

Tales of the USS Bluefin

Semper Paratus

By The Lone Redshirt

Chapter 1

Stardate 53498.7 (1 July 2376)

Starbase 42

Office of Rear-Admiral (Upper Half) Thran Pham, Sector Commander

Commander Inga Strauss sat impatiently in the anteroom of Admiral Thran Pham's office on the fourth level of Starbase 42. She willed herself not to chew on her thumbnail - a quirk that she often indulged when nervous - focusing instead on the various items in the waiting room. Besides a taciturn Vulcan Yeoman efficiently perusing a stack of data PADDs, there was the obligatory Philodendron plant, a portrait of the Admiral's former command, the USS *Brisbane*, and a few mediocre landscape paintings. The walls were light grey, the carpet deep blue, and the waiting room chairs not quite uncomfortable. She glanced down at the PADD in her lap, the reason for her being here and the source of all that was wrong in her universe. Strauss decided that standing might hasten the time of her appointment. She walked over to a large viewport from which she saw several Starfleet vessels and a crater-pocked moon around which the Starbase orbited. She checked her reflection in the viewport. A pretty, petite human woman, barely 30 years of age stared back with piercing blue eyes, blonde hair neatly braided, and a still-new third gold pip on her uniform collar. For the thousandth time, she wished she were taller.

Strauss' reverie was interrupted by the Vulcan Yeoman. "Commander Strauss? Admiral Phan will see you now."

Taking a deep, calming breath, Strauss entered the admiral's inner sanctum and stood rigidly at attention. "Commander Inga Strauss reporting," she said briskly.

The Admiral, a large Asian man in his late 50's, came around his desk, beaming, and engulfed Inga's right hand in both of his. "So formal, little one! The last time I saw you, you called me 'Uncle Thran.' Come, join me by the viewport and let's catch up."

Inga smiled, Admiral Phan had served with her late father, Captain Dieter Strauss, years earlier and they had been very close friends. Phan had known Inga all her life and had sponsored her entrance into the Academy after her father's death.

"Thank you sir, but I don't think regulations allow me to refer to a rear-admiral as 'uncle'."

Admiral Phan took a seat by a small coffee table by the viewport and indicated for Inga to take the opposite chair. He poured tea from a china service and handed a cup to Inga. "Inga, in my office I make my own regulations."

They spoke of family and happier times for a several minutes before the Admiral became more business-like and said, "Commander, I know you didn't come here just to re-live old times. What's on your mind?"

Inga steeled herself and handed Admiral Phan the PADD she carried. "Admiral, I'm puzzled by my new orders. To be honest, I had hoped that I would be allowed to remain on the *Thunderchild* as first officer or perhaps be assigned to an explorer vessel. Instead, I'm being transferred to a border cutter!"

Phan returned the PADD and regarded her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Do you find these orders untenable?" he asked quietly.

"No sir! . . . no, it's just . . . well . . . I thought I was doing a *good* job on the *Thunderchild* as acting first officer after we lost Commander T'Vel. Certainly, I could understand having a more senior commander replace me and I return to being second officer. But to be assigned to a Border Service cutter? Sir, what did I do wrong to deserve *that*?"

"We like to refer to them as patrol frigates," said Phan, placing his coffee cup on the table. "Inga, you should know that I am the one who recommended your transfer." Phan saw the sudden pained look on Strauss' face and held up a hand. "Let me continue. You know very well that your position as first officer

of the *Thunderchild* was provisional. Because of the war, we promoted many officers much sooner than we ever would in peace-time. To be blunt, if it were not for the heavy personnel losses, you would still be a lieutenant, perhaps a lieutenant commander. Now we are in the process of placing the more senior officers that are coming off damaged or destroyed ships onto our active front-line vessels. Inga, you very nearly lost your provisional rank of commander - *not* because of your performance but because of your youth. That's happening a lot these days. This assignment as executive officer of the *Bluefin* will allow you to keep your rank as commander *and* give you much needed experience. I suggest you make the most of this opportunity." There was a hint of warning in the Admiral's tone.

Inga was still disappointed, but she swallowed her pride and said, "I understand, sir, and I promise I will give it my very best!"

Admiral Phan smiled. "I know you will Inga, that's why I pushed for this. Captain Akinola is one of the most experienced commanding officers in all of Starfleet, much less the Border Service. I know it may not seem particularly appealing to you, but the Border Service provides an invaluable service to the Federation through search and rescue, patrolling the space lanes, and law enforcement. I understand the *Bluefin* is quite a capable little ship with a proud history. I'm confident that you will add to their distinguished exploits."

Chapter 2

Stardate 53499.2 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

On patrol – Sector 0324

Captain Joseph Barrabas Akinola carefully watched his adversary while slipping into a defensive posture, hands reflexively tightening into fists. His dark-red skinned opponent flashed a feral smile and attacked suddenly with a quick snap-kick aimed at Akinola's knee. The Captain swept his left arm down, deflecting the kick while stepping in to his opponent and launching an abrupt counter-punch toward his opponent's face. He stopped the punch a centimeter from the surprised Orion's nose, then stepped back, bowed slightly to his opponent, and turned to a line of a dozen men and women dressed in similar white Karate ghis.

"Corpsman Sanders, what did Senior Chief Brin do wrong?" asked the Captain.

Sanders, a freckle-faced 1st Class Petty Officer grinned. "He took on a fourth degree black belt?"

Akinola shook his head and snorted. "Sanders, you're hopeless. What about you Lieutenant Fralk? What did you observe?"

The Denobulan helmsman answered, "Senior Chief Brin didn't hide his weight transfer before kicking. If he had feinted with a punch, he wouldn't have been so predictable."

"Correct! Let that be a lesson to you all. Good form and precise movements are essential for training purposes, but for actual hand-to-hand combat, you've got to mix things up. Predictability can get you killed, right Senior Chief?"

Senior Chief Petty Officer Solly Brin gave his captain a mischievous look. "But Skipper, you told me to go with the snap-kick so you could block it and impress your faithful students."

The captain glared at his Chief of the Boat. "Solly, why don't you go get a shower before I have you scrubbing the hull with a toothbrush . . . without an EV suit!"

The Red-Orion non-com grabbed a towel from a stack. "Aye-aye, sir! Let me know the next time you need a target, I mean, sparring partner."

The captain grinned, and addressed his students. "Okay, break into sparring groups, half-speed only! I don't want any bloody noses like last time. Remember, short linear movements. When you're fighting in close quarters, you don't have room or time for sweeping kicks or circular movement - economy of motion, folks!"

The ship's comm system interrupted. *"Captain Akinola - incoming message from the Kilimanjaro."*

Akinola moved to a communication panel on the wall of the ship's compact gym. "Akinola, acknowledged. Pipe it into my quarters, I'll take it there." He turned to the group of crewmen and officers. "Mr. Fralk, run them through the sparring exercise and focus on rising blocks and forearm blocks. Then run through their *katas* before cutting everyone loose."

"Aye, sir." said Fralk.

"Remember - half-speed!" Akinola warned as he headed into the corridor. He trotted to a ladder, bypassing the turbo-lift and went up two decks, then took a few short steps to his quarters. Inside, he picked up a towel and rubbed the sweat from his face before sitting at his desk and keying the screen. Instantly, the face of his old friend, Captain Vress appeared. Vress was the Andorian commanding officer of the Border Service vessel, USS *Kilimanjaro*, an *Everest* - class asteroid breaker/warp tug. Vress smiled and his antennae turned toward his screen.

"Joseph! I'm glad to see you still try to keep up with your crew. You haven't put anyone in sickbay with your Karate lessons, have you?"

"Not lately, Vress. Now did you call to antagonize me or do you have our supplies?" asked Akinola with a bemused look.

Vress looked at a PADD. *"Let's see . . . Medical supplies, repair parts for your transporter, hmmm, Ah! Here's what you were wanting - 25 liters of cherry vanilla ice cream. I don't know how you humans can stand the stuff - it's too sweet!"*

Akinola grinned. "Vress, you just don't know what's good. Thanks a million! I owe you for the ice cream."

"Joseph, when are you going to break down and put a food replicator on your ship? This is the 24th century, after all!"

"Vress, no replicator made can produce acceptable cherry vanilla ice cream. We also have the best cook in the Border Service!"

"You have one of the only cooks in the service. But that's your business." said Vress.

"Do you have time to join in a game of Bridge? T'Ser and I would like a rematch against you and Lt. Delerieux." said Akinola.

Vress shook his head. *"I regret that duty calls. We're due to clear some asteroids in sector 0323. The governor of one of the system colonies has been complaining about navigational hazards."*

"You're just afraid that you'll lose again," countered Akinola. "We'll catch you next time, Captain Vress. Be safe!"

"Pleasant journeys, my friend. Kilimanjaro out."

Akinola stripped out of his Karate gi, carefully folded his black belt, and stepped into the head and into the sonic shower. After cleaning his body and soothing his muscles through the gentle sonic vibration, he put on his duty uniform and stepped to the mirror. The reflection showed a dark-skinned human who did not look his 59 years of age, despite the generous amount of grey sprinkled in his dark hair. Though not a particularly handsome man, he had a dignified face with calm, brown eyes. Somewhat taller than average, he maintained good physical condition through Karate training and a generally sensible diet (He does love cherry vanilla ice cream!). Only the deep lines around his eyes betrayed the harsh and sometimes sad experiences of his life.

His communicator beeped and he tapped the com badge on his chest. "Akinola, go ahead."

"T'Ser, here. Just wanted you to know that the runabout, Colorado, has requested permission to enter our landing bay. They have our new executive officer, Commander Strauss, on board."

"Very well. T'Ser, why don't you go down and meet our new XO, take her by her quarters, then bring her to my ready room. I'm heading to the bridge."

"Acknowledged. T'Ser, out."

* * *

Commander Strauss was more than weary of travel on the space-worn runabout. It had creaked and rattled much of the 12 hour flight from Star Station Echo, where she had boarded following a week-long voyage from Star Base 42 on the *USS Hyperion*. Now, she craned her neck through the viewport to catch the first glimpse of the *USS Bluefin*. She was immediately intrigued with what she saw. The *Bluefin* had many of the classic features of Federation starship design - a circular primary hull with secondary engineering hull and two warp nacelles attached with pylons. She observed that the primary saucer was somewhat small in proportion to the long, tapered engineering hull. She was surprised to see that the impulse engines were quite large relative to the overall size of the ship and that the support pylons for the nacelles were shorter and thicker than the norm. Strauss also noticed numerous tractor beam nodes on the engineering hull which seemed excessive for the ship. She was disappointed to see that the ship lacked the modern Type X phaser arrays common on most capital ships. Instead, there were three paired Type VIII turrets that were visible to her, plus fore and aft torpedo launcher tubes. The ship was painted brilliant white, a color that was more common to Starfleet vessels built in the early part of the century. Prominently displayed on the cutter's hull, between twin lines of blue and red, was the registry number, NCC-4458, and her name, *USS Bluefin*.

