

Tales of the USS Bluefin The More Things Change By The Lone Redshirt

Chapter One

Stardate 54068.2 (25 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Star Station Echo – Berth 14

Captain's log – Stardate 54068.2. The past few weeks have been blessedly uneventful. Outside of one routine rescue mission and two supply runs, we've enjoyed a bit of down-time following the Bluefin's encounter with a rogue Starfleet vessel and my own journey to Verex III. I think Admiral Bateson has calmed down a bit too. He seemed his old, friendly self when he called with the news this morning – Starfleet's stop-loss order has been rescinded. I guess we can now say that the war is truly over. There is a down-side, however. Many good, experienced people will be resigning from Starfleet and also from the Border Service over the next few months. I fear we may lose some good people from the Bluefin. If so, I wish them all the best.

This morning we head out on routine patrol near the Klingon border and the Molari Badlands. At present, there are no reports of unusual pirate activity but we are entering a period of more intense ion storms. I hope both the freighter captains and the smugglers have the good sense to avoid the badlands for a while.

Captain Joseph Akinola took a sip of coffee, and spoke again. "Computer, save log entry and close."

Acknowledged, replied the computer.

Akinola reached forward to set the coffee mug on his desk and winced as pain shot through his left side. He sat back in the chair with a wry expression on his face. Obviously, his ribs and chest muscles were not quite healed, despite the ministrations of the *Eschaton's* fine medic, and the follow-up treatment by Dr. Castille. Akinola had received a brutal beating at the hands of Lortho Elix

and three of his henchmen the previous month. Lortho was a prince in the Orion Syndicate – heir apparent to the Elix cartel. Akinola smiled as he recalled how he had meted out more punishment than he received. Still, at 60 years of age, the old cutter skipper didn't heal as quickly as when he was a young man. With a grunt, he stood from the chair and reluctantly headed toward sick bay.

* * *

Commander Inga Strauss, the young executive officer of the *Bluefin*, sat in the ward room, finishing her breakfast of mixed fruit and a cup of *Raktajino*. The door slid open and Lt. Nigel Bane entered, carrying a tray of food. He hesitated when he saw Inga, then proceeded around the long table and placed the tray down.

"D'you mind if I sit here, Commander?" he asked in a hesitant tone.

Inga nodded and offered a nervous smile. "Not at all, Nigel. Please - have a seat."

Nigel did so, and began spreading Vegemite on toast before digging into his sausage and eggs. The two maintained an uneasy silence for several minutes.

Inga decided to break the silence. "How is Jack doing?"

Nigel shrugged. "Better, I guess. He's still in the station's infirmary. As soon as he's well enough, he'll be transferred back to Earth to face charges."

"Oh." There didn't seem to be much else Inga could say without venturing into painful areas. She decided to change the subject.

"The stop-loss order has been rescinded," remarked Inga in a conversational tone.

"Has it?" replied Bane between bites. "That's interesting." More silence.

Strauss decided to go out on a limb. "The Captain told me that you offered your resignation."

Bane didn't say anything for a moment. He took a sip of tea, and then nodded. "That's true."

“Why would you do that?” she asked.

Nigel didn't say anything for a moment as he chewed his food thoughtfully. Finally, he placed his fork and knife on his plate and slid the tray aside. He leaned forward to speak.

“Inga, I violated my oath as an officer by withholding information about Jack's Syndicate connection. That's no small matter.” His voice was quiet, tinged with guilt and frustration.

“Nigel, there were extenuating circumstances! He's your brother, for God's sake! And you did reveal his connection and helped capture a rogue ship – that's no small thing.”

“And almost got you killed in the process!” he said sharply, the emotion breaking through.

Gott im Himmel! She thought. *That's what this is all about.* “Nigel – look at me! I'm a big girl! I survived a tour during the Dominion war and nearly having the *Thunderchild* blown up under me. Our first officer was killed and suddenly I'm an XO at age 28!” She reached across the narrow table and gently placed her hand on his face. “I do appreciate your concern for me – it's very sweet but it's misplaced. I'm a Starfleet officer and capable of making my own decisions regarding my safety. *I* was in command of this ship when we went after the *Greeley*. It was my decision that we go on board.”

He shook his head. “I should never have let you.”

She rose and looked at him with a mix of affection and irritation. “Do us both a favor, Nigel. Get over this and get your head straight! I know you care for me . . . and I have deep feelings for you also. But we can't let our feelings interfere with our duty. If you can't understand that, well . . . we may not have a future.” She picked up her tray to leave. “My shift's about to start. Think about what I said.”

Nigel watched her leave the wardroom. He picked up a piece of toast, looked at it, and tossed it back on the tray, his appetite gone.

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“Your ribs have healed nicely, Captain, but you're going to experience some residual pain and stiffness for some time to come. I hate to break it to you, but

you're not a young man any more," said Dr. Castille as he folded the medical scanner.

"What an astute observation," said Akinola, dryly. "When can I start working out again?"

Castille pulled a large analgesic patch out of a cabinet and applied it to Akinola's side. "You can start back with stretching and maybe some katas, but *no contact sparring!* I'm serious, Captain – you let Brin or some young buck poke you in the side and you'll be right back in a bio-bed! Take it slow and easy. If you get a little sore, that's okay. If your side starts to throb, you've over-done it. Understood?"

Akinola nodded and pulled his under shirt back on. "Got it. Thanks, Doc."

"Don't mention it." Castille jammed his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. He frowned and stared at the deck in obvious thought. He directed his gaze back up at Akinola "I hear the stop-loss order has expired."

"Rescinded," corrected Akinola. "You heard right."

Castille sighed and shook his head. "I was afraid of that. It looks like we're going to lose Rice, then."

"Oh?"

Castille nodded. "Yeah. She wants to go to medical school. Part of me is very pleased – she's got what it takes to make a fine physician, but I hate to lose her – she's a damn good corpsman."

"That she is, Doc." *And so it begins*, Akinola thought.

* * *

Akinola left the gym, heading for his quarters and a shower. *Rank hath its privileges*, he mused, anticipating a steaming-hot shower. His quarters had a combination water/sonic shower. He seldom used the water feature, and only when they were in port, but there were fewer things that felt better than steaming-hot water to relieve sore muscles.

After a quick but restorative shower, he dressed in his uniform and headed out of his quarters to begin his duty shift. He hoped to have the *Bluefin* under way within the hour.

He stepped onto the turbo-lift which was already occupied by Lt. Delta Simms, decked out in an engineering jumpsuit with the sleeves pushed up. Her curly hair was askew and a streak of grease hid some of the freckles that traversed her nose. Simms was a cute red-head from Alabama who had started on the *Bluefin* as the beta-shift helm officer, but her knack for all things mechanical caught the eye of Chief Engineer Galt and she found herself transferred to engineering.

“Mornin’ Captain,” she said in her pleasant drawl.

Akinola smiled and nodded. “Lieutenant. Been busy this morning, have you?”

Simms smiled in return, “Yes sir. We’ve been upgradin’ the engines on the Stallions. Kind of a messy job, but all four Stallions are good to go now.” The Star Stallions were auxiliary spacecraft larger than Type-10 shuttles, but smaller than runabouts. They were the work horses of the Border Service, often used in rescue operations when transporters were not practical. What the Stallions lacked in creature comforts, they made up for with powerful impulse engines, tractor beams and torpedo launchers.

“Good! Glad to hear it,” replied Akinola as the lift stopped. The two officers stepped out of the lift car and onto the bridge. Simms walked to the aft engineering station and logged in. Akinola settled into the center seat. He noted with satisfaction that the alpha-shift bridge crew was in place and busy.

* * *

25 January 2377

Seattle, North America, Earth

The home of T’Ser’s parents – Sarnok and T’San

0745 local time

T’Ser held the steaming mug of tea in her hands, savoring the warmth as she stood on the upper deck of her parent’s houseboat. The sweat shirt and jeans she wore provided scant protection from the wintry mix of snow and sleet that fell on her. But the cold, while biting, helped her focus her thoughts.

She had been home on leave for nearly a month. Captain Akinola had granted her three months to return to Earth to “mull things over.” In truth, she was still undecided as to her future and wondered if three months or three years would be enough to give her clarity. Her recent past, in her estimation, was still a confusing jumble of events and emotions that she found difficult to untangle. The death of Dale McBride, the *Bluefin*'s former XO and the love of her life had been hard enough. But then, her mentor and friend, Dr. Calvin Baxter had also died under mysterious circumstances. And most recently, Sarnek, her one-time antagonist had wanted to enter into a relationship with her! It dawned on her that while on the *Bluefin* she might never get her head straight. Captain Akinola had been kind enough to give her time away, even suggesting that she consider a transfer to another ship.

T'Ser took a sip of the hot tea, enjoying the warmth of the sweet liquid as it went down her throat. The idea of leaving the *Bluefin* had not occurred to her before. She had served on the elderly cutter for more than seven years. It had been “home” to her – even more so than here in Seattle where she had grown up. Now, though . . .

The sound of the door opening interrupted her thoughts. She turned to see her father, Sarnok, step out onto the snow covered deck. He was wearing a parka with the hood pulled up over his head and his hands jammed into deep pockets. He walked over to T'Ser, a kind expression on his face.

“So daughter, have you forgotten how to dress for winter?”

She regarded him with an affectionate smile. “No, Dad. I've just been enjoying the snow and the solitude.” She looked out over the other houseboats and the moored boats and sailing vessels covered in a thin veil of white. “It's very peaceful here.”

He nodded, “Yes, it is. Your mother and I are fortunate to have found this place. It is so very different from Vulcan.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Well, you and Mom are very different from most Vulcans,” she said, playfully.

He smiled. “True, true.” His expression became more serious. “Have you found what you're seeking, T'Ser?”

She sighed and looked back out over the water. “Not yet,” she admitted, “But I think to find my future, I'll have to move on from my past.”

* * *

After T'Ser's parents left for work, T'Ser sat on the bed of the tiny guest room, PADD in hand. After staring at it for several minutes, she accessed the Star Fleet net and searched until she found a particular e-form. Before her, on the softly glowing screen, was the heading: "REQUEST FOR DUTY REASSIGNMENT."

Chapter Two

Stardate 54068.4 (25 January 2377) USS *Bluefin* en route to the Klingon border, warp 4

Departure from Star Station Echo had been routine and uneventful. The *Bluefin* moved through the void at a leisurely warp 4, en route to their patrol area. With everything running smoothly, Commander Strauss approached Akinola.

"Sir, May I have a few minutes to discuss some personnel matters?"

"Certainly, XO. My ready room. Lt. Sarnek? You have the bridge."

The Vulcan helmsman acknowledged the Captain as Strauss followed Akinola into his office.

Akinola filled a heavy mug with coffee from the wall servitor. "Coffee, Commander?"

Strauss settled into one of the comfortable chairs opposite Akinola's desk. "No, thank you, I had two cups of *Raktajino* with breakfast. Any more caffeine and you'll have to peel me off the ceiling!"

Akinola took his seat behind the antique oak desk. "I don't know how you drink that Klingon sludge. I tried some once - tasted like rancid mud."

She smiled. "It's an acquired taste."

"I'll take your word for it. What have you got for me, XO?"

She handed a PADD across the desk to him. "The new promotion list just came in. I thought you'd like to see it. Also," she hesitated, "we should begin to consider how the end of the stop-loss order is going to affect us."

Akinola scrolled down the promotion list. "I see that Delta Simms made Lt. Commander. Good! She's certainly due." He continued to scroll. "And Bralus finally made jay-gee."

Inga smiled. "I'm sure he'll be thrilled!"

Akinola returned the smile. "No doubt." Bralus was a good helmsman but suffered from poor self-esteem. Maybe this would buck him up a notch. He continued down the list to the end. He let out a slight sigh.

"Solly didn't make Master Chief," he observed. The disappointment was evident in his voice. Akinola had gone to bat for his old friend, apparently for naught. He suspected their recent escapade on Verex III may have torpedoed Solly's chance for promotion.

Inga nodded sympathetically. "No sir. I also couldn't help notice that Ni . . . Lt. Bane wasn't promoted either."

Akinola tossed the PADD on his desk. "No, but in all honesty, he wasn't on the short list, Inga."

"You don't think the business with his brother had anything to do with it?"

Akinola shrugged. "It certainly didn't help, but he's only been a full lieutenant for four years. He's got time yet." He noticed the look on Inga's face. "It's not your fault he didn't get promoted, Inga!" *Although I probably did cost Solly that stripe*, he didn't say aloud.

Strauss smiled weakly. "Yes sir, if you say so. Any guess to how many we'll lose from the crew?"

Akinola laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "Good question. Dr. Castille told me that Corpsman Rice wants to go to medical school, so that's one."

"I believe Lt. Fralk may resign. He's told me that he misses his four wives and wants to return home." Strauss referred to their Denobulan helmsman who piloted the cutter on gamma shift."

Akinola nodded. He wasn't surprised by that. He gave Inga an appraising look. "Commander, there's a fair chance that we may lose Commander T'Ser."

Inga blinked in surprise. "I . . . didn't know! Has she told you why?"

Akinola held up his hand. "I'm not saying it's definite, Inga. But you know she's had a difficult time over the past two years. There are a lot of painful memories for her on this ship. I've admired how she's kept her chin up through it all, but I think it's gotten to the point where she needs a change."

"I hope you're wrong, sir," said Inga, a note of sadness in her voice.

"Me too. In the mean-time, we do need a second officer, at least until T'Ser rejoins us. I want to give Delta Simms a shot at it - any objections?"

Inga shook her head. "None. But what about Commander Galt? He's way more senior."

Akinola chuckled. "If I tried to make Galt second officer, he'd either quit, try to kill me, or both! He's a great engineer but he doesn't have the - how shall I say it? - 'people skills' to handle it."

Strauss smiled in agreement. "No argument there, sir."

"Alright then. Do me a favor and ask Delta to step in so I can break the news to her."

* * *

Stardate 54068.4 (25 January 2377)

SS Backroad

crossing into Federation space from Klingon territory

Carmin Telestro lived his life in the shadows. He wasn't a bad person, per se', but neither did he mind bending the rules when it suited him. His goal was to make enough money to get by, mind his own business, and avoid notice.

Telestro was the owner and Captain of the merchant vessel, *Backroad*, a small, nondescript ship of Terran registry. Most of his business ventures were legitimate. Sometimes, though, he crossed the line into smuggling. This was one of those times.

He kept glancing at his sensor panel, expecting either a Klingon Bird of Prey or Border Service Cutter to suddenly appear, demanding he stop to be boarded. He was far from normal shipping lanes but he couldn't afford to pass through a regular border check-point. Thus, the *Backroad* was entering the Molari Badlands. He hoped he could skirt the edge of the Badlands and avoid the ion storms while still taking advantage of the sensor-crippling background radiation.

Telestro was so focused on his instruments that he jumped with fright when a voice spoke from behind him.

"So, Carmine - have we crossed the border yet?"

Telestro turned to stare at a teenage boy, maybe 17 years of age. The boy was slender with shaggy brown hair, a pimple-infested face, dark eyes, and a shirt that read, *I'm not picking my nose - I'm scratching my brain!* He was looking at Telestro with a bored expression.

Heart hammering, Telestro answered angrily, "Geez, Bug! You damn near gave me a heart attack! Next time, make some noise when you come on the flight deck!"

"Sorry," said Bug, though his voice indicated otherwise. Billy "Bug" Crump was the youngest of Telestro's crew. A war orphan, Bug had learned to survive by stealing and had stowed away on various ships - moving from planet to planet, station to station. Telestro had discovered him stowed away on the *Backroad* almost a year earlier. He had intended to turn him in to the Feddies, but Bug had proved to be very adept with computers and the ship's glitchy control systems. Telestro decided to allow him to stay on in return for Bug's services.

"Never mind," huffed Telestro. "Make sure everything is squared away below. Tell Shonda and Max to close all the hatches, then all of you need to get strapped in. It's gonna be rough for the next few hours."

"So I guess the answer is yes."

Telestro blinked, confused and frustrated. "What?"

"We've crossed the border," said Bug, languidly.

"Of course we've crossed the frakkin' border. Now, hurry up and do what I told ya!"

Bug blinked slowly. "You don't have to shout."

Telestro very *much* needed to shout, to scream, to shake this mis-begotten adolescent, but he didn't have the time. "Just . . . go!" he said, tightly. Thankfully, Bug descended the ladder and Telestro turned his attention back to the controls, just as the ship was rocked by the first gravimetric wave.

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Stardate 54068.5 (25 January 2377)
USS *Bluefin*
en route to the Klingon border, warp 4

"Me? Second officer?" Delta Simms' head was spinning. She had entered Akinola's office with a bit of trepidation, only to be happily relieved to discover she had been promoted to Lt. Commander. Akinola had handed her the black pip trimmed in gold before dropping the other shoe.

"It's provisional," said Akinola, "until Commander T'Ser returns to duty. That will be at least two months of good experience for you. I'm confident you can handle it!"

"Yes sir, thank you," Simms still sounded doubtful. "What of my duties in engineering?"

Akinola smiled. "Let me handle Commander Galt. I will need you on the bridge as gamma shift watch officer, but you can do that from the engineering station on the bridge. That should sooth Galt a little."

"May I ask - why me, sir?"

"You're smart, you're a fine officer, you've been to command school and you work well with people. Plus, that new hardware on your collar means it's time for you to take on more responsibility." He stood to refill his coffee mug. "Delta, this is a good opportunity for you. If you do well, it's possible you might get the job on a more permanent basis."

She frowned. "But what about Commander T'Ser?"

Akinola took a sip of coffee. His face was neutral. "Things change, Commander."

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Stardate 54068.7 (25 January 2377)
IKS *Jhar'toq*
crossing into Federation space from Klingon territory (cloaked)

Commander Choq drummed his fingers on the worn metal armrest of his command chair. His cloaked *B'rel*-class Bird-of-Prey rocked slightly as they entered the region known as *Dak'go'leth* or "Shining Death," what the Federation referred to as the Molari Badlands.

"Status!" He barked.

The helmsman, an aging Klingon with one eye, replied, "All systems functioning. However, our cloak may fail as we encounter ionic disturbances."

"Pah!" Choq spat, "We won't need it when we catch the *pa'tok* Humans that have the *Req'ti*." His face broke into a feral grin. "Perhaps they will attempt to resist!"

Chapter Three

Stardate 54068.8 (25 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Patrolling the Klingon border near the Molari Badlands

Dr. Castille sat at the wardroom table with a Reuben sandwich and a glass of milk, perusing a PADD with the latest issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine*. He was looking forward to some downtime after spending his shift conducting crew physicals and working with Corpsman Sanders on updating their triage protocols.

Castille looked up at the sound of the door sliding open. Delta Simms entered, carrying her dinner on a tray. The Doctor swallowed and felt his pulse quicken. He was attracted to Delta, but had been previously too shy to strike up a conversation with her. Truth be told, he had never been much of a lady's man – much of his young adulthood had been consumed by the study of medicine. Now, in his early 30's, he found that he was often lonely as he had cultivated few friends of either sex.

Delta saw Castille and, with a smile, approached him.

“May I sit here, Doctor?”

Delta had a soft lilt to her voice that Castille found captivating. He realized that he was gaping at her and quickly recovered. “Certainly Lieutenant! Please do.” He gestured to the chair across from him.

“Thanks!” she said, easing her tray containing a bowl of soup and a small salad onto the table. For the first time, Castille noticed the new pip on her collar.

“I see congratulations are in order,” he observed.

For a moment, Simms looked puzzled, before realization struck. Her face flushed slightly. “Oh, that.” She offered an embarrassed smile. “My promotion came through today. The Captain has moved me back to the bridge, at least temporarily. I imagine Galt is having kittens, but . . .” her voice trailed off and she shrugged.

“You don't seem too happy about it,” observed Castille.

Simms took a packet of crackers and broke them up over her tomato soup, stirring them in absently. She crinkled her nose. "Oh, I'm happy over the promotion. I'm just not sure I'm ready to be second officer."

Castille smiled. "Even more cause for congratulations! I think you're an excellent choice."

Simms face lit up. "Really?"

"Absolutely! You have a great rapport with the crew and you're obviously a very capable officer. I've no doubt that the Captain made the right decision."

She smiled at that. Castille was captivated by her. Her wide-set hazel eyes, beautiful smile and wavy red hair were enchanting.

"Thanks for saying so, Doc. I hope you're right!"

"I know I'm right – and please, call me O.C."

She tilted her head slightly, as if appraising him. "Alright – O.C. And please call me Delta."

Castille smiled in return, his fatigue and medical journal forgotten.

* * *

Commander Strauss stifled a yawn as she watched the star field streak by from the command chair. She had worked through much of her "down time" and was paying the price now as conn officer for beta shift. *You should have spent more time sleeping and less time working on crew schedules*, she thought morosely.

Inga stood and stretched her back and rolled her neck. She considered getting coffee, but she had overdone the caffeine earlier and didn't want to make that mistake again.

"You okay, Commander?"

Inga stopped stretching, suddenly very self-conscious. Senior Chief Solly Brin was looking at her, an amused expression on his face as he sat at the tactical station. She dropped her arms and gave him what she hoped was a dignified expression.

“Just getting the blood circulating, Senior Chief. Mind your station.”

Solly grinned. “Aye, aye, ma’am.”

“Commander?” Ensign Vashtee spoke up from Ops. “We’re receiving an incoming message from the USS *Hiryu*.”

Happy for the interruption, Strauss replied, “On screen, Ensign.”

The main viewscreen shifted from the passing starfield to the interior of a Nova-class science vessel. A Vulcan male with Captain’s pips sat in the center seat. Strauss automatically stood straighter.

“*Bluefin*, this is Captain Slenar, in command of the USS *Hiryu*.”

Strauss nodded her head in greeting. “I’m Commander Inga Strauss, Executive Officer. How may we be of assistance Captain?”

Slenar elevated an eyebrow slightly. “It is I who hope to assist you, Commander. We are conducting a scanning survey of the Molari Badlands with our upgraded sensors. We have picked up a transient contact that appears to have come from Klingon space. I am sending you the coordinates of the contact.”

Strauss nodded. “Thank you, sir. We will check it out.”

Slenar inclined his head. “A logical course of action. *Hiryu* out.”

“Chatty fellow, that,” murmured Vashtee.

Strauss resumed her seat. “Do you have the coordinates, helm?”

Lt. Fralk scanned his panel. “Yes ma’am. Bearing 122 degrees mark 17. Speed of contact is point two-five cee.”

“Tryin’ to sneak past us,” observed Solly.

“And they probably would have, if the *Hiryu* didn’t have those fancy sensors,” said Strauss. “Mr. Fralk, if you’d be so kind, lay in an intercept course, warp eight until we reach the Badlands.”

“Aye, ma’am,” replied the Denobulan. The cutters warp engines emitted a low-pitched whine that increased in intensity, then faded to a muted background hum. “ETA to badlands, twenty two minutes.”

“Maya, are you able to get any reading on the contact?” asked Strauss.

Ensign Vashtee adjusted her sensors and shook her head apologetically. “No ma’am, not at this range. We’ll have to take Captain Slenar’s word for it.”

Strauss smiled. “I think that’s a fairly safe course of action. Vulcans aren’t known for practical jokes.” Her smile faded as she thought of her friend, T’Ser. “Well, most aren’t anyway,” she finished, softly.

* * *

Akinola awoke with a start, his pulse hammering and beads of perspiration on his brow. He sat in the darkness of his cabin for several seconds, trying to calm his racing heart and also to recall the fading fragments of his nightmare.

It had been weeks, maybe months since he’d last suffered any nightmares. Akinola had almost forgotten the terror that gripped him in these night fugues. He closed his eyes again, not to sleep, but to concentrate on the wispy tendrils of the fading dream. He remembered . . .

Joey! Take Melody and get in the escape hatch!

But Mom! I don’t want to leave . . .

No arguments! Get in – hurry! There’s not much time!

The old cargo ship shuddered. Joey’s father and uncle trotted past – they carried pulse rifles – His mother kissed Joey and Melody fiercely – there were tears in her eyes – the hatch closed – an explosion and jolt – so dark, so very dark and so cold . . .

. . . and that was all. The dream faded like mist in sunshine. Akinola rubbed his face and stared out the viewport of his cabin. His memories of being launched off of the *Ekku* when his family’s ship had been attacked by pirates had always been cloudy – mere fragments, really.

He frowned. Why was that? He had been 12 years old, for Pete’s sake! He remembered many things from his life before that – why couldn’t he

remember *that* day clearly? And why did he always feel so cold after these dreams?

A subtle vibration in the deckplates brought him out of his reverie. His well-honed senses told him they had just increased speed.

With a sigh, he moved away from his bed and over to his desk terminal. He tapped the communicator stud.

“Captain to bridge, why have we increased speed?”

Strauss’ face appeared on the terminal. She smiled. “Sorry if we woke you sir. The *Hiryu* reported a transient contact in the Badlands. We’ve altered course and speed to check it out.” She looked at Akinola’s face over the viewscreen and her smile faded. “Why not go back to sleep, sir? It’s likely just a smuggler trying to sneak past us. We’ll call if anything interesting turns up.”

Akinola considered this briefly, then shook his head. “I’m afraid sleep is over for me. But I’ll stay out of your way, Commander. I’ll be in the wardroom if you need me.”

Strauss smirked, “Enjoy your ice cream, Captain.”

Akinola snorted. “I didn’t know I’d become so damned predictable - Akinola, out.” He turned off the terminal and stepped into the head for a quick sonic shower.

* * *

Stardate 54069.0 (26 January 2377)

SS Backroad

transiting the Molari Badlands

So far, the trip through the Badlands had been rough but manageable. Carmine rubbed his eyes. He was tired, bone-tired, but he needed to keep all of his attention on guiding the *Backroad* safely through the Badlands and to their rendezvous with their client in the Klaamet system.

The smell of coffee and the soft sound of shoes on the metal ladder caused him to smile. Sure enough, Shonda, his first mate appeared on the flight deck and took a seat in the right-hand chair. She handed a mug of coffee to

Telestro, who accepted it gratefully. She leaned back and took a sip of her own coffee.

“How are things below?” asked Carmine.

The dusky-skinned Deltan smiled. “Bug is sound asleep. Max is – well, being Max.”

Carmine shook his head, incredulous. “That kid can sleep through anything!”

“He sleeps the sleep of the innocent,” she said in her melodic voice.

“HA! Innocent my ass!” Telestro brayed. “That kid has probably been involved in more trouble than you and me put together!”

“He’s also got that navigational computer working properly – without which, may I remind you, we wouldn’t have dared coming through the Badlands. Not to mention getting Max working again.”

“If you can call it working,” grouched Carmine. “Max” was their loader robot, his actual designation being MX 114. Max had come with the ship when Carmine bought it five years earlier. At the time, Max had simply taken up cargo space in the hold, unmoving, unresponsive and seemingly ready for recycling. Bug was able to get the old MX series ‘bot rewired, re-motored and rebooted. Max might be old and battered, but Bug’s efforts had renewed the old safety-yellow automaton, making Max actually better than new.

Shonda smiled and shook her head. “You know very well that Max more than pulls his own weight.” She turned her head to look at the control displays. “So, how much longer do we have to crawl through this soup?”

Telestro grimaced. “To be honest, I’m not sure. Two, maybe three days at this speed.”

“Couldn’t we go ahead and get clear? Surely if any Klingons followed . . .”

Carmine shook his head. “Too risky. If we clear the Badlands too soon, a Border Cutter might pick us up.”

“But Carmine, even if they did, we don’t have anything on board that would rouse their suspicions. I mean, it’s not like the *Req’ti* is Corellan Acid or Brain Blast. I doubt many Border Dogs would even know what it is!”

Carminc frownec. "With our luck, we'd find the one Border Dog that did!"

Chapter Four

Stardate 54069.1 (26 January 2377)

IKS *Jhar'toq*

transiting the Molari Badlands

The cloaked Klingon Bird of Prey maintained a discreet distance behind the *Backroad* as both ships moved through the Molari Badlands. Fortune had favored Commander Choq and the crew of the *Jhar'toq* as their cloaking device continued to function in spite of the constant ion bombardment and intense radiation.

Their luck was about to change, however.

Lt. Largon, Choq's first officer, looked up from his sensor station. "Commander! I'm picking up an incoming vessel moving at high warp speed, approaching our quarry!"

Choq growled in obvious frustration. "Identify that contact!" he barked.

Largon, studied the sensors for several moments, running the returns through the ship's database. He looked up, a concerned expression on his face. "It's an Albacore-class border cutter. They've dropped to sub-light and are on an intercept course with the freighter."

Choq's eyes narrowed, but he kept his temper in check. While aggressive, he was also a realist. Though he was loathe to admit it, their ship was no match for the cutter. Besides, the last thing he wanted was to get into a fire-fight with the Federation Border Service. His superiors would be *most* displeased with him. Not to mention, his current mission was unauthorized.

"Have they scanned in our direction?"

Largon shook his head. "Negative. It would seem we have not been detected."

"Good," grunted Choq. "Maintain course and speed, but be prepared to stop. Chances are, the cutter will intercept and board it our quarry, inspect it, and send it on its way. It's unlikely they will find the *Req'ti*, and even if they do, I doubt they will consider it as more than a curiosity. The Federation is much more lenient with smugglers than are we."

* * *

Stardate 54069.1 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Entering the Molari Badlands

"Bring us out of warp, Mr. Fralk. Continue pursuit at three quarter impulse. Shields up."

"Aye, aye," replied the Denobulan helmsman.

"Commander? I have a positive lock and ID on the transient," reported Ensign Vashtee.

"Let's have it, Ensign."

"Contact is the SS *Backroad*, an Antonov TJ-77 cargo ship of Terran registry ."

"Huh!" exclaimed Chief Brin, "An old 'thunder jug!' Haven't run into one of those in a few years."

Inga smiled at the nickname for the small freighter. "As you were saying, Ensign?"

"The ship's owner and operator is listed as one Carmine Telestro of Toronto, North American Union. There are no outstanding warrants on the ship or crew, however . . ." Vashtee paused, "their safety validation certificate has expired."

Strauss placed her hands on her hips. "Reason enough to stop and board that ship, wouldn't you agree, Senior Chief?"

A look of anticipation formed on the Orion's face. "Oh, yes ma'am! Absolutely!"

"Good. You and Fralk get your replacements up here and get ready to lead the boarding party. Maya, open hailing frequencies."

* * *

Captain Akinola made his way to the bridge and his ready room, carrying a bowl of cherry-vanilla ice cream. He had intended to eat in the wardroom, but he had found Doctor Castille and Commander Simms carrying on a lively

conversation and had decided not to interrupt. He was pleased to see the two hitting it off. Simms had become something of a workaholic after her brief relationship with Dale McBride had ended a few years ago. And Castille had developed a reputation as a recluse since joining the crew last year. Maybe both of them would come out of their respective shells, he hoped.

As he stepped onto the bridge, he noticed the buzz of activity. His first instinct was to take charge, but he reminded himself that Strauss was in the center seat, so he merely inquired of the situation.

"Anything going on, XO?"

She turned toward him. "That contact turned out to be the freighter, *Backroad*. We're going to check them out." Her eyebrow was lifted, as if she expected him to take over.

"Very well. Carry on, Commander. I'll be in my ready room finishing my ice cream and catching up on some wood carving."

Inga's expression softened and she smiled. "Yes sir. I'll keep you posted."

* * *

Stardate 54069.2 (26 January 2377)

SS Backroad

transiting the Molari Badlands

The proximity alarm caused Carmine to jump in his seat. Shonda immediately checked the sensor panel, then stared at Telestro with a look of concern.

"Contact dead astern! It's closing fast!"

"Can you I.D. it?"

Before she could answer, the subspace receiver came to life and a female voice came over the speaker.

Backroad, this is the USS Bluefin, please respond.

Telestro cursed. "A Border Service cutter! How the hell did they find us?"

"Does it matter?" asked Shonda. "What do we do?"

"Get below and wake up the kid. Make sure any of the *questionable* cargo is hidden. I'll try to stall them before they board us."

Backroad, this is the Bluefin. Heave to, and prepare to be boarded. Please respond! The voice was becoming more insistent.

Carmine fumbled for the subspace transmitter controls. "Ah, *Bluefin*, say again please - you're breaking up. . ."

* * *

Stardate 54069.2 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

transiting the Molari Badlands

Inga was beginning to get perturbed. She knew full well that the captain of the *Backroad* was stalling for time. She turned toward Ensign Mahaley, who had relieved Chief Brin at tactical.

"Mr. Mahaley, stand by with forward tractor beams. It seems we may have to stop that ship the hard way." Inga turned toward Ensign Vashtee at Ops. "Maya, is it still safe to use the transporter?"

Vashtee had been carefully monitoring the ion levels and was ready with her answer. "Yes ma'am. We're still well within safety limits."

"Good. Notify the boarding party to stand by in transporter room one." Strauss thought for a moment, then added, "Boost the gain on the transmitter and hail them again."

Vashtee's slender hands moved quickly over the comm board. "Gain increased by 10% - channel open."

Strauss mouth twisted into a mischievous grin. "*Backroad*, this is the *Bluefin* - do you read me now?"

* * *

Stardate 54069.2 (26 January 2377)

SS *Backroad*

transiting the Molari Badlands

"GEEZ!" howled Telestro as the transmission from the *Bluefin* thundered through the speakers, causing his ears to ring. He quickly adjusted the volume to protect his ears. "You don't have to shout, lady! I read you, I read you, already!"

Very well Backroad. Carmine thought he detected a smug tone in that voice. Throttle back your engines, heave to, and prepare to be boarded. If you do not comply, we will be forced to use our tractor beams to stop you.

"Uh, is there a problem, *Bluefin*? We were just taking a short cut to the Klaamet system." Carmine used his best "innocent" tone.

It seems that your safety certificate has expired. We need to make a quick inspection to make sure your systems are operating properly. And I'm afraid we'll have to issue a citation for operating your ship with an expired certificate.

Carmine slapped his forehead in frustration. He'd been meaning to get the ship inspected, but had kept putting it off. Shonda would never let him hear the end of this!

"Um, okay *Bluefin*. I'm throttling back now - but can we make this quick? I've got a schedule to keep?"

I apologize for the delay. We'll make this as quick as possible. Bluefin out.

Carmine didn't think she sounded sorry at all.

Chapter Five

Stardate 54069.2 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

rendezvoused with the SS *Backroad*

Commander Strauss regarded the smaller vessel before her on the main viewscreen. "Ensign Mahalley, if that ship powers up their engines, activate the tractor beams."

"Aye, aye."

"Ensign Vashtee, what do the sensors tell us about that ship and its crew?"

Vashtee leaned over the sensor hood. "Three life forms - two are Human, one reads as mixed race, mostly Deltan I think . . . no weapons detected, no hazardous materials . . . the crew has assembled together in what appears to be their cargo bay."

"Very sporting of them," murmured Strauss. So far, this interdiction operation was going smoothly, but she still had a feeling that the crew of the *Backroad* was more intent on avoiding detection than saving time by going through the Badlands. She tapped her commbadge.

"Strauss to Lt. Fralk."

"Fralk here, go ahead, Commander."

"Is your team ready to beam over?"

"Yes ma'am - we're good to go."

"We're sending the coordinates down to you now. There are no signs of weapons, but keep your guard up. And keep your eyes open, Fralk. I think they're hiding something."

"Understood. We'll give them a thorough look-over."

"Good. Let me know if you find anything of interest. Strauss, out."

* * *

Stardate 54069.2 (26 January 2377)

SS Backroad

rendezvoused with the USS *Bluefin*

Carmine Telestro paced the cargo deck, awaiting the inevitable "inspection" by the Border Service.

"Carmine, will you please calm down! You're not going to help matters by getting agitated!" said Shonda.

"If they figure out what we're carrying, I'll be *way* beyond agitated - I'll be toast - we all will!"

"Not me," said Bug, laconically, "I'm still a minor. While they ship you off to Sundancer, they'll put me in a nice foster care center. When I get bored, I'll just find another ship."

A vein in Carmine's temple began to pulse and his fists tightened. Shonda was afraid she was going to have to restrain him from throttling the boy, when the unmistakable humm of transporter effect filled the room.

Four columns of shimmering light coalesced to reveal four figures in black Starfleet jumpsuits. A Denobulan with two pips on his collar stepped forward.

"I'm Lt. Fralk. Who's in charge here?" he asked, crisply.

To his credit, Carmine had recovered his composure enough to smile. He stepped forward. "I'm Carmine Telestro, Captain of the . . ." His gaze fell on a large Red Orion that stepped beside the Denobulan officer and Carmine's voice trailed away. The Orion's expression was unreadable and his hand rested easily on the phaser at his hip.

"*Backroad*," finished Shonda with an irritated glance at Carmine. "Welcome aboard! I'm Shonda, the First Mate. Bug there, is our crew. The ugly yellow 'bot over there is Max. He's the one with all the personality." She stood with a winning smile and guileless expression.

