



A cry for help... or a call to arms?

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

ERRAND OF MERCY

The fourth voyage of the starship Lotus



STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

USS LOTUS : ERRAND OF MERCY

SEASON 1 EPISODE 4

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(by order of appearance)

John Garrison as Captain John Garrison

Kiernan O'Clare as Doctor Kiernan O'Clare

Ben Smith as Lieutenant Benjamin Smith

Caltern as Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names

Redding as Lieutenant Commander Felez Connora'tu

MoppyCGDaniels as Lieutenant Daniels

Special appearance by

Nova as Fleet Admiral Nova

Athos as Admiral Athos

Forum roleplaying session

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Novelization by Kheren

Cover by Kheren

A word from the novelizer

The job of novelizing a roleplaying session is more than just stringing posts together, correcting typos, spelling and grammatical error and filling in those posts for a smooth, even reading, "novel-style" as the job title implies.

The most difficult and impacting work is to also make sure that are corrected any inconsistencies; be it to the story premises themselves or the larger context of the Star Trek universe, as well as the specific Lotus Fleet RP version of that universe. This sometimes forces the novelizer to alter significant parts of a post so that it all ends up as good a tale as all the participants wanted it to be.

The irregularity of participation in a text-based forum RP also causes characters to suddenly go AWOL or MIA without so much as a word of explanation, leaving the story full of loose ends detrimental to its overall quality and enjoyment.

Hence sometimes the job of the novelizer is to adjust everything right with much more than just a typo or two.

The current reader would not be aware of those drastic changes. But the original authors, or those who read the original posts, might feel bewilderment or maybe even frustration at seeing the original text altered.

In the following story, several major changes indeed had to be made:

-Fleet Admiral Nova, former commander of the Lotus, a PC, was substituted for unknown and irrelevant Admiral Hendricks, an NPC, for better continuity from previous novelizations and stronger, better link to the overall LF Universe.

- Travel path and time were completely altered. Early RPer did not have stargates and warp calculators to give consistency and believability or even simple logic to their travels.

-Confusion in names, ranks, locations, dialog, actions, technical and scientific terms etc had to be addressed in a logical manner and consistent with both Trek and LF RP canon.

It must be reminded here that novelizing a story is aimed at making it better available and enjoyable to people; instilling pride in those who gave life to it, admiration and emulation from fellow rpers, entice people to join RP or even the fleet so as to be part of this fun and enriching activity and, most of all, showcase their talent and imagination. What the novelizer is trying to do is add as little as needed of his own modest writing skills to their work so as to best promote and highlights their efforts and better include it in the overall Lotus Fleet Star Trek Roleplaying Universe.

Hopefully, this effort will be acknowledged for what it is and the efforts and love of the player-authors will stand out all the more because of it.

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CHAPTER 1: OLD ENEMIES, NEW FRIENDS

Captain John Garrison walked through the corridors of Starbase 10, headquarters of Lotus fleet in the Hromi sector of Federation space, thinking about the officers who had left the Lotus and wondered how his new senior officers would work out. Such a major change in the command structure of a starship could only bring a lot of surprises and a lot of needs for adjustments. And this close to both the Klingon and Romulan borders while being right at the doorsteps of the Delta Quadrant, surprises and adjustments could only be cause for worries, even in the best of times.

And, since the recent last attempt from an alleged rogue Romulan faction to take over this starbase, barely weeks after a violent run in with the Klingons now out of the Khitomer Accords, these were not the best of times.

He was so deep in those thoughts that he was startled to hear a message from his combadge.

"Captain Garrison, report to the USS Lotus and await further instructions, Admiral Nova out!"

Garrison immediately headed to the nearest transporter room somewhat confused. Admiral Nova headed the elite division of Starfleet he served in and so, knew very well that the Lotus was barely recovering from a recent battle and also welcoming new, untried bridge officers. To call upon him now and with such urgency could only mean something serious.

He quickly got to the transporter room, stepped on the transporter pad and told the transporter chief in a clipped tone:

"One to beam to the USS Lotus."

"Aye, Sir... Energizing."

Garrison was taken off Starbase 10 in a shimmer of blue light and found himself aboard the Lotus. He made his way through the corridors of the Lotus, avoiding all unnecessary conversation. Entering a turbolift, he only then broke the silence in which he enveloped himself.

"Deck 1".

The turbolift stopped a short moment later and the captain entered the bridge and an ensign shouted instantly:

"Captain on deck!"

"As you were," Garrison replied and walked straight to his right and into his ready room.

The moment he activated his private channel on his desk terminal, he saw that the call from the Commander of Lotus Fleet was on a priority one comm channel that required of him to enter his authorization code.

"Garrison-zeta-alpha-chi-charlie-5-2-7-3"

Admiral Nova's deceptively young-looking face finally appeared on the small screen.

"Captain Garrison, I will be brief and to the point: the Remans began several terrorist strikes on outer colony worlds in revolt and there is much outcry for support... but the Romulan government is currently too weak to assist the outer colony worlds affected by these strikes. They have now openly asked for *our* help. Therefore, we are sending the Lotus, the flagship of Lotus Fleet that so recently helped save hundreds of their citizens, to head our humanitarian efforts."

John vividly recalled the incident of a few weeks ago. The Klingons had tried to force the Federation to enter their conflict with the shattered Romulan Empire by luring them in the Neutral Zone, disabling a civilian Romulan transport to drag it there as bait for both Starfleet and the Imperial navy. Against all odds, the Lotus had saved the civilians and forced the Klingons to retreat... which certainly raised the Klingons enmity towards the Federation... and no guarantee the Romulans felt any gratitude for what they did.

But the Admiral was interrupting his thoughts as he spoke anew.

"You will head for Neutral Zone Outpost Quebec II and pick up supplies and personnel who will take care of the efforts on the planet. Your job is to bring them through Romulan space and to see to their safe return. Any questions?"

"No, Sir!" Garrison replied. The stakes were clear enough to him already

"Then hop to it!", stated Admiral Nova.

Garrison, cut the feed, stood up tugging his uniform back into place and strode briskly out of his office and onto the bridge, tapping his combadge.

"All senior officers, this is the captain; meet me immediately in the briefing room."

At that very moment, Kiernan O'Clare materialized in transporter room 1. The crewman at the transporter controls quickly greeted the new Chief Medical Officer of the flagship.

"Welcome aboard, Ma'am."

She nodded her short-haired chestnut head in acknowledgement.

"Crewman..."

As O'Clare stepped into the corridor, she received the order for all senior staff to report to the briefing room. The medium-sized, lithe woman made her way to the closest turbo lift. The doors slid open and she entered.

A young science ensign, his collar as blue as hers but with one golden pip instead of the two she wore, was already in the cabin. He stood against the wall, with his eyes fixed on a PADD.

"Deck 4."

Kiernan glanced down at her disheveled uniform. Her previous activities at Starbase 10 left her looking as if she had spent the last hour wrestling with an Yridian Yak. She attempted to straighten her jacket as best as she could, and felt to make sure her pips were still in place. All that movement prompted the ensign to abandon his PADD. He stared at O'Clare quizzically.

Noting the odd stare, Kiernan also looked up and the two found themselves staring at each other.

"To heck with good first impressions huh?"

The ensign tried unsuccessfully to hold back his smile from her words.

The doors to the turbo lift opened on deck 4 and she lightly slapped the ensign's shoulder.

"See you around, kid."

O'Clare walked across the short curving corridor and paused outside the briefing room door. She then spoke out loud.

"Computer, note that Kiernan O'Clare has reported for duty."

"Acknowledged, " answered the calm, soft feminine disembodied voice.

She then entered the briefing room and immediately stood at attention.

"Captain."

Once the captain ordered her at ease, she took a seat at the nearest of the seven chairs surrounding the odd shield-shaped table with her wide black grove splitting it in three sections.

"Welcome, Doctor O'Clare, good to have you aboard!"

Garrison, noticing that the other senior members had not yet entered the room, decided to strike up a conversation with Kiernan.

"So, Doctor, although I have read your service records, tell me briefly about your time in your previous position."

She shifted in her chair. If it was actually possible to sit at attention, she just accomplished it.

"Sir, before I joined Starfleet, I was lead nurse on the cardiac replacement team at Nairobi, on Earth's African continent. We were a small specialized unit, but effective. I.. Well, Sir... if you've had a chance to see my service record, you are aware of what I've done as an MD. No disrespect intended, Captain. But I'm sure you've noticed there are some things I'm not allowed to discuss."

She averted her green eyes from Captain Garrison. A fleeting episode of reflection overcame the new officer. Her facial expression became troubled. Perhaps it was remorse, concern, or concentration. O'Clare's immediately snapped back to reality, reassured the answer to that question would remain unknown.

Then, she spoke more slowly.

"Captain, I know this is my first time serving under you...And I know that my record doesn't exactly paint the complete picture. But you and your crew are safe with me. I'll prove it eventually, but for now, all I have to offer you is my word."

She made a pause and sighed before continuing with the same deliberate tone:

"Sir, there is one thing I wanted to discuss with you. I honestly don't know how to phrase this without it being able to be misinterpreted. But... Sir, I don't believe medical protocols are always the answer to the problems a doctor may be faced with. Now, Sir, I'm aware that many intelligent and seasoned individuals have developed these protocols. And I'm not saying I ignore them completely! I'm not saying that they are not applicable either. But I understand that, sometimes, in rare situations, a doctor's interpretation of the patient's condition may not conform to Starfleet's intended ideal. I believe in doing what it takes, Sir... ethically... but thically doing what it takes based on my own judgment. I hope this will not be a problem, Sir."

Garrison, impressed with the Lieutenant's boldness and frankness, replied:

"That will not be a problem."

While they were discussing, the flagship's new Chief Engineer, Benjamin Smith, hustled into a transporter room on Starbase 10. He stepped onto one of the pads and told the warrant officer at the controls:

"USS Lotus, transporter room 1, right away."

"Aye, Sir. Energizing."

With that, Smith was swept away in a shimmering column of sparkling blue light. Reappearing on the USS Lotus, Ben collected his thoughts as, upon arrival, he just received Captain Garrison's message regarding a senior officer meeting in his ready room. barely promoted as a Lieutenant, this would be his first assignment as a senior bridge officer. He was excited that he had been given this opportunity and wanted to make the best of it.

The crewman operating the transporter controls interrupted his thought.

"Welcome aboard, Sir."

Ben recognized the crewman from the personnel logs he had been reviewing recently.

"Thank you, crewman Tr'lek. It is always a good thing to be in one piece after a transport."

The pointed-eared Vulcan crewman didn't express any surprise at hearing his name and simply nodded in affirmation as he went back to his routine with the characteristic stoicism of his kind.

Smith exited the transporter room and walked out into the corridor.

"Computer. Benjamin Smith reporting for duty."

"Acknowledged," answered the artificial voice floating in the air.

He proceeded to the turbolift just down the hallway and entered it. The doors swooshed shut. "Deck 4."

The lift hummed away and, in a few seconds, opened at the designated destination. Benjamin made his way through the passageway leading to the officer's meeting chamber he had been ordered to. Upon reaching the access to the conference room, the doors opened. He entered to see a woman he guessed was the newly appointed Chief Medical Officer and the Captain of this ship already in a conversation. He stood at attention until the Captain ordered him at ease.

Smith nodded politely to O'Clare and quietly took a sit across the table from her.

Garrison looked up to see Lieutenant Smith walk into the room and sit down, studying a moment his new chief engineer before saying:

"Welcome, Lieutenant Smith. Tell me, what is your opinion of the Lotus even if you have only had time to read the tech journals?"

Smith looked the Captain squarely in the eye.

"Sir, this is the flag ship of our fleet."

Then he slowly gathered a breath.

"I have studied all diagnostics that are pertinent for us to move out. I feel confident that this vessel can perform any mission that is presented to her. However, Sir, I have not seen the data on the transporter diagnostic nor the shield integrity field generator. I would ask you for minutes to consult with the teams I have in place before we proceed."

Smith kept his own soft brown eyes into the darker ones of his Captain.

"Perhaps if I could set up a team to investigate these areas, we would benefit from their findings."

The doors to the chamber hissed open once more and paused as a rumbling, rich voice came from behind Chief Engineer Smith.

"What sort of investigation do you propose?"

There was a pause, a sound of something sharp tapping against something, and a brief sound like the flap of a small bat wing as the growl finished saying:

"...Chief-Engineer-Smith?"

The officer entering the briefing room had to duck through the door, and his bulky EVA suit still scrapped the sides of the doorframe as he entered. The suit's gloves were tucked under one arm, the sleeves slightly too short-seeming, allowing auburn-furred, muscled forearms ending in clawed paw-like hands to grasp a PADD displaying the ship's roster upon it. Paws that seemed very fitting, considering the facial features of the newcomer's species. He looked and had the bearing of a walking regal tiger who's ears looked like batwings.

The newcomer was a Kzinti, the only such officer to ever serve in Starfleet, as this species of sentient feline humanoids had been at war with earth, if not just about everyone else, a few centuries before, until they were soundly beaten back to their home space after several bloody wars. And this particular one was especially impressive, towering nearly three meters tall and weighting certainly more than two-hundred kilos of muscle and fur.

"Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names reporting for duty as tactical-security chief, Captain-Garrison," the Kzinti said respectfully. once he was through the door, chaining name and title in one smooth roll of words in the same manner as he spoke his own rather unorthodox name. "It is an honor to serve among heroes."

It took a moment for Smith to compose himself, having never seen an upright tiger on a starship before. He stammered then controlled his monotone to answer the imposing presence.

"Uh Umm. We were ahh... We were discussing the readiness of this vessel. I have signed off on the matter and antimatter injectors. The impulse engines are in good shape. We have tested the geometric pylons and the teradyne output levels. All seems to be a go. Yet, I was briefing the Captain that, if time allowed, I would prefer to run one more diagnostic on the shield intergity field before we departed."

Smith paused for a moment then stood.

"Sir, I feel the same way. It is an honor to serve among heroes. Nice to meet you. Call me Ben."

With that, he offered his hand in greetings to Speaker-of-Names.

"Honored to meet you, Ben."

The felinoid extended one large, furred paw-hand which enveloped Ben's own with surprising gentleness as he shook it.

"It is good that we are in capable hands."

The Kzinti walked around the table, his tail tucked behind him, encased in the thick EVA suit as it was. He glanced down, eyeing the chair before him, and flicked his furred bat-wing-like ears once, shaking his head while grasping the top of the seat with his free hand.

"I profess interest in the results of your shield-integrity-field-diagnostic. There is a saying I encountered back in my Academy days..." The big cat trailed off, looking thoughtful for a moment. "...how did it go?"

A short pause followed, before he smiled, accompanied by an additional fluttering of his ears.

"Ah yes. "And knowing is half the battle." was the phrasing."

Then their commanding officer chimed in.

"Mister Smith, I will make sure you have all the time you need to run diagnostics and have the ship running the way you want it."

Garrison turned to Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names and said:

"Welcome Aboard, Lieutenant. I hope you find the tactical systems to be in order. Mister Speaker-of-Names, it wasn't that long ago that I manned that station."

Kiernan sat in silence as the conversation between the other crewmembers continued. She studied the Kzinti closely, but frequently averted her eyes; she didn't want her curiosity to be obvious.

She had read the medical journals, but had yet to see one in person. Thoughts of Kzinti physiology swirled around in her mind.

With their multiple hearts and reinforced ribs, it would be a strenuous job if this individual ever coded.

Her gaze had fixed on Speaker-Of-Names for too long... and the two briefly caught each other's eyes.

Oh jeeze, is he a telepath? she thought. Reports said some of them could be.

Think of vegetation, Think of vegetation, she reminded herself from those reports stating how such thoughts disgusted the members of this carnivorous species... rumored to even find Human flesh a delicacy.

She turned to stare blankly at the captain while filling her mind with the imagery of chewing on a huge piece of spinach.

Garrison saw the doors open and both Ensign Daniels the Flight Operations chief officer and Lieutenant Commander Felez the orange-skinned, white-haired Efrozian chief of science, doubling as his Executive officer due to his seniority on board, walked in and sat down. Freshly minted lieutenant Daniels was ordered to the ready room where he was given a briefing, the first in his beginning career as a department head.

"Were you in sickbay for your physical?" asked Garrison with a half-smile towards the helmsman, looking at the folds of his uniform betraying a hasty put on.

"Yes, Sir, I was", answered Daniels with a moment of unease the captain's smile dissipated quickly however.

Daniels was now wondering about the Kzinti officer. He had never seen someone of his species before. But like everyone else, he had heard... stories. Odd ones fortunately.

Now a little tired of small talk, the captain saw that his whole senior staff was present and so curtly said:

"Welcome Mister Felez, Mister Daniels. Now let's get down to business. I just received orders from Fleet Admiral Nova to bring relief efforts to outer Romulan colonies that have been attacked by Reman terrorists. We will be going to the nearest Neutral Zone outpost between here and there to pick up both supplies and personnel to aid in this relief effort. During our trip to the Quebec II Outpost, all new personnel will have time to become acquainted with their surroundings and have time to get ship systems running at optimal efficiency. Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names, I want tactical primed and ready when we enter Romulan space. Although this is a humanitarian mission, I have encountered Romulans before and I take their word with a grain of salt; and we could encounter Reman terrorists as well."

Speaker of Names took one more glance towards Doctor O'Clare then seemed to turn his attention away almost as if she weren't there. With a swivel of his head, he regarded the Captain with a nod.

"I have encountered the Romulans before as well, Captain." The words came almost as a purr, though the frown on his face suggested the Kzinti chief wasn't in fact happy. "...and having read your reports in the ship's log, I did make it my interest when I beamed aboard to begin battle-readiness preparations."

He gestured down to his EVA suit with an almost regal roll of his hand, then quirked one side of his lip upward. Quietly, more rumble than mumble, he added:

"I would like a detailed flightpath provided to me, Captain. While en route, I hope to work with Navigation to pick out possible fallback points and... problematic areas. Also, how long are we expecting our trip through Romulan space to be?"

