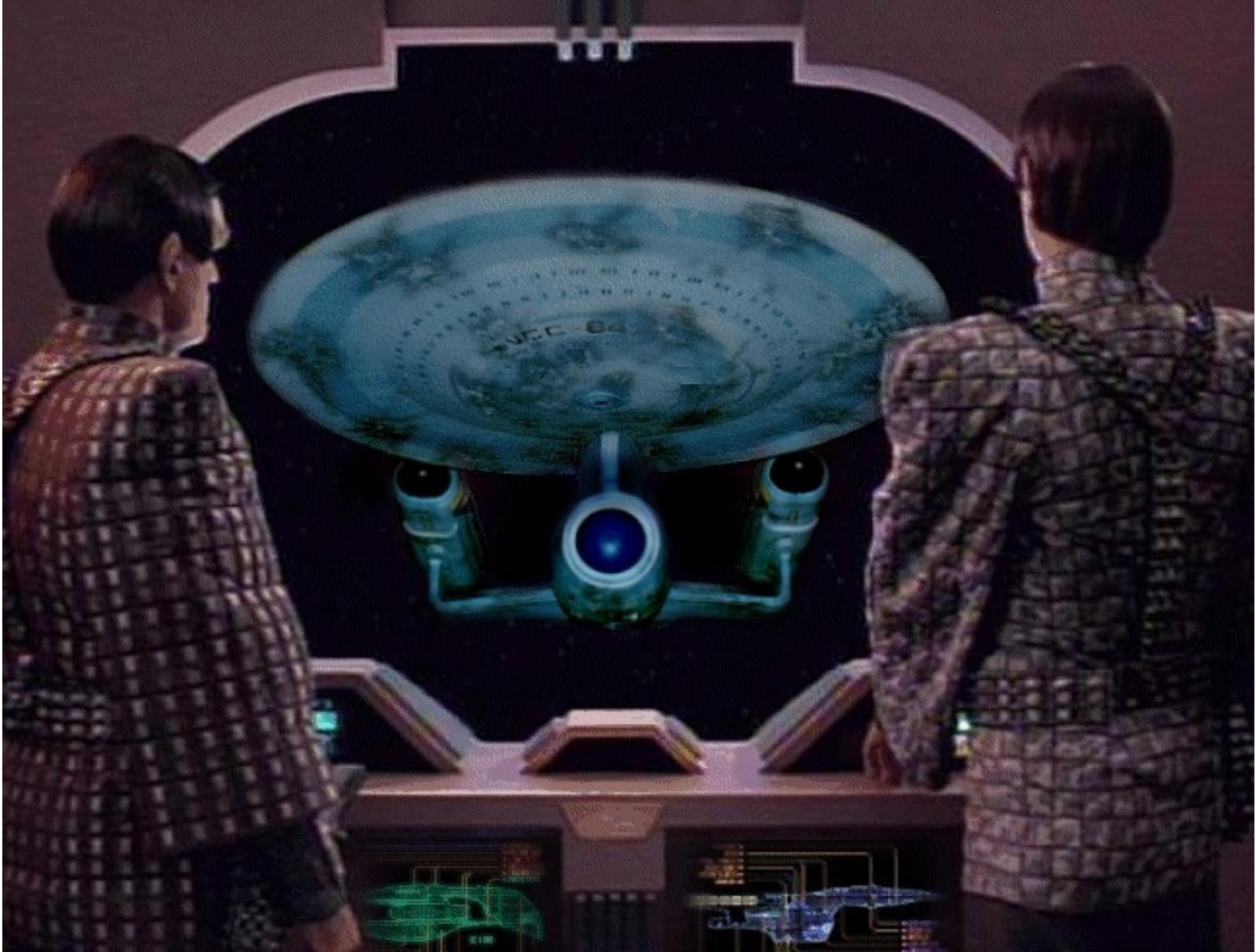


To save all civilizations in the galaxy,
time is of the essence!

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

ROMULAN PARADOX

The Fourth Voyage of the Starship Artemis



STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

USS ARTEMIS: ROMULAN PARADOX

SEASON 1 EPISODE 4

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kheren as Captain Kheren

Drakxii as Commander Michael O'Conner

Jeff T as Lieutenant Syntron

Arma as Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott III

Jaye as Doctor Caius Castiel Aquila

Azzy as Lieutenant Junior Grade Brad Jackson

BlueKnightOne as Lieutenant Junior Grade Danik Brie

Special Appearance by:

BawdyScoundrel as Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta of Fleet Captain Kotari's office.

Evshell as Fleet Captain/Rear Admiral Kotari and Commander/Fleet Captain Allen Samji

Forum roleplaying session

from August 5th 2011 to November 6th 2011

Novelization by Kheren

Story concept by Drakxii

Editing by Jeff T.

Cover by Kheren

*"Ave Cesar, morituri te salutant!"
("Hail Cesar! Those who will die salute you!")*

Oath of the gladiators
in the Coliseum of Ancient Rome (Earth)

PROLOGUE

It looked like a clear, translucent, slightly luminescent snowflake floating in the star-studded darkness of space; a delicate, intricate starburst of thin, whitish lines spreading in all directions like a very complex web across the heavens.

It was beautiful.

Then, the entire star-like flake blazed from within. Bright orange fire spread across all the crisscrossing lines to highlight each one with thick, liquid flames spreading along them all across the vastness of space.

It was frightening.

And, as the fire spread all over the fragile web of light, it spread even further as its fiery heart pulsed with a blinding white flare, like a living, beating heart of flame and searing light, streaking across the stars to engulf them in crackling bolts of lightning.

It was monstrous.

Before the holographic, tridimensional display of the cosmos suddenly engulfed in flames, the reflected lights played like demonic flames on the gaunt, angular features of those assembled around it, the greenish, copperish tint of their feline features enhanced with sharp contrast as shadows deepened the drop of their hawkish nose over their thin, tight-closed lips, the deep furrows over their upswept, bony brows and the blade-like ending of their pointed ears.

The silence among them was that of fear and anger, too intense to be voiced.

But then, one voice nevertheless was heard; soft and clear, from one of the faces, paler, rounder, with peculiar hair of gold so distinctive among all the dark-haired heads each side of it, even more than the robes of red and bronze covering a slim but shapely body.

"They have doomed us all."

For a moment, no one in the vast room dared to lift the weight of gloom and doom that fell behind those words. But finally, one voice, deep and full of the echoes of hidden thoughts broke the oppressive silence.

"And we will sit by and watch them finish what they started: the annihilation of our race."

Mutterings and low growls now filled the large chamber, echoing between the tall, thick columns of gold-veined green marble holding the high-ceiling dome over the tiled floor showing a large part of the galaxy, over which the fiery display had floated and spread to cover it all.

One voice rose louder than the others among all the whispers and grumblings sternly addressing the broad-shouldered, grey-clad figure that had just spoken:

"Admiral Tomalak; you know as well as anyone here in this senate that the Federation did not create the Hobus supernova that destroyed our core worlds: we did."

"But *they* made it possible."

Again, the clear, soft voice of the blonde-haired woman on the largest and highest seat in the chamber brought down the silence of doom on them all.

"Your Highness, now the reproachful voice said, this time with less venom in his tone, there is no evidence that Federation agents had any part in the weapons experiment that..."

"Yes, their Section 31 is almost as efficient as our own Tal Shiar." interrupted the woman. "We thought we were stealing secrets from them to level the battlefield, when in truth they let out the faulty data, knowing full well the true danger such knowledge harbored... letting us risk ourselves as they sat back and watched us do their own experiment, their own dirty work for them... and in the process, bringing us to our knees."

New mutterings filled the Senate main chamber, clashing with more anger and confusion than before.

"Your Highness," said again the deeper voice over the rumble of voices, silencing them once more; "evidence..."

"Is most clear now," again cut in the woman. "All our scientists confirm that this... anomaly is spreading in our space along subspace fractures, as you have just seen in this computer simulation; fractures made by hundreds of years of warp travels in this specific sector... a Federation sector."

"And so conveniently arcing towards our own space." chimed in the one, tall and broad-shouldered Imperial fleet officer named Tomalak.

The other speaker, wearing robes of green hues, glanced angrily at the Admiral before returning his white-haired head and age-wrinkled face towards the throne.

"Empress Sela; we should not decide hastily any course of action that could spill the blood of our people."

"So, what do you propose, Proconsul Pardek; that we avoid confronting the Federation for their crime against the galaxy and our people and just sit while all are engulfed in flames?"

The stout, thick-lipped, white-haired man answering to the name of Pardek opened his short arms as if in plea.

"Even if they *were* truly responsible... we cannot go to war, especially not against the Federation! Not now, when our people are scattered and divided by civil war, while our civilization lies in ruins after a major war and a stellar catastrophe striking us right in its wake, with predatory Klingons breathing down on our necks!"

"And even if they were not, what of it?" retorted Admiral Tomalak; " we are conquerors of the stars, not hypocritical peace-lovers hiding exploitation behind soft words! The Federation itself is engaged with border conflicts with the Klingons also, right after a devastating major war with the Borg... while recent reports tell of violent movements within their own fragmented societies since the discovery of this... cosmic catastrophe in their own backyard."

Making a theatrical pause with a smirk and a telling stare at the golden-haired woman lording over them, he then finished saying with a soft, slurry tone:

"Truly, could there be a better time?"

On the high seat, the Empress just smiled.

"Is there?"

Her own smile and voice mirrored those of the military officer.

She kept her gaze lingering over him a moment before she fully turned her attention and words back at the government official also standing on the central floor.

"You are quite right, Proconsul. Going against the Federation would be both suicidal and futile now."

But despite her own words of doom, the Empress' smile grew wider.

Then, her astonishing sky-blue eyes crossed again the dark, shifting stare of the grey-haired high officer wearing the quilted, broad-shouldered uniform of an Imperial Admiral.

He too was smiling from one corner of his wide, thin-lipped mouth.

"Admiral Surol," suddenly called out Tomalak from his side of the large meeting hall; "is everything ready?"

From the front row of officers assembled near the central floor, a powerfully built officer with darker skin than most and a deceptively soft stare stepped forward and bowed his slightly graying head. He wore the same uniform as the one who had called him out. His voice was surprisingly calm amidst the agitation filling the vast chamber.

"The Terix is ready for departure to Station Kronus," announced Admiral Surol with a smooth and deep voice, his face perfectly composed, unreadable. "All is in readiness over there. If we start now and proceed at maximum warp, we shall reach the Algeron system and implement Operation Victory in seven days."

From the podium, right under the bronze hanging of an immense bird of prey wings outspread while holding a planet in each curved talon, Empress Sela stood up, bringing everyone else down to their knees.

"Admiral Surol: the Honor of your sacrifice shall resound into the afterlife and the soul of every Romulan that had, or will, ever live... and we will *all* share this sacrifice. Through courage and duty, Honor and Life will be one."

Then, her astonishingly alien blue-eyed gaze fell directly on the officer she was honoring.

"Proceed Admiral. Time is of the essence."

And again, she was smiling.

CHAPTER ONE: NEW BLOOD

It was a fairly standard day aboard the Galaxy-class USS Adler. No hazardous anomalies, no dangerous alien diseases, no precarious negotiations. Just a routine patrol and that suited the crew just fine. Deep in the bowels of the Engineering section, a blue-skinned Bolian in a gold jumpsuit was crawling through a Jeffries tube underneath the Adler's Matter-Antimatter Reaction Assembly, dragging a tool kit. Lieutenant, Junior Grade Danik Brie was on his way back from realigning the magnetic restrictors on the Antimatter Reaction Injector when his combadge chirped.

"Oyalrassy to Brie," the voice of the Adler's Chief Engineer echoed slightly in the confines of the Jeffries tube.

Danik paused and tapped the badge on his chest, "Brie here, Commander."

"Lieutenant, you have an incoming communiqué from Starfleet Headquarters. Fleet Captain Kotari wants to speak with you. I suggest that you hurry."

"Acknowledged ma'am. Brie out."

Danik renewed his crawl through the access way at double-time pace.

I wonder why Command is contacting me? He pondered.

A little thrill went through his spine as he wondered what if his performance had not been satisfactory. It was like being called before the Dean back at the Academy. You always thought you were in trouble, even when you hadn't done anything wrong.

Soon, he was at the end of the Jeffries tube opening the access hatch in Main Engineering. Lieutenant Commander Oyalrassy, Danik's Commanding Officer was waiting. She was average height for a Teadan female, which was tall for most humanoids. The blue skin of her face was broken by a flattened nose and patches of pink skin extending back along the sides of her head. Her stark white hair, trimmed in a neat bob, contrasted the rest of her appearance. As Danik pulled himself out of the hatch, she leveled her glassy, grey eyes at him in a curious look. Teadan took responsibility very seriously; evident in the business-like fashion Oyalrassy spoke with her staff while on-duty.

"The Fleet Captain is waiting, Lieutenant. I've had the transmission routed to the console in my office. You may take it there."

Danik nodded and entered the Commander's office, a small room decorated with curving sculptures in the style of her people's artists. There was a rumor that the Commander herself had made some of them, but she never commented when asked. Danik sat at the desk and activated the personal terminal sitting atop it. A screen displaying the United Federation of Planets Insignia above the text "Incoming Transmission" was replaced by the Fleet Captain.

Fleet Captain Kotari, a Boslic man with the striated brow typical of his kind and a trimmed graying beard in the style made popular by the renowned Captain William T. Riker of the USS Titan, was sitting in his office in Starfleet Headquarters when the call had come through from Starbase 10: Another officer requesting a posting upon the Artemis. They had been lucky enough to be able to mostly re-staff the ship so quickly after two of its senior staff had been transferred back to their respective homeworlds due to personal reasons and another had been assigned Executive Officer of the McKenzie.

Yet, the request was not quite what he expected. An Engineer with near perfect scores who showed aptitude in the field on the Hood and the Adler, requesting a position as the Chief Operations Officer of a refitted starship!

So he had put in a call to the Adler where Mister Danik Brie was currently serving. As the blue, ridged face appeared on the viewer, he said:

"Good evening Lieutenant Junior Grade Brie. I am Fleet Captain Kotari. While your application is... unusual, I admit we are greatly in need of someone to fill the position. In the Artemis' past three missions, it seems that fate has deemed to keep her Captain quite busy, forcing the Executive Officer to run the ship and deal with the duty rosters simultaneously. Commander O'Conner could certainly use the help."

Danik, not having been invited to speak, simply nodded his understanding of the situation aboard the Artemis. It was one of the reasons he had applied to the ship as the Chief of Operations.

The Fleet Captain's steely gaze went straight at the young officer when he added:

"I do hope, however, we will be able to use your talents as an Engineer in the foreseeable future. Congratulations and please be prepared for the shuttle we are sending to the Adler's next stop, the Laurentian system. Kotari out."

The Fleet Captain's image winked out and Danik touched a control on the terminal, deactivating the screen.

Chief of Operations aboard the Artemis. They actually accepted my application. Danik thought. He knew it was highly irregular of him, an engineer, to apply to an Operations position, but when he had heard she needed a new officer, he couldn't resist.

"So, Mister Brie, you're leaving us," a voice from the office's doorway said, interrupting Danik's train of thought.

Oyalrassy leaned against the door's frame and crossed her arms in front of her. Danik rose and stepped out from behind her desk to allow her use of her own office.

"Yes ma'am. I've been reassigned to the USS Artemis under Captain Kheren."

"I know. The Executive Officer informed me at this morning's Department Head briefing. I know many are wondering why you picked the position you did, but I think it's good for you to be stepping outside the Engine Room. Taking a posting outside of your comfort zone will only make you a better officer."

She pushed off the wall slightly and stood in front of the Bolian and set both hands on the shoulders of her former technician.

"Good luck, Lieutenant. May the Six Incarnates guide your path."

* * *

Fleet Captain Kotari returned back from a late afternoon meeting and his assistant, Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta, interrupted his approach to his door, handing him another PADD from Lotus Fleet's personnel department.

"It seems like ever since that blasted Borg War where we lost so many good people, all I do now is approve transfer orders," he said to her, shaking his head.

The Orion female nodded.

"Even when you're off duty, Sir."

"And in my sleep," he joked. "In fact, I staffed the entire USS Lotus during my sack time and woke up with the realization it was still in drydock," he added with a smile and a polite nod as he took his leave of her company and entered his office.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Brad Jackson, he saw on the top of the transfer order. *The Artemis again!*

It was the biggest ship in the Lotus Fleet elite Starfleet division and was in need of the most staff, but it seemed like it went through personnel like a Ferengi Tube Grub through... he elected not to finish the rest of the analogy.

He put a call through to the USS Camelot where, luckily, the man was apparently off duty in his quarters, being the assistant chief and on Beta shift.

"Good afternoon Mister Jackson. I'm Fleet Captain Kotari and I am calling to inform you that your application to Lotus Fleet and to the Artemis has been approved. The Artemis' next mission is tasked to be a routine survey mission, so it will be a great place to get your feet wet. As a Tactical and Security Officer, most of your duties will be routine. But don't let your guard down. We're still living in some volatile times and you must be ready to defend the largest ship in Lotus Fleet at a moment's notice!"

He spoke fast and succinctly giving the officer barely time to nod an affirmative. Before Lieutenant Junior Grade Jackson could respond, he continued on.

"It is fortunate that your current ship is returning to Starbase 24, as it should be a relatively short two weeks on a shuttle to get to Starbase 10. When you arrive, report in to Captain Kheren immediately as you won't have much time to prepare before the Artemis ships out. Good luck out there and make Lotus Fleet proud. Kotari out," he finished, and the call ended as abruptly as it began.

Brad's quarters were dimly lit as he sat on the edge of the bed. He still could not believe that he had just gotten off a subspace channel with Fleet Captain Kotari of Lotus Fleet. Transfer orders had come in so fast after his request... and, although it appeared that he was getting a promotion along with it, he felt that it was a bitter sweet moment.

The crew of the USS Camelot had become a kind of family, one that Brad never had before and, although he was excited that Starfleet Command felt he was worthy of an increase in responsibility, it was still going to be hard to leave this ship and her crew. This fact wasn't made any easier by the time line of the transfer either. Normally in his experience, transfer orders came through with time to adjust, time to pack and time to say goodbye...

But not this time.

These orders took effect later this very evening. The Camelot was scheduled to arrive at the starbase in less than five hours; and, apparently, he needed to depart the ship immediately as the travel time from starbase 24 to starbase 10 where the Artemis was currently docked was nearly two weeks, the same amount of time that the Artemis was expected to be at starbase 10 before she launched again.

The five hours had passed quickly... too quickly. Brad just barely had the time to pack and say the goodbyes he needed. The odds of running into the crew of the Camelot again were slim. Not only was he leaving a ship, he was leaving this fleet.

A short man in his late forties with speckled grey hair met him at the doors to the shuttlebay.

"I'm Ensign Mickay, Sir. I'll be your pilot. I've already completed the preflight checklist and we're ready to go as soon as you are."

Brad smiled and nodded his head, following Mickay into the shuttle.

"Is this your first extended trip in a shuttle, Sir?"

Brad nodded his head and shrugged as he sat down in the co-pilot's seat, setting his bag that held his meager possessions down next to the seat.

"Yeah, I've always been blessed to transfer between ships at the wrong starbase."

"Well, I'll do my best to make it a smooth ride, Sir. We'll get you to Starbase 10 as soon as we possibly can!"

Mickay smiled as the older man spoke, a light tone to his voice as his fingers ran across the console.

"And here we go!" Mickay said.

The shuttle lifted off the deck of the shuttlebay and slowly made its way to the forcefield covering the open access to the aft of the ship he was leaving behind. It flickered to allow their class VIII shuttle to plunge into the vacuum of space and then, barely a few hundred kilometers away, engage at its maximum velocity of warp 6 towards his new assignment, towards his next ship; the USS Artemis.

* * *

Within the illuminated confines of Starbase 10's dockyard, under the immense dome of star-like lights pinpointing a few kilometers away the grey-blue walls on the station's inner shell, several small utility crafts orbited the large floating shape of the starship Artemis.

She was Ambassador class; a round, thick saucer, all curves and arches, held by a short but slender neck on the forward top of a cylindrical hull also showing its own lights through numerous portholes all the way back on its flowing curves to the pair of right-angled, wide but slim support pylons, each thrusting upward a long, flat warp nacelle.

Looking at the ship, it gave to most a feeling of nobility and grandeur only this most classic of all Federation starship designs of hers could ever offer. It was like looking at those bronze statues in front of official buildings or at those shiny ancient armors on historical sites; comforting and inspiring; a tangible reminder of the good old days and a visible promise of better times to come.

From the vast transparency of Starbase 10's mess hall, showing a wide panorama of the insides of the gigantic headquarters of Lotus Fleet, the elite division of Starfleet, inhabitants and visitors, workers and officers, all residing or simply coming and going here, could admire her legendary silhouette, born well over three-quarter of a century ago and now revived as a wondrous homage to modern 25th century technology; the symbol of the strength of Federation values; a symbol of pride and hope.

And she was *his* ship.

Seated near the wide opening, Captain Kheren, commanding officer of the USS Artemis, looked at her with all four eyes with a deep feeling inside of him of this pride and hope she embodied. He glanced at the two other ships docked also inside the vast docking bay of the starbase and would have smiled... if his dark blue skinned face had had enough facial muscles to do so. The antenna sprouting from each top side of his white-haired, thick-maned head, containing two of his eyes as well as ears, olfactory, pressure and bioelectric receptors were slowly waving with obvious pleasure, at least obvious for anyone familiar with Andorians.

Both of the other ships were definitely smaller than the massive Ambassador class; but that did not make them any lesser. In fact, they were both of a much more recent design and, especially with their own upgrades, outperforming the old, venerable Artemis in technology, speed and firepower.

One was dagger-shaped, her forward hull a sharp triangle directly atop the flattened stout secondary hull sprouting no less than four small, slim warp nacelles: she was the USS Alsea, Prometheus class, a born and bred warship capable of splitting itself into three separate starships to become an attack squadron all by itself.

Kheren had boarded her once and, as a former tactical officer himself, had been most impressed with the tactical power and versatility of this advanced design.

And yet, he would never leave the Artemis for the Alsea.

Kheren did not want to serve on a ship solely devoted to death and destruction, however wondrous she might be. As a master duelist of Andoria, he had lived through enough of that already to outgrow the need to prove himself in combat. In fact, he had left the home world to join Starfleet especially for that reason; as the founder of Vulcan logic and modern civilization Surak had said: to "wage Peace."

But most of all, even a formidable war machine like the Alsea could not motivate his crew and him to outdo themselves as did the true all purpose but outdated starship that was, even refitted, the USS Artemis. Her limitations were the source of their own strength and resolve.

His stare shifted to the other ship. Like the first, her forward hull was directly part of her flattened engineering hull. But where the Prometheus class design was all sharp angles, this one was all smooth, elongated curves, down aft to her pair of small, stunted nacelles atop short, moving pylons. The Intrepid class was a respected short range exploration and patrol vessel since the return of the USS Voyager from her historical accidental journey into the Delta Quadrant; and this one was the USS Lotus, flagship of the elite fleet... and on her way to a re-launch with the most advanced technology yet devised in Starfleet.

Kheren had served on her before being entrusted with the command of the Artemis. Up to then and since his graduation from the Academy, he had been her chief of security and tactical, even her acting first officer during the Borg War. He knew her and respected her well.

And now, she was in drydock for a refit with the most advanced technologies in existence, including the quantum slipstream drive, making her able to travel hundreds of light years in minutes. Added to her already highly advanced regenerative armor and transphasic torpedoes, the Lotus would once again bear well the responsibility of being the fleet's command ship.

And yet, he would never leave the Artemis to go back to the Lotus.

Kheren did not care about serving or even commanding the most advanced and the most prestigious ship of Lotus Fleet. As the former captain of the flagship Kumari of the Andorian Imperial Guard, he had lived through enough prestige and honor for his taste. In fact, he had left this lofty command to serve in Starfleet also for that reason as well. And again, as the Vulcans now said, he was first to say: "I come to serve."

But most of all, even a wondrous vessel like the Lotus could not inspire his crew and him like the true, classical ship of the line that was the USS Artemis. Her very shape, shared by none other than the most famous USS Enterprise, especially one that bravely sacrificed herself to usher almost a century of Peace, not to mention the Artemis' own prestigious history as the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation during the Cardassian War, filled him with a sense of pride and responsibility no other starship ever could.

The Lotus, the Alsea... and the Defiant class escort USS McKenzie and the heavy cruiser USS Spectre... they were all very fine ships for sure; newer, sleeker, sharper...

But they were not the Artemis.

Finishing up his glass of heavily salted tomato juice, a "Virgin Mary" Humans called it, to his utter bewilderment, the commanding officer of the starship Artemis stood up and exited the large mess hall as it started to fill up with the incoming night shift soon to end its work time and the morning shift coming to get breakfast before taking over. He went to the nearest transporter room but waved off the transporter chief about to send him wherever he asked to. Instead, he activated his combadge.

"Kheren to Artemis."

"Tyvya here, Captain." Answered a feminine voice.

"Beam me aboard."

"Aye, Sir."

In front of his quadriscopic vision, the transporter room of Starbase 10 and its lone operating officer dissolved into that of his own ship, with a man behind the console and a two and a half meters tall, armed Andorian female beside him.

"Welcome back, Captain." said the giantess with the same voice that had answered him over the comm channel.

"How is the security protocol working?"

"Like a charm, Sir. Even a changeling or a clone will be easily spotted in transit, any concealed weapon detected and disarmed... or the intruder beamed straight into the brig... or into space, at your convenience, Sir."

The way she said it, it was obvious where her preferences lay. But like every single crew member now serving aboard the Artemis, she curbed her own impulses under Starfleet and shipboard discipline.

Stepping down the platform, the Andorian captain nodded with satisfaction.

"What about the rest of our ship protocols?" he asked then.

"Level 1 diagnostics of all systems completed by Engineering; Science department did the same with all sensor, probe, computer and data systems; operations finished with all flight systems, auxiliary crafts, transporters and access ports an hour ago; level 1 search of all decks and all cargo completed by our security teams in an hour; medical should finish in two hours."

The towering blue-skinned woman straightened herself:

"There will be no sabotage or infiltration of this ship *this* time, Sir. And if by some miracle there would be... we *will* quickly take care of it, Captain."

From her tone of voice, it was more than a promise: it was a fact.

Kheren again nodded appreciatively.

"I'll make a quick visit to sickbay; then I will welcome our new bridge officers. They should ask to be beamed aboard momentarily. Please escort them to my ready room once they arrive."

After her acknowledgement, he left the main transporter room with a definite spring in his step.

The Artemis was about to move out again.

Three decks above, he entered the rebuilt, ultramodern sickbay of his ship and went straight for the Chief Medical Officer's own office, to the aging but alert man sitting there looking at medical charts.

"May I see you in your office, Doctor?"

Frederic Lumquist almost did a double-take. Having Captain Kheren in sickbay of his own will was a momentous event; aside from coming down to show concern and support to injured crewmembers, or when he was himself too badly injured to get up and leave, the Andorian in command of the Artemis avoided this entire deck as if it was to him as hot as Vulcan.

Most probably because he was... born... in such a place, had confided their ship Counselor, the Aenar Lyrya, herself born on his same ice moon homeworld of Andoria.

Like the rest of the senior medical staff, Doctor Lumquist knew of Captain Kheren's unique bioengineered physiology, making him the first and only one of his four-gender species to be both than and chan: as fully male as any of all the other known two-gender ones. This had caused a major stir back on his planet; even more than an attempt at making humanity a hermaphrodite species would have been on Earth.

No wonder he was not fond of medical facilities.

But yet, here he was, asking to see the senior medical officer on board the Artemis... alone.

"Of course, Captain. This way please."

Lumquist guided his commanding officer into his office, a small but well furnished room, including a viewscreen, a terminal and a replicator. At the moment, the room was curiously bare of any personal effect and decoration, as the last CMO of the Artemis had left a few days ago... and a new one had yet to be assigned.

And this was exactly what Kheren came to discuss. Typical of him and of all Andorians, he wasted no time with small talk and dove right into the heart of the matter:

"Doctor Lumquist, I am here to discuss with you about the Chief Medical Officer position aboard this ship."

The man looked up at the peculiar silver-hued eyes of the Andorian with a rapidly blinking stare as Kheren elaborated:

"Before leaving, our former CMO Doctor Sage recommended you as his replacement. I must say that, reviewing how much and how often you effectively assumed his responsibilities yourself while he was... otherwise occupied, I have to admit that his judgment is sound."

"Thank you, Captain. I am most honored by your and Doctor Sage's praise in me simply doing my duty as best as I can."

The "but" left unsaid at the end of his response was as evident as the one left by the Captain's own words. And, again, Kheren was not one to lose any time to mince words:

"You are aware, however, that we serve within the elite division of Starfleet. If usually a ship's commanding officer is sole judge on who serves on his vessel, it is not quite so in Lotus Fleet."

"Has Fleet Captain Kotari assigned a new CMO to the Artemis, Sir?" asked Lumquist directly.

"Not yet; but if he does so, I will be hard put to object. If you recall, even Captain Froud could not refuse me as his First Officer despite his record and not wanting me in the first place."

The doctor waved a hand and smiled.

"Do not feel concerned about this, Captain. If I am required to assume those responsibilities, I will gladly do so under your command; but if someone else is assigned to them, I will as gladly relinquish them."

Although Andorian faces were not easily able to show how one felt, there was genuine surprise clearly visible on Kheren's features. Lumquist then explained, still smiling:

"To tell the truth, Sir, I would even prefer it."

The Andorian gave him a slightly surprised stare. And so he explained with a shy smile:

"I was always ill at ease assuming command duties on the bridge when Doctor Sage eschewed them for basic medical activities any one of us here in the department could have done. But I understand that he could have felt overwhelmed by them, given his young age and low rank; to be honest, being of the same rank as he was then, I feel the same way as we speak... and I'm much older than him!"

Sighing slightly, he went on:

"When Doctor Nasaro-Myth was CMO here, on our maiden voyage, all went much smoothly; he was an experienced starship officer, a seasoned doctor, a former CMO on two other ships... but, most of all, quite willing and able to assume the command responsibilities his position implied on a ship this size. Frankly, just like Doctor Sage, I am not fond of handling such delicate and important things as ship communications, diplomatic situations while overseeing all possible health hazards on the ship, another ship, planetside or for away teams and medical teams all at once..."

He then smiled a bit sheepishly at the Andorian as he concluded:

"And being your bridge medical and counseling officer on whom you will rely to make your command decisions... that is much too heavy a burden for me to assume, at least for the moment."

Kheren nodded as he listened to the Human's analysis, but looking him right in the eye to estimate how sincere the man was. Doctor Lumquist was familiar with such a look and firmly concluded:

"I am an epidemiologist; there lies my true calling: studying alien diseases and finding cures. I will go where duty calls but, if it's all the same to you, Sir, I would rather stay in the lab."

The captain kept silent for another moment, pondering on the man's words. Then he nodded.

"Very well, Doctor. I shall keep your words in mind. I just wanted to make sure that, if Command would decide otherwise, you would still know that I consider you to be worthy of such responsibilities... and know that, in any case, I consider you a valuable member of this crew."

"Thank you, Sir. That is why I think the best place for me and this ship is in the lab. Let someone else with more drive, ambition and resourcefulness sit with you on the bridge, properly assist you and call all the shots from there."

With a last nod, the Andorian lifted his chin in the typical Andorian gesture of respect and turned to leave.

"Ah, Captain, if I may... while we wait for a possible CMO to take over here, I still have to assume those responsibilities. And I just reviewed your new ship policies regarding the medical department."

"Yes, Doctor. I would like them to be implemented at once." answered Kheren with a most serious tone of voice.

Smiling, Frederic Lumquist stood from behind his desk and went to the door leading to his private examination room. Opening it and gesturing with an inviting hand he simply said:

"Very well, Sir. If you would please step in..."

For a moment, the Captain looked like a trapped predator swaying between fight or flight. Then, with a heavy sigh and a lowered head, antennae drooping, he followed the doctor inside the room.

* * *

Syntron had received a communiqué that the Artemis had just welcomed her newly commissioned Chief Engineer and Chief Medical Officer. Now that he had reached a point of time in between meetings on Starbase 10, he decided to return back to the ship to update his data and possibly meet the new officers who each just arrived aboard.

At least their transfer would be a less tenuous and risky than a certain Chief of Science's unorthodox arrival aboard the Artemis several missions ago Syntron thought as he entered the worker bee transport that was heading to the Artemis.

With the ship's transporters offline under current Level 1 procedures newly implemented to secure the Artemis, access was restricted to the auxiliary crafts of the starship herself and with her own personnel only under the same strict measures.

The commanding officer's orders were clear: there would be no more opportunities for unauthorized personnel to threaten this ship and this crew like those Horizon Children terrorists did during their last mission.

As the small craft departed and flew gingerly through the scaffolding surrounding the exterior of the Ambassador-class vessel, he could see the collection of workers repairing the exterior damage inflicted by the sentient computer-controlled USS Achilles during their last mission in the Mutara nebula. He could also see modifications being added to the external sections of the deflector dish as well, following his own designs for his improved directional space sonar.

The small workshop arrived at the designated portal and slowly backed into the docking port. The Vulcan felt the slight jolt as the small pod physically connected to the Artemis, and then heard the sound of the docking clamps engage as the door swooshed open, exposing the interior of this refitted Ambassador-class vessel as an exchange of gasses hissed between the doors.

The Chief of Science exited the diminutive transport vehicle and headed straight for the turbolift.

"Deck 14" he announced as he stepped inside.

Arriving on deck 14, the doors parted and he headed straight for his office.

As he walked in, Lieutenant Irksos, his assistant, looked up and stated in jest:

"Well, look what the cat dragged in."

Syntron, perplexed by the statement, stopped and nonchalantly looked around to determine what exactly was brought into the Science room by some type of felinoid.

Valencia Irksos, being Human, just started laughing.

"No silly," she laughed as she spoke "It's just an old Earth expression indicating that I'm surprised to see you here."

With merely a slightly raised eyebrow, he replied:

"You Terrans continue to perplex me with your seemingly unlimited collection of ineffectual idioms."

This only resulted in Lieutenant Irksos and the surrounding staff in laughing even harder.

Terrans and their perplexing humor were still challenging after all of these years for this Vulcan officer to fully comprehend. But he was somewhat used to it and let them have their emotional outburst go on.

Afterward, he and Lieutenant Irksos stepped into his office and briefly updated each other on all of the science related events that had transpired on the Artemis and beyond since they last spoke. Syntron had learned early on what a valuable and knowledgeable science officer this dark-skinned Human woman was, despite her Terran frailties.

When the impromptu meeting was concluded, the Science Chief excused himself and headed out into the corridor and back to the turbolift.

"Deck 21" he announced, and the lift began its descent.

* * *

An hour later, Captain Kheren had returned to his own office, a small but well furnished room accessible through a short corridor leading to the main bridge of his ship. There was a second turbolift giving access to this specific hallway and another door leading to the bridge officer's conference room. But the commanding officer of the *Artemis* favored his ready room for a more personal contact with his officers when meeting them for the first time. The young Lieutenant swooped a hand through his hair and adjusted his science-blue collar as he approached the captain's door.

"Stop fidgeting." he whispered to himself with a sigh.

You earned this, you have nothing to prove. Be calm... assertive, but not too assertive... you don't want to seem pushy.

His thoughts raced. Not only was this his first post on a starship, but his first position where he would be commanding others. Caius never thought he'd serve on a ship in Lotus Fleet.

"Hello, Doctor Aquila," the green-skinned woman had said on the recorded message he had received in his personal quarters on Starbase 1. "I am Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta with Fleet Captain Kotari's office. I have carefully reviewed both your application to *USS Artemis* and service record. Your dedication to the Starfleet personnel on Earth Spacedock is very impressive. However, being on Earth Spacedock is a far cry from being on the front line aboard a ship like *Artemis*. Captain Kheren is an exacting commanding officer with the highest of standards. He does not suffer glory hounds or cowboys seeking to prove themselves."

On the small viewer, the Lieutenant then folded her hands and smiled. "I hope you keep this in mind as I am formally informing you of your acceptance to the crew of *USS Artemis* as her Chief Medical Officer. My sincerest congratulations! Please feel free to report to *Artemis* as soon as possible as she is currently here at Starbase 10. Again, my congratulations."

You're a good doctor, the young man reassured himself; but it wasn't all about being a good doctor was it? It was about people...and the little details. It's dealing with issues like Doctor Joe wants a week of well-deserved shore leave but the only person fully qualified to fill in on that shift doesn't get along with several of the other staff on that shift. Shuffling people's schedules around messes up the synergy.

Caius let out a long sigh as he stopped in front of the door.

"Come."

The captain's sensitive auditory receptors in the antennae sprouting from the top side of his white-haired head had already registered the swishing of the door and the unfamiliar footsteps in the short corridor leading to the ship's main conference room and his ready room. his call came even before the one on the other side of the door had touched the chime button.

When the door slid open from the middle, the pair of eyes in his cranial appendages focused with the silvery pupils in his rigid dark blue face on the figure framed by the opened doorway, also taking in with their forward curving the bio-field and odor of the man.

He was indeed Human, of the pale-skinned sort, medium built for one of his species, brown of hair and eye. He looked quite young, especially for one wearing a blue collar and Lieutenant Junior grade pips on it, but still not as much as most officers in Starfleet did these days, especially in an elite division like Lotus Fleet.

The last Borg War had depleted their number of senior officers significantly anyway. It was common occurrence now to have junior officers in command functions.

I wonder if I am the first Andorian he ever met, thought the captain, having already read the Starfleet record of the officer he was about to meet. Even nowadays, there were not that many of his kind even in Starfleet.

Or anywhere else for that matter... even on Andoria.

Standing up, straightening his black and grey uniform with the red collar showing four golden pips, he stepped around his desk and extended a hand to greet the Human in his own tradition; the naturally ambidextrous Andorian remembering at the last instant that they only used their right hand to do so.

"Doctor Aquila; welcome aboard. Please be seated."

Caius Aquila was a bit startled seeing the strikingly peculiar-looking alien, but regained his composure and shook the captain's hand.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you ever since I got my orders, Captain," the doctor said as he took a seat.

"Some have lived to regret it, Doctor." shot back the Andorian as he returned to his own seat. If he was joking, there was no way to tell in that expressionless dark mask of his.

Once seated, he punched up some controls on his desk terminal and read out loud:

"Aquila, Caius Castiel, graduated from Starfleet Academy under Starfleet's General Surgeon's office stardate 84483.8. Assigned as physician to Starbase 1 Medical center, promoted to Ensign stardate 85170.1 with excellent duty reports through and through; promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade on stardate 87161.9 and assigned to Starfleet Elite Division Lotus Fleet, USS Artemis as Chief Medical Officer."

Turning his four oculars at the young physician, Kheren then asked:

"Do you have any specialty or interest that I should be aware of, Doctor Aquila?"

"I chose not to specialize in any one field of medicine. I prefer to try to familiarize myself with as many subjects as possible." Caius hesitated a moment. "However, I do have an interest in archaeology. I like to collect old forgotten trinkets. Not that archaeology has anything to do with my job here."

The Andorian would have visibly smiled if his few facial muscles had allowed him to.

"We might be surprised, Doctor. If I recall your own world's History, it was doctors who uncovered the virus behind what had been called the Curse of Tut-Ankh-Amon."

Caius thought for a moment, carefully considering his words.

"If I understand correctly, my team needs to do a level 1 examination on all 750 crew members before leaving dock. I'd like to get to work as soon as possible to take this opportunity to ensure examinations are properly scheduled and observe my team in action. I'd hate to have to delay a mission due to my team running behind."

Kheren nodded then stood up.

"Come with me please."

The captain led his new Chief Medical Officer out into the corridor and to the next door leading directly to the bridge. There he stopped before an elaborate, highly advanced command chair right at the left of his own captain's seat which by contrast was a perfect replica of a 23rd century Constitution class one.

With a heavily callused hand, he invited the physician to sit in the left hand chair.

Even before he would comply, Doctor Aquila could see that this was a very special station. It sported an elaborate miniature console directly linked to external and internal sensors, especially calibrated for organic compound and life-form detection and analysis; it displayed also a complete medical scanner and database and complete inner and outer ship communication system with universal translator matrix and socio-politico-cultural database. And everything could be instantly cross-linked with science, engineering and tactical.

And from this station, he could as easily watch the main viewer, the sensor wall-mounted imager on his left and get the ear of the captain to his right. It truly felt as if, from there, one could decide matters of life and death all across the ship and beyond, down planet side or to any away team or medical team on another ship or station as easily as anywhere on board.

"This, Doctor, is the CMO command chair. It was first tested on this ship and is now spreading across the whole of Lotus Fleet... soon enough to the whole of Starfleet. Any physician can work in sickbay; but only you will be responsible for all communications, all health operations in and out of the ship... and first counselor to your captain."

Again indicating the sophisticated chair, he finished:

"Here you will be able to follow your entire staff as they currently undergo the level 1 medical examination of our entire crew, ready to follow your orders wherever they are on the ship or on the starbase. Here you will truly be the Chief Medical officer this ship needs."

With a wink, he added then:

"Oh by the way; you can recall here on the database that mine has already been done today."

Caius sat in the chair, quite amazed, this was some station. "Quite..." Caius trailed off as he sat down and hit a few buttons, navigating the interface, "... amazing."

Dr. Aquilla wasn't quite sure what to think of this. It would be very strange to be so far away from the patients, and take some getting used to.

What's next? Caius thought, *Soon they'll be able to command a fleet from a tricorder.*

As if he had read his mind, Kheren then finished:

"Of course I am not saying that you will have no business anymore in sickbay; we do have an extensive medical staff to take care of most cases, but there will be instances where your personal attention will be required there. That is what it means to be CMO on this ship: you will have to be a physician *and* a bridge officer. Think you are up to it, Doc?"

"Yes sir I am."

The simple, clear conviction in the man's voice, eyes and posture was all the Andorian needed.

"Glad to hear it. Now that you know of your duties here, you are free to go familiarize yourself with the rest. You can start here of course as this aptly named CMO command chair... but I think a more personal approach down there will sit better with you and the rest of your team. And yes there is a level 1 examination in progress."

With a gesture of respect, Captain Kheren let his new Chief medical Officer go free to settle in on board his ship and assume his new, most important role.

* * *

"I can't believe this!" almost shouted the black-skinned man, putting both hands to each side of his bald head as if trying not to hear anything more.

"Calm down, Robert," admonished the blonde woman coming behind the desk of the Chief Engineer's office as she put a cup of tea before herself and another in front of her companion. "It's best for everyone."

"And who says so... our true blue Captain?" exclaimed the engineer Robert Baoule, not even looking at her. "After all you did for this ship since it left dock... filling up for that Chief Engineer that never even showed up at launch... suffering the verbal abuse of our Tellarite acting chief while trying to hold this ship together inside a cosmic hell storm... then for two whole missions taking up all the real responsibilities of a chief preferring to play grease monkey down here... and this is how our commanding officer thank you?"

"Exactly." answered the woman engineer, sipping at her cup with a satisfied calmness that fueled all the more the agitation of the other in front of her.

"Come on, Patricia! Be serious! You even rejected an opportunity of becoming chief engineer of another ship just to stay here! *You* should be chief engineer of the Artemis, not some wet-behind-the-ears technician beamed in from who knows where!"

Licking her lips in obvious appreciation of her beverage, Patricia Blakely, acting chief engineer since the departure of the last captain of engineering after they docked at Starbase 10, retorted with the same infuriating calmness:

"This is Lotus Fleet, Robert; Even Captain Kheren does not always have the final word on who serves on his ship."

"So? Some bureaucrat Fleet Captain decides over his head who is best suited to be chief engineer on a ship nobody knows better than you? You would think this would give our captain some leverage in deciding anything about it... And as I recall, our Andorian ship commander is not one to let anyone dictate to him what is best for his ship."

"Indeed; that is exactly why we lost our last Chief." said Blakely taking another sip of her tea.

"And now he's going to lose another one!" Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert Baoule, propulsion engineer on the starship Artemis stated, pointing a finger straight at her.

"Hardly..." she smirked back at him.

"Don't tell me you would tolerate this... this... situation!"

"Tolerate it? Not at all... I asked for it."

The explosion of the warp core right behind him would have stunned him barely less than what the blonde woman said.

In the following silence, she put down her cup, crossed her hands on her lap and patiently explained to the man in front of her:

"Robert... being chief engineer of the Artemis is not like on those old ships of the past century, when this ship had been built. Despite her old frame, this is a 25th century starship... and a fairly large one still. We have more engineers and technicians on board than needed to fully crew an Intrepid class vessel like the Lotus or a Prometheus warship like the Alsea, almost three Defiants like the McKenzie... enough damage control crews to cover each of our twenty-six decks all at once... and brand new, state of the art technologies... not to mention a crew of ops officers almost as big to assist us if need be... and almost half the crew is cross-trained as technicians, following Starfleet ship regulations and by order of the captain."

"All the more reasons to have a qualified chief engineer..."

Blakely lifted a hand to interrupt Baoule.

"A qualified chief engineer is not just a... "grease monkey" as you say it... not someone down here having nothing to do but tighten screws and grease conduits. He is not just another technician with merely a higher rank; a qualified chief engineer is nothing less than the captain of engineering: the ship's technical master... the *entire* ship."

To make her point, she proceeded then to explain after a moment:

"This is not an antique Constitution class of two hundred years ago, Robert. A true chief engineer of a modern starship is someone who can lead such a huge team everywhere on board at once, and on away missions, overseeing ship maintenance on every deck even while teams are repairing the ship inside or outside, all the while able to detect and analyze technical data from internal and external sensors, coordinate all systems with the other departments of the ship and, on top of that, be a top technical advisor to the captain so that he can make the proper decisions for the whole ship... and in return apply those decisions instantly... and all that can only be done up there, on the bridge."

"But... that is exactly what you did almost the whole time!" protested the man fervently.

"Yes... the whole time our real chief engineer, a *Commander*, chose to limit his work to that of an engine mechanic, down here in main engineering, I, a *Junior Lieutenant*, had to assume all those heavy responsibilities in his stead. Now, do you think I *enjoyed* this?"

Again, Baoule was struck silent. And again, Blakely filled it with her soft, clear voice as she stood up and went to him:

"When I heard that I was next in line as chief engineer on another starship. because of what I did here, I *knew* I could do it... and then, once the surprise and feeling of pride wore off, I knew as well, again because I did it, that I didn't *want* to do it. And I said so to Captain Kheren... and he understood."

"I certainly don't." admitted the man.

She came to him and smiled.

"Being chief engineer on another ship means leaving the Artemis... and all the people that gives her life and meaning; that gives *me* life and meaning."

She took his hand in hers.

"Being chief engineer *on* the Artemis means being up there with him. I want to be down here... with you."

At that moment, he understood.

O'Conner smiled as listened to the two engineers talk. He had headed to main engineering to give a good once over before the new chief engineer got on board. With the new regulations that Kheren and O'Conner had detailed, the First officer of the Artemis wanted to make sure that main engineering was up to snuff. This way it was clear what was expected of the new chief engineer.

But as he listened to the young engineers talk, he couldn't help but think about his time on the Thunderchild and Spector. This brought a smile to his lips as thought about the freedom responsibilities he had.

He then opened the door fully and stepped in to the room with a smile. "Lieutenant Baoule, you need to learn to enjoy your time as just an engineer. You are both fine engineers. I have no doubt either of you would excel as a chief engineer but as Lieutenant Blakely said being chief engineer comes with heavy responsibilities.

I suggest that you enjoy your time as a hands-on engineer and save the responsibilities for the future."

They both stood up as the First officer of the Artemis came in. Michael O'Conner was the quiet-type of a leader, but, or maybe because of it, earned the respect of every crew member on board who understood what it truly meant to be a Starfleet officer. His discipline, reliability and effectiveness were flawless, no small thing when serving under such a demanding captain as the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"Yes, Sir, of course," answered the black-skinned engineer.

"Thank you, Sir," then added Patricia Blakely with a glance at the bald man besides her.

"Commander, if I may, then asked engineer Baoule; do you have any news about who Lotus Fleet Command might assign as our new Chief?"

O'Conner smiled at the pair.

"The transfer orders came through this morning. It's a new transfer from the 9th, Montgomery Scott the Third. And yes, before you ask; he *is* the grandson of the famous chief engineer of the starship Enterprise; *Captain Kirk's* Enterprise."

Smiling at their goggling eyes he finished:

"He should arrive any time now. I need you two to be ready for him, so we can show him what we expect of officers on the Artemis."

"He served in the 9th Fleet? The one stationed at DS9?" the amazed propulsion engineer finally managed to spurt out.

"He should be quite at home with our stern captain then, commented Patricia Blakely right after him. The 9th Fleet was among the leading forces of the Cardassian war; no grumbling slackers coming from over there."

The bald dark-skinned man nodded with a wry smile.

"And if he's anything like his grand sire was said to be, no tool will collect dust in here! And he should prove quite the needed technical advisor for you up there on Olympus."

Elsewhere on board the five hundred meters starship, Captain Kheren was finishing his plate of crisp Terran salted bacon, washed down with his ever present Cardassian fish juice at room temperature, when the ship intercom buzzed:

"Kheren here."

"Sir, our new chief engineer is aboard. His identity was confirmed through transporter buffer scan."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Tyvya. Bring him to The Bow... and send me his file as well."

"Acknowledged." answered the strong but clear feminine voice.

As he gulped down the last strips of broiled meat and put the empty plate for recycling into the replicator slot, the Andorian went to a wall terminal and brought up the man's Starfleet record.

Graduated from the Academy under Starfleet's Corps of Engineers, stardate 84390.8; first tour of duty with the 9th Fleet on Deepspace Station 9... read the commanding officer of the Artemis. Quite a prestigious start... Made Ensign barely a year after that... now two years later promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade upon being accepted into Starfleet's elite division of Lotus fleet, assigned to the USS Artemis as chief engineer... Well, not taking things slow and easy...

Then, the name struck a bell in his mind after a moment.

Well, what do you know! No wonder then...

Scotty had just arrived on the Artemis when he saw an amazingly tall, blue-skinned Andorian woman approach him from the transporter console. She introduced herself as Lieutenant Tyvya, and that she was taking him to "The Bow".

During his walk there, Scotty said nothing to the giant woman, instead focusing on what the Captain might say to him once he arrived and met her. His mind swirled back to when he had received his transfer order.

"Well now," he recalled, "you submitted an application for USS Artemis as her chief engineer. Life as a ChEng can be strenuous, but I'm sure with a legacy particular to yours you're prepared for it," said the Lieutenant from Fleet Captain Kotari's office while looking over the PADD in front of her. "However, you may not be used to the idea that on an overhauled and retrofitted with 25th century technology ship like Artemis, the majority of your time will be spent delegating responsibility to engineering staff from the main bridge."

She had set down the PADD and looked at Scott then. *"Your service record suggests nothing but good things from you in the past. However, Captain Kheren expects nothing less than the absolute best from his senior staff, as well as their utmost adherence to Starfleet regulations."*

But then, she had smiled again. *"Application approved. I suggest gathering your immediate belongings and reporting to Artemis right away, as she is due to leave Starbase 10 any day now. Congratulations! Dismissed."*

And now, here he was.

The Bow; that is how the foremost room aboard the Ambassador class starship USS Artemis had been named. Located on deck 8, it occupied a large portion of the foremost part of the saucer section. Its numerous wide windows showed a panoramic view of what lied forward.

Because of this and of its location, it served both as a recreational and social area and an observation deck looking out forward. As such, it could be converted to all the defined missions of the Artemis: provide an agreeable atmosphere for diplomatic occasions or used as a sensor less observatory post in case of conflict, even provide a large evacuation and emergency area or act as an emergency storage area.

The curved form of the vast room, located at the forefront of a ship named after the ancient Greek goddess of the hunt, was all that was needed to have it christened as it was.

It was certainly vastly more appropriate than the bland copying of the Ten Forward name made famous by the USS Enterprise that many other ships tended to do... especially that, on an Ambassador class, the area was not even on deck 10 to begin with!

And that was not the only difference: on the Artemis, the area was not held by any civilian but by Starfleet junior officers under the authority of the Chief of Ops and the Quartermaster. It was also used as a disciplinary measure for minor offenses onboard; serving others while off duty was a good way to reinforce respect, humility and sense of duty for undisciplined crewmen, beginning Starfleet personnel and cadets on their final year cruise. It also helped keep minimal order in what was a basically casual section of the ship: one where some might forget that they were serving on a starship, not on a tourist cruiser.

For that same reason, true intoxicating beverages were not available unless authorized by the Captain, First Officer, Chief of Ops or Quartermaster. Such authorization was reserved for official celebrations, diplomatic occasions and such appropriate events; the rest of the time, it was as restricted as the armory itself. With the quality of all synthehol products, there was no justification for any crewmember of the Artemis to risk deficiency or dishonor by courting the debilitating effects of true intoxication.

As for the room itself, it was uniquely decorated with authentic wood paneling and furniture, Holographic sky ceiling reproducing time of day and night, grass-green carpeting and animated holopictures of wildlife and hunting scenes from all over the Federation: from prehistoric mammoth hunting of Earth to Ancient Andorian falconry, Tellarite medieval chasse a courre to Vulcan modern Lemathya mindtracking, Centaurian horse catching of the early colonies to the latest Starfleet cosmozoan observing...

And, at the center of the bar, a full-sized bronze statue of Artemis herself, the exact replica of the 18th century bronze masterpiece *Diane Chasseresse* of Jean-Francois Houdon, still at the Louvres Museum of Paris, right across the street from the Federation Presidency Palace.

Even nature's fragrance and feeling could be experienced here, with environmental controls including olfactory emitters providing various wildlife aromas and an artificial breeze giving the hint of the outdoors. Soothing natural sounds, from the haunting ice winds of Andoria to those of the scorching Vulcan desert, the powerful breathing of the immense oceans of Earth to the crystalline singing of the waterfalls of Betazed: everything was both to relax and distance everyone from the cold emptiness of space... and yet, provide a social gathering atmosphere to every being onboard.

Consequently, hunting-themed replicator menus were quite popular at each end of the curved reception room where were found the crewmen mess hall on the left and the officer mess hall on the right, the last one including the Captain's table that could be closed from the rest for privacy. The quartermaster prided himself to even be able to offer Hirogen, Klingon and Kzinti hunt experiences and products in the two holosuites adjoining each of the dining rooms.

It was a most impressive room, worthy of a ship class named Ambassador. It reminded keenly how much the Artemis was a ship from an earlier, gentler time.

Finally, the doors to the private dining room at one end opened, and there stood Captain Kheren.

The door to the Captain's dining room slid open. The two and a half meters tall Andorian giantess acting as chief of security on board since the former officer in charge transferred upon being promoted, ushered in a medium built, brown-haired, brown eyed, pale-skinned Human with gold adorning the collar of his black and grey standard issue uniform.

Kheren thrust out his left hand, then his right following a frown from the towering Lieutenant Tyvya as she left them alone in the small dining room.

"Lieutenant Montgomery Scott; welcome aboard the Artemis."

Scotty had heard much about him, most of it good. Scotty was both excited to meet the captain, while also wanting to get to work.

He took the Captain's right hand firmly, and said in his English accent that was somewhat muted over time.

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate the honor that you've bestowed upon me."

As soon as he finished saying this, the young engineer smiled at his new commanding officer, eagerly waiting to hear what he had to say next.

"Well, I am not the one "bestowing the honor," Mister Scott. You *earned* your posting within Lotus Fleet. I however will judge if you earn your place on board my ship; and more than a few officers would tell you that I am not making it easy, starting with your predecessor."

His own words almost made him wince inwardly. Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, the last officer to serve on the Artemis as Chief Engineer, was a high ranking Lotus Fleet hero of the Borg War, decorated numerous times; yet, he had found serving under the strict and demanding Andorian captain of the Artemis an unbearable task. Kheren freely admitted it but made no excuse for it, nor harbored any regret. This was his ship, his command, his responsibility.

But after the mutually bad experience with his former third in command, he knew now that he had to make things ice clear with his next master of engineering.

Inviting the engineer to sit at the dining table, Kheren sat on the other side and then glanced at the wall monitor before asking:

"Tell me Lieutenant, your record does not mention any engineering specialty out of your Academy training and prior tour of duty. What is your best and preferred area of expertise?"

Scotty listened to what the captain was saying about pushing on the Chief Engineer a lot. Surprisingly, he wasn't worried. Scotty continued to look into his new Captain's eyes as he spoke:

"I quite like Warp Mechanics. In fact, it's what I specialized in during the Academy. Anything to do with the warp core, I'm your man, easily."

Scotty paused for a minute, and then said:

"Sir, I'll do my best to show you that I've earned this post."

Scotty was sincere with these words. He knew the stigma that his family name brought upon him. Scotty felt that he would be able to live up to the standards that everyone placed upon him and the Scott last name.

For his part, the Andorian nodded but kept his eyes on the man; all four of them.

"I have every confidence that you will, Lieutenant. You carry a proud and famous family name; and we Andorians know well the value and the burden of such heritage."

Taking a moment to pause so as to let his words sink in, he then resumed his welcoming speech, saying:

"I hope you realize however, that being the Chief Engineer on board the Artemis is much more than just playing grease monkey with our engines. You will be responsible all at once with every technical need and problem from bow to stern and from planet-side to sensor data; but most of all, I will need you on hand at any time instantly as my technical advisor. I will need you for me to do *my* job, which is making the proper decisions for this ship. And for that I will need you to do *your* job... first as a bridge officer. I already have a barrel of monkeys in engineering."

The monkey joke was often used by several alien species to tease Humans. But here, it was obvious the captain was *not* joking. It was clear that, this time, he asked for, even demanded, a command bridge officer, not just a glorified technician.

Scotty nodded at the bridge officer comment.

"I understand, sir. Sounds like I'm going to have a long and tough road ahead of me as this ship's Chief Engineer. I'll do my best when it comes to being your technical advisor, Sir."

Briefly, the engineer turned and looked outside the window, seeing with awe the inside of Starbase 10. Turning around he said:

"Captain, as soon as I graduated, I was recruited by the 9th Fleet. I never got the chance to see Starbase 10. I had only heard about it from other cadets."

Scotty smiles slightly for a second, taking a slight pause before adding:

"I didn't think that it would rival the beauty of Deep Space 9."

After this little moment, Scotty turned back to face the Captain.

"Thanks again, for giving me a shot." Scotty smiled. "I'll...uh, try and not let you down, Sir."

The Andorian stood up.

"We work together, Mister Scott. As long as we remember that, we will serve well together... and we will succeed... together."

After he met the captain, Scotty decided that he'd take a look at Engineering. As he descended in the turbolift, he tried to think about what things he would say to the engineering crew.

Hmm, maybe I should introduce myself? No, no, no, too cheesy. Maybe I'll just wing it. Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.

Finally, Scotty arrived on deck 21, Main Engineering. He walked into to the room carefully and deliberately. When he entered, no one had taken much notice to him, so he had some time to look around. Scotty pulled up the ship's status and saw that everything was a-ok.

To that effect, he inhaled a large lungful of engine room, in which he remembered working his butt off on the 9th Fleet flagship as a warp engine/propulsion engineer.

Leaving the chief engineer office, Commander O'Conner noticed Scotty outside at the primary console. Having seen the transfer orders, the XO was the only one in the office that could identify Scotty by sight.

O'Conner stepped outside and ask the new engineer:

"How does she look, Lieutenant?"

Scotty turned when he realized that he was addressed by a superior officer.

"She looks good, Sir."

As he looked more at this officer, he was puzzled, until he saw the three gold pips on his red collar and asked;

"Are you the XO?"

"Mhm" O'Conner acknowledged with a nod as he sized up the officer. "I am Commander Michael O'Conner. Welcome aboard. I have heard good things about you but I do hope your leadership skills are as good as your engineering skills."

Scotty nodded as he looked at the executive officer of his new ship. Carefully, he extended his right hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Sir."

Scotty slightly chuckled at the last part of his sentence.

"Grandpa taught me many things, including a brief primer on leadership. I'm sure I'll manage to become acquainted with this large group."

O'Conner smiled and shook his hand.

"Well I'll leave you to it; but just remember... the captain can be a demanding man. So you best be prepared to work hard with little sleep."

He then began his walk to the turbolift.

Scotty nodded with complete understanding as he walks past.

"Yes, Sir."

After Commander O'Conner left Engineering, Scotty headed up to the Chief Engineer's office, his office now to meet whoever was still there.

Politely, he knocked lightly on the door, and with his muted English accent, he said:

"Hello?"

As soon as he entered, a shapely blonde woman and a tall, bald, dark-skinned man wearing the same pips as he did on their own golden collar stood as one to greet him.

"Welcome Sir. Judging by your uniform and your bag, you must be our new Chief Engineer. I am Lieutenant Junior Grade Patricia Blakely, your first assistant; this is Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert Baoule, our propulsion engineer."

"Greetings, Lieutenant Scott." then also welcomed the black man.

Scotty sets his bag on the deck plating and extends his hand to both of them, in order.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Blakely, and same to you, Mister Baoule."

Scotty sighed for a second.

"Before I arrived, I was told about how great a pair of engineers you both were, and I don't want to make it seem as though I'm trying to take anything away from either of you."

Scotty looked apologetically at each of them.

The blonde woman shot a sideway glance at the tall bald man before replying with a smile:

"Think nothing of it, Sir. *You* are the Chief Engineer; we are here to help you make the Artemis outdo herself. After the captain's and the first officer's, your word is law here. And knowing them both, they will also respect your authority and either defer to you for technical matters or send their own orders *through* you, *not* over your head."

"And neither will we, or anyone else in engineering I can assure you, Sir." added Baoule with a smile of his own but a serious glint in his eye. "If this ship is still in one piece, it is because we all understand the necessity of a chain of command. And on this ship, aside from the captain and the XO, only chief of science Lieutenant Syntron outranks you. So have no fear, Chief: you lead, we follow."

Scotty smiled at the Lieutenants.

"Thanks for those words of encouragement, you two. I do appreciate it a lot."

"And we will be your advisors just as you will be on the bridge for our captain," she finished. Then, she took a second to pause before announcing:

"By the way, we are already well underway with the Level 1 diagnostics our new ship regulations require while in spacedock. Care to take over now, Sir?"

Scotty nodded when Patricia Blakely asks about the diagnostics.

"Which systems are undergoing the required diagnostics now? I'll probably want to observe and help on a few. It's been a while since I've been in an Ambassador-class ship, so I need to get reacquainted a little bit."

"Actually, Sir... all of them." answered the blonde woman. "Mister Syntron's staff will specifically take care of the computers, sensors and probes and the entire Ops complement is assisting us as well, especially with all transporters and flight systems down to each shuttlecraft... Since the last sabotage attempt, no deckplate will be left unturned."

On the monitor of what was now Scott's office, she brought up the entire new maintenance schedule ordered by the captain, defining when and how all 5 levels of technical diagnostics and maintenance where to be applied, from time spent in spacedock to every hour on board.

"Which reminds me; I am due for the impulse engines check up in a few minutes." interjected Robert Baoule. "With your permission, Chief..."

Scotty then thought for a second.

"I could use a tour first, though," he finally said as he smiled and chuckled.

Falling back in her own familiar role as assistant chief engineer, Lieutenant Blakely added:

"Our teams are already well underway and briefed on their duties. So I guess you are right, Sir: first thing would be to have you tour the ship. The Artemis might be a venerable Ambassador class, but there have been a *lot* of upgrades done to her. She barely keeps but her superstructure from her original built!"

As the dark-skinned propulsion engineer left them with a last nod to the new Chief Engineer and a warm smile to the woman, Patricia Blakely invited Scotty to step out and start with main engineering, where the very first glance showed how well this vessel was a wondrous blend of the old and the new: there was no classic "pool table" monitor but instead a large wall-mounted tridimensional holographic schematics display like the one on the bridge. With it, she started to detail what they would see on their tour of the USS Artemis.

Scotty was amazed by what he saw. On 9th Fleet ships, he had only dealt with table-style information systems. While still staring at the three-dimensional display, he turned to her.

"Wow, this is quite impressive. 9th Fleet ships don't have this."

"If you think this is something, wait 'till you see what they plan for the flagship." winked Blakely. "The USS Lotus is in drydock, right alongside us, for major refits. Even this will look outdated with what they plan to refit her with. But I must admit it serves our purposes well. A central display would still have been more practical, especially a holographic one... but the refitting teams had to work with what they had on the Artemis."

He turned back to the display and saw how the power was routed, intermix ratio, containment field strength. He looked around on the display and noticed something he didn't recognize, but it seemed familiar. Pointing at it, he asked:

"I assume that's the backup generator power level and status?"

"Yes Sir. And you can do level 3 to 5 diagnostics of it and any other system from here, just like on the bridge monitor."

While speaking, she focused the display on what had peaked the new chief engineer's interest to briefly show him how to work the controls for himself... although she suspected he had already figured it all out by the way he glanced at them.

Scotty watched her work the controls. Indeed he already had a good idea of how it worked.

"I'm gonna pull up the warp core readings and a simulated warp field. Just want to check it out." Scotty said, looking serious.

He looked attentively at the monitor and pulled up the information. Thankfully, everything looked perfectly stable, despite that the ship's warp core was too powerful for her frame.

"Ensign Shenolia is our power systems expert on board, explained Blakely, pointing at a Bolian woman overlooking the dilithium matrix, and then at the small red-haired man besides the blue-skinned hairless woman as she added: "Ensign John J. Johnson is our matter/antimatter engineer. Our warp field specialist is Ensign Horaga... I hope you are not too ill at ease with Tellarites, Sir. Even for her kind she is rather... forthcoming."

Scotty looked at each of them individually, and made a mental image of their faces. Then, for a second, he grinned slightly.

"No, I don't have a problem with Tellarites. I was actually under a Tellarite Chief, back in the 9th Fleet. Good man, but also very forthcoming."

Scotty turned to Patricia Blakely to ask her:

"Lieutenant Blakely, I'm curious. I've got a couple of questions on my mind. Why did you pick the Artemis as your posting? Also, why do you do this job in particular? Why Engineering and not something completely different, like Medical?"

The blonde engineer was obviously surprised by the questions; and so, she took a moment to collect her thoughts before answering:

"Strange you should put it that way; before I joined the Academy to see the stars, like most of us... I was considering a career in the medical field; but then I realized that what I truly loved was to fix things, be it a good meal, a broken handle or a broken relationship. The other thing I realized was that it was easier fixing things than people; things do not die if you make a mistake. So I signed for Engineering."

She looked around her with a small smile on her face.

"The funny thing is; now that I am an engineer, I do see starships now just as if they were people; they need care and respect... and love."

A moment went by before she refocused on her new senior officer.

"As for the Artemis... Well, Sir, she is an Ambassador class, probably the last of her kind. And as you surely know, this design was the test-bed of all the revolutionary technologies that brought Starfleet designs out of the 23rd century fully into the 24th: phaser arrays replacing phaser banks, burst-fire torpedo tubes instead of single-shot launchers, double-coiled warp nacelles replacing limited single ones, isolar circuitry instead of aging duotronics, holomatrix systems instead of flatscreens, re-crystallizing dillithium chambers making manual replacement obsolete... It was so good that it barely was fielded when, victim of its own success, Starfleet used all its innovations to bring about the single best starship design ever: the Galaxy class."

Her gaze once again roamed the entire vast engineering room with a visible glint of pride and joy that was heard in her voice:

"And Lotus Fleet did it again when it took this old frame and refitted it. The CMO command chair, integrated metaphasic shielding, and now Lieutenant Syntron's space sonar... They were all first implemented on the Artemis. And just thinking of the challenge of integrating the old and the new... Sir, this ship is an engineer's dream!"

Her big blue eyes went straight at Scotty.

"That is why, when I heard about the re-commissioning of the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation, I did everything I could to get posted here. And I loved every minute of it since. Any other ship just looks... bland in comparison."

She left out other, more... personal reasons... that made the Artemis so attractive to her. She figured that it would not be of much concern to the chief anyway.

Scotty smiled widely when he heard the pride in her voice about being an engineer.

This is what makes an engineer great. Their pride for their ship.

After the Lieutenant was done speaking, the young man commented:

"Medical? My father went into medical instead of engineering. He called it, 'Engineering of the body' as a matter of fact."

Making a pause to think for a second, he then added:

"Well, I suppose, since you told me why, I myself should tell you why I'm an engineer."

Scotty took a breath in.

"Well, I've known since I was little, I've always loved to take things apart and put them back together. My grandfather saw this, and told my dad that I had a gift that was worth pursuing. So, I started learning all kinds of engineering tips and tricks from my grandpa. That brought me to the Academy, and eventually to here."

"Sounds so simple the way you put it." retorted Blakely. "But, being the grandson of no less than the famous "Miracle Worker," being tutored by him... that must have been a unique experience... almost a call of destiny, no?"

"Heh, I guess from any other persons point of view, it would be a very unique experience to be learning from my grandfather."

The new chief engineer shrugged slightly.

"Didn't faze me too much, he was just a normal man, who had a deep, deep love of engineering that he instilled in me."

"We should be in good hands, then." the blonde woman smiled back at him.

Scotty flashed a quick smile back.

"Heh... yeah, I'll sure try."

Just then, Chief of science Syntron walked over and then crossed the threshold of the two large blast doors and entered into Main Engineering. The Vulcan headed off toward the port side of Main Engineering to the Chief Engineer's Office but, as he stepped into the vast room, he noticed and recognized from his file the new officer standing next to the diagnostics console.

He walked over to the brown-haired Human and introduced himself:

"Greetings Chief Engineer Scott, I am Lieutenant Syntron, Chief of Science."

Scotty heard his name from this new officer, Lieutenant Syntron he had already heard about. He was a bit surprised however to discover that he was Vulcan.

"Ah, yes, hello."

Scotty extended his right hand toward him and smiled slightly.

"Pleased to meet you."

He had just heard of Syntron's invention, the "space sonar". He was still curious about it.

"So, I hear that you have some inventions that have made their way into ships systems." Scotty said while gesturing towards Lieutenant Blakely. "My assistant told me that you created a "space sonar" and I was wondering about it."

"You'll find Lieutenant Scott, that creativity and inventiveness coupled with thoroughness and attention to details are not only expectations aboard the Artemis, they are fundamental necessities," the Vulcan science officer conveyed with conviction.

As he repositioned his stance slightly, he provided a concise yet comprehensive accounting of the events that transpired over the past missions to the new engineer along with the manner in which their respective departments had effectively coordinated their efforts to solve a series of seemingly improbable challenges in order to keep the ship safe and the crew alive.

"Fortunately Lieutenant Scott, you are taking command of a very dedicated and experienced department with a group of talented engineers and officers" the Vulcan science officer proclaimed.

He gazed for a moment at the blank viewscreen on the console and added reflectively:

"Our departments have been working closely together over these past few perilous and demanding missions, Lieutenant... engineering and science... and the staff of these two diverse departments are acquiring the benefits of both a theoretical and applicable cross-pollination of expertise in their respective fields, as we are reaching workable solutions and, at times, pushing beyond the boundaries of what is currently possible."

He thought for a moment before adding:

"What I am conveying, Lieutenant, is that you may find that we go by the book here aboard the Artemis; but, be forewarned Mister Scott, there will be times when we will be required out of sheer necessity to add a few new pages to the book ourselves."

Scotty nodded at the Vulcan.

"Yes, I understand about the "adding pages to the book" sometimes. It's something that my grandfather taught me."

The engineer moved slightly, with no emotion on his face, saying then:

"I think that engineering and science are more closely related. In engineering, we take scientific principles and put them in real world applications."

Scotty flashed a smile for a second, and then continued his train of thought:

"Sometimes, we even break the theoretical threshold of what was thought to be absolute by science. For instance, in the 20th century, it was thought that nothing could go faster than the speed of light. Zefram Cochrane proved that theory wrong with the first warp drive."

"Indeed, Lieutenant Scott, your grandfather was quite an inventor himself... 'a miracle worker' is how I believe the late Captain Kirk used to refer to him."

As the chief of science turned toward the door he added:

"It is quite a reputation to live up to, Mister Scott; but you are aboard the vessel that can help you develop your individual status as a Chief Engineer, and I am confident that the influences of your grandfather along with your own dedication and achievements will lead you toward your own respective destiny."

After a few more brief verbal exchanges, Syntron bid farewell to the new Chief Engineer, then turned and headed out through the large blast doors and proceeded toward the turbolift.

Upon entering the relatively small enclosure, he simply stated "Sickbay." The doors closed and the lift began its ascend to deck 7. He would seize the opportunity to meet with the new Chief Medical Officer who had only recently received his commission and arrived aboard the Artemis.

"I should probably take that tour now, said the young engineer when he was alone again with the blonde woman; and eventually make my way to sickbay."

"Our entire department has already done so for the mandatory check up under our new ship regs during the last few days. I believe that leaves only you now, Sir."

Winking at him she added with a smile:

"I hope you're not allergic to discipline and efficiency because I bet our doctors will even diagnose that now."

With a hand, she then showed him the way around the peculiarly crescent-shaped engineering room. Deck 21 not only housed Main Engineering but also the largest of the Artemis' three Shuttlebay Hangar and Maintenance Section and the primary and emergency deflector dish graviton polarity generators where they could see the modifications done for the new sonar sensor devised by Chief of Science Syntron a few weeks back.

Guiding the new chief engineer further down into the bowels of the ship, Patricia Blakely showed him the emergency fusion reactors 1 and 2 on deck 22, then the next pair of reactors, with the main deflector auxiliary systems now housing the Vulcan's invention on deck 23. Deck 24 gave access to the nacelle power transfer assembly personnel transfer conduit.

Then, it was a look at waste recycling, environmental control, secondary hull emergency batteries, anti-matter generators, gravimetric polaron generators and the secondary shield generators on deck 25 before reaching the very belly of the ship on deck 26 where the anti-matter injectors, the bottom of the Warp Core reaction Assembly, emergency gravimetric polaron generators, tractor Beam Generator and the fore and aft tractor beam assemblies were housed.

Taking the turbolift up now, they went on with the visit of all the other sections of the ship now directly under Lieutenant Scott's authority: deck 20 gave them access to the upper engineering support area, the machine shop, the primary maintenance support center and the damage control triage and assembly area; Deck 19 showed them the primary maintenance support center and the damage control triage and storage area while up to deck 17 they could examine the secondary computer core occupying both this deck and the one below, the secondary hull's impulse engine control and support center and the deuterium injection reactors; they had seen also the deuterium fuel pumps and fill ports and storage tanks on the previous lower deck along with the subspace field distortion generators.

Going up to deck 14, they had a chance to look at the secondary deflector control and the top of the warp core going down for the twelve decks they had seen and the secondary hull impulse engines extending down to the next lower deck. They went on deck 13 to see the primary shuttle maintenance hangar, the emergency batteries and a pair of fusion power generators, then checked the systems support compartment and the next pair of fusion power generators, on the deck above. Next, on deck 11, they looked at the saucer section damage control and triage compartment.

They went thus all the way up to the auxiliary control Room and support, primary hull impulse engines and Engineering support on deck 5, after looking at the primary life support systems on deck 6 where were located the controls for the main computer core extending down to deck 8, the same deck where the first two fusion power generators and the interconnecting dorsal intermix turbolift shafts were located, themselves going all the way down to deck 13, through the emergency saucer separation clamps that could sever but not reconnect both hulls in case of catastrophic damage.

It had taken them the whole shift to tour all those technical locations, often using Jefferies tubes for better access to the innards of the vessel. The well over five hundred meters long, three hundred meters tall and one hundred meters wide Ambassador-class USS Artemis was indeed a big ship.

"I would think you are well due for your medical examination, Chief." finally reminded Lieutenant Blakely to her new senior officer. "Sickbay is on deck 7. You might even find our new Chief Medical Officer there."

She almost said "and I heard he was cute too" but kept silent and only smiled. After all, they were on the very deck her dear Robert was working on.

Scotty nodded at the Lieutenant.

"Well, in that case, I'll go to sick bay and get it done."

He carefully climbed out of the Jefferies tube, and made his way to a corridor where he can hitch a ride on a turbolift. Eventually, Scotty entered a turbolift on deck 13.

"Deck 7." He commanded to the computer, which responded with a chirp.

* * *

Snap!

Caius Aquila frowned, staring at his pocket watch with the hands stuck at 0700 hours 32 seconds. Every morning for the last 10 years he would wind this watch, and this particular morning something just had to break. He held the watch up to his ear and shook it. Something rattled inside. He'd never tried to take the watch apart before; he didn't want to risk breaking it.

"I'll deal with you later." Caius said as he shoved the watch into a pocket and headed toward sickbay.

Alpha shift didn't start for another hour, but this would be an opportunity to observe the Gamma shift personnel before it ends. This particular morning, Doctor Lumquist would be the specialty head on rotation. The new Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis had yet to speak with the previous acting CMO, and had quite a few questions to ask.

He yawned as he strolled toward the turbo lift. He'd been up all night studying medical files. He didn't want to be unprepared to accommodate any special needs various personnel might have.

"Deck 7." Caius said after stepping onto the lift.

Once on the med deck, he strolled into sickbay looking around. It was a bit busier than he'd expected. He approached the Chief Medical Officer's office, hoping to find Lumquist. He could tell that some of the medical crew had taken notice to his presence.

When Aquila looked into the office that was now to be his, he was startled to see there a strikingly beautiful woman with amber eyes reviewing a medical file on the wall-mounted screen.

Despite the fact that she was completely bald, the perfection of her features and complexion was enough to send any man's pulse racing, regardless of his species. But she was even more than her fascinating beauty conveyed.

She was Deltan.

Her large, luminous eyes settled gently on Aquila as her soft, soothing voice filtered through her full-lipped smile:

"Hello... Doctor Aquila, right? We were just told you would be by. I am Doctor Sayla Nedaro-Lenn, chief therapist. Welcome to your office, Sir."

"Hello Dr. Nedaro-Lenn, pleased to meet you." Caius looked a little shocked to see the therapist.

"I was hoping to find Dr. Lumquist, there are a few things that I wanted to go over with him."

The Deltan woman turned to face him with a warm smile.

"Doctor Lumquist is about to end his shift; but you may still find him in the main examination room, overseeing the Level 1 examination of the crew."

The new ship CMO paused for a moment then before adding:

"As the Chief Therapist, I'm thinking you may actually be able to help me out a little more. I take it that you have a pretty good understanding of several members of the medical team?"

Caius had wanted to try to identify the weakest link on the medical team.

Who needs the most guidance? Who has the most room to grow? Caius pondered.

She nodded her fully shaved head fractionally in acknowledgement.

"If you are speaking about their physical health, I can be of help to you, yes. If you are referring to their psychological health, our chief psychiatrist, Doctor Sirris, would be more helpful. But if you are interested in their professional evaluation in relation to both, Counselor Lyrya would be the person to address your queries to."

"Thank you." Caius said. He started to turn to leave then turned back. "Was there anything you wanted to talk to me about before I went to find Lumquist?"

She smiled again.

"Nothing specific Sir, you are CMO now; your responsibility will be to take care of seven hundred and fifty people of various species on board, see to the health of other crews be they alien or Starfleet as we encounter them, manage all of us here in medical, oversee all medical related studies and research from our sensors and probes to our labs, ensure proper flow of communication in and out of the ship, coordinate it all with all the other departments and be the heart and conscience of this ship for our captain. Ours will be much easier; it will be to help you do it all... and we will, Sir."

With a graceful gesture, she pointed at a far away biobed.

"Doctor Lumquist is with our Acting Chief of Operations, Lieutenant Cheonghi; that's the Edoan putting his shirt back on over there."

As Syntron came into sickbay and walked briskly toward the CMO's office, he noticed a small-framed Caucasian Terran male standing near the entrance door engaged in a conversation with the strikingly attractive Deltan Chief Therapist, Doctor Sayla Nedaro-Lenn. Apparently the Deltan therapist attracted significant admiration and attention from the male population of the Artemis wherever she went. To Syntron, she was just another medical doctor; though with an unusually smooth scalp and very balanced features.

Not wanting to impose on their conversation, he stopped about five meters from the CMO's doorway. As he waited for their conversation to conclude, he gazed around the medical facility and could see a line of crew members patiently awaiting their mandatory medical checkups. He could hear the commands of Doctor Lumquist as he attempted to keep the medical process moving along smoothly and efficiently.

He then saw the Terran male move away from the door and head toward Doctor Frederic Lumquist. Syntron intercepted him along the way and addressed the new crew member.

"Dr. Aquila, I wanted to take but a moment and welcome you aboard the Artemis. I am the Chief of Science Lieutenant Syntron."

Caius looked through the Vulcan as if his mind was somewhere else and then blinked. He had a rather overwhelmed expression on his face.

"I'm sorry, I was a bit preoccupied. Pleased to meet you." the young physician apologized.

Caius stared at the chaos of the examinations going on behind Syntron.

This is so unorganized.

There was no line. Patients were mostly standing around chatting with one another while each waited for his/her turn. The medical staff was very disorganized, and even appeared to be a bit short handed. Caius hadn't noticed earlier, he was too determined to meet with Dr. Lumquist.

It seemed like everyone decided to get their examinations out of the way early in the morning.

"Did you want to go ahead and get your examination out of the way, Sir?"

Syntron was a bit taken aback by the new doctor's leap into the assertion that he had come here for a medical exam. Hadn't he clearly stated that he was here to greet the new CMO?

Gazing carefully at the new doctor, he surmised that the chief medical officer was enthusiastically overzealous to exert himself into his new role aboard the Artemis.

Positioned in this precarious circumstance, the Chief of Science looked back over at the line of crew members already in place and stated:

"Thank you doctor for your... generous offer to confirm my already acceptable state of health... but I am not officially on duty yet... and it appears that you have other crew members to attend to at the moment. Perhaps we can make arrangements to complete this obligation at more opportune time."

Caius Aquila felt completely scatterbrained. There weren't a lot of things that made him uneasy, but a chaotic room full of people was one of them.

"Yes... I think that we should schedule you for another time; definitely when we are less busy in here."

The young physician started to say something else, but the clutter bothered him too much.

"Let's continue this conversation a bit later. I have to fix this."

Caius waved a hand in the air as he away from the center of sickbay.

"Attention please." he said loudly. "If you have not yet been seen by anyone, please form a line over here."

The new CMO of the Artemis motioned to an area out of the way of traffic and then moved across the room.

"If you have already been seen by a nurse and are waiting to be seen by a doctor, please form a line over here."

He looked around at the staff, hunting for someone that needed something to do.

"I need a volunteer..."

He led the first person to even slightly respond to the query over to a console toward the front of the first line and grabbed a PADD, Personal Access Display Device.

"I need you to start scheduling these patients. Most of them will need to come back later."

Doctor Aquila hit a few buttons and handed the PADD over.

"Schedule each patient and have those that have been scheduled form a line over there," Caius pointed, " and those that are scheduled for any more than 30 minutes out will need to come back later and their designated time."

He then started rounding up the nurses.

"I need all of my nurses over here please." Caius moved over to a now vacant area toward the center of the room.

Caius explained that he wanted to create an assembly line just as if they were setting up an emergency triage. They would create stations with one nurse to a station, and a few assistants ensuring patients get moved from station to station.

This shift was about to end in just another 40 minutes, but once everything was organized the next shift would be able to fall right in.

Like clockwork, the young doctor thought.

He was satisfied with the examinations now being done in a more orderly fashion and started looking around for the tall Vulcan who introduced himself as lieutenant Syntron.

The Chief of Science officer had stepped off to the side, watching as the new CMO reigned in control of the crew members and staff wandering about within sickbay. From Syntron's estimation, the doctor and his staff would need to medically examine approximately 105 crew members from Operations, 159 from Engineering, 153 from his Science department, 159 from Tactical and Security and 132 from the doctor's own Medical department; plus of course the Captain, First Officer and the Operations Officer.

It was a daunting task indeed for the new CMO to effectively orchestrate this procedure but, from the looks of things, he was already off to a promising start.

Doctor Aquila then approached Syntron.

"I apologize for being so short before. The situation was driving me nuts. So, do you have any advice for a new officer aboard the Artemis?"

Syntron gazed carefully at the new officer and pondered deeply regarding his question. He then based his response on what he had observed and learned about the Andorian commander since his own arrival on the Artemis.

"As the new CMO, I want you to be aware that the Captain is quite adamant about his Chief Medical Officer making full use of the Chief Medical Officer's chair to the left of the Captain's center seat on the bridge. Once we are enroute to, from or during a mission, this is where Captain Kheren will expect you to coordinate all of your medical activities... from this bridge station... except in specific emergencies requiring your exclusive attention."

He deduced by his nod that the young man had already seen the innovative command station on the bridge, and so he continued.

"In addition, he is a staunch advocate of Federation ideals of a peaceful universe and expects strict adherence to Starfleet rules and regulations. He requires the crew to follow with upmost conviction Starfleet's original Rules of Engagement with regard for sentient life as the preeminent factor behind all decisions and actions."

He then paused for a moment looking at the Terran officer and concluded his recommendations:

"He demands the highest level of discipline and performance of every crewmember under his command, and expects the same of every officer; including himself. If you can adhere to this and follow it consistently, then you will be on your way to a successful and prosperous vocation aboard the Artemis."

Caius smiled.

"In that case, I think I'll be quite alright."

After concluding the requisite salutations with the new Doctor, Syntron exited the sickbay and headed back to the turbolift.

"Deck 14" he ordered and the turbolift descended toward the Science facility with a steady low-level hum.

Just as the Vulcan Lieutenant departed, Scotty exited the turbolift on Deck 7 to make his way to sickbay. As he walked toward the doors, they shooshed open letting out the tall Vulcan who nodded in passing to the new chief engineer. Briefly, Lieutenant Scott looked around the room, and saw people moving about in very busy and purposeful fashion.

Politely, he asked the nearest crewman:

"Crewman, what's going on here?"

The crewman quickly responded with a shrug, and said:

"The CMO is getting us reorganized for examinations."

The chief engineer just nodded his head as a reply back to the crewman.

Caius Aquila noticed the Chief Engineer standing around in sickbay. He recognized him from the picture in his medical record he had studied upon coming on board.

"How do you do? I'm Doctor Aquila, Chief Medical Officer. Pleased to meet you."

The young physician extended his hand. Scotty firmly took the newly minted Chief Medical Officer's hand.

"Likewise. Montgomery Scott III. Before you ask, yes, my grandfather was the "original" Scotty."

He chuckled slightly at the comment he made.

* * *

As the lift doors hissed apart once arriving to the requested deck, Lieutenant Syntron stepped out of the lift and headed toward Stellar Cartography, the Astrometrics lab and his Chief of Science office.

He entered the Science lab area and headed first into the stellar cartography lab. This was the area of the starship dedicated to the science and practice of charting planets or areas of space and was used extensively as they had begun mapping out subspace fractures when they were contending with the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly during a previous mission.

The lab housed a central console that could project vast three dimensional representations of cosmic phenomena such as stellar material, globular clusters, nebulae, and planetary systems among other celestial objects and was used in conjunction with the Astrometrics lab to begin to establish emerging patterns, providing a highly effective identification process of locating subspace fractures used by the anomaly to enter normal space and wreak havoc in its path.

Back during their last encounter with the Azimuth Horizon, they had used a large wraparound holographic wall screen of the Astrometrics lab to display their projections of the emerging fractures in a localized stellar region three dimensionally. In conjunction with his science team members stationed in astrometrics and other consoles on the ship, they had accessed sensor readings and used them to create a computerized construct of the data that had been uploaded to the bridge and to the auxiliary bridge after the Aegis had separated near the Dyson shell.

Afterward, the Chief of Science had used the construct to reconfigure the sensor arrays and then the large deflector dish of this ship to allow it to generate and emit concentrated anti-polaric ion beams at the subspace fractures to seal them up. A smaller scale version had also been applied to the Aegis after ship separation to allow it to contain the fractures in the immediate vicinity, in a desperate attempt to keep the anomaly from destroying the Dyson Shell and its X'ell inhabitants.

Now months later and back to the science deck, Syntron saw Lieutenant Junior Grade T'Val, a fellow Vulcan, focused at the helm of the console, configuring new data from the research information that he had recently brought back from Starbase 10. The chief of science of the Artemis was due to return back to the station in two point forty-seven hours to finalize this work he was doing with scientists in residence and with colleagues docked along the station with the Artemis.

Weeks earlier they had been attempting to finish that same work related to the anomaly and subspace fractures when the crew had been abruptly recalled back before their last mission.

Now, once again back in port, he used this break between meetings on the Starbase to return to the Artemis. He was a Vulcan, he did not require rest and sustenance between meetings when there were preparations, reconfigurations, and updates to be implemented on the vessel prior to the launching of a new mission. Therefore, Syntron selectively utilized the available time to confer with his science staff aboard the Artemis in preparation for pre-departure. He would begin these series of engagements with his head of Astrometrics and Astrophysics: Lieutenant T'Val.

When Syntron entered astrometrics, astrophysicist T'Val turned around from the dome-shaped holographic simulator where she was inputting the latest data on the anomaly. But as she looked up, she straightened herself suddenly; her almond shaped black eyes looking past the tall Vulcan as he was entering.

"Captain, Sir. We were not expecting your inspection."

Kheren was standing in the doorway, both antennae pointed at the tridimensional display with obvious interest mirrored in his silvery eyes.

"That is because this is not one, Lieutenant," he retorted matter-of-factly.

Stepping inside the astrometrics lab, the Andorian captain went right before the large imaging system, looking intently at the now frighteningly too familiar fiery globe of gold, orange and white floating there, sending tendrils of crackling fire all around it. Without turning his metallic-hued gaze from the image, he added in a definitely casual tone:

"As you were, Lieutenant T'Val. Do not mind me. I came here looking for your chief."

As the Vulcan woman nodded acknowledgement and resumed her work on the simulation computer, the commanding officer of the Artemis turned towards the taller chief of science.

"Mister Syntron, I would like to have your evaluation on the status of our current scientific capabilities, personnel and material."

Syntron then cast his eyes from the holographic simulation over to the Andorian Captain who stood there steadfast... yet appearing well-rested and more at ease than their last encounter in the arboretum as they were returning from the Mutara Nebula.

"Captain Kheren," the Science officer replied as he lifted his hand and offered his commanding officer a formal Vulcan salute; which served both as a greeting and a farewell gesture. With his fingers parted down the middle forming the familiar V shape gesticulation, he was respectfully acknowledging the proverbial peaceful Vulcan adage of "live long and prosper" to his Captain.

From her computer station, Lieutenant T'Val raised an eyebrow as she saw the Andorian return the Vulcan salute with practiced ease. Noticing her stare, Kheren glanced at her:

"P'Jem monastery, Lieutenant. That is where I also learned meditation, Ipon Ilfa and how to use the anh woon."

He did not know if she had ever heard of the "blue student" from Vulcan adepts. But he did not provide any more clues himself as Syntron was answering him.

Then addressing his Captain's inquiry, he responded:

"Approximately ninety-two point three percent of Gamma shift personnel are concluding their interactions aboard the Starbase and should be returning to the ship within two point forty-six hours. Eighty-four point seven percent of Alpha shift is also on Starbase 10, but not due back for another ten point six hours. Ninety-eight point nine percent of Beta shift members are currently at their posts."

With what could hardly be considered a pause, he then continued:

"In respect to our scientific capabilities, the final modifications to the exterior of the ship's sizeable deflector dish are estimated to be completed before the ending of the next Alpha shift... which would be approximately eighteen point six hours. We have already replaced two faulty consoles in the main science lab, updated the primary core computer, restructured facilities in both the biochemistry labs and the physics lab, and added all of the relevant data from Dr. Daystrom's files into the data bank in the genetics lab. We have reprogrammed the Astrometrics lab main computer interface and one in Stellar Cartography to better handle and represent the magnitude of data that we've been collecting and processing from the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly to be more efficiently and effectively prepared for any future encounters with this dangerous phenomenon."

"Excellent, Mister Syntron. I expect Lotus Fleet command to indeed assign us to further study the anomaly. After all, we did discover it, and no one anywhere has nearly as much knowledge and experience about it as we do, nor is as well equipped yet to do the job as the Artemis. And we *were* due this assignment before being drawn into the Achilles incident over a month ago."

He lifted an amused look at the taller Vulcan.

"Not to mention that I *did* ask for a nice, quiet survey mission for a change."

With barely a lifted eyebrow, the Vulcan added:

"In regards to materials, the head of each department has compiled a list of required materials and requested materials for their specific Department."

He then signaled for Lieutenant Irksos standing near his office to go and get his PADD sitting on top of his desk.

She briskly glided into his office and swept the device off of the science chief's desk. As she handed the PADD to him, Syntron nodded to her in a gesture of acknowledgement as he activated the portable access and display data.

"As you can see here Captain, as he showed a graphic representation from a file on his PADD, each department has selected an individual responsible for procuring the required materials and a separate individual for investigating additional information about the requested materials. So far, as of the last update from four point thirty-four hours ago, the departments together have procured an average of eighty-three point forty-seven percent of the required materials. It is their objective to have a hundred percent of all required materials in possession and appropriately placed within their respective department prior to our departure from Starbase 10."

"I will have Ops look at your requirements," said Captain Kheren, nodding in satisfied approval. "It will be a perfect opportunity for our upcoming new Chief of operations to get acquainted with ship and crew."

Looking again at the digital holographic representation of the Azimuth Horizon being more and more detailed by the astrometrics imager, the Andorian restrained a sigh.

"What do you think of all this, Lieutenant? Us going to... how do Humans state it... to face the Gates of Hell once again?"

Syntron looked at the Andorian quizzically because his question seemed to be both serious and yet whimsically poetic.

After a brief reflection, he responded to the commander of the Artemis:

"I believe it was also a Terran who stated "Courage and perseverance have a magical talisman, before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish into air."

He then quickly added:

"But Vulcans do not believe in magical items and, therefore, it would also be wise to have a reconfigured deflector dish, metaphasic shielding, an arsenal of appropriate technology along with a viable plan mapped out and simulated to accompany the courage and perseverance when addressing those difficulties such as a voracious anomaly that does not so easily disappear or vanish; especially in an environment void of air."

After a brief pause he clarified:

"In other words Captain, these are the ways in which we will prepare ourselves to face this colossal adversary once again."

He glanced down at his PADD and stated:

"While we are continuing to prepare ourselves throughout the ship, I will also be meeting with the science teams on Starbase 10 again to finalize our overall plans based on the most recently acquired information."

He then looked directly at the firm Andorian commander and concluded:

"Therefore... when the time comes once again Captain, we will pass through those gates... though better equipped and prepared than ever before."

Kheren glanced one last time at the astrometrics display then back at his science officer.

"Hopefully, we will not be asked to go through again. The exploration of the other universe this anomaly allows will be for another time. For now, our first priority is in working on ways to prevent its presence from consuming our own. We should be able to do this just standing in the doorway and taking a peek."

Syntron acknowledged the Captain's response and then inquired:

"Any word about when we will be heading back to... have a peek?"

Kheren curbed both antennae inward in obvious amusement and the two eyes in his indigo face widened with mild surprise at the ease which the science chief fell into the human colloquialism.

And they say Vulcans have no sense of humor...

As if to answer the question, the internal ship channel chirped.

"Bridge to Captain Kheren."

"Go ahead Mister Cheonghi."

