

Tales of the USS Bluefin Storms and Shadows

By The Lone Redshirt

Chapter 1

The Border Services Cutter, USS *Bluefin*, glided silently through the darkness of sector 10324 on routine patrol. Fresh from a recent stint in space dock at Star Station Echo, the crew of the *Bluefin* was looking forward to more routine duties such as search & rescue and tending to subspace relay buoys. Their recent encounter with a renegade Klingon ship with its plasma cannon had cost them the lives of many friends and colleagues aboard the USS *Kilimanjaro*. Their physical scars were healing nicely, but the same was not true for all of the emotional scars.

Commander Inga Strauss, the young, very petite executive officer of the *Bluefin* finished her workout in the ship's gym with some stretching exercises. She glanced at the wall-mounted chronometer and saw that she still had over an hour before her duty shift began. She decided she had enough time for breakfast in the wardroom before showering and heading to the bridge.

As she entered the wardroom, carrying a tray with coffee, orange juice, wheat toast (no butter) and Rigellian blue-melon slices, she saw that Lt. Commander T'Ser, the "emotional" Vulcan OPS officer was already seated, a data PADD in her hand. Strauss sat down across from T'Ser and marveled at the large plate of food in front of the Vulcan woman.

"T'Ser - how on Earth can you eat so much and stay so slim?" Strauss indicated a plate filled with eggs, Belgian waffles, bacon, fruit and hash brown potatoes.

T'Ser, engrossed in the PADD she was reading, stabbed a piece of waffle with a fork and said simply, "Vulcan metabolism."

Strauss sat down and surveyed her own, meager breakfast. She was a very pretty, blond Human, barely 30 years of age. Her short stature had been as asset when she was an Olympic caliber gymnast almost 15 years earlier. Now,

she wished she were taller and constantly fretted over her diet, afraid of getting fat. "Well, I have to deal with my short, human metabolism."

T'Ser looked up, an eyebrow raised. "How can your metabolism be 'short'?"

"Never mind." Strauss took a bite of toast. At that moment, Lt. Nigel Bane entered the wardroom carrying a tray also loaded down with food. He was a tall, trim man of Australian descent with handsome features and sandy blond hair. Strauss wondered how he managed to have such a nice tan, serving on a star ship.

"G'day commanders!" he said brightly. Strauss returned the greeting while T'Ser merely grunted and kept reading her PADD.

"Anything interesting happen on Alpha shift?" Strauss asked T'Ser.

The Vulcan continued reading the PADD, but answered, "We replaced two Type 16 Subspace Relay Buoys, and Commander Galt submitted a report complaining that the ship yard did, and I quote, a 'Yariq-assed job of installing the new warp coils.' Besides that, it was pretty dull."

Strauss smiled at that. Galt, their crusty Tellarite chief engineer often used colorful language. He was something of a tyrant in engineering but he was still well-liked by the officers and crew of the *Bluefin*. As she continued to nibble at her breakfast, she occasionally glanced at the Aussie lieutenant down the table. Bane seemed to be in a hurry as he wolfed down his food quickly. He placed his tray in the disposal slot and sauntered out of the room.

"He *is* nice looking, isn't he?" said T'Ser.

Strauss blushed. "What? Lt. Bane? Why, I hadn't really noticed."

T'Ser smiled. "You noticed. I saw you stir your coffee with a piece of melon while you were staring at him."

"I wasn't staring!" Strauss protested. She paused, a worried expression on her face. "Did I really stir my coffee with a piece of fruit?" she asked, plaintively.

"You did. But don't worry, I don't think Nigel noticed. He's almost always in a hurry like that. If you want to talk to him, I think you're going to have to trip him or something."

Strauss looked back at T'Ser. "Do you think it would be appropriate? I mean, I'm his superior officer."

T'Ser shrugged. "Why not? You're both officers, you're about the same age, you're obviously horny."

" *T'Ser!* I am NOT . . . well, you know, *THAT!* "

T'Ser regarded her with a deadpan expression."Okay, if you say so." She returned her attention to her PADD.

Strauss regarded her friend. "T'Ser, what kind of man do *you* like?"

T'Ser continued reading her PADD. "Oh, you know, one with a pulse."

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Captain Joseph B. Akinola, a 59 year old human of African descent, was reading a report when the buzzer to his ready room door sounded.

"Come!" he said.

Commander Strauss, now showered and dressed in uniform, entered with a PADD under her arm. Akinola smiled at his young XO.

"Good morning, commander," he said.

"Morning, sir. I was wondering if I could go over some duty roster adjustments I've made to Beta shift."

"Fine, fine. But first, I just learned something interesting about our Klingon renegade that you sent off to Sto'Vo'Kor last month. Want to hear it?"

The captain's cavalier reference to the Klingon ship she helped destroy caught her off-guard. She still had bad dreams about the battle that day. Strauss forced a smile and said, "Certainly, sir."

"I had learned that Krell, our renegade commander, was from the disenfranchised house of K'Tinga. The name rang a bell, but I did not make a connection until I read the report from the Klingon command. It seems this was the house of Thought Admiral K'Tinga, one of the most famous Klingon warriors of the past 500 years."

"Really?" asked Strauss, genuinely interested. "So how did the house fall out of favor? I understand that's a pretty big deal in Klingon culture."

Akinola gave Strauss a meaningful look. "Oh yes, it's a *huge* deal! It's the ultimate shame to have one's house disenfranchised. Most Klingons would prefer death before dishonor." He paused, looking at his computer screen. "It seems that Krell's father, Pralq, was part of the group that tried to overthrow the chancellor a few years back, causing the Klingon civil war. As you know, the loyalists shut that rebellion down. Many of the rebels were killed, including Pralq. His son, Krell, was spared for some reason, but the house was dissolved. I guess the shame was too much for Krell. He became a privateer for a while, attacking Klingon merchant vessels and living on the run, until, well . . ."

Akinola left unspoken what they both knew too well. Krell's ship had attacked and destroyed the *USS Kilimanjaro* killing Akinola's close friend, Captain Vress.

Strauss frowned, both at the memory and a thought that had troubled her. "Sir, I still don't understand the reason for Krell's actions in the Molari Belt. I mean, I know he was trying to frame the Orion Syndicate for the attack, but *why* do that?"

Akinola gave a tight smile. "You've asked the million credit question, commander."

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Although Strauss did not exactly miss the stress and abject terror that she had experienced the previous month when they battled the renegade Klingon, she was beginning to realize that serving on a cutter also entailed periods of tedium.

Seated in the command chair of the compact bridge, she was beginning to hope for something, anything out of the ordinary, to break the monotony. She soon had her wish granted.

"Commander?" Ensign Vashtee spoke up from the communications station, a frown on her dark features. "We're being hailed by an Orion Raider."

Strauss was surprised, as was the rest of the bridge crew. Generally, any Orion Syndicate ship would take special pains to avoid the notice of a Border Service vessel. To be hailed by a Raider was almost unheard of.

"Are they in distress, Ensign?" Strauss asked.

"Negative, commander, although they are asking specifically to speak to Captain Akinola." said Vashtee.

"Well then, page the captain. Mr. Ryan, raise shields. Are their weapons on line?"

"No ma'am," replied Ryan, "Their weapons are off-line and their shields are lowered."

Strauss frowned "Ensign Vashtee, put them on-screen."

The star field on the main view screen was quickly replaced by the view of another ship's bridge. The lighting was dim and it was difficult to make out much detail, but there were three figures in view. Seated in a garishly ornate command chair, was a burly Red-Orion male, dressed in a flamboyant robe. He wore the traditional face scars identifying his clan and status. By the intricacies of the scar patterns, he was advanced in rank. He wore a smile on his face and he seemed perfectly at ease.

Strauss spoke first, deciding to take an aggressive posture. "This is Commander Inga Strauss, executive officer of the Border Service Cutter, *USS Bluefin*. Identify yourselves and your business."

The Orion appeared unperturbed. "Ah, Commander! I am Lortho Elix, Supreme of the vessel *Troshmaran*. I was hoping to speak to Captain Akinola - he is an old friend and I desired to pass along some helpful information."

"Why don't you save us both some time and pass the information on to me?" she asked; a hint of challenge in her voice.

"We are in no hurry, commander," he said reasonably. "We will wait until the captain is available." The screen flickered and was once again a star field.

"This is damned odd," she said to herself. "Helm, what's their position?"

"Holding steady, bearing 118 mark 34. They're maintaining position off of our starboard bow."

Momentarily, Captain Akinola came onto the bridge. Strauss apprised him of the situation. Akinola did not look pleased.

"Lortho Elix! We've had several unpleasant run-ins with him and his crew. Wonder what he wants?"

"He was very calm but insistent on speaking to you," said Strauss.

Akinola remained standing and indicated for Ensign Vashtee to hail the *Troshmaran*. Momentarily, the smiling face of Elix was on the screen.

"Ah, Captain! So good of you to answer my summons!"

Akinola ignored the condescension in the Orion's tone. "State your business, Elix, before I decide to inspect your cargo holds."

Elix was unfazed. "Now captain, we have nothing to hide on our vessel. But if you'd like to conduct an inspection, feel free to do so. But . . ." a pained expression came over the Orion's face. "I'm afraid it would put you late in coming to the aid of the transport vessel from which we received a distress call."

Akinola tensed. "What distress call? What vessel? Don't play games with me, Elix!"

"Why, the distress call we received from the *Sun Dancer*. They reported that their engines had failed and they were drifting into the Molari Badlands - right into the path of a category 4 ion storm!"

"And you did nothing to help?" Akinola asked, angrily.

"Now captain, we're but a simple merchant ship, ill-equipped for such undertakings. We simply wanted to be neighborly by contacting the Border Service, which we have now done." Another insincere smile. "We'll take our leave of you now - I'm transmitting the coordinates of the ship, but best you hurry - they seemed rather desperate." Elix paused, then said, "Please say hello to my cousin, Solly, for me." Then the signal was cut.

Akinola barked orders. "Navigator, lay in the heading that Elix transmitted. Helm, ahead warp 9." He tapped his comm badge. "Akinola to engineering."

"Engineering, Galt here - go ahead."

"Commander, we're heading for the Molari Badlands. We're going to need to rig for a category 4 ion storm to conduct a SAR mission."

"Deities!" groused Galt. "We just got out of space dock - I'll never get these warp coils adjusted correctly."

Akinola was not in the mood for banter. "Get on it, Galt! Akinola out." He turned to Strauss and asked, "Did you have a big breakfast this morning?"

Strauss, puzzled, shook her head.

Akinola nodded. "That's probably a good thing, commander. This ride is about to get very rough!"

Chapter 2

Captain Valentina Kiranov listened to the creaking and popping of the *Sun Dancer's* hull with growing concern. She knew that it had been foolish to divert into the Molari Badlands, but she had feared the Orion Raider that had headed toward them even more. At first, it seemed that her decision had paid off as the Raider broke off its pursuit once she had entered the Badlands. Now, though, it was beginning to look like a fatal mistake.

The *Sun Dancer* was a converted CargoMaster freighter, now used for transporting refugees from the devastated former war zone to new homes. Kiranov was of the rare breed that did it more out of a compassionate heart than for profit. She had been making these runs for over a year. It broke her heart to see the refugees from several devastated worlds - most of them with only the clothes on their backs and a few, meager possessions. Many were malnourished and sick. Still others were damaged in other, terrible ways with emotional scars that would not heal.

With the ion storm raging around the ship, the engines dead and the reactor failing, it seemed that all of them were destined to perish together in this radioactive maelstrom. The old ship's back-up systems struggled to keep the life support system operative, but the instruments told Kiranov that carbon dioxide levels were rising as the temperature on board dropped. Even more ominous were the radiation readings which were creeping up at to alarming levels. She keyed the intercom panel to contact Rom Garvin, her first mate and engineer. "Rom? Any luck with the reactor?"

There was a pause and the crackle of static before she heard a reply. "It's no good, Val. The coolant pumps are over-stressed and the internal temperature is reaching critical levels. I figure we've got 20 minutes before it goes into auto-shutdown. With the batteries, we have maybe another hour before we lose all power," replied Rom.

Captain Kiranov took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Okay. Thank you for trying Rom. I'm sorry I got us into this."

"Hey, Val! None of that! You made the right call. I'd rather die here than face what those Orion bastards would do," said Rom.

"Sure, Rom. Sure. No argument there. Kiranov, out." She cut the connection and sat down at the communications station on the cramped flight deck, placing her head in her hands. She knew all too well that Rom was right. Her

brother, Alexei had served on a ship that was taken by Orion pirates. All of the women were taken and all the men, well...she would never get the image of his mutilated corpse out of her head.

Kiranov was about to get up and go back once more to lie to her passengers, to give them false hope, when a burst of static over the communications channel stopped her.

Had she heard a voice? She had stopped calling for help but had left the auto-distress signal going. She strained her ears.

For several moments there was only silence. Kiranov turned again to go aft when she heard:

"...ancer, this . . . cutter *Bluefin* . . . you read?"

Kiranov nearly dove for the communications console. She keyed the transmit switch. "Any vessel, any vessel, this is the transport *Sun Dancer* . We are in desperate need of assistance. Engines have failed; power is fading as is life support. Please respond!"

There was another momentary delay, then another, stronger reply. "*Sun Dancer*, we read you. This is the Border Service Cutter, *USS Bluefin*. We understand your situation. We are currently 150 thousand kilometers from your position. We will be alongside shortly. Please stand by for instructions."

"Understood, *Bluefin*, we're standing by awaiting instructions. Be advised we have less than one hour until we lose power completely."

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When Captain Akinola heard Captain Kiranov's last message he winced. "Damn!" he muttered, "That doesn't give us much time." He spoke louder, "Helm, bring us in close. We're going to have to extend our shields around them if we're going to have a chance with transporters." He tapped his com badge, "Bridge to engineering."

"Gralt here, Captain."

"Commander, we're going to need to extend our shields around the *Sun Dancer*. How are things holding up down there?"

"Pretty good considering what you've been taking us through. I've got two crewmen who've already decorated themselves with breakfast." Galt paused. "Systems are all normal, Impulse engines are running beautifully, we'll keep the shields at full power but remember, we lose shield efficiency if we extend them too long."

"Understood, commander. Time is not a luxury we have today. Bridge out."

Akinola looked at the maelstrom on the viewscreen as the ship lurched for the hundredth time in the last hour. He tapped his com badge again. "Chief Brin - have your SAR team ready to beam over in five minutes. Do a VERY quick assessment. If we can't get their power going, we'll have to evacuate them to our ship."

"Understood, sir. We're ready to go on your order," said Brin.

"Standby, chief. Akinola, out."

The cutter plowed ahead against a barrage of charged ions driven by fluctuating gravity fields. The visual effect was spectacular, but it made navigation difficult. Fralk, the Denobulan helmsman, deftly maneuvered the veteran starship in closer to the floundering transport. The hull of the *Sun Dancer* flashed as charged particles collided, creating a St. Elmo's fire that swirled and snaked along the ship.

"Sir, I have us parallel and stationary relative to the *Sun Dancer*," said Ensign Fralk.

"Nicely done, ensign!" said the captain, a proud smile on his face. "There will be an extra ration of ice cream for you tonight!" Akinola tapped his com badge. "Akinola to SAR team - we have rendezvoused with the *Sun Dancer* and are extending shields now. Transport over and see what you can do. You have 15 minutes. After that, we'll have to begin evacuation, understood?"

Chief Brin responded almost immediately. "Understood, sir. Preparing to transport."

Senior Chief Solly Brin, the Red-Orion Chief of the Boat and senior non-commissioned officer on the *Bluefin*, materialized on the *Sun Dancer* with his detail of five crewmen. The cold and the smell hit him immediately. Obviously, the sanitation systems had been overloaded along with the other problems on the transport ship. He turned to survey the scene. His search and rescue team

were in a mess hall crowded with people of various races. The people showed little reaction to the arrival of the SAR team. Most of them were exhausted, some already unconscious from the foul air and lack of oxygen. Chief Brin began to give orders.

"Sanders, you and Taggart begin checking the passengers - see who is in the worst shape so we can get them transported to sickbay. D'Tyr and Epstein, head back to engineering. See what you can do. I'm heading to the bridge."

Chief Brin hurried to the forward section of the ship. He came to a hatch marked, "Flight Deck - Authorized Personnel Only," and he opened it. Inside, he found a very cramped control center with archaic instrumentation. Seated at a console was a dark-haired woman in gray coveralls. Brin spoke. "Captain Kiranov?"

The woman started as she stared at Brin. Suspicion mingled with fear gripped her features. She said simply, "You are Orion."

"Yes ma'am. I'm Chief Solly Brin from the *Bluefin*. I'm leading the rescue team."

Kiranov continued to stare at Brin. She said simply, "My brother was murdered by Orion pirates."

Chief Brin nodded and spoke in a gentle tone. "Yes ma'am, I am sorry. My father was also killed by Orion pirates."

Kiranov's eyes widened. She searched his face and found truth. "How terrible for you!"

Brin nodded. "Yes, it was. And I know your loss was terrible. But ma'am, right now we've got more than 50 people on this ship that need help. Right now, I need your help. I need to run a diagnostic program on your ship's systems. If we can't get your power back, we're going to have to evacuate to the *Bluefin*. Do you understand, ma'am?"

Captain Kiranov seemed to come back to herself. "Da! Yes! I will help you." She showed Brin the computer access and he went to work.