"I actually don't anticipate any fights with the Romulans... but I am wary of the possibility. And I can't give an estimate for how long we will be in Romulan space since it will depend on how badly the Romulan colony we are going to has been hit. We will not be going in weapons armed and we will remain on yellow alert unless fired upon."

Speaker-of-Names nodded once at the answer, seeming satisfied with the information provided to him.

"Understood, Sir."

"Doctor O'Clare, now ordered the captain, I will need you to be ready to provide care for the badly wounded on the planet as well as coordinating your staff for transport down to the planet.

"Captain..." O'Clare paused for acknowledgement before proceeding with her proposal. "I would like to request that Cargo Bay 3 on Deck 5 be allocated for medical use. If we were to run into problems from here out, we may need the space. I feel that it's close location to sickbay would make it an optimal choice for triage. Sir, I know that we would typically use the mess hall for triage in emergency situations. But by using cargo bay 3, it would be easier for me to oversee ops in both sections. I am sure you are aware of our sickbay's limited capabilities."

After a moment of silence, O'Clare quickly realized she'd been on board for only twenty minutes and was already making requests.

"It's just an idea, Sir. I simply want to make sure we are ready for any and every thing. I assure you that I would keep the space available for other uses if the need arrives."

John turned to answer Doctor O'Clare.

"I will see if that cargo bay can be used but, due to the fact we will be taking on a large amount of supplies, I can't make any promises."

Smith watched as O'Clare had first chatted with the tactical chief and then how she responded to the Captain's orders. He could see how passionate she was with regard to her position. He hadn't even formally met her but he already admired her.

"Mister Smith, see what you can do about increasing our warp core's energy output and getting us past a hundred percent efficiency."

As the Captain addressed him, Benjamin showed a stone cold face that even a poker player would have relished. Although, inside him, his stomach churned with thought and anxiety.

Oh, great my first assignment and I have to live up to the work Niomo Lire had done here. From the way the Captain talks those two must have been really close. Some of the engineers he knew often joked that Niomo had engineering genetically implanted into his brain. On top of that, the Captain wants me to overcook the engines...what have I gotta myself into here?

Then, in an ultra confident tone, he replied.

"Of course, Captain. I will personally oversee the work on the warp core output testing. I believe team 3 can run that diagnostic on the shield and structural integrity field and perform the transporter check while we get the prior done. I will have them report any anomalies to myself and to Speaker-of-Names regarding the shields."

I hope Niomo left some specs behind, he thought quickly then continued.

"Captain; with your permission, I would like to begin as soon as we break this briefing."

John listened carefully and then stated:

"Permission granted. Take all the time you need. As I have already said, I want this ship in tip top shape when we enter Romulan space."

Garrison smiled, thinking back when he had worked with Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire, the former engineer of the Lotus, and how Niomo had increased the teradyne output far over the standard specs.

"Any more questions or concerns?"

The voice of the Efrogian science officer rose for the first time.

"As for myself, I see this mission from a more favorable position. Relations between the Federation and the Star Empire were very favorable since the fall of Shinzon until recent times following the Hobus catastrophe and I see this as a positive step in going back to that standing."

"His white, seemingly blind eyes darted straight at each other officer in turn.

"I myself have worked with a few and found them quite reasonable unless.. provoked. My own concern is from possible outside interference, seeking to harm the diplomatic possibilities of this mission."

The commanding officer of the flagship of Lotus Fleet simply nodded. His science officer had just explained why they were asked to do this very mission, beyond the fast travel capabilities of his otherwise smallish vessel for such a large scale critical endeavor.

"Ok; this meeting is adjourned. Everyone report to your stations."

Chief Smith exited the briefing, entered the turbo lift and ordered :

"Main engineering."

The lift began to move. Smith then tapped his combadge.

"Team 1, I am en route to main engineering; be ready for a teradyne testing of the warp core."

Ben then addressed team 3 of engineering.

"Team 3, run a full diagnostic on the transport systems. Once finished, send your findings to my PADD. Then, move to main engineering to follow up with a system test on the structural integrity field. I will assist team 1 with a warp core efficiency test."

As Ben made his way into the corridor leading to engineering, he heard the smatterings of "Aye, Sir."

He entered main engineering and walked over to team 1. All of the members were working furiously on their PADDs to come up with information regarding expanding the warp core efficiency. Smith nodded to them.

"OK gentlemen; let's get to work."

Speaker-of-Names, still in his EVA suit, waited until the others had filed out before braving the door threshold again. The thought of removing the attire for the Starfleet uniform beneath was an appealing one...unfortunately, it would have to wait. Still, despite the air of cultured restraint and grace he wrapped himself in like a cloak, there was definitely an subtly eager energy to his movements.

The USS Lotus, his third posting in the Federation and his first as Chief Tactical and Security Officer, was about to ship out, after all.

Behind him, Captain John Garrison waited until all the senior staff left the room and then headed for the Bridge.

Garrison rejoined with all of his senior staff on the bridge, minus Lieutenant Smith who was down in Engineering. He walked on to the bridge and was greeted with a loud "Captain on Deck!" Looking at all the other personnel settling into their positions, he sat down in the center chair.

"Hail Starbase 10."

"Channel open, Sir."

"Docking control, We request permission to depart."

"Permission granted, Captain." the voice of the dockmaster replied.

"Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names, secure from condition blue. Lieutenant Daniels, rig the ship for departure."

"Coming out of Blue Alert. Aye, Sir," the big cat responded once he got to his station.

The sharp click of his claws upon the data input surface soon disengaged the pulsing of blue lights all over the ship, while another set of clicks, accompanied by the pleasant chirping of the LCARS interface sent predetermined orders and requests for status reports to each of the security teams. He looked up a few moments later, the motion causing him to scrape his massive shoulder against the wall slightly while nodding to Captain Garrison.

"All decks report ready, Sir."

O'Clare paused on the bridge to observe the crew in action. The newer crew members snapped into action with rigid, uncomfortable body language and posturing. It was almost amusing to contrast them against the casual yet focused presence of the stalwartly veteran crew. A sense of unease came over O'Clare as she realized one of the bridge crew was staring awkwardly at her.

First officer and science chief Felez had moved to his familiar station with an almost automatic motion when he quickly noticed the new doctor looking over the bridge crew for several seconds, pausing at the turbolift door. When she herself noticed that he was watching her in turn, she gave an awkward smile and quickly boarded the lift.

Kiernan was indeed realizing that her moment of observation had lasted a little too long; and this was not her place.

"Deck 5."

Felez gave a little smirk at the closing door of the lift and went back to checking his station. The doctor seemed like a competent person, but there was something she was keeping private; he didn't have to be an empath to see that in her.

Still, it was no business of his, and he had work to do..

Exiting the turbolift, Kiernan O.Clare proceeded down the corridor and entered sickbay. The room was empty and silent. Glancing around, the sickbay was everything she read about. She passed through the treatment area and into her office. Quickly checking the science lab located behind it.

"Where is my nurse?"

O'Clare sat down at her desk. She turned on her console and began searching through the crew manifest.

"Ah, Nurse Slavik....where are you?"

O'Clare tapped her combadge.

"Sickbay to Nurse Slavik."

After a short pause, the audio response arrived.

"Copy."

"I need you to report for duty. Sickbay out"

As O'Clare continued to look around the room, she noted a small bag laying on the surgical bed.

"Well, at least I had time to transport over my uniforms."

O'Clare picked up a PADD and started reviewing sickbay's readiness report.

"Oh, this isn't going to work..."

As soon as the last word had left her lips, the door to sickbay slid open. Nurse Slavik entered and quickly moved his way to the CMO's office.

He stood at attention in front of O'Clare's desk.

"Slavik reporting for duty, Ma'am"

O'Clare had only a brief moment to review Slavik's personnel file before they met. All she could remember was that he was a middle aged male nurse from Earth. His thick accent and surname lead her to believe he was from somewhere in Central Europe. She tried to recall his previous duty postings, but was at a lost. However, she did remember being impressed. Knowing he was a seasoned veteran eased some of her concerns about her own posting to the Lotus.

"At ease, Mister Slavik. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm Kiernan O'Clare, the new CMO."

Slavik paused with a curious look on his face.

"I am aware of that, Ma'am. Pleasure to meet you as well."

O'Clare held up the PADD in her hand.

"The diagnostics you ran on our biobeds; was this before the ship last docked at Starbase 10?"

"Yes, Ma'am"

"Run them again."

O'Clare stood, and handed Slavik the PADD before they both walked into the main area of sickbay. The two paused in the center of the room to look around.

"Anything else Ma'am?"

"Yeah, I want you to check all of the hyposprays. Make sure they are properly loaded and up to date. That's all"

As Slavik began to perform the task delegated to him, O'Clare walked over to the main terminal.

"Computer, activate the EMH."

The Emergency Medical Hologram materialized beside her.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

"No emergency Doc, just wanted to take a look at you. Do you have control of your activation and deactivation subroutines?"

"Yes, I do."

"And what diagnostic and surgical subroutine are you equipped with?"

"Omega 981"

"All up to date, huh? Very good."

As O'Clare started to walk around sickbay, the holographic doctor followed beside her.

"EMH, I'm making changes in our protocols. Record them in your subroutines. I will assume the position of medic on all away missions. While I am off the ship, you will retain control over sickbay. In the event of a Mass Casualty Incident, Slavik and I will run Triage and forward patients to you. Once all have been triaged, I will resume my roll in sickbay. At that time I intend for you and Slavik to oversee the triage area. All of this is situational of course."

The EMH stared distally forward. O'Clare paused to allow him to record all of the information she had just issued.

Slavik also had listened closely to O'Clare's speech and had stopped his work altogether.

"Doctor O'Clare," Slavik chimed in. Stepping away from the EMH, O'Clare approached the nurse's work area.

"Is there a problem, Slavik?"

"Ma'am, are you sure the Captain will approve of those changes? If I may speak freely..."

"You may."

"That seems a little out of the norm, Ma'am. There are science crewmen that are cross trained as field medics."

O'Clare glanced back at the holographic medical officer who was now facing them.

"EMH, have you noted those changes?"

"Affirmative."

"Computer, end EMH."

The Doctor hopped up on the biobed to take a seat beside where Nurse Slavik was standing.

"Lighten up, Slavik. I hate formalities. Call me Doctor, Doc, Kiernan, or O'Clare. But there is no need to keep it formal. Now what exactly are you trying to say?"

Slavik eased his posture a bit and proceeded slowly.

"Well.."

O'Clare cut him off.

"Like I said, when you're talking to me, just spit it out. Look, this isn't a big sickbay. It's not like we're overrun with medical staff. It's you, the EMH, and me. We're in this one together... got it? As far as I'm concerned, my rank only applies when I'm issuing orders."

O'Clare examined the nurse's perplexed facial expressions while he took in this newly created casual atmosphere. Giving in, he also sat on the biobed beside the doctor.

"Doc, that's just not the way we usually run medical ops. You shouldn't put yourself at risk. It's illogical to put our primary caregiver in harms way. Its... well, it's just illogical. Besides, you could coordinate things just as well from the ship."

The nurse's statements brought a smile to the doctor's face. O'Clare leaned over and nudged the nurse with her elbow.

"Don't tell me you're half Vulcan."

"No," replied Slavik. "You asked for my input, and I gave it."

O'Clare took another brief pause while she nodded her head. Looking over at Slavik, she replied:

"And I want your input, always. But this is the route I've chosen. Do you have a problem with me assigning you to triage?"

"No ma'am."

"Good."

O'Clare slapped Slavik on the back before hopping off the biobed.

"Now come on, we've got to get this readiness report to the captain."

Slavik slid off the biobed, and resumed his work.

"Computer, activate EMH."

As soon as the hologram materialized, O'Clare instructed him to aide in diagnostic tests of the equipment. The three worked together efficiently and quickly completed the task.

After loading the readiness report into a PADD, O'Clare instructed Nurse Slavik to deliver it to the captain.

Meanwhile, down in main engineering, Benjamin Smith viewed a monitor with Ensign Taggart. They both appeared to be frustrated. Smith's combadge then beeped.

"Chief, Ensign S'Tlorn here, Sir. We have completed our testing on the transporter systems. I will briefly highlight our findings. We detected a random magnetic field in transporter room 1. A magneton scanner was used to degauss the room. All the other diagnostics were within normal variants. Transporter chief Korrit has sent the precise numbers to you for further review."

"Very good, S'Tlorn, " Smith responded. "Now, split your team up. Send half of them to inspect the structural integrity field around the warp coils. The rest of you hustle down to meet us in main engineering to monitor the SIF here. We will be warping soon so make haste."

Chief Smith then went back to the monitor. He shrugged then commented to Taggart.

"It is what it is. We can and will do better. Next time, I will use one the ideas you suggested, Jim. Carry on; we should be on the move soon."

Taggart nodded.

"Aye, Sir."

He then moved over to the warp core station and started pressing the keypad. Smith used the elevator to maneuver up to the second deck of main engineering. He walked over to his office. As he sat down at his desk, he accessed the computer panel there. Ben started to review the information that the transporter chief had sent him. He then tapped his combadge to contact Captain Garrison.

"Captain, Smith here."

He paused and waited until Garrison told him to proceed with his report.

"Captain, it appears the transporter systems are in order. We are in the final stages of our tests on the SIF. I don't foresee any issue with that."

Smith paused again and cleared his throat.

"My initial testing on the matter-antimatter reaction produced a rating of three thousand eight hundred and forty-eight teradynes. My team and I have a few ideas to increase that ninety-six percent rating. Barring any issues with the team inspecting the warp coils, we should be ready for warp momentarily."

Smith then leaned back in his chair contemplating the result display of the matter-antimatter test they had just performed.

"Good, answered Garrison over the comm. " Just make sure all your tests on the warp core are done by the time we are ready to go to warp."

Smith reviewed the data that ensign S'Tlorn found regarding the SIF.

"Hmm. Very good."

S'Tlorn stood silent waiting for orders.

"Your team did good work, Ensign. This data finalizes our departments status report to the Captain." Smith continued. "Ensign, contact Wilson on team 2. I want your crew to switch off with them. Have them maintain the SIF here in main engineering."

Ben nodded to S'Tlorn.

"I see your crew had already been at it quite awhile in the last thirty-six hours. Rest up a bit, things should be getting interesting soon. I need you guys at your best."

"Thank you, Sir," S'Tlorn replied. "I will contact Wilson and then fill my team in with regard to your orders."

S'Tlorn then stoically left the chief's office.

Smith tapped his combadge.

"Captain, all systems are functioning properly. We are ready for warp upon your command."

"Good Work, Lieutenant Smith." replied Garrison before addressing helmsman Daniels before him at the navigation console between him and the main viewer. "Helm, take us out."

"Clearing all moorings and activating thrusters."

Captain Garrison watched as Starbase 10's spacedoors opened to the stars.

"Helm, as soon as we clear the Starbase, I want warp 9 straight to the outpost."

"Warp 9, aye aye, Sir."

The Lotus then accelerated past light speed and the pinpoint lights of the stars became like streaks of lights rushing at them and passing them by.

For a while, the Kzin officer at the security and tactical station was quiet. There was a somewhat wistful look in his eyes as he craned his head forward, watching the viewfinder as if seeking his future within the rainbow-streaks of stars.

Then the moment passed as his status board chirped at him.

Glancing down, Speaker-of-Names clicked out a series of commands, then looked up and towards the Captain.

"Sir. Permission to leave the bridge. I desire to begin intensively drilling my staff as soon as possible. Lieutenant-Junior-Grade-Tomah would be replacing me."

A pause, and a fluttering of his ears before he added:

"I would also take that time to remove this EVA suit."

"Permission granted. You should have a while before we reach the Neutral Zone and then a while more before we get to Romulan space; so get what you need to get done, done."

"Thank you, Sir."

A sharp but smooth nod followed, militantly respectful in nature.

He tapped his combadge with his right paw-like hand and said, tilting his head upwards as if talking to the ceiling:

"Security-Alpha-Shift, report to Holodeck-One. Security-Beta-Shift, report for duty. Security-Gamma-Shift, if you are not resting at this moment, I recommend you do so now." He then tapped his badge again and continued, "Lieutenant-Junior-Grade-Tomah to the Bridge."

Orders given, the Kzinti Security officer stepped away from his station and started walking towards the turbolift even as Lieutenant Junior grade Edward Tomah exited it, smoothly taking his superior's place.

Emerging a short while later from his quarters, Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names headed down towards Holodeck 1, looking freshly brushed and not even a bit smaller even with his bulky EVA suit had been removed. His furless tail swished freely now in an undulating manner behind him as he looked at the PADD once again clasped in his right hand. Occasionally, he'd tap at the surface of the instrument, reviewing and revising the notes he'd made for this exercise, and at other times, he'd look down with an acknowledging nod to crewmen also using the corridors.

When he arrived, he paused at the door and took a breath. The first time doing things his way. His first speech as Chief of Security and Tactical. He silently hoped he wouldn't mess it up.

Clasping the PADD behind his back with both hands, he took the momentous step that took him out of the corridor and through to the Holodeck's interior.

Inside, every security officer who would normally be on duty was present and assembled, watching him. He willed his hackles to still themselves, preferably not in the raised position, as he approached the front of the assemblage and said:

"Computer, initiate if you please program Speaker-of-Names-Alpha-Zero-Zero-One-Point-Eight."

His command was acknowledged, and the black and gold grid that comprised the Holodeck's interior faded away, resolving into an empty shuttlebay with a podium and lectern about where he was standing.