"Sir, said the Edoan Acting Chief of Ops, message for you from Lotus Fleet Command."

"In my ready room, Lieutenant. I will be there presently."

Closing the channel, he nodded to Syntron.

"Well, I guess "soon"... if not "now," Lieutenant. I will keep you posted of course. Keep up the good work. We will need you most in the upcoming days for sure."

"Thank You Captain, I should have completed my work on Starbase 10 approximately about the time that the Alpha shift is returning as well; in ten point fifty-seven hours."

As the Captain turned to leave, he added:

"Meanwhile, if you need me to return to the ship sooner... then sent a message and I will return without delay."

"It goes without saying, Mister Syntron," confirmed Kheren. "But you should have plenty of time to complete your work. Mister Cheonghi did not say it was an urgent or an encrypted message this time. And statistically speaking, we have well beaten the odds with emergency launches already. "

Nodding to his science chief, the commanding officer of the Artemis left the astrometrics lab and went to the nearest turbolift.

"Olympus," he called out and the cabin shot upward towards deck 1 where the bridge and his ready room were located.

A nice, quiet survey mission... he repeated in his mind all the way up, like a meditation mantra... or more like a prayer.

After meeting and discussing a range of in-depth preparation-related issues with all leading staff members of the science department, science Lieutenant Syntron departed the Artemis and spent the next sixteen hours in a variety of science meetings at Starbase 10; a longer time period than he anticipated.

The exhaustion of intensely participating in non-stop meetings on both the Artemis and the Starbase since their arrival and subsequent docking with the Starbase were beginning to affect his cognitive functions and the degree of intense concentration that he relied on to perform at optimal levels.

At the conclusion of his last meeting, he transported back aboard the Artemis and headed straight for his quarters. He had no intentions of interacting with any crew members at this point of time.

Arriving at his quarters, a quick sonic shower was followed by a simple but nutritional Vulcan meal accompanied by the soft sounds of a series of Mozart concertos recorded on Earth centuries before playing in the background.

Afterward, the Vulcan chief of science slowly positioned himself into a meditative stance, closed his eyes and allowed the resonance of the distant ancient symphony and the increasing warm environment to draw him into a meditative state of rest.

* * *

After an uneventful shuttle flight and an unavoidable layover at Starbase 10, newly promoted Lieutenant junior Grade Danik Brie found himself aboard his new ship, standing in his new quarters. The beating of his heart in his chest reminded him of his first deep sea dive aboard a submersible on a Class O planet in the Aido system. The Structural Integrity Field had begun to malfunction while the vessel was at depth, and Danik distinctly remembered the sound of the hull groaning under the incredible pressures of the deep ocean."

He hoped this trip wouldn't be so dramatic.

First things first, though. He had to report in to his new Captain.

"Computer, where is Captain Kheren?"

"Captain Kheren is in turbolift 2 heading for deck 1," answered the familiar disembodied feminine voice found on every Starfleet ship for the last century.

A short moment later, emerging from the turbolift onto the bridge, Danik was treating to his first sight of the refitted Ambassador-class ship. The first thing that came to his attention was the merging of designs between the older Excelsior- and newer Galaxy-class bridge schemes. The wide console at the fore of the compartment, situated on a lower level than the rest of the bridge, was definitely one of the elements that came through from the original schematics. The raised Captain's chair, with two flanking seats, sitting just forward of the Tactical station, along with the two separate stations echoed the design of newer ships despite the center seat being of the venerable Constitution class style.

The officer at Tactical, the frighteningly tall Andorian woman that had welcomed him upon arrival, recognized the new Chief of Operations and pointed to the door leading to the Captain's ready room.

"He just arrived, you should see him now."

Nodding in thanks, Danik approached the door to the Captain's ready room. Straightening his uniform jacket, Danik reached forward and tapped the control panel next to the frame, indicating his desire to speak with the Captain within.

Kheren had but walked a few steps inside his ready room, intent on getting to his desk terminal, when the door chimed behind him.

But he only heard it once he turned around his translucent desk so that his antennae could pick up the sound as they straightened in surprise.

"Come."

The door slid open to admit a young, blue-skinned medium-tall but solidly built officer wearing above his grey and black Starfleet uniform the gold collar of the technical division and two golden pips on it, one hollowed. His skin tone was much paler than that of the Andorian, himself much darker than most of his own cobalt-blooded kind, and a ridge divided the Bolian's face up and behind his bald head.

Two brilliant startling yellow eyes blinked at him with curiosity and intelligence as his face tightened more about the distinctive coolness of the room than any trepidation of being face to face for the first time with his commanding officer. The temperature reminded Danik of diving in the deep seas of his home world.

Kheren knew each and every face under his command; and there was only one he had not seen yet, the last of his new officers assigned to his ship. So he knew who it was:

"Lieutenant Danik Brie. Good timing; I was about to inquire about you after security confirmed you being now on board. Please sit down."

As his own callused hand offered a plush chair before his desk, the Andorian sat down, punching up a file from ship records.

"Thank you, Sir," came the reply. Danik slipped into the chair, but didn't lean back.

"Brie, Danik, Lieutenant Junior Grade, hailing from Bolarus IX... Graduated on stardate 84483.8 from Starfleet Academy under the Starfleet Corps of Engineers with excellent marks, specializing in warp mechanics... with a commendation from Command after publishing a paper on Starfleet code of uniforms for its elite division..."

The captain nodded with obvious respect.

"I cannot remember having ever heard of a cadet being decorated before graduation except for the legendary James T. Kirk..."

That surprised Danik somewhat. He had written the paper on a whim after conversations with other officers while he was at a third-year cadet. He certainly hadn't expected it to attract the attention of a fleet officer, nor for the commendation that followed. He especially couldn't have predicted that it would have impressed his new Captain.

Being compared to a legendary man like Kirk, whom Brie had done a profile on back in the Academy, was too much. Danik was a bit embarrassed.

Kheren's four eyes followed the illuminated script further before he added out loud:

"Assigned as Senior Chief Petty Officer to damage control team and ODN technician responsibilities upon graduation to 1st Fleet's USS Hood... Then promoted to Ensign and warp technician to the USS Adler, until the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade after exemplary work. Quite a remarkable start, Lieutenant."

Lifting the oculars of his face and of his cranial appendages all up and directly towards the Bolian's own two eyes, Kheren crossed his hands on his desk.

"I have no doubt you are more than qualified to serve on the Artemis, Mister Brie. One question however if I may ask: why ask to serve on board this old refitted vessel after getting such great marks aboard a Sovereign and then a Galaxy class?"

Danik pondered the question for a moment before speaking.

"Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

"Hmmm... seems like I asked for it..." agreed the Andorian, with as much humor as the seriousness of the request would allow.

Then he simply nodded.

Danik gestured to the ship surrounding them.

"Sir, the Hood and the Adler were fine ships, and it was a privilege to serve aboard them, but they are not Ambassador-class ships. They are definitely not the Artemis. While my previous assignments were aboard the most advanced ships in the fleet, those ships began here. The Artemis and other ships of her class have been pushing the bounds of Starfleet technology for the better part of a century. She may be old, Sir, but as for me, I can't think of a better place to be."

The antennae of the Andorian captain curved inward in pleasure but kept their angle forward with the seriousness he felt. His deep voice conveyed the same pride:

"I certainly share your feeling, Mister Brie. There is no ship now serving in the fleet that I find more beautiful and more inspiring than the Artemis. And yes, she is old, but she has proven again the very qualities you are attributing her when they refitted her to 25th century state of the art specs. She might still be outperformed by all other more modern designs, but there is nothing she cannot do above and beyond, because of one specific asset with which she can challenge successfully any other ship out there: her crew."

Danik rose from his chair and moved behind it, resting his hands on the back.

"While we are being frank, Sir, I have a personal reason for wanting to serve aboard the Artemis. A good friend, and a mentor, has been pushing me to move forward in my career. To take chances that might otherwise be overlooked, even if they seem odd to others. My people tend to be very group-oriented, and it is... difficult to leave my old crew behind. But I value this person's advice. I believe that serving aboard *this* ship is the best way I can honor that advice and make use of my skills, if you will put them to work."

Kheren blinked at him, his rigid face unreadable. But the intensity he shared with the young officer was heard in his voice:

"Lieutenant, the single best and most important asset of the Artemis is her crew; and that includes you, now. Having such reasons and motivation to be here honors you... and us."

Kheren's voice now became more than serious.

"I warn you however: I am starting to build quite a reputation as a stern, strict, demanding ship commander; at least to a few officers. Others would rather simply see me as an insensitive, rule-bound slave master."

He crossed his muscular arms on his wide chest to finish:

"Since we are being honest and open here, let me tell you that I do not and will not dispute nor apologize about any of it. I care only about this ship, this crew and especially *why* both are out there."

He pointed a finger towards the Bolian.

"Your job, Lieutenant, will be more than to just see that all our systems run smoothly; it will also be to ensure that the *crew* runs even more smoothly. You will be responsible not only for machines, but most of all for *people*: I must know that I can rely not only on every system, but most of all on each and every person on board to be at their post, follow orders, do their best, uphold all that Starfleet and the Federation stand for... and that each and everyone trust that *I* will *never* do nothing else myself, nor anything less... including you, Lieutenant."

His silvery eyes bore into the amber ones of the Bolian officer.

"Do you think you are up to all that for this ship, this crew as well as for yourself, Mister Brie?"

Danik straightened and stood at attention.

"Sir. I *will* give you my best, Sir."

"And so will I, Lieutenant."

Standing up, the Andorian captain lifted his chin respectfully to his new Chief of Operations.

"Unless you have anything else, Mister Brie, I suggest you go to the bridge and familiarize yourself with our multitask Ops console where you will work. I guess you know already what I'm talking about; the forward most one that came with the original Ambassador class design that can look over every function of the ship and support or substitute any and all other bridge stations even simultaneously."

Then his antennae curved towards one another, a sure sign of good humor to anyone familiar with Andorians. But his voice alone carried his feeling just as well as he added:

"We used to have a three-armed Edoan manning it, but I am sure you will do as well as your chief assistant, even with only two hands."

He was about to sit back down behind his desk when he straightened suddenly.

"Oh... welcome aboard, Chief."

Now alone in his office, the commanding officer of the starship Artemis called up the last message from Lotus Fleet Command.

He took the time to read his mission orders carefully; twice.

Then, amazingly, his thin lips almost curved up as much as his antennae.

Ask and thou shall receive...

But he could not refrain to lift his silver eyes skyward, as if to plea some higher being to make his thought come true.

After all, this was but only the *third* time he was assigned this same mission...

Third time is the charm the humans say... This time... THIS time...

* * *

After his meeting with the Captain, Danik went about familiarizing himself with his new post. He took his position at the forward Ops station on the bridge, dismissing the female Andorian Ensign manning it.

As he sat in the comfortable chair, his yellow eyes scanned the displays. From the left to the right he found status displays for various ships' systems, resource allocation requests from different departments in order of priority, transporter controls, tractor beam targeting controls, just about anything one could do from any station on the bridge could be found on the console, or accessed within a few quick taps.

Danik decided he should probably begin with the current status of primary systems and with his new staff. Pulling a PADD out of a storage compartment, he retrieved the current Operations duty roster and collected the Starfleet dossiers on his senior staff. At the top of the list were two names: Lieutenant, Junior Grade Thankhuun Cheonghi, First Assistant Chief Operations Officer and Ensign Lurnok, Second Assistant Chief Operations Officer. The first name was classically Edoan, and Danik assumed it was the three-armed crewman the Captain had mentioned.

Danik tapped his combadge.

"Computer, inform Lieutenant Cheonghi that I'd like to meet with him and the Senior department heads in one hour to discuss current systems status."

Danik's badge chirped in confirmation.

Tapping controls on the console, he began reviewing ship's systems and transferring the data to his PADD for review at the meeting with Cheonghi and the other department heads.

One hour later, Danik entered the office labeled **Chief of Operations** where his senior operations staff was gathering. The tripod, red-skinned, chitinous First Assistant Chief stood out in the roomful of pale, hairy bipeds and Danik moved forward to greet him first, offering the Edoan his hand, palm down in the typical Bolian fashion.

"Lieutenant, pleased to finally meet you. I want to thank you for the work you've been doing as Acting Chief. It's making my transition in much easier," the Bolian said.

His response was a formal "Sir," and a respectful nod.

Danik then stepped behind the desk-*His* desk, he reminded himself, and surveyed the rest of the gathered officers.

Ensign S'Prek, the Vulcan Master Transporter Chief, stood at an almost relaxed form of attention, relative to Vulcans. He seemed to be examining Danik in turn, sizing up his new Commanding Officer.

Next to him, at a height closer to S'Prek's waist than his head was the *Artemis'* Tellarite Dock Master, Ensign Horagruu. She fidgeted impatiently, probably wanting to get back to her duties managing the transfer of supplies and equipment.

Next was the Systems Senior Chief, Ensign Donald Bartlett and the Master Chief of Services, Ensign Broth. They had been discussing, strongly, the finer points of a finely aged Risan Caesar Salad when Danik walked in. Or rather, the human had been trying to explain to the Bolian that most humanoids did not find rotting vegetables appetizing and Broth was trying to convince the other of the opposite.

Finally, Master Chief of Resources, Ensign Peter Jameson stood quietly to the back of the group, observing the others quietly. Danik wondered briefly about the human. He hadn't known their species to be so reserved.

Danik took in each of his new colleagues and began his briefing.

"First, I want to express my gratitude to all of you now for your patience during my transition onto the *Artemis*. I know you have been in your positions for some time and are used to doing things a certain way. During the coming mission, I hope to get to know each of you better and make Artemis' Operations Department run even smoother than it has. As you know, we are the backbone of the ship. Our jobs make it possible for others to do theirs: when we are an efficient and well-coordinated team, the entire ship benefits."

The officers in the room nodded in agreement. They had operated under the strict command of the current Andorian Captain for months now and knew the score.

"Enough with the pleasantries, let's get to work. I want a report on the status of each of your departments, starting with Transporters. Ensign S'Prek?"

The Vulcan began matter-of-factly listing information and statistics while Danik listened carefully. Once he finished, the Tellarite began and progressed like that through each department. Once all the reports were finished, they discussed areas of opportunity and concern before dismissing to complete preparations for launch.

* * *

After five point twenty-eight hours of meditative rest, the Vulcan chief of science stood up and stretched momentarily. The classical music was still playing softly in the background of his officer quarters as he walked over to his science PADD and engaged the device.

He then voiced verbal commands to increase the luminosity of the room and to terminate the symphony from the airwaves.

Looking at the illuminated screen from his PADD, he checked on the status of each of the departments under his command. Ninety-eight point four percent of all personnel had reported in and were already following normal shift rotations. According to the logs, the remaining few science crew members not on board were still on Starbase 10; in the process of procuring the remaining science department items on their lists.

He walked over to the replicator and ordered what would be considered by Terran standards a searing cup of Vulcan mocha. After a few sip he pressed his combadge:

"Syntron to Lieutenant Irksos."

After a few seconds his combadge activated.

"Irksos here."

"Lieutenant, please assemble the heads of all Science departments in my main office in 10 minutes."

He thought for a moment and then included "Please ensure that each representative brings an updated account representing the comprehensive status of their designated department. Syntron out."

He set the cup of steaming mocha onto a table and revisited the replicator. This time he ordered a formulated fresh plate of Gespar, a Vulcan fruit to accompany his beverage. He reasoned that he didn't know when he might have an opportunity to consume some nourishment once the next mission was under way. He quietly consumed the fruit as he mentally began mapping out the content of the meeting that he had called for and that would commence in eight point thirty-seven minutes.

Eight minutes later, he walked into the chief of science office on deck 14.

He had an elongated table and chairs added in his office to accommodate such meetings: akin to a science ready room.

As he glanced around the table he noted that all the key personnel were accounted for and appeared ready to present their reports.

"Everyone be seated" the chief of science stated, as he placed his PADD near the end seat where he could access the files during their meeting.

He then sat down at the conference table and looked around at his team made up primarily of both genders of Humans, Boliars, and Vulcans. Despite the differences of genders and in species, of philosophies and beliefs, of cultures and environment, they sat there united: a diversity of individuals working together for a common goal who truly represented the ideals of Starfleet.

Their primary focus as a science team was to concentrate on the scientific aspects of the missions on the Artemis, yet over these last missions they had expanded their levels of expertise and given roles into a paragon of cross-departmental involvement and activities that have literally solved insurmountable problems and helped to save the Artemis and lives on this ship and beyond.

A human would be swelling with pride at their continuous and unwavering dedication and accomplishments, but the Vulcan Science officer apparently viewed this as a team optimally fulfilling its obligation to the ship and her Captain.

The Chief of Science officer opened the meeting by first providing an overview of the most recent information he had received while on Starbase 10, and what his expectations were for the upcoming mission. Afterward, he handed the meeting over to each of the department representatives. He listened acutely as each member described the status and when appropriate updates of each of their respective departments.

Around the table the reports and the conversation went: from Lieutenant T'Val proving a detailed summation of the progress made in Astrometrics and Astrophysics to Lieutenant Korbo proving a concise synopsis of Physics and Mathematics all the way through to the remaining seven other representatives of the science department.

Then, as Ensign Marion was just concluding his summary from the History and Archeology department, an announcement came from the ship's comm: be it on every deck of the starship Artemis, every level of Starbase 10 and through both general communication channels and individual combadges, a deep but soft voice nevertheless strong with tranquil authority was heard:

"Attention: this is Captain Kheren. The USS Artemis departs at 0900 hours. All hands report immediately to your department head; all departments report readiness to Chief of Ops in three hours. All bridge officers, report on the bridge to Executive officer O'Conner one hour before time of departure. Captain out."

CHAPTER TWO: ONCE MORE ONTO THE BREACH

**CAPTAIN'S LOG
STARDATE: 87181.1**

After two weeks of resupplying, repairs, restaffing and upgrades, the Artemis is once more ready for launch.

Once again, we are headed for the location of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly we ourselves discovered a few months ago. Our mission: map out the entire subspace fracture grid with which the anomaly travels to get out of its own universe and into normal space.

It will be an ideal set up to settle in several untried bridge officers coming aboard. And, with this data, Lotus Fleet will be able to mobilize later all our ships and resources to channel and close these points of entry as one would dig and dam against a flood, preserving both our universe and this opening to another.

After a deadly first encounter with those cosmic forces on our maiden voyage, then confronting them again to chase off invading Klingons and help a previously unknown advanced civilization save themselves from both threat, and so recently fighting off a deadly rogue artificial intelligence as well as a terrorist attack, this nice, quiet survey mission is most welcome.

And it's about time.

Commander and First officer Michael D. O'Conner had not left the ship once since they had arrived at space dock, 2 weeks ago.

He thought briefly about Engineering Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo and Security Commander Kelsey Alther, both of whom he had known since their first assignment on board the USS Spectre well over a year ago... and about Doctor Josiah Sage whom with which he shared the last several months on the Artemis...

He had quietly watched them leave with both pity and regret. O'Conner hoped that they would be able to become fine officers some day... but he didn't envy who would have to work with them next.

And now, O'Conner glanced at all the replacement officers on his PADD and sighed.

Hopefully this will be a easy one. I rather not take a near full set of untested bridge officers in to battle, he thought as he put the PADD away and glanced around the near empty bridge. O'Conner pulled out his new pocket watch, to check the time. It was an old family tradition to give one when one made Commander. It was beautifully hand crafted out of silver and steel and under the lid lay a picture of a female officer that brought a smile to the tall officer's face.

Wish YOU were here, Akari... he sighed inwardly.

Alone a moment on the bridge before all the others reported in, he looked longingly at the dark lustrous straight hair, the almond shaped obsidian eyes, the high cheekbones and the finely chiseled lips red as a cherry blossom on the white-gold face.

And he kept waiting, not really hearing acknowledging signals of the captain's orders.

Scotty acknowledged first the departure order as soon as it was heard. He planned on getting to the bridge a bit early, so he could acquaint himself with the Engineering station.

He thought that it was a little bit odd to be placed on the bridge as the Chief Engineer, but his worries quickly vanished.

After getting things straight in Engineering, he walked over to the Deck 21 turbolift, and entered it with full confidence in all the ship's systems readiness.

"Deck 1," he told the lift, computer. Being a new crewmember, he wasn't completely aware of the nicknames that surrounded each place, including the bridge. But fortunately, the computer could interpret it all properly and, eventually; he arrived swiftly on the bridge.

Moments later, he walked over to the Executive Officer, and began to introduce himself.

"Commander O'Conner, Lieutenant Montgomery Scott III reporting in, Sir!"

O'Conner glanced up from his chair's control pad.

"Hello Mister Scott. Welcome to Olympus. Your station is over here."

From down on deck 14, Lieutenant Syntron had also acknowledged the summons.

"It appears that we are slightly ahead of schedule. This will give each of you time to make your final preparations. I will be on the bridge in approximately four point five minutes if you need me. Please ensure that the last remaining crew members have returned from Starbase 10 and that all departments are fully ready prior to launch. Each of you needs to send me a confirmation memo via my PADD when your department is ready for departure. This meeting is adjourned."

Syntron stood up and all of the science team members followed suit. One-by-one, each member exited out of the room and headed toward their divisions within the science department.

He then saved the information on his PADD and afterward walked over and placed it back in its handcrafted satchel on his desk. He spoke briefly to his second assistant chief of science, Lieutenant T'Val, before heading out of the room, past Astrometrics and into the corridor.

He stepped into the turbolift and announced: "Bridge"

The lift doors closed and he ascended up to deck 1.

The doors hissed open when he arrived and he stepped on to Olympus, the colloquial name for the bridge. He saw the First Officer Michael O'Conner standing by the Captain's empty chair with the new chief engineer already present and walked over to the human First Officer.

"Lieutenant Syntron, reporting for duty" he stated to the first officer and then headed toward his now familiar science console on the farthest and highest level of the bridge.

"Very good" O'Conner gave the science officer a nod as he showed the new chief of engineering to his station, on the same level as that of the science station but on the other side of the back wall of the command center.

At the same moment, in his examination office on deck 7, Doctor Caius C. Aquila for his part was cursing under his breath.

Then he stood up, pacing back and forth in front of the table.

"The patient remains non-responsive and is in need of an organ transplant." Caius said out loud, pretending to be making a medical log entry. "After having been wound up too tight, and over stressed, the patient's main spring has broken. I have replicated a new one, but am unable to determine how to open patient's chest."

He stopped and stared at his broken pocket watch laying on the table.

Then he remembered the duty call order.

The young physician snatched up the watch and placed it into a pocket then headed out of his personal examination room adjacent to his office and spent a few moments in sickbay to ensure all was well before heading to the bridge.

"Dr. Aquila reporting for duty, Sir." he said to the First Officer as he headed to the medical console.

O'Conner by this time had already moved back to his chair.

"Good to see you, Doctor. Your chair is next to the captain's."

The new Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis was already stepping up to it.

Barely five decks below, Danik Brie still sat in his chair, rubbing his eyes. He had a lot of catching up to do in order to be an effective officer. And he wasn't even sure if it was all his inexperience.

Better get back to the bridge. Everyone is about to start reporting in.

Danik pushed back away from his desk and stood and ran a blue hand over his bald head. Straightening his uniform he left the office and returned to the Bridge.

Commander Michael O'Conner, the First Officer was on duty. Danik approached the human and introduced himself.

"Sir, Lieutenant, Junior Grade Danik Brie reporting for duty. We haven't had a chance to meet since I've been aboard."

Michael O'Conner nodded to the new chief of operations.

"Lieutenant, if you would take your station."

The first officer of the Artemis glanced around and smiled at the readied bridge. Only thing missing now were the captain, a helmsman and a chief of tactical.

The bridge officers present had some time to meet one another, look up their respective stations and run the mandatory diagnostics and security checks before the other door of the ship's command center parted to admit Captain Kheren.

With him came the towering Andorian security woman Lieutenant Tyvya and a medium-sized, dark-copper skinned human with silky dark hair tied behind him into a low-hanging ponytail, slanted dark eyes and a blood-red complex tattoo around the left one.

"Gentlemen, Kheren announced, you already have met Lieutenant Tyvya, acting chief of security and tactical until we get our new one assigned by Command... if ever. And this is Lieutenant Junior Grade Aguk Snow, our new chief of navigation. And being descended from a far northern tribe of Earth, please note that *he* made no complaint about my ready room's ambient temperature."

Respectfully nodding to all the other officers in a perfunctory manner, his face as inscrutable as even that of a Vulcan, Ensign Snow did not outwardly acknowledge if the captain's comment was either humorous or truly commending. He simply took his seat on the left side of the long double console that housed in tandem both the navigation station and the tactical one behind which the giantess assumed her own post.

Moving to his own, old style command seat, the Andorian captain nodded to each officer in satisfied acknowledgement on seeing them all there and ready. Then, still standing, he opened his combadge ship wide and stated in his deep, soft tone:

"This is the captain. Time is 2050. By order of Lotus Fleet Command, we will go meet once more the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Our mission: chart all subspace fractures from to predict its exact path of expansion, which will allow the upcoming fleet operation to contain it within its current position."

He made a pause, letting time for everyone to guess and understand their own expected role in such an endeavor. Then, he added:

"We have been there before; more often and deeper than anyone. And now, with knowledge and with metaphasic shielding, inverted ionic pulse and spatial echosonar, we will face dangers we already faced successfully even without those, even in ignorance. Thus, the Federation... and perhaps more... are counting on us to chart the path to do away with this menace."

He took a look around, at all the eyes turned toward him on the bridge, as if through them he could see the seven-hundred and fifty souls on board. Then, he took a deep breath and said:

"The greatest danger of all is fear, and the greatest fear is that of the unknown; it is now our duty to dissipate this ignorance and, with it, all fears blinding us to what the universe, *two* universes, may truly offer us. This is the starship Artemis: the Goddess of the Hunt will track the wild beast that will later be trapped... and tamed."

Sitting down in his large command chair and looking up and forward, he finished:

"All hands: stand by for departure."

* * *

14 days, 14 long days, it had been 14 days of sitting in the copilot's seat of a tiny shuttle. Brad paced back and forth with anticipation and tension as he waited, waited as patiently as he could. Another sigh escaped his lips as he fought with himself to ask how long.

They'd been through this so many times that the pilot of Starbase 24's long range personal shuttlecraft knew the signs. It was obvious that the Lieutenant didn't handle being cooped up very well, but at least it was almost over.

"Lieutenant, before you ask again, we're almost there. You should be able to see the Artemis in a minute or two. Now please, take your seat and I'll get you on your ship as soon as I can."

Brad laughed a bit as he moved back up to the front of the shuttle and sat down next to the pilot.

"Thank the gods. Nothing against you or the shuttle but I don't think I could have taken another day being stuck in here."

The pilot rolled his eyes as he dropped the type 10 shuttle out of warp, glad this assignment was pretty much over. Most passengers were glad for a little down time, time to read, time to relax, but not this man.

"None taken, Sir... and there she is."

Brad had taken the time to read up on the Artemis' previous mission reports, on her captain and the crew rosters, or as much as he'd been able to get with his clearance, but to say that he didn't get stir crazy would have been highly inaccurate. His hand reached out to the companel, touching it lightly.

"Shuttle Neal to Artemis, requesting permission to dock."

A minute or so passed before the pilot looked over.

"I'm getting a text only response from the Artemis, putting it to your screen."

The newly assigned tactical officer read over the message, not fully grasping what it meant until he looked at the chronometer.

"By Captain's orders no craft not assigned to the Artemis proper is authorized to dock. All crafts are currently locked in the shuttlebay and accounted for. Please note orders have been given to depart at 2100 hours."

"Get me to the starbase now!" Brad's voice was a bit louder than necessary as he looked at the chronometer realizing he had less than an hour for the shuttle to dock and get on board the Artemis.

"Sir, we are going as fast as we can. I will have us docked at the station in less than five minutes. Now if you would leave me to my duties I will get you there faster than if you continue distracting me."

Brad slunk back in his chair rubbing his temples, feeling a headache coming on as he forced himself to take deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

Everything is going to be alright, I will get on board in time

He kept repeating the inner-mantra to himself as the five minutes drug on taking longer than any five minute period he'd ever experienced before.

Finally the shuttle docked and was cleared by station security, he was clear to debark.

"Thank you, Ensign!" he said as he jumped out of his chair, grabbed his bag and ran out of the shuttle bay.

Originally had 40 minutes, docking took 10, 30 minutes left...I can make it, GET OUT OF MY WAY PEOPLE! his mind screamed.

The station was especially busy; people milling around. Normally that would have been a good thing but he was in a hurry and it wasn't working to his benefit. Brad moved as fast as he could but his panic rose with every viewport he passed. He could see the Artemis prepping for launch. The warp engines were already heating up. Time was against him and he had a bad feeling this wasn't going to end well.

Finally he arrived at the access port; the ship was still docked after all so he should have been able to get on board that way. As soon as he saw the docking plank he knew something wasn't right. It should have been open, but it was closed. Looking around he saw an ensign who appeared to be a part of starbase operations. Motioning to the man he spoke, the panic obvious in his voice.

"Ensign, I need to get on the Artemis."

"I'm sorry, Sir; the Artemis' security chief has taken control of the ship's security and at the captain's orders has sealed the access port. No one is allowed on or off the ship without the captain's authorization."

"But I am the Artemis' security chief!"

"I don't know what to tell you, Sir; my only suggestion would be to head to the transporter room. You might be able to beam in but she's scheduled to depart in 15 minutes and I know her captain is big on being prompt."

"Fine, where's the nearest transporter room?"

"Deck 8 on the starboard side, it's going to take you a few minutes to get there."

Brad sighed as he bit down on his lower lip, not even taking the time to thank the crewman, for that matter what should he be thanking the man for? He wasn't any help. His head shook as he ran through the corridor seeing the nearest turbolift in the distance. If he could just make it there...

He ran for all with he was worth; pushing his way through the crowd of people. There was no excuse for it being this hard for a new crewmember to report for duty. It was almost as if he was being tested, but the problem was if he failed the test he'd be in for a world of hurt. Starfleet didn't take kindly to a crewmember missing his report for duty time. He'd probably end up stationed on the station cleaning plasma ducts until the Artemis returned, and that wasn't a pleasant thought.

Through the viewports as he ran Brad saw the ship continuing its preparations to launch. The main deflector dish and the impulse engines were now online. Time was ticking and he wasn't getting much closer.

"I have... to make it..." Brad spoke under his breath as he ran, finally stepping into the turbolift.

"Transporter room, Deck 8!" he yelled as the doors shut, thankfully the only one in the lift.

His foot tapped on the floor as he mentally watched the minutes tick by, probably less than 10 minutes from the ship's launch. It felt like the short trip to the transporter room took 10-15 minutes itself although he knew it could only have taken one or two.

As the doors to the turbolift opened he sprinted through them and into the transporter room. Out of breath he ran onto the transport pad pushing people out of his way and yelled:

"Beam me to the Artemis, now! It's about to leave!"

The transport chief frowned at his lack of etiquette but nodded his head and began queuing up the transport only to shake his head.

"Sorry, Sir, the Artemis isn't accepting any transports that are not initiated by their own transporter systems. It appears this is by the captain's command."

Brad's eyes closed as he took a deep breath and stepped off the transporter pad. Mentally he was throwing out every cuss word he knew, but he was trying to keep it at least slightly professional on the outside.

"Thank you Chief." He said with an irritated tone to his voice.

There was still five minutes so there was still a chance. Brad moved to the companel and requested a channel with the Artemis. His eyes never left the chronometer as he waited for the channel to open.

Finally a voice came across, a suspicious cold voice.

"This is the Artemis' main transporter room."

"This is Lieutenant Junior Grade Bradley Jackson, I'm the new chief of security. I need to be beamed on board NOW!" he nearly yelled as he began compiling a mental list of whose lives he was going to need to make hell.

Another minute passed by with silence before a woman who obviously didn't take anything from anyone responded.

"Please send in your identification and order documents for authentication."

Three more minutes passed by as Brad's eyes got wide. Someone was going to pay for this. His head shook as he watched the chronometer flip over to 2100 hours, it was too late.

At that exact moment he felt the familiar sensation of the transporter beam, but something felt different. It didn't feel like it took the normal amount of time. Something had gone wrong. Were his atoms scattered across the universe with no way to put them back together? Fear struck through his mind. Brad had never been a huge fan of transporter technology as it was. He'd much rather take a shuttle from place to place over transporting but he knew it was a necessary evil of the job, but now, his fears had finally been proven true. He was dead, by a transporter beam.

All these thoughts ran through his mind in the span of a few seconds before he finally rematerialized, out of breath from both fear and the running he'd been doing on the station. Brad's head moved from side to side, his eyes taking in every facet of the location. It was an oddly old-styled transporter room, a style he'd never seen before, but it obviously worked. Something felt different though. His bag, and his personal phaser, they were both gone.

The two people behind the transporter console were both staring at him, as if waiting for him to make a move. Brad stepped down from the pad as he sized up the Vulcan transporter chief, obvious from the gold uniform and the gigantic Andorian female security officer who towered over him.

The security officer was the first to speak. She was doing the same that he was, obviously sizing him up just like he was doing to her.

"The Captain has received, read and approved of your transfer orders, Mister Jackson. Your weapon is in the armory and your personal items in your quarters, all duly inspected. Your identity has been confirmed through bioscan. Please report immediately with all the other senior officers to the bridge."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He said simply, not wishing to speak any more at this moment.

Brad moved to the door and exited the room without speaking another word but heard her add.

"Oh, and I am Lieutenant Junior Grade Tyvya. I will be your assistant. Welcome to the starship Artemis, Sir."

As soon as the door closed behind him he sighed for a third but final time as he shook his head.

Why does SHE have to be my assistant?

Pushing that thought out of his head he quickly moved to the turbolift. As the doors closed he called out for the bridge, only to get more frustrated when the computer voice responded:

"Access to the bridge is restricted to ship personnel with security clearance 4 and above only."

Brad's hands moved to his head, running down the back of his head to his neck as he struggled to hold his composure, frustration beginning to get the best of him. At that moment the doors opened and Tyvya appeared again holding a combadge, identical to the one he was already wearing, or at least it appeared that way.

"Sorry, Sir, I forgot to give you one of these so that you may move freely throughout the ship."

"Thank you again, Lieutenant." Brad waited for the doors to close again before asking for the bridge one more time, actually feeling the turbolift move this time.

A few short seconds late the doors opened and he got his first real glimpse of the bridge, although all the stations were currently occupied, except for his. As confidently as possible considering what he'd just gone through Brad stepped off the turbolift and onto the bridge. His eyes roamed from side to side taking in every detail of the bridge, including the senior staff sitting at their consoles.

Stepping down and off to the side of the center chair Brad nodded to the Captain and forced a confident tone into his voice.

"Captain, Lieutenant Jackson requesting permission to report for duty at tactical."

As per regulations, the commanding officer of the starship Artemis had been informed by Lotus Fleet Command on the assignation of a new chief of security and tactical to his vessel when it had been approved, two weeks ago. He had read his Starfleet record and noted the transfer orders from the USS Camelot to Starbase 24 and from there by shuttle to Starbase 10 where the Artemis was docked.

And so, he had requested daily follow up on his travels and coordinated his ship departure with it... knowing full well that it would be a close call and thus, a good opportunity to test the man he would rely on for the very safety of his crew.

After what had happened during their last mission and now being deprived of Commander Kelsey Alther, the high-ranking, decorated and experienced security officer he had always relied on so far, Captain Kheren wanted to be sure he was getting nothing less than the best available man for the job; but most of all, the *right* man for the job.

From his command chair, Captain Kheren looked up at that man now finally standing before him: black haired, blue eyed, with a pale skin darkened from outdoor exposure, he looked like the quintessential security officer: a shade taller than Kheren himself, athletically built... and in top physical shape, judging alone by the way he already had caught his breath after a thirty minutes run under emotional tension from the starbase docking bay to the Artemis bridge.

Informed at his request by Starbase security of his shuttle's arrival, the commanding officer of the Artemis had followed his movements from the shuttlebay to his bridge on his command chair PADD through the internal sensor link with Starbase 10.

The new security chief of his ship had displayed to his personal satisfaction both speedy decisiveness and methodical decision-making abilities in his run to get aboard in time.

But most of all, the Andorian appreciated the self control and discipline the man showed at this moment, despite what must have been two frustrating weeks of travel confined in a shuttle, knowing he would barely make it in time and then facing all the ship's security measures as so many obstacles to his goal; frustrating if not downright frightening, especially to a junior officer. Those usually were very conscious about their career and personal record; the fear of failing to reach his assigned post because of some flight travel bureaucratic foul up must have been really testing on top of it all.

But anyone pretending to be a chief of security had to be able to cope with far worse; after all, there had been no life in the balance during this ordeal.

And here, Lieutenant Junior Grade Bradley Jackson had passed with flying colors.

"Welcome aboard the Artemis, Mister Jackson," said the Andorian, looking at him with his usual blank expression, but his deep, soft voice neither stern nor unconcerned. "Glad you could finally join us. Please assume your station."

After being dismissed by the captain, Brad spoke confidently:

"Thank you, Sir."

For some reason he now truly got the feeling that this truly *had* been a test.

Turning his back he moved to the only available station on the bridge and sat bringing up all the technical specs, adjusting the standard display of the tactical and security console to his personal profile. He'd never understood the standard set up of menus; it just didn't seem as efficient as it could be, but it was the standard that most bridge officers worked off of.

Now that his security access had been approved he began downloading all of the ship specific security measures, some of which he'd already been versed in through the trail in the future he would refer to as *the Artemis test*, to a PADD that he could review as soon as his shift was up. He knew that he certainly had a lot of studying to do, a lot of work that would be taking up his off duty time in the future. For now he set one side of the panel to review his security officer's training rosters, mentally preparing a rotation of drills so he could personally test their proficiencies.

When he saw that his latest officer was obviously ready and at work, Captain Kheren looked straight at the main viewer and the sight of the immense space doors a few kilometers in front of the ship.

"Take us out, Number One."

"Aye sir." O'Conner said as he stood up and barked orders at the new officers.

"Mr. Scott, ready the thrusters."

This made Scotty turn to face him and say:

"Ready thrusters, aye."

Scotty punched in some commands to double check the thruster systems. Seconds after that, he readied them for departure.

"Thrusters ready for departure." he reported back.

"Lieutenant Danik; request clearance to undock and release mooring claps."

"Aye, Sir," Danik acknowledged to the Exec of the Artemis.

He keyed a message for the stationmaster requesting undocking clearance and a departure heading. While waiting he issued commands for the dockmaster to retract and secure the energy and supply umbilicals from the station. The indicators reported the updated status.

"Station umbilicals released, all systems show ready," Danik Brie reported.

A blinking indicator signaled a response from the stationmaster. Danik touched the control and read the reply.

"Starbase 10 has granted departure clearance. All traffic on our outbound flight path has been cleared." A few more taps on the console, "Mooring disengaged and secured. Ship is ready for departure."

"Once free, Lieutenant Snow, take us out and engage a course to the Azimuth Horizon warp 6."

"Confirmed, Sir. We are clear and free to navigate," then added helmsman Snow. "Engaging thrusters at eighteen hundred kph. We will reach spacedoors in three minutes."

Slowly, with a majestic grace that always awed even the most seasoned space veteran, the near four million tons starship slid out of its berth and floated like a titanic blue and silvery bird towards the edge of the immense dome covering the vast interior of the round starbase. A minute before it reached the light-studded wall, two massive panels slid apart, opening before her bow the unending vista of outer space.

Over the comm channel, a feminine voice was heard:

"Space doors are open; USS Artemis, you are free to depart from Starbase 10. May the winds be at your back."

"Thank you Starbase 10. We will bring you back some nice pictures," answered Captain Kheren.

"We have cleared spacedoors, then announced the Inuit pilot; engaging full impulse."

On the ship, nothing was felt; only the soft whine of the impulse engines was faintly heard, somewhere far behind them. Yet the Artemis suddenly jumped from a mere few hundreds of kilometers per hour to a quarter of the speed of light, seventy-five thousand kilometers per second.

And after a few minutes, with everyone looking at a departing view of the saucer-shaped space station and its fully restored ring, the vibrant, nasal voice of Ensign Snow broke the silence over the soft hum of consoles:

"Course for Azimuth Horizon anomaly plotted and laid in, Sir. ETA at warp 6: twenty-three hours forty three minutes. Ready at your command."

Sitting farther into his seat, Captain Kheren nodded.

"Warp speed, Mister Snow."

And then, with a rising noise of engines even farther back and yet, infinitely more powerful, the starship Artemis went from a mere quarter of the speed of light to several hundred times the Einsteinian limit.

And with a flash of light, she whisked herself away.

Most starship commanders either looked at launch as a boring routine best left to lower officers or as a personal exercise to assert personal control over ship and crew. For Kheren however, it was something else entirely: it was the first, best way to urge crew efficiency... and especially to start to know his senior officers better.

Launching any starship was not just like taking out a hovercraft from a garage and speed along the highway; it involved a thousand big and small operations all at once and all across the entire vessel as well as the base. Even one small mistake or omission, one order executed out of order or negligently could spell mishap, even a catastrophe to ship and crew.

Space was the most hostile environment to life one could dare to face. It was not only cold and uncaring: it was unforgiving.

Sitting back and watching how each officer worked in this deceptively routine procedure, how the crew and the ship responded at every phase of the launch, told more to the Andorian about his vessel and his people than any Starfleet record or sensor data ever could.

And from experience, he knew now that he could have faith in his crew in the big things if he could rely on them on the little things first.

And so, he always let his second in command direct the maneuver to most enjoy and learn from this part of even the longest journey, the first small step.

Even sitting on the left hand of the ship's commanding officer, for his part Doctor Aquila as always felt uneasy at launch. It just wasn't natural to accelerate so fast. If humanoids were meant to go that fast, they'd have all evolved built in warp engines.

All the more reason a good doctor should be present.

He flipped through page after page on his medical console, absorbed in his work. He wanted to cross-reference every medical condition of every crew member with as much information as he could obtain about the anomaly they were going to investigate. If anyone was going to start experiencing strange symptoms, he wanted to be sure he could anticipate it.

Caius was compiling some notes to send to Syntron in order to gather more information about additional radiation/particles that may form as a result of their presence near this cosmic phenomenon. After watching the newest arrival enter the bridge, the new Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis pulled Jackson's medical file and created a reminder to ensure that he received the required physical.

Sitting in his retro-style bridge chair he obtained at Starbase 10 prior to the previous mission, Syntron looked over his console and called up all of the incoming information. He then checked the reports that arrived from each department head. All science crew members in each department were accounted for and they were all synchronized with the current duty shifts and schedules. Each department head demonstrated once again that they were functioning at optimal efficiency.

He then opened the ship comm and directed a communication link to Lieutenant Irksos who was working with Lieutenant T'Val in the Astrometrics lab. Over the course of many perilous missions, they had come to respect and rely on each other's skills and effectiveness throughout the ship: from all sections and locations of the science department and into and throughout the Engineering sections as well. As a team, this Terran female and this Vulcan female were second to none.

"Irksos here" the attractive Human female replied in a tone indicating that she was in the midst of working on something demanding her utmost attention.

"Lieutenant, how are preparations for the upcoming survey of the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly proceeding?" the Vulcan Chief of Science inquired.

"Sir, the reprogrammed Astrometrics lab computer with the updated interface to the Stellar Cartography computer are cohesively performing flawlessly. We've updated all the existing data and already this combined system is capable of not only handling the enormity of data that we've been collecting and processing from the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly, but simultaneously representing a continuous data stream in our three-dimensional holographic projection system. This gives us the advantage to actually see any changes occurring in regards to subspace fractures and the emerging tendrils of the anomaly so that we can immediately employ precise and effective counter measures"

"T'Val here, Sir," the exotically featured Vulcan working with his assistant stated: "we are now working with the reconfigured sensor arrays and the modified deflector enhancements, including your directional space sonar, to feed the data that we collect surrounding the ship and beyond immediately to our systems here. We are then working on our means to instantaneously recalibrate all of these signals to tactical, science and ops stations and consoles on both the main bridge and the auxiliary bridge to be more efficiently and effectively prepared for all of our upcoming encounters with the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly."

Lieutenant Irksos then added:

"Sir, with instantaneous data analysis and projections, we will be able to directly follow and predict virtually all anomaly activity in and beyond our proximity range; theoretically even before they occur. This will provide us with a great advantage since it will allow us to counter these subspace fractures and this anomaly with the upmost speed, precision and efficiency."

"We estimate that everything should be fully operational and ready for simulated testing in about six point seven hours," T'Val chimed in.

Syntron acknowledged their responses and concluded:

"Impressive reporting Lieutenants... keep me apprised of your progress and when the simulation will be ready for testing." Syntron out.

As the Artemis now cruised gracefully through space, Commander O'Conner leaned over to the captain.

"Sir, this might be a good time for the new department heads to get to know their officers and start to gain their trust."

The Andorian nodded, turning his dark blue face towards his right hand man.

"See to it, Number One. As soon as all is secured and completed for this shift, have their relief come to their stations. Mister Syntron for his part will have to work on finishing our preparations for the astrometric survey ahead. And I will meet our new security chief presently. You have the bridge, Commander."

"Aye, Sir." O'Conner replied.

He looked around the bridge and, seeing the slew of new faces, offered them a bit of advice.

"Lieutenants Danik, Jackson, and Scott, Doctor Aquila; It would be wise for you to use this shift to get acquainted with your station, the ship and your fellow officers. Also, while I won't order you to, you should try to get to know your alpha shift members, after your shift."

"Aye, Sir," both said Brad and Caius together, their eyes barely lifting from their consoles.

Scotty looked over to the Executive Officer and gave him a clear head nod.

"Yes, Sir."

"Aye, Commander," came Danik's reply.

Returning his attention to the console, the Bolian Chief of Operations began with a more in-depth study of the mission parameters. Every ship had been briefed on the Azimuth Horizon, but data on the anomaly wasn't particularly forthcoming at Danik's old post. He knew it was a kind of wormhole, but of a different variety than your typical extra-dimensional tunnel through normal space-time. According to the Artemis' own logs, it was known for doing bad things to good ships. Very bad things. Total obliteration kinds of things if one were not careful.

Before long, Danik decided he'd rather know more about the officers under his direct command. It seemed more conducive to him getting sleep that night than reading about how the Azimuth Horizon could cook a being right through the ship's shields. Retrieving the PADD he had used earlier from its storage compartment, he called up the database he created earlier.

I think it's time I conducted my own tour of the ship, he thought. Get a chance to see how these people go about doing their jobs. What was it Oyalrassy always said? "Drinking with someone is only half their story, work with them to hear the rest?" It will let them have a chance to get used to me, too.

Danik signaled the computer to summon Lieutenant Cheonghi from the Auxiliary Control Room on Deck 5. While he waited for the six-limbed Edoan to arrive, he began reviewing his roster, deciding where to start.

The same Auxiliary Control Room Cheonghi is coming from would be the logical place. Maybe I'll have a chance to get down to Engineering. I'd really like to see how they managed to fit the Class 8 M/ARA into an Ambassador-class ship.

A presence next to him interrupted his reverie. His relief had arrived and was waiting to take his position. Danik quickly stood and let the other officer take his position.

Before leaving, Danik asked Cheonghi:

"Who is on duty in Auxiliary Control?"

"Lieutenant Morrison, Sir," came the reply.

Danik nodded and crossed the bridge to the Turbolift, recalling it after it dropped their new Chief Engineer off at his destination.

"Deck 5," Danik ordered the lift, speeding it on its way through the ship.

Standing up, the captain lowered all four oculars to the man sitting below and in front of him to his right at the right end of the joined helm-tactical console.

"Mister Jackson; would you care to join me in my ready room?"

With the man in tow, the Andorian guided him to the left hand access to the bridge. The door slid apart to show a sort corridor with two doors on the left and on at the end; this one obviously of a second turbolift. But the captain entered the nearest one and they came inside the typical commanding officer office, albeit devoid of any personal object, almost spartan and bare; there was no decoration or adornment, not even the popular fish tank... and it was definitely much cooler than the rest of the ship, almost cold for the man.

Brad followed the Captain into the ready room. It was his first time in a captain's office if truth were to be told and it was a bit overwhelming that he was now in a position where this wasn't going to be the only time he'd enter those doors. It was certainly a different experience being the chief rather than the assistant chief. His eyes moved around the small room taking in every facet, although there weren't many things to observe in this Captain's office. One of the first things they taught you in security training was observe everything. He'd honed his skills, learning to look for the tiny details, and that had served him well.

Captain Kheren went behind his desk to sit in his high-backed chair and punch up the man's Starfleet record he had perused from his bridge armchair monitor a short while ago.

"Jackson, Bradley, born on Earth stardate 62506.6... graduated from Starfleet Academy in security and tactical with extensive training and education in paramedical and rescue operations, stardate 84483.8; assigned upon graduation as Petty officer 3rd class to security an tactical on the USS Tsunami; upon promotion to Ensign, stardate 84976.6, transferred to the USS Camelot and rising to the position of assistant chief of security; upon promotion to Lieutenant Junior grade, assigned to USS Artemis on stardate 87161.9... Command certainly did not want you to lose any time with you now, did it?"

As the Captain read his record Brad stood at attention in front of the man's desk observing the captain and how he related in this instance. There was much to learn about a person, simply by watching and listening to them.

"No sir, they did not. I am quite pleased that they saw the potential in me to give me this opportunity."

Brad smiled in line with his simple response. It was clear now to him that the commanding officer of his new ship knew quite well why the new chief had arrived so late, since he had obviously received and confirmed the transfer orders two weeks ago... along with the medical file that had been checked out by Doctor Lumquist and integrated into the transporter pattern buffers. Lieutenant Jackson had been late... but far from unexpected.

And the captain had taken full advantage of it to start knowing firsthand the man to whom he would entrust the safety of his ship and the lives of his crew.

"Anything to add to your record that I should be aware of, Lieutenant?"

"No sir, I believe everything is there."

There was probably more there than he even knew. One thing he'd learned quickly was that you never knew what was in your personnel record. It was like medical records, although they were about you, you never truly knew what the doctors were writing about you.

Kheren was slightly surprised by the privacy of the man; usually, Humans in particular were prompt to reveal some hobby or special interest beyond their duties. But being Andorian, the captain was certainly not bothered by a man that kept his private world and his professional world apart. He of all people least of all. And so he invited the man to sit in front of him with a hand, taking note of the strict discipline of the man who had stood at attention, not as an impressed, fearful cadet, but as would a respectful officer.

Brad sat nodding his head.

It wasn't that he was trying to hide anything about himself, his hobbies or interests. It was simply the fact that there was no point bringing up small talk in a situation like this. The ship was about to head into a situation that he had no knowledge about and right now it was time for him to jump in head first. He needed information; knowledge was power and right now he wasn't very powerful with the knowledge he had about this ship and its policies at this point of time.

"Now that you are part of this crew, I would like now to go at length through the security protocols of this ship with you, Mister Jackson."

He looked at him with all four eyes locked with his two.

"I appreciate that, Sir. As you know, I have already encountered some unexpected security protocols and would like to make sure I am not caught unprepared in the future."

"Good, if they could surprise an officer of your caliber, they should provide adequate against those against which they are intended."

At this point he was certain the captain had been testing him. There was no doubt about this fact at this point.

But it now was clear that he had been testing his ship, his crew and himself as well.

He nodded to the new chief of security.

"I want you fully informed, lieutenant. Hence why I am showing you this. Now, first and foremost: all orders, rules and regulations aboard this ship will now be strictly followed without discussion or delay, following the chain of command and with the behavior expected of a Starfleet officer. Failing to do so will be ground for immediate relief of duty and transfer off this ship. There is a reason why Lotus Fleet is called the Elite Division of Starfleet. About time it means something."

Kheren showed then a PADD containing the entire Starfleet book where passages had been highlighted, in this case, especially General orders 34 and 39 and Starfleet regulations number 1 and number 256 section 15. Then he went on:

"Now, unless called for a long term assignment, there will be no civilian aboard this ship anymore. And if such occurs, every civilian will be screened like the rest of the crew and follow the same regulations. All civilians formerly residing on this ship have been taken in by Starbase 10 for relocation... starting with that pretentious poser of a bartender that swindled his way aboard an up to my bridge the last time. I will not needlessly risk the lives of innocents anymore... and the time of roaming freely aboard this ship as if was a park is over. No one will set foot on board without authorization, confirmation of identity and purpose and with appropriate access restrictions. And I do not care if it is the Starfleet Commander in Chief or the Federation President. This is a Starfleet vessel, not a tourist cruiser out on a pleasure tour."

For the most part, what the captain was saying made sense and actually made his life much easier. Brad had never really understood the idea of a starship carrying lots of civilians. He understood families being allowed aboard, but at the same time as he knew from his father, being on a ship was dangerous, and had his mother gone on board the ship with his father, Brad wouldn't have been here today. Families did not belong on board a starship, especially not in the trying times the Federation was going through.

The Andorian was pointing out the relevant General Order 27 as he did so. Then he handed the man another PADD, this one with ship regulations.

"Any problem so far, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir. I will perform my duties to the utmost of my abilities. The protocols you have mentioned so far only make sense."

He knew he needed to read up on the previous mission logs, now that he had clearance. Brad certainly had a lot to read and a lot to learn.

And the captain was obviously intent on steering him in the right direction.

"Considering recent events, new search schedules, guard duties, access controls and vehicle, equipment and weapons management are to be strictly enforced at all times, as both part of training drills and actual duty. Even a changeling should be spotted before he puts one foot on board. There are also a few simple security measures implemented that I will go over with you, starting with the autoalarm they used to have on old Constitution class starships. The next time someone on board draws a weapon without authorization, I want it to be his first and last mistake."

He showed the technical data attached to the files of the PADD; it was clear that 25th century technology would be used to the fullest... and that the wisdom of the past would no longer be ignored.

Brad's head nodded as he read the parts of the PADD the Captain was highlighting for him. Again this all seemed like technology being used to its fullest. It was a hassle when you were trying to get from point A to point B, and anyone would be a fool to claim it infallible. Technology was only as good as those who were utilizing it, and even then it wasn't guaranteed.

"Frankly, Mister Jackson, it has come to a point where I would even be tempted to enforce full telepathic scan if I did not think it excessive... at this time," he told the Lieutenant as he resumed his directives. "If, back during your own so called Second World War, a British interrogator could make an SS officer willingly talk with but a cup of tea... or a German ones spot an American spy at a glance of his sitting habit... our 25th century experts certainly can flush out an impersonating alien or deluded fanatic. And we do have Betazoids and other telepaths and empaths distributed in every department and decks throughout the ship... even the only Aenar currently serving in Starfleet heads our counseling staff; any conscious plan against this ship will not escape them for long, even if they are not looking for it."

At this point Brad began to get a bit wary. Everything up to this point had been pure 'logic', but what the captain was speaking of now was a bit concerning. Part of being a security officer was upholding the ideals of Starfleet, personal liberties, freedom and these words were not along those lines. He did his best to guard his reaction, hoping not to give anything away; after all it wasn't appropriate to judge before hearing the man out fully. Part of what he was thinking was probably obvious though if the Captain was watching closely for it.

He sighed audibly.

"I just hope events will not force us to invoke things like Special Regulation 66715 and go deeper to save lives."

And so saying, he showed him on the PADD what such extreme Starfleet rule implied. It was clear in his silvery eyes that the Andorian did not wish this to happen... but it was just as clear that he would not hesitate if lives were at stake. He also made it as clear however that he would not go to those extremes like the infamous Section 31 just out of fear or suspicion.

As Brad's eyes read the special regulation stated he paused, his tongue running across the inside of his lip. He didn't even try to hide the fact that he was deep in thought at this point, this was seriously deep stuff and it deserved deep thought. He sighed along with the captain but if it came to enacting these regulations he would do his duty.

"I strongly believe that it will not come to that if we but apply our basic regulations properly. Last time, if I had just allowed the regulation medical exam before we launched instead of after we were in it, we would have avoided the entire mess of the Achilles Incident."

Again, he looked straight at the young man.

"I want the means to fit the ends, never the ends to justify the means, Lieutenant."

"I desire the same Captain..."

Brad's tone of voice was serious. There was no mistaking the fact that he would do his duty if forced into a situation like this but he certainly hoped he wasn't placed in that situation. He had a death clutch on the PADD, as if letting it go would let events precipitate out of control. Even though he already knew the answer he asked the question regardless.

"I assume these regulations are meant to remain confidential?"

Kheren almost smiled.

"Not at all. The best deterrent to problems is to plainly show everyone that you are ready for them."

Kheren now brought Jackson's attention to what followed on the PADD:

"So, let us start there: as per Starfleet regulations 73-C, Subsection A, 104 section C and 121 section A, all crewmembers will be subjected to a full medical and psychological examination before and after each mission and a regular schedule implemented; We have enough medical personnel on board alone to almost entirely crew the flagship herself, so we can implement this effortlessly. Any objection to either will be cause for immediate exclusion out of this ship. This applies to everyone, including pets, you and me... and believe me, of all people, *I* am the one hating *both* the most."

Kheren sighed again, softly and subtly this time. He would share the burden like everyone else on board. As he had readily agreed with his First officer when they discussed all this, if he did not himself follow in an exemplary fashion his own orders and show unfailing discipline, how could he demand anything out of anyone?

"Any concern, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir. I do not know if my record shows it but my mother is second in command of the Academy's medical division. I understand the importance of ensuring all officers meet basic physical and mental parameters."

Brad actually wondered why mental evaluations were not required more frequently than once a year as it was. The job of a Starfleet officer was not an easy one. When things went bad, they tended to go very bad. Not all officers were able to handle the mental strain, but many were very hesitant to seek help. Requiring more frequent evaluations would build that relationship with the counselor so when the need arose, the officer might be more willing to seek help before it was too late.

"Indeed, Lieutenant, answered the Andorian; that is why on this ship they will be well taken care of on a daily basis. And so will it be for the ship as well."

He pointed out the next safety directives on the PADD:

"Following Starfleet technical regulations without fail, all ship systems will be under diagnostics on this schedule. Our engineering team is big enough to crew almost three Defiant class warships like the McKenzie; this will barely affect their workload, if at all. But there will be no more easy sabotage of this ship."

Kheren shook his head.

"If basic regulations *had* been followed as they *should* have, if every bridge officer had been at his post as he *should* have, including me... this crewman saboteur, who should not have been allowed near the bridge Ops station in the first place, would not have been left free to endanger everyone on board."

His eyes and voice told that he would no longer tolerate archaic inefficiency and personal whims, not when the safety of his ship and crew were in the balance.

"Science will conduct the following schedule, he then added, for sensor sweeps, testing all internal and external sensor and computer systems. This will not only keep the ship in top performance condition, but prevent nasty surprises from making us look no better than a Ferengi cargo ship like the last time."

The thoroughness of Lieutenant Syntron, chief science officer of the Artemis, undoubtedly had a hand in devising these procedures. And so did that of the former chief of security now captain, when he finally came with the specifics of Jackson's own department:

"From now on, security will follow this search schedule as a routine procedure. With their shortened shifts and enough of them alone to fully man the Lotus, our security staff will have no problem following this regimen as part of their active duties and daily training."

It was so simple a drill that it would even go unnoticed by the crew itself and yet, would secure the ship easily and efficiently. The Captain had taken to heart his First Officer's recommendation about keeping their security crew actively sharp and ready.

"In all this, the Ops department will be supporting all the others in those duties, including your own, according to the cross-training of its personnel. This too will simply have them do their job more readily and sharply."

His hands crossed before him on his desk as he leaned forward on his elbow.

"Any questions, Chief?"

Brad now had two PADDs in his hands. It looked like he was going to need to have his assistant chief man the tactical station while he read up on more than he realized he was going to have to read, at least until they got close to their destination.

"Not at this time, Sir. I will review all of the regulations and schedules and if any come up I will let you know. Do you have any objections to having another certified bridge tactical officer manning the station so I can review all of these documents before we get to our destination?"

"That is why you have Lieutenant Tyvya as an assistant, Chief; being Andorian, she needs only three hours of sleep every day and is fully dedicated to her job. And her hobbies are combat training, shooting and starship combat simulation. She's been with me in security since my first day as chief of the flagship. Her job is to help you do yours as you best see fit. Just make sure *you* are up here during an alert."

Kheren winked at his security chief; a Human sign of complicity and humor he had learned from his former senior officer, Commander Mark Robertson, while serving on the USS Lotus... and one his rare facial muscles did allow him to do easily.

At the same time, Brad was already formulating a plan to 'test' his officers. If they were currently already performing the scheduled searches it would be necessary to plant something for them to find to ensure they were working at top notch. It was almost like the security dogs of Earth's history; you had to plant something for them to find or they got bored. If his officers searched day after day after day and never found anything, it would simply become routine and they would get rusty, beginning to look over things that could be suspicious because they were used to finding nothing.

The captain concluded then:

"Let's put all this to work with you, Mister Jackson: report to Doctor Aquila for full examination, then to First Officer O'Conner and Counselor Lyrya for further discussion on your responsibilities on board. Then you will meet your personnel and get acquainted with them and ship rules... and make them acquainted to them and you, Lieutenant."

He stood up. The meeting was over.

Brad stood up as well, nodding his head. He moved the PADDs from his hand to hold them under his arm and responded before turning on his heels and moving towards the door.

"Thank you Captain. I will report to the doctor immediately."

Instead of heading to the turbolift Brad turned right and headed back on the bridge. As the doors opened, he found the scene nearly identical as when he had left the bridge with the Captain less than fifteen minutes ago. He went by the tactical station where the tall Andorian woman was about to give him back his chair.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, stay on the bridge to man the tactical station. I will be off the bridge for the rest of the duty shift unless required by an alert status."

"Aye, Sir." she nodded and slid back her giant frame behind the console.

Turning his attention to the doctor, he made his way to the man's side.

"Doctor, do you have time to perform my physical? The captain has requested that it be completed before I assume my full duties."

After Brad's conversation with the Captain, he knew it was time to get his physical out of the way. He wasn't skittish around doctors like many other officers were, but that was the cost of having a doctor for a mother. Every little sniffle as a child had him being injected with a hypospray, but of course there were some things that were incurable and those were the things he would need to speak with the doctor about.

Caius nodded to the chief of security with his mouth hanging open as if meaning to speak, but was completely immersed in work.

He held up a finger while he finished reading some medical files.

Curious...

Brad stood nearly motionless as he waited for the doctor to truly acknowledge his presence. This sort of thing wasn't uncommon among doctors, although he'd never experienced a doctor on board a bridge before. His mother had frequently gotten so immersed in her work that she'd forget to cook dinner, or that sort of thing. It was a good thing that they had replicators so cooking wasn't a large deal.

Then, Aquila's eyes darted up to Jackson as if having just woke up.

"Certainly." Caius said as he locked his console and stood up.

He motioned toward the turbo lift.

"After you."

Brad made his way off the bridge, nodding to Tyvya as a manner of appreciation. Although he had certainly gotten frustrated with her on his abrupt arrival, she seemed to be quite competent at her work and the Captain obviously thought highly of her.

As they stepped into the turbolift, Brad ordered it to sickbay then stood against the back of the lift waiting for it to arrive at their destination. Small talk wasn't something he was great at.

He'd actually prefer to stand in the silence than 'shoot the breeze' as the old Earth saying went, so he was perfectly content to stand there in silence unless the doctor wanted to talk.

"How common are the phantom pains?" Caius asked.

Brad looked up at the doctor, a bit shocked at how out of the blue the question came. This was the first time he'd met a doctor that didn't like the small talk 'tell me about yourself' style of physical. Not even gotten to sickbay yet and they were already discussing his medical file.

"Relatively infrequent, they tend to come when I get overly stressed, but I have learned to live with them."

He spoke simply as it was a fact. Up until now, there hadn't been a doctor who had found a 'cure' for them as there simply wasn't anything truly wrong with him. A few counselors had said that they came on when he was stressed because his subconscious mind was going back to the fire fight and reliving how hopeless it had seemed, but he'd never failed in a duty even though the pain was there to afflict him.

The turbolift doors swished open, and Caius Aquila led him into sickbay.

"This mission is likely to cause a great deal of stress. Some of the particulars of exposure to the anomaly will cause various levels of discomfort. I expect that most of the crew will be somewhat, agitated."

Brad nodded his head as he tried to remain motionless while the doctor spoke about the mission and began his physical examination.

Caius started moving a scanner around his patient.

"I'm going to make sure to have some bicaridine in the med kits on the bridge. Just in case it flares up with a high intensity." Caius said.

The chief medical officer of the Artemis continued to examine Brad only with an occasional "Hmm" and "Uh huh".

After the doctor finished the physical exam and began analyzing the results, Jackson took the time to sit down on the biobed and await his results. He sat there for a short moment as the CMO looked engrossed in what he was seeing before he finally spoke.

"Well I have some good news and some bad news. What do you want first?"

"The bad please; it's always better to end on a good note after all."

Caius Aquila put on the most serious, most worried face he could dig up.

"I'm afraid..." He sighed, "The bad news is that there's no way you're going to be able to get out of this mission. Not for medical reasons anyway."

He patted him on the shoulder and smiled.

"That's because the good news is that you're perfectly healthy."

Brad laughed a bit and nodded smiling himself, a bit of a rare occasion for someone who took his work so seriously.

"That's a good thing because I wasn't planning on trying to get out of the mission regardless. I appreciate your stamp of approval though."

"Then you're all set. Shall we?" Doctor Aquila replied and headed back toward the bridge.

"I'm actually going to head to my office but I'm sure I'll see you on the bridge soon."

Bradley Jackson spoke as he nodded his head to the doctor and made his way the opposite direction, down the corridor towards a turbolift that would take him to his office, his first time with an office of his own.

For an hour, engineering Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott looked through all the systems and recorded their baselines, and their lower and upper extremes. He did this all fluidly, and with great accuracy.

He wanted to make sure that the ship was squared away before they visited the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, as it would affect all kinds of ships systems that he'd have to compensate for.

After he finished working through the console, and he felt that he had enough of a feel for it, he gestured to the first Engineering assistant, so that he could go to Engineering. As she walked over, he spoke:

"Lieutenant Blakely, please take over my station while I'm in Engineering. I'll be back before my shift is up, earlier if required to by a status change."

The assistant spoke in a soft tone, affirming his order.

Scotty stood and walked over to the turbolift, taking it down to Deck 21, Main Engineering.

* * *

Reflected lights played like mystic flames on the taunt, frozen features of those staring from their station at the wide viewing screen, where the vastness of the cosmos was engulfed in flames.

It was monstrous.

"Reduce magnification."

The image flickered and jumped back to show the entire blaze of the heavens. Fire spread all over a barely glimpsed fragile web of light, spreading even further as its fiery heart pulsed with a blinding white flare, like a living, beating heart of flame and searing light, streaking across the stars to engulf them all in crackling bolts of lightning.

It was frightening.

"Tactical."

Then, bright orange fire dissolved from a star-like pattern of crisscrossing broken lines, the thick, liquid flames spreading along them all across the vastness of space resurging to leave behind like a faint blazing trail a clear, translucent, slightly luminescent snowflake floating in the star-studded darkness of space; a delicate, intricate starburst of thin, whitish lines spreading in all directions like a very complex web across the heavens.

It was beautiful.

But it was still frightening and monstrous... and more than a few on the bridge of the starship Artemis knew instantly what it was, almost felt again despite the distance the heat of those fires the computer had deceptively muted to show their path of destruction across the dark skies... almost felt again the searing sting in their mind as when it had touched their flesh.

Unmoving and silent, Captain Kheren sat in his chair, his elbows on his knees in that now typical posture of his when he was intent on what was on the main viewer. Around him, the alpha shift bridge officers were coming back to their post, relieving the last shift's officers, ready to undergo the vital mission they had been entrusted with.

Without a word, security Lieutenant Junior Grade Mrrish had fluidly vacated the command seat she had occupied during the night watch, nodding her dark-furred, thick-maned black head to him as she left, but visibly unable to tear away her large, slitted bright blue eyes from the majestic view on the screen. Her silence told as much of the relief of a peaceful night as of the apprehension of what this new day would bring.

She had been part of the crew when they had first encountered the Azimuth Horizon. And so had been all the gamma shift officers now relieved by the senior staff of the Artemis.

"We have not yet reached the coordinates, Sir..." almost whispered the new chief helmsman Aguk Snow as he relieved the Andorian zhen Sheeneea from navigation. His slanted obsidian eyes were wide and unblinking as he looked at the astonishing anomaly looking like some living, monstrous, tentacled beast of fire out of legends and nightmares. "Distance: five-hundred million kilometers; ETA at full impulse: one point eighty-five hours."

"Projected expansion of the anomaly is less than initially calculated, Mister Syntron," reported Lieutenant junior Grade Seton. The half-Human, half-Vulcan subspace and quantum mechanics specialist had already aligned sensor pallets to start preliminary scans of the anomaly and showed the incoming data to his department chief; "but all other recorded parameters remain unchanged."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Seton," Syntron acknowledged as he walked over to resume his post.

He listened carefully as all of the department representatives confirmed their readiness status as well.

At one point eight-five hours away from the anomaly, even though it had not expanded to the level of their previous projections, it was nevertheless an enormously dangerous phenomenon.

As he sat down in his retro style chair, Syntron turned to face the science console and initiated the ship comm and directed a communication link back to Lieutenant Irksos who was finalizing her work with Lieutenant T'Val in the Astrometrics lab.

"Irksos here," the Assistant Chief Science Officer replied, his black-skinned face smiling at him.

"Lieutenant... what is the current status of our readiness for the upcoming survey mission of the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly?" the Vulcan Chief of Science inquired. "We are currently one point eighty-five hours away" he added.

"Sir, all of the simulated testing for both surveying and combating the anomaly have been completed," Lieutenant Irksos responded confidently. "Once we concluded several modifications and adjustments, the results now are all positive."

On the small intraship comm videoscreen, Syntron could see that she looked over at her Vulcan partner T'Val and added with a smile:

"We then went on to also set up an option available on both bridges to immediately switch the deflector settings from either a directed spatial sonar to an inverted ionic pulse and back again as quickly as needed to both identify and remedy subspace fractures as they appear."

Lieutenant T'Val standing nearby Irksos leaned in toward the ship comm and simply concluded:

"We are ready, Sir."

"Acknowledged," confirmed the chief of science. "But be ready for the unexpected as well once we reach the threshold of the anomaly. Syntron out."

He then turned toward the Captain sitting unwavering and silent in the center seat of the bridge and simply stated:

"The Science department is ready and all personnel are manning their stations."

"All systems nominal, Lieutenant Scott," the night watch engineer Lieutenant Junior Grade Benjamin Ferrier told his senior officer when they met at the engineering station; "we are still far enough that the known effects of the phenomenon are not impacting on them yet."

"No report of ill effects from the crew yet, Doctor," stated the wide-headed Denobulan doctor Shledax as Aquila came up to the CMO chair. "We are however experiencing disruption of all long range subspace communications even at this distance."

He spoke matter-of-factly, but his usual wide smile seemed a bit forced as he left, glancing at the bridge crew and at the image of the anomaly... and especially at the captain, whom he remembered from previous missions at having been quite affected by the anomaly, like all Andorians on board.

Doctor Aquila took his station and gave Doctor Shledax a nod.

Let's see what I can do about these communications...

He studied readings on the computer screen. Caius was used to being a doctor. He could diagnose, prescribe, test, observe, mend bones. Doctor stuff. He had a few worries about how he'd measure up to being a bridge officer with additional duties.

Danik Brie had learned a lot about the Azimuth Horizon since the end of his last shift. He had studied logs, sensor analyses, listened to crew anecdotes from the *Artemis'* last encounters with the phenomena. He understood the data, he realized the incredible danger the ship was going into.

He didn't realize that it would be so captivating.

Danik stood gawking at the main viewscreen for a moment before he realized he was blocking the way out for some of the departing Gamma Shift crew. He sheepishly stepped out of the way and reported to his duty station.

"Probes at the ready, deflector reconfigured for either spatial sonar or inverted ionic pulse as needed, Sir," showed to Danik Brie on the multitask console his second assistant, the Benzite woman Ensign Lurnok, her grey, slick hairless head rigid behind her respirator; "main power to sensors, safety systems and propulsion; all alpha shift crews reporting at their post."

"Thank you, Ensign. Good work," Ops Chief Brie said to the Benzite as he relieved her at the Ops station.

Taking his seat, Danik keyed in his security access code, serving the dual purpose of reporting the start of his duty shift to the computer and unlocking the console's functions for his use.

Expecting the Captain to call for a fresh sensor analysis of the anomaly, the Bolian initiated a level 5 diagnostic on the sensor arrays and probe launcher system.

Wouldn't do for the Captain to order the launch of a probe and the thing get lodged in the tube from a faulty thruster.

One by one, the telltales on the console lit up green, indicating system readiness and working condition. Satisfied, Danik began organizing the incoming resource allocation requests, prioritizing the departments like Astrometrics and Astrophysics that would need sensor data in order to conduct the survey.

Brad Jackson walked onto the bridge, pulling at the bottom of the tunic of his uniform. It was an action that he had heard that Captain Riker frequently performed, but also one that he had learned from his father. It was more of a nervous habit, but most people would never realize that about him.

As he walked to his post he tapped Ensign Lee on his shoulder letting the man know that he was ready to resume his duties, as well as asking for a status report.

"Metaphasic shields ready to activate, Chief," confirmed Ensign Charles Lee; "we have calibrated all quantum torpedoes on different subspace frequencies and grouped them in salvos to cover the entire subspace spectrum when they will detonate together to divert any incoming plasma burst from that thing. We should again simulate effectively a transphasic torpedo blast... but only for as long as our ammunition will last. And half of our phaser arrays frequencies have been reconfigured as tractor emitters in case we want to repulse any incoming space debris of the corona... or the captain needs to recreate his protective shell again."

Brad's head nodded as the other man stood up and vacated the duty station.

"Thank you Ensign Lee." he said dismissing the man from the bridge as he took a seat behind the console. Logging into the station, Lieutenant Jackson thought back to his actions over the past few hours. Although he'd been on board less than a full day, it had been a long day.

Most of the information the Ensign had relayed he was already aware of. He hadn't slept much, only about four hours, as he knew he had a lot of information to assimilate before truly taking over as the chief. During that time he'd read report after report after report, studying up on the Artemis' previous missions as well as the members of his team. He'd also held a mandatory briefing in conference room 5 with all of his security staff to introduce himself and perform a question and answer session.

To say that everyone on his staff loved him at this moment was a bold-faced lie, but he had faith that people would appreciate his leadership in time. What Brad really wished was their mission would have been a little bit more laid back. There were many things that he wanted to do that he simply hadn't had the time to do with his team. The security officers on board were largely untested by him, and he had yet the chance to prove himself to them. This fact was certainly going to make this mission more difficult if anything unexpected occurred, and in his experience, something unexpected *always* occurred.

O'Conner calmly stepped on to the bridge at 0759. This gave him just enough time to walk down to his station, relieve Lieutenant JG Morrison with a salute and short exchange of words and then log on to his console, to see 0800 on the chronograph.

O'Conner prided himself on being on time.

He then gave the Captain a nod before turning his gaze to the Azimuth Horizon.

Unlike the new bridge officers, O'Conner did not fear the Horizon itself. He of course respected its power but then he had traveled through the Horizon on a dead ship; he knew what it could do. Instead of fear, all that went through his head as he gazed at the sight before them was the hope that one of the new officers could find a way to close it.

"All decks and departments report full readiness, Commander," then announced Lieutenant Junior Grade Geoffrey George Morrison, whose turn it was to get command experience during the night watch, assuming the Exec position until Michael O'Conner was back with the rest of Alpha shift.

Kheren sat in silence, waiting for his senior officers to settle in... and take their own good look at what they would be facing.

With all the bridge officers now at their post and ready, Captain Kheren sat back in his chair.

"Mister Jackson; keep an eye on that metaphasic shielding and have all probes ready. Mister Brie; we will need to allocate as much resources as possible to sensors, astrometrics and stellar cartography. Mister Scott; be on the lookout for any drain on our antimatter reserves."

Scotty nodded at the captain.

"Yes, Sir."

He started to continuously watch the reserves, in case something were to happen while near the Azimuth Horizon anomaly... which it likely was.

"Aye, Captain," Danik acknowledged.

He worked his console to carry out the Captain's orders, canceling secondary experiments and requests to make more sensor capability available for bridge use. Once that was completed, Danik assigned dedicated sub-processors and direct ODN access to the Library Computer for Astrometric and Stellar Cartography.

The commanding officer of the Artemis then turned his head to the left.

"Doctor, I hope you will monitor all our vital signs, in case our shield falters."

Doctor Aquila nodded.

"I'm on it."

Caius increased the frequency of the automated personnel medical scans, but in order to keep resources in check set it only scan a sample of the crew each time, ensuring that at least one crewman of each race would be included each time.

The bridge crew would be monitored constantly.

Security Chief Brad Jackson listened to the Captain's orders closely, his head nodding at the appropriate time. The information he'd read the previous evening about the anomaly frightened him slightly. He could handle going into battle, fighting enemies, routine missions... but there was something about the anomaly that felt wrong.

Normally reading up on a subject helped him to understand it better, but science had never been his strong point and, the more he read about the anomaly, the less he understood it.

He could keep the shields up as long as they lasted but that wasn't very encouraging considering the simulations. The simple fact was there wasn't much he personally could do about how long the shields lasted. Once the power was gone, it was gone.

If they could strengthen the shields they'd last longer, but the problem there was that every department needed power for this mission; it wasn't like he could steal all the power for the shields. The operations department had done their job and determined the best energy allocation for this mission and, now, it was his responsibility to keep the shields up, at least as long as possible, with the power he'd been allocated.

Although every department head was in the same situation, wishing they had more power allocated to their use, it didn't make him feel any more comfortable. After all, if the shields fell, they'd all start to feel the effects of the anomaly, and that wasn't a pleasant thought.

The debilitating effects of the phenomenon on living organisms were well known by most of them now... first hand. It was not something they looked forward to, even those who had just read about it. But the metaphasic shielding would protect them; at least as long as it would hold. But Captain Kheren did not want to take any chances.

Turning his silver eyes to his right, he added:

"We know how this anomaly might affect us in general and me in particular; be ready as always Number One."

If the anomaly would again affect him like the last time, the Andorian was glad his Human First Officer would be right there to take over.

Bringing back his stare to the viewscreen and the awesome sight of the Azimuth Horizon, the captain finished saying:

"Well, Mister Syntron; seems you will lead us on this one. Let us get to work, shall we?"

The Vulcan Science Chief turned toward the Andorian commander and stated philosophically:

"Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors, Captain... and a kite rises highest against the wind-not with it..."

He looked back toward his console.

"Sensor sweeps are in effect and are fully operational and deflector controls are performing optimally. Simulations have all been performed and all department hands stand prepared."

He gazed back up at the Captain sitting calmly in his command seat; indeed the calm before the storm... and assured him:

"We are ready, Captain... and, as we have learned, adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which, in prosperous circumstances, would have lain dormant."

He then added confidently:

"We will find a way to contain this anomaly... even if we begin this process by taking just a few cautious peeks with our sensors."

"Know thy enemy as you know thyself, Lieutenant," quoted the Andorian with a wink at the Vulcan. "Once we will have scanned this thing fully, the fleet will be able to do just that."

Then, turning back at the large double console before him, he addressed the Eskimo helmsman on the left side:

"Is our survey pattern laid in, Lieutenant Snow?"

"Aye, Captain; flight path at maximum warp around a cubic area of one parsec on a side at one AU distance of the anomaly's corona, all stop for scanning and probe deployment phase at six facing coordinates. Course laid in, Sir."

"Time estimate?"

"Fifteen hours of travel, plus eight hours of monitoring for each of the six search grids; we will complete total survey of the anomaly in six point sixty-six days, Sir."

"The Number of the Beast," muttered Kheren, antennae curving inward in amusement as he recalled the Human legend. But his stare was darted at the image of the Azimuth Horizon with the angry glare of a fighter facing off with a dangerous adversary.

He took a deep breath then sighed forcibly with a single word:

"Engage."

Just as the order was given to move ahead by the Captain, Syntron turned to the new Tactical officer Brad Jackson and stated:

"Mr. Jackson, we have reconfigured all of ship sensors and sensor arrays. They are now modulated to register any changes in the immediate areas around the ship and toward the anomaly through a full range of frequencies and bandwidths. This anomaly's frequency matches that of the universe's background radiation and therefore it is able to effectively camouflage itself. Our improved sensors however will now detect even the minutest emergence of any subspace fractures which the anomaly uses as a gateway to enter into our space-time."

Brad's head turned towards the Vulcan science chief as the man addressed him.

Syntron engaged a visual model created in Astrometrics on the main viewscreen to show a simulation of an opening subspace fracture and the ensuing violent energy of the anomaly whipping out in a rage of multi-colored energy flame-like tendrils.

"As you can see, once the subspace fracture has opened and the anomaly has gained a foothold in our space-time, it is not only more difficult to contain the emerging subspace fractures, but now we have the violent energy of the anomaly attacking us while we would attempt to push it back and seal up the fracture."

On the viewscreen, waves of plasma-like flames were violently whipping about like a sea of angry orange-yellow energy octopus arms reaching through an opening trying to swat and destroy anything it could reach.

Then the laser-like anti-polaric ion beams were seen precisely targeting the subspace fractures; effectively sealing the fractures and eventually forcing the resistant arms of the beast back into its own dimension.

"Now you can see that, when we seal the fractures as they are just emerging, it not only takes less time and energy to accomplish this, but also occurs with 97.6% less risk and danger to the ship and her crew."

The viewscreen then displayed a scene of a fracture just beginning to open and only a trace of energy starting to emerge just as a precisely targeted anti-polaric ion beam readily laser-beamed it shut with virtually no fanfare.

Chief Jackson listened closely to the report and nodded his head, his eyes moving to the viewscreen as he watched the demonstration of a fracture being sealed by the inverted ionic pulse from the modified deflector dish. This obviously meant that it was going to be even more necessary to keep a very close eye on the sensors.

The metaphasic shields were currently at one hundred percent but he knew that wasn't going to last forever; eventually, they would begin to deplete under the stress of the anomaly.

"The early detection and sealing of any emerging subspace fractures within proximity to the ship will be paramount in ensuring the safety of this ship and crew as we attempt to circumnavigate and analyze this highly dangerous phenomenon" the Vulcan Chief of Science concluded.

"That will be a good testing of the procedure the fleet will have to follow, Mister Syntron," approved the captain, nodding at him from over his shoulder. "But at the distance we will travel to both stay safe and cover as much area as possible with our short range scanners, we will have to do it only intermittently and just as a series of testing operations at different moments of subspace emergence."

"One ship could never hope to cover a spreading anomaly already near thirty cubic light years across anyway, Sir," added helmsman Aguk Snow, pointing at his navigational display; unless we would have a *lot* of time on our hands."

"Agreed, Mister Snow," said Kheren. "But a few shots at them will be good practice for our new tactical chief and his teams... and provide exact targeting parameters to give all the other ships when the time will come for all of us to cage the beast."

Brad Jackson looked deep in thought for a moment as his tongue ran across his teeth, causing his lips to pooch out.

"How long do we have to detect and seal the fractures before this method will no longer work?"

A curious question the Vulcan science thought.

"Your question is rather ambiguously stated Lieutenant Jackson. If you are inquiring as to the maximum amount of time that can elapse from the moment of detection until the sealing process becomes ineffectual... then I would ask in response what would prevent this method from continuing to work other than us stalling in our response to it?" Syntron posed rhetorically.

Without waiting for an answer, he thus continued:

"If I were to hypothesis the intent of your question, Mister Jackson, perhaps you were inquiring whether these subspace fractures become impervious to our anti-polaric ion beam. The answer to this, from what we have determined thus far, is simply no. Others in the past have also used phasers to seal the fractures, but they do not work to the level and degree of effectiveness as the previously stated method."

The Vulcan Science Chief, sensing that he answer did not appear to fully address the Tactical officer's interrogative, proceeded with an expansion to his initial response.

"If you were questioning whether the fractures "adapt" to our ionic pulse, the answer again is: they do not. This is not a sentient entity like the Borg adapting to weapons firing... requiring constant remodulations, nor on a simpler scale, like a virus becoming immune to treatments and mutating and evolving over time. These fractures are analogous to tears in the fabric of time-space between two different dimensional universes that we are simply repairing to keep what is on the other side from gaining further entrance into our own galaxy."

Without hesitation, the Science Chief continued:

"However, if in your question you were referring to the consequences of waiting too long... would the tear become too great for us to repair it? In this situation, we have ascertained that the level of energy emanating from the anomaly is directly proportional to the size of the fracture. Therefore, the longer we hesitate to address the fractures as they occur, the greater the force of energy emanating from them will become as the fracture continues to open and expand."

He made a pause to let his crewmate digest the information before explaining further:

"As you realize, Lieutenant, while we are sealing these fractures, the ship is not stationary. The ship is in fact following specific trajectories based on constant sensory input. Because of the collision of time and anti-time along these subspace fractures, the ship sensors will be registering high levels of both chronitons and nucleons while inversely noting an absence of any matter to produce electromagnetic and gravimetric properties. Navigation officers will need to closely follow a parallel course to these readings to allow precise firing of the ionic beams directly into these areas of space."

He gave the tactical officer a moment again to consider his statement before adding:

"This, Lieutenant, then comes back full circle to what was stated initially: it would be in our best interest to respond to these fractures immediately. In addition, we will be continuing to survey this anomaly from a distance because as previously stated, the closer to the center of this phenomena we travel, the greater the gap in time-space and thus the more powerful and dangerous this anomaly becomes. It is therefore advisable for us to continue to circle around the proverbial beast, staying out of harm's reach and collect our data; and as the Captain might say... in an attempt at getting to better "know thy enemy"... It would be to foolish tackle the beast without it... or by steering directly into the heart of this perilous anomaly to gather information."

Although he was pretty sure he understood what Syntron was telling him, he wasn't the science chief, and science had never been his strong suit; so it was better to be safe and ensure he had all the relevant information. It appeared that this part of the mission was going to be harder on his department than he had initially figured. It certainly meant he needed to ensure he had his best tactical officers on the bridge when he was not personally able to be there.

"So to make sure I'm understanding you correctly we will need to manually target the subspace fractures nearly instantaneously as they emerge with an anti-polaric ion beam to seal them before they can cause more potential harm to the ship?"

Syntron looked back to the new human tactical officer and, sensing his high level of concern and a degree of puzzlement, responded assuredly:

"Lieutenant Jackson, you can use the console's auto-targeting system to assist in the closing of these subspace fractures as well as manually targeting them. However, we have seen that at times... multiple fractures can begin to emerge simultaneously and in relative proximity to each other. It is at least advisable to have multiple tactical officers at hand to be working in conjunction with one another. Additionally, it is also possible that the auto-targeting system could become inoperable at some point during this mission... given the immense amount of forceful energy released from this entity at any given moment. After the targeting of each subspace fracture has been established, then the ionic beam is used to seal along the seams of each of the fractures."

Brad listened to the science chief's explanation carefully. He had almost responded to the rhetorical question, not realizing it hadn't been meant to be answered. When Syntron continued without waiting for an answer it quickly occurred to him that no answer was needed. Waiting for the chief to finish his explanation he rolled all of the additional information that was being imparted to him around in his head.

There was a lot of mumbo jumbo being thrown around that he really didn't understand but at least he was able to organize the important information in his head as necessary.

"I knew that we could use the manually target locks, I just wanted to make sure we were prepared for when they go offline as I understand they very likely will. Thank you for the additional information."

Brad spoke a bit shortly before he turned his attention back to his console. He was fully expecting that the manual targeting sensors would not work in time, which had been the main reason for his question. If he hadn't been around multiple Vulcans on other assignments he might have felt like Syntron had been talking down to him, like he was stupid.

Thankfully he had dealt with his fair share of Vulcans so he knew that was simply the way they talked.

Making a mental note he reminded himself that he would need to be much more specific in regards to questions to the Vulcan man in the future, although some of the additional information he had gained would be helpful. Compiling his thoughts he ran through what he now knew.

The fractures will require exponentially more energy to close the longer they are open. Closing them as soon as possible is of the utmost importance.

If the sensor locks go offline this is going to get much more difficult as manually targeting will become necessary, which previous information indicates will probably happen.

"Coming to first search position, Sir." announced the Inuit lieutenant at helm.

As he was thinking about these things, the freshly-minted Lieutenant Junior Grade at the tactical console heard the helmsman sitting right to his left report that they were approaching their first search position. Quickly, Brad's fingers began to fly across the console programming in an automation that would alert the tactical officer on duty when and where a subspace fracture had been detected. This would allow the computer to inform the officer manning the station when one was detected rather than relying on the officer to notice it through the scans, hopefully saving vital time and making it easier to seal the fractures.

Danik listened to the Vulcan Science Officer explain the finer points of managing subspace fissures as he worked. At the moment, Danik was monitoring the effectiveness of the ship's navigational deflector. With subspace raging and tearing around the ship, he didn't want some stray speck of stellar debris punching through the hull. An issue of concern even at slower impulse speeds.

To one side of his console, he had set displays showing the results of their sensor sweeps of the Azimuth Horizon as they conducted their survey. One of the scans of subspace around the anomaly contained a familiar looking pattern, almost like the charts of currents he remembered his parents studying a part of the exo-oceanography research. Subspace seem to flow around the tendrils, swirl into eddies, and erupt out of fissures like a waterfall viewed from underneath.

That much activity was probably going to push the ship around by its warp field, metaphasic shielding or not.

"Captain, sensors are detecting a lot of subspace turbulence. It is enough to cause some difficulties in navigation and station-keeping," Danik reported.

And sure enough, there was a slight vibration felt throughout the ship; then again a moment later.

"Mister Snow?" asked the Andorian.

"Confirmed, Captain; a bit unexpected but I am compensating. It will be easier once we get out of warp at each observation point; those Scarback V "Peacemaker" impulse engines and class 5 MHGF thrusters of the original Ambassador design are second to none, even today."

"Thank you, Mister Snow. Between you at the rudder and Mister Brie here on deck watch, this will be smooth sailing."

Kheren's use of nautical terms was quite surprising coming from an Andorian. The deep hydrophobia of his species was well known; they even considered their own version of Hell as a watery realm. But this particular Andorian was in the habit of always facing his fears to better conquer them, so his nautical vocabulary unconsciously betrayed this defiance of his natural inhibitions.

And he did develop a great fascination for Earth's maritime History, naval traditions and sea-going figures, most of all the legendary Odysseus of their Ancient Greece realm's mythology, the same mythos that had christened his own ship; it was in fact a big part of what made Humans so fascinating to him.

But for now, his fascination was turned towards the raging sea of flames they were just starting to circumnavigate.

May we avoid angering the gods and find ourselves lost at sea for twenty years like he did, mused Kheren half-jokingly.

And so began the long, slow, tedious study of the Azimuth Horizon's expansion path; and no one aboard was going to complain about the soft, calm, tranquility of the following week; at least, not those who had gone through a first perilous encounter with it once, then battled it along with a Klingon incursion force to save a newly discovered advanced civilization, then survived a face off with a rogue warship.

A nice, quiet survey mission contentedly sighed the Andorian inwardly.

* * *

After several relatively uneventful hours had passed since his duty shift had ended, Syntron entered onto the turbolift and headed down to his quarters. While playing through an old classical piece on his Terran violin, he received a message from the biology department.

"Lieutenant Syntron, Anita Muller here," the Terran female scientist began.

"Proceed Ensign Muller," Syntron replied as he stood up and placed the violin back into its case.

"Well... it looks like our offspring are ready for phase two of their journey. Are you available to be part of this ceremonious occasion?" she asked lightheartedly, knowing the Vulcan would react in some capacity to the phrasing and the inflection in her voice.

After a brief pause he cautiously responded:

"If I interpret your unusual interrogative correctly Ensign, then I affirm that I will proceed to your lab to witness this biological occurrence in about two point seven-two minutes."

He could hear a slight female giggle as he concluded: "Syntron out."

He put away violin case and walked out of his quarters and headed back to the turbolift. As he entered the lift and commanded it to take him to deck 7, he once again pondered about the curious behavior that females tend to express; especially Terran females. Even as scientists with years of Starfleet training, these females still exhibited what appeared to be random acts of emotional outburst, reactions and peculiarities... totally illogical.

Nevertheless, many were highly competent science officers. During the ending of the last mission, Syntron had discovered that of the head of his Xenology and Biology department, Ensign Anita Muller, was also a botanist and horticulturalist. Among her many talents and trainings, she had a specialization in plant embryonic rescue, genetic engineering, molecular markers, and identification of plant physiological constraints. Along with Ensign Sonia Liston, who had become an apprentice under her tutelage, they were working diligently to establish a viable repository of plants and seeds within their department.

Their goal during this survey mission was to take viable seedlings grown in their recently designed and constructed greenhouse in the biochemistry lab on deck 7 and transplant them into a large section of the Arboretum on deck 8. They would then continue testing the plant's resistance to virus infection and replication in transgenic plants, while monitoring virus detection and strain differentiation by serology and nucleic acid hybridization.

Together, these Terran females were going to transform this section of the Arboretum into an environment of intense biological experimentation, while also maintaining its valued aesthetic qualities.

As they were returning to Starbase 10 at the end of their last mission, Syntron who did not eat very often but had reached his tolerance level of synthesized and replicated food, met with them and offered them both a challenging proposal: would they be able to obtain and grow a variety of edible Vulcan plants in their lab and then ultimately transplant them in the Arboretum? To state that they readily accepted this challenge would be a vast understatement. Within hours, they were not only in contact with Starbase 10 science personnel, but also with key personnel on ships of all sizes in proximity to the Starbase as well. The first and most difficult aspect to this assignment was obtaining a variety of the initial viable seeds and samples to begin this biological process. But, by the time the Artemis had docked on Starbase 10, they were already making transactions for their first set of samples. Although it took them quite some time to track down and procure these Vulcan samples, they had obtained a variety of samples of Vulcan plants by the time the Artemis was completing its final boarding .

As he was arriving into the Biochemistry lab, Ensign Muller walked over to greet the Chief of Science with a mischievous smirk on her face.

"Come on along here, Mister Vulcan," she said as she slyly put her hand around his arm and guided him toward the greenhouse nursery; "and see with pride the growth and development of your little hatchings."

Syntron, who knew that she was merely teasing his stoic and unreactive manner, chose to just peer ahead at the greenhouse.

Arriving, he saw a plaque labeled: Vulcan herbology specimens: Do not disturb.

He looked closely and read a list of Vulcan plants that were now growing and a rough Terran equivalent of each specimen:

Vulcan = Terran
srandala = snap beans
claulanees = cactus fruit
silopt = broccoli
jenespera = peppers
connikatrenti = onions
serranstivlen = pomegranate
ierstorindele = citris
treialeiahstrvoc = lettuce

As he then looked beyond the glass enclosures, he could see a collection of each living specimen grouped in rows with small signs identifying the genus and species of each.

Ensign Muller then took a mock serious tone and stated:

"We had difficulty getting some of the seeds to germinate and then continue to grow, but since then, with some selective modifications, the plants now appear to be thriving. Once these reach maturity, we will begin a second generation of plants and expand our crops. Before you know it, Lieutenant Syntron, you'll have forgotten how to even operate a food replicator."

