

Tales of the USS Bluefin Through a Glass, Darkly By The Lone Redshirt

PROLOGUE

T'Ser read the dispatch again. She held the PADD with numb fingers, her eyes brimming with tears. As if in slow motion, she moved to the captain's ready room, entering without pressing the enunciator.

Akinola looked up from his desk, annoyed. "T'Ser, what do you? . . ." Then he saw her face. "T'Ser," he said softly, "What is wrong?"

She looked at him and handed over the PADD. "This just came over the Newsnet - it's about Dr. Baxter."

Akinola took the PADD, a sense of dread coming over him.

Federation Newsnet - Earthdate 20 October 2376, 1400 GMT.
Tulsa, Oklahoma, North America.

Dr. Calvin Henry Baxter, of Tulsa, was found dead at his home today by neighbors after failing to show up for a golf outing. Baxter was the former director of Starfleet Medical in Atlanta and recently served as Chief Medical Officer aboard the Border Service Cutter, USS Bluefin. He served in Starfleet fifty years. Chief Constable Drayton Long issued a statement in which he stated that the cause of death was respiratory arrest due to an overdose of pain medication. Apparently Dr. Baxter deactivated the bio-sensors in his home which prevented medical assistance from arriving in time to revive him.

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Akinola dropped the PADD on the desk, not reading the parts about next of kin, honors and awards, and the shock expressed by his neighbors. He stood up slowly, walked around his desk and hugged T'Ser tightly, feeling her body shake as she sobbed deeply. Akinola closed his eyes and surrendered to his own pain and grief.

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USS *Bluefin* (NCC-4458)
Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Captain Joseph B. Akinola stared out the viewport of his ready room. His eyes were not focused on anything in particular. He was vaguely aware of the structural members of the berth in which his cutter was docked. Shadows of workpods and shuttlecraft occasionally flitted across his field of vision, but he did not notice. The PADD on his lap still glowed softly with the awful message of his friend's death.

In the past half-hour he had re-read the message three times, hoping, somehow that the message might read differently, that this was somehow all a mistake. Yet, each time he read it, the words in a soft, sans-serif font, mocked him accusingly. *It's your fault, Akinola!* he thought, *If you hadn't tried to play counselor, Calvin might still be alive. Instead, you gave him some half-assed advice and sent him home to die by his own hand.*

Suddenly, in a burst of anger and frustration, he hurled the offending PADD across the small office into a bookcase, smashing a model of a *Constitution* class starship he had carved long ago. Momentarily, the annunciator to his ready room chimed. For a moment, Akinola considered ignoring it, but his sense of duty prevailed. "Come!" he rasped.

Lt. Commander T'Ser entered the room she had left only thirty minutes earlier. She appeared composed but subdued, a concerned expression on her face. "Captain? . . ." she asked, cautiously.

Akinola stood and straightened the burgundy jacket he wore. "Come in, commander," he said, his voice giving no hint to his internal turmoil.

T'Ser knelt down to retrieve the PADD. She made no mention of the ruined wood carving that lay in pieces on the carpet.

"I've notified the crew about Dr. Baxter's . . . death," hesitating before finishing her sentence. "However, Commander Strauss and Lt. Bane are on the station at the moment, in one of the holo-decks. Did you want me to contact them now, or . . .?"

Akinola shook his head as he re-seated himself. "No, let them enjoy their outing. They'll find out soon enough. We're too far distant from Earth to make it for the funeral anyway, I suppose."

"Ten days at maximum warp," replied T'Ser. She paused a moment, seeming to consider whether to continue. "It's not your fault, you know."

Akinola looked up sharply. "The Hell it isn't! If I hadn't been so concerned about keeping this quiet and turned him over to Starfleet medical for psychiatric evaluation, he might be alive right now."

T'Ser was unfazed. "Alive . . . and broken. Captain, you didn't cause this to happen, the Romulans did. You did your best to help a friend, to give him an opportunity to redeem himself, to seek help on his terms. What he did was his choice, as much as we hate it."

Akinola rubbed his face and gazed up at the Vulcan second officer. "T'Ser, I appreciate it, but . . ."

T'Ser interrupted Akinola. "You've told us many times that ship commanders have to make hard decisions - decisions that might cost the lives of people we care about. You also said that if we begin to second-guess ourselves, we become a danger to our crew, our ship and ourselves."

Akinola gave a slight, bitter smile. "Damn your eidetic memory, anyway." The smile faded and he shook his head in obvious grief. "T'Ser, first it was Dale, now Calvin . . ."

T'Ser was not deterred. "Don't start second-guessing, sir. For all of our sakes."

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Star Station Echo
Level 16, Holodeck 4

Inga Strauss looked at the terrain before her in wonder. "Are you sure this is supposed to be on Earth?" she asked, skeptically.

Nigel Bane grinned, "Oh, yeah. Welcome to the "Never-Never," or, as you probably know it, the Outback."

Inga looked around at the desolate, yet hauntingly beautiful vista. The soil at her feet was a dusty red. Short, scrubby vegetation covered the ground sparsely. Several trees with trunks that twisted in sharp angles swayed slightly in the hot breeze. In the distance were mountains and the terrain

appeared somewhat greener. Nigel pointed in that direction. "That's the MacDonnell Range. Where the dessert comes up on the base of the mountains is our destination, Red Stump Creek."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Why, it's home!"

Inga noticed a dust cloud moving across the barren plain ahead of them. She squinted her eyes, trying to discover the source.

"Brumbies," said Bane. "Wild horses. Their ancestors were brought over hundreds of years ago by the early settlers. Now, they run free all over the Red Centre."

Her face lit up in a smile as the horses came in view. "They're magnificent!"

"Yeah, they're beauties, all right."

"Have you ever ridden one?" she asked, cocking her head at him.

"Me? Nah. I'm a fair rider, but those Brumbies would have their way with me, fair dinkum!" These here are more my speed."

Strauss turned and for the first time realized they were not alone. Two rather large horses regarded her with large, calm eyes. They were both saddled and their reins were wrapped around a small bush. Nigel walked over to the first horse, a roan stallion. "Ello, Edgar!" he said as he gave the steed a neck rub. Edgar's companion, a gray, dappled steed bobbed his head and nickered softly. Nigel went over and rubbed the horse's nose. "Alright, Diablo, I haven't forgotten you. Say, I want you two to meet a friend of mine." He indicated Inga, who felt a bit silly being introduced to horses. "This is Inga, and I want you to take good care of her, you understand? No trouble from you now, got it?"

Diablo flicked his ears and gazed steadily at Inga. Inga swallowed as she looked back. Diablo looked *very* tall to her.

"Inga, come on over. That's it! Don't be shy. Here now, why don't you give Diablo this carrot? That'll win 'em over." Nigel pulled a carrot from a pocket of his jeans and handed it to Inga, who looked at it as if it were a dead mouse. She directed a pleading look at Bane.

"Nigel, I'm not so sure about this . . ."

"Nonsense! Look, just rub his neck like so, there you go! Now, hold the carrot in your palm and give it to him - there your go!"

Inga stroked the neck of the gray giant and gingerly held the carrot in front of Diablo. The horse lowered his head and quickly took the proffered gift, crunching the treat with his large, flat teeth. Inga wiped the horse slobber on her jeans.

"See? He likes you already. Alright, then. Time to mount up!"

Inga was startled. "What?"

"Time to get on the horse, Inga," Nigel said, patiently.

"Oh, right!" She quickly turned to face the horse so her blushing face wouldn't be seen. "Um, is there a ladder or something? . . ."

To his credit, Nigel did not laugh. Patiently he explained, "No, Inga. Look. Just put this foot in the stirrup - no, *that's* the stirrup, right! Now, take the reins in this hand and grab the saddle horn and pull yourself up - upsey daisy!"

Inga was slightly startled to feel Nigel's hands pushing up on her rear-end, but she did not protest. She actually settled into the saddle with a fair amount of grace, owing partly to her training as a gymnast and partly to Nigel's boost.

The Australian lieutenant patted Diablo's neck. "Okay, Inga, just hold the reins firmly but don't hold his head back. He know's where we're headin' but you've got to let him know that you're in charge. Just remember, pull the left rein for left, right to go right, and both to stop." He moved to Edgar and mounted in a quick, easy motion.

"What if I fall off?" asked Inga, as she measured the distance to the ground.

"No worries!" Nigel said with a grin as he adjusted his broad-brimmed hat down over his eyes. "The ground will break your fall!"

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USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Akinola picked up the pieces of the broken wooden starship model and regarded the wreckage. He thought he might be able to salvage it if he replaced the struts. The saucer section was okay as was the secondary hull. His thought were interrupted by the computer signaling an in-coming message. He set the pieces of wood back on the bookcase, walked around his desk and activated the viewer. Lt. Vashtee's face appeared on the screen.

"Captain, I'm receiving a private message for you, eye's only. It's a Starfleet encrypted signal, authenticated. I've got it in the de-scrambler buffer for you, but I can't tell you the source."

Akinola frowned. *Now what?* he thought. Aloud he said, "Put it through, lieutenant."

Vashtee's face was replaced momentarily by the face of a striking Andorian woman in a Starfleet uniform. Captain Lhar'Shon of the USS *Shadow* spoke with a pleasant, alto voice. "Captain Akinola, forgive me for contacting you at this time. I have heard of the death of your chief medical officer and wish to extend my condolences."

Akinola inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. "Thank you Captain Lhar'Shon, although I have to wonder why you've contacted me over an encrypted channel to tell me this?"

"To be honest, captain, my superiors would be highly displeased if they knew I was speaking to you. During our brief recent encounter, you must know that my mission is of a . . . sensitive nature."