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The cloaked Romulan scout ship maintained station 500 thousand kilometers from the *Bluefin* and the *Sun Dancer*. The crew of three watched with interest the unfolding rescue operation.

"It seems to be an inordinate risk to attempt to rescue such an old ship and these refugees," said T'Vash.

"It is their way. Do not mistake their compassion for weakness," said Voladek.

"The Border Service ship - it seems well-suited for navigating these ion storms. It has extremely powerful impulse engines and is very strong structurally," said Tor'dex.

"Should we scan the Federation ship?" asked T'Vash.

"No, we must not risk detection. Even in this ion storm, they might detect an active scan. Besides, we already have sufficient data on this class ship. Maintain passive sensors only," said Voladek.

"Has the sleeper agent been activated?" asked T'Vash.

"Soon, young one. Very soon," said Voladek.

Chapter 3

Chief Brin looked at the diagnostic readouts of the *Sun Dancer's* systems and swore softly to himself. He turned to Captain Kiranov who was watching, anxiously.

"Ma'am? There's no way we can get power and life support back up in the next few minutes. We must evacuate your crew and passengers to the *Bluefin*," said Brin in a gentle tone.

Kiranov smiled thinly and nodded. "It is as I thought, Chief Brin. She looked around the spartan control center. "Sun *Dancer* has been a good ship. But ships can be replaced. People cannot." She returned her gaze to him. "What do you need me to do?"

"The most important thing is to get everyone together for transport. Do you have a ship's manifest?" Kiranov nodded. "Then get everyone into the mess hall - make sure everyone on the manifest is present and accounted for. Let me know if anyone is missing." Brin tapped his com badge.

"Brin to *Bluefin*."

Akinola's voice responded. "Go ahead chief."

"Captain, we need to begin evacuation. We're too late to get the reactor running. Captain Kiranov and I will see that all passengers get to the mess hall for transport," said Brin.

"Acknowledged. Chief, be advised that the ion storm is increasing in intensity. Shield integrity may be compromised, and if that happens, well, you know what that means," said Akinola.

Brin nodded, grimly. "Yeah, no transporters. Okay, skipper, we're going to move our butts. Brin, out." He looked at Captain Kiranov. "You heard?" She nodded. "Okay, then. Let's get moving."

Aboard the *Bluefin*, Commander Strauss and Lt. Commander T'Ser were preparing the shuttle hangar to receive guests. Crewman set portable bulkheads in place and began setting up cots. Strauss followed T'Ser's lead as Strauss had never been involved in an actual ship rescue operation before. She was still recovering from a case of space sickness due to the rough transit through the Molari Badlands and the ion storm.

"We can handle as many as 150 evacuees in a pinch," said T'Ser, "but not with any degree of comfort. In this situation, with only 54 people, we can handle them quite easily."

Commander Strauss had been impressed with how quickly the crew prepared the ship to receive evacuees. Even now, crewmen were manning both personnel transporters and the large cargo transporter to begin the process of bringing over the evacuees. "T'Ser - what happens to these people once we bring them on board?"

T'Ser received a PADD from a crewman, nodded, handing back the PADD before answering. "Usually, we take them to the nearest Star Station or Starbase. There, they can receive needed attention and, hopefully, a ship to take them on to their destination. In this case, I don't know. These people aren't your typical colonists. They've been displaced by the war and really don't have very bright prospects wherever they go. It's sad, but there's not a lot we can do to help them."

Strauss remained silent, pondering this. A door from the corridor opened and Dr. Calvin Baxter appeared with several medics, loaded with medical equipment. "Hello commanders!" he said, cheerfully. "Where do you want us to set up triage?"

T'Ser indicated an open area on the opposite side of the hangar deck. "Splendid!" said Baxter, "That will do nicely." He turned to his entourage, "Come along, people. We've work to do!" He headed off, like the Pied Piper.

Strauss smiled in spite of herself. "He's a character, I must say!"

T'Ser also smiled. "He is a bit eccentric. Don't let that English accent fool you, though. He was born and raised in Oklahoma."

Strauss laughed at that, but her laughter was cut short as she saw the first group of evacuees as they were brought in. They were as haggard and pitiful a group as she had ever seen.

T'Ser spoke. "I suppose you got used to seeing this during the war."

Strauss shook her head. "We were always on our ship, or on a station. We seldom ever saw civilians. Only enemy ships at a distance on our viewscreen."

she paused. "It was kind of impersonal. We didn't see the real face of the war. Not like this."

On the bridge, Captain Akinola monitored the intensifying ion storm. "Mr. Bane, status of shields?"

Bane replied, "Still holding steady capt'n, but much more and they will begin to degrade. We've boosted the output with auxiliary power to maintain our extended shield envelope."

"We've got to keep them up until we complete the evacuation, Nigel. It's far too rough to send shuttles over," said the captain.

"We'll keep the shields goin' Cap'n. No worries about that!"

Akinola smiled. "I know I can count on you, Mr. Bane." He tapped his com badge. "Akinola to Chief Brin. What's the status of the SAR-Op?"

Brin's deep voice responded. "Almost done here, sir. We're down to the last two groups of evacuees, then my team and Captain Kiranov will beam over." Brin paused, "Sir, Captain Kiranov was wondering if it was possible to tow the *Sun Dancer* out of the Badlands." Brin paused again, then spoke in a heartfelt manner, "Sir, this ship is all she's got."

Akinola rubbed his face and sighed. He looked up at the static-ridden view screen at the battered transport vessel. "No promises, chief, but I'll see what I can do. Akinola out." He tapped his com badge again. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Engineering, Ensign Brooks here."

Akinola frowned slightly. "Brooks? Where's Commander Galt?"

There was a slight pause. "He's ah, discussing something with a crewman, sir." In the background, Akinola could hear Galt berating some poor crewman with some colorful Tellarite curses. "Here he comes sir."

Galt came on the com. "By the diseased second deity's pustulent eye! Save us from these incompetent whelps! Now, what do you want?"

" *Commander Galt*, this is *Captain Akinola*. Sorry to interrupt your butt chewing, but I need to ask a question . . ."

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The cloaked Romulan scout ship was still positioned a half a million clicks from the rescue scene. The Tal Shiar crew powered up the engines and began to move away from the *Bluefin*, its movement shielded by the interference of the ion storm. It moved carefully and deliberately through the maelstrom, finally coming to its destination in the very heart of the Molari Badlands. It held position for a few minutes until, in the midst of the storm; a vortex suddenly appeared, opening like an iris. Energy and plasma swirled around this sudden door in the heavens. The scout ship applied power and swiftly entered the vortex, quickly disappearing. A minute more and the wormhole vanished as suddenly as it appeared.

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"What the bloody hell?" exclaimed Lt. Bane from the sensor station.

Akinola looked at him sharply, "What's wrong, lieutenant?"

"Sir, I just read a massive energy spike. It was there a minute ago, now it's gone!"

Akinola frowned. "Nigel, we *are* in the middle of an ion storm. What's unusual about an energy spike?"

Bane shook his head. "Wrong type energy readings, sir. We get energy fluctuations in here all the time. This was sudden, and it almost went off the scale. It held for about a minute, then just blinked out. Too long for an explosion, not long enough for a plasma surge." He continued to fiddle with his instruments, then stared at a screen for a moment. He turned back to the captain. "Sir? It read more like a quantum singularity."

"A wormhole?" said Akinola in disbelief. "In the Badlands? That shouldn't be possible. And how come we've never come across it before."

Bane looked puzzled. "I don't know sir, but I know what I saw."

"I believe you, son, I believe you." said Akinola. He stared again at the viewscreen. "What the hell is going on?"

Chapter 4

The powerful impulse engines of the *Bluefin* thundered soundlessly in the vacuum of space as the border cutter towed the crippled transport vessel through the treacherous ion storm to the open void of the relatively normal space of the Borderlands. On the bridge, Captain Akinola kept a small smile of pride on his face. When he suggested to Gralt that the challenge of towing a 150 thousand metric ton transport through a category 4 ion storm might be "too much for the engines," Gralt had taken the bait. "By the deities, we could tow a *Galaxy* class ship through a category 5 plasma storm on one engine, let alone two!" Gralt had worked his magic with the tractor beams and now they were nearly in the clear. They would head on to Star Station Echo to drop off the refugees and the *Sun Dancer* and pick up some new crew members who were waiting at the station. Akinola decided to go pay his respects to their temporary guest.

"You have the con, Mr. Bane. I'm going to check on our passengers," said Akinola.

"Aye, sir!" said Lt. Bane, moving to the command chair as Akinola entered the lift.

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Commander Strauss was pleased to see that the refugees had been cared for in such a quick and efficient manner. Dr. Baxter's triage team had checked out all 54 of their guests for radiation exposure. Thankfully, their exposure had not been harmful. Cookie and his kitchen crew had put together a nice, hot meal and most of the refugees were now quiet and on cots, fatigued from their ordeal. She was about to head to the bridge, when she saw one of the refugees, a rather large, slovenly looking Bajoran, making his way rather unsteadily toward her. Strauss turned to face him.

"May I help you?" she asked, politely.

The man, obviously inebriated, spoke in an aggressive manner. "What's this crap I'm hearing 'bout you takin' us to some star station?"

Strauss did not back up, even though the man moved far too close to her and was better than a foot taller. "That is correct, sir. We are heading to Star Station Echo where you can make arrangements for transport to your final destination."

"Well that's just frikkin great!" he said, his breath causing her eyes to water. "Just pick us up and drop us off like so much cargo. Why not take us on the Verix now?"

"As I said, sir, you can get transport from the station on the Verix or wherever you're heading. Now if you'll excuse me, I have duties on the bridge."

She turned to go, but the Bajoran suddenly grabbed her roughly by the arm. "By the prophets, don't think you can walk away when I'm talkin' to you!"

Strauss faced the drunken man. "Let go of my arm - now!" she said quietly but firmly.

Instead, he tightened his grip and pulled her closer, his rank smell making her nauseous again. "And what if I don't, little girl?" he said, leering at her.

In an instant, Strauss had slammed the big man down on the deck, very hard. His arm was bent up behind his back in a very painful manner, Strauss' knee planted squarely in the small of his back.

Two security crewmen were trotting toward them, having seen the brief struggle. Strauss bent forward and whispered fiercely to the now thoroughly cowed man, "Do not EVER put your hands on me or any member of this crew. If you do, I will personally break your arm. *Understood?*"

The drunken bully was almost sobbing in pain and anger. As the security crewmen arrived to take him to the brig, he bawled. "She assaulted me! I wanna press charges."

The first crewman, a massive Tenarian, said, "Better shut up, little man, or the XO will kick your ass again!" He gave a smile of approval to Strauss. "Nicely done, commander!" The two men then lifted the whining Bajoran onto his feet and half walked, half drug him off of the hangar deck.

Strauss tugged at her tunic and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. She turned to head off toward the bridge when she saw Captain Akinola casually leaning against the bulkhead, arms folded and grinning at her.

"Well commander," he said, "It seems that you've had your workout for this morning."

"Not much of one," she said as she headed out the doorway. "Captain." she said with a respectful nod of the head.

Akinola shook his head and chuckled, then went in search of Captain Kiranov.

* * *

"Captain Akinola, I am very grateful for all that you have done for us," said the Russian woman, "But I must apologize for Greb Jorla. We've had previous problems with him, although he's not too bad when he's sober."

Captain Akinola waved aside the apology. "Not your fault, captain. All of these folks have been through a lot. Unfortunately, stress sometimes brings out the worst in people."

Kiranov gave Akinola a meaningful look. "But sometimes it brings out the best." She paused, "I am most grateful for your efforts in salvaging my ship. That was beyond what I had hoped for. You and your crew have been very kind to us."

Akinola gave a sardonic smile and took a sip of his coffee. "Ma'am, that's our job."

"Well then, you're very good at your job!" said Kiranov.

Akinola smiled. "That we are, ma'am. That we are."

"All the same, we had about given up hope. I know it was foolish to enter the Badlands, but I've...well, had some very bad experiences with Orion pirates. When that Raider showed up on our scanners I thought we could lose them." She looked down. "Instead, I nearly lost my ship and the lives of everyone on board. Especially after that other ship in the Badlands did not answer our hails."

Akinola's hand stopped midway with his coffee mug. "Ship? We didn't detect any other vessels out there," said Akinola.

Kiranov sighed. "It may have been a sensor glitch from the ion storm, but right before our engines failed, we briefly picked up another ship in the Badlands. Things began to go badly rather quickly and we sent a distress call. The other vessel did not respond." She frowned. "It seemed to just . . . disappear. But, as I said, our sensors are not very good and the storm . . ."

Akinola interrupted. "Can you tell me anything at all about this other ship?"

* * *

The USS *Bluefin* arrived at Star Station Echo with no further incidents. The *Sun Dancer* was towed to a civilian space dock berth and the refugees transferred to the station. The cutter prepared to take on new personnel. Most of the evacuees expressed gratitude to the officers and crew of the *Bluefin* for their rescue, although Greb Jorla (now sober) was careful to avoid Commander Strauss.

Akinola gave instructions to his senior officers. "I'm going to meet with Admiral Bateson. See that our new crew members get settled in. Commander Strauss, get them on the duty rotation after they're squared away. We should be good on supplies since we just left here a few days ago, but check with the department heads to be on the safe side. I want to be underway in three hours."

"Understood, sir." said Strauss.

* * *

"Joseph! Good to see you, come in and have a seat."

Admiral Morgan Bateson, the former CO of the USS *Bozeman* and Commander, Border Service Squadron 7, extended a large hand to greet Captain Akinola. He was taller than Akinola, with thinning brown hair and a rakish beard. He was one of the very few flag officers for whom Akinola had much regard.

"Admiral, thanks for seeing me on short notice."

Bateson sat down, gesturing to a pile of PADDs on his desk. "Driving a desk gets pretty tedious. Always glad to hear from someone who's actually doing something! I hear an 'atta-boy' is in order for that little SAR-OPs you just completed." A wistful look came over the admiral's face. "God, how I miss those days." He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out two heavy glasses and a bottle containing a blue liquid that seemed to glow. "A shame that they outlawed Romulan Ale again. Fortunately, I managed to acquire a fair supply before the imports stopped." He poured a finger's worth into each glass and shoved one to Akinola. "Semper Paratus!" Bateson said, in way of a toast.

"To fast cutters and fair sailing," returned Akinola. He drained his glass, the fiery liquid burning down his throat. Akinola caught his breath, and then spoke. "Sir, the SAR was successful, but there were some odd aspects to it." He related their encounter with the Orion Raider, the wormhole reading and the mysterious ship in the Badlands.

"I'll be damned," Bateson said; a thoughtful look on his face. "Captain, just last week Captain Hauck of the *Everest* reported a similar mysterious vessel contact, also in the Badlands. Do you know Hauck? A bright young man on TDY from the Corps of Engineers. Anyway, they picked up a contact but it disappeared before they could get a bearing."

"Admiral, since our recent encounter with that Klingon ship, I'm a bit paranoid about cloaked ships." confessed Akinola. "But more puzzling to me is why Lortho Elix would warn us about a ship in distress. Especially since it is likely he was the one originally pursuing the *Sun Dancer*."

Bateson leaned back in his chair, "Joseph, in my 'former life' before my crew and I had our time in the temporal loop, we had several run-ins with Lortho's father and grandfather. I can never recall them or any Orion volunteering any helpful information," he paused, "unless it suited their purpose." He looked at Akinola. "What's Chief Brin's take on this?"

Akinola shook his head. "Solly thinks his cousin is just playing mind games with us. I suppose that's possible, especially with Elix's tendency to goad Solly at any opportunity."

"Maybe he's trying to return a favor. After all, you *did* break up Krell's little scheme to get the Federation and the Syndicate into a shooting war," suggested Bateson.

"Maybe," said Akinola, doubtfully. "But that whole situation still bothers me, Morgan. How was a war between us and the Oreos going to help Krell? My understanding was he wanted to regain honor for his house. There's something missing."

Bateson grunted, then stroked his beard in thought. "Captain, I'm going to kick this up-hill, see if we can get some more assets in the sector. Right now, I'm more concerned about the possibility of cloaked ships lurking about. It might be another Klingon privateer snooping about, or worse, the Orions may have bought or stolen cloaking technology. Why don't you and the *Bluefin* head toward the coordinates of that wormhole you think you found?"

"Admiral, if Lt. Bane said he saw it, then it's there." said Akinola.

Bateson nodded. "Then, hopefully, your Lt. Bane can find it again."

"And what if we come upon one of these mystery ships? What are our rules of engagement?" asked Akinola

Bateson looked at him intently. "Do what you have to, captain. Try to establish contact, but be ready to defend yourself, if necessary. God knows we don't want to start another war, especially considering we don't know who the hell we're dealing with. But I will not allow any of my squadron to have their hands tied."

"Thank you, sir. That's what I wanted to hear!"

* * *

Lt. Commander T'Ser was on the bridge, serving as duty officer when a yeoman handed her a PADD. "Ma'am? These are the new crew members who just beamed aboard. We've logged them in and have assigned them quarters."

T'Ser took the PADD, scanning the names - a couple of crewmen for engineering, a new medic, Ah *good!* - Ensign Li, one of the survivors from the *Kilimanjaro* was staying on, and . . .