He shifted slightly to center himself, then placed the PADD on the lectern before him. "Security-Alpha-Shift, thank you for attending. I will get to the pulsing-heart of the matter. We are headed into Romulan territory to provide aid. We cannot assume that such a journey into the territory of a once-enemy will be without conflict however, especially in light of recent rogue Klingon house attacks against this ship. I had intended this first meeting to be an organizational restructuring one, so we will be integrating an anti-Romulan and anti-Klingon intensive training exercise of my own design with your new squad details. Computer, display my PADD's currently displayed information on the viewscreen behind me."

The screen obediently flicked to life, showing several groups, each with four portraits and names, under bold-faced team names. Of note, each team had at least one female, and one team, designated "Team-Rhetti" was all female. Also interesting was the icons in the bottom left of each portrait, seeming to indicate what equipment each officer would be taking. One person per team carried a medkit and PADD. Of final note, half the teams were in red, the other half in blue.

"I have taken into account those of you who have served together before, and noted your subspecialties. However, if you feel I have placed you in an undesirable position, you may feel free to approach me after today's training. For now, please reorganize yourselves into the teams displayed. Those of you in teams displayed in Red, report to Holodeck-Two. Meanwhile... Computer, create equipment as noted for each member of the blue teams, and initiate phase 2: Klingon-Boarding-Parties."

He bared his teeth in a grin gazing upon the security teams remaining as if they were prey.

"You know what that means."

Tail swishing behind him, he added one final note, the feral look gone for now.

"Those of you with PADDs have your team's duty assignments. Additionally, you'll find each PADD displays a schematic of the deck you're on, with indicators for the positions of each other security officer. Good luck. I will be watching with interest."

And with that, he stepped out of the holodeck and headed for Holodeck 2 to initiate a similar program for the red teams.

Between here and Romulan space, they would still hope for the best... and be ready for the worst.

CHAPTER 2 : TO BOLDLY GO

"Captain, we are now on final approach to the Quebec II outpost."

Captain Garrison watched the star streaks return to normal.

"Hail the outpost and request permission to dock."

"Hailing Frequencies open, Captain."

"This is Captain John Garrison of the starship Lotus. By order of Starfleet Command we request docking authorization for embarking appointed supply and personnel."

"Permission Granted, you may proceed to dock." said the dockmaster over the comm.

"Very well; helm, bring us in to dock with the central docking port."

"Aye aye, Captain.", replied Daniels now back on the bridge with the rest of Alpha shift.

The Lotus moved towards the old style surveillance outpost, like all the others along the Romulan Neutral Zone built almost three hundred years ago in one typical fashion; more than a kilometer inside a solid rocky asteroid, only subspace sensors and antennae, weapons and docking ports betraying its very presence. As the Lotus moved towards the main docking port, its spacedoors opened and linked with the starboard sideport of the Intrepid class flagship, making the entire vessel for a time as an extended unit of the whole outpost, much like they did with the ancient first space station Earth had built at the end of its twentieth century.

"Incoming Hail from Admiral Nova."

"I will take it in my Ready Room, replied Garrison. "Prepare for incoming supply shipments."

Garrison entered his office and his computer opened up with the screen reading: "Incoming transmission from Starfleet Command." Garrison entered his authorization code and saw Admiral Nova's familiar youthful yet always very serious face appear on screen.

"Good to see you, Captain." said the admiral. "I have a change of plans for your mission although you are still going to be heading to outlying Romulan colonies, I am now entrusting you and your crew with the duty of safeguarding a convoy of freighters to help other colony worlds."

Garrison looked surprised. The admiral then stated his reasons.

"The damage to the Romulan conlony worlds was more extensive than we thought and we will not be able to provide enough supplies just using the Lotus alone."

"How large of a convoy will we be escorting?"

"The convoy will consist of five freighters, but you will not be alone in escort duty. I am authorized to assign the USS Xerxes, a Sabre class ship, to assist you should you run into problems. You have full command over the convoy and the escort. I am sending you all data we have on this sector, possible whereabouts of the Reman rebels and and the Romulan colonies position. Keep your wits about you, Captain: Trouble is stirring, Admiral Nova out."

As quickly as the comm was closed, Garrison walked out on to the bridge and announced:

"All Senior officers, meet me in the briefing room at once. I have received a revision from the admiral to our mission."

Garrison then walked toward the turbolift entered the cabin that brought him to deck 4. With a deep scowl on his face, the captain of the Lotus exited it and walked down the corridor leading to the briefing room. There, he took his seat at the head of the oddly-shaped table and waited for his senior staff to join him.

The incoming message from the com system pulled Kiernan O'Clare from a light sleep.

Revisions...

Curiosity caused her to linger. Slowly she stood to her feet, and pulled on the rest of her uniform.

The captain is going to start to think I actually brought that Yridian Yak onboard with me.

O'Clare did take the time to straighten her hair though. Her one feature she was vain about. After making her way through the corridors and onto the turbolift, she finally arrived on deck 4. She made her way to the ready room. Entering, she paused and came to attention.

"Captain."

Once put at ease, O'Clare grabbed the closest seat. Pulling it out, she sat down and waited for the others.

The chief engineer just then tapped his combadge.

"Understood, Captain. I am on my way."

Ben turned to address Ensign Taggart.

"Jim, if this problem persists, have team 3 run a level 4 diagnostic on these blasted replicators."

Taggart shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll keep monitoring it Chief. It would not be good if the Captain asked for water and we replicated hydrogen peroxide."

With that, Smith left the mess hall and moved down the corridor towards the turbo lift. He followed a pair of other Human crewmen that were expressing their apprehension at being back so soon so close to Romulan space. He understood then that some members of the crew had been posted on the ship a lot longer than he had realized. He entered the lift and began to think as he swooshed up toward deck 4.

I wonder what this revision is? It is probably a babysitting job or a diplomatic endeavor. Whatever it is my guys seem ready for the challenge.

He was glad to have had time to familiarize himself with his department's staff over the last few days. Exiting the lift, Ben made his way to the briefing door. As he entered, he noticed that Kiernan O'Clare had already arrived and was seated next to the Captain. He quickly grabbed the seat next to her and waited to engage in the briefing.

"Good to see you Lieutenant Smith. Once, the rest of the senior staff arrive, I will begin the briefing," Garrison said to him, just as he had said to his chief medical officer as she entered.

Lieutenant Commander Felez quickly made his way into the room at that moment and found a seat opposing that of the doctor, on the right side of the captain as was usual for a first officer.

"Sorry I'm late Captain. I had a slight problem gaining access to the ship's library and was caught with the diagnostic cycle."

"Nothing serious I hope?"

"No Sir; finally ended up being nothing technical but the usual lack of updated data we always face when dealing with anything *Rihansuu*; Romulans."

Then Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names entered the briefing room, nodding to his fellow officers as he strode towards his seat beside the Efrozian science officer, his tail swishing behind him just a bit. His posture showed that he was relaxed and alert, even satisfied.

The training exercises had gone well so far. Since many of the security team were holdovers from Captain Garrison's stint as security chief, it was heartening to the big cat. Still, he had put them through every hell he could think of except sleep deprivation; they needed to be awake and alert for any potential threats to the ship, after all.

As he sat down, the Chief of Security nodded to Smith and O'Clare in turn; the latter almost an afterthought of a nod. Then, the towering felinoid turned his attention to Captain Garrison and Lieutenant Commander Redding.

"You caught me mid-meal, Sir."

There was a fluttering of his bat-wing-like ears, which seemed to indicate his amusement.

Captain Garrison nodded and smiled dismissively to the Kzinti as he watched Chief flight officer Daniels come in and sit down in the third chair on the same side. Garrison then started the meeting without any delay.

"Let's get down to business. I have just received changes to our mission. While our main objectives are the same, we're going to be going in a group. Admiral Nova has informed me that damage to the outer Romulan colonies have worsened with more brazen attacks by Reman rebels. Because of this, he believes that more supplies will be needed and is sending us with a convoy of five freighters as well as an additional escort ship, the USS Xerxes. We are to assist three Romulan colony worlds, in the Ke'rak system. We are to ensure the freighters' safety and deliver the relief supplies as quickly as possible."

As the Captain finished his brief Ben thought bitterly:

The Remans have really turned the heat up in that sector. Aren't those civilian outposts?

But Captain Garrison was now issuing orders:

"Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names, I need for you to keep in regular contact with the Xerxes during this mission."

The rumble from the Kzinti's side of the table was short.

"No questions, Captain-Garrison. I will begin coordinating with Xerxes."

"Lieutenant O'Clare, we will be taking on wounded, so be prepared."

"Sickbay will be ready, Cap. Just let me know where you want triage if we need it."

"Any available space that is needed is yours to use, Doctor. Lieutenant Felez, while we are in Romulan space, I want keep constant scans running so we don't run into an ambush."

"Aye Captain; and with your permission, I'd like to switch my team to six hour rotational shifts for this. I'd prefer more 'wide awake' crewmen manning the sensors as long as were in their space."

"Very Well; coordinate your teams, Lieutenant Felez. Lieutenant Smith, the Lotus transporters need to be ready to beam in wounded and help beam down large amounts of relief supplies."

"Captain, do you have a sense of how long before we start bringing the casualties aboard and how many we might expect? I would like to move the smaller supplies next to the emergency transporters located throughout the ship to enable us to immediately off-load those as we arrive. In addition, this would allow us more bandwidth to up-load the injured. I have a feeling that we will need all the pattern buffers we can get."

"Lieutenant Daniels. we are to proceed along specific nav points while in Romulan space, the Romulans are somewhat paranoid..."

"Considering that even crossing the Neutral Zone was until very recently even out of any consideration, Sir, commented the navigator with a smirk, I would say they are becoming amazingly... confident and relaxed now. I'll make sure she doesn't go a centimeter off course."

"Good, Lieutenant."

Garrison then waited for any final comments or questions.

"Any questions?"

Smith opened his hand and motioned toward O'Clare.

"If the hostiles are contained, I believe having Doctor O'Clare down there would be instrumental. She could triage there, allowing us to expedite the injured in a streamlined fashion. We probably need to start thinking about triage areas up here but I will leave that up to her."

Smith then quickly turned to the Chief of Security.

"Speaker, we will need a "go to" person from your team on the ground to assist engineering with the transfer of all of these supplies. I am sure that the ships in this convoy are already thinking the same thing and probably want a relief-wide team in charge. However, I would prefer one of our people in charge of what leaves our cargo bays. If you'd like, you could send someone to review our bays which I have a feeling are being populated as we speak."

With that, Ben sat back, nervously tapping his right foot.

The flick of the Kzinti's batwing-shaped ears showed attention as he inclined his head towards the Chief Engineer.

"If the Captain wishes it so, Team-Cargo-Bay can be given this...additional work. Team-Cargo-Bay's Coordination-Member would assume this role, since I have assigned him a similar role." He then turned to O'Clare and smiled. The tone of his voice was gentle, as if speaking to a child.

"You should also let me know if Team-Sickbay will be required to handle additional tasks, so that I may clear schedules for additional exercises, Doctor."

If one looked close enough, one could actually see the muscles moving to clench O'Clare's jaw shut. Self-restraint wasn't one of her strengths, but she was attempting to make an effort.

O'Clare stared intently at the security officer. For once, she hoped he really was a telepath so that her message would come across clearly. A sinister smile stretched across her face. She leaned forward, propping herself on the table with her hands crossed neatly in front of her. Scornfully and slowly she replied to the Kzinti's statement.

"You patronizin' me kitty?" The scorn quickly switched to sarcasm. "By sickbay team, if you mean me and Slavik... We're more than capable of handling things ourselves. I don't feel that your assistance will be needed."

With that, she settled back into her chair, turning it to angle towards Caltern. Mentally, she continued the conversation the way she would have liked to if they were in private.

The captain almost jumped out of his seat.

"This isn't the time or place for a fight. If you want to blow off steam, do it on your own time in the holodeck," said Garrison looking at both Caltern and O'Clare.

O'Clare paused before averting her eyes to Garrison.

"Understood Captain"

Speaker blinked once, then frowned.

"Your pardon, I did not mean to offend. Team-Sickbay, he continued, seeming to misunderstand the anger, is a four-member security team, designated to guard the location in the event of an emergency."

He glanced around the table, and explained to all:

"All security teams are now named for the locations they are assigned to guard-safe, and consist of four members, except for Team-Rhetti, which is named for its composition instead."

He seemed oblivious to the mental barrage the CMO was hurling his way, turning to her again to say:

"What I then meant to convey was that if the security team stationed within Sickbay were to be required additional duties, I should be informed so I may adjust their schedules and train them further."

O'Clare eased a bit in her chair. She could feel the tension easing, being rapidly overtaken with the awkwardness of the situation. She looked around the room to note everyone staring at her.

"We'll coordinate later."

She sunk further in her chair, hoping the attention that she had gained would be adverted elsewhere.

Reviewing Kzinti culture, she had discovered an unsettling characteristic. Kzinti males usually showed very little respect for females of any race, based on their own very primitive mates. Knowing this new bit of trivia had set Kiernan into defensive mode. This character flaw would obviously exclude her from any diplomatic endeavors.

Trapped in her own thoughts, she sat motionless. Praying for this meeting to end, so she could make a quick escape.

Smith sat there wondering if the misunderstanding had distracted the Captain with regards to his queries. Sensing that, he attempted to move the conversation in another direction. He looked at Lieutenant Felez.

"Felez, let me know if you are still having problems with library access. There are still a few glitches in this new ship. I believe there is some valuable scanning information in the library from the maiden voyage."

"So far its the only problem I've run into, but I'll be sure to let you know if that changes Lieutenant, and ill be sure to review that data as well, Thank you."

Judging by his almost monotonal voice, he whole situation went by Felez as if it had never happened, or perhaps he just wanted it forgotten as soon as possible.

Ben Smith felt the mood of the room starting to shift, yet as he sat back in his chair his right foot began to tap again.

Garrison remembered that he had something to say.

"I'll assign a team to assist you in moving the supplies and organizing them, Mister Smith."

Then he waited one last moment for any final comments or questions.

"I think it is time we get to the mission instead of talking about it. Meeting adjourned."

Captain Garrison got out of his seat and watched the rest of the senior staff leave the room. He then walked out the door and into the turbolift.

"Deck 1."

The turbolift whisked him up to the bridge. Garrison exited the turbolift and was greeted with the yell of an ensign with the familiar "Captain on Deck."

"At ease," John replied mechanically and sat down in the center chair, checking cargo manifests and data on the USS Xerxes on the armchair PADD of the neighboring executive officer chair. After a moment, he opened the intercom.

"Mister Smith, how close are we to being ready to leave?"

"Captain, the cargo transfer is complete," came back the reply over the comm. "The team that Speaker assigned to us has helped immensely. We have relocated some vital cargo near many of the emergency transports."

He paused a second then continued.

"The ship is functioning in peak performance. We have had the luxury to test most systems on our route to Earth. I have made a few nominal changes at docking. I have no problem with recommending our departure at this time. Oh, Captain, one more thing. The computer teams did isolate a few issues in the one subroutine that might have caused Lieutenant Felez' access problem. The problem should be fixed and we are looking into the cause."

As he finished the transmission to Captain Garrison, Ben walked out into the second deck of main engineering awaiting orders. He couldn't but help to feel a bit nervous. He walked over to one of the ensigns monitoring the SIF and began analyzing the data with her.

Elsewhere on the ship, preparations were also undergoing at a serious pace.

"Computer, display on both terminals Speaker-Display-Aid-Flightpath-Alpha."

Within Security's main office, Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names was seated, elbows on the table before him, hands folded together and propped under his chin, brow knitted thoughtfully.

"This is the sector that most concerns me, Lieutenant-Gamm. Computer, focus and enlarge the asteroid field."

An acknowledging chirp was followed by the display zooming in on a large section of space, littered with large asteroids. Several were highlighted, denoting the size as several times that of an Intrepid-class starship.

"You see, Chief-of-Security-of-Xerxes? Our convoy will have to pass near this sector of space."

The Andorian security officer on screen nodded once, grunting.

"Yeah, I see it, Lieutenant Speaker. Not just the asteroids, but if you'll note...that distortion there. I've encountered that before. Ionizing radiation. Sensors could sweep right through that area and not see an Oberth-sized vessel sitting right in front of them."

He then regarded Gamm and smiled.

"Good nose. You would be an excellent hunter."

The Kzinti grunted, suddenly glad for the order to coordinate with Xerxes. The place was an even more perfect place for an ambush than he'd realized. He tapped his combadge.

"Captain-Garrison, this is Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names. When you have a moment, I would like to speak with you."

"Once we're underway, meet me in my ready room."

Speaker looked up and nodded once.

"Yes Captain."

Getting up, he looked to Lieutenant Gamm, and nodded once to the Andorian. "We will speak again soon. Speaker out."

While this was all going on, the doors to sickbay slid open and Kiernan entered, quickly making her way to her office. As she accessed sickbay's inventory, Nurse Slavik appeared in her doorway. Leaning over her desk, she continued at her task.

"So...how was the briefing?"

Without diverting her attention she replied "interesting."

"Interesting?"

"We need to prepare for a MCI."

"What's the situation?"

"I'll fill you in on the details later."

"No anti-grav lifts huh?"

The nurse's quizzical expressions answered O'Clare's question.

"If we can replicate the parts, we could assemble one. I'm not a mechanical person, do you think you could pull this off?"

Slavik answered assuredly:

"I'm sure I could. But we could get someone in engineering to work on this. It would probably go smoothly if they took over this task."

Without further thought the CMO dismissed this suggestion.

"We'll handle all of sickbay's needs. They have their hands full as it is."

"Hmmm, perhaps a more simple solution."

O'Clare used her terminal to access the computer's library. When she found the file she was looking for, she turned the display towards her nurse.

"Are you familiar with these?"

Slavik stepped forward to read the display.

"A gurney?"

"Yes, I've seen them in a museum before."

O'Clare shook her head in disapproval.

"A museum? Of course, the perfect place for anything practical. Let's slap a piece of technology on a simplistic piece of equipment and replace it. These will be much easier to replicate and assemble. I want two of them at our disposal."

