed Castille. "Coffee - it smells just like scorched coffee!"

"This way!" said Akinola, moving forward suddenly. The others almost had to trot to keep up.

The Captain led them to a compartment off the main corridor. It was the *Ekus* galley, primitive by even the *Bluefin's* standards. On one wall was an ancient protein re-sequencer of early 23rd century vintage. Nearby was a moderate size stasis chamber for meat, fruit and vegetables. A counter with cabinets lined the opposite wall with a small stove, sink and a coffee urn. The coffee urn's red light was still glowing and the strong smell of over-done coffee.

Akinola walked over and switched off the coffee urn, staring at it as if in a dream. He ran his hand tentatively over the chrome plated vessel.

"Dad wired the coffee maker into the emergency circuit. He always said, 'No problem is too big if you have enough coffee.'"

"Sir? Look at this," said Delta. She was standing by a metal dining table in the middle of the room. Akinola turned, his eyes falling on the remains of a half-eaten meal.

Castille ran his scanner over the food remains. His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"What the hell?" the Doctor muttered. He picked up a half-eaten sandwich and sniffed it. He stared at Akinola.

"It's still good!" he announced, incredulous. "The bread's a little stale, but you could eat it."

The Captain walked over to the table, reaching for one of the plates, but withdrew his hand before touching it, as if it were somehow bewitched.

"My father and uncle liked to come in and grab a late-night snack," The Captain explained, "They did a lot of the maintenance work during the 'night' cycle, while Melody and I were asleep. They probably came in here just before . . ." He stopped abruptly as dormant memories began to surface.

Castille noted the haunted expression on the Captain's face. "Captain, maybe you've seen enough this time . . ."

"Nonsense!" Akinola's voice firmed up. "We've got a lot to do, so let's . . ."

"*Quiet!*" hissed Brin, abruptly. His voice carried absolute authority, even though he was outranked by everyone else in the galley. A phaser had appeared in his hand, as if by magic. He was staring intently at his own scanner.

"What is it, Solly?" asked Akinola in a low tone.

"That life-form that's been hiding in engineering?" he whispered, "It's coming our way."

## Chapter Seven

**Stardate 54258.9 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Officers' Wardroom

Inga gazed at Nigel with affection. She had deep feelings for the brash Australian officer, but she knew that there were elements of his past that still remained a mystery to her. Of course, she knew he had several intense but brief romantic relationships with other women in past years, but she had never before pried into the details.

Now, her position as Executive Officer forced her to delve more into Nigel's past than she really wanted. To learn more about the temperament and judgment of an officer under her charge (in this case, K'lira Rune) trumped personal feelings. She had to know whether Lt. (j.g.) Rune was a responsible officer who had made a terrible mistake, or was she a loose cannon who played by her own rules.

She reached across the table and grasped his hand. "Nigel, tell me what happened that day."

Bane smiled, but there was a tinge of sadness to it. He nodded, "Alright – you need to know, I understand that. I just hope it won't . . . you know . . ."

Inga squeezed his hand. "Change things between us?" she finished. She squeezed his hand and smiled at him. "Don't worry about that, Nigel. I don't hold your past against you."

He nodded, accepting her words and he seemed to relax a bit. His brows knit slightly as he gathered his thoughts.

"Like I told you, K'lira and I enjoyed flirting with each other. I enjoyed her company and, well, she liked to hang out with me as well. But I didn't really realize *how* strongly she felt about me, until things went really, *really* wrong on that boarding mission."

Strauss listened intently, not wanting to break his train of thought.

Nigel took a breath and continued. “We were patrolling when we picked up a vessel emerging from the Badlands. They were running without a transponder, so the Captain ordered us in to investigate. Turns out it was a pirate ship and they had attacked a Merchant Service vessel, stolen what they could from the manifest and taken a dozen of the merchant crew as hostages.”

Bane’s eyes seemed to grow distant as the memories flooded back. “We pursued the blighters for five hours – they gave us quite a run, I’ll give ‘em that. Finally, we got close enough to launch a couple of rat-traps which brought ‘em to a quick stop. The Captain ordered up boarding parties. I was in a group with Commander McBride, Lt. Fralk, Lt. Rune, and a couple of crewman. Senior Chief Brin was in another group with Lt. Caruso and T’Ser – Caruso’s the one who later transferred to the regular fleet and was killed in the war.”

He paused a moment, getting back on track. “Lt. Caruso’s team beamed over to the bridge and immediately got caught in a fire-fight. This bunch of pirates had no intention of giving up quietly. We beamed into engineering and were able to gain control pretty quickly. We had to kill two of the pirates but the others gave up in short order. That’s when I think we let our guard down a bit. Or, I should say, *I* did.”

Nigel swallowed and Inga noticed a sheen of perspiration on Bane’s forehead. He cleared his throat, whether out of distress or embarrassment, Inga could not tell.

“I was putting restraints on one of the perps, when another pirate suddenly appears. I swear, to this day I don’t know where he came from. He’s got a Merchant Service officer by the throat and a disruptor to the poor sod’s head. The pirate is screaming at us – not making much sense, but his intent was clear – back off, or he kills the hostage.”

“To say I was caught with my knickers down would be an understatement. I’d holstered my phaser and had no cover at all. The bloody pirate suddenly realized he’s got a clear shot at a Border Dog and he begins to smile. Gawd, what an ugly set of teeth in that bloke’s scabby head! I heard McBride and Lt. Rune shout at the pirate at about the same time – warning him to stand down. Scabby keeps brandishing the disruptor, using his hostage as a shield. That’s when K’lira begins to . . .”

He paused, reliving that dreadful moment, a look of anxiety and sadness on his face.

“Nigel . . . it’s alright. Take your time,” encouraged Inga.

“She broke cover and walked out into the clear. McBride was about to have kittens! The Commander warned her off and began to scream at her, to ‘back off’ and ‘stand-down’ and such, but she ignored the XO and aimed a phaser carbine at the pirate. Scabby-face just grins bigger and aims his disruptor right back at me, taunting Lt. Rune, saying that I would die first.”

Bane looked up at Inga, his eyes large and dark. “I honestly thought it was the end for me, Inga. I knew he was going to pull the trigger.”

“What happened?” she asked, softly.

“Lt. Rune fired first,” he said, his voice somewhat distant. “It was a bonzer shot, Inga – caught ‘ol ugly right in the head. He dropped like he’d kissed a Cappelan Power Cat. The hostage staggered a bit, but he seemed alright – just scared to death. Or so we thought.”

Nigel looked down at the table for a moment. “I was shaking like a twig in a gale, couldn’t move for a few seconds. To be honest, the next few minutes were kind of a blur. Our blokes came out of the woodwork. A corpsman went to check on the pirate and the Merchant Service officer just kind of stood there, looking stunned but otherwise okay. K’lira was heading my way when McBride ran over and just unloaded on her! God, Inga, I never saw Commander McBride so angry before nor since!”

“What did Lt. Rune do?” asked Strauss.

Bane snorted, his lips twisting into a rueful smile. “She unloaded a few choice Orion curses on him – I understood a few of them, but I won’t repeat them. The XO relieved her of duty on the spot and sent her back to the ship. At that point, she probably would have received an official reprimand and ship-board punishment, but that’s probably all.”

“But?” prodded Inga.

“But,” sighed Nigel, “The Merchant Service officer suddenly collapses. Corpsman Rice ran over and checked him. Next thing I know, she’s calling for an emergency beam-out directly to sickbay.”

Bane rubbed his face and shook his head slightly. "Poor bloke had a massive heart attack. Dr. Baxter said he was probably dead before he hit the floor. Doc did all he could but, well, our sickbay's not as advanced as a ship of the line or a starbase. Even then, he probably wouldn't have made it."

Inga shook her head in sympathy. "And Lt. Rune was implicated in his death."

Bane nodded. "Yeah – she was already up shi . . . , in hot water for disobeying the XO and insubordination. But I think if it had ended there, the Skipper would have handled it – though it wouldn't have been pleasant for her."

Strauss grimaced, trying to imagine such a meeting with Captain Akinola and deciding she didn't want to know. "No doubt. But the merchant officer's death changed all that."

"Oh yeah. I imagine you know most of the rest from her personnel file – the inquest, the general court martial, etc. She barely avoided a dishonorable discharge and time at the New Zealand penal colony . . . or worse. Instead, they reduced her one grade in rank and banished her from ship duty for four years. All of her commendations and awards were stripped from her record. I doubt she'll ever advance beyond lieutenant."

Inga frowned slightly. "But why *didn't* she get discharged? I mean, she was implicated in the merchant officer's death, right?"

"True enough. But her record had been exemplary up to that point. She had some strong advocates on her behalf – T'Ser, the Skipper . . . and me. She *did* probably save my life, after all."

"At the expense of a civilian life," murmured Strauss. She quickly looked at Bane, her eyes widening. "Oh, Nigel, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like . . ."

Bane waved a hand. "It's alright, Inga. And you're right. She made the wrong call. But . . . well, I can't help but feel grateful to her, regardless of what she did."

"But why the rift with Solly?" asked Inga. "I mean, he wasn't there when it went down – he was on the pirate ship's bridge, right?"

"Yeah, but he took it pretty hard, Inga. He refused to come forward as a character witness during the proceedings, said it would be . . . 'inappropriate.' More than that, I think he was very disappointed in her conduct, probably as

much about her mouthing off at Commander McBride than her taking the shot at that slimy bastard of a pirate!”

Inga nodded, conceding the point. “Okay, I can believe that. But still, didn’t he try to help her at all? Encourage her in any way?”

Bane cocked his head at Strauss. “We *are* talking about Solly Brin here – right? Brin is a top-notch NCO and a down-right scary bastard in a fight, but as to relationships . . .he’s not exactly the warm and fuzzy type.”

Inga absently chewed on her thumbnail in thought. “No, I suppose not. But *dammit*, this is his daughter, Nigel, or *step*-daughter, or *near*-daughter or whatever . . . That should count for something!

He shrugged. “Orions can be odd ducks at times.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Strauss, still troubled. She forced a smile and squeezed Bane’s hand. “Thanks for opening up to me. It must have been difficult.”

Nigel lifted her hand and kissed it. “Anything for the XO,” he said with a wink.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.9 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Finback***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

The initial away team from the *Scamp* materialized on the bridge of the cutter, *Finback*. Captain Rodenko gazed around the dimly lit bridge. It appeared completely intact and undamaged, save for a lack of power. And the lack of her crew.

Assistant Engineer, Lt. Ali bin Salaam made his way to the engineering station, shaking his head as he gazed at the console.

“Tactile controls . . . switches . . . this looks like something from a museum!” he exclaimed.

Rodenko walked over to the young officer. “The *Albacore*- class has been through two major refits since this ship disappeared, Lieutenant. The

technology may be dated, but it worked just fine when *I* served on this ship. Surely you don't think that I belong in a museum as well?"

"No sir!" answered bin Salaam quickly. He continued to scan the console, running his fingers over the familiar, yet different pattern of readouts. He tentatively pressed four toggle switches and the console came to life, at least partially. Other bridge displays whirred to life also, giving the bridge a greater level of illumination, though the main lights were still dark.

"Auxiliary power is still available," the Arab officer murmured in wonder. "The fusion reactors should be back up in a few minutes and we'll have lights and environmental back up."

Rodenko nodded in approval. "Good. Well done, Ali." He rubbed his arms, the chill on the darkened ship penetrating the heavy field-jacket he wore. "Let's get this ship warmed up and we'll begin a deck by deck inspection."

He turned to the other four members of the away team – an ensign, a CPO and four crewmen. "While we wait, look but for now, do not touch! When power is restored, we will document every control panel, check every read-out, and test every system. After that, we will access the computer logs and scan every millimeter of this ship – inside and out. I intend to find out what happened here!"

The Russian Captain walked around the rail to the lower control pit, which contained the nav/helm console and the command chair. He ran his hand over the leather-covered chair – not markedly different from his own seat on the *Scamp*. Glancing at his fingers, he noted that no dust had accumulated on the chair. It could have been vacated mere moments ago.

Rodenko absently rubbed his hands together as the rest of the away team wandered the bridge, gawking at the obsolete controls while they waited for power to be restored.

*So!* he thought, *We have the ship . . . but where is the crew?*

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.9 (14 April 2377)**

***SS Eku***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**



Akinola pulled his phaser from his hip and joined Solly by the galley door. He pressed a finger to his lips and gestured for the others to remain still.

Solly used hand signals, indicating for Akinola to focus on the left side of the corridor while he took the right. Akinola nodded in agreement. Solly then held up four fingers, then used them to count down to zero.

The Captain and the Senior Chief sprang into the dim corridor, phasers leveled. Several meters aft, a pair of green eyes glowed in the gloom.

“Meow?”

Akinola blinked, then noticed Solly tense – preparing to fire. He reached over and pulled the burly Orion’s arm down.

“Stand down, Solly – it’s okay!”

Solly’s yellow eyes glowed suspiciously. “What the frak *is* that, Skipper?”

A rather plump, gray cat strolled up to the two men and sat on the deck, regarding them curiously. “Meow,” it said, as if explaining the obvious to the red Orion.

“That,” said Akinola, placing his phaser back on his hip, “is Mr. Fluff.”

\* \* \*

Dr. Castille ran his medical scanner over Mr. Fluff as the large, gray feline purred from his perch on the table. Akinola had located some of the cat’s food in a cabinet and the cat was eating with gusto. Castille flipped the scanner shut and crossed his arms.

“I’m not a veterinarian, but best I can tell, this cat is about three years old and in excellent shape, except for being about five pounds over-weight.”

Akinola rubbed his chin, pleased yet disturbed by this new discovery. “Mr. Fluff was my sister’s cat,” he said, wistfully, “Mom wouldn’t allow him to sleep with Melody, but he usually ended up with her anyway. He pretty much had the run of the ship. When Melody and I . . . left the ship, we didn’t have time to take him with us.”

He reached over and rubbed the cat's ears, eliciting even louder purring from the feline. "Mr. Fluff, I wish you could talk to us and tell us where you've been all these decades," he said softly, "and, why you haven't aged a day."

Finishing its meal, the gray cat hopped nimbly from the table and began to intertwine itself around Senior Chief Brin's legs. Solly frowned, obviously uncomfortable with this behavior.

Delta smiled at Solly's discomfiture. "What's wrong, Senior? Don't you like cats?"

"Dunno," he said, still eyeing the cat warily. "How do they taste?"

\* \* \*

Captain Akinola took Dr. Castille and Lt. Rune to check the bridge while Solly accompanied Lt. Commander Simms to engineering.

To Akinola, the bridge seemed smaller than he remembered. *You were a foot shorter, Joseph – the scale has changed*, he thought.

Calling the control center of the *Ekú* a bridge was a bit of an overstatement. There were, in fact, only three stations in the cramped compartment. Two fairly comfortable looking swivel chairs were located at the helm and at a general systems panel. An ancient navigational plotter took up space in the aft portion of the area.

"All of the system busses are open," remarked Rune, shining her light on the operations board. "Must have been some sort of power surge."

Akinola tapped his combadge. "Akinola to Commander Simms."

*"Simms, go ahead, sir."*

"We've got evidence of a power surge up here. After you check the core and the reactor, see if you can get power up and we'll do a system reset up here."

*"Yes sir. I'm looking at the core now. Containment is fine and the inter-mix chamber is empty, so there's no risk of back-flush when we start her up. I'll check the fusion reactor and the fuel pods next, along with the EPS couplings. If there are no surprises, we should be able to restore power within the hour."*

“Thanks, Delta. Keep us posted.”

Dr. Castille was perusing the ship’s controls with a mix of interest and amazement.

“I don’t know the first thing about operating a ship, but this doesn’t look like it could possibly do the job,” he remarked.

“Doctor, at least the first part of that statement was accurate,” said Akinola, annoyed.

The Captain took a seat at the helm, running his fingers over the familiar control surfaces. He smiled, remembering the times his father allowed him some “bootleg” hours piloting the ship when he was as young as eight. By the time he was thirteen, he had logged hundreds of star hours piloting the vessel. It was common practice on boomer ships, though technically a violation of several Federation statutes. Still, it was the accepted way that most boomers learned to run their family-owned ships.

On a whim, he suddenly rose from his seat. “You two stay here and wait on Delta to get the power up.” He began to make his way down the ladder to the main corridor.

“Where are you going?” asked Dr. Castille, warily.

“I’m going to check out my old quarters. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

\* \* \*

Delta closed her tri-corder, a look of satisfaction on her face. “She’s in remarkable shape!” she said, in admiration of the elderly ship. “The Skipper’s family obviously took good care of her.”

She stood, hands on hips looking around the cramped but immaculate engineering space. Everything had checked out within acceptable tolerances. The only flaw she found was a slight leak in the inner lining of the deuterium tank. The outer containment vessel was sound, however, so the leak posed no hazard, save for causing a few sensor glitches.

Delta suddenly realized that she was alone in the compartment. Puzzled, she called out, “Senior Chief? Where’d you go?”

“Out here in the corridor,” came his reply. “Come here, Commander – I found something you should see.” There was an ominous tone to his voice.

Frowning, Delta stepped through the knee-knocker hatch into the corridor. Solly was shining his light on an object lying on the deck. She knelt beside him.

“What is that?” she asked, puzzled, as she pulled out her tri-corder.

“Don’t bother. I already scanned it,” he said in that same ominous tone. He reached down and picked up the small, metallic object. It was dark gray in color, bordering on black, a circle of some exotic alloy that looked totally out of place on the *Ekua*. He handed it to Simms.

She held it in her palm, the metal inexplicably warm in contrast to the still chilly atmosphere of the freighter.

“So, what did your scanner tell you?” she asked, intrigued.

His yellow eyes glowed with malevolence. “It’s Borg.”

## Chapter Eight

**Stardate 54259.0 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Finback***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Good as his word, Lt. bin Salaam had the primary fusion reactor operating in less than an hour. With power restored, the ship began to quickly warm back to a comfortable level. Captain Rodenko authorized additional away teams to beam over from the *Scamp* to begin their thorough inspection of the *Finback*.

With teams assigned, Rodenko entered the ready room of Captain G'lil Shartuurn, C.O. of the *Finback* when they disappeared.

The room was not very different from his own ready room on the *Scamp*, save for a few details. The wall panels were a light gray and the carpet, medium blue. A standard issue gray desk stood in front of the view port. Its surface was bare, save for an old-style data slate and an earlier version of terminal screen.

Rodenko hesitated before sitting behind the desk, feeling as if he were intruding somehow. With a sigh, he pushed back his feelings and adjusted the terminal display. Removing his field jacket, he settled into the chair.

He glanced around the Spartan room, its austere decorations in keeping with Captain Shartuurn's stoic demeanor. An Andorian landscape was portrayed in relief on a material that looked much like a slab of ice. A few religious icons from one of the predominant Andorian religious sects held a place of honor on a small shelf. But apart from these, there were no other shelves, no holopics of family or friends, no tapestries or other personal items in the room - just Starfleet issue furnishings.

Turning his attention to the terminal once more, he settled into the chair and cleared his throat.

"Computer, replay last log-entry of Captain Shartuurn."

*"Unable to comply without command authorization."*

Boris pursed his lips. They had not been able to obtain the command override code for the *Finback*, since she had been presumed destroyed nearly three

decades ago and her codes were no longer in *Scamp's* database. But then, he had not expected this to be easy. He took a different tack.

"Computer, open ship's log entries, authorization Rodenko Beta one five eight one."

*"Invalid code. Please submit valid command code."*

"Damn," he muttered. Of course his own command code wasn't recognized – he was only a junior lieutenant the last time the *Finback's* database was updated.

He leaned back in the chair a few moments, considering. Finally, he nodded to himself and leaned forward.

"Computer, what is today's date?"

*"Currently, it is stardate 54259.02"*

Rodenko nodded in satisfaction. The computer had given the correct stardate, meaning it was picking up the Federation subspace transponders at least.

"Computer, what was the date when you went off-line?"

*"The computer core went off-line on stardate 26831.77."*

"Now we're getting somewhere," he muttered. That was the date the *Finback* disappeared, 28 years earlier. Another thought struck him, causing his brow to furrow.

"Computer, based on the half-life of the deuterium on board and its rate of decay, how much time has elapsed since the computer core went off-line and its reactivation?"

