

Tales of the USS Bluefin Stand-Off! By The Lone Redshirt

PROLOGUE

Stardate 53947.7 (12 December 2376)
Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards
Mars Orbit

Captain Tyre D'Angelo regarded his new command, his *first* command, with satisfaction, though his expression remained impassive. He stood with his hands behind his back, almost at parade-rest, and noted that the registry number of the USS *Sequoia* now had an NCC rather than NX prefix. This pleased him – it was an outward symbol that the trials, the testing, and the shake-down phase were over. *Sequoia* was now ready for active duty.

To the passer-by, Captain D'Angelo would have seemed the ideal poster boy for Starfleet. He was handsome, well-muscled, and exuded an air of confidence and authority. Truth be told, he was all of these things and more. D'Angelo had overcome personal obstacles to gain entrance to the Academy, where he excelled both academically and in athletics. He was highly disciplined; almost a perfectionist, and his drive and ambition had eventually earned him the coveted rank of captain. At age 38, he was one of the youngest in Starfleet to hold that rank.

Yet the very qualities that had brought him to this point of his career served to isolate him. Though his fitness reports through the years ranged from “excellent” to “superior,” a close reading would reveal a common caveat. “Needs to loosen up,” commented one first officer. “Tends to be a loner,” remarked a department head. “Has difficulty building relationships,” observed a counselor. While serving on the USS *Ticonderoga*, he had gained the nick-name, “Ice-man.” Less charitable crewmates called him “Iceberg.” The tag had followed him from ship to ship. D'Angelo knew of the nick-name. He simply did not care.

These thoughts were far from his mind now as he waited for the ceremony whereby the Fast Response Cutter *Sequoia*, NCC-88800, would be added to

the list of active ships and given her first assignment. D'Angelo checked his reflection in the viewport, making sure his uniform was impeccable as always. A dark skinned man with brown eyes, close-cropped black hair and handsome features stared back. On the rare occasions when he smiled, his face became almost boyish. But those occasions were *very* rare.

In the viewport's reflection he also noted the approach of his Executive Officer, Commander Maria Galvani. She was walking with two crewmen, laughing expansively at something one of them said.

This did not please D'Angelo. He felt that Galvani tended to be lax regarding crew conduct and discipline. One could not expect efficient crew discipline if one was too "buddy-buddy." To him, it was unseemly behavior for an officer. D'Angelo supposed it was a by-product of her years spent on Border Service cutters. All of his previous experience had been with the "Regular Fleet." He would discuss that with her - again - later.

Commander Galvani walked up to D'Angelo, still wearing a broad grin on her face. She was a polar opposite to the Captain. Maria Galvani was outgoing, fun-loving, and was not averse to bending regulations if she saw the need arise. (Which was fairly often, D'Angelo mused.) She was tall and attractive, nearly as tall as Galvani, with classic Mediterranean features - high cheekbones, green eyes, olive complexion, and long black hair.

"Ready for the big event, Skipper?" she asked, a faint Italian accent seasoning her voice.

"Commander," D'Angelo said, "I've repeatedly asked you to call me 'Captain,' not 'Skipper.'" His tone was quiet, but a note of impatience crept in.

Her smile never faltered. "Suit yourself. But you'll have a hard time breaking the crew of it. 'Skipper' is an old Border Dog term. I wish you'd reconsider."

The Captain's jaw tightened imperceptibly. "It will be *your* job, XO, to get the crew in line. I expect you to abide by my wishes. The crew will follow your example."

"Aye, sir," she said, unperturbed. In truth, D'Angelo found Galvani's apparent nonchalance puzzling. She was the only one on the ship that was not intimidated by his presence. Part of him admired that trait, but it also unsettled him. At first, he had considered requesting a replacement for her,

but Galvani was so effective in her work that he decided to put up with her foibles.

“Captain D’Angelo?”

He turned and quickly straightened. Admiral Deidre Bouvier, Commander – Border Services, had walked up. Galvani also straightened.

“Admiral,” replied D’Angelo, evenly.

Bouvier glanced at Galvani. “Commander, would you be so kind as to allow me to speak with the Captain in private?” She turned her attention back to D’Angelo, effectively dismissing the XO.

“Yes ma’am,” replied Galvani. She still wore a smile, but D’Angelo noticed that the smile no longer extended to her eyes. Admiral Bouvier was *not* popular with most Border Service personnel. The XO turned on her heel and walked toward the bank of turbo-lifts.

The Admiral favored D’Angelo with a terse smile. Her thin frame and gaunt features made her smile appear as a grimace. Tyre kept his face neutral.

“I know the official ‘send-off’ is still two hours away, but I thought you’d be interested in your orders – a ‘sneak peak,’ if you will.” She seemed pleased with herself.

“Of course, Admiral - thank you.” replied D’Angelo. Truthfully, he had mixed feelings about Admiral Bouvier. He knew very well that she had political aspirations and saw her current position as a spring-board to C-in-C. From there . . . well, that was her business. D’Angelo also knew that she had paved the way for him to take command of the first of the *Sequoia*-class cutters - a move that rankled many in the Border Service. D’Angelo had never served on a cutter. It was no secret that Bouvier wanted to make changes in the Border Service. Rumor had it that her goal was to integrate it fully into Starfleet.

D’Angelo had no desire to be any one’s pawn, but he couldn’t pass up the opportunity that this fourth pip and a command billet afforded.

Bouvier turned her gaze toward the new cutter. “*Sequoia* is the first new cutter designed specifically for the Border Service in decades. I plan on modernizing the Service, Captain, and to do that, changes will be forthcoming.”

Tyre maintained a respectful silence.

The Admiral, taking his silence for agreement, continued. "Things have grown lax in the Border Service, Captain D'Angelo. Currently, we have a hodge-podge of elderly ships and a group of commanding officers that are far too independent minded for my liking! I intend to bring cohesion, discipline and accountability to the Service, much as you yourself are accustomed. In time, we may integrate this rag-tag outfit into the greater whole of Starfleet!" She turned back toward him, the tight grin even wider on her face.

"I'm sending you where dinosaurs still roam, Captain."

D'Angelo's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Ma'am? I'm not sure I follow."

"After a couple of months patrol duty in occupied Cardassian space, you will be attached to the Seventh Border Service Squadron at Star Station Echo, commanded by Admiral Bateson. *That* is the nexus of the old-school commanders, which – in time - I intend to break up! You will be the first of the new breed of captains I plan to install."

Wisely, D'Angelo kept his opinion to himself. Apparently, he was to be a pawn, after all.

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Chapter One

Stardate 54243.4 (30 March 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04331

“Bring us to within 500 meters, Ensign,” ordered Commander Inga Strauss, XO of the cutter *Bluefin*. “Ahead, dead slow.”

“Aye, ma’am,” replied the young Andorian helmsman, Ensign Drii An’Shil. She swallowed in nervous apprehension as she guided the cutter close to the disabled subspace relay buoy. It wasn’t actually necessary to maneuver so close to the relay, but An’Shil knew the XO was testing her to see if she could handle the stress of such a close rendezvous.

An’Shil watched the proximity display and caressed the controls which activated the bow thrusters. The *Bluefin* slowed to a relative stop.

“Five hundred meters, ma’am,” announced An’Shil, a relieved smile on her face.

“Very well. Thrusters at station-keeping.” Strauss turned toward the Ops station. “Ensign Vashtee, please inform Chief Rumraa that his team may retrieve the relay buoy.” Inga stood and stifled a yawn. “By the way, nicely done Drii!”

The Andorian helmsman flushed a deep shade of blue. “Thank you, Commander.” She grinned to herself. She was finally getting the hang of piloting the cutter after a rocky start a month earlier. An’Shil had discovered that there was a vast difference between being proficient on a simulator and skillfully piloting the real thing! Thankfully, her mistakes had not been catastrophic, and the senior officers had been patient with her . . . well, for the most part!

An’Shil suddenly became aware of someone standing by her station. She looked up, surprised to see Lt. Sarnek.

“I relieve you, Ensign,” he said, patiently.

“Oh! I’m sorry sir – I didn’t realize that the shift had ended!”

“Obviously,” noted the Vulcan helmsman.

An'Shil stood and saw that most of beta shift had already exited the bridge and gamma shift was already in place. Lt. Commander Simms looked up from a PADD she was reading and smiled at An'Shil from the command chair.

"Ensign, don't be so anxious to pull a double shift! You'll have plenty of chances to lose sleep before you retire," Simms said with a wink.

"Yes ma'am," replied An'Shil, meekly. She was still intimidated by the senior officers, even though they had been kind to her, especially Commander Sims. But Captain Akinola still made her nervous! She was glad she had been moved to beta shift. She could swear that she could *feel* the Captain's eyes on the back of her head every time she was slow making a course change.

"Come on Drii!" called Maya Vashtee from the lift, "or would you rather take the ladder?"

"Coming!" she said, and hurried to join the Sri Lankan operations officer. Delta Simms smiled and shook her head as she turned her attention back to the report on her PADD.

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Joseph Akinola stepped back and brought his left forearm around in a sweeping block, easily deflecting his opponent's punch to his mid-section. Quickly, he counter-struck by shifting his hips forward and launching a straight-arm punch.

Solly Brin parried Akinola's punch with a rising forearm block, stepped back and administered a front snap-kick which the Captain deflecting with a downward, sweeping block.

Both men stepped back, bowed toward each other, and turned to face the gathered crewmen in the gym.

"And that's how I want you to do it," said the Captain, "fluid motion – let your weight transfer do the work for you. Don't worry about speed or power; focus on balance and snapping your punch at the end. Any questions?"

The gathered crewmen in their white *ghis* looked around, but no one spoke.

“Alright,” continued Akinola, “get with your partner and run through the sparring routine. Remember - belt testing is in two weeks, so brush up on your *katas*.” He gestured toward Solly, “Senior Chief Brin will hang around if any of you need any coaching.”

Solly nodded and clapped his hands together. “Okay people, pair up!”

Akinola stepped off the wood floor, turned and bowed as was tradition in *Shodokan*, then headed out of the gym toward the turbo-lift. As he entered the lift, he slumped against the wall as the pain in his side threatened to overwhelm him. Gritting his teeth, he hissed, “Sickbay.”

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Dr. Octavius Castille glanced at his medical scanner, frowned, and closed it with a practiced snap of his wrist. He folded his arms and looked at the Captain unhappily.

“I thought I told you to take it easy with the karate,” he said.

“I *have* been taking it easy, Doc! Hell, Solly and I weren’t even making contact. It just felt like something sort of popped, then my whole side started burning.”

“You’ve got torn cartilage in your rib-cage. The *same* cartilage I’ve repaired *twice* in the last four months! For God’s sake, Captain, do you *enjoy* undoing my work?”

“Maybe if you’d patch me up *better*, I wouldn’t be in here so often!” Akinola retorted.

Castille glowered. “May I remind you that you just turned sixty? While it is true that, statistically speaking, you probably have that many years left, your body no longer heals as quickly as when you were thirty or forty. And it’s not going to get better!”

“Just wave your damn machines over me Doc, and send me on my way,” groused the Captain.

“Uh-uh. It doesn’t work that way, Captain. And let me remind you, in here, *I* make the rules, not you.” Castille went to a cabinet and pulled out a hypospray. He moved it towards Akinola’s neck.

Akinola pulled back. "What's that for?"

Castille waved the hypospray in front of Akinola's face. "In a perfect world, it would allow me to control your mind whereby you might actually *follow* my advice. Unfortunately, this is only going to relieve the pain and reduce the swelling. Come back in about two hours and I'll see what I can do about knitting back that cartilage – *again!*"

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Stardate 54243.4 (30 March 2377)

SS Queen Elizabeth VII

Sector 04339

Captain Wallace Lumford, C.O. of the Cunard Star Lines flagship, the *Queen Elizabeth VII*, stood on the bridge of the famous starliner, enjoying the relative quiet and glad for a respite from the passengers. While he enjoyed mingling with people and conversation at dinner, he always looked forward to these quiet moments on his bridge.

Lumford looked around at the other blue-coated officers who efficiently oversaw the operations of the massive ship. He took quiet pride in both their professionalism and their genuine affection for the old liner.

The *QE VII* was nearly fifty years old. Next year would be the special jubilee celebration for the ship, then, retirement for the great starliner and for Lumford as well.

He had served as master of the ship for the past 12 years. They had been good years – mostly. The past few years during the war had been a challenge, but the ship and crew had performed admirably when the *QE VII* had been pressed into service as a troop transport.

Now, refitted and restored to her rightful glory, the royal lady moved at a leisurely warp 8, en route to Vega from Earth. On this particular run, the ship carried 1800 passengers plus over 1000 officers and crew. Not quite full capacity, but a large manifest, nonetheless.

Captain Lumford reached into his coat pocket and pulled out an antique watch – a centuries old stem-winder that had been passed down from generation to generation of Lumfords until he gained ownership when his

father passed away. He opened the gold lid and checked the time against the ship's chronometer. Of course, the ancient time-piece could not calculate stardates, but it kept 'normal' time quite admirably.

He snapped shut the lid and replaced the watch in his pocket, watching the stars streak past on the main viewscreen.

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Thirty decks below the bridge and nearly 900 meters aft, Steward 2nd class Kenda Byress latched the door to his tiny room and began to work. He gathered components from various drawers, under his bunk, and even from the heel of a boot. In short order, he had the components assembled and laying on his bunk. He smiled in satisfaction as he gazed at the Klingon disruptor pistol before him.

He glanced at the wall chronometer. Still over eighteen hours until he and his fellow Neo-Maquis operatives went into action.

The Bajoran quickly disassembled the disruptor and once more hid the components. He splashed some water on his face, straightened his white uniform jacket, and, breathing a silent prayer to the prophets, he left his quarters for the main dining room some twenty eight decks above.

Chapter Two

Stardate 54243.7 (30 March 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Approaching Star Station Echo

"The station has given us clearance to dock, sir, berth five," announced Ensign Dakdar, from operations.

"Very well," replied Captain D'Angelo. "Take us in Mr. Nguyen."

"Aye, sir," replied the Vietnamese helmsman.

D'Angelo took in the sight of the star station. Over a century old, Star Station Echo had grown considerably over the decades. A long, central core was surrounded by three large docking pods, each capable of berthing eight ships as large as *Excelsior*-class. Larger class ships simply orbited the station. Even now, a *Galaxy*-class ship loitered nearby. D'Angelo noted an *Albacore*-class ship heading out from its berth. It was the USS *Pompano*, commanded by Captain Zhurtha, as he recalled. D'Angelo had made it a point to commit to memory the ships and their captains of the seventh cutter squadron.

"Impulse engines to standby. Thrusters on-line, preparing for docking maneuver," said Nguyen. The ship rocked slightly as they moved within the gravity envelope of the station. Momentarily, there was another slight rumble through the hull and the muted thuds of the docking clamps engaging.

"All stop," announced the helmsman. "Positive lock on docking clamps. Thrusters off-line. The helm is secure, Captain."

"Positive seal on airlock. Station power is available," announced Dakdar.

"Transmit my compliments to station control, connect to station power grid and take our engines off-line." D'Angelo stood. "XO, my ready room, please."

Commander Galvani stood from her station at tactical and followed the Captain to the ready room, located just aft of the bridge.

D'Angelo's ready room was neat, almost Spartan in appearance. His black desk was devoid of any personal items or knick-knacks. A generic star-scape painting adorned the wall behind his desk and a few pieces of abstract

sculpture sat forlorn on a shelf along one wall. Again, Galvani was struck by the absence of any holo-cubes or pictures of family, friends or shipmates.

The Captain took a seat behind the desk. "Commander, before you begin shore leave rotations, I want you to notify the department heads to prepare for inspection."

Galvani was surprised. "Sir?"

D'Angelos' expression did not betray his annoyance at repeating himself. "You heard me, XO. The inspection will commence in one hour."

"Sir, couldn't we conduct an inspection later? The crew has been drilling non-stop ever since we left Utopia Planitia - they're tired and ready for some R&R."

"And they will have ample opportunity for rest, Commander, *after* the inspection."

Galvani took a breath. "Permission to speak freely?"

D'Angelo leaned back in his chair, silent for a moment as he regarded her with dark, inscrutable eyes. "Go ahead," he said, finally.

Galvani placed her hands on his desk and leaned forward. "The crew has done well these past few weeks - each time we've run a drill, their time has improved and the number of errors has decreased. Running an inspection now will seem like punishment! You're riding them too hard!"

The Captain's expression did not waver. "Is that all, Commander?"

Galvani straightened and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "Just one other thing - If you're trying to prove yourself to the other C.O.'s around here, you're going about it the wrong way!"

D'Angelo's eyes narrowed slightly. "*That* will be all, Commander. Instruct the department heads that the inspection begins in fifty-seven minutes."

She maintained her gaze just short of insubordination. "Aye, sir," she said, stiffly, as she turned to leave.

"Commander?"

Galvani paused, and turned back to face the Captain.

"Sir?" she asked, her anger barely veiled.

"The crew did well during the drills. I have some commendations I'd like to give out, but I'll need your input. Perhaps we can discuss it tomorrow?"

Galvani blinked, caught off-guard. "Ah, yes sir. That would be fine."

D'Angelo nodded. "Good! 1400 hours, tomorrow then. Dismissed."

The XO stepped out of the ready room and the door hissed shut behind her. She shook her head in frustration. *Dammit!* she thought, *Just when I think I have the guy figured out...*

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Stardate 54243.8 (30 March 2377)

Star Station Echo

Office of Admiral Morgan Bateson - Commander, Seventh Border Service Squadron

"Admiral? Captain D'Angelo is here to see you," came the voice of Bateson's aide over the com link.

"Send him on in," replied Bateson. He stood and walked around his desk as his office door opened and Captain D'Angelo entered. The young C.O. straightened nearly to attention.

"Captain Tyre D'Angelo and *Sequoia* reporting for duty, sir!" he said briskly.

Bateson grinned broadly and extended a large hand. "Welcome to the Borderlands, Captain," as he shook D'Angelo's hand. "Come on and sit down so we can get acquainted. Would you like some coffee? Perhaps something a bit stronger?"

D'Angelo shook his head fractionally. "Thank you, no, sir."

"Eh, suit yourself!" Bateson ordered coffee from his replicator and carried the steaming mug to his desk. His chair creaked audibly as he leaned back, hands folded across his midsection as he regarded his new Captain.

"So how are things in Cardie territory?" Bateson asked.

"Fairly quiet, sir. We didn't encounter any problems while there."

"Good, good," said Bateson as he took a sip of coffee. "And the *Sequoia*? Any teething pains to report?"

"None worth mentioning sir."

"I see," said Bateson. *Damn, this kid is stiff!* he thought.

"Sir, I'd like to request that we receive our assignment as quickly as possible so we can get underway in the next couple of days."

Bateson's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Oh? What's the hurry, Captain? You just arrived."

"The crew still needs some work, Admiral. I'd like a quick turn-around so we can get back to our drills and get on-station."

"Uh-*huh*," replied Bateson. He remained silent for several moments, regarding D'Angelo with hooded eyes. "And you think a quick turn-around will help you mold your crew into a disciplined, cohesive unit - am I right?"

Bateson noticed a slight twitch of surprise around D'Angelo's eyes - the first expressive act from the young man he had seen.

"Sir, I know it takes time . . ."

"Do you?" interrupted Bateson. "From where I'm sitting, it sounds like you don't understand a basic command principle - an exhausted crew is a dangerous crew. We're not on a war footing, Captain. Work them hard when you're on station, but when you can take a break - do it!"

D'Angelo's mouth tightened. "With respect, sir. Isn't that my call as C.O. of the ship?"

Bateson's gaze did not waver. "It is, Captain. And as Squadron Commander, it is *my* job to make sure that each of my cutters has both the resources they need as well as clearly defined parameters for their missions. One of those

resources, Captain, is a place and time for rest. This station is well-equipped in that regard. I hope that you will avail yourself of it."

"Is that an order, Admiral?" D'Angelo asked, stiffly.

"No. No, it's not. Think of it as a suggestion."

"Yes sir."

Bateson changed the subject. "Tonight at 1900 hours, there will be a reception for the cutter skippers who are in-port. It will be a good opportunity for you to get acquainted with some of your colleagues."

"Actually, sir, I wanted to meet with my chief engineer this evening regarding some adjustments to the impulse drive."

Bateson placed his coffee mug back on his desk, sat up and clasped his hands before him on the desk. He leaned forward and favored the young man with a smile.

"Captain, that *wasn't* a suggestion. It's an order. I'll see you at 1900 in the Reception Room two doors down from this office. Oh, and bring your XO, too."

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Stardate 54243.8 (30 March 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04339

Security Technician 1st Class Rondo Frinz made his rounds though the maze of access tunnels of the great star liner, checking to make sure no passengers had wandered into hazardous or unauthorized areas. He absently hummed a Rigellian folk tune that had been playing in his head most of his shift. In another hour, he'd be off-duty and in the crew rec room for the nightly *Maknaj* game.

As he came to a hatch marked "Internal Sensor Control" he paused, a puzzled frown on his face. The lock status light should have glowed red for locked or green for open. Instead, the indicator was dark.

He took the e-key on his lanyard and inserted it in the slot, while pressing his thumb against an adjacent plate.

The door hummed, but did not open at first. He was about to tap his combadge when the door suddenly slid open. Lt. Muriel Allender stood just inside, an embarrassed smile on her face.

Frinz blinked in surprise. "Lieutenant? What are you doing in there? This is a restricted zone!"

She responded with a sheepish look. "I know, Rondo, but, well . . . come in, it's easier for me to show you than explain."

More puzzled than suspicious, Frinz did as Allender bade and entered the sensor control room. The door slid quietly shut behind them.

"Come around here and see for yourself," Lt. Allender said, beckoning him to follow her behind tall banks of isolinear chips.

He rounded the corner to find the body of Crewman Il'shuun lying in a pool of congealing aquamarine blood. He looked at Allender in shock.

"Lieutenant, what's going . . ." He never finished his sentence as Allender's ceramic blade slid between his ribs, puncturing his pericardium and left lung.

Frinz looked down, stupefied by the knife sticking out of his chest. He looked back at Lt. Allender with an expression of surprised reproach before his eyes rolled back and he collapsed on the deck.

Another figure stepped from the shadows. A Bajoran female in civilian garb grimaced at the second corpse.

"You said we wouldn't be interrupted!" the Bajoran said accusingly.

"Calm down, Hyra! He won't be missed for at least an hour. We'll be done here in less than five minutes. After that, no one on the bridge will be able to scan the interior of the ship for weapons or individuals!" Allender pulled an isolinear chip from her tunic, replacing one of the myriad chips in the panel. An indicator light changed from green to red, then back to green.

Allender smiled in satisfaction. "There! That's done! Now, help me move these two out of the way."

Chapter Three

Stardate 54243.8 (30 March 2377)

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo - Berth Twelve

As the *Bluefin* secured from arrival stations, Captain Akinola regarded the viewscreen with a sense of bemusement and irritation. Adjacent to them in berth eleven was the *USS Sequoia*, the newest ship in the Border Service.

"Nice looking cutter," remarked Lt. Commander T'Ser as she rose from her station.

"Oh, it's a pretty enough ship, Commander. I just hope it's tough enough to get the job done."

T'Ser lifted an eyebrow in a very Vulcan manner. "I take it you don't like the design?"

Akinola turned his gaze from the viewscreen toward her. "Captain Rodenko calls the ship 'Bouvier's folly.' I tend to agree with him. As a fast patrol vessel or picket, it would probably be fine. But I have serious doubts about its durability as a border cutter. Our squadron spends a lot of time in the badlands and our ships tend to take a beating."

"So I've noticed," said T'Ser, dryly.

Akinola smiled. "Yeah, I'm preaching to the choir. The other problem is the lack of tractor beam emitters." He gestured toward the screen. "That ship doesn't have the capability of towing anything larger than a runabout - not very useful in our line of business."

T'Ser frowned. "So . . . why did this design get the go-ahead?"

Akinola's smile faded. "That, Commander, is the million credit question."

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At 1845 hours, Captain Akinola and Commander Strauss made their way through the station toward the captain's reception. Akinola side-stepped an elderly Bolian couple that waddled past, then stopped abruptly, almost causing Strauss to collide with him.

A smile broke out on his face. "Well, I'll be damned! Maria - how the hell are you?" he said, a note of pleasant surprise in his voice.

The petite Strauss tried to look around Akinola. "What?"

"Captain Akinola! It's great to see you again!"

Strauss was surprised to see the Captain and a striking female commander with dark hair embrace warmly, right in the middle of the promenade.

Akinola turned, smiling and gestured to Inga. "Commander Maria Galvani, this is Commander Inga Strauss, my XO on the *Bluefin*."

Galvani stepped forward and shook Inga's hand. She was a full head taller than the petite German woman. "Nice to meet you, Commander Strauss."

Strauss returned the handshake. "Likewise," replied Inga, somewhat puzzled.

"Commander Galvani served on *Bluefin* as Ops officer for about five years - right before T'Ser came on board." explained Akinola. Galvani nodded in agreement. "She was promoted to Lt. Commander and got herself transferred to the Second Squadron along the Romulan Neutral Zone." He turned back to the Italian commander. "So what are you doing here, Maria?"

"I'm the XO on the *Sequoia*," she replied.

"Is that so?" Akinola wore an enigmatic smile. "Your C.O. is, who, Captain D'Artagnan?"

Galvani made a face. "Do you still do that? Honestly!" she said in mock frustration. "You know damn well his name is Tyre D'Angelo." She gave Inga a conspiratorial wink. "He does that on purpose, you know."

Inga smiled and nodded sagely. "*Oh*, yes. I know!"

Akinola's eyes crinkled as he grinned. "I have no idea what you're talking about." His gaze became more penetrating. "So, how do you like serving on the *Sequoia*."

