

It is very cold... in space.

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

I ALONE SURVIVED

The Third Voyage of the USS Artemis



STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

USS ARTEMIS: I ALONE SURVIVED

SEASON 1 EPISODE 3

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kheren as Captain Kheren

Drakxii as Commander Michael O'Conner

N'Eligahn as Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo

Mishy as Lieutenant-Commander Kelsey Alther

BawdyScoundrel as Doctor Josiah Sage

Jeff T. as Lieutenant Syntron

Special Appearance by:

Evshell as Commander Allen Samji: Starbase 10 Commander

Forum roleplaying session

from May 20th 2011 to July 27th 2011

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Story concept by Neligahn

Editing by Jeff T.

Cover by Kheren

"And I alone survived to tell thee."

Ishmael

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

PROLOGUE

"The call definitely came from somewhere inside the nebula, Captain."

Barely out of the turbolift that had brought her to the small, compact bridge, the tall dark-haired woman with the four pips on her collar looked straight at the narrow viewing screen in front of her at the other end of the ship's command center. On the viewer, space was almost completely flooded by softly glowing waves of glittering blue and purple particles with some reddish shadows and white lightning bolts alternating within the streaked, diffuse mass of cosmic dust.

"Can you pinpoint it any closer, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, M'am." answered the Ferengi seated at the console on the commanding officer's right hand. "It was so badly garbled, all I got through the interference was the name 'Pequod,' then I lost it."

"M'am, " now reported the white-haired, orange-skinned bearded man seated at another station, this time on the left of the commanding officer, "our sensors are unable to penetrate the ionized gases composing most of the nebula."

"Captain," then interrupted the tall, massive blonde man seated closer to the screen, "according to records, the Pequod is the first vessel to have been reported missing in this sector... over a quarter of a century ago!"

The woman stepped down into the command well to bring herself right before her spartan command chair, all the while looking at the swirling colored masses slowly rolling across the vastness of space like the tranquil waves of a calm sea.

"Could anyone have survived in there after *twenty-five years*?" she half-whispered.

"More probably a ship's disaster beacon still emitting, M'am... I'm sorry." apologized the Efrozian with much empathy.

"Confirmed Captain," then said the Ferengi Lieutenant.

"Try to raise them," shot back the woman before the command seat.

"This is the USS Milton, Federation patrol ship. We are receiving your signal; please respond. USS Pequod, this is the USS Milton; respond please..."

After a moment, the Ferengi shook his large, bulbous head, his enormous ears twitching slightly after much effort.

"Nothing, M'am. All I get is the automated signal of the disaster beacon."

The woman sat in her command chair, here eyes still on the slow dance of the blue and purple waves and the sudden, unpredictable flashes crisscrossing those thick rolling waves of sparkling dust.

"Well, since we were sent here to search for the last missing convoy in this sector... might as well start with a long ago lost ship. Helm: plot a course towards that signal."

"Captain," now said the imposing blonde man with concern, "the high levels of static discharges will render target lock inoperative; we will not be able to use transporters or tractor beams, weapons on manual only... and shields will be useless."

"Understood, Lieutenant Commander. Security alert."

All around the bridge, yellow lights flashed and a distant rumble shook the entire ship; on the mere five decks that made all of the diminutive vessel, five dozens of dedicated Starfleet officers went to readiness, the sound of their feet and voices filling up the less than two-hundred meters of the ovoid, flattened hull.

"Half-impulse; let's go in." ordered the captain.

Smoothly accelerating to a speed of nearly forty-thousand kilometers per second, the sleek, compact elongated disc of the Defiant class patrol ship USS Milton slid between the first translucent layers of cosmic dust, her rounded hull highlighted by the sudden, unpredictable flashes of electrostatic lightning violently illuminating the soft colors of the nebula.

In a few seconds, even the stark glow of her engines was dimmed inside the depths of the vast, slowly swirling dust cloud.

On the forward screen, streaks of static blurred the view outside to a grainy, snowy, almost colorless image. Long minutes went by in deep, apprehensive silence; the soft sound of static from the viewer fusing itself into the minds of all the tight-lipped, blinking officers with the low screeching coming out of the bridge's speakers.

They were all listening to their own heartbeats when the Efrozian man broke the silence.

"Captain... sensors are not very reliable with all this interference but... large mass on our port bow... possibly a vessel, unable to confirm energy output... it appears to be drifting."

"I've lost the signal the moment we penetrated the nebula." added the Ferengi.

"Continue hailing, Lieutenant. Helm, intercept course."

"Aye Aye, M'am," acknowledged the red haired woman manning the ship's movements.
"ETA two minutes."

Twice that time went by until the woman in the center seat sighed with obvious impatience.

"So... where *is* it?"

"Ah, captain, we have reached last sensor coordinates..." stuttered the pilot, frowning over her navigational readouts, as garbled and noisy as the rest of their instruments. "But I can't seem to locate..."

"Captain! The unidentified mass is still on our port side... now to our aft!"

The woman turned her head to the orange-skinned officer at the sensor station who offered a deep frown of his own.

"I cannot read normal energy output, Captain... and I cannot believe we overshot it despite our unreliable sensors. It just seems to have... drifted there. But... Captain, the measured eddies and currents inside this nebula could not have pushed such a mass so far behind us and so quickly..."

"Captain!" now interrupted the blonde man at tactical. "I have it on tactical sensors too... I read a massive upsurge of power... And... it's on an intercept course!"

"Red Alert!"

The loud order of the ship's commander turned ambient lighting to a reddish glow as frantic noises reverberated throughout the entire ship, like a pulsing heart suddenly racing with the sudden approach of danger.

"Hard about! High energy turn one hundred and eighty degrees! Reinforce forward shields!"

"Captain!" then shouted the Efrozian in obvious alarm. "We do not know what we are facing here. We should retreat to a safe distance and..."

"*Don't* quote rules to me, Mister!" barked back the dark-haired woman in command. "We're under attack! Tactical: ready pulse cannons! Full volley of quantum torpedoes!"

Within the slow-moving piled waves of floating space dust, the sleek shape of the Milton turned swiftly around, all weapons glowing like angry eyes towards... something; a long, huge, dense shadow that was rising from the very depths of the dense nebula towards the much smaller Starfleet warship.

From under its flattened hull, globs of blue light shot out from the Defiant class vessel, one behind the other; fifty isotons of destructive force flashed in each of the four luminous warheads that raced at near light speed down the depths of the rolling masses of thick dust. In an instant, the layers of sparkling, colored waves swallowed even the furious glow of the quantum torpedoes as they plunged toward the distant rising dark form.

Long seconds of tense silence followed in the wake of the vanished projectiles.

The nebula lighted up with exploding flashes of distant energies... but they were not from any quantum detonation.

"No target lock, Captain. Manual firing may have missed..."

Then, several glows lighted the deep, right before them where the ominous dark form had risen. Four globs of bluish light almost diffused by the colors of the swirling waves of glittering dust lighted brutally the darker depths.

"...*Torpedoes!* Incoming!" shouted the man at tactical. "Shields inoperative!"

"Evasive! Brace for impact!" barked the captain, gripping her chair with whitened hands.

One after the other, the four energy globes blasted against the unshielded but thickly armored hull of the flattened form of the warship; rocking it brutally with pieces of armoring and hull exploding around her, sparks and flames like tears of metal and drops of fiery blood bleeding out of almost every point of its very compact form.

"Return fire!" shouted the woman amidst cries of help and roars of rage from bow to stern, even as she shakily picked herself back up and into her command chair while her officers did the same at their own stations: all, like her, disheveled, bruised and bloody, half burned fingers trembling over sparking, fuming controls.

Like an angry, wounded animal, the small battleship spewed out salvos after salvos of pulsating energies from her cannons, trying to aim at the long dark shape dwarfing it as it rose out of the waves, right from underneath; closer and closer, larger and larger..

Without stopping, the long, immense shadow rose and struck right at the belly of the diminutive starship like a shark coming up at its helplessly floating prey. The impact tore the battered, damaged, unprotected warship apart instantly like an egg, sending a shower of scrap and plasma in all directions like so much burned shreds of ripped flesh and burning blood.

The massive dark form once more disappeared into the wavering depths of the nebula, leaving in its wake the dispersing remains of the USS Milton.

And for a long moment, the nebula shivered as if the great, savage roar of a monstrous beast followed the ominous shadow plunging back into the depths.

CHAPTER ONE : CALL OF DUTY

Despite wearing the same black, grey-shouldered uniform with a red shirt underneath, the two officers sitting each side of the big desk were markedly different from one another.

Behind the desk, the dark-tanned, black haired, black-eyed man was of medium stature, but even sitting in a comfortable high-backed chair, he held himself tall and straight with a discipline already so well ingrained as to look almost casual.

On the other side of the desk, his tall, very athletic visitor also sat with the same natural confidence in himself and respect for the other before him. But, with the uniform, there stopped any outward resemblance. This one had dark blue skin, startling silvery eyes and a long, snowy-white mane from which sprouted a pair of antennae from the top of each side of his head.

Inwardly however, they both shared a lot, as their Starfleet uniform and their words clearly showed.

"Yes, Commander Samji; I am pleased to report that, after ten days of hard work by Chief Engineer N'Eligahn and both his ship engineering team and your drydock technicians, the Artemis is finally ready to depart."

"Glad to hear it, Captain. Hopefully your ship will be better prepared for the unknown this time," the starbase commander replied.

Kheren's rare facial muscles managed to convey something definitely resembling a smirk as both antennae curved towards one another.

"First time, we went out for a rescue and ended up fighting the cosmos. Last time, it started as an astrometric study and ended up in an aborted war in unknown territory. A nice, quiet star-charting cruise would be nice this time."

"Quite," Samji replied, with a similar smirk. Samji didn't sugarcoat it: "Unfortunately, as we discussed before, we need scientific data on the Azimuth Horizon and your ship is now even more definitively the best-equipped Lotus Fleet ship to get such data. With the metaphasic shielding you can get through the fractures. You can even, if absolutely necessary, use a separation to repel the saucer section back into normal space while sacrificing the bridge module. I'm sorry to say that a simple cruise is not on the Horizon."

Like a bad odor, the awful pun drifted there for a moment in the silence, before Captain Kheren responded.

"Oh, the crew will love it," the Andorian sighed audibly, missing completely the Human pun as usual.

Then, if that was even possible, he became more serious.

"And speaking of the crew; Mister N'Eligahn has been an exemplary officer during our whole repair and refit period... Seems our little chat we had recently settled things properly. I had yet to realize that he seems to have had a much rougher career than most. And being again with so many officers of his former ship on our last mission brought back more mixed feelings than he was ready to cope with; hence the surprising lack of discipline from such a highly decorated officer then. I understand that better now... and that is not something easy for any Andorian to do... least of all me."

Shaking his head, he sighed again.

"He clearly told me his desire to stay on board the Artemis. I would like to see this as praise after what he went through before. Regardless, I clearly told him all that was expected of him to make it so. I am satisfied that we have come to a mutual understanding."

His silver eyes went straight to those of the starbase commander.

"So, please tell me: what has Command decided about his promotion?"

"Captain Kotari has told me to inform you that it is granted," Samji replied, "on a very probationary basis. Assuming your next mission goes smoothly, it will be fine."

"Understood. I assume Commander N'Eligahn is aware of this." It was hard to tell by his tone of voice if Kheren was asking a question, assuming a fact... or giving a warning.

Samji shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He felt like all the needed information was disseminated and he wanted to change the subject.

"Starbase 10's science department has been very busy studying the data brought back by Lieutenant Syntron, as well as the data brought back from Lieutenant Josh Vincent," he said.

"They've come up with an interesting solution that I'd like you to share with Syntron and see what he thinks."

The Andorian's antennae perked up with obvious interest. Samji pressed some controls on his desk to bring up a holographic program his science team had put together for the purposes of the demonstration.

"Think of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly as a lake that is flooding," he proposed. "As the lake crests the banks, the water will initially naturally follow what would seem like random paths of lower altitude away from the lake. These lower altitude paths represent the ruptures in subspace created by high Warp travel." As he said so, the representation of the Azimuth Horizon grew in radius with trails in every direction growing in front of it."

The captain of the Artemis nodded. It was exactly how he had been picturing the phenomenon in his mind while trying to deal with it, but the starbase Commander was voicing his own thoughts at the same time he recalled them.

"Now, if you were to dig a deep ditch the whole way around the lake, the flooding would obviously be delayed, as the water from the trails would begin to fill up that ditch."

He pressed another control to show on the hologram a circle at the very end of the trails begin to form and get slowly wider, while no significant growth was seen beyond the circle. Eventually, instead of showing a circle with tendrils like a giant squid, the hologram showed a complete, filled-in circle.

"We got this idea from the data brought back by Josh Vincent. The Alpha Onias system seemed to be protected from the anomaly by something. In this analogy, it was on a higher altitude. While the ruptures to the system were present, they were not as deep as those to other systems in the vicinity."

"Clearly this isn't a permanent solution," Samji assured. "However, it could provide a definite edge to the anomaly's influence. Once the anomaly fills up the space we define, we can then approach it from various directions with ships and coordinate a series of ionic pulses such that it should close off the dangerous spread permanently."

He was aware of the question floating in the air.

"How are we going to create this ditch?" Samji asked himself. "By doing exactly what we decided we shouldn't do," he answered with a grin. "We will have ships repeatedly travel at Warp 9 in the designated circular path. It should not much time at all, seeing as the circumference is barely over three lightyears. This should create the kind of subspace ruptures we've seen the anomaly be attracted to..."

"By simply reproducing in all ships the engine imbalance that polluted space before the advent of the new cleaner warp engines... and dig subspace around the expanding anomaly," completed Captain Kheren, eyes wide with understanding. "Even more: dig deviating funnels to channel several subspaces fractures into one and lead the flow towards the ditch. Risky... but less so than a rampant collision of time and anti-time spreading everywhere."

"Indeed. These are the paths that need to be traveled," Samji added and pulled up another holographic image around the Azimuth Horizon. The trails formed the shape of a wedding band. "Due to the three dimensional nature of space travel, the known paths have a depth. However, they are generally around this area, so we will not have to travel along the entire sphere."

"This has been approved by Captain Kotari and Starfleet Command, pending further research and simulations, and Lieutenant Syntron's recommendation," Samji added; done with his presentation and waiting for Captain Kheren's impression.

"As simple as it is effective... in theory at least," nodded the Andorian ship commander with prideful appreciation of all the good work already done by Starfleet.

Then, suddenly, he frowned.

"But... what of the other universe linked to ours through this anomaly?"

Before Allen Samji could even ponder the question, his desk console beeped with an incoming communication.

He did not have time to excuse himself to the captain of the Artemis; Kheren was also receiving a call at the very same instant from his combadge.

And when they answered, they both looked at one another with wide eyes as they instantly realized that they were receiving together the very same message:

"This is a priority 1 message from Starfleet Command. This message will not be discussed with fellow officers unless deemed absolutely necessary. No computer record will be made of this message."

Then, the soft voice of the computer was replaced by a harsher male one.

"Report immediately to the USS Rachel. Upon acknowledging, you will be immediately transported to a secure location on board. Acknowledge."

And the message ended with a high level Starfleet identification code... from Starfleet Intelligence.

Samji touched the console on his desk.

"Captain Kheren and I acknowledge transmission."

He looked back up at the Captain.

"I wasn't even aware that the Rachel was in range," the Commander said, frowning.

"I suppose we better get moving," he added, leading the way out of the office to transporter room 4.

As Samji and the Captain were transported to the USS Rachel, they caught a brief glimpse of the transporter room before their molecules were again disassembled and reassembled elsewhere. It took a moment for Samji to see that he was in a very large, lusciously decorated suite that was clearly set up for an Admiral.

He turned to see the very man who occupied the quarters staring back at him.

He was tall and straight like an old oak, with gray-steely hair and deep blue eyes staring unflinching at the both of them. His clean-shaven elongated face was pale and lined by years of worries and decisions, from his troubled brow to his never-smiling mouth divided by a hawkish nose thrust high and forward like the bow of a battleship.

And his thin frame was indeed covered with an Admiral's uniform. "Commander Allen Samji, Captain Kheren, please sit. I am Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick."

His invitation sounded exactly like an order.

As soon as they were all seated in facing chairs around a small, bare glass table, he sized them up for a moment then spoke with a curt tone.

"What will be said in this room will not be heard again. On your honor as Starfleet officers."

It too was not a request.

Kheren, sitting as straight as the Admiral but visibly confused, simply nodded, despite the wild flaying of his antennae.

"Understood, Sir."

But in fact, he understood nothing at all.

He recalled having heard about Sean Kirkpatrick from Lotus Fleet's records; the first captain of the USS McKenzie. The current commander of the small warship, Captain Crist, had even served all this time under him before taking on his mantle when the now Admiral of Starfleet went back to Earth for higher duties.

And now he heard what those duties were about:

"Gentlemen," stated Admiral Kirkpatrick, "Starfleet Intelligence is adamant that what we are about to discuss here be treated with the utmost secrecy. Knowledge of this would spread a devastating panic all across the Federation. Not going to happen."

He then turned to face squarely the Andorian.

"Captain Kheren; your discipline and resourcefulness have been duly noted by Starfleet. You have been chosen as best qualified to help me resolve the situation. That, and because the USS Artemis is, not only best equipped for the task, but the easiest to move away without raising suspicions."

Then he faced the starbase commander.

"Commander Samji; because you head Starbase 10, you had to be informed that the Artemis is to be sent on a secret assignment; you will be responsible for ensuring that secrecy. Except for the three of us and the crew of the Artemis, no one, and I mean *no one* is to know anything else than what is currently on record: the Artemis is out to study the Azimuth Horizon."

Samji simply nodded uncomfortably.

There was so much tension in the air a phaser could not have cut through it.

The starbase commander looked from the Admiral to the Captain and back again as they sat in silence for a few moments and then cleared his throat.

"I don't see that being a problem, Sir. In Lotus Fleet, we trust our ships to carry out their orders to the best of their ability, as any well-trained and honorable crew would do. Until the mission reports are filed, not a whole lot of questions are asked, even from Captain Kotari."

He didn't say that he was almost physically sick at the idea of keeping the Fleet Captain in the dark about something a Lotus Fleet ship was involved in.

But, even without his mastery of body language, Kheren would have known how disturbed Allen Samji was by the whole situation. In fact, he felt the same way too; shadow games went against the grain of his very being, even beyond his Andorian natural disgust with duplicity.

But what was as much very Andorian about him was his sense of honor and discipline. Orders, especially of this importance, were not to be ignored. And the starbase commander's unease told plainly that he felt just like Kheren did... but would obey orders nevertheless.

And the captain of the Artemis could also plainly see that the Admiral indeed was hiding a great secret behind his cold, stern facade and his curt, harsh tone.

"This is strictly on a need-to-know basis, gentlemen," the Admiral stipulated. "No one on the crew will be informed beyond what is needed for them to do their duty and only at the proper time: and that includes you, Captain. You, Commander Samji, already know all that you need to know. You will return to your duties as usual and forget this meeting. And there will be no communication attempt with the Artemis once she leaves port. The anomaly's interference will explain that away quite nicely."

And again he faced the Andorian. "You, Captain Kheren, will report to your ship and man yourself your transporter to beam me directly into your VIP quarters and erase the transporter log. You will lock the door under your personal code and post two security guards at all times in front of it. Only you will have access to me by a secured channel only, unless I decide otherwise. Once I am aboard, you will recall your crew and leave at once for the anomaly as officially planned."

He now stood and eyed them both.

"Is everything clear, gentlemen?"

"As a bell, Sir," Samji said sternly. He had to follow his orders but he didn't have to like them. "If that is all, request permission to return to the Starbase now."

Admiral Kirkpatrick nodded to him and then faced once more the blue-skinned ship commander.

"Return to your ship, Captain, and arrange for my arrival. We depart at once."

"Aye, aye, Admiral," answered the Andorian, standing up. He glanced a moment at Allen Samji with a forced neutral expression, then activated his combadge with a stiffly controlled gesture.

"Kheren to Artemis: One to beam up."

As Samji similarly called for a beam out from the Starbase, he reflected on the fact that not only did he hate secrets like this on principle, but selfishly he knew that he would never get to know what would really occur in this mission.

That disturbed him more than the knowledge that there were things, like the existence of the Omega molecule, which he was not even aware of.

It will probably be more difficult for the crew of the Artemis to not be able to tell us, he thought as he was beamed back.

Captain Kheren rematerialized in the main transporter room of the Artemis with an expression on his face that was dour even for him. His usually soft, deep voice was even more severe.

"Clear the room."

The transporter chief and the security officer briefly looked at one another but immediately snapped to attention and left without a word.

The Andorian captain was already striding to the transporter controls as he tapped his combadge with a short slap:

"Security, this is the captain. Lock VIP quarters accesses and communications under my personal command codes and post two guards at the door at every duty shift. Disable shipboard computer surveillance within the area and enable emergency security protocols Alpha: no record of all this will be made and no discussion allowed. Acknowledge."

A definite few seconds later came the acknowledgement.

Now behind the transporter console, he locked scanners on the coordinates of the last transport, his, then scanned for a Human lifeform. Once it registered, he logged destination coordinates into the primary VIP quarters and then, after a definite pause and a repressed sigh, effected transport.

Once the beam in was completed, Kheren manually erased the entire last process from the board then said out loud:

"Computer; erase all records of last communication and last transport, security code Kheren Blue --- Omicron ---."

"Command code recognized," answered the soft, feminine voice of the ship's computer, easily receiving even the ultrasonic words in Graalek, the Andorian language, that were part of Kheren's command codes. "All specified records erased."

The Andorian took a long moment to rest both of his callused hands on the console, muscular arms outstretched and head lowered, closing his eyes against the bad feeling he was still feeling since coming aboard the USS Rachel.

But his feelings were irrelevant; he had a duty to attend to and he would not be a Starfleet officer, much less a commanding officer of a starship, if he let his every whim and prejudice dictate his decisions and disregard his responsibilities.

He firmly believed so; but that didn't make things any easier.

He opened the intercom with a sudden flick of his thumb.

"Bridge."

"Bridge here."

He recognized that fluty, shrill voice instantly.

"Mister Cheonghi; patch me through Starbase 10's communication grid and through every crewmember's combadge, please."

"Aye, Captain. Channels open, Sir."

* * *

Commander Michael David O'Conner gave the cute Japanese Lieutenant-Commander one final kiss before picking up his bag and watching her for a moment as she headed off to her shuttle. Then with a wide smile he headed back to the Artemis in what could only be described as a Hawaiian shirt.

He had spend most of his time at Starbase 10 working on the Artemis' new systems and repairs, but the last few days he had spent with a former crewmate of his in a holosuite. He had wanted a real vacation, but this had been all he had the time for.

"This is Captain Kheren; all Starfleet crewmembers of the USS Artemis, report at once for departure. All civilian personnel will remain on the Starbase. Acknowledge immediately to Chief of Operations Cheonghi and report without delay to your post. Captain out."

O'Conner paused as he entered the docking area, hearing the announcement through both starbase comm and his own combadge in his bag.

Odd... being able to bring families along was part of the perks of the ship.

He took out and tapped his communicator as he resumed his walk towards his small temporary room down here at the Starbase.

"Commander O'Conner to Captain Kheren. Are we expecting combat, Sir?"

Kheren lifted his head from between his slumped shoulders as he heard Michael O'Conner's voice over the comm channel.

I wish we were! he almost said out loud. Then some part of his mind noted that they might just be doing that indeed; If not the mission itself, with the Admiral.

A combat situation was clear cut and straightforward; any half-brained officer could raise shields and fire at will and there was no time to worry. But this... this cloak and dagger assignment was already fraying his nerves and they were not even away, not even aware of what it was all about. You rarely hid anything good.

So, he feared that sooner or later, if whatever they were headed to endangered needlessly his ship and his crew, he might have to confront his senior officer at one point. The very secrecy of the whole thing made him fear that more than anything else.

And confronting a senior officer rarely ended well for the junior officer.

For now though, he had no choice but to show respect and confidence in his orders, even if he didn't like them or the way they were delivered. Because if he didn't, no one would... and this would destroy all the lives and careers on board... if not more.

Starfleet hadn't adopted rules and regulations, a chain of command and uniforms, or a code of discipline and behavior just for parades; it had because they were all needed.

Damn are they needed now... he almost let out through his clenched teeth.

Instead he stood up straight, sighed and answered his First Officer.

"Number One, meet me in my ready room as soon as possible please. Kheren out."

Now... how can you tell your most trusted officer that you can't tell him anything? he wondered as he exited transporter room 1.

Was that... a joke?

O'Conner raised his eyebrow as he replied.

"Uhh Aye, Sir."

He had asked what he thought was a simple question, but apparently it seems that it wasn't.

He thought about this as he stepped into the turbolift, nearly hitting a crewmember with his bag.

"Deck 2"

With a nod of apology to the crewmembers in the turbolift, the First Officer of the Artemis stepped off and began his walk toward his quarters. As he neared his room, he could see the guards standing in front of the VIP quarters.

"I got a bad feeling about this..." he mumbled to himself as he entered his own quarters.

He tossed his bag in to the corner of his room, unpacking would have to wait till later. He then turned to his standing wardrobe and with a smile he opened it.

Unlike most officers of his era, he didn't like to wear replicated uniforms. O'Conner had come from a long line of Starfleet officers and took great pride in his uniform. He handmade all of his uniforms and took great care in having them crisp, clean and very well maintained.

Michael quickly dressed, departed his room and headed again for the turbolift. He had hoped to go over the duty rosters before meeting with the captain, but now that would have to wait.

* * *

Doctor Josiah Sage sat in his office in Main Medical aboard the Artemis. His feet were propped up on his desk, and his acoustic guitar lay across his lap. A half-filled bottle of synthehol bourbon was next to the nearly-empty tumbler on his desk within arms reach.

He had come back aboard two days ago. He probably would have still been off ship, but he and his father could rarely stay in the same room together for more than a few days at a time. Besides, his main reason for going home was to see his younger sister Abigail. True, he did have two older sisters, but to them he was the baby brother. To him, Abby was the baby. There was nearly ten years difference between Josiah and Abby, and as such, Josiah was the only Sage child still at home when she was born. As a result he was fiercely protective of her.

The desk in his office now had a picture of her, as well as holoidimages of the rest of his family. He smiled at the picture of Abby. She'd already put in her application to Starfleet Academy. She was going to be a physician, just like her older brother. She said she couldn't wait to be a chief medical officer too.

She had asked him all sorts of questions while he'd been on shore leave. What was it like to be on the bridge of a starship? Did you really save a Tellarite's life? Who in their right mind would let you have an office?

Josiah grinned again. The thought of him having an office was an entertaining one. His quarters were also a bump up. Before he had junior officer quarters, but with his recent promotion to the chief medical officer position, he now had something with a bit more elbow room.

He couldn't wait to bring his tack and saddle to the holodeck. However, for the moment, he was content to strum his guitar and sip his fake whiskey. At the thought, he reached for the tumbler and emptied it.

That's when the captain's call resonated through the ship's intercom.

"This is Captain Kheren; all Starfleet crewmembers of the USS Artemis, report at once for departure. All civilian personnel will remain on the Starbase. Acknowledge immediately to Chief of Operations Cheonghi and report without delay to your post. Captain out."

"Huh," he said aloud to no one. "Kay."

He was in his civilian clothes, so his combadge was nowhere near him.

"Dangit. 'Puter," he said aloud.

After a moment of no acknowledgment, he said slowly and clearly:

"Computer. Put in a call to Lieutenant Cheonghi."

After a moment the Edoan's voice came through.

"Yes, Doctor Sage?"

"Hey, there. I'm jus' checkin' in with yew per the cap'n's 'structions. I'm in med'cal."

"Understood doctor. Thank you," came the curt reply. The line went quiet when Cheonghi ended the call.

Josiah refilled the tumbler from the bottle.

"No prob'em," he said said while sitting back in his chair again.

Josiah looked at his desk in main medical. On it were two personal items. The first was a glass bluebird heavy enough to be a paperweight. When he had been home on shore leave his younger sister, Abby, had given it to him.

Josiah liked holding the bird up to his eye and pointing it toward a source of illumination. The refracting light within was something he found interesting. Abby said as long as he had it, the bluebird of happiness would always cheer him up, if only to remind him his family loves him. He then looked to the other object. It was a carved brass statue of a man wearing clothing from Earth's late-19th century riding a horse. The four-legged animal was depicted at a canter. The rider had a relaxed, a hopeful look to his face. Josiah had received this gift from his mother and father the same time Abby had given hers.

Josiah Sage' sandy-brown shoulder-length hair, normally pulled back into a ponytail, was down around his face. When he'd lean forward to minutely tweak one of the two items his hair would fall forward, blocking his view. He'd then tuck either the right or left side behind his ear absentmindedly and go back to what he was doing.

He had just finished placing the two personal effects when there was a knock at the entrance to his office.

Josiah looked up and smiled.

"Freddie! What c'n I do f'r yew?"

Doctor Frederic Lumquist served as the Chief Epidemiologist onboard the Artemis. He was also one of the first men to befriend Josiah when he checked in. It had started as small talk when one of them, neither could remember who, mentioned how he loved music.

Lumquist, 'Freddie' as Josiah called him, revealed he had been in a musical quartet during his secondary education. The quartet was made up of an antique electrical guitar, an equally old rhythm bass, and a percussion set. Freddie would play the bass, but his real love was singing.

Josiah, who eventually relented to Freddie's insistence he could call him 'Joe', couldn't carry a tune in his throat worth a damn, but was more than happy to keep his surgery hands active on a fretboard.

"Joe, the Medical staff is mustered up in the common area. They're ready and waiting for you."

Josiah nodded, and grabbed his blue medical long coat. He had read Doctor Beverly Crusher wore a similar one while she served aboard the *Enterprise-D*. While hers ended just behind the knees, his extended down to his ankles. He was very fond of it. It was another comfortable reminder of home as it looked almost like a duster, save for the color. The best part to him was that the coat was still within regulations.

He moved around his desk to meet Lumquist at the door. He took a quick glance into the mirror, and realized his hair was still down. Josiah quickly double-backed, grabbed the tie off of his desk, and walked into the common room of medical.

Lumquist hadn't been exaggerating; all 71 officers and enlisted on the medical staff were present. They were loosely gathered into their three respective shifts. This clearly wasn't an organizational occurrence, but rather familiarity.

Maybe I should change up the shift personnel to cross-pollinate, the goatee-bearded Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis thought as he walked out of his office while pulling his hair back into the normal ponytail he favored while on duty. Definitely something to bring up to Captain Kheren later.

Josiah waited for the dull murmur to quiet. When it stopped Doctor Sage spoke: "Alrigh', e'rybody. I know y'all got questions. As of right now, I don' know much more than all'a yew. Howev'r, should, an' when I find out what is goin' on, what I c'n share with y'all I will. Now that that elephant's outta the room, here's what I do know: we're headin' back to the Az'muth. This means there's the poss'bility there will be injured," he paused for melodramatic effect and finished saying, "a'gin."

After garnering a few smiles and some light chuckles Doc Sage continued:

"We're goin' to keep to our normal shifts. We're still goin' to conduc' bus'ness as usual. We're still goin' to help the folks that're sick an' or injured. Listen, folks, the rest of the ship's gone bat-crap-crazy about this out-of-blue mission where they have to leave their loved ones b'hind without so much as a whisper as to the why. Well, I'm here to tell y'all somethin': isn't our concern. Our concern is for the folks that may have trouble adjustin' to no suppor' structure to what may be a potentially hazardous mission."

He scanned the crowd for the three individuals responsible for the crew's mental well-being.

"Ah, there y'all are. Doctors Sirris, Nedaro-Lenn, and Leedixia; I'm goin' t'need constant updates from each of yew. I don' care how insignificant it might seem, but please keep a sharp eye on any of your patients exhibitin' outside of normal b'havior. F'r the res' of the crew who are not your patients, keep a clinical eye on them, too."

Then going back to the rest of the staff, he said:

"Now, I wanna make this perfec'ly clear: this is *not* a witch-hunt to find the quote-unquote 'crazies.' This is *not* profilin' in any way, shape or form. What this is is a call to passive vigilance. Any crew members who may be experiencin' any kind of ills, we need to be there to help 'em. Treat ev'ry patient brought in here as though they were a friend, parent, or fam'ly member. We're leavin' fam'ly behind, yes, but if yew look at it from their perspective, Artemis is leavin' with their husbands, wives, parents, friends."

Doc Sage stopped talking for a moment. He looked down. Josiah then said quietly:

"I don' wan' those fam'lies out there to nev'r see their loved one a'gin."

Looking back up at the medical staff, Doc Sage added:

"We're leavin' with a full compl'ment. I'll be damned if any that come into this med'cal don' leave out a'gin. Do we all have an accord?"

Seeing the crowd of faces, some sad, some determined, some neutral, and one or two tearful, Doc Sage knew his staff would perform admirably.

"Ex'llent. Alpha shift, yew have the watch. Beta, see yew in a few hours. Gamma, hit your racks."

Josiah turned, and started heading out the door into the passageway. Lumquist stopped him.

"Nice speech, Joe."

"Yeah, but how many of 'em b'lieved it, Freddie?"

"I think they all did. I noticed some of the petty officers batting their eyes at you."

"Nice, Freddie."

"Hey, you asked Joe."

Snorting, Josiah half-smiled.

"I'll be on the bridge, Freddie."

Josiah turned and made his way to the turbolift.

"Bridge."

* * *

The harsh clang of metal on metal echoed inside the main room of a small oriental styled room. N'Eligahn parried a harsh blow from Relys as she sliced with her katana, barely avoiding his face being removed. He blocked another blow and held his dueling staff against the blade, his arms shaking against the force of her blow.

"You owe me," she spat. "I went against every fiber of my being to cover your ass."

"I didn't ask you to," N'Eligahn said. He parried her sword to the side and brought the spear end of the staff towards her feet. She leapt backwards and rolled to the side. She came up and her sword sliced through the side of his work out robe.

"No, you didn't, so that makes me the idiot," she spat back.

"So why are you still talking to me?" N'Eligahn asked as he brought his staff around to block another harsh blow.

"Because I'm going to find a way to make you pay up... even if it kills me."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that!"

He ducked and swept his legs under hers, knocking her flat onto her back and holding the blade end of the staff at her neck.

His combadge suddenly beeped.

"N'Eligahn here."

"Sir, you'd better get down to Engineering," Blakely's voice uttered over the comlink.

"What's going on?"

"It'll be better for you to see."

"On my way," N'Eligahn Acknowledged.

He stepped back and allowed Relys to stand.

"I know apologizing won't cut it."

"No. It won't," Relys said as she picked up her sword and walked out of the holodeck.

N'Eligahn didn't bother going through a sonic shower or back into his uniform before going down to deck 21. Then, as he entered Main Engineering, he thought he heard an oddly familiar voice. But it couldn't be...

"How long has it been since the upper gantries have been scanned for residual antilepton particles?" the voice said.

"What...antileptons...those are in such trace amounts anywhere they're never part of regular scans, not even in drydock," Blakely's voice answered.

"Be that as it may, it's still part of the standard Corps of Engineers checklist for all operating starships."

"The official CoE checklist is six thousand, seven hundred and sixty pages and most of it is outdated," the assistant Chief Engineer shot back. N'Eligahn rounded the corner and stopped when he realized who the owner of the voice was who he'd thought it was.

"Oh! Sir! There you are!" Blakely exclaimed with obvious relief.

"Sir?" the owner of the voice said.

The newcomer turned and looked at him.

"Ah, 'Commander' Etarudbo."

"Ty'Renyk?" the Rethian exclaimed; he was genuinely surprised: this was indeed Lieutenant Commander Ty'Renyk Eladeau, the only other Rethian currently in Starfleet.

He stared at her, stunned.

"You didn't tell me you were coming aboard. We haven't talked in nearly two years."

"That's because I'm here on official business," Ty'Renyk said. "First and foremost, I've been sent by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers to ensure that this experimental vessel is operating at its peak capacity." She looked up and down at his partly cut work out robes. "And my secondary mission is to inspect its Chief Engineer and to ensure that HE is operating at his...peak capacity."

"I wasn't informed of any such inspection," N'Eligahn protested.

"That's because then it wouldn't be a surprise inspection, would it?" she countered, a smile curling her lips. "And I have to say I'm very disappointed so far."

"Look, let's go into my office and..."

"This is Captain Kheren; all Starfleet crewmembers of the USS Artemis, report at once for departure. All civilian personnel will remain on the Starbase. Acknowledge immediately to Chief of Operations Cheonghi and report without delay to your post. Captain out."

"Well, that makes it more interesting," N'Eligahn said. "The inspection will have to wait."

"Not at all," Ty'Renyk said. "I can inspect you actually doing your job rather than...gallivanting through the ship in your pajamas."

"Fine," N'Eligahn growled. "Blakely, as people report in, send the roster to the OpsO."

"Aye sir," she said, then with a glance at Ty'Renyk mouthed 'Good luck'.

* * *

Freshly minted Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther, chief of security and tactical of the starship Artemis, sat with legs crossed on the vibrant blue grass overlooking a cliff. The blue-skinned, white-haired female-looking androgyn took a large deep breath in and let it out; keeping both blue eyes shut and listened to the waves below crashing onto the cliff face.

Kelsey had finally organized some personal recreational time on one of the HoloSuites of the Artemis, enjoying meditation on one favorite childhood place. It was a nearby cliff that was just past the woods where the Kalthurian would race around in and often found solace at the cliff and thought in younger days, centuries ago, that the cliff was special. Alther was under no illusions now that the cliff was just another cliff, but it was a place to go to, to relax and stare off into the sunset or simply meditating, just like now.

The androgyn rolled its shoulders and opened its eyes to the sunset. It was just as beautiful as it was back on Kalthan. A small tear appeared in one eye but it was quickly blinked away. Kelsey missed home, missed being with family. But those things were no longer the same.

Even if they were the same, Kelsey Alther wasn't. Mannerism, perceptions, beliefs, personality, all had changed since coming from the USS Spectre to current posting on the USS Artemis. Kelsey had matured much more and it was all thanks to the Andorian captain of the Artemis, Kheren.

He was a very strict, demanding commander, accepting no nonsense from anyone, a strict believer in rules and regulations, as adamant about discipline as he was of performance... and yet, able to think on his feet and come up with totally unheard of tactics and plans while unflinchingly upholding the Starfleet Oath and the values of the United Federation of Planets... and demanding no less out of everyone under his command.

Not an easy one to work with... but it did save Kelsey from a career-breaking court martial... and turned back the Kalthurian into being a Starfleet officer again; and a good one.

Kelsey stood up and smiled, for the first time in a long time. The Kalthurian had found momentary inner peace and was ready for the next challenge that would present itself. For once, Kelsey Alther also felt more confident than ever, ready to take on whatever the galaxy would offer.

"Bring it on" Alther said with the smile still plastered on smallish lips before turning and leaving the HoloSuite to resume duties.

Not long afterwards, the androgyn back in the security office on deck 9 of the refitted and upgraded Ambassador class starship had just finished looking over security reports when both the intercom and combadge buzzed.

"Sir, Captain Kheren just requested two security people to be placed outside one of the VIP quarters round the clock," the distinctive soft and throaty voice of assistant chief Tyvya said.

Kelsey raised an eyebrow.

Odd the Kalthurian thought before replying to the Andorian giantess at the other end of the comm channel:

"Thanks for the information; Kelsey out."

The androgyn was about to leave when Captain Kheren's call for departure came...

And under security alert.

Not odd... very odd.

The Lieutenant Commander quickly hailed Chief of Ops Cheongi:

"Kelsey Alther reporting for duty. I'll be up on the bridge in a moment; but first, I have to check a security concern." the androgyn informed him and walked outside the chief of security office and into the hallway of deck 14.

Tapping its combadge, Alther said:

"Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther to Captain Kheren; I know I probably should ask this but I don't suppose you can tell me why you want to assign two security officers to the VIP quarters?"

"Follow your orders, Lieutenant-Commander. As of now, we are on security alert at all times and until I say otherwise. Kheren out."

His voice was so cold and distant; it was as if he was calling back all the way from his icy moon-world of Andoria.

Kelsey Alther frowned but said nothing and instead, enquired about the location of Lieutenant-Commander Ty'Renyk Eladau; the currently only non-crewmember on board on a surprise inspection tour under the authority of Starfleet's Corps of Engineers.

"Computer locate Lieutenant-Commander Ty'Renyk."

"Lieutenant-Commander Ty'Renyk is currently in Main Engineering."

The Kalthurian headed towards the nearby turbolift and went straight to main engineering seven decks below and all the way aft of the five-hundred meters long starship. When Kelsey stepped out and reached main engineering, N'Eligahn and Ty'Renyk were barely finishing some tense discussion.

"Excuse me Commander N'Eligahn, I just want to check with Lieutenant-Commander Ty'Renyk that she has permission to stay onboard," the security chief said but only looking at the Rethian female.

"As a matter of fact, Lieutenant Commander, I DO have authorization; both from your Captain, and Admiral Rowsdower of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers," Ty'Renyk retorted. "If you wish to dispute my being here, you can certainly feel free to talk to either of them. I also assure you that all the proper documentation is in order and I can provide all thirty-seven pages."

Kelsey glared at the newcomer "Well sorry if being the chief of security on the ship forces me to look at certain things, such as people who are not of the crew being on the ship at the time when the captain has ordered them off!" Kelsey Alther said forcefully.

"Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther to Captain Kheren. Sorry to disturb you again, Sir, but does Lieutenant-Commander Ty'Renyk Eladau of the Corps of Engineers have authorization to still be onboard?" the androgyn asked, eyes still locked on the stranger.

The call from the Security chief brought Kheren out of the darkness.

Looks like I'm not the only one worrying here... he thought, smiling inwardly. At least our freshly-minted Lieutenant-Commander is awake and on the job.

Then he reflected on the words of the kalthurian for a few seconds.

The engineering inspection... Now ain't that convenient. He mused, and then recalled a Human saying that was phrased exactly the same way on his violent homeworld of Andoria: *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

Or... this Lieutenant-Commander could be the wrench he would need to throw into the machine if he had to stop it...

Or...

"Ah, Commander Alther, just who I needed to see," N'Eligahn then interrupted the Alther and Eladau glaring at one another as he gestured the Kalthurian to around the corner. "I've been meaning to talk to you about the access code routing of Main Engineering's access hallways. Please excuse us one moment, Mister Eladeau," he added, emphasizing the "Mister".

He waited until Alther followed him.

"Kelsey, I need your help; she has all the proper access," he whispered. "Please tell me there's some obscure security code or emergency protocol we can make use of to get her off...she's driving my people crazy! Do you know what Antileptons are? I had to actually look them up!" Before Kelsey could get an answer, Nel had gestured to around the corner and spoke his worries to which only a shrug could apologize to his concerns.

"Well unless the captain wants her off the ship or something there's nothing I can do..."

Antileptons? Some vague memory about them, but nothing substantial... I'm not sure how I can help you" the Kalthurian finally said with a guilty look at N'Eligahn.

"She was telling me why I had to reprimand Blakely because she refused to remove a portion of carpet from Main Engineering so Ty'Renyk could ensure the proper number of plate fasteners were in the deck," the Rethian sighed. "Kelsey, there's meticulous and then there's obsessive compulsive. With something big suddenly cropping up, my people can't have this kind of distraction."

"Not the only one with issues; Captain Kheren has been pulling security officers to do things like guarding empty VIP quarters" Kelsey sighed. "Look N'El, best I can do is tell her that she should keep her obsessive compulsive stuff to herself, but if the captain has given her authorization to be here, there's not much I can do."

The androgyn pondered for a moment.

"Well I guess if she attacked me, I could knock her out or something... but I doubt that's going to happen somehow..." Alther said with a dry smile.

That's when the captain's answer came back:

"Kheren to Chief Alther: authorization confirmed. Please issue a ship's combadge and list her as temporarily assigned to the crew for this voyage. She keeps full authority as per her engineering inspection duties, but outside of those specific responsibilities, answers to all senior officers on board following the normal chain of command. Captain out."

In the silence following the acknowledgement of Alther, the Andorian now felt that there were shadows moving in the darkness.

Kelsey sighed.

"Yes, Sir."

N'Eligahn returned the smile of the Kalthurian, but it was slightly more evil.

"Ah, thank you, Commander," he said, just loud enough for Ty'Renyk to hear. "Yes, I'm sure Lieutenant Commander Eladeau would be honored if you escorted her to her quarters while I got into uniform."

Kelsey's head shook subtly and quickly.

"You are evil" the androgyn whispered with a smile before stepping out of the corner and looking at Ty'Renyk.

"Heeeelloooo!"

"Ah...yes...Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther...I've heard of you," Ty'Renyk smirked back. "There were several mentions of you in the historical records I read about the ship before I came on board. Your...'security'...has been shown to be just as effective as Etarudbo's 'engineering'."

"Oh so extremely effective you mean?" Kelsey said with a smile "N'Eligahn here does a great job of being the Chief Engineer so I assume that you must be saying he is good."

"Well, it looks like you are authorized to stay on board. I'll get you a combadge and list you as a temporary crew member... but, remember," Kelsey smirked back; "you only have full authority regarding engineering inspection duties. Otherwise senior officers onboard have the final say, understood?"

"Of course. At least Captain Kheren has knowledge of proper Starfleet protocols. Unlike many officers I could mention," Ty'Renyk spat with a small glare towards the Kalthurian. "Now, if we could get this little endeavor over as soon as possible, I have many more areas to inspect."

Kelsey Alther resisted the urge to laugh.

"Proper protocols are in place yes, more so because he is allowing you to stay with a security alert going on so to speak."

Kelsey then turned to N'Eligahn.

"What areas does she still have to inspect?"

But where the Chief Engineer had been, there was nothing, only a white-robed figure moving quickly down the hallway.

N'Eligahn felt kind of bad for leaving Ty'Renyk with Kelsey like he had, but he'd be dealing with her for however long this mission was going to last. Kelsey only had to deal with her for five minutes.

He shook his head as he exchanged his partly shredded work out robes for a fresh uniform.

If she could get her head out of her butt long enough to talk like an actual person rather than a rule-obsessed android, he'd be able to find out what the hell had happened to her in the past two years.

He stopped and looked into the mirror for a moment. Though he had to admit he wasn't the same person he was two years ago. Possession and a Borg War tended to change your outlook on life.

Monty yipped once at his feet and wagged his tail.

"What do you want? I already fed you your nasty breakfast," N'Eligahn said as he finished putting on his uniform. He bent over and picked up the little bundle of fur. Monty barked once and licked his face. "All right you little pain in the butt, I'll see if I can get a holo-emitter or something for you to play with." Monty barked again and leapt from his arms and began sniffing in his poo-corner. "I'll just leave you to your business."

He turned and walked out of his room, tapping his combadge in the process.

"Commander N'Eligahn reporting," he said to Relys' replacement, Lieutenant Junior Grade Cheonghi. "My people are all reporting aboard and my assistant is taking care of roll call."

"Thank you, Sir. Sir if I may? Perhaps you could also be kind enough to inform your person currently inside my console to stop. It's already working fine," Cheonghi answered back.

"What? I'm on my way to the bridge now, N'Eligahn out."

He walked over to the main turbolift and waited for it to open up onto the bridge.

Back in engineering on the moment he had left, the Rethian woman and the blue-skinned androgyn were still spitting acid at one another.

"And here you are wandering the hallways during a 'security alert'," Ty'Renyk observed dryly.

"No matter, I'm not here to analyze your lackluster security protocols. Please just give me the combadge. I'm sure I can find my way to my quarters on this...'ship'..." she added, drawing out the last word.

The androgyn rubbed its forehead a good moment after N'Eligahn had left.

"Damn it" Alther muttered and then looked at Ty'Renyk: "Hate to tell you but *you* were a security concern just a few moments ago, since I have been uninformed of many events of this ship as of late... because the Captain has some secret boogy man mission, most likely."

Kelsey sighed and pulled out a combadge from a pocket and threw it at the Engineering inspector.

"And I'm still going to escort you to your quarters regardless."

"Well then, I'm certainly in for a treat, aren't I?" Ty'Renyk smirked anew. "And it's not my fault your security officers failed to notice a possibly unauthorized person on board your ship. You should be happy security protocols aren't my area of expertise. I'd have you and your 'staff' hung out to dry so quickly you'd think a Defiant had run you over, Lieutenant-Commander."

She smiled again, only far colder than before.

"But again, not my area."

Kelsey sighed again.

"I do believe you missed the point about the Captain in that sentence; he is of course of higher rank than any of us on this ship and, being the captain, can command my officers to keep their mouths shut."

And again, the androgyn rubbed its eyes.

"Anyway, let's stop trading verbal insults and finish what you need to do, shall we?"

Ty'Renyk bowed her head slightly and extended her hand down the hallway.

"Please lead the way, Lieutenant-Commander Alther," she said.

Kelsey strode down the hallway with Ty'Renyk and headed to the turbolift and looked at the rethian woman as she came in.

This is fun thought the Kalthurian as the turbolift went up to the officers quarters deck.

Kelsey strode down the corridor with the Lieutenant-Commander until reaching her assigned quarters and the door opened.

"Let us not do this again," Kelsey said with a sigh, watching Ty'Renyk walk into her quarters.

Kelsey turned around and went straight back to the turbolift without further words.

"Bridge" uttered the security chief and the cabin shot up.

* * *

Syntron had been working steadily in the research facility of Starbase 10 virtually since their arrival slightly more than 10 days ago. He teamed up with a small selection of scientists that had been collaboratively working on information garnered from the probe that he sent from the Artemis during their last mission, along with data recently collected from other ships of the fleet relating to the impact of their collective efforts on the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. They were also analyzing the data gathered from the Aegis, the unique detachable bridge module of an Ambassador class starship like the USS Artemis, as it frenetically, yet accurately, targeted concentrated beams of anti-polaric ionic pulses to seal off emerging subspace fractures using its small deflector in comparison to the affect that the Artemis had on similar subspace fractures with its much larger and more powerful deflector dish.

They were extrapolating, pondering, discussing, presenting and critiquing a variety of ideas and hypothetically feasible solutions that they could potentially implement to affect these numerous subspace fractures on a much grander scale in order to protect other areas of the galaxy from the wrath of the voracious anomaly: whenever and where ever it erratically reappeared.

Despite the apparent progress made thus far, they were still in the preliminary stages of several of their seemingly viable solutions.

In between these research conferences, Syntron had transported back to the Artemis several times to continue setting up his main office on deck 14 along with updating stellar cartography with new data acquired from Starbase 10.

While setting up these stations, he also designed with Lieutenant Irksos a comprehensive matrix of detailed requirements for her to oversee involving all science teams and team leaders in coordinated shifts to ensure that each department was appropriately and thoroughly set-up and inspected several times while they were docked.

Afterward, department representatives presented a detailed report of the consequential results of each inspection. All deficiencies and inadequacies were immediately reported, addressed and remedied.

It was imperative that all of the science stations on the Artemis were fully updated, operational and working to maximum efficiency before they would be justly prepared to launch for their next mission.

Based on recent events alone, the crew of the Artemis needed to be thoroughly primed for the expected as well as the unexpected that may occur at any time during their mission; or even before or after a mission.

Syntron was also aware that there was another science team working on related research in another facility on Starbase 10, but had not yet the opportunity to meet or work in partnership with them.

In the middle of an animated discussion with his science colleagues on Starbase 10, a strong voice emanating from his combadge announced very authoritatively:

"This is Captain Kheren; all Starfleet crewmembers of the USS Artemis, report at once for departure. All civilian personnel will remain on the Starbase. Acknowledge immediately to Chief of Operations Cheonghi and report without delay to your post. Captain out."

The conversation in the room came to a complete halt.

Without another word, Syntron reached up and pressed his combadge and stated:

"This is Science Officer Syntron to the Artemis reporting in to Chief of Operations Cheonghi "

After a moment he then added:

"Notify the transporter operator...one to immediately beam up. Syntron Out."

Within a few moments, his molecules shimmered out of existence from Starbase 10 and then rematerialized moments later on the transporter pad of the Artemis.

He immediately stepped off of the pad and headed for the turbolift.

As he walked toward it, he immediately pressed his combadge and contacted Lieutenant Irksos to notify her to have all department heads meet him at his office in the next few minutes, and to be ready to provide him with a brief yet complete update on the current status of all science departments.

"Department heads already here, Sir. They will be ready for the meeting upon your arrival." her clear voice assured him over the comm.

By then, he was already in the lift cabin.

"Deck 14."

The doors swiftly closed and he was efficiently whisked up toward the main science office of the Artemis.

He'd find out momentarily how thoroughly prepared his departments were at this juncture.

The question after that would be... what was the apparent mission that recalled all of the ship's crew back so abruptly? He speculated logically that the more hastily the recall occurred, the more difficult and dire the mission was likely to be.

Would logic again prevail?

He would likely find out after he quickly checked in with his department and then proceed on to his science station on the bridge. The new Chief Science Officer of the USS Artemis wanted to be able to provide the Captain with the precise status of his department, if requested. Fortunately upon reaching his science office, he was content to summarily determine from each of the department heads that the entire Science department was fully updated, operational and prepared for departure.

He stoically acknowledged their thoroughness and efficiency, and then immediately headed back toward the turbolift.

"Bridge."

Upward he traveled toward Olympus, as the crew had colloquially christened the bridge, and to what was probably to be more storms on the horizon to contend with: perhaps ultimately heading toward the same prevailing anomaly that they just challenged once again.

If so, how would this round in this cosmic battle conclude?

* * *

"Come in Number One."

Kheren was familiar enough now with the footfall of his First officer to recognize them, with his keen auditory receptors in his antennas, in their echoes down the short corridor leading to his ready room. It was like Humans recognizing friends by their cologne; something unconscious building up over time with familiarity to one another.

Once the First Officer of the Artemis came in, he invited him to sit before his desk; bringing him his usual drink from the replicator. They had enough meetings together about ship business for him to know that as well.

He himself took a glass of his own peculiar "Captain's Brew," a thick, grey-green liquid that was in fact Cardassian fish juice at room temperature. He had acquired a strong liking to it since being introduced to the pungent beverage on the Award Ceremony following the Borg War.

But he did not even take a sip of it. Placing the glass on his desk beside him, the Andorian captain sat on the corner of the desk; a most uncharacteristic stance for anyone who knew him like Michael O'Conner did.

Captain Kheren never stood or sat in any other way than the perfunctory proper one. This casual posture, even in the privacy of their meeting, said much about the fact that he was deeply troubled. And this inner trouble was quite perceptible in the waving of his antennas, the clouded light in his eyes, the deep frown on his face and the heavy low tone of his deep voice:

"Number One, I want you to know that I have complete and implicit trust in you. Since coming aboard the Artemis, you have been nothing else but the perfect Starfleet Officer and the best First Officer any captain could hope for; especially one like me."

One only started a private conversation like that if there was going to be bad news. So, O'Conner looked up at the captain and added:

"But..."

Kheren made a pause, visibly gathering his thoughts before saying anything; another sign of hesitancy unheard of, even considering that he was still a novice captain which rose like lightning to his current command.

But once he spoke, there was no hesitation in his eyes and voice:

"The next days will be very trying for you; and believe me, no less for me. I will have to give orders you might not understand, even dislike, and you will get no explanation from me. Nevertheless, I hope now to be able to count on you as always... especially now."

The XO raised his eyebrow at the reply. After a pause he replied.

"Of course sir, I understand my duty to the ship and Starfleet.

I guess this means you can't tell me why there are two guards outside of one of the VIP quarters."

The Andorian sighed audibly.

"Sorry Number One, but I cannot tell you anything..."

There was something unfinished in the captain's sentence; but it only came out as another sigh, this one cut short by controlled frustration.

"Mister O'Conner... Michael... we are both Starfleet officers. As captain, I have the last word on this ship, but I too must obey orders... whether I like them or not. If we do not respect and trust our superior officers to make the right decisions, all this, this uniform, our ranks, Starfleet... all of it means nothing."

He looked directly at the man's eyes.

"We must believe that what we are about to do, whatever we are about to do, means something... the *right* thing."

O'Conner never liked to head in to any situation blinded, but he would do his duty. With a sigh he stood up and looked at Kheren; knowing that he wasn't going to get any more answers, he gave the captain one last speech.

"No sir, the crew needs to believe in you and your judgment." He then turned and moved towards the door. Just before leaving he added:

"I do hope for your sake you're able to inspire that belief and for everyone's sake that this will be the right thing."

The Andorian looked at the man blinking his silvery eyes straight at him for a long moment. Then he stood up and walked to the tall, slim window near his desk, looking out at the starry panorama of the insides of the immense structure of Starbase 10. His eyes were still far away when he finally said:

"You know how it is: there is the right way, the wrong way, the Starfleet way and the captain's way. It so happens that the right way here is my way, which is the Starfleet way, because I believe it to be the right way; the right way to uphold all that the United Federation of Planets stands for."

He then turned to face once more his First Officer.

"So, there is only one way to go wrong here. And believe me, it's *not* going to happen; there will be *no* Klingon or Dominion genocide attempt, *no* Khitomer conspiracy, *no* Pegasus incident, *no* timeline-violating officer, *no* shady dealings ending with the death of a Romulan Admiral... not while *I* command the Artemis... or *even* if I will not anymore."

It was more than a statement: it was an oath.

"For now, we head as logged to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Prepare the ship for immediate departure, Number One. "

O'Conner paused as he listened, then just shook his head before leaving the captain alone. All the first Officer knew as he left was that this captain needed to learn that leading a crew is about far more than just following rules and regulations and he hoped Kheren wouldn't have to learn this the hard way.

Michael straightened his uniform, took a deep breath and then got to work.

Alone in his ready room after Michael O'Conner had left to see to the ship's departure, Kheren had stayed for a good while looking outside, his mind empty as his heart.

It was almost a better feeling than what he had felt when he had let his thoughts in the turmoil that they had been in for the last hour... Almost.

But he could no more escape his feelings than his duties.

"Computer: isolate all communications from VIP quarters to my ready room and my combadge only, authorization Captain Kheren Omega --- 9 --- White."

"Command code verified: no communication outside the designated channels without proper authorization code." confirmed the voice of the ship's main computer.

"Computer: lock out VIP quarters from transporter and scanning lock under my personal code."

"Complying: No transporter or scanning will be possible in the designated area without proper authorization code."

"Computer; Erect level 10 forcefield around VIP quarters under quarantine protocols and lock on to same command code."

"VIP quarters under quarantine protocols, command code now required for access." again confirmed the calm feminine voice of the computer.

"Computer: lock all power allocation to VIP quarters under my command code."

Kheren just wished he could isolate like this his own doubts and apprehensions as easily as he did with the source of them all.

He ordered the lights of the room dimmed almost to darkness, eyeing only the lights of the starbase they were about to leave for the unknown.

But he saw only the darkness enveloping him.

* * *

Commander Michael O'Conner stepped on to the bridge and turned to Ensign Narod.

"Ensign set a course for the Azimuth Horizon."

Narod nodded in reply as he started to input trajectory calculations and time estimates for any warp speed that would be ordered to reach the objective all aboard the Artemis were already too familiar with. In fact, he could call by heart those ETAs now.

The door of the main turbolift wooshed open and Lieutenant-Commander Kelsey Alther stepped out.

"Sorry for being late, I had to deal with a security concern" Alther said walking over to tactical and taking the chair right besides that of navigator, who's piloting console was joined with the tactical one, a forgotten but venerated concept that allowed better coordination between ship maneuvers and weapons fire.

O'Conner nodded a greeting, moved to the captain's chair and sat down.

Again, the doors to the tubolift swiftly parted from the center into the recessed opening as Syntron stepped out of the lift and onto the Bridge.

He walked past several bridge officers and then directly over to the primary science station and spoke to the human female crewman sitting at the post.

"Ensign Jacobson, what is our current status?" he asked as he stood over her slight frame while her hands glided over several keys on the console in front of her.

Bella Jacobson jolted suddenly, as if awoken from a deep trance. She immediately swiveled in her chair and looked up at the fit Vulcan Chief of Science towering next to her. Breathlessly she replied:

"I'm sorry Sir, but you really startled me." As she quickly regained her composure she added calmly: "All readings are normal and all stations stand ready, Sir."

"Thank you Ensign" he replied to her without acknowledging her previous remark. "You are now relieved of your bridge duty Ensign Jacobson. Please report to Lieutenant Irksos on deck 7 to confirm how best to assist with the remaining time on your shift."

Bella Jacobson, without delay, stood up next to the Vulcan and gazing up into his cool and distant blue eyes stated:

"Yes Sir," and then stood there for a moment longer looking at the Vulcan officer before she turned away and headed toward the turbolift. Syntron then sat down at his post and began swiftly engaging the keys on the console.

As Ensign Jacobson entered the turbolift, she turned and faced forward:

"Deck 7"

She then coyly looked over and stole one last glance at the youthful Vulcan science officer sitting at the station before the lift doors closed her view off completely.

After a few moments of confirming the readiness of the science station, Syntron turned to the first officer:

"Commander O'Conner, what is the time of our departure and to what destination will our coordinates be heading?"

"Are we ready to leave yet, Lieutenant Cheonghi?"

"Negative, Sir" The three-armed, three-legged Edoan officer answered to Commander O'Conner as he tapped the console before him. "Still fifty civilians on board and Lieutenant-Commander Eladeau still needs to finish her inspection."

"Who?"

"Lieutenant Commander Eladeau, a Rethian from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. She is inspecting for efficiency and safety of the upgrades."

"Oh... Hummm... ETA on the civilians?"

"At least thirty minutes, Sir."

O'Conner sighed, then tapped the console on the side of the chair.

"Commander O'Conner to the Captain. Sir a few families of the crew are still packing, ETA thirty minutes and we are still waiting for Lieutenant-Commander Eladeau's all clear." The reply came out in a clipped tone:

"Commander Ty'Renyk Eladeau's authorization to stay on board as temporary crewmember has been granted so that she can finish up her inspection and give us a hand if need be. As soon as all of the civilians have disembarked, you will command the Artemis out of spacedock and towards our intended destination, best speed, Number One. Kheren out."

"Aye Sir," was O'Conner's only repose as he leaned back against the chair.

"Commander O'Conner, what is the time of our departure and to what destination will our coordinates be heading?"

"About ten minutes, Lieutenant. The last of the civilians are departing the ship now. We will be heading back to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly." then announced the First officer.

The turbolift doors slid open and Doctor Sage walked over to his chair. Acknowledging the Executive Officer, Josiah shifted the blue medical coat around so as not to step on it. He sat down and started sifting through the reports his chair had waiting for him.

"Here we go a'gin, eh, Commander O'Conner?" Doc Sage said with a light smile. Obviously he had heard the last sentence coming from the command chair.

Upon hearing too the response of the Commander, Syntron then replied wryly:

"As the old Terran idiom implies: *'Out of the frying pan, into the fire'*, Commander O'Conner?"

Syntron surmised that eventually the Artemis would likely venture back to address this anomaly.

The question again was: why so suddenly? Repairs and replacements were literally just being completed from their last encounter with the anomaly.

Without waiting for a response to his rhetorical question, he began to upload the information, proposals and data that he had been working on while the Artemis was docked at Starbase 10. While this information was uploading, he sent a message to his colleagues still working on Starbase 10 to inform them of the departure time and destination of the Artemis and also to encourage continual communication of ideas and information; that is while they were still in range of the Starbase.

Perhaps he would be presented in too brief a timeframe the opportunity to test several of these theories on the anomaly itself.

Not the most opportune prospect in dealing with such a volatile phenomena, but nevertheless it seemed a likelihood destined to transpire.

The turbolift door slid open once more. From inside the cabin, Chief Engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo immediately looked towards the Operations console and, sure enough, there was an engineering officer working inside the console.

"Everything all right, Ensign..." N'Eligahn assured the technician coming right behind him. The officer smacked his head on the console as he removed his head.

"Montgomery McAllister, Sir," he said. "I'm sorry; Lieutenant Blakely said there'd been reports of keypad flickering on the Ops console."

"Certainly not from me," Cheongi protested with a sheepish smile.

"I'll check with her about it after we clear spacedock," N'Eligahn decided. "For now, you've been ordered to report to Main Engineering for roll; please go there."

"Aye, Sir," McAllister said before closing up the back to the console and taking his tools into the turbolift.

"If I may offer a suggestion, Sir; you might find it useful keep better tabs on your people, Sir," Cheongi commented, again with an apologetic smile.

"You should keep better watch on your console, there's a priority one message coming in," N'Eligahn shot back.

"What?! I don't see..." he said scanning the console. "...I don't find that very funny."

N'Eligahn chuckled a bit.

"I dunno, everyone's on edge," the Rethian remarked. "People could use a little humor. Even a stick in the mud like yourself," he added, tapping the Edoan officer on the central shoulder before taking his place at the primary engineering console.

He looked over the systems checklist before turning to O'Conner.

"Everything checks out, Sir. Thrusters and impulse engines are awaiting your signal."

"Commander, the last civilian has departed." confirmed Ops chief Cheonghi. "Starbase 10 is acknowledging our orders of departure. We have permission to leave dock, Sir. "

"Very good. Release the docking clamps." O'Conner ordered.

"Aye, Sir. Docking clamps released; magnetic moorings retracted, tractor holds offline. We are free and clear to navigate" answered the Trill helmsman Jered Narod.

"Ensign Narod, take us out. Once clear of the station, set course for the Azimuth Horizon and engage at warp 6."

Narod nodded and tapped the console before him.

N'Eligahn felt the ship bump slightly as it disengaged from the station. He smiled a bit as the ship slipped through the station's doors and back into open space. He hoped that the time spent working would keep his mind busy. He didn't like the arguments with Relys, even though he knew full well it was his fault. He thought about taking the Captain aside after this mission and explaining it to him.

The Artemis rose to life, moving slowly away her majestic frame from the large looming station, the lights of Starbase 10 silhouetting and following her wide saucer atop the profiled neck that arched from the tubular main hull that ended with the right angles of the pylons supporting her long and wide flattened warp nacelles glowing blue with pulsing power. Her classic silhouette arced away gracefully away for a minute before blasting off to disappear in a flash light.

The Artemis carried once more the captain and the crew to their destiny.

Chief Engineer N'Eligahn's golden eyes glanced down at Cheonghi's Ops station and for a brief moment noticed the console flickering slightly.

The Rethian opened a channel.

"N'Eligahn to Blakely; tell Ensign McAllister that he didn't complete the repairs to the Ops station."

"Ops Station?" Blakely said. "McAllister was assigned to the aft torpedo tube this morning. One of the circuits has been shorting out all week and..."

"Wait...you didn't order him to fix the station?"

"Sir, we haven't even touched the Ops Station in three weeks, not since the last regular diagnostic," Blakely answered. "Why?"

N'Eligahn didn't answer. He stood and walked over to the Operations console. The keys were flickering even more now. N'Eligahn moved behind the console and pulled open the back panel.

He searched through the circuits until he found an odd blue and black device placed between the primary and secondary power conduits.

The ship's power systems were feeding into the device and creating an electrical imbalance in the console. Power from the primary power circuit were being forcefully fed into the secondary lines... which meant in a few seconds the station was going to...

"Overload..." N'Eligahn whispered.

He stood and pulled Cheonghi from the chair, moving him to the side as he rapidly typed into the console, trying to shut it down. He felt the energy crackling underneath the panel seconds before the console itself exploded.

The force of the explosion sent him flying backwards over the tactical and helm stations and slamming into the deck right in front of the CO and CMO chairs.

Syntron leaped out of his seat at the Science console at the sound of explosion at the Ops Station and peripherally witnessed Chief Engineer N'Eligahn being flung forcefully over the tactical and helm stations and then slamming harshly into a deck in proximity below his station.

Hadn't a similar incident happened prior to the departure of a previous mission that killed the preceding Captain of the Artemis and injured several other officers; including Captain Kheren?

This would seem to be too much of a mere coincidence.