Akinola regarded her with a weary expression and sighed. "Captain, no offense, but I don't give a damn about your mission or its sensitive nature. And I really don't care to know any more about it. As you know, my friend is dead by his own hand. So unless you have anything important to say, I've got things to . . ."

Lhar'Shon interrupted Akinola and fixed him with a penetrating stare. "Captain, your Dr. Baxter did not commit suicide."

Akinola straightened suddenly in his chair. "*What did you say?*"

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USS *Magellan* (NCC-71459)
Star Station Echo, Berth 6

Lt. Octavius Castille re-read the message on his PADD and frowned. His orders transferring him to the USS *Bluefin* had been updated. The word "acting" had been deleted from "Chief Medical Officer." Also deleted were the words, "temporary duty." Already in a foul mood, this was one more source of irritation to add to his collection that had been building over the past few weeks.

He threw the PADD on top of his clam-shell, carry all bag and looked around his quarters for the last time. He had mixed feelings about leaving *Magellan*. On the one hand, he took pride in his contribution to the overall quality and competency of medical care on the *Galaxy* - class ship. But he felt a sense of frustration and anger over having to serve under such an incompetent, pompous ass as CMO Commander Trenton Jennings, MD. One thing he had to hand to Jennings, he knew how to play the political game and cover his rear. Many times, Jennings took credit for things that Castille and the others on the medical staff had done, while discreetly deflecting his own blunders. It had come to a head one month ago when Castille intervened as Jennings was about to botch a relatively simple surgical procedure. Now, Castille was getting the boot while Jennings stayed.

The annunciator to Castille's cabin buzzed. "Come in!" Castille said.

The door slid open to reveal a Trill woman wearing a blue labcoat over her uniform. Lt. Lorsi Zlan walked in and surveyed the room, now devoid of decoration or personal effects. "All packed and ready?" she asked.

Castille spread his hands. "All evidence of my existence aboard *Magellan* has been removed and erased. All Jennings will have are the happy memories," he said with sarcasm.

Lorsi crossed her arms and gave him a stern look. "Listen, O.C., there are probably more than twenty members of this crew that are alive today because of you. That's 'evidence of your existence' that means something."

Castille averted his eyes from her gaze and picked up the PADD and carry-all. "Lorsi, I appreciate that, but you don't need to make me feel better. It's for the best, anyway. Better I go to a Border Service cutter and treat broken noses and sexually transmitted diseases than stay here and kill the CMO. Besides, it

looks like they really want me - my orders have changed from TDY to regular assignment."

Dr. Zlan came over and took Castille by the arm. "Well, at least let me walk you off the ship before you commit murder."

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USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Akinola stared at the viewscreen on his desk. "What do you mean, Dr. Baxter did not commit suicide? I've seen the news report and the flash message from Starfleet Command. Both indicate that he took an overdose of a pain killer after he disabled the bio-scanners in his house."

Lhar'Shon's expression was somber. "That *is* how he died. However, he did not take the overdose of his own volition." She paused. "Captain, I cannot spend too much time on this channel. If you wish, I can meet you at 2100 hours on the station. You are aware of the Omega Pub on Deck 12?"

Akinola snorted, "Of course I do. I was thrown out of it enough when I was still an enlisted man." Akinola's expression became unreadable. He leaned toward the viewscreen, speaking quietly but with deadly conviction, "Listen, Lhar'Shon, and listen well. You had best be straight with me, or God help you, I will become your worst nightmare!"

Lhar'shon returned his gaze. "I will see you at 2100 hours tonight, captain. If you're one minute late, I won't be there." The screen returned to an image of the Border Service insignia. Akinola took an unsteady breath, trying to regain his composure. He steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair, wondering into what storm he was about to jump.

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Star Station Echo

Level 16, Holodeck 4

Inga's initial apprehension about riding a horse quickly turned to delight. Diablo indeed seemed to be a gentleman of the equine variety and the ride with Nigel Bane became the most fun she had experienced in years.

The two Starfleet officers and their mounts soon approached the foothills leading to the MacDonnell mountain range. The foliage became greener, taller and more lush than the Red Centre plains behind them. Inga had marvelled at the variety of wildlife they had seen - birds, wild horses, even camels! Nigel had explained that the camels originated from old Afghanistan and now roamed wild as did the Brumbies.

"There's the creek now, we're almost there," said Bane.

They forded the creek easily, although Inga was a bit nervous as the water came up to her thighs. She enjoyed the feel of the cold water, however, and scooped some up to wipe her face. The holo-deck's safety protocols did not allow the temperature to reach the levels of the actual Outback, but she was warm, nonetheless. Shortly, Nigel led them to a clearing in the trees and to Inga's first sight of his home, or at least a holographic representation.

The main house was long and low, with an oxide-red corrugated metal roof and a wooden porch that went the length of the front. The walls were tan and metal awnings gave shade to the windows. A metal barn and a corral were situated some 30 meters from the house.

"Well, here it is! Red Creek Ranch, or a fair rendition, anyway," said Nigel as he dismounted with practiced ease. He came over to Inga to help her down off of Diablo.

Although a graceful gymnast, Inga could sometimes be a klutz. As she moved her left foot back over the saddle, the heel of her boot caught on a strap and her right boot slipped in the stirrup. With a yelp, Inga fell backwards into the waiting arms of Nigel Bane. Instinctively, Inga put her arms around his neck to stop her fall.

The two of them looked into each other's eyes for a long moment before Inga blushed and averted her eyes. "Nice catch, lieutenant," she said softly.

Bane smiled and set her gently on the ground, "My pleasure, commander! What's say we get something to eat and something cool for our throats."

Inga smiled up at him, oblivious to the fact that she still held his hand. "Sounds good to me."

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USS Bluefin
Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Dr. Octavius "O.C." Castille made his way to berth 14 where his new ship, the *USS Bluefin* was docked. He stopped to look at the cutter through a viewport. Compared to the *Magellan*, the ship seemed very small. Still, it appeared to be well-cared for - its paint and markings very fresh and bright. He took a deep breath and walked down the gangway to the airlock.

A third-class petty officer in a blue jumpsuit and wearing a sidearm stood at the airlock, blocking his way. "May I help you, sir?" he asked, a hint of challenge in his voice.

"I'm Dr. Castille, the new chief medical officer," he said, passing his PADD with his orders to the crewman. "Permission to come aboard?" he added as an afterthought.

The petty officer read the PADD carefully and handed it back to Castille, a not exactly friendly expression on his face. There was a moment's pause before he said, "Granted." No 'welcome aboard,' no 'let me get your bags,' not even a 'kiss my ass, sir! "

"Can you direct me to the CO?" asked Castille.

The petty officer pointed down a narrow corridor. "One quarter way around this corridor, take the lift to deck one. The captain should be in his ready room." He turned back and assumed the position of parade rest, never making eye contact with Castille.

"O-kay, thanks! Good to talk to you." Castille made his way around the corridor which was indeed narrow compared to his last ship. He found the turbo-lift and entered it. "Bridge," he said. The lift ride was very quick as they only ascended six levels. The doors opened onto a small bridge of common design. A woman of asian descent was seated at the OPs station while a Vulcan male was leaning over an auxiliary console. The Vulcan straightened and addressed Castille. "May I be of assistance?"

"Yes, I'm Dr. Castille, the new CMO. I'm supposed to meet Captain Akinola in his ready room."

"I am Lt. Sarnek, duty officer. The ready room is over there," he said, pointing to a doorway on the port side of the bridge. Sarnek then turned back to his task of running diagnostics on the environmental systems.

Castille adjusted the carry-all on his shoulder and walked to the captain's ready room. He pressed the annunciator contact by the door. A voice, muffled but strong, answered, "Enter!"

Castille entered the captain's office and was struck how small it was. He remembered the ready room on the *Magellan* (the one and only time he had been in it) as being huge in comparison. He was intrigued by the wooden models of starships and ocean-going vessels that dominated the decor, but his attention immediately went to the man seated behind the oak desk by the viewport. His skin was dark, his curly black hair salted generously with gray and his eyes were brown and somber. The bags under his eyes indicated that he did not sleep well. His expression was questioning. "And you are? . . ." asked Akinola.

"Lt. Octavius Castille, your new CMO, reporting for duty."

Akinola nodded in recognition, stood and came around the desk with his hand extended. "Welcome aboard, Dr. Castille. Have a seat - we need to have a little chat."

Castille placed his carry-all on one chair and sat in the other. Akinola retook his seat and picked up a PADD.

"Graduate of Johns Hopkins Medical School with honors, Starfleet Academy with honors, resident work on the hospital ship *USS DeBakey*, then served with distinction on the *USS Bombay*, all with accolades, commendations, great performance reviews, etc, etc." Akinola paused then looked over the PADD at Castille. "Then we come to the *USS Magellan* and the wheels come off the cart!"

Akinola tossed the PADD on the desk, leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. Castille seldom felt intimidated but a drop of perspiration trickled down from his balding head along the side of his face. Akinola merely stared at him for a moment, then said, "Would you care to elaborate on your tour of duty aboard the *Magellan*, doctor?"

"There's not much to say, really. I'm sure the captain and CMO on *Magellan* have made their views about me very clear," he said, stiffly.

Akinola leaned forward suddenly. "Let's cut the bullshit son. I'm a fair man and I'm giving you the opportunity to give your side of the story. When I read all of the positive reports on you from people whose opinion carries some weight, then suddenly read that you're a walking time-bomb who can't follow orders and is insubordinate, I get a disconnect - you follow me?"

Castille swallowed and nodded. "Yes sir."

Akinola's tone softened somewhat. "Look, I'm not asking you to talk out of school or shift blame. I do need to know if you're going to be a problem for me, because let me tell you right now - I do *NOT* need any more problems right now! So," he paused, "tell me this. Is this fitness report from the *Magellan* an accurate picture of you, or not?"