Something passed across Galvani's face for a moment, then was gone, but not before Akinola noticed. "Fine, sir! Of course, we're still getting to know the ship and one another, but everything is coming together."

Akinola knew Galvani was not being entirely truthful, but he did not comment. "Glad to hear it, Maria." He glanced at an overhead chronometer. "Look, we can talk at the reception - we better get moving or we're going to be late."

* * *

A well-laden buffet table graced the center of the spacious reception room. Hors d'ouerves and finger foods from several cultures were arranged in a tantalizing manner. Of course, a reception hosted by Admiral Bateson would not be complete without a well-stocked bar.

As the three officers entered, Akinola was immediately accosted by one of his closest friends, Captain Boris Rodenko of the *Scamp*.

Rodenko embraced Akinola in a traditional Russian greeting. "Joseph, *Tovarishch!* It's good to see you! Are you recovered from your recent travails?"

Akinola grasped the broad shoulder of the slightly shorter man. "For the most part, Boris - I don't heal quite as quickly as I once did."

Boris emitted a rumbling laugh and gestured at himself. "Neither of us are getting any younger, eh? Come! Your hand is empty! The admiral has procured a very acceptable bottle of peppered vodka - you need to try it!"

Akinola winced at the thought of the fiery liquid. "I better stick with beer - doctor's orders!"

Rodenko erupted in a gale of laughter as he led Akinola toward the bar.

Galvani and Strauss stood, amused at the sight of the two older captains.

"Captain Rodenko is quite a character," mused Galvani. "Do you know his nick-name?"

Strauss nodded and smiled at the thought, "The '*commissar*.' I understand he's like a father to his crew, but the devil incarnate to pirates."

"A lot like Captain Akinola," agreed Galvani. She turned toward Strauss, her expression suddenly sad. "You're luckier than you'll ever know to serve under Joseph, Inga."

Inga blinked, surprised by the depth of feeling in Galvani's words. "Well, yes - yes I am."

A young and very handsome dark-skinned man approached Strauss and Galvani. Inga thought she detected a change in Galvani's demeanor as the young captain stopped in front of them.

"Mr. Galvani," he said with a slight nod before turning his gaze upon Inga. "And you are?"

"Commander Inga Strauss, XO of the *Bluefin*," she replied, smiling. She extended her hand in greeting.

D'Angelo frowned slightly at the proffered hand, then gave it a perfunctory shake. "Commander Strauss. Please excuse us, I need to have a word with Mr. Galvani." He moved away from Inga, Galvani in tow.

For a moment, Inga simply stood in place, surprised and annoyed by Captain D'Angelo's abruptness.

"A penny for your thoughts, Commander," said a pleasant baritone voice.

Inga started slightly, her face flushing in embarrassment.

"Good evening, Admiral! I apologize - I was wool-gathering."

"No need for apologies, Mr. Strauss." Bateson smiled broadly. "But I won't have my officers standing around like wall-flowers. Let's get you some food and a glass of something - *Schnapps* is your drink as I recall?"

Inga returned the smile. "Yes sir, thank you!"

Bateson nodded as he allowed Inga to walk ahead. His gaze tracked toward Captain D'Angelo and, though his smile never faltered, his eyes narrowed.

* * *

"You're late, Commander," said D'Angelo. His voice was neither loud nor harsh, yet the tone of disapproval was implicit.

"Sorry, sir," replied Galvani. "I had to make some last-minute adjustments to the shore-leave rotations. Then on the way, I ran into my old C.O., Captain Akinola."

D'Angelo nodded, seeming to accept the explanation. "Very well. We'll stay long enough for decorum's sake, but I want to slip out of here as soon as possible. Go ahead and mingle, but be watching for my signal to leave."

"Sir - why not just relax and enjoy the evening? These are some great people, Captain, and worth knowing."

"I'm sure they are, Commander. But we still have too much to do on the *Sequoia* to spend time at parties. Once we're ship-shape, that will be a different matter."

Galvani barely refrained from sighing. "Yes sir. If that is all, I'll go ahead and 'mingle.'"

D'Angelo took a sip of sparkling water. "By all means, Mr. Galvani."

Chapter Four

Stardate 54243.9 (30 March 2377) Star Station Echo - Reception Room 2

Shortly after 2100 hours, the gathering of captains and executive officers began to break up and the throng began making their way back to their various cutters, tenders and warp-tugs.

Akinola was still chuckling at a joke told by Captain F'Sheel of the warp tug, *Ouachita*, when he felt a tug on his elbow. He turned his head to see a smiling Morgan Bateson.

Excuse me, Captains. Joseph, when you have a moment, there's something I need to discuss with you. Just come on down to my office when you can.

"Sure thing, Admiral," replied Akinola.

Five minutes later, Akinola had sent Commander Strauss on back to the *Bluefin* and he entered Bateson's office. The Admiral was retrieving a mug of coffee from the replicator.

"Want some?" asked Bateson, gesturing to the mug.

Akinola shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm going to hit the rack when I get back to the ship. What's up?"

Bateson indicated for Akinola to take a seat, while the Admiral leaned back in his desk chair.

"I take it you met Captain D'Angelo, this evening?" queried Bateson.

"Briefly. Not very talkative, is he?"

Bateson smirked. "That's an understatement. To be honest, I thought he was rude. Normally, I would have called him on it, but I learned something about him earlier today that might explain his standoffish behavior."

"Oh?"

"I was checking his personnel jacket - pretty impressive to be honest. Number four in his class at the academy, consistently excellent fitness reports, except

for the "tends to be a loner' parts. Captain Hultree of the *Potemkin* said he was, and I quote, 'the best damn first officer I've ever had."

"But?" prodded Akinola.

"But . . . there was a confidential section limited to flag rank and above. Of course, my natural curiosity got the best of me, so I waved my hand, uttered the magic command code, and presto - I'm in the inner sanctum!"

Akinola suppressed a grin. Obviously, Bateson had imbibed a bit more than normal tonight. He wasn't drunk, exactly, but he tended to get overly dramatic when he'd had one too many.

"I'm very impressed that the Admiral knows how to open a confidential file, but I'm pretty tired. You were going to tell me why you gave D'Angelo a break?" said Akinola.

Bateson snorted. "I'm coming to that, Joseph! And also why I want you to take him under your wing when you go out on patrol." He held his hand up as Akinola opened his mouth to speak.

"Just hear me out, Joseph - I'm getting to the point. When I opened the confidential section, I discovered something very surprising - do you know who his father is?"

"You?" ventured Akinola with a straight face.

Bateson guffawed. "No, but nice try, *Captain*. D'Angelo's father is Gavin Cunningham."

Akinola's jaw nearly dropped. "You're kidding! The same Cunningham that surrendered his ship during the first Cardassian war without firing a shot?"

Bateson nodded gravely. "The same. Captain D'Angelo has done everything he can to distance himself from his disgraced father, even taking his mother's last name. The counselor's fitness report found nothing to disqualify him from command, but he has a tendency to drive himself hard. Maybe *too* hard. That can have an adverse affect on his crew."

"Wow," mused Akinola, "I can see how that might put a chip on his shoulder! But why are you telling me this?"

"It's not common knowledge, Joseph, and I want it to stay confidential. I felt like you needed to know since I intend to pair the *Sequoia* with the *Bluefin* for a few weeks. Work with them on how we do the routine stuff and let's see how that new ship handles the badlands."

Akinola nodded. "No problem here, Morgan. But how is our young Captain going to take it? I doubt he's going to like having his hand held."

Bateson grimaced. "No, I don't think he will either. But that's my problem. I'll deal with Captain D'Angelo. One other thing." Bateson paused, considering his words.

"Sir?"

"I have a strong, gut-feeling that Admiral Bouvier has assigned *Sequoia* and Captain D'Angelo to our squadron as part of her personal agenda. It's no secret that she wants to 'modernize' the Border Service. But I'm afraid her idea of 'modernization' has nothing to do with improving our effectiveness."

"With respect, sir, that stuff is way above my pay grade," observed Akinola.

The Admiral sighed. "Yes, that's true. But anything you can do to help Captain D'Angelo 'get with the program' would be appreciated."

"I'll do what I can."

Bateson smiled. "That's all I can ask. Now, get out of here - I still have reports to read."

* * *

Stardate 54244.4 (31 March 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04339

Twenty seven Neo-Maquis operatives counted down the hours until the moment arrived for them to take over the star-liner. Ten were actual members of the crew, while the other seventeen were passengers. All had accomplished their respective preliminary tasks. Internal sensors were hacked, external communications could be cut at a moment's notice, and pre-planted and secreted weapons were at the ready. The planning and preparation of three years was about to bear fruit.

Unlike earlier incarnations of the Maquis, this group had no compunctions regarding killing. To them, the objective was everything. If 'civilians' were hurt or killed, well, that was just too bad, wasn't it?

Steward 2nd class Kenda Byress, assembled the Klingon disruptor pistol for the last time. He took the serving tray from his cot, placed the disruptor under the lid, then covered that with a white, linen cloth.

Hoisting the tray of 'food,' Byress exited his cabin and began to make his way toward the bridge.

Chapter Five

Stardate 54244.4 (31 March 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Star Station Echo - Berth Five

Commander Galvani exited the turbo lift onto the bridge of the cutter, *Sequoia*. Lt. Phillip Lamonica quickly stood from the center seat as the XO rounded the railing of the control pit.

"Morning, Phil," said Galvani, cheerfully. She glanced around the bridge. "I take it no one broke anything while I was off-duty?"

The young-looking tactical officer snapped off a smart salute. "No, sir! The Lieutenant has refrained from frakking up while sitting on his ass, sir!"

She shook her head and gave him a tolerant look. "Stow the sarcasm, Mister Lamonica - it's not becoming and you're not good at it. Anything unusual to report?"

Lamonica favored her with a crooked grin. "Not much excitement, sir, seeing as we're tied up to the station." His smile faded slightly. "The Captain said he wanted to see you as soon as you arrived on the bridge." He nodded his head in the direction of the ready room.

Galvani refrained from rolling her eyes. *Now what?* she thought. Aloud, she said, "Thanks, Phil. Keep the seat warm for me."

His smile returned. "You got it, Commander."

Commander Galvani turned and stepped back up onto the outer ring of the bridge, heading aft toward the Captain's ready room. Taking a breath, she affixed a neutral expression on her face and pressed the enunciator. Her sharp ears picked up the melodic chime, followed by a crisp, "Enter!"

The XO entered to find Captain D'Angelo leaned back in his desk chair, staring out the viewport. She was slightly surprised as he usually tended to sit ramrod straight when anyone entered his presence. His normal, emotionless mask had slipped also, revealing a look of consternation - almost anger.

She approached within one meter of his desk, drew herself up straight and fixed her gaze twenty centimeters over D'Angelo's head.

"Commander Galvani, reporting as ordered," she said, crisply. D'Angelo was a stickler for protocol, so she made sure she did *everything* by the book. Well, at least when the Captain was around.

The Captain absently waved a hand. "Have a seat, XO."

Galvani's own neutral expression slipped a bit in surprise. D'Angelo had *never* invited her to sit in his presence. She hesitated a brief moment, then sat in one of the comfortable guest chairs, waiting.

D'Angelo remained silent for a long moment. Galvani wasn't sure whether he was about to read her the riot act or tell her a dirty joke, his behavior was so out of character.

Without turning to face her directly, he finally spoke.

"I just received our orders from Admiral Bateson," he began in his typical, quiet voice. Galvani thought that she detected a hint of barely restrained sarcasm beneath his carefully controlled voice.

"Yes sir?"

"It would seem, Commander, that the Admiral does not trust us . . . no - strike that - does not trust *me* enough to allow us an assignment on our own. For the next three weeks, we are to accompany the *Bluefin* on her patrol to 'observe and learn' from Captain Akinola."

"Captain - that's not altogether unusual. The squadron often dispatches cutters in groups . . ."

"In special circumstances," interrupted D'Angelo. "Yes, yes, I'm aware of that XO. But there are currently no alerts, no special directives or anything of that nature. I have the distinct impression that Admiral Bateson has doubts about the capabilities of this ship and doubts about my abilities to command."

Galvani did not respond. She wasn't sure *how* to respond to that.

D'Angelo emitted a snorting sound that Galvani suddenly realized was muted laughter. "It would seem, Commander, that we're caught between the proverbial 'rock and a hard place' - the rock being Admiral Bouvier and the hard place being Admiral Bateson."

Galvani decided to venture out on a limb. "Sir," she began carefully, "I don't know much about Admiral Bouvier, but I know Admiral Bateson pretty well. He knows as much as anyone about Border Service operations and he tends to be protective of his squadron. If he believes we're here because Admiral Bouvier has some sort of agenda . . ."

"Admiral Bouvier *does* have an agenda, XO. I'm just not entirely sure what it is." He paused again and Galvani remained quiet, not wanting to shut down this tendril of openness from her normally taciturn Captain.

As if reading her mind, D'Angelo changed the subject. "Since we're going to be working with Captain Akinola these next few weeks, I'd like your take on the man. After all, you served under him."

Did she note a tone of sarcasm? Jealousy, perhaps? D'Angelo was still such an enigma to her that she couldn't say for sure.

She allowed a small smile to form on her face. "What would you like to know?"

* * *

Stardate 54244.5 (31 March 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04339

Captain Lumford absently noted the arrival of the white-jacketed steward on the bridge. His arrival was hardly note-worthy. It was common for the galley to send up tea, coffee and sandwiches for the bridge crew.

A sharp expletive from the first officer quickly dispelled any routineness about the steward's presence.

Lumford turned and was shocked to see the steward holding a nasty-looking disruptor pistol. It was aimed squarely at the first officer's chest. Even more shocking was the sight of the second officer holding a similar weapon which was currently leveled at the comm officer.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Lumford.

"Just have a seat, Captain, and no one gets hurt," replied the Bajoran steward. "A Neo-Maquis strike force is currently taking operational control of this vessel. If you cooperate, the passengers and crew will survive this operation. However, any interference by *anyone*, whether intentional or not, will be met by deadly force!"

The Captain blanched with indignant outrage. "Are you telling me you intend to hijack this ship? Are you mad?!"

"The hijacking is a *fait accompli*, Captain. Already, my team has secured the bridge, engineering, communications and environmental control."

"To what end?" retorted Lumford. "Ransom? Some fool political stunt? Surely you know the Federation doesn't deal with terrorists!"

Kenda Byress shrugged slightly. "Oh, I believe that they will 'deal' with us, when the time is right. That's not your concern, anyway, is it?"

Suddenly, the first officer lunged toward the steward, making a desperate attempt to grab the disruptor. Before he managed two steps, the shrill whine of Kenda's disruptor filled the bridge, along with a sickly, green light.

First officer Byron Griggs, age 42, father of three, dissolved before their eyes. As the glow faded, their nostrils were assaulted with the stench of charred flesh and ozone.

Kenda trained his disruptor on a white-faced Lumford. The Captain was visibly trembling, but not from fear.

"You bloody *butcher!*" Lumford hissed. "You murdered him in cold blood."

"Only a fool attacks someone holding a charged disruptor," replied Kenda, calmly. "Now - take your seat and mind your manners, Captain. Mr. Warren?" he addressed his comrade, the erstwhile second officer. "Please bring us about to a new heading - 226 mark 33. What is our current speed?"

Warren brusksly shoved the helmsman from his post and inputted the course change. "Current speed is warp 8," he replied.

Kendra nodded as he slipped off the white steward's jacket, tossing it over an auxiliary console. "Increase speed to warp 9."

Lumford shook his head. "You'll overstress the warp core! She's not designed to cruise at that speed!"

The Bajoran smiled thinly. "Captain - please. I know full well the *QE VII* holds the speed record for starliners. She can run at warp 9 for weeks without a hiccup. Do us both a favor - don't try any little games of deception. It won't help you and may cause me to become annoyed. Understand?"

The Captain glowered but remained silent.

"Secure these others," said Kendra to Warren. "Then check on the engineering team." He looked at the large chronometer on the bulkhead. "Three days until we reach our destination," he murmured. "Then the fun *really* begins!"

* * *

Stardate 54244.5 (30 March 2377)

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo - Berth Six

"Okay, that takes care of the environmental upgrades," said Captain Akinola. "Are we finished with re-load and re-supply?"

Commander Strauss sat across from the Captain in his ready room. She glanced at the PADD on her lap. "Yes sir - we're loaded out with Mark 22's and Mark IX's. And here's a little added bonus," she said with an enigmatic smile.

"What?" asked Akinola as he hoisted a mug of coffee.

"Six quantum torpedoes," she replied smugly.

Akinola's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "No kidding! How did you manage that?"

"The armory had extras that had been designated for the *Magellan*. Apparently they weren't needed, so . . ." She gave a little shrug and looked upwards, expressing total innocence.

The Captain grinned. "Why Inga! I didn't know you had it in you. Nice work!"

"I do have to admit, Senior Chief Brin helped."

"He did? How . . . Wait!" he held up a hand in warning. "I don't want to know."

They were interrupted by the chime of Akinola's comm terminal. He tapped the reply stud. "Go ahead."

"Lt. Bane, sir. Captain D'Angelo of the Sequoia is signaling and wishes to speak to you."

Akinola glanced up at Strauss. "XO, do you mind?"

Inga smiled as she rose from the chair. "Not at all, sir. I'll be on the bridge if you need me."

The Captain turned back to the terminal. "Patch him through, Nigel."

"Aye sir. One moment."

The screen shifted from the image of the Australian Ops officer to the C.O. of the *Sequoia*. Captain D'Angelo wore his typical impassive expression.

Akinola nodded. "Good morning, Captain. What can I do for you?"

"I understand that we will be going out on patrol together," said D'Angelo.

Akinola nodded. "That's right. I hope to head out in 24 hours - will that work for you?"

"24 hours is fine. We'll be ready."

"Captain D'Angelo, why don't you join me for dinner this evening? We can talk a bit about the patrol area and get better acquainted. Not to mention, I've got one of the few chefs serving in the fleet if you'd like something that doesn't come out of replicator."

D'Angelo hesitated, a look of indecision briefly flickering across his face.

"Very well. What time should I come aboard?"

"Make it 1900 hours. I guarantee you won't be disappointed in the meal!"

D'Angelo nodded curtly. *"Acknowledged. D'Angelo, out."*

Akinola regarded the terminal, now displaying the Border Service insignia, and let out a sigh.

"Loosen up, son," he said quietly.

Chapter Six

Stardate 54245.1 (1 April 2377)

Buoy Tender USS *Pamlico*

Sector 04340

Lt. Commander Kelesdi Nor Huren, C.O. of the buoy tender *Pamlico*, tried but failed to ignore the incessant chime of her comm terminal. Emitting a sigh of resignation, the Rigellian rolled out of her bunk and padded toward the desk, stabbing the reply button a fraction harder than necessary.

"What is it, Tien? I was enjoying a very nice dream," Nor Huren said with a touch of reproach in her voice.

"Sorry to wake you," replied Lt. (j.g.) Li Zao Tien, the tender's XO. "We've just picked up a transient contact."

Nor Huren rubbed the scales on the bridge of her nose in a very human gesture. "Are they sending a distress signal?"

The image of the diminutive Asian XO blinked on the screen. "Well, no . . ."

"Are they venting plasma?"

"No."

"Have they fired a spread of torpedoes our way?"

"Um, no."

The skipper took a deep breath and sighed. "Tien?"

"Yes, skipper?"

"*Why* in the name of the seven swamp demons *did* you wake me?"

"It's the Queen Elizabeth VII, ma'am. It's *way* off course and running at warp 9."

Nor Huren's eyes widened at this new piece of information. "I'm on my way to the bridge. Have you tried hailing them?"

"Yes ma'am, no response."

"Keep at it. I'll be there in three minutes."

* * *

Two minutes and forty three seconds later, Commander Nor Huren stepped onto the bridge of the converted *Oberth*-class tender.

"Anything?" she queried.

Tien shook her head. "No ma'am. Joryk has plotted an intercept course, but if they change heading again we'll never catch them."

Nor Huren stared at the viewscreen. "Maximum magnification, Joryk."

The Edosian helmsman tapped a control with his third hand and the viewscreen shimmered, then sharpened into focus. Sure enough, there was the unmistakable outline of a large starliner.

"You checked with the Cunnard office?"

"First thing I did, Skipper," replied Tien. "They're supposed to be on their way to Vega."

The Rigellian C.O. eased into the command chair. "Where will their current course take them?"

"They are on a direct heading to the Brez-krill system."

"Frak me sideways with a photon grenade!" she practically shouted. "Tien - open a priority channel to Echo and patch me through to Admiral Bateson - and I don't care who you have to wake up to do it!"

* * *

Stardate 54245.1 (1 April 2377)

SS Queen Elizabeth VII

Sector 04340

"Mr. Kendra!"

"What is it, Mr. Warren?"

"I'm picking up a ship pursuing us." The Neo-Maquis terrorist adjusted the gain on the starliner's external sensors. "*Oberth*-class," he continued with a note of surprise in his voice. "I thought they had all been retired or scrapped."

Kendra's brow furrowed. "As I recall, the Border Service converted a few into buoy tenders. They're no threat to us though - I doubt if it's even armed."

"Yes, but they can communicate! It won't take a genius for them to figure this ship is a long way off course!"

The Bajoran shrugged. "So? They'll just pass along the news ahead of schedule - that's all. Starfleet won't dare try to stop us, not with all of these civilian sheep on board. They'll follow us, I'm sure, but they'll wait on us to make the first move."

Warren snorted. "I thought we'd *already* made the first move."

"Not completely, Mr. Warren. You're familiar with the Terran game, chess?"

"Sure."

"Well, we've selected and picked up the first piece. We have yet to set it down to complete the move."

* * *

Stardate 54245.2 (1 April 2377)

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo - Berth Six

Captain Akinola washed down the last bite of his waffle with coffee and picked up his depleted breakfast tray, taking it to the disposal slot. Lt. Commander T'Ser was entering the wardroom with her breakfast and nodded at Akinola.

"Good morning, Captain," she said.

"Commander," he replied in way of greeting. "Ready to get under way?"

She placed the tray on the long table and made her way to the coffee urn. "More than ready! Even a routine milk run seems like an adventure after being planet-side so long."

Akinola was about to reply, when his combadge chirped.

"Bridge to Captain," came the voice of Ensign Vashtee.

Akinola tapped the combadge. "Go ahead Ensign."

"Priority one message from Admiral Bateson, sir."

Akinola frowned and T'Ser's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Patch it to the wardroom, Ensign."

"Aye sir."

Akinola and T'Ser walked over to a wall mounted terminal at the end of the room. Admiral Bateson's image appeared momentarily. His expression was serious.

"Captain, I need you and Sequoia to sortee as soon as possible. How quickly can you get under way?"

Captain Akinola frowned in thought. "If we go to alert, fifteen minutes. What's going on, sir?"

"We just got word from the Pamlico that the starliner, Queen Elizabeth VII, was way off course and running wide open. They would not answer Pamlico's hails."

"Any idea why?"

"None yet. However, that's not the worst of it. The liner is on a direct course for the Brez-krill system."

Akinola felt a chill of apprehension tingle his neck. T'Ser's eyes widened at the news.

"Understood, sir. What are your instructions?"

"Make every effort to intercept the QE before she gets to that system! And find out what the hell is going on!"

"Do we have any other assets in that region?"

"Negative. The Pamlico just happened to be setting out a replacement warning buoy. They're pursuing but can't keep up. I've contacted the Amberjack and the Scamp, but it will take them longer to intercept than you. Starfleet is also aware of the situation and they've dispatched the Resolute, but it could take a day or more to arrive on station." Bateson paused, "Joseph, I don't need to remind you of how badly this could go."

"No sir," replied Akinola, grimly. "I get the picture. Any idea how many souls are on board?"

"Over 2800," replied Bateson, quietly.

Akinola nodded, "Any guesses about this, Admiral?"

"All we've got are guesses at this point. Could be a systems failure of some sort. But to head on this particular course with no communications? Sounds intentional to me."

"Yeah, but why? And this is much bigger than anything the Orion pirates have ever attempted," Akinola said thoughtfully. He looked sharply at the Admiral's image. "What if they refuse to stop? Or can't?"

Bateson hesitated, *"Joseph - obviously we want the safe recovery of the passengers and crew of the QE, but that ship must not violate the Brez-krill system boundary. That is your top priority - is that understood?"*

Akinola grimaced. "Yes sir, understood. I'll signal Captain D'Angelo and get them ready to launch. I'll brief him when we're underway. How long until the QE reaches Brez-krill?"

"At their current speed, about two days. Good luck, Joseph! I'll keep you apprised of any new information."

"Thanks," the Captain replied, though his mind was already at work tackling the problem. "We'll handle it, sir."

"I know you will. Bateson, out."

Akinola turned to look at T'Ser who wore an expression of grave concern.

"It looks like that milk run will have to wait for another time, Commander," he said, then tapped his combadge.

"Akinola to Commander Simms."

"Simms here, sir."

"Delta, sound general quarters and prepare for emergency departure stations. Have Vashtee signal the *Sequoia* to do likewise and to form up on us. We've got a runaway starliner to catch!"

"Aye, sir," came Simms startled reply. *"How shall we set our course?"*

Akinola thought for a moment. "Make it 240 mark 22, and take us to maximum warp once we clear the outer markers. I'm on my way to the bridge right now."

Akinola and T'Ser hurried from the wardroom. T'Ser's breakfast tray remained on the table, untouched and forgotten. The sound of Delta Simms' voice suddenly filled the ship and red lights began to pulse rhythmically.

"All hands, all hands, general quarters, general quarters. Report to your duty stations for immediate departure. This is not a drill. Repeat - this is not a drill. All hands, all hands . . ."

Akinola and T'Ser entered the turbo-lift which began its quick ascent to the bridge.

"Captain," began T'Ser, "If we can't stop the *Queen Elizabeth* in time . . .?"

"Then," replied Akinola in a heavy tone, "the moment the *QE* enters the Brezkrill system, we will be at war with the Tzen-Kethi."