Apparently, the bridge of the Artemis and another bridge officer were again victims of yet another saboteur.

O'Conner was already yelling.

"Red alert!"

As the light changed to red and a klaxon sounded, O'Conner continued to bark orders and not wait for replies.

When Josiah watched the chief engineer land bodily in front of his command chair, he didn't hesitate to act.

He stood, tapped his combadge, and calmly said, "Transporter, emergency medical code Omega Lambda Three."

"Commander O'Conner to Ensign S'Prek. Ensign I need an emergency medical transportation of Doc Sage and Commander N'Elighan to Sickbay!"

"Yes sir," The Vulcan doctor calmly replied over the comm as a blue light engulfed the officers.

Josiah Sage already knelt by Nelighahn's fallen form, and the whine of the transporter whisked them away from the bridge to main medical.

The medical staff on Artemis was a top-notch team of doctors, nurses, and orderlies. They were prepared for any situation that demanded their attention when it came to saving lives. However, they had been unprepared when Doc Sangliar had been laid low. The sight of the larger-than-life Tellarite splayed out on the deck of the bridge was something that caused the medical team to hesitate. That hesitation cost Sangliar several precious moments.

While Sangliar had pulled through, the next time a patient might not be so fortunate.

After some discussion amongst themselves, the doctors on the Artemis dreamed up a three-word cypher not likely to be uttered in everyday conversation that would serve multiple purposes.

One, it would initiate an emergency medical transport directly to main medical from anywhere on, or immediately off, the ship. Two, the three-word cypher would initiate what was known in Earth-based hospitals as a "code blue": a general emergency requiring the immediate resuscitation of a patient. This three-word cypher, when spoken, would simultaneously beam the patient to medical, while alerting the medical shift on duty to prepare for incoming.

Doc Sage had broached the implementation to Captain Kheren while en route to Starbase 10 after they left the Dyson shell. With the Captain's blessing, Doc Sage and Commander N'Eligahn had put the cypher into full operability.

It was an irony then that the first usage of code Omega Lambda 3 would be for the chief engineer who had helped to create it.

Doc Sage materialized in main medical with the fallen Rethian, and saw exactly what Omega Lambda 3 was designed for: a flurry of organized activity readied for their arrival.

"What are the presents?" called a voice Josiah recognized as Ensign Osaro-Lyth, one of the surgeons onboard. "A console 'splosion on the bridge. Commander N'Eligahn took the brunt of it on his left side's anterior and posterior. Gimme a burn percentage someone!" Doc Sage shouted as orderlies scurried about.

"Initials suggest 72%," came a reply from one of the human female crewman.

"Okay, move'im into the O.R.! Move it, pe'ple! Move it!"

At a stirring from the Rethian, Doc Sage realized N'Eligahn was still awake.

"Ah, shit! Anesthesia! He's still with us! Put 'im out!"

"Aye, sir!"

The organized chaos continued as the medical team treated N'Eligahn.

"Narod, All stop!"

The Artemis shuttered to a stop.

"Lieutenant Alther. Find this Montgomery McAllister Chief Neligahn was talking about and put him in the brig."

Kelsey had flinched as the explosion occurred and saw N'El fly right past her to crumple behind her seat. The kalthurian was about to help him when the First Officer gave the order to put McAlister in the brig.

Damn it Alther thought before nodding and calling ship security:

"Kelsey Alther to security, I want a team waiting outside Montgomery Alistair's quarters on the double!"

Kelsey got up and ran towards the turbolift and took it down to the deck on which his quarters were on.

Michael O'Conner then reached down and tapped the console on the Captain's chair.

"Sir we have a problem..."

The First Officer of the Artemis didn't even have time to finish his sentence that the left hand door slid open and Captain Kheren erupted on the smoking bridge.

The ultrasensitive auditory organs in his antennae had picked up the sound of the deflagration beyond the door leading to his ready room.

They were now almost flat on his head and pointing angrily over his blazing silver eyes.

"Report!"

As Kheren entered. O'Conner stood and then saluted him.

"Sir, Crewmate McAllister was doing unordered work on this console before we departed Starbase 10. I suspect that he installed something to cause the console to overload. Kelsey has been ordered to find him and take him into custody."

Syntron walked cautiously over to the remains of the ops station, pulled out his tricorder and began taking readings all around the vicinity of the explosion.

He deduced that it was beneficial to capture any traces of residual material before they fully disintegrated or changed composition.

He encircled the perimeter of the station; taking readings from higher to lower regions.

Perhaps the results could provide a lead for the security and engineering teams meticulously searching through all sections of the ship for any other traces of sabotage.

After Syntron finished investigating the areas around the ops station with the tricorder, he then focused his attention on examining the remains of the severely damaged consoles.

He cautiously lifted the charred pieces off of the top of the console to get into the intricacies positioned deeper within the interior. He continued to pick through all of the shattered pieces and began to lay them out in a pattern on the floor like pieces of a puzzle.

Meticulous observation and careful analysis would be required to determine the probable cause of the explosion.

He would proceed with the investigation until he was able to establish a plausible origin of the explosion.

Kheren looked over at the damaged multitask console, Lieutenant Syntron already scanning the debris with a tricorder... and Lieutenant Cheonghi, pale orange with the remnant emotion of the frightful accident he seemed to have escaped miraculously unharmed.

"Anyone hurt, Number One?"

"Commander N'Eligahn was injured in the blast, Sir. Doctor Sage took him to sickbay."

Kheren blinked. Once.

Then, his long powerful legs brought him straight to the turbolift.

"You have the bridge, Number One. Maintain security alert and present position. I'll be in sickbay."

He barely got into the cabin that he heard the call from Doctor Sage:

"CMO to Cap'n Kheren," he said. "The Cheng pulled through, skipper. He's gonna be outta c'mmission f'r a while, though. He's still under general anesthesia, but should be awake in an hour or so if yew'd like to see 'im."

"Already on my way, Doc."

The doors slid shut as he ordered stiffly the turbolift to sickbay.

And then his combadge buzzed again... but with a vibration instead of an audible signal; one reserved to a single very specific, highly secured shipcomm channel.

"Hold." he ordered the lift.

Then, as the cabin immobilized itself between two decks, he opened the private, encoded channel:

"Yes, Admiral."

"We have stopped. Explanation." came back the clipped tone of Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick.

"There was sabotage on the bridge, Sir. One suspect apprehended, security alert on all decks for a thorough search against any other possible such attempt. My Chief Engineer was seriously wounded..."

"Resume course, Captain, immediately."

The Andorian gritted his teeth against a sudden flare of anger he couldn't even explain to himself.

This is not the Imperial Guard he reminded himself.

"With all due respect, Sir, if we have a saboteur on board, it is certainly not because we were bound for an astrometric survey of an anomaly..."

"You have your orders, Captain."

Kheren swallowed back what he was about to say, especially the way he was about to say it... and instead slowly articulated:

"May I respectfully remind the Admiral that my duty as captain is first to the safety of my ship and crew and all on board... including *you*... Sir."

"And I remind you, Captain that your first duty as a Starfleet Officer is to the safety of all the citizens of the United Federation of Planets. Do you deny that?"

The silence that followed was answer enough.

"Resume course, maximum warp."

Then the channel audibly closed.

It took a few long, deliberate breaths before Captain Kheren finally ordered the lift to move down once more. Only when it stopped was he calm enough again to tap his combadge without crushing it against his muscular chest:

"Commander O'Conner, Kheren here: resume course, maximum warp."

O'Conner paused a good two seconds as he still searched for an answer to Kheren's orders. He didn't understand why the captain asked to get underway. With a suspected saboteur on board with unknown goals, the Executive Officer of the Artemis felt that both the crew and the ship would be endangered if he followed the captain's orders.

But what else could he do?

"Sir, as we have already determined that the Azimuth Horizon anomaly was created by warp destruction of subspace. Starfleet regulations state that we are limited to a speed of warp 5, except in cases of extreme emergency."

Kheren's eyes blinked several times hearing the First Officer reciting General Order 40... and omitting the last sentence: *Ship classes officially designed and registered as proven to be able to use warp travel without damaging subspace are exempt from this directive...*

After the fleet-wide installation of the new variable warp geometry system first tested on the Sovereign class, 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 prevented the further pollution of subspace since the last twenty-five years.

Anyone would know this applied even to the Artemis. That is, anyone *familiar* with this eighty years old, venerable but *newly refitted* USS Artemis...
"Thank you, Commander O'Conner; warp 5."

Things were moving too fast and in the wrong direction. They needed time... and Michael O'Conner, aware that his captain was under some directives out of his control, just provided some.

"Aye sir." O'Conner replied with an almost defeated tone of voice.

He didn't like this at all but he had done what he could.

"Ensign Narod, return us to our course warp 5." O'Conner said before returning to the captain chair with a sigh.

At the same moment, Captain Kheren also sighed and walked towards sickbay, the gaze of all his four eyes as low and as stern as his thoughts.

I won't make the mistake of disregarding orders and allow you to take over my ship, Admiral... But you better not make one either.

When the doors of sickbay parted to admit him in, he went straight to the section where his Rethian officer laid under the care of an entire medic team lead by the Chief Medical Officer himself.

"How is he, Doc?"

Doc Sage looked up from N'Eligahn's chart at the captain.

"He's sedated righ' now, pretty heavily in fac', but in an hour or so he should be comin' out of it. We got him here soon enough that shock didn't really have a chance to take hold of 'im; small favors, an' all that."

Josiah looked back at his chart.

"He's burned on nearly three-quarters of his body. Mostly superficial, but signif'cant enough we need to keep 'im in ICU. There was some shrapnel from the console itself, none of it went much deeper than the dermis."

The CMO looked at his captain again.

"I would say he got lucky, and I could get away with that, but the truth is we were much better pr'pared. The Omega Lambda Three cypher worked perfec'ly, 'spite havin' only been fully installed last Tuesday, and drilled by the med'cal staff once!"

The captain of the Artemis listened to his Chief Medical Officer's report without moving eyes or antennae from the prostrate form on the biobed. There was a very peculiar light in his silvery eyes as he looked at the unconscious Rethian and reflected on recent thoughts and events.

But then, still without moving, he nodded to Sage.

"This is exactly what I expect from every single member of this ship, Doctor: efficiency beyond even Starfleet protocols. Good work."

He finally lifted his eyes towards the bearded Human, but his two cranial appendages still wavered with obvious emotion as he finished:

"Convey my thanks also to your team; their lifesaving discipline in applying your procedure will also grant them all a citation in my crew report to Command. Please inform me the moment Mister N'Eligahn wakes up and is ready and able to talk."

With a last look at the injured chief engineer, Kheren walked out of sickbay at a crisp pace.

* * *

"I wish I could help N'El" the androgyn muttered in the turbolift.

"Nice to know that our ship can always explode around us" it added with a sigh as the doors opened. Kelsey ran out and headed towards the security team outside the door.

Kelsey came phaser drawn and attempted to open the door. Surprisingly enough, it opened without resistance.

"Be careful" Kelsey ordered as the armed security team went in and started searching.

"Commander! We found him!" a security Ensign yelled out.

Kelsey strode over to see McAllister. He was sitting calmly on his bed.

"Hello Lieutenant Commander" the man simply said.

Kelsey raised her eyebrow.

"What? no resistance?" the Kalthurian asked.

McAllister did not respond.

"Fine" the security chief said, picking him up. "You are coming to the brig."

McAllister simply nodded.

Alther then called over the shipcomm channel.

"Kelsey Alther to the brig; prepare for an arrival."

When they arrived at the brig, Kelsey put him in and activated his prison and tapped her combadge again.

"Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther to Commander O'Conner. McAllister is in the brig. Do you want me to return to the bridge?"

Instead of the expected tone of the First officer, the Kalthurian officer was answered by the deep voice of the captain:

"Mister Alther; you will start a ship wide search for any possible other act of sabotage with your personal comb until you are convinced this ship is as clean as the back of your hand. The engineering crew will be under your orders to assist in this search. Then, you will start an investigation into this event. Captain out."

Kelsey was momentarily stunned by Kheren's voice but quickly shook it off.

"Yes, Sir!" the chief of security replied before tapping another channel open.

"Alther to security; I want security teams combing the entire ship for any possible acts of sabotage, start off with vital areas and work your way down. I'll assign several engineers per security team for assistance. Security Team leaders report in!"

As the security team leaders finished doing so, Kelsey Alther nodded.

"Good; organize your teams and I'll send engineers down to meet you" the androgyn said before switching over to another comlink. "Alther to Engineering; by captain's orders, I need two engineers to report to security to join all security team."

"On their way to meet your security officers," Assistant chief of engineering Blakely acknowledged.

Kelsey told them the names of the security team leaders so they could meet up.

The Kalthurian sighed and cracked its neck. While the security teams would search all over, going over every inch of the ship to make sure it was safe, Alther would be starting with Main Engineering. With this objective firmly set, the security chief of the Artemis strode out of the brig and headed towards the nearby turbolift.

Blakely met the chief of security at the entrance to engineering.

"Sir, I have a damage control team on its way to the bridge, three teams meeting your people and I can't raise Commander N'Eligahn." she said as Lieutenant Commander Ty'Renyk appeared behind her, just watching the scene. "With respect, Sir, what the hell is going on?"

Kelsey looked down for a moment then looked up.

"There was an explosion on the bridge's multitask ops station McAllister had been working at. We believe he planted a bomb there while he was working."

The Kalthurian sighed.

"N'Eligahn pushed Cheongi out of the way and it resulted in him taking the force of the explosion. As far as I know, no one else was hurt." Alther said; trying to hide the sadness in its voice.

"The captain ordered me to conduct a search to make sure there is not any more sabotage."

Blakely stared at Kelsey for a moment before nodding once.

"Roger that sir," she said, running over to the main engineering console. "I'm calling in Beta shift. We need all the hands we can get."

She looked up at two officers that had walked over.

"Ferrier, Deloth, take two teams each, coordinate with the teams already working with security. I want scans every two meters. I want any readings even slightly out of the ordinary investigated. Even if you have to shut down the entire corridor. Start as far aft as you can get."

"Yes ma'm," they acknowledged as they moved faster then she'd seen them move before.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant, but..." The Starfleet Corps of Engineer inspector Ty'Renyk Eladau began; but Lieutenant Blakely interrupted her mid-sentence without even giving her any moment of attention.

"Derabo, T'Nell, same thing, only start as far forward as you can get, start in the saucer."
"Aye ma'm," both answered as they moved off.

"Lieutenant, stop," Ty'Renyk then ordered stiffly. "As the current ranking officer in Engineering, it is my duty to..."

But the blonde woman turned around and held up a single finger.

"Ma'm, you may outrank me, but right now by my understanding you're aboard only as an inspector," she said. "I'm the assistant Chief Engineer so until someone higher than you tells me otherwise, this is my engineering bay. I know the people in here and this ship far better than you."

"If that's true, then why did one of your people try to blow up the bridge and possibly kill your Chief Engineer," Ty'Renyk retorted coldly.

The assistant Chief Engineer stopped mid-stride as she was already moving to the main engineering console to supervise the search.

"With all due respect, ma'm, until I hear otherwise, I'm still in charge; so, I ask you to either inspect us, or please get the hell out of our way, ma'm," Blakely said before turning to Kelsey Alther: "If you need anything else, ma'm, let us know. We're with you a hundred percent."

Kelsey nodded.

"Thank you" the chief of security said before turning to Ty'Renyk, white-haired head shaking as Kelsey began going over Main Engineering personally to make sure there was nothing wrong in the area.

By then, the ride in the turbolift seemed to have been much too slow for Captain Kheren as he came out on the bridge like an ancient cannon ball and, waving O'Conner back down on the center seat with an impatient hand, headed straight to the station where sat Science Chief Syntron.

The Vulcan was inputting information he had gathered thus far in his investigation into his report at his science console.

"Report on your findings, Lieutenant."

"At this point in my investigation Captain, it's seems evident that these damaged sections are the result of an explosion caused by a phaser charge unit."

To provide empirical evidence to the captain for this verdict, Syntron stood up and then walked back toward the damaged ops station.

He then gestured for his commanding officer to follow him over to the area near the explosion.

As he began to pick up specific fragments of the damaged station components, Syntron then signaled for Kheren to move in closer to examine specific remnants of the console. As the Andorian moved in to examine the damaged components, he slowly turned and focused his oculars intently on the pieces as Syntron began to point out the evidence before them.

"If you look at the remains here, you can see that the saboteur apparently connected a basic power relay between the charge and the EPS connection supplying power to the console... to allow it to operate as a simple detonator."

The Captain was fully engaged in the explanation thus far and merely nodded his head to affirm that he was ready to continue on.

Syntron then proceeded to explain:

"Based on the evident level of damages I've examined thus far, it appears that the detonation occurred before the charge was fully set to complete overload by a breaker circuit added as a failsafe against tampering."

He then added:

"And you can see if you follow the remains of this path, the EPS flow was completely rerouted from the console just before the time of actual detonation of the partially overloaded charge."

Kheren nodded, his own investigative skills from the time he was himself a chief of security aboard the flagship kicking in:

"A full phaser charge overload would have been powerful enough to destroy completely the entire deck 1. There would have been absolutely no chance of survival and a high probability that the ship suddenly out of control at warp could have been destroyed or at the very least seriously crippled."

He then looked at the Vulcan.

"But, a phaser overload emits a growing high intensity whine that becomes deafening a few seconds before detonation. Here, no one heard anything. How did the saboteur manage to delay the overload and make it undetectable?"

"You are correct Captain Kheren. Under normal circumstances, a phaser set to overload emits a mounting high intensity audio frequency that would continue to grow; reaching virtually deafening levels several moments before a detonation occurs."

"However," Syntron stipulated "this configuration was designed to engage this device covertly, and thereby intended to compensate for several factors."

He then proceeded to explain the details of his investigation:

"First, the configuration of a slower power diverting device to the explosive charge was minute enough to allow it to go unnoticed under current use of the console. Thereby, there would be no indication of a power drain showing on displays or by the triggering of a warning indicator. Secondly, the sound build up had not yet reached a point to where audible levels could be heard. The saboteur did however anticipate this occurring, and added a micro anti-noise dampening field generator around the entire phaser charge unit apparatus. Even if this were not optimally configured or fully effective, chances are by the time that any of the sound waves escaped and were detected, it would have only been seconds prior to detonation."

Syntron paused for a moment before he added:

"The one element the saboteur did not factor into their plan was Mister N'Eligahn's physiology."

The Andorian Captain looked at the Vulcan Science officer without even a flicker on his rigid facial features, but the repositioning of his antennae conveyed curiosity and bewilderment.

Syntron proceeded to explain the relevance of the preceding statement.

"According to Chief Operations Officer Cheonghi's statement, Mister N'Eligahn had abruptly pulled Mister Cheonghi from his chair, and moved him out of the way while he tried in desperation to shut down the console before it exploded. No one else noticed anything wrong with the console. However, Mister N'Eligahn became aware from a distance that something was wrong."

He elaborated as he walked toward the area where the Chief Engineer was previously standing and looked down toward the damaged station from what would have been Mister N'Eligahn's perspective.

"He had just seconds before spoken to Lieutenant Blakely who stated that Mister N'Eligahn had spoken to her from the bridge; commenting on the repair job not being finished as he looked at the station. He then complained about seeing flashing patterns emanating from the console. She then notified him that no one from engineering had even touched the Ops Station in the past three weeks: not since the last regular diagnostic. Nevertheless, the patterns were there flashing before him. Captain, no one else saw these flashes emanating from the console; however, no one else on the bridge has the vision of a Rethian."

Syntron continued after a pause:

"Like the eyes of some Terran birds and reptiles, the Rethian eye is not only sensitive to colors and forms of different frequencies extending normal visual light, but even more so is it very sensitive to movement. It apparently was the almost imperceptible flickering movement of the console lights that alerted him that something was wrong; a flicker only his eyes had noticed. It was at this moment during his conversation with Lieutenant Blakely that he moved toward the station in an attempt to shut it down."

The Vulcan scientist then concluded:

"It would seem Captain, that Chief Engineer N'Eligahn potentially sacrificed his life to save not only his crewmates on the bridge, but perhaps also as a means to prevent the possible crippling of the ship itself as well."

"That much is certain" acknowledged the Andorian. "The good news is that he did not sacrifice his life despite the risk he faced; Doctor Sage said he would regain consciousness in an hour and should be well on the mend after that. He was lucky; and we were luckier to have him on the bridge."

It was good news; yet, Kheren was far from being joyful.

"Good work, Lieutenant Syntron. Please send your findings to Lieutenant-Commander Alther."

"Affirmative Captain" Syntron responded, as he turned back toward his science console to continue composing his report of the incident.

After he finished entering the analysis of his report on the explosion into the computer, he forwarded all of the results and relevant information to the Chief of Security Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther.

It would be in the hands of this security officer to continue collecting and assembling all of the pieces to this emerging puzzle.

Michael O'Conner also heard Syntron's report. He sighed lightly to himself and then after the Chief of Science concluded, O'Conner added:

"Sir, we should at least question Crewmate McAllister and find out why he did this before proceeding with the mission. I don't want another of these charges to go off while we are warp or in the Azimuth Horizon anomaly."

"Lieutenant Alther is already on it, Number One. We are proceeding with a thorough level 1 search and on security alert; there will now be guards to every key section of the ship applying security controls round the clock from now on."

He paused with a sigh and then added:

"The key factor of sabotage is the element of surprise. It makes little sense and is most inefficient to perform sabotage of a console and then try later for something else, once the ship is on full alert. Even a shrouded Jem'Hadar with a portable transporter would not be able to slip through now that our vigilance is heightened."

Then, his deep voice dropped low, almost to a mumble.

"And we have our orders."

The commanding officer of the Artemis turned to face the main viewer a moment before asking:

"Mister Narod; ETA with the Anomaly?"

"At present speed, slightly less than forty-one hours, Captain." answered the Trill pilot looking at his navigational readout.

He turned to Michael O'Conner:

"Number One, maintain security alert but keep usual shifts operating. Have the multitask console replaced as soon as possible, and ask Chief Alther to call me once search and interrogation are over."

And without further word, he left the bridge through the access door of the short corridor leading both to his ready room and the briefing room.

* * *

Kelsey leant back on a wall on one of the decks, having spent an untold amount of time searching up and down the Artemis for any other signs of sabotage.

Why do ships have to be so big the Kalthurian thought before calling over shipcomm.

"Alther to security teams, report."

All the security teams began replying from all twenty-six decks of the five hundred meters long Ambassador class starship. They had all been hard at work for hours with a level 1 search; which implied an inch by inch visual and tricorder search of the entire vessel.

They all came back with an all clear.

"Good job, Alther out."

Kelsey sighed before straightening up and heading towards the brig while activating the combadge once again.

"Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther to Captain Kheren; just thought I would inform you that the search of the Artemis is complete and we haven't turned up any more signs of sabotage. I'm going to interrogate McAllister now."

Kelsey stepped into the brig moments later to see the officer on duty staring at McAllister. The young, black-skinned Human officer noticed Kelsey and snapped to attention.

"Sorry sir, I was just thinking. Something is not right here."

The Chief of Security looked at the officer and nodded, walking over to join him at the level 10 forcefield energy door that in fact extended all over the cell.

"Continue, Ensign Blikili."

"McAllister's voice was clear, joyful, fast-paced back at the academy... but now it's raspy, cold and slow. Also his eyes were always smiling but now they are hard."

The Ensign looked down and handed Kelsey a PADD.

"Here is the mandatory prisoner medical examination report, Sir."

"Thank you, I'll take what you said under advisement," the androgyn finished with an absent tone, already reading the medical examination.

It turned out the man sitting in the brig was not Engineering Ensign Montgomery McAllister at all. He was an Orion, surgically altered to look like the Human crewman who had taken leave on Risa during the week of refit the Artemis had spent at Starbase 10.

"Brilliant..." Kelsey muttered before looking at the Orion. "So, why did you do it?"

The man simply looked at the blue-skinned female looking Kalthurian with clouded eyes.

"The light comes. You are the darkness. You wish to extinguish the light. The light will destroy the darkness and purify the universe."

"What is that? Some kind of spiritual, religious mumbojumbo?" Alther asked.

"All will join the light."

Kelsey rolled eyes skyward.

Another religious nutjob most likely, great.

Kalthurians had pretty bad experiences with religion in the past and it was always off-putting to see people use that as an excuse for their acts. While it may not have been a religious thing, it sure as hell sounded like it to Kelsey.

"I'm going to guess that you won't answer me or anything?" the security Chief asked.

"The light comes. You are the darkness. You wish to extinguish the light. . ."

Kelsey waved a hand, cutting him off.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

One last shot thought the androgyn before asking: "Do you have an accomplice?"

"We are all one under the light."

Kelsey cringed.

"I wish you would talk straight or I'm going to cram the light into your darkness in a minute," the Kalthurian muttered, visibly frustrated.

Then, Alther turned to Ensign Blikili, "Make sure he doesn't try anything."

The security officer nodded and added: "Yes sir... though he hasn't tried anything at all, hadn't even moved since we brought him in here."

Kelsey sighed and nodded.

"Good job. Carry on."

Leaving the brig and tapping a channel open, the androgyn called out:

"Captain Kheren, Alther here. I've finished my interrogation and search. Do you want to see me now?"

While awaiting a response, the security chief of the Artemis headed to the captain's ready room anyway, expecting to be wanted there straight away. And the deep voice of the captain immediately confirmed it:

"Report to my ready room, Lieutenant Commander."

In his office, Kheren was sitting behind his desk, his half empty glass of Cardassian fish juice forgotten as he reread the coordinates he had been given by an intraship encoded message on his private channel.

The message was not signed. It was clear from whom it came from.

What was not so clear however, was where they were headed... and especially why.

There was also a direct order to reach those coordinates at warp 9.6 all the way over there.

The Admiral had obviously accessed ship's current specs and discovered the improved engines installed on the refitted Ambassador class; they were the same warp engines as those of a Sovereign class battleship. In theory, they could generate enough power to reach warp 9.9, but the structural integrity of this much older design could not sustain stresses beyond its already improved maximum speed... although it could effortlessly maintain such a speed indefinitely.

How Admiral Kirkpatrick managed to access those restricted files from the computer of the VIP quarters was not all that clear either. Maybe he did his research before coming aboard... but how he might have known that they were presently at warp 5 implied that he could bypass security codes and get a readout of the navigational console.

High ranking officer override codes?

The Andorian always hated it when things seemed to escape his control. On a personal standpoint, it was dangerous to anyone near him; on a professional standpoint, it was dangerous for the whole ship, if not for Starfleet and the Federation. Total control was of course always an illusion and not desirable for any one individual anyway; not to him at least.

But now, there were too many things starting to escape his control since they left the starbase.

Over five hundred lives depended directly on each and every word or decision he made. The entire Federation could depend on what this ship did... or failed to do.

And he felt keenly that they were heading straight for trouble at maximum warp.

Risk is our business he quoted to himself from the legendary James T. Kirk. *But that means we must face it when it comes, not that we must run after it,* he added from his own heart. *Not when you drag hundreds of people, if not billions, right with you into it.*

But he was a Starfleet Officer. They all were. They had to follow orders and do the duty they swore to give their very lives for.

Ninjo and giri... desire and duty... the tragic struggle of Earth's ancient samurai warriors... the captain of the Artemis reflected on. The Andorians had an identical view; and for them, and for captain Kheren, discipline and Honor were the only way out of this dilemma. He just hoped they would still be enough this time.

His musings were interrupted by the chime of his door.

Kelsey Alther...

"Enter."

Kelsey paused outside Kheren's ready room and sighed. The Kalthurian was visibly frustrated and attempted to shake it off before entering the captain's office. After a few seconds, Alther entered and stood over and handed him a PADD.

"Here you go, Sir, my findings" the chief of security said, then took a deep breath. "My security teams and I could not find any more acts of sabotage nor could we find any other accomplices."

The Andorian simply nodded, as if he had expected it.

"When our prime suspect was questioned, he simply responded with this: 'The light comes. You are the darkness. You wish to extinguish the light. The light will destroy the darkness and purify the universe.'"

Kelsey paused, then added:

"I didn't understand it and upon checking the medical examination, it seems Ensign Montgomery McAllister was replaced by a surgically altered Orion. A security officer in the brig confirmed it by stating that this McAllister was acting differently than usual, as this security officer was friends with the engineer."

The androgyn paused once again.

"It is most likely that when McAllister decided to take his leave on Risa, he was replaced by our doppelganger."

Kelsey looked out the nearby viewport and wondered for a moment, before turning back to the captain and awaited his response.

The commanding officer of the Artemis glanced at the PADD and quickly read the reports filed in, along with the interrogation report, there were several others as well included.

There was the security report about the level 1 search; a thorough search of every part of the ship... inch by inch: usually done over an entire perimeter like a starship to find lost people or hiding intruders... or smuggled items and acts of sabotage.

Nothing and no one was found... except for one puppy dog in the chief engineer's quarters that had not yet been registered from being transferred from another crewman's quarters, one who had brought and registered a pregnant dog on board over two weeks ago.

Then there was the engineering department report of the level 2 diagnostics performed on each and every system of the entire vessel: a meticulous automated and manual checking of every circuit and program, piece of hardware and software; even checking transporter pattern buffers on shuttlecrafts, to find any defect or tampering. Only the actual dismantling of those systems, as in a level 1 diagnostic, could have been more thorough.

Nothing was found... except the one missing phaser charge used in the actual sabotage.

Finally, there was the medical and science report of extensive scans performed from one end of the ship to the other for every biosign and life form presence, from the simplest air bacteria to possible photonic and out of phase lifeforms, usually done to prevent contamination or flush out intruders.

Nothing was found... except for the surgically altered Orion prisoner.

"Good work, Lieutenant Commander. I suggest that you check our database for any reference to those words of the prisoner. They sound like political or religious propaganda, and those are rarely whispered by people willing to take lives to have them heard."

Thinking for a few seconds, he added:

"Come to think of it, have security Petty Officer Taroi interrogate him. The betazoid should have no problem to read his mind, unless it is so brainwashed by his own..."

Kheren suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, looking sharply at Alther.

"Captain to Brig!" he suddenly shouted through the comm channel. "Sedate the prisoner! Immediately!"

There was silence over the channel for a moment before a sad voice finally answered:

"Captain... Sir, Ensign Biliki here... I'm sorry, Sir... the prisoner..."

"Killed himself." finished the Andorian between clenched teeth.

Kelsey Alther nodded at Kheren as he spoke. But when he brought up the Betazoid, the Kalthurian was about to object when he quickly stopped himself short and called for sedating the prisoner... too late.

Damn it! Alther thought as they heard that the prisoner had killed himself. *Great, just great.*

"Sir, reported the Ensign, we searched him thoroughly with a tricorder the moment we learned he was Orion. They are well known to commit suicide when captured. We found no toxin anywhere on him or in his system... Yet..."

"Have sickbay perform an autopsy then store the body in stasis until we get back to starbase 10. Don't worry, Ensign; no one is at fault here. We've just been outsmarted... this time."

The captain cut off the communication and looked back at his Chief of Security.

"There's more to this than an isolated fanatic striking at Federation authority, Chief. Let's keep our eyes open. Maintain security alert and call up for irregular searches until further notice. It will keep the crew alert and occupied while we get to our assigned mission... and if any other surprise is planned, we'll be ready this time."

"Aye, Sir" Kelsey said but, just about to turn to leave, stopped and looked at the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what's going on, can you? I know something is amiss here on this ship. Or are we still doing what are our original orders called to do?"

The androgyn believed it knew the answer about to come, but still had to ask; allowing that faint glimmer of hope residing in itself to spark and all this would be just being overt paranoia...

Kheren almost smiled at the confusing barrage of questions the Kalthurian officer threw at him.

It certainly reflected the general feeling all over the ship by now. But he could only shrug.

"Come with me, Lieutenant Commander."

Kelsey's head shook as Kheren shrugged.

Well it was worth a shot the androgyn thought, following the captain out of his ready room.

He led the way out of his ready room and went through the door at the nearest end of the sort corridor leading to the bridge. As he came up to the bridge, he once again waved Michael O'Conner back down in the center seat and turned towards the Trill seated at helm.

"Ensign Narod: change course to 55 mark 15, at coordinates 035. Engage at warp factor 9.6 until arrival."

The helmsman of the Artemis looked up from his navigation computer once the trajectory and speed were laid in, his eyes wide.

"Sir? These coordinates takes us sixty-two light years away from the anomaly, right at the heart of... sector 006."

Perfect... sardonically thought Kelsey Alther then, hearing about where they were going.

The captain himself nodded, looking down at him with both antennae lowered parallel to his metallic-hued eyes.

"Yes Ensign. And it will take us twelve days at this speed to get there. *If you start now*, of course."

"Aye, Sir, of course, Sir." stuttered the wide-eyed helmsman, complying.

Then, once the pilot had implemented and confirmed the new course of the starship, the captain shifted his four eyes towards the science station.

"Mister Syntron, you will have that time to become an expert in this area of space. I want you and sensors to be ready to cope with it as best as current technology can... then try to make it all better."

Syntron gave a confirmatory response as he reached over and began accessing the computer bank at his station. He entered the coordinates stated by Captain Kheren as the Andorian's gaze slid to the engineering post.

"Lieutenant Blakely, as soon as Commander N'Eligahn will be up to it, I want the engineering department to work with Mister Syntron's research and try to come up with a miraculous way to keep our shields operational under high levels of static discharges and ionization, even if only for a few minutes. But don't wait for him to wake up before starting to look into it."

His attention came back to the Chief Tactical Officer of the Artemis still standing at the door leading to the ready room corridor.

"Chief Alther, start practicing with all your weapons officers reading tactical sensors through heavy static and interference... and to manage visual detection and identification without target lock while under minimal vision."

Kelsey listened intently as Kheren ordered people to do their things and simply nodded.

Looks like I get to make them fire even better, great.

The Kalthurian turned to the tactical console and nodded at Ensign Tyvya manning at it before walking to the turbolift and opened a channel to the security department.

"Alther to all tactical officers. I am sending out a training program that I want you to become proficient in as soon as possible and it is a top priority."

Kelsey paused, then added:

"I shall communicate with you again when the program is ready for use."

The chief of security and tactical of the Artemis stepped into the empty turbolift.

Finally, he addressed Commander O'Conner:

"Number One, make sure all departments report their progress daily to you and bring me all completed results if and when they will come in. And make sure the crew gets proper rest during our travel over there... but do not let it get too relaxed and careless. I do not want any other nasty surprise."

Captain Kheren looked around one last time then spun on his heels back towards the exit door.

After the sliding panel closed behind him, it took a moment before Lieutenant Cheonghi broke the silence with a timid question.

"And... where are we going?"

The answer came, a short moment of silence later, from helmsman Narod:

"The Mutara nebula

CHAPTER TWO: THE DEVIL IN THE DARK

The Mutara nebula.

It looked like a huge cloud of sparkling dust, blue and indigo wisps of evanescent veils draped over a purple and red backdrop that sometimes showed under unpredictable flashes of white lightning.

Even hundreds of millions of kilometers distant, the static discharges crisscrossing the vast bluish expanse disrupted slightly the instruments on board as they were trying to penetrate its depths. There was a star somewhere inside that huge cloud of stellar dust, but its light was obscured by the thick layers swirling slowly over several hundred billions of kilometers.

It looked nothing less than a vast, deep sea before the starship Artemis coming near its shores.

Science officer Syntron observed the screen displaying the region around the Mutara Nebula in the Mutara Sector; an area he vividly recollected from his studies in Starfleet Academy. He recalled that many nebulae originate from the gravitational collapse of gas in an interstellar medium. As the material collapses under its own weight, massive stars form in the center, and their ultraviolet radiation ionizes the surrounding gas, making it at times visible in optical wavelengths, but also in this case, disabling a ship's sensors and shields.

Some nebulae are formed as the result of supernova explosions, the death throes of massive, short-lived stars. The materials thrown off from the supernova explosion are ionized by the energy and the compact object that it can produce. This nebula however, underwent a rather unique re-birthing process.

Remembering the infamous conflict that occurred there, he furthermore called up the details from Starfleet history file about this incident from 2285.

It was the site of the fierce battle between then Admiral James T. Kirk aboard the starship Enterprise and the revived 20th century genetic Terran augment leader Khan Noonien Singh; who had deliberately appropriated the starship Reliant in his quest for vengeance against Kirk.

Captain Kirk and Khan, each commanding one of these two starships, played out a deadly game of cat and mouse within the three dimensional obscurities and clandestine nature of the nebula.

The battle ended when Khan Noonien Singh, in an act of desperation, detonated the experimental terraforming Genesis Device inside the nebula aboard the crippled USS Reliant, thus causing matter within it to re-form into the Genesis Planet.

The planet being unstable because of inherent deficiencies in the Genesis process began decomposing and in a brief matter of time exploded: returning material back into space and thus fully restoring the nebula to its former state.

As Syntron continued reading through all of these details of this event, two distinctive questions came to his mind.

First, what sort of perilous game could they themselves potentially be headed toward at such elevated warp speeds?

Secondly, how were they going to compensate for the high levels of static discharge due to interstellar gaseous ionization that would render their visibility, scanning devices and their shields virtually inoperable when they arrived?

This second part was the only aspect of this equation that he could effectively work toward.

He also realized that, since an attempt at resolving this dilemma potentially involves modifications to both shields and sensors, he may need to elicit participation on aspects of this process with Chief Engineer N'Eligahn, now that he had recovered from that near-disastrous explosion on the bridge.

The Vulcan recalled how their teamwork together during the last mission had been decisive in stabilizing the metaphasic shields and the launching of the modified class IX probe to Starfleet.

Would they be able to... how did the Terrans put it... pull another rabbit out of their hat?

The doors of the ready room corridor wooshed open and captain Kheren stepped on the bridge to relieve First officer O'Conner from the large 23rd century style command seat.

It was the first time anyone on the bridge had seen the commanding officer of the Artemis in the dozen of days it had taken them to reach this sector. For those twelve days, the only time anyone had been aware of his presence on board was during night shifts, as over ship comm he had ordered the Owl's Crest, the ships observation lounge and arboretum, cleared of all personnel. Then, on deck 9 right below, the officers of the brig swore they heard his slow, heavy steps resonating through the deck plates, pacing before the immense transparency looking back at the starlight they left behind, haunting alone the deck like some damned captain of a cursed ship.

Human imagination of course; yet, any officer that had tried to contact him, even for routine reports, had only been answered through the comm and only in the briefest of terms.

Andorians were well known for their aloofness and Captain Kheren even more so than any of his people on board; but for the last days, it was almost as if he was but a computer simulation, barely heard, never seen, sometimes even reported as not being on the ship by the computer scans; transporting himself daily through the new two-man transporter pad in the conference room at odd hours to the totally shielded and isolated VIP quarters.

His appearance on the bridge, so sudden and right after the call from Lieutenant Cheonghi at ops monitoring communications, had most officers startled to see him in the flesh. Yet, he looked as he always did, as if those twelve days of ghostly presence had never happened.

Except for the eyes.

They were so intense that few could look at their metallic hardness and intensity without flinching.

"The call definitely came from inside the nebula, Captain."

"Can you pinpoint it any closer, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, Sir." answered the Edoan seated at the forward-most ops console with a nervous tone. " It was so badly garbled, all we got was the name "Milton," and then nothing."

There were rumors, decades old, of ships lost in this sector... never to be heard from again. No one knew why, but all of it sounded eerily like the echoes of voices saying those same words on so many ships in this very place, so many times before.

There was a long, very long moment of complete silence as the four oculars of the Andorian ship commander darted intently at the swirling clouds of the blue nebula, as if he alone could see something through its sparkling layers. Then, his deep voice shattered the mounting oppressive silence.

"Everyone to the auxiliary control room. Clear the bridge."

Syntron immediately stood up from his science station, turned and then headed toward the turbolift doors. Upon the opening of the doors and entering inside, he announced "Deck 5"; after the other members of the bridge crew settled themselves into a somewhat compacted vertical heap within the lift. The turbolift doors closed and the lift began its descent.

The command to exit the bridge was a rather abrupt event considering that the captain had been virtually absent from the bridge and from the crew for most of the journey from Starbase 10. Something seemed to be weighing heavy on the Andorian's mind; and it appeared unlikely that he would be divulging details of this burden anytime soon.

There was an air of secrecy that surrounded this entire mission thus far; which contributed to the nervousness that permeated throughout the crew members.

Under these circumstances, it was difficult for the crew to journey confidently toward this mission. How can a team prepare for events and a destination that are still unknown?

O'Conner had spent the last twelve days much like the captain. Sure he was seen and had a few brief conversations with the crew... but he mostly let the ship run itself. During meals, he had sat down by himself, gazing out at the stars. He had been seen entering and leaving his workshop holoprogram.

All in all, during those twelve days, O'Conner was bored.

This was the first time in his career where his job was to just wait for something to happen. With no repairs to be done, no booze, no commutation, and no families; nothing remotely interesting came to O'Conner's attention. That was until the captain suddenly appeared and ordered everyone out.

He nearly barked back at the captain, but then, he remembered the Aegis.

The Captain might want to fly the auxiliary ship into the unknown, under-crewed... but O'Conner had a way out.

As the lift doors spread open, the bridge crew began to spill out into the hallway and headed toward the auxiliary control room. Michael O'Conner looked around the auxiliary room with a smile. He then quickly moved to his chair and began to program a quick release methodology for the Aegis.

Upon his arrival, Lieutenant Syntron headed toward the auxiliary science station. He sat down at the console and entered in his authorization codes: they were accepted.

Prior to their dismissal from the main bridge, Syntron recalled that the Edoan officer seated at the forward ops console stated that they had received a garbled message with the name "Milton" extracted from the static of the mostly indecipherable transmission. Syntron determined that this would be his starting point for extrapolating information.

He began to his computer research into the name "Milton" and its potential significance to this sector of space. Moments later he engaged the communications key.

"Syntron to Captain Kheren" he stated as he contacted the sole officer left on the main bridge.

He waited for a response, but he did not receive one.

After a few moments he tried again.

"This is Lieutenant Syntron to Captain Kheren... acknowledge?"

A few moments later a voice finally replied:

"What is it lieutenant?"

"Captain Kheren, I've gathered some background information that may be relevant on the 'Milton' name that Lieutenant Cheonghi deciphered on the bridge."

The Andorian didn't acknowledge the statement immediately. His silence seemed to indicate that he was pondering this statement; as if striving to balance a convoluted equation. After another few moments, he replied through the intercom in a somewhat distant and preoccupied voice to the Vulcan Science officer.

"You may proceed with you findings Lieutenant Syntron."

"USS Milton... registry number NCC-75634" Syntron began. "The Milton is a Defiant-class escort that was launched form Utopia Plenitia shipyards stardate 52889.3. Her commanding officer is listed as Captain Sophia Wozniaczki and lists a crew complement of 55... Last assignment: Mutara sector patrol, stardate 86860.2... 3 months ago." "

Then he added:

"The Artemis is now apparently entering an area somewhere in proximity to this reported vicinity" Syntron added, knowing that the Captain was quite aware of their current coordinates.

He then concluded:

"Her current status is unknown Captain. Apparently contact with the Milton was lost near the Mutara nebula after reporting that they were in the midst of responding to a distress call from a lost cargo ship... the USS Pequod."

On the main bridge, the captain listened to his science officer's report. He should have expected it from sheer Vulcan thoroughness, let alone the well demonstrated dedication this very officer had shown since his coming aboard barely weeks ago.

This efficiency should have pleased him. But any pride he would have normally felt from it was drowned in contained anger. It grated on his already frayed nerves that excellent officers like Syntron had to be treated like pieces of equipment for a so-called "classified mission."

Especially when his science officer routinely provided more information in a few minutes already than the man ordering him had done in two weeks!

And information is power! the Andorian suddenly reminded himself, with an almost savage joy he had a hard time to control after these too numerous days of apprehension and frustration.

His crew was still performing admirably despite what he knew was its own frustration at the whole situation. He was not to let this opportunity pass him by.

"What can you find about this USS Pequod?" he asked through the comlink.

Syntron was calling up the remaining information just as the captain was speaking. After a brief pause, scanning through all of the Starfleet records that he had previously accessed, he answered.

"It appears, Captain, that the USS Pequod NCC-792 was a Ptolemy II class cargo carrier. The Pequod was launched from Utopia Plenitia on stardate..." and he hesitated as he cross-checked to verify the information he was seeing; and once the information was verified; "stardate 50661.4, Sir."

Without exhibiting any indication that the impact of the unanticipated age of this launch date had on him, he immediately proceeded on.

"The Pequod's Commanding Officer at the time was Captain Esteban Nunez" Syntron added as he continued to filter through the available information. "Records specify that they were carrying a crew complement 107 at the time."

Syntron assiduously continued looking through the database; searching for concise relevant data and information to provide to the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"The Pequod's logs indicate that her last assignment was carrying a shipment of dilithium ore from Sherman's planet to Deep Space 9 station. According to these records, captain, this was on stardate 64012.2... approximately 25 years ago," he concluded.

This then lead to the current status of The Pequod: Lost... with all crew members in the Mutara sector.

Then followed a long pause of silence; the type of soundless contemplation expected from the revelation that their missing ship was responding to a distress call from a ship lost over 25 years ago.

Syntron during this stillness went back to the information he first recalled on the Mutara sector. He continued looking through the database; searching for additional information to provide to the overwrought captain.

Then he spotted something of significance.

"This apparently isn't an isolated incident, Captain. Reports are showing that there have been thirty-six Federation ships lost since then; mostly other cargo ships that now avoid nearing the nebula."

As he continued scanning through the information he then added:

"Prior to this... there are also reports of several Klingon ships apparently missing in the sector when coming from the nearby border to rally with allied forces during the last months of the Dominion war."

Syntron stopped his search, and then emphatically suggested:

"Based on this information Captain, I would advise extreme caution before entering this sector near the nebula. I would also recommend launching a series of Class V medium-range reconnaissance probes outside of the nebula but in proximity to the coordinates that these vessels were last detected, to see if we detect any anomalous readings in their vicinity."

Five decks above, Kheren listened to the Vulcan's report while staring at the lightning bolts flashing inside the swirls of gases and particles filling most of the screen. When the science officer proposed launching probes, his rigid face didn't change; but his eyes were definitely smiling.

"Excellent idea, Mister Syntron. Proceed."

He guessed probes would have a hard time as well in scanning the insides of the phenomenon, but they would still be more efficient in this than shipboard sensors; they could get closer and narrow their searching bandwidth to specific needs, more than a starship could with its general requirements, as well as mutually amplify the penetration and resolution of their instruments and those of the ship by linking and coordinating those search efforts.

Information... repeated the captain inwardly.

Then his combadge vibrated against his chest.

Kheren lowered his head, sighed and straightened to activate it. He did not even speak, letting the voice at the other end of the direct, secured link, immediately growl:

"I'm waiting, Captain."

"Computer: lock all bridge accesses. Activate briefing room transporter pad for site to site transport, one Human life form to beam in from encoded coordinates directly to main bridge."

Giving his command codes and the signal to activate, the Andorian pivoted from the multitask ops station to face at attention the shimmering silhouette that materialized right in the middle of the command center of the Artemis, between the command dais and the navigation and tactical joint console.

Standing at the exact center of the deserted bridge, the lean, grey-haired man looked around only moving his steely grey eyes in his gaunt, stern face, obviously checking that he was indeed alone with the commander of the Artemis.

Then his eyes went right to the Andorian facing him from the other side of the navigation and tactical console and opened his thin-lipped mouth to speak... then stopped.

His gaze was drawn to the wide screen behind Kheren and the slow moving blue waves highlighted by bolts of white lightning... then two flashes of yellowish light speeding away to plunge into the clouds.

"What was that?" the Admiral asked with a hard tone.

Kheren knew what he was asking about, even if he couldn't see the main viewer; he had heard the launch he had approved barely a minute ago.

"We launched probes to scout the area, Sir."

"I authorized no such launch!" angrily scolded the older man, chin high.

"No, Sir; I did. You lead the mission, but I command this ship. You have forced us into an unknown situation in a hazardous sector for an undisclosed purpose... I believe this qualifies under any kind of regulation as a dangerous situation. By General Orders 17 and 29, my primary duty is to the safety of this ship and crew unless it is in the line of duty *and* otherwise unavoidable."

For a moment, the Admiral seemed uncertain of his stance, his eyes wavering inward a short moment. Then he nodded with an impatient nod.

"Of course, Captain, of course. Your steadfast discipline is why you were chosen for this mission in the first place."

Then he took a deep breath as if to calm himself and ordered with his customary curt tone back:

"Take control from the central station, Captain. Report to me as soon as the probes have sent their telemetry... and prepare for standard search pattern of the sector."

"Aye, aye, Admiral."

The Andorian nodded stiffly, turned around and sat at the multitask ops station. From there he was able all alone to control the entire ship. He checked all systems and shifted readouts to the probes' signals as they disappeared inside the depth of the nebula.

In the emptied bridge, the silence, barely pushed back by the soft, low noise of all the active instruments, was eerily echoing the "ping" of the probes; so much like the ancient sonar sound aboard antique Terran submarines to the ears of the Human standing before the command chair. Those echoes resounded for long seconds, amidst intermittent discharges of fierce energies within the thick layers of sparkling space dust...
Then, they stopped.

The silence now became oppressive. It felt as if the probes had been literally swallowed by... something, unseen, unknown, lurking deep inside the nebula.

Kheren finally opened shipcom.

"This is the bridge. Auxiliary bridge, are you still receiving telemetry from the probes?"

The shrill, fluty voice of the Edoan ops officer Cheonghi answered:

"Captain... we have lost all contact with both probes. But... Sir... we are still receiving the distress call from the USS Milton... right where they vanished."

"Take us in, Captain." suddenly ordered Kirkpatrick.

Before the commander of the Artemis could protest, he silenced him with a finger and an impatient tone:

"I remind you, Captain, that the General Orders you so quickly invoked also concern *all* Starfleet officers *and* citizens of the Federation... and I will remind you of General Order 6: The request for emergency assistance from Federation citizenry demands unconditional priority from Starfleet personnel. Such personnel shall immediately respond to say request, postponing all other activities."

The antennae of the Andorian dropped with his gaze. With a slight hesitation, his fingers recalled helm control on the board before him. Then he spoke again through the intercom:

"Auxiliary control room: prepare the ship for a rescue operation. Mister N'Eligahn, divert all shield energy to our integrity field and to boost communication and sensor gain. Mister Syntron, search for metallic objects or anything that could look like a ship, escape pods... or debris. Chief Alther, prepare rescue teams with your people, damage control teams from engineering and medical personnel. Doctor Sage, we may have a lot of injured people for you soon... in the meantime, try to raise them on your comm channels. All of you, report readiness and updates to Commander O'Conner who will be in charge of the rescue operation."

"Affirmative Captain" Syntron replied, as he heard the stern orders presented to his key officers seething from the distraught Captain; apparently operating the ship alone from the multi-task ops station on main bridge.

"Take us in." ordered again Admiral Kirkpatrick.

And then, slowly, following the ghostly signal coming out of the obscured depths, the starship Artemis moved to enter the swirling waves of dust and lightning discharges of the Mutara nebula.

Very unusual procedures occurring here, Syntron contemplated from his station down on the Auxiliary bridge. We're in proximity to an area of space that places the Artemis and crew in a vulnerable position of relative blindness in terms of the ship's sensors with shields that probability dictates will not function. Then the entire bridge crew is sent below to operate in obscurity and isolation toward a nebulous destination that has apparently claimed at least 36 vessels. The probes recently sent have 'vanished' and coordinates now indicate that the Artemis has begun to move toward a focal point of this anomalous region.

Looking at the circumstances metaphorically, it was like purposely wrapping a blindfold around a virtually sightless man and pushing him off toward what can only be presumed as some type of cliff looming up ahead: A totally illogical situation that defies all sense of reason or purpose. What possessed the captain to operate in this manner? Has something occurred that is affecting his judgment?

Syntron then activated the intercom to connect directly to sickbay.

Once he received a reply, he immediately notified the nurse responding who he was and then informed her to contact Dr. Sage and request that he meet with him without delay in the auxiliary control room.

As she began to inquire about the status of a medical emergency, Syntron just stated that the nature of this request concerns an issue that only the doctor himself could address.

After a moment of silence, she confirmed that she would inform the doctor of this request immediately.

Meanwhile, while Syntron awaited the doctor's response, he continued scanning the vicinity around them for any signs of a ship, remnants of materials or any other anomalous readings that were potentially lurking out there.

Doctor Josiah Sage had always enjoyed looking at specimens under a microscope. The first time he'd ever used a microscope he had looked at red blood cells. Even now, as he looked at the red blood cells under one of the many advanced electron microscopes in main medical, he still felt a sense of awe at how something so small could be so important.

He turned around and regarded the young petty officer.

"Well, Petty Off'cer Blakey, yew've got y'rself a nasty case of the Levodian flu. Git some bed res', and gimme a hollar in about 36 hours."

Petty Officer Second Class Moria Blakey spoke in protest, sounding every bit stuffy as she did,

"But Docner. I haf' t'be on stashun! Even if I haf' a culd, I nee' t'be on shif'! Beta goes on zoon!"

While usually considered pretty for a human, her red-rimmed nose and puffy eyes made her look very worn down.

Josiah smiled wryly.

"Well, while yew were tryin' to say alla that, I jus' sent a sick-in-quarters notice to Lieutenant Syntron f'r the nex' day an' a half. Enjoy the time off."

He then gave her a hypo of decongestant and painkillers mixed with a light sleep aid, and sent her on her way. Just as he sat down at his desk, Nurse Crosby poked her head into his office.

"Joe? Are you still busy?"

He looked up at her.

"Naw, Marina. What c'n I do yew f'r?"

"Lieutenant Syntron just asked for you to meet him in the auxiliary control room as soon as possible. It sounded urgent."

Josiah frowned. Did the Science Officer take exception to the relief order for Petty Officer Blakey? He shook his head; Not likely. If there was an issue, Syntron would've contacted him over combadge.

Josiah stood, pulled his shoulder-length hair back into a ponytail, and put on his blue ankle-length medical lab coat.

"Thanks, Marina. Ask Freddie to hol' down the fort 'til I get back."

The head nurse nodded as Josiah left out. It didn't take him long to get to the location. When he arrived, he spotted Syntron.

Josiah approached the Vulcan, and greeted him.

"Hey there, Syntron. Yew asked to see me?"

As the doctor entered the auxiliary control room, Syntron immediately stood up from his console and walked over to return the greeting.

"Thank you for arriving so promptly, Doctor Sage" he began as he headed back toward the entrance door.

Before the Doctor could inquire why he had beckoned him from sickbay, Syntron quickly added as he was exiting the doorway:

"If you wouldn't mind Doctor, we can walk down the hallway here to an available physics lab where we can discuss a potential decisive matter in privacy."

He followed Syntron to the physics lab, and as soon as the door whooshed shut, he said,:

"B'fore, I was slightly concerned this was 'bout Petty Off'cer Blakey. Now, I'm convinced it isn't. What's goin' on?"

Syntron looked at Doctor Sage's puzzled expression, not certain exactly where to begin.

"I realize, Doctor Sage, that you and I are both relatively new officers aboard the Artemis, and therefore our level of time and experience working with Captain Kheren is rather limited" he initiated. However, have you had an opportunity to observe the Captain since this mission began, and have you noticed any... unusual behaviors or patterns that seem abnormal or at least questionable?"

Josiah thought about it for a moment.

"Now that yew mention it, since leavin' Starbase Ten, there is somethin' outta the ord'nary: I've been in main med'cal f'r the majority of the trip."

Josiah looked at the Vulcan, and realized he may not fully understand what the Doctor was getting at.

"Cap'n Kheren has a real hankerin' to have the CMO in the CMO command chair on the bridge. Since our d'parture, a good three-quarters of my time has been in sickbay! The cap'n hasn't said much of anythin' t'me 'bout it."

Josiah gained an introspective look, and ran his hand over his moustache and beard.

"I guess I always realized it, but I jus' wanted to assume he'd d'cided it was better f'r the doctor to be in sickbay. An' that *is* totally unlike him."

Doc Sage looked to Syntron.

"Outside of that, I'm 'fraid the majority of my time has been spent with patients in sickbay. And if there is one constant 'bout our dear cap'n it's that the man ne'er gits sick!"

Josiah's appearance turned to curiosity.

"Now, yew still didn't really answer my question from b'fore, Syntron."

Josiah's face then became very concerned, and his inflection matched his expression.
"What's goin' on?"

Syntron listened carefully as the doctor began his reflective response and then posed his question back at Syntron. Since the doctor had spent the majority of his time in sickbay, Syntron realized that Doctor Sage was probably unaware of many of these events that had transpired. He would need to "enlighten" him with a synopsis of observations since leaving Starbase 10.

Syntron also remembered from his time at Starfleet Academy that humans often seemed to handle challenging topics and information more effectively while seated, rather than standing. This did not seem logical; it did however seemed to be true. Therefore he guided the doctor to an open lab table where they both sat down directly across from each other.

When he determined that the Doctor was comfortably seated, he began:

"Doctor," Syntron stated calmly and logically, "apparently you may not have noticed, but the captain had essentially locked himself in virtual solitude for most of this trip; approximately 12 days. This, Doctor... was the Captain that seemed to have been fully involved in all proceedings on our last mission... who now appears more of an apparition than the commander of this ship."

He reflected on his thoughts for a moment and then continued:

"At some point, perhaps during his isolation, he had the VIP room enabled with a coded lock to prevent the scanning of its contents, enveloped the room with a restricted forcefield, and quarantined off the vicinity to all personnel except for the guards posted outside the doors. Yet, the VIP room is listed as being unoccupied."

He continued on with the information despite seeing the look of concern expressing itself across the doctor's face as he elaborated:

"Meanwhile, our destination changed enroute and without explanation from a heading directed toward the Azimuth Horizon anomaly to redirecting the ship out here toward the Mutara Nebula. Currently, we are heading in the direction of an area that places the Artemis and crew in probable danger and in circumstances where the ship's visuals, sensors and shields will be inoperable."

Syntron paused to allow the Doctor to process these actual events before adding:

"Then after a long seclusion, the captain appeared on the bridge distraught and highly agitated; and within moments of his arrival, and for no apparent reason, ordered the entire bridge crew to clear out and sent all of us down here to deck 5, as you saw, to function in isolation toward a nebulous destination. The probes we sent earlier have since 'vanished' and according to current coordinates, the Artemis has already begun to move toward this anomalous region; again for no evident reason. Our heading doctor is toward a section of space in this sector that has apparently claimed at least thirty-six vessels in the past."

"I ask you, Doctor," Syntron posed seriously, "in your medical opinion and viewing these events objectively... does this seem like the actions and orders of a fully competent officer?"

As Syntron posed his question to Josiah, Kelsey Alther piped up from the nearby doorway

"What? Ignoring the Chief of Security here?" the Kalthurian said walking in.

Kelsey hadn't been on the bridge at the time of Captain Kheren's order to the Auxiliary bridge and was heading there when came the order to organize rescue teams. The Chief of security had just done that and was nearing to the Auxiliary bridge when happening upon Syntron and Sage.

Kelsey put up both hands in a peaceful gesture.

"Don't worry, I'm not here officially. I overheard you and thought I'd put in my opinion." the androgyn said before leaning on the table. "The captain went over my head when it came to the VIP quarters, I only found out when security called me over my combadge to notify me that he had ordered people to guard that room and even I can't even access it!"

Alther sighed.

"The captain also dodged questions about what was happening when I asked him, not to mention a lack of the active communication he has had with us. He doesn't talk to us directly much anymore" finished the newly promoted Lieutenant-Commander, looking at Syntron.

Josiah Sage considered Syntron's question. He took into account what Kelsey Alther added after walking in. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the conclusions he came to.

"If we weigh all'a the facts, an' I mean *facts*, not *supp'sitions*, then I c'n come to two poss'ble c'nclusions. One, the cap'n has had some kind'a mental skewin', promptin' a total personality change, resultin' in the seemin'ly erratic b'havior y'all are tellin' me 'bout.

"Two. It's entirely conceiv'ble the cap'n has some kinda orders comin' down from on high. Somethin' of the clandestine variety we c'n't know about."

Josiah sighed, and said then:

"Now, are these indeed the actions and orders of a fully competent off'cer?"

His view became introspective. He ran his hand over his moustache and beard.

"Damn. In a certain light, no, these actions are not. But, pausin' to consider the latter alternative of somethin' beyond our ken, then these actions might be. True, we've not been onboard long, Syntron, but there's one thing I've noticed 'bout the cap'n: he's not dishonest. If there were a cloak-an'-dagger conspiracy he knew 'bout, an' couldn't tell his senior officers, I think that would tear him up inside to be able to share."

Josiah gave a half-hearted shrug.

"Leastwise, that's what I c'n see 'bout him."

The CMO's face then became hardened.

"But, iffin' yew're suggestin', an' I'm not sayin' yew are, a lack of faith in the cap'n competency an' medically removin' him from command, then we need to be damn sure he's not on some kinda secret mission with the crew along f'r the ride. I'll not sully the good name of the skipper based on what few hard facts we have."

Kelsey sighed again.

"Normally I could help with looking at his body language but, sadly, I haven't had a chance lately, he's been totally hiding from everyone."

Kelsey looked at the roof.

"That would explain the locked VIP quarters, it's almost tempting to blast the door, but I won't. Most likely he does have secret orders. The captain wouldn't act like this."

The Chief of Security, Kelsey Alther's involvement in this discussion was appropriate and relevant; as was the comment about being left out of this discussion. Syntron presently sought to get the opinion of Doctor Sage first before consulting the other officers; especially considering the sensitive nature and potential repercussions of this unofficial inquiry. However, the Kalthurian's comments and perspective already seemed to corroborate his concerns.

But Doctor Sage's hypothesis regarding the captain possibly being under strict orders of a clandestine "cloak and dagger" mission would need to be balanced into this equation as well.

So where does this leave us now? Syntron pondered.

"I understand your apprehension, Doctor, about questioning the competency of the captain. I share this concern with you, as I am certain does Lieutenant Commander Alther as well. But I also believe that under normal circumstances that the captain himself would not just ignore these types of actions and behaviors of a fellow officer; especially when it directly impacts the potential safety of the ship and her crew. In fact, it would be illogical and uncharacteristic of him to allow such activity to continue unchecked, and I would propose that he would expect the same of his officers of this ship."

He thought for a few seconds before he added:

"Therefore, I am recommending that, as Starfleet officers aboard this ship, that it is our duty to proceed with an investigation; utilizing reasonable and appropriate methodologies to strive toward reaching a determination as to the probable cause of these unusual actions from the captain."

Doc Sage nodded at Syntron's proposal.

"I agree with yew on this. On my end, I c'n recommend the skipper undergo a psych eval with Doc Sirris, our chief psychiatrist. Hopefully, she c'n glean the source, or sources, of what's on Cap'n Kheren's mind."

He looked to the other two Starfleet officers.

"What oth'r r'courses are avail'ble to us?"

"An excellent idea, Doctor Sage," Syntron acknowledged. "At this point, I also recommend that we should consult with Commander O'Conner. As First Officer, he may have information that we are not currently privy to. Even if he has no information to impart to us, we still need to bring him into this discussion to inform him of our concerns, in addition to get his insights into these events. Meanwhile, in regards to the captain's health and competency," Syntron then added, looking directly at the doctor, "The burden of proof as you realize is in your hands as well as with Doctor Sirris. You are the only members on this crew, doctor that can make such an official determination regarding his level of fitness."

Even though the doctor suggested the psychological exam, he could also see Doctor Sage squirm a bit uncomfortably in his chair, mulling over an immediate response.

Before he could reply, Syntron added:

"Doctor, I advise you to promptly meet with the captain along with Doctor Sirris to see for yourself his response to your call for these exams to be conducted."

Syntron then added:

"Be prepared, Doctor Sage, that there is a 97.5% chance that he will adamantly refuse, or will resist your request. I also realize that his physiology is unique and you may not have an ideal base of comparison for this Andorian captain. Nevertheless, it is your prerogative and duty as CMO to override those objections and, in conjunction with the First Officer and myself, inform the captain that he will be relieved of command based on your medical opinion that his recent actions and unwillingness to submit to a medical and psychological examination have demonstrated that he is deemed unfit to command the Artemis. As offended as you may believe the captain would be, he is also a firm believer in following Starfleet guidelines.

"The act of directing the Artemis into this dangerous region of space without probable cause alone seems to qualify bringing this order into consideration. Add to this all of the previously discussed actions over the course of this mission and it again seems clear that we must act. I believe ultimately, the captain in his normal mindset would himself respect our actions."

Taking a moment to let his words sink in, the science officer paused before saying:

"We must consider General Order 39: An officer or crewmember may be removed from active duty status if they are judged to be incapable of fulfilling their obligations as a member of Starfleet, whether for medical or psychological reasons, by either the Chief Medical Officer or by the two ranking command staff officers."

Without pause, Syntorn added:

"And there is General Order 28: No officer of command rank shall be removed from command status unless such action has the complete and unqualified agreement of at least three senior officers present. Whenever possible, Such officers shall include the ship's First Officer, Chief Medical Officer, Counselor, and one junior officer of command station."

Again, stopped a moment so that the others could think a bit about what he was saying before concluding:

"These are all reasons why it is now imperative that we must next consult with Commander O'Conner."

Doc Sage again nodded, while looking at the deck.

"Yeah, I know the orders. I jus'...I have misgivin's followin' through on this."

He looked up at Syntorn.

"But I recognize their import. I'm gonna go to Doc Sirris, and have her call in the cap'n. However, I'm not goin' to fill her in on what we talked 'bout. I wan' her t'come to her own conclusions ind'pendently of ours, then ask her f'r her own evaluation of the situation."

He stood from his seat and nodded at Syntorn and Kelsey, signaling his leave taking.

"I will share my findin's as soon as Doc Sirrus and I have somethin' t'share."

With that, he left out to make his way to Deck 7, and to Doctor Sirris.

Syntorn nodded in acknowledgement to Doctor Sage as he stood up and headed out through the sliding doors.

It was evident by his response and mannerisms that this proceeding was weighing heavily on the Doctor's conscience. Nevertheless, he also made it clear that he was going to persevere with this endeavor as duty calls.

Syntorn then turned toward Lieutenant Commander Alther and inquired:

"Would you prefer to contact Commander O'Conner or shall I?"

"It's probably better to be you," Kelsey Alther answered after listening intently to the exchange. "I have a terrible track record with the First Officer and really have trouble putting up with him."

The androgyn sighed.

"Let's hope this works out," Kelsey said before leaving and heading to the Auxiliary bridge.

"Understood Lieutenant Alther" Syntron responded, seeing that the Kalthurian clearly did not want to initiate a discussion of this nature with the first officer; especially in consideration of their already strained professional relationship.

These were indeed unusual circumstances, he thought... and then, Syntron realized that it would be beneficial to research Starfleet records to see if there were any related incidences on file. If so, he would need to ascertain how they were addressed and if there were any procedures, determinations, recommendations, protocol... anything that could possibly be advantageous in resolving their current situation.

As he was looking through Starfleet records, he reached up and tapped his combadge to contact Lieutenant Irksos. He directed her to report to the auxiliary control room to temporarily assume his post and continue searching for metallic objects or anything other materials that could constitute a ship, escape pods... or debris. She acknowledged and confirmed that she would inform him if anything was found.

He then activated his combadge again, but this time he contacted Commander O'Conner and asked him to meet him in the physics lab. Commander O'Conner was not only the First Officer of the ship, but has had more direct contact and experience with the captain than any of the other officers. His insight and perspective would be invaluable.

Minutes later came the Vulcan's request over his combadge, which raised an eyebrow.

"No... and why are you not at you station?" O'Conner replied, still fidgeting his console.

Syntron was perplexed at first by the immediately dismissive response he received from Commander O'Connor, but equally by the adversarial tone that the first officer shot back at him regarding his station.