*"Decay of deuterium indicates the elapse of twenty-three hours, twelve minutes, ten point seven seconds."*

Rodenko's eyes widened. "Computer, the stardates you gave me indicate twenty eight *years* have elapsed! Explain the discrepancy!"

This time, there was a noticeable pause before the computer responded. *"Unable to account for discrepancy."*

Boris uttered a particularly vile Russian oath.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.0 (15 April 2377)**

**SS *Ek***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Akinola made his way forward along the *Ek*'s central corridor. He paused a moment by the alcove that contained the escape pods. Shining his light into the darkened space, he saw that two of the three pods were still in place.

A sense of overwhelming sadness suddenly washed over him. He had hoped that, somehow, his family had also escaped and were still alive - somewhere. The two unused pods served as a cold reality check. No one else had escaped.

Forcing himself to push back the threatening cloud of despair, he walked deliberately away from the escape pod alcove. He came to his sister's quarters first. Shining his light in the room, he noted that the bunk was exactly as it had been when Akinola's mother had scooped up Melody and hurried with Joseph in tow to the escape pod, where she had deposited them. Melody's small pillow lay on the deck.

Closing his eyes, he tried to recall any small detail of the events of that day, but it was like looking through layers of gauze – distant and indistinct.

*Why can't I remember?* He thought, frustration coursing through his mind. He'd hoped that seeing the old ship, his home for many years, would jar loose his recollection of the day his life changed so drastically.

As he turned to leave Melody's old quarters, a sudden scent tickled his nose. It was faint, but distinct – a familiar, pleasant smell from . . .

His eyes widened in recognition. *Lime! It smells just like the lime-scented beard suppressor that Dad used!*

He whirled around, sniffing at the air like a blood-hound, trying to get a sense of where the smell originated. It seemed to be stronger forward – toward his quarters.

The Captain quelled the urge to hurry and moved steadily forward. The scent, though still faint, seemed to emanate from just ahead. He aimed his light ahead through the gloom of the inadequate emergency lights, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Mere feet away stood the open hatchway to his old quarters. He stopped and stared at the dark room, awash with a sense of *deja vous*. But of course, he *had* been here before – many times as a child. These were his own quarters, his personal retreat from the routine and tedium of life in space. His room.

The dark room seemed to beckon to him, bidding him to enter and discover its secrets.

Even with the ink-black darkness, Akinola sensed, *knew*, somehow that he was not alone. Someone, something was waiting for him in his old room.

He wasn't afraid or even surprised by this sudden certainty. He was vaguely aware that his feet were inching forward, toward the open hatchway. He didn't resist.

*"Brin to Captain Akinola."* The sound of Solly's voice seemed to wake Akinola from some fugue state. He blinked and drew in his breath suddenly. Apparently, he had not taken a breath for long seconds.

Tapping his combadge he replied. "Go ahead, Senior Chief."

*"Skipper, we've found something back near engineering you should see. It may explain what happened to your family."*

"Acknowledged. I'll be back in just a minute. Akinola, out." He turned to head aft, toward engineering, but stole another look at his quarters. Somehow, the darkness did not seem as . . . intense. He also noted the smell of lime was gone. All he smelled was the normal, slightly stale smell of the freighter's atmosphere – a *mélange* of dust, sweat, coolant and coffee.

*Get a grip, Akinola, or Castille will send you back to the ship in restraints!* With a last look toward the doorway to his quarters, he moved quickly aft, toward engineering.

\* \* \*



Dr. Castille regarded the lovely emerald-skinned Lieutenant with curious interest. Lt. Rune continued her work, scanning the control boards for any anomalies.

“Why don’t you take a holo-pic? It’ll last longer,” she said, never taking her eyes off the tri-corder.

Castille uttered an embarrassed laugh. “Sorry – I didn’t mean to stare. I’m just curious about you. I had no idea that the Senior Chief even had a daughter!”

Rune fixed Castille with bright green eyes that glowed in the dim light. “I’m not exactly on his ‘pride and joy’ list, Doctor. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not talk about it.”

Castille shrugged. “Sure, no problem. Just trying to make small-talk.”

K’lira turned her attention back to her tri-corder. “And I’m trying to map all of these circuits before the Captain returns, so if you’ll forgive me, I need to . . .”

She stopped in mid-sentence, frowning. “*Slin-jahmat?*” she whispered in her native tongue, surprise evident on her face.

The Doctor noted the startled expression on Rune’s face. “What?”

Still staring at her tri-corder she waved a hand in his direction. “Get out your medical scanner – my tri-corder isn’t set up for this . . . whatever it is.”

Frowning, Castille complied and opened his medical scanner. “So what am I supposed to . . . whoa!”

He watched the readings on the bio-metric scale suddenly jump, then just as quickly, to fade away.

“What *was* that?” asked K’lira, her eyes wide.

“Hell if I know,” replied the Doctor, staring at his medical instrument warily, as if it had somehow betrayed him. “What did your tri-corder show?”

“I got a sudden energy surge that seemed to coalesce in the forward part of the ship – kind of like a transporter beam, but it originated *inside* the ship . . . like it *wasn’t* there, then it was, now it’s gone again. And the energy frequency was not like anything I’ve ever seen.”

Castille re-checked his medical scanner. “For just a moment, I picked up bio-electric energy readings, then they just faded away.” He ran a sub-routine on the scanner, his eyebrows shooting up as he read the display.

“This looks like human brain-wave energy – but it doesn’t match the Captain, Delta or me, and we’re the only humans on board!”

\* \* \*

Akinola quickly joined Solly and Delta outside engineering. He noted the somber expressions on their faces.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Delta glanced at Solly, her face now registering concern.

“Solly found this on the deck.” She handed the Captain a piece of dark metal.

Akinola noted the unusual warmth of the alloy. “What is it?”

This time, Solly glanced at Commander Simms, hesitating.

The Captain frowned. “Do I have to play twenty questions, or are you going to answer my question?”

“Skipper,” began Brin, his voice unusually soft, “that’s a fragment from a Borg implant.”

Akinola stared at Brin, then down at the small piece of metal in his hand. For a moment, he could not speak, his mind seemed to lock up.

Delta stepped by the Captain, placing a comforting hand on his arm. “Sir, I’m so sorry . . .”

Joseph Akinola closed his eyes. Suddenly, the locked door in his mind opened and a torrent of memories flooded in, overwhelming him.

He gasped deeply and staggered against the bulkhead. Solly grabbed him, preventing him from falling.

“I remember . . . Oh, God! I *REMEMBER!* . . . The cube . . . green light . . .”

Some defense mechanism in Akinola's mind suddenly engaged, causing him to lose consciousness. Solly gently lowered him to the deck.

Delta slapped her combadge. "O.C.! Get down here to engineering, fast! – the Captain just passed out!"

## Chapter Nine

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Finback***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

*"Scamp to Captain Rodenko."*

"Rodenko here, go ahead, XO."

*"Sir, we finally tracked down the command override codes for the Finback. Starfleet archives came through for us a few minutes ago."*

For the first time in hours, a smile appeared on Rodenko's face. "Excellent! Thank you, Commander - you've saved us a lot of time and headaches!"

*"You're welcome, sir. I'll transmit the code to Lt. bin Salaam, so he can unlock all of the files for you."*

"Very good. Nice work, Commander! Rodenko, out." The Russian cutter commander rubbed his hands together in anticipation and gazed at the computer terminal with a smug grin.

"Now, perhaps we can begin to unlock your mysteries, yes?"

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**SS *Ekū***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

From what seemed a long distance, Akinola heard a brief hiss and felt a light pressure on his neck. His eyes suddenly flew open and he found himself looking up into the worried faces of Dr. Castille, Solly Brin and Lt. Commander Simms.

He quickly made to sit up but Castille restrained him.

"Wait just a minute, Captain, and let the stim-shot take effect," ordered the CMO. He ran his medical scanner over Akinola briefly, then snapped it shut, apparently satisfied with what he saw.

"How are you feeling?" Castille asked.

"Like an idiot," groused Akinola. "Can I sit up?"

The Doctor nodded and Akinola worked his way up to a sitting position with Brin steadying him. He frowned at the big Orion.

"For God's sake, Solly, I'm not an invalid - I'm fine!"

Castille looked skeptical. "I think we better cut the field-trip short and get you to sick-bay."

Akinola snorted derisively. "I think not! I feel fine!" And, to prove it, he moved nimbly to his feet - a move that didn't please Castille.

"I just found you lying on the deck, unconscious, Captain. That doesn't fit the definition of 'fine' in my book!" said Castille, firmly.

"It's nothing, Doctor. I just was . . . overwhelmed for a moment. It seems that my memories of . . . that day have returned."

"We showed him this," explained Solly, handing the Doctor the impant remnant.

Castille raised a skeptical eyebrow. "*This* brought back your memory? What's it supposed to be?"

Akinola took the fragment from the Doctor. "It's Borg. Or at least, a piece of their technology." He took a breath, still processing his new-found memories. "That's what I couldn't remember - it wasn't an Orion raider that attacked us. It was a Borg cube. I saw it from the viewport of the escape pod, just as it hit the *Ekú* with a tractor beam. I must have blacked out then and blocked those memories."

Castille still looked doubtful. "You seem pretty sanguine about your sudden recollection, Captain."

The Captain shook his head. "No, not at all. I have to admit, the memory was . . . is pretty overwhelming - I guess that's why I fainted. But it all makes a certain kind of sense, though. It explains why my family is gone while the ship is intact and the cat was spared - the Borg had no interest in them."

"But Captain," interrupted Delta, cautiously, "the *Ekú* disappeared almost 50 years ago. Our best estimate on the first Borg incursions date them at less than 20 years ago."

Akinola shrugged. "But that's all those are, Commander - estimates. Who's to say the Borg didn't make a few probes into the Alpha quadrant at an earlier date? Besides, we're facing some very odd time anomalies as it is."

"This is all very interesting," said an impatient Castille, "but you're *still* ignoring the fact that you blacked out! I'd really feel better if I could give you a thorough check-up."

Akinola sighed, trying to keep his temper in check. "I'll make a deal with you, Doc. *After* we're through here, I'll submit to your checking me out. Then, you can run any test you want. Did your scanner show *anything* wrong with me?"

Castille glared at the Captain. "No," he admitted, reluctantly, "but that *doesn't* mean you're 100% okay - this bio-scanner is limited."

"So is my patience, Doctor! Get on back to the bridge, please, and assist Lt. Rune. Commander - you and Solly see about getting power back up. I still want to poke around a bit, then I'll head back to the bridge myself."

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**  
**USS *Bluefin***  
**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Lt. Bane sat in the center seat as watch officer, fighting boredom. The novelty of the newly discovered ships had faded as the recovery teams were in place, swarming over the four ships. There was little for him to do but wait.

Ensign Vashtee walked over with a cup of coffee from the recently installed bridge replicator. Bane accepted it gratefully.

"Thanks, Maya," he said to the slender Sri Lankan officer. "Hey - I'll make a deal with you," he gestured to the command chair, "You sit on the throne while I sit at Ops!"

Vashtee threw up her hands in mock horror. "Uh-uh! You know I'm not checked-out for that! Besides," she said, with a smirk as she moved back to ops, "you look like you're having *loads* of fun!"

"Yeh, right!" he said sulkily. "Do me a favor, then - run a sensor sweep on the epsilon band. I was getting some background fuzz earlier. The grid may be fritzed out of alignment - might as well give Gralt something to bitch about."

She giggled and smiled. "Sure, it's not like there's much else to do. But I didn't notice anything wrong on my last shift."

"Probably not. Just humor me, okay?"

"No problem." She turned to her board as Bane sipped his coffee and gazed at the *Ekku*, which hung in space a few hundred kilometers distant.

"Mr. Bane?" The good humor had departed Vashtee's voice, replaced by puzzlement. "Could you take a look at this?"

Nigel walked over to Ops and peered over Ensign Vashtee's shoulder. He frowned as he peered at the epsilon band.

"Is this what you meant?" she asked.

Bane frowned. "Yeah, but it's much more intense than earlier." He reached forward, adjusting a gain control. His eyes widened as the wave line on the display suddenly began to spike. A feeling of intense dread washed over him.

"Bollocks!" he breathed. He tapped his combadge.

"*Bluefin* to away team!" his voice was clipped with urgency.

There was a momentary pause before he heard the familiar voice of Captain Akinola.

"*Akinola here, go ahead.*"

"Sir! We need to beam you off of there immediately! We're picking up a massive spike of tri-quantum waves from the vicinity of the *Ekku!*"

Instead of a reply, a sudden squeal of static burst over the open channel, causing both Bane and Vashtee to wince. She quickly lowered the audio gain.

"Captain, do you read me? Please respond!" Bane raised his voice, as if higher decibels could pierce the sudden static.

"Sir!" Maya's face revealed astonishment. "A trans-warp conduit just opened! It's surrounding the *Ek*!"

Bane whirled, staring at the main viewscreen. Crackling green tendrils of energy erupted seemingly from nowhere and engulfed the small freighter. The small vessel appeared to diminish before their eyes, then, as quickly as it appeared, the energy conduit blinked out.

The *Ek* was gone. Only the darkness of the Lesser Riven Nebula remained.

"Frak!" muttered, Bane. He tapped his combadge, "Commander Strauss to the bridge. Repeat, Commander Strauss to the bridge."

He turned to Ensign Vashtee. "Sound red alert, Maya, and contact the away teams on those other ships - tell them to get the hell out of there - Now!"



## Chapter Ten

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**SS *Ek***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Akinola stood in the forward corridor, once more peering into the darkness of his old quarters. This time, however, he did not sense another presence, nor did the darkness seem so foreboding.

*You're still just shook up over seeing the old ship, mused Akinola. There's nothing here but your over-active imagination.*

He was about to enter the room when his combadge chirped, and Lt. Bane's voice came through. Akinola's brow furrowed at the obvious sense of urgency in the young Aussie's voice.

*"Bluefin to away team!"*

The Captain tapped his combadge in acknowledgement. "Akinola here, go ahead."

*"Sir! We need to beam you off of there immediately! We're picking up a massive spike of tri-quantum waves from th . . ."* The transmission was suddenly interrupted by a loud squeal that came over the channel. Akinola winced from the high-pitched noise. "Lieutenant Bane, your signal is breaking up, please . . ."

A sudden wave of vertigo passed over Akinola, causing him to stagger. He leaned against the bulkhead, fighting the sudden dizziness and nausea.

And then time and space went mad.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Bane glanced up as the turbo-lift doors opened and Commander Strauss stepped onto the bridge. At any other time, he would have been amused by her disheveled appearance. Obviously, she had been asleep as her normally

braided hair cascaded freely across her shoulders and down her back. She wore a rumpled academy T-shirt, blue running shorts and fuzzy pink slippers. She did not look particularly happy.

"Report!" she called out as she moved toward Bane and Ensign Vashtee.

Lt. Bane quickly recounted the events of the past few minutes. Strauss' eyes widened as he told of the *Ekus*' sudden disappearance through a trans-warp conduit.

"You've warned the other away teams?" Strauss pressed, trying to fathom the situation.

Bane nodded. "Yes, and they've already been pulled off the other three 'prodigal' ships. So far, there's been no unusual energy readings from them."

Inga blew out a quick breath, concerned and frustrated. "Keep an eye on them. Let me know the instant you spot any anomaly." She turned to Lt. Sarnek who was seated at the helm.

"Sarnek, back us off fifty-thousand clicks from where the *Ekus* disappeared. I want a little more distance between us and where that conduit opened."

Vashtee turned her attention to a signal on her console. She turned back to Strauss.

"In-coming signal from the *Scamp*."

It suddenly dawned on Inga how she was dressed. She set aside her pride and settled into the command chair, trying to look as dignified as fuzzy pink slippers allowed. "On-screen, Ensign."

The face of Captain Boris Rodenko appeared on the main viewer, looking decidedly unhappy. His brows knit together more tightly when he noticed Commander Strauss in a T-shirt, shorts and slippers, but he refrained from commenting on her appearance.

*"Commander, what just happened? We received the emergency recall signal and now I understand the Ekus has vanished. Was Captain Akinola and his away team still on board?"*

"I'm afraid so, sir. All we know at the moment is that a trans-warp conduit suddenly appeared and pulled the *Ekū* away. We're trying now to figure out a possible heading."

Rodenko grunted. *"For all the good that will do. They could be hundreds of thousands of parsecs distant - far beyond our range to help."*

"That's possible, sir," admitted Strauss, "but we have to start somewhere. Maybe they didn't travel so very far."

The Russian Captain regarded Inga with dark eyes. *"Very well Commander. Remain on station and continue your scans. I will contact Admiral Bateson and apprise him of the situation."*

Inga was very glad she didn't have to make that call. "We'll get them back somehow, Captain," she said, with more confidence than she felt.

*"I wish I shared your optimism, Commander Strauss. But I do hope you are right! Scamp, out."*

\* \* \*

**Stardate- Unknown**

**SS *Ekū***

**Sector - Unknown**

*FLASH*

Eight year-old Joseph Akinola stared at the tiny dark-haired bundle that was his new baby sister with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. His mother pulled back the pink blanket so Joseph could better see her face. *"Her name is Melody . . ."*

*FLASH*

"So . . . asked a cocky but nervous First Class Petty Officer Akinola," If I buy you a drink, will you tell me your name?"

The dark skinned petty officer with striking green eyes rewarded him with a speculative gaze and raised a glass in reply. "If you were paying closer attention, you would have noticed I already *have* a drink." Her face broke into a lovely smile at Akinola's sudden crestfallen expression.

"Mayweather, Petty Officer 2nd Class Kalinda Mayweather. And may I say, that was the *lamest* pick-up move I've *ever* seen! . . ."

*FLASH*

"Happy birthday, Joey!" said Samuel Akinola, handing his son a small, brightly wrapped passage.

"What is it?" asked thirteen year-old Joseph.

"Open it, silly!" chided his mother. Joseph quickly tore off the wrapping which revealed an oblong yellow box. Lifting the lid, Joseph's eyes widened and a big grin formed on his face.

"Thanks!" he said, holding an intricately engraved pocket knife. . .

*FLASH*

CPO Joseph Akinola walked slowly around the latest additions to the *Bluefin's* crew - mostly new recruits, fresh from basic training. His eye fell on a burly red-skinned fellow who had a slight scuff on one of his boots.

"You! Red! Who the hell do you think you are, standing there with messed up boots! Damn your ugly hide, you're on the USS *Bluefin*, not some artsy-fartsy fleet ship! You *will* get your ass squared away or I'll ship your ass to a relay station - you got that?"

"Yes, Chief," replied the red Orion tightly.

Akinola got into the man's face and peered into it. "I think you're a slacker, Red! What's your name?"

"Brin . . . Solly Brin . . ."

*FLASH*

Thirteen year-old Joseph pressed his tear-streaked face against the tiny viewport of the escape pod, his breath fogging against the small aperture.

He could just make out the running lights of the *Ekú* against the darkness of the Lesser Riven Nebula. Then, his eyes fixed on a massive object that hung in space very close to the freighter - some gigantic *cube* . . .

*FLASH*

\* \* \*

Captain Akinola seemed to awake from some strange, pro-longed dream. He lifted his face from his hands and looked carefully around.

He was on the *Ekú*, sitting on the edge of his bunk in his darkened quarters. The faint light from the corridor emergency lights created a skewed rectangle of gray from the open doorway. The rest of the room was dark.

Akinola realized his hands were wet. Gently, he reached up to discover that his face was also wet - streaked with inexplicable tears.

Gingerly, he rose to his feet. The vertigo and nausea that had struck him (*when?*) had passed, but his head still felt muzzy, as if he had awoken from a very long sleep.

He looked around the room with his eyes now adjusted to the darkness. He could make out his old desk, the coveralls he wore as a boy draped over the back of the desk chair. He could make out the faint outline of ship models he had built on shelves over the desk.

His eyes drifted left. He saw the old night-stand and lamp by his bunk, though it was still too dark to make out any details.

A change in the light from the corridor caused him to look up. Someone tall was standing there in silhouette, backlit by the emergency lights. Not Solly or Dr. Castille, yet the form was somehow familiar . . .

*FLASH*

\* \* \*

Akinola's eyes jerked open. He was leaning against the corridor bulkhead, where he had sought support when the vertigo hit.

He straightened, somewhat shakily. The vertigo was gone, but he felt a pounding in his head - the ominous portent of an oncoming headache.

He ran his tongue around in his mouth, which was dry and tasted horrible. Clearing his throat, he tapped his combadge.