Fralk gave a perfunctory nod. "This is Senior Chief Solly Brin, Crewman Burke and Crewman Li. May I see your manifest, please?"

His expression still somewhat dazed, Carmine handed Fralk a PADD while keeping his eyes fixed on Solly. Fralk took the PADD and began to scroll down the list of cargo. A slight frown formed on his face.

"I see you're returning from Klingon space, yet you didn't pass through a checkpoint?" Fralk's tone was polite, but accusatory.

Carmine blinked and returned his attention to the lieutenant. "Huh? Oh, well, you see we're a licensed dealer of Klingon art work - look down here on line 47." He pointed to the PADD.

Fralk's frown deepened as he looked at the indicated line. "Hmmm. I see. Those licenses are pretty hard to come by. You must have some pretty good contacts to get one of these." He looked up. "Still, we need to inspect your cargo and your systems."

"Hey, anything to help out the Border Service!" Carmine said with an expansive gesture.

"Uh-huh," said Fralk, not buying Telestro's good humor for a second. "Why don't you accompany me, Captain, and we'll go take a look at your cargo. Senior Chief? Why don't you, the First Mate here, and Li begin a systems check. Burke you're with me."

"What about me?" asked Bug. Telestro gave him a withering look.

Fralk gave the boy an appraising look, then smiled. "You can come with us."

"Whoo-hoo," said Bug, his voice toneless.

* * *

For the next hour, the boarding party ran scans, system diagnostics and poked through pallets, barrels and crates containing everything from statues to tapestries to furniture. Telestro was beginning to relax, when Fralk's commbadge chirped.

"Brin to Lt. Fralk."

"Go ahead, Chief."

"We found a hidey-hole behind an EPS conduit. There are some things in here you might want to see."

Fralk glanced at Telestro, who smiled and shrugged. "What's your location?"

"Upper deck, aft. Just come down the corridor and you'll find us."

"On the way. Fralk, out." He turned to Carmine. "Care to explain, Captain Telestro?"

"That was my idea," interrupted Bug, "I thought it would be a good idea to have a safe hiding spot in case we were ever boarded by raiders or pirates."

Carmine was surprised by Bug's statement, but he quickly recovered and nodded. "That's true, Lieutenant. I guess I shoulda told you about it, but, well, I hoped it woulda been harder to find."

"Riiight," said Fralk, "Let's go see."

* * *

Senior Chief Brin and Crewman Li were standing in the upper deck corridor by an open wall panel. At their feet was an open storage container. Shonda stood aside, a neutral expression on her face.

"What do you have there, Senior Chief?" asked Fralk.

Solly gestured to the open container. "Looks like more of the Klingon 'art,' if you can call it that." By the expression on the Orion's face it was obvious he wasn't impressed.

Fralk came around and looked in the container. Sure enough, there were more statues of Klingon warriors, generally posed in battle to the death with fierce-looking creatures. He had seen similar figurines sold on Merchant's Alley back on the Star Station. Most of those had "Made in Ferrengar" stamped on the bottom. He looked more carefully in the container. The bottom seemed higher than necessary.

"Solly, help me get this stuff out. I think there's a false bottom in this thing."

Carmine's eyes narrowed and Crewman Li's hand moved warningly to his phaser. Telestro tried to relax, but a cold hand was clenching his stomach.

Shortly, the container was emptied of its contents. Solly pulled out his knife and used the heavy blade to pry up a corner of the false bottom. Fralk reached in to the previously hidden space and pulled out a small box of a dark, shiny wood with ornate Klingon symbols carved on it.

"The Skipper would appreciate the carving on that," observed Solly.

"Please! Be careful with that!" said Carmine. "That's the most valuable piece in the collection. Those boxes are extremely rare!"

Fralk looked over at him. "We'll be careful. But we have to check inside it." He was about to open it, thought better of it, and pulled a tricorder out of a pouch. He unfolded the device and scanned the box.

"The box is definitely of Klingon origin - that's genuine Firewood. He adjusted the tricorder, then frowned. He looked up at Solly. "Nothing dangerous, but whatever inside is predominantly organic material." He glanced back at Telestro. "What's inside?"

Telestro decided that now was as good a time as any to lie. "Well, the real value is in the box. There's really no telling what's inside. The Klingons used them to keep all sorts of weird stuff. If it's organic, maybe it's the remains of a pet Targ - who knows?"

Fralk's face twisted into a look of disgust, but he popped open the latches and slowly opened the lid.

Inside was a shriveled mass of . . . *something*. It looked like a dessicated piece of ancient fruit - dark, wrinkled and leathery. Fralk again activated the tricorder. "Definitely is or *was* some kind of organic tissue. Whatever it was died centuries ago - it's practically stone now." He closed the lid. "No bacteria or hazardous biologicals, anyway." He handed the box back to Telestro. "Alright, Captain. I think we're done here. Be sure to get your ship inspected within the next two weeks or the fine doubles and your Master's License will be suspended. And I'd strongly suggest that you get out of the Badlands - we're due for some really nasty ion storms."

Carmine forced a smile. "Thank you Lieutenant. I appreciate your concern and I assure you, I'll get the ship inspected as soon as we deliver our merchandise to Klaamet IV."

Fralk didn't believe him, but their job was done. "Have a safe journey, Captain." He tapped his commbadge. "Fralk to *Bluefin*. Four to beam over." In a moment, they were gone.

Chapter Six

Stardate 54069.3 (26 January 2377)

IKS Jhar'toq

holding position in the Molari Badlands

Commander Choq watched the Federation Border Cutter as it held position near the small merchant vessel. His face was impassive, but he could feel his gut twist with restrained frustration. He hated waiting and he hated the sense of impotence he felt at the moment. For once, it seemed, fortune did *not* favor the bold.

"Commander, what will their border guards do? Will they seize the cargo?" asked Lt. Largon.

Choq shook his head. "Not unless they find something they consider illegal or dangerous. In that case, they would most likely tow the entire ship to their nearest base." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "If the cutter moves off and leaves our quarry, then all should be well. If not . . ." He shrugged. The gesture seemed casual, yet it indicated he had reached a decision. "Better to die in battle than to return in shame."

The young first officer straightened and pulled his fist across his chest in salute. "I live and die for the Empire!"

Choq regarded the young Klingon officer. Largon was intelligent and an efficient first officer, but he had never been tested in battle. His rank was due more to the heavy losses that the Empire had suffered in the Dominion War than his experience. The Commander grunted slightly and directed his gaze back to the viewscreen. "As do we all, Lieutenant," he said, dryly.

* * *

Stardate 54069.3 (26 January 2377)

USS Bluefin

The Molari Badlands

"Commander?" Ensign Vashtee turned toward Inga. "The boarding party is back on board."

"Thank you, Ensign." Inga tapped her commbadge. "Strauss to Lt. Fralk"

"Fralk here."

"Lieutenant, did everything check out on that ship?"

"There are a few questionable items on board, but nothing that warrants seizure or arrest. The ship's systems seem to be in good shape. I gave them a citation for the expired safety certificate and two weeks to get inspected."

"Good enough. Be sure to file a report ASAP. I'm sure the Captain will want to read it."

"Yes ma'am, I'll get right on it."

"Thanks, Fralk. Strauss, out."

* * *

Stardate 54069.3 (26 January 2377)

IKS *Jhar'toq*

holding position in the Molari Badlands (cloaked)

The *Jhar'toq's* helmsman looked back at Commander Choq a toothy grin on his scarred face. "Commander, the Federation patrol vessel is moving off!"

Choq leaned forward in his chair. "Hold station, helm! Give the Federation ship time to clear the area, then resume following our quarry."

"Will we not attack?" asked Largon, a slight hint of challenge in his voice.

Choq fixed the first officer with a stare. "In good time, *Lieutenant!*" His voice emphasizing his subordinate's rank. "If we attack now, the Federation vessel would no doubt notice and return immediately. Station!"

Largon inclined his head slightly in acquiescence, but a surly scowl hung on his face. He returned to his sensor station and took his seat.

You'll bear watching, youngster, thought Chog. He stood. "I will be in my quarters. Notify me the moment the Federation vessel goes to warp."

* * *

Stardate 54069.5 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*
The Molari Badlands

At first, the chiming noise seemed to come from a great distance. Akinola frowned and shook his head. The chime repeated, familiar and clearer now. His eyes flew open and he sat forward with a start.

Must have dozed off, Akinola thought. He rubbed his neck which had become stiff from sleeping at his desk. The annunciator chimed a third time.

"Come!" He said, a trace of irritation in his voice.

The door slid open and Inga Strauss entered, an eyebrow raised. "Is this a bad time, Captain? This can wait."

Akinola rolled his neck. "No, no, come on in Inga." He gestured toward the chairs across from his desk. "I must have fallen asleep."

She sat down with a PADD on her lap and concerned expression on her face. "You *do* look tired, sir. Are you having trouble sleeping again?"

"No more than usual. Never mind me, XO, what do you have?"

"After-action report from checking out that freighter."

Akinola perked up. "How did it go?"

"No problems. Fralk said they had a few 'questionable' items, but no real contraband. He gave them a slap on the wrist and sent them on their way."

He nodded. "Good. Too bad Fralk wants to hang up the uniform. He's turned into a fine officer." Akinola stifled a yawn and stood. "I take it that Commander Simms has the conn?"

Strauss also stood. "Yes sir." Inga smiled. "She has that 'deer in the headlights' look, but I think she'll be fine once she settles down."

"No doubt. What's our current heading?"

"We've resumed our original heading, back toward the border. We've already cleared the badlands - our current speed is warp four."

Akinola nodded. "Very well. I'm going down to the gym for a while, then back to my cabin. Tell Simms not to hesitate to call me if she needs me."

"Aye, sir. Try to get some rest."

* * *

Stardate 54069.5 (26 January 2377)

IKS Jhar'toq

The Molari Badlands

Once more, the Bird of Prey pursued the Terran freighter through the Molari Badlands. The Klingon vessel rocked violently as waves of ion particles impacted their shields. A warning alarm blared from the tactical station.

"Report!" barked Commander Choq.

The crewman at tactical brought his gauntlet down on his board in frustration. "Our cloak is off-line! That last ion wave overloaded the emitters."

"No matter," said Choq in a low rumble. "The time for stealth is past. Helm! Increase speed for intercept - move us to within five thousand kelicams! Weapons! Charge forward disruptors!" He leaned forward. "Do not give them opportunity to escape."

* * *

Stardate 54069.5 (26 January 2377)

SS Backroad

The Molari Badlands

Carmine Telestro lay on the cot in his cramped cabin. He was nursing a bottle of Terran ale but he barely noticed the taste. He was staring at a holo-pic of an attractive dark-haired girl who appeared to be in her late teens.

If we can just complete this job in one piece, I can spend some time with you, baby girl. I know you don't expect much from your old man, and, I can't say I blame ya. I haven't been much of a father, but maybe, just maybe it's not too late.

He turned from the holo-pic on the side table and stared up at the dark ceiling. Gina was almost eighteen now and about to start her university

studies. He smiled with pride but also with a sense of longing and regret. He didn't blame his wife, Elena, for leaving him ten years ago. His lifestyle and wanderlust certainly didn't make for a stable family life. He understood her decision and didn't fight the divorce.

But he missed his baby girl. Gina was the joy of his life. Yet he seldom got to see her. And, as she had grown up, she had also grown more distant. He still remembered her as an eight-year old who would run and jump into his arms whenever he came home. But his times at home had become more infrequent and . . .

The harsh buzz of the intercom broke his reverie. With a frown, he punched the comm button.

"What is it, Shonda, I'm tryin' to . . ."

Shonda interrupted him. "Get up here, Carmine! We've got Klingons right behind us, and they've powered up their weapons."

Telestro's blood went cold and his mind raced. He made a hasty and fateful decision. "Go to full impulse, Shonda! Take us in to the heart of the Badlands - we should be able to lose them there!"

There was a moment's hesitation before she replied. "Camine! That's suicide! If we . . ."

It was Carmine's turn to interrupt. "Just do it, Shonda! If we can't shake them, we're probably dead anyway!" He cut off the channel and ran out of the cabin. As the hatch slammed shut, the holo pic fell off the table and landed on the deck with a clatter. Gina Telestro's smiling face stared up into the darkness of the room.

* * *

Stardate 54069.6 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

En route to patrol duty along the Klingon border

The ache in Aknola's side seemed to abate as he worked through an intricate *kata*. He focused on his moves, concentrating on fluid motion and precision with his blocks and strikes. As he finished the final *kata*, he returned to a ready stance, bowed slightly then straightened. He walked off the wooden

training floor and grabbed a towel to wipe his streaming face. The door to the gym slid open and Senior Chief Brin entered, also wearing a karate *ghi*.

Akinola nodded at his old friend as he toweled his face. "Solly."

"Hey Skipper," replied the big Orion Chief of the Boat. "Finishing up?"

"For now. Did you have fun on the boarding operation?"

Solly began to stretch, preparing for his work out. "Plain vanilla, Skipper. Their captain seemed skittish, but they didn't have anything on board worth mentioning." He paused. "Although some of the art work was pretty strange."

Akinola smiled. "Artwork?"

"Klingon stuff - you know, statues and tapestries that portray warriors in battle. They're not much into still lifes or ocean scenes."

"True enough," agreed Akinola. "I take it the ship was in good shape."

"Yeah, very good shape, actually. At least that crew takes pride in their ship." He paused. "I hope they take the Lieutenant's advice and get into clear space. I'd hate to see that old thunder jug tore up in an ion storm."

"So nothing out of the ordinary to report?" asked Akinola as he moved toward the door.

"Not really, although there was one piece of art that the captain seemed especially concerned about. You would have appreciated it, Skipper! It was a really old Firewood box with intricate carvings on it."

Akinola stopped abruptly and turned. "A Firewood box? It was empty, wasn't it?"

"That's the weird thing, Skipper! It had a shriveled up pieced of petrified organic matter in it. The Lieutenant's tri-corder couldn't identify it, though - it was too old."

"It was a heart," said Akinola, flatly. He was looking away from Solly, a thoughtful frown on his face.

Solly looked surprised. "How'd you know that?"

"I've seen one before." He looked at Solly. "It's a *Req'ti*."

"A wreck-tee? What the frak is that?"

Akinola still wore a concerned expression on his face. He crossed his arms and leaned against the bulkhead. "It's basically a religious icon, a sacred relic. Klingons are big into venerating their ancestors. A *Req'ti* is the heart of one of the founders of the Klingon ancient houses. You know, Khaless, Q'on, B'rel . . . the big dogs of yore. They're passed down from generation to generation from one head of house to another." He paused. "You say this was with a bunch of Klingon artwork?"

"Yes sir. He had receipts and everything. Apparently he won it at auction as representative of a buyer from Klaamet IV."

"That's damned odd!" Akinola seemed deep in thought for several moments, then he stood and went to a wall comm panel and punched the transmit switch. "Akinola to bridge."

"Bridge, Commander Simms here, sir."

"Delta, reverse our heading and take us back toward the Badlands at maximum warp. See if you can locate that freighter we boarded a few hours ago."

"Aye sir . . . may I ask why?"

"I'll fill you in shortly, Commander. Akinola out." He looked back at Solly, who was wearing a knowing look.

"You're expecting trouble," said Brin. It wasn't a question.

"I hope I'm wrong Solly, but I've got a bad feeling that freighter is going to be in serious trouble. No Klingon house would knowingly allow one of their icons to be sold to a *darg'shev'joq* - a non-Klingon. That would be worse than dishonor - more like . . . blasphemy. Chances are, there are Klingon ships already looking for that freighter."

Solly winced. "So, are we about to get into some sort of 'holy war?'"

Akinola shook his head. "I'm hoping we can prevent one from starting!"

Chapter Seven

Stardate 54069.7 (26 January 2377)

By the Yuchan Sea, Klaamet IV

The old man stood on the balcony of his seaside Veranda, savoring the wind coming off the teal waters of the Yuchan Sea. His flowing white hair whipped in the salty breeze and he closed his eyes, basking in the warmth of the orange star, Klaamet. His white linen tunic and trousers rippled in the rush of air. He opened his eyes, grey and piercing they were, and gazed on the pink sands and silver gray rocks below his perch. Several Klaametian sea birds hovered just a few feet away, their forward flight countered by the strong wind. They emitted a *khikee, khikee, khikee* cry that pleased the old man.

Though he was over 200 years old, the man did not look more than 50, save for his snow white hair. He was human, but not Terran. His longevity and a few other esoteric talents were a gift from a race he once nearly destroyed. His sharp mind was his own, however. Once broken, now healed, it was perhaps the best tactical mind in the galaxy. His name had once been both admired and reviled, celebrated and feared. Now, his name was mostly forgotten. This also pleased the old man.

In his retirement, he had become a collector. To the casual observer, his collection was both eclectic and eccentric - containing arcane items from several worlds and cultures with no apparent rhyme or reason. To the old man, they were both trophies and mementos of his former life. Now, he hoped, he was about to add the final piece to his collection. Obtaining that piece had required an extravagant expenditure of gold-pressed latinum, not just to purchase the piece, but to bribe certain Klingons and pay for a ship and crew to transport the item back.

In truth, this last detail vexed him. But this was not a job he could do himself. His name was too well-known (and despised!) in the Klingon Empire. Even traveling incognito was too risky, not that he feared for himself (for he did not fear death nor harm, a fact that often disquieted him) but he did fear failure. Now, his quest was in the hands of Captain Telestro and his crew.

His sharp ears picked up the sounds of footfalls behind him. With a sigh, he turned from the sea and faced the man who approached him.

The old man's valet/body guard, a Terran, wore a perfectly tailored black suit. His dark features were chiseled, his head smoothly shaved. He wore dark

shades that concealed his eyes. The old man often wondered if his body guard was vain or light sensitive. He never asked, it really didn't matter, did it?

"What is it, Wayne?" asked the old man.

Wayne stood with his hands behind his back, at parade rest. Many years as a Federation Marine instilled habits that were hard to break.

"We've lost contact with the *Backroad*, sir. They failed to transmit at the scheduled communication time."

The old man betrayed no emotion, save for a slight tightening around the mouth. He nodded slightly. "I see." He turned back to face his beloved ocean. He had found a place of peace here. "Is the ship ready?"

"Ready and standing by, sir. The crew is at their stations and awaiting your orders."

The old man nodded again, approvingly. "Good. Very good. Please inform Captain Forassh that I will beam aboard within the hour."

Wayne's expression was unreadable, but there was a trace of uncertainty in his voice. "Are you certain that's wise, sir? We've discussed the risks . . ."

The old man held up a hand and turned back to his aid. He wore a rueful smile. "I appreciate your concern and your loyalty, Wayne. But the time has come for me to take matters into my own hand.

* * *

Stardate 54069.7 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

En route to the Molari Badlands, warp 9.2

Delta Simms relinquished the command chair with a sense of relief as Captain Akinola came on the bridge. She moved around to greet her CO.

"We're en route to the Molari Badlands and the last known position of the *Backroad*. Our current speed is warp 9.2 and all systems are functioning normally.

Akinola nodded in approval. "Good. Delta, I want you at the engineering station. We'll be pushing the limits of our shields going through the badlands. I intend to take us in at full impulse."

Delta swallowed and spoke hesitantly. "Yes sir, but you understand that is twice the recommended safe velocity - we might overload the navigational deflectors."

He placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "That's why I want you riding shotgun on them. Let Gralt know we'll need all reserve power available for the deflectors and the shields. He can divert power from non-essential systems if necessary."

"Aye, sir," she hesitated, "May I ask - what's going on?"

"It seems our friends on the *Backroad* have an item that really doesn't belong to them. Or shouldn't anyway. I have no doubt that the Klingons would cast restraint to the wind to get this item back - consequences be damned."

Delta smirked. "And the Klingon's are not exactly known for restraint."

Akinola smiled ruefully. "You've got the picture, Commander."

* * *

Stardate 54069.7 (26 January 2377)

IKS *Jhar'toq*

Molari Badlands

The *B'rel*-class scout shuddered and jerked violently as they pursued the surprisingly agile merchant vessel. The hull of the old Bird of Prey creaked and popped ominously as gravimetric shear and ionic bombardment took their toll on the hull's integrity fields.

"Shields at 70%," announced the helmsman. "Plasma manifold temperature is increasing to a dangerous level."

"Maintain course and speed," growled Choq. "Do not give them quarter, helm. Largon! Can you not get a fix on that ship?"

Largon held on as their ship seemed to skitter through a magnetic eddie of energy. "Only a general heading. They are making random moves that are difficult to anticipate. Not to mention the ionic interference."

Choq's lips peeled back in a rictus of disgust. "I'm not interested in your excuses, Largon! Find that ship, or I'll replace you!"

With a roar of rage, Largon pulled his blade from his belt and turned on the Commander. He stopped abruptly as he saw the barrel of Choq's disruptor pointed squarely at his face.

"Stand down, Lieutenant," said Choq in a quiet, dangerous voice, "and sit at your station. Now is not the time for you to challenge me." He lowered the disruptor, eyes glittering. "When our mission is done . . . *then*, I await you."

* * *

Stardate 54069.7 (26 January 2377)

SS Backroad

The Molari Badlands

Sweat glistened on Carmine's forehead as he wrestled with the helm controls. He stole a glance at Shonda. Her normally serene features were tight, her eyes wide with terror. The ship lurched sharply and Telestro tapped the nose thruster controls to prevent the ship from yawing dangerously to port.

"Are they still following us?" Telestro asked.

Shonda forced her gaze to the sensor panel. She nodded rapidly. "Still there . . . but we're maintaining our distance." Her voice was tight but under control.

Carmine grimaced. Mixed news at best. Certainly, it was good the Klingon ship had not closed on them, but neither had he been able to shake them. And now, they were rapidly moving deeper into the heart of the Badlands where it was only a matter of time until they encountered a full-blown ion storm.

"We've got to keep moving," he said through clenched teeth. "If they catch us, we're toast!"

Shonda's attention was caught by something on their forward sensors. She turned to him sharply. "We may be toast either way!" She jabbed a finger at the sensor panel. "We're heading straight into an ion storm!"

* * *

Stardate 54069.8 (26 January 2377)

SS Janus

Klaamet IV

The old man materialized on the dais of the *Janus'* transporter room. He was met by Captain Forassh, the Andorian who normally commanded his ship. This time, however, Forassh would serve in a secondary role. For the first time in many years, the old man intended to take command of a mission.

He stepped off the platform and shook the hand of the blue-skinned Captain. "Forassh, I trust you've been well."

The Andorian smiled. "Very well. It's good to see you again, Commodore, and an honor, too."

The old man waved aside the compliment. "Are we ready to depart orbit?"

Forassh nodded. "Yes sir. And I've taken the liberty of preparing your cabin."

The old man gently but firmly grasped the Andorian's arm. "Forassh - I'm not coming as a passenger this time. For this trip, I'm in command."

The Andorian looked momentarily surprised, but his smile returned quickly enough. "I would assume, then, that this is more than a pleasure cruise, Commodore."

"You assume correctly, old friend. I hope you understand."

Forassh drew himself up. "It has always been an honor to serve with you sir, both when we were in Starfleet, and now."

The old man relinquished his grip on the Captain's arm and patted his shoulder. "The honor is mine, Forassh. Now, have weapons been loaded?"

"We have a full complement of photon torpedoes and four quantum torpedoes," Forassh said with a smile of pride.

The old man's eyebrows rose in surprise and appreciation. "You still find ways to amaze me, Forassh. Now, let's get to the bridge - we have many miles to go."

The two men took a turbo-lift up several levels until they came to the bridge of the old, but lovingly restored *Avenger*-class starship. Once, it had been part of the old man's fleet in a long-ago war. Now, it was his personal ship under Klaametian registry. The old man stopped for a moment as he stepped onto the bridge, old memories of time spent on other ships - the *Hyperion*, the *Valley Forge* and the *Yorktown* washed over him. He took a moment to savor the memories, both good and bad, then moved to the command chair and took his seat. Captain Forassh stood at his side.

"Would you care to give the order, Commodore?"

The old man smiled. "Yes, Captain." He leaned forward slightly in his seat. "Navigator, plot a course for the Molari Badlands. Helm, take us out - when we clear the gravity well, go to warp 6."

"Aye sir," chorused the navigator and helmsman.

And with that, Garth of Izar once again entered the breach.

Chapter Eight

Stardate 54069.8 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Entering the Molari Badlands

"Secure from warp. Mr. Bralus, ahead full impulse," ordered Captain Akinola.

Commander Strauss eased toward the command chair and whispered in Akinola's ear. "Sir - that is going to seriously stress our shields and navigational deflectors! Not to mention the strain on the inertial dampeners."

Akinola nodded and replied in a subdued voice. "I know, Commander. But we've got a lot of ground to make up. If there is a cloaked Klingon ship after the *Backroad*, and my gut tells me there is, we may already be too late." He rubbed his chin in thought. "Take over tactical, Inga. This might turn ugly."

As Strauss replaced the ensign seated at tactical, Akinola tapped the intra-ship comm button on his chair.

"This is the Captain. We've entered the Badlands in pursuit of a transport that might be followed by a Klingon vessel. We're now at condition yellow and the ride is going to get very rough over the next few hours. Use caution as you move around - the inertial dampeners won't be able to fully compensate for the gravitic turbulence. Akinola, out." He slapped the switch, closing the channel.

Hardly had the words left his mouth when the cutter seemed to dip and roll violently. The bridge crew held tightly to their consoles so as not to be tossed from their stations.

"Sorry about that!" said Bralus. A thin sheen of perspiration had formed on his blue forehead.

"Maintain course and speed, Mr. Bralus. Ops, begin scanning for ion trails - begin with the last known position of the *Backroad*."

"Aye, sir," replied Ensign Vashtee, frowning in concentration. She muttered some choice words in her native tongue. "Nothing yet, sir. Sensor range is very limited." She adjusted the gain on the sensors, running the return through the computer filters. A sudden spike on a sensor graph caused her breath to catch in her throat. She swallowed and turned toward the Captain.

"Sir? I'm picking up an ion storm adjacent to our projected course." She continued to adjust the sensor gain. "Force seven and climbing, sir."

Akinola nodded curtly. "Understood." He tapped the intra-ship button again. "All hands, rig for ion storm. Condition, red-alert. All hands man your stations. This is not a drill - repeat - this is not a drill!"

* * *

Stardate 54069.8 (26 January 2377)

IKS Jhar'toq

Molari Badlands

A loud screeching filled the bridge of the *Jhar'toq*, followed by blaring klaxons and flashing warning strobes.

"Shut off that accursed noise and report!" yelled Choq over the din.

The helmsman complied, but an ominous rumbling continued to set the Klingon commander's teeth on edge.

"Number two coolant pump has failed! We're venting plasma and losing power." said the helmsman as he hurriedly compensated for the power loss.

"Reroute power from reactor one," Choq said tightly, his mind running through various options. "Engage aft thrusters to increase our speed. I want to close on that ship *now!*"

"Sir," the helmsman said, carefully. "If we use our thrusters, we will deplete our fuel more rapidly - we may not have enough to return home."

"If we do not retrieve the *Req'ti*, it won't matter." He stood from his command chair. "Gunner! Bring disruptor cannons on-line! Target their engines when we get in range. Prepare to engage our quarry!"

* * *

Stardate 54069.9 (26 January 2377)

SS Backroad

The Molari Badlands

The small transport continued to rock and shake violently, the impulse engines howled as they pushed the *Backroad* through a swarming maelstrom of ion particles.

"Carmine!" Shonda screamed, just as a disruptor bolt hit the engine cluster. The lights flickered and Carmine nearly lost control of the transport as they yawed dangerously through an ionic wave. Master caution lights began to flash and a harsh beeping warned of major trouble.

"Shut down the port engine! I'm going to try and turn inside their line of fire," Carmine gasped through clenched teeth. Already, the gravimetric shear was beginning to twist their vessel - the inertial dampeners already overwhelmed. He grunted with effort as the g-forces built up and he doggedly turned the *Backroad* into a steep banking turn to starboard, hoping to evade the Klingon's disruptor bolts.

* * *

Stardate 54069.9 (26 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

The Molari Badlands

The cutter plowed valiantly ahead through the strengthening ion storm. Even with uprated shielding and powerful impulse engines, their headway was slow and treacherous.

"Moldering deities, get your hairless asses moving!" Chief Engineer Galt bellowed as he staggered on the constantly shifting engineering deck. He was shouting orders over the thundering din of the impulse engines while trying to keep the systems running on the battered *Bluefin*. "Flanders! We've got a master caution light on the port number four EPS coupling - get on it! Loruth! Help Johnson with that spare impeller - we'll need it if we keep running these engines at 110%!"

A pale crewman third class staggered toward Galt, barely keeping his balance on the pitching deck. He tripped and the crusty Tellarite grabbed him before he fell.

"What is it, Nichols?" Galt shouted.

Nichols face was nearly white, a sheen of perspiration covered his clammy face. "Sir," he gasped, "Request permission to . . . to . . ."

"Gragnar's Balls! Spit it out boy! Request permission to *what?*"

"To . . ." Nichols suddenly doubled over, and with a loud "*Yuuurrrk!*," emptied the contents of his stomach on the deck, splattering Galt's boots and coveralls."

Galt steadied the youngster, looked up and muttered, "The deities all hate me!" Loudly he called, "Egris! *EGRIS!* Get your fat ass over here - and bring the frakkin' *HOSE!*" He looked back down at the sick crewman and patted him absently. "Hang in there, kid - this is going to get a lot worse before it gets better!"

* * *

On the bridge, Lt. Bralus struggled with the helm controls as the cutter moved deeper into the raging ion storm. The viewscreen revealed a miasma of energy that crackled and surged around the ship like St. Elmo's fire.

"Maya, have you got a fix on the *Backroad* yet?" queried Akinola. He held on tightly to the arms of the command chair as the cutter seemed to drop suddenly, then pitch up again.

"I'm . . . not sure, Sir. With all the ionic interference I . . ." she paused, frowning, and tapped a control once, twice, a third time, before turning back to the Captain. Her face was tight. "Disruptor fire, sir! Bearing 28 mark 8. I can't get a range, but it has to be close!"

"Helm! Adjust course to that heading. Mr. Strauss - arm the phasers. If you see a Klingon ship, I want their weapons taken out, understood?"

Inga was having difficulty keeping her seat, but she nodded grimly. "Understood, sir." Her fingers hit the master control for the phasers. "Phasers armed . . ." She tapped a second control several times before uttering a Teutonic curse. "Sir! Targeting scanners are off-line!"

Akinola brought his fist down on the arm of his chair. "Damn! I don't want to accidentally destroy a Klingon ship, even if it is on our side of the border." He thought a moment. "Keep weapons hot, Commander. Delta! Get on the targeting scanners - we need them yesterday! Mr. Bralus - when we close in, bring us between the *Backroad* and whoever's firing on them."

Bralus swallowed, his mouth dry. "Aye sir!"

"Looks like we may take a few dents today," Akinola said grimly.

* * *

Stardate 54070.0 (26 January 2377)

SS *Janus*

The Molari Badlands

"Commodore? We're getting readings consistent with disruptor fire," announced a young Illyrian woman seated at the Operations station.

Garth's brow furrowed. "Bearing and distance?"

"Difficult to ascertain, sir. It's along a heading that will take us into a Force seven ion storm - approximately two hours away at our current speed."

"Force seven," murmured Captain Forrash. "That will rip our shields to shreds. Not to mention this ship."

Commodore Garth of Izar nodded. "That may be, old friend. But there are people out there carrying out a mission *I* sent them on. I will not abandon them." He turned to face the Andorian captain. "Are we agreed on this point, Captain?" Garth's voice was soft, but the tone of command was clear.

Forrash looked at the swirling energy through which their old *Avenger*-class ship moved. A smile played across his features. "If it is our time, what better way to go than in battle in the midst of a raging ion storm, eh?"

Garth smiled, but his eyes were distant. "If it is our time, indeed . . ."

Chapter Nine

Stardate 54070.1 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

The Molari Badlands

"Give me a boost, Chief!" Delta Simms had a small tool kit and a spare I-L chip in her hand as she prepared to enter the starboard Jeffrey's tube. She had isolated the cause of the targeting scanner's failure - a control module had over-loaded, probably due to a power surge caused by the ion storm.

"Ma'am - Are you sure this is safe? If one of the shields falters while you're in there . . ." As if to punctuate Brundy's point, the ship jerked violently and the lights flickered.

"I know - don't remind me! The quicker you get me up in there, the faster I'll get this done and out of there."

Chief Brundy furrowed his brow, unconvinced. "I'd really rather do this myself, ma'am."

Delta shook her head. "You're too big, Chief. I can get in there and maneuver around more easily. Now quit arguin' and hoist me up!"

With a sigh of resignation, Brundy easily lifted Delta up where she could grab hand-holds and pull herself into the Jeffrey's tube. She moved quickly, sliding on her back until she came to her destination. She attached a small magnetic key and unlocked the selected panel. She picked a small tool from the pouch and held it in her teeth while she searched for the damaged chip. A bead of sweat crept down her nose and into her left eye. She blinked to ease the sting caused by the salty drop and to clear her vision.

A massive ionic wave, nearly force nine in intensity, crashed against the *Bluefin*. One of the forward ventral shields lost integrity for less than a second, before adjacent shields automatically compensated.

In that brief instant, a heavy bombardment of ionic particles washed over the unprotected portion of the hull. The ship's armor absorbed 90% of the brief exposure, channeling the energy through embedded conduits and heat-sinks that dissipated the charge through the impulse vents.

The remaining 10% of the energy burst coursed through the cutter. Internal surge protectors handled most of this with few problems. One of the new replicators overloaded and began to spark and smoke before failing. The fire suppression system in the wardroom activated, preventing the replicator from bursting into flames. An aft monitoring station on the bridge also sparked heavily, but did not explode. Senior Chief Brin fell out of his chair at the aft station - causing him to strike an elbow against the rail, resulting in a colorful outburst of Orion epithets.

In the starboard Jeffrey's tube, Lt. Commander Delta Simms never saw the sudden energy discharge that erupted through the open access panel. Her body spasmed as the current flowed through her body, then she was still - a small tendril of smoke rose from the heel of her left boot.

Chief Brundy, waiting at the open hatch to the Jeffrey's tube saw the sudden flash and heard a loud "*Snap!*" He peered up anxiously into the now dark maintenance crawlway.

"Commander Simms? Are you okay? Commander? *Commander?*"

* * *

Stardate 54070.1 (27 January 2377)

SS Backroad

The Molari Badlands

The *Backroad* was a tough little ship. Not surprising, as the Antonov TJ-77 was a well-proven, robust design based on rugged Russian engineering. Its designers would not be surprised at the amount of abuse the ship could take and continue to function. In fact, they took special pride in the TJ series of commercial starcraft. A brochure for the TJ-77 boasted, "*Rough enough for asteroid mining, tough enough for the Mutara Nebula.*"

Yet even the sturdiest of ships have their limits. The *Backroad* reached its limit on Stardate 54070.1.

There is probably no more blood-chilling sound than the screaming rush of venting atmosphere from a space vessel. The tempestuous noise nearly drowned out the wail of alarms on the ship.

In the cargo hold, Billy "Bug" Crump struggled into a pressure suit, his head already pounding as the atmospheric pressure dropped. He was wide-eyed

with terror, his usual cockiness forgotten. As he pulled the helmet visor down, he lost his footing as the gravity coils failed. The bulkheads of the cargo bay began to twist and contort. Suddenly a gap appeared in the hull as an overstressed weld-line finally gave way. Bug found himself moving inexorably toward the hull breach, his arms flailing, his helmet filled with the sound of his own screams.

Something firm yet gentle clamped tightly to his left arm. The sudden reprieve startled Bug and the scream died in his throat. He glanced to his left to see the claw-like metal fingers of Max's segmented arm holding him in place. The cargo 'bot's twin optics glowed a soft blue. Max was still firmly attached to his charging platform. For the moment, Bug was relatively safe.

On the flight deck, Carmine was desperately trying to regain control of the crippled ship. He vaguely heard Shonda screaming something about the cargo bay venting atmosphere, but he had no time to deal with that now. The storm had suddenly increased by at least two levels of magnitude. He had to maneuver the ship out of the storm. He no longer cared whether the Klingons caught him or not. He'd rather take his chances with them than to be crushed by his own ship.

But the SS *Backroad* was dying. The impulse drive was gone and the hull was literally coming apart at the seams. The ship would not survive the storm.