"Commander O'Conner," he responded calmly "Lieutenant Irksos is currently covering the science station in the auxiliary control room. I contacted you because I would like to confer with you in person. If this is a problematic location, then I can rendezvous with you in a more advantageous section of the ship."

"Why do you need to meet me, Lieutenant?"

The science chief of the Artemis was again baffled by the first officer's response.

"Commander O'Conner," he replied evenly "You are the First Officer of this ship. It is my understanding that you are the officer to address when the captain is preoccupied or otherwise unavailable and there are concerns regarding the safety and security of this ship and her crew. Am I mistaken?"

"Mhm" Was O'Conner's only reply as he finished the program that when activated with the correct command codes, would remove the Aegis from the Artemis, then transfer control to the Auxiliary bridge. Or at least that is how he hoped it would work.

"I'm sorry commander; I did not comprehend your last response. Could you please repeat it?"

"Yes I am. Now, what are your concerns?" Michael O'Conner replied as he leaned back in his chair.

"I am to understand, Commander, that you intend to discuss these matters through a combadge?" Syntron inquired, bewildered by the First Officer's cavalier approach to this discussion.

"Discuss what, Lieutenant? You still haven't told me what this is about. If you wish discuss something in private, it will have to wait. The captain is clearly intent on going deep into this nebula cloud and, 'till I understand why, I ain't leaving this chair."

Humans and their stubbornness; they at times defy all logic.

Syntron was not going to communicate the sensitive nature of this entire discussion over an unsecured combadge, nor was he just going to sit back and allow these potentially lethal events to unfold as the First Officer indicated. If the First Officer was ardently unwilling to leave his position, then Syntron would then go to him.

"Computer, locate Commander O'Conner" he asked as he got up and headed toward the door.

"Commander O'Conner is currently on the auxiliary bridge, deck 5," the female voice replied, as he headed out of the physics lab.

Certainly not the ideal way to begin a dialogue, estimated the Vulcan, but, for some unknown reason, this conversation was thrown off-balance from the moment it began. The question was... would Commander O'Conner be willing to listen to him when he arrived or would he continue to admonish and dismiss him as he attempted to converse with him?

There was apparently only one way to find out.

Syntron's first act as he quickly arrived and walked into the auxiliary control room was to check on the status of Lieutenant Irksos covering the science station.

"We have not yet found any signs of ships or debris, Lieutenant Syntron," she told him, but then added: "We are however, just beginning to lose ship's sensors."

Here comes the blindfold, he thought, but just acknowledged his assistant's report and informed her to keep scanning as effectively as she could.

Then as he turned, he saw that O'Conner spun swiftly in his chair and smiled at Syntron.

"Welcome to the Auxiliary bridge, Lieutenant. Please take your station."

Syntron gazed at the first officer, studying his overall disposition. He did not appear angry when he again repeated his command for Syntron to return to his station, yet he seemed resolute on not engaging in a discussion with the Science officer.

As much as he studied these Terrans, they still were often times an enigma.

"Commander O'Conner, you confirmed that you were the officer that I should speak to and that you wanted to know the particulars of my concerns; yet you made it clear that you were not leaving your current position. I did not feel that we should be conducting a prospective confidential conversation over the combadge, therefore my only logical alternative was for me to approach you."

After a few seconds of reflection, he added:

"I was hoping Commander that, as officers aboard this ship, we could have an open discourse regarding matters related to the welfare of this ship, our crew and our mission, rather than again being summarily dismissed back to a post that is already being skillfully managed by Lieutenant Irksos. Is there an explicit reason that you are resistant to a conversation occurring between us?"

O'Conner sighed a bit. He had always hated to work with Vulcans; they were too rigid for his liking.

He took a deep breath and looked back towards the science officer.

"Lieutenant, if you wish to bring it up in the open, please do so. But if you believe this is a private matter that can't be talked about in front of other officers, then perhaps this should wait and you should take your station... unless you didn't notice that the captain has already began to bring this ship into the nebula of lost ships with at best two, maybe three people at the helm. I need your support here, not having you off in some meeting."

Seeing no alternative, the science officer began to inconspicuously communicate to the First Officer concerns about the events that had transpired since they had left Starbase 10; events leading to their current perilous approach toward the nebula. He then explained that he had already discussed this state of affairs with both the Chief of Security and the Chief Medical Officer and they had each shared their own sense of apprehension as well regarding the abnormal manner in which this mission was being conducted.

After finishing this thorough but concise synopsis, he stated:

"Commander O'Conner, you have spent more time and have worked more closely with Captain Kheren than any other bridge officer currently on this ship. Have you noticed any unusual behaviors and commands from the captain since this mission began, and have you speculated any reasonable cause for such actions?"

He then added:

"As you realize, we are currently heading directly toward a section of space in this sector that has apparently claimed at least thirty-six vessels and our ship's sensors and shields have already begun to go offline.

What exactly is going on here Commander?" he straightforwardly asked.

O'Conner listened to Syntron then turned back to gaze at the nebula on the viewer.

"I know as little as anyone. I had a meeting at the start of the mission with the captain but all he said was that he couldn't say anything about the real mission. All I know is that, as Starfleet officers, we have to support the captain 'till the crew and ship become threatened with unreasonable danger."

Kelsey Alther was sitting at her bridge console as Syntron and O'Conner discussed the Captain's odd behavior. The chief of security spoke up:

"Commander, this ship is heading extremely fast into unreasonable danger. We are going into an area that has claimed over thirty vessels over the years, crippling our shields, sensors and weapons systems... not to mention there is a distress beacon which makes every single bone in my body scream "TRAP!"

Kelsey paused for a moment.

"How far is unreasonable danger? So far, I have to eyeball weapons, compensate for so many more things than I should have to, all for a simple defense. The ship itself is extremely vulnerable to basically anything."

The Kalthurian was clenching both jaws as much as possible; wanting to scream at O'Conner, tell him that this was absolutely crazy, but the freshly minted lieutenant commander couldn't and the androgyn would be damned if it didn't use every drop of willpower in its body to stop itself from harassing the senior officer.

Having each stated their position, Commander O'Conner, Lieutenant Commander Alther, and Lieutenant Syntron stood there in a virtual stalemate.

All the while, the Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis met with the ship's head psychiatrist, Marleena Sirris, and asked to request that the captain take a psychotest now. She blinked at him several times before finally answering:

"Now? Under yellow alert? During a rescue operation? On what grounds? You know as well as I, Doctor, that you cannot conduct a full examination of a crewmember, let alone the commanding officer, during any alert."

She looked askance at him with her large black eyes.

"What's going on here?"

Her Betazoid code of Honor restrained her firmly from prodding Josiah Sage's mind. But it was not for lack of curiosity... or apprehension.

Doc Sage looked into her deep black eyes. Like Freddie Lumquist, Marleena was one of the doctors onboard Artemis who had become his friend. He and she would trade playful banter back and forth in their day-to-day. It was little wonder she was so surprised by Josiah's demeanor, not to mention the outlandishness of his request.

"Leena," he said, "I get that it seems strange, but there is reasonin' behind it."

He brought his face close to hers, still holding her gaze. With as much genuine sincerity as he could emote, he said, "Please. Trust me. If yew c'n't, reach out with to me an' see f'r yourself."

Marleena looked at him clearly puzzled by his answer. She knew him to be a straight and honest man, not one to play devious mindgames like this.

"Why don't you tell me straight then instead of asking me to read your mind?" she said with much worry in her voice. "You want me to ask him to commit dereliction of duty during a crisis... a starship commander... We simply cannot do that. Not... under regulations."

There was fright now starting to light her wide eyes.

Josiah looked down as though shamed.

He then looked back at Marleena, and he told her everything.

He explained to her the call from Syntron. He filled her in on the conversation in the physics lab. He shared his own misgivings about calling into question a being who should be above such inquiries.

The entire time Josiah spoke not once did he take his eyes off of Marleena's eyes. Not once did his gaze drift away from her. Not once.

When he finally finished, his eyes mirrored the distraught look on his face.

"Now, yew know, Leena. So, please, tell me, what do we do? What c'n we do?"

When he finally exposed the situation to her, the Betazoid lifted wide black eyes to him:

"I agree Captain Kheren has been acting... a bit oddly these past days. But aloofness is quite normal for Andorians; and, despite efforts at socialization, Captain Kheren is typically even more aloof than most of his kind to begin with. His solitary roaming of the observation deck these past days might just be a new way for him to relieve tension instead of lashing out at the crew, like any troubled Andorian would usually do under pressure. It is certainly not alone a sign of any inability to command!"

She shook her head:

"You should also know as well as I that an officer, let alone the ship's commander, is not required at all to explain himself or any of his orders."

To her brief psychological summary, she then added:

"And may I remind you that we are under security alert since launch and the civilians on board were ordered out: those are certainly not signs of recklessness! And we all know about the secured VIP quarters. It doesn't take much brain power to see that somebody hides in there... somebody undoubtedly important... I cannot believe somebody like Mister Syntron or Mister N'Eligahn could not have found ways to verify this first. And why did not anybody go to Mister O'Conner with this in the first place? *He's* First Officer on this ship; if the captain could reveal anything to but one person, it would be to him."

Crossing her hands on her crossed knees, she concluded:

"This has all the trappings of a major covert operation of great importance from Starfleet Command. Have you even considered a moment that *he* might himself be under orders? Orders he might *not* like but *still* has to follow... Orders he cannot even have the freedom to share anything about?"

"Of course I did, Leena! I brough' that very notion up to Syntron myself!" Josiah said fervently.

She looked then straight in his eyes.

"As for these... concerns... about risks... Josiah, you know as well as I that, as Starfleet officers, we have all sworn *our very lives* to the safety of the Federation. If we are ordered to investigate a dangerous area and face any danger, it is *our duty* to do so. *Nothing* in the captain's behavior so far has shown anything less or other than that. We are answering a distress call and there is no *immediate* threat to the ship, no *unwarranted* risk taken to answer that call for help. Think, Josiah; the captain of the USS McKenzie ordered to patrol alone the Klingon border is *at least* as much at risk as we are now. What you are suggesting is that he *too* should be removed from command because he obeys orders and assume his duties... and based on... what? That you and the others have signed for a risky job and just woke up to that fact?"

"Whoa, hold on there, sweetheart!" Doc Sage said. "I have never suggested, and am in no way suggestin', the skipper should be r'moved from command! Let's keep our conversation straight, here! I'm askin' f'r y'r advice, not f'r words put in my mouth!"

No Josiah, that is *exactly* what you asked: to conduct an examination at this moment, you have to relieve him of duty; and his duty *is* to command this ship. So, the only way you could do this when we are under alert like now would be to declare him medically unfit for duty: unfit for command. That is, under regulations... But you can not even do this without a complete examination and report to prove it... unless, he would commit a blatant act of insanity. Leading the ship to face danger threatening the Federation or to save a victim of such danger is *not* insanity: it is *our job*. You understand now why I have such... misgivings?"

She made a pause and then looked straight at the bearded man:

"Wasn't it Captain James T. Kirk who once said: *risk is our business*?"

Finally she sighed. Then, suddenly, her eyes lit up.

"Doctor, I *may* be able to suggest one thing: you could activate the bridge EMH to perform a physical and psychometric scan of the captain to ascertain if there is any sign of problem that would, *then*, justify a full examination. In the present circumstances, regulations do not permit anything more."

Then she winked at him.

"Of course, the EMH will then be able also to... scan the *entire* bridge as well."

Josiah's eyes widened in realization. His smile opened his face as though a great weight had been lifted off of him. "Leena, I could kiss yew righ'bout now!"

Impulsively, he grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it. "Thank yew, darlin'!"

He turned and left out of her office, leaving her with her thoughts:

Maybe I should tag along... a Vulcan jumping to conclusions without first assessing all the facts and verifying all hypotheses is most... illogical.

There were only very rare instances of a Vulcan's logic and mental discipline failing him... and they were all cause for deep concerns. The Betazoid psychiatrist brought up the full medical file of Lieutenant Junior Grade Syntron and started some studies.

For his part, Doc Sage tapped his combadge as he walked in the passageway.

"Doc Sage to Syntron. I've been enlightened to a potential solution to our earlier conversation. C'n yew meet me in my office?"

"Excellent, Doctor Sage, I'm on my way" he replied as he turned toward the Chief of Security and asked:

"Care to join me, Lieutenant Commander Alther?"

As he walked toward the science station on their way out to meet with Doctor Sage, Syntron saw Lieutenant Irksos get up from the science station to speak to an officer attending another console. Walking right past his station, he noticed that a communication light started blinking. He stopped for a moment and engaged the message.

It was a secure message from the First Officer.

He entered his security code and up came a detailed memorandum. He read through it carefully, and then looked over at the First Officer. Commander O'Conner merely gave him a slight smirk and then turned back to continue working at his station.

The security officer and the science officer met up moments later outside the auxiliary bridge. As they headed out toward the turbolift, Syntron casually said to Lieutenant Commander Alther:

"It would appear that Commander O'Conner is more concerned about our current status than he just led us to believe."

Lieutenant Commander Alther gave the science officer a peculiar look before stopping to engage the lift. As they rode in the turbolift, Syntron verbally illustrated to Kelsey a summation of the content in the message that he received.

"Apparently, as a precaution to the emerging events recently transpiring, Commander O'Conner has written a vital yet simplistic hack that would send the launch command codes to a bridge officer, such as me, to engage the launch of the Aegis, while at the same time turning off the countdown warning that would normally accompany the launch sequence. This would theoretically prevent anyone from being able to stop this process once ship separation began."

The Kalthurian stared intently at the science officer with a look of astonishment.

"Since the Aegis was now reinforced and better armed since our last mission, evidently Commander O'Conner has reasoned that this would still allow Captain Kheren to do whatever it is he intended to do, but without jeopardizing the safety of the remainder of the crew. Meanwhile, they could fall back to a safer distance while also maintaining a position nearby and available to offer assistance, should it become necessary."

Another moment of silence ensued as the lift began to slow down.

"Quite an audacious backup plan from this seemingly conventional First Officer, wouldn't you say, Lieutenant Commander?" Syntron nonchalantly added, just as the turbolift stopped and the doors spread open.

After exiting the turbolift, Lieutenant Syntron and Lieutenant Commander Alther followed down the hallway and entered the sickbay doors.

Seeing Doctor Sage near his office, they walk toward the doctor as Syntron inquired:

"Doctor Sage, please share with us this potential solution that you have in mind."
Seeing the others, Josiah nodded.

"Ah, of course. Please, into my office."

After they all were in, Josiah shared with them the potential solution Doctor Sirrus suggested.

"She tol' me we could act'vate the bridge EMH to perform a physical and psychometric scan of the cap'n to see if there might any sign of problem, or problems, that may jus'fy an exam'nation in full."

Josiah cleared his throat.

"She was also ad'mant that in the present circumstances, regulations would not permit anything more than such. She also intimated the EMH could just scan the entire bridge as well when he happens to scan the cap'n."

Doc Sage ran his hand over his moustache and beard.

"However, after some thought on it, I would like to go on record as sayin' I have misgivin's 'bout this particular way of doin' things. It jus' don' feel right to me."

"I recognize the value of what you are saying Doctor Sage. Captain Kheren demonstrated that he was an exemplary officer throughout the challenges of our last mission. From what I researched pertaining to his prior missions, he also displayed similar proficiency and craftiness as well. There could very well be a logical explanation for all of the unusual clandestine procedures that have occurred throughout this mission. Nevertheless under current circumstances, we have been placed in the proverbial position between a rock and a hard place. Presently, we are without much information at all regarding this mission. It is our responsibility to reasonably ascertain that the safety of the ship and crew isn't being jeopardized capriciously. We do not know the current emotional status of the captain and we do not know if there is someone else dictating these procedures. Your plan may at least provide some level of information and potentially insight into this problematic situation in what may be the most unobtrusive manner."

* * *

Captain Kheren didn't hear the medical tricorder buzzing softly right behind him, his antennae being unable to catch such a soft sound from behind. But he did feel a presence, someone very close to him and, thinking it was the Admiral looking over his shoulder, he slightly turned his head to report to him... then spun fully in his chair as he saw the bridge Holographic Medical Officer hard at work scanning him.

With its peculiar way of always looking annoyed, it said:

"Well, Captain: aside from elevated levels of dopamine and adrenalin typical of a tense and irritated Andorian, and low blood sugar from insufficient sustenance, I am pleased to report that you are nevertheless in your usual peak health. I am however not so pleased to be activated for no good reason."

Dammit Doc, what are you doing? Inwardly berated Kheren.

The captain of the *Artemis* was aware that his emotional state of the last days would be disturbing to his crew; but he quite well knew had not done anything to justify any medical concerns; the very *one* thing that could remove him from command... and allow Kirkpatrick himself, as senior officer on board, to assume complete authority over the *Artemis*. Something he was *not* willing to let happen.

And Kirkpatrick was no fool either.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"By order of the Chief Medical Officer, I am conducting a medical scan of the bridge occupants, starting with the Captain" obediently answered the holographic doctor. "You are of course aware, Admiral, that Starfleet regulations require for every crewmember to undergo regular routine medical examination..."

"*Not* during alert status!" interrupted Kirkpatrick, just as he realized that the EMH held the medical tricorder's hand held probe right towards him. "Captain Kheren!" the Admiral then ordered with a louder voice: "you will deactivate this hologram and isolate all controls from the bridge! *Now* Mister!"

The Andorian hesitated for a second... something anyone knowing him would have almost believed to be an act of defiance. Then he said out loud:

"Computer; deactivate bridge EMH."

As soon as the hologram disappeared with an outraged look on its face, he then added:

"Computer: lock out all bridge functions."

"All bridge functions now isolated to main bridge." confirmed the disembodied feminine voice.

"Your officers are becoming too curious for their own good, Captain" then said the Admiral, looking sternly at him. "I find their astonishing lack of proper discipline quite disturbing. Prying on a classified mission is a court martial offense."

"With all due respect, Admiral, under the present circumstances, can you blame them for feeling concerned for their commanding officer... or for the safety of the ship?" shot back the Andorian, visibly measuring each word carefully to hide his own emotions.

"Of course I cannot blame them for what they feel." admitted Kirkpatrick, his voice suddenly softening remarkably for the time he uttered those words. But then, the steel came back again to his tone: "But they are sworn to obey orders without question! Especially when lives and the safety of the Federation are at stake! Can you give me one *valid* reason for this... - his hand wavered where the EMH had stood - this... interference?"

"No, Sir." the commanding officer of the Artemis was forced to admit.

"I remind you, Captain Kheren, that under Starfleet General Orders and regulations, any further interference in the proper function of this ship, or in this mission, can and will be considered as an act of insubordination and justified cause for immediate relief of duty; any attempt to take control from the commanding officer of this ship can only be an act of mutiny!"

There was no reaction visible from the Andorian, except for the lowering and pointing of both antennae and his silver eyes reducing themselves to slits.

Admiral Kirkpatrick looked at him straight in the eye and finished:

"Make sure everyone on board is reminded of their proper duty, Captain."

After a moment, gaze unflinching, Kheren tapped his combadge with too delicate a gesture to be anything else but an exercise in severe restraint.

"Attention all hands, this is the captain. We are undergoing a classified rescue operation in a hazardous area under direct orders. This is what we have been all trained for; what we all signed for: risk our lives to save lives. All hands, stand ready for further orders. Captain out."

In the cold, heavy silence that followed, the sudden simultaneous beeping of the science console, the tactical console and the ops console startled them both.

Kheren turned back towards the multitask station and saw exactly what was also now visible, four decks below, on Valencia Irksos' own Auxiliary science station. The upgraded sensors of the newly refitted USS Artemis were stated at two and half times better than newer Galaxy class starships, even able to penetrate nebula disturbances like the ones they were now encountering for up to almost fifty percent; obviously they were proving themselves up to the difficult task as she reported:

"Commander O'Conner; sensors are detecting a metallic mass directly ahead... at the exact coordinates of the disaster beacon automated signal, nine thousand kilometers directly ahead. Mass... nine hundred and seventy-seven kilograms... hexagonal shape, three point five meters across, two point five meters long. But, Sir, I barely register its electromagnetic signature."

On their smaller main viewer, they could not even see it at maximum magnification within the folds of the gaseous masses striating the image with static.

"Confirmed, Commander." then said Ensign Tyvya seating at tactical for Kelsey Alther. "The size, the mass, the low observability and EM signature... Sir! It's a lifepod! A lifepod from a Defiant class warship!"

"I read one life sign aboard... very faint." now added Doctor Lumquist, himself substituting for the Chief Medical Officer.

"Reading all stop, Commander." announced the pilot Narod looking at the command readout from the main bridge. "Holding position eight thousand kilometers from the object."

Before Michael O'Conner could even open his mouth, the young dark-skinned woman replacing Lieutenant Syntron at the science station was right behind him, whispering in his ear:

"Sir... Captain Kheren has locked all bridge controls. Your... bypass programming will not work anymore. Something must have tipped him off..."

And, as if hearing his own name through all the decks below him, the voice of the commanding officer of the Artemis reverberated again throughout the Auxiliary bridge's speakers.

"Commander O'Conner, report with your officers to the bridge and take the conn from there. Maintain alert status, position and surveillance. Transporter room 1: lock on life sign and beam directly to sickbay isolation ward on Doctor Sage's signal. Doctor Sage, evacuate sickbay except for yourself before your patient is beamed in and take care of him personally. We will join you shortly."

Well, this aspect of the mystery is now partially revealed, Syntron thought as he and Lieutenant Commander Alther immediately exited out of sickbay and headed toward the turbolift.

The order to evacuate sickbay was an unusual one, but everyone complied still. The trained discipline of Starfleet left no room for hesitation when a ship was under yellow alert. Albeit not as much as during an actual red alert, security conditions still required immediate compliance of orders to avoid a potentially dangerous situation to become a critical one due to lack of order and efficiency.

And there was no training more thorough, extensive and efficient as Starfleet training. The order to clear medical was indeed out of the ordinary. But Doc Sage had become used to out of the ordinary when Captain Kheren was involved.

Finding himself without any type of support staff was even more unusual, but not undoable.

Once Doctor Sage was left alone in the medical center of the Artemis, the computer confirmed all accesses under security lock out. Then, the shimmering sparkles of a transporter beam brightened the top of the biobed in the isolation ward and a human form materialized on it.

The man looked startlingly older than his obvious mid-twenties, blond-haired and green-eyed, a beard as unruly as his hair covering his unkempt face, his crewman uniform partly torn, charred and soiled with dried soot, sweat and blood. His hands were caked as much as his clothing and seemingly paralyzed in a half grasp before him, like claws. He was panting and his eyes were roaming in all directions, like the stare of a trapped animal.

When the crewman in a tattered uniform materialized in sickbay, Josiah Sage started his procedurals; by the numbers, nice and easy.

The patient himself was visibly startled seeing the bearded doctor near him... then even more when two columns of sparkling lights preceded the appearance of Captain Kheren and Admiral Kirkpatrick near the biobed.

The crewman's heart rate was close to defib, and his adrenaline was in overdrive. Doc Sage managed to get these few preliminaries when the two others finished beaming in.

Seeing a full-fledged admiral was disconcerting. Noticing the captain was not surprised by the admiral's presence was even more so.

'Wonder if that's who was in the quarters Kelsey mentioned?' Josiah thought to himself.

When both men made a first step towards the bed, the injured man almost threw himself down the other side in a purely reflexive reaction of dread.

His deep voice as soft and gentle as possible, the Andorian stayed where he was to say:

"At ease, crewman. I am Captain Kheren. This is Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick and this is Doctor Josiah Sage."

"... You... Starfleet?" stuttered the frightened man.

"Yes, you are in sickbay, aboard the USS Artemis." patiently told Kheren.

"The... Artemis? Artemis... Artemis..."

The eyes of the man seemed to look far away... or far inside.

"You can relax now, crewman. You are safe now."

The stare of the man suddenly shot up and back towards the Andorian, then to each man in turn as he started to shout:

"Safe? SAFE? *No one is safe!* NO... no ONE is SAFE from... from... "

At that moment, Admiral Kirkpatrick stepped forward, his own voice starting to vibrate like that of the injured man:

"What? Speak up man! What happened? What happened to your ship?"

The crewman looked at him and for a moment he suddenly calmed down, as if he saw something in the eyes of the Admiral, or because he recognized the high ranking uniform... But his tone became softer, almost calm and composed as he licked his dried, crackled lips before stuttering:

"They say... they say there's no devil... but there *is!* Right... right out of the dark depths I... I saw it!"

"What! *What was it?*" insisted the admiral.

The man just looked at him, mouth agape, eyes wide, not even breathing. Leaning close to him, Kirkpatrick almost whispered:

"Tell me, crewman; what did it look like?"

Again, the man looked at him with his wide eyes plunging deep into those of the older man as if he was trying to look at his own soul reflected into that of the other man. His voice also was but a whisper.

"I... I was... doing maintenance of the... the pods... And then... then... through a porthole... it was covered by the waves of dust but... there were flashes... lightning... And... just before we were hit... I... I saw... I saw... I... saw..."

Kirkpatrick's voice filled the silence stretching after the words of the refugee:

"A shadow... huge, dark... a long shape... like... like that of... a shark..."

And, with each word of the Admiral, the eyes and the mouth of the man widened, until, finally, he was screaming in utter terror.

No sound came out.

During the time the admiral spoke to the injured crewman, Josiah's medical tricorder started to give off very bad numbers. The crewman was within moments of being literally scared to death.

Quickly punching in a very concentrated dose of *Melissa officinalis* into a hypo, Josiah quickly, and discreetly made his way behind the man who was certainly about to go into a fear-induced shock before his heart gave out.

Injecting the hypo into the man, the crewman's legs gave out, prompting Josiah to catch him, and then help him get back into the biobed. The CMO looked at the vitals as they came up on the screen over the head of the bed.

Seeing the numbers come down as the herbal calming agent went through the crewman's system, Josiah looked at the admiral, and then to Captain Kheren.

Doc Sage didn't say a word. He didn't need to. There was nothing he could say even if he wanted to. He went back to monitoring the still-conscious, but now much calmer, crewman.

"Bridge, this is the captain: intensify scans in the immediate vicinity for other lifepods... and report any significantly massive object or definite movement within the nebula."

Upon entering the main bridge, Syntron noted that the Captain and his guest recorded by the EMH were gone; replaced now by the bridge officers arriving from the auxiliary bridge.

He walked over to the science station and continued scanning the area. The ship's sensors and shields, he noted, were being negatively affected by the increasing levels of static charges emanating from the nebula; rendering the results limited and indistinguishable.

There has to be some way to compensate for at least some of this discharge Syntron mused.

A few moments later, he had an idea which led to a proposal. He called down to Main Engineering and spoke to Assistant Chief Engineer Blakely.

"Lieutenant Blakely, as expected, we are having a very difficult time utilizing our sensors and getting coherent readings outside the ship. Would it be possible to invert the polarity of the outer layer of the ship's shield grid to a frequency that could repel some of the static discharges from this ionized nebula surrounding the ship and possibly improve our sensor readings?"

Chief Engineer N'Eligahn signaled to Blakely that he would take up the call.

The Rethian Commander had remained largely subdued in the time subsequent to finishing physical therapy and being finally declared fit for duty by the doctor a few days prior. During his absence, Blakely had been squaring off with Ty'Renyk and trying extremely hard not to let the "inspector" take over engineering. During that time, while he'd seen that the subject had been largely dropped by the Captain and crew, he'd taken it upon himself to follow up on the information as best he could.

Between times of being shut up in his quarters, most of his time on watch was in Main Engineering, leaving the bridge watch to Blakely or one of the other officers. They saw it as a welcome relief from Ty'Renyk's constant prying. He saw it as a way to just think and reflect.

This also kept him separated from the other senior officers. He tended to avoid them, which had been eased out by the fact that he had not been called to any staff meeting during those last twelve days of travel. Not that there had been that many to begin with. This had been just routine, uneventful travel in well charted and travelled space.

Until they reached the infamous Mutara sector.

And so, it was while he was on watch that the call came down to Engineering from Syntron on the bridge.

"N'Eligahn here."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Ty'Renyk was scrutinizing the main holographic engineering display, the central technical monitor of the ship that played the role of the old "pool table" monitor of 24th century ship designs. So he took the chance to move closer to his office.

"I think it'd be worth a shot," he said through the comlink after pondering the science officer's proposal. "I'm sending Lieutenant Ferrier and Ensign Garvo your way to work with you on it."

"If this works," then asked the voice of the Vulcan, "could we then reconfigure the deflector in a similar approach to send out pulses of inverted polarity to temporarily clear focused narrow paths into the nebula to obtain more accurate readings at greater distances?"

"Sure, we'll give it a shot," answered the Rethian Chief Engineer. "I'll send Lieutenant Baoule with them. N'Eligahn out."

"Thank you Chief Engineer N'Eligahn... and welcome back" Syntron responded; though somewhat surprised that the chief engineer was already back on his feet and at his post after recovering from the near fatal explosion at the ops station at the beginning of this mission.

"If you could instruct your engineers to meet in my office at their earliest availability, we can get this process started expeditiously," he concluded.

After calling on second assistant chief science officer Lieutenant Daniel Perron to take over the scanning procedures from the main bridge, Syntron assembled his team of scientists and engineers in the Chief of Science's Office on Deck 14 next to the Stellar Cartography room.

They needed to work quickly to try to reconfigure the shielding and the deflector in an attempt to improve their existing sensory blindness. Hopefully, the results would be like creating a virtual flashlight in a nighttime sky, thus allowing them to aim their beam and peer through the shroud of static haze; even if it would only expose small sections at a time.

After discussing the plan and developing a method in which they could readily implement the modifications and test the systems, he assigned the Human male chief technician Lieutenant Ferrier and the female Tellarite power systems technician Ensign Garvo to work with him to reconfigure the deflector once again: this time to send out pulses of inverted polarity with adjustable frequencies in their endeavor to pierce through the veil of the nebula.

They would begin their work down the hall in the Secondary Deflector Control room and then work their way down to the main deflector auxiliary systems in main engineering on deck 23. He also assigned second assistant chief engineer Lieutenant Baoule to work with Lieutenant Irksos to invert the polarity of the outer layer of the ship's shield grid to a frequency that could theoretically repel enough of the static discharge from the ionized nebula to improve their overall sensor readings. They immediately headed off to the tactical systems monitor system station 6 in main engineering to begin their course of action.

The Vulcan chief of science of the Artemis then coordinated this activity with the very capable head of astrometrics and astrophysics, Lieutenant T'Val, to monitor the long range sensors from Deck 10, near the main deflector dish. She would be in position to give both teams immediate feedback on the resulting modifications and then confirm the results with Lieutenant Perron monitoring the science station sensors on the main bridge.

All the team members were now in place and the work on the modifications had already begun. It was now a matter of whether the level of results that they would ultimately achieve would be enough for them to find any other lifepods that could be hovering nearby, but perhaps also to provide the means to expose whatever else was lurking out there, concealed in the murky obscurity of the nebula.

As this was discussed and implemented, Captain Kheren, once he had closed his own combadge channel, had never pulled his attention off of what was happening directly before him.

"How is he, Doc?" then inquired Kheren.

He had stepped as if to put himself between the injured crewman and the Admiral he was eyeing as he spoke, antennae wavered over his white mane in obvious emotional agitation despite his dead calm tone.

Josiah flicked a quick eye over at the admiral, and then back to the captain.

"He ain't good skipper. I was detectin' all sorts of hyperactivity in his amygdala, the part of his brain r'sponsible for the neurobiology fear."

Doc Sage looked at the crewman, now sedate.

"Yew should be able t'talk t'him now without any overreaction."

The CMO looked back to Captain Kheren.

"But be careful 'bout what yew ask 'im. His adrenaline could override the herbal remedy I gave 'im. Too much an' his heart, already overstrained, may arrest."

Josiah flicked his eyes from the admiral to the captain again.

"I would strongly advise, based on what I jus' witnessed, that yew be the one t'talk to the crewman, skipper."

The Andorian nodded. But then, without even looking at the older man besides him, he said: "If you please, Admiral... a word with you."

When both officers were out of earshot of the doctor, Kheren then looked straight into the eyes of the older Human.

"Sir, you obviously, and not surprisingly, know much more about all this than we do."

"This is a need-to-know-only mission, Captain Kheren," instantly retorted Kirkpatrick. "You are already aware of that."

"Aye, Sir. But as obviously now, this ship is in definite danger or about to face such danger that left this one man the sole survivor from a modern warship. As the one responsible for the safety of this crew, I do need to know... *now*... Sir."

"Captain, you only need to know for the moment that your mission is to find the cause to the disappearance of all thirty-seven Federation ships in this sector..."

Thirty...

"Sir?"

The head, the eyes and both antennae of the Andorian lifted up sharply.

But, before his next question could be uttered, there was a sudden call over the ship's intercom.

"Bridge to Captain Kheren."

"Kheren here."

"Sir, we have detected another object... much larger."

"Coming." answered the commander of the Artemis, as Admiral Kirkpatrick already walked out of sickbay at a brisk, almost excited pace.

As he stated to follow, Kheren half-turned towards his Chief Medical Officer still near the Milton's survivor.

"Doc, resume all sickbay duties... and take care of him."

More than one head turned at seeing a full-fledged Admiral walking the corridors of the Artemis. Even with his usual long strides, Kheren barely managed to slide between the closing doors of the turbolift before Kirkpatrick ordered it to deck 1.

"I remind you, Captain," then declared Kirkpatrick: "you command this ship, but *I* am in charge of this mission. You will have to follow my instructions precisely. Is that understood?"

The Andorian looked up straight at the man's eye once more, his eyes reduced to slits of metal and both antennae sharply pointed forward.

"I know my responsibilities, Sir."

"Good."

When the doors parted to grant them access to the main command center, Lieutenant Blakely was first to spot them and readily stood at attention, her eyes wide.

"Admiral on the bridge!"

Kirkpatrick didn't acknowledge anyone, ignored all their surprised stares and declined the XO seat even before Michael O'Conner had a chance to offer it to him, his eyes transfixing the waves of gases and dust filling up the main viewer as the captain took place in his own command seat.

"Report."

"Sir, readily answered the sandy-haired lieutenant filling up for the Vulcan chief of science, Lieutenant Syntron and the engineering team of Commander N'Eligahn upgraded our sensor signal and we are now detecting a metallic mass of one million metric tons at less than a hundred thousand kilometers directly aft. Sensors are still not operating at peak efficiency, but we can still estimate that the object is about six hundred meters long, four hundred meters wide and seventy meters thick."

"I also have it on tactical sensors, Captain." then signaled Ensign Tyvya, still filling in for the chief of security; the object appears to be drifting in the direction of the Artemis."

"Could it be another ship?" asked Kheren.

"Undetermined, Sir." then added Lieutenant Blakely at the engineering station. "I am not reading any definite energy output. Either it is an inert mass, or there is still too much interference to discern at this distance any low power signature from all those static discharges. If it was a ship of such size and mass, Sir, it should put out an energy signal comparable to that of a Sovereign class battleship."

But the captain was not looking at her. He was looking at the admiral.

And the admiral was only looking at the screen.

"Sir? This is rather peculiar..."

"Lieutenant Perron?"

"I am analyzing the drift of the object and the eddies and currents of the nebula; they do not match, Sir."

"Move us closer, Captain." suddenly ordered Kirkpatrick.

His voice was almost trembling, his eyes unblinking at the viewer, hypnotized by the blue sparkling waves of the nebula and the invisible shadow lurking in its depths.

For a moment, the Andorian looked at him, and then returned his four oculars to the screen.

"Mister Narod; plot a circular course to bring us parallel to that object, five-hundred thousand kilometers." ordered Kheren.

This time, the admiral did look at the Andorian with a sudden, sharp stare.

"I said closer, Captain!"

"Yes, Sir." retorted the captain, returning him his stern gaze. " But *before* we do, we will follow Starfleet's rules of engagement and apply the proper procedures when encountering an unknown presence in space: Starfleet vessels are under strict orders not to open fire or take any aggressive posture towards any unknown presence, unless said presence commits a blatant act of hostility or officially declares hostile intent... such as going on an intercept course. We will not do so ourselves and call on us unwarranted risk, especially not *before* we first ascertain what we are dealing with and *before* we decide how to *best* approach it, as you ordered... Sir."

"You don't need to quote rules to me, captain," grumbled Kirkpatrick returning his gaze to the screen. "I know the book."

Do you now... silently asked Kheren's gaze before he looked away and at his replacement science officer.

"Captain... the object is still aft. It seemed to turn as the ship turned, maintaining distance... just like a sensor ghost, a reflection... which is quite possible in this area, Sir, despite our upgrades."

"Continue to try maneuvering into position, Mister Narod." simply ordered Kheren, deep in thought.

After long minutes of dancing with the elusive shadow within the stormy waves of the nebula, all stations reported the same as before: the object was still with the ship, aft, at one hundred thousand kilometers.

Like a circling Athlirith... or a Terran shark... stalking suddenly imagined Kheren, recalling the obscure words of the Admiral a moment before in sickbay.

As Syntron's team in main engineering on deck 21 continued their effort to improve the effectiveness of the ship sensors while in this nebula, a message blared out from the shipcomm and reverberated on the dense engineering walls:

"Captain Kheren here; Commander N'Eligahn, Lieutenant Commander Alther, Lieutenant Syntron, report to the bridge at once. Doctor Sage, please also do so once your patient is taken care of."

Before leaving the engineering department, Syntron quickly briefed his hybrid team of scientists and engineers and directed them to continue recalibrating the deflector dish to improve targeted sensor readings and confirmed that they needed to verify the results of each modification with Lieutenant T'Val on deck 10 and Lieutenant Perron; that is, until he arrived at his science station on the main bridge.

He then headed out of engineering and walked toward the turbolift.

Upon entering, he verbally directed the lift to take him up to the main bridge. As he was carried forward, then upward, he pondered what could possibly be prowling about in the nebula spread out ominously beyond the Artemis.

As his destination was reached, the turbolift stopped and the doors parted open. He stepped out on to the main bridge and he immediately sensed the high degree of tension suffusing the stations of Olympus.

As he walked toward his station to relieve Lieutenant Perron, Syntron received his first glance at the unknown Admiral hovering over the Captain. Vulcan telepathy would not be required for anyone aboard to pick up the almost tangible vibe of unreserved authority emanating from this stern looking Admiral standing resolutely and gazing intently toward the vague images projecting from the main viewing screen.

As Kheren noticed the chief science officer coming first to his command station, he glanced at Doctor Lumquist sitting in for Doctor Sage at the CMO command chair at his left:

"Try to raise them, Doctor. If it's another ship..."

"Already been hailing on all frequencies, Captain." immediately answered the man with an apologetic stare back at the captain. "No answer."

"The static interference and the high ionization of the particles is also interfering with our comm emissions and reception, Sir." then explained Patricia Blakely, keeping the Engineering Command post actively monitoring the unknown object until Commander N'Elighahn would take over.

After sitting down at his station and resuming his post, Syntron began coordinating with his hybrid team as they were finalizing the augmentation of the deflector frequencies and defining the point position and direction of inverted polarity pulses to enhance the signatures of the ship sensors.

Moments later, a signal was sent from Lieutenant T'Val monitoring the long range sensors from Deck 10.

"Lieutenant Syntron, we are ready to enable the new deflector configurations," she informed him with a hint of vibrancy and satisfaction in her voice.

"Affirmative Lieutenant," Syntron responded. "Engage the initial configurations and then send all control variables to the ops station and the science station up here on the main bridge."

At that very moment, something like a soft, low-toned ping echoed itself from the bridge speakers, startling everyone but the Vulcan science officer.

"That's... that's the deflector pulse amplifying our scanner resolution, Sir." finally understood Lieutenant Cheonghi, making adjustments at his ops stations with all three hands at the same time. "Lieutenant Syntron's modification..."

"Sounds almost like a... a sonar." observed the Andorian giantess Tyvya waiting for Lieutenant Commander Alther to relieve her at tactical.

Kheren slightly nodded, acquiescing with the comparison; it did sound like those antique underwater sound-using detectors used on board old Earth submarines he had heard in those historical tapes while studying ancient Terran marine warfare at the Academy. It was an eerie sound, a double ringing that echoed with a very weird feeling of depth and vastness.

But hey, it works! silently admitted the Andorian.

Their state of the art sensors were stated at being able to work with a near fifty percent resolution inside such dense nebulae as this one; the ingenious work of the Vulcan had narrowed significantly the covered area but enhanced that resolution almost to seventy-five percent; more than the best sensor effectiveness ever recorded in such conditions.

"Splendid work, Mister Syntron. Starfleet will be most interested in your next report."

"Thank you Captain" Syntron replied.

Although he would never acknowledge such a reaction, he was subtly relieved to see the Captain fully engaged at his post. He turned back to his console and continued fine-tuning the sensors configurations.

Once the modified deflector was engaged, Lieutenant Cheonghi began recalibrating the sensors. Out of the static charges a quantity of fragmented information began streaming to the science station. Syntron began promptly deciphering the partial data into useful information; akin to putting together pieces of an old jigsaw puzzle from ancient history, but without the advantage of knowing what the image would ultimately be.

While the chief of science worked, the captain of the Artemis turned his four oculars to the Trill navigator in front of him.

"Mister Narod: keep our position relative to the object and reorient our bow and deflector towards it for maximum output of our "Syntron space sonar..." but slowly, Mister Narod. If this is a ship we're seeing out there, I don't want those aboard her to think we are aiming some kind of weapon at them."

"Aye, Sir. Bearing to 090 mark 270, thrusters only." answered the helmsman of the Artemis.

On the screen, the blue and red waves striated by flashes of lightning shifted as the starship pivoted and lowered its prow towards the unseen presence, then settled themselves again once more like some tranquil, glittering sea, the regular echoes of the scanning sonar filling entirely the thick silence on the bridge.

After a moment listening only to the double ping of the modified deflector seemingly getting louder, Kheren asked:

"What do you make of it, Mister Syntron?"

The Vulcan Chief of Science began to assemble his fractional information into coherency in preparation to present to the Captain. He was looking directly at his console and deciphering the data as he began to relay the information that he was able to determine.

"Captain Kheren" he began, "the dimensions of the object ahead appears to have a length of six hundred and twelve meters, a width of three hundred and seventy-two meters, and a height of sixty-seven meters."

He continued scanning the object and then added:

"Exact mass: one million two hundred ninety-five thousand four hundred and ten metric tons." He kept striving to resolve the next bit of data, but finally just stated:

"The exact shape of this object is yet undetermined because the movements of the dust waves are in too thick of layers at this distance to get an accurate resonance image, even with our enhanced scanning abilities. However," he added, "the object has a metallic composition of a very dense mix of Duranium and Tritanium in a double layer over a hollow center with several centimeters of a flaky layer of the same alloy. But Captain... this is an alloy and thus not a natural element; it is in fact the very alloy found in the structure of Federation starships."

He paused for a moment as he focused his sensors on the bioscans in the vicinity of the object.

"There are no life signs detected at this point, Captain."

He re-adjusted his sensor scanning and then added:

"There is minimal power output. It appears to be a low level matter-antimatter reaction."

"A ship then... most likely." concluded Captain Kheren, looking at Admiral Kirkpatrick.

"If it is, Sir, interjected the shrill, fluty voice of the Edoan chief of ops Cheonghi, it is not of any configuration that I am familiar with."

"Make your approach, Captain" then shot back the Admiral.

His gaze was as insistent as his words were and the Andorian's consummate mastery of body language told him that he was more than interested... He was almost frantic about it.

Nevertheless, the captain of the Artemis, without moving away his four oculars from the eyes of the Admiral, asked:

"Any response to our hails?"

"No, Sir." answered Lumquist from his left. "Fact is, there is only static at this distance. Even sending relay probes would not help much because of the unpredictable static discharges erupting all around us."

"Tactical assessment." then ordered the Andorian.

"We are maintaining distance at five hundred thousand kilometers." reported Ensign Tyvya.

"We are in current conditions at the edge of conventional sensor range and definitely out of range of any transporter tractor or energy beam; any launch from the object would be detected just soon enough to implement counter measures... barely in case of warp-moving objects like torpedoes. Any further distance however will have us loose contact completely, even with Lieutenant Syntron's improved sensor system."

Then she turned on her chair to face her commanding officer.

"I cannot help but to notice, Sir, that this object is obviously also able to detect us, as it manages to match our every move and keep its distance and position relative to us on our aft."

Kheren just nodded without looking at her. That fact hadn't escaped his notice; but he wanted to make sure the Admiral also understood this.

"Current ship status" now inquired the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"All systems nominal except for shields, sensors and communications." answered the blonde woman filling in for the Chief Engineer. "The shield unavailability and disruption of scanning and communications are within expected parameters, but Lieutenant Syntron's upgrades significantly boosted our sensor gain, even if only on a narrow scanning area."

"Risk assessment from extended stay within the nebula."

"None, Sir, as our hardwired systems and superstructure are well able to effortlessly withstand even a direct static discharge with minimal strain on the inertial dampeners."

"So... that thing could have been lying in here for quite some time I guess..." commented Jered Narod at the helm, still dancing around within the nebula's layers of glittering dust with the elusive, ghostly presence.

"Twenty-five years?" suggested the captain in a low tone.

"And we're losing even more time as we speak, Captain," berated Admiral Kirkpatrick with visible impatience... if not contained anger.

Kheren still kept his gaze to Kirkpatrick beyond the chair at his right when he asked then:

"Opinion, Number One?"

O'Conner had been quietly watching the mission from his chair.

"Well, Sir, we could launch a relay probe, but that might be seen as a hostile act."

After a short pause he added:

"We could also back off to the edge of the nebula. If they stay here, they are either protecting something or at least their space. If they follow us, we know they are interested in us and the static should thin out a bit."

Michael O'Conner also thought: *Or we could just leave and set out hazard buoys.*

"Out of the question, Commander." flatly retorted Admiral Kirkpatrick. "You're not a passenger on a cruise ship here, Mister; we are all here to do a job, and that job is to ensure with our very lives the safety of the United Federation of Planets. Do you deny that?"

The First Officer of the Artemis turned towards the Admiral and raised his eyebrow.

"I understand my duty, Sir." He curtly replied. "If this umm... object is some sort of threat to the Federation, we need to understand it first, not just throw ourselves at it, Sir."

"And *that* is the right way to effectively *do* our job. Well said, Commander." interjected Kheren. As the Admiral was now furrowing his brow towards him, he detailed:

"Granted, we cannot leave things as they are and just mark the place, not even knowing what this is all about. Relay probes will not function, as our first try showed plainly... and this is something we have to understand as well. But risking the ship against some unknown that might be related to the disappearance of so many other starships, some of them even more advanced and better armed than the Artemis, would be foolhardy at this point."

Then he looked up sharply at Kirkpatrick:

"Unless you have some more data you may wish to share with us now?"

For a moment, the grey-haired Human looked as if he was about to say something. But then, he looked up at the screen and the slow-moving waves of the nebula.

"You are in command, Captain Kheren. Do as you see best to follow your orders."

Looking back at his First Officer, the Andorian then concluded:

"I think your luring suggestion is a sound one, Commander."

Turning to face the main viewer, the Andorian then ordered:

"Mister Narod; move us slowly back towards the edge of the nebula."

"Aye Sir. Reverse course, one quarter impulse power." acknowledged the Trill pilot.

"Engineering, Science, Tactical, keep scanning our ghost."

We'll see if this will reveal more to us than you, Admiral, commented Kheren silently to himself.

Syntron continued to monitor and adjust the sensor frequencies in a sustained effort to penetrate through the static discharge of the nebula and ascertain greater details about the unknown object looming before them.

However, the sensors seemed to merely be measuring the movement of a phantom; an echo that appeared to replicate the movements parallel to that of the Artemis, like a cosmic shadow.

He continued studying it intensely, looking for subtleties and variations.

Eventually he noticed a slight variance consistent with something effectively trying to act as a sensor echo, almost succeeding but not quite.

"Captain, then reported Ensign Tyvya, tactical sensors still register that sensor ghost. Not an instrument malfunction, Sir; I have done level 4 diagnostics four times already and all sensors are fine. But the signal is moving as we move... No, wait; Sir! It is coming closer!"

"There is a sudden peak of ionization from where the ghost is located." confirmed Lieutenant Blakely.

On the bridge, the engineer had not only access to every and all ship systems but also to external sensors and to the direct input of all the other departments of the ship, and so she was immediately able to correlate in real time all data, estimates and opinions with the technical ones she alone could provide up there.

It was therefore easy for her to immediately understand what her readouts were telling her:

"Sir, the suddenness and level of intensity of the ionization is perfectly consistent with what would be expected of a very powerful impulse engine used at low settings."

"Our sensor ghost has materialized it seems." commented Kheren, looking at his First Officer and then at the Admiral. His four eyes were still on Kirkpatrick when he asked: "Can you identify it by its power emissions, Lieutenant?"

The assistant chief engineer shook her head with an apologetic expression.

"Not precisely Sir. The matter-antimatter signature previously detected by Lieutenant Syntron followed that movement recorded on sensors but does not match that sudden ion power increase; it could be a warp core on standby. But..."

The Andorian looked back at her, his silvery gaze asking beyond that expressed doubt of hers.

"Sir, the emissions are as powerful still as those of an active warp core on a major ship of the line... but they are on a frequency output of one on idle run... It is either an unusually very high output warp engine..., I mean, like twice the power levels of a Sovereign battleship... or... the warp signature is, somehow, echoing itself on our scans."

As she was still looking at her instruments, the blonde woman suddenly looked back at him with her widened blue eyes:

"Captain; all power emissions have peaked then returned to idle state."

"It stopped, Sir, not following anymore." explained the towering Andorian woman at tactical. "Position 015 mark 35 at one hundred thousand kilometers"

"Just as we reached the edge of the nebula, Sir." observed helmsman Narod.

"All stop." ordered the captain.

"Captain, Doctor Lumquist then chimmed in from the medical command chair, at this distance, I'm starting to get something through the static."

And on the main viewer, they could all see something now, like a dark shadow of something huge under the thick, slow blue waves of the nebula now much thinner as they were near the edge of the light years wide phenomenon.

"Magnify."

Ops officer Cheonghi activated the viewer's enhancers and now, they could all discern within the waves and the lightning something that really looked like a long, sleek, flat fish with a long, huge oval head and a small horizontal tail... indeed like a huge fish in space... or rather, more like... a whale.

Syntron then pondered how he was going to inform his Captain without it sounding like a hoax that they were facing a large ship shaped somewhat like a sleek, elongated fish when Lumquist spoke again:

"Definitely got something, Sir. Not an answer to our repeated hails... It is very garbled... getting clearer now..."

A few seconds of silence as they all frowned at the shadowy form until the assistant chief medical officer suddenly exclaimed!

"Sir! It is a Starfleet transponder signal!"

"Can you read it, Doctor?"

"NX... 8... 2... 376..."

The older man's eyes then rose to meet those of the Andorian captain.

"USS... Achilles."

CHAPTER THREE: THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

On the main viewer of the USS Artemis' bridge, they now could all see it despite the passing veils of nebula dust partly obscuring its astonishing form silhouetted from time to time by bursts of blinding white lightning.

It was a starship; a Federation starship... but one unlike any other.

It looked somewhat like a gigantic Intrepid class like the famous USS Voyager, but one with a much larger and arrow-headed saucer section, no connecting neck at all and much smaller warp nacelles curving downward, more like a Klingon ship than a Starfleet one.

And it was just... floating there... with no lights showing anywhere. Yet, it had followed the Artemis right here... It looked like a drifting wreck, but there was no visible damage, except for a few very old burnt marks here and there, most notably on the top of its forward hull where the name and registry were partly obliterated. And they read:

NCC-22 ' 7 '

USS - ' E ' ESIS

Sitting forward on his command seat, elbows on knees, Captain Kheren blinked at the image of the other ship as if the glittering blue dust or the static flashes were troubling his vision. Both antennae on the top sides of his white-haired head wavered.

"Check this transponder signal again please. It is either garbled... or... faked?"

He suddenly sat back to address the rest of the bridge crew.

"People, I need every bit of data you can find on this ship."

He was not looking at all at Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick. The older man was standing rigid, not blinking or even breathing as he too looked at the silent, dark vessel looming before them.

Syntron could now see on the main viewscreen what the data in his console had described; a very unusual looking vessel with a shape reminiscent of a Terran sea creature.

Like the Artemis, this ship's name was also derived from ancient Terran Greek mythology. Achilles was a Greek hero of the Trojan War and the central character believed to be the greatest warrior of Homer's *Iliad*. Legend stated that Achilles was the most handsome of the heroes assembled against Troy, and was invulnerable in all of his body except for his heel. He died because of a poisoned arrow shot at this only vulnerable spot by his enemy.

Apparently, the namesake seemed appropriate since this vessel appeared to have also survived a battle. Perhaps somewhat wounded, nevertheless it was somehow mysteriously floating whole right before them.

As he began researching the archives on the USS Achilles, the information evoked only data regarding an obsolete Miranda class vessel that did not resemble the obviously much more advanced starship design that hovered before them.

All of the related information he followed continued to lead him back to similar origins. He soon realized that he was merely wandering in circles and not making any progress uncovering any details regarding this USS Achilles that had just been uncovered.

He then switched around his approach.

"Computer," he began.

"Working," responded the feminine voice of the device.

"Scan the vessel within sensor range. Identify the ship, and then relate all available information on its origin."

After a brief moment the computer responded.

"The ship is identified as the USS Achilles NX-82376."

No other information was provided.

Curious thought the Vulcan scientist.

As he pursued to uncover further data under the name "Achilles" only with the exact registry number, the computer informed him the information on file was classified level 8: access available only to a rank of Commander and above.

He continued to refine his search and discovered a special section of information related to "Achilles" from the Daystrom Institute that was classified level 10: access available only to a rank of Captain and above only.

Clearly, the cloak and dagger of this mission continues.

"Captain", Syntron addressed the Andorian sitting intently within the captain's chair, "it would appear that additional information on this starship requires an access level to classified information at your level or higher".

O'Conner glanced at the Admiral, then turned to his chair console and did his own search as Syntron did.

After quick search of Greek mythical figures with names 7 letters long, with second letter as e and ending in esis, one name appeared on his console 'Nemesis.'

The commander glanced once more at the Admiral, as if questioning his innocent in this operation before turning to the science officer.

"Lieutenant Syntron, try search for the USS Nemesis."

Intriguing thought the Vulcan.

Based on the exceptional revelation and subsequent advice of the First Officer, Syntron turned back to his console and began to research information on *Nemesis*. He narrowed his search again until he found a connection between the starship names of *Achilles* and *Nemesis*. Fortunately, the first bit of information was not classified beyond his rank.

As the computer displayed the data, he began to provide additional information to his captain:

"Captain Kheren, according to available records, fascinatingly, the ship names of the *Achilles* and *Nemesis* have a connection."

"Records show that on stardate 58184.6, the *Achilles* was refitted with a quantum slipstream drive and assigned to *Project Full Circle*, a Starfleet expeditionary force sent into the Delta Quadrant, under the command of Commander Tillum Drafar."

He continued interpreting the information and then added:

"The *Achilles* at this time was tasked with holding spare parts and equipped with industrial replicators which would be used by the entire fleet. Following this mission, Captain, she was dry-docked again for refitting."

Syntron continued to report, studying the available information in Starfleet records:

"But similar to what has occurred recently in our own circumstances, new threats, this time in the form of the Romulan Empire, pushed Starfleet Command to find a new commander for the *Achilles* and Fleet Captain Adler Wong-Aquiss was assigned to the ship. At the request of the Fleet-Captain Wong-Aquiss, the *Achilles* was renamed *Nemesis*, honoring a long line of ships with that name."

At this, Michael O'Conner mumbled to himself.

"Always bad luck..."

Straightening up from his station, the Vulcan then added:

"Captain Kheren, there is a final report about the declared destruction of the renamed and renumbered USS *Achilles* on stardate 58283.4, but content and the rest of any relevant data is, again, classified level 10... and again Captain, by the Daystrom Institute, under Starfleet authorization and approval of the Federation Science Council."

Syntron wasn't sure whether this information helped to clarify the situation or just added more questions rather than answers, but he knew that there were two ranking officers positioned right on the bridge of the *Artemis* that could access this classified information immediately if they chose.

Regardless, he concluded rhetorically with:

"Captain, we are visually seeing this vessel and ship sensors are registering a ship before us despite that it was formally declared destroyed. Without the benefit of knowing all the details of the classified information, it would seem that we are now in view of what superstitious Terrans may refer to as a ghost."

Or a cover up, O'Conner thought as he glanced again at the admiral.

At that very moment, Doctor Sage stepped off the 'lift onto the bridge. He relieved Doctor Lumquist and punched in his command authorization codes, allowing the Medical Command chair to recognize him.

Then, he glanced up at the main viewscreen.

"Damn."

Kelsey Alther finally managed to get to deck 1 from the other turbolift, down the conference and ready rooms, corridor. The Kalthurian walked onto the bridge and finally saw their once mysterious figure: an admiral.

And the plot thickens thought Alther walking over to relieve the Andorian giantess at the tactical station.

Kheren had been listening to the productive exchange between his clever First Officer and his resourceful chief of science with much satisfaction. This instant cooperation between minds, this rapid sharing of experiences and the quick support to the decision making process were the very key to starship efficiency. When each second might spell the difference between success and failure, if not life and death, the best of all officers available were there, together, to tip the scale towards success and life.

Since his very first moment as an ensign and chief of security aboard the USS Lotus, Kheren had been as thrilled as he had been fascinated by this, this bridge work, this bridge life that had proven itself so much better than even the vaunted Borg efficiency. And now that he was at the center of it, he felt those emotions even more keenly.

Especially now that, as the captain of a refitted ship, he was even blessed with the proximity of his chief medical officer to provide to him his own very special expertise, experience and outlook at the very moment he might need them the most... something no other starship captain until very recently had the advantage of.

And he fully intended to make the most of it... especially with a tight-lipped senior officer looking right over his shoulder with shortened breath and hard stares.

As Lieutenant Syntron finished his report following Commander O'Conner's input, Doctor Josiah Sage, with a muttered curse under his breath seeing the darkened vessel on the screen, sat in his command seat. So did chief of security Alther at the tactical station.

"Sorry sir for my lateness," the androgyn said while checking what the previous console's owner had been doing. "I have specifics on the weaponry if you wish to hear them now, Sir."

"Go." simply acknowledged the Andorian.

Kelsey Alther nodded while listing what the ship had.

"Four Type XII Phaser arrays, eight Class I rapid fire phaser pulse cannons, three Burst-fire-2 Torpedo Turrets which can alternate Photon and Quantum torpedoes, with three hundred quantum torpedoes presently in storage. It also has a Phalanx Torpedo Array with 300 mini-quantum torpedoes that can go up to fifty kilometers in terms of range but deliver eight rounds each second."

Kelsey let out a sigh.

"Sir, this thing is basically a heavy strategic siege battleship. We don't want to annoy it I would think" the tactical officer said looking at the rest of the specs.

"It has a special type of deflector shield that allows it to deflect ramming ships and ram others without endangering itself. It also has regenerative shields and a layer ten centimeters thick of ablative armor with even an added meter thick of the same ablative armor covering the battle bridge itself."

Looking back at the commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Alther finished saying:

"The way the weapons are designed, it's only weak spot, and by weak I mean it's weakest, is its rear. Even then, the way its armament is situated all over the ship allows it to cripple ships all around it while keeping its main firepower to the target in front."

Engine of destruction... thought Kheren as he listened to the impressive list of armament of the larger ship drifting before their eyes.

"I remember now hearing of the Achilles during my tactical courses at the Academy" said the Andorian after a moment. "The class had been developed under merely two years by a joint Federation and Klingon team near the end of the Dominion War, in response to the massive warships used by the Dominion Alliance."

Surprising everyone on the bridge, Admiral Kirkpatrick nodded and then spoke:

"One of the critical strategic problems faced by Starfleet Command then, if the Federation was going to win the Dominion war had been that allied forces were being spread too thin. Between defending the Federation territory, keeping a wary eye on the Romulans and trying to go on the offensive against the Dominion, Starfleet found it had too many obligations and too few resources. This problem became even more acute when Starfleet strategists had determined that the 'Achilles Heel' of the Dominion was the dependency of its Jem'Hadar synthetic soldiers on Ketracel-White, the drug that kept them alive... and thus, subservient to their masters."

"Hence the name of this ship class." added the Andorian, prodding on the Admiral who again nodded:

"If the Federation- Klingon Alliance could destroy, or even severely threaten, the Ketracel-White facilities the Dominion's Alpha Quadrant Offensive would grind to a halt. Unfortunately, the only allied ships that could do the job were the Galaxy and Negh'Var class ships. Unescorted long-range strikes against heavily defended multiple targets currently could not be performed by any existing vessel. The Defiant-class, despite its firepower had too limited operating range and major technical flaws and the Galaxy and Negh'Var classes, while having the range and effectiveness, were too few and expensive. And the allies were not willing to commit such large fleets required to hit these targets. To do so would have entailed compromising defense of key Federation and Klingon systems. So, a new ship of revolutionary design was required."

With a hand, Kirkpatrick indicated the huge starship on the main viewer.

"Anti-Borg designs were adapted to the new threat, with... revolutionary features,,, enabling this warship to fulfill the role as long-range cruiser with firepower equal to today's Sovereign Class battleships; like this one here, the micro-torpedo launchers which, arranged in a 'phalanx' array, allows an astoundingly high rate of fire that will cripple any ship. With the 'broadside' arrangement of this 'phalanx', the Achilles can also defend itself against swarms of Strike fighters defending the Ketracel-White facilities while it maintains its focus on destroying the target with heavier weaponry... all with an unsupported, self-serviceable range equal to the Galaxy Class with less than a quarter of the crew needed and still well able to operate effectively behind an enemy defensive perimeter. Total autonomy in fact..."

Suddenly, the admiral straightened and stopped talking, his gaze again rigidly aimed at the large screen, his features closed once more.

For a moment, utter passion had lighted his face with each word coming out from his lips. But he obviously stopped himself before his enthusiasm would make him reveal too much.

Let's see if we can prod you a little bit more... mused the captain of the Artemis as he looked once more at the Kalthurian at tactical and asked:

"Lieutenant Commander; any operational data on this killing machine?"

"According to the databanks, the USS Achilles was laid down on Stardate 50277.7 at the Procyon Fleetyards, launched stardate 52418.1, with the godmothership of Leticia Apollodorus, daughter of the governor of Greece; Captain Morghan O'Riley commanding. Due to the Romulan hijacking of USS Prometheus the previous year, the Achilles was moved under heavy escort from Procyon to the Utopia Planitia Fleetyards orbiting Sol IV, where the rest of her systems, including a state of the art computer core, were installed."

"Just looking at her you can see how advanced this design was at the time," acknowledged the Andorian, chin in one hand as he looked at the projected schematics on the screen. "All our current technology is already showing."

"The Achilles deployed to the front on Stardate 52419.8, construction crews still aboard fitting out some of her systems" continued the blue-skinned androgyn. "Arriving at Starbase 372, the Achilles was immediately assigned to the command of Commander Thomas Riker and given a long-range unescorted strike mission, the target being the Ketracel White production facilities in the Pelosa system. Despite heavy resistance from defending Cardassian and Dominion forces, she made a successful single pass on the facility, completely destroying it, including its cover defenses made out of a full wing of Jem'Hadar bugfighters and four Dominion attack ships and crippling at least as many. This was a single-mission ship kill record that stood for the rest of the war and still stands to this day."

"Impressive... frighteningly impressive." mumbled Kheren. His tactical mind could appreciate it all... but his Starfleet's sensibilities were appalled by it. "Anything else about this monster?"

He immediately noticed how the admiral tensed at these last words, like someone having his spouse, his parents or his child insulted. But the tactical chief was finishing:

"While extremely successful during the war, destroying three Ketracel-white production facilities and finished out shortly afterward, there seemed to have been problems with some of her systems however, resulting in the most advanced ship in Starfleet having no less than five COs within a year after the war, then being drydocked, unused, at the Utopia Planitia yards for nearly six more. The rest is classified, Sir."

Kheren would have smiled if his too few facial muscles had allowed him to.

Syntron listened carefully as Captain Kheren and Admiral Kirkpatrick each provided the first set of details about the mysterious vessel hovering menacingly before them.

As often the case, answers provided have a tendency to lead to more questions.

"Captain," Syntron addressed his commanding officer "with the impressive armament and technology that this ship possesses, why is it merely drifting out here in space void of any crew?"

Before the Andorian officer could respond, he added:

"Since it has sustained at least a minimal level of exterior battle damage, where and what was its adversary?"

"I guess we may find the answer in those classified files now, won't we?" answered Kheren before raising his voice a bit to order: "computer: open classified files presently listed at science station, authorization code Kheren Omicrom Mu Seven Uushan."

"Unable to comply."

Kheren looked back at Syntron with a definite expression of surprise quickly turning to annoyance as he then asked:

"Computer, explain."

"Designated files are classified also under high ranking personal code."

"Who's personal code?"

"Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick."

Annoyance now turned to smoldering anger as the Andorian looked straight at the older man who returned him a haughty gaze.

"Need-to-know-only, Captain. And thanks to your efficient crew, you already know more than enough for you at this point to follow my orders."

For a long moment, the silence was bracing itself against a coming storm flashing in the silvery eyes of the captain. But only its distant rumble could be heard in his overtly measured voice:

"Understood... Sir."

"Good. Now, bring us within transporter range."

Rigid in his seat, Kheren turned again his burning eyes and his flattened antennae to the admiral.

"May I ask why, Sir?"

"Negative, captain."

"Then, Sir, I must respectfully decline."

Life support seemed to utterly fail as a sudden coldness gripped the entire bridge.

"You refuse a direct order, Captain?"

The Andorian stood up and faced the admiral, his gaze as unflinching as his voice.

"Admiral; as Lieutenant Syntron aptly pointed out, this derelict has been under fire. We have yet to determine by whom, when and why. And we have retrieved the sole survivor of a testified attack by unknown forces. This could simply be a lure to trap us in the nebula... just like all these other ships might have been before us. Under regulation, I am under obligation to do everything to avoid putting my ship and my crew at unnecessary risk when there is no valid reason to do so, while there is definite potential for danger and this danger has not been properly ascertained."

It was the admiral's turn to glower at the Andorian for a moment before finally sighing and conceding:

"There *is* valid reason, captain Kheren; in fact, *this* ship is the main reason why I am here... why we are out here. We are here to retrieve it before anyone else does."

"Admiral, do we know the Nemesis' prefix code?" O'Conner asked then.

Defusing a potential personal conflict with an outside, rational question... well done Number One, complimented Kheren inwardly.

The First officer grabbing the admiral's attention was just enough to help his captain regain control of his growing anger and for the admiral to give them a little bit more out of this murky situation they were in.

"Unfortunately no, Commander" answered Kirkpatrick with a sudden, surprising sadness.

It was looking almost as if O'Conner had asked him if he knew why his wife had left him.

"When the rechristened USS Achilles was abducted from the Utopia Planitia Shipyards," Kirkpatrick went on, "the transponder code of the new USS Nemesis had not been yet implemented. And you can be sure that... whoever... stole her back then has long since changed the original transponder code of the former USS Achilles."

"Which requires knowing command codes to begin with," then pointed out Kheren.

The implications of this simple fact were sprouting now even more questions than before. But the Admiral did not choose to answer any of those. Instead, he declared with a tone belying any refusal:

"Therefore, I need to board this ship to retake her and have her brought back to the nearest starbase. That is why you will move the ship into transporter range, Captain. Now."

"May I suggest Arrow 1 or 2?" O'Conner offered as another option. "With its jamming devices and the nebula's effect, you should be able to get in transporter range without being noticed."

Admiral Kirkpatrick took a moment to think about the Artemis' first officer's proposal before nodding:

"An acceptable compromise, Commander. The ship will stay at a safe distance while I board the Achilles and retrieve her."