Chapter Seven

Stardate 54245.2 (1 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Star Station Echo - Berth Five

Captain D'Angelo affixed his thumbprint to the final PADD on his desk and set it aside, pleased to have completed the last of the requisition forms for the station quartermaster.

He turned to his computer terminal, preparing to begin a log entry, but paused before speaking. He turned in his desk chair and looked out the ready room's starboard viewport, which afforded him a view of the *Bluefin*.

The young Captain reflected on his dinner meeting with Captain Akinola the previous evening. He was surprised to admit to himself that he had enjoyed the visit. Akinola had proved to be a gracious host, giving him a tour of the vintage cutter. D'Angelo had been surprised at how cramped the *Albacore*-class cutter had seemed, compared to the *Sequoia*. Though the *Bluefin* was a larger vessel, it seemed that every square inch was utilized.

"They didn't build in much space for recreation or gathering," Akinola had remarked when D'Angelo had asked about *Bluefin's* design. *"We have to learn to work together in close quarters. Good relationships are crucial."*

D'Angelo had puzzled over that remark, and over Akinola's easy rapport with his crew. Tyre had been surprised that Akinola seemed to know *everyone* on the cutter by first name, often pausing to ask a seemingly pointless question about personal matters or to laugh at a joke. The old Captain even mingled well with the enlisted crew!

The *Sequoia's* C.O. shook his head in consternation. Akinola's command style was 180 degrees different from his own, yet Akinola's ship and crew were practically legendary in the Border Service. He had initially thought that Commander Galvani's glowing praise of "The Old Man" as she called him, had been exaggerated. Now, he wasn't so sure.

His own philosophy of command had been one of maintaining rigid discipline, tight regimens, and a distrust of close relationships with the crew. It had worked well for him as a junior officer, department head, even as a first officer. Now as a commanding officer . . .

His reverie was interrupted by the chime from his terminal. He tapped the reply stud.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Lt. Lamonica, sir. We've just received a priority message from Captain Akinola requesting our immediate departure. Apparently a starliner is off-course and incommunicado."

D'Angelo frowned. "Anything else?"

"That's all for now. He said he'd pass along the details to you once we're underway."

The Captain stood. "Sound general quarters, Lieutenant. I want us underway in ten minutes!"

* * *

Stardate 54245.3 (1 April 2377)

USS Sequoia

Sector 04339 - Warp 9.9

"So, Captain - what's this all about?" asked D'Angelo as he stared at the image of Captain Akinola on his terminal.

The white-haired Nigerian Captain's expression was grim. *"The Queen Elizabeth VII has deviated from her charted course to Vega and is heading toward the Brez-krill system at warp 9. At her current speed, she'll get there within two days."*

D'Angelo was still puzzled. "Forgive me, but I still don't understand the extreme urgency. That liner is obviously operational to travel at that speed. It seems like a simple enough matter to intercept them and find out why they're off course."

"Sorry, D'Angelo, I keep forgetting you're new to this region of space. The major issue is where they're headed. The Brez-krill system is part of the Tzen-Kethi Autarchy. While the system is not technically in Tzen-Kethi space, it was granted to them as part of the armistice agreement over two decades ago."

D'Angelo grimaced. "And the Tzen-Kethi view any violation of their sovereign territory as an act of war - regardless of the circumstances."

Akinola nodded. *"Exactly. This is complicated by the fact we don't know why the QE is headed that way. Best guess is that it's intentional, but the who or why is unknown. There are over 2800 beings on that ship, D'Angelo. Our job is to make sure they're safe, but . . ."* The older Captain hesitated, *"we cannot allow the QE to violate Tzen-Kethi space."*

D'Angelo's mouth went dry as he considered the ramifications of Akinola's words. "How do we stop them, Captain?"

"Short answer? I have no idea yet. The best case scenario is they change course or stop of their own accord."

"And the worst-case scenario?"

Akinola's face seemed to visibly age on the viewscreen. *"I don't think I have to explain that to you, Captain. I do need you to do something now, though."*

"What's that?"

"Your ship is faster than Bluefin. You can catch up with them in twelve hours. It will take us more than fourteen. Continue ahead at maximum warp - when you get within range, try to communicate with them - find out what the hell is going on. You'll be on your own until we arrive."

"You can count on us, Captain," said D'Angelo.

Akinola gave the young Captain a piercing look. *"I am counting on you. Bluefin, out."*

* * *

Stardate 54245.3 (1 April 2377)
Tzen-Kethi Patrol Frigate *Blood Claw*
Coreward perimeter, Brez-Krill System

The *Blood Claw* moved silently through the darkness of the Brez-Krill perimeter, far from the warmth and light of the central star. The dark red ship was a surreal study in angles and curves, mixed with solemn shadows. Only a few glowing viewports gave evidence to the living, breathing crew of

aggressive Felinoids that inhabited the vessel. The sublight engines glowed a brilliant orange, adding an almost cheerful splash of light and color to the otherwise sinister vessel.

Chuft-Captain Gravaz g'Rivenn strode through the dimly lit corridors toward the control den. His green eyes glowed in the semi-darkness and his robe swished in rythm with his steps.

Underlings scurried out of his way, lest they incur his notice (usually sufficient for a hard cuff to the ears) or his wrath (which generally meant death to the unfortunate one.)

At nearly three meters in height, Gravas g'Rivenn was what Humans would call an "alpha-male." His size, strength, and cunning were greater than the norm, even for the war-like Tzen-Kethi. He was a handsome specimen for his species - his thick fur was burnt orange, highlighted by occassional stripes of black and silver. His long fangs were bejeweled as fitting his rank and his left ear was notched in the manner of his sire-clan.

Upon entering the control den, the crew averted their eyes, with the exception of the Chuft-Captain's first officer and mate, Hras-Commander Klinjah kurr Gravas. Her ears flattened to her head and she greeted him with a ritual hiss.

g'Rivenn responded with a low growl, then took his seat. No one rose to vacate the command chair. For anyone other than the Chuft-Captain to sit there would invite death by disembowelment.

"Why have you summoned me, Hras-Commander?" he asked in his rumbling voice. His tone was neutral but there always existed a hint of violence when he spoke.

His mate/ first officer bowed her head slightly. "I apologize for disturbing the Chuft-Captain, but we have picked up a ship on long-range scanners. On it's current heading and speed, it will enter our space within two demi-cycles."

g'Rivenn's eyes narrowed and his snout drew up in a feral snarl. "A warship?"

The Hras-Commander looked left in a negative gesture. "No, honored one. It appears to be a transport of some kind. Very large and moving at high warp speed. It does not fit the design of any known warships of Federation or Klingon design."

The Chuft-Captain extended a razor-sharp claw and absently pulled at a whisker. "Regardless, we will be ready when it arrives. Klinja - notify Central Command - as soon as this vessel crosses into our space, we will engage and destroy it."

* * *

Stardate 54245.3 (1 April 2377)
SS *Queen Elizabeth VII*
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Captain Lumford chuckled quietly to himself and shook his head as he sat helplessly on the bridge.

"Do you find the situation amusing?" asked Kendra.

Lumford turned his gaze upon the Bajoran. "Amusing? No. Ridiculous? Most certainly!"

Kendra's lips turned up in a slight smile. "How so, Captain?"

The Captain snorted derisively. "For God's sake, man! There are over 2800 people on this ship - a thousand in the crew alone. Do you really expect to keep all of those people contained with your little group of pirates? Sooner or later, you people will be overwhelmed by sheer numbers!"

Kendra's smile broadened and he turned to face his cohort, Mr. Warren. "Why don't you tell our dear Captain about our contingency plan, Mr. Warren?"

"Certainly!" replied the Neo-Maquis operative with enthusiasm. He walked over to his former Captain and leaned in with a menacing leer.

"You might be surprised to know, Captain, that we considered *many* factors in planning this operation - including how to manage nearly 3000 people." He produced a small PADD from his coat pocket. "It's quite simple, really. We over-rode the controls to the emergency bulkheads. Even now, the passengers and crew are confined within small, manageable sections of the ship - no more than 100 per group. They have access to replicators and waste facilities and, of course, breathable atmosphere. However . . ." He held the PADD before the Captain's now sweating face, "any sort of *rebellion* can be

handled quite easily. All I have to do is tap this control twice and . . . *pffftt!*" Any one of those areas can be decompressed in thirty seconds."

Captain Lumford glared at his former second officer with a look of sheer hatred. "You cold bastards! What kind of people are you!" he demanded, his voice dripping with contempt. "Why are you doing this to innocent people?"

"We are determined people, Captain," replied Kendra, coldly, as Warren pocketed the PADD. "And innocence is a relative term, isn't it. Perhaps if the Federation had given more attention to the innocent people who were *butchered* by the Cardassians, *we wouldn't be in this quandary right now!*" The Bajoran's words built in volume and intensity as raw emotion threatened to overwhelm him. Spittle flew from his mouth and landed on Lumford's cheek.

Kendra rose suddenly and took a calming breath.

"Don't speak again of *innocent* people, Captain Lumford." He shook his head bitterly. "There are no innocents - not any more."

Chapter Eight

Stardate 54245.8 (1 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.3

Joseph Akinola gently placed the unfinished wood-carving back on its tray and rubbed his eyes. He had hoped that working on his scale rendition of a Klingon D-7 would provide a brief respite from the monotony and stress of waiting, but it had failed to do so. He glanced at the desk chronometer - two hours until the *Sequoia* intercepted the *Queen Elizabeth VII*.

Though he was loathe to second-guess himself, Akinola had real misgivings about sending Captain D'Angelo and the *Sequoia* ahead. Yet, they desperately needed to catch up with the starliner before it violated Tzen-kethi space and all hell broke loose! *Sequoia* was the only ship fast enough to catch the *QE* in time.

The veteran cutter commander brooded as he stared out the viewport at the streaking stars. How would D'Angelo perform? Akinola recalled the young captain's disgraced father, Captain Gavin Cunningham. Cunningham had surrendered the USS *Concorde* to the Cardassians a quarter century earlier, without firing a shot in defense. Cunningham and his crew spent the next seven years interred in a Cardassian labor camp. More than a third of the *Concorde's* crew did not survive that awful ordeal. Shortly after their release, a gaunt and broken Cunningham faced the further indignity of a general court martial where he was found guilty of dereliction of duty. He was demoted to lieutenant commander and summarily mustered out of Starfleet. Six months later, Gavin Cunningham put a phaser in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

"Small wonder D'Angelo changed his name," mused Akinola. *"I just hope he didn't inherit his father's penchant for freezing up when the shit hits the fan."*

* * *

Stardate 54245.9 (1 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.9

Captain Tyre D'Angelo walked over to the replicator in his ready room.

"Water - cold," he instructed. A glass tumbler of water shimmered into existence in the device.

Removing the glass of water from the replicator, D'Angelo was dismayed to notice that his hand was trembling. Ice in the glass clinked audibly from the tremor in his hand.

D'Angelo took a calming breath, closed his eyes and willed his hand to become steady. Momentarily, it did. Frowning in consternation, he took a sip of cold water and returned to his desk.

The young Captain played various scenarios and responses over in his mind. He found it frustrating to enter such a potentially explosive situation with so little data. He had an eerie feeling of *deja vous*, as he recalled the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario from his Academy days. He had found that particular test disconcerting and frustrating, although he managed to pass it - if having your simulated ship destroyed and your crew killed could really be considered acceptable.

He decided to focus on basic, simple objectives: catch up with the *QE VII*, attempt to communicate with it, render assistance, and turn it away from the Brez-krill system.

Simple and easily defined objectives.

The problem was, D'Angelo wasn't sure *how* he could accomplish these objectives. Sure, catching up to the ship was easy enough, but what if they were unable to communicate? Thus far the *QE* had turned a deaf ear to the hails of the *Pamlico*. Perhaps their subspace communications were down.

Or, perhaps they were unwilling to respond.

That possibility filled D'Angelo with a sense of deep foreboding. If the *Queen Elizabeth* was in hostile hands, this whole scenario could go sideways in a heartbeat.

And Captain Tyre D'Angelo was the point man. The green captain in the unproven ship.

The chime of the communicator startled him. His reaction both annoyed and shamed him. He tapped the reply stud.

"Go ahead," he said crisply. The terminal display morphed into the image of the XO.

"Galvani, sir. You asked to be notified when we were in range of the *Queen Elizabeth*."

"Yes, thank you Commander. I'll be there in a moment."

D'Angelo stood and absently wiped his damp palms on his jumpsuit, before heading to the bridge.

* * *

Stardate 54245.9 (1 April 2377)

SS *Queen Elizabeth VII*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

"Kenda! I'm picking up a vessel astern that's closing rapidly," announced Warren from the starliner's operations station.

"Can you identify it?" asked the Bajoran, calmly.

Warren frowned in concentration as he ran the sensor contact through the ship's database. "It's reading as a *Nova*-class ship, but that can't be right - this thing is travelling at warp 9.9!"

Kenda nodded. "That's not a *Nova*. It's likely one of the new fast-response cutters that the Border Dogs are putting into service. Not to worry, Warren, we knew someone would catch up with us sooner or later. It's all part of the plan."

"Yeah, but we were supposed to be *closer* to the Brezz-krill system before that happened," replied Warren petulantly.

Kenda smiled. "Come on, Mr. Warren - don't you remember anything from your Academy days? 'A battle plan never survives the first encounter with the enemy.'"

Warren gave the Bajoran a disgusted look. "Don't get all 'Starfleet' with me, Kenda! You discarded the uniform before I did!" A sudden beeping from his console drew Warren's attention back to his station.

"We're being hailed," said Warren. "Shall I ignore them?"

Kenda walked to the command chair and roughly removed Captain Lumford. "Have a seat by Mr. Warren, Captain. Rest assured, if you try anything precipitous, I won't grieve long after I kill you." The terrorist gestured meaningfully with his disruptor to emphasize his point.

With an icy look, Lumford reluctantly complied and took a seat near Warren. The Bajoran seated himself in the command chair.

"Put their transmission on-screen, Mr. Warren. Let's see who we're dealing with before we respond."

* * *

Stardate 54245.9 (1 April 2377)
USS *Sequoia*
Sector 04340 - Warp 9.9

"No reply yet, sir," announced Lt. Lamonica.

Commander Galvani walked over to the Ops station and leaned over Lamonica, peering at the data stream. "Phil, bring up the specs on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Might as well know what we can about that liner," ordered the XO.

"Tactical - what are you getting?" queried D'Angelo.

A female Bolian ensign turned to face the Captain. "They've got more than navigational deflectors up. I'm picking up level eight defensive shields."

"What?" said Galvani, straightening in surprise. "That's the same level shielding as on a *Galaxy* - class!"

D'Angelo nodded morosely. "They probably upgraded them when these liners were pressed into troop transport service during the war. Any weapons capabilities, Ensign?"

"No sir, no offensive weapons, anyway. They do have a counter-measures system of rapid fire laser banks. Good for close-in defense against low-yield torpedoes or missiles, but no threat to us."

"Sir!" interrupted Lamonica, "The *QE* is responding to our hail!"

D'Angelo straightened in his command chair. "On screen, Lieutenant."

The streaming field of stars shifted to the image of a Bajoran male with dark hair. Rather than a uniform, the Bajoran wore dark clothes with a tactical vest. Cradled in his lap was a Klingon disruptor pistol. The man had an amused expression on his face.

"I'm Captain Tyre D'Angelo of the Border Service Cutter *Sequoia*. Please identify yourself!"

"Certainly, Captain. I am Kenda Byress of the Neo-Maquis. We currently are in control of this vessel."

A pall came over the bridge of the *Sequoia*. D'Angelo's mouth went dry as he realized the enormity of the situation.

"What is the status of the crew and passengers?" he demanded.

"They are safe - for the moment. However, we have the means to change that status very quickly, were we to be . . . provoked."

"I'd like to speak to the Captain of the ship," continued D'Angelo.

"Would you? Certainly! He's right over here." Kenda gestured to his right. Someone on the liner's bridge made an adjustment, widening the image. Two men sat on the starboard side of the bridge. One, an older man with snow-white hair and a neatly trimmed beard, wore a dark blue coat with brass buttons and four gold stripes on his shoulder epaulets. The white-haired man looked both angry and afraid.

"Go on," prodded Kenda, "Say hello to Captain D'Angelo."

Captain Lumford's eyes shifted back and forth from Kenda to the viewscreen. He licked dry lips before speaking. "I'm Wallace Lumford, ship's Captain. These . . . people apparently have complete control of the ship! But I don't think there are more than . . ."

Lumford stopped in mid-sentence as Kenda's disruptor suddenly appeared mere inches from his face.

"That's enough for now, Captain Lumford," said Kenda. The Bajoran returned to the command chair and casually crossed his legs. He shrugged and smiled in an almost apologetic gesture.

D'Angelo stood up. "The *Queen Elizabeth* is on a direct course with a restricted star system. Why don't you alter course, then we can discuss the situation."

Kenda chuckled and shook his head. "Oh, to be *sure* we're headed toward a restricted system. What - did you think that was a mistake on our part?"

Captain D'Angelo's jaw clenched imperceptibly. "Then you know that we can't possibly allow you to enter Tzen-kethi space."

The Bajoran's smile grew even wider. "Of course I know that, you arrogant *drek'ma!* I'm counting on that!" Kenda suddenly rose from the command chair and approached the viewscreen, his image became proportionally larger on the main screen of the *Sequoia* and his smile turned to a grimace.

"You have *no* idea where this is leading, do you, *Captain?* Welcome to the *real* no-win scenario!"

Kenda's image suddenly disappeared, replaced once more by a flowing field of stars.

D'Angelo swallowed and turned toward Lt. Lamonica. "Try and reestablish a channel, Lieutenant," he said, tightly.

Lamonica made several attempts and shook his head. "Sorry, sir. They refuse to answer our hails."

The Captain nodded curtly. "Helm, time until they reach the boundary of the Brez-krill system?"

"At warp 9, they will cross the boundary in twenty two hours, sixteen minutes."

"Frak," muttered Maria Galvani, softly. D'Angelo overheard but did not reprimand her. In fact, he agreed completely with her succinct assesment.

Chapter Nine

Stardate 54245.9 (1 April 2377)

USS *Resolute*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.5

Captain Samantha Franklin, commanding officer of the *Akira*-class USS *Resolute*, stood impatiently in the center of the bridge, arms crossed, her face grim as her ship streaked toward the hijacked starliner.

"Time until we intercept the *Queen Elizabeth*?" she asked, tersely.

"Four hours, fifty two minutes," responded the Zakdorn helmsman.

Franklin's frown deepened. "Very well. Mr. Xyrel, you have the bridge. I'll be in my ready room."

The Vulcan first officer moved to the center seat while the willowy Captain moved quickly to her sanctuary off the bridge.

Captain Sam Franklin, a 45 year old native of San Francisco, settled into the high-backed chair and closed her eyes for a moment. The soft fragrance of the orchids she carefully cultivated tickled her nose. Usually, she found the plant-filled ready room to be a relaxing respite from the bridge. That was not true today, however.

She considered taking a nap on the sofa, but she was just too wired. When the call had come from Admiral Jellico to head to sector 04340, she'd had a bad premonition. Franklin recalled part of the conversation.

"Admiral, this sounds almost like a nightmare version of the Kobayashi Maru scenario."

Jellico had nodded. *"Unfortunately, that's exactly what I'm thinking. Whoever is controlling the Queen Elizabeth is placing us between a rock and a hard place. I don't have to remind you, Captain Franklin, that we cannot afford to get into a war with the Tzen-Kethi."*

And there it was - the unspoken order from Jellico. Keep the *QE* out of the Brez-krill system at all costs.

But the cost would be horrific! - nearly 3000 innocent beings were on that liner. Certainly, the *Resolute* had the firepower to destroy the *Queen Elizabeth*, even with its uprated shields. The questions remained - did she have the will to give the order if necessary? Could she live with herself afterward?

Right now, she couldn't honestly answer those questions. She hoped against hope that somehow, the Border Dogs that would arrive first could defuse the situation and the terrible arsenal of the *Resolute* would not be required.

* * *

Stardate 54246.0 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

D'Angelo suddenly stood, his decision made. "Helm, bring us directly in front of that ship, bow-on aspect. Begin slowing us down once we're in position."

Galvani allowed herself a small smile. "You're forcing a reaction," she said, approvingly.

"I'm simply trying to slow them down, XO. It's their possible reaction that concerns me," he retorted.

The *Sequoia* easily slipped in front of the massive star-liner, pirouetting on her x-axis to face the vessel head-on.

"Helm begin slowing us very gradually. If they alter course I want you to keep us in their path, understood?"

Ensign Reza Alkami nodded nervously. "Aye sir," the young Egyptian replied as he deftly adjusted the warp controls. "Warp 8.99 . . . 8.98 . . . 8.97 . . ."

As they watched the main viewscreen, the image of the *Queen Elizabeth VII* grew in magnitude as the great ship closed on the small cutter.

"They don't seem to be slowing down, do they?" remarked Galvani, a slight note of strain in her voice.

"Keep slowing, Mr. Alkami," ordered the Captain. His mouth was as dry as cotton.

"Vessel has altered course two degrees to port!" announced Lt. Lamonica, "but they haven't slowed any."

"Keep us in front of them, helm," ordered D'Angelo. "Don't let them slip around us."

"Captain, we're being hailed by the *Queen Elizabeth*," said Lamonica.

D'Angelo allowed himself a small smile. "On screen, Lieutenant."

The image of the Bajoran Neo-Maquis operative appeared. He was shaking his head sadly.

"Really, Captain. I expected more of you than this. Surely, you could be more imaginative!"

"Bring that ship to a stop, then we can talk," replied D'Angelo, sharply.

"No, I think you'll move aside shortly - after my little demonstration. I suggest you zoom in on our starboard bow, about two thirds of the way up. You should notice a sizable observation lounge - see it?"

D'Angelo's blood went cold in sudden realization. "Kenda - no! We'll move . . ."

"Yes, you certainly will!" said Kenda with a feral grin. The channel closed.

The screen returned to the image of the *Queen Elizabeth*. As they watch, horrified, several bursts of light rippled along the observation lounge, venting two sections to the vacuum. A cloud of atmospheric vapor and debris erupted from the liner. Ejected along with the debris were dozens of bodies.

"Lamonica!" shouted D'Angelo, "get a lock on those people and beam them aboard - NOW!"

"Sir - I can't! They're inside that ship's shield envelope!"

The bridge crew watched in stunned horror as bodies tumbled and drifted along the side of the starliner in a sparkling cloud of frozen gas, furnishings and other assorted detritus from the observation lounge. Some of the bodies bounced along the hull of the starliner, while others simple drifted and spun alongside.

"How many?" asked Commander Galvani, quietly. Lamonica turned with a sick look on his face. The XO nodded reassuringly. "Phil - we need to know."

The operations officer turned back to his console, momentarily at a loss as to what to do. Finally, he activated the sensors and checked the display.

"I'm reading 142 bodies . . . all dead," he said, a tremor in his voice.

D'Angelo sat stone-still in the center seat, his left hand covering his chin and mouth as he continued to view the horrible sight on the screen.

"Captain?" prodded Galvani gently. "your orders?"

The Captain seemed oblivious to the XO. He stared ahead, his expression full of shock and disbelief.

"Sir?" Galvani stepped closer to D'Angelo. "Your orders?"

The young Skipper blinked, then turned to face her. "My God, Maria - he just killed them . . . all those people . . . you saw?"

Alarmed by D'Angelo's behavior, Galvani placed a hand on the Captain's shoulder. "We all saw, sir," she said, gently. "There's nothing you could have done. Now, we've got to regroup and try something else . . ."

"And what?" The Captain shot back, "get more of those people killed? There's nothing we *can* do . . ."

Galvani put her face inches from D'Angelo's. "*Hold it together, sir!*" she hissed in a tight whisper. "I'm not sure what we can do for those poor souls on the *QE*, but you've got 85 more on *this* ship that are counting on you."

D'Angelo looked around the bridge and saw the crew staring back at him with expressions ranging from fear, to doubt, to - yes, anger.

He stood, straightening his uniform as he did so. "Commander, you have the bridge. I'll be in my ready room." Without another word, he slowly turned and walked aft.

When the door slid shut behind the Captain, Galvani heard Lamonica mutter, "He's lost it!"

The XO whirled and fixed the ops officer with flashing eyes. "Belay that crap, mister, and mind your station! That goes for all of you!" she said, sharply. She moved to the center of the bridge and glared at the *QE* which seemed to mock her from the viewscreen.

"Don't frak with me, asshole!" she muttered to the screen. "I'm having a bad day and I'm officially pissed-off!" She sat down in the center seat. "Helm - keep us bow-on to that ship, but match their speed for now. Mr. Lamonica, hail those assholes and don't quit trying until they answer!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.1 (2 April 2377)

USS Bluefin

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

"Sensors confirm the *Queen Elizabeth* and *Sequoia* are dead ahead," announced Lt. Commander T'Ser.

"Mr. Bralus, bring us abeam of that liner and match speeds," ordered Commander Strauss. She tapped her combadge. "Bridge to Captain."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"Sir, we've intercepted the *Queen Elizabeth* and are pacing her off her port side."

"Understood. I'll be on the bridge in a moment."

Akinola exited his ready room a few seconds later. Strauss vacated the center seat and moved to tactical. Senior Chief Brin, in turn, moved to an aft auxiliary station.

The Captain took a moment to take in the sight of the massive starliner. It was an impressive ship, to be sure, with classic and graceful lines.

"Sir," began T'Ser, "I'm picking up a debris field surrounding the *QE*."

"Composition?"

"Trace atmospheric gases, various alloys, plastics . . ." she paused, "and organic matter," she finished in a muted tone.

Akinola's face was stony. "Understood, Commander. Open a secure channel to the *Sequoia* - let's find out what the hell happened!"