Castille met Akinola's gaze and did not blink. "No sir, I do not believe it is."

A faint smile played on Akinola's face. "Fair enough, doctor. I'm willing to let you start with a clean slate. But first, there are some hard things you need to know."

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Star Station Echo
Level 16, Holodeck 4

Inga and Nigel sat in rocking chairs on the front porch of the ranch house watching a magnificent sunset. Inga felt a bit sleepy from the fantastic meal that Nigel had prepared - without a replicator!

"You better watch yourself, Lt. Bane, or you'll be assigned as ship's cook," she said with a smile.

Bane feigned mock horror. "Please don't tell anyone! If Cookie finds out, he'll fillet me!"

"Don't worry, your secret is safe with me, on one condition."

"And that would be?"

"You've got to fix me dinner again!"

Bane grinned. "Why Commander Strauss, that's black mail!"

She rocked in the chair languidly. "Damn right it is." She glanced at her wrist chronometer. " *Mein Gott!* look at the time! We're due back on the ship in ten minutes."

Bane stood up and stretched his back. "'Fraid so. Back to reality, I suppose." He picked up his hat and brushed it off. "Computer, save and end program." Instantly, the peaceful setting vanished into a large, cube-shaped room with glowing grid lines.

Inga looked at the sterile holo-deck with a sense of regret. "Nigel, that was lovely. Thank you so much for inviting me - I can't remember the last time I've had so much fun," she hesitated, then gazed into his eyes, "or enjoyed anyone's company."

He returned her gaze. "Likewise."

Inga made a decision. She stepped forward quickly, lifted on her toes and circled Nigel's neck with her arms, planting a firm kiss on his lips. Nigel returned the embrace and the kiss. The two lingered in the embrace as time seemed to stop, if only momentarily. Then they stepped back from one another.

"Nigel, thank you!" she said, simply.

He smiled in return and nodded. "You're welcome."

She sighed, "Let's get back to the ship."

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Star Station Echo

Deck 12, Omega Pub, 2057 hours.

Captain Akinola entered the cramped and crowded pub with a sense of nostalgia. It had been years since he had been in this joint - a hang out for enlisted Starfleet personnel, boomers, mercs, thieves and con men. Officers were a rarity, but there was a section set aside for the brass - nicknamed "Officer's Country," it was three booths in the back with a degree of privacy. It also offered a good view of the entrance so no one could approach

unobserved. Akinola made his way toward a booth where Captain Lhar'Shon was waiting. He slid in across from her.

A barmaid of mixed heritage approached. "What'll you have?"

"Beer - Terran dark," he said while maintaining eye contact with the Andorian captain, who was nursing a snifter of some green, misting beverage.

"I'm glad you decided to come, Captain Akinola," said Lhar'Shon. Akinola was about to reply but she held up a hand in warning to wait. The barmaid returned quickly with Akinola's beer in a mug. Lhar'Shon pulled out a small device and set in on the table. It emitted a soft, blue glow.

"We can talk now," she began. "This will ensure our privacy from any eavesdroppers."

Akinola took a swig of the strong brew. He was glad to know they still didn't water down their beer. "Okay, captain. Tell your tale. If I don't believe you, I'll finish my beer, walk back to my ship and you'd better not contact me again, clear?"

Lhar'Shon inclined her head in consent, her antennae moving about as if scanning the room. "I promise you, captain, I will be honest with you, though I will not be able to tell you everything you might want to know."

"First, why tell me anything? You've already said your superiors would not be happy with you. Forgive me, but we don't know each other very well, so I'm wondering about your motives."

"Fair enough," said Lhar'Shon as she sipped her drink. "You have already figured that I work for Starfleet Intelligence. That must have been obvious to you. But I am first and foremost a Starfleet officer. I swore an oath to serve and protect the Federation that I take seriously and intend to uphold." She paused, "Captain, you seem to be a practical and honorable man. I can also tell that you are anything but naive. So it probably won't come as a shock when I tell you that not every organization in Starfleet has the best interests of the Federation in mind at all times. There are some dark secrets, captain, held by people with dark hearts and darker motives that would stop at nothing to maintain their positions of power and influence, consequences be damned."

Akinola leaned closer. "Does that include murder?"

Lhar'Shon maintained his gaze. "Captain, have you ever heard of Section 31?"

* * *

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Commander Strauss and Lt. Bane made it back to the ship with five minutes to spare. They were surprised to see T'Ser waiting for them at the airlock.

"Hi, Mom, we made it back before curfew!" said Strauss in a teasing manner. Then she noticed T'Ser's somber expression. "T'Ser? What's wrong?"

"Let's go to the wardroom so I can speak to you both."

Strauss and Bane exchanged puzzled glances, but followed the Vulcan officer into the ship.

In the wardroom, Bane poured coffee for Strauss and himself. He gestured to T'Ser with an empty mug, but she shook her head, declining. Bane took the two mugs and sat by Strauss as T'Ser took a seat across from them.

"Okay, T'Ser, spill it. What's wrong?"

It was obvious that T'Ser was struggling to maintain her composure. She clasped her hands on the table and cleared her throat before speaking. "At 1630 hours, we received word that Dr. Baxter was dead."

Strauss gasped and clasped a hand over her mouth. Bane look stunned. He spoke first. "What happened, commander?"

"According to the dispatch, Dr. Baxter took an overdose of painkillers. He was discovered by friends when he didn't show up to play golf."

Strauss looked shocked. "But why? Why would he do that?"

T'Ser shook her head, a forlorn expression on he face. "I do not know. Perhaps he was unable to cope with what the Romulans did to him. Perhaps he harbored a sense of guilt or shame. He did not leave a note, so we'll probably never know for sure."

"I just can't believe it!" said Strauss. "I thought the mind-meld with Sarnek cured him."

T'Ser shook her head. "There were no guarantees. Sarnek thought he had removed the Romulan conditioning. Perhaps he did. That still did not change Dr. Baxter's feelings. He was obviously distraught over what he did, even though we understood it was not his fault." She paused. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news and to hit you with it that way, but I thought it best you hear about it as soon as you returned to the ship."

Strauss nodded, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. "Yeah. Thanks." The three sat for a few moments without speaking. "Lieutenant, I guess we better get ready for our duty shift," Strauss said, finally.

Bane nodded and took a deep breath. "Right." He looked at the mug of coffee and grimaced. He definitely didn't need to add any more acid to his stomach. "Thanks for telling us, Commander T'Ser. I know it was hard for you." He and Strauss left the wardroom.

T'Ser lingered behind for a moment. A tear trickled down her face. "You don't know the half of it," she said bitterly.

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Star Station Echo
Deck 12, The Omega Pub

Akinola frowned. "Section 31? No, never heard of it. What's it supposed to be?"

"Section 31 is the dark-side of Starfleet Intelligence, captain, a covert, black-ops organization. Officially, it doesn't exist. 31 has a long and sinister history going back over 200 years. The justification for such an organization is to address threats to the Federation that most of us don't even know about. They believe they have a mandate to preserve the Federation from perceived danger by any means necessary. Unfortunately, they often take that mandate too far."

"And they had Dr. Baxter killed?" he asked quietly.

Lhar'Shon set down her drink and regarded Akinola. "If I said, 'yes,' captain, what would you do? As I said, they don't officially exist. They operate in the

shadows and also right in front of your eyes. It's not like you can go after some individual and extract revenge."

Akinola narrowed his eyes. "Don't talk in circles, Lhar'Shon, it pisses me off. Did this Section 31 outfit have Doc killed?"

She regarded him with an unreadable expression for a moment, before answering. "Yes, I believe so. However, I do not know who did it, nor exactly why, although I have my suspicions."

"You *believe* so? What the hell is that supposed to mean."

She leaned forward. "It means this, Captain Akinola. You and your crew have been used. That I *do* know. And you have seen some things that you were not meant to see."

"The wormhole in the Molari Badlands." he said, grimly.

Lhar'Shon nodded. "It was bad luck and your good skill that allowed you to discover it. And the bad luck was compounded in you having a Romulan mole on your ship."

Akinola bristled at that. "Baxter was no mole!" he said through clenched teeth. "He was a goddam victim of a Romulan kidnapping and brainwashing."

Lhar'Shon shrugged. "Semantics, captain. But I do apologize if I seem insensitive. The point is, Baxter was an additional . . . 'complication' - a loose end. Section 31 does not like loose ends."

"And what about the rest of my crew? Are they loose ends too?"

"No. I think it unlikely you or your crew are in any danger. You helped bring the recent . . . incident to a satisfactory conclusion. However," she looked around for a moment, then returned her gaze to Akinola, "I have no doubt that they will seek to maintain close tabs on you and your crew."

Akinola leaned back. "A Section 31 plant? On my ship?"

Lhar'Shon took a sip of her drink. "I would think that's very likely."

Akinola could feel the headache coming on. He rubbed his temples, then asked, "That commander that was with you on my ship - Chalmer. Is he Section 31? Did he have anything to do with Baxter's death?"

"I can tell you that Chalmer is a mouthpiece - a spokesman, and little more. I seriously doubt he had anything to do with your friend's death, captain. He's caught up in his own importance and isn't smart enough for real covert work."

Akinola shook his head. "Captain Lhar'shon, I suppose I should thank you for telling me this, but to be honest, I don't feel very grateful at the moment. I don't like to be used and I *really* don't like being spied on." He slid out of the booth and stood. "And I still can't figure you out. Maybe you're trying to help, maybe you're yanking my chain. I do have a strong feeling there's a lot more you're *not* telling me.

Lhar'Shon smiled. She really was quite beautiful. "Good luck, Captain. Perhaps we'll see each other again."