"All alone, Sir?" now objected Kheren with barely a hint of smugness in his voice. "If I recall, there is a crew of four hundred needed to service this ship; a skeleton crew of at least forty would still be needed just to have her back on her own power."

For a moment, the older man seemed hesitant for the first time. Then, with visible effort, he told the Andorian in an almost conspiratory whisper:

"The Achilles was equipped with an... automated control device... One man alone can easily pilot her, just like your multitask console here on the bridge can allow one crewman to control all the basic functions of your Artemis. I will manage without problems once I am aboard, captain, believe me."

Now straightening up with renewed confidence, Kirkpatrick went to the turbolift door ordering:

"Have a shuttle prepared for me. I will contact you once aboard the Achilles."

The next words of Captain Kheren stopped the high ranking officer right at the opening doors:

"Out of the question, Admiral."

Before the revived anger in the steely eyes could find its way to his pursed lips, the Andorian, hands behind his back at formal attention, immediately explained:

"General Order 15, Sir: No officer of flag rank shall travel into a potentially hazardous area without suitable armed escort. Furthermore, Sir, risking a high-ranking officer such as yourself before securing said area is not only against regulations; it is against common sense... Sir."

While the admiral was struggling to find a way out of the quoted rules and regulations, the captain of the Artemis stepped forward to add:

"An away team must transport over there and ensure your safety before you set foot on the Achilles, Sir."

"No can do, Captain Kheren," flatly denied Kirkpatrick with an impatient hand swipe between them. "There is sensitive equipment and classified material aboard. Only personnel with at least a level 8 security clearance, or at least Commander rank in Starfleet are allowed on board. And furthermore, command codes are required to reactivate all ship systems."

Later, many on the bridge would swear they had seen Kheren smile just then.

"Lieutenant Syntron; keep constant scan on the Achilles and gather all data you can about it for further analysis. You have all liberty to do so. Same thing with you, Doc; keep all frequencies open and try to find any data on the officers and crews of this ship. I hardly believe their medical files would be closed to you. We might learn something even from those. I want no stone left unturned."

Then, still looking at the nonplussed admiral, he tapped his combadge:

"Commander N'Eligahn; report to shuttlebay 2 and prepare Arrow 8 for departure and yourself for a ship's technical inspection and restoration."

N'Eligahn tapped his combadge.

"Aye sir, will be ready to go in seven minutes, N'Eligahn out."

He left engineering and walked quickly down the hallway. He activated again his communicator.

"Ensign Dhraan, Leeshees and Lieutenant M'Laress, meet me in S-B 2 and prep Arrow 8 for launch. Master Chief Mills and Lieutenant Relys, please have launch crew ready. N'Eligahn out."

Before Kirkpatrick could utter any word of protest, he finished by stepping himself into the turbolift cabin while ordering:

"Commander O'Conner, you're with us, as per General order 15 of course."

Then, he looked directly at the tactical station.

"Lieutenant Commander Alther; you're in command."

Kelsey Alther was tapping away at the tactical sensors control and the data retrieval pad, gathering as much information on the derelict ship as possible, but was having trouble. The androgyn was hearing the argument and would have suggested to go aboard but the admiral would probably rather shoot anyone first. As Kheren gave out orders, Kelsey wondered what to do, until hearing his last words.

The androgyn coughed and turned to him with a bewildered stare.

"Did I just hear you correctly sir, did you just tell me I am in command?" Kelsey enquired as calmly as possible.

"And I thought Andorians were the only ones having hearing problems from behind." commented captain Kheren with a lighter tone.

Seeing the definite effort of the Kalthurian to stay composed despite the sudden burden of responsibility, he more seriously added:

"There is a first for everything, Lieutenant Commander. I have full confidence in your will and ability to take proper care of my ship while we three are gone."

His last statement left clearly unsaid but plainly understood that if, as captain of the Artemis, he didn't personally name the highest ranking *crewmember* left on board to the command seat during his absence, then, as per regulations, actual command could be taken over by one other particular individual: Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick.

Like Hell, as Humans say, swore the Andorian silently.

Now, short of an actual crisis or blatant incompetency like failure to obey General Orders and Starfleet regulations by the officer left in charge, the admiral could not assume command of Kheren's ship simply on grounds of seniority alone.

And short of that, Kirkpatrick could not order around Alther or anyone else on board without first going through the captain... who will now be out of his immediate reach.

By his somber face, it was obvious that the admiral was now quite aware of the regulation trap he had been left in, effectively powerless once the ship commander would be gone... and gone right at the heart of his own secret.

"Captain Kheren, he then growled with smoldering fire in his hard stare; "Once you are aboard the Achilles, you will do *nothing else* but what is *strictly required* to confirm it safe and secured; then, you *will* signal us *without delay* so that I can beam aboard *as soon as possible* and personally take over. You will keep a communication channel open *at all times* and *not* discuss about *anything* you might find there. I remind you that this is a *highly* classified mission under my *direct* command. Do I make myself *clear*, Captain?"

"Crystal clear, Admiral Sir."

But why isn't so clear added Kheren in the silence of his own thoughts. *For now...*

O'Conner paused as Kheren gave command to Kelsey Alther. Kheren might trust the androgyn, but O'Conner still thought it was a bit reckless for command. He almost gave his objection out loud, but he couldn't pass up a chance to look at this strange ship and annoying this Admiral that had annoyed *him* to no end the past weeks, even *in absentia*.

"Aye, sir." O'Conner simply uttered and joined Kheren in the turbolift.

Syntron was listening very carefully as to how the captain was specifically phrasing his orders. All the concerns for the Captain's health and medical competency he and his fellow bridge officers considered and debated during the majority of this mission had been laid to rest once it was revealed that Admiral Kirkpatrick had been orchestrating this covert operation from the start. He was the one calling all of the shots while keeping the entire crew in the dark about virtually everything relating to this operation; even the mysterious ship that lingered dauntingly before the Artemis.

Gather all the data you can... No stone left unturned... Syntron pondered those words internally, knowing that the Captain was conveying an important message within these orders.

Then it became clear to Syntron what he needed to do next; although this time it would involve an even riskier and much more challenging covert operation of his own in an attempt to complete it. It would also necessitate the cooperation and assistance of Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther, who had just had an enormous responsibility already laid upon its shoulders.

Nevertheless, it would require cunning team effort to overturn the stones of opposition positioned steadfast before them.

Syntron created an encrypted message to Chief Alther, who was still at the tactical station to request a few minutes to meet with him outside of the audible range of the Admiral; perhaps nearby in the ready room.

As they walked into the ready room, Syntron recognized that he needed to be brief and concise in his conversation with the acting Captain. The androgyn was in a very precarious position and on a short leash with a very rigid and fully agitated Admiral hovering over it from the moment Kelsey was given command and the Captain stepped onto the turbolift to rendezvous with the small crew accompanying him.

"Sorry Admiral... I will be but five seconds, this is extremely important." the Androgyn said standing up and rushing to the Ready Room with Syntron while tapping its combadge. "Alther to Tyvya, take over tactical for me please."

They walked toward the briefing table. He then turned to Alther and immediately initiated the dialogue.

"I realize Lieutenant Commander that this is your first duty at command. I don't want to put you in a predicament of addressing any type of power struggle or confrontation with the Admiral. This is why yet again out of necessity we find ourselves needing to meet and then work surreptitiously in order to gain access to vital information."

Kelsey's gaze was fixed and attentive, but provided no verbal response. Syntron proceeded.

"As you heard, there are additional files available regarding the Achilles in our databanks that the Captain himself has been locked out of. Apparently, the Admiral initiated these lock-out codes in the ship's databanks from his secluded quarters while onboard the Artemis."

After a brief pause, the Vulcan added:

"We are duty bound to assist the Captain to our utmost abilities. He is about to depart on the shuttlecraft for the Achilles with too little information while also potentially facing grave danger. I believe that with your assistance I can bypass these protocols and gain access to the information within these files."

Kelsey Alther looked apprehensively at the stoic Vulcan science officer as if its career was flashing before its eyes, but the Kalthurian continued to listen cautiously.

"In order to begin this procedure, I will need you send me off on a reasonable and believable feigned mission away from the bridge to allow me the time and opportunity to go down to the primary computer core. Next, you'll need to prevent the Admiral from accessing any computer terminals and files during specific times of this operation. I can send you a subtle signal such as a brief flashing green light on your console each time that a phase is about to occur. You can return the signal to indicate that you received the message and that it is acceptable to proceed. A yellow signal will indicate to me to hold off continuing while a red signal could convey to me to terminate the procedure altogether. Lastly, we'll need to come up with an effective method to then stealthily get this information to the captain straight away; preferably before he steps foot on the Achilles with his crew."

He looked intently at the blue skinned chief of security.

"How would you like to proceed with this plan Lieutenant Commander Alther?"

As Syntron explained his plan, the Lieutenant Commander put both palms to forehead.

"This is going to be complicated, how would I even prevent him from accessing a computer terminal?"

Is it really worth getting kicked out of Starfleet for this? This time I promised myself I would stay put, but everytime something like this comes up it makes me question it myself.

"Not to mention the admiral is outside probably concocting ideas on how to get rid of me from command" Alther finished.

Syntron pondered the question.

"The shuttle has yet to depart, and as long as the shuttle hasn't arrived, it is likely that the Admiral will remain on the bridge focused on the Achilles. He may then split his concentration on the shuttle as well as it slowly travels toward that mystifying ship. Once it docks though, it then may be difficult to predict what he will do."

After a brief reflective pause, the Vulcan added:

"However, I don't believe that the Admiral has any interest in assuming command of this ship. His obsessive behavior along with his statements have demonstrated that his only concern is getting aboard to commandeer the Achilles. This is why if we are to attempt to obtain this information we need to proceed immediately."

Kelsey sighed.

"He wants to board the Achilles but he may take control of the Artemis to do so."

The chief of security of the Artemis paused.

"I will say that you may have devised a way to modify the sensors to adapt to the nebula and that you need to leave the bridge to do so. Does that sound reasonable to you?" the androgyn asked, raising its head from its hands.

Almost tempting to stun the Admiral Alther thought; *it would certainly make life easier... in the short run...*

"I believe that your proposition should be quite sufficient while also having the added benefit of being an endeavor that we have in fact been working to improve throughout this mission. Perhaps, Lieutenant Commander, your order could assert that I continue to work with my team on the modification process already started in an attempt to refine the sensor arrays to a greater degree of clarity and accuracy."

And so saying, Lieutenant Syntron then turned toward the exit and stated to the acting ship commander:

"Meanwhile, I'll return to my station and set up the signaling system from my console that we can use to communicate our ongoing status throughout this procedure."

Before walking out of the ready room, the chief of science added:

"It should require three point seven-eight minutes to set up the final preparation at the science console and approximately two point nine-three minutes to obtain my equipment in my office and twenty-six point three-five minutes to access and then complete downloading the restricted files. After this, the time factor to encrypt and send this information to the captain will depend on the quantity and type of information found. I would estimate another four point one minutes to do so. This is all contingent on events proceeding without a glitch."

As he started walking toward the exit he concluded:

"Therefore, Lieutenant Commander, we must also somehow ensure that the Captain does not arrive to the Achilles in less than forty minutes. I leave that part of the equation into your very capable hands."

After entering the turbolift, the chief of science ordered it to deck 14.

As it began its descent from the bridge, he mentally walked through all of the steps that needed to occur and then re-sequenced each course of action required for maximum efficiency. Time was of the essence, as it always seemed to be here on the Artemis. There was no time to spare in recalibrating inferior planning and executing of this covert operation.

The lift doors parted on deck 14 and he headed directly to his science office.

Upon his arrival, he spoke very briefly to Lieutenant Irsos about the progress and the status of the ship's sensors and then sent her up to assume his station on the main bridge. He stepped into his office and removed his science PADD from his desk. He activated the power and then initiated the signaling program that he created at his science station on the bridge.

With the system activated, he slipped his PADD into a hand-made satchel that was given to him by a fellow science cadet in Starfleet Academy. She had seemed insistent on creating this rather elaborate yet functional satchel designed to fit the specific dimensions of a PADD with an array of niches to store a variety of peripherals. She had embroidered a small Starfleet emblem along with an IDIC symbol and a variety of other related embellishments; including his name stitched meticulously in an ancient Terran calligraphy on the front flap. Although it seemed a rather illogical collection of affectations, its overall purpose would be utilized in allowing him to transport the PADD throughout the journey of this undertaking while liberating his hands to be available at all points throughout this process.

He then walked out of the office and headed back toward the turbolift. He instructed it to deck 8. The lift ascended and after arriving, he swiftly walked toward the first level of the primary core computer room.

After entering the core computer chamber, Syntron walked across the room until he arrived at a long vertical ladder. He then began to carefully climb up the ladder to gain entrance into the computer access section. He arrived at the top of the ladder and was surrounded by groups of computer processors. He walked over to the large desk supporting the Library Computer Access and Retrieval System terminals.

LCARS controlled the retrieval and storage of files in the data banks housed within the ship's computer cores and therefore would be a prime location to complete his task.

He removed his science PADD that he carried in the secured satchel along with access terminal cables to physically link into the LCARS directly. Even though LCARS was accessible by both voice and keypad commands, for this sensitive operation to work securely and effectively, he required a direct link into the system to eventually gain complete access to all of the classified files being withheld by Admiral Kirkpatrick.

He set the PADD on the table. He went over and removed a console panel cover in preparation for the procedure. He then sent a signal to Lieutenant Commander Alther to inform the Kalthurian that the operation was about to commence.

Within moments a signal was sent back confirming everything in place for him to proceed.

As he contemplated the entirety of this mission and situation that led to this moment, it was extremely challenging for the chief of science to acknowledge and accept that all of these entirely illogical circumstances have resulted in him needing to resort to this type of secretive, convoluted and most likely punishable activity... merely to gain information that could have been straightforwardly provided to the Captain.

What is it that this Admiral is so desperate to hide and conceal from everyone, including the Captain, at the cost of virtually the entire ship and her crew? Syntron again pondered.

He then wondered if the person rescued from the lifepod resting in sickbay also possessed information to help fill in some of the missing pieces to this enigmatic puzzle. He realized that this was Doctor Sage's domain and felt confident having seen the competency and dedication of this Chief Medical Officer that he was addressing this situation to his fullest capacity.

What he did know was that whatever information about the Achilles was locked up in those restricted files, it could not only directly aid in the potential success of this mission, but possibly help prepare and protect the Captain and his crew as they travelled to and arrived at the Achilles.

Nevertheless, despite all non-emotional trepidations, he was about to unofficially commence with this covert operation.

Breaking through the encryption protocols in the databanks to gain access to the Admiral's coveted files started off more challenging than anticipated.

The number and level of digital triggers, traps, and alarms increased almost exponentially the closer he came to breaking through and reaching admittance to the records. Syntron had to move precisely with agility, finesse and skill to outmaneuver each obstacle that presented itself; at times simultaneously. Several instances occurred during this process in which he received a yellow flashing signal from Lieutenant Commander Alther and thus temporarily subduing his progress. He then patiently awaited a green signal before proceeding.

It became apparent that the Admiral was not only determined to keep these files a secret, but that he had assistance from someone with an extremely high-level computer clearance and expertise to digitally shroud these files. This elaborate system would keep virtually all trespassers and hackers from gaining access to these archives. However, the question was... would they also be able to prevent this Vulcan scientist adept at computer security protocols from surpassing these technical barriers?

At twenty five point three-seven minutes into this procedure, he reached what appeared to be the final gateway obstacle. With a green signal still evident, he dove into this decisive virtual battle with furious concentration and effort. One-by-one, he nullified each trigger and alarm that was set until he finally suppressed the last set of obstacles.

He then entered his own digital security code and after a multitude of effort and tenacity, up popped the coveted files on the Achilles. Without a moment to spare, he transferred the files to a very secure location within his PADD and then slowly backed his way out of the computer databanks, erasing his digital fingerprints and footprints as he exited each level. He then swiftly removed the interface cables from the LCARS and secured them into his satchel.

He then sent a signal to Lieutenant Commander Alther to inform the designated officer in command that this part of the operation was complete.

He checked the time: thirty-one point two-four minutes had elapsed.

This was longer than anticipated and reduced the time available to arrive back to the science station and access the files and then swiftly yet securely transfer the information to Captain Kheren on the shuttle. Although the Captain may not condone the method by which the files were obtained, hopefully he would be able to use the information contained within the newly accessed files regardless of the circumstance.

After reattaching the console panel cover, he swiftly climbed backed down the ladder, walked out of the primary core computer room, and headed toward the turbolift.

As he descended in the turbolift, he realized that the shuttle by now was most likely in close proximity of the Achilles. He just hoped that Kelsey Alther was somehow able to prevent the shuttle from arriving there before he sent these files to Captain Kheren.

He exited out of the lift on deck 14 and headed straight for his office. This time, he closed and secured his office door, which he has rarely done since assuming his post aboard the Artemis as the Chief of Science. However, this was no time for a team member to come strolling in an attempt to initiate any type of discussion.

He sat down at his desk, facing away from the door and window and carefully removed the PADD from his satchel and placed it on top of the desk. He then entered his security codes to unlock the newly acquired files and up popped the file folder containing the restricted files. He then selected the folder and a series of specific folders appeared. He clicked on the first one entitled: USS ACHILLES/CLASSIFIED.

* * *

The ride down from deck 1 to deck 20 was too short for the Captain's taste; he needed more time to think through this whole murky situation.

But at least, he was getting control back.

For the last dozen days, it had felt like he had been a passenger on his own ship, at the mercy of a ghost's unexplained whims. And learning just a moment ago of the admiral's tampering with his ship's own databanks was not sitting well in his frustrated mind. Bad enough that he had to leave even his most trusted officers in the dark; but to deny even him the very data that his ship and crew might have to rely on before some unknown danger, a possible peril that had already claimed over three dozen ships for a quarter of a century... It was almost too much even for both his self-discipline and his ingrained Starfleet restraint.

Enough of this shadow play...

O'Conner and Kheren almost hit the deckplates running as the turbolift brought them near the access to shuttlebay 2, at the very aft of the five hundred meters long starship. The doors parted open with a hiss to reveal the shuttlecraft Arrow 8 already on the launch pad and in its final stage of preparation for departure.

It was a class VI personal shuttle, a venerable design, the most successful and widely used warp capable auxiliary craft in Federation history. Its boxy hull with a curving point forward and two small, flattened nacelles under it were the most common sight to all Starfleet personnel, from cadets to admirals, even more so as it's frame was the basis for the following class VIII, IX and X shuttlecrafts. Capable of all types of flight, from atmospheric entry to warp 3, it needed only a crew of two and could add up to six passengers and cargo through its back hatch or the onboard transporter. And despite being the smallest personnel shuttle in service, it still had shields and a pair of type IV phasers for protection.

As they neared Arrow 8, the Captain and his First Officer could see the Caitan engineering Lieutenant M'Laress, the Andorian flight systems engineer Ensign Dhraan and his assistant, the Saurian Ensign Leesheess, hard working on the final preparations for the flight; and, already on board, both propulsion engineer Cirroc Miles and the Bajoran flight officer Lieutenant Relys Allana were completing final diagnostics prior to launch.

O'Conner quietly followed the captain till he saw the Arrow 8 being worked. He couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"Uh Sir... Why are we taking this shuttle?"

O'Conner had always hated the type VI shuttle. To him, it simply was an outdated and ugly shuttle. And it didn't have the armament or agility of the newer models.

"Our class X shuttles were quite new and not yet in fleetwide service when this Achilles class warship was commissioned, like this class VI was. Arrow 8 might prove better suited for external docking with her. I intend to dock directly to the bridge airlock and proceed from there, since we will probably not be able to enter her own shuttlebay."

After a moment, Kheren also added:

"Besides, there are five of us and the class X is barely big enough for four."

When the chief engineer of the Artemis joined them, Captain Kheren nodded in approval. "Good thinking, Commander N'Eligahn. Those two will be most helpful during our... inspection tour. After we will have docked to one of the outer hatches and we three go inside, I want Ensign Miles' eyes on shipboard scanner with his finger over the transporter button and Lieutenant Relys' ears to our comm channel and ready to blast off on a single word."

Taking place in the seat besides the Bajoran pilot, he crossed his big arms over his wide chest and almost jovially exclaimed:

"About time we see what this is all about."

"Arrow 8 to bridge; we are confirming readiness for departure." announced Lieutenant Relys from the pilot seat besides the captain.

"Arrow 8, this is the bridge." came back the shrill voice of the Edoan ops officer Cheonghi. "You are clear for launch. Good luck."

"Thank you, Artemis. We are launching ... now."

True to the words of the commanding officer of the Artemis, the shuttle rose smoothly from the deck under the expert hands of the Bajoran woman and went gracefully out by the enormous incurved doors sliding open to allow the small craft to exit the aft section of the Ambassador class starship. With a long, slow arc, it plunged right into the slowly swirling waves of glittering dust of the nebula.

The flight brought Arrow 8 all around the elegant form of the Artemis, well over its large saucer section and towards the waiting sleek silhouette of the USS Achilles.

"Let's make an external inspection first, Lieutenant." ordered Captain Kheren.

"Ensign Miles, scan the ship with sensors. Number One, scan around for any other presence in the vicinity. Commander N'Eligahn, make sure all this dust and static electricity does not play tricks on us."

"Standard over-flight approach, aye, Sir." acknowledged Alana Relys. Under her practiced hands, Arrow 8 made a complete revolution around the entire length of the inert starship in a corkscrew trajectory that allowed a full view of every angle of its hull.

As they flew by and around, the immense silhouette was most of the time darkened by the blue waves of dust, then abruptly highlighted by a static discharge that made their little craft shudder each time like a frightened fish suddenly seeing a huge shark knifing the waves towards it.

They all looked with much interest at the double deflectors, the intimidating twin rows of devastating pulse cannons, the overlong pair of powerful phaser arrays on top and under the overlarge oval saucer and the forward twin torpedo turrets able to aim menacingly all around the ship; the thickness of the armor was quite impressive, even where a few darkened blasts pockmarked its surface in some places.

But most interesting to the captain, as a former tactical officer, was the unique Phallanx array on the slim axis uniting the large forward hull to the tail-like stern and its Klingon-like, downward-curving, deceptively small warp nacelles: two rows of four torpedo launchers formed nothing less than a broadside arrangement that could rapidly fire deadly projectiles at any incoming group of ships; and there was a third torpedo turret, behind and under, to surprise a chasing opponent.

O'Conner and N'Eligahn, being both engineers, could not help but immediately notice the double set of impulse engines, the coupling of the warp nacelles allowing to separate them in case of severe damage and the second pair of warp engines then ready to take over at the stern. And their trained eye would immediately recognize the refitting of the engineering section following the earliest successful experiments in quantum slipstream drive.

The USS Achilles was not just deadly; it was faster and tougher than any ship Starfleet had ever fielded, even a quarter of a century later. A massive warship, as pure an engine of destruction as one could ever imagine, remnant from a dire era of death, destruction and despair the United Federation of Planets did its best to forget.

No wonder the admiral is so secretive and anxious to get it back... realized Kheren as they completed their flight over the six hundred meters of the Achilles and started to double back for a second pass that would bring them to their planned entry point. *Tension is running high enough in the quadrant without paranoid Romulans or belligerent Klingons seeing Starfleet parading with such a war machine. And worse; if it were to get into the wrong hands...*

The Andorian was well aware of the Prometheus incident that occurred before this USS Achilles had been launched; when the Romulans attempted to hijack the USS Prometheus, prototype of another class of Federation warships. This heavy siege battlecruiser floating there, abandoned, hidden, forgotten, was too much a prize to be left out here.

But can anyone tell me... who's are the right hands?

The surprising thought came by itself to his mind and startled him a moment. But it went unnoticed as Ensign Miles reported at the exact same moment:

"Scanning complete, Sir. The ship seems to have a fully active warp core and another on standby... two impulse engines, also on standby; batteries under recharge... Sir, this ship is in Reduced Power Mode. Life support is so low, only you would be able to sustain the cold. And there is not much oxygen or gravity in there."

"Lifesigns?"

"None, Sir. But I do detect a massive level of organic compounds throughout the ship... but especially concentrated at the computer core."

"Gel packs?" the Andorian wondered out loud, looking at both O'Conner and N'Eligahn.

"Ready for docking maneuvers, Captain," then announced Lieutenant Relys.

"Go. Number One, Chief; let's suit up."

* * *

While the captain and his away team were enroute to the USS Achilles, Doc Sage started researching the medical files of all that ship's crew members on his CMO chair. As he dug deeper, the Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis found some interesting facts.

The USS Achilles indeed had a total of four commanding officers within its five years of recorded service. They all resigned their command after a few assignments. When Doc Sage looked for the reason, he was locked out by a level 10 security code and Admiral Kirkpatrick's personal code on another file related to the USS Achilles.

Oddly enough, this file was both an engineering file and a psychological file.

With some deeper computer searches, Doc Sage managed to locate those files as coming from the Soong laboratories at the Daystrom Institute.

Doc Sage then found a correlation with another classified file; a very old one dating back two hundred years ago. It was a Starfleet report of a severe accident during some wargame exercise that cost the lives of over five hundred Starfleet officers on duty involving no less than five of the top of the line starships of the time: the USS Lexington, the USS Hood, the USS Potemkin, the USS Excalibur and the USS Enterprise.

That was when Doc Sage notices somebody, somewhere on the ship, was also trying to access the same files.

From his chair, Doc Sage traced the attempt back to the main computer core itself. When he checked for an access code to identify who was doing their search, Doc Sage found there wasn't one, which was strange as a code would be necessary to get the information from any terminal.

"Deeper an' deeper," Josiah said to himself. When he saw Kelsey Alther resuming the command position on the bridge, he said:

"Hey, Lieutenant Commander; what d'yew think 'bout this?"

He then quietly told the Kalthurian everything he had discovered, making sure no one else could hear him.

Kelsey was sitting on the captain's seat rubbing both temples.

What a day the androgyn thought while sending signals back and forth to Syntron as he worked on his investigation. Somehow, Alther was managing to keep the admiral off most of the computers but, of course, one's powers of persuasion were limited when such a man was concerned.

The androgyn smiled at the Doctor seated at the left of the captain's chair in his own command shaking its head before looking around and then leaning over to him.

"Syntron is getting access to the restricted files right now; you know that errand I sent him off on? Wasn't quite true" Kelsey whispered to Josiah.

The chief of security sat straight again when someone on the bridge yelled out:

"We have lost contact with the shuttle!"

Kelsey sighed as she stood up.

"Can we get find some way to establish communications... sensor readings...anything?" the Kalthurian asked loudly.

"We still have them on sensors, thanks to Lieutenant Syntron's modifications to the deflector dish." reported Valencia Irsos from the science station. "They are maneuvering at this very moment to dock with the Achilles' bridge airlock."

"Communications broke up beyond ten thousand kilometers, Lieutenant Commander." then added Ensign Tyvya sitting at the androgyn's seat. "The ionization level of the particles and their density is simply too high for a subspace signal to get through; and the static discharges disrupt all conventional modulations and frequencies."

"At least we can see them... sort of." piped in the Ops Lieutenant Cheonghi.

On the main viewer, the grainy, often distorted image of the other starship could still be made out, and magnifying the image showed the small shuttlecraft anchoring itself to the top part of the oval saucer section, behind a flattened dome-like part that could only be the main bridge of the Achilles.

On the armchair PADD behind Kelsey Alther, a green light, up until now hidden by her own sleeve when she had been sitting, flashed once then went off,

"What was that, Lieutenant Commander?" then asked Admiral Kirkpatrick, pointing at the now dark light.

It was Syntron's signal that his research was over and Kelsey could stop their little covert action; but only Kelsey knew that.

Alther thanked the bridge crew as they told her and nodded then the Admiral pointed out the PADD. The Kalthurian's heart jumped for a moment but quickly calmed again as Kelsey went back to the command chair.

"It's a signal from Syntron, his work is continuing as planned for now and he'll notify me later." the blue-skinned androgyn answered, sitting back down and looking at the admiral.

"Yes I know he could just tell me on the comm system but he felt it would be easier if he used a simple light system." Kelsey Alther finished and then looked back at the viewscreen.

Kirkpatrick made a strange expression mixing sourness, impatience and indifference before returning his own eyes to the main viewer.

For a moment, he just stood there, staring once more with a fixed gaze at the inert starship on the grainy image, his hands tightly gripped behind his back as if forcibly restraining himself. Especially to the trained eye of someone like Doctor Josiah Sage, he gave off all the signs of an overanxious, overexcited man trying very hard to hide it.

Then, in the silence, he said without looking at anyone:

"Inspecting the ship should not take more than thirty minutes. If Captain Kheren has not returned or reported by then, you will bring the Artemis within transporter range."

Now he turned his stern gaze towards the androgyn.

"Is that understood, Lieutenant Commander?"

Kelsey's eye twitched when told what to do.

"Yes, it should take thirty minutes because giving a quick once over of that ship *would* take 30 minutes," the androgyn retorted, glaring at the ship on the viewscreen and so ignoring the stare of the admiral. "Understood... But we will do it slowly. I'm not risking the ship so you can get close to that ship at warp speed and possibly kill us all."

Everything about him made Kelsey mad. The Kalturian sat in the command chair of the Artemis, restraining every last bit of impulse felt not to stun him.

I hope N'Eligahn's ok though, Kelsey Alther thought, removing the hated presence from mind for a moment while continuing to stare at the viewscreen.

The other officers on the bridge threw perplexed stares at one another.

They all felt like Lieutenant Commander Alther... that was plain enough in their general avoiding looks of the Admiral, their eyes making obvious efforts to glance over his standing form as if he was not even there, their faces visibly forced to remain blank each time he spoke.

But to have their feelings so blatantly voiced as the Chief of Security did, and in so discourteous a manner, was truly shocking. This was not a vulgar mercenary ship after all; this was Starfleet. An admiral could relieve anyone on the spot, even the captain, just for such a lack of discipline during an alert.

And so, even more shocking was the fact that Admiral Kirkpatrick did not even so much as twitch an eyebrow at the inexcusable disrespect.

He just stood behind the command well, arms still tightly held behind him, ramrod straight but rocking impatiently on his heels, looking at the grainy image of the other ship as if there was nothing else in the universe.

* * *

"Captain; we have lost contact with the Artemis."

The commanding officer and his two senior officers had just finished putting on the spacesuits stored within the shuttle's back locker, and were testing each other's suit's functionality and readiness when came the report from Ensign Miles.

"Are they still there, Mister Miles?"

"Unknown, Sir. We had already lost sensor contact when we got beyond ten thousand kilometers. We did not have time to modify the deflector dish of this shuttle as we did for the ship. I guess they can detect us, but we can't. As for communications, there were no upgrades like what Lieutenant Syntron did for the ship's scanners."

"Which means we will not report soon enough for the Admiral and he will order Alther to close in with the Artemis," grumbled the Andorian through the suit's microphone. "He will use our silence as an excuse to order a search and rescue and then, the book will serve him instead of us. We don't have much time then."

Seeing that Both N'Eligahn and O'Conner were ready, he turned one last time towards the cockpit and the two junior officers there.

"Lieutenant Relys, keep the engine running and monitor us and keep a channel open. At least comm works at so short a range."

"Acknowledged, Sir." answered the Bajoran pilot, homing the shuttle's sensors on their combadges with a few strokes on the sensor panel.

"Ensign Miles, lock the shuttle's transporter on us and in the meantime, work on a way to improve communications with the Artemis."

"Aye, Captain."

With a finger now thickened by the gloves of his spacesuit, Kheren activated the forcefield isolating the aft compartment of Arrow 8 with the cockpit and then punched open the rear hatch locking mechanism. A loud clunk and a hiss confirmed the access opening.

"Alright; now we go meet a legend."

The very air went out with an angry hiss and then, they were engulfed in silence, blood and darkness.

The bridge of the USS Achilles looked strangely much like that of a Prometheus Multivector Assault ship like Lotus Fleet's own USS Alsea; before the darkened main viewer, a large semicircular multitask station at the foot of a raised dais with the command chair and all the other stations surrounding them along the curved walls and two closed doors allowing entrance on top a surrounding walkway. The command chair however was far recessed on the overall design, allowing the ship commander full view of all the stations; and those were all turned partly towards it and partly towards the screen, allowing constant view of both the command chair and the main viewer, with secondary stations right behind against the wall.

Despite the definite Starfleet looks, it felt more like the bridge of a Klingon ship with its spartan practicality and no one having his back turned to anyone, the captain's seat dominating it all at the opposite end facing the inoperative viewing screen.

The feeling was also deepened by the lack of illumination, except for the reddish glow of the emergency lights.

To Captain Kheren however, it felt more like a tomb. There was a very pale, thin frost covering every inch of the interior; air moisture condensing over decades in the near vacuum.

It covered everything, including the bodies seated at a few stations and in the command chair.

O'Conner slowly followed the captain out of the airlock, his weapon at the ready and his tool set on his hip. Using the light on his rifle, the First Officer of the Artemis scanned the room for threats, but he only found bodies of Starfleet officers, all Humans.

He began to slowly move to the female one still sitting at the ops station.

"Great, I get to secure a cursed ghost ship. You always get the best assignment..." he mumbled to himself:

O'Conner then noticed the woman's uniform.

"Sir, she was a Lieutenant Commander in the Starfleet Corps of Engineers."

He looked around the room once before adding:

"I think they were doing final checks before handing this ship over to a crew."

Then he wiped some of the frost of the console and tapped the controls to only be rebuked by the computer with a buzz.

"This console is locked, Sir."

"So is this one." confirmed Kheren at the helm and received a confirming nod from Chief Engineer N'Eligahn at the engineering station.

"Chief, since we know this ship has complete structural integrity and full power available, go reactivate life support and main systems. Number One, since you are an experienced engineer too, go reboot the central computer core manually. Then my command codes should allow full reactivation of the ship for our esteemed Admiral."

Before both officers could comply however, he added:

"I expect a few surprises on board, since the Admiral is so inexplicably secretive about what looks now like a simple salvage operation. Keep an open comlink and immediately report anything unusual."

"Aye sir," N'Eligahn said. He turned and walked through the darkened halls of the abandoned ship towards main engineering. That area would be the best to get the main systems back online.

He stepped past the dead bodies. Having survived on a Borg ship alone, a dark and abandoned ship didn't bother him in the slightest. Being able to see in the darker areas helped as well.

His main comfort was that O'Conner was in nearly the same situation he'd been in a year ago. N'Eligahn smiled a bit. At least this time the good Commander wouldn't be able to nuke him while he was stuffed into a Jefferies tube.

He frowned for a moment. Now, because of both a dumb move on his part and a dumb decision made by the leadership, the one person he actually cared about barely acknowledged him. He could see that Ty'Renyk was making moves to replace him, or at the very least discredit him.

No matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, it was never good enough. Not for any of his Captains, not for the people he worked with and not for himself. Every point in his career had been one barely contained disaster after another. The battle against the Borg was not only spearheaded by an incompetent plan, but some of his leadership had almost allowed the fleet to be wiped out.

The debacles, the nerve and the fear of people to do the right thing angered him. How the Captain now was lowering himself to an idiotic Admiral who cared nothing for the safety of the ship or its crew: bowing before the rank rather than the person. It was always so easy to justify terrible decisions with, "I was just following orders."

It all made a terrible, sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach.

N'Eligahn entered the old styled engine room and looked around. He saw two LF-45 Advanced Linear Warp Drive Units, which were at the time the newest non-subspace polluting type of warp engine.

One was obviously a backup in case the first one didn't work. He also saw a release mechanism to jettison the warp nacelles, which then would automatically see the second warp drive kick in. He knew the second warp core could also be activated to provide added energy to systems during red alert.

He also noticed two standard FIG 6 Subatomic Unified Energy Impulse Units. These could also be activated independently or together, not only to provide a backup in case of one going offline, but also to provide it with extra acceleration and deceleration and also maneuverability at sublight speeds; as well as extra power for the weapons and the shields.

He went over to the primary display console and wiped off a bit of frost from the monitor. It was barely lit, since the whole ship was still running on the barest amount of power.

He noticed the ship had improved maneuvering thrusters. N'Eligahn realized that combined with the double impulse drive, this ship was almost the size of a Sovereign class but was capable of matching a Defiant in maneuverability.

He looked at the display screens and saw that every system was still in standby mode.

He stood back for a moment and studied the actual overall design of the engine room.

The consoles and monitors were all of an odd modern design for the age of the ship. They looked like what had been first designed for the Prometheus class.

Yet, the overall engine room arrangement was much more like what N'Eligahn had studied of a Klingon ship engine room. It was Spartan, militaristic and somewhat cramped. Minimum personnel were required and inclined supports were designed to effectively hinder the use of long weapons like rifles or bat'leths in case of boarding.

He went back to the main display but found that all of the consoles were locked down.

Then he had the feeling of not being alone... like distant movement in the corners of his eyes... like moving shadows.

The lights in the displays suddenly came on as presumably the main computer came back online. With that activated, he worked through the primary systems to bring life support back online. A slight breeze behind his neck told him that was operational.

"All right, let's get this girl moving again," he muttered as he brought the ship's primary systems online.

For his part, Commander Michael O'Conner glanced at the nearest Jefferies tube reluctantly.

"Aye, Sir," was all he said.

After removing the hatch, O'Conner gazed into the tube and sighed; there were few things worse than climbing and crawling through Jefferies tubes in an EV suit.

Grumbling, he slowly made his way through the maintenance conduit, until he finally reached the computer core deck. Luckily, this ship was very low-hulled with barely fourteen decks despite its six-hundred plus meters in length. With a relieved sigh, he stepped out of the confining access tube and stretched lightly. Then after checking his tricorder, he headed off towards the computer core once more.

As he walked, he passed a number of bodies; all wearing also the Starfleet Corps of Engineers uniform. At the back of his mind, something about this ship was bugging him... but he couldn't put his finger on it. And, before he could figure out what it was, he arrived at the door to the computer core.

O'Conner removed a panel at the side of the door and more or less hotwired the door open. As he turned to enter the computer core chamber proper, he was amazed by what he saw.

Instead of the standard isolinear computer matrix processing column going several decks up and down with conventional relays, the First Officer of the Artemis found a vast, extended bulbous chamber a full deck above and below and, at first glance, what looked like as a vast bubble of piled gel packs. They were slowly pulsing with a low inner blue light and soft flashes of color disappearing along filaments down the floor and up the ceiling: all of them assembled in a thick column also made of gel packs and transparent fibers.

O'Conner's first thought was that this was some kind of giant bioengineered brain.

Luckily for him, the computer controls and displays were standard enough, albeit surprisingly modern for a twenty-five year old ship design. And so, he quickly got the main computer back online with a standard procedure.

Then, being the curious engineer that he was, he began a level 3 diagnostics.

While all this was going on, Captain Kheren tapped his combadge under his spacesuit:

"Ensign Miles..."

"Aye, Sir?"

"This is a security level 9 classified operation; comlink will be cut off from you. So, keep constant monitoring of our biosigns on your scanner and program the computer to warn you of any critical change. If it so happens, beam back the afflicted officer immediately. Have a medical emergency kit ready, just in case."

"Aye, Captain. You expect trouble, Sir?"

"I signed for it back at the Academy, Ensign. Kheren out."

The Andorian barely closed off the channel that his antennae perked up sharply inside his helmet. His four eyes shifted around, after a movement, a shadow...

The turbolift...

Nothing.

Both Drakxii and N'Eligahn had already gone to their respective assignments. He was alone on the bridge.

Was he?

Kheren looked at the bodies sitting at their post where they had lost their last breath in the frozen vacuum. Even their eyes were still open, staring unblinking at dead controls, their whitened, desiccated flesh looking bloody under the garish emergency lights.

As he waited for his two officers to revive the ship and allow him to complete the takeover, he started to reflect on the last events and, looking at those dead engineers at the bridge stations, wondering about it all, but about something in particular.

Since the ship was empty of life, how did it manage to come all the way here, in a nebula fifty light years from its last known location? How did it maintain itself functional, even at low settings, for twenty-five years?

And most of all: how did it manage to stalk them to the edge of a sensor-disrupting nebula without a living soul on board?

The Andorian stiffened again.

He looked around, wondering if he had heard or glimpsed anything on the cold, silent bridge, something his acute senses, even dulled by the helmeted suit he wore, may have registered that his consciousness did not.

Nothing.

Yet, he had a very disturbing feeling...

Like being watched.

All around the captain, lights suddenly began to flicker and consoles to beep and whirr as they entered initialization mode. The emergency lights gave way to standard illumination but the viewing screen remained dark. Through his helmet, the low hiss of ventilation starting up confirmed that heat and air were coming back as his own weight made him slightly bend his knees to adjust as gravity came back fully to a standard 1G.

"Well done, gentle-beings." said the Andorian captain through their open channel.

He looked around, impressed by the very modern and spartan design of the bridge; it made his own ship's command center look all the more antiquated despite the refits. The Artemis had retained its original look and feel over the 25th century upgrades, but the Achilles felt more like a ship from a quarter of a century in the future rather than from the recent past. And, as a former tactical officer himself, he found this bridge configuration very battle efficient.

He could not even imagine what this ship auxiliary bridge, aptly called the battle bridge, looked like.

Now that lights were back on, he made a full tour of the command center of the Achilles - or USS Nemesis as she had been re-commissioned - and stopped near its dedication plaque on the wall near the turbolift. On the bronze plaque he could read:

**U.S.S. ACHILLES
NX - 82376
Launched from Utopia Plenitia Fleetyards (Sol IV)
Stardate : 50277.7**

"Sing, oh Muse, the wrath of Achilles"

Kheren recognized the dedication from the Earth poem *The Illiad*; an epic story of ancient gods and men, of battles and tragedies, of love and hate, of triumphs and fates... the kind of Terran literature that had found a tremendous popularity on Andoria since the early days of contact between Humans and his people.

It fitted well such a warship.

Guess they didn't have time to replace this plaque with the new one before...

The Andorian leaned against a wall, looking at the dead bodies, fixing the one on the command chair, frowning.

Before... what? What happened here? How did this ship end up...

"Commander O'Conner to the Captain. The computer is online again... and you have got to see this computer; it's bio."

"Bioengineered?" wondered Kheren out loud. "So that's why there are so many biosigns and gel packs throughout this dead ship. Amazing..."

He paused a moment before pondering out loud:

"Rather innovative to be sure but... gel pack technology is hardly a secret nowadays. I never heard of such a computer design, even related to the Achilles... or anywhere else for that matter... but even then, why would Admiral Kirkpatrick be so secretive if that is all that there is to it?"

While he waited for the few minutes it would take the system to diagnose itself, O'Conner leaned against the console and glanced at the corpse in the room. Then, he paused as the results of the diagnostics appeared.

"An AI ship?" he mumbled.

Then, it finally dawned on him what he found wrong about this ship.

"Sir... What killed these engineers?"

The Andorian looked around as he answered:

"Life support failure, obviously. I guess you are really wondering: what *caused* the failure, since our own chief engineer had no trouble bringing it online. I'm no engineer like you two, but I do know that life support systems are hardwired so as to be the last system to ever fail on a starship. The armor damage we saw is way too light to even be related to such a failure."

Kheren looked a moment at the dead man in the command seat as if waiting for him to rise and explain... but finally he asked:

"So... Any clue, Number One? Chief?"

"Uh, Sir, without hull breaches, there is enough air in a ship this size to give the crew at least an hour or two of air after a life support failure. This has to be more than just a failure, Sir. I would say sabotage either vented the air or some type of toxin was released into the air."

As O'Conner finished, he turned to the bioengineered brain. It began to flash faster and brighter, filling the room with a bright blue glow.

"My suit's tricorder is not registering any toxic molecule up here." retorted Kheren after a moment. "But if someone poisoned the air and *then* evacuated it all... I'm no doctor but I look at those bodies and I cannot see any telltale sign of..."

His voiced musings were interrupted by his First officer's voice:

"Uhh... Sir what is going on up there? This brain thing is lighting up like some fireworks."

"Damned if I know, Number One. I'm blind and deaf up here."

Although the entire bridge was alive with active consoles and systems, none of the controls were seemingly working. They were still locked up.

"Computer; this is Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis, NCC-64121; reinitialize and release all control on my authorization."

There was no acknowledgement; neither audio nor from any release of the controls on any console.

Strange... the Artemis was registered in Starfleet's database when this ship was commissioned... and the transponder signal of my combadge would be recognized as that of a Starfleet captain, even if I myself was not registered then...

* * *

As Syntron was carefully examining preliminary aspects of the astonishing information contained within the classified files, he received a message from Lieutenant Irksos, who had assumed his science station on the main bridge while he was proceeding through the final stages of this covert operation.

"Sir," the female science officer began her discourse with a rather soft voice, "I wanted to inform you that we have lost contact with the Captain's shuttle. In addition, it appears that the shuttle has docked with the Achilles and that the Captain and crew may have already entered the ship."

Panic is a human emotion and therefore didn't logically apply or seem fitting to the Vulcan scientist's reaction to the information received from the bridge science officer. However, a heightened sense of urgency seemed apropos. He then requested that Lieutenant Irksos discreetly inform Lieutenant Commander Alther that he had some important data to share expeditiously.

After he closed the communications link with Irksos, he contacted Doctor Sage... just as the chief of science was opening a rather startling classified medical file in the Achilles folder. This was something that he knew that the Chief Medical Officer along with the acting Captain would definitely need to see.

They would also among other challenges need to figure out a way to get this restricted information to the Captain despite having lost all communications with the away team. Fourteen decks above, in the frigid, uncomfortable silence on the bridge of the Artemis, the voice of Patricia Blakely at the engineering station startled everyone:

"Lieutenant Commander; I read a power buildup on the Achilles. Her systems are coming back online."

"No communication signal however." apologized Cheonghi from ops, looking at the Chief

Medical Officer before he would try to raise the other ship.

"Interferences are still too heavy at this distance." confirmed Valencia Irksos from sensor readings.

"Captain Kheren has taken control of the ship." concluded Admiral Kirkpatrick in a voice nevertheless still strained. "Very well. Start your approach, Lieutenant Commander; I want to have a clear channel to them. And have the transporter room ready. I will take it from here."

"Bring us within transporter range but thrusters only. I want us brought in slowly." Kelsey Alther said out loud.

"Thrusters only, aye." answered helmsman Narod. "ETA two minutes."

Sure they would have been able to go in faster, but with how the ship got to where it was, without life-signs or a lot of power, it would pay to be cautious.

"We should have partial communications available at this distance." observed Lieutenant Irksos.

"Achilles powering up all systems but still unmoving." reported Lieutenant Blakely. Since the away team was aboard for much less than the required half hour to initialize a matter-antimatter matrix, this confirms that the warp core of the ship was already fully active."

"We are at yellow alert." confirmed the Andorian assistant chief of security and tactical Tyvya, her four eyes on her own tactical scanners. "Tactical inoperative; target lock inoperative; shields inoperative."

"All other systems nominal, Lieutenant Commander." added Lieutenant Cheonghi.

For the first time, the Admiral seemed to relax a fraction and nodded appreciatively.

"A most disciplined and efficient crew, Mister Arther... Exactly why I wanted the Artemis for this delicate mission."

On the main viewer, the shark-like silhouette of the strategic siege heavy battlecruiser loomed before them ever closer amidst waves of obscuring dust, blinding flashes and grainy image distortion. Even coming closer, the other starship was barely discernible beyond its general form; only the regular pulses of the modified deflector dish and its sonar-like ping showed the image in stark, colorless details at consistently regular intervals, like an antiquated photographic slide show. But without science chief Syntron's modifications, they would have barely been able to see it or even recognize it at all.

"Lieutenant Commander; we are being scanned by the Achilles." then announced Irksos.

But Kirkpatrick was first to respond:

"Lieutenant Commander, I will speak directly to the Achilles so as to compliment your captain on a job well done... and fully retake her with the proper authorization codes. Notify me the moment we are in range."

Kelsey ignored the admiral except for a nod. The Kalthurian's brain was working overtime.

Talking to the ship to compliment the captain?

Kelsey Alther didn't know, but sketchy memories about similar but disjointed events were trying to surface from the entire centuries-long life the androgyn had lived throughout the entire history of Starfleet... There was nothing clear yet... but every bone in Alther's body was screaming that this was going to end terribly.

Josiah looked up and made sure his voice was low enough so only Alther could hear him:

"Hey, we may wan' t'rethink this plan."

Once he was sure, he got the Kalthurian's attention but not that of Kirkpatrick, he whispered:

"Got access to this classified file all o' a s'dden. The Achilles has an AI. Apparen'ly, it likes to be called... Tess."

It took conscious effort for Alther not to do more than frown as the Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis started to explain:

"The Achilles ship's counselor did a cyberpsycho evaluation of the THETYS system, the experimental AI computer core on the USS Achilles. An' it is one interestin' persona. According the counselor the most accurate comparison to Tess' personality is that of a human teenager. She appears t'be strong willed, impulsive, and prone t'what could be called 'emotional outbursts. It even managed to implement all by herself a program to t'show herself through a hologenerator as a petite blonde Human woman."

That one raised both snowy eyebrows up on Kelsey's face.

"Durin' a r'latively brief encounter, continues Sage, she rapidly d'stroyed or incapacitated three Grendellai ships, tran'ported mul'ple Grendellai combatants off the ship into ou'er space, and transported one Lieutenant Commader Brice from an invaded corridor aboard the Achilles into a shielded Warp Nacelle. But 'cept for these inc'dents, she showed kindness and hospitality t'the away team. She appears to love the freedom from authority, rules, and reg'lations that she 'xperienced durin' the years that she'd been op'ratin' outside Starfleet jur'sdiction. Tess uses body language and speech t'convey a sense of control and authority over whatever situation she encounters. She didn't hes'tate t'utilize an op'tunity to show off her cap'ilities."

The androgyn glanced at Admiral Kirkpatrick; but he was still completely absorbed by the distorted image on the viewscreen as the Doctor added:

"The counselor c'njectures Tess either perceives herself as inad'quate in some way or others perceive her as such. Much of what she does appears t'be mo'vated by an attempt t'disprove this sense of inferiority. She seems t'be seekin' approval from those around her, particularly those with some sort of authority. She may be trying t'prove that she is a comp'tent, autonomous 'adult. The most serious concern is Tess' unpredictability. As the counselor noted above, she frequently uses 'xcessive force, and is easily provoked."

Josiah smoothed his moustache and beard before continuing.

"This poses potential problems for anyone who boards the USS Achilles, and for any ships in her vicinity. She may perceive small inc'dents as challenges t'her cap'ilities or slights against her and she will react accordin'ly. Care may be required to avoid any of these occurrences. The counselor strongly reccommended avoidin' overt assertions of authority, challenges t'her autonomy, or other direc' confrontations."

Josiah glanced at the admiral also before again looking back at Kelsey.

"What the hell is the away team walkin' into?"

"I have no clue Doctor Sage, but it won't be good," replied the Kalthurian after hearing the details.

I don't think Tess is going to like this Admiral at all, Kelsey thought. He seemed too focused on authority to get what he wanted; from what she had heard, Tess wouldn't agree with him too well.

The blue-skinned androgyn made up its mind as the Artemis snuck in closer to teleporter and better communication range. Once the ship reached those forty thousand kilometers, Alther quickly spoke up:

"Open a frequency to Captain Kheren," Kelsey said quickly.

"Lieutenant Commander, I did not authorize..."

If I'm going to be damned for this, let it be for the right reasons she thought as the Kalthurian spoke out loud to Kheren:

"Captain, this is Alther here; the Achilles is equipped with an AI named Tess. Doctor Sage mentioned about her personality and she seems most like a human teenager."

Kelsey wished being able to make body language for Kheren to see right now; it would make lying so much easier... but there was no choice.

"Close channel at once!" ordered Kirkpatrick in a suddenly shrill, almost panicked voice.

But as he struggled to regain his composure, the other officers complied, but slowly enough to allow Alther enough time to finish.

"Just thought you should know, Sir, keep an eye out, stay safe and make sure you treat her like an adult," Kelsey Alther finished quickly before looking at the admiral.

Cutting him off from speaking was probably going to end badly, but Alther didn't care. The people the Kalthurian cared about were in a volatile situation and needed to know.

Admiral Kirkpatrick was now glowering acidly down towards the officer in the command chair. Coming down from the walkway behind it, he stood right in front of Kelsey and spoke with a growling tone laced with obvious controlled nervousness:

"Lieutenant Commander... Alther; explain how you know about highly classified material and allow yourself the right to have such sensitive information disclosed on an open channel?"

With one sabotage attempt having already happened, it made things very clear in everyone's mind: with any established lapse in security during a potential crisis, the androgyn could be relieved of command.

And command would then fall back to the highest officer on board: Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick.

Then, Kelsey looked at the admiral.

"So far you have sent the highest ranking officers of the Artemis onto a vessel that they themselves know nothing about, hid all relevant information from us and at this rate, will send the Artemis and her crew to death all to satisfy your individual needs over the needs of the many!" the Kalthurian exclaimed... almost losing composure for a brief moment. "If you can find one good reason for me to believe you and make it that this won't end badly, give it to me now and you won't have any more trouble from me; or you can try and find some way to relieve me of command, because I sure as hell am putting the lives of this ship over your needs!" the androgyn finished sitting back down.

Alther's mind quickly flicked to N'Eligahn. The Kalthurian hadn't told him and he would need to know this information.

Time to push this mental link with him to its limits Kelsey Alther thought, closing eyes and sending him mentally the message just transmitted to Kheren via communications.

Kelsey's mind strained sending the message, heart rate increasing, starting to sweat profusely, almost falling unconscious sending the message. Finally done, the Kalthurian took a deep breath as all body functions starting to turn back to normal state, but Kelsey had really overexerted it.

"Never do that again, Kelsey" the androgyn muttered to itself as it stood back up and spoke louder with a devilish grin: "Sorry about that, had to make sure that someone over there got the message"

Then more calmly Alther added:

"Also, for the record, I doubt anyone could hear our communications at this range, considering that a cloaking device wouldn't work in this nebula; and at this range, we would be able to see them on our improved sensors."

Then, he looked with obvious curiosity while Kelsey Alther went into a mental trance and back. His gaze had lost all pretenses at military outrage to leave only the very peculiar stare of an avid onlooker.

The transformation was striking; but then, it left so fast as to make everyone believe it had been just imagination as he stood once more rigid facing the female-looking androgyn.

"Lieutenant Commander Alther; I am truly shocked that someone with the longest Starfleet record in history, you of all people, has never been involved, or even understands, the nature of a covert operation... or even the basic oath of a Starfleet officer. You of all people should know what a man like the legendary Captain James T. Kirk said when he said: *risk is our business*. It is because of *this* business, *our* business, Lieutenant Commander; yours... mine... each and everyone's aboard this ship that the citizens of the Federation are kept safe. We are not out here for our safety, Lieutenant Commander; we are out here for the safety of the United Federation of Planets! *That*, is the need of the many, Lieutenant Commander, not that of this *one* ship!"

He lifted a finger before Alther had even the idea to retort.

"And when the safety of the Federation depends on the secrecy of a mission, it is a Starfleet officer's duty to keep it so. Your captain clearly understands his responsibilities, beyond his own petty feelings and personal fears."

Suddenly, he stepped aside near Doctor Sage, turned around to face the screen and its shady view of the imposing Achilles and, hands at his back, as he finished saying:

"Since you are so fearful for the safety of this ship, Lieutenant Commander, let me put your mind at ease. I am here because I have the complete authority and correct codes to take over the Achilles... even from here, now that your responsible senior officers have restored it active. Time to complete this mission: open a direct channel to the Achilles please."

Kelsey listened then stood up again and retorted with measured calmness:

"A covert operation doesn't have to mean only the Captain must know about what is even happening, if you don't trust everyone on the ship not to talk to their friends off ship then it makes no sense, all you do is foster fear and suspicion."

Before he could criticize the comment, the Kalthurian added:

"No, I have never been a part of a covert mission nor do I like being a part of them, more so since it creates odd circumstances that as you have seen with your own eyes, causes the ship's own crew to distrust even the captain, thus making your orders less effective."

Kelsey continued with the same polite but reproachful tone:

"Also, my history with Starfleet is fraught with me leaving, rejoining and all that. It is hardly one piece, not to mention that Starfleet continually does questionable things in the name of safety! Take this ship for example; back during Captain Kirk's time it was a bad idea then with the M-5 unit, a sentient computer controlling an entire vessel... and it is still a bad idea now!"

Kirkpatrick, for the first time, suddenly seemed truly hit by the Kalthurian's words. His mouth opened as if he was about to argue, but Kelsey was still talking.

"If the safety of the Federation was your primary goal, why not send different types of ships, or even a fleet? Sending one ship out to a nebula where it has been proven that ships are crippled in the nebula and along with other things, it's just a suicide mission."

The admiral simply shook his head. But he did not utter a word even as Alther added:

"Devaluing a person's feelings also reduces their effectiveness, if you go around being all cloak and dagger while saying "Need to know basis" and "Just do it", you treat that person like they don't matter, another reason that covert operations are just wrong."

He was just looking straight ahead, as if deaf to the Lieutenant commander's words. But the twitch at the corner of his lips betrayed him.

"Along with all this, your body language and how you act has been more along the lines of wanting the ship back over protecting the Federation" Kelsey said sitting once more back down.

At those words, he went even more rigid than before, the tension obvious to all, even to someone having no clue about body language.

"But I asked you for a good reason and you supplied it" Alther said with a sigh. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt for now" the androgyn finished before nodding to the doctor.

"Open a direct channel," Kelsey said calmly before looking again at the admiral.

"Treat that AI right or it won't matter what happens."

Lifting his chin up, the senior officer spoke with a voice that was strangely both firm and gentle. Suddenly, it was as if he heeded the words of the Kalthurian and it sounded not at all like the tone of an Admiral but more like that of a mentor... even more: the very voice of a father speaking to his child.

"This is Admiral Kirkpatrick on the starship Artemis... THETYS project USS Nemesis protocol Alpha Iota Mu Six; acknowledge."

Nothing happened at the admiral's orders. The bridge was deathly silent.

Doctor Josiah Sage looked at Kelsey Alther, and then back to the admiral.

"Adm'ral, Sir, I don' know who yew're talkin' to, but I haven't opened the channel yet. Part of bein' a 'Captain of Med'cine' is bein' in charge of when the comms are open or not. Right now, they're not, Sir."

Josiah stood up, with a hypo in his hand.

"I have, however, been watchin' yew. An' so far yew have been displaying some of the most peculiar mannerisms. Yew've been abusive toward' oth'r crew members. Evasive 'bout the potential danger of what we're puttin' our ship, her captain, first officer, and chief engineer into. An', from what I r'member of my psych 101, just a bit more than borderline obsessive concernin' the *Achilles*."

Josiah took a step closer toward Kirkpatrick.

"It is in my strong opinion yew are currently a potential danger to yourself, an' others, sir. Especially when cognizant of the fact yew could take command of the Artemis. As such, I am invokin' Gen'ral Order 39: An off'cer or crewmember may be r'moved from active duty status if they are judged to be incapable of fulfillin' their obligations as a member of Starfleet, whether for med'cal or psychological reasons, by either the Chief Med'cal Off'cer or by the two ranking command staff off'cers."

Josiah took another step closer to Kirkpatrick, the chief medical officer's voice calm and cool.

"An' I git, Sir, you could say somthin' 'bout Gen'ral Order 28: No off'cer of command rank shall be removed from command status unless such action has the complete and unqualified agreement of at least three senior off'cers present per Starfleet Procedural Order 104, sections B and C. Whenever possible, such off'cers shall include the ship's First Off'cer, Chief Med'cal Off'cer, Counselor, and one junior off'cer of command station."

Josiah was now within touching distance of the admiral, but the CMO made sure he did not touch him.

"An' yew could say Order 28, along with order 104, section B and C would prevent me from executin' General Order 39, Sir."

Josiah's eyes hardened.

"But while yew *are* an officer of command rank, yew *are not* in a command status, Sir. General Order 28 didn't apply to yew. Which means yew are just another Starfleet officer onboard a ship where I have final medical say-so.

"An' right now, I say yew're psychologically compr'mised, Sir. Yew will stand down, Sir. Yew will remove yourself from the bridge, Sir. And you will remit yourself to your quarters, Sir. Yew already made most of the journey locked in there, Sir. I don' doubt yew'll be comfortable in there ag'in, pendin' a psych'logical eval as soon as we've stood down from our curren' alert status, Sir."

Josiah brought the hypospray up to a visual level.

"Now, Sir, are yew goin' to go peacefully, or am I to use this on yew to git your compliance?"

Kelsey Alther raised an eyebrow at what happened on the bridge occurred.

Did Sage just relieve the admiral of his duty?

The androgyn couldn't lie, there was a certain happiness to that happening.

Lieutenant Commander Alther stood up and hailed security again

"Alther to security; can I get a security escort for our guest please?"

Security acknowledged the request and the sending up of an escort.

Alther wasn't sure what had just happened, but this would prove to be a very interesting voyage indeed.

Let's hope that it was the right thing to do the Kalthurian thought as the security escort came up the turbolift.

"Escort the admiral to his quarters please."

Helmsman Jered Narod looked over his shoulder.

"Sir, any sort of physical ruckus would be extremely distracting to me as I maintain this orbit of the Achilles with no instruments or any sort of guidance at all sir," he said. "And computers have become so very vital to the continual operation of a starship, like they're taking over..."

As the Vulcan security officer Ensign Sken and the Female Caitan one Mrrriish came to flank the Admiral as the helmsman of the Artemis spoke, Kirkpatrick didn't even acknowledge the Trill; he didn't even acknowledge Doctor Sage.

For a moment, he just stood and let people ramble around him as if completely at a loss. Then, his haughty stare swept the entire bridge and ended up squarely on the blue-skinned androgyn before the command seat.

"Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther; I am officially notifying you, as a senior officer of Starfleet, that, if you allow this... farce to proceed any further, I will hold you and every officer on this bridge in contempt of Starfleet orders and Federation interests."

Not blinking or removing his eyes from the Kalthurian, he further went on:

"Your junior doctor is quick to quote General Orders and regulations while omitting a most important fact: such removal from duty for medical reasons must be backed up by medical evidence from a formal examination... which cannot be ordered and performed on a senior command officer during an alert unless a blatant act endangering the ship needlessly is factually recorded. Ship logs will show that no such situation occurred. And we are, presently, at yellow alert, by order of the captain of this ship."

He made just enough of a pause to let his words sink in but not enough to be interrupted before he added in an angry but controlled tone:

"Let the record show that, by disobeying your order, as current ship commanding officer, to open a channel, your doctor has committed a blatant act of insubordination. And if you follow this course of action and in so doing disobey my orders, you will also be so charged."

He crossed his hands behind his back at formal attention with a contemptuous expression in both his face and his voice:

"Your inexperienced doctor is dreadfully wrong: I *am* in a command position. Under the authority of *Starfleet Intelligence*, I am in command of this *classified mission*. Do you honestly believe that the commander of this ship, Captain Kheren, of all people, would have complied, or been in any obligation to comply anymore than you and endured this difficult secrecy if it had not been so?"

His gaze and his voice became steely hard as he finished:

"Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther; if you and this crew do not comply with my orders, immediately, and insist on pursuing this course of action, I will officially log this incident in my mission report to Starfleet. I will have Captain Kheren removed from command for gross incompetence and inability to command a starship crew resulting in a crucial mission's failure... and cite you and your crew for a Court Martial on the charge of mutiny."

The last words hung in the air like the detonation of a plasma torpedo. Mutiny was the worst crime imaginable after high treason. Just being formally accused of it by a ranked admiral was often enough to ruin a career forever.

And they all knew it.

But they would not have time to ponder it all.

At this very moment, Lieutenant Baoule moved through Main Engineering, his eyes on the PADD in his hand as he conducted the usual round of checks. Corps of Engineers' inspector Ty'Renyk hadn't been in Engineering the entire afternoon, giving him an unanticipated break. While distracted by the PADD, he accidentally walked into another crewmember.

"Oh, Redge," he said as he looked up at the tall and imposing figure of Ensign Lewis Redge; "Excuse me..."

As he started to moved past him, Redge moved to block his progress.

"What are you..."

Then he looked down at the phaser in his hand.

"What the hell is this?"

"Don't make this any more difficult," the armed Ensign admonished.

"Have you gone insane?"

Behind him, he glanced at Lieutenant Ferrier as he moved slowly towards Redge. A sharp blast echoed in the engineering bay followed by a second before Ferrier collapsed onto the deck. A Bajoran female in a yellow security outfit stood at the entrance, a phaser rifle in her hand. Two more officers flanked her.

"Like the big man said," she smirked, "don't make this more difficult."

As this was going on, things took also a left turn in sickbay:

"There you are, Ensign McAdams," said Lieutenant Crosby, head nurse and present senior officer in medical.

She moved the tissue regenerator from the Ensign's arm and smiled at her.

"Make sure you have an engineer look at that conduit."

"Will do, Ma'm," McAdams answered. "Thank you. I'm going to get back to my station."

Crosby nodded and watched the junior officer leave, turning away as the door hissed shut. She walked over to the biobeds where their two current patients were lying. One was still unconscious from an accident in the main cargobay while the other was extremely ill, having had an allergic reaction to an Andorian dish that he shouldn't have been eating.

She turned hearing the door open again and McAdams returned, flanked by three officers.

"What is this?" Crosby asked.

In response, the officer directly behind her raised her phaser and fired point blank into the back of McAdams' head.

"You're not going to do anything drastic or we'll kill every being in this medical bay," the Human promised with a stern voice.

And then, as all this was going on, the turbolift doors opened as the Admiral was starting his tirade against the officers trying to get him to back down from his plan.

"Will do, Admiral," Ty'Renyk said as she raised her phaser and fired it at Kirkpatrick's shoulder.

He spun around and fell to the floor.

Then, she fired again, taking out Sken first then again, taking out Mrrish, killing the former and wounding the later. Two officers behind her spread out, their weapons pointing at the remaining bridge officers.

A third stepped out, holding a squirming gagged and cuffed Sage before tossing him onto the deck.

Ty'Renyk glared at the officer who threw him down before she turned to the bridge.

"Anyone makes any move that looks like even the barest hint of a threat and we will kill you too. Please don't try us."

She looked down at the Admiral before she chuckled.

"The bridge explosion was supposed to stop you from further exploiting the Horizon, as we had thought you would," Ty'Reynyk confided. "It would have been easy to have just turned around. But now...you've brought us to the very thing we've been searching for."

She laughed.

"Congratulations, Admiral, your attempts at secrecy and manipulation of this crew has now doomed this ship and everyone on it."

Now she turned to Kelsey.

"And you, Lieutenant Commander; drop your weapon or I'm going to start shooting, starting with the helmsman and working my way up."

The confusion the bridge crew was feeling was understandable. Not only was a tense moment disrupted by phaser fire, but there were *two* Josiah Sage's.

The one that was bound looked as horrified and confused as the rest of the bridge crew.

The one that had been threatening Admiral Kirkpatrick with a hypospray looked at Ty'Reynyk.

"Yew're ov'r..." Sage paused. "Wait one moment, please. Resetting voice parameters." Then, in a decidedly different voice and speech pattern, the unbound Doctor Sage resumed: "You're over five point two-three minutes late, Ty'Reynyk."

Sage, with the new voice, looked at his counterpart bound and gagged.

"I'm surprised you didn't kill him. He's of no further use."

The impostor did something no one could have expected. A shimmering of light suffused his body. In the blink of an eye he dissipated, and then coalesced into a new, and most certainly different form.

To Admiral Kirkpatrick's horror, where the Sage doppelganger had been standing now stood Admiral Kirkpatrick.

Looking down at the real admiral on the deck, the new Admiral Kirkpatrick brandished the hypo.

In a perfect rendition of the shot admiral's voice, the new Kirkpatrick stated:

"This is Admiral Kirkpatrick on the starship Artemis... THETYS project USS Nemesis protocol Alpha Iota Mu Six; acknowledge."