* * *

Stardate 54070.1 (27 January 2377)

IKS *Jhar'toq*

Molari Badlands

The old Bird of Prey was literally coming apart. A glowing tendril of plasma trailed behind the crippled ship. The secondary reactor stopped functioning when its over-stressed coolant pump failed. Super-heated coolant exploded from the containment vessel, killing or seriously injuring the five engineering crewmen. The shields faltered momentarily as back-up power came on-line. But in those few moments, the sudden blast of charged particles ripped through the hull like hungry Pirhanna. The port side disruptor cannon was sheared away, spinning in the ionic eddies like a twig in a hurricane. Power couplings throughout the ship were quickly overloaded. Some failed, some began to spark, others exploded, killing or maiming more of the Klingon crew.

On the bridge, emergency bulkheads had sealed in the atmosphere, granting a temporary reprieve to the surviving crew. But even here, there was death. The one-eyed helmsman lay sprawled on the deck. The remains of his face a charred, smoking ruin adorned with bits of glass, ceramics and metal alloys. Likewise, the gunner was slumped over the tactical station, a long shard of metal protruding from his chest, his open eyes fixed and staring at some unseen point.

Commander Choq tried to get off the deck but found his legs would not cooperate. He felt cold and his vision was fading. He sensed someone squatting over him. He squinted, struggling to focus.

"Largon," he croaked. "Status . . ."

Largon stared at him with cold contempt. "Status? Our ship is wrecked, we have lost the *Req'ti*, and we are going to die without honor, you miserable *P'taQ!*" The ship lurched and Largon caught his balance by grabbing Choq by the throat, his dagger raised in his right hand. "I should have killed you when I first had the chance!" Largon growled.

A brilliant green burst of light erupted between Choq and Largon, accompanied by a sharp burst of sound. Largon was thrown backwards, his body hit the deck and slid, leaving a trail of bright, pink blood. The dagger tumbled across the metal grating with a metallic rattle.

Choq held the disruptor shakily. He ran his tongue over dry lips. "For once . . . I agree with you . . . Lieutenant. You should have . . . killed me first."

With slow, painful effort, Choq drug himself to the tactical station, willing himself to stay conscious. He knew his time was short, but he had a final duty to perform. Just above him, just out of reach was a switch hidden by a protective cover . . .

* * *

Stardate 54070.2 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

The Molari Badlands

Chief Brundy moved with impressive speed for a man his size. He jumped up and caught the handholds leading into the Jeffrey's tube. He muscled his way in, crawling forward on his elbows and knees into the dark space.

"Commander! Answer me! Are you hurt?" He moved forward until he bumped against her still form. In the tight space, he checked for a pulse, placing his hand along her neck. Nothing.

With a curse and surge of adrenaline, he moved backwards quickly, pulling the unconscious woman out of the Jeffrey's tube. He slid out, landing on the deck with Simms landing on top of him. He quickly placed her on the deck and slapped his combadge.

"Brundy to sickbay! Medical emergency, deck four, starboard." He again checked for a pulse and listened to her chest. Nothing.

Tilting the young woman's head back, he cleared her airway, pinched her nostrils and administered three quick breaths. Then, he moved to her side and began CPR.

* * *

"I've got them, sir!" shouted Ensign Vashtee over the increasing noise level of the struggling impulse engines. "On screen."

Even with the distorting interference, the scene that appeared on the main viewer caused Akinola to shake his head sadly. The small freighter was slowly tumbling, frozen gases trailed from obvious breaches in the hull. Nearby, a Klingon Bird of Prey also drifted - its hull ravaged and scarred. Plasma and frozen atmosphere surrounded the ship like a wreath.

"Scan for life signs, Ensign. Mr. Bralus, move us in as close as you can. Let's try to extend our shields around the *Backroad*. Vashtee, try to hail both ships. Let's see if anyone is still alive to help." Akinola felt a sick feeling in his gut. It appeared that they were too late.

* * *

Corpsman Rice and Dr. Castille skidded to a stop by Chief Brundy and the prone form of Delta Simms. Rice none too gently pushed Brundy back and Castille moved a scanner over Simms. Checking the reading, he uttered a curse and pulled a hypo-spray from his med-kit. He dialed in a dose and

pressed the hypo spray against Delta's neck. He glanced at the scanner and shook his head.

"Corticle stimulator," he said, tersely. Rice took a small, flat device and placed it on Delta's forehead. She pressed a stud on her own scanner.

Delta's body spasmed again and she drew in a sharp breath. Her body began to tremble and spasm.

"V-tach!" said Castille who administered a second hypo-spray to Delta's neck.

"Come on, Delta! Breathe, goddammit!" Castille uttered through clenched teeth.

After a moment, the spasms eased and she seemed to relax, this time her chest rose and fell with normal respiration. Castille seemed to relax slightly and nodded.

"Her pulse is still thready, but I think we can move her to sickbay now," announced Castille. "Can't risk beaming her there in her condition with this damned storm. Chief - give us a hand with the stretcher."

* * *

Stardate 54070.2 (27 January 2377)

IKS *Jhar'toq*

Molari Badlands

His arms shaking with effort, Commander Choq managed to drag the dead gunner from his chair. Now, he pulled with his remaining strength, trying to hoist himself up to reach the tactical station and one particular control switch.

The ship rocked violently as a gravimetric wave gripped the derelict vessel. Choq lost his grip on the chair, sliding on the blood slicked seat cover. With a snarl of frustration, he once again reached up and grabbed the top of the chair.

"Get up . . . get up, you weak . . . son of a targ," he hissed at himself, furious to be so close to his goal, yet unable to reach it. With a scream of pain and effort, he managed to get himself to a precarious perch on the chair. He waited a moment as his vision dimmed, *"Can't fall now . . . must stay awake . . ."* he

thought. His breath was raspy and shallow. Choq knew that his injuries would catch up with him soon. He didn't have much time.

Blinking hard to stay alert, he scanned the tactical station. There seemed to be two of everything - his blurred vision now doubled. Over there - to his left. Yes, there was the cover. He reached a trembling hand, *hands?* toward the cover. He tried closing one eye - yes! that helped. He flipped up the cover. Inside was a D-shaped handle. He managed to grab it and pull it straight up. It ratcheted up several centimeters, then clicked into a final stop.

A deep, monotone computer voice spoke. *Self-destruct sequence is armed. To engage, enter command authorization code.*

Keeping one eye closed, Choq punched in his personal code on the console's keypad. A blue light flickered to life, dimmed, then steadied.

Authorization code accepted. Depress activation switch to detonate.

Choq coughed. His breath was becoming more labored and his vision was constricting. He took a hitching breath. "It is . . . a good day . . . to die."

With the last of his strength, he plunged the handle down.

Chapter Ten

Stardate 54070.3 (27 January 2377)

IKS *Jhar'toq*

Molari Badlands

Fate has a twisted sense of humor.

The same destructive energies that had heavily damaged the *Jhar'toq* had conspired to delay its destruction. The old *B'Rel*-class scout utilized a mechanical linkage to open the magnetic hatch which separated the matter from the anti-matter in the warp core. The linkage was damaged from the heavy battering of the ion storm. When Choq engaged the self destruct sequence, the mechanical arm that should have opened wide the magnetic hatch jammed after moving mere millimeters. Thus, rather than the sudden, catastrophic explosion which should have occurred, the magnetic seal only allowed a tiny stream of anti-deuterium to enter the inter-mix chamber.

Still, in a short time, perhaps five to ten minutes, the resulting imbalance would ultimately lead to a warp-core breach and explosion.

* * *

Stardate 54070.3 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

The Molari Badlands

"Oh, *Hell* no!" exclaimed Ensign Vashtee.

"What is it Maya?" asked Akinola, sharply.

She turned to face the Captain, her face pale, her eyes wide. "I'm reading an imminent warp-core breach on the Bird of Prey!"

Her pronouncement caught the attention of everyone on the bridge. "Any life-signs on the Klingon vessel?" demanded Akinola.

"No - No, sir," Vashtee replied, a slight tremor in her voice. "I am reading three life forms on the *Backroad*." She swallowed. "I estimate we have anywhere from five to ten minutes before that warp core explodes."

"Okay, we've got to do this fast," said Akinola. He spoke quickly but in a calm, reassuring manner. "Mr. Bralus, bring us in as close as you can to that 'Thunder-jug.' I don't care if you scratch the paint. Inga - as soon as possible, extend our shields around that ship!"

Akinola tapped his combadge. "Akinola to Lt. Bane."

"Bane, go ahead Captain," the Australian Lieutenant replied from his station in Auxiliary Control.

"I need you and Chief Deryx to transport over to the *Backroad*. There are three souls on board. And Nigel . . ."

"Sir?"

"That Bird of Prey is about to blow its warp-core. Get this done *fast!* If you can't get them over here in five minutes, well . . ." Akinola left the rest unsaid.

"No worries, sir! We'll get 'em quick enough."

Akinola smiled, "I know you will. Good luck, son."

The Captain could not see the haunted expression on Commander Strauss' face.

* * *

Stardate 54070.3 (27 January 2377)

SS Janus

The Molari Badlands

The old *Avenger*-class ship was taking a severe beating as it pushed ahead into the raging ion storm.

"Damage reports coming in from all decks," announced the Ops officer. "Forward shields are beginning to fluctuate."

"Boost with auxiliary power," ordered Captain Forrash. His antennae twitched in agitation. "Transfer power from life-support if you have to, but maintain those shields!"

"Multiple contacts, bearing dead ahead!" announced the helmsman.

"Identify!" ordered Commodore Garth.

"One moment, sir, I'm trying to clean up these returns," said the Ops officer. She frowned in concentration. "*Albacore*-class cutter . . . it appears to be very close to another ship . . ." she looked up suddenly. "It's the *Backroad*."

Garth relaxed slightly. Maybe his people would be rescued after all.

"One additional contact! . . . Klingon Bird of Prey - *B'Rel*-class!"

"Location of the Klingon ship!" barked Garth, his senses now heightened. He was in full-command mode.

"3000 kilometers from the cutter and the *Backroad*. It appears to be drifting . . . wait . . ." She turned quickly from the sensor panel. "I'm reading a warp-core breach in progress!"

In the blink of an eye a dozen possible scenarios raced through Garth's sharp mind. Eleven ended with disastrous outcomes. One scenario had a slim chance.

"Helm, I need every bit of speed you can give me. Bring us in to rendezvous with the cutter and the *Backroad*."

Forrash gave his mentor a questioning look. "You have a plan?"

"If I were that cutter commander, I would extend my shields around the *Backroad* so I could beam over a rescue party. But by doing so, they're straining their shields to the limit. With the pounding they've taken from the ion storm, I doubt they can survive a warp-core explosion." He fixed the Andorian captain with a piercing look. "But if we extend *our* shields around both ships, they might survive!"

"And what of us, Commodore? Do we sacrifice ourselves?" The question was not accusatory. Forrash simply wanted to know. He was willing to give his life at the order of Garth.

Garth smiled. "I have no intention of sacrificing the good people on this ship, Captain. Once we have our shields extended, I'll request permission to beam our people over to the cutter. I'm sure they can squeeze us in with little trouble."

"But we'll still lose the *Janus*," Forrash pointed out.

Garth shrugged. "It's about time to get a new ship, anyway. Lieutenant, hail that cutter!"

* * *

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

The Molari Badlands

"Captain, the away team had transported to the *Backroad*," reported Vashtee.

Akinola nodded. "Thank you Maya. Any updates on that Klingon vessel?"

"No sir. Energy readings are still climbing. At their current rate of increase, we have seven minutes, twelve seconds before detonation."

Akinola did some quick mental calculations. With two minutes at full impulse, they could open up considerable distance between them and the Bird of Prey. But would it be enough? Akinola didn't think so.

"Sir? Another vessel is approaching - we're being hailed."

Now what? thought Akinola, surprised. "On screen, Ensign."

The image that appeared on the screen suffered from ionic interference, but it was clear enough. A bridge of obvious Federation design came into view. An Andorian wearing a tan uniform stood by a man seated in the command chair. Akinola was surprised to see that he was wearing a white, linen suit and sandals. His hair was long and white. But even with the interference, his steel-gray eyes were piercing. Akinola thought he looked somehow familiar. The man spoke.

"Federation Border Cutter, this is the SS *Janus* out of Klaamet IV. We wish to offer our assistance."

Even the voice had a familiar ring. Akinola frowned. "*Janus*, I'm Captain Joseph Akinola in command of the USS *Bluefin*. I appreciate the offer, but we are conducting SAR-OPs under very hazardous conditions. There's a Klingon

vessel nearby that's about to blow it's warp core. I advise that you clear out of the area at best speed."

The man stood from the chair. "We're aware of the situation, Captain. The ship you are assisting is in my hire so we are willing to face the risk. I propose that we extend our shields around both your ship and our transport. With two layers of shielding, we all may survive the blast."

"I doubt your ship would, Captain . . . ?"

The man smiled and gestured to the Andorian. "Forrash, here is the captain. I own both vessels and am responsible for the safety of both crews. Please, Captain - allow us to help! I assure you, our shields combined with yours will provide the protection we all need. I would request that you allow our crew to beam to your vessel once we've extended our shields."

Akinola could not find fault in the plan and he had no better options. "Very well - but make it fast! We're down to the wire, here." He checked the ship's chronometer. "That Bird of Prey is going to blow in less than six minutes!"

* * *

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)

SS Backroad

The Molari Badlands

Lt. Bane and Chief Deryx found themselves weightless and floating as they materialized in the *Backroad*. The ship was dark, save for the pale, yellow emergency lanterns. Both men switched on their helmet lights.

"Chief, I'll head topside. I'm reading two lifeforms up there. See if you can find the one here in the cargo bay."

"Yeah - Frakkin' storm is playing hell with my tri-corder. I guess we'll have to eye-ball it."

"Four minutes, thirty seconds, Chief. Then we head back - with or without 'em. Captain's orders."

Deryx grunted. "Understood." The Denobulan CPO began to pull himself along by grabbing the hull braces. Bane moved forward until he found a ladder. In the zero-g conditions, he easily pulled his way up until he found a sealed

hatch. He saw with satisfaction that it was an air-lock. Unfortunately, the ship lacked power so he would have to open it manually - which would take time.

He pulled a hyper-jack off his belt, inserted it in the slot by the hatch, and began to pump it quickly. The sweat that trickled down his face was not entirely due to exertion.

* * *

The *Janus* moved into position slightly above the *Bluefin* and *Backroad*. It slowly settled until its dorsal section was mere meters from the *Bluefin's* saucer section.

On the bridge of the *Bluefin* Akinola nodded to himself as he watched the *Janus* move into position. Obviously, they had a very capable helmsman. He again briefly wondered about the man in the command chair of the *Janus*. Akinola knew him somehow, but from where? And why had he avoided giving his name?

His reverie was interrupted by Commander Strauss. "The *Janus* has extended their shields around us and the *Backroad*. We've opened a window in our shields and they're beginning to beam over their personnel," she reported.

"Good. How many in their crew?"

"Fifty seven sir. I've got a team setting up space for them on the hangar deck."

"Fine." He glanced again at the chronometer and frowned. He tapped his combadge. "Akinola to Lt. Bane - what's your status?"

* * *

His arm burning with exertion, Lt. Bane continued to rapidly pump the hyper-jack. Finally, the hatch slid open and a small remnant of atmosphere swirled past him, carrying small bits of debris. Motes of dust reflected in his helmet lights. As he pulled the tool out of the door slot, his helmet speakers crackled.

"Akinola to Lt. Bane - what's your status?"

"Just getting through the air-lock to the flight deck, sir."

"Shake a leg, Nigel. We're beaming you off that wreck in two minutes."

"Understood." Bane floated up into the air-lock chamber and pulled the hatch closed. Thankfully, re-pressurizing the chamber only required turning a valve. As pressure replaced vacuum, he began to hear the hiss of pressurization. He checked the tri-corder strapped to his fore-arm. It indicated point eight atmospheres. Good enough, then.

He checked a bulkhead mounted gauge and was relieved to see that the flight deck still had pressure. He pulled the lever and opened the hatch.

* * *

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)

SS Janus

The Molari Badlands

"That's everyone except for you and me, sir," reported Captain Forrash. "It's time for us to go."

Garth of Izar smiled at his long-time friend and placed a hand on his shoulder. "One of us needs to stay and monitor the shields. If we lose one, we'll have to make manual adjustments to compensate."

"I'll do it," said Forrash. "As Captain, that's my responsibility."

Garth squeezed the nerve bundle at the base of Forrash's neck. The Andorian's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the deck.

"I never thanked Slevok for teaching me that trick," muttered Garth as he drug the unconscious Andorian onto the transporter platform.

* * *

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)

SS Backroad

The Molari Badlands

A blue glow caught the attention of Chief Deryx. He turned his helmet lights toward the source. Against the far bulkhead loomed a large, yellow cargo robot. Curled in the outstretched arms of the machine was a space-suited figure.

Deryx kicked against a structural beam and flew toward the robot. He noted with consternation that a sizable hole gaped across the port side of this section. He averted his gaze from the opening, concentrating on finding a handhold on the robot.

To his surprise. The 'bot extended an arm and gently caught Deryx. The Chief moved toward the still crewman and looked into the faceplate.

A young man - not more than a boy, really, peered back at him with wide eyes through the fogged faceplate. Deryx looked over the boy's pressure suit, noting that his air supply was okay but that it lacked a communicator. He placed his visor directly against the boy's visor, hoping that the contact would allow them to communicate.

"I'm Chief Deryx of the Border Service. We need to beam you off of here, right now!"

The boy was scared and confused. He shook his head, gesturing toward the robot. "... leave without Max,"

Deryx frowned. "Who's Max?"

Bug pointed again. "The robot - he's got to go, too!"

Deryx sighed. "We'll see what we can do, kid." He nudged the transmit key with his chin. "Deryx to *Bluefin*. Two to beam over. And have the cargo transporter on standby."

* * *

Lt. Bain found two occupants on the cramped flight deck. Both were unconscious, but appeared to be alive. He unstrapped them from their seats and activated his communicator.

"Bane to *Bluefin* - I've located two survivors. Lock onto my signal and beam us over." In a moment, the transporter effect engulfed them and they vanished from the *Backroad*."

* * *

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)
IKS *Jhar'toq*

Molari Badlands

A gravimetric wave engulfed the IKS *Jhar'toq*, twisting the derelict. The impact jarred the linkage of the anti-matter containment hatch, allowing it to slide open. The remaining anti-deuterium dumped into the intermix chamber, creating a final, cataclysmic reaction.

The *Jhar'toq* disappeared in an expanding corona of light and released energy.

Chapter Eleven

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Badlands

Blinding white light filled the main viewscreen on the *Bluefin's* bridge, dazzling the crew before the screen compensated and dimmed.

Akinola slapped the intra-ship comm button. "All hands! Brace for impact!" He tightly grasped the armrests of the command chair, unconsciously bracing himself for the imminent blast wave.

* * *

In sickbay, Dr. Castille was shouting orders to his staff. "Secure the patients and hang on!" He reached across the still unconscious form of Delta Simms and tightly gripped the rails on her bed.

* * *

Moving with astounding speed and agility, Commander Galt raced to the main engineering panel and pulled four large handles, taking the mains off-line and activating a containment field around the warp core.

* * *

In transporter room two, Lt. Bane had not cleared the platform when Akinola's voice boomed through the ship.

"Get down!" shouted Bane, as he placed his arms around the still-unconscious Carmine and Shonda.

* * *

Stardate 54070.4 (27 January 2377)

SS *Janus*

Molari Badlands

Seated at Auxiliary Control, deep within the heart of the *Janus*, Garth of Izar remotely activated the transporter, then watched in awe on the viewscreen as

the *Jhar'toq* went nova. His finger was poised steadily over a control on the helm as he waited . . .

* * *

IMPACT

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Bridge

It felt like they had rammed into a solid wall.

Everyone on the bridge was ejected from their seat. The lights blinked once, twice and everything went dark - the only illumination provided by the sparks from over-loaded LCARS panels.

Akinola felt himself move upward, out of his chair. He absently wondered if the gravity coils had failed. Then, he awkwardly hit the deck - his breath exploding from him in a painful bark, the wind knocked out of him.

Strauss was launched from her station, her body slamming against the forward bulkhead. She slid to the deck, limp and still.

Lt. (j.g.) Bralus somersaulted over the helm console, landing on his back. This was fortunate as his board exploded in a shower of lethal shards.

Ensign Vashtee was not as fortunate as Bralus. Her board also exploded, sending her flying backward. Numerous shards slashed her face and torso. She landed awkwardly on the deck in a pool of spreading blood.

Senior Chief Brin had wisely hit the deck when Akinola had called out his warning. Even so, he was tossed hard against the pit rail, his head hitting one of the stanchions. He struggled to remain conscious, but darkness overwhelmed him.

* * *

Sickbay

The lights flickered and failed as the deck pitched wildly. Dr. Castille held tightly to the rails of Simms' bed, even as his feet flew out from beneath him. He heard equipment crashing and a scream of pain across the room.

As quickly as the violent motion began, it stopped. Emergency lights flickered on. Several more objects hit the deck, not as heavy this time.

"Is everyone alright?" Castille called in a shaky voice.

* * *

Engineering

Gralt blinked and shook his head. Something heavy was lying on top of him. He gingerly moved his arms and legs - at least they still worked. He tried to move, but whatever was on top of him weighed a good bit. He squirmed, trying to gain purchase on the object, and realized that it was a person.

"Hey! Whoever you are! How about getting off me?" He said. But even as he spoke, he felt the warm slickness of blood on the deck and on the figure.

The emergency lights came on, allowing Gralt to survey his surroundings. He struggled against the heavy figure, wriggling free and knelt to see who had fallen atop him.

Chief Brundy stared up at him with one unseeing eye, a shard of metal protruded from the left eye socket.

"Aw, Chief," Gralt whispered, sagging onto the deck, "Aw frak, no."

* * *

Bridge

The emergency lights came on, filling the bridge with an eerie redness. Tendrils of smoke drifted from multiple panels, adding a gray fog to the atmosphere. Sparks still geysered from the helm.

Akinola struggled to catch his breath. His side burned like fire. *Probably didn't do those gimpy ribs any good*, he thought. The smell of burning transtators tickled his nose, causing him to cough, which intensified the pain in his side.

Painfully, he staggered upright to survey the damage. He was momentarily puzzled to notice that all the stations were vacant. Then, he saw the rest of the bridge crew scattered across the deck, like broken discarded dolls.

He tapped his combadge, "Bridge . . . to sickbay," he wheezed, gasping painfully for enough air to speak. "Medical . . . emergency." He staggered backward, landing in his command chair. Then, steeling himself against the pain, he forced himself to his feet and moved toward Ensign Vashtee. He dropped to his knees beside her, his mouth dry with apprehension.

"Maya!" he whispered in a hoarse croak. Her face was streaked with blood. He placed his fingers alongside her neck. Yes! There was a pulse, but it was weak and irregular.

He staggered to the starboard bulkhead to get the first aid kit.

* * *

Sickbay

Over the sickbay intercom, Castille heard a voice he almost didn't recognize. "*Bridge . . . to sickbay . . . medical . . . emergency.*"

Castille shed his shock like removing a soiled shirt. "Sanders! Get to the bridge, stat! I'll be right behind you." He looked around sickbay at the patients. It appeared they had weathered the blast fairly well, their beds providing adequate restraint and protection. He saw Rice leaning against a bulkhead, her face nearly white with pain. She was cradling her left arm which was obviously broken.

"Computer - activate EMH program."

Immediately, a bald-pated EMH Mark I shimmered into view. "Please state the nature of the emergency," he said in a calm, confident tone.

"Let's just say things have gone to Hell in a hand-basket!" replied Castille as he grabbed a med-kit. "See to Corpsman Rice there - I need her functioning ASAP. Splint her arm and give her something for pain, but I need her head clear! And check on the other patients, too."

"*Splint her arm?*" The EMH sniffed in an offended manner. "Have we traveled back to the dark ages?"

"Just get on it!" growled Castille, "Or I'll trade you in on a newer model and you can spend the rest of your existence mining asteroids!"

"Well!" responded the EMH with raised eyebrows.

* * *

Auxiliary Control

Lt. Fralk shook the cobwebs from his head and tried to focus on the status panels before him. He frowned in consternation at the sheer number of flashing red lights, all clamoring for attention. He began to run through his check-list.

"Life support . . . okay!" He felt a bit of the fear ease at that. "Hull integrity . . ." He frowned as he noted several small hull breaches, primarily on the saucer, where hull plates had twisted. Emergency force fields kept in the atmosphere.

"Power . . ." At the moment, they were operating on emergency power, but the engineering panel showed that the warp-core was intact, just off-line. He blew out a relieved breath. "Nice work, Galt!" he murmured to himself.

Seeing that the *Bluefin* was not in imminent peril, he checked the sensors to get a sense of their surroundings. He frowned at the readings. *That doesn't make sense!* he thought.

According to the sensors, they were 8.2 light minutes from their previous location. And, there was no sign of either the *Backroad* or the *Janus*. For that matter, there were no traces of the late, lamented Bird of Prey.

"Did we make a warp jump?" he asked the room.

* * *

Engineering

Galt forced himself away from the body of CPO Brundy and moved stiffly toward the main Engineering panel. He expelled a breath of relief when he saw that the warp-core was undamaged and all major systems were intact. He ran the emergency sub-routine check, which revealed it was safe to bring the

mains on-line. He reached up and pushed the four, huge switches back into place.

A low hum and the increased level of light told him that things were working. Maybe not to his high standards, but enough to get by. He tapped his combadge.

"Gralt to sickbay."

"Sickbay - Corpsman Rice, go ahead, Commander." Gralt thought her voice sounded tight and strained.

"I'm afraid I have a casualty in engineering, Rice. Chief Brundy is dead."

A pause. "I'm sorry, Commander. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just bruised up. Where's Doc Castille?"

"On his way to the bridge - it sounds bad up there!" Gralt heard a definite tremor in her voice this time.

"Frak!" he muttered. "Okay, Rice. No rush down here," he glanced at the prone form of Brundy. "The chief's not going anywhere."

* * *

Bridge

Akinola used the multi-scanner from the first aid kit to check Vashtee's vital signs. Her pulse and respiration were worrisome, but at least her heart was beating and she was breathing. He was pretty certain she was going into shock. He removed a tiny square from the kit, pulled off a corner, and the square expanded into a pre-warmed blanket. He placed it gently over the young woman, feeling otherwise helpless.

"Skipper? You okay?" Brin was leaning over them, a prominent bruise had nearly closed his left eye.

"I'm okay," Akinola rasped. "Vashtee's in bad shape." He tried to take a deep breath, but stabbing pain grabbed him. "Check on the others, Solly - I've called sickbay."

Brin moved around the front of the helm where Bralus was trying to sit up.

"Take it easy, Mr. Bralus! Help's on the way."

Bralus merely nodded and lay back on the deck. Solly moved toward the tactical station but froze as he saw the crumpled form of Inga Strauss. He blinked and covered the distance in three quick strides.

Strauss was unconscious. A trickle of blood flowed from her right ear and her nose. Brin checked her pulse - at least it seemed strong and her breathing was steady.

The turbo-lift doors slid open and Corpsman Sanders and Dr. Castille hurried onto the bridge. Castille quickly surveyed the scene. He directed Sanders toward Solly and Inga, while he quickly moved toward Akinola. Castille grimaced as he saw Vashtee's face. He popped open his medical tri-corder and frowned.

"Internal bleeding . . . heart, lungs and liver seem okay . . . looks like the pulmonary vein was nicked, though . . . her eyes . . ." He snapped shut the tri-corder, not completing the sentence. Pulling out a hypo-spray, he made an adjustment to the dosage and applied it to her neck, the contents flowing in with a faint hiss.

"Doc!" called Sanders from across the bridge, "Commander Strauss has a skull fracture and sub-dural bleeding!"

"And I've got a tear in the pulmonary vein on Vashtee," Castille answered. He tapped his combadge. "Transporter room - anyone there?"

The voice of Chief Deryx replied, "Deryx here, who it this?"

"Doctor Castille. Chief, are the transporters working? We've got two we need to beam from the bridge directly to sick bay!"

"Wait one." There was a pause as Deryx checked the transporter console. "We're good to go, Doc. Give me a target."

"Just beam everyone off the bridge, Chief, they're all hurt."

* * *

Auxiliary Control

Satisfied that the ship was stable and secure, Lt. Fralk tried to contact the bridge.

"Auxiliary Control to bridge,"

There was no immediate response. Fralk was about to repeat his call, when the Captain contacted him.

"Akinola to Lt. Fralk, ship's status, please." The Captain's voice sounded reedy and thin.

Fralk frowned in concern but responded. "We took a pounding but all major systems are functioning. The mains are back on-line, life support is good, shields are still holding. We'll have to replace some hull plates and clean up inside, but we're holding together, sir."

"Good," a reedy breath, "Right now, you've got the conn, Lieutenant. The bridge is a mess, so we'll need you at Auxiliary Control for now." Another breath. "Send out a distress signal, we could use some help." A longer pause. "How did the *Janus* and the *Backroad* fair?"

"Sir, that's the wierd part. We're over eight light minutes from our previous coordinates. There's no sign of either of those ships."

Another pause. "Did we go to warp?"

"It wasn;t us, Captain. Gralt had the mains off-line. It had to be the *Janus*."

A longer silence. "I'll be in sickbay if you need me. Akinola, out."

Fralk activated the subspace transmitter. "Any ship, this is the USS *Bluefin*. We are in distress and request assistance. Repeat, any ship, this is the USS *Bluefin*, we are in distress and request assistance."

A response was nearly immediate. "*Bluefin this is the USS Growler. We have you on long-range scanners and are en route. What's the nature of your emergency?*"

"Growler, we were caught in the blast wave from a warp core explosion. We have injuries and require medical assistance. Our bridge is heavily damaged but otherwise, we're in pretty good shape."

"Understood, Bluefin. We will have medical teams ready to beam over. Our ETA is one hour, twenty minutes."

"Acknowledged, Growler. We appreciate the help."

"How's Captain Akinola? Was he hurt?"

"I just spoke to him. He's in sickbay, but he's alert and giving orders."

There was a chuckle over the channel. *"I imagine he could give orders in his sleep. Who am I speaking with?"*

"Lieutenant Fralk. I'm sitting in Auxiliary Control."

"Copy that, Lieutenant. I'm Commander Brennan, ship's XO. Hang in there - we're on the way."

"Just be careful of the ion storm, sir. It's a ball-buster!"

Another chuckle. *"You might want to check your sensors again, Lieutenant. That storm has dissipated. And you're almost in clear space anyway."*

Fralk checked the sensors again. "Huh! How about that!" he muttered.

"What ship blew up, Lieutenant?"

Fralk sighed, "Sir, that's a *long* story . . ."

Chapter Twelve

Stardate 54070.6 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Badlands

Commander Brennan was as good as his word. Less than an hour and twenty minutes later, the *Bluefin's* sister ship, the USS *Growler*, arrived on station. The *Albacore*-class cutter took up a position bow-on to the battered *Bluefin*.

In Auxiliary control, the face of a dark-skinned Vulcan woman wearing captain's pips appeared on Lt. Fralk's screen.

"*Bluefin*, this is Captain T'San of the *Growler*. We have medical and engineering teams standing by to beam over. Are you prepared to receive us?"

"Captain, this is Lt. Fralk. That's affirmative, ma'am. We request you beam one medical team to sickbay and one to the hangar deck. Our Chief Engineer, Commander Gralt, has requested any engineers meet him directly on the bridge."

Captain T'San nodded slightly. "Understood, Lieutenant. Our teams will beam over immediately. Please contact me if you require further assistance. The USS *Adair* is also en route - their ETA is four hours."

Fralk managed to keep a straight face and said, "Thank you, ma'am." To himself, he thought, "*Captain A's gonna get his butt chewed out when Captain Gunderson gets here!*"

T'San's eyebrow rose slightly, as if she had read Fralk's mind. "Captain Gunderson was most . . . insistent, that she help with the operation."

This time, Fralk did grin. "Yes ma'am - I have no doubt."

"We will be standing by. *Growler*, out."

* * *

Captain Akinola sat on a stool, blearily watching the controlled chaos of sickbay. Sanderson and Rice moved quickly from patient to patient - even the

EMH remained busy. Dr. Castille was in the surgical suite, attending to Ensign Vashtee.

The EMH approached Akinola, a medical tri-corder in hand. Akinola glared at him, but refrained from comment as the holographic physician scanned him.

The EMH folded the tri-corder with a snap of the wrist. "You have torn cartilage in your rib-cage and a bruised lung, Captain. Fortunately, you did not break any ribs - *this* time." There was a note of reproach in the EMH's voice.

"Just take care of it," wheezed Akinola, just as four figures materialized in Sick Bay. Three Border Service corpsmen and a short, Asian woman in a blue medical uniform materialized. She wore three pips on her collar and a frown on her face."

"Who's in charge here?" she demanded, a note of absolute authority in her voice.

"I'm Captain Akinola . . ." Joseph began.

"Not you!" she said, dismissively. "Who's the CMO?"

The EMH stepped forward. "Dr. Castille is in surgery at the moment. May I show you the triage list?"

Akinola slumped against the wall and muttered to himself, "I hate doctors . . ."

* * *

Lt. Sarnek heard the distinct sound of transporter effect, and turned to see four figures appear on the hangar deck. A tall, Andorian CPO walked forward.

"Lieutenant, I'm Chief Corpsman Lishdar, where do you need us?"

Sarnek pointed forward. "We've set up cots for the injured on the other side of the Star Stallions. Most are from the SS *Janus*. None of the injuries appear life-threatening, but I have no doubt our Corpsmen would welcome your help."

Lishdar nodded and turned to the other corpsmen from the *Growler*. "You heard the Lieutenant - grab your gear and make yourselves useful."

* * *

Akinola had to admit he felt much better. The EMH had pumped him full of anti-inflammatory drugs with some pain-killers. He was finally able to breathe deeply without pain, although admittedly, his entire side was numb.

He looked up to see Lt. Bane enter Sick Bay, still wearing his EVA suit. Bane's face was tight with worry, his hair was askew - tendrils plastered to his forehead by sweat. Akinola stood and intercepted the young officer.

"Lieutenant . . ."

"Sir, how is she? I heard . . ." Bane's voice trailed off.

Akinola gently placed his hands on Bane's shoulders. "Easy, son. Dr. Han from the *Growler* is with her right now. She's in good hands."

"I want to see her." It wasn't a request.

Akinola gazed into the scared young man's eyes for a moment before nodding. "Come on." He led Bane back into Sick Bay.

* * *

Lt. Commander Galt, Senior Chief Brin and Lt. Commander Xorthan from the *Growler*, stared at the carnage on the *Bluefin's* bridge. The harsh stink of burnt materials and fire suppressant hung in the air, burning their nostrils and their eyes.

The scaly Rigellian, Xorthan, made a clicking noise of sympathy with his beak. "You've got a mess here, Galt."

Galt gave the Chief Engineer of the *Growler* a baleful look. "Fornicating deities! Xorthan - ya think? I'm so glad for your expertise - we wouldn't have been able to figure that out on our own, would we Senior Chief?"

Xorthan opened his beak wider revealing a sharp, black tongue, then snapped it closed again. "Frak you, Galt!" he replied with a gurgling chuckle. "So what *do* you think? Repair or replace?"

Gralt sighed. "It might be easier to drop in a new bridge module, but I'm hearing rumors that Fleet Ops might start retiring any heavily damaged *Albacores*. I think I'd rather patch her up myself instead."

The Rigellian bobbed his head in agreement. "Okay. Where do you want my people?"

"Have them pull all the LCARS panels and check the integrity of the conduits. I'll have my people fabricate any new consoles we need and get all the crapped-out stuff to the 'cyclers."

Xorthan turned to his engineering team. "You heard Commander Gralt - get to it!"

* * *

Dr. Han glared at Akinola and Bane when they entered the curtained cubicle where Inga lay. Her face softened, however, when she saw the look of anguish on Bane's face.

The top of Inga's head was hidden beneath an arch-shaped piece of equipment. Blue light escaped from the beneath of the device, creating mysterious shadows on Inga's face. Monitors over her bed beeped softly, with a reassuring rhythm.

Nigel stepped forward and took her left hand in both of his. He leaned over and gently kissed her hand before carefully lowering it back to the bed. He maintained his grip on that hand as he settled onto a bed-side stool. His eyes were riveted on her serene face.

"How is she?" he asked, quietly.

Dr. Han glanced at Akinola, then at Lt. Bane. "She's stable, Lieutenant. She suffered a skull fracture and some inter-cranial bleeding. We've repaired the fracture and staunched the blood flow, but there is some swelling to the brain."

Bane swallowed. "What . . . How long for her to recover?" he asked in that same, quiet voice.

Han grimaced and again glanced at Akinola. "I can't say yet. With a brain injury we must be cautious. As I said, we've repaired the obvious damage -

now her body must do its part. That takes time." Her voice was calm and sympathetic, quite a contrast to her initial demeanor in Sick Bay. "Would you like to sit with her, Lieutenant?"