O'Clare transferred the information from her terminal to a PADD.

"Oh, I want to go over this with you right quick."

O'Clare sat at her desk, and removed another PADD from one of the desk drawers. She held it up for Slavik to view. It appeared slightly smaller than the traditional PADD and had a looped cord attached to it.

"I made these for us. Triage Tags. Have you used them before?" O'Clare cut him off before he could reply. "It's a basic standard PADD. Activated and used the same way. I've reprogrammed it though. Once I enter the information and select the status, it will start flashing the entered status. Color-coded of course."

Kiernan handed the device to Slavik.

"You'll easily see it's color from a short distance. Standard triage colors encoded. Are you aware of that classification system?"

"No..."

"If I enter Black, have support staff transfer the body to the morgue. Red is for life threatening conditions. Those are the ones I want you to immediately start transferring back to sickbay for the LMH. We can temporarily delay care for those who I tag yellow. These are patients with serious but non-life threatening injuries. I'll need you to keep an eye on these, to make sure their condition doesn't worsen. Green is for non-serious injuries. They are lowest priority. Once I transfer the LMH to the triage area, I'll let him oversee the other's while you patch this group up."

O'Clare paused to stare at Slavik looking over the PADD.

"You got all of that?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Good."

She tossed the other PADD at the nurse.

"Remember, I want two of those. Raise me on the Com when you're done. I'm going to go check out cargo bay 3."

With that O'Clare exited sickbay.

If it all but depended on her, they would be ready, comes what may.

* * *

Hail the outpost."

"Hailing Frequencies open, Captain.",replied the comms officer.

"Permission requested to undock and depart."

"Permission Granted; Godspeed, Lotus."

"Helm clear all moorings. Comm, hail the convoy and inform them that we are getting ready to leave."

"Clearing all moorings!" Daniels replied.

"The convoy is preparing to move out," confirmed the communication officer.

Captain Garrison said to Daniels:

"Take us out, thrusters only."

The Lotus slowly moved away from the giant asteroid encasing the surveillance border outpost. the sleek fishlike form of the Lotus Fleet flagship kept a slow pace as it entered a stationary orbit with the outpost while the freighters left their own docking ports to join her

"Xerxes says the convoy is rounded up and we are ready to go to warp." then announced the comm officer,

"Helm; Warp 6 to our designated coordinates."

The Lotus and the other ships accelerated past the speed of light, leaving everything in a blur. The warp 6 pace would be taxing for the freighter engines as it was their maximum safe speed, but time was of the essence and everybody knew it. At this speed, it would take the convoy nearly two days to cross the one light-year wide buffer zone from Federation space to the Romulan Star Empire.

"Ill be in my my ready room for the rest of the shift. Notify me, if anything unusual happens,"

Garrison got out of his seat and headed to his ready room to read some reports and to get something to eat.

A few moments later, Speaker-of-Names was standing in front of the ready room's door, chime pressed, awaiting the "Come" that would allow him entry. When it came, he entered, and nodded to the Captain.

"Captain, Chief-Gamm-of-Xerses and I have discovered a threat to the convoy along our present course."

He then went into detail on what the two had found.

"I recommend a course change, Sir. While the current course is more convenient, we cannot guarantee the safety of the convoy in the presence of such a perfect ambush location."

Garrison turned to the Lieutenant.

"I want to do so, but the Romulans have ordered us to follow a specific set of nav points, if we break off we would be breaching their regulations. I believe we could remote pilot a shuttlecraft into the asteroid field and use it's sensors to patrol the asteroid field before we enter it."

The Kzinti nodded once, frowning slightly, clearly not exactly happy with the situation and its solution.

"That does make it more difficult, doesn't it?"

He reached up and stroked the fur extending from his jaw thoughtfully.

"The shuttle is a good solution...though I am loathe to allow a shuttlecraft to be captured or destroyed. Still, the alternative is the convoy..."

He let the frown deepen.

"I admit I am unfamiliar with the properties of ionizing radiation...save that they make sensors useless. Is there no way to calibrate our systems to reduce this disadvantage?"

"We should bring this matter to engineering and science, maybe they can come up with a solution.Until then we will stick with the shuttle plan."

Captain Garrison walked onto the bridge with Speaker of Names and called for Lieutenant Smith and Lieutenant Felez at the Efrozian's station. Once they all met there, he exposed to them the new problem they were facing.

"Hmm.. aboard the USS Response, we ran into a similar problem in the Aurtoran Nebula while looking for a lost shuttlecraft."

He then brought up a display of a Probe on a monitor.

"We modified a class II probe to emit a baryon pulse's at ten second intervals and then launched it following in a Delta flight pattern, creating a 'sensor net' if you will."

He then turned to face the captain.

"We should be able to adapt this into making a 'sensor corridor'; while this wont tell us 'what' is out there, it will at least tell us something is and so give us a chance to react if it decides to do anything."

Smith took in all that Felez proposed.

"That is an excellent idea." He replied. "If you would like, I could help you setting up the probes."

"This sounds like a good idea; but I want the probes in a tight formation. I don't want the Romulans to think we are spying on them," Garrison nodded and then said: "Make it happen."

The Kzinti also nodded in approval, respectfully listening quietly until the Captain set Felez and Smith to work. He then turned to the Captain.

"In the meantime, Sir, I will apprise Xerses of our plan. It will still likely be a... roughride, I believe the term is?"

John smiled to the giant felinoid and they each parted to their respective duties, leaving the science chief and the chief engineer to their assigned work. Felez and Smith immediately started talking over the details of the mission.

"If we need to keep them in a precise spacing as the captain directed, Felez said, they will have to be placed by shuttlecraft, or crafts as it were, perhaps three depending on how fast we wish to travel through the corridor."

"And we will need to run a shuttle diagnostic against the local ionizing radiation effect as well, so there are no surprises," Ben added pensively.

The Efrozian smiled at Smith. He found smiling worked well with most Humans.

"Which would you prefer to begin with, or should we each take an item?"

Smith contemplated a bit then replied to Felez:

"How many probes are we looking at here? This is a fascinating proposal you have. When we have time I would really like to hear how you guys thought of it on the USS Response."

Smith scratched his head in thought then continued.

"You know, Lieutenant, if we use the Delta search pattern and time the pulses correctly, it will resemble the old minesweeping strategies that were used on my homeworld some five centuries earlier. I think it has the "none aggressive" appearance we are looking for as well. If discovered by the Romulans, we can assert that we are using the strategy to keep in touch with the Xerxes."

receiving a nod of approval from the orange-skinned officer, he added:

"Felez, perhaps we should run some quick simulations to frame the parameters of the probe launches and the length of the pulses. We may need to route some more power to your sensors."

Both Officers looked intently at the Science Chief's computer panel and began formulating their solution to the "Corridor Issue".

"Mine sweeping is it? I fear I have little flare for tactics, but if I understand the concept, that should work to our needs. As for how many it would take, that greatly depends on our route, we need only 'sweep' the areas effected by the ionization."

Building up the computer simulation as he talked, the Efrogian after a moment added:

"It should be possible to deploy them in front of us as we go, then retrieve them via transporter as we pass. It will take a coordinated effort to perform properly, but it's sound in theory."

He entered a mock up quickly into the Sci station.

"Two ships forward, placing the 'sweepers' and one at the rear to retrieve them, rotating out between affected points."

As the two men worked on the maneuver, Felez decided to supply a short version of its origin.

"In a sense, it had been my idea back then. However, the end result was not what I had hoped for."

Ben listened intently at the report the science officer recalled for him from his first deep space assignment, before he ever came to serve on the USS Lotus.

"The Auroran Nebula contained some rather unique properties as well as ion particles. My intention was to use the probes as more of a communication relay within the cloud, making it possible to contact the scouting shuttle we sent in there. But what ended up happening is that the heavier plasma of the shuttle's impulse engines reacted to the compression created when the baryon emissions interacted with the recently charged ionization of the shuttle as it passed through it. In short, it left a luminescent trail. After that, we simply followed it to the shuttle"

The Efrogian gave kind of a sigh

"Well, perhaps not 'simply' but we did find it"

"Well... we do have some work before us then," smiled the chief engineer and they both went on to prepare their equipment and operational protocols for the task ahead.

* * *

As O'Clare walked through sickbay's doors, a young male exited at the same time. Without breaking stride or acknowledging him, she glanced over her shoulder and watched him walk out of sight. She came to a stop at the workstation where Slavik was putting away equipment.

"What was that about?"

"Crewman slipped climbing up a Jefferies tube. Sprained his ankle."

O'Clare crossed her arms, and turned to face Slavik.

"You could've contacted me. I think it'd be nice to have the CMO around when a patient is being treated in my sickbay."

The nurse quickly dismissed her statement and sarcastically replied:

"Or I could've just handled it."

Kiernan conceded.

"Or you could've just handled it" she slowly replied while nodding her head. "Well, you did the treatment, so you're going to be the one logging this."

An object in the corner of the room caught her eye, and she moved towards it. The two gurneys she had instructed Slavik to construct were ready. She reached out and ran her hand over the top of one of them. O'Clare then briefly shook and started rolling the gurney back and forth. Slavik had taken note of her action, and was watching.

She turned to face him, and nodded her head towards the gurney.

"Lay down"

Nurse Slavik's eyes opened wide. He cleared his throat and replied quizzically;

"Ma'am?"

O'Clare turned back to the gurney and lifted on side up.

"I want to see how sturdy these things are."

When she turned back to Slavik she noticed his face was now flushed. Realizing what she had said, she quickly went on the defense.

"Oh don't flatter yourself. You know what I mean."

Slavik slowly approached O'Clare and the gurney. He paused beside her and started to speak.

"Well.." The grin on his face made it difficult for O'Clare to hide the humor she found in the situation.

"Just get on the gurney Slavik"

He laid down on the gurney, and adjusted his uniform top.

"Certainly not as comfortable as a biobed."

O'Clare placed one of her reprogrammed Triage PADDs on top of his chest and activated it. A pulsating green light projected upwards from it.

"Well if you really need one of these you were already uncomfortable to start with."

"Alright, let's take this thing for a spin."

"What?"

Without answering, Kiernan stood at the head of the stretcher and began to move it forward. She thought of pushing from the foot due to Slavik's earlier remarks, but nauseating her only nurse wouldn't have been convenient. She maneuvered the gurney out into the hallway, pausing briefly to make sure no one would be in the way. She crouched slightly to put most of the weight into her legs, and began to run while pushing the gurney. Gurneys are typically not easy to maneuver, but luckily it was a straight shot to Cargo Bay 3.

Running through the corridor, the other crewmembers quickly stepped out of their way. Soon into their trip they passed a security crewman who refused to just pass by. He yelled out for them to stop, but Kiernan just glanced over her shoulder and kept running. The security crewman gave chase, but did not catch up until Kiernan stopped outside of the cargo bay's door. She quickly grabbed the PADD from Slavik and pressed the screen to deactivate it.

Instantly, the security crewman arrived.

"What's going on here?"

Kiernan was winded from the running, and didn't have the breath to answer him immediately. Her lack of response prompted security to approach her. Reaching out, he grabbed Kiernan by her shoulder, crumpling up her uniform in his hand and pulling her slightly closer to him. Slavik quickly sat up.

"Whoa, wait!"

Like a natural reflex, O'Clare shifted her weight and pulled the crewman's hand on her shoulder into a wristlock. Manipulating the joint to cause enough pain to render him speechless, but not enough to do permanent damage. With her breathing reduced to a normal rate, Kiernan could finally answer him. However, she chose not to do so just yet.

"Since when did it become acceptable to accost a superior officer without warrant?"

She released his wrist, and he stumbled back a step.

"This is what I like to refer to as a training exercise. I'm sure you're aware of what they are."

The security crewman took a moment to choose his words carefully.

"Perhaps next time it would be best to alert security to any such exercises."

Kiernan turned her back to the security crewman.

"You're dismissed."

She then hopped up on the gurney and sat beside Slavik.

"Ma'am" acknowledged the security officer stiffly before he took his leave.

Slavik began to chuckle.

"You ever think about reducing caffeine in your diet?"

Kiernan grinned.

"Yeah, and I'm sure Speaker-Of-Names will love to hear about this."

The two sat staring at the Cargo Bay door. Kiernan picked up the PADD and read its display.

"Three minutes, twenty-eight seconds. Not bad."

She held up the PADD for Slavik to see.

"You see, there is method to my madness after all."

A quizzical look spread across Slavik's face.

"You know we could have just figured this out with a simple mathematical equation."

"Yeah, but where's the fun in that? Besides, I also just worked in my cardio exercise. It's all about efficiency!"

Slavik's only response was a quick shake of his head.

Other crewmembers began to pass by in the corridor; shooting odd looks their way.

"Well, we better get this back to sickbay," stated O'Clare as she hopped off the gurney.

Slavik slid off and helped her push the equipment.

"You think we're ready for this mission now?" he questioned.

"We'll always be ready for anything. But if we have time, I have a simulation I want us to run through in the holodeck. I'll set it up later."

Their actual mission was only due well over tomorrow. For once, they did have time to prepare. And it would count.

Lives were at stake.

CHAPTER 3 : VIGILANCE IS THE PRICE TO PAY

Back on the bridge with the Alpha shift after an uneventful day of travel, Captain Garrison turned to the helm officer and asked him:

"Our ETA to the asteroid field, Lieutenant?"

"We should reach the Asteroid field in a hour, our ETA to Romulan space is thirty minutes beyond that point."

Garrison then opened the intercom to chief engineer Smith.

"Engineering; Chief, Im gonna need those probes ready soon."

Smith acknowledged the Captain.

"Yes, Sir! It looks like ten class IV from each shuttle should do it. I will coordinate with the Chief Engineer of the Xerses about retrieving them. I will adhere to Felez regarding the pulse fluctuation."

On the bridge, Felez completed the sensor modulations and sent his team to work on the probes. Thirty probes in an hour would be a doable if challenging project, and he wanted ten more ready on a fourth shuttle, just in case they had to pull one back.

"Mister Felez, announced his assistant, shuttles Alpha and Beta are in position at the main shuttlebay, but Gamma is reporting a problem with the nav deflector and will be delayed."

"Very well. Move Delta into it's slot and have Gamma in position as back-up as soon as possible."

"Aye, Sir" acknowledged the Ensign as he quickly walked off.

"Captain, Ben Smith added then, If these are detected, we need to have a solid response convoy-wide as to why we are doing this? I don't think if we say we thought we might be ambushed would be suitable. In addition, we might want to think about altering our alert status for the next two hours."

Why did I just say that? The Captain doesn't need to be told what status the ship needs to be on. Ben then chastised himself silently.

As he started to formulate his proposal to the ChEng of the Xerses on his PADD, he wondered if he had overstepped protocol between him and his Captain.

"Sorry to interrupt, then chimed in the Efrogian chief of science, but I've moved the Delta shuttle into the primary rotation do to a Nav system failure in Charly, but we should be ready on time, provided there are no further problems."

"Great work. Can you let the Captain know we have our eyes in the asteroid field? I have a bit more work to finalize on the emergency transporters."

Smith paused a second then continued his dialogue with the Science Chief.

"Once we get through this mission, we should find a little time to discuss the ship' sensors. I believe I have an idea to optimize them for you."

With that, Smith stared at a console near an emergency transporter. He then smiled and started to input a sequence of commands.

The hour passed quickly for the busy crew of the Lotus. it seemed like mere minutes had passed when Lieutenant Daniels turned to the captain and announced;

"We are approaching the asteroid field. Distance; nine hundred million kilometers."

Captain Garrison then ordered to drop out of warp at thirty million kilometers and go to quarter impulse to enter the system. When the starfield on the screen returned to normal from its familiar faster than light steaking effect, he turned then to Lieutenant Felez.

"We will be in position in twenty-five minutes."

Some time later in the torpedo maintenance room, Felez was finishing up with the last batch of modified probes when a Crewman walked up to him.

"Lieutenant Felez, I just got a report from the pilot of Bravo shuttle that his inertial dampers are showing a decreased efficiency of thirty-eight percent. Should we pull it from the rotation?"

"No, there isn't time.."

It was at times like this he was glad that Efrogians didn't show there emotions without effort, he was getting vary annoyed.

"I'll fix it myself, during the mission if necessary, finish getting these loaded," Felez answered and gestured at the probes.

"Aye, Sir, good luck"

The science chief informed Lieutenant Smith of the problem, but assured him there would be no further delay, grabbed his kit and went to the shuttle. It was a short walk from probe storage to the shuttle bay and Felez hurried along until he came to the shuttle and went straight in.

Ensign Corver had been assigned as its pilot and was working on a control system. As Felez came in, Corver looked over at him.

"Sorry, Sir, I can't find the problem. I'm betting its a misaligned coupler but that would take some time to find."

"I'll handle it, Ensign. Prepare the shuttle for take off while I work on it."

Corver hesitated, then sat down at the controls.

"That's against regs, Sir. If the dampers where to fail in flight we could... well... be crushed. I would think the best course would be to pull another shuttle, just to be safe."

"I would agree if there where more time, but the risk of complete failure is less than twelve percent and replacing the shuttle would require perhaps another thirty to forty minutes, if you like, I can ask for another pilot."

"No, Sir; I'll be ok"

Felez could feel a number of weak emotions coming from the man. Most made sense. There was annoyance and fear, nothing strange about that considering there was a risk involved... but, oddly, he was also anxious.

Even after all these years, he still had trouble understanding Humans.

As Felez worked, he noticed that Corver seemed to get more and more agitated but doing his best to hide to from him.

"Are you sure you're ok, Corver?"

"Fine, Sir."

His voice was steady and in control, without a hint of what was going on inside him.

"I'm reading a micro fracture in one of the couplers... not enough to damage it though, more like..."

He stopped short as the thought came to him.

More like someone had manually adjusted it, in a hurry...