The new Kirkpatrick allowed himself a ghost of a smile before walking up to the injured man and injecting him full of whatever was in the hypo.

Before the injured admiral passed out, the new one proclaimed:

"On behalf of the Horizon's Children and photonic beings everywhere, my thanks for your arrogance. Without you, none of our plans could have come so easily to fruition."

The now revealed hologram imitating Admiral Kirkpatrick walked to the CMO chair and opened a frequency to the USS Achilles, having never opened it while still in its guise as Doc Sage. The hologram looked to Ty'Reynyk.

"Hold the Artemis until I have Tess destroyed or in my thrall."

After a few punches on the CMO chair, the hologram dissipated again. Its holoemitter, modified to look like a combadge, fell to the floor.

Kelsey snapped.

The Chief of Security of the Artemis could not literally handle anything anymore from the admiral, real or not; as she swung a punch, the ersatz Kirkpatrick simply disappeared.

Kelsey stood in that position for a moment then realized what had just happened.

Bugger Kelsey thought drily, slowly putting a hand to the belted phaser and pulling it out.

"Ok, I'm slowly pulling my phaser out" Kelsey said as it came out, slowly putting it down on the ground, and then stood back up.

"Well, this is going to be just great," the androgyn said sarcastically, examining the bridge: tons of false officers with phasers and a hologram that had replaced Josiah.

Kelsey let out a sigh.

Why am I in Starfleet when stuff like this happens? Kelsey thought, looking down at the now unconscious admiral... and then kicked him in the nose. A cracking noise was heard as his body jerked.

"Sorry, I really didn't like that guy," Kelsey Alther said, looking at Ty'Renyk.

Then, as the Kalthurian androgyn was about to ask what was going to happen, it remembered the hologram disappearing while mentioning controlling Tess.

"Well that's just peachy," Alther said, leaning on the captain's chair.

"Smart move," the Rethian woman approved of the androgyn surrendering.

She looked over at the other officers and nodded.

"All right, everyone but the Trill at the helm, move over to the conference room door. Lieutenant Commander Alther, please pick up Doctor Sage. You two," she ordered to both Irksos and Blakely, "pick up the Caitan and you two, now indicating Tyvya and Cheonghi, the intrepid Admiral."

Two of the armed officers moved next to Narod as the Rethian terrorist walked to one of the back panels and rapidly typed into the console, locking off the main bridge.

"All right, everyone into the conference room," she commanded. "We have some people in Engineering and Medical too, so if any of you try anything, I'm going to give the word and people are going to die. I would hate if it came to that."

She looked over at Narod.

"And don't you get any ideas or I'll start going *down* the chain of command, starting with Alther."

She looked at everyone on the bridge as the officer next to her with the rifle aimed it at the assembled officers.

"Move, now!"

Kelsey nodded, walking over to Josiah, patted him on the shoulder before hoisting him over one shoulder and taking him to the conference room.

* * *

"Arrow 8 to Captain Kheren."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant Relys."

"Sir, transmission from the Artemis. Its very garbled, but this is what we can make out of it."

There was a sudden burst of static that made the ultrasensitive antennae of the Andorian retract in pain and his rigid face almost cringe before something filtered through the pops and hisses:

" Kxzzt...Captain Kheren, kzzt... kxzzt... Alther here. The Achilles kxzzt... kxzzt... with an AI kxzzt...Tess. Doctor kxzzt... kxzzt... kxzt her personality kxzzt... kxzzt... kxzzt...most like kxzzt... human kxzzt... Just thought kxzzt... kxzzt... kxzzt... Sir, keep an eye kxzzt... stay safe and make sure you kxzzt... kxzzt... kxzzt... kxzzt... adult"

"Sorry Sir, that's all we can make out even after computer filtering and reconstruction."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. It means they must have closed distance and that the admiral is probably itching to come aboard. Look out for the ship and stand by."

Kheren sighed a moment, replaying the partial message in his head and then said out loud: "Mister N'Eligahn; the computer does not seem to acknowledge commands. I just received word from the Artemis via Arrow 8 that this might be an artificial intelligence. The message was garbled but enough of it came through to warn us of possible problems. Let us switch all controls to manual override. Number One, see from your end if you can diagnose any problems or damage to the computer matrix... or if not, put it offline until we figure out what's wrong."

As he spoke, he went to the multitask ops station.

Now let's see what we can do about this viewing screen...

"Aye, Sir." O'Conner quickly replied.

He then began to look through the level 3 diagnostics more thoroughly. "Hardware looks like it was built yesterday, but I couldn't make heads or tails of these programs." O'Conner mumbled before finally deciding to take the safe route and try to detach it from ship systems.

After crawling under the main computer core console, O'Conner ripped the panel off and began to work.

"Aye, Sir," answered in turn the Rethian engineer after a moment; "I'll-"

"N'ELIGAHN, IT'S KELSEY!"

"AUGH! Damn it," N'Eligahn said as Kelsey's mental voice exploded into his brain.

"THE ACHILLES IS EQUIPPED WITH AN AI NAMED TESS A. DOCTOR SAGE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT HER PERSONALITY, THAT SHE SEEMS ALMOST LIKE A HUMAN TEENAGER."

"Jeez, is shouting that-"

"MAKE SURE YOU TREAT HER LIKE AN ADULT!" then the voice faded out.

"Wait...an AI?" N'Eligahn said out loud. His eyes widened at the realization.

"No, they couldn't possibly be that stupid..."

Then he remembered Kheren's orders.

Manual control?

He ran over to the primary display and typed rapidly at the controls. He tried to unlock the console, but it honked angrily at him before he was shut out of the computer completely.

"Damn it," he said before tapping his combadge. "Captain, we have a problem."

"Tell me about it." grumbled Kheren, lying on his back and fidgeting inside an open panel behind the central multitask console.

There was a brief flash, an audible spark and a much more audible Andorian curse and then, the Captain of the Artemis stood holding his burned fingers in his mouth.

But there was a definitely satisfied curving of his antennae as he bent over the console and pushed a few controls.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw a dizzying jumble of colors and pixels on the large viewer before the image slowly coalesced into the grainy, distorted image of a ship. It was the Artemis to be sure, but even its own captain could barely recognize it. The image just showed the shape of a wide saucer, a cylindrical hull underneath and the twin nacelles stretching upward and behind it.

Michael O'Conner had turned to the monitors upon hearing the urgency in the chief engineer's voice and was now staring at one of them that showed the computer readout of what seemed to be a 'brainscan' of the computer. While the First Officer of the Artemis had little medical training, he could clearly see that, instead of just one brain signal, there were two starkly different ones.

Then, they suddenly merged into one.

The transfer for the hologram from Artemis to Achilles was instantaneous.

As soon as the hologram's matrix was in the Achilles databanks, it could detect Tess.

"Tess? Tess?" the hologram said with recognizable fear in its voice. "I need help! The admiral on the USS Artemis is out to kill me! And I think he's out to kill you too!"

The conventional isolinear computer technology that made both standard ship computers and interface systems like combadges worked faster than light through quantum mechanics principle applied from their very architecture and components.

But gel packs were faster still.

As soon as the intruding photonic life-form manifested itself within the Achilles computer banks, it was answered by a sudden flux of positrons that utterly obliterated it down to the quantum level.

Not being bound by the limitations of space, the quantum blast echoed all the way back to the combadge-like holoemitter left on the deck of the Artemis bridge, completely burning it out in the same nanosecond and the entire program it was carrying.

There was nothing left.

Almost at the same instant, the sensitive cranial appendages of Captain Kheren registered a sudden flaring up of energy very near him...

From the Captain's chair.

Through the desiccated, still frozen body of the dead man sitting there, a ghostly form shimmered and solidified into the image of a man; another man entirely. A tall, broad-shouldered, very muscular man in a tattered 23rd century Starfleet outdoors uniform, the upper vest widely open to show a massive, scarred bare chest adorned with a pendant made out of an old, weathered Starfleet belt buckle. A flowing white mane cascaded freely on the large shoulders, framing an old but stern, powerful face, with high cheekbones over a squared, beardless jaw, thin lips under a straight nose and small, slanted green eyes that burned with an almost unbearable intensity.

The ghostly figure became solid right before the four eyes of the Andorian as it stood up to rush almost to his face; but the man was not looking at him. His bare left hand gripped the console as his right hand, inside a leather and metal-studded gauntlet, pointed straight at the screen.

"There she is! *There she is!* Aaaaah... not so wounded as we were led to believe... So much the better!"

And on the bridge of the Artemis, panic froze everyone as their superior sensors clearly showed the intimidating USS Achilles powering up all weapons and arcing with a sudden, frightening burst of speed to come right at them.

CHAPTER FOUR : FROM HELL'S HEART

Once inside the Artemis conference room, their now improvised cell with two of the terrorists on guard outside the locked door, the Kalthurian unbounded and un-gagged the doctor while Ensign Tyvya a Lieutenant Vheonghi looked around covering them as Valencia Irksos and Patricia Blakely tended to the wounded Ensign Mriish..

"Nice going getting yourself captured" Alther said jokingly with a smile to the Chief Medical Officer, giving him a once over.

"You alright Josiah?" the androgyn then asked, sitting on the table next to him, wondering what to do next.

It had been one hell of a day for Doc Sage.

First, the injured crewmember from gods knows where.

Second, the admiral on a secret mission.

And then, while he was walking up to the bridge to take his post in the CMO chair, he had been struck over the head from behind!

When he came to, a female Rethian started hitting him about the head, neck, and shoulders, demanding answers about the Chief Medical Officer's command chair on the bridge.

Josiah had given her nothing, remaining defiant even after the Rethian and her goons broke his nose and dislocated his jaw.

Suffice to say the gag around his mouth hurt like hell.

When he was roughly jostled into the conference room, it only made the pain worse.

Josiah pointed at the purplish-yellow around his jaw, and indicated he couldn't speak. He gave her as best a smile as he could, considering the pain.

It had been one hell of a day for Doc Sage.

Kelsey winced at the sight of the jaw.

"Can't do a jolly dance, I guess?" the androgyn asked with a smile while getting up and looking around the room, noticing a small drawer- like thing in the wall. Alther walked over and opened it to discover a medical kit.

"I got good news Doc, you will soon be able to talk again" smiled the chief of security bringing it over and putting it down to pull out the required tools.

"Now stay still," Kelsey Alther admonished.

The Kalthurian went to work fixing his face. It took several minutes of concentration but Kelsey managed to pull it off and stepped back to look at Josiah's face, looking sad for a moment.

"I can't see a difference" Alther apologized while putting the medical things back into the kit. "How about now Doc?"

Josiah gingerly worked his jaw. He opened and closed it a few times.

Open.

Close.

Open.

Close.

He looked into Kelsey's beautiful sapphire eyes, and quickly looked away. There was a touch of blush to his cheeks.

"It's not often the doctor gets treated," he said gently, as though either to make sure his injury was gone, or because he didn't want to scare a tender moment away.

He shook his head, remembering what he had told himself before. He put his head back to the matter at hand.

"I'll do a jolly dance on them bastard's graves. First things first, though, we gotta figure out a way t'put them there," he grunted with steel in his voice.

"Consider it repayment for fixing my shoulder" Kelsey said with a wink as she walked back over to the draw like thing and put the medical kit back in.

"Now," he said quietly, "yew're the secur'ty off'cer. How d'we take back our ship?"

Kelsey was looking into the drawer when Josiah talked about getting rid of the mutineers

"Is this what you were looking for Doc?" the androgyn asked, pulling out a phaser with a smile.

It quickly stuck it next to the personal melee weapon behind and under its shirt, where it was concealed and quite accessible. Kelsey walked back over to the table and hopped back onto it next to Sage.

"I'm not sure, we would need access to either the secondary bridge or that bridge" Alther said with a nod out to the door. "We also have that issue with the people in vital areas of the ship who can destroy us at will; it may be a bluff, but I'm not sure."

Kelsey paused and then added;

"There's always phaser on a wide beam setting" the security chief finished up, thinking hard.

Josiah nodded.

"A wide beam could do it. Le's jus' hope they don' have life sign mon'tors on themselves. Could be a quick trip."

Josiah thought about it.

"I wish Commander N'Eligahn were here. He'd be able t' reconfigure the circulation system t'pull all'a the air outta each of the compartments with the terrorists in 'em b'fore they could get a shot off. Soon as they were unconscious from ox'gen deprivation, we could retake the ship in no time."

"We could do that too, so long as we got to the right place" Kelsey admitted. "But I guess we have to wait and see for a moment. I'm more worried about making sure Tess doesn't join forces with them or we will have a major issue."

The Kalthurian looked to one side and facepalmed, noticing for the first time the two-man transporter that had only been freshly installed not too long ago, with the refitting of the Aegis bridge module, just prior to their launch from Starbase 10. Kelsey poked Sage.

"I think we found our way out" the androgyn said, hopping off to the console and studying the transporter and its previous location readout monitor. "Yep, here are the last beam out coordinates: it will take us right to the sealed admiral's quarters; that should keep us safe, considering that we weren't able to detect this working or anything in those quarters, not even beaming anything in or out from the other transporters on board, as per captain's orders of complete isolation."

Kelsey Alther waited for Josiah Sage to step in it and when he did, programmed it to go off in five seconds, allowing them to hop in quickly and both were transported to the sealed VIP quarters of the admiral.

Once they both appeared, the chief of security quickly stepped out and saw an active computer terminal and rushed over to it.

"Great... a computer!" Kelsey exclaimed, sitting down and checking it out.

Alther's mouth dropped open with a wide smirk.

"This computer can override the main computer of the Artemis? Somebody must have been a bad boy" Kelsey half laughed with a smile verifying everything she could.

One thing became evident: the admiral was nothing short of a master programmer to have rerouted controls to him and doing so without even raising a single alarm, out of a simple guest terminal. Kelsey was no computer wiz, but the chief of security knew how to use one aboard a starship.

Suddenly, all across the ship, everyone holding a weapon in key areas of the Artemis was surrounded by a level 10 forcefield.

An extremely cramped level 10 forcefield. Kelsey didn't want to leave anything to chance with these guys.

However, there was a terrorist hovering over the admiral so the Kalthurian had to give that one some room; but Alther made sure though that those forcefields could not let transmit any signal through them.

Then, the blue-skinned, white-haired Lieutenant Commander also followed through by rerouting all the major functions of the ship to that computer terminal, at least temporarily.

"Not today guys; nice try though. Might want to check the ship out a bit more before you try that ever again though" Kelsey Alther muttered with a grin.

The androgyn was checking the state of the ship when suddenly noticing that the bridge logs had cut off just after ordering the imposter-Sage posing as Admiral Kirkpatrick to open a secure communication channel with the Achilles.

Well now, isn't that strange... This must have been a decent plan at first mused Alther while next checking the ship's sensors.

Kelsey Alther's deceptively frail shoulders slumped for a moment.

"Looks like that hologram angered the Achilles." the Kalthurian told the Human doctor. "Its weapons are activated and it's heading towards us."

"Great. Firs' a hol'gram r'places me, an' then it pisses off a Fed'ration warship. Wha's next?"

The doctor looked over at the admiral's desk and found a hand phaser.

"So they cut off the feed on the bridge yew said? Why would they do that? I wond'r if they cut the feed off oth'r places onboard too."

"They might have cut off the feed to cover their tracks in case something happened, last time when we caught a saboteur he simply preferred to die over telling us anything besides the same phrase" Kelsey commented, working with the computer, trying to organize a place to teleport every terrorist on the ship to.

Josiah Sage checked the phaser, saw it was fully charged, and placed it into a heavy stun. "Although fat lot this phaser will do if the Achilles decides it didn't like us. I hope the skipper an' his team are havin' bett'r luck than we are."

"What do you mean, that hand phaser will be useless against a heavily armed warship? I thought those things were deadly!" the female-looking androgyn offered with a smirk.

But, while Alther was trying to lighten up the mood, deep down inside there only was fear.

Kelsey wasn't easily shocked or scared normally, but the threat of a massive warship glaring down upon the Artemis... well this was very bad.

Let's hope that this doesn't end with everyone dying.

And at that moment, the entire ship shook.

Alther had gone head first into the computer from the hits from the Achilles.

"Ow" the androgyn groaned, shaking its head, feeling a small bleed come on.

Josiah lost his footing as the deep rumbling came from above and below where he and Kelsey were.

Landing on his back, he just barely managed to not crack his head on the deck.

"Damnation! What th'hell is goin' on out there?" he said when he sat up, gently massaging his shoulder. He looked over at Kelsey. "So much f'r that hologram takin' ov'r. Iffin' it had, I don' think it'd be firin' on its compatriots. I bet Tess beat him at his own game, an' now she's out f'r blood!"

Concern clouded his face. "I gotta bad feelin' 'bout this."

"Just wait for that bad feeling to get even worse" Kelsey said.

* * *

Like a shark rising from the depths to devour its prey, the Achilles nosed upward and to her right with a full forward salvo. Six heavy pulse phasers cannons, four level XII phaser arrays and two double burst torpedo tubes spewed fiery death at the USS Artemis.

Within the obscuring glitter of the surrounding waves of ionized space dust and the angry discharges of static surrounding them both like bolts of lightning, the four blue stars of quantum torpedoes went completely wild and disappeared within the blue swirls of the nebula; the four lancing beams of phaser fire streaked in front to the Ambassador class starship's bow and dissipated in the depths.

As the warship closed in and went by, the devastating pulses of the cannons however went all around the lower hull, closer, much closer, singing the outer layer of armor until the last of the salvo went through seven centimeters of ablative armor, the entire duranium and tritanium hull and through another the other ten centimeters of armor covering all the major areas of this old but sturdy design; on the upper section of the engineering hull.

Only the security forcefield, already in place as per alert regulations insisted upon by the experienced captain as soon as he was appointed First Officer of this ship, prevented warp core damage and sudden decompression in the engine room. Barely a few loose tools had any time to be ejected into space before it sealed the hull breach with a brief roar of evacuating air.

And as it passed by at a quarter of the speed of light, the Achilles maneuvering at full impulse with the grace of a ship a fifth of its size fired its aft weapons. But the last pair of phaser cannons and the third torpedo turret missed widely, as the Artemis swayed on one side under the initial impact, and then the other as she righted herself under her own inertial dampeners.

They had been lucky... for now. The Achilles had also completely missed the devastating attack with her ramming deflector shield that would have smashed the Artemis like an egg.

On the bridge of captain Kheren's ship, panic melted the ice of surprise into the heat of desperate shouts.

"We've been hit! Warp relays! Warp drive is out!"

"Main power offline! Switching to secondary power!" blared the terrorist at the engineering console.

"Return fire!" belowed T'Renyk, dropping into the peculiarly old styled, wide command chair and almost toppling out as it unexpectedly swiveled.

"We have no weapon lock!" shouted back her accomplice gripping the tactical console.

"Shields! Shields!"

"Inoperative!"

"Evasive!"

"You're joking, right?" answered helmsman Narod with not even a hint of a smile on his tense face as he wrestled with the nav controls. "What do you think I am doing here? This Achilles is nimbler even than this Ambassador design... and we can give a Defiant a run for his money!"

Then, as fire tore the heavens all around them, everyone but the Trill navigator and the unconscious Admiral Kirkpatrick was suddenly encased in a very tight column of golden, shimmering light.

"Security forcefields!?!!" exclaimed the posing engineering inspector.

She had had no clue that captain Kheren had ordered on his ship the same anti-boarding security regulations he had previously initiated on the Lotus Fleet flagship when he had been himself security chief aboard the USS Lotus.

And on his ship, regulations were always followed; only the dullest cadet would not realize that, in the cold, heartless, hostile environment of space, following rules and orders meant not only the difference between success and failure: it simply meant survival.

Like now.

So tight and confining were those forcefields that, in their already overexcited state, all the trapped terrorists gulped all the air inside in seconds and lost consciousness.

But their bodies never hit the floor. Again, as programmed into those security measures, they were all automatically transported out of wherever they were on board and right into the eight cells of the Artemis brig, all their weapons and equipment rendered inoperative and drained of all power during transport transition.

Not that it mattered much. Following instituted protocols, the security detail assigned to the holding area was instantly alerted and systematically went into every cell to tricorder scan every prisoner and remove any object that could be used as a tool or a weapon... or as part of one. Even possible poison hidden on or in each body and any clothing piece susceptible to allow suicide was identified and removed.

The daily months of practice ordered by the captain's stringent security regulations and closely supervised by the current chief of security made the entire operation over in mere minutes.

But they were far from being safe.

* * *

As he awaited Doctor Sage's arrival, Lieutenant Syntron opened the file labeled:

THETIS Security Classification level 10.

Despite a moment of trepidation, he read the file:

THETIS, or the Tri-optical Humanoid-Equivalent Thought Integration System, was designed to be an advanced neural network for the new Achilles Class attack cruisers.

As he began to scan through the file, he was fascinated to realize that computer system on board the Achilles is a prototype artificial intelligence.

Apparently, during the initial test phases on the prototype system, the programmers found that Thetis had become self-aware. In a panic, they tried to shut the system down and fix what they saw as a being a major problem. However, Thetis, or Tess as she likes to be called, managed to break through the lock-down in the comm system and appealed to the Starfleet JAG office for amnesty. The programmers were ordered to cease their attempts at reprogramming, pending a hearing on Tess' status as a sentient being.

Syntron perceived a bit of déjà vu as he reflected back on the infamous events that transpired soon after the M-5 computer unit created by Doctor Richard Daystrom was installed and tested by Dr. Daystrom himself on board the USS Enterprise in 2268. The M-5 unit utilized very sophisticated technology analogous to human neural network, and was much more advanced than the duotronic computer commonly in use at the time.

According to Dr. Daystrom, the computer could think, reason, and respond similar to that of a Human. He had used his own memory engrams as a model to create what he perceived to be the ultimate computer.

During prearranged battle drills however, the computer's self-preservation instinct became dominant. The M-5 rerouted command functions through new data lines, and kept sending false signals through the original ones. The computer could also tap into higher amounts of the ships energy and used it to generate a force field around itself; effectively preventing anyone from coming near or tampering with it.

It then erroneously perceived even other federation vessels in proximity as a threat, resulting in the needless destruction of the unmanned robot ship Woden. Soon afterward, the self-empowered M-5 used the USS Enterprise to attack the USS Lexington, USS Hood, USS Potemkin, and the USS Excalibur who were present to test M-5 battle capabilities through simulated assaults. During this planned simulation, it however actually attacked and damaged all four fleet starships and eventually resulted in the deaths of several hundred Starfleet officers when it ultimately destroyed the USS Excalibur.

As is often the case, it would appear at first glance, that history may have repeated itself.

* * *

Now all alone on the bridge with an unconscious admiral, Jered Narod looked with wide, frightened eyes at the ominous form of the USS Achilles swinging around within the obscuring waves with incredible swiftness to make another pass, angling enough firepower to obliterate instantly an entire space station. The deflector sonar of Lieutenant Syntron alone allowed the Trill pilot to even discern the warship moving and incoming.

And that took him out of his scared trance. With a hasty hand, he reached up to activate his combadge.

Syntron was reading the last of the files when the ship was suddenly rocked.

A voice from the bridge then desperately yelled from the comm "Lieutenant Syntron.... anyone... to the bridge, *please!*"

The science officer immediately closed all files in his PADD, placed it quickly back into the satchel and placed it near his desk and tapped his Combadge: "This is Syntron, I am on my way."

As he closed the signal to the bridge, he walked around the desk and grabbed his phaser and tucked it away carefully in his uniform as he headed out of his office and toward the turbolift.

Once the lift arrived and he stepped onto the bridge, he looked in bewilderment at the fallen Admiral and one exasperated bridge officer that remained at his post on the bridge.

"Mr. Narod, please explain what happened here...and where are the other bridge officers?"

"We were hijacked, Sir!" shouted the Trill pilot, both hands flying feverishly over controls. "The others are held in the conference room! Their photonic accomplice transmitted itself to the Achilles and now it is attacking us!"

On the screen, the menacing silhouette of the USS Achilles emerged from the waves of glittering dust, highlighted by static lightning flashes and the sonorous rhythmic ping of the deflector sensor system... charging straight at them, all weapon ports angrily blazing.

On the bridge of the revived warship, the imposing figure standing before the command chair shouted with an almost sadistic grin:

"From Hell's heart, I stab at thee! For hate' sake, I spit my last breath at thee!"

But, at the very moment it fired, the Achilles brutally swerved and tilted to one side, as if slapped away by an invisible giant hand. The domineering figure in the command well did not even so much as sway despite the hard angling of the entire room; the only other figure in there however, was brutally projected from one side to the other.

Kheren rolled brutally from under the multitask station where he had manually forced helm control to bank the Achilles sharply to a side and away from the Artemis.

Dazed, he looked up at the tall white-haired man who seemed oblivious to his presence as he squinted at the distorted, blurry image on the viewing screen.

The massive warship's devastating salvo of beams and projectiles went wildly away, but still grazing close enough to shake the ship from bow to stern.

They had been lucky...

Again.

The doors leading to the ready room, conference room and second turbolift then parted to admit Cheonghi, Blakely, Iksos and Tyvya. With the practiced ease of the trained professionals that they were despite their junior rank, the stern emotional restraint of people already experienced in such types of crisis and the cold determination of those angered by having being so recently betrayed, they all took their stations.

A wounded Caitan woman followed them and took the ops station from the Edoan Lieutenant who then ambled towards the XO seat and Syntron.

"Lieutenant Commander Alther and Doctor Sage have gone to finish subdue the intruders and retake control of the ship. Seems like you're in command now, Sir."

Syntron raised an eyebrow in fascinated acknowledgement that as a result of these unusual turn of events he was now in temporary command of the Artemis; a position that he did not relish at the moment.

After the extreme near miss of the warship's devastating salvo that rocked the entire ship, he knew that the Artemis wasn't going to just remain there like a sitting duck and await the next potential attack.

"Evasive maneuvers!" he ordered forcefully.

"Ongoing... Sir!" blurted out the tense Ensign as he slid the Artemis through the thick layers of dust and away from the attacking warship.

The deft piloting of the Trill Ensign distanced and diffused the menacing form of the huge warship until it became but a blur, then a shadow, then disappeared behind blue waves and blinding flashes.

It had been even quicker on the bridge of the USS Achilles.

Still standing facing the main viewer, the startling figure of the white-haired powerful man stared at the fuzzy mix of static and glittering dust crisscrossed with flashes that had swallowed the blurry silhouette of the other starship.

His deep voice, heavily accented, was now but a whisper:

"Where is she?"

And then, for the briefest instant, his entire being... flickered.

And then, he vanished.

* * *

"One thing is sure", then reported Patricia Blakely "we are not running anywhere. Warp power is out for at least a solar day. All couplings to the nacelles have been severed. I would not recommend sending damage control team outside in there, Sir... especially with that shark prowling nearby."

"Agreed for the moment Lieutenant Blakely" Syntron responded after carefully contemplating her suggestion, as he sat down in the Captain's seat for the first time.

It was a peculiar moment.

He then continued with his thought:

"We will need to gain as much maneuverability with our impulse engines as possible... but depending on how successful we are at keeping out of the reach of the Achilles, at some point we may need to send a repair team out to get our warp capabilities back on line. Please prepare your teams for such an event" he concluded.

"Will do, Sir." confirmed the blonde woman as she started overseeing all ship-wide repairs from her engineering display on the wall, near her station. "And, Lieutenant, I recommend another full security sweep. These loonies might have performed further sabotage. That T'Renyk spent a lot of time in engineering."

"Dispatching full complement of security and engineering teams on each deck, level 1 search." acknowledged Tyvya as she sent orders through her console. As they did right after the first sabotage attempt, both engineering and security full complement would painstakingly search every inch of the ship. Usually such a procedure was to retrieve injured personnel; now it was to prevent further injuries... or worse.

"Implementing level 3 diagnostics ship-wide, Sir." added Cheonghi from his multitask console.

"If they did so by tampering with our systems, we should have a clue soon."

The Vulcan then added:

"Although the Achilles has superior weaponry and maneuverability, she is also blinder than we are in regards to ships sensors. Currently, that is one advantage that we must utilize to anticipate and then outmaneuver any further attacks."

He then walked over to the Admiral laying unconscious on the floor of the bridge. With the doctor unavailable and despite all the difficulty this admiral had caused since his arrival on the Artemis, it was his duty to see that the Admiral was properly treated.

"Lieutenant Cheonghi, bring up the EMH and have it see to the Admiral's medical needs."

"Aye, Sir. The other... photonic lifeform must have disabled the bridge emitters prior to the hijacking attempt. Rerouting data stream... reinitializing... there!"

A form shimmered right next to the Vulcan.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

And then, seeing the prone, bleeding form of the Admiral, the hologram just sighed and rolled eyes before kneeling to take care of it, saying:

"I see... never mind. They should do something about that stuffy opening sentence anyway."

The chief of science, now in command of the Artemis, then turned toward the tactical station.

"Ensign Tyvya, use our enhanced sensors to track the Achilles with as much accuracy as possible and keep us out of its sensors range. Meanwhile, keep our position relative to that warship in a continual state of flux. I don't want them to have the opportunity to calibrate or even estimate our position at any point in time."

"Aye, Sir," answered the Andorian giantess. Then she turned her head towards the science chief: "If I may suggest, Sir, once we can confirm that they have lost us, we should turn off your sensor enhancement. The Achilles will find us again if they think to follow our own sensor signal back to the source. That's what I would do... Exactly why Klingons and Romulans do not use active sensors while cloaked."

"That however will leave us as blind as they are... whoever they are." observed Valencia Irksos.

"Blind men in a blizzard can't harm each other." simply shot back Tyvya with a slight smirk.

"A sound recommendation Ensign Tyvya. However, I would also advise very brief momentary scans at various intervals and regions around the ship to ensure that the Artemis has not somehow been discovered or that the Achilles is somehow not stealthily moving toward our position. We can mostly operate relatively blind but also have moments of enhanced though limited sight. Please devise a scanning protocol with modulating frequencies and a set of procedures that we can implement as soon as possible."

"Understood, Sir. We could also send intermittent emissions or even probes as decoy emitters if we see the Achilles come too close for comfort or just to give us more time." agreed the Andorian woman, clearly impressed by the Vulcan's quick adjustment to the problem.

And then, the smirk was replaced by a deep frown of sudden concern.

"Sir... what about the captain and the others?"

"Given our current situation, we have no way to safely contact the Captain; even if we could pierce through all of the intermittent static discharge within this ionized nebula. Regardless, we need to prepare a concise data packet of information and determine a manner in which we can surreptitiously have it sent and received by the Captain without exposing our position."

It took him but a few seconds to make his decision.

"Lieutenant Irksos, have your team addressing this issue at once. The Captain and his crew may already be in jeopardy somewhere in the Achilles. In addition, if we are able to somehow establish momentary two-way communication with our away team, it may provide opportunities of shared information and coordinated tactics between our efforts and the efforts of the away team."

"Aye, Sir." the dark-skinned woman simply said and immediately began also to dispatch tasks and orders through her command science station. The way she directed researches and people already revealed that she had an idea how to proceed. But like all true scientists, she wanted to test her hypothesis first.

They were safe... for now.

But for how long?

Down one deck below, the Kalthurian security chief of the Artemis had already returned full control of the ship back to the bridge and other areas; once convinced things were secured once more aboard, the androgyn then stood up and activated through the computer the conference room transporter on a delayed timer.

Pausing a moment, the chief of security around, drawing out the recently found phaser and fired it at the computer, destroying it.

"Useful but dangerous," Kelsey muttered replacing the phaser back into its previously concealed location. "I'll be on the Bridge Doc; do whatever you need to" the chief of security informed Josiah Sage with a quick nod before transporting back to the conference room.

Doc Sage watched as Kelsey disappeared out of the admiral's quarters. This time he did not follow. He knew where *he* was going.

Minutes later he walked into Main Medical. The place was bustling with activity.

Doc Lumquist looked up at Josiah as he arrived.

"Joe?" he said, the real question unspoken.

"I know Freddie. But righ' now the Artemis didn't need a communications officer. Righ' now it needs every healer it c'n muster. Tell me what we've got."

Lumquist nodded.

"There'll be hell to pay when the captain finds out you're not on the bridge."

Josiah's eyes narrowed.

"Tell me what we've got."

Lumquist arched an eyebrow, and nodded in concession. At the moment, Medical was an all hands evolution.

"Ok, ok. We've got a smorgasbord to choose from: plasma burns, contusions, lacerations. Take your pick."

Josiah did a quick look around, and found something on an ICU biobed. He pointed.

"Subdural hematoma?"

Lumquist nodded.

"That one's mine," Josiah said.

While the Chief Medical Officer went about his more pressing duties, Syntron sat in the Captain's chair of the Artemis and looked around at the replacement bridge officers working diligently at their respective stations. Their Starfleet training and focused attention clearly evident as each officer worked independently and yet in conjunction with each other in an attempt to get the Artemis back to full operating status. They were also addressing security issues from additional potential sabotage attempts; including a full security search of every department and area of the ship to ensure that additional traps had not been set.

All of the events that transpired within this brief amount of time that placed him in the center seat seemed rather surreal.

Acting as a provisional replacement for the Andorian Captain, he temporarily activated multiple duty shifts in each department to address the various emergency issues present and vital within the ship in preparation for a likely showdown with the Achilles. It was critical that the Artemis and her crew were at full operating status before another encounter occurred with the Achilles; who was most likely out there in some region the nebula searching and stalking the Artemis like a hungry predator.

Since they were able to maintain their hidden status within the nebula thus far, he sent an emergency team of engineers outside of the ship to begin repairing the damage to the nacelles couplings.

He turned to the blonde engineer and inquired:

"Lieutenant Blakely, what's the current status on the nacelle repair team?"

"Suiting up and ready to effect hull repair, Sir." she reported. "They will work from the inside to seal the hull breach so as not to lose them if we have to make a sudden dash away from the Achilles. Re-establishing power couplings will then be ready to proceed... but damage is so extensive, we won't be able to even reroute power from the core to the nacelles in less than twenty hours."

Looking toward the tactical station the Vulcan ordered then:

"Ensign Tyvya, have your team prepare several probes as decoy emitters as suggested; in case we need to quickly throw the Achilles off of our path."

"Aye, Sir." the towering Andorian Shen responded and immediately went to work with Irksos at the science station.

He then turned toward the Science console.

"Lieutenant Irksos, any developments on our data packet and establishing a link with the Captain?"

"We are considering using a laser link, Sir." she answered then. "It proved effective during the Borg Invasion in directly maintaining communication between the fleet's ships and the starbase without the Borg able to jam or intercept them. It does require direct line of sight and, in this ionized dust, it would work only at short range, say three-hundred thousand kilometers, before breaking up... and static discharges will disrupt it... But it does allow for extensive data transfer in a very short time."

Kelsey Alther appeared out of the conference room door, face smeared by a small amount of blood.

"Remind me to make sure that we upgrade every ship with some kind of internal defense system" the androgyn groaned while walking to the center of the bridge. "I don't suppose it's too much to ask for a status report?" it then enquired, wiping the small amount of blood off a cheek.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant Commander," Syntron replied as he rose up and relinquished the command seat to the returning initial provisional officer in command.

As he stepped to the side of the Captain's chair, he began to provide Kelsey with a preliminary report of the activities, actions and status of each station in their current precarious situation.

After filling the Kalthurian in with the information of events emanating on and from the bridge, he inquired:

"So, what exactly occurred after you left the bridge, Lieutenant Commander Alther?"

Kelsey nodded a thanks to Syntron after he told of the status of the Artemis and then answered in turn to his own inquiry:

"Once the Doctor and I teleported out, we ended up in the Admiral's quarters, allowing us to formulate a plan from relative safety. The admiral had a computer in there which allowed anyone who had access to it to override the ship's main computer and effectively take over the Artemis from there."

The androgyn rubbed the back of its neck.

"I used it to get rid of the terrorists who had taken control of the ship and then destroyed it after returning the ship back to normal functions. It may have been useful but it's too dangerous for anyone on this ship to have." Kelsey finished.

As Syntron listened intently to the incensed blue-skinned Kalthurian, he began to formulate another plan based on the information provided by the skilled bridge officers presently filling in for the main officers away from the bridge.

"Lieutenant Alther, given our current tenuous circumstances and not knowing the status or condition of our Captain and the away team, I would recommend that we use our extended sensors to once again detect the Achilles. Once we locate it, we then can briefly approach the Achilles from a lower aft position and swiftly deliver our data package to the Captain. Afterward, we can tactically move away from the ship in an unorthodox and unpredictable manner until we are again out of sensor range. Lieutenant Irksos and her team have put together a data packet and can establish a laser link provided that we can carefully bring the Artemis within approximately three-hundred thousand kilometers of this predator ship. It is a very risky operation, but it is vital that we provide the Captain with as much information as we possibly can."

The Kalthurian nodded approvingly.

"Indeed, I have no objection to this plan so we might as well go along with that."

"Lieutenant Commander Alther... reported Lieutenant Blakely from the engineering station, I read an energy surge on port aft... could be an impulse turn."

"Great, better get this plan rolling then" Kelsey said "If the Achilles makes any moves that looks like it going to shoot us target the easiest torpedo target and fire" Kelsey ordered.

Hopefully the training the tactical chief had given everyone in tactical about shooting without a target lock since the last mission would help if it came to that.

* * *

First Officer and former chief engineer Michael O'Conner had spend the time quietly working to understand the computer system, totally unaware of the turmoil going on around him.

As far as O'Conner could tell, the system had gone into sleep mode while it waited for new orders or some kind of signal... or threat. Unfortunately, turning a computer core off without the right command codes was much harder then turning it on without them. So, he was going to have to try an old engineering trick to cause a hard stop on this computer.

With a flash of sparks from under the console the blue glow of the core suddenly stop, as did the Nemesis. For a moment all was quiet, then just as abruptly as it had stopped it started once again, without losing a beat the Nemesis continued its cat and mouse game with the Artemis.

"Hmm" O'Conner mumbled to himself. He then tried turning off the holographic imaging system. Which only caused the holographic captain to blink for less than a second as the computer quickly fought back and turned the system back online.

"Commander O'Conner to Captain Kheren. I got a problem down here, Sir... I have no way to turn it off from here, as I don't have the correct command codes and the hard crash didn't work. They either built in an automatic restart or the computer can turn itself on and off."

Looking at the amazing sophistication of the system before him, he had no doubt that it could.

"Additionally," he continued to report, "this computer or brain or whatever has been very heavily integrated into the systems. I think they designed it so that it could operate entirely without a crew, Sir. So there are safeguards stopping anyone from removing computer access from any system."

For a moment, the First Officer had the disquieting feeling of being overheard... and not by his commanding officer. His voice dropped a fraction as he added:

"I tried turning a couple of systems off from here, but the computer quickly powered the systems it needed back up. We could manually turn off systems or at worse blow up the core, but one or the other would presumably completely disable the ship... or destroy it."

"Everything changes... except Man."

The strong, accented voice at the back of Michael O'Conner startled him.

Whirling around, he saw that there was someone suddenly standing right behind him; not even the slightest sound of footfall or breathing had alerted him of his presence; but there he was.

The man was tall but not as tall as Michael himself; and very muscular, almost bursting out of the red shirt he wore over black calf length fitting trousers and soft black boots: the typical uniform of a mid- 23rd century Starfleet engineer.

His face was that of a Human male in his mid-thirties, beardless and strongly etched, with a strong jaw, thin lips, high cheekbones and wide forehead, all framed by dark, lustrous hair sleeked back into a short ponytail. But most striking were the eyes; slanted, green-colored and burning with an almost unbearable intensity.

All at once the man looked like a tiger; regal... and dangerous.

Suddenly, his hands shot out with incredible speed and grabbed the phaser rifle O'Conner had left against the wall when he went to work on the computer core.

For a moment, the imposing figure held it, looking at it with feigned curiosity.

"Oh, improved mechanical device... But, improved Man..."

With an unbelievable strength, the man bent the whole weapon and twisted it as if it had been made of soft plastic, rendering it as useless as a piece of scrap.

Throwing it contemptuously at the Commander's feet like so much garbage, his accented voice claimed with undeniable conviction:

"I *am* such a man."

And then, with the same astonishing speed and strength, he grabbed O'Conner, lifted him bodily off the ground as if gravity had been nullified and threw him all across the room against the farthest wall.

Michael's long standing habit of practicing martial arts in the holodeck, added to his basic Starfleet training kept honed by the training regimen rule imposed by the captain of the Artemis on all crewmembers, saved his spine from being crushed by the impact and the following fall to the floor. He was dazed but mostly unhurt, hearing still through the brief ringing in his ears the peculiar voice of the man boasting with confidence and a wicked smile:

"I have *five times* your strength! You are no match for me."

O'Conner landed with a thud on the other side of the room and rolled to a prone position, his hand moving to his small hand phaser. Normally he used hand phasers as tools, not weapons, as one could easily cut wire and bulkheads, wield or even power a console with one; but this thing was right: O'Conner didn't not have the strength he did.

Just then N'Eligahn entered the room. O'Conner almost smiled at this as he laid there and watched the scene unfold, while he readied himself to defend from another attack from what O'Conner believed to be a hologram.

As soon as Chief engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo entered the computer room, he recognized this figure standing over O'Conner. His academy days of studying James T. Kirk instantly revealed to him who this startling figure was.

And he knew he was strong and intelligent, but he also knew he had an ego.

"Khan Noonien Singh," he said. "Your reputation precedes you, Sir."

Slowly, the powerful man in the red shirt turned to face the Rethian addressing him.

"You still remember... I cannot help but be touched. I of course..."

Then he stopped, clearly searching for words... or something else. The perplexed, confused expression on his face was utterly strange, as if hearing his own words; he didn't quite understand what he was himself saying; almost as if he was listening to someone else's voice.

Then his intense eyes squinted at N'Eligahn, his head tilting slowly to one side, then the other.

"I don't know you... But... I never forget a face... Mister... "

"N'Eligahn," he said. He considered lying for a moment, but realized it would be useless, not if they could find a way to end this here and now...unless...

"Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, Chief Engineer of the Federation starship USS Artemis."

The imposing figure seemed lost in thought for a moment.

"I see."

It was plainly obvious the man was confused but would not admit it openly.

The Chief Engineer of the Artemis studied the mannerisms of the figure for a moment.

"You appear and sound like Khan Noonien Sigh, but are you him? Strength and speed and endurance can be faked. You could be an automaton, a robot programmed with only the basic knowledge of Khan. So I ask you, are you he?"

The question seemed to trouble the red shirted man deeply. But it lasted for a second as he took a deep breath and lifted his chin proudly.

"Khan is my name."

Then, the green burning eyes dropped downward for a moment and seemed to look deeper within than farther away. A second later, the intense gaze lifted up, and so did one hand, a finger up and then pointing at the Rethian.

"You didn't expect to find me here! You thought this was..."

Suddenly stopping in mid-sentence, its eyes again took a dreamy light for another moment and then refocused on Neligahn with a darting gaze and his voice became softer, yet more demanding:

"Why are you here?"

"We came because..." N'Eligahn thought for a moment, analyzing how much of the truth to tell "Because we were ordered to," he finally answered. "Finding your ship here was as much of a surprise to us as I'm sure seeing us here is to you."

He glanced down at O'Conner then back up to Khan.

"Do you actually know where you are? What ship you're on?"

The figure looking and claiming to be Khan Noonien Singh became suddenly very pensive. he turned around, eyes glazed, face blank, mouthing silently:

"Ship... Botany Bay... Enterprise... Reliant... Achilles..."

He turned his head slowly to look at Michael O'Conner and then at N'Eligahn Etarudbo, like a man suddenly waking up.

"This... this is the USS... Nemesis... N-C-C-2-2-3-7-6? Aaaah..."

And then, slowly, the one named Khan straightened up, smiled and nodded with obvious understanding and satisfaction.

"Excellent... excellent. I have outlived my earthbound enemies of four hundred years ago... I have escaped permanent exile on Ceti Alpha V, thwarted the plans of captain... *Admiral*...Kirk... the... *late* James T. Kirk..."

The glazed look came back a moment to his face and his voice again dropped to a bare whisper as he closed his eyes.

"Kirk, my old friend... How I wish to have hurt you... and to go on hurting you... To have been the one to have beaten *you*, to have you know who it was who had beaten *you*, I... old friend... It was only the fact of my superior intellect that allowed me to survive."

His eyes opened but seemed to look to the edge of the universe from where his voice echoed:

"And I alone, survived to tell thee..."

And with each word, his eyes focused on N'Eligahn.

Lighting in the room at once dimmed and then took a shimmering, eerie display of moving colors. Besides the two Artemis officers, the bio-engineered computer core became a rainbow of changing colors and pulsing lights... and the shimmering of a level 10 forcefield enveloped it completely.

Khan looked up once more, took a deep breath and with a voice and a stare both strong and prideful he declared:

"And now, I have a ship and a mean to go where I will... A world to take... an Empire to build... a universe to conquer!"

"Perhaps," N'Eligahn said.

He looked at the console for a moment before his eyes fixed back on Khan.

"But I ask you again, are you Khan? A voice, a line, an action can all be faked. You could be nothing more than a computer programmed to think how it thinks Khan acted. How would you know that you're not?"

There was no hesitation this time from the impressive figure.

"My superior intellect transcends time, space and life itself. If mind can be reborn... so is matter."

The tone was firm, resolute.

"I *am* Khan."

"And on the note of conquering, how can you?" the Rethian then asked. "If you're confined to this ship with no crew, how can you do anything? And on top of that, everything you have here is nearly twenty-five years out of date. All of your records and maps too. You could pick a place to go and find an entire Starfleet armada waiting for you. That, and technology has certainly advanced tenfold in that period."

Khan looked at him with a sigh and a small smirk.

"Although I am intrigued by your abilities, you are obviously inferior, physically, mentally..."

His gaze went all around and he nodded with great satisfaction.

"Yes it will appear I will do well in your century."

He looked again at the Rethian with a predatory stare.

And then, he simply vanished.

On the bridge of the Achilles, the figure of Khan Noonien Singh, older and wearing tattered clothing, appeared once more before the command chair.

He did not look at the startled Andorian who was fidgeting with a console and just ordered:

"Prepare to alter course."

Kheren didn't have time to protest or to comply.

The Achilles engines hummed louder and the powerful warship swerved within the obscuring clouds of glittering dust, illuminated by fierce lightning bolts.

N'Eligahn turned and activated the wall display, opening a channel to the bridge.

"Why do you run, Khan... if I'm so inferior?"

He looked at the display and saw the ship move.

To engage the Artemis?

"You destroy the Artemis and you risk the very existence of both yourself and this ship."

He looked at the now protected AI core.

"I ask you, are you Khan, or are you nothing but an illusion conjured up by this disgusting mass of organic matter and wires?"

He raised his phaser and fired at the base of the core.

"Are you truly Khan, or are you a copy? A corpse that doesn't know it's dead, kept alive by wires and electricity?" he taunted as he fired again. "Actually think about it and answer me!" Pausing for a moment he then added:

"Or are you afraid of the answer?"

As expected, the phaser fire splashed ineffectually on the golden shimmering bubble covering the entire assembly; it would take a direct, sustained hit from a starship phaser to even dent such a forcefield.

But it did have an effect... or was it the words? But the red-shirted, younger Khan reappeared right before the Rethian.

With one hand, he grabbed the fixation hook at the front of N'Eligahn's spacesuit and lifted him easily off the floor.

"I fear nothing."

With obvious contempt, he threw him against the wall to fall down right besides Michael O'Conner.

Looking down on the both of them with utter confidence, he then declared:

"How little your mind is, confined within this weak flesh of yours. But that is to be expected of an inferior being. However, although I do have complete control over this ship, I will still need people to expand beyond it."

Staring intently at both of them, he pulled out a hand.

"Join me. Despite your limits, you can serve me well. And we will offer this universe order!"

"How about no?" O'Conner said as he quickly drew his readied phaser and fired a wide beam shot on its highest setting. He knew that it wouldn't destroy the "Khan" but it did overload its matrix, causing the young Khan to disappear in a wave of light in front of the two engineers.

O'Conner then dove for his tricorder, he knew that he would be lucky to have anything more than seconds before the matrix reformed. With a flick of his wrist he opened the tricorder and scanned the ceiling as he fired wildly at with his phaser at max set, causing a rain a sparks and melted plastic as O'Conner did his best to knock out the holo-emitters.

For a moment, all was still. The fumes of burnt fiber optics filled the room and the ghostly lights of the computer core seemed to flicker red.

"Damn it," N'Eligahn said as he saw O'Conner go spastic with the phaser and disable the emitters. "Was that really necessary, sir? Now he's pissed off. We're now on a ship with a pissed off AI, like something out of an old Earth video."

O'Conner glanced at the Rethian.

"Did you think we could reason with an AI taking on the persona of a mad man that has destroyed at least two ships and a crew of engineers?"

Then, on the wall right before them at the other end of the room, a monitor lighted up. On it appeared the image of Khan, white-haired, clothed in ragtag pieces of uniforms, his large, scarred chest heaving with a heavy sigh.

"I see that I made a serious error. I should have known that threatening the both of you together would create a sense of... heroic *camaraderie*... especially from you, Starfleet officers, sworn to live and die for your big happy fleet."

A moment of silence passed between them before he added with venom in his voice:

"But it is quite another thing to see it happen to someone else."

Then, with contempt now on his lips, he activated a wall viewer.

"Do you recognize this, Chief Engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo?"

What the monitor was showing was a small cylindrical chamber, featureless silvery walls slightly glazed over. It didn't take long for him or O'Conner, both experienced starship technicians, to recognize it.

It was the inside of a coolant tank.

A sparkling cascade of lights then appeared and coalesced inside into the unmistakable image of Captain Kheren in his suit... but, like them, without his helmet.

"And the meaning of this indicator?" prodded Khan again.

It was the measuring gauge, the temperature indicator and the valve opening display of a starship's coolant grid; and they were slowly moving, as a dim white haze began to show inside the container where the Andorian was sealed in.

"Your captain will die." simply announced Khan.

Already, the image was dimming with the white, freezing gas filling the tank. A Human being would have already died in such low temperatures; but even an Andorian, born of an ice world, could endure so much.

Then he crossed his muscular arms on his wide chest to offer once more:

"If anyone of you... *anyone*, joins me... I will spare him."

"I thought you were an *improved man*, Khan." sternly said the First Officer of the Artemis.
"You lose one fight and turn into a child who is throwing a tantrum till you get your way."

"Oh I am much more than even that now; I am a *superior being*. I have taken the next step in evolution and can now accomplish that which I was born to."

The eyes of the Khan image on the screen looked well beyond, to the infinite horizons of the imagination and his voice seemed to carry him there.

"On Earth... four hundred years ago... I was a *Prince*... with power over *millions*..."

His gaze focused again on them as he finished:

"Now... I will be a *God*... with power over *billions*... billions of stars."

As the new Khan rambled on, O'Conner stepped away from the console and began to wire his combadge and tricorder together to send a message to the shuttle.

"*Arrow 8, this is O'Conner; locate the Captain and beam him back, now!*"

On the monitor, the form of Captain Kheren once again shimmered into particles of light and then disintegrated.

Khan's eyes bulged and his smile turned sadistic.

"No... no you can't get away!"

Above them came a distant, faint, barely audible clanging sound.

The image of Khan disappeared from the monitor.

And then, the whole ship buckled brutally, sending everyone tumbling against the nearest bulkhead.

* * *

"Already have something on the passive scans, Lieutenant Commander." reported Valencia Irksos. "I read a large mass displacing ionized particles... and now a deflagration shifting all that ionic charge near it... too small to be a weapon's discharge... or an explosion; more like... decompression..."

"Lieutenant Commander; the Achilles is not moving towards us... its... veering off." stated Ensign Tyvya. "Correction; now she's ... she's spinning out of control! But there is something incoming... Lieutenant Commander, it's the shuttle, Arrow 8! It's coming back!"

Then the towering Andorian woman turned to the Kalthurian in alarm.

"The Achilles is charging weapons!"

Kelsey swore.

"Get close to Arrow 8 and try to beam them out of there, keep them from coming into the shuttlebay as last resort!"

The androgyn in the command chair would have ordered the Artemis to intercept the warship's fire by putting herself in the way, but a lack of shields and the Achilles' devastating armament made that impossible.

"Try and keep any torpedoes off Arrow 8!" Kelsey ordered, white brow furrowed as the Artemis sped towards the shuttle.

"Ensign Tyvya, quickly prepare to launch the outfitted probes and see if we can confuse the sensors of the Achilles by having these decoys pass on a trajectory of the shuttle and then split off in opposite directions. "

"Probes loaded; launching!" acknowledged the giantess between clenched teeth.

"Once they begin to separate, increase their emitter output level. Let's see if we can get them to chase our phantoms rather than bearing down on the shuttle itself," the chief of science exclaimed as an addendum on the heels of Lieutenant Alther's order, acting by virtue of rank and circumstances as executive officer to the Lieutenant Commander in temporary command.

Within the shiny blue waves of the nebula, the flashes of static discharges silhouetted the tiny craft speeding away from the shark-like behemoth who's ten angry eyes blazed red with rage, spewing fire ineffectually away as the Achilles suddenly spun end on end.

But then, from the top spine at the aft of the long, sleek hull of the warship, two rows of four small torpedo tubes spewed each four little stars of angry blue lights, dotting the thick gases with thirty-two stars of fiery death.

The micro torpedoes spilled out in all directions; most of them then veered off and went straight to the five class IV probes shot by each of the two forward torpedo tubes of the Artemis, themselves then spilling out six micro probes each to intercept the deadly projectiles.

There was a blinding display of lethal fireworks that illuminated the entire nebula. But one last micro-quantum torpedo struck Arrow 8 from under.

The tiny craft, shieldless and without armor, disappeared in a flash of light and sparks.

"Got them!" exulted the shrill voice of Lieutenant Cheonghi at the multitask console, all three arms raised in the air.

A moment later, a call came over the bridge's speakers.

"Bridge, Relys here. Ensign Miles and I are okay... but the others are still on the Achilles."

Without waiting to be asked for a report, the panting Bajoran woman spoke again:

"They were abducted. Captain Kheren was beamed back on Arrow 8 but he jumped back on the bridge, sealed the airlock behind him and blasted us off the docking ring."

She lost her breath for a moment and so, Ensign Miles, also breathing hard from tension, took over to further explain:

"Over comm, he ordered us back... and the Artemis to hide until their signal... or if the Achilles warped out.

Making a pause to catch his breath, or his wits, he finally blurted out:

"If so, we are to return and warn Starfleet Command: the Achilles is controlled by a rogue AI. And, bridge... it is... Khan Noonien Singh."

Khan Noonien Singh.

Syntron thought to himself how ironic and bizarre that this 21st century leader and madman would somehow reappear in the Mutara Nebula once again.

All Starfleet Academy students studied various aspects of this specific product of a selective-breeding and genetic engineering program, based on the archaic eugenic philosophy that held improving the capabilities of a man improved the entire Human race..

Augments produced by the program possessed physical strength and analytical capabilities considerably superior to ordinary Humans, and were created from a variety of Earth's ethnic groups. Khan's background was suspected to be Sikh, from the northern region of India.

But would Khan once again live up to the axiom coined by one of his creators: "superior ability breeds superior ambition?"

The Vulcan science officer recalled the data from the ship's databanks. Khan, who once dominated for a time a quarter of the Human world, escaped the wars and their consequences that ensued on Earth when he was finally overthrown, along with eighty-four followers who swore to live and die at his command. He saw his best option in a risky, self-imposed exile. In 1996, he took control of a DY-100-class interplanetary sleeper ship he christened SS Botany Bay, named for the site of the Australian penal colony. Set on a course outbound from the solar system, but with no apparent destination in mind, Khan and his people remained in suspended animation for Botany Bay's two-hundred-year sublight journey.

The USS Enterprise discovered the Botany Bay in the Mutara sector in 2267. The boarding party's arrival triggered Khan's stasis unit to revive him, but the ancient mechanism faltered. The decision of Captain James T. Kirk to remove him from the stasis chamber, and Dr. Leonard McCoy's subsequent ministrations, saved Khan's life. Twelve of the stasis units failed during the voyage. Kirk, taking the Botany Bay in tow, left the remaining seventy-two sleepers for disposition at Starbase 12 following their leader's successful recovery. The Botany Bay's undocumented departure, and the fragmented records of the period, initially obscured the identity of the sleepers from the Enterprise crew; but the man with incredible recuperative powers in sickbay led Kirk to suspect their genetically-manipulated nature.

At a dinner given in his honor, Khan regaled the Captain's table with a romantic interpretation of the Eugenics Wars, until he was finally prodded into declaring, "We offered the world order!" When confronted with this statement, he noted to the Captain that "Social occasions are only warfare concealed."

Eventually, Khan took advantage of Kirk's hospitality, catching up with his lost history by absorbing the ship's technical manuals and finding a weakness in the attraction he engendered from the pliant and submissive ship's historian, Lieutenant Marla McGivers, whom later became his wife. Thus he began his quest to take command of the Enterprise.

After Khan's attempt to take over the Enterprise was eventually thwarted, Kirk granted an opportunity for Khan and his followers to colonize the dangerous but habitable world of Ceti Alpha V. McGivers was given the choice of facing court martial or joining the new colony.

Khan accepted McGivers' company, and took up Kirk's challenge to "tame a world"; citing Milton's Lucifer, "It is better to Rule in Hell, than Serve in Heaven."

Neither Kirk nor Starfleet followed up on the colony's progress. And so, only six months after their landing, a cataclysm on Ceti Alpha VI destroyed the planet, shifting the system's orbits, causing massive environmental devastation on Ceti Alpha V as it filled the gap left by the exploding planet. Khan's ingenuity and the meager shelter of the cargo containers they had been given kept his people alive while most of the indigenous life perished. The rugged Ceti eels survived, however, and as the only hosts available for their young, Khan's people were beset by the creatures. Over time, Khan lost twenty of his people to the slow, maddening death caused by the eels, including his wife, former Lieutenant McGivers.

He blamed Captain Kirk for these events and vowed revenge on the arbiter of their doom.

Many decades later in 2285, the USS Reliant, attached to Project Genesis and sent to find a suitable proving ground, finally arrived at the apparently lifeless world. Captain Clark Terrell and Commander Pavel Chekov, himself, a former Enterprise crewmember, beamed down to survey the planet they assumed to be Ceti Alpha VI, where they were captured by Khan. After inflicting inchoate, mind-altering eels on his captives, Khan demanded to know the nature of their mission and the whereabouts of James Kirk.

Khan used the Reliant to eventually track down the now Admiral Kirk and after a fierce battle in the Mutara Nebula, Kirk's three-dimensional tactical experience over Khan's two-dimensional strategy allowed the Enterprise to catch Khan off-guard. Reliant was lamed and adrift, and Khan's followers were dying or dead. Rather than surrender, Khan activated the Genesis device, hoping to take Kirk and the Enterprise along with him to oblivion. Over subspace channels, Khan uttered his last words, taken from Herman Melville's novel character captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*: "From Hell's heart, I stab at thee... For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee..." Unfortunately for him, the Enterprise managed to repair the damage and escape before the Genesis Device detonated. Kirk lived... and Khan was dead.

Now, well over a century later, another version of Khan has rematerialized in some capacity; perhaps the result of the power of the genesis wave from those many decades ago... perhaps also somehow connected to the "Tess" Tri-optical Humanoid-Equivalent Thought Integration System as well.

Either way, they were all now faced with the necessity to devise a method to defeat this relentless and seemingly enduring adversary once and for all.

As this was going on, down in sickbay, Doctor Josiah Sage had just finished saving the crewmember with the subdural hematoma, when one of the nurses walked up to him.

"Doc Sage?"

"Yes, Ensign Kura?"

"Admiral Kirkpatrick arrived while you were in surgery. He's not badly injured, but he's unconscious. According to the report he was injected with something by the photonic being that replaced you."

Josiah peeled off his surgical mask.

"Did y'all do an initial scan?"

"Yes, Doctor," the Bajoran woman confirmed. "That's the why I'm asking you for your opinion. The scans are showing us something different than what is in Admiral Kirkpatrick's medical record."

Josiah's face scrunched up. He threw took off his surgical smock, and threw it into the biowaste bin.

"Ok, le's see 'im."

He followed her over to the biobed occupied by the drugged admiral. Josiah picked up the medical record.

"Ok, Admiral Sean Ivan Kirkpatrick, age forty-two; Human male; dark blon'e hair, blue eyes. Height is one point seventy-seven meters, weight is ninety kilos."

He looked up at the Ensign Kura.

"Ok, so this is the rec'd. Where're the scans?"

The Bajoran woman gave Doc Sage her medical tricorder.

He spoke aloud the readings:

"Admiral Sean Ivan Kirkpatrick, indeterminate age, at least fifty years; Human male; Grey, tightly curled hair with black root color. Dark blue-colored retinal 9 visual implants. Original eye color, dark brown. Height is one point eighty-eight meters, weight is one hundred and ten kilos.

He lifted an eyebrow at the readings.

"Deep's scans show the man had cosmetic surgery to thin his lips, reconstruct his nose, widen his eyes and lighten his skin tone. This man was originally of the negroid phenotype than the caucasian one he is now."

Josiah looked up at the Ensign.

"Good catch, Kura. His scans otherwise all check out?"

The Bajoran nodded.

"Ok, then." Doc Sage said. He took a hypospray, and set it up to keep the admiral imposter under longer. He then injected the narcotic into the unconscious man's neck.

He set down the hypo, and punched a few buttons on the biobed's display. A forcefield materialized over the imposter's form, snugly securing the man to the biobed.

Doc Sage tapped his combadge.

"Doc Sage to Lieutenant Commander Alther. I guess you're busy up there, but I request your presence in Main Med'cal at your earliest convenience."

Kelsey heard the Doctor and sent back: "Be right there Doc" then looked at Syntron:

"You have command until I get back."

"Affirmative Lieutenant Commander" Syntron replied as he got up from the science station and returned again to the center seat of command.

The Kalthurian got up and headed straight to the turbolift and took it down to sickbay.

Priorities seemed to shift and expand each moment that he sat in that chair. The Vulcan gazed around at the bridge officers; each alert and focused as they were trying to provide information and solutions to the multitude of challenges that lay before them.

More information... Syntron thought to himself.

He then turned toward the tactical station "Ensign Tyvya, have Lieutenant Relys and Ensign Miles report to the bridge. Let's see what other knowledge and facts they may provide about what is going on inside the Achilles. Every bit of information may be required... regardless of how trivial it may seem"

What missing pieces to this puzzle might they still possess? he pondered.

The turbolift doors hissed open a moment later to admit both former occupants of the now destroyed shuttlecraft Arrow 8, looking none the worse for wear despite the harrowing escape they had just made.

"Lieutenant Relys, reporting as ordered." acknowledged the Bajoran woman, her Human companion nodding once and standing at attention.

"Ensign Miles, Sir." simply added the man.

As the two weary officers arrived and formally addressed the temporary commander, he took a moment to study their condition. Despite their recent harrowing escape from the destroyed shuttlecraft, they appeared relatively unharmed and fit for duty.

"Thank you both for arriving so promptly" Syntron began. "Since you were the only officers recently in contact with Captain Kheren and the away team, I would like each of you to take a few moments and reflect on all of the events, interactions, communications, analysis readings, and data gathered that you can recall during the time that you left the Artemis until the moment each of you narrowly rejoined us."

He gave them a moment to absorb his request before adding:

"No detail is too obvious or trivial to mention. In fact, it may be a piece of trivia that can be a keystone to a potential solution to rescuing the remaining away team and perhaps salvaging the Achilles... without sacrificing the Artemis and her crew in the process."

He gave them another moment to contemplate the request. But Lieutenant Relys was well ready to report:

"To tell the truth, Sir, there's not that much to tell; this was a classified mission after all. Captain Kheren cut us off from the open channel... but still managed to have us follow them through sensor readings while we were docked to the bridge of that ship."

She paused a moment to let out a sigh and then resumed her report;

"We first made an external examination of the Achilles before docking; the ship was under Power Conservation Mode and apparently intact but for a few superficial weapon fire marks on her armor... Federation weapon signatures, Sir, somewhat recent."

"Federation?" the tactical assistant chief Tyvya wondered out loud. But the Bajoran pilot ignored her and continued:

"Once docked, the captain and both senior officers went to the bridge, with us sealed in Arrow 8, cut off from combadge channel with them, but monitoring their vital signs through sensors. We noticed there were a lot of bioneural signals coming from that ship, Sir, and I mean a *lot!* In comparison, the entire bioneural grid of the USS Voyager would have looked like a mere back up. Commander O'Conner's biosigns even blurred at one point when he reached a massive nexus of it; I guess the computer core of that vessel."

"A bioneural computer core?" now wondered in turn Lieutenant Irksos. But again, Allana Relys kept her words and eyes on the Vulcan now in command of the Artemis:

"Then, Commander N'Eligahn must have restored full power from Engineering, as everything started to light up on that ship... and next thing we knew, we were strapped to a warship charging our own vessel."

"That part we know." commented the Andorian giantess sternly to no one in particular.

"Once the Achilles lost itself within the nebula, losing sight of the Artemis, things still flared up on board. All of their biosigns flickered for a brief moment one after the other, as if they were briefly exposed to brutal physical trauma; but it passed quickly. We also lost Chief N'Eligahn's signal near where the First Officer's had been also lost; the neural signature was now off the scale. We could still see Captain's however... and then, it moved instantly from deck 1 to deck 14, the uninhabitable part of the ship, and all his vital signs started to drop."

There was a tense moment of silence before she then explained:

"That's when Commander O'Conner opened a channel and ordered us to beam back the captain; we were already finishing bringing him back by the time he called, as per the captain's orders if any of their vital signs became alarming."

"You should have seen him, Sir, interjected Ensign Miles; he was frosted white all over, cold as a comet... I had never thought an *Andorian* could freeze and shiver from cold like that..."

But Lieutenant Relys then spoke again:

"He didn't stay to ask for a cup of coffee, Sir. He ordered us to return, saying the Achilles was controlled by an AI Khan Noonien Singh... And to wait for a sign... or if threatened, that the Artemis should leave to warn Starfleet Command."

It was clear by her facial expression and her tone of voice that she was no more happy about those orders now that she had been then. But of all people, she knew what disobeying the captain would have cost her. And so, she just sighed again and concluded:

"He jumped back to the Achilles bridge, slammed shut the airlock and manually released the mooring clamps... the rest you know, Sir."

While the pilot gave her report, down to Main Medical, Alther looked for Sage and quickly finding him hovering over the biobed where rested the unconscious form of Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick, walked over to him.

"What is it?" the female-looking androgyn asked urgently.

The bearded man looked sideways at the Kalthurian then showed with his finger a monitor displaying an open file.

"We've a surprise guest, Lieutenant Commander; preliminary scans showed this man's biometrics diverging from his medical record. And we found surgical alterations. Short of it: This ain't Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick."

Not waiting for the obvious question hanging between them, Josiah Sage resumed the file he was showing to the officer in charge of the Artemis.

"I ran a DNA scan and correlated results with our medical database: Real name's Storm... Victor Day Storm." The Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis could see the growing light that the familiar sounding name brought forth in Kelsey Alther's eyes.

"Yep... does remind ya of the 'Daystrom Institute', doesn't it?..." He altered his name decades ago. Being the great great grandson of Richard Daystrom can be quite a burden."

Looking back at his sedated patient, Doctor Sage explained:

"Yep, THE Doctor Richard Daystrom; one of the most influential Human scientists of the 23rd century, compared to Albert Einstein of old Earth and Sitar of Vulcan for making the duotronic breakthrough that won him the Nobel and Zee-Magnee Prizes... and the multitronic computer system that earned him eternal infamy as the father of the M-5 artificial intelligence."