Bane simply nodded. Dr. Han looked questioningly at Akinola who nodded in return. "Very well. You may talk to her if you wish. It is quite possible that she hears us, even in a comatose state."

Akinola placed a hand on Bane's shoulder. "Take some time with her, Nigel. When you can, get changed and something to eat. For now, Lt. Fralk is acting XO and you're my second officer. You can relieve Fralk in Auxiliary Control later."

Bane nodded. "Thank you, Captain."

The Captain gave Bane's shoulder a squeeze and he left the cubicle. He saw Dr. Castille exit the surgical suite, peeling off a blood-spattered surgical gown. His face was drawn and haggard, dark circles under his eyes made him look older. The Doctor slumped down and sat on the same stool where Akinola had perched. He looked up when he saw Akinola approach.

"Doc? . . ." Akinola began.

A small smile formed on the Doctor's face. "Damn, I'm good," he said, in a weary but satisfied tone.

The Captain relaxed slightly. "I take it the surgery went well?"

Castille leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. "Oh yeah!" He breathed out a sigh and rubbed his eyes. "The repair to the pulmonary vein was text-book perfect! And her eyes . . ." He paused a moment. "I have to admit, I was really concerned about her eyes, but by God, her vision will be better now than before! I was able to correct a tiny bit of astigmatism in her left eye." With his eyes still closed, he shook his head slowly side to side and chuckled softly. "I wish I had time for a drink!"

Akinola smiled. "Tell you what, Doc. When we get back to Echo, I'm buying."

Castille took a deep breath, and yawned expansively. "I'll hold you to that."

* * *

For the third time, Lt. Fralk ran through the sensor logs from just prior to the warp-core explosion to several minutes past. He frowned in puzzlement each time. It just didn't make sense!

The door to Auxiliary Control slid open and Lt. Sarnek entered, carrying a tray.

"I thought you might be hungry, so I took the liberty of bringing you food." Sarnek placed the tray on an adjacent console.

"May the Other bless you with seven wives!" said Fralk happily as he lifted the cover off the plate. A strong, sour smell filled the space. Fralk's grin widened to that rather disconcerting degree that only Denobulans can manage. "Kimchi! Bless Cookie's cholesterol-filled heart!"

Sarnek managed to not wrinkle his nose. "I must admit, I find your affection for this Terran . . . 'food' . . . to be puzzling."

Fralk took a large bite of the spicy, fermented cabbage. He closed his eyes in delight. "Oh yeah, that's good!" he chewed appreciatively. "I first tried it at a Korean restaurant on Starbase 315. It's very similar to a popular Denobulan dish." His eyes fell on the display over which he had been working. "Say Sarnek, since you're here, how about taking a look at the sensor log - It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Sarnek seated himself in an adjacent chair and ran through the readout. After several minutes, he leaned back, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" asked Fralk.

Sarnek's eyebrow twitched. "Perhaps. If I am reading this correctly, it appears that the *Janus* somehow beamed something off the *Backroad*, then jumped to warp mere nano-seconds after the blast wave hit us. Apparently, our proximity to the *Janus'* warp field hurled us 8.213 light minutes from our original position."

* * *

Lt. Commander Delta Simms felt like someone had shoved her out an airlock. Her head pounded, her chest ached and her dry mouth tasted like a swamp. *If I hurt like this, I'm either still alive or I've died and gone to Hell*, she thought.

Her eyelids seemed sticky, but with effort, she forced them open. Her vision was blurry, but she could tell she was in Sick Bay. Then, someone appeared over her bed. She squinted, trying to focus her eyes.

Octavius Castille grinned at her. *He looks exhausted!* thought Delta. She cleared her throat. "Could I have some water?" she croaked.

Castille disappeared from her view momentarily, then returned with a cup of ice water with a straw. Delta sipped the water greedily.

"Easy! Not too much too quick - it'll make you sick to your stomach." He pulled the cup out of her reach. She blinked again, her vision clearing.

"What happened?" she asked.

He favored her with a sad smile. "A lot's happened since you left the building. As for you, you took a nasty shock while in the Jeffrey's tube. You gave us all quite a scare!"

She frowned. "I can't remember that - last I remember, Chief Brundy gave me a boost into the tube. He must have pulled me out."

Something flickered across Castille's face. "Yes, that's right. Listen, you need to rest . . ."

"I really need to thank Chief Brundy for saving my butt . . . Guess I should have listened to him in the first place."

"Sure, sure. Look, I've got a room full of patients. I'll see you again in a bit."

She smiled. "See that you do!"

* * *

Captain Akinola joined Lt. Fralk and Lt. Sarnek in Auxiliary control. Fralk was about to report their findings, when they were interrupted by an in-coming hail.

Bluefin, this is the USS Adair - respond please.

A rueful smile formed on Akinola's face. "She found out, huh?"

Fralk gave him a sympathetic look. " 'Fraid so, Captain. They made good time getting here - we weren't expecting them for another 20 minutes."

The Captain shook his head and responded to the hail. "*Adair*, this is the *Bluefin*, go ahead."

The small viewscreen came to life, revealing the face of Captain Margaret Gunderson. Gunderson and Akinola had a long and occasionally intimate history. They still had deep feelings for one another, though they no longer had a "formal" relationship. Gunderson's attractive face was a mixture of concern and relief. She absently tucked a length of chestnut brown hair behind an ear.

"Joseph? Are you alright? What's your status?"

"We're banged up but in one piece, Marge. Captain T'San and the *Growler* are helping out. You didn't have to . . ."

"Like Hell!" she interrupted. "We'll be on station in ten minutes, then I'm beaming over to see for myself. I've got teams ready to help wherever you need them."

Joseph chuckled. "Okay, okay! But I warn you, it's already crowded over here. We've got more than 50 personnel from the SS *Janus* on board."

"We'll squeeze in. Gunderson, out."

"You handled that well, sir," said Fralk, with a straight face.

"Up yours, Lieutenant," Akinola said, chuckling. "Now, what was it in the sensor logs you wanted to show me?"

Chapter Thirteen

Stardate 54070.8 (27 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Badlands

Sickbay

Nigel Bane gently caressed Inga's left hand. Though her vital signs were strong and steady, she remained unconscious.

"Y'know," began Nigel, softly, "I've been a jerk these past few weeks . . . I guess I've been feelin' sorry for m'self, what with Jack's troubles and all." He sighed, looking at the small slender fingers in his rough, tanned hand. "And I was scared over what almost happened to you on the *Greeley*. I felt responsible, Inga. I would hate to do anything that would hurt you in any way." He paused again, listening to the reassuring beep of the monitor and glancing at her lovely, still face.

"And, I've got to admit - I'm scared for you now. I hope you wake up soon, 'cause, to be honest, I don't know what I'd do without you. But I also understand you're doin' what you love. Hell, I guess we both are, aren't we? And, like you said - if we're goin' to have a future, we've just got to deal with that. . . No," he corrected himself, "*I* have to deal with it. I think you already have."

He glanced at the chronometer over her bed and stood. "I guess my time's about up for now. I've got to relieve Fralk in a few minutes and need to change out of this EVA suit." He leaned over her, brushing her lips with his own. He hesitated, then said in a whisper, "I love you, Inga Strauss."

But Inga remained still and silent.

* * *

Auxiliary Control

Akinola crossed his arms, the furrow in his brow deepening as Fralk and Sarnek reviewed the sensor logs for him.

"So you're telling me that *someone* stayed on the *Janus*, beamed something off the *Backroad*, and jumped to warp a split-second after the explosion?"

Fralk nodded. "That's pretty much what happened."

"I'll be damned," the Captain murmured. "I'd bet my retirement income that I know what was beamed off the *Backroad*. And I've got a hunch who the culprit is, which should be easy to ascertain."

"What should be easy to ascertain?" came a feminine voice from the doorway of Auxiliary Control.

"Hi Marge!" said Akinola with a crooked grin. "You up for a round of 'good cop - bad cop?'"

* * *

Officers' Wardroom

Captain Forrash had a headache. That headache was intensifying as the dark-skinned Border Service captain continued to interrogate him, occasionally with shouts and veiled threats of physical violence. The fair-skinned female captain was much friendlier, yet she kept asking the same questions with maddening persistence, as if she had not heard his answers.

"For the tenth time," said Forrash, angrily, "I do not *know* what happened to the *Janus*! I was unconscious when I was beamed over. You can verify that with your transporter chief!"

Akinola snorted. "Easy enough to fake, Captain. You still haven't answered this question - who stayed behind on the *Janus*?"

Forrash shook his head. "I'm not sure - most of the crew had already beamed over here." His eyes flicked away from Akinola for just a moment.

You're lying, thought Akinola. "Well, since your memory is faulty, let me help you out. Our Lt. Sarnek has checked your crew manifest. All are accounted for except the owner of the vessel - a Mr. Larson Chandler."

Forrash nodded, but again, he avoided direct eye-contact. "Yes, Mr. Chandler is the owner of the *Janus*. He hired the crew of the *Backroad* to purchase some items at auction in the Klingon empire. It's all perfectly legal and above board, Captain!"

"Your Mr. Chandler looked familiar to me, Captain Forrash. Why is that?" Akinola's voice was no longer loud, but his quiet tone was somehow more ominous.

Forrash shrugged. "Mr. Chandler is well known as a philanthropist and explorer. No doubt, you've seen him on the news-net."

"No doubt," said Akinola, said sarcastically. "That's all the questions for now, Captain Forrash. Why don't you go back and join your crew - I believe dinner is being served for them about now."

Forrash stood, nodded curtly and left the wardroom. Akinola looked at Captain Gunderson, who raised her eyebrows.

"So? . . ." she queried.

"So, he's hiding something. Damned if I know what, though."

"What do you want to do now?"

Akinola stood and winced. The pain-killers were starting to wear off and his side was throbbing. "Right now, I want to get something to eat, then get another pain shot. After that, why don't you join me for a little side-trip in one of the Stallions. I want to go check out the area where that Bird of Prey blew - maybe there's something there to give us a clue."

Captain Gunderson looked doubtful. "Joseph, anything within a few thousand kilometers was reduced to sub-atomic particles."

"Yeah, you're probably right. But I'll feel better seeing for myself. And I think we'll take Captain Telestro and his crew along too. Maybe they can shed some more light on this little mystery."

* * *

Sickbay

Delta was getting the fidgets. She was feeling fine, really! And she was ready to get back to work. Yet Dr. Castille had been hesitant to release her from Sickbay for some reason.

As if summoned, Castille approached her bed, a padd in hand.

"How are you feeling, Delta?"

"Like I keep telling everyone - I'm *fine!* Will you *please* let me out of here so I can get back to work? I know we're short-handed right now."

Castille smiled. "Actually, with the *Growler* and the *Adair* here, we've got people running into each other. There's no sense rushing back to duty, Delta. A plasma shock can have lasting neurological effects. We just want to make sure that you don't have any nasty after-effects, that's all. Just be patient."

"I'm *tired* of being a patient, O.C.! Look - if you let me out, I promise to behave - I'll rest in my quarters. Just give me a chance to find Chief Brundy and thank him for saving my life."

A pained expression crossed Castille's face. He took her hand. "Delta, there's something I need to tell you . . ."

* * *

Stardate 54070.9 (27 January 2377)

Star Stallion 01

Molari Badlands

Lt. Bralus piloted the Stallion with Senior Chief Brin riding shotgun. In the aft section, Captains Akinola and Gunderson sat across from Carmine Telestro, Shonda and Bug. A faint sheen of nervous perspiration glistened on Carmine's forehead.

"Listen, Captain - I want to thank you again for saving our butts! I really thought we were goners when we lost power!"

Akinola nodded. "It's part of our job, Mr. Telestro. Glad to be of service."

"Yeah, right. But I gotta ask - why are we goin' back there? I mean, it's not like there's gonna be anything left of the *Backroad*, is there?"

Akinola made a non-committal gesture. "Probably not. I'm just a curious fellow, Mr. Telestro. I thought going back might help me get some things straight in my mind before I write my report. That's another part of the job, you know - writing reports. God knows, I hate that part! Still, I want to have my facts straight. You can understand that, can't you?" Akinola's expression

was serene and his tone pleasant. Still, Carmine felt like a mouse caught in a cat's gaze.

"Uh, sure. Sure I can! But I don't see how we can be much help."

Akinola smiled. "We'll see shortly."

Solly's voice boomed from the flight deck. "We're here, Skipper!"

"Excuse me, won't you?" Akinola made his way forward and stood between Bralus and Chief Brin.

"Anything?" he asked.

Brin shook his head. "Too much background radiation for any detailed scans. I'll try short-range and see if we get lucky."

"At least the storm has passed," muttered Bralus. "This is practically calm compared to a few hours ago."

"Fly a spiral search pattern, Mr. Bralus. We'll give it a couple of hours, then head back to the ship." Akinola returned aft. Captain Gunderson looked up.

"Well?" she asked.

Akinola shook his head. "Nothing yet. We'll poke around a while, maybe we'll luck up on something." He leaned back against the bulkhead and crossed his arms.

"So Mr. Telestro. Tell me about the *Req'ti*." Akinola said, pleasantly.

Carmine simply gaped at him.

Chapter Fourteen

Stardate 54070.9 (27 January 2377)

Star Stallion 01

Molari Badlands

Carmine swallowed, his mouth was dry as cotton. "I don't know what you're . . ." He began.

"Cut the bullshit!" Akinola thundered. Telestro winced and Shonda placed a hand on Carmine's arm in a protective manner. Akinola continued in a calmer tone.

"Mr. Telestro, right now I have a sickbay full of injured personnel. My assistant engineer, Chief Brundy, is dead. A Klingon Bird of Prey has blown itself to *Sto'voKor*. Your ship was destroyed, my cutter has been damaged, and the man who seems to be behind it all has left the party. Now . . ." Akinola leaned forward, gazing sternly at the unhappy freighter captain, "I'd really like to get some answers."

Carmine glanced at Shonda. The Deltan gave him a quick nod of encouragement and Telestro nodded in return.

"Okay, Captain. We owe you that much. And we are grateful to you for saving our lives - that's no bullshit! But you gotta understand, we probably don't know much more than you."

"Let me be the judge of that," replied Akinola. Captain Gunderson also leaned forward, giving her attention to Telestro.

Carmine let out a nervous, shaky breath. "Yeah, right." He rubbed his hands together and stared at the deck, gathering his thoughts, before looking back at the two cutter Captains.

"We're pretty much what you see - just Boomers trying to make a living. We made the Klaamet to Molari run because it paid well and there wasn't a lot of competition." He grinned crookedly. "Not too many folks like skirting the badlands or flying through the Molari asteroid belt."

Akinola nodded but didn't interrupt.

"Anyway, we hauled mining equipment, supplies, the occasional passenger - you know, normal stuff. You guys must see it all the time. We stayed clear of the black market and the Orions - I figured we didn't need that kind of trouble." He glanced at Shonda who gave him a small smile of encouragement.

"About a month ago, we were docked at the Port Hagner station orbiting Klaamet IV. To be honest, we were kind of desperate for work - one of the major mining operations in the Molari system had closed down - and I was shaking the bushes looking for a cargo run. Well, this well-dressed guy stops at our berth - shaved head, no neck, like a Marine - and says he has a proposition for us. His boss, Larson Chandler, collects Klingon artifacts and was interested in some specific items that were coming up for auction. The problem was, the auction was to be held on Q'Ralis, which is in Klingon territory. Bullet head says that Mr. Chandler was "not welcome in the Empire," for reasons he wouldn't discuss."

"So you didn't meet Chandler face-to-face?" asked Captain Gunderson.

Carmine shook his head. "No, never. Just his assistant - what was his name, Shonda?"

"Wayne. I'm not sure if it was his first name or last."

Carmine nodded in agreement. "Yeah, Wayne. He was very business-like and to the point. Not friendly, but not unfriendly either."

"Professional," observed Akinola.

"Yeah! That's it exactly! Anyway, he said if we would go to the auction and bid on certain items that Mr. Chandler would pay us 50 thousand in gold-pressed latinum. I gotta tell you, at first I thought ol' Wayne was yanking my chain, ya know? But then he opens a brief case with 10 thousand, right then and there. I nearly passed out! I've never seen that much scratch in my entire life!"

Akinola and Gunderson exchanged looks. 50 thousand in gold-pressed latinum was a small fortune!

"Wayne says, 'This is just a down payment. Complete the task successfully and you'll get the rest when you deliver the items.' Now, I have to admit, part of me is thinking that this is too good to be true - there's got to be some strings attached, right? So I ask Wayne that very question."

"And?" prodded Akinola.

"Wayne admitted that there *was* a possibility that certain Klingons might not be happy about Mr. Chandler purchasing these items, but that certain *guarantees* had been made to ensure we would be the winning bidders."

"Chandler bribed the auctioneer," said Akinola, flatly.

"Yeah. Now, here's where it gets strange - Wayne says that there is one item in particular that was . . . how did he put it? 'Sensitive' in nature."

"The *Req'ti*." said Akinola.

Carmine nodded. "Yeah, that's right. So I start to get second thoughts, I mean, what good is a fortune if you're dead and can't spend it, right?"

"But you took the job," pointed out Gunderson.

Telestro sighed and nodded. "Yeah, we took the job. Wayne assured us that the *Req'ti* was from a disenfranchised house and was no longer 'revered.'" Carmine frowned and barked out a bitter laugh. "Guess no one told the Klingons that nearly killed us!"

Akinola's eyes narrowed. "What was the name of the Klingon house?"

Carmine shrugged. "Hey, I don't know! I don't read Klingonese."

"I do," said Bug, who until now had remained silent. The others looked at him in surprise.

"There must have been an inscription on the box - do you remember what it said, son?" asked Akinola.

Bug nodded. "It said, *Remember the glory, honor and courage of Lord K'Tinga - May he find conquest in the Black Fleet.*

"Son of a bitch . . ." breathed Akinola.

* * *

**Stardate 54071.0 (28 January 2377)
Garth of Izar's personal shuttlecraft**

Sector 10106

Garth guided his personal shuttle through seldom-traveled inter-stellar space. He regretted abandoning the *Janus*, but the explosion and warp jump had badly damaged the old ship. He had limped into an unpopulated star system, loaded supplies into his shuttle, then set an automated course for the *Janus* that would take it into the system's star within a day's time.

He checked the flight computer. At his current speed of warp 4, he would reach his destination in three days. Garth felt regret over abandoning Forrash and the crew of the *Janus*, but at least they were safe and should avoid trouble. He was loathe to involve anyone else in the next step of his plan. If it succeeded, he would be lauded for his boldness and foresight. If he failed, well . . .

Setting the ship on auto-pilot, he moved aft to a small galley area. He ordered Izarian *Chamba* tea from the replicator, than sat down in a comfortable chair. Across from him, secured in another chair, rested the *Req'ti* of the late, lamented Lord Admiral K'Tinga of the Klingon Imperial Fleet.

Garth raised his tea cup in salute to the glossy black box. "To bold leaders, old fellow! May our tribe increase!" He smiled to himself, relishing a private joke.

"You were a worthy leader, Lord K'Tinga. It's been a long time since the Klingons had a leader worthy of their potential. I fought against one of your descendants, you know - Captain Kranth was a brilliant tactician! He nearly won the day for your empire at Axanar." Garth took a sip of the tea, savoring the spicy warmth. "It was a shame, no - a travesty that Koorlan, that idiot, cost your house the honor of your lineage!"

Garth leaned back in the chair and slowly drank his tea, his eyes half-closed in thought. "Now, your once noble empire is led by bickering fools and opportunists. Your best and brightest leaders were slaughtered like cannon fodder in the recent war. That makes your Empire an even greater threat to the Federation!" He placed the china cup on the table and steeped his fingers while peering at the box.

"Better we have an honorable adversary that we can understand and respect, than a dishonorable ally we cannot trust." Garth smiled, "Thus, it is time, Lord K'Tinga, for you to return . . ."

Chapter Fifteen

Stardate 54071.4 (28 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Badlands

Captain Gunderson had been right. There was no debris field at the point of explosion. However, they did gain some valuable information. The residual energy readings accounted for the destruction of the Klingon ship and the *Backroad*, but not the *Janus*. Clearly, it had escaped.

Upon returning to the *Bluefin*, Akinola retired to his quarters for a few hours of much-needed sleep. Gunderson had the crew of the *Janus* beamed to the *Adair* for transport back to Klaamet IV. Repair work continued on the *Bluefin*.

* * *

Captain's Ready Room

Akinola separated the remains of his wood carvings into two containers - salvageable and total losses. Only one carving - a model of a 23rd century *Perrigrine*-class cutter had survived unscathed. He was frowning over a model of an *Excelsior*-class ship, trying to determine if it was worth saving, when the door annunciator chimed.

"Come!" he called out.

Captain Gunderson entered, carrying two steaming mugs of coffee. She looked around sadly at Akinola's ready room.

"Oh, Joseph! All that hard work!" She handed him a mug and picked up the mangled remains of an *Alabcore*-class ship model.

Akinola accepted the mug gratefully. "Well," he began, "I'll have something to do when I can't sleep. I wasn't totally happy with a few of these carvings, anyway." He sat down in one of the leather guest chairs, indicating for Gunderson to sit in the other. She did, crossing her legs and taking a sip of her coffee, closing her eyes in appreciation.

"Mmmm. Chicory!" she said, appreciatively. "Tell you what, Joseph - I'll take Cookie off your hands in trade for all the help we've given you."

Akinola looked at his lovely friend with a bemused expression. "Margaret, I would very much hate to fire on your ship, *but!* . . ."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I swear, you are such a relic Jospeh! You probably have the only dedicated cook in all of Starfleet."

"And I intend to keep him." He changed the subject. "How are things going this morning?"

"We've got the crew of the *Janus* and the *Backroad* transferred to the *Adair*. They're all squared-away and we'll be departing for Klaamet IV within the hour."

Akinola nodded. "It looks like our bridge is nearly usable again. We'll head back to *Echo* to finish our repairs and turn Brundy's body over to his family."

Marge reached over and took Akinola's hand. "Joseph - it was a good operation! If you hadn't followed your instincts, the crew of the *Backroad* would be dead. Don't forget that!"

Akinola nodded morosely. "Yeah, I know. But, dammit! I still don't understand what this is all about! What's so important about K'Tinga's shriveled heart that Chandler would pay so much and risk so many lives? Hell, he's no Klingon! What was the point of all of this!"

Agitated, Akinola stood and walked to the viewport. In the near distance, the *Adair* hung in space.

Margaret stood, walked up behind Akinola and put her arms around him, resting her cheek against his back. "Joseph," she said, softly, "we don't always have the answers."

His eyes were hard as he stared out at the stars. "I refuse to accept that."

* * *

Bridge

Lt. Bane concentrated on calibrating the ship's sensors. Focusing on the task at hand helped staunch his worry over Inga. He had stopped by earlier to check on her but she remained in a comatose state.

Be patient, Mr. Bane Dr. Castille had admonished. *This may take some time. I promise to let you know if there's any change in her condition.*

"Okay, check panel B," said a muffled voice that came from beneath the console. Only Delta Simms' legs appeared from beneath the Ops station.

Nigel tapped the indicated control surface and it blinked to life.

"That's got it, Commander."

Delta wriggled out from under the console, her hair slightly disheveled. Nigel stifled a grin. It seemed that Commander Simms always had something askew - either her hair or coolant stains on her uniform or grease under her fingernails. Truth be told, he admired her hands-on approach to problems.

As if reading his mind, she ran her fingers through her auburn hair, trying to straighten the offending strands and recover a degree of decorum.

"Okay," she began, "We've got the essential stations up and running. I've got tactical tied-in to the helm for now and environmental is slaved to the engineering station. But we should be fine 'til we make it back to the station."

"Assuming we don't run through any more ion storms or warp-core explosions," Bane pointed out.

"Too true," she admitted as she looked around the bridge. "It wouldn't take much to undo these repairs."

Banes' combadge came to life. *"Sickbay to Lt. Bane."*

Bane started. An expression of apprehension came over his face. Delta also looked concerned.

"Bane - go ahead, Doc."

"There's a certain Executive Officer down here asking to see you. So, whenever you get the chance to stop by..."

Nigel's face broke out in a goofy grin. Delta smiled broadly and squeezed his arm. "Go on, Nigel! I'll cover the bridge while you're gone."

"Yes ma'am - Thank you!" He trotted toward the turbo-lift and disappeared.

Still smiling, Delta tapped her combadge. "Simms to Sickbay."

Castille's voice answered. *"Go ahead, Delta."*

"I think you just made Lt. Bane's day, O.C."

"Mine too. I'll see you later."

"Looking forward to it! Simms, out."

* * *

Captain's Ready Room

"Time I got back to the *Adair*, Joseph. My XO is probably forming a search party."

Akinola's face cracked into a small smile. "Thanks for everything, Marge. I do appreciate the assist."

She smiled in return, but there was a hint of sadness in her eyes. "There never seems to be any time . . . for us, I mean."

"Like you once told me, Margaret. We're both already married - to our ships."

"Damn you and your memory, anyway!" she said with feigned annoyance. Her face softened as she stepped toward him. They embraced warmly, their kiss was long and familiar, sweet yet sad.

As Margaret stepped back, she said, "Take care of yourself, Captain."

"You do the same, Captain."

She smiled, touching his face for a moment, before turning and leaving the ready room.

Akinola looked regretfully at the door for a moment, then returned to sorting the damaged model ships.

* * *

Sickbay

Nigel cautiously entered Inga's cubicle. Her eyes were still closed but the apparatus had been removed from her head. He sat down on the all-to-familiar stool and took her hand.

Inga's eyes fluttered open. She squinted at Nigel and smiled.

"Hey!" she said, her voice slightly raspy.

A broad grin formed on Nigel's face. "Hey yourself! While you've been down here accumulatin rack time, the rest of us have been working our arses off!"

She smiled sleepily. "Yeah. I'll bet." She frowned and cleared her throat. Nigel noticed a cup of water with a straw on the side table. He took it, offering the straw to Inga. She sipped the water gratefully.

"You gave us quite a scare!"

"I don't remember much about it - probably just as well," she said, muzzily.

He stroked her hair. "I don't want to wear out my welcome. I better head back to the bridge. I'll see you again after while." He began to rise, but Inga grasped his wrist with surprising strength.

"Don't go yet, Nigel . . . please," she said.

Nigel lowered himself back to the stool. "Alright. I can stay a little bit longer."

She stared at him with an affectionate gaze. "I was in a dark place . . . it was peaceful but also lonely . . . at first."

Nigel looked puzzled. "What - when you were in your . . . when you were asleep, you mean?"

She smiled. "Yeah. Then, I heard your voice . . . It seemed far away and I couldn't understand what you were saying, but I knew it was you. It made me feel better, knowing you were somewhere close - that I wasn't really alone."

"So . . . you didn't understand what I was saying to you?"

"Not at first . . . but gradually - yeah, it became clearer."

"And?"

Her eyes glistened. "I love you, too," she whispered.

* * *

Stardate 54073.3 (30 January 2377)

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo - Spacedock 4

"Give us another three days - four at the outside, and we'll be as good as new," reported Lt. Commander Galt.

"Good job, Commander! I figured we'd be laid up for at least a week," replied Akinola, sounding pleased.

Galt snorted. "It's not like this is the first time I've had to put my ship back together."

"Practice makes perfect!" rejoined Akinola, patiently.

Galt rolled his eyes, then he was quiet for a moment, obviously in thought. "Captain, there is one other thing that's been on my mind."

"What's that, Galt?"

"Well, seeing how Delta got herself promoted upstairs and Brundy getting killed, I'm short an assistant in Engineering."

Akinola sighed and nodded. "Point well taken, Galt. I'll see what I can do about getting you a replacement. With the stop-loss order rescinded, we may lose some more crew along the way."

Galt spread his arms expansively. "What? And give up all this?" He turned to exit the Ready Room, then stopped before he got to the door. "Just be sure that you don't get me some Yariq-assed, snot nosed PhD! I'm getting too old to deal with that crap! I'm liable to shove some know-it-all into a torpedo tube!"

"Noted, Commander," Akinola said, dryly. "Like I said, I'll see what I can do."

* * *

Stardate 54073.4 (30 January 2377)
Star Station Echo
Office of Rear Admiral Morgan Bateson - Commander, Border Service Squadron 7

Bateson shook his head slowly, an incredulous expression on his face as he read Akinola's report. Finally, he tossed the padd on his desk.

"Good Lord, Joseph! What's this all about?"

"I wish I knew, Morgan. This 'Mr. Chandler' certainly went to a lot of trouble and expense to get that old Klingon relic."

Bateson looked thoughtful. "Admiral K'Tinga used to be highly revered in the empire. Remember their old uprated D-7 cruisers? That class was named for him!"

Akinola nodded. He'd stared across at more than one *K'Tinga*-class cruiser in his day. "Wonder why the Klingons even had his *Req'ti* up for auction?"

"My understanding is one of his descendants was charged with cowardice under fire - in their eyes, that ranks up there with treason."

Akinola winced. "What did they do to the guy?"

"Oddly enough, he wasn't executed - they save that for 'honorable' crimes. He was stripped of his rank, mustered out, and became a 'non-person.' Worse still, the entire House of K'Tinga was disenfranchised over the affair. I imagine his relatives did what the Empire refused to do."

Akinola was quiet a moment. "Last year, Commander Krell destroyed the *Kilimanjaro* and nearly us as well. He was a descendant of K'Tinga. Now, we have the entire crew of a Bird of Prey dead - again, because of K'Tinga or at least what remains of him." He looked up at Bateson. "Apparently K'Tinga still has quite a loyal following - disenfranchised house or not."

Bateson frowned. "What are you thinking, Joseph?"

"Like I said before, Chandler went to a *lot* of trouble to get K'Tinga's *Req'ti*. I doubt he plans to use it as a paper weight."

Both men were silent with their thoughts for a time.

Chapter Sixteen

30 January 2377
Palo Duro, Texas
Earth

T'Ser reclined in her compact rental skimmer as it glided over the hard pan of the old west Texas road. Unlike her last visit, it was cold and blustery outside. She had passed through some flurries since leaving the Amarillo shuttle port, but the snow had stopped for the moment. Still, the gray sky looked foreboding.

A year had passed since the tragic death of Dale McBride - her best friend and her lover. A part of her had died on that awful day. She had come to Earth for his funeral and met Dale's parents and had promised to visit them again. Now, on the anniversary of his death, T'Ser had decided to keep her promise.

Palo Duro was too small to really be considered a town, even by west Texas standards, but the community of hearty folk, mostly cattle ranchers, had continued since its founding more than 500 years earlier, and little had changed.

Scrubby Mesquite and Joshua trees dotted the otherwise featureless plain. A faint dusting of snow caused the darker ground and rocks to stand out in relief.

T'Ser had tried reading some articles from the current issue of *Starfleet Proceedings* on her padd, but her concentration lagged. She considered taking manual control of the skimmer to break the monotony, but she was not familiar enough with her surroundings to chance that. So, her thoughts once more drifted to her life, her future and choices she must make. Thus far, she had not heard back from the Bureau of Personnel regarding her request for transfer. No doubt, the rescinding of the stop-loss order was keeping them busy enough. She had hoped that at least making the decision to transfer off the *Bluefin* would give her peace.

It had not.

Now, T'Ser felt she was in a kind of limbo. She was technically still the second officer of the *Bluefin*, yet that could change tomorrow. Where would she go next? When would she know? The uncertainty was nearly as bad as before she placed her transfer request.

The skimmer's computer voice interrupted her thoughts. *We will arrive at your destination in five minutes. The current temperature is 7 degrees, northerly winds are variable from 5 to 15 kph. And as always, thank you for using Hertz!*

* * *

True to its word, the skimmer arrived at the small, white wood-frame Palo Duro Baptist Church. The cemetery was behind the church building, covering several acres. Taking manual control, she guided the skimmer through the open gates to the cemetery until she found a small parking area. She powered down the car, which settled on its skids with a fading whine. Pulling the hood of her coat up to protect her head, she opened the door and stepped out on the dusty ground.

T'Ser took a moment to gain her bearings, then set off across the grave yard, between monuments that dated back centuries. Scrubby dead grass poked up haphazardly through the dusty soil; the ground was mostly pale dirt and rocks. A spindly tumbleweed bounced and rolled across her path before lodging in a rusty iron fence surrounding a family plot.

A bit more than fifty meters from where she parked, she found Dale's grave. Following local custom, she had brought a small flower arrangement, which she placed in an empty receptacle at the base of the marker.

She felt numb, and not just because of the cold. Her heart ached and her vision began to blur with hot tears. She wiped her eyes and gazed at the headstone - a new addition since the burial. The gray marble marker was similar to hundreds of others across the cemetery. On one side was inscribed, "McBride." The side facing the grave gave more information, dark letters in cold stone . . .

Dale Edward McBride, Commander, SFBS

Born 18 May 2335

Died 31 January 2376

***"Greater love hath no man than this -
than to lay down his life for his friends."***

T'Ser ran her hand over the letters of the cool marble. She could see her reflection in the polished surface of the headstone. A tiny, hot spark of anger

flashed in her mind - *Is this it? Dale's life is compressed into five lines on a rock?* But the spark died just as quickly, replaced by cold sadness.

Why didn't you accept the damn ring?, her inner voice chided her. She shook her head, both in grief and refusal to follow this line of thought. What was done was done. Nothing in the universe could change that.

"I miss you, Dale," she began. "I wish I could talk to you right now - I'm at a crossroad and I'm not sure which way to go." She smiled wanly, "Not that there's anything new about that, is there?"

Her sharp hearing picked up the crunch of gravel under foot. She straightened to see who was approaching.

A tall man in a gray Stetson hat, wearing a heavy suede coat and blue jeans approached her. She immediately recognized William McBride - Dale's father. The elder McBride moved steadily up the slight rise toward his son's grave. His weathered face broke into a grin when he made eye contact with T'Ser. As he reached her, he engulfed her in an expansive bear hug. Bill McBride looked like an older, somewhat larger version of Dale. He smelled faintly of alfalfa and Old Spice - good, comforting smells.

"T'Ser, it is so good to see you again! I figured you'd stop by here first, but the temperature is fixin' to drop fast. Why don't you come on and follow me out to the house - we can come back by here tomorrow." His voice was deeper and drawl more pronounced, but he sounded very much like his son.

"Well, Mr. McBride, I'd planned on taking the shuttle back to Seattle tonight . . ."

"Horse apples!" he exclaimed. "Melba has the guest room ready for you and supper's waitin'. And no more of that 'Mr. McBride' stuff! - you just call me 'Bill.'"

T'Ser grinned in spite of herself. She already felt better in the presence of this man. "Alright, . . . *Bill*, lead on!"

* * *

Stardate 54073.8 (30 January 2377)
Star Station Echo - Level 16
Merchants' Alley

Captain Akinola wandered aimlessly through the throng of people that crowded the retail sector of the station, commonly known as "Merchants' Alley." Today had been a mix of ups and downs. He had been happy to see both Commander Strauss and Ensign Vashtee up on their feet, albeit under the watchful eye of Dr. Castille and his staff. The CMO had said he would allow Strauss to return to limited duty in a couple of days, while Vashtee would be a bit longer in her recovery.

Then, he had met the parents of Chief Franklin Brundy, who had arrived from Centauri IV to retrieve his body. The elder Brundy was a retired Starfleet non-com and had expressed his thanks to Akinola for "bringing our boy home." Brundy's mother had not said a word. She had simply stared at the torpedo casing that held her son with haunted eyes.

Now, Akinola just wanted some time to be alone. He had no agenda, no set destination, he merely walked through the crowds, occasionally looking in the window of a shop or pub before moving on. He allowed his mind to drift as well, so much so that he almost didn't hear his name being called.

"Captain? Captain Akinola!"

Akinola turned, unsure at first from what direction he was being called. Then, he saw a familiar face approaching him. He nearly turned and walked away, but instead, he sighed and fixed the approaching figure with a baleful stare.

"Captain Lhar'Shon, what do you want?"

The beautiful Andorian intelligence officer and C.O. of the USS *Shadow* smiled. "I understand that you've had an eventful week, Captain Akinola. I have some information that you might find of considerable interest."

Akinola glowered. "I really don't have time to play your spook games, Lhar'Shon."

"Not even if I could tell you more about Larson Chandler?" She inclined her head in the direction of one of the pubs. "I'm buying."

Akinola still didn't look happy, but he reluctantly nodded. "You've just bought five minutes of my time, Captain. If what you say interests me, I may even pay for my own drink."

Chapter Seventeen

30 January 2377

Palo Duro, Texas

Earth

T'Ser walked with Bill McBride back toward the parking area of the cemetery. The sunlight was fading rapidly and the wind was picking up. T'Ser clutched her jacket tightly as a gust nearly pulled the hood off her head. The wind produced a thin wail as it blew across the scrubby terrain.