"Akinola to *Bluefin*."

There was no reply, not even the background hiss of an open channel. He tried again.

"Akinola to *Bluefin*, come in please."

No response. He decided to try a different tack.

"Akinola to Brin, what's your current location?"

He was only rewarded by further silence.

Aggravated by the malfunctioning combadge but concerned for his crew, he began to move quickly aft.

"Solly? Delta? Are you alright?" he called as he neared engineering. There was no reply. He stepped over the knee-knocker lip of the hatch and entered the engineering space. His flashlight caught the prone form of Delta Simms, sprawled on the metal grating.

He hurried to her side, his heart hammering, and placed his fingers along her neck. He released his breath in relief as he found a strong pulse.

Simms moaned softly and attempted to lift herself from the deck. Akinola gently turned her over.

"Easy, Delta. Don't try to move too fast."

"Uhhhh," she groaned, "what happened? I got so dizzy . . ."

"You're not the only one," replied Akinola. "And I don't know what happened - yet. For now, we're incommunicado - I can't reach *Bluefin*. For that matter, I'm not sure my combadge is working at all." He peered into Simm's face. "Feeling better?"

She nodded slightly. "Yes sir, just . . . a little woozy."

"Sit tight for now. I'm going to check on the others."

As the Captain re-entered the corridor, he was rewarded by the sight of Solly Brin walking unsteadily from the aft head. He was rubbing his head and muttering to himself.

"Solly? You okay?" queried the Captain.

"What the *frak* happened, Skipper? I was using the head . . . next thing I know, I hear this high-pitched squeal . . ." he continued to rub his head. "Must've fallen off the *frakkin'* throne!"

Akinola managed to restrain a smile. "I'm not sure what happened. I must have passed out again and I just found Delta unconscious in the engine room. She's come around, but still groggy. How's your head?"

"I've been hit harder," he grouched. "What about K'lira and Doc?" he asked, sudden concern apparent in his voice.

"You go up to the bridge and check on them - I'll see if Commander Simms is up to moving around, yet."

Brin lumbered off toward the bridge. Akinola turned and . . .

*FLASH*

The Captain sat on the side of his bunk in the dimness of his old quarters. He blinked slowly and frowned, not remembering how he got here.

A shadow fell over the rectangular patch of light that came from the corridor. He glanced up to see a tall figure standing in the doorway. The silhouette was so familiar . . .

A familiar, pleasant scent wafted into the room. Lime . . . it smelled just like the lime beard suppressor his father . . . he reached out his hand . . .

*FLASH*

His hand came to rest on the hard edge of the hatchway to the engine room. Delta Simms was standing before him, a startled look on her face.

"Captain, are *you* okay?"

## Chapter Eleven

**Stardate 54259.2 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Commander Strauss managed to slip down to her quarters long enough to don a proper uniform and run a brush through her hair. In her haste, she decided to forgo her usual braid, letting her long blond hair remain unfettered for a change.

Returning to the bridge, she found that Lt. Commander Galt had joined Lt. Bane and Ensign Vashtee at operations. Galt, with his usual Telarite charm, was making an emphatic point.

"By the tumorous third nose of the blind deity! Trans-warp conduits don't just appear out of *nowhere*, Bane! It must have been a worm-hole or cosmic string that grabbed that freighter!" The shorter Galt was crowding up against the considerably taller Bane, a stubby finger poking the Lieutenant's chest for emphasis."

"Worm-holes and cosmic strings don't produce tri-quantum waves, Commander!" replied Bane, testily. "If you'd just look at the data stream . . ."

Inga strode up and gazed at the two officers. "Have you made any progress, gentlemen?" she asked in a calm voice.

Bane looked relieved at the arrival of Strauss while Galt looked annoyed. Of course, Galt *always* looked annoyed, so reading his actual mood was something of a challenge.

The crotchety Chief Engineer turned his bucolic gaze on the XO. "Progress? How the frak can we make *progress* when we still don't know what happened?!"

"We *do* know what bloody happened!" insisted Bane, "We just don't know *how!*"

"Same difference," grumbled Galt, folding his arms across his chest, dismissively.



Inga smiled tightly and spoke in a sweet, quiet, yet steely tone. "Right now, I need our Chief Engineer and our Operations Manager to call a truce and stop the bickering. *Understood?*"

Gralt and Bane continued to glare at each other, but both dropped their gaze when they noticed Strauss' expression.

"Sorry . . . Yes Ma'am," they muttered like two chastened school boys.

"Good! Let's start with what you *do* know. Mr. Bane, you mentioned tri-quantum waves. Is there any phenomena that could produce those waves other than a trans-warp conduit?"

Nigel shook his head. "No ma'am, at least no *known* phenomena. 'Course our experience with trans-warp is limited to Starfleet's failed experiment a century ago and our encounters with the Borg."

Strauss frowned at that. "Well, as far as we know, Starfleet still hasn't mastered trans-warp technology, which seems to leave the Borg as culprits."

Gralt made a rude noise and stared at Strauss and Bane with an incredulous expression. "You're not rutting serious! Since when have the Borg been known for subtlety? That's *not* exactly their style. They tend to be all 'We are the frakking Borg, we're going to assimilate your ass and there's not a gods-whoring thing you can do about it!'"

Strauss sighed. "Point well taken, Mr. Gralt - but it seems that the Borg are the logical culprits based on our current evidence."

Gralt squinted his inky black eyes and replied sarcastically, "Please - if you're going to patronize me, don't do it sounding like some tight-ass Vulcan!"

Strauss folded her own arms and put her nose inches from Gralt's snout - her voice low and dangerous. "And don't *you* get condescending with me, Mister! I am *not* in the mood. In case you've forgotten, five of our people are missing. Either do something constructive and help *find* them, or I'll by God replace you with someone who can!"

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**  
***SS Eku***

## Sector - Unknown

Delta Simms' face reflected genuine concern and she placed a hand on the Captain's arm.

"Captain, are you *okay*?"

*Did I just disappear for a moment, Commander? . . . Probably not the best question to ask at the moment,* he thought. Aloud, he said:

"Fine, Commander. I was just . . . elsewhere for a moment. Are you feeling better?"

A small smile flickered across her face, but her hazel eyes still registered concern. "Yes sir, I'm okay - the dizziness has passed. What do you think happened?"

Akinola frowned. "I don't know, Delta. Right now, we need to try and reestablish contact with the *Bluefin*. Whatever happened to us may have affected them too. Try your combadge."

Simms tapped her combadge, but there was no tell-tale chirp of activation. She tapped it again with no better result.

"Mine's not working either."

"See if you can get power restored and we can use the ship's com-system. I'm heading to the bridge, but I'll be back in just a few minutes."

Delta nodded. "Yes sir. I should be able to power us back up in ten or fifteen minutes."

Akinola smiled. "Good. See you shortly."

\* \* \*

Brin quickly ascended the ladder to the bridge, where he found K'lira kneeling over Dr. Castille. The Doctor appeared to still be unconscious, with an ominous bump over his left eye.

"Are you alright?" Brin asked, K'lira.

She turned at the sound of Brin's voice and their eyes locked momentarily. Solly couldn't read her expression.

"Yes," she finally responded, "there was a high-frequency burst - like feedback, only worse. I must have fainted for just a moment. When I came to, I saw the Doctor lying on the deck - looks like he hit his head on the console."

Brin knelt down beside the Doctor and checked his pulse, annoying K'lira.

"I had enough sense to do that, you know," she said coolly.

"I'm sure you do," he replied, carefully. "Sorry."

She gave a curt nod. "Anyone else pass out?"

"Apparently, we all did," replied Solly, "Do me a favor - check Doc's medi-kit. There should be a cold-compress in it."

Rune opened the small kit and peered into the contents, then withdrew a small square. She twisted it slightly, precipitating a chemical reaction that chilled the compress. Carefully, she placed it on Castille's forehead, then reached across the unconscious CMO and pulled the medical scanner from his hip.

Solly frowned as K'lira opened the bio-scanner and activated it.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" he asked, doubtfully.

"You might be surprised to know, we actually did more at the Academy than sing songs and march around the quad."

Brin's retort was cut off by the sound of boots on the ladder. A moment later, Akinola appeared. His already serious expression became more troubled when he noticed the prone form of the CMO on the deck.

"What's wrong with him?" he queried.

"He must have hit his head when we passed out," replied Lt. Rune, running the scanner over Castille. She glanced at the readout, pursing her lips in thought.

"The best I can tell, there's no major injury, but he does have a mild concussion. We better get him back to the *Bluefin*," she said.

Brin and Akinola exchanged glances. "That may be a bit of a problem, Lieutenant," said Akinola, "we're unable to contact *Bluefin*. Commander Simms is working to restore power so we can use the ship's communicator."

Reflexively, K'lira tapped her own combadge to be rewarded with silence. "What could have happened?" she wondered aloud.

"Hopefully, we'll get some answers when we restore communications."

She turned her head and raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Hopefully?"

Akinola looked grim. "Lieutenant, don't you think Commander Strauss would beam us back to the ship once communications were lost? Since we're still here, we can assume that something has affected the *Bluefin* as well. I've no doubt they're working as fast as they can to restore any systems that are off-line, just as we are."

Suddenly, the lights on the compact bridge flickered to life and the control consoles began to beep as power flowed once more.

Akinola stood, smiling for the first time in hours. "Nice work, Delta," he murmured.

He stepped to the multi-function operations console and activated the communications system. He adjusted the frequency and keyed the transmit control.

"*Ek*u to *Bluefin*, come in please!"

The soft hiss of the open channel breathed through the speakers, but they received no reply. Akinola checked the comm-board, frowning.

"Everything appears to be functioning," he muttered. "They should be receiving us."

"Maybe their comm system is down," suggested Solly.

"Maybe," conceded the Captain. They all turned at the sound of steps on the ladder rungs and Delta Simms appeared suddenly, her freckled face somewhat pale and her expression flustered.

"Nice work getting the power back up," remarked Akinola.

"Captain, *I* didn't do it!" Simms said in a puzzled voice. "I was still looking for the reactor reset controls when the lights just . . . came on!"

"An auxiliary back-up system?" suggested Rune. Akinola shook his head, clearly non-plussed.

"No . . . *Ek*u doesn't have auxiliary power like *Bluefin*. Just the emergency batteries," Akinola's eyes tracked upward to the power circuit controls. "Look at that . . ." he said, softly.

The others followed his gaze to the power busses. They were still locked in the open position. There was no way power should flow to the bridge unless they were in the closed position.

"Frak!" muttered Solly, who made a subtle Orion warding gesture. K'lira caught the gesture.

"I thought you didn't believe in that stuff," she said, derisively.

"K'lira, for once could you just . . ." Brin began.

"Not . . . now," rasped Akinola. He depressed a series of switches on the operations board.

The viewscreen came to life, diagnostic code scrolling down one side of the screen momentarily before the image stabilized and they were finally able to see outside the *Ek*u.

Delta's eyes widened and she clasped her hands to her mouth.

"Oh God!" she whispered, imploringly. The others simply stared, speechless at the spectacle that met their eyes.

Instead of the *Bluefin*, six Borg cubes hung in space like dark mountains. The mere sight of the monstrous vessels unleashed a primal spark of fear in each of the small band.

*No!* thought Akinola, *Not this!*

## Chapter Twelve

**Stardate - Unknown**

**SS *Ek***

**Sector - Unknown**

Dr. Octavius Castille moaned softly as consciousness flowed into his pounding skull. He gingerly lifted his hand to his forehead, fingering the cold compress that covered a rather painful bump. He winced as his fingers explored the goose-egg.

He opened his eyes, squinting at the overhead lights and blinking to re-focus. He was somewhat surprised (and slightly miffed) that no one was paying him any mind. Everyone's attention was glued to the viewscreen.

Castille shifted up on his elbows to see what was so damn fascinating.

"Oh crap," he whispered when he finally glimpsed the screen.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.5 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

*Ship's Log, Stardate 54259.5 - Commander Inga Strauss in temporary command.*

*It's been nearly five hours since the Eku was pulled through a trans-warp conduit, taking Captain Akinola, Lt. Commander Simms, Dr. Castille, Lt. Rune and Senior Chief Brin with it. Thus far, none of the other 'prodigal' ships, as they've been named, have disappeared. Still, with the possibility lingering, we are hesitant to place any personnel on these ships.*

*Captain Rodenko notified me that Starfleet is dispatching the USS Schuylkill, a specialized sensor vessel, to help in our search for the Eku. Hopefully they can track where the ship may have gone.*

*For the moment, the location and fate of the Eku remains a mystery. While the transwarp conduit seems to indicate Borg involvement, I am forced to agree with Commander Gralt's assessment - this is totally unlike any tactic we've seen*

*from the Borg. We remain hopeful that our friends will return to us safely . . . and soon.*

Strauss closed and saved the log entry and picked up her steaming mug of *Raktajino*. She sipped the strong, hot beverage and allowed her eyes to close for just a moment.

The chime of the door annunciator interrupted her brief respite.

With a sigh, she placed the mug back on the desk. "Come in," she called.

The ready room door slid open and Lt. Bane entered, carrying a data PADD. Inga noticed dark circles under his eyes and his trademark cocky grin was absent. He slumped down into one of the leather chairs and placed the PADD on the desk.

"Anything?" she asked.

Bane rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn. "Not much. We did find a few trace chroniton particles, but that may just be normal for these conduits - we've never really studied them to any degree."

"True," replied Strauss. Generally, when the Borg were about, one was more concerned with survival than with collecting data on interesting phenomena.

"So," Bane continued, "That just adds another variable to the mix. We not only don't know *where* they are, we can't even be certain of *when* they are."

Inga rubbed her temples. "Nigel, this whole thing seems senseless to me. If it was a trap, it was pretty inefficient - all that effort to snag five people?"

"Yeah - I've wondered about that too. Why not snag the others as well?"

"It's almost like Captain Akinola and his group were targeted somehow," she continued.

"What? By the Borg? Not to sound disrespectful, Inga, but why would the Borg care a fig about the Skipper? He's never had any direct contact with 'em. Now if it were Captain Picard who got snatched, well, that might make some sense . . ."



She nodded, conceding the point. "I guess you're right," she replied, her brows furrowing in thought.

"What?" queried Bane.

"Well, *someone* initiated that transwarp conduit and pulled in the *Ekku*! If not the Borg - who?"

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**

**SS *Ekku***

**Sector - Unknown**

"Why don't they *do* something?" whispered Commander Simms, still staring wide-eyed at the six Borg cubes on the viewscreen.

Akinola shook off his initial shock and frowned. "Good question. Lt. Rune - have they hailed us?"

K'lira forced her gaze away from the viewscreen and turned her attention to the comm panel. She turned back to Akinola and shook her head.

"No sir. The comm system is functioning, but we've received no incoming transmissions of any kind on any frequencies."

"That's damned peculiar," Akinola murmured, as he ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip. "Lieutenant, see if you can patch your tri-corder into the ship's sensor grid - try to get a reading on those cubes."

Solly looked at Akinola. "What are you thinking, Skipper?"

Akinola shook his head fractionally. "I've never faced the Borg before, but from what I've read, they aren't usually so reticent."

"Maybe they want to observe us first," chimed in Castille as he rose unsteadily to his feet. Delta moved quickly to help him to a chair.

"Maybe . . ." replied Akinola, but his tone indicated doubt.

"Sir!" Lt. Rune interrupted, "I've tied in my tri-corder to the sensor grid." She turned, her expression both hopeful and perplexed. "According to these

readings, those cubes are dead in space - I'm only getting minimal energy readings."

"Maybe they're in regeneration mode," suggested Simms.

Rune shook her head. "No, I remember that they maintain normal energy levels for the cubes, even when regenerating - there's barely enough power on those cubes for minimal life support."

"Just the same, keep an eye on them, Lieutenant," ordered the Captain, "Maybe these Borg just like to conserve energy. Delta - see if you can get our bearing and locate the *Bluefin* and the other ships."

Simms and Rune turned their attention back to the operations panel. Castille rubbed a hand over his eyes, his face was pale and haggard.

"You okay, Doc?" asked Akinola.

"I've felt better," he admitted. "But I sure wish I knew why I passed out."

"We all did. You just happened to hit your head when you fell. Lt. Rune checked you with your scanner - said you had a mild concussion."

Castille picked up the bio-scanner and checked the display, grunting in approval.

"Nice to know someone besides me can read this thing," he said. He reached into the med-kit and pulled out a programmable hypo-spray. Dialing in a healing agent, he pressed the device against his neck. His color began improving quickly. He turned his gaze back to the Captain.

"So what do we do now?"

"What we *are* doing, Doctor - trying to determine our situation and finding the *Bluefin*. The good news is the *Ekú* seems sound and has power. We've also got food and water - enough to last for weeks, months if we're careful." He neglected the detail of the mysterious way the power came on.

Castille frowned. "You expect us to be here that long?"

"Right now, I have no idea what to expect."

"Captain?" called out Simms. "Could you come here and look at this?"

Akinola joined the auburn-haired officer at the navigational plotter. She pointed into the three-dimensional representation of the surrounding stars.

"Does any of that look familiar?" she asked.

The Captain frowned. "No . . . no it doesn't," he replied quietly. Solly and the Doctor joined them.

"So, where are we?" asked Castille.

Delta gazed into the physician's eyes. "That's just it, O.C. I have no idea!" She pointed at the plotter. "Those stars are completely unfamiliar to me - they don't correlate with any of the onboard star charts!"

"Wherever we are," continued Akinola somberly, "we're definitely not in the Alpha quadrant."

## Chapter Thirteen

**Stardate - Unknown**

**SS Eku**

**Sector - Unknown**

"I've run the scans a dozen times, sir. Those cubes are effectively derelicts. Right now, we're generating more power than those six Borg cubes combined!"

Captain Akinola looked at the tri-corder Lt. Rune handed him. "That's a cute trick, considering our reactor is still off-line! Have you figured out where our power is coming from?"

K'lira shook her head ruefully. "No sir. Commander Simms is checking to see if there's some sort of power surge from the batteries, but apart from that . . ."

Akinola passed the tri-corder back to the young Orion officer. "I know. None of this makes much sense, Lieutenant. But someone or something brought us here. There's got to be a reason. Try broadcasting in the clear - maybe someone will answer us."

"Aye, sir." Akinola turned to speak to Solly . . .

*FLASH*

. . . and found himself standing inside a vast structure of conduits, metal beams and seemingly endless metal walkways.

Akinola staggered, overwhelmed with a sense of displacement. He was standing on a walkway of metal grating that led into a corridor from which faint, blue lighting emanated. Distant thuds, clanks and pops echoed in the distance. It took him a moment to realize where he stood.

*I'm on a Borg cube!* he thought, amazed but not particularly frightened. *I must be dreaming.*

He found himself walking slowly toward the corridor. As he entered, he paused in amazement to see row after row of Borg standing in regeneration chambers, blue energy crackling over each cache.

Silently, he turned to survey his surroundings. He realized this was just one of many, perhaps thousands of regeneration chambers. They seemed to stretch in all directions, even as he looked up and then down, over the railing.

The Captain continued to walk slowly forward, pausing occasionally to observe the enslaved creatures from many worlds. Some he recognized, but most were alien to him, apparently from worlds far from the Alpha Quadrant.

He felt inexplicably drawn to follow a circuitous route that led him up several levels. At no time did he encounter any active Borg. All seemed to be . . . asleep? Regenerating? He did not know.

He stopped before an alcove that contained what appeared to be a human woman, or what remained of her at any rate. She was mostly encased in Borg implants and her skin was deathly gray. Still, there was something about the shape of her mouth and her jawline that . . .

Akinola froze in place as realization dawned.

"Mama?" he whispered.

The Borg's remaining eye flew open, revealing a milky-white orb that fixed intently on Akinola.

*FLASH*

Joseph Akinola sat on the bunk of his old quarters on the *Ekú*. Light spilled in from the corridor, creating a rectangle on the otherwise dark floor.

A shadow appeared on the rectangle and Akinola looked up to see a tall figure standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the light. The figure's face was caught in shadow, hiding his face. A faint scent of lime wafted through the dark room.

The tall figure reached for the light switch, turning it with an audible 'click.'

Akinola stared mutely as his father, Samuel Akinola, smiled at him and opened his mouth to speak.

*FLASH*

Akinola was startled to see both Solly Brin and Dr. Castille standing before him, concerned expressions on their faces. The Captain took a quick step

backward and Solly grabbed his arm, steadying him. He was back on the *Eku's* bridge.