In short order, the image of Commander Maria Galvani appeared on the viewscreen. By her expression, Akinola could tell she was as mad as hell.

"*Sequoia* here - go ahead, *Bluefin*."

"Commander," Akinola began without preamble, "what happened?"

A muted look of anguish crossed Galvani's face. She cleared her throat before she spoke. "The Neo-Maquis have control of the *Queen Elizabeth*. They seem hell-bent on getting to the Brez-krill system. We attempted to slow them down, but . . . they responded by . . . blowing out one of their observation lounges."

"Survivors?" asked Akinola, sharply.

Galvani shook her head. "They're running shields up - we couldn't beam them aboard."

"I see," replied Akinola, quietly. "How many, Maria?"

"142."

Everyone was silent on the *Bluefin*. T'Ser closed her eyes briefly. Inga Strauss simply stared at the screen. At the rear of the bridge, Senior Chief Brin's expression became murderous.

Akinola filed the number and the bitter sense of failure away for the moment. "Where's Captain D'Angelo?" he asked.

He noticed that Galvani hesitated slightly at the question, and he knew.

"He's . . . unavailable for the moment."

Akinola regarded his former Ops officer with a steady gaze over the subspace channel. "Commander, I want you and your Captain to beam over here in ten minutes. We've got to put together a plan in short order, or a lot more than 142 will die today."

Galvani nodded. "Aye, sir, understood!"

The Old Man nodded. "Good. You're going to be okay, Commander. *Bluefin*, out."

Chapter Ten

Stardate 54246.1 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Commander Galvani strode purposefully through the ready room door, ignoring the enunciator and protocol.

Captain D'Angelo looked up sharply, "Commander, what do you . . ."

Galvani placed both fists on D'Angelo's spartan desk and leaned forward, a look of blazing fury in her eyes.

"How *dare* you abandon the bridge when we're in the middle of an operation! That is inexcusable, *sir!* You've got a crew out there that needs your leadership, not to mention thousands of lives that depend on our actions!"

Galvani had hoped to spark a reaction of anger, of *something* to snap the Captain out of his funk. She was dismayed to see the man merely nod his head in a listless manner.

"My *leadership*, as you call it, Commander, just killed 142 people," he said quietly.

"No *sir!* The Neo-Maquis killed those people, *not* you! You made the right call, Captain - everyone on that bridge out there knows it. And we're all sick about those deaths, but we can't just tuck our tails and leave!"

D'Angelo's face broke into a mirthless smile. "I don't know . . . that's certainly a tempting option."

Galvani straightened and folded her arms. "Captain D'Angelo," she began, her tone formal and hard, "Captain Akinola wants us on the *Bluefin* in seven minutes to develop a plan of action. You are going to get from behind that desk and come with me, or I will have you relieved of command for dereliction of duty and confined to your quarters."

Something seemed to spark in D'Angelo's eyes - it wasn't as strong a reaction as Galvani hoped, but it was better than his previous listlessness.

The fire in his eye quickly faded, but he stood nonetheless and straightened his uniform. His face was a mask of reserve - completely devoid of emotion, such as would make a Vulcan adept proud.

"Very well, Commander," he said, brusquely. "I will accompany you."

* * *

Stardate 54246.2 (2 April 2377)

USS Bluefin

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Captain Akinola entered the ward room and took his place at the head of the long table. Commander Strauss entered with him and took the place to his right. Already seated were Chief Engineer, Lt. Commander Galt, CMO Dr. Octavius Castille, and Master Chief Solly Brin. All expressions around the table were serious.

"People, we've got a situation that's about to go super-nova and I need options. Here's what we know - One: the *Queen Elizabeth* has been hijacked by an unknown number of Neo-Maquis and are in control of the bridge. We must assume they have control of the entire ship. Two: they are on a direct course for the Brez-Krill system at warp 9. That system is Tzen-kethi territory and any violation on our part, for whatever reason will be construed as an act of war. Three: the Neo-Maquis have already killed 142 people, so we know they're ruthless. Four: The *QE* has level eight shields. Our job is to stop that ship before it reaches Tzen-kethi space and rescue the passenger and crew while apprehending the Neo-Maquis. Oh, and we have less than twenty hours to do so. Any questions?"

"Yeah," groused Galt. "What do we do with the other 19 hours?"

There were muted chuckles around the table and Akinola allowed himself a reluctant grin. "I know it's a tall order, but . . ."

The door to the ward room slid open and Captain D'Angelo entered, followed by Commander Galvani.

Akinola nodded tersely. "Captain, Commander, thank you for coming. Please have a seat, we're just getting started - there's coffee on the side table if you want."

D'Angelo took a seat at the opposite end of the table. Galvani poured a mug of coffee, then took a seat next to Dr. Castille.

"Back to business," continued Akinola, "We've got less than twenty hours until the *QE* crosses into the Brez-Krill system. Our long-range sensors have picked up the energy signature of a Tzen-kethi ship on the outer perimeter of their system, so the 'cats' know we're heading their way." He leaned back to allow this to sink in.

"Our best case scenario is that we stop that ship with no one getting hurt. Even if it means prolonged negotiations, that is better than option two, which is coming in form of the *USS Resolute*."

Dr. Castille frowned. "The *Resolute*? I'm not familiar with that ship. What would be their role?"

"It's an *Akira*-class ship, Doctor," answered Commander Strauss, quietly. "It has fifteen rapid-fire torpedo launchers, over 300 torpedos and six Type-X phaser arrays with over 25,000 terra watts of output." She gave him a solemn look. "I think their role is pretty clear."

Castille looked aghast. "Are you telling me that Starfleet plans on *destroying* the *Queen Elizabeth*? Madre de Dios! -That's insane!"

"Would you rather have hundreds of thousands killed in a war with the Tzen-kethi, Doctor?" Strauss snapped back, testily.

"Enough!" rumbled Captain Akinola. "That's why we're here, Doctor - to make sure that the *Resolute* doesn't have to take that option. But I've got to have some viable options, folks, and I need them yesterday."

Strauss looked chastened, but Castille still glowered.

"What about tractor beams?" queried Galvani. "Maybe we could at least slow them down."

The Tellarite engineer shook his head. "Won't work at warp 9. Besides, even if they slowed to warp 4, it would take four cutters and a couple of tugs to have an effect. Now, if we could get 'em to drop out of warp, we could mess with their ability to maneuver - knock 'em off course a bit."

"And they would likely kill more passengers," interjected Captain D'Angelo. "Let's face it - these terrorists have us against the wall. Anything we try will get more passengers killed! This is all a waste of time!"

"Captain, I'd like a word with you - in private," said Akinola, in a tone as cold as ice. "Commander Strauss - keep the meeting going. We'll be back shortly."

D'Angelo returned Akinola's glare with a defiant look. Reluctantly, he stood and followed the senior Captain into the corridor.

"Someone is about to get neutered," mumbled Galt.

"Did you say something, Commander?" Inga asked, a warning note in her voice.

"I said, I need to access the computer - you know, run some computer models and stuff . . ."

"That's what I thought you said," replied Strauss. "Time for that after our meeting, let's proceed . . ."

* * *

"Really, Captain, I don't appreciate . . ."

D'Angelo was interrupted when Akinola suddenly shoved the young man against the corridor wall. The old Captain's eyes were blazing.

"What the *hell* is wrong with you, D'Angelo? Are you giving up already?"

D'Angelo roughly shoved Akinola's hand off his shoulder. "Get your hand off me! I don't care if you are senior, I'm entitled to respect!"

Akinola looked incredulous. "*Entitled to respect?* Those pips on your collar aren't worth shit if you can't lead! You want my respect? You want the respect of your crew? You're gonna have to goddam well *earn* it! And telling those officers that anything we do is useless is *not* the way to do it!"

The two men glared at each other for another beat, then D'Angelo sagged and looked down. He shook his head.

"You don't understand," he said, quietly, "I gave the order that got those people killed! I frakked up, Akinola!"

Akinola's face relaxed just a fraction. "Dammit, D'Angelo, it goes with the territory! You go out day after day, trying to bring home just one more - some days you do, some days you don't. But you keep . . . going . . . out!"

D'Angelo continued to shake his head, wrestling with his personal demons.

"Look son," continued Akinola, "you're not your father - don't judge your actions based on his."

The young man looked up sharply, a pained expression on his face. "You know?"

A crooked grin broke out on the Old Man's face. "Hell, Captain, I know everything! I'm god-almighty on this tin can! It's my job as a cutter skipper. Yours, too, Captain!"

Akinola placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder, gently this time. "You made the right call, D'Angelo. I would have done the same. Hell, yes! - It hurts to lose people, especially the one's you're trying to rescue. It's happened to me more than once. But you've *got* to shake this off and get back in the game - we need you and we need your ship. I know you're a sharp officer and you can think outside the box. We need that right now."

D'Angelo nodded slightly. He closed his eyes, swallowed, then opened them to look at Akinola.

"Captain," Akinola said more sharply. "Are you ready to resume the meeting?"

Captain D'Angelo straightened. His expression still revealed turmoil, but Akinola thought that an improvement over his previous mask of aloofness.

"Yes, Captain. I'm ready. I . . . apologize for my behavior. No excuse, sir."

Akinola peered intently into the young Captain's face, looking for something. Apparently, he liked what he say. "That's good enough for me, Captain. Let's get back in there."

* * *

Stardate 54246.2 (2 April 2377)
SS *Queen Elizabeth VII*
Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Criswell sat at one of the many tables in dining room 13-A, warily watching the black-clad terrorist who kept watch over the hundred or so assembled passengers. The Neo-Maquis carried a Nausican disruptor rifle and continually swept the room with his dark eyes.

The Criswells appeared to be typical human passengers. Both were in their late 80's, with white hair and lined faces. A more observant person would note they seemed especially fit for their age.

In fact, the Criswells were both retired Federation Marines. Master Gunnery Sergeant Vincent Criswell had been retired for fifteen years. His wife, Sergeant Major Pamela Criswell had retired eleven years ago. However, they both maintained their fitness regimen and their combat skills, while a bit rusty, were very much effective and deadly.

And right now, Mr. and Mrs. Criswell were angry. There are few things more dangerous in the galaxy than pissed-off Marines.

They waited, seeking an opportunity to take out their captor. Unfortunately, they did not know the ship-wide situation, but the sight of fellow passengers floating by the viewport had galvanized their resolve. No way would they be led to the slaughter like frakking sheep!

They continued to carefully watch their captor, biding their time for the right moment.

At least one scum-bag would die before their own tickets were punched.

* * *

Stardate 54246.2 (2 April 2377)
USS *Bluefin*
Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Captain's Akinola and D'Angelo resumed their seats in the ward room as if nothing had happened.

"Any ideas?" asked Akinola as he scooted his chair forward.

"We've defined our objectives and have a few ideas," said Strauss.

"Let's hear them."

"Yes sir. Obviously, we want to stop that ship, yet prevent more passengers from being killed. Those are the two critical objectives."

Akinola nodded. "Agreed. How do we do that?"

"Well - Commander Galt thinks we might be able to use the Mark 22 torpedoes to stop or at least slow the ship."

Akinola frowned. "The Mark 22's can't punch through those shields - even if they could, the EMP burst wouldn't be strong enough to disable her."

Galt wore a smug expression on his porcine features. "That would be true for a military vessel, but that liner doesn't have hardened systems! It was built before they began installing internal shielding on passenger ships. If our two cutters launched every Mark 22 we have, it should be enough to overwhelm their computer core. No computer - no control!"

"But you haven't answered the question about their shields," pointed out Akinola.

D'Angelo allowed himself a small smile. He began to nod his head. "A quantum burst," he murmured.

"What?"

Galt frowned, annoyed to have his thunder stolen. He stole a reproachful glance at Captain D'Angelo, then nodded his head in agreement. "Captain D'Angelo is correct. A dozen quantum torpedoes, programmed to detonated 100 km outside their shield envelope, will make their shields crumple faster than a Ferengi promise!"

Akinola considered this for a moment. "Alright . . . suppose this plan works - you take out the shields, knock out their computer core. They should drop out of warp. But what's to keep them from killing passengers?"

Galt's drew up his muzzle in consternation. "If they're using remote devices to depressurize sections of the ship, they'll lose that option. The EMP burst

will neutralize those controls. But, if they're armed with conventional weapons ..."

"Then that's where me and my team comes in, Skipper," said Solly Brin, a glitter of anticipation in his yellow eyes.

Akinola looked around the table. "Does anyone have a better plan?" No one spoke. "Very well. Work out the details and let's be ready to go in twelve hours. Dismissed!"

Chapter Eleven

Stardate 54246.3 (2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Lt. Commander Delta Simms entered the ward room, seeking the replicator and a glass of iced tea. She was pleasantly surprised to see Dr. Castille seated at the long table, but she hesitated when she saw the dour look on his face.

“O.C.? Are you okay?” she asked, concern in her soft voice.

Castille looked up. “Hmm? Oh, hi Delta. No . . . nothing’s wrong.”

The auburn-haired second officer walked to the replicator. “Tea – Daddy’s blend, Simms Oh-441.” A tall glass of tea over crushed ice shimmered into existence, a wedge of lemon floating on top.

Delta retrieved the glass of tea and sat across from the CMO. Castille looked distracted.

“Nothing’s wrong, huh?” she said before taking a sip of the cold, sweet beverage.

“No . . . Yes! . . . Damn.” Castille fidgeted in his chair. Finally, he leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial tone.

“Did you know that Starfleet is sending the *Resolute* to destroy the *Queen Elizabeth* if we can’t stop her?”

Delta took another sip of tea and set the glass down carefully on the table. She regarded him with her lovely hazel eyes. She nodded.

“Yes, I was aware of that.”

“And you’re okay with that?” he asked, incredulous.

She placed a hand over his tightly clasped hands. “With what? Destroying the *QE*, or having a contingency plan to prevent war with the Tzen-kethi?”

He huffed out a breath in frustration. “For God’s sake, Delta! The people on that star liner aren’t pawns! We have no right to treat them as such.”

“Nobody wants to see those people hurt or killed, O.C. You should know that! But at the same time, we can’t afford war with the Tzen-kethi. Starfleet is still hurting from the Dominion war, and we just lost several more ships and thousands of people in the Talarian incursion. And now there’s news that five more ships have been lost en route to the Velkamis system!”

“That doesn’t justify murdering civilians!” growled Castille, obstinately.

Delta sighed. “Look. Here’s the harsh truth: If that liner crosses into Tzen-kethi space, we’re effectively at war. All the explanations and all the diplomatic overtures in the galaxy won’t prevent it. And in our weakened state, the Tzen-kethi will pose a very real threat to us. It won’t be like the last time we fought when we had superior technological and strategic advantage. This time, the playing field will be just about even. In that case, we could be looking at casualties in the *hundreds* of thousands, perhaps *millions!* There’s a very real possibility we might not be able to win such a war.”

Castille grimaced. “Okay, okay, I see your point. But, *dammit!* I didn’t sign on to kill people, I signed on to help them!”

She reached over and placed her hand against his cheek. Her palm felt cool and soothing on his hot skin. She smiled.

“I guess that’s what I like most about you, Doc – you give a damn.”

“And I thought it was my dashing good looks,” he grouched, but a shadow of a smile formed on his lips.

She stood and leaned over, kissing him on top of his balding head. “Well that too, of course.” She straightened and favored him with a weary smile. “I’ll see you later – I’ve got to catch a few hours of sleep before all hell breaks loose.”

* * *

Inga Strauss sat in the command chair, effectively alone with her thoughts. The bridge lights were dimmed and the subdued red caste of the combat lighting gave the ship’s control center a somber hue.

She sat with her legs crossed, a now cold cup of coffee in her hands as she gazed at the luxurious star liner they paced, a few thousand kilometers off their port bow. She wondered about the passengers, how they were holding

up under the stress. Surely many had seen the bodies of their dead shipmates drifting alongside. What a horrible spectacle that must have been for them.

She also wondered about the circumstances that placed the passengers on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Probably for many, this trip was a long-time dream, the culmination of years of saving and scrimping. Some might be on their honeymoon. Others, enjoying a retirement cruise. Perhaps some were traveling to visit family and friends.

One thing she knew for certain. The dream had turned into a nightmare.

“Commander?”

Inga blinked, and turned toward Nigel Bane. Their eyes locked, allowing a fleeting moment of intimate communication. She smiled at the handsome Australian lieutenant.

“Yes, Mr. Bane?”

“I’m picking up three contacts on long-range sensors – heading our way.”

“Bearing and speed?”

“190 mark 88, speed – warp 8. On their current course, they should intercept us in about ninety minutes.”

Strauss frowned, her reverie completely forgotten. “Can you determine their origin?”

He shook his head apologetically. “Not with any degree of certainty. However, they are coming from the general direction of Cardassian space.”

A small alarm went off in Inga’s head. “I need you to identify those ships for me, Lieutenant - now.”

“They’re running without ident transponders – that’s how they got so close before we picked them up. I estimate it will take another half hour before I can give you an ID. But they’re running in formation and heading straight for us.”

“And that’s no coincidence,” replied Strauss. She tapped her com-badge. “Captain to the bridge!”

Momentarily, she heard a sleepy reply. "Akinola here. What's up, Commander?"

"We have three unidentified in-bound vessels on an intercept course. Estimated time of arrival is ninety minutes."

"I'm on my way, Akinola - out."

* * *

Stardate 54246.3 (2 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Kenda Byress looked at the chronometer adjacent to the helm console and smiled. He turned to regard the haggard face of Captain Lumford.

"Do you enjoy the theatre, Captain Lumford?"

The white-haired captain frowned in puzzlement. "What? What the bloody hell does that have to do with anything?"

"Just making conversation. Of course, we didn't have much time for entertainment on Bajor when I was growing up. And what drama we had was unbearably heavy with religious overtones. But when I spent time on Earth, I had the chance to attend several plays, including one on Broadway in New York." He smiled at the memory. "I have to admit, you Humans are rich in the performing arts."

Lumford remained quiet, glaring at the Bajoran terrorist.

Kenda was unfazed by the Captain's stubborn silence. "I particularly enjoyed the symmetry of theatre - how the various scenes and acts came together to make up a whole. I found a certain . . ." he gestured in the air, seeking the right word, "*elegance* to the progression of those plays. The plot moved along until it reached its *denouement* - the final resolution. The story hinged on that point, you see."

He stood, suddenly, and walked over to the operations console. He scrolled through various readouts, finally stopping and gazing intently at one particular screen. A feral smile crept across his face.

“It would seem, my dear Captain, that our own little play is nearing its final resolution. Only one or two scenes remain to be played out.” He turned, beaming at Lumford. “Perhaps you’ll win an award for your supporting role!”

“Go frak yourself, you preening *gint!*” shouted Lumford, his face bright red with rage.

Kenda threw back his head and laughed. “Oh my, Captain! How thin is the veil of your civility!” He suddenly sobered, his expression growing hard and menacing. “Just like the thin veil of civility that our precious Federation and Starfleet has hidden behind for so long.”

He walked quickly toward the old Captain, thrusting his face in close enough for Lumford to smell the *Raktajino* on the Bajoran’s breath.

“The veil is about to be ripped away, my dear Captain Lumford. Ripped away and shredded. Soon, the entire quadrant will know how *uncivilized* our Federation can really be!”

Chapter Twelve

Stardate 54246.3 (2 April 2377)

SS Queen Elizabeth VII

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.0

Dining Room 13-A

Ulka Yol cradled his Nausican assault rifle and continued to sweep the cowering occupants of the dining room with a dispassionate gaze. The young Bajoran was, in fact, beginning to get drowsy and the tactical mask was making his face itch. He blinked perspiration from his eyes and considered popping a stim-pill. Yol hated the pills - they gave him the jitters, but he supposed it was better than nodding off.

A commotion from a table to his right caused him to turn and level the rifle. He saw a white haired human male lying prone beside the table, a woman, presumably his wife, looked around helplessly.

"Help me, someone, please! My husband - I think it's his heart!"

Yol glanced around the room. The other diners seemed disinclined to help, no doubt frozen in place with fear. The Neo-Maquis terrorist cautiously approached the table, weapon at the ready.

"Sit down!" he said gruffly to the tearful woman.

"Please!" she implored, tears streaming down her face. "Do something for him! Can't you see he's sick?"

In truth, the old man did not look well. His eyes were rolled back in his head and he didn't appear to be breathing. Yol wasn't suspicious - these two looked to be older than his own grandparents. He knelt down, moving his hand toward the old man's neck to check his pulse.

Suddenly, a vice-like pressure gripped his neck, cutting off his breathing and the blood-flow to his brain. Instinctively, he dropped the rifle and reached up to pry loose the arm that was crushing his trachea. Already, dark spots were beginning to cloud his vision and a sense of panic took hold.

Vincent Criswell quickly opened his eyes and caught the abandoned assault rifle while his wife, Pat, applied lethal pressure to the terrorist's neck. With a

sudden twist and a sickening "crack," the terrorist went limp and Mrs. Criswell dumped him unceremoniously on the floor. She wiped her hands together and favored her husband with a look of satisfaction. Vince nodded slightly in approval.

There were murmurs of shock and even a muffled scream at the brief but violent display. Vincent quickly shouldered the rifle and looked around.

"We're Federation Marines!" He announced. "Anyone else in here with military experience?"

Three people rose from their seats - two women and a young man.

"Get over here - now!" ordered former Master Gunnery Sergeant Vincent Criswell, easily falling back into his familiar command role. The three heard the note of authority in his voice and quickly moved his way.

"The rest of you, just sit tight! Help is probably on the way, but we need to level the playing field a bit."

A portly man stood and spoke. "And who put you in charge?" he challenged, a nervous tremor in his voice. There were a few murmurs of agreement to the query.

Criswell gave the man a withering stare. "I did," he said flatly in a tone that brokered no argument. "However, if you want to come take the rifle from me - be my guest!"

The portly man, his face now crimson with embarrassment, mumbled something unintelligible and retook his seat. Criswell turned to the three that had approached.

"I'm Vincent Criswell and that's my wife, Pat," he said gesturing to his now smiling wife. "Who are you and what's your branch of service?"

The two women were both former Starfleet officers. Unfortunately, neither had combat experience and only basic weapons training. The young man, as it turned out, was PFC Harlan Owens, a young Marine who was traveling to see his parents.

"Okay, Owens - we probably don't have much time. I need you to put on the perp's gear and get back into his position. Chances are, whoever's running

this operation is monitoring us. Pat and I are going to try to get through the door and find a comm station."

The wide-eyed PFC nodded and with the help of the two ex-Starfleeters, began to strip the gear from the dead terrorist. Vincent turned to his wife.

"Think you can still bypass a locked pressure door?" he asked.

She gave him a withering look. "In my sleep, Gunny," she said, then winked. "Why don't you find us some useful weapons while I jack the door."

Vincent grinned, "I love it when you talk dirty!" He moved to the buffet table where he found several sharp carving knives. He gave two to the former 'Fleeters and kept the others for Pat and himself. PFC Owens quickly donned the black coverall, vest and mask. A small transceiver was in the ear of the corpse. He dug it out and popped it in his own ear. Vincent nodded approvingly as others at the table hid the dead terrorist under the folds of the tablecloth.

"Alright, Owens - just do what our late friend was doing. Pretend to keep watch over the folks in here. If someone contacts you - act like you're having comm problems. Oh, and you *do* know how to handle that Nausican Hell-slinger, don't you?"

The youngster quickly unsafed the weapon and ratcheted the power setting to level four - all without looking at the weapon. He smiled broadly.

"Master Gunnery Sergeant - a Marine is expert with *all* weapons!" he replied, briskly.

Vincent grinned and cuffed Owens on the arm. "Right answer, Marine. If anyone but us comes through that door, you know what to do. The missus and I are off to hurt people and break things. Good luck!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.4 (2 April 2377)

USS *Resolute*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.3

"Captain Franklin? Incoming message from the USS *Bluefin* on secure channel." announced the Ops officer.

"On screen, Mr. Oolkan," replied Franklin.

Momentarily the image of a dark-skinned human captain appeared on the main viewer. Franklin noticed the lines of fatigue around the man's eyes.

"Captain, I'm Joseph Akinola, CO of the Bluefin. We've picked up three ships heading our way, ETA one hour. I don't think they're part of the USO tour."

Franklin grimaced. "Samantha Franklin, Captain. Understood - do you plan to engage the inbound vessels?"

"Actually, we were hoping you could head them off, Captain. We've worked up a plan that should allow us to knock the Queen Elizabeth out of warp and beam over boarding parties from our two cutters."

Franklin frowned. "Captain Akinola - my orders are explicit. I'm to make dead-certain that liner doesn't get near to the Brez-kril system." She cringed inwardly at her poor choice of words. "I'm sorry, but I don't have the latitude to engage unknown targets."

"I understand your quandary, Captain. . . I'm confident we can accomplish that goal without destroying the liner and 2800 people. But if we have to break-off and tangle with these other ships . . . well . . ." Akinola left the rest unsaid.

Captain Franklin felt caught in her own no-win scenario. If she violated her orders, her career was effectively finished. But, on the other hand, if those people had even a *slim* chance of being rescued . . .

She stared at the waiting image of Akinola. She didn't know the man, yet something in his voice inspired trust. Hell, she *needed* to trust him right now. To be honest, she wasn't at all sure she could give the order to fire on the *QE*, if it came to that.

Which made her decision much simpler.

"Alright, Captain - give us the bearing of those ships. Helm, prepare to adjust course to engage inbound targets."

A ghost of a smile formed on the cutter commander's face. *"Thank you, Captain. We won't let you down. Bluefin, out."*

Akinola's face disappeared from the viewscreen to be replaced by the streaking starfield. Samantha Franklin sat quietly in her command chair, suddenly feeling as if a great burden had been lifted from her heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Stardate 54246.5 (2 April 2377)

SS *Queen Elizabeth VII*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Main Bridge

Kenda Byress stifled a yawn and frowned. The Neo-Maquis operation was entering a critical phase where stress and fatigue could cause mistakes. And, he was under no illusions that Starfleet and the Border Service planned to merely stand by and watch. Even now, he was sure his adversaries were formulating some sort of plan to thwart his operation.