Sabotage.

"More like what, Sir?"

Ensign Corver's voice hadn't changed at all.

"Never mind.. this damage is old, might have happened during it's installation"

Corvers level of apprehension jumped when the empathic Efrozian mentioned the damaged coupler but only went down slightly at his explanation, this meant two things to Felez.

He knew about the coupler and wasn't going for his explanation. Or...

Felez was no fighter and wasn't wearing a sidearm, so he needed another way. Fortunately, the way was at hand.

"I think i've found the problem anyway... that should... do it..."

Felez got up, straightening his uniform. He noticed that Corver's hand hovered discreetly at his side, near his phaser. He walked over to Corver and sat down at the helm controls.

"Just a quick check and you should be good to go."

As he had moved past the ensign, he glanced at the communication panel. As he suspected, it was active, most likely jamming outgoing calls.

"I'm sorry.. but I dont think so... Sir," Corver then said and quickly pulled out his phaser, pointing it at him. "Don't try calling for help. I've disabled the comm."

"I see... that bad an actor am I?"

His hands froze in their current position, but all he needed was two more inputs and this would be over.

"So... now what? as I'm not dead yet, what do you want?"

Corver gently pressed the phaser against his head.

"I don't have to kill you, if you don't make me."

"Ill admit I'd rather not be dead, and you do seem to have the upper hand in this situation."

"Good, smart man.. Ok, this is what where going to do..."

Slowly he reached down and removes Felez's comadge.

"I'll call in that your staying on board to work on the coupler while you pilot the shuttle into position. I'm sure you can handle that much just from the academy classes," the Ensign said and smiled.

"Yes; I may not have the most flare, but I am a qualified pilot," felez acknowledged and nodded in agreement.

"Glad to hear it, lets get moving"

Corver glanced back at the coupler.

"Did you really fix that or are we working at sixty-two percent right now?"

"Not at all" Felez admitted as he hit the last two buttons. "I turned it off."

Bravo shuttle suddenly jumped out of position and skidded across the hanger plowing through some storage containers before coming to a stop ten meters away, tilting slightly to its port.

Just as suddenly, Corver seemed to be launched across the cabin by the slap of an invisible giant's hand, slamming the rear cargo bay door hard and sticking there for a full two seconds.

And at the same moment, Felez himself was pushed into his chair with so much force he blacked out.

The approach to the asteroid field meant one thing to the men and women of the USS Lotus' security force.

Increased vigilance.

Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names had, up until just a few hours ago, been drilling his four man teams around the clock. Still, none of them expected trouble this soon.

"Team Cargo-Bay to Lieutenant Speaker!" said one of the gold-collared Humans rushing to get out of the way of the skidding shuttlecraft.

Glancing back, noting he was safe for the moment, he took a breath, and glanced at his other three teammates. Rivers had her phaser rifle trained on the door to the craft. Yylna, the androgyn, had its fingerpads on the shuttlebay's tractor emitter, the team's medkit slung over its bony shoulder. Shuemacher had his hand phaser up, sweeping his gaze from left to right, away from the debacle in case the shuttlecraft was a diversion somehow. He also had his hand phaser out as he continued speaking to the Security Chief.

"Shuttle Bravo just went all sorts of crazy here. Ensign Yylna is on tractor. Shuemacher and I are sweeps. Your orders, Sir?"

On the bridge, the big cat looked with surprise towards his Captain. The rich rumbling growl of the Kzinti namer responded quickly.

"Activate security fields over the shuttle bay doors." He began, then ran his fingers over his data panels quickly. "I am diverting Team-Rhetti to secure the surrounding area. They are your backup. Once you have the shuttle tractored, do NOT move it from its current position. I am on my way."

O'Clare setting slumped in her office chair down in sickbay was half-heartedly reviewing information on her terminal. The security alert startled her out of the daze she found herself in. Slavik entered the office from the science lab located behind it. The two were motionless as they awaited any communication over the comm.

After a few seconds, Kiernan stood and made her way to a centralized terminal in the treatment area of sickbay. Slavik followed suit and observed over her shoulder as she began tapping the display.

"The Alert is in shuttlebay" she informed Slavik, even though he could clearly see the information.

With a few input commands, she began scanning for lifesigns. Nothing of interest caught her attention. Tapping at the display she expanded the scans to include CPK levels of all identified lifesigns.

Her actions caused Slavik to lean in and examine the display closer. The movement temporarily distracted O'Clare. Turning her head, she glared at him over her shoulder.

"What?" she questioned.

Not that she minded his interest, or his reading over her shoulder. She just valued her personal space.

He laughed at what he felt was the absurdity of her actions.

"Thinking the alert caused a heart attack? While it is alarming, I doubt it had that much of an effect."

O'Clare's facial expression conveyed anything but amusement. Stepping to the side, she shoved Slavik in front of her to have an unobstructed view. As she continued to review the incoming analysis, she explained.

"CPK levels aren't specific to cardiac tissue. Any form of injury to muscular tissue will cause an elevation...and there it is. Look."

She pointed to information on the display

"Elevated CPK One and CPK Three levels on two individuals. We've got head trauma headed our way."

The two scurried to ready their supplies and treatment stations.

At the same instant, Chief Engineer Smith had been standing near the warp core, reviewing reports on the pod configurations, when Ensign Tomko yelled down to him from the top deck of engineering:

"Chief, you'd better take a look that this. We have a situation in shuttle bay 1 with shuttlecraft Bravo. It appears to have rammed the shuttlebay door."

Isn't that where Felez was going? Ben thought then.

As he moved up to the top deck, he shouted to Tomko:

"Has there been a hull breach near the door? Has it been closed? Have the fire suppression systems been activated?"

Chief Smith appeared slightly winded as he reached Tomko who was standing by Ensign Taggart at the consoles where they had both been assigned to monitor the probes deployment operation.

Taggart replied first.

"Chief, there is no evidence of a hull breach. Apparently, the doors were never opened. It looks like they took quite a hit. I doubt they will open properly at the moment. I am reading some micro fractures down there that will have to be addressed."

"There doesn't appear to have been any explosion, Sir," Tomko continued. "Life support systems are optimal and fire suppression systems were not needed."

Ben tapped his combadge.

"Team 3 assemble in engineering immediately to assume routine duties!"

He then turned to Ensign Taggart.

"Jim, gather the rest of Team 1 and all the tools we might need and meet me in shuttlebay 1."

Quickly turning to Tomko.

"John, take charge here with the shift turnover then assist us as time permits."

With that, the three crewmen went their separate ways. Smith exited engineering and made his way toward the shuttlebay with haste.

Back there, Felez awoke slowly and dazed. For a second, he couldn't remember where he was. His face was numb and his right cheek was wet with his thin Efrogian blood.

He ignored it. He pulled himself off the floor and worked his way over to Corver, almost tripping over his tool kit as he went. He could see that Corver's left collarbone had snapped from the impact and he more than likely suffered back injuries. But he was still alive; and for that Felez was thankful.

"Corver, he choked it out, then tried again; Corver! can you hear me?"

Corver let out a weak groan and his eyes cracked open.

"Corver.. who are you working for? tell me what's going on."

After getting out a med kit, Felez got down on one knee beside him as he spoke. Corver tried to move, perhaps to attack him, but gasped in pain. Felez restrained him as carefully as possible then scanned him with the med tricorder.

"Don't try to move again, you'll only make it worse"

Corver gave out a rough cough and smiled.

"Doesn't matter now," he weezed. "And to think.. I was trying to save you and me both..."

His teeth gritted with pain, but he made no sound.

Felez debated with himself about using the painkiller ready in the hypospray of the medkit. He needed the information Corver had. Of course, the fact that he could feel Corver's pain too, if only slightly, didn't help.

"What's going to happen Lieutenant? I need to know."

Corver just smiled and choked out a single word before fading out again.

"Stampede," he said.

Lieutenant Speaker-of-Names quickly strode into the shuttlebay at that moment, nodding once to the four vigilant security officers now guarding the perimeter.

"Report."

"Sir, began Ensign Rivers, the redheaded woman with the phaser rifle trained on the shuttle door, no sign of movement since last report. Yylna has the craft secured, and is currently being covered by Schumacher while it tries to get tricorder readings."

"About that, Sir," came the flute-like voice of Ensign Yylna. "Two lifesigns, one weak."

Speaker nodded, then tapped his combadge.

"Medical assistance to the shuttle bay as soon as possible. Doctor-O'Clare," he began as he peered over Yylna's bony shoulder,. "Injuries are the result of a shuttle going...haywire I think you humans call it."

Then came Captain Garrison's voice over the internal communication channel.

"So, what's going on down there?"

"Captain-Garrison, one of the shuttlecraft elected to smash itself into a wall. One very serious injury. Medical has been informed. I have Team-Rhetti on security standby and Team-Cargo-Bay on site. Cargo-Bay has secured the shuttle with tractor beams. Security force fields are in place. Ensign-Yylna and I are going in to see to the injured, backed by... and he glanced back to the last member of Team Cargo Bay and nodded to him while continuing, Ensign-Tungstad, until Doctor-O'Clare's team arrives."

He kept the comm line open, even as he keyed in the necessary codes to override the security lock on the shuttle door. He then held his phaser before him and stepped through the hatch. His fan-like ears flicked in recognition as his gaze fell upon Felez.

"Lieutenant-Felez is in this shuttle, Sir," he called out, raising his voice over the loud, steady drone of the still-active tractor beam.

Seeing the situation, with Felez crouched over Corver in apparent concern, the auburn Kzinti stepped aside into the craft to allow the next of his team through.

"Mister-Yylna, that one first." He said, indicating Corver while bringing new meaning to the phrase 'pointing-at' with his clawlike hand.

Quickly Yylna stepped inside while still covered by Tungstad, running the tricorder over the more injured man, fingerpads tapping through the readings the instrument gave it. With that information gleaned, the androgyn began first aid procedures, utilizing tools from within the medkit it carried. And while he worked, Speaker frowned at Schumacher, who was still conducting sweeps through the shuttle bay. The man was evaluating a rather impressive gouge in the wall at the moment.

"Captain, I will have Ensign-Rivers begin interviewing witnesses, but if we are to make our planned foray into the asteroid field in a timely fashion, we may need Chief-Smith down here."

Garrison turned to the helm officer.

"Our ETA to the Asteroid Field, Lieutenant."

"We should reach the asteroid field in fifteen minutes, Captain," Daniels confirmed.

Garrison then opened a channel to main engineering.

"Mister Smith, Lieutenant felez has been injured... and I'm gonna need those probes ready soon. And get a repair team to the shuttlebay. I want you to personally assess the damage."

Ben Smith sensed a ominous tone in the captain's voice. he replied as he just entered the corridor leading to the shuttlebay.

"Captain, almost there, Sir! Preliminary reports are sketchy but no hull breach is imminent."

He reached the entrance to the shuttlebay and entered. He immediately saw Speaker and his personnel in charge of what appeared to him to be an attack.

"What the heck is going on down there?" Smith grumbled as they closed in on the wreckage. I believe someone attempted to leave the ship in a shuttlecraft... " Cutting off his thought, he turned to his men then and ordered: "About the damage; let's be sure it stays that way."

Doctor O'Clare had heard Lieutenant Speaker-Of-Names over the comm, but had chosen not to reply as she had already made her way to the shuttlebay's corridor before he contacted her. Strolling into the bay right behind the chief engineer and his damage control team, she paused to take in the scene.

"Impressive."

Making her way into the shuttlecraft, she pushed past the security team. Tapping the androgyn Ensign on the shoulder, she relieved it.

"I'll take it from here."

Yylna nodded in acknowledgment, and immediately handed the medical tricorder over to the CMO. O'Clare's gaze was fixed on Cover, reaching out, she accepted the tricorder without recognition of the act. She didn't need scans or advanced information to recognize a bad situation. As she kneeled, she extended her hand and rested it softly on the side of Corver's face. The cool, clammy feel of his skin was just another sign of his decline. Sliding her fingers around the back of his neck, crepitus was instantly noted.

Turning to look over her shoulder, she finally spoke to Speaker.

"I need to borrow Yylna."

Speaker nodded once to Kiernan.

"Of course, Doctor-O'Clare."

He then looked to Yylna and tilted his head in her direction before saying:

"Rivers, Schumacher, Tungstad. I will be your new team member until Yylna finishes its duties. Rivers, you and I will begin interviews and log reviews. Doctor." A pause. "You will inform me when I can interview those two?"

Kiernan nodded absently, all her attention on her two patients.

He clapped his paw-like hands together once.

"Let's move."

His eyes glinted. Now, the hunt began.

Opening her own medkit, she removed two neural pads. O'Clare placed one of the pads on Cover's distal nape of the neck. It was slightly lower than she would've preferred, but the questionable structure of his skull forced its current location. Standing, and turning to face the ensign, she noted the apprehension on its face.

"Are you ok with this?"

Yylna stumbled over its words at first.

"I don't know." "What do I have to do?"

"Just breathe," She replied and she placed a neural pad at the base of its skull.

O'Clare moved to where Felez had slumped over. She threw his arm around her shoulders and helped him to stand. Then she signaled everyone except Yylna to evacuate the damaged shuttle. Once they were the only ones remaining inside, she tapped her combadge.

"Transporter room 1, medical emergency; four to beam to sickbay."

Meanwhile, on the bridge, Garrison also wanted to head down to the shuttlebay, but he then thought that someone might be around to pick up the shuttle that had attempted to launch so abruptly.

"Ensign Stottlemeyer, I want an intensive scan of the whole area."

The ensign manning the science station in the absence of Lieutenant Commander Felez turned and said with a neutral voice:

"Beginning scan."

Garrison waited for the scan to complete rather impatiently. But he didn't have long to wait.

"Captain, sensors are detecting several anomalies near our position."

Garrison realized that the convoy could be in danger.

"Yellow alert. Comm, hail the convoy and the Xerxes and order them to back off."

As the klaxon blared across the ship, Garrison then announced over the shipwide comm:

"All senior officers report to the bridge."

Chief Smith was coordinating repairs in the shuttlebay with team 1 when he received the Captain's order.

"Aye, Captain!" Smith replied.

He motioned Ensign Taggart over.

"Jim, keep on this non-stop. We need those micro fractures patched. I don't care if it looks pretty or not; just get us secured."

"Understood!" the engineering ensign acknowledged and resumed his repair work.

Before heading out, Smith stopped Ensign Tomko.

"What kind of damage did these doors take?"

"Chief, it could have been a whole lot worse. It appears the craft slammed sideways into those containers over there before hitting the bay doors. The containers absorbed a lot of the energy. We have a bit of structural damage but we should be able to repair the doors within a couple of hours."

Ben spoke firmly.

"John, I don't have to tell you the importance of this shuttlebay on this relief mission. Get those doors functioning and spare no expense."

Tomko nodded in agreement.

"Yes, Sir."

Smith exited the shuttlebay and made his way to the bridge.

At the same moment, in sickbay, Felez was being attended by O'Clare's assistant, nurse Slavik, while the good doctor worked on the more serious injuries of Ensign Corver.

Speaker-of-Names arrived shortly afterwards to speak with him. Felez quickly recounted the events in the shuttle.

"There not much more I can offer, It would seem he was doing his best to delay the shuttle deployment. More than this, I cannot say."

"Did he add nothing else?"

"In Fact he did, when I asked him what was going on he said: Stampede. I am unsure what this meant, but it may be important."

As the giant felinoid nodded in thanks to him, the call from the bridge was heard and he quickly exited the infirmary. Felez looked at Slavik with his strange white eyes to ask:

"If it's permissible, I'd like to return to duty as soon as possible."

While waiting to be released from sickbay the Efrozian used the PADD near the biobed used for the patient's own needs and researched every possible meaning or cultural reference to the word 'Stampede' in the ships library. After that, he checked the language database, just in case it meant something else to another, non-human culture. But Corver being Human, he prioritized that first.

It was interesting reading but lead him to no conclusions. It would however, get him started reading old Earth westerns...

Kiernan O'Clare would never admit to having tunnel vision, but obviously she had. The command for all senior staff to report to the bridge escaped her, as well as Speaker-of-Name's former presence in her sickbay. Although leaving sickbay was not an option at present, and security's involvement did not concern her, protocol as well as sheer manners would have directed her to reply to the captain. But for the time being, her hands were full.

The readings on the biofunction monitor were not well, despite all of O'Clare's actions. Advanced Life Support measures were required, followed by invasive measures.

Knowing there were also other pressing matters, O'Clare switched Corver over to life support to attend to Felez.

When walking over to the biobed, she noted Yylna standing guard at the entrance. Quickly making her way over, she scanned the security crewman.

"How are you feeling? Any dizziness, nausea?"

Never breaking its guarded posture, Yylna replied:

"I'm fine, Ma'am."

All medical readings were unremarkable. The CMO reached towards Yylna's face. Perhaps a little too quickly. The androgyn immediately tensed, pressing its palm into O'Clare's shoulder and tightly gripping its phaser rifle. O'Clare stood breathless, and slowly in a fluid motion removed the neural pad from the back of Yylna's neck. Continuing to move her arm slowly she moved her hand to the androgyn's field of vision, showing it the pad. Releasing the CMO, the security officer returned to attention.

"You're relieved," the Chief Medical Officer of the flagship ordered. "Report back to sickbay if you experience any adverse reactions."

O'Clare turned away before noting if Yylna complied with her orders or not. Quickly, she made her way over to Felez's biobed. The Efronzian was alert and reviewing information on a PADD. Before observing his vitals signs, Kiernan removed an outdated piece of medical equipment called a pen light from her lab coat. She flashed the light in each of Felez's white pupils, moving it quickly from the medial to lateral side. Leaning to the side, she took a quick peak at his biofunctions. Resting her hand over his, she paused briefly to offer a bit of comfort.

"Heck of a headache huh?"

The thin smile that stretched across her face told that even she didn't approve at her lame attempt at humor.