Syntron again let this comment pass and inquired:

"So, Ensign, are these plants ready to be transplanted to the Arboretum?"

As if on cue, two other lab assistants came rolling in with a long and tall portable device designed to carry transportable biological specimens; in this case, a collection of Vulcan plant seedlings.

The loading process took about fifty-four minutes to skillfully complete. By this time, they had filled virtually every volumetric centimeter of the carrier with the plant containers. As they were rolling down the corridor toward the lift, the Head of Astrometrics and Astrophysics, Lieutenant junior grade T'Val, a fellow Vulcan science officer, glanced at them curiously with a slightly raised eyebrow.

Ensign Muller, seeing this opportunity, stated without hesitation:

"Hey, Lieutenant, if you want to get in on the action here... the time is now... that is, if you like to start consuming some fresh food in the next few weeks or so... instead of relying solely on your replicated Vulcan dishes."

Without the utterance of a single word, Lieutenant T'Val was over, instantaneously helping to push and steer the cart into the turbolift. There was literally not enough room for them all to fit, so the two lab assistants waited behind for the crew to make their one deck descent before joining them afterward.

After they slowly and cautiously pushed and pulled the carrier out of the lift, they waited a moment for the two lab assistants to descend down and join them as they scarcely corralled the bio-carrier into the Arboretum.

As they arrived into the Arboretum, the aroma of the fragrant plants and flowers enticed the senses of everyone in the vicinity; including the Vulcans. Along with the fragrances of the flora, there was also a subtle hint of newly exposed soil. Ensign Sonia Liston saw them arrive and waved them over to an area that they had just prepared for the newly grown and transported Vulcan plants.

"Greetings everyone," Liston exclaimed, covered in soil literally from her head to her foot apparel.

"I didn't realize that we were going to have some additional helpers assist us in transplanting all of our babies here."

Syntron and T'Val just glanced at each other in a look of bewilderment, but before they could respond, Ensign Muller jumped in and prodded them both.

"Now, surely," she began with a twinkle of jest in her voice, "you two dedicated science officers aren't afraid of some dirt and a bit of manual labor now, are you?"

And before they could respond, she turned toward Ensign Liston.

"Sonia, I'm sure that you and you lab assistants could use an extra couple pair of hands here transplanting all of these delicate Vulcan plants..."

"Absolutely, Anita," stated Ensign Liston with melodramatic exuberance, "and who could be better to assist us than those two, a pair of Vulcan scientists themselves!"

They both turned toward Syntron and T'Val with smiles like the Cheshire cat.

This wasn't three dimensional chess... this was checkers and their options were being anticipated, jumped over and captured before they could utter a response.

Recognizing the futility of protesting, especially considering that these Ensigns and their team had already invested a large amount of time, effort and energy getting these plants into their current state, Syntron somewhat reluctantly turned toward T'Val and stated:

"Well Lieutenant... I guess that it is time to roll up our sleeves and get started."

Lieutenant T'Val just looked back at her superior officer and replied with a controlled sentiment as she literally began to roll her sleeve higher up her arm:

"Yes, Sir.. I can see that it is."

This resulted in all the humans laughing in pure joy and appreciation.

"You know... with you two helping us we'll be done in no time at all" Ensign Liston said with a wink, as she reached over and grabbed her first plant sample.

Two point four-seven hours later, they had carefully transplanted their last plant, placed a detailed label in front of it, and replenished the soil with a specified liquid of required nutrients.

As he brushed of the last remnants of soil from his uniform and hands, Syntron turned to Ensign Liston and Ensign Muller.

"Thank you for allowing me to participate in this... transplanting experience. I look forward to literally reaping what I have sown as these specimens begin to mature and are ready to be gathered."

With that, he turned and headed toward the turbolift.

But within a few steps, he heard Ensign Muller respond back:

"Oh don't you worry about a thing Lieutenant Syntron... we'll take good care of these plants..."

As he was approaching the turbolift he heard Ensign Liston add with a giggle:

"Yeah... and we'll call you as soon as they are ready for you to come back down and pick them."

He heard them laugh good-naturedly as the turbolift doors closed.

"Deck 2" he commanded the lift computer. He ascended toward his quarters, followed by a sonic shower and a much needed change of clothes.

* * *

The past six hours had been pretty uneventful. A few fractures had opened but through the procedures outlined by Syntron it had been easy enough to close them quickly. All in all it had been a pretty routine duty shift, nothing like what Brad had been expecting. If the full week continued like this it would have been easy to quickly become complacent; but that wasn't something he was about to allow to have happen.

Half way through the duty shift, he had sent a message to all security officers making them aware of a required drill that would be held in the holodeck. There would be three drills held over the week that they were in the anomaly, assuming everything went according to plan of course, and they would all be welcome to attend any of the three that they desired.

The new security chief needed to assess their ability to work as a team and that couldn't necessarily be completed in normal circumstances like this so he needed to throw them into a crisis situation. For now his plans were to keep the same team leaders in place as well as keeping all the officers assigned to the same shifts they had been before he boarded. Unless something in the drills made him believe otherwise it didn't logically make sense to tear apart a team that was working well without adequate cause.

The first of the three drills was going to begin in two hours so he needed to get some dinner before heading to the holodeck and ensuring his program was loaded and ready to go. Tyvya had arrived to relieve him on the bridge but before he left he needed to make sure she was going to be joining him for the simulated drills.
"Thank you, Lieutenant."

He paused shortly before continuing as she sat down at the terminal.

"I'm not sure if you were planning on it or not but I would appreciate it if you joined me for all three drills. Your knowledge of the security teams will be valuable as I evaluate them."

His voice was soft as he spoke but it conveyed the fact that although he was requesting it, it would easily be made more than a request if necessary.

"I will be there."

Her face betrayed no emotions as she sat down at the station logging in and setting up the scanning protocols necessary to do her duties, almost ignoring him except for the direct response necessary to his indirect order.

"Thank you,"

Brad spoke simply as he walked away from the station and to the turbolift in the corner of the bridge. Suddenly he realized that forging a relationship with his assistant chief was going to be more difficult than he had originally thought.

In his past assignments he hadn't had much experience with Andorians. He knew the basics from the diversity classes at the Academy, but besides that, he didn't know very much. Making sure that the doors to the turbolift were closed he spoke out to the computer once, asking for it to take him to the mess hall and then paused, waiting for the turbolift to begin moving before speaking a second time.

"Computer, download cultural information on Andorians to my personal PADD access code Jackson Alpha Bravo Bravo One Two."

Once the computer had confirmed the request he sighed and spoke under his breath:

"Looks like I have some more reading to do..."

* * *

The black knight went up on a rise, dominating the field from his central position, looking down directly at the enemy king.

There was nothing the queen could do; her own surviving white knight was still too far out to help either, holding off the rest of the enemy forces.

The king was alone.

Then, he climbed on the isolated plateau nearer to his nemesis.

"Pat," announced Captain Kheren.

There was no way now for the remnants of the white army to capture the black king. But, if the black knight moved, he would expose his king to the white one; and if any other remaining black piece tried to capture the white king, it would also immediately expose their king to a direct attack from the remaining white pieces on the board.

"You sacrificed all your units to reach a stalemate," realized Counselor Lyrya, sitting back in her chair, her blind white eyes blinking and her antennae waving in confusion on top of her thick white mane falling down below her shoulders.

"Of course; caught you in a loop. There was no way to win against both myself *and* you; only denying you victory doing the only thing you would not expect," explained the dark-hued Andorian to the Aenar.

Around them, more than a few crew members, also relaxing like them in the starboard aft section of deck 15 nicknamed the Quiver, slowly shook their heads and muttered, some in bewilderment, a few in admiration, many in surprise but most in amusement. One or two even pat the captain on the back; here in the Quiver, it was the only place on the ship where ranks and titles meant nothing... a tradition of the Ambassador class the captain of the Artemis dutifully respected, even indulged in, like now.

"You could just have not asked me to read your mind while playing," Counselor Lyrya said with a tone of wonder but with some reproach in her soft, clear voice.

"Part of the challenge... and of the deception," admitted Kheren, placing the pieces back on their starting level of the tridimensional chess board between them. "A fixed mental image is a basic but effective way to foil you, telepaths; my subconscious just reacted to your moves to bottle them up while I made you see things from my point of view. And, out of fairness, I did want you to see the board as clearly as I was."

"You wanted me to think that we saw things the same way, inducing me into a false sense of familiarity to hide the only way out of defeat for you from a no-win situation," understood Lyrya, now nodding out of her surprise, almost smiling with her typically Andorian-rigid face.

"Self-sacrifice to trap the enemy with you... and save the day for the rest of the universe," summarized Kheren.

"Is that how you faced the Kobayashi Maru test, back at the Academy?" then asked the ship's counselor, before taking a sip of her glass of Altair water.

"I never took the Kobayashi Maru test."

Again, her wide, unseeing eyes blinked at him.

"I would have thought that, of all people, the master duelist of Andoria would welcome the challenge."

The captain sat back in turn but did not touch his salted Virgin Mary as his own silvery eyes settled on the tall, slim form of the Aenar zhen on the other side of the gaming table.

"The Kobayashi Maru scenario is not a challenge; it is a test of character. A challenge *implicitly* requires at least *one* possible way to win; this test has none: whatever the story variants, it simply comes down to cutting off all options as they come up and piling up enemies until you are overwhelmed. The test does not aim at seeing you find a way to win; only to see how you will react to a situation with no correct resolution."

"So, you never faced that test," said the Aenar woman after another sip.

"It is worthless," answered the dark-skinned Andorian, taking also a small taste of his pungent, blood-red beverage.

"Is it?"

"At least for me... It shows little of your *true* character."

"Starfleet has used it for almost two centuries," remarked the Aenar.

"Indeed. And here lies another problem: *everyone* knows it is a test, and what test it is... at least, I do," he explained. "Despite the emotional investment you *might* be *willing* to make in the holodeck simulation; you still know that it is a simulation, a test. So, it is quite easy for you to decide to sacrifice yourself, your ship and your crew, order any suicidal maneuver like ramming the enemy ship, order self-destruct and so on... because you *know* that there are *no real consequences* to your decisions. It is easy to play the noble hero in a make-believe story; quite another thing in real life."

The captain took another sip of his drink before finishing:

"I bet a Vulcan came up with that test."

"And so, you never faced that situation," repeated Lyrya with antennae curving slightly towards one another in small amusement.

"Quite the opposite; I solved it beforehand," countered Kheren, crossing his callused hands behind the back of his platinum-haired head as he reclined deeper into his seat.

"By not facing it?"

"Exactly. Playing out a no-win situation you know is both unreal and unsolvable is simply an exercise in futility for both the tester and the subject."

"But doesn't History recall that Captain Kirk did *beat* the no-win scenario?"

"Did he?" retorted Kheren, winking at her.

As she blinked back at him, confusion making again her antennae waive this way and that, he explained further:

"When the legendary James T Kirk allegedly beat the no-win scenario, it *was* by *not* playing it; he manipulated things to turn them in his favor and *give himself* a winning option. In other words: he changed the conditions of the test so that it was possible to win."

"Yet, he received a commendation for it," reminded Lyrya.

"Yes, but he did *not* receive a commendation because he cheated! Nor because he solved the test; since he cheated, he did *not* solve it."

"Obviously not," she admitted. "What for then?"

"It was for the leadership, the strategic and tactical expertise and the courage he showed. He convinced other cadets to risk being expelled with him by joining him in the commando operation he planned and led to defeat Starfleet security, infiltrate the test site and alter the programming without anyone finding out... until it happened before their very eyes."

The admiration he himself held of those qualities was easily heard in his low voice. His despising of the test was as clearly heard when he spoke next:

"Even done *three* times, the test showed *none* of those qualities that made him the great leader, the great strategist and tactician, the courageous captain History recalls; what *did* it was his refusal to submit himself to an artificially-made dead-end, to let himself be cornered by fatality... how he made success possible through his own actions and preparedness, once he learned and understood what he was truly facing."

The ship's counselor nodded after a moment. As she still reflected upon the words of her captain, he added with a not-quite-so-light tone:

"As Humans say, a wise man looks before he leaps, does not forget his umbrella if it could rain, listens before he answers... Or, more to the point: only a fool paints himself into a corner."

"Humans also say: shit happens," offered Lyrya.

Kheren brought his large torso forward and leaned his elbows on his knees, nosing toward the tridi chess board.

"And you will surely step in it if you willingly walk with your eyes closed."

Counselor Lyrya pondered a moment and then raised her unseeing white eyes to him.

"So, the only way to solve a no-win situation..."

"Is to work our best to make sure that it never happens."

"There always are... possibilities," Lyrya admitted.

"So say even the Vulcans," acknowledged Kheren, looking at the chessboard with a telling look.

At that moment, the intraship comm beeped.

"Bridge to Captain."

"Go ahead."

"Sir, we are entering the final search grid."

"Thank you, Mister Snow. "

This was the last leg of their survey mission; they would finish mapping the entire subspace fracture grid in and around the Azimuth Horizon by the end of this seventh day, collecting all remaining data about the anomaly. Late tomorrow, they would be back at Starbase 10 with all that would be needed for them all to do what had to be done.

About time... he said silently to himself.

The Aenar counselor Lyrya perceived the thought even if she did not try to read his mind now, as her upbringing and honor code dictated her; but she nevertheless perceived the captain's state of mind, resurfacing so strongly now that he was not distracting himself by concentrating on a complex tridimensional chess game while misdirecting a telepath at the same time.

She understood that, somehow, this "nice, quiet survey mission" did not feel as good as he had thought... at least to him. Oh, ship and crew turned out pretty fine... But, somehow, he had started to feel strange, out of place... almost restless, as the days of routine research and uneventful travel went by.

There was something... something... odd about the whole situation.

One is at his best when in a crisis, his troubled mind said to him; *probably why I feel worse now!* He tried to convince himself silently. *I'm more Andorian than I care to admit.*

He almost convinced himself of that as time went by.

Almost.

* * *

Brad's office was dimly lit as he reviewed the results of the three security drills he had held over the past few days. He sighed as he rubbed his face in the palm of his hands as he wondered if taking this promotion had been the correct decision.

He had always enjoyed doing the job, enjoyed protecting people and enjoyed training but the administrative tasks of being a chief were not where his strength lay. Even worse were his leadership skills, or at least that was the way he saw it. His self confidence in himself certainly left something lacking, but he knew that people saw something in him or he would not have found himself here.

Commander McKay, the security chief of his last assignment, had taken him under his wing, training him, mentoring him. As his assistant, he had put Brad in charge of two of the shifts, even had him lead away teams from the security stand point. He had the experience; he just did not know if it was really where he belonged. It had seemed like the past few days all he had done was reading reports. He even had other tactical officers cover his bridge shifts so he could read more reports and it was already driving him insane.

And now, the worst part was about to begin.

His eyes looked at the chronometer on the wall. Taking a deep breath, he sighed as he saw how spartan his office was. There were no decorations on the walls, no personal effects on his desk. In essence, there was absolutely nothing in his office that would give it the feeling of home, nothing that made it *his* office.

But that wasn't the point of sitting behind his desk, waiting for the next five minutes to go by.

Two security officers were scheduled for an appointment and he had no idea how it was going to go. Ensigns Salvok and Campen had not performed up to expectations in the drills and his first responsibility as a chief was to discuss their performance with them. He knew that this was part of being the department head, but this was not the part that he looked forward too. Not many people in his career had enjoyed giving feedback, so at least he knew he was not alone in his dislike for giving discussions.

He got so lost in thought that he did not realize how quickly those few minutes had flown. Before he knew it the door chime went off and he was abruptly brought back to reality. Looking up at the door he sighed once again.

I am going to have to get something for this office to make it feel more homely.

Quickly he followed the thought up with, "Come!" signaling the computer to open the door for those waiting on the other side.

Two young crewmembers stood on the corridor side of the chief's office, neither sure why they had been summoned to this meeting. They both thought they had performed...well, at least ok, in the drill. Neither of their performance had been perfect, but they were both young, inexperienced so they were not sure what he expected of them.

Ensign Kathryn Campen stepped forward first, her young nervous face obvious as she entered her chief's office. Her hair was shoulder length, black as the night, framing a round face with pale peach skin. As she stepped inside, she spoke with a voice cracking with obvious nervousness as she stood at attention.
"Ensign Campen reporting as ordered, Sir."

As she spoke, the Vulcan man who appeared as young as she was, although probably much older, entered behind her. He could tell that Katie was nervous and although he did not understand the emotion he wished he could make her nervousness go away.

"Ensign Salvok reporting as ordered as well, Sir."

Brad smiled as both Ensigns entered his office, one obviously much more nervous than the other. Part of him wished he could let her see how uncertain he felt, but that would not have been appropriate.

"Please, come in, have a seat."

As he spoke, the chief motioned to the two chairs on the other side of the desk from behind which he was standing. He wanted this meeting to be official, but at the same time there was no need for it to be formal.

"Can I get either of you something to drink?"

Katie responded first as she moved forward, pulling the chair back and sitting down, holding her hands in between her legs.

"No thank you, Sir."

It was obvious that she just wanted this to be done and to be out of his office.

Salvok's response was much more direct, just like a Vulcan as he moved to the chair and sat down, back straight as a board. If it was possible to sit at attention, he was doing it.

"I do not require any liquids at this time."

Brad's head nodded as he sat down, placing his elbows on the desk. His fingers crossed up to his pointer and thumb placing those in an 'L' shape, with his thumbs under his chin.

"Ensign Campen, Ensign Salvok, thank you for coming. I did have something I needed to discuss with you."

He paused for a moment, making eye contact with both of his crewmembers as he tried to determine what words to speak.

"I don't want to beat around the bush so I'm just going to come out and say it. I have some concerns with your performance during the drills. You both scored the lowest accuracy rating in your drill and your reaction times were slow."

Brad paused for a second again, letting his words sink in. It was true that they were the newest two security officers to be assigned to the ship, barely out of the Academy. They had a lot of learning to do, but they were also in a place where they could end up hurting someone if they did not improve. His words were not spoken out of malice. Although the words were harsh, there was a pleasant tone to his voice which continued as he spoke again.

"I would like to offer you both a proposal. Lieutenant Tyvya and I have talked about it and we would like to take you both on as mentees. If you find this acceptable, we will be moving you to Alpha shift where you will work directly under the supervision of either Lieutenant Tyvya or myself."

Pausing to let the offer sink in as well as to watch their reaction, he saw that at least Ensign Campen seemed to like the idea while Salvok didn't really seem to know one way or the other. Brad thought about it for a moment, making sure his proposal made 'logical' sense, but could not see any way it would be interpreted otherwise.

"I am not going to lie; this is not going to be easy. We will be working you much harder than anyone else. There will be times where we will have you working double shifts when your peers are not, there will be additional required training sessions that she or I will be hosting and I will be inviting you to train with me in my personal training routine. Although that is an invitation, I will fully expect to see both of you at least once a week while I train. We are going to push you hard, but we are also going to see that you learn. If you accept and give this your all, I assure you we will have you at the top of your game in no time at all."

Katie seemed to really like the idea, while the Vulcan seemed deep in thought; but, to keep any impulse decisions from being made, Chief Jackson wanted them to take the night and think it over. What he wasn't telling them was he and Tyvya had already come to the consensus that, if they declined the offer, he would be going to the Captain and requesting their transfer off the ship.

Lieutenant Jackson was going to press his officers for excellence, and if the two that needed pressing the most were being offered personal training time from their chief and assistant chief and they declined it, they didn't belong on board this ship.

"Please, take the rest of the night to think about it and let me know tomorrow by the end of your duty shift."

It was already obvious that Ensign Campen was going to be accepting the offer. Her mood had improved one hundred percent... while Salvok almost seemed in a worse mood.

"Thank you for your time and, if you don't have any questions, you are dismissed."

Neither Ensign appeared to have any questions as they stood and both in nearly unison said, "Thank you" before turning on their heels and exiting.

As soon as the door behind them was shut, Brad sighed again, leaning deeply back in his chair.

I guess that wasn't as hard as I thought it would be...

* * *

Danik sunk into a chair in *Artemis'* lounge located in the forward section of Deck 8, colloquially known as *The Bow*, with an audible sigh.

The preliminary scans of the Azimuth Horizon had been taxing. The turbulence thrown off by aberration in space had required Danik and Lieutenant Snow to constantly adjust the ship's heading and course. By the end of the shift, Danik's back ached from hunching over the console and his fingers tingled from the incessant tapping on the control surfaces. Danik flexed his hands, trying to restore the feeling in his numb fingers.

One of the servers approached his table to take his order. It surprised him at first to see a bartender wearing a Starfleet uniform. He was used to the civilian staff on his previous two ships. Made sense, though. The Captain had apparently tightened security recently. Danik supposed that extended to civilian staff as well.

After the server took his order and wandered off, Danik leaned back and closed his eyes, trying to relax and let the tension bleed off.

He was beginning to question the wisdom of accepting the COO post aboard the ship. Over the past eight hours, he had been managing sensor sweeps, arbitrating between departments bickering over ship's systems, and working with Lieutenant Snow on fighting the waves of subspace turbulence that barraged the ship, knocking it off course.

The Bolian was exhausted, to say the least.

Just as Danik was settling in, his combadge chirped.

"Ensign Wayne to Lieutenant Brie," a female voice paged the Bolian.

Danik sighed. He hadn't had a chance to meet the human transporter chief from Beta Shift yet, but he doubted she would be calling during her shift for a social visit.

"Brie here. Go ahead, Ensign."

"We're having a problem with the primary energizing coils. We can't stabilize the power flow. We might have to take the whole transporter system offline if we can't track down the problem."

Danik squeezed his eyes as he briefly wondered if he should hoist the problem off on Engineering, or at least have them lock down the transporters until the morning. It wasn't even as though they could transport anywhere outside the ship while in proximity to the Azimuth Horizon. Not that there was anywhere to transport to this far out in space.

No, no, Danik thought. *If I were to put this off, that's the one time we would need to use the transporters.*

Standing, Danik shrugged apologetically to the server bringing his drink.

"I'm on my way. Brie out."

A turbolift ride and a few turns down the corridor later, Danik stepped into Transporter Room 1 and came up short just inside the hatch. Danik could have sworn the thunk he heard was his jaw hitting the floor. Turned out it was just a spanner that the transporter chief had dropped while she was standing on a stepladder, elbow deep into the access space for the primary energizing coils above the transporter pad. Components dangled out of hatches around the room, isolar chips scattered haphazardly about the Operator's Console. Pulling her head out of the hatch, the small, brunette officer looked at the newcomer.

"Oh, Lieutenant. Glad you're here. Could you hand me that spanner I just dropped?"

Danik thought he delivered his next statement with all the aplomb and dignity that the situation merited;

"Ensign Wayne... WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THIS TRANSPORTER?"

The Ensign blinked twice in surprise.

"Trying to track down that power fluctuation I was telling you about. Why?"

"Why? Why? Because you've torn half the transporter system apart, that's why! Do you know what would happen if the Captain were to walk in on this? He'd probably bust us both down to crewman!"

Danik stomped over to the console in irritation, calling up a status read-out.

"No, wait, he'd bust *you* down to crewman. He'd just toss me out the airlock since I'm supposed to be running this department."

Then Danik heard a noise that made him raise his head. Ensign Wayne had climbed down from the stepladder onto the transporter pad with her back to Danik. Her shoulders were shaking and she was making a choking sound. Was she trying not to cry? Danik immediately sank into himself. He hadn't meant to come down that hard on the girl. After all, she really was just trying to do her job. Plus, she was showing initiative by trying to solve the problem herself.

Coming around the console, Danik raised his hands and tried to soften his voice.

"No, no. Don't do that. I didn't mean to come down on you like that."

Climbing the steps up to the pad and putting a hand on her shoulder, he turned her around. Tears were streaming down her face, but a grin spread from ear to ear. She was laughing at him!

When Wayne saw the confused expression on Danik's face, she could keep hold back her mirth any longer. Her laughter filled the transporter room as she doubled over.

After a few minutes, she would begin to calm down, but apparently whatever private joke she was enjoying at the Chief of Operations' expense was still funny. She would glance at Danik and a fresh fit of laughter would rack her body.

It wasn't long before she was clutching her side, gasping for air between giggles. When she finally began calming down, Danik asked:

"I don't suppose you'd tell me what you find so funny."

Wayne wiped the tears from her eyes as she straightened.

"Heh, heh, hee. You! You're what's funny. First, you have a lot to learn about our Captain. Sure, he seems stern and rigid. And in a way he is. But he's also reasonable and appreciative of hard work. The new officers always seem to miss that. But that's not really what I was laughing about."

"Then what?"

Wayne's eyes twinkled with barely constrained amusement as they met Danik's.

"I've never seen an upset Bolian before. You're funny when your feathers get ruffled."

Danik rubbed his bald head in confusion. He wasn't sure whether to be irritated on behalf of his species at the connotation that exasperated Bolians were comical, relieved that he hadn't actually upset the Ensign, or angry at the borderline insubordination.

Eventually, he decided to just let it go.

"Let's just repair this unit and get the equipment squared away," Danik ordered.

With an acknowledging nod, Wayne turned back to her tools as Danik returned to the console.

"Maybe once we're done," she added, "we can head over to *The Bow*. You look like you could use a drink."

Truer words have never been spoken, Danik thought to himself.

* * *

Sitting in the central chair, the commanding officer of the starship Artemis looked strangely restless to any keen-eyed observer, despite his calm exterior. Somewhat, this tranquil space-charting assignment, even as it was about to end, was starting to really get on Captain Kheren's nerves.

And he did not know why.

He was struggling with a curious feeling that had been slowly and subtly building up as the last days went by: an inexplicable sensation of not being where he was supposed to be, not doing what he was supposed to do... almost as if not even being who he was supposed to be.

Feelings of alienation were hardly new to him. It had started from the moment of his unique birth and throughout his turbulent life as an outcast on Andoria; he, the genetically-fused male of a four-gender species, the only one of his kind.

The messiah... the abomination...

He had grown quite used to it... and he had finally pushed it all behind him when he had left his harsh, cold homeworld to join Starfleet.

Then, it had flared anew about the time he graduated from the Academy.

Right then, he had found himself assigned upon graduation to the elite Lotus Fleet division, sent to Starbase 10 as a security crewman... and suddenly in the middle of a Romulan takeover where he almost got killed saving a senior officer during a warbird's sabotage.

From then on, it had grown again as he became the first Ensign ever to be assigned a department command aboard a flagship, then skyrocketed through the ranks while thrusting into one dramatic event after another, from almost dying under friendly fire while thwarting an alien abduction to facing the Borg without a commanding officer... and once more up against a typically covert Romulan plot, chasing a hidden invading fleet...

That is until he found himself in the here and now; captain of the newest and oldest and one of the most renowned and oddest ships in Starfleet.

With time passing by, sitting in the command chair and facing difficult situations successfully, thanks to his versatile ship and admirable crew, he had slowly started to get used to the situation, slowly accepting that he was where he should be, doing what he should do... even when some of his officers started doubting and criticizing his position... but then afterwards so conveniently willingly removing themselves. Finally, after discovering and successfully facing a cosmic menace, a doorway to a different universe, a new civilization, a Klingon incursion, a terrorist cell and a rogue warship, he had thought the feeling of estrangement, of being somewhat... disconnected, finally conquered...

Until the last few days.

There's a reason you're here... there's a storm, and it's ready to sweep out and swallow the Federation whole. We're moving the more promising officers... no, more like pushing them... into positions they may not be ready for...

Those had been the words of Captain Felez, himself newly appointed as commanding officer of the USS Lotus, when he had promoted Kheren to Lieutenant while the Andorian was barely starting to serve on board the flagship; his first commanding officer who, almost at the very moment he saw him, had put him in the center seat during a combat simulation... then, discussed at length the finer points of space combat, ship command and officer responsibility with him.

A storm...

And there was, right in front of him, a cosmic storm about to swallow the Federation whole... *He's Efrozian, but... still... how could he have known...*

The Azimuth Horizon anomaly, a raging energy storm of cosmic proportions, had been discovered under Kheren's first and sudden command assignment to the Artemis. Who could have known... why would they have singled him out...and how?

I pushed you unfairly because we may need you, and others like you, sooner than we'd like to admit.

Something felt oddly prophetic now in those cryptic words of his first commanding officer... and not only because of Kheren's own meteoric rise to command. There has been a lot of sudden, hardly explained bridge officer replacements the Artemis seemed cursed with, from the very moment of launch and then through every mission afterwards.

Science Chief DeVem and Chief Engineer Anthony Jackson strangely never showing up at launch, held up on their respective homeworlds on the eve of departure... Lieutenant M'Rall replacing DeVem, only to get reassigned immediately after the first mission was over without much of an explanation, along with Lieutenant Sangliar before he could be confirmed as the new chief engineer; and, at the same time, the most space-experienced CMO of the fleet, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, suddenly resigning from Starfleet...

On their second mission, only a temporary Chief Medical Officer had been given to his ship, and immediately recalled to Starbase 10 after being injured while being replaced by Doctor Josiah Sage on Kheren's orders; then, there was the uncharacteristically rushed assignment of science chief Syntron...

At the end of their third mission, there was the surprising transfer to Starbase 10 of Doctor Sage, without assignment... of war hero N'Eligahn Etarudbo, who came from an Exec position of the USS Spectre, down to his old refitted ship as 3rd in command and then back up as Exec, now of the USS McKenzie... of several junior officers in key areas... and of chief of security Kelsey Alther, without assignment despite both promotion and distinguished service...

Just a few days ago, their new chief of security and tactical, Lieutenant Bradley Jackson, had been rushed into serving aboard at the last instant...

And now, all those brand new other bridge officers assigned to *this* ship... Aquila, Scott, Brie, Jackson... when Starfleet was struggling to crew all remaining ships after the war...

It looked to the Andorian captain like he was part of a deck of cards being shuffled by an unseen magician planning some big vanishing act as a grand finale.

Kheren did not believe in destiny, did not accept fatality; and he had quickly dismissed the feelings of conspiracy and backstage manipulation out of hand as being simply nervous novice apprehension.

Was it? he now wondered.

Didn't the living legend Jean-Luc Picard once discover similar manipulations from body-controlling aliens decades ago... thwarting them right up to Starfleet Command but not before they managed to send a signal out in space?

His silvery gaze lost itself in the turmoil of the cosmic maelstrom, raging before his four eyes like his own thoughts, memories, feelings and emotions inside of him.

Before he could have really settled down in his role as chief of security and tactical of the flagship, the unexpected call had come to serve on the Artemis... even before she was ready to launch... and just as the Borg War started, seeing him suddenly named First officer of the flagship... and of the Artemis... and that, even not for an entire day, as the tragic and strange accidental death of Captain Froud on the eve of an emergency rescue had finally catapulted him to the center seat. And Command had been most insistent for him to sit down in it.

I need him on the Artemis, had stated Fleet Captain Kotari when he had announced Kheren's quick promotion and immediate transfer to both him and Captain Felez.

Why? had wondered Kheren then... just as he was wondering again now.

And then, he had not been the only one.

I will be straight with you, Mister Kheren: You're not who I wanted as my Number One... But, disregarding my command privilege in this matter, Starfleet appointed you, over my formal objections.

Captain Froud...

Veteran commanding officer Captain Kevin Froud had been assigned to the Artemis by Vice-Admiral Spawner, understandably ignoring Fleet Captain Kotari and Starbase Commander and refit supervisor Speaker-of-Names' recommendations of then junior officer Kheren, as rumor had it... He recalled vividly how the dubious veteran command officer Froud had been about his presence on board, about him.

Kheren himself had been too, despite his resolute will to prove himself worthy of the heavy responsibilities piled on him so quickly. He had never backed down from a meaningful challenge. Risk was certainly not new to him...

But why would *Starfleet* take any risk with *him*?

So many high-ranking officers had taken a direct hand in his career: Fleet Captain Kraawn promoting him and assigning him to the flagship at his very sickbay bed, barely awoke from near death after the Romulan attack on Starbase 10... Captain Felez fast-promoting and specifically training him mission after mission... with the blessings and under the watchful eye of Admiral Redding... Fleet Captain Kotari making sure he got to the *Artemis* and got her command at the first opportunity, almost disregarding proper regulations... and personally shifting his ship personnel even up until now... willingly?

So many high-ranking officers... seemingly were pulling strings over him...

Were they? Are they? Why?

Established commanding officers had requested the command of the *Artemis* when she had been recommissioned: all had been flatly thanked and dismissed. More experienced officers had also been available back then; his own First officer, Michael O'Conner to name one... And yet, Lotus Fleet Command had been adamant about *his* immediate rise to captaincy of *this* ship, appointing him with no chance to bow out, on the very hour following the untimely death of her designated commanding officer.

A weird, unfortunate accident that should not even have happened.

The launch of the *Artemis* had been a singularly precipitated affair. Yes, there was a dire emergency back then, with a cargo ship full of refugees stranded in space. But even basic security and launch protocols had been roughly disregarded to rush the ship out, despite being still filled with civilians and not fully crewed... to Captain Froud's deep displeasure; and then, the fatal accident. Starbase 10's commander at the time, Speaker-of-Names, had been most insistent... And Kheren recalled suddenly that he too had been abruptly transferred from chief of security of the flagship to command of the Starbase... and, barely a month later, reassigned to a far away diplomatic command... once the *Artemis* was launched and presumed lost into the then newly discovered Azimuth horizon anomaly...

Thinking back of those days, Kheren suddenly wondered dreadfully if even Captain Froud himself knew of something back then:

Mister Kheren, please proceed; as she is still YOUR ship to show, as I have not input my command codes into the ship's main computer yet and taken command; Depending how the inspection goes, I may NOT enter my command codes.

When Froud had said this during the aborted final inspection tour, Kheren had imagined that this had been some of that peculiar "Human humor" he had always so hard a time understanding. But he still failed to see the humor in it, especially now, well after the accident that took the life of the captain, because of some incomprehensible oversight of Starfleet Intelligence... and Starfleet's Corps of Engineers.. and Lotus Fleet retrofit crews... leaving the ship ripe for him to take over with one swift order as soon as events had forced it upon them all and sending him out quick enough before anyone could have any idea of stopping it.

The wording of this order from Commander Allendros, right out of Fleet Captain Kotari's office, now filled again his confused thoughts:

She's yours now, CAPTAIN; remember Captain Froud, but keep in mind that his would have been a different ship than what yours will be.

And *why* was *this* of any importance to Starfleet Command? At the time, it had just felt like apprehension to him; then, in the last few days, it had surfaced again... and it felt... wrong... and yet, somehow, it also felt... *right*.

Kheren was truly lost... and not just in his thoughts...

"Captain; last search grid completed."

"All stop and hold position, Mister Snow," ordered the Andorian, suddenly straightening in his chair like a man bringing back his mind from elsewhere, far away. "Plot our return course to Starbase 10, standard cruising speed."

"Aye , Sir; course plotted and laid in. Time to reach SB10 at warp 7 is thirteen hours twenty-one minutes."

"Thank you; we will see if our job is truly finished presently before heading back."

"Aye, Sir; thrusters at station keeping."

Kheren stood up and tugged at his uniform. There was none of the troubled misgivings swirling in the back of his mind that were to be heard in his voice when he tapped his combadge:

"This is the captain: all senior bridge officers to the main conference room in one hour. All department heads... bring a summary of your staff's work concluding our survey mission. Captain out."

* * *

The survey's was welcome but, at the same time, too quick in coming, Danik thought.

It was his first assignment as Chief of *anything*. While he felt he had really been unprepared for the duties that came with that, he also knew that he had grown into them over the last few days. He was a little sad to see it end.

Danik was once again meeting with his senior staff in his office, reviewing Ship's Operations. He leaned against the front of his desk with his arms crossed, a posture picked up from his last Commanding Officer, Oyalrassy, listening as the officers delivered their reports. They had been doing this faithfully each day, and it had helped to ease Danik's transition into the department. Ensign S'Prek was in the middle of summarizing work on the transporters, systems Danik himself had been working on only a few days prior.

The Captain's voice on the ship-wide interrupted the Vulcan.

Danik began issuing orders.

"Alright. Reports on all system status on my desk in thirty minutes. Cheonghi, get with the Science people and put together a sensor array analysis over the last week. Dismissed."

"Aye, Sir." acknowledged the assistant chief of ops with his shrill voice.

As the officers filed out, he wondered briefly about what the *Artemis'* next assignment would be. Probably something to do with the data just gathered. Maybe they would even be working to seal the Horizon altogether?

He straightened and rounded the desk to take a seat and begin compiling his own report to the Captain.

Ambling out of the meeting room with his peculiar gait, the Edoan Lieutenant Cheonghi ignored the turbolift getting crowded with ops personnel moving out and went for the access ladder instead, starting his drop from deck 5 to deck 14.

With three legs and three arms, climbing was in fact easier to one of his kind than walking was for a Human. And climbing down was just a matter of controlled falling, grasping alternatively one rung after the next with any one of his strong three-fingered hands as he descended faster than a man could run and with less exertion. Plus in the access tube, he didn't have to worry about anyone stepping on his middle foot.

Normally, he would have paged the science deck and asked for the report to be transmitted to his terminal. But after a solar week of sitting at a console, at meetings, at terminals and in the mess hall, he needed the exercise.

And the isolation of an access tube, barely used even by ship technicians, was a much sought after moment of relief to soothe his natural shyness so trampled upon by such a long, intense period of unstopped teamwork.

Reaching the science deck of the starship, he exited the access shaft and went straight for the chief of science's office, right next to the stellar cartography bay. There were a lot of blue-collared officers in the corridor next to it and the door stayed perpetually open with all of them coming and going, chatting excitedly about the huge fiery display covered with symbols and numbers that he glimpsed in the vast holographic room. The astrometrics lab across the corridor was no less crowded and active, a complex diagram of interwoven lines floating amidst a cloud of changing data streams.

The door to the office of Lieutenant Syntron, third in command of the Artemis, was also open as many researchers brought their work to the tall Vulcan in charge. Since his return to duty prior to the beginning of his shift, Syntron had split his time between his bridge station, the Astrometrics lab, the Stellar Cartography bay and his office. His team had been furiously gathering and analyzing data since reaching and circumnavigating the peripheral edge of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly seven days ago. They were certainly pushing the limits of the updated systems' capacity to accumulate and analyze continuous streams of data received from the ship's reconfigured sensors and several carefully positioned probes, then projecting vast tridimensional representations of the anomaly's composition and activity from the floor-mounted holo imaging emitter and the large wraparound viewscreen.

They were also analyzing all aspects of the anomaly's ability to dimensionally shift between space-time and correlating all of the readings and signatures emitted throughout the process into their central computer. Like Human scientists of the 20th and early 21st century's quest to map out and sequence the human genome stored within deoxyribonucleic acid, the scientists of the Artemis were attempting to unravel, map out and anticipate all of the mysteries of this perilous phenomena to effectively prepare themselves when the time would eventually arrive to confront this dangerous beast.

All of the scientists stopped in their tracks as the Captain announced the upcoming meeting. The Chief of Science seized the moment immediately afterward:

"All departments" his voice commanded "an analytical synopsis of all data collected as we conclude the final moments of our sensor survey of the anomaly is required to be entered into your department report within twenty-five minutes. In thirty minutes, all department heads will meet in my office to discuss all findings, make inquiries, and work together to create a guide of recommended procedures that we can share with our staff and ultimately with other ships of Lotus Fleet to prepare to offensively and defensively confront this anomaly." He paused for a moment and glanced around at all faces of his science department staff that had quietly gathered around the area from which he spoke. They collectively conveyed an appearance of a dedicated but exhausted group who knew that it was time to quickly work as one unit to put all of the pieces of data together in what little time remained.

"The significance and urgency of what we are completing here should be evident to everyone within this department. Just as we have been able to do so in the past, so again we shall do now... in terms of providing information and solutions to address all of the dangerous possibilities that we potentially face. The lives of not only Federation officers aboard each of our fleet ships are at stake here, but perhaps the existence of lives on planets throughout all of the sectors. It is up to us to provide the most comprehensive and viable information and solutions possible."

He then looked around again and merely concluded saying; "dismissed."

As the science staff dispersed and reconvened in their respective department and teams in murmurs of focused conversations, Syntron and T'Val walked toward the Science Chief's office.

They were in discussion about finalizing the Astrometric data configurations when the three-legged and three-armed Edoan First Assistant Chief Operations Officer surreptitiously entered into the science department.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Syntron," said Cheonghi from the doorway, but may I have sensor diagnostics of the last seven days on a PADD, please?"

Syntron turned and looked at the Edoan standing in the doorway.

"Greetings Lieutenant Cheonghi. We are just about to conclude our final rounds of sensor sweeps within the next seven point three-five minutes. After this, Lieutenant T'Val will download a tentative overview of the sensor findings into a PADD for you. A more detailed version will be provided for you just prior to the upcoming meeting as well."

Lieutenant T'Val then stated stoically:

"If you will follow me, Lieutenant Cheonghi, I will begin to prepare a PADD for you now as the final data is being collected. We should have you on your way with the sensor information in nine point one-three minutes."

Lieutenant T'Val led the way out of the office with the Edoan First Assistant Chief Operations Officer shambling quietly behind her.

Danik was still in his office compiling his data when the door announcer chimed about half an hour later. He leaned back in the comfortable chair and stretched his back, listening to the bones in his neck pop.

"Come in," he called.

The door slid open with a hiss to admit Lieutenant Cheonghi. The Assistant Chief of Operations held a PADD in his third hand as he shuffled in with his peculiar gait.

"Sir," Cheonghi began, holding out the PADD. "Here is the data you requested on the sensor array. According to the Head of Astrometrics and Astrophysics, Lieutenant T'Val, the sensor arrays have been operating 'within expected parameters' throughout the course of our mission."

Danik accepted the PADD and briefly reviewed the data on the screen.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said, nodding to the other officer. "I'll add this to my report to the Captain. Computer, how long until the scheduled meeting with the other senior officers?"

"Scheduled conference is in twenty minutes," came the mechanical reply.

Danik stood, taking the PADD.

"Once our survey mission is completed, I expect we will set course back to Starbase 10. During the trip back, I'd like to discuss a shift rotation schedule that I plan on submitting to Commander O'Conner. I'd like you, Ensign Lurnok, and I to start rotating through the shifts. Get to know the staff on each duty rotation."

Cheonghi nodded.

"I'm sure you're familiar with them,, now said the Bolian Chief of Ops, but I would benefit from spending some time with each department. There are some other personnel issues I would like to discuss with you."

* * *

Brad was sitting in the Bow, enjoying a nice morning cup of coffee. The mission had not been as unexpected as he had initially thought it would be. All in all, the security department had been able to perform the drills he desired as well as some training exercises.

In one hand he held the hot cup, steam still rising off of it, nearly too hot to drink. Lifting the mug to his lips he savored the taste of the caramel mocha, the taste of the creamy caramel mixing with the chocolate. The computer could not do the drink justice, much preferring the scent of freshly ground beans and real chocolate to the replicated liquid. Regardless he drank the replicated liquid frequently, getting the caffeine fix that he'd always needed at mid-day.

His other hand held a PADD that he was reviewing. Ensign Campen had taken his offer and he had moved the duty assignments around a bit. Ensign Salvok on the other hand had declined the offer, claiming that it was illogical. He could not understand why it was illogical to accept help from a senior officer, but the decision was his. Although Brad had really hoped that both junior officers would accept the help, he was not going to force it on anyone and as such had already compiled his request to have the man transferred off the ship.

The peace and near quiet of the bow was broken as he heard the Captain's voice come through the comsystem.

The security department did not have very much work related to the survey mission, but there were certainly things that did need to be reported. His hand moved to his combadge as he stood up, carrying his half full steaming mug of coffee with him.

"All security department heads, this is Lieutenant Jackson. Please meet in my office in thirty minutes. Bring a readiness report as well as any information your section has compiled on the anomaly."

He was pretty sure that he had already read the majority of the information his department had to report, but he wanted to make sure he heard it directly from their mouths. Sometimes, it was easier to ensure you got all the information if you got a verbal report rather than a written one; at least in verbal reports, you could get instantaneous feedback.

Forty-five minutes later, Brad dismissed the security department report and stood up. The mug from his earlier cup of coffee was now on the corner of his desk; a tiny bit of cold liquid in the bottom of it. The department heads had told him exactly what he had expected; but better to over prepare than to get caught unprepared, or at least that's the way he saw it.

"Thank you all." He said as he ushered each shift leader out of his office.

Picking up the PADD that now contained all the information from this meeting as well as his personal notes, he stood up and followed them out into the corridor. At that point, each member of the team scattered, going in different directions towards their duties, with the chief stepping into the turbolift.

"Bridge," he called out as soon as the doors closed in front of him; and a short minute later, he stepped out onto the bridge.

An Ensign that he didn't recognize was manning the tactical console and, as she saw the chief step out of the turbolift, she began to stand up. Brad shook his head and motioned for her to keep her station.

"I'll be in the conference room if you need me."

She nodded her head and turned her attention back to the console, looking a bit nervous at having her chief on the bridge with her; but that only lasted a minute as he quickly made his way through the door on the other side of the command center and into the corridor that led to the captain's ready room, the conference room and the additional turbolift.

His gaze momentarily turned to the Captain's ready room before entering the conference room and seeing he was the first one there. The first thing that caught his eye was the strange table in the room. Every conference room he'd ever been inside had a long table, slightly rounded; but this table was triangular. It was surely a strange table, but then not many things on board this ship were 'normal' and, to a certain extent, that suited him.

The triangular table did present an additional challenge to the already uncertain situation. As this was his first briefing on board the ship, he wasn't sure how the seating arrangement went. He knew that different ships operated differently, already evidenced in the present case by the different table, so he'd just have to guess and hope he didn't step on anyone's toes.

Picking a chair that put his back to the windows, he sat with a full view of the door. He preferred to never have his back to a door unless it was absolutely necessary. Softly, he placed his PADD on the table in front of him and crossed his hands, waiting for the rest of the senior staff to arrive.

Normally he wouldn't have been this early, but it wouldn't be late to his first senior staff meeting. There would come a time to relax a bit, but now was not that time.

Brad sat comfortably in the chair, his eyes looking over the conference room surveying everything, taking special note of the mini transporter pad in the corner of the room. It was a very non conventional room. It fit the personality of the ship, a retrofitted ship that theoretically should have been scrapped, but brought back to new life to go to new places and experience new things.

He had always fully believed a ship was alive in some fashion. Of course it was not a sentient being, but there was something different about every ship. Every single ship had its own story to tell, its own feel, its own smell.

He did not talk about these things very often. Most people simply thought he was crazy, but he knew that there was something special about each and every starship.

Down on deck 5, Danik Brie parted ways with his First Assistant and walked the short distance to the turbolift. When the doors opened, he entered, nodding to the crewman already inside.

"Bridge," he announced.

It was a short ride, interrupted only by the pause on Deck 3 to let off the crewman. The doors slid smoothly open to admit Danik to the bridge. Nodding to the Andorian Ensign manning the Ops station, he strode across the bridge, entering the conference room.

The Bolian looked around the room in confusion for a moment. Instead of the long conference table he was used to on the Sovereign-class Hood and Galaxy-class Adler, there was a triangular table with a holoprojector in the center and seats along the edges.

The Artemis' Chief of Security and Tactical Officer, Lieutenant Jackson, was already seated. Danik wasn't particularly familiar with the Human. The survey mission had taken most of his time, and his duties at Ops hadn't left much more for social visits. The Human Chief of Security and tactical of the Artemis had gotten lost in his thoughts until he had heard the swish of the doors opening and watched the Bolian operations officer walk through them and into the room. Neither man spoke to the other initially, but Brad nodded his head, acknowledging that he saw him... that he knew he was here. His eyes watched Danik closely as he hadn't had much time to review the new chief of operations of the ship.

When Danik sat down on the side of the triangle to the right of him he turned his attention back to the doors, not wanting to intrude on the man's privacy. It wasn't appropriate to stare, or at least that's what his mother had told him when he'd been a child.

He noticed how the Bolian took a seat at the other corner of Jackson's side of the table, leaving the chairs closest to the door open for the Captain and First Officer.

"Jackson," Lieutenant Brie said by way of greeting. They had a few minutes while they waited for the rest of the officers, so Brie decided to try and strike up a conversation. "How did your security drills turn out?"

When the other man's voice broke the silence, Brad smiled and responded.

"It's nice to see you again, Lieutenant."

His head shook up and down as he appeared to be thinking for a moment before answering Danik's question about the drills.

"They went well. I only had two officers that didn't necessarily perform up to my expectations but one of them has accepted my offer to train directly with myself, so I can't really complain about her."

Being new to the whole department head thing, he wasn't really sure how much he could or should mention about his staff's performance. Of course, if it had been the captain or the executive officer speaking, he would be completely blunt, but that was obviously necessary. Speaking to another department head, on the other hand, he really wasn't sure what the protocol was regarding discussing a crew member's performance.

As this was going on, the science briefing concluded in the Chief of Science office on deck 14. Syntron stood up and then slipped his PADD into the hand-crafted satchel and exited the science department. He bypassed his staff members that were still finishing their conversations within and beyond his office and took one last glance at the most current three-dimensional representation of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly as he went by the doorway.

As he entered the turbolift, he announced "Bridge" and the lift soon began its ascension.

As Chief of Science, he was now ready to provide the Captain with the most current information in the fleet regarding the anomaly. With the wide-ranging input from the other department officers, the Artemis should be prepared at some point to help lead the campaign against this dangerous phenomenon. But like any approaching battle, comprehensive and accurate information was crucial for successful strategies to be effectively planned and implemented.

The door to the turbolift parted open and Syntron headed toward the main conference room, giving a subtle nod of acknowledgement to Lieutenant Irksos who had recently taken over and manned the science console from her shift predecessor.

The doors to the conference room parted and the Science Chief walked toward the triangular conference table and then placed his PADD on its cool and smooth surface as he sat down. Near him from across one table corner sat the new Terran Chief of Security and Tactical officer Lieutenant Jackson, who was quietly conversing with another new officer, the blue-colored Bolian Chief of Operations officer Lieutenant Brie. Syntron gave them each a formal greeting as he removed the PADD from the satchel and proceeded to set up his files for the meeting and presentation that was about to begin.

Down on deck 7, in sickbay, Doctor Caius Aquila scratched his chin in amusement as he placed a PADD aside and now headed toward the conference room.

He had been studying about ship communications systems and details about what bridge officers typically did. He never really paid much attention to anything related to ship operations back at the Academy. There was just too much medical stuff, and too little time to take it all in.

Besides, why would a doctor need to be on the bridge?

Aquila never prepared for, or expected, a Chief Medical Officer's chair on the bridge of a ship. So he had never prepared to be on the bridge of a ship. And he was not the best at communicating on a personal level. He usually was always strictly business, and to the point. Unfortunately, he was going to have to learn to make some small talk with the rest of the bridge crew if he was to find even ship routine bearable.

And so, it was with these thoughts that he entered the conference room before the appointed time and sat on the same side as Syntron from the unexpected triangular table.

There is definitely nothing conventional about this ship, he mused.

At that very moment, Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott the Third, the newly appointed chief engineer of the Artemis, entered the briefing room as ordered.

He was a bit frazzled by the anomaly, but he seemed pretty happy that they were finally about to get away from it.

He took a seat next to Danik Brie, looking over some engineering information on his PADD.

A couple of minutes after the last of the other officers entered, O'Conner quietly walked in to the room, sat down at his seat and quietly assessed these officers before him.

O'Conner smiled to himself as he thought of the senior officers assembling in the meeting room. During the last week, he had spend most of his time watching the new bridge chiefs and asking their own officers and crewmembers about them. Unlike the last few trips out of spacedock, this time he had time to study and learn about these officers on the job.

He had taken basic notes about the officers on a PADD following the customary meeting with them, and he added his most recent observations, all of which he was going to give Captain at the meeting. In his mind, he was already reviewing the gist of it.

Their new chief of security, Bradley Jackson, was a fine officer, very well prepared and organized, but O'Conner worried about how fast he could react to new threats... and at times he seemed almost paranoid with his tendency to worry about the simplest details.

While a bit stand-offish, their new chief medical officer, Doctor Caius Castiel Aquila, seemed to be both a fine doctor and leader but, in his case, Michael worried if he could inspire men in a time of need as was expected of any good leader.

Then, there was their new chief engineer, Montgomery Scott, third to bear the name, seemed similar in personality to the doctor, but the First officer of the Artemis wondered just how much of the famous miracle worker was in him.

Finally, there was the new Bolian officer. O'Conner had always liked Bolians and this one was no different to the ones he was used to from way back to his times aboard the USS Thunderchild and on Starbase 10; he too seemed like a hard worker. While at times he seemed to worry about every little thing, O'Conner liked this because he could trust Danik Brie not to miss anything.

Now that they had shown their potential as team leaders in their respective areas, it was time to see how well they meshed together as a team of senior officers.

Captain Kheren came in last. Although nothing showed on his rigid face, he was nevertheless most pleased about this meeting and working place. The main conference room of the starship Artemis was the perfect reflection of the entire vessel: it was a smooth blend of the past and the present turned towards a better future.

The original architecture of the soft-colored walls housed state of the art replicator and tridimensional viewing screen opposing energy transparencies within tall and slim old style window frames. At the center, nine modern collapsible chairs encircled an antique triangular black table where the old pyramidal monitor had been replaced by a fully holographic display that could be manipulated directly by touch from any point of the table.

The Andorian captain had requested this particular original old table not to be replaced by the common "banana-shaped" reunion table favored by all other ships. His preference was not a matter of nostalgia but of optimal efficiency; because of its three equal sides, it brought everyone closer and at an indirect angle, almost side by side to one another, instead of facing one another across a dividing table or in any hierarchical order; thus, it favored freer exchanges on an equal footing and right at the captain's ear, without enticing direct confrontation or isolating one end from another or juniors from seniors. The sitting arrangement also neatly identified command, research and application during conversation, ordering thought and words in a more efficient way. It made this room the best place for discussions and resolutions, as much as the bridge was for decisions and actions.

Since the very first meeting in here, the seating choices of his officers as they took place around it showed how much and how well they understood ship efficiency and their proper role on board, even how and how well they related to one another.

Like many things aboard Kheren's ship, this simple table served more than just a utilitarian purpose to him.

Especially today.

To the commanding officer of the Artemis, it was truly impressive to see the three sides of this meeting table now so crowded with officers. It suddenly filled him with a sense of both pride and humility to be in the company of so many brave and brilliant individuals, some bringing with them the energy of youth and others the wisdom of experience, but all offering their own unquestionable level of competence in a harmonious blend of converging beliefs and purposes in full confidence of his authority and guidance.

And then, taking a moment to reflect upon the assembled officers before him, something strange happened, making Kheren pause.

Seeing now these particular faces all together looking at him, it suddenly occurred to the Andorian that, at *this* very moment, it was the first time he *truly* felt like a starship captain...

No, it was more than that; it was like... like he was the right person at the right place... like he truly belonged.

Odd...

Kheren pushed aside for now his instinctive habit of trying to comprehend things and just basked in this sudden new feeling, so different, so contrary to his growing misgivings of the last days... but, at the moment, so good, so... *right*... as he looked at them in turn.

On his side of the table sat his First officer, Commander O'Conner, the experienced man as calm and of as few words as ever. To their left were aligned the enthusiastic Chief Engineer Scott, the efficient Bolian chief of Operations Brie and the dedicated tactical and security chief Jackson; to their right was found both the methodical Chief Medical Officer Doctor Aquila and closer to them the thorough Vulcan Chief of Science Syntron.

To him, the captain directed his attention first:

"Well, Mister Syntron; do you estimate that we have completed our mission well enough so as to satisfy the expectations of Lotus Fleet Command?"

The Science Chief looked up at his Captain who appeared calmer and more assured than he had beforehand. Here in this conference room sat a mostly new crew of bridge officers and department specialists and yet this mission so far though had proceeded efficiently and without incident more so than any previous mission they've been on. This was what was being reflected back from the Captain's demeanor.

"Indeed, Captain," the Science officer began; "We have had the opportunity to carefully scrutinize more details about this anomaly as we circumnavigated its entire perimeter than our previous missions combined... and this time with only minimal confrontations. All of the details of our findings have been processed by our computers working in conjunction with the Astrometric Lab and Stellar Cartography."

"Computer, then ordered Kheren, display and visualize all astrometrics data of nearby anomaly."

Between them all, hovering over the three-sided table, a fiery ball of orange-golden light appeared, with scrolling data surrounding it. From this information, they could all quickly learn the essentials about this fiery phenomenon: it was the result of a collision between time and antitime similar to theories about the Big Bang that created this universe; except this one was the spillover from the birth of another, a pocket universe, open like a wormhole in the center and spreading out its deflagration through subspace and out into our own.

Located in the Hromi Cluster of Federation Space between Starbase 10 and the Romulan and Klingon borders, its blindingly white center was four light years from Starbase 10 but it's orange corona now at about one light year distance... and expanding exponentially since an estimated time of origin on stardate 86566.9... barely four years ago. As it followed subspace fractures to travel through normal space, the implications were becoming clear.

"Computer: estimated time in standard solar days before the anomaly's expansion reaches starbase 10."

"Two-hundred and sixteen solar days," coldly answered the computer voice.

"Time estimate until it reaches Sector 001," now asked the captain.

"three-hundred and fifty-seven solar days."

"Time estimate before reaching galactic center."

"Four-hundred and fifty-one solar days."

"Time before it reaches the nearest galaxy."

"The anomaly's corona will reach the Andromeda galaxy, NGC224, Messier 31, in six-hundred and eleven solar days."

Now, veterans of the Azimuth Horizon and newcomers, they all knew what was at stake.

"Computer," now asked the Artemis commander, "highlight the current expansion path of the anomaly and project that path outward at one day per second."

The ball of fire dimmed as a dense web of crisscrossing broken lines emerged from its center to slowly expand like an ice crystal in all directions. Despite the peaceful beauty of it, like that of a white, fragile flower slowly opening, they could all see that, on this accelerated hologram representation, it was going to reach the projected location of their home base in less than four minutes... and there was a definite orientation to this spreading of lines towards it and the rest of Federation main lines of travel... as well as directly towards the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire.

"That gentlemen, is what we came for," summarized Kheren; "The exact, detailed pattern of displacement of this anomaly: what Lotus Fleet will have to know so as to be at each and every juncture of space and subspace in order to suture that juncture and contain the spread of this cosmic deflagration, before it destroys any other world like it did with the planet Neural a month ago."

He guessed that a few among them might have heard about this Prime Directive world, once visited by the legendary Captain Kirk to stop a Klingon interference with the social and arms technology status of its population of hill men and villages; but less would have learned about the recent evacuation of its inhabitants from the coming of the Azimuth Horizon by the USS Lotus on her last mission. Speaking of it now, as they looked at the rapid expansion of this cosmic storm, would point out the importance and urgency of their last week of seemingly dull work most vividly.

Chief of science Syntron looked around carefully at all of the officers sitting along each edge of the triangular table before bringing his focus back toward the Andorian Captain tenaciously standing before them all and concluded:

"Our mission here is complete Captain... we are ready to proceed onward."

"Glad to hear it, Mister Syntron," nodded the Andorian. "You and your team did great work out here. Commander O'Conner, what is our current overall ship and crew status?"

O'Conner turned his glance to the captain and nodded and passed him the PADD, with his report on the new officers.

"Nothing major to report, Sir. Negligible hull damage, metaphasic shields are holding well. The crew is in high spirits. Only a few minor mishaps to be attributed to the storm's effects."

"Negligible is the key word I like to hear, Commander," acknowledged Kheren, looking at the PADD his First officer just gave him and rapidly scrolling its contents. "I can tell you myself how well the metaphasic shields seems to be working just by not having felt dizzy the whole week we've been out here. If you recall our other brush with this sector of space, I could barely distinguish floor from ceiling."

Looking up from the Personal Access and Display Device and the list of names and notations O'Conner had made under them, he addressed the first one highlighted there, Caius Aquila, the other officer with a blue collar sitting at the table besides the Vulcan scientist.

"But my own feelings are hardly scientific estimates. Doctor, could your own staff confirm the effectiveness of the metaphasic shielding over such a long exposure? Did it adequately stave off all of the anomaly's effects on a ship's crew complement?"

"There have been no unusual reports to sickbay and the automated medical scans have not picked up anything out of the ordinary Captain."

Short and to the point; visits to sickbay might not be as dreadful as they used to be now... thought the captain after the straightforward reply of his new CMO.

"This is good news, Doctor. This confirms that metaphasic shielding fully protects the crew from all the effects of a standard plasma discharge coming from this thing, as well as those various debilitating effects on the crew under prolonged exposure we experienced earlier. Being fully protected from the chronic fatigue and stress, the bone and muscle tissue degradation, short sightedness and diminishing field of vision, nullified psionics and overexcited endocrinal reactions will go a long way in ensuring the safe success of Lotus Fleet when finally taming this anomaly."

Kheren turned his four oculars towards the other side of the table, where the technical people sat.

"And we have been in close proximity to the Azimuth Horizon more often and now for far longer than any other vessel. Anything to report on ship status, Mister Scott?"

Scotty nodded at the Captain.

"Yes, Sir. There was a six percent drop in our antimatter reserves and impulse reactor power while we were in proximity of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. All in all, from what I've read, we fared very well. Looking at the data, I think the improved metaphasic shielding really held up like we expected it to. Other than that slight drain in the antimatter and impulse power, nothing happened with the other systems, and everything else was not affected."

Scotty relaxed slightly, and nodded back again to the Captain.

"Well done, Mister Scott. Keep an eye on them still. It would not do much good for the planned operation if power reserves were to be affected like they had been the last time. Warp power is next to useless in there and impulse power is severely hampered by the ambient depolarization. When it was barely a light year wide, it was already a daunting task to go through it on thrusters alone, even enhanced as they were with the lack of gravitation in there... Now that it has bloated itself three times..."
His silver eyes followed his antennae pointing then towards the Bolian sitting beside him.

"How about navigation, Mister Brie? I can tell you the first two times we came in contact with this anomaly, it had not been a joyride. Any potential problem to apprehend even with our new shield configuration?"

Danik nodded in agreement with the statement of navigation difficulties.

"As you know, sir, Lieutenant Snow and I have had to make continual course corrections throughout our mission. At first I thought it was subspace turbulence from the rifts."

As Danik spoke, he tapped a few controls on the conference table causing the three-dimensional hologram to change. It zoomed in to show the Artemis in a relative scale to the Azimuth Horizon.

"In reality, the subspace turbulence simply made for a bumpy flight. The course corrections were due to gravitational pull, but not from the wormhole as we would have suspected. Watch the anomaly as I play back our sensor logs."

With another press of a control, the image began to move while Danik narrated:

"This is a record of us moving from our second observation point after completing a scan grid."

As the Artemis fired thrusters to begin the next leg of its trip, a curious thing happened: The Azimuth Horizon shifted with it, in the same direction.

"We were pulling the anomaly. The Azimuth Horizon itself is essentially without mass. Without mass, there is no gravitational pull. The Artemis, however, has mass and thus a gravity field. While the effect we had on the Horizon was miniscule, it was enough to bring it close enough to us to necessitate changing course." The playback came to an end and Danik returned the display to its original status. Lieutenant Snow and I feel there will be no problem breaking away on our return to Starbase 10."

Kheren leaned forward with obvious interest as his new chief of operations spoke.

"This is quite significant, Mister Brie," finally commented the captain. "My compliments on this discovery."

Then, he looked in turn at his science officer and then at his chief engineer.

"Mister Syntron, Mister Scott, I believe your teams should look into this. There might be something useful devised out of this to better contain this anomaly."

The Vulcan scientist nodded.

"Given these stated conditions, it may be possible, Captain, to manipulate... to a small degree... the outer edges of the anomaly by using a graviton beam to append an additional gravitational pull on the anomaly followed by a high level anti-graviton beam to equally repel the perimeter of the anomaly within close proximity. Theoretically, Captain, this could allow us to manipulate aspects of the shape of the outer regions of the anomaly in our attempt to corral it. We would need to once again modify aspects of the main deflector and then supplement our current deflector control with this option to accompany the anti-polaric ion beams we previously implemented."

After completing some swift calculation Syntron informed his commander:

"It will take approximately one point forty-seven hours to set up a preliminary prototype modification of the deflector and create a tactical program that we could test on the perimeter of the anomaly before leaving this area. Depending on the results of this experiment, we may need to follow up with additional modifications, refinements and subsequent tests. This will delay our departure, Captain, but if this is successful, it would be worth the investment of time to provide us with another process and tool that could be used in the eventual containment of this anomaly."

Kheren's four eyes turned towards the chief of security of the Artemis.

"Any concerns about us staying a bit longer in the neighborhood, Mister Jackson?"

Brad had been listening carefully to the other officers as they provided their reports regarding the effects of the anomaly. What Danik had just mentioned was indeed a huge find. He had some concerns considering the state of their weapons but nothing was too concerning to give way to arguing that they leave immediately.

"I do have some concerns regarding our readiness if we were to end up in a combat situation. As Lieutenant Scott already mentioned, the anomaly has had some effect on the antimatter supplies. Something we didn't foresee was the fact that the warhead storage areas are not as highly shielded as the warp core. The ship's antimatter supplies weren't affected greatly because of their higher shielding, but unfortunately the photon and quantum torpedoes didn't fare as well. "

He made a pause before explaining:

"To put it bluntly, our photon torpedoes are now effectively nothing more than large bullets. The quantum torpedoes fared a little bit better but from our estimates they won't be able to detonate at anything greater than 40%. As we have seen from our manual targeting drills, the phasers have been unaffected, but the torpedoes are a huge portion of our tactical strength. Considering this, I do have some reservations, but at this point I don't think any additional harm would come from remaining to study the new information."

He paused for a second, looking down at the PADD in front of him, debating whether to mention the last item. It didn't seem like it was relevant to the discussion at hand but at the same time he'd rather ensure Captain Kheren was fully briefed to make his decisions rather than short change him by withholding information that could potentially be relevant.

"We've also noticed a large building up of chroniton particles in the ablative armor matrix. The only record of this phenomenon that my team was able to find dealt with the USS Defiant. When they ran their cloaking device over an extended period of time, they found the same form of build up but, when they deactivated the system, the particles dissipated. I'll partner with the science department if we need to investigate this but, from what I've read, it appears that there should be no adverse effects from this phenomenon. "

Kheren was barely opening his mouth that the ship's intercom chirped and the voice Lieutenant Snow filled the silence.

"Bridge to Captain Kheren!"

"Kheren here."

"Sir! We're picking up a massive surge of chroniton radiation..."

Suddenly, everything went blindingly white, from their eyes to their minds.

And then, as they recovered wits and senses, they saw that they were now completely engulfed by a raging sea of fire.

CHAPTER THREE: TIME OUT

**CAPTAIN'S LOG
STARDATE: 87209.8**

While we were completing our seventh day of research in the vicinity of the Azimuth Horizon, the Artemis was struck by a massive surge of chroniton radiation of unknown origin.

For reasons yet unexplained, we then found ourselves completely engulfed within the corona of the anomaly, when a moment before we were holding position six-hundred thousand kilometers from its edge.

At this distance, our sensors should have picked up any sudden shift in the phenomenon and alerted our navigation to effect a course change.

But, it seemed, we simply ran out of time.

They all poured onto the bridge with haste, their eyes darting to the main viewer where they all saw the same frightening vision that they had found beyond the transparencies of the conference room, once the blinding whiteness had left their eyes and their minds: a furious stream of plasma fire, dotted with innumerable masses of dark, compressed stellar matter caught in the flow of fire raging all around them when, a heartbeat before, it was but a fiery display on the horizon.

"Report." called out Captain Kheren as he sat in his command chair.

"We are right into the outer layer of the anomaly, Sir," reported the copper-skinned, dark-haired Human at helm. "But... navigational sensors confirm we were, and are still, stationary, Sir! It's like the storm just... blew up and engulfed us!"

"There has been no change in sensor data, Captain," now added Valencia Irsos as she left her chair at the science station to let her Vulcan senior officer relieve her and review the data she was summarizing. "The anomaly has remained perfectly stable within all known parameters... until that chroniton surge hit us."

"Damage report," now asked the Andorian.

"None so far, Sir," answered Patricia Blakely as chief engineer Scott relieved her also to verify all decks and systems on the engineering master display.

"Metaphasic shielding holding, Captain," then said the giantess Tyvya as she rose to her full towering height to free the chair at the tactical station for Lieutenant Jackson, her antennae bristling with tension. "But we are now dangerously exposed to the erratic trajectories of the inert neutronium masses caught in the vortex with us." Kheren sat deeply in his chair and ordered:

"Doctor Aquila, prepare and send out immediately a communication buoy with all our data on the Azimuth Horizon towards Starbase 10 *and* Starbase 24; once we clear the area, contact them both to warn them about what happened. Then, make sure there were no ill-effect on the crew from that chroniton exposure."

"Acknowledged."

Aquila compiled and prepared communication buoys as ordered.

He hoped the shielding would continue to protect the crew in this situation. Caius had never been in a position, or really considered the unlikely chance, that he would have to declare a superior medically unfit for duty.

The anomaly could cause a wide range of symptoms. The most subjective being changes in mood. Andorians were specifically vulnerable, and Klingons too.

Violent mood swings were easy for others to identify, but the patient may not recognize it as such, and it can be a chore to convince the patient to willingly submit to treatment or isolate themselves.

Aquila sighed and began to have the ship run medical scans on the crew.

Keeping his eyes to the raging inferno filling the viewing screen, the Andorian ship commander then added:

"Mister Jackson, Mister Brie; convert all phasers to tractor beam frequencies and use them with our main tractor emitters on inverted polarity to push away any closing in object. Mister Scott, make sure we keep enough power to get out of here in one piece; priority to shields, impulse drive and tractor emitters. Mister Syntron, find us the shortest way outside of this storm."

"Affirmative Captain" Syntron responded as he turned back toward his console and began to investigate the changing dynamics of the anomaly in relation to their current position.

"Aye, Captain," Danik acknowledged. "Readjusting tractor beams to inverted polarity, scanning for incoming debris."

Danik Brie felt not a little unlike a Bolian navigational deflector as he manipulated his console. Shunting systems status displays to the side, Danik called up sensor readouts and configured his console to display three different views of the Artemis; one dorsal elevation, one aft elevation, and a third set to represent sensor contacts in tridimensional space, prioritizing stellar matter that posed the most significant threat to the ship in a translucent sphere around the representation of the Artemis.

Alright, you big, pretentious, over-glorified excuse for a Morris-Thorne wormhole, he thought at the Horizon. *Let's see what you got.*

Brad nodded his head and began to work with the Bolian Ops officer to get all phaser banks converted to tractor frequencies. It would be necessary to have multiple potential beams in case more than one neutronium mass came on a collision trajectory at once, which was highly possible with the swirling chaos they were currently inside.

As Scotty was checking that all decks and systems for fine for the time being, he started a level 3 diagnostic on the sensor array, just to make sure that it was still accurate.

Suddenly, the captain called out his name, and he listened intently. As he briefly nodded, he responded back.

"Yes, sir. Prioritize shields, tractor beams, and impulse drive."

Scotty started running the calculations, and watched the antimatter levels, as well as anything else affected by the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. As long as the metaphasic shields held, there would be no depolarization effect from this area which could affect the magnetic containment of the warp core and allow antimater to drain out: as long as they did not actually used the warp engines. The plasma energies of the anomaly would then find a way inside their plasma vents and overload their own EPS grid, rupturing every single part of it all across the ship... with obvious catastrophic consequences.

But impulse engines would still depolarize; the higher output they used, the faster they would until they would loose all thrusting power. The balance between use and depletion will be most tricky to keep and monitor. And the longer it would take to clear out of the phenomenon area of effect, the harder it would get.

Kheren leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees to finish:

"Lead the way, Number One. I want *you* to make sure that we get out of here. If those shields fail, the first thing to go offline will probably be me."

"Aye, Sir." O'Conner quickly replied with a nod, before taking his seat and turning to the chief of security.

"Jackson if you could put out some of those flames for Mister Snow. I rather not have our shield melt away."

He turned towards O'Conner and responded.

"Commander, with all our phaser arrays tuned to tractor beam frequencies, we would not be able to put out any subspace fractures as we were previously able with them."

He didn't like that response, and he knew neither the captain or the commander were going to like it but he had been given two conflicting orders.

"I believe that if we only transfer fifty of the phaser arrays we will still have an acceptable number of reverse polarity tractor beams to do both tasks."

"The inverted ionic pulse emitters on the deflector dish installed by Lieutenant Syntron will take care of the fractures and faster than conventional phaser fire, Mister Jackson, " then said the captain, now aware that the new tactical chief did know about this new system developed and tested by his science officer barely over a month ago. So understandably, he was a bit confused by the orders.

Sitting straighter in his chair, he added:

"Still... keeping all options open is wise. Let us follow your recommendation anyway as added insurance, Lieutenant."

Brad nodded his head kicking himself mentally for not knowing about the upgrades to the deflector dish. That was something he shouldn't have missed considering all the reading he had done during the survey portion of the mission. At least the sting was taken away a bit by the Captain taking his recommendation; although it wasn't really necessary if the deflector dish could accomplish the task that the phaser arrays were performing.

"Aye, Sir." he said as he began targeting the raging fires closest to them with the pulse emitters on the deflector dish, firing highly concentrated bursts that acted much like a bucket of water being poured over a flame, extinguishing it and its effects.

"Ionic pulses are working as expected, radiation levels bombarding the shields are decreasing."

After Jackson's reply, O'Conner turned to the Vulcan in the room.

"Lieutenant Syntron if you could humor me, would you please check the position of the stars, once we are clear?"

O'Conner wanted to make sure that they hadn't been knocked in to the storm's bubble galaxy.

"Yes, Commander," the Vulcan science chief acknowledged the First Officer's request.

"Good point, Number One," approved the captain with a respectful nod, guessing the man's reasoning behind his orders; "since we have no way to orient ourselves effectively while inside this inferno, we might think simply backing out would bring us outside and into the Hromi sector... while we could have drifted so much as to find ourselves in the pocket universe at the heart of the Azimuth Horizon."

He looked again at the fiery vista on the main viewer.

"This chroniton burst blinded all our instruments as much as us... long enough for the ship to even have come about without us realizing it. You are wise to have us locate ourselves as soon as we clear the storm."

He winked at his First Officer sitting at his right.

"And to think that I am not even feeling dizzy yet. Glad to have you aboard, Commander."

With these words, he glanced at his new CMO sitting at his left, hoping he was now fully versed in the anomaly's effects on Andorian physiology... especially *his* peculiar Andorian physiology.

There was nothing else he could say or do now. From this moment on, it was all in the hands of his capable officers and crew.

And *this* was the hardest part of command.

At least, for someone like him, who's emotions and desire to have things in his own hands raged within him... as much as the elements raged outside of the fragile energy bubble that stood between his ship and the ferocious fury of the monstrous cosmic storm that, suddenly, swelled out of proportion, seemingly to devour them and the rest of the universe.

Kheren had taken note of the way the young man tried to resolve what looked to him like confusing orders; not with emotional outbursts or deciding for himself what was best in his mind for the ship, but pointing out the problem with disciplined respect *and* offering an alternative to help command make that best choice for the ship.

Prime officer material appreciated the Andorian silently.

The Q incident and the uneasy feeling of displacement and alienation he had felt growing these last days were easy to forget now with such remarkable officers working with him.

Starfleet officers.

Now he felt ready to face space and time.

Kheren nodded with approval as Chief Jackson made sure their way out was kept clean and safe and the Andorian returned his four eyes to the main viewer. The sooner they would be out of this storm, the better. Their job was almost complete and, with a few hours outside its perimeter to test out the gravimetric effect discovery of Danik Brie, they would be finally ready to get back home and deliver what was expected of them: the data needed to tame this storm.

He noticed Doctor Aquila ordering the aft torpedo tube to launch their log buoys while starting to watch the crew's vital signs on a monitor, his fingers poised to switch hailing frequencies while his ears waited for the anomaly's interference to clear and receive Starfleet's comm traffic. The speed and the ease with which he had adapted to his complex array of responsibilities and the coordinating capability of his bridge station was amazing for so young an officer.

They do train them well these days... concluded the Andorian. But that might also be more because of the qualities of the man himself... or both... as it should be.

The same could be said for all the others around him, from veterans like Commander O'Conner and science officer Syntron to their brand new chief of Ops Brie and engineer Scott as showed a moment ago by Jackson, their tactical officer.

Even at the heart of a storm, he felt confident, at ease, knowing they were there with him.

But let's get out of here anyway now, shall we? he told himself silently.

There was still the matter of that unexpected chroniton surge that inexplicably threw them over half a billion kilometers inside the Azimuth Horizon. Massless particles displacing four million tons of starship?

They needed to take time to find out about that as well. Because that would have been expected from gravitons. Chronitons were not associated with mass and space as gravitons were.

They were associated with time.

And *that* was worrying him.

Lieutenant Jackson had reported an accumulation of chronitons in their ablative armor from prolonged exposure to the anomaly; and then, out of nowhere, a massive surge of those same particles.

That was worrying him a lot.

But, as the minutes went by, the swirling of the Andorian's emotions behind his frozen, expressionless face abated as that of the fierce cosmic storm too slowly but surely calmed down. At a prudent half-impulse speed and careful trajectory set by First officer O'Conner, they managed to clear the anomaly after an hour of silent travelling. Under science officer Syntron's vigilance at the sensors, Lieutenant Jackson's accuracy shoved away any floating debris that came too close to their shield chief Scott worked dilligently to keep active as much as the engines, while Ops officer Brie monitored ship systems with the same care Doctor Aquila did for the crew.

Finally, it looked like they were out of the fire.

From Danik's chair at Ops, it hadn't offered much. In fact, it had almost seemed too easy; which worried Danik a bit. Hadn't this very ship attempted this very same mission *three times* already? From the briefs he had reviewed, Danik didn't recall those assignments to have gone nearly this smoothly. In fact, he had begun to wonder if the Azimuth Horizon was the space-born version of his home planet's Senden Funnel. Several of the legends in Bolian mythology certainly would fit.

"Status report," asked Kheren, sitting back in his command chair and looking with a relieved sigh at the silent, dim twinkling of the stars now filling the large viewscreen.

The Vulcan chief of science was first to answer:

"We're maintaining position once again at six hundred thousand kilometers from the edge of the anomaly. The patterns of stars confirm that it was not the Artemis that change location, but the anomaly itself that instantaneously shifted its border's location."

At the request from the Captain, Brie automatically launched Level 5 diagnostics on all key ship's systems. As the telltales on his console switched from standby to ready status one after the other, he smiled slightly to himself, thanking the Great Bird of the Galaxy himself for their good fortune.

"Sir, ship system's ready status confirmed. No malfunctions or abnormalities from exposure to the Azimuth Horizon or the chroniton surge."

As he continued surveying the area surrounding the Artemis, Syntron began cross-checking this data with sensor readings just prior, during and after this event, and then noted several unusual results.

"Captain, referencing our sensory data in sequence as this event occurred, it would seem that nuclear radiation and chroniton particles have indeed slowly accumulated to significant levels all around the metaphasic shielding during our exposure to the anomaly's emissions over this past week... Doctor Aquila may need run a medical diagnostic scan to verify if any of this radiation penetrated through the shielding and the hull."

"The log buoys are en route to Starbase 10 and 24, Sir" Then confirmed Doctor Aquila on his left. "There are no adverse effects being reported by the crew. It appears that the metaphasic shield is still holding."

As the Captain asked for all departments to report status, Chief Jackson looked down at the controls. He listened to the science officer's report and licked his lips nodding his head slightly. The report was concerning, especially considering what he was seeing on his console.

The science chief then added:

"Preliminary results of these particles may have had some type of temporal effect on the Artemis... and it seems that we have experienced a rather small time dilation effect that suspended time within the shielding bubble. Perhaps this could be related to the apparent anomaly shift that just occurred."

THAT is what I am afraid of, said Kheren silently to himself.

After his bewildering instant adventure to the 23rd century under the Q entity's interference a short while ago, the Andorian captain was now most wary about anything related to time... like chronitons... and reports of time dilation by efficient Vulcan scientists.

But instead of voicing his fears, he stood very straight and asked:

"Stardate confirmation, please."

Brad looked around and saw the other officers working on getting a stardate fix. He couldn't help with that but his report fit in well considering what Syntron had just reported.

Turning his head over his shoulder to look at both the captain and the second in command of the ship he began to speak.

"Captain, I cannot speak to the stardate, but I think it's important to mention that the chroniton buildup in the ablative armor matrix has subsided. The buildup from the past week is nearly gone. What little is remaining I would say built up in the time we've been exiting the anomaly. The chroniton accumulation on the shield bubble has also abated."

It was obvious what he was stating. Now all that remained was waiting for one of the other officers to get a fix on a communications buoy that would allow them to verify the stardate. As much as he didn't want to admit it, all the evidence was pointing him to believe that they were no longer where they had been, displaced in time.

Once again.

Syntron acknowledged the Captain's order with a nod, after which he employed a variety of verification procedures to ascertain their stardate and location.

He then reported:

"Based on observational calculations from stellar drift and relative constellation patterns, pulsar positioning and star spectrography... they confirm that our ship chronometers and localizers are in synchronicity with the known universe."

Continuing with his analysis, the Vulcan science chief then added:

"Despite slight discrepancies within sensor scanning when comparing them to the universal quantum signature, it would seem that we are within our own space-time continuum... and not in the Azimuth Horizon pocket universe or any parallel one, like the Mirror Universe."

After a pause, he concluded;

"This slight discrepancy, Captain, may be due to the chroniton contamination from the extended exposure to the nearby anomaly during our orbiting examination of this phenomenon and its removal from the chroniton surge."

"A chroniton surge engulfs us... and all the chronitons already covering us disappear?"

The four oculars of the Andorian captain went from Syntron at the science station to Jackson at the tactical console then back.

As the rest of the bridge officers relayed their reports, Danik shared his shipmate's confusion. Chronitons, despite their temporal properties, were still matter, granted on a subatomic level. Physics just didn't allow for energy and matter to be created and destroyed on a whim. Which left the question, where did all of that build-up go?

O'Conner tapped his console at his side.

Then, with a frown, he looked over at the Captain and reported.

"Crew and ship's systems undamaged, Sir, but seems all of our photon torpedoes have been completely drained. The quantum torpedoes fared better but are less than half of a standard yield."

Michael O'Conner's engineering expertise allowed him to answer his commanding officer's question before he even voiced it:

"It will take at least three days to replace or rearm that many torpedoes at a Starbase, Sir."

"As good a reason as any to avoid any trouble then," retorted the Andorian.

It might have sounded like light banter had it not been for the seriousness of his stare and of his tone of voice matching that of his bland face. He was still looking at the Ops officer at the very front of the ship, waiting for confirmation of the stardate when he ordered:

"Doctor, open a channel to Starbase 10."

Doctor Aquila looked a bit puzzled as he complied and activated the correct hailing frequency.

"I'm not receiving any response, Sir. Let me see..."
He hit a few keys.

"There is no interference level high enough to hamper communications. If anyone's there, they should be hearing us."

Unless...

The ominous thought of the Andorian captain was cut short and smoldered when Lieutenant Snow at helm reported then:

"Stardate confirmed, Captain; 87199.1. Present location... "

From his seat, Kheren could see the large navigation board and that they were indeed where they should be... and *when* they should be.

And therefore, should Starbase 10...

"Doctor; scan all frequencies. If you cannot raise Starbase 10, try contacting Starfleet."

Danik made some adjustments to the plasma distribution manifold.

"Doctor, I'm boosting power to the transceiver array. If there's anyone out there to hear you, you should be able to find them."

"Acknowledged."

Aquila fiddled with a few controls.

"Sir, there's absolutely no chatter on any Starfleet or Federation frequency. No interference. No jamming. It's completely silent."

He paused for a moment.

"I am expanding the search on all frequencies, Sir."

The Artemis' Chief medical Officer's face changed completely. He double, then triple, even quadruple checked the computer readout.

"Sir, out of all known frequencies, there is only one set of frequencies that has any chatter at all."

Doctor Aquila swallowed.

"Romulan frequencies. Almost all of it is encrypted."

If we haven't traveled through time, maybe the chronitons shielded us from something that may have drastically changed our timeline... Aquila thought with fast-mounting apprehension. Caius quickly drew his own attention back to the console when it beeped.

"Sir, I'm getting a message coming from the former location of the Romulan Star Empire's homeworld. It's broadcasting on all subspace frequencies."

"On audio, Doctor."

Andorians had very few facial muscles. But they still could frown noticeably when something looked strange... or threatening; even more when it felt like it was both. Total radio silence would happen only for very specific reasons: a large scale catastrophe, a full scale war, or...

What they heard then, booming out from the bridge's speakers, confirmed that it was both.

"WE ARE THE BORG. LOWER YOUR SHIELDS AND SURRENDER YOUR SHIPS. WE WILL ADD YOUR BIOLOGICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVENESS TO OUR OWN. YOU WILL ADAPT TO SERVICE US. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE."

For a moment of eternity, they all froze as if time had no meaning.

And sure enough, that was indeed the truth.

Brad had not been expecting what he heard. Those fatal words hit his ears and his brain struggled to comprehend. There was no possible way, was there? It was as if his worst nightmares had come to fruition. The Borg war had recently ended, the fleets were struggling to rebuild after the devastation that had already occurred, and here they were again.

Shaking his head quickly and violently he shook the indecision, the fear, the trepidation out of his mind, or at least out of the forefront of his mind. The fear was still there, the indecision was still there, but he had a duty to do. Now was not the time to give in to the fear.

Immediately, he assigned the tactical sensors to scan the surrounding area. With their limited armament, they were effectively dead in the water tactically speaking. If they were to run into a Borg cube, he didn't know what they would do. With limited weapons and engines that couldn't outrun it, there were limited options; none of them comforting at the moment.

Thankfully, the results of the scan came back negative.

Thank the Gods for the little miracles... he thought before giving his report to the Captain.

"No vessels in range of tactical sensors," he said loud enough to be heard as he began running simulations determining the best course of action if they were to engage a cube.

With the typical hormonal reaction of Andorians to fear and danger, Kheren's voice became utterly calm and focused.

"Mister Snow; keep us as close as possible to the anomaly without risking being sucked into it. With the level of local interference, we should be invisible to all long range sensors this way. Mister Brie, watch for any system failure. Mister Scott: make sure to keep our power levels stable even this close to the Azimuth Horizon, especially our shields. And please keep them up above all else, Mister Jackson."

Turning his silvery gaze to his left, he then asked:

Doctor; make sure the crew will be safe so near the anomaly and that they stay focused on their job. The last thing we need is anxious people being affected by it."

After a slight raising of an eyebrow upon hearing this most unexpected message, Syntron immediately began a swift analysis of their situation.

"At this close proximity Captain, all of our long range sensors are inoperative," Syntron replied as he continued modulating scanning frequencies. "However, the Vulcan scientist continued "in addition to the expected anomaly emissions, our short range sensors indicate that there is also a residual chroniton trace following a parallel trajectory and in the same direction as the subspace signal just received."

"You are telling me this chroniton surge came from Romulan Space?" wondered out loud the Andorian Captain, spinning his chair towards the science station, eyes wide and antennae high up. "From the Borg? But the the Borg are no more; We erased their entire Collective with a telepathic attack right at their queen in the final conflict. Even if by some miracle some remnant of their decimated kind could have survived... they could not have produced such a radiation surge and be able to threaten the whole Romulan Empire, could they?"

He could see the tall bearded Vulcan shake his head to refute the possibility.

"Since there were apparently no remaining Borg after the conclusion of the recent warring encounter with them, there must be some other explanation for losing contact with all Starfleet frequencies and then receiving a Borg transmission through a subspace frequency broadcast from the Romulan Star Empire's homeworld." The Vulcan surmised.

"Wait a minute; there is *no* Romulan homeworld. Not anymore; Romulus and Remus were vaporized years ago by the Hobus catastrophe!"

"Begging the captain's pardon, then chimed in helmsman Snow, but navigational optical scans are confirmed; the transmission came from a star system... at the exact location where records say the Romulan central twin worlds were... Sir."

"And the chroniton emission?" asked the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"Same heading... but several parsecs closer," read the pilot from his nav records, once he linked them to the sensor readouts with a few taps.

"Captain", the Vulcan science chief pondered, "Perhaps the anomaly has opened up a rift and created some type of temporal flux."

The mouth of the Andorian dropped open. With his still fresh time displacement experience with Q, he dreaded for a moment to be again the victim of the annoying and dangerous entity... then dismissed the idea as soon as it flashed in his mind. This was completely different... but just as foreboding... and potentially as heavy in consequences.

But before the Captain could respond, he added:

"Or perhaps we are somehow hearing an 'echo' of a transmission emitted during the last Borg war... reaching us now due to the effects of the chroniton trail."

Yet, even as he proffered the last explanation, he realized that this did not explain why all of the Starfleet signals have all been vanquished. And the captain was already pointing it out, shaking his white-haired, earless head.

"That would not explain Starfleet's silence. And you Doctor, he added glancing at the man sitting at his left side, you said that there were no subspace frequencies active at all but for those of the Romulans; that means the Klingons too are... not there anymore."

There was nothing reassuring in this sudden new realization about their situation.

"Or possibly... Syntron then hypothesized, a unique combination of these events have somehow triggered something other than a subspace tear in the universe... perhaps something along the lines of a catalyst opening an interdimensional door to an antimatter continuum."

"Let's not get carried away on wild theories here," Kheren then said, his pragmatic Andorian nature cutting short the broad spectrum of ideas a Vulcan would instinctively dwell into. "I know as well as you that we, being ourselves of matter, could not even exist more than a fraction of a second in an antimatter continuum. And you yourself pointed out all the accumulated evidence confirming that we *are* in our *own* reality, in our own time... Except that... it is now, somewhat... different from what we know... or... remember.."

While he spoke, his gaze wandered to Ops chief Danik Brie at the forefront multitask console of the bridge, then at Bradley Jackson sitting behind him at the tactical station, then finally at the science station at the back of the command center where chief of science Syntron looked back at him.

He could see that they too now, remembered the timejump they had shared between two heartbeats; the dramatic changes in History they had prevented.

Didn't they?

To the First Officer of the Artemis, there was no way in a couple of weeks, let alone hours, that the neutered Borg could have taken over both the Federation and the Klingons and now be threatening to finish off the Romulans.

And so, looking back on his Starfleet engineering classes, O'Conner worked to remember what he could from Temporal Physics. And, a few moments later, he leaned over to the captain and whispered.

"Sir, perhaps someone changed the past. The buildup of chroniton we experienced after a week here may have insulated the ship from a temporal change."

"We have a game we play on Andoria when we are in what you Humans would call our teenage period of life, Kheren whispered back to him. " It's a daring game: who would dare plunge his bare hand into molten metal. The trick is to first dip your fingers into cold water and then plunge them quickly in and out before the moment of insulation provided by the water's surface tension on your fingers evaporates. What you are suggesting is something similar... but on the space-time cosmic scale."

The commanding officer of the starship Artemis pondered what his First Officer suggested.

"Syntron did confirm the chroniton accumulation reported by Jackson disappeared when we were hit by that chroniton surge... and chronitons are to time what gravitons are to gravity. If, as you say, our week-long accumulation somewhat... insulated us from the outside emission... like cold water from hot metal... we could still be where and when we were, even if everything else could have changed."

He turned a wide-eyed stare at O'Conner and could barely keep his voice down.

"If... *if* this chroniton emission caused or resulted in a change in the timeline... And *if*, as you suggest, it was a deliberate act... erasing the Federation from History... Then, you may be right! *This* could very well be the result!"

Taking a pause to calm himself, the captain then went further into his train of thought.

"We know the Borg made forays on the edge of the Neutral Zone, against both Romulans and Starfleet outposts, before the historical first accidental meeting of the USS Enterprise with them in the Delta Quadrant precipitated their attacks on the Federation. Now, *if* they had come later... but with no Starfleet, no Enterprise, no Jean-Luc Picard warned of their existence... or even there to stop them... the Romulan Empire *would* have stood alone directly in their path of conquest... like now."

The Andorian looked back at the screen where the fiery maelstrom of the Azimuth Horizon loomed like the doors of the Human Hell themselves. But at this precise moment, he wondered on which side of the doors they were now.

His voice was still low and for his First officer alone. But it was tense like a restrained shout.

"And... without a Federation to stop their plans of conquest, the Romulans would have never *needed* to tamper with subspace weaponry and cause the stellar catastrophe that destroyed their homeworld... and so, Romulus and Remus would still be there, like they are now... still there to be the Borg's main target... instead of Earth."

And then, his four eyes went back to O'Conner.

"And this chroniton surge... it came from... Romulan Space."

He blinked once.

O'Conner nodded along with Kheren's reasoning.

"Recommendation, Number One?"

"To use an old earth Idiom: 'Out of the frying pan and in to the fire', Sir. I believe we need to head to the source of the surge. If we are lucky, the Borg won't have destroyed what ever is there and we could find out what happened."

Kheren nodded in turn. Then he stood up and tapped his combadge.

"All hands, this is the Captain. By now, each of you must be aware that we were hit by a chroniton surge... and that the Borg have magically reappeared to threaten this quadrant, when we all know they were annihilated barely months ago. It is my belief that we have witnessed a major change in the timeline... a change from which we have been miraculously spared."

He made a pause to let everyone on board take time to grasp the significance of what he was telling them... and to anticipate what he was about to say next:

"Whatever your beliefs are, or your absence of beliefs, one thing is clear: it seems that we alone can see if this is true and, if so, attempt to correct it. We have all sworn an oath to serve the greater good when we decided to put on that uniform we are wearing. Let us be ready."

Closing the channel, he now addressed the bridge crew.

"Mister Scott; we need to mask or disguise our warp signature and to sustain as much speed as possible. Mister Brie; rationalize our power consumption to reduce as much as possible our detectable power output. Mister Jackson, plan tactical contingencies with what we have left in case we are intercepted by either Borg or Romulan vessels."

Making a pause to make sure they all understood what was expected of them, the Andorian spun towards the science station behind him and to his left.

"Mister Syntron, all this will depend on you; we will need your sensor expertise to follow that chroniton trail all the way back to its source and transmit all necessary course corrections to Mister Snow."

Once the Vulcan Acknowledged, he looked down with all four oculars at the Chief medical officer in his own command chair.

"Doctor; we need you to research all medical data regarding time travel theories and their effect on all species on board. We might very well need it if we ourselves are to tamper with time. If this crew falters at a crucial moment, we will not survive all this for long, let alone succeed."

"Acknowledged, Sir." answered Aquila. And then he asked:"Should we retrieve those log buoys?"

"By all means," promptly answered the captain. "Good thinking, Doctor. If The Borg or the Romulans would have found one of them, they would have been on our tail in no time... and all possibilities of restoring our reality would have been gone with us. "

Sitting back slowly and heavily in his command chair, Kheren ordered lastly:

As soon as everyone is ready, have us on our way, Number One... best possible speed."

He sighed and added: "And may time be on our side."

* * *

CAPTAIN'S LOG SUPPLEMENTAL STARDATE: 87209.9

After being hit by a chroniton surge while our ship was already blanketed by the emissions of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, we have found ourselves in an alternate timeline where the United Federation of Planets never existed.