T'Ser stared at the final name in disbelief. *No! Not him! Not on this ship!*

Commander Strauss entered the bridge for her duty shift and walked over to T'Ser to relieve her. Strauss' smile quickly faded as she saw the troubled look on the Vulcan's face.

"T'Ser? What's wrong?" Strauss asked quietly, with concern.

T'Ser looked up, startled. She attempted to compose herself and indicated the PADD. "Did you do this . . . as a joke?" her whispered words trembled with emotion.

Strauss frowned as she also whispered, "Joke? What are you talking about?" She took the PADD from T'Ser. "It's just the list of new officers and crew. What about it?"

T'Ser stood and gestured for Strauss to follow her to the empty ready room. There, T'Ser indicated the last name on the list. "Lt. Sarnek. He's coming on as helm officer."

Strauss eyed her friend. "So? Do you have a problem with another Vulcan on board?"

T'Ser looked Strauss directly in the eye. "You do not know, then. Lt. Sarnek is not just any Vulcan. He is the brother of my *former* betrothed."

Strauss looked at T'Ser incredulously. "WHAT?" She caught herself and spoke in a low voice. "Betrothed? I thought you and your parents didn't believe in that stuff."

"We don't. But my maternal grandmother does. *Very* strongly! As family matriarch, she decided that she had to do what my parents would not do. Needless to say, mother and father were upset and broke off the betrothal. It caused a pretty nasty stink for both families. Strevel, the one who to whom I was betrothed, and his family, considered my parents and I to have committed a serious breach of tradition and ethics. That's a huge deal in Vulcan culture! The last time a betrothal was broken off was over a hundred years ago and involved Ambassador Spock."

Strauss tried to reassure T'Ser. "Look, Lt. Sarnek is a trained Starfleet officer. Surely, he can put this aside. I mean, aren't Vulcans supposed to be above emotional reactions?"

T'Ser looked doubtful. "Don't believe everything you hear about Vulcans and their ability to be dispassionate. Vulcans can suppress emotions very well. But, it does not mean they forgive . . . or forget." She paused, and then shook her head in a resigned manner. "This is going to be awkward."

Chapter 5

The text message on his computer screen seemed innocuous enough. He began to read it, puzzled at first, until a certain key word grabbed his attention. As he continued to read, it was as if he woke from a long slumber. His purpose, long buried in the deep recesses of his mind, now came forth. Part of him, the part that represented his life for so many decades, rebelled. *You must not! You will betray those you know and love!* But the deeply ingrained mental conditioning from decades earlier quickly put down that brief mental rebellion. The sleeper agent, kidnapped and brainwashed by the Tal Shiar many years ago, was now very much awake. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply before continuing to read the coded message. His time to act was at hand.

* * *

"You were detected?" The question was more of a statement.

"Commander, the new cloaking device, though highly effective, cannot be sustained for long periods. While it was unfortunate that the transport vessel was in the vicinity, it is unlikely they learned anything of importance regarding our ship." said Voladek.

"I am less concerned about your ship than I am the possible detection of the artificial wormhole," said the commander.

Voladek shrugged, "And how do you suggest we cloak a wormhole?"

The commander waved a hand, conceding the point. "Again, a necessary risk. The sleeper agent has been activated to help prevent further detection."

"And if he is discovered?" challenged Voladek. The commander did not respond, but merely gave the old agent a knowing look.

"Commander?" interrupted T'Vash. "Would it not be simpler to enlist the assistance of the Federation, rather than operate covertly? Our risk of detection rises every time we use the artificial wormhole."

The Tal Shiar commander sighed. "That is precisely what I have told the director, and he has in turn told the Praetor. Nonetheless, the Praetor is adamant that the treachery of the Orion Syndicate remain a secret. Even the Senate does not know what has happened."

Tor'dex frowned. "Does the Praetor not trust the Federation to help? They proved to be effective and capable allies in the war with the Dominion."

"Tor'dex, this is not about trust. It is about pride. The Praetor does not want the Federation to know what the Orions have done." The commander straightened in his chair. "This line of questioning is not productive. Now, what have you discovered?"

* * *

"Commander Strauss? I'd like you to meet Lt. Sarnek, our new helm officer," said Captain Akinola.

Strauss rose from the command chair to greet the young Vulcan officer. *At least he looks young*, thought Strauss, *Although he could be anywhere from 30 to 70*. Aloud she said, "Lieutenant, welcome aboard. You'll find the *Bluefin* a challenge. She's got quite a power to mass ratio with her impulse engines. It takes a bit of getting used to."

The Vulcan lieutenant's expression did not change. "I served on the USS *Ardent*, a Defiant - class vessel with a 7.2% higher power to mass ratio. I should be well able to adjust to the power curve on this ship."

Before Strauss could respond, Akinola interrupted. "Lt. Sarnek, if you would, please relieve Mr. Fralk at the helm. Commander, could you meet with me a few moments in my ready room?"

Akinola led Strauss into the ready room and indicated for her to be seated. He took his place behind his desk.

"I heard that there might be some tension between T'Ser and our new helm officer," said Akinola.

"She spoke to you, then?" asked Strauss.

"No, not directly, but I knew of her broken betrothal, and it was pretty easy to check the family connections once I saw Sarnek's name on the transfer list."

Strauss shook her head. "Do the people at the bureau of personnel check into these things before making assignments?"

Akinola laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. "They do, but ability and availability trumps personal considerations. We needed a new helm officer - one who was experienced with high-powered impulse drives. Sarnek was able and available. It's as simple as that."

Strauss shrugged. "His personnel file shows he's very capable, but his supervisors say he tends to be a loner, even by Vulcan standards."

Akinola smiled. "Well, XO. Part of YOUR job is to make sure he fits in. We're a small ship with a close-knit crew. I don't expect T'Ser and Sarnek to kiss and make-up, but I do expect them both to act in a professional manner, particularly toward each other. Clear?"

"As crystal, sir."

"Good," Akinola leaned forward. "I'm glad we had this little chat."

* * *

"Captain? Message coming in from Admiral Bateson," said Lt. Bane.

"On view-screen, Mr. Bane," said Akinola.

The star field on the bridge view-screen shifted to an image of Admiral Morgan Bateson. He did not look pleased. "Captain Akinola, I wanted you to know that Starfleet Command declined my request for additional ships in the sector. They seemed unimpressed with the possibility of a new wormhole in the Molari Badlands or of phantom ships." He clasped his hands in front of him, obviously frustrated. "I'm sorry, Joseph, right now, you're on your own. I've talked to the captains of the *Everest*, *Scamp* and *Matterhorn* about the situation, but we're already spread too thin for them to be much help. They're on standby if something unforeseen comes up."

Akinola smiled sardonically. "Admiral, this whole situation could be categorized as 'unforeseen'".

Bateson snorted. "No argument there, Captain. But right now, you are the most experienced CO I've got, so the job is yours - begin patrolling the Badlands and try to locate the wormhole or any vessels that are attempting to transit through it."

"Understood, sir."

"Good luck, captain. Bateson, out."

The view-screen returned to the stars against the blackness of space. Akinola spoke, "Navigator, plot a course for the Badlands. Helm, make our speed warp 6."

* * *

The now-active "sleeper" agent began to use skills he had not previously known he possessed. He quickly hacked into the computer system of the ship, bypassing passwords and security protocols. He found the file for which he had searched. He deleted the file - a sensor log indicating the detection of an artificial singularity, substituting a new file in its place. He exited the routine, leaving no apparent trace of his tampering. Returning to his quarters, he sat in the darkness. A tear trickled down his face.

Chapter 6

The *Bluefin* dropped out of warp as it approached the Molari Badlands. Captain Akinola took a moment to appreciate the violent beauty of this maelstrom - a portion of space in the Borderlands between Klingon, Orion and Federation space that had resulted in the loss of many ships and their crews over the centuries. Part of the job of the Border Service was to go into this area to rescue the crews of ships that became disabled by ion storms, plasma surges, gravitic shear and temporal anomalies. This time, though, the *Bluefin* had a different reason to venture into the Badlands - to locate a previously unknown wormhole.

"Mr. Sarnek, full power to the shields and to the inertial dampeners." Akinola turned to Lt. Bane at the sensor station. "Mr. Bane, do you have a bearing on where the wormhole appeared?"

Lt. Nigel Bane stared at a computer screen, a slight frown on his face. He hesitated a moment before replying, "Yes sir, transferring coordinates to navigation."

Akinola noticed the hesitation. "Something wrong, lieutenant?"

Bane turned; a sheepish grin on his face. "No sir, I just thought I remembered a different set of coordinates than the computer is showing, but I've double-checked the sensor log. I must be gettin' bleary-eyed from starin' in the sensor hood all shift."

Akinola chuckled, "You can get some rack time soon, Mr. Bane." He turned his attention back forward. "Mr. Sarnek, ahead full impulse. Mind the gravity shear!"

"Acknowledged," said Sarnek.

The border cutter surged ahead, its inertial dampeners challenged by the constantly changing gravity fields and intense ion eddies.

* * *

Captain Akinola strode into sickbay at the end of his duty shift in search of Dr. Baxter. The white-haired physician showed surprise at the captain's appearance. "Joseph? What brings you to my humble infirmary?"

Akinola rubbed his forehead, "Doc, I've been fighting a headache all day. Didn't sleep well last night either - weird dreams."

Baxter picked up a Feinberger scanner from a tray and moved the humming device around Akinola's head. He tipped it in his hand to get the reading. "Well, no vascular problems and your sinuses seem clear enough. I do read a bit of cranio-muscular tension, though." He sat on a stool and crossed his arms. "How long have you had problems sleeping?"

Akinola snorted. "You know me, Calvin. I seldom sleep more than five hours on any given night - haven't for years."

"Yes, and I've offered to give you something for that," retorted Baxter. "Your wood-carving hobby may be partly responsible for your headache, with all of that close, detail work."

"It helps me relax, Doc. Besides, the headache's something new. And I don't want any sleep aides - I need to be alert at a moment's notice."

It was Baxter's turn to snort. "Welcome to the 24th century, captain. I can give you a patch to wear that will help you sleep that works like synthehol - you'll get a pleasant buzz that you can shake off at will."

Akinola still looked doubtful. "Just something for the headache now. If I still have problems sleeping, I'll come back."

Baxter rolled his eyes but did not press the issue. He went to a cabinet, filled a hypo-spray and walked back to the captain. "This is a mild analgesic with B-12. You'll feel much better by the time you get to your quarters."

"I'm not going to my quarters, I'm going to the gym," teased Akinola.

"I don't know why I bother," muttered Baxter as he administered the hypo-spray.

* * *

Akinola had to admit that he was feeling better as he neared the gym. As he entered, he saw Chief Solly Brin already leading the Shodokan class through their warm-up routines. He noticed that Ensign Li, the young officer that had survived the destruction of the USS *Kilimanjaro* and was now part of their

crew was with them, sporting a black belt and a bandaged hand. He approached Li, who quickly straightened to attention when he saw Akinola.

"As you were, ensign. We're pretty informal in the gym. I see you're wearing a black belt - Shodokan?" asked Akinola.

"Actually, Aikido and Shodokan, sir. But I'm rusty and need to start working out again."

Akinola indicated the bandage on Li's hand. "How did you get that, ensign?"

Li at first looked at the bandage as if he had never seen it before. He blinked, then smiled, "I was careless, sir. Nicked myself with a micro-torch replacing some circuits."

Akinola nodded. "Best to be careful with those things." He changed the subject, "Ensign, I'd like to start using you to lead some of the classes. Ol' Senior Chief Brin is starting to get slow in his old age," Akinola said, teasing.

"I heard that!" said Brin. "And I can still whip your butt."

"That's, I can whip your butt - *sir!*," said Akinola.

* * *

Lt. Commander T'Ser was finishing her meal in the wardroom when she sensed a presence in the doorway. She looked up to see Lt. Sarnek, holding a tray, standing still. His face was expressionless.

"Well, lieutenant, are you going to block the doorway or are you going to sit down and eat," asked T'Ser.

For a moment, T'Ser thought that Sarnek might turn and leave, but he finally sat at the wardroom table at the opposite end from her.

At first, he did not speak to her, instead, he carefully unwrapped his utensils from a napkin. T'Ser was about to leave when Sarnek finally spoke. "I did not know that you were assigned to this ship," he said simply.

"Well, imagine my surprise when I saw your name listed with the new transfers," she said neutrally. "How have you been, Sarnek?"

"I am well." He began to eat his salad, slowly, avoiding eye contact with T'Ser.

"And your family?" she pressed.

Sarnek carefully wiped his mouth with his napkin, set his utensils precisely on his plate and turned to face her. "Commander, the status of my family is not your concern. I have no wish to make 'small talk' with you, nor have any more contact with you than is absolutely necessary to carry out my duties."

T'Ser's face began to flush emerald. "*Lieutenant!* I was attempting to be polite. Of course, I should have realized that you would consider that 'illogical' and a waste of time. Fine. But get this straight, mister, you *will* show me respect! I am the second officer of this ship and I goddam out-rank you!" She paused a second to let that sink in.

Sarnek merely stared impassively at her for several moments, and then spoke. "Will that be all, commander?" he asked, calmly.

T'Ser held his stare for a few seconds before responding. "Yes, Mr. Sarnek. That is very much all."

He stood wordlessly with easy grace, took his tray to the disposal slot and left the wardroom. T'Ser continued to stare at the doorway for a few moments, then put her head down on her arms. "Well, T'Ser," she said sarcastically to herself, "You handled that well."

* * *

Ensign Vashtee looked up from the sensor hood and spoke to Commander Strauss. "Ma'am? We are at the coordinates for the wormhole."

"Very good, Ms. Vashtee. Begin active sensor scan of the area. Mr. Fralk, hold our position here."

"Aye, holding position," said the Denobulan helmsman.

For several minutes, the bridge was quiet save for the constant background beeps and hums of equipment. Strauss was working on crew schedules on her PADD when Ensign Vashtee spoke again, puzzlement in her voice. "Commander? I don't understand, but there are no residual traces that indicate a wormhole appeared anywhere in this area."

Strauss frowned. "That's odd. Did you verify that we are at the correct coordinates?"

The young Indian officer nodded. "Yes ma'am, and re-checked. We are at the precise location indicated by our sensor logs. But my scans show absolutely no sign of a massive singularity event having occurred within range of our sensors."

Strauss asked, "Could the sensor logs be incorrect?"

Vashtee looked as if Strauss had asked her to french-kiss a Horta. "No . . . ma'am. I don't see how that could be."

Strauss pressed, "Yet those sensor logs show the wormhole we encountered a few days ago to be at this very location?"

"Yes ma'am."

Strauss was beginning to get irritated. "Ensign, either that sensor log is wrong, our sensors are wrong, or we're in the wrong place. Which is it?"

"I . . . I'm not sure, ma'am."

Strauss looked at her PADD, verifying what she already knew. She tapped her com badge. "Lieutenant Bane, this is Commander Strauss, report to the bridge, immediately."

"Bane here, on my way."

Ensign Vashtee looked stricken. Strauss attempted to cheer her up. "Mr. Bane logged the wormhole the first time, maybe he can tell us where it went." She looked back at the viewscreen and the colorful, whirling vortex. "Somebody damn well better find it," she said to herself.

Chapter 7

As the crew of the *Bluefin* sought the mysterious wormhole in the wrong place, the Tal Shiar scout ship came through the wormhole and into the Molari Badlands, far from the searching border cutter.

"Scan for other vessels," ordered Sub-Commander Voladek.

T'Vash checked her instruments and smiled. "No vessels within scanning range. Apparently, our sleeper agent's subterfuge was successful."

"Yes," said Tor'dex, "But they will soon discover their mistake and resume their search for the wormhole."

"Let them," said Voladek, "We will be elsewhere." He straightened in the command chair. "Set a course for Verex III." He smiled a menacing smile. "Lortho Elix believes himself safe from us. He is badly mistaken. Tor'dex! Best speed through the Badlands, then maximum warp to the Orion's homeworld."

The scout ship picked up speed, heading out of the Badlands.

* * *

Captain Akinola entered the bridge to see a cadre of his senior officers gathered around the sensor station. Lt. Bane was seated, deeply focused on something. Ensign Vashtee stood to the side, a look of puzzlement and frustration on her face. Commander Strauss and Lt. Commander Galt were having an animated conversation while T'Ser looked over Bane's shoulders.

Akinola strode up to the group. "So what's so important that you had to wake me from the best sleep I've had in days?"

Strauss spoke up. "Sorry, sir, but we've got a strange problem. Apparently, someone has tampered with our sensor logs. The coordinates they indicate for the wormhole are incorrect."

Akinola frowned. "Tampered? You better explain!"

Lt. Bane turned from the sensors. "Sir? Do you remember how I was confused by our coordinates when we arrived on station? I just figured I was tired, but it seems I was right - we are not where the wormhole first appeared. The

sensor logs should always be correct, unless someone deliberately tampers with them."

"And how hard is it to do that?" asked the captain.

T'Ser spoke up. "It's not all that easy, captain. You have to bypass a number of security protocols to even access the log files - then to make the changes would require considerable knowledge of programming code."

Akinola considered this. "Who on board could do that?"

T'Ser furrowed her brow in thought, "Well, I could. So could Galt, Lt. Bane, and Chief Deryx. Those are the ones I *know* of that would have the necessary knowledge and access. But there could be others with the know-how of whom we're not aware. And that doesn't begin to answer *why* someone would do it!

