

Backup

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Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Fandom:	Star Trek: Gibraltar
Character:	Ensemble Cast - GIB , Ro Laren , Benjamin Maxwell
Additional Tags:	Crew as Family , Friendship , Mystery , Camaraderie
Language:	English
Series:	Part 10 of Star Trek: Gibraltar
Stats:	Published: 2023-11-24 Completed: 2023-12-09 Words: 27,502 Chapters: 12/12

Backup

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

Gibraltar is ambushed during a routine convoy escort and engages in a desperate fight for survival in a treacherous asteroid field. Who is behind this unprovoked attack, and will help arrive in time? This story is a crossover with TheLoneRedshirt's Tales of the USS Bluefin.

Chapter 1

USS *Bluefin*

Sector 21509

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

“Code One-Alpha-Zero!” Commander Inga Strauss announced from where she examined the Ops board over Lt. Commander T’Ser’s shoulder. “Ship in distress.”

Captain Joseph B. Akinola sat forward in his command chair, suddenly imbued with a sense of urgency after days of relative quietude on patrol in occupied Cardassian space. “Specifics,” he ordered.

T’Ser answered promptly. “It’s from the starship *Gibraltar*, sir. Records show she’s currently tasked to escort duty, one of four ships sitting watchdog on a convoy of freighters bearing relief supplies to Cardassian colonies in Sector 21508.”

Strauss resumed her seat to initiate a level-four diagnostic on all ship’s defensive systems. “Stats on *Gibraltar*?” she inquired of T’Ser.

The Vulcan quirked a dubious eyebrow as the starship’s information scrolled across her display. “*Constitution*-class, ma’am, reactivated and refit during the war. Moderate armament, maximum speed rated at Warp 8.2.”

“Can you say ‘sitting duck?’” muttered Senior Chief Solly Brin, a burly red-skinned Orion, from his seat at an auxiliary station aft.

“What’s her situation?” Akinola pressed.

T’Ser delved into the encoded substrate of the distress call, decipherable only to those in possession of the proper Starfleet encryption matrices. “It appears she was sent to investigate a suspicious distress call from a Kriosian freighter in the E’Mdifarr Belt some point-seven lightyears off the convoy’s course.” She paused, gleaned additional information from the brief text message. T’Ser turned to fix a serious look on the captain. “They’ve been ambushed, sir. At present, they’re fighting four ships that look to be cargo haulers modified for combat, and a number of smaller fighters and corsairs.”

“Set an intercept course for those coordinates at maximum warp and engage,” Akinola ordered, watching the starfield on the main viewer shift as the *Albacore*-class Border Cutter came about and engaged her faster-than-light engines. “Then send an encrypted burst message... let them know we’re on our way.”

“Aye, sir,” T’Ser acknowledged as she carried out the order. She glanced back at Akinola. “Sir, what about their fellow convoy escort ships? Wouldn’t they be able to respond more quickly?”

Akinola nodded somberly. “They could, Commander, but they won’t. *Gibraltar* is likely buying time for the convoy to get away. That’s their job.”

“Bait, sir?”

“Precisely, Mister T’Ser.”

USS *Gibraltar*

E’Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E’Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

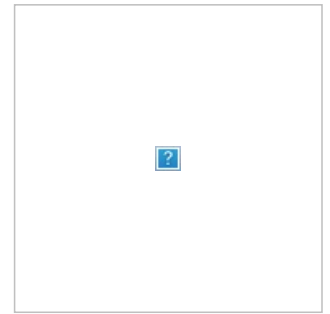
“Shields down to fifty-three percent!” shouted Master Chief Tark from the Tactical station over the crash of another barrage against *Gibraltar*’s shields.

“Helm, tighter turns,” Captain Donald Sandhurst urged from the command chair as he watched the starship slalom between enormous chunks of asteroid debris that loomed large in the viewer.

They had come to the asteroid belt in response to a distress call from a freighter claiming to be under attack by insurgent vessels. Though suspicious that an emergency should occur so close to the path of the convoy, the crew had at first sensed nothing out of the ordinary as the handful of armed shuttles attacking the freighter scattered upon their arrival.

But as soon as Commander Ramirez’s away team had beamed over to assist, all hell had broken loose. The damaged freighter had been a ruse. In fact, the ship had been retrofit to carry capital weapons and shield generators, making the humble looking cargo hauler into a formidable warship.

The supposedly routed fighters had returned with a vengeance, accompanied by three more of the faux-freighters, a force clearly capable of inflicting great damage on the unsuspecting convoy. So, the *Gibraltar* had fled deeper into the asteroid field to draw the pirate vessels into a pursuit. As long as they were busy chasing the starship, the convoy was safe.



“Communications?” Sandhurst asked.

“Still being jammed,” answered Lt. Commander Pell Ojana, the ship’s Bajoran second officer and diplomatic specialist.

As he looked over to his young science officer, Sandhurst inquired, “Status of the IFEW?”

The tall, ebony skinned Zulu, Ensign Kuenre Shanathi, clung to his console as Ensign Brett Lightner’s wild maneuvering at the helm pushed the inertial dampeners to their limits. Shanathi finally found his voice and answered, “The Ionization Field Effect Weapon is primed and ready for deployment, Captain.”

“Good, let’s just make sure all our new friends are in close proximity when we set it off.”

From Ops, Lieutenant(j.g.) Olivia Juneau piped up, “Two of the freighters are lagging behind, sir. We’ll have to either slow down or double back to maneuver them in range of the device.”

“Mister Lightner, hook us around smartly. A one-hundred eighty degree turn beneath that big monster bearing 173-mark-008,” Sandhurst commanded.

Lightner beamed like a kid in a candy store as he responded in the affirmative and threw the old workhorse into a tight turn, utilizing the gravitational field of the asteroid to sling-shot the starship back in the opposite direction of their pursuers.

As Tark lay down a fusillade of photon torpedo and phaser fire, Juneau opened the aft shuttlebay doors to expose the large cylindrical device in its launch cradle that now monopolized most of the bay’s space.

**Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*
E’Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E’Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory**

Gibraltar’s away team sat in sullen silence, held at gunpoint by members of the freighter’s crew. Two humans and a Zaranite kept watch over the Starfleeters as the freighter shuddered under fire from the starship as well as the stress of high-g maneuvers within the asteroid field.

“This could have gone better,” Commander Liana Ramirez announced definitively but quietly. The first officer's small frame was nearly dwarfed by the enormous Bolian lieutenant seated next to her on the deck of the cargo bay.

They had been surrounded and captured almost instantaneously upon beaming onboard the supposedly stricken cargo ship. Their captors, whoever they were, had done an admirable job of feigning damage through the creative use of localized subspace fields and thoron emissions.

On the other side of Ramirez sat the *Gibraltar’s* El-Aurian chief security/tactical officer. He wasn’t a big man, but he was whipcord lean and much stronger than he appeared. He took the opportunity to lean in towards the XO with an ironic smirk gracing his deceptively youthful features. “Excuse me, sir, but would this be a bad time to reflect on how your security chief voted for transporting a recon drone over prior to beaming in?”

Ramirez scratched idly at her temple with her middle finger. “Cork it, Pava,” she offered in a subdued voice.

“I’m merely attempting to offer real-time feedback on potentially hazardous courses of action implemented by the XO, sir.”

Ramirez rolled her eyes as the ship’s chief medical officer, Lieutenant(j.g.) Issara Taiee struggled to suppress a grin despite the seriousness of their situation.

“We can’t just sit here, Commander,” rumbled the large Bolian engineer, Ashok.

“For the time being, Lieutenant, we don’t have much choice in the matter,” Ramirez sighed.

“Enough talking!” barked one of their jailers, emphasizing his point by waving the barrel of his Klingon disruptor rifle at the group.

She and the others obligingly fell silent, all of them still contemplating some kind of escape strategy.

The ship rocked again, the sensation accompanied by the screech and hollow thump of a hull breach somewhere nearby. Their ears all popped simultaneously as the compartment experienced a brief yet telling change in atmospheric pressure.

A moment later, an Andorian in smudged coveralls walked briskly into the compartment, escorted by two more armed humans. He regarded the captured Starfleet personnel coolly and asked, “Which one of you is the engineer?”

Ashok began to rise and was startled when Lar’ragos jumped to his feet. “That’d be me.”

The Andorian looked at Lar’ragos skeptically, then gestured to Ashok. “Then why is he getting up?”

“Him?” Lar’ragos looked to the Bolian. “Look at him, the big bruiser’s the security officer. He’s just trying to protect me. Man can’t tell the difference between a spanner and a plasma-torch.”

Ashok reluctantly resumed his seat, and Ramirez patted his arm in silent encouragement.

Lar’ragos offered the XO a discrete wink as he turned back toward the Andorian, whom he presumed to be the freighter’s engineer. “Can I have my equipment?”

The Andorian looked to one of the guards and dispatched the man to collect the engineering kit Ashok had brought over. He held on to the briefcase-sized kit himself and gestured for Lar’ragos to follow, flanked by the two armed men.

They moved down a narrow, dimly lit corridor, and the four arrived at a dilapidated looking turbolift car. As they entered the turbocar, the Andorian stepped to the side to allow Lar’ragos and his escorts room. The Andorian thought idly that it was strange for the Starfleet engineer to be wearing a disturbing little smile.

“What’s so damn funny?” the Andorian asked hotly as the doors slid closed.

Lar’ragos said nothing, but his eyes narrowed and the smile grew wider.

USS *Bluefin*

En route to Sector 21508, Warp 9.2

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

With over an hour before their rendezvous with the besieged *Gibraltar*, Akinola had moved to his ready room in an attempt to gauge the likelihood that *Bluefin* would find survivors upon their arrival.

He was no longer a young man, and though still quite physically fit, more than a bit of grey had found its way into his tightly curled hair. He was of Terran African descent, tall and well built. Akinola cut an imposing figure, due as much to his height as his bearing. Originally an enlisted man in Starfleet, Akinola had eventually risen to the rank of Senior Chief before pursuing his officer’s commission. His entire career had been spent among the ‘Border Dogs,’ Starfleet’s overworked and unappreciated red-headed stepchild, the Border Service.

If Starfleet could be considered the Federation’s navy, the Border Service was akin to the Coast Guard. They patrolled the borders and internal space-lanes, safeguarding commercial traffic, tending comms relays and navigation buoys, and generally keep the peace, freeing Starfleet to engage in its mandates of exploration and humanitarian assistance.

Akinola took a seat at his desk and called up the general specs of the old *Connie*. He reflected that Starfleet had done an admirable job in restoring the ship, taking so much time in fact that she’d slipped from her drydock moorings only after the end of the Dominion War.

Her senior officers’ records indicated that her captain, Sandhurst, had been an engineer of some renown who had somehow been talked into accepting a captaincy. That was the thing about long wars, Akinola mused, they created many opportunities for upward mobility through the ranks. He scanned the bullet points of the *Gibraltar*’s recent history and noted that though Sandhurst had occupied the center seat for less than a year, his ship was already gaining a reputation for finding itself in the eye of the storm. Sandhurst had cut his teeth on the fiasco at the Cardassian colony of Lakesh in the Crolsa system, and had then followed months of routine escort missions by joining up with Jean-Luc Picard’s ill-fated mission of mercy into the Briar Patch.

Despite their widely divergent career paths, Akinola felt a growing sense of kinship for the man who, like him, commanded what many saw as an outdated vessel fated to carry out the kinds of mundane missions that nonetheless kept the Federation functioning.

He switched off his terminal and Akinola vowed that if at all possible, he would deliver Sandhurst and his crew safely from this most recent trouble. ‘*We old bucket captains have to stick together, after all.*’

Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*

E’Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E’Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

The doors parted to reveal a scene of absolute carnage. Lar’ragos limped out of the turbocar, holding a rifle in each hand. His face was cut, bruised, and bleeding, but the smile remained. He spat wetly to dislodge the severed Andorian antennae that had been clutched in his teeth.

He emerged from the shadows behind the three guards that remained watching over the away team members. Lar’ragos would rather have incapacitated their captors, but the weapons he held had no stun setting and he dare not give them the opportunity to alert the rest of the ship. He was also in no shape for another physical confrontation, the savage brawl in the confines of turbolift having left him with significant injuries.

Lar’ragos triggered both rifles simultaneously and sent streams of pulsed plasma into the backs of two of the men, turning both into smoking piles of charred flesh and fragmented bone.

The third guard spun around as he raised his own weapon. Ramirez took the opportunity to sweep the man's legs with her own, which sent him crashing to the deck where he was quickly incapacitated by Ramirez, Ashok, and Petty Officer Dunleavy of the security detail.

As she rose to her feet, Ramirez caught one of the rifles out of the air as Lar'ragos threw it to her. She looked over the El-Aurian and took note of his injuries as she shook her head in a mixture of disbelief and resignation. "Do I want to know, Pava?"

"Almost certainly not, sir," he replied gravely, stumbling and sinking to one knee as Taiee moved to assist him.

Ramirez hefted the rifle and motioned for the others to get to their feet. "First order of business is locating the bridge on this heap."

Chapter 2

Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

As Lar'ragos' adrenaline ebbed, the severity of his injuries became more apparent. While Ramirez was dispatching Ashok to recover the away team's confiscated equipment, Lar'ragos tried to rise and stumbled again, nearly toppling over. Ramirez and Taiee moved to assist him to the floor. Ramirez handed off Pava's rifle to Petty Officer Saihra Dunleavy who took up a defensive position behind a cargo container and oriented herself towards the turbolift.

Still awaiting her medical instrumentation, Taiee nonetheless managed to diagnose the most serious of the man's injuries. Lar'ragos was suffering a concussion, three fractured ribs, multiple bruised internal organs, a broken right hand, and a hyper-extended left knee.

"What the devil happened in there, Pava?" Ramirez asked as she waited for Taiee to finish her assessment.

Lar'ragos grimaced. "No room to maneuver in there. Plus, I'm pretty sure one of them used to be a Starfleet Marine. He sure as hell fought like one."

Ramirez shook her head as she chided him gently. "That was brave, Pava. Incredibly reckless and stupid, but brave."

Lar'ragos craned his head to look at what remained of the two men he had shot, though he winced and gritted his teeth with the effort. "The three in the lift car are alive, and I'm sorry about those two." He gestured towards the rifle in Ramirez's hands. "No stun setting, and I wasn't in any shape for another fight."

"You did what you had to, Pava." Ramirez glanced up at the open turbolift door, just visible in the shadows. The bodies splayed on the car's floor were still motionless. Almost wistfully, she whispered, "What you always do, in fact."

He coughed painfully. "Just make sure the captain knows... he's keeping me on a short leash these days."

Ashok arrived with their gear and handed the medical kit to Taiee who proceeded to scan Lar'ragos with her tricorder as the other personnel retrieved their phasers. Ramirez looked to the Bolian. "Ashok, find a computer access junction and hack in. I want to see what we can find out about these people."

She glanced back down at Lar'ragos. "Your tactical assessment, Lieutenant?"

"They're not pirates, Commander. That crowd usually runs with Orions, Nausicaans or Chalnoth as muscle." He gave her a meaningful look. "Federation nationals in civilian vessels geared for combat. Who does that sound like to you?"

She nodded dourly. "I'd hoped those reports of a Maquis resurgence were overstated. Looks like they weren't."

Ramirez motioned towards Dunleavy and Ashok's engineering assistant as she called out, "Get those men out of the turbolift and frisk them for additional weapons and comms. Then let Taiee treat them."

"What about the bridge?" Lar'ragos asked.

"The bridge can wait," Ramirez answered thoughtfully. "Our opponents just jumped a few levels higher in the threat column. We'd better have a workable plan before we take these people on."

USS *Gibraltar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Disruptor pulses, phaser beams and mercurite rockets flared against *Gibraltar's* forward shields in a maelstrom of fury as the starship bore down on her would-be pursuers. *Gibraltar's* return fire, however, was much more discriminating, focusing on the ersatz-warship's shield generators with punishing blows from her photon torpedoes and surgically pinpointed blasts from her phaser banks.

"Right on the mark, Master Chief, keep it up," encouraged Sandhurst.

"Their shield strength will have to be no higher than forty percent for this to work," Shanthi reminded the bridge crew unnecessarily.

"I *was* at the briefing, thanks," Juneau replied snidely, too focused on the looming asteroids on the viewscreen to add her customary eye roll.

"Focus, children," Sandhurst admonished from the center seat as the ship was buffeted by another enemy salvo. He glanced at Shanthi

to double check that the young ensign's hand was well away from the release toggle for the IFEW. *'No sense in making this whole party for nothing,'* he reflected mordantly. Even if the experimental device was unsuccessful, every moment these brigands spent chasing his ship was another percentage of a parsec distance the convoy put between themselves and the pirates.

Juneau announced, "Five seconds until all FTL capable threat vessels are within range, sir."

"Five seconds, mark," Sandhurst acknowledged as he engaged the chronometer on his chair's armrest. He looked up and his eyes grew wide as a giant asteroid hove into view ahead of them. Sandhurst gestured futilely at the viewer as his command persona slipped several notches. "Rock!" he gasped. "Big rock!"

Purposefully looking back at the ashen-faced captain as he nimbly skirted the two kilometer wide obstruction, Ensign Lightner smiled widely. "I'm on it, sir. No worries."

Sandhurst sank back into his chair, cursing the young pilot silently in his head as he fought to salvage his composure. Just in time, he noticed the chronometer reaching '1.' "Launch the weapon," he ordered, his voice regaining its authoritative timbre.

Shanthi tapped his panel to initiate release of the ten meter long cylinder sitting in its launch cradle in the aft-most section of the shuttle bay. The object slid out behind the starship and began to spin slowly end-over-end, its reflective surface glinting weakly in the diffused starlight.

"Emergency shutdown of engineering mains," Sandhurst ordered. "Route all auxiliary power to the structural integrity field in the engine nacelles."

The bridge duty engineer answered in the affirmative as Juneau announced, "Detonation in four... three... two..."

There was the faintest pulse of whitish light from the object and then it self-destructed in a small, ridiculously anti-climactic explosion.