"Captain, what's wrong?" queried Dr. Castille, "you went blank on us for several seconds!"

Akinola swallowed and nodded. "I was on one of the Borg cubes. I . . . think I saw . . ." He shook his head violently, trying to shake off the image of his mother.

"Skipper . . . you've been right here the whole time," said Solly, cautiously.

"You may be suffering after-effects of whatever caused all of us to lose consciousness," added Castille.

"Maybe so," agreed the Captain, "but I've been having several of these . . . visions since we came on board. Maybe they mean something."

Castille looked doubtful. "Let me run the scanner over you - see if there's some physiological or neurological explanation."

Akinola sat in one of the swivel chairs, eyeing the medical scanner with suspicion. "If I'm going nuts, will that thing tell you?"

"I hardly think that's the case," replied Castille dryly. "More likely, you're suffering from a combination of stress, latent shock over the reappearance of your family's ship, and whatever the hell just happened to all of us." He ran the scanner over Akinola and frowned. Surprisingly, he began scanning away from the Captain, running it over the control surfaces.

"Maybe Doc is losing *his* mind," whispered Brin to Akinola.

Akinola waved his hand at Castille. "Hey, Doc! I'm over here, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep your shirt on," muttered the CMO as he peered at his medical scanner as if it had somehow betrayed him.

"Doctor!" Akinola's tone became firm. "Report!"

Castille hesitated, then looked at the Captain. "I'm picking up bio-neural energy readings - but they don't belong to any of us!"

"Where?" pressed Akinola, rising to his feet.

"All around us . . . *thousands* of them!" replied the CMO with a trace of awe in his voice, "they're literally all over this ship!"

## Chapter Fourteen

**Stardate 54259.8 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Boris Rodenko sipped his sweet, black tea while he waited for his operations officer to open a subspace channel to a ship many light-years distant. Though a proud man, Rodenko was wise enough to accept the limits of his own knowledge and experience. This situation, he had to admit, was far beyond his scope.

He gazed at the newly arrived USS *Schuylkill* which cruised slowly nearby. The sensor vessel reminded Rodenko of some bizarre deep-sea creature with bumps, spikes and protuberences that sprouted from its surface like tumors. He had little hope that the ungainly ship would help them recover his friends on the *Ekú*.

His terminal chimed and the youthful face of the Beta shift ops-officer appeared.

*"Sir, I've established contact with the Sutherland. Captain Shelby is standing by."*

Rodenko placed his tea cup on his desk and nodded in acknowledgement. "Thank you, Ensign. Please patch Captain Shelby through to my terminal."

The image shifted and Ensign Filmore's visage was replaced by a strawberry-blond woman wearing captain's pips. Elizabeth Shelby smiled warmly, seated in her spacious ready room.

*"Boris - this is a pleasant surprise! I know it's only been a short while since we parted ways but I've missed your handsome face."*

Rodenko smiled in return, but the smile was weak and haggard. "As I have also missed you, Elizaveta. I only wish this were a social call, but we are in the middle of a perplexing situation and I thought, perhaps, you could shed some light, based on your past experience with the Borg.

Shelby's smile instantly faded and her eyes narrowed. *"The Borg? What the hell have you gotten into, Boris?"*



Rodenko sighed and related the events of the last two days, up to the disappearance of the *Ekü* through the trans-warp conduit.

Captain Shelby knitted her brow in thought. *"This doesn't sound at all like the Borg to me, Boris. They've never been circumspect in their approach - at least not in our encounters. While I admit the trans-warp conduit is in keeping with their technology, there's no reason to believe some other civilization hasn't also perfected it. My guess is you're dealing with something else. I wish I could be more helpful."*

The Russian cutter commander nodded his head in resignation. "Thank you anyway, Betts. At the moment, we're just trying to figure out exactly *what* happened and how we can get our people back."

Shelby regarded her friend and sometime lover with a sympathetic gaze. *"Look . . . Boris, you know all too well that Akinola and I, well . . . we just don't see eye to eye on a lot of things. But I do respect the old bastard and I sincerely hope you get him and the others back safely. Just don't tell him I said that when he returns!"* She said the last with an impish grin.

Boris managed a sincere smile. "Da! - it will be our secret, Elizaveta. Thank you for your time and input."

*"Anytime, Boris. I wish we were close enough to lend assistance, but we're two weeks away at maximum warp and it sounds like you've already got good people on the scene. Oh, and Boris?"*

Rodenko raised a bushy eyebrow. "Yes, Elizaveta?"

She gave him a knowing look. *"You'll find them. Somehow, someday, you'll get them back. Shelby, out."*

The screen reverted to an image of the Border Service logo. Rodenko retrieved his tea cup and leaned back in his chair.

"I wished I shared your confidence, Betts," he murmured.

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**

**SS *Ekü***

**Sector - Unknown**

"Bio-neural readings? What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Akinola.

Castille slapped the medical tri-corder with the back of his hand, as if it has somehow offended him. "According to my scans, this ship is infested with many thousands of individual, unique bio-neural signatures. Somehow, they've become integrated with the ships systems - that's how the power came back on, I suppose."

Both Lt. Rune and Lt. Commander Simms had their own tri-corders out. Simms nodded her head in confirmation.

"I can confirm there's some sort of multi-sourced energy phenomena that's providing power to our systems," she said, a note of wonder in her voice.

"Are you saying the *Ek* is *possessed*?" pressed the Captain.

The normally unflappable CMO looked distinctly uncomfortable with the question. "I don't know if I'd put it in quite those terms, Captain, but I *am* saying that every indication is that these signatures are intelligent."

"Great," muttered Solly, "the frakkin' ship's haunted!"

"Belay that crap, Senior Chief!" Akinola said, sternly. "The Federation has encountered other non-corporeal life-forms before. I am not ready to accept that we're possessed by . . . *ghosts*!"

"Call them whatever you like, Captain," continued Castille, "but for all practical purposes, they're in control of this ship!"

The Captain glowered momentarily at the Doctor before nodding his head in a grudging manner.

"Alright - you say they're intelligent? Then let's try to communicate with them. Maybe they know where we are and, more importantly, how we get back home!"

Castille blinked at Akinola. "How do you propose to communicate with them?"

Akinola hesitated. "I think they've already been trying to communicate . . . with me - through these strange visions I've been having."

Brin stepped up to the Captain and regarded him with burning yellow eyes. "Skipper, for all we know, these things may be hostile! We've been yanked to gods know where and we're surrounded by six frakkin' dead Borg cubes! These . . . bio-neutered . . . whatever might've offed the Borg!"

"Bio-neural," corrected Castille, automatically.

Solly ignored the CMO. "I'm just sayin' - they've already been frakkin' around in your head, Skipper. That doesn't seem too friendly to me!"

"Point well taken, Solly," replied Akinola, "but given our circumstances, I don't see another option. Do one of you have a better idea?"

Simms looked meaningfully at Castille and shrugged helplessly. K'lira Rune let out a breath and shook her head, earning a glower from Solly.

The Captain nodded. "That's what I thought."

Solly grabbed his arm, "Dammit, Joe!" he whispered where only the Captain could hear, "Don't risk it!"

Akinola favored his old comrade-in-arms with a crooked grin. "What's wrong, Solly - don't you believe in the old, "To boldly go," credo?"

"That's 'Fleeter bullshit, Skipper. We're Border Dogs, not frakkin' tourists!" He relinquished his grip on Akinola's bicep, however, and took a grudging step backward.

Akinola turned to the others. "Keep your tri-corders running. If something happens to me, well . . . maybe you'll learn something that will get you home." He stepped to the middle of the bridge and cleared his throat nervously. "No time like the present, I suppose," he said, *sotto voce*.

"My name is Captain Joseph Akinola," he boomed, "if someone wants to communciate with me - I'm listening!"

He stood with his hands on his hips, waiting for several minutes. Nothing happened.

"So much for . . ."

*FLASH*

Akinola blinked, slightly dazed. He was still standing in the middle of the *Ekú's* small bridge.

He was also alone.

"Solly? Doc?" he called out. His voice rang slightly in the space and echoed down the ladder that led below.

"Delta? Lt. Rune? Is anyone else on board?" Again, his voice reverberated through the cargo ship, but he received no answer.

Frustrated, he grabbed the back of one of the chairs - the firm, physical sensation of the worn upholstery in his grasp precluded the notion that this was a dream or vision.

Angrily, he raised his voice. "What the *hell* do you want? *Speak* to me, dammit! We don't want to be your enemies, but you sure aren't making any friends!"

A faint glow appeared by the operations panel as tendrils of energy began to weave together and coalesce into a form. Akinola watched with fascination as the glowing orb elongated and began to grow arms, legs and a head. The glow began to fade and the distinct form of a humanoid appeared, no - not just humanoid - *human!*

Akinola could scarcely breathe as the form suddenly looked up and gazed into his face with dark, brown eyes. The entity smiled and struck an easy posture.

"Hello, son," said the image of Samuel Akinola.

Captain Akinola's mouth was dry. "Who are you?" he asked, warily.

"I am . . . who I appear to be . . . and more," the apparition said, his tone warm and conversational.

Joseph shook his head slightly. "You could have easily come up with this . . . form through the ship's database."

Samuel Akinola nodded, as if in understanding. "My time is limited, Joseph. There are many of us here . . . not all want to help you . . ."

Joseph frowned. "Many of you? Help us? I don't understand - who, *what* are you?"

Samuel Akinola began to fade slightly and the glow reappeared.

"Wait!" entreated Joseph.

The glow morphed and another figure coalesced, smaller than the first, but equally familiar.

Joseph felt his jaw clench with emotion as the image of his mother, Sonari Akinola, appeared before him and smiled. It was a sad smile.

"Hello, Joey," she said, "Oh, I have longed to see you again!"

The Captain forced his emotions down. "You can stop the mind-games, because I'm not playing! Either give me some straight answers or leave us in peace!"

Sonari's smile didn't fade but became tighter. She cocked her head in a way that was all-too familiar to Joseph - it had been her way of indicating that he had said one thing too many! That gesture, more than *anything* she could have said, convinced him - this *was* his mother, or at least some remnant of her.

Apparently, Akinola's shocked expression was sufficient for the apparition of Sonari Akinola. Her smile softened and her head straightened.

"That's better, baby. I'm sorry, but there's so little time . . . here is what you must do."

## Chapter Fourteen

**Stardate 54259.9 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Inga grimaced in her sleep, annoyed by the incessant chirping.

"Mama, there's a cricket in here," she muttered.

The chirping continued, unabated.

Strauss suddenly jerked awake, glancing around disoriented. She was still in the ready room - apparently she dozed off. The chirping was coming from the door enunciator.

Shaking her head and rubbing her face to wake herself fully, she called, "Come in!"

The door slid open and Nigel Bane walked in, carrying a PADD. He stopped and favored her with a puzzled grin.

"Inga?"

She waved him over, still rubbing her cheek which was numb from pressing against the desk. "Come on in - I was just resting my eyes."

"Uh-huh," he said with a widening smile. "You've got a little . . ." He gestured to her mouth.

Inga quickly brushed her sleeve against the side of her mouth, erasing the trace of drool that had trickled out while she dozed. "Oh - thanks!"

Bane's smile faded and his expression became concerned. "You're not doing anyone any good if you're exhausted. Why not get some rest? We'll contact you if anything comes up."

She took a deep breath and straightened in the chair. "Maybe later," she said, non-committally. "What's the latest from Captain V'dren?" she asked, referring to the Vulcan CO of the *Schuykill*.

"They've placed sensor drones on the remaining three prodigal ships. Now we'll have fair warning if another trans-warp conduit forms. Aside from that, they haven't picked up any anomalies apart from the traces of the *Eku's* disappearance."

"So, we continue to circle and wait," remarked Inga, frustration evident in her voice.

"Fraid so," he agreed. "Captain Rodenko is thinking of returning some of his people to the *Finback* if nothing else happens over the next few hours."

Strauss frowned. "But if this is all some Venus Fly-trap scenario, that might trigger another disappearance."

Bane nodded. "Yeah, there is that possibility. That's why he ordered us *not* to board any of the other ships."

Inga snorted - "His call, his responsibility - I get the picture." She stood and stretched, rolling her head around to loosen tense muscles.

Nigel walked up behind her and began to massage her neck.

"Ooooh, *that* feels good!" she said, smiling. How much do you charge by the hour?"

"Nah! I only work eight hour shifts," he said with a wink and a grin.

She turned and lifted up on her toes, encircling his neck with her arms and giving him a quick kiss. "Too bad we don't have eight hours," she sighed.

He kissed the top of her head, breathing in her delicate fragrance as he held her close. "Yeah, seems like time's in short supply these days." He gently moved her to arms length and peered into her eyes.

"As acting XO, I'm insisting that the acting CO get some rest or I'll have the acting CMO relieve you of duty!"

She shook her head, a small smile forming. "We don't *have* an acting CMO, you big goof!"

"Sure we do! Doc left the EMH in charge of sickbay. 'Doc Photon' and I have become as thick as thieves, so don't cross me!"

She held up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. Have Lt. Sarnek take the conn for gamma shift. But I want to be notified the instant anything, and I mean *anything*, happens, you got it mister?"

Bane snapped off a jaunty salute that would have made his Royal Australian Navy ancestors proud. "Aye, aye Cap'n Strauss, *sar!*"

Inga's smile faded. "Let's leave the 'captain' off, Nigel. I just don't want to think that way right now."

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**

***SS Eku***

**Sector - Unknown**

The apparition of Joseph Akinola's mother smiled, but her expression was sad.

"We don't have much time, Joey," she warned, "It is very difficult for us to appear to you like this . . . and we're growing weaker."

"Us? Who are you . . . all of you?"

That which was, and was not, Sonari Akinola closed her eyes as if gathering strength. Her image appeared to fade, then solidified. She nodded her head, as if agreeing with someone Akinola could neither see nor hear.

"You deserve an explanation, but it must be brief if you are to return back home." She hesitated and a look of pain and sorrow clouded her features. The expression tore at Joseph's heart.

"Mom . . ." he said, both in acknowledgment and concern.

"Hush, child. Don't interrupt . . . this is very hard," but her voice belied the small smile that again played on her lips in pleasure of hearing Joseph address her so.

She again opened her eyes. "We are . . ." She frowned and shook her head, "were . . . the Borg."



\* \* \*

"What the hell?" exclaimed Solly. He moved forward with amazing speed, but the Captain was already gone.

"Where'd he go?" asked Castille, startled.

"O.C. - come look at this," exclaimed Delta. She was peering intently into her tri-corder.

Castille moved quickly by Simms' side. He gazed into her tri-corder, then glanced at his medical scanner, frowning in puzzlement.

"What?" queried Lt. Rune, still stunned by the Captain's abrupt disappearance.

"The Captain's bio-signs - they're still here!" announced Castille.

Solly whipped his head back and forth. "Why can't we see him?" he growled.

Delta fielded the question. "His bio-signs are present, but his quantum signature has shifted slightly - enough where he's no longer in our physical reality."

"Is he okay?" asked Rune.

Castille nodded. "Somehow, I can still read his life-signs. Everything appears normal. In fact, I would guess he's still in this room - just in a slightly different physical state."

"Yeah? So how do we get him back?" challenged Brin, his anger and frustration slipping through his tough facade.

Castille glanced at Delta before turning to Solly.

"I'm afraid I have no idea!"

"Maybe he got what he wanted," suggested K'lira, hopefully.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Solly demanded.

Rune's eyes flashed in anger at her adoptive father. "I'm talking about communication, Senior Chief!" she retorted. "Maybe the Captain finally found a way to talk to these entities - you could learn something from him!"

Solly opened his mouth to speak, but found he had no reply.

## Chapter Fifteen

**Stardate 54260.0 (16 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

"Captain, please! Won't you reconsider?" Commander Ronata Vribb was obviously distressed to see Rodenko lead the away team back to the *Finback*.

Boris stepped onto the transporter dais, joining the chief engineer, Lt. Commander Slevon and two other engineers. He favored the Bolian XO with a strained smile. Lack of sleep and worry over his friends had left him in a testy mood.

"Your objection is both noted and appreciated, Commander," he replied in his thick Russian accent. "But now is not the time for sentimentality. I am most familiar with the *Finback* and Commander Slevon and his men are best suited to assist me in accessing the ship's database."

"Sir," she continued with typical Bolian stubbornness, "starfleet regulation number . . ."

". . . is subject to overrule by the commanding officer under extenuating circumstances," Rodenko finished. "I'm quite aware of the regulations, Commander. You may submit a formal protest if you wish, but I *am* going over to that ship!"

Ronata wilted slightly. "I won't do that, sir. But I still think it's a mistake for *anyone* to set foot on those ships - we still don't know what happened to the *Ekku*."

"That's precisely why we *must* go back!" retorted Rodenko, his patience worn to a bare thread. "We've discovered *nothing* by creeping along with our sensors. The *Schuylkill* has turned up *nothing* useful, nor have their sensor drones. Now, please return to the bridge, Commander, I don't have time to argue with you."

Vribb stiffened and her blue face turned a shade of lavender, but she nodded in acquiescence and left the transporter room.

Composing himself, Rodenko took his place by Slevon, who raised an eyebrow but wisely said nothing.

"Energize" ordered the Captain, sharply.

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**

**SS Eku**

**Sector - Unknown**

Castille rubbed his chin as he tried to figure out how to operate the unfamiliar coffee maker.

"Computer, activate coffee machine," he stated.

A sudden giggle behind him caused him to turn. Delta Simms was regarding him with a mix of affection and amusement.

"You didn't just talk to the coffee maker!" she said, and began to laugh again.

Feeling foolish but not quite sure why, he folded his arms and gestured at the device. "Let's see you do any better!" he responded, grumpily.

Still smiling, Delta walked over to the coffee maker and pulled out the battered steel caraffe. She filled it with water from the sink, then looked in the overhead cabinet. Finding a pouch of coffee, she opened it and poured the contents into the filter basket of the machine.

Castille watched in puzzled fascination as Delta poured the water from the caraffe into the coffee maker's reservoir, then pushed a switch. A red diode began to glow and the little coffee maker soon rumbled to life, filling the galley with the inviting aroma of freshly-brewed coffee.

Forgetting his irritation, Castille looked at Delta with admiration.

"How did you know how to do that?" he asked.

She smiled, hazel eyes twinkling. "My Dad's hunting camp had one like this. No replicators in the woods near Sylacauga, Alabama," she said.

"You actually *hunted? Live animals? With weapons?*" Castille's astonishment caused Delta to laugh again.

"Well sure! 'Course, we don't use rocks or spears any more. Neural disruptors are used by hunters back home - it's quick and painless to the deer we harvest."

"It still seems . . . well, kind of barbaric!" he blurted.

Delta pulled two mugs from off a shelf. "Sweetie, you've always lived in the city. I'm a country girl. Hunting's always been a part of my way of life. We have to thin the deer herd each year or their population grows beyond the land's ability to support them. Then, the deer die off due to disease or malnutrition. Believe me, managed hunting is much more humane."

Castille still looked doubtful. "But still . . . to kill innocent creatures . . ."

Delta poured coffee into the mugs. "O.C. - there's been a debate over hunting for five hundred years. It doesn't bother me if you're against it - just don't expect me to change my ways, okay?" Her eyes were still warm and friendly, but there was a hint of flintiness there as well.

He took a sip of the coffee, surprised at how good it was. He grinned at her.

"Are all the girls in Alabama like you?"

"Me? Shoot, I'm just a typical southern gal, O.C. We're all just sweetness 'n light."

"I just bet you are," he said, earning a punch in the arm.

\* \* \*

Solly and K'lira regarded each other warily across the *Ekus* bridge. Solly had no doubt that Commander Simms had intentionally left them with bridge duty so they could 'resolve their differences."

K'lira remained focused on her tri-corder, trying to track the Captain's whereabouts. Thus far, his life-signs remained on the bridge. Solly hoped that he'd soon return from his tet-a-tet. *If* he returned.

He leaned back in the helm chair, arms folded, and brooded about the young woman who sat a few meters away. It was hard to believe there was a time they had been very close. Those days seemed like another life-time.

"You still got a lock on the Skipper?" he asked. He wasn't sure why he asked the question, other than the silence was beginning to grate on his nerves.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "I *do* know how to use this, Senior Chief. If I'd lost his signature, you would know it."