Strauss had spent some of her transit time perusing computer files about the *Bluefin*. She learned that *Bluefin* was an *Albacore* - class Border Cutter (contrary to what the admiral said), first developed about the same time as the *Excelsior* and *Constellation* class ships at the end of the 23rd century. The *Albacores* were designed to be tough and agile with very powerful impulse engines, redundant shields and multiple tractor beams, allowing the ship class to not only survive but safely navigate ion storms while towing vessels in distress. They had been refit in the mid-24th century with extended landing bays to handle more and larger shuttle craft and Star Stallion support craft. Top speed for this class vessel was warp 9.2 and normal sustained maximum was warp 8.5. Not particularly fast by Starfleet standards, but much faster than commercial and most hostile vessels they would likely face. Originally, there were 18 *Albacore* - class ships. Now, only 8 were left in active service, the others retired, sold or destroyed.

As the runabout entered the hangar bay, Strauss closed her eyes and whispered to herself, "*Gott im Himmel - Please don't let me screw up!*"

Chapter 3

Stardate 53499.3 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

On patrol – Sector 0324

As Commander Strauss disembarked from the runabout, her eyes were drawn to a large, cartoonish painting on the hangar deck wall that portrayed a large blue fish with a prominent dorsal fin. The fish cradled a phaser rifle and wore a very determined expression on its face. Circling the mural was the ship's registry and name followed by "*Semper Paratus.*"

Realizing there were personnel waiting for her, she recovered and asked, "Permission to come aboard?"

An attractive Vulcan female wearing the rank insignia of a lieutenant commander stepped forward and replied, "Granted." Strauss received a shock when the same Vulcan actually *smiled* and extended her hand in greeting.

"Welcome aboard the *Bluefin* Commander Strauss. I'm Lt. Commander T'Ser, Second Officer and Senior Operations Officer."

Strauss was so surprised by such atypical behavior for a Vulcan, that for a brief moment she merely gaped at T'Ser. Strauss quickly regained her poise, however, and grasped the proffered hand, which was very dry and warm, receiving a firm handshake. "Thank you, Commander. It's good to be here!"

T'Ser continued, "Captain Akinola asked that I take you by your quarters first, then to meet him in his ready room. Do you require assistance with any personal belongings?"

Strauss patted the duffel bag on her shoulder. "No thanks, I travel light. Lead on, Commander T'Ser."

The two women entered a corridor off of the hangar deck and entered a narrow turbo lift. "Deck 3," said T'Ser. She turned to Strauss. "Your quarters are located on deck 3, port side. My quarters are also on deck 3 on the starboard side. The captain's quarters are on deck 4, forward. His ready room is off of the bridge which is, of course, deck one."

Strauss tried to commit to memory the locations as T'Ser listed them. They quickly came to deck 3 and proceeded around a curved corridor to the port side. The layout seemed normal enough to Strauss but the corridors were much narrower than she had experienced while serving on *Ambassador* and *Akira* - class starships. Approaching crewmen smiled and hugged the walls as they passed. She decided to ask a question that was nagging her.

"Mr. T'Ser, forgive me if I'm prying, but your demeanor is, um, *different* from other Vulcans I've ever encountered."

T'Ser smiled again. "I'm what is called *V'tosh ka'tur*. I grew up in Seattle on Earth. My parents hold views that most Vulcans considered to be *quite* unorthodox. They believe that the principle of IDIC should apply to *all* peoples - including Vulcans. That extended even to the embracing of emotions." Her voice revealed a trace of irony and her smile became rueful. "However, we discovered that most Vulcans, including my grandparents on both sides, did *not* share that view."

T'Ser stopped at a cabin doorway with a sign that read, "Executive Officer." Traces of another sign, recently removed, still remained. T'Ser continued. "Anyway, I grew up with two quite emotional Vulcan parents and spent my childhood on Earth - so here I am - a Vulcan that laughs, cries, and cheats at cards. Scandalous, isn't it?" T'Ser punched in a code, unlocking the door, which slid open.

To Commander Strauss, her new quarters reminded her of the junior officer quarters she inhabited as a green ensign aboard the USS *Exeter*. The space was certainly not generous - a single bed was along one wall with storage cabinets above and below. A desk with computer terminal was on the opposite wall. Against the far bulkhead was a small couch beneath a circular viewport. Beyond the desk was a doorway leading to a private head and sonic shower. Near to the hall door was a storage closet and a beverage servitor.

Still, it suited Strauss' sensibilities. The space was efficient and appeared clean and comfortable. She always thought that her large quarters on the *Thunderchild* were better suited to a luxury starliner than a Starfleet vessel.

"This will do nicely, Commander T'Ser," remarked Strauss. Another thought struck her. "By the way, what became of your previous executive officer - was he promoted and transferred?"

Strauss immediately regretted the question as she saw the sudden, pained expression on T'Ser's face. The Vulcan quickly composed her features and placed her hands behind her back before speaking.

"Our former XO, Commander Dale McBride, was killed last year during a boarding operation on an Orion Raider." Her voice was soft but there was no missing the underlying sorrow.

"I'm terribly sorry, T'Ser! I didn't know," Strauss said, feeling awkward and embarrassed.

"No . . . no, of course you didn't." T'Ser paused, clearing her throat before continuing. "Commander McBride was leading a boarding party when we disabled the Raider. We knew they were transporting slaves and our boarders were attempting to rescue the prisoners and secure the ship."

T'Ser paused a moment and Strauss noticed that tears had formed in the Vulcan's eyes. "Dale found a cell with children in it . . . apparently he lost his com badge and turned to call for a corpsman when a ten year old Orion boy shoved a knife in his neck. Unfortunately, this occurred before he had a chance to call for help. He bled out before he could be saved. If he had been found five minutes sooner . . . well."

T'Ser stopped and forced a smile. "We better get you to the bridge. The Captain is waiting. As you will discover, he's not a patient man."

* * *

The bridge of the *Bluefin* was familiar in its traditional design - circular with the usual control stations, a central viewscreen, and the command chair in the middle of it all. It was more compact than other bridges in Strauss' experience, but arranged in an efficient and practical manner. A handsome, sandy-haired lieutenant manned the center chair when Strauss and T'Ser stepped onto the bridge from the turbo-lift. He turned and flashed a friendly smile at the new arrivals, focusing his gaze on Inga. The human male appeared to be in his early thirties, with a surprisingly deep tan for a spacefarer. His thick hair was wavy, just short of unruly. There was more than a hint of cockiness in his smile.

Strauss felt a flutter in her stomach as she made eye-contact with the young officer. She quickly averted her eyes, silently chastening herself for reacting

like some adolescent girl. At the same time, she had to admit that the Lieutenant was *very* nice looking!

T'Ser indicated the doorway to the Ready Room. "The captain is in there. Please let me know if I can help you get settled in," said T'Ser.

Strauss, still feeling badly for asking a painful question, replied, "I appreciate the hospitality you've shown me. And I'm sorry for opening old wounds."

"No apologies necessary, Commander. We all miss Dale, but we have many good memories. I'll see you again soon." T'Ser inclined her head and re-entered the lift. Strauss took another look around the bridge. The lieutenant in the center seat was now engrossed with a PADD and the four other bridge personnel all seemed occupied with their stations. She walked to the doorway to the Ready Room, took a breath, and pressed the enunciator.

"Come!" rumbled a deep voice from within. Strauss stepped forward and the door slid open.

The Captain's ready room was (as was becoming the norm) smaller than she had seen before. It was also quite interesting! Wood carvings of numerous ships and a few people were displayed on shelves and on tables. The ship carvings caught her eye because of their intricate detail. Several were of ancient sailing ships and were inside bottles. On a small table, in a place of prominence, was a highly detailed model of the *Bluefin* carved from beautifully grained wood, very light in color that nearly glowed with a glossy sheen. And, rising from behind an antique Oak desk, was Captain Joseph B. Akinola. A friendly grin brightened his face.

"Commander Strauss, welcome aboard! It's nice to finally meet you." He walked around and extended a hand in greeting. He was much taller than Strauss, so she practically came to attention and rose up slightly on the balls of her feet.

"Thank you, sir. It's good to finally be here! It was a long journey from Starbase 42."

"No doubt. Hopefully you can get a chance to rest up later. First, I want to go over a few things together, and then give you a chance to meet the senior officers. Does that sound agreeable?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Good! Please have a seat." Akinola indicated a comfortable looking leather chair. He resumed his seat behind his desk, leaned back and steepled his fingers. For a few moments, he simply regarded Strauss with hooded eyes without saying anything. The butterflies returned to Strauss' stomach, but she managed not to show it. Finally, Akinola spoke.

"I take it you're not exactly thrilled to be serving on the *Bluefin*, Commander?"

Strauss was shocked. "Sir, how . . . why do you say that?"

"I spoke to Admiral Phan about you. He thinks highly of you in and considers you a very capable officer," said Akinola. "As he put it, you should 'go very far' in your career."

Strauss could feel her face flush in anger. "Sir, with all due respect, that was a private conversation. The admiral should not have shared the content of our discussion - especially with you, considering the circumstances!"

Akinola regarded her with a calm gaze. "Admiral Phan didn't tell me you had reservations about serving on a border cutter, Commander. You just did."

Strauss found herself momentarily speechless and decidedly off-balance. She composed herself quickly, however, and spoke with measured tones. "Captain, I . . . don't understand. Are you saying the admiral did *not* reveal our conversation to you? Begging your pardon, but I'm confused!" She was unable to conceal the frustration in her voice.

Akinola smiled and held up a hand. "At ease, Commander. No, Admiral Phan didn't discuss any conversations the two of you had. I *did* contact him about you and, as I already mentioned, he spoke highly of you. By the way, I hold his opinion in high regard."

"Then, sir, how did you know I have reservations about serving on this ship?" asked Strauss.

"Oh, *that's* pretty simple! You're a young, up-and-comer - first in your class at the Academy, won a boat-load of academic awards, qualified for the Olympic trials in gymnastics, you've served on some of the better known ships of the line, and you served with distinction and bravery during the war. Why would someone with your credentials want to serve on a 70 year-old Border Service

cutter in the backwater systems chasing smugglers, tending marker buoys, and rescuing the occasional wayward boomer?"