Alarms began to wail from the engineering station, and the officer manning the board began a damage assessment. At Sciences, Shanthi announced, "Ion pulse confirmed, Captain. Strength and duration are within expected parameters."

"Confirmed, sir," Juneau agreed. "The warp nacelles of all vessels within one-million kilometers have been depolarized."

"Including ours," the duty engineer added. "Though thanks to our emergency shutdown and SIF reinforcement, we took less of a hit, sir. Crews are being dispatched to begin repairs, and we'll have a head start over the threat vessels."

"Understood," Sandhurst said tersely. "Launch a full spread of photons, Master Chief. Mister Lightner, get us the hell out of here while they're still trying to figure out what just happened."

Pell looked up from her board and fixed Sandhurst with a cautiously worried expression. "What about the away team, Captain?"

Sandhurst was unable to keep the glare forming on his features in check, causing Pell to blanch. "You better than anyone should know I don't leave our people behind, Commander. For the moment, however, we don't even know which of those four freighters they're aboard." He turned his face, now laden with resolve, towards the viewscreen as a flurry of photons arced towards the scattering enemy craft. "We *will* be back for them."

As *Gibraltar* fled deeper into the asteroid field, Sandhurst allowed himself a brief moment of muted satisfaction. Thanks to the successful deployment of the device, a weapon of his own design, their attackers would be unable to pursue the aid ships. Regardless of the fate that ultimately befell *Gibraltar*, the convoy would be safe, and the relief supplies they carried would make it to the suffering Cardassians clinging to life amidst the rubble of their devastated colonies.

USS *Bluefin*

En route to E'Mdifarr system, Warp 9.2

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Akinola's ready room door chimed, and he invited the visitor inside. Inga Strauss entered to find the captain reclining in his desk chair, arms crossed behind his head as the strains of classic Terran jazz played in the compartment. A half-finished wood carving of what appeared to be a starship sat atop the desk amidst a pile of wood shavings and a host of various wood-working tools.

Strauss was young for her rank, just into her early 30's, a petite blond with piercing blue eyes that hinted at the carefully restrained intensity lurking beneath the surface. Her hair was elaborately braided, and her stylized Border Service combadge gleamed with a newness indicative of her recent transfer from the regular fleet.

"What do you have for me, XO?"

"Pre-engagement diagnostics complete, sir. All weapons and defensive systems are functioning nominally, and I've got the crew running damage control drills."

"Very good, Commander." Akinola sat forward slowly, a calm smile on his face. "ETA to the E'Mdifarr system?"

"Seventeen minutes, sir." Strauss observed her captain's relaxed demeanor and envied the older man's composure in the face of imminent

combat. She had seen more than her share of warfare, but still found herself keyed up every time before an engagement.

“Anything noteworthy on sensors?”

“We detected what appears to have been a sizeable ionic discharge somewhere within the system’s asteroid field and it’s been playing hell with our sensors, sir. We’ve been unable to identify any spacecraft within the system so far, and comms are still being jammed locally.”

Akinola nodded fractionally. “Sounds like our comrades are giving the enemy a good fight.”

“You think *Gibraltar*’s still in one piece, Captain?” Strauss looked skeptical. “From the brief distress call they got off before the jamming started, it sounded as if these pirates got the jump on them. Not to mention the fact that they’re outnumbered and outgunned.”

Akinola activated his desktop terminal and turned the screen for Strauss to see. A cross section of a *Constitution*-class starship was displayed, along with the lean face of a man who appeared to be in his mid-forties, the ship’s captain presumably. “I’ve been reading up on the ship and its crew, and do you know what I’ve discovered?”

“What’s that, sir?”

“That despite their ship’s limitations they’re a wily bunch who’ve managed to turn the tables on stronger opponents more than once in the past.” Akinola gave Strauss an expectant look, “Remind you of anyone?”

She smiled in response. “Now that you mention it, sir, it does.”

Akinola switched off the terminal and rose from his chair. “I’m counting on them to stay in the fight until we get there, Commander. Then *Bluefin* and *Gibraltar* are going to make these sorry sons-of-bitches wish they’d selected a different life path.”

Strauss nodded enthusiastically. “Aye, sir.”

Chapter 3

USS *Gibraltar*

E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Sandhurst strode through the narrow corridor under the flickering overhead lighting as he resisted the urge with every step to open the nearest EPS access panel and assist in the ship's repairs. His engineering teams could handle it, and he had other priorities to attend to.

As he stepped into Sickbay, Sandhurst was relieved to find only a few of his crew being attended to by the ship's two Emergency Medical Holograms and Lt. Taicee's efficient nursing staff. He quickly located the person who had prompted his visit to Sickbay and he approached the examination table currently occupied by Ensign Belinda Lascomb, the ship's assistant chief engineer. The young woman's legs and lower torso were still clad in her radiation-hardened engineering jumpsuit, though the upper half had been cut away in order to treat her injuries.

Sandhurst looked to the medical hologram and inquired briskly, "What's her condition?"

The EMH looked up from the panel where he was directing the ensign's treatment. "Severe radiation poisoning, sir. She absorbed close to five-hundred REMS while in the nacelle housing, despite her protective garment."

"How soon can you have her back to duty?"

The hologram favored Sandhurst with an expression of disbelief mixed with disdain. "You can't be serious, sir? I've given her the maximum dosage of hyronalin that her body can handle. That, coupled with the deionization series I'm running on her will hopefully stave off any long-term damage. There's no way she can return to duty in less than a week, and even then she'll have to be careful not to expose herself to any further radiation, even at low levels, for several months."

Sandhurst marshalled his patience as he explained as calmly as possible, "Our ship is damaged and without warp capability. We can only hide out here for so long before the enemy finds us. I need to get those nacelles polarized within the next few hours so that we can escape this system, and at present only two people aboard have the requisite skills to do that... Ensign Lascomb and myself."

The hologram met his gaze unflinchingly. "Then I'd suggest finding a Rad-Haz suit in your size, Captain, because the ensign is out of commission."

The sudden pressure of Lascomb's hand grasping his own startled Sandhurst. He glanced down to find the young woman retching into a pan held by a nurse who also cradled Lascomb's head gently as the engineer evacuated her stomach. Lascomb took a few deep, shuddering breaths, and turned her head to look at Sandhurst. As she opened her mouth to speak, Sandhurst saw her teeth tinged red from her bleeding gums. "I can... do it, Captain. Just... need a few... minutes to catch... my breath." Her eyes were focused on him like lasers, her mind and spirit willing despite the radiation-induced weakness of her flesh. The last thing Lascomb wanted to do, Sandhurst realized, was let her captain and her crewmates down.

He was momentarily overcome by a sense of self-loathing; that he had come here to force the junior officer back into the storm of hard radiation being given off by the depolarized warp coils. Sandhurst's mind wandered back to his days at Command Officer Candidate's training, where they had drummed into the students that a CO must be willing to order others to their deaths for the good of the majority. *'Easier said than done,'* he thought darkly.

Sandhurst took Lascomb's hand in his as he forced on his best supportive smile. "That's alright, Ensign. You've done your duty. Your efforts and those of your team have got us more than halfway there. Time for the old man to step up."

He nodded to the EMH as he stepped away from the exam bed towards the exit, only to find Pell standing near the entrance, arms folded across her chest. Sandhurst walked past her into the corridor and Pell fell into step beside him. "The hell you are—" she began.

"It's not up for discussion, Commander," he replied brusquely, cutting her off.

"Don't think that because Ramirez isn't here that I'm just going to sit by and let you do something foolish," Pell pressed. "As acting XO, it's my responsibility to make sure this crew has the best possible chance of surviving our current circumstances. Our best chance is with you in the captain's chair, sir, not crawling around inside the nacelles."

The pair stepped into the turbolift and Sandhurst ordered, "Main Engineering."

As the turbocar began its descent, Pell turned to him. "And outside the bounds of my official duty, Donald, from a purely selfish standpoint I don't want you doing this."

The determination set in his features softened somewhat. "I know, Ojana. I'm sorry. This is something I *have* to do."

"No, this is something Lascomb has to do. It's her job."

Sandhurst kept his gaze fixed deliberately at the lift car's doors. "She's barely a year out of the academy. I can't ask her to sacrifice her life like this. Not for something that I walked into because I wasn't being cautious enough."

Pell emitted an exasperated sigh. "It was an ambush! And don't beat yourself up too badly, Ramirez didn't see it coming either. For that matter, neither did your supposedly prescient little sidekick."

He shot her a hard glare as the doors parted. “Pava’s saved my life, Ojana, you’d do well to remember that. And you said *we* needed lessons in diplomacy?”

She followed him through Engineering to a bank of equipment lockers. As Sandhurst opened one and removed a radiation suit, he said coolly, “I’ll send updates as to my progress every five minutes. Your place is on the bridge, Commander.” He looked over to find her still standing there defiantly. Sandhurst added, “That’s an order.”

In full view of the engineering personnel and heedless of the consequences, Pell raised up on her tiptoes and kissed Sandhurst briefly on the cheek. “Aye, Captain. Try not to get yourself killed while you’re being dramatically heroic, sir.”

Tactical Outpost Theta
Hakton VII
Sector 21512, Former Demilitarized Zone
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

“*Laren, what the hell happened?*” The former Starfleet captain’s voice was taut with barely contained anger that was not assuaged by his lightyears distance from the event.

Ro Laren sighed, “I wish we knew for certain, Ben. Something’s gone wrong in the E’Mdifarr system; that much is obvious.” She felt a headache coming on, a bad one. Months of planning had gone into this operation, and it had unraveled in mere minutes.

“Laramie’s group was staged and ready to deploy. They issued their distress call on schedule and succeeded in drawing in one of the Starfleet escorts. After taking out the escort, Laramie was supposed to signal that the Q-ships were ready, before leaving to rendezvous with your group and offload cargo from the relief convoy.”

“*Only he never signaled,*” Benjamin Maxwell concluded.

“Correct. That’s why I aborted the mission. There was no sense in your group jumping the convoy and assuming all the risk of dueling with the other three escort ships if we were going to have to abandon the cargo.”

She could see Maxwell nodding slightly as he absorbed the facts. “*You did the right thing, Laren. I just hate to see all our work evaporate like that.*”

“I’m right there with you, Ben.”

“*Remind me again why the hell we let Laramie join our cell?*”

Her smile was tinged with irony. “Because his family owns the shipyard that produced the Q-ships and they’ve held Maquis sympathies from the beginning.”

Maxwell rolled his eyes. “*That’s right, now I remember.*” His mood turned more somber and he appeared thoughtful. “*What do you propose we do now?*”

“Cut our losses, unfortunately.” Ro shook her head. “Those ships represent a huge investment on our part, both in personnel and materiel. But as much as I’d dearly love to send a ship or two to find out what’s gone wrong, if Laramie and his people have been captured, they know enough to threaten our entire operation. We’ll have to evacuate all our currently established bases, at least all the ones Laramie knows about.”

“*As much as I hate to admit it, that’s undoubtedly the safest course of action.*” The ex-captain’s features darkened. “*I’m sure as hell not going back to prison over this.*”

Ro frowned as she observed, “We’ve both done time in the Starfleet Stockade, Ben. Don’t flatter yourself. That place is a damned country club compared to Lazon II. After you’ve experienced Cardassian hospitality, even Rura Penthe would seem luxurious.”

Maxwell winced at his own gaffe. “*I’ll have to take your word for that. I’m sorry if it seemed like I was invalidating your experiences there. I know those wounds are still fresh.*” He signaled to someone off screen. “*Anyway, looks like it’s time to start packing. I’ll meet you at our auxiliary rally point in say... two weeks?*”

“Two weeks it is. I’ll see you then, Capt—” she caught herself, “Mr. Maxwell.”

USS *Bluefin*
E’Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Akinola waited patiently in the command chair for updates from his senior staff. He had learned long ago that constant prompting from an anxious captain did not speed matters up so much as cause sufficient angst among the bridge officers to encourage hasty assessments that invariably endangered the mission.

“Still experiencing significant communications jamming, sir,” reported T’Ser from Operations. “It’s strongest in the vicinity of the system’s

asteroid field, bearing 116-mark-025. If we close any further, we'll be out of comms range with Starfleet."

Strauss looked up from the Tactical station. "We could drop a series of communications buoys behind us as we approach, sir."

Akinola smiled. "A variant on the old bread-crumbs trail, XO?"

"Something like that, Captain," Strauss confirmed. "The buoys will be vulnerable to attack, of course, but if the people that ambushed *Gibraltar* see them, it might just be enough to draw them out to try and disable our comms relay."

"A solid plan," Akinola assessed. "Implement it immediately, Commander." He turned back to look at Lieutenant Bane at the sensor station. Akinola gave the man a questioning expression.

"Nothing yet, Cap'n," Bane announced in his Australian-accented Standard. "If someone's out there in the asteroids, they're keeping their heads down. No worries, though, I can detect a Cardassian vole fart at a lightyear plus, Captain."

Akinola mock winced as he observed, "Thank you for that unnecessarily graphic descriptive, Nigel." He called back over his shoulder to ask, "Senior Chief, what other assets do we have inbound to assist?"

"At last report, sir, the starship *Trafalgar* and the cutter *Onodaga* are *en route* at maximum warp. However, *Trafalgar* isn't due to arrive for another twelve hours."

Akinola mused, "Hmm. Captain Littlefoot is going to miss out on all the fun. Pity, Marcus always did like a good scrap." To the bridge crew in general he announced, "Alright, people, let's step up our readiness."

"Red alert," ordered Strauss, which initiated the crimson strobes and muted klaxon that elevated their status from yellow alert and set the crew to general quarters. "This is not a drill, all hands to battle stations!"

**Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory**

The turbolift doors to the freighter's bridge opened to a dazzling burst of weapons fire that scored and blacked the interior of the lift car for lack of another target.

Kyle Lightner lowered his disruptor pistol and frowned at the empty chamber. "Dolka, where the hell are they? You said the lift car didn't make any stops between the cargo level and here."

"It didn't," came the Tellarite's gruff reply. "Sensors confirmed there were three lifeforms in the car."

Lightner shook his head in disgust as he stepped forward to examine the battered interior of the lift. "This is ridiculous. First the Starfleeters manage to overpower our people in the cargo bay, and now they're playing mind games with us. We've got to reassert control of this situation now. This is *our damn ship!*"

The ceiling panel on the lift car banged downward, opening unexpectedly and causing Kyle to jump back and begin to raise his weapon. A hand reached down from somewhere atop the lift car and tossed a cylindrical device onto the bridge. Lightner had just enough time to yell, "Grenade!" as he dove for the dubious cover of a cargo status console on the upper deck of the rectangular bridge.

The photon grenade, primed for stun, bounced off the top of a control panel and clattered under a work station at the back of the bridge. The force of its detonation was partially blocked by the interceding consoles which shielded most of the Maquis from more than a brief dose of the weapon's discharge.

Ramirez dropped down into the lift car from the ceiling hatch, followed closely by Dunleavy. Both women were armed with hand phasers, and as the two pivoted smartly around either side of the lift, they were disappointed to see most of the armed bridge crew clambering to their feet, weapons still in hand. The women opened fire nearly simultaneously.

Ramirez scored two hits, sending her targets reeling and crashing to the deck. Then, someone off to the side of the lift grabbed a hold of her extended arm and pulled, throwing her off balance and sending her stumbling onto the bridge. She found herself face to face with a human male who looked suspiciously familiar, though in the heat of the moment she couldn't quite discern why. The man wrenched her arm, forcing her to drop her phaser. Ramirez replied by driving her knee up and into the man's thigh.

Dunleavy, meanwhile, dropped another two of the freighter crew with well-placed stun shots. Suddenly, she was knocked back by a disruptor bolt that slammed into the side of the lift door near her head and showered her with molten metal shrapnel.

The Maquis opposing Ramirez danced backwards, favoring his other leg as he tried to throw the smaller woman off balance. She brought her head forward and then up sharply to drive the back of her skull into the man's chin. This sent him stumbling backwards and she followed the blow with another knee strike to his groin and a palm-heel jab that rocked his head back yet again. This time he tottered for a split second before falling down the short staircase into the bridge well.

As she turned to retrieve her phaser, Ramirez found a Maquis pointing an old style Starfleet pistol phaser directly at her, his finger depressing the trigger. She braced herself for the killing shot, only to blink in confusion as something whistled past her head and buried itself in the man's chest. As the stricken Maquis sank to his knees and his phaser clattered to the deck, she realized the implement used to bring him down was a circular panel cover from inside the lift car.

Ramirez spun around just in time to see Ashok, who had finally managed to wriggle down through the small ceiling hatch, disarm yet another of the Maquis by grabbing the man's forearm and wrenching it to the tune of cracking bone. Then the enormous Bolian picked the man up and threw him bodily across the bridge to collide with the last of the bridge crew, who was bringing his Ferengi phaser to bear. The two men collapsed in a tangle of limbs and unconscious flesh.

Dumbfounded, Ramirez looked back at the Maquis with the panel cover protruding from his chest. "Lieutenant... how... holy shit!"

Ashok picked up an unconscious crew member up in each hand and dragged them towards the back of the bridge. As he did so, the taciturn Bolian said simply, "Starfleet Academy track and field. Discus champion three years running."

Ramirez moved to assist Dunleavy, who was huddled in the corner of the lift, clutching at her burned face with both hands. "And I thought Pava was the dangerous one..." the exec murmured.

Chapter 4

Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

"How'd it go?" Lar'ragos asked from where he lay recuperating on the floor of the cargo bay.

"About what you'd expect," Ramirez said as she entered and knelt next to one of the away team's equipment kits. "Stun grenade didn't work worth a damn, and we ended up having to go hand-to-hand. Dunleavy's got burns and shrapnel in her face. Oh, and Ashok hit a guy with a turbolift... that was new."

Lar'ragos winced. "Why can't anything ever go easily for us?" He pushed himself up on his elbows to regard the XO as she squatted over the kit, tapping at a tricorder. "How's Dunleavy?"

"Taice says she'll be fine. No signs of ocular damage, just superficial facial injuries."

"Good," he nodded, glad to hear one of his most capable security specialists would suffer no permanent injury. "By the way, it's official. Next time Big Blue gets to take the 'lift ride with the goons."