"Have you discovered any more sabotage?" asked Akinola, quietly.

The other officers looked uncomfortable. Akinola had said the "s-word" that, thus far, had been unspoken. Finally, Strauss spoke up. "Captain, we've been focusing on the sensor logs, but I've asked Galt to begin a check of all the ship's systems - just in case."

"Good. Listen, people. We don't know who did this, and maybe not all of the reasons. But we do know somebody wanted to keep us from finding that wormhole, or at least delay us." Akinola looked from face to face, as if searching for something. "I don't want to think that someone on this ship is a saboteur, but we have to accept that possibility. From now on, I want at least two of you monitoring the computer logs at all times. If *anything* out of the ordinary happens, I want to know about it immediately, understood?"

There were murmurs of assent all around. Lt. Bane spoke up, "Sir? I think I can remember the actual coordinates, or at least pretty close, where we first encountered the wormhole traces."

"Okay, Nigel. Pass those on to the navigator and let's get there ASAP. Galt? Is there anything we can do to beef up security on critical systems?"

The Tellarite chief engineer rubbed his snout. "Yeah, there's a few things we can do - rotate access codes, limit access to fewer terminals, set some stickies ..."

"Stickies?" asked Akinola, puzzled.

"They are little software traps that indicate whether someone has been messing with the code. The perp wouldn't know, but we would! I'll get on it." He ambled off, focused on his task.

Akinola turned back to the remaining officers. "Commander Strauss, let's make best speed to the coordinates that Mr. Bane remembers. T'Ser, work with Mr. Bane and check the rest of the sensor logs for any anomalies. I'll be in my quarters."

* * *

Admiral Morgan Bateson received his unexpected visitor with a mix of distrust and curiosity. "Commander Chalmer, what can I do for you?" Bateson asked of the Intelligence Officer who was secretly a Section 31 operative.

Chalmer, wearing civilian clothes rather than a Starfleet uniform, made himself comfortable in one of Bateson's guest chairs. "Actually, admiral, I may be able to do something for you. Or, at least shine some light on some things that have been puzzling you."

Bateson kept his poker face. "And how would you know what's been puzzling me, Mr. Chalmer?"

"Your recent request for additional ships in the sector following the *Bluefin's* run-in with Krell and your report of a previously unknown wormhole. Needless to say, that caught our attention."

"Okay," admitted Bateson. "I can see how that would interest intelligence. But what 'light' can you shine for me."

Chalmer steepled his fingers. "Understand, admiral, that this is highly classified. In fact, my superiors debated whether to pass this along. In the end, it was felt that you are in a 'need to know' position."

Bateson was tiring of the spy dramatics. "Mr. Chalmer, please get to the point."

Chalmer was unfazed by Bateson's impatience. "Admiral, what would you say if I told you that the Orion Syndicate has kidnapped the daughter of the Romulan Praetor?"

For a moment, Bateson was speechless. Then his speech became unprintable.

* * *

The Romulan scout ship dropped from warp as it entered the Verex system.

"Engage cloaking device at level two, maintain full sublight to Verex III," said Voladek. "Begin scanning for Lortho Elix's ship, the *Treshmaran*."

"Sub-commander, do you think he's keeping her on the ship?" asked T'Vash.

"Unknown. Most likely she is being held on the third planet. It has served as their base of operations for their slaving operations for centuries."

"It's a big planet," observed Tor'dex.

"All the more reason to take Elix - alive. He will lead us to the Praetor's daughter," said Voladek.

"And if he does not?" asked T'Vash.

"Then we take Elix back to the Praetor. In which case, Elix will wish that we *had* killed him."

Chapter 8

Admiral Bateson was incredulous. "Let me get this straight, Chalmer. The Orion Syndicate managed to kidnap the daughter of the Romulan Praetor? That's simply unbelievable! How could they do it, and why?"

"I'm afraid the how is still a bit of a mystery, but the why . . . well, that's fairly easy. This gambit will give the involved Syndicate family a huge reputation boost, not just in this sector but throughout the quadrant. They probably believe that the Romulans have no option but to pay the ransom - giving the Syndicate family huge financial resources and a large boost to their self-image. In the Syndicate's view, the Romulans can't make a military move - this sector is on the opposite side of Federation space from the neutral zone. And they also figured, correctly, that the Roms would not enlist our help."

"Why not?" interrupted Bateson.

"Romulan pride, mostly. You'd be surprised to learn that the Syndicate has a fairly sophisticated intelligence network of their own. They've read the Romulan reaction correctly . . . up to a point," said Chalmer.

"And that point would be?" asked Bateson.

"They are correct from a tactical standpoint. The Praetor will not risk war with the Federation to mount a military operation in our territory. But the syndicate has underestimated the Romulans' other methods - stealth, misdirection, patience. We have strong reason to believe that the Romulans are, even now, attempting a covert operation against this Syndicate family to rescue the Praetor's daughter and to extract retribution."

Bateson nodded. The events of the past two months were beginning to make sense. "Perhaps the Roms thought we could make the job easier for them - if we thought the Orions had destroyed the *Kilimanjaro*, for example."

Chalmer inclined his head. "That would seem to be the case. Fortunately, one of your cutters was in the right place at the right time and broke up that plan. Now it appears that the Roms are taking a more direct, but riskier approach."

Bateson finished the thought. "They're sending a cloaked ship through some sort of artificial wormhole, aren't they?"

Chalmer did not answer the question directly. "It would be in the best interests of the Federation if none of this came out publicly. Our relations with the Romulans, though perhaps not at their best, are at least stable. If we send a fleet of starships into this sector on a seek and destroy mission, well . . ." Chalmer paused momentarily, then continued. "If, however, a lone ship, say, one of your cutters, could make contact with the Romulans, even offer assistance, it could help the situation come to a more amicable conclusion for both of our governments."

Bateson was not happy with that idea. "We're the border service, Chalmer, not some covert spy agency. We don't do assassinations or espionage."

"And you wouldn't have to," said Chalmer smoothly, "Your mission is to provide assistance, is it not? If your ship can expedite the Romulans in recovering this girl and, perhaps, learn something about the wormhole in the process, we'll have a successful end to this affair."

"Chalmer, I know enough that when the intelligence service says something's going to be easy, it's usually anything but." Bateson glared at the Section 31 agent a moment longer before continuing. "Okay, we'll play along with your game, but I'm bringing Captain Akinola into the loop. I will not send him into this mess blindfolded!"

Chalmer did not look pleased at this, but, seeing the look on Bateson's face, did not argue.

* * *

"Crikey! Look 'ere ma'am! Someone's pokin' into the system again!" Lt. Bane's Australian accent was more pronounced, probably due to his excitement. He looked up at T'Ser from the display. "Accordin' to Mr. Galt's "sticky," our friend is accessing a terminal in Jeffries tube 4, level 6."

T'Ser tapped her com badge. "Commander T'Ser to security . . ."

* * *

Senior Chief Brin and three security crewmen stealthily approached the Jeffries tube where their suspected saboteur was at work. The area was dim, but they could see well enough without visual aides. Brin used hand signals to place the rest of the security detail in position. He then double checked his

own phaser, making sure it was set for heavy stun. He took a calming breath then cautiously entered the Jeffries tube.

* * *

The cloaked Romulan scout ship entered orbit around Verex III. Many ships orbited the infamous planet. Many were Orion Syndicate ships, other were personal or commercial ships from many worlds. The Tal Shiar agents watched their sensors intently, looking for signs of their target, the *Troshmaran*. Finally, after two hours of searching, a smile played across the face of Tor'dex. He looked up at the other two agents. "I've got him!"

* * *

Chief Brin moved carefully into the Jeffries tube. He paused at a junction, listening intently. Sure enough, someone was there, just around the corner from him. Brin could hear him breathing and make out a shadow from some small source of light. With his phaser at the ready, he eased around the corner.

A figure was hunched over a terminal station. He must have sensed Brin's presence because he suddenly whirled on him. In the dimness, Brin could just make out some object in the other's hand. He pressed the firing stud of the phaser. Immediately, the cramped crawlway was illuminated by an eerie blue light as the phaser emitted its characteristic warbling cry. The shadowy figure grunted and crumpled to the deck.

Instantly, Brin tapped his com badge. "Security detail, move in - man down!" He moved closer, still cautious, and turned the figure where he could view his face.

Though the lighting was poor, Brin's breath caught in his throat. Lying before him, with a small flashlight still clutched in his hand, was a very familiar form.

Chapter 9

The cloaked Romulan scout ship took up a position just astern of Lortho Elix's ship, the *Toshmaran*.

Sub-commander Voladek turned to Tor'dex, "Anything?"

"They are running with shields up, but I am reading 27 Orion life forms, no Romulans."

Voladek grunted. "We never expected this to be easy. Very well. T'Vash - prepare to scramble their weapons and shields and beam over the stun grenades."

* * *

On board the *Toshmaran*, the Orion pilot frowned at his boards. "Supreme! We are being scanned."

Lothar Elix shifted his ample body around on his command throne. "Who is scanning us? Where are they?"

The pilot worked his controls frantically. "I can not find the source. It is coming from aft of us, but there are no ships there."

"Fool!" shouted Elix. "It must be a cloaked ship! Prepare to fire phasers, wide dispersal."

* * *

The Orion phaser fire was deflected easily by the shields of the Romulan scout ship. T'Vash smiled, "They are nothing, if not predictable." Using the Orions phasers against them, she instigated a feedback loop which overwhelmed their weapons and their shields. "Too bad this does not work against more powerful defenses," she observed. T'Vash then deactivated the cloaking device and engaged the transporter.

* * *

The Pilot was nearly in panic. "Supreme! A ship is decloaking immediately behind us."

Elix looked at the viewscreen at the green ship that suddenly appeared. Though he did not recognize the ship, he had no doubt as to who occupied it. "Fire, you idiot! Destroy that ship!"

The pilot frantically attempted to fire their phasers, to no avail. "Weapons and shields are down!"

Elix was about to order the pilot to engage their engines and flee the scout ship, when a wavering hum filled the small flight deck. He looked on, frozen in fear, as two small, round objects suddenly materialized. Red lights blinked on the stun grenades. Elix had only a moment to recognize the objects before everything went very bright, then very dark.

* * *

T'Ser nearly collided with Commander Strauss as she hurried to sick bay. "Did you hear? . . ." began T'Ser.

"Yeah, but I'm having a hard time believing it," replied Strauss, grimly. "Come on!"

The two officers entered sickbay together. Chief Brin was standing by a bio-bed, he turned to look at them. A mixture of sorrow and anger clouded his face. "Commanders, I . . ." His voice tailed off and he looked back down at the figure in the bed. T'Ser and Strauss joined him.

His face was pale and drawn, and, though still unconscious, his arms and legs were bound. T'Ser frowned at Brin. "Is that really necessary?"

"It is," said a familiar voice. T'Ser turned to see Captain Akinola, leaning against the far wall with arms crossed, his face a mask. "I ordered it."

Neither T'Ser nor Strauss responded, but turned instead to look again at the still form of Dr. Calvin Baxter.

* * *

At first, everything was blurry to Elix. He felt dizzy and nauseous. He tried to wipe his forehead but he found he could not move his arms. This alarmed him and he strained harder to make out his surroundings.

Elix could make out greenish gray walls and that he was restrained in some sort of hard, metal chair. He was firmly held in place, though there were no signs of straps or ropes. He realized that he was not alone.

"Hello, Lothar," said a calm, quiet voice.

"Who's there? Who are you?" Elix decided the situation called for bluster. "Whoever you are, you've made the worst mistake of your life! If you don't release me immediately, your lives will be forfeit! My family will hunt you down and skin you slowly!"

The shadowy figure made a tsking sound. "Lortho, surely an Orion prince such as yourself can be more imaginative than that. Such practices are archaic and often ineffective." The figure leaned in, revealing the face of a smiling Romulan. "I, on the other hand, know some truly unique and inventive ways of inflicting pain."

Voladek paused as the truth of the situation began to dawn on Elix. He leaned in closer to Elix and spoke again in the same calm, quiet manner, "Now, Lortho, where is the Praetor's daughter? Where is T'Lera?"

* * *

T'Ser was aghast. She turned to Brin. "Chief, are you *sure* that Doc was jacking the system? Couldn't he have been in the Jeffries tube for some other reason?"

Akinola interrupted, "T'ser."

She looked at him, a stricken look on her face. "I just can't believe that Dr. Baxter could do anything like this. He's served faithfully in Starfleet for 50 years."

"I'm having a hard time with this too. But the evidence is damning. This time, he tried to infiltrate our defensive systems. That's serious, T'Ser. I have no choice but to treat this in a serious manner." Akinola looked at the medic who was standing by. "Wake him."

The young corpsman looked startled. "Sir?"

"Give him something to wake him up. I want to talk to him, now," said Akinola, calmly but firmly.

The corpsman might have argued, but there was something in Akinola's face that made him hold his tongue. He checked a hypospray, dialed in a mild stimulant, and pressed it against Baxter's neck.

Almost immediately, Baxter began to grimace and moaned softly. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes, squinting somewhat at the light. He finally focused on Captain Akinola. "Joseph? What's happening?" He tried to sit up, but the combination of dizziness and the restraints caused him to lay back down. He paused, slowly regaining his senses. He calmly asked, "Why am I in a bio-bed, under restraints?"

Akinola replied, "You're recovering from a stun shot from a phaser."

"I must still be dreaming," Baxter said. "This is all so strange." He tugged gingerly at the restraints. "But these feel real." He paused, then with more emotion, "For God's sake, what's going on?"

"Calvin, you were caught in a Jeffries tube, hacking in to our defense systems. The best we can tell, you were attempting to override our shields and disable our weapons," Akinola paused. "Why don't *you* tell *us* what's going on."

Baxter looked genuinely confused, "Captain, I have no idea what you are talking about! I wouldn't know how to do that and I certainly wouldn't even if I could!"

Akinola was about to respond when T'Ser interrupted. "Doctor, what is the last thing you remember?"

Baxter frowned. "I remember finishing my shift here in sickbay; I left Corpsman Menendez in charge. I went to my quarters before going to eat . . ." Baxter stopped, a confused look now coming over his face. He looked around at the gathered officers, shaking his head slightly. "I don't remember anything after going to my quarters."

Akinola stared at Baxter for several, long moments. "Calvin, I've known you for seven years and, to my knowledge, you've never lied to me. But you must know this is a huge problem. You've been caught red-handed engaged in an act of espionage against this ship and this crew."

Baxter shook his head. "This must just be the same bad dream."

"What dream?" asked T'Ser.

Baxter looked at her, a pleading expression on his face. "T'Ser, I've dreamed that I've been exploring the ship, doing things with computers that I don't understand. Then I wake up in bed. I couldn't have been doing any of this . . . could I?" He looked again at Akinola.

Akinola wore a look of deep sadness on his face. "Calvin, this has happened twice. I don't know," he shook his head, "that Starfleet is going to accept that you were just 'sleep walking.'" A pause, "Hell, I don't know that I can believe that myself."

T'Ser turned to Akinola. "There is a way we might find out what really happened."

* * *

Perspiration beaded on Lortho Elix's brow, but he stubbornly refused to say anything to the Romulan.

Voladek shook his head. "Really, Lortho, this is such a waste of time and effort. You have the information I want and you shall give it to me."

"Why don't you fornicate with a Horta!" spat Elix.

Voladek ignored Elix, instead he produced a small, innocuous looking cylinder. "This is a most interesting invention that has just been made available to us. Quite remarkable, really! With it, I can transport any part of your body somewhere else - even onto or in your body. I simply adjust the focus of the beam, like so . . ." He twisted a portion of the device, "Then, I set return settings. I can transport your heart out of your body and in to your lap, for example. But, rather than waste time talking, why don't I show you!" He placed the device squarely into Elix's crotch. "How would you like a new appendage on your forehead?"

* * *

Voladek entered the cramped bridge of the Romulan vessel. Tor'dex raised an eyebrow and asked, "Did he talk?"

Voladek smiled, "Oh yes, he was most informative. Unfortunately, he does not know exactly where T'Lera is. But he did give us the coordinates of the compound where she must be." He took the "torture" cylinder that he was

carrying, and twisted off the top. As he did so, steam rose from the opening. He looked at the other two agents and asked, "Tea?"

* * *

Sarnek answered the chime to his quarters. "You may enter." His eyebrow crept up as he saw his visitor standing in the doorway.

"Lt. Sarnek, I would ask something of you," said T'Ser, formally.

Chapter 10

Sarnek stood stiffly, arms positioned behind his back. "And what is it you would have me do, commander?"

"I believe that Dr. Baxter has been forced to do things against his nature - things that may have been implanted deeply into his subconscious mind," said T'Ser.

Sarnek frowned slightly, "You believe this, but have no proof, I take it."

"No. But Dr. Baxter has served Starfleet and the federation for half a century. He has served honorably and with distinction. It is not . . . logical, that he would do anything contrary to the ideals he has so long upheld."

Again, Sarnek's eyebrow shot up. "You speak of logic? You rejected that path years ago. Do you hope to sway me by suddenly embracing the Vulcan ideal?"

T'Ser held her temper in check. "Sarnek, even humans understand and often employ logic." She took a step forward. "I am not asking this for me. I am asking for Dr. Baxter. You have not had the opportunity to get to know him as well as I, but I believe you would find him worthy of your assistance."