Strauss felt her face redden, chagrined. "I have to admit, I wasn't thrilled when I first received my orders." She looked up quickly and said with determination, "But I will serve you and this ship to the best of my abilities."

Akinola leaned forward, matching the intensity of her gaze. "Just so we understand one another, Commander, the Border Service is *not* the poor step-child of Starfleet. We have a hard, mostly tedious, often dangerous mission out here. This crew trains hard, works hard, and likes to play hard, too. I need an XO who will work with us, not against us by angling for the first ticket out on a *Sovereign*. Do I make myself clear?"

Strauss, her gaze not wavering, replied, "*Perfectly* clear, sir. You'll have my best - on that you have my word as an officer. I intend to work my butt off. I'm not out here to make friends or look for a cushy assignment. I'm here because I've got a job to do, sir, and other considerations be damned!" with that, Strauss leaned back in her chair, arms crossed, daring the captain to respond.

Akinola maintained his stare for a few more moments, and then began to nod his head slowly. "You'll do, XO. You'll do."

At that moment, Akinola's terminal chimed and a voice came over the speaker. "*Captain to the bridge, repeat, Captain to the bridge.*"

A look of aggravation tinged with concern crossed Akinola's face. He quickly pressed the reply stud. "Akinola here - what is it, Nigel?"

"*Sir!*" the voice replied, "*We're picking up a disaster buoy signal - it's from the Kilimanjaro!*"

Akinola looked up sharply at Strauss. "Acknowledged! Set course for the position of the buoy - maximum warp! I'm on the way." He stood and motioned to Strauss to follow. "You're with me, Commander. Time to earn our pay."

Chapter 4

Stardate 53499.2 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

En route to Sector 0323, Warp 9

Akinola and Strauss entered the bridge which was buzzing with activity. Lieutenant Bane, the watch officer, was looking over the shoulder of a young dusky-skinned woman at the sensor station. The ensign was making attempts to contact the *Kilimanjaro* with no apparent success. The navigator and helmsman were both focused on their boards. Strauss sized up the situation and immediately went to the un-manned weapons station where she began to check the status of shields, phasers and torpedoes. Akinola nodded to himself in silent approval as he watched her before taking a seat in the command chair.

Akinola turned his attention to the sandy-haired officer. "Mr. Bane, report!"

Bane turned and straightened. "Skipper, Ensign Vashtee picked up a signal from a disaster beacon three minutes ago. The transponder code matches that of the *Kilimanjaro*. We've attempted hailin' 'em on all frequencies but with no response. We're still too far out for long-range scanners to tell us anything." The Lieutenant spoke with a distinct Australian accent.

"Very well," replied Akinola. "Helm – what's our current heading and speed?"

"Heading is 103 mark 30, on an intercept course with the known coordinates of the beacon. Our current speed is warp 9."

"Thank you, Mr. Bralus." Akinola tapped his com badge. "Bridge to Engineering."

"*Gralt. Go ahead,*" replied the Tellarite chief engineer brusquely.

"Mr. Gralt, I need some more speed. Can you give us warp 9.2?" asked Akinola.

Gralt must have heard the urgency in Akinola's voice and responded without his characteristic sarcasm. "*Aye, sir. We'll do our best, but we won't be able to maintain that speed for long before we overheat the mains!*"

"Just hold them together Gralt. I'm counting on you and your team."

"Consider them held."

"Thank you Commander. Bridge out." Akinola turned to Strauss.

"Commander Strauss, we're going into this blind, so when we come out of warp I want shields up and weapons hot. I find it unlikely that an *Everest* - class ship just suddenly blew up. We will operate under the premise that they were attacked by hostile forces and be ready to respond in kind."

Though her heart was beating rapidly, Strauss was calm and focused. This was not the first time she had faced the prospect of battle. "Concur, captain. Shields are up at 100% strength. Weapons are ready with Mark 9 torpedoes loaded. Phaser crews report ready and on stand-by"

Akinola allowed a small smile to form on his face. "Way to be on the ball, XO." He tapped the inter-ship button on the command chair.

"All hands, this is the captain. We've picked up a disaster signal from the *Kilimanjaro*. Most of us have friends on that ship. Certainly, Captain Vress is a close friend of mine. At this point, we have no details on the actual status of the *Kilimanjaro*. We're going in, prepared for the worst but hoping for the best. Just carry out your assignments to your utmost ability. I expect no less. At this time, we are on yellow alert. Our ETA is 45 minutes at which time we will go to red alert. Godspeed! Akinola, out."

A moment later, Captain Akinola received a call from sickbay. *"Joseph? It's Calvin. Are we expecting casualties?"*

"Unknown Doctor, but best to be ready."

"Understood. I have triage teams and corpsmen standing by. Baxter out."

Akinola looked at the stars speed past on the viewscreen and glanced at the chronometer between the helmsman and navigator. He willed it to move faster, but time proved to be as obstinate as ever. He spoke to himself, "Vress, what have you gotten into?"

* * *

Forty-five minutes later, the *Bluefin* dropped out of warp in sector 0323. The ship was at red alert and the bridge was bathed in the red glow of battle

lighting. Lt. Commander T'Ser now occupied the sensor station and scanned the surrounding region of space. Akinola waited, impatiently.

"T'Ser, anything?" Akinola queried.

T'Ser did not look up from the sensor hood. "I'm not reading any ships in this sector. However . . . there is a debris field approximately 2.5 million kilometers off of our port bow. I'm reading tritanium, aluminum, deuterium . . . overall mass of debris is consistent with a Federation starship of the *Everest* - class."

The bridge was silent for a moment as the awful news sunk in. Strauss swallowed hard, a lump having formed in her throat. She had hoped to never repeat this scenario after the war ended.

Akinola leaned forward with his arms on his thighs and his hands clasped. He finally spoke in a tone of resignation. "Any signs of lifepods or organic matter?"

"I am showing organic matter in the debris field but no life forms . . . wait!" T'Ser turned to look at Akinola, her face animated. "I've got faint signals from two life pods, bearing 26 mark 30, distance 2.2 million clicks."

Akinola responded instantly. "Helm, follow that course, full impulse. He tapped his com badge. "Transporter room one, prepare to take on survivors. Sickbay, medical team to Transporter room one." He stood. "Commander Strauss, you have the conn. T'Ser, keep scanning for survivors and be sure to find that disaster beacon. We need to get that thing on board ASAP. Keep your eyes open for any hostiles."

As he stepped into the turbo-lift, he muttered, "This is very wrong!"

Chapter 5

Stardate 53499.3 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Conducting SAR-Ops, Sector 0323

Captain Akinola quickly made his way to transporter room one. Upon entering, he was gratified to see Dr. Calvin Baxter, the ship's Chief Medical Officer, and three corpsmen already present. Senior Chief Solly Brin was at the transporter controls.

"Do you have a lock, Senior Chief?" asked Akinola.

Brin frowned, "On the closest pod, I've got a good read on three life forms, but I'm having trouble getting a lock on them. There's some kind of residual radiation surrounding the pods that's interfering."

"What kind of radiation."

Brin shook his head. "Can't tell just yet. Hang on - I've got a lock! Energizing." The Orion manipulated the transporter controls and the alcove began to hum with building energy. The shimmering particles quickly coalesced into three prone figures wearing Starfleet uniforms. Dr. Baxter and the medics hurried onto the transporter dais, scanners at the ready.

Akinola spoke first. "Doc, are they . . .?"

Dr. Baxter did not turn but continued to scan the unconscious crewmen from the *Kilimanjaro*. "Alive - yes, but not out of the woods." He continued to run his scanner then compared his with one of the medics, frowning. "That's devilishly odd!" he murmured, more to himself than the Captain. He administered a hypospray to all three victims before looking up at the medics. "Let's get these men down to sickbay. Start each of them on a drip of Triazapan and piggy back a unit of Ringer's. I'll be down after I speak to the Captain."

The corpsmen gently placed the unconscious men on anti-grav gurneys and quickly moved them out of the transporter room. Dr. Baxter came over to Akinola, his brow furrowed, obviously disturbed. He ran his hand through his mane of white hair, and then absently began to stroke his beard. Akinola knew the doctor well enough to leave him alone until the doctor was ready to speak. Finally, Baxter fixed Akinola with a sharp gaze.

"First, the good news. These men should live. Their physical injuries do not appear to be life threatening," said Baxter.

The captain relaxed just a bit. "But? . . ."

"But," replied Baxter. "They're suffering from some sort of high energy burst - their symptoms are similar to being jolted by high voltage electricity. Only it's not electrocution. There is a residual energy trace that I can't identify with my medical tricorder. I'll see what the bio-beds in sickbay come up with."

Akinola frowned. "This energy trace . . . is it a danger to the crew or the ship?"

Baxter shook his head. "No, I don't think so. It's diminished quite a bit and the readings were going down as I scanned them. Another hour or two and we probably wouldn't have picked it up at all."

"Doctor, as soon as any one of them wakes up, I need to talk with them," said Akinola.

Baxter raised both eyebrows. "Joseph, I said that they would probably survive. But as to regaining consciousness, well . . . that's another matter! The energy charge they took likely affected their nervous system. I've got to proceed slowly or we could risk losing them."

Akinola placed a hand gently on his friend's shoulder. "Calvin, I understand. But if there is *any* way at all to wake one of them, even for a short time, please try. I *must* find out what happened to Captain Vress and his crew . . . and why!"

Baxter peered at Akinola for a long moment. "Joseph, you may be too close to the situation. Be careful - don't let old friendships cloud your judgment." He paused and sighed before continuing. "No promises, but I'll do my best. *If* I feel that it's safe, and *if* I can, I'll try to wake them."

Akinola gave the doctor's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "Thank you, Doc. And . . . thanks for keeping me on track."

Baxter snorted. "Someone's got to. Now, let me get to work."

* * *

On the bridge, Lt. Commander T'Ser continued to scan the debris field.

"Have you located the disaster beacon?" asked Strauss.

"Not yet," replied T'Ser. "It may have been damaged in the initial explosion and its power source drained. Also, there are some residual background energy readings that are interfering with our sensors."

Strauss frowned, "Source?"

"Unknown at this time. However, it is localized in the immediate area of the debris field. It would seem likely that it is related to the destruction of the *Kilimanjaro*." T'Ser paused as she adjusted the sensors. "Hmmm. I'm picking up readings that would indicate recent phaser fire, also a faint ion trail - possibly from a ship's impulse engines."