"So noted," Ramirez remarked distractedly. She looked up and focused on the El-Aurian, the sparkle of an idea lighting her eyes. "You up for assisting in an interrogation?"

"Sure, who's the subject?"

"I'm pretty certain the captain of this freighter is Ensign Lightner's older brother, Kyle."

He chuckled darkly. "Small galaxy."

"Yeah," she agreed. "What are the odds?"

USS *Gibraltar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Sandhurst had lost track of time within the nacelle housing. His hands moved as if of their own accord as his mind raced five steps ahead in the process of restoring functionality to the warp field coils.

The persistent danger of his circumstances eluded him until his suit called out, '*WARNING: Radiation levels reaching design tolerances. Five minutes until suit occupant experiences injurious radiation exposure.*'

He cursed his lack of attention and stood from where he had been crouched at the base of a coil toroid. He abandoned his attempt to re-initialize one of the plasma injectors and began taking long, lumbering steps towards the forward maintenance compartment. There he would change into a fresh radiation-hazard garment and take a few minutes rest before returning to his arduous task.

Once Sandhurst had passed through the permeable shielded doorway and into the decontamination chamber, he took a moment to reflect on how Ensign Lascomb had repeated this procedure more times than safety protocols would allow. He could do no less. Without warp speed, when they finally managed to locate and rescue the away team, they would have no way to escape their pursuers. The pressure door hissed open to allow the medical team entry. They swarmed Sandhurst, injecting hyronalin into his neck as they assisted him out of the cumbersome suit and began preparing its replacement.

USS *Bluefin*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Bluefin slipped cautiously through the substantial mass of asteroids as she reached out with all her senses to detect any signs of spacecraft, whether threat or friendly.

Lieutenant Bane looked up from his sensor scope, stretching to relieve the muscle fatigue resulting from sitting in the same position for five hours straight.

Strauss had the conn and was perched in the captain's chair reviewing status reports on a padd. She had briefly toyed with the idea of standing down from red alert, as one could only have the crew on the razor's edge of alertness for so long before adrenaline and attention began to ebb. Keeping the crew keyed up for prolonged periods of time reduced their effectiveness and reaction time. However, Strauss had decided to let the captain make that call whenever he came out of his ready room.

Suddenly, Bane's scope began to chime insistently. "Transient contact detected, Commander," he announced.

He had her attention immediately. "Bearing and distance?"

"Distance unknown, sir. It's a sporadic sensor return, probably interrupted by the debris between it and ourselves. Bearing is roughly 303-mark-006."

Strauss sat a little straighter in the chair. "Helm, move us onto a gradual heading for intercept. Nothing too jarring. If they haven't detected us yet, I'd rather they think we're just another piece of rock out here." She glanced upward out of habit as she called out, "Captain to the bridge."

Akinola had been catnapping in his office mere meters away as he tried to keep his mind sharp despite the lack of a concrete enemy to engage. He was up and out of his chair in an instant, roused from his semi-sleeping state and returning to full wakefulness in just seconds as he stepped across the threshold and onto the bridge. "Report."

Strauss filled him in as she surrendered the command chair to the captain and assumed her customary post at the Tactical station.

Moments of tense silence followed as *Bluefin* threaded her way past billions of metric tons of planetary rubble as she tried to slide in unobserved behind whatever was producing the sensor contact.

Then, on the main viewer, an object could be seen darting between the mammoth outcroppings of free floating rock.

"Magnify and identify," ordered Akinola.

"*Kestrel*-class raider, sir." Bane elaborated, "She appears to be outfitted with photon torpedoes and Class-6 phasers."

"I haven't seen one of those since before the war," observed Akinola. "Not since the last time I tangled with the Maquis."

From the Tactical station, Strauss quietly relayed, "Starfleet Intelligence has been reporting a potential Maquis resurgence in and around the former DMZ, Captain."

"Damn," the captain breathed. "This complicates things."

"Par for the course?" Strauss offered wryly.

Bluefin slipped unseen behind the smaller craft, whose sensors were directed forward as the ship executed a search pattern.

"Ready the tractor beam," Akinola ordered as he leaned forward slightly in his chair, like a bird of prey observing his quarry from on high.

"Tractor beam, aye," confirmed Lt. Commander Galt, the Tellarite chief engineer.

Just as *Bluefin* moved into tractor range, the raider arced around the curve of an asteroid measuring five kilometers in diameter. As they followed in the raider's wake, the older *Albacore*-class cutter came around the far side and unexpectedly came face-to-face with a large Kriosian cargo hauler.

Collision klaxons blared and Akinola gritted his teeth as the freighter bore down on them on the main viewer. "Helm, hard over!"

The freighter opened fire at nearly point blank range, her disruptor ports and missile batteries already exposed in anticipation of the raider drawing the cutter in. Mercurite missiles and disruptor pulses raked *Bluefin's* shields as the ship heeled over and raced for cover. The raider doubled back to add its phasers and photon torpedoes to the fusillade of fire pounding the cutter.

"Helm, evasive pattern theta! Tactical, return fire, engage targets at will!" Akinola clung to his chair as the ship shuddered from repeated blows and the spaceframe groaned from the strain of violent evasive maneuvers.

"Aft shields at thirty-three percent. Starboard grid at twenty-nine percent and falling," Strauss assessed calmly, her earlier jitters having evaporated now that battle had been joined.

"We've got stress microfractures in the starboard nacelle pylon," Galt appraised as he clutched at his console. "By the pulsing sphincter of the Andorian goddess, those bastards set us up!" he cried in an infuriated tone. "Bastards!" he reiterated for effect.

Akinola glared as his chief engineer from the command seat. "Belay that crap, Commander! This isn't the first time we've been sucker punched, so keep your head in the game."

He looked to Strauss and Akinola braced himself as the *Bluefin* bucked from yet another wave of weapons impacts. "Okay, XO, let's turn the tide in our favor, shall we?"

"I'm all ears, Captain," Strauss replied earnestly as she sent a stream of phaser energy back at their attackers, accompanied by a flight of crimson torpedoes.

**Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory**

"Kyle?"

His eyes fluttered at the sound of his name. Where was he? Was this the penal colony on Leavenworth?

“Inmate Lightner, front and center! Sound off like you’ve got a pair!”

‘That cinches it,’ he thought, *‘I’m still in lockup. That whole neo-Maquis business was just another damned dream.’* Kyle Lightner forced his eyes open only to find himself staring into the face of the young Starfleet commander who had rendered him unconscious on the command deck of his own ship.

“There you are,” she said with a disarming smile.

Lightner tried to sit forward, only to find that he was secured to a chair in the freighter’s small dining compartment. “What is this? Let me go!”

“Kyle Lightner, you are in a lot of trouble.” The commander moved away to lean against the side of a nearby table. “My name is Ramirez. Obviously, I’m with Starfleet.”

“Obviously,” he spat venomously.

“Kyle, we need to know the size and disposition of Maquis forces in the E’Mdiffar system.”

He laughed in response. “Piss off.” Only then did he notice the presence of the other officer, a youthful looking man wearing lieutenant’s insignia. He was watching Kyle very closely, almost as if... “Is he a Betazoid?” The color drained from Lightner’s face. “You can’t scan minds without consent!”

Lar’ragos smirked and pointed to his eyes. “I’m no Betazoid, Kyle. Just relax.” There was something about the man’s smile that set Lightner on edge.

The Maquis scowled. “How do you know my name?”

“That’s not important,” Ramirez said. “What’s important is for you to cooperate with us to shut down this operation before anyone else gets hurt.”

Lightner shook his head. “Not a chance.”

Ramirez’s features darkened. “Three of your crew are already dead, Kyle, and you’re looking at a lot of prison time for this stunt.”

Lightner was defiant. “I’ve done three years in a Federation penal colony, Ms. Ramirez. You’ll have to do better than that.”

Her eyes took on a hard cast as Ramirez nodded fractionally. “Fine, how about this? You’ve committed acts of terrorism and attempted piracy in Cardassian space, making you and your friends subject to Cardassian law.”

“Nice try,” came his acerbic retort. “We both know you can’t render prisoners into the custody of powers that aren’t signatories to the Seldonis IV Convention. The pre-war Cardassian government might have paid lip service to the treaty, but since you invaded and occupied them, that government and its treaties are no longer valid.”

Lar’ragos took no small amount of pleasure in voicing, “The newly constituted Cardassian government just signed the Seldonis Convention three weeks ago. I guess it pays to keep up on the news feeds.”

“A Cardassian prison,” Ramirez practically chortled. “My that does sound like fun.”

Lightner’s pale complexion became positively waxen, and he found himself unable to form a comeback as he tried to imagine what that particular version of hell might be like.

“What I can’t understand is just who you thought you were dealing with?” Ramirez mused. “I realize you were with the original Maquis movement before the war, but you apparently haven’t been paying attention. This isn’t the same Starfleet you faced four years ago, Kyle. Most of us still drawing breath are veterans used to fighting the likes of Jem’Hadar and the Cardassians. You and your little band of pirates are playing in the wrong damn league, my friend.”

“It would be in your best interests to talk, Mr. Lightner,” Lar’ragos said evenly, seeing no need for theatrics. “Your cooperation would go a long way toward our requesting that your case and those of your crew be heard before a Federation court.”

Barely thirty seconds passed before Kyle Lightner started talking. The Starfleet officers were surprised, having decided beforehand that it would take the Maquis at least five minutes before betraying his comrades.

USS *Bluefin*
E’Mdiffar Asteroid Belt, E’Mdiffar system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

“Good work, Mister Fralk. Keep the high-g maneuvers coming!” Akinola praised from the center seat. He glanced back at Strauss and asked, “We all set, XO?”

“Aye, sir. Tractor beam standing by for your command.”

Akinola turned to face the viewer and ordered, “Very well. Initiate tactic ‘Pinball One.’”

In response to the captain's order, the aft tractor emitter reached out and contacted the forward shields of the pursuing raider. With the raider's shields up, it would be especially difficult to get a tractor lock under normal circumstances. However, the beam had been inverted in such a way that it now repelled rather than attracted, and the resulting collision drove the smaller ship off course. This caused the raider to glance off the side of a relatively small forty-thousand ton rock, which nonetheless managed to shear off the raider's port wing strut and thruster assembly and sent it into an unrecoverable spin that ended abruptly on the surface of another nearby asteroid.

Strauss grinned mightily and tamped down the urge to cheer. Instead, she announced, "Pinball One is a success, sir. However, it now appears we're fresh out of balls." She blanched as several heads swiveled in her direction, faces struggling to maintain composure. "Wait... that's not what I—"

"I'll thank you to speak for yourself, sir," Bane offered between snorts of laughter.

Akinola chuckled out loud, despite the dire situation still facing them. "That's okay, Commander, I know what you meant." He swiveled around in his chair to fix his gaze on the crusty Tellarite manning the Engineering board. "Mister Galt, what's our status?"

"Shield generators starboard and aft are overtaxed, and I'm having difficulty firming up the grid. Current operational strength of those deflectors is hovering around twenty-five percent, sir. The starboard nacelle pylon will need shoring up before we can push any faster than Warp 3, and our aft phaser array is inoperable. We've got structural buckling on Decks 4, 5, 7 and—"

Akinola held up a hand. "I've got the picture, Commander. Why don't you go see to your damage control teams personally?"

"Thank you, sir," Galt allowed gruffly as he made a beeline for the turbolift.

"Mister Bane, status of the other threat vessel?"

Still gazing into his sensor display, the Australian lieutenant answered without looking up. "They couldn't match our maneuvers, sir. We've lost them for the moment, though I am reading a new sensor contact bearing 279-mark-357. That might be them initiating a grid search pattern."

He folded his arms across his chest and Akinola pondered that for a moment. "Keep an eye on that contact, Mister Bane." To the Helm, he directed, "Ensign Fralk, snug us up close to the asteroid where the raider crashed while we make repairs. Hopefully, anyone wandering through here will mistake our energy signature for residual traces of the raider's antimatter containment breach."

Akinola gave Strauss a serious look as he slid out of his chair. "XO, compile a complete casualty and damage report for me. I'm going on walk-about to tour the ship."

"Right away, Captain."

Chapter 5

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Ben Maxwell sat in the gloomy, somber silence of his cabin. He mused that on this particular day, the bleak Klingon bulkheads and deficient lighting suited his mood as he contemplated the four ships and over fifty Maquis members that he and Ro Laren had summarily written off an hour earlier.

Since rejoining her Maquis brethren, Ro had become the consummate pragmatist. Having spent years in a Cardassian prison camp had removed all pretense from her nature. She had no time or patience for sentimentality, for the indulgence of exuberant idealism. All shades of grey had been erased from her universe; a thing was or it wasn't, it did, or it didn't. No middle ground, no hesitation, no flexibility.

Maxwell could not let those men and women go so easily. It was the Starfleet in him, the core of the man he once was, before the humiliation of court-martial and the soul sapping tedium of the stockade. For five years he had languished in captivity, carrying out mundane make-work chores for the penal authority under the guise of rehabilitation. As if hand checking isolar chips for production defects, a task carried out thousands of times more efficiently and accurately by computer, could quench the torch of vengeance he carried within him.

He had been released mere months before the start of the Dominion War. When the conflict had erupted in earnest, Maxwell had begged Starfleet to reactivate his commission, to allow him to serve in the capacity in which he had demonstrated unparalleled genius, the art of warfare. He had been summarily refused. Maxwell had then offered his services as a civilian strategic advisor, and again had been rebuffed. So stained was his name among the leadership of Starfleet that certain members of the admiralty had even petitioned to have the two medals of valor he had been awarded during the Cardassian Wars rescinded. Ultimately that idea had been quashed, but only barely.

And so, Maxwell had eventually found his way to the Federation/Cardassian border, the area encompassed by the old Demilitarized Zone. Here he had been approached by the newly reconstituted Maquis. Those from among the freedom fighters who had been imprisoned before the Dominion purges had formed the core of a reinvigorated movement. They sought the colonization of those worlds ceded to the Cardassians by the Federation in the disastrous treaty six years earlier. When Cardassia had joined the Dominion, the Jem'Hadar had scoured those worlds clean of any Federation presence, obliterating Maquis and civilian settlements with equal enthusiasm.

Now that those worlds were again under Federation jurisdiction, the friends and relatives of those killed in the Dominion purges of the DMZ had petitioned the Federation Council to reinstate their settlement rights. The Council had refused, stubbornly insisting that when the alliance relinquished control of Cardassian territory to the Union's newly formed civilian government, the borders would be identical to their pre-war lines. Thus, the Maquis had come back into the picture, rededicated to ensuring that the planets that had been settled by Federation citizens and had been paid for in their blood would not fall into Cardassian hands once again.

He sat forward and placed the now empty glass of scotch atop the Spartan desk. Maxwell came to a decision. If this endeavor had any chance of success, the Maquis, old and new, must learn to trust one another. Leaving people behind to be captured would send the message to the others that they were expendable. He reached out to toggle the antiquated Klingon intercom and the former Starfleet captain stated, "Maxwell to bridge, prepare to copy change of heading."

The speaker hissed and crackled, finally allowing, "*Beston here, Ben. Where are we headed?*"

"Set course for the E'Mdifarr system and engage at best speed. Ready the gunnery crews, we'll be going into combat."

"*You got it, Ben.*"

Maxwell sat back as he forced his mind clear of all matters save the potential tactical scenarios they might encounter in the hazard-ridden star system. He flexed mental muscles that had lay dormant for years and prepared to bring his substantial knowledge of Starfleet strategy and tactics to the fore. With cold determination he vowed that he would now employ them against his former comrades.

Kriosian-flagged freighter *SS Draskaar*

E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

As they stepped out of the dining compartment, Ramirez moved a few paces down the passageway before she turned back and leaned against the bulkhead. Lar'ragos stepped to the other side of the corridor, moving stiffly and looking pained.

"What do your senses tell you, Pava?"

He chose his words carefully and the El-Aurian hesitated a moment before replying. "He's telling us the truth, sir, or what he knows of it. My guess is that he's been deliberately kept in the dark, and doesn't even know who's really running this operational cell. Just as he told us, his immediate superior is a man named Laramie. They've got four of these Q-ships, and the five smaller craft we saw faking the attack on this freighter when we arrived."

"And he's being truthful about their plan?"

Lar'ragos nodded. "Yes, sir. They were to disable or destroy *Gibraltar* and then set a pursuit course with the convoy. Presumably, the other Maquis attack group slated to intercept the formation and overcome the other three escorts was lying in wait somewhere along their route."

Ramirez frowned. "And with local comms frequencies jammed, we have no way to warn the convoy or to discover if their attack was successful."

"Not until we leave the system."

She gave the lieutenant a curious look. "You said they planned to disable or *destroy* our ship. The Maquis used to go out of their way to avoid causing Federation and Starfleet casualties."

Lar'ragos shrugged with his hands as he noted, "This is a whole new breed, Commander. Look at it from their perspective for a moment. They tempered their pre-war efforts with restraint, and what did it get them in the end?"

"Wiped out," was her somber reply.

"Exactly, sir."

Ramirez's combadge chirped. "*Ashok to Ramirez. Impulse power has been restored, sir. We can be underway in fifteen minutes.*"

After acknowledging the message, the XO reached up and gripped the security officer's shoulder. "Good work, Pava. As always, your insights are invaluable." She turned for the antiquated and battle-scarred turbolift as she gestured for the remaining security specialist to stand guard over Kyle Lightner in the dining compartment. Ramirez looked back to Lar'ragos and said, "C'mon, Lieutenant, let's go even the odds a little."

Ramirez settled into the command chair of the combat-rigged freighter before casting a glance towards Ashok who towered over the relatively diminutive engineering station. "Are we good to go, Lieutenant?"

Ashok, who abhorred physical violence of any kind, was now more aloof than normal following the earlier unpleasantness on the bridge. In response, he nodded curtly and assessed, "You have full impulse and warp reactor power at your command, as well as shields and weapons load-outs. The warp drive itself is still offline, however, and I don't have the proper equipment to re-polarize the nacelles."