Sarnek held her gaze for a long, uncomfortable moment before speaking. "You would have me meld with him?"

"It is the only way we can discover the truth, Sarnek."

"I am not an adept, commander. My knowledge and experience are limited."

"But you *have* the requisite training that I do not have. I know I am asking much of you, Sarnek, but . . ."

Sarnek interrupted, "Before I answer, I must know two things. First, is Dr. Baxter willing?"

"Yes, I explained the process, although he has heard of it. He is willing to submit to the meld."

Sarnek nodded. "My second question is this - why did you reject my brother?"

The question caught T'Ser off guard. Part of her was angered that he would dare use the question as a bargaining chip, while part of her understood his need to know. She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed out. "Sarnek, I did not reject your brother. One cannot reject what one has never met or knows. My family rejected ancient dogma that we did not want controlling our lives. In your eyes we are *V'tosh ka'tur*. But we simply wanted to live our lives in freedom and peace. We chose to walk a different path than most Vulcans. But isn't that difference another aspect of IDIC?"

Sarnek did not answer her question directly. He stood deep in thought before speaking. "I will need privacy with the doctor to conduct the meld. You should also have a corpsman ready to administer 10cc's of Lexorin to him afterwards. If someone has truly tampered with his mind, there is danger that I may make the situation worse."

"Thank you," T'Ser said simply.

"Do not thank me, commander. There is no guarantee that I will be successful."

* * *

"Bridge to Captain Akinola."

Akinola tapped his com badge. "Akinola, go ahead."

"Sir, you have a priority one communication incoming."

"Acknowledged, pipe it to my quarters."

* * *

"Sub-commander? I have located the compound," said T'Vash.

"Good. Now let's see if these codes work so we can beam down. Tor'dex, get our stealth suits, hand scanners and sidearms. T'Vash, you will remain on the ship. If we do not report back in two hours, you are to return to Romulus at maximum speed and turn Elix over to the Praetor."

"Understood."

* * *

"Admiral, with all due respect, that's *bullshit!*"

Admiral Bateson's face showed that he did not entirely disagree with Akinola's comment. "Captain, I know it stinks to high heaven, but it gives us a chance to bring this to a close."

"Sir, there's a good chance that the Roms are behind sabotage on this ship! And now the intelligence guys want us to *help them?* We are being played like a violin!"

On the viewer, Bateson folded his hands, a sign that his mind was made up. "Captain, I sympathize with your plight and your feelings. My feelings are similar, but we've got to set those aside for now. You have your orders. As to Dr. Baxter, well, let's see what your Lt. Sarnek can do. Personally, I don't have much sympathy for Baxter, but he's one of your officers, so I'll give you some latitude. But understand this, captain. Unless he has some rock solid reasons behind his actions, he'll probably live out the rest of his life on a prison colony. Bateson out."

The image of Admiral Bateson was replaced by the Border Service insignia. Akinola simply stared at the screen, frustrated. "Damn!" he said, softly.

* * *

Lt. Sarnek stood by Dr. Baxter's bio-bed. "Doctor, you do realize that this may accomplish nothing. It may, in fact, cause you additional mental trauma. Do you understand and accept this?"

Dr. Baxter held Sarnek's gaze. "Anything is better than not knowing what I've done or why I've done it. Do what you need to do, Sarnek."

Sarnek nodded. "Very well. Let us begin." He steepled his hands for a moment, in deep concentration. With his eyes still closed he came close to Baxter, placing his fingers on key pressure points on Baxter's face and head. "My mind to your mind . . ." he murmured.

* * *

Captain Akinola strode purposefully onto the bridge. Commander Strauss relinquished the center seat. "What are our orders, captain?"

"XO, it seems that our orders are to assist the Romulans in a hostage rescue." Akinola had to suppress a smile at the shocked expression on the petite commander's face. "However, our orders are not explicit as to *how* we are to do that. So, based on what I *do* know, set a course to the Verex system."

Strauss blanched. "The *Verex* system? That's the Orion system - outside of Federation space."

"I'm well aware of that, commander. Navigator, plot our course. Helm, ahead warp 6."

The *Bluefin* spun gracefully on her vertical axis, then shot into warp with a flash of light.

* * *

Sarnek began the tedious journey into the mind of Dr. Calvin Baxter. He found a mind of contrasts - orderly and disciplined, yet emotional and somewhat eccentric. The contrasts were both fascinating and disturbing to Sarnek, who had never melded with anyone besides another Vulcan.

Sarnek began to sense resistance as he probed Baxter's memories. He moved cautiously, not wanting Baxter to withdraw into himself. Ever so carefully, Sarnek began to sift through layers of recent memories. What he discovered was puzzling to him. There seemed to be two sets of memories that paralleled each other. One set embodied Baxter's normal ship-board routine and were in the forefront of his conscious mind. Another set lurked below the surface in his deeper sub-conscious. It was these memories that disturbed Sarnek and, the deeper he probed, the more disturbing they became. As Sarnek began to focus on these hidden memories, he sensed Baxter's pulse and respiration increasing. Sarnek paused, taking the anxiety and fear into his own mind. Baxter began to relax, so Sarnek moved deeper and deeper into Baxter's memories. Sarnek was aware that he, too, was beginning to feel distress, but he pressed on.

Sarnek finally came to the penultimate memory that was locked away from Baxter's conscious mind. Here, Sarnek found the answer for which he had been seeking. As Sarnek began to carefully withdraw, he spoke/thought to Baxter about the dark place, purposefully hidden in his sub-conscious - "*Forget! . . .*"

Chapter 11

Sarnek exited sickbay to meet with Akinola, Strauss and T'Ser. He looked gaunt and his skin had an unhealthy yellowish pallor. Akinola almost reached out to support Sarnek, but stopped as Sarnek straightened and appeared to rally himself.

"It is done," Sarnek said simply.

"Let's go to the wardroom. You look like you need to sit down," said Akinola.

A few moments later, the four officers were seated at the wardroom table. Cookie stuck his head in to see if they wanted to eat, but Akinola shook his head. "Just bring some water for Lt. Sarnek, please," said the captain. Cookie brought back a pitcher of water with four glasses, then left them alone.

Akinola allowed Sarnek to take a drink of water before asking, "Sarnek, what did you learn."

Sarnek regarded his glass of water a moment before answering. "Captain, in most instances, a mind-meld is a very private affair. But this . . . is a most different situation." He looked up at the other three. "There is no question that someone has tampered with Dr. Baxter's mind."

Akinola looked grim. "Could you tell who did it, or when?"

"Who? Oh, it was the Romulans, that is certain. As to when, it happened forty years ago, when Dr. Baxter was a young officer, serving on the USS *Endeavour*. He was a surgical resident on the ship as they patrolled the Neutral Zone. He was kidnapped while on shore-leave on Flasquil'a - a non-aligned planet near the zone. It seems that the Romulans had Tal Shiar agents on the planet and occasionally kidnapped Starfleet officers. In Dr. Baxter's case, they just kept him for three days - long enough to hide the memory of his abduction and 'condition' him to respond to them at the time of their choosing. Since he returned to the ship before his leave time was over, no one was the wiser."

"Were you able to reverse the conditioning?" asked T'Ser.

"I believe so. However, he still must deal with the guilt he feels over his actions, as unfounded as those feelings may be." Sarnek paused. "I am certainly not qualified to help him in that regard."

"Sarnek, is he still a threat to this ship?" asked Akinola.

"No sir. I was successful in eliminating the conditioning from his mind. However, as I stated, his overall mental state is somewhat precarious. In time, and with qualified counseling, he should recover."

Akinola nodded; a relieved expression on his face. "Thank you lieutenant - well done! Now, go get some rest. You've earned it."

Sarnek rose and inclined his head, then left for his quarters. Akinola looked at Strauss and T'Ser. "We will get him the help he needs, that I promise. First, though, we've got to find these Romulan agents."

"What will we do when we find them?" asked Strauss.

"That depends on them," replied Akinola.

* * *

Voladek and Tor'dex materialized in a wooded area outside the slave compound. "At least we know the code worked," observed Tor'dex."

"Yes. If it hadn't, we wouldn't know anything at all," Voladek said, dryly." He looked at his scanner and frowned. "The walls are made of a material that is impervious to my scanner. We'll have to get inside before we can scan for T'Lera."

The Tal Shiar agents moved slowly under the cover of darkness along the tree line. Their stealth suits gave them a certain degree of protection against Orion sensor sweeps. While the suits did not hide them completely, they would appear as some small life-form unless directly targeted. Finally, they came to an entry to the compound. Two Orion sentries stood guard.

Using hand signals, Voladek directed Tor'dex to use his small dart gun, rather than his disruptor. Tor'dex fired twice and both guards collapsed. They made their way quickly to the prone figures and searched them. One had an electronic key, which they used to gain entrance into the compound.

"We won't have much time before the sentries are discovered," whispered Voladek. "We'll have to move quickly."

Again, Voladek checked his scanner. This time, he was able to locate a Romulan life sign, two levels down. He motioned for Tor'dex to follow. They moved quickly, disruptors at the ready.

* * *

On the cloaked Romulan ship, T'Vash noticed with alarm that another Orion vessel with the same markings as the *Toshmaran* was moving toward her position.

"This isn't good," she muttered to herself. The other ship would soon discover that the crew of the *Toshmaran* were dead, killed by poison gas after Lortho Elix had been abducted. While the cloak protected her for now, more Orion ships would make evasion and escape much more difficult.

* * *

Akinola looked at the drawn face of his friend. "Calvin, how are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure, really. Part of me thinks I'm still in a dream, part of me is all too aware of what I've done."

"Listen Calvin, this is not about what *you've* done, it's about what the Romulans did to you. That was not your fault!"

"Perhaps, perhaps. But that does not alter the consequences of my actions," said Baxter.

Akinola sighed. "Doc, thankfully we discovered what you were doing before any harm was done. We know it wasn't your fault - you're no spy! You're the victim of a kidnapping and a brutal mental assault." He patted Baxter on the shoulder. "You're going to be okay, Doc. We're going to see to that."

A tear slid down Baxter's face. He took a shaky breath, "I wish I had your confidence, Joseph."

* * *

"Here! Behind this door." Voladek pointed to a heavy metal door set in the stone wall.

Tor'dex took the electronic key from the sentry and tried it on the lock. But, instead of the door opening, klaxons began to sound.

Tor'dex cursed. He drew his disruptor and aimed at the lock. "Stand back!" he warned. He pulled the trigger and a beam of red energy surged from the gun.

A significant portion of the door vaporized in a flash of light and heat. Tor'dex kicked the door inward. In the distance, they could hear running footfalls and shouting.

The room was dim and stuffy. The walls were bare stone with blue mold growing on them. There were no furnishings except for a bed and a toilet. On the bed lay a Romulan female, wearing some sort of restraining garment. She appeared to be unconscious. Voladek pulled his dagger and began to cut her loose from her restraints. He saw that her face was bruised and there was a cut above one eye. Anger flared within him, but he did not allow himself the luxury of giving into it. He turned to Tor'dex. "Situation?"

Tor'dex checked his scanner. "At least 12 coming, energy weapons charged. We don't have more than one minute."

Voladek keyed his communicator, "T'Vash - three to transport, immediately!"

T'Vash responded, "Sub-commander, we have company up here!"

Voladek exchanged a look with Tor'dex. "Understood. Bring weapons on-line, drop the cloak and shields and beam us up."

"It looks like we are going to have to fight our way out," he said to Tor'dex.

Chapter 12

Even as Voladek felt his feet materialize on the small transporter platform, he felt an ominous shudder in the deck. He turned to Tor'dex. See to T'Lera. Make sure she's stable, then get to the bridge quickly." The ship shook again, this time more violently. "It would seem our operation is no longer covert."

* * *

Akinola sat in the semi-darkness of his ready room, staring out the viewport at the stars. The door chime buzzed. "Enter!" he said.

Commander Strauss walked in and stood before his desk at parade rest. Akinola nearly smiled. He had come to recognize his young XO's body language. She was clearly unhappy. He spoke first, "Commander, why don't you sit down. We're not on the Academy parade grounds."

Inga blushed slightly. It always irritated her when the captain made a dig at her Academy training. Akinola had come up through the ranks and received a field-commission years ago. She understood and even respected that. But for some reason, he had a certain degree of contempt for the Academy, which was incomprehensible to her. She set those thoughts aside. "Captain, why are we headed for the Verex system? The Romulans are bound to return to the Molari Badlands - we have a better chance of intercepting them there."

Akinola nodded. "That's probably true, commander. But I have a hunch that the Roms are going to stir up a hornets' nest when they attempt to rescue that girl. They may have a cloaking device, but they'll have to lower it to use their transporter and to fire weapons. When they do, the Orions will pick them up and might get lucky. If so, they'll need our help."

Strauss frowned and crossed her arms. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Go ahead."

"Captain, why the hell are we *helping* the Romulans? They were responsible, at least indirectly for the destruction of the *Kilimanjaro*." They kidnapped Dr. Baxter and turned him into a mole. They've violated our territory . . . Mein Gott! We ought to be helping the Orions blow them out of the sky!" Strauss caught herself and attempted to regain her composure.

Akinola wore a neutral expression but nodded his head. "Inga, everything you said I agree with. But we do have our orders. They may be bitter and hard to swallow. I shared my sentiments with Admiral Bateson just as you have shared with me, but in the end, I said 'aye, aye, sir" and left it there. I'm a pretty simple man, Inga. I'm no diplomat. I'll never captain a ship of the line. Part of my job is search and rescue and this fits in those parameters. I may not like who we're rescuing, but that's besides the point."

Strauss kept her arms folded. "And that's it? We just ride in like the cavalry, rescue the Romulans and send them on their merry way?"

Akinola stared back at Strauss. "Commander, I hope it will be that easy."

* * *

As Voladek seated himself, the scout ship shuddered again. "T'Vash - report!"

T'Vash kept her attention on her controls as she answered. "The Orion gunner is either very lucky or very good. In the short time I dropped our cloak and shields to beam you up; he's disabled our cloaking device as well as our counter-measures. We have 70% shields and disruptors."

Voladek cursed quietly. "Very well, bring us to full power, set an evasive course out of the system and back to the Badlands."

T'Vash remarked, "Acknowledged. However, we are now out-numbered and out-gunned."

"Noted." He studied the tactical viewer, considering. "T'Vash, target the *Toshmaran*. When the lead ship gets close to it, fire all disruptors."

T'Vash acknowledged the order, while still plotting their course. The lead Orion raider, emboldened by their initial success, began to bear down on the Romulan ship. It proved to be a fatal mistake.

As the Raider came abreast of the drifting *Toshmaran*, T'Vash unleashed a volley of disruptor fire at the unshielded derelict. The *Toshmaran* exploded in a spectacular display of light and debris as its warp core imploded and ignited like a small sun. The attacking Raider was caught in the blast effect, its shields overwhelmed by the massive energy wave. It likewise succumbed, exploding in similar fashion.

On the Romulan ship, Voladek gave a grunt of satisfaction but quickly noted the second Raider closing within firing range. The tactical viewer also indicated two other Raiders just emerging from the event horizon of the planet. "T'Vash, engage engines - now!"

The small scout ship moved swiftly, breaking orbit and heading outbound from the Verex system. The Orion ships immediately pursued. Voladek noted this on the viewer. "Time until we can jump to warp?"

T'Vash frowned. "The three gas giants in this system have very large gravity wells. We have to get past them first. Estimate twenty minutes until we are clear."

Voladek grimaced. "In twenty minutes we very well may be dead."

* * *

On the bridge of the USS *Bluefin*, Captain Akinola squinted at the viewscreen, willing the Verex system to come into view. "Time until we reach the Verex system," he asked.

Bralus, the Bolian helmsman checked his board. "Twelve minutes, sir."

"Good. Commander T'Ser, I want sensors on full active. I want everyone to know we're here and for us to know who's gonna be at the dance."

"Acknowledged."

"Commander Strauss, I want shields up and weapons hot. Tubes loaded with Mark 22 torpedoes."

Strauss turned from the tactical station. "Mark 22's sir?"

"That's right commander. I don't want to go to war against the Orions, just slow them down," said Akinola.

Strauss acknowledged the order and relayed it to the torpedo gang on deck 8. The Mark 22 "rat trap" torpedoes were specially designed to blind sensors and destabilize warp fields without physically damaging a ship. They were often utilized by border cutters in interdiction efforts where arrest rather than destruction was the goal.

T'Ser stared intently into the sensor hood. "Captain, I am picking up a small scout ship, moving in an erratic manner heading on a bearing out of the Verex system." She paused a moment, then added. "Three Raider-class Orion vessels are in pursuit and closing!"

Akinola barked, "Tactical on viewer!" The star field was replaced by a grid and flashing indicators notating the other ships. The Romulan ship was a yellow blip while three red blips followed. The distance between was shrinking quickly. "Navigator, plot an intercept course for those Raiders. I want us between them and that Romulan tub. Helm, get us in as close as possible at maximum warp, then drop us down to one quarter impulse, bow-on to the Raiders."

The bridge crew carried out their orders quickly and efficiently as the *Bluefin* burned through sub-space.

* * *

Tor'dex joined his colleagues on the bridge. Voladek turned to him. "How is she?"