Brin blew out a breath in frustration. "Is that how it's going to be, K'lira? Do you just *have* to smart off at me at every opportunity."

Rune uttered a sarcastic bark of laughter. "I don't believe this! You are actually playing the indignant father?!" she shook her head. "Simply unbelievable."

Solly rose suddenly, feeling both frustrated, angry, and . . . yes, a little afraid. "Just what is wrong, K'lira? Huh? What - is - wrong?"

She drew herself up and gazed at him, her emerald eyes burning with unfettered emotion.

"*How dare you even ask me that!*" she hissed. "*Where were you when I needed you seven years ago? Huh? Where. Were. You?!*" Her chest heaved and tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

The sudden eruption of enraged indignation caused Solly to take a step back. He felt like he'd been hit in the gut with a heavy stun round.

He swallowed. "K'lira - I couldn't speak on your behalf at the inquest . . . I wasn't present when . . ."

"That's *not* what I meant!" Her anguish was pouring out now, the initial tears had unleashed a torrent of repressed grief and hurt. "I knew you couldn't testify, I'm not stupid! But you could at least have *showed up!* Every day for *ten days* I sat in the chamber, grilled by the brass and guard-house lawyers. Every day, I thought you would come, just . . . to *be* there for me - like you always were when I was a kid."

Solly stood silently, allowing the accusations to hit him and sink in, like barbs from arrows. He didn't try to defend himself.

He couldn't. Everything she was saying was true.

She glared at him, her chest still heaving. "Well? Aren't you going to say something? Or are you going to just be tough and silent - like you were then?"

"I was wrong."

She frowned at him. "What? You were *wrong*?" She uttered another short, harsh laugh. "Is that supposed to be some sort of explanation?"

He forced himself to stare into the inferno of her gaze and took a step forward. "Just so we're straight on one thing, K'lira . . . I've always been very proud of you. That has *never* changed!"

Her expression was still hurt but also confused. "What . . . what is that supposed to mean? How can you even *say* that, after my court martial!"

"I'm not saying you were innocent or guilty - I didn't see it go down. You did what you did for a shipmate - I understand that, might've done it myself." He frowned, frustrated at how difficult it was to express himself to her.

For her part, K'lira seemed willing to let him speak his mind. She continued to glare at him with crossed arms, but she didn't interrupt.

"I'm a strong guy - always have been. I had to be, just to survive as a kid - you know a little about that too. I've learned to set aside physical pain, learned how to get inside my enemy's head to out-think and out-fight 'em. I've seen men and women die - a few in my arms. And I've killed too. Too many times to remember. If there's a worse place than Verex IV waiting for me when I die, well - so be it. I don't regret what I've done for the service."

He took a breath and swallowed. For a moment, there was no sound on the bridge except for the slight hum of the environmental system and the steady beep from the scanner. K'lira's expression was unreadable, but she listened intently.

"But, I will *always* regret not standing by you."

She continued to gaze inflexibly at him. "You still haven't told me why you avoided me," she said, quietly.

There was a pause before Solly answered. "I was afraid."

She frowned in puzzlement.

"I was afraid . . . to see them hurt you, to judge you. I'm not sure . . . that I could have controlled myself. If I had been there . . . I honestly don't know what I would have done."

She continued her gaze, nodding slightly. "Look," she began, "Um, could you just . . . leave the bridge for now. I can't handle being around you right now and I still need to . . ." She gestured to the tri-corder.

He held his gaze a few moments longer, then nodded slightly and headed slowly for the ladder. He hesitated, "K'lira . . ."

She held up a hand and sat at the Ops station, turning away from him. "Please. Just . . . go."

\* \* \*

The apparition that was and was not Sonari Akinola again closed her eyes and grimaced, as if in pain or great concentration.

Joseph Akinola felt sickened. He tried to push away the thought that his parents and his uncle and aunt had been assimilated, *enslaved* by the Borg. He didn't notice that his fists were tightly clenched and trembling.

"Tell me what you can," he said in a raspy voice.

She opened her eyes. "I will show you," she said.

*FLASH*

Suddenly, images began to pour into Akinola's eyes - scenes from his very early childhood, the family's rare trips to Nigeria, piloting the *Ekú* under his father's watchful eye, meals together, and . . .

*FLASH*

Joseph was in the escape pod in which his mother had placed him and his little sister so long ago. Except, he was his sixty-year old self. Melody was not there, but his mother stood by him, looking exactly as she had that fateful day.

*You remember what happened.* He heard her voice in his mind and he nodded.



*We didn't know who . . . what they were at first. Your father knew they were dangerous though. That cube was hundreds of times larger than any ship we'd ever encountered. He told me to get you and Melody into the escape pod, which I did. But this time, I knew . . . just knew, I'd never see you again.*

Akinola turned to face his mother. She still stood by him, but now her face was a pale gray, dark implants dug into her flesh and an optical device glowed a menacing red. A tear flowed from the remaining eye of his mother - the Borg drone.

*I will not tell you all that happened to us. Some things, you just don't need to know, son. Suffice it to say, the Borg captured our ship in some sort of tractor beam - several of them materialized on the Eku. Your father and your Uncle Robert tried to fight them off. They hit two of the drones with pulse rounds before . . . well, they overcame us quickly. They took us on their ship. I was paralyzed, couldn't move as they . . . changed us. We became part of the collective. Time passed . . . how long, I cannot say. A small part of me was aware, but I was trapped in my own mind - a prisoner of the collective.*

*FLASH*

Akinola and his mother stood inside one of the vast Borg cubes, perhaps the same one he had "visited" in a previous vision.

*If this is a vision.* he thought, wryly. His mother once more appeared as her normal self. He was relieved not to see her ensconced in the accursed Borg appliances.

Akinola finally found his voice. "What happened to you and to the . . . others." he couldn't bring himself to say, "Borg."

She nodded and looked at the distant regeneration chambers. A look akin to regret crossed her dark features.

*We assimilated many beings and added their essence to serve the collective.* Akinola shivered slightly, hearing such words come from his mother - even if the words were only in his mind.

*One day, we encountered a new species. They called themselves the V'Griid . . . They tried to resist, but resistance is futile.*

*Or so we believed.*

## Chapter Sixteen

**Stardate - Unknown**

***SS Eku***

**Sector - Unknown**

Lt. Commander Simms looked through the steam from her coffee mug to see a dejected-looking SCPO Brin trudge into the *Eku's* galley. She felt an empathetic twinge of sadness for the big Orion non-com. Solly might be a fearsome physical specimen, but she knew well-enough he was out of his element when it came to matters of the heart.

"Coffee, Senior?" she asked and pulled out a chair for Brin. Solly shook his head.

"No ma'am, thanks. I just needed to stretch my legs a bit. I get restless when there's nothing to do."

*In a pig's eye*, she thought. "Does Lt. Rune still have a solid reading on the Skipper?" she asked aloud.

"Oh yes, the Lieutenant has *everything* under control." Solly almost covered the edge of bitterness in his voice. Almost.

Simms placed her coffee mug on the table and stood. "Walk with me, Senior Chief. Doc, why don't you see if there's some milk in the stasis box for the kitty?"

Castille looked at Mr. Fluff, who regarded him in turn with inscrutable green eyes. "Come on, cat. Look's like it's just you and me."

\* \* \*

Simms walked with Solly a short distance down the corridor before stopping and facing him.

"Okay, Solly, what's wrong?"

He averted his gaze. "Nothing I can't handle."

"Bull," she said. Her voice was soft, but Solly winced slightly. She sighed.

"Look . . . Solly, I'm not going to pry into your personal life, but let me give you some advice . . . as a friend, okay?"

Solly nodded but kept his eyes averted.

"Give K'lira some time. She's carryin' more than her share of emotional baggage and a 50 kilo chip on her shoulder. I'm sure she'll loosen up once she feels accepted again."

Brin snorted. "I hope you're right, Commander."

"Course, I'm right! Tell you what, I'll go talk to K'lira while we wait on the Skipper. Why don't you go keep Doc and the cat company."

A small smile formed on Solly's face. "I'm not much at small talk."

"Neither is Doc. 'Cept when he's talking to coffee makers."

Solly's brow knit in puzzlement. "Ma'am?"

Simms smiled. "Never mind, Senior. I'm gonna put on my counselor hat and head to the bridge. Oh, and be sure you don't hurt the cat!"

\* \* \*

Akinola watched as the image of his mother morphed into the image of an Andorian woman, wearing an out-of-date Border Service uniform. The rank of captain adorned her shoulder flash.

"Captain Shartuurn, I presume?" Akinola asked, dryly. He was beginning to grow accustomed to the frequent twists and turns he was experiencing with these . . .

What? . . . Ghosts? Bio-electric manifestations? Non-corporeal entities? He didn't pretend to know or understand. Not that it really mattered. What mattered was they were somehow trying to help him and his crew get home. But he wanted some answers first.

The sharp featured Andorian nodded curtly. "We have little time, Captain Akinola, so I will be concise. We assimilated the V'Griid after a brief battle. Their technology did not prove to be of interest, but we readily assimilated

500 survivors. Our initial scans showed them to be carbon-based quadrupeds, similar to other species previously integrated into the collective. Our scans failed to reveal that the V'Griid were, in fact, hosts to symbiotic creatures."

"Like the Trill?" asked Akinola.

The image of Captain Shartuurn shook her head. "No. The symbiots did not have a physical form. They existed in a non-corporeal state, siphoning off miniscule amounts of bio-electric energy from the host V'Griid. Shortly after we assimilated the V'Griid, the symbiots . . . retaliated."

Akinola listened in fascination as the Andorian spectre described how these non-corporeal beings attacked the Borg systems, turning the local collective against itself. The symbiots acted much like a self-replicating computer virus, breaking down the Borg defenses and cutting them off from the greater collective.

"We once more became self-aware . . . as the symbiots continued their onslaught. We likely would all have perished, except the V'Griid drones were able to communicate with their former symbiots. But the damage to the cubes was irreparable. Although we were now free from the collective, we could no longer regenerate. Our physical bodies began to deteriorate as the cybernetic appliances began to fail. Yet our conscious selves continued on somehow, perhaps because of the symbiots. For us, it was a small price to regain our freedom and dignity."

Akinola frowned. "That doesn't explain why you sent the ships back to the Alpha quadrant. Or why you brought us here."

*FLASH*

Joseph Akinola was once more aboard the *Ekku*, in his old quarters. The image of his father, Samuel, stood before him, a crooked smile on his face.

"There are worse things than death, son," said the spectre of the elder Akinola. "You can't imagine the relief we experienced to once more control our thoughts, our will. To know it would cost our lives was a small price to pay."

Samuel Akinola pulled up a chair and turned it around before sitting astride it. Joseph remembered how his father had always done so before having a "man-to-man" talk. The memory caused his heart to ache.

"But we also wanted our families to know our fate. There was a great sense of shared sadness among us. Even though the collective no longer held us, we still shared our thoughts and feelings. Because of that, we learned you were in the Border Service - because of our link with the crew members of the *Finback*. It was a long-shot, but we hoped that sending the *Ekú* and the other ships back would pique someone's curiosity. We . . . that is, *I* am pleased that you are the one who came."

Joseph sat on the edge of his bunk, silently for several moments. "There's so much I want to say," he began, "so much I need to ask . . ."

The elder Akinola shook his head, sadly. "As much as I wish we could continue, there is simply not enough time. Even now, our energy is fading. We must regroup for a time and rest. Then, we will return a final time to you and tell you what must be done . . ."

Joseph reached out his hand, "Wait, Father . . ."

But Samuel Akinola was gone.

\* \* \*

"How's it going, Lieutenant?"

K'lira Rune jerked her head up from her tricorder, startled by the arrival of Commander Simms on the bridge.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Commander - I didn't hear you come up the ladder. You must be part *slinjaki*."

Simms lifted an eyebrow. "Slin - what?"

Rune smiled and turned her attention back to the tricorder. "*Slinjaki* - they're out of Orion mythology. Kind of like your Terran demons . . . or ghosts."

"I'd say we have more than enough ghosts at the moment," Simms remarked as she glanced around the small flight deck. "Any change on the Captain's status?"

Rune shook her head. "His life signs are strong. I guess that means he's okay . . ."

Simms checked the bulkhead chronometer and frowned. "He's been gone nearly an hour . . ." she left the rest of her thought unspoken and forced a smile back on her face. "I guess you didn't expect to jump back in like this, did you?"

The Orion woman tucked a strand of green-black hair behind her ear and shrugged. "No ma'am, I suppose not."

"Can I ask you something?"

K'lira cut her eyes toward the auburn-haired commander. "You're my superior officer, you can ask what you want."

Simms ignored the dig, remembering how they once held equal rank. "Why did you come back to the *Bluefin*, K'lira?"

Rune's eyes flashed, but she refrained from lashing out with a sarcastic reply. She gazed at Simms for several moments. "What do you care?" she asked, guardedly.

Delta took the other vacant seat and leaned forward with her elbows resting on her thighs, hands steepled in front of her mouth as she gazed into the Orion's eyes.

"We were friends before," replied Simms, "and I'm hoping we can still be friends. So, I'm asking because I'm concerned about you."

Lt. Rune again averted her gaze. She was silent for a moment before nodding to herself.

"I guess I needed to prove to myself that I still have value - to the service, to my old crew . . ." she paused, hesitating.

"To your near-father?" Simms asked, gently.

Rune said nothing for a long moment. Then, "Yeah. To the old hard-hearted *slis'pul*, too."

"Hard-headed, yeah. But as to his heart, not so much," said Delta.

Before Lt. Rune could reply, Captain Akinola suddenly appeared out of thin air and collapsed onto the deck.

## Chapter Seventeen

**Stardate 54260.1 (16 April 2377)**

**USS *Finback***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

The away team from the *Scamp* materialized on the bridge of the *Finback* without incident. Once again, Captain Rodenko experienced something akin to *deja vous* as he looked at the setting which was both familiar, yet profoundly disturbing.

"Commander Slevon, please take Chief Fujita with you to engineering and see if you can continue restoring the ship's systems. Lt. Bin Salaam, you will remain on the bridge with me. I want to access all of the ship's logs as quickly as possible."

As Slevon and Fujita headed to the turbo lift, Rodenko added: "I need not remind you that we may have to depart quickly. At the first indication of tri-quantum waves, you are to beam back to *Scamp*. You are not to wait for any order from me, understood?"

The Vulcan Chief Engineer inclined his head. "Perfectly, Captain. I shall keep you apprised of our progress."

Rodenko nodded, still caught between restlessness and distraction. "Da, good. Carry on, Commander."

The Russian cutter skipper joined Bin Salaam at the operations station. The Lieutenant's hands hovered over the old-style control configuration as he familiarized himself with the layout. Rodenko pointed to a small alphanumeric keypad.

"I believe this is what you are seeking, Lieutenant," Rodenko said, concealing his impatience.

Bin Salaam nodded and smiled nervously. "Yes sir - thank you." With that, the young officer entered the command over-ride code they had received from Star Fleet Archives.

*"Command over-ride accepted,"* said the *Finback's* computer. *"Awaiting instructions."*

Rodenko placed his hands on the console and leaned forward. "Computer, replay last log entry of Capatin Shartuurn."

*"Acknowledged, commencing playback."*

A round viewscreen at the Ops station came to life, revealing the severe features of Captain G'lil Shartuurn, C.O. of the *Finback* and Rodenko's former Skipper. The dour Andorian woman was seated primly in her ready room, her back ram-rod straight and her hands clasped loosely on the desk.

*"Captain's log, Stardate 26450 point 6. Captain G'lil Shartuurn, recording.*

*I have ordered a course change to investigate an unusual energy surge near the Lesser Riven Nebula. I have enformed Echo base of our intentions and we are currently en route at warp factor six with an ETA of two hours, fifty minutes.*

*Lt. Bruenner reports that the energy readings are approaching 500 teracochranes in intensity, suggesting this is not a natural phenomenon. Though our sensor capabilities are limited compared to a science vessel, we will record the event and submit our report at a later time."*

The recording ended, causing Rodenko to frown in consternation.

"She sounds more like a Vulcan than an Andorian," mused Bin Salaam, earning a sharp look from Rodenko.

"She was a fine Captain and ran a tight ship, Lieutenant. I would not have you mock her memory!"

Bin Salaam's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, sir - I meant no disrespect."

Rodenko sighed and clasped the young officer's shoulder. "Of course you didn't, Ali. Forgive my testiness . . . I'm frustrated that we have so few answers."

"Yes sir. Perhaps we would learn more by replaying the bridge recordings?"

Rodenko smiled. "Good thinking, Lieutenant! Begin with time index 26450 point six-oh. Put it on the main viewer on quick-scan mode."



Boris settled into the command chair as Bin Salaam set up the playback from the bridge scanners. Momentarily, they were seeing the bridge of the *Scamp* from a scanner located near the ceiling, on the aft port side. This afforded them a bird's eye view of the bridge crew and the main view screen. In the quick-scan mode, the crew scurried around with exaggerated speed. Suddenly, the contact indicator light on the helm console began to strobe.

"Stop there, Lieutenant. Back it up a couple of minutes and resume at normal speed," ordered Rodenko.

The view ran in reverse for a few moments, then resumed at normal speed. Captain Shartuurn was seated in the command chair. A Human female sat at the helm and a Deltan male was at Ops. Boris allowed a wistful smile to play across his face as he recognized the raven-haired woman at the helm.

"Lt. Annette Fourier," he said quietly to himself. "Such a crush I had on you those many years ago . . ."

*"Helm, drop us out of warp - make our speed one half impulse. Ops, give me an update on that energy surge,"* ordered Captain Shartuurn.

A fair-skinned Human male with close-cropped russet hair turned from the Ops board. *"Energy levels have dropped to 200 teracochranes and are holding steady."*

*"That's more output than a dozen Ambassador class ships!"* exclaimed an Asian woman seated at tactical. Rodenko remembered her as Lt. Commander Sun Li, the *Finback's* second officer.

*"Noted, Commander,"* replied Captain Shartuurn, calmly.

The contact indicator on the helm began to flash, instantly elevating the tension level among the bridge crew.

*"Contact, bearing 117 mark 6, distance . . . 840 million kilometers and closing."* reported the Operations officer.

*"Identification, please, Mr. Bruenner,"* replied the Captain, her voice emanating serenity with a hint of rebuke.

Rodenko and Bin Salaam watched with rapt fascination as the Operations officer checked and re-checked his readings. Bruenner said something unintelligible, obviously profoundly disturbed by the sensor readings.

*"Ma'am . . ." he began, "I'm not sure . . . it's definitely not in the database, but it's massive! We should be able to get a visual on it . . ."*

*"On-screen,"* ordered Shartuurn.

Rodenko felt a primal chill of goose-flesh rippling down his arms as the viewscreen revealed a cube-shaped object rapidly approaching the *Finback*.

"Now we know . . ." Rodenko muttered. On the screen, the *Finback's* bridge crew watched with amazement and awe. Fear and horror were still moments away.

*"Open a channel to that vessel, Mr. Bruenner,"* ordered Captain Shartuurn as she stood from her chair and tugged at her burgundy jacket.

*"Hailing frequencies are open, Captain."*

*"I am Captain G'lil Shartuurn, in command of the Federation vessel, Finback. Please identify yourself and state your intentions."*

For a moment, there was no response, save the cube increased in size, filling the viewscreen as it closed on the cutter.

The Andorian Captain crossed her arms, clearly perturbed. She was about to repeat her hail when a harsh chorus of voices replied . . .

*"We are the Borg. Resistance is futile . . ."*

Rodenko and Bin Salaam watched helplessly for several more minutes as the cube caught the border cutter in a tractor beam. Captain Shartuurn ordered phasers to fire at the Borg cube, but the initial effectiveness of their resistance was soon quashed as the Borg adapted and adjusted to the *Finback's* limited arsenal. All too soon, they witnessed the horrific sight of Borg drones materializing on the bridge. Though the bridge crew fought valiantly, the struggle was over quickly.

As the viewscreen showed the Borg inserting nano-probes into their victims, Rodenko said quietly, "That's enough, Ali. We've seen all we need here."

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**

***SS Eku***

**Sector - Unknown**

"Sir? Sir! Are you alright?" Delta Simms raced to Akinola's side as the Captain knelt on the deck, trying to regain his equilibrium.

He took a deep breath, then rose carefully to his feet. "I'm fine, Delta. I'm starting to get the hang of these weird side-trips."