"Understood." She turned to where Lar'ragos sat uncomfortably at the weapons console. "And you, Mister Lar'ragos?"

"Weapons and defensive systems standing by, Commander. We're armed with Ferengi disruptors, Talarian mercurite missile batteries, and Bajoran phaser cannons."

Ramirez shook her head, smirking. "We're outfitted like an orbital display model at an Orion arms bazaar."

Lar'ragos returned the grin. "Being heavily armed means never having to say you're sorry, sir."

"Let's put your aphorism to the test, shall we, Mister Lar'ragos? Helm, ahead slow, advancing to fifteen-hundred kph."

Dunleavy, who manned the helm console, would have smiled as well if not for the dermal regeneration patches affixed to her face. "Aye. Ahead slow, sir."

"We're off to find *Gibraltar*, and if we happen to stumble onto any more Maquis during our search, we can repay them in kind for our ambush."

The away team's only response was a series of grim smiles.

USS *Gibraltar*

E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Sandhurst stumbled into the decon chamber. He gasped for breath as the deionizer beam swept back and forth over him, its bluish rays laboring to neutralize the radiation swirling around his suited figure. As the beam terminated and Sandhurst tore off his helmet, the internal speakers could be heard scolding, '*WARNING: Radiation levels have exceeded design tolerances. Lethal exposure in one minute, thirty seconds.*'

The medical team rushed in to heft Sandhurst up and spirit him towards the small, two person lift car that shuttled maintenance personnel from the engineering hull up the nacelle strut and into the small habitable compartment. The captain's body was already flooded with nearly twice the recommended dosage of hyronalin and all that could be done for him now was a deep tissue deionization treatment in Sickbay.

As the med-tech clutched Sandhurst to him and squeezed into the transport car, the captain croaked to one of the engineering personnel present, "It's... done."

The nacelle diagnostic readouts flashed green just as the text message arrived. The petty officer manning the Engineering board called to Pell, "Commander, warp engines back online."

Pell sat motionless in the command chair, and waited just long enough to make certain her voice was free of anxiety before posing the question, "Status of the captain?"

"Unknown, sir. He's on route to Sickbay," came the hushed response.

She nodded soberly. "Time to find our people." Pell initiated the public address and her voice carried throughout the ship. *"This is the Second Officer. We have restored warp capability and are now getting underway to locate our away team. I realize that in a perfect world the captain or Commander Ramirez would be sitting up here calling the shots, but I assure you I have every intention of finding and rescuing our missing crew. May the Prophets take pity upon anyone who stands in our path, for our cause is righteous and our resolution fixed as the Rock of Gibraltar. All auxiliary personnel report to damage control rally points and standby for further orders. Make ready for combat; all hands to battle stations."*

As the ship got underway, Pell reflected distantly that it appeared she had been contaminated by the same lack of subtlety she had recently referenced to the captain. *'When in Rome...'* she thought, surrendering silently to the inevitable.

USS *Bluefin*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Akinola strode into Main Engineering, already smirking at the constant stream of colorful invective that had been audible for the length of the corridor.

Junior officers and enlisted specialists scurried to-and-fro in a flurry of activity as Galt struggled into an EVA pressure suit. "Move your *frinixing* backsides or I *will* see the lot of you scrubbing plasma conduits with your own toothbrushes! No, belay that, I'll track down a waste hauler and make you clean that out using nothing but the tongues your misbegotten, genetically deficient parents passed on to you!"

"Ah, so you're the one," Akinola called up to Galt as the Tellarite fought to get his oversized foot into a troublesome boot on the mezzanine level.

"The one what, sir?" Galt groused with evident irritation.

"The author of *'How to Win Friends and Influence People,'* the captain replied dryly.

"No time for fun and games, sir." Galt finished pulling on the pressure garment and stepped onto the transparent lift platform that descended to the main level. "The rest of my EVA team is waiting in the shuttle bay. We've got to get those work pods out there and secure that strut ASAP."

Akinola stepped to the side as he gestured to the exit. "Don't let me stand in your way, Commander."

"Thank you, Cap-" The intercom sprang to life, cutting short Galt's reply.

"Strauss to the captain. One of the modified freighters is searching the vicinity of our asteroid, sir. Estimate they'll stumble upon our position in less than five minutes."

Akinola and Galt shared a grim look as the captain tapped his communicator. "Acknowledged, XO. On my way." As he turned for the exit, Akinola called back over his shoulder, "Sorry, Galt, you'll have to make due for the time being. Get your people back from the shuttle bay, I've got a feeling we're going to take a few more hits before this is over."

As the doors hissed closed behind him, Akinola could make out a bellowing cadence through the barrier as Galt and his team shifted priorities yet again and set to work.

Chapter 6

USS *Bluefin*

E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

As Akinola took his place in the center seat, the main viewer displayed an image of one of the innocuous looking Kriosian freighters moving slowly around the perimeter of the asteroid towards *Bluefin's* hiding place.

"Status," the captain uttered tersely.

Strauss answered promptly from the Tactical station. "Their shields are up and weapons are on hot standby, Captain."

"Sir," T'Ser observed from Ops, "their power curve reads like that of a dedicated warship. I'm picking up signs of secondary and tertiary power sources to supplement both shields as well as weapons." T'Ser looked back over her shoulder to lock eyes with Akinola. "I'd estimate they outgun us by at least two-to-one."

"Noted," was Akinola's only reply. He turned to address Strauss at the Tactical station. "XO, I want a full phaser and torpedo spread aimed at their primary sensor array. We'll throw some sand in their eyes while we put some distance between us. Slugging it out with them here in this asteroid field will be like a knife fight in a turbolift, and odds favor the people with the bigger guns."

"Aye, sir," she replied steadily. "Standing by for your command."

"Captain to Engineering," Akinola called. "Be prepared to route auxiliary power to the impulse engines and aft shields."

"Understood, sir," came Galt's response. "I've got the starboard nacelle pylon reinforced through the SIF, but we'll need to try and avoid any hits to that quarter."

"We'll try, Commander, but no promises. Bridge, out."

Bane looked up from the Science console. "Cap'n, this is odd. I'm reading significant radiation leakage from their engine housings."

"Battle damage?" Akinola asked.

"There's no sign of physical damage to the nacelles, but if I'm interpreting this correctly, it appears their nacelles have been completely depolarized."

Akinola smiled slightly as he surmised, "So, no warp drive then."

"Correct, sir."

"Advantage to us," the captain muttered, a hard edge to his voice. "Alright, people, stand ready."

Bluefin darted out from cover to launch a salvo of photon torpedoes and a scintillating volley of phaser fire that slammed into the Q-ship's shield grid. The surprised freighter crew rallied and tried to acquire a target lock on the fleeing cutter, but their sensors had been partially overloaded by the opening barrage and *Bluefin* had rounded the curve of the asteroid by the time their screens cleared.

The Q-ship fired up its impulse engines and set off in pursuit.

USS *Bluefin*

"Another freighter directly ahead!" T'Ser called out in alarm.

Akinola's stomach clenched at the thought of being trapped between two of the formidable warships. "Another full spread at the approaching target. Helm, Z plus one-thousand meters, then come to 090-mark-00 and engage at one-half impulse!"

Bane's voice added to the cacophony filling the bridge, "Aft threat vessel has cleared the asteroid and is acquiring a weapons lock."

The captain's mind raced with tactical permutations, nearly all of them coming to the same dismal conclusion. They might be able to overwhelm one of the Q-ships with superior tactics and maneuverability, but two would prove impossible. "Helm, prepare to jump to warp."

Fralk, to his credit, did not voice the obvious. They were still in an asteroid field, and a warp jump, even a short one, was tantamount to suicide. "Aye... sir," the young man stammered as he plugged away gamely at his board while attempting to compensate for the seemingly endless tons of debris that still lay in their path.

**Kriosian-flagged freighter SS *Draskaar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory**

The sight of a Federation starship arcing around the large asteroid directly in their path had been surprise enough, but the storm of fire from the ship, however understandable under the circumstances, was still something of a shock.

"Federation starship, sir, an *Albacore*-class cutter," Lar'ragos identified the ship even as its weapons thundered against the *Draskaar's* forward screens. "Shields holding... wait, another sensor return just cresting the asteroid, Commander. Another Q-ship in pursuit of the cutter."

"Try tight-beam laser communications, Ashok," ordered Ramirez. "We've got to let them know we're on their side."

"They're taking fire from the Q-ship, sir. I don't think they can even detect the comms laser due to all the EM interference."

Ramirez nodded slowly, her hands gripping the armrests of the command chair. "Target the Maquis vessel and communicate our extreme displeasure to them, Mister Lar'ragos."

A wicked smile graced his lips as the El-Aurian did as instructed. "Salvo-firing mercurite missiles, sir, followed by phaser and disruptor barrage."

USS *Bluefin*

Seconds seemed to crawl past as Fralk struggled to compute a safe faster-than-light jump vector through the dense field. Another volley from the ship that had chased them from the asteroid slammed home, causing the deck to buck wildly as control circuits sparked at one of the auxiliary bridge stations.

T'Ser spoke up, her voice sounding incredulous even as she announced, "Captain, the oncoming freighter has just fired on the one pursuing us."

"Say again, Commander?"

"Confirmed, sir!" Bane acknowledged. "The second ship is hitting the first one with everything they have."

"Helm, bring us about one-hundred eighty degrees," Akinola barked suddenly. "XO, target the vessel on the receiving end of that salvo and add our fire to the effort."

Bluefin turned around sharply, her forward tubes disgorging a flight of shimmering torpedoes that struck the Maquis vessel in concert with its sister ship's incoming fire. The resulting paroxysm of destructive energy overtaxed the vessel's formidable shields, and the last of *Bluefin's* photons passed through the dissolving deflector grid and impacted the naked spaceframe of the ship.

Streamers of flame boiled from the blistered hull of the Q-ship and were extinguished by vacuum. It continued on its original course, rudderless and on fire, its momentum carrying it towards a contingent of asteroids many times its mass.

"Incoming laser-link communication detected from the other freighter, Captain. They're requesting parlay."

"This should prove interesting," Akinola mused. "On screen, Commander."

A grainy image took shape on the viewer that took a moment to clear as the two vessels' directed-energy comms systems synced up. Rather than the Maquis crew he had been expecting, Akinola was face-to-face with a youthful looking woman in a Starfleet uniform. Behind her were other Starfleet personnel manning the freighter's bridge stations.

The woman stood and came to attention. "*Sir, I am Commander Liana Ramirez, First Officer, starship Gibraltar.*"

Still wary of a ruse, Akinola buried his skepticism beneath a cool veneer of authority. "I assume you have an explanation for your presence aboard that ship, Commander?"

"*Yes, sir. Our away team beamed over to this freighter in response to a distress call. We were captured by the freighter's crew and our ship was ambushed. These people are Maquis, Captain.*"

Strauss called up a crew manifest from the *Gibraltar* and matched the woman on the viewer to the picture from her service file. She quickly scanned its contents and murmured *sotto voce* to the captain, "It's a match, sir. She's listed as the ship's XO."

"Forgive me for saying so, Commander, but you don't appear especially 'captured' to me at the moment."

"No, sir. We were able to overpower our captors and assume control of the ship."

Akinola pondered that. "I'll tell you what, Commander. We'll beam you over here and you can explain in greater detail. In the meantime, I'd appreciate it if you powered down your weapons and lowered your shields as a sign of good will."

Ramirez nodded. "Immediately, sir." She motioned to an officer at the back of the bridge, and the freighter's shields and weapons powered down.

"I'm looking forward to meeting you, Mister Ramirez," Akinola said, gesturing for the comms signal to be terminated. He looked to Strauss. "XO, please meet our guest in the transporter room."

Strauss arrived in the transporter room flanked by two security personnel to find Chief Petty Officer Deryx at the console. He held three matter streams in transit, the columns of bluish light wavering on their individual beaming pads.

"Three signals in the buffer, Commander. Two human females, and an El-Aurian male."

Strauss frowned. "I thought we were only beaming over one person."

"Commander Ramirez indicated the other two needed medical attention, sir," Deryx replied.

Strauss glanced at the transporter console and asked, "Any signs of weapons or biological agents, Chief?"

"None, sir."

"Bring them in, then," Strauss ordered.

A second later, the three matter streams coalesced into fully realized people. A diminutive female of Hispanic ancestry stepped forward to announce, "Commander Ramirez, reporting as ordered. Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted," Strauss allowed. She moved forward and offered her hand as Ramirez stepped down off the platform. "Inga Strauss, XO of the border cutter *Bluefin*."

Ramirez shook the proffered hand firmly. "I should have realized it would be the Border Service coming to our rescue," she said with a smile.

Strauss worked to decipher any hidden subtext to the statement, suddenly self-conscious after having briefly reviewed the other woman's service record. "Meaning?"

"Only that it's usually you folks tasked to come to the rescue of us regular Fleet pogues when we get in over our heads," Ramirez said with a deferential grin. She turned to introduce her comrades. "This is Lieutenant Lar'ragos and Petty Officer Dunleavy. Both were injured in the effort to take the ship from the Maquis. I'd like to request they be attended to in Sickbay."

"Of course." Strauss gestured to one of the security specialists. "Escort them to see Dr. Castille."

Strauss moved into the corridor with Ramirez in tow. "How'd you manage to take the ship, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Our security chief back there thinks he's a Klingon targ in a Starfleet uniform," Ramirez answered. "Taking the bridge was a bit of a fiasco, but we got it done. We've got a number of Maquis prisoners aboard as well."

As the two stepped into a turbolift, Strauss glanced over at her counterpart, her expression uncertain. "I'm afraid we haven't detected any signs of *Gibraltar* yet."

Ramirez didn't seem particularly disturbed by this bit of news. "She'll turn up. She always does."

Strauss nodded wordlessly at the other woman's evident confidence in her ship and crew as the lift completed its ascent.

For a physician of Castille's caliber, the injuries from the two visiting Starfleet personnel were an easy mend. As Dunleavy sat in a special chair under a dermal regeneration mask, Castille completed his repair of Lar'ragos' fractured ribs. It wasn't the man's present injuries that fascinated the young doctor, however, but the history of traumatic episodes hinted at by the mass of scar tissue and bone calcification throughout the El-Aurian's body.

Castille waved the ostio-knitter over Lar'ragos' chest and said by way of conversation, "I'm guessing you've got some interesting stories to tell, Lieutenant."

"If you only knew," the man replied cryptically.

The doctor glanced at a computer readout, frowned, and then passed a medical sensor wand over Pava's mouth. He then moved the sensor down towards Lar'ragos' abdomen. "I'm picking up traces of Andorian blood in your oral tissues and digestive tract. You're not blended-race,

by any chance?"

Lar'ragos shook his head slightly. "No, I'm not from around here."

"Then how did it get there?"

"One of the Maquis was Andorian," Lar'ragos said simply. "I bit off his antennae."

Castille blinked at the casual mention of such extreme violence. "You... you *what*? Why would you do that?"

"He proved unreasonably stubborn and wouldn't stay down," Lar'ragos answered. He sat up and dangled his feet over the side of the exam table. As he flexed his leg, the lieutenant nodded approvingly. "Nice work, Doc. Much obliged." Lar'ragos slid down off the table and moved to the exit to address the security detail. "Can I get an escort back to the transporter room? I'd like to return to the freighter as soon as possible."

"Where--" Castille tried to wrap his mind around the man's indifference. "Where are the antennae now? I might be able to reattach them."

Lar'ragos looked thoughtful as he reflected, "One of them is someplace near the turbolift on Deck 5 of the freighter. The other..." he glanced down at his abdomen, "well, I'll be seeing that one in a few days, I'm sure."

The security officer stepped out into the corridor, gesturing for Lar'ragos to follow.

He grinned at the horrified look on Castille's face and Lar'ragos added, "Don't worry, Doc. Of all people, you should know those things grow back." He leaned back through the doorway and called to Dunleavy, "Saihra, report back to the freighter as soon as you're discharged, okay?"

Unable to speak due to the dermal mask, Dunleavy responded with a thumbs up from the chair.

Chapter 7

USS *Bluefin*

E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

The captain's ready room door chimed, prompting him to call, "Enter."

Strauss obliged, leading Ramirez into the small office. Akinola stood from behind the desk as his XO made the introductions. "Captain Joseph Akinola, Commander Liana Ramirez of the *Gibraltar*."

"I appreciate your sense of dramatic timing, Commander," he said with a pronounced smile, his hand fairly enveloping that of the smaller woman. Despite the difference in their statures, Ramirez's handshake was firm and she maintained a self-assured presence.

"It was our pleasure, sir. My thanks for coming to our rescue."

Akinola gestured for Ramirez to sit, and she slid easily into one of the chairs facing the desk. Strauss moved for the exit, but the captain motioned towards the other seat. "I'd like you to sit in on the debrief, XO."

For the next twenty minutes, Ramirez gave a detailed report on the situation that had drawn *Gibraltar* to the E'Mdifarr system, and the capture and subsequent escape of her away team from the clutches of the Maquis.

As he listened to her story, Akinola reflected on the service record he had skimmed while Strauss was collecting Ramirez from the transporter room. Ramirez's posting to the *Constitution*-class vessel was as unusual as Akinola having been assigned Strauss. The women were of a kind, both highly professional, driven, with sterling service records and numerous citations and decorations to their credit. Akinola surmised that it wouldn't be long before both of them commanded ships of their own.

"One question, Commander. We noticed both the Maquis ship that we destroyed as well as the one you've commandeered had damaged warp drives. Any clue as to why that is?"

Ramirez nodded. "Yes, sir. Captain Sandhurst engineered a device designed to create a pulse capable of depolarizing the warp engines of any spacecraft within a certain radius. The idea was that if someone attempted to ambush the convoy, we'd run interference and set off the device near the largest number of enemy ships possible. This would drop them to sub-light and leave them unable to harass the convoy any further."

Akinola looked reasonably impressed. "And would this device affect *Gibraltar* similarly?"

"Yes, sir. We'd hardened some of our systems against the pulse and increased the structural integrity fields of the nacelles so as not to take as heavy a hit, but if the ship's shields are even moderately compromised, there's no known defense against it."