The Romulan Star Empire conquered the Klingons and all the other spacefaring cultures of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants, only now to become the sole target of the Borg Collective, unhindered by any Federation, USS Enterprise, captain Picard or Janeway... or a Lotus Fleet.

Our duty is now clear: we must find out what happened to the timeline... and somehow correct it. So far, our only clue is that chroniton surge that hit us emanated from somewhere on the edge of Romulan Space.

After recalibrating the sensor configuration, Syntron turned to the Andorian sitting staunchly in the command chair.

"I have projected the precise path of the chronitron trail, Captain... transmitting all current coordinates to Mister Snow" announced the Vulcan Science Chief as he activated the console and relayed the data to the Chief Flight Control Officer. "I will continue monitoring all sensory data and convey any corrections or anomalies as they emerge."

"Thank you, Mister Syntron," answered Kheren. "Mister Snow, plot our course and get ready to warp out as soon as Commander O'Conner orders it after he gets confirmation that Mister Scott can hide our warp signature and Mister Brie finishes lowering our power sensor signal as much as possible."

"Sensor data received, course plotted and laid in, Captain," confirmed the Inuit helmsman.

"According to Mister Syntron's data, this would lead us to... 340 mark 12; the Algeron system, Sir."

"Where the Treaty of Algeron was signed... recalled the captain outloud. It helped ensure peace between us and the Romulans to be sure... and with the Klingons too in a way... But I cannot fathom how disturbing the signing of the ban against Federation cloaking technology could have by itself caused all this. There must be something else."

Turning again towards his left and the science station, Kheren looked past his busy Chief Medical Officer getting reports on the mental and physical health of the crew to address the tall Vulcan Lieutenant.

"Mister Syntron; what do we know about Algeron... besides the fact that a treaty was signed over there?"

After conducting an expeditious investigation using the available data in the library banks, Syntron responded:

"There is unexpectedly minimal information available about the Algeron system other than it was an inhabited star system in Federation space situated near the Romulan Neutral Zone. The system consists of Algeron I, II, III, and IV."

After a brief hesitation, the Science officer added:

"In regards to the treaty itself... as a historical reference... in 2311, delegates from the United Federation of Planets and the Romulan Star Empire traveled to this system for a peace conference where they wrote the Treaty of Algeron. This peace treaty not only reinforced and redefined the Romulan Neutral Zone, it stipulated that any violations of the Zone without adequate notification, by either side would be considered an act of war. The original treaty would not even allow any vessel in, notified or not, even for an emergency. In addition, at the time, it also prohibited the development or use of cloaking technology by the Federation."

The Vulcan then looked up and concluded:

"Under the current circumstances Captain, these last details appear rather... irrelevant."

"Indeed, admitted the commanding officer of the Artemis; if there is no Federation, there is no Treaty of the Neutral Zone... therefore no Neutral Zone or cloaking ban to violate."

He sighed audibly.

"It will not make our current job all that much easier... but at least we will have a few restrictions less to consider when doing it."

Taking a deep breath, he added:

"Once there, we will have to search the entire system. There is something out there... or there was... and we will have to find it."

He did not say "hope" because, if they did not find the cause of the chroniton emission and how it affected the timeline... and how to reverse it... then there would *be* no hope at all left.

For them... or anyone else.

Subsequent to transmitting the projected path of the chroniton trail to Lieutenant Snow and reporting information available about the Algeron system to the Captain, Syntron now had a moment to review the overall details of the anomaly sensor readings, correlating those last taken to those initially gathered.

The results were... fascinating; so much so that he rechecked the results several times and confirmed them with Lieutenant T'Val in Astrometrics and Lieutenant Irksos in Stellar Cartography and then assigned them to an immediate task.

"Captain" he reported, "Based on an overall examination and reconfirmation of our complete sensory readings and analysis, it appears that the anomaly has entirely changed in configuration and size; it now expands beyond the previous measurements of one astronomical unit towards Federation Space... but now, nearly ten times as much towards the Klingon border and well over two light years towards Romulan Space. All other preliminary data has remained unchanged; yet its size and shape have dramatically changed... almost instantaneously."

"So that's why we found ourselves suddenly inside of it," understood Kheren. "Because of the change in the timeline?"

Syntron nodded as he was running through a series of key inputs on the science console.

"After discovering this, I then logically conducted a level 3 diagnostics and confirmed that these readings were not due to any type sensory malfunctions... during these readings or even currently. I am now in the midst of preparing a simulation to show you the results of this transformation, Captain, and how it may be linked to our current situation," he stated as he then correlated the data and coordinated with Lieutenant T'Val in Astrometrics to prepare a simulation of the morphing anomaly's changing form on the bridge's main viewscreen.

He first projected a map to show the areas of Federation, Romulan, and Klingon space relative to one another with markers and border configurations to use as a backdrop for the display.

Lieutenant Iksos then contacted Syntron to indicate that the data projection was ready. The Chief of science of the Artemis then projected over the map of territorial space the anomaly's form morphing from a lenticular shape one-light year across, to a new incarnation... suddenly swelling to a comet-like globulous shape fifty-three percent larger, with a distinctive tail angling directly toward the Romulan border.

He left the projection on for all to absorb this revelation and to ponder its implications.

"If I may, Sir, then interjected Aguk Snow, turning from his piloting console, "but if as I understood it, the anomaly travels through subspace fractures, then I believe that we are looking at the travelling pattern of this altered timeline: no Federation traffic, but heavy passages to and from the Romulan Empire... who, like the Klingons, never bothered much about the pollution of subspace their own warp technology might have caused."

"And with no warp 5 directive like we had when this effect was discovered in the mid-24th century... now understood also the captain. "And it was Federation scientists who discovered this damaging phenomenon in the first place, Federation citizens who showed concern about it, Federation engineers who found out how to correct it; but if there never was any United Federation of Planets..."

The new size and shape of the anomaly threatening to destroy the entire universe suddenly, frighteningly, made sense now.

And it also added to the already heavy burden of their responsibility to bring things back the way they were. That is, if it was even possible.

As the science chief continued working at his console, an epiphany manifested itself as he was unconsciously thinking about the dilemma of the Artemis being detected by the Romulans or the Borg while they headed toward the origin of the chroniton emission.

"Captain, in regards to masking the ship's warp signature, perhaps we could compensate for the detectable neutrino emissions of the ship's nacelles by over-layering a controllable field of antilepton particles to nullify the neutrino discharge. Mister Scott and I could reconfigure several shield emitters to generate this antilepton energy screen and interlace several layers of this field around the nacelles. It may take a bit of adjusting but perhaps we can develop a way the correlate this with a given warp speed and allow us to travel in relative obscurity."

"As long as it does not compromise our defensive capabilities, go ahead Lieutenant," Acknowledged the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"The downside to this method though, Captain, is that while the antileptons may mask our warp signature to prevent us from being detected by our adversaries, this also has the unfortunate consequence of interfering with all subspace communications; leaving us virtually deaf to any additional signals being emitted from our destination."

"You want to make a phone call, Mister Syntron?" asked Kheren with a raised eyebrow worthy of his Vulcan officer. "We're not going after the Borg. Unless they are the source of that chroniton emission in the Algeron system, I would rather avoid them entirely. And we certainly do not want them to call us."

He shifted his silvery gaze forward again.

"We will make no transmission, no active scans, nothing that would betray our presence. I do not care if we are deaf and short-sighted as long as we remain silent and unseen. And it is not just for our own sake..."

He did not have to word out to anyone what was indeed at stake.

Syntron looked rather perplexed toward his Captain. He did not register the concept of a "phone call" but interpreted its meaning as relating to some form of primitive communication.

He then replied rather stoically: "I didn't intend to imply that we would attempt any type of communication with either the Borg or the Romulans Captain, but was merely stating the consequences of our intended methodology; realizing that we would be sacrificing the tactical advantage of receiving any potentially useful information or signals being transmitted from either species as we headed toward Romulan space under our antilepton energy screen."

"I very much doubt they will be discussing anything relevant while occupied in annihilating each other, Lieutenant. Especially that, for *them*, everything *is* as it *should* be. Algeron is our best chance of learning anything useful. But first, we must get there... and our best strategy is to do it without attracting attention to us."

The Andorian sighed then looked back at his science officer.

"But you are as thorough as usual and we will certainly need this quality of yours if we are ever to manage restoring the timeline. Mister Jackson will work on preparing us for any confrontation with that limitation in mind. Mister Syntron, Mister Scott, do what's best to get us there unnoticed. Mister Brie's rationing of our power consumption and Mister Snow's flight plan will surely help as well."

Scotty nodded back at the Captain.

"Yes, Sir."

The Vulcan chief of science then turned toward Engineer Scott sitting at the Engineering console and stated simply:

"If you are ready, Mister Scott, we can begin this procedure immediately."

Before the Vulcan science officer asked him if he was ready to begin the procedure, Scotty had been thinking about what needed to be done in order to get underway as the Captain had ordered. Altering a warp signature was simple enough... but masking it completely...

After a few brief moments, he answered Syntron with a nod.

"Yes, I'm ready. I can do most of the adjustments here, but the more specific stuff, I'd have to go to Main Engineering."

The Chief Engineer of the Artemis then sat down at his console and started the preparation work on the antilepton energy screen.

Nodding in approval, Kheren then glanced directly to his right.

"Coordinate all departments working on this, Number One. Make sure we get there safely."

"Aye, Sir." The First Officer replied almost instinctively.

O'Conner didn't share the worry about Romulan or Borg forces that Kheren did. It was true that both groups would most probably be larger in this timeline than in their own, but in his eyes this was a disadvantage. The Federation hadn't been powerful because of its size but because of the decades of struggle that forced it to evolve and develop. So while there might be more Borg and Romulans, they haven't faced yet the might of the 25th century Federation.

Even if it was but one ship.

The captain stood up and looked at the man sitting on his left.

"Doctor, I will accompany you on a small tour of the ship. I think our crew will need a health and a morale boost from the both of us while we get ready to change History."

"Agreed Captain."

They both went to the turbolift where Kheren ordered the cabin down to deck 25, the lowest inhabitable deck of his twenty-six-deck ship, where Waste Recycling, Environmental Control, Emergency Batteries, Anti-matter Generators, Gravimetric Polaron Generators, Secondary Shield Generators and the lower portion of the Warp Core Reaction Assembly were serviced by engineering junior crewmembers.

In his mind, there were no lower decks, be it with the vessel itself or the crew roster; everything and everyone was equally important as a part of the whole, and starting there would certainly emphasize that. After all, if he was touring the ship now, it was only for the morale support he felt was part of his responsibility as commander of a starship; especially now, when for all of them, home did not exist anymore... and might never will.

Then as Kheren left the bridge, O'Conner turned to the human pilot.

"Mister Snow, if you would, once all is ready, best possible speed."

"Aye, Commander. Waiting on confirmation from engineering that our warp signature is masked and from Ops about power rationing. If we can make maximum warp, it will take us five days to reach the Algeron star system... assuming no evasive course will be needed, Sir."

O'Conner then turned towards Jackson.

"Lieutenant Jackson, could you see if you could combine some of our remaining torpedoes into fully functioning ones? If we can't, try to increase reloading speed as we might have to ripple-fire the weakened warheads. And lets hope we get lucky that the Borg or the Romulans haven't seen quantum torpedoes or metaphasic shields yet."

Brad's head nodded as the Commander gave him the order to try to work up some way to combine the firepower of the torpedos, something he had already been researching. Up to this point he hadn't mentioned it because he hadn't found any sources that cited it as possible.

But, almost at the exact moment O'Conner suggested that course of action, he found a case where a science team had been able to successfully combine antimatter resources in the field, ultimately creating a larger single ball instead of two separate sources.

"I believe I have a potential workaround, Sir," he said as he turned his chair around to look towards the science station.

"Mister Syntron, I'm sending a report to your station, would you look it over and let me know if it looks feasible in our situation?"

As he asked the question, he sent the report to the science station, hoping that the science chief would determine that it was doable and they'd be able to combine some of the quantum torpedoes. Although it would reduce even further their ammunition, it would make the warheads that remained more potent, giving them a better chance of actually doing some damage if they did encounter enemy resistance.

Syntron turned toward the Chief tactical officer as he addressed him and then looked down to rechecked his console.

"Your proposal just arrived, Mister Jackson... I will analyze the possibility of its implementation and inform you of a determination promptly" the Vulcan science officer responded as he began to study its contents.

After thoroughly examining the proposal and investigating some potential alternatives, Syntron turned and addressed the chief tactical officer across the bridge.

"One of the challenges, Mister Jackson, would be safely extracting the plasma from the reaction chamber of one torpedo and effectively transferring it into the chamber of another torpedo without triggering a reaction from either weapon."

After a brief pause he continued:

"It is a viable possibility. However... if successful, our available quantum weapons would then be at fifty percent capacity. Given the current circumstance, I understand your logic: it would be preferable to have fifty percent of the weapons at one-hundred percent capacity than the reverse."

Then, now standing straight towards the man, the Vulcan scientist added:

"Perhaps though... as an alternative, we could carefully interconnect a unidirectional EPS conduit directly to a torpedo and extract a minute amount of plasma directly from the warp core or the impulse engines; redirecting a measured, specified amount slowly and directly into the reaction chamber of one torpedo. If this is successful, we can then meticulously follow a similar procedure with the remaining torpedoes and eventually return our offensive capabilities back to full capacity."

Brad listened to the science officer's suggestion. Although he didn't have an in-depth knowledge regarding engineering, plasma or antimatter what he suggested made sense. It certainly couldn't hurt to try it on a single torpedo and if it worked they'd theoretically be able to recharge the majority of their supply rather than depleting half the supply of projectiles.

"That sounds like a great proposal. Do you have a science officer available that we could partner with one of my armory technicians to test your theory?"

As the security chief asked the question he turned his chair back around to bring up the duty roster, checking for a suitable candidate on his side to partner with the science officer.

"Lieutenant Seton would be highly qualified for such a procedure" the Vulcan Scientist responded.

"You may want to join him for the initial test... to ensure that things run smoothly. Mister Scott, he then said turning to his right. Can you have a team in engineering ready to join us in this rather surgically delicate procedure?"

Scotty nodded.

"Lieutenant Blakely will be heading whatever team needs to make sure everything runs smoothly. As for me, I need to continue to convert these emitters."

The blonde woman acting as his first assistant nodded in acknowledgement.

"Of course, Sir. Mister Syntron... Mister Jackson, I will be in the armory waiting for your specialists to join us."

And so saying, she went to the turbolift and called for deck 9, where the forward torpedo magazine and the armory and its shop were both located.

Meanwhile, as the lift shot down towards the farthest part of the Artemis, the Captain looked straight at his new Chief Medical Officer:

"Well, Doctor, how do you think we will all hold up now that we are alone in a hostile universe and tasked to restore reality itself?"

Aquila paused as he often did, thinking of what he was about to say before saying it.

"As a doctor, I have seen patients pull through that should have died, and I've seen them die with no warning."

He paused for a moment again.

"What I'm trying to say is that there are things outside of our control, and that with a little faith everything will be as it should."

Caius rethought his response again.

"In other words, I think that, because we still exist, we probably have a guardian angel looking over us, and that we should stay focused. We still exist for a reason, and I don't think it's our time to die just yet."

Despite his lack of facial expression, the Andorian was visibly surprised by the response.

"Quite a spiritual answer for a man of science, Doctor. Do you really believe there are occult forces and entities presiding over our lives? Deciding what our destiny is?"

"I think that there may be something that interferes with the natural order of things from time to time. Consider the statistical improbability that we would be spared from the timeline change. A Lotus Fleet ship. Some of the best of Starfleet officers are here. If anyone can solve this, it's this crew. The odds of anyone being spared from the timeline change are slim. The odds of just the right crew being spared, even less. What are the odds of us being spared and having the ability to track the source of the problem?"

Aquila shrugged.

"I don't know if there are occult forces at work, guiding us. However, we know that there are entities in existence with massive amounts of power. Consider the Q Continuum. Even if the Q aren't at work here, there may be some other invisible entity placing the right people in the right place at the right time. Playing with us like game pieces. We Humans have legends of gods that did these kinds of things, making heroes of common men."

The Doctor chuckled.

"And what are the odds. We just left Olympus." He chuckled again, referring to the bridge's nickname.

"Indeed, the humor of the imagery does not escape me," acknowledged the captain, despite the fact that he was not laughing at all. But his antennae were almost touching.

Especially now, Kheren was certainly the last one willing to dispute the point his chief medical officer made; barely an hour ago, he had been himself a pawn in one of the aforementioned Q entity's games. But that did not mean that he was willing to accept it.

"You know, Doctor, Andorians never had gods; not in the sense you Humans did. More like the saints of certain of your ancient beliefs. Our beliefs have always been about ancestors whose lives and deeds are highly glorified, even mythified, to inspire us... not supernatural beings playing with our lives and denying us free will and responsibility over our own destiny... "

He shrugged.

"But even Andorians can not deny today that cosmic entities do exist with us in this universe. That being said, Q himself bowed more than once before the Human spirit. And it is that spirit we need to keep healthy here, if we are, as you so aptly noted, to continue beating the odds as we did until now."

He now looked again at the man.

"So, any recommendation, Doctor?"

"I think that walking among the crew just as you are doing now is the best course of action for morale. In times like these, people either come together or split apart."

Aquila looked the captain straight in the eye.

"You need to be the glue that holds everyone together."

Kheren nodded, visibly a bit ill at ease. And he indeed said so:

"The thing is, Doctor, I am not very good at... relationships. Andorians do not need such... emotional attachments when it comes to perform their duty; and this very common duty shared is what naturally builds up such relationships between us, with no... extraneous socializing needed. Humans however, and most species except maybe Vulcans, not only seem to need it, they seem to crave it. And to be honest, I am not prone to it... even with my own kind."

They had reached the lowest level of the ship and walked towards the technicians working there as he finished:

"I do hope you will be able to... nurse me through this difficulty, Doctor. Your counsel, your... humanity... will always be more vital to me and this ship than all the buttons you can push or the hyposprays you can handle."

He was interrupted by the shrill voice of one of the crewmen shouting:

"Captain on deck!"

Everyone literally froze at attention.

"As you were," immediately said the Andorian, raising a hand. "I appreciate the sentiment and the discipline, but let us keep this formality for admirals, shall we?"

It was obvious the presence of the commanding officer of the ship was not only surprising... it was deeply felt by the men and women working in the bowels of the ship. It took them a moment to realize that this was not an inspection but the captain showing his personal concern with *them*, not with the work or even the vessel.

After all, they were all together what was left of their entire universe. And Kheren made sure that each one of them knew that they were all in this together, that he was proud and confident in each and all of them... and that they would all together prevail... somehow.

As his shift ended, Syntron went down to deck 9 to check on the progress of the weapons procedure he hypothesized about, that was now already in full operation in the armory.

As he approached the head of quantum mechanics in his science department, he noticed him working carefully with Lieutenant Blakely and a small team of scientists and engineers on one of the quantum torpedoes.

"So Lieutenant Seton, what is the status of our weaponry rearmament?" he inquired.

"The first torpedo was the most challenging, Sir, the other Vulcan answered; but once we completed three of these quantum torpedoes, we were able to establish the most effective methodology for completing each one. We then broke the process down to five principle steps. Afterward, we created four additional teams; each specializing in one step of the process and so, we created an assembly line approach to most effectively complete the procedure. We are now completing each torpedo at an average of eight point four-five minutes. We have completed thirty-two quantum torpedoes thus far. At this current rate and allowing for the training of new teams during each shift change, we should have the remaining torpedoes complete and in place in about twenty-two point three-seven hours, Sir."

"Excellent Mr. Seton, carry on." The Vulcan chief of science acknowledged.

As long as they would be lucky enough to avoid any hostile encounter for the next day, they would be in a much better position to face the dangers up ahead. Since the Borg in this timeline never faced the Federation, they would not be ready against the Artemis weaponry: Nor the Romulans.

Syntron wondered however if they would be ready for what lay ahead of them, in that star system.

* * *

"Entering the Algeron system, Captain," announced Lieutenant Snow.

Even being able to maintain all the time their maximum speed of warp 9.6, it had been five days of tense travelling for the lonely crew of the starship Artemis. Scott and Syntron's work on the engine emissions had apparently worked well enough to hide them. By rationing power consumption and keeping active scanners offline until their arrival to their destination, Chief of Ops Brie succeeded in reducing their sensor signal well enough so that long range scans would not pick them up enough to alert anyone of their presence... or their identity. And all the while... helmsman Snow kept their trajectory straight between the Azimuth Horizon anomaly and Romulan Space, the old "flying before the sun" masking trick of Terran aircraft war pilots.

Fortunately, this followed the chroniton decay trace science officer Syntron managed to keep track of with passive sensors as they flew towards the source of the time change... and, hopefully, the way to restore it.

As they entered the star system where sensors pinpointed the source of chronitons that came with the change in History, tension rose under the yellow alert condition called by the ship's klaxon. Tactical chief Jackson had drilled the entire crew daily in preparation for the worst, from a squadron of cloaked Romulan warbirds hunting them down to the Borg boarding the ship. Doctor Aquila likewise prepared medical teams for everything in between moral loss to ship emergency evacuation. But no amount of preparation could completely diffuse the sense of loneliness and responsibility they all felt, knowing they were in the here and now the only ones left of what had been the United Federation of Planets... if not of their own species.

The need to succeed and the fear of failure had never been so intense for those seven-hundred and fifty individuals that time forgot.

All the while, every mind on board had thought about how to face their main problem: how to restore the timeline. But there was little they could really think of, let alone accomplish, until they had precise data on how this alteration had been done in the first place.

And now, they were about to find out.

"Slow down to half impulse," ordered Kheren as he came on the bridge and sat in his massive command chair. He looked a moment at the image of the two orange-colored stars on the screen, one a sub-giant and the other a dwarf star fairly distant from it.

"Mister Scott, stand by warp power for emergency warp out in case we are approached. Mister Brie, prepare five decoy probes in one forward tube to throw off any pursuit if we do have to flee."

Sitting back in his seat as both officers answered, the Andorian paused for a moment before adding:

"Mister Jackson, I know our remaining photons are just good for a light show, but that should still help us blind the sensors of a pursuer; load aft torpedo tube with a full salvo. Number One, start thinking about an escape route and a hiding place. We cannot afford detection or risk any damage or casualties in combat while we are here."

He kept his four eyes straight at the stellar vista before them as he spoke.

"Mister Syntron, full scan please."

"Long range scanning in process now" The Vulcan replied as he continued to carefully scrutinize the Algeron system before their solitary starship.

He then looked up with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"Intriguing... according to our records there should be a pre-warp civilization in this vicinity, but according to our sensors, there is no trace of them now... not even remains of a past civilization."

As the Vulcan scientist looked back down through his sensory data he noted aloud:

"In fact Captain, there are not any life-signs registering at all... or even any traces of technology existing within this entire system. The system appears to be completely lifeless."

Making this discovery merely added to the perplexing circumstances they were already facing. Afterward, he modulated his sensor scans and continued sweeping throughout the system. During this process, he came upon a distant energy reading.

"Captain, I am now detecting an energy output reading of perhaps a microsingularity emanating at the external fringe of an asteroid field..." stated the science chief as he honed in on the reading.

He looked up a bit bewildered.

"The energy reading is coming from what appears as an important concentration of alloys that are identical in composition to those used in Romulan starship construction."

Kheren sat straighter in his chair. He did not immediately call up Red Alert; their power signature would have flared up and signaled their presence immediately light years away, something he most decidedly did not want to.

Still at Yellow alert, the Artemis slid discreetly into the system as the Andorian now turned his big chair to look at his science officer.

"There is an uncloaked Romulan ship in there?"

As the science chief continued scanning the energy output reading, he clarified:

"Currently, this energy source and what appears to be a metallic mass are motionless."

He then began to further analyze the data to hypothesize approximate dimensions.

"Therefore, to answer your inquiry, Captain, the answer appears to be negative since our readings indicate that this object is much too large to be any vessel ever made by Romulans that we ever knew of: including the Reman Scimitar design. In addition," he added "there are no indications of any warp trail coming or going from anywhere in this system; at least recent enough to be detected. Only the chroniton trace remains and is now almost completely dissipated. According to sensor readings, it leads directly to the location of the singularity and the alloy deposit... and it appears to be surrounded by a cloud of decaying chroniton radiation."

"That is our target then," understood the captain, turning back to his helmsman. "Mister Snow, follow Mister Syntron's sensor signal, half impulse. Let us tip toe closer."

"Aye, Captain," answered the Inuit pilot. Then after a moment he added: "Sir, sensor signal is leading us inside that large asteroid field. There is some kind of dense particle cloud there, like Mister Syntron said."

"Try to use an indirect trajectory, using the largest asteroids to hide us, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Sir."

For a tense hour, the Ambassador class starship swerved within the immense field of planetary debris, obviously the remnants of a fifth planet destroyed by some unexplained destructive display of energies that did not affect the rest of the solar system... unless it also related to the unexplained disappearance of the pre-warp culture the Vulcan chief of science had noted. But the files had said that there were four planets in the Algeron system, and a dense asteroid field... just like now. Whatever happened seemed not related to their experienced timeshift.

Nevertheless, Kheren did not feel any less apprehensive as they went deeper in.

The captain's musings were then interrupted by the viewscreen showing the vessel entering something that looked like a miniature nebula. It quickly parted a few minutes later like a veil to reveal finally the source of those particles and of Syntron's sensor signal.

It floated amidst the debris field in a pocket of empty space, a grey-green hexagonal darkened structure with gracefully arcing curves and ending in sharply curved points, the center a large, ovoid, bulbous enclosed space from which extended in a radial: six skeletal frames of curving latticework of the same dull, flaked metal.

It was obviously a space station, complete with docking and fleet yards facilities.

And it was Romulan.

O'Conner studied his console until the base came in to view. He looked it over and smiled a bit as he quietly asked;

"Should we knock first?"

Kheren glanced back at his First officer, antennae curving inward in amusement.

"Let's look over at the manor before we announce ourselves... if there is anyone in the house to begin with. We should have already been challenged coming out so close and so suddenly on the place."

Despite the power signature detected by Syntron's instruments, there was no sign of activity visible, even as they approached the station; no lighted windows, no emissions coming out... not even positional lights flashing.

"All stop at farthest transporter range. "

"Answering all stop. Holding position at forty thousand kilometers of the object." acknowledged Lieutenant Snow.

"Analysis." the Andorian ordered outloud.

Syntron began digging through the library archives in an attempt to find additional information on this specific area of Romulan space.

This time, using the coordinates as a reference point, he uncovered an old file.

"Captain, historical records indicate that on Stardate 0811, a Starfleet group stumbled upon a major Romulan base in this system... obviously this one. "

Turning around from his station, he recited what he had already committed to memory:

The surprise attack dealt the enemy its first true defeat when thirty Romulan war vessels that were manned only by skeleton crews during a resupply operation were destroyed in orbit of it before they could fire a single shot. Six Starfleet vessels were lost in the engagement when the planetary base destroyed itself after its shields had been damaged seriously. The loss of the fleet was a crippling blow to the Romulans who never recovered fully from its effects. The orbital base however was evacuated before the final suicide destruction of the ground facility and Starfleet hoped to use it as a beachhead for further incursions into Romulan territory; redeployment and successful counterstrikes prevented Starfleet from achieving its goal, but the Romulans never recovered use of the place either... apparently they were pressed too much with diminished forces on other more major fronts."

Syntron returned to his console, continued to cross reference through the available data and discovered another related file.

"Records also indicate that this base was rediscovered and reactivated briefly for the signing of the Treaty of Algeron on board it, then shut down permanently according to the stipulations of the Treaty of the Neutral Zone stating no installation or vehicle or piece of equipment belonging to either faction is allowed within the zone. The station however was not destroyed, but on mutual consent left as a derelict there, a monument to symbolize the event and remind both of the tragedy of space war."

Syntron then began short range scanning the darkened hexagonal structure suspended before them in space like a ghostly relic from the past.

"It would appear that this station is situated within the coordinates of the historical location of the abandoned Romulan orbital base we just discovered in the files. Scans indicate there is a definite power source that is minimally active, singularity based... and once activated Captain, a power source such as this can never be shut down."

As the science chief continued his short range scans, he realized another unusual condition.

"Curiously Captain, according to our sensor readings, this structure, despite being obviously of an ancient design, does not show the usual decay that would be expected from a structure almost 300 years old."

He then switched to a bioscan analysis of the construct and reported:

"There are not any life-signs registering on any of our bioscans, but there are organic compounds indicated in the habitable areas... which still registers minimal life support."

After listening to the science chief give his input into the analysis of the situation, Brad began to speak. His fingers ran across the console's touch screen as he read the readings outloud to the command team, starting with the big picture and moving towards the smaller details. "My scans confirm a lack of propulsion trails. There haven't been any ships in this area in quite a while. All weapons systems on the station are cold; as far as I can tell, we aren't in any danger at the moment, but I don't like it. It appears the station has six plasma torpedo launchers but it looks like they've been hooked up to the EPS grid. The connection looks rather much like that of a starship nacelle venting system, nothing I've ever seen on a station though. It's a rather odd design, I'm not really sure what they were trying to accomplish."

The readings of the weapons systems were amazing. If the weapons had been hot they would have already been blown out of the stars.

"As I mentioned, disruptor arrays are cold, there's no weapons lock on the ship, but there's something strange about them. The scans are showing that this model of array is at least a hundred years newer than any other part of the station."

His eyes continued to scan the results as they came in.

"The station is outfitted with cloaking emitters, but those are also not functioning."

Brad paused as he read the next line, it was strange indeed.

"Curious, I'm not reading any escape pods. It looks like someone left here in quite a hurry, but there are at least twenty fully equipped shuttles on the hangar decks."

"That is because Romulans do not use escape pods, Mister Jackson, " explained the captain.

"Especially in those early days, deep space travel was so new, rare and limited, the chances to be rescued in space were practically non existent... but more than that: Romulans see it as their solemn duty to die to prevent capture, to never give nor ask for quarter. In the days this station was designed, they always shot down an enemy ship... and escape pods."

"I thought from the Kobayashi Maru test that it was the Klingons who never took prisoners," commented Aguk Snow.

"It never was the Klingons, Lieutenant. Klingons will gladly die in battle because they will not shy from any and all means to gain victory, including taking and interrogating prisoners; they did invent the mind-sifter for this very purpose after all... and Rura Penthe is centuries old. But Romulans however always chose death before capture, in the name of their Empire. Ritual suicide for them is as deeply ingrained in their mentality, in their sense of pride and honor, as it was for your own ancient samurais on Earth."

Kheren glanced at Jackson.

"I suppose that both using the same Klingon ship designs and Romulan cloaks during their alliance of the 23rd century caused the confusion."

"So... they could still be in there," concluded the helmsman.

The Andorian then turned his four oculars towards the chief medical officer sitting at his left.

"Well... there are no life signs or movement, Captain, "Aquila reported; "There is life support, but it's fairly minimal. A half G and cold at 278.15 Kelvin. The air should be breathable, but any level of exertion would render one unconscious."

The doctor scrolled the data on the screen of his chair's integrated console.

"The organic compounds are probably food or some such; although they could be dead-bodies. No way of telling."

Doctor Aquila looked at the captain, hoping that his next recommendation was not too overly cautious.

"If you are planning on sending an away team, I can administer injections that should allow people to stay long enough to restore life support to acceptable levels. However, considering that we are in an alternate timeline, I do not want to rule out new diseases that may be present on this station. I would recommend we take bio-hazard precautions until we can be certain that these organic compounds are not harmful."

"I appreciate your caution, Doc," nodded Kheren. " I will leave such preparations in your capable hands; seems we will have little choice but to go in, if we are to ever understand what happened and how we can correct it. There is but so much we can learn from out here."

The commanding officer of the Artemis turned his attention to the other side of the bridge and towards the man at the engineering station.

"What can you tell us about this place, Mister Scott?"

"Captain, answered the chief engineer, Lieutenant Blakely has just finished an analysis of the station. Since she is quite knowledgeable in historical comparative engineering studies, I'll let her fill you in."

With a sheepish smile flashed to her direct superior officer, the blonde woman turned to step down to the engineering display screen and brought up the schematics of the scanned Romulan installation.

"Sir, she then began, this structure is an early 22nd century spacedock facility from the Romulan Star Empire but not so different from those used by the United Earth Starfleet of those days; a central storage, housing and flight control structure extending six yard arms to house starships for docking, resupplying and repair."

The station indeed looked like some older, simpler version of the earlier space outposts like space station K7 on the Klingon border far away on the other side of the Azimuth horizon anomaly; but instead of the three large storage silos of K7, there were six skeletal structures with mechanized hooks and cranes and grapplers looking like antiquated TV antennae extending radially from the inhabitable center.

"The power source is typically Romulan, she detailed next: singularity power generator at low output with antiquated nuclear power plants back-ups using enriched plutonium. Those have been shut down but still emit some radiation."

The display highlighted the power sources' location and readouts as she pointed out:

"You know however that such singularity power was not used by the Romulans until the later half of the 23rd century, a hundred years after installations like this were built. The material analysis also points out to late 24th century Romulan metallurgy on several parts of the structure, mostly the docking array. Despite its obvious great age, this base has been extensively refitted at most but a few years ago."

"There are no ships in any the dock lattices..." observed Kheren with puzzlement in his voice.

"No, Sir, she admitted; but on an asteroid facing the station, there are debris consistent with the remains of a Romulan Talon-class scoutship... And, although the alloys and shape of those hull fragments are consistent with those of a late 24th century design, the atomic decay dates the debris to be several centuries old..."

"That would make no sense," began the Andorian looking at the new sensor display the assistant chief engineer brought up, then only to add: "except, now, for us..."

"Nor does this shipyard structure, Sir," chimed in helmsman Aguk Snow, pointing at the main viewer. "Look at those docking arms; it's like they are all completely inverted. This station now looks more like a... a huge emitter array of some sort."

Blakely nodded to the red-skinned man at the helm.

"Good guess; the chroniton traces we detected are most dense around the base. It is still heavily contaminated, especially where cloaking emitters and plasma coils are located, which are surprisingly of very recent design compared with the rest of the structure... and quite numerous, much more so than needed just to mask an installation of this size."

Kheren now looked straight at his Chief Engineer and Scotty simply nodded.

"Captain... the way this old station has been reengineered... it had been transformed into a huge chroniton generator."

For a long moment, there was only silence on the bridge of the starship Artemis.

Both Chief engineer Scott and Chief of Ops Brie were speechless before the technical achievement of turning an antique space station into an experimental time particle emitter array of such advanced design in a field few ever dared to thread in. The work was impressive... and frightening.

Chief of Science Syntron and Doctor Aquila kept silent, pondering the scientific and moral implications of anyone daring to deliberately use time as a tool... or a weapon. This structure was the source of the chroniton wave that had struck them, carrying with it all the changes of the timeline; the destruction of everything that they knew. Those implications were now clear enough...

Chief tactical officer Jackson and even First officer O'Conner could not find the words to express the potential danger of such a construct able to affect time itself and destroy enemies by literally erasing them from History; a dreadful doomsday weapon in the wrong hands. The little they already knew of this altered timeline spoke of it plainly enough...

As for Captain Kheren, all four eyes riveted to the image floating in space amidst the debris of a blasted planetoid, surrounded by a sinister halo of ominous radiation particles, he could only stare in silence himself for long seconds before he finally ordered:

Michael O'Conner looked to the main viewer and raised his eye as he said:

"Syntron; can you determine from here how this, umm... generator, fires... or where a ship would need to be to be sent back in time by its emissions?"

The Andorian looked sideways at Michael.

"You have an idea how this thing works, Number One?"

For a moment, Kheren had forgotten that his Exec was himself an experienced technician, a former starship chief engineer with also years of work on a starbase. The man might very well have already deciphered the purpose of the whole structure just by looking at it and hearing its specs from Scott and his people.

Wizards of the 25th century... he thought with an inward grin.

O'Conner continued to gaze out the viewscreen, studying the design of the station.

"It's just a bit of educated guess and a bit of a hunch, Sir, but, because it's reconfigured as an emitter array and knowing the age of the scoutship wreckage. I assume it fires a chronitron burst in such a way that it sent the ship back about two-hundred and fifty years."

"Either it was a field test of their "time machine"... or that is what they did to change History," supposed the captain. "We will have to get over there to find out."

The First Officer acknowledged.

"For the away team, I suggest we work on getting the life support and power up and running. Then, once we get the station fired up, we can bring down several teams to study it, figure out what happen and fix it, before the Borg or the Romulans find us."

Kheren nodded.

"Let us hope they will keep each other busy long enough for us to find out what was done here...and how we can bring back everything the way it was."

He looked back at the screen.

"Lead your team over there, Commander and use all personnel you deem necessary to bring this installation back online. Download its computer core and any log you may find that will tell us what they did here."

"Aye, Sir."

O'Conner glanced around the room and studied the other officers, remembering their weaknesses and strength.

Still at his post on the bridge, Brad Jackson sat at his console reviewing the data on the station. It just didn't *feel* right.

The odds that one ship would have been spared, and that it would be this ship, it just wasn't right.

He didn't believe in religion; that had been his mother's thing... but an experience like this made him wonder. Were there 'Gods' up above playing with them? The idea of a god wasn't really that different from the 'Q's. Maybe a Q had visited Earth thousands of years ago and created Humans so it would have something to play with later. There was no way to know and he certainly didn't have the faith to blindly believe.

Trying to keep from letting himself get too absorbed in his thoughts, he sent a message to Tyvya, requesting her presence on the bridge. Although he had yet to be called for the away team, he was relatively certain it would be happening soon. He didn't have much experience yet with Commander O'Conner... and for some reason he got the feeling that the executive officer didn't really think that highly of him... but protocol called for the chief of security to join away teams. As little as he knew about the captain, he had gotten the picture that he liked protocol, and there would have to be a pretty darn good reason for not following it.

So, it only made sense to prepare.

As he glanced at Danik, Michael O'Conner remembered just how important this mission was... so he picked every senior officer on the bridge.

"Danik, Aquila, Jackson, Scotty, and Syntron; transporter room 1, fifteen minutes. Bring an EV suit and your equipment. Also prepare additional medical, repair and science away teams," The XO ordered as he moved to the turbolift.

Scotty nodded in the direction of the First Officer.

"Got it, Sir."

He then motioned to Blakely to take the engineering console while he would be away.

Captain Kheren then turned his silvery stare to his left.

"You might want to go with them, Doctor. If by any chance there are still people over there, they might be in pretty bad shape with such low life support. Or at worse, those bodies you believe that you found might tell us something."

Doctor Aquila turned to his console on the bridge and skimmed through the available personnel then tapped his combadge.

"Aquila to sickbay. I need the following personnel to report to transporter room 1 in ten minutes with standard medkits and EV suits: Doctors Shledax, Lumquist, and Sirris."

Since the ship was at yellow alert, there were already emergency medical teams on standby, so if there were any undetected injured people on the station, additional help could be sent over.

Caius knew that if there were any medical hazards on the station, the chief pathologist and chief epidemiologist would be able to identify it quickly. Additionally, since tensions were high, he thought having the chief therapist might prove useful to help keep everyone calm in a high stress situation.

"Acknowledged, Mister O'Conner" the Vulcan for his part responded after an uncharacteristically long moment.

Syntron, gazing at the ominous grey-green hexagonal darkened structure, was literally at a loss for words, even when the First Officer addressed him. But now he finally managed to find his voice back and elaborate:

"Unfortunately, Mister O'Conner... I am not really certain how this apparatus functions, let alone know the appropriate procedures for operating it. What I would advise is extreme caution. We don't want to inadvertently make the complexity of our situation with time even worse by altering the timeline capriciously."

Kheren lifted his four oculars past the Chief medical Officer to the tall Vulcan who had just spoken.

"Wise words, Lieutenant. It might be wise as well for you to accompany them and evaluate immediately any data found over there."

"Affirmative Captain, I will prepare for the away team departure."

Then the science chief walked to the turbolift and descended one level to his quarters. He changed into an away mission uniform more suited for a low temperature environment. He then headed back to the turbolift and descended to deck 14 and walked until he reached the science department. After a few brief conversations in Astrometrics with T'Val and Irksos who was heading up to the bridge to assume the science post, he walked into his office and gathered his science tricorder and his PADD. Once he was duly equipped, he headed to the turbolift and then toward the transporter room.

He wasn't certain what he would do on the Romulan station other than scan the areas and begin to gather data. What would follow would depend and how effectively they could decipher the unusual apparatus and determine a way to counteract the time displacement that has literally changed their universe. Not exactly a routine mission, but he has yet to experience much of a routine mission since arriving on the Artemis.

With extra time available, he decided to head back to the science office and go over the details of the away mission with his science team.

He would bring with him Lieutenant T'Val as someone to bounce ideas off of in addition to her astrometrics proficiency, Ensign S'Krell with his expertise in linguistics and cryptology, Lieutenant Seton with his know-how in subspace technology and quantum mechanics, and Ensign Muller as an expert in Xenology and biology.

He arrived at his office and called in his crew. They had minutes to clarify their gameplan.

When given the direction that he would be joining the away team and finding out there would be multiple teams Brad sent messages to multiple other security officers; assigning one to each of the other teams. Orders were given to ensure that everyone reported to the transporter room within 12 minutes, giving the security officers just enough time to prepare for the mission but also to make sure that the security officers reported prior to the other teams.

Quickly, Security Chief Brad Jackson made his way to the armory to authorize the release and locking of all needed weapons for his team; including his own personal rifle and then to the storage locker nearest the transporter room and pull out an EVA suit.

He hated EVA suits. They were horribly uncomfortable and restricted personal movement. It simply made things all that more difficult if they were to end up needing to move quickly; but there wasn't any way around it. So he wore it and kept his mouth shut.

As he walked towards the transporter room, he reflected on what this mission meant. Everything he had ever known, everyone he had ever known, it was all gone. His right hand stroked the shaft of the class III phaser rifle he carried on his shoulder, biting down on his lower lip. In this timeline he would never have inherited this weapon; his father would have never been born, let alone died. Everything would be different.

His mind continued along that train of thought until he stepped up to the doors of the transporter room. Shaking his head slightly, Brad pushed the thoughts out of his mind and forced himself to concentrate on the mission. His duty at this moment was not to worry about the timeline but to protect those who might be able to do something about it. Syntron, Danik, Scotty, Doctor Aquila, or O'Conner; they might be able to come up with some amazing solution to the problem and they'd all find themselves back in their own reality... But if something happened to them that shouldn't happen...

No, it was his duty to protect those who would work to protect the very fabric of their reality and he didn't have any more time to daydream.

Stepping into the room, he nodded his head to the Commander and made his way over to his other security officers, ensuring they all knew where they were to be. Part of him wondered why they were taking over such a large team at this moment but that wasn't his place to make such an assessment. The executive officer and Captain had reasons for their decisions and, although from a security standpoint he would have preferred to keep the initial away team smaller, he trusted his team to do their duties just as well as he would.

They were all ready. They had to be.

As they concluded their meeting, the science team walked to their lockers and then carefully began to put on their environmental suits. Afterward, they carefully ran through a series of tests to confirm that every system in the suit was fully functional. A hostile environment is not the place to discover a flaw in any system or in the suit itself.

All of the tests resulted positively. The team then headed toward transporter one to meet up with the first officer and the other team members from each department.

Each Science team member knew specifically what their responsibility would be once they would arrive onto the station, but they also needed to be fully alert and prepared for the unexpected. They were keenly aware that nothing about this environment or these circumstances was ordinary and that any error in judgment or action could have devastating consequences.

When the Science team arrived at transporter room 1, the chief of science noticed several other teams had arrived as well from medical and ops and were finishing organizing their gear.

Scotty and his team arrived shortly after Syntron and his team did.

He nodded at the First Officer and Syntron.

"This is my team, and I think we're ready to go when you are."
Lieutenant Syntron then walked up to the first Officer.

"Mister O'Conner; what is the target location of our transport?"

"Well, we still don't know much about the base so, the plan is to transport near the largest segment of bodies. If we are lucky, one of the stations near there will allow us to activate the power systems and life support. "

After putting on his environmental suit, O'Conner strapped his personal engineering kit to his thigh and grabbed the phaser rifle he had brought from the armory, before heading to the transporter console with his helmet under the other arm.

His mind however was still lingering back to his own quarters where he had gone a moment to get his own tool kit. Just as he had been about to exit his room, he had stopped and turned to the solo picture on his night stand and sighed slightly. He had stepped over next to the display and had picked up the small frame with a picture of a young female officer that was topping it and had whispered to it: "For you", before quickly putting it down and darting out the room.

His feet had moved him away readily enough; but his mind was still lingering back there... and his heart much farther still.

Michael O'Conner had lost more than just a universe. He was determined to get it all back.

"Once these systems are up, we can bring over your team to help us foil this Romulan scheme."

There was little doubt left in his mind; the chroniton wave from the Romulan border, the chroniton generator built on a Romulan hidden base, History itself erased, leaving only the Romulans to face the Borg... The culprits were clearly known to him.

And they would not get away with it.

"Affirmative Mr. O'Conner", Syntron acknowledged as he walked back over to his team and explained to them the plan presented by the first officer.

Then they each carefully rechecked their equipment while Syntron activated his PADD to confirm that his Romulan translator program was installed and functional.

He had never used this program before, usually relying on the universal translator they wore; but hypothesized that even if it wasn't completely accurate, it could at least help them to decipher some of the symbols of the written language that may be present on the equipment within the Romulan station. That is, if the visibility was clear enough on the station and nothing had damaged the consoles too severely.

O'Conner stepped over to the transporter operator and quietly gave him coordinates for the beam in. Then he moved to the pad.

"Let's get moving. Time waits for no man." He ordered with a small smile.

Once they had all made it on the pad, O'Conner nodded to the operator.

"Go."

And, with a woosh of light, they were gone.

Stepping first up on the transporter PADD, Chief Jackson heard the commander give the order and felt the familiar tingle as his molecules scattered and were organized back in their initial form on board the station.

Beaming aboard the Romulan Space station, they were greeted with a ghastly sight. It appeared as if they had arrived in an ice-covered ghost town; complete with frozen corpses.

While it had only been a couple of days, the vacuum of space had an ability to suck the life and air out of just about any place. Before them, in the room only lit by their handlamps and the sheen of ice, lay bodies of over a dozen Romulans slumped over their consoles or laying on the ground in awkward positions, each frozen to the core. Everyone of them was proudly wearing their dress Romulan Star Empire uniforms as if they had celebrated a momentous event; as if they knew they would die and wanted to look their best for posterity.

Typical Romulan mindset, recognized Michael with a sour grin.

In the distance, O'Conner could see that bay doors had been breached, allowing the air to be sucked out of the room.

Syntron immediately opened his tricorder and began taking readings. No life signs showed on his bio-scanner other than the landing party.

After nearly a minute of awe at the grisly scene, O'Conner shook his head and started to bark orders.

"Lieutenant Jackson, check for any automated defense system. Scotty, find a way to seal this room and to restore power. Mister Brie, Mister Syntron; check the consoles. See if you can find an active one or one that can be repaired and reactivated."

"Affirmative" the science chief replied as he signaled his team to head over to a console. It was heavily covered with layers of ice and despite several attempts of removing it manually, it clearly became a futile endeavor without the proper tools.

He reached down and grabbed his phaser adjusted it to heat setting and then fired along the console's surface until the majority of ice was sublimated into the void of space around them. The console was not damaged through this process and by focusing the beam of light of the integrated lamp on their suit on to the exposed console surface, it allowed them to see the Romulan symbols.

Syntron carefully removed his PADD and engaged the translation program. He then used his tricorder to scan an image of the symbols and transferred the signal to his PADD. The program analyzed the data and then revealed to him that this was a docking console.

After they finished analyzing the remainder of the consoles, they placed a printed card on the console with an identification key and the meaning of the activation inputs. His team then went around to all of the remaining consoles and followed a similar procedure, thus allowing the mystery of this station to slowly be revealed; like the pieces to a gigantic jig-saw puzzle.

Looking around again, Michael O'Conner let the science, engineering and ops officers do their work and finished with the chief medical officer besides him.

"Doctor, is the room clear of biohazards?"

Aquila had already begun scanning the room with his own tricorder, and looking over at the nearest bodies.

"So far so good. I'll let you know as soon as I have concluded analysis of my scans. One thing good about the coldness of space; not that many lifeforms can survive in it."

Brad Jackson, weapon at the ready, looked around and he saw the ice, the dead bodies; the result of a cold, harsh lack of an atmosphere. None of it looked any different than if this station would have been in their reality. Death appeared the same no matter what form.

But there wasn't time to reflect on that. Brad motioned two of his security officers over and they began a methodical scan of the room and the surrounding areas.

The scan did not take very long. The station was as lifeless as the bodies of the Romulans. It was easy to see there weren't any power sources active in the near area. Feeling comfortable with where things were at the moment, Brad made his way back to the main party, leaving his two guards at the closed access door as a precaution. Turning his attention to the Commander he made his report.

"Commander, everything appears to be safe for the moment. We didn't find anything that will pose a threat to the away teams as long as we remain in our EVA suits. I would advise caution as we go about powering up any of the computer stations though. It is highly possible that there are automated security protocols in place that are simply not active due to the lack of power to run them. Activating any of the power could bring them online endangering the away team."

"Less you happen to have a degree in temporal mechanics, I don't think we will have a choice."

So saying, O'Conner quietly walked over to one of the two officers lying frozen near the access door on the ground and inspected him.

"Never mess with timeline, Sub-lieutenant... It never ends well." He quietly said.

The first officer of the Artemis then stood and turned to the young security lieutenant.

"Besides, where would be the fun in coming all the way down here and not flip a couple switches?" He replied with a smile behind the lighted faceplate of his helmet before turning to Syntron and Brie, then to Scotty.

"Report!"

After completing the deciphering and identification process on the majority of the command center's consoles on the Romulan Space station, Syntron had a brief meeting with his science team to plan out the most reasonable and safe re-powering up procedure. Just as they were concluding their prognosis, the First Officer requested a report.

"Currently, none of the consoles we checked are active," the science chief began reporting as ordered; "nor do they appear damaged. They are apparently merely lacking power."

He then showed the First Officer a quick map that he had constructed on his PADD showing all of the consoles with detailed notes written along side of each.

"First, we're planning on temporarily disabling all defensive systems and the consoles that are linked in any capacity to the chroniton emitters," he explained as he pointed to each of them on the display of the small screen. "We don't want any of these systems creating more challenges than we are already addressing when we begin to add power into the system."

Obviously, the Vulcan had heard the recommendation of security chief Jackson.

"Second, we are going to use the portable power packs that the engineering team beamed down to initiate a start-up on the remaining key consoles. We'll begin with the environmental control consoles and then move on to the gravity consoles."

Syntron again showed the First Officer on the graphic representation the sequence of each step mapped out on the PADD display.

"If these are successful, it will make the remaining operations and procedures safer and much more efficient. If Mister Scott would join in with his engineering team, we would have this process completed within one point zero two-three hours... as a rough estimate, Mister O'Conner."

Michael turned to the chief science, and nodded in agreement.

"Sounds like a plan Mister Syntron. Work with Scotty's team to get that power back online. Once we have the basic systems up, bring as many people as you need on board. Then work to figure out the working of this station and contact me as soon as you have an idea of how this base might work."

"Commander. My team and I have finished our scans." Doctor Aquila then chimed in. "There are very few surviving micro organisms, and none of them are harmful. We've confirmed that there are no other life signs. We are currently in the process of examining the bodies and, so far, they are all Romulan and all data used to determine the causes of death is consistent with rapid decompression, asphyxiation, and hypothermia."

Caius Aquila wanted to add something more, but he was unsure of why. Something about the bodies was off. He just couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Doctor Shledax then showed Aquila some tricorder readings.

"Doesn't this seem strange to you?" Shledax asked.

The Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis nodded.

"Their adrenaline levels are extremely low considering the manner in which they all died."

He still couldn't quite put his finger on it. The bodies were all at their duty stations, and Aquila hadn't quite noticed how calm their facial expressions were, or that they were in dress uniform. Some were even smiling.

"Doctor Lumquist to Aquila."

"Come in"

"There are two Remans in the power control room. Same cause of death."

"Acknowledged." Caius accepted and noted this new bit of data on a PADD.

Then, after he received and read all of the reports, he shook his head.

"Now this is interesting."

He tapped his combadge.

"Doctor Aquila to Commander O'Conner."

"Yes, Doctor." answered the calm tone of the Artemis' first officer.

"It would seem that this place was very busy. There's sufficient evidence to suggest that there were lots of people here, perhaps in the thousands. This station is pretty small and should only accommodate a few hundred at most. After power is restored, I'd like to take a look at the station's sickbay and see if I can find any useful information in the logs."

"Sounds good Doctor. Michael replied. "Also, once we get power and life support systems back up, I will need you to coordinate the cleanup of this..." he glanced around at the bodies before finally ending saying; "this... mess."

Scotty then finished receiving reports from his own team on their comm channel and looked over the first officer.

"Sir, all critical systems are offline. However, getting them online would be simple. All we would need to do is power up the core. The only problem with that is that the EPS conduits are pretty clogged right now. Cleaning the EPS conduits would take some time...a couple days at max."

"Couple of days? That will not do, Scotty. Restore minimal power, cutting it off to all but life support and the main computer. Start cleaning those EPS conduits. Then, reactivate power at full. You can restore the other systems while the Doctor and Syntron work."

O'Conner then looked around finishing:

"And, what is the exact status of the hull breach?"

"The result of microfractures expanding and rupturing; a massive power surge from the core would be my guess as to the cause, before automatic failsafe systems finished the shut down operation these... gentlemen most probably started, unaware of those fractures. We can effectively seal the breach with a portable forcefield, and then work on the breach from the outside. Wouldn't take long at all."

"Much better, Mister Scott. I expect that breach to be sealed and basic power back on within the hour. Let's see if you truly are the miracle worker's grandson." Michael said with a smirk.

The First officer of the Artemis then turned to the chief of security.

"Lieutenant Jackson! I need you to find their armory and to give me an inventory. We might need some disruptors."

Every member of the away team' specific task group then was reporting to their superior officer.

"Chief Jackson," Lieutenant Mriish, said a typically purring Caitan female voice; "we have secured all the decks of this station, Sir. Security systems have all been disabled and no one is here but us. We are ready to deploy pattern enhancers to ensure any emergency beam out in case we have to leave in a hurry."

"This is Doctor Lumquist," now came on an older but still calm and firm voice; "Doctor Aquila, we are completing the disposal of the Romulan bodies. They will be put into the station's morgue until you decide if you need to examine or autopsy them here or back on the Artemis. We have found the medical log recorder here in their central sickbay and await power allocation to activate it."

"Lieutenant Syntron," then reported S'Krell the other Vulcan that had beamed down with him and the rest of the science team; "we have identified every major control station, As soon as they are active, we may connect our universal translator matrix with their computer interface to reconfigure them in Federation Standard. Standing by for your signal, Sir."

"All main stations ready to be reactivated as soon as the engineering team restores power, Lieutenant Brie," said the Artemis systems senior chief Ensign Donald Bartlett, coming up to the Bolian chief of Ops. "We have rerouted power to secondary power outlets less affected by the chroniton build up and limited the power flow to the key systems we should need only, Sir."

"Mister Scott, Lieutenant Baoule in the main reactor chamber, Sir; maintenance teams are coming to service the EPS conduits and damage control team in place to seal off the hull breach. We are ready to bring main power back online. "

All the data and communications went to each supervising officer who now could relay to the first officer their readiness to proceed with unveiling all the secrets of this Romulan space station that time had forgot.
Just like them.

Back on the Artemis, keeping stations at transporter range, the relief bridge crew was getting busy as well.

"Captain," reported the Edoan Lieutenant Cheonghi standing in for Chief Danik Brie, all systems are nominal. "Passage through the chroniton cloud has not affected them in any way so far."

"Well that is the trick is it not?" almost smirked Captain Kheren from his command chair. "So far.. chronitons are to time what gravitons are to gravity. Whatever they may do to our systems might show up only in a hundred years... or yesterday. Keep constant diagnostic mode operational Lieutenant."

"Power is nominal as well, Sir," now said the blonde Patricia Blakely from the engineering command station vacated by chief engineer Scott. "Core output, impulse power and reactor reserves show no drain since we left the anomaly. Steady at ninety-six percent."

"Sensors are impeded by the chroniton layer density around this zone, Sir," now told dark-skinned, dark-haired, dark-eyed Valencia Irsos, the chief assistant of Lieutenant Syntron calling out from the science console behind Kheren. " The spatial sonar will be able to go through it easily however."

"I recommend against it, Captain," interjected the Andorian giantess Tyvva sitting in Lieutenant Jackson's chair. "The radiation cloud effectively hides us and this station, even from Borg sensors. But even if we had our full ammunition supply available, we would not be able to fight off a Borg cube alone, let alone several, or a Romulan attack force, if any of them happened to find us out. No doubt either of them would be... curious about us if they got... pinged by our special sensor signal and found the Artemis."

"Are there any indication that they might come this way, Counselor?"

The willowy, ghostly pale Aenar now sitting in Doctor Aquila's CMO chair did not bother to turn her blind eyes or her antennae towards the Andorian ship commander as she answered with her soft voice:

"None, Sir. I get a lot of combat orders going between numerous Romulan vessels apparently engaged in military action but none of the coordinates shouted between them are relevant to our current position."

"And how is the current war ongoing?"

"Not good, Sir. This all sounds like the historical recordings of the last instants of the Battle of Wolf 359. The Romulan Empire of this timeline is about to fall."

Barbarians at the gate recalled the captain from historical accounts on the Fall of Rome.

But this time, the coming Dark Ages would be galactic in scope. Things were already pretty somber as they were for his ship and crew already...

Kheren sighed then ordered:

"Lieutenant Blakely; modify a covert probe to record and return upon the approach of any Borg or Romulan vessel within the radius of long range sensors. Lieutenant Irksos, select and prepare the best type of probe to be sent out. Lieutenant Tyvya, launch when ready and rig automatic red alert if it comes back."

Fifty-three minutes later, everyone on the derelict Romulan station felt his body suddenly lower heavily to the deckplates as a wooshing, hissing sound came through the external receptors of their EVA suits. The lights went on and a moment later, the voice of Lieutenant Robert Baoule confirmed through everyone's comlink what they all understood:

"Main power restored."

"Life support is back online, Sir," then added Ensign Bartlett to both Lieutenant Brie and Commander O'Conner. "Air is gonna be cold and stale but we can at least peel ourselves out of our tin cans... Sir. We have rerouted main power to sickbay and Ops only for the moment, until the engineering team clean up the EPS grid."

"Damage control team will commence scrubbing now that the hull breach is physically sealed, Commander," acknowledged Baoule in response.

Danik released his helmet with the telltale *snap-hiss* of equalizing pressure. Tugging the headgear off, he let out a heavy sigh of relief. A lot of people thought that EVA suits were like SCUBA gear meant for space. Danik disagreed with that comparison. SCUBA gear was much more comfortable.

O'Conner smiled to himself as he removed his helmet and unzipped his EVA suit.

"It's all coming together." He quietly said to no one in particular.

As the chief of science was carefully removing his environmental suit's helmet, he heard the first officer command:

"Syntron," he then ordered louder, "get your team working. I need to know everything about this station."

"Affirmative Commander O'Conner" the Vulcan replied as he reached over and began to activate the computer console.

Michael O'Conner spun to look at the chief of ops on the other side of the control room, overseeing the restored systems.

Lieutenant Brie, I need to know where this D'Deridex went. Get to work."

"Aye, Commander," Danik acknowledged. Balancing his helmet on the ledge of the central console, he extracted his tricorder from its holster and flipped it open. He leaned down to examine the console and, pulling an EVA glove off with his teeth, tied the tricorder into the ship's Universal Translator.

With a few presses of the console and some referring back and forth to the tricorder, the chief of ops of the Artemis managed to begin a station wide diagnostic. Allowing the computer to run a systems check, he continued to examine the controls with his tricorder, switching the hand holding the device and pulling off the other glove. As he passed one particular console, the scanner began beeping insistently.

"Commander," Brie called to O'Conner, "I think I've found something."

Continuing to translate the Romulan glyphs, Danik's brow deepened in concentration. Keywords like "chroniton", "emitters", and "array" made a surprising number of appearances in the text along with others like "analysis" and "modulation".

"It looks like this is the station dedicated to researching the manipulation of chronitons."

The Bolian manipulated the console, testing functions and exploring command pathways.

"I'm finding modulation controls, recorders, and analysis functions for the entire array."

A harsh beep sounded from the first panel, calling Danik back.

"Diagnostics report that all systems are online, but not at full capacity. Understandable since the station hasn't been maintained and open to vacuum as long as it has."

His golden eyes darted back and forth as the translated details scrolled down the tricorder's display.

"Nothing too bad. I can have teams from my department down here to begin repairs on systems while Mr. Scott handles the heavy lifting. Fourteen... Sixteen hours maximum."

"Computer core active, data bank access confirmed, Mister Syntron," now announced S'Rek to his immediate superior.

"All logs and files too," came back the voice of Doctor Lumquist over the comm.

Already down in the base's central medical facility, Doctor Aquila read the now accessible and decrypted report regarding the station's medical logs. As he went through the most prominent data, his eyes went wide; it took him a moment to open his comlink and report to O'Conner.

"Commander; according to the medical logs of this station, they did testing on every single crew member of the IRW Terix, a D'Deridex class warbird under the command of an Admiral Surol. Reports tell that they tested for reaction to radiation poisoning."

He cleared his throat. What followed was stranger still.

"Sir, according to this, they injected an antichroniton-based radiation serum to those crewmembers, one that would irradiate the individual with a lethal dose of those particles. They would surely die in a few years from such an injection. They apparently did this with every single person on this station. But, Sir, examination of the bodies currently on base shows that these were not injected with this... but they do show chroniton irradiation consistent with brief exposure at close range to a shielded major radiation source."

Aquila mused for a moment on what this could mean as he skimmed through the logs.

"They also have some stolen Federation files regarding chronitons and a case study from the U.S.S. Voyager's EMH regarding a nurse that had been uncontrollably traveling through time... and was cured of her condition through a similar serum injection after a similar chroniton exposure."

The doctor thought about the data before him for a moment and sent the information over to Syntron for confirmation.

"Sir, I'm not a physicist. However it looks to me like the lethal serum might have been injected as an attempt to counteract some side effects of time displacement. But I'm not entirely sure what to make of it. Does that sound right to you?"

It took the science chief and his team a while to bypass the security protocols, but once he worked his way into the system, the decryption process was relatively easy since it was stored in simple binary code; a once universal but now an almost primitive computer language.

He began searching through the somewhat fragmented information within the console; probing through the research logs; seeking even general information and data. Eventually Syntron found files referencing chronometric particles... and then some information defining chronitons as "the constituent components of an energy form with temporal properties." In a partial briefing, they described Chronitons as "subatomic particles with temporal properties."

Another entry went on to state "Chronitons are produced by the normal operation of their Romulan cloaking devices, and are often associated with the phenomenon of time travel." But these were just explanations and observations. He needed specific information of what they were doing on the station along the steps explaining how they were doing it.

Eventually, he found some more specific research data and summoned the first officer.

"There is an extensive research file about detecting, analyzing and calibrating emitters to specific chroniton signatures, the specific temporal signal coming from an object."

After another moment he added:

"It would seem, Commander O'Conner, that the Romulans have managed to develop a chroniton signature decay sensor to read the exact time of origin of matter and to modulate temporal energy...chroniton emissions... to match such a signature. This in turn has the effect of effectively displacing any object from one time period to another."

Syntron then looked squarely at the first officer.

"You may need to inform the Captain of these findings so that he may use them in conjunction with any additional information that has already been uncovered."

While Syntron and Brie were working on deducing the scientific nature of the station, Brad Jackson was busy trying to work his way into the security logs. Computer science had never been his strong suit but he was alright at it. There were probably members of his team that would be faster at it than he was, but they were all busy in one part of the station or another guarding the teams that had spread out to investigate. Bothering one of the scientists or engineers might have been faster as well, but everyone was already quite busy.

He heard Syntron's report and Brie's before he finally hacked into the security system. At that point, it was simple; download the logs to a PADD which was set to translate them. Quickly many of the things that they had deduced became obvious facts. This team of scientists and engineers were at the top of their game, even their deductions tended to be accurate.

"Commander..." Brad said motioning O'Conner over to the console he was working on.

"This console operates like a targeting system for the chroniton discharger. If I'm reading this right, each of these six controls manipulates one of the docking arms, letting them focus on a single point. Correlating with the Artemis' sensors, they're currently aimed at an empty area of the asteroid field. I thought it looked strange when we were first investigating the field, but now it makes sense..."

As Brad spoke he pointed on the screen a particular rock formation in the asteroid belt.

"Each of these asteroids here has tractor beam emitters on their surface, keeping them in place to form this kind of bowl-shaped formation you see. In this formation, they act like a converging lense amplifying the power of the beam. Security logs are showing that the visiting warbird, transponder code identifying it as the IRW Terix, left the station on thrusters five days ago and moved to the focal point inside the asteroid formation. Once there, the warbird came to a full stop and disappeared. The rest of the logs show nothing until we arrived."

They could both see the visual recording of the bird-shaped vessel coming into position and then slowly vanish once it stopped there... almost as if it had been transported.

But before they could ponder the meaning of it all, the comm channel came alive:

"Misterr Jackson; we have sensorrs and tarrgeting systems opperrational, " then purred Lieutenant Mrrriish. "Commanderr O'Connerr, the base's armorry is empty... The only weapons arre those found on the thirrteen bodies and they arre ceremonial Rromulan Honorr blades only. And the captain is asking forr a status rreporrt."

"Very good Lieutenant Mrrriish," O'Conner replied before adding: "Work with Lieutenant Jackson and figure out if anything is salvageable from that Talon class ship."
O'Conner then tapped his comm.

"O'Conner to the Artemis. We have main power and life support back online, Sir. They seem to be a splinter military group. I have the doctor reviewing the medical logs, Lieutenant Syntron is studying the computer core and Lieutenant Brie is going to give us a target time."

On the bridge of the Artemis, Kheren listened to his First officer's report, his usually bland face now utterly inscrutable.

He knew of the Terix and of Surol. About forty years ago, then a commander of the same ship, he had had a confrontation with the USS Enterprise of then Captain Jean-Luc Picard during the Pegasus Incident, when the Federation was caught red-handed at having illegally experimented with cloaking technology; phase-cloaking technology to be precise, that not only rendered a ship invisible but intangible. Heads had rolled that day in Starfleet, as high as that of then Admiral Erik Pressman who had captained that illegal research and had tried to revive it when Picard had put a stop to it and revealed the whole thing to this Commander Surol. Admiral Surol now...Undoubtably a promotion after unmasking this insidious plot of the hypocritical Federation, thus bringing honor and the glory of the Empire...

This Surol might have been as important to the Romulan Star Empire as Picard himself had been to Starfleet. If he was involved in whatever had been done here, it could only mean that it was a major endeavor.

When O'Conner finished with the details so far deciphered by the away team, the Andorian captain took a deep breath and sat straighter into his chair.

"So... if I get everything right here, the Romulans built a giant chroniton generator, injected the full crew complement of a famous warship with a radiation counteracting serum to the powerful emissions of this station... and created a massive chroniton surge... after which History was drastically changed. In essence, they built a time machine and went back in time to change History... undoubtedly for the glory of the Empire."

"Judging by the current situation, Captain, then commented Counselor Lyrya sitting at his left, it seems that someone miscalculated badly..."

"Nevertheless, they did alter the timeline... and in a most dreadful way," pointed out Valencia Irskos from behind her at the science console.

"Let's make sure then that *we do not* miscalculate our *own* next action," concluded Kheren straightening his uniform. "Number One, I want to know exactly what they planned and how they did it... because if, as it seems most likely, they traveled back in time to alter History, the only option I see is to do the same as they did and go stop them, this time before they do it."

*Darn temporal mechanics...*The Andorian was getting a headache just listening to himself.

Once his First Officer Acknowledged the order, he was then hailed by the voice of the chief of science assistant.

"Probe ready, captain," announced Lieutenant Irksos; "we will be launching a class V medium range reconnaissance probe. With over six thousand scanning channels and two point five megawatts of operating power, extended passive data gathering and recording systems, it will effectively act as an early warning system over several light years."

"Will it be able to patrol around us in a safe enough perimeter and still come back in time to warn us?" inquired the Andorian coming in front of his large old style command chair.

"With its low power warp 2 engine, it should go far enough and fast enough while remaining unnoticed and it can operate for extended duration at sublight," now added Lieutenant Blakely. "It is already designed for full autonomy and return capability."

"I assume you took the necessary measures to not have it betray our presence," then asked the captain sitting back in his chair.

"The class V probe is made of low observatory coatings and hull materials. Sir," assured Tyvya. "And since it can be readily modified for tactical applications with addition of custom sensor countermeasure package, it was the best choice among the ones available on board for our discreet surveillance. Also, since it will remain on passive surveillance and come back to warn us instead of transmitting any alarm signal, it will ensure that we will remain hidden even if something wicked this way come."

"Well done, people," congratulated the captain visibly without getting the joking reference at all. "Load probe in tube number 2."

"It will make a fine watchdog, Sir," commented Lieutenant Snow at helm. "Patrol perimeter course plotted and laid in."

"Probe loaded, Sir," confirmed the giantess at tactical.

"Launch probe."

On the main viewer, a streak of light fled from under their field of vision and then went to warp.

"Let us hope the night will be quiet," whispered Captain Kheren.

"Sir... then reported Counselor Lyrya, all hailing frequencies have gone silent."

Well, I did not mean THAT quiet, he said silently to himself.

"Are they being jammed?" he asked out loud; this time as he came rigid into his chair.

"Negative, Sir; not even static; just... silence. "

"Captain, now interjected tactical assistant chief Tyvya, if all subspace emissions have ceased, we can only assume one thing: the Borg have won."

This time, the silence spread throughout the entire bridge.

They all understood the implications; if the Borg had won, it meant that they had succeeded in assimilating the Romulan Star Empire. All data and knowledge of the entire civilization, from secret files to individual memories, would now be known to the Collective.

Including possibly, knowledge of this space station.

"Lieutenant Cheonghi, then ordered Kheren, keep a constant lock on each and all members of the away team round the clock with all transporter rooms. If we have to, I want them all out of there before I finish ordering it, understood?"

"Perfectly, Captain," answered the shrill voice of the Edoan after swallowing back his own bile.

Looking back at the image of the resuscitated space station on the viewing screen, the Andorian straightened as he sent through the channel with the away team:

"Commander O'Conner, please work in all due haste. Time is not playing in our favor here."

"Aye Captain. We have several ideas on how this station works, Sir. I have the teams send their ideas up to you. We are still working on *when* the Romulans went though."

A short while later, Lieutenant Blakely turned from her own engineering station to report to her commanding officer.

"Captain, I just went through Mister Scott's report."

"Go." simply ordered Kheren.

The blonde woman nodded and went to the holographic wall display between her station and the turbolift door. She demanded of the computer to display sensor schematics of the Romulan base and the display highlighted the relevant parts as she spoke, scrolling data on the upper right corner as she detailed out loud:

"The station is an antiquated twenty-second century design that has been completely refitted to the most recent technologies we know of the Empire. It has been also extensively modified to become essentially a huge emitter array of focused chroniton particles... not unlike what had been attempted on the Cardassian-made station Deep Space 9 several decades ago, when a possessing Pa-Wraith entity tried to use it to destroy the so-called Prophets living in the nearby Bajoran wormhole."

"I thought chronitons were harmless," interjected the Andorian captain.

"They are, basically, then explained Counselor Lyrya, except for creatures like those Prophets and Pa-Wraiths living outside of a fixed timeframe like do most organic lifeforms, such as us. And, like all forms of radiation, they can still have harmful effects if the exposition to them is high and long enough."

"What about this array?" then asked Kheren.

Blakely showed a computer simulation of the reconfigured Romulan station in operation.

"The chronitons are generated by a inordinate amount of small cloaking devices installed as emitters on every segment of each docking arm; they appear to be older designs used half a century ago on Klingon ships that were retired because of defective plasma coils. These were susceptible to tachyon emissions that destabilized them, causing an accumulation of chroniton particles. These cloaking devices have also been modified to maximize that defect, making them ineffective as cloaking emitters. Therefore, the way they are disposed, they would not cloak the station at all but channel their emissions away from the station in one massive chroniton beam focused at a single point in space."

"Like the Krenim weaponship," commented tactical Lieutenant Tyvya. As her captain looked at her, she elaborated: "The USS Voyager reported an encounter with a vessel in the Delta Quadrant that was used by a culture called the Krenim Imperium to alter the timeline with a huge temporal canon; they were erasing places and even entire worlds and cultures from History in a mad attempt to correct the disaster they had caused by using it in the first place in their war of conquest. This station seems to follow the same design and intent."

"And ending up with the same result," grimly pointed out the captain of the Artemis.

The assistant chief engineer nodded in agreement and concluded:

"The power source of the station is typically Romulan: a micro-singularity power core. This too emits chronitons as a by-product of its own workings; but this is rechanneled through the EPS grid to the cloaking emitters, instead of being vented out as is the case of a warbird's engine for example. It was in an idle state until Mister Scott and his team reactivated it just now, as once activated such power source can never be completely shut down like you can with a matter-antimatter reaction chamber. The abnormally high level of waste in the plasma conduits indicate that the entire power grid was subjected to a massive cascade failure that should have ended in the core's explosion. This happened a few days, at most a week ago."

"When we got hit by that chroniton wave," realized Kheren outloud.

"Yes, Sir," now confirmed science lieutenant Irksos. "The only way for this installation to produce enough chronitons to theoretically create a time displacement effect would be to bring this power core on the brink of a breach. The Starfleet Science Council filed the same condition with the twenty-nine century Federation timeships like the USS Relativity that had been encountered so far."

"*That* is why those thirteen Romulans stayed behind," then understood Lyrya. "They sacrificed themselves to control that reaction and prevent any premature destruction of the station before the time displacement was completed."

"I do not intend to leave anyone behind."

The statement was uttered with definite finality by the captain of the Artemis.

"We can rig the installation to be controlled remotely from here, Sir," then proposed Patricia Blakely. "But once we get displaced, there will be no way to end the cascade failure. The station will be destroyed."

"I do not intend to leave it behind either," retorted Kheren with the same determination. "Certainly not with the Borg now masters of the whole galaxy and already familiar themselves with time travel."

"This means we will have only one try and no margin for failure, Sir," warned Irksos. "And this will be a one-way trip."

"As long as it is the *correct* one..." finished the Andorian. "Lieutenant Irksos, make sure your chief finds out the *exact* space-time coordinates the Romulans targeted for their temporal incursion... and *what* they hoped to do that resulted in this whole cosmic mess."

His four oculars went to each junior officer on the bridge and ended up to the viewing screen as he proclaimed with a calm certainty what they all knew would be his next order:

"We are going after them."

Meanwhile on the Romulan base, after finishing with the captain, O'Conner had turned to the away team leaders with him in the control room while speaking to everyone else on the comlink.

"Hurry it up team; we need to know *how* they did it and especially *when* they went. Without a target time period, this will be all for naught."

He then tapped his combadge to a specific channel.

"Doctor; got any ideas on how we can do this without killing ourselves?"

"We can reproduce the antichroniton serum from the Voyager's EMH files in our own databanks, and diffuse it into the ship's internal atmosphere during time displacement. Afterwards, we'll purge it through the environmental controls. I think this will help avoid the lethal effects of injecting it directly into the bloodstream."

Doctor Aquila's voice stopped for a second.

"Commander, with the time left and given the material available, we'll have one shot at this. We won't have enough ryetalin to make enough serum for a second attempt."

O'Conner pondered a moment then asked the ominous question.

"So, this *is* a one way trip?"

"Ryetalin is the main component of the serum and it is a most rare one which we do not have in much quantity. It is too complex to replicate, except in its raw natural state... and we do not have the refining facilities to process any such raw ore, even if we could be lucky enough to find any and able to start the replicating process. What we have will barely suffice."

Following like everyone else the conversation on the open comlink, Ops ensign Bartlett summarized it all then:

"So, be it on the medical standpoint or the engineering standpoint, we will indeed have but one shot at this, Sir."

Syntron then chimed in on the open comlink:

"Captain Kheren, we have just recovered logs devoted to analyzing extensively the isotope decay, carbon dating emissions and chroniton data from the crashed Romulan Talon class scoutship detected on the asteroid and from the station itself, even prior to its redesigning from a shipyard and resupply orbital rig into this current chroniton array."

As the science chief continued scrolling through the recovered records he detailed:

"A specific chroniton signature has been recorded which dates back a hundred and fifty years ago... more specifically, to the year 2159; that is, of Earth's old Gregorian calendar."

As he continued rummaging around through the logs and data files, he added reflectively and in a somewhat perplexed tone;

"Ironically, Captain, despite all of the logs and files we have uncovered, we have been unable to find anything that indicates exactly what they specifically intended to accomplish through all of these efforts."

He then concluded:

"Based on all of these pieces of this puzzle uncovered thus far, Captain, it appears that unfortunately at this point... it may be left for us to infer the Romulans initial intention."

Kheren listened to his chief of science's report and his antennae perked up sharply.

"I think however that *I* have now a fairly good idea what was their intent, Mister Syntron."

He turned towards the Vulcan's substitute at the science station.

"Lieutenant Irksos; search databanks for historical data regarding the Earth calendar date 2159. Confine search parameters to any significant event that could have had large scale implications."

It took barely a few minutes for the dark-skinned woman to jerk up from the console and look back at her commanding officer.

"Captain, 2159 was during the height of the Earth-Romulan war; it is when, after three years of devastating stellar conflict, the Allied Forces of Earth, Andoria, Vulcan, Tellar and the Alpha Centauri colonies finally turned the tide against the Romulan Star Empire who had almost reached Earth itself. Specifically..."

"The Battle of Cheron," finished tactical officer Tyvya, her own antennae also jerking up suddenly.

Kheren simply nodded. Like her and all tactical graduates of Starfleet Academy, he knew this portion of History as well as any Terran knew about the three world wars of planet Earth and such battles as the battle of the Marne, D-Day and the Eugenics wars:

"The Alliance victory at Cheron devastated the Romulan fleet; and its remnants, deprived of the support of fallback bases like this one because they had been obliterated earlier, could only retreat in a losing battle from then on. A year later... both forces, depleted beyond their ability to pursue this terrible conflict, agreed to a cease fire and a negotiated peace. It brought about the creation of the Romulan Neutral Zone... and of the United Federation of Planets."

"But if the Romulans had won..."

Helmsman Aguk Snow did not have to finish his train of thought. The evidence was all around them: No Federation to restrain the Romulans from expanding and, with the resources of the conquered worlds that would not have been accessible otherwise, conquered the Klingon Empire, the Cardassian Union, the Ferengi Alliance... until it was left alone, complacent in its supremacy like all long-lived and bloated empires, to face the Borg.

And, in the end, get assimilated.

Now they knew what had happened... and the only way they could possibly stop it.

"Commander O'Conner, now ordered Captain Kheren; we are to follow that D'Deridex back and stop it by any means necessary from what we believe is most likely what they did: from changing the outcome of the Battle of Cheron. Have engineer Scott coordinate teams to bring this station operational in the shortest time possible; in the meantime, Lieutenant Brie will have to make all station controls operable remotely from the Artemis. Doctor Aquila will have the antichroniton serum ready to distribute throughout the ship by the time we get into position for temporal displacement using this array."

After a pause, the commanding officer of the Artemis finished saying:

"Mister Syntron, Mister Jackson: return immediately to the ship with the Romulan databanks and correlate with our own files. I want a complete historical and tactical analysis of both the Battle of Cheron and the Romulan D'Deridex class, and how such one ship could change the outcome of the battle. I need this by the time we start our chase once we get to the 22nd century."

"Affirmative Captain; but we'll need just a few moments to complete the data bank transfers," Syntron replied.

Closing the channel, Kheren then further ordered:

"Counselor, I need a complete psycho-profile of the Romulan military in general and of this Admiral Terix in particular. I want to know them and him as if I had been serving under them."

"Aye, Captain," Acknowledged the Aenar woman.

"Mister Snow; plot the straightest course at maximum warp from this point to the star system where the Battle of Cheron occurred; and prepare for the best maneuvers against what the recovered data will tell us about the Terix."

"Understood, Sir," the Inuit pilot answered.

At that moment, Lieutenant Cheonghi at ops addressed the captain.

"Sir... the probe..."

On the main viewer, a flash of light preceded the reappearance of the watchdog probe they had launched earlier, emerging from the surrounding fog of radiation.

"Telemetry coming in, Sir," confirmed Valencia Irksos from her sensor readouts.

"On screen; magnify and enhance."

The image of the starbase was replaced by a view of outer space that seemed utterly peaceful and quiet. Then, a greenish glow played like an aurora borealis folding upon itself; and from it emerged a huge, massive, cubed-shaped construct, bristling with scaffolds and emitters, ports and vents, bulkheads and plates, glowing with some inner green fire within.

"Borg cube on a direct course towards this star system, Sir," read Lieutenant Tyvya from her tactical board. "current speed warp 9.5; ETA from recorded time index and location: thirty-two hours."

Kheren spoke through the open channel with the away team.

"Commander O'Conner; the Borg are coming. I want us to be out of the here and now in twenty-four hours. From now on and until we depart, we are on constant yellow alert. Now there is no time to waste, people."

"Aye, Sir!" O'Conner replied, before turning to the away team. "You heard the captain! We got twenty-four hours to save the past."

O'Conner then went to work with Scotty's crew to help them reactivate the station for use.

Danik had moved to join Syntron in perusing over the notes from the Romulan researchers. He felt his pulse quicken a bit at the mention of the Borg cube making its way to their location. He glanced at the science officer, his expression clear. They had better be quick.

"Sir, we know that Romulans use artificial singularity to power their ships and bases rather than the matter-antimatter power plants that we use. The problem, though, is that the power output required to generate a chroniton field large enough to displace an entire starship through time means that power output must reach a state of cascade failure. By my calculations, they would have to wait until point zero-three seconds before the breach to generate the required output."

Glancing at the now empty seats where the dead Romulans had been found, he added:

"I think those technicians were the ones in charge of controlling the reaction. Probably making sure the cascade didn't destroy the station before their experiment produced results. What do you think?"

Syntron glanced up from the console during the transfer and responded "I would agree with your assessment, Lieutenant Brie. Let us be certain that our solution does not require a similar sacrifice."

Just as the data finished transferring over, he gathered his PADD and signaled over to the security and tactical officer.

"Syntron to Artemis; two to beam up," the science chief hailed just as Jackson arrived at the beam up point.

Moments later their atoms dematerialized from the Romulan base.

Arriving back on the Artemis, Syntron proceeded immediately to the bridge. After exiting the turbolift on deck 1, he walked over to the science console and to his assistant science chief.

"Thank you Lieutenant Irksos."

She acknowledged and then arose to resume her duties on deck 14.

After assuming the seat at his science station, Syntron then inputted his individual code which gave him a higher security access to computer information and the library banks. He then transferred data from the Romulan databanks stored in his PADD and began to correlate the information with Starfleet's data.

Once this was completed, he then started researching the information requested by Captain Kheren before they had beamed up from the Romulan station.

It did not take long for the Science chief to find the first part of what he was looking for. He then addressed the Captain sitting calmly yet contemplatively in the center seat.

"Captain Kheren; according to the combined information gathered from our updated library banks, the Battle of Cheron was a pivotal confrontation that took place in 2159, between the Romulan Star Empire and an a Human-Andorian-Vulcan-Tellarite alliance. The outcome of the battle effectively ended the Earth-Romulan War with the "humiliating defeat" of the Romulans. Even today, the battle remains an intense embarrassment for the Empire, which, according to defecting Admiral Alidar Jarok several decades back, would be retributed by "the new leaders" on Romulus, who "vowed to discard the treaty and claim the Neutral Zone," with a base on Nelvana III within the forbidden Neutral Zone being the first step."

"So *that* is what they had planned to do," finally understood the commanding officer of the Artemis. "Change the outcome of the battle so that the Empire would win the war and conquer Earth even before the Federation was even born."

"For all the good that did them... and everyone else," Counselor Lyrya commented dryly.

"Plans built on violence can only end in ruin, " she added in typical Aenar pacifism.

Syntron changed his search parameters and, after retrieving several relevant files, reported:

"In regards to the Romulan ship, the addition of their data bank information gave a much more comprehensive description of this type of vessel. In summary, Captain: the Romulan design of this ship is referred to as D'deridex-class, B-type warbird or Warbird class, and is one of the largest and most powerful mainstays of the Romulan Star Empire, even to this day: serving as the backbone of the Romulan fleet since the latter half of the 24th century, not from a hundred and fifty years ago."

"We study this extensively at the Academy during Military History courses," interjected the Andorian. "The Earth Romulan war was the first large-scale interstellar conflict in our quadrant of the galaxy, fought in primitive sublight spaceships using mostly crude atomic missiles and without shields or even visual communication possible. It lasted barely five years and was brutal, unforgiving and devastating to both sides. But nothing during this era could even remotely match a D'Deridex warbird. With its sheer mass and size, warp capability, energy shields, disruptors and plasma torpedoes, it would be in the 22nd century as unstoppable as a Borg Cube."

"It is classified as a battle cruiser by Starfleet," then specified the Vulcan. "Using a forced quantum singularity as a power source and the latest in Romulan cloaking technology, the D'deridex is not only one of the most advanced vessels in the Romulan Star Empire, but apparently, also in the Alpha Quadrant. These warbirds are roughly twice as long as a Federation Galaxy-class starship but with a lower overall maximum speed."

Scrolling through the data files, the science chief then happened upon a schematic, projected its image upon the main viewscreen and used a digital pointer to emphasize its unique features.

"As you can see, Captain, in terms of physical structure, the outboard plan of this warbird's design incorporates a unique horizontally split-"shell" hull configuration, with a prominent forward section. The bulk of the ship's overall size is incorporated in the open-shell, which resemble two separate "wings" that meet at either side at the warp nacelles, at the "tail" and off the "neck", which is connected to the "head" or primary forward hull section. The "head" features the bridge, main engineering and most of the primary weapon systems of the vessel."

Kheren's tactical mind immediately started formulating attack vectors and defensive maneuvering against it as the chief science officer went on:

"In regards to its tactical systems, the primary directed energy weapons array of a warbird is located in its "head", and consist of a disruptor array, capable of firing both beams and pulses, which also appears to have been shared with a torpedo launcher. The files also indicate that some warbirds have also been equipped with phasers. Three additional weapon arrays were located, one each along the top of the upper "neck" support, along the bottom of the lower "neck" support, and at the tip of the "nose."

Concluding, Syntron merely stated:

"Obviously, Captain, these warships are not to be confronted capriciously."

"Thank you Mister Syntron. This data will be most useful. Send it to Chief Jackson so as to have him ready to work out the best battle tactics against it. Then, we will have to figure out how *exactly* they planned to, and *did*, change that battle... and all of History... and prevent it."

Kheren had no doubt in his mind; confrontation with the Romulans was inevitable.

And he hated it.

* * *

Captain's Log
Stardate: 87225.8

It has been six days since we have found ourselves in an alternate timeline created by the Romulans, an alternate reality where the Federation never existed. Now the Borg have crushed the once all powerful Romulan Star Empire... and are coming for us.

Our only hope; use the very chroniton generator they built to send a warship back to the battle of Cheron... and travel after it back in time to stop it before it somehow turns the tide of the Earth-Romulan war... and doom the future of the galaxy.

In less than eight hours, a Borg cube will be here. Time is running out...for us and for the universe.

The door to the corridor leading to both conference room and ready room sighed open as Captain Kheren stepped energetically onto the Artemis bridge.

No one of the Gamma Shift still manning the bridge stations knew if the Andorian had slept or not since he had ordered the vast operation to revive the Romulan time station a full day ago. Andorians needed to sleep at most four out of every thirty-two hours, so it was all very probable he had spent all the time in his own office, studying historical archives and starcharts sifted by the science department, ship data and military reports highlighted by the tactical section, D'Deridex and Ambassador class specs comparison provided by ship engineers, operational studies of both 22nd and 25th centuries looked at by Ops... even the medical, cultural and sociological information on the Rihannsu, deformed as the Romulans in Federation standard, that could find the medical department.

The commanding officer of the starship USS Artemis, last and only remnant of a civilization that now never was, certainly did not work any less than the hundreds of his crew members and officers desperately working round the clock to reactivate the Romulan chroniton generator, understand its workings... and get ready to save galactic History itself, before they ran out of time.

Coming to a stop in front of his big, square-shaped command chair, itself a reminder of another era, another reality, Kheren looked at the image of the old refitted Romulan space station and barked in his deep yet soft voice:

"Report."

"Mister Scott reports station fully operational," answered Lieutenant Ferrier, the Gamma shift bridge engineer.

"All station systems on remote control," then reported the Benzite woman manning Ops, her nasal voice coming from the respirator covering the front of her bald, leathery blue head so that her mouth tendrils could barely be seen. "Chief Brie is securing the connection now."

"Array is being targeted at the focal point of the asteroid formation, following original Romulan design," added Ensign Lee, looking up from his tactical board. "Chief Jackson is finishing the ordered research on tactical capabilities of the Artemis and the Terix, Sir."

"Course plotted and laid in for the Leonis 83 star system Planet Leo III better known as Cheron to the Romulans; ETA at maximum warp of 9.6 directly from here is eleven days, two hours, twenty-four minutes, Sir," told Ensign Skyn, the Vulcan currently at the helm station.

"Doctor Aquila signals the antichroniton serum is being readied for diffusion through environmental systems, captain," announced the epidemiologist ensign Peter Jameson from the CMO chair.

Kheren still stood in front of his chair, looking straight at the screen while the junior officers reported final preparations for their upcoming amazing odyssey. The very idea of travelling through time, under their own capabilities, not from some freak cosmic accident or some alien entity's god-like power, sent a chill of excitement along his spine; and it took much to chill an Andorian.

"I hope we know what we are doing..." he wondered out loud.

"The calculations have been verified, Sir," said Ensign Norbert Baoule at the science console.

He was the twin of engineer Robert Baoule among the away team technicians sent over at the Romulan base. But while his brother shaved his head bald, he wore his curling dark brown hair a standard regulation haircut. But the facial features of his black-skinned face were absolutely identical. And so was his tone of voice:

"The time displacement controls are rather crude but we have tried to refine them somewhat with our own bridge multitask control and the help of Lieutenant Brie and his people," he then explained in that typical habit of science officers to elaborate. "We cannot pinpoint the exact time displacement of the Romulan ship we are pursuing, but we will ourselves arrive within six hours to six days after it did in the targeted timeframe."

"That is a rather large margin of error, Mister Baoule," observed the captain, his rigid face almost frowning.

"Best we can do for now, Sir; we could pinpoint the space-time coordinates more accurately if we could test the array for a day or two..."

"We do not have a day or two, Ensign," cut the Andorian sitting down in his chair. We barely have a few hours left..."

"Not even that! Look!" suddenly shouted Ops officer Lurnok.

On the viewing screen, the distant veil of radiation beyond the asteroid field encircling the Romulan station parted before the ominous form of a gigantic cubic shape emerging from the nebulous, luminescent fog of irradiated particles.

"Red Alert!"

Kheren's voice was drowned a moment by the klaxon blaring all across every deck of the starship. Then, sitting straight in his command seat, his usually soft voice bellowed with power and authority.

"All power to engines, shields and transmitters! All hands! Prepare for timewarp!"

"Sir!" then exclaimed Ensign Lee right behind the captain's string of orders; "the technical away teams under Mister O'Conner's command are still over there for operational testing of the station!"

"Beam them back, now! Helm; full speed to the target area! Ops; start countdown for time displacement!"

"They must have accelerated when detecting the chroniton cloud in this system and eager to investigate before it dissipated," guessed Baoule as to the reason of the Borg's early arrival.

There was no more time left; the Borg were now coming right at them.

Despite the distance, the titanic cybernetic vessel was looming behind the comparatively diminutive form of the Romulan station as it closed in on their position, eerie green lights flashing inside its complex structure of exposed crisscrossing systems.

"Their emissions are jamming our comm system, Sir," nervously reported Jameson from the CMO chair. "But the signal from the pattern enhancers is still clear enough to..."

"Transport complete, Captain!" then shouted ops junior officer Lurnok, her blue complexion turning almost purple with emotion. "Got them all, Sir!"

"Mister Skyn; full impulse to the displacement point, parabolic course; get us *and* them away from the station before they fancy to assimilate it first, before we use it" ordered Kheren, his deep, steady voice coalescing the maelstrom of emotions, orders and actions around his calm center of authority.

"One minute before array activation!" now said a calmer Benzite woman at ops. "All control signals steady through the enhancers."

"Antichroniton serum distributed on all decks," announced with a strained voice the epidemiologist Jameson in the CMO command seat.

"Adjusting course and speed to activation time zero," confirmed the Vulcan pilot with typical calmness.

"They are scanning us, Sir." then announced Lieutenant Baoule, eyes glued to his sensors readout.

"They have no clue who or what we are," understood engineering Lieutenant Ferrier. "No one ever saw a Federation starship in this universe."

"Thirty seconds to activation!" counted down Lieutenant Lurnok.

Within the heart of the hazy chroniton fog bank encircling the remnants of a blasted planet, the silvery silhouette of the Ambassador class starship arced gracefully away from the station towards the hemispherical formation of asteroids on the opposite side, seconds ticking as the Romulan chroniton generator flared up to life, its six docking arms glowing with a build-up of radiation.

"They are scanning the station also," added the black-skinned science officer.

"Sir! Suddenly exclaimed the junior officer at tactical, if the Borg get their hands on this time travel technology..."

"They will not," simply promised Kheren.

Then, suddenly, the entire ship jolted to halt, throwing people almost out of their seat.

"Tractor beam!" spoke aloud Baoule what everyone thought.

"Reading all stop," confirmed Skyn in a toneless voice.

"Fifteen seconds to activation!"

"We are three hundred forty-seven and fifty-three thousand kilometers from the displacement target point." added the Vulcan pilot.

"Mister Skyn! Warp 1 on my mark!" then ordered Kheren

Even being Vulcan, the helmsman head jerked up, one eyebrow arching high.

"Sir... going to warp while held by a..."

"Ten seconds!" interrupted the Benzite at ops.

"Mister Lee!" the Andorian barked, ignoring the Vulcan; "On my mark, full torpedo salvo and all phasers on their tractor emitter!"

"Target locked!" shouted back the junior tactical officer.

"Five seconds... Four... three... "

"Mark!"

The entire ship trembled as five quantum torpedoes and as many phaser arrays suddenly roared with destructive fire straight at the massive Borg Cube. Then the trembling made the entire vessel groan like a piece of metal being torn as the warp engines strained against the immense power of the titanic cube-shaped ship.

"Two..."

"WE ARE THE BORG. LOWER YOUR SHIELDS AND SURRENDER..."

The dreadful droning of thousands of voices speaking as one was brutally cut off from the speakers as three hundred isotons of matter-antimatter discharge across the quantum level and well over a hundred megawatts of phased emissions of radiation struck directly at the exact point where the whitish green cone of gravitic energy had erupted to link both vessels together.

"One..."