"Her vital signs are stable but she's still unconscious. I detected traces of a sedative in her system. Most of her physical wounds are superficial. However . . ." he paused, his voice caught with sudden emotion, "she has been . . . violated."

For a few moments the only sound on the tiny bridge was the chirp of instruments and the faint hum of the environmental unit. Voladek then nodded. "Thank you Tor'dex. Now, please take your station. Our lead over the Orions is diminishing. If we can make it to the perimeter of the system, we can outrun them at warp. If not, well . . . it has been an honor to serve with both of you."

Tor'dex was about to reply when T'Vash spoke up with alarm. "Sub-commander! A Federation vessel has dropped out of warp just astern of us!"

The three Romulans watched the viewscreen in surprise as a Federation Border Cutter took up station between them and the on-coming Orion Raiders. Voladek spoke, puzzlement in his voice, "Now what the *s'hrenta* are they doing?"

* * *

"Orion vessels. This is the USS *Bluefin*. Stand down and break off your pursuit." Akinola boomed in his command voice.

The screen shimmered to the view of a rather ugly Orion male. His red face was covered with scars of rank and honor, his skin mottled with age. "This is Grand Supreme Tranji Elix of the *Kaijupran*. You are in *our* system, human! You have no jurisdiction here. Now, get your ship out of our way - my son has been abducted and is on that ship! I intend to get him back!"

Akinola was unfazed. "We both know that your son is not the only kidnapping victim on that ship, so drop the act. Break off and I promise to do everything in my power to get Lortho back." With that, T'Ser and Strauss looked at the captain with surprise.

The old Orion said something in his own tongue, then spoke again to Akinola. "We do not need or want your help, human. This is a family matter. You would do well to remember that."

Chief Brin had been quietly sitting at the engineering station to this point. By some unspoken signal from the captain, he rose and spoke. "You speak of family, you *karq' torspa vrelo!* You shamed your family name 30 years ago when you murdered my father, *your own brother!* Now you bring shame to our people again. To me, you are *grolusk ni mofuu shralisk.*" With this Solly made a sign, tapping his left eye and left ear.

The elder Elix roared in anger and the channel was cut. Akinola turned to Chief Brin. "Damn, Solly - I think you pissed him off!" The captain turned back to the screen and smiled coldly. "Good."

Strauss spoke up. "The Orion ships have changed course toward us and are assuming an attack formation. They are charging weapons!"

"Bring it on," said Akinola, calmly.

Chapter 13

Akinola fired off orders. "Chief Brin, get a tractor beam on the lead Raider. Commander Strauss, lock phasers on the engines of targets two and three. Wait for my command to fire."

On the tactical plotter, the three Orion ships approached in a reverse delta formation, two ships seeking flanking positions while the *Kaijupran* took the more direct approach. Akinola shook his head. "These guys must get their tactics from holo-novels."

The flanking Raiders fired phasers at the *Bluefin*, which in turn, fired her heavier phasers at the passing ships. The cutter's shields flared but held steady under the Orion fire. One Raider was not so fortunate as the *Bluefin's* sustained fire collapsed the rear shields and severely damaged the sub-light engines of the Orion ship. The second raider turned to make another pass.

"Chief, activate tractor beams!" barked Akinola.

The *Kaijupran* was rocked as the cutter's powerful tractor beams took firm hold of the ship. On the bridge of the Raider, Grand Supreme Tranji Elix raged at his crew. "Idiots! Break free from that tractor beam! Fire weapons!"

The helmsman turned to Elix. "My Lord, we will overload our engines if we try."

"Then overload them!" Elix screamed as he moved forward, grabbing the hapless helmsman and pulling him from his seat. Elix grabbed the throttle controls and shoved them to their limits.

The *Bluefin* rocked as the Raider sought to break away from the tractor beams. "Chief, maintain those tractor beams! Commander Strauss, get a firing solution on target three." ordered Akinola.

"Target three preparing for another attack run. Shields holding at 90%" advised T'Ser.

"Noted! Helm, prepare for 'bullwhip' maneuver. Chief, on my mark, deactivate tractors." Akinola watched the tactical plotter as the third ship came at their starboard side. "Looks like they're going after the tractor emitters, but they're going to be a bit late. Helm, engage bullwhip - Now! Chief, disengage tractors!"

From an outside perspective, the *Bluefin* turned sharply to port under full impulse, pulling the straining *Kaijupran* with it. As the cutter completed the maneuver, the tractor beams holding the Raider cut off, releasing it. The Orion ship flew off as if shot from a sling, the whiplash effect and its over-throttled engines causing it to tumble out of control, its inertial compensators overloaded and its crew out of the battle.

The tactical plotter showed the third and final Raider veering off and heading back in-system. Akinola grinned. "Looks like they're tired of playing. Status on the lead ship?"

T'Ser looked up from her sensor hood, a smile on her face. "Sensors show they're alive but out of it. They must have pulled better than 16 g's. Lucky for them Orions are tougher than they are smart."

"Hey! I heard that!" protested Chief Brin.

"Sometimes the truth hurts, Solly," said Akinola. "T'Ser track that Romulan ship. Navigator, prepare a pursuit course, Helm stand by for maximum warp."

* * *

Voladek pondered what happened behind them. "Why would a Federation vessel intercede on our behalf?"

"It is a border cutter, it is tasked with protecting civilian vessels from pirates, such as the Orions. Perhaps it was merely doing its duty?" suggested T'Vash.

"We're not in Federation space, T'Vash. Why would a Federation ship jump into Orion space?" asked Tor'dex.

Voladek shook his head. "There are no consequences. Maintain evasive pattern until we clear the system, then go to maximum warp." he looked at T'Vash. "Time until we clear the system?"

T'Vash checked her instruments. "Five minutes."

* * *

"I have them sir. They're still headed out of system at .3c," said T'Ser.

"Very well. Transfer their course to the navigator. Mr. Bralus, ahead full impulse. Commander Strauss, stand by on those Mark 22's."

* * *

"Sub-commander! The Federation cutter is pursuing us!" exclaimed T'Vash. "At their present speed, they will intercept us before we clear the system."

Voladek looked grim. "Tor'dex, see if you can get the cloaking device on line. T'Vash, bring the disruptors on line."

"Sir?" she asked, incredulously. "How are we going to fight off that ship?"

"We beat the odds before, T'Vash. We only need to do it once more."

* * *

"T'Ser, open a hailing frequency to that ship," said Akinola.

T'Ser tapped contacts at her board. "Channel open, sir."

Akinola stood. "This is Captain Joseph Akinola in commander of the Federation Border Cutter USS *Bluefin* to Romulan vessel. Please respond."

* * *

T'Vash's eyes widened as they received the hail. "They know who we are!"

"Obviously," said Voladek dryly.

"Should we respond?" asked Tor'dex.

Voladek rubbed his jaw in thought. "No. I imagine their captain is trying to slow us down. Ignore their hails, at least for now."

"How did they find out about us?" asked Tor'dex.

Voladek shook his head. "Obviously, we are not the only ones who have spies."

* * *

"Not very talkative, are they?" observed T'Ser.

Akinola sighed. "It would appear not. Commander Strauss, do you have a firing solution."

"Still out of range for a lock, sir."

"Captain, they'll be clear for warp speed in 30 seconds," said T'Ser.

Akinola reseated himself and steepled his fingers. He came to a decision. "Commander Strauss. Fire two Mark 22 torpedoes!"

Two bright projectiles erupted from the cutter's forward torpedo tube and sped toward the fleeing Romulan scout ship.

* * *

"Two torpedoes, inbound!" T'Vash said, her voice edging toward panic.

Tor'dex turned to Voladek. "Countermeasures are still off-line!"

"Come hard about, 180 degrees," ordered Voladek. The scout ship made a tight turn, back toward the *Bluefin*.

* * *

Akinola grunted, admiring the audacious move of the Romulan vessel. "Very good," he murmured. "You gambled that we didn't have a lock and now you want to get inside our torpedo minimum range." Aloud he said, "Target their engines with phasers, commander. We want them intact!"

Strauss frowned over her weapons station. "I can't get a lock on him, sir. He's too agile."

"Chief, stand by on tractor beams," said the captain.

Brin shook his head. "He's smart, captain. His evasive maneuvers are totally random. I can't get a tractor lock."

Akinola tapped his fist on his chin. "Commander Strauss, have another Mark 22 loaded, but disable the proximity safeties."

Strauss whirled and stared at the captain, "Sir?"

"Do it!" He tapped his com badge. "Bridge to engineering."

"Engineering, Galt here."

"Commander, I need you to divert as much power as you can spare to the shields - tie into the mains if you need to. I need about 120% in sixty seconds."

"Well, thanks for the warning," groused the Tellarite engineer. "Anything else you need in the next minute?"

"Less mouth, more movement, Galt," Akinola out. "Mr. Bralus, do your best to keep up with that ship and close the gap. Commander Strauss, when I give the order, fire that torpedo at point blank range."

Wide eyed, Strauss turned her attention back to the weapons station. "Aye, sir."

* * *

Voladek watched the tactical plotter anxiously. While they were more maneuverable, the Federation cutter was faster and beginning to gain ground, even with their wild evasive movements.

"Their helmsman is very skilled," remarked Tor'dex.

"Let us hope their weapons officer is less so," countered Voladek. "T'Vash, continue evasive maneuvers, but take us back toward the system perimeter. Tor'dex, begin firing the aft disruptors at them. It may slow them down some."

* * *

The *Bluefin* rocked slightly as disruptor bolts glanced off of their shields.

T'Ser looked up from her station. "They appear to be taking random shots at us, probably to slow us down. Shields holding firm."

"Alright, I've had about enough of this." Akinola tapped his com badge. "Galt, I need those shields boosted, now!"

"You've got it, but we'll overload something, mark my words!" said Galt.

"Consider them marked. Akinola, out." He leaned forward in his command chair. "Distance to target?"

"We are within 300,000 kilometers," responded T'Ser.

"Okay, XO, can you get a torpedo lock?"

Strauss shook her head. "Negative. But blast effect should be sufficient at this range." She paused, and then added, "Against us, too, sir."

"Understood, commander," he took a deep breath, "Fire torpedo!"

Chapter 14

The Mark 22 "Rat Trap" torpedo quickly closed the distance between the *Bluefin* and the Romulan scout ship. It never gained a solid lock on the vessel, but that really did not matter. The torpedo was not designed to hit an enemy vessel, but to detonate near enough for the resulting electro-magnetic pulse to disable it by overloading its shields, sensors and control systems. Mark 22's were ineffective against most capitol warships because of their heavy shielding. The Romulan vessel did not fall into this category.

The blinding flash on the viewscreen caused the three Romulan Tal Shiar operatives to wince in pain. Immediately, systems failed and emergency lighting blinked on. "Damage report!" demanded Voladek as he rubbed his stinging eyes.

T'Vash blinked, regaining her focus as she began to scan the instruments. She muttered a curse under her breath and replied, "Almost all systems are off-line. Propulsion, weapons, shields and sensors are down. I've lost helm control too."

"What was that?" asked Tor'dex.

"Probably some sort of pulse-wave device - old technology, but effective," replied Voladek. "See if you can get secondary systems operating."

T'Vash shook her head in frustration. "No good. All circuits are fused. We have emergency lighting and hull integrity - that's about all. Life support is also off-line although reserves are functioning. We have about 4 hours before we run out of air." She turned to face Voladek, "We have no power and no defenses."

Voladek took a breath and leaned back in his chair. "So. It would seem we have been caught."

"Your orders, sir?" asked Tor'dex, more formally than usual. This touched Voladek in a strange way. He smiled and clapped his comrade on the shoulder. "I think my time for giving orders is at an end, old friend. I'm sorry I could not get us home." He straightened in his chair. "There is, of course, one final duty we must perform."

* * *

"What's our status?" queried Captain Akinola.

"Long-range sensors are down, shields are down to 25%, besides that, other than a few reports of minor system glitches and power outages, we're in good shape," replied T'Ser.

"What about the Romulan ship?"

"Scanning with short-range sensors now," T'Ser responded as she bent over the sensor hood. "I have them . . . bearing 126, mark 17. They appear to be adrift."

"Helm, move us in, ahead slow. Commander Strauss, target their weapons and engines, but do not fire unless they do."

"Already targeted, sir," replied Strauss.

Akinola smiled. "Thank you XO." He tapped his combadge. "Bridge to transporter room one."

"Transporter room, Delerieux here."

"Jean, get a lock on the occupants of that vessel and stand by to transport on my order."

"Aye, sir. Standing by."

"Chief Brin, have a security detail meet me in the transporter room. XO, you have the conn." Akinola rose from his chair as Strauss moved to the center seat and Brin moved to weapons control. "T'Ser, contact me if there is any change in the status of that ship." He then tapped his combadge to make one more call.

* * *

"We must hurry, I have no doubt they will try to board us," said Voladek. He clenched his teeth, sickened and shamed by his failure. At least he would not have to face the Praetor and his daughter would now die honorably rather than live in continual shame and torment at the hands of the Orions.

"T'Lera is still heavily sedated, Voladek. She will feel nothing," said Tor'dex.

Voladek nodded his appreciation. "Thank you. Now, let's finish this." He opened a panel on his control console. He reached in and grabbed a red handle. Facing his comrades, he said, "Thank you for your friendship and your loyalty." Voladek twisted the handle and pulled.

Nothing happened.

* * *

Inga Strauss drummed her fingers on the arm of the command chair. "T'Ser, time until we're in transporter range?"

"About two minutes, commander."

"Any change in the status of that ship?"

T'Ser frowned slightly and popped the sensor hood with her hand. Shaking her head slightly, she responded, "Sensors are still glitchy, but best I can tell they are totally without power."

"Okay," said Strauss. "Helm, when we get in transporter range, bring us to full stop."

"Aye, sir."

T'Ser turned with a questioning raised eyebrow. "What?"

"You do know that Romulans prefer death to capture, don't you?" asked Strauss.

"I have heard that."

"Well, I'm pretty sure they'll try to go out in a blaze of glory, if they can. Hopefully our little fireworks display took away that option for them."

"But just to be on the safe side," began T'Ser.

"We keep our distance," finished Strauss.

* * *

Voladek reset the self destruct mechanism and tried to trigger it again, with no success. For a moment, he simply stared at the red handle, incredulous.

"Voladek, we could set a couple of disruptors on overload," offered Tor'dex.

Voladek smiled sadly. "They'll likely be fused as well." He breathed in and spoke with conviction. "No, my friends, this is fate. It seems we are destined to face our Federation pursuers. You did not know this, but I counseled the director to seek their assistance from the beginning. It would seem that I may get my way after all."

* * *

"Strauss to transporter room one."

"Akinola here, XO, go ahead."

"We're holding position just inside transporter range."

"Thank you XO. Transporter room out." The captain turned to 1st class petty officer Delerieux. "Jean, enable weapons filter and bring them aboard."

Standing beside the captain, Dr. Baxter whispered, "Joseph, I don't think I'm ready . . ."

Akinola cut him off and whispered, "You're my CMO, Doc, and I need you. Right here, right now."

The transporter hum began to grow louder and five forms began to materialize on the dais. Two security crewmen held phasers at the ready. As the transport completed, three figures stood while two lay prone. One of the standing figures took a step forward. "I am Sub-Commander Voladek. It is imperative that I speak to your commanding officer."

* * *

"You seem to know a great deal about our operation, Captain," said Voladek. He was seated in the wardroom with Akinola, Strauss and two security crewmen standing watch.

Akinola chose not to take the bait. "What I do know, sub-commander, is that you and your crew entered Federation space in violation of treaty accords,

you have destroyed two Orion Raiders and killed their crew, abducted an Orion prince, and fired on my ship. Those are the pertinent facts for the moment."

Voladek replied calmly, "And, as you well know, those same Orions were involved in the abduction of a Romulan citizen. We were engaged in a rescue mission which, unfortunately, went awry. We merely sought to evade you, captain, not cause you or your ship any harm."

Akinola regarded the Romulan for a moment. "Sub-commander, I'm curious. How did a group of thugs and pirates like the Orions manage to kidnap your Praetor's daughter?"

To his credit, Voladek did not react, at least not visibly. He smiled. "It is as I thought, then. I won't insult you by asking how you came by this information. Likewise, I hope you understand that I cannot divulge all of the information surrounding this incident. Suffice it to say that there was a . . . 'security breakdown' that has been addressed."

Akinola nodded. He did not expect to learn more, nor did he really care. "Sub-commander Voladek, let me get to the point. We have a very volatile situation here. Your actions are technically an act of war. Personally, I have no love for the Orion syndicate and I can understand why your Praetor would want his daughter back. But your actions have caused some serious problems and I find myself in the unhappy position of trying to clean up this mess. So, here's what's going to happen. One, you are going to give me the exact coordinates of the wormhole in the Molari Badlands. Two, you and your crew, along with the Praetor's daughter, will be given safe passage back to Romulan space. Three, we will keep Lortho Elix . . ."

Voladek's eyes flared with anger, "That is *not* acceptable!"

Akinola stared at Voladek coldly. "These are not negotiations, sub-commander. I am not a diplomat. Nor am I an intelligence officer. My job is to keep the peace in this sector of space. You have disrupted that peace. I don't give a damn what's *acceptable* to you!" he leaned forward in his chair, and then spoke again in a quieter but somehow more threatening tone. "Do you know of the *USS Kilimanjaro*, sub-commander?"