"And am to understand you're in possession of Maquis prisoners?"

"We are, sir. We have twelve prisoners in custody aboard the freighter, along with the bodies of three Maquis fatalities. With your permission, I'd like to transfer them aboard the *Bluefin*. At present, we don't have the necessary facilities to keep them securely guarded."

"Of course." He looked to Strauss briefly to communicate his intent to accept custody of the prisoners before refocusing his attention on the visiting officer. "Have you detected any signs of the *Gibraltar* since you took control of the Q-ship, Commander?"

"None, Captain," Ramirez answered evenly. "I'd speculate they went to ground somewhere in the asteroid field to conduct repairs to their nacelles."

Akinola frowned. "You mean before attempting to recover your away team?"

Ramirez answered his downcast expression with an earnest look. "To be perfectly candid, sir, the captain likely realized that finding us before restoring their warp drive would preclude a quick grab-and-escape operation. Additionally, he knows his senior staff can handle themselves in a detached capacity. We're rather used to it."

He still looked dubious and Akinola pressed, "Just so we're clear, I don't suffer captains who would put their people in danger needlessly."

Ramirez held Akinola's stern gaze without flinching as she replied, "Respectfully, Captain, the last time my away team was in danger, Sandhurst went head-to-head with a Son'a battlecruiser and an Alshain warship to rescue us. All shipboard loyalty aside, sir, one thing I cannot fault him on is his dedication to his crew's welfare."

Akinola inclined his head grudgingly and conceded. "If you say so, Commander."

Ramirez's communicator chirped, and she tapped the device as she gave the captain an apologetic look. "Go ahead."

"*Lar'ragos here, sir. I'm finished in Sickbay, and ship's security is escorting me back to the transporter room.*"

"Understood, Pava. Please coordinate with *Bluefin's* security detachment to transfer custody of the Maquis to the ship."

"Acknowledged, Commander."

A thoughtful expression on his features, Akinola reflected, "Lar'ragos... where do I know that name from?"

"Probably Tzenketh, sir," Ramirez offered. "He was in the last group evacuated from the embassy compound four years ago during the planet's last cycle of succession violence. Made something of a name for himself as 'the last man off Tzenketh.'"

Akinola nodded in recognition. "That's right. I remember now." He gave Ramirez a conspiratorial grin. "Is he still a staunch defender of the Federation's honor?"

An ironic smile tugged at the edge of Ramirez's mouth. "You have no idea, sir. They let him keep the flag."

He held her gaze a moment longer, and then chuckled. "Alright, then. What would you propose for our next course of action?"

"I'd advise keeping our ships together to maintain an edge in firepower, sir. The Maquis still have two more Q-ships that we know of, plus a half-dozen or so reasonably well armed smallcraft."

"Agreed, Commander. However, I want you and your people prepared to abandon that freighter at a moment's notice. If we have to retreat from this system, *Bluefin* appears to be the only ship in the vicinity still capable of achieving warp speed."

"Understood, sir."

"Thank you, Commander Ramirez." Akinola nodded to the officer. "Dismissed."

After Ramirez had stepped out, the captain focused on his exec. "Impressions, XO? Is she covering for Sandhurst?"

Strauss suppressed a sardonic grin as she observed, "Weren't you the one singing the man's praises just a few hours ago, sir?"

"That's before I was aware he'd left his away team in enemy hands."

She played devil's advocate. "They were under attack by a superior force. You're suggesting he should have sacrificed the entire ship and crew in a futile attempt to rescue six people, sir?"

Akinola blew out a breath, his irritation ebbing slightly. "Point taken, Commander. It's just not the way I'd have handled it."

Strauss shrugged. "His ship, his rules. Besides, if Ramirez isn't bothered by the fact, why should we raise a stink, Captain?"

Akinola nodded slowly and relaxed. "You're right, of course."

USS *Gibraltar*

E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system

Sector 21508

Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

Gibraltar slipped silently around the asteroid, the shattered landscape of the planetary shard bearing mute witness to the vessel's stealthy pursuit of her enemy.

Ensign Lightner kept the ship just outside the sensor range of the Q-ship, using the massive rocks themselves to shield their presence from the Maquis.

"Nicely done, Ensign," Pell observed from where she stood directly behind the Helm and Ops stations, a hand on the back of each seat. "Anything from our passive sensor reception, Shanthi?"

His eyes fixed to his sensor display, the lanky young man uttered, "Nothing yet, sir. The freighter's heavy shielding means she isn't giving off much in the way of decipherable information."

Pell glared at the fleeting image of the freighter as if she could will herself to see into its structure. Was Ramirez's team being held captive aboard the Q-ship? Could they safely return fire on the warship if attacked without having to worry about the welfare of their comrades? So many questions, but so damnably few answers.

"Sickbay to Commander Pell."

Her heart crawled into her throat as Pell tapped her combadge. "Pell here."

"I have an update on the captain's condition, sir."

Pell wanted desperately to take this conversation to the ready room, as much to shield the crew from her own reaction if the news was bad as

to protect them from the news itself. She had lost her husband Soyam to the depredations of the Cardassians more than a decade earlier. Her renewed relationship with Donald was still so new, so tenuous, that the thought of losing him as well after such a long time spent in deliberate isolation was nearly more than she could bear.

She retreated to the command chair and took a seat. "Proceed, Doctor," she instructed the hologram.

"I've run a successful deionization series on him, as well as a blood transfusion. At present I've injected him with a heavy concentration of nanoprobes designed to repair any remaining cellular damage caused by his radiation exposure. I expect a full recovery, Commander, due in no small part to my ingenious treatment regimen. The captain should be clear to return to duty within seventy-two hours."

She was so relieved at the good news that Pell didn't even blink at the EMH's conceited assessment of its own prowess. "Thank you, Doctor. Well done."

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*
E'Mdifarr Asteroid Belt, E'Mdifarr system
Sector 21508
Alliance Occupied Cardassian Territory

'I can't believe they've still got a Connie in service,' thought a bemused Ben Maxwell as his cloaked Bird-of-Prey followed in the wake of the Federation starship. Upon arriving at E'Mdifarr, Maxwell had managed to trace the Q-ship based on the fact that it was now the only remaining source of communications jamming in the system. He had very nearly decloaked and signaled the other Maquis ship when his weapons officer spotted the escort ship trailing the freighter. Now, Maxwell had joined the cat and mouse game, likening himself to the wolf bringing up the rear.

"Status of their shields?" he asked, still admiring the graceful lines of the starship on the viewer.

"Holding at approximately seventy percent of rated output."

Maxwell rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. "Still too strong for us to breach their shields with a single volley." He chewed various tactics in his mind as he cycled through dozens of possibilities until he settled upon a plan that would serve two purposes simultaneously.

He glanced at his weapons officer. "Weaps, target disruptors on their rear phaser emitters and photon launcher." Maxwell pushed buttons on the worn command chair to call up an orange and red Klingon tactical display on the viewer. "And put the first of our torpedoes here. The detonation should cause a cascade barrage that will overwhelm their shields. Once the shields are down, we'll disable their remaining weapons and raid their medical supplies and their armory." He sat back in his chair to await the results of his innovative tactic. "Oh," he added as an afterthought, "tell Osgood to get his boarding team prepped."

The weapons man's response was accompanied by a venomous smile. "On it, Ben."

USS *Gibraltar*

Shanthi called out, his voice suddenly laced with dread, "I'm reading a tetryon surge, Commander."

Pell swiveled towards the Science station and prompted, "Location?"

Shanthi looked perplexed as he glanced up from his sensor display. "Surge from astern!"

"Aft view," Pell ordered. "Standby weapons."

"Vessel identified," Juneau announced from Ops. "Klingon Bird-of-Prey, *B'rel*-class."

"Friend or foe?" Pell pressed.

"They're arming weapons and raising shields," Juneau noted as her voice tightened. "They're locking targeting sensors."

Unconsciously leaning forward in the chair, Pell urged, "Full spread aft!"

Tark carried out the order and watched a glowing green torpedo flash from the scout ship's forward launch tube an instant before pressing his own firing toggle.

The torpedo raced past *Gibraltar* to slam instead into the side of a tumbling asteroid nearby. The impact cleaved away a sizeable piece of rock, and the calved shard immediately shattered into dozens of pieces of scattering rubble. This debris pelted the starship's starboard shield grid as the generators labored to repel the massive kinetic force of the onslaught before finally succumbing to their pre-programmed overload protocols.

Simultaneously, the *Garth of Izar's* disruptors waited until the red glow of *Gibraltar's* aft torpedo launcher announced a launch was imminent

before firing. The green energy bolts met the torpedo just aft of the starship's shield envelope, causing a concussive explosion that collapsed the aft shields, ripped away the shuttlebay doors, and savaged the hull plating along the aft third of the engineering section.

Tark's phaser beams sizzled across the Bird-of-Prey's shields as the smaller craft executed a diving roll that sent it spiraling behind the cover of the asteroid Maxwell had targeted moments earlier.

Gibraltar's bridge lurched as panels overloaded and klaxons howled in protest. Juneau cried out, "Shields have failed, sir! Reading explosive decompression of the shuttle bay and multiple hull breaches in the aft sections of the secondary hull."

"Oh... God." Lightner's plaintive cry brought Pell's attention back to the main screen, which now displayed a forward view. The Bird-of-Prey was coming at them head on, her wingtip disruptors flashing as the scout systematically blasted the phaser emitters arrayed along *Gibraltar's* saucer as the old ship juddered in protest.

"Return fire!" Pell shouted.

"With what?" Tark growled. "Phasers are disabled and we can't fire torpedoes at this range without shields."

Shanthi called out from the Science station, "The Kriosian freighter has apparently detected our exchange of fire, Commander. They're coming about."

Pell closed her eyes for a brief moment and uttered a silent prayer to the Prophets. Tark beat his fists against now useless Tactical console, cursing colorfully in his native tongue.

"Reading transporter signatures in Sickbay and the security armory, Commander," Juneau noted dourly as she drew a phaser from beneath her console. "It looks like they're beaming away our stores of medical supplies and small arms."

As she sighed heavily, Pell looked to Tark. "Master Chief, assemble teams to repel any boarding parties. Take whomever you need."

Tark drew his own phaser, then gestured to Lightner and Juneau. "With me, sirs."

Shanthi slid into the Helm station as his fellow ensign vacated the seat. From behind him, he heard Pell say quietly, "Someone open a channel to the Bird-of-Prey... and announce our intention to surrender."

Chapter 8

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*

Something tugged at the edge of Sandhurst's consciousness, drawing him inexorably upward from the depths of his torpor. His eyes felt leaden as he struggled to open them, only to find Sickbay bathed with the blood-red strobes of alert lighting. He tried to catch the attention of a nurse rushing past but discovered that he couldn't find his voice. Sandhurst heard raised voices, then shouting, something about medical supplies and evacuating the patients from Sickbay. He dug down deep within himself and fought to muster enough willpower to roll off the biobed. It was only after he had completed the initial weight shift and roll that Sandhurst discovered to his dismay that his legs didn't seem to want to function...

Bridge, USS *Gibraltar*

"Surrender, sir?" Shanthi asked, his voice tinged with concern.

"It's called stalling for time, Ensign," Pell answered patiently as she moved from the command chair to the master system's display at the back of the bridge. As she analyzed the cutaway diagram of the ship, Pell assessed *Gibraltar's* overall state. The board indicated moderate damage to the saucer and serious damage to the secondary hull. She imagined that Engineering would be scrambling to restore key systems right about now. Pell traced the EPS lines to the ship's transporter rooms and deciphered that transporter functions were offline for the moment.

The enlisted rating now occupying the Ops station called back to Pell. "Commander, I have the Bird-of-Prey on comms, audio only."

Pell moved to the center of the bridge to press an interface toggle on the armrest of the center seat that engaged the audio pickup. "Unidentified vessel, this is Lt. Commander Pell Ojana of the Federation starship *Gibraltar*. You have initiated an unprovoked attack on our ship, causing serious damage and casualties. State your intent."

The crewman at Ops looked up from his console, whispering, "Casualty reports coming in, sir."

Pell held up her hand in a delaying gesture as she awaited a response from their attackers. Finally, it came, a heavily digitized voice whose gender and species of origin were unknowable. "*Federation ship, you will power down all weapons and defensive systems. Once we have completed taking the supplies we need from your stores, you will set a course at one-quarter impulse and exit the system. If you deviate from your egress route or attempt to re-enter the system, you will be destroyed. Signal your intent to comply with these instructions.*"

A shimmering purple line appeared on the master system's display, marking a bright path from the EPS feeds to the transporter grid and catching Pell's eye. One of their transporter rooms now had power. Pell opened the channel once again to reply, "I understand your terms and hereby signal our agreement." She muted the audio and stated to the petty officer at Tactical, "Cut power to the shields and weapons, make it look like we're complying."

Pell tapped her communicator and ordered, "Transporter room one, ready photon charges for transport over to the Bird-of-Prey on my mark."

"Aye, sir."

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

Maxwell's weapons officer looked up from his sensor window and smirked. "Just as you predicted, Ben. They've restored partial transporter power, and it looks like they're prepping to beam over explosives."

As he nodded with satisfaction, Maxwell turned to another of his crew. "Dorsey, how goes our resource reallocation?"

"Three minutes and we'll have emptied their armory. We've got the medical supplies aboard, and Eiena says the ship appears to be equipped with two medical holograms."

Maxwell raised an eyebrow. A holographic doctor. That *would* come in handy. "Weaps, ready another torpedo, set for EM-burst detonation. I want to fry every multitronic circuit and iso-chip on that starship. We'll leave them reflecting on the meaning of 'compliance' as they're drifting without power in an asteroid field." Maxwell looked to his first mate and inquired, "How's an EMH holo-system going to stand up to that?"

The former Starfleet lieutenant commander replied evenly, "They're designed to be operational even under disaster circumstances, and the holomatrix database and projectors are rated to take a substantial EM discharge. I'd give us fifty-fifty odds of recovering an operational unit."

Maxwell weighed the odds. "Let's do it. Tell Osgood his boarding party is a go. I want one of those holographic medical modules and enough emitters to set up wherever we establish our next outpost."

"You got it, Ben."

Bridge, USS *Gibraltar*

"Transporter room, how's it coming?" Pell pushed.

"Almost there, sir. Some of the automation circuitry is offline so security's down here arming the charges manually now."

"Reading another torpedo launch, sir!" Ops shouted.

Pell gritted her teeth as she knelt to the deck and grabbed the safety railing. "Brace for impact!"

The greenish missile detonated some fifteen meters from the starship's hull, infusing the entire superstructure with electro-magnetic radiation. Roiling white streamers of electricity arced across *Gibraltar's* hull as the ship's running lights flickered and died.

On the bridge silence and inky blackness reigned, interrupted by the occasional gout of sparks from an overloaded console and the sizzle of dying circuitry. "Emergency power," Pell ordered as she tried to keep the tenor of desperation from creeping into her voice.

Emergency lighting wavered and then steadied, leaving Pell staring at a bridge bereft of power. The only faint glimmer of operability was from the Engineering station, where the crewman was squinting to make out the faint text scrolling across the compartment's only working monitor. "Main power's out, sir. The auxiliaries, too. We're on tertiary backups, just enough power left for life support and gravity."

"Transporters?" Pell asked hopefully.

The crewman shook his head. "Negative, sir."

Her mind raced as Pell sought urgently for an innovative plan, something to steal momentum from their attackers and turn the tide. Something like Donald or Liana might come up with. This, she decided, is why she had never pursued her own command. Ultimately, the fate of the crew would rest on the shoulders of their commanding officer, and as Pell felt herself burdened by that weighty responsibility, she found herself wanting. "Wait..." she called out. "The transporters aboard the shuttlecraft should still be operational, right?"

"No way to get to them, sir," Shanthy replied from the inert Helm station. "The shuttle bay's depressurized and we don't have the power to erect a forcefield over the breach."

Pell moved back to the command chair, her legs giving out and depositing her unceremoniously onto the seat. She leaned forward and cradled her head in her hands briefly before coming back up into a seated position. "Whatever power we have left, route it to comms. Hopefully, this time they'll let us surrender genuinely."

Shanthy looked doubtful as he abandoned the Helm station and made his way towards the randomly flickering Engineering console. He reconfigured part of the panel display to communications. "I'll try, sir," the young man uttered soberly as Pell's apparent helplessness began to creep into his own psyche.

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*

Sandhurst crawled to a counter and reached up with shaking hands. He managed to lever himself to a sitting position from which he could just make out the contents of the tabletop. He grasped a hypospray syringe and fumbled through the medication ampoules with his other hand, finally locating two promising vials that he loaded into the base of the device, one after the other. Sandhurst had selected an adrenaline-analogue and a potent dose of amphetamine. He hoped that his concoction wouldn't kill him as he pressed the hypo to his neck, the contents injecting into his bloodstream with a soft hiss. As the chemicals flooded his body, Sandhurst managed to pull himself to his knees with his new found, albeit artificial strength. Again, he began sorting through the drug ampoules, whispering, "Thank you, *Ahmet* Kutav," with no small amount of irony.

Corridor Intersection 5-D, USS *Gibraltar*

Orange streams of Starfleet phaser fire lit the corridor, competing with the brilliant strobes of disruptor bolts and pulse plasma discharges from Maquis small arms that screamed back down the passageway. Tark and his security team were at an impasse, unable to advance any further in the face of furious opposition. The master chief was trying to arrange a flanking maneuver, but onboard communications were spotty, and even their combadges had become unreliable in the heavily EM laden environment.

Lightner eased around the corner of the corridor intersection to let off a sustained burst of phaser energy before darting back behind cover as a fusillade of return fire gnawed at the tritanium plating inches away from his head. "Yep," he assessed helpfully, "they are definitely in no mood to retreat."

Tark looked askance at the youngster and shook his head. "Why don't you jump out there and draw some more fire for us, genius?"

Lightner grinned broadly. "That's genius 'sir' to you, Master Chief."