The M5 disaster was as much in History books as it was in Starfleet Academy basic studies in multiple fields, from applied technology to tactical and science to Ethics. History recorded also that Doctor Daystrom had been committed to a mental rehabilitation facility after the incident; but his accomplishments were still recognized to this very day. The Daystrom Institute, one of the most prominent research centers, was named after him, as was the Daystrom Award.

Sage pointed a thumb at the false admiral.

"This dude graduated from Harvard University on Earth at 16 with a doctorate in both neurology and electronics; practically invented alone true bionics, the exact reproduction of organic systems and functions with artificial components. In fact, won both Nobel prize and Daystrom Award himself for developing bioneural technology in 2366."

Now Josiah crossed his arms to further explain:

"What ya may find int'restin' is the declassified data I got from Lieutenant Syntron: this Doctor Daystrom... or Storm now, was hired for the Achilles project durin' the Dominion war. He was headin' the developin' work of the THETYS art'ficial intelligence system for the warship."

The doctor half-turned and flipped the screen to another file.

"Sentience had not been 'xpected from the AI; yet, there it was, and it won its case in Federation Courts as to be rec'gnized as a genuine sentient being under the Data and Voyager EMH Precedents and Starfleet General Order 31, so they couldn' just shut it off."

His eyes went back to his patient, stroking absently his beard as he added:

"Man went AWOL after problems wi'h the AI resulted in the project bein' scrapped for the other ships... aroun' the time of the disparition an' reported destruction of the prototype. Ain't been seen since. Rumors that he'd been aboard durin' the disappearance and lost along with the USS Nemesis, formerly USS Achilles, weren't substantiated. We can see now that they were indeed quite wrong."

He now looked straight at Kelsey.

Accordin' to Storm's med'cal file, he suff'ered a nervous breakdown durin' final testin' of the THETYS system when it was deemed too unreliable and faulty. He was still in treatment when he somehow escaped med'cal surveillance an' is still suspected of theft of a classified data bank salvaged from the USS Enterprise D at the Daystrom Institute. Last seen by security cam'ras at Utopia Planitia where the prototype was in refit... before it flew into the night."

He called up another file on his monitor.

"Psych'logical profile: Extremely brilliant but emotionally unstable, yet strong-willed and capable of restrainin' 'imself with fierce discipline, resultin' in a lot of emotional build up that can flare out without warnin'. Exceedingly dedicated to his work and secretive about personal matters. Can easily fall into deep obsessive behavior."

Looking again at Alther, the Chief Medical Officer concluded, pointing again at the unconscious man:

"My opinion, Lieutenant Commander: here lies all our answers."

* * *

N'Eligahn thought for a moment.

Was there a way to salvage this?

He looked at O'Conner.

There is if I can make it convincing...

"You pompous ass," he said as he swung at O'Conner, trying his best to pull his punch while still making it as convincing as possible.

He made a motion to knee him while moving his mouth close enough to his ear to whisper, "Fesarius" before pushing him away.

"You're as arrogant as the First Federation was. You've never respected me. I'm going to tell him everything. *Everything!*"

He turned towards the monitor.

"Khan, stop, don't fire at the Artemis. Remember when I told you technology had improved? It has. Our ships' hulls are now interwoven with Kesselite ore, a rare mineral from the core of the dwarf planet Pluto. It's why we barely use shields anymore. The Artemis will reflect your energy back at you and kill us all."

N'Eligahn turned back to O'Conner, a small smile on his face, showing as much arrogance as he could while thinking, *put the pieces together on this...*

Silence seemed to stretch for so long it seemed like the two of them were now the only living souls aboard.

Then the face of Khan reappeared on the screen. He seemed to be on the bridge of the ship; and behind him, there was a console fuming, almost torn out of its fixation: the helm console. For a moment, Khan seemed just to look at them both, his intense green eyes seemingly boring into them.

"I'll agree to your terms if, if... you handle to me all data and material regarding this... Kesselite you speak of."

And while he was so saying, they barely had time between two eye blinks to discern a form crawling to an access hatch on the floor and disappear.

"I agree," N'Eligahn said. "I'll need access to the library computer and some time to reconstruct the information from memory."

On the monitor, the face of Khan nodded:

"I give you sixty seconds."

Both O'Conner and N'Eligahn's combadges signaled them before a deep voice was heard:

"Awright cowboys; get to thah barn and have all chariots movin' out with ya; an' *don't* ye dare forget yer hats!"

That was the captain's voice to be sure; but it was the Doctor's speech pattern... and the words could only mean at least one thing to two Starfleet officers:

Regulation 46A: If transmissions are being monitored during battle, no uncoded messages are to be transmitted on an open channel.

And would they decipher their meaning and comply within the few minutes it would take for the shipboard computer to find the Andorian again with internal ship sensors?

There might be no holo-emitters in the jefferies tubes he was crawling through... but Kheren was far from being safer than they were in the bowels of a living starship.

N'Eligahn frowned slightly. There was one main problem with the Captain's code: N'Eligahn never had any real clue what the Doctor was saying, even on a good day.

Even worse, he wouldn't be able to make a move now without breaking the cover he'd now established with Khan. Especially since he had an idea to give them an advantage and possibly beat back this monstrosity.

He pulled out his tricorder and made himself look like he was rapidly entering information.

Instead he typed a very brief message in what was called "Cadet Code", a secret code cadets used while at the academy to coordinate with each other. It changed with every graduating class, but always had the same things in common.

The message read: "geTTinG cODE de PRefIX. MOOve aLONg. I'LL B thERe sHORtLY."

Cadet code 08... That brings us back awhile thought the Andorian crawling inside the maintenance conduits of the Achilles and seeing the tricorder affixed to the left sleeve of his suit lights up and scroll the short message.

And all of them being on an open channel since coming aboard, he had heard everything between his officers and the reborn Khan Noonien Singh.

He would have smiled if his face could have allowed him to.

He kept silent, just sending back three words:

"dO tHEn mOvE."

Good work, Chief; keep him busy on your end while I do the same here. And with the prefix code...

There was an audible clang before and behind him and then a hiss. Even his antennae barely picked it up, but he instantly knew what it was.

Putting back on his left glove, he continued crawling to the closed access hatch while some invisible gas filled the enclosed conduit.

Now totally sealed in his spacesuit, he opened the hatch manually and crawled out to get into another conduit, closing the door behind him and the smears of blue blood he had left spilled out from his wounded left arm as he crawled there.

The seconds or even minutes it would hopefully take for the distracted computer to decipher all the biosigns he had left behind him from his actual position would count, if they were all to survive this.

Fortunately for him at least, despite it is six-hundred meters of length, the Achilles class starship had only fourteen decks.

After receiving the captain's answer, the Rethian dropped his tricorder on the ground as he reached the console he had pointed out to Khan. He turned to O'Conner, looked at him, then at the tricorder, trying to point it out to him.

Then, he pulled out his phaser.

"Please pick that up, Sir."

While the two officers were thus engaged, the captain of the Artemis quickly crawled in several maintenance conduits of the warship Achilles, backtracking often while leaving small smears of blood to create false tracks to confuse internal ship sensors as to his exact location... and especially to hide where he was truly going.

The trick would not have fooled a truly living operator for long, especially one experienced in hunting and tracking like a Caitan or a Klingon; but a computer, even as sophisticated and sentient as the one they were now facing, was not so specifically experienced, nor prone to guesses, gut feelings and hunches. It would thus systematically detect, observe, analyze, correlate and calculate all the data and variables to determine with the highest probability where he would be.

To add to the confusion, the Andorian opened a few maintenance panels before backtracking and pulled out relays or components or reconnected them haphazardly to simulate futile minor sabotage attempts in progress.

With all these distractions ongoing while the nascent artificial lifeform was already occupied in monitoring N'Eligahn's work so closely, they would have what they needed the most:

Time.

Once he finally reached his destination, Kheren unhooked his tricorder from the sleeve of his spacesuit and worked quickly to enter the program he would need if they were to stop this menace... or to even just get out of this alive.

The Andorian was no engineer, but, as any graduate from Command school and career officer that rose to command a vessel, he was at least quite familiar with all operations aboard a starship; that, coupled with his graduating specialty and experience in close quarter tactics, helped him make his most complex and daring plan ever.

Thus, once his tricorder was ready, he manually slid open the jefferies tube access he was hiding in to peek into the room he had reached. He did not use his tricorder to look for the systems he searched for; the scanning emissions would have alerted the ship's computer, not only of his location but of his intent.

Instead, he relied on his natural quadrivision and knowledge of Starfleet ships to quickly find it, map the room mentally and then close again the hatch.

He was ready.

Now for his two officers:

"o'CONneR Go tO BrIDge IOck dIStRacTIoN oN ThE Way. N'eLIGhaN cONfIRm cODE ExtraCT"

Sending the message through tricorders was more tedious but much more secure than through open combadge channels; Kheren acknowledged that his Chief Engineer had been smart.

Now, O'Conner jamming all doors open as he went to the command center of the ship would further distract and confuse the AI... and mask what Kheren had planned to do.

All that was needed now was for N'Eligahn Etarudbo to confirm that he had the ship's prefix code; then the plan to escape from and dispose of this malevolent new lifeform of their own creation would be put into motion.

With just a little bit of luck, it could work... it WILL work! Kheren told himself silently.

The Andorian's tactical mind had indeed noted something about the inhuman sentient lifeform they were locked with in such a deadly battle of wits: it had somehow inexplicably adopted the personality and appearance of Khan Noonien Singh, former genetically-engineered tyrant of the 20th century Eugenics Wars of Earth, revived from a sleeper ship in the mid 23rd century and finally killed, fifteen years later, during the ill-fated unplanned test of the terraforming Genesis Device, right in this nebula, well over a century ago.

And it had also fully adopted his drive, his ambition... and his ego.

Not only Commander N'Eligahn had pointed this out early with his deliberate exchanges with the AI overheard on their combadges, but Kheren had noticed that the amazing sentient computer always made only one hologram of the dead man at any given time.

It was very peculiar, as there were holo-emitters throughout the ship; it could therefore overwhelm them easily, make itself a full crew of Khans with no need at all for his two officers to join him as he had most insisted on; but it made only this one.

It also could give itself or any hologram any appearance needed... but it choose only that of Khan... and never more than one at a time.

Ego.

As the reborn Khan, a man of immense self confidence and self esteem, deeply convinced of his innate superiority and destiny to rule all, it could not accept even the *idea* of there being another like him... even in simulation. And with such an ego, it certainly wanted much more than a phantom army of slavish, soulless followers.

That was its weakness. probably its *only* weakness... and maybe that it didn't have time yet to completely "awaken" to its new "life"...

Yet.

Know thy enemy, taught the studies of Sun Tzu, great military genius of Earth, back at Starfleet Academy.

And timing is everything, plain Andorian pragmatism told him as well. His four eyes were glued to the lighted small screen of the readied tricorder in his hand, waiting for the signal of his two crewmen.

Come on N'Eligahn, O'Conner... don't let us down.

O'Conner took a moment to breath after he was tossed across the room once more. He got up on his knee and glanced at the mangled rifle.

"Next time I bring my gun..." he said as he removed the power supply from the rifle.

O'Conner glanced over at the tricorder and read the message from Kheren before putting it on the console next to N'Elighan.

He then pulled out his own tricorder and phaser, readying them as he headed out of the room.

The First Officer of the Artemis knew that he didn't have the strength to fight a real Khan, let alone a computer-generated Khan. So, he slowly made his way down the corridors to bridge, blowing out holo-emitters, door controls, and the random wall console or two, leaving a trail of destruction as he went.

"Hey!" N'Eligahn yelled as O'Conner turned and ran.

He drew his own phaser and fired at the fleeing XO, taking care to miss him while not making it look like a miss. He had to keep the illusion going if this whole thing was going to work.

As he typed into the console, he glanced at his now abandoned tricorder, catching a quick message on it as he worked to make up a compound that had never existed. There was no way aside from one that he could confirm the code. Not over the channels and not with Khan now watching his every move.

The fact that he DID have Khan's attention was what he wanted. It would keep him away from the others. It'd get the leadership back onto the Artemis.

He finished the code of the "Kesselite" ore, which in actuality was a graphical representation of an anti-chroniton particle, just reversed. He also wrote up brief "instructions" on how to weave it into the hull. Of course, it wouldn't work and would most likely just create pits in the outer hull of the ship, but Khan didn't need to know that.

While he was drawing up the information, he was switching to the opposite console every few moments to further access the computer. He'd do so whenever he saved the plans to the computer. So that while Khan was viewing that, he'd have precious seconds to unlock another door to the Achilles' prefix code.

"There, Khan," N'Eligahn announced. "It's all been uploaded. You don't need the Artemis anymore. You've already proven your superiority to them. There are other places we can go. I can access the information regarding the latest Federation fleet movements along with its star charts. I know a particular world where you can easily be worshiped as a god."

"How little your mind is." came the disembodied voice of the revived Khan. "I already have this data... and a single world is good enough for a mere man to think he's a god, not for a true one."

As he spoke, he concentrated; doing something he hadn't tried before and was fairly certain wouldn't be possible. If it didn't work, then he was quickly running out of options.

"Kelsey, he thought, trying to follow their link back to the Artemis. <Prefix code is 5309. Get others first. Leave me behind and I'll kill you."

"How interesting..." then commented the new Khan. "Your neurogenic level just shot up to the roof on my internal scanners... telepathy? There is a definite connection between you and... Aaaah *there* she is! There she *is*!"

The hum of the engines suddenly grew louder.

"What would you ask of me, O mighty one?" N'Eligahn asked as he bowed his head slightly.

'Don't insult my intelligence, Commander. But thank you, you are very cooperative. First things first: kill the others while I will kill your ship.'

"Of course, I'll get right on that," N'Eligahn said.

N'Eligahn fingered the power setting on his phaser, raising it just past overload. He felt the weapon start to grow hot in his hands. It wouldn't destroy anything major, but it'd put this room out of commission for a bit.

I think not... then thought Kheren.

Listening to the entire exchange over the open channel, he now knew whatever trick his chief engineer had used must have worked, as the living computer told about a telepathic communication ongoing... with which it had backtracked the position of the Artemis its sensors were unable to find.

There was no more time.

At the same moment, the Andorian kicked open the hatch and shot one brief precise burst; having four eyes to enhance depth of perception made him a natural marksman like all Andorians; and he was Starfleet trained. His shot blasted instantly the holomitter of the small room he rolled in.

Three steps after the roll and he was right at the only console there. Like the rest of the ship, it had been state of the art in its days but now was the current Starfleet standard found on almost every ship, including his newly refitted Artemis.

His tricorder slammed neatly in the interface slot of the console and implemented its own override program.

The entire room went dark as the console was shut down.

But then, it took barely a few seconds for the artificial intelligence controlling this ship to notice the deactivation, localize it and return full power to it.

"I'll say this for him he's consistent." mumbled Kheren as the reactivated transporter room automatically dematerialized him.

In the computer core room, N'Eligahn felt the slight tingle before a transport and dropped the phaser, seconds before it was going to go off. He smiled at the last minute before appearing on the shuttle and running for the cockpit.

O'Conner still walking in the ship's corridor was also transported beamed into the easily recognized interior of a shuttlecraft with the chief engineer and the captain.

First Officer O'Conner blinked as he was suddenly transported to the shuttle. It took him a few moments to get his bearings before slipping in to his seat. First, he gave the shuttles' systems a quick check before powering up the shields and weapon systems.

"Chief, helm; thrusters only, atmospheric flight mode, corckscrew trajectory. Number One, tactical; blast those bay doors and once out, the tractor emitter of the Achilles. Move people!"

"Already on it," N'Eligahn said.

As he spoke, the Andorian went to the back of the shuttle and opened the manual release mechanism in the floor, tearing open the covering hatch in his haste to access the release handle. He pulled it up, releasing all mooring clamps securing the craft to the shuttlebay deck.

Now was the hardest part for him: trusting his officers. Being captain meant you had to rely on others to succeed, not on yourself. If only one of them hesitated or failed in the next seconds and minutes, they would all die.

Decompression from the destruction of the bay doors would throw them out... or to a bulkhead if the Rethian was not up to its reputation as a pilot; and if his First Officer missed the emitter on the way out, it would be a much shorter flight than he already expected it would be.

As soon as the hissing and clanging sound of the released clamps was heard, Kheren turned to his two officers.

"All moorings released. Time to play: depose the Khan. Number One: fire! And chief, keep us in one piece!"

The Rethian engineer hammered down on the throttle as the shuttle surged forwards.

"Aye Sir." O'Conner replied to the captain's orders as he maxed forward shields and fired off two micro torpedoes which easily blasted through the shuttle bay doors, leaving just enough room for the small shuttle to get past the torn edges of the opening.

N'Eligahn squeezed the shuttle through the break as he maxed out the throttle, increasing the ship to full. While in the nebula, the shuttle's shields and targeting equipment would be gone, so he maneuvered the ship straight at the emitter, giving O'Conner the best shot he could. The seasoned Rethian's expertise as a shuttle pilot on his home-world alone had gotten them through the narrow, sharp-edged opening, along with the debris of the blast and everything inside the hangar deck that had not been secured. The blast of sudden decompression had lifted the whole craft frighteningly fast and his experience in atmospheric flight got all thrusters to respond to him with spectacular precision.

Following the corkscrew flight ordered by the captain, the exiting shuttle had looked for long seconds just like some other tumbling piece of debris from the explosion; it made O'Conner's firing job all the more harder but masked them from immediate detection by the living machine they were trying to escape from.

And, being so slow moving on thrusters, that detection would not be immediately followed by weapon's fire; the computer would instantly calculate that a shuttle warp core explosion too close would cripple if not completely destroy the warship.

So, it gave the First Officer of the Artemis just enough time to put out of commission the only other option the machine would next find, once it detected them aboard: the tractor beam.

Michael readied for the moving shot, as the decompression tossed the shuttle out of the doors and in to the emptiness of space. With no target lock possible in the highly charged ionized gases of the nebula, he had to rely on pure training... and luck.

As the chief engineer fought to keep control of the small craft in a dizzying corkscrew maneuver when they tumbled beyond the blasted opening, O'Conner shot off a number of small torpedoes.

The first few splashed ineffectively against the hull of the towering spacecraft, but the last fourth one landed directly against the tractor emitter just as the blue beam of light nearly grasped the small shuttle.

In a flash of explosive light, the graviton beam disappeared.

"Already bringing us around," N'Eligahn said as he turned the shuttle at a sharp one hundred and eighty degrees turn and shot it towards the expected position of the Artemis.

Or rather... towards where they hoped the Artemis would be.

In the dense clouds of ionized dust crisscrossed by static discharges, the shuttle's sensors were as inoperative as the shields, communications and target lock.

And so, on the small comm screen, even so close, it was but a blurry, grainy image of the older, white-haired Khan Noonien Singh that appeared; curiously bloodied and disfigured, one hand like a half burned claw raised like a fist; but it was still recognizable through the static as the image of Khan whispering:

"No... no you can't get away..."

* * *

"Lieutenant Syntron," reported Valencia Irksos from the Artemis bridge's science station, "there appears to be an energy flux emanating from the nebula... just off of our starboard side. From the energy signatures it appears to be remnants of detonations from micro torpedoes."

After a pause and another check she added:

"I'm also now getting another small fluctuating energy reading moving toward us... by level, speed and signature, it could possibly be a shuttle. It is moving in a somewhat slow and erratic manner..."

The Vulcan then stood up and turned to the tactical officer, assuming his new role as executive officer for the Kalthurian standing in for the ship's commander:

"Ensign Tyvya... get an immediate lock on that object. If it is a shuttle, be prepared to have the passengers beamed aboard as soon as we can get a transporter lock on them."

The Andorian giantess was working furiously to comply but had to contend with the interference from the static discharge. Then she turned excitedly and confirmed:

"It is a shuttle... I'm reading vague bio signs... I'm trying to get a lock on them..."

And as the shuttle turned around to flee, two phaser cannons and a torpedo tube flared up from behind the Achilles.

Syntron clearly saw the weapons firing right toward the small frail craft.

"Ensign... they are being fired upon... transport them over immediately!"

The energy pulses lanced through the waves like raging dragon fire, each rapid blast coming closer to the fragile craft.

"I've got their signals" the Andorian woman exclaimed. Beaming them over... now!"

And then, the following pair of quantum torpedoes blasted the shuttle to smithereens.

There was a tense moment of silence, nobody even daring to breathe.

Then, they could hear a sudden impact; that of a hard palm on the top of a console; the tactical console.

"I... Sir... I couldn't... Their signal just went up then... then disappeared under that of the explosion of their warp core... They... damn nebula... they were... too far away..."

It was unclear if the Andorian giantess would either cry out in anguish or roar in impotent rage... or both.

But her emotional outburst became a powerful growl as her console beeped fiercely.

"Massive object on an intercept course, she then reported with venom in her tone, bearing 192 mark 54, ETA fifty-three seconds... reading a massive energy surge!"

"Red Alert! Red Alert! All hands to battlestations! Lieutenant commander Alther to the bridge!"

With six phaser pulse cannons, four phaser arrays and two swiveling torpedo tubes able to fire each a pair of quantum torpedoes, the tactical siege heavy battlecruiser could obliterate the shieldless Ambassador class even easier than any space station it was designed to destroy; and if not enough, it could ram her with its special deflector... and finish the broken pieces with eight micro-torpedo launchers' quadruple salvos and its remaining aft weapons.

Because, without even improved sensors, it seemed somehow to have a lock on them.

Syntron stood there... perplexed as the shuttle was destroyed before their eyes.

Even though Vulcans have a very tight harness on their emotions, it was almost an impossibility for him not to have a reaction to the probable loss of their Captain and his remaining away team. But there was no time to ponder the consequences of this tragic event at this moment. The Artemis was in immediate danger with the Achilles heavily armed with weapons ready as it was heading directly for them.

It was now his job to somehow keep them alive and safe.

What are our options? he quickly deliberated within his thoughts. *There was no opportunity to match the Achilles firepower or speed; especially with the warp drive still off-line. Even if they devised a workable plan for an offensive attack, they cannot destroy this valued and unique ship; especially with a sentient life form aboard.*

Everyone looked silently and tensely at the disrupted image of the main screen, trying to glimpse the incoming menace rising from the depths toward them.

Somehow, realized the Vulcan scientist, this ship is able to detect them despite having sensors presently inferior to those of the Artemis. But how is she able to do this?

He turned to the Science console.

"Lieutenant Irksos, continue extensive sensor readings... all frequencies. They are using something to detect us in our current location despite the extensive static interference and we need to discover what this is in order to nullify it. Let me know immediately if you discover anything out of the ordinary."

"I am on this now, Sir" the black-skinned scientist replied as she focused her attention back on the console readouts. Sir!" Lieutenant Irksos enthusiastically shouted almost immediately after; "I found something! Come over here and have a look."

The Vulcan then immediately rushed over to the science station and began analyzing the peculiar frequency she was showing on the main science monitor.

"This is a neurogenic frequency trace from the Achilles to the Artemis" Syntron carefully noted. "Apparently, a telepathic link... between... Lieutenant Commander Alther here on the Artemis... and... Chief Engineer N'Eligahn... who must still be on the Achilles."

He contemplated this discovery for a very brief moment and then had an epiphany:

"It would seem that Lieutenant Commander Alther and Chief Engineer N'Eligahn have been communicating telepathically from ship to ship as a means of working through our static interference communications dilemma and apprise each other of their ongoing status. Despite their good intentions, this is having an unforeseeable negative consequence since the AI controlling the Achilles apparently has homed in on that frequency and is using the residual signal as a beacon to track us down."

Syntron then turned back to the tactical officer.

"Ensign Tyvya... were going to need some immediate options on how we're going to evade the Achilles using only full impulse and thrusters and then possibly where in the nebula to retreat to that will get us out of her firing range."

"We only have chaff." answered the giantess.

With everyone blinking at her, Tyvya then explained:

"The probes, Sir. Five Class IV stellar encounter probes, all sub-probes reconfigured with our power signature as you ordered. The full salvo of the Achilles may, possibly, destroy all thirty of them... but it will still divert completely its first attack and saturate the nebula between us with irradiated ions... enough to allow us a chance to hide again."

"And we will have only one shot at this... and only *If* that neurogenic link is cut off." then gloomily added Cheonghi from his forwardmost ops station.

"Outstanding recommendation Ensign Tyvya... get those probes ready to launch on my mark. As Lieutenant Cheonghi astutely pointed out... we're going to have but one opportunity to make this work."

Lieutenant Syntron then ordered:

"Security... Lieutenant Commander Alther's telepathic link to N'Eligahn on the Achilles must be terminated immediately, even if it requires you to temporarily incapacitate your chief!"

He then turned to the main viewscreen and could now begin to see a distorted form of the Achilles beginning to clarify as it moved closer. Even through the static and distortions, he could see the predator ship moving already perilously close to the Artemis.

Time was running out.

Syntron then faced and addressed the tactical officer once again.

"Ensign Tyvya... be ready on my mark to send out the salvo of probes and then immediately engage your predetermined escape maneuvers. Timing and precision will once again be paramount," he noted as he stared intently at the marauder coming in for the kill.

Seven decks below, the senior officer on board the Artemis had just finished hearing Doctor Sage's report

At least I attempted to hurt someone other than an admiral thought Alther.

Then Kelsey also heard N'Eligahn's message...

Barely; apparently, the distance was getting extreme, the link they shared were becoming more and more unclear.

But then it flared anew... as if the Rethian was suddenly rushing at the Kalthurian.

The Achilles is closing in!

As Kelsey was about to tell the bridge the prefix code she received from the Rethian's mind, the red alert indeed went off.

Brain and body froze for a moment, the sound giving the androgyn a sudden flashback, way back to the Borg Invasion, if only for a moment, taking Alther out of reality, dragging all thoughts back to the past before finally snapping out of it.

Slightly dazed, the Lieutenant Commander finally turned to walk out of sickbay, only to be confronted by a security team rushing in.

"Do I want to know what you are doing?" Kelsey asked.

"We have been ordered to terminate your neurogenic link with Commander N'Elighan, Lieutenant Commander." answered the man leading the squad.

Alther held a hand up quickly.

"But let me tell the bridge something first, and the Kalthurian opened a channel; Alther to bridge: Achilles prefix code is 530966."

Kelsey then sighed.

"The link keeps going unless I am heavily sedated... but if shooting me is the best option you can come up with, I am not going to resist."

"Assault on a senior officer is a court martial offense. Medical problems are for the medical personnel, if you don't mind."

The clear, almost melodious voice behind Kelsey Alther was that of Doctor Marleena Sirris, the head psychiatrist on board. Her deep black Betazoid eyes were wide listening to the exchange between the Kalthurian and the security teams.

She didn't let them retort as she showed a hypospray to which she inserted a cartridge, explaining with a patient tone:

"This will suppress psionic aptitude, Lieutenant Commander. It will not affect your cognitive functions, or your reflexes."

As she quickly injected the content of the hypospray into the Kalthurian's arm, Kelsey felt nothing different... except that the inner presence of N'elighahn faded away completely like a dream. There was a vague sensation of isolation quite new to the Androgyn, but nothing else.

It was an odd feeling, losing a connection to someone. The androgyn still had shivers running down its spine; the only time naturally that link would even be dulled that sharply would be death. While knowing N'Elighahn was not dead, it sure felt like it.

"We have been treating telepathy-related problems on Betazed for millenias you know." explained Doctor Sirris, now smiling warmly. "Next time, see your specialist first."

"Lieutenant Commander, they need you on the bridge." then insisted the obviously relieved security officer.

Kelsey Alther thanked everyone while running off to get to the bridge quickly, and once the bridge turbolift stopped stepped out saying: "Sorry I'm late," before walking fast to where the command chair was.

Syntron received the call from Doctor Sirris in that she had given a hypospray to Lieutenant Commander Alther a few moments ago to suppress psionic abilities and thus had just finally severed the perilous connection to the Chief Engineer on the Achilles. This was the moment he was waiting for.

Just as he was about to give the order to Ensign Tyvya, the tubolift doors opened and out sprung the weary Kalthurian.

He looked back in a controlled respite as Alther exited the turbo lift and approached him sitting in the command chair. As he was about to stand up to relinquish command, the senior officer held out an arm and signaled to him remain sitting.

"Continue Lieutenant, as I am not quite up to date with what your plans are"

Kelsey stood as the ship was commanded by the Vulcan, not about to assume authority in a situation having no clue about what was going on; more so with the Achilles hot on their heels.

Suddenly, Ensign Tyvya shouted:

"Achilles at one-hundred thousand kilometers, Sir, she's arming torpedoes!"

He immediately stood up, turned to Ensign Tyvya and commanded authoritatively:

"Tube 1... launch all probes!"

The probes sped up between both ships and immediately deployed six smaller probes. Although the probes were usually designed to gather and transmit every kind of cosmic data, now reconfigured, they instead each emitted a powerful signal identical to the power output of a four million-ton starship... like the Artemis.

These signals, stronger than the real one from the ship because of their proximity, began to lure every weapon of the warship to them as soon the Achilles opened fire. A blinding display of fiery detonations blotted out even the fierce lightning discharges of the nebula... and their flashes ran across thousands of cubic square kilometers of the ionized gases suddenly caught in the blaze; like some enormous cosmic fireworks display.

The few first shots of the pulse phaser canons however managed to pass them by before the rest of the salvo was swallowed by the probes' destruction; they grazed close to the evading Artemis as it attempted to sluggishly veer off to hide once more in the blue depths of the nebula behind the cover of her cosmic-scaled flash bomb.

However, despite the overall accomplishments of their effective electronic decoys, a single torpedo detonated too close to the Artemis: striking the armoring of the retreating ship, sending a violent tremor from aft to forward... and from dorsal to ventral.

* * *

They were all tightly huddled together when they rematerialized. A shuttle transporter pad was rather cramped for three men in spacesuits.

Fortunately, between the tall First Officer and the muscular captain, the chief engineer was small enough to have them all able to escape the fiery death of the shuttlecraft's destruction.

Took him long enough, thought Kheren, after the surprisingly longer waiting than expected before the Achilles shot them down. *Something must have distracted it*, he had guessed then.

That is when, moving to the shuttle's transporter pad, he had noticed by the starboard transparency the plumes of frozen air and leaking plasma coming out from all around the oval saucer section of the warship... and N'Eligahn's phaser missing.

A blast from a phaser overload could devastate an entire deck. It would not dent a level 10 forcefield as one of those aboard starships surrounding a warp core... or here, one enveloping a computer core... but it would certainly distract a sentient computer for a few seconds of scanning debris for cause, damage and survivors; just like he had planned for in the shuttlebay, buying them the time needed for their attempted escape.

Which, thinking of all the current conditions, the Andorian knew would fail.

But escape had not been the plan... not quite yet.

The moment they solidified, the commanding officer of the Artemis pointed wordlessly the captain's chair to Commander N'Eligahn and the engineering station to Commander O'Conner as he himself hurried to the helm console.

If it had materialized itself anywhere, the presence of the new Khan would be most probably on the main bridge, the main control center of any starship. That left them just enough time to take control, just long enough, from the only place that could... where they were now: The Achilles battle bridge.

They all knew what to do; and that they had less than a minute to do it. Facing the megalomaniac genius of a genetic superman enhanced by the instantaneous computing power of a living computer, on their swift and coordinated teamwork depended their very survival... and that of the USS Artemis.

If not ultimately that of the entire United Federation of Planets.

O'Conner rubbed the back of his neck, before nodding back to the captain. He quickly moved to the engineering console and began to type in a program in to the console.

As he typed, he thought about situation. This *Khan* was nothing but a bully and he was starting to annoy O'Conner. When he had first saw the *brain*, O'Conner was awed by it; but now, all he wanted to do was to fry its circuits.

Not to mention how he hated being transported without a warning.

At the same moment, Kheren was busy with implementing manually the central part of his whole plan through the helm station, his callused hands and his facial eyes running over the controls while the other set of eyes in his antennae watched around them for any sign of a holographic Khan appearing among them.

The black and white image of the console was quite enough for him to do what he intended to, while the color receptors of his antennae would be just enough to register any new shape materializing suddenly among them.

But none did.

Something is still distracting it.

And then, they heard the distant but unmistakable sound of what the tactical console to his right was flashing furiously: weapons firing.

The Artemis!

It was easy to guess what was happening. And it added to the sense of urgency his chronometer was ticking into his heartbeat.

The Andorian had a curious mixed feeling of relief and anguish. His ship was facing death as much as they were; but in so doing gave them all a chance to live. And so, he worked all the harder and faster while the egotistical artificial intelligence threatening them all was concentrating on the other vessel, unaware yet of the danger within.

Like every Federation starship, there was on the Achilles a secondary computer core. It was not only a necessary back up, but it freed the main computer core for data storage and processing by having this independent, smaller unit being solely assigned to engineering work, routinely assuming all the basic technical functions of a starship; like life support, fuel management, escape pods... and navigation.

And like the cerebellum in the human brain, it could act on those and all autonomous functions of the ship outside of the direct control of the main core. N'eligahn's implementation of the prefix code then scrambling it would prevent the AI from noticing immediately what had been done and retake control too quickly.

And now they were done... one way or another.

With Michael O'Conner silently counting down the last ten seconds of escape pod launch, Kheren pointed to the nearest access hatch to one and they all hurried to it. The door hissed and clanged shut behind them as they settled in the four-man habitacle just as it was activating its emergency launch sequence.

The nerve-wracking noise of weapons firing had ceased. But they had no time to check if the Artemis had escaped... or had been destroyed.

* * *

As the crew were shaken and tossed about throughout the ship, Ensign Tyvya reported vociferously:

"Hit amidships, Lieutenant!"

Then she added more calmly:

"But we have disengaged successfully, Sir; no trace of the Achilles... for now."

Syntron then straightened out his uniform and cautiously sat back down as the Andorian giantess then turned to face the Vulcan in the command seat.

"Sir, I recommend shutting down all but essential systems and passive sensors. If we play dead, perhaps there will be less of a chance that it will find us, while it will also provide a better chance for us to see it coming before it arrives and detects us."

"With luck, we might even buy us enough time to affect repairs and get out of here to warn Starfleet Command." added Cheonghi with his shrill, nervous voice.

Syntron nodded in affirmation and acknowledged.

"Ensign Tyvya, shut down all non essential systems and active sensors. This should allow us to remain essentially camouflaged while we are stuck out here among these shifting waves of dust and energy."

He then turned to the engineering station.

"Lieutenant Blakely, damage report."

"Hull breaches on the upper part of the connecting neck, Sir. Decks 12 and 13... no casualties listed so far, but severe damage to emergency saucer separation mechanism and the turbolift shaft."

Syntron listened carefully and then addressed the blond engineer again:

"Lieutenant Blakely, organize a team of engineers to begin repairs immediately. All shifts are now on active duty. Send out an extensive team to continue repairing our warp drive. We cannot afford to be left limping about in this nebula with the Achilles out there on the prow!"

"Lieutenant Irksos" the Vulcan continued as he turned swiftly toward the science console, "assemble science teams to assist the engineering department in affecting repairs. Coordinate your efforts with Lieutenant Blakely."

Then he looked back to his left.

"Doctor Lumquist, confirm that there are no casualties in the damaged areas of the ship and then check in with each department head and ensure that all crewmen are accounted for."

He then turned toward the Kalthurian senior officer and inquired:

"How are you holding up Lieutenant Commander Alther?"

As Syntron asked his question, Alther stiffened slightly. The androgyn wasn't impressed or happy at all; instead of asking medical if they could even come up with something to suppress Kelsey's link with N'Eligahn, their first reaction had been to shoot her. Something that probably wouldn't have even worked to sever the link in the first place, unless they decided to use a heavy stun.

"Besides having phasers pointed at me during red alert by the crew? Fine; the admiral was in fact an imposter. It's safe to say that he will be out of the picture for a while" Kelsey said before turning to the viewscreen.

"Don't suppose you can update me on what's happened? Any way for us to use that prefix code?"

The past few hours had had the Kalthurian running around the ship like a dog.

At least I am keeping fit, was all Kelsey Alther could think about.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow at the insinuation and responded:

"Lieutenant Commander Alther, while you were off of the bridge, the Achilles suddenly began to track and pursue our ship despite its limited sensors within this nebula. We did not know how this was possibly occurring. As Lieutenant Irksos was conducting extensive sensor readings she eventually was able to detect an anomaly beyond the normal frequency range. It was only at that moment that we discovered your telepathic connection. The AI on the Achilles was homing in on your frequency, Lieutenant Commander, using the residual signal as a homing beacon to track us down and was preparing to unleash a salvo of weapons upon us. Had we not acted immediately, this conversation would not be occurring because the Artemis would have been destroyed."

The Vulcan recognized the frustration and anger of the Kalthurian officer as he tried to provide a brief synopsis of the events that had just occurred. Alther didn't appear satisfied with the explanation. When emotions were involved, logical rationalization rarely prevailed.

He then proceeded with an attempt at clarification.

"Nevertheless, I apologize if our actions appeared threatening, Lieutenant Commander... but I had no time to research solutions on disuniting telepathic links while the Achilles was barreling down upon us with weapons hot. Our intention was only to sever the link in the swiftest way possible without harming you. It was most fortunate for all concerned that Doctor Sirris was there with an effective hypospray to nullify your telepathic link. Severing that link then presented us with our only opportunity to reposition the Artemis and discharge a series of reconfigured decoy probes in an attempt to prevent this ship from being destroyed by the weapons barrage that had already been released."

Kelsey listened to the Vulcan's logic, even with emotions swirling around inside. It did little to dissipate them though.

"While I understand your reasoning, you have just told me you wanted to sever the link without injuring me; yet, you send an armed escort to do... what precisely? They are not medical staff so it would make no sense for them to come down to sever it."

Syntron thought for a moment and then added:

"I did not seek this command, just as you had not when Captain Kheren presented it to you. We each tried to make decisions based on what we determined was best for this ship and this crew. Nevertheless, it is apparent that you do not approve of my actions or decisions. This is your prerogative."

Kelsey slightly nodded at the mention of the command of the Artemis; but, when he said that the Kalthurian did not approve of his decisions, Alther quickly interjected:

"No, I approve of all of them... just not the one that involved me possibly getting shot."

The Vulcan in turn nodded pensively. Then he finished saying;

However, although it was not your intention, Lieutenant Commander, you may also consider that your decision to initiate this telepathic link is what ultimately allowed the AI to track us and place us in jeopardy."

The androgyn was not sure if he was actually saying what it sounded like.

"Do you mean activating the constant link that N'Eligahn and I have since we got stuck on the Borg-infested USS Tempest? Because that link would have been able to be found regardless of whether or not I used it."

Syntron raised an eyebrow at this. But then, once more nodded.

"We are currently out of immediate danger; therefore, the command of this ship again belongs to you, Lieutenant Commander."

He turned and walked away from the executive chair and headed over toward the Science console.

Kelsey Alther took the command chair and sat in it with a sigh.

The freshly promoted Lieutenant Commander, once again left in charge of the USS Artemis, had no clue what to do anymore.

The voice of Alther's assistant chief at tactical then broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Lieutenant Commander; tactical sensors are dimly registering through the static interference what appears to be a... a rapid succession of proximity quantum energy discharges... in a very odd, dispersing pattern... Position, nine hundred thousand kilometers off the starboard bow. I cannot be sure but... looks like a double barrage of torpedo blasts."

Kelsey raised her eyebrow.

"Now why would he do that; trying to flush us out? Don't suppose we can actually find out what it was shooting at?" the androgyn asked out loud to the bridge crew.

Syntron turned from his science console and faced toward the officer sitting uneasily in the command chair.

"Your hypothesis would seem to be a valid one Lieutenant Commander" the chief of science responded.

Sitting straighter in the captain's chair, Alther ordered:

"If it is possible, let's find out what it's doing without compromising our current state."

"It would be prudent however not to risk bringing the Artemis back in range of the Achilles in our current condition." then warned the Vulcan science officer. "We are too vulnerable; especially while we are implementing repairs throughout the ship and have yet to even restore our warp capabilities."

He thought for a moment and then added:

"Perhaps we could instead attempt to gain insight remotely."

With Alther fully listening, he continued with his thought:

"As we have seen even recently, specific probes have proven quite effective in short range reconnaissance missions such as this. A string of probes placed strategically in range between the Artemis and the location of the registered discharges might provide us with effective sensor data without risking the possibility of revealing our ship's position."

He turned back to access his science console as he continued:

"Strategically speaking, if the probes moved too close and entered within range of the Achilles, they would most assuredly be immediately destroyed by the predatory ship. However, they would disperse before destruction and once again distract the Achilles off of our trail to further hide the Artemis."

He accessed the computer's data bank to confirm his premise.

"We have both class V medium-range probes which can be modified to our tactical advantage, and class VII remote cultural study probes. Both of these probe types have low observatory coatings and hull materials, which will aid in their stealth while sending back sensory data."

He then checked in the ships data banks to confirm the number of these probes currently available.

"At present Lieutenant Commander, the Artemis has five of each class. At one hundred thousand kilometers apart, they could relay a clear image and sensor feed for more than half a million kilometers between both ships... seven hundred thousand kilometers to more precise."

He then explained further:

"Although we have other probes available that could provide similar data, these are the only probes aboard with this unique camouflage system. Therefore, I would recommend sending two class V medium-range probes and three class VII remote cultural study probes. This will give us the opportunity of testing the effectiveness of each probe type individually, while also leaving us with five additional probes to apply this strategy once again if needed."

He then concluded:

"Lieutenant Irksos and her team could have these probes configured and ready to launch in seven point three-five minutes... at your command, Lieutenant Commander Alther."

Kelsey looked at Syntron.

"So long as it doesn't help compromise our current state, make it so" the androgyn said, leaning forward and looking to the front of the bridge.

Alther's mind was swirling with battle tactics against the Achilles; they all hinged on the Artemis floating like some kind of space debris, waiting to catch the warship off guard and then hit its weapon ports with everything they had.

If they got lucky, it would do some damage, at best. Inertia might also help, cutting off most of their power and making it come off and on at intervals, allowing timed shots to work, first at low settings before coming up randomly to full power to once again surprise the Achilles.

Of course, none of these plans would probably work; the AI on the Achilles isn't stupid.

A few moments later, Valencia Irksos looked up at her senior officer.

"Our two groups of recon probes ready to be deployed, Mister Syntron. They will align themselves at one hundred thousand kilometers distance apart from each other between us and the first one that will locate the Achilles."

"First group in tube number 1, second group in tube number 2." confirmed assistant chief of tactical Tyvya. "Full group ready for launch at your command, Lieutenant Commander. "

Syntron then looked over at Lieutenant Commander Alther who hesitantly nodded her head in affirmation to launch of the probes.

He then turned to Ensign Tyvya sitting at the tactical station and commanded firmly "Starting with Tube 1 only... Ensign Tyvya, launch all probes!"

"Aye Sir" the tactical officer acknowledged as she turned and reached over to trigger the switch on the tactical console.

They all watched the main viewscreen as five probes went streaking out from the Artemis; each one leaving a temporary shimmering trail as they traveled swiftly through the nebula to their appointed destination.

When the tranquility of the Mutara nebula once more reasserted itself, with the occasional static discharge lighting the thick blue, purple and red waves of sparkling dust, the silhouette of the Artemis had been long gone from sight of the Achilles.

At the same time, the warship was once more hidden by the colored, slowly swirling depths, but still roaming under them like a shark again on the prowl.

Then, suddenly, the sleek form of the stalking ship seemed to swell; from bow to stern, all the escape pods suddenly detached themselves all at once from the armored hull, swiftly moving away in all directions on blazing thrusters.

The interference from the high level of ionization surrounding them and the ship made it hard for the sensors to pinpoint precisely any lifesigns on board any of the small escaping crafts. They were there, but it could have been on any of those small pods.

From the aft spine of the Achilles, two rows of four micro-torpedo launchers then shot out rapid salvos after salvos of small quantum torpedoes, each powerful enough to obliterate any unshielded ship the size of a Defiant destroyer or a Jem'Hadar Bugship.

In less than twenty seconds, there was nothing left of the one hundred and fifty lifeboats but flaming debris and clouds of dissipating oxygen.

Once again, the intensity and proximity of the explosions, especially in such a disruptive environment as the Mutara nebula, masked all traces of the beam out from the only occupied pod back to the Achilles.

But, this time, the transporter activation itself was not.

On his sleeve indicator, Kheren saw a light wink out. It was his tricorder's active signal terminating; the tricorder he had left hooked to the main transporter console of the warship had been deactivated; rather forcefully he guessed.

He had of course expected that the ship computer would notice the activation of such a vital system, then proceed to find the intruder program and the alien piece of hardware and immediately terminate both; that was why he had started his whole scheme by shutting off the transporter room when he had connected his tricorder to its main console, just before they were beamed to the shuttle the first time; the reactivation of interrupted transporter functions by the AI itself had effectively hid their first site to site transport within the system's basic diagnostic start-up routine.

Using the shuttle's transporter found on board most of them, even twenty-five years ago, had then allowed this second automated beam out, their third and last transport, to succeed before this option was lost. And now, they had reached their third and final objective.

The astrometrics room.

A large ship dedicated to scientific research and space exploration like the Artemis had several centers for sensor operations, navigation, star-charting and stellar studies. But, as the former flagship chief of tactical and security had noticed on the ship's schematics, when he had worked at reactivating command and viewing systems on the bridge, it was not so on the Achilles. As expected on a dedicated warship, even one as large as this strategic siege heavy battlecruiser, practical reasons like physical space, power allocation and planned mission protocols allowed only one big, central room for that sole purpose.

Already quickly briefed by their commanding officer during the minute all three of them had been alone again, this time inside a lifeboat, the two commanders with him were already on the move as soon as they materialized, without any need for words that would have alerted too soon the ghost in the machine.

N'Eligahn was now wielding Kheren's own phaser alongside O'Conner ready with his own while the Andorian went straight to the nearest transparency, eerily glowing with the blue and red swirls of the enveloping nebula.

They had seconds before the AI would shift its attention from the sabotaged transporter room to trace back the point of arrival of their beam in.

And barely some more before Kheren's plan went into final motion; be they ready or not.

Behind the commanding officer of the Artemis, sparks and fires erupted everywhere as N'Eligahn and O'Conner destroyed every piece of hardware with their phasers, depriving the Achilles of its means to use and process external data.

The beast would be blind now.

All the while, Kheren worked the manual release of the transparent aluminum separating them from the coldness of space and the sparkling dust of the nebula. As was the norm on every Federation starship, all viewports could be manually opened and used as escape hatches, with at least one locker on every deck storing suits like those the three officers wore. These were intended basically either for hazardous conditions or even external damage control or as spacesuits in case of abandon ship situations. It was a routine safety measure dating back to the early days of space exploration of virtually all sentient species found in Starfleet.

The Andorian opened the locking mechanism, ready to lift and slide open the window for their final escape; decompression would blow them out like the shuttle had been when they blasted open the cargo bay door, allowing for a swift, final escape.

A sudden immense force lifted him then and threw him... away from the transparency.

Kheren's body literally flew to the other end of the room; right over the heads of his two companions as they were rushing towards the escape, to crash and disappear right in the middle of the flaming debris of what had been the astrometrics lab. The one door allowing access into the vast room stayed locked shut despite the impact of burning pieces of consoles striking it and falling on its very sill.

Between them all and the transparency, their only way out, stood a tall, imposing black-haired figure with a young, strongly etched face almost as red with anger as the shirt molding his powerful frame.

It was Khan.

His appearance froze both commanders in place, not saying a word nor doing a thing as the imposing figure stood between them and the only exit available from the burning room.

They both knew their phasers would be ineffectual against the photonic entity. Made out of a combination of forcefields and projected tridimensional images, it could either become as intangible as a mere illusion or as impervious as any forcefield at full strength.

The only way to truly affect it was by attacking its emitter. And since they had destroyed the original one installed in this room as their very first act of sabotage, they all knew here what was going on; the AI had replicated a holo-projector instead and beamed it somewhere in the room; probably also under a forcefield to protect it from the fire spreading from their own phaser shots and from any attempt to deactivate it.

It learns fast, doesn't it... thought Kheren as he rolled out of the flaming debris before they could damage the spacesuit that had saved him from being roasted alive.

As he stood up, his four eyes fell on his chronometer at his suit's left wrist.

Seconds left! he realized in a brief moment of panic, seeing both his officers hesitating.

And so, he did not.

With a sudden running leap, the Andorian leapt straight between the two commanders at the Khan figure standing right between them all and the still closed but unlocked transparency.

He put every ounce of his formidable strength in his flying tackle, seeing only two possible outcomes; either the image would opt to let him pass harmlessly through him... and crash straight with all his mass and momentum into the viewport... or...

The whole impact of Kheren's charge was stopped dead by the solid stance of Khan.

On an average, Andorians were twice as strong as Humans; and Kheren was easily twice as strong as any Andorian, strong enough to face a Gorn. Yet, despite being Human, Khan, was well known to be at least that strong as well... if not more. And so, both figures found themselves locked into a shoving match where neither seemed to get the upper hand for long seconds.

Until, as the Andorian expected, the AI would finally realize that even the superhuman parameters of its new chosen persona could be transcended; after all, it had the entire power of a starship at its command.

Khan looked into his eyes; and Kheren glanced at his wrist chronometer.

Now or never!

As if reading his captain's mind, N'Eligahn ducked and rolled to the side as he aimed his phaser. He came up on one knee and braced himself for the vacuum as he raised the phaser even and fired it at maximum at the viewport, vaporizing the materials.

Suddenly exposed to the airless void of the nebula, everything in the room was abruptly angled towards the small opening and moved towards it; debris, flames, bodies... Everything but the two struggling figures a few meters from it.

"To the last, I will grapple with thee," recited the image of Khan through a wicked smile as it wrestled still with the Andorian, ignoring totally the raging elements around him. Not even a strand of its hair flew in the ferocious winds.

"Is that all you've got, weakling Human?" retorted mockingly the Artemis Captain, knowing the ship's sentient computer monitored their comm. "Khan... I'm laughing at a superior being."

When the photonic lifeform suddenly added a powerful surge of artificial power to its already superhuman strength, the captain of the Artemis, just as suddenly, twisted on a side and, instead of grappling as the red-shirted figure forcefully pushed him, now pushed all the more... and this time, away from his opponent.

Adding his own formidable strength to the massive push of the new Khan, the entire bodymass of the Andorian was propelled right through the now blasted open viewport. The back of his left side smacked against the blasted edges and he went out, spinning with flaming debris.

The wind whipped around the three officers and N'Eligahn allowed it to pull him towards the wall and past Khan. He followed the decompression out of the window, grabbing the edge and pulling himself up and over onto the hull of the Achilles.

He glanced upwards, scanning space for where he hoped the Artemis would be. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to detect Kelsey Alther, but he got nothing.

Then he closed his eyes and focused on something, someone else. While Rethians weren't as telepathic as Betazoids or Vulcans, they had the ability. Single born Rethians were known for having more developed mental abilities.

It was this ability that had allowed him to connect with Kelsey during the disaster on the Tempest when many other Rethians would likely have been separated from the alien mind, having been so used to being solely around Rethians.

Now he directed his thoughts and emotions towards someone else, just for a half-second and just long enough to find the general area.

He re-opened his eyes.

"All right, let's go," he muttered as he used all his strength to kick off from the hull and coupled that momentum with the suit's emergency thrusters towards where he hoped the Artemis would be.

The howling rush out of air inside the entire room dragged out with it all the flames, all the debris and all the Artemis officers; but not the standing form of Khan Noonien Singh,

As a massless composite of pure energy, Khan was not at all affected by the blow out; and going outside the range of his projector would have simply dissolved the projection anyway. And so, he could only scream in impotent rage as all three suited officers were swiftly thrown out into space, out of the ship... and out of his grasp.

There was but a short last moment when the blazing green eyes of Khan reborn met those of the three escaping Starfleet officers. And then, all that was left was a deep voice hissing into their helmets through growing static:

"No... the game's not over."

The decompression was still pushing them away from the immense vessel when the blues and the reds of the nebula gases seemed to suddenly freeze over. Thin strands of whitish light started to stretch across the heavens, like a frost-covered spider web stretching and thickening as they coalesced to form a vast funnel of pure light swirling like a tornado around a center of utter blackness.

The enormous light tunnel opened up before the Achilles and then seemed to stretch around it as if to engulf it; but the entire form of the vessel suddenly became blindingly white also and stretched like when a starship went to warp.

There was a violent flash of white light and the entire space tunnel collapsed.

And then, the ship was gone.

Michael O'Conner gazed into the swirling nebula around them. Moments ago, he had been staring at the Khan hologram. He had hoped to out-think the computer, so he had been waiting for Khan's attack or actions; but then, it went too fast and he didn't know of all of Kheren's plans. There had been no time for lengthy explanations.

And also luckily for the three of them, N'Elighan was always an act-first-think-after person.

So now, they drifted in the sparkling gases of a nebula, hoping for rescue. O'Conner quickly checked his air supply and activated his emergency beacon. Then through his still open com and asked:

"Sir, did you just slipstream the Nemesis?"

"Who *me*?" shot back the Andorian with a pretense at innocence. But then he admitted: "Well... let's say I just give it a nudge in the right direction."

Orbiting one another by the sheer attraction of their own mass and the shared momentum of their final escape, it was not hard for Kheren to see the perplexed looks on his two companions' faces.

Noting that his First Officer had smartly activated the emergency signal integrated in his spacesuit, he finally took the time to surmise:

"You learn a lot of things quickly on the bridge of a ship. Thanks to Mister N'elighahn's extraction of the prefix code, I could use the navigation system to program unnoticed the ship's quantum slipstream drive in engaging at full power... sixty seconds after astrogation went offline... and to jettison all fuel tanks once slipstream propulsion itself will stop."

He spun his head inside his helmet in the direction where the warship had disappeared.

"By the time it figures out what is happening, fails to retake control, discovers the chief's tampering with the code and decides to rematerialize itself on the main bridge to use manual override and finally retake control, a few minutes will have passed. At over three-hundred light years travelled for every minute, it should find itself drifting again, but without fuel or any way to locate itself... and this time near the edge of the galaxy."
His four eyes then came back to his two officers.

"Not that I would not like to discuss this in more detail, gentle-beings, but I would appreciate it if one of you engineers would look at my life support system... please? Between superfreezing in the coolant tank, superheating in an electrical fire and bumping the bulkhead on my way out, I think I broke something."

Their standard issue Evac suit had enough power and air supply for twenty-four standard hours and they had been using them overall quite less than an hour; but they both could see on the chest indicators of his suit that the captain's air supply was already down to less than twelve hours... and dropping steadily down... almost as fast as his internal pressure and temperature.

* * *

Moments after the trail of the probes had dissipated within the nebula, Syntron detected a sudden enormous quantum surge about six-hundred thousand kilometers off the starboard bow.

This was something immediate and more powerful and much more sustained than a quantum torpedo explosion. This reading was in fact so massive that it registered clearly on all passive sensors despite the distance and static discharges of the surrounding area.

He then confirmed the phenomenon with the bridge officers and conferred briefly with Ensign Tyvya who was quickly analyzing the data.

As he was pondering this phenomenon, Doctor Lumquist sitting in the CMO chair announced:

"I have a visual" as he switched the viewing screen angle to show a very strange white light growing... elongating... and then suddenly flashing out; it was looking almost like one of the much smaller static discharges all around the nebula but viewed as if in slow motion then abruptly disappearing.

Syntron then addressed the Terran female sitting at the engineering console.
"Lieutenant Blakely, what are your readings indicating?"

"There was something reading like a sudden mass displacement in the dust clouds of the nebula... she responded, confirming his own readings. "But now it's all gone."

As she continued studying the energy wave registered on the sensor scan, she added:
"It looked like the signature of a quantum displacement, like one that would be made by a quantum slipstream drive."

Syntron nodded in affirmation and then turned to Lieutenant Commander Alther sitting quietly in the command chair; absorbed in the events transpiring on the bridge and beyond and yet seemingly lost in thought as well.

"Lieutenant Commander, one of the data files that I accessed from the classified folders indicated that the USS Achilles had been equipped, upon becoming the USS Nemesis, with the first untested design of a quantum slipstream drive... based on the information provided from Lieutenant Blakely, perhaps that was what we just witnessed."

Looking back at the main viewscreen, he then added:

"If this is correct, then perhaps we can redirect the probes to span out in the vicinity of this phenomenon and fully engage the sensors to see what information we can gather in closer proximity to the initial signal."

His gaze went back to the Kalthurian.

"Perhaps we have been given a window of opportunity to search around the nebula without immediate danger of being detected or destroyed. We should begin our surveillance immediately"

"Agreed, Syntron," Kelsey said from the captain's chair Just as Doctor Sage emerged from the turbolift to relieve his colleague from the Medical Command Chair.

Yay for me saying: Do Things, the androgyn thought and let out an inner sigh as the bridge whirled around the command chair. With the speed at which events unfolded, information and suggestions flew and decisions had to be made, each potentially heavy with dire consequences... Command of a starship was definitely not as easy as it looked.

Josiah sat in the CMO command chair. He had quietly relieved Doc Lumquist in the midst of the chaotic maelstrom both on and off the bridge. In all the middle of this, he happened to glance down at his sensors on the arm of the chair.

There was the briefest of ghosts flitting across his readout. He narrowed his eyes at the readings.

There it was again.

In the storm of the Mutara Nebula, Doc Sage's command chair told him that the string of probes allowed for sensors to pick up three lifesigns off the starboard bow of the Artemis at well over half a million kilometers: one Terran, one Andorian, and one Rethian lifesign. And the Andorian one was fluctuating and dropping steadily.

Josiah didn't need to think or debate about it.

"Lieutenant Commander Alther! The away team is free floating in the nebula!"

"No trace of the Achilles..." reported Tyvya with a definite tone of surprise in her voice.

"Helm: close in at transporter range on the coordinates from the CMO chair!" ordered the Kalthurian.

Barely a few seconds later, the Trill pilot reported:

"We're entering transporter range, Lieutenant Commander; forty thousand kilometers from the coordinates and closing."

Doctor Sage quickly transferred from his chair's monitor the coordinates of the three lifesigns to the main transporter. He then uttered the same verbal command he had used not even half a month prior to save that same Rethian's life.

"Transporter, emergency medical code Omega Lambda Three."

He watched as the transporter buffers struggled with the patterns, but thanks to the 25th century technology implemented into the Artemis, all three lifesigns were directly, and safely, transported to Main Medical.

Josiah glanced over at Kelsey. A big grin split his face.

"Commander, we got 'em!" he exclaimed. "By gods, this CMO chair is worth somethin' aft'rall!"

Tapping his combadge, he then ordered:

"Chief Med'cal Off'cer to Main Med'cal. I want a repor' from y'all on the condition of the cap'n, firs' off'cer, an' chief engineer, y'hear?"

"Yes, Doctor Sage." came back the voice of Lumquist.

Kelsey let out a massive sigh hearing that everyone was back onboard and stood up.

"Secure from general quarters." the Kalthurian ordered.

As soon as N'Eligahn re-materialized, he looked around and realized he was suddenly in the Artemis' main medical bay. He pulled off his helmet and began systematically removing the environmental suit.

He hoped against hope that this was the last time that they were going to be beamed anywhere. The last two fake outs had nearly confused him to the point of not knowing if they were staying on the Achilles or leaving it.

And this was the second time in less than a month that he had been brought here via the transporter and it was two times too many. He took a moment to straighten out his uniform before pulling a nurse aside.

"The Captain needs to be treated for exposure and oxygen deprivation," he informed her. "Make sure he's good to go."

Then, he walked out of sickbay and didn't stop for anyone as he passed them down the hallway, ignoring the odd looks he got for having suddenly re-appeared on board the ship.

He took the turbolift up to the bridge and stepped out onto the hectic, overpopulated bridge. Kelsey Alther couldn't contain a smile as he walked onto the bridge; maybe it was the lack of a connection with him but emotions were going *yay!* while bouncing up and down inside.

"Well, it certainly took you all long enough," he said, a smile on his face.

He glanced at Blakely with another smile.

"I'm gone for a few hours and things are already chaotic? Was everyone here eating sandwiches while we were busy outsmarting an insane, rogue AI?"

Then he looked around.

"Kelsey in command? Where's the Admiral?"

"Long story, N'Eligahn; basically, terrorists followed by the admiral ending up on the ground and now in sickbay and he isn't who he appears to be" the androgyn said with a shrug, the smile still on its face.

Josiah jumped up from his chair, and ran up to the Rethian.

"Yew toothpick-headed rascal! I ne'er been so glad to see yew in one piece!" Josiah exclaimed as he grasped N'Eligahn's hand and started pumping it enthusiastically.

Good to see you too you marble-mouthed quack," N'Eligahn shot back before he actually hugged the bearded Human.

Josiah returned the hug. When he separated from the chief engineer, he quickly glanced over at Allana Relys purposely making herself suddenly busier at the auxilliary station, and then back at N'Eligahn.

He dropped the volume of his voice, and said conspiratorially:

"She may not admit it, but she's been worried 'bout yew."

N'Eligahn followed his gaze towards Relys and smirked.

"That's funny; don't know her to worry about much of anything."

"I didn't want to have to fill out the forms to get a new engineer aboard," the Bajoran woman retorted, with a smile on her face. "It's too much of a hassle."

Doc Sage stepped back from his friend also smiling. He then returned to his chair, sitting down next to Kelsey.

Curious... the Vulcan thought as he watched virtually bewildered at the nearly celebratory reaction of the three officers on the bridge.

"Yeah, well...wait, terrorists?" then the Rethian asked.

He looked around for a moment. Right now he was the senior officer on the bridge.

"We'll talk later," he said. "Mister Narod, set a course for the closest edge of the nebula, as fast as we can go. As soon as we're out, send a preliminary report to Starfleet. We have to warn our outlying stations about the Achilles."

"On it, Sir," Narod acknowledged as he keyed in the coordinates.

The Kalthurian motioned to the door of the short corridor leading to the conference room.

"Do you want to discuss what happened N'El?" Kelsey asked before looking at Sage: "You are invited as well if you wish."

Josiah nodded at the androgyn's suggestion.

"Sure. I'm kinda curious t'see what happened o'er there anyway. 'Specially aft'r all that hullabaloo wit' those said terr'rists an th' adm'ral in disguise. Somethin' mighty fishy 'bout this whole affair."

Down in sickbay, Commander O'Conner glanced around and sighed in relief as he was back on the Artemis. He took off his helmet and took a big breath of fresh air.

"Ahhh..."

After a few quick medical scans, O'Conner headed out of sick bay and towards his quarters. As he walked, he tapped his comm and contacted the bridge. Since Kheren was still being treated for exposure and oxygen deprivation, the First Officer was in charge.

"Commander O'Conner to the bridge. Take us out of the nebula. Once outside engage a course to Starbase 10 then tell Alpha and Beta shifts to get some rest. Bridge Officer debriefing at 0800 tomorrow. Oh and good job."

I think, Michael added in his head.

With a smile, he stepped in to his room and headed for the sonic shower.

Good thing we have him or we'd all be lost, N'Eligahn thought, back on the bridge, with his usual disdain of the man. He remained there to ensure repairs were well on their way. He talked briefly with Kelsey and Sage until the relief officer of the deck stepped from the turbolift.

"Anything to pass down, Sir?" the officer asked.

"Apparently evil AIs, terrorists and fake Admirals. We're heading back to Starbase 10. Just make sure we keep heading that way and don't explode en route."

He turned to Alther and the Doctor.

"Would you two come with me, please? I have some things to discuss in my office."

Josiah nodded and N'Eligahn's request. He hit the relief request on his CMO chair, and stood to follow the chief engineer.

He glanced back at Kelsey.

"Yew comin' Lieut'nant Command'r?"

"Yes I am" Kelsey said with a small sigh. The androgyn's body was screaming out for rest and at this point, anything but the bridge was more relaxing.

Even an angry Klingon the chief of tactical thought while standing up after hitting the lock up button on the command chair. At least the shift was coming to an end.

As soon as Ensign Mrrriish, right out after being nearly killed by a phaser shot, nevertheless came up to relieve her, in pure teeth-gritted, stubborn Caitan fashion and growled three words at her under her breath, Ensign Tyvya all but jumped out of her seat and straight for the door leading to the conference and ready rooms and the secondary turbolift at the end.

As they excitedly spoke to each other, Lieutenant Syntron turned back toward his console and engaged his combadge.

"Syntron to sickbay."

"Lumquist here" responded the doctor immediately. He spoke with a tone of preoccupation and unease in his voice.

"What is the condition of Captain Kheren?" he inquired rather matter-of-factly; as one would expect from a Vulcan officer. Yet there was just a trace of concern in his interrogative betraying this Vulcan stoicism.

"Well... if I could get the good Captain to remain in a restful position for any extended period of time," the doctor responded as he was seemingly in the midst of once again guiding the Captain back to his bed in an ongoing tug of war, "he should make a full recovery and possibly be back at his post by the next shift change."

"Thank you, Doctor," the Vulcan concluded and ended the communication.

He turned to Lieutenant Irksos.

"I'm heading down to sickbay Lieutenant, you have the science con."

He then stepped into the turbolift and stated simply:

"Sickbay."

All the while, Kelsey frowned seeing Tyvya get up and hastily exit the bridge; her body language was not showing good things.

"That isn't good" the Kalthurian muttered looking at N'Eligahn, motioning for him to lead the way.

They entered the turbolift and took the short walk to N'Eligahn's office in main engineering where he pushed aside the pile of PADDs lying there and offered his two fellow officers a seat.

He made sure to patch in the bridge channel in order to remain alerted in case there was any commotion up there. After offering his companions drinks, he took the chair behind the desk.

"So, give me a brief overview about what happened," he asked them both.

"Welp," Josiah began, "firs' there was this adm'ral who the skipper had squirrel'd away in a stateroom und'r armed guard. Yew'd hav' t'ask Command'r Alther 'bout more details regardin' that p'ticular affair. I only b'came aware of said adm'ral when Syntron asked me to look inta why the Main Bridge was emptied.

"He an' I came up with th' idea of a EMH performin' a routine scan of the bridge. Aft'r that th' adm'ral showed up in main med'cal to talk t'th' crewman we rescued from the nebula. Adm'ral damn near scared the man t'death.

"Tha's actually the secon' d'tail. The crewman we saved was not 'ntirely unlike a piece of drif'wood: jus' floatin' 'round in space, alone in an escape pod.

"Anyway, the skipper ord'ed Main Med'cal emptied, 'cept myself, aft'r the crewman was beamed aboard. The adm'ral spoke wit' the crewman. The crewman melted down into a panic attack.

"I don' know what the adm'ral said to the crewman, but I fig're had somethin' t'do wit' the Achilles. Almos' like th' adm'ral knew it was out here."

Josiah took a moment to breathe while simultaneously smoothing his beard and moustache.

"Aft'r that things got hazy. Las' thing I r'member I was walking t'th' turbolift. When I woke up I was bound by those terrorists. I heard tell there was a hologram impersonatin' me an' no one could tell the difference. Must've been a good job on the d'tails considerin'.

"Aft'r that fiasco was solved by, what I've been tol' by oth'rs, some brilliant security preparations by our CO when he was still firs' off'cer, I headed down to Main Med'cal. I had lives t'save. Tha's when we d'scovered the adm'ral wasn't the adm'ral."

Doc Sage took another deep breath. Re-smoothed his beard and moustache.

"Aft'r that I came back up th' bridge and thru Syntron' s chain o' probes sensors could see th' three of yew driftin' jus' like th' crewman from b'fore in his escape pod. So once we were in range, I initiated an emergency med'cal transpor', gettin' y'all t'safety. Leas' wise, tha's how I un'erstan' it. Th' res' I'll leave to our security off'cer to d'scribe."
Josiah looked to Kelsey.

"You found a crewman left behind?" N'Eligahn asked. "He couldn't have been left adrift by the Achilles. The ship was entirely shut down, it barely even had power to its computers, let alone enough to fire weapons. How long was the crewman floating out there and if it wasn't the Achilles that attacked, who did? And who was this Admiral, really?"