Strauss sat up straighter in the command chair. "Can you get a bearing from the ion trail?" she asked, masking the excitement she felt.

T'Ser frowned. "Not with a great degree of certainty. However, it appears to come from the vicinity of the asteroid belt that surrounds the Molari system." She straightened and turned to face Strauss.

"That's where the *Kilimanjaro* was headed on an asteroid-breaking assignment." T'Ser's board began to beep for attention. She turned and looked into the scanner hood again. A smile formed on her lips. "There you are!" she said, softly. Turning again to Strauss, she said, "We've located the disaster beacon."

Strauss responded immediately. "Helm, move us into tractor beam range from the coordinates that Commander T'Ser will send you." She then tapped her com badge. "Bridge to transporter room. We've located the disaster beam and are moving into range of the tractor beam. Is it possible to beam it aboard?"

"Bridge, this is Brin. I'll get it aboard with the cargo transporter. We can tap into its recorders from there. Have the tractor beam crew stabilize it for us so we can get a good lock."

"Will do. Let me know when it's aboard." said Strauss. She tapped her com badge again. "Strauss to Captain Akinola."

"Akinola, go ahead."

"Sir, we've found the disaster buoy and will beam it aboard shortly."

"Very good, Commander." he paused. "I want you and T'Ser to meet me in the wardroom with Commander Galt in 15 minutes."

"Yes sir. Oh, and sir, T'Ser has found evidence of another vessel and possible phaser fire. She's also discovered a faint ion trail leading in the direction of the Molari asteroid belt." said Strauss.

"Okay, plot a course to the asteroid belt and let's head there at full impulse. Stand down from red alert. I'll see you in 15. Akinola, out."

Strauss turned to the navigator. "Plot a pursuit course based on the best known heading of the ion trail. Helm, ahead full impulse." She punched a control stud, canceling red alert, before hitting the inter-ship button. "All hands, stand down from red alert. Commander Galt, please report to the wardroom." She stood and spoke to the Vulcan Ops officer. "T'Ser, you're with me."

* * *

Strauss followed T'Ser to the wardroom (seeing how she didn't yet know where it was located). They came to a room one deck below the bridge where the smell of coffee and food beckoned. Strauss' stomach began to rumble and she suddenly realized that she was famished, her last meal being on the runabout many hours ago.

As she entered, she was taken by the ambiance of the wardroom. It was paneled in oak veneer and was decorated with paintings of ships, all bearing the name *Bluefin*. She noticed a sailing vessel; a submarine of the old U.S. Navy that she guessed was from the Second World War, and a more modern looking ship of a tri-maran design. Underneath it was a plate which read "Fast Response Cutter 760, USCGC *Bluefin* , Circa 2012 C.E." Her reverie was cut short by the round, smiling face of a very large man clad a white tunic and neck scarf.

"Excuse me ma'am," he said with a grin. "I'm Petty Officer First Class Marino, the ship's cook. Everyone just calls me 'Cookie'. Can I get you something to eat?"

"That sounds great, Cookie. I'm Commander Strauss, the new XO, and I'm starved. What do you have?"

"Well, for short-notice meetings like this, I don't get to show off much, but I do have several kinds of sandwiches and salads prepared, plus fresh fruit from Rigel IV and some pastries I just made. There's coffee and water on the table, or I could fix you tea or something else to drink." Cookie gestured to a smaller table at the end of the room piled with the food he had mentioned.

"Coffee's fine. Thanks for pointing me to the food!"

"Yes ma'am. I hope you enjoy it. And whenever you're on duty and can't make it down here, just call me and I'll be happy to bring something to you on the bridge. We keep the crewman's galley open 24 hours and the wardroom is always available to officers."

"That's very kind of you, Cookie," said Strauss, sincerely.

"Shoot ma'am, I love doing it. Now let me get out of here and back to the galley."

Strauss went to the table, helped herself to a chicken salad sandwich and some of the Rigellian fruit. She also indulged in an apple Danish.

She sat down at the table by T'Ser when Lt. Commander Galt, the Tellarite chief engineer came in. He was wearing engineering coveralls that were spotted with various stains and scorch marks - obviously he had been busy in engineering. He went to the food table and came back with a generous portion of fruit, plopping into a chair opposite Strauss. He regarded her with dark, sad eyes for a moment. "So. You must be the new XO. I'm Galt, chief engineer." He peered at her more closely. "You look awfully young to be a commander."

"So I've been told," she said with a trace of irony. "Nice to meet you, Commander Galt."

Galt snorted. "You won't think so once you get to know me. Now where's the Captain? He called this meeting. I've got work to do."

As if on cue, Captain Akinola strode into the wardroom. "I see you're being your usual charming self, Galt," he said.

Gralt shrugged. "What can I say? It's a gift." He began to eat rather noisily.

Akinola put two sandwiches on a plate, and sat at the head of the table. "I've just been speaking with Admiral Bateson; he's Commander of the 7th Border Service Squadron, Mr. Strauss. It looks like we're on our own out here on this, at least for now. The other border cutters are all busy or too far out of range and Starfleet isn't willing to send any other assets. He did say he would send the *Matterhorn* our way, but she's at least four days out. At this point, I'm not sure what good another ship would do until we find out more about what happened." He turned to Gralt. "Have we gotten anything off of the disaster beacon?"

Gralt replied, "Do you think I got this dirty playing cards? The thing was a mess - a lot of blast damage. I'm amazed we even picked up the signal, the power cells were corrupted and couldn't have lasted long."

"So, did you learn anything *useful*?" Akinola asked with strained patience.

"I'm coming to that. Unfortunately, most of the data files were damaged, which is surprising considering how well shielded these beacons are supposed to be. That's the bad news. The good news is that we did learn some very interesting things. Computer! - Display slide Gralt 1A."

The viewscreen at the opposite end of the wardroom came to life, revealing a complex diagram with several sine waves. One of the waves flashed bright red. T'Ser whistled and Gralt grunted in agreement. Strauss was confused as was the Captain.

Akinola spoke first. "Okay, not all of us have Ph.D.s in here. Tell us what we're seeing."

Gralt fielded the question. "The flashing sine wave you see represents a focused energy wave that hit the *Kilimanjaro* moments before it exploded. I've *never* seen anything that strong short of a category 10 stellar flare! Even if they had their shields up, which is unlikely, I doubt they could have survived."

Gralt allowed that to sink in before continuing. "The energy surge created a cascade effect that ultimately overwhelmed their warp core safeties. Bottom line - they died of a warp core explosion."

Strauss frowned and asked the next question. "Commander Galt, I can see the energy surge and the explosion, but what are the smaller waves in between?"

Galt gave her a meaningful look. "Those waves are consistent with phaser fire, but not from the *Kilimanjaro*. The frequencies match phasers often used by ships of the Orion Syndicate."

Strauss was puzzled. "But . . . that doesn't make sense! Why would an Orion Raider fire phasers at a ship that was already in the process of blowing up?"

Captain Akinola folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "They wouldn't, Commander. But someone wants us to *believe* that the Syndicate was responsible. Think about it - if we hadn't picked up the disaster beacon's signal, it would have been days before we would have come across the debris field. These strong energy traces would have dissipated, but we'd still have evidence of phaser fire on the debris. We probably would have assumed that an Orion Raider had attacked based on that evidence."

T'Ser had been listening carefully, a thoughtful frown on her face. She looked up and spoke.

"I recall an incident where a Starfleet vessel was attacked by an energy pulse of this magnitude. It was over a century ago, though I do not recall the exact Stardate. It involved the USS *Enterprise* under the command of James Kirk. There was a skirmish along the Romulan neutral zone. A Romulan Bird of Prey came on our side and attacked an outpost with a similar weapon. It nearly destroyed the *Enterprise*, but due to the weapon's limited range and tremendous power consumption, it failed to produce victory for the Romulans. Intelligence reports from that era suggest that the Romulans moth-balled the program."

Akinola nodded his head. "I remember reading about that too. And another thing to consider. The Romulans have cloaking devices."

Strauss interrupted. "Wait a minute! Are you suggesting this was done by the Romulans? We're on the opposite side of the quadrant from the Neutral Zone!"

T'Ser replied. "Not necessarily the Romulans, but the same technology might be at work."

Akinola's com badge chirped. *"Sickbay to Akinola."*

"Akinola here. Go ahead, Doctor."

"You better get down here, Joseph," said Baxter. "One of our patients just woke up."

Chapter 6

Stardate 53499.4 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 0323

Akinola and Gralt excused themselves from the wardroom. T'Ser and Strauss lingered over their food, deep in thought. Then a question came to Strauss.

"T'Ser, I have a question that may seem silly, but it's been bugging me."

"Are you wondering if I'm a vegetarian? The answer is no."

Strauss shook her head. "No, that wasn't my question, though now that you bring it up, I *had* wondered." She shook her head slightly, getting back on track.

"My question is about Dr. Baxter and the Captain. I've noticed that the Doctor always refers to the Captain by his first name, even over communications channels. Now, I may be new to the Border Service, but that seems like a breach of protocol."

T'Res smiled and put down her coffee mug. "Obviously, you've never heard of Calvin Baxter, M.D., F.F.C.S.?"

"Well, no. I honestly don't keep up with Starfleet Medical. That's pretty much outside my area of responsibility."

"Then you wouldn't know of *Vice-Admiral* Calvin Baxter, former Commanding Officer of Starfleet Medical in Atlanta."

Strauss gaped wide-eyed at T'Ser for several moments. Finally, she spoke. "Are you telling me that our CMO is an *admiral*?"

"No. Dr. Baxter *was* an admiral. He retired several years ago. Doc was tired of "pushing paper," as he put it and went back into private practice. When the Dominion War broke out, he wanted to come out of retirement and serve on a ship. Of course, the admiralty wouldn't hear of it - his age, former rank, etc. etc. I don't know *what* strings he pulled, and he won't say, but he managed to get assigned to the *Bluefin* with the provisional rank of Commander. We're fortunate to have him! He's an outstanding physician and surgeon." T'Ser

grinned, "But *sometimes* he forgets he's no longer an admiral. Captain Akinola has too much respect and affection for him to say anything. You've noticed that the Captain calls the doctor 'Calvin'?"

Strauss just nodded, a dazed expression on her face. "This has been such a strange day."

* * *

Akinola entered sickbay and found Dr. Baxter perusing a PADD and drinking tea.

"Ah, Joseph. I'm glad to share some good news for a change! It seems that all three of our patients should recover fully."

"That *is* good to hear! Now, what about the one who's awake?" asked Akinola.