"Whelp," the pugnacious Tellarite replied, unable to completely hide his own grim smile. He returned to the fray and tapped his

communicator, yelling into the device. "Tark to Diamato, how's it coming in the Jefferies tube, Ensign?" Static was his only reply.

"What about stun grenades, Master Chief?" Security Specialist Sharpe posited.

"They were among the armory supplies that were beamed away by our friends out there," Tark snarled, his disgust evident.

On the opposite side of the intersection, Juneau cowered against the bulkhead, her unfired phaser clutched in both hands like some kind of magic talisman whose mere presence would keep evil spirits at bay. She had demonstrated plenty of bravado by drawing the weapon on the bridge and dashing off with Tark to defend the ship against enemy boarding parties. Now that the fighting had begun in earnest, however, she found herself paralyzed by fear.

Juneau kept waiting for the bravery and leadership skills credited to her during *Gibraltar's* classified mission to the Pierosh system to re-emerge. She had supposedly led a last-ditch defense of an underground bunker complex against an attack by a horde of nightmarish creatures and had subsequently been awarded a citation for bravery by the captain. She remembered none of it, having become the apparent victim of a stray energy discharge that had erased her short term memory along with that of the master chief subsequent to their being beamed back to the ship. Now, though, any thoughts of bravery and sacrifice had fled from her mind, and her current paralysis was just another in a long line of bad memories she could credit to her lackluster career.

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*

Former Starfleet Special Missions Teams operator Sylvan Osgood and his Maquis boarding party executed a fluid tactical entry into the starship's Sickbay. They were fresh from a vicious firefight with a security team that had burst forth from a Jefferies tube access hatch right in his party's midst. It had quickly devolved into a brutal hand-to-hand engagement, and only Osgood's skill and stamina had turned the tide against the less experienced though eager security officers. Fortunately the youngsters would live to learn from the experience. Osgood reflected guiltily, *'Well, most of them will.'* He had been forced to shoot one young ensign at close range with a Ferengi phaser set to kill.

As they played their portable lights across the dimly lit Sickbay ward, they discovered the compartment had been largely evacuated prior to their arrival. *'So much the better,'* Osgood mused. A single Starfleeter, garbed in a medical gown, sat slumped unconscious against a storage cabinet along one wall. "Fan out, people. Disassemble as many of the holoprojectors as you can find. T'Mir and I will pull the program storage block."

As the Vulcan Maquis approached the compartment's main computer interface panel, the crewman resting against the cabinetry suddenly lunged forward, eyes open, and pressed a hypospray against the woman's leg. T'Mir moved to draw her pistol, but suddenly collapsed before her weapon had cleared its holster.

Osgood raised his Ferengi phaser and took aim at the man. "Brave, but stupid. She'd better only be unconscious, or you're the one who'll need medical assistance."

Sandhurst glared at the intruder with blatant anger. "I'll give you just one warning. Get the hell off my ship and no harm will come to you."

The former commando replied with an arrogant smirk. "Strong words from a guy who can't even stand up." He set his phaser for stun and took aim at the slouching officer. "Say goodnight..."

"Computer, activate EMH!" Sandhurst shouted.

Before Osgood could depress the trigger, he heard the brief hum of ionization as the EMH took form behind him. There was a gasp from one of his boarding party, and another of his other men muttered, "What the hell—"

Osgood pivoted around to see a metallic cylinder hovering on end in the middle of Sickbay. An assortment of blades, flails, and other cutting implements jutted from its central mass. "Computer, identify all non-crewmembers as threats and engage now!" Sandhurst urged from where he remained sitting.

Instantly, the device became a whirling dervish of carnage as it spun towards the Maquis intruders. It hacked and slashed them to ribbons so quickly only two of them managed to get off ineffectual shots before the holographic weapon was upon them. Osgood evaded, diving over the main examination table in the center of the room. He performed a shoulder roll and came up with his phaser at arm's length.

Sandhurst winced and covered his face with his arm as gore spattered the compartment. In seconds, it was over. Only Osgood remained, the man's gun-hand shaking with rage as he increased his phaser's discharge power and moved around the exam table to get a clear shot at Sandhurst. "You sick son-of-a-bitch!"

The captain's expression was appropriately dark. "You didn't give me much choice, Maquis. I *warned* you."

"I'm going to kill you, you bastard!" Osgood stood from his crouch, finger depressing the trigger. Sandhurst rolled to the side as the phaser beam punched a smoking hole in the cabinet he had been sitting against. At that moment, a uniformed arm appeared in front of Osgood and snatched the phaser from his hand with both inhuman speed and strength. The commando replied by driving an elbow at his attacker, only to fall completely through the holographic figure, a standard Mark I EMH projection. The hologram then bent at the waist to deliver a textbook perfect Vulcan nerve pinch to the Maquis that rendered him insensate.

Its scything blades now flinging off the last of the Maquis' blood, the twirling weapon uttered a choppy rendition of its programmed verbal query, *"Please... state the... nature... of the medicaaaaaaal... emergency."*

A bleak frown scarred his face as Sandhurst climbed slowly to his feet. "Doc, I think you just violated your Hippocratic oath." He looked down at his blood soaked hands and hospital tunic. "EMH-1, program pause," he ordered. The spinning flail of death stopped obediently in mid-air.

The un-modified EMH-2 looked around Sickbay with undisguised horror. "Was this necessary?" it asked, its voice thick with derision.

As he knelt to check the pulse of the unconscious Vulcan, Sandhurst murmured, "I'm afraid so."

Chapter 9

USS *Bluefin*

The *Bluefin* and the captured Maquis Q-ship *Draskaar* moved together through the field of slowly drifting asteroids, their destination a set of coordinates where the ever watchful Lt. Bane had identified energy discharges marking an exchange of high-yield weapons fire.

Akinola had allowed Gralt and his team forty-five minutes to shore up their starboard nacelle strut as best they could before resuming their search for *Gibraltar*. The obstinate Tellarite wasn't happy with that, and truth be told, neither was the captain. Regardless, the lives of their fellow Starfleet personnel took precedence over repairs which, if completed, would only improve *Bluefin's* performance by a marginal factor.

Akinola sat patiently in the captain's chair as he resisted the urge to stare at Bane while the man worked to tweak his incoming sensor returns to maximize data yield. He did, however, look over at Strauss to find the young woman's gaze focused on the Australian lieutenant. Far from anxious, Akinola would have described the look on his XO's face as being a mix of pride and longing. He suppressed a knowing smile and the captain turned his attention to the viewer.

"ETA to energy discharge contact three minutes," Fralk announced from the Helm station. The Denobulan was completely engrossed in his console, plotting constant course adjustments to avoid the ever-shifting field of planetary rubble.

"XO, sound General Quarters."

"Aye, sir." Strauss replied, toggling the PA. "*All hands, red alert. Stand to battle stations.*"

Akinola accessed a scrambled laser-link comms frequency, raising the *Draskaar*. "Commander Ramirez, what's your status?"

Her reply was immediate. "*All weapons running hot and shields at full strength, sir. Awaiting your orders, Captain.*" Akinola had to admit that thus far he had been impressed by Ramirez. Despite being without her ship, she and her team had overcome significant odds to turn the tables on their captors. Upon *Bluefin's* arrival, Ramirez had exhibited no hesitation at following the orders of a 'mere' Border Service captain. Rather, she had immediately acknowledged his authority and set about working seamlessly with his crew. Joseph knew there were more than a few first officers in the regular Fleet who would have balked at surrendering their authority to the CO of a cutter.

From an auxiliary console, Senior Chief Brin observed, "Captain, the *Trafalgar* should be arriving in system any moment, sir."

Akinola responded with a small shake of his head. "They'll drop out of warp at the system periphery due to the severe navigational hazard of the belt. ETA from there to here at max impulse is over forty minutes. I expect this will all be over by then."

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

Maxwell sat impatiently as he watched the seconds tick past on the chronometer just below the viewscreen. He was just about to ask for a status report when his chief gunner spoke up. "Ben, we just lost bio-telemetry from most of the boarding party."

Maxwell stood suddenly and moved across the cramped bridge to the gunner's station as he asked, "Most? Who do you have?"

"Osgood and T'Mir are the only two I'm still reading, and their returns indicate both of them may be unconscious."

"What the hell's happening over there?" Maxwell fumed. "Beam those two back straight away."

"Roger that."

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*

The main doors to Sickbay hissed open, and Tark found himself staring down the emitter of the Bajoran phaser pistol Sandhurst had liberated from T'Mir's holster. "Captain?" Tark stepped forward, clearly concerned about Sandhurst's disheveled and blood-soaked appearance.

The captain was kneeling over an unconscious female in the midst of what looked to be almost unimaginable carnage. The walls, ceiling, and work surfaces of the main Sickbay ward were splashed with crimson, and the shredded remains of what appeared to be multiple people littered the floor.

"Sir... are you alright?" Tark stepped aside to allow the rest of his ad-hoc security team through the door. There were gasps and muttered oaths from the others as they caught sight of the slaughter.

Sandhurst nodded numbly and lowered the phaser clutched in his trembling hand. "Maquis. No options," he croaked weakly.

"I'm... I'm sure, sir," Tark offered lamely. As he moved towards a second intact but unmoving figure, this one a male human, he detected the harmonic component of a transporter beam. As the comatose male vanished before his eyes, Tark turned to shout a warning to Sandhurst. The

master chief spun around just in time to see the telltale red shimmer of a Klingon transporter beam engulfing both the captain and the woman at his feet.

SS *Draskaar*

Ramirez called back to where Lar'ragos manned the weapons console and inquired, "You ready for a fight, Pava?"

"Always am, sir."

"Mister Ashok," she called. "Ready those additional generators and power cells. We're going to kick the Maquis in the teeth until they beg for mercy."

The Bolian's only reply was a satisfied sounding grunt.

Taiee stepped onto the bridge, an emergency medical kit slung over one shoulder. She assumed a seat at an empty cargo management console.

Ramirez glanced over at the nurse practitioner. "Evening, Doc. Come to watch the show?"

"More like patch the lot of you up after the brawl," she answered with an ironic smile.

"Fair enough." Ramirez addressed Sarnak, the Vulcan flight control officer on loan from the *Bluefin*. "How is she responding at helm, Lieutenant?"

"Sluggishly, sir. Her modification into a combat platform included only a slight improvement in maneuverability from the ship's original design specifications."

Ramirez grinned. "You mean she handles like a beached whale."

Sarnak minded his console as he tried to maintain formation with the more maneuverable *Bluefin*. "I believe that is what I'd indicated, Commander." The Vulcan seemed immune to the laughter this response elicited from the others. As the *Draskaar* cleared the last of the rocky obstructions, he noted stoically, "We have arrived at the projected coordinates, sir."

Lar'ragos chimed in, "Sensors reading... one *Constitution*-class starship, one Maquis Q-ship, and a Klingon scout-type Bird-of-Prey."

Ramirez resisted the urge to lean forward in the command chair. "Status of *Gibraltar*, Ashok?"

"I'm seeing significant damage to the engineering hull and severe structural integrity loss to the main shuttle bay. Their tactical systems and shields have been compromised, and they appear to be running on minimal emergency power, sir."

"She's damaged and in over her head," Lar'ragos muttered sardonically. "It must be Tuesday."

USS *Bluefin*

Bane reported much the same information to Akinola as the *Bluefin* crested an asteroid similar in size to the object that caused the great Cretaceous extinction on Earth. Akinola keyed his comlink to the *Draskaar*. "Akinola to Ramirez, we'll take the Bird-of-Prey. You keep that other Q-ship occupied."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

A photon torpedo accompanied by twin disruptor blasts from *Garth of Izar's* wingtip cannons slammed into *Bluefin's* forward screens, causing the bridge lights to dim momentarily as the ship's shield generators pulled additional power to stabilize the defense grid.

"XO, priority targeting on weapons and propulsion. I want prisoners." Akinola planted his elbows on the command chair's armrests and interlaced his fingers, his mind now switching to full tactical mode.

"Aye, opening fire." A volley of torpedoes reached out for the Bird-of-Prey as the smaller ship winged-over and raced for cover. One of the two torpedoes reached its target, as did a phaser blast from the cutter. The two in concert delivered a serious blow to the scout's aft deflectors as the ship disappeared behind a nearby asteroid.

Momentary confusion on the part of the Maquis manning the Q-ship led to their opening fire on *Bluefin* first, despite the sudden approach of the *Draskaar*. A salvo of mercurite missiles swarmed through the void to impact the cutter's shields amidst punishing strikes from the freighter's disruptor batteries.

On *Bluefin's* bridge, it felt like multiple sledgehammer blows against the ship's spaceframe which caused consoles to crackle and tossed T'Ser out of her seat at the Ops board. The Vulcan cursed under her breath as she pulled herself back into a sitting position as Gralt called out, "Port-aft shields failing, Captain. Re-routing the auxiliaries to the defense grid, but that's going to drain our available phaser power."

"Do what you have to, Commander," came Akinola's brusque reply. "Helm," Akinola called out over the cacophony of alarms and the squawk of frantic comms bleeding across the PA system. "Get after that bird and keep us out of that monster's gun sights!"

SS *Draskaar*

"The Q-ship's firing on *Bluefin*," Lar'ragos assessed as the *Draskaar* bore down on her sister vessel.

"Open fire, Lieutenant. Give them everything we have." She called over her shoulder to Ashok and ordered, "All ancillary power to the forward shields." Then to Helm, "Mister Sarnak, ramming speed."

To his credit, the Vulcan did not hesitate or demonstrate the slightest emotional response, merely voicing, "Aye, Helm answers ahead full. Ramming speed."

"Bring us in at an angle that will cause maximum damage to their weapons arrays as we clip them, Lieutenant."

Sarnak complied promptly and adjusted the *Draskaar's* course while Lar'ragos pummeled the other ship with a scorching bombardment designed to tax their opponents' shielding.

Ramirez keyed the PA. "All hands, brace for collision!"

Draskaar slammed into its twin, the impact devastating the faltering shields of the Maquis vessel. *Draskaar's* underside hull plating gouged a trench across the other Q-ship's faux upper cargo holds which contained her formidable weapons arrays. Secondary explosions rippled across the Maquis ship's exterior as her mercurite batteries and disruptor cannons were annihilated by the mass of the attacking vessel.

Draskaar lurched free of its doppelganger, trailed by a cloud of glittering debris and escaping gasses. Lar'ragos pivoted his weapons batteries on their swivel mounts to an aft-ward orientation, and then sent a stream of disruptor fire and the last of their missiles at the now unshielded behemoth. His aim was true, and his fusillade devastated the last of the Maquis weapons arrays as well as their impulse engines, leaving the hapless freighter adrift in a shimmering cloud of flotsam as atmosphere vented from her catastrophic wounds. "Target has been incapacitated, sir," he announced with finality.

"Well done, Pava," Ramirez praised as she assessed the condition of *Gibraltar*. The ship hung dark and powerless on the viewer, the latter-half of her secondary hull scored and pitted.

"Shall we pursue *Bluefin* and the Bird-of-Prey, Commander?" Sarnak inquired.

"Negative, Lieutenant. Both ships are too maneuverable, we'd never catch up in this hulk. Bring us alongside *Gibraltar* so we can render aid."

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

Sandhurst blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dimly lit interior of the Klingon transporter room. He caught sight of a human female standing at the control console, staring at him in evident shock. She reached for something at her waist, and Sandhurst raised and fired his phaser in a single impulsive movement that was completed even before he had fully realized what was happening.

The beam struck the left side of the woman's chest, which erupted in a shower of sparks as the energy stream penetrated her torso and incinerated the organs within. As disoriented as Sandhurst was, he had merely assumed the phaser was set to stun. He had neglected to check when he had pulled it from the Vulcan's holster. "No!" he screamed as he rushed off the transport platform. "No, no, no!" He knelt at the woman's side, searching frantically for a pulse, a breath, any sign of life. There was none.

Sandhurst began CPR, giving the woman life-breaths and chest compressions until after a few moments it became evident that there was no longer an intact heart or pulmonary system left to stimulate.

The doors lurched open with a metallic shriek to admit a burly looking Bolian that the dazed Sandhurst nearly mistook for Ashok. The man looked at the unconscious Vulcan and human laying on the transport dais, then zeroed in on Sandhurst kneeling over the clearly deceased transporter operator.

Sandhurst cast a glance at the Bajoran phaser lying nearby. He realized that if he went for the pistol he would have no chance to alter the setting before firing. He would be forced to kill, again.

The Bolian evidenced no such hesitation and drew a large knife from a leg sheath as he advanced on the blood-spattered Starfleet officer. Sandhurst rolled, snatching up the phaser as he rose to his knees. The Bolian was ready for him and delivered a jolting kick that knocked the phaser from Sandhurst's hands and sent it skittering across the deck. The Bolian raised the knife as he sneered, "Time to die, little man."

His chemically induced strength now ebbing, Sandhurst struck out with a foot, trying for the Bolian's knee. It was like kicking the trunk of a tree, and just as effective. The Bolian laughed mockingly as he sheathed his knife and growled, "I'm going to make this last awhile." He reached down and hefted Sandhurst up by his hospital gown, pulling the captain to his feet. Sandhurst reared back, then drove his fist into the Bolian's face as hard as he could. The captain took some small measure of joy in hearing a satisfying crunch from the man's bifurcated nose. Bluish blood trickled from his nostrils, but the large man seemed otherwise unaffected. He wrapped his meaty hands around Sandhurst's throat

and began to squeeze.

Sandhurst gurgled and gasped for breath as his airway was constricted. He clawed and struck at the Bolian's face to no avail. The ship lurched suddenly, the lights dimming with an exterior weapons impact, but the Bolian kept his feet as his face contorted into a blood-thirsty mask of rage. "That woman over there was named Ganzi. She was my lover. Do you understand, human? You've killed my *mate!*"

With just enough strength left for one last attempt, Sandhurst reached down and grasped the handle of the Bolian's knife. He even managed to get it out of the scabbard before the Bolian redoubled his effort to crush the captain's throat, causing Sandhurst's hand to spasm as the knife slipped free of his slackening grasp and clattered to the floor.

"I say," a clipped voice sounded from behind the Bolian. "I believe he's had enough."