"Just follow me. It ain't but a couple of miles from here."

T'Ser smiled at the archaic reference to distance. Apparently the locals still used miles rather than kilometers. McBride made his way to an ancient looking pick-up parked next to T'Ser's skimmer. Embossed on the rusty tailgate was "Chevro-Lectric." She quickly entered her skimmer, powered up the vehicle and turned on the heat, momentarily luxuriating in the blast of warm air that flowed from the vents.

McBride's truck moved in reverse, then rolled over the uneven terrain on its tires. A faint rooster tail of dust followed the old pick-up, so T'Ser held back a bit to avoid being blinded by a cloud of dirt and dust.

She had little trouble keeping up with Mr. McBride - he drove slowly as dusk gave way to darkness. His tail lights provided two glowing, red beacons for her to follow.

Soon, they pulled off the county road onto a private drive. The pick-up bounced over a cattle gap, then proceeded west. T'Ser's vehicle glided smoothly over the gap but she stopped the skimmer as Bill's taillights suddenly brightened and he came to a halt.

In the glow of her headlights. T'Ser saw several forms moving slowly across their path. Long horns on craggy heads revealed them to be cattle. A few steers lowed softly, apparently protesting the need to make way for these interlopers. McBride's truck moved forward once again and T'Ser followed suit.

They traveled just under two kilometers before arriving at an L-shaped house with a long front porch. A separate garage was situated a few meters away from the main house. The drive circled in front of the house and T'Ser pulled

into a parking area next to a large skimmer. Bill parked on the opposite side of the skimmer.

As T'Ser got out, a large, black form appeared out of the night - two green, glowing eyes regarded her. Then, the creature bounded toward T'Ser, rearing up on its hind legs, its big tail swishing wildly. T'Ser suddenly found herself staring into the face of a large, friendly dog with bad breath.

"Get down, Duke, ya idjit!" Bill McBride came to T'Ser's rescue, but not before the black Lab planted a wet doggie kiss on T'Ser's face. He obediently sat on his haunches and gazed at McBride with adoring eyes.

Laughing, T'Ser knelt and scratched the ears of Duke, whose tongue lolled out in bliss.

"Let's get on in - I expect that Melba's already got supper on the table. Here - let me help you with that bag."

McBride took T'Ser's clamshell case, heedless of her feeble protest. They moved along the porch toward the side door to the big house and entered.

Immediately, T'Ser's keen nose was overwhelmed by delicious aromas. She suddenly realized that she was *very* hungry!

Melba McBride appeared around the corner of the kitchen, wearing a chambray shirt and jeans. Instead of boots like her husband, her feet were bare. Her silver hair was pulled back in a pony tail and her face was flushed from the heat in the kitchen. She hugged T'Ser tightly and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

"We're so glad you came to see us, T'Ser! You just make yourself at home. Let's head on to the dining room - I hope you like what we've fixed for supper."

T'Ser followed Bill and Melba through a large, well-equipped kitchen into a massive dining room. A welcoming fire crackled in a fireplace on one wall. The head of a large buck stared down at them from over the mantle. A long, oak dining table with a dozen chairs filled the center of the room. An antique buffet along the opposite wall functioned as the serving table.

T'Ser was slightly stunned at the sheer volume of food on the buffet. There were massive steaks piled high on a platter, roasted ears of corn, green beans, peas, mashed potatoes, home-made bread, assorted peppers, and more.

"Dale once told us that you liked steak and most Terran food, so . . ." Melba gestured at the feast. "I threw a few things together. Now grab a plate and serve yourself - we don't stand on ceremony around here. The others will be here shortly."

T'Ser merely nodded, awestruck by the food and the tantalizing aromas.

* * *

Stardate 54073.8 (30 January 2377)
Star Station Echo - Level 16
The Wanderer's Pub

Akinola and Lhar'Shon entered the noisy pub and made their way to an isolated, corner booth. The pub was decorated with an eclectic mix of Terran, Rigellian, and Andorian paraphernalia plus a few items from other worlds. In truth, it was rather gaudy, but Akinola knew the service and the beer were both good.

A Bolian waiter took their order. Akinola ordered a Terran dark ale while Lhar'Shon ordered an Andorian wine. They remained silent as Akinola glared at Lhar'shon, who smiled enigmatically.

After the waiter left their drinks on the table, Captain Lhar'shon took out a small device and placed it on the table. Akinola remembered the device from their previous meeting - it would create a "no-eavesdropping" zone around them.

Akinola took a long pull on the frosty bottle as the Andorian intelligence officer sipped her wine. He set the bottle aside, crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward.

"Okay, Lhar'shon - what's on your mind? Still chasing after Section 21?"

"31," she corrected as she held her wine glass and stared into the emerald green liquid. "I understand you had an encounter with Larson Chandler."

"You know damn well we did, so quit playing games and get to the point."

Lhar'shon nodded, unperturbed. "How about an exchange of information, Captain? I'll tell you what I know about Larson Chandler - you tell me about this 'relic' he was trying to procure."

Akinola took another pull on his beer, then set it down, considering. He was loathe to get involved with spook business, but he figured he had some unfinished business of his own. Finally, he nodded grudgingly.

"Okay, we'll play your little game, Lhar'shon - you first."

"To begin, Chandler is not his real name."

"Big surprise. I kinda figured that one out on my own."

She inclined her head. "Be that as it may, you haven't figured out who he *really* is, have you?"

Akinola shook his head. "No," he admitted, "although I could swear I knew him from somewhere."

"Very likely so, Captain. Larson Chandler is actually Garth of Izar."

Akinola burst out laughing. "Yeah - right! And I'm James T-Frakkin' Kirk!" His laugh faded as he saw the expression on her face and his own memory kicked in. He *had* known that face, though it was from a holo-vid from officers' training, years ago. And that face *had* looked much younger.

"I'll be damned!" he muttered.

* * *

Stardate 54073.8 (30 January 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Star Station Echo - Spacedock 4

Lt. Commander Galt was focused on his diagnostic padd, so he did not hear the sound of the new arrival in engineering. A shadow fell over the viewscreen he was reading, causing him to turn in aggravation.

"Move your worthless carcass out of my . . ." His voice trailed off, his mouth hung agape. A primitive part of his brain screamed at him *to run, run away!*

Standing, no, *towering* over Galt was a very large, male Caitian. The Caitian peered at Galt with bright, golden yellow eyes. His honey colored mane added to his apparent bulk. He emitted a low rumbling that could be a purr or a growl. One of his ears twitched.

"Commanderr Grralt? I'm Chief Rumraa, yourr new assistant, reporrting forr duty," said the Caitian in a bass rumble.

For once in his life, Galt was speechless.

* * *

Stardate 54073.8 (30 January 2377)
Star Station Echo - Level 16
The Wanderer's Pub

Akinola shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around Lhar'Shon's revelation.

"I have to admit, I'm having a hard time believing this," said Akinola. "If that really is Garth, he'd have to be, what? - over 160 years old! That's really pushing it for a human."

"Garth is Izarian, Captain. Though virtually indiscernible from humans, there are differences. He also received some special . . . gifts, along the way."

"Alright, supposing I believe you . . . what's Garth up to?"

Lhar'Shon shook her head. "Not so fast, Captain. We had an agreement. Before I tell you any more, I want to know about the 'relic' you mentioned in your report."

He grimaced, but he had made a deal. "It was *a Req'ti*. Are you familiar with the term?"

Lhar'shon nodded, the smile gone from her face. "Klingon icons, usually the heart or liver of a house patriarch." She paused a moment in thought. "Do you know who . . . ?"

"K'Tinga."

"Damn!" Lhar'shon's unexpected show of emotion surprised Akinola. She had always been the epitome of cool in their previous meetings.

"What's this all about, Lhar'Shon? And don't give my any 'need-to-know' bullshit, either! I lost a good man over this shriveled up knick knack! Why is it so important to Garth?"

Lhar'Shon avoided Akinola's gaze and twirled the remaining wine in her glass. "I suppose you remember the events at the Khitomer conference back in 2293?"

"Sure - several Starfleet big shots, including the C-in-C, were involved in a conspiracy to sabotage the peace talks with the Klingons and start another war. They nearly succeeded, except for Kirk's intervention."

She nodded. "An accurate if overly simple summary, Captain. What you didn't know, is that there were others involved in the conspiracy who were never caught or charged."

Akinola's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying Garth was involved in the conspiracy?"

"Almost certainly. But he was very clever - he hid his tracks very well. There was not enough evidence at the time to bring charges against him. Still, he knew that he was a suspect and opted for retirement from Starfleet. After that, he disappeared for several decades. We believe he took on the Larson Chandler persona about fifty years ago."

"How do you know all of this?"

Lhar'Shon's smile returned. "Allow me to keep some of our trade secrets, Captain." The smile faded. "Based on what you've told me, I'm afraid Garth had plans to cause mischief in the Klingon Empire." She shook her head. "And he couldn't have chosen a better time, or worse, depending on your perspective."

Akinola nodded. He knew all too well how unstable things were in the Empire. The chance for another Klingon civil war was all too real. Such a war could easily spill over the border into Federation space.

"Do you have any idea where Garth might have gone to ground?"

Lhar'Shon gazed at Akinola a long time. "What would you do with this information, Captain - assuming I had it?"

Akinola smiled thinly, "What do you think?"

She regarded him with dark blue eyes. "Perhaps we need to pool our resources, Captain."

Chapter Eighteen

30 January 2377

Palo Duro, Texas - Flying M Ranch
Earth

T'Ser sat in a very comfortable leather chair with a cup of tea, staring sleepily at a crackling fire. Supper had been a memorable event indeed. The food had been wonderful and she had enjoyed the table banter among the McBrides and their five ranch hands who also came to supper.

Now, seated in the den and wrapped in *a serape*, T'Ser enjoyed the warmth and the quiet. Bill and Melba were in the kitchen - he was helping Melba put away dishes. They had allowed her to help clear the table, but then shooed her out to the den to relax.

Bill McBride strode into the den and folded his long frame into a rocking chair by a reading lamp and table. He was holding a snifter of brandy. He gestured to his drink.

"Are you sure you won't have one?" he asked.

T'Ser shook her head. "No, thank you. The tea is just right." She looked past McBride at the wall of built-in bookcases (*filled with actual books!* she marvelled,) and noticed numerous photos and holo-cubes. She walked to the bookcase to peruse the images. There were many group family pictures and images of prize horses and steers. Of course, there were also many pictures of Dale and his younger sister, Debbie.

She smiled at images of Dale as a chubby baby, young boy, gangly teenager, and young adult. She laughed softly at a holo-cube portraying Dale at about 4 or 5 years of age in a bright, red and white cowboy outfit, sitting astride a gray mule.

"That was on his fifth birthday," said Melba, who had walked up behind T'Ser. "For some reason, he loved that old Mule! When he was little, he'd rather ride it than the horses!"

"That's 'cause they were kindred spirits, Mother," said Bill from his chair. "Both tough and stubborn."

"Bill!" Melba said with mock indignation. T'Ser smiled at the thought, and how apt Bill's description had been. Dale had definitely been tough and stubborn!

"And here's his Academy graduation picture," said Melba, proudly, as she handed another cube to T'Ser. Dale peered out at them with his slightly crooked, cocky grin. This image was so much like him that T'Ser's eyes blurred with tears. She had loved that goofy grin!

Melba gazed at T'Ser with kind eyes. "There's something else I want you to see. Come with me." T'Ser followed Melba down the hallway to a small home office. Melba activated the terminal to the house computer.

"Computer, access last four messages from Dale," said Melba.

Messages are now available for viewing. Please indicate video or text only.

"Video, in order they were received." She turned to T'Ser. "I thought you might like to see these. I'll be in the den when you're done." Melba gave T'Ser's hand a squeeze, then she left the room, shutting the door behind her.

T'Ser stood still for a moment. The room's only illumination came from a desk lamp and the soft glow of the terminal screen. Taking a deep breath, she eased into an oak swivel chair that squeaked as she pulled it closer to the big desk. On the screen was the brand mark of the McBride's ranch - a letter M with wings.

"Computer, play back first message."

The Flying M disappeared, replaced by Dales' face, seated in his quarters on the *Bluefin*. "*Hey Mom and Dad! Greetings from somewhere in the armpit of the galaxy...*"

T'Ser's smile widened as she watched and listened to Dale; a tear tracked down her cheek, unnoticed.

* * *

Stardate 54073.8 (30 January 2377)
Star Station Echo - Level 16
Merchant's Alley

Dr. Castille and Lt. Commander Simms moved slowly through the crowd. Castille was content to allow Delta to lead as they moved in and out of shops and kiosks. It had been a very long time since he had been on a date of any kind and he still felt butterflies in his stomach.

They came upon a small Bistro with a small courtyard. "Hungry?" asked Delta.

Castille realized it had been a while since he had eaten anything. "Yes, actually."

"This place has really good Italian food - do you like Italian?" she asked.

"To be honest, I've never had Italian."

Delta's face registered surprise. "You're kiddin' me - right?"

Castille shook his head with a slightly embarrassed smile. "No. That's the truth!"

Her face lit up with a brilliant smile. "Well then, you're in for a treat!"

They managed to get a table in the courtyard, allowing them a view of the milling throng of people. Castille allowed Delta to order for them both. She selected eggplant parmigiana with a side of ravioli and a nice, Italian wine of respectable vintage.

As they waited for the main course, their conversation lagged. Delta seemed pensive and a bit distant.

"Delta? Are you alright?" asked Castille, concerned.

"Hmm?" Her hazel eyes had been distant. She refocused on O.C. "I'm so sorry! I zoned out, didn't I?"

Castille smiled. "A little. . . Look, Delta . . . If you're not comfortable going out with me, I understand."

She quickly reached across and grabbed Castille's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Gosh, no, O.C.! That's not it at all!" She hesitated a moment. "I was just thinking about Chief Brundy, that's all."

Castille nodded. "I know that was a shock for you. Were you close?"

She shook her head, a rueful expression on her face. "No, not really. I guess that's what's bothering me. I never really got to know Chief Brundy. He wasn't on the *Bluefin* for very long, and he was a pretty quiet guy - but nice, you know? I think he hung out with the other non-coms - Brin, Deryx and Sanders - but outside of that, he kept to himself. I always figured that there would be plenty of time to get to know him." She shrugged. "I was wrong."

"I know what you mean. When I was in medical school, I was always focused on my studies and just surviving each day - the class work, lab work, internship, then residency. Then, when I was assigned ship duty, I stayed focused on my job and never really made time for others."

She smiled. "Well, thank you for making time for me!"

"My pleasure!"

Their food arrived and Castille found that he *really* liked Italian cuisine. Delta was amused by the gusto with which Castille inhaled his food. After their entree', they ordered *Tiramisu* and coffee.

"So, O.C., tell me about yourself - where's home?"

Castille placed his coffee cup back in its saucer and pursed his lips. "That's kind of complicated, Delta."

"I'm a good listener," she said, encouraging him.

He shrugged. "Okay - I was born on Earth - Matanzas, Cuba to be exact. I never knew my father - he left when I was still an infant. My mother emigrated to Rigel IV with me and my two older sisters when I was just four years old, so I don't have too many memories of Cuba."

Delta's brow furrowed. "Why Rigel IV? Did she have family there?"

Castille looked down at his coffee cup, rubbing his finger around the handle. "No - no family. My father's involvement with some shady types made it hard for her to keep a job in Matanzas. I suspect he was in the Syndicate." He paused, "Sure, food and free housing were available just about anywhere on Earth, but she hated the stigma of living in government housing. She always told us, "Nothing in life is really free - even the free stuff will cost you." He looked up. "Look, I don't want to bore you . . ."

"You're not boring me, O.C.! Please, go on."

Castille sighed. "We went to Rigel IV because my mother had heard that jobs were plentiful - no questions asked. And that part was right, anyway." He took a sip of coffee and grimaced. It had gone cold. "Let's just say that the type of work mother could get was not what she had anticipated." He swallowed and cleared his throat. "We lived in a pretty rough part of Dronas-Gyr. Probably the worst city on Rigel IV, so you can use your imagination. Mother paid the rent, provided food and kept us clothed and in school. She tried to keep her . . . 'boyfriends' away from us. She wasn't always successful."

Delta had gripped his hand. Her eyes shone with sympathy. "O.C. - How did you cope?" she asked, softly.

"I was pretty street-smart for a kid. I learned how to avoid and evade pretty well. I kept clear of the gangs. Mother would have died of a broken heart if I'd gotten involved with them. Most of the gangs were just training camps for the Syndicate thugs, anyway. So, I escaped by reading, by studying hard in school - such that it was. When I was old enough to leave, I did. Got a scholarship to the University of Chicago, then Johns-Hopkins back on Earth. After I finished med school and my surgical residency, I decided to see the galaxy by joining Starfleet - and here I am!" He spread his arms and leaned back in his chair, a wan smile on his face.

"What happened to your mother? To your sisters?"

Castille seemed to deflate slightly and his expression grew sad. "I wish I knew . . . I went back to Rigel IV about a year ago, right after the war ended. I had some accumulated leave and wanted to see the family." He paused and gazed at Delta with somber eyes. "But, when I went to the old apartment, they were gone. No one knew where. I found an old neighbor lady who remembered mother and my sisters, but she wasn't much help. She said they left suddenly, about six months earlier, without telling anyone where they were going. I asked how they had been doing, but the neighbor lady got real evasive - like she knew something - something bad - but didn't want to tell me."

"My God, O.C. - that's awful! So you don't have any idea where they went?"

He shook his head. "None. I checked to see if they might have gone back to Cuba, but no luck there. It's like they just fell into a black hole. I've done net

searches and checked with numerous police agencies on dozens of planets. Absolutely *nada*."

* * *

Stardate 54073.9 (30 January 2377)
Thurilin's Moon - Sulistus Prime

Garth regarded the Section 31 operative with barely concealed contempt. Chalmer was an incompetent *prima donna*, far too full of himself and not half as clever as he supposed. Still, Garth needed the resources that Chalmer could provide. So long as their goals remained aligned, Garth would tolerate the fool.

"So this is all that's left of the infamous Lord K'Tinga," observed Chalmer, lifting the lid of the black box.

Garth gently but firmly took the box from Commander. "I suggest that you be careful with the *Req'ti*, Commander Chalmer. Without it, we have no DNA from K'Tinga and all our plans would come to naught. Now, have you obtained the required equipment?"

Chalmer maintained a stiff smile. He didn't trust Garth and, truth be told, he thought the man was insane. Still, he had to admit that Garth was a genius and his plan to "shake up" the Klingon High Council was brilliant.

"Certainly, Commodore, though I must say, it wasn't easy! We lost several good agents 'acquiring' the equipment. I hope it will be worth it."

Garth fixed Chalmer with a withering stare. "If you brought me what I need, I assure you that it will be 'worth it,' Commander. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get to work. There is much to be done."

* * *

Stardate 54074.1 (31 January 2377)
USS *Bluefin*
Star Station Echo - Spacedock 4

Sleep eluded Captain Akinola as he replayed his meeting with Captain Lhar'Shon. Was he embarking on a fool's errand? He didn't think so. Still, he was going to sit down with Admiral Bateson. Morgan probably knew more

about Klingon culture than anyone in the sector. Could Garth really pull off this crazy plan? Lhar'Shon seemed to think it was possible, and if so, Garth had to be stopped.

He was also troubled by the thought of collaborating with Lhar'Shon and Starfleet Intelligence. He had developed what he considered to be a healthy distrust of intelligence operatives over the course of his career. Many had proved to be opportunists, others were conspiracy nuts. Most just liked knowing more than you did.

With Lhar'Shon, he was uncertain. So far, she had not *lied* to him - at least as far as he knew. But he was loathe to place the lives of his crew in her hands, so he was going to be very cautious. But being cautious was not his normal nature. *If you dance with the Devil, you're liable to get burned, Akinola!* he thought, morosely.

He threw aside the bed covers and padded to the sink, splashing some water in his face. He dressed in the dark and left his cabin to prow around his ship, deep in thought.

He passed by the officers' wardroom and heard voices. He peeked inside to see Lt. Bane and Commander Strauss talking. Strauss laughed softly and Akinola noticed their fingers intertwined across the table.

He moved quietly down the corridor, not wishing to disturb them. His mood was a bit lighter though. He smiled to himself and thought, *At least some things are right in the universe.*

Chapter Nineteen

Stardate 54074.3 (31 January 2377)

Star Station Echo

Office of Admiral Morgan Bateson - Commander, 7th Border Service Squadron

Admiral Bateson stood, staring out through the transparent aluminum viewport at the craggy moon that hung just a few thousand kilometers from the star station. Captain Akinola and Captain Lhar'Shon remained silent as Bateson digested the information they had shared with him.

"You are quite certain that it's Garth?" asked Bateson, quietly.

"There is no doubt, Admiral. Our analysts have made a firm connection between the persona of Larson Chandler and Garth of Izar. Garth went to great pains to disappear and be forgotten, but there have always been those in Starfleet Intelligence that have believed he's been alive and in hiding," replied Lhar'Shon.

Bateson sighed and turned slightly. "I was a student of his at the Academy, you know. He taught a course in advanced tactics my senior year, right before he . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Went nuts?" interjected Akinola.

Bateson snorted and raised an eyebrow. "I was *going* to say, before he was sent to the Elba II asylum, but . . . yes. I was saddened by what happened to Garth and, later, gratified to hear that he responded well to treatments and was eventually reinstated in Starfleet. Then, of course, I spent 80 years in a temporal loop and haven't given a moment's thought to Fleet Captain Garth."

"Commodore Garth," corrected Lhar'Shon. "He was promoted shortly before his 'retirement.'"

Bateson took his seat and clasped his hands together on his desk. "And you think he was involved in that idiocy at Khitomer?"

The Andorian Captain nodded. "While it was never proven, there was significant circumstantial evidence which suggested Garth's complicity. That's why he retired. If any firm evidence had been uncovered, he would have been arrested and tried along with the other conspirators."

"A sad moment in our history," observed Bateson. "Now, what do you want from me?"

"Two things, Admiral," began Akinola. "First, permission to pursue Garth, apprehend him and recover the *Req'ti*. Second, any insights you can give us into how the Klingons might play into this. You know more about the ridge-heads than any one else in the sector."

Bateson smirked. "I suppose you think flattery will grease the skids." His expression became more serious. "Why should you get involved any further, Joseph? Seems you've done most of the leg work thus far." The Admiral fixed Lhar'Shon with a meaningful gaze.

"To be honest, Admiral, I'm not crazy about getting involved in this cloak and dagger stuff, but if half of what Lhar'Shon has told me is true, we've got a fair chance of stopping Garth's scheme before it gets out of hand. The last thing we need right now are more troubles with the Klingons!"

The Admiral grunted. "No argument there." He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me something, Captain Lhar'Shon – why do you need Captain Akinola's help? This seems to be more up your alley than ours."

She hesitated for a moment. "Admiral, there are . . . other factions in the intelligence community of Starfleet that would like to see Garth succeed. If I were to intervene directly, there's a good chance that Garth would be tipped off."

Bateson nodded slowly. He'd heard stories of a rogue clandestine organization within Starfleet.

Akinola turned to Lhar'Shon. "Which brings up another situation. You yourself told me that this Section 41 . . ."

"31"

"Whatever . . . has planted a mole on my ship. It seems to me that's a pretty big problem!"

She smiled thinly. "I'm glad you brought that up, Captain. We've had some success in cracking their encryption codes. We've identified your mole and

modified the encryption, adjusting a few lines of code. Any information he now passes along will be inaccurate.”

Akinola’s jaw tightened. “Who is it?”

She shook her head. “The mole is not your enemy, Captain. Just an unwitting pawn in this very old game. If he’s guilty of anything, it’s of being naive. If you were to arrest him, 31 would just find someone else. Leave it be, Captain.”

Akinola glared at her a moment before reluctantly agreeing. “Fine. We’ll do it your way. But if I ever do find out who it is, he’d better be able to breathe vacuum!”

Bateson stood from behind his desk – a clear sign that he’d reached a decision. “Alright, Captains. I’m willing to give the go-ahead for Captain Akinola to take the *Bluefin* on this mission . . . with one stipulation.”

“What's that, sir?" asked Akinola.

"I'm coming along."

* * *

Stardate 54074.1 (31 January 2377)

Klingon Forward Station G-12

Near the Federation Border

Captain Mertok scowled as he tried to retrieve his mug of *Kef* from the replicator while holding a data tablet under the stump of his left arm. He had lost the limb in combat during the Dominion war and was now relegated to commanding this cold, cramped space station.

He was a pragmatist, however, and was content to serve the Empire, even in this reduced capacity. Klingon medical technology lagged far behind the Federation, so he did not have the option of acquiring a bio-synthetic limb. He had tried a prosthetic device, but it had proved to be slow and clumsy. So, he had learned to adjust to living with one arm, but some days *it* was an inconvenience.

Mertok made his way back to his office - a small compartment that overlooked the station's control center. From there, Mertok and his staff provided control and support for a dozen *triads* of ships, primarily older *B'Rel*

scouts that patrolled along the Klingon-Federation border. His mood was particularly sour because one of those ships was now overdue - the *Jhar'toq*.

As he entered his office, he was greatly annoyed to find someone seated at his desk. Eyes narrowing, Mertok slammed down the cup of *Kef* on the desk, splashing out some of the hot, dark liquid. He grabbed the data tablet from under his stump and tossed it roughly onto a side table.

"You are in my chair," the Captain said to the dark-skinned Klingon officer. "I would advise you to vacate it. . . Now." Mertok's voice was quiet but menacing. He had seldom felt the need to raise his voice with subordinates.

The officer grinned, revealing a set of crooked, sharp teeth. "As you wish . . . Captain." There was an underlying tone of scorn in his voice. He probably considered Mertok to be inferior since he lacked an arm. He stood slowly, his armor creaking audibly. "I am Commander Kaltuk of Imperial Intelligence. I would speak to you now."

Mertok briefly considered gutting Kaltuk, but decided he didn't want to be bothered. He settled behind his desk as Kaltuk moved opposite him.

"I understand that you have lost one of your ships, Mertok."

"That's *Captain* Mertok to you, *targ!* And what concern is that to Imperial Intelligence? Most of our patrol ships are so old it is a wonder we don't lose more to structural fatigue or faulty warp cores!"

"Perhaps so," said Kaltuk, "but it seems the *Jhar'toq* has disappeared in *Federation* space."

"*What?*" interrupted Mertok, incredulously. "That's absurd! Commander C'hoq is a seasoned, loyal officer. He would never do anything so precipitous!"

Kaltuk continued as if Mertok had not spoken. " One of our long-range reconnaissance vessels tracked the *Jhar'toq* as it crossed into Federation space and entered the *Dak'go'leth*. Apparently they were following a small cargo vessel of Terran registry."

Mertok angrily shook his head in disbelief. "It makes no sense! Why would C'hoq do such a thing?"

"Captain Mertok," The derision was gone from Kaltuk's tone, replaced with a cold earnestness. "I need to know *everything* you can tell me about Commander C'hoq."

Chapter Twenty

Stardate 54075.2 (1 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

En route to the Sulistus system, warp 8

Captain's Log - Stardate 54075.2. The Bluefin is en route to Sulistus, a remote, sparsely populated system that was once part of the Klingon Empire prior to the Four-Years War of the last century. According to Captain Lhar'Shon's "sources," Garth has set up a hiding place on one of the moons of the fourth planet.

Such information would barely be useful, except her "sources" have managed to track Garth's right-hand man, former Marine Major Wayne Tilos, to this moon and we now have his ship's description and warp signature. With a little luck, we may be able to find Garth. I hope so - my faith in our intelligence services is not very strong.

And, true to his word, Admiral Bateson has joined us on this mission. He's assured me that he simply wants to help us out when we confront Garth. After all, as a former student the Admiral does know the man. Other than that, he plans to be, in his words, "as quiet as a church mouse." That would be a large, opinionated and high-ranking church mouse, of course.

Captain Akinola saved his log and exited his ready room for the bridge. Lt. Commander Simms was in the center seat, looking somewhat nervous. Small wonder, with Admiral Bateson prowling the bridge like a caged animal. Currently, the Admiral was intently studying the *Bluefin's* dedication plaque by the turbo lift. He straightened when he saw Akinola and smiled.

"Did you know my former C.O. from the *Merlin* was on the design team for this ship?" asked Bateson. Akinola walked over and looked at the plaque. Bateson pointed to one name - Silas Parker.

"I know every name on that plaque but I never knew you served under Parker," remarked Akinola.

"Yes, the *Merlin* was my first assignment right out of the academy." Bateson pointed to another name on the plaque. "And Sharlon B. Erdon was our XO. As I recall, she hated the name 'Sharlon' for some reason. Captain Parker always called her 'Brooks.'"

"I've always wished I could thank the *Albacore*-class design team," said Akinola. "Best designed and toughest ships in the Border Service!"

"Better than the new *Sequoias*?" asked Bateson with a mischievous grin.

Akinola snorted. "Don't get me started, Admiral. The *Sequoias* were designed by bean-counters, not engineers. Taking an anemic *Nova*-class space-frame and slapping an upgraded warp drive and a few more weapons on it doesn't make it a cutter!"

"Don't let Admiral Bondurant hear you say that, Joseph. This is her pet project. I'm hearing rumors that she wants to retire the *Albacores* within five years and replace them with the *Sequoias*." Bateson referred to Admiral Bridgette Bondurant, the current Commander, Border Services.

"When that happens, I'll turn in my pips and retire myself," said Akinola, gruffly.

"Now, don't start filing your retirement papers just yet! With President Satie's cost-cutting measures in effect, I imagine the *Bluefin* will be in service for many years to come. And Admiral Bondurant won't be receiving near the number of *Sequoias* that she wants."

"I hope you're right, sir. Have you had breakfast yet?"

Bateson shook his head. "Just a cup of coffee in my cabin."

Akinola smiled. "Come on then. I'll have Cookie fix you *a real* breakfast!"

* * *

1 February 2377 Seattle, Earth

The recent snow had given way to cold rain this week. T'Ser gamely jogged through the park, occasionally wiping droplets of cold water from her face. After all the food she had eaten during her visit with the McBrides, she was determined to resume her running regimen. Even with her high metabolism, she had been dismayed to discover she had gained two pounds!

After 10 kilometers, she headed back toward the marina and her parents' houseboat. She was actually looking forward to some of her mother's *Plomeek*

soup, just to have something warm in her stomach. Normally, she didn't care much for the bland broth (in truth, she didn't like much of *any* Vulcan cuisine) but her mother's was actually pretty good.

She slowed as she entered the parking area of the marina, stopping by her father's blue Honda Lift skimmer to stretch out her muscles. Only a few other house boat tenants were out just now. A middle-aged man in jogging shorts, rain jacket and floppy hat trotted by led by a red dachshund whose short legs were a blur of motion. He nodded in greeting as he and the wiener dog moved by. An elderly woman hurried along one of the docks, her umbrella up in a futile gesture to ward off the incessant moisture.

T'Ser moved carefully along the rain-slick dock, not fully trusting the anti-skid surface. She had once watched a young man trot along the dock in similar weather, stumble and slip right off into the cold water. He had come up sputtering, then quickly climbed back onto the dock, trying to act casual. As soon as he had passed from sight, T'Ser and her mother had erupted in a gale of laughter.

The house boat was warm and dry. Her parents were at work, so she decided to get a shower then warm up some of the *Plomeek* soup for breakfast. As she passed the computer terminal, she noticed the message light blinking. She hesitated, then said, "Computer - are there any saved messages for me?"

"Affirmative. You have one new message. Do you wish to review it now?"

"First, identify source of message."

"You have a personal message from Commander Inga Strauss, received at 0817 hours, 1 February 2377. Do you wish to play, save or delete the message?"

T'Ser considered for a moment, deciding the shower could wait. She pulled out the desk chair and sat down. "Play message."

The screen, which had shown an image of T'Ser's parents at Yellowstone Park, shifted to a very familiar face as the image of Inga Strauss appeared.

"Hey, T'Ser! I'm sorry I missed you. We've had an eventful couple of weeks . . ."

T'Ser listened with rapt fascination as Inga shared most of the events of the past days. A sense of sadness came over her as she learned of Chief Brundy's

death, but also relief to learn that Strauss and Vashtee were recovering from their injuries. Now, the *Bluefin* was off on another mission.

"I can't go into details, of course, since this isn't a secure channel. But I can say the mission looks to be 'interesting!'" Strauss hesitated a moment before proceeding. *"Look, T'Ser . . . I know you've been through a lot over the past year and that you're trying to decide your next step. I would hate to see you leave the Bluefin - I'm sure that goes for the rest of the crew as well. But, well, if that's your decision, I just wanted you to know that won't affect our friendship."* Inga glanced at something off-screen for a moment and grimaced. *"I'm going to be late for my shift if I don't hurry. Take care of yourself, T'Ser! Nigel says 'Hello!' I'll talk to you soon - Strauss, out."*

The screen returned to the view of T'Ser's parents, looking like typical tourists, standing in front of one of the geysers at Yellowstone. She sighed and rubbed her neck. It seemed that every time she came close to making a firm decision about her future, she was reminded of how dear the past and present were to her.

* * *

**Stardate 54077.4 (3 February 2377)
Thurilin's Moon - Sulistus Prime**

Xerok, the Vulcan geneticist, approached Garth with a Padd in hand. He inclined his head in greeting.

"I trust you're making progress, Dr. Xerok?" asked Garth, pleasantly.

The silver-haired scientist nodded. "Indeed, the replicants have nearly reached maturity. At their current rate of growth, we should be able to begin neural mapping in the next 14 point 42 hours. That, of course, will be the most critical phase. If all goes well, we should produce twenty four viable replicants."

Garth smiled. "Excellent, Doctor! Please convey my appreciation to your team."

"Certainly," Xerok hesitated for a moment.

"What is it, Xerok?"

"There are . . . ethical issues with which I'm still struggling."

Garth fixed the Vulcan with an unreadable gaze. "I thought I had addressed those concerns for you, Doctor. Perhaps you have forgotten one of Surak's principles - 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.'"

Xerok shook his head. "Not at all, Commodore. That principle is precisely the cause of my concern - are we not dooming many Klingons to suffering and death if we implement your strategem?"

"My friend, you are standing too close to the problem. You must step back to see the big picture - the grand scheme that will ultimately bring lasting peace and stability to billions on both sides of the border. If sacrifices are made along the way, well . . ." Garth spread his arms expansively, "those sacrifices will be for the greater good!"

The Vulcan's dark eyes stayed fixed on Garth, but his expression betrayed no emotion. "If you will excuse me, Commodore Garth, I must return to the chambers." Xerok turned and moved back toward the laboratory.

Garth's smile faded. He heard soft footfalls approaching from the hallway.

"What is it, Wayne?" asked Garth.

The former marine's face was grim. "Another vessel has entered the system. It is the cutter you encountered in the badlands - the *Bluefin*."

The Izarian's face remained impassive, but his steel grey eyes narrowed. "You were followed."

"Impossible! Not with the route I took, nor the countermeasures I employed!"

"Nonetheless, they are here, Wayne. It would seem that Starfleet Intelligence has improved their spy network considerably." Garth put a hand on Major Tilos' shoulder. "Activate the energy dampening field. We can't be interrupted yet. Xerok and his team need about 15 more hours to finish." His eyes lost their focus as his mind processed and rejected multiple scenarios.

"Wayne, I may need you to provide a diversion for us. It is imperative that we are not discovered by the Border Service or SFI or whoever the devil is on that ship. If at all possible, avoid any direct conflict with them. I don't want them hurt - they're our people, *but* . . ." Garth placed his other hand on

Wayne's opposite shoulder and peered into his eyes. "Our mission takes *absolute* priority over all other considerations - understood?"

Major Tilos returned Garth's stare with equal intensity. "Understood, sir!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Stardate 54077.4 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Entering the Sulistus system

"Ahead one-quarter impulse, Mr. Bralus. Mr. Bane - what are you picking up?" queried the Captain.

Bane perused sensor data from his station. "A lot of debris floating around in-system, Captain. Sizable amounts of tritanium, endurium and other inorganic materials. Most likely the wreckage of multiple space vessels."

"Don't they still teach history at the academy?" asked Admiral Bateson, not unkindly.

"Sir?" replied Bane, puzzled.

"The Battle of Silustus, Lieutenant" interjected Akinola. "One of the last battles of the Four Years War with the Klingons. Federation forces destroyed over 100 enemy vessels in less than two days. The Battle of Axanar was the turning point in the war. Silustus was the stake in their heart."

"Not bad for an old mustang," observed Bateson with a wink.

"I can read," said Akinola dryly, "contrary to what some of you ring-knockers think."