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a slight grin. "Now, why does that sound like a threat?"

* * *

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Dr. Castille had been more impressed with sickbay than any other area of the ship. For the past two hours, he had examined the equipment and medical stores and found a state of the art medical facility. Apparently his predecessor had done a fine job of keeping up with current technology - with one exception. Now he was dealing with that one exception, and beginning to regret it.

Gralt shook his head as he surveyed his handiwork. "Captain Akinola is going to blow a warp coil when he sees this."

Castille looked surprised. "Why? It's standard fare on all Starfleet vessels these days. And the new fleet upgrade orders require it to be retrofitted to obsol. . ." he paused when he saw Gralt's face darken. "older model ships," he finished.

Gralt flared his nostrils and snorted. "No hair off my ass. Just be sure to show the captain those frakkin' upgrade orders or you may be floating home without an EVA suit. Now, I've got real work in engineering, so have fun playing with your imaginary friend." The Tellarite stalked out of sickbay, muttering to himself.

Castille frowned, puzzled by the attitudes he had encountered thus far. He at least understood his somewhat cool reception after Akinola told him of Dr. Baxter's suicide. He had not known Baxter personally, but understood how the tragedy might have affected the crew. He set aside those thoughts and spoke, "Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram."

A figure in a Starfleet jumpsuit with blue trim shimmered into existence. "Please state the nature of the emergency," said the balding EMH.

Castille walked around the figure, hand rubbing his chin in appraisal. "Well," he said, "You're just a Mark I, but I guess you'll have to do."

"I beg your pardon!" said the EMH, indignantly.

* * *

USS Bluefin

Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Akinola sat up suddenly, gasping for breath. Perspiration ran in rivulets down his face and back and his heart was racing. "Lights!" he croaked.

The lights in his cabin came up, chasing away the darkness and the last vestiges of the nightmare that robbed his sleep. He twisted around and sat on the side of his bunk, covers askew from the tossing and thrashing of his night terror. Rubbing his face to bring himself to wakefulness, he concentrated, trying to grasp the fading mists of the dream. He recalled being in a dark, cold space with someone else - a young girl he thought. He also remembered that it was hard to breathe and . . .

And nothing. The nightmare was gone, as was any hope for rest. The headache, however, was back in all its throbbing splendor. He stood and walked over to the beverage servitor for a glass of water. He opened the small cabinet behind his sink mirror and frowned. He was out of the analgesic patches that Baxter had given him some weeks earlier. Grumbling to himself, he pulled on a black t-shirt and slipped a pair of sweat pants over his skivvies

and trudged toward sickbay. *Corpsman Sanders should be on duty - maybe he can fix me up with a patch.* he thought.

Akinola entered sickbay and stopped suddenly as the doors closed behind him with a quiet hiss. "What the Hell?!!"

Standing before him with a faint smile and a look of extreme confidence and serenity was a Mark I EMH. "May I be of assistance?" he asked, politely. Sanders ran out of the office and breathed a not quite audible, "Oh, shit!"

Akinola locked eyes with the Corpsman. "Sanders! Get Castille in here. NOW!"

* * *

In less than two minutes, a confused and sleepy looking Octavius Castille entered sickbay, wearing a Johns Hopkins t-shirt and running shorts. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Akinola turned on him and pointed an accusing finger at the EMH. "Just what the Hell is THAT?"

Castille blinked, frowning. "It's an Emergency Medical Hologram. I had it installed this . . ."

Akinola walked up to the doctor. "I know what it is, doctor. I want to know what it's doing on my ship!"

Castille looked squarely in the captain's eyes. "It's on this ship, captain, because the chief medical officer, that being me, ordered it so."

Akinola was taken aback slightly by Castille, but did not back down. "Then you can order it removed, doctor!"

"Just one second." Castille strode into the sickbay office and recovered a PADD. "You might want to read this first, captain!" He thrust it toward Akinola who stared at it with suspicion before taking it. As Akinola read the directive from Starfleet Medical and Fleet OPs, Castille continued. "For the record, captain, I'm not crazy about having a coalesced pile of photons in my sickbay, either . . ."

"Excuse me! I'm standing here!" said the EMH

"... but as you can see, it is a *fleet wide* directive!"

"May I say something?" interjected the EMH.

"NO!" thundered Castille and Akinola, simultaneously.

Castille kept his momentum, staring hard at his taller CO. "And since we're having this discussion, captain, let me remind you that while your orders are law as far as the operation of this ship goes, in here *I AM* God! You have no authority over any medical matters and I have no authority over ship operations. That's the way it's been since there's been a Starfleet!" He stopped, face red with arms crossed. Sanders watched from behind a bio-bed, expecting to witness a murder at any moment. The EMH opted to deactivate itself.

Akinola stared back for a long moment. Finally, he shoved the PADD back at Castille. "Very well, *doctor!*, but hear this - if that, *thing* screws up just once, it's gone. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly!"

"Then I need to get an analgesic patch - my head's killing me!"

Castille glared at Akinola for a moment, then relaxed. He walked to a cabinet and pulled out a small box and tossed them to Akinola. "Here, one should be good for 24 hours. But I want to do a work-up on you in the next day or so."

"Don't push it, doctor. Now, get back to bed."

Akinola left sickbay and walked to the nearest lift. Inside, his face relaxed and he began to chuckle softly. "Damn," he said, shaking his head in disbelief, "Castille's got a big brass set hanging on him." He leaned back against the lift as it rose. "Sure hope I don't have to cut them off and shove 'em down his throat."

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Star Station Echo, Berth 14

Akinola made his way back to his cabin but decided against trying to sleep again. The sight of his bed made him slightly uneasy. Instead, he stepped into

the sonic shower, then dressed himself in his gray turtleneck and burgundy jacket with black pants. While his choice of uniform was technically out of date, he liked it because it was warmer than the standard jump suit. For some reason, whenever he had a nightmare, he had a hard time staying warm the next day.

The patch had relieved his headache markedly and the nightmare was mostly forgotten. Leaving his cabin again, he stopped by the wardroom to get a mug of coffee before heading for the bridge.

* * *

Commander Strauss was surprised to see the captain on the bridge so early. She stood, relinquishing the command chair. "Captain, you're up early this morning."

"Couldn't sleep," he said simply. "Anything going on I should know about?"

Strauss gave him an appraising look but did not remark on his lack of sleep. "We've completed laying in stores and replenishing our torpedoes. Everyone on shore leave has checked back in and engineering reports that all diagnostics are complete and we are ready to leave at your discretion."

Akinola winced slightly as he sipped the hot coffee. "Very well, XO. Notify the station that we will be departing within the hour."

"Aye sir. And our orders?"

"We're to head to the Klaamat system by way of the Badlands. It seems a couple of freighters have come up missing. Might be raiders, may have been an ion storm," he took another sip of coffee, "or, might be the Maquis."

Strauss raised her eyebrows. "The Maquis? Are they active again?"

Akinola nodded. "Apparently so. And from the intel report I received, they're playing hardball now."

* * *

An hour later, the bridge crew was at departure stations and everyone was focused on their tasks. Akinola was in the command seat while Strauss manned tactical. Bane was at OPs, Lt. Sarnek manned the Helm and Ensign Li

sat at the navigator's console. Master Chief Solly Brin took his usual departure station, seated aft at environmental controls.

"Station traffic control has cleared us for departure, captain," said Bane.

"Very well. Navigator, plot a direct course to the Klaamat system through the Badlands. Helm, ahead slow on thrusters until we clear the yard, the one half impulse until we clear the outer markers. When clear, make our speed warp 6," said Akinola.

Each station acknowledged their orders, then proceeded to carry out their assignments. When they received confirmation that the ship was secure and the umbilicals and gangway were retracted, Akinola said, "Take us out, Mr. Sarnek."

The departure for the *Bluefin* was routine and uneventful. Usually, Akinola enjoyed watching the play unfold, but this morning, he was distracted. Strauss noticed that he forgot to order the departure angle on the viewscreen. Certainly, not a mandatory procedure, but tradition nonetheless. As Sarnek brought the ship to one half impulse, Strauss walked up to Akinola, who appeared deep in thought. "Captain?" she said softly, "Are you alright?"

Akinola sat up and gave a slight smile. "Yes commander, just thinking." He regarded his young executive officer and seemed to come to a decision. "I need to bend your ear for a few minutes, XO." He stood, indicating the ready room. "Mr. Bane, you have the conn."

Strauss took a seat across from the captain. "Sir, I don't mean to press the issue, but are you sure you're alright?"

Akinola gave a short laugh. "I'm fine, XO. Just a bit sleep-deprived. That's not why I called you in here anyway."

He leaned forward, and looked at her with a penetrating gaze. "Commander, what we're about to discuss is not to leave this room until I say otherwise, is that clear?"

"As crystal, sir."

"Good." He leaned back in his chair, maintaining eye contact with the petite XO. "I'll be honest with you. I debated whether to discuss this with you. You're still relatively new to the ship and we're still getting to know each other."

Inga nodded, wondering where this was leading.

"But," Akinola continued, "I realized if I couldn't trust you with this, then we've got no business serving together on this ship. Now, I reiterate, what I'm going to tell you is between you and me for now." He paused. "I have learned that Dr. Baxter did not commit suicide. He was murdered."

For a moment, Strauss was dumbstruck. She shook her head, an incredulous expression on her face. "Murdered? But who . . . why would anyone kill Dr. Baxter? Who told you this?"

Akinola held up a hand. "One thing at a time, commander. Let's just say my source is in a position to know such things. The problem is, I'm not sure how far I can trust this source. As to who, have you ever heard of Section 31?"

Strauss shook her head. "What's that?"

"It's a covert group within Starfleet intelligence - a rogue agency with its own agenda. Apparently, it's been around as long as Starfleet. And they operate outside of Federation law."