The large man craned his head around to look at the newcomer. He found a youthful looking human male dressed in dark clothing standing by the control console. The man was definitely not one of the *Garth of Izar's* crew compliment. The Bolian gave Sandhurst's ominously crackling neck a final squeeze for good measure and then tossed the man's body unceremoniously to the deck. "Who the hell are you?" he challenged as he stooped to retrieve his knife from the floor.

"An old friend of Donald's," the man said with a sinister smile. "Besides, you can't have him. He's mine."

"Fine," the Bolian spat. "You two can arrive in the afterlife together." He moved towards the smaller human as his blade carved intricate patterns in the air.

The human didn't move until the Bolian finally committed and slashed outward with the knife. The smaller man stepped forward to catch the larger man's arm, twisting and pivoting simultaneously with surprising strength. He added his own momentum to the thrust that was redirected up and into the Bolian's own gut. The man twisted the knife cruelly, causing the Bolian to cry out in pain as he sank to his knees.

"I can make this quick for you," the human said with false gentleness, "if you beg."

"Please," the Bolian whispered, still trying to pull the knife free with his considerable strength. The smaller man held the blade firmly in place, however, unmoved by the Bolian's efforts.

The human drew an object from his pocket that shimmered briefly in the dim light. He touched it to the Bolian's forehead, and the object emitted a pulse of energy that silenced the man's neural activity for all time, though the weapon left no discernable damage. The human dragged the Bolian with surprisingly little effort over to where his mate had died mere minutes earlier. He laid the man next to her before returning to where Sandhurst's lifeless form rested on the deck.

The man passed the object in his hand over Sandhurst, a yellow teardrop shaped crystal whose facets danced with alien glyphs and colors. "No, Donald. Today is not your day. Soon, though. You have debts to pay." The crystal glowed brightly, and Sandhurst, already dead for nearly two minutes, drew in a sharp, shuddering breath. The ship lurched again, accompanied by the crash of straining shields and the groaning of stressed metals. "Now then, let's get you to an escape pod. Appearances must be kept, after all..."

Chapter 10

USS *Bluefin*

“Maintain pursuit. All forward weapons engage as the target presents itself,” Akinola ordered, feeling the kick of *Bluefin*’s powerful impulse engines as they propelled the *Albacore*-class cutter after the Bird-of-Prey.

Asteroids tumbled by as Fralk piloted the ship deftly through the lethal obstacle course, somehow managing to keep up with the presumably more maneuverable scout.

From Tactical, Strauss assessed, “Captain, usually the *B’rel*-class lacks any aft weaponry, but I’m detecting a Class-5 point defense phaser emplacement.”

“Good catch, XO.” Akinola favored Strauss with a bleak smile. “Helm, watch out for that, they’ve got a sharp tail.”

“Yes, sir.”

Strauss let fly a phaser blast as both ships were momentarily within view of one another. The beam flared against the *Garth of Izar*’s rear screens and seemed to encourage even more desperately dangerous evasive tactics by the Maquis helmsman.

T’Ser marveled from Ops, “At this rate, they’ll kill themselves without any help from us.”

“That’d be fine by me, “ Akinola muttered from behind clenched teeth.

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

Maxwell was jostled in his seat as another phaser discharge from the pursuing cutter further depleted their aft shielding.

His pilot’s course had become so erratic that Maxwell was occasionally forced to look away from the viewscreen as mountainous shards of rock flashed past.

At the weapons console, McCready whistled appreciatively. “They’re still with us, Ben. Damned if I can explain how that old bucket can keep up with Beston’s spastic maneuvers.”

“*Albacore*-class,” Maxwell grouched, his voice tinged with reluctant admiration. “Damned things are just giant impulse engines with running lights and a registry.”

McCready frowned and pressed a comms call switch on his board. “Still no reply from the transporter room.” He flicked the toggle twice more for good measure. “Ganzi, Vraxx, what’s going on back there?” There was no answer.

A loud, metallic thud reverberated through the hull, but wasn’t accompanied by the same shaking as a weapons strike. McCready gawked at his readings. “Ben, we just launched an escape pod!” The man turned towards the bridge exit hatch.

“Mind your post, Weaps!” Maxwell snapped. “If we don’t get out of this, whatever’s happening back there won’t matter. And if those two love birds decided to jump ship, fine. Let them honeymoon in a life pod until Starfleet picks them up.” Maxwell gripped the armrests of his battered Klingon command chair tightly as he ordered, “We’re going offensive. Weaps, drop the mines while Beston slingshots us around one of those big rocks. If we can time it just right, we’ll come into firing range just as those mines detonate.”

“On it...”

USS *Bluefin*

Lt. Bane spoke up from the Science station. “Sir, looks like they just jettisoned an escape pod. I’m reading one life form... a human.”

“Mark these coordinates, Mr. Bane. We’ll pick up that lifeboat on our way back.”

“Aye, sir.”

The two ships continued to slalom through the planetary debris, exchanging the occasional pot shot as the opportunity presented itself.

Akinola called back to Senior Chief Brin, “Solly, get a boarding party readied in transporter room one. Once we disable the Maquis ship, we’ll be beaming over to take prisoners.”

Brin stood from his console and nodded curtly. “Aye, Captain.” He headed into the turbolift, the beginnings of an eager smile tugging at his lips.

Strauss glanced up at Akinola from her post at Tactical. "Should I have someone relieve me, Captain?"

Akinola shook his head fractionally. "Negative, XO. I'll be leading the boarding action."

Her eyes focused on Akinola like lasers, and in the flood of anger and disbelief that his announcement generated, she missed the two metallic objects detaching from the Bird-of-Prey ahead of them.

Fortunately, Bane had her back and called out, "Two more objects just separated from the scout, sir."

"More escape pods?" Akinola queried suspiciously.

"Standby... no, negative... I'm reading anti-matter charges in ea—"

"Helm," Akinola roared, "those are mines! Take evasive acti—"

The screen was suddenly awash in light, a fraction of a second before a concussive wave of explosive energy washed over *Bluefin*, crashing into her forward screens and sending bridge crew tumbling from their workstations as consoles sparked and died.

Akinola knew instantly what the mines presaged. While his crew was trying to pick up the pieces and get their bearings, the Bird-of-Prey was undoubtedly doubling back to finish them off. "Helm, throttle back to one-eighth impulse. Forward weapons fire!"

Strauss pulled herself back to her feet with painful slowness to call out above the din, "I... don't have a target."

"Just fire a blind pattern, as much energy as you can get downrange." Akinola prayed for a clear view of their enemy but the viewscreen offered only flickering static. "Bane, find me that ship!"

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

The Bird-of-Prey rounded the asteroid to find the cutter slowing and disgorging an impressive field of fire that alarmed Maxwell for a fraction of a second before he realized the ship was firing blindly. "Status of their shields?"

McCready nodded to himself. "Forward shields at sixteen percent."

"Fine," Maxwell hissed. "Chew them up, Weaps."

"My pleasure," McCready replied as he pressed the torpedo launch stud on his antiquated display. Orange lights flashed on his panel. "Damn it! Ben, I'm getting an automation jam warning from the torpedo tube's loading mechanism."

Maxwell grimaced. "Perfect timing. Disruptors then."

"Firing."

USS *Bluefin*

Bane fought his console as he desperately tried to route data feeds from the traumatized sensor suite to his board. He finally filtered out the interference and ghost images clouding the display. "Got her—" Bane clutched the edge of his console as disruptor blasts buffeted the cutter. "Bearing 348-mark-047, range seventeen-hundred kilometers." His hands flew across the console in a blur. "Uploading target coordinates to Tactical."

Strauss, a dark bruise forming on one of her high cheekbones, met Bane's expectant gaze. Her eyes transmitting gratitude and something deeper. "Got them..."

Akinola stood. "Fire a volley of Mark VI's, followed by Mark 22's when we've penetrated their shields."

"Aye, sir. One shake n' bake, coming up."

Twin crimson suns flashed from *Bluefin's* forward tubes, slicing through vacuum to slam into the Bird-of-Prey's port side and collapsing the scout's overtaxed shields. The second pair of torpedoes, set to deliver an overwhelming electromagnetic surge, followed right behind. Stringers of electrical current crackled across the vessel's hull as even the ruggedly hardened and redundant Klingon control systems succumbed to the storm of electrons.

Bane smiled triumphantly. "We got her, sir! Target has lost all primary systems and most of her backups. Life support and gravity functioning at minimal levels."

His battle lust far from sated, Akinola nodded curtly but refused to share in the bridge crew's whoops and shouts of celebration. He stepped up onto the upper deck of the bridge and made for the 'lift. Just as the doors began to close, Strauss slid into the lift car beside the captain.

"I don't want to hear it," he announced tersely.

"Tough," was Strauss' unexpected reply. "With all respect, sir, this is my job."

"Not today, Commander. Captain's prerogative." Akinola's eyes were fixed straight ahead at the lift car's doors. "Transporter room one," he instructed the computer.

"Hold lift," she countered, earning a rebuking glare from Akinola. "Am I to believe you hate the Maquis so much that you just have to lead this team, or is it that you don't trust me to get the job done?"

"I don't owe you an explanation, XO. Drop it and resume your post." He looked at Strauss expectantly, and when she refused to budge he growled, "Resume," to the computer.

As the lift began its descent, Strauss spoke in a carefully modulated tone. "This is about McBride, isn't it?"

Rather than the scathing reprimand she had expected at having brought up her predecessor's name, Akinola closed his eyes briefly, his face going slack and giving the impression of great weariness.

"That's precisely what this is about, Inga. I won't see another promising command officer killed needlessly." He opened his eyes and turned towards Strauss. "Am I reacting emotionally? Hell yes. Is this the best idea I've ever had? Certainly not. Do these four pips give me the right to do this my way?" The merest hint of an ironic smirk flickered across his features. "Absolutely." He reached out a hand, clasping her shoulder. "I do trust you to do this. I just can't sit idly by up there on the bridge while you do it... not again."

She nodded reluctantly as the doors slid open. "I understand, sir. I don't agree... but there's obviously no changing your mind."

Akinola held her gaze for a fraction of a second before he strode out into the corridor. He called back, "You have the Conn."

Maquis Bird-of-Prey *Garth of Izar*

Maxwell came around in response to McCready's persistent shaking. He blinked and tried to clear the cobwebs, then found his weapons specialist within his swimming field of vision. "What... happened?"

"They must have got a weapons lock at the last moment, Ben. We've been disabled. They're probably pulling alongside right now."

He regained his feet with McCready's help, but Maxwell groaned at the effort. "They'll be... boarding us any minute."

McCready drew his Cardassian phaser from its holster. "Then we'll go down fighting."

"Beston?" Maxwell inquired, glimpsing an unmoving form draped across the helm console. McCready shook his head in response. As the other man assisted him through the aft door into the passageway back to the body of the scout, Maxwell reflected, "Losing to Picard and the *Enterprise*, that I can stomach. The man may be a fool, but he commanded a worthy ship. Being shut down by an obsolete cutter, I have to admit, that stings a little."

McCready chuckled in response. "They say pride goeth before a fall."

The hum of a transporter field farther down the corridor spurred both men to take cover behind support struts on either side of the passageway. Maxwell pulled a Klingon disruptor pistol from a thigh holster shakily, still out of sorts. He took wavering aim and waited.

The men caught a fleeting glimpse of something moving up the corridor toward them but were unable to focus sufficiently to open fire. A discus shaped Starfleet tactical drone flashed past the two men as it fired transporter beacon tags into each with little puffs of compressed gas. Maxwell felt the sharp jab of the tag biting into flesh, then looked down in surprise. Just as he reached for it, he felt the familiar tingle of a transporter effect infusing him.

"The drone's tagged two for beaming," Chief Deryx noted.

"Energize and hold in transit," Akinola ordered. Two columns of light took partial shape on the transporter dais, their signals cycling through the pattern buffers.

"Registering two energy weapons," Deryx observed.

"Deactivate them," the captain instructed. "Beam these two to the brig as soon as security is ready for them." Akinola slapped a power cell magazine into his phaser carbine and the weapon's ready lights activated. "I'm glad we acquired some of those tactical drones."

Brin gave Akinola a disapproving glance as he tightened the straps on his tactical vest, but the ruddy Orion held his tongue.

Akinola turned to face him. "You disagree, Senior Chief?"

“If I’d wanted to play it safe,” Brin replied laconically, “I’d have joined a slipshod high-g gas mining operation run by the Ferengi.”

“Everyone’s a comedian,” Akinola muttered as he closed the combat visor of his helmet. He then stepped up onto the pad after the two Maquis were banished to the brig. The rest of the boarding team joined him, Senior Chief Brin lowering his own visor as the team assumed a tactical beam-in formation, everyone facing outward with weapons raised.

“Energize.”

Chapter 11

USS *Bluefin*

Dr. Castille rechecked his figures as the patient slowly regained consciousness. The man had been suffering from radiation exposure but had recently undergone radical nano-therapy in addition to a standard deionization series. He also showed signs of being exposed to high levels of a dangerous stimulant. To make matters more interesting, the man evidenced ligation marks on his neck that suggested someone had tried to strangle him. *'The expression 'having a bad day' just doesn't seem adequate,'* the young doctor mused as he finished stabilizing the patient.

The man had been beamed off a Klingon escape pod during *Bluefin's* return trip to *Gibraltar's* coordinates, the captured Bird-of-Prey safely in tow. Two security personnel stood by in case the presumed Maquis attempted anything unfriendly, something Castille believed highly unlikely given the man's condition.

Strauss entered Sickbay. She approached the exam table and held up a padd. "I think we can forgo the security standby, Doctor. We've identified him."

Castille glanced at the padd, "Sandhurst, Donald M. Captain, Starfleet." The physician looked curious. "What the hell was he doing in a Maquis escape pod, then?"

"*Gibraltar* confirms Captain Sandhurst was beamed away by the Maquis when they sent a boarding party into the ship's Sickbay," Strauss clarified.

"Well, then," the young doctor said, smiling. "Let's get the good captain cleaned up, shall we?"

Sandhurst had been aboard many different classes of vessel in his career, but this was the first time he'd set foot on an *Albacore*-class cutter. The narrow corridors and burnished wall plating reminded him of his own ship more so than did more modern designs. Thanks to Dr. Castille's ministrations and a fresh uniform, Sandhurst felt very nearly human once again.

As Commander Strauss escorted him to his meeting with Captain Akinola, Sandhurst paused twice to inspect some manner of engineering irregularity peculiar to this type of vessel. After the second such occasion, he caught Strauss smirking at his boyish enthusiasm for the design. "They obviously built these ships to last," Sandhurst appraised.

"That they did, sir," she replied proudly.

Moments later, they arrived in modest ready room off the bridge. Strauss introduced the two men, who shook hands before Akinola offered Sandhurst a seat. Inga slipped out quietly as Akinola assumed his place behind the desk. "It appears you've had an exciting few days here in the E'Mdifarr system."

Akinola carried himself with an easy confidence borne of years of experience. His affability, Sandhurst realized, served to cover a pragmatic interior. It was obvious Akinola had been sitting in the center seat for considerably longer than he.

Sandhurst cocked his head. "Exciting isn't the first adjective I'd choose, but it'll do."

"Can you fill me in on what happened after your away team was captured, Captain?"

The younger captain relayed the story of *Gibraltar's* desperate gambit to trap the Maquis ships in the system. Sandhurst wove the tale, eventually ending his summary with what little he could remember of his struggle with the Bolian terrorist in the Bird-of-Prey's transporter room.

Akinola absorbed the information silently, seeking only occasional clarification on some point or offering an encouraging nod of his head. "And the last thing you remember?"

"Being choked by the Bolian," Sandhurst said, his voice taking on a detached quality. "I seem to recall reaching for his knife... then waking up in your Sickbay."

"That jibes with our forensic examination of the ship," Akinola revealed. "The Bolian was found with a knife in his abdomen. Which begs the question, how did you get to the escape capsule? Other than the two Maquis operatives we captured after we neutralized the scout, the only others we found alive were the two you'd incapacitated aboard *Gibraltar* who were still unconscious on their transporter pad."

Sandhurst shook his head. "Your guess is as good as mine, Captain. If I managed to crawl to a lifeboat, I don't remember doing it." A look of realization darkened Sandhurst's features. "Ah... I understand. You suspect some Maquis collusion might be involved in my escape."

Akinola nodded uneasily, uncomfortable with the idea but acknowledging the line of reasoning just the same. "It's an angle that must be looked at, as I'm sure you're aware. Three of the four Maquis prisoners we captured from the Bird-of-Prey were former Federation officers; two Starfleet, and one Marine. Captain Benjamin Maxwell was among them."

Sandhurst looked genuinely shocked. "Maxwell?" He sighed, "So much for a successful rehabilitation, eh?"

“Looks that way,” Akinola agreed mirthlessly.

“If you’re afraid I’m in league with the Maquis, Captain, I can assure you that’s not the case.” He shifted in his chair as troubled thoughts clouded his memories. “Ask the Maquis that I butchered aboard *Gibraltar* how friendly I am to their movement...” he trailed off, closing his eyes to keep the images at bay.

Akinola observed Sandhurst’s discomfort and elected to probe further. “You saw action in the war?”

Sandhurst responded with a distracted nod. “The *Venture* participated in most of the major fleet engagements and led a hit-and-run squadron operating out of Starbase 53 along the Coridan Front.”

“You seem unusually upset about the Maquis for someone who’s seen so much death.”

A far-away cast to his eyes, Sandhurst replied, “Before this mission, I’d never killed someone face-to-face. Ship-to-ship combat, certainly, but never this close, never this *personal*.” He shook off his torpor to direct a biting glare at the senior captain. “I apologize if my reticence offends you.”

“Quite the opposite,” Akinola parried. “I’d be more concerned if it didn’t trouble you, Sandhurst.”

Sandhurst changed the subject abruptly with a query. “Any updates on *Gibraltar*’s status?”

“Commander Ramirez reports they’ve completed the initial damage control sweep of the ship and are affecting temporary repairs to shore up life support systems. You’ll need a tow back to a shipyard, however.”