Baxter stood and stretched his long, slender frame, his spine popping audibly. "That would be one Ensign Chiang Li. He apparently was in the auxiliary control room with two crewmen when everything went to hell in a hand basket. The extra shielding there protected them enough to allow them to reach an escape pod. Li seems to have suffered the least from the energy surge and awoke a few minutes ago. The other two are in REM sleep and I'd like to keep them that way a while longer. You can talk to them later."

"Thanks, Calvin. Good work!"

Dr. Baxter took another sip of tea. "Well, one does try."

Baxter led Akinola out from his office through the main ward of sickbay to an intensive care cubicle. On a bio-bed was a young Asian man who appeared to be in his early twenties. He was sitting up, drinking juice through a straw. When he saw Akinola, he straightened in bed, as if to come to attention. Akinola came to his side and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Relax, Ensign. You've been through quite an ordeal today! I'm Captain Joseph Akinola, CO of the *Bluefin* ."

The ensign offered a bleak smile. "Yes sir, I remember you from when our crew played yours in volleyball at Station Echo."

Akinola smiled. "As I recall, you handed our butts to us that day." He paused, and spoke gently. "Mr. Li, can you tell me what happened to the *Kilimanjaro*?"

Tears welled up in the young man's eyes. "I understand that only three of us made it?"

Akinola nodded. "We're still searching, but we only found your pod and another pod that was empty. Now - what happened, son?"

Ensign Li cleared his throat and gathered himself. "I was on duty in auxiliary control along with Crewman Strevik and Crewman D'Longa. I remember that at 0930 D'Longa went and got coffee for us. He returned in just a few minutes. As you know, our auxiliary control station provides duplicate read-outs from the bridge. Captain Vress always liked to have someone there, you know, just to be redundant - *safe*."

He said the last with obvious irony. Li took a shakey breath and continued. "Anyway, we were drinking coffee, running routine diagnostics, when the board went crazy . . . it showed a massive power surge. The ship began to shake . . . then . . ." He stopped for a moment, closing his eyes to regain his composure. "It's kind of a blur, captain. The warp breach alarm began to sound. God, I hope I *never* hear *that* sound again!" He paused. "I told the men to get to the escape pod. There's one right outside auxiliary control. Radiation alarms were going off, then the lights went out, but I could still hear the breach alarm. We got in the pod, dogged the hatch and jettisoned. Then . . . well . . . I don't know. That's all I remember until I woke up here."

Akinola nodded and patted the young man's shoulder. "That's good Ensign. That helps us. Just one more question for now and I'll let you rest. Did your instruments show any other ships in the area?"

Li frowned in concentration for a moment. "Sir, the instruments were haywire, every alarm going off . . . it was pure chaos! But . . ." He frowned again, a deep furrow formed across his brow, beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. His pulse rate began to increase.

Alarmed, Dr. Baxter stepped forward and said, "I think that's enough for now."

Akinola pressed on. "Ensign, what were you about to say?"

Li, near exhaustion, finally blurted out, "The proximity alarm! It went off first! It's like a ship just popped up out of nowhere! I almost forgot . . . I almost forgot! . . ."

Baxter reached forward and applied a hypospray to the ensign's neck. Almost as soon as it stopped hissing, the young man relaxed and went back to sleep. Baxter turned to Akinola. "So, there was another ship."

"Sure looks that way, doesn't it?"

"What do we do now?" asked Baxter.

"We hunt that ship down - and we kill it!" said Akinola, coldly.

Chapter 7

Stardate 53499.6 (2 July 2376) Unidentified Enemy Vessel (cloaked) Sector 0323

The adversary sat on the dark and quiet bridge of his cloaked ship, hidden in the Molari Asteroid Belt. The sight of the border cutter on his view screen enraged him, but he held his emotions in check. He spoke in an ominous tone to the figure that stood on the opposite side of the bridge.

"You said that the Federation ship would be totally destroyed!" There was a threatening edge to his voice.

"And it was," the other said calmly. "The plasma cannon worked flawlessly."

"*Flawlessly?*" The adversary's quiet voice suddenly rose to a shout. "Then explain how they got off a signal and a border cutter is coming in our direction!"

The other was unperturbed. "Most likely, an automatic disaster beacon of some sort. Surely you realize that such devices are common to Federation vessels? As to the cutter, it is of no consequence."

"No consequence! They are heading right toward us!"

"And what will they find? A diminishing ion trail and tens of thousands of asteroids. Our cloaking device will shield us. You must control yourself," said the other.

The adversary whirled in his seat, a disruptor in his hand, aimed at the other. "Have a care . . .," he said in a quieter, but more ominous tone. "how you speak to me, *spy!* I have lost much - my honor and my name! It would disturb me none to lose you."

The other smiled in the dim shadows. "And I care nothing for your name or your honor. But remember this - I am but one of many. You may kill me if you wish. But your own life and any you care for will be forfeit." He paused, "Enough of this! We must prepare, lest these Federation pawns get lucky."

The adversary lowered the disruptor pistol. "Very well, *spy.* But mark my words! - I will make a new name for myself and for my house! And if it means

both of our deaths, well..." he grinned a hideous, toothy grin, "...then it will be a *good* day to die!

* * *

Stardate 53499.6 (2 July 2376)
USS *Bluefin*
Sector 0323

Captain Akinola returned to the wardroom as Strauss and T'Ser finished their meal. He spoke to the two officers.

"Good news! It looks like our three survivors are going to be just fine. T'Ser, be sure to log them in on the crew manifest. They'll be with us until we finish this."

"Captain?" asked Strauss, "Just how are we going to 'finish this'?"

"We're going hunting, Commander, and I don't intend to quit until we catch the murderers responsible for the 72 deaths on the *Kilimanjaro*," he said firmly.

"How do we find a ship that probably has a cloaking device that's hiding in an asteroid belt?"

Akinola smiled. "Commander, I have a few tricks of my own up my sleeve. Let's just say they've already made two mistakes. I only need them to make one more."

His smile faded and he changed the subject. "Right now, Commander, I want you and T'Ser to get some rest. We're about four hours out from the Molari Belt at this speed, so take advantage of our transit time." He held up a hand as Strauss began to protest.

"Stow it Commander! That's an order. T'Ser, get Lt. Bane on the sensors - he's got a sixth sense for these types of searches. I'm heading down to engineering to discuss an idea with Galt."

* * *

Five minutes later, Captain Akinola entered the cramped and noisy main engineering room in the secondary hull. Galt was directing some crewmen who were making adjustments to the coolant flow to the warp core.

"No, no, NO! By the daughter of the fourth deity, *how* many times do I have to tell you! The pump impellers have to be at a complete stop - *zero* rpm - before you reverse that valve! It could blow off and take your ugly head with it! Then I'd be short a crewman until I could get a replacement. Do it *right!*" The Tellarite moved away, shaking his head and muttering to himself about the crewman's deficient genes when he saw the Captain.

"Oh, it's you. I hope this is important - I'm busy trying to prevent these *Yarliq*-brained deck apes from blowing up my ship!" said Galt.

"You know Galt, I think it's your charm that makes you such an effective leader," said the Captain.

"Blow it out your torpedo tube, sir! Now, what's up?"

Akinola became serious. "When we catch up to this ship, you can bet they'll fire that energy weapon at us too. Can our shields handle it?"

Galt rubbed his snout and frowned in consternation. "Yeah, I've been thinking about that and I have an idea. Come over here."

Galt led the captain to his office, a cluttered cubicle constructed of transparent aluminum panels, where he could survey his domain. His desk was covered with PADDs, assorted tools, and half-empty cups of herb tea and root juice. He rummaged around and picked up a scarred PADD and handed it to the captain.

Akinola perused it for a moment, and then raised an eyebrow. "Will this *work?*" he asked.

Galt nodded. "It should. But we'll likely blow some power converters in the process. And, it will probably only protect us once. If they get a chance to fire a second time, well . . . you saw what happened to the *Kilimanjaro*."

Akinola exhaled sharply and nodded. "We'll have to make sure they don't get a second shot." He gestured with the PADD. "Leave it to you to come up with a complex answer to a simple problem." He handed the PADD back to Galt. "Make it happen."

"Aye sir, and spare me the sarcasm. You're no good at it."

Akinola smiled wanly. "I'll leave the sarcasm and the problem of the shields to the master!"

Gralt snorted, "Fine. Now get out of my engine room before the crew starts slacking off."

* * *

Commander Strauss lay on her bunk, staring at the ceiling of her cabin. Sleep eluded her - she was too keyed up and her mind raced with possibilities. She couldn't fathom why anyone would want to frame the Orions for this. Of course, there was no love lost between the Federation and the Orion Syndicate, so a frame would be believable. But who could gain from this? What was the point? The whole situation seemed strange and random.

She wondered about Captain Akinola. He certainly seemed well in control and in command, but how did the loss of his close friend affect him? What counsel should she give as his new executive officer?

Fatigue finally overtook her, and she drifted off to a fitful sleep. Her dreams were filled with exploding ships and death.

Chapter 8

Stardate 53499.8 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 0323

Captain Akinola sat brooding in his darkened ready room, sipping coffee. He stared out the small viewport at the stars and the distant, shimmering maelstrom of the Badlands. He focused his mind on the past 24 hours. Something nagged doggedly at the back of his mind . . . something that Vress said during their last, their *final* conversation. Akinola closed his eyes and concentrated. In his mind he heard Vress speaking, ". . . *I regret that duty calls. We're due to clear some asteroids in sector 323. The governor of one of the system colonies has been complaining about navigational hazards.*"

Akinola's eyes flew open. He tapped his com badge. "Akinola to bridge."

"Bridge, Lt. Bane here."

"Nigel, contact Border Service Command. Find out which colony governor in the Molari system recently requested an asteroid breaker to open shipping lanes."

"Aye, sir."

"Let me know ASAP, Akinola out." He paused a moment, then turned to the terminal on his desk. "Computer, search for reports of navigational hazards in the Molari system over the past four months, particularly related to the asteroid belt."

After a momentary pause, the computer responded. *"There are no reports of navigational hazards in the Molari system during that time period. All current navigational marker buoys are functioning within acceptable parameters."*

Akinola sat back and frowned. His com badge beeped and he tapped it. "Akinola, go."

"Lt. Bane, sir. Command reports that Governor George Tarleck of the Sedona Mining Colony on Molari III submitted the request."

"Tarleck? I've heard that name."

"Yes sir, most likely from the hyper-net news services. He's been implicated in some pretty shady deals. I understand that he's cozy with the Orion Syndicate."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Akinola out." He steepled his fingers and turned once more to stare out the viewport. "Mr. Tarleck, I will be having words with you," he said softly.