With the sound of an immense sigh, the starship Artemis suddenly jumped forward towards the opening of its subspace bubble to enter warp, brutally accelerating to three-hundred thousand kilometers per second; but before it reached that point, it was suddenly caught in another energy beam.

"Time!"

The Romulan chroniton array bathed the outrushing ship the instant before it slammed into the asteroid field arrayed like a concave lense right in the path of its warp jump. The entire vessel seemed to dissolve in a mere second into fine, luminescent particles.

In an instant, there was no trace at all left of the last Federation starship.

All that was ever left of its existence was a few pattern enhancers on a derelict, abandoned Romulan space station that exploded after a cascade failure of its singularity-powered energy core, no one left aboard to prevent it, obliterating everything around it for over half a billion kilometers...

Including one cube-shaped cybernetic vessel.

Even had they had any emotion left to cry out in rage or fear or surprise, the one hundred thousand Borg drones aboard would not be heard by anyone, not even the rest of the Collective, as the chroniton cloud surrounding the area had already severed any link with the rest of the universe.

In that last second, there was nothing left.

Not even a memory.

CHAPTER FOUR: TIME AFTER TIME

Captain's Log supplemental
Stardate: -16223.3... the 22nd century.

We left a future that should never be to a past that never was... caught out of time... unless we stop a Romulan warship from changing History... again... and for good.

If we can.

First officer Michael O'Conner muttered angrily as he stood up. Moments ago, he had been talking to the transport chief, but now, he was rubbing his crimson hair to ease the itching of the nasty bump under it. The jolt to the past has wrecked the internal dampeners and the belt one he had, integrating the worksuit he had kept all the time up to the last instant while finishing working on the Romulan station, which one had not kicked in either.

"You're getting an accelerometer." O'Conner said to his belt before he noticed the emergency lights.

"Great... the Jefferies tube..."

With a sigh, the executive officer of the Artemis moved to the door and forced it open manually then began to make his way back up to the bridge... through the Jefferies tube if need be.

Kheren came back from the brink of unconsciousness, still sprawled in his large command chair, his antennae slowly stretching out from his thick white mane to bring back colors, sounds and smells. Around him, junior bridge officers rose back to their feet and their chairs to retake control of their respective stations and get reports from all over the ship as the entire crew regained their wits and senses.

Between the early arrival of the Borg and the precipitated jump to another time, there had been no chance to deploy their Personal Inertial Dampeners. The ship had been shaken and brutally stopped then released again before plunging into timewarp, and so, reports of damage and wounded only now started to come to every department control center on the barely lit bridge.

As the emergency lights came on, the Andorian sat straighter in his chair.

"Report."

As the chroniton wave that passed over the whole ship was now almost fully dissipated, ship sensors were starting to come back online.

With the assistance of Lieutenant T'Val using astrometric measurements and stellar drift in the Astrometrics Lab, the science team was able to determine that the time displacement was complete and that the Artemis had time warped back to the year 2159. The current date was now October 12... exactly twelve days before the historical battle of Cheron, which was currently projected at fifty-eight light years away from the Algeron system they were still in.

After listening to all department heads reports, Kheren nodded with satisfaction as the lights came fully back on and the powerful hum of the warp core vibrated up to the bridge itself. Still making his way climbing the rungs molded inside the closest vertical Jefferies tube he had accessed earlier, O'Conner smiled slightly as the lights came on.

"Well, things are looking better" He mumbled to himself, while he put away his hand lamp. Then he began his crawl back out of the Jefferies tube and out the nearest hatch to walk down the main corridor of deck 4 until he got the nearest turbolift.

"We have full power, Sir," voiced Aguk Snow from the helm. "Warp speed at your command, Captain. "

"Best possible speed to Cheron, Mister Snow."

"At best speed available, estimated time of arrival to the Leonis 83 star system is eleven days," confirmed the Inuit pilot.

"At a recorded maximum speed of warp 9.2, chimed in tactical officer Tyvya, we should intercept them a full two days before they reach their target, taking into account the time interval between our time displacement and theirs and assuming they follow the same direct course as we do."

"They have no reason not to," said the captain. "They have to be there right on time to wreck History. Lieutenant, use Mister Syntron's sonar to locate them in case they travel under cloak."

"Begging your pardon, Sir, the giantess then offered, but once we ping them, that will tell them at the exact same moment that we are behind and coming after them."

"I'm counting on it," retorted Kheren. "Mister Snow: warp speed."

"Aye, Sir. Bearing 097 mark 15."

The humming of the powerful warp engine of the refitted Ambassador class starship rose to a higher pitch... and even as a very faint groan was briefly heard and a short vibration was felt coming from the deckplates, it all settled back to the familiar feeling of the ship jumping to warp just before the stars on the main viewer stretched out and flashed in a blinding burst of light, then followed by the familiar streaking starview of warp travel.

Kheren's voice then filled the silence:

"All senior officers to the conference room. "

Rising from his command chair, he glanced at the tactical console before him and to his right.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, you have the conn."

"Aye, Sir."

Without another word, he walked out to the left hand door and disappeared in the short corridor leading past his ready room and to the main meeting chamber of the Artemis to wait for his bridge officers to join him.

There was a war to prepare for.

What the hell was that?

After Scotty had been thrown off his feet as the Artemis brutally had gone to warp, he had slowly stood up and, as soon as his footing was stable, immediately collected reports from his engineering and damage teams feverishly working to revive the vessel after its incredible time jump.

As soon as he heard the Captain's voice commanding all senior officers to the main conference room, he headed to the nearest turbolift to get to the bridge. Scotty arrived on the bridge and without pause headed to the conference room where he waited for the other officers.

Syntron acknowledged the Captain's order as he continued to gather additional data from the downloaded Romulan databanks and transferred the additional information into his PADD. He contacted Lieutenant Irksos to come and manage the bridge science station as the he then logged off and headed toward the conference room with the updated Science PADD at hand.

The captain's call he was answering had been heard all over the ship, but not immediately by everyone.

"Doctor Aquila... Doctor..." Ensign Meereenia's voice came from nowhere. "Wake up."

The doctor opened his eyes to see a busy sickbay treating all sorts of minor injuries caused by the jarring of the ship when it time-jumped. *That* he certainly did notice. He rubbed his head.

"I guess we made it?" He asked.

"Yes... but the captain has requested all senior officers to the conference room. You've got a small bump on your head, but there's no reason to keep you here... and we sort of need the bed for other patients."

"Yes. Yes."

Aquila nodded as he stood up.

"The conference room." He said to himself as he gathered his thoughts.

It did not take long for the Chief Engineer and the Chief of Science to join first the captain in the main meeting chamber, each one taking a seat on one side of the large triangular table, both reviewing data on their personal PADD.

Kheren himself stood at the third side, his callused knuckles resting on the polished surface as he ordered out loud:

"Computer; display schematics and data on the IRW Terix."

Between the three officers hovered over the center of the table a detailed representation of the most respected Romulan vessel ever designed; a massive grey-green starship with a tall, narrow prow shaped like the head of a bird of prey with two dozen deck lights giving a good measure of the scale of the one thousand and two hundred meters long warship. Its thin back extended each side like spread wings to a pair of warp nacelles where the thin, flat belly paralleled the top, giving the large starship a hollow, ovoid shape with still numerous decks on each of the narrow sides and still a few more in the stunted, pointed tail.

The whole design was both graceful and imposing. It was deemed the most sophisticated starship design yet seen in the galaxy, barely matched by the Galaxy class Federation starship, still the best one ever fielded by Starfleet, even half a century earlier.

And that is what they were going after... with a strained, refitted starship who's own design was already old when this one's prototype was still on the drawing board.

He wandered through the busy hallways and turbolifts of the U.S.S. Artemis and eventually found his way to the conference room to see two other bridge officers and the captain looking over the schematic of the Romulan vessel they had all been talking about for the last day.

The way the four eyes of the Andorian captain darted on every detail of the insides and outsides of the warbird, on every data line scrolling, it was clear that he had no intention to loose any time... and especially not this confrontation.

"Sir." Aquila gave a half-hearted salute.

He looked, and felt like hell. He made his way to a seat to await further instruction.

For a moment, Kheren was distracted from the hovering hologram by the arrival and appearance of his Chief Medical Officer. As he returned his gaze to the tridimensional image, he asked the man:

"You have a nasty bump on your head, Doc; you alright?"

"I'll be fine."

He didn't want to elaborate about the cause of the bump. It was his own young, impatient behavior that caused it. He just didn't want to talk about it.

There was no good reason for being in such a hurry and tripping over a chair. He should have expected some turbulence, and moved more carefully after the ship went to red alert. Though it was Caius' first experience with a red alert, and he would certainly learn from it.

The Andorian simply nodded. His four oculars kept studying the schematics.

Quietly, First officer O'Conner entered the meeting room and gave the captain a slight nod before sitting down.

Kheren slightly nodded back to acknowledge his exec but still kept his four oculars at the holographic cut-out of the Romulan warship. His expression was the one he showed when already caught a life and death struggle. Obviously, he was thinking furiously about the upcoming confrontation and the tunneling effect of his Andorian physiology out of this tension on his vision and his mind was focusing his concentration away from his own officers' very presence.

Yet, after a moment of silence, he said suddenly, almost in an absent tone:

"Mister Syntron; what would such a ship do to turn the Battle of Cheron from an Earth victory into a decisive one for the Empire?"

The Chief of Science sat there in the conference room and pondered the question for a moment that was just put to him by the commander of the Artemis. This was not an easy query that could be readily answered with a simple logical hypothesis.

Then Syntron looked up at the Captain.

"I am not certain at this point Captain... but I would presume that the commander of this vessel pondered this very question quite carefully himself before actually implementing his strategy."

After another brief moment, Syntron added:

"I would also presume that he chose a method that would utilize the capabilities of 24th century technology in a manner that the Earth forces would be unable and unprepared to rectify."

"Well, I do have a pretty good idea how *this* Admiral Suroi commanding *this* ship of doom will act in *this* particular instance," told the Andorian with a glance at his second officer, then on the other side at his executive officer.

"Number One, how good are we and the Artemis to tackle all this?"

O'Conner turned to the captain and raised his eyebrow.

"We better be more than good, Sir. We are the Federation's and all our races' only chance for survival."

The Andorian lowered his head and sighed at the expected concise comment of his first officer.

"In other words; ready or not, we're going in."

As the rest of the senior officers filled in the seats around the three-sided table, he straightened up again and looked each other in the eye before explaining with a firm tone:

"I've spent the last day studying files on the Rihansuu culture, the Imperial military in general, the capability of this warship class and most specifically of the IRW Terix as analyzed by Mister Jackson and Mister Scott; and, from Doctor Aquila's files, the psycho-historical profile of her commanding officer for the last forty-seven years, Admiral Suroi. I did this within the specific setting of the Earth-Romulan war in general and the Battle of Cheron in particular from the research done by Mister Syntron. Then, I did what Terran navy destroyer captains did to flush out lurking submarines during their World Wars, an idea given to me by the report of our Bolian chief of Ops, Mister Brie; I put myself in the place of this commander of the Terix on a mission to change the losing outcome of the battle of Cheron into a decisive victory for the Empire and thus, change History. With all of this, I tested myself in a simulation and came up with a ninety-seven point fifty-three percent probability."

Looking again at the senior officers of his ship with an unblinking stare, he then said:

"By their own admission as much as by facts, the Rihansuu, the Romulans as we call them, are nothing if not creatures of duty. And the first, highest, noblest, most honorable, best and last duty of any Romulan soldier is to die for the glory of the Empire. Not even the Klingons go as far and as readily as they do to give their life for the sole glory of their civilization. And *that* is what they are here for."

Crossing his hands behind his back, he ordered out loud:

"Computer; display historical simulation 0811, time index 21591012."

The schematic view of the warbird Terix shifted to the representation of an area of space, a small, four planets binary star system with a cool orange-colored subgiant star and a smaller, fairly close dwarf star of the same color.

"The 83 Leo star system or, as the Romulans and later History recall it; Cheron."

The computer-generated view zoomed in to show an impressive armada of flat, winged vessels with their hull plated and painted so as to look like giant birds of prey. Laser turrets protruded from the wingtips and missile launchers could be seen across their underbellies.

"October 12, 2159, Earth old calendar; The Imperial Armada... now in striking distance of Earth and preparing in earnest to a final, major assault after their main supply base was destroyed a few months before by a chance encounter of a Terran task Force... in the Algeron star system. The Earth-Romulan war has been devastating both sides for four years now and the discovered presence of an advanced Earth strategic outpost on the third planet of Leonis 83 provides the opportunity for the Empire to cripple Earth's Command and launch a massive, final thrust towards Earth itself with all its remaining forces."

The display then showed the sudden warping in close to the assembled vessels of an encircling fleet of numerous groups of wedge-shaped ships spreading out in a lenticular formation and then, before the Romulan ships could fully deploy, opening fire with a barrage of laser beams and missile salvos exploding with the telltale flash of atomic energy. In a short, furious moment, there is brutal pandemonium as both fleets engage one another. But it is obvious the Imperial fleet has been taken completely by surprise and, unable to maneuver, is utterly destroyed, leaving but a few battered ships to limp away from the edge of the short but intense battle.

"The Earth outpost was but a fake to lure and trap the Romulans for the Terran Alliance lying in wait to pounce on them as they bottled themselves up in the high-gravity well of the close binary stars, " concluded Kheren.

"A year later, the war was over... the Neutral Zone was established... and the United Federation of Planets was born."

Giving a moment for the bridge officers to grasp the events, the Andorian then called out loud:

"Computer; display command simulation Kheren RTS01."

Then, looking again at the men assembled, he announced:

"Now, picture a twenty-fourth century ship of the line at that pivotal moment of galactic history, with an Honor-bound Admiral and an elite crew of soldiers dedicated to the death as much as he is in securing the Empire's future."

The display repeated itself seemingly identical as before... until the earth ships showed up and opened fire.

As both fleet exchanged volleys of laser fire and nuclear warheads, there was a massive explosion right in the middle of the deploying the Terran fleet. In a blinding instant, the entire complement of Earth forces is blasted out of the stars as if all launched missiles, theirs as those of the enemy fleet, suddenly veered off and exploded in their faces.

When the light dimmed, only a few, crippled allied ships remained, drifting until the surviving fleet of bird-shaped ships blew them apart with their lasers and proceeded onward, out of the system... towards a dim, distant yellow star.

Captain Kheren, in a few words, removed all doubts and questions in their minds.

"This is the result of a fully armed D'Deridex class warbird's self-destruct under cloak at point blank range."

Now looking sternly at all of them, he concluded with a voice as heavy as his silvery stare:

"This is the madness we will be going to prevent... *if* we are to save the Federation... and *even* the Romulan Empire itself from its own folly... along with galactic History."

Syntron recognized the magnitude of the Captain's revelation yet indicated this by merely the rise of a single eyebrow.

He then looked toward the commanding officer of the only remaining Starfleet vessel in existence.

"We will obviously need to detect this cloaked ship before we approach it and yet remain out of its potential wrathful attack Captain. As we have seen, this type of vessel presents a very deadly and dangerous adversary to be... how do Terrans say... 'sneaking' up on. How would you like us to prepare for this event Captain?"

O'Conner turned to the officers and asked a question that was bugging him.

"It's far easier to ruin history, than save it. Do we have any ideas on how to stop them from detecting us?"

Only silence answered the Artemis First Officer.

Around the table, almost all of them were junior officers, on their first assignment as department heads, barely two weeks into their new responsibilities... and they already had to deal with brushing with a destructive anomaly, then the annihilation of everything that they ever knew, and then the return of the Borg Collective swallowing the galaxy and finally experiencing time travel and now being asked to find a way to stop a powerful, invisible ship from causing it all.

Their silence was certainly not surprising. But here and now, it could prove fatal... for all.

The senior among them, in typical Vulcan fashion, had wasted no time in deferring to the one officer who would be responsible for everything they would do... or failed to do.

Kheren bent again to rest his fists on the table in front of him and lowered his head, feeling all the weight of the moment. But then, he raised his silvery stare to each one of them in turn and his voice had a firmness that allowed no doubt as to his resolve.

"Mister Scott; you will ensure this ship is in as best condition as it can be for combat engagement a week from now. But first, you will rework your warp remodulation trick to make us look on sensors like a D'Deridex warbird."

Scotty nodded.

"Yes, Sir. I'll get right on that; shouldn't take more than two hours, since everything is all set up now."

"Good," nodded back the Andorian captain. "If you can help us dupe them at least until we get into visual range, you will give us the chance we need to stop them."

His four eyes shifted to the Bolian beside him.

"Mister Brie; you will conduct flight exercises with Mister Snow for the next ten days, full time, until you are both confident you can follow another ship so as to make us appear like a sensor echo, a reflection of itself. You will also train for emergency transport operations under heavy jamming and combat conditions."

Danik nodded in acknowledgment.

"Aye, Sir. I'll also begin reviewing near-warp transport procedures with my transporter crews. We should be able to minimize the time we need to slow to sub-light for any transport operations."

Glancing at the man sitting at his right, he explained:

"Commander O'Conner is right; the longer we stay hidden from them, the closer we will get in order to stop them. And we *must*, we *will* stop them... from the inside as well as from the outside."

His eyes lifted to the other side of the table, right into those of his Vulcan science officer.

"Mister Syntron; we will need your sensor expertise to locate the warp trail of the Terix... without letting the Romulans notice us... "sniffing" their footprints. And then, to keep track of our people once they board their ship."

Before anyone could react to his last words, the Andorian then turned his head back to the technical side of the meeting table and the third officer sitting there.

"Mister Jackson; you have ten days to train yourself and our tactical teams to engage a D'Deridex warbird with our reduced torpedo complement. At the same time, prepare the following officers for covert boarding action with Romulan Honor blades only as weapons: Flight Ensign Skyn, Ops Chief T'Brin, Engineering Petty Officer T'Mell, Medical Petty Officer Sten and especially Master Chief Atrus from your own section and science chief Turan. The others are Vulcan but these last two are Half-Romulan as well. Mister Brie will see that the quartermaster provides them all with proper Romulan uniforms and tools."

Danik paused, pondering the orders.

"Sir, are we planning boarding actions? Should I be discussing that with Mr. Jackson and Mr. Snow?"

"Yes we are, Mister Brie. All the officers I have selected are either Vulcan or half-Romulan and only Commander O'Conner will need special attention so as to avoid the Terix internal sensors while they do whatever they can to make sure this ship will never reach Cheron."

Then, again, he looked straight at his First officer.

"Number One, you will have to lead this team aboard the Terix. You will train them, and with them as well, to infiltrate the warbird, sabotage it with what you will find in there only... even possibly reach their bridge to confront Admiral Surol with our recording of the terrible future they are unknowingly about to create. Which objective will be completed or how many will be up to you. But whatever you will do, this ship must *not* be allowed to reach Cheron in time to change the outcome of the battle... or left behind to further tamper with History."

"Of course" O'Conner replied to Kheren as he pondered the mission before him.

Pausing a moment, the Andorian then added:

"Come to think of it... Mister Brie, you will provide Commander O'Conner with a complete record of what we have witnessed in the alternate future these Romulans are unknowingly about to create. The larger anomaly from their own unchecked warp travels, the fall of the Empire under the Borg... Make sure he has a complete log that will show them the consequences of their actions."

Looking back at his Exec, Kheren shrugged.

"I doubt this will convince them to renounce their mission... or if you will even find an opportunity to show it to them... but at least, if there is a small chance to stop them and save the future without spilling blood, we have to give it a try."

His metallic eyes then became hard and cold as he finished:

"Or else, there *will* be blood."

The Andorian then brought his four oculars towards the chief medical officer of the Artemis.

"Doctor Aquila; Romulans will certainly have internal sensors on computer monitoring just as we do to immediately detect unauthorized energy weapon signatures and alien lifesigns on board their ship. Vulcans biosigns are virtually identical to those of Romulans, but a Human will be immediately detected. You will have to disguise Commander O'Conner not only physically but with a lifesign decoy as well. Make it part of his transponder implant. Every away team member will need one if we are to retrieve them even through interference or jamming signals. Have them all tested and ready by the time we meet the Terix."

"Affirmative, Captain" the Science Chief finally responded as he began mapping out a plan on his PADD. Moments later, he proffered a solution.

"Perhaps Captain, we can extensively modify a Reconnaissance Probe. Within its shell, we could incorporate a sophisticated array of computer technology as well as its own high-powered warp drive. To avoid detection, it will utilize the enhanced technology allowing it to be capable of masking its own warp trail. This can be used in conjunction with the low observatory coatings and hull materials and together, this should in effect allow our probe to be as ghost-like as possible throughout its mission."

Syntron then added:

"In addition to following the ionized trail of the Terix stealthily, I can also program this probe with enhanced non-detectable sensors to follow the path of each of our crew members aboard the ship and prepare a protocol to augment an emergency transport signal should the need arise to remove our crew members with undo haste."

As he mapped out the details of this plan on his PADD, he also informed his Captain:

"I would estimate that this procedure will involve approximately 27.25 hours to complete the actual construction and perhaps another 1.33 hours to run the probe through a series of comprehensive simulations."

"An interesting idea, Mister Syntron, said Kheren, but, as far as I know, the Class IX is the fastest warp capable probe and can only sustain warp 9 for 12 hours. The D'Deridex can maintain warp 9.2, with already some lead on us. Mister Snow confirmed it will take us nearly twelve days just to hope in catching up with them at our present best speed."

Musing for a moment, he then ordered:

"However... since your work can be done in so short a time, prepare it as a back up support for retrieval of our infiltration team. We will deploy it upon contact with the Romulans."

Then, as O'Conner looked around the room a bit, a sly grin rose on his lips as an idea came to his mind.

"Captain; instead of just hiding, can we convert the ship to look like an Earth ship of this era? or at least like one of this era?"

Kheren looked sideways at his first officer, blinking in confusion.

"What do you have in mind, Number One?"

"Well we don't really have any form of stealth at hand, Sir, but perhaps with a bit of holographics, modified emissions and change of uniform, we could pass as some advanced Earth ship to anyone that might spot us."

The Andorian pondered the idea a moment.

"And how are we going to equip a five-hundred meters starship with external holoemitters while at high warp?"

He shook his head.

"And aside from the technical problem... we are forced to go on a sustained pursuing course at warp 9.4; there was no known vessel of the twenty-second century that could even go beyond warp 7, especially not from Earth. That would blow off any disguise we would come up with... except maybe, just maybe, assuming that of a sensor echo as we are planning now."

Kheren sighed.

"And if they do detect us... better that they see us for what we are. Maybe that would make them pause long enough to foil their plans. Although I would not bet on it... Would I be Admiral Surol, I would let nothing slow me down or divert me from my rendez-vous with History."

Kheren finally straightened up and crossed his hands behind his back.

"We have twelve days before we meet with those who would doom the future, our own time. We will be ready in ten. Dismiss."

As they rose, each with their own assigned duties clearly defined, the captain of the Artemis turned around and went to the transparency, looking at the stars streaking by as they rushed at nearly two thousand times the speed of light to catch up with a ship of doom.

The last question, the last problem, he kept for himself. It was not a question of whether or not they would succeed; they had no choice but to succeed. Somehow, they would succeed... they *must* succeed.

Then what?

That was the last problem, the last question left in his mind.

A short while later, inside of one of the holodecks stood O'Conner in front table with a holographic deck layout. With him were the selected crewmembers who where to accompany him on their assault of the Terix: Flight Ensign Skyn, a Vulcan with simulator training in Romulan ship designs; Ops Chief T'Brin, also of Vulcan but her expertise was in Romulan ops systems she studied as a hobby; Engineering Petty Officer T'Mell was the other Vulcan woman, a specialist in singularity power theories; Medical Petty Officer Sten was Vulcan but he was also knowledgeable in Romulan script; Security Master Chief Atrus and science chief Turan were both half-Romulans and spoke the Rihansuu language fluently, with Atrus being trained with Romulan weaponry while Turan's specialty was the Empire's society and culture. They all not only brought the perfect cover against internal sensor detection and disguise, but levels of expertise that would be of direct use to the mission.

Their team leader, the only Human among them, brought them immediately up to speed with the tridimensional deck layout.

"This is what we got, crew. We need to decide entry points and target locations. The captain wants us to try to spare this ship and crew so we need to be able to force these Romulans to see what we know."

He made it immediately clear that he harbored no illusion as to their chances of convincing the Romulans to forego their mad attempt to alter History.

"Also, we will need a backup plan to destroy the ship if needed and as completely as we can. We don't want twenty-fourth century tech to fall in someone's hands in this era."

And with that, they began to brainstorm ideas and tactics.

* * *

The bridge of the D'Deridex class Romulan warbird IRW Terix was utterly silent. The officers lining the stations on the curving walls kept their eyes on their monitors and readouts, their deeply etched brows furrowed, their arcing eyebrows following the sharp angle of their short-cropped, straight dark hair and the point of their ears. All their angular features looked almost gaunt with their green-tinged skin bright with tension, mirroring for almost two weeks now the apprehension on the faces of their superior officers.

There was a wall isolating the command podium from the surrounding workstations, prominently showing in sparkling, metallic hues the Imperial symbol of the *shavok*, the noble hawk, spreading wide its wings to encompass the universe while holding in its talons both master worlds of Romulus and Remus.

From where, or more precisely when they came from, the twin homeworld of the Romulan Star Empire floated in ashes, consumed by its people's own ruthless ambition when its unwise research in subspace weaponry caused the Hobus catastrophe, a massive stellar deflagration five hundred light years across that burned down their too proud and too hungry empire... and their unquenching dreams of conquest and eternal rule.

But from the bitterness of those ashes still burned, the passionate desire to lash out in pain, in anger and in tears to deny fate... even one of their own doing. Its fire could be seen in the eyes of the two leading officers sitting side by side under the raptor's wings, facing the main viewer where the stars rushed at them while the immense warship around them vibrated with long sustained effort at flying towards its chosen destiny.

"Report."

One of the officers left his post and went right beside the two seated officers on the forward podium, standing ramrod straight at the one on the right who just spoke. Looking over their head at the imperial symbol, the junior officer reported as ordered with a firm but toneless voice.

"Commander Varin; the signal is still there on our sensors, Sir."

"It's been two days now, Centurion, since you first reported this; have you finally managed to identify it?"

The voice was cold and smooth like a sharp blade that could slit a throat at a moment's notice. It made the junior officer lift his head a bit higher with tension but also with a hint of defiance at the challenge to his competence implied in the question.

"Same as before, Commander; it moves as we move and registers with our own warp signature, amplifying as if it was closing in on us but that has been ruled out as the result of our own efforts at tightening and amplifying our scans."

"So... you still believe we are running from our own shadow, a reflection... from a sensor echo?"

The young officer blinked and his voice faltered ever so slightly.

"Commander... there is no technology in this time period that can even come close to our own, or achieve our current speed, even less detect and track us... let alone match our course. Sir, If... as ludicrous as it sounds, if this could even be something, or someone, after us... what... or who... who could it possibly be?"

"Who indeed..."

The soft, slow, deep voice of the other senior officer was ominous. His uniform was that of an admiral and his face was that of a man with the weight of an empire on his shoulders.

They all blinked for several seconds, pondering his words before, suddenly, another officer broke the silence spreading all across the bridge with a confused shout:

"Admiral Surol! We... we are being hailed!"

"We?" blurted out Commander Varin in disbelief. "*We are hailed?*"

"Yes, Commander! By *name*! And it's a... a *Federation* hailing signal!"

Who indeed." repeated Admiral Surol, now almost smiling but without any humor.

"On screen... but do not return the signal, Sub-Commander!" ordered Varin, turning back to face again the main viewer with the Admiral coming forward himself on his own seat for a closer look.

The view of the rushing stars at high warp was replaced by that of a recognizable but definitely odd Federation starship bridge, state of the art stations within an old style design and even with a centuries old command chair... and in which sat a Federation captain with stark silvery eyes in a dark blue face and a long, thick white mane of hair from which extended, not any ears, but instead a pair of antennae.

"A... an Andorian?" recognized not without some difficulty the Terix captain with obvious surprise.

He was used to see Humans in command of Starfleet vessels, sometimes even the rare Vulcan. This was the first time he ever saw a live Andorian and the mere sight of it's very stark, non-human features was almost shocking, especially one sitting in an enemy ship's typically lone command seat.

But the words spoken by the deep, powerful yet soft voice of this utterly alien ship commander were even more shocking than his bizarre appearance.

"This is Captain Kheren, commanding the starship Artemis of the United Federation of Planets. Admiral Surol of the Romulan warbird Terix, you are planning to intervene at the Battle of Cheron to alter History. You must not continue on your present course of action."

The shocked silence spread throughout the entire bridge as they heard the words of the Starfleet commander. Only the centurion, still standing near the command podium, managed to turn towards his superiors to forcibly whispers in obvious alarm:

"That's *impossible*! How could *they* be *here, now*... how could they *know*? How..."

The admiral lifted a hand to silence him as the Andorian spoke anew.

"Your action will effectively prevent the rise of the Federation... and in so doing, you will condemn the Romulan Star Empire to be conquered by the Borg... before the Azimuth Horizon anomaly will, in the end, destroy it all. This is the future, the destiny your own actions will bring about."

"This weird blue-faced fool thinks to sway us from our sacred duty with such a ridiculous fable?" scoffed Varin with a smirk. But his eyes were not so amused. Again the Federation showed its most disturbing talent to be where they were always least expected.

And, in an uncanny moment, as if he had heard the Terix commander, the Starfleet captain added:

"We know this because we were there before coming after you back to this century with your own time travel station. Records made from our own logs and the logs of your own station will prove to you the consequences of your own planned actions. We are transmitting them now. Cease and desist, or we will stop you by any means..."

"Cut the feed, now!" shouted Varin over the voice of the Federation ship commander, almost jumping out of his seat. "Maintain course and speed! Reserve power to the cloak!"

The image vanished from the screen as he turned towards Surol.

"Its a trick! They would have downloaded a computer virus through their transmission to disable us! They have no other recourse against us..."

"Perhaps, Commander," admitted the admiral, still looking at the blank viewscreen.

The ship commander looked askance at his superior officer.

"With all due respect, Admiral; you are not suggesting that this... talking bug was telling the truth about this preposterous fall of the Empire because we..."

"That, I do not know, Commander. But I do know a bit about Andorians like this... Captain Kheren. They are the true warriors of the Federation, a match even for the fierce Klingons themselves. And Starfleet captains are men of their word. If this Starfleet Andorian captain is intent on stopping us..."

"Commander!" now shouted another officer, this one sitting at the tactical station; "the sensor echo is now accelerating on an intercept course! I read graviton emissions as shielding is forming, torpedo ports... opening, phased energy charging up..."

"Condition Emerald! Battle stations!" barked Commander Varin, gripping his armrests. "Divert all remaining power to engines and maintain course, maximum warp! Prepare for evasive!"

"Commander! Are we not going to attack?" wondered the Centurion returning to his post.

"We did not come all the way here to crush one ship! We are here to crush them all and forever! To save the Empire! Maintain course!" shouted back Varin. All the bridge officers saluted in return.

"Commander! Our engines are already strained. If we push them further, they will be forced beyond design limits," warned the officer from the engineering console.

"Will we still reach our objective on time?" inquired Surol calmly over the blaring alert siren.

"Yes, Admiral."

Surol simply nodded.

He did not look back.

* * *

"... necessary. This is your only warning. You have one minute to comply. Artemis out."

On the bridge of the USS Artemis, there was a long moment of silence following the last words of Captain Kheren as he sat in front of the star-streaked image on the main viewer. The Romulans had not returned communication nor even acknowledged the message. But reception of the signal was confirmed... and that now they had cut it off.

They had heard... but they did not listen.

And to think those were once... Vulcans, bitterly thought Kheren.

"Doctor Aquila, keep trying to send them our logs."

The silence stretched into eternity.

Chief of Science Lieutenant Syntron was working on his console preparing for the launch of the modified probe, in case the Captain called for its use. After they finished completing a series of operational simulations, he had attached a coupling device to the outer shell of the probe in case it reached close enough proximity to the Terix so that it could stealthily attach itself temporarily to an obscure section of the ship's hull; provided there was a significant distraction during the process to allow this potential scenario to occur.

From this position, the probe could serve multiple purposes: to aide in the continuous detection of the vessel even when it's cloaked, to assist in tracking Artemis personnel should they beam aboard this advanced Romulan vessel and if needed, help boost an emergency transport signal to remove them quickly, and under extreme circumstances it could be detonated to cause a significant rupture in the ship's hull.

"Mister Syntron, keep us locked on them with your spatial sonar. We dare not lose them now. And the doctor's lock on the infiltration team's transponders will depend on it."

"Acknowledged Captain" the Vulcan responded as he switched his attention to engage the spatial sonar and directed its focus on the clocked Romulan ship attempting furiously to evade their pursuit.

He then turned to the Captain.

"We have their signal locked on" he announced and then added: "if deemed necessary, the modified probe is loaded and prepared for launch at your command, Captain."

A full minute went by.

The entire future poised on but a single minute... reflected the Andorian.

Then, he finally sighed, a long, slow and heavy release of breath, like that of a dying man. But his eyes were burning with raging life and as cold and as hard as metal as he ordered with a heavy voice:

"Mister Scott, we will go to warp 9.6 to maneuver and overtake them. I know, our structural integrity is compromised; but if we do not stop them here, it is the entire timeline that will fall apart."

He kept his four eyes on the main viewer as if he could see the cloaked warbird. As he now addressed his chief of operations at the forefront of the command center of his ship, he opened a channel to the main transporter room.

"Mister Brie, you will have to lock on and beam over Commander O'Conner's team while we are at high warp. Number One, stand ready... and good luck."

The unique multitask station of the Artemis bridge could fuse sensor signals, navigation data and transporter controls under one single button, the moment all three stations would light green together. The Bolian Lieutenant had to be alert and poised for instant action the moment to beam out the away team came.

But even with this console at his disposal, transport from one ship to another at high warp was a critical maneuver, especially from an already strained ship to a fully cloaked one. There was no shield on a cloaked ship to prevent the beam in, but their warp fields had to be in contact to allow it... and that meant flying dangerously close to an unseen, evading target. All would rely on perfect flying from Lieutenant Snow, exact sensor localization from Lieutenant Syntron, Doctor Aquila maintaining constant monitoring of Commander O'Conner's team, Chief Engineer Scott ensuring complete reliability of all critical systems under combat conditions and precise timing in transport operations from Chief of Ops Brie with whatever tactical trick would be used by Lieutenant Jackson to mask both probe launch and transporter beam from enemy detection.

The captain had devised the maneuver and would give the final order, assuming the responsibility of any failure for his brave officers, his ship... and the future of the galaxy.

And so, he sat very straight in his command chair as he calmly ordered:

"Mister Snow; attack pattern Omega III."

"Omega III, aye, Captain," immediately acknowledged the Inuit helmsman, his fingers finishing activating the flight sequence before he finished talking.

"Mister Jackson; lock on sonar signal; all forward tubes, full spread of photon torpedoes, widest dispersal pattern."

Their few remaining photon warheads, all depleted after their week long exposure to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, were now only good for a light show. They would do no damage upon detonation... but their antimatter spread, weak as it would be, would blind all sensors of the D'Deridex... at least, just long enough to hide the launch of Syntron's probe... and beam the away team aboard unnoticed.

But with the difficulty of the whole maneuver and their few remaining photon torpedoes, they would get one and only one try.

Now.

"Fire."

From the pair of launchers at the base of the neck structure linking both hulls of the Ambassador class starship, ten blobs of pale reddish light shot out and dispersed themselves in a large conical pattern before the vessel over their maximum range of three million kilometers. Their explosion each covered three hundred thousand kilometers of weak antimatter particles that annihilated with space's dispersed atoms of stellar matter. The resulting intense light blotted out everything for a second.

The second needed to send Syntron's covert probe and Michael O'Conner and his team undetected on the ship of doom.

All of destiny in the hands of but a few men and women.

* * *

The entire bridge of the IRW Terix vibrated with the rumbling of its warp engines forced beyond its normal output, pushing the immense vessel beyond its normal 9.2 maximum speed to sustain a dangerous warp 9.4 velocity its large, open structure was not able to withstand. By the time they would reach Cheron, their power systems would burn out and they would never be able to get back home.

But it did not matter; the moment they started this journey, they had already sworn never to return.

But they had also sworn to fulfill their duty; to save the Empire. And for that, they needed to reach their rendezvous with History... and escape this odd federation starship suddenly coming out of nowhere to try and stop them.

"How, Admiral... *how?*" almost shouted Commander Varin, his eyes going from the Admiral sitting besides him and the screen showing the Starfleet ship moving into an attack vector.

"How could *they* be *here*? *How* can they locate us? These Federations, they are sorcerers!"

For a moment, even the inscrutable Surol looked pale and uncertain. His mind had difficulty understanding all the confusing details piling up by the second; a Starfleet ship chasing them... a ship of a class a century old, but which found their 25th century secret installation and used it to track them back in time... even through their cloak...

Then, his brain clamped down on the flood of emotions and he started to see clearer. This fooling echo they had detected... some energy signature masking procedure and some kind of new sensor system able to pinpoint their ship through the diffusing effect of their cloaking device... Although the Admiral also considered that this Andorian captain could have been shrewd enough to guess that the Terix, with the involved time and distance in mind, would have been flying in a straight line from the time station to the Cheron system... He just followed the same course with the higher speed of his own obviously refitted starship.

His voice was now firm and controlled.

"Change our heading, Commander. Shake them off our tail."

"But... the Battle..." started to remind the ship master. But Surol cut him off.

"Helm; how much time to reach our target site have we gained with our acceleration?"

"Three point forty-six hours, Admiral Sir." answered the sub-lieutenant at the helm after a moment, his face strained with every vibration that went through the bridge.

"That's how long you have, Commander."

A feral glint flashed in Varin's eyes as he turned to face the screen.

"Federation torpedoes incoming!"

Under cloak, the warbird was shieldless; its hull plating would not withstand twenty-five isotons of matter-antimatter explosion one photon warhead could deliver; the tactical board registered ten incoming in a wide dispersal trajectory... but two directly at them.

"Full evasive! All hands brace for impact!"

Just as he shouted, Varin and all the other bridge officers were suddenly and painfully blinded by the white glare that overloaded the main viewer's filters. Their third eyelid saved their eyesight from prolonged blindness and in but mere seconds, their tear-filled, blinking eyes could focus again on their wildly disoriented instruments. The entire bridge shook.

But not from any detonation; it was still but the rumbling of their own overtaxed engines only.

Their eyesight had returned but their minds still took a few seconds to recover from the shock of being still alive and their ship unharmed.

"Disengage cloak and raise shields! All weapons lock on target! Attack pattern Valdore 3! Execute!" barked Commander Varin spring out of his chair a fist raised at the returning image of the Federation starship arcing back for another pass.

Still in his chair, Surol crossed his fingers before his tight-lipped mouth as he listened to the battle readiness of the Terix while watching the Starfleet vessel called Artemis. As the ship's commanding officer dealt with the *how* of the confrontation, he silently tried to deal with the *why*.

Starfleet officers were no blundering mercenaries with dubious goals and emotional, self-serving interests; they were highly trained and experienced scientific researchers and military officers with a sworn duty and clear, well-thought out and battle-proven directives. Because of that, they were far more dangerous than even the fierce and fearless Klingon warmongers and all their savage life-long combat preparedness. And clearly, they could somehow pinpoint at least their general location.

Then... how come they fired... *blanks* at them?

Surol knew well the vaunted Federation claim to honor sentient life and their pretense at waging Peace above all else. But even pacifist fools like the Vulcans knew there was a time for peace and a time for war. The alien captain of this Starfleet ship clearly stated that he knew why the Terix was here, in this place and time; and he stated as clearly that he was here to stop them... at any cost. The stakes he had alleged to would require nothing less, even for peacemongers like those Federation people.

A warning shot? Or... what?

And as to confirm his doubts, the ship shook suddenly with the unmistakable shock of weapon fire returning their own disruptor bolts glancing at the Starfleet ship's shields flashing on the screen.

"Commander! They are targeting our engines!"

"Aim at their power core! All batteries and tubes to bear! Fire at will!"

"Sir! They maneuver to stay on our ventral aft side! We only have a couple of disruptors covering that angle!"

"Attack pattern Shinzon 2! Go for their flank!"

The battle was on... but something was definitely amiss here.

"Commander Varin, the Admiral then ordered; show me our sensor logs on them back from the moment they first fired at us up until now. Have all instruments checked and scan the surrounding area."

The shipmaster looked back at his superior officer with a raised eyebrow. And Surol, now looking down at the small monitor before his command chair, simply explained:

"They claim to stop us by any means to save History. Yet, first they only fired to blind us and now they try only to disable us. I want to know why."

* * *

In a flash, Commander Michael O'Conner and his team of Vulcanoids appeared in a darkened substructure of the ship. While Kheren has clearly intended this mission to be more a subterfuge mission than a combat mission, O'Conner was never a good liar or actor. But he was a good engineer and with the right team, in the right place and with the right tools, he knew he could complete this mission.

As they had practiced quickly in the holodeck the engineering team of O'Conner, chief T'Brin, petty officer T'Mell, and chief Turan taking up positions as a repair team would. The security chief Artus, the flight officer Skyn and the medic Sten taking up tactical positions as an escort might.

O'Conner plan had three parts and he whispered it again to his team:

"Alright team let us review this plan step by step. First step: T'Brin and Turan will use T'brin's knowledge of Romulan ops and Turan's culture knowledge to try to hack in to the viewscreens and consoles of the warbird to force every screen of the ship to show the video prepared by the Chief Ops officer. This is, if they can get by the Romulan firewalls without being shut down first."

"Mister Syntron had my tricorder programmed with a descrambler algorithm that should bypass their security lock outs, at least long enough for us to act, Sir." whispered T'Brin with assurance as he hefted his instrument and looking for a wall monitor.

The disguised O'Conner nodded at T'Brin.

"Very good. Be cautious but quick. Once you start hacking their system, the clock will be running. They will find us if you take too long."

The Vulcan woman acknowledged with a nod.

"Good. Second step: Petty Officer T'Mell and myself will use her expertise in Romulan energy systems and a pair of disruptors to create a cascade failure in the right wing of the warbird, which should... violently... throw the warbird out of warp... or cause a cascade failure of the singularly drive itself."

"Power core failure is much easier to do on a warbird than on a Starfleet ship; what is as difficult however is getting access the restricted main engineering area, Sir," confided the other Vulcan woman. "If we do, just destroying with a few hand weapons shots the control failsafes and it will be impossible to stop the implosion. I suggest we make sure of our escape route once we do so, Commander."

O'Conner turned to the power conduit before him.

"True, T'Mell, but if we can cause a disruption with their warp-field, then we can throw them out of warp. Remember, we don't need to destroy them or their systems. Just stop them for now."

O'Conner continued as he scanned the conduit.

"And third: If all else fails, I brought enough explosives and weapons to destroy the ship from within... but it would be bloody on both sides if it comes down to that."

"And I suggest, Commander, that we attempt both first and second options simultaneously before engaging the third," chimed in security officer Atrus. "We will undoubtedly have the element of surprise in the opening volley; but after that, we will simply be overwhelmed by ship internal security systems unless something else distracts them long enough for us to attempt an escape."

"In all logic, the recorded logs playing on all their terminals and a power core failure alarm, all while in the middle of a space battle, should both serve this purpose well," estimated out loud flight officer Skyn deadpan.

As they listened in silence to the alarm resounding all across the immense warship, medical officer Sten was scanning around with his own tricorder and finally reported;

"No movement towards our position. I also received the contact signal of Mister Syntron's hidden probe. our covert infiltration is successful. Tricorder set on our disguised combadges for emergency beam out the moment you order it, Commander."

Listening to his cold, calm voice, it was hard to believe they were a group of disguised Vulcans led by a surgically altered Human with a masking biotransponder lurking inside an enemy warship at full alert while their own ship was pounding at it.

"Very good Sten," replied the first officer with a smile. "We should have this rigged in fifteen minutes."

Now it all boiled down to just how fast the Romulan reacted to them... and how they reacted.

The XO looked over at T'Brin for a moment and asked:
"How long will it take you two?"

Still being a Vulcan, she glanced at her chronograph on her tricorder before replying.

"Twelve minutes and forty-two seconds."

"Let's hope the Artemis can keep them busy that long," O'Conner mumbled.

Out in space, the two ships were locked in a swerving dance of death, lancing at one another with energy beams impacting on energy shields that flashed with each impact. The much larger grey-green warbird repeatedly tried to come about to face its smaller opponent as most of its weapons, especially its deadly plasma torpedoes, fired from the bow; but the silver-blue Starfleet ship was much too agile for the lumbering giant and kept moving to its underside and its rear, where barely a few disruptors could target it... while it lashed out at the engines of the Terix with all of its phaser arrays evenly distributed around its sleeker frame.

But, despite its obvious tactical advantage and better firing opportunities, the Artemis did not use its own much more powerful warheads, its quantum torpedoes recently rejuvenated by Scott, Jackson and Syntron.

And, within the first minute of battle, it did not escape the notice of the Romulan commander.

"What are they waiting for?" he asked out loud to no one in particular. "Shields are down to twenty-five percent! Another of their torpedo salvo would blow us out of the stars!"

"Look here, Commander," then said Admiral Surol, turning towards him his own armset monitor where showed the log record of the opening moments of their space duel.

"It's their first volley..." recognized Varin with some stressed impatience in his voice.

"Look closely at the firing pattern," insisted the Admiral.

And then he saw.

"There were five shots from each of their two forward tubes and... and one from their aft torpedo launcher... but... tactical sensors register... twelve photon detonations..."

Thirteen shots... twelve impacts.

What had happened with the thirteenth one?

Commander Varin looked with raised eyebrows and widened eyes at Admiral Surol.

"A... dud? or... a... a *probe*? But... we are well over warp 9! no probe can fly over warp 9!"

"And even that, not for long," admitted Surol. But then, look at when they fired and especially where they were at the moment of firing."

Now, the record of the sensor logs showed the two ships' movement and position as the Starfleet vessel made its strafing run and flew by after firing its blinding but apparently ineffectual photon barrage which then wiped out the entire sensor record for a few seconds.

"They were barely a few hundred of meters from us!" realized the ship commander. "And we had no shields to protect us while cloaked... maybe they came even closer when the sensors were blinded... Did they try to ram us? They were so close... "

"Close enough to overlap warp bubbles," specified Surol then. "The way we are shaking under our own overtaxed engines, we would not have even felt it. And for the few seconds that both ships were connected, while we were blinded, they could have launched undetected that mysterious probe at us... not enough time for a shuttlecraft but enough time as well for... a transporter beam?"

"External sensors on surrounding area! Activate Internal security scan!" suddenly barked Varin.

"Nothing on sensors, Commander, " came the tactical report after a few dozen seconds. "Aft shields down to twenty percent."

"No intruder registering on board, " added the security officer a dozen seconds more later.

"Commander, the security grid would have immediately detected non-Romulans the very instant they would have set foot on board, " reminded the centurion who had reported to Varin earlier. "That and any non-authorized hand weapons signature, especially non-Romulan ones."

"Would it?" wondered Suroi out loud. A Starfleet boarding party aboard the Terix would explain why the Federation starship refrained from trying to destroy them. "Centurion; have internal scans compare recorded ship complement with current number of biosigns on board."

After a minute, the ship still buffeted by enemy fire and trembling from its own strained engines, the centurion turned and came up to them, his face stretched in alarm.

"Admiral... Commander! We register seven more lifesigns on board than when we set out from the station!"

"Security squads on alert!" shouted Commander Varin. "Search every deck and section for unregistered personnel! Seven intruders that will appear and register as Romulans! Verify ID tags! *Find* them... and *kill* them!"

O'Conner had nearly prepared the panel for the overcharge, when he heard Sten.

"Incoming, Sir."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw a trio of Romulan guards turning the corner.

"Took them long enough" He mumbled and then leaned over to T'Mell. "We ready?"

"We will not know till we try, Sir."

All O'Conner could think of at that moment is how much he hated working with Vulcans. "You there! Show us your ID!" The lead officer among the Romulans yelled out as they all moved towards the group of disguised Starfleet officers weapons raised.

"Well here goes nothing..." O'Conner said to himself as he pressed a button on the wired tricorder he had set near the ship's power conduits.

As the tricorder beeped, the leader of the Romulan squad yelled again.

"You there! Stop at once!"

They began to run towards the group just as their own disruptors released their full charge into the nearby exposed power grid of the ship.

This caused all the bulkheads down the line to blow out as the charge ran restlessly towards the right wing of the ship. It arrived with a flash and bang of explosive light as the once neon green light of the warp nacelle on the right wing of the immense warship blinded once, twice, three times before going dark.

As went the wing nacelle so went out the entire vessel's warp shell, quickly throwing the Terix out of warp and anyone in it against the nearest wall as the inertial dampeners strained to compensate.

Luckily for the away team, O'Conner had the chance to add an accelerometer not only to his own PID but to each member of the away team's dampening field belt as well; and so, Atrus and his team were able quickly move unhindered to the fallen and dazed Romulan guards and subdue them with their own disruptors.

The commotion allowed T'Brin and Turan enough to finish up their work just in time for the Romulans to see the results of their tapping into their computer and communication network.

"Commander! Weapons fire on lower aft engineering deck, section..."

The security officer monitoring internal scans did not have time to finish his report. A violent jolt shook everyone in their seat as the tremors that until now had vibrated the entire bridge suddenly stopped.

"We're out of warp!" shouted the helmsman.

"Starboard nacelle offline! Main power couplings burned out by plasma overload! Attempting to reroute!" barked the engineering officer frantically pushing buttons.

On the viewer, the eluding Starfleet vessel suddenly appeared right in front of them, passing them by as it came also out of warp, obviously taken a moment by surprise at the brutal drop of the Romulan ship to sublight speed.

And Commander Varin had not been put in command of the Terix because he missed opportunities.

"Torpedo, *fire!* "

From the beak-like prow of the warship emerged a ball of fire that rushed out to engulf the Artemis at point blank range; even had the firing officer been fast enough to fire at the warhead to detonate it before impact, it would have made no difference. This was the original weapon devised during the mid 23rd century and refined for a century afterwards, a warhead capable of destroying an entire outpost a kilometer through solid rock; and so, the blast was close enough and powerful enough to singe both ships... and swallow the entire Federation starship into a huge ball of flame.

"*Jolan Tru!*"

With his triumphant shout still echoing throughout the bridge, Verin did not waste any second to turn towards the security officer and order:

"Locate the source of the disruptor discharge, seal off the entire deck and depressurize!"

"Commander... our technicians down there... the security squads..."

It was Admiral Surol who cut the officer off, looking at him and everyone on the Terix' bridge to claim with conviction:

"Let us salute them as the first heroes to die for the Empire's future."

On the bridge of the starship Artemis, Lieutenant Syntron had sat attentively at his Science station, carefully monitoring the covert probe's status; there couldn't be even a moment's hesitation in response to the events occurring between these two ships and the away team's hazardous mission aboard the deadly Romulan warship.

He had had the probe's emergency transport signal boosted to maximum capacity as it rested directly on the external hull plating of the warbird and had set up a one-button trigger to detonate the probe if necessary.

Since the first moment of the engagement, he had also been monitoring the condition of the Artemis' shields from Brad Jackson's tactical readout farther down from his own station and was ready to implement additional shield strength if needed. It was one of the designs he had worked on during their previous encounter with the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly; an inverted ion pulse to diminish the damage invoked by the emerging plasma strands the anomaly discharged.

It would also theoretically function to protect them from extensive damage inflicted by the plasma warheads of the warbird if it managed to bring its lone forward tube to bear... and also possibly against the very high probability of the menacingly proximal explosion of the Terix's power core, be it voluntary or not; something that he preferred that they would not need to test out in this ensuing battle.

The D'Deridex class warbird at that very moment he thought thus had then suddenly dropped out of warp, surprising helmsman's Snow who had immediately compensated. But, just as they had also dropped down to impulse speeds, Brad Jackson had shouted:

"Incoming aft!"

It was a paradoxical moment: the events between the warring ships unfolded so rapidly and yet seemed to play out in a slow-motion surreal cascade of time; like the frames of an antiquated old Terran film projector reduced to its slowest speed of operation.

It was Syntron's swift Vulcan reactions that allowed him perceive this discernible moment and engage the modified shielding immediately as the Terix unleashed its salvo of devastation.

And then, they had been shaken and blinded by Hell's very inferno.

All went dark.

On the main viewing screen of the warbird Terix, the Federation starship floated like a derelict, no power output lighting its pale hull pockmarked by disruptor blasts and the blast of the plasma torpedo. It drifted slowly like a dead fish on a stagnant pond of stars.

"Glorious."

Admiral Surol did not acknowledge the exclamation of the ship's commander. After a few seconds, he sat back, sighed and simply said:

"Resume our course, Commander."

Varin stood very stiff before turning wide eyes towards his superior officer.

"Admiral! We have to finish them off first! Our duty is to crush the enemies of the Empress!"

"Our duty, Commander Varin, is to the *future* of the Empire. If we waste time here and miss our rendezvous at the Battle of Cheron, even in death these enemies of the Empire will have defeated us... and the will of our Empress."

For a moment, the Terix master seemed about to protest indignantly. Then, he frowned, nodded, saluted both the Admiral and the Imperial Symbol above his head in a single gesture that was repeated by every officer on the bridge. Then he asked:

"Time estimate before we reestablish warp speed."

"Twenty minutes, Commander," answered the chief technician.

"*You* will use your own Honor Blade on yourself in eleven minutes... unless we are at warp before that."

The technician saluted stiffly and hurriedly exited to get to work promptly. But Varin was already ignoring him as he turned towards the security station with the same cold, hard stare.

"Report."

"The entire lower section of the starboard engineering level is isolated with level 5 forcefields and starting to depressurize, Commander. No lifesigns left."

"Do not bother repressurizing this section, Lieutenant. In a few hours, it won't matter anyway."

Turning back towards the navigation post, he ordered:

"Resume course to Cheron, full impulse." Then looking at the shipboard chronometer as he sat down in his command chair beside the Admiral, he added: "Maximum warp in... nine minutes."

The centurion then came up to face Varin squarely.

"Commander! This leaves us more than enough time to destroy the Starfleet vessel."

"Are you disputing my orders or those of the Admiral, Centurion?" retorted Varin with a dangerous tone and a baleful glare, his hand already gripping his Honor Blade.

Looking up directly at the Imperial Eagle, the officer said in a voice loud enough for everyone on the bridge to hear:

"I am invoking the Blood Oath and the Right of Victory of the Romulan warrior, and his sworn vow before the Empress herself of leaving no enemy of the Empire alive to ever threaten it again. The Vow of the Warrior supersedes any order given in the field... even be it by the Admiralty, the Imperial Senate... or the Throne itself."

His dark gaze then went back down to both the Admiral and the ship master as he finished:

"If you will not, Commander Varin... then allow me the glory of the kill."

A tense moment of silence froze the entire command center of the Terix. The Centurion held his own blade at his hip with a firm grip. By tradition, he was allowed to duel the commander refusing to fulfill his sacred vow... or to take out his own life in shame for being forced to rescind his own.

And so would every single Romulan warrior aboard the entire ship.

Suroi sighed. Between risking a mutiny and a mass suicide ending their glorious mission and losing time satisfying the pride of an Empire and of those he had to rely on to satisfy both and finish his duty, the choice was clear. But leaving it in the hands of a minor officer would shame both senior officers when they were already committed to die for the greatest honor of them all, marring their own name in the final moment of ultimate Honor.

And they were all Romulans. To the end.

"Finish them, Commander."

Commander Varin nodded respectfully to the Admiral and then almost as respectfully to his junior officer before sitting back and ordering:

"Helm; change course. Attack vector Varin 1, bearing 180 mark 45. Tactical: lock on all batteries on the Federation cruiser. Fire at my command."

On the darkened bridge of the Artemis, there was no movement, no sound and no light but that of a few consoles barely operating... not even the sound of moaning or breathing. A thin haze of burning smoke filled the air.

The immensely destructive plasma blast shot so close by the Terix had overloaded most of the ship's systems as her protective energy shield was whisked out like the flame of a candle under a sudden gust of wind. Failsafe programs had frantically activated themselves in a desperate effort to compensate from the massive energy surge bathing the entire vessel in order to consume it, shutting down the vulnerable warp core, closing off the sensitive EPS grid, isolating the sensitive computer core and disconnecting every system automatically except for life support, which only the utter destruction of the starship could turn off.

And that destruction would certainly have been the result... had it not been for a certain metaphasic program Laforge 1 implemented long ago, in another time and for another flaming peril... and the alertness and forethought of a certain Vulcan science officer and his own supportive defense system, also installed in that other time and for the purpose of opposing the very energies now unleashed with deadly intent against them.

The Artemis had been burned, stunned... but not killed outright. And so, not even taking time to wonder at this astonishing miracle of survival, the aggressor was pouncing again, this time to truly make the kill on a defenseless prey.

Or so it thought.

On the dark, silent bridge of the starship Artemis, nothing moved, nothing breathed... but all eyes were on the main viewer showing the gigantic Romulan warbird that was pulling away at impulse now slowly coming about.

They had thought for a moment the giant ship would just run off to its deadly rendezvous with History, ignoring the puny attempt made to stop it; but then, in typical Romulan no quarter asked or given fashion, it was now veering back to finish off its enemy.

"Wait for it..." suddenly whispered the deep, calm voice of Captain Kheren, his hand on the shoulder of Jackson poised on the instant of attack they had planned to stop it before it fled.

But it was not fleeing at all now. The massive warship on the screen was turning with deliberate slowness to bear down on the seemingly helpless Federation starship.

"Cold start intermix formula encoded and ready to reengage the core at full power." It was whispered from the engineering station, the voice unrecognizable.

"Ready to raise shields," came another whisper, barely a breath.

"No shields..." hissed the Andorian captain. "Play dead..."
The threatening D'Dedirex class vessel now completed its half-circle to come back facing the powerless Artemis.

"Mister Syntron, keep contact with your probe's signal at all costs, now breathed Kheren tonelessly, and keep feeding the tactical board; Doctor, do not lose the away team transponder signal and keep sending it to Mister Brie's station. Mister Brie... ready main transporter."

The beak-like prow of the warbird was now facing them and coming dangerously close.

"Steady..."

In the center of the birdhead-shaped front of the Romulan ship, the huge central torpedo tube glowed with inner fire.

"Stand by people... On my mark..."

It all depended on a split second of decision now... and on the sheer guts of all the officers of the starship Artemis... even on a man not even with them now, named Michael O'Conner.

And down in the bowels of the incoming warship, the man Captain Kheren was thinking about was indeed working furiously to do what he must to ensure the survival not only of his ship but of History itself.

"Commander O'Conner the Romulans are preparing to vent this section. We will not be able to stop them." T'Brin then calmly told her team leader.

"Well... shit." O'Conner replied as he moved to activate the transponder to teleport them back to the Artemis.

O'Conner only hoped that it was in range.

Doctor Aquila didn't had time to say anything as, in the darkened, silent bridge of the motionless Artemis, the beep on his console blared out like an alert klaxon the transponder signal of the away team, startling everyone.

"Beam them back now, Mister Brie!" ordered Kheren immediately.

The incoming warship had all shields raised and weapons glowing hot as it came in full offensive mode against the seemingly helpless Federation vessel to ruthlessly finish it. But Syntron's probe, attached unnoticed directly to its hull during the blinding pass that also hid the beam in of O'Conner's team, was sending a full stream of data the science chief relayed to all the other stations.

Including the Terix' shield frequency.

Matching the signal, the Bolian chief of ops could retrieve them through the shields of the warbird as easily as he could have done through their own had they been raised.

Then, the tactical sensors board of Brad Jackson flashed to announce the arming and launching of the Romulan deadly plasma torpedo.

"Jackson, Syntron... now!"

"Torpedoes, fire!" came the order from the tactical station.

"Torpedoes, fire!" was heard from the forward torpedo room through the speakers.

"Torpedoes, away!" then came back the confirmation from the firing squad as the powerful woosh of ejection was heard all the way up to the silenced bridge.

Being aimed and shot manually, the two quantum torpedoes were not detected until they flashed out of the two open forward tubes; and at well over warp 9, they closed the several millions of kilometers between the two vessels in barely a second, going cleanly through the decoded Romulan shields as if they simply were not there... to impact on the armor plating of the massive D'Deridex... and one directly with the more powerful but slower plasma warhead just as it came out of its own launch tube.

Quantum discharges and plasma fire engulfed the entire bird-like prow of the one and a half kilometer long warbird... before a blinding eruption of antimatter flared suddenly from its aft section, followed by a massive implosion of gravimetric forces.

As Jackson's tactical team fired, so had Lieutenant Syntron; with but a button, he had collapsed the magnetic bottle containing the micro warp core of the probe. The resulting instant conflagration not only sheared off the entire aft section of the huge warship where it had been affixed, but from there destroyed the containment chamber of the micro-singularity powering the massive ship itself.

The lightning succession of explosions and implosions literally disintegrated the IRW Terix and all souls on board.

The shockwave buffeted the Artemis and alarms resounded on all decks. But already wearing their Personal Inertial Dampeners, all aboard the starship weathered the storm as it passed to leave behind it only minute flaming particles in a cloud of shiny dust.

In the shadowy silence of the Artemis bridge settling once more like a heavy blanket on them all, a feeling of grim fatality showed on the dark, rigid face of the Andorian captain and was mirrored by all looking at the vast debris field dissipating like embers in the wind; all that was left of two thousand, proud and stubborn warriors who had blindly believed that they had to die for what they had thought was the right thing to do... even when it was not.

If only they had listened... Kheren thought with a sour taste in his mouth dripping down to his very soul. *If only...*

"Mister Scott; bring us back online; Mister Brie, full damage report; Doctor, casualties... Mister Syntron, long range scan of the entire area; you too Mister Jackson. Transporter room 1; Mister O'Conner... are you back with us?"

The anxiety in the captain's voice was clearly heard by everyone on the bridge.

O'Conner glanced around at the silent darkness he suddenly found himself in. He pondered for a moment if he was dead before he heard the captain.

"Uh.."

O'Conner grabbed his hand lamp and scanned the room. He almost drew his weapon when he saw the other disguised officers but he then smiled and replied.

"Aye, Sir. We seem to have made it."

As the emergency lights came back on, announcing power returning, he added jokingly:

"Also, Sir, might I make the suggestion that you lead the next suicidal mission on to an enemy's heavily armed ship in a costume..."

Hearing the lighthearted tone of his First Officer, Kheren sighed and almost smiled through the few facial muscles he had. But his antennae did curve sharply towards one another in relieved amusement.

"Well, Number One, next time I will do just that... and you better remember that you asked for it."

Then, straightening up in his chair, the commanding officer of the starship Artemis spoke out loud throughout the ship:

"All hands, this is the captain; well done. Through your courage and dedication, we have seemingly averted the destruction of our own timeline. Report to your senior officer for complete report of ship status... then, we will find a safe haven to rest for a day before we tackle our final challenge: getting back home. All hands, look alive! Captain out."

* * *

"Captain; I am detecting an energy surge one hundred and thirty-two degrees off our present course..."

The hawk-faced man in the command seat stood up and went to the Vulcan woman at the sensor station.

"Can you make out what it is?"

"Gravimetric cascade implosion... residual antideuterium detonation... quantum surge... all already dissipating rapidly... At this intensity and distance, I would estimate... an explosion."

The man looked at the viewing screen with a puzzled, worried expression.

"A ship?"

"If so I would say several, all at once," corrected the Vulcan. "For only one ship to put out so much, it would have needed to be almost fifty times our own mass."

The captain went back to stand before his seat, frowning.

"Do we have a scouting force out there?"

"Negative, Sir; all our forces are committed with us to the surprise assault at Leonis 83," then interjected the distinctive English accent of the man sitting at the tactical station opposing that of the Vulcan woman. "Sir, it could be a Romulan squadron patrolling out of the system."

The captain turned his piercing eyes to the woman sitting beside the Vulcan scientist at the communications console.

"Anything?"

"Nothing, Sir," answered the smallish Asian woman, shaking her head. "I am not even receiving any ship's disaster beacon."

"How long to get there from our current route?" now asked the captain.

"At present speed, the better part of the day, Captain," reported the black-skinned man at the helm. "With all the warp 5 capable ships currently towing the slower ones, we would have to break formation to investigate."

"If we do that, we won't even be able to come back to bring them with us in time for the party," commented the blond engineer looking over at the situation screen at the back of the bridge. "And if we leave them here, it's three-quarter of our entire attack fleet that won't be able to make it."

"Sir, then chimed in the Asian comm officer, it's the Columbia; Captain Hernandez is asking to speak with you."

"On screen."

The firm and mature yet seductive face of a dark brown haired woman filled the screen, showing her wearing the same uniform as the ship's captain.

"Jonathan... we picked up what might be an explosion almost beyond sensor range."

"We did too. Any ideas?"

"I just got calls from Commander Shran, Captain Sovek, Captain Krall and Captain Korin; even their own better sensors cannot confirm anything more than it being an explosion from a powerful and highly concentrated power source... possibly a ship but more probably several judging by the strength of the signal."

"We thought as much. Do they want to investigate?"

"Shran does; but the Vulcans would rather send a probe and keep on course. The Centaurians and the Tellarites are against it, fearing it could betray our presence and compromise this entire operation."

The captain thought for a moment then glanced at his officers in turn.

"T'Pol, keep passive scanning on that area while Malcolm's tactical sensors keeps watching our target zone. Trip, make sure we lose nobody along the way. Full speed ahead Mister Mayweather. Hoshi; open fleetwide channel."

"Fleet channel open, Sir."

"This is Captain Archer; stay on course. Flagships Enterprise, Seleya and Kumari will keep passive sensors on the area of the unidentified energy surge for the next twelve hours. The fleet will go on yellow alert for that time and until we reach our engagement zone. We all know that the exact timing of our operation is crucial to its very success, so, let us be wary but not distracted. The whole war, maybe our very future, might just depend on this one Battle at Cheron. We shall not miss our rendezvous with History. Enterprise out."

Every ship of the Earth Alliance Fleet acknowledged the order and kept on flying towards the two dim orange stars before them and to their place into the pages of History books.

CHAPTER FIVE: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Captain's Log

Stardate: hope and fear.

Thanks to the courage and efforts of the crew of the Artemis, History has been restored, all civilizations in the galaxy have been brought back to their proper state and the Federation is, or will be, whole again. Everything is, once again, as it was, where it should be...

Except us.

Stopping the Romulans from their ill-conceived, ill-fated scheme had been costly with all the damage, casualties and regrets for all lives lost on all sides left afterwards; but that still was the easy part. Now, we have to find a way to bring back our battered ship and strained crew to our own time period. Every moment we stay in the twenty-second century multiplies by one hundred and fifty, with each one of us aboard, the chances of destroying the timeline ourselves by our mere presence.

We are currently hidden in the Iota Leonis star system, the nearest uninhabited and still uncharted star system five light years away from the historical site where now rages the Battle of Cheron; and we dare not take more than a single day before we attempt our voyage home, back to the future.

And even then... how are we to prevent the Romulans from attempting it again? Not to mention that, even if we do somehow find a way to solve this Romulan paradox, our very return might create a new paradox of our own.

From the large transparency showing the large vista of the universe outside of the main conference room on deck 1, the cold blackness of space was lighted and warmed by the strong yellow-white glare of two subgiant stars so close to one another that they looked as one single star from Earth, over fifty light years away.

Back on that planet, it had been seen as part of the constellation Leo, "the Lion"; and one of their most ancient cultures, called the Chinese, had seen this particular star as the third light of the Right Wall of the Supreme palace Enclosure and specifically named it Cijiang, the "Vice-General."

At the moment, Captain Kheren needed the symbolic courage of the lion, as he did not feel at all as a Vice-General... even as all the responsibilities he had on his broad shoulders were certainly the same; he felt much more like he was trapped within the walls of some supreme enclosure... and with no light on the wall to guide him.

But then, he corrected himself. He did have lights to guide him: his team of bridge officers.

Some were seasoned like his First officer Michael O'Conner sitting at his right hand, or the Chief of Science, the Vulcan Lieutenant Syntron on the left side of the triangular table they all sat around. Others were quite new to their responsibilities, like the young Doctor Caius Aquila besides the Vulcan and the three gold-collared officers facing them both from the third side of the table, the Bolian chief of ops Danik Brie, security chief Brad Jackson and chief engineer Montgomery Scott the Third. But their mettle had been tested and proven with a week of deadly anomaly study, then another lost in a frightening alternate timeline, then two more travelling back in time to stop a ruthless, unforgiving enemy from destroying all that they knew.

And now, they joined him again to face the next great challenge this universe threw at them all. And their commanding officer wasted no time laying all the cards on the table:

"People, I believe we will agree that we must attempt everything we can to return to our own time. Since we do not have anymore the availability of the time displacement station we used to come to the here and now, we need to find another way to get back."

Looking pointedly with eyes and antennae to each of his bridge officers, he added with a cold, hard tone:

"The only other alternative is to find an uninhabited class M planet as far away as possible and spend the rest of our lives in isolation and exile, away from any potential risk of altering History even with our mere presence."

As soon as the confrontation with the Romulans had concluded in the expected dramatic way it did, Syntron's methodical mind had instantly shifted to what he knew would be his next logical task as chief science officer: determine and assist in the time traveling process to return the Artemis and her crew back to what was their proper time period, now awaiting them in the restored future.

Having excelled in temporal mechanics on Vulcan and during his time in Starfleet Academy, Syntron realized from the start that there were several theoretical and experimented ways to accomplish this. A temporal rift creating a distortion in the space-time continuum which could allow for a temporal displacement to occur could be one possibility, but a very high risk option considering all of the alterations that have already occurred recently in the space-time continuum... not to mention that creating such a rift was in all probability beyond their current technical capacity.

However, he also knew of an older yet less impactful method that could accomplish the same goal with their actual resources and with much less risk to space and time:

The slingshot effect.

Also known as the light-speed breakaway factor, this was a crude but proven method of time travel through the use of an artificially-created time warp. This maneuver, first accidentally discovered by the 23rd century Constitution class starship Enterprise, was performed by traveling at an extremely high warp factor of at least warp 8 towards a stellar body with a high gravitational attraction, like that of a star of at least the gravitational mass of Sol.

After allowing the gravitational pull to accelerate the vessel to even faster speeds, beyond the warp barrier, the vessel would, hopefully, manage to break away from the stellar body, creating a whiplash effect which could transport the Artemis through time.

Performing this maneuver would require extremely precise calculations to be made, such as availability of fuel components, acceleration, and mass of a vessel through a time continuum. Syntron knew well that the speed increase that dislodged the ship from the space-time continuum in a slingshot effect was caused by a mathematical factor called the Cochrane's factor. It was added as a multiplier to the basic warp formula from the amount of curvature of space the ship was traveling through.

The main challenge however was the fact that it was calculations made with variables that changed while the calculations themselves were ongoing, leaving a somewhat unpredictable result until actually applied.

While the factor within the normal interstellar medium of Federation space was an average of one thousand two-hundred and ninety-two point seven-two-three-eight and in the intergalactic void only of one, in the close proximity of stars and other massive objects, it was so high that these disproportionately high speeds were thus created. He knew that this would be a mathematical puzzle that he and his science team would be able to resolve relatively quickly... but the results would still not be exactly predictable.

Syntron then turned toward the Captain before beginning to lose himself in any of the fascinating aspects and calculations of this procedure and stated:

"Captain Kheren, may I suggest that we prepare to implement light-speed breakaway and slingshot our way back to our future? We could have the calculations available for implementation within approximately sixteen point seven-two minutes, but it would take an additional nineteen point eighty-three hours to set up precise measures throughout the ship and run through numerous simulations to refine and adjust specific triggering parameters before we would be ready to actually engage this procedure."

The Andorian listened to his science officer and pondered a moment on his words before he commented:

"We all learned about this procedure in our basic temporal mechanics courses back at the Academy. And we know that, even with the most precise of calculations, the end result is never accurately predictable, since many other factors during the timewarp can alter the final result."

Kheren sighed and looked around.

"Still... anyone else has any better option for us?"

No one spoke.

"Very well," acknowledged Kheren with a nod at his science chief. "Now, the question is: are ship and crew able to attempt such a maneuver?"

"Sir, spoke Chief Engineer Scott, the EPS conduits could use a cleaning, but they'll be fine for now. The batteries and reactors are charged and at nominal levels. However, the main problem would be structural integrity. At best, it's worrisome. The structural integrity field is practically maxed out at this point. If we were back at Starbase 10, it'd be fixed in a week...but we are in another time, alone, without resources. At this level, we will be able to maintain operational status for a couple of months, but after that..."

Scotty gave a telling look that left no doubt about the seriousness of their situation.

Silence followed.

And from this silence of his most senior officers, even from his stoic and experienced first officer, it was plain to Kheren now that, with the frantic chase after the Romulans to save History over, the reality of their situation was kicking them all full in the face, leaving them senseless, numbed and overwhelmed by it all.

They were all lost, alone, time itself working against them... and the only option laid out before them had better chances to lose them even further into the unforgiving folds of time... if not kill them outright... than save them.

But, if they did not attempt to cheat both death and time by playing with the forces of the universe in a battered starship, they would simply fade away into nothingness, far away from everyone and everything they had known, loved and fought for.

And even that, if they, and the rest of the galaxy, were lucky.

For a moment, the Andorian stood, bowed with hands on the table, his white-haired head lowered as if submitting to the weight of fatality. But anyone knowing Andorians knew that this posture, submissive to humanoids, was in fact their very fighting attitude; bearing all four eyes and all senses to face squarely the enemy before them.

And now, this Andorian was staring at the emptiness before him... and a sigh came out of his pressed lips almost like a growl.

Then he spoke.

"Prepare for timewarp... and may our best be enough."

"Acknowledged Captain" Syntron responded as he was ready to implement the initial procedures for this rather precarious breakaway time-warp attempt he himself had proposed.

Once he reached his science station on the bridge, the Vulcan chief of science addressed his assistant science chief who was currently manning the ship's sensors.

"Lieutenant Irksos, we are going to be preparing for a light-speed breakaway procedure in an attempt to return us back to our previous time frame. Please assemble all key members of our team and again; work with the engineering team on addressing the technical aspects of accomplishing this while maintaining the structural integrity of the vessel. I will be working on the preliminary calculations and measures needed to effectively engage this process. Have Lieutenant T'Val assist you in this process and keep me updated on your progress."

The dark-skinned woman widened her dark eyes and opened her pulpous mouth hearing from Syntron what they were going to undertake. Thoughts ran through her eyes faster than her fingers went on the main console before her. But after a moment, Valencia Irksos turned with a composed expression towards her immediate superior officer:

"Sir, she said in a barely strained voice, I recommend applied Physics researcher Lieutenant Korbo, subspace and quantum mechanics expert Lieutenant Seton, as well as historian Ensign Marion and temporal mechanics specialist Ensign Baoule to work with astrophysicist T'Val."

"Excellent recommendations Lieutenant," the Science chief confirmed. "Make it so."

Syntron then computed a few equations into the board and added:

"After I finish refining these preliminary calculations and set-up a protocol, have your teams in place and prepared to run through a series of rigorous simulations. We will be very challenged with pinpointing the precise arrive time in a safe region of space while maintaining the integrity of this ship... and in all likelihood, we will have but one opportunity to succeed. Let us ensure that all that we have accomplished thus far in this mission was not in vain. Carry on Lieutenant."

"Aye, Sir," she acknowledged.

Irksos then stretched her neck past the tall Vulcan chief of science to address the blonde woman at the Engineering station:

"Patricia, do you have people to spare to help us work this slingshot maneuver?"

"The Chief already selected flight systems engineers Ensigns Sira and Dhraan, warp field specialist Ensign Horaga and propulsion engineer O'Toole to come with Second Chief Assistant Baoule to help you out."

"Are you telling me the twins will be working together now?" commented Irksos with a wide smile.

"Should be enough to power the whole ship all the way home," grinned back Blakely.

"As long as they don't tear her apart before we do it ourselves with that crazy stunt," mumbled the dark woman for herself.

She was no engineer... but she could remember hearing the groans of the deckplates when they had fled the battle zone for an entire day at high warp. And what they were intent on doing would make such a warp flight look like a thruster hop.

But like everyone else, she knew they had little choices left. They had to leave from the here and now... one way or another.

* * *

It took the twenty hours announced by chief science officer Syntron, or rather nineteen hours, forty-nine minutes and forty-eight seconds to be as exact as he had been, before all departments reported readiness for the voyage home.

At least, as ready as they could ever be.

The cold, heavy silence that had muted the bridge officers during the planning meeting had spread throughout the entire ship as the surviving seven hundred and thirty-seven crewmembers worked sullenly at preparing the strained starship for its grueling ordeal.

For all those hours, First Officer Michael O'Conner was the anchor keeping everyone focused and balanced against the tides of fear that might have drowned many. His now legendary poise and assurance, even in the direst of moments like this one, made each and every individual on board concentrate on doing one's part to beat the odds, tame time, deny fatality and cheat death for oneself and everyone else aboard the starship Artemis.

The ship was lost... they had not yet.

Under the young but highly competent chief engineer, the damage control crews did their best to reinforce the integrity field and repair as much damage as possible; but the numerous microfractures throughout the hull, now only partially covered by what was left of the ablative armor, worried Scotty to no end. There was no telling if the ship would support the massive stresses of the gravitational forces that it will endure flying in close proximity to a pair of stars and the resulting hypervelocity that will result.

That is, if they didn't fly out of control and right into the stellar inferno. They would be rushing at high warp almost inside their photosphere, faster and closer than any ship which ever attempted this high-risk maneuver.

The flight officers under the ever efficient Lieutenant Brie were therefore understandably nervous. The Chief of Ops had not spoken to anyone since the battle with the Romulans, simply rerouting and checking systems from the bridge, letting the people under his command react to his work and prepare all systems accordingly for the difficult voyage ahead. But there was no telling which system would endure and which one would fail during a timewarp. If such a maneuver would have been that easy, Starfleet would already have been exploring time as well as space for over two centuries now.

The safety of ship and crew during this attempt was thus of paramount concern to the new security chief of the Artemis. Judging by his sullen silence alone, Lieutenant Jackson was obviously feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility, if not outright frustrated by his powerlessness to do anything but implement basic travel safety protocols and hope for the best. Preparing oneself and one's ship to face a living enemy like the Romulans was hard enough, even when led by a courageous and energetic young man like Bradley Jackson; but how did one prepare to face time?

The thought was worrying everyone in Doctor Aquila's sickbay. If preparing a ship to get through the dangers of time travel by flying around a star was difficult enough, how did any individual prepare to face those dangers... or worse, failure to get back to his own time, his own universe, his own life? How then would anyone cope with the idea of being condemned to live the rest of one's life in exile, both in space and time? There were over seven hundred answers running around at the moment, and only one young but extraordinarily dedicated chief medical officer to care for them when came what may.

Even the science teams under Lieutenant Syntron, as inspired as they were by his self-mastery, his relentless work and his brilliant intellect, had fallen under the silencing spell of apprehension and growing fear gripping the whole vessel. But they were the ones everybody counted on to provide the answers, not only to their predicament, but to their destiny, their future as well. And the only answer would come once they plunged into the raging currents of the river of time.

Now... or never.

On the bridge of the starship Artemis, all the senior officers were there, silent, tense, but determined to succeed. They were all looking at the fused glare of the two orange stars they were now facing with calm but intense eyes.

The ominous silence was finally broken by the soft, deep voice of the ship's commanding officer.

"All hands, this the captain. Timewarp in three minutes. We are about to attempt returning home. Keep close to your heart the thought that you are with all those who most respect you and that you have saved the Federation, the galaxy and History itself. There never was or will ever be another crew more worthy of what nobility, honor and valor Starfleet ever was or will be known and remembered for. It is my highest privilege and deepest honor to serve with each one of you."

A pause and then he finished:

"All hands... stand ready."

Kheren looked at each one of his senior officers and took a deep breath, for a moment letting his pride in them submerge his fears. Then, rising from his chair, he activated like them his own PID and, hands behind his back, resolved to face destiny on his own two feet.

"Mister Snow; warp speed."

In the tensed silence permeating the bridge of the Artemis, the hum of the engines flared up noticeably, buzzing in their ears and letting them feel the power vibrating the deckplates under their feet. On the main viewer, the vista of the twin orange stars moved rapidly larger and brighter as they were now rushing at increasing speed towards them.

At the forward Ops station, Danik carefully monitored their course and speed. Kirk had made time travel via slingshot maneuver seem easy... like stepping around the corner in a corridor. In reality, it was more like shooting a flea off a targ's back from half a kilometer with a malfunctioning phaser.

And the targ happens to be the High Chancellor's favorite pet.

And you're running full-speed.

With one eye covered.

Scotty sat in the Chief engineer's seat and watched the power readouts and hull stresses measurements with each increment of warp speed.

"Warp 2... Power flow steady... Warp 3... Structural integrity holding, compensating hull stresses with structural integrity field..."

Around them, the entire starship seemed to tremble with effort and fatigue, fear and resolve as they flew hundreds of time faster than light to the stars, now filling almost entirely the screen, their dimness still blinding despite the heavy filtering of the computer.

"Warp 5..." continued to notify Scotty; "thermals on the shield is increasing as expected, hull temperature keeping well under tolerance threshold... Warp 7... plasma flow intensifying... Warp 8... warp field remains stable."

"We have reached the photosphere," announced the Inuit navigator.

They could all see the screen filled with the orange glow of the cosmic fires of the two stars of the Iota Leonis star system in which they now fully bathed under the thin covering of their metaphasic shielding.

A flashing light on the astrogation display cried impatiently for Danik's attention. The Artemis was beginning to veer off the carefully calculated flight path.

"Captain, heading is beginning to deviate by point-seven degrees... Compensating with thrusters."

"Course corrected, following calculated trajectory for timewarp... Achieving elliptical orbit around Iota Leonis," reported helmsman Snow, half-bent over his console like those ancient bicycle runners of old Earth. "Computer emergency control on navigation activated."

The ship began bucking and squealing around them as gravitational and inertial forces buffeted them, even through their warp field. Danik held on to his console as he attempted to steady himself enough to read the displays.

"Braking thrusters primed and ready to fire!" the Bolian chief of Ops shouted to be heard over the din.

The Artemis groaned and whined like a beast caught in fire, her entire frame shaking as if under pain as the image of the stars they were speeding around became a blur of lights and colors.

"Warp 9.1... droned on the chief engineer as loud as he could. Warp 9.3... Prepare for breakaway... Warp 9.5... Thermals on the shield reaching maximum, structural integrity field down to eighty percent.... Warp 9.75... structural integrity field down to 40 %. hull is... "

"Exceeding design speed limits!" warned Aguk Snow shouting over the roar of the engines and the screeching of the hull.

Engineer Scott felt the ship turn, and in an instant he felt different. Somewhere else.

Suddenly, it felt as if the bottom of the universe's stomach had suddenly fallen out, and taken Danik Brie with it. For a moment, the ship was coming and going.

The Romulans, the Borg, and the Federation were born, aged, and died.

Danik thought he saw a man with a hookish nose wearing a Starfleet uniform give a bemused chuckle as they passed by.

Then Danik didn't see anything at all.

The red alert klaxon blared as the computers calm, soft feminine voice was heard:

"Warning: Computation altered; warp field modifying stellar mass from excessive proximity; ship mass and integrity modified by structural damage. Time equation no longer valid. Complete system failure in three minutes. Hull breach in two minutes. warp core collapse in one minute. Warp field collapse in thirty seconds. Life support failing in..."

Then, from infinity to the smallest corner of everyone's mind, all went blindingly white. Silence roared from the end of the universe to deep inside each one's soul. Eternity became but a moment and the moment stretched into eternity...

And everything went black.

* * *

The darkness of space was barely lighted by the twinkling stars around a shadowy shape, floating like a dead asteroid in the silent void between them.

Pale golden-red light slowly silhouetted the inert object to reveal the drifting form of a vessel, her twin flat nacelles darkened, all the portholes on her peeled armor and burned cylindrical hull unlighted, as on the stunted support neck and the saucer shaped section atop of it all.

Darkness inside was barely lighted by the twinkling lights atop shadowy shapes floating like dead bodies in the silent command center of the starship.

Then, emergency lighting slowly flickered on to spread a weak light on the uniformed bodies slowly settling back on seats of the ground as gravity came slowly back and time resumed itself to its normal, steady flow. The timid sounds of systems reactivating on standby mode and automated self-diagnostics filled the silence and, slowly, life struggled to come back aboard the USS Artemis.

First officer Michael O'Conner rubbed the back of his neck as he stood up.

"Report!" He ordered.

After a moment of quiet silence, he looked around; squinting in the semi-darkness barely lighted by standby lights on consoles and noticed everyone else was still unconscious.

"Oh..."

Besides him, Captain Kheren laid in his large command chair, unmoving, his antennae retracted in his skull as was their peculiar reflex unique to him when he was unconscious. Michael recollected that he had been standing the whole time they had faced space and time themselves, resolute to lead the way to salvation... or die on his feet.

But even his PID hadn't prevented his fall and bumping his head on his own seat. Moving through the darkened bridge, O'Conner made his way to the doctor and then began to try to shake him awake.

Chief of ops Danik brie slowly stirred. His eyes fluttered open but for several moments he couldn't see anything more than fuzzy shapes tinted by the emergency lighting. As the shapes began to refine into more solid objects, words began flitting around his brain, attempting to attach meaning to images like K'tarian bats to livestock. *Flat* was the first word that seemed to find its perch on anything. The two concepts began to stumble around as if they'd had too much to drink and were looking to find the third member of their team that had seemed to run off during the party that must have been going on in Danik's skull.

It was like a large and, frankly, wild party.

That was the only reason the blue-skinned, bald Lieutenant's addled mind could come up with for the massive headaches he felt. He was a little put-out that someone had thrown a party in his head and discourteously neglected to invite him.

The two earlier abstracts finally caught up with the third and promptly demanded an explanation for what was going on. The third merely said *Ceiling* before he too staggered away. Things were a little clearer but now left the Bolian with another question.

Why was he staring at the ceiling?

Another shape resolved into focus which Danik had a great deal less effort remembering. It was the ops console that he normally sat at, except there was something odd about it. He didn't remember it ever looking like that. Slowly he realized that he was viewing it from an angle that was decidedly not standard operating procedure. He seemed to be flat on his back, on the opposite side of the operator's chair, looking at the underside.

Finally showing he had paid attention in his various mathematical courses he attended during the Academy, Lieutenant Brie put two and two together.

During the breaking maneuver out of the timewarp, the sudden deceleration caused him to flip over his console and land on his back despite the efforts of his personal inertial dampener. A theory which was given much more credence when that particular area of his body decided that now was the most opportune time to remind the Chief of Operations that he was not a gymnast.

The fall had been in an odd slow motion movement because of his PID and the weird effects of time dilation; but the landing had still hurt... less than expected... but definitely longer.

Groaning, Danik rolled over to his stomach, crawled the rest of the way under the console, and used the chair to leverage himself into a more or less upright and seated position. He seemed to remember enough at this point to begin searching out the ships's current systems status. He was vaguely aware of someone else moving about, but giving less effort in identifying objects around him seemed like a good course of action.

Kheren's antennae peeked slowly out of his thick white mane like fearful snails and his reflective silvery eyes flickered open. His powerful arms straightened his body in his chair with vigor; but they did not manage to bring him back on his feet as he had intended as dizziness made him pause a moment. He glanced around him, checking on everyone's welfare, oblivious of the bad lighting as he was of the hardware, only one thought in his mind, a thought he voiced almost as fast as it came through his thin lips:

"Is everyone alright? Did we make it?"

"All systems on standby while automated diagnostics are underway," Danik announced for anyone who cared to hear. "Reports are beginning to come in from all over the ship, so it looks like we're still in one piece."

Stations everywhere signaled their sending of their current status to the executive officer's station. At least people were alive and still at their duties.

But then again, they were all Starfleet officers; strangeness, hardships, challenges... even risk and deaths were part of their job's description, their chosen destiny.

Scotty painfully woke up from a temporary state of unconsciousness. He groaned and slowly stands up.

"Where... *when* are we?"

He saw that the emergency lights were on, and he looked at the console in front of him before he collapsed back down into the chair.

His assistant, Patricia Blakely, had been luckier than most, just loosing consciousness in her chair. She simply straightened herself and with blinking eyes brought slowly her fingers to her board and croaked orders to report status from the other technical posts of the ship.

Syntron's keen mind was a bit fuzzy and certainly as perplexed as that of the chief engineer after his eyes opened to find his viewpoint inverted ninety degrees.

He discovered that he was lying sideways on the deck of the ship near the science console on the bridge. His PID had not been able to fully compensate for the tremendous forces of the timewarp, but still had managed to make his fall so slow and soft that he had not felt anything.

Fascinating he thought as he carefully stood up and straightened out his Starfleet uniform.

He repositioned his retro-style chair back in front of his console and immediately sat down and checked the status of his station.

The sensors were all offline. He then began to proceed through various sequences to reactivate them. Within a few minutes, he had restored them back to full capacity.

With his natural logic, the science chief then immediately proceeded to make astrogation measurements of stellar drift in an attempt to determine where and when their space-time relocation travel had taken them. After contacting Lieutenant Irksos in the Astrometrics lab, she and her team had their detection and analysis capabilities back in virtually full-functioning capacity within a few moments. They then worked in conjunction with the bridge to obtain sensor reading and compute stellar measurements and calculations.

After the readings were confirmed, Syntron announced:

"We are fourteen point three light years rimward from Iota Leonis, our last position. Sir, according to our calculations, our current position is listed as: Sector 003B, coordinates 215 mark 030 mark 2... the Lorilla star system, star Gamma Leporis."

On the viewing screen, now reactivated with the rest of the sensor suite of the ship, everyone could gaze at the three very bright and very close yellow-white stars circling one another and almost pulsing like quasars with their fast rotation, numerous solar flares and sunspots marking them all over their burning surface. Most recognized this star system, at least by name, since Gamma Leporis was part of the famous Ursa Major constellation as seen from Earth, barely twenty-nine light years away, where in the past it had been considered a prime target for its early terrestrial planets finder mission.

Fortunately for the starship Artemis, stranded in space and time, it had in the end revealed itself to be totally devoid of planets, and thus completely forgotten by space traffic or surveillance.

And so they were safe... for a while.

But they were still far from home.

The tall Vulcan then began looking back at the computer records after they engaged the time-warp procedure.

"According to the computer records Captain, as we emerged from the time-warp back into Einsteinian space, we were going at warp 9.99999 until the gravitational pull of the next nearest star pulled us to a relative stop."

He then looked at the chronometer sever times before revealing:

"Our current stardate is 44832.6... October 31st... 2367."

He then looked up toward the Artemis commander and announced:

"Captain, we are currently forty-three years before our time."

The silence that gripped the entire bridge was as cold and heavy as the one following a death toll.

Forty-three years!

A freezing shiver shook the Andorian's spine from deep in his memory and up to his bewildered stare at the men and women now still stranded with him in the past. Forty-three years... 2367... Kheren was one of the rare crewmembers that had been even alive then... a ten year old outcast on Andoria, tutored by the monks of the Temple of the Great Wash to become the reincarnated hero that would save their entire people from extinction... while the rest of the planet screamed of the abomination that he was... Shunned and despised by most, challenged daily by every other youngling and fighting incessantly year after year after year to prove his worth, to earn his place, to get food and sleep, to simply justify his existence...

Forty-three years...

But there was something more to this time period than his childhood that nagged at his mind; something that almost surfaced when he looked around him but still could not fully recall yet.

"Mister Snow, move us into the Gamma Leporis system and hide us as close as possible to those stars to avoid detection."

"Aye, captain," acknowledged with a strained voice the Eskimo pilot nursing a small bump on his forehead. "We have impulse for now... helm sluggish, Sir. ETA sixty-seven minutes."

Sixty-seven... 2367...

The date ran wildly into his head again, hinting to a thought or a remembrance cloaked in shadows, daring him to see, to remember.

Scotty then looked up at the captain.

"Sir... in the state we are in, there is absolutely no way we are doing another breakaway. Structural integrity at this point is so far taxed that we can't even risk going above cruising speed. We'd just shake ourselves apart..."

And now the bad news, thought Kheren wryly.

Syntron was already investigating how the slingshot effect of the light-speed breakaway maneuver fell short by forty-three years. This was an illogical outcome based on his repeated computer simulations and precise preparatory calculations.

As he continued his analysis however, he determined a possible cause.

"Captain, apparently the time-jump maneuver we attempted fell short of our intended calculations because the computer itself stopped it before the ship would shake apart. The metaphasic shielding did hold and protect the ship while it orbited closer to the stars... but the warp field so close to them affected the stellar masses and threw all of our calculations off."

He then added:

"Unfortunately as Mister Scott indicated, even if we initiate another attempt at a slingshot maneuver, the integrity of the ship would have less than sixteen point five percent chance of enduring the extensive stress levels that would be imposed throughout the process; especially as we would reach near breakaway velocity."

He then noted in conclusion with calculated stoicism:

"It would seem Captain that we will need to find another way forward to our previous period in time."

"Guess so," Kheren offered as an acknowledgement.

Two-hundred and eight years down, forty-three left to go...

"Mister Syntron," he ordered then, "research this time period and what we have now got ourselves into."

Kheren pushed the nagging thought to the back of his mind, wincing a little from the pain there, and looked around.

"Number One, see that we get back on our feet as quickly and as best as possible. We will need warp power as soon as possible and make sure life support remains stable and secured. Doctor Aquila, take care of the crew, especially with their state of mind. This is a setback, not a failure. We *will* find a way back home."

There was no mistaking the steely resolve of the Andorian captain at this moment.

Doctor Aquila was still stunned. Too stunned and disoriented to be of much use to anyone for a moment still. The words of the captain and other bridge officers did an elusive dance through his ears, and didn't register.

Finally, the doctor pulled himself together and had the computer run an automated medical scan of the crew, starting with the captain. He then grabbed a special medkit for Andorians from a compartment of the captain's chair.

Aquila quickly looked down at his medical console after it chimed completion of the scan.

"No major injuries reported."

"First good news we had for a long while," sighed the commanding officer of the Artemis.

They already had lost too many fighting the suicidal Romulans.

"Captain, if you don't mind, I'd like to get a closer look at where you hit your head. I'd like to make sure you have not suffered a concussion."

Sitting stoically in his command seat while his first officer minded the ship, the Andorian nodded to the young chief medical officer to go ahead. He did feel a bit dizzy, confused, drained; but, even if he was no doctor, he was sure it was nothing physical.

Looking out at the bright stars they were moving to, Kheren sighed and said:

"Mister Jackson, round the clock surveillance of the surrounding area. I do not want to be chanced upon by a passing ship of this era..."

Suddenly, the Andorian stopped talking.

Ships of this era...

The nagging thought jumped back out of hiding and poked him maliciously like a mockingly laughing jester jumping around and daring him to catch him now that he could glimpse him.

Slowly he stood up, eyes lost in the vista of outer space.

"Carry on, Number One. I will be in the Owl's Crest."

And so saying, he moved out to the turbolift.

"Aye sir." O'Conner replied as he slumped down in a chair. A bit disheartened, he barked out orders.