"What happened, sir?"

The smell of coffee tickled the Captain's nose. He suddenly realized he was famished. "Let's go to the galley - I'm starving! I'll fill everyone in there."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, the three Humans, two Orions, and one overweight feline, gathered around the table in the *Eku's* galley. Akinola was tearing into a sandwich as he related his contact with the ex-Borg.

"So all of this was just a desperate attempt to share what happened to them?" asked Castille. He shook his head. "Sorry, but I just don't get it."

"Think about it, O.C." replied Delta, "These people have been lost from their loved ones for years - some for decades. They realize their time is short . . . what would *you* do in the same situation?"

Castille frowned, "Well, I . . ." he hesitated, "I guess I've never really thought about it."

"That's all they've had time to do, since they regained their free will," pointed out Akinola. "They want to be . . . remembered."

Solly had listened quietly through Akinola's account. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Beggin' your pardon, Skipper, but aren't there like *thousands* of them? How the frak do we 'remember' all those people? Hell, we don't even know who they are!"

Akinola gestured at the dark metal circle that sat in the center of the table - the Borg appliance.

"Scan that thing with your tri-corder, Delta," he ordered.

Simms raised her eyebrows in surprise, but complied. Her surprised expression turned to wonder.

"It's a data-chip!" she exclaimed. "It lists everyone who was captured by the Borg over the past two centuries, at least on these cubes."

Akinola took the dark metal object from Simms and gazed at it. "If nothing else, we're going to provide closure for a lot of people back home."

"Speaking of home," interrupted Castille, "have they left a chunk of metal anywhere telling us how to get back?"

"No," admitted the Captain. "My understanding is, they needed some time to rest. I think their energy levels are getting pretty low. They said they would communicate with me a final time to tell me what needs to be done to get us back home."

Castille snorted. "This is like some twisted version of Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol,' " he grouched.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54260.2 (16 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Inga Strauss sat in the command chair, willing herself not to fidget. She watched the warp-tug, USS *Scioto*, drift languidly by on the main viewer. Captain Phralnis was anxious to tow the Vulcan and Orion ships back to Echo and get back to his normal routine. The fact that *Scioto* was still on station was probably due to Captain Rodenko exerting his seniority.

*And if I'm any judge, I imagine Captain Rodenko was more than a little blunt in his conversation with Captain Phralnis.* The thought made Inga smile a little. She had known that the *Scamp's* C.O. was a close friend of Captain Akinola's, but she had come to appreciate his loyalty and tenacity at finding their missing comrades.

Her smile faded as she considered how helpless they were in making a rescue. For all of their sensor sweeps, multi-spectrum scans, hypotheses and wild guesses, they had no real idea what to do.

*At some point, Admiral Bateson will be forced to call off SAR-OPs and we'll have to give up,* she thought, morosely. The idea that they might not recover the Captain, Delta, Doc, Solly, or Lt. Rune seemed surreal to her. She could not imagine such a loss. This wasn't like a combat situation where at least you knew people were dying for a cause . . . for all she knew (and hoped) they were alive and well - just out of reach.

Nervous energy forced her to bound to her feet. She walked forward and stood behind the helm station with her arms crossed, glaring at the viewscreen.

Lt. Bralus glanced up at her. He was going to make a comment, but upon seeing her expression, decided that silence was the wiser option.

## Chapter Eighteen

**Stardate 54260.2 (16 April 2377)**

**USS *Finback***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Rodenko and Lt. Bin Salaam continued to pour over sensor logs, personal logs and other shreds of data. They learned little more, except that the Borg cube pulled the *Finback* through a warp conduit after the crew was assimilated, confirming what they already suspected about the fate of the ship.

"The power shut down roughly 12 hours after they first encountered the Borg," remarked the Lieutenant. "Apparently, the Borg shut down the core but left the ship intact. I wonder why?"

"Who can say, Mr. Bin Salaam? The Borg seem to have reasons for what they do, but they tend to keep their own counsel. I am more curious as to why the ship shows no passage of the decades since it was taken!"

"I may have an answer for you, Captain," came a familiar voice. Rodenko turned to see Lt. Commander Slevon step onto the bridge from the port ladder access.

"Your timing is impeccable," remarked Rodenko, dryly.

"Thank you. As I was saying, I believe I have an explanation for why the ship has not aged since its disappearance."

Rodenko made a rolling gesture with his hand. "*And?...*"

"I have discovered trace amounts of anti-chroniton particles in the warp core."

Lt. Bin Salaam turned, a puzzled look on his face. "Anti-chroniton particles? But sir, Thalos' corrolary states that such particles cannot exist in normal space!"

Slevon raised a withering eyebrow. "Lieutenant, I believe Dr. Thalos stated that such particles could not be *created* in normal space, not that they cannot exist."

Rodenko raised his hands. "Gentlemen, please, remember that I am a mere Captain. Could you explain this in layman's terms?"

Slevon inclined his head. "I shall endeavor to do so. You are familiar with chroniton particles?"

Rodenko nodded. "Da, yes, of course. The particles are the residue created from time-travel or by some cloaking devices."

By sheer will-power, Slevon did not wince. "A roughly accurate, if overly simplistic description. In a similar way, anti-chroniton particles give evidence to anomalies in time such as temporal loops or static bubbles."

The Captain nodded. "So you are saying that the *Finback* was caught in such a temporal loop as Admiral, rather, 'Captain' Bateson and the *Bozeman* were?"

"In my opinion, a static bubble better fits the hypothesis, Captain, but in essence - yes, the outcome is the same. Time passes in normal space but not within a static bubble."

Rodenko frowned. "I was not aware that the Borg had such capabilities."

"Nor was I, Captain. Certainly, it is not a capability they have revealed in our recent encounters. It is possible that it is related to their transwarp capability, but I cannot be certain without more data."

"Good work, Commander! Do you have anything else to report?"

"Yes sir. We have completed our inspection of engineering and are ready to restore full power at your order."

"Very well. Make it so, Commander." Rodenko stood. "Let's bring the *Finback* to life."

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54260.3 (16 April 2377)**  
**USS *Bluefin***  
**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

"Hey you."

Strauss jerked upright from her somewhat relaxed position in the command chair. She glanced up to see Nigel Bane standing by her chair, holding a steaming mug of *raktajino*.

Smiling, she accepted the proffered mug. "Thanks. Since you were nice enough to bring this, I'll spare you the reaming out for startling me out of my daydream."

The Aussie grinned. "Sorry about that. It's time for shift-change. I'm here to relieve you."

She glanced at the chronometer, surprised by the passage of time. She stood and arched her back, trying to regain circulation to her legs.

"I stand relieved, then, Lieutenant. We're still running our grid pattern, but nothing much to report there. Captain Rodenko and some of his crew restored power to the *Finback*. He also confirmed what we suspected - the ship was originally taken by the Borg."

Bane's smile faltered. "So . . . do you think the Borg took the Captain and the others?" he spoke quietly as other crew members moved about the bridge for the shift change.

"We can't discount the possibility," Strauss grudgingly admitted.

"Inga . . . how much longer do we keep this up? The search, I mean?" asked Bane.

Strauss hesitated. Bane had verbalized the terrible question that nagged her thoughts.

"We'll keep at it Nigel. The answer to that is above our paygrade," she said evasively.

Bane gazed into her eyes. "That's no answer, Inga."

"It's the best I can offer for now," she said, and moved toward the turbo-lift.

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**  
***SS Eku***



## Sector - Unknown

Akinola held the dark, alien circle of metal before him, as if he could read the data held within.

"Sir?" began Delta, hesitating.

The Captain glanced at the second officer. Delta was gazing at him with her wide-set hazel eyes, an expression of compassionate concern on her face.

"What is it, Commander?"

She glanced at Dr. Castille who cocked his head quizzically back at her. Returning her gaze to the Captain, she continued.

"Sir, are *you* alright? I mean, this has to be difficult for you . . . to find out about your parents like this, I mean."

Akinola smiled wanly. "I appreciate your concern, Commander." He looked around at the others at the table. "To be honest, this hasn't really sunk in with me yet. My main concern is getting us back home, hopefully very soon." He leaned back in his chair, a pensive expression on his face.

"I suppose I should feel shock or horror, but . . ." he paused.

"But?" prodded Solly, who had been mostly silent throughout the conversation.

"But," continued Akinola, "I mainly feel relief. For the first time in my life, I actually know what became of my family. Sure, I know that being assimilated by the Borg is a horrible fate - maybe that will sink in later. But now they're free of the collective. And I've had a chance to see my parents again - in a sense. How many people get a chance like that?"

The others were silent as they considered Akinola's words. Castille looked unconvinced, but held his tongue for the moment.

Near the doorway of the galley, a sudden light appeared - glowing softly at first, then coalescing into a more solid outline.

The group watched in fascination as the the glow faded to be replaced by a completely alien creature. The alien stood on four slender legs. It was covered with silky cream colored fur and wore what appeared to be a vest patched

together with brightly-colored material. at the end of a long, slender neck was a head reminiscent of a Terran marsupial. Large, brown eyes regarded them with intelligent interest while a small, pink tongue darted occasionally from it's muzzle as if tasting the air. It rared up on its hind legs, balancing easily as it now stood nearly two meters tall. At the end of each fore-leg (fore-arm?) were small three-fingered hands that moved daintily, as if the creature were waving shyly at them.

The creature did not speak, but everyone heard its words projected into their minds.

*"Greetings, child of Akinola-et and your kith. Feesh of the V'Griid I am. Our time has come to the closing of the circle, kith-et-sa. All we, V'Griid, Et-kith and Homm prepare now for the final unleashing of our naf-et. Your circle still unfolds Akinola-et, and we bid you fortune and fair season. Attend well! You must complete that which is yet un-held, that we may all be released from the here and the not-now."*

Castille ran a hand over his balding pate. "Um, what did he just say?"

The image of the V'Griid suddenly morphed into the form of Sonari Akinola. She appeared as she had the day she placed Joseph and Melody in the escape pod - still young and vibrant.

"The V'Griid said, 'goodbye' and 'it's time to send you home, Doctor.'" she said, smiling. She looked meaningfully at Joseph and her expression became wistful.

"Son, I must ask you to do one final thing, and it will be very hard for you."

## Chapter Nineteen

**Stardate 54260.3 (16 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Boris Rodenko sat dejectedly in his ready room, an ignored cup of black tea growing cold on his desk. On his terminal screen, the image of Admiral Morgan Bateson appeared equally somber.

"And that's all I have to report, Admiral," sighed Rodenko. "It would seem that the Borg have somehow abducted Captain Akinola and his comrades, but we have no way of knowing where."

Bateson ran a hand through his beard and nodded. *"I see."* He gazed off-screen for several moments, apparently deep in thought. *"Based on your report, Captain, I am calling an end to the search and rescue operation, effective 24 hours from now."*

Rodenko's eyes widened in disbelief. "Calling it off? *Bozhe moi!* Admiral - you can't be serious! We've only been on-station 36 hours . . . it's much too soon to give up!"

*"I understand how you feel, Boris, but this is no longer a search and rescue operation by any reasonable definition. You have no idea where the Eku went and have no way of conducting a rescue. I will order the Pamlico to your location to drop off sensor buoys, but I need your ship and the Bluefin back on patrol - we're short available cutters as it is."*

"Joseph Akinola would not give up so easily if *you* were missing!" Rodenko snapped.

Bateson glared at the Russian Captain for several seconds before responding.

*"Joseph Akinola is my friend, too, Captain. He is also a consummate professional! He would know when a situation required his presence and when it was time to move on,"* Bateson said, in a dangerously quiet tone. *"I will overlook your outburst . . . this time . . . because I know how close you are to Captain Akinola. But I expect you to carry out my orders, is that understood?"*

Rodenko returned Bateson's glare, but gave a curt nod. "Aye, aye," he replied, tightly.

Bateson held Rodenko's gaze across the subspace channel without flinching. *"Good. Believe me, Captain, it gives me no pleasure to give this order. I hope to hell that somehow, Joseph can find their way back home."*

"Da, as do I," replied Rodenko, his burst of anger spent he sagged morosely back into his chair.

Bateson offered a weak smile. *"Then at least we agree on something. The Pamlico will arrive in about 18 hours to deploy the sensor buoys. If you come up with anything before then, let me know. Bateson, out."*

Morgan Bateson's face disappeared, to be replaced by the Border Service logo. Rodenko continued to stare at the screen for several moments before picking up his tea cup. He grimaced as the tepid tea passed his lips and he set the cup down in disgust.

\* \* \*

On Star Station Echo, Admiral Bateson sat brooding at his desk for several minutes. He finally stood and walked to the cabinet where he kept his collection of fine beverages. He pulled out a bottle that glowed an electric blue and poured a generous amount into a glass. Downing it swiftly, he placed his knuckles on the counter top, savoring the burning flow of the liquid as it coursed its way to his gut.

He looked up to see his reflection in the mirror over the cabinet. He glared at his image

"Who are you looking at, you disloyal son-of-a-bitch?" he growled.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54260.3 (16 April 2377)**  
**USS *Bluefin***  
**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Inga Strauss sat at the desk in her quarters, a plate of food from the wardroom barely touched lay before her. She had not felt like socializing with the junior officers and had brought the tray to her cabin for some solitude. She found, though, that she had no appetite, even though the chicken casserole was one of her favorites from Cookie's galley.

She turned her attention to crew rotations to take her mind off the numbing sense of helplessness that threatened to overwhelm her. Strauss found a degree of comfort in the routine of working out personnel assignments and the challenge of properly staffing the three shifts, week in and week out.

Strauss noted a comment from Cookie Marino, the ship's cook, requesting additional enlisted help in the galley.

*I need to pass that along to Solly . . .* the thought brought her up short. No Solly . . . no Chief of the Boat. No Captain, no Chief Medical Officer, no Second Officer and no Assistant Ops Officer either.

She felt ashamed that she was even considering the loss of key officers and crew related to their function. These were her shipmates! Friends, for the most part.

Angrily, she pushed the terminal screen away from her and stood. She had to *do something!*

The problem was, she had no idea *what* to do.

She was about to change into her work-out togs and head to the gym, when her commbadge chirped. She tapped it a bit harder than necessary.

"Strauss, go ahead."

*"Ensign Vashtee, ma'am. I have Captain Rodenko standing by to speak to you."*

*Now what?* Strauss thought. Aloud, she said. "Pipe it through to my quarters, Ensign."

Inga re-seated herself and turned the screen back to face her. Momentarily, the image of Boris Rodenko appeared on the terminal. He did not look happy.

*"Commander,"* he began without preamble, *"Admiral Bateson has ordered us to conclude SAR-OPs within 24 hours. The Pamlico is en-route to deploy sensor buoys, but we are to resume patrol duties after that time."*

Strauss felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. "So soon?" she asked, weakly.

*"It is the Admiral's opinion that we are not accomplishing anything useful by remaining on scene,"* he said, tersely.

"You . . . don't agree?" she asked, cautiously.

*"I have already expressed my opinion to the Admiral, Commander Strauss. I will do my duty, as will you."* His tone broached no argument.

"Yes sir." There really wasn't anything else to say.

Rodenko's expression softened slightly. *"Commander, the Bluefin is yours, at least in the short run. I know Captain Akinola held . . . holds you in the highest regard. This cannot be easy for you, but you must carry on. It is what he would want."*

The door annunciator to Inga's cabin began to chime. She frowned, trying to ignore it.

"I will do my best, sir," she said, though without enthusiasm.

Rodenko nodded. *"I am sure of it. Dasvidanya, Commander Strauss. Rodenko, out."*

The chiming of the annunciator continued incessantly. Inga swore softly and strode purposefully toward the door, ready to give whoever it was a royal ass-chewing.

To her surprise, when the door slid open, Lt. Commander Galt pushed past her, his normally morose expression animated.

"Galt?" she asked, perplexed, "What the hell do you . . ."

The Telarite Chief Engineer ignored her. "By the copulating leprous demons of Tragnur, I think I've got it!" he exclaimed.

She blinked. "Got what?"

He thrust a Data PADD at her. She held it, glanced at him, then back at the PADD, as if he'd handed her a dead fish. Galt beamed triumphantly.

"I don't understand . . ." she began.

"The anti-chroniton particles!" he exclaimed, pointing at a complex series of equations on the PADD's screen. "Don't you see?"

She shook her head, somewhat dazed, "No . . . sorry . . . Galt, what?"

He snatched the PADD back. "Frak a god-whoring Yaq-dul, Strauss!" he snorted, impatiently, "It's right there on the screen - I know where the Captain and the others are!"

Strauss' jaw hung open for a moment, before she recovered. "What? Where, Galt? Where are they?"

He shook his head quickly, his dark black eyes wide with excitement. "They're still right in the area! They didn't really *go* anywhere. And the right question isn't where, it's *when!*"

## **Chapter Twenty**

**Stardate - Unknown**

***SS Eku***

**Sector - Unknown**

Joseph Akinola's mouth was dry as he spoke. "What do I have to do?"

The apparition that was and was not Sonari Akinola gazed at her son for a long moment before answering.

"To send you back home will require a vast expenditure of energy - more than the former collective can generate on our own. Our energy levels are nearly depleted. Even now, I can feel our essence beginning to wane."

As she spoke, her appearance became more transparent and her voice seemed to come from a distance. Captain Akinola instinctively stepped forward, as if to pull her back from the edge of some ethereal precipice. Her form became more substantial, however, and she waved him back in an impatient manner. She continued.

"Each of our vessels, what you call 'cubes,' is equipped with a self-destruct mechanism. They are linked whereby any one can trigger all six. The energy released by their destruction will provide us what we need to send you back."

Akinola swallowed. "And what will become of you?" he asked, quietly.

She smiled. "We will finally be free."

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54260.4 (16 April 2377)**

***USS Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Commander Strauss wanted to pound her fist in frustration on the desk, but she restrained her emotions as she gazed at the image of Captain Rodenko on the viewscreen. He looked tired and haggard. Worse, he looked defeated.

"Commader Strauss," he said, irritation evident under his thick accent, "Gralt's wild theories aside, you still haven't given me anything substantial to change Admiral Bateson's mind."



"I realize that, Captain, but I think Galt has a solid hypothesis on which we can build . . ."

"Build what, Commander?" interrupted Rodenko. "Let's suppose that Galt is correct - that the *Ekua* did not travel in distance but in time. Can you tell me to what date they travelled? Are they in the past or future?"

Strauss mentally counted to ten before replying. "As I've stated, sir, we don't have that information just *yet*, but I'm confident that given time . . ."

"Ah yes, time," interjected the Russian cutter skipper. "I have some knowledge of the subject," he continued cryptically, "and I know that under the *best* of circumstances that a rescue involving time travel is very, very risky. . ."

"No argument, sir. And I am not suggesting we act precipitously. But please - can't you ask the Admiral for a few additional days on station? Even if there's only a tiny chance of recovering Captain Akinola and the others, shouldn't we take it? Isn't that what Border Dogs are *supposed* to do?"

Rodenko was silent as he gazed at Inga through the open channel. He rubbed eyes that burned from lack of sleep before nodding slowly.

"Da," he answered finally. "We should do all we can, though I have to tell you, this is most likely a waste of time." He leaned back in his chair and tugged his tunic down, as if to punctuate his decision. "Commander, you are to remain on station for now, by my direct order as senior commander. I will depart for Star Station Echo at the end of the 24 hour period and present myself to the admiral for disciplinary action. That will protect you and give you at least two more days - is that understood?"

Strauss blanched, "Sir! You can't . . ."

Captain Rodenko cut her off with a sharp gesture. "Enough! I have made my decision. You have your orders, Commander, and you have two extra days with which to work. I've no doubt that the Admiral will countermand my orders once he learns what I have done. Use your time well. Rodenko, out."

The Russian captain's image abruptly vanished, to be replaced with the Border Service insignia. Inga leaned back in the high-back leather chair and

absently gnawed on her thumbnail. She turned to look out the ready room viewport at their sister ship, the *Scamp*, which was just visible to port.

Her stomach clenched as she realized the enormity of the situation. By badgering Rodenko into giving her and the *Bluefin's* crew more time for the search, she may have cost the *Scamp's* C.O. his career.

*Then there's no time to waste*, she thought. She slapped her hand on her combadge. "Commander Galt, Lt. Bane, report to the ready room on the double!"