"But why would they want Dr. Baxter dead? Does it have anything to do with what happened with the Romulans and the wormhole?"

"That seems likely, although I don't understand how he could be a threat to them. Inga there's one other thing, and this is why I don't want you to tell anyone about our conversation. It is likely that Section 31 has planted an operative on this ship."

"For what possible reason?"

"We know about the wormhole and the cloaked ships that Starfleet Intelligence is using. And my gut tells me there's something else going on here, too. I just don't have a clue what it is."

"Sir, what do you want me to do?" asked Strauss, earnestly.

Akinola smiled. "For the moment, nothing. The last thing I want to do is to start spying on my own crew. That's just a short walk around the corner to paranoia. But if you do come across anything out of the ordinary - unauthorized communications, for example, let me know."

Strauss nodded, a serious expression on her face. "I will, sir." She hesitated before adding, "But I hate keeping the truth about Dr. Baxter from the crew!"

"So do I, commander. But if we reveal it, our mole, if we do have one, will know that *we* know about Section 31. And right now, feigned ignorance works in our favor."

* * *

T'Ser had finished breakfast and returned to her quarters. She was about to compose a message to her parents, when her door annunciator chimed. "Come in," she said.

She was surprised to see Lt. Sarnek standing in the doorway.

"Commander, I apologize for the intrusion, but I was wondering if I might speak with you for a moment."

T'Ser stood and gestured for the young Vulcan to enter. "What can I do for you, lieutenant?" she asked, cautiously.

Sarnek stood with his hands behind him, his expression was troubled. "I wish to express to you my regret that I was unable to help Dr. Baxter."

T'Ser was caught off-guard by the statement. "Sarnek - it was not your fault. I and the rest of the crew appreciate your effort to help him. Mind-melding with Dr. Baxter must have been difficult."

Sarnek frowned, not making eye contact with T'Ser. "But it was not difficult, commander. I was surprised to find how open his mind was - the experience was . . . enlightening." He looked up. "Though I have only been on this ship for a short while, the meld gave me a deep understanding and appreciation for him. He was truly a remarkable man."

T'Ser fought to maintain her composure. "Yes, yes he was. He was like a grandfather to me."

Sarnek nodded. "Yes, he felt very close to you, commander. And, to be honest with you, touching his mind has made me re-evaluate some of my own prejudices . . . towards you."

T'Ser could not speak, but nodded her head briefly.

"I wanted to say that . . . and also to say, I grieve with thee, T'Ser," the last spoken in formal Vulcan.

T'Ser found her voice at last. "Thank you, Sarnek. That means a great deal to me."

Sarnek nodded, but still appeared troubled. "There is one thing I do not understand, though."

"What would that be, Sarnek?"

"When I touched Dr. Baxter's mind, I discovered no proclivity for self-destruction. He was upset and ashamed, to be sure, but he also had a great . . . love for life. His religious beliefs, which were very strong, rejected suicide as an option. If anything, I found one over-riding principle that permeated his thoughts - hope." He looked up at T'Ser. "It is neither logical nor credible that Dr. Baxter would kill himself."

* * *

USS Bluefin

Approaching the Molari Badlands, Warp 6

The colorful maelstrom of the Molari Badlands was beautiful to behold. Captain Akinola always regarded it with a sense of awe and foreboding. Over the centuries, hundreds of ships from many worlds had been lost in this region of space. Ion storms, plasma storms, and gravimetric shear could reduce an unprotected ship to its base components in minutes. Some of the most terrifying moments that Akinola had experienced in his long career occurred in the Badlands.

Yet, the very nature of the region made it a haven for smugglers and pirates, seeking a hidden and less frequented space route to ply their criminal trade. And unsuspecting or inexperienced commercial and private ships often blundered into the region, looking for a short-cut or a "thrill." For the Border Cutter, *USS Bluefin* and her crew, it was part of the patrol area and just another aspect of the job.

"Drop us out of warp, Mr. Fralk. Ahead one-half impulse." ordered Akinola. "Full power to the shields and inertial dampeners, Ms. T'Ser."

The two officers acknowledged and implemented their orders with practiced ease. The ship rocked gently as it entered a dense cloud of charged ion particles.

"Okay, people, we're looking for two missing freighters, one Kriosian flagged ship, the *SS Draskaar* and one Rigellian transport, the *SS Telenia Rial*. Both ships last reported leaving the Klaamat system bound for Molari III. Neither ship has been seen or heard from in three days and no distress signals have been heard. This is the proverbial needle in a haystack, so we'll need full active scans - and a lot of luck!"

"For all the good scans will do in this murk," muttered T'Ser.

"Just keep your Mark I eyeballs open and your Mark II mouths shut and maybe we won't miss anything," said Akinola dryly.

"Aye sir. Shutting up, sir." said T'Ser.

* * *

Dr. Castille was reviewing some of Dr. Baxter's notes on the crew when he realized that someone was standing outside of his office. He stood and walked out to meet a rather petite, blond haired young woman with ice blue eyes. To his surprise, she wore the insignia of a full commander. She held out her hand. "Dr. Castille, I'm Inga Strauss, the XO. I thought I'd come by and introduce myself and see if you've settled in okay."

He returned the handshake. "Yes, thanks. I did have a couple of questions though. First, I noticed that there's no replicator in my cabin or in sickbay. Is there one centrally located? I've yet to find one."

Strauss gave an apologetic look and shook her head. "I'm afraid the nearest replicator is behind us on Star Station Echo, doctor. As is the nearest holo-deck."

Castille looked surprised. "Really? Huh! Well, that helps explain why there wasn't an EMH when I first came on board." He paused, "And it does explain why the captain went ballistic after I had the engineer install one."

Strauss' eyes went wide. "You installed an *EMH*? And you're alive to tell about it. I'm impressed!"

Castille looked confused. "I have to admit, I feel like I've stepped back into the 23rd century after serving on a *Galaxy* - class ship. Tell me, commander. Is the captain always so . . . intense?"

Strauss suppressed a smile. "He's very much old-school, doctor. He's proud of this ship and doesn't like to see it changed. But he's a very good CO and knows what he's doing. Believe me, his good traits far outweigh his quirks. Now, did you have any other questions?"

"Actually, yes. Since I couldn't find a replicator, I'm pretty hungry. Where does one eat on this ship?"

She smiled. "Come on, let me introduce you to Cookie."

* * *

SS Cielo Vista

Terran flagged freighter

Molari Badlands

The independent freight haulers known as "Boomers" still made up a sizable percentage of commercial shipping, even in the 24th century. Raul Espinoza's family had operated the old R-class freighter, *Cielo Vista*, for three generations. His wife, Rita, their 20 year old son, Juan and their jack-of-all-trades engineer, retired Starfleet Master Chief Devon Horne, kept the old freighter in good running order.

The Espinozas made a comfortable living by shipping freight and carrying passengers in the somewhat hazardous Borderlands region. Today, they were carrying machinery parts, computer equipment and medical supplies to Klaamat IV. They also carried three passengers - two humans and a Bajoran.

Raul and Juan manned the flight deck as they traversed the Badlands. While Raul preferred to avoid the dangerous area of space, he was a seasoned pilot and he had fitted his ship well. He looked at his son. "Juan, be sure to keep an eye on the field density of the aft shields. Devon replaced the grid last week, but watch it, just to be safe."

Juan grinned. "Sure, Pop. Just you keep an eye on the plasma eddies. I thought Mom was going to tear you a new one when we got in one last week. Food went everywhere!"

"Such language!" Raul shook his head in mock indignation.

The door to the flight deck opened and Devon Horne entered. "Well, there's no radiation leakage and the impulse engines are purring like kittens."

"Good," said Raul. "By the way, how are our passengers?"

Devon's expression changed. "To be honest, Raul, there's something about them that bothers me. They've pretty much stayed holed up in their compartment since we left Tranlinaca. And whenever I have seen them, they always stop talking when I'm around."

Raul chuckled. "This isn't exactly a cruise ship, Devon. And we've carried our share of shady characters before without any trouble."

"Yeah, well my trouble meter is pinging overtime."

Raul laughed. "That's just the plumbing you hear. I thought you were going to fix the forward head!"

Devon smiled. "Slave driver! Tell you what, let me get us some coffee and I'll tell you some old bull-shit fleet stories about the first Dominion war. Then I'll fix the head."

"Deal!"

* * *

The three Maquis operatives began to assemble their weapons in their cramped cabin in preparation for their assault on the crew of the *Cielo Vista*. If successful, this would be the third freighter that the Maquis captured in a week.

The Bajoran looked at her two compatriots. "Tylo, head to engineering. Mark, head toward the crew quarters and keep anyone there under wraps. I'm heading to the flight deck. If anyone gives you any grief, shoot them." She shouldered the phaser rifle and headed out of the cabin.

* * *

Devon was in a small galley alcove where they kept a food replicator when he heard footsteps on the deck grating echoing up the narrow corridor. Some sixth sense made him peek through a crack in the narrow doorway. The Bajoran woman was slowly approaching, holding a nasty-looking phaser rifle of Orion design. "Shit!" he said under his breath, but remained perfectly still. The woman seemed focused on the door to the flight deck. Maybe she would miss the tiny galley and think it was a storage or equipment locker.

Come on old man - think! You need a weapon! The old Master Chief indeed had a weapon, a type two phaser, stored in a footlocker in his cabin. Unfortunately, that was a deck below and 50 meters aft. He looked around the small galley for something, perhaps a knife, but nothing presented itself. Then he remembered what he was holding in his hand.

Luck, providence, or the Great Bird of the Galaxy was with him as the armed woman passed by the door behind which he hid. Devon's heart was beating so hard that he was afraid she might hear it. She moved forward to the door of the flight deck, looked back once more, then pushed it in quickly with the rifle raised.