"No Doctor, the damage is to the left side of my face, while that is indeed part of.."

Then he stopped, wincing.

"Yes, Ma'am, very annoying."

Taking a seat on the side of the biobed, she took a follow up scan of his torso.

"Well, they aren't broken, but I'm sure there is significant bruising. No internal bleeding, and that head injury is just a standard counter-coop.

"My left arm received a prior injury, but I think that discomfort is still normal," Felez admitted.

Slavik," she called out and pointed to a tray to indicate she needed supplies, the nurse handing them over quickly.

Then she told the science chief:

" I want you to wear this."

She instructed while placing a neurocortical monitor on Felez:

"Anything feels out of sort, I want you to report back immediately. I'm releasing you to return to modified duty. Nothing strenuous, at most I just want you available to answer security's questions and participate in passive daily activities. Now, let's see how you are on your feet."

O'Clare leaned down; hooking her arms under Felez and lifted him to a sitting position slowly.

"Good so far?"

The lieutenant's nod allowed O'Clare to pull him into a standing position. She allowed a moment for him to get his bearing before releasing him. Felez stood sturdy on his feet and under direction of the CMO began taking slow steps. She finally felt comfortable with her decision to release him after watching him walk around sickbay for a few moments while recording his neural activity.

"Alright, you are released Mister Felez. Do not hesitate to call if you feel any changes in your condition."

"Thank you Doctor, I shall keep you advised... and, if I may ask, could you notify me if Ensign Corver's condition changes? I'd like to know."

She nodded. He then left for the bridge. O'Clare watch him leave before returning her attention to Corver.

Her temporary fix of putting him on life support was holding up well. With a few clicks of a control panel, she erected a stasis field around Corver. Turning to Slavik, she began issuing a list of orders.

"I need to you ready surgical unit 1. Gather supplies, and after you have transported him over erect a sterile field. Keep him in suspension and monitor his vitals until I get back."

O'Clare departed sickbay and made her way to the bridge right after him and the chief of security already on his way himself..

"Stampede." Muttered Speaker-of-Names on the way to the turbolift. Rivers was at his side, with Schumacher and Tungstad following. Shortly after Chief Smith's arrival and the order to return to the bridge, the Kzinti had assigned Team-Rhetti to the shuttlebay. Team-Cargo-Bay, now a part of the security chief's team, would head to the bridge with him.

The door slid open with a compressed air hiss, and all four stepped inside.

"Bridge." Speaker growled, while he toyed with the word in his mind. "I do not know all the history of this word." he admitted while the turbolift obediently ascended.

"Well, Sir, I don't see how it'd apply in this sense," contributed Schumacher. He tended to drawl with his words. "Stampede refers to a whole lotta animals running in one direction in a panic or a rage or somethin'."

Tungstad nodded.

"Well maybe, just maybe, that's what it is. When I hear Stampede, the next word I consider is Trample. So some sort of movement, bent on crushing whatever's in the way."

Speaker expected Rivers to say something at this point, and frowned when she didn't. He glanced down at her and said condescendingly, with a wry smile.

"Cat got your tongue, Ensign?"

She took a breath, tightened her grip on her phaser rifle slightly, and shook her head, looking away.

"No sir."

This gave the big cat pause, and he looked at her consideringly, as if suddenly remembering something unpleasant. He opened his mouth to speak once again, when the turbolift doors opened, prompting the current Team-Cargo-Bay to file out. He closed his mouth again, and nodded to Edward Tomah, the security officer at his station.

"Team-Bridge, assume Team-Rhetti's default responsibility." The three other gold-collared officers stationed around the bridge nodded with a quiet, "Aye-Sir" and filed out to the turbolift, followed shortly by Lieutenant Tomah, who delayed to brief the Security Chief on what had transpired since he'd left for the shuttlebay.

Without needing to be told, the members of Team-Cargo-Bay filed into the positions vacated by Bridge's default security team, including Speaker, who wedged himself once again into his security station.

"Status report, Captain-Garrison: Starship-Xerses and the convoy have backed off to prescribed positions. Sensor anomalies still present, and closer than last reported."

He looked up from his databoards and confirmed yellow alert status: "Shields up, Captain; phasers in heated stage, torpedo tube 1 loaded."

The bridge had a solemn look to it as they expected the worst. Garrison then awaited the arrival of his science officer so he could have him on the bridge to monitor the probes telemetry when launched.

Captain Garrison noticed then his Efrozian science chief enter the bridge.

"Lieutenant Commander Felez, are we able to launch the probes yet?"

"A moment Captain, but I believe so."

Felez contacted the shuttlebay. They reported that the damage was minor and they could precede at anytime, he told them to stand by.

"Captain, shuttlebay reports ready for launch, do we have a go, Sir?"

Garrison gave him a quick nod.

"Shuttlebay, launch of recon shuttles is approved. Begin deployment"

One by one, the shuttles quickly left the ship, splitting up as they did to cover their assigned areas. Within minutes, the first modified probes where launched, disappearing into the hazy background of the asteroid field.

"Receiving telemetry data now, captain," confirmed the science chief and began looking it over.

The turbolift doors opened again and Doctor O'Clare stepped onto the bridge. Everyone was silent and the tension in the room was obvious. She stood silently beside the science station, observing to better understand the situation. The stern look on Captain Garrison's face and intense focus in his eyes riveted to the main viewer lead her to believe that this would not be the best time to interrupt.

Watching Felez quickly resume his post caused a lingering concern to the Chief Medical Officer of the Lotus. The question of *Did I release him to quickly?* floated around in her mind. The readings transmitted from his cortical monitor helped alleviate some of her apprehensiveness

The bridge crew continued their work, but O'Clare felt like an unneeded observer. Knowing she had a patient waiting on the surgical table didn't help. Having Corver occupying her only surgical unit only further complicated things. If the ship was actually in store for rough times, that unit could be needed.

"Telemetry data coming in captain," announced Felez. "Where not picking up any movement within the area, but there is indication of resent activity, Sir"

He brought the readings up on the main viewing screen.

"There's a decaying ion stream scattered around the field but, given the breakdown of particles in the stream, I say it was a single ship more than seven hours ago, possibly Survey type in size."

O'Clare paused a little longer to observe the crew, and silently exited to return to sickbay.

Behind her as she exited, the commanding officer of the flagship ordered:

"Helm, plot a course in using the probes telemetry, one-quarter impulse."

Daniels nodded and began the maneuver. Garrison then turned and addressed his Chief Tactical officer.

"Lieutenant, hail the Xerxes and the convoy."

Speaker hailed the Xerxes. An Andorian appeared on screen, his white-haired, rigid blue face nevertheless marred by a frown and the pair of antennae on the front top of his head waving slightly in anticipation.

"Hello Captain Garrison."

"Captain Ramor; please take up a position in the front of the convoy, behind the Lotus, were going in."

"I've relayed the message to the convoy, we can follow you in on your order."

"Follow us in one-quarter impulse."

The Lotus moved in with the convoy behind it, slowly moving through the asteroid field.

* * *

On returning to sickbay, O'Clare found out that Slavik had followed through on her orders. Corver had been transferred to surgical bed 1 with a sterile field erected. She called out to Slavik while briskly walking towards her office.

"How are we doing?"

Slavik's eyes remained fixed on the patient's display as he spoke.

"Stasis field is holding; stable for the time being."

"Initiate extensive sub-neural scans."

After entering her office and pulling the shades on the windows, O'Clare exited moments later dressed in red surgical scrubs. Slavik was reviewing the results of the sub-neural scans outside of the sterile field.

"What do you make of this, doc?"

Glancing over the speaking nurse's shoulder, the results on the screen were extremely displeasing.

"Good grief! This man must've landed directly on his head. I have no idea how he regained consciousness."

With a few clicks of the control panel, O'Clare expanded the image to take a closer look. The patient's diffuse axonal injury was widespread, and would have to be tackled from different angles.

"Computer, activate the EMH."

On materializing, O'Clare quickly cut off the hologram before it could issue its standardized greeting.

"We're prepping for surgery, your assistance is needed."

After instructing Slavik to assemble a neural specific surgical tray, she began to confer with the EMH.

"We've got extensive axonal damage to deal with, on top of secondary injuries. Security needs imperative information from this man."

She directed the EMH's attention to the test results.

"Doctor, I'm not greatly familiar with holographic capabilities; but if we were to transfer his synaptic patterns into a hologram, would the program be able to restructure the axons? The quicker he is available for questioning, the better... but not at the cost of his life."

After swiftly processing the information, the EMH finally had an opportunity to speak.

"I may be able to construct something sufficient. But at this point that is speculative. My database has no information on a successful case as such. However, there are unproven procedures that may be adapted to this situation."

O'Clare nodded her head slowly.

"It's worth a shot. I will leave this task in your hands."

With the use of a synaptic stimulator and neural implant, the EMH began his procedure. To make use of precious time, O'Clare began reconstructing Corver's ribcage with an Osteo-regenerator. Correcting the patient's chest now would have to prove beneficial during the actual surgery.

The EMH was able to gather Corver's pattern much more quickly than thought. With that task complete, O'Clare began the arduous task of reforming the many axons that had been elongated. Within the hour, the EMH had successfully transferred the synaptic patterns into a hologram matrix. After a few basic questions such as name, rank, assignment, and place of birth to the photonic construct, the medical team was satisfied with the result and decided to turn it over to security.

With the EMH now available to assist, the time required to perform the operation was sure to be reduced. O'Clare wasn't thrilled to have this technology involved, but his ability to recall Doctor Leonard McCoy's founding procedure was of great value. The two continued to work quietly with the assistance of Slavik as their scrub nurse. The CMO then tapped open her chest communicator:

"O'Clare to Speaker-Of-Names. We may have devised a way for you to question Corver despite his current comatose state."

"That is indeed good news, Doctor-O'Clare. I'll dispatch my second there immediately."

The Kzinti sounded a little unhappy. Clearly, he'd been wanting to do the interrogation himself. But his place was on the bridge during yellow alert. He finished sending the computer commands necessary to get his people on the interrogation, then switched one of his displays to monitor the proceedings in medical.

If he couldn't be there for the interrogation itself, he'd at least observe it out of the corner of his eye.

The clear voice of the chief medical officer of the Lotus finished their exchange with a warning.

"However, I must warn you it's not a full-proof guarantee. The hologram will be available for questioning in my office. O'Clare out."

Hologram?

But the conversation was cut off before Speaker could inquire out loud about this and things were about to get a lot more pressing on the bridge...

Working swiftly, the medical crew had already reconstructed Corver's corticospinal tract by the time the security team had arrived. Although her back was turned to the door, she could sense their presence.

"In my office boys," she announced without turning to face them. "And close the door."

Ma'am." Came the reply from the door as Security's second in command stepped in. Immediately, the security team assigned to Sickbay seemed more alert and one of them stepped out, likely to replace whatever team the junior-grade lieutenant had left.

"Ah-I don't think we've met. I'm Edward Tomah, Lieutenant Speaker's second."

The statement was quiet, to the point, and just a touch awkward as he closed the door on her suggestion.

"I'll interview your patient now ...with your permission."

"Computer activate program medical 1-X-X-1," ordered the doctor outloud.

She turned in time to see the hologram materialize in her office between her and the security officer.

His platinum blonde eyebrows shot up, noting what the doctor had had to do to make this interrogation happen. He gave her a questioning glance to make sure what he was seeing was right.

"Ah-apparently the Chief didn't give me the entire lowdown. Just to be sure: I'm interviewing a hologram?"

With a reconstruction of Corver's brain," specified Kiernan with a half smile. But her eyes showed clearly that she was not joking

Due to the precision needed in placement of the synthetic axon, O'Clare made the security team wait in silence as she slipped it into place.

"That's the general idea" she finally replied as she straightened up and flexed her back. Leaning over the surgical table and performing such a meticulous task was taking a toll on her energy level. She turned to face the security team, and to offer an explanation on the circumstance.

"At this point, we're going to have to work with what we've got. I can't guarantee it's going to work. We've taken his severed neural patterns and transferred them into the hologram. The reconstruction was computer generated though, so one missed or misaligned axon may prove to be an obstacle. We've asked some basic questions, but nothing indepth. So far so good."

As the security team caught on the unorthodox situation, she again turned her attention back to the procedure in progress. The three layers of the cerebellum were completed. The sight brought temporary relief to O'Clare as she realized the remainder of the surgery should progress quickly. The EMH, acknowledged the CMO's silent estimation.

"Ready to move on to the cerebral cortex."

O'Clare nodded while picking up a hypospray and injecting Corver with doses of cortical analeptics.

" We've reconstructed the corticospinal tract, so the preganglionic fibers should be all that's left."

With the main task complete, reconnecting the fibers only took the EMH a matter of minutes. O'Clare then deactivated the holographic doctor and used the osteoregenerator to reconstruct the skull. After removing life support, Corver's basic functions immediately returned.

"I want to keep him sedated and comfortable. Administer another dose of analeptics," she ordered Slavik, while readjusting the settings of the blood gass infuser.

Slavik approached Corver and administered the drug via hypospray.

"Why are you resetting that? He's breathing fine."

"We're going to do as much as possible for him while he recovers; take some strain off of his body while he heals. Give him four milliliters of Trianoline, We're going to have to keep an eye on his cerebral edema."

After assisting Slavik in inventorying the equipment they used, O'Clare left him to finish cleaning the surgical unit.

She re-entered her office and interrupted the security team's interrogation. However, it was obvious that she had not interrupted anything important. The Hologram's speech was choppy, like a distorted audio file. The few immediately recognizable words formed incoherent sentences.

Tomah turned to face the doctor.

"This isn't going too well, Ma'am. Is there anything we can do to improve the holographic program?"

"I'm afraid that's the extent of it, Lieutenant. It may be time to cut our losses. I'd like to keep Corver sedated for the next twenty-four hours. I could have him alert and responsive in four; but it seems as if we're already in the thick of it anyway."

"Computer, end program medical 1-x-x-1."

The room fell to silence, and O'Clare took the opportunity to observe Tomah's obvious discontentment with the situation.

"Give me at least four hours. If Speaker-Of-Names feels this interrogation is imperative, I'll wake him. If he honestly feels that we have absolutely no other option, I will even bring him to earlier than that. But if we can get by, I'd prefer it."

She closed her eyes a moment and sighed briefly, then looked again at Tomah.

"Now if you'll clear out your security team, I'll be sure to contact you if anything changes."

After security exited, O'Clare went back to check on Corver and Slavik.

Biofunction readings were optimal and Slavik had completed his duties. O'Clare patted the nurse on the shoulder.

"You did good...good work. Why don't you take a breather? Get out and walk around, stop by Ten Forward for a bit."

"Ma'am?"

"I want you to take a break."

"But I'm fine ma'am. Besides, you'll need me here to help monitor him."

"I can take care of that. I want you to get out of here to help you regroup. It'll allow you to stay sharp."

O'Clare let out a brief laugh.

"Don't get me wrong, you're not getting the rest of the shift off!"

"Understood ma'am."

Slavik eventually gave in to O'Clare's request and exited sickbay

She pulled up a chair close to Corver's biobed and positioned it to get an optimal view of his biomonitor. Relaxing in the chair and kicking up her feet, she took a moment to rub her eyes.

It would not be long before her tranquility would be disturbed.

CHAPTER 4 : BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

So far, so good, John Garrison thought after a few minutes have passed after they entered the slow swirling mass of floating rocks.

"Captain-Garrison; Xerses-Security-Chief communicated a concern. The sensor distortions are arranged in a pattern that initially suggests a raiding fleet."

Speaker paused, peering to the data displays to his side. Then he continued.

"We are coordinating sensor information in an attempt to refine our estimates on possible numbers and positions."

"Keep on the look out, Lieutenant." Garrison said then turned all the way around to his science officer. "Can you give me a verification on those readings, Lieutenant Felez ?"

Garrison: "Can you give me a verification on those readings, Lieutenant Felez ?"

Felez moved from one control panel to the next.

"Yes and No, Captain; I am picking up sensor fractals from the area, so its possible that from as many as seven to twelve ships could be concealed within that area."

Then, the strange white eyes of the Efrogian looked up at him as he finished:

"But I cannot confirm for a fact even one of..."

An alert beeping sound came from his panel.

"Captain, what ever they are, they're now on an intercept course with the convoy!"

"All Hands, Red Alert! Helm, move us into a defensive position; back us out!"

Garrison then turned back to Speaker of Names.

"Hail the Xerxes, order them to move into defensive formation and to back out slowly! Lower the shields and activate the ablative hull armor!"

Speaker's clawed hands clicked quickly across the control surfaces of his station. One motion, reminiscent of the famed ctrl-alt-del move of the twentieth century keyboard computers called up a hail to the Xerxes, allowing to speak to the security chief there while his fingers played out a martial staccato of computer-chirps and claw-clicks.

"Xerxes-Chief, this is Lotus-Chief. Defensive formation! Back out slowly." He growled out as his auburn fur began to stand on end. His smooth, rich voice continued, "Focus on targets that are ignoring Starship-Lotus. Contingency Pattern Alpha-Six-Seven."

Even as he spoke, the Kzinti was keying in the orders needed to carry out Captain Garrison's wishes.

Outside the ship, tranquil blue pulses flowed rhythmically over the ship from industrial replicators disseminated on key points over the external plating, leaving heavy-duty decatherium armor slabs in its wake, encasing the USS Lotus from bow to stern in a shell making it look like some prehistoric fish. The gray armor glinted dully in the galactic ambiance as the starship cruised to a halt in the midst of the unknown, then began to move back the way it had come into a defensive position, forming a protective shield for the convoy with its own reinforced hull.

"Shields down, ablative armor online, Captain-Garrison. Phasers unusable at the moment but torpedo sequences available at your command. Xerxes-Security-Chief reports USS-Xerxes in position. Convoy captains reporting in."