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**

**SS Eku**

**Sector - Unknown**

"There is one more thing," continued the visual manifestation of Sonari Akinola. "To initiate the self-destruct sequence will require the physical presence of one of you. We lack the ability to manipulate the controls."

"*What?*" interjected Dr. Castille. "Are you saying one of us has to go *into* one of those cubes and pull the trigger? That's suicide!"

"Quiet, Doctor!" ordered Akinola, sharply. He turned back to the representation of his mother. "Tell me how to activate the self-destruct mechanism."

"No way, Skipper!" Solly moved with amazing speed for a big man. He stepped between the Captain and the apparition. "You're NOT going to sacrifice yourself. I'll go."

"Stand aside, Senior Chief," Akinola's voice was quiet but firm. "I'm in command and I will decide who does what."

Brin did not back down but stepped up toe-to-toe with the Captain. His yellow eyes blazed with intensity as he stared back at his C.O. and closest friend.

"You can court-martial me if you want, but you're not going to do this." He crossed his arms, corded muscles rippling, as if to emphasize his point.

The apparition appeared by the Captain and Solly, like a referee about to start a boxing match.

"There is no need for anyone to die, Solly Brin," said the spectre. "We will transport *all* of you back home before you can be harmed by the explosion. The energy that's released will be absorbed into our essence, which we will channel into creating your way of escape."

"Satisfied?" queried Akinola to the Red Orion NCO.

Solly looked anything but satisfied, but he took a step backwards.

"Skipper, all we have is the word of a . . . a ghost, to guarantee your safety. Excuse me if I'm having trouble with that." He glanced at the apparition. "No offense."

Sonari Akinola smiled thinly. "It pleases me to know you have such loyal, if stubborn friends, son. But we have no time for arguments. We must do this - now."

Captain Akinola nodded sharply. "Let's do this, then."

And the next moment he was standing on a catwalk inside of a Borg cube.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54260.4 (16 April 2377)**

***USS Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

"Enough techno-babble Gralt! I need a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer. Can you determine where in time the *Ekua* went?" Inga's voice relayed the strain and frustration they all felt.

The Telarite Chief Engineer glanced back and forth between Strauss and Bane. The hair along his skull and down his neck were raised in tension. He drew a calming breath and rubbed the side of his snout.

"Commander," he said with uncharacteristic calm, "there is no *simple* yes or no to your question. There are many variables that have to be factored in to such a determination. The short answer is - yes, it is *possible* to find them. But the real ball-buster is how long it might take to figure it out!"

Strauss sagged in her seat. "How long? Can you do it in 48 hours?"

Galt's large, black eyes shone as he turned from Bane to Strauss. He spread his stubby hands in an all too human gesture of helplessness. "I don't know. Maybe in 48 hours. Maybe in 48 years. Maybe in 48 centuries! Like I said, there are too many variables for me to know at the moment."

Inga rubbed her nose, unconsciously imitating the Captain's gesture of frustration. "Pull together whoever you need and whatever you need, Commander. This takes priority over everything, it that clear?"

Galt stared back. "Understood, but I make no promises."

This time, she did bring her fist down on her desk. "No excuses, Commander! This was your idea - do you stand behind it, or do I contact Captain Rodenko to tell him you were wrong and that we're packing it in?"

Galt stood slowly, bristling with anger. "I was an engineer on this ship when you were still in suckling school! I've held this ship together while I held my own guts in my hands! Do not speak to me like I was a frakking plebe!"

Strauss stood slowly and placed her nuckles on the desk. She leaned forward and spoke softly.

"I don't give a damn about what you've done in the past, Galt. All I care about is what you do in the next 48 hours. You want my respect? Get. This. Done."

They held each other's gaze for several seconds. Finally, Galt turned abruptly and stormed from the ready room. Inga blew out a tense breath and collapsed back into the chair.

Bane nodded his head slowly. "I thought that went well," he said, dead-pan.

"Shut up, Nigel," Strauss said wearily as she buried her face in her hands.

\* \* \*

**Stardate - Unknown**  
**Aboard a Borg Cube**  
**Sector - Unknown**

It took Akinola a moment to recover from a vague sense of vertigo. The sheer volume of the Borg cube was staggering. Walkways seemed to lead off into infinity and he could not tell where the vessel began or ended.

"Joseph."

Akinola turned to see his father again. It was like looking through vapor. The image of the elder Akinola smiled wanly.

"No time for good-byes, son. Just know your mother and I love you and are very proud of you. Please convey our love to Melody."

Akinola nodded, unable to speak.

The elder Akinola pointed at a post at the convergence of several walkways. "That is the destruct mechanism. We were able to disengage the safeties, but it requires your physical touch to activate."

Akinola found his voice. "What do I do?"

"Push back the top of the post. Inside, you will find a metal ring. Take that ring, close the lid, and place the ring in the depression on top."

"That's it?"

The image of Samuel Akinola faded, slightly, then became more solid. "That's it." The form morphed a final time into the image of Sonari Akinola.

"Son?"

"Yes, Mom?"

"Thank you."

Joseph Akinola nodded. Sonari Akinola smiled, then faded from view. Akinola stared at the empty space for a moment, then turned to the post. He pushed the top, which tilted back easily enough. Inside was a ring of apparently solid metal. He took it from the post and the lid slid back silently into place, revealing a round indentation. No alarms blared, no sonorous voice warned of imminent destruction.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered, as he placed the ring into the receptacle.

Apparently, the Borg did not believe in delay. A sudden, bright light engulfed Akinola. He had the odd sensation of being stretched like taffy, although he felt no pain and heard no sound.

*Is this what it's like to die?* he wondered. He was not afraid, in fact he was somewhat intrigued by the experience.

The light continued to grow in intensity, so bright he should have been blinded. Yet his eyes were not ruined - they didn't even sting from the brilliance. If anything, he felt a vague sensation of warmth - a pleasant feeling like being under a warm blanket in winter.

The brilliance faded and, as it did, so did Akinola's awareness. The light turned to darkness as Joseph Akinola slipped into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.8 (14 April 2377)**

***USS Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

The first sensation Joseph Akinola felt was a pounding headache.

With a moan, he sat up. The pain in his head eased and the sudden awareness of his surroundings caused him to look around in bewilderment.

He was in his ready room on the *Bluefin*.

## Chapter Twenty-One

**Stardate 54258.8 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

"Hey Doc! Resting your eyes?"

Octavius Castille jerked awake and blinked. He was seated in his office in sickbay. Corpsman 1st Class Sanderson was leaned against the doorway with a bemused expression on his face.

Castille rubbed his face and yawned. "Guess I dozed off Sandy. What's up?"

Sanders held out a PADD. "I finished the inventory on the pharmaceutical stores. We need to pick up some more Keldipril when we're in station since we can't replicate the stuff."

Castille nodded, still feeling muzzy-headed. The faint tendrils of a strange dream had mostly evaporated, but he felt odd - as if his days and nights had somehow crossed. He reached for the proffered PADD, but a wave of dizziness forced him back into his chair.

A look of concern crossed Sanders face. He quickly set the PADD on the counter and stepped toward Castille. He frowned as he noticed a prominent bump on the CMO's head which had taken on an impressive shade of purple.

"That's a nasty lump on your head, Doc," murmured Sanders as he automatically reached for the medical scanner on his hip. Castille didn't protest - his head hurt too much.

The small scanner whirred melodically for a moment. Sanders read the display and grunted non-committally. He straightened and spoke.

"Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram."

This time, Castille managed a weak protest. "What? Dammit, Sandy, there's no need . . ."

The EMH Mark I shimmered into existence. "Please state the nature of the emergency," it said in a confident and slightly condescending tone.

"Dr. Castille has a contusion on his forehead with marked swelling. Initial scans indicate a level one concussion."

"Allow me to be the judge of that," sniffed the EMH as he brushed past the Corpsman. Sanders glowered at the hologram but held his tongue.

"When did the injury occur?" queried the EMH as he hovered over Castille, his own scanner open and activated.

"Well, I . . ." Castille frowned as he searched his memory. He had a vague recollection of Delta and Lt. Rune standing over him. "I'm not sure actually."

The EMH snapped shut his scanner with a dramatic flourish. "Short-term memory loss. Not uncommon for a level one concussion. No sub-dural bleeding is evident. Hypo spray . . ."

The last, the EMH addressed to Corpsman Sanders, who dutifully slapped a programmable hypo-spray into his hand. The EMH twisted the handle until he was satisfied with the selection and dosage. He pressed the hypo spray against Castille's neck.

"I'm injecting you with 10 cc's of Moprosin and 5 cc's of Rymadil. That will ease the pain and reverse any minor neural damage," said the EMH in his schoolmaster's voice.

"I know what they do," grouched Castille, the pain already disappearing. "I *am* the CMO, you know."

"Hmm, yes, I suppose you are," said the EMH, doubtfully. He turned to Sanders. "Five minutes with the sub-dural regenerator will eradicate the swelling and any internal trauma. Call me if you have a *real* emergency."

The haughty voice of the EMH faded like an echo as he shimmered out of existence.

"And I thought I had a bad bed-side manner," muttered Castille as Sanders went to work with the S-D Regenerator.

\* \* \*



Lt. Commander Simms rounded the curved corridor on Deck 4 and nearly collided with Lt. (j.g) Rune. Both women stopped abruptly just before colliding.

"Oh! K'lira! Sorry about that! I must have been day-dreaming," apologized Delta.

Rune blinked and looked around, an expression of befuddlement on her exotic features.

"My fault, Commander, I was . . ." Rune frowned, looking back in the direction she had come from. She turned back toward Simms.

"Um, Commander . . . what deck are we on?"

Simms cocked her head and smiled. "Deck 4. Are you lost, Lieutenant?"

Rune shook her head, but still appeared distracted. "No . . . no ma'am. Sorry, I must not have been paying attention when I got off the turbo-lift." A thought seemed to occur to the green Orion officer and she offered a wan smile. "I do want to thank you for talking with me earlier . . . thanks for hearing me out."

Simms smiled, but an odd feeling of *deja-vous* came over her. "Why, sure K'lira . . . uh, anytime." She began to walk away, then stopped and turned - surprised to see that Lt. Rune had also stopped again and turned toward her, the look of puzzlement back on her green features.

"K'lira," began Simms, tentatively, "when did we . . . ?"

Rune frowned. "But we . . ." She stopped, the puzzlement turning to frustration. "I'm sorry, I need to go." She turned and walked quickly away.

Commander Simms stood still for a moment in puzzlement. *What just happened?* she wondered to herself. Frowning, she proceeded around the curved corridor to her quarters. . .

. . . to find a rather plump, gray cat standing in the corridor, languidly swishing his tail.

"Meow?"

Simms smiled at the fluffy feline. "Why, hi there kitty! Who do you belong to?" She knelt down and the gray cat came to her, purring loudly.

She laughed softly. "You sure are a fluffy cat . . ." Her voice trailed off and she felt something akin to a chill run up her spine. In her head, she heard Captain Akinola's voice. *"His name is Mr. Fluff . . . he was my sister's cat."*

\* \* \*

Solly Brin refilled his coffee mug from the beverage servitor that took up a corner of his armory office. He drank down the hot, strong brew in long swallows, ignoring the burning sensation to his tongue in throat.

*Damn this sl'is jainok headache, anyway, he thought. That last batch of hooch that Deryx made must have aged too long.*

Brin moved back to his battered desk and settled his large frame into the chair. Rummaging through a drawer, he found a left-over analgesic patch that Sanders had given him after the last martial arts tournament. After applying the patch to his neck, he massaged his brow with his fingers, hoping to alleviate the pounding ache that had settled in like a dust storm in a nebula.

A stray thought kept running through his mind. *Is the Skipper okay?* A foolish thought, certainly. Joe was either on the bridge or in his ready room now. Yet, Solly felt a very strong compulsion to tap his combadge and check on the Captain.

*And what do you plan on saying, Solly?* he asked himself. *Hey, Skipper - you okay? I was down in my office with a headache, when I got all teary-eyed about you . . .* Brin snorted. *Deryx would never let me live that down.*

Just then, Solly's combadge beeped and the voice of Joseph Akinola came over the open channel. Brin's eyes widened when he heard the strain in the Captain's voice:

*"Solly - are you alright?"*

\* \* \*

Captain Akinola sat motionless in his chair, scanning the ready room with his eyes.

*How did I get here?* he wondered, *Where is the Eku? Where are the others?*

He stood, intending to go to the bridge and let Strauss and the crew know he was back, when his eye caught the stardate displayed at the bottom of his terminal: 54258.8. He stopped, staring at the date in disbelief.

*No! It's 54260! Or at least, it was last time I checked. We're back two days before we disappeared.*

Akinola tried to consider the ramifications of that fact. He had never given much thought to time travel - to be honest, the subject made his head swim. He never in his wildest imagination considered that he might travel back and forth in time.

*Get a grip, Akinola!* he chided himself. *Play it cool, but find out what the hell is going on!* He glanced at his image in a wall mirror. He looked haggard, but then, he never looked particularly well rested. He tugged down his jacket and strode through the ready room door onto the bridge.

Standing on the upper level of the bridge, he gazed out at the beta-shift crew. Commander Strauss was in the center seat, studying a PADD. Lt. Bralus was at the helm and Ensign Vashtee was at OPs. Ensign Li rounded out the bridge crew, seated at tactical. No one seemed the least bit surprised by his presence. No exclamations of, *"It's the Captain!"* or *"He's back!"*

Strauss turned slightly in the chair and favored him with a smile. "Ready to explore the mystery, Captain?"

Akinola started slightly at her choice of words. "Mystery?"

"Sure! The *Finback*. I'm sure you and Captain Rodenko are eager to go on board and explore her." She shook her head in wonderment. "What an incredible find! Who would have thought she could have survived intact after all these years?"

"Who indeed?" murmured Akinola. He cleared his throat and spoke with more volume. "What of the other ships, Commander? What is their status?" He tried to be non-chalant as he spoke, but he couldn't completely hide a strained edge to his voice.

Strauss' smile faded and her face took on a puzzled expression. "Other ships, sir?"

"Yes - the Vulcan ship, that old Orion raider, the . . . L-type freighter. . . " His voice trailed off as Strauss' brow furrowed.

"Sir - the only ships in this immediate sub-sector are the *Bluefin*, *Scamp* and the *Finback*." Strauss spoke in measured tones, her sudden concern apparent.

Akinola tried to cover his *faux pas*. "Sorry, Commander, I must have, uh, misread the report. Carry on." He turned and beat a hasty retreat to the ready room.

Strauss stared after the Captain. *What the hell? . . .* she wondered. She turned back to see Bralus and Li looking at her quizzically.

"Mind your stations!" she barked, more sharply than she intended.

\* \* \*

Akinola leaned against the ready room door with his eyes closed, trying to regain his composure and his sense of reality. He was shaken and non-plussed - feelings with which he was not overly familiar.

He opened his eyes and they fell on an object lying on the floor by his desk. A strange mixture of feelings suddenly rushed over him - relief, concern, wonder. Akinola stepped toward the desk and looked down at the strange relic. He knelt down and picked up the small, metallic object. It was dark gray in color, bordering on black, a circle of some exotic alloy that looked totally out of place on the *Bluefin*. Though it looked like cold metal, the object felt warm in his hand.

It was the Borg data chip that contained the names of all the beings that had been part of collective that included his parents.

He stared at it for several minutes, almost afraid it would vanish from his hands. A smile formed on his face and a chuckle escaped his lips as he felt its reassuring solidity.

"You didn't dream this," he whispered. "It really happened!"

A thought crossed his mind and the smile vanished, replaced with a look bordering on panic. He slapped the combadge on his tunic. Before the recipient could reply vocally, Akinola rasped,

"Solly? Are you alright?"

For an interminable moment, there was no reply. A sharp spasm of fear gripped Akinola and he was about to repeat his query when he heard Solly's voice.

*"Yeah, Skipper - I'm okay."* There was a pause. *"I was about to contact you and ask you the same thing."*

Relief again washed over the Captain like a rushing wave. He relaxed and sagged against the desk. "Yeah. Listen, we need to talk Solly. I'll meet you in the armory. We need to check on the others, too."

The pause was longer this time. *"Others? Skipper, I'm not following you. . ."*

The wave of relief retreated and Akinola spoke cautiously. "Solly - don't you remember the last two days? Where we've been?" He remained intentionally vague, not wanting to repeat his mistake on the bridge.

Another pause. *"To be honest, everything is kinda fuzzy right now. I've got one super-nova of a headache."*

"Stay put, Solly. I need to check on the oth . . . on something. Akinola, out."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

**Stardate 54258.8 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Rodenko forced himself to appear non-chalant as he watched his old ship, the USS *Finback*, drift silently a mere 50 thousand kilometers away. His philosophy was to never appear overly excited in front of the crew. Of course, Rodenko did not consider the occasional flare-ups of his legendary temper as being "excited," but merely exercising targeted leadership with extreme prejudice.

Boris turned in the command chair and addressed the two officers hovering over the operations station.

"Have you completed your sensor sweeps, Mr. bin Salaam?"

The slender lieutenant stood and turned to face the Russian C.O. "Very nearly sir. As our initial scans indicated, the *Finback* is adrift without power, but her hull appears intact. In fact, I would say she's in remarkable condition considering the years that have passed."

"Indeed," rumbled Rodenko, turning back to face the viewscreen. "Any reason we can't send a team over to investigate?"

"It should be safe enough, provided they wear e-suits. Even though we're reading atmosphere over there, it's liable to be pretty foul after all these years. Plus, there is a bit of background radiation to consider."

Rodenko turned back to bin Salaam. "Elaborate, Lieutenant."

"Nothing terribly troubling, sir, but a bit peculiar. There are slight but measurable amounts of chroniton particles in evidence. Odd, but nothing to worry about."

Rodenko's brow knit together in thought. "Chroniton particles you say?" Possibilities flowed through the veteran skipper's mind as he recalled his own recent history. "Scan for anti-Chroniton particles as well, Lieutenant."

bin Salaam's eyebrows rose in surprise. He cleared his throat and spoke hesitantly. "Sir? Anti-Chroniton particles only exist in theory . . . not in normal space."

"Humor me, Lieutenant," replied Rodenko, who was rubbing his chin in thought.

bin Salaam thought to ask why, but wisely remained silent and turned back to the sensor controls.

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54258.9 (14 April 2377)**

***USS Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Akinola quickly made his way to the lower decks - his old stomping grounds - and soon entered the armory which served as NCO country. He was glad to see that none of the other non-coms were present as he rapped on the doorway of Senior Chief Solly Brin's office.

"Come!" bellowed Solly.

Akinola entered the compartment that had served as his own office when he had been Chief of the Boat over two decades earlier. Brin and Akinola had known each other too long to stand on ceremony, so the burly Orion remained seated with his feet propped on the desk and gestured toward the servitor.

"You know where the mugs are," replied Solly, still rubbing his forehead. Akinola shook his head and took a chair opposite Brin.

"Maybe later. Solly, I . . ." Akinola hesitated. "Hell, I'm not sure where to start."

Solly took his feet off the desk and leaned forward in the chair. He frowned as he regarded his old friend.

"Damn, Skipper! You look spooked - what's up?"

A wry grin crossed Akinola's face. "An appropriate choice of words, under the circumstances." The smile faded and he focused a piercing gaze on Solly.

"What do you remember about the last two days, Solly?"

Brin chuckled. "Hell, Skipper - are you testing me to see if I can still hold my booze?" The laugh died in his throat when he noticed Akinola's expression and Solly immediately became serious.

"Okay, but I hope you'll tell me what's going on . . . Let's see. We've been on routine patrol, pretty quiet of late now that the ion storms have died down. We boarded a small merchant ship and found some Ferengi contraband - no problems from the ship's master, we cited him and let him go. Yesterday we picked up a malfunctioning subspace marker buoy. Poletka repaired it and we set it back out. Then, we received word from *Scamp* about finding the *Finback*. We made a high-warp run and arrived on station six hours ago . . . I must have still been sleepin' off this hangover . . . and now I'm sitting here playing 20 questions with the Captain."

Akinola nodded, but his gaze was unfocused. The Captain didn't speak for almost a minute. Solly sensed the inner turmoil in his old comrade, but remained silent - giving Akinola time to choose his words.

Finally, the Captain spoke. "Solly . . . what if I told you that I have a completely different recollection of the past few days . . . that, in fact, it should be two days from *now* and not today . . ." His voice trailed off and he gazed back at Solly.