Bateson chuckled, then sobered as the ravaged form of Silustus Prime appeared on the screen. His voice was more subdued as he spoke again. "This was the last stand for the Klingon Empire, and the first time we took the war to their territory. Silustus Prime was once a class-M planet with over 400 million inhabitants - citizens of the Empire. Of course, there's no Klingonese word for 'civilian.' Or for 'surrender' for that matter."

Bateson stroked his beard thoughtfully as the planet grew on the screen. Silustus Prime was dark and foreboding. a gray, craggy moon hung in orbit. There were no clouds surrounding the planet, no signs of water or of any kind of life. It was a dead world.

Bateson's eyes had a distant look as he resumed speaking. "Fleet Captain Garth led a task force including the *Yorktown*, *Exeter*, *Constellation* and

Enterprise. My brother, Trevor, was navigator on the *Enterprise* during the battle, serving under Captain Robert April. I was still in high school, but Trevor told me about the battle later." He paused, emitting a sigh.

"It was like shooting fish in a barrel. The Klingons' front-line ships had been nearly wiped out at Axanar. Garth brought overwhelming firepower against a few aging D-4 and D-5 cruisers and a decrepit fleet of ancient scout ships. The outcome was never in doubt."

The bridge was very quiet. Everyone, Akinola included, listened with rapt attention.

"Captain April tried to slow down the slaughter when it was apparent the battle was won. But Garth's reply was, '*Send them all to Hell!*' Not one Klingon ship escaped. Finally, when the battle was done, Garth contacted the Klingon Governor, Thurilin, demanding the surrender of Sulistus Prime. Thurilin laughed, congratulated Garth for winning the battle, then he released a biogenic weapon on his own planet, killing every single Klingon - male, female, young and old."

This time the silence was prolonged, broken only by the sound of the instruments and soft hum of the environmental system

Bateson's jaw worked for a moment. "My brother said Captain April was never the same after that. He used to be a very personable commander, if a bit eccentric. After the battle though, April became reclusive and morose. Garth, of course, made the 'correct' strategic decision in the battle. He showed the Klingons that we could match them in sheer brutality. Less than a month later, the war ended and the neutral zone was established. Garth was hailed as a hero. April led one more five-year mission before turning the *Enterprise* over to Captain Pike."

"Admiral," asked Akinola quietly. "Why do you think Garth returned here?"

Bateson shrugged. "I'm no shrink, Joseph. I don't pretend to know what's going on in his head. But my guess is that this place reminds him that Klingons don't surrender, but they *can* be beaten." The Admiral frowned. "One tidbit that didn't make it into the history books - Garth was a proponent of continuing the war and wiping out the Klingons altogether. His was the lone voice in that camp, but I believe he had sympathizers. He once said, "If your neighbor has a mad dog in his yard, sooner or later it will bite your children."

"And now, Garth wants to kill the dog," said Akinola, flatly.

Bateson merely nodded. "But instead of taking it on directly, he apparently intends to feed it poison."

* * *

Major Tilos guided his small ship away from the moon, using the moon's mass to shield him from the sensors of the cutter. He then activated the ship's cloaking device, obtained from the same foolish Klingon operatives that had helped the crew of the *Backroad* obtain the *Req'ti* of K'tinga.

Tilos shook his head at the irony. The stupid lobster heads had helped provide the Commodore with the seed of their own destruction. Part of him wondered how the first war with the Klingons had lasted four years. If everything went according to plan, *this* war would be over in four months - and without a single Federation casualty!

Focusing on the task at hand, he activated the tactical systems of his strikecraft and began a long, arcing turn that would bring him behind the *Bluefin*. The Commodore had said he didn't want anyone hurt on the cutter, but then, he hadn't exactly *forbade* him, had he?

He scrolled through the tactical screen, selecting and arming two micro-torpedoes with quantum warheads. His lips curled back in anticipation as he accelerated to full impulse.

* * *

Dr. Xerok impassively regarded the two dozen cylinders that occupied the large laboratory. His colleagues, seven highly respected scientists from a variety of disciplines, checked read-outs and moved busily among the cylinders.

The Vulcan geneticist noted Dr. Essch' a' Kliss, approaching him. His antennae were moving in a sign of agitation. He angrily shoved a Padd at Xerok.

"Look at this! Did you realize what we're doing by introducing this mutagenic catalyst to the matrix?"

Xerok held the Andorian's gaze. "Certainly, Dr. Kliss. Why are you surprised?"

"These replicants will be walking bio-genic weapons!" he hissed. "I didn't sign on to be a part of a biological weapons project!"

Xerok raised an eyebrow slightly, but through discipline he did not sigh. "You have knowingly been a part of work that is technically against Federation law, using experimental genetic manipulation techniques on cloned beings. Are you being obtuse, Doctor, or are you really that naive?"

"I wanted to engage in work that has been banned by ignorant moralists and politicians! I never wanted to be a part of mass murder!"

Xerok stared at the Andorian coldly. "While I too have struggled with some of the ethical considerations, it is entirely logical to treat a disease with extreme measures. There is a 71.835% probability that the Federation and the Klingon Empire will again be at war within the next 20 years unless something happens to intervene." He paused, taking in the laboratory and the 24 cylinders. "The Klingons are the disease, Doctor. We are providing the cure."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stardate 54077.5 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Approaching Thurilin's Moon

"Mr. Bane, initiate active scanning. I want to know if there are any other ships in-system," ordered Akinola.

"Aye, sir, I'm on it - initial scans are negative. However, there is a lot of debris floating around that might conceal a small craft."

As Bane spoke, the wing section of an old Klingon destroyer tumbled across their field of view. The green hull plating was buckled and scored from multiple phaser strikes. The Imperial Klingon trefoil was still discernable, though pitted and faded. Lt. Bralus adjusted their course slightly, keeping the *Bluefin* well clear of the dense debris field.

A thought tickled the back of Akinola's mind as he watched the remains of the Klingon D-5 drift by. He frowned in thought . . . he had missed something, but what? He rubbed his chin in frustration.

"Orbital insertion in five minutes," announced Bralus from the helm.

Akinola was about to respond when Lt. Bane suddenly stiffened at his post. "I'm reading a surge in tachyon emissions, 2000 clicks dead astern!" His voice was tight with apprehension.

Realization dawned on Akinola. "Helm, evasive maneuvers - shields up! Aft view on screen!"

The deck lurched underfoot as the *Bluefin* increased power and speed, momentarily over-loading the inertial dampeners. Bralus' fingers danced over the helm controls as the cutter accelerated in a series of twists and sharp turns.

On the main viewscreen, a section of space seemed to shimmer, then the form of an *Anaconda* - class strike fighter coalesced. Two orbs of red light shot from the fighter and began to close the distance to the *Bluefin*.

Strauss activated the countermeasures, and a swarm of tiny projectiles erupted from below the hangar deck. One of the torpedoes flew directly into

the swarm, detonating in a blinding flash of light. The viewscreen automatically dimmed, but Akinola still had to shield his eyes from the brilliance.

"Second torpedo is still locked and tracking us!" exclaimed Bane. "I'm reading it as a quantum warhead."

Akinola and Bateson exchanged brief glances. The *Bluefin's* shields would not be sufficient protection against a quantum yield.

"Mr. Bralus! Take us into that debris field!" said Akinola, sharply. "XO, I want our weapons hot - load Mark 22's in forward and aft tubes and warm up the phasers."

"Rat-traps and phasers, aye! Standing by, sir." Commander Strauss was calm and focussed. Despite the tension, Akinola smiled slightly at her calm demeanor.

The *Bluefin's* hull began to creak and pop under the strain of the wild maneuvers, but the cutter hung together. Bralus piled on even more speed. Now, they were in nearly as much peril from collision with a chunk of derelict starship as from the closing torpedo.

"Impact in ten seconds!" announced Bane.

"Mr. Bralus, head for that big wing section, then turn hard to port in seven seconds."

Bralus grunted an acknowledgment, all his concentration focused on the helm controls. A sheen of sweat formed on his blue, bald head. He held his finger over the key that would hurl the cutter ninety degrees to port.

"Now, Bralus!"

The *Bluefin* suddenly broke to the left. Alarms blared on the bridge as structural integrity fields were over-loaded.

The quantum torpedo tracked in and detonated.

* * *

Major Tilos held up a fist in triumph as he watched the torpedo close on the *Bluefin* then detonate. The ship's canopy went opaque, protecting his eyes from the sudden sun-like burst of light, then cleared as the blast effect faded.

"Gotcha!" he said, smugly. He moved the fighter in closer to check the debris field and to pick off any life pods, though he doubted any could have survived.

The area was a jumble of debris; bits and pieces of metal sparked as they struck the shields of his fighter.

"Completely annihilated," he murmured, somewhat in awe of the destructive power of the quantum warhead.

Tilos was so intent on gloating over the debris field, he almost failed to notice the two torpedoes that were racing towards him.

* * *

"Torpedoes locked and tracking, sir," announced Strauss.

"Keep closing in, helm. By the way, nice flying, son!" said Akinola, approvingly.

Bralus nodded and exhaled a shuddering breath. "Thank you sir - I had to improvise a little."

Akinola smiled, "Yeah, that quick jump to warp probably saved our hides. It may have been a violation of procedure, but - Hell! It worked!" He looked over at Admiral Bateson. "I believe we can overlook that slight violation of protocol, can't we sir?"

The color was just coming back into Bateson's face, but he managed a wan smile. "Captain, at this point I'm pleased that I didn't soil my pants. You have no complaints from me!"

Akinola settled back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the fighter and the two torpedoes streaking toward it. "Mr. Bane, start compiling damage reports and have a security detail hustle to transporter room one. We're gonna yank that son-of-a-bitch right out of his cockpit!"

* * *

The warble of the missile-lock alarm shocked Tilos out of his reverie.

"What the hell? . . ." he breathed, stunned by the sudden attack. He jammed the throttles into full-impulse, but he was already too late.

The two Mark 22 torpedoes detonated soundlessly within 500 meters of the fighter. The massive electro-magnetic pulse of the two torpedoes easily breached his shields and overwhelmed the small-craft's systems. Tilos looked on in helpless rage as all of his displays went dark and the fighter began to tumble slowly, without power or defenses.

Cursing, he drew his phaser just as he felt the familiar tingle of a transporter engulf him.

* * *

"Okay, Solly, I've got him held up in the pattern buffer," said Chief Deryx from the transporter console. "Looks like he came to play - I'm reading an active phaser."

Solly leveled his phaser carbine at the transporter dais, his yellow eyes narrow and menacing. "I'm not in the mood to play, today. Deactivate his pea-shooter and bring him on board."

Energy coalesced quickly into the form of a well-built human male. Tilos brought up his phaser and pressed the firing stud. Nothing happened.

Senior Chief Brin looked at Tilos with contempt. "Welcome aboard, asshole!" he said, and fired a heavy stun round into the major. Tilos was hurled against the back wall of the transporter chamber, then he slid to the deck. Solly walked over to the prone form. "That's for spilling my coffee!"

Brin turned to the two security ratings. "Haul his sorry carcass down to the brig. I imagine the Skipper will have some questions for him."

The two men drug Tilos out of the transporter room. Brin reached down and picked up the Major's phaser, inspecting it. He grunted. "Looks like Marine issue." He tossed it to Deryx who also inspected it and nodded in agreement.

"You're right," said Deryx, who tossed the phaser back to Solly. "These things are nearly impossible to find on the black market, so . . ."

"So we may have us a genuine Jar-head on our hands, Chief Deryx. And if he's not talkative, I bet the Corps can I.D. him for us!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Stardate 54077.6 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon

"Admiral, would you care to take the conn while I go check on our 'guest?'" asked Akinola.

Bateson looked both surprised and pleased at the request. "I'd be honored - Thank you, Captain!"

"XO, please watch the Admiral and make sure he doesn't break anything," ordered Akinola with a straight face.

Inga nodded. "Like a hawk, sir!" she replied with a grin.

"That's right," Bateson responded, dryly, "make fun of the old fossil. Would it make you happier if I sat on my hands?"

Akinola's face broke into a crooked grin. "That won't be necessary, sir." He looked toward the Operations station. "Nigel! Begin scans of the moon's surface. Look for any kind of surface installation or an indication of underground facilities. This old moon was once a major mining operation, so there are plenty of places for Garth to hide."

"Aye, sir," acknowledged Lt. Bane.

"The bridge is yours, Admiral. I'll be down in the brig."

* * *

Consciousness slowly pushed back the darkness that enveloped Tilos. As his awareness grew, so did the pain and nausea. His head pounded, his chest felt like he'd been hit with a sledge-hammer, and he had a metallic taste in his mouth.

He heard a voice say, "Give him the stim-shot, Sandy."

Tilos felt pressure against his neck and heard the hiss of a hypo-spray. The pain and nausea abated somewhat and he immediately felt more alert. He attempted to open his eyes, but a bright light was shining in his face. He

squinted and blinked, trying to make out his surroundings. It was apparent that he was secured tightly to some sort of chair. His arms were immobile as were his ankles.

The voice spoke again. "You are a prisoner on the Border Service cutter, USS *Bluefin*. You're facing numerous charges at the moment, not the least of which is firing on a Starfleet vessel. I must tell you that you are not protected by Federation rights of due process unless and until you reveal your identity and we can confirm that you are a citizen of the Federation. Do you understand me?"

Tilos remained silent.

The voice continued. The tone was calm, neither angry nor perturbed. "Since my combadge contains a universal translator and our initial medical assessment indicates that you are capable of hearing, I must assume that you are refusing to cooperate. Very well, then. I will save us time by telling you what we know and what we want from you. However, before I do that, I will give you time to reflect on your situation. Enjoy the music."

Tilos frowned slightly. *Music?*

Suddenly, a cacophony of sound assaulted his ears. Instinctively, Tilos tried to bring his hands up to cover his head, but they were secured behind him. Turning his head from side to side didn't help, either - the noise filled the cell, crashing over him in waves. It was indescribably loud and hideous!

Akinola pulled the sound-proof door shut, cutting off the sound of a popular Klingon opera from Solly's collection of music files. Shaking his head, he looked at the Red Orion Senior Chief. "You actually *like* that, Solly?"

Solly looked slightly surprised. "Well, sure I do, Skipper! It's got *culture*, you know."

"So does a petri dish of bacteria," observed the Captain.

* * *

The two security ratings at the brig's control station spoke quietly, a few meters away from the Captain and Brin.

"Twenty credits says he breaks in ten minutes," said Crewman Murphy.

"Hah! More like five minutes," replied Petty Officer Eisenbaum.

"You're on," replied Murphy, who glanced at the chronometer. "But that guy looked pretty tough to me."

Eisenbaum glanced at his partner. "So, how long could you take it, Murph?"

Murphy grimaced. "Are you kidding? That Klingon stuff sounds like someone's skinning a live cat with a dull knife, with photon torpedoes for percussion! I can't take more than about 15 seconds!"

"Huh!" Responded Eisenbaum. "I always thought it sounded like someone being disemboweled while gargling acid."

"Nah, you're thinking of Tellarite ballet."

"Oh yeah, right."

* * *

Admiral Bateson enjoyed the rare privilege of sitting in the center seat of one of his cutters. He often missed commanding a ship, but he knew he was in the right place, serving as squadron commander.

At the moment, the bridge was quiet, very different from the drama that played out a mere hour earlier. The viewscreen showed the gray, pock-marked surface of the moon, passing languidly below. A more cheerless place would be hard to find.

"Anything, Lt. Bane?" asked Bateson.

Bane turned and shook his head. "Nothing yet, sir. We'll complete surface scans in about fifteen minutes, then start working our way deeper into the moon. It may take a while," he added, apologetically.

"Carry on, then," replied Bateson. He remembered well the old saying about Starship duty - long periods of tedium punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

"Sir!" Bane suddenly exclaimed. "Two vessels de-cloaking on our port and starboard bow!"

Bateson stood, peering intently at the screen. He was about to order the ship to red alert, when he recognized the vessels. His initial anxiety turned to irritation.

Two *Defiant* - class ships joined the *Bluefin* in orbit, flanking the cutter and matching her speed. Bateson did not need to see the registries to know who operated those ships.

"We're being hailed, Admiral," announced Bane.

Bateson nodded. "Wait one, Lieutenant." He turned to Strauss. "Commander, if you would be so kind, please raise the shields - I trust those people about as far as I can throw this ship!"

"Acknowledged, sir. Shields up," replied Strauss, promptly. By the tone of his voice, the Admiral was obviously pissed!

"Alright, Mr. Bane, let's hear what they have to say." said Bateson as he crossed his arms.

* * *

It took Tilos a moment to realize that the interminable noise had stopped. The ringing in his ears still mocked him as a reminder that it could return.

The voice spoke once more. "I hope you've reconsidered cooperating with us. Shall we talk, or are you that much of an opera fan?"

"This is torture!" hissed Tilos, through clenched teeth.

"No," said the voice in a reasonable tone. "According to our Chief of the Boat, this is high art."

"Like Hell!" said Tilos, his voice still somewhat unsteady.

"This technique is from the field interrogation guide when dealing with enemy combatants - particularly those who fly combat vessels while wearing civilian clothing. I can assure you that you'll experience *no lasting* effects, but . . ." the voice paused, "I have to agree that it is an unpleasant experience. Now . . ." the voice came closer. "Let's start over. What is your name?"

Tilos bit his lip.

The voice uttered a sigh. "Very well. We've got a lot more files of this, so . . ."

"Tilos, Wayne E." the Major said in clipped tones.

There was no sound for a moment. Tilos wondered if he was alone. Then the voice spoke again. "Good. *Wayne* Tilos. Now we're getting somewhere!" There was another pause. "It says here, *Wayne*, that you are a former Marine Major, is that correct?"

Tilos said nothing, the muscles in his jaw tightened perceptibly.

"It also says, *Wayne*, that you are listed as MIA, presumed dead - were you aware of that, *Wayne*?"

"Now that you know who I am," growled Tilos, "You also know that I'm a Federation citizen. I don't have to say a word, especially without counsel."

The bright light suddenly went out. Tilos blinked as colored spots clouded his vision. In a moment, his eyes were able to focus. A dark-skinned man with graying hair and captain's pips on his collar regarded him impassively.

"You're half right, Mr. Tilos," said Akinola. "But let me add something for you to chew on." The Captain leaned in, his nose nearly touching Tilos'.

"Your status has changed from MIA, presumed dead, to deserter, Mr. Tilos. And I happen to know that the Marine Corps still has two capital offenses in their regs - desertion and treason. I'm betting they might get you on both - what do you think? Ready to face a firing-squad?"

The muscles in Tilos' jaw began to twitch. He began to blink as perspiration rolled into his eyes, stinging them.

"Yessir, desertion during a time of war. How many of your men did you abandon, Mr. Tilos? *You were* a field-grade officer, after all, Mr. Tilos. Was it hard for you to just bug out? Did you get so scared you just couldn't *hack* it? Did you start to *cry for your Mommy*? What's your *excuse, you miserable piece of shit!?!*"

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT THE FRAK UP!" Tilos erupted, straining against his restraints. His muscles bulged with the effort and murder filled his eyes.

His chest heaved and his lips quivered. "You weren't there . . ." he murmured. "You weren't *there!*"

Akinola straightened, unperturbed. "Alright, Mr. Tilos - tell me about it. Help me understand why a Marine officer would abandon his men."

Tilos shook his head. "It wasn't like that." He took a hitching breath. "I was part of the expeditionary force to the Tyra system," he began quietly.

Akinola's expression remained stoic, but internally, he cringed. Tyra had been one of the worst Federation defeats during the war.

Tilos continued. "I was in command of two companies of Marines, plus a company of Klingon infantry. We dropped onto Tyra IV to attack a Jem'Hadar base and destroy their supply of Ketracel White. . . " He paused, his eyes distant. "They knew we were coming, somehow . . . My men, were pinned down by heavy fire . . . I called the Klingon Force-Commander for reinforcements . . . he *ignored* me, the bastard! He attempted a frontal assault on the facility and got himself and his warriors wiped out. For '*honor*' I suppose." Tilos was breathing heavily, caught up in the horrible memory. "We called for extraction but, . . ." he shook his head, "our transport was gone - blown out of orbit. We were on our own." His eyes locked with Akinola's. "We were on our own!"

"What happened, son?" asked Akinola, gently.

Tilos frowned, remembering. "We held off the Jem'Hadar for two days, but they were smart - they knew we were cut-off. They bided their time, never giving us a chance to rest or regroup. Finally, well . . ." He swallowed, "It finally ended in a cluster frak. We were fighting hand-to-hand, with small arms, knives, even rocks. At some point, I was hit and blacked out . . . I don't know how long. When I came too, I was surrounded by bodies . . . the bodies of my men. There were no friendly vessels left . . . we'd been abandoned."

"So, how did you get out of there?"

"I waited a few days, there were field rations and water scattered about. I made my way to the Jem'Hadar base," he shook his head. "It was abandoned! Can you believe that? Hundreds of men died for that hole, and the Jem'Hadar didn't even keep it! Is that frakked up or what?" He paused, then continued, "I scouted around and found one of their shuttles - it was damaged but operational. I scavenged parts off a couple of their frakked-up shuttles and

managed to get off that rock." He looked up at Akinola, a look of pleading in his eyes. "I didn't desert, Captain. The Klingons . . . our Fleet . . . they deserted us! . . ." He looked down. "After that . . . I . . . just took off. Somehow, I ended up in the Klaamet system and Commodore Garth found me . . . offered me a job." Tilos looked at Akinola with piercing eyes. "Garth understands the Klingons, Captain! Better than anyone! They're not our allies - they only care about their frakked up traditions and their stinking *honor!*"

Akinola squatted down, and stared at the former Marine officer. "Listen to me, Tilos. If what you said checks out, I swear to you, I'll go to bat for you . . . *but*, I need your help! Tell me where to find Garth!"

Tilos' face hardened. "Garth trusted me, Captain. He gave me a purpose again. I won't betray him."

"Son, let me give it to you straight - if we can get to Garth, stop him before he does something *really* stupid - there's a chance we can preserve his reputation and maybe save his life!

Tilos still looked unconvinced. Akinola's combadge chirped. He stood. "Akinola, go."

"Joseph, it's Bateson. It looks like some of our 'friends' have joined the party."

Akinola grimaced. "On my way, Akinola out." He looked at Tilos.

"Think about what I said. Our time may already be up!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Stardate 54077.7 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon

Akinola strode onto the bridge, stopping at the pit rail with hands on his waist, glaring at the two ships on the viewscreen. Bateson stood from the center chair.

"I kept your seat warm," quipped the Admiral.

"When did *they* show up?" asked Akinola, clearly unhappy.

Bateson shook his head. "Who knows? They were cloaked. For all we know, they may have been in-system before we got here."

"Mr. Bane, how were you able to detect that cloaked fighter, but not these vessels?" Akinola turned his gaze on the Australian Operations officer.

Bane responded with a look of frustration. "It must be a different type of cloaking device, sir. There was no tachyon surge or anti-proton trace to give them away."

"They're probably using the Romulan design, Joseph," interjected Bateson. "The Roms have practically perfected the damnable things." The Admiral moved toward an auxiliary station and took a seat. "Captain Lhar'Shon is standing by."

"I'll just bet she is!" Akinola walked around to his chair but did not sit. "Open a channel, Mr. Bane."

The moon and the two gunships disappeared, replaced with the image of the beautiful Andorian intelligence officer. Her antennae turned forward and a small smile formed on her face.

"Captain Akinola - my apologies for sneaking up on you like this," she began.

"Do what you're good at - that's what I always say," Akinola said with barely concealed sarcasm. "What happened to your concerns about Section 51? You said you were going to keep out of this to avoid dragging them in as well!"

"31," she corrected, automatically. "I'm afraid it's too late for that. We've learned that 31 is already involved in Garth's plot, at least to a degree. But I have a strong feeling that Garth has played them, that they don't know his ultimate goal."

"You know this . . . how?" asked Akinola, still perturbed.

She shook her head slightly. "Need-to-know, Captain. You know how it is."

"No, Captain - *I don't* 'know how it is!'" he replied, his anger rising. "I have a very strong suspicion that you're playing *us*, and I'm damn sick of it! We nearly got blown out of space a short while ago - where were you then? Watching and placing bets?" His voice was controlled, but the menace in his tone was evident for all.

Lhar'Shon's smile was gone. "We don't have time for this, Captain. I'm going to give you two hours to find and apprehend Garth, or I implement our contingency plan."

Akinola held her gaze, his eyes narrowing. "What contingency plan? What are you talking about?"

"Let's just say that you will need to break orbit and depart this system with all due haste in two hours."

He shook his head slowly, incredulous. "You're going to destroy this moon, aren't you? You're no better than this so-called Section 31 you go on about!" His voice dripped with contempt.

Lhar'Shon's expression didn't change, but her voice grew more quiet. "I'm sorry you think that, Captain. Believe me, I hope you succeed; *I want* you to succeed! But considering the stakes, *I will* do what must be done if you can't find and capture Garth."

Akinola's fists were clenched tightly, he hesitated before speaking, gaining control over his anger. "At least help us scan the moon. With three ships, we have a better chance of locating his lair."

She nodded. "Certainly, Captain. We will most definitely do that."

* * *

Garth paced the corridors of the underground sanctuary, frustrated and angry. Wayne had not communicated with him in over two hours. Garth feared that the young man had overstepped his bounds and actually attacked the cutter.

The energy dampening field that provided some camouflage from orbital scans also limited their ability to "see" the outside world. He was effectively deaf and blind, a situation he found untenable.

He considered the possibilities - One, Wayne had obeyed him and managed to lead the cutter out of system, providing them the time needed to complete their work and escape. But if that had happened, why hadn't Wayne notified him? A second possibility was that Wayne had attacked the cutter, crippling or possibly destroying it. Garth hoped that had not happened, but it would allow them time to finish. Yet again, why hadn't Wayne communicated or returned? Was his ship damaged as well?

The third possibility seemed the most likely to Garth. Wayne had been either captured or killed, and that cutter may very well be in orbit over the moon at this very moment. The not knowing was maddening!

He considered reducing the power of the dampening field, long enough for a passive sensor sweep. There were risks with this option - if the cutter were within 500 km, their sensors would certainly pick up the change in energy readings and home in on his position.

No, he would be patient and allow the energy dampening field to provide cover. With luck, they would finish their work and slip away in a few hours time.

The large, double doors of the cloning chamber slid open and Dr. Xerok walked toward Garth.

"Status report, Doctor," ordered Garth, slipping unconsciously into "command mode."

"We are in the final stage, Commodore. The neural mapping is complete. We must wait for the bio-genic matrix to establish itself in the replicants' DNA."

"How long will that take?"

"Unfortunately, that is a variable we cannot predict. Each replicant will encode the Matrix at different rates."

"Give me your best estimate, then."

Xerok raised an eyebrow. "Commodore, this has never before been attempted. I have no examples to cite. It may take minutes or hours, depending on the replicant - but I really cannot say with any degree of certainty."

Garth considered this. "When the first replicant is ready, bring his stasis chamber to my ship."

Xerok frowned in puzzlement. "You do not wish to take them all?"

Garth fixed the Vulcan with a piercing stare. "Time is running out, Doctor - if I can only take one, then that will have to do." He relaxed somewhat. "Thank you for the update, Doctor. Please return to your work."

Xerok inclined his head, and walked back to the lab.

Garth watched him go, then turned and moved down the corridor. He came to a heavy air-lock. He cycled his way through to a sizable landing bay, once used by Klingon mining crews. Three warp-capable small-craft were parked in the hangar. He went to the first ship, and powered up the craft, readying it for a hasty departure. As he exited the flight deck, he passed a storage locker. Hesitating for a moment, he opened it and removed a phaser pistol. He stared at the weapon for a moment, testing its heft in his hand, before drawing back his cloak and attaching it to his belt.

Garth returned through the airlock and proceeded back the way he came. Time weighed heavily on him.

* * *

"Admiral - are you sure it's wise for you to go down there? Assuming we even find Garth?"

Bateson and Akinola were sequestered in the ready room. Bateson looked out the viewport at the moon below.

"I've got the best chance of reasoning with him, Joseph. If nothing else, maybe I can keep him occupied long enough for Brin and his team to take control of the situation."

Akinola looked doubtful. "I don't like it, Morgan, but I don't have any better ideas. Let's just hope we can find Garth's base of operations." He glanced at his chronometer. "We've only got an hour and a half. Lhar'Shon doesn't seem the type to grant extensions."

Morgan grunted in agreement. "What about this Major Tilos? Anything out of him?"

Akinola shook his head grimly. "Nothing. I thought he would open up to me after I got him to spill about his background. To be honest, I have a degree of sympathy for the guy - his story does check out, by the way. He was at Tyra."

The Admiral shook his head. "Poor bastard! That makes him the only survivor."

"Yeah - I dangled the immunity carrot under his nose, after twisting a JAG captain's arm over subspace. He's not talking. The guy is totally loyal to Garth."

Bateson snorted. "Garth always instilled that kind of loyalty. It's part of what made him a great starship captain - and probably why he was able to enlist a group for his latest 'cause.'"

Akinola's terminal beeped and Bane's voice came over the channel.

"Captain? Bridge - I think we may have found something."

"What do you have, Nigel?"

"There's an area about 100 kilometers in circumference, where the energy readings are all the same. There should be some sort of variance - different minerals give off varied trace emissions. It's too uniform to be natural."

Akinola looked up at Bateson and grinned. "Good job, Lieutenant! We'll be there in a moment."

"I'll head to the transporter room," said Bateson.

The Captain nodded. "Solly and his team will meet you there." He paused and grabbed Bateson's arm. "Be careful down there, Admiral!"

Bateson favored him with a roguish grin. "Why Captain, I've been doing this for over a century - it will be a walk in the park!"

Akinola's face was solemn. "Morgan - Just remember . . . Garth will have his back against the wall. He's never lost a battle - I seriously doubt that he's a gracious loser."

"Neither am I, Joseph." The Admiral patted Akinola's shoulder affectionately and strode from the ready room.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Stardate 54077.8 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon

Bateson shook his head as Senior Chief Brin fumed.

"No, Senior Chief. I'm not wearing armor and I'm not carrying a phaser. My best chance of getting close to Garth is to go unarmed."

"Beggin' your pardon sir, but that's just *frakkin' nuts!*" rejoined the burly Red Orion Chief of the Boat. "What's to stop him from shooting you down like a mad Targ?"

"That's not his style," replied Bateson, with more confidence than he felt. "I'm not going to argue about it. Let's go, Senior Chief - that's an order!"

Brin held his gaze a fraction longer, then reluctantly moved up onto the transporter dais. He and Bateson were joined by five other security crewmen, all wearing body armor and carrying phaser carbines. He looked at Chief Deryx at the transporter console.

"Do you have a clear landing spot for us?"

Deryx nodded. "There's a chamber about 30 meters below the surface that shows breathable air. No other life signs are in the immediate area. Once you land, head 74 degrees for about half a klick. There's definitely activity there."

"Lock and load, people," ordered Brin. The whine of charging phase capacitors filled the chamber as the landing party powered up their weapons.

"Energize," ordered Bateson.

The landing party materialized in a dim cavern. Derelict mining equipment, covered with course dust and debris, was scattered about the area. The sound of slow-dripping water echoed in the space.

Solly checked the combat scanner strapped to his forearm. He pointed to a tunnel a dozen meters away.

"That's our way in," he said. "Keep your eyes open - if they don't know we're here yet, they soon will!"

* * *

A persistent beeping noise caught Garth's attention. He quickly pulled a small device off his belt and frowned. They had company, and the intruders were moving their way. He pressed a control on the device, causing two, large security doors to trundle shut. He was under no illusions that this would buy him much time.

He moved quickly to the cloning chamber and entered. Twenty four gleaming cylinders occupied the center of the large room, arranged in six rows of four each. A series of monitors hung over each. Xerok noticed Garth and moved toward him.

"Doctor, it would seem our time is up. Are any of the replicants ready?"

The Vulcan's face was expressionless, but Garth thought he sensed disappointment in Xerok, nonetheless.

"Only two, Commodore. Number four and, of course, number twenty four. The others are still in-process."

Garth nodded quickly. "Understood, Doctor. Though time is short, I must tell you how much I appreciate what you've done. Perhaps one day you will receive your due recompense."

"My satisfaction lies in the work itself, Commodore, but thank you for the opportunity to do this," Xerok gestured toward the cylinders.

"Now, I'm afraid I must take my leave, Doctor Xerok. Please have cylinder four moved to my ship. I suggest that you make your own escape, once you've initiated our contingency plan."

Xerok inclined his head. "Understood." He lifted his hand and spread his fingers in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Garth of Izar."

Garth returned the salute. "Peace, and long life, Xerok of Vulcan. Perhaps we will see each other again someday." As Garth turned to head toward his ship, a muffled explosion rattled the chamber, sending down a cascade of dust. He turned back to Xerok.

"I suggest you hurry!"

* * *

Bateson and the security detail came to a sudden halt, their way blocked by large security doors.

"Murph - get up here!" ordered Brin. The security crewman joined the Senior Chief at the doors.

"I need these open," said Brin. Murphy's face spread into a grin.

"I gotcha covered, Senior Chief! Move everyone back around the curve in the tunnel."

As Brin and the others retreated, Murphy pulled two small detonators from a pouch on his belt. Quickly inspecting the door, he found two location that suited him, and he attached the tiny devices. Activating both of them, he sprinted back in the opposite direction, sliding to a stop by the others, who were huddled down, heads covered. He checked the chronometer on his combat scanner, then announced:

"Fire in the hole!"

There was a muffled *KRUMPH*, followed by a sudden cloud of dust and the clatter of the doors as they hit the ground.

Waving a hand in front of his face to clear the air, Solly announced, "Let's move out, people!"

* * *

Admiral Bateson noticed the level of light increasing ahead. He grabbed Solly by the arm, halting him.

"Senior Chief, I want you to hang back here - I'm going in alone to try to talk with Garth. I'll leave my combadge activated, so you can monitor the situation. *Do not* intervene unless absolutely necessary, is that understood?"

Reluctantly, Brin nodded his head. He reached into a pocket on his black coveralls and pulled out a small object, pressing it into Bateson's hand. The

Admiral looked down, surprised. It was a small phaser, one of the old "diplomatic" models that was no longer issued.

"Keep that with you sir . . . just in case," said Brin.

Bateson bounced it in his hand a couple of times, then passed it back to the Senior Chief.

"Thanks, Solly, but he'd know. Just keep your ears open - if you hear phaser fire, come running. I'll try to make a difficult target!"

Brin snorted, looking at the large man. "Good luck with *that*, sir."

Bateson grinned and patted the Orion on the shoulder. "See you shortly," he said, covering his apprehension with bravado.

* * *

Stardate 54077.8 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon

"Sir!" announced Lt. Bane, "I've got multiple launches from the moon - sixteen, no . . . *eighteen* small-craft, accelerating rapidly on multiple vectors!"

"Damn!" grimaced Akinola. "Helm - lay in a pursuit course to the nearest ship! Commander Simms, power up the tractor beams. Mr. Bane - contact our 'escorts,' we need some help, here!"

The *Bluefin's* powerful impulse engines pushed the cutter out of orbit, gathering speed to close the increasing gap between them and the escaping ships.

"Sir, we'll never catch them all," pointed out Commander Strauss, "each ship is on a different heading!"

"Noted, Commander, but we've got to try. Nigel - hail those ships, and warn them to heave-to or we'll open fire. XO, warm up the phasers - we might be able to disable a few before they get out of range."

Inga looked doubtful. "Sir, those ships are pretty small. There's a risk we might destroy them instead of disabling their engines."

Akinola frowned, considering their options. "Load the Mark 22's, then."

"Aye, sir." But Strauss and Akinola both knew they couldn't stop that many ships with EMP bursts. And the reload time for the torpedoes guaranteed that some would likely escape.

"*Spectre* and *Shadow* are now in pursuit, Captain," announced Bane.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Akinola rubbed his chin in frustration. The *Defiant* - class ships weren't designed for interdiction. He doubted they were equipped with tractor beams, much less - Marks 22 torpedoes.

"Target one in range," announced Strauss.

"Fire one," ordered Akinola.

A red orb streaked from one of the cutter's forward torpedo tubes. It tracked in behind the small-craft, detonating in a flash of brilliant light.

The small-craft pitched forward, continuing its forward progress on momentum. But its engines were dead and major systems off-line.

"Mark it's trajectory, Mr. Bane. XO, lock onto target two and *fire!*"

Again, a Mark 22 torpedo raced from the cutter, disabling a second small-craft.

"Reload, and close on target three," ordered Akinola, just as the remaining small-craft jumped to warp.

For a moment, no one on the bridge said anything. Akinola sighed. "Belay that, helm. Let's go pick up the other two and see if our 'spy-ships' had any luck."

Soon, the *Bluefin* once more orbited the moon, two small ships trailing behind her like fish on a stringer.