He looked up, and nodded affirmatively to the human leader.

"Convoy stands ready to maneuver and stay within our protection radius."

A chirp at his console, and he looked down once more.

"All security teams in place." He paused. "Your orders, Captain?"

Garrison brought his gaze back to the main viewer as he asked:

"How long until intercept, Lieutenant Felez?"

The calm appearance of his species hid the true frustration he was feeling.

"At present speed.. not at all. They are matching our velocity Captain. I still cannot ascertain what class or type they..."

An indicator light started flashing on his panel.

"Captain! I am picking up elevated levels of Tetryon radiation around the ship, increasing exponentially!"

His normality placid face went wide-eyed at his readings.

"Sir! we have to get away from this area immedia.."

The Efrogian was cut off by a sudden violent movement of the ship and power flickered.

Directly in front of the Lotus, a small purplish swirl appeared, its edges streaking out rapidly like spikes that seemed to rip the very fabric of space. And it was growing at an alarming rate.

"Lieutenant Felez; report! what is that?"

"Its a subspace rift. Sir... and at the current rate of growth, it will overtake the convoy in just under two minutes!"

"Lieutenant Felez, can you get a tractor lock on the nearest freighter?"

"No Sir, their shields are still active."

He held himself onto his console so as not to be thrown by the distortion waves as they emanated from the growing space anomaly.

"Captain, it is unlikely that this event is natural. Its rate of increase is far to rapid!"

Speaker-Of-Names flicked his fan-like ears once, and glanced up thoughtfully.

"Captain, Lieutenant; it is common understanding that both shields and tractor beams make use of gravitons. Is it possible to convert our tractor and communications somehow to transmit a signal through their shields?"

"An inspiring idea, but the receiving ship would have to know our intent in order to decipher our signal and there is no time for them to figure it out," retorted Felez.

Garrison then addressed the computer.

"Computer, I want all references to subspace rifts of this type on the command PADD."

The computer replied to Captain Garrison with references to various subspace rifts encountered by other starfleet captains throughout history. He thought for a second and then got an idea.

"Computer, is it possible to collapse the rift by detonating several high yield explosives on the inside?"

"There is a fifty percent possibility of succeeding, and a fifty percent possibility that the destructive force of the rift would destroy the explosives beforehand," replied the disembodied feminine voice of the ship's computer.

Garrison turned to his science officer.

"Doesn't transphasic torpedoes function by phasing out of our dimension into another? Could they be adjusted to survive the trip inside the rift?"

The Efrogian shook his head in frustration.

"No, Sir; you're speaking of the chroniton warheads used by the Krenim Empire against the USS Voyager back when it was lost in the Delta Quadrant, which where out of synch with normal time and thus penetrating all defenses to detonate... the transphasic torpedoes like the ones we have on board do not phase out of normal space at all; what they do is that the compression pulse is only active at the point of impact and splash out through multiple subspace layers so as to circumvent shields modulation and deliver full impact beyond it."

As he spoke, Felez' mind worked on the idea his commanding officer had brought forward and then added:

"It may be possible however to stagger the first torpedo, making a kind of fire brake for the remainder of the salvo to reach the center of the rift."

"Make it happen."

Garrison looked back at the screen, seeing how precariously the freighters were positioned and wondered if it might not be too late already.

Felez quickly fed the telemetry data to Speaker on spacing and detonation sequence of the warheads then gave him a nod.

"Torpedo salvo ready, Captain," then announced Speaker.

"Fire at will."

Speaker-of-Names growled low in satisfaction as he fired the torpedo sequence Felez had programmed.

"Transphasic-torpedoes away, Captain."

His predatory gaze followed the golden haze of the twin projectiles as they burned through space, their light distorting as they passed deeper into the subspace rift the convoy was threatened by. As the torpedoes detonate in the center of the rift, a flash of color appeared and the rift exploded outward but did not disappear.

Garrison then noticed one of the freighters getting pulled inside.

"Report!" he yelled to his science officer.

The Lotus lurched forward at the same moment, also pulled by renewed force from the rift.

"Subspace disruption field magnitude exceeding three point one teracochranes; presence of triquantum wave energy.. Its... its a wormhole aperture. Captain!"

The Information came up on his over head display.

"The convoy is being drawn in due to the stabilizing matter stream!"

As the aperture stabilized, the rough appearance of an upside down blue energy pyramid could be seen on the main viewer, the tips of it stretching away from its center.

And then, another ship seemed to slip smoothly into the conduit... and simply vanished.

With the rift stabilized, communication boards lit back up and several automatic distress calls were sent from all remaining ships.

Garrison relaxes slightly realizing the freighters are no longer in immediate serious danger.

"Lieutenant, Is it safe to follow them inside?"

"If the corridor remains stable, yes... but if it should collapse while any vessel is in it, that vessel would be destroyed."

Raising his white stare towards the command chair, the Efrogian added with concern in his voice:

"The matter stream has stabilized Sir, its no longer pulling vessels in. Captain, There are no self-sustainable wormhole known to exist in a natural state except for the Bajoran wormhole. It should be collapsing now, but is not." and checked his readings again. "The possibility of it being of artificial origin is most probable."

"And there is still the matter of those sensor anomalies," growled the Kzinti tactical officer from his station with a sly grin of bared sharp teeth, "I may not be able to see them, Captain-Garrison, but I *can* see the sensor anomalies their presence makes."

He hunched lower subconsciously, as if preparing to pounce.

"Torpedo pattern-Gamma-Six-Seven available on closest target on your orders, Sir."

"Lieutenant Speaker, give me a battle readiness report on the Xerxes and maintain our defensive posture. I'm not looking for a fight but, if they are, then we'll be ready to give it to them. As soon as you are done, set up a broadcast hail to surrounding area."

At that moment, the voice of Lieutenant commander Felez rose:

"I've identified the source of the anomaly, Captain. There are three warp emitters set into an overlapping triangular configuration. This overlapping concentration of warp fields in this unstable environment is what literally caught and is currently stabilizing the wormhole."

"They... caught a wormhole by the tail?" exclaimed with amazement helmsman Daniels, his eyes flickering between his navigation board and the viewing screen.

Speaker-Of-Names' growling voice then reported:

"Captain, one of the signals is breaking away from the others... it's on an intercept course with one of these emitters."

"If it should damage any of the emitters... the corridor will collapse," warned Felez.

"Can we tractor the signal emitter?" Garrison asked of his science officer.

Chief Smith, who up until now had silently stood studying his terminal, punched a couple of buttons then looked over and at Felez.

"I can divert some power from ancillary systems. It could boost the tractor beam yield and range about twenty-five percent."

But Felez shook his head

"Each of the emitters is seventy-four meters in length and misaligning them to any great degree would also destabilize the corridor."

Captain Garrison decided to turn the problem over to science and Engineering.

"What do you recommend to prevent the corridor from collapsing?"

Felez immediately answered.

"Its possible, if necessary, for a ship to take the place of an emitter by using its main deflector if properly adjusted to feed the matter stream. But my first suggestion would be to stop that whatever is moving towards the emitters, if its intention is to damage any of them of course.

Garrison nodded then ordered:.

"Tactical; if anything so much as scans the emitters the wrong way, shoot it out of the sky. Helm; move to the coordinates provided by Lieutenant Commander Felez to be ready to replace any signal emitter that would be taken out. Engineering; ready main deflector."

At which point the science chief added:

"Mister Smith; in the event that we may need the main deflector to perform in such a manner We'll need you to prepair the warp core."

Smith nodded to Felez. He then looked at Captain Garrison.

"Captain, I'm going to have main engineering spearhead our efforts there. I will have Taggart begin the modifications to the deflector array."

Garrison nodded in agreement.As he was speaking, the chief engineer caught a glimpse of the big cat inputing defense protocols.

"Speaker, let me give you assistance here on the bridge. I have indepth knowledge of these kinds of emitters. I can fill in for you while you attend to the imminent threat we are certain to be facing soon."

Speaker nodded, his paws flying over the control surfaces around him, shifting she ship's myriad of offensive and defensive resources to the new orders.

"Maintaining defensive posture. Tracking all potential hostiles."

Speaker intentionally allowed Smith a bit of room to work next to him. They both worked in concert. targeting the signal that was showing itself as a potential threat to the emitter.

Scant seconds after, his rumbling voice broke the silence again.

"Sir! The moving signal is emitting a targeting scan at one of the emitter, Captain!"

And on the viewing screen appeared the typical curves of greenish hue that was the unmistakable silhouette of a Romulan small cruiser barely the size of the Lotus herself.

Garrison, realizing that the safety of the freighters was hanging in the balance, ordered to the Kzinti tactical officer:

"Disable it!"

Speaker growled then responded to the Captain.

"Firing quantum torpedoes, Captain!"

"Tactical; signal the Xerses the stay in covering position of the convoy! Helm, Attack maneuver Garrison Beta!"

"Aye, Sir," aknowledged Daniels.

The Lotus dropped under the belly of the Romulan vessel and pulled up directly behind it.

"Incoming disruptor fire, bearing..."

before the Kzinti could finish, the tactical console exploded with a shower of sparks behind his right shoulder.

Events moved in slow motion for Ben Smith. He was suddenly repelled from the tactical station. As he gathered his thoughts, he realized the big cat beside had be hurt. Ben started to move towards his fallen friend. He then heard some shouts and started feeling somewhat in control of himself again.

As he moved back towards the tactical controls, he started to hear voices again as things began moving at lightspeed.

"I've resequenced that station Ben," came in the voice of Felez far away from his left. " You have torpedo control again, but the targeting system is down! you'll have to fire manually!"

The Efrozian left his station and went to tend to Speaker.

"Bridge to Sickbay; medical emergency! prepare for beam in of Lieutenant Speaker-Of-Names!"

He could tell Speaker's breathing was erratic but not much else. There was a large burn still fuming on his chest.

The incoming communication from the bridge startled O'Clare and forced her to sit upright.

"Copy. O'Clare to Slavik; I need you back in sickbay Stat."

O'Clare paused for a moment, waiting on a reply. but none came.

At the same moment, on the bridge, Chief Smith stood at the tactical console and tapped the torpedo controls.

"Return fire!" then shouted Garrison.

"Aye, Captain! Firing torpedoes!"

In his rush to get the job done, Smith nearly inadvertently launched a torpedo from the ship's aft. He shook his head and punched the key panel again then shouted:

"Captain, launching full forward volley in spread array towards the enemy ship."

As Ben continued to gather his composure, the torpedoes headed swiftly away from the Lotus. The torpedoes fired in three successive volleys of two torps each, all set to its own course at the Romulan ship. The ship went into evasive flight, nimbly avoiding the first four torpedoes, one of which came within thirty meters of the nearest wormhole-stabilizing emitter, making Ben cringe a little; but it sailed harmlessly past it.

The fifth projectile however struck a glancing blow on the starboard aft shielding of the enemy craft, punching the shield and causing minor damage to its starboard warp nacelle. The last one then hit dead amidships, the effecting blast going through the flickering energy shield nearly cracking the hull in two. Debris and atmosphere gases could be seen coming from the breach.

The Lotus victoriously flew past the Romulan shrike class ship's drifting hulk.

Down in sickbay, Doctor O'Clare had glanced over to ensure life support systems were functioning optimally for Corver before grabbing her private Med Kit, sling it over her shoulder and trot out of sickbay. As she quickly made her way to the turbolift, she tried to raise Slavik on the comm again.

"Slavik, reply."

Again, no response, even as she entered the lift cabin and ordered it to deck 1.

"Computer, Locate Nurse Slavik."

"Ensign Slavik is on Deck 3, section D."

The turbolift doors opened, and Kiernan immediately stepped onto the bridge. Oblivious to recent events, the sight of the Lotus in action was quite the shock. The images on the view screen had completely captured her attention. The sound of the other crewmember's voices became nothing more than background noise. As she watched the fragments of the Romulan ship scatter across the view screen, a distinct soft noise made its way through the daze she found herself in. In regards to any medical professional, the sound of Cheyne-Stokes is always an immediate attention getter.

She turned to the direction it seemed to originate, and saw Speaker-Of-Names laying on the floor, unconscious. Running over, she fell to her knees at his side. A quick scan of the tricorder revealed ventricular fibrillation. Cardiac output had already decreased greatly, and the Kzniti was tinkering on the edge of a full out code. Immediately, O'Clare swung her right arm over her head in a close fist, delivering a hard blow to Speaker's chest. His reinforced ribcage barely gave, rendering the cardiac thump ineffective and nothing more than a good excuse for a bruise on the woman's hand.

Grabbing the cardio stimulator, she adjusted the settings to administer a biphasic shock of two hundred Joules. Again, her actions were in vain. Abandoning all reserve, she readjusted the stimulator for a monophasic shock of four hundred and twenty Joules. The shock singed the fur on his chest, and burned through to the skin. However, it was enough to invert the arrhythmia.

She quickly glanced around the bridge to note all of the crew were busy working diligently at their stations. With no other choice, she slipped a neural pad on Speaker and one on herself. Pausing to take one last look at the viewscreen, O'Clare tapped her combadge.

"Transporter Room. Emergency transport to sickbay; one Human, one Kzinti."

Still kneeling at his side, the two dematerialized.

The bridge crew did not register it as they were all tensely watching for any further enemy showing up from under cloak. But, all this time, the other signals previously detected remained in position, having taking no further action since first appearing on Felez' scanners.

"Captain, it would appear the remaining ship signatures were sensor decoys, I believe the tactic was designed to push us.." a look of clarity came across his face "or should I say 'Stampede' us to the target area"

John looked at his second in command with a knowing smirk.

"Mister Smith; send a message to the Xerxes. Tell them to guard the emitters and the corridor. Advise the convoy to follow us. Helm, coordinate with Felez. Were going in."

"Where approaching the aperture Captain, penetration in 12 seconds," Lieutenant Daniels told everyone from his piloting station.

"Our regenerative armor should compensate for any stress we may encounter inside normal levels," assured the science chief.

"Signal from the Xerxes, Sir; they will comply with your request and safeguard the area until we're all through then fall in behind," now informed Smith from the tactical station.

The Lotus glided through the gate without incident, slipping into it smoothly. The ride inside the wormhole itself however was rougher than expected, but Daniels increased the inertial dampers to compensate.

The Lotus then slid back into normal space.

On the screen, the two freighters that had previously disappeared inside the wormhole were now seen floating one near the other, apparently disabled but seemingly otherwise intact. Immediately, Felez send fingers and eyes over his console for a few moments before lifting widened eyes at his commanding officer.

"From these astrometric readings, Captain, I've established that we are now twenty-eight light years from our starting point, inside... Klingon space!"

Garrison sat up in his chair.

"Oh great... Chief, send out a hail to all ships. We need to get them rounded up before we encounter Klingon trouble. Felez, can you give me a status report on the state of the corridor?"

"No, Sir. We are no longer in concurrent space with it, it will not be possible to return the same way we came because there is no stabilizing emitter from this side of the conduit. This one was a one way trip for us."

"Okay... Mister Smith, patch me in on a secure channel with Admiral Nova in my ready room. I pretty sure the Chancellor of the Klingon high Council owes him one."

But Felez, voice again rose in objection.

"Captain, there are no Federation subspace relays inside Klingon space. We could use theirs of course but, doing so without permission, they may consider this an act of espionage. An without the use of such communication relay, a message even to Starbase 10, our nearest base, would take approximately nine days, Sir."

Then the chief engineer chimed in.

"Captain, do you want active scanning to continue or should we have all the ships go to Gray Mode to avoid detection until we receive a reply?"

The commanding officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship rubbed his face with his hands and then, after a sigh, ordered:

"Send the message through the Klingon communication grid then enter Gray Mode."

Garrison sat uneasily in his command chair, realizing that klingons could arrive at any moment and an unnecessary firefight could occur.

"Captain Ramor agrees with this tactic, Sir," reported Smith after a moment. "They will enter grey Mode and will await our signal for any status change."

Felez conducted one last sensor sweep of the area then switched them over to passive operating status, so that there would be no emissions from them that could betray their position to any passing Klingon vessel or watching station.

"Lieutenant Smith; you may proceed with the shutdown of our primary systems," confirmed Felez in his role as executive officer of the Lotus.

Then he tapped open his combadge:

"Lieutenant Felez to Sickbay; Doctor, were shutting down primary power. Do you have any special requirements?"

"Just a moment, Lieutenant Felez."

O'Clare approached Corver's biobed.

"Well, I guess now's as good of time as any."

She slowly reduced life support settings and monitored respiratory functions. The process went well with Corver immediately resuming normal respiratory capacity. Initiating scans revealed proper peripheral gas exchange and tidal volume. The sedation was holding, but not interfering with respiratory function. O'Clare was pleased with this process and felt comfortable permanently removing him from any mechanical assistance.

"O'Clare to Felez" "We're set here, no special requirements."

On arrival in sickbay, Speaker-of-names had begun to come around. With his cardiac rhythm stable, he was out of danger but in serious pain. O'Clare quickly administered eight milliliters of Improvoline to sedate the large tactical officer. Grabbing a back up blood gas infuser, she started him on high flow oxygen to help reoxygenate his tissues.

Not seeing her head nurse in sickbay and getting frustrated by the lack of response to her previous hails, O'Clare tapped her combadge again.

"O'Clare to Tomah. I need you to dispatch one of your crew to locate Slavik."

"Ah, no need Doctor, he's with us. He was plugging a plasma leak on deck 3."

Plugging a plasma leak? Why was my head nurse plugging a plasma leak? angrily wondered the chief medical officer of the Lotus.

And then came up the voice of Slavik over the comm.

"There are no injuries to report here, Sir. I'm headed back to sickbay now, post haste."

"What the hell were you doing there playing engineer?" finally burst out O'Clare.