Solly frowned but did not speak right away as he considered Akinola's words. "I'd say . . . I'd want to hear your version of events."

Akinola related his own experiences, including the discovery of the other ships, boarding the *Ekku*, and how their small band had been whisked away to parts, or at least, times unknown. He finished by placing the Borg data chip on Solly's desk.

"That was on the deck of the ready room. It's the only tangible proof I have to corroborate my story."

Solly picked up the small, round object and examined it, nodding his head slowly. "Yeah, I've seen a few Borg relics before. But Skipper . . . to be honest, you can find these at a few of the shops in Merchant's Alley on the station. Hell, I think Deryx has one in his quarters."



"Yeah, I know that. But this has the names of all the people that were assimilated by those Borg cubes - including my parents!"

Solly glanced sharply at Akinola before returning his gaze to the Borg artifact. "Then, let's check it out."

Brin stood and led the Captain out into the armory. He opened a locker and pulled out a combat scanner, adjusting the gain and sensitivity of the device. Activating it, he placed the ring-shaped object directly on a sensor pad.

The scanner hummed momentarily, then a stream of data began to flow across the small screen. Akinola smiled, but the smile quickly faded as he looked at the data stream.

"It's gibberish," he said, morosely, "the data must have been corrupted somehow."

"Maybe it was damaged somehow, or maybe there's some kind of encryption key required?" suggested Solly.

"Maybe. . ." replied Akinola doubtfully. It seemed the only evidence of the *Ekus*' existence and the fate of his parents was gone - erased in a spiteful twist.

"Look - let me get Deryx and Poletka to check it out. They're good at this kind of thing . . ."

Akinola shook his head. "Maybe later, Solly. Let me talk to the others, see if any of them remember what happened."

"You haven't spoken to any of them yet?"

The Captain shook his head. "No. I verified with the computer that they were on board and safe. I wanted to talk to you first."

Solly shook his head, looking grim. "Skipper . . . I *do* believe you. But I just don't remember any of what you told me . . . sorry!"

"No need to be sorry. And thanks for listening - just keep it under your hat for now. In the mean-time, I need to get with Captain Rodenko about checking out the *Finback*."

"Are you going to tell him?" asked Brin.

The Captain paused, considering. "I don't know. Maybe."

Brin nodded. "If I *do* remember anything, I'll let you know."

"Sure. Thanks, Solly." Akinola turned to leave, then paused again.

"One more thing, Solly."

"Sir?"

"You might find this a good time to talk to K'lira."

Solly looked surprised. "Why do you say that?"

The Captain smiled. "Call it a hunch . . . or a window of opportunity. Your call. I'll talk to you later." With that, Akinola stode out of the armory, leaving a puzzled Solly Brin with much to consider.

In the turbo-lift, Akinola said, "Bridge." The lift began to move when Akinola spoke again.

"Belay that. Sickbay." The lift slowed to stop.

*Might as well see if Doc still has that knot on his head before I contact Rodenko,* Akinola thought.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

**Stardate 54258.9 (14 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Akinola entered Sickbay to find Corpsman Sanders tending to Dr. Castille with a softly humming medical device.

"Be right with you, Skipper," announced Sanders as he continued moving the sub-dural regenerator slowly over Castille's forehead. The CMO had a chagrined expression on his face, but otherwise appeared alright to Akinola.

"Take your time, Sandy. I'm here to speak with the Doctor, anyway." Akinola squatted down so he could address Castille while Sanders continued his ministrations.

"What happened to you?" asked Akinola, in as non-chalant manner as he could muster.

"Damned if I know," muttered Castille, obviously impatient. "Sandy! Turn it up a level or we'll be here all day!"

Sanders chuckled. "Doc, *you're* the one who always said not to rush a re-gen job. Just sit still and we'll be done in about a minute." The corpsman whistled cheerfully while Castille glowered but held his tongue. True to his word, Sanders switched off the device in less than 60 seconds."

"There! That should do it," said the corpsman approvingly. "'Course, I can always call back 'Doc Photon' if you want a second opinion . . ."

Castille stood and looked in the mirror at the now smooth and unblemished skin on his forehead. "No way! I'd rather have the concussion than deal with that arrogant EMH." He turned his head side to side and nodded in approval. "Nice job, Sandy. Thanks!"

"Any time, Doc," replied the corpsman as he replaced the medical device back in its storage cabinet. "Just be sure to duck next time."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," grouched Castille. "Go find something useful to do."

"Aye, aye," said Sanders in a parody of military propriety. He nodded to Akinola as he left the office cubicle. "Skipper."

"Corpsman," replied Akinola, who slid the door shut after Sanders left. He sat on a stool, amused to see the CMO still checking himself in the mirror.

"Do you need something, or do you enjoy gloating over the misfortunes of others?" asked Castille, finally turning from the mirror and taking his seat.

"I was getting low on those patches for my headaches," lied Akinola, "but I'm far more interested in what happened to you." He kept his voice light and amused.

"It should be obvious even to you that I hit my head," said Castille. "I don't see what's so damn interesting about that."

"How did it happen?"

Castille frowned, annoyed, but his annoyance was no longer directed toward the Captain. He shook his head.

"To be honest, I'm not really sure. I guess the S-D regen needs a little more time."

"What *do* you remember? About the last day or so?" Akinola kept his tone light, but Castille glanced at him sharply.

"Why all the sudden interest, *Dr.* Akinola? Bucking for my job? I assure you, I'm fine and capable of carrying out my duties!"

Akinola held up his hand. "Easy, Doc. I'm not trying to relieve you - I'm just curious, that's all. Humor me."

Castille glowered a moment longer, then shrugged. "Okay, why not? It's been blessedly quiet in Sickbay the last couple of days. Crewman Yazuka came in with a stomach-ache yesterday. She has a penchant for Habanero peppers, it seems. We finished our monthly inventory of pharmaceutical stores this morning. Oh, and the CMO apparently tripped and got a boo-boo on his head so we let the EMH out to play for a few minutes. That's about it."

Akinola sighed inwardly. "So you have no idea how you hit your head?"

Castille cocked his head at the captain. "No, I don't. If I should remember, you'll be the second one to know."

"Who'll be the first?"

"Me. Now, unless you really need something, go bother Galt or Strauss. I've got work to do."

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.0 (15 April 2377)**  
**USS *Finback***  
**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

The tell-tale musical sound of transporter effect caused Boris Rodenko to turn in the command chair centered on the *Finback's* bridge. He smiled as the form coalesced into his old friend and colleague, Joseph Akinola.

"Permission to come aboard?" asked Akinola with a wry grin.

"Granted!" boomed the Russian skipper who strode to his friend, planting a kiss on his friend's cheeks. Akinola suffered the traditional greeting dutifully and gripped Rodenko's hand firmly.

"You do that just because it creeps me out, don't you?" accused Akinola.

Rodenko wore an innocent expression and shrugged in a "who can say?" manner. Then his face broke out in a broad grin.

"It's been too long, *tovarisch!* Take a look around - incredible, isn't it?"

Akinola did gaze around at the old *Albacore*-class ship. The obsolete control panels and out-of-date color scheme reminded him of the *Bluefin* when he first boarded her as a young CPO many years ago.

"She is in remarkable shape, isn't she?" said Akinola, appreciatively.

"Da! Yes, she is. Incredibly, the atmosphere is still good and the back-up systems were still functioning, though at a very low level. It's like she was only lost yesterday!"

Akinola struggled to keep his own bearings relative to the flow of time. This conversation, these circumstances were *not* as he remembered them before the *Ekú* was whisked away.

He walked along the perimeter of the bridge, stepping past technicians and engineers from both the *Scamp* and *Bluefin*.

"Any, um, theories as to how she ended up here?" Akinola asked.

"Several theories, yes, but nothing conclusive. As you know, we found traces of chroniton particles which *could* indicate some sort of temporal anomaly, but at this point that's only a vague possibility."

Akinola nodded, pausing before he spoke again. "What of the triquantum waves that the navigational buoy picked up?"

Rodenko blinked. "Triquantum waves? Navigational buoy? What are you talking about?" The Russian sounded genuinely puzzled.

The Nigerian cutter commander glanced around at the other crew members. Thankfully, they were all engrossed in their tasks and paying little attention to the two captains. He let out a nervous breath and gazed at the shorter man.

"Boris, we need to talk. In private."

Bushy eyebrows rose on Rodenko's forehead, but he nodded. "The ready room should do." He led Akinola to the port, aft section of the bridge and the door to Captain Slintaas' office.

Inside, Rodenko took one guest chair and gestured for Akinola to take the other, which he did.

"Joseph, what is it? You seem distressed!" Genuine concern tinged the Russian's voice.

"Distressed is an understatement, Boris. What I am about to ask, and what I will likely say will seem strange to you. I'm asking you to humor me and hear me out."

Rodenko looked confused, but he nodded. "Of course."

Akinola nodded. "Thank you. First, tell me how we discovered the *Finback*."

Rodenko blinked in surprise at the question, but answered gamely. "Well, the *Pamlico* was servicing a Navigational buoy when she picked up a ship drifting in the Lesser Riven Nebula. They contacted us, that is, my ship, since we could get there quicker. We arrived to find *Finback* adrift but intact. I notified Admiral Bateson, who dispatched you here as well . . ."

His voice trailed off as he saw the distressed look on Akinola's face. "Joseph, you know all of this, of course . . ."

Akinola stood and walked to the viewport. He had a clear view of both the *Scamp* and *Bluefin* holding station a short distance away. He turned back to face Rodenko.

"But that's just it, Boris. I *don't* know that."

Rodenko stared at him blankly. Akinola sighed.

"Boris, what if I were to tell you that I have a completely different account of what has, and what *will* transpire over these few days?"

Rodenko was quiet for a moment. "I would say, I want to hear more."

So Akinola told him.

\* \* \*

For nearly an hour, Captain Akinola shared his version of the events surrounding the appearance of the *Finback*, along with the appearance of the other three vessels and their own odyssey on the *Ekú*. For his part, Rodenko asked an occasional question to clarify a point, but otherwise he remained silent and attentive.

Finally, Akinola came to the end of his narrative. He sat heavily back into the other guest chair, seemingly exhausted. Rodenko remained pensive, his brows drawn tight in thought.

"Well?" asked Akinola after a few minutes passed. "Are you ready to notify security and have me taken away in restraints?"

Rodenko snorted derisively. "Nyet!" he exclaimed forcefully. "You are as sane as I am, though that may not be saying so much."

Akinola chuckled, feeling a sense of relief. "Thanks. I guess."

Rodenko suddenly rose. "We have much to discuss, I think, but not here."

"Why not here?"

"Because I need a drink. Slintaas was a teetotaler, so there's nothing in here but bottles of Andorian glacier water. Come - we'll go to *my* ready room on the *Scamp* where we can get a decent drink of Vodka!"

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Five minutes later, the two captains were comfortably ensconced in Rodenko's ready room on the *Scamp*. Boris handed Akinola a glass of clear liquid before pouring himself a drink and taking his seat behind his desk. He raised his glass toward Akinola in a toast.

"*Vashe Zdorovie!* - Your health!" he exclaimed and tossed the contents back into his mouth.

"And to yours," replied Akinola as he followed suit. The peppery Vodka nearly caused a coughing spasm, but he managed to catch his breath and smile approvingly. "That was the real thing, wasn't it?"

Rodenko grinned. "Of course! A replicator can't do justice to peppered Vodka." He placed his glass down with an audible 'thunk' and gave Akinola an appraising look.

"Joseph, I believe what you've told me. Every word."

"But? . . ."

The Russian waved dismissively. "No buts! I know you, Yoseph Samuelovitch. You are not one given to fanciful imagination. And, I have very good reason to think your story is plausible."

Now it was Akinola's turn to look puzzled. "Oh? And why is that?"



Rodenko picked up the shot glass, as if to inspect it. "Just recently, I found myself over one hundred years in the past."

Akinola stood. "Damn it, Boris! If you can't take me seriously, at least . . ."

Rodenko brought the shot glass down on his desk with a sudden burst of anger, shattering it.

"Sit *down*, Joseph! I have listened to you. Now - you will listen to me!"

## Chapter Twenty-Four

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Delta Simms reclined on her bunk, head propped on fist, watching the fluffy, gray cat scarf down some cat food. A slight smile graced Simms' face, but her eyes seemed distant.

She had checked the ship's database to discover the cat's owner, with no success. Only two other pet cats were registered - a Siamese female to Ensign Vashtee, and an orange Tabby male to Petty Officer Girard. This cat did not fit either description, but she had double-checked with both Vashtee and Girard to find their cats were safe and secure in their quarters.

"So, where did you come from, my fuzzy little stowaway?" Simms murmured. Certainly, it was not unheard of for the occasional animal to sneak aboard ships at ports. Cats were particularly notorious for doing so. This feline probably belonged to someone on *Echo* station.

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, Delta did not think so. She felt an odd connection to the cat, as if they shared some deep, dark secret.

*That's completely absurd!* thought Delta. *It's just someone's pet who decided to hitch a ride on a cutter. I bet his owner's worried sick over him.*

An idea struck Delta. She could clear this up once and for all! Rising from her bed, she walked to her desk and seated herself before the terminal.

"Computer, do you, ah, register a cat in my quarters?"

*"Affirmative. A 'Felis Catus' male, weighing 4.12 kilograms of the breed, Himalayan, approximately two years, eight months of age. . ."*

"Yes, yes, that's enough computer," she said with a hint of asperity. She hesitated before asking her next question.

"Computer, how long has this cat been on board the *Bluefin*?"

*"The indicated Felis Catus has been on board for three hours, twelve minutes, 38 seconds,"* replied the computer.

Delta blinked in surprise. "Computer, we're in deep space. How is that possible? Did it transport in from another vessel?"

*"No such transport is recorded in the transporter logs."*

"Then explain how a dad-burn cat appeared onboard out of nowhere!"

*"Unable to comply. Insufficient data,"* replied the computer in a reasonable tone.

Delta turned back to stare at the cat who was busy grooming a paw. It stopped and stared back at Simms with inscrutable green eyes, its fluffy gray tail swishing slowly.

"Meowr?" - *What?* it seemed to ask.

"Kitty, you got some 'splainin' to do!"

\* \* \*

**Stardate 54259.1 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Scamp***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

"Sit *down*, Joseph - please!" implored Captain Rodenko as he absently brushed fragments of broken glass into a pile on his desk.

Feeling somewhat abashed, Akinola lowered himself back into the leather guest chair.

"Boris, I'm sorry . . ."

Rodenko brushed aside the apology. "Pah! Think nothing of it. I should have been more circumspect in my approach. But I assure you, my friend - I am *not* mocking you in the least. I swear to you as an officer that I did indeed travel to the 23rd century little more than a month ago."

Akinola shook his head in bewilderment. "Damn, Boris . . . I believe you, but . . ." He snorted in bemusement. "It makes me realize how crazy *my* story must sound."

"Indeed," replied the Russian, dryly. "In fact, that is why I had not planned on sharing this mission with you. But, considering what you've experienced, I thought it might help you regain a sense of perspective."

"You have my complete attention," said Akinola, settling back in the chair.

Rodenko nodded. "Unfortunately, I cannot go into many details - much of what transpired is classified Ultraviolet under the Temporal Prime Directive. You are cleared high enough that I can fill you in on a few of the basic details, with the understanding that you cannot share this with *anyone* - are you agreeable to this?"

Akinola nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Very well. At some point, Admiral Bateson may fill you in on more details - that will be his call."

"Morgan was aware of this?"

Rodenko smiled. "More than aware - he was directly involved. Our 'ring leader' you might say." His smile faded as a memory, apparently not a good one, crossed his face. "It began when Captain Elizabeth Shelby's runabout, the *Seine*, was caught in a wave of Chroniton particles and she was thrown back to the 2260's, where she was picked up by the USS *Lexington*."

Akinola's eyes widened. "The *Lexington*? That was Robert Wesley's ship at the time. And wasn't he . . .?"

The Russian skipper nodded. "Elizaveta's grandfather."

Akinola shook his head in wonder, trying to process the ramifications of such a meeting. He suddenly looked up sharply. "And Morgan . . . he was serving on the *Lex* back then too, wasn't he?"

Again, Boris nodded.

"Lord, what a cluster-frak!" exclaimed the Nigerian captain.

Rodenko smiled wanly. "Joseph, you have no idea . . ."

\* \* \*

Akinola listened with rapt attention as Captain Rodenko shared the basics of their rescue of Captain Shelby, though he left out the account of the Blood-wraith, the Orb of Renascence, and the Gem of K'Tesh.

"So you actually commanded the *Sutherland* while Shelby was in command of the *Lexington*?" Akinola chuckled. "I'm amazed the time-line survived intact!"

"Da," agreed Rodenko, affably, "and now you and Captain Shelby have some things in common."

Akinola looked doubtful. "Boris, I can't imagine Shelby and I having much of *anything* in common, except for the uniform and commanding a ship."

"Oh, but you do! Both of you have traveled through time to meet your relatives! Elizaveta met her grandparents and you met your parents."

Akinola had no reply to that.

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**Stardate 54259.2 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 – Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Senior Chief Solly Brin looked at the stack of PADDs waiting on his desk and sighed. Right now, he couldn't concentrate on requisitions and reports. The headache had passed but he still felt muzzy-headed, as if he were not yet completely awake.

Deciding a workout might clear his head, he changed into his work-out gear and headed toward the ship's gym for some reps on the magnetic-resistance machines.

Climbing the ladder up a level, he rounded the corridor . . .

. . . and came face-to-face with K'lira.

For a moment, neither said a word, caught in the awkwardness of the moment. Finally, Solly managed a weak smile.

"Sorry Lieutenant." He made to move past her, but she reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Wait . . ."

Solly looked at the slender green hand that firmly clasped his upper arm, then into the eyes of his adoptive daughter. He swallowed, unsure of what to do or say.

"Look," she began, her voice tremulous and uncertain, "I'm still struggling to deal with what happened between you and me, but, well . . . I appreciate you opening up to me. I know that was hard for you . . ."

Solly nearly said, "*What are you talking about?*" when a shadow of a memory crossed his mind, causing him to hold his tongue. K'lira continued.

"I'm still pissed off at you - and I can't get my head around how your brain works - but . . ."

Impulsively, she gave him a brief, fierce hug. She quickly stepped back and stared at him, tears glistening in her eyes.

"I don't know where we stand, Solly," she continued, "and I don't know if we can ever go back to the way things were. But maybe, we can start from here?" The last, she said in an imploring manner that caused Solly's heart to ache.

His throat tight, the burly Red Orion looked down at his near-daughter and nodded with a crooked smile.

"Yeah. We can do that, I think."

She nodded quickly, grinning in an almost mirror fashion. "Okay. That's good then." She looked around, suddenly self-conscious. "Um, I better go - my duty shift starts in five minutes and I can't afford to be late." She began to move off quickly.

"K'lira!" Solly suddenly called after her. She stopped, her expression both hopeful and apprehensive.

"Yes?"

Solly nodded at her. "Have a good shift!"

Her face suddenly broke into a smile he had not seen in more than four years and she relaxed visibly as she walked backwards toward the turbo-lift.

"Yeah - okay. I will!" She turned quickly and moved to the lift, disappearing from Solly's view.

Solly stood in the corridor staring after her for a few moments. His brow knitted momentarily in confusion, then he shrugged.

"Frak it!" he said, grinning, then turned toward the gym.

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**Stardate 54259.4 (15 April 2377)**

**USS *Bluefin***

**Sector 04341 - Near the Lesser Riven nebula**

Captain Akinola sat in the near darkness of his ready room listening to the soothing refrains of 20th century Terran jazz. He closed his eyes as the Duke Ellington orchestra poured out "*Take the A Train*" like a smooth, sweet nectar. As the final notes faded, he opened his eyes and took a sip of coffee from the steaming mug on his desk. His eyes fell on the holo-cube of his family, taken oh, so many years ago on a rare vacation to Earth. He smiled at the sight of his mother and father and a small trickle of moisture traced a path along the crow's feet at the corner of his right eye.

He turned his attention toward his desk terminal and spoke.

"Computer, open personal log - new entry - scramble and encrypt. Akinola gamma oh seven three three."

The computer made a high pitched *bleep*, and said, "*Acknowledged - you may record when ready.*"

Akinola nodded absently to himself. He picked up the small Borg artifact, twisting it between his fingers, and began . . .

**END**