Sandhurst rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. “That figures. Overall, it’s a better outcome than I’d expected, so I guess I can’t complain.”

“Better outcome?”

Sandhurst met Akinola’s unwavering gaze and elaborated. “I had to concede the possibility of *Gibraltar* being destroyed when I set off the IFEW and trapped the ship in this system with a swarm of angry Maquis. I’m grateful for the timely rescue.”

Akinola frowned as he inquired, “You didn’t have a plan for getting out of here?”

“Not at the time. The device was originally designed to be delivered in open space, where we’d have had the chance to warp out of the effect radius before it detonated. Here, especially with the damage to our shields, the odds of us getting away were very slim.”

“That’s a bit reckless, isn’t it? Gambling with your people’s lives like that?” It was a blunt assessment, but given recent events aboard the *Bluefin*, Akinola found himself unable to hold his tongue.

Sandhurst gave Akinola a curious look. “I was assigned a mission. Protect the convoy at all costs. That’s pretty self-explanatory. Literally millions of people on multiple Cardassian colonies were relying on those ships getting through. If we’d failed, a lot more people would have died than the crew of a single starship.”

Akinola inclined his head, conceding the point.

“We get the job done, Captain. That’s what counts.” Sandhurst’s features hardened.

“Mission over everything, even the welfare of your crew?” Akinola asked frostily.

“Not always. Each mission is different, and that assessment becomes a judgment call.” Sandhurst’s cheeks began to color, his anger fueled by Akinola’s line of questioning. “Ultimately, we’re all expendable to one degree or another, Captain. You know that. If you don’t, then you weren’t close enough to the war.” Sandhurst crossed his arms defensively. “Being flung against Dominion fleets time and again underscores that point quite effectively.”

Akinola held up a hand. “I’m not questioning your judgment or your people’s bravery, Sandhurst. I’m merely seeking to clarify some of the loose threads dangling from this mission.”

“From where I’m sitting, this feels a lot like an interrogation,” Sandhurst shot back. “Perhaps in the Molari Badlands you have the luxury of 20/20 foresight, but along the Cardassian border we’re not afforded that advantage. If you’re going to be working out here, you should expect to be kicked in the gut on a regular basis.” Sandhurst stared out the viewport over Akinola’s shoulder, vaguely registering the asteroids as they drifted past. “My ship is going to have to be overhauled for the fifth time in nine months. I’ve lost dozens of people since I took command and I’m about to lose my top-notch exec to her own commission. And on a personal level it feels like some days I’m barely hanging on to my sanity by my fingernails. So, before you start judging me, you might want to try pulling a full tour out here in occupied Cardie space. Walk a lightyear in my boots, as it were.”

Akinola held up his hands in a gesture of assuagement as he acceded, “You’re right, Captain. I’m a bit out of my element in this region. We’re used to the occasional knife fight with pirates or rogue Klingon or Romulan elements. What you’re describing sounds more like a persistent, low-level war than a police action. I apologize if I came across as disparaging. I’m simply trying to wrap my head around this new assignment.”

Sandhurst sighed. "Forgive my outburst, Captain. I understand you're only doing your duty, and you're asking the same questions Starfleet Command will be when I submit my after-action reports." He dipped his head to rub his eyes tiredly with one hand. "Our recent excursion to Alshain space proved just as lively as our tour in the old DMZ has been. The few occasions my crew has had for down time hasn't recharged our collective batteries sufficiently."

"That I can understand completely," Akinola offered. "And no apology is necessary. To be perfectly honest, if I'd had the device you employed against the Maquis I might have used it myself under the same circumstances. I just needed to get a look inside your head to convince me I was dealing with a straight shooter. This Maquis business is reopening a lot of old wounds in the Fleet." Akinola stood and moved around the desk to a shelving unit containing an assortment of glasses situated above a shelf of wooden, hand-carved starships.

He returned with two glasses and Akinola reached into a desk drawer to pull out a bottle of Tennessee whiskey. "Can I offer you a drink, Captain?"

"Gods yes," Sandhurst breathed. "That sounds fantastic." Akinola poured two glasses, handing one to the younger officer. Sandhurst accepted the offering gratefully.

Akinola raised his in a toast, "To both our 'old girls.' They may no longer be ships of the line, but they'll always get the job done and bring us home."

Sandhurst touched his glass to Akinola's and offered his first smile of the day. "I'll drink to that, Captain."

Akinola resumed his seat. "Aside from a tow back to the nearest starbase, is there anything else I can do for you?"

Sandhurst mulled that over for a moment as he savored the bite of the whisky. "There is one favor I would ask of you, Captain."

"Name it."

"The nearest repair yard is at DS9, but I'm going to need to take *Gibraltar* a bit farther afield..."

Chapter 12

Starbase 371

The two stood in the viewing gallery of the repair gantry which looked out upon the sight of the starship *Gibraltar* swarmed by work pods, space-suited engineers, and robotic repair drones.

Commander Leslie Nowark, a tall, willowy red head wearing the mustard collar of an SCE senior engineer shook her billowing scarlet curls as she reviewed the results of her engineering team's initial inspection. "You took a big gamble bringing her here, Donald."

Sandhurst stood with his arms folded across his chest as he idly watched the teams strip the battered and holed hull plating from the aft third of the engineering hull. Without looking at his old friend, he replied, "As opposed to where, Les? Point Station Delta? DS9? The Fantoma Yards?" He sighed tiredly. "I almost asked to be towed to 375. With everyone busy rebuilding the starbase, I figured nobody would notice."

Nowark turned to face him. "You and I both know that in the past nine months you've put more stress on *Gibraltar's* spaceframe and incurred more structural fatigue than in her first ninety years of service. By all rights, she should be retired from duty permanently—"

"Fine," he replied heatedly as his face darkened. "Yes, that's precisely why I had her towed here, Les. I knew that you'd at least hear me out."

She rolled her eyes. "You mean you thought I'd let you talk me into authorizing a structural refit that violates half a dozen logistics and safety protocols. *Gibraltar* is a full twenty percent over the redline acceptable standards for spaceworthy operations."

"We've had an eventful tour," Sandhurst offered, his voice subdued.

She gave him a skeptical look and sighed. "Please don't tell me you're emotionally attached to this ship. You're an engineer for heaven's sake... of all the people who'd ought to know better..."

"She's my ship, I'm her captain," Sandhurst said with such quiet conviction that it brought Nowark up short. "Until you've sat in the center seat, you can't understand."

Nowark scanned the contents of her padd and shook her head again as she took stock of the ship's recent entanglements. "Orbital combat at Lakesh, gravitational shearing and two ejected nacelles in what's listed as a classified mission two months later. More combat and serious structural damage during your foray into the Briar Patch... not to mention the pounding you so recently survived at Yashk'lin IV. And now you've taken *more* damage while simultaneously burning out every isoliner circuit in the ship and scorching five-hundred kilometers worth of optic data cable."

"Thanks for the run-down," he said acidly. "I was there."

Nowark reached out a hand to grasp Sandhurst's shoulder lightly. "Donald, there are other ships, newer ships. SCE's still on wartime production footing; we're churning out dozens of starships a month all over the Federation. Finding people to crew them, that's where we're coming up short. And with Starfleet Command repealing the stop-loss orders next month, we'll be even more desperate to find good crews for the new ships."

"I'm not interested in another ship, Leslie."

She studied the padd in silence for a few moments as she contemplated pushing the key that would cease repair operations on the *Gibraltar* and initiate a decommissioning cycle. Nowark glanced up at Sandhurst and reflected on all he had done for her over the years. "You know," she said, her voice suddenly heavy with emotion, "you're the finest engineer and supervisor I've ever worked for. You were always cheerful, supportive, and endlessly patient with all of us who served under you. You taught me everything you knew and pushed me to strive for even greater achievements as an officer and an engineer. I owe a large part of my position as yard master here to your guidance."

She touched her other hand to the padd to register her thumbprint and subsequently signed off on a Level-2 structural overhaul for NCC-1859, USS *Gibraltar*. "I consider us even, Donald."

He nodded fractionally in reply, his gaze still fixed on the starship. "Thank you, Les. This means more to me than you can know."

"Did I hear right?" Nowark asked, steering the conversation away from the questionable repair order. "You and Pell are back together?"

He pulled his eyes away from his ship and turned towards Nowark. "Yes, actually."

She smiled warmly. "Good. The two of you were always a good fit for each other. And you look as though you could use a little happiness in your life."

He managed a smile, now tinged with relief. "I couldn't agree more."

As she looked past him at the old *Constitution*-class, her interior exposed amidst the frenzied activity of people, pods, and drones, Nowark spoke with conviction. "If you want to keep *Gibraltar* any longer, you'd best be gentle with her. This is a temporary fix, not a cure by any stretch of the imagination. You go and get beat up on again, and I guarantee you that SCE will scrap her so fast you'll think she'd been beamed out from under you. Am I clear?"

“As crystal, Commander.”

Nowark embraced him in a brief hug. “Good luck, Captain.” Then she was gone, heading off to oversee repairs to the less badly damaged *Bluefin*.

Sandhurst was left in silent communion with his first command.

USS *Bluefin*

Akinola entered the brig and made his way to the invisible energy barrier that barred the escape of former Starfleet captain Benjamin Maxwell.

Maxwell was sitting on the built-in bunk, reading a data padd, and glanced up as Akinola approached. “Joseph Akinola,” the cutter CO said by way of introduction. Maxwell said nothing in response.

“You know,” Akinola began, “I used to read about your exploits during the Cardassian Wars, and even prior to that. Your first contact with the Kobheerians, your handling of the Capellan dynastic crisis... practically the stuff of legend.”

“Your point?” Maxwell asked dryly.

“My point is that given what happened to your family, I can understand and even forgive what you perpetrated against the Cardassians a decade ago. I think it was a sad and ignoble way to end a stellar career, but you made your choice and accepted the consequences.” Akinola paused to inspect the man, so much smaller and more unremarkable than the infamous living legend he had expected. “What I can’t figure out is why, after having paid your debt to society for your crimes, you’d turn around and take up arms against the Federation.”

Maxwell tossed the padd onto his bunk. “The Federation turned its back on me, just like it turned its back on the original settlers in the DMZ.”

“And what do my crew and Captain Sandhurst’s have to do with that?”

Maxwell looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“One of my men, Petty Officer Jahlwen, is burned over sixty percent of his body, and is now blind in one eye because of you, Maxwell. Ensign Albert Diamato from the *Gibraltar* was murdered by one of your crew when they beamed over to steal medical supplies. Diamato survived a half-dozen engagements since he graduated the academy less than a year ago. He was the middle child in a family of three, and according to his records, Albert dreamed of becoming a Starfleet officer since he was a child.”

The color drained from Maxwell’s face. “That... that’s not my concern. You just don’t see the big picture.”

“Oh, I see the big picture just fine, Mr. Maxwell. The Cardassians hurt you, so you hurt them back. I understand vengeance quite well. But you failed to realize that when you butchered the Cardassians with the *Phoenix* that you not only disgraced yourself and your uniform, you also stained the memory of your wife and children.”

Maxwell stood suddenly, advancing on the energy barrier. “You leave them the hell out of this!”

“Do you think this is how they wanted to see you, Benjamin?” Akinola’s expression was one of disdain, tinged with pity. “Reduced from an exalted starship captain to a caged animal? Wherever they are, I have to believe they’re terribly disappointed in you.”

“Shut up! Shut up, damn you!” Maxwell howled as he charged the screen, only to be sent reeling backwards from the powerful contact discharge. He collapsed to the deck and lay gasping as he looked at his captor with pure hatred.

“Benjamin Maxwell, whatever you were before, you’ve now become a small, pathetic man and you will rightfully spend the rest of your life in confinement. I’d blow you out the nearest airlock for the pure enjoyment of it, but I’d be bringing myself down to your level.” Despite his own better judgment, Akinola reached out and deactivated the security field. The specialist manning the monitoring desk stood and drew his phaser. Akinola waved him off. “Dismissed, crewman.” The man turned smartly and walked out without hesitation.

Akinola stepped into the cell and snarled, “C’mon, Maxwell. Let’s see what you’ve got. Show me some of that righteous Maquis fire, you cowardly little shit.”

Maxwell clambered slowly to his feet as he took measure of the officer facing him. Akinola held himself in a casual seeming posture, a dead giveaway that he knew how to handle himself. The former Starfleet captain predicted a high probability that if he charged Akinola, the man would wipe the floor with him and cherish every second of the experience. He gathered what little pride he could, turned and returned to the bunk.

“Yeah,” Akinola breathed, his voice dripping with contempt. “That’s what I thought.” He stepped out of the cell, reactivated the field, and walked towards the exit. He paused on the threshold and turned back. “And on those cold nights in whatever hole they stick you for the rest of your days, I hope the fact that you were beaten by a seventy-year old cutter commanded by a former enlisted man keeps you warm at night.”

Starbase 371
Surface Complex, Galleria Commercial Zone
Bons Temps De Café

Pell found her sitting at an outdoor table at the café, a nibbled-on croissant and half-empty cup of coffee in front of her along with an array of pads that littered the table top.

She approached Ramirez's table. "You up for company, Liana?"

Ramirez pulled her attention from one of the pads and looked up with a smile. "Of course, Ojana. Please, have a seat."

A waiter approached, and Pell asked for a cup of raktajino, eliciting a disapproving frown from a haughty Tiburonian waiter whom Pell mused must have come from his planet's own version of France.

Pell inclined her head towards the assortment of pads cluttering the table. "You look like you're cramming for an academy final."

Her smile widened and Ramirez shook her head lightly. "It almost feels like that, but no." She held up one of the pads, which displayed a rotating view of a *Norway*-class starship.

Pell examined it curiously. "USS *Yassim*... is that named after Vedek Yassim?"

"In fact it is. A brave woman, that. Did you know that Colonel Kira credits Yassim's suicide on DS9's promenade with sparking her resistance cell?"

"Yes, actually. Yassim's a bit of a celebrity on Bajor right now, but I'm pleased a Bajoran martyr is receiving that kind of recognition by the Federation." Pell accepted her Klingon coffee from the waiter, who carried the drink as if it were radioactive. "Who's the *Yassim* belong to?"

"She's finishing her final phase of construction at Utopia Planitia right now, and after she finishes trials in two months, she'll belong to me."

Her eyes widened with surprise and Pell laughed. "Liana, that's wonderful. Congratulations!"

Ramirez beamed proudly and accepted the pad back from Pell. "It's not official yet, but I have it on good authority that both the *Yassim* commission and my promotion to captain are a done deal." She eyed the Bajoran officer meaningfully. "Of course, this means the captain will have to find another XO."

Pell dipped her head, suddenly finding the tabletop endlessly fascinating. "That's not for me, Liana. I've been first officer before, more out of obligation and friendship than anything else. It wasn't for me."

Ramirez scrutinized her. "Is this about the Maquis crippling the ship? I've read the logs, Ojana, you did everything you could. You were up against Ben Maxwell. There's no shame in losing to someone of that caliber. *Gibraltar's* still here battered but intact, and Maxwell's in custody, so everything worked out."

Pell, never one to fret obsessively about something, nodded reluctantly. "I suppose, but to be perfectly honest, I don't want the job. I'm fine serving as second officer in addition to my diplomatic duties. Besides, Donald and I being involved would make my being exec very complicated."

Ramirez agreed and conceded the point. "That's true enough. I suppose he'll have to start burning the midnight oil and find himself some other ambitious young officer."

Pell grinned. "You mean one he doesn't have to shanghai into the job against her will?"

Ramirez blushed. "I'll admit, I was angry as hell when I was posted to *Gibraltar*. In the end, though, it's been a master's level education in command. It beats doing scheduling for an admiral and making sure her coffee is the right temperature."

As she raised her cup of raktajino, Pell smirked. "You'd better believe it. Monica's very finicky about her coffee."

USS *Bluefin*

"I'm not sure how much pull I'll have with regular Fleet Ops, Joseph, but I'm willing to give it a shot." Admiral Morgan Bateson inspected his old friend carefully over the comlink. "Can I ask why this is so important to you?"

Seated in his ready room, Akinola had an unobstructed view of *Gibraltar*, which shared the cavernous interior docking bay with *Bluefin* and a half dozen other ships of various classes. "They're a good crew, Morgan, and they're damn close to reaching the breaking point. I thought we'd been in some hot situations since the end of the war, but these people have been raked over the coals repeatedly. There's no such thing as routine escort duties anywhere near occupied Cardassian territory. Insurgents, pirates, raiders, everybody's shown up to the party out here."

Bateson referenced a secondary data terminal. "There are dozens of ships assigned to those duties along the old DMZ, Joseph. Some Border Service, many regular Fleet. What makes this crew so special?"

He paused to gather his thoughts and Akinola finally replied, “They remind me a lot of my own people. They’re brave, dedicated, and constantly in it up to their necks. I’d just like to see them get a break, even if just for a few weeks.”

Bateson looked unsure. “I’ll see what I can do. No promises though.”

Akinola smiled wearily. “Good enough for me, sir.”

Bateson changed tacks and called up a split screen, his image on one half, and an abbreviated tactical chart of the former DMZ region. “Owing to the increased activity out there, the Border Service has been asked to step up and relieve some of the pressure on the regular Fleet. Apparently, the Talarians are taking the opportunity to start saber rattling again, and Starfleet’s sending additional resources to patrol our border with the Little Cousins.” It was an old deprecating nickname for the Talarian people, who had been so named a generation ago by Starfleet during the border skirmishes with their military. Due to their cranial ridges and warlike nature, people had likened them to ‘Little Cousins’ of the Klingons.

“After you’ve completed repairs, I’m tasking you to report to Point Station Gamma inside occupied Cardassian territory. I hear the place makes Star Station Echo look like an engineering marvel.”

Akinola bobbed his head in assent and said, “How long will we be out here, Morgan? This place is making me homesick for the Molari Badlands.”

“Tough to say. I promise I’ll try to get you back here as soon as possible, but if the situation keeps deteriorating, there’s no telling.”

A knowing smile on his lips, Joseph Akinola sighed. “The life of a cutter crew. We’ll get the job done, sir.”

“You always do, Captain.”

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