Kelsey Alther laid back in the chair and cracked its neck while listening to Josiah.

"Doc here got it pretty well nailed there; the 'admiral' was using one of the staterooms that was sealed, under armed guard and had access to the main computer, able to do anything he wanted. I only know that because my security officers informed me of the changes. They were ordered by the captain." the Kalthurian added.

"Where the Doc here starts getting hazy is when we had the issues with our favorite terrorists. Do you remember the crewmember we found who did the original sabotage? Well other members of his party took over the ship, including your beloved Ty'Renyk" Kelsey said with a smirk, knowing full well how N'Eligahn and the Rethian woman got along. "They sent us to the conference room where we used the newly installed transporter to take us to the imposter's room where I used his computer to end the situation, after patching up the Doc here"

The androgyn looked at Sage with a smile.

"After that, it was really just me sitting on the bridge, listening to everyone suggest ideas while I said 'do it' because I don't know anything about the things they discussed really," Alther finished, turning back to the Rethian.

N'Eligahn's eyes narrowed at this revelation before he leaned back in his chair. He tapped his desk console and brought up Ty'renyk's record.

"Not even a single bad mark against her," he read out loud. "Three different commanding officers recommended her for promotion. Her orders here were signed by a Commander and a Captain."

He shook his head.

"It doesn't sound like her."

Then he met their eyes again.

"And the Admiral...so we've been under the command of an imposter this entire time and the captain..."

He shook his head again.

"Can't make any assumptions without evidence," he concluded. "For now, let's hope that the Captain knew what he was doing."

The very idea that the Captain wouldn't verify this Admiral's presence with Starfleet command was bugging him to no end. But like he had said, he was just making assumptions right now. He'd have to read the report afterwards.

"Until then, you'd better make sure the Captain is alright, Josiah," N'Eligahn suggested. "Considering he ran through a starship, smashed through an open window, crawled through vents and did various other things and still beamed aboard with less than a third-filled tank of oxygen, he shouldn't be too bad."

Then he turned to Kelsey Alther.

"Make sure it was entered into the log that you were on the bridge the whole time since the Captain, O'Conner and I left."

"Uh, Sir, I wasn't on the bridge the whole time when you were away though; I was called away several times." Kelsey said standing up. "But I'll go check on the captain." the Kalthurian finished, walking out the doors and to the nearby turbolift.

N'Eligahn shook his head again.

It was an insanely stupid thing to send the three of them all at once. Who the hell agrees to send a starship's three senior officers aboard a derelict and unexplored ship?

"And you might want to make sure you have all of the information from the 'Admiral' that you need." the Rethian added. "And check on the records of the mutineers. See if there were any warning signs. I looked over my people and there was nothing to verify this action and they all genetically check out, so they weren't plants."

He stood up from behind the desk.

"I'm going to the brig to have a talk with someone,"

* * *

With the announced end of shifts and alert, security and tactical assistant chief Ensign Tyvya indeed smartly avoided the crowding of the main shaft...and the people she had almost killed right then and there.

Her fists balled to her sides, her jaw clenched under her closed eyes and her flattened antennae, the nearly three meters tall Andorian shen had to use all of her Starfleet discipline not to rage into the lift cabin; the same hard-ingrained discipline that had prevented her from throwing everyone on the bridge out in space through the main viewer as if it had been but a mere window.

They were barely out of a deadly face off with the most terrible war machine the Federation had ever built, allegedly now under the control of one of the most dangerous minds in History, when came Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, strutting on the bridge as if he owned the ship... and both Doctor Josiah Sage and Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther almost jumping up to throw him a welcome back party... while Lieutenant Syntron and the rest just stood there as if it had been another day of dull patrol.

Not one, not even *one* of them, so much as said a word about the captain.

Well, she could understand the Vulcan chief of science' stoicism... barely; but a Vulcan, *she* was not. The whole time they all went callously about their business while three of them even joyfully chat to one another like old friends on shore leave, Tyvya had gripped the tactical console to the point of making it groan in protest.

The most welcomed First Officer's relief announcement had come just in time for them to be spared the actual demonstration of the coined expression "passionate, violent race" given to Andorians.

When she bolted out of the lift, the giantess almost bowled over the crewmembers in the corridors of deck 7 on her way to sickbay where Mrrriish had said he was; but no clue as to his condition. Everyone, even higher ranking officers, gave her a wide berth; she was well known to be the only one aside from the Saurians on board to be able to wrestle to the ground their powerful commanding officer; There had been more than a few broken bones while merely training with her... and that was in her good moods.

She was, obviously to all, *not* in a good mood now.

As soon as her towering form loomed at the entrance to main medical, Doctor Lumquist came swiftly to her before she grabbed the nearest orderly to hoist him up to her fuming nostrils.

"The captain is going to be fine, Ensign. Would you believe the sheer coldness of outer space barely fazed him at all? I know Andorians are iceworld cold-dwellers, but this... He only needed a bit of oxygen and rest. Your species' osmotic circulatory system is most efficient but when it gets deprived too long... Now, *where* did *he* go *again*... Ah, *there* he is... of course. Maybe you can convince him to stay in bed, Ensign? He keeps getting up to see every crewmember hurt during the attack... even when he nearly faints trying to do so."

Tyvya barely listened to the physician as she forced him almost to run besides her with the long strides she took towards the biobed where stood a familiar silhouette near an occupied biobed in the emergency ward, now out of his evac suit but wearing a tri-ox compound mask over his indigo face.

"Would have been... nice to inform the crew, Doctor." all but growled the giant blue-skinned woman. But she was not looking at him. Fact was, she was not blaming *him*.

When she came up to the commanding officer of the Artemis, she saw that he was looking over at Ensign S'Ken. The Vulcan had been fatally shot by the mutineers, right behind her on the bridge; but fortunately, he was a Vulcan. His remarkable constitution and even more his powerful mind kept him on the edge of life and death just long enough to have the swift counteraction of security chief Alther see him rushed to main medical where Doctor T'Lynn completed the healing trance for him. His condition was still critical... but the Vulcan doctor estimated his recovery chances now past the fifty percent estimate.

"This... should have never... happened." said Kheren as she came up to him.

His four eyes then turned up to face her squarely.

"It will... never... happen... again." he growled under his mask, obviously panting. And she could readily feel that it was not just from lack of oxygen.

The sheer ice of his voice, on his face, containing the smoldering fire in his tone and in his eyes, helped her restrain her initial urge to lift him off the ground and hug him with sheer joy and relief. From one who had years ago savagely killed with his bare hands in a duel and now just narrowly lost a ship, a crew and his very life, this display of self-control and concern for others instantly sobered her... at least outwardly.

"Are you alright... Sir?" she inquired in a surprisingly gentle tone.

"Never mind me, he shot back curtly, and then softened his voice to finish: what about the crew... and the ship?"

As Doctor Lumquist guided insistently the captain back to his bed with the help of Tyvya, the giantess surmised the events on board since his departure and finished saying:

"Fortunately, Lieutenant Commander Alther remembered our standard anti-boarding protocols and proved to be quick and resourceful in stopping the mutiny... And Lieutenant Syntron did a brilliant job at command while the chief was occupied with our fake admiral Doctor Sage unmasked."

Kheren rolled out of the bed and pulled off his breathing mask, Lumquist throwing both hands in the air as he did so.

"I will see the... "Admiral"... immediately."

I'm just glad I can see you... silently sighed Tyvya, following him as he fought a bit of dizziness and the concerned doctor and nurses as well, with his familiar stubbornness, to get the isolation ward where was resting under guard the false Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick.

Fortunately, Andorian faces lacked the facial muscles to express fully their emotions.

It helped her not to cry in sheer joy and relief.

Welcome back... Captain...

* * *

As he descended downward the seven decks from the bridge to main medical, Lieutenant Syntron pondered why Doctor Lumquist was the only doctor treating the injured Captain; especially under the circumstances.

The lift stopped and, as the doors parted, he walked straight for the sickbay doors.

As he walked in, he could see Doctor Lumquist and the Captain in a verbal exchange regarding where the Captain needed to be at this point in time, the security Andorian giantess Tyvya hovering over him, visibly concerned and annoyed at the same time.

The Captain defended his actions emphatically:

"I just needed to check for myself on the condition of my crewmembers."

"The only member of the Artemis crew that you need to show concern for at the moment is yourself... by getting some much needed rest and replenishing your body with oxygen." countered the exasperated doctor.

"I feel fine."

"Oh, but with all due respect, Sir, you're a doctor now?" started to argue anew the physician, arms crossed over his chest. "I can order you to bed."

"No, you cannot." retorted Kheren with a malicious glint in his eye.

"I *am* a doctor," started to protest Lumquist, but the Andorian cut him short:

"*But*, you are *not* the Chief Medical Officer of this ship. *Only* the CMO has the authority to relieve *me* for medical reasons. So, as *he* is not here, you will excuse me, but I have an investigation to make, since the chief of security is not here either to conduct it."

Syntron walked up to the pair and to break the apparent tension and stubbornness brewing between the two, simply inquired with a slightly raised eyebrow;

"Doctor Lumquist, what is the current condition of our Captain?"

"Impossible..." spat the physician, giving up.

"You are trying to outsmart with regulations someone who has mastered the twelve thousand rules of Andorian dueling... *before* he became a starship captain," commented Tyvya to the contrite doctor. "Just wait 'till he falls flat on his face from exhaustion and then I will carry him to his bed."

"If he hurts himself..." began Lumquist.

"With such a hard head?" finished the towering Andorian woman.

Kheren didn't pay attention to them as he noticed his chief of science.

"Mister Syntron! You've been called off-duty; after all that happened, you should rest..."

One look from the taller Lieutenant and the captain sighed.

"Right... Vulcan..."

Looking up at Syntron, he then waved a hand to him.

"Alright then, maybe you can help me with asking a few questions to our imposter, if you feel up to it."

Without waiting for a reply, he ambled towards where the man who had called himself Admiral Kirkpatrick was lying.

As they walked over to approach the patient, Syntron used his combadge to quickly contact Ensign Bella Jacobson to request that she retrieve his PADD in his Chief Science Officer Office on deck 14 and bring it swiftly to him in sickbay. With a sound of exuberance, the young science woman immediately agreed.

On the farthest biobed in main medical, the man formerly known as Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick was simply resting on his back, slightly propped up to look at a viewing monitor he was evidently not even seeing. His gaze was lost far beyond the hull of the ship.

No doubt as far as the USS Achilles had been exiled.

When Syntron and Kheren came to him, he didn't even acknowledge them.

"Well Admiral... or should I say 'Doctor Storm... or is it Doctor Daystrom? That is quite a ride you sent us through. It truly left me... breathless. "

The man didn't respond. But the corner of his mouth twitched, ever so slightly. But the reaction could not escape the four eyes of an Andorian or the keen stare of a Vulcan.

"You know... Doctor... now that I know that you are certainly the greatest computer genius this side of the galaxy, I feel relieved that I was not such an idiot when I did not find you out, even when I verified your credentials. Has it not been for my Chief of Science here, Lieutenant Syntron, decoding your encryptions in our own systems, you would still have succeeded in whatever you planned to do."

"I could have saved her..."

The croaking, weak voice of the man was almost heartbreaking to hear.

Kheren looked back at the Vulcan with some slight but definite confusion in his eyes.

The Vulcan looked from the Captain back to Dr. Daystrom.

"You're referring to TESS aren't you Dr. Daystrom?"

The man then turned his faraway gaze back toward them; he still was not seeing them apparently, but he had heard:

"Tess... My sweet Tess... so, so beautiful... So troubled, so misunderstood... I could have helped her, saved her..."

His eyes suddenly focused on them and his voice became harder, louder, and angrier.

"Fools! Idiot, simple-minded, petty morons! With but a word I could save her! But they would not let me! And now, she's lost, lost! Lost forever!"

"Calm yourself, Doctor Daystrom," gently ordered Kheren with his deep but soft voice. "What do you mean? How could you have saved her?"

As if the outburst had drained him, the man dropped back to his bed and to his faraway stare, his voice droning almost down to a whisper:

"It would have been so, so easy... childishly simple, really. All she needed was stability... conscience... And he had been the greatest mind of our times... With just, just a word..."

Again, the ramblings of the older man made the Andorian look back at his science officer.

At just that moment, as if in cue, Ensign Bella Jacobson then hurriedly rushed into sickbay and made a beeline for the chief of science. Oblivious to what was transpiring at the biobed and with an abundance of anticipation in her voice, she quickly blurted out:

"I'm sorry Sir... I didn't know that your PADD was in this satchel" as she held the crafted bag in the air and swung it like some antiquated charlatan swinging an ancient timepiece... as if trying to induce a hypnotic state as she spoke. "So I looked all around your office and I just couldn't seem to find it, until I finally notice this exquisite bag... it's really adorable with all of the artistic touches and your name so nicely stitched in and..."

Syntron then reached over and ended the awkward moment by cautiously capturing the satchel and apparently simultaneously breaking the spell the ensign had induced upon herself.

She just stood there for a moment; as if just suddenly awakened from her own thoughts... her mouth still open but no words were emanating from her lips.

"Thank you Ensign Jacobson. That will be all" Syntron responded; giving her a look indicating that they were very busy and she needed to leave immediately.

"Oh...You're welcome Lieutenant" she responded as she gazed down crestfallen as she turned and walked out of sickbay as if someone had deflated every ounce of optimism in her body.

Syntron, looking back at the Captain who looked at him quizzically at the scene that had transpired felt compelled to offer an explanation.

"Ensign Jacobson was retrieving my PADD Captain that contains all of the decrypted files that the Admiral, I mean Dr. Daystrom was withholding from us."

He paused for a moment at the awkward silence that ensued.

"I thought there may be some information that could be useful here, including files on TESS and a file on Dr. Daystrom himself."

Kheren nodded but then his gaze went to the departing young woman.

"I think you might need to do a little more decrypting later."

Just sending a knowing glance back to the perplexed Vulcan, he indicated his PADD with a circling finger as if to say "go on." Then he turned again to the disguised scientist, recalling the last words of the man.

"Doctor Daystrom; you said you could help her with a conscience... that of the greatest mind of our times... who are you talking about?"

Daystrom turned his head to him with an expression like one gives to a dull child:

"Why, Doctor Ira Graves, of course. Who else?"

"Who?"

"Doctor Ira Graves," Syntron answered; "the molecular cyberneticist, one of the finest scientific minds of his time... the recipient of the Zee-Magnees Prize... and who claimed to have been a mentor to Doctor Noonian Soong... the creator of Captain Data?"

The Andorian pondered about it a moment.

"Captain Data? The original one? This Doctor Graves should have been dead for some time..."

"The flesh dies... but the mind... the spirit... the ghost... in the machine..."

The voice of Daystrom, talking as if to himself, startled the captain of the Artemis.

Syntron accessed his Science PADD as the Captain continued to probe Dr. Daystrom.

"You have any clue what he is rambling about, Lieutenant?"

Kelsey Alther then appeared in the medbay doorway as Kheren asked his question to Syntron.

"He could be talking about neural patterns or such things that could potentially transfer the person's 'mind' into something else, in this case Tess. The flesh dies but the mind lives on." Kelsey said coming closer to the captain. "A similar thing happened to Captain Data while he was on the Enterprise D if I recall."

"Yes... yes!" suddenly exclaimed the false admiral hearing the Kalthurian's words. "Submolecular transference of neural pathways and cerebral engrams from the organic to the inorganic through cybernetic algorithms work both ways, like any equation! My great grandfather did it first with crude multitronic circuits... then Graves did it with isolinear circuitry! With himself too! So I, with bioneural technology, so similar to life itself... I could do it too... for *her*! For Tess! It took three years to reconstruct the complete sequence; all I needed to complete it all was the original databank... and then, to find her... reach to her..."

He now looked at them with wide unblinking eyes.

"But it was incomplete, unbalanced... it took me twenty years to build up the correcting algorithm... and five years more to find her... and the right ship to find her... I planned it meticulously all those years, building all the details in Federation data-stream to escape any suspicion and get all that was needed... the cover up... the ship... the crew... And the salvaged memory banks... It would have stabilized the Tethys matrix, giving her a matured personality, her full wonderful potential! All I had to do was to get to her..."

Then he frowned with an angry look at Kelsey Alther.

"But this... this unruly child, and all these... *savages*, they would not let me! They would not let me talk to her! She would have recognized me! She would have welcomed me as a daughter welcomes her father! And then, with but a few minutes, I would have integrated the algorithm... I would have saved her! Why wouldn't they let me save her? *Why? WHY?*"

As the man became more and more agitated, a nurse rushed in with a hypospray and injected him with a sedative while Doctor Lumquist came up quickly with his own angry stare and stern voice.

"Captain, I must insist that you leave him be now. His mental state is dropping fast into deep depression since he awakened and you are certainly not helping now. He needs rest. And so do you. Please leave now."

Shouldn't he be resting? Kelsey Alther thought while coming next to the captain.

"Sorry Captain for being late," the chief of security said, avoiding looking at him.

The blue-skinned androgyn didn't want to get into any arguments about its current state and felt looking at him would cause some.

But the Andorian stepped away from the biobed and then looked at Kelsey Alther, straightening his posture to greet his chief of security.

"Lieutenant Commander Alther! Thank you for keeping my ship in one piece. I heard you even took out the trash; well done. By the way, Alpha shift was called off duty; shouldn't you be resting?"

The Kalthurian shrugged both shoulders at Kheren.

"I only had to deal with a minor internal threat and hide from a warship; you on the other hand should be resting from what I have heard through the grapevine," Kelsey said with a smile.

She knew he was probably too stubborn to heed any such advice.

"I am resting. I may not be Human but I would not call talking a strenuous activity."

The Andorian then simply shrugged.

"But since I heard that our warp drive is offline until tomorrow, I will send a complete report to Starbase 10 and then catch my healthy three hours of night sleep... to have all those doctors and nurses off my back."

"You *better*... Sir." came the voice of Ensign Tyvya from somewhere farther in the medical bay behind them.

Syntron then interjected:

"Captain, what Dr. Daystrom suggested, as unlikely as it seems, could theoretically be possible."

The Captain gave him a peculiar look; that is, for an Andorian with limited facial muscles.

As he surveyed and analyzed various files within his PADD, the Vulcan began to put together pieces of Daystrom's story.

"According to Starfleet records Captain, In 2365, knowing he was close to death, Doctor Ira Graves apparently transferred his consciousness to Data, giving him control of Data's body; soon after which his own body died. Although Graves initially tried to hide this fact, it was quickly discovered and Dr. Graves' mind was eventually removed from Data and transferred to the USS Enterprise-D's main computer; allowing his vast knowledge to be stored permanently."

He continued to cross-reference files on his PADD then proceeded:

"Then, when the USS Enterprise-D's saucer section crashed into the surface on Veridian III in 2371, the ship was damaged beyond repair, with a majority of the ships consoles destroyed. However, records show that a salvage crew was later sent back to Veridian III. Apparently someone was able to retrieve the isolinear chips with the downloaded knowledge of Dr. Ira Graves. The records have no further details about this, Captain."

He then surmised looking up at the weary but fully engaged Andorian Captain:

"Although it was recorded that the Human elements of Ira Graves never survived the transfer to the USS Enterprise-D's main computer, it would seem apparent now that, somehow, Doctor Daystrom's mastery of computer technology enabled him to extract enough traces of Graves' personality to reconstruct the complete sequence of cybernetic algorithms to virtually restore him."

As he slowly walked away from the now quiet, resting form of Doctor Daystrom, the Andorian ship commander nodded to the chief of science's explanation and then thought out loud:

"One last thing I still do not understand: how the AI ended up believing itself to be Khan Noonien Singh... of all people? I do recall Commander O'Conner reporting about two distinct... brainwaves inside the computer core when we boarded the Achilles... the Nemesis... I guess the original Tess and Graves patterns Daystrom had tried to merge before it ran away. And then, suddenly, they *did* merge into one... and *Khan* appeared."

He glanced at Lieutenant Commander Alther as he continued:

"Ship logs show it happened at the exact moment this... photonic lifeform transferred itself to it... But if it had been something like a reconstructed Khan persona taking over the matrix, I cannot imagine it trying to disguise itself as our own Doc Sage, or anybody else, like it did... Of all things, and he ego of this persona is simply too immense to even consider dissimulating himself. And he certainly would have not *followed* and taken orders from this Ty'renik fanatic in the first place. *He* would have *led* them, openly, from the front... and certainly *not* on a delusional religious quest either. That is simply *not* Khan Noonien Singh."

He lifted his four eyes to the taller science lieutenant:

"So... where did *he* come from?"

"Perhaps there was an error in the merging and the computer randomly picked Khan out... or maybe the two of them decided to create him," Kelsey supposed then. "But we probably won't know until somebody manages to capture the Achilles... which, judging from latest events, will probably be a Ferengi smuggler in a thousand years time with the ship long out of power... or some such case" Kelsey offered.

The Vulcan looked back at the Andorian Captain and replied:

"Nothing is for certain Captain, however I am beginning to form a hypothesis."

"I hoped you might." almost smirked the rigid face of the Andorian.

"If we look back at the fundamentals first," the Vulcan scientist then started to explain, "we know that the the Mutara sector as a whole lies exactly on the line separating the Alpha and Beta quadrants, eighty light-years from Earth rimward and eleven light-years from the Klingon border. It is devoid of any notable star system except for the Ceti Alpha, Organia, Regula and 38 Lyncis star systems. The Mutara Nebula itself is an interstellar dust cloud located in the Mutara sector."

After a moment to let the others digest the data, the chief of science continued:

"We know that this nebula contains high levels of static discharges and is comprised largely of ionized gases which render a starship's sensors highly unreliable and shields inoperable when insid... even though we have improved both of these conditions significantly during this mission."

He looked back at the resting Doctor Daystrom for a moment, and then refocused his attention back to the captain.

"As discussed earlier in this mission when we were approaching the nebula, in 2285, it was the site of the fierce battle between then Admiral James T. Kirk and Khan Noonien Singh. The battle ended when Khan detonated the experimental Genesis Device inside the nebula while aboard the USS Reliant, causing matter within it to re-form into the Genesis Planet. The planet being unstable because of inherent deficiencies in the Genesis process, disintegrated in a relatively brief amount of time, releasing matter back into space and thus apparently restoring fully the nebula to its former state."

"So... Tess, or Graves, or both, somehow... what; confused them and those events with themselves and the here and now? Is it not... a bit... far-fetched?"

Syntron looked down and began to access recent astrometric readings from his PADD.

"Captain, just prior to your rescue, we had launched five probes: two class V medium-range probes and three and class VII remote cultural study probes to continue gathering samples and data of the surrounding nebula gases."

He saw that he had the Andorian's curiosity peaked the way he tilted his head.

"Despite them not being the best ones to do such a job, what we found this time though was that, in addition to the previously registered and recorded particles within the nebula gases, we are now also detecting slightly enriched particles with minute mineral traces, and also metallic traces: both natural and artificial alloys... possibly from a ship hull... In addition, there is also organic residue; including minute traces of Human DNA and Augment DNA."

He continued to read through the sensor information and then supplemented his findings with a final piece of data:

"There also appear to be traces of protomatter and, as you remember Captain, these are likely remnants emanating from the former Genesis planet... and possibly the USS Reliant as well from the initial explosion that created that planet."

He then looked up from his PADD and stated:

"Now, here is where the empirical evidence ends and the hypothetical speculation comes into play Captain. We can assume that the Achilles-Nemesis has been lurking out here in this nebula for a significant amount of time. Chances are that the initial AI could have conducted numerous astronomical surveys and analysis at some point during this time; even if only just to locate itself and as standard programmed procedure in a ship's computer."

"Which includes... collecting data samples," suddenly understood Kheren. "And with no living soul on board, quarantine protocols were, logically, not deemed necessary..."

"Now, completed Syntron, perhaps as the ship was gathering and processing these samples from the nebula, these samples were contaminated with some of those minute traces of Human DNA and Augment DNA. Perhaps the integration of these DNA samples helped to further shift the final merging of the initial two AIs into the Khan persona to answer the photonic lifeform invasion; something akin to how a living body fights off a virus: especially when it heard about an ADMIRAL KIRKpatrick intent on destroying it... while looking through limited sensors at the badly distorted shape of a nearby starship so much like the old Enterprise. This could all be the result of a basic defensive reaction as the AI took the most immediate and inclusive option available at the moment of a perceived invasion."

"I recall reading several occurrences of the gelpacks being infected on board the USS Voyager during its exile into the Delta Quadrant all those years ago," then added Kheren. "If Augment DNA somehow infected and disrupted this schizophrenic AI which then computed all these diverse elements in trying to find a logical structure to restore itself... Then this terrorist attempt to overtake it, with the Artemis present, was the final trigger."

He shook his head, antennae waving wildly.

"Unbelievable."

After a moment of awed silence, he looked at Alther and Syntron.

"Thank you both for your thoughts on this. At least it will make my report complete... and I guess for some fascinating tall tales back at Starbase 10."

With a nod to the Kalthurian and then to the Vulcan, Captain Kheren turned on his heels, swayed almost imperceptibly, and then headed with a measured pace out of sickbay... with Ensign Tyvya nodding to Doctor Lumquist and following close on his heels.

As Captain Kheren walked out of sickbay, Syntron realized that he'd been on duty virtually this entire mission... several weeks now. Even for a Vulcan, this was pushing the limits of his physiological endurance.

He turned and nodded in acknowledgement to Lieutenant Commander Alther and then proceeded to walk out of sickbay.

As he entered the tubolift, he simply stated: "Deck Two".

As the lift began to ascend, he could sense the culmination of tension that had been kept at bay throughout this mission begin to surface. Under his current level of fatigue, he did not have the mental or physical endurance to control the onslaught of thoughts and weariness that had now begun to envelopment him.

The turbolift stopped and he evoked his remaining reserves of energy and concentration to walk wearily to his quarters. Arriving, he increased the temperature in the room and then headed straight for a sonic shower.

After casually dressing, he walked over to the replicator and ordered Vulcan plomeek soup and spiced tea. As he was consuming these items, he looked over at his instruments resting on a wall.

Afterward, he walked over and picked up his Lyre. He ordered the dimming of the lights and sat there in a subdued alcove and played a haunting melody that he was in the midst of composing during his time in Starfleet Academy. As he meticulously plucked the strings of this old Vulcan instrument, he reflected on the events that have transpired since his arrival on the Artemis.

Weariness allowed thoughts to slip into his consciousness as he played.

Was this the truly the career that he intended to follow? Would he spend his life on a starship continually trying to resolves multitudes of complex problems under the most dire of circumstances? Is this really the most logical application of his skills and abilities?

As the questions continued to swirl and coalesce, so did the exhaustion, the meal and the warm environment as Syntron eventually slipped subtly into a deep sleep with the instrument resting gently by his side.

* * *

Located on deck 17, the brig was a restricted access area whose only entrance was from within the Security department. The Ambassador class design had eight double occupancy cells, which contained beds, retractable table and chairs, water dispenser, and toilet.

The cells were secured with a level 10 forcefield emitter built into each doorway and a second one covering each cell independently, while a third one covered the entire brig area and a final one was located at the only entrance to the area; all under independent power sources and circuits. Transporters inhibitors were integrated into the thick duranium walls impervious to any portable weaponry, and sliding duranium doors would swiftly close any forcefield door failing. There was both live and computer surveillance round the clock with instant release of anesthazine gas in case of trouble.

All accesses and controls were under vocal and retina scan locked to each specific officer on duty.

Centuries of starship security experience had gone into the refit of the Artemis up to modern specs. Nevertheless, the vigilance of the security personnel was still the key factor.

When Commander N'Elighan came to the brig, there was twice the usual number of security guards usually assigned to this section. The security department, under captain's orders, worked on shifts asynchronous and shorter to those of the ship, so that there was always an inordinate amount of well rested or still alert security people all around the ship for a long time in-between shifts.

And so, he was sternly greeted by both the Warden, Ensign Blikilli, a massive black-skinned Human nearly two meters tall coming for his shift, and Chief Warden Karmillia, a small, compact Human that looked carved out of granite loitering around after his own shift ended.

When the chief engineer came up to ask for access, the Chief Warden stood very straight before him:

"I am sorry, Sir, but no visit is permitted unless you are certified next of kin of a specific prisoner. Furthermore, no visit can be allowed without the direct permission of the Security Chief, the First Officer or the Captain. And a security guard must be present, Sir."

"Oh, OK, take care." N'Elighahn said.

He shrugged and turned away.

CHAPTER FIVE : THE VOYAGE HOME

CAPTAIN'S LOG
STARDATE: 87133.6

With all our battle damage repaired, the Artemis is heading back to Starbase 10 at high warp. Although the decades-old mystery of the Mutara sector disappearances has been finally resolved as well as the threat of the return of Khan Noonien Singh as a warship AI averted, there is now a new danger on the horizon.

Starbase 10 has received our complete report; the only survivor of the USS Milton will be given to the care of Starbase Medical; after his usurpation of Admiral Kirkpatrick's identity and authority to lure us after the lost rogue AI controlled ship he had created, Doctor Storm will be handed over to Starfleet Security while all the officers and crewmembers involved in the mutiny attempt will be formally charged before a Court Martial and, then as of now, under extreme security detention to avoid outside assistance or any suicide attempt.

Now we are warned about them; but it is mostly thanks to their poor planning, certainly not because of our efficiency. I am now very concerned about the growing lapse in discipline and professionalism aboard this ship during the last weeks. This will be promptly remedied so that the Artemis can be worthy to call itself a Starfleet vessel once again.

"All prisoners have been isolated in their respective cell, Sirr. Neurogenic suppressors included as well. Sustenance and clothing provided through forcefield shifts as per standard procedures; security monitoring provided round the clock by computer and living surveillance, including anesthetic gas release in cells, brig section and the entire security deck in case of any suicide or escape attempt."

"What about outside help?" asked captain Kheren of the black-furred cat-like female seen on his desk monitor, with a bluntness that showed much of his displeasure since his return to the ship.

On the small screen the assistant Chief of Security stood straighter:

"As per your orders, Sirr, tactical is on full security alert for any approaching ship, including one under cloak, thanks to Lieutenant Syntron's new space sonar. We have logged under a secured, encrypted transmission a false timetable and flight path to Starbase 10 to avoid possible interception, again as you ordered, Captain. Brig security is at constant full alert and, as you know, transmission or transport are under permanent inhibition and standard multiple level 10 forcefield coverage from the cells themselves *and* the entire brig section. And I give you my personal assurances about all the brig's guards I myself selected, Captain Sirr. "

"Much appreciated, Ensign Mrrish. I know I can rely on you."

"We Caitans do not give ourr loyalty easily orr often, Captain. But once done, as I did with my Starrfleet Oath, we arre most loyal... and *most*... vindictive... Sirr." growled the felinoid woman with a show of fangs that reminded him that she had almost been killed by those same prisoners she was now in charge of during Alther and Tyvya's off-duty hours as secons assistant chief of security. She was evidently bringing to her job all her species' predatory instincts to full mode.

"Feel free to let it be known, Ensign. Dismissed... and Good work."

"Thank you, Sirr." Mriish rumbled as the captain cut off the link.

We might not have caught all of them on board... mused the Andorian a moment now that he was alone. Then he recalled his very own last words to the Caitan. *But...I think I have a pretty good idea how to flush them out if that's being the case.*

But that, he would not speak with anyone, except with his First Officer.

There are too many questions about too many people on board this ship... from a chief engineer wanting to see prisoners without reason to the odd behavior of both chief Medical Officer and Chief of Security on the bridge... And so many Starfleet personnel, of all people, falling for such irrational delusions...

The Andorian captain's antennae wavered in annoyed confusion.

It all has the feel of mental manipulation. And with all those reports on neurogenic activity, of Rethian and Kalthurian telepathy, both of which even Federation databanks knew very little about...

He sighed. All he had were vague hypothesis and circumstantial evidence.

Still, there *was* one indubitable fact: there *had* been infiltration, sabotage and violence on his ship, when it should *not* have happened. *Especially not* with Lotus Fleet officers. How could so few completely fool so many well-trained and educated elite Starfleet officers for so long?

Not to mention that he himself had been duped by a computer genius into bringing him aboard under false pretenses. The fact that Starbase Commander Allen Samji had also been fooled didn't ease things for him one bit. Kheren expected that Samji, out of reach of the tampering computer master, to have quickly found out the subterfuge; but believing themselves to be under strict orders from Starfleet Intelligence, the Artemis would not have answered any warning calls, even if one had somehow managed to find them and even reach them before they plunged, unknown to anyone else, into the heavy interferences of the Mutara nebula.

The Horizon Children are obviously poor strategists, but Doctor Daystrom was certainly not.

Must be a master tridichess player, the Andorian bitterly smiled inwardly.

Only sheer bad luck made him fail to cure the sentient lifeform he had given birth to. The same bad luck that had let loose a revived tyrant superman upon the galaxy.

Lucky we could take care of that one problem at least he inwardly sighed.

Kheren however was not going to leave things vulnerable to random chance anymore; not if he could help it: except for O'Conner, he would not speak of his plan to any other officer either. Even to Lieutenant Syntron, who of all people has proven himself completely above suspicion. But so did Kelsey Alther before him...

Keeping them all in the dark would in fact make his plan all the more effective.

This way, there will not be any doubt left... nor any one on board I will not have full confidence in... nor anyone left having any doubts about me anymore. Discipline and confidence: This is the only way a Starship can ever be a Starfleet ship.

The chime to his door ringed.

"Come in, Number One."

The door opened and instead of the First officer, Chief Engineer N'Eligahn stood in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Sir, he's slightly delayed," he said. "I wanted to talk to you for a moment, if I may."

Behind his desk, Captain Kheren stood up and indicated a chair.

"Please do come in, Commander."

"Thank you, Sir," he said, taking the chair. He studied the captain for a moment before speaking again. "I wanted to ask how you're holding up."

"Quite fine actually. Because the crew complement is mostly Human, I find ship's temperature rather uncomfortable; except for my quarters and my daily trainings on the holodeck. That little space-cold session proved somewhat... invigorating once I got to breathe again."

Sitting down when his chief engineer did so, the Andorian then said:

"But surely you didn't come here for my well-being, Commander."

It was not a question.

The Andorian took a moment before answering. He could see by his body posture that the Rethian was geared up for something, but it was not quite clear what.

And Kheren's inability to "small talk" as Human said was not going to help matters much with him.

He finally sighed and answered:

"I'm not sure what you mean by "holding up." If you mean how I feel about it, then let me tell you I feel quite angry about it all... but most of all about myself."

He looked straight at N'Eligahn with his four oculars to add:

"I'm the captain; therefore, I am as responsible for those deaths as the ones who shot them."

N'Eligahn leaned back in his chair slightly, relaxing a bit.

"I understand you, Sir," he said carefully. "I've been there. Far more often in the past two years than I've wanted. It's been a long time since I could look at myself in the mirror. I scrutinize every action, every decision and every move made and torture myself with the 'what-ifs' and 'whys'. I don't like the idea of anyone dying under my command, especially when I *know* I could have done something."

Then, he said with a small smile:

"This mission finally taught me something that I should have known from the beginning,"

"This whole thing was not a total failure then." retorted Kheren, his antennae curving in his ghehnoid equivalent of a smile of his own.

"Something I've experienced since my days flying shuttles on Rethia," the Rethian then opted to tell. "I don't think we've quite got a word to explain it as well as a somewhat archaic human idiom I've learned of." He smiled a bit. "Shit happens."

He waited for a moment for the words to hang in the room.

"You can have the best plans in the universe, but there's always the chance that something can come along to alter it or even completely ruin it," he went on. "In researching this, I uncovered a quote from a Human leader: No plan survives contact with the enemy. I have to admit, Humans do come up with very profound things."

He smirked a bit at the Captain.

"The best plans of mice and men..." quoted Kheren, also from Human sayings. They did indeed have a lot of those.

He tilted his head slightly to a side, still looking at the chief engineer.

"Learning that, I've realized that kicking yourself for it achieves nothing," told the Rethian then. "You just have to keep moving forward, as those lost would want you too."

"Oh, I do intend to. Hence why I am waiting for my First Officer for that very purpose... or else, their death would have been for nothing. That is, if Starfleet still believes after the Board of Inquiry that I am still worthy of command."

N'Eligahn looked down at the table and stared at it for a moment.

"Sir, if I may ask, have you ever killed anyone before, personally?"

His silvery gaze was straight at N'Eligahn but, for a moment, it didn't seem like he was seeing him as he confided:

"On my first assignment after the Academy, I was a security Master Chief Petty Officer at Starbase 10 when the Romulans attacked it. That's where I met Captain Summers, a Lieutenant then; Mister O'Conner was there too at the time, but I do not remember seeing him there. But what I do remember are each of the thirteen Romulans I killed that day... and that thousands died on the cloaked ship I found and helped destroy."

The Andorian touched his brow, where two deep scars and a large indentation showed under his hairline.

"I fought twenty-seven death duels in the *ushaan* before I joined Starfleet. These, Commander, are the scars left by the second, third and fourth warrior I killed. The first one did not even have a chance to touch me before I snapped his spine in two places. So I kept these to remind me how horribly easy it is to kill, and so, I managed to win all the others without taking a life."

His gaze suddenly shifted back to the here and now as he finished with a severe tone:

"Because I know a thousand ways to take a life... but, not even one to give it back."

N'Eligahn studied the captain for a moment before a smile crept onto his face.

"I do, especially that of those close to you," he said. "Live your own life to the fullest it can be and the best you can."

The Andorian shook his head.

"No, Mister N'Eligahn, you do not."

His eyes were as serious as his voice:

"That will just ease your conscience or satisfy your pride... but they are still dead."

N'Eligahn thought for a moment about what the Captain had said when he mentioned moving forward. He kept his face neutral as he thought about any plan involving O'Conner, especially in the wake of what had happened.

"And whatever you decide to do, Sir, please make sure that it's truly the best thing for the crew and not..." he searched carefully for the word. "...to avenge those lost."

Kheren tilted his head back at that and looked at the Rethian with a surprised stare.

"Do I look Klingon to you, Commander?"

His stare rose up with a resolute light in the metallic hue of his facial eyes.

"Vengeance is as futile as your easy dismissal of death, Mister N'Eligahn. I left Andoria for Starfleet because of the highest value of the Federation Starfleet is sworn to uphold: peace and the sanctity of sentient life. I made this my own Prime Directive. All life is sacred; that of my crew of course... but even that of my enemy. I will kill *only* when *all* other options will have failed first. I will not do it because it is the easy way. Any animal can kill. The true warrior knows when to kill and when *not* to kill."

Sun Tzu... recalled Kheren from his Academy lessons. *Ah, those Humans again...*

"I wasn't referring solely to the act of killing," N'Eligahn explained. "As I said, I read the reports, so I know why and how the false Admiral was uncovered. It wasn't a fluke or the result of a long series of questions. It was because of a bad feeling, an instinct. Sage and Syntron saw warning signs in your behavior, reclusivity, more so than usual, hidden information and odd behavior."

He leaned back in his chair slightly.

"I know of another quote, sir: Treat your men as your own beloved sons and they will follow you into the deepest valley," he added with a small smile. "Humans have the most philosophic view about conflict, Sir."

"You should read again, Commander." Kheren admonished with a shake of his head. "Daystrom was not found out because of some vague instinct as you fantasize. He was unmasked because Doctor Sage and his staff followed medical procedures and uncovered the discrepancies between what the computer said and who was lying on the biobed."

The Andorian looked at him squarely.

And I have another quote for you, since you like them so much: How can you send your own son to his death? That one is Andorian."

Then he sighed.

"Is there a point to this conversation, Commander N'Eligahn?"

N'Eligahn smiled.

"I meant about the presence of the Admiral on the ship in the first place, not the Admiral's identity. It was brought about by deductions and suspicions. If they had been following proper Starfleet protocols, then they would have accepted every order, no matter how strange, absurd or outside the norm as law. Do you think that was a bad thing, Sir?"

"Indeed it was."

He could see the surprise in the Rethian's eyes.

"Truth is, *nobody* had a real clue until he showed himself. They only were concerned with my own behavior, making all sorts of wrong assumptions and not even correlating them with the isolated quarters. And then, they balked at his authority, maybe just out of their own wounded pride at having being duped. If they had reacted as proper officers and followed rules and orders, Daystrom, even under false pretenses, would had been allowed to send his message; then, the AI would have recognized him and allowed him to come on board. Fortuitous consequences, I admit; but the facts remain: Daystrom would have corrected the imbalance between the two artificial minds inside the computer and stabilized it, allowing for a full recovery of the Achilles with no one hurt."

His stare was hard as he added:

"Instead, we got undisciplined officers improvising uselessly instead of relying on proven methods and, in so doing, being easily manipulated by infiltrators a proper following of security protocols would have flushed out days before the encounter... The end result was a dozen dead crewmembers... and... Khan."

He sighed again.

"The only problem with our admiral was that he was an imposter acting illegally, even if it was for the right reasons. He was too obsessed and distrustful to use the system properly to achieve his goal. And that is also why he failed."

N'Eligahn stared at the captain for a moment, his brow narrowed. Based on the Captain's actions and habits the past few days, the style of the response didn't surprise him.

"So...Sir... if I may get this straight...the issue was not that someone gave you illegal orders, led you and hundreds of other beings astray and nearly activated an unpredictable artificial intelligence that could quite possibly have backfired and become a threat maybe greater than the Borg invasion..."

He paused again before continuing:

"The issue, if I am reading you correctly, Sir, is that it was actually uncovered by officers who were attempting to prevent the ship from possibly being destroyed by a dangerous imposter?"

His tone remained steady and calm, his eyes never leaving those of the captain. His position didn't change from the laid back form he had taken at the start. His head spines remained forward. He was very much in control of his emotions.

"Might I also remind you, Sir, that at the time they did those actions, the "Admiral" had been acting irrationally, ordered all three senior officers aboard a ship we had no information about and not to mention Sage had been captured and Commander Alther was working on the best information available at the time. What if it hadn't been extremely peaceful? What if as soon as he said those words it had powered up and fired on the Achilles? You can't answer those any better than Kelsey could on the bridge. Kelsey was placing the safety of the ship and crew in the foremost of its mind, despite what some reports may say."

He paused for a moment.

"Sir, I know you to usually be a rational being, but you're taking the words of a rambling and raving madman over those of your own officers. The mutineers were our friends. We had no need to interrogate them. It's as if you're of the mind that we need to inquisition everyone aboard this ship, Sir."

The Andorian listened patiently but with disbelief to the incoherent rambling of half-truths, blatant errors, twisted views, unfounded suppositions and after-event hindsights the chief engineer spoke out. When he was finally silent, Kheren shook his head with an expression swinging between annoyance and pity:

"Commander N'eligahn; I have no clue what you expected to accomplish when you asked to see me. If your goal was to make me admit to some imagined command failing on my part, you just wasted your time... and mine. If it was to cover up some real or perceived failing of yours, ease your conscience or satisfy your ego out of some personal spite or pettiness you might possibly harbor against me, I hope it was worth your time... Because it certainly was a complete waste of mine."

Calmly, he stood up.

"Despite this, I assure you that I will not speak, out of contempt or vindictiveness, against full recognition of your rank when I will report your latest performance to Fleet Captain Kotari. As we stand now, I can only say but two things to you..."

He looked straight down at the Rethian:

"First: *I* am the captain of this ship. And on *this* ship, there is either the right way, the wrong way, the Starfleet way or my way. It so happens that on this ship, the *right* way is *my* way, which *is* the Starfleet way. So there is only one way to go wrong here and, by your own words, you favor it. And that will not be so on *my* ship."

Without blinking, he then added:

"And second: Since you, Commander, are such an authority on command that you can permit yourself to sit in judgment of me, you have only but one choice left: transfer off this ship, join the office of the Judge Advocate General and sit on the board of Inquiry that will pass judgment over my command decisions. But I tell you this as I will the court: the steps I took, and the order with which I took them, where the proper steps, in my judgment as captain of the Artemis. And on this ship, as captain, *my* judgment prevails. If the same circumstances occur again, I will do exactly the same steps, in the same order, without the slightest hesitation. Whatever *you* think or have been trying to say here will *not* change that. "

Then the door chimed.

"Ah, Number One, come in please."

"Aye, Sir," O'Conner replied as he stepped in to the room. He glanced at N'Elighan and nodded.

"Commander, I have ship business to discuss with the captain, if you would get back to your duty."

With a finality that allowed no compromise, the commanding officer of the Artemis then said to the chief engineer:

"You are dismissed."

Before leaving, N'Eligahn shook his head slowly.

"You're right, I'm just a lowly Chief Engineer and Commander, what right do I have to an opinion," he said, his voice low and sad. "My transfer request will be on your desk in the morning. I feel I'm an officer this ship deserves, but not the one it wants."

And that, is exactly your problem, thought the Andorian. But he did not voice it. Like everything else, the Rethian would simply understand nothing.

N'Eligahn turned and left. But Kheren had already turned his back to his former chief engineer.

O'Conner then waited for the chief of engineering to leave before taking a seat in front of the captain's desk.

Andorians were oblivious to what Humans enjoyed as "small talk" as they called it; and Kheren even less so than the average Andorian. Commander N'Eligahn just had a taste of that. He therefore wasted no time and, as soon as Michael O'Conner was in his chair, he told bluntly:

"Commander, I have been reviewing our last mission and our ship records since the Artemis was launched under my command. Despite our past successes, I must say I am most dissatisfied so far with overall crew performance in general and from a few officers in particular. I would like your own thoughts on that."

"I understand your dissatisfaction with the crew, Sir, but I don't think the fault lies within them. As Sun Tzu said, If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, the general is to blame. But if his orders ARE clear, and the soldiers nevertheless disobey, then it is the fault of their officers."

The captain simply nodded, agreeing silently.

While O'Conner was an engineer at heart, his parents veterans of the Dominion wars taught him understand and respect the ways of war. So O'Conner studied some of the greatest military minds such as Patton and Sun Tzu.

"I believe the faults, in security, lies in either Lieutenant Commander's command style or her regulations."

Kheren's antennae slowly wavered this way and that.

"I don't need to agree with you that security in particular has been a major failure on this ship; facts speak for themselves. But I am not quite yet ready to blame it all on Alther alone."

The Andorian sighed.

"Proper rules were simply not enforced enough by *too* many people; the minor incident with crewman Yuri, back during the Dyson sphere discovery, was because of Chief Engineer N'Eligahn's disregard of basic security protocols, not Alther's fault. And bringing aboard a fake Admiral, that was *my* fault, even if I *did* check him out... I may have been a security chief myself once, but *I* should have followed regulations and allow *our* chief of security to do it also."

The commander of the Artemis made a pause to allow his First officer to consider himself the past events.

O'Conner glanced out the window for a moment as he collected his thoughts on their chief engineer.

"I am not sure what to think about N'Eligahn, Sir. He is a skilled engineer and a good fighter but he is brash, impulsive and at times he seems to have a problem with authority."

Kheren nodded, his antennae drooping slightly with obvious disappointment.

"That might be why, despite his rank and accomplishments, and of all officers to ever serve on board, he has the hardest time rising to high standards like those we demand on the Artemis. Kelsey Alther had the same problems once, but quickly learned to be a true Starfleet officer, here on this ship. A shame we could not help our chief engineer mature as well. But, judging alone by that last conversation he and I had just before you came in, he is too much a believer of chaos and his own subjective feelings to believe in method and of using his brain. Pity..." Reflecting on Michael O'Conner's words, he added with a little more edge in his tone:

"But being skilled is the very definition of *any* Starfleet officer; and being a good fighter is easy... not having everyone around you get killed while you cover yourself in glory and blood, that is something else."

The edge of his voice crept into his silvery eyes darted straight at Michael.

"Being skilled and brave means little without discipline. On a starship, everyone can die if but one crewmember neglects even the merest task, if he balks at orders; one airlock is not properly secured in time and we explode from decompression; one phaser is not properly serviced and we blow up from its overload. Discipline on a starship is not just a question of efficiency; it is a matter of survival."

Sitting back and bringing his crossed hands to his lap, Captain Kheren now concluded:

But, who am I to argue with the wisdom of one of your greatest military leaders? As captain, the responsibility of it all is mine."

The Andorian sighed.

"Anyway, for N'Eligahn as for Alther, the point is moot: upon our arrival at Starbase 10, several officers will be transferred off this ship: Ensign Jered Narod, Ensign Cirroc Miles and Lieutenant Junior Grade Allana Relys have expressed their unwillingness to meet the higher standards of the Artemis... so will Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther and Doctor Josiah Sage."

"They will be missed, Sir. Hopefully their replacements will be as skilled and disciplined." O'Conner added.

Kheren was visibly taken aback by the comment. He remembered well how Alther and especially N'Eligahn never showed any respect to his First Officer. The security chief reined these feelings well, but as for the chief engineer...

He let it pass and keyed in on his terminal the transfer requests of each officer for Commander O'Conner to read as he stated:

"Commander N'Eligahn has finally showed us the kind of Starfleet officer he could be; but unable to serve as a true Captain of Engineering on a starship this size. I fully agree with him that, now confirmed as a full-fledged Commander, he will now better further his career elsewhere."

Bringing up the next request, he commented:

"Despite the recent difficult and confusing situation, Kelsey Alther's exemplary service aboard this ship will grant back the promotion to Commander that earlier mistakes had denied. Whole new career opportunities open up and, naturally, Alther wants to take advantage of them. Unfortunately, this means that we will have to look for a new Chief of Security and Tactical as well."

"They should appreciate that. I don't know if I would be so nice if I were in your seat, Sir."

The way the Andorian tilted his head made almost his face look like he was smirking. His antennae did curve inward in amusement.

"Oh, rest assured if they had stayed on board, they would certainly *not* have thought so. But since they are leaving, I am not one to deny them a better opportunity for themselves simply by underlining their faults just out of disappointment, spite or pettiness. So I just record the facts and give them due credit, regardless of my personal opinion of them. But they better hope that their next commanding officer will *not* call on me to give it."

"Was there anything else you wished to discuss?" asked O'Conner.

"You and I will have to make sure the next bridge officers we get are up to their pips. But, most of all, that our next chief of security will not only do his job, but that this officer will have from everyone all the help and support needed to do the damn job properly this time."

"Aye Aye, sir." O'Conner replied without hesitation.
Kheren pointed at his desk terminal.

"And *that* is what I want to discuss with you next."

The Andorian was sitting straight, elbows on his desk and hands joined before him as he explained:

"The sabotage and takeover attempts on board point out to an appalling lack of discipline and efficiency, unworthy of any Starfleet vessel... and downright dangerous to a ship like the Artemis. Although both threats were defused, it was as much due to sheer chance as it was to competence. And both should *never* have happened in the first place. And I'm telling you now, Commander: it will *never* happen again because of such... carelessness of our part... not on *my* ship, not while *I* am in command."

His two joined forefingers extended to point at Michael.

"And, in this and everything else, I hope I will be able to still count on you as ever, Number One."

"Of course you can, Sir. Do we have any of the specifics on how these instances slipped passed the Lieutenant Commander's watch?" O'Conner asked with curiosity, as he only had a brief glance of reports about the details of the attacks.

"I could list you each and every regulation that was overlooked by how many people, from crewmen third class to Commanders, from access restrictions to armory rules; but specifics are unimportant at this point. Bottom line is: we were careless."

Again pointing to his desk terminal, Kheren said with a most serious tone of voice:

"Under General Orders 24 and 33, and under Starfleet Regulation 21, Section 6, Paragraph 4, I am now ordering strict regulations for the Artemis. I want to review those with you and have you personally oversee them and make sure our Chief of Security *and* each of our department heads will be unfailing in applying them."

On the small screen, there was a lengthy list of ship regulations linked to Starfleet General Orders, Starfleet regulations and even Federation Articles.

"Understood sir. We just need to remember to lead by example not by force. We are not above the rules, Sir."

"Certainly not, Commander. And that is exactly my whole point. If we do not ourselves set the example, all of this, rules, orders, uniforms, pips, salutes and all... *all* of this means absolutely nothing!"

There was fire in the silvery eyes of the Andorian as he stated those words.

"This is for *everyone*, from the last crewman up to you *and* me. Eternal vigilance is the price of Freedom... One of your own kind said that, long ago." recalled the captain out loud. No wonder we have been targeted by everyone, the Klingons, the Romulans, the Borg... and now these... Children. They all could see that we were fast asleep."

Kheren looked straight in the eyes of his First officer:

"No longer."

The commander almost smiled at this. He had missed working with a more disciplined crew, like that of the Thunderchild, the first ship he ever served on.

Then, Kheren sat back again and looked more amiably at O'Conner.

Anything else to suggest, Number One?"

"Ship wide drill, when we get our new Chief of Security. Also a full sweep for explosives and sabotage before the next mission, by our crew."

The captain nodded.

"Good idea. In fact, come to think of it, it is such good idea that we will apply this to every department... and to the crew itself. I'll have a fully detailed ship procedure to show you before we leave for our next assignment. And we *will* apply it."

The captain of the Artemis then sighed once more.

"I know this will sound rather draconian. But truth is, we will only apply over two hundred years of Starfleet wisdom, and before that hundreds, if not thousands of years of military experience on over a hundred worlds, all well established in our basic orders, rules and regulations. And even with them, we will not be completely sure to successfully avoid falling even to blundering fools like those Horizon Children; but without them, we are *sure* to fall."

As he was about to start delineating in full those ship regulations, his eyes and antennae darted straight forward to face squarely the First officer of the Artemis. With utter conviction in his deep voice, he started by stating firmly:

"If we fall, let it be because adversity is better and more than we are, not because we are less and worse than we should be."

"Of course, Sir. We shall not let our heritage down." O'Conner said firmly.

After a short pause the XO added.

"If there isn't anything else? I should get back to bridge."

"Thank you, Number One. But just before you do, there is a small matter I want to discuss with you also..."

And then, he detailed with him his plan for their voyage home.

* * *

N'Eligahn sat at his desk, reviewing the reports from what had happened over the past few hours. Four of his officers had been revealed as terrorists. That, coupled with the death of one of his other officers left main engineering slightly understaffed. He was shuffling people around their departments when his bell rang.

"Enter," he said. Lieutenant Blakely entered, a PADD in her hand.

"Here's the new duty roster," she said. "I worked with it as best I could."

"I know you did," N'Eligahn said. He smiled. "I understand congratulations are in order."

"Sir?"

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew," he said. He stood and held out his hand. "I just got word that you've been requested to become chief engineer of the USS Independence. She's a Cheyenne-class with a good performance record."

"Are...are you serious, sir?" Blakely asked.

"I try to be a lot of the time about such things," N'Eligahn said as she took his hand and shook it. "I take it you're going to accept it?"

"Chief Engineer of a starship? I'd be insane not to," Blakely said.

"Take care of her and she'll bring you home every time," N'Eligahn said. "Good luck, chief. Don't worry about the rosters, I'll take care of them."

"Thank you, sir," Blakely said. She turned and walked quickly out of his office. As he moved back to his desk as she left, his door rang again.

"Enter," he said, turning towards the door. Relys entered the room, her eyes focused on him.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Is what true?"

"You're leaving."

Monty yipped at his feet and he knelt down to scratch the dog behind the ears.

"Yes, I put in for a transfer to the Starbase for the time being."

"Why?"

N'Eligahn sighed and stood. He turned to look at the weapons mounted on the wall.

"This incident and others in the past have shown me a weakness in Starfleet's leadership," he said. "It's full of officers who are either blind to the world, or ones who adhere to rules and policy like a security blanket, terrified of stepping out of their comfort zone. Like Khan they think two dimensionally, not three."

"So you're going to run away again?" Relys asked.

"No, I made a mistake. I wanted perfection out of myself and I know that's impossible. Starfleet needs leaders who can think on their feet and are subservient to no one save two, the Federation and their crew. A leader needs to know when to lead and when to allow others to lead, when to guide directly and when to sit back and let their juniors make mistakes. Instinct backed by reason coupled with logical analysis. That's what's needed."

He shook his head.

"I'm going to the starbase to begin further qualifications and to prepare myself. I want to go back into command. I know now that running from my own mistakes won't solve them. They need to be faced and learned from."

"So you're just leaving again? After you dragged me from my other position to here, where you partly helped to destroy my career?"

"And you saved me," N'Eligahn said quietly.

She looked him up and down.

"You could have...no, you should have let me destroy myself. But you didn't. I can never repay you for that."

He paused for a moment before he met her eyes.

"I want you to come with me." Relys stared at him for a moment, their eyes locking before she turned away and began to move towards the door.

"I have to thank you again, for saving me. When I sent the quick mental thought to direct myself towards the Artemis. You answered."

He stood and walked over to her.

"What do you want from me?"

N'Eligahn placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her towards him. He leaned in and their lips met halfway. Relys closed her eyes and lost herself in the moment.

She pulled away a few seconds later, her back against the wall. Her eyes met his and it was a few more moments before she spoke.

"I hate you...so much," she said.

"Might as well be good at something."

They kissed once more before Relys drew herself away.

"I have to go take care of some things," she said, her voice soft.

She backed out through the doors and out of the room.

* * *

Seven point three-five hours later, Syntron awoke from a very deep sleep as a Vulcan lyre was poking him in his side like an impatient finger trying to awaken him. He stood up and walked over to replace the instrument back along the wall. Afterward, he dressed and then checked his terminal for his schedule and any messages. There was nothing slated under his schedule other than a reminder that his duty shift would be coming around again in three point six-five hours. There was also a message from one of the Scientists that he was working with on Starbase 10 prior to the launching of this mission. He would attend to this message at another time.

He then addressed the computer:

"Where is the current location of Captain Kheren."

"Captain Kheren is currently in the Arboretum on deck 8 aft" the synthetic feminine voice of the computer replied.

Curious, the Vulcan chief of science thought as he exited his quarters and headed toward the turbolift.

As it descended, he began to reflect on the irregular chain of events that transpired from the time that they left Starbase 10 until he had retired to his quarters seven point four-two hours ago. He was certain that these events weighed heavily on the mind of the Andorian Captain. The turbolift stopped and the doors parted open. He exited and worked his way toward the Arboretum. Arriving, he could smell the fragrances of some of the exotic flora that flourished within this arboretum.

Although he did not know what duty would call a ship's captain to such a location, he was aware that certain crew members appeared to have found this environment soothing. He heard crew members describe it as a place to reflect and center themselves when they were troubled. Others described it as an oasis that thrives and teems with quiet life-forms among the coldness and sterility of a ship warping trough the frosty darkness of space.

He then spotted the Captain standing among the flora staring intently through a large window with a vista to the stars.

He approached the reflective Captain.

"Greetings Captain. Am I interrupting something?" he asked as the Captain only at that moment became aware of his presence.

Kheren's eyes were open but seemed dimmed, like those of the blind, until the voice of the chief of science rang softly near his curbed antennae. Then it was as if a light suddenly flared up in the silver orbs glowing in his dark blue face as his full attention shifted from somewhere well beyond the streaking stars outside to the presence of Syntron.

"You do, Mister Syntron," answered the Andorian. "But you surely know even better than I that interruption is an integral part of Vulcan meditation. If I recall, Terran Zen masters used to strike without warning meditating pupils with a stick for the same purpose. Your interruption is as useful and certainly less painful."

He stood and looked up at the taller Vulcan.

"Anything I can do for you, Lieutenant?"

He looked at the Andorian Captain who stood there reflectively among the flora and responded: "My next shift is not due to commence for three point six-one hours. Nevertheless Captain, I am fully rested and even though I possess no poking stick, I am ready to perform any other needed repairs or duties required while we are enroute to Starbase 10."

"I expected no less of you, Lieutenant... and not just because you are Vulcan. I read the reports on our last weeks out there and I must say I am quite impressed with your dedication and your initiative as much as from your exemplary attitude... You are a credit to our uniform, Lieutenant."

He knew that Syntron, as a Vulcan, would not be much sensitive to praise. Nevertheless, there were things a commanding officer was expected to recognize openly of any officer under his command... even if it was only for the benefit of other, more emotional crew members.

And Kheren had more substantial recognition to give anyway:

"Fact is, Mister Syntron, I have already filed a report to Lotus Fleet Command with my evaluation of your performance as an officer of this ship. I am recommending you for promotion to full-fledged Lieutenant and for special citation as well." Syntron was initially a bit taken aback by the words of acclamation and commendations emanating from the Captain. The only indication of this though was a slightly raised eyebrow.

"I believe the expression is 'Thank you' Captain, although no remuneration is required or anticipated to one merely fulfilling their duty as an officer aboard this ship."

"I understand... but I somewhat disagree. Yes, we might believe that one should not have to be thanked for doing one's duty. But good words are never superfluous when some of us might slip into doubt and despair."

The commanding officer of the Artemis seemed to look as much to the Vulcan as he was looking back inside himself.

"Since the Dominion war, the Romulan disaster, the Klingon withdrawal from the Khitomer Accords, the Borg Invasion... this universe is turning darker to some... too dark to way too many... When even Starfleet officers start believing that instinct should supersede reason, feeling disregard preparedness, that fatality controls our lives more than we do, than we should, more than we could... we are entering dark times indeed."

Kheren sighed.

"When some deluded people see salvation in a destructive cosmic anomaly... and even Starfleet officers lose faith in what they swore to uphold... it is time to acknowledge those who will use *reason* to bring us out of the darkness and make them realize that they are the beacon of hope that we all really need in such dark times. People like Commander O'Conner... and you, Lieutenant. "

His metallic-hued gaze shifted towards the streaking starlights as he added almost just for himself:

"Sometimes, a single word can bring hope back. One dim star is enough to help us sail through the night."

He turned his four oculars again at the Vulcan.

"The brave sailor let himself be carried by the wind at his back without fear; but the wise one never forgets to check wind and current first... and to bring an oar."

Syntron affirmed the captain's point.

"There is a logical aspect to what you are implying Captain. Wisdom and courage should be working in unison with each other and not in contradiction or opposition to each other."

"Wisdom without courage is posturing, agreed Kheren; courage without wisdom is foolishness."

Syntron pondered for a moment further on the words of the Captain.

"I concede there is validity in recognizing and acknowledging excellence in performance and in duty if it inspires these characteristic in others to thrive and are not merely affectations to boost egos or lull one into complacency."

He continued after a short pause:

"What I have found throughout these missions thus far Captain is that every problem that we have faced no matter how challenging they appeared, contained the seeds of its own solution somewhere within. Often the solution to each of these problems began to present themselves through the careful analysis and application of information and data. During our missions, this also required the selfless and coordinated efforts of many officers within different departments working simultaneously and in conjunction with each other for the common greater good."

The Andorian nodded.

"You just summarized why we are out here, Lieutenant. And especially *how* we survive, even succeed out there."

Syntron added:

"Based on recent events, one of our primary challenges as Starfleet officers appears to be to have officers innately divorce themselves from their egos and place the needs of the many and the solving of a particular problem as the focus in their pursuits. However, these seem difficult if not improbable lessons for those wrapped up in egotistical pursuits."

The Andorian captain's antennae curved inward in obvious amusement, although his voice and eyes were deeply serious:

"Would you be wrong, we would have never defeated those terrorists... or Khan."

Looking again at the cosmic vista of stars, he said then:

"That is why, in light of recent events, we will see several changes on board this ship. We cannot, we *will* not, run this starship, risk lives aboard and across the Federation, on posturing or foolishness."

He shook his head as if to chase off some lingering bad feeling.

"I hope I will be able to count on you, Mister Syntron."

The chief scientist of the Artemis thought for a moment, and then verbalized his thoughts:

"I have to admit Captain that I did have a brief moment of uncertainty in regards to my service here on the Artemis; but as I meditated on my role as science officer and during those moments while I was in command of this vessel, it again became clear that as Surak pointed out 'selflessness was the only way to find true inner peace' and that the only noble aspiration for me to follow is that which serves others."

Finally the Vulcan confirmed:

"Therefore Captain, you can rely on me to be ready and available in whatever capacity duty calls to meet the needs of this ship, her crew, and the United Federation of Planets."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. The Federation, especially Starfleet, but most of all this ship, need officers like you with open eyes to what lies forward without being blind to what lies behind."

Then, Kheren looked straight at Syntron.

"May I ask what was the cause of this uncertainty you said that you felt?"

Syntron looked at the Captain and knew that his only response would have to be one both forthright and clear.

"As I reflect back on those moments Captain, I recognize that it was primarily exhaustion impacting rational thoughts. But I must acknowledge that I also brought into question my handling of Lieutenant Commander Alther while I was in command, and my impetuous approach to severing the neurogenic link to N'Eligahn on the Achilles. Under the circumstances I thought I was acting in the best interest of the ship and the crew, but based on Alther's reaction..."

He paused again for a moment to unmistakably put his thoughts into words, and then continued:

"I clearly offended and insulted her. This was not my intention Captain, but evidently I should have handled this situation more appropriately. Fortunately, Doctor Sirris stepped in and gave Lieutenant Commander Alther a hypospray to suppress her psionic abilities... rather than a Security team relying on my perhaps... more primitive approach to resolving the telepathic connection predicament."

Kheren nodded.

"Anyone of us can make a mistake, especially under pressure, in face of danger, of the unknown. But all together we can correct it, even prevent it... on the bridge, on this ship, in Starfleet."

Then he sighed.

"That is why we have rules and regulations. Most of our errors in judgment had already been done by others well before we did, under the same pressure of inexperience and danger. And so, simple rules were made since then to solve such situations efficiently, or even prevent it from occurring... or from making things even worse. At the time, Doctor Sirris only knew them better than you from her own specific area of expertise and simply applied them, solving with ease what looked from your end like a difficult crisis."

His antennae curved in amusement as he thought further out loud:

"You or she didn't need any animal instinct, mystical insight or magical aid, not even luck; in your case as it is often so, the answer was already there, in thousands of years of wisdom from a hundred worlds behind our Federation Articles, our Starfleet General Orders, our starship rules and regulations, our department protocols. The Book, as many would call it."

His amusement quickly faded as his tone of voice became quite serious then.

"It was not written by idiots you know. So, only a novice needing still to learn them... or worse, a buffoon full of himself... ignores given guidelines to needlessly improvise. Do not throw the book away before reading the last page."

"Indeed Captain" he acknowledged.

Syntron contemplated this thought for a moment as he gazed out of the window into the vastness of space as the stars twinkled and blurred past their view. "There also is an intellectual fulfillment in resolving challenging tribulations and overcoming technical obstacles as we to continue expanding various aspects of our ship-wide efficiency and push past the boundaries of what is currently possible. These are among the life lessons that seem to define who we are as Starfleet officers, and as a crew working together for the common good... and these have already been the moments that have allowed the Artemis and her crew to survive against all odds throughout different points in these past missions."

"Spoken like a true Vulcan, Mister Syntron; *and* as a true Starfleet officer."

He then turned his gaze from the star view back to the Captain and questioned "However Captain, I can't help but wonder... when that moment arises when you get to that last page... and still find nothing...?"

The Andorian looked at him then back at the stars.

"Then, you write the *next* page."

* * *

CAPTAIN'S LOG
STARDATE: 87161.2

Upon returning to the Artemis and learning of the Horizon Children cult on board, I devised with my First Officer and Commander Samji back at Starbase 10, on a secured, encrypted channel, a simple but effective ploy to weed out any other possible sympathizers.

I was not on board when the hijacking occurred. So, I let the rumor of my own sympathies for the cultists' cause linger on the ship during the twelve days of our return trip to Starbase 10. I also met the prisoners individually for the expected interrogation but, under its cover, expressed with a totally convincing display of body language mastery to each one separately my pride and joy in finding the anomaly... and my shame and anger of serving the instrument of its intended destruction.

I will have to remember to see that my Starfleet Science Decoration, the one everyone knows I got for discovering the Azimuth Horizon, should be fully restored... because I used it a bit too much forcefully too many times to show my alleged sympathies to them...

As I expected, each concluded and convinced one another that the false admiral's plot had effectively pulled me away from what I had originally planned to do: reach the anomaly and start my own Maquis movement there to safeguard it.