* * *

Commander Strauss entered the bridge to find Captain Akinola standing by the very handsome, sandy-haired Lieutenant she had noticed earlier. She walked over to them. Akinola looked up.

"Hello, Commander - I trust you rested well. Let me introduce you to Lt. Nigel Bane. He's our resident sensor wizard - he can find things that most people would overlook. Nigel, tell the XO what you were telling me."

"As I was telling the Cap'n," he said with a pronounced Australian accent, "A cloaking device works great most of the time - assuming no one knows you're there. But if you suspect some bloke's lurking about in a cloaked ship, you can generally find 'em - given time. In our case, the bloody bast . . . pardon, ma'am, the perpetrator, made a cardinal mistake by hiding in an asteroid field."

Strauss smiled, in spite of herself, "Why is that, Lieutenant?"

"Well, as you likely know, there are trillions of small particles floating through any asteroid field - the microscopic debris caused when the asteroids collide, which happens constantly. Ships, of course, can navigate through the dust with our navigational deflectors. But, we leave a visible 'wake' - visible to sensors, anyhow. Now - in the case of a cloaked ship that's relatively stationary, it's a tad tricky. So, what I have to do is look for a 'hole' - a spot in space where the dust particles can't go - and, there she is, pretty as a picture!" Bane gestured dramatically to a screen on his console. A sector star map was displayed and, flashing prominently, was an indicator of a ship less than ten million kilometers from their location.

Akinola squeezed Bane's shoulder. "Nice work, Nigel." He turned to the Ensign at the navigation station. "Mr. Argo, plot a spiral course through the asteroid field and bring us up behind the target. Mr. Fralk, ahead slow. I want it to appear that we're still in search mode. We're going to get a big asteroid between us and come up behind him. At the last moment, we'll come around the asteroid with a volley of phasers."

Akinola returned to the center seat. He tapped his com badge. "Akinola to Galt."

"Galt here, go ahead."

"Commander, we've located our target and we're going to move in. Are you ready with our defenses?"

"Ready and standing by. But remember - we can only take one shot from that energy weapon. And I don't know what damage we'll suffer. It would be nice if they don't get the chance to use it!" said Galt.

"You read my mind, Mr. Galt. Akinola, out." He turned his attention back to Lt. Bane. "Mr. Bane, please open a channel to the Constabulary on Molari III and contact Chief Inspector Timothy McGrath. I'll take it in my ready room. Commander Strauss? Come with me, please."

The two senior officers entered Akinola's ready room where the Captain shared his discovery about Governor Tarleck's bogus request.

Strauss frowned at the news. "But why would Tarleck do that? Do you think he's connected to the destruction of the *Kilimanjaro*?"

Akinola replied, "Inga, I've been in this service for 41 years. If I've learned anything, there are few coincidences. Yeah - I believe he's involved."

"But how can we possibly prove that?"

Akinola's com badge beeped, interrupting them. "Akinola."

"Bane, sir. I have Chief Inspector McGrath for you."

"Thank you, Nigel. Transfer the connection to my terminal, please and scramble the signal." He turned the screen where Strauss could also see it. Momentarily, a florid-faced man with a large moustache and sad eyes appeared.

"Captain Akinola, it's good to hear from you! How may I be of service?"

"Tim, nice to see you. I'm afraid I have some urgent business to address. Were you aware of the destruction of the *Kilimanjaro* not far from the Molari system?"

McGrath's eyebrows shot up in surprise. *"No, Captain. That's the first I've heard of it - what of Captain Vress and his crew?"*

"Vress is dead. So is most of the crew. We only managed to pick up three survivors," said Akinola, somberly.

"My God! Joseph, I am sorry! Vress was a good friend. This is terrible! What happened - was there an accident?" asked McGrath.

Akinola shook his head. "This was no accident, Tim. They were ambushed by a cloaked ship using some kind of plasma weapon. Someone set them up! We think we've located the ship responsible, but I think that one of the system governors, George Tarleck, is involved."

A look of disgust crossed McGrath's face. *"Tarleck!"* he spat. *"He's been a thorn in my side for years. He's thick with the Syndicate but manages to stay out of prison. I wouldn't put something like this past him - but why do it? What's in it for him?"*

"Tim, that's why I'm calling you. You spent many years in Starfleet Intelligence before taking your current job. I need to ask a big favor of you, and it will likely require some of your old skills. For Vress and his crew."

For a moment, McGrath did not say anything, his face pensive. He seemed to reach some internal decision and spoke. *"Tell me what you need me to do."*

* * *

Stardate 53499.8 (2 July 2376)
Enemy Vessel (cloaked)
Molari Asteroid Belt

"See! Even now they are changing course," said the other.

The adversary grunted. "They are in a search pattern. If we remain here, they may well discover us - even cloaked. The Federation has learned much about war, spy! Do not underestimate them." He turned to the crew pit. "Navigator, plot an intercept course to the Federation vessel. Helm, be ready to give us

full power on my command." He turned back to the other. "My patience for waiting grows thin!"

The other stared back, dispassionately. "Even a warrior knows when to bide his time - Klingon!"

The Klingon commander nodded; a dangerous smile on his face. "Yes, Romulan. But I also know when it is time to act! You *Tal Shiar* spies are content to hide in the shadows and let others carry the blade. This time, we hold the blade together - for the dark purposes of your Praetor, and for the rebirth of House K'Tinga! We shall shame both the Federation and the *p'taQ* Klingon High Command! *Q'plaH'*!

Chapter 9

Stardate 53499.9 (2 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Asteroid Belt

Lt. Commander T'Ser returned to the bridge, relieving Lt. Bane at the sensor station. Lt. Commander Galt also came onto the bridge, surprising Akinola.

"Commander, to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" asked Akinola of the crusty Tellarite.

Galt, obviously fatigued, set aside his usual sarcasm and answered succinctly. "I need to be up here when the shooting starts, so I can coordinate our defensive plan."

"Tell me what you've got."

Galt seated himself at the engineering station, and spoke as he brought up several displays. "Our shields alone won't be sufficient to stop that energy weapon, should they use it. I'm going to employ a static subspace field from the warp engines. That, along with the shields, should protect the ship and the crew from what happened to the *Kilimanjaro*. But it's going to take precise timing - we can't sustain a static subspace field for more than a few seconds. And, I imagine one shot will still overload many, if not most of our systems." He turned to Akinola and gave him a meaningful look. "We'll probably lose warp drive, at least temporarily."

"What about weapons?" asked Akinola.

Galt shrugged. "I honestly don't know. But chances are they'll be affected too." He saw the frown form on Akinola's face. "Hey, at least I can keep us from being blown to bits! That should count for something!"

The Captain nodded, conceding the point. "Alright, Galt. Good work! We'll have to figure another way to put them out of commission, if we lose phasers and torpedoes,"

"We can always throw rocks," grumbled Galt. "There's plenty of them out here."

Akinola turned his head back to Galt, a hint of a smile forming on his face. "Say that again, commander . . ."

* * *

Stardate 53499.9 (2 July 2376)
Enemy Vessel (cloaked)
Molari Asteroid Belt

The Klingon commander watched the tactical display and made his decision. "Helm! Move us in toward the target, one quarter speed. Bring us within 1000 kelikams of their stern. Gunner! Bring weapons on line - initiate charging cycle for the plasma cannon."

The Romulan agent grabbed the command chair and turned the Klingon to face him. "You fool!" he hissed. "This is unnecessary! Let the Federation vessel pass - we have already achieved our purpose! You're jeopardizing my mission!"

The Klingon glowered at the Romulan and spoke in a slow, threatening tone. "*Your* mission? Be silent, spy, or I will feed your tongue to my pet Targ! If you interfere again, I will gut you with my blade where you stand!"

The Romulan looked down to see a tri-bladed dagger pressed against his abdomen. He straightened, maintaining his dignity. "Very well, *Commander*," his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I leave you to your mission of conquest and glory."

The Klingon either did not recognize the sarcasm or chose to ignore it. "See that you do. Now, stay out of my way! I have business to which I must attend." He turned back to the viewscreen and barked an order. "Stations! Prepare for an attack run!"

* * *

Stardate 53499.9 (2 July 2376)
USS *Bluefin*
Molari Asteroid Belt

T'Ser turned from the sensor hood. "Captain! Target vessel is on the move." she announced, her voice urgent.

Akinola, jammed his finger down on the Red Alert button. Immediately, the bridge lights changed to red and the alert klaxon sounded throughout the cutter. "Bearing?"

T'Ser shook her head in frustration. "They're still cloaked. I can tell where they *were* but I can't get a lock on where they *are* at any given moment."

Strauss was ready at the weapons console. "Phasers are armed. Torpedoes loaded and ready, sir."

Gralt spoke from the engineering station. "Should I deploy the subspace field?"

Akinola shook his head. "Negative! They can't fire while cloaked and we can't deploy the field until they fire."

He turned to Strauss. "Commander, they'll likely come at us from astern. But we won't know their angle of attack until they decloak. I want you to be ready to fire the instant we get a visual. Don't wait for a target lock, set phasers to wide angle."

Strauss protested. "But sir, the phasers won't be as effective."

Akinola nodded. "I know. But it might be enough to throw their aim off a bit. T'Ser, any idea of their course and speed?"

"Best estimate, they are circling astern of us at one-quarter impulse. If they move straight at us, it will be extremely difficult to track them." she said.

Akinola rubbed his chin. "If this weapon is based on the old Romulan technology, it probably has a limited range, so they'll have to get in fairly close. Commander Strauss, deactivate the minimum range safeties on the torpedoes - we may be getting into a knife fight!"

* * *

"Time to target?" demanded the Klingon commander.

"One minute - range, 5000 kelikams," replied the Helmsman.

"Plasma cannon to full power. Prepare to de-cloak!"

* * *

"Captain, I've lost them!" T'Ser said; frustration in her voice.

"Steady, people. Gralt, be ready to activate defenses as soon as they appear," Akinola said, his voice calm and steady. "Helm, maintain course and speed. We don't want to spook them. Let them think we're sitting ducks."

* * *

Stardate 53499.9 (2 July 2376)
Enemy Vessel (cloaked)
Molari Asteroid Belt

The Klingon gunner spoke. "Commander! Target is acquired. Plasma cannon at 100% charge."