"The *Shadow* is hailing us, sir," said Bane.

"On screen, Lieutenant," replied Akinola.

Captain Lhar'Shon's face appeared. "It would seem they planned their escape very well, Captain."

"We were only able to catch two ships. Did you have any luck?" asked Akinola.

"Unfortunately, we were only able to stop one vessel with some fine phaser work by our tactical officer. Interestingly enough, the vessel was empty - operating on computer controls."

"Decoys," said Akinola with grudging admiration. "A damn good ploy on their part. We did manage to grab two perps - a Vulcan and an Andorian. We're holding them in our brig right now."

"And what of Garth?" asked Lhar'Shon.

* * *

**Stardate 54077.9 (3 February 2377)
Thurilin's Moon**

"Commodore!" called Bateson, loudly.

Garth whirled at the sound of Bateson's voice. A phaser had suddenly appeared in his hand. The Izarian regarded Bateson for a moment, a slight frown on his face.

"Do I know you?" he asked, keeping the phaser trained on Bateson.

The Admiral nodded. His mouth was dry, but he managed to keep his voice calm and casual.

"Yes! I was a student of yours at the Academy. My name is Morgan Bateson."

A look of recognition came over Garth's face. He nodded slightly and the frown faded, though the phaser remained trained on Bateson.

"Yes, yes, Bateson . . . I do remember you! I heard how you were caught in that temporal loop for all those many years." A small smile formed on his face. "I would really enjoy the opportunity to catch up with you, but I'm afraid I'm rather busy at the moment."

Bateson took a single step forward. Garth extended the phaser slightly in a warning gesture. The Admiral stopped, holding his hands out to his side.

"Commodore Garth, I'm unarmed. Please . . . give me five minutes of your time!"

"For what, Mr. Bateson? To talk me out of this 'folly?'" Garth gestured dramatically toward the cloning lab. "You of all people should know that the Klingons remain a threat to the Federation! Their current corrupt government and humiliating losses of ships and personnel in the recent war make them more dangerous than ever!"

"There hasn't been a war with the Klingons in over a century, Commodore. We've managed to coexist! We're allies . . ."

"NEVER!" shouted Garth, the sound of his voice reverberating in the cavern. "They have been and ever *shall* be our enemies!" His eyes narrowed and he shook his head at Bateson, as if trying to reason with a dull-witted student. "You were too young to remember the horrors of the Four Years War. You don't know how close we came to *losing*! For too long, we tried to fight 'civilly,' to seek avenues of diplomacy!" Garth uttered a harsh bark of a laugh. "For that, they saw us as *weak* - they increased their levels of brutality!" He paused again, nodding to himself. "I saw what they did on Vega II . . . they slaughtered every man, woman and child - *after* the colony surrendered! I saw the bodies . . . I remember the smell . . . the carrion eaters that we had to drive away."

"We have blood on our heads, too, Commodore," said Bateson in a quiet but firm voice. "Human history is replete with savagery - yet we moved beyond that . . . for the most part."

Garth shook his head dismissively. "This is different, Bateson. It's more than just a cultural bent to violence for the Klingons, it is part of their genetic makeup! I know! I've been studying them for over one hundred years." A smile crept over his face. "And I've learned how to eliminate the disease! Soon, the scourge of the Klingons will be just a memory."

Bateson felt his blood go cold. "What have you done, Commodore?" he asked, quietly.

"No sense hiding it any longer," said Garth, once more in a pleasant voice. "I've created a bio-pathogen that only affects Klingons - it is harmless to every

other known race in the quadrant. The delivery system is . . . fitting for their kind. The pathogen will spread rapidly throughout their population and kill every Klingon." His smile broadened. "Every . . . last . . . one."

Bateson just stared at his former teacher and idol. Finally, he found his voice. "You sick, butchering son of a bitch . . . I hope you burn in Hell!"

Garth shrugged slightly. "I didn't think you'd understand." He quickly brought the phaser up into firing position.

Multiple bursts of phaser fire converged on Garth, shaking him like a Terrier shaking a rag doll. He collapsed in a heap, his phaser pistol clattering along the rough ground.

Bateson trotted forward as Brin and the rest of the landing party converged from the shadows, their weapons still fixed on the motionless form. Corpsman Sanders passed a medical tri-corder over the unconscious man, and looked up at the Admiral.

"He's out cold, but his vital signs are good, sir. Are you alright?"

Bateson took a breath and nodded. "Fine, Corpsman Sanders." He reached down to retrieve Garth's phaser. He frowned as he looked at it. "Senior Chief, look at this."

Solly took the phaser from Bateson. "What the . . . ? The power cell is empty - it's useless!"

Bateson looked down at Garth, puzzled. "He wanted to be captured."

"Spread out, people - let's search this place by the numbers. Sing out if you find anything or anyone," shouted Brin. He turned to the Admiral. "You might as well head back to the ship, sir."

Bateson nodded. "Very well. Carry on, Senior Chief." He moved over to Sanders and the unconscious Garth, then tapped his combadge.

"Bateson to *Bluefin*. Three to beam-up from my signal."

In a moment, the three men disappeared.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Stardate 54077.8 (3 February 2377)

Thurilin's Moon

Senior Chief Brin and the landing party had scarcely begun reconnoitering the underground chambers, when the distinctive musical whine of transporter effect caught their ears.

Five figures in Starfleet uniforms appeared. One of the party, a lieutenant, looked around, spotted Solly, and walked in his direction.

Solly straightened as the Asian officer stopped in front of him. The officer's face was neutral as he looked up at the Red Orion.

"Senior Chief, I'm Lt. Izuko of the *Spectre*. We'll take over from here - your team is relieved."

Sure, now that the shooting's over, thought Brin. "Have at it, Lieutenant," said Brin, scarcely keeping the disdain from his voice, "we certainly don't want to interfere with the *experts*."

Izuko frowned and was about to reply, but something in Brin's eyes made him pause.

"Ah, sure, Senior Chief. Thanks for securing the area."

Brin nodded slightly, his expression hard as stone. "Yes sir," He turned his head and shouted, "Form up, Border Dogs! Time to go!"

The rest of the detail from the *Bluefin* trotted over to Solly. Brin tapped his combadge. "Landing party to *Bluefin*, five to beam-up." Almost immediately, the group dematerialized.

"Scary-looking S.O.B., huh, Mr. Izuko?" observed an ensign from the *Spectre*.

Izuko frowned, still looking in the direction where Brin and the others beamed out. "Why don't you shut up, DuPree, and get to work."

* * *

Stardate 54077.8 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin* **Standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon**

Captain Lhar'Shon had beamed over to the *Bluefin* to question the Vulcan and Andorian prisoners. She walked with Bateson and Akinola toward the cutter's brig.

"I've called in extra assets to try and track those ships, but with their head-start we'll be hard-pressed to find them," she said, obviously frustrated.

Akinola stopped in the corridor and crossed his arms. "Lhar'SHon, I think it's time you came clean with us - what just happened? How does Garth plan to wipe out the Klingons."

The Andorian sighed. "Time is against us, Captain, but here's the short version - Garth has cloned several Klingons, using the DNA from twenty-four notable figures from their history. K'Tinga, of course, you know about. Garth's scientists have turned the clones into walking time-bombs - they're carrying a deadly pathogen that's fatal to Klingons. And now, it looks like they've been unleashed!

"But why these historical figures? Why not just get the DNA from some random Klingons? I don't get it - why go to all this trouble?" asked Akinola as he moved forward toward the brig.

Lhar'Shon shook her head. "I'm hoping Garth will tell us. Remember, the man has an ego as big as the moon we're orbiting! My guess? It pleases his sense of irony - using the most revered figures from Klingon history to bring about their demise."

"Ironic? That's just insane!" said Akinola in disgust.

"You'll get no argument from me," replied Lhar'Shon as they entered the brig.

* * *

Thirty minutes with the geneticist, Dr. Xerok, yielded nothing but silence, stony looks and frustration on the parts of Lhar'Shon, Akinola and Bateson. Frustrated by the Vulcan's stone-walling, the senior officers had him returned to his cell.

"We'd get more information from a Horta!" fumed Akinola, as he hastily stood from his chair in the interrogation room, obviously agitated.

"He's a Vulcan - did you really expect him to respond to intimidation, Joseph?" asked Bateson.

"Of course not!" replied Akinola, testily, "but I had hoped he'd at least respond to logic!"

Lhar'Shon shook her head. "To do so, would be for him to acknowledge that his own logic was flawed. I believe he'd prefer torture to that. Let's talk to the Andorian, perhaps he'll be more forth-coming."

Lhar'Shon's combadge beeped. "Excuse me, gentlemen," she said and stepped out of the interrogation room.

"It would seem that the genie is out of the bottle, Joseph," observed Bateson. His face was drawn and haggard.

"Yeah, well I intend to find out where those clones are headed. And if that means I threaten to push Garth out an airlock, by God, I'll do it!"

Bateson shook his head and smiled wanly. "And they call me a dinosaur!"

"Dammit, Morgan! We don't have time to play by the rules, here! There are 25 billion Klingons on the other side of that border, whose lives depend on what we do right now! If that means I have to take action that gets me thrown out of the service . . . it'll be worth it!"

"It may not come to that," said Lhar'Shon as she returned to the room. "That was Lt. Izuko, my Science Officer. From his inspection of the equipment, only two of the clones were fully viable and only one successfully received the bio-genetic matrix. The others were removed from their cylinders before the pathogen could be fully integrated into their DNA."

"Okay - explain how that's good news?" demanded Akinola.

"Twenty two of the twenty four clones will begin to degrade within hours - they're no threat to anyone. And only one actually carries the pathogen."

"So we're looking for one Klingon instead of twenty-four?" clarified Bateson.

"Twenty-three," corrected Lhar'Shon. "The twenty-fourth clone wasn't Klingon. It was human."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Stardate 54077.9 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

In standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon

Dr. Essch' a' Kliss, the Andorian geneticist, sat nervous and alone in the interrogation room of the *Bluefin*. The room seemed much too warm and stuffy and the hard, metal chair was uncomfortable.

He was both angry and frightened. Angry and indignant to be incarcerated like a common criminal by these Border thugs, yet frightened that his predicament might be much, much worse than he previously imagined.

Now, this infernal *waiting* was wearing on his already frayed nerves. He had neither seen nor spoken to anyone since being locked in this stark room, with just two chairs and a table. His head hurt. He was thirsty. He really needed to void his bladder!

The blue glow of the forcefield at the doorway suddenly blinked out. Three officers entered the room - two humans and another Andorian. The Andorian Captain sat opposite Kliss, yet did not acknowledge his presence. She held a data padd, perusing it with a slight frown. The humans stood against the wall. The dark-skinned one glowered at Kliss, while the pink-skin wore a thin smile.

"Why am I being held here?" demanded Kliss. "I demand to know why you disabled my ship and abducted me! This is barbarous treatment!"

Lhar'Shon set the padd on the table and regarded the scientist impassively for several moments before speaking.

"Essch' a' Kliss, you are being held as a suspected co-conspirator in a plot to wage genocide against an allied power. In addition, you are implicated in the violation of several Federation statutes including genetic manipulation, genetic augmentation, cloning of a sentient being, illegal possession of controlled substances, illegal possession of controlled technology . . . shall I continue?"

Kliss' face had turned a dark shade of blue and his antennae flattened against his head. He had trouble getting enough breath to speak. His mouth moved for several seconds before he uttered words.

"I . . . I never intended . . . I didn't know . . ." he stammered.

Lhar'Shon's face was impassive. "Come now, Dr. Kliss. You are a highly intelligent person - surely you understood what Garth was doing?"

"No! No . . . I did not . . . I thought he merely wanted to plant the replicants in the Empire to force an eventual change in the Klingon government! I did not suspect his real purpose until . . ." Kliss suddenly stopped speaking, realizing the implication of his words. He swallowed. "I demand counsel before I speak further."

"That is your right," agreed Lhar'Shon. "However, you need to consider this." She leaned forward, peering intently into the older Andorian's eyes. "Time is of the essence, *Doctor*. The longer that you dither, the greater the head-start Garth has! If he succeeds, *your* name will forever be tied to his as an accessory to one of the most heinous crimes in the history of this galaxy! Now . . ." She leaned back, maintaining her gaze, "You can 'lawyer up,' or you can help us stop Garth! The choice is yours - you have ten seconds to decide, then these officers and I will leave you here, to ponder your fate and your legacy."

There was silence in the interrogation room. Dr. Kliss looked ill. The dark blue flush had faded from his cheeks. Now his face was almost gray. Tears formed in his eyes.

"I didn't know!" he rasped. "If I did, I would never have . . ."

"*Enough!*" said Lhar'Shon, sharply. "We're not interested in your puerile mewling! Tell us something useful if you can, but *do not* waste our time!"

Kliss blinked at her, his expression stunned as if she had struck him physically. Finally, he nodded jerkily. "I . . . will tell you what I know."

And he did.

* * *

"Akinola to sickbay,"

Dr. O.C. Castille tapped his combadge. "Sickbay - Castille here. Go ahead."

"Doc, I'm on my way down there. Is Garth conscious yet?"

"No sir, and frankly, I'm puzzled by that - he should have recovered from the phaser stun by now."

"Doctor, listen carefully - I need you to perform a cellular scan. Find out how old he is - got that?"

Castille frowned, puzzled. "Sure, I understand, but why? . . . "

"Humor me, Doc - it's important! I'll see you in a minute."

* * *

Akinola and Castille stood over Garth's bed. The Izarian's vital signs appeared normal, yet he was still unconscious.

"Let's see what we get," murmured Castille as he held a special scanner over Garth. The device emitted a soft, wavering hum. Castille looked at the device and frowned. "*That can't be right!*"

"What does it say?" asked the Captain.

Castille shook his head, puzzled. "According to this cellular scan, this man is only a few hours old!"

Akinola glanced at the still form. "That bastard has played us every step of the way! He's left us his goddam clone!" The Captain stormed out of sickbay.

Castille stood by Garth's bed, a perplexed expression on his face.

"What just happened?" he asked the unconscious form.

* * *

Former Marine Major Wayne Tilos lay on the bunk in his cell. It was a relief to not be bound to a chair and the bunk wasn't too bad. He had received a decent meal a short time earlier, so he felt pretty good physically.

But something still gnawed at his gut - had he done the right thing in protecting Garth?

His heart said, "yes." Garth had taken him in when Tilos had been at his lowest. He had given him a job of importance and a sense of purpose. For that, Tilos would always be grateful.

But whispers in his mind were giving him doubts. Tilos had assumed that Garth was setting up the Klingon government for a fall. That was something with which Tilos whole-heartedly approved.

His earlier conversation with Captain Akinola had shaken him, though he concealed that well enough. Had Garth been straight with him? He was beginning to have doubts.

Tilos suddenly realized the slight background hum of the forcefield had ceased. He sat up on the bunk, wary.

Captain Akinola stood in the doorway, his face unreadable.

"Mr. Tilos, I'm giving you one more chance to talk. Before you clam-up, there's something you need to know . . ."

* * *

Stardate 54077.9 (3 February 2377)

Garth's shuttlecraft

Areq'dola system

Garth guided the shuttle craft to a small planetoid in the Areq'dola system - another remote, unpopulated string of planets and asteroids circling a mundane red star in the no-man's land between Federation and Klingon space. He entered a deep ravine in the planetoid, slowing the craft for landing.

He smiled as the shuttle's spot lights revealed a small, Klingon transport a few dozen meters away. Garth nimbly adjusted the controls, bringing the shuttle to a smooth landing on the rocky terrain. He brought the impulse engines to idle, not shutting them down completely, then left the flight deck, moving aft to the main cabin.

The cloning cylinder took up most of the space in the cabin. Garth was able to squeeze by its side and inputted a series of commands into the control interface.

The cylinder began to hum, then with a sudden loud *HISSES*, the cylinder opened. Opaque gases flowed from the open sarcophagus, obscuring the occupant. Garth waited for the atmosphere to clear, then smiled as his gaze fell on the replicant.

An imposing Klingon male lay in the cylinder, his eyes closed, his chest unmoving. Garth inputted another series of commands and waited.

A tube moved from the side of the cylinder, and pressed against the Klingon's neck. Suddenly, the Klingon's eyes flew open wide and his back arched. He inhaled loudly and deeply in several gasps, before his respiration became more steady. The dark eyes turned and focused on Garth, narrowing. The Klingon appeared to size-up Garth.

"Who are you?" asked the Klingon in a guttural baritone. There was neither fear nor threat in his tone - merely curiosity.

Garth smiled. "That's not important right now. I want you to listen carefully to this . . . *'eclipse.'*"

The control word had its desired effect. K'Tinga blinked rapidly and his face relaxed. He sat up, and quickly climbed out of the chamber. Garth stood back, giving the tall Klingon room. He handed K'Tinga a stack of clothing.

"You have instructions for me," stated K'Tinga. Garth was impressed with the Klingon, in spite of himself. Even with the programmed mental conditioning, K'Tinga had an aura of command about him. He spoke not as a subordinate, but as a peer . . . perhaps more.

"They are very simple, my friend. I will explain as you get dressed." said Garth, smiling.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Stardate 54077.9 (3 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

In standard orbit - Thurilin's Moon

Wayne Tilos shook his head in stunned disbelief. Captain Akinola still stood, leaning against the cell wall, arms crossed as he waited for Tilos to speak.

"I can't believe that!" said Tilos, finally. "I mean, I know Commodore Garth has no love for the Klingons - but this was always about bringing down their government, not wiping them out!"

"I have the sworn testimony of one of the scientists who can back me up, Mr. Tilos - not to mention the records we have already recovered." Akinola stepped away from the wall, then drew up a chair and sat down. He leaned forward, his hands dangling between his knees as he looked into the young man's eyes. "On my word as an officer, Garth intends to wipe out the Klingon race - every man, woman, and child! He's got the weapon right now, and he's on his way to use it!"

Tilos' face was pale and perspiration beaded his upper lip. "Captain - you have to believe me - if I had known . . ."

"Mr. Tilos!" Akinola interrupted firmly, "There's no time for 'coulda, woulda, shoulda!' I need your help *now*! Do you know where he is headed with that clone?"

Tilos blinked, then nodded. "I think I do . . ."

* * *

Akinola strode onto the cutter's bridge and entered the ready room. Admiral Bateson and Captain Lhar'Shon were already there.

"Tilos says Garth is headed toward the Areq'dola system," Akinola said without preamble.

Bateson frowned. "That's right on the border, in the old neutral zone. It's uninhabited, but with five planets and hundreds of planetoids, there are a lot of places he could hide!"

"I doubt he's hiding, Admiral," said Lhar'Shon. "He knows by now that we're on to him. He'll attempt to get K'Tinga across the border into Klingon space."

"Then we need to get after him - now!" said Akinola.

Lhar'Shon looked doubtful. "He's got a huge head start, Captain. I don't know that we can get there in time. And we have no other assets nearby!"

A small smile formed on Bateson's face. "I think I can call in some reinforcements."

* * *

Stardate 54078.0 (4 February 2377)
Klingon Forward Station G-12
Near the Federation Border

Captain Mertok growled in frustration, willing himself not to scratch the maddening itch in his non-existent arm. The physicians had called it "phantom" pain, and they were right! But how did you attack a phantom?

He forced his mind back to the report he was reviewing, when the terminal communicator buzzed twice in staccato fashion.

"I said I was not to be disturbed!" Mertok said angrily, though in truth, he welcomed any distraction from these accursed reports.

The image of the young Klingon lieutenant lowered his head slightly, acknowledging his interruption. "My apologies, Captain, but there is an urgent transmission for you from Admiral Morgan Bateson of the Federation Border Service."

Mertok's brow furrowed. "Bateson? What does he want?" demanded the old warrior.

"I do not know, sir. All I can tell you is that it is scrambled and tagged priority level one."

Mertok grunted in surprise. Maybe he would get lucky and learn another war had broken out. Anything to break the monotony that he knew would be his death. "Very well. Put him through."

While he waited for the channel to open, Mertok considered his old adversary. He had been a very young officer in the old days, the *good* days when Klingon and Federation border ships would test their skills against one another along the former neutral zone. Bateson had been a well-known foe, a respected enemy commander before disappearing for those many years. In those years, things had changed and old enemies had become allies. Sometimes, though, Mertok missed the old times - they had certainly been more interesting!

His terminal buzzed once, and the image of Morgan Bateson appeared.

"Admiral, it has been a long time," began Mertok. "What is so urgent?"

Bateson surprised him by skipping the usual, foolish "small talk" employed by humans and making a very direct declaration.

"Captain Mertok, what I am about to tell you is the absolute truth. I swear that to you as a fellow officer and upon the house of my ancestors."

Mertok was momentarily speechless, caught not so much by what Bateson said but *how* he said it. Finally, he answered.

"I will hear you."

Bateson spoke for three minutes. Mertok never interrupted for a question or to cast aspersion or doubt. When he was finished speaking, Bateson simply stared back over the viewscreen, waiting.

Mertok considered the ramifications of all that Bateson had told him. Though the tale was fantastic, Mertok had no doubt in his mind that it was true. There was no time to pass this along to higher authorities - the time had come to act!

"I will do what you have asked, Admiral. *Q'plah!*"

Bateson's face relaxed a degree, but he did not smile. "Success to you as well, Captain. I hope we can share a drink and some stories once this is over."

"It shall be as you say. Please excuse me Admiral, I have much to do."

"Understood, Captain. Bateson, out."

Mertok sat for a moment longer, then a smile stretched across his face. He pounded the com-switch on his desk.

"Lieutenant Trelik, alert the squadron!"

* * *

Stardate 54078.0 (4 February 2377)
USS *Bluefin*
en route to the Areq'dola system - warp 9.3

Chief Rumraa uttered a low growl of concern as he watched the inter-cooler temperature climb. The Caitian turned toward Commander Galt.

"Sirr! At this speed, we will overheat the mains soon. I rrecommend we cut back to warrp 9."

Galt eyed his new assistant. "Grolen's mangy beard! You don't know this ship yet, Chief. We'll push it to 9.4 if the Captain needs it, and we'll put it together when it flies apart! Understood?"

"Yes sirr," replied Rumraa, though he still sounded concerned.

"Good! Better check on the shield generators before we arrive in system."

Rumraa nodded and moved off. Galt waited until Rumraa was out of earshot before slapping his combadge.

"Galt to Captain."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"Sir - the core temperature is approaching critical! How much longer until we reach our destination?"

"About fifteen more minutes - can you hold it together that long?"

Galt sighed, "Don't I always? Galt out." He turned and watched the status board with concern as the temperature indicator moved inexorably toward the critical range.

"Course, there's always a chance I could be wrong," he grouched.

* * *

Captain Akinola forced down more coffee as he watched the stars streak by on the viewscreen. They were traveling beyond their top-rated speed, trying to keep pace with the faster *Defiant* - class ships. Finding Garth and his Klingon bio-weapon before they could escape the Areq-dola system was critical.

He had now gone nearly 24 hours without sleep. Part of him knew that fatigue often brought about poor judgment, but he was in this for the duration. Besides, Bateson hadn't rested either. The Admiral sat at one of the unused stations, alone with his thoughts. Akinola hoped that Bateson's call to his Klingon counterpart would help.

"Now entering the Areq'dola system," announced Lt. Sarnek from the helm.

"Helm, bring us out of warp. Ahead one quarter impulse." Akinola turned toward the Operations station and smiled.

"It's good to have you back on the bridge, Ensign Vashtee. Please begin scanning for any other vessels."

Maya Vashtee returned the smile. Her face was thinner, but otherwise she looked well, considering her recent close brush with death.

"Thank you, sir - it's good to be back! Beginning active scanning."

Akinola turned toward the tactical station. "Commander Strauss, if we find Garth's ship, we must stop it - whatever it takes."

"Shall I load Mark-22's?"

Akinola glanced at Bateson, who met his eyes and shook his head slightly.

"Negative, we can't take the chance. Load the Mark-four's, XO. This time, if we find his ship, we take it out."

* * *

**Stardate 54078.0 (3 February 2377)
Garth's shuttlecraft**

Areq'dola system

Garth nodded in approval as he looked K'Tinga up and down. "Very impressive! I imagine our 'friends' on the other ship will be awestruck!"

K'Tinga wore the modern battle dress of a flag officer. He was tall, even by Klingon standards, with broad shoulders and piercing, dark eyes. Though Garth could never bring himself to describe any Klingon as 'handsome,' he had to admit that K'Tinga was certainly a striking figure.

K'Tinga flipped open an older-style communicator. "We're ready to beam over," he said.

"Acknowledged," came the curt reply. Momentarily, Garth and K'Tinga were caught in a transporter beam. They materialized inside the Klingon transport.

Three Klingons, two males and a female, gaped in awe at the sight of K'Tinga. Finally the female shook herself and focused on Garth. She grinned, revealing sharp teeth.

Garth forced a smile in return. For him, this was the most dangerous moment. He knew very well that these renegade Klingons might attempt treachery. Though he had no doubt that he could survive such an eventuality, his plan would be effectively scuttled.

"You are Chandler?"

Garth thought the question rather absurd - who else would land on this god-forsaken planetoid with a replcant of K'Tinga? He squelched the sarcastic reply that entered his mind.

"Yes. I have delivered your 'Lord' as per our agreement. You have my payment?"

The woman leveled a disruptor at Garth. He sighed - incredulous at the lack of imagination these Klingons demonstrated.

"Before you cast me into *Sto'Vo'Kor*, you may wish to know that K'Tinga here has a slight flaw - I've attached an explosive device to his heart. If I do not deactivate it at a pre-determined time then, *Boom!*" Garth splayed out his hands for dramatic effect. "Lord K'Tinga will be little more than Targ food."

The woman's sneer tightened and her eyes grew hard, but she lowered her weapon. "Bring it here," she ordered.

One of the other Klingons brought a metal case to Garth. He opened it, inspecting the contents. Satisfied, he closed it.

"How do we know you will deactivate the bomb?" she asked.

Garth smiled. "You don't. But fear not, our purposes are aligned in this case. I wish *you every success* in getting K'Tinga back into the Empire, to one day take his rightful place. Now, if you will excuse me, I will take my leave."

* * *

Stardate 54078.0 (4 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Areq'dola system

"Initial scans complete, Captain," announced Ensign Vashtee. "No other contacts besides the *Spectre* and the *Shadow*."

"Understood, Ensign. Keep scanning and focus on those planetoids. XO? You have the conn." Akinola stood from his chair and walked toward the ready room. Bateson followed.

The Captain leaned back in his chair, and yawned expansively. Bateson sat heavily in one of the guest chairs, his own fatigue apparent.

"We're getting too old for this, Joseph," observed Bateson.

"Speak for yourself, Morgan. I'm just getting my second wind."

The Admiral rolled his eyes. "Right." He yawned and rubbed his face.

Akinola regarded his friend. "So, what's Garth doing now?"

Bateson frowned and scratched his beard. "Damned if I know. Every time I think I've got this figured out, he throws another curve our way. The man is a genius, Joseph. Bug-house crazy, but a genius!"

"Yeah, but he's a cocky bastard too. Maybe he'll get over-confident and slip up."

Bateson snorted. "Fat chance. He's always managed to keep his ego in check when it comes to tactics." He paused a moment, lost in thought.

"What?" queried Akinola.

"The ego-thing. I thought he'd try to get K'Tinga over the border himself - just to show he could do it, you know?"

"Yeah, but that's a pretty big risk on his part," observed Akinola.

"Exactly! So far, he's had a contingency plan for *everything*. Why not now?"

Akinola frowned, "A rendezvous?"

"Why not? It makes more sense for a Klingon ship to sneak across, pick up K'Tinga, then sneak back than for Garth to try to make it in a Federation-registered shuttle!"

The Captain straightened and tapped his combadge. "Captain to Ops."

"Vashtee here, go ahead sir."

"We may be looking for *two* vessels, not just one. The other is probably a Klingon ship. Pass that along to our 'escorts' too."

"Aye, sir. I'll do that right now."

Akinola closed the channel. "Now, we wait," he said to Bateson.

"Yeah," replied Bateson as he again rubbed his face hard, trying to stay alert. "I hate this part."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Stardate 54078.0 (4 February 2377)

Klingon Transport *Cho'paQ*

Areq'dola system

Lirlek, the female Klingon, settled into the pilot's seat of the transport and powered up the ship. Nad'jiq, her co-pilot also took his seat while K'Tinga stood just behind them.

"Lord K'Tinga," she said to the replicant, "We will take you to Roq'hid, where we will meet with the other . . ."

"No," said K'Tinga, firmly. "Take me to Qo'nos."

Lirlek hesitated. "My Lord, it is important that we plan our next step!"

The replicant cast a baleful stare at the Klingon woman. "My steps are my own, as are my plans. Do as I say! . . . *Station!*" He turned and left the flight deck before she could protest.

Nad'jig turned to Lirlek, a look of concern on his face. "What do we do?"

"We leave this rock, that's what we do. We will figure out our next step when we cross the border." She was going to say more, when her throat tightened and she was caught by a spasm of coughing. In truth, she suddenly did not feel well at all.

"Lirlek?" Nad'jiq frowned at the woman.

"It is nothing. Activate thrusters and prepare for take-off."

* * *

Stardate 54078.1 (4 February 2377)

IKS *Gortaj*

Klingon space, near the Federation Border

"Captain Mertok - you honor me with your presence! But I am puzzled as to the suddenness of this exercise - what is our objective?" Commander Derjoth was appropriately deferential to his squadron commander, but Mertok was not in a talkative mood.

"The objective, Commander, is for you to obey my orders when I give them. You have done that to my satisfaction - *so far!*"

Derjoth seemed to wilt under Mertok's gaze and he moved away. Mertok sighed to himself, wondering if he still had *any* real warriors under his command. Certainly Commander Choq had fit that description. A shame he was dead - they could use *him* and the *Jhar'toq* right now.

He took his place in the center seat of the *B'Rel* class Bird-of-Prey, knowing it was an insult to Commander Derjoth, but not caring. It would have pleased him, had Derjoth challenged him, but the young commander pretended to ignore the slight, standing beside the command chair, eyes fixed on the viewscreen.

If you haven't the stomach to challenge a one-armed old man, you will not last long in command, Mertok thought. Aloud he said, "Have the *Il'Kran* and the *Sag'duJaQ* form up on us. Helm! Bring us to 128 mark 39 and go to maximum warp!"

* * *

Stardate 54078.1 (4 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Areq'dola system

"I'm picking up an energy signature, bearing 44 mark 10 . . . range . . . 10.2 million kilometers!" announced Vashtee.

"Mr. Sarnek, lay in a pursuit course - maximum impulse!" ordered Commander Strauss. Instantly, the hum of the impulse engines rose audibly. A moment later, Captain Akinola and Admiral Bateson exited the ready room onto the bridge.

"Report, Commander," said Akinola as Inga rose from the command chair.

"We have a contact, sir. We're on a pursuit course at maximum impulse."

"Very well. Ensign Vashtee, can you I.D. that contact?"

The Sri Lankan woman shook her head. "No sir, not at this range. However, the signature is different from a Federation shuttle craft. Too small for a combat ship - possible a transport or small freighter."

"What's their course and speed?"

"They are heading out of system at point seven-nine cee," she paused a moment, double-checking her readout, "their current heading is 72 mark 32," she turned looking at the Captain, "straight for the border!"

Akinola frowned in consternation. "Contact the *Spectre* and *Shadow*. See if they are in a better position for pursuit. And see if you can pin-point the origin of that ship - chances are, we'll find Garth's shuttle!"

"Aye, sir," responded Vashtee.

Inga remained by Akinola's chair. "At this range, we won't be able to intercept them before they cross the border," she said, quietly.

He looked up at her. She was struck by the lines of fatigue in his face. "Yeah, I know. It's up to the Klingons to stop them now."

"Sir?" Vashtee spoke up again. "Both *Spectre* and *Shadow* are too far for pursuit. I do have the location of the asteroid where that ship originated."

"Feed the coordinates to Mr. Sarnek and to the other ships. We'll rendezvous there and deal with our friend, Garth!" Akinola's voice barely contained the frustration and anger he felt.

* * *

In sickbay, Dr. Castille was in his small office, when an alarm sounded. He ran out of the office, nearly colliding with Corpsman Rice as they both ran toward the bed containing Garth's clone. Castille grimaced as he saw the bio-monitor above the bed.

"Flat-line!" he announced. "He grabbed a hypo-spray and dialed in Cordrazyne as Rice placed a cortical stimulator over the replicant's forehead. Castille pressed the hypo-spray against 'Garth's' neck and administered 10 cc's of the drug. He glanced at the display. The line didn't even jump.

"Damn! Grab the thoracic arch!" ordered Castille.

Rice grabbed the arch and placed it over the dying man. It activated instantly, sensing the replicant's lack of bio-signs, and activated the defibrillator - administering a shock to the clone.

'Garth's' body arched, spasmodically and collapsed back onto the bio-bed. All of the bio-signs remained flat. Castille frowned in puzzlement. "That doesn't make sense!" he mused, "He should have had some reaction!" Castille turned to Rice. "Try the cortical stimulator."

Rice obeyed, tapping her medical tri-corder. Though the device functioned properly, there was no change to the clone's vital signs.

For ten minutes, Castille and Rice continued their efforts to resuscitate the clone of Garth, but with no success.

Finally, Castille called off their efforts. He deactivated the thoracic arch and removed the cortical stimulator from the brow of the dead man.

"Log time of death," he said in a weary tone, "and put him in stasis. I'll do a post later."

"Yes sir," replied Rice. She hesitated, then spoke again. "Doctor - it was almost like he just . . . shut down. Weird, isn't it?"

Castille considered the petite corpsman's words. "Yeah - a good way of putting it. Almost like someone had thrown a switch."

* * *

"Second contact!" announced Vashtee. "Federation shuttle craft, Type-7 model. It's moving at full impulse, but we're in pursuit range!"

"Mr. Sarnek, close the gap on that shuttle craft! XO, bring weapons on-line!"

Inga hesitated, "Sir, do you still want to . . ."

Akinola shook his head. "Too late for that. But maybe we can catch the S.O.B.! Warm up the phasers, load the Mark-22's and stand-by on tractor beams."

"We are closing on the contact," announced Lt. Sarnek from the helm. "At our current speed, intercept time in three minutes, 12 seconds."

"He's going evasive," announced Inga from tactical. "I guess he doesn't want to give up."

"Too bad!" said Akinola. "Stand-by on the rat-traps."

"Aye, sir," replied Strauss.

"Contact has reversed course," announced Sarnek. There was a tone of surprise in the Vulcan's normally reserved voice. "The shuttle is on a direct course with us - collision in 48 point 3 seconds."

"Evasive, Mr. Sarnek - XO, stand by on phasers." said Akinola, calmly.

"He wants to get inside our torepdo range," observed Bateson.

"Yeah," replied Akinola, "but I'm not playing by his rules, today."

"I've got a lock!" announced Strauss.

"Take those engines out - fire phasers!"

As the *Bluefin* skewed to port, twin beams of energy lanced out from the starboard, ventral phaser mount. The phaser beams found their target, easily overloading the shuttle craft's shields, and striking the starboard nacelle of the shuttle.

The impact rocked the small craft and it began a clock-wise spin, out of control but still moving at a high rate of speed.

"Contact ship's impulse and warp drive are off-line, announced Vashtee." She paused, frowning at her display. "However, I'm reading an energy build-up in the warp core." The tension in her voice was apparent.

Akinola quickly responded. "Have the transporter room stand-by for an emergency beam-out. Commander Strauss - get a tractor beam on that shuttle and get it under control!"

"Sir? I'm reading one life-sign on the ship, but there's some kind of interference that's preventing us from getting a transporter lock!"

"Got it!" said Strauss, in triumph. "Slowing down the rate of spin . . . now activating a second tractor beam . . ."

"How much time until that warp core goes critical?"

Vashtee frowned, puzzled. "Sir - it's losing integrity fast . . . if we don't . . ."

Akinola did not hesitate. "Inga, disengage tractors - *Now!* Helm, ahead full impulse! Let's get some distance . . ."

The shuttlecraft erupted in a burst of light and energy. Though the explosion was small compared to the warp core breach on the *Jhar'toq*, the shock wave shook the retreating cutter. Fortunately, the shields held and the crew endured the rumbling and vibration with no injuries.

The Captain was silent for a moment as he watched on the viewscreen a shower of debris speed from the site of the explosion while the glowing orb of energy faded to black.

"Damage report," he finally said, quietly.

"None reported sir," said Vashtee, with a slight quaver to her voice.

"Captain?" Strauss spoke up, a look of puzzlement on her face.

"Yes XO?"

"We didn't hit him that hard - there's no reason that warp core should have blown like that!"

"I guess he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory," replied Akinola, a trace of sarcasm in his voice. "He destroyed his own ship to avoid capture."