"Don't make any sudden moves and you won't get hurt!" she announced to the startled father and son. Juan began to rise from his seat, but she quickly trained the weapon on him. "I said, no sudden moves! Sit-down!" Juan complied. "Just for the record, this does not have a stun setting."

"What do you want from us?" asked Raul. "If you want the cargo . . ."

She shook her head. "I don't care about you or the cargo. I'm only interested in the ship. Cooperate, and you and your family will live. If not, well . . . let's just say I don't have much to lose."

While the Bajoran talked, Devon moved behind her, as stealthily as he could. Unfortunately, Juan saw him and his eyes widened. The woman saw this and whirled.

Although Devon was still out of striking range, the cramped flight deck hindered the Bajoran's movement. As she swung the phaser rifle around, the barrel hit the aft engineering station. Devon took the container of scalding-hot coffee and launched it into the woman's face. Instantly, she screamed in pain and anger, pulling the trigger on the phaser rifle as she did so. The resulting deflected blast knocked her back, but part of the phased energy burst hit Devon. He collapsed onto the deck. Juan jumped up and grabbed the woman

in a choke hold with his right arm while trying to grab the rifle with his left. Raul had the presence of mind to activate the distress signal, then went to help his son.

* * *

USS Bluefin
Molari Badlands

T'Ser looked up from her console and addressed the captain. "Sir, I'm picking up a distress signal from the *SS Cielo Vista*. Bearing 221 mark 48. They must be close - the signal is strong, but I can't give you distance. Too much ionic interference."

"Bring us about on that heading, navigator. Helm, increase speed to full impulse. Yellow alert." Akinola turned to T'Ser. "Anything else, commander?"

She continued to check her board. "Negative, sir. An automated distress call with course and bearing. No details on the nature of the emergency."

"Tell me about the ship."

T'Ser consulted the database and replied. "Class R freighter, 250 metric tons, Terran flagged vessel, the ship's captain is Raul Espinoza."

The name clicked for Akinola. "I know them! Or at least I know Espinoza's father. Nice family, run a legitimate shipping business." His mind raced with possibilities, none of them good. "With two freighters missing and now the *Cielo Vista* in trouble, we're not taking any chances." He turned to face Senior Chief Brin at the aft station. "Solly, get a boarding party ready to go on one of the stallions. I've got a hunch we might encounter hostiles, so go loaded out with phaser rifles and armor."

Brin rose from his seat, moving quickly to the turbo-lift. "Aye, sir."

Akinola turned to face the viewscreen, willing the cutter to move faster.

* * *

SS Cielo Vista
Molari Badlands

The Bajoran Maquis operative smashed an elbow into Juan Espinoza's midsection, causing him to lose his hold on her and the phaser rifle. Raul stood quickly, only to find himself staring at the emitter of the rifle. He closed his eyes, expecting impending death.

KLANG!

Raul opened his eyes to see the woman crumpled on the deck, blood trickling from a scalp wound. Devon Horne stood over her, the now dented coffee carafe in his head. He still looked dazed and in pain, but very much alive.

"Are you two okay?" rasped Horne, his sides heaving.

Raul nodded, then looked with concern at his son, who sat on the deck trying to re-catch his breath.

"I'm . . . okay . . . Pop . . . Need to . . . catch my breath," the younger Espinoza wheezed.

Raul began to move out of the flight deck. "Rita!" he said, an edge of panic in his voice. "I must get to her before . . ."

The old Master Chief grabbed Raul by the upper arm, stopping him. "No, Raul - use your head! There are two more of them somewhere on the ship, probably armed. Paul - secure her arms. Raul, get on the subspace and call for help." Horne reached down and picked up the phaser rifle in a practiced manner. "I'll get Rita. Lock the door to the flight deck - understood?"

Raul nodded, "Devon - please, find Rita . . ." his voice tailed off as tears formed in his eyes.

Devon grabbed the younger man on the shoulder and peered into his eyes. "I will not let them hurt her. You have my word!"

Raul nodded and turned back to the controls to activate the subspace communicator. Horne held the phaser rifle in a defensive posture and moved off the flight deck, closing and securing the door. He fought against the burning pain that radiated through his side and chest. "Please, God!" he said quietly, "Don't let me screw up!"

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

Molari Badlands, en route to the SS *Cielo Vista*

Senior Chief Brin found the rest of the boarding party in the armory off the hangar deck, preparing for their mission.

As he pulled on an armored vest, his communicator beeped.

"Akinola to Chief Brin."

"Brin, go ahead Captain."

"Solly, we just received a message from the captain of the *Cielo Vista*. They have three hostiles on board, one down. The first had a phaser rifle and we can assume the same about the others. We're downloading a schematic of the ship to your tactical scanners."

Chief Brin looked at the combat scanner strapped to his forearm. "Confirmed, captain. I've got it up now."

"Good. And Solly - the engineer on the ship is an old friend. Do you remember Master Chief Devon Horne?"

Brin laughed. "Hell, yes sir! Glad to know we'll have one more on our side."

"According to Captain Espinoza, Horne was wounded but managed to take out the first hijacker. He's got a phaser rifle and heading to rescue the captain's wife. So watch out for him when you board."

"Understood, sir. Do we have an ETA yet?"

"T'Ser finally got a clean fix on the ship. We're five minutes out. Load up the stallion and dock on the ventral port. Akinola out."

Brin turned to the other five members of the boarding party. "Okay, people, you heard the captain. We've got at least two active hostiles and a retired Master Chief running around with guns. Take down the hostiles - alive if you can, but don't take chances. Check your tactical scanners. This freighter has tight corridors and a lot of hidey holes. Watch your six and keep in sight of your partner." Brin reached into his locker and pulled out a wicked looking knife and slid it into a thigh scabbard. "Let's load up!"

* * *

SS Cielo Vista
Molari Badlands

Devon Horne moved stealthily aft, then slipped down a Jeffrey's tube to the engineering level. He really didn't know where the other two hijackers would go, but he assumed one would try to secure engineering. He hoped that they had not found or hurt Rita.

He slid out of the Jeffrey's tube into main engineering. The tube hatch was hidden behind a Deuterium tank, so his entrance was unnoticed. He eased around the tank then stepped out, rifle at the ready.

No one was there.

A sudden metallic sound on the catwalk saved his life. He dodged left as a bolt of blue energy hit the deck where he stood a moment before. He squeezed off two blasts blindly in the direction of fire as he retreated back toward the Jeffrey's tube. Cursing his clumsy move, he headed back up two levels to try a different approach.

* * *

Chief Brin maneuvered the Star Stallion under the freighter, then brought the universal docking ring into contact with the freighter's air-lock.

"I read firm dock and seal, senior chief," said Corpsman Sanders, seated in the right-hand seat.

Brin turned and faced the boarding party. "Chief Deryx, you and Sanders head to the bridge and check out the crew and the captured hostile. Bragdon and Worth, head to engineering. Gandy, you're with me. Let's move!"

Brin eased into the corridor off of the airlock and scanned both directions. "I'm reading two life signs twenty meters aft, one down in engineering and one on deck one moving aft," he whispered. "Set weapons on heavy stun. Deryx, Sanders, Go!"

The Denobulan CPO and the corpsman moved stealthily but quickly forward. Brin then dispatched the next two. Finally, he turned to the husky Centauran, 2nd class petty officer Gandy. He indicated the two life signs that were

together just twenty meters away on his scanner. "Have a couple of stun grenades ready," Brin whispered.

* * *

Horne slid down a ladder to deck two and paused, chest heaving. His left arm was numb and he had broken into a cold sweat. *Hold together, old man*, he thought. He moved forward as quietly as he could. As he turned a corner, he was shocked to see two armed figures, wearing dark armor and helmets with weapons leveled at him. He quickly lowered his weapon and looked quizzically as one of the figures raised the blast-visor on his helmet.

"Solly? Solly Brin?" Horne asked, in amazement.

* * *

SS Cielo Vista
Molari Badlands

Markos Askinopolous was getting worried. He looked at the terrified woman, Rita Espinoza, with growing trepidation. His Maquis cell leader, Qel Sorna, was supposed to have contacted him once she had secured the bridge of the freighter. But the deadline for her to contact him had passed ten minutes ago and Markos had a strong hunch that the mission was going sideways, badly.

Worse still, Qel had ordered him to kill the Espinoza woman and any other remaining ship's crew if she did not report on time. When they planned the mission, he saw no problem with that. Even after they boarded the ship three days ago, he thought he could handle killing if and when the time came. But now . . .

He avoided eye contact with the woman who stared at him with wide-eyed fear, tears streaming down her face. He considered contacting Qel or Brad, but that would violate protocol. He wiped a sweaty palm on his jacket and shifted the phaser rifle. One way or the other, he was going to have to make a decision, and soon.

* * *

Solly grinned at the perplexed expression on Devon Horne's face. "Hey, Master Chief, long time no see! Understand you have a bit of a situation on board and we were in the neighborhood, so . . ."

Horne was feeling a degree of relief. "Damn, Solly! You have no idea how happy I am to see you guys. When did you come over? You didn't beam in, did you?"

Chief Brin shook his head. "Too much ionic interference. Our team came over in a stallion, docked below. I've got two headed to the bridge, two to engineering and then Gandy and me."

Horne nodded. "The one who attacked us on the flight deck is down. I crowned her with a coffee pot, but not before she caught me with a phaser burst."

Brin's expression turned to one of concern. "We need to get you seen about."

Horne's expression hardened. "Negative! We get Rita clear, then I'll worry about me."

Solly didn't have time for arguments. "Okay. Look, I'm reading two lifeforms in a cabin about ten meters down and on the left. Who might that be?"