Nearby, still seated at an auxiliary station, Captain Lumford's head was tucked down. The sound of gentle snoring emanated from the older man. His initial adrenaline rush having faded, Lumford has succumbed to his own weariness.

Kenda glanced over at Mr. Warren, his comrade in arms and noted a vacant stare on his face.

"Mr. Warren!"

Warren started at the sound of his name. He turned, blinking toward Kenda, acutely aware that he had nearly dozed off.

"Yeah - I'm awake."

Kenda smiled. "Better take a stim-pill to be on the safe side. How are the passengers behaving?"

The former second officer of the *Queen Elizabeth* turned his head side to side, eliciting a quick *pop* from his neck. He turned to the bank of monitors, scanning them briefly.

"The sheep all look quiet."

"Good. What about our ships?"

Warren moved to the external scanners and called up a screen. "They're closing on our position - I make their ETA as 25 minutes."

"Good. We'll hail them in . . ."

Warren suddenly leaned closer to his display, his fingers adjusting the sensitivity of the star liner's long-range scanners. He jerked his head toward Byress, a look of consternation on his face.

"There's a vessel on an intercept course with our ships! *Akira*-class!"

Kenda's eyes narrowed. "We expected this, Warren - calm down!"

"Those converted freighters don't stand a chance against that ship!" Warren retorted.

"Only one has to get through - they'll scatter when that cruiser engages them. That *Akira* won't be able to catch all three!"

"Don't be overconfident, Byress! I served on the *Thunderchild* and I know what those ships can do! They're fast with a lot of long-range firepower. Even if they scatter, the 'Fleeters might get lucky!"

Kenda conceded the argument with a slight nod. "Point taken, Mr. Warren. I think it's time we once more demonstrate our resolve - contact Yol - I believe he's in one of the dining rooms, 13-A. Tell him to get out and seal the room. We're going to space that group of diners and dissuade our Border Dog friends from any precipitous acts." His tone was casual, almost pleasant.

Warren turned to comply, but a deep part of him was repulsed by his own actions and the cold ruthlessness of the Bajoran who sat in the center seat.

* * *

Stardate 54246.5 (2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

"T'Ser, is the *Sequoia* ready to proceed?" asked Captain Akinola.

"Affirmative. Commander Galvani has her boarding teams standing by. Captain D'Angelo is ready to launch a spread of quantum torpedoes on the pre-programmed trajectories on your order."

"Good." Akinola tapped his combadge. "Akinola to Commander Strauss."

"Strauss. Go ahead, sir."

"Are your boarding teams ready?"

"Yes sir. We've got eight teams standing by, ready to beam over on your order."

"Very well. Lethal force is authorized, XO - if you see anyone with a weapon, take them out. We can't chance them recovering from a stun round and harming more passengers."

A brief pause. *"Understood sir. We'll do what's necessary."*

"I know you will. Be careful, Commander, and good luck. Be ready to go on my signal."

"Aye, sir."

Akinola turned to Lt. Commander Simms, who was seated at tactical.

"Weapons status, Commander?"

"Four quantum torpedoes loaded and armed, programmed for simultaneous detonation at their designated target points. Mark 22's are ready to load."

Akinola nodded. "Good, thank you, Delta. T'ser?"

"Sir?"

"Signal the *Sequoia*," he paused, checking the chronometer on the helm console, "launch quantum torpedoes."

* * *

Stardate 54246.5 (2 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Dining Room 13-A

PFC Harlan Owens stood with the Nausican disruptor rifle cradled in his arm, much as he had seen the now-deceased terrorist hold it. It went against his training to hold the rifle in such a cavalier fashion, but he had to keep up the act, in case someone should monitor the dining room.

He jumped slightly as a voice crackled in his ear-piece.

"Yol, this is Warren - get out of the dining room and seal the door! We're going to blow the charges."

Oh God, what do I do now? Owens thought, horrified by this directive. He tapped the ear-piece and pretended to not understand.

"Say again - you're signal is breaking up." The nineteen year-old Marine from Olympic City, Mars, was scared, but his training and innate courage helped him keep his voice steady.

* * *

Main Bridge

Warren frowned at the response from Yol - something about the voice wasn't quite right. He checked the comm system - it showed no malfunction. He turned to the monitor and adjusted the controls, zooming in on the black-clad figure in Dining Room 13-A. It *looked* like Yol standing there, but with the mask and coveralls . . . He zoomed in further, focusing on Yol's right hand.

"Frak!" Warren exclaimed. The exotic tattoo of a three-headed serpent of which Yol was so proud, was conspicuously absent from the hand grasping the pistol-grip of the rifle.

Warren quickly turned toward the controls he had rigged to detonate the charges in 13-A, when the liner suddenly shook violently and the gravity fluctuated momentarily. Lights flickered on the bridge and multiple warning klaxons began to blare.

The ex second officer was thrown from his seat, striking his head violently against the sensor console. He slumped to the carpeted deck, a trickle of bright red blood flowing from a gaping wound on his forehead.

Kenda Byress managed to hang on to the captain's chair, a grimace of rage and determination darkened his normally calm features. As the violent

shaking subsided, he made his way toward the explosives control, grabbing it and flipping back the cover over a prominent red switch. Before he could throw the switch, however, he was knocked to the deck.

Captain Lumford desperately wrestled with the Bajoran, trying to twist the detonator from the hands of the terrorist. Byress was decades younger, however, and had the advantage of strength, agility and combat training. Byress threw his head forward in a savage head-butt, smashing the nose of the older man. Stunned and bleeding, Lumford sagged and lost his grip on the detonator.

Breathing hard and knowing time was running out, Byress was about to throw the switch when suddenly, every light and every control panel on the bridge went dark.

Chapter Fourteen

Stardate 54246.5 (2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Akinola squinted his eyes as eight quantum torpedoes detonated at their pre-programmed target points. Even with the automatic dimming of the viewscreen, the massive release of energy was dazzling. The cutter rocked as the blast wave passed over the ship.

"Report!" barked the Captain.

T'Ser was bent over the sensor hood, blue light painting surreal shadows over her Vulcanoid features. She smiled at what she saw in the display.

"Their shields have buckled like wet paper! They're wide-open!"

Instantly, Akinola responded. "Fire Rat-traps!"

The cutters *Bluefin* and *Sequoia* fired a spread of Mark-22 "Rat-trap" torpedoes at the now defenseless star-liner. The warheads were not designed to destroy - merely to cripple. The now un-shielded *Queen Elizabeth* lacked the internal hardening common to combat vessels. The massive electromagnetic pulse of the interdicator weapons overwhelmed many of the key systems of the star-liner.

"I'm reading a massive cascade failure of their major systems," announced T'Ser, "Their comm-system, shields and sensors are down. Unfortunately, their warp drive is still operative - they're maintaining warp 9."

Akinola grimaced. "I was afraid of that - their warp core is deep within that ship. There's just too much mass for the EMP to penetrate. No doubt they have a back-up computer system for the drive."

T'Ser straightened and faced Akinola. "True, sir. But at least we've leveled the playing field."

A small smile formed on Akinola's face. "That we have, Commander. Now, it's time to take the game to the Maquis." He slapped his commbadge.

"Akinola to Strauss."

"Strauss, go ahead, sir."

"Begin boarding operations."

In transporter room one, a tight smile formed on the petite XO's face. "Aye, sir!" She tightened the chin strap on her helmet as she turned to face Senior Chief Brin.

"The word is given, Senior Chief - let's move out!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.6(2 April 2377)

USS Resolute

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.3

"Captain - targets have initiated evasive maneuvers and have separated on divergent courses."

Franklin grunted. She knew this wasn't going to be easy.

"Very well - Ops, hail those vessels and order them to stand-down. Tactical, plot a firing solution on all three vessels. I'd prefer to disable them, but if that fails, we'll have to use all measures to stop them."

The Captain surveyed the tactical view on the main screen. "Helm, close on the nearest target first."

"Captain!" interjected the Operations officer, "Target two is headed for the Brez-krill system!"

Franklin grimaced. "Belay that last order, helm. Take us after target two - maximum warp!"

"Aye, sir!" acknowledged the Rigellian helm officer. "Time to intercept, ten minutes."

"Captain," interrupted the tactical officer, "that will take us out of firing range of the other two ships."

"Can't be helped, Lieutenant. Our top priority is preventing a war with the Tzen-kethi. I'm sure they've got reinforcements heading in-system. Ops - contact the *Bluefin* and apprise Captain Akinola of our situation. He's got two in-bound bandits to deal with."

* * *

Stardate 54246.6 (2 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Main Bridge

Emergency lights flickered on but most of the bridge displays remained dark. Kenda Byress suppressed the smoldering rage that threatened to boil over. He grabbed the disruptor pistol that he had dropped in the scuffle with Captain Lumford. He aimed it at the unconscious man, his finger applying increasing pressure until he suddenly let out a harsh laugh and dropped the weapon to his side.

"I've got to hand it to you, Captain. You're a brave man! Foolish, but brave. I suppose I owe you at least a thin chance at survival, should I fail. But, I must warn you! I'm not beaten yet!"

Lumford offered no reply. He remained sprawled on the carpeted deck, unconscious - a trickle of dark blood flowed from his broken nose. Kenda grabbed the white steward's coat and slipped it on. He placed the disruptor in his waist band at the small of his back - a risky move as Klingon weapons have no safeties.

Abandoning the main bridge, he made his way down murky stairways to begin to do hands-on what he could no longer do remotely.

* * *

Stardate 54246.6 (2 April 2377)
USS Sequoia
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

"Incoming message from the *Bluefin*," announced Lt. Lamonica.

"On-screen," replied Captain D'Angelo. Captain Akinola's face quickly appeared on the main viewer.

"Captain, we've still got two in-bound ships. The Resolute is chasing a third that's heading toward the Brez-krill system. I need you to take the Sequoia and see if you can 'dissuade' them from coming near."

A rare smile formed on D'Angelo's face. "I believe we can manage that, Captain."

"Just to give fair warning, D'Angelo - we went up against these type of ships before. Don't let looks deceive you - they're probably packing a lot of firepower, so be careful!"

The young captain nodded. "Understood. We won't take them lightly, I assure you."

Akinola nodded in return. *"Good. We'll remain on station to take on any wounded or if things get any worse."*

"Very well. *Sequoia*, out." D'Angelo turned to his tactical officer. "Mr. Xelren, what's our weapon's status?"

The young Vulcan answered immediately. "We have two quantum warheads, eight Mark 22's and twenty Mark 9 photon torpedoes available. Phasers are fully charged and shields are at 100%."

"Load Mark 9's, Lieutenant. We'll try to disable their weapons and engines with phasers first - I'm not going to depend on the Rat-traps. Helm - take us out on an intercept course, maximum warp!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.6 (2 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Sixteen boarding teams from the *Bluefin* and *Sequoia* materialized at multiple locations around the vast star-liner.

Bluefin Team One

Commander Strauss, Senior Chief Brin and Corpsman Sanders materialized on deck 20, near one of the retail pavilions. Brin checked his combat scanner then gestured forward.

"There's a large group of people about 40 meters forward, port-side. I'm reading an energy weapon," he said, quietly.

Strauss nodded. "Let's go. Solly, you take point, Sandy you take up the rear."

The black-clad trio moved quickly ahead.

Sequoia Team Alpha

Maria Galvani materialized on a metal catwalk in one of the myriad engineering sections. CPO Kasparov and Ensign Carson materialized with her.

The Italian XO pulled oculars down against her face to help see in the deep gloom. Apparently, the designers of the *QE* didn't see the need to provide much in the way of emergency lighting in this little-used maintenance space. Kasparov and Carson followed suit.

Commander Galvani checked the power level on her phaser carbine while Chief Kasparov scanned their surroundings.

"No one within fifty meters," he announced.

Galvani nodded. "Okay, our job is to get to auxiliary engineering and take the mains off-line. We've got to drop this ship out of warp. Let's go!" she said, taking the lead.

* * *

Stardate 54246.6 (2 April 2377)

USS *Endurance*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

"Unidentified vessel, this is the USS *Resolute*. Your current heading will lead you into restricted space. Shut down your engines, heave to and prepare to . . ."

Captain Franklin's transmission was interrupted as phaser fire impacted the *Resolute's* shields. Franklin's eyes narrowed.

"Have it your way, then," she said tightly. Aloud she said, "Target their engines and fire phasers!"

Red beams of lethal energy erupted from the *Resolute's* ventral phaser array. The small freighter, though slower than the heavy cruiser, was surprisingly agile. It rolled nimbly away from the first bursts of fire, peppering the starship with its own phaser bursts.

"Shields holding steady," announced the tactical officer.

"Bring us in closer, helm. We don't have all day for this," Franklin gently chided.

"Aye," replied the helmsman, who promptly put the *Akira*-class vessel in a sharp turn, cutting inside the turn of the freighter. Suddenly, two red orbs ejected from the stern of the freighter.

The operations officer jerked upright at her station. "I'm reading a quantum signature!"

"Helm! Hard over! Prepare for impact!"

But the *Resolute* was already in a hard port turn. Despite a heroic effort, the helmsman could not turn the starship away from the inbound torpedoes, which impacted on the bow of the ship.

The hammering blows of the twin torpedoes overwhelmed the forward shields, wreaking havoc to the bow of the ship. Hull plates buckled and two compartments were vented to space, costing the lives of twelve crewmen.

On the bridge, klaxon lights blared and fire suppression systems activated to extinguish flaming consoles. Captain Franklin pulled herself up from the deck. "Damage report!" she demanded.

"Reports coming in from all over the ship!" announced the Ops officer. "Hull breaches in the forward primary hull - containment fields are in place, but we lost some people," a pause, "Mains are still on-line and weapons are hot. We were lucky, ma'am!"

"Like hell!" Franklin growled, allowing anger to assuage the anguish over the dead. "We're going to finish this - now! Target that ship with all forward tubes and *fire!*"

Four torpedoes flared from the *Resolute* and tracked after the wildly gyrating freighter. The chase was swift and deadly. Franklin watched with stony satisfaction as the Neo-Maquis Q-ship was caught at the convergence of the four quantum torpedoes and reduced to sub-atomic particles.

Chapter Fifteen

Stardate 54246.6 (2 April 2377)
SS *Queen Elizabeth VII*
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Deck 13, Section C Forward

Vincent and Pat Criswell moved forward along the wide corridor when a sudden violent jolt nearly threw them to the deck. They grabbed one another for support as the *Queen Elizabeth* vibrated and rocked. A sudden brilliant light streamed through an observation port, then quickly faded.

"Looks like Starfleet finally showed up," grumbled Vince as the shaking subsided. "'Bout frakkin' time!"

"Less talk, more walk," chided Patricia, "I remember an access tube just ahead - we can go up three levels and head aft - there was a comm station on deck ten."

"Yes, dear," replied the former Master Gunnery Sergeant, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. Pat gave him a withering look that quickly morphed into a smile.

"You're having fun, aren't you Gunny?"

Vince smiled. "I haven't had this much fun since we blew up that Cardie fuel processing center on Vestaria IV!"

Pat shook her head. "It was Vestaria III - and it was an ammo dump." The two began trotting forward again.

Vince sighed. "Yes, dear." He was smart enough to know when to shut up.

* * *

Deck 10, Section G Midship - *Bluefin* Team Four

Nigel Bane, Chief Deryx and Ensign Li materialized outside a souvenir kiosk. Emergency lights created pools of muddy yellow light that did little to push back the darkness of the long corridor.

Bane performed a quick sensor sweep while Deryx and Li swept the immediate area with their phaser carbines.

"I'm picking up a sizeable group of life-forms ahead," announced Bane, quietly. "Two charged energy weapons - reading like disruptors." He looked up. "Must be a ball room or restaurant - it's sixty meters ahead. Chief - you got the tactical drones ready?"

Deryx pulled two flat objects from his rucksack and activated them. The black ellipses hummed to life, extended in length and sprouted small sensor probes. The drones rose from the deck and floated quickly down the corridor. Deryx produced a sturdy-looking PADD which afforded them a view from the drones' sensors.

In short order, the drones approached two large doors. Deryx activated a control on the PADD and was rewarded with a thermal image of the room beyond.

"Looks like 100 plus passengers . . . and those must be the perps!" Deryx indicated two blobs superimposed with the bright-blue telltale image of energy weapons.

Bane nodded. "Right then. Looks like they're separated from the hostages - should make our job a bit easier! Let's get in position. Chief, you get the drones to take down the doors and take down the perps. Li, you follow-up on the right-hand perp, I'll take the one on the left."

"Aye sir," replied Deryx. Li swallowed nervously, and nodded in understanding. Bane grinned and cuffed the young Asian Ensign on the shoulder."

"A walk in the park, Ensign! Just like in our training exercises."

"Yeah," agreed Deryx, "'Cept these guys have their disruptors set to kill!"

* * *

Bluefin Team One

Senior Chief Brin checked his combat scanner and frowned. The energy output from the nearby fusion reactors was interfering with the sensor readings. He turned and whispered to Strauss.

"Scanner's no good down here. Use your ears and eyes."

Inga nodded and gestured for Brin to proceed.

The Red Orion grasped the manual over-ride handle on the hatch before them, and cranked it open. Strauss cringed at the audible creaking of the hatch as it slowly slid open. So much for a stealthy entry.

Brin eased forward, phaser carbine at the ready and scanned the massive chamber with his eyes. Unlike Strauss, he did not require oculars to see in the dark.

He sensed, rather than saw, motion to his left. Using hand signals, he directed Strauss and Sanders to move right on the catwalk, toward the bank of reactor controls.

Brin began to move to his left, his boots making no sound on the metal grating. He was unaware of the grin that had formed on his face. It was not a pleasant expression.

* * *

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.7

The *Sequoia* rapidly closed the gap with the approaching Q-ships. Captain D'Angelo absently stroked his chin as he studied the tactical plotter.

"Sir?" called Lt. Vorl, "Signal from the *Resolute*. They've destroyed one of the ships, but took damage from quantum torpedoes. They're heading our way, but won't arrive before we engage the targets."

D'Angelo frowned. "Quantum torpedoes? Are you sure about that, Lieutenant?"

"Yes sir - I had them repeat the message to be sure. Somehow, the Maquis got hold of some."

"Very well - we must assume these two ships may have quantum torps as well. Helm, allow us plenty of maneuvering room. Mr. Lamonica - target their

weapons first! We'll worry about their engines once we knock out their teeth!"

There were enthusiastic acknowledgements to D'Angelo's orders. Lt. Lamonica smiled as he turned back to the tactical console. The Captain was actually showing a spark of enthusiasm! Lamonica didn't know where it came from, or why it had appeared, but he was glad to see it!

"Tactical - designate nearest ship as 'target one' and the other as 'target two.' I anticipate they will split off momentarily. Helm, close on target one first. Ops - let us know if they fire any torpedoes!"

"I'm on it, sir," responded Vorl.

"There they go!" observed Lamonica as the two Q-ships broke off in opposite directions.

"Stick with target one, Mr. Kitna - close the gap. Stand-by on phasers, Mr. Lamonica." D'Angelo's voice was calm and firm. He actually seemed to be enjoying himself.

"We're closing the gap, sir," announced Lilly Kitna from the helm. She absently huffed a stray strand of dark hair from her face.

"Phaser range in thirty seconds," advised Lamonica.

"When you get a firm lock, fire at will Mr. Lamonica," ordered D'Angelo, who absently rubbed his hands together as he leaned forward - eyes intent on the viewscreen.

"Inbound torpedo!" shouted Lt. Vorl, a note of fear in his voice. "Definite quantum signature! . . . Now picking up second torpedo!"

"Activate counter-measures! Mr. Kitna, evasive pattern, Tycho - Seven."

The cutter suddenly went vertical relative to the elliptic plane. Numerous micro-probes were ejected from the stern of the ship, spreading in multiple directions. Each probe generated an energy signature that mimicked the *Sequoia*.

The counter-measures successfully defeated the first torpedo, which detonated in close proximity to the cloud of micro-probes. The explosion

wiped out the remaining decoys, however, and the second torpedo followed-on relentlessly.

"Whoever's commanding that ship is familiar with our tactics," observed D'Angelo. "Helm, reverse course and bring us in to target one - maximum speed! I want to get inside his safety envelope."

Kitna's slender hands flew over the helm console. The cutter shuddered as the inertial compensators were pushed to their limits, then exceeded. Numerous warning lights began to flash in protest.

The quantum torpedo gamely followed the *Sequoia*, as it raced toward the Maquis vessel. The commander of the Maquis ship, realizing D'Angelo's plan, attempted to outrun the cutter.

It was no contest.

The *Sequoia* bore down on the converted freighter, which in turn, fired its phasers at the Boder Service ship. The fire was ineffectual.

"Mr. Lamonica, target their engines - fire!"

The *Sequoia's* twin phaser cannons erupted, sending lethal streams of phased energy at the Q-ship, whose shields quickly buckled. Lamonica's aim was true and the stubby nacelles of the Maquis vessel were quickly shredded, as were the impulse vents. Debris spiraled away from the wounded ship and tendrils of glowing red plasma began to stream from the struts.

"Reverse course, Mr. Kitna - *now!*"

Once again pushing the limits of the cutter, the pixyish helm officer threw the *Sequoia* into a wrenching 180 degree turn.

The torpedo, which had doggedly followed the cutter, suddenly locked onto the now defenseless and powerless Q-ship, which quickly dissolved in a spectacular ball of light and radiation.

"Nicely done, Mr. Lamonica, Mr. Kitna - now . . . lay in a pursuit course for target two!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

"Captain, *Sequoia* reports second Q-ship destroyed. They're pursuing the last vessel."

"Can they catch them in time?" asked Akinola.

T'Ser turned and favored him with a doubtful look. "It'll be close. And if that Q-ship launches its quantum torpedoes at the *Queen Elizabeth* . . ."

"Then all of this will be for nothing," finished Akinola. "What about the *Resolute*?"

The Vulcan operations officer shook her head. "They're limited to warp 8 - they took heavy hull damage when they engaged the first ship. They won't get here in time to help."

Akinola nodded. "Delta, power up the weapons. If *Sequoia* can't catch that ship, it's up to us to stop it."

Chapter Sixteen

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)

SS Queen Elizabeth VII

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Deck 20 - Fusion Reactor Control Room #2

Neo-Maquis terrorist Gayle Alexander, aka Lt. Muriel Allender, held the heavy disruptor pistol before her with both hands, waiting on the Border Dogs to appear so she could take them out. She ran her tongue over dry lips, her eyes wide in anticipation and apprehension. Her heart pounded so hard she feared that her adversaries might hear it.

"Come on, come on . . ." she whispered under her breath. Why were they taking so long? They had to come this way sooner or later."

She thought she heard a footfall a few meters away. Instantly, she stepped from her hiding space, behind a massive Deuterium tank, and squeezed off a shot with the disruptor. The bright green flash revealed nothing. The high-pitched echo of the disruptor bolt mocked her.

No one was there.

What the hell? she thought. Her apprehension was creeping into the realm of fear.

The hairs on her neck suddenly rose. Someone, *something*, was behind her - she *knew it!*

She whirled, bringing her weapon up to fire.

No one was there.

Shakily, she lowered the disruptor fractionally. *Keep your head, Gayle! - the darkness has you spooked. Probably no one is in here after all.*

Taking a hitching breath, she turned back the way she had previously faced. Two glowing, yellow orbs seemed to float in the darkness, studying her with malevolent interest. Her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't move - she was paralyzed with fear!

"Hi," said Solly Brin, before punching her in the face.

* * *

Sequoia Team Alpha - Auxiliary Engineering

"Chief, can you drop us out of warp?" asked Galvani.

Chief Kasparov shook his head. "No ma'am. Controls are locked-out. Whoever did this knew what they were doing." He turned and gave her an apologetic look. "If they can't shut it down on the bridge, there's only one way to stop this ship - we'll have to dump the warp core."

Galvani grimaced. "Damn. Where do we need to go, Chief?" She already knew the answer.

"We've got to get to main engineering."

"Where we know there are ten Maquis armed and waiting." She sighed and absently rubbed her forehead in frustration. "Right - contact team Bravo and Gamma to meet us down there. We'll have to let the *Bluefin's* teams handle the hostages."

* * *

Bluefin Team Two - Main Bridge

Lt. Sarnek, Chief Rumraa and Corpsman Toleno cautiously entered the bridge from an access hatch. The massive Caitian CPO moved forward, phaser carbine at the ready and fangs bared. He quickly surveyed the bridge and relaxed slightly.

"Clearr. Two men down," Rumraa announced.

Sarnek and Toleno moved forward and joined Rumraa. Sarnek moved to the control stations while the New Cyprian medic knelt by the two unconscious figures. Rumraa remained on guard, his golden eyes sweeping the gleaming control room with suspicion.

Sarnek tapped his commbadge. "Sarnek to *Bluefin*."

"*Bluefin*, go ahead Lieutenant," came the voice of T'Ser.

"We have successfully accessed the main bridge. Two men are down but are still alive. There is no sign of Kenda Byress."

"Understood. Can you gain control of the ship?"

"Not at this time - all bridge systems are off-line. I shall endeavor to effect repairs, but it will take time. Please inform sick-bay that we have two injured to beam over."

A groan from Captain Lumford interrupted Sarnek.

"No . . . No, I'm not leaving the ship," rasped the ship's Master. "Not while the Maquis have my passengers hostage."

"Sir, you're injured," said Corpsman Toleno, gently. "You need to let our doctor . . ."

"No!" said Lumford, forcefully. "Not until every one of these Maquis bastards is off my ship!"