But it was Lieutenant Tomah who explained:

"Ah, Doctor, ah, Security had shown up within two minutes of the explosion in section D, but by then, Ensign Slavik had contained the damage. If he had not had been there at just that moment, the damage might well have disabled the entire weapon's power grid.

"Good for us then," now said the doctor a bit calmer. "Now get back here! You are still part of the *medical* crew, remember?"

"On my way, Doctor," acknowledged the nurse.

"Ah, good work, Slavik," then said Edward Tomah. "You saved us one huge headache being so quick. Ah, say, ah... how did you happen to be here anyway?"

"I'll explain later, I am needed in sickbay at this time, " nodded the medical ensign politely as he walked off quickly.

"Oh, and Mister Tomah; your chief has been injured. You are leading security for now."

As she spoke, Kiernan saw that the officer she was talking about was starting to pull himself to a standing position.

"Oh no you don't!"

O'Clare ran up to him and quickly administered a stronger sedative. Obviously her first attempt was ineffective due to his larger body structure. With the immediate onset of a hypospray injection, Speaker quickly became overwhelmingly groggy and started to slump forward, nearly falling off the biobed.

O'Clare wedged her shoulder up against him for a brace. She struggled to push him back on the table, putting all of her body weight into it. She felt the strain transfer down her shoulders to her back and legs. With the sickbay doors swishing open, Slavik ran forward to offer assistance. He also nudged his shoulder into Speaker's huge chest. Briefly, the two struggled together.

With strain echoing through her voice she acknowledged his earlier absence and his silence.

"A simple busy as a response would have sufficed."

Slavik squirmed under the weight.

"Well...I was busy."

The two eventually toppled the massive felinoid onto his back. Pulling at his legs and shoulders, they positioned him properly on the biobed.

Slavik had already begun extensive medical scans on Speaker-Of-Names without any prompting. Quickly making her way over to him, she reviewed the results with no marked issues.

"What happened here?" Slavik nosed towards the downed Kzinti.

"Electric shock threw off his cardiac rhythm. I had to deliver a heck of a shock to invert him."

"Now, what do we do for him?" asked Slavik.

"Nothing, his rhythm is stable. No outside factors to invert him again."

O'Clare picked up a dermal regenerator and began to repair the burn damage.

"I sedated him until we could heal the burns. You know, even wounded and dazed, he was still intent on heading straight back to the bridge to continue the fight."

"Is that such a bad thing? I'm sure they needed him, and it would only take you a couple of seconds to repair his skin. You surprise me playing it so conservative... especially in time of battle."

O'Clare finished the sweeps with the regenerator before answering Slavik's review of her practice. Not that it couldn't have waited just a second, or required absolute concentration. She just didn't expect to be questioned to that degree, and had to prepare her statement.

"If I thought that the crew could not handle the situation without him, I would not hesitate. Sedating him wasn't only to allow me to attend to his wounds, but to ease his pain. You ever experience an electrical burn, only to turn around and be hit with over four hundred joules?"

"I imagine it's not a pleasant experience...it can't be."

O'Clare stared at Slavik blankly. She found herself frustrated at his ease in questioning her practice, but relieved to know she could depend on him for a peer review.

"Go monitor Corver."

O'Clare passed a medical tricorder over Speaker to assure that no pathogens had the opportunity to become systemic. Staring over him while he slept, she contemplated reviving him. She traced her fingers over the hairless entry point of her initialized cardio inversion and shook her head. She decided to give his body time to recover from the shock.

* * *

"Lieutenant Smith; you may proceed with the shutdown of our primary systems"

"Roger that!" the chief engineer replied to Felez. then he activated his commbadge.

"Team 3; you know what to do. Everyone stand at alert to bring primary power back online as quickly as I shut this down."

He tapped his badge off.

"Starting sequence for condition grey," he announced for the entire bridge.

Smith tapped away on the bridge's engineering console. As he continued to type the constant hums and beeps that permeated the room started to fade as did the lighting. The ship had entered Grey mode. This way, even active scans would have a hard time locating them unless within a short range distance; and they would not tip off any routine scan for power output.

Inside the Intrepid class starship, corridor after corridor lights winked out as the systems supporting them went off line, The low drumming noise of the impulse engines, normally never noticed, went silent. The ship felt colder and more enclosed as both lights and atmosphere dimmed down to minimum levels.

Garrison took a deep breath then ordered;

"Send our transmission, Chief."

Now they would have to wait... knowing that their comm signal and the one they would receive in response would be the only thing pointing directly to them, as they sat, motionless, within the confine of the belligerent Klingon Empire.

CHAPTER 5 : THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

It was within this pensive darkness that Speaker-of-Names finally awoke, a low rumble issuing from his throat, his version of a groan it seemed. One clawed hand reached up, and flopped down gently over his eyes.

"Computer," he addressed the air groggily, tilting his head slightly upwards as if to talk directly to the ship, "...lights."

There was a pause before the paw-hand slipped away and the security chief peered into the minimal lighting.

"Comp..." he began, then stopped when he saw both Slavik and O'Clare peering over him.

His ears flicked a couple times, then he turned his head and addressed Slavik as he quickly sat up.

"How long was I out? What's the ship's status?"

Kiernan Spoke up with a note of authority in her voice.

"You've been out for a couple of hours. The ship is still in once piece and safe for the moment. We are standing by in gray mode."

O'Clare passed a medical tricorder over Speaker.

"Your cadiac output is optimal now, but the anticoagulants still have your clotting factor slightly reduced. I'd like to maintain these levels for a bit longer."

O'Clare glanced away from her instrument to note Speaker covering his eyes with his paw.

"How are you feeling?"

His response was temporarily interrupted by a visit from Smith and Felez. The interaction was a welcomed break from the isolation of sickbay.

"I'm sure he'll feel much better knowing that Lieutenant Smith here stood in for him.. at least adequately," said Felez to both the doctor and the injured security chief. " So, he can remain in sickbay until you deem him fit to be released, Doctor."

Smith for his part felt uncomfortable under the big cat's glare, but couldn't really tell if it was a good.. or a bad glare. So he just smiled and nodded without saying anything. After completing the gray mode sequence, Ben had toured the ship to oversee damage control, then had made his way back to his darkened office. He sat there quietly, leaning back in his seat and embracing the silence. He then had took the waiting period to fill up reports and reflect on the mission at hand.

He had been proud of how the engineers had handled themselves. After a while, he had gotten up and had walked through main engineering so as to give his crewmen praise and words of encouragement.

Then he had made his way over to sickbay to check on Speaker who was just waking up. Ben was not voicing it in his presence but had gained a lot of respect for the Tactical officer and the Chief Medical officer that was treating him.

But they both saw it in his eyes.

After a moment, they both left him so that he could rest and continue discussing with his doctor.

"I am... feeling fine."

Speaker finally answered Kiernan once Felez and Smith had left. The cat still gazed after them, relieved that at least the Lotus' Chief Engineer had gotten the message conveyed when their eyes met: this was a rather embarrassing state for the Kzinti warrior to be in, cultured and Starfleet-trained or not.

After a moment, his gaze dropped down to the tricorder, and he took it from Kiernan's hand.

"It looks like I am fine as well."

Then he frowned and lowered his ears as he finally took notice of the raw, bare skin on his chest.

"I don't suppose there's such a thing as a fur regenerator tool."

After handing back the tricorder, the security chief shifted on the bed, drawing a rustle of material as he began the process of standing up. In the dim interior lighting of the sickbay, his thoughtful eyes reflected in an intense golden hue.

"Thank you for saving me, Doctor."

And then his paw came down and patted her on the head.

Thank God his claws were retracted, thought O'Clare.

Realizing Speaker was readying himself to leave sickbay, she reached to stop him.

"The fur may regrow a bit", Kiernan reached for optimism. "Hey, thought the big warrior wouldn't mind a battle scar."

The awkward silence that followed prompted her continued ramblings. She grabbed Speaker's arm again to stop him from leaving.

"Oh come on. It's not that bad. Here."

She began smoothing over his fur to try to hide the spot.

"Not that noticeable at all. I might even do a hair transplant later."

O'Clare glanced up at the Kzinti that towered over her. The look on his face clearly letting her know she was not helping the situation.

Kiernan always did better when her patients were sedated. Bedside manner was something hard to come by at times.

"What I mean is...well..umm.."

Stumbling over her words she felt it odd to maintain eye contact and dropped her eyes to the tricorder, which she was now nervously tapping on her hand.

"Like I said, your clotting factor is still a little low. So no major physical activity, and take care with your actions. I'll call you back to sickbay for vitamin K injection tomorrow. You're free to leave"

After Speaker exited sickbay, Slavik leaned over a biobed and addressed the CMO.

"Lapses in your people skills, huh? You do know his pride was hurt right?"

O'Clare tossed the tricorder towards Slavik, and it landed on the biobed in front of him.

"The one thing I haven't figured out is how to fix yet."

O'Clare stared over her shoulder at sickbay's door.

"Finish putting away the equipment. I've got reports to fill out."

* * *

Felez started overseeing the repairs to the weapon power grid and stopped once at sickbay to check up on both Speaker and Corver before heading back out to check in with Lieutenant Smith. He could sense the mood of the ship like a dark spot in the back of his mind, growing slowly as more time passed.

He wasn't worried that they might be detected this far into Klingon space; they were well past any listening posts or boarder patrols and, powered down as they were, the odds of a ship stumbling upon them were literally millions to one.

It was only three hours but, to most of the crew, it was an eternity of nothingness, sitting at their post in case the ship needed to spring back to life at any given moment. Rations were passed out as use of the replicators was discouraged and of course the hollowdeck was off limits as well.

"Ah, Captain; incoming coded transmission from Starfleet Command... Verifying..."

Several seconds passed as Edward Tomah did so.

"Code confirmed, Sir. We are to hold position while they resolve this with the Klingon consulate and arrange for passage back to Federation space... Expect next contact within twelve hours... and... they wish us luck, Sir."

Felez sighed.

More waiting, he thought.

Seven more hours passed quietly on board the Lotus. Posts had been relaxed and most people were either reading or sleeping due to the complete lack of activity on the powered down ship.

Captain Garrison had a fairly good view of the freighters, thanks to a thoughtful helmsman that lined them up to be seen from his ready room; otherwise, the view was bare of anything but stars.

Seemed that even Klingon space itself had little creativity.

Tomah's voice finally came over the intercom.

"Captain; incoming message from Starbase 10. It's a direct line Sir, using a local relay."

"Put it through, Tomah," ordered Garrison.

A square-faced, broad-shouldered man with Admiral pips on his red collar appeared on screen.

"Admiral Athos," greeted with surprise the commanding officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship.

"Captain Garrison; good to see you alive and well John. We've managed to contact and convince the Klingons that your presence in their space was accidental; although explaining a whole convoy's presence was a bit trickier, but our diplomatic officer, Fleet Captain Leandros managed to pull it off."

Garrison guessed how much work the seemingly simple explanation of the executive officer of Fleet Admiral Nova really entailed. Klingons were notoriously not easy to get down to talk, especially if their territorial integrity was concerned. Relations between the Empire and the Federation were already strained to the breaking point.

But Admiral Athos was speaking again, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"You're to wait at your current location for an escort; shouldn't be more than an hour... and remain in Grey Mode until contacted, at their request. We think there might be some dissension about the meaning of your presence and they want you out before any belligerent and glory-seeking minor house can try to challenge your presence in there space."

The captain of the Lotus nodded. Klingon culture was rather feudal in structure, with independent leaders fighting as much against one another for territory and resources within their own empire as they did with outside spacefaring civilizations. Their High Council was the unifying authority ensuring order and cohesion between all those houses, but it did not stop, or even discourage, individual grabs for power... or exerting their own harsh authority within what they claimed as their own domain.

Klingon space was not safe and friendly territory for a stranded Federation convoy.

The admiral's orders were therefore as expected as they were clear.

"Your Priority is now to bring your convoy out of Klingon space. Take whatever action is necessary to make sure that you do. You have our support on this, Captain Garrison. Athos out."

Garrison tapped his combadge as soon as the screen went blank.

"Mister Tomah; inform me when the Klingons have arrived. I will be in my ready room."

John Garrison stayed in his ready room, activated his PADD, and input a transcript of his log.

Captain's Log, stardate 85785.5,

The Lotus started out with the objective of safeguarding a convoy of freighters through Romulan space to assist several terrorized planets and we found ourselves nearly falling victim to sabotage... then getting attacked by the people we were trying to help... and then end up in Klingon space. We are now preparing to leave Klingon space under Klingon escort and safely guard the freighters. Although things have been rough, the crew has performed well above my expectations.

Garrison finished recording his log and sat back in his chair, determined to leave as soon as he had the opportunity to do so.

Understandably, the crew grew tense knowing that Klingon ships were currently coming to meet them and they were sitting out there in their own space, helpless. If the situation went bad...

Science chief Felez could feel them stewing through his Efrozian natural empathy. People were jumping at small sounds and any panel light that flashed at their station was alarming to them.

Felez himself remained a vigil at his station, watching the passive sensors for even the slightest signal; even scolding a yeoman for distracting him for but a few seconds when she came for a routine system diagnostic.

The ship would likely never again be so quiet and still have a crew aboard.

Although normally a common sound, when the communication panel gave out its three steadily beeps it seemed this time to blast through the bridge and everyone either jumped or looked around in sudden alarm.

From the tactical station, Lieutenant Tomah acknowledged the signal then informed the captain.

Garrison walked out of his office and on the bridge to stand in front of his chair.

"Open hailing frequencies."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged Tomah.

A scowling Klingon appeared on the screen.

"We are here to escort you back to Federation space."

Garrison looked at the Klingon's face and realized that he was the same Klingon commander that had led the attack on the Lotus in the Romulan Neutral Zone during their first mission.

He must be really ticked off... Garrison thought.

The captain of the USS Lotus brought his attention back to the present and to the Klingon commander.

"Alright; we will follow you out."

Garrison ordered to cut the communication. Then, he smiled.

Assuming his executive officer's role, Lieutenant Commander Felez opened ship-wide communications.

"All hands to stations; we are returning to standard ship operational status. I repeat, All hands to stations."

The tension lifted throughout the ship in seconds as everyone scrambled back awake at their posts and power came back on. Hallways lit back up and panels came back to life. A few more minutes later, the low hum of main engineering could be heard and felt again in the background.

Tomah informed the other ships and the whole convoy slowly lit up, coming back to life as well, being careful no doubt not to show any hostile intent to their Klingon escort.

"Bridge to Main Engineering, situational status Lieutenant Smith?" asked Felez as they all waited for the all clear.

Chief Smith stood in Main Engineering, having just greeted Team 1 to their duty shift. Crewmembers halted activities as the all hands announcement sounded throughout the ship.

All eyes turned toward the chief as the First officer's message arrived.

Smith snapped a command to Taggart and engineering began to come alive. Crewmen stood alert at their posts, waiting to revive the Lotus. He tapped his combadge.

"Sir, we are status Grey. Shall I wake this sleeping beauty so we can get moving again?"

Ben looked down at the main power console he was standing at. His fingers twitched millimeters above the display, anticipating a response from the bridge.

"Make it so, Lieutenant"

Felez didn't know why, but saying that made him feel more in charge for some reason... But he shrugged and went back to work.

"Roger that, Sir! Beginning sequence initialization. We'll be up to Code Green in a few minutes."

With that, Smith began pressing buttons on the display, starting the sequence of commands to bring all of the Lotus' systems back online. Lights suddenly illuminated main engineering and the familiar humming and grinding of machinery took the place of the cold silence that had become the norm for the last day.

Smith barked commands to his staff and they moved in great haste to bring each of their stations back to life. It wasn't long before the Lotus was ready to roll.

The ship came back up to a hundred percent readiness in the expected half hour of reinitializing the warp core.

"All systems are go Captain," finally confirmed Felez to his commanding officer.

Garrison nodded, eyes riveted to the main viewer.

"Helm; take us into our customary escort position with our convoy. Then, follow the lead Klingon vessel."

The Lotus moved in behind the Vor'Cha battlecruiser leading the Klingon escort squadron of three ships, the pair of B'Rel class attack cruisers forming a boxing triangle formation behind the Federation convoy; as much to protect them as to watch them... and ready to blast them all out of the stars at the first opportunity they would be given to call out any treachery, real or perceived.

But, without any further word or incident, all ships jumped to warp virtually simultaneously.

Seven hours later, the USS Lotus and the Federation freighters entered Federation space barely a light year from the Romulan Neutral Zone. Without a word, the Klingon escort broke off to stay within their own side of the Klingon border but stayed there, obviously waiting for the Federation convoy to head away in the proper direction; which meant anywhere but Klingon space.

Garrison now knew the relief operation in Romulan territory was irremediably compromised. Their humanitarian mission had been sent into a trap, seemingly by the very same people that had asked for help; a trap that had been apparently laid out to throw them into Klingon territory, with the obvious intent of seeing this incident stir up the brewing conflict between the Empire and the Federation.

It would have worked... if cool heads had not prevailed that day. Yet, it could still later be pointed at as the prelude to a dire conflict that seemed to be sooner or later inevitable.

One thing was sure in the captain's mind; all this effort had been for nothing.

No, not for nothing, he chastized himself silently. Now, the Romulans know they can not trap us so easily... and that we will now be aware of their trickery and their true intent; and the Klingons will be aware of it as well... something the Romulans will also be aware of. In the end, we will all end up watching each other warily... And that alone might postpone, or even avert a global war.

It had worked on Earth during the later half of the twentieth century, when major powers were on the verge of planetary annihilation, pointing enough nuclear warheads at each other to obliterate the whole planet.

Then too, cooler heads had prevailed and, in the following decades, the impending threat of mutual destruction had held them all off long enough to work things out and emerge from the brink of disaster into a precarious but hopeful future.

Just like now.

Captain Garrison sighed; but this time, it was with relief. Even from failure could come hope.

Like now.

"Helm, take us back to starbase 10, warp factor 5. Engage."

The End