"That's Raul and Rita's cabin. If she's in there, then one of those punks is with her. I got into a shoot-out with the second perp just a couple of minutes ago in engineering."

Brin passed that information along to the second fire team heading to engineering by sending a text message on his tactical scanner. "Okay. We need to take this guy and take him down fast before he can hurt the hostage. Devon, what are they packing?"

"The Bajoran woman was carrying this." He indicated the Orion phaser rifle he now carried.

Chief Brin uttered an Orion curse. "Nasty rifle, that. No stun setting, so if he gets a shot off at Mrs. Espinoza . . ." He left that thought dangling in the air.

Gandy looked at the two senior NCO's. "I've been looking at these doors and I can get us in there. You two be ready to take out the perp." He explained his idea.

Brin looked thoughtful. "Yeah, that might just work. But you might get your ass fried in the process, Gandy."

"I've got on armor and my hide's tougher than either of yours," said the brawny Centauran.

"Okay," agreed Brin. "Let's do it. Master Chief, cover our six. You don't have any armor and you've already been shot once."

Horne snorted. "You don't have to remind me!"

* * *

Markos had waited long enough. He flipped open the old communicator he carried. "Qel! Have you secured the bridge?"

Silence was his only reply. "Brad! Come in! Do you copy?"

Brad did not reply, but instead of silence, Markos heard a slight noise near the door. As if a small animal was scratching. Markos wondered if the crew had a pet dog on board. He moved closer to the door and put his ear against it listening.

Suddenly, the entire door smashed in. Markos was caught in a wave of smashed density board and massive Centauran. He fell backward against the deck, crushed under the nearly 200 kilos of muscle and armor of the madly grinning petty officer Gandy. Markos' vision began to dim from the knock on his skull and his inability to breathe under the massive man. Chief Brin stood on Markos' arm and removed the phaser rifle, aiming his weapon at Marko's face. Gandy spoke, mere centimeters from the dazed man's face. "You're busted, asshole!"

* * *

In the engineering section, Brad Morgan, formerly a Starfleet ensign, moved backwards on the catwalk, trying to get a clear shot at the main doors to engineering. He was pretty sure he had missed the old engineer who tried to enter earlier so he wanted a better vantage point. He continued to back until he suddenly felt something cold and solid against the back of his neck. His blood turned cold.

"Hi there!" said Security Specialist Lisa Worth. "Be a good boy and hand me the rifle or I'll have to vaporize your head."

Caught between anger and fright, the Maquis operative complied. Then the other security specialist, Missy Bragdon, appeared out of the shadows and put a stubby phaser rifle into Morgan's face. "How 'bout you assume the position, sweetie? We got a nice, warm brig all set and waiting on you."

Lisa kicked Morgan's feet apart and leaned him against the bulkhead with his arms pulled painfully behind him. She put the auto-restraints around his waist and wrists. Then she texted Brin on the tactical scanner, "Sweeper two has subject two in custody. Awaiting instructions."

* * *

On the flight deck of the *Cielo Vista*, Corpsman Sanders checked out Juan and found him uninjured, only having the breath knocked out of him in the scuffle. The Bajoran woman was still unconscious, but Chief Deryx kept his weapon trained on her, all the same. Sanders stood to check her when he saw the message indicator on his scanner flash. He read it and smiled. "Good news! Mrs. Espinoza is fine and both of the other subjects are in custody."

Raul Espinoza slumped down in his chair, relief evident on his face. "Madre de Dios, what a day. Thank you so much!"

Chief Deryx grinned, "Glad to help, sir."

The elder Espinoza shook his head. "Why do you think they did this?"

Sanders glanced up as he knelt over the prone woman. "At this point, we don't know much more than you." he ran his medical tricorder over the injured woman - a concussion, as he suspected. *But I imagine Chief Brin will know something before we leave this ship!*, he did not say aloud.

* * *

SS Cielo Vista
Molari Badlands

Chief Brin glanced at his tactical scanner and noticed, with satisfaction, that all the perps were in custody. He tapped his comm badge, "Brin to *Bluefin*,"

"Go ahead, chief," said T'Ser.

"The ship is secure. We have three subjects in custody, one wounded. The crew is alive and safe with one wounded. We'll transport the prisoners and wounded over shortly. Have a security detail standing by to take the prisoners to the brig."

"Acknowledged. *Bluefin* standing by."

Brin and Gandy pulled the still stunned Maquis operative off of the deck and placed him in a chair. "Gandy, you and Devon escort Mrs. Espinoza to the flight deck. I'll be along in a minute."

Gandy gave Chief Brin a questioning look, but said nothing. He and Horne escorted the still trembling woman out of the cabin and into the corridor.

Brin removed his helmet and stared at Markos. "Now, my friend. You and I are going to have a little talk and I better get some answers. They had better be truthful answers." He drew the long knife out of his thigh sheath and placed the tip against Markos' stomach. "Or else, you and Mr. Blade are going to become very intimate."

Markos, though still groggy, turned pale. He looked in the Orion's eyes and saw death - his own.

* * *

USS *Bluefin*
Molari Badlands

Akinola headed toward the wardroom for breakfast. He was very pleased with the speed and efficiency of the boarding party in subduing the hijackers and rescuing the crew. He would get the low-down from Brin during the debrief. Now, though, he was looking forward to a few minutes of quiet over some of Cookie's Belgian waffles and coffee.

He picked up a tray from the galley and crossed the hall into the wardroom. It was empty except for Lt. Sarnek, who was languidly picking at a bowl of fruit. "Mr. Sarnek," Akinola said, by way of greeting. He placed his tray across from the Vulcan officer and filled a heavy porcelain mug with coffee, adding just a pinch of salt.

As he sat, Sarnek raised an eyebrow in a quizzical manner.

"Something wrong, lieutenant?" asked Akinola.

"I noticed that you added sodium chloride to your coffee. I do not believe I have ever seen that done."

Akinola smiled as he poured syrup over his waffles. "You just haven't been around NCO's much. Remember, I was an enlisted man a lot longer than I've been an officer. Adding salt to coffee is an old Earth naval tradition dating back centuries. Old chiefs would add a pinch of salt to coffee - partly to cut the bitterness, partly for luck. It's just a tradition, really. I don't think it really changes the taste of the coffee."

Sarnek frowned slightly. "Do you think it adds . . . luck?"

Akinola chewed a bite of waffle, then pointed his fork at Sarnek for emphasis. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

Sarnek had difficulty answering this odd bit of logic. He changed the subject. "Captain, there is something I wish to say, but I must confess I find it difficult to do so."

"Just spit it out, lieutenant." Akinola took a sip of coffee.

"I don't believe that Dr. Baxter killed himself."

It was Akinola's turn to spew.

* * *

SS Cielo Vista
Molari Badlands

Chief Brin escorted the still living and very relieved Markos Askinopoulos to the flight deck. He put him down next to the other young Maquis operative and the now conscious and very pissed Bajoran woman.

"Looks like we've got us a little Maquis cell," said Chief Brin.

"You just couldn't keep your mouth shut, you little . . ." hissed Qel Sorna.

"Quiet!" warned Chief Deryx. He looked at Senior Chief Brin. "Mrs. Espinoza is fine, just traumatized by the experience. She declined any treatment, though, so I guess we'll just take Mr. Horne over and let Doc check him out."

Brin looked at the Espinoza family. "I'm very glad you folks are alright! We'd like to borrow Devon for a bit to get him checked out and get some information, then we'll bring him back over. At that time, we'd like to take statements from you, then you can be on your way. Please let us know if you need anything. Sanders? Why don't you hang around here until we get back."

Sanders nodded, understanding Solly's intent. The Espinozas needed to be 'talked down' from their experience and Sanders was well-trained in that regard.

Brin turned to the rest of the boarding party. "Let's get the prisoners on the stallion. Master Chief, you can ride shotgun with me."

* * *

USS Bluefin
Molari Badlands

Captain Akinola fixed Sarnek with a sharp gaze. "Mr. Sarnek, how did you come by this information?"

Sarnek tilted his head, puzzled by the captain's emotional intensity. "As I shared with Commander T'Ser, the mind-touch I shared with Dr. Baxter convinced me that he was incapable of self-destructive acts. I suppose it is possible that something else happened to change that, but that is most unlikely."

Akinola relaxed somewhat and nodded his head. Looking around to make sure they were still alone, he leaned forward and spoke quietly but firmly. "You are correct, Mr. Sarnek. Dr. Baxter did not commit suicide. But hear this well, you are *not* to share that knowledge with anyone else from this point on, unless I give you permission. Understood?"

Sarnek nodded. "Understood, sir. May I ask why this must remain a secret."

Akinola sat back. "You may ask, lieutenant. But, I'm not saying for the moment. I may divulge that to you later. Now, did you share this with anyone else besides T'Ser?"

"No one, captain."

Akinola relaxed a degree more. "Good. Keep it that way. And thank you for coming to me with this, Sarnek. I appreciate it." he paused, then added. "Thank you, also, for what you did for Doc. I consider what you did to be a heroic act. I won't forget it!"

Sarnek maintained his stoic expression. "I only regret that I could not do more for him."

"Sarnek, believe me, you helped. And you had no way of preventing what happened to him." Akinola stood. "I need to speak to Commander T'Ser."

* * *

The Star Stallion settled gently on its designated landing pad in the hangar bay. Four armed security crewmen approached as the whine of the engines faded. The hatch opened and Chief Deryx stepped off followed by the three restrained prisoners. Senior Chief Brin followed and spoke to the lead security crewman. "Get them settled in the brig - separate cells, then let sickbay know the woman probably suffered a concussion. Doc will probably want to check her. First, I'm going to have him check the freighter's engineer."