Toleno directed an imploring look toward Sarnek. Only the Vulcan's discipline prevented him from sighing. "Very well, treat him as best you can, Corpsman. Perhaps the Captain can help us in restoring control of the ship."

Lumford nodded. "I'll do all I can!" A look of pained remembrance crossed the older man's face. He turned and angrily pointed at the other prone figure.

"Warren!" he spat. "He's one of the terrorists! The blighter's been on this ship three years, then the sodding bastard turns on us!" Lumford's voice shook with indignant anger.

Sarnek re-opened the comm channel. "*Bluefin*, a correction - only one to beam to sick-bay. Advise security and Dr. Castille that it is one of the Maquis."

"Acknowledged. Security protocols activated. Keep us posted, Sarnek - Bluefin, out."

* * *

Deck 10, Section J, Aft

Kenda Byress cautiously looked both ways along the dim corridor and listened carefully. He checked the chronometer on his wrist. Less than one hour until the Maquis ships rendezvoused. He was under no illusion that all three vessels would survive the attempt, but that didn't matter. One was all he needed. Still, time was short and he had to move quickly.

He adjusted the power setting on his disruptor to maximum. Enough to overcome any Border Dog's or 'Fleeter's armor.

Hugging the deep shadows of the shops and cafe's, he began to move quickly forward.

Time for a little mayhem, he thought, and a feral smile of anticipation crossed his face. Kenda lived for mayhem. Unlike previous generations of Maquis, he worked for no noble cause. Truth be told, the Maquis was simply a means to an end for this Bajoran. He was under no false belief that he was a "freedom-fighter." He cared nothing for the suffering of his people under the Cardassians. A part of him actually admired the brutality of the snake-heads.

No - Kenda Byress had a motive that was darker, yet more pure.

He was an anarchist and a killer. He reveled in chaos and destruction. He was incapable of compassion, pity or remorse. The concepts were alien to him.

Simply put, Kenda was a psychopath.

* * *

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.9

D'Angelo rested his chin on his fist, staring at the cutter's viewscreen. Their successful engagement with one of the Maquis Q-ships had allowed the other to open a sizable lead over the *Sequoia*. Now the cutter was at maximum warp, desperately attempting to close the gap before the Maquis vessel could get within firing range of the *Queen Elizabeth*.

"Captain," began Lt. Vorl, "*Bluefin* has signalled that they are taking up a defensive position between the Maquis vessel and the *Queen Elizabeth*."

D'Angelo nodded. "Good. Relay my complements to Captain Akinola and that we intend to stop that ship before it can do any damage." He turned in his chair. "Mr. Lamonica - time until we're in weapons range?"

"Ten minutes at our current speed, sir."

"And time until the Maquis ship is in range of the *Queen Elizabeth*?"

Lamonica scanned his tactical readouts and grimaced. He turned to D'Angelo, his expression grim.

"Seven minutes."

For a moment, no one spoke on the bridge. D'Angelo turned to Vorl.

"Signal the *Bluefin*. They're going to have to slow that ship down for at least three minutes until we arrive on station."

Lamonica hesitated, then spoke up. "Captain, in three minutes . . ."

The young Captain nodded in agreement. "Yeah - anything can happen in three minutes."

Chapter Seventeen

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

"Move us away from the *Queen Elizabeth*, Ensign An'Shill. Get us between that incoming Q-ship and the liner," ordered Akinola.

"Aye, sir," replied the nervous young Andorian helmsman. Drii An'Shill had helm duty by default with Sarnek and Bralus leading boarding parties on the *QE*. Now, she was piloting the *Bluefin* into combat - her very first time in battle.

As if sensing An'Shill's fear, Akinola gently encouraged her. "You're doing fine, Drii. Steady as she goes and be ready to follow my orders."

"Yes sir," she replied quietly. Akinola's words gave her a sense of comfort and fortified her resolve. "I'm ready."

Akinola smiled and nodded. "Good. Commander T'Ser - compute the trajectory of that Maquis vessel and transmit heading to tactical. Commander Simms, stand by on phasers - wide dispersal. If they fire any quantum torpedoes, you won't have time for target lock. Just pour on the fire-power and let's pray it'll be enough."

Delta smirked. "Just like openin' the choke on my Daddy's 12-gauge," she said. "Phasers set to 'wide-bore,' aye!"

"And here they come!" announced T'Ser. "Trajectory computed. The Maquis vessel is still outside of firing range but bearing straight for us. *Sequoia* is closing, but not quickly enough."

"Hold position, helm," ordered the Captain. "At the sign of torpedo launch, you are free to fire, Delta."

* * *

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)

USS *Resolute*

Sector 04340 - Warp 8.1

Captain Franklin tapped her commbadge. "Franklin to engineering."

"Engineering, Vanboerner here, Captain."

"John, tell me we'll have warp 9 or better in a few minutes!"

The sigh on the other end of the channel was audible. *"Sorry, Sam. We're doing well to run at warp 8. The warp field from the starboard nacelle is fluctuating as it is. If we push any harder, we'll collapse the field and drop out of warp."*

Franklin rubbed her forehead in frustration. "Understood. Keep working at it and keep me apprised of your progress." She closed the channel and looked back at the streaking stars on the viewscreen. "So much for getting back into the fight."

Commander Xyrel stood at the operations station, checking long-range sensors. A sudden spike on the theta band caught his attention. Focusing the powerful sensors of the *Resolute* on the Brez-krill system, he discovered a disturbing new development. The Vulcan first officer turned and addressed Franklin.

"Captain - long range sensors have picked up six additional Tzen-kethi warships. They have formed a picket line at the periphery of the Brez-krill system."

Franklin tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Can you identify the type of vessels, Commander?"

"Based on their power-output, it appears that three heavy cruisers, two frigates and a dreadnought have joined the original vessel."

Franklin shook her head in disbelief. "This day just gets better and better," she said, sarcastically. "Helm, take us out of warp and hold position. Number One, keep our sensors trained on those Tzen-kethi ships. Mr. Hamartu, contact Starbase 500 and get me Admiral Jellico - right now!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.7 (2 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Deck 10, Section G Midship - *The Collonades* ballroom

Frith J'Kliiz prowled near the tall, double doors that separated the hostages from the corridor. The Nausican mercenary was in the temporary employ of the Maquis - not for political reasons, but because the money was good. He was becoming agitated - a dangerous state for a Nausican.

Dola Karn, the other Maquis operative, watched the pacing Nausican with growing irritation. Finally, the Bajoran woman spoke sharply.

"For the sake of the Prophets, stop your incessant pacing, Frith!"

The Nausican turned his disruptor on his supposed ally. "Watch how you speak, Bajoran! I might decide to relieve my boredom by carving out your heart!"

Dola's eyes narrowed. "Keep in mind - you frak this up, you don't get paid! Understand?"

The two-meter tall mercenary made a hissing sound, then turned abruptly from the Bajoran.

Oddly enough, the hissing sound continued. In fact, it was growing louder.

Frowning, Dola began to move around, trying to surmise the source of the sound. Now the hissing became a low pulsing hum - it seemed to be coming from just outside the doors . . .

Dola's eyes flew open wide in sudden realization. She shouted a warning.

"Frith! *Get away from the . . .*"

The massive doors blew off their hinges in a cacophony of sound. Frith was crushed under one of the durasteel doors - a trail of brown blood smeared the polished floor as the door continued to slide inward with Frith underneath.

Dola clapped her hands to her head and dropped to her knees, stunned by the sonic burst that had smashed open the doors. Temporarily deafened, she stared dumbly at a dark cylinder that floated into view and began to approach her. She saw a flash of light, then everything went black.

* * *

"Move in! Move in!" shouted Lt. Bane as his team ran in behind the tactical drones. Deryx swept the room with his carbine but saw no hostiles. Ensign Li noticed the blood smear and the crumpled remains of a Nausicaan disruptor.

"One perp down!" Li announced.

Bane moved to the still form of a Bajoran woman, clad in black coveralls and a tactical vest. He kicked the disruptor pistol out of her reach and switched his combat scanner to bio-diagnostic mode. The woman was alive, just out cold.

He knelt and none-too-gently applied restraints to her wrists and ankles before turning his attention to the assembled passengers. Some near the doors were also unconscious - caught in the initial sonic concussion. Most were simply terrified, cowering away from these new dark-clad interlopers. Deryx and Li began to tend to the injured.

Lt. Bane hopped up on a nearby table. "Border Service!" he shouted. "You're all going to be okay, but we need you to do *exactly* what we tell you . . ."

* * *

Deck 10, Section H, Midships

Kenda Byress instinctively ducked at the sudden, muffled *BOOM* that emanated not far ahead. The sound was wrong - certainly not the charges that he and his cohorts had planted around the ship.

"Border Dogs!" he breathed, his voice dripping with venom. "They must have reached the ballroom."

The terrorist began to move away when movement just ahead caught his eye. He was surprised to see an elderly couple exit the ladder access hatch. He supposed they must have been overlooked in the initial sweep and were wandering the ship, confused and afraid.

His face twisting into a predator's grin, he moved forward purposefully. A pair of personal hostages would prove useful as one of his ships would arrive momentarily to beam him off before destroying the *Queen Elizabeth*.

Slipping easily into his persona of Steward 2nd class. He straightened his white jacket and allowed a fearful, harried expression to form on his face.

"Madame! Sir! Over here!" he hissed, his voice seemingly frantic. "The terrorists are just down the corridor! Please - come with me! I can lead you to safety!"

The white-haired couple glanced at one another, then began moving toward Kenda. In the dim light, the Bajoran could not see that their faces were anything *but* frightened.

* * *

Stardate 54246.8(2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - Holding position 1.2 million km relative to the *Queen Elizabeth*

"Torpedo inbound!" announced T'Ser. "It's tracking toward *us*, not the *QE!*"

"Helm! Evasive! - pattern alpha alpha two," ordered Akinola.

Gamely, Ensign An'Shill inputted the requisite commands, sending the cutter backwards in a random, spiraling maneuver. Her antennae twisted in rhythm with the cutter's gyrations.

"Fire phasers!" barked the Captain.

The forward Type VIII batteries opened up, blasting forth twin streams of phased energy overlapping in wide cones.

The quantum torpedo streaked after the *Bluefin*, doggedly homing in on the border cutter. At a mere 20 thousand kilometers, the phasers struck the quantum torpedo, causing its premature detonation and unleashing hellish, destructive energy.

The *Bluefin's* shields saved it from destruction, but the massive energy wave overloaded many sub-systems of the cutter. Lights failed and the ship shook violently for several seconds before the blast effect subsided.

"Damage report!" demanded Akinola over the din of warning alarms that blared for attention. Pulsing red battle lanterns and emergency lights created eerie shadows that rose and fell across the bridge.

"Shields down to 20%," replied T'Ser. "Weapons and subspace communications are off-line. Warp drive is off-line. No hull breaches reported, life support is operating at full capacity. Impulse engines should be available momentarily."

"What about casualties?"

"Unknown. Dr. Castille said he'll get back to us."

"Damn," breathed Akinola. "T'Ser, get damage control parties moving - we need weapons and we need warp speed yesterday!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

On the main screen, a small sun seemed to appear momentarily, then it rapidly faded away.

"Quantum explosion, dead ahead!" announced Vorl from operations.

"Source?" demanded D'Angelo. "Was it the *Queen Elizabeth*?"

"Negative. I'm still picking up the starliner - it's continuing on course to the Brez-krill system at warp 9." Vorl paused, peering intently at his readings. "I've got the *Bluefin* on sensors - she's intact but apparently damaged. The Maquis vessel is continuing to close on the *QE*." Another pause. "Sir, we've closed the gap significantly - engaging the *Bluefin* slowed them down. We're barely in weapons range."

D'Angelo didn't hesitate. "Mr. Lamonica - target the Q-ship with both forward tubes and *fire!*"

Two photon torpedoes slipped silently from the forward launcher tubes of the *Sequoia*, swiftly closing on the Maquis ship.

Chapter Eighteen

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

SS Queen Elizabeth VII

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Main Bridge

"Hang on half a mo! I think I've about got sensors back up . . ." Captain Lumford's voice was thick and nasal, his broken and swollen nose full of clotted blood.

Lt. Sarnek stood by the old ship's master who was still unsteady on his feet despite a stim-shot from the corpsman. The Vulcan frowned at the unorthodox methods that Lumford employed to bypass systems damaged by the electro-magnetic pulse.

"Sir, I really don't see how you can . . ."

Sarnek stopped in mid-sentence as a bank of consoles whirred to life. His eyebrows shot up in genuine surprise as monitors blinked, flickered then steadied as systems began to re-boot.

Lumford favored Sarnek with a toothy grin. "What? They don't teach you how to jack around fried EMS couplings at the Academy?"

"Certainly not in this manner," replied Sarnek - impressed, nonetheless. "Perhaps, once the crisis is passed you could share your methodology."

"Perhaps, but you don't strike me as the 'spit 'n bailing wire' type," winked Lumford. His grin faded as the sensors steadied. "Uh-oh, looks like more trouble in the vicinity!"

Sarnek turned his attention to the bank of monitors that revealed the space battle raging not far from their position.

"Captain Lumford, I would suggest that you proceed with your '*spit and bailing wire*' with all due haste!"

* * *

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

USS Resolute

Sector 04340 - Holding station 84 light years from Brez-krill

"I'm sorry, Captain, but the President and the Council have refused the request for additional ships. They're afraid of escalating the situation," said Admiral Edward Jellico.

"And what are we supposed to do if those six additional Tzen-kethi warships head our way, Admiral? Make diplomatic overtures? Invite them over for coffee?" a flash of anger slipped through Captain Franklin's usual reserve.

"Easy, Sam! I'm on your side here. It's very unlikely the Cats will move into neutral space - it's not their normal tactics. As long as you avoid crossing into their territory they should leave you alone."

"Forgive me if that doesn't exactly fill me with confidence," said Franklin, scarcely keeping the sarcasm from her voice.

The gray-haired admiral nodded, conceding the point. *"I'd probably feel the same way if I were in your shoes, Captain. I will do this much - I'm dispatching the Swiftsure and the Hornet to Tran'da 224, ostensibly to update the sector star maps. That will put them 12 hours away at maximum warp."*

Franklin regarded her old mentor with a wan smile. "That's better than nothing, sir. I appreciate it."

"I know it's not much, but my hands are tied at the moment. Hang in there, Sam. And don't forget you're not alone out there - I met Captain Akinola a long time ago during the first Cardassian war, back when he was still a non-com. He struck me as a very capable fellow then, and by his reputation, he's a cagey cutter C.O."

Samantha Franklin nodded. "He'd better be. We'll hold position and act as the 'trip-wire' in case the Tzen-kethi change the rules or the *QE* gets past the Border Dogs."

* * *

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

USS Bluefin

Sector 04340 - .25 c

Captain Akinola hovered over Lt. Commander T'Ser and Ensign Vashtee as damage reports came in from all over the ship. They were lucky to be in one piece, but for the moment they were slow, toothless and vulnerable.

"Sickbay to Bridge."

Akinola tapped his commbadge. "Akinola here - go ahead, Doctor."

"First the good news - no fatalities and the injuries we're seeing are moderate to minor. We were damn lucky!"

"No argument there, Doc," replied Akinola dryly. "I take it there's bad news as well?"

"Our Chief Engineer is out of commission for the moment. Galt took a pretty hard blow to the head and was unconscious for several minutes. He's come around, but he's in no condition to . . ."

"Fornicating deities!" came the muffled voice of the feisty Tellarite Chief Engineer, *"I'm fine you insolent whelp! Get me out of this rutting bed and let me get the frak back to engineering!"*

Both Akinola and T'Ser had to suppress grins. "Doc, tie him down if necessary - I'll need him in good shape later, when we can put things together properly. Anything else I need to know?"

"That's it for now. Just do me a favor - whatever you just did, don't do it again!"

"No promises, Doctor. Bridge, out." Akinola looked across the bridge toward Commander Simms.

"Delta, looks like your old job is calling - get down to engineering and take over until Galt is up and around."

"Aye sir - on my way!" The red-head from Alabama gracefully rose from her seat at tactical and quickly moved to the ladder alcove.

Akinola turned his attention back to T'Ser and Vashtee. "Keep at it, you two. Let me know the minute we get any of our main systems back up and running."

He re-took his seat at the center of the bridge, rubbing his chin in consternation. The static star-field mocked him - a reminder that the battle and the *Queen Elizabeth* were moving ever farther out of reach.

* * *

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)
SS *Queen Elizabeth VII*
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Deck 10, Section H, Midships

Vince and Pam Criswell were surprised at the sudden appearance of the steward. They glanced at one another.

"Should we trust him?" whispered Vince.

"Hell no!" replied Patricia, "but maybe we should play along, in case he's for real."

"Agreed. Time to play the frightened tourists again. Got your knife hidden?"

"Wouldn't you like to know where?" she replied, demurely.

* * *

Kenda couldn't hear what the elderly couple were saying over the distance. They were probably wondering if he was "safe."

He moved forward, hands in the air. The disruptor still concealed in the small of his back under his jacket.

"I'm Kenda Byress," he called out in a high-pitched, non-threatening voice. "Steward, 2nd class. I was able to hide in one of the kitchens when the ship was hi-jacked. Please - come with me! I'll take you there - we'll be safe until help arrives!"

* * *

Lt. Bane stepped outside of the ballroom for a moment to get another scan of the area. He froze as his combat scanner picked up three life-forms less than 100 meters aft of his position. One carried an energy weapon.

Bane hesitated for a moment, considering whether to call Chief Deryx or Ensign Li, but they had their hands full with the passengers, trying to get them calm.

He checked the power setting on his phaser carbine and trotted through the darkened corridor, avoiding the pools of stale light that came from the emergency lamps.

* * *

Kenda smiled as the old man and woman approached, their eyes wide and their posture stooped with age and fatigue. They appeared completely harmless.

"Come on! We must hurry before the terrorists spot us!" he urged, gently, "That's it! Now, what are your names?"

"Pat and Vince Criswell," said the white-haired woman. "We hid in a maintenance corridor when all the trouble began."

Her voice had a slight tremor to it - she certainly sounded nervous, but . . .

Kenda began to look at them more carefully and paused, the smile frozen on his face. Finely honed survival instincts warned him that something was wrong - both of them looked fit, *too* fit for average retirees - and the man's eyes - though they were wide, they burned with intensity.

Maybe not such good hostages after all . . . Kenda thought and slowly moved his right hand behind his back.

* * *

Bane heard voices and slowed, moving forward in a crouch and using chairs, tables and large plant urns as cover. Peering through the leaves of a Philodendron, he saw an elderly couple and a man in a white jacket - the same man who had taunted them from the bridge earlier!

Crikey! thought Bane, *I don't have a clear shot from here!* He thought quickly - only one possibility came to mind. He closed his eyes for a moment and clenched his teeth.

I love you, Inga! he thought as he stepped clear of concealment, hoping to get a clean angle of fire on the terrorist. Of course, the terrorist now had a clear shot at him.

* * *

In close combat, time tends to dilate - speeding up at points, slowing down at others.

Kenda's eyes widened as he saw the black clad figure emerge from the shadows, the familiar outline of a Border Service phaser carbine moved upward, red primer diodes glowing like the eyes of a fire-bat.

Vincent saw Kenda's hand move backward. He desperately tried to push Pat aside, but she was already moving *forward*, toward the steward.

Once Kenda's hand moved backward, Patricia moved instinctively - her right hand pulling the knife from underneath the back of her blouse, her left driving forward to grab Kenda.

The Bajoran was well-trained. He brought the disruptor to bear on Bane with extraordinary speed and fired off a round. The green bolt of energy tracked toward the Australian Lieutenant.

To her dismay, Pat discovered that her own reflexes were not as quick as even ten years ago. Kenda grabbed her outstretched left hand and wrenched it sharply, sending agonizing pain along her arm to her shoulder. Somehow, she managed to maintain her grip on the knife which she continued to hold concealed along her right side.

* * *

Almost too late, Bane saw the weapon appear as if by magic in Kenda's hand. The Aussie instinctively began to move to his right, when a shocking hammer blow caught the left side of his armored vest, just below his armpit. Fiery pain streaked along his left side, the impact spinning him like a top before dropping him on the deck like a discarded rag-doll. His phaser carbine clattered loudly on the polished floor and slid into the darkness.

Muscles along his left side began to spasm uncontrollably in awful, searing cramps, yet the pain served a beneficial purpose - it kept Bane conscious.

Grinding his teeth, he willed all of his energy, all of his muscle control to focus on his right hand. Slowly and with great pain he moved his fingers toward the phaser pistol on his belt.

* * *

Nearly dislocating Pat's shoulder, Kenda brought the disruptor against her temple, his left hand holding her left arm behind her back at an unnatural angle. A rictus grin pulled the skin back from his teeth. In that moment, in the uncertain light, Vince thought Kenda looked more like some mythical monster from some ancient tale than a Bajoran. The terrorist's eyes glittered in the manner reserved solely for the insane.

"Better step back, old man," breathed Kenda in a sing-song voice. "I'm in the mood for mayhem! But I've got a schedule to keep. So drop that meat cleaver before I vaporize your wife's pretty head!" To emphasize his point he jammed the emitter of the disruptor against Pat's head hard enough to leave a bruise.

Vince froze in place. For one of the few times in his life, he didn't know what to do! Tears of pain rolled down Pat's cheek, yet she didn't cry out. He looked at his wife of nearly sixty years with an expression of helplessness.

To his amazement, she winked at him!

Kenda moved the disruptor fractionally away from Pat's head so he could access the communicator on his wrist.

"It's time for me to say goodbye. I'm afraid Mrs. Criswell will have to join me, though." He chinned the transmit control "Kenda to *Anarchy* . . ."

Pat Criswell jammed the chef's knife into Kenda's upper thigh with her remaining strength, severing the femoral artery. She twisted the blade.

Kenda's eyes widened in shock and pain. Staggering, he loosened his grip on Patricia, who dropped to the deck. Though blood pulsed from his wound, the terrorist brought up the disruptor, aiming it at the woman.

"Nicely *done*, Bitch!"

Vince grabbed the meat cleaver from the floor and was about to charge Kenda when a blue beam suddenly appeared from behind them, accompanied by the familiar warble of a Starfleet-issue phaser.

Kenda Byress' body was engulfed in a blue aura that expanded and brightened, before winking out. The Bajoran terrorist was gone, vaporized by the phaser beam.

Stunned, Vince turned to see a black-clad figure lying prone on the deck, some 15 meters away. The phaser wavered, then dropped to the floor with a muffled *clink*. The figure slumped back, and was still.

Chapter Nineteen

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Captain D'Angelo's enthusiastic desire to intercept the Maquis vessel led him to make a common tactical error: He over-pursued. Tactical experts tend to agree that tunnel-vision and a loss of situational awareness has killed more beings in battle than any other cause.

The commander of the Maquis Q-ship, a former Starfleet commander and tactical officer had slowed his vessel fractionally, allowing the *Sequoia* to catch up. At the same time the cutter launched its photon torpedoes, the Q-ship fired two of its own.

* * *

"Inbound torpedoes!" shouted Lt. Vorl, sudden terror evident in his voice.

"Evasive!" ordered, D'Angelo. It was all he had time to say. Inwardly, he cursed himself for his mistake - something a first year cadet should know to avoid.

Lt. Kitna valiantly threw the cutter into a corkscrew turn away from the torpedoes. Her effort was partially successful as one of the old Mark V torpedoes, lost sensor lock - its 30 year-old targeting scanner failing in the tight maneuvers.

The second torpedo doggedly followed the *Sequoia*, detonating against the aft ventral shields.

As for the Maquis vessel, the commander proved to be as lucky as he was sly. Numerous phaser blasts lashed out at the incoming torpedoes. In a stroke of incredible fortune for the Neo-Maquis crew, they managed to destroy both torpedoes without incurring any significant damage.

* * *

"Damage report!" ordered D'Angelo. The cutter was still intact and moving, despite the hammer-blow they received from the photon torpedo.

"Drive systems are intact," replied Vorl. "No hull breaches, no reports of any serious injuries . . . aft shields are down to 70% . . . weapons are off-line!"

The Captain snapped his head up at this last pronouncement. "Status of the Maquis ship?"

Vorl adjusted the sensors and shook his head in amazement. "It appears they were undamaged. The torpedoes detonated short of impact."

D'Angelo brought his fist down on the armrest of his chair. "I walked right into their set-up!" He quickly regained composure. "Helm, pursue that ship at maximum warp."

"Sir," reminded Lt. Lamonica. "We don't have weapons. What can we do?"

D'Angelo fixed the tactical officer with a piercing gaze. "Whatever we have to do to protect that starliner."

* * *

Stardate 54246.9 (2 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340 - .25c

Akinola sipped from his mug of tepid coffee, feeling impotent as the *Bluefin* crawled along at one-quarter the speed of light. He knew there was nothing more they could do, at least for the moment. The fate of the *Queen Elizabeth*, its passengers and crew, rested in the hands of the eight boarding parties and the *Sequoia*.

"*Engineering to bridge,*" Lt. Commander Simms' voice came over the open channel.

"Go ahead, Delta," replied Akinola.

"*Good news - we've got the mains back on-line, at least temporarily. You're clear to go to warp.*"

"Ensign An'Shill - you heard the lady! Take us to maximum warp in pursuit of the *Queen Elizabeth*." Returning his focus to Commander Simms, he continued, "Nice work, Delta! Galt will be jealous."

"He's not going to be happy when he sees the mess we made. We've bypassed a lot of safeties, so I'd advise avoiding getting shot at again."

"Understood. We'll see what we can do," replied Akinola, dryly. "If they can spare you down there, I'd like you back on the bridge."

"Yes sir, Ensign Stanley has things under control. I'll be there shortly."

"Good - Bridge out." As he closed the channel, he watched the viewscreen with satisfaction as the formerly static stars now streaked by rapidly. For the first time in hours, a small smile stole across his weathered face.

