

Crimson Blues

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Summary

A skirmish with raiders leads Captain Trujillo to question the status quo and Reykjavik's mission.

Molari Badlands – May 18th 2320

USS *Reykjavik*

The scintillating violet beam crashed into the weakened shields of the Border Service cutter, the bleed-over through the grid causing portions of hull plate to buckle as power systems fluctuated. The compact ship heeled over with the impact as streamers of electrical current surged across her hull.

“*Albacore*'s taken another hit, sir,” Lieutenant Arwen DeSilva reported from the Operations station.

Captain Nandi Trujillo made a quick notation on her console, “Acknowledged. Comms, tell *Albacore* to withdraw, we'll cover them.” She leaned forward slightly in the command chair, speaking to the young ensign manning the Helm console, “Mister Naifeh, pursuit course after the larger of the raiders.”

Farouk Naifeh replied over his shoulder to his captain as he executed the command, “Aye, sir. I'd point out that the smaller vessel is doing most of the damage, Captain.”

From his post at an auxiliary console on the bridge's upper level, the Tellarite XO Glal turned a chary eye on the youth for daring to question the captain's grasp of the situation.

The communications officer cut in, “Incoming comm from *Albacore*, sir. It's Captain Varoud.”

Trujillo smiled patiently at Naifeh, responding, “Indeed it is, Ensign. That's why we're following the other one. We're putting distance between us and the more aggressive ship to allow for the use of our torpedoes.” Trujillo cast a glance to the Weapons station. “Maintain phaser fire on the larger ship and launch aft torpedoes at the smaller when we reach minimum weapons envelope.”

She made a pointed gesture to comms. “Open a channel, audio only.”

On the main viewer, *Reykjavik*'s phasers lashed out in fiery streams to bludgeon the shields of the fleeing Nausicaan raider. She was nimble and well armed, Trujillo would give her that, but she was no match for a second generation *Shangri-La*-class attack cruiser.

“Captain Trujillo, our damage is moderate and we'll have restored torpedo systems momentarily. We're still in this,” Varoud pressed. The proud Tiburonian Border Service captain undoubtedly bristled at being pushed out of the fight as though being sent to his room.

“That was never in doubt, Captain,” Trujillo replied with a hint of grim amusement in her tone. “Please begin venting drive plasma, I want that persistent little bastard latched onto you and ignoring us for the next thirty seconds.”

“You're using me as bait?” Varoud asked pointedly.

“Objections, Captain?” she countered.

“None whatsoever. I just didn't want to miss out on the rest of this tussle. *Albacore*, out.”

“Good man,” Trujillo murmured under her breath. She spared a brief moment to reflect that despite this truly being her element, she wasn't enjoying this as much as she should. Trujillo thrived on juggling a dozen different priorities simultaneously while fighting her ship. The experience typically filled her with a giddy, almost child-like excitement. It wasn't a need for combat, *per se*, but rather her being the calm center of the storm of activity that swirled around her, a storm whose course she bent to her will.

This time, though, she felt none of the rush, none of the fulfillment. A distant kind of weariness had taken its place.

Reykjavík's phasers lanced the Nausicaan's shield blister, scoring across their starboard engine pod before punching a hole into the main spaceframe. A brief flash of flame accompanied the gout of gasses expelled from the stricken craft.

"Multiple direct hits," Lieutenant Jarrod at the Weapons station reported laconically. "The larger raider is disabled and is launching escape pods." He switched targets and unleashed two photon torpedoes aft towards the second, smaller raider still in pursuit of *Albacore*.

The torpedoes bracketed the ship before detonating, their overlapping explosions engulfing the vessel. The raider's shields collapsed as hull fragments spun into the void like a trail of glittering confetti. *Albacore* executed a tight turn, the cutter coming hard about to cripple the raider with precisely aimed bursts of phaser fire.

At Ops, DeSilva called out, "both threat craft have been neutralized, Captain. *Albacore* is moving to secure the smaller ship."

"Understood," Trujillo said. She pointed to the Communications station, "Convey my compliments to Captain Varoud and his gallant crew." Then, to the Helm, "Ensign, bring us to within transporter range of the larger ship and its escape craft."