Senior Chief Brin began to escort retired Master Chief Horne off the hangar deck. As they crossed the deck, Horne's legs suddenly buckled and he grabbed his chest. Brin turned, alarmed at the paleness of Horne's face and the profusion of sweat on his forehead. "Devon?"

Horne dropped to his knees, hand still clutching at his sternum. "Chest . . ." he wheezed, "feels like a shuttle craft is sitting on it." Then his eyes rolled back and he crumpled to the deck.

Instantly, Solly, slapped his comm badge. "Brin to sickbay - medical emergency on the hangar deck!"

Without waiting for a reply he bent over his fallen friend and checked his neck for a pulse. Finding none, he began CPR as a corpsman raced across the deck with a first aid kit to help. Momentarily, Dr. Castille and two additional corpsman arrived on the run.

* * *

Castille exited the critical care cubical and came to speak to Akinola and Senior Chief Brin. His face showed fatigue but also a slight smile. "We've got him stable and resting comfortably for the moment, although it was touch and go. Chief, your quick reaction probably saved his life!"

Akinola slapped the Orion on the back. "Good job, Solly." He addressed Castille, "So, what happened? Was it a heart attack?"

Castille nodded. "Yes, that was the major event, anyway. While his cardiovascular system was in overall good shape, the phaser hit he took negatively affected the electrical rhythm of his heart. He went into ventricular tachycardia. That, along with the physical and emotional stress resulted in the myocardial infarction."

Brin frowned. "Um, so you're saying the phaser blast caused the heart attack."

"Yes, that's what I said," replied Castille with a bit of irritation.

"So, what's his prognosis, doctor?" asked Akinola.

"I expect a complete recovery. I've begun nano-therapy to remove any damage to the pericardium and drug therapy to stimulate the healing process. The phaser burns we can repair easily with the dermal regenerator. A few days of rest and he should be fine." Castille picked up a medi-kit and medical tri-corder. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to check on the woman in the brig."

"Can we see him?" asked Brin.

Castille considered, "I don't see why not. Just keep it brief, he's still pretty groggy."

Akinola and Brin entered the cubicle. Horne lay in a bio-bed, an oxygen canula under his nose and a dermal regenerator covering his torso, emitting a faint blue glow.

"Master Chief?" asked Akinola, quietly.

Horne's eyes fluttered open. He squinted, looking at Akinola, trying to get his eyes to focus. A crooked grin formed on his face. "Frak me! It's Chief Akinola! What're you doin' in this joint?" Horne asked, thickly.

Akinola indicated the four pips on his collar and grinned. "Horne, you're drunk. I haven't been a CPO in over twenty years."

Horne's eyes widened a bit and he spoke, muzzily. "Damn! I must be drunk. Akinola a captain . . . whoul'da thunk it . . ." Horne's eyes closed again he began to snore.

Akinola shook his head and Brin grinned broadly as they left the cubicle. "Solly, inform the Espinozas about Horne's condition. Tell them we can stay with them in transit a few days until he's fit enough to rejoin them. Then you can tell me about all the fun you had boarding the freighter."

"Aye, sir. Too bad you couldn't join us!"

Akinola smirked. "Watch it, chief. You're treading on sensitive ground."

* * *

The ironic thing about the Section 31 mole was he had no idea that he was one. He had never heard of Section 31 and had no idea that he was spying on their behalf.

He had been approached by a senior officer at a starbase, ostensibly to be a part of an experiment with encrypted messages. He had been ordered to simply report on the activities of the cutter, where they were headed, what transpired on a given day, and the like. When he expressed concern, he was assured that his CO was aware of the experiment, but he still was not to discuss it with his CO or anyone else on board, lest the experiment be "compromised."

He was given a small device that translated his reports about the *Bluefin* into innocuous letters to his parents, which went out with the daily dispatches. Of course, the messages went to Section 31.

He completed his report and transferred it to his document through the encryption device. He was always amazed at the "letters" to his parents that appeared. They always seemed innocent, plausible and read as if he had written them himself. Occasionally, he wondered about this, but dismissed such thoughts as paranoia. *It's a Starfleet program*, he would think. *What could possibly be wrong with it?*

* * *

USS *Bluefin*

departing the Molari Badlands en-route to Klaamat IV

Captain Akinola took a mug and filled it with coffee from the servitor in his cabin. He sat at his desk to review reports when his desk communicator chimed.

"Bridge to captain. We're receiving an in-coming message from the cutter *Bozeman*" said Ensign Vashtee.

"Pipe it down here, ensign." Momentarily, the Border Service insignia on the desk viewer was replaced by the smiling face of Captain Gabriel Bush, the current commanding officer of the USS *Bozeman*.

"Greetings, Joseph. How was the ride through the badlands?" said the sandy haired captain.

"Pretty tame, for once, Gabe. We did have a bit of fun breaking up a hijacking by a Maquis cell group."

"Yeah, we heard. That's one of the reasons I'm here - to take your prisoners off your hands and transport them to Starbase 415." said Bush.

Akinola was surprised. "I thought we'd drop them off to Federation Security on Klaamat IV."

"Change of plans. The 'bearded one' is on board, reliving his glory days. He's got new orders for you."

Akinola grinned at the nick-name for Admiral Bateson. "You still let him drive that thing?"

Captain Bush rolled his eyes in mock frustration. "Are you kidding?" He walked closer to the viewer and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "He's about to drive us all nuts, Joseph! I'm about ready to fire him out a torpedo tube!"

Off screen a voice boomed. "I heard that, Gabe!" Admiral Bateson strode into view and placed a fatherly arm around Bush. "Forgive Captain Bush, Joseph. He seems to forget that I *still* out-rank him, even if the powers that be let him command *my* ship, however temporarily."

Akinola grinned. "Hello, admiral. I understand you have new orders for us."

"I do, let me go to my . . .that is *Gabe's* ready room and we'll talk."

"Standing by, sir." said Akinola.

* * *

Commander Strauss was preparing for her duty shift when her door annunciator chimed. "Come!" she called.

Her cabin door hissed open to reveal Lt. Bane standing, his arms behind his back.

Inga smiled at the sight of the Australian lieutenant. "Nigel! *Wie gehts!* How are you this morning."

He returned the smile. "I'll be doing much better if a certain lovely, German commander would consider accompanying me to the ship's holo-movie during beta shift."

Inga cocked an eyebrow and regarded him with a coy expression. "I don't know," she said playfully. "It depends on what's showing."

"It's a remake of *Gone With the Wind*, the original Klingon opera version." he said, deadpan.

She made a face. "Is it any good?"

"Absolutely abysmal." He produced a rose from behind his back. "That's why I brought a bribe."

She walked over, coming very close to him. "You think that with charm and a rose that I'll just melt and go see that awful movie."

"That's the idea," he said with a grin.

"Good plan," she said, putting her arms around his neck and pressing her warm lips against his. They lingered a moment, then Inga took the rose and placed in in a water glass on her sink. She took his arm as they headed toward the bridge. "Where did you find a rose? I know you didn't replicate it!"

Bane had a very pleased expression on his face. "Cookie maintains a hydroponics garden for herbs and the like. Lately, he's been experimenting with other plants, including roses."

Strauss raised an eye-brow. "And you owe him, right?"

Band nodded his expression now slightly worried. "Big-time."

* * *

T'Ser sat in the command chair on the bridge, watching the *Bozeman* keeping station nearby. Her thoughts were elsewhere, however. Akinola and Commander Strauss had met with her yesterday and confirmed Sarnek's suspicion that Dr. Baxter had not committed suicide. The captain had further confided in her about the conversation with Captain Lhar'Shon that implicated Section 31 in Baxter's murder.

T'Ser had accepted the explanation and agreed to keep the matter confidential for now. But, she realized, the captain had not *implicitly* stated that she could not do some snooping on her own. She was determined to discover the mole and any information that would lead them to Dr. Baxter's killer. Vengeance, she knew, was not logical. But then, no one had ever accused her of living her life by logic!

* * *

Captain Akinola sat in his quarters, drinking coffee and viewing the image of his squadron commander, Admiral Morgan Bateson, on his computer screen.

"That was a nice job your boarding party did on the *Cielo Vista*, Joseph. Quick and clean with no casualties. That's what I like to hear!"

Akinola nodded and took a sip of coffee. "Senior Chief Brin keeps the sweeper teams well-trained and ready, admiral. In fact, I'd like to recommend him for promotion to master chief. He's got enough years in and he certainly deserves it."

Bateson smiled. "Agreed. But I've got to run it through BuPers first. And, as you know, there's a cap on the number of active duty master chiefs in Starfleet."

"I'd appreciate any leverage you could add, sir."

"You've got it, captain. Now, for your new orders," said Bateson.

Akinola frowned slightly. "You're pulling us off the search for those freighters?"

"Not me. This comes from up the chain. You're probably aware of the troubles in occupied Cardassian space – food shortages, outbreaks of disease, sectarian violence, the whole, nasty apocalyptic package. The Maquis are making a come-back and the Klingons have been causing some trouble too. They're both into the "eye for an eye" thing pretty heavily with the Cardies. You're being assigned patrol and SAR duty in sector 21509. There will be some other ships handling convoy and defense duties, including an old Connie."

Akinola raised his eyebrows. "A *Constitution* – class starship? I haven't seen one since I was a crewman, third!

Bateson had a wistful look. "Fantastic ships, Joseph! Timeless and graceful design. Did I tell you I served on the old *Lexington* under Commodore Robert Wesley in my 'previous life'?"

Akinola raised his coffee mug to hide his wide grin. "You may have mentioned it, sir."

Bateson sighed, "Anyway, your orders have been transmitted. How soon can you depart your current station?"

"We'll be ready in two hours, sir."

END