Bateson sat quietly, his brow furrowed in thought, an uncertain look on his face.

Chapter Thirty

Stardate 54078.1 (4 February 2377)

USS *Spectre*

Approaching the Klingon Border - Warp 9.9

Captain Lhar'Shon willed her antennae not to twist, the Andorian equivalent to drumming one's fingers. Yes, she was tense but she was not going to show it!

"Helm, time to the border?" she queried.

The Benzite helmsman glanced down at his board. "At our current speed, eight minutes."

Her mouth tightened as she considered her options - none of them very appealing.

"Very well. Ensign Tapuli - contact Commander Svensen on the *Spectre*. Tell him I want him to break off pursuit and return to Thurillan's moon. They can rendezvous with our other ships and begin removing that cloning equipment. We will continue pursuit, on my order and responsibility."

To his credit, the Samoan's expression did not change as he complied with Lhar'Shon's order.

"Helm, reverse course for five minutes, then activate the cloak, reverse again and take us into Klingon space."

Lt. Commander V'Ter, the Vulcan First Officer raised an eyebrow and walked over to the Captain. "You wish to convince the Klingon forward sentry posts that we are not crossing the border." It was not a question.

"If you're going to violate someone's sovereign territory, V'Ter, it's best not to announce it."

"That is true. However, our quarry will have that much more time to elude us," pointed out the Vulcan.

Lhar'Shon nodded. That was the part of the plan she did not like.

* * *

Stardate 54078.1 (4 February 2377)
IKS *Gortaj*
Klingon space, near the Federation Border

The three Klingon birds of prey were in position and scanning surrounding space. Thus far, they had intercepted and released four Klingon ships, a Ferengi trader, and run off a dubious Orion ship.

Commander Derjoth moved near the center seat and spoke in a low voice where only Mertok could hear.

"Captain, it would help if we knew *what* we were looking for. And why are the warriors boarding those ships required to wear environmental suits?"

"When you figure out the answer to the second question, Commander, you'll have the answer to the first." Mertok turned and peered into the face of the young Commander. "Know this, Derjoth - if we fail in this, the Empire will fall."

Derjoth's eyes widened. "We will not fail, Captain! On the honor of my blood-line, I swear it!"

Mertok cast a weary look at his subordinate. "Your blood-line?" He shook his head and uttered a mirthless laugh. "It would seem that honor and blood are against us today."

* * *

Stardate 54078.1 (4 February 2377)
USS *Bluefin*
En route to the Klingon Border - Warp 9.2

Dr. Kliss sat listlessly on the bunk in his cell. He was having difficulty coming to grips with the potential consequences of his actions and those of his fellow scientists. The thought of exterminating an entire race, even one as violent and ruthless as the Klingons, filled him with a sick sense of dread.

"Doctor?"

Kliss started, surprised by the sudden interruption. He looked up to see Admiral Bateson standing outside of his cell.

"What do you want?" Kliss asked, warily.

"Just one thing - You said that there were supposed to be twenty-four clones, twenty-three Klingon and one human, correct?"

"Yes, yes, I've already told you that. Only the human and one of the Klingons was fully viable."

"Right - I understand that, Doctor. Were there any other cylinders? In another chamber, perhaps?"

Kliss frowned and shook his head. "No - why do you ask?"

Bateson's brow knitted. "Did you clone anyone else with those cylinders?"

"No, we didn't. Admiral, what's this about?"

The Admiral shook his head. "Never mind. I just had a sudden thought. Sorry to bother you." He turned to leave.

Kliss frowned. "Of course, I don't know if the *first* cylinder was used before we arrived."

Bateson stopped and turned. "What? What are you talking about?"

"We set up twenty-three cylinders when we first arrived, but one was already in place, giving us a total of twenty-four. For all I know, it had been in use before we got there."

* * *

Stardate 54078.1 (4 February 2377)

Klingon Transport *Cho'paQ*

Klingon space - near the Federation Border

Lirlek would normally have celebrated the return to home space, especially with a successful mission within their grasp, but she felt too bad for that. Her cough had worsened, and now she was coughing up bright, pink blood. Her lungs felt tight and her head pounded.

Nad'jiq was also beginning to cough, though not as often or as deeply.

We must have picked up some p'taQ virus while in Federation space, she thought. Well, they could deal with a slight illness after their work was done.

Nad'jiq suddenly spoke up, a note of alarm in his voice. "Three *B'Rel* - class scouts are closing on us!"

"gHuy'Cha!" Lirlek cursed and checked her display. "Probably a routine patrol triad, but change course ten degrees *chan* just in case."

"What do we do if they *board* us?" demanded Nad'jiq.

"Control yourself!" Lirlek snapped, then she was caught in a fit of coughing. Her vision narrowed and darkness crept in momentarily. When she turned back to him, he was frowning.

"Lirlek - Your nose is bleeding!"

She reached up and wiped at her nose, coming away with more sticky, pink blood..

"What is this?" she growled as Nad'jiq began his own coughing jag. She reached forward and activated the inter-ship com.

"Chardok, what is your status?" she called to their comrade in the engine room. There was no response.

Reaching for her disruptor, she rose from the pilot's seat. "Keep us away from those scouts. I'm going to check on Chaldok and our passenger."

Nad'jiq coughed before replying. "What's happening to us?"

"I don't know - but I'm going to get some answers!"

* * *

Stardate 54078.2 (4 February 2377)
IKS *Gortaj*
Klingon space, near the Federation Border

"Contact!" The tactical officer sang out. "Vector 103, grid negative 8. *Chu'qa* - 800 thousand kelikams."

"Identify," ordered Mertok.

"*Bre'Gha* - class commercial transport. Transponder code indicates it is the *Cho'paQ*."

"Lay in an intercept course," said Mertok. "Have boarders standing by for transport. Commander, hail them - have them shut down their engines and stand by."

* * *

Stardate 54078.2 (4 February 2377)

USS *Spectre*

Klingon Space - running cloaked

"I've got them sir!" announced Ensign Talupi.

"Feed heading to the helm and lay in pursuit course," ordered Lhar'Shon. "Tactical - load quantum torpedoes in forward tubes."

"Captain!" interrupted Talupi, "Three more contacts on an intercept course with the target. I make them to be *B'Rel* - class scouts."

Lhar'Shon clenched her teeth in frustration. They had to decloak to fire. But if those birds of prey identified the *Shadow*, it could be construed as an act of war!

It took her only a moment to select a course of action.

"Helm, prepare to increase our speed to maximum warp. Over-ride safety protocols. Lay in a course that takes us directly into that ship! It is imperative that we stop it. All other considerations are secondary - is that understood?"

Lhar'Shon looked around the quiet bridge. The bridge crew returned her gaze solemnly but without protest. At that moment, she was more proud of her crew than she had ever been!

"Engage!" she ordered.

Chapter Thirty-One

Stardate 54078.2 (4 February 2377)

USS *Shadow*

Klingon Space - running cloaked

"Two minutes until impact," announced V'Ter from tactical, her voice flat and with no trace of emotion.

Ensign Tapuli cringed inwardly at the draconian countdown. He was not nearly so sanguine about his imminent death as they bore down on the Klingon transport. He clenched his jaws and focused on his readouts, intent on doing his job to the very end and distracting his mind from contemplating his mortality.

He directed the *Shadow's* advanced (and highly classified) sensors toward the incoming Klingon birds of prey, attempting to pick up any transmissions. He was immediately rewarded by a broadcast from the lead ship. His eyes widened slightly and his breath caught in sudden excitement and hope.

"Captain!" Tapuli shouted, decorum forgotten. "Those ships are led by Captain Mertok! He's ordering the transport to heave to!"

Lhar'Shon responded instantly. "Helm! Hard over! Bring us around and maintain station 100 thousand clicks from the target." She relaxed her grip on the armrests of her chair, unaware that her fingers left slight indentations in the simulated leather.

"Let's give Mertok a chance to end this. If he fails . . . well, we can fall back on our original plan." The Captain looked over at the Ops station. "Thank you, Ensign Tapuli!"

The big Samoan turned in his chair, a crooked grin on his face. "Very happy to help ma'am!" He turned back to his station, and tried to make his hands stop shaking.

The cloaked *Shadow* pirouetted gracefully around the *Cho'paQ* to wait - unseen and unheard. Her specialized sensors watched and listened carefully as the three birds of prey encircled the transport.

* * *

Stardate 54078.2 (4 February 2377)
IKS *Gortaj*
Klingon space, near the Federation Border

"Channel open, Captain," announced the communications officer.

Captain Mertok nodded curtly in acknowledgment. "Transport *Cho'paQ* - this is Captain Mertok of the Imperial Vessel *Gortaj*. Shut down your engines and lower your shields. Prepare to be boarded. Comply, or we will open fire."

The face of a Klingon male appeared on the viewscreen. Mertok thought the man looked ill.

"*Gortaj*, this is the *Cho'paQ*. Please explain - we are a transport vessel returning from delivering supplies and personnel to the *Dji'Jorn* colony. Our destination is *Roq'hid* - you can scan us if you wish and our flight plan has been logged. We request you not detain us . . ."

There was a sudden commotion on the flight deck of the *Cho'paQ* and the sound of disruptor fire. *Nad'jiq* slumped from view, his gurgle of death apparent over the speaker.

Mertok was about to issue an order, when another figure appeared on-screen, shoving the body of the dead Klingon out of the way.

"Remove your ships from this area - *Now!*" the interloper said in a low rumble. This Klingon wore the uniform of an admiral and his face was well-known throughout the empire, disgraced house or not.

Mertok frowned as he heard exclamations from several of his bridge crew as they reacted to the image before them.

"*Stations!*" Mertok barked, silencing the surprised murmurs. He turned his attention back to the screen and glowered. "I will repeat my order to you - once. Stand down, lower your shields, and prepare to be boarded!"

The figure on the screen leaned forward, his face enlarging on the screen. "And I will repeat my order this once, Captain. Return to base and impede me no longer." The replicant's voice boomed with presumed authority.

And his tone had immediate effect. Someone on the *Gortaj's* bridge whispered, "It's Lord K'Tinga!" Mertok clenched his remaining fist tightly and growled, frustrated by the gullibility and superstitious nature of this lot.

"SILENCE!" Mertok roared at the bridge crew and drew his disruptor. "The next of you that speaks out of turn, I will kill you where you stand!"

The image of K'Tinga leered. "Your crew recognizes me, Captain. Do you not?" There was a note of confidence, bordering on arrogance in his tone.

Mertok's eyes narrowed. His reply was low and steady. "All I see is a flawed, diseased copy of a once great warrior who has been *dead* for centuries." He stood and his volume grew louder. "You *dare* to present yourself as Lord Admiral K'tinga? You who carry in your cells a weapon to kill every person in the Empire??" He shook his head slowly. "You are no 'Lord.' You are an *abomination!* A reproach to a great warrior's name." He pointed at the replicant. "But your treachery ends here and now - *Gunner!* . . . remove that ship from my sight."

Though confused by what he saw, the tactical officer was a disciplined warrior. Instantly, he targeted the transport and unleashed the wing disruptors at the *Cho'paQ*. The other two Klingon scouts, taking their cue from the *Gortaj*, added their firepower to the mix.

The transport's shields were not designed to withstand such an assault. The volley of disruptor fire quickly overwhelmed the *Cho'paQ's* meager defenses and the transport was reduced to a glowing debris field.

As the *Cho'paQ* disintegrated around him, the last emotion of the K'Tinga replicant was surprise.

* * *

Stardate 54078.3 (4 February 2377)

USS *Shadow*

Klingon Space - running cloaked

"Scan for life signs," ordered Lhar'Shon, though she doubted anything had survived the pounding those Klingon *B'Rel's* had applied to that transport.

"Scanning now," replied Tatupi, checking multiple displays giving readings from bands of energy, thermal, and bio-metric scales. He shook his head.

"Nothing left but base components, sir. I'd say the Klingons were very thorough. I doubt even a microbe survived."

"Very well, Ensign. Helm, keep us on station. XO - once those Klingon ships have cleared the area, I want to detonate a quantum warhead in that debris field."

V'Ter lifted an eyebrow. "Captain, isn't that what is called, 'over-kill?'"

Lhar'Shon allowed herself the first smile in many hours. "A good human expression, V'Ter. Perhaps it is excessive, but I'm taking no chances. After all, what's a million credit warhead compared to peace of mind?"

V'Ter frowned. "An interesting philosophical question, Captain. I shall consider it in my meditations."

Ensign Tatupi, head averted, rolled his eyes. *Knock yourself out, Commander!* he thought.

* * *

Stardate 54078.3 (4 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Maintaining position near the Klingon Border

Captain Akinola sat impassively in the center chair, fatigue and emotional exhaustion had nearly drained him. Now, he felt impotent, unable to pursue K'Tinga, lest crossing the border make the situation grow even worse. He hated having to rely on Lhar'Shon and the Klingon, Mertok, but he had no choice. Nevertheless, he trusted Admiral Bateson's judgment and Morgan seemed confident that Mertok could get the job done.

He turned to look at his old friend. Bateson sat at an auxiliary station, his expression neutral. The dark circles under his eyes revealed that he also suffered from fatigue. Bateson caught Akinola's look and smiled.

"So, how do you like sitting on the sidelines for a change?"

Akinola shook his head. "I don't. And I don't know how you put up with it, day in and day out."

Bateson's smile faded slightly. "You get used to it." He almost sounded convincing.

"Captain," interrupted Ensign Vashtee. "I'm reading weapons fire ahead . . . definitely disruptors . . ." She turned toward Akinola. "Somebody just got blown out of space!"

"Confirmed," said Commander Strauss from tactical. "Energy release is consistent with the size vessel we were pursuing . . ." She looked up, an apologetic look on her face, "But also consistent with a vessel the size of the *Shadow*."

Akinola snorted. "In other words, we still don't know what the hell is going on!" He glowered at the viewscreen which only showed a shimmering field of stars. "XO - prepare a tactical probe and launch it across the border in the direction of that skirmish."

"Joseph," warned Bateson, "that's still a violation of their space."

"Yes, but a probe is too small for them to notice unless they're actually looking for it. We'll set it to self-destruct an hour after it arrives on scene."

Bateson grunted in agreement. "Alright, I can live with that. It beats sitting here not knowing."

"Do it, Commander Strauss," said Akinola.

"Aye, sir. Class nine probe, programmed with course and auto-destruct, loaded and ready."

"Launch probe," ordered Akinola.

The small probe flashed out of the number two forward torpedo tube and sped away from the cutter.

"Probe is active and transmitting," said Vashtee. "I'm receiving telemetry."

"Keep us updated, Ensign."

For twenty minutes, the bridge crew bided their time. Beta shift arrived, but the Alpha shift crew was reluctant to leave, so the replacements took seats by their counterparts.

Finally, Vashtee spoke up. "Probe is on station . . . definite debris field, no other ships are - what the *hell*?"

Akinola looked sharply at the Sri Lankan Ops officer. "What?" he demanded, tersely.

Vashtee looked startled. "I . . . I'm sorry, sir! We just lost the probe - there was a secondary explosion of some sort."

Akinola frowned. "You said there were no other ships . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence. "What kind of explosion was it, Ensign?"

"I managed to pick that up, before we lost all telemetry. It had a quantum signature."

Akinola relaxed slightly. "Lhar'Shon," he said, wryly. "I guess she wanted to 'clean-up.'"

Chapter Thirty-Two

4 February 2377

Seattle, North America, Earth

The home of T'Ser's parents – Sarnok and T'San

0722 local time

"You're not eating much, T'Ser - do you feel alright?" asked her mother, T'San.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry. I've just had some things on my mind."

Sarnok placed his coffee cup down and raised an eyebrow at his daughter.

"You've been unusually reticent this morning, daughter. Is there something troubling you?" asked Sarnok.

T'Ser let out a light breath, but kept her eyes on her mostly uneaten bowl of oatmeal. "I've decided to cut my leave short and head back to the *Bluefin*."

Sarnok's second eyebrow joined the first. T'San leaned forward and took her daughter's hand.

"Why, T'Ser? Your leave is not up for weeks! Have we done something to offend you?" she asked, obviously distressed.

T'Ser's eyes widened. "Oh no! Gosh, no, Mom! You two have been great and I've loved spending time here. It's just . . ." she took a deep breath, "since I submitted my request for transfer, I realized I could be reassigned any day. I might be required to head to my new ship and not get the chance to say goodbye to my friends *on Bluefin*."

Sarnok nodded in understanding. "Taking one's leave is a tradition common to Vulcan and Terran culture. I believe you are making a wise decision, T'Ser."

T'San stood abruptly, her eyes glistening. "Excuse me, I need to get these dishes in the 'cycler." She picked up their breakfast plates and hurried into the houseboat's galley.

Sarnok looked in the direction of the galley and sighed. "There are times when embracing emotion has its down-side."

T'Ser leaned over and kissed her father on the cheek. "Let me talk to her."

* * *

"Mom . . ."

T'San kept her back toward T'Ser. "I'll be through shortly, T'Ser - just give me a minute."

T'Ser gently grasped her mothers shoulders and turned her. "Mom . . . please . . . don't be upset!"

Tears streaked T'San's face. She wiped at them with her hand. "I'm sorry, T'Ser! I should have better control than this . . ."

T'Ser hugged her mother to her tightly. "Don't be sorry! I'm glad you care enough to cry when I leave. But this is something I need to do . . ."

T'San returned the hug. "I know, daughter. I was just hoping to have more time with you before you left again." She forced a smile. "You never liked to stay still, even as a child!"

"Yes, I remember a few 'meetings' between you and some of my teachers."

T'San laughed lightly and wiped her eyes with a napkin. "Your second grade teacher said you were 'a bit of a social butterfly.'"

T'Ser grimaced. "Oh God! Was I that bad?"

"No, of course not." T'San placed a hand on T'Ser's cheek. "We've always been proud of you, daughter! Do what you need to do - only be careful! We worry about you, you know."

T'Ser smiled at her mother, her own eyes brimming with tears. "I know, Mom. I love you!"

"And I, you, T'Ser."

* * *

Stardate 54078.4 (4 February 2377)
USS *Bluefin*
Maintaining position near the Klingon Border

"Vessel decloaking off our starboard bow," announced Ensign Vashtee. "It's the *Shadow* and they're hailing us."

"On-screen," said Akinola, relaxing a bit more.

Captain Lhar'Shon's face appeared on screen. She wore a small smile. "Captain, I am happy to report that our 'problem' has been eliminated, thanks to Captain Mertok and his scout squadron."

A wave of relief washed over Captain Akinola and he allowed a smile to break out on his beard-stubbed face. "That is good to hear, Captain. Well done!"

"It was a bit . . . *intense* for a few moments, but Mertok came through." She directed her gaze toward Bateson. "My thanks to you, Admiral, for enlisting his help. Without it, well . . ." She shrugged in a very human gesture.

Bateson merely nodded, understanding that which remained unsaid. "Won't you join us for a drink, Captain?"

"I regret I must decline this time, Admiral. There is much to be done on Thurillan's moon and we need to get their quickly." She paused and her expression grew somber. "Thank you both for trusting me on this," she said.

Akinola and Bateson both nodded. "Take care of yourself, Captain," said Akinola.

"Farewell, Captain, Admiral. Until we meet again." The screen wavered and shifted back to the view of space as the channel closed.

"That sounded almost like a threat," said Akinola, dryly. He straightened in his chair and looked around the bridge. "Alpha shift! What are you hanging around for? Clear the bridge and let Beta shift get to work!" He stood as Lt. Commander Simms stepped forward. She straightened, almost to attention, a gleam in her eye.

"I relieve you, sir!"

Akinola smirked, but straightened as he replied. "I stand relieved! Carry on, Mr. Simms."

"Aye, sir. Your orders?"

Akinola grinned and shook his head ruefully. He was so tired, he had neglected to order the ship on a new heading.

"You know the way home, Delta. Just get us started in the right direction."

"Yes sir. Why don't you get some rest?"

Bateson, Strauss, Sarnek and Vashtee were already in the lift as Akinola exited the pit. "An excellent suggestion, Mr. Simms! Don't wake me unless war breaks out." He joined the other officers in the lift as they headed for their quarters.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Stardate 54079.2 (5 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

En route to Star Station Echo - warp 4

Captain Akinola carried his breakfast tray into the wardroom to find Admiral Bateson already seated and holding a mug of coffee, a pensive expression on his face.

"Good morning, Admiral - did you rest well?"

"Hmm? Oh, 'morning Joseph. Yes, I got a little sleep."

Akinola placed his tray across from the Admiral and filled his own mug from a caraffe on the table. He noticed that Bateson still looked tired and seemed distracted.

"I slept like a log, which is pretty unusual for me." Akinola took a sip of coffee and poured syrup on his waffle. He took another look at Bateson and his expression became concerned.

"Morgan? Are you alright?"

Bateson seemed to rouse himself and smiled. "Sure. I've just been playing back all that's happened these past few days, trying to fit everything together."

"And?" asked Akinola around a mouthful of waffle.

Bateson leaned forward and clasped his large hands together on the table. "Doesn't it seem that Garth gave up pretty easily?"

"I don't know that I'd call blowing up your ship, 'giving up,'" replied the Captain.

"No . . . I suppose not. But it just doesn't seem his style, Joseph. It was such a . . . *futile* gesture, I suppose. Garth *always* thought two or three moves ahead - surely he had a better escape plan than to try to outrun us in a shuttlecraft!"

Akinola set his fork down, leaned back and crossed his arms. "So what's your point?"

"I spoke to Dr. Kliss again," he said in a seeming *non sequitur*. "I found out that one of those cloning cylinders had been there for awhile - apparently for some time before Kliss, Xerok and the other scientists arrived."

Akinola frowned. "Are you going where I think you're going?"

Bateson nodded. "He had himself cloned once. What if there are *other* clones running around? Hell, what if we've never actually run into the real Garth?!"

"That's just speculation, Admiral," but a trace of doubt had crept into Akinola's voice.

"True. And even if we knew *for sure* that he was still alive, we have no clue where he might be!"

"Here's an even scarier thought, Admiral."

"What?"

"What if all of this was just a ruse - a decoy to cover his real plan?"

"Yeah," agreed Bateson morosely. "That's what's keeping me awake."

* * *

"O.C.! Hey, wait up!"

Dr. Castille turned and his face broke into a large grin as Delta Simms trotted up to him.

"Hi!," he said, "Where are you headed in such a hurry?"

She returned the smile. "Just heading back to my quarters so I can get changed for my workout. I was wondering . . . when we get to the station, would you like to go rafting with me?"

"Rafting?" he asked, puzzled.

"White-water rafting. I've got a great holo-deck program of the Ocoee River. There's some great cat-4 rapids - it's a blast!" she said with enthusiasm.

"Rapids?" Castille's puzzlement turned to concern.

"Don't worry - I keep the safety protocols on . . . well, *most* of them, anyway. It wouldn't be any fun if there wasn't some risk, would it?"

"I suppose not . . ."

"Great! We should arrive in about four hours, but we both have our duty shifts - why not tomorrow, say 0900?"

Though he was nervous about the idea of white-water rafting, the hopeful expression on her face, her bright, hazel eyes and her lovely smile melted his defences.

"I look forward to it!" he said.

Her eyes sparkled and her smile grew even brighter. "Great! Catch you later, O.C.!" She trotted off toward her quarters.

Castille felt a bit dizzy, as if he'd just been caught in a tornado. He smiled.

It was a nice feeling.

* * *

"Docking clamps engaged and umbilicals connected. Station power on standby - positive pressure at airlock," announced Lt. Fralk from the helm.

"Thank you, Mr. Fralk," replied Commander Strauss. "Mr. Bane, shift to station power and notify Mr. Gralt that he may power down his engines."

"Aye, ma'am," replied Bane.

Inga stood and walked over to the Denobulan helmsman. She placed a hand affectionately on his shoulder. "We're going to miss you, Mr. Fralk, but I know you'll be glad to see your family again."

Fralk turned and favored her with a disconcertingly wide grin. "Thank you, Commander! Yes, I am looking forward to seeing my four wives and most of their other husbands. There are a couple of their husbands, I must admit, that I hope *not* to see."

"Ah, right," replied Inga. It made her head hurt trying to understand Denobulan family relationships. "When are you heading out?"

"Tomorrow," he said. "I have to get processed out, then I catch a transport home. I'll arrive on Denobula in about four days."

Bane walked over and extended his hand. "It's been a pleasure, mate! We're gonna miss your smilin' face on the bridge!"

Fralk returned the handshake. "Likewise, Nigel. Perhaps both of you will visit Denobula one day? I'd love to show you some of the sights! It's a vibrant place, if a bit crowded. You would enjoy the communal baths of Tretaria! A marvelous, intimate setting - hundreds of people, all writhing in the throes of passion . . ."

Inga's face had turned a brilliant shade of crimson. "That, ah, sounds lovely, Fralk! Perhaps one day . . ."

"Oh yeah!" said Nigel with a wicked wink. "You can count on us, fair dinkum!"

Strauss cleared her throat and gave him an *"are you out of your mind?"* look. "Mr. Bane, perhaps you should see to securing your station . . . now?!"

"Right-o, Commander," he replied, still wearing a roguish grin. "I'll see you before you leave, Fralk."

* * *

The senior NCOs gathered in the armory for a solemn ceremony.

"Attention on the deck!" bellowed Senior Chief Solly Brin.

Chief Deryx, Chief Rumraa, PO 1st Class Sanders and PO 1st Class Menendez all came to strict attention.

Petty Officer 1st Class Rice shook her head, smiling. "Okay guys, this is just silly . . ."

"Attention to orders!" called Brin, ignoring the petite corpsman. He unrolled a piece of replicated parchment. "Be it known to those gathered for this solemn occasion, we hereby recognize Corpsman 1st Class Linda Renee Rice upon her

promotion to the exalted position of civilian, 3rd class, with all the rights, responsibilities and headaches, etc. etc."

"Hear, hear!" said Menendez.

"Shut up, Raul, I'm not done yet."

"Sorry!"

"As I was saying, we gather to honor the service of Corpsman Rice, for dedication to duty, her bravery in the face of extreme height deprivation . . ."

"*Hey!*" said Rice, in mock indignation. "I resemble that remark!"

". . . her courage, and administering enemas above and beyond the call of duty!"

"Screw you, Senior Chief!" said Rice, struggling to keep a straight face.

"Hear, hear!" said Menendez.

"Shut the Frak up, Petty Officer Menendez, and stick to the script!" said Brin.

"Sorry!" said Menendez.

"As a token of our esteem and our soon-to-be drunken state," continued Solly, "we hereby award you the Royal Order of the Bedpan." Brin produced a vintage, stainless steel bedpan. In the bottom was a picture of Brin, Deryx, Rumraa, Sanders and Menedez with target rings superimposed over their image. He solemnly handed it to Rice who began to giggle.

Brin glared at Menendez then elbowed him hard in the side.

"Huh? Oh! Hear, hear!" said Menendez. The other Non-coms began to applaud.

Rice shook her head with a goofy grin as she held the bedpan. Her eyes shone with restrained tears. "I'll think of you guys every time I go to the head!"

"Well, *that* was too much information!" observed Sanders. "Come on, Senior Chief - break out the hooch!"

Brin picked up Rice in a big bear-hug. "Just make good grades in medical school, kid! Maybe you'll end up as CMO on one of these tubs one day!"

* * *

Stardate 54080.2 (6 February 2377)

USS *Bluefin*

Star Station Echo - Berth 16

"Captain, it has been an honor to serve under you!" said Lt. Fralk, sincerely.

"The honor is mine, Lieutenant. You've been an excellent officer and a fine helmsman. I wish you all the best!" replied Akinola as he firmly gripped the Denobulan's hand. "Not to wish you ill, but if the 'Fleet ever activates your reserve commission, I'll be looking for you to report back to the *Bluefin*!"

"Absolutely, sir!" Fralk made his way down the line of his fellow officers in the crowded wardroom. Shaking hands and receiving hugs.

When he came to Lt. Sarnek, the Vulcan offered the traditional spread-finger salute. "Live long and prosper, Fralk of Denobula. You have shown yourself to be an adequate helmsman."

Fralk tried to return the salute, but his fingers wouldn't cooperate. "Try not to scratch the paint, Sarnek. And Bralus . . ." Fralk turned to the third helmsman. "for the Maker's sake, don't blow out the ventral compensators again! Let the impulse regulators do their job."

The blue-skinned Bolian rolled his eyes. "Yes, master. This wretched excuse for a helmsman humbly receives your wisdom."

Fralk nodded in approval. "Well-said, young Padawan!" He then grabbed Bralus in a tight embrace. "Take care of yourself, Blue-boy!" He said, trying to contain his emotions. He stepped back, smiled, then quickly exited.

Inga wiped her eyes. "I hate good-byes," she said.

Akinola nodded in agreement. "Yeah, me too."

* * *

Stardate 54082.5 (8 February 2377)

USS Bluefin
Star Station Echo - Berth 16

Inga and Nigel strolled along level ten of the station, deciding whether to go to one of the holodecks or get something to eat. They were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Hey! Do either of you know where a girl could catch a ride on a cutter?"

Inga and Nigel quickly turned. "T'Ser!" Inga said, surprised, and her face lit up in a big smile.

The two women hugged, then Inga stood back looking at her friend.

"So, are you back for good?"

T'Ser's smile faltered slightly. "Well, let's say I'm back for now. I'll tell you about it later." She turned to Bane. "Nigel - aren't I entitled to a hug?"

"Well, Commander, you know what the regs say about public displays of affection!" he replied, before scooping up the Vulcan officer and spinning her around on his shoulder.

"Nigel!" hissed Inga, mortified. "For God's sake, put her down! Someone might see!"

T'Ser steadied herself after her "ride." "Glad to see that you've matured, Mr. Bane. What are you two up to?" she asked, still grinning.

"Dinner and the holodeck," replied Inga, "Only we can't decide which to do first. Why don't you join us?"

T'Ser shook her head and patted her clamshell carryall. "Can't - I still need to check in and stow my gear. I'll see you both later." She moved off toward the bank of turbo-lifts, heading toward the ships' bays.

"It's sure good to see her back," remarked Bane.

Inga's smile faded. "Yeah. I just wonder for how long."

* * *

"Welcome aboard, Commander!" said Akinola as he moved around his desk to greet T'Ser. He clasped her hand and indicated for her to take a seat, while he leaned against his desk.

"Thank you, sir. I have to admit, it feels good to be here."

"I imagine you're tired after your trip."

She smiled. "Three days on a runabout is *not* the way I'd want to travel on a regular basis."

Akinola chuckled and walked to the beverage servitor, pouring a mug of steaming dark roast. "How about some coffee, Commander?"

"Yes sir, thanks!" Akinola handed her a mug. She took a sip, savoring the strong flavor. "You know, after six weeks in the Mecca for coffee snobs, I really came to appreciate the coffee here."

Akinola returned to his desk chair and leaned back. "It does grow on you, that's true." He took a sip and regarded the Vulcan woman. "So, how are you doing, T'Ser."

She smiled, having anticipated the question. "Better, sir. And thanks again for letting me have some time away. I was able to come to grips with a few things . . ."

"But not all?" asked Akinola with a raised eyebrow.

T'Ser sighed. "There are still a lot of ghosts on this ship, Captain. And, as much as I love it here, I did put in for a transfer."

The Captain nodded in understanding. "I'm glad you reached a decision, T'Ser. And I'm especially glad you're here again, even if for a short while."

"You're . . . not upset with me, are you?"

Akinola smiled. "Hardly. That's not to say you won't be missed - you will. And finding another competent Ops officer to put in the rotation won't be easy, but we'll manage. The important thing is that you didn't allow indecision to paralyze you. You considered the factors, and then made a tough call. I'm proud that you did."

"I appreciate that, sir. It means a lot . . . coming from you, that is."

Akinola inclined his head. "That being said, I've made some changes. Lt. Commander Simms is now in the second officer slot. I'd like to keep her there for continuity, especially since you've put in for your transfer."

T'Ser nodded. "Understood, sir. No problem here."

"Good. You're still senior Ops officer and you'll work Alpha shift for the duration. We've got two weeks lay-over while Gralt finishes some repairs that he rushed through earlier. Also, we've got some replacements coming in as well." Akinola stood, indicating that the meeting was at an end. T'Ser also stood.

"It is good to see you, T'Ser. I'll let you get your gear squared away now."

"Thank you, sir."

Akinola nodded. "Dismissed."

* * *

Ensign Drii An'Shil moved slowly through the throng of beings, trying to find directional indicators to the ship berthing area. The young Andorian woman was fresh from the Academy and more than a bit apprehensive about her first ship-board assignment. She checked once again to make sure she had the PADD containing her orders. It was the third time in five minutes that she had done so.

As she looked at the PADD, she collided with a very large, solid man, and fell unceremoniously to the deck. Quickly, a strong hand grabbed her arm and easily lifted her back to her feet.

She looked up into the dark, red face of an Orion senior chief petty officer. He had a slightly amused expression on his face, which countered his otherwise intimidating visage. She blinked at the large man, momentarily speechless.

"Sorry about that Ensign," said the senior chief. "Are you okay?"

"Yes sir, I'm fine," she replied and winced. She knew better than to address a non-com as "sir."

The Orion seemed not to notice. "Can I help you ma'am? Begging your pardon, but you seem a bit lost." he said, not unkindly.

"Thank you, *I could* use some help with directions. I'm trying to find the USS *Bluefin*."

Another look of amusement crossed the big non-com's face. "The *Bluefin*, you say? . . . Yes ma'am, I can most definitely help you there." He reached down and picked up her carryall. "If you'll follow me, Ensign, I'll take you there m'self."

"Oh, I don't want to take you out of your way . . ." she protested.

"Actually, it's *right* on my way. My name's Brin, Solly Brin."

She hurried to keep up with the burly Orion. "I'm Ensign Drii An'Shil." She hesitated before adding, "I just graduated from the Academy."

Brin chuckled. "Yes ma'am. I kinda figured."

* * *

Admiral Bateson rubbed his eyes, then returned to the stack of padds on his desk. His brief stint on the *Bluefin* had not slowed the influx of reports, requests, complaints, and directives that now threatened to overwhelm his desk.

His terminal chimed and his new aide appeared on the screen. He stifled a sigh and stared impassively at the terminal.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

The Trill lieutenant looked befuddled. "Uh, sir? There's a Klingon captain here with a bottle of blood-wine demanding to see you."

Bateson's face broke into a broad grin. "By all means - send Captain Mertok in!"

* * *

**Stardate 54085.1 (11 February 2377)
By the Yuchan Sea, Klaamet IV**

The old man stood on the balcony of his veranda, overlooking his beloved sea. Dark clouds moved quickly across the sky and the waves thundered against the shore, giving promise of an approaching storm.

He closed his eyes, savoring the wind and the tang of spray in his face. His long white hair streamed in the wind.

After a few moments of solitude. He opened his eyes and sighed. It was time to move on. Already, he had stayed beyond what he knew to be a safe interval. But he dearly loved this place and it pained him to leave.

Turning he re-entered the pink-stone house and closed the double doors. He moved to the den where a fire crackled in a stone fireplace, pushing back the chill and dampness. He settled into a favorite chair and picked up a black box, smooth and lustrous, marked with alien glyphs hinting at its mysterious contents.

The old man caressed the box, even as his still-sharp ears picked up a faint sound behind him. He replaced the box on the low table, then stood, turning to face the intruder.

"I must say, I'm impressed Commander Chalmer! I honestly didn't think you had the mental capacity to track me down."

The Section 31 operative gazed impassively at the old man. "You crossed us, 'Mr. Chandler.' That is something that my superiors do not forgive."

The old man shrugged. "Well, you served my purpose after all. That's what counts."

Commander Chalmer leveled a phaser at the old man. Beads of perspiration covered his forehead. "You've caused enough trouble . . ." Chalmer began to cough violently, his eyes widened in surprise and sudden fear. Dropping the phaser, he clutched at his throat and fell to his knees.

The old man walked over and casually retrieved the phaser. "You might be interested to know, Commander, that I keep a particularly virulent and fast-acting agent circulating through my humble house at all times. Of course, I and those authorized to be here, have been inoculated." He squatted before the choking Section 31 agent. "Unfortunately, it seems you were not invited. Pity."

Chalmer's eyes rolled back and he fell over, hitting the wooden floor with a loud thud.

The old man regarded Chalmer for a moment, then he reached forward and clasped the agent's face between his hands.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. *It's been a long time since I've done this*, he thought.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, in the blink of an eye, the old man assumed the form of the dead Section 31 agent.

Garth of Izar straightened and brushed the clothing that had also morphed. He moved to a mirror to inspect the change. He sighed.

"You're a homely sod, but I suppose I can't be choosy." He pocketed the phaser, picked up the *Req'ti*, and exited his Veranda. As to his destination and plans, Garth will keep his own counsel. For now.

END