The Klingon commander smiled. "Prepare to join the Black Fleet, Earthers . . . Helm, disengage cloak, gunner - *fire!*"

* * *

Stardate 53499.9 (2 July 2376)
USS *Bluefin*
Molari Asteroid Belt

At first, the viewscreen simply showed the blackness of space and several large asteroids aft of the *Bluefin*. Then, a small section of space began to shimmer slightly, taking the form of a *K'Vort* class Bird-of-Prey.

Akinola barked orders quickly. "Fire all weapons! Gralt, activate defenses!"

Charged parcels of death and mayhem spat forth from both vessels. Tens of thousands of terrawatts of energy lit up the perpetual night sky of space as if a new star were born.

Phaser fire sizzled against the shields of the Bird-of-Prey as two photon torpedoes detonated nearby, releasing the harsh, searing energy of the annihilation of matter and anti-matter. At almost the same instant, a blindingly bright orb of green energy erupted from the nose of the Klingon ship, quickly enveloping the *Bluefin* and unleashing hellish radiation against the cutter's shields, which blazed like St. Elmo's fire, then failed.

Darkness returned once more to the Molari asteroid belt.

Chapter 10

Stardate 53500.0 (3 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Asteroid Belt

Strauss shook her head, trying to clear the ringing in her ears. She had a pounding headache, the nasty taste of blood in her mouth, and felt like she might throw up, but at least she was still alive.

She turned, wincing at the sudden announced pain from bruises and contusions, to survey the bridge. T'Ser was kneeling by the prone form of the Captain. Strauss' blood turned cold.

"T'Ser! The Captain - is he? . . ." asked Strauss, anxiously.

T'Ser looked up. "His pulse is strong, but he's unconscious. He probably has a concussion. I've already contacted sickbay for a medical team."

Strauss, quickly rallied, realizing they were still in a potentially dangerous tactical situation. She shifted to command mode. "Status?"

Galt fielded the question. "We're alive and the ship's intact. Thank the twelve deities for *that!* The Klingon ship appears to be drifting for now, no weapons reading at present, although they still have power and life support."

"And *Bluefin's* status?" pressed Strauss.

Galt winced as he turned in his chair; a pronounced bump was over one eye. "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

Strauss breathed heavily. "Just give it all to me."

Galt looked at a display at his station. "We've lost warp drive, which I anticipated. We also lost phasers - feedback from their energy weapon fried the emitters. Torpedoes are also off-line, navigational deflectors are operational but will need some work." He paused. "The good news - life support is fine and there are no hull breaches, but I bet we took some dings to the hull plates here and there. The warp core is intact but the coils are damaged. We'll need two weeks in the ship yard to get those replaced. Communications are inoperative, but I can have that fixed in short order. Oh,

and we have the secondary shields operating, but only at 40%. Impulse drive is fully operational."

A medical team, led by Dr. Baxter, exited the turbo-lift and moved quickly to the Captain. Baxter favored Inga for a moment and smiled wryly.

"Commander Strauss, I presume? Calvin Baxter - sorry we haven't had the chance to be properly introduced." He knelt down and ran a medical scanner over Akinola.

Inga smiled weakly at the doctor. "We've both been kind of busy. How is he, Doctor?"

Baxter regarded the scanner with a slight frown and grunted. "A concussion - third one this year!" He shook his head in aggravation. "He'll be just fine Commander. We'll get him down to sickbay for observation but he'll soon be as right as rain."

"Other casualties?" asked Struass.

"Only bumps and bruises so far." Baxter gave her a meaningful look. "We were very lucky!"

Akinola moaned and his eyelids fluttered open and fixed on Baxter. He groaned, and then spoke. "Well, since it's you, I must not be dead."

"No Joseph, once again you've been saved by your amazingly hard head," said Baxter.

Akinola tried to sit up, but Baxter gently restrained him. "Uh-uh-uh! It's off to a bio-bed for you. Commander Strauss has matters well in hand."

The wave of nausea and dizziness that overwhelmed Akinola convinced him. He closed his eyes and lay back on the deck. He waved Strauss over. "Status?" he croaked.

"We're alive, intact and have minimal shields and impulse. Weapons and warp drive are down," replied Strauss.

"Okay . . . take care of the ship." he said in a raspy voice. He appeared to be losing consciousness again. "Don't forget the rocks, Inga . . ." Akinola slipped

back into the arms of Morpheus. Baxter and two medics transported him off the bridge on an anti-grav gurney.

T'Ser looked at Struass, puzzled. "Rocks?"

"Probably the concussion," said Strauss. "Scan that other ship - I want to know if they're dead or getting prepared for another run."

T'Ser responded. "I just did - they are functioning, but their mains are off-line. I believe they may have maneuvering thrusters but no impulse or warp drive. As to weapons, they are all off-line at present and their shields are down to 20%."

"Life-signs?"

"There are 20 life signs on board. Some of these are fading, however. It appears they were less prepared for our barrage than we for theirs," said T'Ser.

Inga stared at the sinister image of the Bird-of-Prey hanging in space. "Well, we need to finish this. Can we beam over a boarding party?"

T'Ser shook her head. "No, even down to 20%, their shields will block our ability to use the transporter."

Strauss sat in the command chair, and thoughtful look on her face. "Alright, we need a plan B."

* * *

Stardate 53500.0 (3 July 2376)

Klingon Bird-of-Prey

Molari Asteroid Belt

The Klingon commander coughed and spat bright, pink blood onto the deck. The atmosphere was even thicker than normal with smoke from electrical fires. He quickly sought to assess the situation. Emergency lights provided only bare, grudging illumination to the damaged bridge.

"Report!" He barked, raspily.

He received no reply at first, and then the helmsman roused up from his board, blood oozing from a gash to his head. He blinked once, trying to focus his eyes on his read-outs and then spoke. "My Lord, we have lost both warp and sub-light drives. Life support is fluctuating. Shields are down to 20%. We have maneuvering thrusters on stand-by."

The commander growled, "Weapons, fool! What of our *weapons*?"

The helmsman staggered to the gunnery station, absently pushing his dead crew mate out of the seat. He took a moment to study the flickering displays and shook his head. "Phasers are gone - the emitters are fused. Of course, no torpedoes with the plasma cannon. And the cannon itself . . . "the helmsman peered at the unfamiliar readings, "is off-line but appears undamaged. However, the power conduits are damaged. We might be able to re-charge and fire a burst, but we may destroy ourselves in the process."

The disenfranchised Klingon Commander simply sat still for a moment, his anger a smoldering ember. *If only we had decent disruptors instead of those useless Orion phasers!*, he thought. He turned to berate the Romulan agent for his foolish ruse and saw the spy, lying lifeless on the deck in a pool of dark green blood, a large piece of shrapnel jutting from the remains of his left eye.

"So!" he said to the corpse. "It *is* turning into a good day, after all!"

He turned back to the crewman. "What of the Federation ship? Was it destroyed?"

The helmsman returned to his station. He banged his fist on his board. "The Federation ship is *intact!*" he said, anger mixed with disbelief in his voice. "It is not possible!"

The Commander nodded slowly, a thin, appreciative smile on his face. "A worthy adversary, indeed," he murmured to himself. To the helmsman, he barked - "Their status, fool! What of their weapons? Their shields?"

The helmsman concentrated on his readouts. "Weapons are off-line. They have shields, but they are weakened - appear to be less than 50%. They are holding station at the moment."

"They probably want to negotiate terms for our surrender," the Commander said with a sneer. "Helmsman! Begin charging the plasma cannon!" He sat back in his chair. "There will be songs sung of our exploits!"

"Not if no one is left alive to report it," muttered the helmsman to himself.

* * *

Stardate 53500.0 (3 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Asteroid Belt

"Commander? I'm reading an energy build-up on the Klingon vessel!" said T'Ser. "It appears that they are charging the energy weapon."

Strauss stood up. "Time until they can fire?"

T'Ser replied, "Best guess? With their damage, probably five minutes."

Strauss turned to Galt. "Commander, is there *any* chance you can re-create the static subspace field again?"

Galt shook his head. "No way. I had to use the warp coils to create the first one and they're fried. Our shields alone won't help at full strength, much less at 50%."

Strauss turned again to T'Ser. "Can we outrun it?"

"Unlikely at impulse speeds. The energy burst would overtake us before we could get out of range."

Strauss said, "Then we've got to take them out first."

Galt snorted, "Sure! We've got no phasers, no torpedoes. I know! We could threaten to write a nasty letter to the Klingon Chancellor!"

"Stow it, Commander," said Strauss sharply. "I need options, and I need them now!" She maintained her gaze on the screen, watching the Klingon vessel. As she did, a shadow passed over the hull of the other ship - a large asteroid drifting lazily through space. She suddenly heard the Captain's voice in her head, "... *Don't forget the rocks, Inga.* "

She whirled back toward Galt. "Do we still have tractor beams?"

At first, Galt looked confused. "Well, yes, but I don't see . . ." He paused, a look of realization coming over his face. "Fornicating deities! *Yes!*" He turned to his station, tapping switches, and then turned back to Strauss, a toothy grin on his furry muzzle. "We have full power on all four tractor beams."

Commander Strauss spoke quickly. "Commander Galt, latch on to that asteroid and bring it our way . . . right through that ship! Helm, prepare for evasive maneuvers - this may get hairy!"

* * *

Stardate 53500.0 (3 July 2376)
Klingon Bird-of-Prey
Molari Asteroid Belt

The Klingon commander watched the Federation ship on his screen. He was somewhat disappointed that he could not contact them, that he could not see their faces when they realized that he, Krell of House K'Tinga, had beaten them.

"My Lord!" exclaimed the helmsman.

"What is it? Is the weapon charged?" asked Krell.

"The enemy vessel has engaged tractor beams!"

Krell frowned, "We do not appear to be caught in a tractor beam."

"Sir, the beams are not aimed at us!"

Realization suddenly hit the Klingon commander. "*Thrusters*, you fool! Move us, now - *NOW!*"

A proximity warning klaxon began blaring on the bridge of the Bird-of-Prey. The helmsman spoke, tonelessly, "Too late."

The 790 thousand metric ton asteroid was quite small relative to other asteroids in the Molari Belt. It was much too small to receive its own designation on any star charts. The deflectors of most capital ships would move it aside effortlessly. But it still had more mass than a *Galaxy* class starship and it ripped through the Klingon vessel as if it were wet tissue paper. The collision created an explosion that vaporized the Bird-of-Prey and

knocked a few minor fragments from the asteroid. The explosion flared briefly, then quickly dimmed, the asteroid continuing on its endless journey at the edge of the Molari system.