Voladek felt his stomach twist, but decided to tell the truth. "Yes captain, I know of that ship."

"The official story is that a crazy, renegade Klingon was responsible for its destruction. The captain and most of the crew were killed. The captain - he was a close friend of mine, did you know that?"

"I am sorry for your loss."

"Is that so? Well sub-commander, did you have anything to do with that 'incident'?"

"Did I? No, captain. It was a stupid plan doomed to failure that I argued against."

"Really? How noble of you." Akinola leaned forward across the table. "Understand this, Sub-commander Voladek. Right now, I don't give a damn about you, your Praetor or 'stable relations between our two governments'. You will cooperate with me fully, or I promise that I will personally deliver you back to the Orions. You, your crew and the Praetor's daughter."

Voladek was quiet for a moment. He heard truth with no bluster in Akinola's words. It did not frighten him, but it gave him pause. Finally he spoke. "Captain, I will give you the coordinates to the wormhole, but I must tell you, if you seek to take us through to Romulan space, you may receive a rather rude reception."

"Let me worry about that," said Akinola as he rose from the table.

* * *

Lortho Elix groaned as he regained consciousness. He felt light-headed and his eyes were slow to focus. He tried to gain some sense of his whereabouts. He vaguely remembered being bound up on the Romulan ship but this place seemed different. He sat up slowly and his eyes began to clear. Then he heard a voice.

"Hello, Lortho."

Elix looked up. Standing before him was a familiar figure dressed in a Starfleet uniform. "Well, if it isn't my cousin Solly, playing soldier. I suppose this means that you caught up with the Romulans that kidnapped me."

"Actually, we're just helping them along, Lortho. Seems the family has gotten itself in way over its head. I imagine the Praetor will be very happy to meet you, of course. You've always been good at explaining things."

Lortho sneered at Solly. "You were always a poor liar, Solly. Just another weak character trait on your part. But then, you always have been weak - just like your father."

Solly shrugged. "Well, that's your opinion of course, which I rate just a bit lower than your intelligence. But really, I just wanted to stop by and see if you were awake."

Elix snorted, "Yeah, Solly, you pathetic *slis'pul*. Wide awake."

Solly smiled. "Good!" Then he slammed a lightning fast punch into the larger Orion's face. The sound of crunching bone and cartilage reverberated in the compact cell. Elix staggered back, dark red blood pouring from his nostrils. He shook his head and roared in rage and pain, lunging for Solly. Brin brought a snap-kick squarely into the crotch of Elix, who doubled over, retching and convulsing in agony. The chief waited for Elix to recover somewhat, the larger Orion's fury overshadowing pain and prudence. Again he sought to rush at Brin. This time, the chief swept Elix's legs out from under him. As the large man hit the deck hard, Brin kicked him in the head. Elix returned to his previous, unconscious state.

Chief Brin stepped back out of the cell and reactivated the force field. He tugged on his tunic, brushed his sleeves and walked to the brig's monitoring desk where a crewman sat.

"Everything okay, chief?" asked the crewman.

"Just fine, Steiner. Oh, do me a favor - check on the prisoner in cell 3. It looks like he fell down and hurt himself."

"Sure, chief," Steiner said as he reactivated the monitor for cell 3.

* * *

Akinola returned to the bridge with Strauss. "Commander, set a course for the coordinates Voladek gave us - best warp speed that Galt will allow. I don't want these Roms on here any longer than necessary. I'm heading to sickbay to check on the girl."

Strauss nodded, then asked, "Captain, what you said just now about turning the Romulans back over to the Orions - were you serious?"

"Did we get the information we needed?"

"Well, yes."

"Then what does it matter?"

Chapter 15

Captain Akinola entered sickbay to check on the Praetor's daughter, T'Lera. He spotted a corpsman and approached him. "Trelix, how's the young lady?"

Corpsman Trelix turned and nodded. "She's doing very well, sir. All of her vital signs are strong. We've cleared up her bruises and abrasions."

"Has she been awake?"

"No sir. The sedative in her system is long-acting. Doc said it would be better to let her sleep it off rather than try to counter-act it."

Akinola nodded. "Okay. Let me know when she does wake up. Where's Doc?"

"I believe he's in his quarters, sir."

Akinola frowned slightly at that. "Very well. Carry on, Corpsman."

Akinola left sickbay and headed to the opposite side of the level to Baxter's quarters. He pressed the door buzzer.

At first, there was no response. Akinola was about to leave to check the wardroom, when the door slid open. Baxter stood in the doorway, his face looking pale and haggard. Dark circles beneath his eyes gave him a haunted look. He gave a weak smile. "Joseph, what is it? Trelix is on duty if you need anything."

"Actually, Calvin, I went by to check on the Romulan girl but wanted to see how you're doing."

Baxter raised and lowered an eyebrow in a nervous gesture. "Well, I honestly don't know, Joseph." He turned around and went back into his quarters. Akinola followed. Baxter took a seat on his bunk while Akinola pulled up a chair and sat down near him. For a long moment, neither spoke. Finally, Baxter took a long, shuddering breath. "Joseph, I am so sorry . . ."

Akinola reached out and gently grabbed the older man's shoulder. "Calvin, there's no need to apologize. You couldn't help what happened - you weren't in control."

Baxter hit the mattress in frustration. "That's the problem captain - I. Was. Not. In. Control." He swallowed hard and looked at the captain intently. "I'm a surgeon and a Starfleet officer. If I'm not in control, then I'm worse than useless - I'm a danger to this ship and crew."

"Doc, Sarnek said he was able to eliminate the Romulan conditioning from your mind. You don't have to worry about that any more."

Baxter shook his head. "I wish I had as much confidence in that as Mr. Sarnek." another, shaky breath. "Joseph, I believe it would be best for me to resign my commission."

Akinola looked at Baxter for a long moment before replying. "Do you remember how you patched me up after that raid on Prentis IV about five years ago?"

Baxter looked puzzled for a moment at the change of subject. "Well, yes, of course I do. You were in pretty bad shape when Commander McBride got you back to the ship. For the life of me, I still don't know what you thought you were doing trying to intervene in a Nausicaan drug smuggling operation . . ."

Akinola grinned and waved his hand for Baxter to stop. "Okay, okay, it was dumb for me to go down there. But my point is, that after the surgery and dealing with the pain and rehab - I seriously thought about hanging it up and retiring. Do you remember what you told me?"

Baxter closed his eyes and rubbed them. "Joseph, I've said a lot of things to you over these past few years. Perhaps you could freshen my memory?"

"I was lying in one of your damn bio-beds, feeling sorry for myself. It may have been the pain; it may have been the drugs or my own lack of character. I guess that doesn't matter. What does matter is what you told me: 'Joseph, don't let the pain decide for you. Take six months, get past the situation, and then if you want to retire, go ahead.'"

"I didn't realize I talked so much," groused Baxter.

"Calvin, it was good advice then, it's good advice now. I was able to get past that pretty quickly, thanks to you, and I'm still here. You, well, it may take a while longer, but I believe you can get through this." He straightened in his chair. "Why not take a leave of absence? Hell, you've got plenty of leave time

accumulated. Visit family, see a counselor, maybe play some golf. But give this time, Calvin, give this time."

Baxter bowed his head for a moment. Akinola wondered if he had nodded off, but he momentarily raised his head and looked at Akinola, his expression still haunted. "Okay, Joseph. I will do that."

* * *

The *Bluefin* dropped out of warp as they approached the Molari Badlands. Commander Strauss, in the center seat, began to give orders to the bridge crew. "Mr. Bane, I need a sensor sweep if you please."

"Yes ma'am. Long range sensors are still off-line. Short range scans show no vessels in the vicinity, ion storm intensity at level 2, gravimetric shear is negligible."

"Very well. Mr. Sarnek, maintain present course and heading, ahead one half impulse."

"One half impulse, aye," replied Sarnek.

"Let's get this over with," she muttered to herself.

Undetected, two other vessels, both concealed by cloaking devices, followed the *Bluefin* into the Badlands.

* * *

". . . And so, admiral, that's pretty much it to this point. We're entering the Badlands and should reach the coordinates of the wormhole in about four hours," said Akinola, as he sat at the desk in his quarters.

On the viewscreen, Admiral Bateson looked serious. "Captain, I'm still not crazy about this. Proceed with extreme caution. If you detect any other Romulan vessels, get out of there pronto! Head back here and we'll sort this out some other way."

"Oh come on, Admiral, I've always wanted to go up against a Romulan Warbird," joked Akinola.

"Not funny, Joseph. I'm serious! You did a remarkable job in getting those Roms before the Oreos did, but don't push your luck." Bateson took a calming breath. "Now, have you considered *how* you'll send them back through the wormhole since you disabled their ship? You can't exactly take them through in the *Bluefin*, you know."

"I've already thought about that, sir. We'll let them take a type 6 shuttle through. Hopefully they can communicate with their friends on the other side before they get blown out of the sky."

Bateson grunted. "Well, I don't have any better suggestions. But the bean-counters at fleet aren't going to be happy about losing a shuttle that way."

"Sorry about that," said Akinola.

"No you're not. Get this done and return to base, captain. You and your crew could use a little time off. Bateson, out."

The viewscreen returned to an image of the Border Service insignia. Akinola picked up his coffee mug and leaned back in his chair, running through his mind all the things that could go very wrong.

* * *

Lt. Bane turned to Commander Strauss. "Ma'am? We're at the designated coordinates."

"Full stop, Mr. Sarnek. Mr. Bane, scan for signs of the wormhole."

Bane turned to his sensor hood, making fine adjustments. He was silent for several moments, and then a smile formed on his face. "Definite signs consistent with a quantum singularity in this area of space."

Strauss walked over to Bane's station. "Is there any way to tell the last time it was 'open'?"

He turned to her, making eye contact. *He has very nice eyes*, she thought, then mentally chastised herself. *Stay focused, Inga!*

"Unfortunately, no, at least not with our instruments. Maybe a science vessel or explorer could, but we're not set up for that."

Strauss nodded. "Will we have any warning when it does reappear?"

"Oh yes, we'll pick up a massive surge on this scale," he said pointing to a line on his display. "It will also be quite visible on the viewscreen." He maintained his gaze into her eyes. She quickly averted her stare, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

"Thank you, Mr. Bane. Let me know immediately of any change." she returned to the center seat.

Suddenly, the proximity alert began to sound. Bane turned back to his sensors, then looked back at Strauss and spoke urgently. "Two ships decloaking to port and starboard!"

"Shields!" she commanded, simultaneously hitting the red alert switch on the command chair. Immediately, the bridge lighting changed to red and the alert klaxon sounded throughout the ship. She hit the inter-ship switch. "All hands, man your battle stations. Captain Akinola to the bridge." She turned to the viewscreen, trying to get a glimpse of the vessels. "I need an ID on those ships!" she called to Bane. But before he could reply, she saw one of the interloping vessels on the screen.

"Oh, hell no!" she said.

Chapter 16

Akinola charged onto the bridge less than a minute after the ship went to red alert. What he saw on the viewscreen stopped him in his tracks. "Report," he said, sharply.

Strauss stood up from the command chair and turned to face him. "They de-cloaked just moments ago and are holding position port and starboard at about 10 thousand klicks."

Akinola turned his attention to Strauss. "De-cloaked?"

She nodded. Her expression was a mix of puzzlement and irritation. Akinola returned his gaze to the viewscreen. The distinctive image of a *Defiant* class starship was center screen. He could clearly make out the name and registry, USS *Shadow*, NCC-80166. Akinola moved forward to the command chair. "Mr. Bane, do you have positive ID on those ships?" asked the captain.

"Yes sir. IFF transponders positively indicate two *Defiant* class gunships, the USS *Shadow* and the USS *Spectre*." replied Bane.

"And you're sure they were cloaked?" pressed Akinola.

"No question, sir." said Bane. His panel beeped and he turned to check it. "We're being hailed by the *Shadow*."

"Wait one. Commander, maintain alert status until we find out what's going on." ordered Akinola.

"Understood, sir." replied Strauss.

Akinola nodded slowly and rubbed his face in thought. Finally he said, "On screen, Mr. Bane."

The image of the *Shadow* was replaced by the image of an Andorian female wearing captain's pips, seated in the center seat of her bridge. She spoke with a pleasant alto voice. "Captain Akinola? I am Captain Lhar'shon of the USS *Shadow*. Please accept my apologies for our sneaking up on you like this."

"Sneaking up? That's one way of putting it Captain. Did you follow us here or have you been waiting on us all the time?"

Lhar'shon ignored the question. "Captain, may I and one of my officers beam over? It is imperative that I speak with you - in private. It concerns your . . . passengers."

"Stand by a moment, captain." Akinola gave a hand signal for Bane to cut the channel. "What's the status of those ships?"

"Their weapons are off-line. Shields at normal settings for this region of space," replied Bane.

"Sir?" interrupted Strauss. "I was under the impression that cloaking devices on Federation vessels were against treaty stipulations."

"Well commander, it appears that whoever ordered the construction of those ships didn't read that part of the treaty," he said dryly. "Mr. Bane, re-open a channel to that ship."

Once again, the image of the Andorian captain appeared. "Captain Lhar'shon, you may beam over when ready. I'll meet you in our transporter room."

"Thank you, Captain Akinola. *Shadow* out."

Akinola tapped his commbadge. "Akinola to Chief Brin."

"Brin here, sir. Go ahead."

"Solly, we're about to receive a couple of guests in transporter room one. I'm headed there now. I want security teams on alert - but be discreet. They appear to be Starfleet officers, but I want your men ready, just in case."

"Understood, sir. I'll take care of it."

"Good. Akinola out." He rose from the chair. "Commander, let me know if either of those two ships makes any kind of move. As soon as we beam over those two, raise shields."

"Captain, if their intentions *were* hostile, we wouldn't stand a chance against those ships," she pointed out.

"Maybe not. Just humor an old man. You have the conn."

* * *

Captain Lhar'shon and a red-headed, human commander stepped off the transporter platform. She looked at Akinola and asked, "Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted," replied Akinola, who extended a hand. "Welcome aboard the *Bluefin*."

Lhar'shon took Akinola's hand in greeting. Her grip was firm and cool. She indicated her companion. "Allow me to introduce Commander Brendon Chalmer of Fleet Intelligence." Chalmer nodded his head but did not extend a hand.

"Commander," Akinola said. There was something about the intelligence officer that he did not like. "Well, Captain Lhar'shon, perhaps you can now explain why two gunboats have suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the Badlands." His smile did not reach his eyes, which remained hard.

"Is there someplace we can speak in private?" she asked.

"Follow me." They exited the transporter room, went up one level and entered the empty wardroom. Akinola gestured for the two officers to be seated at the table. He sat across from them.

"This is an interesting ship," remarked Lhar'shon. "I've never been on a cutter before. It's *Albacore* - class, correct?"

Akinola nodded. His dislike did not extend to the Andorian captain, at least not as much. "That's right. We're an upgrade to the *Skipjack* - class. *Bluefin* is 70 years old and still handles the ion storms and the occasional run-in with an Orion Raider very handily." He paused, and then added. "But you didn't come here to admire a vintage cutter. What's going on, captain?"

Chalmer spoke before Lhar'shon could reply. "Captain Akinola, you have done an excellent job in helping the Romulans get away from the Elix family. For that, we are grateful. Now, it's time for the professionals to take over. We'll be taking them off of your hands now." Lhar'shon gave Chalmer a withering side-long glance.

Akinola stared at Chalmer as a cat would gaze at a cornered rodent. "I'm sorry, *commander*, but I was speaking to Captain Lhar'shon. Exactly *what* is your business here?"

Chalmer's face reddened, but he maintained his poise. "Captain Akinola, I am the one who had Admiral Bateson issue you your orders. This is *my* operation. We needed a credible presence in this sector to be involved to keep the situation contained. As I said, you've carried out your orders admirably. But your part in this drama is now at an end."

"Drama? Do you think this is play-acting, Commander Chalmer, or whatever the hell your real name is."

"There is no need to be hostile . . ."

"Hostile?" Akinola actually smiled and shook his head. "Commander, you haven't seen me hostile - yet. Now, if you want to avoid any *hostility* , mister, you had better tell me why two Defiant - class gunships with cloaking devices, no less, have taken up defensive positions on either side of my ship! My part will be over when I know what the hell is going on!"

Chalmer appeared unfazed by Akinola's outburst. Nonetheless, he took a more conciliatory approach. "My apologies, captain. I've been told that I lack tact. I will tell you what I can. First, our two ships are there not to threaten you but to protect you. Second, I'm sure, from your perspective that this has been about recovering the Praetor's daughter. While we do want that to happen, if for no other reason than to keep the peace, it is the wormhole that is our primary concern."

Akinola crossed his arms. "Alright, commander. I can believe that. But from whom or what are you protecting us?"

"Why, the Romulans, of course. If they discover that their scout ship is disabled, they may come after it and their operatives."

"And how would they know this?" asked Akinola.

Chalmer gave Akinola a long, appraising look. "We have reason to believe that you may have a Romulan mole as part of your crew."

Akinola did not react. "Really? Any idea who it could be?" he asked, innocently.

"Unfortunately, no. Our source believes that one of their sleeper agents may have been activated as part of their operation. He only knew that he served on a cutter in this sector, but not which specific ship or his identity."