* * *

Stardate 54246.9 (2 April 2377)

USS *Sequoia*

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.9

Once again, the swift cutter closed the distance to the Maquis vessel. Unfortunately, it had opened a significant lead, even now closing on the looming form of the starliner.

"Why doesn't he fire?" mused Lamonica. The Q-ship was within weapons' range of the *Queen Elizabeth*.

"They probably want to beam off their 'friends' before they open fire," replied D'Angelo. "That may give us the time we need."

Lt. Lamonica turned in his chair and faced the young Captain. "Time to do what, sir? What do you have in mind?" There was no challenge in Lamonica's voice, instead his tone was both respectful and accepting.

"We don't have phasers or torpedoes. Our tractor beam won't do any good against a ship that size. Do the math, Mr. Lamonica," replied D'Angelo, calmly.

The bridge was quiet as realization dawned on the crew. The last line of defense for the *Queen Elizabeth* was the *Sequoia* herself - sans weapons.

Lt. Lilly Kitna swallowed hard. She straightened in her seat at the helm and cleared her throat.

"Your orders, sir?" she asked, her voice remarkably calm.

The Captain smiled thinly. "Aim for amid-ships on that vessel, Mr. Kitna. We're going to cut the bastards in two! Lt. Vorl, route all auxiliary power to the forward shields, life support included, and boost the structural containment fields."

His fingers slid to the intra-ship comm stud. "*All hands, this is the Captain. Brace yourselves for imminent collision. Engineering, activate emergency containment field around the warp core. Everyone hang on, this is going to be rough!*"

* * *

Stardate 54246.9 (2 April 2377)
Maquis vessel *Anarchy*
Sector 04340 - Warp 8

Jarman Klein, Commander of the *Anarchy*, frowned at the rapidly growing image of the *Queen Elizabeth*. He turned to one of his comrades at the communications console.

"Have we got Kenda on board, yet?"

The mixed-race female turned, a perplexed expression on her face. "I don't know what happened! He signalled us to beam him over, then we lost transporter lock. I can't raise him and we've lost his bio-signal."

"The Border Dogs must have killed him," Klein said, though his voice lacked any sympathy. In fact, Klein despised the Bajoran. If he was dead, well, so much the better.

"Lock quantum torpedo on that ship, Ernst, and prepare to fire."

Zori Balos turned from the communication station and fixed Klein with a blistering gaze. "We haven't beamed the others over yet!"

Klein shook his head. "No time. Or have you forgotten that cutter that nearly blew us out of the stars a short time ago!"

"They're our *friends*, Klein! You can't abandon them!"

"They all knew the stakes," he replied, dismissively. "The cause is bigger than any individual."

"That cutter's back and closing!" shouted a bald-headed human seated at the sensor station. "He's on a collision course!"

"Evasive, damn you!" shouted Klein, frantically. He shoved the startled woman at the helm roughly out of the way. Desperately trying to turn the Q-ship out of the path of the hurtling *Sequoia*, he yelled, "Launch the tor . . ."

Klein never finished his last thought as the 120 metric ton cutter tore threw the freighter's shields, rending apart the hull and collapsing the Q-ship in on itself. The cutter sliced through the rapidly disintegrating freighter as gasses ignited, creating multiple explosions. Pieces of both ships spun away in a growing cloud of debris.

Once more alone, the *Queen Elizabeth VII* continued toward the Brez-Krill sector and the waiting Tzen-Kethi battle group. Only the *USS Resolute* remained in her path.

* * *

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

USS Bluefin

Sector 04340 - Warp 9.3

T'Ser gasped in astonishment and recoiled from the sensor hood. Her hand reflexively covering her mouth in shock.

"What's wrong, T'Ser?" queried the Captain, sharply.

"It's . . . the *Sequoia* - she just rammed the last Q-ship!"

Akinola sat stunned, momentarily speechless. "Disposition of those ships, Commander?"

T'Ser forced herself to peer into the sensor hood once more. She adjusted the focused, reaching her hand out with experienced ease to filter out interference. After several tense moments, she relaxed fractionally.

"Sequoia is still intact but adrift - her bow section received major damage and the bridge module took a heavy hit. Emergency force-fields are in place and I'm reading low-level power on board."

"What of the Q-ship?" pressed Akinola, impatiently.

T'Ser shook her head. "It's mostly a debris field. There are five recognizable sections, but no power or life-signs." She gave Akinola an ironic look. "They're toast."

The Captain nodded tersely. "Helm, get us in close to the *Sequoia*. T'Ser, see that transporter rooms are ready to beam over survivors. Commander Simms, you have the conn." Akinola rose and moved toward the turbo-lift.

"Sir, may I ask what you're doing?" asked Simms, surprised at Akinola's actions.

"In case you haven't noticed, Commander, we're a bit short-handed. I'm going to suit up and lead a rescue team." Before Simms could protest, he turned from her toward the operations console. "T'Ser, you better come too. Get Vashtee up here to relieve you!"

T'Ser complied and joined Akinola in the turbo-lift, leaving a flustered Delta Simms in the center seat.

"If anything else happens, I'm leaving the EMH in charge," she muttered to herself.

Chapter Twenty

Stardate 54246.8 (2 April 2377)

SS Queen Elizabeth VII

Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Deck 10, Section H, Midships

The Criswells hurried to Bane's side, Vincent placing two fingers to the young Lieutenant's neck.

"He's got a pulse - thank God for that! And he's breathing, too. Check his scanner, Pat."

Mrs. Criswell turned her attention to the combat scanner strapped to Bane's left forearm.

"Fried," she announced. "The disruptor bolt frinxed it good."

"Try the distress signal - it uses a flash source and should've been shielded from the bolt."

The combat scanner was not significantly different from the scanners they had used in the Corps. After a moment, they were rewarded with a steady "beep."

"Got it!" she said, pleased with herself. "That should get a corpsman shagging ass over here!"

"That's no language for a lady!" said Vince with a grin. Pat popped him on the back of the head.

"Ow!" he said, still grinning. "What the hell was *that* for?"

"General principles," she replied, grinning back at her husband and brother-in-arms.

Momentarily, they heard approaching footfalls. Another black-clad Border Dog appeared. He pulled up sharply, his phaser carbine leveled at the Criswells.

"Stand-down, god-dammit," rumbled Vince Criswell. "and get over here and help your Lieutenant - he caught a disruptor bolt but he's still alive! Looks like his armor saved his ass."

CPO Deryx approached cautiously, surprised to see the white-haired couple kneeling by the lieutenant and equally surprised by the commanding voice of the man - he sounded like a non-com.

"I'm Chief Deryx - Border Service." He lowered the carbine fractionally but kept it at the ready. "Who are you?"

"We're frakkin' tourists!" announced Pat, beginning to lose patience. "Now get your foot off your crank and get over here! Are you a corpsman?"

Deryx figured if *they* were Maquis, *he* was a green Orion slave girl. He moved forward, dropping down beside the fallen officer. "No, I'm no corpsman, but I can get one here pretty damn quick!" He tapped a text message into his scanner, then checked over the Lieutenant. Satisfied that Bane was alive and breathing, though still unconscious, he turned his attention back to the Criswells.

"You guys Starfleet?" he asked.

Vince snorted and Patricia barked a short laugh. "Hell, no, Doggy, we're no 'Fleeters! The missus and I are Marines - currently inactive." In the Criswell's vocabulary, there were no such things as 'ex' or 'retired' Marines.

Deryx grinned at the "Doggy" reference a common Marine nick-name for Border Service personnel. That, more than anything, convinced him they were indeed who they claimed.

"Mind telling me what the hell happened here?" asked the Denobulan CPO.

The Criswells shared their experiences, from the initial takeover by the Maquis, to their escape from the dining room and their encounter with Kenda Byress.

"Your lieutenant, here, saved our asses, Chief!" said Vince, looking at the young officer with a mix of admiration and concern. "He broke cover and drew fire away from Pat - and got himself shot in the process."

"Well, nobody said officers were real bright," observed Deryx. The Criswells nodded in agreement.

* * *

Bluefin Team One, Deck 22

Commander Strauss, SCPO Brin and Corpsman Sanders moved deeper into the bowels of the massive starliner. They had successfully liberated 38 of the *Queen Elizabeth's* crew. One Maquis died in the brief skirmish, making the foolish mistake of charging at Senior Chief Brin. Mercifully for the terrorist, he was dead before he hit the ground, Brin's long-bladed knife protruding from his left eye socket.

Strauss turned command of the liner's crew to a young lieutenant. Now, armed with the terrorists' weapons plus knives and make-shift clubs, they were on their own mission to liberate the rest of the crew.

Descending a steep ladder, the trio from the *Bluefin* all paused as their combat scanners vibrated with an in-coming distress signal. Inga's breath caught in her throat as she saw that the signal came from Nigel Bane.

Brin gently placed a hand on her arm. "Hey, Commander! The Lieutenant's alive - we wouldn't be receivin' the distress signal otherwise. A corpsman will get to him quick - it'll be okay."

She bobbed her head and smiled gamely, touched at how this burly warrior could exhibit such concern. "Thanks, Solly. I'm sure you're right. Come on - we've got to rendezvous with Commander Galvani's team at main engineering. Time is running out and we've got to eject that warp core!"

* * *

Sequoia Team Alpha, Deck 24

Commander Maria Galvani knelt beside the Ukranian CPO, who was frowning at his scanner.

"What do we have, Chief?" she whispered. They were now only a dozen meters from the massive double doors to main engineering.

"Twelve life-signs and multiple energy weapons. What concerns me is if we start a fire-fight in there. One stray round in the wrong place could start a warp-core breach. Then it's goodbye to all of us!"

Galvani frowned at the news. "Wouldn't the computer automatically jettison the warp core in case of a breach?"

Kasparov shrugged. "The Maquis have already messed with most of the control systems and our Mark 22's didn't help. I wouldn't bet my life on the safety protocols working."

The *Sequoia's* XO checked her chronometer. "We have less than 45 minutes, Chief. We're going to have to risk it before the *Resolute* takes the decision out of our hands."

* * *

Stardate 54246.9 (2 April 2377)
USS *Sequoia*
Sector 04340 - damaged and adrift

Four figures in environmental suits materialized on the remains of the *Sequoia's* bridge. Captain Akinola, Dr. Castille, Crewman Norris and Petty Officer Cookie Marino looked around in hushed awe at the monstrous destruction of the cutter's control center. A large, gaping hole opened their view to the void where the main viewer was once located. A faint blue glow was the only indication of the emergency force-field that prevented the unconscious occupants of the bridge from being sucked into the vacuum of space.

"Spread out and tend to the wounded," ordered Akinola, somberly. His eyes caught sight of an arm protruding from beneath a pile of ceiling panels and a structural beam.

"Cookie! Give me a hand!"

The portly ship's cook joined Akinola and together, they moved debris aside to reveal the still form of Captain D'Angelo.

"Doc!" called Akinola. Castille joined them, kneeling as he ran a medical tricorder over the unconscious captain.

"He's alive, but just barely. Let's beam him directly to sickbay. I've already activated the EMH."

Seconds after contacting the *Bluefin*, Captain D'Angelo disappeared in the shimmer of the transporter beam, whisked away to sickbay. Akinola, Castille and the others turned their attention back to the rest of the injured bridge crew.

* * *

Lt. Commander T'Ser, Ensign Ryan and Corpsman N'gali materialized outside of *Sequoia's* engineering section.

"Radiation levels normal, atmosphere is within acceptable range" commented T'Ser. With that determined, the trio deactivated the force-fields that served as faceplates on their helmets. "Let's check out engineering."

They moved toward the double doors, which remained obstinately closed.

"Jammed," muttered T'Ser. "Ensign, try the hyper-jack and get the doors opened. N'gali check the rest of the deck for casualties, then get back to us."

Ensign Ryan pumped the hyper-jack in a slot by the doors. At first, nothing happened. Then an audible pop and creak emanated from the doors, which began to slowly slide open.

As soon as the opening was wide enough, T'Ser slipped through into engineering.

Leaning against one of the consoles was an older male Trill with lieutenant commander pips on his collar. T'Ser hurried by his side. The Trill blinked at her blearily, obviously dazed and in shock.

"I'm Lt. Commander T'Ser from the *Bluefin*," she said gently. "Are you injured?"

The Trill seemed to rally and attempted to regain his feet. T'Ser helped him to a chair.

"I'm alright - just banged up a bit." Realization and a look of sudden concern crossed his face. "The ship? . . ."

She smiled. "You're still in one piece . . . well, mostly. Most of the damage appears to be forward and to the bridge." She patted his shoulder reassuringly. "You did well, Commander. The warp core is intact and the ship appears stable for the moment. We're tending to the wounded first, then we'll begin securing the ship."

"Thanks - I'm Carn Lorvis, Chief Engineer, by the way. I apologize for my appearance . . ." he gestured to the tear to his left sleeve. A nasty looking bruise discolored the exposed flesh.

A sudden thought came to Lorvis and his brow furrowed. "What of the bridge crew? The Captain . . .?"

T'Ser forced a smile. "Our Captain is up there now with a rescue party. They're in good hands." She looked up as Corpsman N'gali walked in, followed by several dazed but ambulatory crewmen. She gestured for the corpsman, grateful for the interruption.

"Commander, this is Corpsman N'gali - he's going to check that arm out for you. Excuse me while I check out the ship's systems and begin an inventory of the damage."

* * *

Stardate 54246.9 (2 April 2377)
Tzen-kethi vessel, *Blood Claw*
Brez-Krill system, outer perimeter

Chuft Captain Gravaz g'Rivenn sat brooding in his private chambers, watching a tactical display that showed the approaching Federation vessels. He had noted with surprise the battles that had occurred, resulting in the destruction of at least three ships - possibly a fourth.

He was loathe to admit that he was puzzled by what he observed. Rather than the probing incursion he anticipated, he was puzzled that the Federation ships would turn on one another in such a violent manner. Part of him both admired and envied the combat - his own battle lust began to grow with each passing moment.

Now, he tried to interpret the tactical data he collected. Several scenarios crossed his mind: An outbreak of a civil war in the Federation? Unlikely. A ruse to distract the Tzen-kethi battle group? To what end? The Tzen-Kethi

were now on a heightened war-footing, more than prepared for the few ships that hurtled their way.

What is happening over there? The grizzled veteran of numerous campaigns was at a loss to explain the bizarre behavior of those Federation ships. Perhaps they had simply gone mad.

He growled in frustration and stood. *No matter - in less than one cycle, we will meet this bizarre incursion head-on, giving no quarter and showing no mercy!*

Chapter Twenty-One

Stardate 54247.0 (3 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Main Bridge

Lt. Sarnek watched with concern as Captain Lumford worked frantically to re-route systems and regain control of the starliner. Beads of perspiration were prominent on the Captain's forehead.

"Captain Lumford, perhaps you should rest for a moment. You do not appear well," stated Sarnek.

"*NO!*" thundered the old ship's master, then in a calmer tone, "No . . . no, thank you, but I'm alright. I can rest later - I nearly have internal sensors back up. Some blighter uploaded a worm program into the system, but I've managed to isolate it . . . just . . . one . . . more . . . *there!*" he finished in a voice of triumph.

A large bank of monitors blinked to life and for the first time since the hijacking began, the bridge could monitor every nook and cranny of the ship.

Sarnek nodded in approval. "Well done, Captain. Now please, sit and rest. Chief Rumraa - please check these monitors and pass along the locations of the hostages and Maquis to the boarding teams."

"Aye sirr," rumbled the Caitian CPO as he squeezed his large frame into a chair.

Sarnek's gaze was caught by the monitor showing main engineering. With a slight frown, he tapped a message into his combat scanner.

* * *

Bluefin Team One and *Sequoia* Team Alpha - Deck 24

"Commander Galvani!" Strauss called to her counterpart from the *Sequoia*.

Galvani turned and acknowledged the arrival of Team One from the *Bluefin*.

"Commander Strauss," she replied. "Glad you could make it to the party! We're about ready to blow the doors and take down the perps in Engineering. You guys ready?"

Strauss frowned. "Do you have any tactical drones left?"

Galvani shook her head. "None. You?"

"We used our last two a few minutes ago. I guess we do this the hard way." Strauss was interrupted by the vibration of her combat scanner. She glanced down and read the incoming message. She looked up sharply at Galvani.

"That was Lt. Sarnek from the bridge. They've got internal scanners back up - he's downloading the video feed from engineering."

Both XO's peered at their scanners as real-time images of both their objective and adversaries came through. Galvani's brow furrowed in puzzled amazement.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked, incredulous.

"I'm afraid so - Senior Chief, take a look!" Strauss gestured Brin to look at the video feed.

The red Orion's face pulled into a frown. "A portable shield generator? Who the hell is supplying these guys? This is top-of-the-line stuff!"

"We'll worry about that later, assuming we survive this," said Galvani. "Change of plans, guys - direct assault is out. They can blow us away and we can't even touch them!"

A thoughtful expression crossed Solly's face. "That's true *if* we make a direct frontal assault. Maybe we just need a little mis-direction."

"What's your plan, Solly?" queried Strauss as she stole a glance at her chronometer. Only 35 minutes left.

Brin accessed the ship's schematics on his scanner and laid out his plan. Strauss shook her head adamantly.

"No, Senior Chief - I'm not letting you commit suicide!"

"Commander, I can *do* this. We don't have time to argue, unless you can come up with a better plan in the next thirty seconds! We're out of options!"

Strauss hesitated. She knew Brin was right, but she didn't see how even he could come through this crazy plan unscathed. Finally she let out a frustrated breath.

"Okay. Let's do this," she said, flatly. She felt like she'd just signed Solly's death warrant. *How will I face the Captain after this?* she wondered.

Brin stripped off his armored vest, helmet, weapons belt and scanner - anything that could hinder movement or get caught in the air shaft. Strauss handed him her phaser pistol, but he shook his head, pulling the ceramic Andorian blade from the sheath strapped between his shoulder blades.

"This is all I'll need," he said in a business-like tone.

Galvani shuddered inwardly, as if someone had stepped on her grave.

* * *

Deck 10, Section H, Midships

Corpsman Ramirez trotted up to the small group clustered around Lt. Bane. He pulled a medical scanner from his belt and began to run it over Bane's body. Checking the reading, he frowned, then rummaged for a hypo-spray. Dialing in an anti-shock compound, he pressed the device against Bane's neck.

"Is he gonna be alright?" asked Vincent Criswell.

Ramirez favored the white-haired man with a quizzical look, but answered the question.

"Yeah, he should make it, but he's got significant nerve and cellular damage in his left arm. Doc should be able to repair the damage, but it's a pretty nasty injury."

Deryx grunted. "Mr. Bane is damn lucky to be alive! You want to transport him over to the ship?"

"Can't yet, the Captain took the ship out against some incoming Maquis ships. I still can't raise them."

The Denobulan CPO's face darkened. "I hope the Skipper blows the frakkers away!"

Ramirez nodded in agreement. He gestured down at Bane. "What hit him, Chief? A disruptor?" Deryx nodded and the Corpsman winced.

"Goddam barbaric weapons," opined Ramirez, darkly. "They cause the cells to literally explode! Even a partially deflected hit like this can do a lot of damage and hurts like hell! The Lieutenant will spend quite a few days in sickbay, I can promise you that." He glanced again at the Criswells. "So . . . who are you guys?"

* * *

Deck 24

Brin moved quietly through the air shaft that fed into main engineering. His nocturnal vision allowed him to navigate in the dark, confining space. Twice, he nearly became wedged as the shaft turned at sharp angles, but both times he was able to wriggle through, navigating the gauntlet of duct work with surprising speed for a being his size.

In ten minutes, he was peering through a vent cover into engineering. A dozen men and women were focused on the main doors, weapons at the ready. A portable field generator hummed in their midst, providing them protection from the boarding teams' phasers.

Directly in the center of the chamber was the tall pulsing cylinder which contained the warp core. Even now, the core throbbed with constrained energy, channeling the awesome power to the massive coils in the nacelles. His gaze moved around the room until it fell on a specific control panel. From there, he could eject the core.

Using his knife, he pried the clips that held the vent cover loose. Working quietly yet quickly, he pulled the cover into the shaft behind him, then he slowly moved outward and downward. If any of the terrorists were to turn at that moment, he knew he'd be dead in the blink of an eye.

* * *

In the corridor outside main engineering, Strauss and Galvani checked their chronometers, then looked at each other.

"Time," said Strauss, simply.

Galvani nodded. "Chief Kasparov - blow the door!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stardate 54247.0 (3 April 2377)

USS *Resolute*

Sector 04340 - Holding station 84 light years from Brez-krill

Captain Franklin watched the growing image of the *Queen Elizabeth* on the main view-screen with a sense of growing dread.

"Time to intercept?" she asked to no one in particular.

"22 minutes, 14 seconds" replied Commander Xyrel. His voice was even more subdued than usual, reflecting the somber pall that had fallen over the bridge crew. Everyone knew what they had to do, but no one wanted to do it.

Franklin nodded absently and slid the tip of her tongue over dry lips. "Tactical, load all forward tubes with quantum warheads." She marveled at the detached nature of her own voice - as if she had merely ordered a minor course change.

The tactical officer, a tall, gangly Edosian emitted a quiet sigh and quickly inputted the necessary commands with his three arms.

"Torpedoes loaded and armed," he replied in his high-pitched, clipped voice. "Standing by for targeting instructions. "

And here it is . . . thought Franklin. *The order that sets the stage for killing nearly 3,000 people. I wonder how hot the corner of Hell is that's reserved for me?*

Aloud, she said, "Target the *Queen Elizabeth*, Lt. Fadjak. Following that, you are relieved from your station."

Fadjak turned in his chair, puzzled. "Sir?"

Franklin stood and walked to the tactical station. She regarded the red-skinned being with a sad smile. "My order, my responsibility, Lieutenant." She jerked her head toward the rear of the bridge. "Go back there and keep Ensign Byrd company at Environmental."

The Edosian hesitated, blinking at his commanding officer, before unfolding his angular frame from the seat and moving quietly aft, torn between guilt and relief at his sudden reprieve.

Captain Franklin settled in at the tactical station. A strong feeling of *deja-vous* flowing over her as she recalled the thousands of hours she sat at similar stations over her career. As she perused the targetting scanner, now locked on the approaching star-liner, she felt a presence by her side. She glanced up to see Commander Xyrel. The gray-haired Vulcan regarded her with a look that bordered suspiciously on concern.

"Commander?" she asked.

"Samantha," he said quietly, in a tone only she could hear, "you need not bear this burden alone."

Franklin was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude and affection for the old Vulcan. In many ways, he was more of a father-figure than executive officer to her. She felt her throat tighten with barely contained emotion.

"I wish that were true, Xyrel. But this is one burden I can't share with anyone - not even you."

* * *

Stardate 54247.0 (3 April 2377)
SS Queen Elizabeth VII
Sector 04340 - Warp 9

Deck 24 - Main Engineering

The massive pressure doors to engineering blew inward with thunderous noise as the blast wave from Chief Kasparov's charges expended its destructive energy.

Using the noisy explosion as a diversion, Solly dropped nimbly from the air vent and rolled behind the massive central warp core chamber. Crawling on his knees and elbows, he stole a quick glance at the group of Maquis that were attempting to hold off the assault of the two Border Service strike teams.

The shield generator had protected the terrorists from the initial explosion, even deflecting the impact of one of the pressure doors which weighed in

excess of two tons. Now, the Maquis were firing wildly into the corridor beyond engineering, effectively dissuading the Border Service teams from making head-way.

Solly quickly scrambled to the warp core control station opposite the warp core chamber. His success depended greatly on luck. If one of the terrorists were to turn in his direction, he had no cover for protection.

Using the blade of his knife, he pried up a locked panel cover, revealing two red handles. Placing the knife between his teeth, he reached in and turned the handles toward each other, then yanked upward with all his might.

Solly winced as a shrill klaxon sounded three times. He glanced back at the pitched battle, but the cacophony of weapons fire had drowned out the warning alarm. The dark panel before him came to life and the screen flashed: *"Input command code to initiate warp core ejection."*

Using the code key provided them by the Cunard Line, Solly tapped in the ten-digit code.

This time, red warning lights began to flash throughout engineering and a much louder klaxon began to blare a steady warning beat. The screen before him changed to read: *"To eject core, depress both handles."*

* * *

The Maquis terrorists were startled by the sudden blaring of the klaxon and the pulse of the red warning lights.

"What's happening?" asked a human male.

"It's the warp core ejection warning!" replied a Bajoran female. She turned, her eyes widening as she spotted Brin at the control panel across engineering. Her arm flew up, pointing in a desperate manner.

"Shoot him!" she screamed. "Shoot him, before he pushes down those plungers!"

A Nausican with a heavy phaser rifle turned quickly, leveling the weapon at Solly. As he was about to squeeze the trigger, a volley of phaser fire from the Border Service teams impacted their shield, causing it to flare and spark.

Reflexively, the Nausican pulled the trigger of his weapon. His aim was off slightly, and the bolt did not hit Solly squarely as he had hoped.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of the phaser beam caught Solly in the back. His body spasmed, and his vision began to grow dark.

With the final vestiges of his strength and consciousness, he fell forward on the twin plungers - depressing them fully before he slid to the floor, still and unbreathing.

* * *

The long, cylindrical warp core slid soundlessly from the starliner into the void of space and began to slowly tumble away from the ship.

Lacking a power source, the warp coils went into immediate shut-down as the last tendrils of energy were consumed.

With a low-rumble, the *Queen Elizabeth VII* dropped out of warp into normal space, approximately ten minutes from the Brez-krill system at their former speed. A kaleidoscope of Coriolis radiation trailed the massive ship as it transitioned out of subspace at high relativistic speed. The vessel was now centuries rather than minutes from Tzen-Kethi territory.

* * *

Deck 24 - *Bluefin* Team One, *Sequoia* Team Alpha

"The core's gone! Solly did it!" exclaimed Strauss over the din of weapons fire.