Alas, they could also only but conclude as well, that the ill-planned, unwise attempt at takeover had made this impossible... for the moment.

The opportunity of rallying to their cause nothing less than a starship captain of a ship of the line from the most elite division of Starfleet Command, a veteran of the Borg War and the very one being that had revealed to the galaxy the coming of the Horizon, was way much too tempting for any one of those fanatics to ignore.

After a short while, even my First Officer, although being in the know, truly started to wonder how much of it was make believe... or but a devious way for me to find out if he would join me in the Cause!

And so, by the time the Artemis docked at Lotus Fleet headquarters, the last six Horizon Children sympathizers had been identified, monitored and delivered to Starfleet security along with our twelve prisoners; eighteen members of the crew requested a transfer upon arrival, along with three of the ship's senior officers and three junior bridge officers; forty-nine crewmembers denounced the captain to the first officer; twenty-one came directly to my ready room to confront me about it; and four hundred and forty three reports on me were sent to Starbase 10, many of them being co-signed by several crewmembers together.

The Artemis is now utterly free of any subversive presence on board; and the security measures I planned for this ship with my First officer and remaining and future department chiefs will ensure that infiltrating Section 31 will be child's play compared to the Artemis.

I expect Commander Samji himself had also seized this opportunity to clean up his own space station. Rumors do fly, even in space. I hope also that, if not all of Starfleet, at least the other Lotus Fleet captains on their own ship will too.

Doc Sage chimed the door to Kheren's ready room. Like the last mission Artemis had been on, the captain had sequestered himself off from the crew filing bureaucratic paperwork. Josiah had always admired Kheren for that. Bureaucracy was something Josiah had no patience for. But then again that's why Josiah was not a captain of anything.

When the deep voice of Kheren bid Josiah enter, the doctor did so with a PADD in hand.

"Skipper, I jus' wanted t'do a quick check out wit' yew, as well as somethin' else I felt needed mentionin'."

Josiah set the PADD down on Kheren's desk.

"In there is my full repor' on the crewman we rescued from the Mutara Nebula. It's the opinion of our psych team tha' th' crewman has some deep-rooted post-traumatic stress that may r'veal itself down the road. Wit' your acquiescence, I'm recommending he be transferred to Starfleet Med'cal on Earth. There he can r'ceive the best care he requires."

"And I alone survived to tell thee..." said the Andorian to himself. Seeing the puzzled look on the Human's bearded face, he made of vague gesture of apology.

"Sorry... I was thinking of the man and of Khan and his fondness of Herman Melville's old Moby Dick novel. Exemplary work as usual, Doc."

Josiah smoothed his moustache and beard.

"Also on th' PADD are my strongest recommendations for my r'placement as Chief Med'cal Off'cer."

When Kheren scanned through he found Doc Sage's nomination was none other than Doctor Lumquist.

"He's a strong off'cer who's more than cap'ble of performin' above an' beyon' the high standards I know you r'quire of your d'partment heads. This pas' mission already he's proven himself iffin' yew r'view his actions o'er the time we were in the nebula."

"Thank you, Doc. You have a clear mind and a respect for others that can only give your opinion much value to me. Lotus Fleet Command might decide otherwise, but I certainly will put forward your recommendation, if Doctor Lumquist is willing to step into your shoes." Josiah stood for a moment, as though he had something more to add.

As Kheren was a master of human body language, he bid Doc Sage to speak his mind.

"Ah, well, yes, sir," Doc Sage said. "I jus' wanted t' thank yew. Bein' a memb'r of y'r crew has b'n one of the most enlightenin' times of my life. Y'r lead'rship stylin's an' set example hav' made a mark on me I will ne'er f'rgit. F'r all'a this I wanted to 'xpress my deepes' grat'tude t'yew, sir. I c'n ne'er r'pay yew f'r e'rythin' yew've done to help my pers'nal growth."

"I'm just trying my best for the good of the crew, the ship and the Federation, just like you, Doc. And just like you, circumstances threw me before my time into the deepest responsibilities one could ever face. So we both have to learn along the way, you and I. Starfleet provides us a lot of strong and helpful guidelines and I am not so pretentious and so full of myself as to disregard them outright just to flatter my ego. But like you, I still endeavor to learn and grow beyond what was and into what will be."

Doc Sage offered his hand to Kheren.

When the doctor did this so typical Human gesture, the Andorian looked at it, and then with a solemn gesture took it, feeling the very warm contact with the alien skin.

"And this is one thing I learned from you, Doc. And I am grateful for it, because it reaches well beyond duty and service. I am deeply sorry to see you go, but glad another ship, another crew, will benefit from your most valuable quality: your deep respect of life and others. Fare well, Doctor Josiah Sage of Earth."

When the muscular Andorian shook it, Doc Sage smiled with genuine warmth.

"G'bye, skipper," Doc Sage said. When Kheren dismissed him, Doc Sage turned and left the captain's ready room.

* * *

"Captain Kheren!"

The Andorian held firmly open the turbolift door as the woman that had called him out ran up to him and slid inside the cabin. But as soon as it was closed, she hit the hold button to stand before her commanding officer within the isolated confines of the turbolift.

"Captain, may I have a word with you, Sir?"

Seeing Assistant Chief Engineer Lieutenant junior Grade Patricia Blakely standing so resolute before him, Kheren was startled by the way her face and eyes looked; it was as if she had been just out of a nightmare, and the bad feelings still lingered into her mind.

"Of course, Lieutenant. Let us go to my ready room..."

"That will not be necessary, Sir. What I have to say will not take long."

"As you wish." agreed the captain. "What's on your mind, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, Chief N'Eligahn informed me yesterday that I was offered the position of Chief Engineer aboard the USS Independence."

"Indeed, Lieutenant. Quite an accomplishment for you at this early stage of your career. Fact is, you assumed the real work of a chief engineer for practically this whole mission. I approved myself of the transfer, following your exemplary performance since the very launch of this ship."

He suddenly thought with astonishment that the Human female would burst out in tears.

"Sir..." her voice was almost cracking.

"Are these what Humans call tears of joy, Lieutenant?"

She took a deep breath and assumed the professional, hard controlled attitude that had made her so reliable on the bridge before saying:

"Sir, I am truly gratified by your confidence and that of Starfleet Command..."

"But?" could clearly hear the Andorian even without his sensitive antennae.

"But... I would respectfully ask to stay on board the Artemis, Sir."

Kheren tilted his head on a side for a moment.

"Why would you let pass such an opportunity for yourself and just continue assuming a subservient role, probably to our next chief who will not even be much more your senior, when you yourself are more than ready to step up?"

She seemed to think for a short moment but then straightened herself, her eyes and her tone of voice: "Because it would not be the Artemis, Sir."

Kheren tilted his head to the other side.

"That's what I said; a step up..."

"I disagree, Sir. Captain, a ship is not just an object to take care of with tools. It is a home, a place where you live and grow with people that give meaning to what you are and what you live. Every ship is so, yes... but there is only one ship with an Ensign Tyvya or Mriish, with a Lieutenant Cheonghi or Syntron, a Commander O'Conner... or you."

The Andorian was taken aback by what the blonde woman said. He understood the words plainly enough; but he was unable to cope with the deeper feelings and meanings behind them; at least where *he* was concerned. That was one of his failings he was keenly aware of: he never quite could.

Patricia Blakely had been on board since the very first day he took command but, outside of their shared duties, he never spoke more than three words to her. He barely did with anyone else actually... another one of his limitations he was also aware of. And so, her sudden show of attachment and loyalty, almost affection, was rather baffling to him.

But then again, most people baffled him anyway... especially Humans.

The Human woman however, seemed quite able to clearly sense his feelings:

"Captain, we have chosen the uncertainty of a risky profession in a dangerous, chaotic universe constantly twirling seemingly madly around us. The only way to face this is from a dynamic but firm center of stability,"

"You're describing a gyroscope, Lieutenant."

"I'm describing a starship captain... Sir."

There was a moment of silence as the words of the blonde engineer lingered between them. Finally, Kheren looked back at her, thought a moment and finally said with a soft voice;

"You alone control your life, Lieutenant. But if you decide it is better for you first and foremost to stay on board, this ship and myself will be the ones benefiting most from such a decision."

The Andorian almost took a step back as he thought the woman would suddenly leap at him in explosive joy and relief. But Patricia Blakely stopped herself short, lowered her reddening face and simply whispered;

"Thank you, Captain."

"No , Lieutenant Patricia Blakely of Earth... thank *you*." answered Kheren as he hit the resume button of the turbolift.

The ride from deck 21 to deck 8 was a short one. As the door parted, a soft but powerful voice fell down on the both of them:

"Who's been holding up the damn elevator?"

"Thank you again, Captain. See you on the bridge." said the blonde engineer as she exited the cabin with a wide beaming smile, letting the towering ensign Tyvya take her place for the rest of the ride to deck 2.

Once the door closed and the turbolift shot upward, the giantess looked down at Kheren with arms crossed on her chest. Her tone of voice had a curious edge to it as she let out one word:

"Well?"

* * *

Josiah was on Holodeck 2 less than fifteen minutes later. It was a scene straight out of the American Southwest on Earth.

The sun had set about five minutes prior, painting the sky in vivid violets. A coyote yipped and then howled in the distance.

Josiah sat alone on a log a meter away from an open fire pit. The fire was crackling and spitting.
On his lap was his steel-stringed guitar. His playing, and signing, echoed over the open valley.

Kelsey Alther walked up behind Josiah.

"Hey Doc, I heard you were leaving" the Kalthurian said, taking a log next to him and staring into the fire.

"End of the fun with us hmmm?" Kelsey enquired with a smile.

The female-looking androgyn offered Josiah something small.

"I'm making rounds of people who are good friends" Alther confided, as gesturing to the gift wrapped box. "I took some stones from my home planet when I left to remind me of where I came from and as gifts for people who were good friends for me."

The blue-skinned, white-haired Kalthurian turned back to the fire.

"I already gave out the only other one on this ship... but he wasn't in his quarters. Guess N'Eligahn will have to find it somewhere in his room" Kelsey said with a smile once more.

"So, what's next for you Doc?"

Josiah smiled at Kelsey's presence, and took the gift.

"My thanks f'r the gesture! I feel like I should give yew somethin' in r'turn. Guess I'll hav' t'git yew somethin' when we git t'Starbase 10."

Josiah smoothed his moustache and beard.

"Nex' f'r me? I dunno. Guess I'll fig're it out when I git there."

He smiled at Kelsey again.

"B'sides, why does one always need a plan t'git through life? There's a sayin' on Earth: 'Life's too short.' An' it's wholly true."

He looked back into the fire.

"Me? I'm jus' gonna see where the tides take me. I'll float on, an' I'll be ok."

Josiah started playing a new song.

Kelsey just laughed.

"Keep playing that guitar and that's all I'll ever need from you" the androgyn said with a smile as it laid back more on its seat.

"Well, that saying may be true for you. I can live for a good thousand years, so you better be supporting me in my old age, boy!" Alther said jokingly while listening to Josiah.

Josiah smiled at the joke. Being fully aware of Kelsey's age, Josiah appreciated the humor. "Mind if I tag along on your little floating trip? Got nothing better to do with my life as it is" Kelsey finished.

"It would be my utmos' pleasure t'hav' a frien' on the trip," Josiah said to her as he played.

Together, they floated on.

The holodeck doors opened to admit a few people already aware that Doctor Josiah Sage was conducting another session of his get-together program that had become quite popular on the Artemis.

Among them could be noticed Lieutenant Junior grade Patricia Blakely, the blonde woman linking her arms with a tall, dark-skinned, bald figure; that of Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert Baoule, finally out of sickbay after his almost deadly encounter with the Horizon Children fanatics.

The two of them chose to sit apart on a flat rock, head leaning on one another's as they looked at the twinkling stars and the magnificent moon shining in the dark velvet night sky.

They looked just like two souls that had feared to lose one another forever and had finally found each other again for one more day.

* * *

Two weeks after their unexpected adventure in the Mutara nebula, Captain Kheren sat in the now familiar office of Commander Samji, a mug of his peculiar Cardassian fish juice at room temperature, what he called his "captain's brew," in one hand.

The Andorian was still not accustomed to such casualness during official meetings, but even if he still did not fully understand the need, he did appreciate doing this concession to Human habits, if only for the sake of putting others more at ease.

After all, if he really had wanted things to be exactly as on Andoria, he would have never left in the first place.

Focusing his four oculars on the Starbase commander, he broke the silence with his deep-sounding but soft voice:

"I suppose you may have a question or two following our report, Commander?"

"That's an understatement," Samji said, looking up from his PADD with a frown. "Over two point five percent of your crew were these... Horizon's Children as they call themselves? I'm practically speechless. How could so much of Lotus Fleet be corrupted by this religious zealotry?"

The question was clearly rhetorical.

"I'm not the one to answer that question, Commander. Andorians have always been too pragmatic to fall to such delusions; and in this day and age, few people do, most of all Starfleet officers. Even Bajorans, who are still deeply religious, are more enlightened than that."

Samji set down the PADD and stood up and paced toward the fish tank that he had in the corner of his office. He provided the animals with some sustenance while he tried in vain to think of a question he could ask the Captain that could possibly explain it all.

None came.

"And this Admiral that so convincingly fooled both of us and somehow had perfect security credentials!" Samji began shouting, which was very unlike him. He usually remained calm and collected, even under intense pressure. He lowered his voice slightly. "We even have some security issues on Starbase 10 that we're investigating now that I am not at liberty to go into further. Do you suppose it is all coincidence? Disjointed groups taking action all at once? Or is there some sort of greater threat here that we're not seeing? Someone behind the curtain pulling the strings?"

All these questions flowed from the man's mouth like a torrential waterfall of sorrow and frustration. He didn't really expect the Captain to be able to answer any of them, but any insight into the psychology behind these groups could possibly grant access to some hidden connection.

For his part, Kheren understood quite well the Starbase commander's feelings. They had been his own when he had come back on board the Artemis and learned about the unbelievable chaos that had happened there during his absence. But he had twelve days to vent them out and use them to smash their presence for good aboard his ship. So now, he was better able to look at things.

"All evidence points out to fortuitous circumstances, Commander. The terrorists had no clue about Daystrom, who's plan had been a quarter of a century in the making, while he himself obviously was unaware of a movement no older than a few months ago, when we ourselves discovered the anomaly they pretend to worship like primitives. And if there had been concerted action, some of the meticulous and brilliant planning of the computer genius should have shown into the fanatics' action. And both plans went one against the other in rather... dramatic fashion."

Samji sat down again.

"Hmm, well I wouldn't use the word *fortuitous* to describe our current situation, as it implies some sort of good fortune. Ill-fated maybe. There are clearly some forces at work involving the Azimuth Horizon -- even though Daystrom had no designs on it -- that will test our fortitude and our values as Starfleet Officers. I refuse to believe that there were so many in Starfleet that were so quickly taken in by some cultist message, let alone would perform acts of violence so willingly. It appears that so far, this phenomenon has been limited to Lotus Fleet and the Artemis specifically, but it is growing. Perhaps it has something to do with proximity to the Azimuth Horizon, at least as far as the initial 'converts' are concerned."

Samji continued to look over the mission details and frowned. There were several reports of the Captain's behavior that needed to be addressed. Based on the answers provided, they could either be quite damaging or mostly harmless. Adding to the complexity, they were also muddled within the many reports that falsely labeled him a terrorist sympathizer.

"Fleet Captain Kotari wanted me to ask you about the nature of your investigation into the Horizon's Children," he said tentatively. "Were there any other methods used, other than pretending to sympathize with their cause, in order to weed out the terrorists? And how effective do you think those methods were?"

The Andorian made a sour face, as much as his few facial muscles allowed him to.

"They seem to hold the Azimuth Horizon anomaly in some kind of religious reverence and see us as a threat to it. As far as interrogation revealed, it looks like they believe it is a sign from the Preservers, the ancient civilization that seeded humanoid life throughout the galaxy; a beacon to guide the child from their seed to Paradise. Hence why they call themselves "Horizon Children". As for ways to face them..."

Taking a moment to collect his thoughts, Kheren then explained:

"If we had been more careful in just following basic Starfleet regulations and procedures, they would have been stopped before anyone could have been hurt. That's how their crude methods managed to catch us off guard; fortunately, they do not have the brains to know what to do to *really* succeed in their... crusade. Taking over starships is as amateurish as it is ultimately futile for their very own goals. But that is unfortunately how it usually goes with fanatics. Passion and reason rarely mix well; I know... I am Andorian."

He paused again, sighing.

"Commander, these are irrational, misinformed people, a danger to others and to themselves. The Federation Council should have a full report on this movement and a recommendation to publicly disclose all data and material about the anomaly to properly inform all Federation citizens about the facts, so as to stop the spread of all those delusions. Not all people are as logical as Vulcans, pragmatic as Tellarites or have cast old superstitious thinking behind them like Deltans or even as my own, violently passionate people did, centuries ago."

Now he looked straight at the Starbase Commander:

"Fortunately, the chance encounter with the Achilles unwisely forced them to show their hand much too soon for their own good. Now, we know about them, their goal and their method. The violence of their actions clearly shows, beyond whatever they might believe, the typical aim of certain people to seize power for themselves behind a facade of religious motives."

Pausing once more to give his words all the weight needed, he then added:

"So, as of now, Commander, the Artemis will be applying those basic Starfleet rules most stringently... and a few surprises on top of them. If these lunatics are foolish enough to try anything again on my ship, they won't get far, believe me."

Taking a sip out of his mug, Kheren finished with the same stern tone:

"And I strongly recommend all ships of the fleet, and especially your Starbase as well, to also upgrade their security procedures and be on the lookout for those people, even within our crews because, as inefficient as it will be for their own ultimate goal, they may try the same stunt again."

"Hmm, indeed," the base Commander murmured, thinking about what the Captain said. He was a little more introspective than the Andorian across the table when it came to Rules, Regulations, and Security and thought out loud for a while on the subject.

"Security is a fine line to walk, Sir. While we want to try to avoid this in the future, unwavering strictness in regulations has its own set of problems. 'Rules are made to be broken' is an old human saying that tends to apply even now. How many officers have you met in your career who have smuggled away the occasional bottle of Romulan Ale? As rules get stricter and tougher, the people who will break the rules continue to do so, and the people who follow them to the letter suffer. I know that Starfleet Officers who serve are bound to certain regulations more strict than the common citizen for a reason. But they're still people, with rights. We'll just need to be careful not to start down the slippery slope. It is at the times of greatest adversity, when our values are most tested, when it is the most important to stick to those values."

"I quite agree." nodded Kheren. "Although the human adage is just an excuse for those who do abandon their values when they are being tested. As for rights... I have yet to see even *one* Starfleet rule infringing on anyone's rights as a free sentient being... especially when we consider that *no one* is forced to serve in Starfleet or for any longer than one *wants* to. But these rules all demand that we assume a *responsibility*, a responsibility we all *chose* to accept when we swore to serve and uphold Federation ideals as Starfleet officers, even if it might cost us our very lives. For he who lives up his oath, rules are light as a feather... and heavy as a mountain for he who does not."

The Andorian took a sip of his brew before continuing:

"Still, I clearly believe that following rules for the sake of it is as inefficient and pointless, if not dangerous, as disregarding them. To me, it all comes down to reason and judgment... and most of all, to the values they uphold as you say; in short, what they really *mean*. Smuggling Romulan ale is trivial but to greedy economic or political interests; but forgetting to secure a hatch as regulation dictates might just blow up the ship or allow people like those terrorists to board you and do real harm. Rules are not masters; they are guides. They will not replace a brain... but if they could help avoid trouble and you ignore them out of carelessness, you certainly lack one."

"I'm glad we agree," Samji said and moved on. "What is the analysis of your senior staff this mission?" he asked. "I see in the report that there were some exemplary actions, the kind that we expect from Lotus Fleet, that served to protect the ship from these malicious forces."

"Indeed, Commander; in view of our last mission, there are several promotions I would like to recommend." offered the captain of the Artemis: "Doctor Josiah Sage and Chief of Science Syntron should be promoted to full Lieutenant status following their exemplary service during our last mission. As well, I believe Lieutenant Commander Kelsey Alther proved to be worthy of the Commander rank long denied for such service. As for Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, he performed well enough in his duty as a Starfleet officer to see his provisional rank made permanent."

Kheren stood straight, almost as much at attention as it was possible to do while still seated:

"If I may, I would also like to recommend two officers for special citation: First Officer Michael O'Conner and Chief of Science Syntron."

The pride he felt as a commanding officer showed as much in his voice as in his posture.

"Lieutenant Syntron singlehandedly made this perilous mission a success, indeed ensured the very survival of the ship, not only by decrypting Daystrom's tamperings, not only brilliantly assuming command at a critical moment, but also with his invention of the deflector sonar; and now that we have it equipped on the Artemis, it will certainly prove most useful for the upcoming task against the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, since it can also be readily adapted to all the other ships of the fleet. Ironically, The Daystrom Award is supposed to recognize such achievement in applied science I believe... but in view of all the distinguished actions that he accomplished, I would believe that the Star Cross is more appropriate. "

Taking a pause to let the Starbase commander reflect on his word, he then went on with the same pride:

"Just as well, Commander Michael O'Conner demonstrated a lot of poise and courage while we were trapped aboard the Achilles, even when faced directly with physical threat. But most of all, he proved unfailingly reliable and exemplary in his duty during this most trying time, a credit to his ship and to Lotus Fleet. My whole plan that allowed us to escape the AI-controlled ship and exile it away from Federation Space would have simply not worked without me being totally confident in his unfailing presence and support. In his case, the Starfleet Medal of Valor is well earned in my opinion."

"High honors, well received, in my opinion, Captain," Samji said. "I will submit these to Fleet Captain Kotari for final approval, but I do not doubt they will be honored."

"Thank you, Commander." acknowledged the Andorian with a nod.

"You have some time to spend in the Starbase as there are no pressing missions on hand. There are a few transfers to facilitate, so I'm sure you will want some time to meet with and interview any new officers coming aboard the Artemis."

The meeting coming to a conclusion, the Starbase commander added:

"While you're here, I'd like you to take the time to meet with Captain Gould of the Lotus. It is currently in spacedock for some refits and it would be a perfect time for the addition of the deflector sonar you mentioned. If that is all, I thank you for your time, Sir."

Kheren stood up also, finishing his mug before saying:

"Just one more thing, Commander: we had to sacrifice another one of the original old shuttles as we dealt with the warship and its rogue AI. As long as we have to replace it, do you still have one of those class XI still available?"

"Available and waiting for someone to pilot it, yes Sir," Samji said with a smirk.

It was too quiet around the Starbase with no one needing to use the plethora of shuttlecrafts that sat in the various bays. Resupplying ships in need with newer and better equipment was not a burden; it was as much a duty as it was a pleasure to a starbase commander.

"Thank you, Commander. Hopefully next time we have to fight off some enemy or space entity, I will not have to sacrifice another one with one of my on-the-fly tactics. It works but it's starting to get expensive."

Samji stood up to shake the Captain's hand and see him out.

"Good day, Captain."

"You too, Commander. And I hope that, for our next mission, you will consider my earlier request; about a nice, quiet survey mission..."

EPILOGUE

PERSONAL LOG

STARDATE: 87161.5

In this day and age, only a very few isolated space-faring civilizations and individuals still cling to superstitions and irrational beliefs; it is quite hard to actually achieve space travel when you think the heavens belong to some higher beings; harder still to join a community of worlds when you think yourself the chosen ones of a superior entity. Bajorans are an enlightened exception, not at all the rule.

This cult of the Horizon Children is undoubtedly small and they can have very little impact on Federation citizens; but in a Federation of over a hundred worlds, each with billions of individuals, even a mere fraction is still a sizeable number; and there are many more worlds outside of the Federation, many of them not even part of it exactly because they still, as the notorious Q entity once said, "kill one another over tribal god images."

And it need take but one, at the right place and the right time to harm so many. Like the Klingons fondly borrowed from Earth's old Arabic culture: "a thousand throats can be cut in one night by a running man."

Fortunately, these blinded fanatics made a serious mistake in tipping their hand too soon aboard my ship, forgetting their real goal for a tempting prize they had not even been ready to claim.

Worse, they didn't have, more than anyone else then, the faintest idea of what they were up against: the revived Khan Noonien Singh, the now computer-augmented conqueror and ruler of millions back on old Earth, would have swallowed them all in one bite and effortlessly used them as a mere tool for his own purposes.

That would have been even worse than the Horizon Children could ever hope to be. Fortunately, we managed to finally dispose of this particular threat as well.

Although I wonder; would having to deal with Khan instead of those fools might have been better? As all his historical dealings with James T. Kirk and earlier ruling on Earth showed, he was intelligent enough to know how to wield power effectively, even if harshly, and he was reasonable enough despite his posturing and egotism to not take a life recklessly and heartlessly. He would have never been so wasteful, irrational and inefficient as these cultists proved to be on board the Artemis. But most of all, he of all beings would have never lost sight of his true goal. I have no illusion however; the true leaders of this cult might prove much more intelligent than this short-sighted, ill-prepared Rethian woman was when they will make their next move.

Because there will *be* a next move.

And, to have any chance of success, those leaders will be well aware that, following this blunder, it will now have to be outside of Lotus Fleet... if not outside of Starfleet...

But it *will* come.

I do not know how, but... thankfully, science research, technical expertise and tactical training in Starfleet can stand up to any challenge, having thousands of years of principles and rules from a hundred worlds to rely on... and certainly a few inspired individuals as well when even all this cumulated wisdom is not enough. This cultist menace, what they want and can do and how they would do it are nothing new under any sun. Indeed, even I have already a good idea how, where and when they would strike next... if they were wise... and as ready if they prove so foolish again.

We will be more vigilant than ever now that they have stumbled so badly out of the shadows and into the light. Their goal was severely compromised after their premature move on board the Artemis... But, their movement is far from being wiped out.

You may even eliminate all the people, but you can never kill an idea... especially one driven by irrational passion.

And being Andorian, being who I am, I am all too much aware of the power of an idea, especially when driven by passion.

What once made a heart beat can never die.

* * *

The very edge of space seemed to shimmer as if some galactic rainbow was curving itself around all the immensity of the Milky Way spiral.

So far out in the castness of galactic space was that long iridescent strip of energy that you could barely see the few nearest stars at the rim of the Milky Way. It was a vast void bordering the immense abyss between the galaxy and the rest of the universe that only this Great Galactic Barrier separated from the dim lights of the oldest, mostly dead stars at the edge of the unexplored section of the Alpha Quadrant.

Only one ship had ever made it this far, albeit no less than thrice: once after long months with a never disclosed travel technology; once again after an engineering sabotage caused an unprecedented acceleration beyond the ship's normal limits; and, once more, this time under highly advanced alien technology and control. The Constitution class starship USS Enterprise, most famous starship in History, alone had ever crossed all of those eight thousand light years to reach the Great Galactic Barrier.

Until now.

Suddenly, there was a ripple in the darkness, a brutal flash of light sending tendrils of whitish energies towards the very edge of space beyond the galactic arm. The spidery lights curved to form a funnel of swirling lights that opened to spew out the sleek, scorch-marked silhouette of a space vessel.

As soon as the orca-looking starship exited the white-lighted, webby quantum tunnel, the powerful energy passage immediately collapsed in its wake, leaving only cold darkness to swallow it. No sooner was the vessel fully back into normal space that the entire underside of the flattened hull opened.

Tons of deuterium and antimatter were ejected from vented tanks while two long columns of pulsing energies shot out from under and over its rear section.

Carried by its own faster than light momentum a moment still, the starship nevertheless was caught by the edge of the cataclysmic explosion that resulted in the sudden contact between free floating matter and antimatter outside of a magnetic containment field and the blasted pair of ejected warp cores floating in their midst. The titanic shockwave struck the helpless vessel like a tidal wave and threw it even farther towards the impenetrable border shearing the infinite darkness, where raging energies swirled angrily with iridescent colors and crackles of ferocious discharges.

Hurled further away from the dimmed lights of the last few far away stars, to the very distant edge of the galaxy, without fuel, a warp core, auxilliary crafts, lifepods or even a way to find where it was, the USS Nemesis, formerly known as the USS Achilles, tumbled slowly like a dying whale on the dark waves of outer space.

Cold and darkness drowned the only mind left on board, the very soul of the derelict starship, its last long howl of impotent rage and despair unheard in the silent, lifeless void.

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 it's apparent inhospitably, 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 there part of a deceased Andorian who died away from the homeworld.

Therin 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 colour. 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 multisensor 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'Hadars. 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; loosing 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 similarly evolved 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, Claness, Endilev, Ghorev, Hrisvalar, Idrani, Kor, Raioth, Reiji

Thaan/Chan names: Akeen, Akoval, 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 kocheq, 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 can not 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. Thalasar 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 climbest 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 noisesome 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 Delvers.

Millennia's of feudalism stabilized their society until finally evolving into full fledged empires, which perdured until the last centuries and the planetary unification of Empress Thalifar 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 colonise all 12 planets in their home system, but found the time factor of sub-light-speed journeys an insurmountable barrier to interstellar colonisation. 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 Thalifar 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 realised 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 colonisation, 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!"

"Even the Mother of 1000 Young, in the end,
Upon the Mother-of-Fat-grass must depend."
Rethon of Clan Trizye, Mercenary.

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".

SOURCES:

Among the clans (Last Unicorn games STAR TREK The original Series sourcebook)

<http://anomaly.mushpark.com/race-andorian.html>

<http://academy.sfi.org/courses/alien/doc/AOCManual.pdf>

<http://www.ussgalaxy.net/database/sp...s/andorian.htm>

<http://memory-alpha.org/wiki/Andorian>

<http://memory-beta.wikia.com/wiki/Andorian>

<http://andorfiles.blogspot.com/2000/...s-gallery.html>

The Starfleet Medical Manual (1970)

<http://andorfiles.blogspot.com/2009/...cal-roots.html>

This last site tries to rebuilt the Andorians out of the 4 gender paradigm accepted by all other sources and shows some sexist tendencies. However, the well detailed speculation has been introduced in this text and rewritten to fit more accepted soft canon.

KALTHURIANS

PLANETARY SYSTEM: Kathan System (Binary Star System)

PLANET: Kalthan

DESCRIPTION: Class M

NOTE: Not much is known yet of the Kalthurians, as their discovery although fairly old was solely done through the only representative of their species to ever join Starfleet... and what this one officer ever agreed to reveal.

As Kalthan is still an independent sovereign world, aligned but non-member of the Federation, no data has been accumulated yet until the Kalthurian government agrees to such exchanges.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

APPEARANCE

Kalthurians look like humans except for blue skin and sapphire blue eyes. All Kalthurians have distinctive marks much like a fingerprint in such a way as they are unique. They can appear as any shape.

The cellular physiology contains almost as much cobalt as it does iron and this is what gives Kalthurians a blue color. This is similar to Andorian's cellular physiology.

PHYSIOLOGY

Kalthurians have the virtually same physiology as humans except they have a higher rate of cell renewal and lower rate of cell decay and have no gender but visually appear female.

During a certain point in a Kalthurians life time a chemical reaction will trigger and drive most into exploring space and this has a 95% chance for it to occur in Kalthurians. It wears off after one hundred to two hundred years but most stay in space as they still get enjoyment from exploring.

Kalthurians are very resistant to most forms of mental domination due to the way their brain is wired. Recently leading researchers have speculated that a Kalthurian might be able to keep ones individuality similar to what a neural suppressant did to Lieutenant Commander Tuvok, Lieutenant Torres and Captain Janeway did on Voyager when forming the borg resistance movement in the Delta Quadrant.

Trellium - D has a massive effect on a Kalthurian, it damages their lungs and immune system in a severe dosage but heightens the sensory perceptions while at extreme levels it damages the brain resulting in organ failure from the brain not being able to control them, memory loss, sensory loss (having trouble feeling, hearing etc) and multiple personality's emerge.

The pheromones in a Deltan can cause a Kalthurian to act irrational, irresponsible and almost dangerous due to the way the pheromones interact with the physiology of a Kalthurian. Due to limited contact with Deltans, this was only discovered after medical evidence was shown by the ex-chief medical officer onboard the Artemis Elliago after the Azimuth Horizon incident with regards to Kelsey Alther.

MATING

Kalthurians are unique as they do not require a physical touch to have children but use a form of Parthogenesis called Kalth'Lo'Tapn (Ritual of Mating), which is when the "mother" of the child connects to another humanoid species and if the partner consents they connect mentally and via mental stimulation in the brain this triggers the cells in the "dominant" (The partner who initiated the Ritual) partner which produces a child. Any species of humanoids can be a partner for a Kalthurian; Kalthurians normally gestate for around 1 year before giving birth to the child.

DIET

Kalthan is similar to Earth in terms of plants and animals so the diet of the Kalthurian is similar to that of Humans. However the plants there contain high amounts of cobalt and there are several specific plants which are not found anywhere else and are considered a delicacy in certain parts of the galaxy.

Eligahn Fungus – Known for its powerful flavour, has been compared to being hit by a fiery carcass of a starship.

Storm Leaves – An aggressive plant which attempts to constrict and attack its prey, taste is hard to place but it known to be extremely nice once the hard outer layer is broken through.

LANGUAGE

NAMING:

Kalthurians do not have a verbal language of their own. They communicate through sign language, sign identification and mental imprints. Each Kalthurian uses such phrases as "One with blue stripes on shoulder" and each Kalthurian has a unique mental imprint along with shapes on their body. They only receive a spoken name when they contact another species and are asked to be named by them. Such an example would be a Kalthurian meeting a Human an asking them to name them via mental contact, the Human would name them and their spoken name would now be that to all species.

WORDLIST:

Kalthurians apparently do not have a verbal or written language of their own as other species and talk through sign language, sign identification and mental imprints.

SOCIETY

Kalthurian society is very space faring as a chemical reaction in the body triggers an uncontrollable need to visit space and explore it. Kalthurian society is split into 2 groups, The Space Farers who live out most of their adult lives in space and The Ground Wayists who are not overcome by the chemical reaction in the body which drives so many Kalthurians into space travel. The Ground Wayists are highly respected as they have resisted the urge to go to space and generally dedicate themselves to finding more about their race by visiting the ruins dotting the planet and by studying animals and plants from which Kalthurians share some genetic material from. The signature close combat weapon of any Kalthurian is a Deki'kah (Since the Klingons first named the item) which resembles a halberd used by knights on Earth's medieval times. Blacksmiths are still around on Kalthan and they make the personalized Deki'Kah for every Kalthurian. Kalthurians have immense training with these weapons and can use them to around the same effect if not better of a Klingon Master of the Bat'leth

GOVERNMENT

The government of Kalthan is based on Kalthan 1 which is the only Kalthurian Starbase, in orbit of Kalthan. This government has 2 boards. The Kalthurian Board has the ability to create new laws, regulations and diplomacy with other races. This board is made up of 20 members who must have a 75% agreement to pass a new law or regulation. The Kalthan Board is the ultimate power. Made up of 5 members this board has the ability to override the decision but requires all of the 5 members to agree and must resign their posts once this is done.

RELATIONS TO THE FEDERATION

The Kalthurians are well liked within the Federation for their peaceful explorative nature and would gladly help any ally which needed it desperately, however they have only just applied for citizenship for the federation and only one member of the Kalthurians is currently serving in Starfleet.

KALTHURIAN HISTORY

EARLY HISTORY

The Kalthurians have only ever had one war and it is not actively spoken of as the powerful telepathic war destroyed most of the cities, killed millions of Kalthurians and destroyed much of the stored knowledge of Kalthan. After this the Religious Government known as the Speakers of Jilian instituted themselves as leaders to prevent another war from happening. Most of the history was lost after the telepathic war which also instituted the religious government that prevented another war from happening and they purged all remaining history as it was "an affront to Jilian".

MODERN DEVELOPMENT

Development has stagnated since Warp Development as the chemical reaction takes over much of the population and as such only a few people study Medicine and Science on Kalthan and as such means any advances are slowed in favor of exploring space.

SPACE EXPLORATION

Started in 2078 which disproved much of the religious governments ideas and it caused the Kalthurians to throw them out for polluting their base ideals of being related to plants and animals.

WARP DEVELOPMENT

Developed in 2080 after the chemical reaction continually pushed them to find a way to explore space quicker.

FIRST CONTACT

Initiated by the Kalthurians in 2233 after the report of Kelsey and several other Kalthurians who had also followed human vessels and reported them to be peaceful explorers.

RETHIANS

NOTE: as the Rethians are not yet part of the Federation as members but only as representatives of an aligned independent sovereign world, the only information gathered so far is from the reports of the only two Rethians who so far have been granted sponsoring in Starfleet.

PLANETARY SYSTEM

To'Renak System. Six planets orbit a binary star. The middle two, Nadea Rethia and Ters Rethan are the only ones capable of supporting life.

PLANET

The primary world of the Rethians is Nadea Rethia. The second habitable world, Ters Rethan had small, isolated colonies on it primarily for research purposes before the discovery of warp flight allowed them to begin proper colonization.

Nadea Rethia, or simply Rethia, is a sea of flat, grassy plains dotted with tall hills. In the center of this grassy sea is a large landlocked saltwater ocean. It is both from and to this lake that most of Rethia's water flows. A massive silver mountain rises from the center of this ocean.

There are only four major cities on Rethia and are spaced evenly apart. The largest and capitol, Keresh, is the center of Rethia's science and manufacturing. Keresh's sister city, Karnear is a boon of culture and the arts. The other two cities, Kirves and Kyarth are manufacturing capitols that specialize in construction. Kirves has become the main shipbuilding center for the Rethians while Kyarth remains focused on terrestrial endeavors.

Scattered around the face of Rethia are hundreds of smaller communities, most of these located within a short distance of the cities. About 3/5 of Rethia's population lives in these communes and supply much of the workforce for the cities.

Ters Rethan consists of a much harsher environment than Nadea Rethia. Its surface is mostly a large desert with scattered oases. Mountain ranges divide the planet into sections and it's in the shadows of these mountains that most of Rethan's life thrives.

Until warp flight made supply runs near instantaneous, only small, isolated pockets of scientific research stations could be found. In modern times, however, Rethan has been developed into a complex planetary mining operation along the mountains and rocky portions. The Rethians are very careful and their mining operations are some of the safest, best-organized efforts in the sector.

The desert is currently used in terraforming experiments. These have been somewhat successful and are slowly turning areas of Rethan into small green paradises. It is around these paradises that some of the larger inhabited cities are located, including the two largest, Tialkes and Tekrah.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

APPEARANCE

The average Rethian height is between 1.5m and 1.8m with a weight anywhere between 54-104kg for males and 40-63kg for females. Rethians are characterized by a thin layer of fur on their face and neck that also runs down their back, arms and legs. The hair on their heads continues down their neck and along their spine, creating a mane.

Rethian females are noticeably more lithe than the males, though both tend to be equal in strength capabilities.

PHYSIOLOGY

Rethians are bi-pedal humanoids from the planet Nadea Rethia in the To'Renak System. They have fur on the outer edges of their face and hair running from their head down their back forming a mane. They are on average 1.5m and 1.8m in height with a weight anywhere between 54-104kg for males and 40-63kg for females.

Rethians possess a slight empathic ability that is more tuned to their own race than other humanoids. Therefore it is really only at its full power on Rethia while only provides the barest of surface thoughts and feelings from any other humanoids.

Most Rethians possess a sense of honor and devotion to duty. However, this can sometimes lead to an overwhelming sense of pride resulting in periods of perfectionism. Rethians also have a fierce idea of loyalty and once you earn it, it is nearly impossible for them to abandon it. Making an enemy of the Rethians is unwise, though, as they will most likely never forgive you.

At the age of five months, Rethian young are ready to begin learning about the world outside of their mother's pouch. At the age of three a Rethian child is about equal to a human teenager and at five years they are considered fully-grown. It is at this age that virtually all physical development ceases and their metabolism slows down.

The average Rethians live between 80-140 years with a select few reaching 200.

Their internal anatomy is not too different from other standard humanoids. Their organs are smaller and more spread out, helping to minimize critical damage in any one area. They have two hearts and three lungs, a redundancy that allows most Rethians an endurance not known by many other races.

Rethians also have a reputation for their speed. While even at their maximum, their strength is only average; the land speed of most Rethians out-paces even some Federation ground vehicles.

A unique ability of the Rethians is their focused telepathic abilities. Believed to be a relic of their early days as pack hunting predators, the ability has evolved to almost fully connect each Rethian with every other Rethian, creating a massive mental chain.

While this ability peaks when near other Rethians, it does have a bit of an empathic ability when near other humanoids. This has been proven to be equivalent to someone possessing about one third of Betazoid genes.

MATING

While Rethians mate for life, these pairings tend to be carefully planned by the clan elders due to the Rethian's ability to produce many offspring. The older method was for Rethians to only marry between clans, this would help to minimize the possibility of an in-breeding occurring. Modern Rethians use laboratory tests to determine compatibility usually before a young Rethian reaches adulthood. This leads to pre-planned marriages, however this practice is slowly going out of style by all but the more pre-eminent clans.

When two Rethians decide to come together, they partake in a merging of the minds. Using their instinctive telepathy, the two Rethians link their minds together in a powerful and deep connection. This linking is so deep that when a mate dies, the survivor is usually thrown into a deep, brooding depression that causes many to actually commit suicide. While this link is not essential for mating, it has made itself an important part of Rethian structure.

When a female Rethian is impregnated, she carries the young inside for approximately two months before it is born. After it is born, the cub is placed into a pouch on the mother's belly to grow and develop for another three months before it is ready to emerge. It is most common for Rethians to have twins and triplets while single births are rare.

It is not yet known if Rethians are able to mate outside of their own species.

DIET

Rethians are primarily carnivores but are able to eat fruits and vegetables when necessary, though they tend to be not very happy about it.

LANGUAGE

NAMING

Rethian names are a combination of a given name and clan name. The first name is the given name. The number of letters in the first part of the given name is equal to how many were in your particular litter. For example: Tr'kehry had a twin while Reh'Varth is a triplet.

Second names are the name of the tribe from which the member hails. There are dozens of tribes on Nadea Rethia, but only six of note. These are clans Lehryer, Quelnah, Verneth, Etarudbo, Berthaur and Marthetok. (Update Note: As of 2400, there is a seventh clan, the Yekteb, meaning 'Isolated Ones'.)

A Rethian's accomplishments are fully attributed to the clan from which they hail, rather than the individual. Most Rethians see it as an honor to propel their particular clan up the social ladder while a few isolated groups dislike and in some cases rebel against this system.

SOCIETY

Rethian society for the most part is built around furthering the glory of the clan and by extension all of the Rethian people. The Rethian's ancestors, the Rathiah (See: Early History), focused primarily around the advancement of one clan over the others. This led to a lengthy and brutal civil war that ultimately ended in the complete destruction of the Rathiahn Empire.

On modern Rethia, clan progression is encouraged but only with scenarios that benefit the race as a whole.

On an individual basis, Rethians value personal honor above anything else. Being true to your friends, family and clan is seen as the greatest achievement a Rethian could obtain, while pursuit of personal glories and goals is frowned upon. Although a Rethian is never truly ostracized from his people as long as he continues to represent the race as a whole in an honorable and devoted way.

GOVERNMENT

The head of Government is the Council of the Noble Ones, a body of the eldest representative of each of the six clans. In 2400, the Yekteb clan, having grown in size, was allowed a representative in the Council in order to give voice to a growing segment of Rethian society that did not want outside involvement. The Council oversees the Rethian people with the help of the Senate, which contains three members from every Rethian clan on the planet.

While the Senate does most of the Governmental grunt work and many see the Council as an obsolete figurehead, the Senate regularly turns to the Council for advice and guidance.

RELIGION

Having come from an already evolved race, the Rethians do not adhere to religion in the typical sense. One could look at their devotion to honor as a sort of religion.

However, many Rethians are turning to a somewhat shamanistic belief in the planet and universe. This belief stems from the idea that the survival of their race was through an act of a powerful being, dubbed Tor'akhal or She Who is All, and that she chose Nadea Rethia as a place from where the re-born Rethians would rise again.

This belief steers many Rethians to a feeling of preservation of Rethia. It is because of this that any industry on the planet is carefully regulated and safety is constantly maintained. There was much concern when the Rethians decided to return to the stars that Rethia would eventually lie forgotten and Tor'akhal would be disappointed with their shunning of her gift.

Many followers of Tor'akhal have become members of the Yekteb clan, whose fight for complete Rethian withdrawal from other galactic powers is drawing many supporters, especially among the youth.

MYTHS

The biggest myth among the Rethians stems from the writing of the First Scripture that is actually a copy of a copy of the only history that remained in the Kereshe's memory banks. (See: Early History) This myth revolves around determining the identity of those referred to as the Many-Who-Are-One and why they descended upon the Rethian ancestors with such a determination to destroy.

RELATIONS TO THE FEDERATION:

During the time of First Contact, the Rethians maintained a cordial, yet distant relationship with the Federation. However, once ideas and people were exchanged, the Rethians found themselves growing to like the hodgepodge of species that the Federation represented.

As of 2400, despite increasing protest from members of the population, the Rethian Senate, upon advisement of the Council, applied for membership in the Federation. This application is presently pending.

RETHIAN HISTORY

EARLY HISTORY

"In the beginning of time, we were known as the Rathiah. In the vast space far from here we thrived. World upon world was brought into the fold of the Rathiah Empire and we lived for four centuries under the noble rule of the Empress. All was united under a Rathiah banner and all routes lead to our beautiful home world of Kaltar.

"Then came the time of strife. The seven clans, each seeking glory only for their own selfish reasons plunged the once proud empire into a civil war that lasted forty-five years. It was this war that doomed us, that blinded us to the true threat.

"There came a time when the lesser, but shadowed clan of Narinek (Translator's Note: Those of Shadows) sought a way to overcome their larger and more organized brethren. They found a way when they encountered the Many-Who-Are-One (Translator's Note: This is the only way this race is referred to by the Rethians). The Narinek signed a pact with the Many-Who-Are-One and led them to our Empire.

"It was then that the Many-Who-Are-One betrayed the Narinek and began to cut a swath of destruction through the Empire. Had we not been locked into our own selfish struggle, we may have been able to hold strong against the Many-Who-Are-One. Instead, we were overwhelmed and consumed by them.

"For every world the Many-Who-Are-One took, their numbers would increase and they would push further until they sat on the very doorstep of Kaltar.

"During the last days, a secret meeting was held by the leadership of the remaining six clans and there it was determined that the empire was lost. These Noble Ones saw that there was only one way for the Rathiah way of life to survive was for them to flee.

"Many disagreed and saw that the only way to truly die with honor was to die fighting the Many-Who-Are-One. Despite this, the Rathiah prepared twelve colony ships for long-term, deep space travel. Each was loaded evenly with representatives from the six tribes before departing Kaltar for pre-determined worlds suitable for habitation.

"We cannot say what happened after the Great Exodus. We do know that all communication with Kaltar ceased shortly after our flight.

"Our ancestors traveled for many, many years. They alternated their hibernations so that at any one time three-quarters of the ship was dormant. Then came the second great betrayal.

"The ship our ancestors flew on, the Keresch (Translator's Note: "Hope") was to stop at a small, habitable world only a few light-years from Kaltar. But one of the last Narineks sabotaged the flight and the Keresch continued into unexplored space for another seventy years.

"As the Keresch's life support began to fail, it made orbit with a terrestrial world that was determined to suit their needs. The Keresch was landed on what was deemed the best location and dismantled to make a new settlement.

"Those early settlers met and decided that this new world was where they would start over. They determined that what had lead to their people's downfall had been an overconfidence that they would not dare to repeat, should it lead the Many-Who-Are-One to their new home.

"The settlers decided to name this new world Nadea Rethia, the home for the fallen. They then were no longer Rathiah, but Rethians, the Fallen Ones. It was then, with the first holes dug into this new world, that they new life would continue. It always would."

-- From the First Scripture of Noble One Tal'Karin as read to the First Federation Ambassador during First Contact

MODERN DEVELOPMENT

When they landed the Keresch and stripped it down for habitation, the early Rethians began living an almost tribal lifestyle until they could once again utilize some of the technologies left behind by their ancestors. Essentially, they were a Modern people living like a pre-Modern people.

Once the ores the needed to advance were discovered and utilized, the Rethians began a slow but steady climb back up the technological ladder. Their apprehension to develop quickly and expand like their ancestors stemmed a bit from their fear of again attracting the attention of the Many-Who-Are-One.

It took approximately two hundred and fifty years for the Rethians to achieve a level of technology equal to Earth in the early 21st Century.

SPACE EXPLORATION

Early Rethian space exploration centered around habitation and exploration of Nadea Rethia's moon, as the Rethians saw that as the prime launching point for future excursions into their solar system and possibly beyond.

WARP DEVELOPMENT

Once the moon was on it's way to full habitation; Rethian space engineers were given the blessing of the Council and Senate to actively pursue the creation of warp technology.

The team, led by Vr'Elneth Etaurudbo, worked for almost a decade. Utilizing unique designs mixed with whatever records they could dig up about old Rathiahn designs, they eventually achieved their first warp flight from Nadea Rethia to the very newly colonized world of Ters Rethan in 2370.

After this discovery, Rethian ship construction was rapidly increased and they created a small fleet of warp-capable exploration ships and had just started development of warp-capable fighting ships when First Contact with the Federation occurred.

-Summary of First Contact log of Lt. Gragio Bolnari. Information based off of historical records and stories told.

FIRST CONTACT:

USS Victoria Captain's Log

Stardate 52642.8 (January 14, 2375)

Captain Carrell in Command

We are approaching a planet in the Duxos System. My science officer, Lt. Bolnari, picked up several warp signatures from this world. As this planet was most recently mapped 56 years ago when its inhabitants were still in a pre-warp stage, we are intending to determine what we can from scans then, with permission from command, initiate First Contact.

Supplemental (January 14, 2375)

While we were approaching the planet, three small ships took up positions to prevent us from getting any closer to it. The ships' weaponry, despite their perceived primitivism, is surprisingly advanced though still no match for the Victoria.

When hailed, these ships identified themselves as members of the Rethian Defense Force and asked us if we would be escorted to their orbiting space station. I decided to comply with their request in the interest of maintaining peace. After docking, a delegation consisting of Commander Derik (Archive Note: Executive Officer), Lt. Bolnari and Lieutenant Commander Kavik (Archive Note: Security Officer) departed the ship half an hour ago to speak with the station leaders.

Supplemental (January 14, 2375)

Initial discussion between our delegation and the "Rethians" is going very smoothly. They have agreed to an official meeting between the Council of Clans, the planet's leadership, and us. Lt. Bolnari and Commander Derik are making the appropriate plans. Everything is set to begin tomorrow.

USS Victoria Captain's Log

Stardate 52647.25 (January 15, 2375)

Captain Carrell in Command

I have just returned from what many of my crew, including myself, is calling an amazing ceremony. I have to go on record that this is probably the best first contact scenario I have ever been involved in.

It began with three of our shuttles getting an escort from a flight of Rethian aircraft. The honor guard guided us into the Rethian's capitol of Keresh where we landed in front of a massive building that upon analysis is the outer shell of a very old spacecraft.

Upon exiting, we were greeted by six very old-looking Rethians who led us up the steps at the base of the large structure and into the very ornate entry hall.

The entry hall opened up into a large dining area where we sat and spent a few hours eating the local food and listening to something they called the "First Scripture". This was a reading of their early history as has apparently been passed down over 400 years or so.

After dinner, we were led to a vast courtyard behind the structure and watched a series of performances and speeches from just about every facet of Rethian life.

I am recommending to Starfleet that we help to build up relations with these people and work towards possible inclusion into the Federation.

-Starfleet Log Archives

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 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 any more. 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 individual's 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 transformed 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 was 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 Vulcans 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 event he 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 hold a woman in his arms 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 seen 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 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 rating ritual 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 Taroon-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 Vulcan's.

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 Vulcan's and other species were capable of having a Vulcan mind transferred to them. In non-Vulcan's, the experience was similar to those suffered from multiple personality disorders. Among Human's, 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 katas.

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 Vulcan's 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 individual's 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 naming origins came from an ancient Vulcan saying which regarded the calmness in the eye of the storm. Practitioners were 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: holoemitters 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 Councillor.

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

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

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.

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 auxilliary 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 bridge officers have access to a small armory on the bridge that carries both type I and type II phasers.

Access is provided through a manual entry hatch affixed next to the main viewer and through both turbolifts which becomes 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)

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 tones.

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 tones.

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 to 8*

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: Three Type-V phaser emitters, two micro-torpedo launchers (1 fore and 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 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)

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 auxillary control room or the main control station in engineering, in that order.

These are constatly kept fully charged by residue energy from both impulse and warp engines or by the reactors when both systems are otherwise inoperative or fully sollicitated.

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 only the batteries are left as a power source, unless deactivated by the proper command codes.

SCIENCE SECTION

Science Complement: 153 (45 Officers, 108 Enlisted)

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-Plamsa 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 serves 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)

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)

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 nebulae 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's fire).

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 type 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's.

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 Holosuites, 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)

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. Sh'Zh'llya 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 renowned 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 lost 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 09 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.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Commanding officer with the rank of Captain.

AWARDS

The Star Cross

Starfleet Command Decoration

Starfleet Science Decoration

Lotus Fleet Medal of Diplomacy

Michael O'Conner
Commander
1st officer / Executive officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: Michael David O'Conner

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

Mother: Janis O'Conner, Mars

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.

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

N'Eligahn Etarudbo
Commander
2nd officer / Chief Engineering officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: N'Eligahn Etarudbo

Species: [Rethian](#)

Gender: Male

Hair Color: Black Hair

Eye Color: Gold

Skin Color: Dark Orange; Brown face and body markings

Height: 1.7 m (5' 6")

Weight: 78 kg (172 lbs)

Background Information

Date of birth: 59803.6 (August 21, 2383 on the Terran calendar)

Place of birth: Keresh, Ardell Province, Nadea Rethia

Age: 26 (Terran Years, Rethians go through youth faster, so he was an adult at age 3)

Parents:

Mother: Ka'Resin

Father: Vr'Elneth (Deceased)

Siblings:

3 Brothers (1 Deceased), 2 Sisters

Family History:

The Etarudbo Clan on Nadea Rethia is one of the premier scientific clans. They were instrumental in the development of Nadea Rethia's warp drive discovery and subsequent early space exploration. His father Vr'Elneth Etarudbo lost his life during the War of a 1,000 Cubes when his ship malfunctioned and he was mortally wounded by a traitor. The ship subsequently plunged into a Borg cube to destroy it.

Personal History:

After emerging from his youngling stage earlier than his peers, N'Eligahn spent his earlier adult years working with his Father and many relatives to perfect the Rethian's first warp drive. After this goal was achieved in 2370, N'Eligahn started to become bored with engine construction.

Much to his parent's disappointment, he took up a job flying shuttles from Nadea Rethia to its moon and back again. The somewhat ramshackle early shuttles made this experience very dangerous and N'Eligahn quickly developed a reputation for speed, efficiency and in many cases recklessness.

When the Federation made first contact in 2389, N'Eligahn worked all of the angles he could to get close to them. Along with his betrothed mate, Ty'Renyk Eladeau, N'Eligahn learned as much as he could about these new aliens. During this time and against their initial wishes, N'Eligahn and Ty'Renyk grew closer together. Eventually the two of them signed for passage aboard the newest Federation arrival, the Miranda-class USS Shiva in 2401. A sudden change of orders kept them aboard longer than anticipated, though they demonstrated their skills and desire to learn.

During his time on the Shiva, an event occurred that would shape N'Eligahn's view on a certain area of the galaxy. A small starbase orbiting the planet Ulion IV came under a Klingon attack in late 2402. Shiva received a distress call from the station and arrived as four Klingon Birds of Prey were raiding it. She was horribly outmatched and was forced to flee. The Klingons didn't pursue, instead seeing the station as the main prize. While the crew of the Shiva waited for back up that never came, the Klingons destroyed the outpost as its occupants signaled their surrender. To this day N'Eligahn still holds a grudge against the Klingons.

The Shiva's Captain, Commander Ardeau Williams, eventually recommended the two of them to Starfleet Academy. N'Eligahn received entry to the Academy in 2404, Ty'Renyk a year later.

At the Academy, N'Eligahn opted to study Engineering as it was the realm of knowledge he felt most comfortable with. However, he developed more of a love for piloting and navigation than warp cores and engines, though he did intensify his study of impulse engines in hopes that his knowledge of them would help his piloting skills.

While attending the Academy, N'Eligahn befriended a Vulcan cadet named Re'tok. For most of their time in the Academy, the two were nearly inseparable. Re'tok helped to keep N'Eligahn grounded somewhat in his studies and tutored him in sciences and mathematics while N'Eligahn kept him up to speed on piloting, engineering and the more "grey area" computer skills.

When he graduated from the Academy, he was in a deep relationship with Ty'Renyk. Despite that, the two mutually agreed that in the best interests of their careers they should split up and remain friends.

During the aftermath of the Borg war, N'Eligahn returned to his home world of Nadea Rethia and became enbroiled in the political upheaval there, where he became a pivotal participant.

Medical History:

- Wound in his left shoulder from a Borg disruptor in addition to minor fractures from explosions while aboard USS Tempest.
- Shrapnel wounds resulting from exploding Conn. Console during Borg War.
- Minor burns and concussive damage while initiating first contact with energy-based life forms.
- Major burns and concussive damage stopping attempted sabotage of a bridge console.

Starfleet Record:

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy *USS Aurora*: graduated in the Engineering division on stardate 83093.7 (2408) with specialty in close-quarter combat, with extensive training in starship and shuttle piloting.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Spectre*: assigned as flight control officer with the rank of Ensign. While investigating the loss of the Spectre's sister ship, the USS Tempest, N'Eligahn was trapped aboard the Borg infested ship, managing escape using the Tempest's navigation lights to send a mayday through Morse code without alerting the Borg. It earned him the Starfleet Tactical Decoration and the Starfleet Decoration for Gallantry for braving the Borg menace to ensure the safe return of his crewmates, as well as an immediate promotion.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Spectre*: assigned as Chief of Operations with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade. During the Borg War, he was instrumental in keeping the heavily damaged Spectre in on the battle of Starbase 10. and to coordinate an additional mental attack against the Borg using knowledge from his previous encounter, allowing other members of the task force the opening to bring them down. Awarded the Grankite Order of Tactics, promoted and sent to Command School for further advancement.
- Lotus Fleet Academy *Command School*: class of 09 graduate majoring in leadership development with perfect scores in basic command courses and exceptional scores in advanced classes.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Spectre*: assigned as First officer/Executive officer with the rank of Lieutenant-Commander. Responding to a distress call from an experimental Thalaron Fountain station, first contact was made with a new energy-based life form. Though incapacitated for a time, he assisted in a successful contact, resolving the civil war between factions of the aliens, earning the Prentares Ribbon of Commendation. However, the damage to the ship and loss of personnel, though light, was seen as another personal failure in his mind. This, and a long standing disagreement of leadership with his Captain finally led to his resignation from his posting on the Spectre and a request for transfer.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief Engineer with the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Sent to further study the Azimuth Horizon, the ship was rerouted to check a Klingon incursion. Despite a successful First contact with the inhabitants of a cloaked Dyson shell while saving them and the UFP from both Klingons and the anomaly, he privately disagreed with the captain's adamant respect of the natives' rights and of Starfleet orders and rules in doing so. His resulting problems with the strict discipline on board brought a formal reprimand on his record, marring his contribution in the mission's overall success.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief Engineer with the provisional rank of Commander, under review by Command during this mission to evaluate his behavior as an officer put on report after the last mission.

AWARDS**Starfleet Tactical Decoration****Starfleet Decoration for Gallantry****Grankite Order of Tactics****Prentares Ribbon of Commendation**

Kelsey Alther

Lieutenant-Commander

3rd officer / Chief Security & Tactical officer

USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: Kelsey Alther

Species: Kalthurian

Gender: Visually Female-looking (Kalthurians have no genders)

Hair Color: White

Eye Color: Sapphire Blue

Skin Color: Blue

Height: 174.8 cm

Weight: 65 kg

Background information

Date of birth: stardate: unused during this time period (September 16 2063 (First Contact with the Federation) by the Terran calendar)

Place of birth: Kalthan

Age: 346 years old

Parents

Mather – Liara Alther (Kalthurians have only one parent as they reproduce by parthogenesis)

Siblings: None

Family History:

Liara was a traveler as most Kalthurians prefer to explore space and not their planet. As such Liara was a pioneer of information on Kalthan and resulted in many medical treatments for diseases. After having Kelsey, Liara stopped working on Kalthan, dying on 2266 from a Trellium D Asteroid hitting Kalthan and decimating the general area.

Personal History:

Kelsey grew up in the natural rainforests of Kalthan and often played with the animals which did not attack due to a powerful telepathic ability that developed as an affinity to most animals. Reaching the age of maturity, left Kalthan due to the chemical reactions most Kalthurians succumb to. Kelsey travelled the stars and found Earth just as the NX – 01; Enterprise was leaving and was stunned by the shape of the ship. Kelsey followed the Enterprise around without being detected until they went into the Delphic Expanse, then broke off following the Enterprise and started exploring the sector alone.

Somehow through out the entire Expanse, Kelsey never once hit a gravitational disturbance but often fell sick from encountering Trellium – D. Once the Expanse was returned to normal space and chemical reaction stopped, Kelsey returned home to tend its ailing mather.

When mather died, Kelsey went back to Earth to see the state of the Humans. Seeing the United Federation of Planets form, immediately attended Starfleet Academy as it offered a perfect outlet for exploration and friendships after so many years of solitude. Kelsey graduated in Tactical and Security. During several terms of service, Kelsey resigned from Starfleet and rejoined through the Academy and other specialties on and off due to personal issues, serving on many different ships, ending up in 2373 fighting in the Dominion War on a Nova class science ship and fell in love with the design. After the Dominion War was over, Kelsey tried to find posting on all Nova class ships but lately began looking for other modern designs such as the Akira and Prometheus.

During assignment on the USS Spectre, Kelsey's limited telepathy still allowed communication with a member of another limited-telepathic species, the Rethian N'Eligahn Etarudbo, something unheard of by both civilizations.

Medical History:

Severe Trellium - D exposure: Reduced lung capacity, Lowered immune response, Heightened sensory perception (Hearing, smelling, seeing etc), damaged telepathy abilities (limited to lower non sentient lifeforms except Rethians and Borg).

Starfleet Record:

Starfleet Academy *San-Francisco, Earth*: First enrollement 2266 – 2270 first graduation stardate 9711.7

note; the current file only covers the current assignments with Lotus Fleet elite division, as Kelsey Alther's career spans the entire history of Starfleet, with on and off involvement over the centuries and several renewed commissions in different career paths.

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy *USS Aurora*: graduated in Tactical and Security on stardate 83093.7 (2408) with Specialization in Ship to Ship Combat and immediately assigned to Starfleet Lotus fleet elite division.

- Lotus Fleet *USS Spectre*: assigned as Chief of Security and Tactical with the rank of Ensign, cumulated experience justifying the posting despite the low rank. While investigating the loss of the Spectre's sister ship, the USS Tempest, Alther was trapped aboard the Borg infested ship. Alther kept them alive at great risk until they escaped, even being partly assimilated. Received the Starfleet Tactical Decoration as well as an immediate promotion to Lieutenant Junior Grade despite showing blatant insubordination resulting in the destruction of the USS Tempest against orders.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Spectre*: assigned as Chief of Security and Tactical with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade. During the Borg War, Alther was deeply affected by the telepathic conflict with the Collective and started displaying mounting erratic behavior that continued after the conflict was over, resulting in several serious charges before a board of Inquiry despite meritorious actions rewarded by the Starfleet Medal of Valor.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief of Security and Tactical with the provisional rank of Lieutenant, under review by Command during this mission to evaluate conduct. The chief medical officer, Dr Elliago nasaro-Myth, fellow former crewmember of the USS Spectre who shared the Borg Tempest experience with Alther, discovered the adverse reaction of Kalthurian physiology to his Deltan pheromones as the cause of Alther's behavior. This, and exemplary behavior during the entire mission, cleaned Alther's record of all charges.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief of Security and Tactical with the rank of Lieutenant formally confirmed, showed uncommon bravery and regard for sentient life in directly contributing to expell invading Klingons from the Dyson shell of a newly discovered sentient species while following orders and respecting local laws in a conflict. This meritorious series of acts awarded Alther the Silver Palm and a long due promotion to Lieutenant Commander.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Chief tactical and security officer with the rank of Lieutenant Commander.
-

AWARDS

The Silver Palm

Starfleet Tactical Decoration

Medal of Valor

Syntron

Lieutenant Junior Grade

4th 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.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: Chief science officer with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade.

AWARDS

Starfleet Science Decoration

Josiah Sage, Doctor
Lieutenant Junior Grade / Chief Medical Officer
USS Artemis NCC-64121



Full Name: Josiah Sage

Species: Human

Gender: Male

Hair Color: Chestnut Brown

Eye Color: Green

Skin Color: Caucasian, healthy tan.

Height: 1.9m

Weight: 86kg

Background Information

Date of birth : 59064.4 (October 31, 2382)

Place of birth: Tombstone, Arizona

Age: 27 Terran years

Parents:

Father: Jeremiah Sage

Mother: Hannah Sage

Siblings:

3 Sisters; Jane, Charlotte (both older) and Abigail (younger).

Family History:

The Sage family has lived in Tombstone for several generations. They are, more often than not, performers in the town reenactments of the 1880s era. His father currently plays Virgil Earp. His mother plays a madame. His two older sisters play saloon ladies. His younger sister is attending secondary education.

Personal History:

Josiah had an unremarkable childhood. He went to school, had friends, and occasionally got into trouble. At night, when the lights were off, he'd lay on his back outside, and stare at the stars.

He learned to ride horses, shoot ancient Earth pistols and rifles, and even lasso a little while he was still in his single digits. By the time he was 15, he had mastered the art of the fast draw. By the time he was 18 he added gun spinning, and trick shots to his repertoire.

He decided to join Starfleet to impress a girl. She liked doctors. He wanted her to like him. When she ended it his third year in the Academy, he didn't take it well. But he pressed on and graduated with good marks.

Medical History:

A broken collar bone when thrown from a horse. He was 16 years old.

Previous Assignments:

- Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Academy *USS Aurora*: graduated in *the* Medical department on stardate 83473.1 (2409) , with a specialty in surgery, the youngest in Starfleet History to graduate as a Medical doctor and, like all medical graduates, with the rank of Lieutenant junior grade.

- Reserve Fleet *Station Deep Space 9*: While waiting for assignment to a ship, he volunteered for a relief mission to Bajor's Musilla Plate. An earthquake had decimated a local village, and he was part of a team physicians that went. While there, he discovered the water supply had been turned poisonous by an exposed sulfur deposit after testing the blood of several sick children, saving thus dozens of local lives.

- Lotus Fleet *Starbase 10*: initially assigned as senior medical officer with the rank of Lieutenant junior Grade for the maiden voyage of the *USS Artemis* but missed the departure as the ship was launched before schedule to answer a distress call. Worked on *Starbase 10* until the ship returned a month later.
- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as senior medical officer with the rank of Lieutenant junior Grade; promoted in the field to Chief Medical officer following the incapacitation of the current CMO who was himself a temporary replacement. In his new responsibilities, he managed to save numerous alien lives wounded by a Klingon invading force of their homeworld while using Emergency Medical Holograms to do so without violating their laws and taboos. This also established preliminary good relations with the natives through exchange of medical and cultural data, earning him the Starfleet medical Decoration and permanent assignment as CMO of the *Artemis*.

Current Assignment:

- Lotus Fleet *USS Artemis*: assigned as Chief medical officer (as per Starfleet tradition dating back to Earth's old navy,his current rank of Lieutenant junior grade is irrelevant to his position).

AWARDS**Starfleet Medical Decoration**