"Scotty, get main systems back best you can, but keep the newer upgrades we don't need to survive offline for now."

Turning to the other side of the bridge, the tall bearded man then ordered:

"Mister Syntron, have some of your crew scan the system for any raw materials Scotty might need."

"I'll take care of it, Sir," answered Valencia Iksos to both the executive officer and her immediate superior.

"Lieutenant Danik, keep an ear out for any comm traffic about us."

Michael's eyes then went down to the reports flooding his armchair integrated PADD from all over the ship and his fingers tapped acknowledgements and directives as he went through them.

As Syntron responded to the captain's and exec's orders, the date began to come to the forefront of his memory. He then called up the available data on the battle and the location to share with the commanding officer.

"Captain" the science chief spoke as the commanding officer had turned to leave the bridge. "2367 is the year of the Battle of Wolf 359; most notable as the site of the first large-scale engagement between Starfleet and the Borg. A fleet of forty ships under the command of Admiral Hanson engaged a Borg cube commanded by Locutus of Borg."

Kheren stopped before the lift doors to look intently at the Vulcan as he then continued:

"Locutus had actually been Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise-D prior to being assimilated by the Borg, and he then unwillingly provided them with a decisive advantage through his knowledge of Starfleet technology and tactics. This led to the Federation fleet, tasked with preventing the advance of the Borg to Earth, being quickly overwhelmed and utterly destroyed. Of the forty vessels that engaged the Borg cube, thirty-nine were destroyed, resulting in approximately eleven thousand deaths."

Another jump in time... to another pivotal battle in History... wondered the Andorian. Is there a connection?

The Vulcan science officer for his part continued to report the overall details in his predictable non-emotional manner.

"After the disastrously one-sided engagement, the Borg cube advanced towards Earth. It was able to quickly breach the Mars Defense Perimeter by defeating the much smaller and weaker force available there and took up position over the Earth as it prepared to assimilate Humanity. Ironically, The Enterprise-D which had been disabled in a previous contact with the Borg that took place shortly before the battle at Wolf 359, under the command of William T. Riker, ultimately destroyed the Borg cube and ended the threat by turning Picard's knowledge of the Borg, gained as Locutus, back against them."

All the while Syntron spoke and for a moment longer afterwards, the captain pondered the data given to him by his always thorough chief of science. But then, the nagging jester of an elusive memory laughed back at him.

This was truly fascinating... but, although he knew not exactly why... ultimately useless.

"I am a tactical officer by training, Mister Syntron. I am well aware of the military historical significance of the current stardate. But somehow... I feel there is something else... something more... significant... at least to us, specifically, even than the Wolf 359 battle."

The doors sighed for him as he stepped into the cabin. He turned around and then, after another moment, finally said:

"Search also for any other historical event immediately before or after the current date. Don't ask me how... not yet anyway... but I have this feeling something has happened, or will happen, that should be important to us... and, somehow, point to us the way back home."

"Affirmative, Captain," the Vulcan science chief confirmed as he went back searching through the historical records.

The hidden memory smirked at Kheren from the shadows of his unnerved mind.

"I'll be on the observation deck."

The doors slide shut over his thoughtful and worried expression, clearly visible even through the frozen mask of his unmoving face.

* * *

The immense panorama of the universe displayed its innumerable colors across the vast transparency several meters tall that made up the main feature of the observation deck, at the back end of the vast saucer section of the Artemis.

The impression of peace and quiet of the cosmos was not quite enough to calm the turmoil raging within the mind of the commanding officer of the starship Artemis as he had hoped for. His four eyes were lost in the deep vastness of space and his confidence was almost lost with them in the cruel irony of it all.

Despite their best efforts and a good dose of luck, they were still lost in a time not their own, still a danger to History itself by their mere presence, still hiding in a universe that was now again their own but to which they could not return to. It was easy to feel despair in such circumstances.

Yet, his soul refused to relent. Outwardly, he appeared calm, composed, almost in a meditative state as he stood hands crossed behind him within the exotic trees filling up to the high ceiling the arboretum occupying this large room, the Owl's Crest as it was called, in honor of the Owl of Wisdom, the companion of the Goddess of which this ship bore the name. It was as vast as a cargo bay but filled with an artificial park with a large collection of vegetation, from tiny blades of grass to thick flowery bushes and thick, tall trees from dozens of worlds, all somehow coexisting in the same controlled environment despite their wildly diverging points of origin. The Artemis arboretum was not just a tribute to Federation engineering but even more to Federation ideals; the peaceful coexistence of life from all across the universe.

It was also a quiet, soothing part of the ship designed not only to supplement with natural means the life support system of the ship, but to provide its crew with a place to relax, meditate, get inspired through a communion with life even within the cold vastness of outer space.

But for now, inspiration so ardently sought after still eluded the captain.

And the hidden memory, the nagging thought that had brought him here was still there, still snickering at him from the shadowy corners of his mind.

One ship... lost... forgotten...

It was like some old ember smoldering under ashes, only awaiting a spark to flare anew.

But that spark was not coming from the light of the distant stars, nor the white gold aura of the stars they were now orbiting. The three luminous suns blinded any other eye or sensor that would turn their way; but they for the moment also blinded their own path to salvation as well.

And Kheren was determined to find that path. And he would find it. He had the best people one could hope for to do it. he had no confidence in fate, never had; but he still had confidence in himself... and in them.

He would carry the torch to guide them on the road of salvation as soon as they would bring the spark to light it.

And then it came to him.

And it came first through the steps of his science officer.

He did not hear the approach of the taller Vulcan as he entered the Owl's crest and came up to him. His rigid antennae could not catch much of anything from behind. But he felt his presence when he came to stand beside him even if he did not turn his stare from the cosmic vista beyond the vast window.

"What did you find, Mister Syntron?"

"What should have been initially obvious, Sir. The other significant event that occurred during this time period was the Federation-Cardassian armistice agreement that was initiated for the duration of the Federation-Cardassian War; signed by both the United Federation of Planets and the Cardassian Union in 2367, which ended major engagements between these factions."

The Cardassian wars...

From the obscure corners of his mind, the memory jumped out from a sudden spark under the cold embers of lost thoughts and made a face at him. Syntron then proceeded with additional details.

"The Treaty was primarily negotiated by Admiral Alynna Nechayev, and mainly dealt with the status of the Federation-Cardassian border, leading to the establishment of the Demilitarized Zone. Within the Zone, neither side was permitted to deploy armaments, or establish military bases. The official border, which ran through the zone, was redrawn requiring the exchange of several worlds. Although the colonists on these worlds were given the option of resettlement, many refused as they felt that their rights had been ignored. The resulting dissatisfaction eventually led to the establishment of the underground insurgency group called the Maquis" he concluded.

But then, the Vulcan began to ponder the time paradox implications of the Artemis, a damaged vessel forty-three years in the past with technology from the future.

And so did Kheren.

The Demilitarized Zone... the Maquis... hiding... unknown from both Cardassians and Starfleet... with ships... in secret bases...

The spark suddenly flared up and illuminated every corner of the Andorian's mind.

Kheren looked squarely at his chief of science.

And, to the astonishment of all who could see it, his rigid face stretched into a wide smile.

"Lieutenant, you may have just found our road to salvation."

What exactly did this Andorian Captain have up his sleeve? Syntron wondered.

The science chief then turned toward the Captain and asked with obvious curiosity:

"Captain Kheren, what is our immediate objective?"

"To take our rightful place back in History." the captain answered.

In a quick and concise way, he exposed his inspiration to the Vulcan's logic.

With just a slight raise of an eyebrow, the Vulcan science chief merely uttered.

"Fascinating."

The Andorian moved at a half run to the entrance of the observation deck, activated the wall terminal there and hastily looked at some star charts. Then, he tapped his combadge:

"Kheren to Lieutenant Snow: best possible speed to coordinates 006A3R, bearing 095 mark 15."

"Sir?" came back the voice of the Inuit pilot. "Captain, this brings us right to the Cardassian Demilitarized Zone..."

"*Future* Demilitarized Zone, Lieutenant. And *our* future is waiting for us there as well; Engage."

"Aye, Sir. Coordinates locked in, engaging at standard cruising speed warp 7. ETA with rendezvous coordinates; thirty-seven days, twenty and a half hours."

From the large transparencies, the universe turned wildly to expose the frighteningly close fire of the trinary star system they had been orbiting. Then, the enormous warp nacelles of the Artemis flared up brightly and there was a blinding but brief flash of light before the stars suddenly fled from them with long streaks of light.

The Andorian captain looked at the scene without really seeing it as he spoke again through his communicator.

"Lieutenant Jackson; make sure our masking procedures we used in that alternate future are still fully operating and that we evade any chance encounter for the next thirty-seven days. Lieutenant Brie; you will start a full review and preparation of all shuttles and escape pods and of our largest cargo container available. Doctor Aquila: wait for me in your office. Commander O'Conner, Mister Scott, meet us there now."

Doctor Aquila nodded unconsciously hearing the captain's voice.

"Yes Sir."

Having just finished his full health scan of the crew, he was already entering a turbo lift and disappeared behind its doors, on his way to sickbay.

Glancing at Syntron, he nodded to him to follow and almost ran out of the room.

He knew the way.

And now, time was on *their* side.

* * *

Captain's log
Stardate: 44936.2

We have managed to travel for thirty-seven days without any incident or encounter; not surprising when you consider the immensity of space, but this is mid twenty-fourth century Federation space when there has been a war with Cardassia, conflict with the Borg was ongoing and a Dominion war was about to start. Starfleet was producing ships at an unprecedented rate and patrolling space as never before; aligned and non-aligned worlds built or expanded home fleets while watching closely their neighboring space; and covert flights from cloaked Klingons and Romulans, disguised Dominion agents, even expanding Ferengi traders and devious Section 31 spies were increasing in number.

Taking all precautions to remain inconspicuous had been paramount for us. And fortunately, it had worked.

We have now reached our destination... where past and present will meet us to open the way to our future... and back home.

On the main viewer, a hazy orange-brown cloud of star dust dimmed the blackness of space and the brightness of the stars right across the path of the Artemis.

"We have reached target coordinates, announced Lieutenant Aguk Snow; the Hugora Nebula."

On the bridge, all the senior officers of the Artemis were there, looking at the cosmic cloud, knowing already what it was and what it meant... and why they were here. The captain had exposed and discussed his plan with them all a month ago, and since then, they had worked daily to prepare for this day. It was as bold as it was risky but there had been little argument as to it being their only chance left now to restore everything properly... especially where their own place in it was concerned.

The entire crew had been advised afterwards as to their path to the future. Everyone had been invited to discuss the plan and provide their own perspective and expertise to it during the entire month of careful travel. More than a few did; all readily came to agree that this was their best hope to get back home.

But most of all, they were all Starfleet officers... and they all trusted their captain.

That is why he *was* the captain after all. Since he took command of the Artemis, he and the command staff he had gathered had led them out of a deadly anomaly, out of a Klingon war and out of a deadly encounter with murderous fanatics and a demented artificial intelligence, even out of a nightmarish time and of a merciless battle with the Romulans. They had warned the Federation of a cosmic catastrophe, saved an advanced civilization, secured space from a marauding ship and restored the timeline.

They all knew that, if anyone could get them back home, it was him and the team of senior officers working with him.

But there still was a tense silence between those bridge officers shouldering all these responsibilities, as everyone's hope now lied inside the murky depths of this dense, obfuscating nebula.

"Take us in, full impulse," ordered Captain Kheren.

Slowly, the orange veils covered their entire vision as the Artemis plunged inside the space fog spread out across the stars.

"Full passive scan, Mister Syntron."

Without the enhanced active sensor ability the Artemis had gained from the efforts of its chief of science, the vessel was half blinded by the ionized gases and suspended particles of the nebula; but even as her twenty-fifth century sensors were being hampered, those of twenty-fourth century ships however would be utterly blinded... as long as the Artemis did not signal her presence with any emission or active scan.

"Shut down the warp core, Mister Scott."

After all, they would not need shields or weapons now. The impulse engines, fusion reactors and batteries would be more than enough to power the entire ship from now on; and so, there would be no detectable power emission.

The Artemis was not going anywhere.

At least for the time being.

"Captain!"

The call from the tactical chief brought everyone's attention to the large viewing screen as his board flashed a signal. After a moment, they saw what the tactical sensors had detected. Within the gloom of the nebula, shadows slowly coalesced into deformed shapes, like the gutted carcasses of titanic fishes floating dead in the brackish depths of the sea of dust. As they got closer, they became the derelict hulks of destroyed vessels.

"Cardassian, Sir! Galor class... two of them..." reported Brad Jackson. "There is also partial mass debris from at least two others... and Starfleet hull residue as well..."

As if to confirm his words, another piece of debris came into view; it was without any doubt a complete severed warp nacelle, just like those on the Artemis herself.

"All stop."

"Answering all stop, Captain," acknowledged the helmsman.

"Secure magnetic anchor and all moorings to those derelicts. Mister Brie; go oversee our next operation as planned from flight control. Mister Jackson, Doctor Aquila, make sure that everything goes in a smooth and orderly manner."

Looking behind him at the stations there, Kheren then added:

"Start shut down sequence, Mister Scott."

Scotty looked at the captain, then looked down at his console and nodded.

"Yes, Sir... Powering down warp core, and beginning shutdown sequence."

As Scotty punched in his commands, the computer replied with a "Authorization required" remark, and he spoke his command code. Soon, the Artemis was running on impulse, reactors and batteries only.

"Mister Syntron," now ordered the commanding officer of the Artemis, "download our logs then purge the entire computer database. Leave only operation programming and encode it."

"Acknowledged Captain" Syntron replied.

Kheren finally turned his four eyes to the man at his right hand.

"Number One, see that nothing is overlooked. Then go to Arrow 1 to lead our main operation."

"Aye, Sir."

Inwardly, Michael O'Conner was starting to think that the captain was a bit crazy with these plans of his... but, so far, they had worked, even if he had to have himself dressed up like a bird or a Romulan.

Now he was chancing his life to another one of the captain's crazy plans. But they all where... And hopefully, this one would work as well.

But this one was the craziest yet for sure!

Once all officers acknowledged, Kheren stood up. He looked once more around him at the determined faces and then tapped open his combadge.

His voice resonated throughout the entire ship.

"All hands, this is the captain. We have reached our destination. Follow your deck officer's directives as you were instructed."

The Andorian captain made a pause, took a deep breath and then ordered in a voice full of firmness and finality:

" All hands, abandon ship. I repeat: abandon ship."

* * *

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott stepped away from his master console, placing the shutdown procedure on automatic as he had carefully programmed it over the past weeks. Briefly, he looked back to the First Officer and the Captain before finally asking:

"Sir, the ship is on automatic shutdown. Permission to head to Engineering to help my teams complete all required proceedings to secure all systems."

"Go ahead Mister Scott," acknowledged the Captain. "Once you will be done with ship and crew, help Mister Brie link all pods into gaggle mode so that all our shuttles can tractor them safely. And make sure your warp signature mask is operational for all of them. Mister Syntron will assist you once his own task is completed."

Their evacuation convoy would have to go to warp 3; it was the fastest speed of their slowest warp-capable shuttles. And tractoring something at such velocities required the head part to be inside the warpfield. The more power and stability to the field the chief engineer and his people would be able to provide and maintain, the easier it would be for their exodus to succeed. The trip would be long, but it was the best way to make it safe.

Scotty nodded back at the Captain, and headed down to main engineering to participate in the final preparation of the ship for evacuation. Every now and then, he checked to make sure that everything with the automatic shutdown went fine.

Soon, he got around to activating gaggle mode for all escape pods, by way of a unidirectional subspace code. This code was masked into the background radiation of the universe, as well as encrypted, making it very tough for anyone to find their location based on it. During this time, he also made sure that the warp signature mask that he and Syntron had created earlier was working on all warp capable ships.

For some illogical reason, as he began downloading critical information and data files to his PADD, Science Chief Syntron thought about the instruments in his personal quarters. His Vulcan Lyre and Terran Violin were not replicated instruments. They were each hand-crafted on their respective planets: rare in the time when most instruments were merely replicated and thus easily replaceable. There was no logic to his attachment to such items and yet there they were entering his thoughts.

He quickly dismissed them and proceeded on.

Once this task was completed, he headed down to the medical sections of the ship to assist in the preparation for evacuating the ship. He placed his PADD in its satchel to keep his hands free and engaged the turbolift.

He checked in on the shuttle bay which housed five mobile hospitals deployable either on the flight deck, or transported to Cargo Bay 2 and 3 for emergency overflow triage centers. At least one of these if ejected could be of use in case of an emergency once they had completed their evacuation of the Artemis. The Doctor and his team were readily handling those preparations.

He then went to survey the condition of the escape pods. The majority of the one hundred eight-person triangular shaped pods were fully operational, but several had been damaged during their encounter with the Romulan ship. The crew of the Artemis could theoretically survive for up to eight months independently in one of those pods, even longer if connected in Gaggle Mode as was now planned: although this would be quite challenging for such a long period with each pod's restricting dimensions, measuring only less than six meters tall and a shade over six meters on a side.

Fortunately, their planned exodus was to me much shorter than that. But it would still be almost a month of living inside those confined quarters for eighty-seven percent of the crew.

There was enormous activity occurring to determine which pods were immediately usable, easily repairable, or generally useless at this point. Simultaneously, Security and Ops were also coordinating their efforts to determine how to divide the crew into eight-person teams so that each pod would contain officers of various skills and experience to assist with a variety of possible emergencies that could potentially occur once the evacuation process was complete.

The evacuation of this ship was no minor event. It was going to take the coordinated effort of the entire ship's complement to allow this vast process to occur smoothly and successfully. The Chief of Science was ready as well to assist in any capacity possible to accomplish this enormous undertaking.

Meanwhile, on the bridge, and after a long moment of thinking, First Officer O'Conner stood up at that moment and moved to the multifunction stations vacated by chief of ops Brie, now supervising all shuttle launches from the flight control deck. The executive officer of the Artemis brought up the internal sensors and did a quick count of personnel. Then he switched to external scans.

"First set of occupied pods away, Sir."

"Carry on, Number One, approved Kheren. "Make sure the ones with people are in the lead when the shuttles will haul them."

Chief engineer Scott came back on the bridge right then and looked at the Captain.

"Sir, everything is in order on my end. Warp masking and gaggle mode have been enabled."

"Thank you, Mister Scott. Time for the goddess to go to sleep."

Already, all non-essential systems were shut off and others disconnected themselves once their job was finished. On the internal monitor boards, several vacated decks now went offline; even their life support being put on standby, only to reactivate when someone would step back on one of them later.

Much, much later.

Junior officers, selected by their own department, were now filling up deck 1 for the upcoming launch of the detachable bridge module. It would be a cramped journey... but if their main plan was to succeed, they had to make sure what they hoped for waited for them out there... before the rest of the crew, defenseless in their escape pods, could be exposed to any possible danger.

This was a difficult time for the Federation... and it was not even their own time. They would not be too careful, especially with what they had planned to do to get back to the next century.

From the bridge speakers, a now familiar voice called the command center of the ship.

"Bridge, Lieutenant Jackson here. The evacuation is proceeding as planned. We should have the entire ship complement out in space by twenty hundred hours."

"Good, " answered Kheren. "Come back up here and we will launch the Aegis to proceed with the next phase. Commander O'Conner will take it from here."

"Acknowledged," replied the young Lieutenant.
The Andorian looked up at his first officer.

"You're in charge of the rest of the evacuation, Number One. We will see you on the way in a week. If all goes well, we will be ready when the whole convoy arrives in a month at our rendezvous point."

O'Conner nodded to the captain and then made his way to the turbolift.

"Captain as they say it's better to be lucky than good. I hope we will be both." He said with a nervous smile before the doors closed.

"Deck 2." He commanded. While the captain had said not to bring anything, and in truth it was pointless to do so, O'Conner just couldn't leaving something behind.

He quickly made his way to his quarters and grabbed the picture frame on his night stand and smashed it against the floor. He grabbed the photo the young female officer he hoped to see again, the sword he gave her and his trusty tool kit before darting back out of the door.

As he quickly made his way down the empty darkened corridor towards shuttle bay 1, he couldn't help but thinking this was a bad idea.

But he had always thought so each time the captain came up with his bewildering plans... and they had all worked.

So far...

As he stepped in to the shuttlebay he asked.

"We ready?"

"Aye, Sir." The female engineer Patricia Blakely welcoming him replied. "Aegis is away and all pods have launched. Lieutenant Mriish is awaiting us to join them at warp."

"Good, good..." O'Conner said as he stepped in to the shuttle and sat down at the controls. Putting the photo off to the side he teased the woman already seated into the two-places combat shuttle as he closed the hatch behind him..

"Ready for a month of rations, Ensign?"

"And no showers, Sir." She teased back as she opened the shuttle bay door venting the air of the shuttle bay.

"Take us out, so the fun can begin." O'Conner replied as he passed the final codes to the Artemis to turn everything off.

"Yes Sir." She said with a smile.

During the planning stages, O'Conner had chosen his pilot based on both skill and how well they matched as they were going to be the same room for a month.

After a few moments, they were gone, cruising at warp 6 to catch up with Lieutenant Mriish the rest of the evacuation convoy and began the long journey together. This left their home and protector alone, crippled and drifting in space, forty-three years in the past.

They had each shuttle fully occupied. Eight officers in the pair of the slow class VI shuttles, Arrow 6 and 7, as many on board Arrow 3, 4 and 5, their slightly faster but almost identical class VIII shuttles and ten more on each of the runabout-sized, newly-designed class XI shuttles, Arrow 8 and 9.

And then, each craft would be tractoring a dozen escape pods with the remaining six hundred and thirty-six surviving crew members inside, for their twenty-eight days trip, a parsec away... almost all of it hidden in the gaseous clouds of the Hugora nebula.

As for the remaining Arrow 1 and 2, the sleek class X combat shuttles, Commander O'Conner and Lieutenant Mriish, each with an engineering co-pilot, would both escort the evacuation convoy under the First officer's overall command while the rest of the senior bridge officers, assisted by twenty-six specialists from all departments, would scout ahead at warp 6 in the Aegis, the detachable bridge module of their Ambassador class starship. Thus, they would be able to clear the way safe and prepare their coming, as they would arrive in barely over three days to their final destination:

The Bryma star system.

There, as the captain had explained to all of them, was waiting all their best, their only hope, to get back to the future... and ensure that all they did to save it would not have been done in vain.

And the hardships of their travel from here to there would be the easy part of the sacrifice they had all agreed to.

To save History.

* * *

The star was a small, dim yellow sun, hanging in the darkness with veils of asteroid belts and a few planets circling it. One of them was definitely class M, a blue-white sphere with no natural satellites around it.

"Entering the Bryma system, Captain, " confirmed helmsman Aguk Snow as the Aegis swerved inside the outer asteroid belt that ringed the yellowish star. From their approach angle, it looked startlingly like the Sol system, with its blue-white world beyond two smaller planetary bodies around a single yellowish sun.

"There is a ring of communications and detection satellites around the third planet," then reported Lieutenant Jackson, looking at his passive tactical sensors readout. "Our countermeasures are masking us from their old-type sensors easily,"

"Sir, then chimed in one of the three junior officers manning the auxiliary station on the unusually crowded bridge, this is undoubtedly the Bryma planet annexed by Cardassia in 2343... fourteen years ago," he said with some lingering disbelief in his own words, the reality of being back in time still having a hard time settling into his mind. "In three years from now, in 2370, it will be inside the Demilitarized Zone established by the peace treaty between Cardassia and the Federation."

"I remember the name now," added Brad Jackson, turning to look at the Andorian in the command chair. "Back at the Academy, the military history course about the Maquis mentioned this world; the rebel Federation colonists in the zone favoring armed conflict against the terms of the treaty mounted their first major strike against this Bryma colony, thinking there was, will be, a hidden and illegal military depot there. War would have flared anew if they had not been repelled by forces commanded by Benjamin Sisko from the Deep Space 9 station." "They were not that far from the mark," retorted Kheren then, almost just for himself.

"Are we heading for the colony, Sir?" asked Lieutenant Snow.

Like everyone on board the Artemis, he had been briefed by the captain himself, when a month ago he had assembled the entire crew into cargo bay 1 to share with them his plan to bring them back home... and finish what they had started. They all knew the hardware and the steps involved, they all had agreed to the risks and the necessity of it all. But the boldness of it all had kept doubts lingering in their minds. The Cardassian colony had been singled out as the plan B of the whole scheme... and for many, the mere possibility of plan A was dubious at best.

But not for Captain Kheren.

Blinking, he straightened in his chair, took a breath and ordered:

"Stay in the outer asteroid belt; heading 060 mark 10, full impulse. Look for the largest asteroid on the other side of the star from the planet."

For long minutes, the elliptical module flew amidst the cloud of rocks circling the star, the silence of space spreading inside the detached bridge, inside everyone's soul... until, within the vast field of asteroids filling the main viewer, one, much larger than the others, loomed before their swerving path.

"There!" suddenly exclaimed Captain Kheren, a sudden excitation heard in his voice and making his silver eyes bright with a new light that a moment before, and for a month now, had been but a dim but steady spark only kept alight by the hope burning in his heart.

And now, this hope was becoming as hard and tangible as the immense asteroid filling up the bridge's large viewing screen.

"Come around from the rimward direction, Mister Snow," he demanded, standing up and stepping down until he stood between the helmsman and the tactical chief, his hands on the long console joining them together.

As the Aegis turned to go around to the other side of the enormous rock, everyone looked intently at the screen, wondering, hoping. The asteroid was several kilometers in diameter, but definitely way too small to be of any use to hundreds of refugees stranded in space and time. It was but a big rock in space, dark, cold and dead.

"Captain... finally wondered out loud Lieutenant Jackson for everyone else aboard the detached bridge, do you really believe..."

"O thou unbeliever...behold!" answered Kheren almost petulant, all four eyes to the viewer and bringing everyone's attention from him back to the view outside. "The goddess answers our prayers!"

The Aegis came around to the other star-facing side of the immense asteroid. There was a huge crevice there, and it had been obviously widened and shaped by blasts of artificially focused energies so as to hollow out the massive asteroid, turning it into a colossal bowl of black stone. Metallic structures plunged inside that opening as if to keep the passage wide open, and from which hanged long rows of large projectors, emitters and automated cranes, all as dark and silent as the lightless windows dotting the insides of the kilometer-wide and deep cavity.

But the light of the star flooded entirely the interior of the hollow asteroid and showed the thing the captain was pointing at, hanging like a sleeping dragon within the depth of the great cavern.

It was a starship.

Everyone gasped. With open mouths and widened eyes, they looked at each other, speechless, and back at the image of the half a kilometer long vessel snugly fitted inside the asteroid. They blinked at the single warp nacelle stretching behind from a side, the gouged cylindrical hull, the forward-angling neck supporting the wide blackened saucer section on top.

They all recognized instantly the vessel docked inside the hidden base. They could even clearly read its registration number and its name on its disruptor-blasted armor plates.

NCC – 64121

U.S.S. ARTEMIS

CHAPTER SIX: OPERATION SYSIPHUS

Sitting in his plush black, high-backed chair, newly promoted Fleet Captain Kotari looked at the soft wood-styled paneling of the walls, the glass and metal furniture and the gold models of celebrated starships and starbases ornamenting one of the walls, opposing the large transparencies showing a splendid view of the cosmos beyond the kilometers-wide rim of the brand new commissioned Starbase 10. Behind him hung a tridimensional holographic map of Federation Space, updated continuously by the station's gigantic computer core and immense sensor and communications array. Beside it stood the flag of the United Federation of Planets on one side and that of Starfleet on the other.

Before him, on the glass and chrome desk, stood a small computer terminal. He looked at it all with a bleak eye and a heavy sigh escaping his lips.

And now, I am in command of a desk.

The Boslic man's furrowed brow was etched even more deeply than what was usual for his species and his newly sported salt and pepper beard matched in light and darkness his short receding hair and his cloudy grey eyes. He had been promoted as the new Commandant of the entire Hromi sector by Fleet Admiral Nova himself, who even now was bringing to the station the newly commissioned USS Lotus, the flagship of the most elite division of Starfleet entrusted with the safety of the entire Federation at both the borders of Klingon and Romulan space... and on the direct invasion route of all possible hostile forces of the Delta Quadrant, from the Hirogens to the Borg.

Assuming the entire responsibility of overseeing this hot sector of space was an immense challenge and a most prestigious work; one he had accepted with both humility and resolve when the rank and position was bestowed upon him. But still lingered in him the nostalgia of commanding but a single starship, a single crew, and going out there to face all those challenges head on.

That he had done aplenty. It was time to let go and pass the torch to a younger generation. But still... what he would have done to do it one last time, to fly one last time out there...

"Fleet Captain Sir... someone... is here to see you..."

That was the voice of Commander Allendros, his personal aide de camp. He barely recognized it. The young, energetic woman was never this hesitant.

"Who is it, Commander?"

Before he could take another breath, the door to his office opened and two men came in. Both wore civilian outfits of some undefined dark color, briefcases with no markings and faces so expressionless that you would forget them right after they left your field of vision.

"Who the hell are you, barging in like this..."

"Dulmer..." said the slimmest and smallest of the two.

"Luksly..." said the heavysset one.

"Office of Temporal Investigations." finished the one named Dulmer. That threw a blanket of heavy, cold silence over the entire office.

"Commander Allendros, then finally said Kotari through his communicator, cancel all appointments for today."

"... Yes, Sir." finally answered the feminine voice.

"Fleet Captain Kotari, you are directly in charge of this sector but also of all personnel and ships assigned... or to be assigned... to Lotus Fleet." said the one named Luksly.

It was not a question.

"Since yesterday, yes..."

Before he could say anything else, the shorter man showed him an official order PADD from Starfleet Command and summarized it for him:

"Captain Allistair Cobb is en route via a runabout to assume your duties in your absence. We need for you to come with us." then said Dulmer.

It was not a request.

Kotari rose as they turned around to exit the office.

"And where are we going?"

"To sector 006 grid A3 rimward..." started Dulmer.

"The Bryma star system." explained Luksly.

"But... started to protest the Boslic man, glancing at his stargate on the wall, that is... right inside the Demilitarized Zone... over a hundred light years away from here! That is over five sectors, out of my jurisdiction..."

"One hundred and fourteen light years..." specified Dulmer.

"At our sustained velocity of warp 9.8, it will take us fifteen days, twenty hours, eighteen minutes and fourteen seconds, approximately." finished Luksly.

"But... why?"

They did not stop or answer until they all got to the transporter pad of his office and they ordered transport of all three of them to their ship, a small, compact but very fast courier ship which was nothing less than a Sovereign class captain's yacht; among the fastest Starfleet crafts currently in service. It did not sport a name; only a registry number which was not Starfleet-issued and on the hull the seal of the Federation Council.

Only once they were all three alone inside the courier ship did the two men open their briefcases and each gave to Kotari a PADD before inviting him to a passenger seat while they took their place at the controls.

One detailed the complete Starfleet records of seven hundred and thirty-six officers and enlisted crews of Lotus Fleet assigned to one specific starship.

The other contained a complete set of data from that starship, one he himself had heard about in his younger years. He recognized the registry and name immediately:

NCC – 64121

U.S.S. ARTEMIS

* * *

Even after over two weeks, Fleet Captain Kotari of Lotus Fleet could still not believe it; even when the evidence stared right back at him.

Before the large viewport of the temporal Investigators' courier ship, he could see the damaged Ambassador class starship berthed inside an huge asteroid evidently fitted to perfectly house and service the Starfleet vessel, obviously halfway restored from obvious combat damage then just forgotten there.

Combat damage indeed; this ship, the USS Artemis, the most renowned vessel of the Cardassian-Federation conflict, the "Stalwart Guardian of the Federation" as it had been called then, had been reported lost in action in the Hugora nebula in the final days of the war, falling into an ambush set by five Galor class cruisers armed with their latest plasma weapons of the time. Both Cardassian and Starfleet reports told that the Artemis destroyed two ships and crippled two others before disappearing in a huge ball of flame. Only one severed nacelle had been seen being blasted away, attesting to its complete destruction.

And yet, here it was, indeed missing a nacelle completely, a wounded, sleeping giant nursing its wounds, waiting to revive again.

"The New government of Cardassia alerted the Federation Council and offered to give back the ship as soon as they found that forgotten hidden base, or so they claim," explained Dulmer as they entered the hollowed area filled with floodlights, cranes and gantries around the five hundred meters long vessel.

"Once Starfleet learned of her and came to reclaim the vessel, they made a thorough examination of her and then, finding peculiar evidence aboard, immediately contacted us, or so they claim," added Lukslly with that same cold, dispassionate and slightly annoyed tone they both shared.

Their ship did not dock with the asteroid station, despite it being fully active with workbees and suited engineers buzzing about the starship. Instead, it went behind the huge secondary hull and entered inside through its opened shuttlebay to settle amidst densely packed, crowded ranks of various shuttlecrafts, most of them of the older class VI, VII and VIII types, about twice as would normally be assigned to a starship this size. And there was also a pair of class X combat shuttles and even two brand new class XI runabout-sized ones that should not have been aboard at all.

Seeing them, after seeing the neatly stocked escape pods, a hundred of them or so, lining one of the dockyard sides, the Boslic officer slowly came to accept finally that what he had learned might have been the truth... as incredible as it was.

And once inside and brought to the huge main cargo bay by the two temporal investigators, the truth could not be denied anymore.

The cargo bay was filled with hundreds and hundreds of stasis units.

And, inside each stasis unit, lied someone wearing a Starfleet uniform; the Lotus Fleet uniform... the one that had been officially chosen only a week ago.

Dulmer turned to face the wide-eyed Boslic man.

"Fleet captain Kotari of Lotus Fleet, these are your people..."

"The company and crew of the starship Artemis." finished Luksly.

* * *

They were all seated along the classic rectangular stone table of a Cardassian meeting chamber. From the oval portholes, they could see the immense form of the starship Artemis docked inside the secret base where it had been found, dozens of suited figures and workbee pods busily repairing and restoring her.

On one side, two civilian-clothed, deceivingly dull-eyed humans and one bearded Boslic high ranking Starfleet officer.

On the other side, four Humans, three of medium height, one taller and bearded; one Bolian, mid-sized and unusually athletic; one tall, bearded Vulcan; and one unusually brawny and dark-skinned Andorian.

To this one, the Starfleet officer addressed himself:

"And you still want to go through with this?"

The Andorian looked at the others seated with him before returning his silvery eyes towards the three facing them.

"We all agreed to this."

"Yes... *forty-three years* ago!"

The Boslic officer shook his head still having a hard time believing it all.

"To us, Sir, it feels like it was about forty-three seconds ago." retorted the Andorian wearing the uniform of a Starfleet captain.

The Vulcan Syntron remembered how he himself had been perplexed by the Captain's plan to literally 'wait out' the forty-three year time difference. However, since they had all been committed to this decision, they each had needed to be prepared for the long slumber... like the legend of Rip Van Winkle from an old Terran early seventeenth century myth on Earth: except that their slumber lasted two point fifteen times longer than Rip's lasted; fortunately, no one had been wearing a thirty centimeter-long beard when they awoke.

Syntron had spent most of his time preparing and backing up all of the science components to ensure that none of these would fail over the more than two score time period. Among many tasks, this had included verifying that the back-up systems had functioning and reliable back-up power systems as well.

Once everything had been completed, he had returned to his quarters on board the Artemis left in hiding in the nebula and had prepared his instruments to endure the long duration without any exposure to the elements. All of the wood portions had needed to be moisturized and the strings loosened to help prevent any warping of the necks. The air and moisture had then been removed from their containers and they had been placed in a climate controlled environment as well.

After the remaining items in his quarters had been secured, he had reported to the bridge of the docked Artemis back in the asteroid field of the Bryma star system to assist in any other preparations that had been required before the process of the deep sleep would commence.

For a touch of irony, the last portion of food consumed by Syntron had been an apple. In the end, to acknowledge that this had been an unusual solution would be quite an understatement. There could have been a multitude of things that could have easily gone wrong during this extended time period; even just with the technology itself.

It all went well; but his apprehensions of the time were now voiced by the disbelief of the bearded Fleet Captain seated across the table.

"Forty-three *years* in stasis... using those of two ships and building the rest to put over *seven hundred* people in suspended animation, with only a docked ship's power reserve in a shut down secret base to back it up if anything went wrong. So *many* things could have gone wrong..."

"We did not have a lot of options left to us," explained the blue-skinned captain to the head-shaking Boslic man. "And both my chief medical officer and chief of ops worked hard to make it all safe and sure. We knew all the details about the discovery of *this* ship; putting ourselves in stasis *here* was our surest chance of being safely hidden *and* found again... and at a determined, specific, appropriate time, so that we could be revived... and finish our mission."

"Captain Kheren... now said the small, thin civilian man, you are aware that what you propose will condemn your entire crew and yourself to eternal imprisonment in a causality loop..."

"And that the Office of Temporal Investigations will have to ensure that this causality loop will never be broken." added the heavysset one beside him.

The Andorian looked again at his bridge officers beside him. At the other end of the table, his tactical and security chief nodded to him.

Just by looking at Lieutenant Junior Grade Bradley Jackson, their entire astonishing journey was plain to be seen; so much older and wiser now were the crisp, clear eyes than what could be expected in so young a face.

Facing a deadly space anomaly for a full week, ending up vulnerable to any sudden attack with depleted torpedoes... Emerging in a time that should ever be, to dodge a dying empire and a spreading malevolent civilization... Returning to a time long ago when war was an even more dirty business than today, to fight a warship on a crazy mission of doom... Flying a battle-scarred ship around a star almost to our death, only to reemerge in a time between two wars, a time that was not our own... and finally putting ourselves to sleep and our destiny into the hands of History... which now we will give our very existence to protect forever...

He recalled everything as if from a dream... a dream from another life, farther than the years he had already lived... and yet vivid as last night's nightmare.

Any part of it would have frightened the stoutest of men; all of it was almost too much to grasp for one young officer. But, that was what he was: a Starfleet Officer.

The day he took his Oath to Starfleet, he meant every word of it.

And so, when his captain looked at him, his heart was almost bursting out of his chest. Out of fear, yes, but also out of pride. With trepidation, yes, but also with confidence... and fulfillment.

He had always wanted to make a difference. That is why he had joined Starfleet. He had always wanted to fight for something worthy, something grand, something significant. That is why he had joined Starfleet Security.

And now, more than he could have ever believed possible in his whole life, he knew that he was going to.

Like the day Bradley Jackson had joined the crew of the starship Artemis, like on the day he had exposed to everyone his whole plan to save them and save History itself, Captain Kheren looked at him.

Brad simply nodded.

"It is the only way to ensure that History will not be tampered with again, " Kheren said with firmness in his voice and his eyes. "While *this* ship will follow its restoration and recommission to Lotus Fleet, with our own selves of this timeline assigned to it, just as History recorded, *we* will go back to *our* ship we left hidden in the Hugora nebula, bring it back here for full restoration, install external holographic emitters following my First officer's recommendation to disguise us as an asteroid, fly it under the masked warp signature devised by my chief engineer to the hidden Romulan time displacement station and hide in its surrounding asteroid field... until the time is right for my tactical chief to destroy it as we follow the Terix back in time, thanks to my science officer's special scanner... and stop them again."

"And you, once again attempting a failed timewarp, ending forty-three years ago to put yourself back into stasis in this ship until you are found once again... and start the whole cycle again... and again... until the end of time..."

"If there is such a thing..." commented agent Luksly turning a blank face at his associate.

"Completely condemning yourselves nonetheless!" exclaimed Fleet Captain Kotari.

"Not completely, Sir," corrected Captain Kheren. "According to Mister Syntron here, who is quite versed in temporal mechanics, we, sitting here at this table, will be trapped in time... but our own selves currently out there will not. To them and to the rest of the universe, everything will go on without any interruption as the whole history-altering event will be confined to the time loop we will create... and therefore a time incursion that will *never* occur."

"This... Flying Dutchman thing is giving me a headache," grumbled the Boslic Fleet Captain.

"Do not concern yourself with the time variables, Fleet Captain," said Dulmer with an even tone. "We have reviewed Captain Kheren's proposal and found it valid. The Federation Council, Starfleet Command and the Office of Temporal Investigations have all approved it and put the entire operation, code named "Sysiphus," under our authority and into his hands and those of his brave crew."

"*Your* concern, Fleet Captain, now explained agent Luksly, will be to make sure that the right people are in the right place at the right time so that this crew will be the one to come back from a... vital scientific study... two years from now."

"Exactly on stardate 87212.6," Dulmer specified.

"A Tuesday." added Luksly, oblivious to the stares the Starfleet officers exchanged between them; even Kotari.

"I will have to shift personnel on short notice and approve fast promotions and transfers and find plausible reasons to justify them all, " mused the Boslic man out loud. "I may have to bring a few key officers into the know..."

"Use your best judgment in this, Fleet Captain, " agent Dulmer told him then.

"But remember that this is all classified by our office, Starfleet Command *and* the Federation Council. The less people who know and those who do. knowing as little as possible, the better." warned agent Luksly. "How the universe as we know it could disappear if not but for one ship and crew looping through time is not something we want to make widely known for sure."

"You too should have our complete ship records and our personal logs. We downloaded them in this ship's computer to explain our presence here to those we knew would find us. You may use them to guide you in this," added the Andorian.

Kotari shook his head and sighed.

"And I thought flying a desk would be dull..."

"Try flying in circle," shot back Kheren.

* * *

The light had been dimmed to simulate nighttime in the Owl's Crest, the vast arboritum on the observation deck of the starship Artemis. The entire ship was in fact plunged in semi-darkness, not just to provide the normal daily cycle to those on board but to better hide the five hundred meters long vessel inside the hollowed asteroid it has been discreetly moved in.

Alone on the observation deck, as usual at this hour, Captain Kheren looked out at the insides of this secret installation less than a hundred souls in the universe now knew anything about, even less knowing like he did why it had been there.

This asteroid, modified almost half a century ago as a secret dockyard by Cardassian operatives of the now dissolved Obsidian Order, had been built and equipped specifically to hide the Federation Ambassador class starship USS Artemis, found drifting in the Hugora nebula where it had done its last, heroic battle at the end of the terrible war that had raged between an Imperialistic-minded Cardassia and a Federation weakened by an aborted Borg incursion.

Few survivors had been found on board the heavily damaged starship; no record of what happened to them afterward ever were. In a civilization famed for its unequaled bureaucratic efficiency, one of the strength of the Obsidian Order had been its ability to forge, erase or avoid any record of what it did... or intended to do.

The same had even been done with the very intentions behind taking and restoring the derelict vessel. As the war was nearing an impasse, a plan had been hastily hatched to restore it, boobytrap it and leave it at the edge of the nebula it had been last known to be, so that Starfleet would claim back what had been then one of its top ships of the line, attempt to bring it back to the front... and by remotely damaging the Artemis at a crucial moment, provide an opportunity to weaken that front for a decisive counterstrike.

But, the war ended before the plan could be fully put into motion. The militaristic order was routed, the secret base was simply abandoned and quickly forgotten, its hidden gem unknown even to the Cardassian settlers who later came to this Bryma system to colonize its inhabitable planet, even to the Maquis operatives who later heard rumors of a secret military installation in the system that they thought was there on the Cardassian colony.

But, decades after the ashes and dust of war fell and settled at last, the lost shipyard was chanced upon by miners from the colony; and so was found the lost Stalwart Guardian of the United Federation of Planets.

But this USS Artemis now occupying the masked shipyard was not the ship that had been found there.

The original USS Artemis, forgotten inside the secret asteroid base, had been returned to Starfleet by the new Cardassian government once its discovery had been reported. The return of the legendary starship had been welcomed with enthusiasm as Borg and Undine incursions, troubles with the Klingon and the Romulan Empires and Cardassian renegades were coming to the boiling point; and the Federation was barely recovering from the devastations of the Dominion war even decades after. Restoring and re-launching old but still serviceable ships and designs with state of the art technology was the short term approach of Starfleet to rebuild its depleted fleet as quickly and economically as possible.

And then came the final Borg Invasion to destroy all life in the entire Alpha Quadrant, barely stopped in time but crippling Starfleet at this critical juncture. And so, a ship of the line as renowned as the USS Artemis, coming back at this very moment to once again be the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation, was too good a practical and symbolic opportunity to pass up.

The venerable Ambassador-class starship had been moved from the hidden base, restored, upgraded, assigned to the most elite division of Starfleet in the hottest sector of space and launched with flare and fanfare before the whole galactic community.

The discovery of an entire crew in suspended animation within this ship from the past, or that another starship Artemis lied hidden within the nearby nebula, was kept a closely guarded secret. No one knew that the starship Artemis still rested in the very abandoned secret base it had been found; nor that this was the Artemis from a near future, getting ready to make sure this future would never be destroyed.

And no one would ever know it.

Kheren silently retold himself these historical events, then all the events that had occurred bringing him to the seemingly fortuitous command of this vessel, what came to happen under his command and the final circumstances that had brought him here. Now he understood how those events had been not fortuitous at all but the result of forces, both mundane and extraordinary, both provoked and accidental, channeled as much by the will of some as by the larger workings of the cosmos. He knew and understood it now. Not all of it... but at least the parts where he had been directly involved, from his meteoric rise to command to the sudden shifts of personnel; from the apprehensive thoughts that had haunted him when stated his last assignment to many of the words told to him by people who came and went in his life between then... and now.

And now, he was hiding, even from his own self out there, in command of the original USS Artemis soon to launch for a quiet scientific survey mission... hiding until the time would be right.

Until time was right... once again.

"Captain?"

The Andorian turned to the black-skinned, bald Human standing now beside him.

"Sir, the external holo-emitters have been installed and tested. With our warp emissions masked and as long as we do not use any active scan, even a vessel at short range visual distance will think us a rogue asteroid. We also had the idea of equipping similarly a full salvo of quantum torpedoes... to confuse any chance detection of us firing on the Romulan station when we will timejump in the wake of the Terix."

"Well done, Mister Baoule."

Second Assistant Chief Engineer Robert Baoule also liked to come in the quiet of night shift to gaze at the stars or smell the flowers on the Owl's Crest. The Captain and him occasionally met here and quietly discussed on a wide range of subjects, from Orion women to dark matter, from what happened down in engineering to what would happen in this new beginning century. The last time they had met here was forty-three years ago, when the engineer came to bring Chief Engineer's Scott latest report on repairs after the failed timewarp attempt. The man had exited before Lieutenant Syntron had come for his own report to the meditating Captain, but not before they had the chance to discuss their dramatic predicament and the story of the starship Artemis in which original time period they had almost found themselves in.

That discussion had sparked the whole plan of captain Kheren once Syntron provided the train of thought that fueled it then.

And now, here they were again.

For a moment, both Starfleet officers looked out at the gantries and floodlights surrounding their hidden vessel now ready to face destiny.

"You think it will work, Mister Baoule?"

It was unusual to hear doubt in the captain's voice. But these were as unusual circumstances as any could be; and this was a more unusual plan than any even this unorthodox ship commander has ever hatched. And so much was riding on it.

"Well, Captain... the assistant chief engineer said after a moment, we have a major advantage we never had before; we know exactly everything that will happen until then. Our memory banks even has all the logged flight plans and detected passage of each and every vessel between here and the Algeron system, between here and the next twenty days it will take us at maximum warp to get there. The chance encounter with some undetected or unknown vessel will be slim in the immensity of interstellar space... and our camouflage will take care of that. We will get there, Sir."

"And then, Mister Baoule... the Andorian asked, turning his four eyes to the man, will we be able to secure destiny?"

"We will... if it is part of it."

Kheren turned his silvery gaze back towards the soft yellow-white glow of the star outside, framed by the mouth of the artificial cavern they were hiding in like a pearl in a half-opened oyster.

"I do not believe in destiny."

Assistant chief engineer Robert Baoule looked also at the bright star before them.

"Me neither, Captain."

* * *

It had seen the birth and death of life, the rise and fall of sentience on many worlds and the first steps of space-faring civilizations, until one empire stood on one side and a united federation of planets on the other of a one parsec wide band of space. While outposts lined each border, a starbase was built in the path of an invasion from the Delta Quadrant and a ship was launched to face a burning fire threatening to devour the entire cosmos.

The large blue-white star was circled by a dozen planets, most being gaseous giants except for the three innermost planets. Between the second and the third one was a large asteroid field, the visible remnants of a large rocky planetary body that had but fairly recently exploded from the effect of some intense form of concentrated radiation that still left a lingering fog of irradiated particles within it.

This veil of sparkling cosmic dust hid the largest planetary fragments arrayed in a concave formation that reminded the heavens of the shape of the destroyed planet that had once floated there. And, at the outer focal point of this rocky formation was something that nature had not constructed.

It floated amidst the debris field in a pocket of empty space, a grey-green hexagonal darkened structure with gracefully arcing curves and ending in sharply curved points, the center a large, ovoid, bulbous enclosed space from which extended in a radial six skeletal frames of curving latticework of the same dull, flaked metal.

It was obviously a space station, complete with docking and fleet yards facilities.

And it was, as obviously, Romulan.

This station was an early 22nd century spacedock facility from the Romulan Star Empire but not so different from those used by the United Earth Starfleet of those days; a central storage, housing and flight control structure extending six yard arms to house starships for docking, resupplying and repair. The station indeed looked like some older, simpler version of the earlier space outposts like space station K7 on the Klingon border; but, instead of the three large storage silos of K7, there were six skeletal structures with mechanized hooks and cranes and grapples, all six looking like antiquated TV antennae extending radially from the inhabitable center.

Within the heart of the hazy radiation fog bank encircling the remnants of the blasted planet, the greenish silhouette of a D'Deridex starship arced gracefully away from the station at one quarter impulse towards the hemispherical formation of asteroids on the opposite side.

Seconds ticked away as the Romulan chroniton generator that the station had been remade into flared up to life behind it, its six docking arms glowing with a build-up of radiation from the emitters arraying it, made out of modified cloaking plasma coils.

The Romulan chroniton array bathed the outgoing ship and the entire rocky bowl the instant before the ship slammed into the asteroid field forming like a concave lense right in its path... and before a roaming asteroid, over five hundred meters long that slid suddenly from the asteroid field and into the focal point of the chroniton burst, smashed into it.

The entire vessel seemed to dissolve in a mere second into fine, luminescent particles as a wave of chroniton radiation spread out over it and outward into space.

In an instant, there was no trace at all left of the IRW Terix.

Nor of the asteroid that had almost smashed into it... except for five fragments, all about two to three meters long, that, at the very moment it dissolved behind the Romulan warship, flew away in a very peculiarly concentrated path and at a speed three thousand times over what could be possible from any natural phenomenon.

Then, the Romulan space station exploded, in a sudden burst of quantum and antimatter energies as all asteroid pieces hit its central hub, the destruction of its forced singularity power core obliterating everything around it for over half a billion kilometers.

A mere moment later, there was nothing left. The silent stillness of the cosmos reigned once more, the only lights now being the twinkling of stars born and dying across eternity.

And time resumed its course.

* * *

"Bridge to Captain Kheren!"

"Kheren here."

"Sir! We're picking up a massive surge of chroniton radiation..."

Suddenly, everything went blindingly white, from their eyes to their minds.

And then, as they recovered wits and senses, all the senior bridge officers of the starship Artemis only saw that they were all blinking at each other with confused stares.

A mere moment later, they all poured onto the bridge with haste, their eyes darting to the main viewer where they all saw the now familiar vision that they had seen from the conference room's transparencies, once the blinding whiteness had left their eyes and their minds: a furious stream of plasma fire, dotted with innumerable masses of dark, compressed stellar matter caught in the flow of a raging fire, like the fiery display of some swirling, titanic plasma storm on the horizon.

"Report." called out Captain Kheren as he sat in his command chair.

"We are still at station-keeping five hundred thousand kilometers from the outer layer of the anomaly, Sir," reported the copper-skinned, dark-haired Human at helm."

"There has been no change in sensor data, Captain," now added Valencia Irksos as she left her chair at the science station to let her Vulcan senior officer relieve her and review the data she was summarizing. "The anomaly has remained perfectly stable within all known parameters as recorded before that chroniton surge hit us. Spatial sonar is attempting to track the chroniton emission back to its source."

"Damage report," now asked the Andorian.

"None so far, Sir," answered Patricia Blakely as chief engineer Scott relieved her also to verify all decks and systems on the engineering master display. As Scotty was checking that all decks and systems for fine for the time being, he started a level 3 diagnostic on the sensor array, just to make sure that it was still accurate."

At the request from the Captain, Brie automatically launched Level 5 diagnostics on all key ship's systems.

"Sir, ship system's ready status confirmed. No malfunctions or abnormalities from exposure to the Azimuth Horizon or the chroniton surge."

"Metaphasic shielding holding, Captain," then said the giantess Tyvya as she rose to her full towering height to free the chair at the tactical station for Lieutenant Jackson, her antennae slowly bobbing with slight confusion.

Kheren sat deeply in his chair and ordered:

"Alright; Mister Snow, move us out full impulse. Once clear of the anomaly's interference, sail us back to port, standard cruising speed. "

Aye, Captain," answered Lieutenant Snow.

"Doctor Aquila, make sure there were no ill-effect on the crew from that chroniton exposure."

"Acknowledged."

Now, they needed to take time to find out about that Chroniton surge. Chroniton particles were like what gravitons were to gravitation; except that chronitons were associated with time.

And that was worrying him.

Lieutenant Jackson had just reported an accumulation of chronitons in their ablative armor from prolonged exposure to the anomaly; and then, out of nowhere, a massive surge of those same particles.

That was worrying him a lot.

But instead of voicing his fears, he stood very straight and asked:

"Stardate confirmation, please."

"Captain, Tactical Chief Jackson said, I cannot speak as to the stardate, but I think its important to mention that the chroniton buildup in the ablative armor matrix has subsided. The buildup from the past week is all gone. The chroniton accumulation on the shield bubble has also abated."

"A chroniton surge engulfs us... and all the chronitons already covering us disappear?"

The four oculars of the Andorian captain went from Syntron at the science station to Jackson at the tactical console then back.

But, as the minutes went by, the swirling fire of the Andorian's emotions behind his frozen, expressionless face dissipated as that of the fierce cosmic storm which, slowly but surely, was receding from view on the bridge's screen. At a prudent sublight speed and careful trajectory set by First officer O'Conner, they managed to clear the anomaly's presence after an hour of tense, silent travelling.

Syntron employed a variety of verification procedures to ascertain their stardate and location. He then reported:

“Based on observational calculations from stellar drift and relative constellation patterns, pulsar positioning and star spectrography... they confirm that our ship chronometers and localizers are in synchronicity with the known universe.”

Continuing with his analysis, the Vulcan science chief then added:

“No discrepancies within sensor scanning when comparing them to the universal quantum signature; we are within our own space-time continuum.”

Without being aware of it, or even knowing why, Kheren let go his breath he was holding in a relieved sigh.

"Warp speed, Mister Snow. Time to go home."

"Aye, Sir. Warp 7. ETA to Starbase 10, twenty-two hours."

The stars jumped at them and streaked past as they went from seventy-eight thousand kilometers a second to well over six hundred times the speed of light.

After recalibrating the sensor configuration, Syntron turned again to the Andorian sitting staunchly in the command chair.

“I have projected the precise path of the chronitron trail, Captain; 340 mark 12; the Algeron system, Sir.”

"Where the Treaty of Algeron was signed... recalled the captain outloud. "Establish contact with the outpost bordering the Neutral Zone nearest to Algeron. Transmit our report on the chroniton surge and ask for their own. They must have seen something."

A moment later, a black-haired, olive-skinned woman's face wearing a commander's uniform filled the screen.

"USS Artemis, this is Outpost Quebec IV. We have received your transmission and confirm the presence of a chroniton surge originating from the Algeron star system within the Romulan Neutral Zone at the same space-time coordinates you have reported."

"Any idea what it was, Commander?" asked Kheren.

"We have pinpointed it to the exact location of Romulan Space Station Algeron within the debris field of Algeron III. But sensors cannot currently confirm the existence of the station."

"Destroyed?" inquired the Andorian, frowning.

"At least according to our sensor data," acknowledged the woman. "We are detecting the expected residue of a forced singularity implosion consistent with a Romulan Space Station power core victim of a cascade failure... although the chroniton emissions associated with the normal output of such power sources was exceptionally large. Our guess is that either the Romulans decided to remove this piece of their past technology from the zone according to Treaty stipulation or some paranoiac security decision... or that they attempted to secretly bring the station back online and something went wrong with their cloaking device's plasma coils..."

"Well, so much for so-called devious Romulan ploys, " commented the captain of the Artemis.

"We will add your own sensor logs and report to our own," said the outpost commander. "But at this point, there is not much more we can do than continue monitoring the area. Next time, maybe..."

Kheren frowned but kept his tone light.

"Next time..."

* * *

Newly promoted Fleet Captain Allen Samji's sector commander office had soft wood-styled paneling of the walls, glass and metal furniture with a push black high-backed chair and the gold models of celebrated starships and starbases ornamenting one of the walls, opposing the large transparencies showing a splendid view of the cosmos beyond the kilometers-wide rim of the now renowned headquarters of Lotus Fleet, Starbase 10. Behind the wide desk hung a tridimensional holographic map of Federation Space, updated continuously by the station's gigantic computer core and immense sensor and communications array. Beside it stood the flag of the United Federation of Planets on one side and that of Starfleet on the other.

On the glass and chrome desk, stood a small computer terminal. It signaled to him with a soft chime.

"Transmission for you, Sir," announced the familiar voice of his Ferengi aide from the other end of the link; "for your eyes only, Sir."

To his surprise, the Logo that appeared on the small screen was not that of Starfleet. It was nothing less than the sigil of the Federation Council.

It stayed on the screen as letters appeared while the voice of the computer droned:

"THIS IS A CLASSIFIED COMMUNIQUE, SECURITY LEVEL DUKOVCHKA."

Just as the new commander of the entire Hromi sector feared; this was the highest security level in the entire Federation. It was usually reserved for nothing less than cosmic-scaled situations.

"IDENTIFY FOR RETINA SCAN."

He exposed his right eye to the scanning red light of the computer and stated name and rank in his own voice.

"IDENTITY SCAN APPROVED."

Now appeared the familiar icon of Starfleet as the cold voice of the computer demanded:

THEN, The feminine voice of the computer ordered:

"IDENTIFY FOR GENETIC SCAN."

There was only a black screen while this new, unfamiliar security procedure was activated, requiring Samji to give again name and rank and touch his keyboard once, allowing the computer to read his DNA from his fingerprint residue.

"IDENTITY ANALYSIS POSITIVE."

The Lotus Fleet symbol finally showed itself on the screen.

"INPUT PERSONAL COMMAND CODE."

Once it was all done, the image did not change as the computer now announced:

"THIS IS A CODE 47 STARFLEET COMMUNIQUE.
THERE WILL BE NO DISCUSSION OF THIS WITH OTHER SENIOR OFFICERS UNLESS DEEMED
ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.
THERE WILL BE NO COMPUTER RECORD OF THIS TRANSMISSION."

The screen became black again as letters appeared, reading:

FROM:
STARFLEET COMMAND
REAR ADMIRAL KOTARI
STARBASE 1 SECTOR 001

TO:
LOTUS FLEET COMMAND
FLEET CAPTAIN ALLEN SAMJI
STARBASE 10 HROMI SECTOR

Now appeared the familiar face of a Boslic man; what was not yet familiar was the Rear Admiral Lower half rank showing on the red collar of his uniform. The grim, serious face and tone of voice of Kotari however was commensurate with the unusual array of security measures that had preceded them.

"To Fleet Captain Allen Samji, Lotus Fleet Command, Starbase 10, Hromi sector: you will find with this transmission an encoded access to a secured file designated as Operation Sysiphus, classified under the authority of the Federation Council, Starfleet intelligence and the Office of Temporal Investigations."

A *triple* classification... very few things were secured that much; the Temporal Cold War, the Talos IV report, the Omega research... Before Samji could wonder any further, the transmission continued:

"The USS Artemis will dock at Starbase 10 in less than twelve hours. I am sending a transmission including promotions and awards from Starfleet Command. However, with the necessity for focusing on preparations for Operation Horizon, the granting of these commendations will be put on hold until such time as the situation is dealt with. Not to mention it will provide cover for the true purpose of the awards and their temporal nature."

Seated in his new office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at Starfleet Command, the newly-minted admiral on the screen this time waited for the acknowledgement of the man who had replaced him at the head of the tri-border sector. Based on the classification, Samji was already aware the Artemis must have been sent back in time and had performed admirably to preserve the timeline. However, he asked the question anyway.

"Temporal nature, Sir?"

"I did mention the Office of Temporal Investigations, did I?"

The new Commandant of the Hromi sector failed to repress a sigh. It was the second one within the last forty-eight hours he had been aware of... and both involved the Andorian captain of the Artemis and members of his crew.

Was there a connection?

But he could not discuss this, even with the Rear Admiral... or anyone else outside of those implicated in both incidents and the officers of Temporal Investigations.

Kotari put the matter aside for the moment with a wave of a hand and continued.

"To all crewmembers of the USS Artemis, a citation will be logged in their personal Starfleet record for voluntary involvement in Operation Sysiphus. As the details of this operation are highly classified, you will officially enter it on their Starfleet record as for most meritorious conduct in the line of duty during preliminary preparations of Operation Horizon."

The steely eyes of Kotari lowered, visibly to a PADD below the screen's field of vision.

"Special commendation should be noted for the following officers: Doctor Caius Aquiel Aquila, for his voluntary involvement and medical work in Operation Sysiphus. Lieutenant Junior Grade Danik Brie is to be commended for his direct involvement in restoring the timeline... again, and for his voluntary involvement and technical work in Operation Sysiphus."

Sysiphus... wondered Samji while the Admiral made a pause. *The man condemned for eternity to roll a boulder up a cliff, only to have it roll back down, forcing him to roll it up again and again...*

But Kotari now spoke again.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Bradley Jackson is to receive a commendation, again for his dutiful work on Operation Sysiphus, and will be immediately recalled to Starfleet Security for special briefing and training. His tactical experience with no less than two time incursions will be most valuable at this point for our current work on the Temporal Prime Directive."

The voice of the admiral was trying to hide a definite feeling of growing pride behind a tone of detached professionalism as he went on.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott III is to be commended for his Engineering expertise and leadership during Operation Sysiphus. Lieutenant Syntron will receive an award for self sacrifice, direct involvement and definite leadership in restoring the timeline and for theoretical and applied advancements in temporal mechanics."

The sheer volume of data annexed behind the Artemis science officer's name made Samji pause for a moment. But he could not even glance at it as Kotari was talking still:

"The First Officer of the USS Artemis, Commander Michael O'Conner, should be confirmed officially as next in line for the command of a starship for exemplary leadership during all past missions including this one, and for his meritorious conduct in restoring the timeline and his voluntary involvement in Operation Sysiphus."

Now, the Boslic admiral lifted his eyes towards the screen. What he had to say now, he had obviously thought about for a long time.

"As for Captain Kheren, the Federation Council has acknowledged the reports of both the Office of Temporal Investigations and Starfleet Intelligence that, under his command, the USS Artemis did nothing less than save the UFP, the galaxy and History itself. Through his leadership, the company and crew of the USS Artemis selflessly and anonymously sacrificed all with him to restore the timeline and to fully resolve a time paradox in a most exemplary manner. We leave it up to you however, his direct superior officer, to officially recognize his true merit with any special commendation commensurate with the feats accomplished under his command."

Kotari's hard stare now sought all the attention of the commander of Starbase 10:

"Be aware, Fleet Captain Samji that, for now, *no one* on the Artemis will know *anything* about this. As far as they are concerned, they are coming back from a critical but uneventful week of scientific survey mission. Upon their arrival however, the command staff of the Artemis will be debriefed in a classified session about the events that really occurred. Agents Dulmer and Luksly of the Office of Temporal Investigations are on their way to Starbase 10 and will arrive on the exact same stardate as the Artemis will. Cooperate with them in full and without question. And you are not to discuss anything pertaining to this present affair, is that perfectly clear, Fleet Captain?"

"Yes, Sir," Samji acknowledged.

All this information was a lot to take in and his attention span was struggling with the amount of hours he had put in recently to make preparations for Operation Horizon. One thing was nagging him through all this.

"Sir, if they are unaware of what occurred, why even tell them at all, and risk imparting too much knowledge of events from an alternate timeline?"

Kotari nodded at the new Fleet Captain.

"I anticipated this question coming up. Well, Starfleet has a lot of experience with especially resourceful officers as these. Even just a bad dream or a single log discrepancy would be enough for such individuals to launch a wide scale investigation and cause a lot of noise, unrelenting until they found out the solution of their mystery. It happened often enough in the past... We deem preferable to have them in the know so that they will not only avoid making out such noise but also actually work with us to keep things quiet."

Samji nodded.

"I guess that makes sense. For the same reason, it makes sense to tell me..." He sighed. "Although I'd rather not know."

Kotari smiled.

"In that regard, you will withhold all above given citations and promotions until after the conclusion of Operation Horizon. They will be given officially for other reasons included with the classified transmission and with any other promotion or citation directly related to said operation these officers might earn also afterwards, so that the fleet's major undertaking against the anomaly will properly cover-up their true justification to all non-authorized personnel."

His hand moved below the screen and he typed in some letters and numbers which Samji saw appear on the screen.

"Here are the security codes for accessing the data about the true events of the Artemis' latest mission... and about Captain Kheren's whole Sysiphus plan... Please see to it that everything is... properly... recognized and filed."

He now looked directly at the screen, smiling more warmly.

"Congratulations with your new responsibilities, Fleet Captain Samji. As you can now see, flying a desk might not be as dull as one would believe... especially when you *also* have to command a major starbase *and* the ships of the most elite division of Starfleet. Not to mention that you have a coming major cosmic catastrophe on your hands. but, as you can see here, you have good people with you; let us hope that it will be enough. Good luck... to all of us."

"Thank you, Sir," Samji replied. "As the Federation's first line of defense to all of these factions and events, we will make it our sole mission and give our lives if necessary to ensure you don't need a second."

On the small screen, Kotari nodded respectfully to him and left him a supportive smile before ending the transmission.

The screen went dark. But outside, the stars were shining still.

* * *

Captain's Personal Log
Stardate: 87212.6

Docking to Stabase 10 twenty-two hours after completing our week-long science survey mission, I can't help but feel satisfied with having succeeded in a critical scientific survey mission that will be most helpful in the next major operation of the Fleet... and for once, without any incident.

Yet, I also feel... uneasy. It's like... something is... missing.

It feels like when the air is heavy and darkening with a coming storm that finally blows away by your own wishes and prayers, without ever falling down on you as it should have done. And, somehow, you feel that it was of your own doing.

Or maybe this is all just apprehension for the upcoming battle with the Azimuth Horizon anomaly that is now catching up with me after such a nice, quiet survey mission.

Only time will tell.

EPILOGUE

It looked like a clear, translucent, slightly luminescent snowflake floating in the star-studded darkness of space; a delicate, intricate starburst of thin, whitish lines spreading in all directions like a very complex web across the heavens.

It was beautiful.

Then, the entire star-like flake blazed from within. Bright orange fire spread across all the crisscrossing lines to highlight each one with thick, liquid flames spreading along them all across the vastness of space.

It was frightening.

And, as the fire spread all over the fragile web of light, it spread even further as its fiery heart pulsed with a blinding white flare, like a living, beating heart of flame and searing light, streaking across the stars to engulf them in crackling bolts of lightning.

It was monstrous.

Before the holographic, tridimensional display of the cosmos suddenly engulfed in flames, the reflected lights played like demonic flames on the gaunt, angular features of those assembled around it, the greenish, copperish tint of their feline features enhanced with sharp contrast as shadows deepened the drop of their hawkish nose over their thin, tight-closed lips, the deep furrows over their upwept, bony brows and the blade-like ending of their pointed ears.

The silence among them was that of fear and anger, too intense to be voiced.

But then, one voice nevertheless was heard; soft and low, from one of the faces, squarer and more etched with wrinkles of age and worry under the white cap of its receding hair. But the eyes were dark and fierce still, just like the words the voice spoke:

"We will doom us all."

The tridimensional display showed the cosmic storm deforming and stretching wider and longer between the borders of the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire; then the image zoomed towards this last sector of space, until details of star systems showed, making one small yellowish sun stand out where two planets, circling each other around it, filled the entire field of vision.

And around those twin worlds, one white and blue like a jewel, the other red and dark like a piece of ember, swarmed ugly ships, cubed-shaped, finishing off a few bird-like minuscule vessels vainly trying to flee those planets now darkening and turning into balls of methane and carbon dioxide as mechanized tendrils swept over them like a metallic cancer.

For a moment, no one in the vast room dared to lift the weight of gloom and doom that fell behind those words and before those images. But finally, the same voice as before, deep and full of the echoes of hidden thoughts, broke the oppressive silence.

"We will do what you had believed *they* had started: the annihilation of our race... and then... of everything."

Mutterings and low growls now filled the large chamber, echoing between the tall, thick columns of gold-veined green marble holding the high-ceiling dome over the tiled floor showing a large part of the galaxy, over which the fiery display had floated and spread to cover it all... and that now was covered with the dull grey and sickly green of the cancer that had started to spread from the twin worlds to cover the entire galaxy... before the fiery storm finally devoured it all in one final display of raging inferno.

The silence among them now was that of disbelief and denial, but also of fear and despair, too intense to be voiced or even acknowledged.

"The evidence is irrefutable." finished the broad old man clasping his hands behind his back and looking at every other wide-eyed stare around him, every pale, open-mouthed face.

One, already paler than all the others, rounder, with peculiar hair of gold so distinctive among all the dark-haired heads each side of it, rose with a soft whisper of robes of red and bronze covering a slim but shapely body. It shook itself under the forced refusal that etched the clear, soft voice coming from it.

"It can't be!"

"Empress Sela, retorted the old man with grave dignity, this projection has been thoroughly analysed by the very best minds of the Empire. With all the data we have on past and recent events, including stolen data from the Federation, this is what is going to happen... if we go on with this... plan... any further."

"It can't be..."

The denial sounded more like a prayer now, barely whispered by the tall woman falling back on the high-backed chair dominating the assembly from an elevated dais.

One voice then rose louder than the others among all the whispers and grumblings, sternly addressing the broad-shouldered, dark green-clad figure that had just spoken:

"Empress Sela! This is just a fantasy! A ghost story to frighten us from punishing the Federation for its devilish crimes and from taking back our own rightful destiny..."

"Admiral Tomalak!" cut loudly the still powerful voice of the old man. "How many times must I say this? You know as well as anyone here in this senate that the Federation did *not* create the Hobus catastrophe: *we* did! Your own men attempted this ill-advised time altering quest of yours to prevent it, to allegedly prevent this... anomaly spreading across the stars... and to give us this vague glorious vision of a restored, all-conquering empire... and it *failed*! *You* failed! *Nothing* has changed and the only installation capable of such time displacement was destroyed in the process! "

"We can try to rebuild..."

"Yes! Let us rebuilt it! Let us try again! And in so doing, let *us* destroy *ourselves* and *everything else*!"

New mutterings filled the Senate main chamber, clashing with more anger and confusion than before, laced with mounting fear and receding denial.

"Your Highness, said again the portly senator over the rumble of voices, silencing them once more; evidence..."

"Is most clear now," cut in the golden-haired woman with a heavy tone. "All our scientists confirm that this anomaly is spreading in our space along subspace fractures from warp travels in this specific sector... a Federation sector. But... without any Federation, *our* very spread, unhindered in the quadrant, will do exactly the same thing... even worse, as we knew not until very recently about this polluting phenomenon Federation scientists discovered and corrected decades ago. And without the Federation to, somehow, stop the Borg as we do know they did, alone... we will fall... before our time."

"You Highness... this is but mere speculations." chimed in the one, tall and broad-shouldered Imperial fleet officer named Tomalak. "Surely we can adjust and compensate for any..."

Senator Pardek glanced angrily at the Admiral before returning his white-haired head and age-wrinkled towards the throne to interrupt the officer's babbling.

"Empress Sela; we have already decided hastily a course of action which, as fate would have it, failed... failed to spill the blood of our people. You have read the full reports of our best minds; they all agree that the mere *possibility* of these events occurring from the actions we had foolishly planned to do is *much* too high to ignore."

"So, what do you propose, Proconsul Pardek; that we avoid confronting the Federation for their crime against the galaxy and our people and just sit while all are engulfed in flames? That we leave our own destiny into their hands?"

The stout, thick-lipped, white-haired man answering to the name of Pardek opened his short arms as if in plea.

"What I say here is that, playing with time is obviously too hazardous, too heavy with unforeseen or, worse, foreseeable fatal consequences to be attempted... again. You Highness: let us forget about the past and worry about the future later; let us act now with what fate has given us, and act with courage and honor to *forge* that destiny, not *force* it."

"And how do you propose to do this, Senator? Ask the wise and mighty Federation for help?" retorted Admiral Tomalak with a sneer; " We are conquerors of the stars, not hypocritical peace-lovers hiding exploitation behind soft words!"

"Let us do what we must do... and be what we must be," answered Pardek with chin raised, addressing not only Tomalak but the entire Romulan Senate and the Empress. " Let's not make the noble sacrifice of Admiral Surol, Commander Varin and the crew of the Terix be in vain, or become the first step towards ultimate failure, death and destruction! Let their misguided but true heroism be the warning beacon of a *wiser* course of action, the guiding light of a *better* destiny! Be it on the peacetalk table or the battlefield, let us be and do what we must by *assuming* both our failures and successes of the past to *earn* the glory and honor of our future!"

"JOLAN TRU!"

All the voices of the senator in the large circular chamber echoed even beyond the thick walls of the ancient building and deep even into the heart of the doubtful. Their duty to the Empire was clear; their honor to fulfill their duty was deeply ingrained in them since the day they were born as Romulans. And, in the end, they were, all, Romulans.

The spontaneous shout still filled the Senate chamber when senator Pardek was first to take leave from the Empress, still frowning and sighing as she looked despondently at the computer image filling up the center of the vast chamber. Pardek would leave to their own schemes and plans those who would lead the Empire in these troubled times,

In this, his own part, his own honorable duty, was done.

His soft footsteps took him in the lesser halls of the vast circular building, until his own form was shadowed by a row of thick, high columns of green and gold marble where another shadow moved to meet him.

"I believe we are successful."

The whisper of the Romulan senator was answered by a deep, calm voice.

"You have done well, my friend. For the future of both our people."

"Least I could do to amend for the errors of the past." apologized Pardek.

"Regrets are illogical. In a crisis, each one of us act according to his gifts. I was fortunate to know you; that is why I was given the logs of the USS Artemis from her time into the alternate future so that your own experts could only but admit to the truth of the consequences of your own actions. But only you, a Romulan proconsul, a member of the Imperial Senate, could have convinced your own people of that truth. And more importantly, a Romulan had to make that truth known for the Empire and accepted by its people."

The Romulan senator knew well the philosophy behind those words; a peculiar, alien one to be sure... but who's wisdom now, once again, proved itself to be sound.

"We are as we are and do as we must to better our present... and our future," repeated Pardek, this time for himself.

"May this be but one more step towards such a future bringing us all closer together."

The Romulan glanced at some people now turning a corner and coming in their direction. Then he turned away from the other shadow, but not before he lowered his head in respect and whispered:

"Jolan Tru, Spock."

"Live long and prosper, Pardek."

They both parted in the shadows, moving unseen among the Romulan senators now pouring out of the Senate with the confused mix of hopes and fears of the Rihansuu people frowning their thick brows.

But in each one of those two silent shadows was an inner light that still bound them together and brightened more than even the growing fires of any raging cosmic anomaly.

Hope.

A brightness that transcended races, cultures, politics, space...

And time.

THE END

APPENDIX

STARFLEET DATAFILES

XENOLOGY

ANDORIANS

NATIVE PLANETARY SYSTEM

F5V-IV Binary star system (Procyon A (Alpha Canis Minoris) white main sequence giant 30 times larger and 1000 hotter (6000k) than Sol, and Procyon B blue companion (10,000k)) at 11 light-years in a roughly coreward direction from Sol and 6 light-years from Vulcan.

There is a controversy regarding the point of origin of Andorians, since many of them referred to Epsilon Indi IV and VIII as their "Homeworld". In fact, those were very early colonies stated as birthplace and mistaken as the race's point of origin. Like Humans, Andorians tend to name new places in relation to their old ones (ie. Terra Nova for Terrans).

This confusion, and the peculiar biology of Andorians, have made some to speculate that they may originate from even farther, outside of what is actually known as Andorian space altogether.

PLANET

Andoria (called Fesoan in native language)

Class M moon 56,500km of circumference, orbiting with two other moons the ringed gas giant Procyon VIII called Andor. The ecosystem is arctic and subarctic, mostly covered with ice all year round. Summer temperature averages minus 28C and only the rare and short heat wave will bring temperature above freezing.

Seismic instabilities and cold weather make the few highly salted liquid water seas on Andoria so treacherous that most Andorian religions conceive of watery hells (Andorians are definitely not fond of swimming). They are nevertheless teeming with sea life and therefore a rich source of food, industrial energy and scientific study, but obviously not considered for recreation.

Geothermal activity provided the necessary heat for the development of indigenous lifeforms. If it were not for heavy background radiation and what would otherwise be considered unstable volcanic tectonics, Andoria would have been unable to sustain all but the most rudimentary life, and so the life that has developed there is hardy.

Geothermal activity as the main source of heat and energy also made civilization develop as much underground as on the surface; cities are located in deep caverns and connected with thousands of kilometers of tunnels.

Despite its apparent inhospitability, Andoria has a thriving tourist industry. Places of notes:

Capital City: Laibok, the largest underground city.

The Andorian Art Academy said to be the greatest, most prestigious and sought after by art collectors within the whole Federation.

The Wall of Heroes: a monument to fallen warriors. Andorians consider a sacred duty to bring their part of a deceased Andorian who died away from the homeworld.

Therion Park is a remarkable collection of plant and animal life

The Reserve: an off-limit area where the Codices state all Life on Andoria began. Local radiation nullifies scanners and only traditional archaeological research is possible... but rarely allowed.

The great Wash: a valley prone to spectacular flash floods near the Butte Temple

The view of the giant planet Andor is also a sight to amaze even seasoned spacefarers.

APPEARANCE

Relatively tall, slim humanoids, averaging between 1.7 and 2.1 meters, with a pair of antennae protruding from their earless skull. Their shape and position and skin tone defines of which of the subspecies the individual belongs to:

Thalassan - Darker, with knobby antennae from the rear parietal lobes. The most numerous of all the sub-species (60%), mostly coastal dwellers and fond of technology.

Thalish - Grayer with flimsy antennae from the front parietal lobes. Less populous.

Bishee - Lighter with small straight antennae from the frontal lobes. Also fairly common (30%) but living inland and still semi-nomadic and more tradition-bound.

Aenar - White-skinned with small flimsy antennae from the frontal lobes. An offshoot of the Bishee. Considered a myth until the 22nd century when a small colony was found surviving at the poles. Born peculiarly blind (their eyes move around and they can "perceive" colors) and powerfully telepathic, they are profoundly pacifist, and so secretive that even most Andorians never see them in the flesh.

Andorian cellular physiology is based as much on cobalt as iron, giving them a skin tone ranging from cerulean to a blushing purple, their hair white, ranging from silvery to platinum. They blush purple when embarrassed. A protenous dye (HZB-41) comparable to melanin in Humans, is responsible for their spectacular coloration.

The dye-cells have a comparatively short life span and must be produced constantly from protein sources in the diet. One of the most common symptoms of serious illness is insufficient dye production and a corresponding loss of skin color. In the folklore, ghosts and walking-dead and other supernatural visitants are always described as "ghastly pale". This perhaps explains one of the early difficulties in contact between the Andorian Empire and humans. Possibly the unfortunate reaction to the appearance of the first contact team can be explained by an excerpt from the ancient ballad, 'The Ghost Brother':

*"His face in the light was as pale as his hair,
And Rashilla fell weeping in dread and despair.
'Put back the helmet and leave,' she said,
'For now I know that thou surely are dead!'
Sing: waily, waily, and the long grasses grow."*

ANDORIAN PHYSIOLOGY

The Andorians are Ghelnoid, which is a unique blend of mammalian (endothermal, inner skeleton, viviparous) and insectoid biology (chitin, antennae and osmosis circulatory system). Andorians are the only known sentient race in that unique category apparently exclusive to Andoria. The average Andorian body temperature is about 29° C, a consequence of their evolution in their incredibly harsh arctic-like planetary environment.

The heavy cobalt base to an Andorian's blood and tissue make them most compatible, on a cellular level, with Bolians, whereas both race's blood would be incompatible with a Vulcan's, for instance, and require great effort to make it compatible with Humans.

The race has a genetic disposition towards violent behavior. Imminent danger causes a biochemical reaction resulting in a increase in physical and emotional responses and in sensory input levels, which in turn enhance analytical and reasoning skills. Andorians do not succumb easily to pressure and actually get calmer in a crisis... until they become violent.

Despite their misleadingly fragile appearance, Andorians are almost as strong as Vulcans, able to lift at least twice their own body weight because of their denser bone and muscle tissue. Thus in the famous ballad 'Baron Hathiye' it is not to be taken purely as fable that the hero...

*"... stood upon his ramparts, defying one and all,
And then picked up his treacherous steed and threw it over the wall.
Sing: waily, waily, and the silver leaves are tossing."*

They are also at least as tough as Klingons. They have a higher cartilage-to-bone ratio in their skeletal structure, and a chitin-like cartilage-bone fusion; internal ridges of this quasi-chitin also compartmentalize organs from gross physical trauma. All of these make them more resistant to pain, injury, and soreness. Andorians take impact differently, and their more efficient circulatory system means they rarely get sore or stiff from over-exertion and never suffer numbness from a cramped posture; they do not experience discomfort from high humidity nor suffer frostbite or hypothermia in cold weather.

They in fact resist with ease extremes of coldness that could kill other humanoids outright. They also require sleep only for 3-4 hours over the 32 hours of the Andorian day. Neither diurnal nor nocturnal, they function equally well at any moment of the day.

Born ambidextrous, they are also natural marksmen because of their superior depth perception coming from their most unique and spectacular feature: the antennae. Their reaction time and speed is slightly above human norm due to their higher metabolism.

They do not have an efficient cooling system since their environment never required them to face heat (when they do sweat, they give out a fruity scent). Because they also have a higher metabolism than humans they are very susceptible to high temperatures. An Andorian could lose 10% of its body weight in as little as 2 days in climates near the boiling point of water.

Their diffuse circulatory system is extremely vulnerable to toxins. Entire cottage industries exist in some Orion Syndicate-controlled systems brewing poisons and drugs that work best on Andorians. Andorians require intramuscular injections (hyposprays do not penetrate their chitin) but injected medicines will also work quickly through their natural osmosis.

Andorians are more prone to shock than humans, even from minor injuries, and are more easily exhausted due to their higher metabolic rate. They can get infected, sometimes mortally if not properly treated, by phaser or disruptor damage.

Because their bones have the tensile properties of cartilage, they break messily (although it requires about 3 times the force necessary to break human bones); any injury which breaks an Andorian's bones will require a great deal of healing time, and cause severe pain.

The average lifespan of the Andorian of any gender is 160 Terran years and they do not seem to suffer any of the physical debilitating effects associated with age; however, until recently, an old Andorian was somewhat rare to behold, given their violent way of life and utter lack of self-preservation fear when exposed to danger. Modern life and exposure to alien ways have softened enough their lifestyle to allow for less abrupt death than in their past, so that now elderly Andorians are much less rare than they once were.

Andorians regard themselves as a passionate, aggressive, even violent race. However, their character is much more complex. At first glance, they appear intelligent, even intellectual humanoids, deadpan and emotionless, very calm, rational and logical like the Vulcans. But in truth, their emotions can emerge with intense psychological and physical reactions.

Although none of the Andorian sexes is truly male or female as humans define them, they do accept male or female pronouns to ease interactions with the various two-sex species that dominate the universe, and to avoid unwelcomed questions about their biology, which they do not discuss with off-worlders.

Andorian history is one of conflict, though they do not battle without reason. The martial spirit is still very much alive in Andorian culture. Andorians are extremely disciplined, possessing a strong sense of duty and personal honor, and so they make excellent military officers.

Though they are stoic and largely unsentimental, they do respect, even revere, family ties. Andorians have little nudity taboos. Non-Andorian visitors will see much blue skin. Although not known for their charity and have few sympathies, they place their highest value on family.

Andorians are fond of technology, but insist on its use with respect for nature. For this reason, even their early wars of conquest were fought with a regard for planetary environment, and so the Andorians avoided much of the ecological devastation suffered by Terrans and many other cultures. Weapons of mass destruction were unknown and the very idea is still considered most barbaric.

They are hard-working and serious, often incorrectly viewed as humorless and irritable. Andorians have a complex set of propositional "grammars" to express humor; thus they do not tend to find human humor amusing, nor do non-Andorians tend to "get" theirs. The harsh history of early Andorian civilization left a strong taboo against frivolity or wasted effort and so they feel uncomfortable when invited to purely recreational activities. Their curt refusals often make them seem prudish or unsociable, while in fact they simply have a strong cultural pragmatism.

Andorians are also reluctant to enter strong personal relationships outside their bondmates, another left over trait from their troubled past. This lack of a social skill reinforces the sense of isolation and distance that others perceive between them and other races.

THE ANTENNAES

The Andorian antennae are unique organs literally functioning as a living multisensory array.

They act as an added pair of eyes (giving them quadriscopic vision, thus higher depth perception). The Andorian retina is composed entirely of intensity sensitive rods and is incapable of discerning color. Color comes through the antennae which feature a complex matrix of light-sensitive cones covering the spectrum of color visible to Terran eyes, even beyond, into limited infrared wavelengths.

they serve also as unidirectional ears effective from infrasonic to ultrasonic ranges.

They can additionally perceive variations of temperature and pressure, display definite aural sensitivity and provide a prodigious sense of smell.

All of this make them able to detect even shrouded Jem'Hadar. Some Andorians can also recognize familiar footfalls and heartbeats close-up, but this is a skill which takes as much practice as it takes for a human recognizing a friend by his after-shave.

The antennae also convey much more emotions than their few, rigid facial muscles:
curving forward: polite attention or interest
rigid and quivering: excitement or fear
drooping: weariness or depression
wringing and lashing: confused or upset
slow writhing; sexual arousal
wobbling wildly: intoxication or disorientation
flattened: rage
facing each other: shrug (slightly) or amusement (almost touching)

Andorians "kiss" by touching antennae; when mating, a telepathic link is achieved and a deep bonding ensues, deeper than that of Vulcan mates. Not only can they sense each other over immeasurable distances afterwards, but the death of one causes such a shock that most Andorians do not survive the death of a spouse.

Because of their importance, Andorian psychology is deeply related to it. Offering antenna jewelry is a gift of deep friendship, if not courtship. The Andorian version of the wedding ring is worn on the left antenna rather than on a finger.

On the other hand, fear of damaging one is deeper than fear of castration to human males; losing one equates blindness, deafness, muteness, castration and disfigurement all at once and many do not choose to live with it, even knowing it will regenerate within 9 months (half that time with proper treatment of cranial massages and electro stimulation).

Meanwhile the wounded Andorian will be handicapped (no color vision, reduced depth perception, deafness, loss of taste and smell and 48 hours loss of balance). Any hit will cause intense pain to an Andorian. Touching one uninvited is inexcusable rudeness, and threat or attack against it is legal ground for assault and murder... as occasional, unfortunate incidents have shown. For example, in the famous tapestry 'The Assault on Yodina', one notes that Yodina is actually leaning toward the captor who has imprisoned her arms and away from the villainous baron who has clutched her left antenna. To the student of Andorian culture, it comes as no surprise that Yodina's relatives later tore the wicked baron into several pieces and fed the fragments to their hunting beasts before a cheering crowd.

Their relative rigidity make Andorians almost deaf and unable to catch an odor from behind. From there stems their deep aversion to duplicity and treachery; attacking from behind is the foulest form of dishonor and cowardice to them. Thus, they do not respect much cloaking-using cultures like Klingons and Romulans.

ANDORIAN MATING

Andorians are able to reproduce only for 5 years after puberty; they are unique for having completely retractable sexual organs and 4 sexes; the males Chan and Thaan each have $\frac{1}{4}$ of the chromosomes; the female Shen has $\frac{1}{2}$ of the chromosomes and a transferring organ for the female Zhen who carries the pregnancy within a marsupial like pouch with four teats inside it to nurture the embryo. Twins, triplets and quadruplets were more common in ancient times.

Females are generally taller than males and sexually much more aggressive. All subspecies are sexually and genetically totally compatible between themselves but, understandably, not at all with other humanoids... unless drastic and complex genetic manipulation would be involved.

Andorians choose their beloved forming a 'quad'. Andorian marriage bonds are stronger than just about anything. To an Andorian, the remaining three adults of the quad are life mates, even more important than children born to the quad. An Andorian forced to choose his spouses over his children in a medical emergency, or forced to duel his own father to defend the honor of his wife, will do so with little hesitation.

However, they will do their best to make as many children as possible during their fertility period and go to extremes to protect and nurture them.

Because of this peculiar mode of reproduction, the Andorian species is decreasing in number with each generation. Today the danger of extinction is very real.

Recently, it was discovered that secret genetic resequencing research has been ongoing, unsanctioned by the government that would reduce the 4-gender species to just 2, thus hopefully making the species viable. There is also a philosophical and political movement supporting this that has found a voice within the government despite the outrage voiced by the traditionalist segment of Andorian society, calling blasphemy this monstrous altering of what is considered the very essence of Andorian life and culture.

SPECIFIC DETAILS OF REPRODUCTION

Before the advent of modern medicine and especially genetic science, it was difficult, if not impossible, to determine the sex of an Andorian child at birth, with the result that for millenias, children were raised without different treatment accorded by gender. This is one reason why Andorian society is, even today, completely ambiarchal. The child's genital organs remain dormant until first puberty, which starts at the approximate age of 12 and is completed by the age of 15, when s/he begins the neuter phase of adulthood. At this time, the sex of the individual first becomes apparent. The male possesses a retractable penis AND subcutaneous testes; the Shen female possesses a uterus and vagina while the Zhen has a retractable ovipositor, a ventral pouch, and four breasts - flat and dormant in the neuter phase and arranged in pairs.

Since the sexual activity of neuters does not result in pregnancy, it is given little social importance and is described by the word "play" or "amusement". Neuters are allowed, if not encouraged, to experiment sexually in any way that interests them and are restricted by no taboos whatever. A neuter may "play" with its brothers, sisters, other relatives, friends, enemies, strangers and livestock; nobody cares, unless the activity results in physical injury, which is then treated as a simple case of assault. Although passionate, emotional involvement can form between playing neuters - and are celebrated in story and song - they are not considered in the same category with attachment to one's true mate. The resulting sexual liberality of neuters often puzzles outsiders and has led to some unfortunate misunderstandings, as related in Khardillye's modern poem, 'The Flat-Antennaed ("eared") Stranger':

*"Incomprehensible playmate, last night's friend,
Why art thou displeased by daylight, tell?
Have we not played happily all night long?
Enjoying every protrusion and orifice well?*

*Why, then, this post-sleep change?
Why this attempt to press guinea-pig coins in my hand?
Why your suggestion I hide when the landlady knocked?
Why this insistence on leaving by separate doors?*

*I believe I detect in your manner a note of contempt.
Ignoring my backswept antennae, you press me too far.
Indeed, we shall exit by separate doorways! - Be off!
Or I'll rip out your windpipe and throw you straight out of this window!"*

Second puberty occurs when a neuter forms a serious emotional attachment to neuters of the opposite sex and their normal empathic connection deepens into a full telepathic bond. Because of the need to find, not one partner but three, the process becomes incredibly complex, difficult and time consuming in practice - something that explains a great deal about their dwindling population.

This process, known as formal courtship, also lasts several months, often a year and more. During this courtship, the telepathic bonding, by a method the Andorians are reluctant to reveal, causes physiological changes that bring on full fertility: ovulation of the Shen, development of the Zhen's breasts and pouch, increased size and protrusion of the Chan and Thaan testes and the production of gametes. From the time of the first symptoms of change, the quad is considered betrothed, and they may marry at any time before the final bonding. Final bonding consists of male's-penis to female's-vagina mating, from each male of the pair, then the egg transfer from the Shen's uterus to the Zhen pouch, while all are in full telepathic rapport for the first time, and results in first pregnancy.

In a "true" mating, each "male" successively provide a quarter of the required chromosome through standard copulation. The Thaan fully fertilize the zygote which divides into two to eight sub-zygotes, which then grow in the Shen's womb for 3.7 standard months. Here they develop into eggs, which are approximately the size and shape of baseballs, having elastic, gold shells. At the end of this stage, the Chan fertilizes the eggs to make them mature and break open to free the fetuses. The fetuses first digest the egg shells through osmosis in about 0.7 months, and then Sh'en deposits the fetuses, through her ovipositor, in the pouch of the Zhen. The fetuses remain there for an additional 3.6 months, absorbing fluid through the teats in the pouch and increasing embryo growth under the higher body temperature in the pouch.

They obtain nourishment during this period by means of two hollow, bony protrusions (called pouch-fangs) located in their double navels, with which they pierce a large blood vessel running vertically through the posterior wall of the pouch, thus plugging their circulatory systems into the mother's.

It is not uncommon for Zhen in pouch-pregnancy to have voracious appetites, and doubly so if they are also nursing still another litter at the same time. For this reason, the Andorian fertility goddess is often described as The Great Devourer, or The Inspiration of Livestock Raids. Understandably she is usually depicted as the wife of the war god.

In the interests of keeping the quad together, the mating bond causes physical changes in the nervous system so that bonded individuals cease to have sexual interest in any save their mates, and literally cannot perform a fertile mating with anyone else. "Adultery" is an unknown concept among Andorians. "Illegitimacy" is barely possible (not counting the purely social disgrace of failing to undergo the formal marriage ceremony before the final bonding) and is extremely difficult. It consists of a female obtaining an egg which is not hers and introducing it into her paired Zhen's pouch, or a Zhen stealing a fetus, or yet a Chan or a Thaan substituting himself as one of the two genitors. This is considered a horrid disgrace and the usual punishment is death for all members of the quad - the "females" for having deceived their mate and the "males" for having been so thoroughly deceived (which implies unbearable stupidity and imperfection of the telepathic bond). Thus, when the deception is discovered in the ballad 'The Tragedy of Rok, Hail, Shey and Arn':

*"...Wives, thou hast caused us to bear a bastard!
Barons Shey, Arn, he cried.
We'll not endure such vile disgrace;
Better we first had died!"
Sing: waily, waily, and the gentle breezes blow.*

*They speared the wives through their false hearts,
And pinned them against the wall.
Then they drew out their good long-sword,
And on it they did fall.
Sing: waily, waily, all down by the River Rhoe."*

There is no divorce among Andorians; the marriage bond lasts for life, and the death of one partner usually causes death of all the others. This is especially true if the death of one partner occurs by violence; the resulting telepathic shock causes sudden and severe stress to the heart, often resulting in fatal coronary occlusion. A widowed Andorian who survives the initial shock is still prey to psychic disorientation, endocrine imbalance and savage psychological depression; these are often sufficient to cause a widowed partner to "lay doon and dee" in a fashion familiar to any observer of telepathic races. A widowed Andorian who does survive the breaking of the bond reverts to neuter phase and never becomes fertile again.