* * *

Stardate 53500.0 (3 July 2376)

USS Bluefin

Molari Asteroid Belt

Commander Strauss watched the asteroid annihilate the Bird-of-Prey as the *Bluefin* moved easily away from the blast effect and cloud of debris. She spoke softly, a look of weary satisfaction on her face.

"Send us a card from *Sto'Vo'Kor*, you cold son of a bitch."

Chapter 11

Stardate 53500.8 (3 July 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 0323

Captain Joseph Akinola sat up in his bio-bed, enjoying a bowl of cherry vanilla ice cream. He looked up as Commander Strauss entered sickbay.

Akinola began to speak, "Well, Commander . . ."

Strauss interrupted. "Sir, damage control parties are at work and repairs are underway. Communications are back up and shields are back to 100%. I've ordered helm to make best speed out of the Molari Belt and rendezvous with the USS *Matterhorn* ."

"Commander . . ."

"At which time, Captain Hastings will tow us back to the ship yard at Star Station Echo, ETA - four days. Galt says that repairs should take . . ."

"Commander!"

Strauss stopped suddenly, embarrassed. She realized that she had been rambling, so intent on giving her report, that she had not responded to the captain.

Akinola looked at the young officer, grinning. "Nicely done, Commander! Now, sit down before you fall down," he ordered, not unkindly.

She looked down for a moment, still embarrassed, and then took a seat on a stool by Akinola's bed. She realized how very tired she was, now that the adrenaline rush had faded.

"Sorry, sir. I just wanted to submit my report and get back to the bridge," she said.

"The bridge will still be there when you get back, XO. We have a good crew and they're busy doing their jobs. Let them," he said, gently. "T'Ser already stopped by and told me what happened. You showed good command presence and made the right decisions under a tremendous amount of stress."

Strauss kept her gaze fixed on the deck. She could feel herself blush. "Sir, *you* were the one with the idea to use the tractors on an asteroid. I was slow on the uptake . . ."

"*Bull!*" Akinola said, firmly, startling Strauss. "I didn't tell you what to do. I was barely conscious and you heard me babbling about rocks. It was *your* initiative, Commander, and your proper assessment of the tactical situation and the options that saved this ship. You made good use of your officers and you kept your wits. I know you were scared - Hell, I was too!" He paused before resuming in a quieter tone.

"Inga, you did well today. You still have a lot to learn about this old cutter and what we're about, but I'm confident that you've got what it takes to serve on the *Bluefin*. Now . . . would you like some ice-cream?"

Strauss stood, a tired smile on her face. "Thank you sir, but I can't stand cherry vanilla. If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to work."

Akinola feigned a hurt expression on his face, "Fine. See if I offer to share my ice cream again." His smile returned. "Go on Commander. I'll see you later."

After Strauss left, Akinola pulled a computer screen to his bed. He contacted the Ensign at communications and gave her instructions. Soon, the face of Chief Inspector Timothy McGrath appeared.

"Chief Inspector, do you have any news for me?"

McGrath nodded. "*I do. But you realize that we cant legally use this information in any Federation legal proceedings.*"

"I figured as much," said Akinola. "I have an idea about getting around that, though. Now, tell me what you've learned."

McGrath did.

* * *

One month later . . .

Stardate 53594.1 (5 August 2376)

Office of the Governor Plateau City, Molari III

Governor George Tarleck stood at the large windows of his opulent office, gazing out at the Red Mountains of Molari III. He was smoking a cigar made of the finest, most expensive Ferengi tobacco. A snifter of Saurian brandy was in his right hand. Tarleck was a large, corpulent man, wearing a finely tailored suit. He smiled as he surveyed his domain. He was also in a very good mood.

The deal he'd brokered with the Klingon renegade, Krell, would more than cover the debt he owed the Orion Syndicate. His small part of the deal, luring a Federation asteroid breaker into a trap, had been a simple matter. While there might be questions about why he had done so, he had plausible deniability about the ship's destruction. Regrettable, of course, was the loss of lives, but business was business. He cared not a bit for the Klingon's motives or his "honor." In his mind, Krell was a loser, a low-level privateer who had picked the wrong side in the short-lived Klingon civil war. What had interested Tarleck were the crates of gold-pressed latinum that Krell had delivered.

He'd recently learned that Krell's ship had been destroyed out in the Belt. He figured that there was no way that he could be linked to the Klingon's activities and that he was free and clear. No loose ends suited him very well.

Tarleck's reverie was interrupted by a commotion at the door of his office.

"You can't go in without an appointment!" Tarleck's assistant was saying.

Two men moved past the flustered secretary. One was a Starfleet officer, the other, an all too familiar figure.

"Chief Inspector McGrath!" said Tarleck, "So nice of you to drop in. I see you're still getting your suits from re-manufactured replicators. Ms. Carlin, it's alright. You may go back to your desk."

The buxom secretary with the bright, purple hair quickly closed the door. Tarleck forced a genteel smile on his face. "Can I offer you gentlemen refreshment - coffee? Perhaps something stronger?"

McGrath and Akinola ignored the false hospitality. The lawman spoke first. "Governor Tarleck, we know that you were involved in the recent ambush and destruction of the Border Service vessel, USS *Kilimanjaro* and that you

were involved in a conspiracy with a renegade Klingon to falsely implicate the Orion Syndicate."

Tarleck was not a man who spooked easily. He picked up a large, gold lighter from his desk and re-lit his cigar. He spoke around the cigar, expressing clouds of fragrant smoke.

"That's a pretty bold accusation, McGrath. But I very much doubt you have any real evidence to back it up. Besides, why would *I* want to do such a terrible thing?"

"Maybe to get the Syndicate off your back permanently," replied the Starfleet officer, "by having us retaliate against them for destroying one of our ships."

Tarleck kept his poker face, but that comment had found its mark. "And just *who* the Hell are you?"

"Captain Joseph Akinola, commanding officer of the USS *Bluefin*." The tall, dark-skinned human replied. "There were over 70 beings from a dozen worlds on the *Kilimanjaro*. Men and women who would lay down their lives to save your sorry ass if you were really in trouble. You set them up. They walked into your trap, and now my colleagues and friends are dead," he said, ice in his voice, "Just so you could avoid paying off some gambling debts."

Tarleck snorted derisively. "You know, this is getting tedious. I'm a busy man, so why don't you go and peddle your fairy tales somewhere else!"

McGrath remained unperturbed. "It might interest you to know that I had a nice little chat with one of your employees, a Mr. M'butto. I must say, he was a bit hesitant to talk with me - at first. But with a bit of . . . persuasion, he was quite talkative."

Tarleck's face went ashen. "That's inadmissible in *any* court in the Federation," he blustered, spittle flying from his mouth. "My lawyers will have a field day and *both* of you will be begging for a job in my mines when they're through with you, do you *hear!*"

McGrath regarded him through hooded eyes as a cat might regard an interesting rodent. "It *is* true, Tarleck, that Mr. M'butto's testimony is totally worthless in any Federation legal proceedings, despite the damning nature of his testimony. Oh, I have a recording, if you'd like to hear it," he offered.

Tarleck was off-balance, a position to which he was not accustomed. "Well . . . like you said - you've got no case!"

Akinola responded. "No. What he said was that we've no case under *Federation* law. That's true enough." He paused. "But *Klingon* law, well now . . . that's a different matter."

Tarleck's mouth went dry and his knees unhinged. He staggered backward against his desk. "You can't . . .," he rasped.

"Oh, but we *can!*" said Akinola, his voice hard. He tapped his comm badge. "Senior Chief Brin, please beam down our guests."

Momentarily, the shimmering effect of transporter energy appeared as three distinct columns. They quickly coalesced into three large Klingon warriors.

"Governor Tarleck, this is Lt. Trarn of the Imperial Klingon Defense Force. He and these two officers will escort you to Klingon space where you will be tried on charges of conspiracy to commit acts of treason against the Empire."

Tarleck was shaking with fear and rage. "*You can't do this!*" he screamed. "*I'm a Federation citizen.*"

McGrath spoke. "That is true. However, you should know that there are aspects of our mutual-defense treaty that allow for very speedy extradition in such cases. Of course, your attorneys will have an opportunity to appeal to the Klingons, but . . . that may be a lengthy process. And I believe that your attorneys may be busy with other aspects of your business affairs."

The Klingon Lieutenant moved forward and grabbed Tarleck roughly. He grinned menacingly, revealing a row of jagged teeth. "Come now, *Governor*, you may find that Rura Penthe is very nice this time of year."

* * *

Stardate 53594.5 (5 August 2376)

USS *Bluefin*

Standard orbit, Molari III

Captain Akinola sat in his ready room with a steaming cup of coffee. On his screen was the image of Admiral Morgan Bateson.

"So, Admiral, you agree that there was more to this than a crooked governor and a crazy, disgraced Klingon?"

On the screen, the Admiral ran a hand through his thinning hair. *"It would seem so. From what we could tell from inspecting the Bluefin's hull, the faint energy traces are consistent with what we know of Romulan plasma weapons."*

Akinola shook his head. "It doesn't make sense, Admiral. The Romulans never do anything without a very good reason. What could they possibly have gained from this - our going to war with the Syndicate? I don't see how that works."

Bateson looked troubled. *"I don't either. But if the Roms are involved in something on this side of the quadrant, you can bet it will mean more trouble for us."*

Akinola gave a thin smile. "Semper Paratus, sir. We're always ready!"

Bateson snorted. *"Thank God for that. Take care of yourself, Joseph. Bateson, out."*

Akinola turned off the screen and picked up a piece of wood and a carving knife. Although the piece was still in rough form, the characteristic shape of an *Everest* class asteroid breaker was apparent.

* * *

Stardate 53597.2 (8 August 2376)
A non-descript government office building
Romulus

"Tar'kilik was a valuable agent. The Director is highly displeased that he is dead."

The female Romulan operative inclined her head, acknowledging her superior. "It was a risky operation. The Klingon was far too head-strong."

The Supervisor steepled his fingers. "It was Tar'kilik who failed, not you T'Vash. You counseled against the plan."

"That is true. But if the strategem had succeeded, we would have been in an excellent position to make our foray into the Badlands."

The Supervisor frowned. "Never say, 'what if,' T'Vash. It is a bad habit and clouds your focus."

Another nod of the head. "As you say. What are your orders, Commander?"

"It is imperative that we get assets into the heart of the Badlands - before the Federation or the Klingons discover what lies hidden therein." he paused. "It is time to activate one of our sleeper agents in the Federation."

T'Vash raised an eyebrow and cautioned, "There is great risk."

The Supervisor nodded in agreement. "Sometimes, with great risk comes great reward!"

END