"Mr. Chalmer, there are eleven cutters of various types in this sector. Why think it was our ship?"

"Your ship routinely patrols the shipping lanes between Federation, Klingon and Orion space. You're strategic patrol zone would make you an ideal vessel for the Romulans to place an operative."

"Maybe. I don't pretend to understand all of this cloak and dagger stuff. But I do know I've got four Roms on board that need to get through that wormhole and go home."

"Plus one Orion," added Chalmer.

"No. He stays," said Akinola, firmly.

Chalmer frowned. "Why do you care? I know that he's caused you a lot of trouble in the past."

"You don't know much about the syndicate, do you, Mr. Chalmer? I have to deal with those pirates all of the time. We just roughed up several of their ships *after* the Roms made a raid on their home world and destroyed two of their ships, killing their crews in the process. To maintain the peace, as you put it, means I need to give them something to save face. Lortho Elix is that something."

Chalmer considered this. "Very well, captain. It's really all the same to me. The Praetor gets his daughter back but not the object of his wrath." He paused, and then continued, "You realize, of course, that you've just signed the death warrants of the Romulan agents in your brig. The Praetor will demand satisfaction. If they don't deliver Elix, he'll take it out of their hides."

Akinola returned his stare. "I suppose they knew that when they signed up, right?"

Chalmer shrugged, but indicated agreement. "I'd like to speak to them, particularly their leader."

Akinola stood. "Follow me."

* * *

Voladek lay on the bunk in his cell, contemplating his future. While he took satisfaction in knowing that T'Lera was safe, he felt shame that he had allowed himself and his comrades to be taken alive. He had no illusions about what the future held. Most likely, he would be held and interrogated at length, then imprisoned or executed for espionage. If a prisoner exchange were arranged between the Romulan Empire and the Federation, he still faced the wrath of the Praetor, despite the safe return of his daughter. He did not fear death, but his failure was a bitter tang that was almost palpable.

His thoughts were interrupted as two figures appeared at the door to his cell. The glow of the force field blinked out as an Andorian female and human male, both wearing Starfleet uniforms entered.

"Sub-commander? My name is Chalmer. I have a proposition for you."

* * *

On the bridge, Strauss distracted herself from the two gunships and a certain handsome Australian lieutenant by going over crew shift assignments. She had almost figured out a way to resolve a conflict between two damage control teams, when Bane's excited voice broke her concentration.

"Commander! I'm picking up interspatial flexure readings indicative of a wormhole forming."

Even as he spoke, Strauss could see a spiral of blue form and expand on the viewscreen. She watched in fascination as it continued to expand and open. It was beautiful and awesome, a rare sight for most. Seeing it here in the wildness of the Molari Badlands gave it an even more spectral and ominous appearance.

Bane's initial exuberance changed as he focused his sensors. "Commander, something's coming through!" his voice now serious.

Strauss caught her breath as an immense, green starship emerged from the whirling wormhole. She did not need sensors to tell her what she saw. The massive ship dwarfed the three Starfleet vessels as it glided majestically toward them.

She broke from her trance and slammed her hand down on the red-alert switch, hard enough to bruise her hand. The silent, flashing red lights were once again joined by the cacophony of the alert klaxon.

"Mr. Li, bring phasers on-line. Target torpedoes on that ship!" As she issued the orders, the two *Defiant* class ships began to move, seeking flanking positions around the huge vessel.

The *Valdore* - class warbird glided to a graceful stop in the midst of the three Federation vessels. Somewhat smaller, but no less imposing than the *D'deridex* - class, it was as if an eagle were surrounded by sparrows.

Strauss shook her head. "May you live in interesting times . . ." she muttered to herself.

Chapter 17

Strauss looked at Lt. Bane. "Status on the warbird?"

"Weapons still read as off-line. Their shields are up and they're holding position."

Strauss wondered whether she should try hailing the Romulan vessel when that quandary was solved for her.

"Incoming message from the warbird, commander. They're broadcasting in the clear."

"On screen, Mr. Bane."

The ominous sight of the Romulan battleship was replaced by the slightly less imposing view of a Romulan female wearing the rank insignia of commander. "Attention Federation vessels, this is Commander Donatra of the *Valdore*. Our intentions are not, repeat, not hostile. We are on a rescue mission and will withdraw when we have completed that mission. You are requested to remain on station to monitor us, but be warned, we will defend ourselves against any attack."

Strauss was so intent on the message that she jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Captain Akinola standing by the command chair. "Sir, did you hear . . .?" she began.

"I heard," he said. "Nigel, open a channel to the warbird." He took his seat as T'Ser stood by Bane's station. "*Valdore*, this is Captain Joseph Akinola of the USS *Bluefin*. Commander Donatra, that is a rather large vessel to send on a rescue mission, especially when you are in violation of the Neutral Zone by several thousand light years. I must insist that you return the way you came and allow us to handle any rescue operation for you."

The Romulan commander had a bemused expression on her face. "I must say, captain, that those are bold words, considering the relative sizes of our ships. Please do not interfere with our mission. You have my word that we will leave as soon as possible."

Akinola smiled. "Well, commander, I have to admit that you have my ship outgunned. However, you might find the two gunships flanking you have a

much bigger bite. Why don't we stop posturing and you tell me what you want."

As Akinola spoke, he could see another Romulan officer whisper something to the commander. She nodded and turned back to Akinola. "Very well, captain. It seems that you have what I want. Prepare to beam over the Romulan citizens on your vessel. I expect them on my ship in ten of your minutes. *Valdore* out." The viewscreen once more showed the Romulan ship hanging in space.

Akinola tapped his commbadge. "Bridge to Chief Brin."

"Brin here."

"Solly, take a security detachment to the brig. Escort our Romulan guests to transporter room one."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, chief. Looks like the Praetor got impatient and has sent in some reinforcements. Oh, if our guests from the *Shadow* object, shoot them."

"On stun, sir?"

"Whatever it takes, chief. Akinola, out." He tapped his commbadge again, "Akinola to sickbay . . ."

* * *

Captain Lhar'shon listened to the incoming communication with concern. "Acknowledged, lieutenant. For now, keep weapons safe. Under no circumstances are you to activate the cloaking device - understood?"

"Yes ma'am"

"If they do make a hostile move toward the *Bluefin*, release weapons and try to take out their disruptors and torpedo launchers. Get between the warbird and this cutter if you have to. Lhar'shon out." She moved back into the cell with Chalmer and Voladek. "It appears that we are out of time," said the captain.

Chalmer turned back to the Romulan. "No more time, sub-commander. I need your answer - now!"

Voladek looked at the intelligence officers. "No, Commander Chalmer. My life may be forfeit if I return, but I will not add to my shame by defecting."

Chalmer shook his head. "Too bad. You would have enjoyed life in the Federation."

Voladek smiled sadly. "Commander, I do not imagine there is a safe place in the galaxy for me to hide. I am ready to face my destiny at the hands of the Praetor."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry, sub-commander."

* * *

Akinola, Lhar'shon and Chalmer stood by as the Romulan Tal Shiar agents stood on the transporter platform. They carried a stretcher with the still unconscious T'Lera.

Akinola looked at Voladek. "Good luck to you."

Voladek lifted an eyebrow. "You do not strike me as a man who believes in luck, captain."

Akinola shrugged. "I take whatever I can get." He directed his attention to Chief Brin at the transporter controls. "Energize."

The Romulans faded into columns of energy, and then were gone. Akinola turned to Lhar'shon and Chalmer. "Not to be rude, but I think it's time you were going too."

Captain Lhar'shon smiled. "I'm sorry we had to meet in such a fashion, Captain Akinola. Perhaps we will meet again."

"Next time, give me some warning."

Lhar'shon inclined her head as she and Chalmer climbed up on the platform. Akinola stepped forward. "Just a moment. Commander Chalmer, one question - now what? Do we just let the Romulans go their merry way as if nothing happened?"

Chalmer and Lhar'shon exchanged a look. "Believe me, captain. That's the best possible outcome."

"What about the wormhole?" he pressed.

"Leave that to us," Chalmer said, enigmatically.

Akinola thought to press the issue but didn't. He was tired and wanted nothing more to do with spies and intrigue. He turned to Chief Brin. "Solly, send them home." He turned and left before they faded completely.

* * *

Voladek stepped off the transporter on the *Valdore*. A female commander stood waiting. Voladek stepped forward and saluted. "Commander, I am Sub-commander Voladek." He indicated the stretcher. "And this is the Praetor's daughter. She is well but has been . . . abused by the Orions."

The commander gave orders and T'Lera was taken off to their medical section. She turned to Voladek. "Come with me." She led him down a corridor to an empty conference room. "What of the one's responsible for this?" she asked.

"The Orion, Lortho Elix, is on board the *Bluefin*. Their captain refuses to give him over."

Commander Donatra looked surprised. "Why is that?"

Voladek hesitated. "I believe it is a matter of personal honor for him. He put his ship and crew at risk to help us escape the Orions."

Donatra pursed her lips in thought. "Very well then, we will not press the issue."

Voladek looked surprised. "Commander - my orders from the Praetor were explicit. I have failed in bringing back the kidnappers."

"Sub-commander, you have carried out your mission successfully. The Praetor's daughter is alive and safe. Your crew is intact. Speak no more of failure."

"But the Praetor . . ."

The commander's eyes flashed. ". . . Nearly brought us to war over the carelessness of his empty-headed daughter! Don't think that he has managed to keep this secret from everyone!" She regained her composure. "Voladek, there are several of us in the military that believe that the Praetor's leadership, or lack thereof, will lead us to ruin." She looked at him appraisingly. "You are much too valuable an asset to be discarded on the whim of the Praetor."

"Commander," Voladek said, cautiously, "What you say could be considered treasonous."

"Is it not treason to endanger our people and plunge us into war because he could not keep his own daughter under control?" she countered. "Do you know why she was abducted, sub-commander?"

"I was not told," Voladek admitted.

"She was gambling on some of the border planets - on the *Federation* side of the border. Apparently, she got caught up in some criminal activities that involved the Orion syndicate. The Praetor, of course, did not wish this to be known. For him, it was better to risk valuable intelligence and military assets on this fool's errand."

The revelation stunned and sickened Voladek. "I had no idea . . ."

"No. You didn't. You've been used badly, Voladek. But not in service to the empire. Only in service to a perverted emperor and his slut of a daughter." She paused, "I could use someone of your talents, sub-commander, to help restore the empire to its greatness. Would you consider this?"

Voladek was silent for a moment. "Commander, this is a lot to take in. But if what you say is true . . ."

"It is. And I can verify what I've said."

"Then, yes. I will consider it."

* * *

"Captain? Message coming through from the *Valdore*."

"On screen, Mr. Bane."

Once more, the serious face of Commander Donatra filled the viewscreen. "Captain Akinola, I want to thank you for your help in this 'rescue' operation. Your forbearance is appreciated."

"Not that we had a great deal of choice in the matter, commander. Now, I must insist that you withdraw to your territory." said Akinola, evenly.

"That is our intention, captain. As soon as the wormhole opens, we will withdraw."

"Strange, isn't it?" continued Akinola, "how a wormhole has suddenly formed in this sector. I've patrolled this area of space for 25 years and never encountered one."

"The galaxy is full of strange things, Captain Akinola. Sometimes it's best to simply note the unusual and move on."

"Funny thing about me, commander. I sometimes have difficulty moving on when something bothers me. Have a safe trip home, commander."

"And you, captain. Farewell." The screen returned to the view of the *Valdore*."

* * *

"Captain's Log - Stardate 54102.2 - The Valdore has returned through the wormhole, presumable to Romulan space, although I suppose that's debatable. We are en route back to Star Station Echo for some R&R and minor repairs. The Shadow and Specter are remaining on station at the location of the Molari wormhole, whether to guard it, study it or destroy it, I neither know or care." He paused, and then continued. "Commendations are in order for Commander Strauss and Lt. Bane. Both showed courage and coolness under very stressful circumstances. As to Dr. Baxter, he has agreed to take a leave of absence for 'personal reasons.' I see no need to elaborate further, save to say that I agree with his decision. I have already requested a temporary replacement and have learned that one should be ready to come on board in about one week. One last loose end - Lortho Elix is still in our brig and making a nuisance of himself. We'll turn him over to station security and let the diplomats work out turning him over to the Orions. Personally, I would not want to be him when he faces his father."

The door enunciator to the ready room chimed. Akinola stopped recording and said, "Enter!"

Lt. Commander T'Ser stepped in. "Excuse me, captain, but Galt said long-range sensors are back up and running."

Akinola waved her in. "Now that we're almost to the station, huh? Oh well, better late than never." He looked more carefully at T'Ser. "Is something wrong, commander?"

T'Ser pursed her mouth. "I was wondering about Dr. Baxter. I understand that he's leaving the ship."

"Not permanently, at least I hope not. We both agreed that he needs some away time to get past this."

"What of his reputation?"

"T'Ser, outside of a handful on this ship and Admiral Bateson, no one knows what happened. I've decided to leave that out of my after-action report. Bateson is okay with that, considering the circumstances and Doc's years of service."

T'Ser lifted an eyebrow and smiled. "Filing a false report is a court-martial offense, captain."

"I'm too old to care and too stubborn to do otherwise, T'Ser."

"Yes sir," she said simply.

EPILOGUE

The *Bluefin* was safely docked at Star Station Echo. Commander Strauss had worked out a rotation for crew leave and was about to head to the gym when her door chime buzzed. Expecting another crewman wanting to change his schedule, she sighed and said testily, "Enter!"

To her surprise, Lt. Nigel Bane entered her quarters. He was dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots and a denim shirt. Strauss felt her pulse speed up slightly. "Mr. Bane, what can I do for you?"

"I was about to head to the station. I have a program I like to run on their holodeck - well, it's home actually. The Australian Outback I mean." He was obviously nervous and not making a great deal of sense. Strauss gave him a puzzled smile. Bane continued, "Anyway, I like to ride horses and, well, I was wondering if you'd care to join me?"

Her smile widened, "Mr. Bane, are you inviting me on a date?"

"Call me Nigel, we're off duty. And, yes. Yes I am!"

"Okay, Nigel. But I have to warn you, I've never ridden a horse."

"Oh, no worries! I'll let you ride Diablo, he's a gentleman."

"Diablo?" she asked, uncertainly.

* * *

"Joseph, when did this all get so complicated?" asked Morgan Bateson as he sipped a snifter of Saurian Brandy. "I miss the days of chasing Klingons and busting smugglers. Now you're out there chasing Romulans and butting heads with spooks."

Akinola smiled as he took a sip of his drink. They were seated at a private table at one of the nicer restaurants on the station. "Believe me, admiral. I'll be happy to get back on a nice, normal patrol. I'd rather leave this type of stuff to Picard or Shelby or some other hot shot captain."

"I suppose we must play the cards we're dealt, Joseph." The admiral was beginning to sound maudlin; a sure sign the brandy was taking effect. Akinola decided to change the subject.

"So when do I get a new CMO?" asked the captain.

"You've got another week in station, what's your hurry?" Bateson saw Akinola roll his eyes. "Okay, okay. You're getting Lt. Octavius Castille, MD. He's supposed to arrive on station in two days with the *Magellan*."

"Castille, huh? What can you tell me about him?"

Bateson puffed out his cheeks and gave a dismissive wave, "Oh, you know, the usual. Brilliant doctor, dedicated officer, etc., etc."

Akinola pressed, "What aren't you telling me, Morgan?"

"Hmmm. Seems like I recall that he tends to tick off his senior officers. Got into a knock down drag-out with the CMO on *Magellan*. Right in the middle of surgery, too."

"You can't be serious!" said Akinola.

"Oh, I'm serious alright. As it turns out, he was right and the CMO was wrong. Castille probably saved the patient's life. Like I said, he's a brilliant doctor, just a bit shy on people skills."

"He and Gralt should get along famously," said Akinola morosely. "At least he should be better than having an EMH in sickbay."

"Ah yes, about that . . ." began Bateson.

* * *

T'Ser read the dispatch again. She held the PADD with numb fingers, her eyes brimming with tears. As if in slow motion, she moved to the captain's ready room, entering without pressing the enunciator.

Akinola looked up from his desk, annoyed. "T'Ser, what do you? . . ." Then he saw her face. "T'Ser," he said softly, "What is wrong?"

She looked at him and handed over the PADD. "This just came over the Newsnet - it's about Dr. Baxter."

Akinola took the PADD, a sense of dread coming over him.

Federation Newsnet - Earthdate 20 October 2376, 1400 GMT.
Tulsa, Oklahoma, North America.

Dr. Calvin Henry Baxter, of Tulsa, was found dead at his home today by neighbors after failing to show up for a golf outing. Baxter was the former director of Starfleet Medical in Atlanta and recently served as Chief Medical Officer aboard the Border Service Cutter, USS *Bluefin*. He served in Starfleet fifty years. Chief Constable Drayton Long issued a statement in which he stated that the cause of death was respiratory arrest due to an overdose of pain medication. Apparently Dr. Baxter deactivated the bio-sensors in his home which prevented medical assistance from arriving in time to revive him.

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Akinola dropped the PADD on the desk, not reading the parts about next of kin, honors and awards, and the shock expressed by his neighbors. He stood up slowly, walked around his desk and hugged T'Ser tightly, feeling her body shake as she sobbed deeply. Akinola closed his eyes and surrendered to his own pain and grief.

END