There are so many well known ballads about this subject that it would be pointless to quote from them, and it is not surprising: those sentimental human ballads about lovers dying of a "broken heart" are quite popular on Andoria.

CULTURAL EFFECT OF THE REPRODUCTION MECHANISM

Because bonding and "true" mating causes such changes in the individual's physiology and lifestyle (and, subsequently, in the personality), it is surrounded by a constellation of important social customs. Bonded quads, being necessarily concerned with feeding their offspring, tend to be sedentary and conservative - and concerned also with trade, war or other means of acquiring land and livestock. Neuters, having no fierce biological commitment to other individuals, tend to be nomadic and innovative, concerned more with artistic or abstract studies. Bonded Andorians also dress and speak in different modes than neuters, are more formal in public and have a different role in religious practices. For example, only neuters worship Hyuhef, Inspirer of Playmates, and only bonded ones take part in the rites of the fertility-goddess.

These differences, plus the above-mentioned variation in sexual behavior, are doubtless the causes of the first contact-team's disastrous misassumption that neuters and bonded ones were two different classes, or races, with neuters socially subordinated to the land-owning bonded ones. One result of this unfortunate mistake was the discovery that bonded Andorians tend to be much fiercer in battle than neuters.

So great are the social and psychological changes brought about by sexual bonding that neuters usually regard the bonded state with mixed fear and fascination. A common feature of Andorian psychology is the bonding dream, usually described as a nightmare, in which a neuter dreams of the expected change in terms of a supernatural visitant whose touch transforms the dreamer in mind and body. The dreamer usually awakens in a state of mixed fright and extreme sexual arousal, and often counteracts this by plunging into fierce sexual activity or personal combat. Consequently, the standard colloquialism applied to a neuter observed in an agitated or belligerent state is "S/he must have dreamed of The Changer". Another result is that The Changer is an important deity in the Andorian pantheon, called The First Child of the Great Mother, whose presence is invoked by lovers who wish to marry. Thus do dreams become gods.

Some neuters, for career, personal or religious reasons (such as sworn service to Armored Hlasha, Protector of Mercenaries), choose to remain neuters all their lives, never experience the Change and, hence, never breed. This is considered the honorable form of birth control and older neuters are highly respected for their dedication and self-discipline. Less honorable means of birth control include egg-smashing and infanticide.

Andorians who do marry promptly find themselves faced with the great physiosocial problem of parenthood. Litters of young usually numbered from two to four, although single births are more the norm nowadays. Litters of eight were not rare in ancient times. Since a bonded quad can carry two litters at once (one in the Shen's womb, one in the Zhen's pouch) while nursing a third, a healthy couple can produce up to an average of 16 children per standard year - although an Andorian's breeding life is rather short...

One of the common epithets for the fertility goddess is Mother of 1000 Young - which is obviously a wish incarnated in a symbolic figure. Andorians themselves speculate that the concept of the fertility-goddess began with a famous ancestress who spawned great numbers of surviving children, passed in due course from a heroic ancestor-spirit into a tribal goddess, and later merged with similar goddesses of other tribes. Thus do memories become gods.

ANDORIAN DIET:

Although omnivorous, they have a mostly carnivorous diet because of the high level of complex protein their high metabolism requires. Lack of it will show in a noticeable discoloration of the skin.

Andorians have unique senses of smell and taste. For example, salt is spicy to them, and macho Andorians like to eat hearty Andorian, Terran, or Klingon meat dishes sprinkled liberally with salt. Some Andorian Starfleet officers drink highly salted Margaritas or Bloody Marys once introduced to them by humans. Other favorite drinks include sweet Agranu wine, as well as the earthy/rich ales brewed by Keth Endilev, and famous to non-Andorians as 'Andorian ale'. Some Andorian food: Saysha, a barely edible beetle delicacy served on orbital stations to off-worlders, Impararay a red bat meat served with tarrid, Tarrid a common beverage, Hari a bread, Katheka a coffee, Fridd a chikoree, Srjula a tea, Talla is a common drink made from bark, Andorian tuber root is known to be served in salad or in a pie, Andorian flat root is a vegetable, Ale comes in several varieties from blue (strongest) to yellow (foamy).

Common caffeine, even from chocolate, is almost poisonous to them and alcohol is highly intoxicating due to their osmotic circulatory system.

The Andorian nervous system requires great amounts of complex protein for its maintenance and growth, protein which is not available from the few edible nuts, fruits and grains found on Andoria. Also, though most Andorian food beasts are mammals, their milk production is limited and reserved for their litters of young, so there is no Andorian dairy industry. Consequently, the Andorian diet is largely carnivorous. Andorians raise a large variety of livestock, and hunt many non-domestic species. It is not true, as early contact teams suggested, that Andorians will eat anything that walks, flies or crawls through the grass; they do not, for instance, practice cannibalism - except in cases of extreme emergency.

Certain nuts and fruits are considered condiments, desserts or emergency rations but, for the most part, Andorians look on vegetables as livestock feed. The most important of these is fat-grass, a grain-bearing plant that grows wild in great abundance all over Andoria. It is most like a cross of terran lichen and mushroom in nature, as it is most often found near geothermal sources and even deep underground, not requiring photosynthesis to thrive. In nutritive qualities, fat-grass is analogous to high fat-content quadrottriticale; in its ubiquity, vitality, and persistence, it is analogous to crabgrass. It spreads by seed and creeper and can survive in any soil - although it grows best when fertilized by livestock droppings and the bodies of the dead. Andorians have long been aware of this, and subsequently practice burial instead of cremation. Indeed, the Andorian word for "burial" is feeding the fat-grass - and The Mother of Fat-grass, a major Andorian deity, is also called The Comforter of the Dead.

ANDORIAN LANGUAGE

Andorian language evolved from music. This gives a very melodic and mathematical quality to Andorian speech and thought, explaining much of their strange combination of deep passion and strict discipline. It is soft and somewhat eerie to other races due to the peculiar range of their hearing apparatus. Some undertones are not easily perceived by other humanoids. Their ability to sense vibration and pitch is what turned music into language in the first place.

The Andorii Language (Graalek) reflects much of the highly stratified social system (clan-lodge-family-individual), so firmly entrenched in the culture of Andoria, as well as Piin'tel, Aad'hozh, Em'phur, and their other colonies. The Andorian psyche is prevalent in all aspects of the language as much as their physiological peculiarities.

Writing came about much later and now exists in 2 form of scripts: symbolic and phonetic, the symbolic one is amazingly almost virtually identical to standard musical writing but without standard partitions.

NAMING

Today, an Andorian's name is made of a first name followed by a combination of contracted paternal names, a suffix denoting sexual identity then a combining of the contracted maternal names, then finally the clan's name (i.e. Kheren Kalel Th'Shelleryll Keth Reiji), all of it being also part of the namesong.

The clan name ending is not used anymore by most since the founding of the Federation, except in Parliament sessions and traditional ceremonies like marriage. When dealing with off-worlders, only the first name is used to ease contact and avoid insulting and disgraceful mispronunciations (i.e: Captain Kheren).

Andorian names are harsh sounding; often very long affairs, literally an entire song, difficult for foreigners to master. In their full traditional form, they are as much an identification system as a poetic description of a moment of great significance to the naming parent, similar to Japanese Haiku; with off-worlders, Andorians simply go by the first word in their Namesong.

Samples of Andorian names :

Keth names: Aniri, Clanness, Endilev, Ghorev, Hrisvalar, Idrani, Kor, Raioth, Reiji

Thaan/Chan names: Akeen, Akeval, Igrilan, Keval, Shran, Shras, Sorjei, Thalev, Theb, Theleb.

Shen/Zhen names: Jaylas, Imaru, Lissan, Lyaas, Lyrya, Neruu, Schel, Tara, Tala, Tyvya.

WORDLIST

Alneesh - marsh bison

Athlirith - eagle

Challorn - flower

Ecceara - traditional zhen clothing

Elta - flower tree

Eketha - hardwood tree

Eth'la - flower vine

Grayth - feline

Grelth - spider

Hybor - were-rabbit

Kelthreth - one's own clan

Khe' - coldness

Kheth - temporary pouch that grows over and around the lower abdomen of a zhen for the final phase of Andorian gestation

Klazh - erratic moving animal

Ren - Fire

Saf - aphrodisiac

Schanchen - medicinal plant

Shax - poisonous insect

Shelthreth - marriage

Taras - tree

Thezha - non-marital sex

Vithi - vegetable

Xixu - marine nurturing plant

Zabathu - camel

Zhavey - eldest mother

Zhiassa - mother's milk

ANDORIAN SOCIETY

Much that appears bizarre and bewildering about Andorian culture - its violence, territoriality, demanding etiquette, clan-based social structure, contradictory sexual morality, oddly primitive religion and art, grim practicality and tendency toward fratricide - becomes comprehensible when one learns the nature of Andorian biology. Andorian culture appears to be shaped almost entirely by biology, and attempts to reach beyond biology meet with only partial success.

Andoria itself supports nowadays a population of 30 millions. Although there were billions in the past, they now merely number 90 millions in all of known space.

Originally a violent and warlike people, Andorians have now a surprisingly peaceful if strict, stable democratic society evolved from a clan-family system where artistic and martial values are both strongly emphasized. Although not unknown, obesity is despised because of this as a sign of laziness and weakness of both body and mind unworthy of a warrior. They do retain a strong dueling tradition and males and females shares equal rights, although motherhood is particularly revered, giving the impression of over protectiveness and nobility of the Sh'en and especially the Zhen genders, and consequently showing more males within the military.

As might be assumed on a planet where weather conditions are severe and predators abound, Andorians evolved a clan-based social structure which has not yet been discarded. Andorians live communally in of 3 basic social structures, from largest to smallest:

Kethni (singular: keth), a clan. The biggest 300 kethni form the ruling council of Andoria, and clans come and go under strict rules. A keth is ruled by an atlolla, or 'chieftain'. Kethni do interrelate and intermarry. Andorian culture is based on the Clan. A Clan today is about 60 to 100 families banding together to pool resources and abilities. It tends now to grow around single lines of endeavor or related centers than just blood ties and location as in the past.

'Lodge', or temporary-but-stable community living amongst non-Andorian majorities. In a Starfleet's station, ship, colony, or outpost, it will combine several living quarters where all Andorians live. Families sometimes do not; but it is very rare for any single adult Andorian to live outside The Lodge, a formal term with deep significance. Andorians in lodges do sleep and dine communally, even in modern ones with side chambers for private use.

'Quads', or marriage structures. Often, once the quad has created offspring, they separate to pursue their own interests.

There are 4 traditional rituals among the Andorians.

The Nutak (Birth) is a ceremony held when a new Andorian is born, there is a 4 days "welcome" ceremony. They celebrate arriving to this world. In the last day, it receives a bless from the priest. Moments after birth, the child's genetic structure is mapped to match with the most compatible mates.

The Time of Knowing is when bondmates become aware of each other for the first time during their mid-teens. They each contribute a strand of hair to each other to be intertwined into a pendant or locket called a Shapla. Then they are taught The First Truth:

"One alone cannot be Whole. What one chooses, is chosen for all, what befalls one, befalls all. Their lives are yours... My life is theirs."

The Remali'y is the Andorian "turning age" ritual. It is a 3 day ceremony to celebrate adulthood. First day is alone with a mentor (preparation); second day is alone (meditation); the third day, a formal ceremony of acceptance among the adults (consumption).

Andorians thinks highly of knowledge, culture, work and nature. They do not value recreation and sports, with exception of martial arts. The educational level in Andoria is very high; all villages have schools, and universities are in almost all cities. The high level of Andorians universities is known in all of the Federation.

From age 3 to 12, it's obligatory to attend primary school. There is a secondary school, that goes from 13 to 18, and upon graduation, university. Although only primary school is mandatory, barely 1.5% of Andorians don't finish their university studies.

Art is another important factor in Andorian life. They cultivate their art, and value their artists. Their Academy of Arts is said to be the greatest of all the Federation and collector from all over covet their creations, from ceramics to music.

Andorian sense of community and team-effort show in their few sports and games. Andorians prefer team play to solo play; sports include kochek, a cross between hockey and jai-alai played between 3 teams wearing spiked footwear on ice, as well as team-based dueling and martial arts competitions. A warrior culture, their fencing and unarmed martial arts styles are embraced by all Andorians.

The most common Andorian blades are the chaka, an unwieldy three-bladed hand-weapon similar to the Klingon bat'leth and serving a similar honor-blade function, too heavy and awkward to carry in day-to-day use and reserved mostly for ceremonies; the hrisal, a lightly curved short-sword used most for duty functions; dueling however is done with a crescent-shaped serrated blade, the ushaan-thor which was originally an elaborated icepick used by miners for work and movement.

Andorians practice a devastating kick boxing art known as kharakom and a brutal wrestling art known as hleshvalath.

The 12000 rules of the Andorian dueling code is called the ushaan. Duels are fought traditionally on white linens over ice floors, so that blood can be seen clearly and the duel ended at the appropriate time. Starfleet regulations allow Andorian officers and enlisted to participate -death in the ushaan is legally considered suicide. The ushaan consists of the duelists, 3-5 neutral representatives of the governing body or appropriate law enforcement agency at hand, and 2 professional 'recorders'. Starfleet regulations state that the Commanding Officer of a Starfleet ship or installation is to be one of the 'judges', regardless of race and ignorance of the code; by tradition, the CO should choose at least one neutral Andorian as one of the judges as well.

Because survival was the chief activity of the clan, religion, art and education were shaped by their relevance to it. Education, particularly technological, took precedence over art, which in turn took precedence over religion. Wandering neuters transmitted information in the same order; the result was that technological change spreads quickly, artistic innovation more slowly and religious development hardly at all. Thus, Andorian culture presents the peculiar mixed spectacle of space-age technology, medieval artistic development and religious forms of the Late Stone Age.

Andorian science began with advances in animal husbandry, ecology, veterinary medicine, defensive architecture, military engineering, and weapons technology. Such advances gave their discoverers advantages over their neighbors and thus spread rapidly, by conquest or taught by wandering neuters. This insured evolutionary direction toward greater intelligence, higher creativity and further technological progress.

The Andorian word for art derives from the ancient words for family amusement and ancestor glorification and it is not surprising that Andorian arts are somewhat limited in scope. The plastic arts are primarily decorative (including tapestry blankets and hangings, colorful pottery, intricate jewelry and embellished weapons and utensils), or functional (such as religious idols and icons, commemorative statues, family portraits and educational illustrations of clan histories).

Literature is limited to historical drama (popular mainly in urban areas), literary poetry (written and read primarily by wandering neuters) and song (usually folk ballads meant for the edification and amusement of clan gatherings).

Andorian drama bears a strong resemblance to early Elizabethan theater of Earth in its length, complexity, structure, subject matter, language, and luridness; reviewers often complain that by the 5th act, the players are having difficulty moving about because of the numbers of bodies littering the stage. Literary poetry, although comparatively free and innovative in form, tends to confine its subject matter to mood pieces, usually love songs. Sung poetry is primarily of the sing along ballad variety. As an example:

*"We smote them on the helmet,
And we smote them on the thigh.
We smote them here, we smote them there,
And laughed to watch them die.
Sing: waily, waily, and the gentle rain falls.*

*We lifted half their livestock,
And their pickled meat and beer,
And we ate and drank and sang about it
For nearly half a year.
Sing: waily, waily, and the gentle rain falls."*

A crucial part of Andorian tradition since Antiquity is the ushaan, a code of honor demanding a duel by someone for personal vengeance or honor retribution. However, there are over 12,000 amendments to the rules; among them rights of substitution, allowing each combatant to put up a replacement for themselves. Furthermore, each married combatant could postpone a duel indefinitely if there were no children to continue his claim. Additionally, the fight is called off if one combatant is disabled so that he cannot continue the duel to its pre-ordained conclusion (first blood, submission, death etc)

GOVERNMENT

Andorian society is balkanized into a single government with various parties represented. Before 400 years ago, the largest social structures were the multi-clan walled cities, until the last several centuries brought the notion of a central planetary government: first as an Empire, then back to a democratic oligarchy in the 22nd Century just before the founding of the Federation.

The Andorian Confederation is ruled by the Parliamentary Council, made of representatives of the keths. The main congregation of representatives is the Enclave (also found in all clan Keeps).

The Parliament is formed by representatives from the clans, and the number of representatives from each clan is proportional to the number of people from each clan. There are 64 electoral provinces represented, and all is overseen by the Presider, even though Andoria is still legally a Constitutional Monarchy, despite the fact that no single ruler had reigned over the planet in centuries. Thalisar the Last, who first united her people centuries ago, had deliberately died childless—but not before implementing the parliamentary system that she had created to succeed her, and which has governed Andoria ever since.

The Visionary Party and Modern Progressive Party are the largest parties currently residing in government. The Progressive Party currently rules Parliament. A new party, the Revisionists, is now heard in parliament, promoting the genetic alteration of the Andorian race to save it from extinction. They are forcefully opposed by the Traditionalists.

The Andorian military has no specific political power but it is well developed and influential. Definitely a militaristic warrior race, war is serious business to them, as underscored by the fact that, prior to helping found the Federation, their weapons had no stun setting, service in the Andorian Imperial Guard is considered most honorable. Military ranks have a great influence on social reputations.

SOCIAL EFFECTS OF ANDORIAN FERTILITY

The first effect of their overly complex reproductive system is the clan-centered structure of Andorian society. A single quad is long in forming, and so children are long in coming; indeed, if a quad begins breeding early, it can expect to preside over four generations of descendants - usually living on the same lands and guarding the same herds - if they do not die early, which is a most common occurrence in their harsh environment and violent culture. Raising those offspring absorbs most of a quad's time and attention, leaving little energy for contact with members of other clans. Children raised in these clans have so few relatives of various ages to interact with that they however seek contact outside the clan - thus answering the spread of the gene pool. In view of this, it is not difficult to see why the clan is the only stable Andorian social unit: it is the safe haven for adventuring young and the stable refuge for nursing elders.

The second effect of the complex Andorian fertility mechanism is an aggressive and territorial nature. In order to protect those precious children, even a single quad must strive constantly to preserve its herds - which necessarily means guarding the tribal lands, since Andorian vegetation is notoriously unsuitable to cultivation and the herds must perforce go wherever the fat-grass chooses to grow. Such protectiveness inevitably brings a clan into competition with its neighbors if it grows any larger due to good fortune, and the usual result is war. Although occasionally one finds a clan that has, by virtue of unusual cunning or strength or luck, managed to overcome its neighbors and absorb their lands, herds and survivors, it is far more common for such clan warfare to result in no significant change of borders, but merely a paring down of numbers on both sides. This is the origin of the Vulcan "joke" about "Andorian population control".

This constant aggressive protectiveness not only explains their deep reluctance for meaningless violence but makes Andorians correspondingly peaceful within the clan - but only up to a point. The population pressure within a successful - and thus fruitful - clan when usually they are so few for a long period can operate against familial harmony at the drop of a sword. Clans at peace with their neighbors often turn their aggression inward, resulting in dynastic struggles and fratricide, which usually does not end until the clan is decimated by warfare - or until war with neighboring clans is resumed. On Andoria, the phrase: "The family that slays together, stays together" is not a joke.

Fratricidal competitiveness is not dependent solely on territoriality; it begins with sibling rivalry among littermates, which is fierce enough by nature and unfortunately exacerbated by culture. The competition begins, literally, in the hour of birth. Shortly after jettisoning the pouch-fangs, the young emerge from the pouch and scramble for the mother's breasts - which, unfortunately, are not always enough.

To free the mother's hands for self defense and feeding, the breasts of a fertile female Andorian are covered with curly white fur to which the infants cling. The upper two breasts, being the largest and having the most fur (therefore called white teats), are the most desirable from the infant's point of view. The lowest pair is least furred (blue) and considered suitable for the runts of the litter. Thus, in competing for the best breasts, the children become stereotyped in classifications that last throughout childhood, if not throughout life. White teat children tend to have superiority complexes and usually stay home to manage the clan herds and lands. Blue teats often develop deep resentments and inferiority complexes and tend to have the least loyalty to the clan.

The unfortunate result of this situation is the amazingly fierce Andorian sibling rivalry. One's older or younger siblings may become one's friends, but never one's littermates. Intra-litter fratricide is common and is usually treated as nothing worse than a serious misdemeanor, comparable to shoplifting.

It has been speculated that this has slowly evolved the Andorians to have less and less children, and thus starting the extinction process now observed, that the already difficult reproductive process is further favoring. Many Zhen today barely develop the second pair of breasts as single births are more the norm and even mere twins a rarity. Social and cultural pressure are also obviously influencing this depopulating process further.

The more fortunate result of such intra-litter competitiveness is the tendency of lower-ranking littermates to leave the tribe upon reaching first puberty to seek their fortunes elsewhere. The wandering neuter, travelling from clan to clan, thus becomes not only an important factor in randomizing the gene pool, but a valuable transmitter of culture as well. Often the wandering neuters are the only source of inter-clan communications; as such, they are highly valued as messengers, teachers, sources of news and bearers of innovations. The most common trade of a wandering neuter in post-industrial times, however, is that of hired herdsman/soldier. Andorian herding clans, being usually involved in wars, are constantly in need of temporary manpower for guarding their lands or raiding their neighbors', and find it more practical and of course much easier to hire soldiers at need than to breed them. As a result, one of the common words for an individual in the neuter phase is derived from mercenary soldier.

Wandering neuters who survive livestock raids and prove themselves too valuable to be discharged in peacetime often marry into their employers' families. Besides keeping the gene pool refreshed, this system allows for social mobility - thus creating legend after legend of the poor family's poorest child who ends by marrying into a wealthy family and founding a famous dynasty. These factors clarify the famous - and formerly inexplicable - Andorian classic, 'The Love Song of Dyathalih':

*"Oh love, of all thy clan the fairest, hear:
I, poor blue-teat pramha-farmer, sing thee my humble song.
Long have I watched thee afar, loving thy glory. Oh love,
Let us not be mercenaries long!*

*Yea, from the hour thy pouch-fangs dropped,
Thou climber the high breast to clutch the palest fur,
Kicking thy rivals back. Yea, all thy clan
Knew how destined for great things you were!*

*Oh play with me, and Change with me,
And let us join our loves;
Our children shall slaughter our noisome neighbors,
And rule the world in droves."*

BASIC PLANETARY ECONOMY

Because Andorians require such large amounts of meat, livestock-raising has long been of primary importance to Andoria's economy. This dependence on herds of livestock is the cause of several cultural conventions. For example, the Andorian word for "war" derives from the ancient term for livestock-raid, the word for "wedding gift" from basic breeding herd, "trade" from exchange of livestock, "disaster" from loss-of-livestock and "home" from grazing range.

Andorian currency is based on the value of livestock. The largest denomination is the teeghar, from teegh (the largest domestic animal, roughly equivalent to the Terran horse or cow). Smaller denominations include the sleemhar (roughly value of a domesticated reindeer), the nohagar (value of a large pig), the ashklar (value of an antelope), and the mefilhar (value of a small goat).

The smallest coin, the pramhar (value of a guinea pig), has especially interesting connotations. Because of long-standing cultural pressure, no family would dare to be without at least a token number of food-beasts; for urban dwellers, this means maintaining a number of pramha (which can be kept in a small cage) and a window-box garden of fat-grass to feed them. Thus, the term pramha farmer can refer to a very poor family or an urban family. By a pun, it can also mean a penny-pinching miser or a person of small resources and large pretensions. In the ballad 'The Tragedy of Jalrhain', the heroine is described as servant to a pramha farmer to indicate her poverty, misery and desperation; this is her motivation for her subsequent violence to her employer and his entire clan.

SOCIAL CHECKS ON AGGRESSION

At first glance, one might wonder how such an aggressive species managed to keep from destroying itself when technological progress made super-efficient weaponry possible; it comes as a great surprise that Andoria has never suffered what humans would term a major war. The fact is that Andorians place stringent restrictions on their fratricidal weaponry, as well as on their inter-tribal aggression.

Andorians have always restricted their weaponry with their practical attitude toward warfare. Specifically, they never lose sight of what they are fighting for: hrashklain (food-land). Being painfully aware of their dependency on their herds, and the herds' dependency on the fat-grass, Andorians are much more solicitous of the welfare of their beasts and lands than they are of each other. They are, by nature, the most passionately concerned ecologists in the Federation; not even Vulcans outdo them. The wanton destruction of livestock or grazing-land fills Andorians with horror and outrage; it is the one unforgivable sin, the one crime that can make all neighboring clans drop their feuds and form solid alliances to destroy the "pervert" who would dare to do such a thing.

In fact, the Andorian word for "criminally insane" is derived from the words for destroyer of grasslands. To an Andorian, the whole point of warfare is to seize the prize which prolongs the life of the victor; therefore, nothing could be more insane than to destroy or injure the prize. As a result, all weapons that could in any way damage the lands or herd are fiercely banned. This is why, despite their warlike nature and long technological history, Andorians still fight their clan-wars with spear and sword, axe and club, and bow and arrow - much to the amazement of all observers.

Another check on inter-tribal warfare is the early invention of trade. Progressive clans soon discovered that by producing desirable goods and exchanging them for livestock, they could increase their herds without losing any children or paying the hire of extra mercenaries. Since the clan structure is well suited to corporate activity, many clans became manufacturing specialists. Clan-houses expanded easily into factories, then factory-towns and thus evolved into the first Andorian cities. A famous example is the Talliryen Clan, whose legendary ancestor, Tallirye, enriched his pramha-poor clan by discovering the smelting of iron. Since the Talliryen family lands sat over a natural deposit of iron ore, the Talliryens soon became iron-workers and iron-mongers for all the surrounding clans. Since their skills made them greatly desirable as allies, as well as too valuable to kill, the Talliryens have not fought a clan war within historical memory.

To this day, Talliryen Steel is one of the most successful clan companies on Andoria and Tallirye himself has evolved into the patron god of smithcraft.

The development of non-combative trading clans necessitated the invention of some method of reducing intra-clan friction. One result of this was the evolution of a rigorous etiquette, designed to keep a polite distance between members of the same clan so that they don't get on each other's nerves. The longer a clan is at peace with its neighbors, the more necessary and rigid the etiquette becomes. The above-mentioned Talliryen Clan, for example, with its long history of inter-clan peace, is so fiercely punctilious that it makes medieval Japanese royalty look casual by comparison. This is only slightly less true of other urban clans. In an Andorian city, a social gaffe is cause for assault, murder or ritual suicide - as the original contact team discovered the hard way. This is understandable when one considers that the breaching of custom is the equivalent of declaring war upon members of one's own clan, and hence too dangerous to excuse. Outwardly aggressive, rural Andorians are aware of this urban peculiarity, and find it amusing at best, as Chondenvre's ballad shows:

*"I'd rather fight nine days in ten
And gnaw thin pramha from my neighbor's pen
Than eat fine dinners a la Talliryen.
Thank the gods I'm a country neuter!"*

RELIGION

With one exception, all Andorian religions view marriage as a secular social contract, honored but not promoted by the religious hierarchy. However, some fringe sects of Borvaism, a semi-idolatrous, philosophical warrior-religion referred to colloquially by some wags as 'Andorian Buddhism', promote 'hexes', or 6-person marriage for odd religious reasons. Most of these folks are considered 'fruitcakes' by other Andorians, as respected as Borvaism itself is.

Other Andorian religions include Eila Clahd, a back-to-nature faith decrying technological advancement; Emasha Yul, a polytheistic faith which is to Borvaism what Hinduism is to Buddhism; Hastra Bei Hastra, a very common non-idolatrous faith combining beliefs in reincarnation, purification of the soul, and strict scholasticism, with one wild high holiday a year to allow for a break from its relative asceticism; and Umarinism, a popular modern religious construct advocating the duty of Andorians to keep their passionate warrior nature alive and strong to set a holy example for the less passionate races of the Federation.

Andorian religion is simple, practical and utterly without theological speculation. Andorian "gods" are deified spirits of heroic ancestors or personifications of natural and psychological forces - or both. They have straightforward and practical functions (guiding their descendants, promoting fertility, protecting herds, etc.), and seen as having the attributes and limitations of their worshipers. For example, the war-goddess Larashkail is depicted as armed, embattled, enraged, and pregnant - the epitome of a fierce Andorian warrior.

The limitations of the gods are accepted in the standard nodes of worship, as typified by the 'Prayer of Distress to Barhkoryu of the Rains':

*"Oh Soul of Storms, why has thee locked the gates of the sky?
Why has thee turned thy antennae from our distress?
Behold, the fat-grass withereth for thirst.
Our teeth grow hollow-flanked with parched starvation.
Our children perish in outrageous numbers.
What have we done to anger thee to such harshness?
Show us our fault, and we shall correct it gladly.
Surely thou canst not mean to slay us all!
Open the sky, Barhkoryu! Loose the rains!
Then we shall sing thy praises all night long.
We shall feast thy honor and feed thee our best.
Our neuters shall play with what agent thou shalt choose.
Ask and it shall be done, but give us rain!
And if thou provest recalcitrant past enduring,
We shall blow out thy lamps and close thy shrine,
And write insults to thy name on every wall,
And invite thee no more to our, feasts
Until thou shalt relent."*

The Shapla is a pendant or locket, usually containing a strand of hair from each bondmate, signifying a term of engagement given at the Time of Knowing. The remainder of the quad each return theirs to the deceased to make him or her Whole.

The Fomel is the Andorian wedding which is a 10 day ceremony, involving the families, friends and more distant relatives. The 4 mates are in constant contact with all the people and unable to consummate their union. The first 3 days, they don't even see each other, as they participate to "preparatory rituals". A priest marries them all on the 4th day; the 5th and 6th are used for meditation, and then they have 3 days of celebration.

The Whole Vessel Law, legally allows bondmates to separate before reproducing through the shelthreth.

Rite of Memory is a ritual preformed by those closest to the one who has died when they record their memories of the deceased onto a crystal called the Rite of Memory.

The Mask of Grief is created by each individual attending the deceased's Sending, it is a mask representative of their feelings.

The Sending is a ritual performed as a funeral. Andorians see death as natural, but they believe in life after death. They don't mourn so much, as they believe that the spirit is finally free. They have special places to bury their dead. All the pieces of the deceased's life are re-assembled through family and friends before sending them on. Involves several days of remembrance, eating, and dancing. It also includes:

The funeral bier arrives on the shoulders of 6 bearers, accompanied by the First Kin those remaining in the bond clad in traditional garb - plus a priestess of the Guardian representing the deceased, and the zhavey of the one who has died, carrying the Cipher of the Rite of Memory. The coffin is placed upon an altar while the priestess sings the Tale of the Breaking, and the mourners surround the First Kin, wearing shrouds of white with the Masks of Grief upon their faces.

"Who comes, seeking safe passage for (name of the deceased)?"

Together, the First Kin say: "We, her Whole, do."

The priestess then opens her arms to the sky. "As we return (name of the deceased) to you, the great Guardians of the Night, we plead for safe passage to the next life. From you, Mother Stars, came the substance of life, which you poured into the vessel of her parents to give form. To you, Mother Stars, we return it. Who will send (name of the deceased) home?"

After declaring that she will send the deceased, the zhavey places the Cipher into a notch just under the head of the coffin, and gives it 2 hard turns to ignite the funeral pyre.

THE TALE OF THE BREAKING MYTH:

Thirishar rose up with sword in hand and challenged the gatekeeper of Uzaveh, saying, "I have done as your Master commanded. The tasks are completed. Now let me pass or face the same fate as those who were sent forth to stop my quest."

But Uzaveh the Infinite, watching from the Throne of Life, was amused that this creature, made of little more than the dust of the universe, dared demand entry. To spare the gatekeeper from the warrior's death-blade, Uzaveh bid Thirishar enter.

Thirishar walked proudly down the Path of Light, believing that as the first to complete the tasks of Uzaveh, the Empty Throne beside the Infinite, the Throne of Secrets, now belonged to the Greatest Among Mortals. Had Thirishar not earned the right?

But wise Uzaveh, omnipotent and omniscient, Eternal and Infinite, knew that the warrior possessed the power and knowledge to conquer all challenges, save one.

Uzaveh held up a hand, and Thirishar halted.

"Are you Whole?" whispered Uzaveh in a voice that shook the universe.

The warrior did not understand the question. "I am Thirishar. I claim the Empty Throne."

"No," answered Uzaveh. "You are unworthy, for you are not yet Whole."

Thirishar trembled and knelt before Uzaveh, for the first time understanding the arrogance and the vanity that had misled the mortal to this moment.

Still, Uzaveh had mercy. Death was not to be Thirishar's fate.

Thus decreed Uzaveh, "From one, there shall be four. To one shall be given wisdom to be a protector—the cunning warrior who shall fight for the future. To another shall be given strength, providing a foundation upon which the others can build. One shall be given blood, the river of life that shall flow among the others, providing nurture and sustenance when the flesh longs to yield. And to the last shall be given passion, for the flame of desire will bring change to the others and warm them when the chill is bitterest."

So Thirishar became four: Charaleas became wisdom; Zheusal became strength; Shanchen became blood; Thirizaz became passion. Together, the four are the First Kin.

Uzaveh banished the four to the farthest reaches of the kingdom and upon seeing them there, so far from the Thrones and utterly alone, appointed for each a guardian.

For Thirizaz, the Fire Daemon fed the soul-consuming passion. Loving Shanchen became a vessel for the Water Spirit, forever bound to the Eternal love flowing from Uzaveh's Throne. For strong Zheusal, Earth became protector. For wise Charaleas, the Stars became guides, their light defying darkest night.

"When you are Whole, as I am Whole," Uzaveh said. "Then shall you return to my presence and assume your place at my side."

From The Liturgy of the Temple of Uzaveh,
Third-Century Codex

RELATIONS TO THE FEDERATION:

A founding race of the Federation, Andorians are often credited for the militaristic aspects of it, in counterbalance with Vulcan pacifism while Humans strike the perfect balance between the two.

Upon joining the Federation, Andorians, as the other founding races, reserved one starship of every 'flagship generation' to be crewed mostly by their own kind. Since the 2240s, the USS Eagle has been the name reserved for her, due to the similarities of the Terran Eagle to a similar Andorian bird, the Athilrith, symbolic of honor and nobility and the warrior spirit.

The original USS Eagle NCC 956 was a Constitution class explorer which served from 2247 to 2307 with regular refits; the USS Eagle NCC 956-A, a Constellation-class Exploratory Cruiser, lasted a similarly long 56 years until it was replaced by the USS Eagle NCC 956-B, an Ambassador-class Explorer, in the 2340's. When the Eagle-B was destroyed at the height of the Dominion War, there was a short but intense debate as to what class of ship would supply the Eagle-C. Some fought for the luxurious Andoria-class Explorer, meant for long-term deep space missions, and in fact pointed out that the Andoria class was designed explicitly to provide such a replacement. However, needs of the war led the more heavily armed, less luxurious, thinly disguised battleship that is the Sovereign-class Heavy Explorer to be the model of the new Eagle NCC-956-C, launched in 2374. The next 25th century version, USS Eagle-D, is expected to be of the upcoming NX-91001 class.

Within the Federation the Andorians became well known for their efficiency in ship construction, Andorians winning many lucrative Federation ship building contracts, especially when more specialized "warship" classes were commissioned. The Andorian military have traditionally used bleeding edge technology. The designs produced for Starfleet use by the Andorians tend to be much more subdued than what they use in their planetary defense forces. Pure Andorian fleets tend to maximize available heavy weapons mounts at the cost of taxing the ship's reactor. It was because of this propensity for overpowering their ships that early Andorian designs were able to hold their own against their more advanced FTL-capable contemporaries.

Although a part of the Federation, Andoria continues to design and build its own ships for its own planetary force, still calling it by its ancient traditional name: The Imperial Guard. Most Andorians joining Starfleet have at least served a term within the Imperial Guard. Andoria also maintains the Andorian Starflight Training Institute for training the crews on its own ships. The flagship of the Andorian Force is always named "Kumari" in honor of the first ship to circumnavigate Andoria.

Outside of the Andorian system and its colonies, the Andorian ships and crews work under the control of Starfleet Command

ANDORIAN HISTORY

EARLY HISTORY:

It is believed that Andorian sentience originated on the southern polar continent, Mangea. During the pre-glaciations periods, glaciers and ice fields covered only a large portion of Mangea. It's very probable that this is the main cause that Andorians are to a degree endothermic while having troubles maintaining their body temperatures. When external temperatures are over 30° C, they abandon logic and rationality and become irritable and violent.

As the planet entered its unending glaciations, Andorians built their dwellings underground. Very few facilities and other structures were ever built on the surface, even before as heat was even more of a threat to survival.

During the Pre-Historic Period, Andorian tribes were nomadic, The First Migration saw many tribes migrate northwards, searching for land and food. But as they reached the planet's Equator, the higher temperatures of the time increased their violent tendencies. In the middle of this period, Andorians began establishing settlements. In the South, the first cities began to form, while in the hotter central regions, the tribes stayed semi-nomadic. These tribes had a slower technological development, being less rational and more aggressive than average, fighting for land and food even if they had enough of both.

During this period, some tribes continued their migration northwards, and reached the Northern part of the planet where temperatures were lower. Those tribes who already arrived with some agricultural concepts settled like the southern tribes.

It was during this period that Andorians learned the rudiments of agriculture, animal domestication, bronze working, religion, masonry and the basics of commerce. Even while more aggressive, Andorians continued to be efficient and inner tribes were not that far behind their "cooler" brethren.

During this period, the settlements were based in regions with natural water. Once Andoria had vast oceans, like Earth. Settlements were located along the coast and rivers. The climate and food in the North and South were more difficult to deal with than in the Equatorial regions, but they developed quite effective agricultural techniques and hunting to offset this issue.

When the Great Ice Age finally froze Andoria, a form of Feudalism allowed the growing societies to survive and thrive. At the very beginnings of this Andorian Cooperative lifestyle was the Bond of the Words Unspoken, or the Khun-Haga, in which an individual pledged trust and service to the Tyk (Lord), in return for which the Tyk pledged the same to the individual. The Andorians understood that making this covenant a deep and binding extension of their thoughts and lives was the only thing that kept their fragile tribes safe and together, and being a stoic people, made it a point of honor to never speak to one another about the bond. No thanks were ever given for supporting the Tyk, and no explanations were ever offered to outsiders about the specific nature of the Tyk's unspoken bond. The only thing that was recognized by all was that the Khun-Haga was a force in Andorian life more powerful than lightning, harder to break than the rare and powerful bellium weapons of the first Delves.

Millennia's of feudalism stabilized their society until finally evolving into full fledged empires, which perjured until the last centuries and the planetary unification of Empress Thaligar the Last who instituted the mechanism of a modern constitutional monarchy precluding today's planetary Oligarchic Council.

MODERN DEVELOPMENT

Although always involved in various ways, mostly in military or artistic aspects, more Andorians are now joining Starfleet since the apprehended extinction of the race motivates many to seek a solution in the vastness of the universe. The recent Dominion Wars and the impending danger of war with the Klingon Empire and a possible renewed Borg invasion has also stirred their martial spirit. This generation is the most prominent one to be seen applying for Starfleet Academy.

SPACE EXPLORATION

Andorian History has been one of conflict and war. Andorians evolved from planetary warring factions into a paranoid space faring race. Once in space they quickly found new races to war with... until the ushering of a new age of seclusion and paranoia ended a 100 years of space warfare due to their lack of FTL drive. Eventually they overcame their fears and got back out into space. But this time, they were doing so in a manner that best reflects a society that prefers to know thy enemy; to that end they are now known as much as one of the best races for intelligence and covert actions as for their military prowess.

The Andorians managed to colonize all 12 planets in their home system, but found the time factor of sub-light-speed journeys an insurmountable barrier to interstellar colonization. They did attempt interstellar journeys with sleeper ships and generation ships, but found that sleeper ships fell easy prey to random accidents and that generation ships had a lamentable tendency to break up in civil wars.

Andorians encountered the Orions and Rigellians first, then the Vulcans and Tellarites, then Humanity. Relations with the Orions have always been love-hate, while relations with the Tellarites are usually a hot-tempered loving rivalry similar to a younger and older sibling. Vulcans, of course, are never really understood, but some Andorians claim that Vulcan passion is simply harder to ignite, but flares hotter when finally put to the torch. Relations with humans however, after some "cultural shock", started immediately with frank respect and recognition of their mutual passion and reason, of courage and honor in both the pursuit of war and peace.

THE EFFECTS OF SPACE TRAVEL AND FEDERATION MEMBERSHIP

With the advent of space travel, Andorians began to think seriously of themselves as a species rather than a collection of clans. The discovery of semi-intelligent life on the fifth planet of their Epsilon Indi system colony compelled Andorians to consider the existence of other intelligent species and the possibility of interplanetary warfare. This led, by analogy, to the concept of all Andorians as members of one super-clan, faced off against other such super-clans.

The immediate result of such thinking was that a planetary government. First under an Emperor, it became, with the voluntary celibate of Thaligar the Last, a council of elders, one from each major clan. Thus did Andoria jump from a fragmented, clan-based society to a fairly unified, planetary society - without going through the stage of nationalism. This unique case of rapid social evolution proved remarkably successful for the Andorians, although it did cause some problems with early contacts between the Andorian Empire and the other Federation co-founders (Earth, Alpha Centauri, Vulcan, Tellar).

Indeed, one may say that successful relations between Andoria and Earth were the result of the famous Andorian practicality. Despite lamentable early misunderstandings, the Andorians soon realized that membership in a multi-stellar community held great advantages for them - particularly in technological gains, such as reliable methods of birth-control and faster-than-light space drive.

FTL drive especially, with its concomitant possibility of interstellar colonization, may prove to be the greatest scientific advance in Andorian history - freeing the Andorians from their age-old problem of a dwindling population on too harsh a land. This fact alone would explain the presence of so many Andorian neuters flooding Starfleet Academy and, indeed, all Federation space lines, with applications in a desperate attempt to get out into deep space.

Whether or not these escape attempts will be successful in increasing Andorian population, and whether or not such success will reduce the aggressive tendencies of Andorian nature, is still unknown. Nonetheless, there is much reason to hope that, in time, we shall no longer agree with the famous comment by the lone survivor of the first contact team: "Aliens? Mi God, what aliens! These people are so alien that, compared to them, the Vulcans might as well be from New Jersey!"

WARP DEVELOPMENT

The cultural pressure toward purely practical rather than theoretical education in Andorian History constrained the direction of progress in a few areas. One example of this is the surprising absence of an Andorian faster-than-light drive. Lacking the necessary backing of purely theoretical mathematics and physics, the Andorians never discovered the principles of FTL drive - which is why they didn't colonize the galaxy long ago even when they have had space travel longer than any other species in the Federation.

Although Andorians didn't have advanced physics to develop their own warp drive capability, they eventually managed to efficiently retro-engineer it from captured enemy ships and intelligence gathering, then rapidly implement it just before first contact was made.

FIRST CONTACT

First contact with Humans came between two armed vessels; but instead of open conflict, both recognized immediately the strength of each other and, opening communications first instead of opening fire, they also recognized the courage and honor of each other. They discovered to their mutual surprise that they shared the same complex mix of passions and discipline, and thus, easily found kinship with one another.

But relations between them were not so easy at first. Although humans and Andorians had limited contact after their initial meeting, with some trade and cultural exchanges, each group found the other too "alien" to easily get along with at first. In those days, the idea of insects, over hundreds of millions of years, evolving into larger, sentient, humanoid-like creatures, was almost too much for the human psyche. However, stronger relations did come during the Xindi and Romulan Wars of the middle 22nd century, when the Andorians allied with Earth and proved themselves to be worthy interstellar warriors. As a result of improving relations, Andoria was invited to be a charter member of the Federation after the Romulan Wars ended.

Some Andorians sometimes still use the ancient affectionate term "pink skin" when dealing with Humans while they in turn affectionately refers to any Andorian activity as "blueing".

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BOLIANS

NATIVE STAR SYSTEM

The Bolias system, located 35 light years from Earth in the Bolian sector of Federation space coreward of the Bassen Rift, has 13 planets, one inhabitable, orbiting the star Bolarus, a blue subgiant named Alf Gru in native language of its inhabitants, the Bolians.

A **subgiant star** is a star that is slightly brighter than a normal main-sequence (dwarf) star of the same spectral class, but not as bright as true giant stars. Although certain subgiants appear to be simply unusually bright metal-rich hydrogen-fusing stars (in the same way subdwarfs are unusually dim metal-poor hydrogen-fusing stars), they are generally believed to be stars that are ceasing or have already ceased fusing hydrogen in their cores. In stars of roughly a solar mass, this causes the core to contract, which increases the star's central temperature enough to move hydrogen fusion into a shell surrounding the core. This swells the star on the way to becoming a true giant. At the start of the subgiant phase (such as a star like Procyon A) the diameter and brightness have increased, but the star has yet to cool down or change color significantly. Later subgiants that are closer to becoming true giants have larger diameters and lower temperature than stars of similar mass in the main sequence. Overall luminosity changes little during the subgiant stage, as shown by a more or less horizontal evolution off the immediate main sequence; this feature is prominent in Hertzsprung-Russell diagrams of globular clusters, as the lateral extension after the turnoff point but before the "ascent" to red giant status.

Many subgiants are rich in metals, and commonly host orbiting planets. Partly for these reasons, and also because the subgiant phase can last up to a few billion years, subgiants are the only type of stars other than main-sequence stars that for a long time was believed capable of hosting life-bearing planets. In Yerkes spectral classification they are class IV.

Class **O** stars like Bolarus are very hot and extremely luminous, being bluish in color; in fact, most of their output is in the ultraviolet range. These are the rarest of all main-sequence stars. About 1 in 3,000,000 of the main-sequence stars in the solar neighborhood are Class **O** stars. Some of the most massive stars lie within this spectral class. Type-O stars are so hot as to have complicated surroundings which make measurement of their spectra difficult.

Spectrum of an O5 V star

O-stars shine with a power over a million times our Sun's output. These stars have dominant lines of absorption and sometimes emission for He II lines, prominent ionized (Si IV, O III, N III, and C III) and neutral helium lines, strengthening from O5 to O9, and prominent hydrogen Balmer lines, although not as strong as in later types. Because they are so massive, class O stars have very hot cores, thus burn through their hydrogen fuel very quickly, and so are the first stars to leave the main sequence.

Recent observations by the Spitzer Space Telescope indicate that planetary formation does not occur around other stars in the vicinity of an O class star due to the photo evaporation effect.

When the MKK classification scheme was first described in 1943, the only subtypes of class O used were O5 to O9.5. The MKK scheme was extended to O4 in 1978, and new classification schemes have subsequently been introduced which add types O2, O3 and O3.5. O3 stars are the hottest currently known stars of conventional structure.

Other similar stars are: Zeta Orionis, Zeta Puppis, Lambda Orionis, Delta Orionis, Theta Orionis C, HD 93129A

In the mid-**2370s**, the Bolarus system was near the battlefront in the **Dominion War**, and was protected by the **Sixth Fleet**. Bolarus and the Bolian system had been captured by the **Dominion** and liberated by the **Romulan Star Empire, as it is** in the **Beta Quadrant**, near the border of the **Romulan Neutral Zone**, parallel to the **Devron system**.

Homeworld

Full Name: Bolarus IX

Native Name: Bolarus, Bolius, Boliax, Bole or Bolias (dialects variations)

Classification: M

Affiliation: United Federation of Planets

First Contact: 2289

Joined the UFP: 2320

Moons: 4

Population: 5.7 Billion

Capital: Lommat

Bolarus IX is an M-class planet similar to Earth with a warm, average temperature of 22°C (71.6°F) to 36°C (96.8°F). The planet's atmosphere is a Oxygen/Nitrogen/Argon mix and approximately 85% of the surface is covered by water. Gravity is 1.1G.

Geography

There are three main continents on Bolarus IX: Rabinu, Rasara, and Bolk'ni. These continents lie along the planet's equator, making Bolarus a much more temperate planet than Earth. Its land mass is mostly hydrosphere, although aside from the major continents there are other smaller landmasses; B'olos, Izos and Kastron, each named for the tectonic plate to which they are attached. While these are technically continents in themselves, they are comparatively very small. Due to the increased proportion of water to land on the planet, tectonic shift is somewhat slower than normal, and nearly all of the planet's fault lines lie below the surface of the ocean. As such, mountain ranges are very rare, but ranges of island archipelagos are common.

Bolian society revolves around a group dynamic, the most notable result of which is a lack of territorial boundaries. However, townships exist due to the co-location of family homesteads that have developed and built up since the Bolian equivalent of the middle ages. The typical Bolian family is extended rather than nuclear, as aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, offspring, siblings and parents all live as close to each other as possible. It would be impractical, given the number of individuals this would entail, for everyone to live under the same roof, but where this is not possible, they live as neighbours, or as close as physically possible. Whenever Bolians are married, the family extends, resulting in an even larger township. As a result of this, Bolarus IX is home to megalopoli, which are in effect cities with millions of inhabitants. The largest such megalopolis is Hosppat, home to 22.67 million Bolians, while the capital city (by virtue of being the biggest township when the Bolian Central Council chamber was erected) was Lommat, with a population of 17.65 million.

Hundreds of years ago an unusual storm front developed over a large area very close to the southern ice cap of Bolarus IX. It became stronger, but conditions at the time prevented it from breaking or moving. As such, a standing storm developed, which remains in situ even at present. Manifested as a violent electrical storm accompanied by torrential rain above an oceanic maelstrom, scientists have been unable to determine what caused this strange atmospheric event. Starfleet scientists have debated various ideas, but without the ability to watch its original formation they are unable to settle upon a final hypothesis. This storm system has been named the Senden Funnel.

Bodies of water

- Bay of Bolse, a deep cut of ocean going far inside the land mass.
- Kisaran Ocean covers the entire northern hemisphere.
- Lirathanan Ocean covers the entire southern hemisphere.
- Losara Ocean is the name given to the waters between the other two oceans and enveloping all the major land masses of the planet, and delineated by the warmer temperatures of its waters.

Continents

- Bol'ki located between the other two continents sports the largest fresh water mass of the entire planet, a vast inland sea near its eastern coast.
- Rabinu, located between the Lirathanan and Kisaran oceans and surrounded by several small islands. Rabinu's major topological feature are the Rasnih Mountains stretching southwards parallel to the western coast. The island Elivos is separated from the continent by the Bolse Sea on the east coast.
- Rasara, also known as Asmira from the logs of the first contact Federation team, is the largest continent, located the Lirathanian ocean to the north and the Kisaran ocean southwards. As evidenced by the surface map, Rasara's northern and eastern tip were covered by deserts. Two mountain ranges stretched along the northern and southern coast. The Bay of Bolse cutted relatively deep into the landmass.

Islands and archipelagos

- Elivos in the Bolse sea between Ravinu and Rasara continents.
- Izos northwest of Bol'Ki and north east of Rasara.
- Kasiron a large island north east of Linmos and north west of Volos.
- Linmos a large island north of the rabinu continent
- Rabor Archipelago
- V'olos located at equal distance from the northern coast of both ravinu and Rasara, the nearest landmass to the Tragon underwater city up north.

Cities and settlements

- Arinol is an underwater settlement of the Kisaran ocean in the southern hemisphere.
- Bokitu is a city located at the Bay of Bolse on the rasar continent, close to the equator.
- Bol'Kehr, an equatorial domed underwater settlement in the Lirathanan ocean off the coast of Rashara.

- Bolkinua, a coastal city of the Lolsara ocean, on the Bol'ki continent in the eastern hemisphere.
- Bol'Kt, a city on the northern coast of the Bol'Ki continent near the Lirathanan ocean.
- Bolsetu, a city of the rasara continent, former capital of a national state there. In the 24th century, it became famous for the Bolian Academy of Applied Sciences and the Bolian Interstellar Research institute where scientists and even Starfleet cadets could specialize in gravitic studies and material engineering.
- Rholdar, a domed underwater settlement in the northern hemisphere's litahranan ocean, off the northern coast of the Bol'Ki continent.
- Res'lar, a city north of the equator on a large island between the continents of Rasara and Bol'Ki.
- Tragon, a domed underwater settlement in the northern hemisphere's Lirathanan ocean
- Viral, a domed underwater settlement found in the southern hemisphere's Kisaran ocean, just south of the Lolsara ocean.

Other topographic features

- Bolkintu Mountains south west of the Bol'Ki continent
- Cliffs of Bole, a scenic emplacement known throughout the Federation where hang gliding is unparalleled in height and duration.
- Rovim Mountains near the center of the Bol'Ki continent but fairly close to its southern coast.
- Rasnih Mountains walling the western side of the Rabinu continent.
- Senden Funnel is a peculiar and barely understood weather phenomenon near the planet's South Pole, a huge maelstrom topped by a raging tornado and crisscrossed by electric storms that appeared during the last centuries.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Bolians were distinctively known for a bifurcating (cartilaginous) ridge running vertically along the center of the head and face, and partway down the chest. Skin color ranged from blue-gray to vivid blue and was occasionally accented with dark blue bands on the head. Disturbingly, Cardassians highly value Bolian skin, and Cardassian females in particular enjoy wearing it.

Bolian males were completely bald, were on average as tall as the average Human male, and were not known for their physical prowess. Male Bolians have been known to wear toupées on occasion. Bolian females were predominantly bald. However, there were the occasional few who had hair.

In addition to the ridge on their heads, they were also noted for having cartilaginous lining on their tongues that allowed them to consume foods not normally palatable by other races, including strong acids. One such example of traditional Bolian cuisine was the consumption of meat that had been allowed to partially decay.

Bolian hearts were on the right side of their body. When removed from the body, Bolian blood was blue in color. The chemistry of their blood was very different from that of other species, especially Vulcans. If a blood transfusion was given from a Vulcan to a Bolian it would result in the death of the Bolian.

There were instances, however, when artificial blood was unavailable; when this occurs, existing blood cells had to be genetically altered for inter-species transfusions to be successful. Intimate relations between Bolians and Humans typically cause adverse effects to the latter, which might include fatigue, nausea, and joint inflammation.

Bolian Whiskey is said to be the most popular drink exported from Bolarus IX. In truth, it is a fruit wine that has a taste similar to apples and caramel. It is blue, although not as dark as Romulan ale. Another drink exported from the Bolians is Bolian Tonic Water. It has certain properties that calm humanoid nerves.

Being a water loving species, a Bolian's diet includes a considerable amount of seafood, raw or cooked. They say that when they bite into their seafood meals, they can tell the type of creature and its origin just from the taste. Bolian "shimmershells" are a delicacy on Bolarus IX. Another large part of Bolian diet is land meat. Unlike seafood, Bolians always cook the land meat, even though it is usually prepared in a decayed state.

PSYCHOLOGY

Bolian psychology revolves around two key aspects, the will to succeed and the need to function within a group. Both qualities make for ideal Starfleet officers: the former ensuring that duties are carried out to the full extent of a Bolian's ability, and the latter ensuring that they function well in a large department.

Bolians are meticulous hard-workers. They are efficient, have an eye for detail, and are able to create order out of the deepest chaos, enjoying the process as it develops. Duty is a matter of personal honour to a Bolian, and it is of utmost importance that they uphold their workhorse reputation. Failure is not dishonourable - the only shame brought to a Bolian in this regard is the failure to attempt a given task, as one can and will learn from mistakes. This tenet leads Bolians to accept even the most dangerous of assignments - if something is suggested by their Captain they will likely volunteer no matter the personal risk. With such a work-oriented mindset, some Bolians find themselves lost in the day to day grind, and do not manage to focus on leisure pursuits or building relationships with their crew. However, these instances are quite rare.

While personal success is rewarding, group success is the pinnacle of achievement for a Bolian. This leads many Bolians to careers in research, medicine and the sciences, where any ground covered by an individual can be applied to the work of a team, or even planet or Federation wide. This, in part, explains the selfless attitudes often displayed by Bolians during dangerous situations - if they need to sacrifice themselves for the good of the team then they will do so willingly. The group dynamic in which Bolians work has resulted in a trait that is almost unique to races throughout the galaxy. Xenophobia is non-existent among Bolians, who believe that an amalgamation of races with different skills and abilities is ideal for teamwork. Relying on their own race alone would be a limitation. Bolians can sometimes be regarded as talkative by other races, as their will for the group to succeed can sometimes lead them to offer advice, even where it isn't warranted.

In addition, they enjoy exchanging information to a further extent than most, and this can often go past the boundaries of comfort for some alien species, leading them to find Bolians a little intrusive. Should a suggestion be made on how to better achieve success within a group which is subsequently ignored, it would not be unusual for a Bolian to research into the subject as extensively as possible so as to have their suggestions accepted in the future.

While sometimes regarded as cold and purely work oriented, Bolians are most famed for their drive, commitment, hard work and dedication to the team.

Attitudes About Sex and Marriage

Bolians usually marry more than once. They start in pairs, and after a while a third Bolian may be added to the group. Usually, the spouse count reaches no higher than 5. The group is not allowed to divorce. There is a tradition on Bolarus IX to have a Bolian family houseboat, passed down for hundreds of years. Married men are called "co-husbands" on Bolarus IX. Bolian families can easily have ten or more children.

Bolians are not typically sexually compatible with other species, including humans. However, they are usually compatible with Andorians. Vulcan blood is actually toxic to Bolians.

LANGUAGE

Most Bolians have two names, one family name and one given name. Bolians from the largest continent, Rasara, only take a single given name. In the case where two names are used, the family name often refers to the original head of the family's profession, which has then been passed down through the ages and has spread throughout the extended family to thousands of descendants. In either case, names often end in a double consonant that can be followed by a suffix to denote a special meaning. Traditional Bolian names are often monosyllabic, and end in a double consonant.

Some terms include:

"Iren-Uzor" - A reference to a historical conflict between two species. It has come to be synonymous with the human phrase, "Catch-22"

The human name "Frederick" bears a close resemblance to an impolite Bolian term.

Bolian script consists of a linear series of characters containing angles and shapes that resemble aquatic animals.

SOCIETY

Bolian society supports a strong medical philosophy to support euthanasia that has been in existence for hundreds of years. The "Double-Effect" principle, as it is known, refers to an "action that has the principal effect of relieving suffering and may be ethically justified even though the same action has the secondary effect of causing death." The principle refers to assisted suicide rather than the termination of a patient's life through the wishes of their family, and must be requested by the person involved. The origins of this principle lie in the Bolians' intolerance of seeing their family members suffer: if there is nothing they can do to absolve the suffering through curing the cause, the Double-Effect principle can be invoked.

Government

Its governing body is the Quorum of Bole, establishing all planetary legislature for the Bolian people wherever they are. It steadfastly support its own membership of the federatrion and espousing its values, although some dissension might appear from time to time, without any significant effect on their overall position.

The Bank of Bolias is a prominent Federation financial institution, robbed in 2374 by the Orion Syndicate and so now under direct protection by Starfleet instead of any homefleet. It makes Bolarus IX a key economical sector for the United federation of Planets and a favored place for discussing such matters among the member worlds. In 2377, Urwyzden government officials however referenced the Bank of Bolias as an example of bureaucracy that their clients want to avoid.

Current Head Counselor is Counselor Nea who recently proposed secession from the UFP. His proposal was unanimously rejected by the Council.

Culture

Most Bolians are cooperative and extremely productive. They have great skill in group dynamics and are only happy when they are doing something useful. They are typically most happy when they are performing something beneficial to others

Being evolved from water-dwelling beings, Bolians have always been fascinated with their oceans. Long before their warp drive, they studied the tides and currents of the water bodies.

Spirituality

While Bolians in general are a pragmatic and practical species, some worship a religion revolving around the "Great Bird of the Galaxy". They also possess several myths about the formation of the Senden Funnel.

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Married men are called "co-husbands" on Bolarus IX. Bolian families can easily have ten or more children.

Bolians are not typically sexually compatible with other species, including humans. Vulcan and Orion blood is actually toxic to Bolians while Andorian blood is quite compatible.

Wedding Ceremony

Courtship rituals are common for all Bolians, and consist of the male and female pressing their foreheads together and closing their eyes, while touching their partner's neck with both hands. While the courting and reproductive habits of Bolians involve only two people, marriages often extend to three or four members, or sometimes more. This custom is similar to that of Denobulans, although the guidelines on the number of males and females joined in matrimony are much more relaxed.

When a marriage occurs, should one of the members of the union have children already, they are welcomed into the family unit. Dysfunction within families is extremely rare, and when it does occur it can become a heavy psychological burden on all involved.

HISTORY

Warp development

The Bolians successfully constructed their first warp propulsion systems in 2252.

First Contact

The species' curiosity led them to explore Bolarus IX early in its intelligent life. This resulted in colonization of the islands of the planet, and three nations forming. Many, many centuries later, all three nations explored space and found two fighting species called the Iren and the Uzor. During the period that the Bolians were caught in the middle of the war, a Federation scout found warp signatures at Bolarus XIII, indicating that Bolians had been experimenting with it. Contact was made, and the Federation helped rid Bolarus IX of the Iren and the Uzor. At the end of that war, Bolians managed to stop the destruction of the Uzor star. Because of their self-sacrifice and efficiency, Bolians gained membership to the United Federation of Planets in 2320. After the events of the Iren and Uzor conflict, Bolians developed a saying: "Its an Iren-Uzor," meaning a lose-lose situation, like a "Catch-22."

Relations with the Federation

Bolians are, like humans, always seeking knowledge and ways to control the universe around them. For Bolian intelligence, many respected academies for the Federation are placed on Bolarus IX. Bolian instructors at these academies tend to lose many students, due to the workload that they give. However, on the job, Bolians are good leaders. They are admired for their resourcefulness and their ability to use science, medicine, to do research, and to manage technology.

After 2320, Bolians contributed many inventions and new technologies to the Federation in a short time. Some discoveries include more advanced antigravity systems, metallurgical and alloy processing machines, and dilithium crystallization processes. They also developed a fierce loyalty to the Federation, which proved quite helpful.

Former [Federation president Min Zife](#) was from Bolarus, first serving as planetary district representative, then as Bolian [Federation councillor](#), and finally as president.

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VULCANS

STAR SYSTEM

The Vulcan homeworld, Vulcan, orbits around the star 40 Eridani A, also known as Omicron 2 Eridani, or Keid, from the Arabic word qayd, (egg) shells. It is a triple star system less than 16.5 light years away from Earth, in the constellation Eridanus. It is known as *Nevasa* to the Vulcans.

The primary star of the system, 40 Eridani A, is a main sequence dwarf of spectral type K1 easily visible to the naked eye from Earth. 40 Eridani B is a faint star, white in color: a 9th magnitude white dwarf (spectral type DA4), the first white dwarf discovered by Earth astronomers. 40 Eridani C, is an 11th magnitude red dwarf flare star (spectral type M4.5e) which has the variable star designation DY Eridani. While B was originally a main sequence star and was then the most massive member of the system, billions of years ago it ejected most of its mass before it became a white dwarf. B and C orbit each other approximately 400 astronomical units (AU) from the primary star, A. Their orbit has a semimajor axis of 35 AU, which is also the approximate average distance between B and C and is rather elliptical (eccentricity 0.410).

The primary component of the main star, 40 Eridani A, has a metallicity of about 65% of the solar metallicity, thus providing sufficient heavy element abundance for the formation of terrestrial planets.

There are no habitable planets around the B star because planets circling 40 Eridani B have been destroyed by its evolution into a white dwarf, not even leaving an asteroid field of any magnitude.

As for 40 Eridani C, it is prone to flares, which cause large momentary increases in the emission of X-rays as well as visible light, lethal to any form of life on the planet in its own habitable zone.

HOMEWORLD: VULCAN

Native Name: T'Khasi or Ti-Valka'ain

Vulcan is a reddish Minshara-Class planet. Its inhabitants were sometimes called Vulcanians until the second half of the 23rd century when the name Vulcans was made official.

The habitable zone of 40 Eridani A, where can orbit a planet with liquid water, is near 0.63 (calculated from habitable zone) AU from it. At this distance, Vulcan completes a revolution in 203 Earth days and 40 Eridani A appears about 30% wider than the Sun does on Earth. From that same point of view from the surface of Vulcan, the B/C pair of stars appears as unusually bright (magnitudes -8 and -6) white and reddish-orange stars in the night sky. This is not bright enough to diminish the darkness at night, though they are clearly visible in daylight because of the thinner atmosphere. (By comparison, Earth's full moon is magnitude -12.6, and Venus at its brightest is -4.7.).

Vulcan has no natural satellite but there is *T'Khut*, a smaller planet with which it shares an orbit around a common center of gravity; the two worlds are a mere 149,895.3579 kilometers apart, and *T'Khut* fills the sky of the single hemisphere of Vulcan it is visible from, due to the planets being tidally locked.

Because of this huge reflecting body in the sky, those two bright stars and the thinner atmosphere, the Vulcan night is much brighter than a full moon night on Earth is; and adding the number of short but intense solar eclipses due to *T'Khut* regularly passing before the sun, it is easy to understand why the Vulcans' have lower nightsight adaptability compared to Humans and, consequently also, a glare-protecting second eyelid.

Vulcan revolves around itself in an astonishingly similar time frame of 24 hours. The similitude with Earth's own revolution, despite the gravitational and volume discrepancies and so close to another massive stellar body, is of much interest to planetologists and cosmologists. Artificial tampering from some as yet unknown method and reason has been theorized but, as of now, no evidence backs up this.

Because of its closeness to its sun, most of its surface consists of deserts and mountain ranges, and large areas are set aside as wilderness preserves. It is much hotter, it has a stronger surface gravity, and its atmosphere is thinner than that of Earth. As a result of these factors, humans tend to tire out and dehydrate more quickly than native Vulcans.

The planet's population has stayed stable at six billion inhabitants for the last two centuries as rational birth control methods, emigration policies and widening interests for space exploration has been systematically, and of course, logically applied with planetary resources efficient exploitation and sustenance in mind.

Geography

Vulcan is a harsh, desert planet with barely a quarter of its surface area containing water. It has a thin atmosphere and high gravity (1.4 G).

Vulcan has three primary continents called Na'nam, Han-shir and Xir'tan. The first are enormous land masses that were divided into various provinces whilst the third is an island somewhat larger than the Earth continent of Australia. Due to the strong tidal forces brought about by the planet's interaction with T'Khut Vulcan is highly volcanically active. This generated a number of impressive lava spectacles, such as the Fire Plains. Vulcan's geology and desert environment produced starkly up-thrust craggy and inhospitable mountains, with jagged and steep formations cut out by wind swept sand.

Vulcan maintained the oxygen in its atmosphere by deriving phytoplankton from its oceans, which existed as microscopic organisms that make up 90% of all planetary oxygenation processes, including those of Earth. Despite being a desert planet and not having a suitable source of oxygen in viable plant-life throughout most of their year, there is a sufficient amount of oxygenation occurring within the environment from the microbic water.

ShiKahr (The Capital City)

The primary facilities of the Vulcan Science Academy were located on the outskirts of ShiKahr. The city was also home to the ShiKahr Academy. During the age of Surak, it was also home to the Vulcan Space Institute.

The city was built over artesian wells and through the use of solar power; water was easily pumped to all parts of ShiKahr. This meant that they did not irrigate the outdoor gardens whilst the water table was low, there was adequate water for a small greenhouse.

They made use of recycling which included the water from the shower which was cleaned after which it was filtered and added to the system.

Beyond the outskirts of ShiKahr was a small shrine which housed the city's dead. There were no bodies located at the shrine but instead consisted of merely polished black markers, each of which were inscribed with two names; the first being the name which the deceased was known to all which was written in modern Vulcan and the second was the family name that was written in an ancient script. The markers did not contain the actual physical remains of the dead as the sand was too soft as well as shifting for burial. Instead, the deceased were cremated with their ashes scattered to the desert wind.

Artisan Quarter

This region of the city held the best artists on the planet Vulcan and was similar to the Old Quarter in that travellers had to look carefully in order to obtain a valuable craft instead of a replicated Ferengi knockoff. Amongst the actual artists, there were several renowned masters that still made their home in this quarter.

Old Quarter

This part contained most of the oldest architecture in the city and was where Vulcans had gone through great lengths to keep as close to its original ancient design as possible. Within this region was the Suta temple which was given special care even though few Vulcans worshipped there anymore. However, despite this being the case, it held a special place in the city's history as it was one of the first areas that allowed Surak along with his followers to preach their publicly.

Many people came to the Old Quarter in order to learn more about Vulcan history but the sheer number of tourists along with visitors had resulted in it being an odd combination of history and modernity. Subspace links rested in ancient minerats whilst merchants weighed out kevas trinkets on antique balances during the time they were recording transactions on top quality PADD's. A number of good quality hotels and inns were also found in this quarter though one had to deal with tourist junkets along with guided tours.

The Vulcan residents of the area tended to avoid the quarter during the time tourists were around as they were constantly asked to have their holo taken which most Vulcans consider the action being rude. The Tav'Sal'Nava hotel was located in this area.

Physiology

A humanoid race, with copper-based blood, slightly green-tinted complexion and notably pointed ears, they are responsible in a large part for the founding of the Federation. Over the centuries, Vulcans have developed a culture dedicated to the complete mastery of logic, learning to suppress their once-violent emotions in nearly every aspect of their existence.

Vulcans are generally a tall, thin people, falling in the upper average height range for humanoid/vulcanoid species. Adult males average between 6'-6'7" (1.8-2.0 m) in height, adult females 5'7"-6' (1.7-1.8 m). Weight is commensurate with height and build, although Vulcans weigh slightly more than expected due to tissue density. Muscle density and strong attachment to the skeletal structure make Vulcans much stronger for their size than most humanoids. Vulcans display a natural ability in many athletic events and martial arts. Their tall, thin body structure also aids in the dispersion of heat, the same as that of the similar body structure found in desert-dwelling aborigines on many worlds, including Earth.

Blood

The blood of Vulcans is made up of hemoglobin based on copper. This copper-based blood is most obvious from its green color, which also tints the tissues of Vulcan's greenish, much like the iron-rich red blood of many other races tints their tissues a pinkish or reddish color. Having copper-based blood aids in the utilization of oxygen under the low atmospheric pressure and low oxygen conditions on Vulcan. The Vulcan blood cells have a double-convex form, which in addition to helping to maximize oxygenation, also aids in cooling each blood cell, the blood stream, and ultimately the entire body. A lot of the waste heat conducted by blood cells is transferred into the lungs during respiration, thus making the exhaled breath of Vulcans fairly hot under most conditions, especially during exertion.

Senses

Vulcan vision is more acute in bright light but not as good as Human eyesight to adapt to darkness, a direct result of their homeworld's thinner atmosphere and brightness of their sky, even at night. The same higher ambient luminosity however has evolved in the native lifeforms, including the Vulcanoids, a second inner translucent eyelid protecting the eyes from dust and sudden illumination and glare, even those that could cause blindness in most other species.

The hearing of the Vulcans is very acute under most conditions. While the Vulcan low frequency hearing range is nearly identical to humans, their high frequency hearing range is significantly higher.

Because of their evolution in a hot, arid environment, though, the nose of the Vulcans has become highly adapted to filtering dust and sand from the air during inhalation, and minimizing moisture loss during exhalation. Because the sinus spaces of the Vulcans contain moisture-reclaiming cells in place of what would be a large number of olfactory cells in other beings.

Skin

The epidermis of Vulcans is a twin-featured moisture-proof barrier to prevent dehydration. Vulcans lack sweat glands as an evolutionary development to conserve moisture in an extremely hot, arid climate. Excess heat is drawn away by the blood to be exhaled or stored and radiated from the skin when external temperatures are lower.

This is why Vulcans have a very warm breath and their skin is almost hot to the touch under most conditions. Another difference in the skin of Vulcans is the fact that, even though the skin does not give off moisture, it can directly absorb moisture from the surroundings if there is any. In prehistoric times, Vulcans would stand in rare fog or rainfalls nude to maximize absorption of precious water that the body then stored. This technique is taught to the present day as a survival tool.

Brain

A normal Vulcan brain is about 1600 cc in size, practically identical to that of humans. The olfactory center of the Vulcan brain is smaller due to function, while the Vulcan mid-brain is somewhat larger and more convoluted than that of a human, explaining the telepathic powers all Vulcans possess to one degree or another.

Heart

The Vulcan heart is located approximately where one would expect to find the liver in most humanoids. It is believed that the Vulcan heart was displaced to allow additional space for the lungs which, by necessity, are somewhat larger in order to extract sufficient oxygen from a thin atmosphere. In order to protect the heart region, cartilaginous ribs extend lower on the torso of a Vulcan. The adult Vulcan heart rate is approximately 240 beats per minute and normal blood pressure is 80/40, both far from the norm of most humanoids. The Vulcan heart is larger than humanoid/vulcanoid average for body size due to the increased workload of the heart in not only circulating blood to feed the tissues and remove wastes, but also to aid in the cooling of the body.

Liver

The Vulcan liver is much smaller than that of most humanoids because many of the functions it has in other humanoids is done elsewhere in the Vulcan body. For example, the Vulcan kidneys not only filter fluids, they filter out and store certain substances. Other parts of the digestive and circulatory systems also have additional functions.

Kidneys & Bladder

In some ways the kidneys of the Vulcan are more important than any other organ, since they manage the body's water retention system. In pre-technical times, kidney disease was the number one medical condition that caused a premature death, whereas cancers or heart disease were the cause in most other humanoids.

Digestion

Because civilized Vulcans have been vegetarians for many centuries, most Vulcans are unable to digest meat products of any kind should a survival situation require it. Most Vulcan first aid or survival kits contain packets of oral enzyme supplements for use in such emergencies. Replicated meat substitutes, based on plant proteins, do not require such supplements.

Reproduction

The Vulcan male can mate at any time, but very rarely choose to do so with their strict personal discipline putting work and responsibilities way ahead of any personal or pleasure pursuit. But the male of the species must imperatively seek out a mate once every 7 years during pon farr or he will die from the emotional and physiological stress of continence too long imposed by the strict cold logic of the Vulcan way of life. Furthermore, when this mate is chosen during childhood by the parents as tradition usually demands, a psychic bond linking them regardless of distance forces that mating to be between them alone, until consumption or rejection by the female during an antique ritual called Koon-ut-ka-lee-fee. Vulcans will not readily discuss this subject with non-Vulcans, as it is a last remnant of their savage, violent past nature they have no choice but to endure as the price for their pure emotionless logic today. However, Federation doctors and biologists have noted this 7-year cycle in all Vulcan animal life to one extent or another. It is believed that Vulcan males remain fertile during their entire adult life.

There are extremely rare cases of Vulcan females experiencing Pon Farr after abnormally deep and closeley repeated mind melds with an affected male; and some Vulcans involved in exceptionally deep space assignments and unable to reach Vulcan during their Pon Farr period had managed to alleviate and even consume it with the use of holodecks and a photonic simulation of their true mate. These cases strongly confirms the psychophysiological nature of Pon Farr.

Lifespan

The Vulcan lifespan is longer than that of humans. Vulcans have been known to live over 200 years, and the Vulcan Zakal lived to the age of 276 - dying just as Surak's teachings began to take hold in Vulcan society. After reaching adulthood, the aging process of Vulcans slowed a great deal. Vulcans who appeared to be young adults by human standards could actually be as much as two or three times older than their appearance indicated.

Psionic Abilities

The most famous aspect of the Vulcan brain is the inherent telepathic abilities, such as the Vulcan mind meld. Vulcans are natural touch-telepaths. Though considerable training is required to utilize this ability to the fullest (this would be performing the fal-tor-pan), simpler contacts do not require any concentration, training or even conscious knowledge of the act. Stronger minds are capable of non-contact telepathic projection and scanning, usually over short distances, but sometimes even over interstellar distances.

Another psionic ability of the Vulcan race is the telepathic suggestion/compulsion. In some rare cases this ability can be unconsciously performed Vulcans over the age of 200 more or less 'dumping' their normally regulate emotions into other persons in their proximity.

Besides the Trill, who achieve this through the zhian'tara ritual, Vulcans are the only other known humanoid race capable of performing a synaptic pattern displacement, or the transfer of one individuals consciousness into another, known as the Katra or the intellectual substance of the individual.

Some Vulcans in very rare cases have also demonstrated telekinetic powers, giving them the ability to move objects with their minds. This ability usually requires high levels of concentration, leaving the individual vulnerable. There are meditation techniques which help focus the mind to allow telekinesis to be performed without lengthy preparations, but these are only known to a handful of Kolinahr Masters.

Society

Government

The Confederacy of Vulcan was governed by the Vulcan Council, a group of just seven ministers, each responsible for a different ministry. The seven ministries were the Ministry of State, Defense, Security, Trade, Thought, Science, and Health. Each was maintained various agencies to carry out its functions. The Council's seven ministers each controlled one of Vulcan's ministries, which in turn operated various government agencies. The ministries worked semi-autonomously, with each minister largely trusting the others to carry out their duties with expertise.

Elections were held every ten years, with candidates selected logically on their merit for the job. Other governing bodies were the High Assembly and the Vulcan High Command, with the Vulcan High Command's Administrator functioning as head of government, governing with the approval of the Council. The head of government also took the title of Vulcan First Minister.

VULCAN HISTORY

Ancient History

Much of Vulcan pre-history was a mixture of myth and legends, one of which stated that their race was seeded by the Preservers, or the race that Sargon belonged to. Another myth spoke of the Vhorani, who were known as the Ancient Ones, who came from the Wellspring of Creation known as Vorta Vor. Once they reached the harsh world that was the planet Vulcan, they created the Vulcan species.

Among the Vulcan species, it was believed that the first of their kind, known as The Wanderer, was the one who developed speech and the first word. These same primitive Vulcans witnessed the intense damage done to their world by their sun's solar flare which wiped out much of the planet's surface and transform it into its desert form. In the aftermath, the planet was divided into numerous clans that sought refuge in the few locations left on the now desolate world. Locations that held water were prized locations but the dangers of day time travel meant that it was difficult to wage conflict when the sun was up.

However, one clan that possessed the Eye - the inner eyelid, held an advantage as they were able to travel during day time and they attacked the well spring at Pelasht. After taking it, they decided to hold their advantage by allowing other clans to breed with the clan of the Eyes women so that their own offspring would develop the trait. In exchange, they gained access to resources as well as bred with other clans that possessed their own unique advantages such as the ability to touch minds. This formed the basis of modern Vulcan marriage customs that stemmed from a primitive form of eugenics program. In time, various telepathic and other traits were passed down the gene pool of the Vulcan species and spread throughout their race.

During the earliest points on Vulcan, it difficult to gather sufficient metals and ores. This was not entirely because their world was resource poor but rather that they were deep below the surface and there was no means to access such metals.

As such, Vulcan metal smiths had to work extremely hard in order to craft the items that they needed from simple weapons to agricultural tools. This changed as the mindsciences developed that allowed adepts to locate veins of ores and adepts were able to pull such materials from the crust itself through the power of their minds alone.

At one point during ancient Vulcan history, the world was invaded by a race of non-corporeal entities that relished in causing death and destruction. As non-corporeal beings, conventional means were incapable of killing them. Fortunately, the Vulcan Sajik created the Sword of Sajik, which was used to slay many of the creatures, eventually driving them away from Vulcan.

As early as the 3rd century Vulcans had the capacity for space travel. One group of Vulcans from this time crash landed on the planetoid Darien 224 where they formed the Last-of-all-Cities colony. They remained isolated there for two millennia.

Early Vulcan also developed several advanced psionic technologies, including psionic weapons such as the Tol par-doj and Vorl-tak. Most of these technologies were lost during the Time of Awakening. During these early periods, tribes of Vulcans were known to have consisted of skilled cultures. The arid climate of their home world was conducive to accuracy over long distances though the heavier gravity led to some challenges. However, those that learnt to shoot an arrow on Vulcan were capable of using the skill easily on other worlds.

The Time of Awakening

By the 4th century the Vulcan's had developed a violent culture, planet Vulcan was subject to violence and war as the Vulcan people fought one another in countless battles that stained the sand of the deserts with their green blood. Wars would arise from either conquest or need for water resources, which were scarce on the planet. The most well recorded of the Vulcan warlords was the tyrant Sudoc, who gained power by assassinating the previous ruling leader. Using his powerful psionic abilities and skilled tactical mind, he led his vicious barbarian armies in campaigns that dominated most of the homeworld. Those who resisted would be slaughtered and those who fell under his rule would be subject to telepathic "adjustments" to make them loyal.

It was in this time that a young Vulcan boy was born in the city state of ShiKahr, known as Surak. His home city was one of Sudoc's chief rivals and he attempted to assassinate the ruling generals which included members of Surak's family. Surak became a skilled computer scientist, but his creations were used as weapons of war, which provoked Surak into developing the goals of logic and peace.

Surak's new beliefs spread across Vulcan and took hold in the populace. The warlords began to lose power and the captured territories of Sudoc began to fracture as his empire began to disintegrate. Sudoc's rule and empire finally ended with the tyrant's death, though members of his loyal cadre that did survive formed the Children of Ket-Cheleb which were led by the warrior Tellus.

It was also known that at some point, thousands of years ago, a group of rational men who helped found the new Vulcan philosophy of logic decided to seek perfection by developing a method of removing their emotions and sealing them within bottles. However, this process diminished the soul of the individual and thus the device that accomplished this was destroyed. Instead, they devoted their life to teaching the value of logic instead. The bottles that contained the removed emotions survived through the centuries and in honor of their mentors, the Vulcan people created a shrine on the planet Beta IV where the artifacts remained hidden in Room 101 where they were meant to be preserved for all of life.

In the climate that followed, the Vulcan people were still fractured into various groups while Surak spread his message. It was at this time that the species made their first contact with another form of life which were people of Etosha who appeared at Shikahr before the assembled delegates as a peaceful race.

While appearing as kind strangers from the heavens, the Etoshans were pirates that used deception as a tactic to capture slaves and hold planetary leaders for ransom which they accomplished at Vulcan where they took hold of numerous leaders along with Surak's student S'task. Surak himself was spared this fate due to transportation difficulties at a port facility which prevented him from attending the meeting.

What followed this event was labeled at "the Ahkh", also known as the War. This action reduced all previous conflicts to simple skirmishes as the Vulcan species worked to defeat the invaders. S'task proved instrumental in this move as he liberated many of his kinsmen and killed thousands of pirates in his escape from their vessels. While primitive compared to the advanced technology of the pirates, the Vulcans had a well developed skill in the psionic arts which allowed them to unravel the metal ships of the enemy or set their pilots on suicidal courses. Through such actions, was Vulcan itself finally freed from the invaders that had terrorized them.

Despite the changes spreading across Vulcan numerous opposing groups still existed, such as the Northeastern Alliance, the Southern Hegemony and the Te-Vikram Brotherhood, which threatened to further destabilize the planet and bring about the death of Vulcan-kind.

During the height of the conflict where various factions fought one another while Surak attempted to preach his belief in pacifism and logic; the planet Vulcan was visited by extraterrestrial life forms. However, instead of the peaceful encounter the Vulcan people were seeking, they were instead attacked by a faction of Orion pirates that attempted to enslave them.

Varying books portray a different period of the Sundering. The Vulcan's Soul books portray it as an inter-racial warfare while Spock's World states that it was an invasion by Orion pirates.

This era of unrest brought about the Sundering, as groups of Vulcans discontented with Surak's philosophy left Vulcan to develop their own cultures as they saw fit. The largest group were the Romulans who went on to form the Romulan Star Empire. Other groups included the Debrune and the Watraii.

The Age of Expansion

With the departure of the more violent element of Vulcan society the remainder of the Vulcan people were left to flourish in a new era of peace and logic.

The new Vulcan space age saw limited expansion within their own solar system, however, none of these planets was habitable on the level the Vulcan homeworld. At some time in this era a wormhole appeared near the system, from which came an invasion force of starships which attacked the Vulcans. Attempts were made for peaceful contact with these invaders, but these attempted were answered with by violence. Eventually, the Vulcan Council responded and defeated the incursions. Few knew the origin of these invaders, as the wormhole they appeared from was unstable and would open and close randomly. Some suspected that the invaders were actually the warriors of the self exiled Children of Ket-Cheleb, who became the Romulans.

The Vulcan's limited space technologies took a great leap when the scientist T'Vran discovered the secrets of warp drive in 1440. Unmanned automated probes were first used which were successful enough that T'Vran herself participated in a manned flight. This sparked a new age for the Vulcan people, who would produce exploratory vessels to travel space, catapulting the Vulcan civilization across the stars. The Vulcans soon established colonies on worlds such as T'Khut, Kethri and Mevet. This new age of exploration lasted six hundred years with the further aim of locating the hostile force that attacked them earlier, but they never discover the Romulan Star Empire during this time.

Early contacts with numerous primitive races which turned violent provoked the Vulcan belief in remaining hidden from such races until they "matured" or developed themselves. This would later form the initial basis for the Prime Directive.

During their encounters in space, the Vulcans encountered the Andorian Empire and were distressed by the violent as well as emotional nature of the Andorian species to the point that they sought to guide that race. However, the Vulcans actions were seen as being both overt as well as covert attempts to coerce and control the Andorian people who reacted violently to their actions. This sparked a series of conflicts and skirmishes between the two races that ended with the signing of the Tau Ceti Accords and left a state of cold war between the two governments.

This was not the only attempt at the Vulcans guiding other species as they encountered the dilithium rich world of Coridan and sought to help the native inhabitants develop a stable world government. Whilst such an act would seemingly be against the policy of non-interference of developing worlds, the Vulcans logically reasoned that Coridan's resources would benefit the Vulcan government and by stabilizing it they could facilitate a mining agreement.

This was crucial to the Vulcan state as the significant economic as well as material gains along with the tensions from Andoria meant that it was an exception to their usual policy. Vulcan kept both close economic and political ties with the Coridan government which spawned dissident rebellious factions who in turn were supported by the Andorians that sought to acquire Coridan's resources. The cold war for Coridan continued for many years as both sides sought to control the planet.

The Vulcan Reformation

The Vulcan Reformation was a period of great upheaval and change in Vulcan philosophy that began in or around the month of July in 2154. The Reformation marked the beginning of the greatest changes on Vulcan since the Time of Awakening.

Over the centuries following the death of Surak, the father of the Vulcan logic movement, his teachings had been subject to numerous interpretations and possible revisions. As a result, much of the original intent had been lost.

The recovery of the Kir'Shara, an artifact (long considered a legend) containing Surak's original writings, allowed Vulcan society to reconsider the many choices made since Surak's death and especially the direction of the government under then Administrator V'Las.

Captain Jonathan Archer, Commander T'Pol, and a member of the Syrrannite movement named T'Pol were responsible for recovering the artifact. During their search, the three were pursued by soldiers of the Vulcan High Command, who wished to put an end to the Syrrannites as a prelude to launching a pre-emptive strike on Andoria.

The High Command was successful in destroying one of the main sanctuaries of the Syrrannites. Archer and the others, however, succeeded in getting the artifact to the chambers of the High Command, undermining their efforts and bringing a new era to Vulcan. Archer was reported by some to have been led to the writings by the katra, or essence of spirit, of Surak. After reflecting on the writings, the Vulcans decided to rededicate themselves to lives of peace and logic. They also decided that they would no longer oversee matters regarding Humans and space travel, a role they had played since first contact, allowing Humans to explore space on their own.

In 2155 the Vulcan government signed the Coalition Compact which made them officially part of the Coalition of Planets, alongside Earth, Andoria and Tellar. In 2161 the Coalition worlds joined together to form the United Federation of Planets

Society

Founded by an ancient Vulcan named Surak, the essence of Vulcan society is in arriving at the truth through logical process. Most Vulcans believe that emotions are illogical, thus making them impure, and deterrent to truth. However, Vulcans are born with the same emotions that afflicted their violent ancestors, but the continual mind conditioning, the t'an s'at, gives them the impassivity sought after by all Vulcans.

The t'an s'at is an intellectual deconstruction of emotional patterns, a lifelong process that strives for absolute detachment from all emotion. Though not all can arrive at the ultimate pure logical state, the exacting process of mental control gives Vulcans enough to conform to the ideals of Vulcan society. Vulcans of this creed are impervious to greed, deception, anger, and all other vices.

The majority of Vulcans follow a belief in logic known as Cthia and many aim to achieve a state without emotion known as Kolinahr. This philosophy meant that they relied on logic and reason to guide their lives, rather than emotion. All expression of emotions was completely forbidden, negative or otherwise. This did not mean that Vulcans had cast away all emotions they once had; they had merely made a choice not to let those emotions influence the decisions they were making.

This led to the mistaken belief amongst other species that Vulcans had no emotions which they did possess though they did not permit those emotions to show in public or allow them to control their actions. Few Vulcans managed to extinguish all their emotions but most had mastered the ability to contain them. This went in line with Vulcan philosophy that their race had adopted which stated that there was no reason why any emotion should have any influence on behavior or cloud the path of logic.

Curiosity was one emotion which Vulcans admitted and even approved. One Vulcan saying is 'The Vulcan knows there is a time for everything' which is an approximate translation from the Kahr-y-Tan which means the 'Way of the Vulcan'. An aspect of this is the herb gathering ritual which Vulcans engage in which is where they collect necessary herbs in preparation of tea for Vulcan Masters.

Vulcans are noted for their patience and believe it is a necessity among their species while it was a virtue among Humans. One of the most famous qualities among the Vulcan people was their high degree of honesty. This was to such an extent that many Vulcan's were highly reluctant to tell a lie which led to the saying that "Vulcans cannot lie" Despite this, it was known that, under logical reasons of course, that they were capable of accomplishing such a task or make an omission. No Vulcan admitted such a dishonesty and considered it an act of "lying".

Culture: From Birth to Death

Vulcans were noted for their more complex family relationships compared to Humans. Such family units consisted of the Eldest of House with normally a matriarch in charge of the affairs of the House. Traditionally, a male Vulcan was not present at the time when their mate was delivering their child during the pregnancy. Children when they were born were not given a name until their Naming Day. Similar to the ceremonies surrounding marriage and burial, the Vulcan rituals that concerned birth had remained intact over the millenia with even the logic of Surak failing to strip the Vulcan race of their dark and ancient rites.

Newborn children until the age of four were known to take part in visual mathematics, basical calculation as well as beginning the neurological organization of their brains which was followed by an identity meld.

By the time they were four, they began mathematics and species identification as well as began to coordinate the use of their physical bodies. Furthermore, algebra, geometry and physics dominated their study life at this time. Typically, as part of Vulcan custom, children are betrothed at around seven Earth years of age when they undergo a Bonding ceremony which telepathically links the two. As a result the two Vulcans would seek one another during their pon farr cycle. This practice had been in place for thousands of generations. This was a parental arrangement which dated to ancient times as it served as a method of preventing wars and strengthening ties between neighbors whose ancestral lands adjoined. When they were eight, children began preliminary telepathic communication and were taught etiquette as well as their clans history along with Vulcan anthropology, calculus and quantum physics.

When the child was ten, they learn to suppress cortical stimuli in the dominant hemisphere as well as learn of their races cultural history and began a study of Vulcan rites of passage. By the time they were eleven, they learn of the pressure points needed for mind melding in addition to learning memory accuracy and internal time counting. Furthermore, they were introduced to logic and definition, the principles of analysis, concreteness of thought and physical deportment. These early years of study were expected to continue til the child was between the age of thirteen to fifteen after which their formal training began.

When formal training began, the first rite conducted was Tal T'Lee where they were assisted in their meditation by an adept of their clan council. They learn to control their subdominant cortices which was followed by Dwemish Hi-An where identity isolation was learnt along with brain control with numbers systems and equations. They also learn multiplication left to right whereupon they took part in Enok-Kal Fi Lar which was the processes of definition and the concepts of given. Once this was complete, the child took part in An-Prele between the age of sixteen to nineteen where they learn pain control meditation from a clan council adept. They were also expected to read Essays of Discipline and Analysis of Pseudodoxy as well as was expected to learn to segregate the lobes of their brains. As the child grew older, one of their rights of passage was the Kahs-wan maturity test which was a survival ritual that dated before the time of Surak. Those who survived took their first step into adulthood.

At the age of twenty to twenty four, the Vulcan was expected to learn of logical paradigms and behavioral modification through the Runes of T'Vish. They also learn multiplication right to left, diagonal and cross multiplication as well as learn to isolate their katra. This continued til the age of twenty five to twenty nine where the Sele-An-T'Lee was conducted which comprised of lessons in subdominant brain organization, advanced philosophy and logic, muscle coordination and the control of will.

Part of this also included learning the five steps which were the belief discipline, reality awareness, sensory acuteness, visual calculation and fact analysis. There were further readings expected which included Logic and Definition, Equations, Systems of Logic, The Interior and Purpose as Prime Motivator. There were also taught advanced mind meld techniques.

By the time the Vulcan was thirty to thirty five, they were expected to had conducted the Norn-La-Hal which involved superior control meditation and neurological organization. Furthermore, importance was placed on the dignity and tradition in Vulcan identity as well as the contemplations of infinity. The final stage of this training involved Venlinahr which was the state most adult Vulcans had attained and involved meditation by individual discretion. There was also further study of Vulcan dharma as well as advanced readings on the mystagogues of Surak, Scorus, T'Enne, T'Vish, Prisu and Seltar. It should be noted that the above events were in relation to children of the Lyr Zor clan and thus may not be true to all Vulcan children.

Vulcans youths were not allowed to guide the conversations of their elders, this was especially the case if the child in question was not past the age of the Ka nifoor. From a young age, Vulcans were geared towards the suppression of feelings of emotions and divest themselves from such traits. By the time a Vulcan was an adult, they had learnt a set of mind rules which governed their telepathic abilities as well as the necessary skills needed to shield their thoughts from outside emotions.

It was generally believed that the Vulcans did not possess any emotions though such a line of thought was false as they in fact hold the capacity to not only understand but deal with emotions. However, they had chosen not to do so and instead worked for the suppression of such feelings. Though ultimately logical creatures, it took many years of practice and training for young Vulcans who do demonstrate emotions at first before beginning the long process that was made by Surak centuries ago. To accomplish this, Vulcan parents used learning tools and techniques to train their children in the primary concepts of logic, and to gain control over their emotions. Eventually, through these processes young children began to learn emotional control. As part of their belief in honesty, Vulcan parents were known not to shield the truth from their young as they believed it would hinder their in coping with such difficulties. Furthermore, a parent's attachment to the child was not considered an emotion but rather as part of the parent's identity and without the child, the parent would not be complete.

Vulcans preferred not to dance with another man's wife which was attributed to their customs which stated that it was not appropriate for a man to his in his arms a woman that was not his. During the marital arrangements, it was possible for the male to pay a bride price to his future wife. These dowries were not paid by a bride's family on Vulcan but by the husband when he was seem to be fortunate enough to gain a life partner.

At the time of the formal announcement of marriage, the husband paid a monthly sum to the bride's family until the wedding took place. This money was used to provide the future wife's needs until the husband officially took on his marital responsibilities. This was the case even if the woman was wealthy or had a career of her own or even both. This meant that the bride price also varied and was determined by the husband's wealth with the more wealthy having to contribute more money to their future wife.

In addition, there were strict teachings that spoke against desecrating the dead.