Commander Galvani grinned. "So he did! Chief - time to take off the gloves."

CPO Kasparov nodded grimly. "Agreed!" The grizzled veteran placed an intimidating weapon on his shoulder. "Everyone, get back! This is going to leave a mark!"

No longer inhibited by fear of breaching the warp core, Chief Kasparov brought up a fairly new addition to the Border Service arsenal. He looked into the viewscreen of the Ion Lance and powered up the weapon.

"Target!" he announced, "Firing!"

A blinding white spear of compressed ions screamed from the lance, impacting and crumpling the portable shield that had protected the Maquis to this point. Unprotected, the terrorists were rent asunder by the sudden burst of focused ions. The effect was like standing directly behind a starship's sublight engine vents at full impulse. None of the Maquis lived long enough to share their experience.

The Border Dogs streamed into Engineering, quickly checking the scattered Maquis bodies.

Strauss sprinted around the now-empty core chamber, pulling up short as she spotted the prone form of Solly Brin, sprawled below the control station.

"Oh God!" she breathed, "Sandy!" she shouted, "Get up here, *now!* Man down!" She moved forward quickly, dropping her carbine and helmet by Solly's side.

She checked for a pulse, her breath catching as she found none.

Corpsman Sanders slid in, brusquely pushing the Commander aside as he checked for a pulse or respiration. He shook his head.

"Help me roll him over!" he directed. Commander Galvani trotted up and the three of them rolled the heavy Orion onto his back.

Brin's normally dark red complexion was now an unhealthy, mottled orange. His eyes were partially open, but rolled back - revealing only yellow sclera.

Sanders quickly placed a cortical stimulator on Solly's forehead. "Clear!" he shouted.

Galvani and Strauss moved back fractionally as the big Orion jerked spasmodically to the cortical stimulator. Sanders checked his medical scanner and cursed - his expression a mix of anger and fear. He grabbed a programmable hypo-spray from his bag, dialed in a dose - paused to consider, then upped the dosage. He gave Strauss and Galvani a serious look.

"I'm going to inject him with Cordrazine. This is dangerous stuff for humans and *very* unpredictable with Orions. I'm giving him a hefty dose, 'cause he's a big fellow. You two be ready - when this hits his heart, he may get a bit unruly."

The two officers nodded, taking up positions on both sides of Brin. Sanders pursed his lips, breathed a silent prayer, and pressed the hypo-spray against Solly's neck - injecting 30 cc of Cordrazine in a long, sustained hiss.

Seconds passed, and nothing happened. Sanders cursed, dialed in an additional 10 cc, and reached toward Solly's neck. He never made it.

The big Orion's eyes suddenly flew open wide. With a roar, he reached up and clamped his right hand around the hapless corpsman's neck. Sanders dropped the hypo-spray which clattered away and grasped the vice-like grip of Senior Chief Brin.

"*Solly!* Let him go! For God's sake, it's Sanders!" Strauss tried to pry the cable-strong fingers from the frantic corpsman's neck. Sanders face was growing purple. Galvani tugged from the other direction, to no avail.

"He's gonna kill him!" shouted Galvani.

"He doesn't know what he's doing!" grunted Strauss as she pulled in vain at Solly's arm. Finally, she let go and turned back toward Solly.

"Senior Chief, I'm sorry about this . . ." Strauss drew back her left arm, and slugged him in the jaw with all her strength.

Whether through luck, skill or the Orion's weakened state, Inga's punch caused Brin to relapse into unconsciousness, his hand relaxing its death grip on Corpsman Sanders.

Sanders rolled back, gasping in great, shuddering breaths. Galvani tended to the shook-up corpsman while Inga rocked back and forth, cradling her injured left hand and uttering a string of impressive Teutonic curses. Finally, she regained her composure enough to check Solly.

She was relieved to see the gentle rise and fall of his massive chest. His color was once more a healthy russet shade. Her smile faltered, however, as she noted a prominent purple bruise rising on the right side of his jaw.

Still rubbing her hand, she approached Sanders who, though shaky, seemed alright.

"Sandy? You okay?" she asked.

He nodded and coughed. Clearing his throat, he replied in a raspy voice, "Yes ma'am - and thanks! You just saved my life."

Inga nodded. "Uh huh. But we need to reach an understanding, Corpsman Sanders."

Sandy noticed the serious note in her voice. "Yes ma'am?"

"If you *ever* tell Senior Chief Brin that I hit him, *I* will strangle you - are we clear on that?"

Galvani attempted to hide her grin as she saw the corpsman's eyes widen with alarm. "Yes *ma'am!* I most definitely did *not* see the XO punch out the Senior Chief's lights!"

Strauss maintained her piercing gaze for a beat longer, then nodded.

"Good, Sandy - very good. Now, see to the Senior Chief. Looks like he's okay. When *Bluefin* or *Sequoia* get back in communicator range, we'll get him transported to sickbay."

Strauss and Galvani stood and surveyed the carnage in engineering, their eyes fixing on the empty core chamber.

"Mission accomplished, Commander Galvani," remarked Strauss, a weary smile forming on her face.

"Frakkin-A, Commander Strauss," replied Galvani. She glanced at several messages on her combat scanner and nodded in approval. "It would seem we've nearly mopped up the remnants of the Maquis on this tub. Now, we just need to wait on our rides to show up."

"Outstanding," answered Strauss wearily, a wave of exhaustion threatening to overwhelm her. A sudden realization struck her and her eyes widened. "Ah, Commander, if you'll excuse me, I need to check on one of my officers up on deck ten!"

* * *

Stardate 54247.1 (3 April 2377)

USS *Resolute*

Sector 04340 - Holding station 84 light years from Brez-krill

Captain Franklin stared mutely at the panel of torpedo controls before her. Each one glowed a steady red, indicating that they were not only armed, but locked on a specific target.

It struck her that the *Resolute* carried more destructive fire-power than all of the Earth navies of the 20th century combined. The four armed quantum torpedoes that she was prepared to launch at a civilian vessel would unleash more hellish energy than all of the nuclear weapons expended during the third world war.

She shook her head slightly. *And to think, you joined Starfleet to be an explorer!* The bitterness of the irony was not lost on her.

"Captain!" interrupted Xyrel, his voice more animated than usual, "The *Queen Elizabeth* has dropped out of warp - I am detecting their warp core has been ejected."

Instantly, there were thunderous whoops and whistles on the bridge of the *Resolute*. Captain Franklin closed her eyes and breathed a silent prayer of thanks, before speaking.

"Settle down everyone, settle down - mind your station! Commander Xyrel, stand us down from battle-stations." She turned back to tactical and carefully disarmed the torpedoes and deactivated the targeting system. Her hands didn't shake *too* much.

She stood, glad that her weak legs did not wobble, and moved back to the command chair, almost euphoric with relief.

"Helm, move us in to rendezvous with the *Queen Elizabeth*. Let's see if we can render assistance."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Stardate 54248.3 (4 April 2377)

USS *Resolute*

Sector 04340

Captain's Ready Room

Captain Akinola and Commander Strauss followed Captain Franklin and her husband, Commander John Vanboerner, into Franklin's ready room. Strauss was completely at home on the *Resolute*, having served four years on the *Akira*-class *Thunderchild*.

Akinola, by contrast, was taken by the sheer size and spaciousness of the vessel. He gazed around Franklin's ready room, which dwarfed his small office on the *Bluefin*.

Hell, he thought, amused, *it's nearly as big as our bridge*. Strauss gravitated towards Franklin's collection of exotic Orchids – mostly Terran versions with a few alien hybrids mixed in.

Vanboerner made himself at home, moving to a small side-table that served as a bar. He glanced toward Akinola.

"An after-dinner Brandy, Captain?" he asked, lifting a cut-crystal decanter.

Akinola walked over to the tall Chief Engineer – a soft-spoken man for which Akinola had taken an immediate liking.

Akinola accepted the snifter, twirling the liquid and giving it an appreciative sniff.

"This is the real stuff, isn't it?" asked the Captain.

Vanboerner nodded and his eyes crinkled when he smiled. "We don't replicate *everything* on the *Resolute*, Captain. Some things are sacred, you know." The engineer splashed Brandy in two more crystal snifters, handing one to his wife and one to Commander Strauss. They moved to four chairs placed by the viewport.

Strauss took a tentative sip, concentrating on the flavor. "Hmmm. Not Cognac, Klipdrift, perhaps?"

The engineer smiled. "Very good, Commander! You have an educated palate."

She blushed. "Actually, it was a guess. By your last name I assume you're South African?"

Vanboerner nodded. "Yes, Johannesburg is my home town. Still, I'm impressed you know of Klipdrift. Not to many outside of my home country do."

Akinola took a sip, raising an eyebrow in appreciation. "Wherever it came from, this is fine stuff!" He gazed at Franklin and Vanboerner. "Thank you both for your hospitality and the tour of your ship. Most impressive!"

Franklin crossed her legs, and sipped her Brandy. "Believe me, Captain, it was our pleasure! I only wish Commander Galvani could join us."

Akinola nodded. "I'm sure she would've enjoyed coming, but she has a full plate now as acting commander of the *Sequoia*."

Franklin nodded, her expression thoughtful. "No doubt. Do you think she'll be made permanent commander?"

The Nigerian Captain shrugged and gazed into his snifter, as if hoping to read the future. "I honestly don't know. Our CMO says that D'Angelo's recovery and rehabilitation will likely take more than a year." He looked up. "By the way, thank you for taking him on to Starbase 500."

Franklin smiled. "I'm honored to do so and glad that Captain D'Angelo will survive and eventually recover. He certainly has a long road ahead, though." At that moment, Captain D'Angelo lay in a stasis chamber in *Resolute's* sick bay. His injuries were severe: a fractured skull, broken neck with spinal chord trauma, bruised lungs, ruptured spleen and several other bone fractures. Dr. Castille had stabilized D'Angelo before placing him in stasis and transferring him to the Starfleet vessek. At the Starbase 500 medical facility, D'Angelo would receive the best care available.

Akinola nodded. "True, but that young man is made of stern stuff. I predict he'll be back on the bridge of a starship sooner than any of the doctors expect."

"So what of you, Captain Akinola. Where do you go next?"

“We’ll tow the *Sequoia* back to Star Station Echo and get her in a repair dock. Now that the *Ouachita* and *Cimarron* are on-station, they’ll tow the *Queen Elizabeth* back to Starbase 42. I suppose the Cunard Line will get her back to Earth from there. The *Hyperion* is due to arrive in a few hours to transport the injured passengers directly to Earth.”

“I must say, I’m amazed that the *Sequoia* survived ramming that freighter, Captain,” interjected Vanboerner. “That is one robust little ship!”

Akinola smiled ruefully and nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I have to admit – I had my doubts about her. And while I think she needs a few changes . . .”

“Tractor beams . . .” muttered Straus, *sotto voce*.

“Heavier plating and additional shields,” continued Akinola, “she’s proved to be a fast and capable cutter.” The veteran cutter commander glanced at a wall-mounted chronometer and stood, placing the empty snifter on a table.

“I’m afraid Commander Strauss and I need to get back to the *Bluefin*,” he said as the others also stood. “It was good to meet you Captain, Commander . . .” Akinola shook hands with the couple, as did Strauss.

“Likewise, Captain Akinola,” replied Franklin. “I hope we meet again under less trying circumstances.”

Akinola smiled. “You never know – we pop up in some unexpected places.”

* * *

Stardate 54248.5 (4 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 04340

Sickbay

“Remember, Lieutenant – keep that arm in the sling for the next two weeks! I would hate for you to undo all the repairs I’ve made. Disruptor wounds take time to heal, so don’t rush things!” admonished Dr. Castille.

Nigel Bane glanced down at the black sling in which his left arm rested. "I reckon I can get used to this contraption," he replied. He looked back up at Castille. "But it sure does itch like a bastard!"

Castille refrained from sighing. "Those would be your nerves regenerating, Lieutenant. In this case, itching is a *good* thing. And for God's sake – don't *scratch your arm!*"

Castille said the last as Bane was reaching toward his left arm with his right hand.

"Don't worry, Doctor," interjected Commander Strauss. "I'll see that the Lieutenant behaves himself."

With a leering grin, Nigel turned his head and winked at Strauss, who immediately blushed. Castille shook his head in mock irritation.

"Oh, for Pete's sake - get a room!"

* * *

Hurrying to the bridge for her duty shift, Strauss was startled to encounter Senior Chief Brin in the turbo-lift. Swallowing, she turned to face the doors, feeling the heat rise in her face.

"Bridge," she said in a remarkably steady voice.

Brin continued to stare straight ahead, absently rubbing his right jaw.

"Ma'am," he said, in way of greeting.

"Senior Chief," Strauss replied, focusing intently on the seam between the door panels. Why was it suddenly so hot in the lift?

The two rode in silence for a few seconds until they arrived at deck two. The doors opened and Solly began to move forward. He stopped in the doorway, not looking back towards Strauss.

"How's the hand?" he asked.

"It's doing ... ah ... oh ..." Her voice trailed off.

Solly nodded to himself. "Have a good shift, Commander." The doors slid shut behind him.

Strauss stared at the closed doors. Then, her eyes narrowed.

"*Sanders!*" She breathed, murderously, through clenched teeth.

* * *

Stardate 54255.5 (11 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Star Station Echo – Berth 6

Office of Admiral Morgan Bateson – Commander, 7th Border Service Squadron

"Come in!" barked Morgan Bateson, obviously irritated.

Captain Akinola entered, raising an eyebrow at his friend and superior. "Did I come at a bad time?"

Bateson was pacing behind his desk, obviously angry. "Yes! No! Sit down, dammit!"

Akinola did as he was bid, allowing Bateson time to calm down.

Finally, the chestnut haired Admiral dropped into his desk chair which squeaked in protest.

"That woman is going to be the *death* of me, Joseph!" fumed Bateson

"I don't know, I kind of like Dr. Murakawa . . ."

"No, blast you! Not Denise! – I'm speaking of Admiral Bouvier!"

"Oh, *that* woman. What did Admiral Bouvier do *this* time to get you so ticked off?"

Bateson glared at Akinola. "She had the gall to inform me that she's putting together a review board regarding you and D'Angelo's handling of the *Queen Elizabeth* hi-jacking."

Akinola shrugged. "So? That's pretty standard for something like this."

"Yes, yes, but you don't know the woman like *I* do, Joseph! I guarantee you, she's already placed the blame for this – directly at your and D'Angelo's feet!

"Blame for what? Stopping the *QE* before we had to blow it out of space?"

Bateson shook his head. "Joseph, you are a damn-fine cutter skipper, but you're woefully naïve when it comes to Fleet politics." He leaned forward, peering at Akinola. "She's going to focus on the 142 dead civilians and the heavy damage to the *Sequoia*. Face it – she's mad 'cause her pretty little ship got broke and her fair-haired boy captain is out of commission for God knows how long!"

Akinola frowned. "That's crazy, Admiral! We were damn lucky to get off with as few casualties as we did! And she ought to know that ships and Border Service personnel are expendable when it comes to a rescue-op!"

Bateson sighed. "Oh, I'm sure that somewhere in her devious mind, she knows that. She *knows* that you did the right thing and things turned out as well as could be hoped. But what matters to *her* is her agenda! This is a stumbling block in her eyes, so heads must roll."

Akinola tossed his hands up. "Fine. Let her have her review board. Bring it on – I'm ready."

Admiral Bateson stroked his beard thoughtfully. "There is a silver lining in all of this, though." The gleam had returned to Morgan's eye now that his tirade had passed.

"Which is?"

Bateson folded his hands across his stomach and favored Akinola with an inscrutable grin. "I also received a call from Victoria McIntosh, President of the Cunard Line. She is *very* grateful for our efforts and asked if there was anything she could do for us." His smile broadened.

Akinola rolled his hand in an, "And? . . ." gesture.

"She's holding a press briefing today, which will show up on all the news-nets, no doubt. Ms. McIntosh will praise the Border Service to the skies, mentioning the *Bluefin* and *Sequoia* by name. Bouvier won't dare make a play against you

after that – the P.R. helps her as much as anyone. Like I said, she’s a politician first.”

“So, this round goes to you,” observed Akinola.

Bateson’s smile faded. “Yes, *this* round.”

* * *

Stardate 54255.9 (11 April 2377)

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo – Berth 6

Captain’s Ready Room

Weary from filing his long and complicated after-action report, Captain Akinola slid open the bottom right-hand drawer of his antique desk and withdrew his current wood-working project. He unrolled the leather pouch that contained his assortment of carving tools, selecting a v-groove gouge. Picking up the block of Myrtlewood, he eyed the roughed-in shape of the starship model with satisfaction. As he reached for his magnifying loops, his terminal chimed softly.

Sighing, he placed the magnifiers back on the desk and tapped the reply stud at the base of the terminal.

“Akinola – go ahead.”

Ensign Vashtee appeared on the screen – an apologetic look on her face.

“Sorry to bother you Captain, but there’s an incoming transmission from Captain Sandhurst of the Gibraltar.”

Akinola’s eyebrows arched upwards in surprise. “Sandhurst? Very well, patch him through, Maya.”

“Aye, sir. Stand by.”

As Vashtee routed the transmission, Akinola wondered about the younger captain and the purpose of his call. He’d heard of the tragic events in the Velkaris system, though he wasn’t sure how much was rumor and how much was fact. What he *did* know was that the *Gibraltar* had lost several of her crew

– including her XO, Liana Ramirez. Scuttlebutt hinted that Sandhurst had issued the order that resulted in her death. He'd also heard that fractures had developed between the senior officers of the *Gibraltar* and Captain Sandhurst.

His train of thought was interrupted by the appearance of Captain Donald Sandhurst on his terminal screen. Akinola noted additional lines around the younger captain's dark eyes.

"Captain Akinola, it's been a while. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

Akinola smiled. "Hardly! I was just taking a break from dictating reports and about to indulge in some wood-carving. What can I do for you, Sandhurst?"

"I can only assume you've heard about the loss of Captain Ramirez in the Gamma Quadrant. That mission resulted not only in her death, but in the shakeup of my senior staff. I'm down an XO, second officer, and chief of security right now. My top candidate to fill the XO's post just pulled out after being offered a spot in this year's Advanced Tactical School. I've been made aware that Commander T'Ser has submitted a request for reassignment, and I wanted to ask you if you'd object to my offering her the XO's billet on Gibraltar."

Akinola's brow furrowed. "Isn't that something you should be taking up with her? Why come to me about it?"

A thin smile formed on Sandhurst's face. *"Because I know that if you objected to the offer, you'd be able to steer her in another direction with a single word. You take care of your people, and that's an attribute I respect tremendously . . . "* His expression grew pinched as more memories threatened to intrude into the present, *" . . . though recent incidents might seem to suggest otherwise."*

Akinola shifted in his chair. "Well, I have to admit that this is a surprise . . ."

Sandhurst frowned slightly. *"You didn't know Commander T'Ser had requested a transfer?"*

"Oh yes, she told me some time back. You just caught me off-guard, that's all. T'Ser has been with us a long time – it's going to be tough to see her go."

Something passed over Sandhurst's face, an expression Akinola couldn't read. It passed as quickly as it had appeared. Part of Akinola wanted to interrogate the younger captain – to ask, *What the hell happened in the Velkamis system, Sandhurst? Did you screw up?*

But the Nigerian cutter commander did not give voice to any of these questions. Instead, he asked, "How are you doing, Sandhurst? I heard about your run-in with the Velk and that rogue Founder. It sure sounded bad."

Though he would never speak it aloud, Akinola harbored some feelings of responsibility for *Gibraltar's* participation in the tragedy. After *Bluefin's* recent mission to rescue *Gibraltar* from Maquis raiders, it had been Akinola's request, routed through Starfleet Command, that had resulted in Sandhurst's ship being reassigned from hazardous escort duty in occupied Cardassian space to a presumably safer diplomatic mission to the Gamma Quadrant.

Sandhurst uttered a short, mirthless chuckle. "*Bad? That doesn't begin to describe it. I did what I had to in order to find out who'd killed nearly twenty-five hundred of our comrades, but that knowledge came at a price.*" He settled back into his chair haggardly. "*Apparently, the board of inquiry agrees with me, so I'm still commanding the Gibraltar. As to 'how I'm doing,' the counselors consider me fit for duty.*" He paused and gazed at Akinola across the light-years. "*You're afraid I'm going to get T'Ser killed, aren't you?*" It was a blunt, graceless assessment, but Sandhurst had found himself short on tact of late.

Yes! thought Akinola. Aloud, he said, "Captain, I didn't say that. Still, you can't blame me for watching out for her – she's an outstanding officer and a dear friend. I'm not going to second-guess what you did, Captain – I made that mistake once before. But I *am* going to offer some advice."

"*What's that?*" asked Sandhurst, warily.

"Put what happened behind you. Mourn your losses, learn what you can, and move on."

A weary expression formed on Sandhurst's face. "*That's good advice, Captain. I'm sure I will, in time. This last year... well, it's been the year of hell for myself and my crew. We're picking up the pieces as best we can. Last time you and I met, I didn't think we could take any more tragedy. Turns out not only did fate have other plans, but we're stronger than I'd given us credit for.*" Sandhurst's features registered a look of resolute determination, however briefly. "*Regardless, I can't run this ship without a solid first officer at my side. T'Ser's record indicates she'd be well suited to that position.*"

Akinola nodded in acknowledgement. "She'll make an outstanding first officer, Captain. Take good care of her." There was the faintest hint of warning in Akinola's voice.

"You have my word, Captain Akinola. I'll go ahead and officially tender the offer. Thank you for your time, sir." As a fellow captain, Sandhurst need not have affixed the 'sir' to his farewell, but did so anyway in deference to the senior captain's decades of experience.

Sandhurst terminated the comlink. He stifled a deep sigh as he mused dourly, *My word . . . for whatever good that is, eh, Liana?*

Akinola sat quietly as the Border Service insignia replaced the image of Donald Sandhurst. Momentarily, he picked up the magnifying loops and the unfinished wooden model. He hefted it absently, his gaze unfocused, but his eyes clearly troubled.

* * *

T'Ser pulled on her old Academy sweats and began to brush her hair. Her dark tresses touched her shoulders – the longest her hair had been since . . .

Since before I met Dale, she thought. The memory did not make her sad, however, and she smiled at her reflection in the mirror. She would always miss Dale, but she was glad she could now think about him without sinking into the abyss.

The musical chime of an in-coming message caught her attention. She quickly pulled her hair back into a pony tail and applied a band with practiced ease before moving to her desk. *It's probably Mom and Dad*, she thought.

Upon tapping the reply tab, she was surprised to see a different face, though one not unknown to her.

"Captain Sandhurst?" she blurted, surprised.

Donald Sandhurst, C.O. of the USS *Gibraltar*, smiled. *"Commander T'Ser – I'm surprised that you remember me."*

She tapped her head. "Eidetic memory – standard equipment for Vulcans."

Sandhurst chuckled. *“Of course. I apologize for the interruption – if it’s convenient, there’s a matter I’d like to discuss with you.”*

T’Ser was unable to prevent a slender eyebrow from creeping up. “No problem, sir. What did you wish to discuss?”

The Captain leaned forward in his chair and folded his hands on the desk before him. *“The XO’s position on my ship is presently vacant. I’ve received your transfer request and checked out your personnel jacket. To be straight, your references are impressive as hell, and I’d like to offer you the billet of first officer on Gibraltar.”*

T’Ser was momentarily speechless. “Um, thank you, sir! I’m honored that you would consider me. Did Commander Ramirez transfer to another ship?”

T’Ser regretted the question when she saw the stricken look that crossed Sandhurst’s face. He composed himself quickly.

“Obviously, you don’t know what happened,” he said, quietly.

“No sir, I’m afraid not. I was on Earth for two months, then we got involved in the incident with the *Queen Elizabeth* shortly after I returned. I’m still behind the times on ‘Fleet news.’”

Sandhurst nodded in understanding. *“I see. You deserve to know what happened before you make a decision, Commander. This would be one of those full-disclosure situations.”*

The Captain gave a brief account of the events in the Velkamis system and how events rapidly spiraled out of control. T’Ser winced upon hearing of Ramirez’ death as well as the deaths of others of the *Gibraltar’s* crew.

“To summarize the situation,” continued Sandhurst, *“we’re trying hard to pull things back together and build a cohesive crew. I won’t lie to you – this won’t be an easy assignment if you accept. But I wouldn’t be offering you the position if I didn’t think you could handle it.”*

T’Ser nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Captain, have you mentioned this to Captain Akinola?”

The smile returned to Sandhurst's face. *"He was my first call, Commander. I know your Captain well enough to ask for his blessing before stealing one of his top officers."*

"And what did he say?"

"He thinks your ready – that you'll make a fine first officer. And if I don't do right by you, he'll hunt me down and cut my throat."

T'Ser laughed. "He said that?"

"He didn't have to. I could tell by the look in his eye." Sandhurst became more serious. *"I realize this is rather sudden Commander, but I'd like an answer as soon as possible. How much time to you need to decide?"*

The lovely Vulcan officer let her gaze drift above the terminal screen to a shelf containing a holo-cube of Dale McBride. She smiled at the sight of his goofy grin.

Dale, your ghost isn't here on the Bluefin, she thought, and your love will always be in my heart – wherever I go.

Returning her gaze to the terminal, she said. "My decision has been made for a while, sir. When do I report to *Gibraltar*?"

* * *

Stardate 54257.3 (13 April 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Star Station Echo – Berth 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lt. Rune nodded. "Thanks, Ensign . . .?"

"Li. Ensign Yun Li, ma'am. May I help you with your duffle bag? Show you to your quarters?"

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

"No, thanks, Mr. Li. I can find my way around. This isn't my first tour on *Bluefin*. Oh, don't forget to log me in." Rune gently pried her PADD from the wide-eyed ensign and entered a place she thought she'd left for good.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

END