Trujillo released her chair's safety harness and stood while toggling the intraship. "*This is the captain. Due to your outstanding efforts, we have disabled the raiders that jumped our freighter and the Border Service cutter that came to its rescue. We'll be beaming survivors aboard and I'll relay additional information as it becomes available. Cancel red alert, stand to yellow alert for SAR and security ops.*"

She gave her executive officer, the pugnacious Lt. Commander Glal a measured look. "Coordinate assistance with *Albacore's* repair efforts and find me some prisoners to interrogate, Commander. I'll be in my ready room."

* * *

"Enter."

Glal stepped into the ready room with a large data-slate tucked under one arm. He came to attention in front of Trujillo's desk.

"At ease, Commander. What do you have?"

"A host of uncooperative Nausicaans, Captain," Glal answered, taking a seat at Trujillo's beckoning. "Right up until we discovered they're also wanted for attacks on Klingon shipping."

She gave him a dazzling smile. "Did that change their tune?"

"Remarkably, sir. Apparently, the threat of a life sentence to Rura Penthe elicits much more cooperation than two years in a Federation penal settlement." He paused to reference the padd. "They're part of a loosely affiliated pirate clan operating out of the Molari Badlands. They seize merchant shipping and fence the goods through Orion and Yridian intermediaries. Any prisoners they take on their raids end up in Orion slaver pens, sold off to a host of unsavory clients throughout the quadrant."

Trujillo's expression hardened. "They should have fled after *Reykjavík* jumped into the fight. *Albacore* had destroyed one raider before we arrived. We could have taken all three without breaking a sweat. So... why didn't they run?"

"*Ahmet-sur* Giilva," Glal offered by way of explanation. "He's the new power-broker in this region after a very brutal struggle between competing Orion warlords. He's apparently also legendarily blood-thirsty and rules with a neutronium fist. When he orders you to take a cargo ship, you either come back with your prize or you don't come back. If the Nausicaans had escaped us, Giilva would have killed all of them and sold their ships to other promising young self-starters."

"He sounds delightful," Trujillo noted dryly. She gestured to her desk-top computer interface. "I just received word from Command that we're being attached to the Border Service at Star Station Echo for the time being. *Albacore* will be out of action for at least two weeks, and she's the fourth of Echo's cutters to take significant damage from these pirates in the past month and a half. The Border Service isn't used to pirates putting up this kind of a fight, especially when they're outnumbered and outgunned."

Glal spread his arms expansively. "We are the fire brigade, after all. Whenever something flares up, they send in *Reykjavík*."

Trujillo conceded the point with a nod. "Yes, but when you're only used as a hammer everything begins to look like a nail."

Her XO's expression shifted to one of concern. "You're not getting tired of the good fight, are you, sir?"

She offered him a wan smile. "Let's just say I wouldn't mind the occasional survey mission or a diplomatic assignment."

"We do diplomatic details all the time," Glal protested.

"We transport VIP's to and from conferences as hired guns and you know it," she parried. "Four years, Glal. Who *haven't* we fought? Klingon brigands, Orion pirates, Tzenkethi raiders, Gorn separatists, the Tholians, the Nausicaans. And before that I was commanding escorts. My life is hauling my butt back and forth between starbases, with occasional bursts of violence to keep things interesting."

Glal's tusks twitched, an expression akin to a raised Vulcan eyebrow. "Are you considering pursuing a new commission, sir? Exploration aboard one of the *Excelsiors*?"

“And break up the team?” she laughed. “No, Glal, I’m just being maudlin. I’m too much the old soldier to give up a command I worked a decade to achieve.”

“Well, good then.” Glal stood. “*Albacore*’s been patched well enough to make it back to Echo at warp four. We’ll escort her and the freighter back.” He gave the captain a comically hopeful look. “Shore leave for the crew?”

“Of course,” Trujillo said. “They’ve more than earned it.”

As Glal turned to leave she said, “And Commander?”

He paused at the threshold of the door. “Sir?”

“The Nausicaans, render them over to the Klingons.”

Glal blanched. “But, sir, they cooperat—”

“Commander, each of those men is no doubt responsible for the deaths or enslavement of countless Federation citizens. I want the last thing they feel to be a Klingon boot on their throats after a soul-crushing decade of mining dilithium by hand.”

The Tellarite snuffled humorlessly. “No mercy, eh Captain?”

“*Mercy* is a hospital ship, Commander. This is a gunboat. Dismissed.”

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