Diet

Vulcans are vegetarians. They do not like to touch their food with their hands, preferring to use utensils whenever possible. It is a Vulcan custom for guests in the home to prepare meals for their hosts. Vulcans generally do not drink alcoholic beverages, though they will "indulge" on special occasions. Vulcans are immune to the effects of alcohol, but instead can become inebriated by ingesting chocolate.

Rites and Rituals of the Lyr Zor Clan

The Lyr Zor were a clan of Vulcans that resided on their home world. They lived on the more remote parts of their planet, namely in the Lyr T'aya region in the Vuldi Gorge.

The Bonding

The Bonding was a ritual that was present within the Vulcan civilization. It was typically part of the marriage custom and involved a telepathic link that connected both husband and wife after the official ceremony. No Vulcan marriage was complete without a Bonding which bound the two to a greater level than simple custom.

Another form of bonding was an ancient rite that had been lost for centuries by the time of the 24th century though it was discovered by time. This rite dated back to when the Vulcan race first began to harness their incredible telepathic powers which led to extremely deep as well as profound unions of the mind. These initial bondings were done with young helpless infants by the parents as it was believed that it was easier to meld with family members with whom one shared blood rather than distant relatives or friends. Once made, the child was capable of being linked to their parents more firmly which was both a sacred act as well as quite powerful.

Tal T'lee

Tal T'lee was a ritual that was known to the Vulcan race. It was part of the formal training of a young Vulcan who was reaching adulthood and was the first meditation they faced which was assisted by an Adept. This led to a control of the sub-dominant cortices thus leading to their mastery of emotions.

Dwemish Hi-An

Dwemish Hi-An was an aspect of the Vulcan civilization. It was part of the formal training a young member of the race took during their path to adulthood. This rite involved identify isolation as well as brain control with number systems and equations. In addition, the child learnt multiplication, left to right.

Enok-Kal Fi Lar

Enok-Kal Fi Lar was an aspect within the Vulcan civilization. Young Vulcans were expected to take part in this ritual as part of their formal training which required them to understand the processes of definition as well as the concepts of given.

An-Prele

An-Prele was a concept known to the Vulcan civilization. This was typically conducted between the age of sixteen and nineteen where the subject was to learn pain control meditations through the help of an Adept.

Kahs-Wan

The kahs-wan was a Vulcan rite of passage that young Vulcans were expected to accomplish. It involved a trial into the desert where the Vulcan was expected to survive in order to be considered an adult. (TAS episode: "Yesteryear") The rules of this maturity test meant that it was a test of individual survival and as such, teamwork was forbidden. Those children that were wounded and discovered by another were left until the kahs-wan student returned home at the end of the survival course where they reported the dangers faced by the other student.

Runes of T'Vish

The Runes of T'Vish were an aspect known to the Vulcan civilization. At the age of twenty to twenty four, a young Vulcan was expected to take part in the Runes of T'Vish which were logical paradigms. They led to behavioral modification as well as multiplication right to left, diagonal and cross multiplication. The teachings learnt at this stage also led to the isolation of the Katra.

Sele-An-T'Lee

The Sele-An-T'Lee was an aspect known to the Vulcan civilization. This ritual was conducted at the age of twenty five to twenty nine which comprised of lessons in subdominant brain organizations. It also included the teaching of advanced philosophy as well as logic along with muscle coordination and the control of will. There were a further five steps to the lesson which included belief discipline, reality awareness, sensory acuteness, visual calculation and fact analysis. There were also taught advanced mind meld techniques as part of their training.

Norn-La-Hal

The Norn-La-Hal was an event experienced by members of the Vulcan race. It was the time of transition from being a child to being an adult. Once they achieved this state did they get taught the blanket training. This rite involved superior control over meditation and neurological organization. Furthermore, it taught the importance of dignity and the tradition of Vulcan identity with the contemplation of infinity.

Venlinahr

Venlinahr was a ritual known to the Vulcan race and was the normal state of adult discipline.

Koon-Ut-So'lik

The koon-ut-so'lik was a Vulcan ritual marriage proposal. It can be conducted when, or even before, the Vulcan is in the grips of pon farr. They may precede the koon-ut-kal-if-fee ritual. The koon-ut-so'lik is (apparently) made when a Vulcan wishes to choose their own mate, as Vorik - who was interested in choosing B'Elanna Torres as his mate - gave her the ritual proposal. Usually, in cases of marriage, Vulcans are bonded to their mate at childhood by their parents and when the time for Pon farr occurs, they seek the mate out. However, on certain conditions the Vulcan might not be bonded and thus are free to choose a mate at which point they invoke the koon-ut-so'lik.

Kal-If-Fee

The kal-if-fee is a Vulcan challenge in which two male combatants fight for the right to mate with a certain female. During the Vulcan rite known as koon-ut-kal-if-fee, a female can claim kal-if-fee if she doesn't wish to be with the male that was betrothed to her in childhood. Once the female has declared kal-if-fee, the male that was arranged for her must battle her chosen mate.

Koon-Ut-Kal-If-Fee

The Koon-ut-kal-if-fee is a mating ritual conducted by the Vulcan people and has been part of their culture since before the time of Surak.

The ritual means "marriage or challenge" and is essentially a part of the marriage ceremony. In most cases, if the female accepts the proposal made by the male's parents, and there are no other challengers the marriage ceremony will proceed without the need for combat. However, if two Vulcans desire the same mate, or if the female mate rejects the male's proposal (which was made during childhood by the parents), this will lead to combat.

In this case and especially if both males are subjected to the urges of Pon-Farr, the Kal-if-fee is a fight of passion in which Vulcans fight over another's mate. These fights are to the death: they can only end with the death of one of the parties and no one is permitted to interfere during the ritual. As part of the ritual, the female can choose any defender to fight for her which can include either one of the candidates, herself, another male or even an alien present at the ritual. A male under Pon-Farr will snap out of it when the outpouring of emotional and physical tension will culminate and be totally spent to finally end immediately with the death of the other... or his own.

Rite of Tal'oth

The Rite of Tal'oth is a Vulcan desert survival ritual conducted by young adults who are required to survive for four months in the desert with only a ritual blade being in their possession. It was considered a more advanced version of the Kahs-wan ritual.

Mind Meld

The Vulcan mind meld (or mind touch) was a telepathic technique employed exclusively by Vulcans in which the minds of two individuals become a single entity. In the Vulcan language, it was known as Taroan-Ifla. Typically, physical contact was required for a meld, however particularly powerful melder, such as Slovaak, are capable of performing melds remotely. Melding was a deeply personal experience, as the two minds of the medlees are entirely open to each other. However, melding can be used as an interrogation technique in which case the melder can block the medlee's access to their own mind. Those that learnt this discipline on Vulcan were required to take an oath that they would rather die before violating the privacy of another's consciousness against their will.

Melding can be dangerous, particularly so when conducted with a non-Vulcan but it can also be a useful tool, some neurological conditions can be cured by a mind meld. Further, melds often result in part of each of the participant's knowledge and mental state being transferred to each other and are also the manner in which someone can deposit or obtain a katra.

Despite the practise of melding dating back to the time of Surak, by the mid-22nd century, something of a stigma had developed around melding. Those who were capable of or practiced melding were seen as an undesirable minority. As a consequence Pa'nar Syndrome, a condition contracted by melding also became taboo subject. Ironically, Pa'nar Syndrome can easily be cured by a meld with an experienced melder. Fortunately following reforms on Vulcan in 2154, melding once again became socially acceptable.

Katra

This word was the name the Vulcan language gave to their soul or spirit as well as the essence of their memories and life. The term katra was a word that no one had ever been able to translate with any degree of precision. It was not exactly a soul or a personality; it was more than a memory but less than a living being. Typically, when a Vulcan neared death, they transferred their katra into the mind of another in order for it to be interred in the Hall of Ancient Thought at Mount Seleya on the Vulcan homeworld. Once there, the mind was placed within a katric ark where it resided in peace within the chambers of the Hall. Similarly, the acolytes of the Kolinahr ritual who resided at the Kolinahr Monastery were known to have a chamber that contained the minds of former High Masters of the Kolinahr. In addition to this, there was the Fal-lan-tral near Seleya where individuals met with the Tral Katra in order to meet with the ancient minds of deceased Vulcans. Upon the transference of another's katra, the other individual often benefited from the experiences of that person's mind and memories. However, as the katra was capable of resisting the transfer, the procedure was not without risks and thus needed to be performed according to a specific ritual. This capacity to pass on a katra to another was not just limited to Vulcans and other species were capable of having a Vulcan mind transferred to them. In non-Vulcans, the experience was similar to those suffered from multiple personality disorders. Among Humans, they led to a severe shock upon the transfer as their nervous systems were quite vulnerable to the procedure. The restoration of a katra was normally done by a Vulcan priest who had experience in the use of katra.

A Vulcan's katra lives on after the death of the physical body, and can be released into the mind of a living host being to either communicate with or control the host. Among the Vulcans who are known to have done this include the venerated Surak, the insane Zakal, and the Starfleet cadet, T'Pol. Typically, a Vulcan who held the katra of another were known as a Keeper. Whilst this was the case with those Vulcans who had died, it was considered dangerous to mind meld with a disembodied mind; one of those placed within a katric ark. The only time it was considered a necessity to engage in such an act was in the gravest of emergencies as the outcome could lead to madness. Those individuals that housed a katra in their mind against their will were known as Val'reth. It was also possible to restore a Vulcan if they had died if their katra had survived through the use of the Fal-tor-pan ritual.

The body of all living beings were noted to have katra points and stimulation of these regions helped in the promotion of healing. Furthermore, it was these locations that a Vulcan touched in order to create a mind meld. Humans were known to not possessing a katra and thus their minds were not capable of being held by a Keeper.

Vulcan Martial Arts

Although a pacifist people out of simple logic (violence brings no positive result), Vulcans had their own violent past, savage, even by Humans standards. Out of tradition, the Vulcans retained part of this heritage as a reminder of what logic had freed them of.

Kareel-Ifla

Created many millenia ago when the planet Vulcan suffered a more violent time in its history. Kareel-ifla was best described as the Vulcan equivalent of Karate and focused on the quick as well as direct application of force in order to end a fight as quickly as possible. Due to its unsavory origins, it was often considered quite brutish to modern Vulcans. Despite this being the case, practitioners of the art were quite formidable and effective in combat allowing them to fight against such opponents such as Klingons and Nausicaans.

The Tal-Shaya was a method of execution performed by the practitioners of Kareel-Ifla. Tal-Shaya involved breaking the neck of an individual in a very precise method designed to cause instant death, and was in Vulcan's past to be considered a merciful form of execution.

Ponn-Ifla

It was created by the warrior poet Ladok in the 1600's who developed a technique known as the "eye of the storm". The discipline's tenet involved resistance as well as moderation with a master being able to "transform a fight into a poem, and a poem into meditation." In later years, it became a popular martial art of the Vulcans with more modern schools borrowing some skills from other Vulcan arts.

It was considered a very young discipline by Vulcan standards. Ponn-ifla was the opposite of Kareel-ifla in that it was non-violent in nature but was still quite an effective hand-to-hand combat art. Much like Terran Aikido, this discipline focused on the use of minimum force and movement by turning an attackers own force back at them rather than initiate combat. Such master practitioners were known to take on a dozen opponents as well as incapacitate them without even moving a foot or two from their starting position.
Other moves from Ponn-ifla:

Kroika: a central move of the art which involved deflecting an opponent's fist downwards in order to put him off-balance.

Taroon: this aspect of the fighting style was to use the opponent's own attack as a means of getting an opening for a nerve pinch.

Ponn-K'sin: borrowed from the more aggressive kareel-ifla but modified by ponn-ifla masters, this move involved a leg sweep.

Narilk: a joint lock with the addition of applying agonizing pain without giving them any permanent damage. The style's name came from an ancient Vulcan saying about calmness in the eye of the storm. Adepts are required to be an eye of peacefulness in the storm of violence.

Suus Mahna

This martial art focuses on a special move known as the Navorkot which teaches the practitioner a way to evade incoming blades. This is done by jumping to the side and rolling based on reading the movement of the enemy and to foresee when, as well as where, they intend to strike. Suus Mahna takes many years to master and is reminiscent of Terran Capoeira. Some Vulcan children were taught this dance-like fighting art.

V'Shan

It features a comprehensive study of pressure points and their effects on the central nervous system like the Terran arts of Chin Na and Kwappo. By the 24th century, it was taught at Starfleet Academy. Some V'Shan moves are:

Sok-Pal: a grabbing maneuver which can be used in pretending to turn over a sidearm, and from there go into the dangerous rol-shaya grip.

Rol-shaya: a grip in which the forearm is held against an opponent's neck, in a potentially fatal manner.

Tael-Shaya: a swift grip aimed at breaking the neck vertebrae, either to permanently paralyze or even kill the opponent. Its very deadly nature brought it much into discredit in the last centuries and is rarely, if ever, taught anymore, even to the most advanced and trusted students. It may have been lost forever, as Ambassador Sarek was rumored to have been the last exponent of this technique and no such thing as a Vulcan death grip is known to off-worlders. In ancient times, it was mostly taught to executioners as it was considered a merciful form of killing.

First Contact

During the early 1900s, an unmanned Vulcan robot probe prevented a cometary fragment from wiping out half of central Europe by diverting the body in order to force it to explode over an uninhabited region of Siberia. Though unaware of this activity, between 1955 to 2018, there were at least eighteen legitimate two dimensional photographs taken of the Vulcan probe ships. However, they were without exception dismissed as being frauds and hoaxes.

Vulcan society was well aware of the existence of sentient life on the planet Earth as far back as 2063 and the Vulcan Science Academy also knew of a devastating planetary conflict that raged on its surface. The Vulcans suspected that the native life forms known as Humans would ultimately destroy themselves in the war. At some point, the Vulcan Science Academy authorized a probe mission to chart gravitic anomalies in the Alpha Centauri system. However, three months before reaching its destination, a new order was sent from the communications division of the Vulcan Science Academy that diverted it to the Sol system in order to track wormhole eddies that were suspected to be generated by Jupiter's intersection with its sun.

On April 5th 2063 the Vulcan starship T'Plana-Hath, detected a warp flight from the planet Earth and became the first alien species to formally make contact with Humans. The T'Plana Hath landed in Montana, the launch site of the warp ship, to greet its creator, Zefram Cochrane.

This marked humans' first official true encounter with an alien species.

Relations with the Federation

With their new Human allies, the Vulcan High Command established the Vulcan Advisory Council which coordinated with United Earth Starfleet Command and monitored Earth's progress. The Vulcans refused to provide their technology to Earth, which resulted in Earth's first warp five starship launching a century after Humanity first developed warp technology. For some Humans this was a source of much resentment; they believed that the Vulcans had impeded their progress.

Eventually, the Vulcans realized the error of trying to direct another civilization's destiny and relented, providing by their own example the final incentive to bring about the most important and famous of all Federation laws, the Prime Directive.

In 2155 the Vulcan government signed the Coalition Compact which made them officially part of the Coalition of Planets, alongside Earth, Andoria, the independent colonies of Alpha Centauri and Tellar. In 2161 this Coalition worlds joined together to form the United Federation of Planets.

Although one Commander T'Pol served onboard the Earth ship Enterprise before then as a Vulcan observer, there were no Vulcans among the Starfleet personnel dedicated to maintain peace and security within the UFP, as their pacifism did not accept well this military duty of the peacekeeping space organization, until Spock, son of Sarek, son of S'kon, went against his father's wishes and enlisted in Starfleet Academy in 2252.

His quadrant famous career soon inspired other Vulcans to join Starfleet (like Commander Sonak who died in a transporter accident in 2271) so that today they are well represented within Starfleet ranks, although in considerably less numbers than the more adventurous Humans and mostly in scientific or technical positions, although a few like the famous Lieutenant Tuvok of the ill-fated USS Voyager served in security and tactical between 2371 and 2378. More than one Vulcan reached as high as the Admiralty and the Joint Chief of Staff, doing much to curtail Starfleet and the Federation from the warlike tendencies that the Dominion War brought about in the other, emotional species.

In fact, many Vulcans end up such careers as respected diplomats and ambassadors, bringing the voice of peace and reason throughout the galaxy after so many experiences beyond the confines of their own world (and some say beyond the confines of their own logic).

TECHNOLOGY

STARFLEET SHIP REGISTRY

Designation: USS Artemis

Registry: NCC-64121

Ship class: Ambassador class (original design frame)

Classification: Heavy cruiser (Enhanced Scientific/Diplomatic deep space Explorer)

Assignment: Lotus Fleet elite division of Starfleet

Base of Operations: Starbase 10, tri-border region, Hromi sector

Commanding officer: Captain Kheren

Launch date: stardate 17605.8 (last of its class) Nesrun Fleetyards of Andoria, Andor sector

Relaunch date: stardate 86161.6 Starbase 10, Hromi sector (last refit 25th century upgrade)

Dedication Plaque: *The Sun never Saw her like Outside Olympus*

Specifications:

Structure

Length : 526 m

Beam : 320 m

Height : 125 m

Decks : 26 (25 habitable)

Mass: 3,700,000 metric tons(unloaded)

Crew: 750 (250 officers, 500 enlisted); 100 visiting personnel or civilians; 1250 evacuation limit

Offensive Capabilities

10 x Type X phaser arrays

2 x Type 5 burst fire photon torpedo tube with 250 rounds fore and aft of photon and quantum torpedoes

Defensive Capabilities

Standard Shield System with Metaphasic laforge Program 1 implemented to ship and all auxiliary crafts.

Standard Duranium/Tritanium Double hull plus 7 cm ablative armor. A further 3cm of original armor over sensitive sections (bridge, engineering, power sections).

Standard level Structural Integrity Field

Propulsion

Normal Cruise : Warp 7

Maximum Rated : upgraded to Warp 9.6 (no time limit as the engine, the General Electric Class 8 M/ARA drive and power system initially tested on the Sovereign Class, can provide for warp 9.98 for 12 hours but never reached as the structural integrity of the ship can not withstand it)

New Impulse engines Sternback V ("blue" type to "red" type) developed specifically to the Ambassador Class.

Standard Version 5 magnetohydrodynamic gas-fusion thrusters, developed specifically for the Ambassador Class. Each thruster quad can produce 4 million Newtons of exhaust.

Auxiliary crafts

4 WORK BEE : Arrowhead 5 to 8

4 TYPE-16 SHUTTLEPOD : Arrowhead 1 to 4

5 TYPE-18 SHUTTLEPOD: Arrow 10 to 14

3 TYPE-7 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT: Arrow 6 to 8

3 TYPE-8 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT: Arrow 3 to 5

2 TYPE-10 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT: Arrow 1 & 2

1 TYPE-11 MULTIPURPOSE SHUTTLECRAFT: Arrow 9

1 DETACHABLE BRIDGE MODULE: Aegis

USS Artemis Upgrade notes:

- Phaser arrays were updated to Type X, first introduced with the Galaxy-class. (Originally Type IX)
- Burst fire photon torpedo launchers were standard on Ambassador-class vessels. "Burst fire" indicates the ability to fire 5 torpedoes at a time. There is one pair of tubes situated fore, and one pair situated aft. All are masked by retractable cowls reducing the threat signature of the vessel.
- Refit teams avoided touching the sensor dome, beyond repairing the damage inflicted upon it, however they did upgrade several other sensor palettes located around the ship.
- Refit teams additionally upgraded all Science Labs to current Starfleet Standard. This has allowed the team to repurpose two labs, one as a holodeck, the other as a limited-holography Astrometrics lab. (see: Star Trek: Generations)
- Sickbay has undergone a full renovation, as a hull breach and EPS explosions had destroyed the previous one. 4 brand new biobeds, with an additional one set aside in an isolation ward. Holoemitters have been installed, allowing for the operation of the ship's brand new EMH.

Addendum: *holo-emitters installed throughout the ship with the new Starfleet protocols hardwiring safety limitations making it impossible to bypass.*

- Upgraded bridge science station. In conjunction with other Science upgrades, the Artemis is rated at 120% scientific capability when compared to the original Galaxy-class' 100%.
- Upgraded bridge auxiliary station. With a quick menu choice and proper authorizations, the station can now be configured to operate as any other bridge station, as well as Engineering. This console can also be configured to support any other bridge station.
- Installed Chief Medical Officer's station, to the right of the Captain's chair. This station is in the testing phase, it is meant to allow the Chief Medical Officer to efficiently coordinate with the Chief of Security at the Tactical station and their respective teams. The console physically resembles the Tactical station, and can be reconfigured to other advisory stations, such as Diplomatic Advisory or Councilor.

addendum: field test successful; CMO chair now to be further tested with the entire complement of Lotus Fleet ships.

- Installed First Officer's chair, to the left of the Captain's chair, a feature also in the testing phase. It is meant to allow the First Officer the ability to call up important mission details while stationed next to the Captain. In a pinch, the First Officer station's small, PADD-like display can be reconfigured to perform any other bridge station's functions at a limited capacity. This display's vertical mount is built into the right side armrest, with a pivot to allow the Captain to see the data, or to fold down into the armrest when not in use.
- Starboard nacelle and strut entirely replaced. When the Artemis was found, she was missing the nacelle, and the strut was heavily damaged.

- The new impulse engines are optimized for high efficiency at low settings. At these low speeds, the Artemis is much more agile than the much larger Galaxy-class. The Artemis is rated at 250% Combat Maneuverability when compared to the original Galaxy-class' 100%.
- During the shakedown cruise of the maiden voyage, acting Chief Engineer Marksus Sangliar refined the intermix formula to upgrade emergency warp speed to Warp 9.6 for a 12 hours duration.
- During second mission, Chief Engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo implemented the La Forge program 1, giving metaphasic shielding to the ship and all auxiliary crafts including the bridge module.
- The Bridge Module has been also upgraded with all the capabilities of a class XI shuttle, including warp 6 capability, 4 phaser V arrays, 2 microtorpedo tubes, a universal magnaclamp and an added multipurpose emitter.
- A class XI shuttle replaced the lost Class VIII shuttlecraft as the new Arrow 9.

DECK LAYOUT

Deck 1: Captain's Ready Room, Main Bridge (Olympus), Briefing Room, secondary turbolift

Deck 2: Senior Officers Quarters, VIP/Guest Quarters, Bridge Module Connectors

Deck 3: Officers Quarters, Holosuites

Deck 4: NCO Quarters, Enlisted Crew Mess, Galley

Deck 5: Main Phaser and Fire Control, Auxiliary Control Room and Support (Auxiliary Bridge), Impulse Engines and Engineering Support

Deck 6: Primary Life Support Systems, Primary Computer Core Control (Oracle), Shuttle Bay 1, Cargo Bay 1 & 2, Holodeck 1 and 2

Deck 7: Computer Core (Delphi), Sickbay, Chief Medical Officer's Office, Primary Science Labs, Counselor's Office, Primary Shuttle Maintenance Hangar

Deck 8: Computer Core (Delphi), Crew Quarters, Main Lounge (The Bow), VIP/officers Mess, Secondary Science Labs, observation deck (Owl's Crest), Fusion Power Generators 1 and 2, Interconnecting Dorsal/Intermix Shaft/Turbolifts, and Arboretum

Deck 9: Interconnecting Dorsal/Intermix Shaft/Turbolifts, Forward Torpedo Bay Control, Forward Torpedo Bay Magazine, Armory, Holding Cells, Chief Tactical Officer's Office

Deck 10: Transporter Room 1, Interconnecting Dorsal/Intermix Shaft/Turbolifts, Forward Torpedo Launchers

Deck 11: Saucer Section Damage Control and Triage Compartment, Living Quarters, Interconnecting Dorsal/Intermix Shaft/Turbolifts

Deck 12: Systems Support Compartment, Living Quarters, Fusion Power Generators 3 and 4, Forward Torpedo Bay Control, Forward Torpedo Bay Magazine, Interconnecting Dorsal/Intermix Shaft/Turbolifts

Deck 13: Living Quarters, Emergency Batteries / Fusion Power Generators 4-6, Emergency Transporter Rooms 1 and 2, Forward Torpedo Launchers

Deck 14: Secondary Deflector Control, Living Quarters, Stellar Cartography, Astrometrics Lab, Cargo Bay 1, Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Engineering Section Impulse Engines, Enlisted Personnel Living Quarters, Interconnecting Dorsal/Intermix Shaft/Turbolifts, Chief of Science Office.

Deck 15: Recreation Deck/Zero-G Gymnasium, Crew Lounge (the Quiver), Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Engineering Section Impulse Engines

Deck 16: Tertiary Multipurpose Laboratories, Transporter Room 2, Emergency Transporter Room 3-4, Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Cargo Bay 2 - Primary Cargo Bay, Cargo Transporter Room 1 - 2

Deck 17: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Brig, Secondary Computer Core, Engineering Section Impulse Engine Control and Support Center, Enlisted Personnel Living Quarters, Deuterium Injection Reactors

Deck 18: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Secondary Computer Core, Deuterium Fuel Pumps and Fill Ports, Deuterium Storage Tanks Subspace field distortion generators, Enlisted Personnel Living Quarters

Deck 19: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Primary Maintenance Support Center, Damage Control Triage and Storage Area, Enlisted Personnel Living Quarters

Deck 20: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Upper Engineering Support Area, Machine Shop, Primary Maintenance Support Center, Shuttle Bay 2, Damage Control Triage and Assembly Area

Deck 21: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Main Engineering, Shuttlebay 3 Hangar and Maintenance Section, Primary and Emergency Deflector Dish Graviton Polarity Generators

Deck 22: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Aft Phaser and Torpedo Weapon Control, Emergency Fusion Reactors 1 and 2

Deck 23: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Main Deflector Auxiliary Systems, Emergency Fusion Reactors 3 and 4

Deck 24: Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Cargo Bay 2, Cargo Bay 4, Cargo Transporter Rooms 3 and 4. Nacelle Power Transfer Assembly, Nacelle Personnel Transfer Conduit

Deck 25: Waste Recycling, Environmental Control, Emergency Batteries, Anti-matter Generators, Gravimetric Polaron Generators, Secondary Shield Generators, Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly

Deck 26: Anti-matter Injectors, Warp Core - M/ARA Reaction Assembly, Emergency Gravimetric Polaron Generators, Tractor Beam Generator, fore and aft Tractor Beam assemblies.

COLORFUL NAMES ON THE USS ARTEMIS

A starship is more than just a vehicle or even a home away from home. It is a defining element of the lives of the officers serving aboard.

It becomes therefore natural for the crew to appropriate and assume the distinctiveness of their ship with some terms showing their pride in their vessel; just like knights of old named their sword and their steed.

The following is a list of specific places on the USS Artemis as they have been renamed by the crew (even into the turbolift programming). The names are all inspired by the very name of the ship, that of the ancient Greece mythological Goddess of the Hunt.

BRIDGE (deck 1 top) : *Olympus*

BRIDGE MODULE (deck 1 separated from the ship): *The Aegis*

VIP LOUNGE (deck 8 forward) ; *The Bow*

OBSERVATION DECK & ARBORITUM (deck 8 aft) : *Owl's Crest*

MESS HALL (deck 15 starboard aft) : *The Quiver*

MAIN ENGINEERING (deck 21 aft) : *The Forge* or *Hades* (this last one coming mostly from heat sensitive Andorians on board, including the captain)

SHUTTLEBAY 1 (deck 12 aft): class 10 shuttle: *Arrow 1 & Arrow 2*

class 7 shuttle : *Arrow 3*

class 6 shuttle : *Arrow 6 & 7*

(shuttle maintenance hangar on deck 13 aft): class 15 shuttlepod: *Arrow 10*

class 18 workbee: *Arrowhead 1*

SHUTTLEBAY 2 (deck 20 aft): class 7 shuttle : *Arrow 4 & Arrow 5*

class 6 shuttle : *Arrow 8*

class 15 shuttlepod : *Arrow 11 to 13*

SHUTTLEBAY 3 (deck 21 aft): class 15 shuttlepod : *Arrow 14 & Arrow 15*

class 18 workbee : *Arrowhead 2 to 4*
class 9 advanced shuttle/runabout: *Arrow 9*

The computer specialists have also nicknamed the computer core (deck 7 & 8 forward) "Delphi" as in "Oracle of Delphi" but it hasn't caught on yet with the rest of the crew.

Some key areas have not been nicknamed yet, most notably Sickbay (deck 7 forward) since the CMO was originally Deltan and not fond of Human mythology and renaming antics. It will be up to the new CMO to judge if it is appropriate or not to follow ship tradition.

COMMAND SECTION

Complement: 8 (1 captain, 1 executive officer plus: 6 bridge officers heading all departments which are numbered within their own section.

Current Command personnel:

Captain Kheren (Commanding officer)
Commander O'Conner, Michael D. (Executive officer)

Artemis Command Alumni:

Captain Harrison, Gregory (First commanding officer) MIA
Captain Froud, Kevin (refit first ship commander) KIA
Commander Rys, Joana (First Executive officer) KIA
Commander T'Rem (Executive officer) KIA
Lieutenant Commander Kheren (refit first Executive officer) field promoted to captaincy

MAIN BRIDGE (OLYMPUS)

The Primary operational control of the Ambassador Class, the main bridge, is located at the top of the primary hull (saucer section) or Deck 1.

There is an auxiliary control room on deck 5 that can assume all bridge functions in case of the main bridge becoming inoperative. It can only be activated by the highest officer present on board the ship through computer security multi-level identification including security codes.

The Main Bridge directly supervises all primary mission operations (with the exception of the Flight bay and assorted craft) and coordinates all departmental activities.

There are two turbolifts on the bridge that can handle normal transit around the starship. There is also an emergency ladder that connects the bridge to Deck 3. There is a door, on the aft platform of the bridge, that leads to the Conference Room, which is directly aft of the Main Bridge besides the Captain's Ready Room. Both are accessible via the second turbolift without the need to go through the bridge.

There are no escape pods connected to the bridge itself. Pods are located on all decks below Deck 3. Each pod can support two people for 4 hours in space, and has a maximum speed of half impulse. Two pods are reserved for the top four officers in the chain of command on the starship, because they are the last four to leave the ship. These are located on Deck 2.

As the number of experienced Captains dwindles in Starfleet, the antique navy notion of a Captain going down with his ship has been abolished. The top four officers in the chain of command will wait until everyone else is off the ship, opt to arm the auto-Destruct if needed, and then leave in those escape pods.

The Main Bridge is a highly restricted area; only Level 4 security clearance personnel (Officers with the Rank of Ensign or Higher) and authorized bridge personnel are allowed on the bridge.

All bridge officers have access to a small armory on the bridge that carries both type I and type II phasers. They are conveniently located in push-open drawers at each station on the side of the console itself or under each one of the 3 command chairs. The compartment also contains the new Personal Inertial Dampeners (PID) and hyposprays with stimulants and sedatives ready, a feature dating back to the original era of the Artemis when EMH were not yet available. (note that the ones under the captain's chair have a needle as conventional hyposprays do not penetrate Andorian chitinous skin).

The Main Bridge is an ejectable module, allowing for a wider variety in mission parameters. It is obviously the precursor of the saucer seper functionality of the following Galaxy class model, itself forerunner to the Multi Vector Assault Mode of the latest Prometheus class. The saucer section of the Ambassador class can detach in dire emergencies and move with thrusters and the initial ship's momentum; but, unlike the bridge module, it cannot reattach without the assistance of a starbase or shipyard.

Because of its topmost location where the highest ranking officers command the entire ship, the bridge of the USS Artemis has been nicknamed *Olympus*, in reference to the ancient Greek paradise atop a mountain where the gods like Artemis ruled the mortal world.

BRIDGE MODULE: *The Aegis*

Type: Integrated Craft, bridge separation system

Accommodation: 9 flight crew, 6 passengers.

Power Plant: Toroidal driver coil-based impulse propulsion system; aerodyne flight motors. One 400 cochrane warp engine, four RCS thrusters.

Dimensions: Diameter: 18 m Height: 8 m

Performance: Maximum Warp speed: factor 6; Maximum impulse: 0.65c; normal atmospheric cruising velocity: Mach 6; maximum atmospheric velocity: Mach 20.

Offensive systems: Four Type-V phaser emitters, two micro-torpedo launchers (fore and aft), aft-mounted variable purpose emitter.

Defensive systems: standard shielding with laForge program 1 Metaphasic shielding, deflector field, level 10 emergency forcefield, reinforced armor plating.

Technical systems: magnaclamp docking port underneath capable of linking up to other ships similarly equipped as well as to the ship saucer section; two-person transporter pad in conference room.

Ambassador-class vessels are equipped with a detachable Main Bridge: an ejectable module, allowing for a wider variety in mission parameters as an auxiliary spacecraft used for special exploration, diplomatic or emergency missions and situations. Much larger than a shuttlecraft, this module is mounted topside of the ship's saucer section like all Federation starship bridges where it remains docked during normal flight operations. It predates the saucer seper system of the following Galaxy class and the later concept of the multivector assault mode of the Prometheus design.

The Main Bridge is a highly restricted area; only Level 4 security clearance personnel (Officers with the Rank of Ensign or Higher) and authorized bridge personnel are allowed on the bridge. All officers have access to an armory on the bridge that carries both type I and II phasers.

Access is provided through a manual entry hatch affixed next to the main viewer and through both turbolifts which become automated airlocks when in separation mode. Ten EVA suits are also stored in a compartment near the main turbolift. The addition of a small 2-person transporter pad in the conference room also allow further egress and access.

It is essentially divided into two decks, with the bottom deck housing a toroidal driver coil-based impulse propulsion system, four connectors acting as landing legs for planetary landings, a series of aerodyne flight motors for atmospheric flight as well as fuel and maintenance access to various subsystems. It has no offensive systems but a full array of defenses, including the thickened armoring found on all vital areas of the original Ambassador class design.

Manned by the bridge crew, the habitable deck houses the flight deck, the conference room converted into the flight crew bunks and galley and the captain's ready room as his personal quarters and command /meeting center. The module is especially designed so that it can be launched from its parent ship at speeds as high as Warp 7, where it then coasts down to normal impulse speeds. A deflector system and onboard sensor pallets make the craft suitable for short-range travel. The forward multitask console right before the main viewer allows even a single person to fully man the module alone.

Upgrades to the module, like adding warp capability and a two-person short-range transporter system similar to what is aboard shuttles, have been initially scrapped when the Ambassador class was prematurely retired to use its tremendous success with new technologies to bring about the Galaxy class. Studies in warp-capable bridge modules at the time failed basic objective requirements due to the amount of internal reworking caused by the additional hardware, as well as sacrifices in terms of craft internal space and mass in relation to the original starship frame. Experimentation with membrane-based warp coils, as well as deployable warp nacelles, similar to the Sovereign-class Captain's Yacht and the primary hull of the Prometheus class were not yet implemented when production of the Ambassador class was interrupted.

Following the second mission of the refitted USS Artemis where the Bridge Module's limitations were highlighted, it was immediately upon return to Starbase 10 refitted with recent shuttle technology: hull integrated membrane warp coil and nacelles, miniaturized warp core, micro torpedo launchers, phaser arrays and small transporter, even an aft multipurpose emitter were all added to give back to the Aegis the purpose to which it had always been intended from initial design; to act as a supplementary starship for the Ambassador class main frame. Shields were also upgraded with the LaForge metaphasic program 1 and the old mechanical coupling replaced with a modern magnaclamp one to make room for the added warp and offensive capabilities.

OPERATIONS SECTION

Complement: 105 (30 Officers, 75 Enlisted)

*Current **Chief of Ops***

Lieutenant J,G, Blueknightone

Artemis Operations Alumni

Lieutenant Commander O'Conner, Michael D. (Refit first Chief of Ops) field promoted to Exec

OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS

TRACTOR BEAMS

Type: Multiphase subspace graviton beam for direct manipulation of objects from a submicron to a macroscopic level at any relative bearing to the starship. Each emitter directly mounted to the primary members of the ship's framework, to lessen the effects of isopiestic subspace shearing, inertial potential imbalance, and mechanical stress.

Output: Each emitter built around 3 multiphase 15 MW graviton polarity sources, each feeding a pair of 475 millicochrane subspace field amplifiers. Phase accuracy is within 1.3 arc-seconds/microsecond, giving superior interference pattern control. Each emitter can gain extra power from the SIF by means of molybdenum-jacketed waveguides. Subspace fields around the beam can envelop objects up to 920 meters, lowering the local gravitational constant of the universe for the region inside the field, making it much easier to manipulate.

Range: varies with payload mass and desired delta-v (change in relative velocity). Assuming a nominal 15 m/sec-squared delta-v, the multiphase tractor emitters can be used with a payload approaching 116,380,000,000 metric tons at less than 2,000 meters. Conversely, the same delta-v can be imparted to an object massing about one metric ton at ranges approaching 30,000 kilometers.

Primary purpose: Towing or manipulation of objects

Secondary purpose: Tactical; pushing enemy ships into each other. Countering ramming attacks, immobilizing LTL missiles, moving spatial objects to shield the hull

TRANSPORTERS

Total number of Systems:12

Personnel Transporters:6 (Transporter Rooms 1-2 - each with 3 transporter stations)

Max Payload Mass: 800kg (1,763 lbs)

Max Range: 40,000 km

Max Beam Up/Out Rate: Approx. 100 persons/hour each Transporter

Cargo Transporters:3

Max Payload Mass: 500 metric tons. Standard operation is molecular resolution (Non-Lifeform).

Set for quantum (lifeform) resolution: 1 metric ton

Max Beam Up/Out Rate (Quantum Setting): Approx. 100 persons/hour each Transporter

Emergency Transporters:3

Max Range: 15,000 km (send only) [depends on available power]

Max Beam Out Rate: 160 persons/hour each Transporter (560 persons per hour with 4

Emergency Transports)

COMMUNICATIONS

Standard Range: 42,000 - 100,000 kilometers

Standard Data Transmission Speed: 18.5 kiloquads per second

Subspace Communications Speed: Warp 9.9997

SHIP OPERATIONS

MISSION TYPES

Ship operations fall under one of three categories:

Flight Operations: all tasks relating directly to the function of the ship itself, include power generation, upkeep, environmental systems, and any other maintained and used to keep the vessel spaceworthy.

Primary Mission Operations: all tasks assigned and directed from the Main Bridge which require full control and discretion over ship navigation and resources.

Secondary Mission Operations: all tasks not under the direct control of the Main Bridge, or that do not impact Primary Mission Operations. Include long-range cultural, diplomatic or scientific programs run by independent or semi-autonomous groups aboard.

The Ambassador Class is classified as a multi-role Starship, in keeping with Federation Council Policy. This offers the Federation flexibility in assigning it nearly any objective within the realm of Starfleet's assigned duties.

Missions may fall into one of the following, as stated by Starfleet Policies:

Federation Policy and Diplomacy: used as an envoy during deep-space operations.

Emergency/Search and Rescue: include answering standard Federation emergency beacons, extraction of Federation or Non-Federation citizens in distress, retrieval of Federation or Non-Federation spacecraft in distress, small-scale planetary evacuation

Deep-space Exploration: long-range interstellar survey and mapping missions of a wide variety of planetary classifications and interstellar phenomena.

Contact with Alien Lifeforms: use of various xenobiological suites, and small cultural anthropology staff, allowing for limited deep-space life form study and interaction.

Ongoing Scientific Investigation: *scientific laboratories and a wide variety of sensor probes and sensor arrays to perform a wide range of ongoing scientific investigations.

Tactical/Defensive Operations: include patrolling, interdiction, or protecting any Federation interest from hostile intent in planetary or interstellar conflicts, or any peace keeping duty.

OPERATING PROTOCOLS

Normal operations are conducted in accordance with a variety of Starfleet standard operating rules, determined by the current operational state of the starship. These are determined by the Commanding Officer, although in certain specific cases, the Computer can automatically adjust to a higher alert status. Operating modes are:

CRUISE MODE or Standard Operations (standard ship operations excluding tactical/defensive operations; automated defense may be activated to raise shields in case of Yellow Alert conditions appearing like an object or high energy source moving deliberately on an intercept course.)

YELLOW ALERT or Security Alert (apprehended danger to ship and crew or near hazardous conditions. In this operating mode, a second shift is on standby to support the current active shift, shields are raised, phasers are pre-heated and one torpedo tube armed and ready)

RED ALERT or General Quarters (immediate danger to ship and crew or entering hazardous conditions; all on board assigned to duties; medical teams and damage control teams at the ready; security teams deployed on all decks and armed with phaser II and body armor; all personnel armed with phaser I; offensive and defensive measures fully activated)

CONDITION BLUE or External Support Mode (on approach to starbase, space station, shipyards etc, ship flight controls taken over by facility's flight operations; warp core powering down.)

CONDITION WHITE or Reduced Power Mode (in dock; ship is all powered down and maintained through facility's own power systems.)

FLIGHT OPERATIONS

Complement: 40 (20 Officers, 20 Enlisted)

Flight Operations Office: Deck 6, near Main Shuttlebay

All designated flight officers are periodically checked for piloting efficiency once every 6 months on all types of vehicles carried by the ship, and in ship piloting, in holodeck simulation.

SHIP FLIGHT PERFORMANCE

MANEUVERABILITY

Known to outclass the best Romulan warships of her era, the Ambassador class can maneuver at impulse speeds as if it was one class lower, as a light cruiser of her era (as a frigate in contemporary setting with the size growth of her current class which would make her 2 classes lower in current time period).

ATMOSPHERIC FLIGHT

Possible for short duration with thrusters only. Landing will be safe for the crew but cause 45% structural integrity loss, preventing deep space flight but still allowing interplanetary and short stellar travel.

EMERGENCY SAUCER SEPARATION

In catastrophic emergencies, saucer can house the entire crew and detach to move with impulse (+ 0.25%) and thrusters (maneuverability 2 classes lower) and able to do safe atmospheric flight and landing. Reattachment possible only at a starbase facility. If secondary hull is lost, the ship is officially decommissioned.

AUXILIARY CRAFTS

The recent refit of the USS Artemis included an upgrade in the standard complement of auxiliary crafts usually found on the Ambassador class.

There are three shuttlebays on the Artemis:

Shuttlebay 1 is on deck 6 aft of the saucer section and houses the crafts designated as Arrow 1 to 4 and Arrowhead 1, 2 and 5.

Shuttlebay 2 or main shuttle bay is on deck 20, aft of the secondary hull is the largest and houses Arrow 5 to 9 and Arrowhead 6 to 10.

Shuttlebay 3 in the lower aft part of the secondary hull on deck 21 and is the smallest, where Arrowhead 3 and 12 to 14 are stored.

TYPE-16 SHUTTLEPOD : *Arrowhead 1 to 4*

Type: Medium short-range sublight shuttle.

Accommodation: Two; pilot and system manager.

Power Plant: Two 750 millicochrane impulse driver engines, four RCS thrusters, four sarium krellide storage cells.

Dimensions: Length, 4.8 m; beam, 2.4 m; height 1.6 m.

Mass: 1.25 metric tons.

Performance: Maximum delta-v, 12,250 m/sec.

Armament: Two Type-IV phaser emitters.

Like the Type-15, the Type-16 Shuttlepod is a two person craft primarily used for short-ranged transportations of personnel and cargo, as well as for extravehicular inspections of Federation starships, stations and associated facilities. Lacking the ability to obtain warp speeds, the Type-16 is a poor candidate for even interplanetary travel, and is traditionally used as a means of transport between objects only a few kilometers apart. The craft is capable of atmospheric flight, allowing for routine flights between orbiting craft or stations and planetside facilities, and its cargo capacity is slightly higher than that of the Type-15. Ships of this type are stationed aboard various starship classes and stations, both spaceborne and planetside.

TYPE-18 SHUTTLEPOD: *Arrow 10 to 14*

Type: Medium short-range sublight shuttle.

Accommodation: Two; pilot and system manager.

Power Plant: Two 800 millicochrane impulse driver engines, four RCS thrusters, four sarium krellide storage cells.

Dimensions: Length, 4.5 m; beam, 3.1 m; height 1.8 m.

Mass: 1.12 metric tons.

Performance: Maximum delta-v, 16,750 m/sec.

Armament: Three Type-V phaser emitters.

Developed in the mid-2360s, the Type-18 Shuttlepod is somewhat of a departure from the traditional layout for ships of its size. In response to the growing threat of conflicts with various galactic powers bordering or near to the Federation, this shuttlepod was designed to handle more vigorous assignments that still fell into the short-range roles of a shuttlepods. Even with her parent vessel under attack, the Type-18 was designed to function in battle situations and could even be used as an escape vehicle should the need arise. Lacking a warp core, the pod is a poor choice for travel beyond several million kilometers. Ships of this type are seeing limited deployment on various border patrol and defensive starship classes, including the Defiant-, Sabre-, and Steamrunner-class.

TYPE-7 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT: *Arrow 6 & 7*

Type: Medium short-range warp shuttle.

Accommodation: Two flight crew, six passengers.

Power Plant: One 150 cochrane warp engine, two 750 millicochrane impulse engines, four RCS thrusters.

Dimensions: Length, 8.5 m; beam, 3.6 m; height 2.7 m.

Mass: 3.96 metric tones.

Performance: Sustained Warp 4.

Armament: Two Type-V phaser emitters.

With the borders of the Federation ever expanding as Starfleet reached the latter half of the 24th Century, the ASDB realized that there was sufficient need for a shuttlecraft capable of making the week-long journeys between planets and stations at low warp. The Type-7 was the first step in this direction, and is equipped for short-range warp travel. To offer comfort to its occupants, the shuttle contains a standard replicator system and sleeping compartments. The forward and aft compartments are separated by a small, informal living area that has a workstation and table. The aft area is normally equipped with a bunk area, but can easily be converted to allow for increased cargo capabilities. A medium-range transporter and atmospheric flight capabilities allow for the Type-7 to service starbases, starships and stations. Ships of this type are currently in use aboard most medium to large sized starship classes, as well as aboard stations and Starbases.

TYPE-8 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT: *Arrow 3 to 5*

Type: Light long-range warp shuttle.

Accommodation: Two flight crew, six passengers.

Power Plant: One 150 cochrane warp engine, two 750 millicochrane impulse engines, four RCS thrusters.

Dimensions: Length, 6.2 m; beam, 4.5 m; height 2.8 m.

Mass: 3.47 metric tones.

Performance: Warp 4.

Armament: Two Type-V phaser emitters.

Based upon the frame of the Type-6, the Type-8 Shuttlecraft is the most capable follow-up in the realm of personnel shuttles. Only slightly larger, the Type-8 is equipped with a medium-range transporter and has the ability to travel within a planet's atmosphere. With a large cargo area that can also seat six passengers, the shuttle is a capable transport craft. Slowly replacing its elder parent craft, the Type-8 is now seeing rapid deployment on all medium to large starships, as well as to Starbases and stations throughout the Federation.

TYPE-10 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT: *Arrow 1 & 2*

Type: Heavy long-range warp shuttle.

Accommodation: Two flight crew, two passengers.

Power Plant: One 250 cochrane warp engine, two 800 millicochrane impulse engines, four RCS thrusters.

Dimensions: Length, 9.64 m; beam, 5.82 m; height 3.35 m.

Mass: 19.73 metric tones.

Performance: Warp 5.

Armament: 3 Type-V phasers, 2 micro-torpedo launchers (1 fore 1 aft) jamming devices.

Developed specifically for the Defiant-class starship project, the Type-10 Personnel Shuttle is the largest departure from the traditional role of an auxiliary craft that Starfleet has made in the past century. Short of a dedicated fighter craft, the Type-10 is one of the most powerful auxiliary ships, with only the bulkier Type-11 being more heavily equipped. Nonetheless, the shuttle sports increased hull armor and the addition of micro-torpedo launchers, as well as a suite of tactical jamming devices. A larger warp coil assembly, as well as torpedo stores, makes the Type-10 much more heavier than other shuttles. Elements from the Defiant-class project that were incorporated into the shuttle include armored bussard collectors, as well as a complex plasma venting system for use during possible warp core breach situations. This bulky craft is equipped with a powerful navigation deflector that allows it to travel at high-warp, and a complex sensor system makes this shuttle suitable for reconnaissance work. Able to hold its own in battle situations, the Type-10 has first seen limited deployment on Defiant-class starships, as well as border patrol vessels and combat-ready ships but is now more widely used in larger ships.

TYPE-11 PERSONNEL SHUTTLECRAFT : *Arrow 8 & 9*

Type: Heavy long-range warp shuttle.

Accommodation: Four flight crew, six passengers.

Power Plant: One 400 cochrane warp engine, two 800 millicochrane impulse engines, four RCS thrusters.

Dimensions: Length, 16 m; beam, 9.78 m; height 4.25 m.

Mass: 28.11 metric tones.

Performance: Warp 6.

Armament: Four Type-V phaser emitters, two micro-torpedo launchers (fore and aft), aft-mounted veritable purpose emitter.

With an ultimate goal towards creating a useful all-purpose shuttlecraft for the Sovereign class battleship, the designers of the Type-11 Personnel Shuttle set out to create a craft that was equipped with all the systems of a starship within the shell of a relatively small shuttle. Allocation of the Danube-class runabout to starships in the field proved too costly, and with the expressed need for a capable shuttle, the Type-11 was born. Its overall frame and components are a meshing of lessons learned in both the Type-9 and Danube-class vessels. Impressive shielding, several phaser emitters, micro-torpedo launchers and a capable warp propulsion system makes this shuttle capable of performing a multitude of tasks. Both the ventral and dorsal areas of the shuttle feature a new magnaclamp docking port that is capable of linking up to other ships similarly equipped. A two-person transporter and a large aft compartment with a replicator adds to the shuttle's versatility. The end hope is that these all-purpose shuttles will replace the more specific-purpose crafts already stationed on starships, reducing the amount of space needed for shuttle storage in already-cramped bays. The Type-11 is now extensively used on modern starships after seeing selective deployment to further assess its capabilities in the field.

TECHNICAL NOTE: Major technological advancements in the 2370's allowed for further upgrades to be made to the engine systems aboard shuttlecrafts. These upgrades make these crafts more capable of long-range spaceflight and, like their starship counterparts, no longer damage subspace.

WORK BEE : *Arrowhead 5 to 8*

Type: Utility craft.

Accommodation: One operator.

Power Plant: One microfusion reactor, four RCS thrusters.

Dimensions: Length, 4.11 m; beam, 1.92 m; height 1.90 m.

Mass: 1.68 metric tones.

Performance: Maximum delta-v, 4,000 m/sec.

Armament:None

The Work Bee is a capable stand-alone craft used for inspection of spaceborne hardware, repairs, assembly, and other activities requiring remote manipulators. The fully pressurized craft has changed little in design during the past 150 years, although periodic updates to the internal systems are done routinely. Onboard fuel cells and microfusion generators can keep the craft operational for 76.4 hours, and the life-support systems can provide breathable air, drinking water and cooling for the pilot for as long as fifteen hours. If the pilot is wearing a pressure suit or SEWG, the craft allows for the operator to exit while conducting operations. Entrance and exit is provided by the forward window, which lifts vertically to allow the pilot to come and go.

A pair of robotic manipulator arms is folded beneath the main housing, and allows for work to be done through pilot-operated controls. In addition, the Work Bee is capable of handling a cargo attachment that makes it ideal for transferring cargo around large Starbase and spaceborne construction facilities. The cargo attachment features additional microfusion engines for supporting the increased mass.

BRIDGE MODULE: *The Aegis* (see Command section above)

ENGINEERING SECTION

Complement: 159 (60 Officers, 99 Enlisted)

Current Chief Engineer

Lieutenant J.G. Scott, Montgomery the Third

Artemis Engineering Alumni

Lieutenant Commander Harrison, Melinda (First chief engineer) MIA

Lieutenant J.G. Jackson, Anthony T. (refit first chief engineer) extended leave of absence

Lieutenant J.G. Sangliar, Marksus (refit maiden voyage chief engineer) transferred to SB10

Commander Etarudbo, N'Eligahn (chief engineer) transferred to USS McKenzie as Exec

MAIN ENGINEERING

On Deck 21, access to almost all systems aboard the starship, manages repairs, power flow, and general maintenance. Access is highly restricted, being the most sensitive area of the ship after the main bridge. Only officers with security access clearance 4 or higher (Ensign and above) and ship-registered engineering personnel may access this section. Any unlisted personnel, even starbase technical personnel and officers, must get permission from the Chief Engineer, the Chief of Security, the First Officer or the Captain to enter the area.

Entrance to Main Engineering is by two large blast doors that can be closed for internal or external security reasons.

Crescent-shaped observation area where technicians monitor various systems of the ship.

Floor-mounted situational display similar to the Master Systems Display on the Bridge.

Farther in from the observation area is the warp core and main control systems. The semi-circular room is designed to be small but exceedingly functional to save space and promote efficiency, especially under alert conditions. Usable consoles mounted on every system around the room provide primary control access for engineers and technicians.

Off to the port side of Main Engineering is the Chief Engineer's Office, equipped with a diagnostics table, assembly and repair equipment, a small replicator, and a personal use console with built-in private viewscreen.

In the center of Main Engineering is the Matter/Anti-Matter Assembly (M/ARA) where primary power for the ship is generated in the Matter/Anti-Matter Reaction Chamber (M/ARC) checked on a regular basis. Access is restricted, with front port to the Dilithium matrix and over side port for access to warp plasma conduits.

A second tier rings the second level of Main Engineering. A small single-person elevator, as well as a ladder on the opposite end, provides access.

Access to the Jefferies Tubes is provided in various places on both the First and Second Tier of Main Engineering.

Typical crew compliment in Main Engineering consists of 30 engineers and 40 technicians of various grades. During Red or Yellow Alert, that number is increased.

All systems and decks are accessible through a web of Jeffries tubes between the hulls and deck levels. Engineers and technicians are required to know the layout of those workspaces as well as those of the decks proper. Regular training is required to ensure that all engineering personnel can quickly and easily reach any part of the ship even when powered transportations are inoperative.

NOTE ON THE WARP PROPULSION SYSTEM

The extensive refit of the Artemis allowed installation of the latest Class 8 General Electric Matter/Anti-Matter Reaction Drive, first tested on the Sovereign class of battleships; a warp reactor which makes use of multi-lobed magnetic constriction segment columns that allow for additional reactant streams to surround the primary stream that travels down the center of the magnetic constrictor columns. Advances in pressure vessel construction and compact reactor injector nozzles with a six-lobed design allows for a total of seven reactant streams of both matter and antimatter to collide in the dilithium articulation chamber, resulting in the most powerful starship-grade reactor output to date. The matter/antimatter reactor assembly spans 14 decks with the dilithium chamber and plasma transfer conduits located on the second level of Main Engineering.

Another large advancement utilized in the development of the new warp propulsion system installed was the utilization of a rotatable dilithium articulation chamber within the warp core, where the matter and antimatter reactants are combined to create the high-energy warp plasma needed to power the engine nacelles, as well as shipboard systems through the use of EPS power taps. Computer-controlled rotation of the frame allows for manipulation of the manner in which the reactants meet, allowing for further control of the warp plasma into a "cleaner" power source. Redesigned verterium cortenide components within each pair of warp field coils is then able to use the warp plasma to generate a more energy-efficient subspace field with less particle waste products and stresses that were found in older propulsion systems to damage subspace, like the original one found on the Ambassador class. After the fleet-wide installation of this new variable warp geometry system, Starfleet was able to remove the so-called "Warp Speed Limit" of Warp 5, established in 2370 after the discovery of pollution by Dr. Serova in the Hekaras Corridor. Pursuant to Starfleet Command Directive 12856.A, all starships traveling within Federation space were required to receive engine upgrades that prevent the further pollution of subspace by 2380.

And so it was for the USS Artemis. However, although the engine can theoretically reach a sustainable speed of warp 9.98, the structural integrity of the Ambassador class only allows for a maximum warp speed of 9.6, after it was optimized by the former chief engineer Marksus Sangliar; although it can maintain it indefinitely, as it is designed for a sustainable speed of warp 9.7 on the original Sovereign class design.

NOTE ON THE IMPULSE PROPUSION SYSTEM

The original Scarbak V "Red Peacemakers" Ambassador Class mass drivers, developed specifically for the Ambassador Class are still fully operational on the Artemis.

The one engine, located on the neck, can propel the Ambassador Class at speeds within the area known as Standard impulse operations. These speeds are limited to a maximum speed of .25c, due to time dilation problems. Quarter impulse is rated at .0625c, half impulse being .125c and full impulse is rated at .25c or 1/4th the speed of light. However, not only can it reach 0.75c in emergencies, but the exceptional maneuverability it allows make the Ambassador class more nimble than any vessel of comparable mass or higher, and can even challenge lighter ship designs like the Intrepid class at sublight speeds.

NOTE ON THRUSTER ASSEMBLY

Still installed on board the Artemis are the Version 5 magnetohydrodynamic gas-fusion thrusters, developed specifically for the Ambassador Class. Each thruster quad produces 4 million Newtons of exhaust, contributing to the exceptional maneuverability of the class.

ENERGY RESERVES

Accumulators and rechargeable batteries are distributed throughout all key systems of the ship. They can be coupled, rerouted, bypassed or isolated from any engineering control station under the overall control of the bridge engineering station, the auxiliary control room or the main control station in engineering, in that order.

These are constantly kept fully charged by residue energy from both impulse and warp engines or by the reactors when both systems are otherwise inoperative or fully solicited.

Batteries will become automatically active if all other systems are inoperative. Life support systems and ship's automated disaster beacon are prioritized by an integrated hard-wired program that cannot be bypassed in the advent when no other system can provide for environmental controls. Only residual energy can then be allocated from the batteries to other systems, if any.

The automatic disaster beacon will start broadcasting if any the batteries are left as a power source, unless deactivated by the proper command codes.

SCIENCE SECTION

Science Complement: 153 (45 Officers, 108 Enlisted)

*Current **Chief of Science***

Lieutenant Syntron

Artemis Science Alumni

Lieutenant Commander T'Rem (First chief of science) promoted to Exec of the Artemis, KIA
Lieutenant J.G. DeVem (Refit first chief of science) extended medical leave on Trill homeworld
Lieutenant J.G. M'Rall, Lucy Shinboline (Refit maiden voyage chief of science) transferred to USS Spectre

Science facilities:

5 bio-chem-physics labs: deck 5 (usable for medical)

Primary computer core: Deck 6-7-8

Science Office: Deck 7

5 Primary Labs: Deck 7 : 2 for bio-chem-physics; 2 for extraterrestrial analysis; 1 genetic lab

5 Secondary Labs: Deck 8

Probe storage: Deck 12 & 13

Chief Science Officer Office: Deck 14 next to Stellar Cartography room

Stellar Cartography: Deck 14

5 Tertiary Adaptable Multipurpose Labs; Deck 16

Secondary computer core: Deck 17-18

Sensors:

Long Range Sensors – Deck 10, near main deflector dish

20 Lateral Sensor Pallets – Various, external*can work independently or combines.

1 Warp current sensor – tracking warp fields

Completely refitted for 25th century deep space exploration, the USS Artemis uses all the benefits of its large Ambassador class hull capacity to provide the most performing mobile science platform currently available for Lotus Fleet.

Two specialized sections of the ship are most noteworthy:

STELLAR CARTOGRAPHY BAY

The entrance to the main stellar cartography bay is located on Deck 14. The lab is served by a direct Electro-Plasma System power feed from the impulse engines. All information is directed to the bridge and can be displayed on any console or the main viewscreen, the auxiliary screen, the science station display or the auxiliary station's display. The multitask station at the front of the bridge can also access it if converted into a science console.

The Chief Science Officer's office is located next to the Stellar Cartography bay. Newly installed during the Artemis refit, it is slightly larger than a standard cargo bay and is every bit as impressive as the famous Galaxy-class Stellar Cartography Bay. When under warp the Stellar Cartography Bay is manned by a supervising officer and up to three subordinates.

The large room contains highly-specialized holographic emitters which are capable of creating detailed representations of any region of space stored in the ship's computer or from data transmitted from probes or other external sources. The Artemis stellar cartography room has been upgraded with the newest holographic systems, capable of rendering stellar locations in three dimensions and real time as well as provide a full range of simulation studies and observations.

A significant portion of the computer core is dedicated to data storage and can store up to a full year of cosmology data that can later be processed at a starbase science facility.

ASTROMETRICS LAB

The Artemis also has on deck 14 an upgraded astrometrics laboratory, which closely resembles the Intrepid-class Stellar Cartography room, exactly where the former astrometrics lab was located on the original design.

An advancement in integrated data processing, the Astrometrics Laboratory brings with it technological refinements used first aboard the USS Voyager. Served directly by the auxiliary computer core, the Astrometrics Lab conceivably has the largest single processing potential of any single laboratory aboard a ship saves the main stellar cartography bay.

Facilities include multiple multi-use consoles, control facilities, a large wraparound viewscreen and a centrally placed dais with a floor-mounted holo imaging emitter. With the wide range of science facilities aboard, and the sophisticated high power DSS sensor system, the Artemis state of the art astrometrics lab brings those data streams together in one singular laboratory designed as a brain trust of sorts for visual scientific study. It also features a trio of large viewscreens on each of the side walls with the consoles intended for research crew use.

All information is directed to the bridge and can be displayed on any console or the main viewscreen. When under warp or staffed by demand, the Astrometrics Laboratory is manned by one supervising officer and as many as eight subordinates and can also serve the functions of Stellar Cartography if several or large scale researches are required.

Combined with the upgraded bridge science station, in conjunction with other Science upgrades and labs, the refitted USS Artemis is now rated at 120% scientific capability when compared to the Galaxy-class' 100%.

MEDICAL SECTION

Complement: 132 (33 Officers, 99 Enlisted)

*Current **Chief Medical Officer***

Doctor Aquila, Caius Castiel (Lieutenant J.G.)

Artemis Medical Alumni

Doctor Nasaro-Myth, Elliago (Lieutenant, Refit First CMO) retired

Doctor Sage, Josiah (Lieutenant, CMO) retired

Medical Resources:

One large sickbay facility on Deck 7 with :

- Intensive-care ward
- Medical laboratory
- Nursery
- CMO's office
- 4 surgical suites
- Null-grav therapy ward
- Morgue
- Biohazard isolation unit
- Dental care office

100 Stasis units are stored for general epidemic or heavy casualty scenarios, would spare parts to built rapidly in case of catastrophic situations.

Lifepods can also serve as isolation units in the direst of emergencies when current facilities aren't adequate.

Pursuant to new Medical Protocols, all Medical Facilities are equipped with holoemitters for the emergency usage of the Emergency Medical Holographic System.

Also pursuant to recent developments in holotechnology; holoemitters are distributed throughout the ship for medical and technical purposes. Safety protocols are hardwired into the system and cannot be bypassed aboard the ship anywhere.

Counseling resources: the Ship's Counselor's private office is on Deck 7, near main Medical. The office has standard furnishings and is decorated to the Counselor's preference. Also in the office are a personal viewscreen, a computer display, and replicator.

There is an individual therapy room furnished with chairs and couch for one on one sessions. There is also a large, group therapy room, consisting of several couches and chairs, located adjacent to the Counselor's office.

If a crewmember suffers a psychotic episode, isolation from the crew is done in sickbay, in the isolation unit, or in the intensive care units, determined by bed availability. Confinement to quarters is a preferred option to imprisonment unless the case represents a threat to ship and crew. The brig is used only in the gravest cases and/or when there is no other room available.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL OPERATIONS

Starfleet Policy and Medical Emergency Operations requires that at least 40% of the officers and crew are cross-trained to serve as Emergency Medical Technicians, to serve as triage specialists, medics, and other emergency medical functions with non-medical emergency operations in engineering or tactical departments.

The recreation deck and lounge on deck 15 and the VIP/guest quarters on deck 2 can serve as emergency intensive care wards, within 30 minutes with maximum engineering support.

The shuttle bay has 5 mobile hospitals deployable either on the flight deck, or transported to Cargo Bay 2 and 3 for emergency overflow triage centers.

Cargo Bay 3 also provides for the emergency atmosphere recalibration to type H,K, or L environments for non-humanoid casualties.* All facilities are equipped with full Bio-hazard suites.

All medical personnel are tested for expertise and efficiency once every 6 months. All medical emergency assistance ship complement are tested once every 12 months.

TACTICAL AND SECURITY SECTION

Complement: 159 (60 Officers, 99 Enlisted)

*Current **Security & Tactical Chief***

Lieutenant J.G. Tyvya (acting chief of security/tactical)

Artemis Security & Tactical Alumni

Commander Alther, Kelsey (Refit first chief of security/tactical) retired

SECURITY CENTERS:

Security Office: Deck 9

Armory : Deck 9

Torpedo/probe magazine and weapons control room; Deck 9 & 12 forward (accessible through torpedo launchers mechanism also deck 10 and 13) aft magazine and control deck 22 (accessible through deck 23 launcher mechanism)

Brig : Deck 17 (minimal security brig deck 5)

Weapons control & maintenance: Main Deck 5 (aft deck 22)

Note: The entire security department follows not the standard 8 hours 3 shifts of starship operations but four 6-hours shifts station duty. This schedule has 3 purposes:

- 1- keep security personnel at optimum efficiency with shorter shifts
- 2- throw off any shift-synchronized attack on the ship by being out of sync with standard ship schedule and with more security personnel routinely circulating and active throughout the ship.
- 3- leaving 2 hours on duty for mandatory daily study training and thus having a second shift always at readiness to immediately assist the on-duty shift in case of a sudden alert.

This protocol was introduced on the USS Lotus by Captain Kheren while he was Chief of Security/Tactical aboard the flagship and applied as soon as he was made First officer of the Artemis, then made permanent with his captaincy.

SHIP'S TACTICAL SUMMARY:

TACTICAL SENSORS; 20 independent automatic-locking emitters 50% ECM resistant and operates within particle flux nebuleas with 50% accuracy and definition.

STRUCTURE:7cm ablative decaterium armor over a double duranium/tritarium hull

DEFENSIVE SHIELDS: 12 shield grids powered by warp core or impulse engines (or added for reinforcement) (each one 145,9 MW overlapping up to 1750 MW but usually with only 8 emitters up to 1258,8 MW). 12% protection from full EM spectrum range 10m from hull modulated with tactical sensor reading to match enemy weapon frequency for added resistance.

Shield modulation option against variable frequency attack and graviton shifting against more powerful weapons like neutron-carbide beams of Tamarian vessels.

The Metaphasic LaForge program 1 allows the ship to enter even a star's corona and fully protect the ship from any energy discharge not concentrated on a specific point (like weapon).

INTERNAL FORCE FIELD GRID: programmable for coordinated movement/containment in case of boarding or infestation. The security crews are trained regularly in various scenarios to coordinate with the forcefield placements.

PHASERS: 10 emitter arrays type X (5.1 MW X2 if paired) powered by impulse and/or fusion reactors modulating with sensors to find and penetrate shield frequencies at 0.986c at 300,000km range. Each is capable of pulse or beam output.

TORPEDOES: 2 tubes forward, 1 tube aft ; 125 typ 2 Quantum torpedoes and 125 type 6 MK XXV photon warheads (+35 configured as probes) autotargeting option 3,500,000 km range at warp 9.9999 Second generation high speed multi launchers able each to fire 1-5 torpedos in one salvo individually or in pattern with option of remote control on detonation

ARMORY CONTENT:

750 type I phasers (16 settings)

750 type II phaser pistols (handle and power pack affixed to type 1)

250 type III phaser rifles (as phaser II but on longer body and bigger power pack)

250 type IIIc compression phaser rifles

250 Duranium blade combat knives (security personnel only)

BRIG: 8 double occupancy cells with level 10 forcefields
4 additional single cells with level 10 forcefields on deck 5
additional cells can be rigged in cargo bays

GYMNASIUM: all security personnel aboard Ambassador class starships are required to train in ancient weaponry to compensate for lack of modern armament and gain experience against foes using such weapons like Klingons and Jem'Hadar.

All personnel are also tested every 6 months in hand to hand combat with the computer combat program which adapts to every individual and learn from one's own style of fighting.

Security personnel on board the Artemis are also required by the captain to train in knife combat and survival use, tested every 6 months, to have a handy tool in case of minimal survival conditions and if facing archaic situations or weapon-wielding ones.

PHASER RANGE: All personnel aboard Ambassador class starship must maintain a minimum level of 14 (on a scale of 25) of marksmanship with type I and II, except security personnel who must have at least level 17 marksmanship with all types of phaser weapons.

All personnel are tested once every 6 months on marksmanship. All testing and training are normally provided by the Marines Lead Officer, but can also be given by the Chief of Security/Tactical or any security/tactical officer designated by the chief, according to expertise and as part of their assigned duty.

ESCAPE PODS

Aside from shuttlecraft or transporters, the primary survival craft of the Ambassador class is the escape pod. Each ship of this class carries 100 of the 8-person variants, 5.6 meters tall and 6.2 meters along the edge of the triangle. Each supports a full complement for 8 months, longer if they are connected together. All are equipped with navigational sensors, microthrusters and emergency subspace communication equipment.

EMERGENCY PROTOCOLS

PERSONAL INERTIAL DAMPENERS (PIDS): a prototype safety harness developed by the first chief engineer of the Artemis, Lieutenant Anthony T. Jackson, it is a portable harness looking and worn like a belt buckle reminiscent of the one seen on the old 23rd century uniforms; activated by simple hand pressure, it deploys a crossing belt pattern across the body (much like the Sovereign class Command chair harness that inspired it) and provide a close range personal inertial dampening field to the wearer. This protects the wearer from loss of ship's own inertial dampeners or gravity as if wearing magnetic boots and can even support vital functions in vacuum or hazardous conditions (coolant or radiation leaks etc)for a up to 5 minutes. It can also act as a crude armor against blunt trauma and is therefore also incorporated into security armor.

Every station throughout the ship is equipped with one readily available to each crewmember (usually inside the side panel or back of seats).

RESCUE OPERATIONS

Rescue and Evacuation Operations fall into one of two categories:

1-Rescue Scenarios

Resources available :

Transport 350 persons/hour via personnel transporters.

Availability of 3 Type 6 shuttlecrafts on hot-standby for immediate launch

All other shuttlecrafts available for launch in an hour's notice. Total transport capabilities of these vary but an average of 150 persons/hour can be offloaded from a standard orbit to a planetary surface.

Up to 4800 evacuees capacity with conversion of the shuttle bays and cargo bays into emergency living quarters.

Ability to convert Hologuites, the Recreation Deck and the Crew Lounge to emergency triage and medical centers.

Ability to convert Cargo Bay 3 to type H,K, or L environments, intended for non-humanoid casualties.

2- Evacuation Scenarios

Resources available :

All rescue scenarios resources applied

Use of escape pods. 100 of the 8-person triangular shaped variants, measuring 5.6 meters tall and 6.2 meters on a side. Each supports a full compliment for 8 months, longer if connected in "Gaggle Mode".

Environmental Suits available for evacuation. In such a scenario, personnel can evacuate via airlocks, the flight bay, or through exterior turbolift couplings.They are available at all exterior egress points, along with survival lockers spaced through-out the habitable portions of the starship.

Exterior windows removable for egress. These manual releases are only activated in the event of atmosphere loss, power loss, certain Red Alert conditions, and if personnel in contiguous compartments have access to environmental suits.

STARFLEET RECORDS

Kheren

Captain

Commanding officer

USS Artemis NCC-64121

note: sections in *italics* (except for ship names) are not in the official record but might be found by an investigating officer and is known by any Andorian.



Full Name: Kheren Kalel Th' Shelleryll (*real name Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'leryll Keith Reiji*)

Species: Andorian

Gender: Thaan (*declared; see medical record below*)

Hair Color: Silvery white

Eye Color: Silver

Skin Color: dark blue

Height: 1,83 m (6')

Weight: 150kg (330lbs but looks like he weights barely 90kg- 200 lbs because of his abnormal muscle and bone density... thus looks very athletic to others like Humans but truly massive to Andorians)

Background information

Date of birth (Stardate 36636.3): May 29th 2358 according to Terran calendar

Place of birth: Andoria (Northern hemisphere, Tharnak community, Infinity Temple near the Great Wash) (Primary moon of Andor or Procyon VIII)

Age: 35 Andorian years (53 standard years)

Parents: *Note: selected donators of genetic material*

Fathers: Ch'El (deceased) and Th'Kal

Mothers: Sh'Shel (deceased) and Zh'Leryll

Siblings:

Ch'Danil, Th'Mijeb, Zh'Krisia, Sh'Zh'Lya (deceased), Ch'Dini

Note: natural born of each donator except for Sh'Zh'Lya which was the "female" part of the same experiment that was also left to die with him and didn't survive.(see below)

Family History:

1st born of Andorian priests of the Infinite and headmembers of the Revisionist Party. *He was not however naturally conceived and bears the genetic markings of an extinct clan, artificially reconstructed. Therefore, he is officially clanless and without a true family. His formal adoption request by the scientist-priests was rejected.*

Note: His genetic code is a perfect reconstruction of that of the extinct clan Reiji. As it was reknowned to be the clan most dedicated of all to the traditions of the Andorian people, it was revived in Kheren with two purposes: mollify the inevitable outrage of the traditionalists over their creation... and remind how old ways and fear of change can bring about annihilation of an entire people, while new ways can ensure survival.

Personal History:

Like all Andorians, he has University level education, his being in Cosmology, Master degree (Laibok Capital University). He is also well versed in Philosophy and History from spending his entire childhood in a Umanirist Monastery, and in Comparative Anatomy and Physiology learned as part of his exhaustive martial arts training.

- Grandmaster and teacher of Andorian martial arts, won 27 duels (*4 to the death in the Ushaan Tor*).
- 20 Terran years of service in the Andorian Imperial Guard. Rose to the rank of captain of the *Kumari*, the Flagship of the Andorian defense force.
- After he loses all promised mates before bonding, *and because of his peculiar nature and social condition*, left his homeworld and joined Starfleet.
- Graduated with Highest Honors from Starfleet Academy, top of his class most notably in Cosmology, Xenology, History, piloting/navigation and all combat related courses.
- Won 3 years in a row the Open martial arts Grand Championship of the Federation, representing the Academy in both free-style unarmed and traditional weapons open divisions.
- Declined teaching advanced martial arts to section 31 elite forces on moral and ethical grounds.(file classified)

Medical History:

He is the only known attempt by the Andorian Progressist Party to genetically modify the race into a 2-gender one. He is both Thaan and Chan (fully male) and the mutation caused his skin to darken, concentrated testosterone levels giving him abnormal strength, muscularity and aggression, and his antennae to become retractable like Andorian genitals. Rejected by his clan for his "blasphemous imperfections" to die in the outside cold, he survived long enough to be rescued by his genitor priests of the Infinite Church as a reincarnation of Thirishar the First Hero. Never bonded, he is however still fertile way past normal Andorian period.

Higher level of tolerance to cold than even the Andorian norm, but adversely more sensitive to heat than others of his species.

Survived phase infection, after being shot from accidental friendly fire, during an alien takeover attempt on the USS Savoy while leading an away mission. It left a large burnt scar across his chest he refuses to have erased, just like the 2 cuts and the indentation marking his forehead from his previous death duels.

The unique retractability of his antennae makes him more prone to dizziness and sensory confusion under electromagnetic anomalies and reflexively retract into his skull when unconscious, providing protection and deeper sleep but causing deafness and loss of color and depth of vision.

Starfleet Record:

Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy, *USS Aurora*: graduated with honors in tactical/security division on stardate 82555.5 (2408) with specialty in close-quarter combat, top of his class in 15 out of 26 courses, making him class of 08 Valedictorian.

Lotus Fleet *Starbase 10*: security crewman during the Romulan incursion, helped find and destroy cloaked enemy ship. Immediately promoted to Ensign and department head on board the flagship for his actions.

Lotus Fleet *USS Lotus*: assigned as chief of security/tactical officer with the rank of Ensign. Although severely injured during the rescue of the lost USS Savoy, contributed to the successful First Contact with the Circoids despite the initial conflict with the aliens, earning him a fast promotion in the field.

Lotus Fleet *USS Lotus*: assigned as chief of security/tactical officer with the rank of Lieutenant Junior grade. His efficient tactical approach in commandeering a cloaked Romulan scoutship during a delicate situation earned him full Lieutenant status and the Star Cross (details of the mission are classified)

Lotus Fleet *USS Lotus*: initially assigned as chief of security/tactical officer with the rank of Lieutenant, the Borg War saw him promoted in the field to Acting First officer of the flagship and even to take temporary command when the acting captain was incapacitated. His unorthodox and bewildering tactics directly contributed to the successful stand at the battle of Starbase 10, earning him the Starfleet Command Decoration, promotion to Lieutenant-Commander and to be offered the position of First officer of the next starship to serve under the Lotus Fleet banner.

Lotus Fleet Academy *Command School*: class of 11 graduate majoring in leadership development with perfect scores in basic command courses.

Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Initially assigned as First Officer with the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Promoted in the field to captaincy after accidental death of commanding officer. His subsequent discovery of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly during the rescue mission also earned him the Science Decoration from Starfleet.

Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Officially assigned as commanding officer with the rank of captain; ordered to further investigate the anomaly, then rerouted to check possible enemy incursion. Discovery of a cloaked Dyson shell and first contact with inhabitants, the X'ell, while saving them and the UFP from both Klingon and Azimuth Horizon threats, all earning him the Lotus Fleet Medal of Diplomacy.

Lotus fleet *USS Artemis*: Assigned as commanding officer with the rank of captain, was ordered by Starfleet Intelligence to lead his ship into a covert operation that flushed out inadvertently the fanatical cult of the Horizon Children and solved the twenty-five years old mystery of disappearances in the Mutara nebula (the Achilles Incident, details classified).

Current Assignment:

Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Commanding officer with the rank of Captain. Assigned to a deep study of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly prior to Lotus Fleet's major operation to deal decisively with the threat.

AWARDS

Starfleet Command Decoration

Starfleet Science Decoration

The Star Cross

Lotus Fleet Medal of Diplomacy

Michael O'Conner
Commander
1st officer / Executive officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: O'Conner, Michael David

Species: Human

Gender: Male

Hair Color: Red

Eye Color: Green

Skin Color: Caucasian

Height: 1,90 m (6' 3")

Weight: 77kg (170lbs)

Background Information

Date of birth: Stardate 53880.74 (March 9th 2377 on the Terran calendar)

Place of birth: Mars, Sol System

Age: 32

Parents:

Father: Ryan O'Conner, Former Starfleet captain, Mars (Sol IV)

Mother: Janis O'Conner, Mars (Sol IV)

Siblings:

Brother: Ensign John O'Conner, Engineer USS Triton

Sister: Cadet Rebeca O'Conner, Starfleet Academy, Engineering.

Family History:

Ryan and Janis met right before the outbreak of the Dominion war. They both fought in the war as commanders on the USS Pendragon. After the war, they got married and moved to Mars where they had Michael and his siblings.

Personal History:

Michael was never much of a troublemaker and his life was quite normal if not boring during his early years. But his boring life did give him quite a bit of time to study and he made it in to Academy at a young age.

Medical History

Had a habit of doing combat training on the holodeck with the safeties off. That was before the general fleetwide hardwiring of safeties made such dangerous practices impossible to prevent dangerous occurrences on ships equipped with shipwide holoemitters.

Starfleet Record:

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy, *USS Aurora* : admitted a year earlier than the norm, he graduated within the Engineering division on Stardate 73372.6 (2398) after cramming one full year of study into all his summer periods, completing his Academy training in a 3 years record time.
- Reserve Fleet *USS Thunderchild* (NCC-63549); assigned to a recently retrofitted Akira class as an engineering crewman. His commanding officer admired his willingness to help other engineers during his off time and his endless tinkering that always seemed to come in handy. While on the Thunderchild he befriended security officer Akari Kato. While she seem small and weak on the outside she introduced Michael to Kenjutsu and other forms of combat training. Admiring his determination, she taught him many different fighting styles and marksmanship, and even gave him a katana when he left the ship.
- Lotus Fleet *Starbase 10*; Assigned as duty engineer with the rank of Ensign, earning much experience during eight years of hard work and dedicated service. Part of the starbase personnel that helped retake it from a Romulan takeover.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Spectre*; Assigned as Chief Engineer despite his low rank of Lieutenant. Promoted in the field to Executive officer following the mysterious and debilitating illness of the commanding officer, forcing the actual First officer to take command. Then, his position is confirmed during the Borg Invasion, where his engineering skills in making the ship able to effectively fight the invaders earned him a quick promotion and the Cochrane Medal of Excellence.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*; request transfer as Executive officer to the newly refitted Ambassador class deep space explorer but is instead offered the position of Chief of Operations, at the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Again, the sudden death of the commanding officer brings him up to the Executive position. His successful command of the ship while the new captain was incapacitated during the escape from the newly discovered Azimuth Horizon anomaly earned him another fast promotion and the Command Decoration from Starfleet.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*; assigned as First Officer with the rank of Commander. His leadership during the delicate commando operation planned to chase off a Klingon squadron from a newly discovered civilization of a Dyson shell, without violating the laws of the natives or provoking a war, earned him the Prentares Ribbon of Commendation.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*; assigned as First officer with the rank of Commander. His exemplary performance and attitude as a Starfleet officer during the classified crisis of the Achilles Incident earned him the Award of Valor from Starfleet Command.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Executive officer with the rank of Commander.

AWARDS

Cochrane Medal of Excellence
Starfleet Command Decoration
Prentares Ribbon of Commendation
Award of Valor

Syntron

Lieutenant

2nd officer / Chief Science officer

USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: Syntron, son of Kalellothran, son of Siyak

Species: Vulcan

Gender: Male

Hair Color: Black

Eye Color: Blue

Skin Color: Olive-light greenish/tan hue

Height: 1,93m (6'4")

Weight: 84kg (185 lbs)

Background Information

Date of birth: stardate 62840.8 (Fri Dec 11 12:11:00 MST 2386 by terran calendar)

Place of birth: Vulcan

Age: 24 (Terran years)

Parents

Father: Kalellothran: An Administrator of the Vulcan Security Directorate

Mother: T'Maire: A Vulcan Historian and Archivist in the Vulcan Ministry of Information

Siblings:

Older Brother: S'Claulan, a mid-level Supervisor in the Vulcan Space Counsel

Family History

Syntron is the youngest offspring of Kalelothran and T'Maire Nacluv. His parents are both working professionals on Vulcan. They have lived on their current family property within range of Mount Seleya on Vulcan for many generations, each generation adapting and modifying the property and its structures according to the necessity of technological and biological circumstances and needs. Each family member has taken a different professional path, yet share in a rich commitment to Vulcan heritage.

Personal History

Syntron grew up with his older brother and parents on the foothills of Vulcan near Mount Seleya and the Gol plateau. While a student at the Vulcan Academy, he gravitated toward the Sciences in his studies and music as a hobby. He was accomplished with the Vulcan lyre and while a cadet at Starfleet Academy, he began also studying the terran violin. He travels with both in his possession to improve his skills with each. They have also become a part of his meditative ritual. There are no records indicating that he has taken a mate in pon farr.

Once out of the homeworld, the most challenging aspects in Starfleet Academy weren't the academic studies or the rigorous physical demands during combat exercises. These came rather easily to Syntron. His challenge was learning to deal with an array of interpersonal interactions from a variety of beings attending the academy. Many of these beings were often highly emotional, melodramatic, and totally illogical. Their continuous outbursts and bewildering reactions perplexed Syntron throughout his time in the academy.

He found himself at times playing the "straight man" to numerous pranks and mischievous ploys that his fellow cadets would play on each other. Eventually, he learned how to utilize his quick wit and improvisational skills to counteract many of their schemes, and ultimately became a valued and sought after accomplice in the ensuing pranks.

Syntron learned that these interactions were paradoxically essential in developing long-lasting personal relationships and trust with his fellow cadets, despite the irrational appearance of such questionable activities. This was a skill not taught in Starfleet Academy, but was nevertheless just as vital as any required Starfleet course.

Medical History (if any)

Nothing noteworthy in his medical history, other than having to build up an immunity to a variety of species diseases he was exposed to attending the academy, and learning to adapt to a cooler more humid environment in most places that he's been stationed.

Starfleet Record:

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy *USS Aurora*: graduated on stardate 83473.1 (2409) in the Science division.
- Reserve Fleet *Starbase 24*: Since graduating from the academy, Syntron has participated in a number of starship training missions: most simulated, but also placed on several ships as a temporarily replacement for crew members on short-term leave, or serving as an assistant and an unofficial science advisor to Starfleet Joint Chiefs where he earned his Ensign rank.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief of Science with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade; he was brought hastily to the Artemis on board one of the ships of the Task Force Alpha of 1st Fleet rushing to assist her against a possible Klingon invading force. Transferred on board, his deep research of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly provided an effective way to deter its threat from a newly discovered Dyson shell inhabited by an unknown civilization, earning the Starfleet Science Decoration for his discovery.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as chief science officer with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade; during the classified Achilles Incident, he devised a new type of sensor able to penetrate nebula interferences, decrypted sensitive data crucial to ship and crew survival and properly assumed command at a critical moment, all of which earned him a promotion to full Lieutenant status, higher ship responsibilities and the Star Cross distinction.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Chief science officer and second in command with the rank of Lieutenant.

AWARDS

Starfleet Science Decoration
The Star Cross

Montgomery Scott III
Lieutenant Junior Grade
3rd Officer / Chief Engineering Officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full name : Scott, Montgomery, third to bear the name

Species : Human

Gender : Male

Hair Color : Brown

Eye Color : Brown

Skin Color : Caucasian

Height : 1,78m (5' 10)

Weight : 68kg (150 lbs)

Background Information

Date of birth : stardate 64052.3

Place of birth : London, United Kingdom, Earth (Sol III)

Age : 25

Parents

Montgomery Scott Jr. - Father - Scotty's son. Didn't go into engineering, but medical instead. Described it as "engineering of the body". Retired after having Montgomery Scott III.

Carol Rockhaven - Mother - Montgomery Scott Jr. met her during leave, and married her a year later, producing Montgomery Scott III. She was an artist who loved to paint various planetary landscapes.

Cares for his parents and hopes that they're alright while he's on a starship.

Siblings

None.

Family History

Montgomery Scott III is the famous Montgomery Scott Sr.'s grandson who served as chief engineer of the legendary captain James T. Kirk on board the original starship Enterprise. The males in the family have (for the most part) joined Starfleet. They have a long and proud history of engineers that can get the job done quickly and decisively.

Personal History

Scott was born on Earth. This was in the middle of leave time of his father, who was a CMO aboard a starship. He spent his entire life in starships and among Starfleet people, raised on the legends of his grandfather's exploits.

Medical History

No major surgeries or injuries.

Starfleet Record

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy, *USS Aurora* : graduated within the Engineering division on Stardate 84390.8 (2410) in general engineering. As an engineer, he believes that one must focus at the task at hand and don't get too stressed out in the process. After the highly critical task has been completed, then one can relax.

- 9th Fleet, *space station DS9* : spent three years serving as an Engineer Ensign; his excellent tour of duty had his request to join the elite Starfleet division of Lotus Fleet approved.

Current assignement

- Lotus Fleet, *USS Artemis* : assigned as Chief Engineer with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade.

Brad Jackson
Lieutenant Junior Grade
4th Officer / Chief Tactical & Security Officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Character Name: Jackson, Bradley

Species: Human

Gender: Male

Hair Color: Black

Eye Color: Blue

Skin Color: White/Tan

Height: 1,86m (6ft 1inch)

Weight: 86kg (190lbs)

Background Information

Date of birth; stardate 62503.61

Place of birth: Earth (Portland, Oregon, North American continent) (Sol III)

Age: 27

Parents

Father: Captain Bradley Jackson Senior

Mother: Anika Jackson

Siblings: None

Family History

Brad was born to Ankia and Bradley in Portland Oregon, on Earth. Ankia was a professor of medicine at the Starfleet Academy while his father was an up and coming command officer. Before Brad was born everything had seemed to be perfect, but shortly after his birth things changed. His father got an offer for command of the USS Yensid and refused to turn it down even though Anika was unwilling to leave Earth. She loved medicine and she loved Earth so she let the newly promoted Captain leave. The Yensid was sent on a patrol mission and was ambushed and destroyed with all hands lost during its first mission. Abandoning their new family for the stars, and ultimately dying was something Anika could never forgive him for as she lived the life of a single mother.

Personal History

Brad knew he wanted a life in Starfleet early, but he also knew he didn't want to live on Earth like his mother. He knew that as soon as he left she was going to believe that he was betraying her, but his dreams were in the stars... so he left. The day he got his first assignment had been one of the hardest days of his life. They had gotten into the biggest fight ever, but he had already made his decision so he left. Over the past few years he's tried to get in contact with her, but every time he calls she isn't available.

Medical History (if any)

None

Previous Assignments

Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet, *USS Aurora*; graduated Stardate 84483.8 in Tactical and Security with a specialization in rescue operations with a strong background in medicine. He came out with the strong belief that Sometimes you have to do what you believe is right no matter how hard it is and how much you have to give up for it. Brad is interested in taking the Kobayashi Maru in the future but did not pursue it in the Academy.

- Starfleet Reserve Fleet, *USS Tsunami* : assigned to security with the rank of Petty officer 3rd class and served for two years before being transferred upon promotion.

- Starfleet Reserve Fleet, *USS Camelot* : assigned as assistant chief of security/tactical officer with the rank of Ensign for two years before being transferred upon promotion.

Current Assignments

- Lotus Fleet, *USS Artemis* : assigned as Chief of Security/Tactical with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade.

Danik Brie
Lieutenant Junior Grade
5th Officer / Chief Operations Officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: Brie, Danik

Species: Bolian

Gender: Male

Hair Color: Bald

Eye Color: Yellow

Skin Color: Medium Blue

Height: 5'10

Weight: 210 lbs (95 kg)

Background Information

Date of birth: 74340.74

Place of birth: Bolarus IX

Age: 26

Parents

Father: Zipok Brie

Mother: Vais Brie

Siblings

Hett Brie (20) – Siste

Family History

Danik's parents both worked as civilian marine exo-biologists travelling between worlds and studying the varieties and quirks of ocean systems, taking young Danik with them.

While interested in his parent's studies, Danik found their small ship's engine systems to be much more fascinating. An interest that would lead him to enroll at Starfleet Academy.

His parents, proud of their son's accomplishments, still travel through space on their studies. Whenever the topic of their Starfleet son is brought up, they insist on maintaining that he was born near a very powerful warp core.

Personal History

As a young Bolian, Danik found taking things apart much more stimulating than watching "funny fish" swim around in some strange oceans. His parents often encouraged this, sometimes to their own chagrin.

For instance, in one particular incident, they had given Danik a set of play tools. Danik immediately went to work in the maintenance panel underneath the sink in the ship cabin's head. His parents, pleased that their gift had made their son happy, left him to play while they continued a study of Edosian suckerfish. It was only later, when Vais ran water in the sink and the water was running across the floor that they discovered Danik had managed to take apart the sink's plumbing assemblage with his toy tools. When they found Danik after, he was on his way to the ship's impulse drive.

Later, Danik assisted in ship maintenance tasks aboard his parent's research vessel, gaining a better appreciation for the way things work on a starship. Danik expressed a particular interest in Warp Drive systems, finding the methods by which the propelled a ship faster than light fascinating. His desire to have a chance to work with the newest and most advanced starship engines naturally led him to apply to Starfleet Academy.

Medical History (if any)

At age 14, Danik was treated for poisoning and lacerations sustained from a Ktarian Stingray during an exploratory SCUBA dive on Ktaris.

Previous Assignments

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet *USS Aurora* : graduated within Starfleet's Corps of Engineers with a specialty in warp mechanics on stardate 84483.8 with a view that situations aren't always black and white, that sometimes leading others meant that you had to make difficult, even fatal, decisions. During the Kobayashi Maru test, he lost both colonies and the ship but his fatal ramming attack saved the convoy. Attempted the Corbomite Maneuver, but opponents didn't fall for it. He showed remarkable resourcefulness, sense of duty and responsibility and poise, foreshadowing a brilliant potential as a command officer.

During his Academy years, he published an in-depth study and proposal about Starfleet's uniforms for its elite division which was commended by Starfleet Command, making him one of the very rare cadets in Starfleet History (one of them being the legendary James T Kirk) to be so commended before entering actual service.

- First Fleet, *USS Hood* : assignment as Senior chief petty officer of the Engineering department aboard the *USS Hood* as part of Damage Control Team Charlie and as a ODN Technician. He served aboard the *Hood* for one year before being transferred to help contain the attrition of officers caused by the Borg War.

- Reserve Fleet, *USS Adler* : assigned as a M/ARA Technician with the rank of Ensign where his excellence was noticed by Starfleet Command.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet, *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief of Operations with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade.

**Caius Castiel Aquila, Doctor
Lieutenant Junior Grade
Chief Medical Officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121**



Full Name: Caius Castiel Aquila

Species : Human

Gender : Male

Hair Color : Brown

Eye Color : Brown

Skin Color : Caucasion

Height : 1,75 m (5' 9)

Weight : 67 kg (148lbs)

Background Information

Date of birth : 58001.82

Place of birth : Earth (Sol III)

Age : 29

Parents

Father: Wiley Aquila - Somewhat well known romance fiction author and less well known Archaeologist.

Mother: Dr. Philena Aquila - Non-Starfleet baby doctor.

Caius respects and loves both of his parents, but is easily irritated when people ask about his father's books during introductions/small talk.

Siblings

Older brother (by 6 years): Dr. Vincent Aquila - Also a non-Starfleet doctor. Is a general practitioner working as the sole doctor for a young colony. The colony sponsored for his schooling in exchange for his services upon graduation. Caius is intimidated by his older brother and can never quite seem to get out of Vincent's shadow.

Family History

Philena fell in love with and married Wiley while they were both in college. Wiley started writing romance novels after retiring from archaeology.

Vincent decided to become a general family doctor and was sponsored by a colony in exchange for his services upon graduation.

Inspired by Vincent's traveling across the galaxy, Caius decided to join Starfleet and become a ship's doctor to see the galaxy.

Personal History

Caius was privileged to be able to go with his father on several digs and has fond memories of the adventures.

He decided to study medicine and sometimes describes diagnostics as the archaeology of a person's health.

He once fell in love at an old fashioned masquerade party while in the academy. He only remembers that she had gold hair, a green mask, and a green dress. She never said her name.

Upon graduation Caius' father Wiley gave him two things. A fountain pen and a pocket watch. The fountain pen has "Dr. Caius Aquila" engraved on the cap.

The pocket watch is a relic from a dig that Wiley had grown fond of. On the outside it is merely the remnants of an ornate flowery design. On the inside is a very clear inscription that reads, "To Frank, Happy birthday. Hopefully with this watch you won't be late for dinner. Love, Michelle". Caius' always loved the watch, it gave him a sense of wonder about the past and past lives. Who was Frank? How often was he late for dinner? Did the watch help?

Medical History

Perfectly healthy with no special condition recorded.

Starfleet Record

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy, *USS Aurora* : graduated within the Medical division on Stardate 84483.8 (2410) in medical sciences. As a physician, he firmly believes that the desire to cure a patient should never supersede a patient's desire to stay injured. Other races and cultures do not always make sense, and in the end one must uphold the patient's wishes.

- General Surgeon's Office, *Starbase 1* : spent three years stationed at Earth Space Dock as a member of the medical staff. Primarily dealing with routine physical examinations. Took the time to perfect his practice before applying to a much coveted starship assignment.

Current assignment

- Lotus Fleet, *USS Artemis* : assigned as Chief medical officer with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade.